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Mainländer's Philosophy of Redemption

1. The Heroic Pessimist

On the night of 1 April 1876, the young Philipp Batz, only 34 years old, standing on stacked copies of his just published philosophical work, hanged himself. Some thought Batz was insane; others said he had been depressed. But his suicide, which had been long planned,[1] was also an act of conviction; it was indeed the final will and testament of his philosophy. In a pessimistic age, Batz was perhaps the most radical pessimist of them all. Like all pessimists, he taught that life is suffering, and that it is not worth living. Unlike the others, however, Batz not only taught pessimism; he lived it and breathed it, making its ascetic principles the basis of his conduct. He alone was willing to take pessimism to its ultimate conclusion: suicide.

The book that provided the platform for Batz's suicide on that sad night was his life's work, *Die Philosophie der Erlösung*,[2] whose first volume appeared in 1876, just days before his death. In the months before his suicide, Batz had written a second supplementary volume, which would be published only in 1886.[3] Apart from his philosophical work, Batz wrote dramas, a long historical play, *Die letzten Hohenstaufen*,[4] and a comedy, *Die Macht der Motive*.[5] His knack for poetry made him a good prose writer.

Die Philosophie der Erlösung is an idiosyncratic masterpiece. It is the exposition of a complete worldview, containing an epistemology, metaphysics, aesthetics, physics, ethics and politics. All these elements of the book support its underlying gospel: that salvation from the misery of life lies only in death, which is nothingness. Batz was

[1] On Batz's final reflections before his suicide, see Walther Rauschenberger, 'Aus der letzten Lebenszeit Philipp Mainländers: Nach ungedruckten Briefen und Aufzeichnungen des Philosophen', in *Süddeutsche Monatshefte,* IX (1911/12), 117–31. It is noteworthy that Batz's older brother and older sister also committed suicide.

[2] The first edition appeared as *Die Philosophie der Erlösung* (Berlin: Grieben, 1876). We will cite Mainländer's works according to *Schriften*, ed. Winfried H. Müller-Seyfarth (Hildesheim: Olms Verlag, 1996). 4 vols. An abridged version, selected and edited by Ulrich Horstmann, appeared with Suhrkamp Verlag in 1989. For a complete catalogue of Mainländer's works, see *Schriften,* IV. 474.

[3] *Die Philosophie der Erlösung*, Zweiter Band. *Zwölf philosophische Essays.* Frankfurt: C. Koenitzer, 1886. Second edition1894.

[4] *Die Letzten Hohenstaufen: Ein dramatisches Gedicht in drei Theilen* (Leipzig: Heinrich Schmidt & Carl Günther, 1876). Reprint 1997 as volume III of *Schriften*,.

[5] *Die Macht der Motive* was first published in 1998 in *Schriften*, IV. 79–187.

confident that his system was the culmination of all philosophy. He claimed that it combined into a single vision, into a perfect organic whole, all the essential truths of idealism and realism, monism and pluralism, Christianity and Buddhism.[6]

The primary purpose of Batz's work was to explain the cardinal doctrines of Christianity—"the greatest of all world religions"—on a secular or rational basis. His soteriology can be equally described as Christianized paganism or paganized Christianity. We learn that the esoteric meaning of all the essential truths of Christianity—the incarnation, trinity, the resurrection—is that the suffering of life is redeemed only in death, which is the peace of utter nothingness. That death is nothingness is, of course, what the pagan Epicurus taught; but it is also, Batz tells us, what Christ really meant. In the course of explaining Christian doctrine, Batz introduces a very modern and redolent theme: the death of God. He popularized the theme before Nietzsche, though he gives it a much more metaphysical meaning.

Besides the death of God, Batz's philosophy contains another signature doctrine, one no less powerful, puzzling and original. This is his idea of the death wish, i.e. that the inner striving of all beings, the final goal of all their activity, is death.[7] At the core of everyone, Batz teaches us, lies their deep longing for utter nothingness. Schopenhauer's aimless and blind will turns out to have a goal after all: death. Batz admits that there is an instinct for self-preservation in all of us; but he insists that, upon reflection, this desire for life is really only the means for death. We will life only for the sake of death. Batz finds this longing for death not only in each individual, but in the general process of history, whose sole and ultimate goal is death. In some following sections I shall examine the metaphysical and ethical basis for this paradoxical doctrine.[8]

In a letter to his publisher Batz expressed the wish for his work to be published under the pseudonym *Philipp Mainländer*, a name that honoured his home town, Offenbach am Main.[9] Batz told his publisher he wanted to be called this until his death and for all time. Ever since, Batz's request has been honoured, and he has been known almost exclusively by his pseudonym. Henceforth I will honour that custom.

Mainländer gives the lie to the common generalization that pessimism goes hand-in-hand with a conservative or reactionary politics. He was a social democrat or communist, preaching the value of free love and the equal distribution of wealth. He had the deepest sympathy for the suffering of the common man and much of his thinking was preoccupied with "the social question", i.e. the poverty of the mass of people and the workers. One of the chief aims of his *Philosophie der Erlösung* was to provide a message of redemption for the common man. While Schopenhauer limited deliverance to the elite few—the saint or artistic genius—Mainländer extended it to the whole

[6] See Batz's summary of his philosophy, 'Die Philosophie der Erlösung', in *Die Philosophie der Erlösung,* II. 233–42.

[7] According to Ludger Lütkehaus, Mainländer was the proper discoverer of the death wish, and Freud only rehabilitated the idea. See his *Nichts* (Frankfurt: Zweitausendeins, 2003), p. 251.

[8] See sections 2 and 4 below. [9] See 'Aus meinem Leben', *Schriften,* IV. 366–7.

of humanity.[10] It is not the least token of Mainländer's humanity that he was sympathetic to the Jews, whose charity and sagacity he much admired.[11]

Mainländer's radical politics raises, however, a problem of consistency. If we take his pessimism seriously, as we must, it becomes difficult to reconcile with his left-wing convictions. For while his pessimism preaches resignation and quietism, his radical politics teaches the value of resistance and activism. This tension lies at the very heart of Mainländer's philosophy, and poses its deepest challenge. I will consider in the final section Mainländer's attempt to address this apparent inconsistency.

The task of the following chapter is to provide an introduction to the basic ideas of Mainländer's philosophy, the study of which has lately undergone a renaissance.[12] It is a mistake to underestimate Mainländer as a philosopher, as Nietzsche once had.[13] Mainländer not only makes penetrating criticisms of Kant and Schopenhauer, but he also creates a coherent and original worldview. His interpretations of traditional Christian doctrines, while not historically accurate, are interesting in their own right as attempts to rehabilitate them from a modern perspective. Few philosophers thought with as much passion as Mainländer, and few attempted to live so completely and honestly according to their philosophy. We must pay him high tribute: Mainländer was the heroic pessimist, the only one willing to live—and die—by his convictions.

2. Life and Philosophical Education

Mainländer's death brought to an end a remarkable career, one filled with a passionate devotion to the life of the spirit. He was born 5 October 1841, the youngest son of a wealthy bourgeois family. From 1848 to 1856 Mainländer attended the Realschule in Offenbach, and then went to a business school in Dresden. Mainländer never went to a university, and he was self-taught in literature and philosophy. Such an education gave his thinking not only its simplicity but also its originality. After finishing business school in 1858, he went to work in various trades in Italy, where he lived for five years. The Italian years were the happiest of his life. Mainländer learned Italian, wrote poetry

[10] See Mainländer's critique of Schopenhauer in his 'Aehrenlese', Essay 11 of the second volume II of *Die Philosophie der Erlösung, Schriften*, IV. 481–505.

[11] See his comments in the 'Anhang' to *Philosophie der Erlösung*, I. 597–8.

[12] Recently, in addition to the new editions of Mainländer's works stated in n. 2, several collections of articles on Mainländer have appeared. See *"Die modernen Pessimisten als décadents": Von Nietzsche zu Horstmann. Texte zur Rezeptionsgeschichte von Philipp Mainländers Philosophie der Erlösung*, ed. Winfried Müller-Seyfarth (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1993); *Was Philipp Mainländer ausmacht: Offenbacher Mainländer Symposium* 2001, ed. Winfried Müller-Seyfarth (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2002); *Anleitung zum glücklichen Nichtssein: Offenbacher Mainländer-Essaywettbewerb*, ed. Winfried Müller-Seyfarth (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2006). Also see the monograph by Winfried Müller-Seyfarth, *Metaphysik der Entropie: Philipp Mainländers transzendentale Analyse und ihre ethisch-metaphysische Relevanz* (Berlin: Van Bremen, 2000).

