DESOレーション’S MARCH

The Rise of Personalism and The Reign of Amusement in 21st Century America

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DESOLATION'S MARCH

THE RISE OF PERSONALISM AND
THE REIGN OF AMUSEMENT
IN 21\textsuperscript{ST} CENTURY AMERICA
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It would be different if it were given to us to live a second time through the same events with all the knowledge of what we have seen before. How different would things appear to us; how important and often alarming would changes seem that we now scarcely notice.

Friederich A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*
Chapter One

The Millennium Closes

Where may the wearied eye repose,
When gazing on the great;
Where neither guilty glory grows,
Nor despicable state?

Lord Byron

The proud, war-weary, mid-twentieth century country into which I was born has become alien and distant from the one I now inhabit as the third millennium A.D. opens. Seventy-seven million of the Baby Boom generation made their bawling, naked entries between 1946 and 1964—grateful for the prolonged, collective spasm of amorousness that punctuated the end of World War II. My life began three years before the mid-century mark. One power-worshiping mass murderer, Adolph Hitler, was recently dead. A second, Joseph Stalin, would continue the long reign over his Eastern European empire for another six grim years before his underlings finally put an end to him. A third, Mao Zedong, stood in the epicenter of the second major communist revolution of the century and on the brink of supreme power in the world’s most populous country. Decades of greater turmoil and misery—forced collectivization, ceaseless political indoctrination and mass starvation—awaited the Chinese. At mid-century, Americans looked upon large portions of the globe where tens of millions of people had just been, or were about to be, subject to tyranny, twentieth-century style.

By 1945, the Allied armies had crushed the forces of National Socialism
in Germany and Fascism in Italy. Communism by contrast appeared to be for many, even in the West, the way of the future. Both National Socialism and Communism, however, were massive social experiments launched by passionate visionaries, men who possessed a swollen sense of their superiority. They disdained the old order and those who ran it. “I have proved by my life,” Hitler fulminated in 1938 in Vienna, “that I am more competent than the dwarfs, my predecessors, who brought this country to destruction.” These visionaries claimed a moral and intellectual superiority to their despised, effete predecessors. They would do things differently. To their ambitions they recognized few limits, moral or any other.

The National Socialists were supremely confident in the future of the Aryan race and in the superiority of all things German—Deutschland über alles. Cleansed like the Fatherland itself, they simply needed territory to grow and to expand the boundaries of their empire.

The Bolsheviks, a minority party of resentful intellectuals, connived their way into power. They were bolstered with an unshakable conviction that they alone possessed the blueprint for the design of the classless society—no poverty, no exploitation, no inferiority, and no social and economic disparities. Everyone would be a social equal. A socialist workers’ paradise was to culminate in a world revolution, one the Bolsheviks would launch and oversee. This historically determined conflagration would ultimately destroy the old order and with it the bourgeoisie capitalist class, entrenched as it was in greed, corruption and privilege.

The Communists and National Socialists took up methods that were age old. These visionaries, however, employed them with greater boldness on a much larger scale and with a more systematic and calculating ingenuity—lies, manipulation, intimidation, and raw, brutal force. These were the most notable, impressive features of the revolutions that they had furiously unleashed.

Unique to this age though, were the preoccupation with ideology and the yearning to enact the complete restructuring and reordering of society. Millions of
people became subjects for the Great Social Experiments, as they found themselves reduced to the status of statistical means to achieve utopian ends. In order to maintain ideological purity they had to endure relentless, crushing pressures for conformity, a mindless cult of party leadership, the ceaseless production of propaganda and manipulation of information, and the threat of concentration camps. The goose-stepping armies and the ubiquitous secret security forces must have made it obvious, even to the most casual or naive onlookers, that the pursuit and worship of unlimited power were what moved these grand promise makers. Near the middle of the twentieth century, the essential elements of the modern, ideology-driven police state came together.

Much of America's encounter with the world outside its borders since 1940 has been shaped by the threat or fear of totalitarians and their ideologies. World War II, the Cold War, Korea, Vietnam, conflicts with Cuba and Nicaragua were all theatrical productions in which the official scripts featured American power and goodness resisting forces of aggression and domination. The reviews, even from our own intellectuals, were mixed, and the stalemate of Korea and the failure in Vietnam made it increasingly difficult to view the international arena in this way.

Hitler, Stalin and Mao were three of the most powerful men who ever lived. They were also among the world's greatest purveyors of resentment, the supreme driving force behind their personalities and ambitions. This resentment was searing, inflammatory, and highly contagious. Coupled with political and military power it was translated into death and human misery on a grand scale—few at the beginning of the century could have imagined, much less predicted the convulsions and the horror. No one now can ponder the tragic, sanguinary course of events of the middle decades of our own century without turning over many bitter and melancholy thoughts about the desolation they brought. Their lives have been the subject of endless conjectures for biographers, historians and social theorists with affinities for the elucidation of psycho-pathology and social depravity. The number of books and articles on Hitler alone is staggering. Their
careers were sufficiently long and despicable as to provide observers of the human condition with copious materials for the exploration of human folly, cruelty and degeneracy. These ranged from the famine Stalin engineered for Ukrainian peasants in the 1930s, to Hitler's full scale mechanization of mass murder for European Jews in the 1940s, to Mao's massively destructive "Great Leap Forward" and the Cultural Revolution in the 1950s and 1960s. Such state-sponsored "adventures" in advancing the superior race or building the socialist workers' paradise were beastly and sanguinary beyond normal comprehension. From a retrospective view, these projects amounted to nothing more than what Irving L. Horowitz recently called "the murderous pursuit of worthless objectives." 1

