Montaigne and the Function of Skepticism

Philosophical skepticism has had outstanding representatives in two periods of European history: at the end of antiquity and in the Renaissance. Despite the deep differences between the economic forms of the Greek polis and of those city-states that heralded the emergence of modern nation-states, the transitional phenomena nonetheless reveal certain similarities. In both instances, social struggles and social reorganization take place on the terrain of an older urban culture. Centrally organized forces set about the task of assuming a leading historical role. Highly developed individuals from the urban bourgeoisie see the world caught up in a process of political development that calls into question the values of an ordered life: long-term efficacy, personal security, cooperation of parties, the cultivation of commerce, art, and science. In both instances, the process extended over centuries. The order had already been threatened earlier; now the unrest becomes permanent. Economic progress alternates with deep crises; wealthy bourgeois penetrate into the old patrician strata and even dispossess them; all social contradictions become differentiated and intensify. The urban boom lasted long enough, however, that the refinement of needs and capacities proceeded apace with the division of labor; there were human beings who knew what happiness was, and who had an education too thorough to flee into religious and metaphysical illusions in the face of the transformations that constantly called that happiness into question.

The birth of Pyrrhus, the founder of ancient skepticism, occurred during the epoch of the victories and of the death of Epaminondas. As Burckhardt writes:

After Epaminondas threw one more spasm into these miserable times, it gradually becomes dark in this nation; the definitive destruction of the polis follows. While the cities of the lands under the Diadochi[1] at least led a tranquil economic existence and only the largest rose up in occasional revolts, the ground shook constantly in a great number of the old Greek polises. . . . And now, next to the development of factions among Macedonians, Achaeans, and Aetolians, the degeneration of the state into the latest forms of tyranny goes relentlessly forward with a terrifying military economy and in violent oligarchies and democracies, which distinguish themselves by butchery, expulsions, and the partitioning of land. The unavoidable final consequence of all democracy—strife over property—leads to a true purgatory; communism emerges again and again, both parties enter into every alliance that contributes to the goal, and they allow themselves any means whatsoever. With everything that happened falling into worse and worse hands, the bankruptcy of the Greek idea of the state—which essentially had begun with that senseless upward-striving of the bourgeoisie—became complete. The genuinely Greek feature amidst all this was that delight could be taken in a conspiracy prepared with all due subtlety, whereas one would become quite unsettled if one were to consider the internal solidity of advancing Rome, where individuals were not yet spiritually separated from the state, and cooperated with rather than persecuted one another. If one were unaware of what had happened before and later, Polybius' accounts of the last twenty years of the third century would lead one to believe that the greatest loss of life struck the nation at that time.[2]

Montaigne must be considered the founder of modern skepticism. His life spanned the stormy years of a rising absolutism. In 1533, the year of his birth, the relatively peaceful period into which France had entered at the end of the Hundred Years' War came to an end. An elevated bourgeoisie had emerged.

It consists of people who have made their fortunes in such branches of commerce as meat butchering, cloth trading, and goldsmithing; of shipowners; and especially of financiers with currency-trading firms or who grew rich as civil servants of the king or of the great fiefdoms. These wealthy bourgeois buy up country real estate and even large demesnes, and thus invade the ranks of the nobility. The incumbents of royal offices also often receive patents of nobility. . . . Thus begins a social transformation that would spread dramatically in the course of the sixteenth century.[3]

The means of circulation are multiplied by the extension of trade, inflation ruins the old nobility, and the lower social strata suffer widespread impoverishment. Workers' wages sink tremendously with the currency devaluation. Naturally, the entire rise in prices

is blamed on the rise in wages, which lag pathetically behind the rapid price increases. The authorities rush to the aid of the employers, establish wage ceilings, hinder proletarian organization, and forbid strikes. Popular rebellions animated by poverty follow one another in the cities; plagues and famines become the order of the day.[4]

The class struggles between bourgeoisie and proletariat were complicated by those among the ruling strata. Reinforced by the financial disarray of the feudal nobility, the court under the last Valois vacillates between alliance with the old powers—the Church and an aristocracy oriented toward Spain—on the one hand, and with progressive bourgeois and the Reformation on the other. The religious civil wars are largely traceable directly to the economic conflicts among the ruling groups. The impoverishment of the masses served as a lever to mobilize them for the various purposes of these parties. The mob was an especially useful tool in the hands of the clergy. Michelet sees the origins of the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre in the proposal, made in Paris in 1561, that the goods of the clergy be sold. "From the day when the church beheld the king wavering, and tempted by the hopes of that booty, she turned hastily, violently towards the people, and employed every means in her power, by preaching, by alms, by different influences, and by her immense connection, her converts, tradespeople, and mendicants, to organize the massacre."[5] The condition of France after the civil wars mirrors that of the German Empire during the Thirty Years' War. The peasants, for whom military and other bands prepared a gruesome fate,[6] surged into the cities, whose tasks became insoluble.

> Pressed by the poor, whose numbers had been multiplied by unemployment and the decline of business among their bourgeois, [the cities] watched with growing concern as people from the flatlands streamed to their gates. Hungry mouths, hands without work, demoralization, infectious diseases, treason, insurrection—all of these could be expected from them. The gates were closed to them, but they circumvented the sentries and snuck into the cities individually, or forced their way in *en masse,* partially with permission and partially by force. They were repulsed by citizens deputized for the task with the telling name of "rogue-chasers" [*chasse-coquins*] or they were pressed into concentration camps for excavation or demolition work, in which they wore distinguishing marks. Plague and starvation came periodically, and decimated an urban population weakened by poverty.[7]

The miserable condition of the roads, the innumerable tolls and duties everywhere one passed on land or on the waterways, and the hordes of wolves and bandits made the insecurity so great that in many areas trade was completely paralyzed.[8] Plunder was the order of the day. "I have a thousand times gone to bed in my own house," writes Montaigne, "with an apprehension that I should be betrayed and struck dead that same night."[9]

In the face of the horrors of the transition to modernity, Montaigne flees no more than the ancient skeptics into a strong faith. He scorns the illusion of unconditional certainty. There are far too many who consider their views absolute, whether theoretically or morally, and who mutually contradict one another. One need only peruse literature and the world in order to see that. No one can sit in judgment and determine which of the authorities, so certain of their opinions, is correct. In essence they are simply uneducated. The senses themselves are uncertain, not to speak of concepts. To pledge oneself to a theory is always limited. The wise person sees the mass of unconditionally certain judgments—the one overthrowing the other—and smiles. Such a person notes the appearance of a new doctrine with the thought that it was preceded by another, once equally prevalent, and that yet another will come to replace it. Human beings tend to acquire their so-called convictions through custom, socialization, material interest, or other circumstances. They drift

> without judgment and without choice, nay, most often before the age of discretion. . . . Is there not some advantage in being free from the necessity that curbs others? Is it not better to remain in suspense, than to be entangled in the many errors that the human imagination has brought forth? Is it not better to suspend one's conviction than to get mixed up with those seditious and wrangling divisions? . . . Take the most reputed school theory, it will never be so sure but that, in order to defend it, you will be obliged to attack and combat hundreds of contrary theories. Is it not better to keep out of this scuffle?[10]

Montaigne's reaction to these frightful circumstances is to retreat from any kind of unconditional certainty to a moderate self-interest. Pyrrhus was quite correct.

> He had no wish to make himself a stock or stone; he wished to be a living, discoursing and reasoning being, enjoying all natural pleasures and amenities,

using and bringing all his bodily and spiritual gifts into play, in right and orderly fashion. The fantastic, imaginary and unreal privileges which man has usurped of lording it, of laying down the law and setting up the truth, he honestly renounced and abandoned.[11]

Montaigne also shows himself a rejuvenator of the old skepticism through his knowledge of the world and his statesmanlike abilities. Pyrrhus went to India with Alexander's army.[12] Carneades, the most significant representative of academic skepticism, participated in the mission of Greek philosophers to Rome and had great success due to his adroit behavior.[13] By character, Montaigne was a diplomat. He belonged to the new nobility arising from the bourgeoisie, and thus considered himself fully a noble. Though as a conservative he was a strict adherent of the state religion, Catholicism, and declared during the religious conflicts that it is "neither handsome nor honorable to be a wobbler and a hybrid, to be unmoved in one's affections and to incline to neither side,"[14] he saw his role essentially as that of a negotiator rather than an antagonist. As mayor of Bourdeaux, he showed exemplary objectivity. His moderate position in general questions corresponds to that of the party of the "politicians" who believed it dangerous to exchange Catholicism for the fanatical Protestantism of Calvin as the state religion, but who also did not want to enter into alliance with a retrograde Spain. The motto "one faith, one law, one king" hardly appeared to them beyond question. They began to assert that "between the intolerance of Rome and that of Geneva, two religions exist in one state."[15] Montaigne did not put it so explicitly, but he held talks with both parties, the Parisian court and the Huguenots. The representative of the Inquisition promised him his favor, and the Protestant majesty from Navarre was a guest in his quarters. Goethe admired that "a knight loyally and enthusiastically devoted to the Roman Church as well as to the monarchy . . . could conduct animated, open discussions with Catholic as well as Protestant clerics and schoolteachers in Germany concerning divergent faiths and opinions."[16] As with the ancients, philosophical skepticism presupposes a broad horizon. It is the opposite of narrow-mindedness. Its style is that of description, not theory. "I don't teach, I tell stories," says Montaigne, and Goethe repeats it enthusiastically.[17]

The relativism of the Greek skeptics had already been accused of making action impossible. They replied that in order to act, one does

not need knowledge; probability suffices.[18] Human beings act not on the basis of absolutes, which do not exist, but primarily out of prejudice and habit. Since no opinion is better than any other, it is never advisable to contravene existing customs and institutions. According to Zeller, Carneades "acted like a true Sceptic. He expressed doubts as to whether anything could be known about God, but for practical purposes he accepted the belief in God as an opinion more or less probable and useful."[19] In practice, skepticism means a sympathetic stance toward the traditional and mistrust toward all utopias. If there is no such thing as truth, it makes little sense to stick up for it. At times, of course, even the display of reserve can be dangerous. There are times in which the state fails to guarantee even the freedom to consider the dominant ideology as merely probable, even though one obeys it. In such periods, skepticism tends to blossom in silence, for struggle—even that concerning its development as a particular doctrine—is not its element. Where conflicts arise and the skeptics prove themselves courageous, they are driven not so much by their philosophy; even the liberality and tolerance occasionally connected with it is insufficient for that. At times like these, a militant love of humanity comes to the fore which can slumber behind a skeptical attitude and take hold of the individual. The skeptic typically lets experience and healthy, sensuous common sense reign. To be sure, our senses are a paltry thread; even the animals have sharper and perhaps more numerous ones than we. Nonetheless, science—which has not yet come very far—begins and ends with the senses; "they are our masters."[20]

The skeptics are of one mind with respect to sensualism. They have consistently opposed those schools that gave an independent role to thought, and particularly to constructive theory. If it is completely vain—indeed meaningless—to speak of the essence of a thing, there remain observation and the connection of phenomena with conjectures regarding their repetition. The basis of practical skills and occupations is experience, against which there is no objection. But the skeptic loathes as dogmatism and speculation all thought that goes beyond given appearances, any kind of judgment that contradicts the plausible. Immediate perception and reflection, natural need, laws and tradition, honed dexterity and customary knowledge are considered the norms of action.[21] The firmly grounded order with its relative freedom, which belongs to the presuppositions of bourgeois commerce, has become a decisive personal need for the representatives of

the skeptical attitude. The diffusion of economic relations advances itself through these representatives by means of their enthusiasm for general practical and theoretical refinement [*Bildung*]. Social life appears to them only as the reproduction of the given. They do not seriously attack the practical and intellectual activities associated with reproduction. However, the thought or the deed that calls the whole thing in question, which they come to know in transitional periods in the form of civil and international wars, is a horror for them. Philosophical skepticism is the exact opposite of destruction, which it occasionally appears to be to its adherents and opponents. It is in essence conservative.

