

## CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

### *The “Crisis of Man” as Obscurity and Re-enlightenment*

In the middle decades of the twentieth century, American intellectuals of manifold types, from disparate and even hostile groups, converged on a perception of danger. The world had entered a new crisis by 1933, the implications of which would echo for nearly three decades to follow: not just the crisis of the liberal state, or capitalist economy generally, and not only the imminent paroxysm of the political world system in world war. The threat was now to “man.” “Man” was in “crisis.” This jeopardy transformed the tone and content of intellectual, political, and literary enterprise, from the late thirties forward, in ways that—because they are so intertwined with panic, piety, and the permanent philosophical questions of human nature—have still not been given an adequate accounting.

To its adherents, the crisis of man specified the danger of the end or barbarization of Western civilization. New conditions seemed destined to snap the long tradition of humanism, the filament of learning, humane confidence, and respect for human capacities that had made intellect modern and progressive since the Renaissance. Thinkers mourned the “end of history” as a forward-moving, progressive stream; it seemed a lonesome terminus in their eyes, and not a fulfillment as in our contemporary “end of history.” Their fear, above all, was that human nature was being changed, either in its permanent essence or in its lineaments for the eyes of other men. The change would have the same result in either form: the demolition of those certainties about human nature, which had been pillars for optimistic thinkers for two centuries.

The Rights of Man had been the foundation upon which modern democracies were built. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men . . . are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights,” the Declaration of Independence asserted in 1776. “[T]he only causes of public misfortunes and the corruption of Governments,” allowed the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in 1789, are the “ignorance, forgetfulness or contempt of the . . . natural, unalienable and sacred rights of man.”<sup>1</sup> After 1939, the unalienable rights of man could not be taken for granted in Europe, as “man” was being alienated and eradicated, altered and undone. These erasures largely occurred at gunpoint, of Nazi, Soviet, or fascist

arms, though intellectuals took the threat to be much more general. Perhaps men had been better off in ignorance and naive hopefulness, except that, the intellectuals warned, it was this blindness that had prepared the field for the disasters of Nazism and totalitarianism.

Meditations on fundamental anthropology are as continuous a stream of introspection as one can find in the history of philosophy, alongside questions of the substance of the world and the nature of the heavens; you can reach down and pull up a dipperful of speculations on the human in any year. The distinct return of man as a center of intellectual inquiry, apart from his scientific, practical, or religious nature, marks more definite occurrences within the long philosophical trajectory of the history of the West, and the period of the interwar years and World War II constitutes one such landmark. In this moment, the modern progress of expanded rights and protections for oppressed human groups and ignored subjects—the nonwhite, nonmale, and the nonelite—gave way to a renewed inquiry into the majoritarian, unmarked human subject itself, to change and reground the rationale for human moral status and inviolability.

From the 1930s through the 1950s, intellectuals debated a fundamental abstraction. “Whatever be the line of inquiry, the thread leads back to man. Man is the problem,” the Jewish sociologist of religion Will Herberg wrote in 1951, speaking for a perception of the uniqueness of his time.<sup>2</sup> His mentor, the Protestant neoorthodox theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, had stated the discourse’s difficulty, however, along with its necessity, a decade earlier, near its inception: “Man has always been his own most vexing problem. How shall he think of himself? Every affirmation which he may make about his stature, virtue, or place in the cosmos becomes involved in contradictions when fully analysed.”<sup>3</sup> Interminable analysis itself also became the intellectuals’ form of action, a means to pull others into the framework of affirmation and contradiction that their thought created.

### “CRISIS” AND “MAN”

“Crisis,” in the context of 1939, had been a thundercloud continually forming new shapes since World War I. Eric Hobsbawm has stressed the thirty-one years of continuous war that define the early twentieth century, one year more than the Reformation’s bloody thirty-year realignment of Europe from 1618–48.<sup>4</sup> It was a single movement, in a way, of changed political, technological, and philosophical norms for Europe. Hobsbawm observes that those shielded from intervening events, as in England and America, could see it as two discrete wars separated by a bad but recognizable peace; this is how Americans do tend to see it today. In fact, at the

time, intellectuals attuned to Continental events could also see it as continuous, from whichever country they looked. From the vantage of England, E. H. Carr, the Cambridge historian, had it as the “Twenty Years’ Crisis” in 1939, a continuity of instability from Versailles to the invasion of Poland.<sup>5</sup> Safely in America, the German émigré Hannah Arendt in 1951 described it in this way: “Two World Wars in one generation, separated by an uninterrupted chain of local wars and revolutions, followed by no peace treaty for the vanquished and no respite for the victor,” ending “in the anticipation of a third World War between the two remaining world powers.”<sup>6</sup> In any country, those with eyes open to the affairs of the world, or ready to listen to such authorities, could sense they were living in a unique and uniquely bad time.

American intellectuals who identified themselves with world politics could recite a continuous list of crises leading up to World War II. They had learned the litany from their newspapers or from networks of political comradeship: 1928, Stalin’s expulsion of Trotsky and the old revolutionaries to concentrate his power; 1929, the stock market crash and global depression; 1931, the Japanese militarists’ occupation of Manchuria; 1933, Hitler’s electoral takeover; 1935, Mussolini’s invasion of Abyssinia, raining bombs and poison gas on lightly armed Ethiopian soldiers; 1936, Franco’s revolt against the Spanish Republic and the rumbling bloodshed of the first fully ideologized, internationalist war in the midst of Europe; 1939, Hitler’s capture of Czechoslovakia, secret nonaggression pact with Stalin, and invasion of Poland to launch World War II. By 1940, France had capitulated, and that signified, in essence, the end of Europe. It was done. From Portugal to Spain to Russia at the furthest meridian of the Continent, democratic forms had expired, either by murder or acquiescent suicide. England stood alone against the ruined Continent, its shapeless island not more than twenty miles separated at Dover from the Normandy coast through which Hitler seemed likely to invade. This meant that those in the United States, who suffered none of these disasters, still knew that the political philosophy of fascism, and its means of controlling populations through terror, complicity, and mobilization (the potent trinity that was very early on called “totalitarianism”), spelled something terrible for the liberal-democratic West and the European tradition with which Americans identified.<sup>7</sup> Serious arguments were proffered that the world was becoming totalitarian because the totalitarian model of the rule of men was more efficient and effective than the liberal state’s manner of leaving men on their own, proposals that reinforced the 1930s intellectuals’ habitual mistrust of liberalism or fears on its behalf. In the press, too, the world conflict reflected rival models of man. *Time*, in its year in review for 1941, pronounced in its books section, a few years late for the intellectuals, that “The greatest

challenge of all” that year “was the triumphant emergence of a new human type, totalitarian man—superbly armed, deliberately destructive and dominant—at the very heart of what had been Europe’s cultural sanctuaries.”<sup>8</sup>

