

## THE CONCEPT OF A NARRATIVE PRACTICE AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO OBJECTIVISM

If nihilism means that everything is permitted, then a nihilistic world would be characterized by what we might call radical contingency. In a radically contingent world, all moral and epistemological categories are open to question; nothing is necessary in the sense that it simply *is*, independent of human agency. Whereas the ethical and political practice of the premodern world was structured by the overriding necessity of an immutable natural order where every being had a place and a function, and even early modernity could confidently rely on the necessity of a mechanically predictable if ultimately purposeless nature to determine appropriate social behavior, the late modern situation is one of unrelenting skepticism about every truth claim because we see all such claims as contingent human interpretations, with no grounding other than changing perceptions. For late modernity, nothing *is*; everything changes, or rather, everything can be changed by human interpretation. Nihilism has resulted from our recent recognition of the extent to which the world we experience is our own creation. If we want to escape from the nihilism of late modernity by regaining a sense of necessary limitations, then it would appear that we must articulate a conception of necessity that is compatible with the interpretive dimension of human existence.

As I have indicated, my project is an attempt to articulate a vocabulary for judging the validity of the communal narratives discussed by Alasdair MacIntyre and others, with the specific goal of demonstrating how limits may be established on individual actions within a community and on the actions a community may take toward both its own individual members and other communities. I will do this by developing the concept of a speech-based place to modify and extend MacIntyre's explication of the role of narrative—or as I will conceptualize it, narrative practice—in political communities. I will approach this task in turn by developing the idea of an oral/aural place as a non-objectivist

concept of necessity. Doing so would, I believe, accomplish the task adumbrated above—of articulating a conception of necessity that is compatible with the interpretive dimension of human existence. I have already discussed why any attempt to establish moral limits on political practice must go beyond the dichotomy of objectivism and relativism; in this chapter, I will explain why a concept of necessity grounded in the human capacity for speech could be a fruitful approach to this issue. This will allow me to establish a context for the chapters that discuss matters that might initially seem rather distantly related to ethics and politics.

We can begin to establish such a context by examining more closely the late modern situation of nihilism or radical contingency. To state the formulation just given in more detail, we could say that nihilism results from the ambiguous nature of modernity. On the one hand, modern humanity has discovered a hitherto underestimated capacity to understand, control, and even change the world, resulting in both previously unimaginable material wealth and relatively egalitarian social and political structures. On the other hand, these developments which have led to the modern idea of progress have been accompanied—and ultimately, it seems, overwhelmed—by an ever-growing epistemological and moral skepticism as our ability to control the world changes precisely those natural and human aspects of reality that we had earlier taken as the unchanging foundations of knowledge.

I will introduce my own project by arguing very briefly that this ambiguous situation of modernity results from what might be called our partial rejection of the classical natural order as articulated by Aristotle. That is, the modern objectivist paradigm has abandoned Aristotle's teleology but not his requirement that order and truth must be ultimately independent of human agency. The tensions produced by this situation have produced modern nihilism. This argument is certainly not original; it has been explicitly made by Jürgen Habermas and it is implied by MacIntyre and indeed most of the work that attempts to go beyond the objectivist/relativist dichotomy.<sup>1</sup> My own innovation is that I will develop this idea using the concepts of necessity and contingency; instead of saying that late modernity has destroyed all limits or that it has become nihilistic, I will argue that modernity has destroyed the cosmological conception of necessity available to the premodern world without providing a substitute, so that human knowledge and action have become radically contingent, and that the source of this radical contingency is ultimately the Enlightenment's objectivist conception of knowledge, which implies a very narrow understanding of necessity.

The implication of this discussion will be the need for a non-objectivist concept of necessity such as I will attempt to construct.

I should point out that I will hardly attempt to demonstrate this claim exhaustively, something that would obviously require a much longer argument; I simply want to establish the plausibility of the basic conceptual framework which will allow me to develop the idea of place. I should also reiterate that my discussion does not imply that my evaluation of modernity is entirely negative; I have already mentioned some of modernity's successes and indicated that I do not consider a return to anything like premodern political order a serious or desirable possibility. My discussion will, however, pay close attention to the destructive tendencies in modernity in order to illuminate more clearly the late modern situation.

### Necessity and Contingency in Modern Political Theory

We have already mentioned that for Aristotle, human fulfillment comes from practicing the virtues appropriate to one's place in the political community and thus in the natural order. The individual can be taught to develop good habits that will enable him<sup>2</sup> to contribute to the healthy maintenance of the society, since by nature it is only here that he can actually be a fulfilled, completed human being. The natural order of things, which consists of the various potentialities of natural beings, sets limits to the possible actions of the individual and in turn sets limits to what the society may demand of the individual. Nature, society, and individual fit together into a harmonious whole. Man has a fixed place in the cosmic scheme of things which allows him to understand himself and his purpose.

