

THE REVOLUTION IN WESTERN THOUGHT

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Quietly irrevocably, something enormous has happened to Western man. His outlook on life and the world has changed so radically that in the perspective of history the twentieth century is likely to rank—with the fourth century, which witnessed the triumph of Christianity, and the seventeenth, which signaled the dawn of modern science—as one of the very few that have instigated genuinely new epochs in human thought. -In this change, which is still in process, we of the current generation are playing a crucial but as yet not widely recognized part.

The dominant assumptions of an age colour the thoughts, beliefs, expectations, and images of the men and women who live within it. Being always with us, these assumptions usually pass unnoticed—like the pair of glasses which, because they are so often on the wearer's nose, simply stop being observed. But this doesn't mean they have no effect. Ultimately, assumptions which underlie our outlooks on life refract the world in ways that condition our art and our institutions: the kinds of homes we live in, our sense of right and wrong, our criteria of success, what we conceive our duty to be, what we think it means to be a man or woman, how we worship our God or whether, indeed, we have a God to worship.

Thus far the odyssey of Western man has carried him through three great configurations of such basic assumptions. The first constituted the Graeco-Roman, or classical, outlook, which flourished up to the fourth century A. D With the triumph of Christianity in the Roman Empire, this Graeco-Roman outlook was replaced by the Christian world view which

proceeded to dominate Europe until the seventeenth century. The rise of modern science inaugurated a third important way of looking at things, a way that has come to be capsuled in the phrase “the Modern Mind.”

It now appears that this modern outlook, too, has run its course and is being replaced by what, in the absence of a more descriptive term, is being called simply the Post-Modern Mind. What follows is an attempt to describe this most recent sea change in Western thought I shall begin by bringing the Christian and modern out looks into focus; for only so can we see how and to what extent our emerging thought patterns differ from those that have directly preceded them.

From the fourth-century triumph of Christianity in the Roman Empire through the Middle Ages and the Reformation, the Western mind was above all else theistic. “God, God, God ; nothing but God”—in the twentieth century one can assume such an exclamation to have come, as it did, from a theologian. In the Middle Ages it could have come from anyone. without question all life and nature were assumed to be under the surveillance of a personal God whose intentions toward man were perfect and whose power to implement these intentions was unlimited.

In such a world, life was transparently meaningful. But although men understood the purpose of their lives, it does not follow that they understood, or even presumed to be capable of understanding, the dynamics of the natural world. The Bible never expands the doctrine of creation into a cosmogony for the excellent reason that it asserts the universe to be at every point the direct product of a will whose ways are not man’s ways. God says, “Let there be”—and there is. That is all. ‘Serene in a blaze of lasting light, God comprehends ‘nature’s ways, but man sees only its surface.

Christian man lived in the world as a child father’s house, accepting its construction and economics unprobed. “Can anyone understand the thunderings of God’s pavilion?” Elihu asks Job. “Do you know the ordinances of the heavens, how the clouds are balanced or the lightning

shines ? Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth, or on what its bases were sunk when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shout ed for joy?” To such rhetorical questions the answer seemed obvious, The leviathan of nature was not to be drawn from the great sea of mystery by the fishhook of man’s paltry mind.

Not until the high Middle Ages was a Christian cosmology attempted, and then through Greek rather than Biblical inspiration, following the rediscovery of Aristotle’s Physics and Metaphysics. Meanwhile nature’s obscurity posed no mejor problem ; for as the cosmos was in good hands, it could be counted on to furnish a reliable context in which man might work out his salvation. The way to this salvation lay not through ordering nature to man’s purposes but through aligning man’s purposes to God’s. And for this objective, information was at hand. As surely as God had kept the secrets of nature to himself, he had, through his divine Word and the teachings of his church, made man’s duty clear. Those who hearkened to this duty would reap an eternal reward, but those who refused to do so would perish. -

We can summarize the chief assumptions underlying the Christian outlook by saying they held that reality is focused in a person, that the mechanics of the physical world exceed our comprehension, and that the way to our salvation lies not in conquering nature but in following the commandment which God has revealed to us.

