

FROM HUMANISM TO NIHILISM: THE ECLIPSE OF SECULAR ETHICS

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The question is no longer as Dostoevski put it “can civilized man believe?” Rather: can unbelieving man be civilized?

Philip Rieff¹

The hollowing out of Western civilization by nihilism is virtually complete

John Gray²

It is the duty of those who can foresee the end of a saturnalia to make their counsel known

Richard Weaver³

In an increasingly secular society, there are naturally those who wish to be rid of every religious influence in ethics, and it is only to be expected that this approach to ethics should seek—and has sought—to make itself felt in every realm of society, including that of education. Initially, it is necessary to distinguish two meanings of the word ‘secular’, one that simply refers in a neutral way to what is not directly related to religion, and another that implies secularism, an anti-religious stance based on a naturalistic perspective. It is the latter meaning that is relevant here, particularly as it relates to humanism, ‘the rejection of religion in favour of a belief in the advancement of humanity by its own efforts’.⁴ Secular humanists see morality as intrinsic to humanity—just as we create our own meanings, so we can make our own laws and prohibitions. Our innate moral authority, it is argued, whilst admittedly a matter of personal choice, provides a sufficient basis for morality. Nonetheless, the notion of a totally secularized morality seems to be a problematic one, and has drawn much recent criticism. In what follows I will consider some widely shared secular humanist values such as reason, naturalism, evolution and progress, and examine some common criticisms of humanism and secular ethics.

Symptoms of Decline

Critics of secularism usually perceive a connection between the secularization of society and moral decline. The widespread concern about moral decline so evident today is not of course new. As the sociologist Frank Furedi observes, ‘Apprehensions about the decline of religion and the weakening appeal of moral codes have haunted the Western imagination for almost two centuries. A sense of loss and the recognition that there was

nothing to replace the old certainties became a central motif in Western thought in the twentieth century'.⁵ It was in 1948 that the American essayist Richard Weaver observed that 'There is good reason for declaring that modern man has become a moral idiot...we approach a condition in which we shall be amoral without the capacity to perceive it and degraded without means to measure our descent'.⁶ For Weaver, this predicament is linked to the denial of the transcendent, which he equates to a denial of truth itself. If, he argued, the humanist notion that 'man is the measure of all things' is to be our moral benchmark, there can only ultimately ensue from this a morally corrosive relativism, amongst the symptoms of which he perceived to be the weakening of normal human sentiment and relationships, the loss of the ability to recognize obscenity, as well as the egoism, narcissism and impiety of contemporary man. More recently, in *After Virtue* (1981), his celebrated study of the contemporary ethical predicament, Alasdair MacIntyre suggests that the West has suffered a sort of moral catastrophe: 'We have—very largely, if not entirely—lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality'.⁷ Such concerns are not confined to those with a religious outlook, for as Camille Paglia observes, 'a totally secularized society with contempt for religion sinks into materialism and self-absorption and eventually goes slack'.⁸

MacIntyre suggests that contemporary Western societies lack agreed moral criteria: 'the question of what it is in virtue of which a particular moral judgment is true or false has come to lack any clear answer'.⁹ The sociologist James Davison Hunter observes that truths have been replaced by values, 'truths that have been deprived of their commanding character. They are substitutes for revelation, imperatives that have dissolved into a range of possibilities...The very word 'value' signifies the reduction of truth to utility, taboo to function, conviction to mere preference; all provisional, all exchangeable....sacredness is conspicuous in its absence'.¹⁰ These developments take place in the context of the rise of moral individualism, the decline of institutions sustaining morality, and a disparagement of self-restraint in which notions of guilt and moral judgment become taboo. The moral continuity of culture appears to have been interrupted and there is no longer the moral consensus that existed until quite recently; as Hunter observes, 'where a consensus remains in our culture, it does so only in terms of the shallowest of platitudes'.¹¹

Christopher Lasch suggests a link between moral decline and the decline of religion, and points to the hostility of socially and culturally influential liberal elites to traditional moral norms.¹² The latter view is echoed by Theodore Dalrymple: 'if blame is to be apportioned, it is the intellectuals who deserve most of it. They should have known better but always preferred to avert their gaze. They considered the purity of their ideas to be more important than the actual consequences of their ideas. I know of no egotism more profound'.¹³ Lasch further contends that 'liberal democracy has lived off the borrowed capital of moral and religious traditions antedating the rise of liberalism'¹⁴; as we shall see, others also argue that humanism too has thrived in parasitic relation to an unacknowledged host, namely religious concepts of human nature and meaning. Yet, as John Gray observes, the religious roots of those values has been rejected, and 'we no longer possess anything like a coherent moral vocabulary....We live rather among the fragments of archaic moral vocabularies whose undergirding structure of metaphysical and religious beliefs has long since collapsed'.¹⁵

Gertrude Himmelfarb argues that the loss of shared values and decline into subjectivism has come at a high price in terms of rising crime in the UK. Noting that in 1991 the rate of serious crime was ten times that in 1955 and forty times that in 1901, with violent crime alone doubling in each decade after 1950¹⁶, that crime in Britain has increased as standards of living have improved, she maintains that 'liberals have always known that absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely...we are now discovering that absolute liberty also tends to corrupt absolutely'.¹⁷ There seems to some observers to be something uniquely degraded in a society in which not just religious values, but the sense of community and the institution of the family are in a state of advanced decay, for as Dalrymple declares, 'having previously worked as a doctor in some of the poorest countries in Africa, as well as in very poor countries in the Pacific and Latin America, I have little hesitation in saying that the mental, cultural, emotional, and spiritual impoverishment of the Western underclass is the greatest of any large group of people I have ever encountered anywhere'.¹⁸