[13] See Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* §357, in *Sämtliche Werke*, III. 601–2. Nietzsche asks himself whether the "*süsslichen Virginitäts-Apostel Mainländer*" can be counted among the genuine Germans, and concludes "*Zuletzt wird es ein Jude gewesen sein (—alle Juden werden süsslich, wenn sie moralisieren)*." I leave Nietzsche scholars to ponder the meaning and value of his opinion.

and read Italian literature. In 1863 he was called home to Germany to take over his father's factory. But the work did not suit him, and he longed to escape. He dreamed of a romantic life as a Prussian soldier. But, because of his age, his efforts to enlist failed, so he went to work with a banking firm in Berlin. This work too stifled him; he strived to earn a fortune through speculation, so that he could devote the rest of his life to philosophy and literature; but the crash of the stock market in 1873 ruined him. Mainländer's attempt to become a soldier finally succeeded in October 1874 when he was allowed to join the Halberstädter Kürassieren, a cavalry regiment. His autobiography provides a fascinating portrait of a cavalryman in the last days of that dying profession. The one year Mainländer spent as a cavalryman proved exciting but exhausting. He had enlisted to stay for three years; but for family and health reasons, he lasted only one and left in November 1875. The five months after leaving the army and before his death were some of his most productive. Mainländer left behind, unpublished, a novel, drafts for two dramas, and the second volume of *Die Philosophie der Erlösung*.

Mainländer's philosophical education began early, in 1858, while he was apprenticed to a banking firm in Naples. The first philosophical work he read was Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus*. This book, he later wrote, "created a revolution in me" (97).[14] "It was as if a thousand veils fell before my eyes, as if an impenetrable morning fog had sunk and as if I saw for the first time the sun rising. I was only seventeen, and I must praise the director of fate that the first philosophical writing put into my hands was this treatise of the great man." It was probably Spinoza who made him skeptical of traditional theism, and who taught him that the truth of the Christian mysteries lay in their ethical message alone. Mainländer also said that Spinoza's views about the state and natural law became "my flesh and blood" (97). He read the *Ethica* too; though he perused it slowly and brooded over some sentences for hours, he confessed he found it too difficult to understand. Significantly, he felt an inner resistance to Spinoza's pantheism—an anticipation of his later rejection of monism.

Two years later, in February 1860, while on a return trip to Germany, Mainländer made another momentous discovery, encountering another philosopher who would have an even greater influence upon him. That philosopher was, of course, Arthur Schopenhauer. He reckoned "the most important day of his life" the one when he ran across Schopenhauer's *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* in a bookstore. This is how Mainländer himself tells the tale:

I went into a bookstore and leafed through the latest books from Leipzig. There I found Schopenhauer's *Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*. Schopenhauer? Who was Schopenhauer? I never heard the name. I paged through the work, and I read of the denial of the will to life;...the text had now entranced me. I forgot my surroundings and sank into myself. Finally I asked: 'What does it cost?' '6 dukats'. 'Here is the money'. I grabbed my treasure and stormed

[14] See Fritz Sommerlad, 'Aus dem Leben Philipp Mainländers. Mitteilungen aus der handschriftlichen Selbstbiographie des Philosophen', *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik*, 112 (1898), 74–101. Reprinted in Müller-Seyfarth, *"Die modernen Pessimisten als décadents"*, pp. 93–113. All references in parentheses here are to the later edition.

like a crazy man from the bookshop and went home, where I read the first volume from beginning to end. It was broad daylight when I finished; I had read it the whole night through. When I finally stood up, I felt myself newborn." (98)

After that fateful February day, Mainländer would continue to read Schopenhauer, studying all his writings until they became part of himself. "I read Schopenhauer's work as a pious soul reads the Bible: to strengthen oneself" (101). Yet, despite his veneration for the Frankfurt sage, Mainländer insists that, from the very beginning, he was still critical of him and that he disagreed with him on many points (98). After reading Spinoza, he found Schopenhauer's political views to be naïve. Furthermore, he already had doubts about Schopenhauer's "half-monism". These early doubts would eventually surface in his later philosophy. Mainländer was slow, however, in articulating them. It was only in 1865, after the trauma of his mother's death, that he began to commit them to paper. From his critique of Schopenhauer, he later wrote, he could see, though only through a glass darkly, the outlines of his chief work (102).

Given that Mainländer's philosophy grew out of his *critique* of Schopenhauer, we should beware of reducing him down to a mere disciple or apostle.[15] Mainländer accepts two of Schopenhauer's cardinal doctrines: that the will is the thing-in-itself; and that life consists in suffering, so that nothingness is better than being. But he departs from central doctrines of Schopenhauer's metaphysics and ethics: his transcendental idealism, i.e. the theory that the external world consists only in our representations; his monism, i.e. the postulate of a cosmic will that exists in all individual wills; and the thesis that the criterion of morality consists in selfless actions.

The beginning of the Franco-Prussian war in 1870 had a powerful effect on Mainländer. Not only did it arouse his patriotism: it also inspired his philosophy. "The feelings that the war aroused in my breast", he later wrote, "were the birth pangs of my philosophy of redemption" (102). But the path from conception to execution is often a long one, and so it was in Mainländer's case. Starting in June 1872, he wrote in three months the first draft of his system; and, after rereading Kant and Schopenhauer, he wrote in the next four months the second draft (104). It was only in the summer of 1874, before beginning his year of military service, that he finished the final draft, which had now grown enormously in size, many times its original length (107). After finishing the work he was filled with elation and foreboding. This is how he described his feelings:

I felt serene that I had forged a good sword, but at the same time I felt a cold dread in me for starting on a course more dangerous than any other philosopher before me. I attacked giants and dragons, everything existing, holy and honourable in state and science: God, the monster

[15] Otto Siebert classified Mainländer among Schopenhauer's "*Anhänger*". See his *Geschichte der neueren deutschen Philosophie seit Hegel* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1898), pp. 239–40. Olga Plümacher placed Mainländer in the "*Schopenhauer'schen Schule*", though she stressed that she used the term "*Schule*" in the widest sense to designate only a general tendency of thought. See her '*Einleitung*' to *Zwei Individualisten der Schopenhauer'sche Schule* (Vienna: Rosner, 1881), pp. 1–6.

of 'the infinite', the species, the powers of nature, and the modern state; and in my stark naked atheism I validated only the individual and egoism. Nevertheless, above them both lay the splendour of the preworldly unity, of God . . . the holy spirit, the greatest and most significant of the three divine beings. Yes, it lay 'brooding with wings of the dove' over the only real things in the world, the individual and its egoism, until it was extinguished in eternal peace, in absolute nothingness. (108)

Having finally finished his masterpiece, and having said all that he wanted to say, Mainländer felt empty and exhausted. His mission was accomplished, his life at a close. What better time to end it all?

3. The Gospel of Redemption

The heart and soul of Mainländer's philosophy lies in its gospel of redemption. That gospel is very simple, and it can be summarized in two propositions: (1) that redemption or deliverance comes only with death; and (2) that death consists in nothingness, complete annihilation. All of Mainländer's philosophy is devoted to the explanation and defence of this gospel.

Fundamental to Mainländer's gospel is Schopenhauer's pessimism. With few reservations, Mainländer endorses Schopenhauer's bleak doctrine.[16] He accepts its central thesis: that nothingness is better than being, that existence is worse than non-existence. And he approves the justification for it: that life is suffering. If we calculate all the pleasures and pains of this life, we find that, on balance, the pains vastly outweigh the pleasures.[17]

This fundamental fact about human existence—the primacy of suffering, the preponderance of pain over pleasure—means that we stand in need of redemption, of some form of deliverance. Release from suffering, Mainländer insists, comes with death alone. Since death extinguishes all desire, it destroys all suffering, which has its source in the frustration of desire.

Although Mainländer insists that redemption comes only with the fact of death, he also thinks that contemplating this fact—facing the reality of death and accepting its forthcoming annihilation—gives us the appropriate attitude to withstand the sorrow and suffering of life.[18] If we firmly keep in mind that death is nothingness, if we fully realize that our existence ends in annihilation, we will come close to the tranquillity

[16] See 'Ethik', §12, *Die Philosophie der Erlösung, Schriften,* I. 183–4; and 'Anhang', I. 575. Mainländer does not accept Schopenhauer's thesis that pleasure has only a negative quality. See 'Aehrenlese', *Die Philosophie der Erlösung, Schriften,* II. 467. In his 'Kritik der Hartmann'sche Philosophie', *Die Philosophie der Erlösung,* II. 529–653, Mainländer, though otherwise severely critical of Hartmann, praises his pessimism and accepts its main conclusions (p. 629).

[17] See 'Aehrenlese', *Die Philosophie der Erlösung, Schriften,* II. 467.

[18] Mainländer describes this attitude in most detail in 'Das wahre Vertrauen', in *Die Philosophie der Erlösung*, II. 243–70.

and serenity preached by the Stoic sage and the Christian mystic (217).[19] We will realize that nothing in the world really matters anymore, so that we will accept all that happens to us with equanimity. The final lines of the main text of *Philosophie der Erlösung* express this teaching with utter clarity: "The wise man looks in the eye, firmly and joyfully, absolute nothingness" (358).

In a revealing passage from his autobiography,[20] Mainländer tells us about the personal origins of his gospel. After quitting a hated job at a Berlin banking firm, he was desperate and destitute. He had no idea of what the future would bring. For several days he wandered through the streets as if lost in a trance. "Then suddenly an electrifying flash drove through my heart, and I was filled with an insurmountable longing for death. And then there began a new life within me . . . a period of my life, where I sacrificed myself to fate with love and out of conviction. What happened to me is what the Christians called the effect of grace." It was an experience straight out of the playbook of the *Theologica germanica*, a text which Mainländer revered and made his guide in life.[21] The central concept of that inspiring work—acceptance, resignation or *Gelassenheit*—would become the heart of Mainländer's ethics.

