

# The Modern **IMPERATIVE**



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The values and accomplishments of secular modernity, the fruits of the Enlightenment and the success of rational scientific inquiry, technology and capitalist free markets have been brought sharply into focus since the events of September 11.

The questioning of this success of modernism itself comes traditionally from a coalition of environmentalists, crypto Marxist anti-globalisation activists, and academic post-modernists. Increasingly visible however, at least in the pages of some conservative journals, are a range of theologians, philosophers, biblical scholars, clerics and spokesmen for leading churches. Given the prevailing mood, their analyses of Western

civilisation's secular, liberal project invites a closer look. This loose Christian coalition focus on a mixture of targets, including economic rationalism (allegedly treating humans only as productive units), crass greed, selfishness and materialism, a decline in morals and a concern that our secular success has led to a society lacking any metaphysical reference system. In their view, the liberal project has left us with meaningless, moral bankruptcy and an ethical void.

Common to their analyses has been a distaste for modernity, an ignorance and misunderstanding of the claims of science and, most importantly, an apparent refusal to examine the reasons for the irreversible demise of a shared set of metaphysical beliefs. This concerted attack on modernism shares much in common with the post-modernist movement. Both pre-modernist Christian and the newer post-modernist critiques of modernism seem to be two sides of the same coin. Both believe that the liberal project has failed; both denounce modernism.

The founding dean of the recently established John Paul II Institute of Family Studies in Melbourne, Tracey Rowland, while claiming that the liberal project is a failure, is particularly interested in defending the church's response to modernism, or as she puts it, the manner in which it accounts for itself before the bar of the Enlightenment. She also believes that, in some respects, post-modernism is a natural ally for the church; fundamentally both the pre-moderns and the post-moderns think that modernism is being bogus about its claim to theological indifference or neutrality. Because of this perception, the post-modernists have, in some ways, at least within the universities, made talking about metaphysics almost intellectually respectable and have thus made acceptable the theoretical underpinning of moral systems. For the church, they have in effect opened up political space by being interested in competing intellectual, cultural and social traditions.

Rowland certainly has a point, when one thinks of the evidence presented by Paul R Gross and Norman Levitt in their devastating critique of universities in *Higher Superstitions, the Academic Left*

*and its quarrels with Science* or the hoax played by Alan Sokal on cultural studies academics, *Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity*. This is sadly true of one of our finest intellectual institutions, Melbourne University, which has an official, published policy to: "encourage faculties to acknowledge the possibility that gender and ethnicity enter into the construction of knowledge . . . The notion of education as an objective uncovering of the truth . . . obscures the fact that truth and knowledge are socially defined and legitimated".

As for these new curriculums being intellectually respectable as Rowland suggests, both the church and post-modernists seem to fail utterly to grasp the nature of the Enlightenment, and have failed to understand the centrality of the impact of scientific inquiry on our knowledge of the physical world, or the nature of the extraordinary human voyage of intellectual discovery that brought us from pre-modern thinking to the modern. There is a compelling and transparent irreversibility in the process although many within the church would disagree. From this misunderstanding of science, both the pre-moderns and post-moderns misunderstand the nature of the liberal project, and by so doing want to deny the demonstrable fact that modernism has been not only a material triumph for mankind with a consequent enrichment of the quality of life and an extraordinary reduction in pain, suffering and squalor but an ethical triumph as well.

To differentiate the pre-modern from the modern, and to understand why man's progress has been so compelling and irreversible, it is useful to look at the impact of our changing perception of time and space brought on through careful observation, empirical testing and intellectual imagination. In preliterate, closed societies, where the notion of an individual was barely a concept in the way we understand it today, the sacred and secular were indistinguishable; the understanding of the physical world was encompassed within a metaphysical framework and there was a very limited understanding of the consistent, law-based way in which the material world functioned. Similarly, in terms of the power of human

agency in social change and in political arrangements, there was at best, in primitive societies, a mythology-swamped fatalism of customary practice, an appeal to various gods through appeasement and sacrifice, displaying little understanding of what we might now call natural laws and their indifference to human circumstances.

