So many things are being talked about, it would surpass the intellectual capacity of a Leibniz. But we don’t even notice; we have changed. There’s no longer a whole man confronting a whole world, only a human something moving about in a general culture-medium.

Robert Musil

The passage from the mid- to the end of the twentieth-century lies under a melancholy shade. We march along a dark and twisting road of modern life that leaves behind the remnants of the traditions of Christianity and the Enlightenment. The road leads into uncharted regions of a techno-assisted barbarism. This barbarism thrives on a cancerous, unremitting nihilism (no enduring beliefs in or attachments to anything), resentment (unwillingness to accept responsibility—others are to blame; I was abused, misunderstood, marginalized) and self-indulgence (no inhibitions or constraints must thwart self-expression).

The preoccupation with amusement is so pervasive and the technologies for its delivery are so powerful and irresistible that the “management” of the presentation of violence and sexuality by the amusement industry has become an overriding social and political issue. Of course, the problem is inevitable! Sex and violence make up the infrastructure of the amusement industry. The more quickly children can be initiated and immersed in these essentials, the sooner
they take up the amusement pursuits and habits of their elders.

What kinds of morally benighted creatures can we expect to emerge after a childhood dedicated to constant diversion, after immersion in amusement built around the themes of violence, mindless self-assertion and degradation? It is difficult to fathom, but one is justified in the anticipation that our society may be populated by nihilists for whom principles or constraints will be foreign notions.

Modern nihilism, though, seems to lie somewhere between the Charybdis of the unfettered quest for amusement and the Scylla of victimhood. Both are built around fixations upon the subjective self. Amusement makes us feel good: the victim has found “another” to blame for his failure to feel good about himself. Michael Polanyi has spoken eloquently of the modern purveyors of resentment who seek redress through officially sanctioned forms of victimhood, and he links that quest to the growing nihilism of our time.

A new destructive scepticism is linked here to a new passionate social conscience; an utter disbelief in the spirit of man in coupled with extravagant moral demands. We see at work here the form of action what has already dealt so many shattering blows to the modern world; the chisel of scepticism driven by the hammer of social passion.¹

In *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* where Gibbon makes his General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West, he confronts the uneasiness which he suspects may have beset the thoughtful reader of his work. Is it possible that the current civilized order (modern Europe) can fall precipitously into barbarism as did ancient Rome? Is decline for a civilized order inevitable?

Yet the experience of four thousand years should enlarge our hopes, and diminish our apprehensions: we cannot determine to what height the human species may aspire in their advances toward human perfection; but it may safely be presumed, that no people, unless the face of nature is changed, will relapse into their original barbarism.²

Irony pervades Gibbon’s prose. This seeming piece of glib reassurance is no exception. Little exists in the 3000 pages of *The Decline and Fall* that gives the
reader hope for human perfection. The contemplation of events since Gibbon wrote offers little cause for optimism. Contemplating the work of many of our twentieth-century revolutionaries and social engineers only confirms our uneasiness and apprehension for the millennium ahead. We cannot indeed determine to "what height the human species may aspire" in that quest for perfection. The aspirations are unlimited, but Gibbon's portrayal of fifteen hundred years of the fruits of that quest is full of degeneracy and weakness. All that Gibbon can really promise is that the human race will not fall into its state of "original barbarism." Barbarisms of new and various sorts, it would seem, are always possible and probably much more dreadful, equipped as they are with modern technology. The mechanized death camps of twentieth-century Europe quickly come to mind. The barbarians that attacked the Roman empire came from without, and perhaps Gibbon himself failed to recognize fully all of the possibilities for the metamorphosis of that barbarian within. Germany in the early twentieth century was one of the most civilized countries in the world.

We are now beset with a new, techno-assisted barbarism. This barbarism is a unique product of our own time—self-indulgent, arrogant, moralistic and ferociously litigious. And, it is immersed in and stimulated by an astonishing variety of electronically-assisted forms of amusement. The self-indulgent and litigious character of our times is what one would expect in a society in which it is impossible to affirm any objective norms or to share standards of restraint. Litigation becomes the primary mechanism for mediating social conflict and disagreement. Lawsuits fill the social void, a void once occupied by mutually accepted norms.

Personalism corrodes norms of self-restraint. Restraint for the personalist is equivalent to repression. Personal responsibility functions as a euphemism for the duping effects of false consciousness. The oppressed internalize the crippling norms and remain unaware that conformity to them only serves the interests of the oppressors, who invent and purvey them for that very purpose.

This notion of repression was a well-worked theme of the 1960s radical
criticism of capitalist America. The Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization* convicted the West of practicing a dehumanizing repression which rationalized restraint because it ultimately served the goal of profit. *Eros and Civilization* was widely read and often quoted by campus radicals. Even sex, Marcuse argued, was converted by capitalism into an activity ruled by an acquisitive system of constraints. Western sexual morality equates "normal" sexuality with some exterior standard of utility, which ultimately denies the good of sexuality as something engaged in for its own sake. Sex, like everything else in capitalist, Western society, he says, gets reduced to utility (exchange value) and whatever conduct does not well serve the exchange process get shunted aside or stigmatized as perverse.