One way to conceptualize Aristotle's cosmos is to say that it is characterized by an unchanging necessity, or that the natural essences of beings set necessary limits on occurrences, including ultimately the kinds of social structures that will allow humans to function properly. We could say that in the classical cosmos, events are only *relatively* contingent, since they are all ultimately derivable from the essences of natural beings. That is, no truly new or novel or *absolutely* contingent event can occur; although change takes place, all possible occurrences are determined by the relatively narrow limits established by the unchanging structures of the various natural beings so that nothing is ever created and reality contains a finite set of possibilities.

This necessity, or rather perceived necessity, although it sets definite limits on human actions, is problematic for modernity because it

implies that humans have no free will—that is, no truly creative capacity—and indeed no way fundamentally to reorder relations of social hierarchy, since they are grounded in the immutable order of nature. From the modern standpoint, the classical political order has very limited possibilities because it is a component of a closed cosmos.

This closed cosmos was shattered by the biblical understanding of the world as absolutely contingent upon the paradigmatic personal speaker, God, who speaks it into existence and whose words remain ultimately always faithful. The world is absolutely or radically contingent in this view because God's speech acts actually create it from nothing and the world so created has infinite possibilities. Events are not derivable from unchanging natural essences because none exist; the possibility exists for truly novel occurrences. Similarly, humans, since they are created in God's image, also have a creative power in their capacity for speech and can actually change the world.<sup>3</sup> The conceptual revolution produced by this model lies at the basis of modern inductive, experimental science and the modern political ideals of freedom, equality, and democracy, but it has destroyed the basis for political theory available to the classical world by breaking down the necessary relations among natural beings and their ends. To gain a better understanding of modernity, we must examine these implications more closely.

For both Plato and Aristotle, the reality we experience with our senses is ultimately only a series of shifting images under which lies the true reality, the world of the Forms or the essences of natural beings. Aristotle had more confidence than Plato in the immanent world, but even for him induction is an inferior form of knowledge, and true science consists in deductive knowledge. Hence, ancient science rarely rose above the level of sophisticated classificatory systems. The implications of the biblical picture, however, are that we can be confident that the appearances we experience are ordered such that they will remain consistent in time; an experiment performed at  $T_1$  will yield results comparable with one performed at  $T_2$ . We can determine general laws from particular experience, since God's faithfulness means that the particular experiences will be consistent and comparable; in Aristotle's understanding of knowledge, such an approach will never yield the true essences of beings, which are the real basis of knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, if the order of the contingent world depends upon the faithful words of God, it cannot be a self-contained hierarchical whole of eternal essences or potentialities, and there will tend to be a flattening out of the hierarchies that define it, including those among people. Man

and woman, slave and free, and all nationalities will be equal under their creator. Additionally, since every person, even the most humble, has the creative power of speech, every human life is of infinite value. Thus, political and social hierarchies and forms of bondage will eventually become suspect.

We can see here how the biblical picture apparently contains the seeds of what is generally recognized as the promise of modernity—freedom, democratic equality, and scientific knowledge. But it seems that we can also see the origins of modern nihilism. For in this picture, humanity is radically displaced. Our place is no longer fixed in the cosmos and the polis; rather, it is wherever we meet God. We become restless wanderers, changing even our names. Even the tomb could not be a permanent place for God incarnate. Humanity's understanding of itself cannot be found in nature but rather in the story of its faithfulness to God's call. Therefore, if this faithfulness becomes problematic, the world may become an absolutely contingent, placeless chaos.<sup>5</sup>

This fundamental shift in orientation to and understanding of reality was not achieved immediately, of course. Only after many centuries of gradual changes in vocabulary and conceptual frameworks did the implications of a world radically contingent upon a transcendent creator-God begin to become clear. Not until the nominalist movement of the later Middle Ages was it decisively grasped that the biblical picture could allow no fixed essences or potentialities such as are central to Aristotle's entire comprehension of reality. Here we have the conceptual breakthrough that revolutionizes the Western conception of motion and thus allows modern mathematical physics to develop. This breakthrough, however, appears to have been made only at a huge cost; given the extent to which the medieval conception of God itself depended upon Aristotle's teleology, trust in God could become highly problematic when that teleology was destroyed, and the universe created by God could become a chaotic void. With nominalism we see the beginnings of what may be the fundamental modern dilemma: how to order a world that is potentially radically contingent.<sup>6</sup>

It is indeed the case that as the hierarchical cosmos of the medieval order crumbled, many of modernity's most prized achievements—scientific knowledge, greater social and political equality, and a greater sense of individual responsibility—began to develop, beginning with the Reformation and the scientific revolution and continuing through various modern reform movements. But also from a very early point, the potentially chaotic implications of a radically contingent world began to manifest themselves. Although there are many aspects to modernity,

one fruitful way of understanding modern political theory is to see it as a series of attempts to come to grips with this question, each one only radicalizing the problem beyond the previous one.

Modern objectivism, with its model of exact, impersonal, context-neutral "facts," can be understood as an attempt to establish necessity in the radically contingent world of nominalism, where there are no natural, unchanging essences or *telo*i. Indeed, René Descartes' prototypical formulation of the objectivist paradigm—that the only true knowledge is that which takes the form of "clear and distinct" ideas, themselves found by systematic skepticism—is explicitly conceived as a response to the possibility that the world in which we live was created by a malevolent trickster. But as much as modern thought is based on the rejection of Aristotelian essences, objectivism still contains a residual element of the Aristotelian cosmos in that it still assumes that the world's order—the "facts" obtained by skeptical reason—must be unchanging and must exist independently of human agency. The tension created by early modernity's apparent rejection of the classical cosmos and its retention of remnants thereof eventually generates late modernity's nihilism.

