

# The Moment of Modernity

*by David Appelbaum*

If there is an inner, esoteric approach to consciousness, its very concealment must lie in its adaptability. If this approach exists, it must exist now—or else it has never existed.

If there is no approach to consciousness in this time, our modern era, there has never been one, and we are deluding ourselves about a golden, Hyperborean age.

When Hegel noted that not everything is possible in every age, he was repeating the hermetic truth of adaptability, the image of quicksilver. The truth of the inner approach must conform to the needs of the time, and such needs are never insulated from conditions of culture and psyche. For exigency expresses itself through humans and the unique way they harmonize organism, personality, and essence. In one age, it is imperative to build great stone cathedrals of a crucified god. In another, it is imperative to construct great scientific theories of universal forces and elemental energies. The lawful conformity of an esoteric approach to given conditions grants the inward way its hidden character. The astute thief (as Hermes is) hides the deepest secret in the most obvious place. So it is with a way of consciousness in our times. That way has not forsaken us who live at the close of the second millennium but rather has simply and secretly taken on the dress of a modern citizen, one who walks the streets of a late twentieth century village or city, Soren Kierkegaard's infamous postman. This is no disguise, any more than the outfit I wear disguises me. Yet it is the best disguise, since I am almost always taken to be the man the clothes make me to be.

A certain strain of thinking tends to demonize the modern dress of an

esoteric approach. At the same time, this thinking exhibits a romantic strain in its fondness for the dress of earlier epochs and what we now identify as their teachings, sacred texts, hymns and prayers, and rituals of concentration. If Baudelaire is accurate in discerning two necessary and contradictory aspects of truth—the eternal and the ephemeral—then the opposition of tradition and modernity that finds the latter vacuous and pernicious is guilty of overstressing necessity over contingency, unity over manifoldness, being over becoming, and permanence over impermanence. Of the twin pitfalls imperiling any point of view that Nagarjuna discerns, eternalism and nihilism, the former is the chief danger of the romantic streak. To claim that ‘the countenance of the Divine’ has ceased to show itself (or show itself less) to these times of ours is to fall into precisely that deep pit. To say that the modern is definable by its being ‘cut off from the Transcendent’ is to sever relations with the present moment, which is the only time we have to follow the inner approach to consciousness. The statement proves itself in a matter that lies beyond seeking proof. Our time is one of exigency, the time to see disguise *as* disguise and penetrate to the essence of the matter.

How to identify the modern era, not as the sinful dragon St. George must slay, but as a time, a field of possibility, a locus of human endeavor. And how to go about the task even though the dress of modernity may lack appeal in showing its face of ‘promiscuity, consumerism, crime, corruption, bigotry, exploitation, disease, overpopulation, famine, environmental degradation, the arrogance of power,’ and the like. For modernity, if anything more than an abstraction, is (as the word says) of the *now*. The matter of discovering this modern time is no trivial matter but the crux of any search for real consciousness. One could even say that unless and until contact with *this* time is made, discourse remains a lofty idealism at best, at worst, fumination. Unless the words relate to the conditions actually given at present, they endanger an inner approach. Proximity, contact with the vehicle through which the other appears, is barred.

I am not thinking of a ‘dating’ of modernity, but of a remembering of Descartes as the ‘father of modernity,’ at least if that attribution of patrimony does not saddle him with a seminal thought. The turn he records in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* had presented itself to the modern era nearly a hundred years before Descartes’ winter in Holland in

1638. But the clarity with which he separates the subject of experience from its object, and hence the realm of subjectivity from objectivity, expresses once and for all the perceptual and conceptual tendencies that crystallized into the modern point of view. That he further identifies the subject's experience as the field of search further consolidates his claim to modernity. It is not a convenience to begin with Descartes but an obligation because he so explicitly expresses the beginning of what needs to be understood.

One can almost hear the specific note being struck. Listen to the second sentence of the *Meditations*: 'From the time I became aware of this, I realized that for once I had to raze everything in my life, down to the very bottom, so as to begin again from the first foundations, if I wanted to establish anything firm and lasting in the sciences.' What he has become aware of, 'the false opinions that in my youth I took to be true,' is, in a blind obedience to traditional learning, the way his mind is actually working. In a more roseate moment in the *Discourse on the Method*, he speaks of 'reading good books being like a conversation with the best men of past centuries.' In the *Meditations*, it is different. Without elaborating it, he had come to perceive the source of his credibility to lie in habit. Hume will make much of the automatic character of thinking later the following century. Descartes, however, cannot yet identify the false or falsifying source. For him who feels the exigency to begin again, the only option is to break the hypnotic hold of the mind of reason and confront the unknown.