The conservative traits emerge more strongly in Montaigne than in the ancients with whom he links up. In Alexander's empire or under the Roman emperors, no new forms of life arose that offered optimism to the educated individual. Hopelessness and emptiness are characteristic of the skeptical philosophy of antiquity; there was no rational worldly content in the power of the *Imperatores* before which it bowed. There is no reasonable prospect for the individual to find contentment in the world. Ancient skepticism prepared the way for mystical Neoplatonism and Christian asceticism. In contrast, Montaigne sees a rising absolutism with which he can identify because it guarantees the conservation of bourgeois property. Despite the horrors of the civil wars, he knows that life goes on and that this, too, shall pass. The national state will protect the new bourgeoisie and establish calm. Montaigne's stoical indifference [*Ataraxie*][22] consists in the contented ordering of the inner spirit, in which one recovers from any inequity. The reservation of judgment, the *Epoché*, here becomes the retreat into private interiority, in which one can replenish oneself, freed from the compulsions of occupational duties. Interiority plays in individual life the role that falls to churches, museums, and places of entertainment—to leisure generally—in social life. In the bourgeois era, the cultural spheres are separated from the economy, in the individual as well as in the social whole. Outside, in work and the economy, duty and the economic law of value arising from the competitive struggle call the tune. In the realm of culture, however, eternal harmony reigns.

The skeptics assure us that no particular mode of action follows from philosophy. With them, the consequences of thought appear only in their being good, loyal citizens. Montaigne chides the Stoics

and Christians, "who [are] slaves to themselves, lie hard, put out [their] eyes, throw [their] riches into the river, court pain (either, as some do, to win the beatitude of another life by torturing [themselves] in this, or, like others, to be safe from falling anew by standing on the lowest step)."[23] He himself practices another method. "It is enough for me, while under Fortune's favours, to prepare for her disfavours, and to picture to myself, whilst I am well off, the ill that is to come, as far as my imagination can reach: just as we exercise ourselves in jousts and tournaments, and mimic wars, in the midst of peace."[24] That is the Stoicism of the rich. According to Pascal, Montaigne "preserve[s] a happy moderation in [his] deportment; [he does] as other people do; and what they do, in a mistaken fancy that they are pursuing true happiness, [he does] from a different principle, which is, that—probabilities on both sides being balanced—example and convenience are the counterpoises of [his] conduct."[25] In short, he acts not so much according to what he thinks, as according to what he has. He describes his independence characteristically:

> We should have wife, children, worldly goods, and, above all, health, if we can; but not be so strongly attached to them that our happiness depends on them. We must reserve a little back-shop, all our own, entirely free, wherein to establish our true liberty and principal retreat and solitude. In this retreat we should keep up our ordinary converse with ourselves, and so private, that no acquaintance or outside communication may find a place there; there to talk and laugh, as if we had neither wife, nor children, nor worldly goods, retinue or servants: to the end that, should we happen to lose them, it may be no new thing to do without them.[26]

He retreats into his inner sanctum, such as into his castle Montaigne (and there into his library) or when he travels. Life decomposes into one's responsibilities, on the one hand, and diversion, edification, and so on, on the other. One's responsibilities also include taking care of the family and the duties of citizenship. Beyond this begins the passing of time. Responsible thought belongs exclusively to those realistic spheres; seriousness is exhausted in them, and otherwise one wants to let go. "To those who ask me why I travel I usually reply, 'I know well what I am fleeing from, but not what I am in search of.' "[27] That is, I travel "pour mon plaisir."[28] In modern skepticism, both diversion and a relationless and comfortably appointed interiority arise from stoical indifference. Worldly enjoyment and retreat into interiority

are identical for Montaigne. Those who sit in their libraries or who take a pleasant trip rest contentedly by themselves. The social stratum in France to which he belonged had the means to create a pleasurable private life.

At the same time, a kind of interiority developed among the masses that had nothing to do with restfulness. The collapse of the feudal [*ständische*] order drove the poor into unaccustomed and arduous work in manufactures. Unemployment and the rising price of food compelled people to hire themselves out at every opportunity. A new labor discipline became necessary. The comfortable mode of work still dominant in France in the sixteenth century was less and less compatible with modern competition. The many holidays, indeed leisure in general, had to be cut down; work itself had to be made more intensive. The process began whereby workers were forced into ever greater responsibility and increasing output, on the one hand, and sustained deprivation, on the other. The adaptation of the masses to this situation took place with the renewal of Christianity, in Protestantism and also in Catholicism after the Council of Trent. One side of Protestantism corresponds exactly with skepticism: we are incapable of perceiving a meaningful order in the world. The lower strata should no longer look to the higher, nor individuals to God in the expectation that the powerful will take care of the powerless. Such hopes are silly and reprehensible. Individuals must make demands not on the higher-ups but on themselves. They must take themselves in hand. Their material needs are directed inward as so many indictments of their own wretchedness. If therefore the individuals of the mass withdraw into their interiority, they find there no such pleasurable relaxation as the cultivated bourgeois of the transition period, but rather their own strict conscience, which accuses them of sin, explores their mistakes and oversights, and drives them to further work. An interiority hostile to enjoyment and opposed to the person becomes increasingly widespread in subsequent centuries. The wealth and education Montaigne received were the fruits of a declining feudal order. In the nascent bourgeois order, culture exists only on the basis of the capitalist form of labor.

Just as the mystical religiosity of antiquity bore skeptical traits,[29] Protestantism is in agreement with Montaigne's critique of knowledge. Luther's attack on reason and science distinguishes itself from

skeptical irony only by virtue of its coarseness of expression. He sees in reason a whore raped and insulted by God.[30] According to Calvin, all thoughts of the wise person are vain. They cannot condemn theoretical thought enough. Human beings should submit to God's word and to authority, and should not think themselves capable of coming up with a better understanding of the truth and with a standard for His actions. Montaigne goes still further. The most famous chapter of the *Essais* is devoted to a defense of Raymond Sebond's *Natural Theology,* which, in accordance with Thomist tradition, did not wish to do without the light of reason in spiritual matters—indeed, sought to ground faith in it. Sebond's defender, however, denies reason any value whatsoever, and not merely in theology but in the realm of science as well.[31] In genuine Reformation style, he says, "Is it possible to imagine anything more ridiculous than that this miserable and puny creature, who is not so much as master of himself, exposed to shocks on all sides, should call himself Master and Emperor of the universe, of which it is not in his power to know the smallest part, much less to command it?"[32] Among the opinions of the ancients, Montaigne prizes most highly "those that are most contemptuous, most humiliating and most crushing. To me Philosophy never seems to have so easy a game as when she attacks our presumption and vanity, when she sincerely admits her own indecision, weakness, and ignorance."[33] Not Luther but the humanistically schooled Calvin thought more highly of reason. To be sure, according to him, "The dulness of the human mind renders it incapable of pursuing the right way of investigating the truth . . . ; thus, in its search after truth, it betrays its incapacity to seek and find it. . . . Yet its attempts are not always so fruitless, but that it makes some discoveries, particularly when it applies itself to inferior things."[34] Montaigne is more definitive. "The conviction of wisdom is the plague of man."[35] "The things that come to us from heaven have alone the right and authority to persuade, they alone have the stamp of truth, which also we do not see with our own eyes, nor receive by our own powers. That great and holy image could not remain in so mean a habitation, unless God prepared it for that purpose, unless God repaired and strengthened it with his particular and supernatural grace and favour."[36] Human reason is not simply weak; it is harmful and dangerous. "People who judge and find fault with their judges never submit to them as they should. How much more

docile and tractable, both to the laws of religion and to the civil laws, are simple and incurious minds, than those wits who supervise and pedantically hold forth on divine and human causes!"[37]

If human beings were to assume the skeptical viewpoint, they would see themselves as

> naked and empty, confessing their natural weakness and ready to receive from on high some power not their own; stripped bare of human knowledge, and all the more fit to harbour within themselves divine knowledge; suppressing their own judgement to leave more room for faith; neither disbelieving nor setting up any teaching contrary to the common observances; humble, obedient, docile, zealous, a sworn enemy to heresy and consequently free from the vain and irreligious beliefs introduced by the false sects. They are blank tablets prepared to take from the finger of God such forms as he shall be pleased to engrave upon them.[38]

The attack on the sects here is undoubtedly directed at the Huguenots—though not at their faith but at their claim as a French party, which would threaten the steady advance of national power. This attack is consistent with the attitude of a triumphant Protestantism. Even Calvin excused and promoted political thought and activity against the Papists; in the Republic of Geneva, however, humility was preferred to vanity, and faith was more important than science. As he put it in the *Institutio,*

> To every noble mind it appears very absurd to submit to an unjust and imperious despotism, if it be possible by any means to resist it. A uniform decision of human reason is, that it is the mark of a servile and abject disposition patiently to bear it, and of an honest and ingenuous mind to shake it off. Nor is the revenging of injuries esteemed a vice among the philosophers. But the Lord, condemning such excessive haughtiness of mind, prescribes to his people that patience which is deemed dishonourable among men.[39]

The reasoning of private persons is idle and vain with respect to the form of the state.[40] Luther imposes complete passivity on human beings. In contrast to his opinion concerning the arrogance of human reason, Montaigne's skeptical *Epoché* appears feeble, and Calvin looks like a crass Catholic. "Like a cripple, with limp hands and feet, the human being must beseech mercy as the taskmistress of action."[41] We must, he says, "return to the point at which we know nothing, desire nothing, are nothing. That is a short path, a *Via Crucis* (Way of the Cross), upon which we shall attain life most readily."[42] Human beings "sin

though they do what they can [to stop themselves], for of themselves they are capable neither of desiring nor of thinking."[43] In other words, Montaigne shares with the Protestants the doctrine of the feebleness of human reason. To be sure, both reject thought only insofar as it comes into contradiction with the given legal order, but they do not reject science as such. Calvin, too, had a sense for Montaigne's ancient philosophers.

> Now, shall we deny the light of truth to the ancient lawyers, who have delivered such just principles of civil order and polity? Shall we say that the philosophers were blind in their exquisite contemplation and in their scientific description of nature? Shall we say that those, who by the art of logic have taught us to speak in a manner consistent with reason, were destitute of understanding themselves? . . . On the contrary, we shall not be able even to read the writings of the ancients on these subjects without great admiration.[44]

Melanchthon moderates Luther's bluntness on this point. The mind is bad only as critical theory and practice; to the extent that it falls in line and subordinates itself—as custom, bourgeois efficiency, practical understanding, and cultural works—it is tolerated in Protestantism as well as in skepticism.

