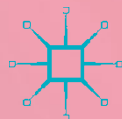


# LIMITS OF THE SECULAR

Social Experience  
and Cultural  
Memory

K A U S T U V R O Y



# Limits of the Secular

Kaustuv Roy

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Social Experience and Cultural Memory

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## PREFACE

My grandmother knew three words of English; it is possible that she knew more, but these were the three that I repeatedly encountered in her vernacular speech. Among the three was the word “modern” (the other two I encountered were “status” and “automatically”), which she used with a certain vehemence. At times the word was accompanied by a downturn of her lips, indicating irony and mild scorn, and at others by a certain wistfulness. As a young person born into modernity I could not fully comprehend the great range of feelings and sensibilities she attempted to articulate by her nuanced use of the term. It was only much later that I understood that the word “modern” represented for her the complex processes by which the meanings and experiences of her life, and for many others like her, were made irrelevant, obsolete. Still later, modernity, especially secular modernity, appeared to me as a pact of silence that attempted to bury the past and pretend that the present was a completely new beginning.

This book is not the mere product of detached scholarship; rather, it is the result of a lifelong struggle with certain ontological and phenomenological issues that connect the constituted individual, including her/his sensibilities, to the collective within modernity, as well as to antiquity, to write about which earlier I did not possess either the language or the courage. Now that I seem to have gathered the audacity, the reader will have to decide whether the language is up to it. One of the tasks before a student of the humanities is to understand the times in which s/he lives. But this task is not easy, since to assess the times in which one lives requires a particular perch from where to look, and most perches, alas, are infected

by the constructs of those very times which one attempts to comprehend. Many scholarly works subtly become prey to this bane of circularity.

One way around the problem is to approach the issue genealogically. But the genealogical approach, although I have the greatest respect for it, is in the end an epistemic one that does not throw sufficient light of ontological praxis on how to develop a particular predicament concretely so that it becomes a threshold from where to move beyond the *status quo*. What does this book offer the scholar? First, it shows why the strictly epistemological approach (secular rationality) to subject-world relations is inadequate from the point of view of critical existence. Second, it offers a way to think about an organic-limiting principle that is missing in modernity by acknowledging the ontological. All modes of perception-action require a limiting principle without which systems can become self-destructive. Rationality cannot produce such a limit from within itself, which is not at all surprising. Secular reason, as I have shown in the book, acts as an effective limit on the mythic element, that is, on claims outside the bounds of reason, but it cannot do the same when it comes to itself. Besides, over the centuries, reason or *ratio* has lost the capacity for self-criticism. Hence, the urgent need for understanding the limits of secular reason. Third, the book offers the possibility of constructing what is termed here as a “bridge consciousness” that links the epistemological (mental constructs of reason) with the ontological (infra and supra mental dimensions).

At the same time the thrust of this book is praxeological, trying to maintain a balance between actors and practices. In pursuit of that I have gone into spaces where worthier persons might have rightly hesitated, and the attempt has brought together disparate and peripheral traditions. The emphasis on peripherality is deliberate. And since my purpose here is not to create a unified, convergent vision, nor attempt at any reconciliation between visions, I have clung to the hope that the reader will forgive my incursions accepting the justification that the non-canonical and the peripheral require shifting nomadic viewpoints. The following has been the driving question of this peripheral and nomadic quest: Are the major premises underlying the social imaginary today adequate for producing livability for all, and have the consequences of those premises truly been able to respond to the ontological predicament we call living? The question is for the most part a rhetorical one, and I set out to write this book only because I felt that the answer to the question is an unqualified “no.”

