Evola, Magical Idealism, & Western Metaphysics

Part One

Collin Cleary

5,254 words

Part 1 of 4 (Part 2 here)

1. Introduction

Early in his career as a writer, Julius Evola published several philosophical works expounding a theory he called “magical idealism.” These include Saggi sull’idealismo magico (Essays on Magical Idealism, 1925), Teoria dell’individuo assoluto (Theory of the Absolute Individual, 1927), and Fenomenologia dell’individuo assoluto (Phenomenology of the Absolute Individual, 1930). Evola seems to use the terms “magical idealism” and “theory of the absolute individual” interchangeably.[1] He makes no secret of the fact that his ideas are a development of the tradition of German Idealism,[2] especially Fichte, and he acknowledges that the term “magical idealism” originates with Novalis. However, Evola forcefully critiques the idealists, and insists that his own position is a major step beyond them. In particular, he insists that his own magical idealism has little to do with that of Novalis.[3]

The purpose of this essay is to offer a summary and critique of magical idealism. Little has been written on this subject in English, and Evola’s philosophical works have so far not been translated. Because my Italian is not good enough to read these works with ease, I will be relying upon the English translation of Evola’s intellectual autobiography, The Path of Cinnabar. Chapter Four of that book is entitled “The Speculative Period of Magical Idealism and the Theory of the Absolute Individual,” and is almost 40 pages long. This gives us a lot to go on, but it must be acknowledged that a truly adequate treatment of magical idealism must await the translation of Evola’s philosophical works. As a result, my conclusions in this essay will merely be preliminary. My aim is to understand Evolian magical idealism within the context of German idealism, and to situate it within the larger context of Western metaphysics. Of necessity, the latter aim is critical, because my approach to Western metaphysics has been shaped by Martin Heidegger’s “destruction” of it.

This essay will defend three major critical claims:

Evola misunderstands certain features of German idealist thought, which has the consequence that Evolian magical idealism is actually much closer to the earlier idealists than Evola thinks that it is. This is especially true of Evola’s relationship to Fichte. Also, contrary to Evola’s own assertions, his ideas are quite close to Novalis’ version of magical idealism.

The epistemological arguments Evola presents in support of his idealism are untenable.

While Evola offers magical idealism as part of his “revolt against the modern world,” and as a philosophical expression of certain traditional teachings, his theory is, from start to finish, mired in philosophical assumptions that are unique to modernity, and to which the nihilism of the contemporary world can be directly traced.

The third critical point is obviously the most significant, since the first two are mainly of academic interest. The third criticism constitutes a major challenge to the idea, dear to many on the Right, that Evola’s philosophical theories offer us a path for the overcoming of modernity. Thus, the present essay should be seen as a continuation of the critique of Traditionalism I began in “Heidegger Against the Traditionalists.” In the next section, I will summarize the philosophical background necessary to understand Evola’s ideas. In succeeding sections, I will discuss Evola’s critique of the German idealists; summarize the basic elements of Evolian magical idealism; and offer concluding, critical reflections on Evola’s philosophy.

2. The Foundations of Magical Idealism in German Philosophy

You can buy Julius Evola’s East & West here.

Evola explicitly characterizes his theories as a development of “transcendental idealism.”[4] This term originates with Kant, who used it to describe his own philosophy. (I have written five essays for Counter-Currents explaining Kant’s philosophy, as part of a larger project that involves a critique of modernity via an exploration of Western metaphysics; start here.) Transcendental idealism is something distinctively different from the subjective idealism (or “phenomenalism”) of Bishop Berkeley, who held that “ideas” — i.e., perceptions or impressions in our minds — are the only things that exist. Berkeley held that there is no world of objects existing independently of our ideas; mind-dependent ideas are the only objects.

In contrast to Berkeley, Kant held that there really is a world that exists independent of our impressions, but that we only know that world as it appears to us; we never know things as they are in themselves (i.e., things as they are independently of our experience of them). This is because our experience is partly the result of innate mental “rules” that “structure” the raw data provided by the senses. Although we can speak loosely and say that “I” structure that data or that “my mind” does so, in fact this structural activity is not performed by the conscious self, and happens, so to speak, “behind the curtain” (i.e., it is unconscious). Kant uses the term “transcendental” to refer to these mental structures, which are the conditions for any experience whatsoever. The tradition of transcendental philosophy that Kant inaugurated uses the term “transcendental subjectivity” to refer to that unconscious aspect of subjectivity which contains these epistemic rules and “applies” them.[5] Thus, transcendental idealism is the position that the objects of our experience are “transcendentally ideal”; i.e., those objects (as we experience them) are partly the product of the acts of transcendental subjectivity.

Now, Evola’s magical idealism takes transcendental idealism as its starting point but aims to radicalize it. Evola believes that Kant’s own position is inconsistent and fundamentally timid. However, Evola was certainly not the first philosopher to think this, and to aspire to radicalize Kant. That distinction belongs to J. G. Fichte (1762-1814), and it is Fichte to whom Evola owes his greatest philosophical debts. (I have written five essays for Counter-Currents explaining Fichte’s ideas, as part of the same series on Western metaphysics; start here.)

Owing mainly to the great obscurity of his writing, Fichte’s major positions have frequently been misunderstood. He is most notorious for his desire to eliminate Kant’s “thing in itself” (a desire shared by Evola). This is the element in Kant’s philosophy that anchors it in realism and keeps subjective idealism at bay. As I said earlier, Kant held that we only know things as they appear to us, but we can never know things as they are in themselves. “Things as they are in themselves” is often abbreviated simply as “the thing-in-itself.” To Fichte, the thing-in-itself seemed like a completely empty and dispensable concept. If we cannot experience it, why accept that it exists? Fichte revered Kant, but he held that the great man’s acceptance of the thing-in-itself was a failure of will. Kant did not fully appreciate the truly radical nature of his own position and was still grasping onto a slim realist reed. Fichte therefore concluded that the thing-in-itself had to be eliminated.

But if we eliminate the thing-in-itself, then we can no longer maintain that objects as we experience them are only partly the result of the activity of transcendental subjectivity. In holding onto the thing-in-itself, Kant was indeed retaining the commonsense position that the table in front of me appears as it does partly due to the extra-mental characteristics of the table; i.e., the inherent characteristics of the table “out there in the world.” If we eliminate the thing-in-itself, then it looks like we are landed in subjective idealism (and possibly solipsism, the conviction that only I, myself exist). In fact, this is the position that is usually ascribed to Fichte. He is usually understood as having held that the world of experience is entirely the creation of the “Absolute Ego” (i.e., transcendental subjectivity).

However, as recent scholarship has demonstrated, this account of Fichte’s philosophy depends upon ignoring key passages in his writings and mis-reading others. Fichte’s actual position is not that the world is the creation of the Absolute Ego, but that it ought to be. In rejecting Kant’s thing-in-itself, Fichte does not, in fact, reject the idea that there is something that transcends consciousness. He rejects the thing-in-itself only insofar as he takes Kant to be referring to an absolutely unknowable object (which is arguably a misinterpretation of Kant). For Fichte, there is no such thing: There is only an ineradicable but shifting aspect of unknowability to all objects. In other words, no matter what object I am concerned with, there is always something about it that is unknown at any given time. For example, when I am looking at one side of the laptop, the other side is concealed from me. Or: I know certain things about laptops, whereas others are a mystery to me. Even if I learn more about them, much else will still remain unknown.

For Fichte, there is no such thing as an object that cannot be known at all, and knowledge is therefore in principle infinitely expandable. However, this must be understood as a “regulative ideal”: We strive to know, as if infinite or complete knowledge were possible. It is not ultimately possible because of the ineluctable element of an “unknown” in the experience of all objects. Despite this reasonable caveat, we have to say that Fichte exhibits a typical Enlightenment optimism about the expansion of knowledge. In fact, he takes that optimism in a revolutionary new direction.

In place of the Cartesian “contemplative” model of knowledge (in which the subject gazes upon an external world of objects), Fichte advances what can be called a “voluntarist” model. We believe in a world “out there,” he says, precisely because of its resistance to will: its resistance to my desire to fully know it and manipulate it. Indeed, the element of the “unknown” discussed above simply amounts to “that which resists my will.” Thus, as one commentator puts it, “for Fichte, the circumference of my world is equivalent to the limits of my will.”[6] Nevertheless, while the world will always, to one degree or another, resist our will, over the course of time we can get better and better at knowing and manipulating it.

So far so good, but what does this have to do with the idea that the world “ought to be” the creation of the Absolute Ego? How is Fichte’s philosophy an idealism at all? The answer has to do with how he conceptualizes the act of knowing or manipulating objects according to the will. The object presents itself as an other. But when I know it or transform it according to my designs, I am overcoming the otherness of the other. And we can also say that we are overcoming the subject-object distinction. Why? Because when I confront the transformed object I am, in effect, confronting myself; the subject is confronting itself as object (the subject becomes object / the object becomes the subject).

To see why, let’s consider a simple example. Suppose I take up a block of wood. This is undeniably an other; an object which I, as a subject, confront in its otherness: I did not create it, and much about it is unknown to me. But suppose I whittle it into a doorstop or into a comb. In confronting this newly created object I am now confronting myself, because in it my own subjectivity (my plans, designs, imagination, etc.) has become objectified. For Fichte, it is the human vocation to transform the entire world in this fashion — to, in effect “make the whole realm of nature disappear.”[7] Thus, our end is to be confronted only with ourselves; to make subjectivity absolute — meaning, to make subjectivity the only thing that exists. Our end is to become the conscious creators of existence; in effect, to become God. It is worth repeating, however, that Fichte holds this to be a regulative ideal: We can work towards this goal, and we will make progress, but it will never be fully and finally achieved.

Lastly, it is necessary to mention that, for Fichte, the human project of transforming nature has an inescapably moral significance. It might have seemed from the foregoing that we are putting our own personal, idiosyncratic stamp upon nature. But Fichte rejects this. He enjoins us to transform the world according to ideals that have a moral significance. What is may not be made over into just any old thing I want; it is to be made over into what ought to be. Further, like Kant, Fichte holds that moral principles (genuine moral principles, at least) are not arbitrary or personal inventions, but are derived from the nature of subjectivity itself.

To fully explain this point would take us too far afield, but we can give a very brief indication of what Fichte means. He characterizes the will as exhibiting a tendency toward “absolute indeterminacy through anything outside itself,” or the tendency “to determine itself absolutely, without any external impetus.”[8] In short, the ultimate goal of the will is absolute freedom; the state of being wholly self-determined; not being determined by anything outside oneself. This is simply Kant’s conception of the autonomy of the moral will taken to a new extreme. And Fichte argues that the will’s absolute freedom, independence, and autonomy (which amount to the same thing) is the supreme principle of morality.

