Chapter Five

The Ends of Metaphysics

Among the many “post”-isms, through which the thought of the present attempts both to create an orientation in regard to its historical place and possibilities, and simultaneously to express its frustration and anxiety about the lack of such an orientation, there is one – certainly predating all the others – which seems to enjoy, perhaps alone among them, strong consensual acceptance. We live in post-metaphysical times, at the times of, or even after, the end of metaphysics. The relatively broad unanimity with respect to this global description may, of course, be due to the fact that it seems to relate to some internal affair of philosophy – an activity which hardly commands a particularly great interest or respect today. Nevertheless such a consensus of philosophers over the state of philosophy seems to be a remarkable occurrence even in itself, given the ineliminable strife of its sects which characterises its whole history.

So it should not come as a great surprise that even in this case the *concordia philosophorum* proves to be a mere mirage, a purely verbal agreement. For the attribute “post-metaphysical” can be – and is today – understood not
only in different, but in principally opposed ways. On the one hand, it can be conceived as the description of what our epoch actually is as a state of privation and perhaps the root of its malaises: a fact of cultural deficit. And this can be articulated either from the standpoint of a conservative critique of modernity or as an attempt genuinely to think through its ultimate consequences. In the first case it then gives rise to vague hopes or nostalgic desires for an eventual return; in the second, to definite programs of the renewal of metaphysics.

On the other hand, “post-metaphysical” is used also to designate not the actual state of the general consciousness, but precisely the task of thinking to overcome this latter, still bogged down in a particularly thoughtless and virulent form of metaphysics, a remnant or the last consequence of its once grand and fertile project. And post-metaphysical thinking as the task of the day again can be conceived either as the consistent realisation of the demands of modernity (or post-modernity), or as the harbinger of its hoped-for end.

The opposed programs of the renovation of, and the radical break with, metaphysics are, of course, supported by weighty philosophical arguments. It is, however, perhaps not devoid of interest that they were and are, almost from the very beginning of the twentieth century, also regularly accompanied with opposed diagnoses concerning the contemporary state of philosophy. Some perceived in it the unmistakable signs of a renewed, others of an irreversibly declining, theoretical interest in metaphysics. This undercurrent of the relatively recent dispute between Dieter Henrich and Odo Marquard on the one side, and Jürgen Habermas on the other, seems only to repeat a cultural constellation that slowly becomes quite habitual.

More importantly, the intellectual success of both these opposed projects, though they are now of respectable, almost century-long alterity, still seems to be quite questionable – and questionable from the viewpoint of their own standards, expectations and adherents. Calls for the renewal of metaphysics usually remained mere programs. Attempts at its realisation – when not generally judged (as for example in the case of Nicolai Hartmann) simply to revert to a now anachronistic style of thought – often are charged by their own side with the mere usurpation of the elevated name of metaphysics. For are not the various models of an “analytic metaphysics” – to bring up one of the more frequently mentioned examples – not so much the antidotes against,