In a repressive order, which enforces the equation between the normal, socially useful and good, the manifestations of pleasure for its own sake must appear *fleurs du mal*. Against a society which employs sexuality as a means for a useful end, the perversions uphold sexuality, as an end it itself; they thus place themselves outside the dominion of the performance principle and challenge its foundations.³

Marcuse is correct about the foundational challenge to our traditional institutions—repressive ones, in his view—mounted by those who would reject a system of restraining rules over an activity such as sex with so many potential moral and social consequences. Societies have always put restraints on sexuality. Societies have always used sex for social ends and maintained proscriptions of behavior centered on notions of perversion and the like. With this critique of sex in America, Marcuse continues to grind the Roussean axe. He pits corrupt, power-preserving, individual-devouring institutions against innately benign, natural human impulses. Marcuse's America when he wrote this in the middle century years was a "repressive order" in his estimation even in comparison with the Soviet Union and China where all the State resources were put in the service of imposing the most rigid, stifling ideological conformity on the people, and slave labor was a normal way of life for many millions of people. Marcuse's personal choice of residence was in the repressive United States.
It is difficult now, though, to imagine what “repression,” sexual or otherwise, remains in the hedonistic, nihilistic early twenty-first-century America. It will not be found in any of the arenas of popular culture, and we can find little enforcement anywhere of sexual norms or standards of conduct. We do not observe anything resembling repression exerted upon the conduct of our political leaders or evident in the lives of the celebrities whose comings and goings are so important to us and so much the focus of the amusement industry. Their sexual antics make them more interesting—the kinkier and more unconventional, the more amusing. What the absence now of Marcuse’s much ballyhooed repression of sexuality by society, immersed in personalism, really means, morally and socially, may be debatable. However, in looking about even the most sanguine individual should wonder if some repression might not be a good thing.

As the quest for amusement and diversion pervades and increasingly dominates our popular culture, the immersion in a timeless present ultimately eviscerates our ideals. Enduring ideals have anchors in the past, constrain us in the present and guide us toward the future. We are in danger of becoming a people with no core or character, reflective surfaces of the mirrors of the most recent preoccupations of an amusement-focused mass media and a mass culture of the eternal now.

The decline of virtue, the loss of constancy and fidelity, and the medicalization of morality make it difficult to hold ourselves responsible for our past conduct and to measure ourselves against ideals that can at the same time inspire and humble us. The past, what we might remember, learn from, and morally ground ourselves in, has instead become for those bound by the amusement ethos a means for stimulating present feelings of nostalgia.

For the therapist, the past exists as a fertile source of diagnostic data. The past merely holds the psychological material or behavioral evidence to be extracted, analyzed, dissected, and therapeutically interpreted, then regurgitated in a current counseling or “recovery” jargon suitable for the manufacture of self-excuse or self-re-invention or pleas for pity.
Former drug addicts and alcoholics form the cadres of drug- and alcohol-abuse counselors. In this now familiar trajectory, one moves from being an addict to talking about being an addict—the self-absorption simply continues, though in a somewhat different venue. Yet, addiction and all of the moral and personal turbulence that arises from it remains the central focus and enduring preoccupation. The expertise of the ex-addict—that which qualifies an ex-abuser for dispensing advice and assistance to current abusers—lies in his capacity to fathom and interpret his own subjective experience of addiction which, in turn, creates that empathetic base for communication with other addicts. ‘I know, from personal experience, what you are going through.’ This is a predictable dynamic of a constantly enlarging therapeutic model of social reality.

Because of the growth of the therapeutic mentality, we find countless numbers of people who are in a state of “recovery.” Recovered ‘x’s are commonplace. Substitute for ‘x’ any of the myriad addictions that take their toll. Thus it does not strike us as strange, even perverse, to install routinely those who have conspicuously failed to manage their own lives in positions where they guide and counsel others who have become incapable of functioning as they ought.

The twenty-first century promises an expansion in scope, intensity and in variation of the personalist-inspired, techno-assisted barbarism that began unfolding in the previous century. The salient features of this barbarism are an ultra-skepticism that destroys the possibility of acting according to principle, and a medicalized model of morality which eschews responsibility and moral character, and churns out a ceaseless proliferation of resentful, litigation-prone victims. This barbarism is also immersed in an insipid nihilism which is expressed in a perpetual quest for novelty and ever-increasing stimulation, and a casual toleration for almost everything as long as there are neither expectations for enduring commitments nor promises to bind. Overturning the feckless status quo, that is, revolution, is the means of choice for fulfilling this quest.

This new barbarism bristles with spectacular ironies. Most striking is that the pursuit of absolute equality creates an expansive, priestly order of privileged
experts who run the new, improved society, those Orwellian pigs who are "more equal than the others." The quest for equality, in practice, yields profound inequalities. "Science means specialism and specialism means oligarchy," observed Chesterton. Experts and specialists are privileged. They constitute an oligarchy, an elite of knowers. The quest for equality, thus, ironically, produces a vast growing order of inequality presided over by the experts, the medicalized moralists and specialty therapists with acute sensitivity to life-style nuances. By exchanging virtue for health, morality, which has always been the business of everyone, becomes the determination of the specially trained, the experts on self-esteem, self-worth, a healthy psyche, or whatever it may happen to be called at the moment. The moral world thus gradually, steadily moves toward oligarchy—the rule of the few over the many. Moral wisdom and insight is possessed by the experts of the psyche, who dispense them to the rest of us, arrogantly and at a high cost. Instead of the equality we envisioned for everyone, our individual personal conduct becomes the object of management by elites who alone possess the technology of behavior control. This is one of the more remarkable unintended consequences in the modern world.

The medicalization of morality overturns our moral world—one in which every individual was presumed to be capable of understanding the basic principles of right and wrong and assuming responsibility for the decisions he makes—making it into an moral oligarchy, a region occupied by experts, a class of elites who interpret the human condition and attempt to translate their prescriptions for its improvement into social policy.