It was the second of these three assumptions —that the dynamics of nature exceed man’s comprehension — which the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries began to question, thereby heralding the transition from the Christian to the modern out-. look. The Renaissance interest in the early Greeks revived the Hellenic interest in nature. For the first time in nearly two thousand years Western man began to look intently at his environment instead of beyond it. Leonardo da Vinci is symbolic. His anatomical studies and drawings in general disclose a direction of interest that has turned eye into camera in his case an extraordinary camera that “could stop the hawk in

flight and fix the rearin horse.” Once again man was attending to nature’s details as a potential messenger of meaning. The rage to know God’s handiwork was rivaling the rage to know God himself.

The consequence, as we know, was modern science. Under scrutiny, nature’s blur was found to be provisional rather than final. With patience the structure of the universe could be brought into marvelous focus. Newton’s exclamation caught the excitement perfectly: “O God, I think thy thoughts after thee!” Although nature’s marvels were infinitely greater than had been supposed, man’s mind was equal to them. The universe was a coherent, law-abiding system. It was intelligible !

It was not long before this discovery began to reap practical rewards. Drudgery could be relieved, health improved, goods multiplied and leisure extended. As these benefits are consider-able, working with intelligible nature began to overshadow obedience to God’s will as a means to human fulfillment. God was not entirely eclipsed—that would have entailed a break with the past more violent than history allows. Rather, God was eased toward thought’s periphery. Not atheism but deism, the notion that God created the world but left it to run according to its own inbuilt laws, was the Modern Mind’s distinctive religious stance.. God stood behind nature as its creator, but it was through nature that his ways and will were to be known.

Like the Christian outlook, the modern outlook can be summarized by identifying its three controlling presuppositions. First, that reality may be personal is less certain and less important than that it is ordered. Second, man’s reason is capable of discerning this order as it manifests itself in the laws of nature. Third, the path to human fulfillment consists primarily in discovering these laws, utilizing them where this is possible and complying with them where it is not.

The reason for suspecting that this modern outlook has had its day and is yielding to a third great mutation in Western thought is that reflective men are no longer confident of any of these three postulates. The first two are the

ones that concern us here. Frontier thinkers are no longer sure that reality is ordered and orderly. If it is, they are not sure that man's mind is capable of grasping its order. Combining the two doubts, we can define the Post-Modern Mind as one which, having lost the conviction that reality is personal, has come to question whether it is ordered in a way that man's reason can lay bare.

It was science which induced our forefathers to think of reality as primarily ordered rather than personal. But contemporary science has crashed through the cosmology which the seventeenth-to-nineteenth-century scientists constructed as if through a sound barrier, leaving us without replacement. It is tempting to attribute this lack to the fact that evidence is pouring in faster than we can throw it into perspective. Although this is part of the problem, another part runs deeper. Basically, the absence of a new cosmology is due to the fact that physics has cut away so radically from our capacity to imagine the way things are that we do not see how the two can get back together.

If modern physics showed us a world at odds with our senses, post-modern physics is showing us one which is at odds with our imagination, where imagination is taken as imagery. We have made peace with the first of these oddities. That the table which appears motionless is in fact incredibly "alive" with electrons circling their nuclei a million times per second; that the chair which feels so secure beneath us is actually a near vacuum—such facts, while certainly very strange, posed no permanent problem for man's sense of order. To accommodate them, all that was necessary was to replace the earlier picture of a gross and ponderous world with a subtle world in which all was sprightly dance and airy whirl.

But the problems the new physics poses for man's sense of order cannot be resolved by refinements in scale. Instead they appear to point to a radical disjunction between the way things behave and every possible way in which we might try to visualize them. How, for example, are we to picture an

electron traveling two or more different routes through space concurrently or passing from orbit to orbit without traversing the space between them at all ? What kind of model can we construct of a space that is finite yet unbounded, or of light which is both wave and particle ? It is such enigmas which have caused physicists like P. W. Bridgman of Harvard to suggest that “the structure of nature may eventually be such that our processes of thought do not correspond to it sufficiently to permit us to think about it at all. The world fades out and eludes us. . . We are confronted with something truly ineffable. We have reached the limit of the vision of the great pioneers of science, the vision, namely, that we live in a sympathetic world in that it is comprehensible by our minds.”