While Mainländer's gospel of redemption has great debts to Schopenhauer, we understand its motivation and purpose only if we recognize that it is a reaction against him.[22] Mainländer praises Schopenhauer for his doctrine of the denial of the will to life, which he thinks should be the basis for ethics (559). But Schopenhauer, he argues, compromises this important principle by clinging to a doctrine of immortality and an afterlife. He held that there is in everyone a cosmic will; and though the individual is destroyed by death, this cosmic will remains and is eternal.[23] It is as if we never escape the cosmic will and never find true annihilation. We are in its clutches even in death because our individuality dissolves into it. Schopenhauer regarded this eternal core in every individual as a source of metaphysical comfort, a proof of eternal existence against the fact of death. For Mainländer, however, this belief in immortality is only a self-deception, a betrayal of the doctrine of self-renunciation, which requires a complete denial of the will in all its forms. The only will that exists, Mainländer insists, is the *individual* will, so that when that will dies nothing remains. If we are to achieve complete tranquillity and composure in the face of death, then we have to realize that nothingness triumphs totally, leaving no trace of the will. Only when the will dies, utterly, entirely and completely, is there deliverance and liberation.

[19] All references in parentheses are to the main text of *Die Philosophie der Erlösung, Schriften,* I. 1–358, or to its appendix, *Schriften,* I. 359–623.

[20] *Aus meinem Leben, Schriften,* IV. 338.

[21] On its importance for Mainländer, see *Aus meinem Leben, Schriften,* IV. 374, 403.

[22] In a later essay, 'Der Idealismus', attached to the second volume of *Die Philosophie der Erlösung*, Mainländer makes clear the importance of this point for his own philosophy. He states that if it were not for Schopenhauer's postulate of a cosmic will in addition to the individual will he would have had little to correct in his philosophy. See II. 65–6. See also 'Aehrenlese', *Philosophie der Erlösung, Schriften,* II. 485.

[23] See Schopenhauer, 'Über den Tod', *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung, Werke,* II. 590–651.

Mainländer saw his philosophy of redemption as timely, as the solution to the most urgent problem of modern humanity. This problem came from a terrible tension in the modern soul: on the one hand, a deep need for religion; on the other hand, a loss of religious faith. Since suffering is the eternal fate of mankind, there is still the great need for deliverance from it; but the traditional sources of religious belief are no longer credible to the general educated public.[24] No one believed anymore in the existence of a heaven beyond the earth where a paternal God rewarded the virtuous and punished the wicked. Hence Mainländer saw the purpose of his philosophy as the formulation of a modern doctrine of redemption, a doctrine that should be completely consistent with the naturalistic worldview of modern science. His philosophy, he was proud to say, would be "the first attempt to ground the essential truths of salvation on the basis of nature alone" (223). The only doctrine of redemption consistent with a modern scientific view of the world, Mainländer maintained, is that which preaches utter nothingness, the complete annihilation of death.

There was, of course, nothing new to such a theory of death. The thesis that death is complete nothingness, the annihilation of the individual, was a central pillar of the Epicurean tradition. The wise Epicurus knew that there is nothing to fear in death, because death means the dissolution of the body, which is the source of all pleasure and pain. Since good and evil are measured in terms of pleasure and pain, death is neither good nor evil; it is just a simple fact that we have to accept at the end of our natural lives. We can accept it easily if we only firmly keep in mind the maxim: "When I am there, it [death] is not; when it is there, I am not." Mainländer accepts the essence of this theory of death; yet he gives it a completely different twist from the Epicurean. For Mainländer, death means deliverance, because life is essentially suffering and there is a need to escape from it. For Epicurus, however, death is not deliverance but simply the natural end of life. Since Epicurus held that we can achieve the highest good on this earth and in this life, he could see no reason for redemption. It is here, in preaching the need for redemption, that we see the deep Christian roots of Mainländer's philosophy.

Mainländer's gospel of redemption was not, however, entirely Christian. It was a paradoxical fusion of the classical pagan and Christian traditions. Mainländer accepted one central principle common to these traditions: that the highest good is happiness, which consists in tranquillity, equanimity, peace of mind. This ideal of the highest good appears in the Epicurean, Stoic and Christian traditions. Its greatest Christian exponent was Augustine, who had turned it against the Epicureans and Stoics by arguing that the highest good cannot be achieved in this life.[25] This life was too filled with suffering and sorrow, Augustine argued, for someone to achieve tranquillity within it. Since Mainländer shares Augustine's pessimism about this life, he endorses his argument against the pagans. He disagrees with Augustine, however, by

[24] On this crisis, see 'Das wahre Vertrauen', *Die Philosophie der Erlösung,* II. 249–50.

[25] See Augustine, *The City of God*, translated by R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), Book XIX, pp. 909–64.

denying the existence of a heavenly realm where all suffering will be redeemed. It is only when we realize that death brings complete annihilation, Mainländer holds, that we achieve the tranquillity of the highest good. So Mainländer joins Christian pessimism to the pagan view about the end of life.

Mainländer's attitude toward the traditional Christian conception of the highest good emerges from his statements about Christian mysticism. The happiest person on earth, Mainländer teaches, is the Christian mystic (197). Because he understands that life is suffering, the Christian mystic attempts to stand above it and to steel himself against its misfortunes. He gets to this point, though, because he believes that there is a heaven beyond this world where he will find his true happiness; but this belief, Mainländer insists, is only the first stepping stone toward true redemption (198–9). Only when the mystic grasps the true meaning of Christ's gospel—that serenity resides in pure nothingness alone—does he develop the equanimity and tranquillity of real happiness. The true mystic learns that salvation comes not with belief in a supernatural realm that satisfies our desires but in the complete renunciation and eventual extinction of desire; only then do the troubles and torments of life cease to matter to him.

It is in this context that we should understand Mainländer's paradoxical doctrine of the death wish. The inner striving of the will is for death because it is only in death that we find true happiness, which is the highest good for every human being. Such happiness resides in complete tranquillity and peace, which comes only with death, the utter nothingness of annihilation. If Mainländer describes life as a means toward death that is because death promises what life really wants: tranquillity and peace.

4. Mainländer and the Young Hegelian Tradition

Much of the motivation behind Mainländer's philosophy of redemption is revealed in the 'Vorwort' to the *Philosophie der Erlösung.* Mainländer writes there that the mission of his philosophy is self-emancipation, the liberation of humanity from its own self-imposed bondage. The history of the world is the story of this self-emancipation, Mainländer tells us. In its path towards self-liberation, humanity goes through the stages of polytheism, monotheism and atheism; in this process humanity learns to be more self-critical and self-conscious of its own powers; it sees how it has enslaved itself to entities of its own making; and so it grows in autonomy, its power to lead life according to its own self-conscious goals and ideals. Humanity is at present at the end of the stage of pantheism, the last stage of monotheism, which appears either in a dynamic (Hegel) or a static (Schopenhauer) form. Now, as humanity nears the final stage, the individual demands the restoration of his rights, the repossession of the powers that he once squandered on heaven.

Mainländer's statement about the mission of his philosophy, and his narrative about the self-emancipation of humanity, show his great debt to Feuerbach and the neo-Hegelian tradition. In his emphasis upon the rights of the individual, Mainländer resembles no one more than Max Stirner, the most radical of the neo-Hegelians, who

would free the individual of every form of self-bondage, whether it came from morality, the state or religion. Like Stirner, Mainländer wants the modern individual to make his own will the centre of his universe, so that all value stems from it alone.

Despite these similarities, there is still the greatest difference between Mainländer and Stirner, and indeed all his neo-Hegelian contemporaries and predecessors. Namely, Mainländer wants self-liberation not so that we *reclaim* the earth but so that we *renounce* it. The neo-Hegelians believed that life can be redeemed if only human beings regain their powers and create the world in their own image; but Mainländer holds just the opposite: that life is irredeemable suffering and that redemption lies only in leaving it. For all their criticisms of state and church, the neo-Hegelians were fundamentally optimistic about life, believing that life is worth living if we only have the power to create it according to our own ideals; the source of suffering for them lay not in existence itself but in corrupt and exploitative moral and political institutions. Mainländer's pessimism divides him utterly from the neo-Hegelians. He finds their optimism naïve. For him the chief sources of suffering lie in existence itself; even in the best state, and even with the greatest progress of the sciences, the main forms of suffering will remain. There will always be the traumas and troubles of birth, sickness, age and death (206–7).

Besides their opposing views about the value of life, there is another important difference between Mainländer and the neo-Hegelian tradition. This concerns their opposing attitudes toward the Christian heritage. Both saw traditional theism as a source of self-imposed bondage, as the hypostasis of human values and powers. Hence both believed it necessary to break with traditional Christian dogma, especially its belief in the supernatural and the kingdom of heaven beyond this earth. For the neo-Hegelians, however, the reckoning with the Christian tradition concerns not only its dogmas but also its values (viz., faith, hope, chastity, humility, self-renunciation). These values will have no place in the brave new earthly kingdom created by man alone. But, for Mainländer, the break with Christian dogma should *not* also be a break with Christian values. We can reinterpret those values so that they are in accord with modern secular life. The old ethics of chastity, humility and self-renunciation still have their importance in a world where evil and suffering prevail, and where people remain caught in the snares of natural desire. If we realize that the only escape from suffering, the only cure for natural desire, lies in the denial of the will to life, we are on the way to a reinterpretation of Christian ethics.