We know that true historical records began during the Sumerian civilisation of the fourth millennium BC because of the use of written documentation. However, at this stage, writing was about self-aggrandisement, political propaganda and religious devotion. But historiography, the writing of history proper as we understand it in the modern sense of critical, disinterested, account and explanation of what actually happens we see first in the *Histories* produced by Herodotus around 403 BC. His work, feted in Cicero's phrase as the "father of history" was the very denial of official history in the oriental, propagandist mode.

With this new consciousness, Thucydides of Athens claimed, "man makes himself". Protagoras added the limitlessly bold claim that "man is the measure of all things". We already see the gods and supernatural forces being marginalised as causative factors. *The Odyssey* is instructive in this regard.

A lesser known but critical development was symptomatic of this new perception. Already by the third century BC, Aristarchus of Samos (310-230 BC) postulated the heliocentric theory of planetary motion, an extraordinary intellectual leap, as it meant that the earth was not at the centre of the universe. Soon after, Eratosthenes (c275-195 BC), calculated the actual size of the earth by observation, deduction and calculation to within a few hundred kilometres. Even more startling was the subsequent calculation by Hipparchus (c190-120 BC) of the actual distance to the moon (to within 5 per cent). By about 100 BC Posidonius had worked out the distance to, and size of, the sun. So, from hazy metaphysical speculations about the nature of the heavenly bodies, a geometrical model which reproduced the observed phenomena with precision was gradually built up. It should

be noted that Aristotle, by 340 BC (in his book *On the Heavens*), while recognising that the earth was indeed spherical, (that it was not a flat plate supported on the back of a tortoise, "with turtles all the way down" as one sarcastic wit put it), wanted to believe that the earth was at the centre of the universe with the sun, moon, planets and stars moving in fixed rotating spheres around it.

It was unfortunate that the church adopted, through Ptolemy, Aristotle's incorrect model. However, for early Christians, an acceptance of this model was consistent with the Scriptures, and left room outside the sphere of the stars for heaven and hell.

In 1514, Nicholas Copernicus came up with the simpler model that Aristarchus had postulated nearly 2000 years earlier. Because of fear of upsetting the church (he was a priest), Copernicus circulated his theory anonymously. Indeed, his proposition got rid of Ptolemy's spheres and the idea of a natural boundary to the universe. It was Johannes Kepler who refined the anomalies revealed by observations of the planets' elliptical paths but it was not until 1687 that Isaac Newton developed a mathematical explanation. Galileo, in the meantime, and with the help of a telescope, supported the new view to the direct displeasure of the Aristotelian professors. At stake was biblical authority in direct conflict with scientific observation. Copernicanism was declared "false and erroneous". The church was emphatic that science could not determine how the world worked because God had ways unknown to man and no restriction could be placed on His omnipotence.

Nietzsche understood this precise antagonism between religious belief and science. He claimed that the psychological impetus of belief was to make sense of a chaotic, threatening and apparently random natural environment whose animist spirits must be appeased, "The believer in magic and miracles reflects on how to impose a law on nature . . . the religious cult is the outcome of this reflection." A logical, coherent explanation of an apparently incoherent physical world directly threatens not only religious belief systems but the authority of the church itself.

The next big shock to metaphysical complacency came with Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830), yet another of history's extraordinary triumphs of the human intellect over preconception and irrationalism. Following Lyell shortly after was Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859). Freud understood that each of these major contributions in science undermined what he called "humanity's naive self-love". Or, as the evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould put it, "each step in this painful progress had shattered yet another facet of an original hope for our own transcendent importance in the universe".

From these discoveries, two of modernism's fundamental attributes emerge, indeed its central qualities; that is the notion of time's arrow the sense of moving forward and the irreversible and undeniable knowledge of a morally value-free and contingent physical world, and man's true place in it. Gould (*Time's Arrow, Time's Cycle, Myth and Metaphor in the Discovery of Geological Time*. Pelican, 1988) explains it succinctly.