Two types of experts make up the world we now inhabit. The first is composed of technologists, scientists, engineers, medical researchers, etc. They develop the elaborate theoretical apparatuses. They write the computer programs, build the complex machinery, design the systems, make the medical discoveries and advances, and create the increasingly sophisticated technology that helps make our everyday world increasingly complex and, ironically, mysterious and unfathomable to most non-experts. Technology at the same time frees us (from
the time-consuming tasks we once did manually) and yet increases our daily dependency on the technology and on the technologists who create and maintain it.

The second class of experts is the most powerful. It is composed of the medical moralists who represent and do the bidding of the elites of the amusement state. These experts help us manage our increasingly complex but fragmented, meaningless lives. They are the educational bureaucrats, therapists, weight loss experts, eating disorder specialists, substance abuse counselors, relationship counselors and other professional managers and helpers who produce, interpret and control the human technology of coping, personal adjustment and self-exploration. The "help" often comes to us as mandatory (in lieu of punishment), courtesy of the amusement state—these professional moralists must have a captive clientele upon which to practice and refine their techniques and ultimately to justify their professional existence. They are the counselors, who preside over the myriad support groups, who guide us through the childhood traumas, the pre-marital counseling, marriage crises, then the divorces, and all the multi-variant "relationship" crises that follow as we make our way to the grave. They handle the children who cannot handle the divorces. Also, they help us deal with the many types of abusers who surround us, wean us from our myriad addictions, be they to substances, e.g., alcohol or drugs, or compulsive behavior such as overeating, gambling, compulsive shopping or rampant sexual promiscuity.

Twenty-first century Americans spend much of their free time pursuing amusement. Does the life of amusement provide stability and purpose? Are those immersed in it happy and satisfied with their lives? More than likely perpetual amusement produces anxiety, boredom and personal frustration. Addictions, dependencies and internal conflicts inevitably arise from the experience of the inherent emptiness of a life caught up in diversion.

The medical moralists have become the linchpins of the courts, the criminal justice system and the prisons. They administer therapy assiduously to the deeply warped personalities of the child molesters, rapists, professional drug
dealers and other phyla of criminals and social predators. They are also comprised of the sensitivity trainers, the disability experts and the cross-culture advisors who initiate us into the mysteries of getting along in a “multicultural” world (necessary to avoid being successfully sued—law suits now the specter hanging over institutions). Common sense, common decency and the principles of fair play no longer suffice. Experts, on racism, sexism, homophobia, agism, disablism, and other “isms” must be in place to fathom, interpret and bridge all of these “differences” between the different groups and facilitate the many “healing” processes that must take place. They are the professional educators whose main task is to raise the self-esteem of our children, provide them with condoms cum instruction, and obviate the effects of whatever ignorance they might inadvertently absorb from parents who might still be mired in the obsolete throes of traditional religious beliefs. They are also the government advisors and bureaucrats and social workers whose jobs are to design and implement the social programs that will make us safer, more secure and comfortable, able to engage in guilt-free amusement.

The amorphous, directionless and open-ended subjectivity of social life heightens our extensive dependence on the therapeutic oligarchs and amusement moguls who constantly broaden the scope of therapy and expand the range and application of amusement. Thus, our unwitting, bovine subjection to their ideological proclivities increases with a depressing inevitability. As we participate haplessly in the stripping away of our spiritual resources and discount the importance of character and virtue in our lives, we surrender the moral capacities that might help us withstand the vicissitudes of modern life to these mandarins: they are eager to tell us what to believe, what to think and not to think about, and most importantly for them, what to feel, and what to value. They are happy to “be there,” whenever we need them to help us sort out our inner feelings, interpret our moods, and help us make the “appropriate” adjustments to our attitudes and expectations whenever boredom, frustration or anxiety threaten.

With the detachment of individuals from shared beliefs in an enduring
objective order comes an imperceptible shift away from principles, obligations and measuring one's self against ethical ideals to the primacy of effecting a satisfying or reassuring interpretation of the self. James Nolan Jr. has characterized the therapeutic ethos most aptly as “conspicuous self-referencing.”

I recently saw a promotional poster for a local blood drive on a university campus that provides a perfect illustration of this: “Feel good about yourself, give blood,” the poster urged. No appeal was made to anything other than the self and the seeming reflexive need to feel good—not to be good or to do something for others. I concluded that if many of us in this locale already felt good about ourselves then the blood drive would have been in jeopardy. But this contingency, of course, never dawned on the promoters. Why should it have? The quest for feeling good is assumed to be a life long, ongoing, routine process. We all need to feel better about ourselves no matter how good we already feel. Self-esteem is permanently deficient. We can never feel good enough about ourselves because the modern self is insatiable in its craving for affirmation and development, or perhaps even worse, so inchoate in its constitution that it can never achieve wholeness or integrity.

This assumption is deeply buried in this common way of appealing to people for good deeds. Reflexive self-referencing is not only conspicuous, it is relentless as well. The “business” (literally and figuratively) of exploring the feelings and all of their nuances and permutations becomes the highest priority. And, psychologists and the like are the supreme technologists of self-exploration. To conduct our interpersonal affairs appropriately we are required to cultivate sensitivity. This involves not simply affirming the value and ensuring the practice of the general protocols of politeness and kindness and mutual respect, but rather constantly absorbing an acute, ever-shifting awareness of ourselves and “others” in their unique but fleeting appearances. And, in order to achieve this genuine but elusive interior awareness, we must call upon the specialists of the psyche, the talking experts, who can facilitate it. Because this subjective, ever-shifting awareness that we must achieve of both others and ourselves is so unstable,
illusive and protean, we constantly require the attention and assistance of these experts, and in ever expanding capacities.

