

Some Thoughts and Questions on Revisiting *The Ethical Function of Architecture*

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For many years I taught a course called The Philosophy of Architecture. I stopped teaching that course eight years ago. That I decided to teach this course at all was the result of conversations with Kent Bloomer, then Director of Yale University's Undergraduate Architecture Program, who suggested that the program was in need of such a course. I had been teaching a course called The Philosophy of Modern Art. *The Meaning of Modern Art*¹, published in 1968, was the result of that course. That book was quite successful, appearing also in Japanese, Korean, and Czech translations. After all these years it is still in print. But with its appearance I lost some of my interest in that course, and so I was quite ready to respond to Kent Bloomer's invitation, especially so since my interest in architecture goes back to my childhood. That course, too, finally resulted in a Book, *The Ethical Function of Architecture*². It, too, has been successful, having been translated into Chinese and Czech; it is currently being translated into Greek and Farsi. But, again, with the appearance of the book I lost some of my interest in the course. If not in the issues it dealt with.

1 Harries 1968

2 Harries 1997

My decision to return to this material once more in this, my last year of teaching, reflects the fact that I have kept thinking and lecturing about what I wrote in that book. Not that I have changed my position in any fundamental way, despite a stream of mostly positive, but sometimes also critical responses. But circumstances have changed; the world has changed. More especially, the way we today relate to space has changed and continues to change. And since architecture may be understood as the art of bounding space, that suggests that our understanding of architecture, too, has or should have changed and is still changing.

Two developments seem to me to be particularly significant in this connection. One is the way an ever developing technology, and today especially the digital revolution, have opened up our everyday existence in ways that

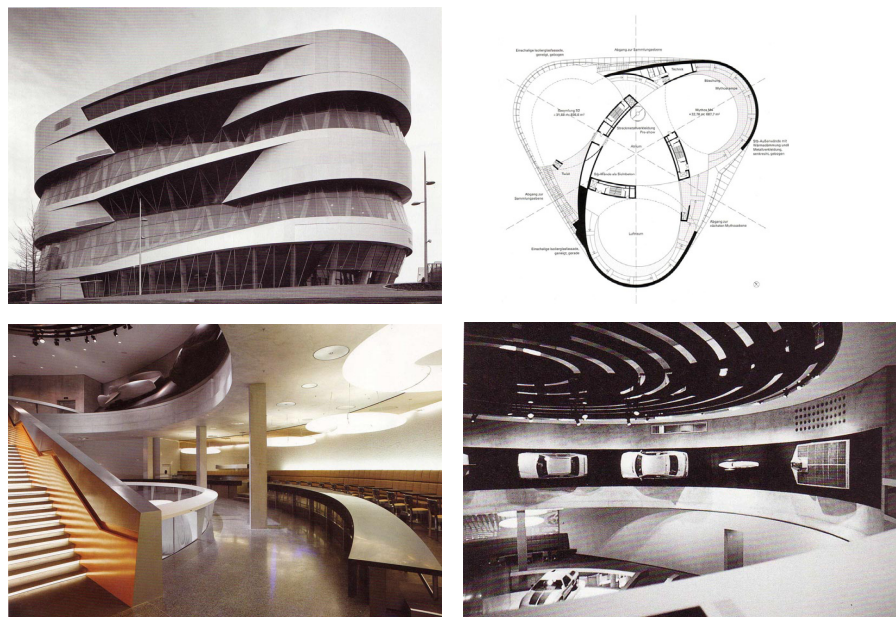
will continue to change our lives in ways we cannot quite foresee. The places where we happen to be, where we happen to have been born, where our children and friends are, seem to matter less and less. We are open today to the world, to the universe, and to imaginary, virtual spaces as never before. This revolution has also transformed the way architects do their work, but, and even more importantly, it has changed our sense of distance, place, and space, and inseparable from it, our way of life, our sense of freedom, and that is to say also, our way of dwelling, which means inevitably also our way of building.

The other, in a sense opposite, but perhaps even more important way in which our world has changed has to do with the way the inevitably limited resources provided by this small planet have to collide with a still increasing humanity and ever increasing demands for a higher standard of living. Not just air and water, but even space is becoming an ever scarcer, and all too often contested resource. Architects too often fail to consider this. Much that gets built today wastes space in ways that I find morally irresponsible. Climate change further complicates the picture.

These developments have made it necessary to revisit *The Ethical Function of Architecture*.

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Fig. 1-4 The Mercedes Benz Museum in Stuttgart by UNStudio. W|C|B



I have spoken of two, in a sense opposed, developments that have changed our understanding of space. To give a focus to a discussion of the first development, consider the Mercedes Benz Museum in Stuttgart (see also <http://www.cloud-cuckoo.net/journal1996-2013/inhalt/de/heft/ausgaben/108/Pieper/pieper.php>), a monument to the car and all it suggests. This is of course not an ordinary building, not house, but a museum; and not just a museum, but one dedicated to the car, which has so decisively increased our mobility and in this sense our freedom, and in so many welcome and also not so welcome

ways has shaped the environment. Celebrating the car, the museum is also a shrine to freedom. The building was begun in 2002 and finished in 2006. The competition for this museum, in which ten leading firms participated, was won by the Amsterdam firm UNStudio. The project architects were Ben van Berkel and Caroline Bos.