"Time's arrow means that history is an irreversible sequence of unrepeatable events. At the other end I shall call it time's cycle events have no meaning as distinct episodes with causal impact upon a contingent history. Fundamental states are immanent in time, always present and never changing. Time has no direction."

Both themes are prominent in the Bible, he observes. God creates earth once, Noah once, Jesus once. Many scholars have identified time's arrow as the most important and distinctive contribution of Jewish thought. Most other systems have favoured the immanence of time's cycle over the chain of linear history. Nevertheless, in Ecclesiastes, as Gould points out, solar and hydrological cycles are invoked in metaphor to illustrate both the immanence of nature's state ("there is nothing new under the sun") and the emptiness of wealth and power.

"The sun also ariseth and the sun goeth down, and

hasteth to his place where he arose. The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits. All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again . . . The thing that hath been, it that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done." (*Ecclesiastes* 1:5-9)

Time as cycle and time as arrow are in conflict. Archaic humanity ". . . defends itself to the utmost of its powers, against all the novelty and irreversibility which history entails" This archaic fleeing from time's arrow is also precisely why post-modernist theory systematically shuns any notion of narrative and historical causality or objective evidence. Post-modernism's archaic response to modernism is very similar to that of the church, and of most traditional cultures, in its recoil from the notion that history embodies no permanent stability.

This pre-modern/post-modern tension was played out over the Hindmarsh debacle. The Genesis story in the Bible is in effect a Palestinian Bronze Age creation myth in very much the same way that Aboriginal stories of fertility are creation myths of the Stone Age. The post-modernists of the ABC arbitrarily chose between the two, hastily criticising the secret men's business, as it were, of the Anglican priesthood, while at the same time reifying the secret women's business of the Narringerri. It is of more than passing interest that the Uniting Church, the South Australian Council of Churches and the Catholic Church's Justice and Peace Commission all publicly opposed the royal commission into the secret women's business. Indeed, one lawyer claimed that it would be intolerable if ever there were to be a royal commission into the virgin birth.

Where does this leave the apparently irresolvable conflict between belief systems and science, the physical world and the metaphysical world? Contempt and misunderstanding of science and its revelations about our physical universe has been a theme of many who find themselves uncomfortable



in the modern, secular, materialist environment, or object to the amoral reductionism of empirical science. John Carroll, a sociologist from La Trobe University, once claimed that Darwin had, in effect, destroyed Western culture. Andrew Ferguson, a journalist, in “How Steven Pinker’s Mind Works” (*Quadrant*, April 1998), gives the clearest expression of the distaste which those with faith have against Pinker, Carl Sagan, Richard Dawkins and other popularisers of science. The “get a grip, face the facts, wake up and smell the coffee” approach to a physical amoral universe infuriates them. Ferguson points out that Sagan sees metaphysical claims as “mere conceits and delusions”. Ferguson, in turn, is dismissive and contemptuous of Sagan’s last book *Pale Blue Dot*, and wilfully misunderstands the point of Sagan’s description of the earth as merely a “dim and tiny planet in an undistinguished sector of an obscure spiral arm” of the equally “fourth-rate milky way”. He just as wilfully misunderstands Pinker’s description of the human being as a “hunk of matter, a very lucky meat puppet with a weakness for self-delusion”.

The confusion that Ferguson has about the limits of science is seen in his suggestion that scientists invent “Just-So” stories, but then, in the same breath, argues that everything was “created by God”. This of course is, to anyone not sharing his view, the ultimate “Just-So” story. The belief in a creator not only does not explain contingent questions about the world, it begs the ontological question. Science limits itself to contingent questions. It has no curiosity about fundamental ontology. Nietzsche was quite correct when he said that science describes things, it does not explain them.

Attention to the struggle between the physical and metaphysical view of the world disguises a beautiful complementarity of the two views. Christians systematically object to an evolutionary view because it appears to diminish man and his uniqueness. One Catholic commentator accuses scientists of hubris, as if they were saying, “we think we are so important, when in fact we are less than nothing don’t even figure on the radar”. Rowland objects that Catholics

“are not opposed to science per se. They are opposed to a mechanical vision of the human person as mere matter in motion.” These positions make difficult an understanding of a view to which Ferguson draws attention, but which he himself is not curious to explain: why scientists would rhapsodise on about how glorious it is to live in an aimless, random, amoral universe.