The second group of background assumptions that is questioned here concerns the widely held impression that the past is a ghost, and while

it might influence the present variously, it can be eventually willed away. Arguably, modernist metaphors such as progress, advancement, and so on, adhere to and even hinge on this deep background belief. However, my investigations, observations, and intuitions show to the contrary. They suggest that cultural memory is not merely a ghost but has material content, and however hard we try to manage social experience, the ghost returns in unexpected and problematic ways to haunt us. The book turns on the notion that cultural memory including source events is conserved (and hence subtly operational) at all times, a kind of *alaya-vijnana* (inextinguishable memory) as the Buddhists might say, and demands that we take a second look at the claim to liberate social experience from the past. Further, this makes critical engagement with the past not simply the reading of history but as being in what Walter Benjamin called a “state of history.” In other words, it makes it imperative that we take seriously the source elements within culture and make these an important part of the ongoing self-analysis of any society. The book attempts to do this by examining certain non-secular and folk concept-practices that have fallen out with modernity and thereupon banished to the edge of cultures. At the same time the book urges us to attempt to free the present from idealized or lumpenized forms of the past through a conscious choice of those elements of culture that allow for multiplicity, dissent, and praxis, as well as those that help us move beyond the constituted subject to touch a larger transpersonal dimension.

We live in dangerous times; more than ever human beings need to make connections between what is happening all around them and their particular lives. The method of the bureaucrat and the technocrat has comprehensively failed to attenuate suffering. And yet these are the primary modes of social realization and action. The book conceives of an action that is different and that requires a firm critique of the present including a critique of the very categories of reason that are generally used for criticism. To do that I have taken recourse to fragments of traditions that have not been fully ritualized or institutionalized.

The book will be helpful for any scholar and serious reader interested in understanding secular modernity, but much more, it will aid those who feel the need to generate for themselves an informed framework within which questions that are no longer asked in modernity can be asked, and raise doubts that no longer can be raised. The book is therefore an attempt to go beyond certain ear-splitting silences that envelop the age.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are at least five classes of contributors to this book. First, there are those like Illich and Jung whose thoughts and practices provide some of the skeletal structure of the book. Second, there are those like Gandhi whose sensibilities are affectively spread throughout the book like an invisible spirit, guiding the writer as well as, hopefully, the reader. Third, there are those like Adorno whose powerful musings provide a framework against which the book attempts to make a point or two. Fourth, there are peripheral human beings such as village folk without whose sharing of experiences and willingness to participate a book like this could not have been written. And fifth, there are those who have contributed directly to the production of the manuscript, chief among whom is Chitra Lakhera in her capacity as research assistant. I have no words to express my gratitude and thankfulness to all of the above classes of contributors and many more who are far too numerous to be named here.



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## Introduction: Where Angels Fear

The primary theme of the present work is the social and cultural effect of systematic suppression and supersession of non-secular experience by secular thought. The following pages argue that the above process that has been going on in the name of human advancement has resulted in a profound schism in the social plane. For the non-secular is the dialectical opposite of the secular and they can legitimately exist only by reference to one another. Yet, while that might seem trivially true, the notions that have eclipsed this truth and driven the former underground are uncritically accepted as some of the foundational postulates of modernity. Hence, we have the following question before us: How does one study this one-sidedness, this “Absence”? Even more, how does one study an Absence that has been in the making for almost 2000 years? For secularity, as the term will be developed here, is, before anything else, a systematic and profound absence—a slow invisibilization of an entire domain of collective human experience.<sup>1</sup> The creation of a polarity and a public stance by which the domain of inward and non-empirical experience is excluded as whimsical, unnecessary, or incredible, especially in its relevance and relation to public reason, will be regarded here as a willed Absence.<sup>2</sup> The “inward” has been mistaken for the personal and therefore not examined

<sup>1</sup>R. D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1969).

<sup>2</sup>Different from secularity, the word “secularism” refers to the separation of Church and State, its historical progression in different societies, and in some cases such as in India, a public even-handedness toward all religions.

seriously. The present book claims that the making of this absence has had devastating consequences for humanity, as well as for those who cohabit this planet alongside humans. To refer only to the scientific or technological spirit for social decision, for example, without a corresponding or dialectical regard for other ways of relating to the world, is to create a unipolar or monocular world that is always on the verge of breakdown.

