

COPYRIGHT NOTICE:

Tzvetan Todorov: Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism □ □

is published by Princeton University Press and copyrighted, © 2002, by Princeton University Press. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher, except for reading and browsing via the World Wide Web. Users are not permitted to mount this file on any network servers.

For COURSE PACK and other PERMISSIONS, refer to entry on previous page. For more information, send e-mail to permissions@pupress.princeton.edu

Chapter 1

The Interplay of Four Families

A revolution took place in the mind of Europeans — a slow revolution, since it took several centuries — which led to the establishment of the modern world. To grasp it in its most general sense, we can describe it as the passage from a world whose structure and laws were preexisting and immutable givens for every member of society, to a world that could discover its own nature and define its norms itself. The members of the old society gradually learned their assigned place in the universe, and wisdom led them to accept it. The inhabitant of contemporary society does not reject everything passed down by tradition but wants to know the world on her own, and demands that whole swathes of existence should be governed by the principles she chooses. The elements of her life are no longer all *givens* in advance; some of them are *chosen*.

Before this revolution, an act was declared just and praiseworthy because it conformed either to nature (that of the universe as well as that of man) or to divine will. These two justifications can sometimes conflict and sometimes be reconciled (this is sometimes described as the rivalry between Athens and Jerusalem); but both require that human beings should submit to an authority external to them: nature, like God, is not accessible except through common wisdom or religion — a tradition accepted and transmitted by society without one's consent. The universe one inhabits, including its human laws, is based on an elsewhere upon which this particular person has no purchase. It was revolutionary to claim that the best justification of an act, one that makes it most legitimate, issues from man himself: from his will, from his reason, from his feelings. The center of gravity shifts, here, from cosmos to

Chapter 1

anthropos, from the objective world to the subjective will; the human being no longer bows to an order that is external to him but wishes to establish this order himself. The movement is therefore double: a disenchantment of the world and a sacralization of man; values, removed from one, will be entrusted to the other. The new principle, whose consequences may still affect us, is responsible for the present face of our politics and our law, our arts and our sciences. This principle also presides over the modern nation-states, and if we accept them, we cannot deny the principle without becoming incoherent. On the other hand, we can do so in the name of a return to the supremacy of religion (as in theocratic fundamentalism) or to the primacy of a natural order that reserves no special place for man (as in certain ecological utopias).

Today we readily agree to describe this passage from the Ancients to the Moderns, which began in the Renaissance, in more or less similar terms. Consensus disappears, however, the moment we begin to analyze its effects. My working thesis is as follows: Modernity itself is not homogeneous; the criticism to which it has been subjected has revealed several tendencies within it that constitute the framework of social thought in which we are living today. For this reason, I find it disconcerting to use a single word to designate these reactions, such as *modernity*, or *individualism*, or *liberalism*, or *rationality*, or *subjectivity*, or “*Western*,” especially since the amalgam imposed by such terms is often used to polemical purpose. I call each of these major tendencies a *family*, both because the various representatives of one family each have their own peculiarities, and because alliances between members of distinct families are always possible. These families are four in number, and they were clearly outlined by the second half of the eighteenth century. Condorcet, Sade, Constant, and Bonald were all born in the middle of the century, between 1740 and 1767; and they embody these four distinct families, which appear quite distinctly in the aftermath of the Revolution, when those who reject it begin to challenge the mode of thought that made it possible. This does not mean, of course, that our families do not have their roots in a much earlier tradition.

It is always awkward to regroup the thought of individual authors under generic labels. No one likes words ending in *ism*, and for good reason: every regrouping has something violent and arbitrary about it (I myself hesitated until the last moment to decide whether it was fairer to speak of three, four, or five major modern families); someone can always challenge you with intermediate or hybrid cases. Every authentic

The Interplay of Four Families

thinker has his or her individuality, and it is a simplification to amalgamate them with others; every work itself is unique and deserves to be considered separately. Only disciples and epigones properly correspond to labels; the original thinkers always participate in more than one intellectual family—witness Montaigne or Rousseau. I am not unaware of the disadvantages of this procedure. I have decided, however, to use it because I also see its advantages. First, we must have at hand a common language in order to speak of the past (proper names are not enough); then, my acquaintance with the texts has convinced me, although it is impossible for me to prove it, that certain affinities, certain differences are more important than others and therefore justify this or that regrouping. Finally, the amalgam of distinct families seems to me to be one of the chief obstacles to the lucid analysis of our current situation. That is why I would now like to evoke them in greater detail.

To begin with, we must recall the principal reproaches addressed to modernity as a whole; these will allow us, paradoxically, to identify the first modern family.

The Conservatives

In the wake of the French Revolution, voices were clearly heard condemning the earlier revolution, the revolution in thought. Its partisans had, of course, been challenged before; but this purely ideological debate remained limited to a particular author or an isolated theme. Once ideas were transformed into actions and institutions, they provoked a reaction of much greater intensity and unremitting resistance. Yes, the opposition maintained, it is possible to see individuals, like collectivities, as self-governing, but this freedom is too dangerous and its benefits insufficient to compensate for the havoc they wreak. It would be preferable to return to the earlier situation, with less freedom but without the new disadvantages.

We might say, then, that whatever the nuances in their different formulations, the advocates of this general argument always proceed from a position of *conservation*. At the same time, this position does not lead us back to the world of the Ancients, pure and simple: this return has become impossible in reality, and only the most extreme reactionaries reject the modern world as a whole. The usual conservatives also constitute a modern family, one that accepts a minimum of modernity, one for

Chapter 1

whom all the other modern families tend to merge and to deserve equal condemnation. The conservatives are those who think that modern men have sold their souls to the devil, and that they ought to regret it, indeed that they should attempt to buy it back. But this critique is not the way they define themselves. Their positive stance is to value and seek to preserve the existing order against revolutionaries and reformers on all sides—against reactionaries as well as progressives (the project of a “conservative revolution” is to them a contradiction in terms). What already exists deserves to exist; changes have, on the whole, more drawbacks than advantages. The conservatives privilege if not immobility, at least gradualism.

In finding a spokesman for this family, we have an abundance of choices, since conservative warnings have never ceased, from the Revolution until our day. To illustrate its variety, I have decided to keep two of its representatives from among the earliest, chosen by design for being as different from one another as possible. One is a theocrat, the other a democrat; yet the substance of their reproaches is very much the same.

The first is Viscount Louis de Bonald, declared enemy of the Revolution, who attacked it, beginning in 1796, in his treatise *Théorie du pouvoir politique et religieux*, and who would develop his criticisms over the next three or four decades.

Bonald begins with what he considers a disastrous effect—revolutionary reality in France—and works his way back to its causes, which he finds in philosophy (Revolution, he assures us, is the freakish child of Philosophy and Atheism), the philosophy of Descartes and Rousseau, itself heir to the Reformation.

Where did the Revolution come from? “From that doctrine which substituted the reason of each for the religion of all, and the calculations of personal interest for the love of the Supreme Being and his fellow men” (*Théorie*, I, 494–95). Thought bears a heavy responsibility: before manifesting itself in action, freedom was in men’s minds. It acted like a corrosive agent in two directions, which Bonald always associates: love of God and love of men, elevation above the self and attachment beyond the self; “religion,” it is readily said, comes from the verb *relier* (to bind, to tie). “Each” is substituted for “all”: this is the fault of Luther and Calvin, followed on this point by the Savoyard Vicar, who claims that the conscience of the individual can be the ultimate judge of good and evil. And reason has replaced religion: the guilty party here is

The Interplay of Four Families

Descartes, at least as far as knowledge of the world is concerned. Consequently, we have come under the rule of personal interest, meaning what does not go beyond the individual (he is alone) and also what serves him (he is selfish). In short, modern man, contrived by Calvin, Descartes, and Rousseau, and put into the world by the Revolution, knows nothing external to himself. Neither above himself (a superior being), nor beyond himself (his fellow men), he is condemned to remain shut inside himself.

The price of freedom is therefore double. On the one hand, modern man is destined to become an “individualist,” in the current sense of the term: to be preoccupied only with himself, to ignore the ties that bind him to other men. It was the philosophers of the social contract, above all Rousseau, who believed that this transformation was necessary; it was the revolutionaries who wanted to impose it. “The philosophy of the last century [that is, the eighteenth century] saw only man and the universe, and never society. On the one hand, it has—if I may use this familiar expression—*made mincemeat* of states and families, in which it saw neither fathers nor mothers nor children, nor masters nor servants, nor powers, nor ministers, nor subjects, but only men, that is to say *individuals*, each with their rights, and not *persons* bound together by relationships. . . . On the other, it has proposed to our affections only the human race” (*Mélanges*, II, 246–47). Such an extension makes any real attachment impossible. The very idea of a contract, the attempt to base everything on the will of consenting individuals, brings with it an “individualistic” conception of humanity, which is deeply disconcerting: “The author of *The Social Contract* saw only the individual in society” (*Législation primitive*, I, 123).

On the other hand, this same modern man is condemned to be nothing but a “materialist,” in the still common sense of the word, that is, a being who has no ideals, who cherishes no value above his personal interest, who can have no moral code. For the only possible basis of morality is religion, the faith in a power infinitely superior to that of men and capable of sanctioning their acts in this world below. “*If God does not exist*,” writes Bonald, “men can legitimate nothing for each other, and all *duty* ceases between beings, where the *power* over all beings ceases” (Rousseau, *Législation Primitive*, II, 142). If God is dead, then all is permitted: this highly problematic linkage, made familiar to us by Dostoevsky, is already present in Bonald.