Despite his proclamation of egoism and atheism, it is astonishing how much Mainländer continues to see his own life in religious terms. In his autobiography he finds the workings of providence in all the major events of his career, and he sees his mission in life as an apostle to spread the gospel of redemption.[26] His aspiration to be a common soldier in the cavalry was inspired by the Christian doctrine of self-humiliation.

[26] See 'Aus meinem Leben', *Schriften,* IV. 318, 363, 405.

The core of his ethical doctrine—"surrender to the universal", i.e. submission to the higher ethical order of the state—was his substitute for the Christian cross.[27]

Mainländer retains and reinterprets at least three core Christian values, which he strived to realize in his own life. First, the virtues of chastity and self-denial. Second, the mystical ideal of *Gelassenheit*, i.e. complete indifference to the world, resignation to all the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Third, the importance of faith and trust in providence, the belief that the universe is governed for the good and that each individual gains by it.

5. Philosophical Foundations

Although the heart of the philosophy of redemption lies in its ethics, and more specifically in its gospel of redemption, Mainländer knew that his ethics requires an epistemological and metaphysical foundation. Without such a foundation, its gospel could be misunderstood, misinterpreted or corrupted. Even worse, there would be no reason to accept his gospel over its rivals, the many competing accounts of redemption. Confident that redemption could be found through his philosophy alone, Mainländer set about providing it with an epistemological and metaphysical foundation. Accordingly, most of the first volume of *Die Philosophie der Erlösung* is devoted to a discussion of the epistemological and metaphysical issues behind his ethics.

A central pillar of Mainländer's philosophy of redemption is its principle of *immanence*, i.e. the demand that philosophy stay within the limits of human experience and that it not postulate causes that transcend or cannot be confirmed by it (3, 199). This means for Mainländer that the content of our concepts has to be taken from human sensation or intuition, which alone gives us knowledge of existence. An immanent philosophy is also for Mainländer a *naturalistic* philosophy, i.e. one that explains everything on the basis of efficient or mechanical laws, and that refuses to grant constitutive status to final or supernatural causes.[28] Since it is immanent and naturalistic, Mainländer believed that his philosophy of redemption is based upon strictly the modern scientific view of the world.

The principle of immanence has the profoundest moral implications for Mainländer. It lays down the basis for a purely humanist ethics, one that banishes any ethics based on alleged supernatural authority, whether that is a holy book or a mystical experience. It also means that redemption cannot be found in any belief in a supernatural world in the hereafter. Although Mainländer thinks that the meaning of life is found in death,

[27] Ibid., p. 368.

[28] On Mainländer's critical stance toward teleology, see *Philosophie der Erlösung,* I. 20, 480, 484. See also his important statement in *Philosophie der Erlösung*, II. 570–1. Here Mainländer states that the purposiveness of the world is not to be denied, and that he has appealed to teleology only once in his work, namely, regarding the original creation of the world, although even there he understands the purpose of the creation in a strictly regulative sense.

which is not within our experience, death is nothingness to him precisely because it is the end of human experience, which determines the limits of intelligibility for us.

Another central pillar of Mainländer's philosophy of redemption is its *nominalism*, i.e. its belief that only particular or determinate things exist. The pillars of immanence and nominalism support one another. Everything in our experience, everything that we sense, feel or intuit, is particular; references to abstract entities—species, ideas, universals or archetypes—are transcendent because we cannot have any experience of them. Although Mainländer gives no systematic defence or exposition of his nominalism, it is perfectly explicit all the same: "There are only individuals in the world" (482; cf. 144).[29] Following this principle, Mainländer often states that the world consists only in a *collection* of individuals; it is only the sum of its individual members; there is no unity above and beyond them (144, 199).

It is on the basis of his nominalism that Mainländer justifies one of his foundational doctrines: "There is only *one* principle in the world: the *individual* will for life; it has nothing else alongside it" (50). Whenever he refers to the will, Mainländer constantly italicizes the adjective "*individual*". The point of such emphasis is entirely polemical: he is prohibiting Schopenhauer's postulate of a single cosmic will within all individuals. This postulate, as we have seen, undermines the gospel of death, because *ex hypothesi* the cosmic will remains after the death of the individual will. In stressing that only the individual will exists, Mainländer is disputing the existence of this cosmic will and the hope for immortality based upon it. Having banished the cosmic will, Mainländer is then in a position to maintain that death will really bring redemption. With the destruction of the individual will, there will be only nothingness.

For Mainländer, the philosophy of redemption is also, crucially and necessarily, "idealism" (3). Idealism is indeed the basis for the immanence of the philosophy of redemption. Since idealism holds that we cannot jump beyond the powers of the knowing subject, it warns us not to transcend our experience and not to aspire to knowledge of another realm behind or beyond it (3). Idealism is for Mainländer closely connected with criticism, the examination of the powers and limits of our knowledge. As such, it advises us to know these powers and limits before we attempt to solve "the puzzle of the world".

Mainländer described his idealism as a "critical" or "transcendental" idealism, though he understood these terms in a specific sense, one that differs markedly from their meaning in Kant and Schopenhauer (40). A *critical* idealism is for Mainländer one that recognizes the subjective sources of our representations of space and time, and that refuses to ascribe *mathematical* space and time to things-in-themselves. A *transcendental* idealism is one that includes an *empirical realism*, though an empirical realism in a full-bodied sense, i.e. it assumes that experience gives us some knowledge of things that exist independent of our representations of them, namely, knowledge of

[29] Cf. *Die Philosophie der Erlösung*, II. 578. Here Mainländer criticizes Schopenhauer's belief in the real existence of species and declares: "*Es giebt nur Individuen in der Welt…*"

their extension and movement (41). Such idealism is "transcendental" in the sense that it gives us knowledge of the *objective* properties of a thing, i.e. properties that transcend our own consciousness of the thing, that exist in the thing itself, apart from and prior to awareness of it (12, 21).[30] Mainländer was critical of Kant's and Schopenhauer's version of empirical realism, because it did not ascribe sufficient independent existence to the objects of experience.[31] According to their empirical realism, experience consists in nothing more than representations, where these representations have objective validity only in the sense that they are governed according to universal and necessary rules; the representations, however, represent nothing beyond themselves, showing us nothing about things as they exist independent of us (454). Mainländer complains that Kant's and Schopenhauer's transcendental idealism comes too close to the idealism of Berkeley, which would ascribe reality only to representations (446–7). Kant's transcendental idealism, Mainländer objects, makes the thing-in-itself something completely unknowable, an indeterminable X, which he might as well have eliminated entirely (369).

As we have described it so far, there seems to be a contradiction in the heart of Mainländer's idealism. On the one hand, it intends to be completely immanent, refusing to make transcendent claims about any reality independent of our experience; on the other hand, however, it insists upon a full-blooded empirical realism that assumes we have knowledge of how things exist independent of our experience of them. The question then arises: how does the empirical realist know that the objects of experience give us knowledge of things-in-themselves, i.e. of things that exist independent of our consciousness of them? Mainländer himself explicitly raised this issue in the long appendix attached to the first volume of the *Philosophie der Erlösung*. The fundamental problem of epistemology, he explains, is this: how do we know that the object of experience is an appearance of the thing-in-itself? How do we know that it is more than a mere representation within consciousness? (437). Mainländer's response to this problem is that we are perfectly justified, on the basis of our experience, in assuming that the cause of a change in our perceptual states lies not in us but outside us, and in assuming that this something indeed exists independent of our consciousness of it (439). The cause cannot lie inside us, because the contents of our consciousness appear independent of our will and imagination; they change and vary when the activity of consciousness remains the same (439). So when we apply the principle of causality to the cause of our sensations, we are not really going beyond experience itself, because it is just *a fact of our experience* that its contents do not depend on us but on some factor independent of it.

[30] On these grounds Plümacher held that Mainländer's idealism is really a form of transcendental realism. See her *Zwei Individualisten*, p. 7. Yet Mainländer warned against conflating properties as we experience them with properties of things-in-themselves. See *Philosophie der Erlösung*, I. 3, 8.

[31] Mainländer did not recognize, therefore, the objective side of Schopenhauer's philosophy. See below chapter 3.5, and 5.5.

Mainländer maintains that Kant and Schopenhauer failed to recognize the objective or realistic dimension of experience because of their theory of space, according to which space is only an a priori intuition. This made them think that *all* spatial properties of an object are only the product of the mind, depending upon nothing more than the innate powers of our sensibility. Mainländer thinks that it was a great achievement of Kant's Transcendental Aesthetic to have demonstrated that *mathematical* space and time are not properties of things-in-themselves, and that they are constructions of the mind. Yet he insists that all Kant's arguments are valid only for *mathematical* space and time, i.e. space and time understood as homogeneous, uniform and continuous media. We construct such a space through the activity of synthesis, by extending a point in three directions (6). We construct such a time by drawing a line through all past and future moments of the present (15). However, particular spaces and times—the particular distances and intervals between things—are real and cannot be the creation of our consciousness alone. Particular spaces are marked by the limits of the efficacy of an object, i.e. its power to resist other bodies occupying its location (6–7, 446); and particular times are marked by movements, by how far something moves or changes place (15).