Some might object to this as an extreme viewpoint, but it is not difficult to show that even as the transcendental spirit as a beacon for collective ethics has been eschewed, secular reason has not been very successful at independently generating new matrix for ethical action. In an interview with Eduardo Mendieta, Jurgen Habermas, the celebrated Left-wing German philosopher, has said:

Egalitarian universalism, from which sprang the ideas of freedom and social solidarity, of an autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, of the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, is the direct heir of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of continual critical appropriation and reinterpretation. To this day, there is no alternative to it. And in light of the current challenges of a postnational constellation, we continue to draw on the substance of this heritage. Everything else is just idle post-modern talk.<sup>3</sup>

But even while this lends substance to the present argument, today the world draws upon the ethic merely discursively; there is no serious ontological attempt to engage and directly relate to the source events in terms of ethical or aesthetic practice. Secular modernity's human relations have come to be mediated by the exchange relation, which has become the great substitute displacing the "ethic of justice" and the "ethic of love" mentioned by Habermas. It is not surprising therefore that a great deal came to be staked on this absence, as the very emergence and eventual hegemony of *homo economicus* or "economic man" was contingent on this absence. It will be partly the task of this book to show that a vital part of the being of the human—the inner as distinct from the outer—was submerged in order to indemnify this new understanding.<sup>4</sup> The repression of

<sup>3</sup>Jurgen Habermas, *Time of Transitions* (London: Polity Press, 2006) 150f.

<sup>4</sup>Unlike Max Weber, who showed how the conditions of possibility of Western Capitalism emerged from the secularization of Christianity, my task here is to explore the peculiarity of a society devoid of the non-secular.

the “inward” processes and the eventual banishment of a timeless part of human experience from the content and intercourse of public societal relations bring about the peculiar phenomenon called secularity.

At its broadest, secularity can be characterized as the methodical exclusion from the social imaginary of a realm outside the boundaries and productions of rational thought. In other words, for the secular order, the sole legitimate tool for making sense of the world publicly is empirical reason. Experiences and sensibilities outside of the rational discourse are confined to the private domain, their understandings made inconsequential for the deliberations of public import. I will argue here that this is a form of blindness to the ontological being and becoming of the human, since the birth of cultures, in the sense of the emergence of the key source events of, say, the Judeo-Christian, the Islamic, the Buddhist, the Egyptian, the Hindu, and so on, has been entirely outside the productions of rational thought, although later explicated and elaborated on by reason. That is to say the founding experiences of cultures were religious and transcendental, inward revelations of a completely different order than the mental, complete in themselves. The developments in rational thought cannot be, and must not be, divorced from the source, no matter how independent they might appear today. It is ruinous to do so. One might even argue therefore that it would be reasonable to expect societies to collectively commit part of their psychological and physical resources to the conscious, active exploration of the circumstances and roots of their genesis. Unfortunately, the opposite has happened, and as societies have drifted from their roots, modernity has engaged less and less directly with this part of cultural and aesthetic experience, even as it has drawn from it intellectually, and often unconsciously.<sup>5</sup> The consequence has been that the roots of many secular concepts that actually lay in another dimension of human experience have become distorted and obscured.

It does not matter very much here for our purposes how we think of the exact nature of the “inner” or the “outside” of thought-consciousness even if such a comprehensive definition were possible. The fact is that the varieties of experiences that testify to a trans-empirical Outside are too numerous in history to enumerate. What matters is to raise the question of its subterranean presence in the cultural memory and inquire into its relevance for continued social existence. At various points in the

<sup>5</sup> I am not referring here to rituals and outer observances of which there are plenty, but to the source events of cultures such as the life and death of the Christ.

book I have referred to the non-empirical as trans-secular, transcendental, religio-psychic, cosmic, supra-rational, sacred, mystical, transpersonal, and so on, aware that these terms are not fully equivalent. However, I have done so in recognition of the fact that the specific form of the Outside must be left to the reader's imagination since sub-cultures have different and unique alignment with the macrocosm, and that uniqueness locally determines the shape of the Outside in collective consciousness and individual experience. Instead, the task I have set for myself in this book is to work out the limits of secular thought and to remind ourselves in multiple ways that cultural memory of transcendence, no matter how submerged, and its conserved social effects cannot be simply wished away.

