

## THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY: ONTOLOGY AND FALSE NEEDS\*

*Alkis Kontos*

I return link by link along the iron chains  
of memory to the city which we inhabited so  
briefly together: the city which used us ...  
precipitated in us conflicts which were hers  
and which we mistook for our own. ...

I see at last that none of us is properly to  
be judged for what happened in the past. It  
is the city which should be judged though we,  
its children, must pay the price.

Capitally, what is this city of ours?

Lawrence Durrell

Any serious, philosophical inquiry into the question of human needs is a normative discourse which must consider the ontological status of needs. Ontology and human needs are so inter-connected that no meaningful consideration of the one without the other is possible. We cannot affirm certain needs as truly human and thus vital to our self-fulfilment, and at the same time pretend to know nothing about the ontology of the individual beings to whom we attribute such needs. Nor can we claim to know the essence of human beings but be blissfully ignorant as to the needs this essence implies.

An ontology implies certain needs and certain needs presuppose an ontology to which they correspond; be they explicit or implicit, ontological assumptions are inevitable in relation to the question of human needs. The very structure of

\* For my friend Ato Sekyi-Otu; wounded by colonialism, history's bizarre political contingency, he retained his fidelity to both, the memory of lost, ancient, mythic kingdoms, and the poetry of the promise of the future.

## *ALKIS KONTOS*

our mind renders it impossible, indeed inconceivable, otherwise. Try to imagine a human face without imagining any identifiable features. If you can do that then you can also sever ontology and needs. Such severance defies the nature of our mental constructs and intellectual conceptualizations.

In this essay I propose the indispensability of an ontological argument regarding human needs and proceed to suggest a conceptual clarification, as a prolegomenon to a perspective for the resolution of the problem of competing ontological claims. In doing so I draw upon relevant aspects of the thought of C.B. Macpherson and Herbert Marcuse. My ultimate aim here is to address critically Leiss' claim regarding ontology and false needs.

A meaningful analysis and evaluation of the quality of human life cannot be initiated if the nature of human beings is either presumed to be unknown or non-existing.<sup>1</sup> Such analysis cannot go beyond mere description of externalities. The question of quality involves values, relations, judgments and critical interpretation. None of these is possible if one adopts the hollow view that everything is equally inessential or essential. We all know the sterility of that pseudo-scientific study of political life which, with immense idiocy, sought to divorce facts from values. Avowed empiricists delude themselves in believing that facts are visibly discernible, like solid objects; or that the truth of a factual universe is self-evident and thus fully and freely accessible; or that what constitutes a social fact is instantly and unambiguously declared. Those ecstatic creatures who believe they have entered the realm of profound analysis should be reminded of Shakespeare's elegant words: "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing".<sup>2</sup> There are no alternatives to intelligent, imaginative, critical interpretation.

Theory possesses no magical method for the resolution of the ontological issue. Neither techniques, nor mechanical systems exist. Ontology must be deciphered within the flux and turmoil of historical time. The struggle with the riddle of history is difficult, but not impossible. History offers us no vantage point, no Archimedean point from which a panoramic view of its topography would yield automatically the truth of its inner structure — its essence, our essence. History must be interrogated from within. We are immersed in history.<sup>3</sup> We are nothing outside history. We are our history, but we are also more than any historical actuality. We are ontologically constituted by historically developing.

The question of ontology has been central to political theory from its very ancient beginnings. The perennial tension between appearance and reality constitutes the problem of essence in philosophy. Plato's allegory of the cave is the first in a series of such articulations. Plato's allegory seeks to capture in a timeless, non-dialectical form the discrepancy between appearance and reality.

The supreme task of critical thought has been, and still remains, to unveil

## THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY

ontology within history. This is not to imply that ontology, like those princesses in fairy tales, lies dormant awaiting the magic kiss of her prince to awaken and find eternal happiness. This is a fool's paradise, not ontology. Adorno's elegant, cryptic reflections from damaged life should dispel any such naiveté. Nor is ontology a solid, inert object to be seen and touched by doubting Thomases. Rather, it is like beauty and intelligence. They exist nowhere but in beautiful and intelligent objects and beings. They constitute characteristic properties of objects and beings but cannot be found independently of such objects or beings (just as in ordinary language no qualities attributed by an adjective can exist apart from a noun, a subject, to which such qualities are attributed).

The fact that ontology is not embedded in the realm of empirical reality, that it is not subject to immediate visibility, does not mean that it is a mysterious entity or an illusion. Nor does it mean that ontology can or must be determined *a priori*. To speak of ontological assumptions we need not, and should not, invite either metaphysical mysteries or theological divinities or preconceived, ossified systems of measure.

History, like empirical reality, does not disclose its truth without philosophical scrutiny and interpretation. History alone, unaided by philosophy, stands mute before its own riddle. History without the enlightenment of a philosophy of history is nothing but a babel of contradictions, the fusion of appearances and reality, the thoughtless interplay of light and darkness. Philosophy steps into the flux of historical time to harness its multiple, contradictory manifestations. To render history coherent and meaningful, it is imperative that we distinguish appearance from reality, the true from the false, the human from the inhuman.

C.B. Macpherson in his recent essay "Needs and Wants: an Ontological or Historical Problem?"<sup>4</sup> offers a brief, insightful analysis and evaluation of the various views of needs in the modern traditions of political theory. Macpherson's main thesis is that ontological assumptions are necessary (I would say indispensable) in any consideration of human needs and that the problem of needs must be seen as both an ontological and an historical one. Both of these dimensions are necessary because the ontological alone could easily lapse into an immutable concept of human nature immune to the passage of time and changing historical circumstances. This would amount to a denial of a developmental perspective. Alone, the historical dimension lapses into relativism because it cannot provide a qualitative criterion for differentiating essence from appearance. Everything becomes engulfed by the one-dimensionality of history. Untouched by history, ontology is reduced to an inert, unreal claim; untouched by ontology, history cannot acknowledge its inhumanity.