You can buy James J. O’Meara’s Mysticism After Modernism here.

An action is moral, ultimately, if it “lies in a series [of actions] through the continuation of which the I would have to become independent.”[9] In other words, an action is moral if it is compatible with, or promotes, the subject’s freedom. But the entire modern project of the mastery and control of nature promotes the subject’s freedom — by canceling the otherness of nature, rendering the subject, in principle, absolutely free and unopposed. Thus, for Fichte, the mastery and control of nature is a moral project. And it bears repeating that this moral ideal is not a personal creation, but (so Fichte believed) derived from the very nature of subjectivity.

Let us note one final thing concerning the moral dimension of Fichte’s idealism, for later on it will allow us to highlight one way in which Evola’s idealism is significantly different. I said above that, for Fichte, there is a moral imperative to master nature by canceling its “otherness.” What we immediately think of is the nature “out there in the world.” He does mean this — but he also means the nature in us. Everything in me that is irrational and unchosen — my emotions, predilections, drives, preferences, and instincts — must be mastered as well: Mastered according to reason, and according to morality. In other words, everything about me that is “natural” must be brought under the dominion of reason. All that is contrary to the absolute freedom and independence of a rational being must be eradicated. (Though, once again, Fichte regards this as an infinite task.)

Of course, this means, in effect, that we must work for the abolition of our own individuality — since it is precisely my own peculiar, unchosen combination of emotions, predilections, drives, preferences, and instincts that makes me unique. Fichte not only recognizes this implication, he positively affirms it: He proclaims the “unconditional rejection of all individuality” and states that we must work toward the eradication of “the personal, sensuous existence of the individual.”[10] The rational life, says Fichte, “consists in a person forgetting himself in the species, placing his life in the service of the life of the whole, and sacrificing it for its sake.”[11]

3. Evola’s Critique of the Idealists

The foregoing is an extremely compressed summary of the philosophical background necessary to understand magical idealism (we will consider the influence of Novalis in the concluding section). So how does Evola’s position differ from Fichte’s? The answer is that magical idealism is, in fact, quite close to Fichte’s version of transcendental idealism. However, it differs from his in one crucial respect. Fichte had argued, in essence, for a “pragmatic” position: Even though the world will never be, fully and finally, the creation of Absolute Ego, we must nevertheless act as if this is possible, and work tirelessly for its realization. To put the matter as succinctly as possible, Evola replaces the Absolute Ego with the personal ego; he argues that we must come to see the world as the creation of the being that says “I.”

Needless to say, this point will require a good deal of elaboration. We must begin by explaining precisely what the difference is between the “Absolute Ego” and the “personal ego,” for the difference may not be immediately obvious to all readers. I noted in the last section that “Absolute Ego” is Fichte’s term for transcendental subjectivity, which is the “unconscious” aspect of subjectivity; that which acts behind the scenes to shape the raw data of the senses according to a priori categories and rules. To see what the difference is between the Absolute Ego and the personal ego, let us just begin by noting that there is absolutely nothing personal or individual about transcendental subjectivity. It was the position of Kant and Fichte, in fact, that transcendental subjectivity is universal: “My” Absolute Ego structures experience exactly like “yours” does. This is why we both have the experience of living in the same world, and why we are able to communicate with each other. Though we may speak loosely of “my” transcendental subjectivity, it contains nothing that is unique to me: none of my memories, quirks, or personal proclivities.

What Evola offers is an idealism that is “pragmatic” in the same sense as Fichte’s. However, it enjoins us to come to see the world not as the creation of some kind of universal, Absolute Ego, but instead as the creation of the finite, personal ego. This will involve, in part, the personal ego coming to assume all the a priori functions that Kant and Fichte had attributed to transcendental subjectivity. In other words, Evola enjoins us to experience the world as if it is the creation of the personal “I” — as if it is my creation. I must come to see that my experience is the result of my own, personal choice. The extent to which my experience seems to be the product of unconscious factors beyond my control, is the extent to which I am guilty of a failure of will and a failure of imagination. In maintaining this, Evola believes he is being truer to the principle of radical freedom and autonomy than Fichte himself was. And there is some reason to follow him in thinking this.

Recall that Fichte maintained that true freedom means being absolutely undetermined by anything “outside” oneself. But there are two major reasons why the Absolute Ego, or transcendental subjectivity, could indeed be said to be “outside myself.” First, I noted a moment ago that while we can speak loosely of “my” transcendental subjectivity or of “yours,” there is absolutely nothing personal about it. Second, transcendental subjectivity, Kant argued, does not appear in space and time. Rather, objects appear for us in space and time precisely as a result of the acts of transcendental subjectivity. This means that transcendental subjectivity is not an object that we could point to, occupying a certain position in space and a certain moment in time.

Given both these points, there is no logical basis for believing that there is more than one transcendental subjectivity. For what indeed would differentiate multiple transcendental subjectivities if they are completely universal and impersonal (and thus indistinguishable), as well as impossible to locate in space and time? Thus, not only is there nothing personal about transcendental subjectivity, there is no reason to think that it is “mine” or that “I have it.” It seems, in fact, to be something quite alien and mysterious.

But there is an even deeper problem for Fichte. Given that there is nothing subjective, personal, or ego-like about the Absolute Ego, in virtue of what is it called “ego” at all? This was precisely the question Schelling and Hegel would ask of Fichte, which led them to drop the language of an “Absolute Ego” entirely and to speak instead of an “Absolute” which transcends the subject-object division. In sum, the Absolute Ego (and, we might add, the Absolute) emerges as something that is decidedly not “me” or “mine.” In fact, it is something “outside” me; it is an “other” to me.

The idea that this other structures my experience thus has to emerge, by the terms of Fichte’s own position, as an intolerable affront to human freedom. This claim is perhaps the most interesting aspect of Evola’s critique of Fichte. To be clear, he argues that if true freedom means being wholly undetermined by anything outside ourselves, then given that transcendental subjectivity is neither “myself” nor under my conscious control, we must, on principle, reject the idea of transcendental subjectivity. Let’s consider some of Evola’s own statements about these ideas.

In The Path of Cinnabar, Evola makes clear his contempt for the academic philosophers who put forward idealist theories: “[What] I found disgusting in all this was the coexistence of the petit-bourgeois, paid, married and conformist university professor alongside the theory of an absolute, free ‘I’ which is the creator of both the world and of history.”[12] Evola thus sees a disconnect between the grand theories of the professors and their own personal lives (a disconnect between what Gurdjieff would call their “knowledge” and their own level of “being”). However, Evola’s criticism goes much deeper than this. He also sees the theories of the same professors (not just their lives) as infected with a basic timidity.

You can buy Collin Cleary’s Wagner’s Ring & the Germanic Tradition here.

Evola argues that transcendental idealism makes the “I” (the personal ego) fundamentally passive: “Ultimately, this approach implies a basic passivity on the part of the true ‘I,’ which is told what he is ‘freely’ to desire in things, history, contingencies, etc.”[13] Indeed, as we have already seen, transcendental idealism insists that the activity of creating our experience of a world “out there” is performed unconsciously by “another part” of subjectivity different from the conscious, personal “I.” As Evola puts the matter, “[An] individual can only claim to possess ‘transcendental thought’ . . . in such a way as to consider the world as something ‘posited’ there by himself, if he conceptualizes such a possession as an unconscious act on his part.”[14]

However, as we have already seen, this “unconscious” part of subjectivity, once it is fully understood, is so impersonal and alien that there is every reason to conceptualize it as an other, and not a part of subjectivity at all. Evola expresses precisely this criticism, and argues that ultimately it completely vitiates the transcendental idealist position. The following difficult passage from The Path of Cinnabar is key, and I shall quote it at length:

My ultimate philosophical conclusions, then, were as follows: the idealist reduction of nature, and most of the world of real experience, to a mere posit of the “I” is accomplished “through the reduction of the ‘I’ to nature, for nothing is known — or rather, nothing is assumed to be known — of that very ‘I’ which is freedom; and further, through an identification of the notion of the ‘I,’ by the use of an evident paralogism, with that of the principle of spontaneity, which is ultimately the principle of nature.” Given that the cosmogonic, transcendental activity of the “I” when compared to that of the concrete “I,” must either be defined as an unconscious act, or be seen to possess the qualities of a passive, unintentional, unpredictable, aimless, and merely “spontaneous” activity, it is clear that, were idealists seriously (and not merely imaginatively) to follow the principle of the concrete person’s conformity to the transcendental “I” (known as the “pure act,” or by whatever name idealists chose to describe their new god), they would have utterly regressed to a sub-personal level; even more so than the various philosophers who sung of “Life” and irrationality, and who were haughtily shunned by Idealists.[15]

What is crucial here is the following: “the Idealist reduction of nature . . . to a mere posit of the ‘I’ is accomplished through the reduction of the ‘I’ to nature.” As I will discuss in more detail later, Fichte had argued that fundamentally only two philosophies are possible: “dogmatism” (i.e., determinism), which explains experience as caused by an external world “out there” (i.e., “nature”) acting upon the subject; and “idealism,” which explains the external world as having been created by subjectivity. Fichte rejects dogmatism and embraces idealism precisely because he rejects the idea (as we have already discussed) of anything “outside” subjectivity determining it; he upholds, in principle, the absolute freedom of the subject. We have seen, however, that on analysis the Absolute Ego or transcendental subjectivity emerges precisely as something “other” that acts upon the conscious “I.”

Thus, in a grand philosophical irony, Fichte’s idealism turns out to be another form of dogmatism! The idealists intend to “reduce nature” to a posit of the “I” but wind up reducing the “I” to a posit of nature (where “nature” is just understood to be anything external to the conscious “I,” including “unconscious” transcendental subjectivity). Further, in the quotation above, Evola claims that the “idealist reduction of nature . . . to a mere posit of the ‘I’” is also accomplished “through an identification of the notion of the ‘I’ . . . with that of the principle of spontaneity, which is ultimately the principle of nature.” Here Evola is framing a related objection, also to the effect that the idealists inadvertently wind up reducing the “I” to nature.