Leszek Kolakowski in an essay, "The Revenge of the Sacred in Secular Culture," describes the twentieth-century descent into nihilism. He suggests, in a poignant and profound passage, what the drive to eliminate all hierarchical forms of value and understanding means for practical daily living.

We live in a world in which all our inherited forms and distinctions have come under violent attack; they are attacked in the name of homogeneity, which is held up as an ideal with the aid of vague equations purporting to show that all difference means hierarchy, and all hierarchy means oppression....

This is precisely what feminist-deconstructionist Luce Irigaray, quoted above, is about in her assertion that logical precision and clarity of thought represents a "phallocratic" imposition which should be resisted by turning "everything upside down, inside out, back to front", and by overthrowing "syntax by suspending its eternally teleological order." All order must be obliterated as it somehow reflects traditional hierarchy which oppresses and limits. Kolakowski, however, points to the effects, with Orwellian overtones, that such an overturning of our traditions has had upon our ability to comprehend reality and to give order to our experience.

Sometimes it seems as if all the words and signs that make up the basic system of distinctions are dissolving before our eyes; as if all the barriers between opposing concepts are gradually being torn down. There is no longer any clear distinction, in political life, between war and peace, sovereignty and servitude, invasion and liberation, equality and despotism. Nor is there a clear-cut dividing line between executioner and victim, between man and woman, between the generations, between crime and heroism, law and arbitrary violence, victory and defeat, right and left, reason and madness, doctor and patient, teacher and pupil, art and buffoonery, knowledge and ignorance. From a world in which all these words picked out and identified certain objects, certain well-defined qualities and situations, arranged in opposing pairs, we have entered another world, in which our system of opposition and classification, has ceased to apply.
Written in 1973, thirty years later the course of this juggernaut of conceptual dissolution looms over us. It is easy to produce instance after instance of the tearing down of the barriers of these fundamental "opposing concepts" cited by Kolakowski. Consider as an example, this grotesque piece of moral and intellectual dishonesty, quite typical of the tergiversation long carried out by our adversarial intellectual class. It is Norman Mailer's odious glorification of a young hoodlum who murders a middle-age shop owner.

For one murders not only a weak fifty-year-old man but an institution as well [private property]... The hoodlum is therefore daring the unknown, and no matter how brutal the act it is not altogether cowardly. (Incidentally, this piece comes from a book entitled, appropriately enough, *Advertisements for Myself.*) The act Mailer re-describes for the reader is, of course, cowardly by any common definition or understanding of the term, among other things. But Mailer by ideological legerdemain converts a common piece of thuggery and brutality into something representative of an abstraction for which he has an affinity. The writing is after all, an advertisement for himself—something radical and hence affirmative. Thus, a base criminal act becomes a brave adventure into the "unknown," a striking out at a repressive institution, private property. Acts of robbery and murder in Mailer's writing dissolve "before our eyes" into heroism. Ordinary criminality gives birth to revolution, the twentieth century prescription for social progress. Mailer's advertisement for himself is an astonishing regurgitation of Rousseau's primal resentment.

This psycho-sociological contrivance obliterates many seemingly inviolable "dividing lines." It is just one small instance of a vast anarchical process that has for years been generally ravaging our thought and judgment such that we now are disposed to call anything whatever we feel like calling it, if we feel strongly enough, or if it happens to suit some generous or noble purpose in our minds. Such pseudo-moral venting then makes us feel good—like real moral revolutionaries or iconoclasts. Feeling good about ourselves is ultimately the object of this moralizing. Morality is just another piece of the conspicuous self-
referencing mentioned above. The process begins and ends with the subjective self. Moralizing in this vein is one more norm-destroying exercise to achieve the personalist goal of self-affirmation—the example cited above is indeed by the author’s own admission a piece of self-advertisement.

Liberated thus from our “inherited forms and distinctions,” heaps of trash dumped into prestigious art galleries by “social activists” can be denominated “art” because they reflect someone’s moral outrage. Retreat from Vietnam is called “peace with honor” by our President. Assault and robbery committed by members of oppressed classes are elevated to “acts of resistance.” Arsonists, looters and pillagers of shops from Los Angeles in 1995 are now in the same category as the Warsaw Poles who resisted the Nazis in 1944—freedom fighters. Rioters are pronounced to be the victims of oppression and their acts blows of affirmation against a repressive order. Differences between men and women are, indeed, complete and utter manifestations of socially constructed reality that reflect nothing more than the arrangements of social power. Real moral and social differences are nearly impossible to assert because the confidence required to make them has been eroded by skepticism and relativism and by the corruption of language that attempts to express them. What is said and intended on one day becomes different the next, depending upon what happens to be the needs, wants or inclinations of the present moment.

Kolakowski’s observations suggest that the tearing down of these categories makes the possibility of acting according to moral principle impossible. One who acknowledges the claim of a moral principle binds himself morally and logically. That is, if he wishes to uphold the principle, he must decide to do or not do what the application of the principle orders or forbids. The words that articulate the principle and the ideas behind them must have a stability of reference and solidity of meaning. One who acts according to principles knows that real, practical consequences follow from those principled acts. In order to act by principle one must give preference to one set of ends over another and in the course of that decision must be able to distinguish in some durable, predictable
way good and bad consequences. With this melt-down of fundamental distinctions, lamented by Kolakowsi, it becomes obviously harder to do this: almost any human action, no matter how base or reprehensible, can be rationalized or excused because the moral categories for evaluating it become extremely flexible.