This subdued and problematic stance of science toward reality is paralleled in philosophy. No one who works in philosophy today can fail to realize that the sense of the cosmos has been shaken by an encyclopedic skepticism. The clearest evidence of this is the collapse of what historically has been philosophy’s central discipline: objective metaphysics, the attempt to discover what reality consists of and the most general radically from our capacity to imagine the way things are that we do not see how the two can get back together.

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The agreement represents the confluence of several philosophical streams. On one hand, it has come from the positivists who, convinced that truth comes only from science, have challenged the metaphysician's claim to extrascientific sources of insight. Their successors are the linguistic analysts, who have dominated British philosophy for the last several decades and who (insofar as they follow their pioneering genius Ludwig Wittgenstein) regard all philosophical perplexities as generated by slovenly use of language. For the analysts, "reality" and "being in general" are notions too thin and vapid to reward analysis. As a leading American proponent of this position, Professor Morton White of Harvard recently stated, "It took philosophers a long time to realize that the number of interesting things that one can say about all things in one full swoop is very limited. Through the effort to become supremely general you lapse into emptiness."

Equal but quite different objections to metaphysics have come from the existentialists who have dominated twentieth-century European philosophy. Heirs of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Dostoevski, these philosophers have been concerned to remind their colleagues of what it means to be a human being. When we are thus reminded, they say, we see that to be human precludes in principle the kind of objective and impartial overview of things—the view of things as they are in themselves, apart from our differing perspectives—that metaphysics has always sought. To be human is to be finite, conditioned, and unique. No two persons have had their lives, shaped by the same concatenation of genetic, cultural, historical, and interpersonal forces. Either these variables are inconsequential—but if we say this we are forgetting again what it means to be human, for our humanity is in fact overwhelmingly shaped by them—or the hope of rising to a God's-eye view of reality is misguided in principle.

The traditional philosopher might protest that in seeking such an overview he never expected perfection, but that we ought to try to make our perspectives as objective as possible. Such a response would only lead the existentialist to press his point deeper ; for his contention is not just that

objectivity is impossible but that it runs so counter to our nature—to what it means to be human—that every step in its direction is a step away from our humanity. (We are speaking here of objectivity as it pertains to our lives as wholes, not to restricted spheres of endeavor within them such as science. In these latter areas objectivity can be an unqualified virtue.) If the journey held hope that in ceasing to be human we might become gods, there could be no objection. But as this is impossible, ceasing to be human can only mean becoming less than human—inhuman in the usual sense of the word. It means forfeiting through inattention the birthright that is ours: the opportunity to plumb the depths and implications of what it means to have an outlook on life which in important respects is unique and will never be duplicated.

Despite the existentialist's sharp rebuke to metaphysics and traditional philosophy in general, there is at least one important point at which he respects their aims. He agrees that it is important to transcend what is accidental and ephemeral in our outlooks and in his own way joins his colleagues of the past in attempting to do so. But the existentialist's way toward this goal does not consist in trying to climb out of his skin in order to rise to Olympian heights from which things can be seen with complete objectivity and detachment. Rather it consists in centering on his own inwardness until he finds within it what he is compelled to accept and can never get away from. In this way he, too, arrives at what he judges to be necessary and eternal. But necessary and eternal for him. What is necessary and eternal for everyone is so impossible for a man to know that he wastes time making the attempt.

With this last insistence the existentialist establishes contact with the metaphysical skepticism of his analytic colleagues across the English Channel. Existentialism (and its frequent but not invariable partner, phenomenology) and analytic philosophy are the two dominant movements in twentieth-century philosophy. In temperament, interest, and method they stand at opposite poles of the philosophical spectrum. They are, in fact,

opposites in every sense but one. Both are creatures of the Post-Modern Mind, the mind which doubts that reality has an absolute order which man's understanding can comprehend.

