



From Humanism to Nihilism: The Eclipse of Secular Ethics

Magnus Bradshaw

*'The question is no longer as Dostoyevsky put it "can civilized man believe?" Rather: can unbelieving man be civilized?'*¹ Philip Rieff¹

In order to deepen our understanding of the place of Islam in the contemporary world, it is useful to contrast Islamic² and secular ethics. The latter is today closely associated with the perspective of secular humanism, 'the rejection of religion in favour of a belief in the advancement of humanity by its own efforts'.³ Whilst Muslims see moral authority as ultimately deriving from God, secular humanists see morality as intrinsic to humanity. Our innate moral authority, it is argued, provides a sufficient basis for making our own laws. Although Islam may grant that the spiritual and rational faculties of humanity provide an intrinsic moral sense, it is also clear that humanity is greatly in need of moral direction and is indeed capable – both individually and collectively – of going dangerously and destructively astray without the light of faith and the submission to divine guidance that flows from it. As for unbelief, the Qur'an makes it clear that it is a state of ignorance and spiritual darkness, the moral and social implications of which are apparent in the corruption and injustice of pre-Islamic Arabia. There is evidently at least a partial analogy between that time and our own, in so far as it is identified with secular humanism and thus atheism. In what follows, I take account of the widespread concern about moral decline so evident today and consider criticisms of a number of widely shared secular humanist values. Rather than presenting a specifically Islamic perspective on the issues at hand, the focus here is on the very different foundations of religious and secular ethics, and the fact that non-Islamic scholars have reached conclusions about the contemporary ethical predicament that many Muslims would share.



SYMPTOMS OF DECLINE

Critics of secularism usually perceive a connection between the secularization of society and moral decline. 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’.⁴ For Weaver, this predicament is linked to the denial of the transcendent, which he equates to a denial of truth itself. If, he argues, 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’.⁵

Indeed, the moral continuity of Western cultures appears to have been interrupted and there is no longer the consensus that existed until quite recently. 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’.⁶ The sociologist James Davison Hunter observes that truths have been replaced by values, that is, ‘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’.⁷ 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 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, and in the Islamic perspective, reason is seen as a tool rather than an entirely self-sufficient means of reaching indisputable moral conclusions, for as Weaver observes, ‘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’.⁸ 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 John 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. 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.⁹

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. 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; as Roger Scruton observes, ‘it is piety, and not reason, that implants in us the respect for the world, for its past and its future, and which impedes us from pillaging all we can before the light of consciousness fails in us’.¹⁰

Many of the original moral values of the Enlightenment had in fact been inherited in transposed form from Christianity. In spite of this, many 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. However, MacIntyre argues that the Enlightenment

project of seeking an independent rational justification for morality and shared rational progress through liberal values has failed,¹¹ resulting in relativism and what Gray refers to as the ‘post-modern condition of fractured perspectives and groundless practices’,¹² 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’. From a post-modern perspective, liberalism, far from providing a set of universal moral principles, turns out to be just another historically-conditioned worldview, one equally vulnerable to the dissolving vortex of moral relativism. The Enlightenment was thus 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. This termination of the Enlightenment project, Gray suggests, undermines much of what is foundational in the Western tradition,¹³ which may in fact not be renewable, but doomed to an irreversible decline. By privileging reason to the exclusion of other values, he argues, the Enlightenment ultimately bequeathed us a world which is ‘humanly unintelligible and destructively purposeless...it has not issued in anything resembling a new civilization... but instead in nihilism.’¹⁴

PROGRESS IN DECLINE

‘Progress is not an accident, but necessity. Surely must evil and immorality disappear; surely must men become perfect’ Herbert Spencer¹⁵

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.’¹⁶ 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, not least amongst contemporary secular liberals who proudly regard themselves as 'progressivists'. Francis Fukuyama's influential *The End of History and the Last Man* expresses a widely-shared faith in 'global democratic capitalism' as the definitive socio-political system. The belief that by expanding its knowledge humanity can remake the world, eradicating hunger, poverty and tyranny, is today closely associated with the worldwide promotion of democracy – by force of arms if necessary. As 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'.¹⁷