Today, scholars and researchers who document and explain these collective feats of the grotesque compute in units of millions the wreckage of human life that was wrought. *Le livre noir du communisme* (*The Black Book of Communism*) set off a firestorm in socialist-ruled France when it was published near the end of the last century. (France has long been home to many of the West's most articulate and fashionable intellectual apologists for communism, the most notable being the Existentialist philosopher, Jean Paul Sartre.) Stéphane Courtois, the chief editor of this remarkable work, estimates the number of communist victims worldwide from 1917 to 1989 to range between 85 and 100 million. The National Socialists with their much shorter time span of opportunity dispatched "only" about 25 million souls. The most murderous years, with some notable exceptions (Cambodia for one), were those early and middle decades of the twentieth century, the "golden age" of sloganeering totalitarian ideologues and goose-stepping soldiers.

For these builders of new societies, their own subjects on whose behalf they claimed to rule were the principal objects of mass predation, degradation and even extermination. Masters of self-deification and self-aggrandizement, these despot-ideologues were assiduously abetted in the administration of their modern tyrannies by preening, toadyng intellectuals. The German universities in the
1930s were run by enthusiastic Nazi professors: many intellectuals during the 1930s and 1940s in the Western democracies practiced the most servile forms of Stalin-worship—permanent copious stains on twentieth-century intellectual history. The intimate partnership between the ideological criminal and the intellectual apologist became a common twentieth-century symbiosis. Its essence was captured with prescience in an epigram by the great nineteenth-century theorist of liberty, Lord Acton:

The strong man with the dagger is followed by the weaker man with the sponge. First the criminal who slays; then the sophist who defends the slayer.²

Now complete, the twentieth century recedes hauntingly into memory. Those of us who were born in it, must, upon reflection, deem it in many ways a dark and evil time. Much of the misery was enthusiastically wrought by our modern revolutionaries, their utopian illusions and their worship of power. R. J. Rummel, a political scientist and demographer, has devoted his career to the study of genocide and other egregious abuses of political power by modern states. He estimates conservatively that governments murdered almost 170 million people during the twentieth century.³

The willful, brutal destruction of human life on a massive scale in this century has occurred in Asia, Africa, Europe, Latin America, almost everywhere except in our own portion of the globe, North America. In the twentieth century America became the greatest industrial and technological force on the planet. But it also became a haven for the persecuted. It was recognized as the most unique and extraordinary place in the world for the stability of its institutions and for its freedom from the ideologically motivated strife that brought such destruction to so many other parts of the world.

The twentieth century dawned with confidence! “Progress” was ascendant. Man’s future presented few limits. Contemplating that century now provokes horror and revulsion. The barbarism of it gives confirmation to Edward Gibbon’s observation that history is “...indeed, little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind.”⁴ In spite of magnificent inventions and
discoveries, economic prosperity, the exploration of galaxies, and the many
spectacular advances in medicine, transportation, electronics and computing
technology, these last hundred years have been above all in history an orgy of
political mass-murder, enslavement and systematic annihilation.

Hitler and the National Socialist regime that ruled Germany for twelve
years and then left it in ruins have since been symbols of the most profound,
incomprehensible evil. The Austrian corporal has no apologists of significance, at
least in this country. The swastika arouses nothing but revulsion. The Fuhrer’s
memory now excites the admiration only of a few truculent psychotics and other
alienated flotsam of the lunatic fringe.

Communism, however, is an ideology with a more enduring legacy. In our
victory over Hitler and his virulent ideology there was a sense that the universal
values of the open society and individual freedom, long acclaimed and cherished
in the West, had been vindicated. At the end of the war, however, we immediately
confronted a new, powerful ideological challenge. Our war ally, the Soviet Union,
had completed its transmogrification. The USSR’s despotic resemblance to Nazi
Germany was unmistakable—another menacing, murderous, relentlessly
expansionist dictatorship. Overnight, the United States and the Soviet Union
changed from allies to the world’s most formidably armed enemies. Stalin, so
often pictured in his drab grey military tunic with the pipe, the yellow eyes and
that stony, inscrutable visage, was a more complex, confusing and ambiguous
villain for us to fathom than the nervous, maniacal Hitler. Stalin had been our
ally, contentious and querulous though he was. His armies, with our generous
assistance, had defeated the Panzer divisions in the East and marched into Berlin.
Winners have greater opportunities to polish their reputations, and they get more
attention and respect than losers. The Russian people endured unspeakable
hardships from the invading Germans, and the Red Army fought them desperately
and valiantly. How could we not be moved by that? Also, the Marxism that Stalin
so confidently professed remained enticing, here in the bastion of world
capitalism, to many of our own intellectuals who seemed to need a secular
religion to replace the traditional ones they could no longer endure. Even those who recognized and admitted Stalin’s crudeness, deceitfulness and brutality excused them glibly as the darker side of a great and determined man whose better instincts were still directed toward advancing the well being of the toiling masses he claimed to represent. Hitler’s performance was complete. His exit from the world historical stage was ignominious, and his evil clear and unambiguous; Stalin’s was not. Neither was Mao’s.