Another effect that the tearing down of fixed moral categories and concepts and the undermining of objectively-determined, shared belief has upon individuals is to dispose them toward the use of power in purely cynical and opportunistic modes. Those in power are marked by the "frequent repudiation of categorial pledges," as H.L. Mencken said of Franklin Roosevelt. Edward Gibbon's concise summation of the character and personality of the late second century A.D. emperor, Severus, is applicable to many of the members of our own ruling classes:

He promised only to betray, he flattered only to ruin; and however he might occasionally bind himself with oaths and treaties, his conscience, obsequious to his interest, always released him from the inconvenient obligation.

With no enduring, external ideals to link the power to and limit and define its application, the exercise of power becomes a cynical and nihilistic game. Whatever ideals that may have claimed anyone's allegiance have been hollowed into the most brittle, fragile shell: the language that expresses them is pressed into service only during some tedious ceremony in an increasingly perfunctory and meaningless fashion. Those in power still boorishly wield the phrases and opportunistically invoke the symbols but they are completely without substance—no one listens carefully and few, if any, believe any of it.

No more spectacular late-twentieth-century example of this evisceration of ideals and hollowing out of symbols exists for us to contemplate carefully and learn from than those last decades of our post-World War II rival empire, the Soviet Union where no one, not even the communist power elite, believed in the promises or principles of the officially imposed social ideology. Communism in the 1970s and 1980s had become an ideological corpse: the stench was so...
overpowering that the putrefying body finally had to be disposed of. ‘From each according to his ability; to each according to his needs’, the withering away of the state, full equality—no one any longer took the German Prophet’s promises seriously. The bloody, repressive reign of his priestly dialecticians was over. All that was left of a once powerful and energizing system of ideas and the future of the classless society were the venal and corrupt manipulations by the party apparatchiks, third-rate gangsters, and political hacks in bankrupt, impoverished countries trying to hold on to the power that operated beneath the empty words.

In our own country whatever tribute might still be paid to self-reliance, individual freedom and truth by the political and cultural elites has become empty and meaningless insofar as it affects any of their programs or policies. Where these values still operate it is in spite of and not because of the elites who enlarge the entitlements, design the amusement packages which make up the popular culture, and advance the ethos of the therapeutic culture—security, diversion, and continuous self-reinvention and self-repair. In the amusement state where each individual is caught up in the subjective pursuit of individual pleasures or the therapeutic reconstruction of the self, it is nearly impossible for any central guiding ideal to exert a serious effect or much influence.  

Part of the reason for this is that politics itself has been co-opted by the amusement medium, television. Television focuses almost exclusively on the visual presentation of the personalities of those who both seek and possess power. Individual style and all those particular, sometimes indefinable qualities that make powerful affective impressions (looks, being likeable, appearance of sincerity, appearing presidential, etc.) become more important and determinant of success than the more abstract considerations such as the implications of political ideas that are espoused, consistency and principle, or even character and integrity. A homely, perhaps dull person contesting for office with a dynamic, attractive one, especially on television, loses, no matter how much better the former’s ideas, arguments and strength of character.

Television works against formal institutions like political parties that
represent political platforms or programs precisely because these things cannot easily be visually represented. They are impersonal, and therefore represent something more enduring and important than a single individual, namely policies, principles and ideas that have application and meaning beyond the immediate moment. The successful political leader, more than ever before, has to be the master of the visual medium (television), the manipulator of immediate impressions. Television dominates the institution of politics in America. Thus, all political issues and ideas are pushed toward the personal and immediate—a natural feature of amusement—which makes it easier for those in power to abuse the power they have and exercise it arbitrarily. They make or break themselves on their style, on their individual presentations of self. Those in power find themselves less constrained by principles and promises. One can promise virtually anything because the subjectivity in which we are all immersed makes the language of the promise infinitely elastic. The promise maker can never be held to account.

The amusement state thus undermines the traditional institutions of representative government which have always been suspicious of power and have attempted to limit it by making its exercise conform to constitutional principles. Principles impose limits. A medium like television makes the imposition of limits difficult because images conquer principles. The powerful emotions aroused by the images of a video displaying an event close up, such as the mangled bodies of soldiers—as if we were there ourselves—will be more determinant of opinions and decisions about the waging of the war that produced the casualties than an abstract appeal to a constitutional principle or even a prudential maxim of collective self-interest.

Television interprets the world. We are on the cusp of being a plebiscitarian dictatorship where media-adroit demagogues measure the pulse of people through the latest polls, focus groups, and other statistical opinion sampling devices, and respond by tailoring policies and bending to current prevailing inclinations. Long-term consequences, issues of constitutionality, and
the rule of law get pushed aside as irrelevant considerations. Such a mode of “governing” in an amusement oriented society makes it difficult if not impossible for political leaders to make decisions and to act as leaders in any principled way.

Resentment remains one of the most salient, distinguishing features of the new barbarism. Moreover, resentment has been a core element of our modern, ideologue-tyrants like Hitler, Stalin, Castro, and Pol Pot. They were immersed in it and it was an essential tool that they adroitly used to consolidate support for their programs of murder and slavery. Frederick Hayek has made the highly relevant observation in this regard that it is easier to create consensus around what people dislike than what they like—hence, the affinity of resentment and modern despotism.