A first thing that is striking about this architecture is that it does not attempt to contribute to knitting some urban fabric. And why should it? A guide to the building compares it to an enormous glacial erratic block.³ It is a thought-provoking comparison to which I shall return. Right next to a six-lane highway and close to an important train track, the building draws our attention by its hulking presence as one travels towards or by it. This is not a building that invites leisurely strolling. The scale is determined less by a human being as by the car, appropriate for a museum dedicated to the history of the Mercedes. The automobile has of course played a crucial part in the diminishing of the importance of distance, changing not only our sense of distance but also of time. The two are inseparably linked. Distances were often measured in minutes or hours, where the measure was provided by a human being walking. The car has changed that measure and the digital revolution has obscured it altogether, forcing us to think in micro- and nano-seconds, erasing all relationship to the embodied self and shrinking distance in unimaginable ways: consider the computer-driven trading that goes on in our stock exchanges.

3 Holl 2007, p.2

A second thing that is striking about the Mercedes Benz Museum is how difficult it is to get a clear sense of its inner organization by looking at its exterior. How many stories are there? Are there indeed any stories at all? One has a sense that there must be some complicated geometric form that dictated what we see. That was indeed the case. The organizational principle is that of a double helix that offers the visitor two routes, but allows for frequent crossovers between the two routes, the one route is thematically ordered, the other allowing the visitor to follow the history of the Mercedes. The architecture does not want to prescribe a clear path. The freedom of the visitor is to be respected. To quote the guide to the museum:

Such linearity is no longer considered appropriate by the architects of today, when everyday life is determined by complex determinants that cannot be predicted. An attitude that by the way we can also detect in the other arts. In literature, for example, authors experiment with fragmentary and complex structures that open up in every moment multiple relations.⁴

4 Holl 2007, p. 14

Self-consciously and with some justice, the architects understand themselves as representing the cutting edge of architectural production.

A third thing is, the observers must experience the work as the product of a process that in important ways seems beyond the control of the designing architect. The metaphor of the glacial erratic block is telling: although here

it is, not nature, but technology, which has become a kind of second nature, that has produced what we see. To cite the guide one more:

That such complexity cannot be designed just by architects alone, but requires the intensive and early cooperation of experts, specialists, and engineers stands to reason. In an integrated manner of working, the team understands itself as joined in a process comparable to that of producing a new car. Not only aesthetics, but technology and construction are advanced and only their cooperation allows for the particular experience. Beyond that the construction of this unusual spatial conception was made possible only by the computer, which allowed the complex geometry to be represented, figured, and made available for its constructive translation into concrete.⁵

5 Holl 2007, p. 16.

The guide speaks of an advance in aesthetics, technology and construction. But this advance invites us to understand it as a recent chapter in the history of that Platonic aesthetics which finds such striking expression in a passage in Plato's *Philebus* that some years ago confirmed Mondrian in his modernist aesthetics.

I do not mean by beauty of form such beauty as that of animals or pictures, which the many would suppose to be my meaning; but says the argument, understand me to mean straight lines and circles, and the plane or solid figures, which are formed by turning lathes and rulers and measures of angles — for these I affirm to be not only relatively beautiful, like other things, but they are eternally or absolutely beautiful, and they have peculiar pleasures, quite unlike the pleasures of scratching. And there are colors, which are of the same character, and have similar pleasures; now do you understand my meaning?⁶

6 Plato, *Philebus*, 51 c–d

Already here beauty is sought in objects that are produced by a process that requires the cooperation of aesthetics, technology and construction. The space that is bounded by architecture embracing such an aesthetics is not that of everyday experience but the more open, abstract space presupposed by geometry or the virtual space presupposed by computer design.

The guide to the Mercedes museum made the point that we meet here with an attitude that we meet with also in the other arts. It mentions literature. I was reminded of Arnold Schoenberg's second string quartet. Its last movement refers to a poem by Stefan George that begins with the line "I feel air from another planet." Recall the guide's description of the museum as an erratic block. An erratic block just happens to be where it now happens to be. It came from quite another place. The real home of this museum would seem to be in that virtual space to which the computer has given us unprecedented access, a space that answers to freedom and a disembodied reason and is at quite some remove from the space of everyday experience. Is it a

truly human space? That it is difficult to feel at home in such a space stands to reason. That this particular example is symptomatic is I hope clear. Other examples, e.g. works by Zaha Hadid, readily come to mind.

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I spoke of two developments that made it necessary to reconsider what I had written in *the Ethical Function of Architecture*. The first concerns the way an ever-developing technology, and especially the digital revolution, have opened up our everyday existence in ways that will continue to change our lives in ways we cannot quite foresee. The second, in a sense opposite, but perhaps even more important development concerns the way in which our world has changed. It has to do with the way the inevitably limited resources provided by this small planet have to collide with a still increasing humanity and our ever increasing demands for a higher standard of living. Not just air and water, but even space, I suggested, is becoming an ever scarcer, and all too often contested resource.

In 1890 the superintendent of the American Census announced that the western frontier was closed. Much has been written since about the significance of this closing, about the way it has shaped American democracy, about its effect on the American psyche, about the way it meant the end of what had made America with its open frontier the envy of Europe, where land had long been in limited supply, stifling demands for freedom. Much of what is best about America is tied to this heritage of open space: its commitment to liberty, to self-reliance, to democracy. But so is much that today has become not just questionable, but unsustainable: we cannot continue to use, and abuse space, the earth and its resources, as we have gotten used to doing: think of the way we continue to pollute air, water, and earth. Today that tension between rugged individualism and environmental concerns is threatening to tear the social fabric.

Let me return to the definition of architecture as the art of bounding space. That invites reflection concerning that space the architect is said to bound. In what sense has that space become a scarce resource?