Yet, in our time, the progressive ideal has to face harsh realities such as economic and ecological crisis, 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. Gray suggests that a pseudo-religion of science has replaced politics as the main vehicle of progressive aspirations, with 'scientific fundamentalists' promising 'salvation' through technology and the eventual abolition of sickness, poverty and even death.¹⁸ Dismissing these chimerical notions, Gray, though himself an atheist, argues that the Christian belief that human knowledge can have both positive and negative consequences is nearer to the truth than a naïve belief in limitless progress.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ ... 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.²¹

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. 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'²², 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. How then is the persistence of belief in progress to be explained? Gray suggests a reason for its enduring appeal:

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.²³

Secular humanism thus finds itself forced to choose between the conflicting claims of reason and sentiment, between a quasi-religious concept that seems increasingly implausible, and an icy scientific 'realism' that is continually haunted by the spectre of nihilism. 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'.²⁴

PSYCHOLOGICAL MORALITY

'Modern psychologists have greatly enlarged the frontiers of irresponsibility: they needed more space in this area.' Karl Krauss²⁵

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 narcissism;²⁶ or, as Philip Rieff expresses it, 'religious man was born to be saved; psychological man was born to be pleased'.²⁷ Imbued with what Richard Weaver refers to as 'the deep psychic anxiety, the extraordinary prevalence of neurosis, which make our age unique',²⁸ his predominant trait in the realm of morals is individualism. Noting that psychological man has arisen in conjunction with increasing secularization, Peter Homans 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"'.²⁹ 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 of course coincided with an increasing tendency to question, and often to reject, traditional sources of moral authority. 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.³⁰ 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.³¹

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 modern psychology has succeeded in replacing the word 'character', with all its ethical implications, with the morally neutral term 'personality'.³² Instead of morals, we now have values, 'little more than sentiments... expressions of individual preference'.³³ Further, according to Hunter, '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'.³⁴ 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'³⁵

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.³⁶ 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. 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.

THE QUESTION OF FREEDOM

'Behind every crooked thought there lies a crooked molecule.' Roy Fuller³⁷

Are people free to make moral choices and to act upon them, or are they determined by forces beyond their control? It is evident that without free will, notions of character, will, conscience, virtue and vice lose much of their meaning. The most reasonable course for the secular humanist in such matters is to defer to the authority of science, which may of course ultimately support determinism. Indeed, argues David Berlinski, if the human mind is an expression of genes, determinism follows as a logical necessity.³⁸ 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.³⁹ The trouble is that what science implies may be incompatible with the modes of thought and being to which even the most reductionist of scientists cannot help but privately defer. Yet determinism presents another serious inconvenience, for as Anthony O'Hear has pointed out, if we are determined our apparent rationality is in fact

rooted in deeper, non-rational forces.⁴⁰ The results of rationally-driven scientific research thus end up undermining 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. In *One Nation Under Therapy*, Christina Hoff Sommers and Sally Satel refer to this increasingly common practice as 'the abuse excuse',⁴¹ 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'.⁴² 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'.⁴³ 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'.⁴⁴

In *Life at the Bottom*, a study of the British underclass based on his experience as a prison psychiatrist, Theodore Dalrymple argues that the notion 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'.⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶ 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'.⁴⁷ 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.

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 Berlinski⁴⁸

If there is one belief that unites virtually all humanists it is Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. It performs the valuable twin role 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,⁴⁹ 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'.⁵⁰ Whilst Darwin himself cannot of course be blamed for these later developments, 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. Such views should not be seen as an isolated aberration, for support for eugenics before the Second World War was a British and American as well as a German phenomenon.⁵¹ 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.

