The high point of the dispute between Leibniz and Clarke is reached when Leibniz asserts the complete equivalence of the system of absolute will and the system of absolute accident, of voluntarism and atomism: "La volonté sans raison sera le hazard des Epicureiens." [Will without reason would be the chance of the Epicureans]. The universe as interpreted by atomism is ruled by the principle of the identity of indiscernibles since the atoms and empty space are defined by the fact that they allow no rational action whatsoever but place reason in a position where all possibilities are indifferent, so that chance becomes the sole principle of reality. The nominalistic God is a superfluous God, Who can be replaced by the accident of the divergence of atoms from their parallel paths, and of the resulting vortices that make up the world. The concept of an absolute will is internally contradictory and consequently a chimera, a fiction.4

We need not be concerned here that since the time of the Stoas the accusation of "Epicureanism" had become a polemical blow below the belt; here the term is in fact very accurately applied. Just as little do we need to concern ourselves that the position Leibniz constructed in opposing Newton did not save the metaphysics of a world order guaranteed by divine reason. The path forward from this point was determined not by the principle of this critique but rather by one of its side effects, the phenomenalizing of space and time. The instructive thing for us is not the antithesis between Leibniz and Clarke, as such, but rather the principle, employed in Leibniz's analysis, of the equivalence of nominalistic and mechanistic explanations of the world, a principle that gives us the key to the reoccupation that was effected in the replacement of the late-medieval by the early-modern type of explanation of nature.

One of the essential, though usually underestimated, phenomena of the beginning of the modern age was the attempt to reappropriate Democritus's atomistic philosophy of nature in the form it had been given by Epicurus and Lucretius. This renewal of ancient atomism prepared the way for the new ideas of matter and motion. But in spite of this function, the process is still understood merely as a piece of 'Renaissance' conditioned by the literary rediscovery of Lucretius in 1417, on account of which it has come to be regarded as a historical datum requiring no further explanation. But the mere demonstration of the presence or reappearance of a source does not explain anything. Renaisances have their genetic logic, and only the exhibition of that logic satisfies the demands of historical understanding. The observation of Leibniz that we have cited, which he made in his argument with Clarke, discloses the structural connection between nominalism as a late-medieval phenomenon and atomism as an early modern one. Both positions regard the origin of the world as an event inaccessible to human rationality. Epicurus had assumed an uncaused divergence of atoms from their parallel straight-line paths in infinite space as the origin from which developed the vortices that gave rise to his worlds; nominalism could provide for all questions regarding the reason and purpose of the Creation only the Augustinian Quia voluit [Because God willed it].

But the systematic interchangeability of the two theses, which Leibniz noted, does not mean that they must be regarded as equivalent in their historical function as well. The primacy of the divine will, which puts rejection of the question in place of explanation, was meant to increase the binding force of the given over men; the basic mechanistic thesis, on the other hand, did indeed remove the origin of the world from the realm of what can be grasped, but it had no 'conservative' implications for the relation of man to nature. On the contrary, it established the material substratum of the world as something meaningless in itself, and consequently as a potentiality open to man's rational disposition. The reoccupation that took place between the absolutes will and matter defined the world as that which is precisely not pregen, as a problem rather than as an established state of affairs. But the question why atomism could have this significance as the successor of voluntarism, but not in its original situation in the ancient world, leads us to a recognition of the irreversibility of this reoccupation: only after nominalism had executed a sufficiently radical destruction of the humanly relevant and dependable cosmos could the mechanistic philosophy of nature by adopted as the tool of self-assertion.