Meant is, of course, not the space of astronomy or physics, nor the space of our imagination, nor the infinite space of Euclidean geometry into which architects for centuries have cast their designs, nor the virtual space that the computer invites us to bound in all sorts of imaginative ways. In all these senses space cannot be considered a scarce resource. "Space," as I am using it here, refers to the space of our life-world, space understood as environment, inescapably mediated by the way we remain bound to this earth. We all need space to live lives worth living, where expressions like "elbow room" and, in a far more ominous way, the German *Lebensraum*, hint at the way the increasing scarcity and the resulting demand for space can dehumanize an individual and a society. The way we bound space, wall things in and out, negotiate the transition from public to ever more intimate private spaces, has an inescapable ethical significance. Whoever builds is involved in such nego-

tiations. Today's oversized McMansions present not only an aesthetic, but an ethical problem in the way they deal with space. But so do, in a very different way, countless oversized asphalted parking lots. We, and especially our architects, have gotten used to wasting space.

To be sure, at bottom we all know that space has become a precious resource. But if so, why does our response remain so half-hearted? The answer is pretty obvious: We must not forget how intimately the availability of space is connected to much that possesses genuine value, to our sense of freedom, to the rights of the individual, also to his property. It is not difficult to understand why our response to the increasing scarcity of space should so often have remained half-hearted. How much of our treasured standard of living, of a way of life to which we have become accustomed, or to which we just aspire, are we, privileged to live in one of the most economically developed countries, really willing to sacrifice for the sake of the environment? Is mobility not a right? How much am I willing to sacrifice for the sake of my neighbor? How much for the sake of people living far away and pretty much unknown to me? How much for the sake of coming generations? As the last few months have once again illustrated: in difficult times, economic considerations, often selfish, often disturbingly short-range, trump environmental concerns. Can this be justified?

That space has become an increasingly scarce resource is first of all a function of the earth's still rapidly increasing population, coupled with the fact that humanity has no plausible alternative to the earth, despite recent reports of the discovery of traces of water on the moon or of very distant earth-like planets. This makes it all the more important to consider the way we use and appropriate space, the way we lay claim to space, denying access to what we have bounded with our walls, fences, borders, and laws to an unwanted larger public. That we cannot continue to use space in that way should have become clear by now. But many builders and even their clients, still have to learn that. Or do both really know better, but do not want to learn it? To be sure, computer-driven design invites us to forget that space is a scarce resource. Too many buildings today, and that includes most buildings designed by our star architects, deal with space in a way that leaves me a bit depressed, even as I recognize their often exciting aesthetic quality.

No reasonable person, it seems to me, can deny the problem we are facing. But, as I pointed out last time, needed is more than reason. Insight does not necessarily lead to right action. Reason alone is as likely to serve egoism as it is to serve altruism. Needed is a change of heart. But how do we change hearts? Can the beauty of the environment, both natural and built, contribute to such a change? We need to change the way we experience the environment, not just as something pre-given, to be used and abused by us as we see fit, but as something to love, a shared home.

Consider once more the way we use space, the way we build, our valued physical mobility, the very real increase in freedom the automobile has brought, the ways it has shaped the environment. We need to consider not only the

very real benefits, but also the burdens our treasured way of life has placed on the environment, the human price it has exacted, the decay of community, the increase in loneliness, the erosion of the earth in quite a number of different senses? And might the increase in spiritual mobility that the computer revolution has brought us not mean a decrease in the importance of physical mobility, e.g. an increased possibility of working at home? Might this not in turn help give new life to our cities? What kind of a life do we want to live? And I would suggest that, for the sake of this earth, for most of us, it can and should only be an urban life. Most of us must live in high density urban areas in order to make possible the preservation of as much nature as possible.

We should not take for granted that what we commonly understand by "a high standard of living" translates into "a high quality of life"? How important is a sense of community? What sort of community? Is it important to our spiritual well-being that this be an ongoing community? How important are mobility and stability? These are questions each one of us first will have to answer for him- or her-self if a genuinely shared common sense is to develop. And, I suspect that our individual answers would show that at heart most of us are less selfish than we often take ourselves to be, that concern for those who come after us is part of our common sense.

But suppose I am wrong. Imagine a society of self-absorbed individuals. What kind of built environment would fit such a society? What comes to your mind? You might come up with a city in the image of New York as seen by Manfredo Tafuri, who experienced New York as a prophecy of the city of the future: "the city as a system of solitudes, as a place wherein the loss of identity is made an institution, wherein the maximum formalism of its structures gives rise to a code of behavior dominated by 'vanity' and 'comedy.'"⁷ Tafuri introduced his discussion of New York with one of Nietzsche's remarks: "Together 100 deep solitudes form the city of Venice — this is its magic. An image for the human beings of the future."⁸ As Tafuri experienced New York, it presented itself to him as "already the 'new Venice'" — where rivers of cars have replaced lagoons. "The fragments of the future contained in the *Serenissima* of Nietzsche have already exploded into the metropolis of total indifference and therefore of the anguished consumption of multiplied signs." To be sure, those living in such urban environments are still assigned roles that grant them place, identity, and a measure of security. But increasingly they experience such roles as arbitrary and readily exchanged for others, experience themselves as actors who assume this or that mask, but see no essential relationship between themselves and these masks. The city becomes a place where people meet or, rather, actors meet, while the individuals remain buried within themselves, hidden behind their masks. Or could it be that in the end nothing is left to be hidden? Loss of place and community, the loss of the city in this sense and loss of personal identity go together.