Visions of the “new man” preceded National Socialism in avant-garde artistic and political utopias of the early century.<sup>9</sup> Yet Hitler’s revolution made the rhetoric distinctively its own. Contemporaries could cite Hitler’s boast to Hermann Rauschning: “Those who see in National Socialism nothing more than a political movement know scarcely anything of it. It is more even than a religion: it is the will to create mankind anew.”<sup>10</sup> Historians of fascism validate the seriousness with which observers in the thirties viewed promises that today seem outlandish, as research has confirmed the centrality of new man theory to propaganda and practice.<sup>11</sup> Joachim Fest has emphasized how “[i]n countless speeches and proclamations Hitler again and again conjured up the image of the ‘new man,’ and the many people who acclaimed the regime, who applauded every step it made and every point in its programme, celebrated the development of this man as the dawn of ‘the truly golden age.’”<sup>12</sup> The cynicism and idealism of the people-shaping program of the Nazi leadership was familiar to Americans who had read the regime’s chief scriptures.<sup>13</sup> In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler warned “that by the clever and continuous use of propaganda a people can even be made to mistake heaven for hell, and vice versa, the most miserable life for Paradise.”<sup>14</sup> In the other official best seller of Nazi Germany, the Aryan race theory diatribe titled *The Myth of the 20th Century*, Alfred Rosenberg specified that the “measures taken on all social planes to mould a new human type” would define a complementary “task of the twentieth century.”<sup>15</sup>

Humanity was divided, said new man theory. The divisions must be accelerated and completed. National Socialists must be taught to identify declining specimens, a subhuman within humanity. This was *Der Untermensch*, eponymous subject of an SS tract from 1935. “For all is not equal which bears a human face! Woe to him who forget[s] this!”<sup>16</sup> Against an Aryan ideal stood the degenerate image specified in the Nazi book *The Counter-Type (Der Gegentyp)*, 1938, which “stated clearly what was involved in the sharp distinction.”<sup>17</sup> Italian fascism advertised comparable ambitions to divide and transform man. Mussolini’s famous 1932 article in *Enciclopedia Italiana*, ghostwritten by Giovanni Gentile, extolled a new “fascist man,” while at the “totalitarian leap” (*svolta totalitarian*) later in the decade, “[a]nother activist party secretary, Achille Starace . . . led a campaign to shape the Fascist ‘new man’ by instituting ‘Fascist customs,’ ‘Fascist language,’ and racial legislation.”<sup>18</sup>

But Hitler excelled all other totalitarian visionaries in his institutions for reshaping the clay of human life and firing it through violence and

crime. “In my great educative work,” Hitler said, “I am beginning with the young. . . . In my *Ordensburgen* [the Nazi academies] a youth will grow up before which the world will shrink back. A violently active, dominating, intrepid, brutal youth—that is what I am after. . . . In this way I will eradicate the thousands of years of human domestication. Then I shall have in front of me the pure and noble natural material. With that I can create the new order.”<sup>19</sup>

With the US entry into the war after Pearl Harbor, government and mass-market magazines began to take up the language of the new crisis, adding the values of man to those fundamentals that democratic armies defended. *Fortune* magazine produced a major unsigned statement by the editors: “The Heart of the Problem: Without Vision of Deep Purpose We Shall Perish,” and turned to professors of philosophy and theologians for “a general meaning.”<sup>20</sup> Professor William Ernest Hocking of Harvard, in an article on “What Man Can Make of Man,” warned that “In all our doings, and by way of these doings, something is happening to human nature.”<sup>21</sup> The French neo-Thomist theologian Jacques Maritain proposed that “the only way of regeneration for the human community is a rediscovery of the true image of man”—in his case, a Catholic image.<sup>22</sup> As a new School of the Humanities was launched at Stanford in 1942, its dean posed, against the outer crisis of the Axis onslaught, the “internal crisis” of the new sense of man, both for evil and good: “Today we see [man] turning the weapons of his brain against himself—groping, amid the noise of a tottering civilization, for some faith in man to which he can cling.”<sup>23</sup>

One can detect much in the early discourse of the crisis of man that is desperate and hortatory. But philosophical intellectuals and practical commentators of the true crisis of man discourse alike tried to understand why Europe had gone under and how England and America might not. They asked what man was, in what part of himself he should have a steady faith, and how he had come to this pass. A confusion and difficulty of the philosophical intellectuals’ enterprise is that they were claiming to ask anew a question that we know they had always asked. Philosophers had contemplated man’s nature for three thousand years. “What is man?” as a discrete phrase is a cliché twice over, and belongs to two different points of origin. One is the Bible: “What is man?” is heard in both Job and Psalms.<sup>24</sup> But “What is man?” held a hallowed place, too, in the philosophy of the Enlightenment. It is remembered from the handbook to Kant’s *Logic*, where he says that there are only four true questions of philosophy in its universal sense: “What can I know?,” “What ought I to do?,” “What may I hope?,” and “What is man?”<sup>25</sup>

When the intellectuals took up man in the recognizable language and concepts of midcentury, they created a historically specific configuration.

These intellectuals attempted to wrench the question free of the context of homiletics, invest it with the utmost urgency, and answer it inductively in a single book, sometimes of 300, 600, or 700 pages. Their seriousness was not a hoax. The inquiry was taken up by major thinkers not dealing in clichés or trafficking in old religion. Yet there is always something odd, unnerving, in this tenacious grasping of a question that really might have deserved its neglect as a sermon title or a lecture-room chalkboard scribble. And one is struck by how many significant secular books in the period begin, in their first line, with the cliché, making no attempt to evade the echo. “What is man?” the German émigré philosopher Ernst Cassirer labels his first section of a short summary book of 1944 written for Americans to cover the body of his own thought and the fundamental questions of philosophical anthropology.<sup>26</sup> “What is man?” the native-born historian and urban theorist Lewis Mumford begins another major book of 1944 within his series of researches on civilization and technology.<sup>27</sup> It is in the dissident theologians’ work as well, renewed: Martin Buber, for example, used the phrase in a mixed philosophical-theological register (as “Was ist der mensch?”) in his inaugural 1938 course of lectures as an émigré to Jerusalem, after years of being monitored and harassed by the Gestapo.<sup>28</sup>

Man became at midcentury the figure everyone insisted must be addressed, recognized, helped, rescued, made the center, the measure, the “root,” and released for “what was in” him. But the thinkers who encouraged this were not, themselves, naive. Paragons of erudition, most knew the shape of other answers, the profusion of historical shrubs and undergrowth on this plot of ground that might tempt one to call the query an unanswerable. The more skeptical among them acknowledged that every effort to specify what the quiddity was that defined man seemed doomed. They had to admit to many previous definitions, as the Oxford philosopher R. G. Collingwood noted:

We know, or at least we have been told, a great deal about Man; that God made him a little lower than the angels; that Nature made him the offspring of apes; that he has an erect posture, to which his circulatory system is ill adapted, and four incisors in each jaw, which are less liable to decay than the rest of his teeth, but more liable to be knocked out; that he is a rational animal, a risible animal, a tool-using animal, an animal uniquely ferocious and malevolent towards his kind; that he is assured of God, freedom, and immortality, and endowed with means of grace, which he prefers to neglect, and the hope of glory, which he prefers to exchange for the fear of hell-fire; and that all his weal and all his woe is a by-product of his Oedipus complex or, alternatively, of his ductless glands.<sup>29</sup>

Still, Collingwood sat down to write his *New Leviathan: Or, Man, Society, Civilization, and Barbarism* in 1942, in the midst of the bombardment of London, as the only way he knew to contribute to the war effort. Knowing already the difficulty or even absurdity of the project, he began his book, too, with those three words that open other books of the period: “What is Man?”<sup>30</sup> And he intended—like the others—to answer.

### ANSWERS AND NON-ANSWERS

In one sense, the intense early thinkers of the discourse of man did answer their questions. They said what man was and what he must do. What he must do was, generally, to stay, or become, whatever they said he was already, or to avoid becoming, or not surrender to, whatever he was tempted to be but should not be. The shape of the answers becomes clearer through comparison. They enjoy a limited range of variety.

For Reinhold Niebuhr, man was a being made by God, yet one who sinned in hubristic efforts at self-transcendence (an orthodox theological answer). For Ernst Cassirer, man was naturally made to transcend himself through intellect, his only “essence” his functional ability to frame concepts as symbols and thereby extend his humanity (a neo-Kantian philosophical answer). For Martin Buber, humanity was that which emerged in the semimystical relation between man and man, having reality neither in the individual nor in the collective (a mystical theological answer). For Julian Huxley, man must be measured scientifically by his “welfare, development, and active participation in social processes” and would be defined by a less personal social standard in the new “Age of Social Man” (a utopian technocratic answer). For Collingwood, man would persist only in a civil community, which meant one in which all human relations were purged of the use of force (a liberal philosophical answer). For Erich Fromm, man would indeed be *known* ever more deeply by psychological science, but in his “physico-spiritual” nature, which existed primarily for the better, peaceful realization of a permanent happiness (a humanistic psychological answer). For C. S. Lewis, all men must learn the *tao*, the unity of religious-moral knowledge that underlies all human nature (a conservative amateur-apologetical answer). While for Sartre, “[m]an is nothing else but what he makes of himself” in responsibility and anxiety, inescapably modeling an idea of man for others (an existentialist answer).<sup>31</sup>

In a different sense, these weren’t answers at all. They were, rather, elevations or promotions of one value or position to the status of an ultimacy. Or they were stakes, in the sense of commitments, “antes” in a hand at cards—starting points in the guise of endings. Their challenge seems to lie in the status of any single claim within the context of a multiplicity of an-

swers—a multiplicity sure to be expanded, not convergently diminished, by the repetition of the insistence that one must answer. It would be wrong to be disappointed by the closeness of the thinkers' answers to their previous positions, but it might be equally wrong to judge the significance of this particular claim as comparable to other of their claims to truth and argument.

Besides the puzzling status of the underlying discourse and its mode of answers, however—and although in summary of individual positions it can seem as if the thinkers talked past one another entirely—we can in fact notice that constellations of positions emerge in four areas of great importance. Here were the subquestions of that overwhelming question or imperative: What is man and how shall we rediscover him? These areas were passed on, too, to later iterations of the discourse among debaters and writers of the late 1940s, the 1950s, and early 1960s.

The first area of concern was with what man was himself, and whether there existed anything fundamental beneath his facade, a human nature, determinate and accessible, when all else was social and unreliable. I will call this level of concern by its traditional name of philosophical anthropology, the “philosophy of man,” or simply the “question” of man and human nature. Was there even such a thing as an abstract, universal man? Was there an individual, freestanding nature that could exist beyond all demands of collectives of men? Should there be such individuality, or was community (of the right kind) a necessary part of human nature?

The second area of preoccupation was with the shape of history. The history question included fears that the twentieth-century cataclysms had shown that the chronology of civilized development was not as people had previously imagined it, that events perhaps had no good order, or that previous fantasies of historical destiny and inevitability had actually led to these violent disasters and therefore needed to be reconceived. Was it possible or desirable to rehabilitate any sense of direction in history?

Third was a concern with faith—a vague word—as a worry about both religion and ideology. What sort of beliefs could and should be maintained in the midst of a world turned upside down? Thinkers wondered whether it was possible or wise to believe in anything abstract, lest it lead to the further abuse of concrete human life, after dogmatic belief—in Germany, Italy, and Russia—had led to the worst disasters. Yet how would they go on without a faith in progress, in God, or simply in a natural supremacy of good rather than evil in the world? It had a concrete political reference, too, in concerns over a “crisis of liberalism,” meaning both economy and democracy, and the fear that even if one felt no temptation to totalitarianism, one possessed no reliable historical model for political order under new global conditions.

The fourth area, finally, was a fear about technology, in the sense that human technologies might be outstripping or perverting humane thought and goals. Technology in this debate included material artifacts like machines and bombs, and factory systems to make them, and also human techniques, especially the forms of technique that would organize men and women (whether in collective “planning,” usually counted as good by the political left and center, and questioned by voices on the laissez-faire right, or in machine control and the de-individualizing propensity of technical efficiency, which was universally accounted bad).

If the human nature and faith questions seem abstract while the history and technology questions are specific, this mismatch very much belonged to the intellectual texture of the age, in an effort to attach the empirical to the spiritual, to hold together evanescent beliefs with hard facts of destruction, which were much too present. Human nature, in this particular discourse, is not really about physiology or evolution. “History” means the philosophy of history’s shape and cycles. “Faith” is less about specific doctrines than the socially binding or undermining function of belief itself. Even technology turns into “technics,” an autonomous, world-reordering force.

### THE USES OF EMPTYNESS

One of the striking features of the discourse of man to modern eyes, in a sense the most striking, is how unreadable it is, how tedious, how unhelpful. The puzzle is why it is unreadable. I don’t believe that it’s only because the context, or our assumptions, have changed, or because the discourse of man was finished off by different claims—though all of that is true. Rather, the discourse of man was somewhat empty in its own time, even where it was at its best; empty for a reason, or, one could say, meaningful because it was empty.

