

School of Theology at Claremont



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# BEYOND NIHILISM

BY

MICHAEL POLANYI

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F.R.S.

THE THIRTEENTH  
ARTHUR STANLEY EDDINGTON  
MEMORIAL LECTURE  
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# THE ARTHUR STANLEY EDDINGTON MEMORIAL LECTURESHIP

This Lectureship was instituted in 1947 with the intention of providing a fitting memorial to Sir Arthur Eddington, O.M., Plumian Professor of Astronomy in the University of Cambridge from 1913 to 1944.

The lectures are to deal with some aspect of contemporary scientific thought considered in its bearing on the philosophy of religion or on ethics. It is hoped that they will thus help to maintain and further Eddington's concern for relating the scientific, the philosophical and the religious methods of seeking truth and will be a means of developing that insight into the unity underlying these different methods which was his characteristic aim.

Man's rapidly increasing control over natural forces holds out prospects of material achievements that are dazzling; but unless this increased control of material power can be matched by a great moral and spiritual advance, it threatens the catastrophic breakdown of human civilization. Consequently, the need was never so urgent as now for a synthesis of the kind of understanding to be gained through various ways—scientific, philosophical and religious—of seeking truth.

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THE Statutes of the Eddington Lectures show that their founders were preoccupied with the tardiness of moral improvement as compared with the swift advances of science, and that they desired that this disparity be clarified by these lectures. Since none of my predecessors has taken up this question, I propose to do so and should like to state in advance the gist of my answer. I shall argue that the assumptions underlying the question are false, or at least profoundly misleading. For I believe that never in the history of mankind has the hunger for brotherhood and righteousness exercised such power over the minds of men as today. The past two centuries have not been an age of moral weakness; but have, on the contrary, seen the outbreak of a moral fervour which has achieved numberless humanitarian reforms and has improved modern society beyond the boldest thoughts of earlier centuries. And I believe that it is this fervour which, in our own lifetime, has outreachéd itself by its inordinate aspirations and thus heaped on mankind the disasters that have befallen us. I admit that these disasters were accompanied by moral depravation.

But I deny that this justifies us in speaking of moral retardation. What sluggish river has ever broken the dams which contained it, or smashed the wheels which harnessed it? We have yet to discover the proper terms for describing this event. Ethics must catch up with the pathological forms of morals due to the modern intensification of morality. We must learn to recognize moral excesses.

I shall suggest that modern nihilism is a moral excess from which we are suffering today. And I shall try to look past this stage and see whether there is in fact anything beyond it. For our passion for nihilistic self-doubt may be incurable, and it may come to an end only when it has finally destroyed our civilization.

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To speak of moral passions is something new. Writers on ethics, both ancient and modern, have defined morality as a composed state of mind. The great spiritual elevation of the fifth century established throughout its immense area—in China, India and Greece—a picture of moral man achieving serenity by curbing his passions. It is true that Greek thought has already discussed to what extent moral happiness may be flavoured by a calm enjoyment of the senses. The union of pleasure and morality has been a recurrent theme

of ethical speculations down to modern times. But modern nihilism is not a form of moral laxity and it can be understood, on the contrary, only as part of a comprehensive moral protest that is without precedent in history. So novel is the present state of morality that it has been overlooked by all writers on ethics. The idea that morality consists in imposing on ourselves the curb of moral commands is so ingrained in us that we simply cannot see that the moral need of our time is, on the contrary, to curb our inordinate moral demands, which precipitate us into moral degradation and threaten us with bodily destruction.

There is admittedly one ancient record of moral admonitions which were outbreaks of moral passions: the sermons of the Hebrew prophets. I might have disregarded these since their fulminations were fired by religious zeal and the religious zeal of Judeo-Christianity is not primarily moral. But these prophetic utterances are relevant here because their Messianism, reinforced by the apocalyptic messages of the New Testament, gave rise in the Middle Ages and after to a series of chiliastic outbursts in which the inversion of moral passion into nihilism made its first appearance.

This has been followed up recently by Norman Cohn in *The Pursuit of the Millennium*. He shows that the initial impetus to the repeated Messianic

rebellions which occurred in Central Europe from the eleventh to the sixteenth centuries was given by the great moral reforms of Gregory VII. His violent resolve to purge the Church of simony, to prohibit the marriage of the clergy and enforce their chastity, retrieved the Church from imminent decay, but it did so at the cost of inciting the populace to rebellion against the clergy. These rebellions were both religious and moral. Their master ideas could be conceived only in a Christian society, for they assailed the spiritual rulers of society for offending against their own teachings. Rulers who did not preach Christian ideals could not be attacked in these terms.<sup>1</sup>

Since no society can live up to Christian precepts, any society professing Christian precepts must be afflicted by an internal contradictions, and when the tension is released by rebellion its agents must tend to establish a nihilist Messianic rule. For a victorious rising will create a new centre of power, and as the rising was motivated by Christian morality, the new centre will be beset by the same contradiction against which its sup-

