

# Morality without Ethics

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Ethics is a concern of philosophers, educators and preachers. They make ethical statements — when they speak of the ways people behave towards each other and towards themselves. They would not say, though, that any description of that behaviour deserves to be counted among ethical statements. To merely say what people do to each other and to themselves does not yet mean speaking ethics: it means at the utmost making statements that belong to sociology or ethnography of moral behaviour. If not only the common conduct, but also its common *evaluation* is covered by the description (that is, the information whether people in question approve of or condemn certain actions), the statements belong to ‘ethnoethics’ — which tells us about the views of right and wrong held by the people described, but not necessarily shared by those who describe them, and certainly not deemed acceptable merely for the fact of being held by those described; ‘ethnoethics’ tells us what certain people (‘ethnos’) *believe* to be right or wrong, without telling us whether those beliefs themselves are right or wrong. Philosophers, educators and preachers will insist that to make an ethical statement it is not enough to say that some people believe something to be right or good or just. If philosophers, educators and preachers make ethics their concern, this is precisely for the fact that none of them would entrust judgement of right and wrong to the people themselves or recognize, without further scrutiny, the authority of their beliefs on that matter.

Ethics is something more than a mere description of what people do; more even than a description of what they believe they ought to be doing in order to be decent, just, good — or, more generally, ‘in the right’. Properly ethical statements are such as do not depend for their truthfulness on what people are actually doing or even on what they believe they ought to be doing. If what the ethical statements

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## 2 *Theory, Culture & Society*

say and what people do or believe are at odds with each other, this is assumed to mean, without need of further proof, that it is the people who err. Only ethics can say what *really* ought to be done so that the good be served. Ideally, ethics is a code of law that prescribes the correct behaviour ‘universally’ — that is, for all people at all times; one that sets apart good from evil once for all and everybody. This is precisely why the spelling out of ethical prescriptions needs to be a job of special people like philosophers, educators, preachers. This is also what casts these special people, the ethical experts, in a position of authority over the ordinary people who just go on doing things while applying rules of thumb they cling to (often without so much as being able to tell clearly what these rules are like). The authority of ethical experts is legislative and juridical at the same time. They pronounce the law, and they judge whether the prescriptions have been followed faithfully and correctly. They claim to be able to do it because of their access to knowledge not available to the ordinary people — speaking to the spirits of the ancestors, studying the holy scriptures, unravelling the dictates of Reason.

The derogatory view of the ‘ethical competence’ of the ordinary people immersed in their ordinary circumstances, and the authority bestowed in advance on what the experts say, may say or would wish to say on the subject, presumes that properly ethical judgements are not ‘founded’ as long as the only evidence which may be called on their behalf is the fact that ‘people do this sort of thing’. True foundations must be stronger and less volatile than the erratic people’s habits and their notoriously unsound and mercurial opinions. What is more, they need to be placed at a safe distance from the hurly-burly of daily life, so that the ordinary people won’t see them from where they conduct their ordinary business, and won’t be able to pretend that they know them unless told, taught or trained by the experts. People’s ethical impotence and the experts’ ethical authority explain and warrant each other: and the postulate of a ‘properly founded’ ethics supports them both.

Let us note that it is not exactly the people’s need for guidance and reassurance that sent the ethical expert to work. Most of the people, most of the time (and that includes the ethical experts themselves whenever they take a break from their professional pursuits and occupy themselves with their mundane daily tasks) can do very well without a code and without official stamps certifying its propriety. Indeed, they need the code and its authorizations so seldom that