When he writes of the “principle of spontaneity,” he is referencing one of the major claims made by Kant and Fichte about transcendental subjectivity. In the technical vocabulary of idealism, saying that transcendental subjectivity exhibits “spontaneity” means that no external cause acts upon it in order to compel it to apply concepts to the matter of sensibility. Transcendental subjectivity is therefore fundamentally free. But this means that if we were to ask where subjectivity’s concepts come from, by the logic of their own position Kant and Fichte cannot appeal to any source, let alone “cause” of the concepts aside from subjectivity itself. Their position therefore seems to require that in some sense or other, transcendental subjectivity freely “specifies itself” into the concepts of the understanding, and the other a priori rules that structure experience. Kant in his Opus Postumum and Fichte in his various versions of the Wissenschaftslehre had tried to detail the nature of this self-specification.

For Evola, however, the problem with this position is that it attributes to transcendental subjectivity the very characteristic that dogmatism/determinism attributes to nature. According to that position, nature is an “other” to subjectivity that appears to us as it does because nature is itself free and spontaneous: through its own activities, it gives rise to various phenomena that present themselves to consciousness. I have no choice but to experience the world the way that I do because the world is inherently that way and didn’t get to be that way as a result of anything I have done.

The trouble with idealism, however, is that it transfers to transcendental subjectivity the freedom and spontaneity that dogmatism attributes to nature. And it thereby declares subjectivity “free” because it is not determined by an “other.” But, as we have seen, on closer examination transcendental subjectivity emerges as so “other” to our conscious selves that there is scarcely any reason to call it “subjectivity” at all. Thus, the idealists make transcendental subjectivity into a second nature: It is free and spontaneous, but it is still not me; it is yet another “other.” Once again, the idealists wind up introducing a new dogmatism, in which “I” am understood to be determined by something external to my conscious self. It is just that this external thing is now named “transcendental subjectivity” rather than “nature.”

At the end of the quotation above, Evola states that “were idealists seriously . . . to follow the principle of the concrete person’s conformity to the transcendental ‘I’ (known as the ‘pure act,’ or by whatever name idealists chose to describe their new god), they would have utterly regressed to a sub-personal level.” What he means by this is that while the idealists think they are affirming the absolute freedom of subjectivity, in fact to accept their philosophy would really mean to passively accept the determination of the conscious “I” by an alien other. It would really mean to embrace a subhuman (and thus “sub-personal”) state. Note also that Evola refers to the “new god” of the idealists. This is certainly a valid claim, given that all of the idealists (save Kant) flirted with the idea of identifying transcendental subjectivity or the Absolute Ego with God (and Hegel is very clear in identifying his Absolute with God). Needless to say, God is yet another “other” external to the self that is supposed to determine it. Evola writes further in The Path of Cinnabar that

[t]he idealist philosopher, like an Atlas shrugging the cosmic weight off his back, had gotten rid of the true “I,” and had embraced a “transcendental “I” or “Absolute Spirit” (also known as Logos, Idea, or Pure Act) which he bestowed with a cosmogonic function. The Idealist philosopher declared that, in comparison to such a transcendental “I,” the concrete personality of an individual is merely illusion or fiction — [Giovanni] Gentile even used the expression “a puppet of the imagination.” According to this idealist view, one partakes of truth, certainty, reality, ethics, spirituality, and history only insofar as one identifies oneself with such a transcendental entity.[16]

By “the true ‘I’” Evola means precisely “the concrete personality of an individual”; i.e., the personal ego. Evola later refers to idealism as exhibiting “a progressive flight away from the genuine “I” in which the individual “does not endure: it gives way; it does not rule things, but melts within them. This is the path of decadence.”[17] In fact, Evola believes that the problems endemic to transcendental idealism must lead to its self-overcoming in magical idealism. He thus asserts a dialectical progression of idealist philosophies, culminating in his own ideas.[18]

We will explore those ideas in much more detail in the next installment.

Evola, Magical Idealism, & Western Metaphysics, Part Two

Collin Cleary

4,214 words

Part 2 of 4 (Part 1 here, Part 3 here)

4. The Principles of Magical Idealism

Evola’s critique of transcendental idealism, which we examined in the last installment, is insightful and interesting — though grand choruses of academic voices would be raised against every step of it, insisting that Evola has misunderstood idealism. That may be the case — indeed, there are strong reasons to think that he has misunderstood certain things. However, this will not be the focus in what follows. The reason is that to fully defend the idealists against Evola would require a great deal of textual exegesis. But this would effectively take the focus away from Evola and put it, principally, upon Fichte. My purpose in this essay, however, is to explore Evola’s ideas. Thus, criticism will be deferred until the concluding installment of this essay.

So, let us look in more detail at what magical idealism is. Much earlier, I noted that the Kantian thing-in-itself was regarded as a bulwark against subjective idealism and, most importantly, solipsism. Solipsism has always been considered the third rail of epistemology: If a position leads to it, then philosophers regard that position as having thereby been discredited. Once, after giving a public lecture, Bertrand Russell was cornered by a woman who insisted on expounding her personal philosophy to him. Russell listened patiently for a few minutes, and then exclaimed, “But madam, that would make you a solipsist.” She responded, “Well, isn’t everybody?” The story is amusing because, of course, there can be no “everybody” if solipsism is true; there is only “I.”

Unlike most philosophers, Evola has no quarrel with solipsism. Indeed, he fully embraces it. In The Path of Cinnabar he refers to his work as “proving the inevitable need of advocating so-called ‘solipsism’ (a rather inadequate term in this case) when one wishes to follow idealist epistemology.”[1] The path of the “absolute individual” is, in fact, the path of solipsism (though, as Evola’s parenthetical remark suggests, it is a heavily qualified solipsism). The absolute individual is absolute in the sense of constituting the one true being. Magical idealism, or the theory of the absolute individual, enjoins me (for I really cannot say “enjoins us,” can I?) to live as if I am the one true being, and all else is my creation.

Based on Evola’s remarks in The Path of Cinnabar, I take him to be offering magical idealism as, in essence, a “pragmatic” position — i.e., I am only asked to live as if I am the one true being.[2] However, Evola also presents positive arguments in favor of an extreme, subjective idealism. In The Path of Cinnabar, just after introducing the concept of solipsism, he writes, “After all . . . do dreams not present us with other living creatures who appear real, act in unlikely ways, and can even terrorize us, while being mere projections of our own fantasy?”[3] Here the influence of Vedanta is evident. We are asked to consider that in dreams our consciousness is capable of inventing an entire world and “projecting” it before the mind’s eye, where it is (mis-)taken as real. Couldn’t waking life also be a creation of my own mind?

The real support for Evola’s idealism, however, comes from philosophical arguments which, oddly enough, seem to owe more to Berkeley than to German idealism. Evola summarizes his philosophical case for idealism in the following passage:

It would be superfluous to present my philosophical arguments in detail. I will limit myself here to a brief overview. In a sense, the philosophy of idealism can be summed up by Berkeley’s formula esse est percipi — that is to say: the only being which a person can concretely and reasonably talk about is the one which meets his own perception, thought or fantasy. As for all other beings, in no way can they be known: it is as if they did not exist.[4]

Esse est percipi means “to be is to be perceived,” which was Berkeley’s way of affirming that the only things that exist are perceptions or impressions in the mind (therefore these are not perceptions or impressions “of something” in the world — though I will argue in the conclusion to this essay that this conception is incoherent). Evola is using Berkeley’s famous formulation to assert that, so far as our own experience is concerned, “existence” amounts simply to “that of which we are aware.” For all intents and purposes, anything we could never become aware of might as well be declared not to exist at all. Thus, existence is effectively “within” consciousness. A couple of pages later, Evola goes further and offers a very clear statement of his position:

The world, then, can only be “my world.” Were there to exist anything apart from oneself, something “objective,” one would still know nothing about it: for in the same way that objects touched by King Midas would turn to gold, the very moment such objective things were to be known, they would turn into one’s own thoughts, experiences, and representations. In other words, in one way or the other, even such objective things would submit to one’s own conditionality. In this regard, I felt that all doubts were dispelled; I felt that the door of mystery had thus been shut, and that the “I” had been provided with a solid and inaccessible fortress in which to feel safe, free, and sovereign.[5]

While it seems that Evola is straightforwardly arguing for subjective idealism, in fact his position is much more complicated than this. We have already seen that his position is what I have characterized as “pragmatic”: he argues that we should live as if solipsism is true. Then he goes on to claim that the choice of solipsism itself is a pragmatic one (though he does not use this term). Evola presents two philosophical paths that the “I” can choose from: the “path of the other” and the “path of the absolute individual.”[6] I have already summarized the latter: It is the path that involves the “I” coming to regard the world as its own creation. The “path of the other” is simply the opposite of this: it holds that the “I” is actually the creation of the world. In other words, it holds that the individual is shaped by “the other”; by what is external to it. For example, the path of the other would hold that my perceptions or impressions are caused by external objects acting upon me.

You can buy Julius Evola’s East & West here.

Now, obviously, Evola rejects the path of the other and chooses the path of the absolute individual. The reason for this is that the former makes the “I” fundamentally passive and determined: a plaything of external forces over which it has no control. Evola, however, claims that both these paths are “equally valid.”[7] In other words, they are equally supported by rational argument. Purely on the basis of evidence, one could therefore go either way. This means that the grounds for choosing between them must be non-rational. Evola describes this position as “bold” and “original”[8] (though in fact, as I shall demonstrate in my conclusion, it comes straight out of Fichte).

Evola expresses his choice of the path of the absolute individual in quasi-Nietzschean terms — as the reflection of a non-rational “will to conquer.” In other words, the superior man chooses idealism because he wills to conquer all of reality: to experience the world as entirely his own possession. Evola writes that “in my work I emphasized the hidden meaning of idealism, and its irrational foundation, which consisted . . . in a will to be and to conquer; hence, according to my own understanding of the term, in a basically ‘magical’ impulse.”[9] We can understand why this impulse is “magical” if we simply consider Aleister Crowley’s famous definition of “magick”: “the science and art of causing change to occur in conformity with will.” Evola’s conception of magic is more or less the same (though he would doubtless object to being compared to Crowley). And we will see later on that Novalis held to a remarkably similar understanding of magic — one even finds the same conception in Bacon.[10]

It might be argued that in defining magic in these terms, all these men have cast too wide a net. After all, technology or applied science might be defined in exactly this same way. Technology is also the science and art of causing change in conformity with the human will. But this is precisely the point. Both Evola and Crowley mean to argue that anything that allows us to cause change in conformity with will is “magical,” including science, technology, and the sort of “magic” that gets dismissed as hokum. In any case, the crucial takeaway here is that Evola has made the will central to his philosophy. He has argued that the will is central to idealism, and that even the choice of idealism over some other philosophy is driven by the will.