## ALKIS KONTOS

Macpherson cautions us regarding the distinction between needs — things absolutely necessary to sustain human life — and wants, things not necessary but gratifying. He tells us that this distinction is both insular, maintained in the English language but not, for example, in French or German, and ideological — only the liberal tradition makes or comes close to making it. Although Macpherson's critique exposes the weakness, inadequacy, and danger, of the needs-wants distinction, and although he proposes its rejection, he continues to make use of it for no apparent reason.

I suggest that any such distinction be discarded.<sup>5</sup> It permits the introduction of an artificial and misleading separation between survival and conditions of existence beyond mere survival. The distinction produces a hiatus between the fact of survival and the qualitative conditions of a genuinely human life, which insulates the first and undermines the normative significance of the second. It is not the seriality of survival needs and needs beyond mere survival, which characterizes human needs, but the combination of these dimensions — a combination which is warranted ontologically but satisfied historically. Furthermore, the fact that these two dimensions are combined in human needs precludes the distillation, even if only for purposes of analysis, of their survival dimension. Because they are manifested and satisfied culturally they are no longer biological, but bio-social. Thus they are more complex in their concrete historicity than in their abstractly conceptualized function. What these needs satisfy cannot be severed from how they meet this function — their mode of satisfaction. Food and sex are examples of survival needs which would be severely impoverished, if reduced to their merely necessary function. A complex, sophisticated constellation of socio-cultural modes of satisfaction would be constricted to its minimum biological roots. In contrast, the distinction we need is one between truly human and false needs — ontology and domination.

Macpherson develops four main categories of modern theories of needs and elaborates their corresponding ontological assumptions. The categories are: (1) Rousseau; (2) Liberal Individualism; (3) Ethical Liberalism; and (4) Marx.

Macpherson's brief analysis discloses Rousseau's argument regarding the gradual historical development, increase the final degeneration of natural man's simple physical needs. The transvaluation of natural needs, their quality, through the quantity of artificial needs permits Rousseau to assert his values of equality and freedom, and to affirm his distinction of natural/artificial needs. Needs are viewed by Rousseau as both historical and ontological but the glorification of natural needs is rejected by Macpherson, and correctly so. Nature becomes, in a paradigmatic sense, trans-historical. It would be more accurate to speak of culturally determined needs and draw the distinction between needs freely developed and needs in effect "imposed by a predatory culture".<sup>6</sup>

## *THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY*

Macpherson's criticism of the Liberal Individualists — primarily the classical political economists and the Utilitarians — is that the essential postulate operative here is that every individual's needs naturally increase endlessly, without limit. This increase is viewed by its proponents as positive. Macpherson sees here a totally unhistorical view which, because it accepts the capitalist market society, disallows any qualitative distinctions between needs.

Ethical Liberalism, the liberalism of J.S. Mill, T.H. Green, L.T. Hobhouse, and a host of twentieth century followers, rejected the mere quantity of classical liberalism. The importance of quality is stressed. Man is not seen as infinite consumer but rather as exerter and developer of all his capacities. Intellectual, moral and aesthetic needs are affirmed. Macpherson's objection to this liberalism is that it fails to take into account the role of capitalist market society in the genesis of certain deplorable needs.

With Marx, Macpherson rejects the possessive, alienated society. For Marx the truly human need consists in "creative transformation of nature and of oneself and one's relations with one's fellows".<sup>7</sup> With Marx we have a proper understanding of the dual dimension of human needs — ontology and history. Furthermore, according to Macpherson, no rank-order or hierarchy of needs is suggested by Marx, nor is it necessary. Rank ordering is unhistorical — unchanging human nature must be postulated. In a brief but devastating examination of Maslow's hierarchical scheme of needs, Macpherson re-affirms Marx's superior approach.

Macpherson tell us this: No needs can be affirmed without an ontological postulate; the validity of an ontological postulate, and consequently of its corresponding needs, depends on the accuracy with which ontology and history are perceived. A balanced, truthful view would not render ontology externally fixed nor would it accept history's developments blindly. Free, creative activity becomes the measure of history's humanly appropriate development.

In a characteristically lucid sketch of the central features and logic of the modern traditions of political theory, Macpherson, in accord with Marx, suggests that not all of history is good but that all that is good is in history regarding the question of human needs.

In Macpherson's own theory, ontological considerations are central, and so are historical developments. His seminal analysis and critique of possessive individualism and particularly his brilliant treatment of Hobbes rest on the Marxian insight that the historical reality of the market society has been ontologized. Rousseau was the first to claim that neither Hobbes nor Locke managed to reach far enough into natural man. They did not strip man of all his socially acquired attributes. Macpherson's claim is that Hobbes' natural man, man in the state of nature (I treat the Hobbes study as the prototype, it is also the most fascinating) is a projection of civilised man, an analysis of men in

## ALKIS KONTOS

established social relationships, established in a *specific* society — capitalist market society. He also argues that Hobbes did grasp accurately the social structure of his time. This is why Macpherson is so meticulous in demonstrating that indeed England was what Hobbes perceived her to be. His study moves on two levels, the internal-textual, and the external-empirical.

Hobbes, a bourgeois theorist, portrays accurately his society but grants his portrayal an ontological status. Hobbes remains for Macpherson the fiercely accurate analyst of capitalist market relations. Macpherson's fascination with Hobbes is the latter's analytical ability; Macpherson's rejection of Hobbes is the latter's inability to differentiate ontology from history. Where Hobbes describes, Marx restores reality. Hobbes and Marx are the intellectual poles of Macpherson's thought.