The stance taken by Dawkins, Pinker et al, is of course a direct response to the claim by the church that God has created the world for man. Without setting out to, science forces us to query that assumption on the simple basis of the evidence. Mark Twain, while getting his figures a bit wrong, sums it up very succinctly:

“Man has been here 32,000 years. That it took a hundred million years to prepare the world for him is proof that that is what it was done for. I suppose it is, I dunno. If the Eiffel Tower were now representing the world’s age the skin of paint on the pinnacle-knob at its summit would represent man’s share of that age; and anybody would perceive that that skin was what the tower was built for. I reckon they would, I dunno.”

What becomes disingenuous in the anti-science attack is the runaway idea that scientists, having understood the position of man in his physical environment in a meaningless, purposeless world, don’t admire man and share in the excitement of his intellectual freedom and triumph in being able to be aware of his unique situation. In a deep sense, the materialist view and the Christian cosmological view may be not so dissimilar. Both see man, at one level, as small, humble and insignificant, and both systems provide the possibility for transcendence. One describes man as a meat puppet, the other describes him as not being “worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table”. The essence of transcendence in effect comes from those things which transcend ordinary limits, that are extraordinary and altogether outside and unrealisable in experience. The contemplation of our place in space and in the evolutionary scheme of things, as science depicts it,

just may conceivably confront materialist rationalists with an awe and transcendental feeling not at all dissimilar to that of a Christian, but without the metaphysical paraphernalia.

Nevertheless, there emerge two contrasting attitudes to our godless world. The first comes from Paul Johnson in his biography of John Paul II: “We have caught our first glimpse of a totally secularised world and it has filled us with terror. We are learning through bitter experience that the expulsion of God from our lives denatures man and leads first to barbarism and ultimately to bestiality. The Church waves her lamp and beckons us back, and horrified humanity is beginning to heed the call.”

This fear is in stark contrast to Nietzsche’s thoughts on the future (*The Gay Science*).

“In fact, we philosophers and ‘free spirits’ feel ourselves irradiated as by a new dawn by the report that the ‘old God is dead’; our hearts overflow with gratitude, astonishment, presentiment and expectation. At last the horizon seems open once more, granting even that it is not bright; our ships can at last put out to sea in face of every danger; every hazard is again permitted to the discernor; the sea, our sea, again lies open before us; perhaps never before did such an ‘open sea’ exist.”

The American commentator Virginia Postrel, in her book *The Future and its Enemies: The Growing Conflict over Creativity, Enterprise, and Progress*, takes on these contrasting themes, seeing the world as made up of those who are fearful of the future (both reactionaries and technocrats), and those who are excited by its prospects. In essence, Postrel identifies the essential feature of the environmentalists and anti-globalisation movements as a fear of the new, fear of technology and fear of change. She claims a dynamic society must be open to creativity, innovation and risk-taking but willingly admits that a libertarian society will not have a perfect moral character and cannot hope to avoid human folly. This, naturally, is what the church rails against in its critique of secular modernism, that without a meta-

physical moral order, without “purpose”, our society is condemned to decadence. But the demand for a moral element, an ideology, is what characterises the pessimistic view of the socialist fringe, S11 (the environment activist group) and Greenpeace in their attacks on free markets and globalisation. It is also implicit in many post-modernist critiques of a patriarchal, racist, capitalist culture.

For the church, a primary piece of evidence cited for those who support the need of a metaphysical framework is the evilness of human conduct of the last century. It came at a time when humanity believed that it could rise and take charge of human affairs and abolish suffering, corruption and injustice by creating a more just society. John Paul II refers to last century as the “century of tears”. Tragic as it was, there is no help or explanation or lesson to be learned by invoking a metaphysical notion of evil. Robert Manne (when editor of *Quadrant*) and (Australian Catholic philosopher) Raymond Gaita, referred to the Holocaust as an evil of such “mystery that nothing on earth can penetrate it except supernatural grace”. While some apparently see in these commentaries the spirit of the archetypal secular enlightenment, they nevertheless invoke a metaphysical notion of morality that does not help to explain the nature of the Holocaust. Indeed, it is a pre-modern, fatalistic surrender.