Because “empty” belongs to an everyday, nontechnical language, it may be misunderstood. I draw a distinction between two very different forms of cultural conversation: empty discourse and cant discourse. The crisis of man had both, usually but not always among different sets of intellectuals and spokesmen. A cant discourse is one in which the words deliberately do not mean anything that can be questioned, argued about, or refined by disagreement. In such a case, the words themselves, as symbols of mystery or profundity, credential the speaker’s other utterances without adding discriminable content. Cant represents a default of thought, and likely bad faith. It may originate as shorthand for an original debate that no longer exists in the consciousness of its hearers, or it may be floated in order to evade a discussion that the user was never capable of sustaining. It becomes a counterfeit that drives out the good.

The utility of the discourse of man for cant was something that troubled its intellectuals, especially in the later years. Perhaps “the dignity of man” suffered this collapse at midcentury more than any other formulation.<sup>32</sup> In this strain, the “dignity of man” could be made a name for whatever was good about American democracy and bad about the USSR, since one system (democracy) knew what people were “really like” and the other (authoritarian socialism) betrayed human dignity. Or the “crisis of man” itself could become a name for the existence of people without religion or values, or individuals made lonely by the individualism and anonymity of cities in alienation; in short, a new name for solvent features of the modern, which had been better diagnosed by Durkheim, Weber, or many a sociologist from the turn of the century to its middle.

However, there *was* a useful empty discourse of man, something quite distinct, coherent, and credible, if not necessarily always lovable or redeemable seventy-five years after the fact. The midcentury discourse that, in the face of the massive degradation of the rights of man, tried to rediscover a foundation for man’s protection simply said: there must be something that must be protected. The human agency to protect this unknown quantity was absent. And so there was a strong temptation to imagine this protection as self-authorizing, auto-guaranteed. Man must carry his warrant within himself, like his heart or lungs. Any person should have it—whatever it should be, from wherever it came.

The gesture in the best part of the crisis of man that substitutes for grounding, and does the real work of the discourse, was the gesture itself of saying “we must protect.” Also: “there must be something to protect.” Finally, “there must be something that protects itself.” What makes it empty, however, is the consequence when participants successively phrase, answer, rephrase, and reanswer their questions in the service of these imperatives. An empty discourse is one that behaves as if it wishes to be filled with a single inductive or deductive answer—a definitive argument meant to persuade all hearers and end inquiry through complete satisfaction—but in fact generates the continuation of attempts, or tacitly admits to unanswerability.

The value of acknowledging this kind of discourse *as* knowledge might be brought out by a familiar analogy to the therapy of ordinary language philosophy on linguistic analysis. Classic linguistic analysis in philosophy thinks of language most often for its function of description of true or false states of affairs: “Socrates is a man.” “The cat is on the mat.” Ordinary language philosophy pointed out the significant presence of multiple classes of meaningful statements that do not describe states of affairs. Best remembered are “performatives” (in J. L. Austin’s long-ago coinage),

including such statements as “I thee wed,” “I dub thee knight,” “I christen thee *Britannia*,” in which the utterance of each of these statements in certain conditions performed an act.<sup>33</sup> Such a speech-act changed a state of affairs in the world through its utterance as a statement, not by itself offering any rival description or proposition.

Say that the form of discourse in the discourse of the crisis of man, too, is not an ordinary truth-describing discourse. It does not cause convergence upon a solution through adversarial arguments and tests. True, each individual participant in the discourse of the crisis of man may give, indeed, is very likely and even duty bound to supply, a single descriptive claim: “Man is X.” My concern—quite difficult to resolve at the level of individual participants’ psychology, and perhaps only to be decided at the higher level of function and effect—is that it doesn’t seem quite right that when each thinker says “Man is X,” this is truly being promoted as a single, provable explanation, intended to end all debate. The underlying utterance, say, in all these presentations, remains both collective and imperative: “*We must* give a new or renewed statement of what man is.” One does not, in fact, expect to stop others from giving answers; one anticipates ever more answers. The proliferation of answers, not their conclusion, seems to be the underlying point.

### GENRES, CHARACTERISTICS, AND SCOPE

Characteristic genres of the discourse of man include collective forms that critics of literature and thought ordinarily hold in ill-repute. One is the series of articles by disparate authorities on a theme or keyword. Another is the anthology. A third is the multiply signed “credo”—more like a monument in front of town hall than a manifesto—combining the prestige of intellectual authorities who but for the present emergency would possess no point of contact. The intellectually arbitrary nature of such formal devices contributes to their force in practice—“here are some geniuses who disagree on all things, but *not this*.” When lions lie down with lambs because both fear a bigger beast, humankind must take notice.

As prose objects, instances of these genres can induce the vertigo of hearing a portentous speaker utter completely incompatible statements on fundamentals—like the nameless collective voice in *The City of Man* (1940), tilting between theism and atheism to match its many authors and signatories: “Universal and total democracy is the principle of liberty and life which the dignity of man opposes to the principle of slavery and spiritual death represented by totalitarian autocracy. . . . Democracy is nothing more and nothing less than humanism in theocracy and rational theocracy

in universal humanism. . . . Democracy teaches that everything must be within humanity, nothing against humanity, nothing outside humanity.”<sup>34</sup> Or it suggests an all-inclusive emptiness and circularity, as in the introduction to an exemplary anthology: “Man is a totality; Man is a unity; and it is irrelevant to a true estimation of his nature to develop an infinite multiplicity of doctrines concerning his nature: a scientific one, a philosophical one, a psychological one, a religious one, a secular or sociological one.” For an answer that supplanted others would be in effect totalitarian: “[I]t is productive of tragic consequences to subordinate all other methods to a single approach whether it be a theological, a rationalistic, or an empirical one.”<sup>35</sup> In the mass magazine series, the reader can get the impression that it would be preferable to forget the content of each previous month’s installment by the arrival of the new one.

The characteristic rhetoric and figures of speech of the discourse of the crisis of man turned to spatial figures, and a simultaneous preoccupation above all with limits and depths. The architectonic was inner, vertical, and spherical—of shells and cores, and Man enclosed by nature and intelligence. Sketched, it would look like Vitruvian Man, whom Leonardo drew touching both the circle and the square. Attachment occurred downward by roots, or upward in aspiration of transcendence. Kinship existed in a family conceived as circular, “nuclear” (for the tiny triad at the nucleus), or tied in a “brotherhood” of individuals who stood to one another in relations simultaneously of identity and fraternity: the human family, alike as paper dolls, linking hands and girdling the earth.

The discourse’s intellectual trajectory rose and declined. It gained urgency in the debate over intervention, expanded once the United States entered the war, reached an intellectual peak by 1951, and, at that point, was popularized and banalized. Yet America did not recover “closure” after the war. On the contrary, it expanded its responsibility to the world, at least the “free world.” It may be crucial to know even at this stage of our inquiry that intellectuals through the 1950s would declare the crisis not over; it was only being swept of its detritus and obstructions, the twigs the storm had broken, to be seen ever more clearly. Their depression began even before the Cold War took firm hold, and remained as the Cold War renewed the crisis and somewhat altered its meaning again, in the firming up of bipolarity and the fracturing of the world into hostile camps, United States and Soviet.