Chairmen Stalin and Mao, in spite of the extensive documentation of the enormity of their crimes, still have their adulators in tow—many of them denizens of the professoriate, the professional chatterers who reside in Western universities. *Academe* remains the last friendly, natural habitat for Marxists. To the many grotesque ironies of twentieth-century history, its residents remain invincibly oblivious. Years of incubation in the protracted adolescence of graduate school are required in order to absorb and master the rebarbative argot of “social critique” and make the dialectical ascent to enlightenment. Born of the professoriate’s convulsions of theoretical agony are the abstruse vocabularies, custom-designed to scourge the same ruling class that underwrites their sinecures and yet pays no attention to their carefully crafted complaints. Their wisdom unfolds these days in the ceremonious production of arcana such as deconstruction, eco-feminism, environmental Marxism, queer theory, animal rights, and other resentment-laden mutations of what now carry the enigmatic label of *post modernism*. Many of these cognoscenti, though, still portentously enthuse about almost any dictator, no matter how brutal or homicidal, as long as he remains staunchly anti-American and spouts edifying left-wing pieties.

The benevolence of the “Great Oarsman” Stalin and the *Little Red Book* wisdom of Chairman Mao inspired a gruesome succession of post-World War II imitators and emulators like Enver Xhoxa, Kim II Sung and, lest we forget, the bloody Pol Pot, recently deceased and unrepentant to the end. The most notable contributions of these luminaries to the elevation of the oppressed working class were the proliferation of mass grave yards, state-enforced penury, and dreary,
fatuous propaganda by the reams—prattle of the most revolting hypocrisy. In our own backyard as of this writing, the *Maximum Lider*, Fidel Castro remains as a “revolutionary” fixture. As he hastens toward decrepitude, Castro still practices his brutal routines on the shabby and impoverished workers’ paradise of his own creation. He has oppressed the people of that unhappy island it seems forever, outlasting nine American Presidents. Along with his homicidal associate from the early days, the late Ernesto “Che” Guevara, an Argentinean Stalinist, Castro remains a romantic revolutionary hero, as Mao and Ho Chi Minh were for our own left of the sixties. We have seen the “charismatic” Fidel run his course from a youthful guerilla in military fatigues—trying to import his revolution worldwide—to an aged *caudillo* in a business suit. He remains in essence what he has always been, an egotistical, bearded gasbag, hanging on pathetically to an incredible forty-four year despotism that has ravaged a beautiful country and a noble people.

We have passed the *fin de siècle* and ponder the dawning of our new millennium. The sheer arbitrariness of the calendar and those curious ways in which we measure and place our signature upon these fleeting moments of our lives set up, however, a profound, awe-inspiring sense of passing, a unique, anxious feeling of momentous entry into a new era. Attached to this feeling is a remarkable past that continually begs for interpretation. The history must be sorted out and inspected as we make the crossing over that great but arbitrary divide. With all of the indulgence in speculation and reflection that a hugely symbolic time-bridge like the passing of a millennium brings to the fore, it is a wonderful but daunting opportunity for turning over our collective memories, attempting to make some sense of our tumultuous times, and for contemplating the events and forces that have transformed our lives.

The mid-century years seem like a terribly long time ago. Yet, the many catastrophic events of those times loom large in the recent historical landscape of the just completed millennium. We are still captives of the ideas and emotions they unleashed, perhaps more than we may realize. These events compel us to
remember, re-remember, and somehow explain. The tragedies that we have witnessed across the oceans and have been spared in our own land were the active work of men and women, energized by ideas. Those people are dead, but their ideas live. Others take them up: we encounter them here and now. What must we make of them, and what threats, if any, might they still pose?

This book is a melancholy reflection upon the march of progress of the twentieth century in America, mostly the second half of it, the part I have lived in and about which I have thought most. That march involves dramatic changes in our ways of thinking about ourselves, in the ways we treat one another, and what we have come to expect from one another.

This march of progress is an important part of the story of personalism. Personalism is a proto-modern perspective of human nature initially articulated by J. J. Rousseau in the mid-eighteenth century, but intellectually refined and expanded throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. American traditional social institutions, I believe, have declined, particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century. This decline is due in part to the growing impact of personalism as it has insinuated itself into the secularized ideologies of modern life.

Personalists evince a deep resentment of social hierarchy and are enthusiasts of social equality. Moreover, personalists yearn for power to remake the world to reflect a perfect social equality—hence, the personalist affinity for revolution and the possession of political power. Power is what the personalist craves. With it, he thinks, he can reshape the world. So ironically, personalism, when put into practice, concentrates political power and produces even greater inequality. The unintended consequence of personalism is tyranny.

The twentieth century was a vast experiment in tyranny, much of it rooted in ideologies of total revolution and revulsion with the social hierarchies of the old order. In Stalin’s Soviet Union, Hitler’s Germany, and Mao’s China, that tyranny was open, ferociously murderous and explicitly ideological. The ideologue-revolutionaries smashed the old traditional order and ground it up. The
discarded detritus were the millions of lives destroyed by the ideologues yearning for life in completely new and "greatly improved" societies.

America escaped the upheaval and destruction that was visited upon so many other portions of the world in the twentieth century by the ideologue new-society-builders. In the latter part of the 20th century, personalism has eroded and corrupted American institutions, but in a manner oblique and imperceptible.

Instrumental in this erosion is the cultural domination of our institutions by television, a medium whose fundamental ethos is amusement. The way in which Americans experience the world and even themselves is increasingly done through the mediation of television.