In contrast to the Protestant Reformers' attitude, however, Montaigne considers the highest virtue to be moderation, not absolute self-abnegation. He views the antagonistic parties from the standpoint of an enlightened diplomat; for him, freedom of conscience is the precondition of peace. According to him, no one is in the right; indeed, there is no such thing as "the right," only order and disorder. From his discussions with German Protestants he drew the conclusion that the religious question amounts to a semantic debate. Luther interprets the Bible differently than the Papists. Luther formed a faction; factions then form concerning how to interpret Luther.[45] Montaigne regards Protestantism as dangerous in France for political, not religious reasons; he fears civil unrest.

> For the common people, lacking the power to weigh things by themselves, and being easily misled by chance appearances, when once they have become possessed with the temerity to despise and criticize the beliefs they once held in the utmost reverence, such as those on which depends their salvation; and when once certain articles of their religion have been called in question and placed in the scales, they will soon be ready to throw into a like uncertainty

all the other articles of their faith, which had no more authority or foundation in their eyes than those which are already shattered; and will shake off . . . all the impressions they once received from the authority of the laws or the reverence of ancient usage; "for, once too dreaded, with more greedy zest/trampled beneath the rabble heel" (Lucretius); resolved henceforth to accept nothing to which they have not applied their judgement and given their special sanction.[46]

To be sure, the orthodox Catholics are not much better. The alliance of the Church, Spain, the house of Guise and the whole decaying aristocracy defended the feudal forms of life in which the partners' parasitic existence was still possible. According to Montaigne, they too stir up the people, and not only "out of true zeal to their religion and a godly desire to maintain the peace and the present state of their country,"[47] but for the sake of their own personal advantage. Neither the common man in the army nor the leaders take religion so seriously. Indeed, when the Dukes of Guise moved against the Calvinists, even the Lutherans were acceptable to them.[48] According to Montaigne, the Catholics' legitimate concern "is only there as an ornament and a cloak: it is indeed alleged, but is neither received nor harboured nor espoused. It is there as on the lips of an advocate, not as in the heart or affection of a suitor."[49] Montaigne's position corresponds to that of his contemporary Bodin, who recommended to the king "the mildest and most holy ways" in the treatment of the Protestants,[50] and who opposed the violent repression of Protestantism for the same reason Montaigne opposed its expansion. Otherwise, says Bodin,

they which are destitute of the exercise of their religion, and withall distasted of the religion of the other, shall become altogether Atheists (as wee daily see) and so after that they have once lost the feare of God, tread also underfoot both the lawes and magistrats, and so inure themselves to all kinds of impieties and villainies, such as is impossible by mans lawes to be redressed. . . . For as the greatest tyranny is nothing so miserable as an Anarchie, . . . [s]o the greatest superstition that is, is not by much anything so detestable as Atheisme.[51]

The inclination to remain personally neutral in religious questions, to subordinate religion to reasons of state, to turn to the strong state as the guarantor of secure trade and commerce corresponds to the conditions of existence of a moneyed bourgeoisie and its alliance with the absolute monarchy. That alliance had its happiest period in France

under Henry IV and, however much against its will, came to an end only at the close of the eighteenth century.

Important aspects of the bourgeois spirit are expressed in Montaigne's attitude. Representative thinkers of other countries—Machiavelli in Italy, Spinoza in Holland, Hobbes in England—have asserted the irrelevance of the content of religion in comparison with the interests of state. The tendency to subordinate the truth to power did not first emerge with fascism; irrationalism, just as deeply rooted in the economic situation of the bourgeoisie as the liberal traits, pervades the entire history of the modern era and limits its concept of reason. Religious ideas—indeed, universal aims as such—recede behind the exigencies of capital accumulation. Yet Montaigne introduced a characteristic development with respect not only to religion but to science as well. His thought stands closer to the classical rationalists Descartes and Leibniz than it might appear. It does not contradict the science they founded, only alchemy and the other kinds of charlatanry that he saw before him. Montaigne's influence on Cartesian doubt, and thus on the critical attitude of modern natural science [*Naturerkenntnis*], is regularly emphasized. Many passages in the *Essais* seem to point to Kant. Human beings "are right in setting up the strictest possible barriers for the human mind. In study, as in all else, its steps should be counted and regulated; its hunting rights should be artificially prescribed."[52] Montaigne's project of describing himself, to which his entire oeuvre is devoted, was significant for the genesis of the great French psychology. The unsystematic form of representation found adherents even among the systematic philosophers. It has been remarked that Descartes first expressed his doctrines in essay form.[53] The *Discourse on Method* contains a biographical sketch. Like Montaigne, Descartes announces his ideas as personal views. In England, the concept of the *Essais* had a sparkling career,[54] and Voltaire reintroduced it into France, probably stimulated by that experience.

As subjectivism, skepticism constitutes an essential aspect of all modern philosophy. Science was held to be objective as long as religious and worldly knowledge had not been separated and the earthly order appeared as posited by God. The structure of the universe which human beings strove to comprehend was its true structure; the central concepts mirrored objective relations, genuine ideas according to which nature, human beings, and society were ordered. Nominalism

shook this conception. The Aristotelian doctrine that things have their essence within them, and that we know them according to that essence, lost its authority. Its dissonance with the reality of the new society became apparent with the advancing disintegration of the medieval *Ordo*. Reality is not characterized by the harmony of form and matter, but rather by their opposition: the opposition between a refractory external world that must be conquered and the individuals confronting it with their own purposes and ideas. Skepticism is the quintessence of nominalism. It lies hidden in all those tendencies at the advent of the modern era that ran counter to Aristotelian scholasticism. For the subjectivization of knowledge, about which the most antagonistic systems concur, is a skeptical function. The Platonist Ficino also opposes the view that objective reality makes its way into the mind in any sense. In truth, thought comprehends only itself and that which it brings forth. Knowledge is by no means the reflection of an object. "Judgment follows the form and nature of those judging, not of the object judged."[55] In this respect, Descartes, Hume, and Kant belong to the same school. At the same time that progressive science experienced the triumph of extending the validity of natural laws infinitely in spatial and temporal terms and of no longer giving any quarter to heavenly bliss, it itself sank to the level of a subjective medium of information. Its concepts amount to signposts. As long as this philosophical tendency went together with an exalted conception of the human being, as with Pico, its skeptical content remained obscure. But such beliefs founder in the Renaissance.[56] The reduction of philosophy to a logic and an epistemology whose object is the general, eternal forms of thought was completed in the next few centuries. Accordingly, the sciences are the manner in which individuals find their way by means of these forms in the chaos of given facts. The isolated ego, a point of power [*Kraftpunkt*], is the only comprehensible reality; there is no meaningful connection with the rest; the world becomes an incomprehensible "out-there," the existence of which is not even certain but must rather be demonstrated by way of complicated inferences. The ego is alone in an uncertain, ephemeral, deceptive world. Montaigne's style of thought thus fits in with modern philosophy's concept of knowledge.

The individual is the positive content of skepticism. Despite all the talk of its inconstancy and triviality, its incapacity for true knowledge, the ego with its powers remains the only principle we can rely on in

theory and practice. Our happiness depends upon us ourselves. Hegel clearly recognizes this in the analysis to which he subjected skepticism. "The sceptical self-consciousness thus experiences in the flux of all that would stand secure before it its own freedom as given and preserved by itself. It is aware of this stoical indifference of a thinking which thinks itself, the unchanging and genuine certainty of itself."[57] The genuine skeptics' irony toward the weak, ephemeral, empirical ego in which we must trust is quite different from the pathos with which rationalism speaks of the subject as the principle of knowledge. Nonetheless, both see in the knowledge and action of the isolated individual the substance of an adequate philosophy. "We need little learning to live happily," says Montaigne. "And Socrates tells us that we have it in us, and instructs us how to find it and make use of it. All these acquisitions of ours that exceed the natural are well-nigh vain and superfluous. It is enough if they do not burden and cumber us more than they do us good."[58] Human beings must rely on their own powers.

Montaigne's opinion of what we can expect from them is tempered. The position of the human being in the universe is not impressive, and each individual is irrelevant in the overall course of things. The highest wisdom consists in developing our talents with common sense, pursuing calmly the happiness afforded us by nature, and adapting to nature as it is given to each of us—as the passage of life's stages, as physical and psychic temperament, as fate in the world. The maxim is to act naturally. Violence against oneself and others, against people and animals, is foolhardiness. There is no logical proof against tyranny and cruelty. Montaigne simply turns away from them. Free development, education without compulsion, the unfolding of naturally given individual powers is his humanistic program, which to be sure he lays out not as a doctrine but as his preference and private opinion. He makes no great distinction between Stoicism and skepticism. The essence of philosophy is *amor fati et naturae:* in the end, overcoming the fear of death. That is the quintessence of the wisdom of life that he sought to practice, at first through unceasing methodological preparation and later through observation of the common man, the "natural" human being.[59] Proper death as well as proper life are in the hands of individuals; they can make themselves independent of external vicissitudes. "The profit of life is not in its length but in the use

we put it to: many a man has lived long, who has lived little; see to it as long as you are here. It lies in your will, not in the number of years, to make the best of life."[60] With respect to the possibility of suicide, he writes falsely: "No one suffers long but by his own fault."[61] Yet not only nature but the prison wardens have always taken precautions against this path of escape. The easy death within the reach of everyone reduces one's anxiety in the face of the terror that ultimately holds society together.

The natural, unconstrained manner of presenting oneself implied by Montaigne's view was the very paragon of the cultivated man throughout the bourgeois epoch. This is the goal of a good upbringing, and more recently of psychoanalysis. Those who demonstrate shortcomings in this respect draw suspicion upon themselves. They have not adapted; their relation to reality is out of order. They add something to reality, but are secretly aggressive. At the pinnacle of society and business, a refined instinct has developed for the unnatural quality of a personality. Those who do not move freely and without rancor in their dealings with the world can be quickly recognized through invisible signs, and have little success. At best they are neurotic; at worst, oppositional. The demand to give nature its due that went along with the emancipation of the bourgeoisie comes to mean that one should address oneself directly and without bias to a world in which nothing is in order. At the beginning of modernity, humanistic figures such as Montaigne emerge and assert the natural behavior of the cultivated personality as the norm of action. In the nascent bourgeoisie they can see that human beings can dispense with physical as well as religious compulsions. Despite all the differences between their theories and temperaments, these broad-minded spirits are united by the enjoyment of the intellectual and material fruits of culture, great political insight, sharp psychological judgment, and religious toleration. Relaxed satisfaction of individual needs in the status quo is their mode of life; they themselves belong to the cultivated bourgeoisie. There are among them examples of great personal courage and of solidarity with the oppressed—particularly Agrippa of Nettesheim, the deepest of these skeptics, but also Montaigne himself.[62] Any obligation is denied, however. Montaigne quotes an old philosopher "who said that the wise man should do nothing but for himself, seeing that he alone was worth doing any-

thing for."[63] It is simply a matter of taste if at times he behaves differently.