It is chiefly because the mind does not have the power to create *particular* spaces and times, still less the *particular* qualities of sensation, that Mainländer thinks we must introduce a realistic dimension to our experience. The a priori functions and forms of our mind consist in the activity of synthesis, which is essential to the constitution of our experience, just as Kant always argued. This activity is crucial for objects appearing as wholes and unities to us, and for us to understand the systematic interconnections between them. However, synthesis by itself is a merely formal activity, and it does not have the power to create everything in our experience, viz., the particular qualities of sensations, still less when, where and how they appear to us. The particular *manner* of synthesis—how, when and where we synthesize just these sensations and no others—depends on the cues given to us by things acting upon us, things that exist entirely independent of our consciousness (12, 21). Our activity of synthesis is therefore circumscribed by the individuality of things; only in following that individuality do we know what, when, where and how to synthesize (446).

In a retrospective essay on idealism in the second volume of *Die Philosophie der Erlösung,*[32] Mainländer summarized in an illuminating way both the strengths and weaknesses of Kant's and Schopenhauer's idealism. Kant and Schopenhauer were entirely correct to stress the a priori aspects of the cognitive faculty, and the contribution they make to knowledge of experience, he acknowledged. Without these a priori aspects, knowledge would be indeed impossible for us. But Kant and Schopenhauer went too far and were guilty of an elementary confusion. For it is one thing to say that the forms and functions of the mind are necessary for *knowledge* of the external world; and it is quite another to say that they are necessary for the *creation* of that world (69).

[32] 'Der Idealismus', *Philosophie der Erlösung*, II. 37–70.

Kant and Schopenhauer, Mainländer implies, have confused the *ratio cognoscendi* with the *ratio essendi*. Nowhere is this confusion more apparent than in Schopenhauer, who argues that because the principle of sufficient reason is a priori, having its origins in our mental activity, the cause of sensation lies within consciousness; in saying this, he confuses, Mainländer maintains, the *actual* efficacy of a thing acting on our sense organs with the conditions of our *perceiving* or *thinking* that this thing acts on them (440). But the principle of sufficient reason alone has no power to create our experience; it is only the condition under which we have knowledge of it. Once we separate *ratio cognoscendi* and *ratio essendi*, Mainländer holds, it is possible to incorporate a strong dose of empirical realism within idealism, for idealism then ceases to be a theory about the *existence* of things, and strictly one about the *knowledge* of things. Was that not for Kant himself, Mainländer could ask, the decisive difference between a critical and metaphysical idealism?

Why was Mainländer so bent on introducing a realistic dimension to his idealism? It is fundamental to pessimism, he insisted. If we hold that experience consists in nothing more than representations, as Kant and Schopenhauer say, then we cannot grant the reality of the suffering of others. Their apparent suffering will be nothing more than representations floating in our minds, and we will have no reason to grant them a reality equal to and independent of ourselves. Hence, Mainländer argued, Schopenhauer's idealism undermines his own pessimism.[33]

6. The Death of God

We have already seen how Mainländer, following his nominalism and his demand for a strictly immanent philosophy, made his basic principle the existence of the *individual* will. He stresses that this principle is the basis of his *entire* philosophy, of his epistemology, ethics, physics, metaphysics and politics (45). His immanent philosophy is distinguished from Schopenhauer's by its refusal to grant the reality of a cosmic universal will above and beyond the individual will. The individual will alone is the ultimate reality, which we cannot transcend, and which conditions all that we think or do.

But no sooner does Mainländer announce his first principle than he admits it suffers from a serious difficulty (102). His first principle means that each individual will is self-sufficient and independent; but natural science shows that all things in the world stand in systematic interconnection, so that every thing depends on every other thing according to necessary laws. How can there be such interconnection if everything is self-sufficient and independent? Or, conversely, how can there be such independence if everything is interconnected? Mainländer declares that this problem is "extraordinarily important", and indeed "the most important of all philosophy" (103). At stake for him is nothing less than the freedom of the individual. For the systematic interconnection of all things will be inevitably grounded in their unity, in a single universal

[33] See 'Aehrenlese', in *Die Philosophie der Erlösung*, II. 483.

substance; and such unity will leave no place for the freedom of the individual, who will become only "a puppet". When the individual acts, his action will be not his own but only the single universal substance acting through him.

Mainländer has another formulation for his difficulty: how can we conceive the unity of the one and the many? We cannot conceive the single universal substance existing in a plurality of individuals. For if it exists as much in Hansel as in Gretel, then it has been divided, and it ceases to be one. So it seems we cannot have both unity and plurality. Nevertheless, both are necessary: science postulates a single universe because of the interconnection of all things according to laws; and ordinary experience teaches us that things are independent of one another, that the destruction or removal of one does not change everything else.

What is the solution of this difficulty? Mainländer proposes a compromise between the conflicting sides of the antinomy. It is necessary to recognize the truth of each side, because there is *both* systematic interconnection and individual independence, *both* unity and plurality. The conflict between them can be resolved, however, by introducing the dimension of time, by making each side true for different stages of development of the universe (104–5). In the beginning, there was indeed a primal unity, a single universal substance, which was an undifferentiated, indivisible oneness. However, that unity no longer exists; its existence lies entirely in the past. The original unity of the world, the single universal substance, gradually split into a multiplicity of individual things; there is enough of its unity left for their interconnection, but not so much that they cannot be independent. The process of the world is therefore from unity to difference, from one to many, where that original oneness gradually and continually differentiates itself, splitting into many fragments, which are more independent units (94, 107). The individual is then *partly* free or independent, according to how much the original unity has dissolved, and *partly* interconnected and dependent, according to how much unity still remains. Freedom and necessity are partial truths, because the individual acts upon the world and changes it, just as the world acts upon the individual and changes it.

It is in this context that Mainländer introduces his dramatic concept of the death of God (108). This primal unity, this single universal substance, has all the attributes of God: it is transcendent, infinite and omnipotent. But since it no longer exists, this God is dead. Yet its death was not in vain. From it came the existence of the world. And so Mainländer declares in prophetic vein: "God is dead and his death was the life of the world" (108). This is Mainländer's atheistic interpretation of the Christian trinity, to which he devotes much attention in the second volume of *Die Philosophie der Erlösung*.[34] "The father gives birth to the son"—Article 20 of the Nicene Creed—means that God (the father) sacrifices himself in creating the world (the son). God exists entirely in and through Christ, so that the death of Christ on the cross is really the

[34] See his later essay 'Das Dogma der Dreieinigkeit', in *Die Philosophie der Erlösung*, II. 189–232, esp. 195–8.

death of God himself. With that divine death, Mainländer proclaims, the mystery of the universe, the riddle of the Sphinx, is finally resolved, because the transcendent God, the source of all mystery, also disappears.

The main subject matter of Mainländer's metaphysics, which makes up the culminating section of the *Philosophie der Erlösung*, is the death of God. Although Mainländer stresses, following his immanent guidelines, that this original unity is unknowable, he also maintains that we know three things about it: (1) that it has fragmented itself in making the world; (2) that because of this primal unity, the individual things in the world still stand in interconnection; and (3) this primal unity once existed but it does so no more (320). To these three points, Mainländer adds a fourth, as if it were an afterthought: that the transition of the primal unity into multiplicity, of the transcendent into the immanent, is the death of God and the birth of the world (320). Having said this much, Mainländer then insists that we cannot know anything more about this God. We can determine his essence and existence only negatively (320), and it is meaningless to ask why he created the world (325).[35] Since the transcendent is *toto genere* distinct from the immanent, we should not venture speculations about the transcendent by analogy with our world (322). So *why* the primal unity fractured itself, *why* the one became many, remains a mystery for us.

Nevertheless, despite such words of caution, Mainländer cannot resist the temptation to speak about the unspeakable. He excuses himself on the grounds that we can say a little something about God's creation after all—provided, of course, that we give it a strictly *regulative* validity. We have to think and write *as if* God were like human beings. If we allow this assumption strictly as a working hypothesis, then we can understand the creation on analogy with our own human actions, namely, as the product of will and intelligence (321–2). Adopting this assumption as his starting point, Mainländer then proceeds to construct a remarkable mythology of the creation.

Before the creation, Mainländer tells us, God had the freedom of the *liberum arbitrium indifferentiae* (323). His absolute power and will meant that there were no causes determining him into action, and that he could have done otherwise with no contradiction to his nature. God had the power to do whatever he willed; but there was one point over which he had no power at all: his sheer existence. Although absolutely free in *how* he existed, he was limited in the mere fact *that* he existed (324). God, for all his omnipotence, could not immediately negate his own existence. After all, if he did not exist, he could not exert his power whatsoever. But once God saw that he existed, he was not amused. Sheer existence horrified him, because he recognized that nothingness is better than being. So God longed for nothingness. Since, however, he could not immediately negate his existence, he decided on a suicide by proxy. God would destroy himself through other things, by creating the world and fragmenting his existence into a multitude of individual things (325). To achieve his goal of complete non-existence,

[35] On these grounds it is unfair to criticize Mainländer, as Lütkehaus does (*Nichts,* pp. 258, 260), for not explaining the reason for the existence of the world.

the total serenity of nothingness, God had to create the world as the necessary means toward his self-destruction.