Faced by what he judges to be the individualism of all modern fami-

Chapter 1

lies, the conservative privileges the social: individual human beings acquire their identity only through the groups, institutions, and customs in which they participate. That is why their duties (which flow from their membership in these larger bodies) prevail over their rights as simple individuals, members of the human race. Man is made by his community; he owes it his allegiance.

This demand for submission to the collectivity has the potential to conflict with the universal appeal of religion. Modern conservatives evade this conflict by making a clean separation between politics and morality. Moral conservatism affirms absolute values based on the will of God or on the natural order (among conservatives the connection with religion is frequent but optional). Yet this moral order does not determine the political order, as in the case of theocracies (and as Bonald recommends; in this respect he is more revolutionary than conservative). The political order is dictated by national interest, and it can differ from one country to the next, even if the two share an affiliation with the same religion. Within the country, conservatism does not seek to submit everything to a single principle, nor to control the individual's whole life; it is satisfied with assuring the rule of law: it is not absolutism, and even less totalitarianism. In the international sphere, political conservatism values above all the defense of the status quo; it is not animated by a proselytizing spirit nor does it engage in crusades, any more than it spearheads imperialistic wars or seeks to impose its values everywhere (the French conservatives of the nineteenth century were opposed to the colonial wars). We might say that for a conservative like Joseph de Maistre, man does not exist, only members of various societies: the French, the Germans, the Russians; on the other hand, God exists (in the singular), and not as a so-called plurality, to say nothing of a war of the gods. This very separation is bound up with the opposition between morality and politics.

From either perspective, the individual must submit to common values, to the group to which he belongs. Man is radically bad and weak: Bonald is in agreement here with the Augustinian tradition, hence with the Jansenists, but also with Luther and Calvin, whom he denounces. Other conservative Christians, even if they do not share such a dark vision of humanity, nonetheless believe in original sin. Consequently, only a force greater than man's can constrain him to behave virtuously. Rather than futile revolt, our goal should be to place ourselves in harmony with the higher order. This is why the very idea of choice is prohibited: one

The Interplay of Four Families

might run the risk of choosing in the name of one's personal interest, whereas if something happens that we haven't willed, this is the sign that it has been decided by God. Anyone who would like to arrange his fate by putting himself in God's place is imitating Satan. Obedience, not autonomy, is the cardinal virtue.

Attempts to base a morality outside of religion are doomed to failure (Bonald has only contempt for the doctrine of the rights of man, which he hopes to see replaced by a defense of the rights of God). How could men, who are wicked, find the strength in themselves to repress this wickedness? "Atheism places the supreme power over men in the very men it must contain, and dreams that a dike will be the child of a flood" (I, 61). What madness! In all logic, Bonald thinks that men will become good only through constraint; for their own good, liberty must be eliminated rather than cultivated. He dreams, therefore, of a theocratic state whose final ends are defined by the Church, which retains ultimate power.

Yet, even a mind as extreme as Bonald's does not truly belong to the Ancients. Witness his taste for rational constructions, for comprehensive plans for the future and authentic theocracy—a thousand times removed from the actual society of the Old Regime, which was an accumulation of heteroclitic traditions and customs. One cannot imagine Edmund Burke, the exemplary conservative, writing a work whose title begins *Theory of the . . .* This incompatibility is so strong that one even hesitates to consider Bonald a conservative—he is, in some respects, a "philosophe" lost among the reactionaries. If conservatives so cherish traditions, it is because they consider them the repository of collective wisdom, unarguably superior to individual reason; indeed, this is why the autonomy of the individual, the freedom he has acquired in league with the devil, must be prohibited. Men are not only morally imperfect, they are intellectually weak; traditions, on the other hand, contain a wisdom that individuals cannot explain but ought to respect. Contrary to what the rationalists believe, it is judgment that errs and prejudice that is wise, because it is shared. The old have experience, the young have only reason: the advantage goes to the first. An intuitive knowledge is accumulated in the bosom of traditions over the course of years, which no reason will ever be able to reduce to principles and rules. That is indeed why real conservatives, unlike Bonald, do not write systematic treatises but content themselves with commenting on current events or recounting their experience.

Chapter 1

Bonald *chose* to be conservative—and for that very reason he was not entirely conservative after all. His thought is, as a result, particularly anachronistic, and though he remained an influential politician under the Restoration, his conservative utopia would never see the light of day. That is why his prophecies readily take on the tone of curses: if the world does not want to set itself on the right course, let it beware of what awaits it! On the other hand, future conservatives would find in his writings, as in those of his contemporary Joseph de Maistre, a source of continual inspiration.

The Broken Chain

The second author I would like to evoke here, Alexis de Tocqueville, flourished after the July Revolution of 1830. To illustrate conservative thought, I have not chosen a man who is known for his stubborn commitment to liberty and his defense, however thwarted, of democracy simply out of a taste for paradox or provocation. I wanted to show that philosophical and political positions far removed from each other can adopt visions of the modern world that are, in the end, quite similar. Tocqueville is, more precisely, both a conservative and a humanist; and his singular position resides in this paradoxical conjunction.

His point of departure is entirely different from Bonald's. First, he does not believe in the possibility of turning back. Viewing things from a historical perspective, he asserts that the advent of modernity is irreversible, that the French have left the aristocratic age behind and have entered the democratic age. The inhabitants of this new age are animated, in his view, by three passions. The first is the passion for liberty, the right to decide one's fate; unlike Bonald, Tocqueville himself cherishes this passion above all things. This cannot be explained according to him, because of a higher goal that might thus be achieved, but finds its justification in the intransitive pleasure experienced by its practitioner. "It is the pleasure of being able to speak, act, and breathe without constraint, under the government of God and the laws alone. Whoever seeks for anything from freedom is made for slavery" (*The Old Regime and the Revolution*, III, 3, p. 217). The object of the second passion is equality, and Tocqueville's judgment of this subject is much more mixed. Finally, the third is the passion for well-being, for which he feels no particular admiration.

The Interplay of Four Families

What Tocqueville dreads, then, is not what terrified Bonald. Bonald regretted the erosion of authority, the only means of instituting the general welfare; Tocqueville fears for the future of liberty. The source of the threat, however, is the same: it is the modern society born of the Revolution. And the idea of a hidden pact, of the price to be paid for what has been gained, is there too. Modern man will have to pay for his choice of equality and well-being by accepting the taints of individualism and materialism.

Tocqueville must be one of the first authors to use this new word, *individualism*, to designate, he says, something equally new belonging to democratic societies, namely, the preference for private life led in the bosom of one's family and friends, and a lack of interest in the global society in which one lives. "Our ancestors lacked the word 'individualism,' which we have created for our own use, because in their era there were, in fact, no individuals who did not belong to a group and who could regard themselves absolutely alone" (II, 9, pp. 162–63). The chief reason for this evolution is not, according to him, free will but the principle of equality. Traditional society, which depends on a hierarchy, makes relations between people necessary. "Aristocracy had made a chain of all the members of the community, from the peasant to the king" (*Democracy in America*, II, 2, 2, p. 99). Modern or democratic society gives everyone the same status; as a result, its inhabitants no longer have need of one another to constitute their identity. "Democracy breaks that chain and severs every link of it": we are not far here from the "mincemeat" society dreaded by Bonald. Individuals no longer really live together. "Each of them, living apart, is as a stranger to the fate of all the rest . . . , he exists only in himself and for himself alone" (II, 4, 6, p. 318). This absence of specifically social relations is only partially compensated for by a more intense private life, on the one hand, and by a certain feeling of belonging to universal humanity on the other ("every individual's duties to the species are much clearer": in this, too, Tocqueville follows Bonald).

The tendency to desocialization, Tocqueville suggests, may be further reinforced. No longer counting on a place designated by society and confirmed by several generations of ancestors, the individual begins as self-contained and is accustomed to thinking of himself as isolated. After reducing society exclusively to his close relations, he no longer even thinks of them; democracy "throws him back forever upon himself alone and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the soli-

Chapter 1

tude of his own heart” (II, 2, 2, p. 99). At first attacking public life alone, the individualist spirit ends by corrupting social life as a whole.

The other great threat that weighs on democratic society comes from the fact that men become obsessed with thinking about the satisfaction of their material interests. For this very reason, they discard spiritual values. “While man takes delight in this honest and lawful pursuit of his own well-being,” Tocqueville writes, “it is to be apprehended that in the end he may lose the use of his sublimest faculties, and that while he is busied in improving all around him, he may at length degrade himself” (II, 2, 15, p. 145). This fear is more than a hypothesis: observing American mores, Tocqueville sees the powerful love of wealth everywhere, since the rich now occupy the summit of the hierarchy, reserved in aristocratic societies for men of honor. “Democracy encourages a taste for physical gratification,” he explains. “This taste, if it becomes excessive, soon disposes men to believe that all is matter only; and materialism, in its turn, hurries them on with a mad impatience to these same delights” (II, 2, 15, p. 145). Materialism is the natural bent of men in democracy.