The Ambiguities of the Enlightenment

For secular humanism, reason is the most fundamental human faculty and thus the necessary basis for any approach to ethics. Yet traditionally, reason was seen as a tool rather than an entirely self-sufficient means of reaching indisputable moral conclusions: 'Reason alone fails to justify itself. Not without cause has the devil been called the prince of lawyers, and not by accident are Shakespeare's villains good reasoners. If the disposition is wrong, reason increases maleficence; if it is right, reason orders and furthers the good'.¹⁹ Nonetheless, the quest for a rational principle of morality that can be applied universally is central to modern secular ethics. Both Immanuel Kant and the utilitarians Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill sought just such a principle, one whose authority no rational person could deny. Paradoxically, reason led them to radically conflicting conclusions, and proved powerless to provide a 'neutral' point of view from which to decide between their competing moral perspectives and claims. Kant's deontological theory and the teleological approach of utilitarianism are both deeply flawed—apart from their intrinsic weaknesses—by their reliance on Enlightenment assumptions about the role of reason in ethics that are now seen, by MacIntyre and Gray amongst others, as obsolete. They suggest that attempts to provide a purely rational basis for an objective morality are inevitably built on non-rational foundations that are ultimately no more than shared sets of preferences and assumptions.²⁰ Many secularists now acknowledge that reason alone has been unable to provide a self-justifying basis for morality, and that there is no reason to be moral that any rational person is compelled to acknowledge.²¹

A further problem for the universal claims of reason-based theories has always been that not all secular thinkers see reason as capable of fulfilling such a role. For David Hume, for example, reason should be the servant of the passions rather than their master, whilst rationalism ignores the fact -religion and modern psychology here being in agreement— that there is an aspect of human nature that is not and never will be rational, this irrationality playing a very significant role in human life. Hume's argument suggests that reason is rarely truly disinterested, but more often driven by hidden motives of egotism and self-interest. Thus, when the pursuit of abstract principles such as duty or the happiness of the majority come into

conflict with our egoistic desires, the latter will often prevail, for in practice such abstractions have little hold on the human will and will be unlikely to inspire much loyalty or fear. The appeal to place reason above self-interest also ignores the fact that we cannot treat people impartially, and that it may be more rational, from a purely secular perspective, to satisfy our desires as efficiently as possible. Alasdair MacIntyre argues that the Enlightenment project of seeking an independent rational justification for morality and shared rational progress through liberal values has failed²², resulting in the relativism and what Gray refers to as the ‘post-modern condition of fractured perspectives and groundless practices’²³, which rejects the Enlightenment concept of reason. Postmodernism, rooted in Friedrich Nietzsche’s criticism of the Enlightenment, emphasizes the multiplicity of perspectives lacking unity or any objective basis, for all values are a matter of perspective and there is no neutral ‘moral point of view’. The Enlightenment was ultimately self-undermining because its rational method of enquiry inexorably exposed its own fundamental principles to a withering scrutiny that they could not withstand in the long run.

Many of the original moral values of the Enlightenment had been inherited from Christianity, yet its radical individualism ultimately contradicts an objective basis for morality such as existed in pre-modern times. Modern liberal societies subsequently sought to free themselves from moral traditions perceived to be tyrannical and outdated by appealing to agreed universal principles available to all. Yet, from a post-modern perspective, liberalism, rather than providing such a set of principles, itself turns out to be just another historically-conditioned worldview, one equally vulnerable to the dissolving vortex of moral relativism. The termination of the Enlightenment, John Gray suggests, undermines much of what is foundational in the Western tradition²⁴, which may in fact not be renewable, but doomed to an irreversible decline.

Progress in Decline

Progress is not an accident, but necessity. Surely must evil and immorality disappear; surely must men become perfect.

Herbert Spencer²⁵

According to Robert Nisbet in his *History of the Idea of Progress*, ‘no single idea has been more important than, perhaps as important as, the idea of progress in Western civilization for nearly three thousand years.’²⁶ Despite the catastrophes of the twentieth century, which suggest a sobering corrective to such hopes, the tendency to see history as a gradual ascent towards a utopian goal is very much alive today, whether through Marxism or a neo-liberal belief in the saving power of free markets. Francis Fukuyama’s influential *The End of History and the Last Man* expresses a widely-shared faith that ‘global democratic capitalism’ will remake the world, whilst contemporary secular liberals proudly regard themselves as ‘progressivists’ and would fully endorse Steven Pinker’s claim that ‘something in modernity and its cultural institutions has made us nobler’.²⁷ The belief that by expanding its knowledge humanity can remake the world, eradicating hunger, poverty and tyranny is today closely associated with the global promotion of democracy—by force of arms if necessary. Karl Marx rejected conventional bourgeois morality *in toto*, yet the task

of working for a classless society may itself become a kind of moral imperative, albeit one that has a close historical connection with mass murder on a vast scale.

Despite the potency of the notion of progress for the secular intellectual, we should note Nisbet's observation that 'if there is one generalization that can be made confidently about the history of the idea of progress, it is that throughout its history the idea has been closely linked with, has depended upon, religion or upon intellectual constructs derived from religion'.²⁸ As John Gray argues, 'the decline of Christianity and the rise of revolutionary utopianism go together. When Christianity was rejected, its eschatological hopes did not disappear. They were repressed, only to return as projects of universal emancipation'²⁹; thus, 'the idea of progress is a secular version of the Christian belief in providence'.³⁰ Yet it is important to bear in mind the distinction between the secular notion of a utopia and the eschatological doctrines of religion that envisage a global restoration brought about by a divine intervention, for whilst the former is constructed solely by human efforts, the latter is initiated by God and has a plainly supernatural aspect. The progressive attempt to perfect human life on earth can be seen as a 'horizontal' reiteration of the religious belief in a 'vertical' salvation after death—faith not in the 'above', but in what lies ahead.