On the basis of this myth, Mainländer then proceeds to sketch, in the final chapter of *Die Philosophie der Erlösung,* his "metaphysics", which is his general theory of nature and history. Metaphysics, he tells us, gives us a view of the world as a whole, so that all the partial perspectives of the earlier chapters of his book now appear as a single vision. That vision is, to put it mildly, macabre. We now enter the darkest recesses of Mainländer's imagination, which fabricate for us a grim cosmology of death. What the metaphysician sees from his exalted standpoint of the whole of things, Mainländer attests, is that everything in nature and history strives for one thing: death (330, 335). There is in all things in nature, and in all actions in history, "the deepest longing for absolute annihilation" (335). In his earlier chapters of his book, in the discussion of physics, ethics and politics, Mainländer wrote about the individual will to life as the very essence of everything, not only of every human being, but also of every thing that exists, whether inorganic or organic. Now in metaphysics, however, we see that this was only a limited perspective, because the striving for existence or life is really only a means for a deeper goal: death (331, 333, 334). We live only so that we die, because the deepest longing within all of us is for peace and tranquillity, which is granted to us only in death. In this longing of all things for death, we are only participating, unbeknownst to ourselves, in the deeper and broader cosmic process of the divine death (355). We long to die, and we are indeed dying, because God wanted to die and he is still dying within us.

Mainländer sees this process of cosmic death taking place all throughout nature, in both the organic and inorganic realms, and he goes into great detail about how it takes place everywhere in the universe. The gases, liquids and solids of the inorganic realm all reveal an urge toward death. A gas has the drive to dissipate itself in all directions, i.e. to annihilate itself (327). Liquids have the striving for an ideal point outside themselves, where, should they ever reach it, they destroy themselves (327–8). Solids, or fixed bodies, have a longing toward the centre of the earth, where they too, if they ever reach it, will eliminate themselves (328). The plants and animals of the organic realm also show a drive toward nothingness; they have a will to life, to be sure, but it coexists with a will to death, which gradually and inevitably triumphs over the will to life (331–3). Although Mainländer has in general little sympathy for the teleological conception of nature, it is remarkable that he still attributes a strange kind of purposiveness to everything in nature: namely, the striving toward self-destruction and death.

The drama of cosmic death and decay in nature Mainländer also finds in history. Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel misunderstood history, he argues, when they saw it as a progression toward the creation of a moral world order. If we examine the development of human civilization from ancient Asia, Greece and Rome, we have to admit that it is a long history of steady decline and decay (260). All these civilizations participated in the general process of dissolution involved in the dying of God, and so they gradually but inevitably became worse (261). Mainländer's vision of history appropriates the

old Christian conception of history, whereby mankind progresses inevitably toward its final day of judgement. But in Mainländer's version we are all saved in the end, goats and sheep alike, simply because we all die. All of humanity is saved in this generous eschatology, not despite death but because of it.

It is hard to know what to make of Mainländer's cosmology of death. If we take his regulative guidelines seriously, then we cannot deem it a conjecture or hypothesis; rather, we have to regard it as a fiction, treating it only *as if* it were true.[36] We do best, then, to take it simply as mythology, as a story meant to replace the religious myths of the past. The justification of such a myth is purely pragmatic: it gives us the power to face death because we imagine ourselves moving inevitably towards it.

7. Ethics

Ethics is for Mainländer essentially "eudemonics" or the doctrine of happiness (169). The task of ethics is to determine happiness in all its forms, and in its most perfect form, i.e. the highest good, which he describes as "complete peace of heart". It also finds the means by which a human being achieves happiness. This definition of ethics is simply axiomatic for Mainländer. He does not consider alternatives to it, still less the challenge to all forms of eudemonism posed by Kant.

Central to Mainländer's ethics is the basic principle of his metaphysics: the individual will (169). According to this principle, there is no will above or beyond the individual will, no cosmic or universal will that exists within everyone alike. This principle is the foundation of moral freedom for Mainländer: it means that the individual will alone is the source of its actions, because when it decides or acts there is no cosmic will deciding or acting through it. Hence the individual will is the basis and source of human responsibility and autonomy.

It is a crucial fact about Mainländer's individual will that it is egoistic, i.e. it strives only for its *own* happiness (57, 169, 180). All human actions are motivated by self-interest, and even those done from charity or sympathy derive from some interest on the part of the agent (180). Mainländer insists on distinguishing the drive for self-preservation from self-interest.[37] A person who sacrifices his life for the community in time of war is still acting from self-interest (e.g. the love of glory). Self-interest therefore has to be understood as the striving for one's own happiness, even if that means ending one's life.

Mainländer's egoism is significant not least because it leads him to question the basic principle of Schopenhauer's ethics, which finds the source of morality in selfless actions. If moral actions have to be selfless, Mainländer argues, then there are no moral actions, because all actions, even the most holy or saintly, derive from self-interest

[36] Mainländer stresses the regulative status of his theory of history in 'Aehrenlese', *Die Philosophie der Erlösung*, II. 506.

[37] See 'Eine naturwissenschaftliche Satire', *Die Philosophie der Erlösung*, II. 527.

(193, 570). There are in fact moral actions, Mainländer insists, but Schopenhauer did not understand them. For an action to be moral, it is *not* necessary that it be selfless, as Schopenhauer thought; it is only necessary that (1) it be legal, i.e. according to the law, and that (2) it be done gladly or with pleasure (189). For an agent to perform an action gladly, it is not necessary that he deny his nature for the sake of duty but only that he realize that the action is in his long-term or enlightened self-interest (193).

Because of his egoism, Mainländer also doubts Schopenhauer's doctrine of pity or sympathy as the basis of morals (202, 569). Schopenhauer believed that pity or sympathy is selfless because the individual gets outside himself and places himself in the position of another. But Mainländer contends that we never leave ourselves in sympathizing with others; it is *myself* that I put in the place of the other. When we sympathize with another, we feel miserable within ourselves; and in helping the other person we are simply attempting to remove this inner misery. Of course, there is such a thing as love; but the very essence of love consists in the *expansion* of the self so that it includes the other (61). Hence love is little more than extended egoism.

Though a potent weapon against Schopenhauer's ethics, Mainländer's egoism also gets him into trouble. For he stresses, no less than Schopenhauer, that the denial of the will is the fundamental virtue (559). If life is not worth living because the selfish pursuit of desire leads to suffering, then the only path to happiness resides in the denial of desire, in self-renunciation. But Mainländer then faces the same problem as Schopenhauer: How is it possible to deny the will if the will is the force behind all human actions? Schopenhauer could get around this difficulty because, unlike Mainländer, he did not maintain egoism; he held that an individual, through rare acts of mystical insight, could get outside himself and sympathize with others. But, by insisting that even these rare acts of insight are ultimately self-interested, Mainländer seems to close off even this escape route. The problem is even more pressing for Mainländer because egoism also seems to undermine his gospel of redemption. If we are to find redemption, he argued, then we must cease to will life and we must instead learn to will death. But if the very core of our being is the will to life, as Mainländer insists (45), then how is it possible for us to will death?

Mainländer's way around this difficulty is to stress the central role of knowledge in human decision-making and action. No less than Schopenhauer, Mainländer is a determinist about human action, and he too denies the existence of the *liberum arbitrium indifferentiae* (176). Each action and decision is the product of an individual's character and motive, where his character is innate and the product of birth. Given a person's character, and given their motive, the action follows of necessity (176). Nevertheless, Mainländer maintains that human beings still have within themselves the power to act contrary to their original character, and to change their character, in the light of knowledge they acquire (563, 565). This power consists in nothing less than reason (178). Reason shows us all the different options and their consequences, so that we can make wise decisions about what is best for us. On this basis we can resist temptation or restrain our inclinations toward certain actions, and so learn to act differently

from what we originally would have done. This power to act according to our better knowledge means, Mainländer maintains, that we have the power to renounce or deny our will, for we see that acting on our original inclinations, pursuing our natural desires, is self-destructive, having worse consequences for us than self-restraint and abstinence.

Mainländer still insists, however, that the role of reason in shaping human decisions and actions does not mean violating egoism. This is because reason teaches us what is in our *long-term* or *enlightened* self-interest rather than our *short-term* or *benighted* self-interest (193). The power of acting according to our better knowledge is really the power to act according to our informed self-interest. For when we see that the struggle to satisfy our desires leads to suffering, we learn that it is more in our enlightened self-interest to deny our desires (215–17). Our enlightened self-interest then consists in acting contrary to the desires of our original nature or character, the pursuit of which is a form of benighted self-interest. So the ascetic or saint, for all the appearances of selflessness, is still egoistic, acting according to his enlightened self-interest.