My claim is that no matter where a society may be located on the curve of secular ideology, the limits of the secular ideology are important for all to consider. To societies that pride themselves on being fully secularized, which also means in part the removal of any serious examination of religious thought in public education, a reconsideration might reveal an associated lack of existential fullness. For those not so secularized, it will serve as a warning not to simplistically embrace the reductive worldview or even the pious policy of so-called religious tolerance. A much more active consideration is needed. There is great peril for all when we take a truncated view of ourselves, societies, and cultures and regard it as the whole. When the part regards itself as the whole, it is bound to make fatal mistakes in its appraisal of its relations with others and with the macrocosm.

Let us, for a moment, look at the necessity of the "Outside" from the angle of reason itself. One of the fundamental laws framed by human reason is the law of causality. Simply put, the law says that every effect has a cause, and an effect cannot precede its cause. In other words, generally speaking, to every perceived effect one can assign (or at least speculate about) a source of its arising. An immediate difficulty arises when we come to consciousness itself. What is the cause of thought, and wherefrom does it arise? No amount of research on artificial intelligence or cognitive theories is able to penetrate the surface of this mystery, and philosophers in the West have tended to avoid the question of consciousness.<sup>6</sup> Since, by the law of causality, thought (effect) cannot precede its cause, the thinker can never *know* what gives rise to it. Yet we do experience thoughts and so it

<sup>6</sup>Here the reference is to the *form* of thought-consciousness and not to its content. The content can be analyzed such as in psychoanalysis, but the form itself eludes our grasp, and therefore its sub-structure.

must have a cause. Hence, by the dint of its own logic, consciousness must admit to an Outside, a *beyond* of thought as “cause” to which thought itself can have no access.

The usual celebration of thought does not allow us to posit this problem in any meaningful way and it remains confined to the formal intellectual domain as an unresolved issue. But I want to suggest that this is a central issue not to be banished to a formal domain or entrusted to the scientists and experts but be part of the social discourse in multiple areas—in education, psychology, economics, and politics—reminding us at all times the ontological boundaries of rationality and thought-consciousness. Only then the Outside will begin to have a broader significance and a different kind of search widely be seen as relevant. My task as set out in this book is to bring back into the reckoning and acknowledge a side of human life and personality that has been increasingly submerged and ignored, resulting in what one might call an impoverished reality.

This book is not about secularism, which concerns the various developments in and the growth of secular formations, or the spread of secular ideology across societies over time. The book is also not about intercultural comparison. Hence, I do not use the term secularism; instead I settle on the term *secularity* to capture and analyze a state of things that has deliberately turned its back on the collective cultural memory of transcendence, inner experience, and supra-sensory sensibilities. Therefore, while secularism is a historical process, *secularity* is a state of being; the former is a diachronic lens, whereas the latter is a synchronic one. In order to understand the limits of the secular and to propose a public dialogue concerning the possibility of an ontological Outside, I interpolate diverse sources, testimonies, and experiences. From these accounts and interpolations I am persuaded to conclude that the West-driven attempt to impose a uniform secular social order, meaning a deliberate distancing from the non-secular spirit, on the whole world is (a) *an elitist attempt to eliminate non-governable experiences*; (b) *a root cause of the contradictions of modernity as well as of religious fundamentalism*; and (c) *the producer of a false and perverse view of individuality and its relation to the collective*. I would go so far as to argue that the ecological crisis of unimaginable proportions facing the world today is a direct result of ignoring the non-secular and the limits it poses, and instead depending solely on the technological aspect to make sense of the world.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man* (London: Unwin, 1990).