Yet, in our time, the progressive ideal has to face some harsh realities: economic and ecological crisis, rapidly growing populations, the widening gap between rich and poor, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the struggle for depleting resources as an increasing source of conflict. The twentieth century dealt a severe blow to hopes that politics could be the vehicle of emancipation. The dystopian visions of George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* seem to be more plausible to the contemporary imagination than any utopian faith. How then is the persistence of belief in progress to be explained? Gray suggests that, for many, science has replaced politics as the main vehicle of progressive aspirations. He refers to 'scientific fundamentalists' in contemporary culture who promise the eventual abolition of sickness, poverty, ageing and even death (through cryonics)³¹; faith in progress and 'salvation' through science has become a new utopian pseudo-religion, with many now looking to science for miracles as they once did to Christianity. Though himself an atheist, Gray nonetheless sees the Christian belief that human knowledge can have both positive and negative consequences as nearer to the truth than a naïve belief in limitless progress.³² He argues that humanity as a whole cannot be fully rational, nor does it improve morally, as the violent history of the 20th century demonstrates. The fact that science and technology will always have harmful as well as beneficial consequences due to the imperfection of human nature is overlooked:

Progress and mass murder run in tandem. As the numbers killed by famine and plague have waned, so death by violence has increased. As science and technology have advanced, so has proficiency in killing. As the hope for a better world has grown, so has mass murder.³³ ...There is no market for the truth that many of our problems are actually insoluble. Whereas religion once enabled us to tolerate this awkward fact, today it has become almost unmentionable.³⁴

The problem for the secular humanist is that ideas of progress and the moral improvement of humanity seem increasingly irrational and contrary to common

sense. Traditional, cyclical doctrines of alternating advance and decline, the idea that whilst things may improve in some ways, they degenerate in others, may appear more plausible than the notion of a linear progress in history. The crux of the progressive contradiction is to see human beings as animals driven by biological imperatives, and also to believe that we can succeed in a rational project to improve the world. Considering the Darwinian perspective, Gray is quick to assert that ‘a truly naturalistic view of the world leaves no room for secular hope’³⁵, for after all, Darwinism posits no teleological mechanism that might lead to a qualitative improvement of, let alone perfection of, human life. Yet the notion that there may be aspects of human nature deaf to reason and reform is intolerable to the progressive mentality. Gray thus suggests a reason for the enduring appeal of a belief in progress:

‘For the men and women of today, an irrational faith in progress may be the only antidote to nihilism....They believe this not from real conviction but from fear of the void that looms if the hope of a better future is given up. Belief in progress is the Prozac of the thinking classes’³⁶

Critics of contemporary progressivism also point to its tendency to deny whatever appears to contradict it. In reference to soaring crime rates in the UK during the 20th century, Gertrude Himmelfarb argues that ‘these realities have been difficult to confront because they violate the dominant ethos, which assumes that moral progress is a necessary by-product of material progress.’³⁷ For John Gray, ‘the dissolution of the Enlightenment project carries with it the ruin of the distinctive modern project of emancipation in a universal civilization’,³⁸ yet as claims of progress becomes less and less tenable, secular humanism finds itself forced to choose between the conflicting claims of reason and sentiment, between a quasi-religious concept that seems increasingly contrary to both reason and experience, and an icy scientific ‘realism’ that is continually haunted by the spectre of nihilism. It is only a religious and eschatological perspective that allows for the quasi-miraculous hope of an ‘escape from history’. Nonetheless, with the contemporary West torn between triumphalism and profound self-doubt, the idea of progress seems likely to persist, albeit in a transposed form, for as Philip Rieff suggests, there are few ideas that are more flattering to our self-image: ‘We believe that we know something our predecessors did not: that we can live freely at last, enjoying all our senses—except the sense of the past—as unremembering, honest and friendly barbarians all in a technological Eden’.³⁹

Psychological Morality

Modern psychologists have greatly enlarged the frontiers of irresponsibility: they needed more space in this area.

Karl Krauss⁴⁰

According to a view prevalent in the social sciences, contemporary man has become characteristically ‘psychological man’, identified with modernity and unbelief as opposed to traditional culture and religious belief. Finding meaning in the personal and psychological rather than in the social domain, he is marked by tendencies towards alienation and narcissism⁴¹; or, as Philip Rieff expresses it, ‘religious man

was born to be saved; psychological man was born to be pleased'.⁴² Imbued with what Richard Weaver refers to as 'the deep psychic anxiety, the extraordinary prevalence of neurosis, which make our age unique',⁴³ his predominant trait in the realm of morals is individualism. Peter Homans cites sociological analyses that 'view psychological man as originating in conjunction with a break with religion', and observes that 'psychology has arisen in direct proportion to the decline of the power of religion...a substitute relation obtains between the two: psychology is modern man's "invisible religion"'.⁴⁴ It is in this context that the therapeutic ethos, with its non-judgmental 'secular priests', has appropriated the territory of morality and meaning that were once within the province of religion. The developing notion of psychological man has coincided with an increasing tendency to question, and often to reject, traditional sources of moral authority. Furthermore, as James Davison Hunter observes, the purpose of morality is no longer self-mastery in service to God and the neighbour, but personal well-being and service to society. Whereas God is traditionally seen as the ultimate moral authority, with social institutions acting as mediators of that authority, the emphasis is now placed on the individual and personal choice.⁴⁵ According to Paul Vitz in *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship*, the humanistic psychology of Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers and others largely replaces moral concepts with the quest for human fulfillment and has thus played a significant role in the decay of moral values in the West.⁴⁶