Macpherson's treatment of Hobbes tells us this about ourselves: alienated and dehumanized in our market relations, we should not see our negation as our essential self. Macpherson's ontological postulate insists on free, creative activity; he frequently speaks of the free development of human capacities; the individual is seen as essentially a doer, a creator, an exerter of energy, an actor.<sup>8</sup>

In order to understand Macpherson's thought it is imperative to realize that the fundamental context in which his analysis operates is that of liberal-democratic theory — its contradictions — and of capitalist market relations. The first constitutes the limiting context; Macpherson defines his intellectual project as an attempt "to work out a revision of liberal-democratic theory, a revision which clearly owes a good deal to Marx, in the hope of making that theory more democratic while rescuing that valuable part of the liberal tradition which is submerged when liberalism is identified with capitalist market relations".<sup>9</sup> Man as infinite appropriator contradicts man the exerter, enjoyer, and developer of his essential powers. This is so because to appropriate without limit is to appropriate land and capital as well as goods for consumption. This consequently results in all the land and capital being appropriated by some, leaving the rest without their own means of labour. This is necessarily so in a capitalist market society. I believe it is because of the logico-historical contradiction within liberal-democratic theory that Macpherson's aversion to metaphysics does not damage his treatment of ontology as it could. A great deal regarding ontology that warrants argumentation and proof is, in Macpherson's case of liberal-democratic theory, already granted as a feature of the universe he wishes to rehabilitate.

That Macpherson does not agonize over crucial ontological and metaphysical problems is not because he is oblivious to them but because his own goal carries such specificity that within its boundaries no such metaphysical problems arise. The context of his theme is the problem of liberal-democratic theory, his desire to revise and thus rectify it. This context forces his analysis toward the concrete

## THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY

political reality and disallows him from undertaking any abstract philosophical analysis. It is true that temperamentally he is not attracted to the realm of metaphysics. Consciously he tries to keep his critique as close as possible to the requirements of his intellectual project. Macpherson's critique of capitalist market relations on Marxian grounds is the road that can lead his analysis and insights well beyond the liberal-democratic theoretical perspective and predicament.

The master analyst of possessive individualism has achieved the simultaneous establishment of a precise domain of investigation and a theoretical perspective expansive enough to embrace the universal. Macpherson's impeccable scholarship and illuminating analysis command our attention. The principles and logic of Macpherson's own ontological postulates, as well as his critique of other such postulates, stop short of a full, systematic investigation of ontology. That Macpherson does brilliantly what he set out to do and that such a task is of great importance, we should have no doubt. Still, the ontological argument warrants more, especially when removed from the protective logic of liberal-democratic theory.

Macpherson's analysis of ontology could be summarized as follows: (1) although ontological postulates are necessary, not *any* such postulate will do; (2) ontology should not be set apart from history, but historical developments must be evaluated from the qualitative perspective of ontology; (3) freedom, free creative activity is *the* ontological postulate; (4) society must be rationally organized to permit the actualization of this postulate and fulfill its corresponding human needs.

Certainly this much suffices for Macpherson's purposes, but more must be said about ontology and history, their possible differentiation and the validation of ontological postulates. For example Macpherson argues that an ontological postulate is a value postulate and as such not entirely a factual one. Since postulates about human essence are value postulates, "they may properly be discarded when they are seen to be at odds with new value judgments about newly possible human goals."<sup>10</sup> Here Macpherson is referring to the postulate of man's essence as infinite consumer, infinite appropriator. Logical and technological considerations permit us to discard it.<sup>11</sup> The postulate that is being discarded is now obsolete. This process of discarding could prove problematical. Certainly there is ambiguity in Macpherson's reference to value postulates and factual postulates. The fact that we can discard a postulate surely is evidence of its invalidation independently of its being a value postulate as opposed to a factual one. A valid value postulate would not be discarded. Furthermore, the argument that is employed in discarding this postulate does not validate the ontological postulate which claims man to be an exerter, doer, developer. The negation of the one postulate does not necessarily support the

## ALKIS KONTOS

other except in the context of liberal-democratic theory. It is the dichotomous historical character of the liberal-democratic paradigm which permits Macpherson's force of argument. It must be borne in mind that the two postulates of the liberal-democratic paradigm are not exhaustive. There can be, and have been, other quite different postulates. One such postulate involves the ascetic rejection of both capitalist possessiveness and rational-technological foundations of freedom. Such a postulate calls for refutation on distinct grounds rather than by association. In another essay, Macpherson refers to the supposed infinite desire for utilities as "this perverse, artificial, and temporary concept of man".<sup>12</sup> Here Macpherson leaves no doubt that this postulate is incorrect, that it pretends to be ontological but is not. From a strictly philosophical point of view this is precisely what must be established: independent grounds for the validation of ontological postulates.

Thus I am cognizant of the inherent difficulties in the attempt to validate the truth of *the* ontological postulate. However, I am also adamantly convinced of the indispensability of ontological postulates, and hence the inescapability of attempts at validation. I do not expect unanimity on any proposed resolution of the problematical character of ontology, nor do I acknowledge unanimity as a validating principle. The arguments, evidence and inference that can be presented in support of an ontological position, do not and cannot carry the conclusiveness of a strictly empirical assertion — nor is ontology proven in the manner and method of the natural sciences. Neither the apodictic character of a syllogism nor the force of a mathematical theorem applies here. Ontology is not demonstrable in any of these senses. However, we should not assume that ontological postulates are arbitrary, mere questions of taste not amenable to logical inference, rational discourse, intelligent insight nor imaginative perception and creativity.

To search for ontology as such, for an entity, would be vain as well as idiotic. We do not search for love independently of lovers. Ontology is empirically manifested, or rather, suggested. It does not disclose itself fully for it is always in a process, an historical process of becoming. I take ontology to be a set of essential attributes which disclose the essential human being in his/her membership in the species. These attributes define human beings *per se*. Within the *genera* we must recognize the unique. The attributes we name as ontological are potentialities, capacities, in the expression of which the human essence is manifested and realised. This essence is not a fixed immutable quality of certain quantity. It is not fixed like the physical dimensions of an object, its weight or volume. Rather, it is like a quality which characterizes something but which transcends its specific expressions. Consider artistic talent. Without an objectified expression/performance of it we cannot know of its existence; but no specific expression or expressions of it determine, reveal or

## THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY

exhaust its totality. The next expression is always qualitatively rooted in the talent, but its concrete specificity remains veiled in indeterminacy until fully objectified.