<sup>1</sup> I am concerned here only with risings proclaiming moral principles which the existing rulers profess, and are accused of failing to observe. This does not apply generally to outbursts of millenarism among primitive people. Even so, such movements are most frequently induced by the teachings of Christian missionaries. (See Peter Worsley, *The Trumpet Sounds*, London, 1957, p. 245.)

porters had risen in rebellion. It will, indeed, be in a worse position, for its internal balance will not be protected by any customary compromise. It can then hold on only by proclaiming itself to be the absolute good; a Second Coming greater than the first and placed therefore beyond good and evil. We see arising then the ‘moral superman’ whom Norman Cohn compares with the ‘armed bohemians’ of our days, the followers of Bakunin and Nietzsche. For the first time the excesses of Christian morality turned here into fierce immorality.

But these events were but scattered prodromal signs. The full power of the disturbance which had caused them became manifest only after the secularization of Europe in the eighteenth century. This change was neither sudden nor complete: but secularization was broadly completed in half a century. It was decisively advanced by the new scientific outlook; the victory of Voltaire over Bossuet was the triumph of Newton, even though Newton might not have wanted it. The scientific revolution supplied the supreme axiom of eighteenth-century rationalism, the rejection of all authority; ‘Nullius in Verba’ had been the motto of the Royal Society at its foundation in 1660. Science served also as a major example for emancipating knowledge from religious dogma.

The new world view was expected to set man

free to follow the natural light of reason, and thus to put an end to religious fanaticism and bigotry which were deemed the worst misfortunes of mankind. Humanity would advance then peacefully towards ever higher intellectual, moral, political and economic perfection. But already quite early in the development of this perspective—almost forty years before universal progress was first envisaged by Condorcet—Rousseau had challenged its hopes in his *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (1750) and *Discourse on Inequality* (1754). He declared that civilized man was morally degenerate, for he lived only outside himself, by the good opinion of others. He was a ‘hollow man’, an ‘other-directed person’, to use terms made current two centuries later. Rousseau actually attributed this degeneration ‘to the progress of the human mind’, which had produced inequalities and consolidated them by the establishment of property. Man’s original virtue had thus been corrupted and his person enslaved. Here was moral fury attacking all that was of good repute: all accepted manners, custom and law; exalting instead a golden age which was before good and evil.

Admittedly, his fervent dedication of the *Discourse on Inequality* to the city of Geneva shows that Rousseau’s text was vastly hyperbolic. Yet by his argument and rhetoric he poured into the channels of rationalism a fierce passion for humanity. His

thought so widened these channels that they could be fraught eventually with all the supreme hopes of Christianity, the hopes which rationalism had released from their dogmatic framework. But for this infusion of Christian fervour, Voltaire's vision of mankind purged of its follies and settling down to cultivate its garden might have come true; and Gibbon's nostalgia for a civilization restored to its antique dispassion might have been satisfied. However, the legacy of Christ blighted these complacent hopes; it had other tasks in store for humanity. So it came that the *philosophes* not only failed to establish an age of quiet enjoyment, but induced instead a violent tide of secular dynamism. And that while this tide was to spread many benefits to humanity, nobler than any that the *philosophes* had ever aimed at, it also degenerated in many places into a fanaticism fiercer than the religious furies which their teachings had appeased. So even before the principles of scientific rationalism had been fully formulated, Rousseau had conjured up the extrapolation of these principles to the kind of secular fanaticism which was actually to result from them.

And he went further. Having anticipated the passions of the European revolution without himself intending any revolution, he anticipated even its sequel which was never intended—and indeed abhorred—by most of those who were to become

its actual agents. He realized that an aggregate of unbridled individuals could form only a totally collectivized political body. For such individuals could be governed only by their own wills and any governmental will formed and justified by them would itself necessarily be unbridled. Such a government could not submit to a superior jurisdiction any conflict arising between itself and its citizens.<sup>1</sup> This argument is the same which led Hobbes to justify an absolutist government on the grounds of an unbridled individualism, and the procedure Rousseau suggested for establishing this absolutism was also the same as postulated by Hobbes. It was construed as a free gift of all individual wills to the will of the sovereign, under the seal of a Social Contract, the sovereign being established in both cases as the sole arbiter of the contract between the citizens and itself.

The congruence between the conclusions derived from an absolute individualism, both by Hobbes who had set out to justify absolutism and Rousseau who hoped to vindicate liberty, testifies to the logical cogency of their argument. It suggests that when revolutions demanding total individual liberty were to lead to the establishment of a collectivist absolutism, these logical implications were actually at work in the process.