There is much one can discuss about the horrors of the past century but it has been quite sensibly suggested that they can be explained more as a symptom of numerical and industrial scale than as anything fundamentally different from what has always marked human life. It should be noted that the total numbers of those killed in the two world wars, as a proportion of the populations involved, was far less (by a factor of five or 10) than the attrition rate of adult males in any nomadic groups involved in inter-tribal warfare over most of human history. Genocide, mass killings and totalitarian tendencies have always been the staple of human activity in pre-modern times.

To put the gentlest interpretation on it, moral turpi-

tude and human wickedness are universal. So one must ask in what way does the presence or absence of a metaphysical moral code have any bearing on things. It is almost trite to draw attention to the paradox that the worst human behaviour and evil have most often been committed in the name of God. The September 11 attack on the United States is the most recent example, as is the continual irruption of conflict between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. The atrocities during the height of the Christian era, the Middle Ages saw the Crusaders, on their way through Asia Minor slicing up the adults and roasting infants on spits. Earlier, Psalm 137 observed, "Happy shall he be who takes and dashes your little ones against the rock".

Michael Casey, personal assistant to Cardinal George Pell, in his book, *Meaninglessness: The Solutions of Nietzsche, Freud and Rorty* (Lexington Books, 2001) charts the collapse of the metaphysical world from a Catholic perspective, and asks what the world would be like if we no longer needed meaning. He quotes Dostoevski, that there is a need for God "to tell us the difference between a murder and a kiss". However, it is hard to imagine that, in the practicalities of day-to-day living, absolute values were relevant to conduct.

What seems to be unarguable is that the materially prosperous and secular West has achieved social and political arrangements that have never existed in human history and has done so in a pretty comprehensive way. We have democracy, the rule of law, a separation of powers and a relative absence of corruption. We have freedom from slavery, poverty and starvation, universal education, an underlying acceptance of a merit-driven, open society which challenges notions of caste and class. Human life is valued more comprehensively as a universal ideal than at any other time in history. Our culture preaches tolerance and we practise in a daily and most routine way the edict "do unto others" and "love thy neighbour". Most striking of all, we manage to tolerate and live side by side with almost every conceivable creed and religious group in existence. This is some remarkable achievement and some remarkable

success for the liberal project. However, many of the elements of the Christian church and the post-modernists and the left not only despise modernity and its successes, they spend their time making tendentious economic analyses to show how iniquitous it is. John Gray, professor of European Thought at the London School of Economics and author of *False Dawn: the delusions of global capitalism* (Granta) dismisses Western modernity as an era of delusion, a short period between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the assault on the World Trade Centre. He sees the fall of the wall as "the triumph of western values", an opportunity "to launch yet another vast utopian project a global free market".

He explains: "What is striking is how closely the market liberal philosophy that underpins globalisation resembles Marxism. Both are essentially secular religions, in which the eschatological hopes and fantasies of Christianity are given an Enlightenment twist. In both, history is understood as the progress of the species, powered by growing knowledge and wealth, and culminating in a universal civilisation."

Gray confounds the two historically distinct branches of the Enlightenment, what David Gress, in *From Plato to Nato*, calls the sceptical and the revolutionary Enlightenment. Gray could not be more in error. He believes that modernism claims that, "History's crimes and tragedies are not thought to have their roots in human nature: they are errors, mistakes that can be corrected by more education, better political institutions, higher living standards." He explicitly equates Marxists with market liberals. But Gress points out that, unlike the revolutionary (French) Enlightenment, sceptical Enlightenment takes human nature as a given, and just concerns itself with improving the material conditions of man. Jean Francois Revel, the author of *La Grande Parade* (Plon 2000), makes the point more emphatically.