Intimately associated with the rising influence of psychology is an anti-authoritarian tendency that is deeply hostile to traditional understandings of pedagogy and the communication of moral values. In the wake of the trauma of Nazism, thinkers such as Theodore Adorno and Erich Fromm, strongly influenced by the views of Marx and Freud, had sought to reduce the susceptibility of the 'mass man' to manipulation by such malign forces.⁴⁷ Rather than distinguishing legitimate and illegitimate authority, however, their solution was to undermine authority in general—albeit exempting their own—whether in law, the family or the classroom. The association of authority with political and social oppression is also implicit in John Dewey's 'democratization' of the classroom. Apart from its effects on discipline, this removal of authority undermines the teacher's function as moral exemplar. Given Hunter's observation that moral education now takes place largely through education and popular culture rather than through religion and the family,⁴⁸ the moral void that critics of secularism often perceive in sectors of British society becomes explicable, for as Theodore Dalrymple observes, 'The equation of all authority, even over the smallest child, with unjustifiable political authoritarianism leads only to personal and social chaos'.⁴⁹ For anti-authoritarian intellectuals, as for Rousseau in his time, 'man is born free yet is everywhere in chains'. The question of who made those chains in the first place does not seem to have occurred to them.

That moral values must have a role in education is widely agreed. What, then, is to be the basis of those values, and how are they to be imparted? In his recent study of moral education in America, *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age without Good or Evil*, James Davison Hunter observes that 'when it comes to the moral life of children, the vocabulary of the psychologist frames virtually all public discussion'.⁵⁰ He notes that modern psychology has succeeded in replacing the word 'character', with all its ethical implications, with the morally neutral term 'personality'.⁵¹ Instead of morals, we now have values, 'little more than

sentiments...expressions of individual preference'.⁵² The psychologically-based regime of contemporary moral education thus undermines character, the restoration of which requires a renewed commitment to restraining truths. However, there is little prospect of this, according to Hunter, for 'given its emphasis on therapeutic processes, the psychological strategy tends to dismiss (often with ridicule) the idea that there is any content-filled moral agenda we should pass on to succeeding generations'.⁵³ Instead, with its emphasis on individual feeling and antipathy to traditional moral codes, 'the therapeutic ethos creates a moral logic of fulfillment rooted in the satisfaction of desires';⁵⁴ ultimately, then, 'The psychological pedagogies are finally pedagogies of permission. They offer permission because there is nothing inherent within this broad cosmology to inhibit individual appetite. There is nothing that restrains the will or limits desire'.⁵⁵ In effect, the growth of psychological influence in the realm of education represents a secularization of moral pedagogy. Yet, at the same time, it has become clear that the psychological approach to moral education is ineffective, for, Hunter notes, the many studies examining their effects,

present conclusions that are as unambiguous as any body of social scientific analysis can provide....*there is little or no association, causal or otherwise, between psychological well-being and moral conduct, and psychologically oriented moral education programs have little or no positive effect upon moral behavior, achievement or anything else.* Even analysts who are sympathetic to this overall strategy have come to the same judgment. (italics in original)⁵⁶

The Question of Freedom

Behind every crooked thought there lies a crooked molecule

Roy Fuller⁵⁷

Are people free to make moral choices and to act upon them, or are they determined by forces beyond their control? Without free will, notions of character, will, conscience, virtue and vice lose much of their meaning, for people cannot be praised or blamed in the same way. A world without free will seems morally incoherent and in many ways humanly degraded. Whilst there are very good arguments against determinism—for, as Samuel Johnson famously remarked, 'All theory is against the freedom of the will; all experience for it'⁵⁸—the most reasonable course for the secular humanist in such matters would seem to be to defer to the authority of science, which may of course ultimately support determinism. Indeed, John Gray argues in *Straw Dogs* that 'there are many reasons for rejecting free will, some of them decisive',⁵⁹ claiming that 'the upshot of neuroscientific research is that we cannot be the authors of our acts'.⁶⁰ To be sure, neuroscientists do tend to compare the brain to a computer which determines our personality and choices, and research has demonstrated that brain tumours can lead to sexual disinhibition or violent tendencies. Gray further cites Benjamin Libet's theory of the 'half-second delay', which suggests that electrical impulses in the brain initiate action, occurring shortly *before* we consciously decide to act.⁶¹ Indeed, argues David Berlinski, if the human mind is an expression of its human genes, determinism follows as a logical necessity.⁶² There is thus also a contradiction

between belief in human free will and the evolutionary psychology proposed by Steven Pinker or Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene*. Yet, as Berlinski observes, both men prefer to ignore the plainly deterministic implications of their work.⁶³ The trouble is that what science implies may be incompatible with the modes of thought and being that even the most reductionist of scientists cannot help but privately defer to. Yet determinism presents another serious inconvenience, for as Anthony O'Hear has pointed out, for if we are determined our apparent rationality is in fact rooted in deeper, non rational forces.⁶⁴ Paradoxically, the results of rationally-driven scientific research may thus undermine reason itself.