The amusement ethos, with its intense subjectivity, its focus on the immediate present, and its preoccupation with the personal self, has insidiously intensified the anti-institutional appeal of personalism. American life has become de-institutionalized: institutions like the family, churches, schools, and universities have for decades been losing their character and identity. With the weakening of institutions, we experience the unfolding of a tyranny different from the kind expressed in Stalin's gulags or Hitler's Kristall Nacht. We settle under a "velvet" tyranny that envelops us subtly and insidiously, but none the less is inimical to the traditional ideals of American freedom.

This tyranny grows proportionately with the precipitous decline in our willingness to hold ourselves personally responsible and accountable. The decline of personal responsibility is the result of a profound change in our moral practice, the medicalization of our morality. Wrong doing has become illness. Illness requires treatment. Proper treatment must be done by specialists, experts who tend to patients, formerly wrong doers. In the 21st century, Americans face the specter of universal patienthood. One observer of this phenomenon has recently written:

The extensive use of disease categories for a wide variety of human behaviors is unique in human history; most of the many mental illnesses that are now taken for granted as objective natural entities are recent creations.5

Indeed, those kinds of behavior considered now in the early 21st century as mental
illness would have been incomprehensible to Americans only fifty years ago. Many of the mental illnesses from which many of us suffer and for which we are treated are recent inventions.

From citizens who rule ourselves we have become patients in need of therapy. The reality of the perception of universal patiethood is matched by a pervasive rhetoric of patienthood. In the wake of the Monica Lewinski scandal and the ensuing impeachment of the President of the United States, President Clinton repeatedly spoke of “national healing.” In the aftermath of the September 11th murderous attack by Muslim fanatics, our elites were calling for “healing” in America. When people now do immoral acts, like lying and betraying trusts, or when they do evil, heinous things, like murdering thousands of people, why do our elites talk of healing? Who are those in need of healing? Who are the healers? What “treatment” do they administer? What is the cost?

III

In the brief period of time since the end of World War II, it is difficult to shake off an uneasy feeling that a profound alteration has taken place in the ways in which we undertake and discharge our obligations. In entering into an obligation, we bind ourselves. We commit ourselves to courses of action that we know may be onerous. To repay the debts we incur, to keep the promises we make, to honor our commitments, obviously means that we must be willing to bear costs that we would, at times, prefer not to have to pay. However, the sense and feeling of obligation is one, if not the most, distinctly human aspects of our communal life. In one respect, the assumption of an obligation brings about a loss of freedom: obligations bind. They shut off desirable or advantageous courses of action we might otherwise take and deprive us of comforts into which we might otherwise happily settle. To a pleasure-maximizing, comfort-seeking, or power-worshiping creature, reverence or respect for obligation can make no sense—to avoid them or repudiate them if possible seems to be a natural and logical course of action. But the willingness to submit to obligations is an indispensable condition for human freedom. The acknowledgment of an obligation establishes mutual trust and
expands cooperation. Mutual respect for obligations breathes life into institutions and makes them human in the best sense of the term. Obligations also enable us to think and act like moral, responsible beings, to transcend the immediate circumstance and rise above our particular impulses and personal inclinations.

To be the kind of person for whom obligations have meaning, one must somehow link the importance and value of upholding obligations to some source of good beyond one's own self or immediate group. Typically, people who keep their promises, honor commitments and follow the rules, are grounded in some objective norm or set of norms that extend beyond themselves, that is, they are willing participants in a system of morality which commands at least the recognition and generally the respect of most of the people, often though not always, through the agency of religion. In the late-twentieth century, this objective sense has unquestionably abated. In part this is due to the erosion of transcendental preoccupations achieved by modernity. This erosion has made the sense of obligation, which is always somewhat fragile and vulnerable to attenuation or corruption, harder to develop and even more difficult to sustain. As a consequence, social obligations of all sorts—marital, filial, financial, parental, professional, civic, and personal—have become viewed by many as unfairly imposed fetters. It is increasingly common to disregard them, attenuate them or rationalize them away. The wife has become disagreeable? Divorce her. Piled up too much debt? Declare bankruptcy and stiff your creditors. Cannot get your way at work? Sue the company. The norms that used to bind us exist now more as irritants to be overcome.

Our great march of progress, I believe, has changed us in many ways, great and small. The greatest change is the near extinction of a confident, objective orientation toward the world involving fixed norms and beliefs, worked out across the course of at least two millennia. Into its place has crept a profoundly personal, shifting and relativistic view of reality and morality. This relativism toward morality has shaped our thinking about what we ought to be, how we ought to act, and what we ought to expect from others. We recognize the
impact through its many insidious effects. They are steadily at work in almost every region of our culture—our manners, morals and religion; our legal, political and educational institutions. But most importantly, relativism has shaped our assumptions about what it means to be human, that is, what sort of creatures we ultimately think we are and what limitations, if any, we admit or acknowledge. Such assumptions determine our aspirations and guide their pursuit and help mold the character and structure of our social institutions. This relativism is profound in both its effects and implications, yet its approach is largely imperceptible. The effects of the changes are insidious, and we proceed unaware. At some point, the bells go off. We suddenly recognize how far reaching the changes and what the effects mean for our daily lives. We pause. We look back. Then with some amazement and perhaps consternation the realization dawns: we are different people from what we used to be; and we are not quite sure why.