Tafuri has given us a caricature. But this much can be said: human beings lose their personal identity to the extent they transform themselves into abstract subjects, possessed of a freedom that refuses all placement. And the

⁷ Tafuri 1987, p. 290

⁸ Nietzsche, 1980, vol. 9, p. 38

closer we come to understanding ourselves as such pure thinking subjects, which only happen to be male or female, American, German, or Chinese, the less we can be expected to feel a need for built environments that place individuals on the earth and under the sky and help such individuals to understand themselves as parts of an ongoing community

Just as Hobbes has helped us understand the liberal state as a construct, an artifact created by self-centered atomic individuals who substitute for an eroded common sense a formal structure of laws and rules that, for the sake of selfish interests, checks the excesses of selfishness, so the built environment of the future may well reduce to an artifact that substitutes for the traditional city and the communal dwelling it served a formal, functional system that allows individuals who have buried themselves within themselves to exist and coexist, without attempting to reconstitute anything resembling a *genius loci* or a sense of community. Has not the progress of freedom, which is also a progress of introversion left both behind? There is no reason why such environments should look like traditional cities. But the price is a loss of a robust sense of personal identity, a loss of self, which gives way to an increasingly abstract freedom.

4

When someone asks us who we are, we may well answer by referring to gender, age, nationality, race, class, vocation, and the like. But we may also choose to consider all such characteristics accidental determinations that do not touch the inner core of our being, a core that can be reached only by rising above all these other determinations. Are we first of all disembodied subjects or embodied selves? Is there an absolute right or wrong here? Each one of us has to choose and take responsibility and live with this choice. But suppose we choose to identify our essential self with our freedom — what does such choice leave of the self? Must it not leave behind what can be called personal identity? To choose oneself in this way is to choose oneself abstractly. Full self-affirmation requires an affirmation of myself as inescapably placed in time and in space. Reflection may well show that this place is in no way privileged, that it is just one of infinitely many possible places. But accidental though it may be, without that place I would not be who I am. And what places me is first of all my body. Full self-affirmation demands affirmation of myself as essentially embodied and that is to say as essentially placed.

To say we are essentially placed is not to claim that we are stuck in one place as turnips are rooted in the ground. Imagination and thought open up an indefinitely open space and with it countless other places. Such openness is inseparable from our freedom. As a free, yet embodied self we find ourselves essentially between place and open space, always already placed, and yet free to move, to change places. Full self-affirmation requires an affirmation of this never quite resolved tension between place and space, between dreams of homecoming and dreams of journeying into the unknown, between the need for places that let us feel at home and open spaces that let us feel

out of place, but that we experience for that very reason, to use Joseph Addison's expression, as "an image of liberty."⁹ This is to say: full self-affirmation demands an environment that preserves the tension between the beautiful and the sublime.

9 Addison 1712

As my body places me, so does my past. Without my specific past, objectively the result of countless accidents, I would not be who I am. Full self-affirmation requires affirmation of that past, even though one may well want to forget its more unpleasant aspects. It also requires affirmation of an inevitably open future. The first requires an environment that preserves the past and helps me to place myself in it. The second requires that such preservation does not block the challenge of the future. This was a challenge with which the Olympia Stadium, site of the 1936 Olympics and a striking example of National Socialist architecture, confronted the city of Berlin. The decision was made to both preserve and to transform it; transform it not just to meet the requirements of a modern stadium, but also to give expression to the conviction that, no matter how terrible, the past could not and should not be erased. Full self-affirmation demands an environment that neither places me so strongly that place is experienced as prison, nor leaves me so dislocated that one place seems just as good as another.

To say that the past places me is inevitably also to say that the community places me. The language I speak, the values I hold, these first of all do not belong to me; they are mine as a member of certain communities. Once again this does not mean that I am stuck with them. There is and should be tension between whatever community I am part of and something within that may bid me challenge that community, perhaps let me dream of a very different, better sort of community, and lead me to take steps towards realizing that community. But again it is important to preserve the tension and not to allow the bond that joins the individual and his dreams to the community to snap. We all are haunted by the promise of still greater freedom, a promise made ever less utopian by the progress of technology. Small wonder that dreams of the city of the future should so often have been haunted by dreams of a mobile, floating, or even air-born architecture. The other side of such dreams are nightmares of settlements inhabited only by forcibly displaced persons. Neither dream nor nightmare satisfies our continued need for community and for a built environment that grants the individual a sense of belonging to a community without denying individuality. Just because our own freedom bears within itself the possibility of profound self-alienation, we are haunted by images of well functioning traditional cities.

Earlier I suggested that "a high standard of living" does not necessarily translate into "a high quality of life." How then are we to understand the latter? How important is it, for example, to have the confidence that coming generations will not find this earth less of a home? How important is it to see a tree sprouting its first green in spring, to actually dig in the earth, to grow one's own tomatoes? If we are to plan responsibly for the future, we need a workable index of what constitutes the "desired" or better "desirable" quality

of life. Any such definition should, I have suggested, acknowledge that space, too, has become a precious resource, acknowledge also a commitment to others and especially to future generations and such a commitment should find expression in the built environment. Full self-affirmation demands responsibility, that is to say, demands that we keep ourselves open and able to respond to others and to the earth that is our shared home. Respect for human beings must include respect for the earth as the only place where human beings can make their proper home.

Having crossed that fabled bridge into the third millennium, we may well wonder whether in the future there will still be a need for the traditional division between city and country or more generally, between artificial and natural environments. Would the erosion of this opposition, the progressive suburbanization and that means also homogenization of the landscape not be more in-keeping with the spirit of the times? Does artifice today not embrace reality ever more completely so that at moments it seems to all but vanish in the embrace?