This prerequisite was not present at the origin of ancient atomism. Epicurus's philosophy is essentially a therapy meant to lessen the human uneasiness caused by natural phenomena, or, more exactly, by the inherited explanations of those phenomena. Nominalism is a system meant to make man extremely uneasy about the world—with the intention, of course, of making him seek salvation outside the world, driving him to despair of his this-worldly possibilities and thus to the unconditional capitulation of the act of faith, which, however, he is again not capable of accomplishing by his own power. After the
classical philosophy of the Greeks, the postulate of ataraxia was still possible, whereas after the theological absolutism of the Middle Ages, self-assertion had to be the implication of any philosophical system. Can these distinctions be substantiated by a comparative analysis of ancient atomism and medieval nominalism? This would lend profile to the thesis that a historical ‘answer’ like that of the modern age could not have been given to Hellenism, but only later, to nominalism. For this purpose the comparable doctrines on each side will have to be defined more accurately in accordance with their functions within each system.

For Epicurus’s gods and for the God of nominalism, there is no ratio creandi [reason for creation], no motive for bringing a world into existence. From this unambiguous shared thesis, however, radically different conclusions are drawn. For Epicurus it follows that no creation whatsoever can be assumed, since no ratio [reason] can be given for the act of creation. This is at any rate the direction taken by Lucretius in attempting to make the argument plausible: He has in mind, as a model of the rational production of a world, the Platonic myth of the demiurge with its prototypical ideas, and in this connection poses the question where in the Epicurean system of empty space and atoms the gods could have found a model, accessible to intuition, of a world to create. The logical circle, according to which a world must have already been present from which to read off what could be created—-a circle that is also present, though hidden, in the Platonic myth of the demiurge—-excludes the idea of creation from the ranks of the rational principles of explanation. The origin of the world is left to chance—-though to a chance that nevertheless contains its own guarantees, as will be shown.

The nominalists derive from the same initial thesis a conclusion that is extremely positive for their theological system: Because the Creation is uncaused, because it does not require a preexisting model for mere demiurgic implementation, it demonstrates the radicalness of the groundless will that is the ground of everything; it is the maximum of causality and the first in the sequence of pure acts of grace that constitutes the real theme of theology. God is not, like the Platonic demiurge, the executor of a world plan that is consistent in itself and makes its own uniqueness manifest, and whose ideal status means precisely that any rational being must recognize in it (and accordingly put into effect) the necessary characteristics of a world as such, so that productive and theoretical insight converge on this model. The nominalistic God stands with His work in the widest horizon of noncontradictory possibilities, within which He chooses and rejects without enabling the result to exhibit in any way the criteria governing His volition. Much of what He could create, He does not choose to create—-for nominalistic thought, that is the difference between the origin of the world and a process of natural causality, from which the whole of the possible effect always results.

This conception of creation is not an incidental piece of doctrine of the Nominalist school but is connected to its philosophical center, to the denial of universals and the assertion of the priority of reality over concepts. It is easy to show this since a realist doctrine regarding concepts, which holds that they possess a binding force as exemplary entities independent of things, is demonstrably incompatible with the strict concept of a creatio ex nihilo. The universale ante rem [universal having an existence prior to things] as that which can be and is repeated at will in concrete things makes sense only so long as the universe represents a finite embodiment of what is possible. The concept of the potestas absoluta [complete, absolute power], however, implies that there is no limit to what is possible, and this renders meaningless the interpretation of the individual as the repetition of a universal. Creation is now supposed to mean that every entity comes into existence from nothing, in such a way that even in respect to its conceptual definition it was not there previously. Only in this way can the possibility be excluded, as William of Ockham argues, that God might restrict His own power by creating a particular entity, because any aspect of other concrete creations that happened to be identical in species with the first could only be imitation and repetition, not creation. Absolute power is original in every one of its creations. It does not recognize the Aristotelian distinction between definite essential form and individuality but produces only what is essentially unique.