The literary critic Newton Arvin tried to explain the widespread return to “fundamentals” in 1950: “For one thing, the nerves of even the most imperturbable might, not incomprehensibly, have been deeply shaken in the last thirty-six years and especially in the last four or five.”<sup>36</sup> Just to make clear what he is saying: Arvin was proposing that the “four or five” postwar

years from 1945–50 might have been more nerve-racking for Americans than the whole rest of the thirty-year crisis since the beginning of World War I. Delmore Schwartz in 1951 described the “mounting and endless crisis” and a “postwar period” that had “quickly assumed the appearance and generated the atmosphere of a new pre-war period.”<sup>37</sup>

Large numbers of people may have felt they ought to have something to say, or know something, or do something, about man. While some of this had to do with the emotion of wartime, it was also a function of elites and public spokesmen who felt it their duty to oblige their fellow men to think about man. The discourse of man was not a popular discourse at its origins. It came from the top and settled downward, finding its way into small officials’ speeches and, presumably, into the crevices of minds. One runs across publications like this one in 1950 from a charitable lecture group called the “Church Peace Union”:

APPENDIX B. SUGGESTIONS FOR ARRANGING  
A SEMINAR ON THE NATURE OF MAN

Those who have read this book will realize that a study of human nature is not an academic pastime in our day. We have seen that leaders of thought trace the so-called “crisis in our civilization” to a crisis in man himself. Hence they tell us that if we would understand our age with its problems of crucial importance, we must find a deeper insight into the nature of man. . . .

SPEAKERS

Many communities could arrange a series on the nature of man by using its own leaders in the schools, professional fields and business world. . . .

PROMOTION

The entire series as well as each meeting must be given wide publicity. . . .

It may also be possible to arrange for programs on the radio—brief addresses by guest speakers or round table discussions on several of the subjects.

And so forth, in “the hope that other communities across the land will arrange series of discussion groups on the nature of man.”<sup>38</sup>

THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF NEGLECT

The 1940s, the initial center of gravity for this study, are often just treated in American intellectual history as interim years of war (as if thought

stopped during the largest single cataclysm of the century), or as a divided period, a wishbone that goes half to the “thirties” and half to the “fifties.” The thirties, as the remains of the period of “radicalism” and social consciousness, pick up some portions of the war decade, though often in their dimensions of retrenchment and intellectual retreat. The war’s massive mobilization, and the period of consumer abundance and yet intellectual anxiety and doubt after the war, get taken up into the Cold War and the “adjustment,” “consensus,” and “conformity” that define the stereotypes of the decade of the fifties and the presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower. Even many of the best scholars of the 1940s look for particular impasses or divisions that can break the decade in two.<sup>39</sup>

The crisis of man and its project of re-enlightenment yield a different periodization without such a sharp split: a complete and consistent phase of thought from 1933 to 1951 in which intellectuals looked outward to shared, new threats, and from 1952 to 1973 a still-continuous phase of philosophical demand and rethinking, turning inward toward America while revolving concrete answers, rebukes, and rejoinders to the questions of the earlier period.

It would be odd if scholars had not noted or assessed the discourse of the crisis of man before. They have. Closer to the era itself, in an effort to understand the background to his experience of the 1960s, Edward Purcell wrote a 1972 history of the 1930s and 1940s as part of a “crisis of democratic theory” that is close to my own early account.<sup>40</sup> In political science and jurisprudence, man appeared to translate to the democratic subject or citizen, whom US thinkers questioned in order to seek new grounds for defense. In art history, the scholar of abstract expressionism Michael Leja identified man discourse on the other side of 1945, ably discerning what he termed “the discourse of Modern Man” as a background to Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and their cohort of American painters and their critics.<sup>41</sup> One can piece together a rich and accomplished bibliography on many of the subtopics that the discourse of the crisis of man underwrites in this period: totalitarianism, existentialism, world war, and Cold War propaganda, theological conflicts, human rights, and the United Nations.

The inability to think of the discourse as a generative matrix that subtends these domains and time slices, however, has not just been a matter of chance. The strictures on thought in this area have sometimes had polemical bases, often of the same vintage as the discourse of man itself. We can also write a historiography of neglect. No stricture has been more obtrusive than the thesis of “deradicalization” (also called “depoliticization”). The accusation emerged in the 1940s in interneccine fighting on the intellectual left, and only much later migrated from the status of a political attack between former allies to reign as a dominant historiographical thesis. One

thus finds a very young Irving Howe, at this point in 1947 associated with one Trotskyist faction, articulating the full thesis in order to criticize another ex-Trotskyist faction with whom he was still friendly. (His immediate target was Dwight Macdonald's *Politics*; Macdonald had used the same charge in 1940 and 1941 to criticize his rivals; a later democratic-socialist Howe, too, as editor of *Dissent*, would find his own place within the crisis of man repositioning):

The political development of the American “left” intellectuals since the great depression may be charted in four major trends: their attraction to radical politics in the early thirties; their subsequent break from Stalinism and turn to Trotskyism; their retreat from Marxism in the late thirties; and finally their flight from politics in general . . . [in] turns to religion, absolute moralism, psychoanalysis and existentialist philosophy as *substitutes* for politics.<sup>42</sup>

The historical tradition that follows from this polemical chronology dismisses the puzzles and incomprehensibilities of the discourse of man by switching focus to the decline of institutional leftism in the 1930s and 1940s. Historians identify themselves with one or another position of the Old Left. This yields counterfactual speculation on what the discourse of the crisis of man might have substituted for, without trying to reconcile the difficult questions of what it actually was.<sup>43</sup>

The obverse of this mode of neglect is the historiography that constitutes a long progress of progressive-liberal uplift and triumph rather than radical decline. Here, the enigmas and abstractions of the interruption of crisis, and the questionings of man, are not interesting or in need of explanation on their own; they are subsumed within a longer practical project—in the influential work of David Hollinger, for example, “inclusion.” On this story, from the turn of the twentieth century through the early 1960s, white American intellectuals fought to include more and more classes of people in progressive, pragmatic, liberal-Protestant unity, in efforts to defuse prejudice and division.<sup>44</sup> This hopeful line, also historically true for its particular protagonists and at its level of chronology, has the consequence that one cannot really treat the sixties, difference, and “multiculturalism” historically except as a betrayal of prior idealism.<sup>45</sup> Other individual accounts do accept that a “crisis” in thought occurred during the midcentury around totalitarianism and the war—often anachronistically attaching it primarily to knowledge of the Holocaust—but seek the triumphant academic reconstructions that overcame it.<sup>46</sup> The most stimulating histories on this side of the evaluative coin understand “unity” to have been a complicated project, or a congeries of discrete projects, without automatically celebrating its solutions.<sup>47</sup> This mode of historical neutrality can be under-

mined by the fact, however, that the unity, reconstruction, and inclusiveness projects that generated the most unambiguous archives were often those sponsored by the state, or by what we now call “nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)” —sources that quickly look like propaganda, for their effort to convince others to unify rather than wrestling with their own doubts or questionings. And once a historian becomes suspicious that the archive is propaganda, the analytical mood is likely to tip back to the more hostile side of the historiographical divide—regretting deradicalization and false unity, and wishing history had furnished something better.