The moral implications of determinism are evident in its alliance with psychology and in the tendency to see criminals as helpless victims of physical, social or psychological impairment. As early as 1891, the German Darwinist Ludwig Buchner had stated that many criminals were 'doomed or predestined to crime by a faulty or imperfect organization of mind and body'.⁶⁵ This led to criminal reforms in the USA in the 1960s which expanded the insanity defence and decreased prison sentencing. The American lawyer Clarence Darrow famously saved two murderers from the death penalty by arguing that they lacked full moral responsibility because they were products of a violent and abusive upbringing. In *One Nation Under Therapy*, Christina Hoff Sommers and Sally Satel refer to this increasingly common practice as 'the abuse excuse',⁶⁶ whilst Frank Furedi notes in *Therapy Culture* that 'traumatic experience has been converted into an all-purpose explanation for numerous forms of crime and antisocial behaviour'.⁶⁷ Modern psychology tends to see people as determined by unconscious motives or trauma; as Sommers and Satel note, 'proponents of therapism...are uncomfortable with the notion of personal responsibility'.⁶⁸ The concept of crime is increasingly being replaced with that of psychological disorders that may lead one to make 'bad choices' or act 'inappropriately'. Concepts of evil and guilt are widely perceived to be inherently judgmental and intolerant, and the idea of sin has been replaced with deterministic notions that undermine moral responsibility. Humanistic psychologists such as Carl Rogers advocate a 'total acceptance' of the patient, for those who do wrong lack self-fulfilment and are in need of therapy rather than punishment. A climate has arisen, according to Gertrude Himmelfarb, in which 'moral principles, still more moral judgments, are thought to be at best an intellectual embarrassment, at worst evidence of an illiberal and repressive disposition'.⁶⁹

In *Life at the Bottom*, a study of the British underclass based on his experience as a prison psychiatrist, Theodore Dalrymple argues that the idea that people don't have personal responsibility for their actions is now widely accepted, with disastrous moral and social consequences: 'The aim of untold millions is to be free to do exactly as they choose and for someone else to pay when things go wrong'.⁷⁰ He argues that in the UK a form of Marxist-influenced social determinism, according to which our consciousness is determined by our social status and poverty excuses crime, is now prevalent.⁷¹ He sees this trend as being supported by therapists and social workers who may have a vested interest in seeing those who behave criminally or irresponsibly as passive, helpless victims in need of their help. Similarly, according to the sociologist Alan Wolfe, 'America has most definitely entered a new era in which virtue and vice are redefined in terms of public health and addiction'.⁷²

Dalrymple likewise notes the increasing use of the term ‘addiction’ and ‘addictive personality’ to cover pleasurable but harmful behaviour related particularly to crime, drugs, food and sex. This has led to the loss for many people of the concepts of discipline and self-control, and their replacement with the notion that such behaviours are a form of disease that excludes choice. The notion that people are not responsible for their actions is encouraged by a therapeutic worldview that sees criminals and addicts as powerless, to be treated like children or as vulnerable and dependent, lacking real control over their lives. People labeled in this way are likely to collude in their status as victims, either because they believe that this is actually the case, or, in the hope of receiving more lenient treatment, as an exercise in self-justification: ‘while we ascribe our conduct to pressures from without, we obey the whims that well up from within, thereby awarding ourselves carte blanche to behave as we choose. Thus we feel good about behaving badly’.⁷³

Apart from its moral and social consequences, determinism poses a threat to the humanist ideal of political freedom. After all, if people’s actions are beyond their control, they may well be amenable to a variety of social, psychological or medical strategies designed to ‘normalize’ them or at least render them harmless. The behavioural psychologist BF Skinner viewed humans as biological machines devoid of free will and drew a parallel between the conditioned responses of animals and humans. Given this state of affairs, there can be no ‘good’ or ‘evil’ acts, just acts that are socially useful or harmful. In *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, Skinner suggested that a better society might be created by conditioning people’s responses to their environment through the positive and negative reinforcements of pleasure and fear, a view famously satirised by Anthony Burgess in his novel *A Clockwork Orange*. Whilst Skinner’s behaviourism may no longer be in fashion, the brutal process of behavioural ‘deprogramming’ undergone by Alex, the young criminal protagonist of Burgess’s novel, remains a prescient depiction of what the future may hold. The psychiatrist Laurence Tancredi predicts a ‘biologically engineered’ morality, a society in which moral deviance will be treated with drugs, whilst Nikolas Rose likewise foresees the compulsory screening of children for a propensity to be ‘morally dysfunctional’, followed by obligatory pharmaceutical treatment.⁷⁴

Evolution and Materialism

The idea that human beings have been endowed with powers and properties not found elsewhere in the animal kingdom—or the universe, so far as we can tell—arises from a simple imperative: Just look around.

David Berlinski⁷⁵

If there is one belief that unites virtually all humanists it is Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution. It performs the valuable twin roles of bulwark against religious belief, and, in combination with a faith in progress, religion-substitute. Yet it is well-known that Darwinism has, to put it mildly, a troubled moral history. In his recent study, *From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics and Racism in Germany*,⁷⁶ Richard Weikert examines the impact of Darwin’s theories in Nazi Germany. Herbert Spencer’s doctrine of Social Darwinism had applied Darwin’s concept of the survival of the fittest to the human social realm, and biologists such as Ernst Haeckel concluded from

this that competition between species became competition between races in the human domain: 'the gulf between [the] thoughtful mind of a civilized man and the thoughtless animal soul of the savage is enormous—greater than the gulf that separates the latter from the soul of the dog'.⁷⁷ Darwinism, especially social Darwinism and eugenics, provided important impetuses to the Nazi view that mass-murder on an industrial scale could be a morally praiseworthy contribution to human progress. Reflecting on his advocacy of involuntary euthanasia, Haeckel reasoned as follows: 'What good does it do to humanity to maintain artificially and rear the thousands of cripples, deaf-mutes, idiots, etc., who are born every year with an hereditary burden of incurable disease?'⁷⁸ Such views should not be seen as an isolated aberration, for, after all, support for eugenics before the Second World War was a British and American as well as a German phenomenon.⁷⁹ The moral problem for the secular humanist is that if human life has nothing sacred about it, if we are simply animals with more complex brains with nothing to qualitatively distinguish us from our supposedly lesser cousins, such reflections may become at least worthy of consideration. Indeed, the ethicist Peter Singer has recently advanced the view that 'if we compare a severely defective human infant with a nonhuman animal, a dog or a pig...we will often find the nonhuman to have superior capacities...Only the fact that the defective infant is a member of the species *Homo sapiens* leads it to be treated differently from the dog or pig. Species membership alone, however, is not morally relevant.'⁸⁰

