

The Thought of George Grant:
the Meaning of Philosophy in Modern Times

Submitted in
May 2016 for the
The Brian M. Keenan Prize in Philosophy

To the unfamiliar eye, George Grant's writings are a strange tangle of metaphysical speculations, histories of philosophy, political commentaries, religious apologies and social histories. It can be difficult to discern whether Dr. Grant is a philosopher concerned with ultimate principles or a popular critic writing social commentary. This difficulty results from the core of his philosophy. Grant took his task as a thinker to be a meditation on what the modern West is and is not in its essence. He knew this essence to both inform and transcend the history and contemporary particularities of the West. He also thought that this essence obscured itself to those who live within it. If this is true, then the better Grant carries out his task, the less intelligible will he be to his general audience. In this essay I try to mark out a path through Grant's writings that will help us begin to think with him what he thinks we are.

Grant thought that the task of his thinking was at once most possible and necessary where he was born and raised, in the heartland of North America. North America, he insists, is the 'spearhead of modernity', with the most exclusively modern land and people. Being a North American and thinking about North America is therefore a privileged perspective for one who would understand the modern West. When one dwells on this experience, Grant thinks one will find the following. The essence of the modern world is the belief in and carrying out of the progressive realization of human freedom in history through the technological domination of nature. This essence brings about certain incredible human goods which we enjoy every day of our lives, but according to Grant it is also plagued by certain unavoidable privations. This is especially the case for North America, being as it is almost exhaustively modern. The direst of

North American privations, and the one that must be remedied before we can even begin to think clearly about the rest, is self-ignorance. The extremity of our modernity results in a naiveté which prevents us from clearly knowing our own essence and therefore its privations. And yet, because our society is the most completely modern of all societies, he thinks that we sense its benefits and privations most powerfully, though dimly. North Americans most need a self-conscious appreciation of the goods and limits of modernity because they feel these most strongly and yet are largely incapable of clarifying them to themselves. This clarification is a large part of philosophy according to Grant. It dwells in the most imminent and important social realities and yet transcends them uncompromisingly. Because it unfolds their essence, it is inaccessible except to the one who comes to transcend them himself.

In its conclusion, this essay will dwell on one of the chief ways Grant thinks that we can overcome our self-ignorance: the study of the humanities. Grant thinks that the humanities have lost their most proper power - that of self-reflective transformation - to the extremes of modernity. As I will argue, they often either devolve into historical or logical technical skill devoid of living significance, or become subservient to common-sense political advocacy untroubled by the rigours of contemplation. But there is another, older approach to the humanities, which we will explore. One of Grant's central claims about education is that if the students most immersed in modernity, feeling its privations most strongly, can come to the humanities from a position of humility and longing, such education can recover its own essence for them, and set them on the path of self-consciousness.

This reflection on his thinking helps point to why Grant's writings seem so eclectic to us at first, as well as their ultimate significance and the proper method for their study. They seem alternatively arcane and shallow because Grant is a humanistic author and we are not yet prepared for the study of the humanities. He is grasping for an understanding of that which we at our very core are and are not. This is a frontier that we are most likely not even aware of, and so we cannot but fail at first to understand the full and interconnected meaning of what he says. Put simply, Grant's is a project of education in the Platonic sense. His diverse writings all try to turn the soul to the light of its own good. If we already understood precisely what he was saying and why he was saying it, there would be no need for him to bring it to our attention. Add to this the fact, which he repeatedly mentions, that he is himself a modern North American, who has only begun his own journey towards self-consciousness, and we have a case of the blind leading the blinder. He is confident that there is an intelligible reality that gives meaning to human life but which modernity has forgotten. But he is only a little further down the path of recognition he wishes to set us upon.

For these reasons, any serious exposition of Grant's thinking cannot be as scholarly or academically satisfying as one might wish. Put crudely, insofar as his writings contain arguments at all, their premises are almost always unclear and their conclusions border on the unknown. He always writes the concrete reality of our world while trying to understand its essence, while we may have all but ceased to believe in essences and surely do not know our own. The things Grant says about the meaning of modernity tend to seem like either self-evident facts or naive, arcane and

even repugnant superstitions. The present essay aims to present Grant's thought in the spirit of that thought itself. It will not deliver detailed exegeses of particular texts and will fall far short of the philosophical exposition of a question as important as the possibility or impossibility of knowing an essence. We will not adequately entertain let alone decide upon many of the key claims Grant makes about the privations of modernity and the true meaning of human life. If Grant is right about modern self-ignorance, we cannot do philosophy until we have secured its beginning for ourselves. I believe that the best way to begin with Grant's thought is for the 'initiated' to communicate to the 'uninitiated' as fully and clearly as they can manage what they consider to be the animating heart of that thought. That heart is a description of certain vicious extremes of modernity (chief among them self-ignorance), an impulse to meditate on their essence and on the essence of what they are not, a defence of the need for such meditation, and a prescription of how modern souls can be opened to its possibility. Through this communication the reader might gain a foothold for future study and for self-conscious meditation on what they themselves are and are not and should and should not be. George Grant thought that this reflective communication is one of the chief fruits of the long hours of study as well as the beginning of a truly humanistic path of education.