5

We are curious creatures, and curiosity calls us again and again beyond the places and the associated points of view and perspectives, calls us away from what we once called home. The loss of paradise will be repeated over and over by human curiosity. As science has opened our life-world to the universe, this earth seems to have become ever less homelike, more and more like a ship lost in an endless ocean, embarked on a journey with no clear goal. But the exploration of space, including the vain search for extraterrestrial intelligence, has led to an ever clearer recognition that we have no other home than this small, fragile, beautiful earth. Despite our freedom, we remain earth-bound mortals. Our bodies and this earth to which it belongs remain the ground of all meaning. In this sense we can speak of the need for a post-Copernican geocentrism.¹⁰

But that expression calls for further discussion. There is obvious tension between “post-Copernican” and “geocentrism.” Our modern world picture presupposes the Copernican revolution and the way it has changed our understanding of space and place. To call for a post-Copernican geocentrism is to acknowledge that we must acknowledge the Copernican achievement and the way it has let us see the earth differently, transformed our life-world, transformed the way we think; but we also must not allow that transformation to totally determine our life-world, or, to speak with Heidegger, our dwelling — and that is to say also our building. At issue is the significance of space and place. But if my call for a post-Copernican geocentrism is to make much sense, we have to recognize first that the Copernican revolution is part of an inheritance that we can not and should not surrender. The question is, what sense then can we make of a new geocentrism, of what could perhaps be called a post-modern religiosity, albeit a religiosity without God. Can the earth take the place of the sacred?

¹⁰ See Blumenberg 1975, 1979 und 1986

But what exactly do I have in mind by a post Copernican geocentrism?¹¹ Consider the Galileo affair. In 1633 Galileo was found to entertain heretical views, incompatible with the geocentric position espoused by the Church. For the rest of his life he was condemned to house arrest. Whenever science and religion collide, the condemnation of Galileo is almost inevitably mentioned as the most obvious example of the Church abusing its authority by trying to subject science to its will, denying the freedom demanded by the pursuit of truth: that philosophical freedom on which Galileo's predecessor, Giordano Bruno had so courageously and for him disastrously insisted: in 1600 he was burned in the stake in the Campo de' Fiori in Rome for his heretical views.¹² With his precursor's fate in mind, Galileo was less courageous, but more prudent. Such prudence may have been strengthened by a conviction that, no matter what victories those who would silence those who speak the truth can claim, in the end truth will win out. And indeed: was the Church not forced to accept the Copernican truth defended by Galileo? On November 10, 1979, Pope John Paul II, in a speech celebrating the centenary of Einstein's birth, admitted that Galileo had been treated unjustly by the Church, praised his religiousness, and singled out for special praise his understanding of the relationship of science and religion.¹³ Here then we would seem to have perhaps the most famous example of the futility of all attempts to stifle free and independent inquiry in the name of orthodoxy.

But was the Church really so blind? At issue here is not so much the truth of the Copernican position embraced by Galileo — as we know, heliocentrism also cannot be defended. The very idea of center of the cosmos has been called into question, had indeed been called into question 200 years before Copernicus by cardinal Nicolaus Cusanus. What is more fundamentally at issue is the meaning of the pursuit of truth as understood by Copernicus and Galileo, and, bound up with this and more importantly, the problem of the value of truth so understood, raised so insistently by Nietzsche, especially in "Beyond Good and Evil" and "On the Genealogy of Morals."¹⁴ Nietzsche recognized a deep connection between the commitment to truth presupposed by modern science and nihilism. How then can religion, how can we make our peace with science? To quote Nietzsche: "Since Copernicus, man seems to have got himself on an inclined plane — now he is slipping faster and faster away from the center into — what? into nothingness? into a penetrating sense of his own nothingness?"¹⁵

Nietzsche was by no means the first to recognize the nihilistic shadow that follows science. Here the beginning of Volume Two of Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*: "In endless space countless luminous spheres, round each of which some dozen smaller illuminated ones revolve, hot at the core and covered with a hard cold crust; on this crust a mouldy film has produced living and knowing beings; this is empirical truth, the real, the world."¹⁶ Our science can know nothing of privileged places, of absolute values, of home. And if what that science teaches us to accept as truth is identified with the truth, then, if we are to escape from nihilism, will we not have

11 See Harries 2001, pp. 242–6281

12 Bruno pleaded for philosophica libertas in his valedictory oration to the professors at Wittenberg (1588). Campanella and Galileo were to reiterate that plea. See Headley 1997, pp. 172–173, 109

13 Finocchiaro, 1989, pp. 306–308 and Pope John Paul, 1979

14 Nietzsche, 1980, vol. 5, p. 15 and pp. 398–401.

15 Nietzsche 1980, vol. 5 p. 404

16 Schopenhauer 1966, p. 3

to cover up the truth or abandon it altogether? Could the insistence on the truth so understood be an obstacle to living the good life? An obstacle to salvation or whatever might take the place of salvation, given that death of God proclaimed by Nietzsche? Nietzsche certainly did not think that the pursuit of truth as understood by science would lead us to the good life: The price of the rigorous pursuit of the facts of nature appears to be the progressive loss of whatever gives significance to human existence. “For a philosopher to say, ‘the good and the beautiful are one,’ is infamy; if he goes on to say: ‘also the true,’ one ought to thrash him. Truth is ugly. We possess art lest we perish of the truth.”¹⁷ The last leaves us with the question: just what kind of art did Nietzsche have in mind.