### THE QUESTION OF EXCLUSION

Moreover, to contemporary eyes, the discourse where it is most active and intense neglects some forms of difference that we would think should be acknowledged, if only to be appreciated and included. It was certainly a discourse favorable to “the human family” and “the brotherhood of man,” and its rhetoric was useful to antiprejudice campaigns.<sup>48</sup> But one begins to wonder if the delineation of a human core emerged in some way to regulate whom to accept and whom to ignore. In the discourse’s midst, one finds encomia to the overcoming of difference in unexpected places, as when Hans Kohn, the rather factual and dry Jewish émigré diplomatic historian, ensconced at Smith College and later Harvard, dedicates one of his series of books about Europe’s crisis: “To Those/Who Strove and Fought/For the Dignity of the Human Being/For the Oneness of the Human Kind.”<sup>49</sup> Yet this “oneness” vibrated at a very high level of abstraction. A previous dedicatory page in the series quoted Goethe on “humanity,” Kant on universal history and the goal of a universal republic, and one bar from the ode of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony.<sup>50</sup> The truth of the high-intellectual discourse of the crisis of man is essentially that it was so assured of its own wishful operation at a level of universality that it could leave basic forms of exclusion and inclusion unthought. It didn’t have to actively regulate exclusion, because it was incapable of believing difference to have real meaning for its concerns.

Was there no “crisis of woman”? No “crisis of color” in the country where W.E.B. Du Bois edited *The Crisis* until 1934, on the basis that the biggest American problem of the century was the problem of the color line? Two of the most important exclusions from the early US discourse of the crisis of man were indeed those of women and of African American men and women. These groups’ exclusion would matter intrinsically, but also because, from those two perspectives, intellectuals would raise voices later, in the 1960s, to make the most influential and forceful assertions of access to a discourse that they no longer necessarily wanted to join in its original

form. Those who did raise their voices in the 1940s were often ignored. Precisely because such positions are excluded, one must look to special events of catalysis and momentary visibility to see their efforts, to recent specialist histories that have documented their repression, and to individual exceptions that broke through to the public culture (seeing these exceptions as latently representative of what others couldn't say).

At the founding of the United Nations, the inscription of human rights into global law and discourse, beyond the boundaries of any single country, was fought for especially hard by organizations representing “minorities.” (We will return to the larger filiation of human rights from the discourse of man in chapter 3.) But as the historian Glenda Sluga has written, “Nora Stanton Barney, writing in the feminist periodical *Equal Rights* in 1946, echoed the sentiments of numerous feminist lobbyists of the UN organization when she claimed: ‘We all know only too well, and have heard only too often great speeches on human rights by people who have in mind only the rights of men, and never think of the human rights of women.’”<sup>51</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt had been made chairwoman of the Commission on Human Rights, representing the United States. She had been chosen in large part for her enormous prestige as wife of the leader of the Allies, the late Franklin Delano Roosevelt; also because human rights were considered diplomatically minor compared to the Security Council and General Assembly, therefore an appropriate outlet for women’s topics and inclinations. Still, only one other woman served as a nation’s delegate to the Commission: Hansa Mehta of India, an activist and legislator involved in Indian independence.

According to Kirsten Sellars, “Mehta, and members of the Commission on the Status of Women,” objected to a preamble proclaiming “All men are brothers,” “and proposed instead ‘all people’ or ‘all human beings.’” Roosevelt quashed the effort to enumerate women as distinct. “American women, she argued, did not feel excluded by the Declaration of Independence’s reference to ‘all men.’”<sup>52</sup> From other feminists’ protests, as Glenda Sluga has written, the Commission on the Status of Women had emerged “out of the fear expressed . . . that women would be forgotten or submerged in the assumption of universality”; then, “once it was created, was effectively marginalized by the Human Rights Commission.”<sup>53</sup>

“Man” language, and the thought of superior male standing that it often conveyed, unquestionably remained the lingua franca for philosophical and reformist writing in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Sometimes, in prose by women participants, the use of “Man,” “man,” and “he” seems compulsive and disconcerting. Ruth Anshen Nanda, friend and facilitator to “great men,” will tell us that “Man alone . . . is free to examine, to know, to criticize and to create. But Man is only Man—and only free—when he is con-

sidered as a being complete . . . for to subdivide Man is to execute him.” “Honor to those heroic warriors who have preserved for us the priceless heritage of freedom and have kept undefiled the sanctity and divine fire of the essence of Man!”<sup>54</sup> Among Nanda’s eighty-five invitees to her three edited volumes of original writings on the crisis of man by the world’s most eminent minds—covering the spectrum from Einstein to Bergson and Malinowski to Piaget—stood only one woman, Margaret Mead. In other writers’ work, including that of Mead, Ruth Benedict, and Hannah Arendt, one may be able to detect interesting modulations in the way man rhetoric is used. Simone Weil, for example, when she sat to write *The Need for Roots* in London in 1943, interestingly used the masculine language of “a man” and “men” when she generalized in a secular spirit in her first pages, but turned to “the human soul” (*l’âme* or *l’âme humaine*) as she reached for higher spiritual values, and made good ultimate use of the “human being.”<sup>55</sup>

Simone de Beauvoir, in Paris, was the truly exceptional figure who broke through and undid the limitations of male language and thought when, in 1949, her *The Second Sex* explicitly announced the inadequacy of a purely male phenomenology of human being. Just three years earlier, as a defender of Sartre but a rising philosopher in her own right, in the orthodox existentialist *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, she had used the familiar encompassing language of “man” and “Man.” Indeed, she had internalized it to the extent that in that book, the generic human individual in rebellion is typified as the “young man” (“A young man wills himself free”); wisdom is the young man’s mature consciousness of conflict and world-making with other men (“To will that there be being is also to will that there be men by and for whom the world is endowed with human significations”).<sup>56</sup> In *The Second Sex*, however, Beauvoir worked out a true alternate language of “Woman” and “women” in a long braid with “female,” “feminine,” “human,” “man,” and “men.” Claiming a common quandary with the American “Negro” and “the Jew,” Beauvoir claimed a common humanity—“The fact that we are human beings is infinitely more important than all the peculiarities that distinguish human beings from one another”—based on mortality and *need*: common nature is “the same essential need for one another.”<sup>57</sup> Her final lines in 1949 rise to a pun on the “brotherhood of men,” the familiar phrase to which Hansa Mehta had rightly objected at the United Nations. Of course *fraternité*, brotherhood, holds a special resonance in French because of the trinity of values of the Republic: *liberté*, *égalité*, *fraternité*. “To gain the supreme victory,” Beauvoir wrote, “it is necessary, for one thing, that by and through their natural differentiation *men and women* unequivocally affirm *their brotherhood*.”<sup>58</sup> For all this, Beauvoir was ridiculed, vilified, and misunderstood by critics in the United

States and France. Her book's public appreciation wouldn't occur until the late 1960s.