Ontological capacities are not identical to teleological views of human nature. Telos can mean a terminal point of arrival, completion; it can also mean purpose, orientation for an ongoing voyage. It is the former which I reject here. Teleology suggests a determinate telos in the beginning which unfolds in the passage of time: the tree is in its seed, potentially — more precisely it is there actually. Teleological views are developmental only in a formal sense. The historical dimension is never an active feature. The telos can and might be prevented from materializing; however, without any negative intervention it is secure, and with its arrival the process terminates. Teleology pays lip service to history but in reality it affirms an unhistorical development: preconceptualization and unfolding. Teleology of this type as well as insistence on a fixed, rigid concept of human nature both fail to consider the historical existence of ontology. They are utterly axiomatic. This is so because from the diversity of historical human behaviour and action a selection is made as truly testifying to the proposed image of human nature. On what ground, however, can such an image be enunciated? History testifies in paradoxes, in ironic opposites: war and peace, cruelty and generosity, sacrifice and exploitation, suffering and joy, knowledge and ignorance. These contradictory manifestations refuse to disclose a coherent pattern. Alone, such opposites offer us a veritable dualism. In formal logic either the dualism would have to be accepted as *the truth* or we would have to approach the impracticable assertion that there is no human nature. Thus, either our attempt to understand history's drama and the nature of its protagonists must terminate in the morass of historical episodes, or, in desperately arbitrary fashion, an *a priori* concept of human nature must be advocated which we pseudo-validate by partial, artificial historical evidence which itself ignores the other side of the historical dualisms. None of these alternatives are satisfactory.

That ontological capacities should not be imagined as solidly sealed in any form that quantifies them, does not mean that these capacities are in constant mutation which either permits their qualitative reversal or precludes their recognizability. Ontology suggests an orientation, a propensity or proclivity of a certain quality. Just as intelligent thoughts emanate from intelligence so it is with ontology. It imputes quality, the ontologically essential one.

I visualize ontological capacities as inherent and dynamic, in constant dialectical relation with historical time and its emergent structures, material and mental. Only in this sense do the otherwise unresolvable and confusing historical opposites enter into the dialectic of appearance and reality. They are transformed into meaningful, active dialectical opposites. They are no longer

## *ALKIS KONTOS*

isolated, inert contradictions. The dialectic embraces actualities and potentialities. The actual is visible and conceals potentiality. It is this dialectic which discloses ontology and renders it simultaneously empirically inferable and intellectually-imaginatively visible. Ontology is not fully of the actual but it is fully submerged in it. It is relational, but dialectically. It is this dialectical relation that Macpherson's thought circumvents although it is perfectly capable of accommodating it. Let us not forget that Macpherson is a critic of capitalist market relations from a Marxian perspective.

Marcuse's thought is centred upon such a dialectic. It should be pointed out that both Macpherson and Marcuse postulate free creative activity as the human essence. Both of them, in accord with Marx, claim that the full content, the substantive expression of a free life cannot and should not be pre-planned, pre-articulated; the creation of its substantive structure remains the task of free individuals.<sup>13</sup> To pronounce its content in advance is to extinguish the very meaning of freedom.

That Marcuse imposes a Marxian perspective on Freud's theory, thereby drawing the distinction between ontology and history, is a well known fact. My intention here is not to offer a systematic elaboration of Marcuse's thought.<sup>14</sup>

Marcuse's narrative of the history of civilisation is based on certain fundamental conceptual distinctions. These distinctions usher in qualitative differentiations which permit the intellectual-empirical decipherment of history and ontology. These distinctions are:

Necessity: A permanent, ineradicable feature of human existence, it is present whatever the form of social organization. This is the realm of human struggle for survival. The material production of everyday life belongs here.

Scarcity: In a world too poor to satisfy human needs without constant work, scarcity is the existential experience of necessity. The fact of scarcity and the organization of scarcity are not the same thing.<sup>15</sup>

Surplus-repression: Additional, excess, unwarranted repression, it is repression over and above what is necessary for the maintenance of civilised human association. It is repression in the service of social domination. With this concept, Marcuse literally forces us to visualize the non-inevitability of domination. It consists of strata of repressive controls not necessitated by civilisation itself.<sup>16</sup>

Performance principle: the prevailing historical form of the reality principle in contemporary civilisation. Under this principle a society is stratified according to the competitive economic performances of its members. The fact of surplus-repression is empirically manifested in the organizational, institutional structures of the prevailing historical form of the reality principle. In turn, these structures operationalize such surplus-repression.

Unfreedom: It is distinct from toil, alienated labour, social domination. It is

## *THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY*

the rationalized and technologized realm of socially necessary work. It is the highest possible amelioration of human effort and work in the realm of necessity. This humanization of necessity does not suggest its eradication. Nor does it transform necessity into freedom. It establishes the necessary and sufficient conditions for ontological realisation: freedom.

**Freedom:** Human activity as an end in itself — the expression and fulfilment of the human essence.

For Marcuse the optimal possible human existence would be defined by the co-existence of unfreedom and freedom where unfreedom serves as the foundation of freedom. Surplus-repression, in any form, is incompatible with this optimum. Because of this necessary relationship between unfreedom and freedom, the latter cannot prevail in the absence of unfreedom as defined above. Clearly then the human condition must be seen as developmental; it follows that where societies are precluded from attaining the necessary material base for the actualization of freedom, the only meaningful goal is to ameliorate the realm of necessity, of exploitation: to reduce human suffering to its minimum and thus raise the society to its maximum possible level of development under the prevailing material circumstances. Material improvement of impoverished conditions, paramount as it might be, should not lead to the belief that quantitative progress is the meaning of freedom — far from it. Capitalist material possessiveness is not freedom. Nor, however, should we assume that nothing can or ought to be done for improvement because the material conditions of the historical moment preclude freedom in the ontological sense. Simply, we should not confuse survival with the conditions of survival, nor should we forget that qualitative distinctions are necessary to any meaningful social critique and must balance the possible with the desirable — the ontologically desirable.