Turning from philosophy to theology, we recall that the Modern Mind did not rule out the possibility of God; it merely referred the question to its highest court of appeal—namely, reality's pattern as disclosed by reason. If the world order entails the notions of providence and a creator, God exists; otherwise not. This approach made the attempt to prove God's existence through reason and nature the major theological thrust of the modern period. "Let us," wrote Bishop Joseph Butler in his famous *The Analogy of Religion*, "compare the known constitution and course of things. . . with what religion teaches us to believe and expect; and see whether they are not analogous and of a piece, . . . It will, I think be found that they are very much so." An enterprising Franciscan named Ramon Lull went even further. He invented a kind of primitive computer which, with the turning of cranks, pulling of levers and revolving of wheels, would sort the theological subjects and predicates fed into it in such a way as to demonstrate the truths of the Trinity and the Incarnation by force of sheer logic working on self-evident propositions. Rationalism had entered theology as early as the Middle Ages, but as long as the Christian outlook prevailed, final confidence was reserved for the direct pronouncements of God himself as given in Scripture. In the modern period, God's existence-came to stand or fall on whether reason, surveying the order of nature, endorsed it. It was as if Christendom and God himself awaited the verdict of science and the philosophers.

This hardly describes the current theological situation. Scientists and philosophers have ceased to issue pronouncements of any sort about ultimates. Post-modern theology builds on its own foundations. Instead of attempting to justify faith by appeals to the objective world, it points out that as such appeals indicate nothing about reality one way or the other, the way is wide open for free decision—or what Kierkegaard called the leap of faith. One hears little these days of the proofs for the existence of God which

seemed so important to the modern world. Instead one hears repeated insistence that however admirably reason is fitted to deal with life's practical problems, it can only end with a confession of ignorance when confronted with questions of ultimate concern. In the famous dictum of Karl Barth, who has influenced twentieth-century theology more than anyone else, there is no straight line from the mind of man to God. "What we say breaks apart constantly . . . producing paradoxes which are held together in seeming unity only by agile and arduous running to and fro on our part." From our own shores Reinhold Niebuhr echoed this conviction. "Life is full of contradictions and incongruities. We live our lives in various realms of meaning which do not cohere rationally."

Instead of "These are the compelling reasons, grounded in the nature of things, why you should believe in God," the approach of the church to the world today tends to be, "This community of faith invites you to share in its venture of trust and commitment." The stance is most evident in Protestant and Orthodox Christianity and Judaism, but even Roman Catholic thought, notwithstanding the powerful rationalism it took over from the Greeks, has not remained untouched by the postmodern perspective. It has become more attentive to the extent to which personal and subjective factors provide the disposition to faith without which theological arguments prove nothing.

It is difficult to assess the mood which accompanies this theological revolution. On one hand, there seems to be a heightened sense of faith's precariousness: as Jesus walked on the water, so must the contemporary man of faith walk on the sea of nothingness, confident even in the absence of rational supports. But vigor is present too. Having laboured in the shadow of rationalism during the modern period, contemporary theology is capitalizing on its restored autonomy. Compensating for loss of rational proofs for God's existence have come two gains. One is new realization of the validity of Pascal's "reasons of the heart" as distinct from those of the mind. The other is a recovery of the awe without which religion, as distinct from ethical philosophy piously expressed, is probably impossible. By including God

within a closed system of rational explanation, modernism lost sight of the endless qualitative distinction between God and man. Post-modern theology has reinstated this distinction with great force. If God exists, the fact that our minds cannot begin to comprehend his nature makes it necessary for us to acknowledge that he is Wholly Other.

These revolutions in science, philosophy and theology have not left the arts unaffected. The worlds of the major twentieth-century artists are many and varied, but none resembles the eighteenth-century world where mysteries seemed to be clearing by the hour. The twentieth-century worlds defy lucid and coherent exegesis. Paradoxical, devoid of sense, they are worlds into which protagonists are thrown without trace as to why—the world which the late French novelist Albert Camus proclaimed “absurd”, which for his compatriot Jean-Paul Sartre was “too much,” and for the Irish dramatist Samuel Beckett is a “void” in which men wait out their lives for what-they-know-not that never comes. Heroes driven by a veritable obsession to find out where they are and what their responsibility is seldom succeed. Most of Franz Kafka is ambiguous, but his parable, *Before the Law*,” closes with as clear a countermand to the modern vision of an ordered reality as can be imagined. “The world-order is based on a lie.”

Objective morality has gone the way of cosmic order. Even where it has not been moralistic, most Western art of the past has been created against the backdrop of a frame of objective values which the artist shared. As our century has, progressed, it has become increasingly difficult to find such a framework standing back of the arts.