If the pursuit of truth as it presides over our science and nihilism should indeed be linked, it becomes easy to understand those who would take a step beyond nihilism by showing that what science takes to be truth is itself only a fiction; and it is not surprising that such sentiments should have found a welcome focus in a re-evaluation of the condemnation of Galileo. Can human beings ever claim to have seized the truth? Richard Rorty’s *Mirror of Nature*¹⁸ gives eloquent expression to such a re-evaluation: in that book, Rorty asks whether today we can “find a way of saying that the considerations advanced against the Copernican theory by Cardinal Bellarmine against Galileo — the scriptural descriptions of the fabric of the heavens — were ‘illogical’ or ‘unscientific’?” Rorty argues that today we have to answer this question with a “no.” He goes on to ask: “What determines that Scripture is not an excellent source of evidence for the way the heavens are set up?” He invites us to think Cardinal Bellarmine’s attempt to limit the scope of Copernicus’ astronomical claims as fundamentally no different from Galileo’s attempt to limit the scope of Scripture. Both Galileo and the Bible claim to describe “the way the heavens are set up.” As it turned out, the future made Galileo the victor. The establishment of science, as we tend to take it for granted, is part of that victory. But this, according to Rorty, does not justify the claim that Galileo had reason on his side.

Rorty is thus unwilling to claim, that Galileo’s view won out, because it had reason on its side. According to Rorty, we simply do not know how to draw a clear line between theological and scientific discourse. We do not possess an understanding of truth sufficiently robust to allow us to draw it.

I want to make the opposite claim: we can draw such a distinction by appealing to our common sense understanding of the nature of truth. The commitment to objectivity that is a presupposition of science is inseparable from the pursuit of truth concerning the things that make up our world. To claim this, however, is not yet to claim to have answered the Nietzschean question of the value of that pursuit.

The pursuit of truth demands objectivity. Objectivity demands that we not allow our understanding to be clouded by our inevitably personal desires and interests. It wants just the facts. With good reason Wittgenstein could therefore say: “In the world everything is as it is and happens as it does hap-

17 *The Will to Power* (abbreviated WP) 822, translated by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, Random House: New York, 1967, 1

18 Rorty 1979, pp. 328–333

pen. In it there is no value—and if there were, it would be of no value.”¹⁹ It would be just another fact that, like all facts, could be other than it happens to be. If there is something that deserves to be called a value, it will not be found in the world of science. To find it we have to step outside that world. To help us take this step, Nietzsche insists, is one task of art, and we can add architecture. And if value cannot be found in the scientific world-picture, the same goes for freedom; and that means also that there is no room for persons. Matter has become just a mute given that happens to be the way it is.

19 Wittgenstein 1918, 6.41

But is this not to say that whatever makes life meaningful must be sought outside the reality known to science? Heidegger makes this elision of what can give meaning to our lives a defining feature of our modern age, of what he calls the “Age of the World Picture.” Science can know nothing of persons as things worthy of our respect. In this sense we can agree with Kierkegaard that subjective truth is higher than objective truth, where we must resist the temptation to translate such subjective truth into some version of objective truth, as phenomenology too often has attempted to do. To the extent that the modern world has indeed become what Heidegger calls “the age of the world-picture” it has become a prison that denies us access to the reality of persons and things. To experience the aura of the real that gives to persons and things their proper weight we have to escape from that prison, have to open a door, or at least a window in the world building scientific understanding has raised, a window to what we may also call the truth of things, but now “truth” may no longer be understood as objective truth. The Church was thus right to deny that the truth that mattered to faith, and we can extend the point and, following Kierkegaard, say the truth that matters to existing individuals, should take second place to the truth that matters to science. But the Church was wrong to think that the truth that matters to faith be understood as objective truth. Copernicus and Galileo put the pursuit of objective truth on the right track. But just because they did, it continues to be important to do justice to the legitimacy and to consider the limits of that pursuit, to inquire into the meaning of “truth.”

6

How are we to understand this pursuit? What is truth? Most people, although perhaps no longer most philosophers, would seem to be quite untroubled by this old Pilate question, quite ready to say with Kant that the meaning of truth as it is pursued by science is correspondence with the facts, not of course with the facts as they are seen by us because of our position in time and space, the bodies we happen to have, and historically conditioned prejudices, but as a truly objective understanding, unburdened by perspectival distortions, an ideal observer, would know them to be. Kant takes this understanding of truth to be so obvious that it can be granted and presupposed without need for much discussion.²⁰ As a regulative ideal it presides over the work of science. The essence of truth is here thought to lie in correspondence, in the agreement of the judgment with its object.

20 Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A 58/B 82

To be sure, as Kant recognized, we use truth in different senses. He thus distinguished such “material (objective) truth” from a merely formal or logical truth and from a merely aesthetic or subjective truth, where our understanding agrees with what appears to the subject. Here I am concerned first of all with the meaning and value of what Kant calls material, objective truth. A commitment to such truth is a presupposition of our science and technology, and that is to say of our modern world picture.