Meanwhile this logic was still only on paper,

<sup>1</sup> Rousseau, *Contrat Social*, Book I, ch. vi.

and even on paper the tyrannical consequences of his position were sometimes vigorously denied by Rousseau himself. The predominant opinion of the Enlightenment certainly opposed both the premises and the conclusions of Rousseau, and continued confidently to pursue the prospect of free and reasonable men in search of individual happiness, under a government to which they would grant only enough power to protect the citizens from encroachments by their fellow citizens or by foreign enemies. The logic of Hobbes and Rousseau was suspended by disregarding the question as to who would arbitrate between the government and the citizens. Fascinated by the examples of British parliamentary government, political philosophy was ready to accept the current maxims of British success. It was not Rousseau but Locke, therefore, whose teachings triumphed in the first revolution, which was to be American and not French. And it was still Locke whose diction prevailed in the Declaration of the Rights of Man at the beginning of the French Revolution.

By that time, however, the secularization of the most active minds of Europe and America had advanced nearly to completion and the rising stream of Christian aspirations, emerging from its shattered dogmatic precincts, was effectively entering the field of public life. The French

Revolution and the collateral movements of reform in all the countries of Europe brought to an end a political state common to mankind for a hundred thousand years from the beginnings of human society. All during these immemorial ages—throughout their myriad tribes and numerous civilizations—men had accepted existing custom and law as the foundation of society. There had been great reforms, but never before had the deliberate contriving of unlimited social improvement been elevated to a dominant principle. The French Revolution marks the dividing line between the immense expanse of essentially static societies and the narrow strip of time over which our modern experience of social dynamism has so far extended.

Little indeed did the great rationalists realize the transformation they were engendering. Voltaire had written in his *Lettres Philosophiques* that not all the works of philosophers would ever cause even as much strife as the quarrel about the length of sleeves to be worn by Franciscan friars had aroused. He did not suspect that the spirit of St Francis himself would enter into the teachings of the philosophers and set the world ablaze with their arguments. And even remoter beyond his horizon lay the fact that rationalism, thus inflamed, would transform the emotional personality of man. Yet this is what followed. Man's

consciousness of himself as a sovereign individual evoked that comprehensive movement of thought and feeling now known as romanticism. Of this great and fruitful germination I shall pick out only the strand which leads on from Rousseau's exaltation of uncivilized man who, like Adam and Eve before the Fall, has yet no knowledge of good and evil. The scorn which Rousseau had poured on all existing society presently found vent in his defiant assertion of his own individuality. His *Confessions* were to show a man in the starkness of nature, and that man would be himself, whom no other man resembled. His lowest vices would be exposed and thrown as a gauntlet at the face of the world. The reader should judge, he wrote, 'whether nature was right in smashing the mould into which she had cast me'.

This is modern immoralism. Rascals had written their lives before and had shamelessly told of their exploits. The wrongdoings which a Benvenuto Cellini or a Boswell related in their writings exceed those of Rousseau, and their authors showed no compunction. Yet they were not immoralists. For they did not proclaim their vices to the world in order to denounce the world's hypocrisy—but merely told a good story.

True, sceptical rationalism had already spread a philosophy of pleasure. Mme du Châtelet wrote that men set free from prejudices should seek no

other purpose in life than to enjoy agreeable sensations; and she acted on this principle. But enlightened libertinism envisaged men pursuing pleasure peacefully within the limits of natural morality. Rousseau's prophetic temper transmuted this hedonism into an angry protest against society and flaunted immoral individuality in contemptuous defiance of society.

There had been periods of moral scepticism in antiquity. The angry young men of Greece had affirmed that the law was but the will of the stronger. And in Greece, too, secularism and critical analysis may have stimulated this view and have contributed also to the immoralism of Alcibiades and his like-minded contemporaries. But this immoralism was not romantic, for it was not proclaimed in protest against the moral shallowness of society.

Likewise, when Thucydides acknowledged that national interests overruled moral standards in dealings between city states, he declared this as a bitter truth. Machiavelli reasserted this teaching and expanded it by authorizing the prince to override all moral constraints in consolidating his own power. And later, Machiavellism was to develop into the doctrine of *Staatsraison*, exercising a steady influence on modern rulers and contributing greatly to the formation of modern states. This *Realpolitik* culminated in the writings, actions and

achievements of Frederick the Great, and still lacked romantic colour. For it still justified itself as a regrettable necessity.

But romantic dynamism transformed this tight-lipped immorality of princes into the exaltation of nationhood as a law unto itself. It affirmed that the uniqueness of great nations gave them the right to unlimited development at the expense of their weaker neighbours. Such national immoralism developed furthest in Germany and was upheld there with a strong feeling of its moral superiority over the moralizing speeches of statesmen in other countries. This German attitude duplicated on the national scale Rousseau's flaunting of his uniquely vicious nature against a hypocritical society. I shall say more about this later.