The major ideologies that came into ascendancy and were put into social practice during the early- and mid-twentieth century—National Socialism, communism and welfare liberalism—had and have strong, relativistic components or tendencies that produced, in some cases, violent reactions against the objective moral claims of both Christianity and the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. These ideologies also have a doctrinal underpinning—human perfectibility and the necessity of a powerful state to achieve it. The relativism that evolved through these ideologies freed many individuals from loyalties and obligations that might compete with those to the state and inhibited them from being the state’s unquestioning servants.

The National Socialists’ obsession with race gave rise to the most appalling characteristic of their political machinations—the subordination of all judgment to stupid and bogus theoretical claptrap about race and its relativity to things human. Hence their willingness, eagerness even, to abandon the most basic and minimal standards of decency in their treatment of non-“Aryan” peoples, the Jews particularly. “Conscience,” remarked Hitler “is a Jewish invention. It is a blemish, like circumcision.” The methods and practices that could be expected to
follow from the lucubration of such a “moralist” with a propaganda machine, powerful armies and secret police forces at his disposal, of course, did indeed follow. These repudiators of such “Jewish inventions” transformed Europe at mid-century from a civilized continent into a vast charnel house. The National Socialists launched their war of extermination against the European Jews, and in the process of murdering five or six million people they also drove many of the finest and creative minds out of Europe and to America.

The communists made their crucial norm- and value-distinctions on the basis of Marx’s theory of economic-social class exploitation—another source of murderous resentment, but decked out in different ideological garb. Morality was relative to class. Lenin, responding to criticism that he was slandering his fellow socialists who disagreed with him as traitors, proclaimed: “Everything that is done in the interest of the proletarian cause is honest.” Thus, for our historical ruminations, is one more depressing glimpse of twentieth-century moral “insight” from another terribly powerful man. Hitler denounced conscience. Lenin proclaimed its irrelevance. Lenin had bequeathed the “ethical” foundations for a program in which any conceivable barbarity can be justified, and was—effortlessly and arrogantly—justified simply by announcing that it advances the cause. For Lenin and his progeny, bourgeoisie “anything” was to be justly plowed under by the proletarian forces of the world revolutionary juggernaut—another ideologically “innovative” perspective that would lead to astonishing dimensions of state-sponsored barbarity and criminality. In this ideological script, members of a social-economic class, rather than race, would be the object of extermination if they were seen to obstruct the progress of communism. Stalin’s savage campaign of collectivization against the Kulaks in the Russian countryside and his program of deliberate mass starvation of peasants in Ukraine in the early 1930s illustrate just how gentle the process of implementing the classless society would be.

Stalin also elevated an ignorant sycophant Trofim D. Lysenko to the pinnacle of Soviet agriculture because he excoriated the “bourgeoisie” genetics of Mendel and trumpeted the theory of acquired characteristics. Science, like
everything else under Stalin's sway, had to conform to his current ideological impulse. Lysenko repaid his benefactor by wrecking Soviet agronomy and agriculture for decades.9

Hitlerian and Leninist-Stalinist ideologies were extreme and their effects nihilistic and destructive. But the cultural forces and ideological impulses that produced them did not go away with their defeat.

The great expansion of the welfare state in the United States, beginning with the First World War and continued by the New Deal and the Great Society, massively increased the power and authority of the federal government. The phenomenal growth of the welfare state helped to enlarge and empower a cultural elite that has grown overtly hostile to traditional norms, particularly traditional Christianity. These elites have enthusiastically promoted a moral relativism embedded in a personalist perspective of human nature that now dominates most of our institutions, including the universities, the vast and powerful entertainment and news industry, and virtually all of the organs of mass culture.

Contemplating the ascendancy of moral relativism and its implication for moral practice, one is inevitably led to a difficult comparative moral and ethical question: as a people, are we any better, any worse, or just different than we were a half-century ago? In attempting to answer these kinds of questions we may risk moral and spiritual disillusion. Have we lost sight of important ideals? If not, how do we explain the changes?

Moral relativism is a part of the outlook of personalism. The part it plays, we will see, is one of intellectual accommodation. But there is more. Personalism is both an intellectual and emotive phenomenon. Personalism establishes the center of human self-understanding and value on the person, and focuses human moral activity on the creation and recreation of the subjective self. Hence, the intellectual accommodation: with the self as life’s center, what is good becomes the good that is relative to my interests and inclinations, to my personal growth. The “shoulds” for you are not necessarily the “shoulds” for me. The emotive aspect of personalism centers on its quest for a persistent enlargement of self-
esteem. Feeling good about one's self is a major personalist preoccupation, and for some, a fulltime occupation. Self-esteem, in spite of the enormous resources and energy devoted to its promotion, always seems to be deficient.

As it has advanced, personalism, with an inherent and acute subjectivity, has produced an increasingly unbearable, adversarial tension which we experience in several ways. That tension is expressed as a pull back and forth between the quest for unfettered self-expansion on the one side, and the demands upon individuals as members of communities on the other. Communities invariably create differentiating roles, impose obligations and place limits on the individual self. We express that tension in a deep conflict—the so-called culture wars—between Americans who live by and endorse secular values and seem untroubled by the loss of moral certainty that secularism brings, and those who embrace traditional values of social morality and whom these events deeply trouble.