In the face of such good sense, the Reformers seem inhuman. Mediated by their fanaticism, there emerges the bourgeois mass individual, who grows out of the childish condition of the medieval individual by way of the inversion of material desires, the subjugation of sensual impulses to a relentlessly driving ego, and the psychic incorporation of economic and political pressure as duty. Such individuals adapt themselves to the nascent bourgeois order—but with rancor and a strong faith, with jealousy and guilty feelings, with sexual envy and misanthropy. The idea of the maternal Church lost its historical basis to the extent that the church surrendered its protective function due to economic upheaval and took on parasitic traits. The Pope's unifying leadership of Christianity yields to the politics of national states, while ministering to spiritual needs gives way to the economic self-reliance of the individual. The devout assume a detached character, like the god in whom they believe, and God takes on the characteristics of the world he rules. They need the ruse of an inscrutable god in order to adapt, for their existence contravenes natural needs and any idea of justice. The size of their income, which is irrationally distributed according to the capitalist law of value, becomes the sign of grace which the hard-working can hope for, but not build upon. In this barbaric doctrine with which the spiritual leaders habituated the people to the new order, however, a concession is made to them: while God may abide in a distant inscrutability, while the heavenly order—with its dark predestination or its irrational justification through grace—may reveal itself as the image of earthly fate, a principle nonetheless exists that is not strictly identical with the world. Human destiny is not exhausted by humans' role in this order. To be sure, Luther conceived of inner freedom as the affirmation of external servitude, and reconciled Christian love and equality with oppression, exploitation, and massacre so long as this was directed at the rebellious masses and not the ruling authorities. Yet the very necessity of taking up Christian concepts and speaking of the Gospel in accessible language played a critical function, even if this ran counter to the will of the Reformers. To be sure, Calvin's concept of freedom was reduced almost to nothing; those who are not blessed choose evil of necessity, but without being forced. Despite such intricate doctrines, despite the careful

limitation of the right of resistance incorporated into Calvin's teachings, even he is incapable of fully dissolving the tension between the ultimate sovereignty of God and the earthly powers.[64]

The Reformers were unable to fulfill their mission of creating individuals who freely subordinate themselves without incorporating into their doctrine, however distortedly, the contradiction between human beings and the order into which they had to deliver themselves. God and world, freedom and servitude, natural instinct and conscience, divine and earthly commandment remain in those teachings unresolved contradictions obscuring the real contradiction of the individual that seeks to develop itself with the relations of an emergent capitalism. The historical resolution of the contradiction can only take place at the end of the era, when the material conditions have developed for the abolition of classes. At the outset, no way out can be glimpsed; social inequality reveals itself as the means of progress and individuals are sacrificed to World Spirit, so to speak. However, the new religiosity was the form in which humanity came to know such injustice and in which it measured the existing against an ideal. The notion of a holy commandment or a duty which at that time constrained the Protestants to the repression or sublimation—or at least the postponement—of their material impulses has no direct connection with a rational society. Indeed, the function of the Reformers consisted in the introversion of the desires of the masses, the diversion of the demands of the dominated away from the rulers and toward their own inner nature.[65] Economic compulsion was mystified as divine. But humanity had come too far to consider the princes, officials, rich bourgeois, etc. as gods, and to view obedience to them as the absolute good. It had transcended the condition of a primitive fetishism. Renewed Christianity was no naked idolization of power and success, even if some tendencies promoted this attitude; rather, its concept of God contains the idea of human indifference toward social distinctions and points beyond the relations of class society. The insight that "they say Christ and mean cotton" illuminates the age, but it is valid in different measure for different classes. The oppressed said "Christ" and have always meant an existence worthy of human beings. Whether peasant rebellion—whose immediate intention was the realization of a more just manorial order—is considered simply a reactionary or, due to its ideas of equality, fraternity, and fairness, a progressive

movement, the suffering peasants and proletarians who identified the reawakened Gospel with their demands did not simply fall prey to an illusion. That Luther knew no bounds in his instigation of a bloodbath among them is reminiscent of the rage of the renegade. He dimly recognized that his doctrine contained elements to which they could with some justice subscribe.[66] The more a superior, rational form of human organization becomes visible with the evolution of bourgeois society and emerges as a conscious objective of social groups, the more inappropriate the religious form of expression becomes for these progressive historical tendencies. In the entire period of early capitalism, from the emergence of the mendicant orders into the early nineteenth century, however, the Gospel had not simply a mystifying but a revolutionary significance as well. The Reformers, at least, did not identify it directly with the earthly order, and oppositional religious thinkers from Münzer to Tolstoy have held it up to the status quo as "a law as it is written in the heart."[67]

The Gospel is thus the negation of skepticism, according to which action is a matter of taste or a question of individual cleverness. To the skeptics, humaneness appears as a sort of adornment of their persons, as a temperamental idiosyncrasy like a fondness for travel. Their concept of the human being is exhausted in the notion of the isolated, empirical individual put together out of life's many moments. However mild they may be toward human beings and animals, their thought remains logically centered around the internal tranquillity and security of the empirical ego. They refuse to accept—even in thought, and contrary to their own existence and capacity for experience—anything against which the ego would decline in importance, or where the ego would extend beyond itself in solidarity. Thus, for the skeptics, the psychological condition of an extremely impoverished and abstracted soul becomes the highest structuring principle and the highest—indeed, the sole—philosophically relevant value (despite the rejection of all objective values). A more transcendent interest plays no conscious role for them, and is in their opinion not necessarily immanent in human beings. Montaigne hates oppression, whether social or private. But to assume the effort to abolish that injustice is, according to his own testimony, beyond his ken. According to a modern study of him, "Montaigne wishes neither to rule, nor to rule himself, nor to be ruled; he is moved and blinded by moral phenomena;

he surrenders himself to contemplation of the many-sided play of the inner life; he grows, ages, and dies in the condition of a pleasant and lax passivity; he rejects exertion; he does not practice it."[68]

More recently, the relationship between skepticism and religiosity has changed. In the seventeenth century the emphasis was primarily on the contrast between the two. Pascal recognizes Montaigne's quietism, saying that the latter made a "soft pillow" of the correct principle that human reason understands itself to be inadequate and that everything outside of faith is uncertain. Fearing that he would probe too deeply into problems by remaining with them for a long time, according to Pascal, he skimmed over them too lightly.[69] Vauvenargues later repeated the judgment. He despises Montaigne's indecisiveness and neutrality.[70] Rationalist philosophy also distanced itself from Montaigne. The same historical tendencies which, in religious terms, saw human beings as divided between conscience and instinct, lead in epistemology to the doctrine of the rational ego that must master the emotions. Religion corresponds to the masses whose historically necessary subordination is not grounded in rational motives, but must rather be taken on as a burden; philosophy refers to the behavior of the bourgeoisie, which postpones immediate gratification out of self-interest. The straightforward description of the empirical conditions of one's own ego, of customs, of worries and predilections, of physiological and anatomical idiosyncrasies, as they can be found in the *Essais,* has, according to Malebranche, nothing to do with the study of mind [*Geist*]. To him, Montaigne's fabled psychological insight is superficial.[71] Descartes, too, seems to have turned away in later years from the conformist worldly wisdom deriving from it.[72] Even Locke, who strongly followed Montaigne in epistemological and pedagogical teachings, calls him (in good Puritan fashion) "full of pride and vanity."[73]

But the contrast lost its clarity; with the transition from the abolutist to the liberal period, the progressive aspects of religion were obscured. Under the particular conditions of Germany's historical underdevelopment, they found a new form in German idealism, whose development as the official philosophy was arrested in the face of a triumphant liberalism, and continued only in the proletarian opposition. Among the dominant classes, however, religion became the uninterrupted affirmation of social forms. Its moral teaching coincides

with the praxis of the decent businessman, and its pedagogy with socialization into frugality and profit making. The distinction is eradicated between the ways of God and the capitalist mechanism for distributing wealth. Troeltsch has described the difference between old and new Protestantism in detail:

> Faith becomes simply trust and devotion to the blessed and holy will of God, as it is expressed in the contemporary decision of a conscience shaped by the community. . . . Dogma moves well behind ethics. At the same time, the tension is moderated between Christian and non-Christian ethics, between mundane and Christian life; the idea of conversion is transformed into that of purification. However much sin may constrain and hinder the human being, . . . the world of creation has not in essence been changed by original sin. The greater part of Protestant ethics makes its infinitely multifarious compromise with the new ethical theories . . . , and no longer concerns itself with the old Protestant contradiction between this world and the next, or with the old Protestant unity of a Christian cultural life.[74]

Liberal theology abandons the significant distinction between action based on custom and tradition tempered by inner reserve, which skepticism teaches, and the absolute religious demand. There remains only the matter of prospering in business, of which "culture" only constitutes another branch.

The liberal's relation to religion corresponds to the skeptical mode of thought. This is nothing less than a militant atheism. The belief in a hidden meaning cannot disappear in an order in which the results of human beings' social labor, the vicissitudes of the market, economic laws and crises appear to them in the form of autonomous powers, as fate or natural law. Religion plays diverse roles in the lives of members of different classes. It may be a consolation to those who must carry the burdens of society—a consolation which is supposed to keep them from despair as well as from revolution. For the individual of the dominant class, however, it sanctions his personal relations and those of the bourgeois organization of society as a whole. In the liberal period, it is also indispensable as a tool of education, even in the upper classes. The bourgeois virtues rest on the postponement of material impulses behind the more enduring interests of the abstract ego. Economic gain is pursued not for the enjoyment it yields but rather for the sake of further gain, and with each new success this striving asserts itself anew as its own true aim. The individual becomes the

agent of capital. This attitude cannot be developed through reason, or through physical force alone. In religious belief, therefore, the pedagogy gives disciples the means for developing the socially required qualities in themselves. Where in education the notion of reason (or indeed that of "cooperation")[75] takes the place of God, as is common in the contemporary American system, it is also irrational—an imperious, quasi-religious power that instructs human beings to rely on themselves, to subordinate the present to the future, to recognize economic utility as the law of their action, and to persist in competition. Later, in the consciousness of adults, the irrational, religious grounding of their rationalist mode of thought recedes into the background, and they come to view their conduct in their calling and in other aspects of life as the product of their own character, or even of some human essence. Montaigne helped to usher in the relation to religion in this period. No negative judgment is made of it, even if it is only "esoteric," only held in secret.[76] But its role in thought and action changes. The specifically religious contents and the particular affairs, concerns, and aims of the individual go separate ways; the spheres of bourgeois life, the private and the public as well as the social, the religious, and the political come to oppose each other. The adult's freedom from religion, the peculiarly bourgeois unbelief consists in the fact that anyone can think anything without this coming into conflict with their faith—indeed, without drawing from it any other consequence than that which is socially required in any case. The mediation between thought and existence, which have diverged since the emancipation of the individual, grows infinitely differentiated. The most highly esteemed ideas are secretly considered a sham. Repressed into the unconscious, the most despised attitude, misanthropy, dominates this world of classes and competition. The interruption of mediation no longer disturbs anyone. Everyone knows what prisons and madhouses are all about; everyone is familiar with the condition of freedom, equality, and justice, those divine ideas; everyone tolerates the condition and reproduces it. In this period, the whole is kept going only by individuals, and all individuals wipe their hands in innocence; they appeal to the superior power, which in turn appeals to them. Society is dissolved into innumerable spheres and subjects, and has not yet put itself together as a subject.