For Marcuse the question of ontology is neither a strictly empirical nor a purely intellectual issue. To proceed toward the recognition of ontology we must effect a genuine recollection. This is not to recall the ancient, timeless past, but to reconstitute the fragments into a coherent totality, to unify what has been set assunder through alienation and domination. Memory — individual and collective — must rupture its repressive prisons of amnesia. Art, where the great refusal is nourished and preserved, must be seen as testifying to the perennial, primordial condemnation of human suffering. These are sources of evidence and inference; none of them alone suffices. In unison they do not validate the ontological postulate of free creative activity as the human essence. However, all these sublime and most elemental voices of past and present humanity become sources of imaginative affirmations of totally other worlds, of a totally other destiny, a leap into a qualitatively different future. It is with such images and metaphors that the critical spirit can step into the flux of

## ALKIS KONTOS

historical time where the gordian knot of ontology and history can be forced loose, where the labyrinth of appearance and reality can be seen for what it is in the reflection of the dialectical movement. There, in history, we can find the actual, concrete negation of what the imagination dreams, of what critical thinking demands, of what reason proclaims. Historical experience becomes the concrete denial of the realisation of the human essence. In its inversion, the human essence *is* the evidence of its truth.

Dehumanization, then, has a structure and a logic which can be investigated under the auspices of critical thinking. The potentiality of freedom and happiness is reflected, albeit through a glass darkly, in the historical forms of human suffering. Its study and analysis touch many crucial areas of human existence; some are empirical, others are not.

When we begin to think seriously about ontology we must realize that our thinking does not begin from a desolate nothing. We have the thoughts and dreams of others who preceded us. We have experience, we have the world before our eyes. We have our own individual self. A full systematic analysis and articulation of our ontological dimension must ultimately be the ground upon which we claim our own self-identity. Such ground cannot be either fully subjective or fully objective. It must be both, bridged in consciousness and imagination.

When we turn to the dehumanized social world we must see individual destinies in their full negation. When ontological capacities are being denied it does not mean, at least not yet, that they have been eliminated. They are exiled to the interior.

What is alive, even if exiled, manifests itself. Thus the grand denial of ontology need not initiate the great refusal, but it does show signs of its betrayal, of its false claims against ontology. The false, as an actual, concrete denial of the essence that it masks, confesses its secret misery.

Evidence can be marshalled to show how contradictory and hollow that universe is, riddled with anxiety, loneliness, troubled sleep, the frenzy of possessiveness. Evidence can be marshalled to indicate the secret meaning of its beliefs and values.

Systematic investigation of the material and value universe of the subjects of domination would reveal their false paradise. Marx as a young man wrote of the dehumanizing effects of capitalism. His utterances and condemnations were passionate and poetic. He gave a fierce, penetrating critique of the transvaluation of values, the inhumanity of money-capital.<sup>17</sup> He called money "the alienated ability of mankind".<sup>18</sup> He quoted Goethe and Shakespeare, for they knew of the false world that money can fabricate. Money becomes "the common whore, the common pimp of people and nations".<sup>19</sup> To the truth of the poets Marx sought a counterpart, the truth which is found in the workings

## THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY

of the market place. The methodical analysis of the workings of capital as well as the faces of the suffering constitute the other reality that Marx studied as an older man. The *Grundrisse* and *Das Kapital* are the major results.

It is in the dialectical relations of matter and mind, of economy and quality of life that astonishingly we find evidence of other possibilities. Ontological

It is in the dialectical relations of matter and mind, of economy and quality of life that astonishingly we find evidence of other possibilities. Ontological postulates permit and grant entry into the solid world of everyday life. There, a meaningful interpretation can commence in which the claims of ontology can be measured against the presumed achievements of society. There, the great exile can return to accuse and re-claim.

In a brief, little known essay in which he summarizes his social theory,<sup>20</sup> Marcuse argues that values, "norms and aspirations which motivate the behavior of social groups in the process of satisfying their needs, material as well as cultural, and in defining their needs",<sup>21</sup> are expressions of the exigencies of the established society, but they are also expressions of "the possibilities inherent in but repressed by the productivity of the established society".<sup>22</sup> He then proceeds to elaborate the two-fold character of values. He argues that the value of honour in feudal society expresses:

the requirements of a hierarchy of domination and dependence founded on direct personal relationships assured not only by force but also by the sanctity of contracts. The value of loyalty, proclaimed in a society of oppression and inequality, was idealized, sublimated, in the great epics, the romances, the court ceremonial of the time, but it would be nonsense to say that heroes like Tristan, Percival, and others are nothing but feudal knights and vassals, that their ideals, adventures, and conflicts do not transcend the feudal society; they certainly do. In and above the feudal framework, we find universal human possibilities, promises, sufferings and happiness.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly with the values of liberty and equality which "express first of all the exigencies of the capitalist mode of production, namely, competition among relative equals, free wage labor, exchange of equivalents regardless of race, status, and so on".<sup>24</sup> They also project qualitatively better forms of human association — as unrealised possibilities. Work as necessity is also said to be the vocation and the calling of human beings. Marcuse, arguing for the ambivalence of values, suggests that the hidden other meaning is the self-realisation of a human being in creative work.<sup>25</sup>

## *ALKIS KONTOS*

Macpherson's critique of the contradictions that beset and vitiate liberal-democratic theory and the conceptual-analytical apparatus which Marcuse employs to differentiate ontology from history offer us a perspective which dissects historical existence into essentials and contingencies, into inevitable fates and possible new destinies. Their powerful analyses move between the theoretical and the empirical, sketching a socio-political universe which must be rigorously explored. Although Macpherson's and Marcuse's theoretical achievements are enormous, much remains to be said and done. Even if one does not fully agree with their views and interpretations, still many insights and challenges are discernible in the corpus of their works.