Because it calls such truth into question, Kierkegaard’s claim, “truth is subjectivity”, deserves some attention. Truth is understood here as “an objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation-process of the most personal inwardness” — Kierkegaard was thinking of love and faith. This he calls “the highest truth attainable for an existing individual”. In such attainment the individual perfects him- or herself. And did not Kant understand “truth” as “the essential and inseparable condition of all perfection of knowledge”?²¹ But Kant might have questioned whether Kierkegaard’s subjective truth deserves to be called a perfection of knowledge. And as the expression “objective uncertainty” suggests, Kierkegaard knew very well that first of all “the question of truth is raised in an objective manner, reflection is directed objectively to the truth, as an object to which the knower is related.”²² But Kierkegaard’s distinction between subjective and objective truth helps to bring into focus what is at issue when Nietzsche raises the question of the value of truth: “The way of objective reflection makes the subject accidental, and thereby transforms existence into something indifferent, something vanishing. Away from the subject the objective way of reflection leads to the objective truth, and while the subject and his subjectivity become indifferent, the truth also becomes indifferent, and this indifference is precisely its objective validity; for all interest, like all decisiveness, is rooted in subjectivity”²³. How then can religion, how can we, make our peace with this commitment to ob-

21 Kant, *Logik* A 69

22 Kierkegaard 1974, pp. 182, 178

23 Kierkegaard 1974, p. 173

Fig. 5 Picture of the Jacob's Ladder in the original Luther Bibles. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/9b/LZB_in_Flensburg_-_Niederdeutsche_Lutherbibel_von_1574-1580%2C_Bild_11B.JPG



jectivity and a truth that threatens to transform the world into the totality of essentially indifferent facts? Galilean science had to call the Church's claim to a truth that saves into question. Not that the Church could have accepted Kierkegaard's Protestant "Truth is subjectivity": how can organized religion make its peace with a privileging of subjectivity that threatens to deny the Church its claim to truth?

Nietzsche and Kierkegaard are right: the pursuit of objective truth inevitably does lead to nihilism. We live a meaningful life by virtue of subjective truth. What did Kierkegaard have in mind? Faith, of course—and love. Both center us and provide life with an orientation. Here I am concerned with the way faith and love establish special times and special places.

7

Consider the story of Jacob's ladder, once read as part of the traditional consecration rite, serving to establish the traditional symbolism of the church as house of God and gate of Heaven.

And he, (Jacob) came to a certain place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he set it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth and the top of it reached the heaven: and behold, the angels of the Lord were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac: the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your descendants; and your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth and you shall spread to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and by your descendants shall all the families of the earth bless themselves. Behold, I am with you, and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done that of which I have spoken to you. Then Jacob awoke and said: "Surely the Lord is in this place. This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." (Gen. 28, 11-17, RSV)

Here it is not prideful humanity that seeks to pierce the clouds with its towers, as did the builders of the Tower of Babel, but God himself who in this place was felt to bridge the gap between heaven and earth, as He bridged it when he sent His angel to announce to Mary that she was to bear the Savior. This particular moment and place are experienced as possessing a special significance. Time is no longer a sequence of equivalent moments, space is no longer experienced as an aggregate of equivalent positions that can provide no orientation. A vertical intersects the mundane horizontal, establishing a special place experienced as filled with the presence of the divine: it is the house of the Lord. In this place, this Bethel, heaven and earth are experi-

enced as somehow linked: it is not only the dwelling place of God but opens up to a higher reality: it is the gate of heaven. The ladder of the dream with its angels ascending and descending symbolizes that linkage.

Of special significance is God's promise to give the land on which Jacob is sleeping to him and his descendants. Here they will flourish. The dream invites Jacob to project himself toward a future community that he will not live to see. It is this projection into the future, the confidence that his descendants will flourish in the future, that gives this moment and this place its special significance. Without such a projection, I want to claim, life is hollow.

That brings to mind the end of Goethe's *Faust*. Faust longs for the ecstasy of some intensely pleasurable moment. For the sake of such a moment he is willing to let the devil have his soul. But when at the end of his long life what he calls the highest moment arrives it is not what either he or Mephistopheles had envisioned. Faust is dreaming of a future that he thinks he helped create, dreams of a land where free people will be able to work and thrive.

Das ist der Weisheit letzter Schluß:
Nur der verdient sich Freiheit wie das Leben,
Der täglich sie erobern muß.
Und so verbringt, umrungen von Gefahr,
Hier Kindheit, Mann und Greis sein tüchtig Jahr.
Solch ein Gewimmel möcht' ich sehn,
Auf freiem Grund mit freiem Volke stehn.
Zum Augenblicke dürft' ich sagen:
Verweile doch, du bist so schön!
Es kann die Spur von meinen Erdentagen
Nicht in Äonen untergehn. –
Im Vorgefühl von solchem hohen Glück
Genieß' ich jetzt den höchsten Augenblick.

The highest moment is tied here to faith in a merely imagined future that Faust will not be part of. Again it is the faith that the present will issue in a flourishing future community that gives the moment its special significance.²⁴

Let me add to these two stories a third: With their opera *Die Frau ohne Schatten* the poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal and the composer Richard Strauss overreached themselves. Mozart and Goethe, the *Magic Flute* and *Faust* provided their opera with self-chosen measures that the opera, magnificent as it is, could not quite live up to. How are we to take seriously such a fairy tale in this modern age? What are we moderns to make of its message. The difficulty is particularly palpable in the chorus sung by the unborn children that concludes the opera, inviting comparison with the *Chorus Mysticus* that concludes Goethe's *Faust*.

Vater, dir drohet nichts,
siehe, es schwindet schon,

24 See Harries 1986

Mutter, das Ängstliche,
das euch beirrte.
Wäre denn je ein Fest,
wären nicht insgeheim
wir die Geladenen,
wir auch die Wirte!