Hume, whose skepticism is representative for liberal philosophy and science, distances religion still further from cognition and action than does Montaigne. He, too, has a sharp eye for misery and injustice; he anticipates Schopenhauer. "Were a stranger to drop, on a sudden, into this world, I would show him, as a specimen of its ills, an hospital full of diseases, a prison crowded with malefactors and debtors, a field of battle strewed with carcasses, a fleet floundering in the ocean, a nation languishing under tyranny, famine, or pestilence. To turn the gay side of life to him, and give him a notion of its pleasures; whither should I conduct him? to a ball, to an opera, to court?"[77] However, according to Hume—and in this he is only a consistent disciple of Montaigne—these insights are not in the least prejudicial to the state religion. Religious ideas assume such an exalted position in consciousness that they can neither influence the understanding [*Einsicht*] linked to praxis nor be undermined or confirmed by it. Where the contradiction between religion and the conditions of reality is taken seriously, and has advanced to the negation either of religion or of reality—as is the case with genuine religious thinkers as well as with militant atheists—the skeptic is appalled. Philosophy accords religion its due respect.

'Tis certainly a kind of indignity to philosophy [Hume begins in a genuinely antique frame of mind], whose sovereign authority ought every where to be acknowledg'd, to oblige her on every occasion to make apologies for her conclusions, and justify herself to every particular art and science, which may be offended at her. This puts one in mind of a king arraign'd for high-treason against his subjects. There is only one occasion, when philosophy will think it necessary and even honourable to justify herself, and that is, when religion may seem to be in the least offended; whose rights are as dear to her as her own, and are indeed the same. . . . If my philosophy . . . makes no addition to the arguments for religion, I have at least the satisfaction to think it takes nothing from them, but that every thing remains precisely as before.[78]

The philosophical thought of the liberal bourgeois does not go to the root of social matters. To the extent that it does not exercise occupational functions in one of the branches of this order, it grows increasingly idle, even to itself. In the nineteenth century, philosophy and literature are still rooted in the whole. On the one hand, however, they serve the continuation of the economic process in its given form through transfiguration, diversion, and reassurance. On the other,

the works of radical writers who call into question the whole of reality in either religious, artistic, or philosophical terms are absorbed as mere topics of discussion in academic environments. Labor and economic gain as the content and aim of existence have become flesh and blood among the members of the bourgeoisie and large parts of the dominated strata. They sit so deeply that they no longer come to the level of reflection. That which, according to Balzac, "skepticism recognizes—namely, the omnipotence, the omniscience, the all-congruity of gold,"[79] has become the true god. Those who own the means of production of social wealth dispose over labor. The freedom of the others consists in their ability to buy. The type and extent of the goods that serve the maintenance and enrichment of life are determined by the process of capital accumulation. In itself, human life has no value in this system. It acquires value only to the degree that it is inserted in the economic dynamic, and even here not for its own sake—because the individual should live—but rather as a cost element in the profit-oriented economy. In the dominant scholarship, this fact is not indicated, except as one view opposed to others. Critical literature, which represents it in the form of the novel, is received as a mere work of art. Just as bourgeois individuals reserve philosophy for their leisure hours and thus turn it into idle thought, knowledge and critique are isolated in the society as particular aspects of business. They are supposed to procure culture, which under these conditions of production is reduced to entertainment. The distinction between truth and mere fun is socially eradicated. After the victory over feudalism, the critical spirit of the bourgeoisie is transformed from a general to a private affair, from a practical to a contemplative reaction. Thus spreads the skeptical mode of thought.

With the disappearance of liberalism in the monopoly capitalist period, skepticism once again changes its meaning. As at its inception, it sees itself confronted by an absolutism that it leaves untouched. This absolutism, however, is different from that of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. At that time, the role of the state consisted in the (admittedly antagonistic) protection of a burgeoning trade and commerce. In the present, the state tends to act as the organ of the strongest capitalist groups, even where reformist governments seek to make of it a guardian of the economically weaker groups. Its apotheosis is the Führer state, in which the consolidation of the industrial and

political bureaucracies is realized. The Führer state advances by political means the economic expropriation of the smaller capitalists by the larger, and regulates trade and commerce in the interest of the industrial and political groups arising from the concentration and centralization of capital. The unprincipled character of skepticism reveals itself under these circumstances. Skeptical negation was quite conscious about not sparing the ego. Hume denied his own existence, and Montaigne, in his dedication to the reader, refers to himself as "a matter . . . frivolous and empty."[80] And yet they make the ego into almost the exclusive theme of philosophy. Indeed, the independence of the ego from external events—the attempt not to lose oneself—constitutes the very meaning and aim of the skeptical mode of thought. But the retreat to the ego is itself a process in the empirical world. It presupposes inner strength and personality. But personality doesn't fall from the sky; it is socially produced and dissolves with the conditions that created it. In bourgeois democracies it is in any case arbitrary which individuals have the potential for such development; the stratum involved is small enough. Under the domination of the totalitarian state, it completely disappears as a possibility. The ego not only no longer has the opportunity to develop itself into a personality; even the stability of the existing character types is accidental. If the individual falls into the clutches of power, it might be not just destroyed but twisted and turned upside-down, depending on the degree to which chemical and psychological technique is advanced. The illusion of skepticism is that in spite of everything it holds the ego to be a safe harbor. Yet its every sinew is bound up with material reality. The capacities that make it up—the senses, memory, and understanding—depend not only on a well-functioning body but on the steady unfolding of the social process. The social environment—its language, rules, and beliefs—determines the existence and forms of reaction of every single ego. The ego consists of reciprocal influence, even down to the nuances. The opinion that there is something permanent in it, something inherent, is mere superficiality. However active the individual ego may be, in itself it is merely abstract; those who reify it in its isolation into a principle or an inner anchor only make of it a fetish. The tension with the environment—the resistance an independent ego is capable of offering it—is heightened independence vis-à-vis the

contemporary situation, not vis-à-vis history as a whole. In confrontation with reality, it has developed a relatively firm shape. Its elasticity and the ideas that it opposes to reality grew out of that reality itself. The skeptical ego creates not so much definite ideas as doubt about its essence, which it takes to be its element. It has yet to discover that it is equally capable of being anxiety and pain, affirmation or indignation. The self-consciousness and independence in which the ego seeks to maintain itself in the face of doubt can be traced back, as psychological factors, to the decline of liberal society. The freedom of judgment which constitutes the lifeblood of skepticism can only be realized through the freedom of the social whole which, contrary to skepticism's aloofness, requires personal intervention. If skepticism fails to sustain itself as a rational mode of thought—namely, by sublating itself and consciously becoming its other, a belief in the concrete possibilities of the human being; if, instead of opposing the dominant conditions, it leaves the present untouched as a result of its characteristic inner reservations, it thus seems to persist unchanged but in fact has already lost the quality of being an expression of mind [*Geist*]. The ego can sustain itself only by seeking to sustain humanity as a whole.

According to Montaigne, *Epoché,* the reservation of judgment, and inner tranquillity are not "frivolous." Indeed, they were not so at that time in the same degree as they are today. To keep oneself free from the historical upheaval: in the sixteenth century, skeptical moderation constituted a progressive attitude. "We may both love virtue too much, and carry a just action to excess. . . . I like temperate and middle natures. Want of moderation, even in the direction of the good, if it does not offend me, astonishes me, and I am at pains how to baptize it."[81] Therein lay historical reason; such moderation was identical with the preservation of one's own person, with going the objectively correct way of tolerance in the national state. It amounted to independence from the illusions of the religious parties. Attentiveness to one's own development, keeping an appropriate distance from popular movements with their veiled aims, was a progressive position conducive to the solution of the problems on the historical agenda. Like religion, it contains a dynamic element despite the conscious quietism. Montaigne's *Epoché* is not without solidarity with humanity. To practice it

entails promoting the happiness with which he was preoccupied for the individual ego not just in particular, but in general. At present, however, only the futility of the principle is evident. The peace that the liberal skeptic today concludes with the authoritarian order expresses not humane praxis but its renunciation. Unlike the absolute state power of those times, fascism does not take under its aegis the most important social forces. The obedience preached by Montaigne, as a good skeptic, was owed to a monarchy locked in battle with reactionary forces. Obedience toward contemporary dictatorships, to which today's skeptics accommodate themselves, is a lockstep into barbarism. Montaigne's relative neutrality in the wars of the Huguenots and Guisards was his retreat into the library and into hostile foreign territory. Neutrality in the struggle against the Führer and the bureaucracies, accommodation to the relations of the authoritarian state in the twentieth century, is tantamount to participation in total mobilization. The alliance between absolutism and the bourgeoisie, to which Montaigne's attitude belongs, arises from the emancipation of the bourgeoisie from a bankrupt feudalism. The alliance between bourgeoisie and fascist organizations arises from anxiety about the proletariat. Out of the skeptical tolerance concerning freedom of conscience comes conformism with the regime of the secret police.

After all, Montaigne wrote: "I am so hungry for freedom that if any one were to forbid me access to some corner of the Indies I should feel my life to be a little more constrained. And as long as I can find earth and air free and open elsewhere, I will never lurk in a place where I must hide. Good heavens, how I should chafe if I were reduced to the condition of so many people I know of, riveted to a district of this kingdom, deprived of the right to enter the chief towns and courts and to make use of the public roads, for having quarrelled with our laws! If those laws I observe were to threaten only the tip of my little finger I should immediately go in search of others, wherever they may be."[82] These words express not only reactionary indifference, but a revolutionary humanism as well. Today's skeptics don't leave the country as long as the bureaucracy lets them be. In any case, it makes no sense to leave, for "earth and air" are no longer open anywhere, and that stretch of land in the Indies is ruled by the same laws that one seeks to flee. The authoritarian order imposed by capital upon some countries in its current phase is already beginning to span

the world, and the skeptical statesmen of the other countries—the disciples of Montaigne and Montesquieu—fall collectively before it. Negotiation has different faces at different times. Today it consolidates the domination of the biggest capital throughout all of Europe. The national contradictions between the European industrial powers are at present subordinated to the necessity of political reorganization. In both domestic and foreign policy, the world creeps softly or strides boldly toward dictatorship, the most appropriate form of government for monopoly. Just as before the war the bourgeoisie came to know better technical methods and the so-called spirit of innovation of the expanding industrial countries, it must now become familiar with something that did not come easily to the conservative industrialists of Western Europe.

Due to the economic laws intrinsic to it, the reigning social order has reached a level in which individuals have completely lost that arbitrary and abstract freedom that they had under liberalism. If they are not congenial to power by nature and attitude, they can no longer find any way out, for the earth is rapidly becoming more uniform. The affirmation of personal freedom—not to speak of its modest use—belongs to that excess of virtue from which Montaigne was so estranged. Humanity, despite its infinitely advanced capacities, is hindered in the rational organization of its affairs by the terror of national cliques. When things have reached this point, skepticism's evasiveness, relativism, and liberal tolerance become the rationalization of misanthropy—an attitude that negates every value, not just theoretically but practically as well. This attitude fails to reveal solidarity with human beings, even unconsciously or in contradiction to itself. Humanity, which expressed itself among such figures as Montaigne and even Hume as diplomacy and a world citizenry, has long since cast off its peaceful form; at present, that attitude reveals only the desire to participate a bit in a decadent power. The idiocy of the notion that an individual or collectivity can save itself or the world by conciliation with the spreading rule of violence has now become so patently obvious that it can only be understood as a thinly veiled sympathy with that rule, or as an anxiety about sunk capital. The skeptical diplomats of the nonauthoritarian countries of Europe, who make concessions to barbarism out of a "love of culture," have behind them dogmatic bankers nervous about their assets. Indeed, even these assets will be

difficult to rescue. Machiavelli writes "that a general who wishes to keep the field cannot avoid a battle when the enemy is determined upon fighting."[83] He scoffs at the "indolent princes or effeminate republics"[84] that instruct their generals only to be cautious. This accusation does not touch the skeptical individuals and polities that pursue this ineffectual tactic at the end of the bourgeois epoch; they don't even want to triumph. Neither the bourgeoisie as a whole nor its members see in the authoritarian order their true enemy: that perspective is illusorily attributed to them only in the wishful thinking of a few of its scattered members who have met misfortune for one reason or another. The style according to which those emigrants who have fled authoritarian states seek to "influence" the democratic environment by denouncing those states—how naive is this clever style, whereby the host countries are supposedly warned in their greatest interest! Despite all the internal and external contradictions that promote war, the representatives of the old order have a common and greater enemy: the rational community of humankind, the possibility of which takes on firmer outlines in popular consciousness, and which can be extinguished in the longer term only by naked terror. Today, skepticism stands opposed to nothing other than the interest in a better future.