This tension can be seen quite clearly in the natural right theory of Hobbes and John Locke. Hobbes retained the concept of nature—of an ultimately unchanging order independent of human agency—but in a radically changed form. For Hobbes, nature is an inertial universe of matter in motion. There are no essences or natural ends to which beings are drawn; there are merely the redirections of inertial motion following collisions between particles of matter, describable by mathematical laws. Humans do not discern natural essences, including their own moral potentiality; in Hobbes's empiricist epistemology, the human subject simply receives its knowledge and passions from outside sensations. Politically, then, there is no highest good for man or natural order for communal life; the world consists simply of isolated individuals pursuing their own individual desires formed by natural passions. These radically dissociated individuals will frequently come into conflict over the scarce resources necessary to satisfy their desires, so that the natural state of man is a perpetual war of all against all. However, since men are mechanisms whose movements are predictable, it can be known with certainty that all of them have one common fear, i.e., violent death. Therefore, sufficient peace and order to allow individuals to pursue their own goals without conflict can be attained through an overpowering sovereign force, based on the fear of violent death, which establishes through authoritative acts of speech the fundamental rules of society, such as the definition of property. The rules established by the sovereign



are to remain unquestioned, although within this framework substantial freedom of action is allowed. The basis for the modern liberal state, which has as its purpose not the promotion of the good life but merely the provision of sufficient order to allow individuals to pursue their own desires without imposing on each other, is established.

Locke arrives at similar but importantly different political conclusions. The state is again simply a device to maintain order for individuals to pursue their private goals, but since, for Locke, the state of nature is relatively peaceful, minimal government is necessary. Indeed, individuals retain most of their natural rights when entering civil society and are allowed, in fact obliged, to overthrow the government if it attempts to take away those rights. Maintaining order requires not authoritarian government but limited, constitutional government.

Hobbes and Locke substantially articulate the political experience of the modern English-speaking world, at least until quite recently. Hobbes's *Leviathan* is the model of the modern Anglo-American liberal semi-secularized Protestant church-state. It exists, as noted, to maintain sufficient order for individuals peacefully to go about their business, it establishes basic laws which order transactions between individuals, it promotes scientific rationality as a means to improve the conditions of material life (that is, to provide for self-preservation), and it is ultimately grounded in an effectively unquestioned constitutional order which contains as a crucial component a civil theology centered around Protestant moral virtues (understood by Hobbes as the rules necessary to keep people out of each other's way), the clearest exemplar of which is the unofficial national religion of the United States, or what has been called the "American Civil Religion."

Hobbes's world is contingent ontologically in that there are no natural essences, only bodies in inertial motion, ethically in that there is similarly no universal end or goal for men, and politically in that society is not something given in the natural order but rather a creation of humans for convenience. On the other hand, there is still a substantial ontological necessity derived from the mathematical laws governing motion, which in turn creates the ethical necessity embodied in the universal fear of violent death and the political necessity of the liberal state's neutral rules. Indeed, the necessity of Hobbes's mechanically determined universe is in certain ways much more rigid than that of Aristotle's functional cosmos, although it ultimately does allow a greater range of possibilities.

Hobbes's assumption that all humans desire self-preservation can be understood as a remnant, however degenerate, of premodern natural

law theories, but Locke's theory shows even more clearly early liberalism's dependence on necessary limits remaining from premodern ethical and political thinking. The most important feature of Locke's theory is tacitly articulated in his conception of the law of nature. Locke's law is different from Hobbes's in that it is a preexisting moral obligation which all (or almost all) can be expected to know, rather than being merely an individual prudential calculation ratified by the state. This difference is why Locke's state of nature is more peaceful than Hobbes's: much of what Hobbes's sovereign does to maintain order, including deciding what counts as property, is built into the structure of Locke's state of nature. Thus, by bringing an essentially Aristotelian element—a moral obligation independent of existentially organized political society—into the picture, without which his theory would be incoherent, or would simply be the same as Hobbes's, Locke indicates the fundamental importance for English-speaking political order and bourgeois culture of a slowly eroding set of premodern (civic republican and biblical) beliefs, which help to legitimate the state (that is, which provide the substance of Hobbes's civil religion) and to temper the disintegrative effects of a purely self-interested individualism, which would otherwise lead to the necessity of the authoritarian state envisioned by Hobbes.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the partial transformation of these older beliefs into such modern manifestations as the Protestant work ethic and early liberal conceptions of rational self-improvement could in certain respects make the social order of liberalism quite harsh, with forcible education or exclusion of those failing to conform to the bourgeois model of the independent self.<sup>9</sup>

In sum, then, natural right theory presents us with a much more contingent, changeable world than is the case with Aristotle, but there are still very substantial elements of necessity derived from residual elements of pre-Enlightenment thinking. As these limiting elements become purged in later modern thought, setting down definitive moral and political principles becomes a much more difficult matter.