But these very riches of creative abundance put human reason in the embarrassing position of having to set its economy of classificatory concepts over against the authentic reality as an auxiliary construct that is just as indispensable as it is inappropriate—in the position, that is, of being unable from the very beginning to interpret its theoretical mastery of reality as anything but self-assertion. Thus the denial of universals directly excludes the possibility that God’s restriction of Himself to His potestas ordinata [ordered, or ordained, power] in nature too could become comprehensible for the benefit of man and his
reason. Divine spirit and human spirit, creative and cognitive principles, operate as though without taking each other into account. The gratuitousness of the Creation implies that it can no longer be expected to exhibit any adaptation to the needs of reason. Rather than helping man to reconstruct an order given in nature, the principle of economy (Ockham's razor) helps him to reduce nature forcibly to an order imputed to it by man. God is not economical; He does many things lavishly that could have been done simply and sparingly: "Quia vult, nec est alia causa quaerenda" [The reason is that He willed it, and no other reason is to be expected]. Ockham's distinction between the potestas absoluta and the potestas ordinata does not alleviate the situation for rationality because although it does imply that once chosen, the ordo [order] will be observed, it does not provide any access to the contents of the chosen order. The potestas ordinata is directly relevant only to the path of salvation, not to the path of knowledge. God's 'will' is supposed to be accessible only through 'revelation'—faith in salvation is not supposed to be translatable into or exchangeable for faith in the world.

While this may not be a metaphysical dualism of the Gnostic type, it is its practical equivalent ad hominem: the only dependable and trustworthy God is the God of salvation, Who has restricted Himself to His potestas ordinata, like a partially constitutional monarch, but Who, through predestination, still withholds from man's knowledge the range over which He chooses to be dependable. It is precisely this restriction to those who are chosen that distinguishes the pragmatic dualism of the late Middle Ages from the Gnostic dualism of late antiquity because liberation from the cosmos now is no longer a divine offering open to all men and authenticated by the possession of knowledge. This time there is no consciousness of conditions under which the world could lose its significance for man. The groundlessness of the Creation is indeed dogmatized as requiring an act of unconditional submission, but submission as such is still not a condition of salvation. Escape from the world into transcendence is no longer an alternative for man himself and precisely for that reason has lost its human relevance and historical effectiveness. But recourse to intraworldly composure of the mind, to the secum vivere [self-sufficient life] of Epicureanataraxia, is also blocked. The method of neutralizing the phenomena and the problems of nature would have been found to have lost its efficacy, if anyone had tried to apply it once more, because its presupposition of the finite and hence completely describable possibilities of natural processes had become untenable against the background of the infinitude of divine power. The dependence of ataraxia on physics could not be reestablished. Only insofar as physics could be thought of as producing real human power over nature could natural science potentially serve as the instrument by which to overcome the new radical insecurity of man's relation to reality.

Philosophy and science, which, autonomously formulated, offered themselves as means for the removal of this uncertainty about the world, could not in themselves, as pure theory, become "the happiness of their age." Philosophy not only had to project and provide a foundation for 'method'; it had itself to become a method of assuring the material adequacy and competence of man's possession of the world. Nature could not once again be forced to the edge of consciousness, its appearances blunted and robbed of their power; on the contrary, it now became the incessantly pressing theme, which made more and more exclusive demands on theoretical attention. There was no longer any refuge in "the lamplight of the private man." Knowledge as the endeavor of an individual, as an attempt to grasp a totality of truth as the source of fulfillment, proved to be hopeless. Scientific method, as it was projected by Descartes, provided the procedural regulations for a summoning-up of incomparable theoretical energy, in whose service both individuals and generations were enrolled.

What was no longer possible, or not again possible, can be exhibited directly by a comparison with Epicurus's intention, which had been to 'humanize' the groundlessness of nature as the ground for indifference to it, to remove by means of physics the potency of the drive for knowledge that holds sway within it, and to make manifest by the same means the superfluosity of theory as theory. This difference is made especially tangible by the formulation that the young Marx gave to the basic character of the Epicurean philosophy in his dissertation: "...the interesting thing about Epicurus," he writes, is "how in every sphere he tries to eliminate the state of affairs that provokes the appearance of presuppositions as such and how he commends as normal the state of affairs in which presuppositions are covered up." While for Epicurus everything is aimed at blunting and diffusing the problems forcing themselves upon man from outside, in the declining Middle Ages the reverse is the case: Everything works to sharpen them to the most acute form. Although the intention in this, to begin