The transformation of skepticism from a humanistic cast of mind into pure conformism is anticipated in the economic principle of the epoch. The independence of the ego to which the skeptic retreats is rooted in the freedom of the individual that each subject enjoys in a commodity economy. In contrast to the slave states of antiquity, this freedom is universal in the modern period. Individuals exist by receiving in exchange for the labor they contribute to the life of society a quantity of goods equivalent to the effort expended. All are free; "every man carries within him the entire form of the human constitution."[85] Humanity is not undermined by the fact that the individual stands in the center of philosophy, or that the author of the *Essais* thematizes himself. In a society that rests on such a principle of exchange, all persons may retreat to themselves, they are their own masters, and their relations with others proceed in an orderly fashion. Given an existence regulated in this manner, the skeptical rejection of revolutionary activity and the hostility toward critique of the totality has nothing cynical about it. Individuals are recognized as equals. But

the principle of bourgeois society has another side whose unfolding in capitalism governs history and drives it toward its own dissolution. Where labor and disposition over the means of production are not unitary but socially divided—that is, distributed among different classes—free exchange takes place as a labor contract. One party offers its productive capacity, while the other furnishes the money to replenish that capacity via food. This act corresponds to the principle. Normally, the labor power expended by workers can be replenished with the products they can buy with their wage; they can get by. The social result, however, is that equality disappears. Infinitely more labor time than is necessary for the reproduction of the workers' lives is congealed in the products that laboring humanity brings forth on the basis of these contracts. Capital disposes over the difference. The equality of free individuals, which renews itself through the exchange, the labor of each as the basis of their possessions and power, in short, the principle of the bourgeoisie—upon which rest its ideology, its justice, and its morality—thus reveals itself as a mere facade that masks the true relations. The further society develops, the more obviously this principle, and with it that of bourgeois freedom, reveal their internal contradictions. The continued dominance of this principle, the skeptical rejection of revolutionary activity, and the hostility toward critique of the totality thus have something cynical about them. They reveal subordination to irrational relations, not integration into rational ones. Skepticism is prepared to respect the freedom of each individual—to the extent that individuals do not forfeit it through the effects of the economic laws and their political consequences. With this contradiction, the modern skeptical attitude together with its tolerance, subjectivism, and liberalism bears a harsh, misanthropic quality; it is not as just and open as it sometimes appears. The essential harmony with forms of life that rest on social inequality—and that are mediated through the life-and-death struggle of competition—makes the reigning version of skepticism deeply unjust and destructive, even if it is occasionally cooperative and open within the framework of the possible (that is, without touching upon its basis). The notions of equality and fair chances for the virtuous, so successfully promulgated by the upper classes, should be evaluated according to the feelings with which one of them loses their fortune. Because they have enjoyed the goods which all could enjoy with the current development of social powers,

they would become aware that a life is hell in which one has nothing to sell but one's labor power.

Montaigne's successors since Hume have only slightly changed their rhetoric. In essence, the same thing is repeated over and over: that all conceptual knowledge is subjective, a mere ordering, while theory is relative and separate from praxis. The skeptics remain liberal now as before; they demand that an intellectual substance be accorded even to those who are not necessarily congenial to the dominant party. Such professions do not have far-reaching consequence. On the one hand, the skeptics believe that, in the universities, critical tendencies should be voiced only toward fantasies—so-called ideologies—and not at all toward things as they are. This is harmless if for no other reason than that the foundation of authoritarian domination lies not in the delusions with which it rationalizes itself, but in the social structure of production that rules the age and shapes the character of human beings according to their place within it. Ideologies are not primary. Precisely because the conditions of existence make the bourgeois type so sober, and because skepticism toward mind [*Geist*] reveals itself as an essential characteristic in the monopoly capital period as in liberalism, fascism can change its slogans almost as often as it does its generals. What human beings consider important today remains individual advancement; any other kind is superficial. With the establishment of mind in its own sphere—that is, precisely through its emancipation as mind—it also became ideology, mere appearance. In liberalism, ideology proves itself relatively constant and substantial; the abstract consciousness of freedom is its essential content. Under the domination of monopoly, in the period of bourgeois decline, one slogan after the other takes hold of manifest thought. The skeptics, who stand up against racial and other misguided doctrines without theory and purely in the name of doubt, are Sancho Panzas who dress themselves up as Don Quixotes. They know that they are, in essence, tilting against windmills.[86] On the other hand, their campaign has the merit that, in the eyes of the public, the truth may easily slip through under the guise of another misguided doctrine. The skeptics no longer traffic in ideas, but only in illusions: the distinction no longer exists.[87] Those who attack ideology without analysis of the base criticize badly, or indeed not at all—regardless of the incisiveness of the criticism. The so-called penetration and dissolving of ideology undertaken without

a definite theory, which Montaigne adopted from the ancients as the confrontation of temporally and spatially distinct moral and religious views, carries the day now. But the proper object of a theoretical and practical critique is the social totality, not ideology.

Not only the intellectuals who seek to make their peace with the domination of monopoly capital, but the common man, too, remains fundamentally the same. It is mistaken to think that the mass individuals of the modern period, particularly as they appear in the authoritarian states, are free of skepticism. The economic conditions from which they arise have not changed their essence since the era of liberalism; instead, they have created a social form in which the individual counts even less. The period has a crippling effect on thought; it replaces the idea of the universal [*Allgemeinheit*] with the fetish of the *Volk*. But "free, philosophic thought has this direct connection with practical freedom, that as the former supplies thought about the absolute, universal and real object, the latter, because it thinks itself, gives itself the character of universality. Thinking means the bringing of something into the form of universality."[88] The emancipation of civil society[89] from the Middle Ages was a reaction, so to speak, "of the element of Universality against the Real World as split up into particularity."[90] The principle that governs civil society has a higher universality than that of the feudal order. According to it, all should find their justice and their happiness. The ambiguity of the economic principle discussed above, however, necessarily reproduces and widens inequality, and in such a way that its foundation disappears from human consciousness. Thought loses its character in that fascism, under the rubric of the nation and the "people's community" [*Volksgemeinschaft*], abolishes certain formal residues of feudalism—external signs of status privileges, religious upbringing, and the other remnants of childishness and idleness—and indeed corrupts some groups with material advantages, in order the more brutally to sharpen the economic inequalities. This result emerges, too, from the fact that fascism organizes the whole militarily in the service of the dominant groups, and thus forces the life of the community "totally" under the profit motive of the few. The concepts *Volk,* nation, and fatherland have real validity, but they are not concrete, goal-oriented ideas. Separated from the interest in a rational society, removed from the reach of all critical thought and puffed up in its given form into the Most

High, the concept of the *Volk* sinks to the level of a false idol. In revolutionary France, death had a different meaning than did military service under Napoleon or MacMahon. In the mouth of the Führer, however, the fatherland of freedom tends to remain the same fatherland, even if freedom has already been eradicated and the last opponent banished or slain. The compulsion imposed upon thought to remain unconditionally in tune with such reified concepts—this prescribed aim that is contrary to its essence—becomes a fetter upon it under which it decays. Because people today are too advanced to take very seriously such a prescribed attitude, and at the same time are too dependent to overcome it consciously, they absorb the *völkisch* content superficially (in the same way that the liberal bourgeois always appropriated mind), but internally they become disappointed skeptics who, like the liberal bourgeios, believe in nothing beyond advancement and success. As at the demise of antiquity and in the Renaissance, skepticism and mysticism today reveal their affinity; today, however, skepticism is no longer religious but *völkisch.*

The insubstantiality of all the motifs upon which each person draws in order to explain the relations—from the belief in the Führer's God-given talents to the notion of the Jewish world threat—is experienced in varying degrees of vagueness. This feeling leads to cynicism, and this has progressive implications. Underneath uniform action and speech, the needs of modern life give rise to the development of correct knowledge—the loosening of the relation of ideology and faith, the hidden development of rationality even among retrograde strata—if only as instinct, as vague intuition, precisely as deep skepticism toward all that exists. These processes take place independent of the will of the dominant powers. They accelerate the pace of older tendencies. After liberalism, society has by no means consolidated itself into a subject. It still has no consciousness with which it could develop in freedom and justice. In the Führer, however, it has a voice acknowledging society's injustice and oppression. Together with more rigid economic organization (which anticipates a historical necessity, even if in a distorted way), the thoroughgoing lack of illusions of a fascist mentality misunderstood as idealistic and frenzied lends it superiority over the liberal environment. Individual freedom in domestic policy and even the idealistic embellishment of an imperialist foreign policy was an ideology whose contradiction with reality became increasingly

apparent. To the extent that the religion of power and a brutal realism serve the maintenance of the social hierarchy of monopoly better than does Christianity, as Machiavelli had already intuited, fascism's cynical and enthusiastic skepticism is well beyond the idealistic skepticism of the previous century.

Fascism is not opposed to bourgeois society, but is rather its appropriate form under definite historical conditions. Given the lawlike quality intrinsic to the system, capital in the contemporary period is capable of occupying a growing majority of the population with tasks unrelated to the satisfaction of general needs. It takes on the character of the oligarchical cliques that prepare to divide the world anew in order to exploit it with modern means. That is the direction of European development. In this period, the mediating categories cast off their humanistic appearance. Money, the universal equivalent, which seemed to equate human beings to each other in a fundamental way, sheds the ephemeral character of independence. It has always mediated and expressed social relations. This becomes openly manifest today. The national group that has good apparatuses of production and repression, and which develops on this basis a rigid military and social organization, becomes increasingly independent of money—or, rather, presses it into its service. Domestic finance is formally taken in hand by capital and its state. The latter determines how the dominated groups shall live. State expenditures with the purpose of binding the masses to the regime, dividing them from themselves, and organizing them instrumentally; public works; official charities, etc.—so-called socialism—encounter serious resistance only in the transition to fascism, so long as the government is not unambiguously sworn to big industry. The complaints of smaller employers are harnessed until the proper authoritarian power is formed, in the face of which rebelliousness is reduced to harmless grumbling. Obstruction goes only this far, and demonstrates the powerlessness of all but the fascist approach. The apparent independence of financial power disappears along with that of parliament. The stratum that controls the means of material production, the industrial and political bureaucracy, emerges formally as authoritative. Competition has always functioned merely as a mediating factor; now it recedes in domestic affairs. In Germany, heavy industry—which came to open domination with the authoritarian state—was at that moment insolvent, remaining far behind other

industries. Measured on liberal principles of competition, it was quite unsound despite its power. In fascism, however, power competes in essence only internationally; domestically, it carries on the struggle against competing industries as well as against the labor force with state resources. Furthermore, it becomes clear that the work relationship was only formally based on the contract; decree and command now openly take its place. It wins new significance as agreement between equally strong cliques within the state, not unlike many relationships in the Middle Ages. In the new system of justice, the universality of law and the independence of judges are openly abandoned.[91] Under liberalism, inequality was masked by equal rights—which guaranteed a minimum of freedom because the mask itself was not without substance. Now, a clean sweep is made of human rights as just another ideology. Specific groups, indeed individuals are affected by the law; laws are enforced retroactively. The judges are freed from the pedestrian obligation of merely interpreting and promulgating the law; they are promoted to the immediate executors of higher orders, and thus become equals of the executioner. This unmasking takes place along with other decisive social factors.