What is common to my three stories is that those peak times in our lives, call them festivals, that make life meaningful by illuminating our lives, fill us with a love and a hope that projects itself into a future beyond our death-bound existence. We will not experience that future, but we must will that there be such a future if our life is to be meaningful. Today, that demands care for our fragile earth. Love of this earth is the hidden center of living a meaningful life. This is how I would have the reader understand my talk of a post-Copernican geocentrism.

8

Let me return to the story of Jacob's ladder. Jacob responds to his dream experience by rising, i.e. by raising himself from a horizontal into a vertical position, and by raising the stone that had served him for a pillow from a horizontal into a vertical position. He then pours some oil on its top. This simple altar, also a representation of the dream ladder, became the archetype of the church and perhaps of all sacred architecture: building here is a response to the *genius loci*, to the divinity felt to be dwelling at this time in this particular place. It is this experience of a higher power touching our life in which this story invites us to seek the origin of architecture. And countless churches have reenacted that establishment, especially with their towers, which so happily allowed the desire to serve God and an all too human pride to merge. The point I am trying to make here was given a provocative formulation by the church architect Rudolf Schwarz in a lecture he gave at the same Darmstädter Gespräch at which Ortega y Gasset and Heidegger spoke:

Many of you who like to travel and to look at works of art will not like to hear me say this: that unfortunately you do not really understand these works. But that is a fact. If you really want to understand a Baroque cathedral, you have to reenact it spiritually so to speak. Here all those beautiful books and words are of little help. You have to join in the great celebration of the community before the eternal, so that you carry yourself into this work and in this manner understand it, not only with your all too clever eye, but with body and soul.²⁵

25 Schwarz 1952, p. 67

To understand a Baroque church as an aesthetic object, with our clever eye, is not really to understand it. The church building is like a score that requires to be performed "with body and soul". Such a performance is the festal celebration of the mass that the church building serves. Schwarz denies mere theory

an adequate understanding of works of architecture. To really understand a work of architecture means to know how to use it, where in this case proper use requires the ability to participate in the communal festival the building serves. Such participation reaffirms the individual's membership in an on-going community and his allegiance to its presiding values. Do we still know such festivals? Perhaps some of us come closest to such experiences in events like a football game. What is it to really understand, say, a football stadium? But let me continue with the cited passage:

It does not help at all to draw pretty houses. There are modern architects who are especially clever at that sort of thing, they take away whole walls and then they replace them with display windows, and the front lawn is brought right into the living room and other such pretty things. All this is good and well, but such tricks will never lead us to a house. Rather to an often highly admirable aesthetic construction of house-like character.²⁶

26 Ibid

The shift from Baroque church to a house is significant, reminding us of the distance that separates us from the former. But do we even understand what a house is? This, too, would require knowing how to use it, as Heidegger, who in Darmstadt spoke just after Schwarz, was to put it, knowing how to dwell. When Schwarz suggests that many “houses” designed by modern architects are better called “aesthetic constructions of a house-like character”, this formulation inverts the priority of building acknowledged by an understanding of the work of architecture as a decorated shed in a way that invites comparison with what Venturi has to say about “ducks”²⁷: Venturi’s “ducks” could be defined as aesthetic objects of a shed-like character.

27 Venturi et al. 1972, p. 163

But if this aesthetic approach does not get us a house, how do we get one? Schwarz's answer may strike us as even more nostalgic and old-fashioned than the example of a Black Forest farmhouse Heidegger was to offer the same audience the following morning.

I am terribly sorry to have to say this, but you only get a house by marrying and by devoting yourself unconditionally to that great law. That may well be much more demanding than designing a house with wonderfully large windows. But I don't think we can arrive at a house in any other way. And this should be the first step towards establishing a decent house, then a village, then a city.²⁸

28 Venturi et al. 1972, p. 67.

Such emphasis on marriage must have seemed annoyingly narrow-minded and old-fashioned even when the lecture was given. And if we generalize and take Schwarz to mean that only proper dwelling gets us a real house, this leaves us with what seems an unilluminating platitude. But Schwarz's main points deserve to be taken seriously: First of all he suggests that we should not ex-

pect too much from the architect: whether what he builds turns out to be a real house, a real school, a real monument, a real church will depend on how these are appropriated. All he can hope to furnish is a suitable framework, a kind of score that demands to be preformed. To do so he must of course attempt to anticipate such appropriation, help shape it, but he cannot and should not attempt to dictate what form it should take.

Issues of dwelling are first of all not aesthetic but ethical issues. And there is tension between the shape of our modern world and the requirements of what Schwarz and Heidegger understood as proper dwelling. Such tension, however, poses problems for the architect, whose very art it threatens. Schwarz ties this threat to the increasing inability or unwillingness of individuals to commit themselves to something larger than their mortal selves. Such a commitment is not only a presupposition of architecture in its highest sense, i.e. of temple and church and whatever might take their place today, but even of what Schwarz would take to be a genuine house. To existing as an individual, Schwarz opposes existing as part of an ongoing community, where as a Christian builder of churches, he dreamed of a family-centered Christian socialism. Lacking his faith, I yet must acknowledge that to live a really meaningful life, in this sense to dwell, I must recognize myself as part of a larger ongoing community. But if that community is indeed to go on and flourish, I must leave the earth in such a state that it can flourish. Preservation of this earth is today the most fundamental requirement of a really meaningful life. That is how I would have you understand my demand for a post-Copernican geo-centrism. Whatever we build should foster love of this earth.

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Figures

Figs. 1–4 aus W|C|B

Fig. 5 https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/9b/LZB_in_Flensburg_-_Niederdeutsche_Lutherbibel_von_1574-1580%2C_Bild_11B.JPG

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