Meanwhile, let me make it clear that I am not concerned with the effect of Rousseau's writings on the course of history. Their effect was considerable, but even had his works been overlooked, the fact would remain that a great thinker anticipated in three respects the inherent instability of the rationalist ideal of a secular society. He saw that it implied an unrestrained individualism, demanding absolute freedom and equality far beyond the limits imposed by any existing society. He saw, next, that such absolute sovereignty of individual citizens was conceivable within society only under a popular government, exercising

absolute power. And thirdly, he anticipated the ideal of an amoral individualism, asserting the rights of a unique creative personality against the morality of a discredited society. And though the transposition of romantic immoralism on to the national scale was admittedly strange to Rousseau's cosmopolitan outlook, yet this too was largely prefigured by his thought. Now that these implications have proved to be paths of history, the fact that they were discerned at a time when no one had yet thought of them as lines of action strongly suggests that they were in fact the logical consequences of their antecedents: that is, of a sceptical rationalism combined with the secularized fervour of Christianity. I do not say that these logical consequences were bound to take effect and I shall show that they have in fact remained unfulfilled in some important areas. But I do suggest that wherever they did come to light during the two centuries after Rousseau, they may be regarded as a manifestation of a logical process which first ran its course in Rousseau's mind.

I have set the scene and introduced the ideas which were to move the past five generations up to the stage which is our own responsibility today. I see the course of these 150 years as the rise of moral passions which, though mostly beneficent, sometimes assumed terrible forms, culminating in

the revolutions of the twentieth century. I see the present generation still reeling under the blows of these moral excesses, groping its way back to the original ideals of the eighteenth century. But since these have once collapsed under the weight of their logical implications, can they possibly be restored to guide us once more? This is now the question.

I have said that the situation in which the modern mind finds itself today has emerged in ~~two~~ stages from the mentality of a static society. The first stage was the process of intellectual secularization, spreading the new scientific outlook of the universe and yet evoking no profound emotions and calling for no vast political actions; the second was the dynamic process which released these emotions and actions. At this point the thoughts of philosophers were transformed into ideologies. Ideologies are fighting creeds. They fought against the defenders of the static age and they also fought against each other, as rivals. Those who speak to-day of the end of ideologies mean that dynamism has abated and can move men today therefore without commitment to a theoretical fighting creed.

The effectiveness of dynamic political action carried on with little ideological guidance is illustrated by the development of Britain in the first half of the nineteenth century. The abolition of slavery, the factory laws, the emancipation of

non-conformists and catholics, the reform of parliament, the lunacy laws, criminal and penal reform and the many other humanitarian improvements, for which this period was named the Age of Reform, were promoted by people of widely different persuasions. The reforms had their early roots in the sustained struggle against oppression and social injustice which had already found influential advocates in politics for centuries before the Enlightenment. They were not achieved by a secularized anti-clerical movement, but by ancient political forces quickened by a new zeal for social improvement. With his theory of British political practice, Montesquieu gave an ideology to France; yet in Britain this theory was never an ideology, but a commentary on established forms of life. No one objected, for example, to the fact that Britain's chief executive was responsible to Parliament and that British judges continued to make case-law, although these proceedings infringed the theoretical division of powers. Such was indeed the fate of all political theory in England: it never became more than a set of maxims, subject to interpretation by customary practice. The genius of Hobbes was disregarded, for his teachings were not consonant with practice. Locke was exalted and the gaps of his theory ignored, for practice readily filled these gaps. The views of Bentham, whose paramount

influence should in strict logic have resulted in the establishment of Aldous Huxley's 'Brave New World', were reduced in practice to a corrective against rigid traditionalism; while Burke's inordinate traditionalism was quietly assimilated as a mere corrective to the predominance of utilitarianism. Later, J. S. Mill achieved lasting influence with his theories of liberty and representative government which ignored all the questions raised by Hobbes and Rousseau and also by German Idealism; and finally, at the turn of the century, even Hegel was domesticated in T. H. Green's adaptation of his philosophy to British constitutional practice.

Yet dynamism did take deep hold on England. Only it did so piecemeal, by arousing those people whom the established order had wronged and by appealing to the conscience of those responsible for maintaining these injustices. As a result, today, after 150 years of reform that have transformed every particle of her life, Britain's institutions still form a single harmonized system, upheld without serious dissent by the entire nation. The end of ideologies will signify no more in this case than the termination of a brief period of doctrinaire Socialism.

Thus Britain avoided the self-destructive implications of the Enlightenment of which she was one chief author. Remember David Hume's game

of backgammon, to which he turned in disgust over the consequences of his scepticism—it has remained the paradigm of British national life. It preserved down to this day the movement of eighteenth-century humanism. In America the same result was achieved through a passionate veneration of the constitution. Hence Britain, whose pioneering scepticism was feared by French conservatives in the eighteenth century, came to be looked upon in the nineteenth century as old-fashioned by the dynamic intelligentsia of the Continent. I have mentioned already how the German romantics, who denied the relevance of moral standards to the external actions of states, indignantly rejected the moralizing talk of English and American statesmen as stupid or dishonest, or both. But German socialists were equally non-plussed by the religious and moral exhortations of British labour leaders. Continental Marxists kept on discussing the curious backwardness of English and American politics—even as Communists in Albania today are probably wondering how countries like Germany, France and England could fall so far behind the enlightened example of Albania.