It is at this point that Tocqueville once again diverges from Bonald: it is to protect liberty and not to annul it that he warns us of the dangers concealed by the other features of life in democracy. For he has discovered that specifically democratic conditions of life can empty the freedoms so laboriously acquired of their contents. Modern man, launched on the search for material satisfactions, requires the state to guarantee his security, his property, his well-being (he turns it into what we call a welfare state). But by always demanding more of the state, he continues to shrink the domain of actions for which he is himself responsible. “Thus it everyday renders the exercise of the free agency of man less useful and less frequent; it circumscribes the will within a narrower range and gradually robs a man of all the uses of himself” (II, 4, 6, pp. 318–19).

The outcome of this process is a democratic (or egalitarian) despotism that is highly adapted to the restriction of our interests to private life alone: “Despotism, rather than struggling against this tendency, makes it irresistible, because it takes away from citizens all common feeling, all common needs, all need for communication, all occasion for common action. It walls them up inside their private lives” (*The Old Regime and the Revolution*, preface, p. 87). Power is, of course, the expression of popular will rather than the legacy of tradition; but this power is at the same time out of reach for the isolated individual. He

The Interplay of Four Families

votes, to be sure, and can therefore repudiate his rulers; but immediately after elections, he is again delivered up to them, bound hand and foot, so that “This rare and brief exercise of their free choice, however important it may be, will not prevent them from gradually losing the faculties of thinking, feeling and acting for themselves, and thus gradually falling below the level of humanity” (*Democracy in America*, II, 4, 6, pp. 320–21).

The use of liberty, for Tocqueville, is therefore a distinctive feature not only of modern society, but even of the human race; yet democracy, appealed to as it is, can annul its own effects. (Is it really so easy to fall back again into being an animal like other animals? Tocqueville is no stranger to a certain amount of catastrophizing.) And it is not just political freedom that is in question: in an even more insidious way, democratic society also annuls the freedom of taste and feeling by augmenting the uniformity of individuals and their inclination to conform, already stigmatized by Rousseau. Modern man is constantly changing his taste; but these changes are similar for everyone. Within a society, men increasingly resemble one another; communication between peoples causes whole societies to resemble one another as well. “When I survey,” Tocqueville writes, “this countless multitude of beings, shaped in each other’s likeness, amid whom nothing rises and nothing falls, the sight of such universal uniformity saddens and chills me and I am tempted to regret that state of society which has ceased to be” (II, 4, 8, p. 332). If all desires are similar, can they still be considered free?

Tocqueville is tempted by the return to aristocratic society, but only in a manner of speaking; in reality, he never gives way to this temptation. His vision of the modern world is conservative, but his political project remains democratic. What he wants to do through his work is to make modern man conscious of the dangers that threaten him and to seek remedies for them. Associations of citizens, freely formed, can attenuate the effects of individualism; a private practice of traditional religion can usefully counterbalance the drawbacks of materialism. There is indeed a price to pay for liberty, but it is worth negotiating.

Finally, the modern revolution has a third consequence, beyond the dissolution of society and morality, which is bemoaned by conservatives: the dislocation of the self as such. Here we are leaving the political framework and entering into the realm of individual analysis. For this reason, we will not find formulations as systematic as in the first two cases: this reproach was uttered by poets and novelists, not by so-

Chapter 1

cial theorists. The individual who prided himself on thinking, feeling, and willing according to his own lights would no longer even be the same person: the abandonment of his predetermined traditional place has opened him up to all sorts of influences and mutations; rather than an autonomous subject, he has become an inauthentic and alienated individual, moved by many contradictory and changeable forces. Thus, taking still further the shift Tocqueville thought he observed, the individual has abandoned not only his close relations so as to focus only on himself, but also himself so as to know only his own ingredients, the various drives that move him. The ultimate result of individualism, then, would be the disappearance of the individual.

The Scientists

I have identified the conservative family in terms of its reaction to the advent of modernity. Modernity affirms the freedom of the subject, individual or collective, along with other causes of his action. The conservative reaction says: the price of this freedom is too steep; we would do better to renounce the transaction so as not to have to pay. On this level, the position of the conservatives is clear. The picture becomes complicated when we turn to the three other major families, which all accept the principle of modernity but draw different conclusions from it.

Scientific thought involves several theses. First, the scientists adhere to a deterministic vision of the world. This vision becomes manifest in France in the wake of the materialism of the Enlightenment, among the Encyclopedists, from Diderot to Condorcet; it penetrated the nineteenth century and its doctrine is found again in Auguste Comte, Ernest Renan, and Hippolyte Taine. But it has much earlier antecedents, as do all the other modern families, in Greek philosophy and the Christian religion. In fact, concerned only with our convenience, we give these general labels a narrow meaning, when in reality each of them covers as great a diversity as the label “modernity.” The conservative family, as I said in passing, can already claim this double heritage, Christian and pagan, by privileging the reference to God or nature, the teaching of the Church, or the laws of the city.

Determinist doctrine is similar. It shares with Greek tradition the conviction of a universal order that man can know; it stands against this tradition in the modalities of this knowledge (Galileo and Descartes

The Interplay of Four Families

would not have flourished in ancient Greece), as well as in its results (the world of homogeneous matter comes to replace the hierarchical universe of the Ancients). In the Christian tradition, determinism resembles one of the two major parties that are in conflict throughout its history: the party that favors divine grace to the detriment of human freedom; this resemblance consists specifically in the refusal to admit the existence of freedom. Saint Paul uses the metaphor of clay in the potter's hands (Rom. 9:21): If man is the material and God the craftsman, can we still speak of freedom and can we expect salvation to come from a place other than grace, the call, or faith? Saint Augustine eventually denounced the heresy of Pelagius, who imagined that human works are adequate to assure our salvation. Luther and Calvin later rebelled against papist practices, the possibility left to men to pay for their sins through a simple act of will. The Jansenists and Pascal then fought the Jesuits (in vain), who tried to spare a place for human initiative. According to the doctrines of grace, the will is nothing because all power rests in God; according to the scientists, it is because nature (or history) has already decided everything for us. The verdict of blood, as people said then, or that of society replaced divine will. Man is powerless because his fate is in God's hands, Pascal says; because he is guided unwittingly by his race, his heredity, and his place in history, Taine would correct.

The forces that drive individuals can be different in nature; the crucial thing is that their reign is absolute. The nineteenth century witnessed the successive rise to power of three great forms of causality, which would be the subjects of three distinct sciences. The first, developing at the very moment of the conservative challenge, was social and historical in its inspiration: men believe they are free, when in reality they are the product of historical circumstances, social conditions, and economic structures. A second form of determinism, biological causality, was added in the second half of the century: the fate of men is decided by their blood (or by the form and volume of their skull, or their size—or any other physical characteristic), and therefore by their heredity. At the end of the century a third form of causality was affirmed that is purely psychic and individual: the behavior of the individual is dictated to him not, as he naively believed, by his conscience and his will but by forces acting inside him unconsciously that are themselves the product of his personal history—in psychoanalysis, the configuration formed around him by his nearest relations in early childhood.

Chapter 1

These three determinisms sometimes struggle with one another for supremacy and sometimes combine. Every generation favors its form of causality, which the following generation discards and tries to replace. These forms of thought are, moreover, always present among us: we have not stopped talking about the laws of history or unconscious drives; and if we no longer believe in the destiny of blood, we are much more certain about the decisive role played by our genes. Racial thought reappears in our times as well. The only thing these three causalities—social, biological, and psychic—have in common is the fact that they consider the freedom of the individual to be essentially an illusion.

Causality is not only omnipresent, it is also the same everywhere: scientism is a universalism. There are still, however, significant differences: if the laws (of nature or history) are everywhere the same, the facts they govern are not. Races are different, as are historical epochs, but all are strictly obedient to the forces that determine them and provoke equally predictable consequences.

To this first scientific thesis bearing on the structure of the universe, a second is added: the inexorable linking of causes and effects can be thoroughly known, and modern science is the royal road to this knowledge. In this respect, scientific doctrine is opposed to the passive acceptance of the world as it is. It also diverges—and this rupture is decisive—from the fatalism of the Ancients. Not satisfied with describing what exists but searching for the mechanism that produced it, scientism can envisage that another reality, better adapted to our needs, might emerge from the same laws. Freedom, formerly reduced to zero, is here reborn; but it can exist only thanks to the mediation of science. He who has penetrated the secret of plants can produce new ones, more fertile and nourishing; he who has understood natural selection can institute artificial selection. We need not be satisfied with existing means of communication, we need not accept that rivers flow in one direction to no purpose, we will prolong the span of human life. Knowledge of existing conditions leads to technology, which allows the manufacture of improved existing conditions. There is a temptation to extend the same principle to human societies: since we know their mechanisms, why not engineer perfect societies?

However, when we speak of the production of something new, we are also speaking of an ideal that stands behind our production. What is a *better* vegetable or animal species, how do we judge that one countryside is *superior* to another, by what criteria do we decide that a certain

The Interplay of Four Families

political regime would be *preferable* to the one that already exists? The scientists' answer would be (and this is their third thesis): Values follow from the nature of things, they are an effect of the natural and historical laws that govern the world, so again, it is up to science to make those values known to us. Scientism, in effect, involves basing an ethics and a politics on what is believed to be the results of science. In other words, science, or what is perceived as such, ceases to be a simple knowledge of the existing world and becomes a generator of values, similar to religion; it can therefore direct political and moral action. "To know the truth in order to conform the order of society to it, such is the unique source of public happiness," writes Condorcet (*Vie de Turgot*, p. 203). This order is a reconstruction adopted because of a particular strategy; historically, it is the desire to improve the lives of men who will open the doors to "scientific" knowledge.