Evola states that his entire philosophical system is based on the “the experience of a pure ‘I,’ a detached ‘I’ which is a center unto itself: a pure being and an absolute form of self-evidence, anterior to any content determined by consciousness and thought.”[11] This “detached ‘I’” is that from which issues the “Olympian gaze” Evola sometimes refers to in his work. However, the detached “I” is far from being a disinterested spectator gazing impassively at the world. Evola argues that the “I” “cannot be defined as mere ‘thought,’ ‘representation,’ or as an ‘epistemological subject’; rather, the ‘I’ is truth, action, and will.”[12] Elsewhere, Evola characterizes his philosophy as asserting “the primacy of will over ‘truth.’”[13]

Note that in this latter quotation, Evola has placed “truth” in scare quotes. This is because here he is rejecting the notion of truth as existing independently of the subject, fixed and unchangeable. If we are to embrace solipsism, this really means affirming that the “I” — the willful “I” — is the one truth. Since it is the nature of this “I” to transform all else according to its will, everything other than the “I” has no fixed being and is thus “untrue.” Everything, in essence, waits upon the “I” to transform it and thereby give it its truth. Evola writes that “existence, truth, and certainty are not to be found in the past but in the future: they are tasks.”[14] At one point he also states that “true action . . . nullifies things by possessing them.” In other words, true action (the willful activity of the “I”) nullifies the being of things by transforming them according to the desires of the “I.” Their being is negated and a new being is conferred upon them: “to be” is now “to be a projection of the subject.” Evola’s point here is thoroughly Fichtean: the world I experience shall be made over according to my will; in confronting this transformed world I am therefore confronting a projection of my own self.

Evola writes at one point that, in opposition to Platonism, he chose to define “ideas as potential realities, and realities as actual ideas. This was a bold and dangerous theory, for it was one that led to action.”[15] What Evola means is that ideas or theories should be understood only with reference to their potential realization. Further, actually existing objects or states of affairs are to be understood as ideas already come to realization. This would refer to the “I” imposing its ideas upon nature, in the Baconian sense of “mastery,” as well as the use of magic to alter reality. However, it also refers to the structural activity of the “I” in creating a world of experience, which had been attributed by earlier idealists to the acts of transcendental subjectivity working from behind the scenes, applying its “ideas” to the raw data of sensory experience. Since Evola rejects the Absolute Ego (or transcendental subjectivity) as an alien “other” and thus as an affront to the freedom of the “I” (see the last installment of this essay), he must attribute its structural activity to the conscious, personal ego. Evola writes,

[When] will it be possible to truly affirm the idealist principle that the “I” posits all things? It will only be possible once the individual has transformed the dark passion of the world into a kind of freedom; that is to say: once the individual experiences his action of representation no longer as a form of [passive] spontaneity and coexistence of reality and possibility, but rather as a form of unconditioned, willed causation and power.

You can buy Collin Cleary’s Wagner’s Ring & the Germanic Tradition here.

In other words: the idealist principle that the “I” posits all things may only be truly affirmed when the very givenness of objects to awareness is seen as a function of my conscious will. Again: “[In] order to possess itself, the ‘I’ must first be — which is to say: the ‘I’ must simply posit itself, with immediacy and spontaneity in those forms which I defined as forms of ‘passive activity.’”[16]

But how can I possibly conceive of my conscious self as constructing the world of experience when I seem to have no conscious awareness of doing so? At least in The Path of Cinnabar, Evola does not offer a clear answer to this (one has to assume that much more detail is to be found in the untranslated works on magical idealism). In essence, he asserts that magical idealism (or the path of the absolute individual) is one in which I strive to come closer and closer to the goal of seeing myself as conscious creator of all that I experience. He writes: “[One] could here envision a gradual process whereby the power of an ‘I’ expands from being the power of thought to that of magical imagination and self-persuasion: to that of persuading others and, ultimately, of persuading and altering reality itself.”[17] Though, admittedly, this passage raises more questions than it answers.

It certainly seems as if the objects of which I am aware have an existence independent of me, and do not depend upon me for their being. In the face of the sheer fact of this independent existence, I seem to be fundamentally powerless. Evola’s answer to this problem is very much in the spirit of Fichte: He asks us to consider this “independent existence” merely as a limit on the subject’s will, rather than an actual being in its own right. Thus, what we seem to experience as an “external world” is merely a “deficiency” or a “privation” (to use Evola’s own terms) — an experience, in other words, of an apparent absence of willful causation on the part of the “I.” It is indeed a limit on the subject’s will — but limits can shift, or be removed entirely. Evola writes:

The path of the absolute individual is based on the following imperative: not to flee from existential deficiency, “not to grant deficiency an existence of its own as a way to avoid its weight” (that is to say: not to define deficiency as a distinct reality such as nature, “the thing in itself,” or God); but rather, to acknowledge the existence of deficiency and render oneself superior to it by facing it and enduring all its weight. One needs to become that very deficiency, and to conceive of all things upon which he has no power as forms of negativity rather than as separate beings and values (i.e., rather than by identifying both what is rational and what is wished with what is real).[18]

Key here is the statement that “one needs to become that deficiency.” It is necessary for Evola to take this position, for it is, in essence, a restatement of a basic principle of magical idealism: I must come to see “the world” as my creation. I experience that world as not me, and because of this I attribute to it substantial, independent existence. This is a pattern of thought I must unlearn, however, for the theory of the absolute individual claims precisely that I am that world, but that I do not (yet) know it. Thus, my experience of an apparent external world is a mark of my own present “deficiency.” I must come to see that I and this “other” are one.

A major question remains (indeed, many questions): Why is it that I must begin with this deficiency? Or, to put it differently: Why is a world given to me as independently existing, if in reality it is not? Why must I work to overcome this illusion? Why am I not already living in a state of enlightenment? Addressing these questions is essentially the task of what Evola terms the “eschatological background” to his philosophy. “Eschatology” literally means “account (logos) of the end of time (eschaton).” However, “end” can mean literal end (i.e., stopping point), or end in the sense of telos, “purpose” or “goal.” Thus, eschatology refers to any philosophical or theological account of the final age, or of the purpose of the world (or both). In the latter sense, it may refer to an account of the divine plan. Magical idealism contains an eschatology in the sense of an account of the ultimate purpose of existence — which is, in a certain manner of speaking, also a divine purpose. Evola refers to the absolute individual as “unfold[ing] itself as the thing by which nature itself is redeemed and transformed into an absolute being possessing beginning and end (the ‘final consummation’ or ekpyrosis) in itself.”[19]

What Evola means is that the coming into being of the absolute individual may be understood to be the purpose of all of reality. If we ask the perennial question, “Why is there anything at all, instead of just nothing?” (which Heidegger regarded as the most profound question in philosophy), Evola’s answer is that existence exists in order to give rise to the absolute individual. This is best understood by putting things in the first person — which is, of course, true to Evola’s solipsism. If I ask myself, “Why do I have an experience of nature, of an external world existing independently of me?”, the answer is that it exists solely to be overcome. It is through the overcoming of the experience of independent existence that the absolute individual is born.

The absolute individual is born, in other words, by the spiritual conquest of all that he initially takes to be “reality.” Thus, the world exists so that I might fully realize my nature as absolute individual (the one, true being); it exists solely as the means to bring about my apotheosis; my divinization. What is crucial to understand here is that, for Evola, this divinization takes place merely through coming to see the world as existing so that I might be. Though it must be added that genuinely coming to believe this is no mean feat. The reason is that only a truly superior man would be capable of such belief (or, one might counter, only a madman).

You can buy Collin Cleary’sWhat is a Rune? here

Evola’s eschatology does indeed constitute a “divine plan” — only it is not a plan imposed upon me and upon nature by an all-powerful other. Instead, the divinity is my own potential divinity, and the “plan” is the evolutionary process by which a world comes into being so that I may come into being, as absolute individual or living god. Evola writes that, “The world of primeval spontaneity, the world of human personality and thought, and the world that transcended it all had to be assumed, I suggested, and ‘inferred’ with respect to an absolute individual who wishes his own self-fulfillment or self-expression.”[20]

Earlier we saw Evola refer to the “final consummation” (consumazione finale) of nature in the absolute individual as the ekpyrosis, which means “conflagration.” The ancient Stoics used this term to refer to the great conflagration of the entire universe that occurs at the end of each cosmic cycle. In Evola’s magical idealism there is a similar conflagration: All of nature is “consumed” by the absolute individual in the process of transforming nature into a projection of himself. Note also that Evola tells us that in this process, nature is “redeemed.” This language has to remind us of another ancient school, that of the Gnostics. Although there are many differences between the views of the various Gnostic sects, most taught some version of the doctrine that the human soul is actually a divinity that has forgotten its divine origin through having been thrust into a physical body and into preoccupation with nature. Nature itself is usually thought to have been the creation of a jealous demiurge (Greek δημιουργός, “craftsman”) who has designed it precisely to keep divine human souls in the dark about their true identity.

There are a number of interesting parallels between Evola’s magical idealism and Gnosticism, and Evola himself draws our attention to these. He states at one point that his views “represented almost a return to Gnostic and Manichean ideas of the crucifixion of the cosmic One in the world as the ultimate meaning of the individual’s existence (albeit without the same dualism or pessimism).”[21] In other words, magical idealism suggests, in effect, that I am a god, but that I do not know it. I have been thrown into this body and into the natural world, which presents itself as an alien other that acts upon me and limits my freedom. Through following the path of magical idealism, however, I can come to see that world as a projection of my own being (as the “self-definition” of the “I”[22]) and thus realize my true nature as absolute individual. In Evola’s scheme, the place of the demiurge is occupied by the self-limitation of the fearful, worldly, finite ego which would rather hold onto its finitude and all its suffering and pain than give way to the realized, infinite ego that is the absolute individual.