According to a neo-Darwinism perspective that seeks to explain every form of human behavior in evolutionary terms, apparently selfless or altruistic behavior is actually driven by genetic or reproductive imperatives. As John G. West Jr. observes, 'most evolutionary psychologists cannot accept the idea that truly self-denying behavior could be produced by natural selection. So they must interpret what appears to be altruism as merely another form of selfishness'.⁸¹ It is evident that if all morality, even apparent altruism, is actually driven by self-interest, egoism is logical and self-sacrifice makes no sense. As Keith Ward suggests, a biological view of morality makes anger, lust, envy, pride and so on into natural aspects of human nature.⁸²

Eager to avoid the cynical outlook on human nature and morality that stems from such observations, Michael Ruse insists that 'there is no question that we are scheming to do what is in our self-interest and yet pretending to be nice. Rather we perform better if we are deceived by our biology...we are moral because our genes, as fashioned by natural selection, fill us full of thoughts about being moral'.⁸³ The question that arises is whether self-deception is really a better basis for morality than scheming, for if we are able to see through the self-deception, scheming would surely be a more logical approach. Having made the remarkable claim that 'There is no foundation for ethics at all...morality is no more than a collective illusion fobbed off on us by our genes for reproductive ends'⁸⁴—a statement that seems to hint at moral nihilism—Ruse acknowledges that 'the simple fact is that if we recognized morality to be no more than an epiphenomenon of our biology, we would cease to believe in it and stop acting upon it'.⁸⁵ Thus, he suggests, biology must find ways to make people believe that morality is something objectively real, whilst knowing that it is in fact an illusion. However, if morality is a socialized mechanism with no objective basis, simply another enabling mechanism for the replication of genes, then it is not rational to follow it when it contradicts self-interest, and imposing such beliefs on others would be a form of deceit. As Keith Ward observes, such a view is a recipe for moral

anarchy, for if a morality is to be based on pragmatism and maintained for its useful social applications, it must be seen as having a basis in reality, or its power to compel us will be dramatically reduced, if not eliminated altogether.⁸⁶

There has been much reluctance, even amongst its adherents, to accept the implications of the worldview that evolution offers us, its profound subversion of the most basic human notions of self, meaning and morality. Daniel Dennett famously referred to Darwinism as a 'universal acid' that corrodes every traditional belief about human nature that is incompatible with materialism.⁸⁷ Yet few humanists really accept the full implications of seeing human beings as mere animals, for as John Gray observes, 'Darwin showed that humans are like other animals, humanists claim they are not'.⁸⁸ It seems that even scientists are not immune to this inconsistency; noting the curious fact that Ruse and Dawkins see morality as having no basis, yet end up believing in liberal moral values,⁸⁹ Ward observes that 'What the biological moralists are really doing is to impose their own moral ideals on to the evolutionary process, rather than, as they claim, deriving moral ideas from the process itself'.⁹⁰

As we have seen, the Enlightenment and the secular ethics that stem from it, are based on fundamentally theistic notions of the uniqueness of humanity. Darwinism, particularly neo-Darwinism, undermines this by telling us that there is no permanent human nature, only an endless interplay of genes with the environment. Reason is shown to have a non-rational origin in survival-oriented human drives. Indeed, the very concepts of truth and reason are undermined, becoming merely biological mechanisms for the replication of genes (although, paradoxically, it is reason that makes this observation). Thus Ward observes that 'when the biological moralist says that morality is just a set of imprinted behavior patterns, and in the same breath recommends that we ought to face up to and accept this, because it is the truth, he is simply contradicting himself'.⁹¹ Furthermore, if morality evolved, it continues to do so and is entirely relative, for evolution only implies change, not any objective basis for moral standards. We are therefore unable to meaningfully compare one set of moral values against another over time, for what is considered evil today may in due course come to be seen as good. Any morality based on evolution must thus be relative to the evolutionary stage of development in which it arises, this stage itself being part of a process of flux with no permanent points of reference.

In *Moral Darwinism: How we Became Hedonists*, Benjamin Wiker argues that the fundamental distinction in Western thought has been between the theistic understanding of a purposive universe created by a higher intelligence, and the materialist view that life consists of a blind and ultimately meaningless material process.⁹² He traces the history of materialism from Epicurus to Darwin, its practical moral implications and how these manifest themselves in contemporary society. For Epicurus, happiness demands freedom from disturbance, and he sees the good life as incompatible with belief in God and the immortality of the soul, since an afterlife in which we are judged places unacceptable restrictions on how we live our lives in this world and nourishes a form of anxiety that is incompatible with happiness. Wiker notes the lack of common ground between the Epicurean and Christian views, this being particularly apparent in their views on sex and marriage:

For Epicurus, there are no intrinsically evil actions because nature itself is immoral. Since human beings are ultimately a random conglomeration of atoms, there is no intrinsic unity causing or

defining “human being” to which we can refer moral judgments. The locus of moral judgments therefore must be the pleasure or pain any particular accidental unity, which we call a “human being” might feel. As a consequence, no sexual act is intrinsically evil, for as Epicurus himself said, “every pleasure is a good thing”. Since only the individual can affirm or deny whether something gives him a pleasing sensation, then no other individual can deny the “goodness” of what someone else finds pleasant. No one can be wrong about what happens to feel good.⁹³