Scientism does not eliminate the will but decides that since the results of science are valid for everyone, this will must be something shared, not individual. In practice, the individual must submit to the collectivity, which "knows" better than he does. The autonomy of the will is maintained, but it is the will of the group, not the person. The followers of scientism act as if there were a continuity between the constraints that man endures at the hands of nature and those that society inflicts on him, effacing the boundary between two kinds of freedom: freedom that is opposed to necessity and freedom that resists constraint. Postulating the absence of the one, they conclude the desirable absence (for the individual) of the other.

Having discovered the objective laws of the real, the partisans of this doctrine decide that they can enlist these laws to run the world as they think best. And this direction, claimed to be imposed by the world itself, becomes a motive for progress: one is acting for the benefit of nature, humanity, a certain society, not of the individuals being addressed. This is already evident among the foremost representatives of the family in the nineteenth century who are "activists," even as they adhere to determinist theses: Darwin recommends eugenics, Marx social revolution. The scientific scholar is tempted to become a demiurge.

In the twentieth century and now in the twenty-first, scientism has flourished in two very different political contexts, which have influenced it to such a degree that we may well hesitate to recognize their offspring as part of the same family. The first variant of scientism was put into practice by totalitarian regimes. The rulers of the countries in which

Chapter 1

these regimes prospered believed, or encouraged the belief, that the evolution of the world obeyed strict laws of a social or biological nature. But far from viewing this as a reason for passive resignation, they judged that, with truth on their side, they could pursue their goal with even more assurance. Everything is necessary, of course, but one has the freedom to accelerate necessity in order to follow the direction of history or the direction of life. The scientism found at the basis of the totalitarian project brings together two extremes: a systematic determinism and a boundless voluntarism. The world is entirely homogeneous, entirely determined, entirely knowable, on the one hand; but on the other, man is an infinitely malleable material, whose observable characteristics are not serious obstacles to the chosen project. Everything is *given* and at the same time everything can be chosen: the paradoxical union of these two assertions comes by way of a third, according to which everything is knowable. And it is this union that makes totalitarianism dangerous: determinism alone can lead to resignation, voluntarism alone can be contested by a rival.

We have moved, here, from the old utopias, dreams of an ideal society meant as criticism of real societies, to modern utopianism, the attempt to establish heaven on earth, here and now. And we have seen the brutal consequences. Since class enemies are destined (by the laws of history revealed by science) to disappear, one can eliminate them with impunity. Since inferior races are both harmful and fated to perish in the struggle for survival, according to the laws of evolution established by science, the extermination of these races is a benefit to humanity, a way of giving destiny a hand. Likewise for less macabre aspects of these societies, from industrialization to the organization of daily life: everything is decided by an iron will, unhindered by any hesitation since it claims to rely on the verities of scientific knowledge.

Controlling society in its entirety, its rulers may be animated by an ideal that is not altogether foreign to that of the conservatives: they are trying to impose greater social cohesion and a submission to common values. This was true of the “socialism” inaugurated by the October Revolution in Russia: victory of the collective over the individual of submission over freedom. In this respect they remind us of the thinking of counterrevolutionaries like Bonald, for example, in France, who tried to reestablish the Old Regime’s way of life by force. In a similar fashion, the so-called conservative revolutions of the twentieth century, fascism or Pétain’s “national revolution,” sought to recover values dear to the conservatives.

The Interplay of Four Families

We might be surprised by this proximity of conservatives and revolutionaries. We are usually aware of the differences between them: the first claim stability, the second change; the first locate their ideals in the past, the second in the future; the first take revealed religion as their reference point, the second the nation or class. Yet Bonald and Claude de Saint-Simon (to name one of the first French representatives of the scientific and utopian tendencies) offer the same objections to the thought embodied by Benjamin Constant, defender of democracy. The preeminence of the “social” over the “individual,” the accent on collective membership (in a race, a class, a nation) are features common to socialist revolutionaries and conservative traditionalists; and similarly, the demand for a public moral order. This explains in part the facility with which a good number of people have been able, in more recent times, to shift from “the extreme right” to “the extreme left,” or vice versa.

The second branch of scientific ideology emerges within the framework of the Western democracies. Its elements—everything is determined, everything is knowable, everything can be improved—intervene in numerous aspects of public life: the neglect of the ends that political or moral actions are supposed to pursue (or the disappearance, pure and simple, of such actions); the conviction that these ends flow automatically from the processes described by science; the desire to submit action to knowledge. Economists, sociologists, and psychologists observe society and individuals, and believe they can identify the laws governing their behavior, the direction of their evolution; politicians and moralists (the “intellectuals”) then urge the population to conform to these laws. The expert replaces the sage as purveyor of final aims, and a thing becomes good simply because it is frequent. Freedom of choice is preserved, remarks Victor Goldschmidt, but it is exercised by “a technocratic collective,” and not by autonomous subjects (*Ecrits*, I, 242). This ideological proximity does not, however, prevent democratic regimes from opposing totalitarian societies: the practice of those States that ensure the freedom of individuals prevents persuasion from becoming coercion, and insubordination from being punished by imprisonment or death.

The Individualists

The scientists’ point of departure is an epistemological postulate: the universe is entirely determined and knowable. The next family defines

Chapter 1

itself within the same modern framework, but bases itself on another anthropological hypothesis: that the individual human being is a self-sufficient entity. This is why I am giving it the name *individualist*, a term I use here in a much narrower sense than when it was made to designate all of modernity (I am following the usage of Alain Renaut). If we return to our starting point, the revelation of the pact and the unforeseen consequences of freedom, the individualist reaction consists not in denying the existence of freedom, as the scientists do, nor in regretting its consequences, as the conservatives do, but in recognizing the truth of the proposition while reversing the value judgment attached to it: instead of deploring it, the individualists rejoice in it. Those things the conservatives decried as threatening or wounding—individualism, materialism, fragmentation of the self—they proclaim loud and clear. If they have one regret, it is that man is not even freer of those fictions consisting of morality, communal life, and the coherent self.

Like the preceding families, the family of individualists has its roots deep in a distant past. The Stoic tradition presents man as a self-sufficient being, or at least as able to aspire to this ideal. Skeptical wisdom shows the relativity of all our judgments and the impossibility of justifying a moral position other than by our habits and interests. In the Augustinian tradition, within the heart of Christianity, one always insists on recalling that weakness is inherent in human nature, therefore also that man is a solitary being, aggressive and amoral. Individualism finds another of its ingredients in William of Occam. If nothing exists outside individual bodies, if abstractions are merely phantoms, the social entity is no longer a necessity: each being is complete in himself. The relations he establishes with other beings around him do not alter him, he does not form a new entity with them. “In order for a thing to exist, it must be so through its own self and no other” (*Lagarde*, V, 174). Occam, who transposes to the life of the city certain principles of monastic life in which the individual stands alone before God, conceives of man as independent of his peers, compelled therefore to attain goodness on his own. “To be a person is to have no need of any other competing reality to subsist” (VI, 42).

This heritage of traditional ideas nourished an image of man that crystallized in France in the seventeenth century, in the thought of La Rochefoucauld. The human being is fundamentally solitary and egotistical; all his actions are motivated by his self-regard and personal interest. But we dare not show our true face to others, for fear that they might

The Interplay of Four Families

punish us; therefore we disguise our egotistical actions as disinterested and generous gestures. The role of the moralist consists, then, of pulling off this virtuous mask and revealing our true nature. “We cannot love anything except in terms of ourselves” (*Maxims*, 81). “Our friendship is really based on interest alone” (85). By deceiving others, we end up believing in our own fictions, and we imagine that life in society is indispensable to us. Yet “social life would not last long if men were not taken in by each other” (87). Pascal, who participates in the same Augustinian tradition, will say much the same thing: “Human relations are only based on mutual deception” (*Pensées*, B. 100, L. 978). But La Rochefoucauld, like Pascal, regrets this solitude and egotism, and seeks to mask if not eliminate them—La Rochefoucauld with courtesy and the acquisition of what he calls honesty, Pascal with grace.

This conception of man was taken up again in the eighteenth century by those same men who would establish the scientific family, the materialist-encyclopedists; and it was gradually freed of the negative judgment it prompted in La Rochefoucauld and Pascal. Man is a self-interested, self-sufficient, solitary being? Fine, Helvetius would say, we must take him as he is rather than rebel futilely against nature; we must bring the ideal and the real closer together. Yet Helvetius is not yet openly individualistic, since for him the common interest, that of the group, must prevail over personal interest.

The first straightforward “individualist” in the French tradition is simultaneously the most extreme: that is Sade. He first observes, in keeping with his predecessors, that man, in the image of other animals, is a purely egotistical being who knows only its own interests. That is the general law of nature: “Nature, the mother of us all, speaks to us only of ourselves, nothing is as egotistical as her voice” (*Philosophie dans le boudoir*, III, 123). Social life is imposed on men from the outside; it is not necessary to them. “Are we not all born in utter isolation? I say more: all enemies of one another, all in a perpetual and reciprocal state of war?” (V, 173). Like La Rochefoucauld, Sade believes that our virtues are merely the homage rendered by vice to convention. “Charity is rather a vice of pride than a true virtue of the soul” (III, 57). “It is always only for oneself that we must love others; to love them for themselves is merely delusion” (V, 178).