The negation of (the ontological postulate of) free, creative activity can be effected in two distinct modes: oppression and domination.<sup>26</sup> Oppression, reaching its apex in tyranny, is a condition of overt, visible, forceful restriction of another's life-activity. It enslaves the other. This condition can occur in any material circumstance, primitive, technologically advanced, or other. What characterizes this condition is the forceful deprivation of another's life-activity for the presumed personal gain of the oppressor and that the oppressed perceives his state as one of enslavement. There is no illusion or deception here. The pain and the anguish are experienced as such and they correspond to the exercise of mastery and the infliction of subordination. The privileges extracted by the masters might be seen as natural from the crushed perspective of the slave. The slaves might believe themselves inferior to the powerful masters.<sup>27</sup> The possible confusion, passivity and ignorance of the enslaved do not, however, eradicate the fact of their negative experience. Whatever magical, divine or superhuman powers and talents they might assume to be the special and unique qualities of their masters, whatever grotesque, abysmal and unreal distance they might draw between their masters and themselves, the oppressed always experience their oppression as a negative condition. The hellish dimension of oppression is never presented or perceived as a blessing. The oppressed can be manipulated to believe that their condition is natural or divinely ordained; they can be made to see no alternatives; they can be driven into total fatalism; they can be made oblivious to the political dynamics of their fate. They cannot, however, be made to experience their oppression as something pleasant and wonderful. Oppression is visible deprivation.

Domination refers to a totally distinct condition. The dominated are denied the fulfilment of their ontological capacities, a fulfilment which is objectively possible but intentionally rendered invisible by the masters of the social organization of domination. The victims of domination are systematically and continuously presented with a social structure and activity that is granted the semblance of the natural, rational and positive. They reorient their goals and aspirations toward this prevailing socio-cultural universe. Yet this social order,

## *THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY*

which is presented as and presumed to be the humanly appropriate order of things, misleads and deceives. It is an actual negation of what could have been the negation of ontological fulfilment and realisation. Domination rests on an actual but false social order — false in the disguised meaning and significance which are granted to it.<sup>28</sup> It is false because it establishes a self-image of humanity against its real essence. False needs are the daily quest of the dominated, not of slaves. Unlike slaves, the dominated appear in the guise of free, self-determined agents, but it does not mean that they are so. The process of internalization of the external structures of domination can be identified and exposed. The inner state of being of the dominated does not suggest idiocy. It is not a matter of intelligence, it is a matter of consciousness. Although there cannot, perhaps, be consciousness without intelligence, there can be intelligence without consciousness. Intelligence is the necessary and not the sufficient condition.

Oppression can be effected both in conditions of material-technological advancement and in primitive, less developed social circumstances. It does not warrant technological implements, although their availability could render oppression more effective and/or more wide-spread. To enslave and conquer we must crush the will of the other. Physical force and coercion remain the universal, classical modes. Terror and torture need not be technological. Orwell brilliantly reminds us in his haunting masterpiece that the final, most unendurable torture in Room 101, beyond pain and courage, was what Imperial China knew and practiced as punishment.<sup>29</sup> Here, a punishment rooted in the past practices of human cruelty is resorted to by those whose fondest desire is the abolition of the past.

Domination, however, presupposes material-technical advancement. It is possible only where a rational re-ordering of existing circumstances could result in the realisation of freedom. By redirecting all such capabilities, domination is in effect the negation of freedom, the denial of the expression of freedom in what could have been a rationalized, technologized realm of necessity.<sup>30</sup> The distinct novelty of domination as a mode of human bondage is precisely this: it negates the actual possibility of freedom and grants to its negation the aura of paradisiac bliss. It falsifies experience itself. It is this falsification, effected on psycho-material grounds, that cannot be achieved in conditions other than those prevalent in advanced industrial societies.

Absence of oppression when a society is materially incapable of conquering scarcity does not mean ontological fulfilment. It means experiencing natural scarcity equitably but severely enough not to be able to achieve freedom. Clearly then, in Macpherson's precise, measured words "technology assists ontology".<sup>31</sup>

If then technology is so imperative when rationalized, we must come to

## ALKIS KONTOS

understand that the historical development of ontology not only demands a future orientation but also renders irrelevant, if not misleading, quests for true humanity in the primitive. Our needs have transcended that predicament as well as the innocence of individual childhood.

This essay, as a prolegomenon, sought to clarify and conceptualize the ground upon which to construct an appropriate perspective on ontology. The schema of what I attempted to do regarding ontology is this: to point out the impossibility of social critique without ontological postulates; to argue that the validation of the ontological postulate warrants quite a distinct method of proof-validation; that such an ontological postulate is neither an arbitrary *a priori* nor a pure empirical datum. Such a postulate does not originate from nowhere. We do not begin *ex nihilo*. We begin from many aspects of the past and present. I have used Macpherson's and Marcuse's thought here because of their significant claims and insights. I do not treat their thought as conclusive truth; nor do I claim to have done anything more than suggested that free, creative activity is the ontological postulate. I do feel, however, that I am in good company regarding this postulate. Minimally, I have suggested that ontology is not a *terra incognita*. Much remains to be done. The investigation of consciousness, of the logic, contradictions and ambivalence of our norms and values, of domination and the possible sources of recollection, of the realm of the imagination and memory, of myth and technology, and more, is the intellectual task that lies ahead. Macpherson and Marcuse have pointed the way.

Recently, in what I take to be a regressive move, William Leiss argued explicitly against the concept of false needs and commodity fetishism and by implication voiced his doubts as to the viability of ontological postulates.<sup>32</sup>

Leiss implicitly holds an ontological postulate. He suggests that his implicit normative posture is "an ontology of needs founded on the somewhat dubious values of stability and clarity".<sup>33</sup> I think his implicit ontology is not what he confesses it to be. Leiss holds a holistic image of the world where a symbiotic relationship exists between human beings and the rest of the world, organic and inorganic. This image suggests a complex and intricate interconnection and interdependence between the human race and the environment. The precise balance of this coexistence warrants reason and moderation. Stability and clarity result from reason and moderation.