I will conclude this account of magical idealism with a brief discussion of how Evola sees his ideas within the history of philosophy, and how he regards philosophy as such. At one point in The Path of Cinnabar, he claims that “transcendental idealism represented the final stage reached by human reason with regard to the issues of certainty and knowledge (that is to say: with regard to the problem of epistemology).”[23] However, a few pages later he asserts that transcendental idealism “inevitably culminates in magical idealism.”[24] This is not a contradiction, however, for Evola regards magical idealism as a step beyond philosophy itself. Transcendental idealism is merely the final stage reached by human reason (“. . . with regard to the issues of certainty and knowledge . . .”). Evola’s claim is that once “the original impulse which had given birth to [transcendental idealism]” is recognized, and pushed to its ultimate conclusion, what results is the “immanent self-transcendence of philosophy as a whole.”[25]

The original impulse that gives birth to idealism is the aforementioned “will to conquer.” Once this is recognized, Evola believes that idealism is transformed from a mere theory about reality into a path of action in the world. Remember that the “I” “cannot be defined as mere ‘thought,’ ‘representation,’ or as an ‘epistemological subject.’” Rather, “the ‘I’ is truth, action, and will.” In realizing that a fully-developed idealism transcends theory (and thus “philosophy”) and becomes action, Evola says that he discovered “that the philosophical works I had written were essentially a preparation for my future exploration of a field which was no longer that of discursive thought and speculation, but the field of inner, self-fulfilling action: the very field aimed at transcending human limits which I had encountered in some of the works I had read at that time.”[26] Further, he quotes Jules Lagneau stating that “Philosophy is the kind of reflection which ultimately recognizes its own insufficiency, and the need for an absolute action arising from within.”[27]

The foregoing covers most of the major points Evola discusses in Chapter Four of The Path of Cinnabar. There is more that could be said, but this account will have to suffice. In the next and final installment, we will consider objections to Evola’s ideas.

Evola, Magical Idealism, & Western Metaphysics, Part Three

Collin Cleary

3,073 words

Part 3 of 4 (Part 1 here, Part 2 here, Part 4 here)

5. Critique of Magical Idealism

In this concluding section, I will discuss three major difficulties with magical idealism:

Evola consistently exaggerates the differences between his position and that of previous idealists, chiefly Fichte and Novalis. In fact, most of the tenets of magical idealism are not original to Evola. Since this topic is mainly of scholarly interest, I will spend less time on it.

The epistemological arguments Evola presents in support of idealism (i.e., for seeing the world as a projection of the personal ego) are untenable. Since he derives much of this position from earlier idealists, including Fichte and Berkeley, the criticisms I will raise will apply, by extension, to some of the other idealist philosophers as well. As already noted, Evola seems to offer magical idealism as a “pragmatic” position — i.e., he asks us to live as if the world is a projection of the ego, as a personal path to the realization of the absolute individual. But just as in Fichte, there is a tension here: At times Evola seems to advance magical idealism as a metaphysical position, as a claim about what really exists, or what is really true. It is when we take him to be doing this that serious problems arise.

Evola offers magical idealism as compatible with traditionalism — indeed, as a philosophical expression of traditional teachings. In response to this, I will argue that some of magical idealism’s explicit tenets straightforwardly contradict traditionalism, as conceived by Guénon and Evola. Magical idealism is also founded upon certain assumptions about subjectivity and the human condition that are unique to modernity. This alone should cast doubt on whether magical idealism is compatible with traditionalism. But matters are actually more serious than this. These assumptions are precisely those which Heidegger and other thinkers have identified as leading to modern nihilism and decadence. If this is correct, then we can no longer consider the theory of the absolute individual as a revolt against the modern world. Indeed, to follow that path would be to swallow more of the poison that is killing us. This is obviously the most controversial of my claims.

(a) How original is magical idealism?

Evola presents the choice between the path of the other and the path of the absolute individual as necessarily resting on non-rational grounds, since both positions are rationally defensible. Evola claims that this move is “bold” and “original.” It is certainly bold, but it is not original. In the celebrated 1797 “First Introduction” to the Wissenschaftslehre, Fichte juxtaposes two positions which I briefly described in an earlier installment: “dogmatism,” which explains experience as caused by an external world acting upon the subject; and “idealism,” which explains the external world as the creation of subjectivity. These are obviously identical to Evola’s “path of the other” and “path of the absolute individual,” respectively. Furthermore, Fichte argues that dogmatism and idealism can both be supported by rational argument. The choice between them must therefore be made on non-rational grounds. He concludes as follows, in a famous passage:

What sort of philosophy one chooses depends, therefore, on what sort of man one is; for a philosophical system is not a dead piece of furniture that we can reject or accept as we wish; it is rather a thing animated by the soul of the person who holds it. A person indolent by nature or dulled and distorted by mental servitude, learned luxury, and vanity will never raise himself to the level of idealism.[1]

As the last sentence of the quote indicates, Fichte does not regard the two positions as equal in all respects. They are equal, in fact, only in that equally strong arguments can be marshalled in support of both. But the two positions are not morally equal, because dogmatism is an affront to human dignity. Now, Evola essentially takes the same position, though without using the language of moralism. For him, the path of the other (Fichte’s “dogmatism”) is, in effect, an affront to his personal dignity. In Evola’s view, quite simply, the superior man would never consent to believe in a philosophy that asserted that he is “determined” by external forces. Instead, the superior man must believe that he is cause of himself — or, more to the point, must strive to become the sole, exclusive cause of himself, of his experience, and of all else.

You can buy Julius Evola’s East & West here.

In the cases of both Fichte and Evola, the choice of philosophies is made on the basis of will. We have seen that Evola asserts “the primacy of will over ‘truth,’” and makes will central to his entire philosophy. In fact, his treatment of will differs little at all from Fichte’s. In section two of this essay, I discussed how Fichte makes will central to his system. Even knowledge, for Fichte, is understood in “voluntarist” terms: The striving to know is the striving to manipulate. Ultimately, I can only truly know that which I have created, and thus it is the human vocation to re-create the world (to transform it according to will), and therefore to erase (asymptotically) the subject-object distinction. The world becomes fully known, in other words, by being “absorbed” into the subject. Evola’s claims that the “I” is “truth, action, and will,” that “existence, truth, and certainty are not to be found in the past but in the future: they are tasks,” and that “true action . . . nullifies things by possessing them,” all read like they could have come straight out of Fichte’s Wissenschaftslehre.

Further, Evola presents “the immanent self-transcendence of philosophy as a whole” as a radically new position — a response to all previous philosophy. Once again, however, there is really no departure here from Fichte’s views. Fichte avoids using the term “philosophy” to describe his ideas, since “philosophy” connotes an ongoing search. He believes that with him the search ends, and philosophy becomes completed science (a position that is erroneously thought to have been original with Hegel). Thus, Fichte prefers to use the terms Wissenschaftslehre (doctrine of science), or simply Wissenschaft (science). It might be objected that unlike Evola’s position, this suggests that philosophy gives way not to action but to yet another theoretical standpoint: science. But this would be a superficial reading of Fichte. As we have already seen, he takes the position that idealism is a path of action in the world whereby we transform reality into an image of our own ideals and aspirations, thus re-making the world into a projection of the ego. Save for the fact that Evola replaces the Absolute Ego with the personal ego, his position is virtually the same as Fichte’s. Philosophy, mere theory, must overcome itself and issue in will-full action.

In fact, there seem to be only three notable ways in which Evola differs significantly from Fichte. The first is the use of the term “magical.” Evola’s broad understanding of magic is one that Fichte could have endorsed, but they would have parted company over the sort of magic advocated by Evola and the Ur Group. Second, as noted earlier, Evola has dropped the conception of an impersonal Absolute Ego in favor of a titanic, quasi-Nietzschean egoism in which the world is to be made over into a projection of the personal ego of the superior man. This is indeed a significant departure from Fichte, for we saw earlier that Fichte argues for the literal eradication of the personal ego (though this was put forward as a regulative ideal). In fact, that is the reason for Evola’s adoption of the term “absolute individual” (as opposed to such earlier, impersonal idealist coinages as “Absolute Ego,” “Absolute Spirit,” “Absolute Idea,” etc.). Third, solipsism is also a significant departure from Fichte, who would never have accepted Evola’s advocacy of solipsism as an infinite task. For Fichte, such a conception would have been literally incoherent, for he held that it is only through an encounter with other selves that my own self is developed, and self-awareness achieved (arguably, in fact, this one of the most profound and interesting aspects of Fichte’s philosophy).

If we ask why it is that Evola seems consistently to miss how close his own position is to Fichte’s, it probably has to do with the fact that, like so many others, he incorrectly reads Fichte as offering a metaphysical idealism. I alluded to this common misreading in the second section of this essay. In brief, it consists in believing that the purpose of Fichte’s Wissenschaftslehre was to prove that reality already is the creation of the Absolute Ego.[2] In fact, as I have discussed, Fichte adopts a “pragmatic” idealism: It is our task to re-make the world into what is, in effect, a projection of the ego, thus bringing ego face to face with itself. Idealism, for Fichte, is thus a project (a never-ending one) and not a metaphysical theory. Idealism is action, not theory. Thus, much of what Evola takes to be innovative in his own position is actually already in Fichte — but it is easily missed if one reads Fichte the wrong way.

Fichte is not the only idealist to whom Evola is heavily indebted. In just a moment I will say something about his relation to Novalis — and we may also note that Evola even owes a good deal to Schelling and Hegel. Recall that the “eschatological” dimension to Evola’s philosophy maintains that the coming into being of the absolute individual may be understood to be the purpose of all of reality. This position is obviously inspired by Hegel’s claim that the purpose of the universe is its coming to consciousness of itself through the philosopher (i.e., through self-aware humanity, principally the philosopher). Critics of Hegel had charged him with “making man into God” (an interpretation eagerly embraced by Feuerbach). Evola goes a step beyond this. He does not make man into God; he makes me into God.

Finally, we must now at last say something, if only briefly, about Novalis and his own “magical idealism.” Novalis was the penname of Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg (1772-1801). Better known as a poet than as a philosopher, he was nonetheless a major contributor to the development of German idealism — a fact which only came to be appreciated for the first time in the middle of the last century. Like so many others who were part of the Romantic-idealist milieu, Novalis studied at Jena (under the eminent Kantian philosopher K. L. Reinhold). Over the course of his extremely brief career, he made the acquaintance of Fichte, Hölderlin, the Schlegel brothers, Tieck, and other luminaries.

In the fall of 1795, while serving as secretary to a government official in Tennstedt, Novalis began making notes on the philosophy of Fichte. In the end, he filled six notebooks full of remarks, ending the exercise late in the summer of 1796. Scholars have given these notebooks the title Fichte Studien (Fichte Studies), and they have been translated into English. Contrary to what this title may imply, Novalis’ notes constitute a critical engagement with Fichte, and seek to address what Novalis believed to be shortcomings in his thinking. The specifics of Novalis’ criticisms of Fichte cannot, of course, occupy us here. Like Schelling, Novalis had also been strongly influenced by Spinoza, who identified God with nature, and he sought to effect a synthesis of Fichte and Spinoza. In essential terms, this would consist in an idealism which affirmed nature as a value and as a source of meaning in its own right, as opposed to Fichte’s view of nature as nothing more than raw material waiting to be transformed by human beings. Another influence on Novalis’ ideas was Plotinus, who spoke of the emanation of nature from the One, and of the “return” to the One in the experience of the philosopher-mystic.