There was a similar relationship between England and the Continent also in respect to romantic individualism. Byron had spread the image of the noble romantic immoralist through European

literature as far as the Russian steppes. The poet Lenski in Pushkin's *Onegin* (1833) has a portrait of Byron in his remote country house. But England itself got rid of Byron without a trace. The problem of evil, the possibility that evil might be morally superior to good, which affected all nineteenth-century thought on the Continent, was never raised in England. Morley, in his book *On Compromise*, deplores the fact that England's civic genius had restrained the adventures of speculative thought so as to keep them politically innocuous. Had he lived to see our own day, Morley might have felt that England had remained backward only on the road to disaster. Or, perhaps more positively, he would have seen that England—like America—had effectively relaxed the internal contradictions inherent in any Christian or post-Christian society, by gradually humanizing society, while strengthening the affection between fellow citizens for the sake of which they may forgive mutual injustices. Because it was this achievement that has preserved the eighteenth century framework of thought almost intact in these countries up to this day.

However, in 1789, France broke away and led the world towards a revolutionary consummation of the contradiction inherent in a post-Christian rationalism. The ideology of total revolution is a variant of the derivation of absolutism from

absolute individualism. Its argument is simple and has yet to be answered. If society is not a divine institution, it is made by man, and man is free to do with society what he likes. There is then no excuse for having a bad society, and we must make a good one without delay. For this purpose you must take power and you can take power over a bad society only by a revolution; so you must go ahead and make a revolution. Moreover, to achieve a comprehensive improvement of society you need comprehensive powers; so you must regard all resistance to yourself as high treason and must put it down mercilessly.

This logic is, alas, familiar to us and we can readily identify its more or less complete fulfilment from Robespierre and St Just to Lenin, Bela Kun, Hitler and Mao Tse Tung. But there is a progression from Robespierre to his successors which transforms *Messianic violence from a means to an end into an aim in itself*. Such is the final position reached by moral passions in their modern embodiments, whether in personal nihilism or in totalitarian violence. I shall call this transformation a process of *moral inversion*.

J. L. Talmon's richly documented account of the ideas which moved the French Revolution and later filled the revolutionary movements up to about 1848, makes us realize the depth of this transformation and supplies already some signs of its

beginnings. Here is the language in which Robespierre addressed his followers:

But it exists, I assure you, pure and sensitive souls; it exists, that passion, so tender, imperious, irresistible, the torment and joy of generous hearts, that deep horror of tyranny, that compassionate zeal for the oppressed, that sacred love of the fatherland, that sublime and sacred love of humanity, without which a great revolution is but a manifest crime that destroys another crime; it exists, that generous ambition to found on this earth the first Republic of the world; that selfishness of men not degraded, which finds its celestial delight in the calm of a pure conscience and the charming spectacle of the public good. You feel it burning at this very moment in your souls; I feel it in my own.<sup>1</sup>

Yes, it existed, this passion of pure and sensitive souls, this sublime and sacred love of humanity—and it still exists today, only it no longer speaks of itself in these terms. Robespierre's text contains some seeds of the more modern terms, when he speaks of that selfishness (*égoïsme*) which delights in the public good. This phrase echoes Helvetius' utilitarianism, which would establish the ideals of humanity scientifically, by rooting them in man's desire for pleasure. The next step was to reject humanitarian ideals as such; Bentham contempt-

<sup>1</sup> J. L. Talmon, *The Origin of Totalitarian Democracy* (London, 1952), p. 68 (my translation).

uously spoke of natural rights and laws of nature as senseless jargon. ‘Utility is the supreme object’, he wrote, ‘which comprehends in itself law, virtue, truth and justice.’ We have seen that the logic of Bentham’s scientific morality was mercifully suspended and its teachings interpreted in support of liberal reforms in England, but on the Continent we see henceforth the scientific formulation of dynamism entering into ever more effective competition with its original emotional manifestations. Both were revolutionary in scope, and the Utopian fantasies of both bordered on insanity; but as time went on all these inordinate hopes became increasingly assimilated to teachings claiming the authority of science. And the new scientific utopianism declared that the future society must submit absolutely to its scientific rulers; once politics had been elevated to the rank of a natural science, liberty of conscience would disappear.<sup>1</sup> The infallibility of Rousseau’s general will was transposed into the unassailable conclusions of a scientific sociology.

About the same time, personal immoralism that had issued from Rousseau underwent a similar scientific incrustation. It resulted in the character first described by Turgenev as a *nihilist*. The line of

<sup>1</sup> See F. A. Hayek, *The Counter-Revolution of Science* (Glencoe, Illinois, 1952), particularly his study of Comte, pp. 138 ff.

romantic immoralists which Pushkin had started in Russia with the Byronic figure of Onegin and of Herman (the Napoleon-struck hero of *The Queen of Spades*) was not discontinued. Raskolnikov develops their problems further, by committing a murder only to test the powers of his immorality. The figure of Raskolnikov was independently re-created by Nietzsche in his tragic apologia of the Pale Criminal in *Zarathustra*, and this figure, with others akin to it, gained popular influence in Germany and France. But not in Russia. The popular ideal of the Russian enlightened youth from about 1860 onwards was the hard, impersonal scientific nihilist, first embodied in Turgenev's hero, the medical student Bazarov.