The Two Great Primals: Ancient and Modern Philosophy

The first task is to understand what North American ignorance consists in, and the second is to think how the humanities could help solve it. The logical starting point for both is to recognize the two 'fates', 'destinies', or 'primals' that Grant thinks

determine the history of the West. These words do not refer to some particular course of action that is predetermined in advance to happen.¹ They point to a 'system of beliefs', the 'presuppositions' of a time that guide its thinking and acting. But even this is too 'logical'. The 'primal' is closer to what Martin Heidegger spoke of as the "destining of revealing", the most basic way of revealing the world and humanity's place in it. This revealing is not within conscious human control, but all human activities make sense of themselves from within it.²

Grant thinks the various Western modes of revealing can be organized into two basic categories. Historically the first is the ancient, 'contemplative' primal. This has its origins in ancient Greece and Christianity. To contemplation as Grant understands it, humanity and the world reveal themselves as a nature intrinsically imbued with an order and goodness beyond themselves.³ Human nature differs from the rest of nature only in the specifics of its order and in that it freely contributes to its own ordering. The highest task of reason at any time and place is to contemplate eternal nature and order human life according to it, thereby making humanity excellent or virtuous.

The second primal is modern, beginning to take firm hold in the 16th century and definitively expressed in the philosophies of men like Machiavelli, Bacon, Hobbes, Locke and Nietzsche.⁴ It reveals human and non-human nature as matter moving

¹ George Grant, *Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America*, (Toronto, House of Anansi, 1969, 46, 63.

² Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell, (New York, Harper Perennial, 2008), 328-340.

³ Grant, *Technology and Empire*, 18, 34-37, 120-121. Also George Grant, *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1995), 15-37. Some of this description is also grasped negatively by the characterizations of the modern primal.

⁴ Grant, *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, 15-24, 38-48; George Grant, *Time as History*, (Toronto, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1969); *Technology and Empire*, 32-34, 137.

according to mathematizable laws and inherently absent of any good giving it meaning beyond itself. The human *spirit* is however essentially different in that it freely posits *values*. Human reason is a means to the end of mastering the laws of nature and moulding nature to meet the demands of the spirit, thus making nature valuable (good) for the first time. Thinking and politics are in this sense modes of making the world as we *want* it to be, rather than modes of ordering ourselves to the good of the world, precisely because the good of the world exists only as a result of our positing it. The good exists only in the world as we can make it, putting the utmost significance on the will and its action through time. This primal conceives of and realizes history as the use of technical reason to gradually liberate the human freedom to value from the force of both human and non-human nature and any remaining accounts of a good inherently belonging to that nature.

The modern primal pervades all of our discourse and action. It shapes our society.⁵ It determines the success or failure of political leaders.⁶ The political spectrum itself lies within its horizon, and from its perspective there is not even an important difference between the politics of cold-war Russia and America.⁷ Communism speaks its language in its prizing of science and material abundance over all else and so does the space project of Grant's day with its rhetoric about the historic achievements of human freedom.⁸ The entire modern public world is shaped by the faith in the increase of human happiness in time by a technical mastery that makes nature valuable to the

⁵ Grant, *Technology and Empire*, 26, for a sketch of technological society in its minutiae.

⁶ George Grant, *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism*, (Ottawa, Carleton University Press, 1997), 23-65, for Grant's analysis of John Diefenbaker's prime-ministership.

⁷ Grant, *Lament*, 67-79; *Technology and Empire*, 29-33.

⁸ Grant, *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, 23-24., 49-61; *Time as History*, 1.

spiritually free subject. This makes impossible any robust appeal to a traditional public religion or conservatism which puts thorough and unnegotiable limits on the will.⁹

The Consequences of Modernity

Because we are so immured in modernity, Grant thinks that we have a responsibility to think through its truth and decide for ourselves whether and how it is good. This is what moral philosophy is: the response to the duty of humanity to think through the options of how it ought to be.¹⁰ This duty is all the more upon us when we get some glimpse into Grant's intimations of the deprivations that are essential to the modern primal.¹¹ One of his major concerns is to point to certain spiritual problems for the modern age that according to him are not mere 'problems of detail' arising from roadblocks on the modern path.¹² These are not to be overcome by the history of human freedom as it extends itself into the future, but result essentially from that modern worldview itself. It will serve to try and capture these essential problems in their principles.