And what is, is good: we must in all things and everywhere submit to “nature.” There is no more question of joining together “to be” and “ought to be,” being and duty, as in Diderot or Helvetius, but of the

Chapter 1

disappearance of the second term to the advantage of the first. “Any human law that would contradict those of nature would deserve nothing but contempt” (III, 77). Happily, nature has given us pleasure to allow us to know precisely what is in our interest; and it is here that the experience of the individual is irrefutable. The relativity of values, which in Helvetius stopped at the group, now reaches the individual: what is good *for me* is good. The individual does not have to consider social conventions. “We can surrender in peace to all our desires, as peculiar as they may appear to the fools who, offended and alarmed by everything, stupidly take social institutions for the divine laws of nature” (96). The individual is sufficient to himself; he should therefore be concerned only with his pleasure. “Our tastes, our temperaments alone must be respected” (61). “No limit to your pleasures but that of your powers and your will” (66). The movement of liberation, which is in the process of being accomplished with the French Revolution, must be pursued on the personal level: the individual will emancipate himself from all social constraint. Common laws are merely a hindrance to sexual pleasure. If the body plays such a large role in Sade’s imaginary world, this is precisely because it belongs exclusively to the individual. “Your body is yours, and yours alone; you are the only one in the world who has the right to enjoy it and to give enjoyment with it as you see fit” (68).

We know that Sade himself derived more specific consequences from this doctrine: having discovered that the pain of others gives him more pleasure than their joy, he recommends situations in which the subject can make this other human being suffer or, taken to an extreme, put him to death. “We are not concerned with knowing whether our actions will please or displease the object that serves us, we are concerned only with igniting our nerve endings by the most violent shock possible” (121). But this sadistic variant is not indispensable to the doctrine; its substance is its individualistic anthropology and its hedonistic morality, if we can call it that.

In the nineteenth century, Sade was the black sheep of the individualist family, and his existence was best ignored. Hedonism was practiced much more than proclaimed. Utilitarianism, which is the individualist doctrine’s philosophical form, claimed a direct line from Helvetius or, further back, from Epicurus. Moreover, egotism was repressed by utilitarianism, since its declared objective was the happiness of all members of the community (of “the greatest number”), not of the individual.

The Interplay of Four Families

This quantitative extension would not, however, transform the initial anthropological hypothesis: individuals are the atoms of society, which is formed by their juxtaposition and addition, rather than being an internal characteristic of these individuals.

The appearance of the very word *individualism*, signaled by Tocqueville, illustrates the wide dissemination of the doctrine. The individualist family has other members as well, such as aestheticism, to which I will return; and individualism is equally manifest in the demand for the blossoming of the self or of an authentic personal existence, which is familiar to all of us. I shall not go into detail about these subdivisions, since they are marginal to my purpose. Our concern here is only the place of the individualists within the ranks of the other families: theirs is a doctrine that welcomes from earlier constraints with satisfaction the liberation of the individual and wishes to push that liberation still further, even if this means emancipating oneself from social ties or common values—a sacrifice made all the easier as the individual, according to this doctrine, is a self-sufficient being.

The Humanist Family

These three major reactions to the revelation of the pact have been identified; one is still missing, however, which has the greatest importance for me and to which I will devote the rest of this book. That is the reaction of the *humanists*, who deny that there ever was a pact, known or unknown—in other words, they deny any necessary relationship between, on the one hand, the acquisition of the right to self-government and, on the other, the dissolution of society, morality, or the subject. We will do well enough by avoiding a few mistakes, by sidestepping a few traps, and there will be no price to pay, the humanists say. They want, say their adversaries, to have their cake and eat it too: to keep their precious newfound freedom without being compelled to renounce the social bond, the recognition of values, or the identity of the self.

The word *humanist* has at least three quite distinct, if significantly related, meanings. The oldest, imposed by the Renaissance, corresponds to people who devote themselves to the study of the humanities, in particular to history and the literature of Greek and Latin antiquity; hence they valorize this study or its subject. The most recent is a purely affective meaning: “humanists” are those who behave humanely toward

Chapter 1

others or who tell us that we must treat human beings decently; in short, they are philanthropists. But I am using the word in neither its historical nor its moral sense; I am using it to designate a doctrine that grants the human being a particular role. Just what is this role? It consists, first of all, of initiating one's own acts (or some portion of them), of being free to accomplish them or not—therefore of being able to act at one's will. The distinctive feature of modernity is constitutive of humanism: man *also* (and not only nature or God) decides his fate. In addition, it implies that the ultimate end of these acts is a human being, not suprahuman entities (God, goodness, justice) or infrahuman ones (pleasures, money, power). Humanism, finally, marks out the space in which the agents of these acts evolve: the space of all human beings, and of them alone.

To denote these three characteristics of the humanist family, I will often resort to briefer formulas, such as the *autonomy of the I*, the *finality of the you*, and the *universality of the they*. I use an opposition here familiar to theorists of language between the personal (I, you) and the impersonal (the “third person”), on the one hand; and between *ego* and *alter* on the other—for it is clear that the man who is the end (the goal) of my actions is not myself but an other (humanism is not an egotism). What guarantees the unity of these three features is the very centrality granted to the human race, embodied by each of its members: it is at once the source, the goal, and the framework of its actions. When during the period of the Renaissance we shift from a geocentric to a heliocentric worldview, and our Earth is expelled from the center of the universe, on the level of human affairs we move from theocentric (or from a pagan “cosmocentric”) to anthropocentric. Every human being, whatever his other characteristics, is recognized as responsible for what he or she does and deserves to be treated as an end in himself or herself. *I* must be the source of my action, *you* must be its goal, *they* all belong to the same human race. These three characteristics (which Kant called the three “formulas of one and the same law” (*Fondements*, II, 303) are not always found together; a particular author may retain only one or two of them, and mingle them with other sources. But only the uniting of the three constitutes humanist thought, properly speaking.

This thought is at once an anthropology (it tells how men are: a race apart whose members are sociable and partially undetermined—and who for this reason are led to exercise their freedom), a morality (it tells how they should be: cherishing human beings for themselves and ac-

The Interplay of Four Families

ording the same dignity to all), and a politics (it privileges regimes in which subjects can exercise their autonomy and enjoy the same rights).

It is conceivable that the motto of the French Revolution—Liberty, equality, fraternity—refers, if only approximately, to this triple humanist demand: liberty designates the autonomy of the subject, equality the unity of the human race; as for fraternity, is treating others as if they were our brothers not tantamount to making them the goal of our affections and our acts? In turn, modern democratic States adopt these same three principles, after transposing them from the individual to the collective level. This collective wields a sovereign power, an expression of popular will; the well-being of its subjects is the ultimate goal of its action; the universality of the law for all citizens is the basic rule of its functioning. Here we see the deep affinity between humanist thought and democratic politics.

Liberal democracy as it has been progressively constituted for two hundred years is the concrete political regime that corresponds most closely to the principles of humanism, because it adopts the ideas of collective autonomy (the sovereignty of the people), individual autonomy (the liberty of the individual), and universality (the equality of rights for all citizens). Nonetheless, humanism and democracy do not coincide: first, because real democracies are far from perfect embodiments of humanist principles (one can endlessly criticize democratic reality in the name of its own ideal), then because the affinity between humanism and democracy is not a relationship of mutual implication exclusive of any other. The fact is, the conservative, scientific, and individualist families prosper equally well within democracies; and in turn democratic societies are not threatened by the presence of these other families in their midst. Heirs to the spirit of religious tolerance, democracies accept a certain pluralism of values: different ideologies can contribute to the pursuit of the same end, the common good. There is no simple correspondence between ideological families and political regimes.

However, whereas humanist thought is central to liberal democracy, the other modern ideologies adapt themselves to democracy but have different centrifugal tendencies that make them diverge from it. The individualists are tempted by anarchistic and libertarian aspirations; they prefer that the common rule, embodied in laws and in the apparatus of the state, be as weak and as limited as possible. The conservatives, who do not believe in the strength and soundness of the individual

Chapter 1

will, favor authoritarian regimes. A state founded on scientific principles may veer toward totalitarianism: if one masters the whole range of biological and historical processes, one can dispense with consulting the will of individuals. Conservatives and the adherents of scientism can at the extreme be recognized in the same type of ideocratic regime, where contradictory ideological justifications are given — science here, theology there, utopia on the one side, tradition on the other. Only the humanist family is free of these centrifugal tendencies.

If we turn toward morality, a new distinction arises. Political humanism with its corollaries (universal suffrage, protection of the individual, etc.) is obviously a minimal humanism, which might be qualified as *passive*. The rejection of the arbitrary prerogatives of royalist rule, of the individual's subjection to slavery or forced indoctrination — these are necessary elements of humanist practice, but they still tell us nothing about its positive values. *Active* humanism, however, is based on the finality of the *you*, on the acceptance of the particular human being (other than self) as the ultimate goal of our actions. Here, even the term *morality* is no longer adequate, or it must be given a broader meaning, since humanists favor not moral injunctions but the value of human attachments, friendship, and love. In turn, such a “morality” intervenes in “politics”: the affairs of the country are no longer conducted in the same manner if we decide to take it into account.