Men of this type were called 'realists', 'progressives', or simply 'new men'. They were strict materialists, who combined their total denial of genuinely moral ideals with a frenzied hatred of society on account of its immorality. Thus they were morally dedicated to commit any act of treachery, blackmail or cruelty in the service of a programme of universal destruction. On 21 November 1869, the nihilist leader Nechaev had his follower, the student Ivanov, assassinated in order to strengthen party discipline. This is the story which Dostoevski has told in *The Possessed*, representing Ivanov by Shatov and Nechaev by Piotr Stepanovitch Werchovenski.

The structure of this crime prefigured the murder of his own followers by Stalin; but there was yet some theoretical support needed. It was supplied by a new scientific sociology claiming to have proved three things: namely, (1) that the total destruction of the existing society was the only method for achieving any essential improvement of society; (2) that nothing beyond this act of violence was required, or even to be considered, since it was unscientific to make any plans for the new society, and (3) that no moral restraints must be observed in the revolutionary seizure of power, since (a) this process was historically inevitable, and so beyond human control and (b) morality, truth, etc., were mere epiphenomena of class interests so that the only scientific meaning of morality, truth, justice, etc., consisted in advancing those class interests which science had proved to be ascendant. Such action would embody all morality, veracity and justice, in the only scientifically accepted sense.

This scientific sociology was supplied by Marxism-Leninism. Though said to transform socialism from Utopia into a science, its convincing power was due to the satisfaction it gave to the Utopian dreams which it purported to replace. And this proved sufficient. Any factual objection to the theory was repelled as a reactionary attack against socialism, while socialism itself

was safe from criticism, since any discussion of it had been condemned as unscientific speculation by Marx. Marxism provided a perfect ideology for a moral dynamism which could express itself only in a naturalistic conception of man; this is its historic function.

The generous passions of our age could now covertly explode inside the engines of a pitiless machinery of violence. The pure and sensitive souls to whom Robespierre had appealed still existed, and were indeed more numerous than ever, and his sublime and sacred love of humanity was still burning as intensely as ever. But these sentiments had become *immanent* in policies of *manifest* immorality. Their accents had become scientifically didactic. Listen to an example of Lenin's language in the programmatic statement made in June 1917.

The dictatorship of the proletariat is a scientific term stating the class in question and the particular form of state authority, called dictatorship, namely, authority based not on law, not on elections, but directly on the armed force of some portion of the population.

Robespierre's terror had justified itself by its noble aspirations; Marx refused such justification and said that violence alone must be the aim of a scientific socialism. This is moral inversion: a condition in which high moral purpose operates only

as the hidden force of an openly declared inhumanity.

In *The Possessed*, the earlier type of *personal* inversion is embodied in Stavrogin, whom the modern *political* immoralist Werchovenski is vainly trying to draw into his conspiratorial organization. But by the twentieth century the two types become convertible into each other throughout Europe. The personally immoralist bohemian converts his anti-bourgeois protest readily into social action by becoming an ‘armed bohemian’ and thus supporting absolute violence as the only honest mode of political action. The two lines of antinomianism meet and mingle in French existentialism. Mme de Beauvoir hails the Marquis de Sade as a great moralist<sup>1</sup> when Sade declares through one of his characters: ‘I have destroyed everything in my heart that might have interfered with my pleasures.’<sup>2</sup> And this triumph over conscience, as she calls it,<sup>3</sup> is interpreted in terms of her own Marxism: ‘Sade passionately exposes the bourgeois hoax which consists in erecting class interests into universal [moral] principles.’<sup>4</sup>

I have said before that romanticism recognized

<sup>1</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Marquis de Sade* (Grove Press, New York, 1953), p. 55: ‘owing to his headstrong sincerity...he deserves to be hailed as a great moralist’.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 54.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 54.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 63.

the extension of national power as a nation's supreme right and duty. This political immoralism is also a moral inversion, akin to the personal immoralism of the romantic school. Meinecke has shown that German *Realpolitik*, the identification of Might and Right in international relations, was the ultimate outcome of the Hegelian teaching of immanent reason. The strength of immanent morality is proved by the violence of manifest immorality. This, Meinecke thinks, is the grim truth, blandly overlooked or hypocritically papered over by moralizing statesmen and English-speaking people in general. He admitted that the knowledge of this truth tended to brutalize its holders, but thought that the English-speaking people had avoided this depravation only by turning a blind eye on the disparity between their teachings and their actions. He appears to see no honest way out: and I would agree that there is no way out that is not exposed to the suspicion of dishonesty.

A great wave of anti-bourgeois immoralism sweeping through the minds of German youth in the inter-war period formed the reservoir from which the SA and SS were recruited. They were inspired by the same truculent honesty and passion for moral sacrifice which turned the nihilists of Russia, whether romantic or scientific, into the *apparatchiks* of Stalinism.