There are two routes from the natural right liberalism of Hobbes and Locke to the deontological liberalism of Immanuel Kant, one represented by David Hume and the other by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Both can be understood as recognitions of residual Aristotelian elements in natural right theory and as consequent further radicalizations of the world's contingency. Hume points out that if we push the empiricist model of knowledge to its logical conclusion, we must admit that causation is really only something we habitually impute to perceived regularity; it is not, as far as we can know, something actually "out



there." Hence, immutable laws of nature governing the motions of bodies, from which are derived the principles of natural right, turn out to be, in effect, remnants of Aristotelian ontology still lodged in our imaginations. Extending Hume's argument, we could say that ethically, even Hobbes's grim formulation of natural right as nothing more than self-preservation turns out to be a kind of back-door Aristotelian telos; if human likes and dislikes vary radically, there is no reason for thinking that the even the desire for self-preservation is universal. Thus, natural right theory founders because it fails fully to recognize the implications of its own assumptions.

Politically, the effects of this theoretical impasse were minimal for the English-speaking world itself, which continued to build relatively stable and effective democratic polities on the basis of a logically incoherent but existentially powerful combination of biblical, republican, and natural right elements. Only relatively recently has this amalgam showed striking signs of being unable to provide an adequate conceptual framework for dealing with the political problems of a technological age. The situation in continental Europe, however, was much less stable. The political theories of Rousseau and the German thinkers more clearly articulate the tensions of societies where traditional communities, social hierarchies, and forms of political legitimation have started to come unravelled under the forces of modernization but where no clearly satisfactory institutional successors are emerging, that is, where traditional elements of necessity are eroding and nothing is taking their place.

Rousseau's criticism of Hobbes and Locke, that they read social attributes into their "natural" men, can be understood in two ways. First, we can interpret it as an articulation of the fact that, however individualistic natural right theory may appear on the surface, a tacit Aristotelian conception of man as a social being remains, however tenuously, in the structure of the theory, corresponding to the residual Aristotelian elements in early empiricist epistemology. Second, we can say that Rousseau, living in eighteenth-century France, is experiencing a much more thoroughgoing disintegration of premodern social structures and belief systems than Hobbes or Locke experienced in seventeenth-century England, or indeed until English-speaking peoples generally experienced until well into the nineteenth or even the twentieth century. The key to the political successes of the Anglo-American democracies, in one sense, is that since they entered the modern world first, they entered it only partially. They have been, until recently, essentially early modern societies. The continental societies were forced to deal with a later and

more thoroughgoing confrontation with a world becoming radically contingent.

Rousseau's political theory articulates this radical contingency in the form of human freedom from nature, or, as he understands it, human potential toward perfectibility. Man in his natural state is asocial and indeed is not really man, being propelled only by inchoate desires, the most important of which is self-preservation, and by sympathy for other proto-humans. Social cooperation develops only slowly as an ad hoc response to natural desires. As it does develop, however, man begins to understand himself as man, as a moral being rather than a natural being, potentially free and perfectible. Unfortunately, social cooperation as it has developed to the present has resulted in the ultimate enslavement of all, including the rulers. But a transformation is possible, and the good society of *The Social Contract* can be created through an act of will. Man can gain true moral freedom through participation in a democratic society where no one dominates or is dominated.

Rousseau puts forward a vision similar to Aristotle's except that all men can be citizens and that freedom from nature, or natural desire, not the fulfillment of a natural end, is what is achieved. But this vision of a free humanity contains an ominous paradox. Since participation in the democratic politics of the good society is precisely what does, or can, lift man from his natural, pre-moral, pre-human state, his freedom and humanity are entirely dependent upon this participation in society. Participation, however, means submitting to the general will, since this is what directs the society and thus creates the individual as a free moral being in the society. Those who disagree with the general will have then, through their mistaken decision, lost their freedom, and they must be forced to be free. Since, in turn, any aspect of life can be relevant to the good of the community, it follows that there can be no limits to the action of the state in forcing one to be free. With Rousseau we see the first articulation of the possibility of modern totalitarianism. Rousseau's conception of freedom becomes paradoxically potentially totalitarian not because it is a positive conception, but because there are no limits to it. The individual becomes radically free from nature in willing the society that creates him as a moral being. But precisely because this means that he is in effect creating himself, his freedom is indeterminate and could result in anything. Rousseau's attempt to create a republic of virtue using a liberal conception of human nature creates an intensified version of Hobbes's Leviathan. And, of course, the French Revolution was, in part, the social embodiment of this paradox. The revolutionaries were

not limited by pre-Enlightenment practice to the extent that the earlier English revolutionaries were, so the revolution, in attempting to bring about freedom, instead eventually supplanted the decaying *ancien regime* with an even worse form of tyranny. With Rousseau the world is even closer than with Hobbes to being radically contingent upon human will; not only does man will society, he now wills himself.