In his ethics of self-denial and renunciation of the will to life, Mainländer laid great importance on the virtue of chastity. Perfect chastity was for him the inner core of Christianity, and the crucial step toward redemption (578). To some extent, Mainländer's emphasis on chastity is perfectly understandable. The will to live is most apparent in the sex drive; and in acting on that drive, we perpetuate suffering by creating another human being. Only through chastity, then, do we break the cycle of desire and end the suffering of mankind. But Mainländer's emphasis on chastity is sometimes extreme; he went beyond the demand for chastity and called for nothing less than virginity, which was for him the only certain sign of self-denial (219). There is, of course, a great difference between chastity and virginity: a chaste person has learned to control his or her sex drives, though he or she has *perhaps* indulged in them; a virgin, however, has *never* acted on his or her sex drives. Mainländer insists on nothing less than virginity because—in a world of uncertain birth control—this alone ensures that life does not perpetuate itself. The demand for virginity caught the notice of Nietzsche, who dismissed Mainländer as the "sentimental apostle of virginity".[38]

We can begin to understand Mainländer's ethic of virginity—at least from a psychoanalytic perspective—if we trace its personal roots. Mainländer's mother died on 5 October 1863, on his 24th birthday. Her loss was deeply painful, and he never overcame it. In his essay on free love in the second volume of *Die Philosophie der Erlösung* he reveals that he had the best conceivable relationship with his mother; but he would now, because her loss has been so painful, gladly lose his memory of her.[39] But forget her he could not. In his autobiography Mainländer informs us that on 26 September 1874, he visited her grave and swore to her "virginity until death".[40] Virginity was thus

[38] See Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft,* §357, in *Sämtliche Werke,* III. 601–2.

[39] 'Die freie Liebe', *Die Philosophie der Erlösung*, II. 322.

[40] 'Aus meinem Leben', IV. 372. Mainländer's italics.

Mainländer's vow of love and loyalty to his mother. In Freudian terms, it was an extreme case of an unresolved Oedipal complex.

The most vexing question of Mainländer's ethics is that of suicide. Suicide, it seems, is the straightforward conclusion of Mainländer's pessimism no less than Schopenhauer's. If life is worse than death, then why go on living? Why not get life over with sooner rather than later if all that it promises is more suffering? Mainländer was much troubled by this question, which he addressed on several occasions.[41]

Mainländer strived to remove prejudices against suicide, and he insisted that there should be no moral law against it. Nothing filled him with more indignation, he confessed, than those clergy who condemn suicide and who even preach withholding pity for those who take such a drastic step (II. 218). To counteract this prejudice, he argued that the two great world religions, Christianity and Buddhism, had nothing against suicide, and that they even approved it. Christ said nothing about suicide; and so there is no reason to think that he would have denied a suicide a resting place in heaven. Indeed, his whole ethics, in the high value it gives to chastity and self-denial, is little more than a prescription for "a long suicide". Buddha not only allowed but recommended suicide, forbidding it only for his priests, who had the solemn duty of teaching redemption (II. 109, 218). He regretted only that the prescription against suicide for his priests would be a burden upon them.

As we might expect, Mainländer rejects Schopenhauer's argument against suicide. Schopenhauer held that suicide is in vain because it cannot destroy the cosmic will behind our actions. Since Mainländer disputes the very existence of such a will, Schopenhauer's argument holds no weight for him. When we destroy our individual will, Mainländer contends, we destroy the will itself, the thing-in-itself behind appearances. The suicide does not intend to destroy the will as such, a cosmic will, Mainländer further implies, but simply his own individual will, in which effort he can be entirely successful.

There are passages in *Die Philosophie der Erlösung* where Mainländer is perfectly explicit in his advocacy of suicide. Whoever cannot bear the burden of life, he says unequivocally, should "throw it off" (349). Whoever cannot endure "the carnival hall of the world", he adds more poetically, should leave through "the always open door" into "that silent night". If we are in an unbearably stuffy room, and a mild hand opens the door for us to escape, we should take the opportunity (545–6). More directly and explicitly, he advises: "Go without trembling, my brothers, out of this life if it lies heavily upon you; you will find neither heaven nor hell in your grave." (II. 218).

There are other passages, however, where Mainländer seems to hesitate before prescribing suicide for everyone. In one place he states that, though the philosophy of redemption does not condemn suicide, it also does not demand it (350). It will even attempt to encourage a would-be suicide to stay in this miserable world. Why? Because, Mainländer answers, each individual should work with others to help all to achieve

[41] See the passages in *Die Philosophie der Erlösung,* I. 349, 545–6, 579, 600; and II. 109, 218.

redemption (349–50). There is, however, something almost evasive, even duplicitous, in Mainländer's explanation. For the work of redemption the disciple should help to promote is really the value of death and non-existence. It would seem, then, that it is best for him to encourage rather than discourage suicide.

Although Mainländer sometimes hesitates before the abyss, on one occasion he even declares his readiness to leap into it. He wants to destroy, he writes, all the convoluted motives that people give to stop themselves from "seeking the still night of death", and he confesses that he would happily "shake off existence" if it would serve as an example for others (II. 218). Given his own suicide, we can hardly charge him with weakness of will or hypocrisy.

8. Theory of the State

Schopenhauer, Mainländer opined, "lacked all understanding for political questions" (596). This was unfair, because Schopenhauer understood well enough the political and social currents of his age; it was just that he disapproved of them. There is, however, a solid core of truth in Mainländer's remark: Schopenhauer had little interest in politics. Because of that lack of interest, his political thought is undeveloped. Not that Schopenhauer completely neglected politics. There is the significant chapter on the state in *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, which, as we shall soon see, heavily influenced Mainländer.[42]

As we might expect, Mainländer's politics reflects his very different attitude toward the issues of his day. He stood on the opposite end of the political spectrum from Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer was on the extreme right, whereas Mainländer was on the extreme left. While Schopenhauer despised the nationalist and democratic movements of 1848, Mainländer fully supported them. He was not only an ardent nationalist, but also a staunch advocate of democracy. Unlike Schopenhauer, he was deeply troubled by "the social question", and he was fully sympathetic to the workers' movement founded by Ferdinand Lasalle.[43] Although Mainländer did not advocate violent revolution, he was a defender of social democracy and what he called "communism", i.e. equal distribution of property, free love and the abolition of the family.

The fundamental problem with Schopenhauer's political attitude, in Mainländer's view, is that he lacked the very virtue he praised the most: pity, sympathy for the suffering of others. If Schopenhauer had that virtue, Mainländer maintains, he would never have been so indifferent about the social question. Schopenhauer provides little consolation, little hope of redemption, for the common man (600). He is like Mephistopheles, Mainländer declares, because he tells the people that their reason will never help them to solve the problem of existence. According to Schopenhauer's system, only the rare

[42] See §62 of Buch IV, *Werke,* I. 457–78.

[43] See Mainländer's brilliant portrait of Lasalle, 'Das Charakterbild Ferdinand Lassalle's', in *Die Philosophie der Erlösung,* II. 343–71.

genius, someone who has the power of intuition to pierce the veil of Maya, can save himself. As for the common man, Schopenhauer condemns him "to languish eternally in the hell of existence". It was one of the more important advantages of his philosophy over Schopenhauer's, Mainländer believed, that it offered hope and redemption for everyone alike.

Given his harsh verdict on Schopenhauer's neglect of politics, we have every reason to expect Mainländer to devote more attention to it. Sure enough, he wrote two sections on politics for the first volume of *Die Philosophie der Erlösung*;[44] and the second part of the second volume, nearly 200 pages, is devoted to a discussion of socialism.[45]

For all his criticism of Schopenhauer, Mainländer's theory of the state, as he first expounds it in *Die Philosophie der Erlösung*,[46] still bears a remarkable resemblance to Schopenhauer's own theory. Like Schopenhauer, Mainländer builds the state on a social contract, on the mutual commitment among individuals not to harm or steal from one another. The major premise behind this theory also comes straight from Schopenhauer: that human beings are egoistic, seeking of necessity their self-interest. A state formed by a contract proves to be the most effective means to satisfy the demands of self-interested agents. The true state, Mainländer declares, gives its citizens more than it takes, i.e. it ensures them some advantage that they would not have otherwise had without it (180–1). People enter into the contract out of self-interest, he explains, because it is the best way to protect their lives and property (181–2). The fact that the strong and smart can be defeated even by the weak and dumb means that the mutual limitation of power is in the interests of everyone, even the stronger and smarter (180). Hence self-interested agents enter into a contract, i.e. they mutually agree not to harm and to respect the property of one another. According to this contract, everyone has certain rights and duties: the rights to have life and property protected; and the duties to respect the similar rights of others (182). The result of this contract is the establishment of a common power or authority which protects the rights of everyone through force.

Following his egoistic theory of human nature, Mainländer stresses how every human being is a reluctant and resentful citizen in the state. Each individual harbours a discontent and mistrust of its powers. Although every man enjoys his rights under the social contract, he complains about his duties, which he performs only begrudgingly (184). Towards the state he feels like man in nature feels toward his enemy (165). He hates having to pay taxes, and he attempts to avoid conscription in times of war. Mainländer leaves us with the impression that if his citizens only had Gyges ring, they would murder and steal to their heart's content.

[44] In the main text of *Philosophie der Erlösung,* see the section entitled 'Politik', I. 225–316; and in the Anhang the section with the same title, I. 583–600. The two sections entitled 'Ethik', I. 167–224 and I. 527–81, are of no less importance for Mainländer's political views.

[45] See section II, 'Der Socialismus', II. 275–460, which includes three of the essays of volume II.

[46] See especially §11 of 'Ethik', I. 180–5, and §25, I. 210–14.