People often speak of Communism or Nazism as a secular religion. But not all fanaticism is religious. The passions of the total revolution and total wars which have devastated our age were not religious but moral. Their morality was inverted and became immanent in brute force because a naturalistic view of man forced them into this manifestation. Once they are immanent, moral motives no longer speak in their own voice and are no longer accessible to moral arguments; such is the structure of modern nihilistic fanaticism.

Here then is my diagnosis of the pathological morality of our time. What chance is there of remedying this condition?

The healer's art must rely ultimately on the patient's natural powers for recovery. We have unmistakable evidence of these powers in our case. From its origins in the French Revolution the great tide of dynamism had been mounting steadily, both spreading its benefits and causing its pathological perversions, for roughly 150 years; and then—at the very centre of revolutionary dynamism—the tide turned. Pasternak dates the change in Russia around 1943. It arose in an upsurge of national feeling. Hatred of Stalin gave way to the resolve of conquering Hitler in spite of Stalin. Victory was in sight, and with this prospect came the growing realization that the exist-

ing system of fanatical hatred, lies and cruelties was in fact pointless. Intimations of freedom began to spread. These thoughts repudiated the core of Messianic immoralism and for a moment broke with its magic. A process of sobering had set in. In 1948 Tito defected from Stalin, invoking truth and national dignity as principles superior to party discipline.

The decline of ideological dynamism set in also on this side of the Iron Curtain. In England, in Germany and in Austria, the change of heart was noticeable from the early 1950's. Socialists who, even in notoriously reformist countries like Britain, had demanded a complete transformation of society, began to reinterpret their principles everywhere in terms of piecemeal progress.

Finally, the events following the death of Stalin (1953) clearly revealed that a system based on a total inversion of morality was intrinsically unstable. The first act of Stalin's successors was to release the thirteen doctors of the Kremlin, who had quite recently been sentenced to death on their own confession of murderous attempts against the life of Stalin and other members of the government. This action had a shattering effect on the Party. A young man who at that time was a fervent supporter of Stalinism in Hungary described to me how he felt when the news came through on the wireless. It seemed as if the motion

picture of his whole political development had started running off backwards. If party-truth was now to be refuted by mere bourgeois objectivity, then Stalin's whole fictitious universe would presently dissolve and so the loyalty which sustained this fiction—and was in its turn sustained by it—would be destroyed as well.

The alarm was justified. For it is clear by now that the new masters of the Kremlin had acted as they did because they believed their position would be safer if they had more of the truth on their side and less against them. So deciding, they had acknowledged the power of the truth over the Party and the existence of an independent ground for opposition against the Party. And this independent ground—this new Mount Ararat laid bare by the receding flood of dynamism—was bound to expand rapidly. For if truth was no longer defined as that which serves the interests of the Party, neither would art, morality or justice continue to be so defined, since all these hang closely together—as has eventually become clearly apparent.

So it came to pass that the whole system of moral inversion broke down in the Hungarian and Polish risings of 1956. These movements were originally not rebellions against the Communists, but a change of mind of leading Communists. The Hungarian rising not only started, but went a long

way towards victory, as a mere revulsion of Communist intellectuals from their own earlier convictions. The first revolutionary event was the meeting of a literary circle, the Petöfi society, on 27 June 1956. An audience of about six thousand, overflowing into the streets, to which the proceedings were transmitted by loudspeakers, met for nine hours. Speaker after speaker demanded freedom to write the truth; to write about real people, real streets and fields, real sentiments and problems; to report truthfully on current events and on matters of history. In making these demands many speakers were reverting to beliefs they had previously abhorred and even violently suppressed.

In the months that followed these reborn principles worked their way rapidly further, frequently bursting out in self-accusations by Communist intellectuals who repented their previous connivance in reducing truth, justice and morality to mere instruments of the Party.

Miklos Gimes, a leading Communist who was hanged by Kadar for his part in the Hungarian Revolution, wrote in this sense in *Béke és Szabadság* on 3 October 1956. He asked how it could have happened that he himself had become unable to see the difference between truth and falsehood. Slowly we had come to believe, at least with the greater, the dominant part of our consciousness we

had come to believe, that there are two kinds of truth, that the truth of the Party and the people can be different and can be more important than the objective truth and that truth and political expediency are in fact identical. This is a terrible thought, yet its significance must be faced squarely. If there is a truth of a higher order than objective truth, if the criterion of truth is political expediency, then even a lie can be ‘true’, for even a lie can be momentarily expedient; even a trumped-up political trial can be ‘true’ in this sense for even such a trial can yield important political advantage. And so we arrive at the outlook which infected not only those who thought up the faked political trials but often affected even the victims; the outlook which poisoned our whole public life, penetrated the remotest corners of our thinking, obscured our vision, paralysed our critical faculties and finally rendered many of us incapable of simply sensing or apprehending truth. This is how it was, it is no use denying it.