Kant's philosophy is an attempt to deal with the implications of Hume's critique of natural right and Rousseau's conception of human freedom. It recognizes the greater extent of human agency implied by Hume and Rousseau but seeks to avoid the indeterminate, or radically contingent, world to which it seems to lead. Kant attempts to do this by arguing that the human subject does not just passively receive sensations but does in a sense actively project a conceptual framework onto the world it perceives. What keeps this framework from being simply an arbitrary creation is that it is limited by certain universal categories, such as causation and non-contradiction, which we cannot possibly conceive as being otherwise. Human intersubjectivity, or understanding of the phenomenal world, and human moral action are thus limited by these categories of the understanding, which in a sense take the place of Aristotle's cosmos. In the case of morality, the fundamental limit is set by the impossibility of the rational will contradicting itself. Hence, the basic moral law derived from pure practical reason is that the agent should always act in such a way that the maxim he acts upon could become a universal law. Kant thought that this meant that the agent should always treat any rational being (including himself) as an end rather than as a means. This amounts to a more abstract restatement of Hobbes's and Locke's law of nature, or to put it differently, the law of nature purged of heteronomy. In this regard, its major effect on liberalism would be to move it away from a primary concern with economics and material well-being to a more thoroughgoing attempt to construct a neutral state, governed by rules of equal justice and an expanded conception of tolerance, such as is found in the theories of reform liberals such as John Rawls.<sup>10</sup>

Later continental philosophers, however, argued that Kant's solution does not succeed, since the limits he perceives to human understanding (and thus the structure of subjectivity and intersubjectivity) turn out simply to be hypostasized elements of Newtonian physics and Euclidean geometry, and the limit he places on human moral freedom, the universalizability of the categorical imperative, turns out to be an empty formalism from which any moral position could be derived; the fundamental liberal moral rule of non-imposition of values does not

follow. In other words, Kant suffers the same fate as the earlier natural right theorists: what he had taken to be the necessary structure of the knowing subject and derivative necessary moral laws turned out to be merely contingent features of his own existential situation. Different subjects may project different conceptual frameworks onto the world.

From here it is a fairly short step to the proto-emotivism of Weber, who realized how indeterminate Kant's conception of the moral will was, and who can be said to have painted a picture of the later bourgeois world to which Kantian philosophies such as Rawls's would most fully apply. In the bureaucratic pluralism described by Weber, there is a schizophrenic split between the phenomenal world, the public realm of necessity, technocracy, and utilitarian individualism, and the noumenal world, the private realm of contingency, value-noncognitivism, and expressive individualism. These realms reinforce each other in a kind of Tocquevillian scenario, with the relentless pressure of bureaucratic control and maneuver in the public realm forcing the individual further and further into his own isolated subjectivity in the private realm, thus making him more susceptible to regularization and normalization in public, and so on. The rational freedom of Kant's noumenal self has become simply the radical contingency of demonic value choices, and the ends of public policy are the outcome of an indeterminate struggle that is rational only in the methods used to conduct it.

Although Rawls has modified his theory considerably since its first presentation in *A Theory of Justice*, his initial formulation of what he called the original position can be understood as a very apt metaphor for the radical contingency of life in the technocratic Weberian order. Beginning with individuals preparing to establish principles of justice by social contract under a veil of ignorance, unaware of their own abilities, preferences, and position in the society they will join, Rawls argues that these people will choose to be governed by a system of rights and liberties that allows equal freedom for all and by a principle of distribution such that all inequalities work to the advantage of the least advantaged, since these principles are what one would rationally choose to maximize one's advantage, that is, to maximize the benefits of the worst possible outcome under the given conditions of high uncertainty. The deontological selves inhabiting the original position, stripped of all attributes except the capacity for rational choice, are, as Rawls himself points out, an articulation of the need to divest all selves of their social history in order to provide for true equality of opportunity;<sup>11</sup> and the great uncertainty provided by the veil of ignorance could be recognized as an articulation of the uncertainty of successfully carrying out one's life

plans in an individualistic, competitive society. In both cases, Rawls's formulation captures the tenuousness of individual identity in a world where the natural moral order of Aristotle or even natural right theory has been lost and nothing has taken its place—that is, where the ethical and political necessity previously provided by a nature of which humans are a part has disappeared.

While the Weberian world just described is, from a moral standpoint, radically contingent, it is still subject to necessity in that Weber (and later bourgeois culture) thought that in the realm of science, at least, objective facts were still ascertainable. Karl Marx and Nietzsche, however, while chronologically earlier than Weber, can be said to have pushed his logic to its ultimate conclusion to show that even “facts” are really human creations. In so doing, they complete the process of destroying any conception of necessity to limit human actions.

With Marx the problem we saw in Rousseau and Kant, that man is partly natural and thus determined but also capable of transcending natural necessity and becoming free, returns but in radically historicized form. Marx accepts the Hegelian understanding of history as a progressively synthetic process but grounds it not in a spiritual process of consciousness but rather in economics. Man must eat to live, and it is in producing the necessities of life that he produces himself as a self-conscious social being. Thus, although human social structures are determined, or at least limited in manifestation, by the technological forces of production, the dialectic of needs—the creation of new needs from the creation of tools necessary to satisfy existing needs—can eventually progress to the point where humans can transcend the limitations of their economic nature to create an abundance great enough to fulfill everyone's needs, thus allowing all to be truly free.