Unlike many others in his own time (and since), Novalis recognized the “pragmatic” nature of Fichte’s idealism. He understood that Fichte was not saying that the world is the creation of the Absolute Ego, but that it ought to be, and that we must work for the realization of the Absolute Ego as a regulative principle. Thus, the “magical idealism” he advocates has at least one strong parallel to Evola’s. Are there other such parallels? Just how close is Evola’s position to that of Novalis? I will offer a very brief sketch of Novalis’ magical idealism, and let the reader decide for himself.

You can buy Greg Johnson’s From Plato to Postmodernism here

The term “magical idealism” occurs in Novalis’ writings after the composition of the Fichte Studien, in the 1798 Allgemeine Brouillon (literally “General Rough Draft”), another set of posthumously published notes. The basic ideas of magical idealism occur earlier, however, in still another set of notes, the “Logologische Fragmente,” this time from 1797. Frederick Beiser explains Novalis’ choice of a name for his philosophy as follows: “Novalis gave his doctrine this name because magic is for him the art of making nature conform to our will . . . , and because idealism is the doctrine that what we perceive depends on our own creative activity.”[3] I submit that this understanding of both “magic” and “idealism” is identical to that of Evola.

Novalis accepts the Kantian doctrine that we only know something insofar as we create it. This has always suggested to thoughtful readers that the world is mere illusion (and Kant — unintentionally, it must be said — encourages this by sometimes speaking as if things in themselves are things as they really are). Novalis embraces this suggestion — in a manner very much in the spirit of Evola. He claims that “all thinking is the art of illusion,” that “illusion” (Schein) is the nature of experience, and that it is “the original form of all truth.”[4] Further, Novalis adopts the Fichtean principle that knowledge is driven by the will. Thus, if the world we experience is the creation of the structural activity of consciousness (if, indeed, it is “illusion”), and if consciousness is driven by the will, then we must conclude that the will itself is, as Novalis put it, “the basis of all creation.”[5]

The implication Novalis draws from this seems strikingly Evolian: If will is the basis of all creation, then it should be possible for us to use our will to achieve complete control over ourselves and over nature. This means that we can, in principle, control our senses (experiencing whatever we wish), and, like an Indian yogi, control even our internal organs. Beiser writes that Novalis “imagines that one day we will be able to control the inner organs of our body just as we are now able to control our thoughts, actions, and speech.”[6] “Everything involuntary is transformed into something voluntary,” Novalis writes.[7] As a result, the entire world is to be transformed into a creation of the will-full “I.” The subject “should have the power to make not only his thoughts into things but also his things into thoughts.”[8] This must remind us of Evola’s dictum that ideas are “potential realities” and realities are “actual ideas.”

The end result of magical idealism is that we will live in a world entirely of our own making, though Novalis insists that this must be carried out according to aesthetic standards of beauty. Thus, as Beiser puts it, “According to Novalis’ own definition, magical idealism is the romantic doctrine because romanticism is making the world into a work of art, so that it regains its magic, mystery, and beauty.”[9] If it seems like Novalis is making man into God, he is. And Novalis is explicit about this.[10] However, it must be noted that, true to Fichte (and much as Evola would hold more than a century later), the human project of achieving total control over nature is offered as a regulative ideal.

We have seen that Novalis’ use of “magic” is very similar to that of Evola — and Crowley, and Francis Bacon. But does “magic,” for Novalis, subsume the “occult” sort of magic (e.g., the magic of the Ur Group or the Golden Dawn), as it does for Evola and Crowley, but not for Bacon? The answer is that it may. Beiser writes that “There can be no doubt that Novalis had some sympathy with the hermetic and cabalist traditions, and that some of its ideas play a crucial role in his magical idealism.”[11] For example, we know that Novalis was an avid reader of Jacob Boehme.

Having now offered a very brief summary of Novalis’ philosophy, we must turn to the topic of Evola’s relation to him. In a 1971 interview, Evola was asked whether Novalis was an influence on him. His answer is somewhat evasive: “Partly. In part because at that time I was intoxicated by the academic methods and in Novalis I perceived a deep intuition. But what actually attracted me was his poetical aspect and his intuitive one — which were all but systematic.” In fact, as he reveals in his notes, Novalis did nurture ambitions to create a systematic philosophy — though it is not clear whether all of that material was available to Evola. In The Path of Cinnabar, Evola is more definite: “while Novalis certainly remained one of my favorite authors, and while some of his intuitions had proven crucial to me, my own system was heading in a very different direction.”[12]

This last assertion, however, is certainly debatable, for the account I have given of Novalis’ magical idealism shows it to be quite close to Evola’s own position. Missing in Novalis is the problematic framing of idealism in terms of solipsism, as well as the amoral, “egoistic” cast of Evola’s idealism, which promises the personal ego a path to absolutization. These differences are not insignificant.

To be continued . . .

Evola, Magical Idealism, & Western Metaphysics, Part Four

Collin Cleary

6,502 words

Part 4 of 4 (Part 1 here, Part 3 here)

5. Critique of Magical Idealism (Continued)

(b) How strong is Evola’s case for idealism?

I noted earlier that Evola sums up his idealism using Berkeley’s famous expression esse est percipi (to be is to be perceived). Berkeley took the position that the only things that exist are ideas or impressions in the mind, and that there is no reason to believe that these are “ideas of” or “impressions of” things in an external world. Berkeley arrives at this position through his commitment to empiricism: He insists that we only have warrant for believing in that of which we are directly aware. Since, so he claims, we are not directly aware of external, material objects but only of “internal” ideas or impressions, we have no basis for believing in material objects existing outside the mind. This position is possible, however, only because Berkeley accepts the “representationalist” model of knowledge from earlier empiricists, chiefly Locke.

I have discussed and critiqued representationalism at length in my essay “The Cartesian Destruction of Being” (part four in my series “Heidegger’s History of Metaphysics”). Representationalism presupposes a fundamental dichotomy between a world “in here,” in the mind, and a world “out there” (the so-called “external world”). We are confined to the world “in here” and thus do not know objects “out there” directly. Instead, what we know directly are internal “copies” (“images”) of external objects (these are usually referred to by empiricists as “ideas” or “impressions”). The human being dwells in a kind of internal theater, viewing (or otherwise experiencing) these copies, which allow us to be indirectly aware of external objects themselves. Berkeley accepts this model of knowledge, taking “ideas” to be “internal objects” – but then he severs their connection to a world “out there” by denying its very existence.

It is extremely important to note that none of these ideas appears in ancient or medieval philosophy. The representationalist paradigm seems to get going chiefly with Descartes, who entertained the possibility that all of our experience of “objects” might be an illusion, an idea that only makes sense if one already accepts the possibility of a rigid divide between a world “out there” and that which I experience “in here.” Skeptical questions such as “how do we know that there is an external world?” and “Could my experience be a dream or a systematic illusion?” simply do not occur in philosophy prior to the modern period, because pre-modern philosophy does not entertain this “two worlds” dichotomy.[1]

Plato’s allegory of the cave presents us with a scenario in which a group of people, chained in a cave, see only shadows but think that they are the only true beings, since they are unaware of the existence of the objects which cast the shadows. In the allegory, the shadows represent sensible objects, whereas the “originals” which cast the shadows represent the “ideas” or “forms.” For Platonism, sensible objects are “copies” of the ideas, which exist in another realm, independent both of the sensible world and of the mind of the knower. In modern representationalism, this relationship has been reversed. “Ideas” are now “subjective” (i.e., they have no existence independent of minds) and it is the ideas that are now “copies” of material things. Plato’s cave has, furthermore, become the model of the mind’s “interior”: We are all trapped in a kind of cave, viewing mere “copies” of what “really” exists.

By contrast, Plato himself seemed to believe that human knowers have an unmediated access to sensible objects and a mediated access to ideas (via reflection on sensible objects). When he intimated that sensible objects are “illusory” he did not mean to suggest that they “might not really be (out) there”; he meant that they possess a lesser sort of being than the forms or ideas. There is no “problem of the external world” for Plato or any of the ancients, because they never entertained the idea that we are locked in an “interior,” cut off from the world “out there.” Thus, the first thing that must be noted about Evola’s Berkeleyan-inspired arguments is that they are based on suppositions unique to modernity. Furthermore, these suppositions do not represent an advance on ancient philosophy, but a disastrous wrong turn. The irony of Berkeley’s position is that, in proclaiming that subjective ideas are all that exist, he thought he was being true to empiricism. In other words, he thought he was being true to what we actually experience. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth.

You can buy Julius Evola’s East & West here.

In front of me there is a window, and through the window I can see a tree, which sits close enough to the house that it takes up most of the view. Right now, I am seeing that tree. “No, no!” Berkeley would counter. “Actually, you are seeing an internal idea and have no basis at all for thinking that it has some relationship to a material object.” The trouble with this position is that it is untrue to my experience. In fact, I am experiencing a tree; not an image of a tree. I know what it is to experience a mere image of a tree, because I have seen trees in paintings, photographs, and films. In every such instance, the image of the tree clearly presented itself as an image, because of the presence of certain “markers” (e.g., the edges of a photograph or a painting or a movie screen, or the two-dimensionality of the same).

However, there is nothing in my experience that would indicate that, when I look out the window (or think I am looking out the window) I am seeing an image. Thus, the claim that in truth all we ever experience is images is not based upon experience, but on a theory we bring to the interpretation of experience: The theory that says “though it may seem like you are experiencing material objects directly, actually you are only seeing internal ideas.” And, again, this theory is possible only if one first constructs the idea that knowers are confined to an interior and must therefore establish (if they can) a connection between interior and exterior.

But why accept this idea of an interior, especially if it is not based upon experience?[2] My experience teaches me that I am always in the world, never cut off or removed from it, and that I experience objects, not “images.” Needless to say, representationalism challenges this as naïve and “illusory.” But, again, let us leave theories about awareness aside for the moment and focus solely on our experience of it. If I do, then I will have to admit that I experience myself as within what I call “the world,” interacting with things and existing alongside them. I am always out here, with the things that I am experiencing, acting upon them and being acted upon by them.