Thus had the decision matured which Gyula Hay, since then imprisoned by Kadar, declared on 22 September in *Irodalmi Ujság*: ‘The best communist writers have resolved—after many difficulties, serious errors and bitter mental struggles—that in no circumstances will they ever write lies again.’ Hay realized that on these grounds all writers, both inside and outside the Party, were now reunited. In a speech made on 17 September he declared: ‘We Hungarian writers, irrespective

of party allegiance or philosophic convictions, form hereby a firm alliance for the dissemination of the truth.'

It was this alliance which lent its voice to the hitherto mute and powerless dissatisfaction of the workers. When the students marched into the streets to hold their forbidden demonstration, tens of thousands streamed from the factories to join them. Within hours the army had changed camp, the secret police was dissolved. The heavily armed and severely disciplined organization of a totalitarian state evaporated overnight, because its convictions had been consumed by its own newly awakened conscience.

This upsurge of truth resembled up to a point the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, but it differed from it profoundly. For the Encyclopaedists were not repudiating a string of lies which they had deliberately swallowed, in order to strengthen their own political convictions. There was no occasion for them to restore a belief in truth and morality, which had never been questioned by the orthodoxy they were attacking, nor ever been scorned by themselves.

By contrast, the process of the Communist revulsion has been dramatically told by the Polish poet Adam Waczek, himself a Party stalwart, in his *Poem for Adults*, written a year before the events in Hungary. Fourier had promised that

socialism would turn the seas into lemonade, and so the Party members had eagerly swallowed sea water as if it were lemonade. But eventually their stomachs turned and from time to time they had to retire and vomit. The word ‘vomiting’ has since become a technical term for describing the recoil of morally inverted man: the act by which he violently turns himself right way up. A new term was needed, because nothing of this kind had ever happened before.

The Hungarian Revolution is the paradigm of an intellectual movement which, in less dramatic forms, has spread all through the area of receding dynamism, almost everywhere outside Communist China. The Soviet Government has condemned its manifestation within its own domain as revisionism, and I think the name ‘revisionism’ may be applied to the different forms of this movement everywhere.

Revisionism recoils from a negation. The negation took place when the Enlightenment, having secularized Christian hopes, destroyed itself by moral inversion; and the recoil from this negation occurred when moral inversion proved unstable in its turn. This recoil is the source of all revisionism.

But, unfortunately, to recognize these antecedents is to call in question all the ideas which

have hitherto guided revisionist movements. A reawakened national feeling has been one of these ideas. Pasternak tells us how it humanized the Soviet regime during the war; it has then served the restoration of humane ideals in Poland, Hungary and Yugoslavia; and it has formed new bonds of civility in France under de Gaulle. And perhaps above all, it has rejuvenated the ancient societies of Asia and Africa, creating, along with much wasteful strife, new popular communities which transcend the ideological conflicts of European dynamism. Another revisionist idea lay in the newly-found alliance between liberalism and religious beliefs. The churches seemed to recall modern man from a state beyond nihilism to his condition before the secular enlightenment. And finally, the sceptical mood of the Enlightenment itself has been given a new lease of life. The more sober, pragmatist attitude towards public affairs which has spread since 1950 through England and America, Germany and Austria, reproduces in its repudiation of ideological strife the attitude of Voltaire and the Encyclopaedists towards religious bigotry.

But revision cannot succeed by merely returning to ideas which have already proved unstable. The rule of a dogmatic authority is no more acceptable today than it was in the days of Voltaire. We shall not go back on the scientific revolution which has

secularized extensive domains of knowledge. We shall not go back either on the hopes of Christianity and become as calmly indifferent to social wrongs as secularized antiquity was. And national feeling has proved in the past no safeguard against moral inversion. In fact, *all the historic antecedents of inversion are present today as they were before*. Can the very channels which had previously led into moral inversion now offer a retreat from it?

I do not wish to explore this question here. We *have* arrived beyond nihilism today, even though the place at which we have arrived is similar to that where we stood before it; and we cannot foresee the creative possibilities by which men may discover an avenue which will not lead back to nihilism. But one possibility should be mentioned. Perhaps the present recoil may be stabilized by the upsurge of a more clear-sighted political conscience. We might conceivably achieve a kind of suspended logic, like that which kept England and America so happily backward on the road to disaster, and indeed this might come about the way it had in England. The religious wars of Europe reached this country in mid-seventeenth century and strife tore England for many years. One king was beheaded, another deposed. But the settlement of 1688, the Petition of Rights, the doctrine of John Locke, have put an end to this conflict and established, for the first

time since the rise of Christianity, the foundations of a secular society. Civility prevailed over religious strife and a society was founded which was dynamic and yet united. May not Europe repeat this feat? May we not learn from the disasters of the past forty years to establish a civic partnership, united in its resolve on continuous reforms—our dynamism restrained by the knowledge that radicalism will throw us back into disaster the moment we try to act out its principles literally?

It may happen. But this is hardly a legitimate field for speculation; for from here onwards, thought must take on the form of action.



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