Also in tune with that theory, Mainländer paints a virtual Rousseauian picture of the state of nature, where each individual leads a solitary life in complete independence from others. Man is by nature a-social, he maintains, and it was only extreme need or boredom that drove him to seek out the company of others (230). Men formed families for the sake of procreation and for protection of the young; families then joined together into wider groups for the purposes of self-defence and hunting (231–2). The heads of these families then entered a social contract not to harm one another, because only by that means could they live together in peace (232).

Given these egoistic and individualistic premises, it is not surprising that Mainländer's social contract ends in "a watchguard state", i.e. one whose chief function is to ensure that people do not violate their rights to one another. The task of the state, he writes, is to ensure that we do not steal or murder; but it cannot do anything more (185). Above all, we cannot expect the state to make people happy. Even if it effectively protects the rights of everyone, it is still possible for them to be miserable. There are four fundamental evils of human life that are constant and that cannot be eradicated by political means: birth, sickness, age and death (206). Mainländer's pessimism was immune to political change or reform, because no state, even a socialist one that cares for all human needs, could make life worth living.

9. Communism, Patriotism and Free Love

So far, so good. Mainländer has expounded a theory of the state that is perfectly in accord with his egoistic and individualist anthropology. It is a theory that seems to differ little from Schopenhauer's. We are left wondering, then, why Mainländer is so critical of Schopenhauer and where his differences with him really lie. But Mainländer's political theory is much more complicated; the side we have explained so far accounts for only one half of it. There is not only the *liberal* Mainländer who expounds a watch-guard state; there is also the *communist* Mainländer who champions state ownership of the means of production and the equal distribution of wealth. There is not only the *individualist* Mainländer who stresses the citizen's mistrust of the state; there is also the *patriotic* Mainländer who advocates complete devotion to the state, the readiness to serve the state in all its goals even to the point of death. And there is not only the *ascetic* Mainländer, who preaches the value of chastity and even virginity; there is also the *indulgent* Mainländer, who teaches the value of free love and the abolition of marriage.

Mainländer's more radical political views emerge most forcefully in the essay on communism he wrote for the second volume of *Die Philosophie der Erlösung.*[47] The purpose of this essay was to remove the fears of communism among the bourgeoisie and aristocracy, though Mainländer's views are so extreme that they were more likely to have alarmed than calmed them. He attempts to reassure his readers: communism is

[47] 'Der Communismus', *Die Philosophie der Erlösung,* II. 280–305.

not the devil, having neither hooves nor horns. It does not mean the abolition of private property, so that the state will own everything; but it does mean public distribution of wealth, and profit sharing between workers and capitalists. Even after the establishment of communism, people will still own their own things, and no one, not even the government, will have a right to appropriate them; it is just that everyone will own an equal amount of things, so that no one suffers from need. Communism also does not mean the abolition of marriage, as if people could no longer form lifelong partnerships; but it does mean allowing divorce and the right to polygamy. All this sounds reassuring enough, perhaps, but there were other aspects of Mainländer's political ideal that would have only horrified his bourgeois or aristocratic readers. He tries to reassure the wealthy that they will continue to enjoy their lifestyle in a communist state; but he insists that is so only because everyone will enjoy such a lifestyle; he optimistically assumes that there is enough wealth for everyone to lead such a life. Even more alarmingly, Mainländer advocates giving children over to the state. Free love is possible, it seems, only when the burden of caring for children is taken over by the state. All the care and concern that parents have for their children, and all the joys of free love, make surrender of children to the state the most advantageous policy.

The only side of Mainländer's communism that would have diminished the fears of the public was his insistence on the value of gradual and peaceful political change. The mechanisms for such change, Mainländer believed, were popular agitation and representation of workers in parliaments. Mainländer was a great admirer of Lasalle's approach to the social question, which stressed the importance of peaceful protest and political representation rather than revolution. With Marx's and Engel's belief in the value and inevitability of revolution Mainländer had no sympathy whatsoever.

These clashing sides of Mainländer's political theory—his watchguard state and communism—are *not* the product of his intellectual development, as if one side evolved after the other to correct and complement it. Both appear explicitly in the first volume of the *Philosophie der Erlösung*. It is as if Mainländer were so troubled by the moral consequences of the watchguard state that he retreated from it and voiced his reservations about it. Such a state, he notes, demands nothing more than respecting the lives and property of others; it requires only that we obey the law in our actions, but not that we act for the sake of the law in our motives or intentions (185). It is perfectly compatible with this state, therefore, that we do not help others in need, and that we even allow them to starve. Mainländer's misgivings are most clear and vocal when it comes to discussing Schopenhauer's theory of the state. He finds it incredible that Schopenhauer had confined the state to a watchguard role—the very state Mainländer himself endorsed in an earlier passage (592). The state should give more than security of life and property, he says. It provides education; it protects religion; and it helps its citizens develop their moral qualities. Although Schopenhauer himself has enjoyed all the benefits of life in the state, he still refuses to acknowledge them.

Repelled by the moral vacuum of the watchguard state, Mainländer puts forward an antithetical conception in *Die Philosophie der Erlösung*. He envisages an ideal state that

will provide for the basic needs of humanity (210). It is not in accord with the fate of humanity, Mainländer says, for each person to be left on his own, or for one person not to help others (212). Each individual should devote himself to an ideal state where human need disappears, and so that misery can be diminished even if it cannot be fully eradicated (212, 214). It is only in the second volume of *Die Philosophie der Erlösung*, however, that Mainländer fully specifies how human need will disappear in the communist state (viz., through distribution of wealth).

How do we reconcile these clashing sides of Mainländer's politics? It is not clear that we can. They stem from two deep strands of Mainländer's thinking whose ultimate consequences push him in opposing directions. These strands are his pessimism and his ethics of compassion. The pessimistic strand, because of its egoistic theory of human action, moves him toward the watchguard state and the political realism that the state cannot make people happy. His ethic of compassion, however, pushes him toward communism and political idealism, the demand that we do all we can to relieve the sources of human suffering. While the pessimistic strand leads to resignation and quietism, the ethical strand leads to indignation and activism, the attempt to relieve suffering through political action.

There is also the even more troubling question whether Mainländer's radical politics is compatible with his pessimism. If we were complete pessimists, utterly convinced that death is preferable to life, then we should have no motivation at all to strive for the ideal state. For we have it in our power to commit suicide right here and now and we need not trouble ourselves further. Of course, we should have pity for the suffering of our fellow human beings; but we need not act on that feeling, because they too have the option of suicide, which they can enact whenever they want. There is also the question whether the communist state, when it is finally and fully realized, will eradicate pessimism. Mainländer attempts to smooth over the inconsistency by stating that the communist state will not make people happy; it will only remove their suffering.[48] But he also is clear that the communist state will not only satisfy people's basic needs; it will also help them realize their desires for the good life; it will indeed allow workers to work less and enjoy the same lifestyle that the bourgeoisie and aristocracy now have.[49] But if this is so, will people not be happy under communism? If offered the choice between being or non-being, would they not choose being in the communist state? The precondition of opting for non-being is suffering, which the communist state will eradicate.

Toward the close of his discussion of communism in the second volume of *Die Philosophie der Erlösung,*[50] Mainländer attempts to address these difficulties. He writes that communism and free love are not his highest ideals, and that he has something better than them: namely, poverty and virginity (333). His highest ideals, he assures us,

[48] Ibid., II. 305.

[49] Ibid., II. 290, 291, 302–3. See also 'Höhere Ansichten', where Mainländer says that ideal state will satisfy the "*Genusssucht Aller*".

[50] 'Höhere Ansichten', II. 333–8.

are those of Christ and Buddha, who preach resignation. Better than life in the ideal state is complete tranquillity and deliverance, which comes only with death. Why, though, bother with creating the ideal state if we can have death now? Mainländer answers: though he personally can find redemption in all political conditions, so that he does not need to bother with the ideal state, the same is not true for the masses, who need to live in the ideal state before they find redemption. Why, though, must they first live in such a state? To that question Mainländer responds somewhat cryptically: before we turn against life, we must learn to enjoy all that it has to offer (337). Only he who attempts to enjoy all the rotten fruits of this earth will see through its emptiness and discover for himself the true value of death.[51]

Perhaps, in the end, it is impossible to square Mainländer's pessimism with his communism, in which case his political philosophy lies shipwrecked on the shoals of inconsistency. Still, there is something admirable about that philosophy. Mainländer's communism was at least an attempt to address the social question, and it did so in a realistic manner by advocating peaceful agitation and parliamentary representation rather than violent revolution. Even if some aspects of his ideals—complete equality of wealth and free love—are naïve, his ideals still stem from a very deep humanity, from a real sympathy for the plight of the working man in modern society. His political philosophy avoids the deepest pitfalls of his contemporaries: the elitism of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Hartmann and Taubert on the right, and the anti-Semitism of Dühring on the left.[52] Despite his obsession with death, the core of Mainländer's thought, and of his very being, was his hope to redeem humanity, *all* of humanity. For that noble cause, his suicide was an act of martyrdom.

[51] See 'Das wahre Vertrauen', *Die Philosophie der Erlösung*, II. 252, 255.

[52] Mainländer was critical of Schopenhauer's anti-Semitism. See *Philosophie der Erlösung*, I. 597–8.