When all goodness is reduced to the absolutely free positing of values by this or that human, it becomes increasingly difficult for modern techniques to find a consistent, contentful goal *towards which* to order the nature they master.¹³ This goal cannot be found in any particular set of 'values'. The question arises - why 'his' values and not

⁹ Grant, *Technology and Empire*, 43-60; *Lament for a Nation*, 79.

¹⁰ Grant, *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, 3-13.

¹¹ Grant, *Technology and Empire*, 137-143 for Grant's insights as 'intimations'.

¹² Grant, *Technology and Empire*, 27-29, 139; *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, 62-74.

¹³ Grant, *Technology and Empire*, 131-140; *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, 69-89; *Time as History*, 10-30.

'mine'? The good itself is just as much subject to each and every contingent will as the means towards it. The result is that the mastery of nature and the reason for that mastery become more and more aligned: the content of the values by which we mould nature becomes publicly irrelevant so long as nature is made amenable to the free human will to some value. The goal of mastery becomes freedom from the necessity of nature in general and in principle.

This logical development implies a publicly enforced relativism: no citizen can consistently criticize the values of any other citizen so long as they allow every other citizen to freely posit and attain their own values.¹⁴ But Grant maintains that this pluralism is a surface impression.¹⁵ There is in fact no disagreement or skepticism about the public good: nature is to be mastered to increase the freedom of all. The only publicly accepted goal towards which technical ability strives must therefore be the "universal and homogenous state" in which *all* members are *equally* free from the contingencies of nature, and the technologically efficient realization of this end becomes the state's principal and official concern.¹⁶ This is certainly a goal that has its fair share of nobility, and Grant is far from denying this.¹⁷ But he also thinks that its assumptions are not neutral and present dangers. Technology becomes a public religion of sorts. It is the pure means to efficiently asserting freedom over nature, our only absolute value left standing. At times technology itself seems to be the only end we have in sight and takes on the significance of freedom in itself. According to him, this refocusing of final

¹⁴ Grant, *Technology and Empire*, 26.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 118-120, 127-133.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 33, 81-109.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 28-29; *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, 25, 46-47, 70-71.

purposes towards the mere means of freedom results in the triumphant, deeply paradoxical *assertion* of 'freedom' by the United States.¹⁸ It is equally responsible for the crisis of purposelessness in our private lives, as well as the popular existentialism that tries to respond by founding the meaning of an arbitrary world in free choice. This response ignores, of course, that it was the total freedom to value which emptied choice of an object beyond itself in the first place.¹⁹

Technological modernity's most hypocritical and common solution to the relativism of values is lived by the 'last men' whose existence Friedrich Nietzsche recognized: those humans who care only for comfort and ease and deride all other values as relative.²⁰ These people recognize that all values are mere decisions of particular humans, past and present. But they resent this reality and therefore anyone who, being less historically sensitive to moral relativism than they, continues to will things whose value and success is uncertain. The last men perversely wish that their own values be absolute. But, recognizing the relativity of values in principle, they set this wish upon those 'average' values which seem common and neutral enough to succeed the test of their more reflective valuation. The standard of goodness is set as what the most mediocre can manage to will and attain, and what allows them to merely go on willing and attaining. Their life tends to prioritize freedom from the impinging necessity of the discomforts of nature: hunger and pain. The last men bask in technologically-induced freedom with nothing else on their mind than the continued

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 63-78; *Time as History*, 8.

¹⁹ Grant, *Technology and Empire*, 58.

²⁰ Grant, *Time as History*, 33. For Nietzsche's own description of the last men: Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, tr. Peter Preuss, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980).

enjoyment of their bodily cycles. For humans living with their acute consciousness of the dependence of all values upon themselves, what value could be more certain than the technological means of prolonging existence and valuing itself?²¹

When humans finally come to a more honest modernity and truly embrace the relativism of their values, including even those most obviously connected to the mere freedom of the spirit, then comes the darkness of the will that Nietzsche prophesied: nihilism.²² With no objective good, only freely posited 'values', no truth but only 'opinions' as to what is good, the most consistent creatures will cease to see how they could consistently will anything at all. The freedom to value itself takes on the thorough aspect of the amoral contingency of nature. But despite this warping of the instinct for some good by the course of natural and spiritual history, men do continue to want to be able to will their values absolutely. And the greatest, most uncompromised freedom from such a thorough sense of contingency consists of conscious commitment to nothingness and the nihilation of all values. Nihilists turn from their vision of the contingency of the human spirit with an absolute will to destroy any faith in any particular value: they will nothing but the absolute freedom of the will from the contingency of everything present to it, including its own constant moments of weakness. Because this is impossible by the very nature of time and the directedness of

²¹ One sees this movement in Hobbes, one of the greatest of modern minds which Grant points to. In Hobbes' *Leviathan*, once it is admitted that the final purpose of existence is not objectively determinable, it is at once however affirmed that we can discover what most men tend to desire. Hobbes account of the human being tends to focus on such straightforward goods as material enjoyment and honour-seeking. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1968), 82-83.