In the face of the horror emerging from the current destruction of a historical form of human life, it looks as if—next to the *völkisch* mysticism that carries within it a skeptical nihilism—there returns the age of a more noble skepticism, which in antiquity was the despondent individual's final word. But history has advanced in the meanwhile, and humanity has conquered the means to create happiness on earth. Thus the skepticism of the educated, who quietly make their peace with things as they are, is today no more noble than the everyday skepticism of the fellow-travelers. Montaigne would find himself at odds with contemporary skeptics. It is Montaigne's desire, "and perhaps a little more than it should be, . . . [that I] would embrace a Pole as I would a Frenchman, subordinating this national tie to the common and universal one."[92] The basis for such professions can be sought only in part in the fact that Montaigne was bound to the Middle Ages and could not follow the national principle, which later proved so revolutionary. Brotherly love is never simply reactionary. It has nothing to do with neutrality toward fascism, with today's decadent skepticism. The fascist type of "human being" and its ideal, the abasement

of the human being under others, are the opposite of humanism, whether religious or skeptical.

> The majority of free people [says Montaigne, putting animals above human beings], for a very slight consideration, surrender their life and being into the power of others. . . . Have tyrants ever failed to find enough men pledged to devote themselves to their service, some of whom were besides obliged to accompany them in death as in life? Whole armies have so bound themselves to their captains. The form of oath in that rude school of men who fought to the bitter end contained this promise: "We swear to suffer ourselves to be fettered, burned, beaten, killed with the sword, and to endure everything that real gladiators suffer at the hands of their masters; most religiously lending both body and soul to his service": "Burn, if thou wilt, my head with fire,/ With sword my body strike, and cut/My back with twisted thong" (Tibullus). That was a covenant indeed;[93] and yet there were, in some years, ten thousand who entered into it and rushed to perdition.[94]

Despite all the admonitions to obedience that move Montaigne close to the Reformers, he nonetheless saw through a sadomasochism masked as personal loyalty to the bitter end. Conformism with a bad reality, the excision from thought of the idea of the universal, the limitation of thought to business and specialized knowledge leads in the present to the falsification of all essential concepts, even among the educated. Even the wise man cannot in the long run remain immune theoretically, if in practice he accommodates himself to the enemies of humanity.

The emergence of a new spirit can be traced in the nineteenth century's judgment of Montaigne. Increasing emphasis is laid on his personality, on his distance from actual events, and above all on his hatred of the masses. Montaigne is considered a great man. Some of the best bourgeois thinkers have recognized the impoverished condition of human beings and the mendacity of the public spirit in the liberal period, without seeing any way out other than the romantic illusion of a new aristocracy—the "noblemen," as Ibsen puts it. The harmonious, isolated personality, independent of the social environment and raised above the man-in-the-mass, was for them the historical goal. They could find support for this position in Montaigne. Mass culture was not his cup of tea. There are differences between human beings. Knowledge is to be valued very highly; what matters is only who possesses it. "A very useful accessory in a naturally gifted mind,

pernicious and harmful to another. Or rather it is a thing of very precious use, which is not to be purchased at a low price; in some hands it is a sceptre, in others a fool's bauble."[95] His attitude toward the civil wars seems similar to that of Goethe, if one ignores the differences between the religious wars in France and the great French Revolution. "All the little caution I possess, in these Civil wars in which we are engaged," says Montaigne, "is exercised to prevent their curtailing my freedom of coming and going."[96] More directly, he writes: "I dislike innovation in any disguise whatever, and have reason to do so, for I have witnessed its very injurious effects."[97] Even in the nineteenth century, mistrust of popular movements contains not just a reactionary element, but—as in the social pessimism to which it belongs—insight as well. Pessimism's bitterness conceals the suspicion that things do not look good for the general happiness in the reigning social order, despite the assurances of its apologists. Conservative thinkers take seriously the contradiction between the achievements of technology and the growing pressure on the masses, between the successes of natural science and the increasing uncertainty, which the liberals seek to paper over with the notions of social harmony and of the possibility of unlimited progress. In the political movements that run through the age, the masses are furthermore not yet capable of achieving their own aims. They appear as the material of bourgeois politics, and are used for the development and renewal of the system whose burdens they themselves must bear. They set out to liberate themselves, and in the process liberate the bourgeois form of property. Their action is as contradictory as the order which, in the end, that action consolidates. The social-psychological experience articulated not only in the gruesome doctrines of de Maistre and Bonald, but by Goethe and Nietzsche as well, is better grounded than the myth of the strength of the people [*Kraft des Volkes*], the unswerving belief in the healthy instincts of the masses. For the theoretician of the proletarian groups which today push beyond the bourgeois order, naive respect is simply harmful. In the struggle for a society without classes, which has been on the historical agenda since the middle of the nineteenth century, the masses must first organize themselves from a mere material into a subject; they must cast off the character of a mass. The attitude of adulation toward theoreticians is inappropriate. The deprivation of the masses or the *Volk* as they are

manipulated in bourgeois politics is included and sublated in the solidarity of the theoreticians with the plight of the oppressed. Solidarity refers not just to human beings as they are, but as they might be as well. The negative moment—knowledge of the darker traits of human beings—is not absent from dialectical thought; critique is its element.

Penetrating though the hostile analysis of the condition of certain bourgeois masses may be, the damning verdict of the conservatives is rooted in an untenable aristocratic ideal. The isolated conception of personality, whose essence that condemnation leaves untouched whether the personality exists in a cruel society or a rational one, had a more progressive function in the Renaissance than in the current period of decay. Nietzsche first distanced himself gradually from history.

> The individual cannot live more fairly than in being prepared to die in the struggle for love and justice and in sacrificing himself to it. . . . We cannot be happy so long as everything around us suffers and creates suffering; we cannot be moral so long as the course of human affairs is determined by force, deception and injustice; we cannot even be wise so long as the whole of mankind has not struggled in competition for wisdom and conducted the individual into life and knowledge in the way dictated by wisdom.[98]

Such judgments—which to be sure were already weakened by that which is ultimately demanded, namely the tragic attitude—still have little to do with the aristocratic attitude of hostility toward the masses. Nietzsche put Montaigne in the proper relation to the present.

> What the individual Montaigne signifies within the agitation of the spirit of the Reformation, a coming to rest within oneself, a peaceful being for oneself and relaxation—and that was certainly how his best reader, Shakespeare, experienced him—is what history is for the modern spirit. If the Germans have for a century been especially devoted to the study of history, this shows that within the agitation of the contemporary world they represent the retarding, delaying, pacifying power: which some might perhaps turn into a commendation of them. On the whole, however, it is a dangerous sign.[99]

Nietzsche's praise is ambiguous. "If I were set the task, I could endure to make myself at home in the world with him."[100] Later on, his admiration for the skeptical Frenchman grows along with repulsion for the Germans, as well as with his error concerning the meaning of the revolution. He glorifies the personality. Montaigne declares that he

was ill-treated by all sides, that he was a Guelph to the Ghibellines and a Ghibelline to the Guelphs, but the accusations remained mute because he stayed meticulously within the law.[101] Nietzsche thus sees him already during his lifetime as "on the *Index librorum prohibitorum* of the Vatican, under suspicion from all parties," and speaks of "his dangerous tolerance, his reviled nonpartisanship."[102] He makes of him a hero, which he certainly was not.[103]

Nonetheless, Nietzsche expresses more the critique of a bourgeoisie in decline than veneration of capital's consolidation of its power. His admiration for Montaigne points to the human meaning of the utopia of the Superman, and permits us to see how the "leaders" of the present constitute its distortion. They represent the historical answer, so to speak, to Nietzsche's error that personalities can still exist in the future while the bourgeois mass continues, that the enslavement rather than the emancipation of the mass is the condition for a humane future. Nietzsche is contradictory, like Montaigne himself. The persistent tendency to reconcile Montaigne with imperial Germany by emphasizing his harsher characteristics emerges, by contrast, in a slip on the part of Dilthey. He claims that Montaigne concurs "with the Stoics in preferring strong, masculine, and joyful feelings to the compassion that he ascribes to women, children, and the conceited crowd."[104] But in the passage cited by Dilthey,[105] Montaigne does not so much agree with the Stoics as simply indicate that they had asserted this position. And according to Montaigne, not just women, children, and the common man[106] were subject to compassion, but he himself as well. As he puts it in the *Essais,* "Among other vices, I cruelly hate cruelty, both by nature and reason, as the worst of all the vices. But then I am so soft in this that I cannot see a chicken's neck wrung without distress, and cannot bear to hear the squealing of a hare between the teeth of my hounds, although the chase is a vehement pleasure."[107] He is more concerned here with dissipation than with killing and booty. Dilthey's minor error is only a symptom. The professorial disdain for the masses in the Wilhelmine era consisted not in enmity toward the system that produces the masses, but in hatred for the forces that could overcome it. Herein was registered the enthusiasm for the world war, which—inseparable from the economic conditions—found renewed ascendancy in the defeat and brings recovery to the entire world as a *völkisch* awakening, as was promised at the

time. The nonpartisan skepticism of modern science thus adds the German scholars to this triumphal march, whether they intended this or not.

Liberal theology pointed the way to the new mentality even earlier than scholarship. D. F. Strauss had already shown how the transition could be made from theology into a naked, authoritarian attitude, hostile to workers.[108] This vulgar materialist theologian virtually anticipated fascism. The Ritschl school, which "owed much" to him, reached the apotheosis of the reconciliation of capitalism and Protestantism with its skeptical agnosticism. "It is in principle an unphilosophical and antiphilosophical theology. It only employs as much philosophy or epistemology as it needs to avoid competing with philosophy and metaphysics."[109] Reverend Traub was one representative of this school; his rebellious liberalism drove him into conflict with the Church before the war. The essence of the rebellion revealed itself during the war as the tireless affirmation of imperialist policy. For his iron propaganda he received a place in the High Consistory. Agnosticism, skeptical hostility toward any theory transcending specialized disciplines, and reconciliation with the reigning order characterize his theological viewpoint.