Further, what I call my awareness is nothing but a directedness towards the world. Awareness, Husserl taught us, is always intentional, meaning that no matter what sort of conscious act we are talking about (perceiving, emoting, abstracting, counting, etc.), it is always of or about something other than itself.[3] When I perceive, for example, I perceive things like this here tree. Berkeley fails to understand the intentionality of consciousness when he claims that “ideas” are all that we are aware of, and also the only things that exist. Ideas are always ideas of something; an idea that is not an idea of something is an incoherent concept — like saying that you can have a mountain without a valley.[4] (For a more in-depth critique of modern representationalist theories of consciousness, again see here.)

Now, when Evola claims that in knowing, we are always knowing our own “thoughts,” he seems to completely buy into the representationalist paradigm that underlies subjective idealism. When he introduces Berkeley’s formula esse est percipi, he glosses it using a formulation which might, at first glance, seem quite reasonable: “The only being which a person can concretely and reasonably talk about is the one which meets his own perception, thought or fantasy. As for all other beings, in no way can they be known: it is as if they did not exist.”[5] Again, this seems reasonable: after all, I can only know the things that I know, right? But that is not exactly what Evola means. This is clear from the way he sums up his idealism in The Path of Cinnabar:

The world, then, can only be “my world.” Were there to exist anything apart from oneself, something “objective,” one would still know nothing about it: for in the same way that objects touched by King Midas would turn to gold, the very moment such objective things were to be known, they would turn into one’s own thoughts, experiences, and representations. In other words, in one way or the other, even such objective things would submit to one’s own conditionality. In this regard, I felt that all doubts were dispelled; I felt that the door of mystery had thus been shut, and that the “I” had been provided with a solid and inaccessible fortress in which to feel safe, free, and sovereign.[6]

Here Evola seems clearly to imply that the objects of which we are directly aware are “thoughts, experiences, and representations,” and that these are not “objective” things at all, but objects in the mind (i.e., they are subjective). Thus, he commits the same error as Berkeley, for thoughts, experiences, and representations are always of something. In other words, they point beyond themselves to a world that transcends consciousness. Evola seems to want to claim that whatever we are aware of is ex hypothesi “within consciousness” (this appears to be the meaning of his claim that “objective things,” as soon as they are known, would “turn into” thoughts, etc.). But this understanding of consciousness is incoherent. Consciousness is precisely the means by which we contact what is not consciousness. To be conscious, once again, is to be conscious of something. “Thoughts, experiences, and representations” are not “objects” in my mind; they are tools through which I engage objects in the world around me.

Evola writes of objects submitting “to one’s own conditionality.” In a certain manner of speaking, this is true — and it is nothing other than what Kant taught us: that consciousness involves a process by which we become aware of objects. But from this claim, legions of philosophers have derived a complete non sequitur: If consciousness involves a process, then we are not “directly” aware of things in the world, but only of the “product” of the process, which must be some kind of internal image or copy. However, this position manages to overlook a simple and obvious fact. The “process” that is consciousness is the means by which I am aware of this here tree. In other words, whatever steps are involved in consciousness, the result is always the givenness of objects in the world, not the givenness of some theoretical entity that is postulated as intervening between my consciousness and objects “out there.”

The lines that conclude the quote above are also highly significant. Evola writes that, “I felt that the door of mystery had thus been shut, and that the ‘I’ had been provided with a solid and inaccessible fortress in which to feel safe, free, and sovereign.” This is clearly a tacit endorsement of the modern presupposition on which representationalism is founded, and which I have already discussed: that subjectivity is locked away in an interior (a “solid and inaccessible fortress”), closed off from anything “out there” (if, indeed, anything “out there” exists at all).

In sum, Evola’s epistemological arguments exhibit the same basic problems one can find with other versions of subjective idealism. Again, these are an issue only when magical idealism is taken to be a metaphysical position about what really exists. If it is a “pragmatic” position — if we are asked only to live as if subjective idealism is true — then such arguments are fundamentally unimportant. However, it is an open question whether it is psychologically possible for anyone to live as if subjective idealism is true; anyone outside of a madhouse, that is. And it is an open question whether this was the spiritual standpoint actually achieved by Evola.

(c) Is magical idealism compatible with traditionalism?

In certain ways, magical idealism seems to directly contradict traditionalism. At a minimum, we can say that traditionalism involves looking to the distant past to recover certain objective (indeed, absolute) truths revealed to the human race in pre-history that have been largely forgotten. What, then, are we to make of magical idealism’s insistence on the “primacy of will over ‘truth’”? As I explained earlier in this essay, Evola places “truth” in scare quotes because he is rejecting the notion of truth as existing independently of the subject, fixed and unchangeable. Evola writes that “existence, truth, and certainty are not to be found in the past but in the future: they are tasks.”[7]

I submit that this assertion constitutes a rejection of traditionalism at its very core. Magical idealism rejects the past as a source of truth and looks instead to a future “truth,” which will be the literal creation of the subject. The very idea of an independently existing truth under which the subject must stand is rejected as an intolerable affront to the freedom of the “I.” And the “I,” the subject, is regarded as the one absolute. All else is merely raw material on which the “I” shall stamp its “truth,” a truth which is quite literally subjective. In essence, everything other than the subject has no fixed being, and waits upon the subject to transform it and thus give it its truth. This infinite task constitutes the progressive elimination of all restraints upon human will; in other words, it constitutes the most radical humanism possible: the absolutization of the individual, human “I.”

These ideas are not just incompatible with traditionalism; they constitute its antithesis. Indeed, they are the core ideals of modernity. All the aspects of magical idealism just now discussed are present in Fichte, and I have argued in a separate series of essays (start here) that Fichte constitutes the quintessential modern philosopher. By this I mean that it is in Fichte, more than any other philosopher, that we find the spirit of modernity present in its purest and most explicit form. More than any other thinker, for example, Fichte anticipates the mindset of modern, technological civilization, referred to by Heidegger as das Gestell (usually translated as “enframing”). Essentially, this refers to the modern attitude that nature is nothing more than raw material for human exploitation. Nature literally has no being for us but waits upon us to confer some being (some purpose, some meaning) upon it. Heidegger scholar Thomas Sheehan interprets Gestell as “the world of exploitation.” He explains this as follows:

Heidegger reads the current dispensation [of Being] as one that provokes and even compels us to treat everything in terms of its exploitability-for-consumption: the being of things is now their ability to be turned into products for use and enjoyment. . . . Earth is now seen as a vast storehouse of resources, both human and natural; and the value and realness of those resources, their being, is measured exclusively by their availability for consumption.[8]

You can buy Collin Cleary’s Summoning the Gods here.

And it would be possible to marshal many more examples of how Fichte either lays the groundwork for modern decadence, or gives explicit expression to ideas that were already “in the air.” It is thus absolutely astonishing that Evola, an avowed traditionalist, chooses to hitch his wagon to Fichte, one of the most poisonous figures in modern philosophy.

And yet Evola not only offers magical idealism as a development of Fichte’s views, he claims that magical idealism is a philosophical restatement of traditional doctrines. In The Path of Cinnabar, Evola refers to “the congruency between my own [philosophical] system and traditional non-philosophical doctrines, which are frequently expressed by means of symbols and myths.”[9] And he states that “Mine was a philosophical introduction to a non-philosophical world” — by which he means the “world of tradition.”[10] Elsewhere in the same work, Evola is more specific, saying that his “earlier, philosophical works” were an attempt to “systematize and present the inner logic of the experiences, practices, and achievements of yoga, magic, and initiation.”[11]

Thus, Evola is quite explicit in maintaining that there is a congruency between his philosophical system and traditional teachings. To be fair, he does also say in The Path of Cinnabar that he later came to recognize that his philosophical writings “attempted to impose an alien and forcefully rationalist approach onto traditional matters.”[12] But notice the language of this statement: Evola is not saying that he came to recognize that the core doctrines of his philosophy were incompatible with traditionalism. He is merely saying that he later recognized that to argue for those doctrines in the “rationalist” manner of Western philosophy constituted imposing an alien framework on traditionalist matters. Nowhere does Evola state that he came to recognize that the content (i.e., doctrine) of his philosophical system was incompatible with traditionalist teachings. Indeed, he says later in the same text that he came to realize that, as a traditionalist, “there was no need to ‘prove’ or ‘deduce’ anything, nor even to ‘discuss’ anything. Rather, it was a matter of either recognizing or not recognizing certain principles and truths on the basis of one’s inclinations, one’s inborn sensitivity and inner awakening.”[13]

This latter statement is also highly problematic. Recall that earlier we discussed Evola’s Fichtean position that the choice of the path of the absolute individual over the “path of the other” must be made on non-rational grounds. The reason for this is that Evola claims both paths are rationally defensible. Therefore, the only basis for choosing between them must be personal inclination. Recall Fichte’s famous statement that “What sort of philosophy one chooses depends, therefore, on what sort of man one is.” This is yet another expression, in both Fichte and Evola, of the “primacy of the will”: faced with a choice that cannot be made rationally, the superior man wills that the path of the absolute individual (or, in Fichte, “idealism”) is true.

Now, Evola claims to have repudiated his early, philosophical approach as found in the texts on magical idealism or the theory of the absolute individual. But when he claims that his later approach to tradition was “a matter of either recognizing or not recognizing certain principles and truths on the basis of one’s inclinations, one’s inborn sensitivity and inner awakening,” how can we not see this as yet another manifestation of the “primacy of will”? Once again, matters are to be decided not on the basis of rational argument but on the basis of inclination or desire. A moment ago, I quoted Evola as saying that he later repudiated the “rationalist” approach to tradition exhibited by his philosophical works. But this effectively misses the point of those works, whose approach was not “rationalist” (a word that is constantly being misused[14]) but voluntarist. This is true, indeed, of Fichte. At its core, the idealism of both Fichte and Evola depends not on philosophical arguments but upon what is willed by the superior sort of man.[15] In what Evola claims was his mature, non-philosophical approach to tradition, there is really no departure from this.

And this leads us to ask whether Evola’s methodology for the recovery of tradition really was as subjective as he seems to imply in this statement. Was it really a matter of consulting “inclinations” and “sensitivities”? It appears that this is at least partly true. The traditionalism of both Evola and Guénon seems to be partly a product of scholarship and study (some of which was quite rigorous), and partly a product of pure imagination. For example, in my essay “Heidegger Against the Traditionalists,” I pointed out that both Guénon and Evola naïvely take Platonism to be “perennial”; to be preserving, in other words, elements of primordial tradition.[16] In fact, however, this is pure speculation, for which there is no credible scholarly evidence. Guénon and Evola are thus in much the same position as the Renaissance “Hermeticists” who falsely believed that the Corpus Hermeticum contained an Egyptian wisdom that antedated Plato and the Greeks, and from whom those philosophers had taken their basic doctrines. In reality, as later scholarship demonstrated, the Corpus Hermeticum was no older than the first century BC, and it derived its doctrines, in large measure, from Plato and his school.