²² Grant, *Time as History*, 34-35. For one of the most thorough expositions of nihilism and the problem to which it responds, see Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, tr. Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Random House, 1989), 1-56.

the instincts, nihilists are endlessly frustrated, vengeful, and striving. Their investment in technology for the sake not of comfort but of power is a chief manifestation of their empty wills, as is their hysterical demand for 'great' deeds, irrespective of particular results.

Nietzsche's solution to this inner crisis of modernity is to point towards a being that could recognize the absolute contingency of nature and history, the relativity of all values and the contingency of their fulfillment, and also stop wanting the absolute in a way the nihilist does not.²³ If this is possible, this creature might paradoxically become able to will whatever the fury of his instincts demands (because he need not be convinced with certainty of their truth) and yet will them with such joy that even though he believes not nor wants the absolute, he enjoys it in a way. But George Grant suspects that this *Urbmensch* is frankly impossible, that the love of fate, of all the contingency of what we happen to want and whether or not we achieve it, can only be founded upon the bedrock of an actual belief in a particular horizon of values valid for all that time.²⁴ Contingency can only be accepted if enfolded in purposeful meaning of some kind. Only if we can finally interpret the world as good can we live sanely through the chaos. If this is correct, modern men, who believe that such absolutisms are false by definition in a contingent natural and spiritual world, must choose between a false and hypocritical belief in absolutes and nihilism. Even nihilism is betrayed as hypocritical by its refusal to stop willing. If the absolute is needed for human happiness, the truly consistent modernity would be the quiet despair of pessimism, which for Grant means

²³ Grant, *Time as History*, 35-45.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 45-47; *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, 92-93.

the basic judgment that the universe is not good.²⁵ And to Grant, such a frank disconnect between the truth about reality and our ability to live well in it is an indication of a false account of human and non-human nature. To him, if the good life is possible only within absolute moral horizons, this is one of the first indications that such horizons are true statements about human life and the world that is its setting.

The Problem of Self-Consciousness in North American Society

It is not our place to come to a judgement about Grant's intimations as to the extremities of modernity. In fact this is impossible and we have barely sketched them.²⁶ The reason he called them "intimations" is that we cannot robustly conceive them to ourselves within the horizon of our current primal.²⁷ Any rigorous discourse on what modernity lacks and the goodness of what it lacks depends upon an insight into and judgement between the great classical and modern philosophers, as the clearest representatives of the two great primals.²⁸ As it stands, we are in all likelihood too modern to judge modernity: our prejudices prevent us from seeing definitively what we ourselves are and are not.²⁹ Until we regain, in principle if not in belief, a "coherent language [of the good] beyond those [languages] which serve the drive to unlimited freedom",³⁰ we cannot gain a standpoint of self-consciousness from which to recognize,

²⁵ Grant, *Lament*, 24. Sheila Grant, 'Afterword' to *Lament*, 109-111. Arthur Schopenhauer was such a pessimist who famously argued that the endless finitude of time and the constant directedness of the will means that life is essentially dissatisfying. From this he argued for the quieting and denial of all willing as the moral ideal for humankind. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation, Vol. 1*, tr. E.F.J Payne, (New York: Dover Books, 1969), 311-412, esp. 311-326 and 378-412.

²⁶ Grant, *Time as History*, 47.

²⁷ Grant, *Technology and Empire*, 40, 137.

²⁸ *Ibid* 81-109; Grant, *Lament*, 104-106.

²⁹ Grant, *Technology and Empire*, 43-45.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 139. Emphasis mine.

let alone evaluate, what modernity is and is not. Grant's writings here become a precious intimation of limits that might point us towards some intimation of a language of the good *beyond* the modern one, by whose pursuit we might for the first time truly and fully think and evaluate modernity. Grant's intimations of deprivation are not so much a philosophically robust critique of modernity as directives for the journeying self-consciousness.

It is here that the sense in which Grant is writing to North America in particular becomes clear. North America is the vanguard of modernity, the most modern land and people.³¹ This is not to say that we are factually the most technologically advanced or socially progressive. It is to say that we live most completely within the horizon of the modern primal.³² We are the only people without a history or consciousness of our own from before modernity. We are "too dynamic [modern] to have memory [consciousness]"³³ of any other way of being. The re-collection³⁴ of a language of good beyond that of freedom through pre-modern traditions is as a result most difficult for us.³⁵ What has made us unique in the modern world is our naive enmeshment in modernity.