As for the humanist doctrine's anthropology, it is relatively meager. Apart from the biological identity of the species, it is reduced to a single feature, sociability; but its consequences are numerous. The most important, in our view, is the existence of a consciousness of self, which animals never achieve; whereas the human child begins to acquire it quite early, from the time he manages to intercept the gaze of the adult leaning over him: *you* look at me, therefore *I* exist. This consciousness of self, inseparable from that of others, will in turn have decisive effects. On the one hand, an increasing complexity of the intersubjective relationship, whose emblem will be human language; on the other, a splitting of the self, equally basic to humanity: the individual is at once a living being like others *and* the consciousness of that being, which allows him to detach himself from it, indeed to stand against it. Such is the basis of human liberty (and of the demand for autonomy that will be its political translation). Man is characterized by this biological trait, the capacity to separate himself from his own being. Sociability and liberty are intrinsically bound together, and they make up part of the very definition of the species.

The Interplay of Four Families

Family Quarrels

In order to complete our picture of humanist doctrine with a little more precision, we should now locate the humanists in relation to the other modern families and identify their response to the devil's claims. The humanists renounce neither values (but these are human, not divine), nor society (which takes multiple forms), nor the responsibility of the subject (however plural it may be). Unlike the individualists, the humanists — Montesquieu, Rousseau, Constant — confirm the fundamental sociability of mankind (man without society is not man, contrary to Occam's contention). Men are not atoms that would have been united, after the fact, within society; their interaction is fundamental to the very identity of the species (the *you* is posed simultaneously with the *I*), and the irreducible individual presupposes intersubjectivity. Against the proponents of scientism, the humanists maintain not only the autonomy of values (these do not flow from facts) but also the possibility of freedom: the human being is not the plaything of forces from which he cannot hope to escape.

There is a kind of symmetry in the opposition between the humanists and the members of these two other families. The individualists believe in personal autonomy but neglect the social membership of individuals. The proponents of scientism accept the autonomy of man but attribute it to the species and the group rather than to the individual: for them, personal autonomy has no real meaning. On their side, the humanists think that the individual can achieve autonomy, that is, act by reason of his own will and in accord with the laws that he himself accepts, without necessarily conceiving this to be outside the human community. The humanists are also distinguished from the conservatives both because they do not deplore the freedom of individuals and because the values to which they adhere are purely human. For this combination of reasons, the humanist response seems to me the most satisfying if not the only worthwhile response to the devil's challenge.

The usual criticism addressed to the humanist doctrine comes from the scientific and conservative families, and it consists of saying that the humanists ignore, willingly or not, the power of determinations that govern human actions — whether biological, social, or cultural. The humanists' response is deployed on two fronts. On the first, the plurality and complexity of causal series are such that they finally result in indeterminacy: our species is characterized by its plasticity, its capacity to

Chapter 1

adapt itself to all circumstances, to change. “Man, that flexible being,” said Montesquieu (*The Spirit of the Laws*, preface, p. xlv). In the eyes of the humanists, man is a potentiality rather than an essence: he can become this or that, act one way or another; he does not do it *out of necessity*. But in addition, and this is essential, even in the presence of the clearest determinations, human beings always have the possibility of opposition, therefore of standing aside from themselves; without that, they are no longer, or not yet, fully human.

We might illustrate the interaction between necessity and freedom by this simple example. Human beings are programmed to speak by their biological nature; neither the parents of a child nor that child herself are at liberty to deprive her of the capacity to speak (except by tampering with her brain). These parents and this child live in a society that uses a particular language: the cultural determination is added to biological causality. Now, as an adult, the child can decide to speak her mother tongue or refuse to speak it and use another language. This rupture in the rule of nature, as in that of culture, is sufficient to introduce the idea of human liberty, and with it all of modernity.

When they are questioned by the representatives of the other families, the humanists therefore do not entirely reject the idea of determinism governing the fate of societies or that of the individual; they do not claim that the human subject is completely free, that he can choose everything in his life and that he alone is master of his fate. But they contend that freedom, choice, and the exercise of the will are options that are equally open to him; that they deserve to be valued more than the situations in which the subject acts by necessity or under constraint; indeed, that certain people manage to multiply these occasions for freedom while others never, as it were, enjoy them. The humanists do not claim that human beings are entirely ruled by their reason or their conscience. They are not unaware of the power of what were formerly called the passions and what we call the unconscious or instinct, nor of the constraints exercised on the individual by biological givens, economic necessities, or cultural traditions. They simply contend that the individual can *also* oppose these constraints and act from his will; and this is what they see as specifically human.

Therefore they value voluntary action, yet without the need to believe in men’s unlimited malleability or in their omnipotence: the place of the given is also irreducible. Humanists do not think, as Sartre does, that man alone makes his own laws: first because man is multiple and this

The Interplay of Four Families

multiplicity can be problematic; then because men today are made also from the past, and this past is in turn shaped by men over whom one has no power; finally and above all, because men must take into account the constraints over which they have no control—constraints imposed by their bodies, the physical characteristics of the countries they inhabit, Earth's place in the universe.

The humanists can even keep company for some distance with members of the family of scientists, but ultimately they go their separate ways. Tocqueville, a humanist here, ends *Democracy in America* with this conclusion: "Providence has not created mankind entirely independent or utterly enslaved. It is true that around every man a fatal circle is traced beyond which he cannot pass; but within the wide verge of that circle he is powerful and free; as it is with man, so with communities" (II, 4, 8). Nature itself is familiar with chance and not only with necessity; history even more so; finally, man can oppose the dictates of nature and history. Natural and historical causality in no way exclude autonomy and voluntary action. In writing these lines, Tocqueville is behaving like a faithful disciple of his liberal predecessors, Montesquieu and Constant.

Humanism is not a monism: it understands human beings and their societies as the result of the interaction of several mutually limiting principles, rather than as the effect of a single cause. The *given* restrains the territory of the chosen, but the will in turn opens a breach in the reign of necessity. This pluralistic choice repeats itself in the area of values, yet without leading to relativism. The paths toward the good are multiple, as becomes evident from the plurality of cultures (this pluralism is therefore a consequence of universalism: one cannot start from the hypothesis that everyone, save us, is mistaken). At the same time, plurality does not degenerate into a war of the gods: just as the spirit of religious tolerance allowed that there are several approaches to the same God, the humanist framework implies that even if values are multiple, it is possible to debate values by means of human dialogue, therefore within a common framework. The gods may be many, but humanity is one.

The same moderation (to use Montesquieu's term) characterizes the humanist attitude toward knowledge. Contrary to the conservatives, who postulate that the effort of men to know the world is condemned to semifailure in advance, contrary to the scientists, who believe they already understand the truth about the laws governing the world, the

Chapter 1

humanists contend that knowledge is limited by fact but not by right. No curse weighs on the world that would make it forever unintelligible, and the capacities of human reason are theoretically unlimited. But in practice, the complexities of matter and mind are such that we know only a small part of them: pride ill-becomes reason, Montaigne observed. That is why a considerable place must be left, next to science, for other forms of comprehension and expression, which allow access to the truth by ways that cannot be made perfectly transparent. Symbol is no less necessary than sign, myth no less than discourse, art no less than science. Humanism locates itself beyond the dichotomy of rationalism and irrationalism; it accepts that knowledge sometimes follows paths that elude rational analysis.

This is perhaps what also explains the humanists' complex relations with religion. On the one hand they separate themselves from it: they want the individual to be able to choose freely whether to believe or not; they want societies to be governed by the will of the people and not by divine right. They also think that man, and not only God, is worthy of being an end in himself. But on the other hand, and even leaving aside the historic affiliation between humanism and Christianity, one cannot help noticing that all the great French humanists, from Montaigne to Constant, described themselves as religious persons and Christians; and this cannot be construed as simply a convenient submission to the laws of the times. Rather, humanism, which is not in itself a religion, is nonetheless not a form of atheism. It separates the management of human affairs from any theological basis or justification; but it does not demand an elimination of the religious dimension of experience. It provides a somewhat vague place for it, outside of politics and science: religion remains a possible response to each person's inquiries into his place in the universe or the meaning of his life.

"Pride" and "Naivete"

We must insist on the irreducible character of the initial human *given* (which does not at all contradict the recognition of freedom as a basic element of the human), for humanism is commonly confused with what may now seem to us its prideful perversion, belief in the omnipotence of man. In this respect, the humanists stand apart from Pelagius and the Pelagians, who nonetheless figure among their precursors. For Pelagius,

The Interplay of Four Families

man is entirely free and therefore responsible for his fate; one can ask him to be perfect, since he is his own master. His nature is good (original sin does not exist), all his imperfections are therefore his own fault, his sins are also willful and cannot be excused. The temptation is great, then, to move from the possible to the obligatory: we demand perfection by providing him with examples to follow (Christ, the Saints) and punishments to dread (the fires of hell).

Similarly, one of the most famous formulas connected to the origin of humanism, Descartes's promise to "make ourselves [like] the lords and masters of nature" (*Discourse on the Method*, pt. VI, *Philosophical Writings*, I, pp. 142–43), refers less to humanist doctrine itself than to this prideful perversion: Humanists affirm that man is not nature's slave, not that nature must become his slave. This Cartesian promise, which is located in the tradition of Ficino or of Francis Bacon, belongs rather to the tradition of the scientific family. Humanists do not claim the omnipotence of man but deny the omnipotence of God or nature; they claim that alongside the *given* there is a place, and a considerable place, for the chosen. Nor are we to conclude that the possibility of intervening in our fate leads inevitably to an infatuation with utopias, the desire to build paradise on earth—which, as we know from the experience of the twentieth century, is more likely to resemble hell. The utopian temptation is more closely related to scientism than to humanism; it rests on the conviction that total mastery of historical processes is possible—which contradicts the hypothesis of liberty. By affirming the role of liberty in man, the humanists know that he can use it in the service of good—but also of evil. The construction of a city in which evil would be excluded plays no part in the humanist project.