Just as Guénon and Evola read Platonism back into the supposed Primordial Tradition, so they also manage to read Indian philosophy through the lens of Western metaphysics.[17] This is an important point that I would like to dwell on for a moment, for I can imagine the following objection to what I have said already: “Evola’s magical idealism is, in fact, traditional, because it is essentially offering us Vedanta, or something very close to it, cloaked in the language of German idealism.”

Now, I am not going to deny that there are certain parallels between Western idealism and Vedanta. Many authors have drawn attention to these, the most famous example being Schopenhauer. However, there are also very significant differences between Indian philosophy and Western metaphysics. To illustrate this, let us just briefly consider what we might call Evola’s “argument from the fact of dreaming,” which I discussed in an earlier installment. To remind the reader, Evola supports his idealism by using the following analogy: “After all . . . do dreams not present us with other living creatures who appear real, act in unlikely ways, and can even terrorize us, while being mere projections of our own fantasy?”[18]

There is an argument implied in this question, and it goes like this: In dreams our consciousness is capable of inventing an entire world and “projecting” it before the mind’s eye, where it is (mis-)taken as real. It is therefore plausible to believe that waking life is also a creation of my own mind. The problem with this argument, however, is that it is one thing to speculate that waking life might be a creation of the mind, but quite another to prove that it actually is. Further, in dreams the mind does not, in fact, create an entire world: It rearranges material that is stored in memory after having been encountered in waking life (e.g., I can dream of a goat with the head of an eagle only because when awake I have seen goats and eagles).

When I mentioned this argument earlier, I noted that it bears the influence of Vedanta — especially, it would seem, the Katha Upanishad. However, Vedanta does not offer a Western-style subjective idealism. Some of my readers will no doubt object to this and will insist that the similarities are very great: “After all, doesn’t the Indian tradition teach us about the veil of maya, illusion, and isn’t this something very much like Kantian phenomena? Aren’t we being told that the world we experience is only images, of which the Absolute Self (Atman) is the author? Aren’t we told, just as in Evola’s idealism (or Fichte’s) that you are it (tat tvam asi)?” In fact, however, none of this is correct.

It is a mistake to interpret the doctrine of maya along the lines of Western subjective idealism — in other words, to believe it asserts that the world we experience is just images in our minds, and thus has no existence independent of minds. When Indian philosophy calls the world illusion, it does not mean that it is “not there” (or “not out there”), or that it is only “images.” In fact, Vedanta claims that the world really exists, but that it lacks true being and is fundamentally misleading; it captivates us, and therefore has the tendency to lead us away from a deeper reality. The point of the dream analogy one finds in Vedanta is therefore not to say that the world might just be images in our minds; it is to call attention to our tendency to become completely absorbed in that which is not the true, fundamental being. As Wendy Doniger puts it,

To say that the universe is an illusion (māyā) is not to say that it is unreal; it is to say, instead, that it is not what it seems to be, that it is something constantly being made. Māyā not only deceives people about the things they think they know; more basically, it limits their knowledge.[19]

I would add that Western subjective idealism is possible — as I argued earlier — only because it accepts the basic premises of representationalism, and that representationalism is possible only if we postulate a radical divide between a world “in here,” in my mind, and a world “out there.” I maintained earlier that this division is not only philosophically indefensible, it also does not appear in Western philosophy before the modern period. I would argue likewise that it also does not appear in classical Indian philosophy. There are thus very fundamental disanalogies between Western-style idealism and Indian thought.

But there is more — and it is highly significant. Vedanta does indeed teach that “you are it” (tat tvam asi) — meaning that I am identical to the source of all being (Brahman). But this claim is fundamentally different from the one that Evola makes in his magical idealism. Vedanta does not claim that “I” am Brahman; it does not maintain that my finite self, sometimes called “ego,” is “it.” Instead, it claims that Atman is Brahman, and Atman is the “true self” that exists “beneath” (or “beyond”) the false ego-self. It is an impersonal and universal “absolute self,” and is therefore analogous to the Fichtean Absolute Ego, or Kantian transcendental subjectivity, which Evola sacrifices on the altar of the “absolute individual.” Evola, in other words, seeks to absolutize the finite self. Nothing could be further from the spirit of Vedanta. (See my short series of essays “Introduction to Vedanta,” starting here.)

Nor, I think, can one rescue Evola by insisting that his is a “Tantric” conception, and that he is following the traditional “left-hand path.” Even in “left-hand” forms of spirituality, the idea is to develop the finite self into something that it is not yet. The idea is for the finite self, in fact, to give way to, or to become identified with, an absolute self which contains none of my personal characteristics. In some texts, Evola seems perfectly aware of this. However, it is not at all clear that he sees this in the philosophical writings on the absolute individual. These do indeed seem (based, at least, on the summation in The Path of Cinnabar) to enjoin us to live as if our personal, finite egos were author of all that exists. Ironically, given his desire to eradicate the individual, Fichte is actually closer to Vedanta than Evola is (though Fichte’s aim is actually for the individual to wholly identify with society, on the principle of Du bist nichts, dein Volk ist alles.)

\*\*\*

In conclusion, I find that I cannot accept magical idealism, or the theory of the absolute individual, either as a metaphysical doctrine or as a “way.” However, as I noted at the very beginning of this essay, in order to really do justice to these ideas we must await the translation of Evola’s philosophical works — a project which, hopefully, some publisher will undertake in the near future. My criticisms are not meant in any way to diminish Evola’s achievements. Though I am unconvinced by Evola’s philosophy, it is still brilliantly imaginative, and reflects a deep engagement with German idealism (a subject quite beyond most readers, even well-educated ones). As this essay has amply illustrated, Evola’s ideas are certainly thought-provoking.

You can buy Jef Costello’s Heidegger in Chicago here

Nor should anything I said earlier be construed as a rejection of the idea of “tradition” and traditionalism. Nevertheless, what we need is to recover a more authentic understanding of tradition — of the pre-modern (and, I would say, pre-philosophical) wisdom of our ancestors. We need an understanding of tradition that is thoroughly grounded in scholarship (i.e., in actual evidence) — and not in the fertile imaginations of charismatic personalities. As I argued earlier (and elsewhere), part of the problem with Guénon and Evola is that they uncritically appropriate the ideas of Western metaphysics, assume they are far more ancient than they are, and then read them into other, unrelated texts and traditions.

One essential prerequisite for recovering a more authentic concept of tradition should therefore be a critical attitude toward Western metaphysics — i.e., the tradition that begins with the pre-Socratic philosophers and, if we follow Heidegger, ends with Nietzsche. The entire point of my series “Heidegger’s History of Metaphysics” is to engage in a kind of intellectual archeological dig, the purpose of which is to understand how we arrived at our present standpoint — in other words, how we went wrong. This activity of self-understanding, at the deepest level, is necessary (among other things) to avoid attributing our own beliefs and presuppositions to our pre-metaphysical ancestors. We imagine that we know exactly what “modernity” consists in, and that we are actively resisting it in our own souls and, so far as we are able, in the world around us. But we are all products of our time, and it is always the case that even the most thorough critics of the present are guilty now and then of taking assumptions unique to their own age for timeless truth. What I have argued in the foregoing is that this is precisely the mistake that Evola makes in his philosophical writings.

Though this is a topic for a future essay (or essays), I believe that Heidegger can be understood as engaged in this project of attempting to recover an authentic “tradition” partly through a “destruction” of Western metaphysics — it is just that he did not conceptualize it in “traditionalist” terms. My series on “Heidegger’s History of Metaphysics” is ongoing (though I no longer use “Heidegger’s History of Metaphysics” in the titles, and I no longer number the entries). It began with Plato and most recently reached Fichte (to whom I devoted five essays). This article on Evola can be considered a sort of “aside” within that series. Heidegger believed that Western metaphysics ended with Nietzsche, and that what has passed for metaphysics since then is mostly repetition. Evola’s heavy reliance upon Fichte certainly illustrates this point: Heidegger would see nothing fundamentally new in Evola’s philosophical writings.

What would “tradition” be, according to a Heideggerean (or neo-Heideggerean) perspective? I believe that, in large measure, it would look like the antithesis of much of what Evola offers in his philosophical writings. For Heidegger, the pre-metaphysical West was characterized by what we can call “openness to Being.” He tells us that the Greek response to Being was “wonder” (θαῦμα)[20] — an attitude of being struck by the sheer fact that things are, and that we are. To wonder at the sheer fact that this tree is is something fundamentally different, for example, from the attitude that wants to cut down the tree and turn it into paper or pencils. To use the language of German idealism and Evola, such an attitude wants to negate the being of the tree and impose on it a new being, one of our own design.

The attitude of wonder, by contrast, is one of openness and acceptance. It lets beings be what they are, and stands before their being and witnesses it, without any agenda. Wonder involves, at a deep level, an acceptance of real otherness, of that which transcends our understanding and control. In the ancient, pre-metaphysical West, our ancestors wondered at the fact that they lived in the midst of a world they had not created and could never fully manipulate and understand. In other words, wonder is, and must be, bound up with an acceptance of mystery.

And to affirm mystery is to affirm human finitude. Mysteries exist precisely because of the limitations on our ability to know or to understand. Thus, if wonder is bound up with an acceptance of mystery, then it must also involve the acceptance of human finitude. This is the standpoint, in fact, that Heidegger finds in Greek drama and poetry. One also finds the affirmation of mystery and human finitude in pre-philosophical Greek mythology, about which Heidegger has surprisingly little to say. There are numerous Greek myths that, in one way or another, remind us of the reality of human finitude, often through characters who are punished for their hubris, an extreme arrogance that seeks to overstep natural limits, especially the boundary between the human and the divine. (See the stories of Arachne, Cassiopeia, Icarus, Niobe, Phaethon, Salmoneus, and Tereus, among others.)

But Evola’s philosophical writings, and the metaphysical tradition they depend upon, negate “openness to Being,” otherness, and mystery. They also negate human finitude and affirm, in effect, the potential infinitude of man, the “absolute individual.” Arguably, the insistence that the human individual is not and can never be absolute is the core feature of an authentic, pre-modern and pre-metaphysical “tradition.” But, again, that is a tale for another time.