Grant argues this best in the essay, "In Defence of North America". He thinks that the Calvinism of the North American settlers, combined with their herculean task of settling an inhospitable land, paved the way for our naiveté.³⁶ Calvinism's spiritual outlook helped remove divinity from the natural world, placing it in the relationship of the

³¹ *Ibid*, 15-16.

³² *Ibid*, 40, 137.

³³ *Ibid*, 25.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 142; *Time as History*, 49-50.

³⁵ Grant, *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, 24-25

³⁶ Grant, *Technology and Empire*, 17-25.

soul with an increasingly elusive and transcendent God. It emphasized pious work upon human and non-human nature as a spiritual task performed in the sight of this unknown God. This *ethos* made it highly receptive to elements in the philosophically modern vision of nature and value as epitomized in Machiavelli, Hobbes and Locke. The struggle with the new land took on a moral (liberating) significance in addition to its religious significance as the stage on which the signs of divine election occur. Eventually the religious sense was eroded and a practical faith in the progress of the technical mastery of nature for human interest was left.³⁷ This is the religion of progress, a particularly vigorous form of secularized Christianity that insists that redemption be found on earth.³⁸ The public discourse of North America takes it for granted that all of its scientific, military, political, and bureaucratic forces are the means towards a universally freer and more just society. The only problems of thought on this horizon are utilitarian details: which kinds of freedom are left to secure and which techniques will master which forces of human and non-human nature to these ends? The terms ‘freedom’, ‘technology’ and ‘control’ are all taken for granted because even our deepest roots as North-Americans stand largely in the modern primal.

This means that when we begin to experience difficulties that lie at the *root* of our modernity, we have a correspondingly naive relationship to them. We lack, for example, a consistent language by which to criticize the development of those technologies which disturb us precisely *because* they afford us greater control over the spontaneity of nature.³⁹ The power of reproductive science was just unfolding in Grant’s time, and we

³⁷ *Ibid*, 26-29.

³⁸ Grant, *Time as History*, 27-29, 31-33.

³⁹ Grant, *Technology and Empire*, 31-34.

might today also look to the strong 'transhumanist' impulse. This latter fantasy is not thoroughly criticized except by a language that can place the human good beyond freedom from the force of contingency. Those who try to express their concerns over such technologies cannot do so consistently and deeply so long as they remain committed in principle to the moulding of nature to freedom. On an even more disturbing note, Grant intimates that there can be no consistently negative reaction to the horror of Vietnam so long as one remains committed in principle to the modern ideals that inform American imperialism.⁴⁰ Most of the contemporary North American protest against American imperialism, he argues, remains committed to the exclusive ideal of the universal and homogenous state, not realizing that it is this that at bottom pragmatically justifies the American empire. We can perhaps recognize a form of this problem ourselves. Would we hesitate about the seditious undermining or unilateral and violent toppling of autocratic regimes abroad if we had a guarantee that it would dramatically increase the freedoms of the people there? Where the result is freedom it becomes increasingly difficult to question such actions.

Our lack of a language by which to even conceive of possible criticisms of particular cases of mastery (whether or not we ultimately should apply them) is a manifestation of our naiveté. One of its most hypocritical manifestations lies in the North American encounter with nihilism. Grant argues that to the degree that we have experienced the pangs of nihilism in the face of the relativity of all values, we have for the most part done so less profoundly and consistently than Europe has.⁴¹ Europe

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 73-78.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 34-40.

experienced what Nietzsche called the ‘death of God’ only because it *had* a God. Only because Europe had, in Judeo-Christian morality, a supposedly objective, natural standard of goodness, could it experience the full terror of the contingency of values subjected to the vicissitudes of nature and the instincts. As Nietzsche struggled with this problem, North America was in the midst of its naive faith that technique was the God through which those values and all the freedom to realize them would finally arrive. With the realization that values are relative when founded in human liberty, it simply went on and continued to experience the individual will and its freedom from necessity as the ultimate source of value. Recognizing the objective relativity of the values this will posits was in some sense a moot point and only led to a reinforcement of the public agenda of pure freedom over objective contingencies through technological mastery. The authentic European nihilism, rooted in the memory of a foundation of the will beyond itself, produced anguish and doubt, but the North American variety, according to Grant, produced the smug, self-assured “end of ideology” in which we are still living. All content except freedom is officially renounced from the public sphere as prejudiced, and a monolithic cult of efficiency is set up as absolute.⁴²

This is above all not *experienced* as a poverty of consciousness, though, but rather as a determined devotion to making the world a better place, to what is most real and important and least contingent in human affairs.⁴³ Action, not thought, is needed in our uncertain times if we are to prosper. Only in such an unthinking⁴⁴ commitment to human action as such could the heralds of the space era welcome a historic time for

⁴² *Ibid*, 40, 118-120, 131.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 17; *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, 38-48, 70-71, 76-83; *Time as History*, 10-20.