The principal argument therefore in the book is as follows: the global construct of secular reason that refuses positive engagement with the trans-secular ends up projecting a partial and fragmented reality as the whole in accordance with ruling worldly interests and the dominant epistemic. This partial reality is an ongoing construct of empirical rationality that systematically excludes from public life any reference to religious sensibilities which are seen as unsophisticated, interfering with material flourishing, and inimical to homogenized secular values. In contrast, the argument here goes like this: the non-secular dimension of human experience cannot be simply cast off or privatized. The attempt to obliterate it gives rise to a dangerously distorted and one-sided view of the world, leading to positions and social arrangements that are unsustainable. In addition, exiling transcendental values from the public sphere or banishing them altogether as anachronism creates a vacuum that is eventually filled by fundamentalism and extremism. Here too elite interests are served since the threat of extremism consolidates power and raises visibility of the rulers, even as the main victims of fundamentalism tend to be ordinary and peripheral people.

Of course there is no easy answer as to how to include the value and logic of the non-secular in public life. But we do have the precise instance of Gandhi who refused to separate transcendental values from political action. Gandhi wanted the right kind of religious values, not institutionalized religion, to ethically guide and limit political action. At the same time, he used political action to undermine canonical forms of religion that were oppressive and exploitative. It is difficult to find in world history a more astute co-deployment of the secular and the non-secular that is aimed at liberation for all. Gandhi returned again and again to the core teachings of major religions, and not to their organized or canonical forms, in order to find praxis. Gandhi believed that if religion was concerned merely with private belief and did not have any bearing on the conduct of collective life, it would be a sheer misapprehension of religiosity. Similarly, if politics was a Machiavellian struggle for power free of religious ethics, it could not possibly bring about well-being and livability for all.

More than argument, the book is concerned with praxis. Conventional usage of the term praxis indicates transformation in thought in the process of action.<sup>8</sup> It is largely an epistemological reconsideration. Here I have shifted focus to the body-being and its ontological possibilities, paying

<sup>8</sup>This is the Marxian idea of praxis.

close attention to the *corpus sensorium* that is otherwise carefully ignored in secular modernity (other than for the purpose of amusement). On the contrary, representational or abstract thinking is highly valued in modernity because it is formal, generalizable, predictable, and controllable. But experience, which is diverse and divergent, is devalued due to its apparent *ad hoc* nature. Consequently, transcendental experience, which is uncontrollable, is impossibly diverse, and may bring about changes in the body-being in unpredictable ways, is highly suspect. Besides, it is its non-market quality and non-standard nature that modernity is unprepared to deal with.

Hence, from the angle of this new kind of psycho-physical praxis and its possibilities toward breaching the apparent bland monotone of immutable reality, I have leaned heavily on Gandhi's practice of "*swaraj*" or self-rule which requires a serious inquiry into our subjectivities. The latter, I have argued, is not simply to be seen as a moral or an ethical gesture, but an important shift in the "center of gravity" of the human from the head (thought) to the heart (senses), a shift that makes it possible to inquire into the transpersonal and the transcendental seriously. This shift pushes the constellation or the composite called the individual against its self- and society-imposed limits. Such an effort makes possible the construction of new constellations at the edges of being, as the brief ethnographic accounts included here demonstrate. I have suggested that logical thinking in general tends to be indifferent toward the ontological, and is dismissive of inward experience in particular. Reversing the position through corporeal praxis shocks the constellation into a new frame of attention.

Since my major purpose here is also to create a threshold for looking into elements of a (variously) transcendent reality, and which I claim to be part of varied human heritage, I have reached out geographically to diverse traditions and experiences in order to envision the same. The focus is on the peripheral, rather than the canonical or the dogmatic forms of tradition. Thus, there is a peripheral Christianity around the actual teachings of the Christ, besides the mainstream canonical form led by the Church. Historically, the latter has been an adversary of the former. Similarly there is a divergence between mainstream Islam and Sufism, just as there is between orthodox Buddhism and its Tibetan counterpart. I look for elements of transcendental praxis in the non-canonical forms. There is of course an infinite variety of transcendental experience besides the above, which we are not able to discuss here, and which is probably one of the major limitations of the book. Some who



have gone over parts of the manuscript have complained that I have left out what are arguably the major forms (such as *Vipassana* in Buddhist practice) to focus only on peripheral approaches. This is a deliberate part of the strategy of the book because I try to build theory based on the experiences and practices of common folk. The early chapters of the book are a preparation for, and anticipate, the multi-pronged praxis in the later chapters.