The same uncertainty also characterizes the human race, precisely, in its relation to good and evil. Is man good or bad? If one adopts the second hypothesis, one finds oneself in the company of Saint Augustine and a long line of Christian thinkers who derive from him. If one adheres to the first, one sides with the defenders of the "noble savage," of the enemies of education and civilization (not to speak of the extreme position of Sade and his emulators, who make "good" synonymous with—actually, superfluous to—"natural"). The humanist refuses to incline in favor of goodness for simple empirical reasons: should he proudly perceive himself an exception to the rule, he need only take note of his country's history, or observe his friends and relations, to renounce the idea that man is thoroughly good. But the humanist also

Chapter 1

refuses the Jansenist or Protestant position, which makes man another Satan. If he thought, like Bérulle, that “we possess nothing in our own right but error and sin” (*Opuscules de piété*, LXXXV, 1, 403), why would he place even the slightest responsibility for his salvation on his own shoulders? Human nature is imperfect, in Montaigne’s words: such is the working hypothesis of the humanists. Man is neither good nor bad; he can become one or the other, or (more often) both.

This point must be emphasized, for it is the source of another frequent confusion, which attributes to the humanists an entirely positive vision of man. In reality, this is a new perversion of the doctrine, not prideful, this time, but *naive*. Whenever we hear about the “grandeur” of man or his “nobility,” the need to “venerate” him as a god or to “respect” him for his intrinsic qualities, we are dealing with this “naive” vision. Of course we can insist that man must be treated as a noble being or that all men must be respected, but these would be moral imperatives, not anthropological hypotheses. In this regard, man in the abstract is merely uncertainty and potentiality — which does not prevent some men from being positively good and others downright evil. A clear boundary therefore separates the humanist family from its neighbors who worship man. To imagine that man is entirely good or omnipotent is an illusion, in the humanists’ view: neither man’s power nor his goodness should be overestimated.

On the other hand, what characterizes the humanists is a certain faith in education. Since, on the one hand, man is partially undetermined and moreover capable of liberty, and on the other, good and evil exist, one can become engaged in that process which leads from neutrality to good, and is called education. Lacking this, certain positive inclinations may be repressed and disappear, while negative inclinations may prosper. Evil is also learned. Montesquieu wrote: “Where does that ferocity come from which we find in the inhabitants of our colonies if not from that continual practice of punishments on an unfortunate part of the human race?” (*Grandeur*, XV, 463). It is not accidental that so many of the great humanists, Montaigne, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and many others evinced, a particular interest in the subject of education. While the conservatives recommend the pure maintenance and faithful transmission of traditions, the scientists lean toward training that mechanically produces the desired results, and the individualists are happy with searching for anything that contributes to the flowering and maximal satisfaction of each person, the humanists would like to have common

The Interplay of Four Families

principles of education that allow men to acquire a greater autonomy, give a human finality to their acts, and recognize the same dignity in all members of their species.

Natural or Artificial

The ultimate reason for these differences between humanists and other modern families lies perhaps in the status respectively granted to values. Let us recall the terms of the classic argument: two major options confront each other historically, as early as the Greek Sophists, according to which values are either based in nature or emerge from human law alone. The two options have always been envisaged, but we can say in a first approximation that the Ancients prefer to think of values as given (by nature, by God), while the Moderns, and in particular the individualists, most often believed that they were, above all, chosen. When Hobbes declares: “it is Authority, not Truth, that makes the Law” (*Leviathan*, XXVI, p. 202)—and this is only one of a thousand formulations, but a particularly influential one—he becomes the spokesman for the purely voluntarist hypothesis concerning the origin of values. If values have no natural justification, they are “artificial” and can arise only from human will; if certain values are more imperative than others, that is because their partisans possess a stronger will.

As one might have expected, these radical declarations provoke a dismissive reaction, the demand to return in some fashion to the earlier situation—to the wisdom of the Greeks or the faith of the Christians—or at least a solution of compromise between the requirements of our will and those of tradition. This “naturalist” or religious reaction belongs to the conservatives. As for the scientists, their choice is naturalist from the outset: they want to discover values in the world (for example, to deduce them from the instinct for self-preservation), not to see them introduced by voluntary decision. Their deductions turn out, however, to be illusory, hence we are generally dealing, in their case too, with an act of will—no less pure but less open.

Yet these two positions, highly present in the contemporary debate, do not exhaust the field of possibilities, as their respective defenders would have it, certain that criticism of the adversary will irresistibly convince all those with any hesitations. Values can be artificial without becoming arbitrary. This has always been the humanists’ claim. They

Chapter 1

refuse to consider man a being in which fact and value are inseparable, as the Ancients would have done; but neither do they accept the choice of many other Moderns who declare that values are the result of a purely arbitrary choice, the product of will alone. They refuse to allow themselves to be trapped into seeing naturalism or relativism as the only alternatives. It is clear, on the one hand, that the three humanist values—autonomy of the *I*, finality of the *you*, universality of the *they*—have not always been admitted. Other societies have vaunted the virtues of submission, required the veneration of one God, or affirmed that *ours* are always preferable to *theirs*. And yet the subject of modern societies does not feel that his choice is really arbitrary: humanist values, unlike their opposites, possess the force of self-evidence. The quasi-unanimous condemnation of racism, claimed today even by parties of the extreme right, is not perceived as the simple effect of our customs or of an overpowering will. What accounts for this feeling of self-evidence? The answer to this question is not clear, and yet the feeling itself is difficult to deny.

The humanists have therefore sought to establish a meaningful relationship between their values and what they have recognized as the very identity of the human race. The universality of the *they* seems, then, to be the counterpart of the membership of all human beings, and they alone, in the same living species. The finality of the *you* accords with the affirmation of the fundamental sociability of men, of their need for one another, not only for their survival and reproduction, but also for their constitution as conscious and communicative beings: the enjoyment of others is the result of this necessary relationship. The autonomy of the *I* corresponds to the human capacity to remove oneself from any determination. Membership in the same species, sociability, or the existence of a consciousness of self are not values in themselves; but humanist values conform to these characteristics of the species. They bear witness in turn, then, to the doctrine's anthropocentrism.

This correspondence between morality, politics, and anthropology is highly present in humanist texts.

In *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu is first concerned with establishing a scale of beings, not according to their greater or lesser intelligence or rationality, but according to their degree of submission to the laws of their species. Men are not cut off, in this respect, from the rest of living nature; they simply possess this characteristic to a degree unknown elsewhere. At the bottom of the scale are plants, which strictly obey the laws of their nature or divine will (which is the same thing for

The Interplay of Four Families

Montesquieu). Above them come the animals who know feeling, since they can prefer one individual to another; they are already in a non-determined state. “They do not invariably follow their natural laws” (I, i, p. 5). Man is inscribed at the summit of this hierarchy, since he is the most complex being; but in addition, there is one difference between him and the other species that is no longer one of degree but one of kind: he can, in full knowledge of biological and social laws, act despite them or against them. “Man, as a physical being, is governed by invariable laws like other bodies. As an intelligent being, he constantly violates the laws God has established and changes those he himself establishes” (I, i, p. 5). From a genealogical perspective, liberation in relation to natural constraints is progressive, from plants to man; but structurally, the difference is radical: the human race is the only one that knows how to reject the laws that govern it.

Or, according to a paradoxical formula that nonetheless accurately represents Montesquieu’s position: “particular intelligent beings” — that is, men — stray from natural or positive laws not only because they can err, but also because “it is in their nature to act by themselves” (I, i, p. 4). Their nature — that is, their identity — consists in this capacity to oppose the laws of their biological nature. And if political liberty (autonomy) is a value for Montesquieu, that is also because it suits the nature of beings with a capacity to will. In a parallel way, it is human sociability that is at the basis of justice, in his view. “Justice is not dependent on human laws. . . . [I]t is based on the existence and sociability of reasonable beings, and not on the dispositions or particular wills of those beings” (*Traité des devoirs*, 181). The Law corresponds to the identity of the human species, and not only to its will. This is also what Constant means when he states: “To wish to subtract nature entirely in a system of legislation, is to deprive laws of their support, their foundation and their limit all at the same time” (*Principles of Politics*, in *Political Writings*, ed. Fontana, XVIII).

Rousseau sees the chief difference between men and animals in the possibility men have to oppose the biological constraints characteristic of their species. “A pigeon would die of hunger near a bowl filled with the best meats, and a cat on heaps of fruit or wheat, although both might very well nourish themselves with the food they disdain if they were wise enough to try it” (*Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, I, 141). Man, however, knows how to change customs and go against his natural instincts; therefore it is not by chance that autonomy becomes his ideal. Tocqueville also thinks that the desire for liberty, hence the pulling away

Chapter 1

from natural givens, is part of the identity of the species; if it were merely a matter of choice and interest, as we have seen, this desire could not have persisted from the beginning. “There is an instinctive, irrepressible and seemingly involuntary instinct for it [liberty], which is born at the invisible source of all passions” (*L’Ancien Régime*, vol. II, 345). The taste for liberty is an instinct that man does not choose freely.