Leiss' implicit ontology also argues for a diversified notion of human experience, diversified beyond commodities and possessions. This diversification is expressed and reflected in the dual character of commodities: symbolic and material. For Leiss, therefore, the socio-material context of human satisfaction ought to be provided by the symbiotic harmonization of man with nature and some necessary degree of symbolization. However, Leiss focusses instead on the high-intensity market setting, and shows that what exists is a futile search for

## THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY

satisfaction in a confusing quest for commodity appropriation.

Had Leiss explicitly stated his ontological postulate a great deal of his analysis would have been altered. An explicit ontology would have compelled more cautious but critical speculation than his presumed critical phenomenology<sup>34</sup> permits.

Leiss' implicit ontological postulate is not a feature of the high-intensity market setting. The grounds upon which it is affirmed transcend the narrow phenomenological methodology of the whole study. The articulation and elaboration of these grounds would have suggested and consolidated the indispensability and non-arbitrary primacy of the ontological argument. Leiss, however, is silent as to the logic, method, and sources of his implicit ontology. Leiss' implicit ontological postulate, had it been fully stated, would have consequently suggested certain corresponding human needs which would have permitted a more realistic exploration of commodities and market relations. Such an ontology would have demanded that Leiss pay attention to the subjective status of needing and satisfaction without ever having to elevate them to a sacrosanct mystery immune to objective judgment. Indeed such an explicit ontology would have protected Leiss from a "pure empiricism" or critical phenomenology in which the terrain under investigation is neutralized as much as the methodology employed, thus eliminating *a priori* any critical insights. The very character of the intensified needs-commodities interplay within the high-intensity market setting, precludes the disclosure of anything meaningful.<sup>35</sup> Neither the ferocity of the battlefield nor the variety of military uniforms can disclose the connection between war and imperialism. Detailed description and observation cannot show the inversion of an actual, empirical situation; they are not dialectical.

Leiss alludes to capitalism and market relations. Instead of applying his obvious and many talents to a badly needed analysis of these phenomena, he hides behind the virgin mind of the confused consumer. To interpret is to unveil, reveal the reality beneath all appearance. Leiss has furnished us with the appearance itself. I see nothing wrong with this, but I see everything wrong when he insists that he has grasped reality.

The conservative positivist Durkheim pointed out that morality cannot be seen directly. It must be read in social indices, in laws and suicide rates. Anomie, he told us, must be seen in human unhappiness and dissatisfaction, which must be read in the suicide rate. Durkheim knew that by themselves, the social text of law and the suicide rate disclose nothing. So it is with the high-intensity market setting.

The disastrous effects of alienation and domination could lead to a new era, an era of freedom or of civilised barbarism. Weber spoke of the iron cage and the wasteland of bureaucratic culture and world disenchantment. The full

## *ALKIS KONTOS*

significance and terror of barbarism is this: the extinction of memory and imagination, of past and future.

Macpherson has argued that the vicious circle of false needs can only be broken by concentrating on the external impediments, now internalized under domination. He says, "the external impediments, palpable, rooted in class, remain basic and deserve the first attention."<sup>36</sup> They are an empirical reality, ontologically perceived.

The inadequacy of our society must be shown, but it must also be seen as such by the dominated themselves;<sup>37</sup> whether this is possible remains to be seen. Whatever the outcome, these dark times must be registered as the epoch of domination. Domination militates against critical thinking, but certainly it does not command confused thinking. Ortega y Gasset has said, I am I and my circumstances. That "I", that self, to become truly itself warrants as its circumstances freedom, freedom for all. If freedom were realised, those who witnessed this transformation, this leap from pre-history into human history, could say with Nietzsche's old Athenian: "how much did this people have to suffer to be able to become so beautiful".<sup>38</sup>

Political Economy  
University of Toronto

### Notes

1. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958. This is a perfect example. She claims that we cannot know human nature and that it is highly probable that such nature does not exist, (p. 10) but the analysis of the human condition is initiated under the auspices of three, implicitly ontological, categories: labour, work, action. My point is simply this: Arendt could not initiate her analysis without *de facto* refuting her claims regarding human nature, and this applies to everyone.
2. Shakespeare, *Complete Works*, W.J. Craig, ed. London: Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 868 "Macbeth".
3. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Situations*, tr. Benita Eisler, New York: George Braziller, 1965, pp. 102-3. Here Sartre replies to Camus.
4. In *Human Needs and Politics*, ed. Ross Fitzgerald, New York: Pergamon Press, 1977, pp. 26-35.
5. See William Leiss, *The Limits to Satisfaction: An essay on the problem of needs and commodities*, Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 1976, pp. 61-3. Leiss rejects the distinction but for reasons of his own: the confused consumer.
6. C.B. Macpherson, "Needs and Wants..." p. 31.

## THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY

7. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
8. Such ontological attributes can be found in his *The Real World of Democracy*, Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (The Massey Lectures), 1965, especially pp. 54, 58, 59, 67; *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973; especially pp. 4-5, Essay 11 *passim*, pp. 42, 51, 53-5, 61, 184; *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, especially pp. 47-8.
9. C.B. Macpherson, "Humanist Democracy and Elusive Marxism: A Response to Minogue and Svacek", in *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, ix, no. 3, (September, 1976), p. 423.
10. C.B. Macpherson, *Democratic Theory*, p. 38.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 36-8.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
13. C.B. Macpherson, "Needs and Wants..." p. 34. "For Marx's whole point about the future good society was that it would be a realm of freedom — freedom for people to develop their own needs and wants in whatever ways they liked. It would have been perfectly inconsistent for him to say in advance what they would be". Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1969, p. 20. He says it is impossible to anticipate "the ways in which liberated human beings would use their freedom". This attitude toward freedom should be understood as suggesting only this: the quality and meaning of freedom, free, creative activity, are not in doubt; the specific configuration of their concrete expression remains open and indeterminate. It is just the same as with intelligence and intelligent thought. Affirming the value of intelligence does not mean that we can express in advance the intelligent thoughts of others, simply because we know of their intellectual talents. The specific expression remains exclusively theirs. Intelligence is the condition; its concrete manifestations are the thoughts of actual, intelligent individuals. So it is with freedom. Freedom is the condition; its concrete manifestations are the actions of free individuals which cannot be foreclosed. Certainly their quality can be specified: Negatively, freedom is inverted in alienation and domination; positively, it amounts to their abolition. The process of abolition itself is that of liberation.
14. See Alkis Kontos, "Between memory and dream", in *Thinking About Change*, ed. David P. Shugarman, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974, pp. 53-70, especially on Marcuse pp. 60ff. Marcuse's philosophic genius, complexity and sophistication have been missed by both his vitriolic detractors and his politically radical, but philosophically naive, followers. A systematic monograph is necessary in order to do justice to Marcuse's thought.
15. Marcuse does not visualize material abundance in indiscriminate massive quantities as the ideal. See his reference to Baudelaire, *Eros and Civilization*, New York: Vintage Books, 1962, p. 139. Neither is Marcuse advocating a return to a simple, ascetic or idyllic primitive past. He is wiser than that. On scarcity, Macpherson is very instructive. He distinguishes natural scarcity from scarcity that was set up as an organizing principle for the emerging capitalist market society. Macpherson and Marcuse are very similar on scarcity and the technological prerequisites to the liberation of ontology. See Macpherson's "Democratic Theory: Ontology and Technology" in his *Democratic Theory*.
16. See Alkis Kontos, "Domination: metaphor and political reality" in *Domination* ed. Alkis Kontos, Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1975, pp. 211-228. Surplus-repression is the fact of any mode of exploitation. It is present in tyranny and in domination. It is the common denominator of all forms of dehumanization. The performance principle, a specific historical manifestation of surplus-repression, constitutes the ground of domination in my sense of the

## ALKIS KONTOS

- term. Mr. Charles Rachlis' work in progress treats systematically and perceptively Marcuse's fundamental categories. See his excellent essay "Marcuse and the Problem of Happiness", in *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, Vol. 2, No. 1, (Winter, 1978), pp. 63-88.
17. Karl Marx, "The Meaning of Human Requirements..." and "The Power of Money in Bourgeois Society" in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961.
  18. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
  19. *Loc. Cit.*
  20. Herbert Marcuse, "A Revolution in Values", in *Political Ideologies*, eds. James A. Gould and Willis H. Truitt, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1973, pp. 331-6. See also his brilliant essay "The Concept of Essence", in his *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, tr. Jeremy J. Shapiro, Boston: Beacon Press, 1968, pp. 43-87.
  21. Marcuse, "A Revolution in Values", p. 331.
  22. *Loc. Cit.*
  23. *Loc. Cit.*
  24. *Loc. Cit.*
  25. *Ibid.*, pp. 331-2.
  26. Marcuse uses the two terms, and alienation, interchangeably. I believe this to be inaccurate. Rachlis is one of the very few who draws correctly the distinction between them. Doug Torgerson is another one. See his sensitive, elegant "Domination and Liberatory Politics", in *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Winter, 1978) pp. 137-157.
  27. Marx was irritated by the passivity of enslaved human beings. Weber was more sensitive and, at times, more perceptive regarding the mental and psychological legitimization process of hierarchical social structures. He saw their ideology as emanating from both sources, the masters' self-righteousness and the victims' tangible misfortune. Theodicy was the result of the victims' desire for the restoration of justice — the improvement of their suffering fate. Whatever the delusions of divine justice, the point here is that suffering humanity sought refuge in an other-worldly promise precisely because they perceived and experienced their condition as one of suffering. See Weber's "The Social Psychology of the World Religions" and "Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions", in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, tr. and ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, New York: Oxford University Press, 1958. Unfortunately Weber does not distinguish between existential suffering, the tragic dimension of human life, and socio-political suffering. The victim of tragic events and the slave are indistinguishable in Weber's perspective.
  28. See Alkis Kontos, "Domination: metaphor and political reality", pp. 219-221.
  29. George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Penguin, p. 230.
  30. See Alkis Kontos, "Between memory and dream", pp. 61-4.
  31. Macpherson, *Democratic Theory*, p. 37, and Marcuse states: "The classical Marxian theory envisages the transition from capitalism to socialism as a political revolution: the proletariat destroys the political apparatus of capitalism but retains the technological apparatus, sub-

## THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY

jecting it to socialization. There is continuity in the revolution; technological rationality, freed from irrational restrictions and destructions, sustains and consumates itself in the new society". *One-Dimensional Man*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1966, pp. 22.

32. William Leiss, *The Limits to Satisfaction*; in his exchange, "... an ontology of stoned concepts" in *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Spring-Summer, 1977), pp. 103-6; Stephen Kline and William Leiss, "Advertising, Needs and 'Commodity Fetishism'" in *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Winter, 1978), pp. 5-30. In my review of *Limits to Satisfaction* I have praised what I thought original and significant there. I stand by that praise. I also pointed out my philosophical disagreements. I stand by those too. See *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Winter, 1977).
33. Leiss, "... an ontology of stoned concepts," p. 165.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
35. The high-intensity market setting is not the equivalent of Macpherson's structured liberal-democratic theory, nor does it carry Marcuse's conceptual apparatus or anything approximating it to permit a critical analysis.
36. Macpherson, *Democratic Theory*, p. 76. Marcuse argues similarly. Technological advancements alter external structures which allow internal changes, leading to instinctual changes. See *Eros and Civilization*, ch. 10.
37. Macpherson, *Democratic Theory*, p. 76; and his *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, pp. 99-108. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 6.
38. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, tr. Walter Kaufmann, New York: Vintage Books, last paragraph.