As indicated above, the praxis is ontological rather than epistemic. The contrast between the epistemic and the ontological approach can be grasped by comparing my method here with that of Ashis Nandy, one of the most insightful commentators on modern India: “A humane society can only be built or sustained on the basis of open politics. And both in South Asia demand the defiance of the ruling categories of our times. These categories have allowed the concept of secularism to hegemonize the idea of tolerance, so that anyone who is not secular becomes definitionally intolerant.”<sup>9</sup> This is a sound description of the problem. However, in this commentary on the secular trajectory in India, Nandy maintains the epistemic opposition: tolerant/intolerant, which is perfectly relevant to the mode of his analysis, which, in his own words, is psychology of the political. The praxis envisaged here nevertheless moves in a different direction and seeks to assess the formal content of thought by dialectically relating it to an ontological Outside. Tolerance is still a matter for the mind, whereas transformation is a matter of the heart consisting of concrete practices. But what transformation are we talking about? The bringing together of the secular and the non-secular results in bringing together the two halves of the human experience and must therefore be the essence of repair in the schism mentioned at the beginning. The human-to-human and human-to-world relations are then guided not by either competition for turf or tolerant acceptance, but by a dialectic between the secular and the non-secular spirit.<sup>10</sup> Both epistemic and the ontological are necessary parts of this transformative relation that takes us beyond divided consciousness.

One more thing I want to suggest is that in the absence of embodied practice, thought (the instrument of rational consciousness), with its fears and conflicts, lives in endless oppositions. The body or corporeal

<sup>9</sup>Ashis Nandy, “An Anti-Secularist Manifesto.” *India International Centre Quarterly*. Vol. 22. No. 1 (1995), 64.

<sup>10</sup>I have by no means rejected the secular position; the requirement is that of an adequate dialectical relation.

practice, in contrast, does not depend upon these ruling categories which are imposed upon it by thought. I recognize that this is a far riskier proposition and may invite the charge that I am attempting to revert to the days of mysticism and the occult. To that I can only reply that the body is a mystery, having many layers and zones of unknown possibilities (the layer we inhabit is only a small part), and these have to be tapped for an authentic change in the direction of societal relations. There is little acknowledgment of this because modernity has mainly a colonial relation with the body, using it for pleasure or as a medium of continuity. But as Nietzsche saw so clearly, the body is the true repository of the mystery of existence, in comparison to which thought is merely epiphenomenal, ephemeral.<sup>11</sup> Body is prior to rational consciousness, and not the other way around, and therefore must be made integral to transformative practice.

Geographically the book is not tied to the cultural experiences of any particular community or ethnic group notwithstanding a few anthropological accounts of non-secular experience located in a non-modern community. While it is true that the ideology of secularism—the progressive freeing of public spaces and discourses from faith bound norms and attitudes—has affected different societies differently, both qualitatively as well as in degree, it is also true that the overarching goal set by the hegemonic world order is the same for all, and each is bound by similar yardsticks within the reward system of that world order. Therefore, I have chosen to focus on the phenomenological and socio-psychological consequences and assumptions of the secular mandate in general in order to understand its limits, notwithstanding its specific performances in diverse settings. And since secularity, or the suppression of the transcendental, is in large part the evolutionary child of organized Christianity, and thus of the Empire, it is not surprising that a great deal of attention in the book has been given to Christendom and its various cultural effects, especially in the erstwhile Imperium. The teachings of the Christ as in the Beatitudes are at all times kept distinct from the institutionalized version of Christianity.

In writing a book like this, one is always walking a very thin line, a “razor’s edge” as it were, since thought/intellect is being challenged to open itself to something that is outside reason, seemingly an absurd proposition. But the even bigger challenge a book like this faces is to impassively persuade an intellectual audience to examine the very substance through which s/he thinks and thereby to experience herself/himself differently.

<sup>11</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals* (London: Dover Publications, 2003).