Personalism conflicts with what was once our dominant method of preparing ourselves to encounter the moral world—the cultivation of virtue. The powerful quest that drove our predecessors—to develop "good character"—has given way to an even more overriding preoccupation in contemporary life—to have a "healthy personality." Morality, in effect, has been almost completely medicalized. Achieving a good character and acting well and honorably is less important than possessing personal self-esteem. "Virtue," a word of much import in the moral vocabulary of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century individuals, is now more of a linguistic object of historical and sociological curiosity. A search in the on-line bookstore holdings of Amazon.com under the subject heading "self-esteem" yields approximately 1,700 items: "virtue" yields 123. "Being virtuous," a once highly desirable state of being that was connected to belief in objective standards of conduct, has given way to the quest for "feeling good," a deeply subjective condition of the personality.

The practitioner of virtue aspired to a perfection of character. This effort, however, was always made against a dark backdrop of objectively defined, well-recognized human limitations or shortcomings, particularly the kind that exerts
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itself in a powerful and persistent tendency for overreaching and for self-centered destructiveness. The recognition of this natural human failing is a primary tenet of the Christian and Jewish moral outlook and also played heavily in the thinking of most modern philosophers from Hobbes to Hume to Kant. Thomas Hobbes captured human nature in its unbridled manifestation of overreaching with that terrible epigram "homo homini lupus" ("man to man is a wolf"). Without intervening norms, constraints and prescriptions, human beings tend to prey upon each other. History bears this out—modern as well as ancient. The process by which virtue was inculcated in human beings was a remarkable piece of social inventiveness. Through virtue an individual might curb self-assertion and impose a disposition of self-restraint, achievements that are not easy or natural. Virtue is necessary because the self needs boundaries and a method to impose them. Montaigne referred to virtue as a "habit of steadfast resoluteness" with which one could "make oneself impassible by one's efforts than to be so by natural inclination."

Virtue was the means for developing and shaping one's own character and for resisting the vicissitudes of impulse. It is a quality associated with being grown up, mature, responsible. Virtue does not fare well in a society caught up with the exaltation of youth and obsessed with amusement. For people given over to the avoidance of guilt and the compulsive need for self-realization, virtue can be of little concern.

Inherent in personalism is an impulse for progressive self-expansion—growth, emphatically not limitation, is the goal. Limitations represent for the personalist not positive boundaries which enable a genuine moral self to come into being, but obstacles to the development and reconstruction of self. Constraints, especially those that are gradually built into tradition—social role, acceptable conduct, ethical prescriptions, conventions and manners—the personalist resents and will attempt to circumvent or destroy. Traditional moral notions that have typically been associated with virtue like guilt, shame and punishment, the personalist views as unnecessary and even pernicious. They limit achievement. Shame and guilt are the products of ignorance and superstition and
instruments of manipulation by the "privileged." They are integral parts of a moral system that are linked to a belief in an objective moral order to which the personalist can no longer give credence.

Personalism has imbedded itself into the moral perspective of early twenty-first-century Americans. The medicalization of morality, a recent social phenomenon, contributes heavily to this momentous alteration of perspective. The insidious transformation of virtue into health, and vice or sin into illness, achieved this strikingly "innovative" moral perspective. Human misconduct becomes a problem for resolution, not through traditional social constraints—guilt, shame, punishment in fact become separate problems—but by therapy. Sin has become sickness, a temporary technical problem. Traditional problems of morality are increasingly construed as technical problems of mental health. When people currently do what we used to call "bad" or "sinful" things, we now find the fault residing in some defective or deficient state of affairs that is the cause of the malefaction, and then look for some expert whose credentials assure us that he can correct the defect or remove that cause of the wrong doing. Edwin C. Boring, a Harvard psychology professor of the 1940s, argued enthusiastically for the reconstruction of the moral dimensions of human conduct into essentially a framework of technical challenges with therapeutic applications. He had great confidence in the science of psychology to solve the traditional problems arising out of human conflict, which he saw as technical problems. "The psychological point of view is, of course, the means of which social problems are solved and social progress is engineered." Engineering requires engineers. Morality, or rather "social progress," as it is renamed under this technical orientation toward living, is necessarily transformed into a specialty requiring experts who, first of all, know how to read the social and psychological maps and determine what the direction of progress is, and, secondly, know how to get the rest of us (non-engineers) on the right road, moving in the proper direction.

Personalists have always exuded great confidence in progress. Their orientation is toward the future where the sweet fruits of progress will some day
be fully harvested. The past by contrast is a barren, weed-infested expanse gladly to be departed from. However, the past remains extremely important to the personalists. They tend to regard the past as an object of resentment, a source of grievances, oppressions and iniquities perpetuated by representatives of the traditionally configured “power structures.” History for the personalist is the story of the wrong people with power. Over the last fifty years, the personalist has formed a powerful alliance with the therapist. Together they struggle to overcome impediments to progress and move mankind toward a destiny of self-realization and freedom from all the restraints (the “hang-ups”) of traditional society—the personalist sings “Song of Myself” and follows any course that promises greater fulfillment; the therapist seeks to heal temporary ruptures of the soul. The human experience, thus conceived, becomes a road of liberation from the restraints that our benighted ancestors visited upon us; the destiny is a state of wholeness that an individual defines and creates entirely for himself. The psychologist, John Watson, captured this notion of escaping the constraints of benighted tradition in his seminal work on behaviorism in the 1930s.

I wish I could picture for you what a rich and wonderful individual we should make of every healthy child if only we could let it shape itself properly and then provide for it a universe in which it could exercise that organization—a universe unshackled by legendary folk-lore of happenings of thousands of years ago; unhampered by disgraceful political history; free of foolish customs and conventions which have no significance in themselves, yet which hem the individual in like taut steel bands.  