According to a neo-Darwinian perspective that seeks to explain every form of human behaviour in evolutionary terms, apparently selfless or altruistic behaviour is actually driven by genetic or reproductive imperatives. It is evident, however, 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.⁵² 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’.⁵³ The question that arises here 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’⁵⁴ – 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’.⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁶

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.⁵⁷ 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’.⁵⁸ 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,⁵⁹ 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’.⁶⁰

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 behaviour 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’.⁶¹ 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.⁶² Wiker notes that for Epicurus all that exists is matter in motion, and ‘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’. Epicurus 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 contentment. For Epicurus, good and evil are ultimately synonymous with pleasure and pain, happiness thus demanding freedom from disturbance. Wiker traces the history of materialism from Epicurus to Darwin and argues that the contemporary scene in the West represents a return from Christian ethics to those of materialism. For example, he regards 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,⁶³ 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’.⁶⁴

Materialism is not, however, 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 Sade⁶⁵, who in many ways represents the dark side of the Enlightenment. Rejecting belief in the soul and comparing human beings to machines, Sade argues that even conscience ultimately has a material origin and that all morality is merely a matter of social pragmatism. 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. We inhabit a universe with no ultimate meaning, the sole purpose of existence being pleasure. According to Sade’s proto-Darwinian logic, the amoral and purely instinctual imperatives that govern nature and humanity justify the radical egoism, the torture, murder and extreme forms of sexual perversion depicted in his writings: ‘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...’.⁶⁶ 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, his works ‘push the logic of atheistic materialism to its ultimate conclusion’;⁶⁷ indeed, that conclusion must be seen as a logical and consistent extrapolation of the materialist worldview to rival that of secular 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 Berlinski⁶⁸

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?*⁶⁹

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 devoid of any eschatological reckoning, 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, we should 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.⁷⁰ 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'.⁷¹ 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"'.⁷² 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'? That is the honest conclusion to which my education has led me – after the most conscientious examination of my spontaneous and uninhibited self.⁷³

Bundy, who had read Sade, 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'.⁷⁴

CONCLUSION

'The hollowing out of Western civilization by nihilism is virtually complete.' John Gray⁷⁵

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.⁷⁶

As Christopher Lasch and others have observed, liberal democracy has borrowed much from preceding religious traditions;⁷⁷ humanism has thrived in parasitic relation to an unacknowledged host, namely religious concepts of human nature and meaning. Yet humanists have absorbed such values 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”.⁷⁸ 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.’⁷⁹

Humanism today finds itself rendered incoherent by a reductionist science with which it is fundamentally incompatible, for 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 observes, ‘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.’⁸⁰ 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.☞

A version of this article was originally published in

Muslim Educational Quarterly

ENDNOTES

- 1 Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, University of Chicago Press, 1987, p.4
- 2 I refer here to normative ‘mainstream’ Islam rather than to recent ‘fundamentalist’ or ‘modernist’ forms of the religion.
- 3 As defined by the Collins Concise Dictionary.
- 4 Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1948, p.187
- 5 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1981, p.2
- 6 MacIntyre, op. cit. p.60
- 7 James Davison Hunter, *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age without Good or Evil*, Basic Books, New York, 2000, p. xiii, xiv
- 8 Weaver op. cit. p.19
- 9 For example, Julian Baggini, *Atheism: A Very Short Introduction*, OUP, Oxford, p.44
- 10 Roger Scruton, *Animal Rights and Wrongs*, Demos Open Access, no date, p.51
- 11 MacIntyre p.38
- 12 Gray p.146
- 13 Ibid. p.146
- 14 John Gray, *Enlightenment’s Wake: Politics and Culture at the Close of the Modern Age*, Routledge, London, 1995, p.146, 145
- 15 Herbert Spencer quoted in Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, University of Chicago Press, 1987, p.7