For African Americans, recent scholarship has shown the extraordinary lengths to which the Truman-era State Department went to restrict the forms of black Americans' appeals to human rights possibilities. The state itself worked to make sure that appeals to universality went only in some directions and not others. One direction, acceptable to the Democratic administration and white liberals, led toward civil rights rather than human rights.<sup>59</sup> The other led to a focus on the Jim Crow South as a singular atavism, rather than affirmation of the continent-wide African American presence as an inner nation, comparable to colonial states and the emerging postcolonial nations of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.<sup>60</sup> African American intellectuals meditated and pursued both routes. Left internationalists with Communist ties, like the singer Paul Robeson and W.E.B. Du Bois, were persecuted and deprived of their passports as betrayers of their citizenship and dangers to America until the Supreme Court ruled in 1958 that this was not within the power of the secretary of state.<sup>61</sup> Apparently more mainstream organizations like the NAACP, under its pragmatic chief Walter White, turned out to have had their own actions and militancy determined by threats and advice from white liberal friends, including Eleanor Roosevelt, to steer clear of appeals that went beyond remedial civil freedoms (which should already have been guaranteed by rule of law) or the integration of government-run institutions.<sup>62</sup> The American discourse of the crisis of man in general was surprisingly oblivious to colonial thinking, and the futures after World War II of the colonial, soon-to-be postcolonial, peoples. Of course, the United States considered itself to have no colonies.

When it comes to other forms of difference that we now consider central but that were, in the 1940s, derided or invisible, instances of self-assertion in terms of the discourse of man can be glimpsed. They adapt its principles to their own needs. The gay poet Robert Duncan advocated in the radical journal *Politics* for "homosexual rights," but only, he said, if they were an aspect of universal "*human* recognition and rights"; for the separatism and difference of even "the most radical, the most enlightened 'queer' circles" make "a second cast-out society as inhumane" as the mainstream "inhumanities of [heterosexual] society." "[T]he growth of a cult of homosexual superiority . . . is loaded with contempt for the human," Duncan wrote. "[O]nly one devotion can be held by a human being . . . and that is a devotion to human freedom, toward the aspiration of human love, human conflicts, human aspirations. To do this one must disown *all* the special groups (nations, religions, sexes, races) that would claim allegiance."<sup>63</sup>

## WHAT IS RE-ENLIGHTENMENT?

The discourse of man intellectuals' thoughts were elsewhere—specifically, perhaps surprisingly, on the historical event they called the Enlightenment. It contributed to their most general answers to the questions "Where had the world gone wrong?" and "Where would one start to set it right?"

The crisis was understood by midcentury intellectuals to be a legacy of the Enlightenment, which had failed them and, if fixed, could save them. "The contemporary human crisis has led to a retreat from the hopes and ideas of the Enlightenment," regretted Erich Fromm—but philosophers couldn't simply return to where their kind had been before.<sup>64</sup> Often they called out in anguish for the creation of a new "humanism," which they meant in its loosest sense: a respect for the human being, a measuring of all actions and behaviors by the individual human scale, human mores, humaneness, and humanity. "The idea of man, the counsel of a new humanism, are certainly the very last things to move the present world to a fundamental change" by themselves, wrote Erich Kahler, "[b]ut we may expect this idea to force itself upon men when the course of human events" itself forces it.<sup>65</sup> Their thorough reviews of the modern period to find a flaw or a definite, earlier moment of decision about man's nature—in fairly fixed, endlessly reiterated comparative histories of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries—spoke insistently to the question of the Enlightenment and their idea of its repair.

Their Enlightenment—as they recalled or reconstructed it—was the era that created a human subject who did not derive his stature from the authority of the Church, or from rulers, or from any state. The political community to which this new man would belong could be constituted only as the expression of his will and consent and that of his equals, his fellow citizens. Man had entered an age in which human inviolability would become self-evident. Man had gained a maturity such that he would not give up his freedom willingly. The era had culminated, without any doubt, in the late eighteenth century, when it wrote the Declaration of Independence and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. It took the republic as its ideal state form, which seemed at a certain point to have spread to nearly all of Europe as well as America. Though it could invoke the names of Locke, Rousseau, and Voltaire, for these intellectuals, focused on Germany and German philosophy, it had Kant as its final formulator and culminating figure, backed by Herder, Schiller, and Fichte. Where rulers maintained oppression by tradition—in imperial political forms that boiled down to tyranny—they would be undone by a gradually enlightened populace. Where holdouts had not heard the Good News of this En-

lightenment, they would be reached by the free circulation of speech and ideas.

That was because the other key aspect of this remembered Enlightenment, besides the change in the stature of man, was its doctrine of progress. Enlightenment was ongoing, teleological, and irreversible. In a first development, man came to have rights and to know the rights of his fellow men by sympathy or sentiment. In a second development, logically and concretely, no one who knew the Rights of Man would be able to justify their violation for others, or would ever will away his own prerogatives. To scholars of the Enlightenment as a historical movement, in its many national variants and philosophical epochs and contradictions, this verges on cartoon. It was the sketch that functioned as a vade mecum for the midcentury intellectuals, however, and so matters to us.

Re-enlightenment differs from a “revival” of the Enlightenment project. Nor did it constitute a “Second Enlightenment.” The midcentury re-enlightenment did not attempt a systematic philosophy, and did not produce one or any full self-consciousness of what it was attempting. Nor did it produce individual figures of systematic philosophizing of the stature of Kant, Rousseau, Hume, Voltaire, Locke, or Hobbes.

The midcentury generation’s way of addressing the crisis of man represented a consensus that something specific had gone wrong and must be made right. Man must again be made self-protecting. “Autonomous humanism” might be a term for what the practitioners believed they were providing—a respect for humanity that would once again let the human being give the law to itself and all men. But the freedom of man as a self-lawgiver was no longer something they could hope for without reservation, as a consequence of human beings’ rational faculty or the ethics that had depended on it. The Nazi jurist and minister of justice Hans Frank, according to Hannah Arendt, wrote in his book *Technik des Staates* (1942) of a new “categorical imperative in the Third Reich . . . ‘Act in such a way that the Führer, if he knew your action, would approve it.’”<sup>66</sup> They had thus seen how Kantian rigorist “duty” could be perverted, among the Nazis, into the duty to do wrong. In implying that they wanted only a *re*-enlightenment, it seemed American intellectuals could stand for a humbler effort to restore the project of human liberation, now understood simply as protection and restraint, without the grandiosity or vulnerability of the earlier age’s vision.