The engines of resentment stoked by our social critics, the masters of _J'acuse_, have brought about the destruction of “civilized” dispute—a long evolving convention that has provided the means to disagree, profoundly disagree even, about fundamental ideas, issues, beliefs and yet maintain mutual respect, even amity. The West has its exemplars of civilized dispute—Socrates, Erasmus, Hume, Gibbon and our own Founding Fathers. The _Federalist Papers_ are a model of how civilized dispute is conducted.

Civilized dispute like all civilized activity appeals to principles and respects limits. Beneath the art of civilized disputation lies a crucial assumption: that there is a common aspect of humanity adhering in different individuals and groups that is the basis for conversation and mutual respect. The conduct of civilized dispute is incompatible with the nurturing of resentment which shuts down conversation. Resentment is always hateful and corrosive. It tears down respect and eats away at any feelings or attachments that individuals in its grip might develop for general principle. Civilized dispute has never aimed for the destruction of the disputants. It operates with the naive, old-fashioned idea that there is an objective reality from which truth can be determined or discovered or approximated and that disputes and differences of opinion should always be governed by those ends. Those who are committed to making dispute civilized
embrace a humility that comes from a profound sense of human fallibility and limitation. Individuals who engage in civilized dispute possess a common end that must override their particular apologetic ambitions, polemical aims or political goals. That common end is the determination of the truth or the realization of the good and the practice of common decency.

The new barbarism, however, thrives on resentment. Its practitioners emphatically deny the reality of such overriding truth or moral good: any standards, such as they might be, must be relative to class, race, culture or some particular kind of collective difference. Dispute, for the new barbarian, cannot and should not be civilized; its primary tool is abuse. The conduct of dispute must be a form of total war, aiming at the annihilation of the opponent.

Lenin, assured of his own infallible grasp on the nature of reality, was perhaps the most resentful figure of world historical significance. Not by coincidence, he developed and mastered the twentieth-century prototype for uncivilized dispute which has had many emulators—no one was more accomplished in it than he was. Lenin's rhetoric was a potent and poisonous mixture of vituperation, calumny and vengefulness. Lenin's enemy, always, was not falsity or error, but his opponents. Dispute was not advanced by reasoned, respectful arguments but by ad hominem assault, by abuse. This type of dispute proceeded by the unveiling or the invention of corrupted motives and intentions of one's opponents. The destruction of their character was the goal. Lenin's aspiration, as Richard Pipes notes, was not victorious competition with his rivals but their "liquidation."

"Liquidation" was one of his favorite prescriptions for those who competed with him for power. Competition of most sorts usually involves adhering to a pre-established set of rules. Lenin cared nothing about rules. He scorned them. His confidence in his own infallibility remained unlimited. He had no use for principles and disdained anyone who did. His sole object was the possession of power to implement his programs, and when he could he destroyed and eliminated anyone, with any means, who opposed him. Of Lenin's view of political dispute Alain Besançon wrote:
Politics aims for the common good. But in Leninism the social matter polarized into classes does not form a political community. There is no common good and there is no friendship either. There is hatred and war.\(^3\)

Lenin saw naked self-interest and personal corruption beneath everyone's actions. Only he himself was immune. Here was another dimension of his moral and intellectual arrogance: it was permeated with a Manichean view of privileged knowledge on one side, ignorance and evil on the other. Lenin was also profoundly cynical: his opponents never really meant what they said. They were hopelessly corrupt and unsalvageable. In quest of power Lenin proceeded by vituperation and vilification; when he had it, by physical extermination.

The death of civilized dispute is connected with the growth of personalism, particularly personalism's triumph over traditional institutions. The personalist cannot conceive of civilized dispute. The notion is fraudulent and disingenuous. Why? Because social institutions always represent vested interests. Remember, as Polanyi observes, there is "utter disbelief in the spirit of man." Dispute or argumentation by its nature is for the personalist steeped in self-interest and seeks to defend privilege. One may sincerely believe that he is arguing from principle, but ultimately the arguer is defending a practice of inequality, a status-quo arrangement that rests upon power and domination. Thus, "bad faith" or "false consciousness" shapes the character of the traditionalist. All moral concepts are in some manner attenuated by considerations of class, race or gender.

For Nicholas Bukharin, the Bolsheviks' chief intellectual and theoretician, ethics was simply a "fetishism" of the values of class.\(^4\) Bukharin, like many of his revolution-launching comrades, was washed over by the blood-bath of Stalin's voracious purges of the 1930s, yet his view of ethics and morality has unfortunately survived and seeped deeper into our own thinking than we may realize. In fact it dominates much of our current perspective.

So we now find ourselves confronted by bourgeois morality and male logic. Every moral, ethical or social concept that might have some claim to
universal application—morality, logic, justice—dissolves into a corrupted particularity of some tribe. Argumentation becomes with this particularized view, not logical or empirical demonstration or refutation, not persuasion, but verbal warfare that exposes and unmasks the enemy. Conversation becomes impossible because the goal is the launching of a successful attack on the motives of one’s opponents, of showing his irresistible connection with corrupting privilege. All moral discourse becomes either a form of attack or defense, but ironically with a tragic futility because there are no common assumptions which can propel the discourse; and there is no universally shared moral vocabulary. Verbal argument constitutes just one more form of warfare, often a prelude to or surrogate of physical warfare and attempted annihilation.