⁴⁴ See the essential distinction Grant employs between thinking and willing in *Time As History*, 10-20.

human freedom without an inkling of the question: for what? Grant thought that signs of a more authentic nihilism were sounding among the youth of his day,⁴⁵ but it might be said that as far as what is publically and generally ours, we still stand in a modernity fit more for unquestioning technical management and the hypocritical comforts of the last men.

The Role of the Humanities: A Light for the Discontent

How can we gain some rational intimation of a horizon of good beyond freedom that makes our struggles clear to us? This is Grant's question. He maintains that such intimations will come from diverse directions and in diverse ways, but that they will all be found by those who immerse themselves in their public world and the "full light of its presence", experiencing the most intense intimations of privation as a result.⁴⁶ We will explain this with reference to one source of a pre-modern horizon: the study of the humanities.

The humanities harbour a pre-modern vision of the good because their traditional orientation stems from ancient Greece. From Socrates onwards, all liberal arts were preparations for *philosophy*, which was understood as the contemplation of the order of human and non-human nature that discovered what was best for men to do.⁴⁷ By definition this humanistic reason transcends the calculation of means and ends in its recognizing, clinging to, and discoursing on what is good. It questions and establishes the order and truth of the 'values' posited by freedom and for that reason involves a

⁴⁵ Grant, *Time as History*, 44-45.

⁴⁶ Grant, *Technology and Empire*, 34, 36-37, 132.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 120-121.

surpassing of the modern assumption of the freedom to value and the modern utilitarian function of reason. The classical experience of a good beyond freedom is bound up essentially with this contemplative position for reason, in which reason has to do with ends and not means, natures and not facts. Even Hobbes and Locke, who were at the vanguard of the destruction of the contemplative primal, express themselves in keeping with its tradition: they offer rational accounts of human and non-human nature upon which they ground the modern vision of the good of humanity.⁴⁸ And I would argue that even Nietzsche, whose writings Grant views as the most consistent and complete statement of modernity, expresses himself this way. Despite his acceptance of historical relativism he still *defines* the human being through its instincts, in which he might even find some sense of a 'good' life to follow. Some remnant of the position of contemplation, however diluted, is the only foundation for any intelligible discussion of meaning and goodness. Without it we are in the position of relativism and self-ignorance, because reason is relegated to the position of a tool serving the freedom that asserts more or less whatever it wants or thinks.

Scholarship in the humanities has traditionally been the reading of those great works concerning human and non-human nature, as an initiation into serious thinking about that most important question of the final meaning of human existence.⁴⁹ But since the modern primal has come to dominate the natural and moral sciences, reducing them to the allegedly 'value free' mastery of nature for the purposes of value-creating freedom,⁵⁰ the role of the humanities in the curriculum has correspondingly changed.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 18-19.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 81, 132.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 113-120.

Reason is now more than ever the means to an arbitrarily established and unquestioned, freely posited value or end. No longer can it play the absolute and contemplatively ordering role it once did.⁵¹ Modern European and North American attempts to reserve for the humanities a morally ordering effect failed as the dominant method of the humanities became historicist and therefore relativistic.⁵² Most serious scholars of the humanities eventually came to judge it a mistake to try and justify their activity in the traditional way. They defended the humanities, much as the social sciences had been justified, as 'non-evaluative', classificatory, historical and analytical sciences. Despite the obvious rigours of these approaches, according to Grant they all stop short at the serious pursuit of the most important questions: which thinkers were right? What is good? They thus can do nothing to challenge the modern answer to that question and actually *legitimize* this answer by only outlining what various writers *thought was good* (ie: freely opined as good) or what can be represented consistently in language as good once it is freely opined. The concern of humanistic study with scholarly or logical techniques cannot transcend the will to mastery to provide it with order. Scholarly and analytical method themselves fit snugly within modern mastery. Just as natural science is a technique for the intellectual and practical mastery of nature, so humanistic scholarship becomes a technical mastery of facts and arguments which cannot touch or think our freedom. The choice of which thinkers' view of reality we 'like' remains largely unquestioned at this level, as does the choice of which 'topics' in human existence we want to analyse. Beneath and beyond the historical

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 122-126; *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, 26-37.

⁵² Grant, *Technology and Empire*, 122-126; *Time as History*, 48-51.

documentation of thought or the logical analysis of language, the free act of valuing remains absolute, as the limit of both what can be questioned about the humanistic writings and of their effect on the scholar.