For Epicurus, as for utilitarianism, good and evil are thus synonymous with pleasure and pain. In Wiker’s view, the contemporary scene in the West represents a return from Christian ethics to those of materialism. He regards, for example, Peter Singer’s dismissal of the sanctity of life based on his contention that human beings are not essentially different from animals, as well as his Alfred Kinsey’s attempt to normalize the practices of bestiality and paedophilia,⁹⁴ as logical extensions of the materialist and Epicurean perspectives. Reflecting on these developments, and the ways in which they may play out in the near future, he has this to say: ‘we may call this phenomenon the law of moral compromise: what yesterday was considered barbaric and unimaginable, is today considered acceptable under extreme circumstances, and tomorrow will be considered part of the general advance of civilized society and unimaginable to live without’.⁹⁵

Despite the extreme libertarian tendencies reflected in these developments, materialism is not a philosophy that necessarily manifests itself in an Epicurean tolerance. Neither his notoriety, nor the extremity of his depiction of human nature, should lead us to overlook the influence of the Marquis de Sade⁹⁶, who in many ways represents the dark side of the Enlightenment. Sade was an atheist, strongly influenced by the materialistic doctrines of his time, rejecting belief in the soul and comparing the human being to a machine. All that exists, as Epicurus has argued, is matter in motion—nature is thus amoral and irrational, driven purely by instinct and self-interest. Thus everything, including conscience, ultimately has a material origin and all morality is a matter of social pragmatism. Sade was also a determinist, arguing that since freedom is an illusion we are justified in committing moral evils because we have no choice but to do so; there can be no moral responsibility, and the concept of crime has no meaning. For Sade, we inhabit a universe with no ultimate meaning, the sole purpose of existence being pleasure. According to his proto-Darwinian logic, extreme egoism, the torture, murder and extreme forms of sexual perversion depicted in his writings, are justified by the imperatives that govern nature, including humanity: ‘assure yourself that you are absolutely sovereign in a world groveling at your feet, that yours is the supreme and unchallengeable right to change, mutilate, destroy, annihilate any and all the living beings you like...’.⁹⁷ In many ways Sade is ahead of his time, his radical, transgressive individualism and contempt for the sacred making him a quintessentially modern thinker. As John Phillips observes, Sade’s works ‘push the logic of atheistic materialism to its ultimate conclusion’⁹⁸; indeed, that conclusion must be seen as a logical and consistent extrapolation of the materialist worldview to rival that of humanism.

Looking into the Abyss

*To scientific atheists, the ancient idea that homo homini lupus—
man is a wolf to man—leaves them shaking their heads in
poodle-like perplexity.*

David Berlinski⁹⁹

What, after all, compels us to keep our promises?

Heinrich Himmler¹⁰⁰

In a letter of 1878 the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky writes:

Now assume that there is no God, or immortality of the soul. Now tell me, why should I live righteously and do good deeds, if I am to die entirely on the earth? And if that is so, why shouldn't I (as long as I can rely on my cleverness and agility to avoid being caught by the law) cut another man's throat, rob and steal?¹⁰¹

Dostoyevsky's challenge, which has often been paraphrased by the statement that 'if God is dead, everything is permitted', suggests that whilst the atheist can choose to conform to moral principles, he is not bound by them. In a godless universe, he suggests, there can be no compelling, absolute authority for morality, and things can no longer be judged good or evil in the same way. Indeed, something cannot become a source of moral value just because someone says it is so—to be effective, to hold sway over the will and the instinctive egoism of human beings, it must be felt to truly be so in an objective sense. A social or psychological source of moral values can only hold sway to the extent that it is itself perceived to be rooted in such a source of value—and becomes weakened to the extent that it is not.

In the absence of God, humanism is not the only alternative, for nihilism may also be true. In defining this term, one can distinguish existential nihilism, the belief that life is meaningless and without value, and the sense of emptiness and despair that follow from this, from ethical nihilism, the view that morality is ultimately based on subjective opinion rather than any objective set of facts, that it is merely a human invention that enables us to cope with living in a meaningless world. Nihilism also entails the implicit view that life's ultimate questions cannot be answered, if indeed they are asked at all, because there are no ultimate truths.¹⁰² For the nihilist, humanism is merely a fragile assemblage of religiously-derived values and comforting, manufactured illusions. Nihilism seems to stalk the humanist imagination like a dark, unacknowledged twin forever seeking recognition.

Indeed, nihilism seems in some ways to be a more adequate reflection than secular humanism of the contemporary scientific—or rather, *scientistic*—*weltanschauung* represented by those, such as Richard Dawkins, for whom 'The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is at bottom no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but pointless indifference'.¹⁰³ Perhaps, then, we may find solace in the realm of private experience? It seems not, if we are to take Francis Crick seriously: 'you, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact

no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules... “you’re nothing but a pack of neurons”.¹⁰⁴ It has too rarely been observed that the worldview of scientific reductionism has much in common with that of the nihilist or indeed the psychopath. Given such statements, it is curious indeed that Dawkins and others sense no inconsistency with their conventional secular pieties concerning the adventure of science and their awe and wonder at the spectacle of the universe.