The thrust of personalism, carried forward by an expanding army of therapists and counselors, is to identify the constraints that thwart the actualization of self and, as much as possible, to be rid of them. These “constraints” typically include the whole range of traditional moral and religious norms and ideals, those conventions, which as Watson complains, are the creations of fools, having “no significance in themselves.”

Because an unimpeded, expansive, “guilt-free” self has become the human ideal, the arts and technology of amusement take on an increasingly
greater importance. Amusement provides an open-ended avenue for pursuing the exploration of self without the danger of incurring obligations, the violations of which might produce guilt. Personalism has developed a symbiotic relationship with amusement in its sophisticated and expansive twentieth-century forms. From its beginnings, personalism has set out to overthrow traditional social hierarchies, including hierarchical systems of value. Value judgments have been rendered highly personal and subjective. We thus have become accustomed to going about our daily business, confronting life's choices with an almost natural, reflexive orientation toward intensely subjective activities of self-exploration.

Amusement and self-exploration have been instrumental forces in the emergence of the *amusement state*, the late-twentieth-century successor to the welfare state. I will elaborate this notion of the amusement state extensively in Chapter Six. In the welfare state that developed across the course of this century and in this country, the primary intention of the expanding government bureaucracies has been to enlarge our individual expanse of security, to protect us—oftentimes even from ourselves—and to ensure our sense of well being and comfort. Amusement has become a predominant feature of modern institutional life, thus the notion of the amusement state. Amusement is an intensely subjective and fluctuating phenomenon, and we pursue it with passion. Is amusement encouraged by our elites? Does our continuous immersion in it threaten despotism? Tocqueville well understood the threat of amusement to democratically ruled societies, including ours.

I seek to trace the novel features under which despotism may appear in the world. The first thing that strikes the observation is an innumerable multitude of men, all equal and alike, all endeavoring to procure the petty and paltry pleasures with which they glut their lives. ... Above this race of men stands an immense and tutelary power, which takes upon itself alone to secure their gratification and watch over their fate.13

The tendency of our contemporary political culture, with its growing personalist hostility to tradition, is to hollow out the norms and ethos of our institutions—government, schools, universities, and churches. Much of our
institutional authority has been eviscerated by a withering skepticism of any transcendental or universal purpose and a relativized view of their roles. Their primary functions—government to protect us, schools to impart wisdom and learning, churches to attend to our spiritual needs—have been adulterated by amusement which has been constantly and insidiously expanding in importance. Amusement by its nature cannot be boring; it must first please and foremost satisfy. It requires an abundance of time in which individuals are completely free from having to attend to obligations that might obstruct the pursuit of fun. Amusement thrives on forgetfulness, and it is most effective when it can help us to forget or suppress inconvenient realities that may intrude upon our lives and trouble us.

We elect to office politicians whose carefully scripted presentations of self are designed to make us feel good about ourselves. We send our children to schools that compete with the amusement-oriented media of television and movies. We deem the process a failure if it does not make them feel good about themselves and fails to raise their self-esteem. We choose churches whose clergy emulate the modern, poll-guided politicians. They reassure us, make us feel worthwhile and loved, and try not to tell us things we don’t want to hear. In the televised church, one finds sophisticated amusement packaging. Moreover, a large part of the electronic church’s appeal turns on the conveniences it offers. Amusement is closely allied with comfort and indolence. Televised church, like television in general, does not make strenuous demands. The only sacrifice is your money. To be “there” you do not even have to dress up or leave your home. You can eat and drink while you watch it and even get up and go to the bathroom.

Government, education, religion—all of these fundamental social endeavors now come to us with a large amusement dimension. The expansion of amusement has also eroded the dignity of these institutions since dignity requires a seriousness that is incompatible with the quest to make all activities amusing. Amusement has become ubiquitous, and we can absorb our growing share of it with greater variety, ease and convenience. Even an activity like shopping, which
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is now assiduously catered by television cable channels and vast amusement park style shopping malls, has become a major venue of amusement, an end in itself satisfying the growing need for more diversion, stimulation and escape.

Politicians and other celebrities now present themselves to the public and attempt to secure their authority by enlarging their popularity—primarily through television. Media, primarily television, drives the enormous price tags of elections. Television thrives on the present. It operates primarily by stimulating intense feelings or conjuring up programmed, manufactured emotions. The primary instrument that television employs for conveying impressions and influencing thinking is the ever moving, always mutating visual image, not logic or rhetoric or even artful, subtle conversation. The dominant effect of this medium of cascading images is the evocation of immediate emotional reaction. On the occasion of national catastrophes, such as the September 11th massacre, we turn to the professional mediators, the talking, electronic heads, who inform us, interpret the complexities of the events, and reassure us.

Television has become an important communication vehicle for addressing issues of social policy and ethics. But it always tends to move away from an appeal to established principle and constancy of purpose and toward the measurement of immediately prevailing sentiments or current opinion: “who cares more” as a maxim for decision-making will push out “what is best.”

