

## VENTER, J J. 1999. MODERNITY: THE HISTORICAL ONTOLOGY

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### *Modernity: the historical ontology*

The article focuses on a fundamental and generally disregarded aspect of modern thought: the turn in eighteenth-century philosophy towards a historical ontology. The works of selected intellectuals such as Defoe and Rousseau (in contrast to Hobbes) highlight the shift away from a static, hierarchical ontology with God as the highest structuring force, in the direction of a historical ontology with an inherent teleology and the dominance of *reason* as its *eschaton* – progress between the dialectically related poles of nature and culture. This historical ontology has since been taken up by important nineteenth-century thinkers such as Hegel, Comte, Marx and Darwin; it also makes its influence felt in the irrationalist tradition (albeit with the poles inverted) and even presently in various areas of culture (such as the film *Dead Poets' Society*).

### *'Moderniteit': die historiese ontologie*

Die artikel beoog om 'n fundamentele, meesal misgekykte aspek van die moderne denke onder vergrootglas te plaas, naamlik die historiese wending in die ontologie in die 18e eeu. Aan die hand van werke van geselekteerde intellektuele soos Defoe en Rousseau (in teenstelling met Hobbes) word die verskuiwing aangedui: weg van 'n statiese hiërargiese ontologie met God as die hoogste struktureerder, in die rigting van 'n historiese kosmologie met 'n inherente teleologie en die heerskappy van rasionaliteit as sy *eschaton* – vooruitgang tussen die dialekties-verbonde pole van natuur en kultuur. Die historiese ontologie kan by belangrike negentiende-eeuse denkers (Hegel, Comte, Marx, Darwin) teruggevind word; dit laat geld hom ook in die irrasionalistiese tradisie (sy dit met die pole omgekeerd), selfs tot vandag in verskillende kultuurvertakkinge (soos die film *Dead Poets' Society*).

### *Introductory narrative*

*This article grew from a paper at a supreme conference. As happens at such conferences, one has thousands of papers running in parallel sessions, each having about six papers in some forty minutes. Ordinary speakers are lucky to have an audience of five to six – usually the other speakers in the session. I provided four more for our session – friends of mine who came out of courtesy. At home it creates the illusion of having spoke at the world's largest conference of your discipline; in the conference itself one rambles through some fragments of your paper and is stopped after some five minutes by the chair ... 'Next speaker ...' I have always made sure that the main points of my argument are summarised in five to six simple statements and had the happy experience of getting most of the three minutes left for dis-cussion at the end of the session. This was also the case at this conference.*

*I presented the historicising of reality in Modernity towards the eighteenth century as my own subjective discovery. Since it lies very much on the surface, I believed that some others must also have seen it. Yet during the session it appeared as at least a new perspective for the ten(!) people present. I later discovered that a near colleague and friend of mine, Prof H G Geertsema of the Free University of Amsterdam, had written a doctoral thesis entitled **Van boven naar voren** (From above to in front), in which he had worked out precisely this theme. It is one of the difficulties of the present-day academic world that the high rate of work expected from academics probably has the wheel being found out a thousand times a year. We have to publish (and teach) much faster than we can read. The universities and colleges remunerate numbers, not quality.*

That somebody else had independently found similar results, did not stop me to continue working in this direction. Independent confirmation supported my interpretation of Modernity. I have found among research managers – often having their roots in the natural sciences or in empirical social sciences – a denigration of overview type of publications – especially ‘books’. This is based on a misunderstanding of the structure of scholarship. The supreme aspect of research is **contextualised interpretation** – it is explaining and making understandable. Theorising – originally – is rooted in telling others how and why things happen as they do happen. ‘Why is it that the ‘paradigm changers’ become the famous scientists – ‘paradigm’ changes are new systematic explanations for ‘odd’ phenomena. It can take quite a long time to really unravel the explanatory connections. These are not simply ‘over-views’ – they are embedded constructive interpretations. All explanations are overviewish ‘constructs’. I do not mean subjective world ‘creations’ – rather rethinking the previously supposed connections among the objects of study, given new analyses of the objects.

The following article has been written in overviewish format. In working on my first explanatory attempt in this area, I had to clarify **why** the historicising took place in an era when the belief in rational absolute truth dominated all scholarly work and all civil life. For historicism has all too often been closely associated with relativism. I also had to find clarity about the supreme role of ‘nature’ in the same era: a ‘nature’ – compared to the Medieval idea of ‘nature’ – reduced to the subrational (physico-mechanical, bio-mechanical, psycho-mechanical). I have found some preliminary answers:

Modern humanism had changed humanity into the **summum bonum** of all reality – substituting humankind into the position of the Medieval final cause and changing nature into the primal source. In a negative sense, Modernity was quite dependent upon Medieval schemata. It had come to the conclusion that though reason was supposed to dominate, this had not yet been the case – by and large human beings had been living a natural life (instinctual, animalistic). For the sake of the domination of reason, one thus needed a history so structured that inevitably humankind would emerge as the rational god – in the civil (citizen) state as the ‘circumstance’ of civility. For this reason one needed to naturalise history, in order to ensure a historical inevitability of the outcome. In order to prove humankind a god, it had to be dehumanised into a brute; in order to make human history scientific it had to be naturalised, dehumanised and dehistoricised into a fixed structure. All this I only later uncovered as the network of ideas behind the historicising.

I have furthermore, via reading of earlier ‘economists’, discovered the secularising of the Medieval idea of ‘natural law’ in order to harmonise it with the Modern idea of nature as mechanical. Also the gradual adjustment of the idea of divine ‘providence’ into a subrational instinctual gut-feeling a priori – where it still rests today. It was in fact a ‘world-ising’ of God. One had to eliminate the

*late-Medieval (Scotist and Ockhamist) divine freedom in order to change him into the 'spirit' in the laws of reduced nature into the warrant of progress – in Descartes and Vico this divine Deism was still in theistic format, but after Vico and since Turgot, in the naturalising of providence, it became the panto-deism which culminated in the French Revolution.*

*In this context I have highlighted the enormous (often quite destructive) role of competitiveness as a moral code since Machiavelli and Hobbes, as well as the equally destructive idea that the civil state is all-encompassing. Modernity confused 'state' and 'society', and thus also civil state with civil society. Deep in Modern Humanism the roots of all kinds of cruel totalitarianism have been hidden. Combined with the naturalising of the humanities, one finds the irregular intervention of the social scientist via the state into family and church life. The present-day human rights doctrines tend again to set up the state as the complete and only guardian – even the creator – of **all rights**.*