Nihilism is one logical consequence, not just of a dehumanizing scientism, but of radical relativism and the postmodern denial of objective truth, including ethical truths. Louis Pojman cites the following paraphrase of a tape-recorded conversation between the serial murderer Ted Bundy—a trained lawyer—and one of his victims in which he attempts to justify his crime. His argument casts a disturbing light on the shadowy territory where relativism and nihilism converge:

Then I learned that all moral judgments are ‘value judgments’, that all value judgments are subjective, and that none can be proved to be either ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. I even read somewhere that the Chief Justice of the United States had written that the American Constitution expressed nothing more than collective value judgments. Believe it or not, I figured out for myself—what apparently the Chief Justice couldn’t figure out for himself—that if the rationality of one value judgment was zero, multiplying it by millions would not make it one whit more rational. Nor is there any ‘reason’ to obey the law for anyone, like myself, who has the boldness and daring—the strength of character—to throw off its shackles...I discovered that to become truly free, truly unfettered, I had to become truly uninhibited. And I quickly discovered that the greatest obstacle to my freedom, the greatest block and limitation to it, consists in the insupportable ‘value judgment’ that I was bound to respect the rights of others. I asked myself, who were these ‘others’? Other human beings, with human rights? Why is it more wrong to kill a human animal than any other animal, a pig or a sheep or a steer? Is your life more to you than a hog’s life to a hog? Why should I be willing to sacrifice my pleasure more for the one than for the other? Surely you would not, in this age of scientific enlightenment, declare that God or nature has marked some pleasures as ‘moral’ or ‘good’ and others as ‘immoral’ or ‘bad’? In any case, let me assure you, my dear young lady, that there is absolutely no comparison between the pleasure I might take in eating ham and the pleasure I anticipate in raping and murdering you. That is the honest conclusion to which my education has led me—after the most conscientious examination of my spontaneous and uninhibited self.¹⁰⁵

Bundy’s argument, which is distinctly Sadean, offers a serious challenge to social contract arguments that make morality a matter of consensus and pragmatism, indeed to any suggestion that an objective basis for morality can exist for the secular humanist. Putting the matter differently, David Berlinski concludes that ‘If moral absolutes are not commanded by God’s will, and if they are not in some sense

absolute, then what ought to be is a matter simply of what men and women decide should be. There is no other source of judgment'.¹⁰⁶

Conclusion

Science has supplanted religion as the chief source of authority, but at the cost of making human life accidental and insignificant.

John Gray¹⁰⁷

The most necessary task of the present time is to accept the irreducible reality of religion.

John Gray¹⁰⁸

It is doubtful that a purely secular morality, rejecting any transcendent divine power—which is not after all the case even in ancient Greece, Rome or Confucian China—has ever proved itself effective in a society over a significant period of time. Indeed, insofar as societies have engaged in such experiments, they have usually, as John Gray suggests, been catastrophic:

The role of humanist thought in shaping the past century's worst regimes is easily demonstrable, but it is passed over, or denied, by those who harp on about the crimes of religion. Yet the mass murders of the twentieth century were not perpetuated by some latter-day version of the Spanish Inquisition. They were carried out by atheist regimes in the service of Enlightenment ideals of progress...the result has been a form of tyranny, new in history, that commits vast crimes in the pursuit of heaven on earth.¹⁰⁹

Humanists have absorbed much of religious morality without acknowledging the possibility that undermining religion might, in the long run, also threaten the viability of their own moral principles. According to Friedrich Nietzsche, as Christianity declines, moral concepts intrinsically linked to it are no longer intelligible, even if they appear to be: "When one gives up the Christian faith, one pulls the right to Christian morality out from under one's feet...it stands or falls with faith in God".¹¹⁰ Yet, as Gray observes, 'In many ways humanism is not much more than secular Christianity; but it has suppressed the profound insights into the contradictions of human nature and the ambivalence of knowledge that were preserved in the Christian tradition.'¹¹¹ Furthermore, Gray suggests that humanism 'has left secular cultures such as Britain stuck between a humanist view of mankind that actually comes from religion and a more genuinely scientific view in which it is just one animal species, no more capable of taking charge of its destiny than any other'.¹¹² John G. West Jr. suggests several fundamental ways in which contemporary science, and the methodological naturalism to which it remains tied, presents problems for morality:

Scientific materialism was dubious science and even shakier philosophy, but it had far-reaching consequences for Western society. By claiming that all human thoughts and actions are dictated by either

biology or environment, scientific materialists undermined traditional theories of human freedom and responsibility. By asserting that moral beliefs were merely the product of heredity or environment, scientific materialists laid the groundwork for moral relativism. By arguing that man should take control of the material processes that produced him to remake society, scientific materialists promoted a virulently coercive strain of utopianism.¹¹³

What is more, as Gray remarks, ‘by privileging science and reason to the exclusion of other values, the Enlightenment ultimately bequeathed us a world ruled by calculation and willfulness which is humanly unintelligible and destructively purposeless’ that ‘has successfully eroded and destroyed local and traditional forms of moral and social knowledge; it has not issued in anything resembling a new civilization, however, but instead in nihilism.’¹¹⁴ Whilst the religious believer looks beyond science, to revelation, for ethical axioms such as the belief in free will, that are held to be immutable, humanism today finds itself dangerously at the mercy of a reductionist science. When contemporary scientists, unmindful of any limits to their discipline, would have us believe that humans are simply higher animals, their minds mere epiphenomena determined by implacable physical laws and processes, humanists, who accept the materialistic premises of science and grant its methods privileged status, are less and less able to justify their allegiance to ideas of human uniqueness, reason and free will. Such a position remains coherent to religious believers alone, and the humanist trails inconsistently in their wake to the extent that he shares it, for as Gray argues, ‘when the claim that humans are radically different from other animals is wrenched from its theological roots it is not just indefensible, but virtually incomprehensible.’¹¹⁵ Humanism, he argues, is no longer coherent, for it has been deconstructed by a naturalistic science with which it is fundamentally incompatible; the continuing strength, indeed resurgence, of religion suggests that ‘we have moved into a post-secular era’.¹¹⁶ Nonetheless, it seems likely that humanism will continue at least as a habit of thought for some time, for it dimly reflects religious doctrines of human uniqueness that are indispensable for morality if not, indeed, for civilization itself. It is more likely the increasing prevalence of a morally ruinous scientism and nihilism that should be of primary concern to those, whether of religious or secular persuasion, who wish to defend enduring human values of any kind.

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