"Another misunderstanding concerning liberalism rests on the belief that it would be, like socialism, an ideology. Nothing could be more false, for liberalism never had the ambition of constructing a perfect society. It [liberalism] rests on the idea of comparing

societies and trying to find out why some work better than others. Like capitalism and unlike socialism and communism, liberalism has the capacity to reform itself and correct its faults. It is based on experience. It is not an aberration, nor is it a utopia. Because one never evaluates a utopia.”

Both the left and the church seem not to understand this. To suggest, as some in the church do that, because there is sex slavery in Europe (coming from the fallen and poverty-stricken former Eastern bloc countries like Albania), or “slavery” of articulated clerks in city law firms, or “unacceptable” poverty within our society, or immorally high levels of taxation, or extremely poor quality in most of our education, or corruption in our police services, this is evidence of the failure of the market economy and the liberal project, is not only to misunderstand the nature of liberalism, but is to treat the unspeakable suffering and inequality of almost all past generations in history and those today who live in the pre-modern third world with utter contempt. Nietzsche is indeed prophetic. “The Christian resolution to find the world ugly and bad, has made the world ugly and bad.”

In a now much overlooked but prescient essay published as the Rede Lecture in 1959, CP Snow, “The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution”, makes the distinction between material progress and moralising clear.

“Most of our fellow human beings, for instance, are underfed and die before their time. In the crudest terms, that is the social condition. There is a moral trap which comes through the insight into man’s loneliness: it tempts one to sit back, complacent in one’s unique tragedy, and let the others go without a meal . . . As a group, the scientists fall into that trap less than others. . . . If the scientists have the future in their bones, then the traditional culture responds by wishing the future did not exist. It is the traditional culture, to an extent remarkably little diminished by the emergence of the scientific one, which manages the Western world . . . It can be said simply, and it is this. If we forget the scientific culture, then the

rest of Western intellectuals have never tried, wanted, or been able to understand the industrial revolution, much less accept it. Intellectuals, in particular literary intellectuals, are natural Luddites. . . For, of course, one truth is straightforward. Industrialisation is the only hope of the poor.”

While it is clear that things are continually improving in the material sphere, it is very difficult to see, in the grand scheme of things, how man is getting worse in the ethical sphere. Most especially in the West, the measured and sober desire to defend itself against the present threat from terrorism, has the value of human life uppermost in its retaliatory strategy. A Taliban spokesman recently made an observation to the effect that the West values the living, but that they value the dead. The lack of value one places on human life on earth when religion propagates a belief in paradise complete with 70 dark-eyed virgins is stark. The Christian record is not much better in that regard although its concept of paradise is definitely inferior where one cannot help feeling that some are more interested in salvation than in the best way to alleviate suffering and poverty. Mother Teresa is a salient recent example.

It remains to be proved that a society that has no convincing metaphysical moral system to rely upon is no less well equipped to create an ethical society than one that does; evidence suggests the chances are better. It was John Paul II’s recent biographer, George Weigel, who admitted that moral values were inscribed genetically or somehow innately imprinted on the human brain, curiously implying that a metaphysically derived morality must somehow be superfluous. Surely, human life will always be treated seriously, if not only for the very obvious reason that we are all human.

It is hard not to feel that pre-modernist thinking is a worryingly perverse form of atavism, particularly when it includes attacks on modern science and Enlightenment values, and displays non-negotiable fundamentalist attitudes. The contemporary Christian church is not exempt. Post-modernists, and the left generally, display a very similar form of atavism



dressed up in trendy post-modern clothes, displaying similarly stubborn forms of non-negotiable fundamentalist attitudes, impervious to empirical evidence. To reject modernism and material progress does not, on the evidence, seem to be a realistic option. On the question of metaphysics, Nietzsche is perhaps unnecessarily glib in declaring that God has gone missing, “that he must have taken a sea voyage”. But to not face a world that provides no evidence or utility for a metaphysical reality, which indeed impedes rational decision-making (a mark of secular liberal progress) could mean a return to an infernal new barbarism and primitivism that does not bear thinking about. We simply have no choice.

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