Grant predicts that as a result the public role of the humanities will become that of high-culture entertainment and shallow activism, as the average modern becomes ever more in need of some language beyond freedom and a content for that freedom beyond mastery.⁵³ We can see this in our own institutions, where too often students see the rigour of study as just as boring, oppressive and meaningless as a technical bureaucracy. Where *knowledge* means mastery and mastery simply a power over nature and thought,⁵⁴ modern students will be unable to see how rigour is tied to living meaning. Knowledge will be experienced increasingly as stuffy pedantics, historical minutiae or technical skill. An impulse for profundity, new and interesting perspectives, and passionate commitment to important ideas grows. But thought without rigour is vain. Thus the works of the great thinkers will be admired and enjoyed, where they can be, as works of pleasure-inducing artistry, mysterious perspectives that students can wonder at before returning to their own lives, unimplicated and unchanged. While this is a purpose different from the main striving of modernity, and might inadvertently mitigate some of the meaninglessness dully felt by the masses as they suddenly realize the inherent lack of goals for their activity, it is no source of rational self-consciousness, let alone a public solution to any moral problem. It is rather a benign and world-avoiding diversion of the energies operating within modernity itself.

⁵³ Grant, *Technology and Empire*, 126-127.

⁵⁴ Grant, *Time as History*, 17-19. George Grant, "Thinking about Technology", in *Technology and Justice*, (Concord: Anansi, 1986) 11-34.

Those students who, though devoid of historical and formal rigour, nevertheless insist more on binding their education to the imminent realities of the day, will yet remain reliant upon the common sense of their own time, place and identity. The humanities will here become a platform for the kind of struggling critique we recognized earlier. Its agenda will be set by popular political intuitions about the failings or needs of the time, but before transcending modern assumptions about value and the will these failings cannot be clarified, let alone solved. While this development is ultimately more morally serious than the impulse for wondrous entertainment and technical scholarship, it is less sophisticated in its ideas. A high example for Grant was the fervent American criticism of communism.⁵⁵ This was a criticism so immersed in particular political realities that it failed to rise above the standpoint of mere propaganda. If we acknowledge with Grant that communism and liberal capitalism share a fundamental vision of the nature of the human good (freedom from nature), we must admit that only a greater degree of self-consciousness than a 'capitalist' critique of 'communism' can clarify either 'system'.

How can we gain a meaningful and rigorous sense of the whole of human life, through which alone we can begin to understand ourselves and our good? It is clear that in each of these curricular roles of the humanities, the dominance of modernity prevents the vestiges of true contemplation from touching us. In summary we might say that so long as we remain naively within the modern mode of revealing, we cannot take the humanities seriously and on their own terms. The language of a good beyond human freedom and the contemplative position of reason that is bound up therein

⁵⁵ Grant, *Time as History*, 49.

remain closed off from us, challenging as they do the essence of modernity. We must always integrate the humanities into our totalizing primal horizon as consistently as possible and they must remain ineffectual. But at this point the reader will ask: if the humanities were supposed to be a source of self-consciousness, how is it that their effect should depend on a modernity that is no longer naive? How can we be awake before being awakened?

The answer, I think, lies in the relationship between modernity's 'intimations of deprivation' and the 'intimations of good' that the humanities are supposed to provide us with. Grant does not think that North Americans remain naive in that they actually experience the technological society as paradise on earth. We have our own struggles, as we mentioned, with relativism, imperialism and the use of various technologies. Our naiveté lies in the fact that we deal with these 'intimations of deprivation' from within the primal that is their ground. We use the language of freedom to 'solve' problems of nihilism, and the language of the progressive state to discard international interventionism as an anomaly. We are naive in that we respond to our deprivations in terms of the very assumptions that cause them, in which we have a total faith and of whose limits we have little consciousness. But this implies not *actually* responding to them; so long as we respond in a modern way to those deprivations that follow essentially upon modernity, we cannot recognize them for what they are. This was our conclusion before: most North American attempts to grasp North American deprivations cannot do so adequately, let alone judge what to do about them in a satisfactory way. Our *attempt* to do so is our naive self-ignorance whose resolution must precede any

meaningful discourse or action in response to these problems and even the decision that they truly are problems and not just absences. We lack not pain but a rational consciousness of the meaning of our pain for our humanity.