Marx's theory creates a world more radically contingent than that of Weber in two ways. First, since all ideas are ultimately the creation of the forces of production, all notions of morality, justice, and even, to a certain extent, empirical social fact, are timebound, historically relative, and simply express the sociological position of those who hold them. Second, since the historical process of production, with its contingent moralities, leads inevitably to the final realm of communism, anything that advances this end result would logically become permissible. The only element of necessity left in this picture is the vision of the communist society, since even the necessity provided by the technological forces of production is ultimately overcome. But unlike even Rousseau's goal of the egalitarian republic, which has some basis in concrete historical examples and clearly embodies moral principles

already available, Marx's communist society is so different from anything hitherto existing that it becomes quite difficult to tell, as a practical matter, just what could bring it about. The goal of communism removes all limitations on the actions of those who would move history toward its culmination—not, as is so often stated, because of the certainty it provides to Marxist ideologues, but precisely because of the almost total uncertainty embodied in the vision of a perfectly free humanity.

Nietzsche, finally, can be understood as radicalizing the conception of human agency found in Marx and thus completing the process begun by Rousseau's recognition of the contradictions in natural right theory. Man is an animal whose fundamental characteristic is not economic activity but rather an unlimited capacity for creation through interpretation. The world in which he lives is therefore nothing more nor less than a chaotic clash of such interpretations. There is no being, only perpetual becoming, so man's notions of right, wrong, good, evil, and even rationality are simply values that he has posited, bridges that he has thrown across the abyss. "Truth" is not that which corresponds to the functional or mechanical natural order or even that which allows man to transcend his current situation through greater economic productivity but simply the most persuasive interpretation generated by the will to power. Recognizing this means that man—or at least the most persuasive men, the artists who create beauty—can cast off the egalitarian mediocrity of liberalism or socialism and the disenchanting analysis of science to create a new aristocratic order. But since this situation has no determinate end, even the tenuous necessity supplied by the good societies of Rousseau and Marx have disappeared. Nothing is left but endless new horizons. Just as Hobbes's instrumental rationalism is prophetic of the nineteenth century, Nietzsche's aesthetic irrationalism is prophetic of the twentieth century.

This prophetic role can perhaps be seen most clearly, not in the fascist appropriation of the will to power or even the deconstructive criticism of postmodernism, but in the overtly irrationalist ideological transformation that has followed the demise of reform liberalism and democratic socialism in the English-speaking world. The recently triumphant neoclassical liberalism of Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, and Robert Nozick asserts that the utterly arbitrary distribution of rewards deriving from unregulated capitalism is the very guarantor of individual freedom, since any "patterned" distribution of rewards imposes someone's values on others. Legitimation comes not from a just distribution of rewards, since none can exist, but from the freedom that



capitalism allows to will one's own values and act on them, i.e., from the system's capacity to provide an ever greater variety of demonic value choices. The moral orientation of contemporary capitalism is no longer rational self-improvement but rather aesthetic self-expression.

The story that I have sketched here attempts to articulate the late modern situation as a loss of any conception of necessity that can allow us to set limits on human actions. We have increasingly destroyed the necessity of Aristotle's ordered cosmos and left ourselves in a radically contingent universe. The form of this contingency can be seen changing, as it becomes more extreme in extent, from the inertial motion of Hobbes to the freedom of the will in Rousseau and Kant, from there to the historical materialism of Marx, and finally to the chaos of interpretations described by Nietzsche. It is this radical contingency, which tears down all limits, that makes the twentieth century unique in its coexistence of spectacular human capacities and grotesque human degradation.

Practically, it seems to me that this radical contingency has manifested itself in two ways in the twentieth century—first in the overt nihilism of the totalitarian movements during the first half of the century, and more recently in the subtler nihilism of the emerging global postindustrial capitalist economy.

The first half of this century engendered mass political movements that transformed vulgarized versions of the nineteenth-century German philosophies into vehicles for secular salvation, resulting not only in unprecedented violence and destruction, as Nietzsche himself had anticipated, but more fundamentally in the thoroughgoing denial of human finitude characteristic of the totalitarian attempt to take the Enlightenment idea of progress to its logical conclusion and actually create a new kind of human being. The world wars and revolutions of this century have been the most obvious manifestations of this breakdown of any limits on human action.

The half-century since the end of World War II has been characterized by relative peace and unprecedented prosperity, but at the same time by a profound sense of cultural exhaustion. The immediate postwar period seemed briefly to recapture a sense of stability as the corporate managerial order, or "new class," which replaced the shattered institutions of classical liberalism in the industrial societies, did achieve some legitimacy, even to the extent of partially reviving nineteenth-century notions of progress. Within a generation, however, Keynesian economic policies seemed to have exhausted their possibilities and popular culture gave clear signs that the widespread alienation that developed under earlier industrialism had actually

intensified; the postwar order did not resolve the fundamental dilemmas of bourgeois civilization which had become manifest in the early twentieth century.