The flat monotone of endless representation and its vicissitudes is one way to experience oneself, but there may be more intense and viable modes of experiencing that are not mere spiritual mumbo jumbo nor “New-Age” individualism but ontological realignment. Ontologically sound, collective rootedness in the cosmos is possible through the fullness of a “the-andric” alignment with the world at large that can also accommodate the scientific spirit. Some readers may be already persuaded that such living is possible because they either have been privy to certain experiences or simply have thought things through for themselves. For them the book offers ways and means of stabilizing those sensibilities and widening them out toward the collective life and a different politics that takes into account the aesthetic dimension.

The task, as I have said in the book, is to create a *bridge consciousness* that moves easily between the inside and the outside of thought, and hence moves equally easily between the so-called individual and the collective. It is from the perch of bridge consciousness that we begin to understand the tragic failure of the project of modernity that had cast the secular and the trans-secular in opposition. We cannot separate ourselves from that failure, and yet we can make amends for it by making an immense effort toward comprehending and possibly transcending the limits of the secular. The move from living exclusively by mental representation and its by-products—a legacy of the eighteenth century—to a search for authentic being-experience is not an easy one and is to be accomplished carefully in stages. This book can only be a pointer in that direction.

Modernity as used in the book is more than just a historical era. It refers to a certain way of visualizing and relating to the world. In this sense there has been a modernity in every age. The Indian epics “the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, for instance, take into account the modern consciousness in the form of the personality types represented by some demons (*danavas*, *daityas*, *rakshasas* and *asuras*).”<sup>12</sup> These may even be usefully thought of as Jungian archetypes given the widespread allusion to their overweening traits throughout cultural memory. A persistent characteristic integral to these types, for example, is their search for absolute power and dominance over the elements and over other beings. And this

<sup>12</sup>Ashis Nandy, *Traditions, Tyranny, and Utopias: Essays in the Politics of Awareness* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 122.

leads them to seek and acquire great technological mastery.<sup>13</sup> This mirrors the modern consciousness which “hierarchizes the relationship between human beings and nature and between those who possess technology and those who do not.”<sup>14</sup>

Next, let me say a few things about the major influences in the book, on whose prodigious insights my own understanding has grown. I have begun by referring to Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* for an important reason. Other than the fact that there are few critiques of modernity as deep, broad, and penetrating as Adorno (and Horkheimer), it seems to me that the critical tradition has been widely appropriated in a selective and partial manner, leaving the more acute discernments that demand a sustained microsocial praxis for realization. Let me clarify this point. For Adorno, “society and culture form a historical totality, such that the pursuit of freedom in society is inseparable from the pursuit of enlightenment in culture.”<sup>15</sup> But, arguably, and unfortunately, much greater attention has been given to the question of “freedom in society” than to “enlightenment in culture.” This is because in the name of fighting superstition or romanticism, modernity “promotes a form of hard materialism which negates even the idea of future freedom from material bondage which was Marx’s dream. Such materialism becomes an end in itself...and defines large parts of critical consciousness as irrational, romantic irrelevancies.”<sup>16</sup> But enlightenment in culture cannot be the sole prerogative of objectivity or objectivism.

Then what do we mean by “enlightenment in culture”? Adorno writes that cultural criticism must result in “determinate negations,” pointing up specific contradictions between what thought claims and what it actually delivers. Elsewhere Adorno states that there is always in reality an excess that escapes the grasp of thought. When one puts the two together the inescapable conclusion is that there is an *irreducible gap* between the projections of thought and its achievements (other than in the domain of *techne*). My view is that cultural studies and other cultural criticisms have focused on the *expressions of thought* in culture rather than on this

<sup>13</sup> In the *Ramayana*, Ravana, the great *rakshasa* (demon), is shown as a supreme technician and a master of warfare.

<sup>14</sup> Nandy, *Traditions, Tyranny, and Utopias*, 136.

<sup>15</sup> Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. (New York: Continuum, 1973) xvi.

<sup>16</sup> Nandy, *Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias*, 136.