As well as in isolated Catholic circles, retrieval of the progressive elements of religion—of the Gospel as a tribunal that can also come into opposition to the status quo—can be found in various orthodox tendencies in Protestantism. Like many political conservatives and above all the small sects, Jehovah's Witnesses, and others who today count their martyrs, they at least have a faith which—like any faith in a divided society—consistently affirms the idea of justice. Within the limits of positive religion, however, faith can only continue to exist in a distorted way. In contrast to the total nihilism of the liberals, to be sure, the courage of the orthodox reveals a higher truth. The totalitarians drive them to the right side against their will, so to speak. But the latter cannot count on them, for their restriction to the biblical word and to cult status is already an obdurate faith, bearing conformism within it despite everything. Christian freedom is promulgated in the Gospel; each individual should possess and act upon it. This cannot be an exclusively inner condition, if only because even freedom of conscience is not compatible with every kind of political and social order. Luther and Calvin knew this; it was not for no reason

that they themselves and their immediate supporters were drawn into political conflict. As capitalism developed out of its liberal phase and into the authoritarian, the illusion was more concretely refuted that inner freedom can be guaranteed by a clause in the constitution or the benevolent nod of the Führer. Christianity is not identical with the middle or late Academy of Athens. The notion that the Gospel espouses, like Arcesilaus and Carneades, a retreat into oneself and obedience toward existing authority—with the difference that the Christian can hope for salvation—would not merely sublate [*aufheben*] Christianity: it would destroy it entirely. The principle of conscience does not demand unmitigated subordination in all social questions, except for occasional outbursts when the state intervenes in the constitution of the Church leadership.

Conscience emerged from the introversion of social demands. In contrast to skeptical *Ataraxie,* it pushes toward the self-actuation of the individual, toward activity, toward labor. Even in the bourgeois economy, however, labor is not as formal a concept as it appears. Its significance lies rather in that it makes a contribution to the life of the society with all its individuals. The moment of freedom as well as of universality are both inconceivable without it. Conscience, too, thus has a direction in history; like the concept of god, it points beyond the relations of class society. "Christianity," writes Hegel, "in its adherents has realised an ever-present sense that they are not and cannot be slaves; if they are made slaves, if the decision as regards their property rests with an arbitrary will, not with laws or courts of justice, they would find the very substance of their life outraged."[110] This is true not only for the particular individual as an exclusively egoistic being, but for society as a whole. It does not mean that conscience can be at ease as long as Christians themselves are not slaves in the given sense while others are.

> Law, property, ethical life, government, constitutions, etc. must be conformed to general principles, in order that they may accord with the idea of Free Will and be Rational. Thus only can the Spirit of Truth manifest itself in Subjective Will—in the particular shapes which the activity of the Will assumes. In virtue of that degree of intensity which Subjective Free Spirit has attained, elevating it to the form of Universality, Objective Spirit attains manifestation. This is the sense in which we must understand the State to be based on Religion.[111]

Religious freedom bears within it a dialectic that drives it beyond interiority.

What set the Reformation and skepticism against each other in the sixteenth century—fanatical spontaneity, on the one hand, and humanism on the other—has been released from these forms and transformed into a theory and praxis which, as active humanism, overcomes and retains the contradiction. It is critical theory, and the historical effort to which this belongs. It is to be met concretely among those in the authoritarian states (and in those that would like to become such) who build the cells of a new world. To them, even after the defeat, thought has not become an internal matter that remains internal and adapts itself to a contradictory reality. They do not wash their hands in innocence. It is possible that everything will go to rack and ruin, but even the most sober analysis demonstrates that a rational society is possible. Humanism consists in committing oneself to its creation. Knowledge without connection to a definite historical praxis that concerns the whole of humanity, the mass of apparently atheoretical facts with which one obstructs the thought of children and especially of students, the philosophical and political doctrines distributed cheaply in the used bookstores of relativistic intellectual history—all of this creates chaos. Its function is more to make one unaccustomed to the truth than to represent it. To say that religion and skepticism are rooted in past cultural achievements is misleading. They have been transformed at their core: not because their wording has changed, but rather because the world has changed. Far from them, splintered into theoretical and political groups and apparently already conquered, the spirit once immanent in them carries on a desperate struggle whose duration and outcome cannot be foreseen. There is spontaneity in this new attitude, because it does not languish by itself, but rather expresses itself in the will to bring reason and freedom into the world; there is humanity, because it maintains the cultural resources and the capacity for enjoyment within just this spontaneity.

Skepticism is a pathological form of intellectual independence; it is immune to truth as well as to untruth. If, according to Pyrrhus, Diogenes Laertius showed his traveling companion a pig that calmly continued to eat and declared that such *Ataraxie* must be that of a wise being,[112] the naturally carefree human attitude toward death—to be attained through reason—may also be appropriate. With respect to

the interests of humanity, toward which the skeptical bourgeois practices it, the behavior of the pig is neither natural nor rational, however widespread it may be. Like dead religiosity, the churches, and hierarchy, a moribund skepticism—the closing off of human beings toward one another, their retreat into their own empty individuality—belongs to an intellectual disposition in contradiction with the current level of development of human powers. Despite all the horror, the superficial appearance of a depraved humanity, overwhelming and discouraging enough, is deceptive. As in those previous transitional periods—at the end of civic freedom in antiquity and in the Renaissance—conditions are likely to make the individual skeptical or religious or both. It is not this repetition, however, but active humanism as it arises from historical developments themselves that now plays the role that once fell to the skeptical philosophers and Reformers. Not just any old ideas but the true ones, in their historically adequate form, distinguish cultural development [*Bildung*] from mere knowledge. The pedagogical effort to make the pragmatic bourgeois immune from barbarism by means of tradition, Greece, and occasional doses of Thomism is quite naive. There is no humanism without a clear position toward the historical problems of the epoch; it cannot exist as a mere profession of faith to itself. The humanism of the past consisted in the critique of the hierarchical feudal order, which had become a fetter on the development of humanity. The humanism of the present consists in the critique of the forms of life under which humanity now perishes, and in the effort to transform them in a rational manner.

Hegel pronounced the ultimate judgment concerning the relation of critical and dialectical theory toward the specific content of skepticism. Dialectics bears a skeptical element within it, in that it reveals the one-sided, limited, and transient in isolated ideas and opinions. Unlike skepticism, however, dialectical thought does not therefore consider these views destroyed, and then retreat to the ego that created them until the ego itself appears as a deception or fiction absurdly triumphing over itself. Like the ancients, Montaigne concluded from the uncertainty of knowledge based on the senses or the understanding, as well as from the multiplicity of moral, metaphysical, and religious perspectives, that one simply cannot know anything. In contrast, the dialectic, in its negative application to ideas that consider

themselves firm and absolute, sees the essence of the power of thought as that of the "negative." Theory consists not in mere repudiation but precisely in the analysis of the forms and contents that have consolidated themselves in thought and life, in the concrete knowledge of the reasons why they are one-sided and contradictory. The result is thus not that one can forget everything as worthless—the emptiness of consciousness as the ideal, so to speak. The result, rather, is the entire process of thought with all its assertions, analyses, limitations, etc. That process comprehends both the manifest opinions and the real relations in which they appear, in all their relativity and transitoriness—not as simply true or false, but rather as they are known according to the level of knowledge attained at the given historical moment.[113] Hegel called truth in this critical and historical form the speculative Idea; it has the power in itself to apply the negative to every determinate structure, to each of its own moments. According to him, truth coincides not merely with philosophical consciousness but with concrete history, which thus shows itself as the negative—that is, history in which all transitory things fall apart due to their limitedness and internal contradictions, and are transformed into a more differentiated, better-adapted form. "The Idea, as abstract Idea," writes Hegel, "is the quiescent and inert; it only is in truth in as far as it grasps itself as living. This occurs because it is implicitly dialectical, in order to abrogate that inert quiescence, and to change itself. But if the philosophic Idea is thus implicitly dialectical, it is not so in a contingent manner. Skepticism, on the contrary, exercises its dialectic contingently, for just as the material comes up before it, it shows in the same that implicitly it is negative."[114]

Unlike Hegel, the materialist dialectic in critical theory rejects the unity of thought and history. At present, real historical forms of life exist whose irrationality has already revealed itself to thought. The dialectic is not closed. There is no harmony between thought and being; rather, contradiction still proves to be the driving force—and not just that between human beings and nature, but between human beings with their needs and capacities and the society that they bring forth. Its overcoming thus takes place in the real historical struggle between the individuals who represent those needs and capacities, i.e., the universality, and those others who represent their ossified forms, i.e., particular interests. Thus the skeptical and critical moment in thought

goes over into concrete historical activity rather than back into the ephemeral ego. And, as a consequence of this relation between thought and history, critical theory in its totality cannot claim for itself the purely logical criterion of uncontestable certainty, the search for which as an always-already-existing transforms skepticism into nihilism. Although many features distinguish true theories from false, theoretical certainty can no more be presupposed than practical, for it is subject to a historical process which includes both the rigor of understanding and, if necessary, the commitment of one's life.

In the concluding pages of the *Essais* can be found the sentence: "A man who can rightly and truly enjoy his existence is absolutely and almost divinely perfect."[115] Classical German idealism has already indicated that such a demand cannot be fulfilled in direct affirmation of the individual ego. According to it, the fulfillment of one's essence consists in the realization of the transcendental, not the empirical ego. In the course of development of this philosophy it became clear that the transcendental tribunal works itself out not just in the processes of the isolated consciousness but in the shaping of human relations as well. Hegel's concept of Spirit and the idea of a rational society as the meaning of the transcendental subject are rooted in Kant's notion of original apperception.[116] In a divided and repugnant society, the ego, too, is divided and repugnant. That it is at peace does not necessarily mean that it is happy, for happiness is not merely a feeling but a real condition of human beings.[117] One cannot deceive oneself about happiness. A social condition in which the dependence of human beings upon the universality, as well as their contribution to it, are masked and withdrawn from their will necessarily constrains the unfolding of their powers and thus their happiness, even if such shortcomings can hardly be conceived of. They cannot come to the enjoyment of their reason because reason exists in particular terms, as the calculation of individual advantage, and thus in inadequate form. In addition to the universal limitation connected with the organizational principle of all hitherto existing society, the capacities of most individuals are constrained physically and psychically by the pressure of labor, by indignities and deprivations. The degradation of the individual; the taboo on the display, not to mention the practice, of decisive instinctual impulses; the prohibition on enjoyment; the continuous anxiety about defeat in the competitive struggle and the false ambition that goes

along with it: these "psychological" influences deform the individual every bit as much as the direct material damage to the senses due to hunger, sickness, and hard work. Montaigne's words can only be fulfilled in a more free organization of humanity. Skepticism transcends itself in this respect. Where happiness is made into a principle, revolutionary action is required.

Though this is manifest, skepticism in its liberal and authoritarian forms constitutes an aspect of the dominant bourgeois type of individual. The reason is that characterological structures are consolidated and transformed not by knowledge and enlightenment but by material conditions. The advances in weapons technology, by means of which entire peoples are held in check by a well-stocked army, are much more decisive for the persistence of skepticism as an anthropological characteristic than the arguments with which the skeptical attitude seeks to rationalize itself. One could counter that insights such as these constitute the very essence of skepticism. To be sure, it is typical of skepticism, as well as of the dominant character as such, to ascribe the vulgar motives—according to which alone the rulers of the world act—not to them and their principle, but to the idea of humanity itself. The difference here is that the critical theory which we espouse, in contrast to skepticism, does not make an antitheoretical absolutism of the insight into the inadequacy of things as they are and the transitoriness of cognition. Instead, even in the face of pessimistic assessments, critical theory is guided by the unswerving interest in a better future.