Resentment is one of our powerful social corrosives; so too is vulgarity. Vulgarity is a powerful weapon in the personalist’s anti-authoritarian arsenal, an effective means of assault on traditional institutions. With the recognition of authority comes respectful distance. This distance can be created by language, thus an aspect of care in the words one chooses and the verbal protocols one follows. A young man speaks and acts differently around his mother and father than when he is with his friends. These differences are signs or manifestations of respect. In the practice of vulgarity, that care and distance that respect is intended to create is broken down. Protocols are cast aside as irrelevant or hypocritical—one acts and talks however one feels like acting and talking, without any tempering of respect for any figure of authority or without any consideration of social norms or conventions, without observing respectful distance. Vulgarity erases the social distance that creates the boundaries for social roles. Vulgarity propels the descent into the purely personal.

The new barbarians assiduously infiltrate vulgarity into all of our public spaces. Constraints on public expression or display vanish—the descent into vulgarity is nearly complete. Turn on the television or the radio. Watch a movie. Go to a professional baseball or football game. Stand in a public place and observe young people loudly, unselfconsciously emitting streams of obscenity in
the presence of the young and the elderly. Walk down the halls of a high school when the classes are changing; listen to children on the playground. Eavesdrop on college students talking. Look at the T-shirts people wear in public (“Shit happens”), the bumper stickers on the cars (“Don’t like my driving? Call 1-800 Eat shit!”)

We are light years from those repressive, “conformist” 1950s when that stuffy middle class morality forbade the use the word “pregnant” on television, and when even married couples on television were portrayed as sleeping in separate beds. Now the sit-coms feature such themes as masturbation, menstruation and nose picking, and in “prime time” for the edification of our children. The material presented is increasingly raw and gross because it is necessary, always, to assault the sensibilities, to move, both in content and style, into the new and forbidden. Robert Pattison has called this part of our destruction of civility as the “triumph of vulgarity” in his book of that title.¹⁵ Crudeness, coarse expression and vulgarity have risen to such pervasive levels and have become widely accepted because the sanctions against them have crumbled. The standards that were in place, even recently, no longer have any force. The sanctions have disappeared because they would have to appeal to commonly accepted norms or standards: conformity to them would involve dimensions of self-restraint, which we have now learned, are phony or hypocritical or repressive and are linked to someone else’s notion of right and wrong.

Lenny Bruce, another one of our 1960s Roussean pioneers in breaking down the hypocritical old order, was much heralded by the personalists. His life was a harbinger of the pervasive vulgarity that would later come to define popular mass culture. In pre-Bruce times, dirty words, foul and course language were confined to locker rooms, barracks and other such places; in our contemporary, electronic-amusement oriented society, billingsgate has become a staple of television, the movies and popular music—it pervades modern life. Along with the Free Speech advocates at Berkeley, this talented antinomian contributed in his own unique, creative way to the eradication of the conventional restraints of
"respectable" language and all of its middle class hypocrisy. He was successful, and like many of the 1960s anti-establishment heroes, his "shocking" routines now would barely stir an embarrassed giggle from a parochial school-girl: the language from any co-ed dorm or elementary school playground now would probably make Bruce blush.

Like many of the personalist heroes of the 1960s, behind Bruce's "moral" crusade was a personal character of reckless self-indulgence and dissipation and a personality of self-absorption, disorder and self-destruction. Even his manner of death symbolized the destruction of inhibition that was accomplished by the 1960s: ravaged by personal excesses, debauches and degradation, his naked corpse was found sprawled out on his bathroom floor at the age of forty. He had apparently pitched himself off the toilet in the throes of a spasm from an overdose of narcotics with which he had just injected himself.

A pervasive, expanding vulgarity in our society is, indeed, one of the understandable effects of the personalist attack on traditional institutions. In a society that mounts a conscious, concerted effort to democratize all human relationships, to remove hierarchical distinctions, it is to be expected that language would come to reflect both the underlying assumption of relativity and the inevitable vulgarizing effects of equalizing.

The great classical historian, Gilbert Murray, in 1925, wrote these lamenting words about the effects of Christianity upon the once great moral system of classical Greek culture.

It is an atmosphere in which the aim of the good man is not so much to live justly, to help the society to which he belongs and enjoy the esteem of his fellow creatures, but rather, by means of a burning faith, by contempt for the world and its standards, by ecstasy, suffering, and martyrdom, to be granted pardon for his unspeakable unworthiness, his immeasurable sins.\footnote{16}

How curiously and ironically applicable these thoughts are to our own time if they are recast to capture the emotive character of personalism with its "contempt" for the past and for tradition and its spurning of norms and standards. The growing
medicalizing of our outlook of human behavior and the pervasiveness of therapy as the means for dealing with human adversity and natural human frailties have us now thinking of ourselves as creatures prone to damage from our surroundings and our associations, creatures constantly in need of psychic repair and entitled to professional assistance in making those on-going repairs.

Thus, Murray's lament might now be paraphrased to read something like the following: the aim of the self-fulfilled person is not so much "to live justly, to help the society to which he belongs and enjoy the esteem of his fellow creatures"...etc., but rather to be provided with copious applications of the therapeutic arts in a never ending quest to render functional his dysfunctional personality and to establish a solid claim to social victimhood. To be a certified victim means that the responsibility for one's shortcomings can be assigned elsewhere. Seeking the esteem of one's fellow creatures, which involves some appeal to fixed standards or persisting ideals, has been displaced by an inward turning effort to produce an illusive sense of self-esteem.