More recently, the revival of laissez-faire ideology and the collapse of communism has given some the impression that the late twentieth century has seen the triumph of a "free-market democracy" which has actually restored a sense of human limits.<sup>12</sup> Nothing could be further from the truth. While the left sees recent developments as the reestablishment of hierarchical domination, and the right interprets the end of the Cold War as the triumph of capitalist realism over Marxist fantasy, the transformation of capitalism to a postindustrial economy and its expansion to global proportions is better understood as the most complete practical manifestation of the radical contingency of late modern existence articulated by Nietzsche. Not only has the new global information economy resulted in a significant increase in inequality of income and wealth, it has uprooted both elites and masses in a more thoroughgoing way than could even have been imagined earlier in the century.

At the elite level, the transformation of capitalism has resulted in the rise of an even newer version of the "new class," deriving its power not from technical expertise but from the production and manipulation of cultural symbols. This transnational dominant class of "symbolic analysts," unlike the earlier entrepreneurial or managerial classes, has little sense of institutional loyalty, as it works on a largely freelance basis. Also, rather than insulating itself from market forces, or attempting to carve out a private life of suburban domesticity separate from its public life of work, as older dominant classes within capitalism attempted to do, the new elite would better be described as living lives of frenzied market activity where public and private are collapsed into a blur of perpetual image-creation.

At the mass level, meanwhile, the postwar middle class of white collar and unionized blue collar workers sees its work being done by computers or low-wage Third World labor, and finds itself sliding into a vast class of service workers who receive not only low pay but more importantly few fringe benefits and virtually no job security. Indeed, the new computer technologies that have created the new economy could within a generation render so much of the population economically superfluous that unemployment rates could reach levels comparable to the Great Depression. One of the most striking features of the new world economy seems to be the prospect of pauperization on a scale not seen since the first industrial revolution.<sup>13</sup>

The aesthetic orientation of the new social order, manifested most obviously in the godlike status of performing artists and professional athletes, corresponds to the triumph of Nietzschean irrationalism in the most recent academic defenses of capitalism discussed earlier. At the level of popular ideology, the most prominent political figure of the new global order personified a vulgar Nietzscheanism: Ronald Reagan, a former movie actor, defined truth as whatever Ronald Reagan wanted truth to be. The degenerate version of the Protestant work ethic that Reagan endlessly preached—that one can succeed against any conceivable obstacle through nothing but hard work—can hardly be anything other than a crude version of the will to power. (The question of whether one is working *productively* or not, which was central to the older Lockean conception of justice, appears to have become irrelevant.) American liberals, chained to such outmoded Kantian notions as “facts,” have been powerless to comprehend the dynamics of the new postmodern capitalist world order of images. The ultimate fulfillment of Nietzsche’s prophecy seems not to be violent totalitarianism but rather libertarian consumer capitalism.

Given this cultural orientation and the more thoroughgoing breakdown of traditional community and family structures currently taking place, reaction to the social dislocations of the global capitalist economy is unlikely to resemble the organized ideological mass movements of the early- and mid-twentieth century. Although the earlier political movements were the product of social atomization and anomie, they did ultimately require and develop high levels of cohesiveness and organization. The current and probable future situation is more likely to result in the chronic low-level random violence of gangs and terrorists; ideological movements are more likely to take the form of splintered rabbles such as American militia groups. Just as the decentralized high-tech economy makes regulation by national governments more difficult, the very disorganization—and thus unpredictability—of violent responses by that economy’s casualties will create severe security problems.<sup>14</sup> The insecurity of the new global economy may represent the culmination of the modern process by which the world’s contingency is utterly radicalized.

As my brief discussion has already indicated, this radical contingency results from modernity’s partial abandonment of the classical cosmos. If the possibility of human creativity is accepted, then any viable concept of necessity must take this creativity into account. This is precisely what modern objectivism fails to do. If acceptable epistemological limits are conceptualized in impersonal, acontextual terms, then no limits will be found to distinguish acceptable from unacceptable

knowledge claims. Similarly, if we assume that limits on human action can only be provided by a fixed principle unaffected by human agency, such as Hobbes's mechanical laws, Kant's categories of the understanding, and even Marx's scientific analysis of the historical process, then the recognition that reality is at least partly a human creation leads inevitably to nihilism. Nietzsche's conclusion that reality is nothing but a clash of different interpretations can itself be seen as a case of disappointed objectivism, since it is based on the recognition that impersonal, objective knowledge is impossible without, however, any consideration that valid knowledge might take any other form.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, we can see how objectivism and the relativism upon which it is parasitical manifest themselves socially and politically in the tendencies of modern societies toward both technocratic tyranny and moral disintegration. Institutions built on objectivist principles will eventually be perceived as oppressive and dehumanizing, since they will be destructive of fundamental elements of human knowledge and communication, and since a conceptual framework understanding truth and rationality in objectivist terms provides no other alternatives, attempts to challenge the objectivist order will typically take relativist or irrationalist forms.