One could go on to investigate the Cartesian 'method' of doubt and determine his yield from this undertaking. But that would be to overshoot of the origin of modernity, the quintessential note of *this* time, as it has been since Descartes. 'To raze everything in my life:' this has the unique meaning of bringing the totality of empirical experience—thought, feeling, and sensation—momentarily to a complete stop. The moment of arrest is an ending that contains the novelty of Descartes' new beginning. Life of the psychophysical *res* (the odd amalgam of mind and body) is brought to a stop so that the attention can rejoin its source and the subject remember its existence, the *sum* or *I am*. Lacking the stop, the *I am* remains obscured by the drama of experience, buried beneath the clockwork of this time.

What then is the quintessentially modern if not an adaptation of an

ancient approach? Which is to say, not a novelty but a redeployment of a means to be receptive to novelty. Patanjali tells in the very opening of the *Yoga Sutras* that yoga is defined as *citta-vrtti-nirodha*, the cessation of the turnings of thought. Patanjali was apparently wary of the subject's identification with a specific function that represents a contraction of human responsibility. Attachment to the productive mind or intentional consciousness (as Husserl calls it) is an ignorance (*avidya*) that ignores the solicitations of the whole being in favor of a single aspect, namely, cognition. Since the world-appearance is a product of the mind's productivity, elaborate provisions exist to prevent any discontinuity of production. Hence, to come to cessation is a great feat that implies a strong *praxis*, good concentration, and exigency. The demons of a broken production line must be faced., those tenets of traditional learning.

Nor does Descartes' break with his cognitive habits, inculcated largely by the Scholastic tradition of the day, mean a triumph once and for all over delusionary beliefs. Emphasis on the *moment* of arrest is another feature of modernity. Perennialism may be of heaven, but change rules our empirical world. To stop thought's turnings once brings the invitation of a repetition, as Descartes finds at the start of the Second Meditation. Mind continues in the next moment with its automatic projection of appearances. *Nirodha* is less a sudden conversion and more a gradual shift in a center of gravity. It is the emerging recognition of the attention's captivation by the same (Plato's *tauteron*) by repeated receptivity to the different (*to heteron*.) The subject becomes sensitized to the sameness of things that are mind-constructed and mindful of the call of the other.

The introduction (or reintroduction) of the temporal element is critical to defining the age of modernity. In a mounting chorus at least since Bergson, philosophers have strove mightily to bring this element back to thought. Since the moment is a bridge between two orders of time, the practice of momentary arrest is uniquely suited to a 'world of increasing fragmentation and spiritual poverty.' Such practice directly confronts a fascination in things—the deluge of *samskara*, the residue from the ongoing bombardment of empirical experience—with an observational awareness. The effort of not interfering with the time of ordinary life (another aspect of a modern approach) but of bearing it witness is also not new, but newly adapted to this age. To inhabit both temporal

orders simultaneously is the core teaching of the *Rg Veda*, repeated in *Mundaka Upanishad* 3.1.1:

Two birds, fast bound companions  
Clasp close the self-same tree.  
Of these two, the one eats sweet fruit;  
The other looks on without eating.

To encamp on that bridge, the momentary relation between two unfixed shores of time, is precisely what modernity requires for its own, specific approach to esoteric knowledge.

To bring the samskritic cycle (particularly in its deeper reaches in the *vasana*) to an end is to begin anew with the matter of existence, the *I am*. But creative novelty supersedes old habit by way of return, not *ex nihilo*. In the same way, modernity's special note, rich in pluses and minuses, echoes earlier approaches—but with the difference that its resonance is in and for this time. Certainly its prodigious brood of dualisms is no more an illness than those of other epochs. As Nietzsche said in a similar context, so is pregnancy in a sense an illness.

And, to propose a further opposition between 'tradition' and 'modernity,' and to call the two separate outlooks, sounds like (in Kant's language) a kind of transcendental idealism. Unless it is the working of a mysterious principle of vitalism by which 'like cures like.' In which case, the introduction of an additional similar ('tradition' to 'modernity') may remove the impediment to freedom and return the understanding to its original condition of purity.