A "good society" now means one in which every individual, no matter what he does or what he becomes, is entitled to "feel good about himself," with professional attention if needed to achieve it. Life for an individual in the late-twentieth century therapeutic society becomes a continuous, professionally assisted project of psychological self-repair, of searching for unconditional approval, of blaming the society rather than helping the society to which he belongs and castigating the traditional institutions for the low self-esteem which he experiences. The aim of a person, in fact, is less to be "good," that is, to establish a solid character, than it is to be relieved of guilt, whether it be the guilt the oppressor comes to feel for inflicting his inequities on others or the guilt of the oppressor's victim. The idea of goodness has become so self-defined, subjectively oriented, and emotively conditioned, so removed from any objective standards, that we have become a nation of moral solipsists.

It is hardly surprising that in such a society resentment, particularly intellectually driven resentment, has become such a growing, powerful force. The
stripping away of personal, individual responsibility—turning individuals into the social-psychological products of impersonal forces—encourages them to think of the things that befall them, even the consequences of their own decisions and actions, as the fault of someone else. The explanation for one’s misdeeds or shortcomings becomes a professionally guided project that culminates in the affixing of blame on others or on impersonal forces. In a society where excuse-making and the expansion of victimhood become the function of social theorizing it is hard to see how people can ever hope to live justly and help the society in which they live.

As the new millennium unfolds, what kind of people are we likely to become? More importantly, what kind of people will our children be and what kind of social world will they find themselves living in? Unhappily, it appears to be one where people will be more inclined to take seriously what sociologists, psychologists, and other “experts” say—no matter how ludicrous, self-serving or contrary to common sense. As the therapeutic ethos takes a greater hold, more people will expect psychiatrists, counselors and support groups to be able to cure them of their manias, addictions, and compulsions and to make them “feel good about themselves.” As they sink into the permanent condition of patienthood, people will increasingly rely on the wisdom and benevolence of government policy makers and bureaucrats who work to expand the scope and authority of the State in its restructuring of society as a fully therapeutic arena. The prevailing religion will be a cluster of twelve-step programs, and the retreat to childhood will be considered as personal growth. This new social world will be a dualistic one inhabited by official benevolence dispensers and benevolence recipients.

The seeming inevitable expansion of the medicalization of morality where more of what we used to call sin or vice is characterized as illness makes the promise of “patienthood” to virtually anyone who is capable of formulating the expression, ‘it wasn’t my fault, I was x’. Substitute for ‘x’ any traumatic event or state of deprivation you like. We will approach the gates of universal patienthood.
Dependency on others will just be a natural part of adulthood—adulthood and childhood in fact will be hard to distinguish. Adults will become indistinguishable from children as we continue our practices of dressing like them, talking like them, and expecting, as do children, others to take care of us.

With the primacy of passive amusement, we will contemplate the continual enlargement of that class of people for whom the consequences of their own behavior, whether it is drinking, eating, gambling, or shopping too much, copulating indiscriminately, render them patients, passive entities who cannot contribute to society and require others to tend to them, make excuses for them, and to contribute vast energies to their maintenance. They will enter into therapeutic custody and become the wards of those whose job it is to protect individuals from the consequences of their behavior. The alcoholic, the drug addict, the compulsive eater and gambler—such individuals, of course, require others to tend to them, to counsel them and to follow up with their treatment and care-taking and to oversee the “recovery” process. Recovery, to be successful, requires talking—the assemblage of groups to talk and discuss and analyze their afflictions.

Thus we can foresee more addictions, more recovering addicts, and more talk about addictions. The immersion of individuals in passive amusement will produce, not surprisingly, passive people who will not be expected to contribute to society but will rather be recipients of its largess and holders of entitlements. They will also be prone to the affliction of copious levels of festering, implacable resentment when the entitlements do not expand as rapidly as their expectations.

With the specter of universal patienthood haunting us, it might be worthwhile finally to recall Edward Gibbon’s nostalgic reference to the Roman Republic and what he called the “ancient model of freedom.” This was the model that also inspired our own Republican founding fathers as they waged their own revolution, not for the hell of it, but with great reluctance and deep conviction. Gibbon’s freedom is that prized by people who view themselves as citizens, spoken of above—people who disdain the dependency and the passivity of
patienthood, a condition into which we now seem with little resistance to find ourselves sinking. Gibbon writes of the Romans who watched their ancient freedom dissipate late in the third century as Rome increasingly took on the character of a military empire. The Roman senate, once the center of Republican power and authority, no longer ruled.

The authority of the senate expired with Probus; nor was the repentance of the soldiers displayed by the same dutiful regard for the civil power, which they had testified after the unfortunate death of Aurelian. The election of Carus was decided without expecting the approbation of the senate...and the Romans, deprived of power and freedom, asserted their privilege of licentious murmurs.\textsuperscript{17}

Gibbon's observation turns grey and melancholy, and like many of them reverberates uncomfortably for an early-twenty-first-century American reader who, in a reflective moment, might be inclined to think of himself as a resident of a decadent empire, once a republic. A people who prized freedom and independence, of a sudden, find themselves reduced to the sorry status of uninhibited complainers, producers, as Gibbon calls it, of "licentious murmurs." These words capture a dismal, impotent and pathetic scene, one which, however, should give us pause: what can there be left for a people to do when they sink into self-absorption, when they give themselves over to amusement and diversion, and when they come to wear with a predictable docility the mantle of patienthood? To await the next judgment of the experts? To petition for more treatment? To lament their increasing helplessness? To blame others for their inadequacies? To murmur?
Chapter Seven: Endnotes


2. Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, II, 515.


10. Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, I, 140.


17. Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, I, 347, italics added.
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