- 16 Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, 1994, p.4
- 17 John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia*, Allen Lane, London, 2007, p.28
- 18 John Gray, *Heresies*, Granta Books, London, 2004, p. 65, 70
- 19 Ibid, p.70-71
- 20 John Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals*, Granta Books, London, 2002, p.96
- 21 Gray, *Heresies*, p.56
- 22 Gray, *Straw Dogs*, p.xii
- 23 Gray, *Heresies*, p.3
- 24 Rieff op. cit. p.4
- 25 Thomas Szasz, *Anti-Freud: Karl Krauss's criticism of Psychoanalysis and Psychiatry*, Syracuse 1990, p.108
- 26 Peter Homans, *Jung in Context: Modernity and the Making of a Psychology*, University of Chicago Press, 1982, p.5
- 27 Rieff p.25
- 28 Weaver p.16
- 29 Homans, op.cit. 5,8-9
- 30 Hunter, op. cit. p.147
- 31 Paul C. Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship*, Lion Publishing, Tring (UK) 1979
- 32 James Davison Hunter, *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age without Good or Evil*, Basic Books, New York, 2000, p. 214
- 33 Ibid. p.216
- 34 Ibid. p.11
- 35 Ibid. p. 192
- 36 Thomas Molnar, *Authority and its Enemies*, Arlington House Publishers, New Rochelle, 1976, p.81
- 37 Quoted in John Cornwell, *A Head for Trouble*, Sunday Times (London), 9/7/06
- 38 David Berlinski, *The Devil's Delusion: Atheism and its Scientific Pretensions*, Basic Books, New York, 2009, p.177
- 39 Ibid. 176-179
- 40 Anthony O'Hear, *After Progress*, Bloomsbury, London, 1999, p.24-25
- 41 Christina Hoff Sommers and Sally Satel, *One Nation under Therapy*, St. Martin's Griffin, New York, 2005. p.95-99
- 42 Frank Furedi, *Therapy Culture*, Routledge, London, 2004, p.29
- 43 Sommers and Satel, op.cit. p.92
- 44 Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The De-Moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1995, p.240
- 45 Theodore Dalrymple, *Life at the Bottom: The Worldview that Makes the Underclass*, Ivan R. Dee, Chicago, 2001, p.5
- 46 Ibid p.13
- 47 Quoted in Sommers and Satel, p.6
- 48 Berlinski, op.cit. p.155
- 49 Richard Weikert, *From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics and Racism in Germany* (Palgrave MacMillan, London, 2006)
- 50 Quoted in Benjamin Wiker, *Moral Darwinism: How we Became Hedonists* (Intervarsity Press, Downer's Grove, Illinois, 2002), p.257
- 51 Wiker, op.cit. p.273
- 52 Keith Ward, *The Battle for the Soul: The End of Morality in a Secular Society*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1985, p.60

- | | | | |
|----|---|----|---|
| 53 | Michael Ruse, <i>The Significance of Evolution</i> , in Peter Singer, ed. <i>A Companion to Ethics</i> , Blackwell, Oxford, 1991, p.504 | 74 | Berlinski p.40 |
| 54 | Ibid. p.506 | 75 | Gray, <i>Enlightenment's Wake</i> , p.179 |
| 55 | Ibid. p.507 | 76 | Gray, <i>Heresies</i> p.44 |
| 56 | Ward op. cit. p.69 | 77 | Lasch, op. cit. p.85 |
| 57 | Quoted in Wiker p.23 | 78 | Quoted in McGrath, op.cit, p. 132 |
| 58 | Gray, <i>Straw Dogs</i> p.4 | 79 | Gray, <i>Heresies</i> , p. 6-7 |
| 59 | Ward p.67 | 80 | Gray, <i>Black Mass</i> , p. 189 |
| 60 | Ibid. p.73 | | |
| 61 | Ibid. p.71 | | |
| 62 | Wiker, op.cit. | | |
| 63 | Wiker p.288 | | |
| 64 | Ibid. p.300 | | |
| 65 | This brief outline of Sade's views is drawn largely from John Phillips; <i>How to Read Sade</i> , Granta, London, 2005 | | |
| 66 | Ibid p.36 | | |
| 67 | Ibid. p.3 | | |
| 68 | Berlinski p.34 | | |
| 69 | Quoted in Alister McGrath, <i>The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World</i> , Doubleday, London, 2004, p.148 | | |
| 70 | Karen L. Carr, <i>The Banalization of Nihilism: Twentieth Century Responses to Meaninglessness</i> , State University of New York Press, Albany, 1992, p.18 | | |
| 71 | Quoted in Wiker p.133 | | |
| 72 | Francis Crick, <i>The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul</i> , Charles Scribners and Sons, New York, 1994, p.3 | | |
| 73 | Quoted in Louis P. Pojman, <i>Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong</i> , Wadsworth, Belmont (California), 1999, p. 31-32 | | |