Perhaps the point of differentiation is that what the midcentury intellectuals really tried to launch (with long-lasting consequences) was not just a new moral autonomy but rather an autochthonous humanism—human respect giving its grounds entirely to itself, without God, natural law, positive fiat, or even anything identifiable about the human person like “rationality.” Here is the sunken treasure a historian detects in all the intellectuals’

fantasies: a human stature self-born, sprung from its own brain like Zeus from the monstrous Chronos; humanity freestanding, rootless, but nevertheless protected—for it would carry its warrant, without criteria, within itself. It would be humanity without religious sanction, political affiliation, tribal identity, or outside tie, yet still be inviolate: the human as such.

Re-enlightenment at its most thoughtful was chastened, modest. It wanted to know what had gone wrong with the rights of man. It did not insist that it knew how to restore or replace these rights, only that something must be done. It did not often blame the Enlightenment wholesale (though, as we will see, the Frankfurt school émigrés did, and some unexpected American colleagues came close), but neither did it venerate the eighteenth century or insist on its return just as it was. Above all, re-enlightenment represented a questioning of what could be left of the Enlightenment without the idea of progress.

Of course, it took a certain desperation to revive the question of man as the intellectuals did; also a certain hubris. Their grandeur of thought and inclination toward a total project was in its way characteristic of the time. In an era of cataclysm at the largest scale, thinkers were familiar with solutions at the largest scale, through force of arms, planning, and worldwide organization, even when their global solution turned out to be a council of limit. So if there was reason to believe in any new large-scale settlement of the nature of mankind, the passion of re-enlightenment was not only a form of humility but a new kind of ambition.

## MAIEUTICS

What shall we call a discourse whose central function has the form “We must ask,” “We must think,” “We must answer?”—yet does surprisingly little work of disputation, selection, and mutual destruction among the answers? Evidently the discourse is interrogatory, imperative, and ramifying. But these do not capture the whole tenor of the function in its demand to bring ideas to birth as a means, too, of coalition, and interpersonal mobilization. Nor are words for discourses, which are the seeming opposite of what is being undertaken—such as the probative, determinative, or conclusive, the apodictic or assertoric—wholly negated by the practice of the discourse. It does make use of proofs, answers, demonstrations, and assertions, but to a different purpose.

I think we can call a discourse of this form maieutic. The maieutic, by insistent and forceful questioning, seeks to bring into being and bring to birth *in another person* answers that will reward the questioner’s own belief in the character of the universal capacity for thinking—and do something to the other person’s character, too. In the *Theaetetus*, Plato has Soc-

rates deliver his explanation of his dialectical method of questioning as *technē maieutikē*, “the art of midwifery.”<sup>67</sup> Maieutics as it is modeled in that dialogue does require supplying some answers, as well as questions, introducing some arguments, as well as provoking them in others. The dissimilarity between the particular Socratic case and our general discursive category is that with Socrates, a single man—as ironist, dialectician, or adherent of the theory of recollection—delivers others of wisdom while claiming none himself, extinguishing his claim to creativity: “I cannot claim as the child of my own soul any discovery worth the name of wisdom.”<sup>68</sup> When we look at our discourse, we have in contrast a transatlantic fellowship of individuals who, claiming to make solitary discoveries, draw others into creation. Maieutics are *shoulds* in discourse or within the intellectual life that help to say what must be addressed or talked about, what stands up as a serious or profound question or contribution, regardless of its ability to solve or determine an inquiry.

What is implied by the discipline of coming up with *an* answer, one single answer, to such a question as “What is man?” It is a straitening of thought. The new imperative seems like the acceptance of an impossibility: How could one wish any one thing to be *the* definitive thing? It is an act of willed restriction. And so it has a dimension of conversion, or consecration of self. After all, what confers the assurance of *depth* in ideas? To some extent, we possess verifiable criteria for depth: complexity, fitness to evidence, originality or unexpectedness, orientation to “first questions,” as well as the latest specialized or recondite ones. But there seem to be further criteria, widely shared, that honor corresponding traits not openly avowable: mystery; appeal to unique intuition (and contact with the ineffable); unknownness, even to the edge of incomprehensibility; and orientation to mortal or primeval concepts (death, time, struggle, will, and limit). The sensibility of depth, rewarded by depth effects, is not entirely alien to the life of the mind. We ordinarily step outside of the discursive system, or systems of thought, when we avow these “depth effects” openly. Yet when it comes to topics like “the human,” as well as some others (conjecturally: those of “the ethical,” “the political,” “the philosophical,” “the humanities,” “God,” “science,” “the natural”), we will need to acknowledge the role of these purposes as a part, even the principal or defining part, of the production, reception, and dissemination of these eminently respectable discourses and their ideas.

The standpoints of the maieutic are three. In one guise, it makes you work on yourself and your own thought, midwife to something that lies inside you and would be valuable to bring out and articulate even if you are in no wise “correct.” From a second standpoint, maieutic stands for the desired effect of your discourse upon others: you supply answers that may

or may not be definitive or final but that draw out a comparable process in hearers. Note that here, too, the purpose is not that another will get the right and final answer or that everyone's offerings will improve and converge upon the right answer. The purpose is that another will undertake the task of speaking, thus doing something to himself and to the listening (or reading) public. In its third-person standpoint, however, maieutic is our analytic judgment upon a discourse that all participants see in more familiar and commonplace terms but we, at a distance, can see pursues a different effect. It names the discourse that we can see emerges in furnishing a *should* to a range of speakers, irresolvably, even when they speak only from their own belief that they participate in familiar discourses of human science.

Midcentury thought faced a desire for a protected human-as-such whose existence it could neither immediately "prove" nor "disprove." Yet thinkers knew they needed (for themselves, and their philosophizing) an assumption of that entity's real existence, or knew that they needed it as an active concept (for other people, for present justice, and for future safety), empty though it might sometimes be, to push men gradually to make it real and full.

In the reconstruction of this discourse as it came into being in the 1930s, strengthened in the 1940s, weakened and was transmitted in the 1950s, and metamorphosed and exploded in the 1960s, we will be moving between explanatory levels without foreclosing any. The greater challenge will not be navigating levels of explanation, however, but seeing how and where the consequences of the discourse touch other worlds of actors and participants. The intellectuals' task, after all, was to give their needy assumptions force within their justificatory framework—but, still more, to find other actors who could carry their questions forward into the world. They might need other forces to develop the requisite new forms of knowledge and will for man.