Humanism is neither a “naturalism” nor an “artificialism”; it defends its values neither because they are embodied in the natural order, nor because the will of the most powerful has decreed it. It is not the “authority” invoked by Hobbes that makes us prefer the right to choose between *yes* or *no* to submission. Likewise for the finality of the *you*, that is, the fact that I prefer to see the human individual as the goal of my action rather than to be satisfied with his exploitation as, say, an agent of economic progress; and for the universality of the *they*, the respect due to all men considered worthier than the preference for “ours” over “theirs.” If the humanist is against slavery, the manipulation and objectification of individuals or the extermination of part of humanity, it is not only because such is his goodwill, in which he might be joined by the pure voluntarist; but also because these values of freedom, respect for others, and the equal dignity of all impose themselves on him with the force of self-evidence, and seem to him more suitable to the human species than others.

It is clear, however, that other values might claim a similar “suitability” and yet are not part of the humanists’ set of values. Why not? Egotism, the preference for one’s own, or the comfort found in submission to the strong are no less “natural” than their opposites. To rationalize their feeling of self-evidence, the humanists are then led to refer to a discriminatory criterion, which is universality itself. One can wish that all human beings were autonomous, that they were all treated as ends in themselves, or provided with the same dignity; one cannot say as much of principles like the survival of the fittest, submission, or the instrumentalization of others. Human universality does double duty in the humanist doctrine, both as one value among others and as the means of legitimizing values.

Humanism in History

Although it is dangerous in the history of thought to use formulas like “for the first time,” I believe I can claim that the various ingredients of

The Interplay of Four Families

the humanist doctrine are found united for the first time in France in the writing of Montaigne. Let me simply indicate here, before going into further detail, that the autonomy of the *I* is implied by his preference for actions that flow from “our voluntary choice and liberty” (*Essays*, I, 27, p. 134); the finality of the *you* by his declaration that the practice of friendship is more necessary and sweeter to man than “the elements of water and fire” (III, 9, 750); the universality of the *they* in his adherence to this principle: “I consider all men my compatriots, and embrace a Pole as I do a Frenchman, setting this national bond after the universal and common one” (III, 9, p. 743). We shall take up the later evolution of the doctrine in the following pages.

As with the other modern doctrines, however, one can find elements of humanism in Greek thought as well as in the Christian religion. The Greek city aspired to govern itself, which is a form of autonomy, and the democracy that it practiced implied that one might prefer voluntary decision to the law transmitted by tradition. Greek literature and painting bear witness to the fact that the individual can become the intransitive aim of other individuals’ aspirations; and the Greeks knew and respected “philanthropy,” or the universal love of mankind.

Humanism also has its roots in certain Christian principles: Christ’s words are addressed to all people without distinction; in addition, humanism takes up the tradition attributed to the name Pelagius, for whom the salvation of men is in their own hands; they are therefore free to save themselves or be damned. This tradition was extended along different lines by Occam, who clearly separates divine and human affairs, and sees in liberty the distinctive feature of our actions. For him, “the very dignity of the human person derives from the faculty that makes him capable at any moment of doing the act that pleases him, as it pleases him” (*Lagarde*, VI, 46). It continues in the thought of Erasmus, who, in contrast to Luther, wants to locate liberty next to grace; similarly with Arminius or with Molina and the Jesuits, whom the Jansenists would pursue with their wrath in the seventeenth century. In other aspects of its doctrine, Protestantism prepares for the advent of the modern individual. Indeed, we can see all the *heretics* as precursors of humanism, since they are, etymologically, “those who choose,” as opposed to those who submit to prevailing doctrine, in other words, the *orthodox*.

The presence of these traditions in European history sometimes gives the impression that we are always engaged in the same debate, in which only the labels change, or the actors rather than the roles. This is espe-

Chapter 1

cially true of the conflict already evoked between grace and freedom in the Christian religion, and of the conflict in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries between freedom and natural or historical necessity, as revealed by science. To justify the free intervention of men, the humanists of different eras in turn had been forced to enlist the same arguments: men are not entirely bad, Erasmus asserts against Luther; they are not moved by self-interest alone, Constant retorts to Helvetius. And the solutions of compromise between the two extremes also bear a close resemblance: the genetic disposition of man allows him to adapt to any situation and to invent a framework for a new life, contemporary biologists will say; “God has created free will,” said Erasmus (*Le Libre arbitre*, 844), and Montaigne: “Nature has put us into the world free and unfettered” (*Essays*, III, 9, 743).

We must not focus exclusively on this revelation of continuities, however. When we study the history of thought, we see that it almost never comes down to single combat between two great coherent and mutually exclusive theses, as we like to imagine, but instead resembles a long rivalry, sometimes specific and sometimes confused, between several major families. The humanists, in particular, are constantly led to engage in separate debates, which prompts them to use arguments that at first sight appear contradictory.

I shall return later to some of their controversies with the other major families. It is enough here to indicate that they are quite conscious of these conflicts themselves. Thus, when Tocqueville writes: “The former abandon freedom because they think it dangerous; the latter, because they hold it to be impossible” (*Democracy in America*, II, 4, 7, p. 329), he is formulating the opposition between conservatives and scientists. Before him, Constant felt compelled to battle both the conservatives à la Bonald (his political adversaries, the ultras, partisans of a Restoration to the bitter end) and the scientists à la Saint-Simon, descendants of Helvetius and of Enlightenment materialism. Against Bonald he asserts the right to autonomy; against the prevailing individualism he rejects the idea that man is a being engaged in the solitary pursuit of his own interest. This intermediary position surely explains why his master work *De la religion* was generally rejected: Constant was too much of a devout for the individualists, not religious enough for the conservatives.

Rousseau insists at length on the need to take a stand simultaneously against two quite distinct adversaries. As the *Lettre à Beaumont* sum-

The Interplay of Four Families

marizes, the Savoyard vicar's profession of faith is composed of two parts. The first "is meant to combat modern materialism, to establish the existence of God and natural religion with all the force of which the author is capable" (996). The second part, in contrast, "proposes doubts and difficulties concerning revelations in general" (996–97). The *Confessions* relate that it is in this spirit of double opposition, to the traditional Christians and to the "philosophers," that the characters of Julie and Wolmar were conceived (IX, 435–36). The *Dialogues* reprise the double combat conducted in *Emile*: here too, Rousseau distances himself as much from the "philosophers" as from the faithful. And long before him, Erasmus was already quite conscious that his position placed him between two extremes; no doubt recalling Aristotle, he defended that position by saying: "This is not an unhappy navigation that stays the course between two contrary evils" (*La Diatribe*, 874). Humanism and democracy can therefore be attacked by the conservatives for their radicalism, while they are reproached by the scientists and the individualists for their excessive timidity. These contradictory reproaches explain why humanist discourse itself sometimes seems incoherent.

It is all the more urgent to identify the plurality of voices that constitute the debate, since each family is inclined, with polemic intentions, to reduce all the other families to a single voice, generally the one that seems most easily attacked, and to regard the others as simple opportunistic camouflage. This last role is attributed, more specifically, to humanism precisely because of its central position: for the conservatives, it is merely a mask for individualism ("Nietzsche fulfills Descartes"); for the individualists, it is a barely attenuated form of scientism ("totalitarianism is an effect of humanism"); as for the scientists, they can describe it as a form of conservatism ("the moral order comes back"). Certain ideological stances could be defined as the simple refusal to recognize this or that boundary.

It must be admitted, at the same time, that more or less stable alliances can indeed be made. Humanists and individualists make common cause in celebrating liberty, which scientists and conservatives condemn (from this point of view, I repeat, Tocqueville is a humanist). Humanists and conservatives defend the necessity of common values, which scientists and individualists reject for opposite reasons (all is necessity — all is freedom). Humanists and scientists make common cause in declaring that rational knowledge of the world is possible, something that conservatives and individualists cast in doubt. Within a single work, different

Chapter 1

doctrines can collaborate or combat one another. Indeed, certain schools of contemporary thought must be described (in our view) as hybrids, offspring of the crossbreeding of several families. This multiple affiliation does not mean that these schools lack coherence: seen from a historical perspective, all thought is hybrid (our four major families as well), exactly like communities themselves.

It will be clear by now that familial regrouping is a risky and thankless task; I have already explained why nonetheless it seemed to me unavoidable. From now on, I will stick by and large to the humanist family. This unique perspective prohibits me from any claim to an even-handed clarification of the other families: I shall systematically privilege one of the voices in the dialogue of the past.

The way I have identified the devil's challenge concerning a hidden pact explains the order of chapters in this book. In chapter 2, I try to understand the actual meaning of the humanist claim for a freedom characteristic of modern man; to this end, I examine the writings of the great French humanists, from Montaigne to Constant, following which I describe the humanists' parries to the devil's threats, or the reasons for their refusal to pay a price for freedom. Chapters 3 through 5 are devoted to the dangers that menace life in society; I deal here with the humanists' conceptions of society and solitude, of love and friendship. Chapter 6 describes the dispersal of the self and is based on the autobiographical practices of Montaigne and Rousseau. Chapters 7 through 9 analyze the question of values in a world in which God is no longer their source nor their guarantee. The epilogue, finally, returns to the present historical context in order to situate within it the responses provided by the humanist thought of the past.