Until we come to know the essence of that which we are and are not, we cannot respond to our privations adequately. And yet our sense of deprivation will not go away, if man is a rational being with some openness to the goodness of what he is not. The pangs of international wars will continue if they are essential to our modernity and yet we continue to 'resolve' them from within modern assumptions. Life will continue to seem meaningless if affirming one's choices as absolutely free is not the solution to despair, but rather its cause. Grant seems to believe that the more naively and completely modern we become in our explicit self-consciousness, the more these intimations of deprivation and our inability to think them must multiply and intensify. Freedom will become more and more extreme and reason yet more of a tool. Through the experience of the greatest deprivation some few of us will turn no longer to modern living and thinking, but to something ... else.⁵⁶ Intimations of a *possible* good beyond freedom, of a part of our nature other than the one we usually inhabit, will follow upon the strongest intimations of deprivation within modernity. We will gradually be pointed beyond our current horizon towards the horizon within which those deprivations that fill our sight might be understood and filled.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Grant, *Technology and Empire*, 36-37, 43-44. It is clear that Grant thinks this turning will occur only for some few of us (59, 94-95), and that it will make these few strangers to the public realm (28, 37, 44, 131). Any eventual sense in which their self-consciousness will take hold publicly is undeveloped.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 141.

But this is not yet self-consciousness: we must come to know that which we struggle with and long for. It might be that in this case, the humanities will not so much deliver to us the first intimations either of deprivation or of good, but will rather provide a robust language of good and a contemplative position for these deprived intimations to latch onto and make themselves intelligible with. Grant clearly thinks that the first step is becoming ready, from the suffering of deprivation, to receive the highest expressions of the deepest roots of our traditions. This requires a deep longing for a viewpoint adequate to the whole of human being. Once we receive and recollect the explicit position of contemplation, its language of a possible good beyond freedom will begin to reveal and clarify for the first time what modernity is and is not, as well as a dim but improved sense of how best to act along this border.⁵⁸ The loving openness to the whole of human being in thought and life will be elevated to its greatest clarity yet and therefore intensified, for not only truth and goodness but also beauty follows upon intelligibility, as Plato knew. In the best moments of the very best of these searchers, the longing for the whole will transcend itself into actual, philosophically adequate thinking.⁵⁹ Only here will 'decisions' be reached on the essence of humanity as conceived by modernity and antiquity, on the elements, goods and limits of each and of their possible syntheses. In the greatest thinkers alone is the greatest clarity on the most important matters to be found. But this changes little for the rest of us who wish to know ourselves. George Grant maintains that any kind of rigorous discourse on the human good would have to rise to the level of the greatest ancient and modern philosophies and perhaps transcend

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 137-138.

⁵⁹ Grant, *Time as History*, 51-52; *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, 36-37, 70-74, 90-103.

them. But this does not prevent us from partaking of some measure of that ultimate clarity and its attendant possibility of virtue, according to our own situation, ability and impulse. Our relative poverty will only increase our longing and perhaps our progress. The darkness and suffering of the self-ignorant rational animal here begins therapy.⁶⁰ The self-conscious desire for the perfection of the whole indicates that the world and the human essence is intelligible and good and that we are imperfect; but it is equally our only way of becoming less imperfect.⁶¹

The humanities, like all other therapies, thus takes its therapeutic power from the spirit's deeply, concretely deprived and self-conscious struggle for the good. This interpretation perhaps makes sense of Grant's otherwise strange comments about the sources of our therapies, and of his own. He tells us that true philosophy (contemplation of the good) might be revived only to those "immersed in understanding the immediacies of the public world".⁶² He tells us that only a "lifetime of madness" faced by the "barrenness of an all-pervading liberalism" first led him *authentically*, through the *search* for a "more adequate stance", to be able to touch the contemplative "vision of life" through the great works of "Athens and Jerusalem".⁶³ He tells us that he suspects that the youth of the future will touch that tradition more easily than him, not despite the fact that "the society is madder" but precisely because of it.⁶⁴ For Grant, the most important visions need not be limited to any particular walk of life or field of study. They

⁶⁰ Grant, *Technology and Empire*, 139-140.

⁶¹ Grant, *Time as History*, 47.

⁶² Grant, *Technology and Empire*, 132.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 36-37 43-44. I have lifted quotations mixed from these two intensely personal passages to try to indicate their overall sense.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 36.

will come to those who experience their modern existence most fully, *let* themselves experience the fullest poverty of the spirit, strive for something beyond the present, and by chance⁶⁵ come into contact with a more comprehensive stance.

Works Cited

Grant, George. *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism*. Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1997.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 36, 131.

Grant, George. *Philosophy in the Mass Age*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995.

Grant, George. *Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America*. Toronto: House of Anansi, 1969.

Grant, George. "Thinking about Technology". In *Technology and Justice*. Concord: Anansi, 1986

Grant, George. *Time as History*. Toronto, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1969.

Heidegger, Martin. "The Question Concerning Technology". In *Basic Writings*. Ed. David Farrell Krell. New York: Harper Perennial, 2008.

Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Tr. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Random House, 1989.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*. Tr. Peter Preuss. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980.

Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Representation, Vol. 1*. Tr. E.F.J Payne. New York: Dover, 1969