If we abandon completely the assumption that epistemological and moral limits must take an impersonal, acontextual form, however, it may be possible to speak of a contextual necessity that actually derives from human creative and interpretive capacities. This possibility is implied in recent post-Wittgensteinian philosophy of language and science, and my main task will be to explore it by developing the concept of narrative practice as an alternative to objectivism, specifically by developing the idea of an oral/aural place.

One additional implication of this discussion, incidentally, is that the radical contingency of the biblical picture, which I presented as setting the whole process in motion, may be problematic only when viewed from the perspective of objectivism or essentialism, or, rather, that this picture contains elements of necessity that become obscured by its interpretation in objectivist or essentialist terms. This would seem to be an implication of the discussion of science above, since it will be recalled that at the bottom of modern science lies the confidence in the orderliness of the immanent world, derived from the belief in God's faithfulness. The problem may well lie with the influence that Greek philosophy has had on Christian theology.<sup>16</sup>

In any case, to further clarify this issue it will be helpful to examine the work of several contemporary political theorists who attempt to deal

with the contingency implied by the collapse of the premodern cosmos and to discuss the difficulties they encounter. Specifically, I will show that none of these theories is able to articulate a conception of necessity that could establish limits, or defeat relativism, precisely because they are unable fully to escape the objectivist framework of knowledge. Or, to put it another way, none of these theories is able to establish a substitute for the classical cosmos, such as an interpretive principle, that could defeat Nietzsche's claim that reality is a radically contingent clash of subjective interpretations. Examining these theories will further clarify why my project of establishing a non-objectivist conception of necessity might be one fruitful approach to the contemporary question of limits.

### Necessity and Contingency in Contemporary Political Theory

I have already discussed in some detail the evolution of modern liberalism. It will be helpful to consider one further example to illustrate the difficulties involved in attempting to establish limits in late modernity. Isaiah Berlin is famous for his discussion of negative and positive liberty. For Berlin, the two conceptions concern themselves with different questions. Negative liberty is concerned with the actual area or space available to the agent for unrestricted movement, and positive liberty is concerned with who or what actually restricts the agent's movement. Berlin argues, of course, that only the negative conception is legitimate, or at least workable, because of the potential for tyranny inherent in the positive conception, which can logically lead to the idea of forcing someone to be free. In the terminology I have developed so far, it could be said that Berlin's discussion is an attempt to come to grips with the radical contingency of late modern existence. Berlin's critique of positive freedom can be seen as a recognition of the collapse of the classical ordered cosmos with its overarching good for human beings. If reality is not characterized by such an objective good, that is, if there are really only competing goods and indeed competing interpretations of the good, then attempts to realize freedom in the positive sense will inevitably result in someone imposing a particular conception of the human good on others who may not even comprehend this conception. The negative conception of freedom can be seen as an attempt to articulate a set of limits, or a conception of necessity, that can coincide with radical contingency. If we cannot find any overarching good for humanity, we can at least declare certain matters private and thus inaccessible to public coercion.

Unfortunately, Berlin's argument self-destructs, because the negative conception of freedom, or rather the distinction between positive and negative conceptions, tacitly assumes that there can be some objective, impersonal measure of the agent's area of unrestricted movement. The distinction between negative and positive liberty, at least as Berlin formulates it, collapses when we consider that the agent and others may disagree about the extent to which he or she actually is restricted; here it becomes a crucial matter *who* is setting the standard of measurement. The idea that there can be an objective, impersonal measure of the extent of the agent's restriction is precisely the product of the "grand metaphysical schemes" of which Berlin is so suspicious. Berlin does not seem to realize that his own radical subjectivism, which denies any fundamental unity to human experience, utterly destroys the objective basis for his distinction. Another way to understand this is to consider Berlin's admonition to "fall back on the ordinary resources of empirical observation and ordinary human knowledge." The obvious question that arises, and that arises from Berlin's own argument, is *whose* version of ordinary knowledge we are supposed to fall back on. To twist one of the phrases Berlin uses, the ordinary experience of an Egyptian peasant is very different from the ordinary experience of an Oxford don. One can also see Berlin's failure fully to appreciate the consequences of the radical contingency with which he is attempting to deal when he argues that only limitations placed by other humans, not natural limitations, should count as restrictions on human freedom. This argument tacitly assumes a natural order independent of human interpretation, which, as we have seen, is a notion incompatible with the subjectivism Berlin assumes to begin with.<sup>17</sup>

What is crucial about Berlin's discussion, for our purposes, is that he develops his negative conception of freedom as an attempt to deal with the radical contingency of the late modern world, but then undermines his own argument by falling back on an objectivist conception of necessity—in this case, some kind of objective measure of the area of an agent's movement. Any conception of necessity that would succeed, given his initial recognition of the extent to which humans interpret the world differently, would have to take this interpretive dimension into account, which Berlin's conception does not do. Indeed, we can also see that Berlin's distinction not only does not solve the problem, it actually blinds him to the real issue, which is the lack of limits in late modernity. As we have seen, it is this, not the notions of community or "collectivism" found in non-liberal political theories, that is responsible for the extreme forms of tyranny experienced in the