A televised presentation of an event requires brevity most of all. Boredom and frustration always threaten the viewer. Commercials compress further the content of the programs. Conversely, a short, seconds-long video clip shown on the news (such as the beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles policemen) is highly emotive and has the capacity to ignite massive riots that ravage communities of tens of thousands of people. Telegenic and strong empathetic qualities are those most likely to garner attention and ensure political success, and the ability to project or manufacture certain kinds of pleasing or reassuring appearances before a camera is the highest “art” in politics. Lyndon Johnson was a far more adroit, experienced, and skilled politician than John Kennedy, but the
television cameras captured his big ears, and his coarse, corn pone manner which compared invidiously with the tanned, urbane, and telegenic JFK.

Government officials, religious figures and leaders from almost all other areas of our culture have over the last forty years been co-opted by the captains of the amusement, television-modeled industry. That is, they must function by the ethos of television and employ its methods of presentation or perish. They must, in effect, submit to its cultural domination: there are few areas of social life that have not been changed by it, and many of our institutions have accommodated themselves to it in significant ways. Schools, as noted above, must compete with television since the young spend so much time watching it and are so thoroughly conditioned by its programming and its mentality. Schools have taken to emulating it and have developed a television-style education quite suitable for those who spend hours per day in front of it. Schools of professional education at our universities have been most obliging in producing theories of "learning styles" including the most important of them, the "visual learner." A visual learning style would indeed seem to be appropriate for today's students who spend far more hours before the television and movie screen than in study or in classrooms.

Universities must pay homage to television. Large segments of the curricula of many universities today are rapidly changing, smorgasbord, fad-driven conglomerations of unconnected courses of passing interest, analogs to the copious program offerings of cable television. Since young people are immersed in television staples like situation comedies, police dramas and talk shows, the trend for developing college courses that accord these shows the same intellectual or aesthetic status as classic drama or literature is hardly a surprising phenomenon.

The late-twentieth century witnessed the culmination of electronic amusement as the dominant cultural preoccupation. The pervasiveness of television in our lives is undeniable. Its enormous influence on our perceptions of reality and its conditioning of our values—along with a steadily expanding
subjectivity of values—has made amusement an alluring, irresistible force, since it promises so many different ways to stimulate and enhance the self.

The twenty-first century has begun to unfold. We can readily contemplate the remarkable, socially and morally transforming effects of these powerful, intermingling forces that have come into ascendancy. Personalism pursues and enlarges an unstable subjective self. Therapy seeks to nurture and speak reassuringly to that subjective self and identifies what forces may impede its growth, development and reconstruction. Amusement (particularly in the electronic form) promoted by the amusement state stimulates the restless subjective self. The temporary escape from reality that amusement offers becomes a permanent end in itself. The twenty-first century may become a nihilistic journey from nowhere to nowhere.

In writing about a time like ours, with so many changes and so much uncertainty, one discovers what seems to be a persistent, devilish play of the ironic in human events. History is a perverse affair. It is also often cruelly ironic, as Edward Gibbon, writing of the decadence of an earlier great civilization, the Roman empire, brilliantly demonstrated over two hundred years ago. Human beings, when they come to be measured against the goodness and greatness of their Gods, can only be regarded as feeble, deluded creatures. Says Gibbon in one of his bitterest, ironic musings:

The theologian may indulge the pleasing task of describing religion as she descended from Heaven arrayed in her native purity. A more melancholy duty is imposed on the historian. He must discover the inevitable mixture of error and corruption, which she contracted in a long residence upon earth among a weak and degenerate race of beings.\(^\text{15}\)

Gibbon pits the theologian against the historian. These two classes of theorists seemed to represent for Gibbon two perennial philosophical archetypes for interpreting or understanding the deep complexities of the human condition. Theology, understood in this context, is a theoretical dreaming, the corruption of the Christian faith by metaphysics and superstition. The “theologian”
comprehends (or invents) and dwells upon the possibilities of perfection—hence perhaps the delusion-based pleasure of believing that man can achieve something approximating divinity and escape his limitations. Gibbon's dreamer theologian in the twentieth century found himself secularized, transmogrified into the most grotesque and dangerous of all creatures, the ideologue. The ideologue, through total revolution, sought to recreate society and make man perfect.

The historian by contrast is a moral pathologist, a moral philosopher, actually, grounded in the knowledge of the constraining realities of human nature. He probes reluctantly, with a "melancholy duty," into the many human aspirations that seem to descend into mischief and folly. He measures the expressed aspirations against the actual accomplishments. In these investigations, he often discovers the processes of degradation. The historian in a way has the worst of it since what he must return to, again and again, is the stark, unavoidable reality of human arrogance, folly, and corruption.

History, therefore, must often become a mocking and deeply melancholy scene. The irony of history thus is all too often cruel and wildly perverse. In the narratives of success and failure, history captures painfully the disparity between the reaches of human aspirations and the reality of their achievement, grotesque applications of the law of unintended consequence—efficiency experts who produce less work, social reformers who make people's lives even more miserable than imagined, spiritual leaders who degrade their followers below the level of beasts, utopias that turn into hells. History manages to highlight the dominance of human pride and arrogance. Nowhere, I would suggest, does this observation strike with more force and vivacity than in the contemplation of the events of the twentieth century. Never has there been a time in which we have collectively possessed such immense bodies of knowledge and so much material capacity to advance it. Never before have the technologies been so powerful and so rich with potential, and the aspirations so ambitious and full of confidence. Yet with all of this, the ironic lesson is the danger of losing sight of our own limitations: and with that vital loss of moral understanding we find ourselves on desolation's march.
Chapter One: Endnotes


6. I owe this observation to Steve Myking.


15. Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, I, 446.