A single example will illustrate the point. One searches in vain for an artistic frame of reference prior to the twentieth century in which matricide might be regarded as a moral act. Yet in Sartre’s play *The Flies*, it is the first authentic deed the protagonist Orestes performs. Whereas his previous actions have been detached, unthinking, or in conformity with the habit patterns that surround him, this one is freely chosen in the light of full self-

consciousness and acceptance of its consequences. As such, it is the first act which is genuinely his, "I have done my deed, Electra," he exults, adding "and that deed was good." Being his, the deed supplies his life with the identity which until then it had lacked. From that moment forward, Orestes ceases to be a free-floating form ; his acquisition of a past he can never escape roots his life into reality. Note the extent to which this analysis relativizes the moral standard. No act is right or wrong in itself. Everything depends on its -relation to the agent, whether it is chosen freely and with full acceptance of its consequences or is done abstractedly, in imitation of the acts of others, or in self-deception.

We move beyond morality into art proper when we note that the traditional distinction between the sublime and the banal, too, has blurred. As long as reality was conceived as a great chain of being—a hierarchy of worth descending from God as its crown through angels, men, animals, and plants to inanimate objects at the base—it could be reasonably argued that great art should attend to great subjects: scenes from the Gospels, major battles, or distinguished lords and ladies. With cubism and surrealism, the distinction between trivial and important disappears. Alarm clocks, driftwood, piece of broken glass become appropriate subjects for the most monumental paintings. In Samuel Beckett and the contemporary French antinovelists, the most mundane items—miscellaneous contents of a pocket, a wastebasket, the random excursions of a runaway dog—are treated with the same care as love, duty, or the question of human destiny.

One is tempted to push the question a final step and ask whether the dissolution of cosmic order, moral order, and the hierarchic order of subject matter is reflected in the very forms of contemporary art. Critic Russel Nye thinks that at least as far as the twentieth-century novel is concerned, the answer is yes. "If there is a discernible trend in the form of the modern novel," he writes, "it is toward the concept of the novel as a series or moments, rather than as a planned progression of events or incidents, moving toward a defined terminal end. Recent novelists tend to explore

rather than arrange or synthesize their materials often their arrangement is random rather than sequential. In the older tradition, a novel was a formal structure composed of actions and reactions which were finished by the end of the story, which did have an end. The modern novel often has no such finality.” Aaron Copland characterizes the music of our young composers as a disrelation of unrelated tones. Notes are strewn about like membra disjecta ; there is an end to continuity in the old sense and an end of thematic relationships.”

When Nietzsche’s eyesight became too poor to read books, he began at last to read himself. The act was prophetic of the century that has followed. As reality has blurred, the gaze of post-modern man has turned increasingly upon himself.

Anthropological philosophy has replaced metaphysics. In the wake of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, attention has turned from objective reality to the individual human personality struggling for self-realization. “Being” remains interesting only as it relates to man. As its order, if it has one, is unknown to us, being cannot be described as it is in itself; but if it is believed to be mysteriously wonderful, as some existentialists think, we should remain open to it. If it is the blind, meaningless enemy, as others suspect, we should maintain our freedom against it.

Even theology, for all its renewed theocentrism, keeps one eye steadily on man, as when the German theologian Rudolph Bultman relates faith to the achievement of authentic selfhood. It is in art, however, that the shift from outer to inner has been most evident. If the twentieth century began by abolishing the distinction between sublime and banal subject matter, it has gone on to dispense with subject matter altogether. Although the tide may have begun to turn, the purest art is still widely felt to be entirely abstract and free of pictorial representation. It is as if the artist had taken the scientist seriously and responded, “If what I see as nature doesn’t represent the way things really are, why should I credit this appearance with its former

importance. Better to turn to what I am sure of: my own intuitions and the purely formal values inherent in the relations of colours, shapes and masses.”

I have argued that the distinctive feature of the contemporary mind as evidenced by frontier thinking in science, philosophy, theology, and the arts is its acceptance of reality as unordered in any objective way that man’s mind can discern. This acceptance separates the Post-Modern Mind from both the Modern Mind, which assumed that reality is objectively ordered, and the Christian mind, which assumed it to be regulated by an inscrutable but beneficent will.