they hardly ever have a chance to discover its absence — just as we do not notice the theft of household items we never use. Most of the people — most of us — follow, most of the time, the habitual and the routine; we behave today the way we behaved yesterday and people around us go on behaving the same, too. As long as no one and nothing stops us from doing ‘the usual’, we may go on like this without end. So it is rather the other way round: it is the ethical experts who cannot remain what they are — the experts bearing authority, in position to tell others what to do, to reproach them for doing wrong and to force them to do what is right — without imputing the need of rock-hard foundations and foolproof reassurance we allegedly miss; without insisting in theory, and better still demonstrating in practice, that without such foundations and the reassurances they found we ‘cannot go on’, or at least we cannot go on as we *should* — as truly decent, *moral* people should. Propositions, once stated repeatedly, with authority and with support of adequate resources, tend to come true — and the training aimed at making us ‘expert-dependent’ cannot but bring its fruit, so that we start seeking keenly and of our own accord the reliable guidance of ‘people in the know’. Once we stop trusting our own judgement, we grow susceptible to the fear of being in the wrong; we call what we dread sin, guilt or shame, but whatever name we use we feel the need of the helpful hand of the expert to fetch us back into the comfort of certainty. It is out of such a fear that the dependency on expertise grows. But once the dependency has germinated and taken root, the need of ethical expertise becomes ‘self-evident’ and, above all, self-reproducing.

Thus the need for the ethical experts depends little, if at all, on whether the experts can or cannot deliver on their promise (just as we need medical experts whatever the effectiveness of the services they offer). It depends solely on the condition in which one cannot do without seeking such delivery. If anything, the need grows bigger as the goods delivered are not fully up to the expectations and thus do not satisfy the need it was hoped they would quell.

### **Society, Operation Cover-Up**

‘Human beings’, noted Cornelius Castoriadis in 1982, ‘cannot accept Chaos and accept it as Chaos, they cannot stand up straight and confront the Abyss.’ That they cannot do that cannot be ‘explained’, ‘given sense’ — represented as the effect of something else, of a cause; it is itself the source and the cause of all sense-making bustle

#### 4 *Theory, Culture & Society*

and all explanatory effort, itself being senseless and inexplicable. Human beings exist in the never ending, since never fully successful, effort to escape from Chaos: society, its institutions and their routines, its images and their compositions, its structures and their managerial principles, are all faces of that forever inconclusive and relentless escape. Society, we might say, is a massive and continuous cover-up operation. And yet the best the escape attempt ever succeeds in coming up with is a thin film of order, continuously pierced, torn apart and folded up by the Chaos over which it stretches: that Chaos 'is constantly invading alleged immanence – the given, the familiar, the apparently domesticated'. And the invasion is, like the 'immanence' itself, a daily, familiar, though never completely domesticated event: it manifests itself 'through the emergence of the irreducibly new, of radical alterity', and 'through destruction, annihilation, death' (Castoriadis, 1993).

We may say though that the cover-up operation called 'Society' is on the whole effective enough for the 'Chaos', the 'Abyss', the 'groundlessness', of which Castoriadis speaks, to appear to us humans, not as the primal scene from which we busy ourselves to run away and hide, but dressed up as the break in 'the given', an interruption, a crevice in the otherwise solid rock of normality, a hole in the smoothly flowing routine of being. It bursts into our lives as signal of defeat and notice of bankruptcy, as the reminder of the laughable arrogance of ambition and the flimsiness of efforts that follow it. Chaos is all the more terrifying for the promises brandished by the routine of the given. Society is an escape from fear; it is also the breeding ground of that fear, and on that fear it feeds and from it the grip in which it holds us draws its powers.

Birth and death, the entry of the new and the exit of the familiar, are two gaping holes in the pretence of order which no effort did or ever will plug. The being locked in the brief/narrow time/space between the entry and the exit, and daily reminded of the stubborn contingency *and* ineluctability of both limits as it travels between the limits of its own, cannot stretch the meanings it spins far enough to cover the *before* and the *beyond*. From that unsupervised and uncontrolled *elsewhere*, from that *otherwise than being*, comes the novelty and the unexpected; and in it all that is usual and homely ultimately sinks. Meaning is an island in the sea of meaninglessness, but a wobbly and drifting island, unanchored to the sea-bottom – if that sea has a bottom, that is. Without an anchor of its own, the self-grown island of meaningfulness needs a support from the

outside: a foundation is needed where the anchor is absent. Says Nietzsche (1911: 286–7):

Natural death is independent of all reason and is really an irrational death, in which the pitiable substance of the shell determines how long the kernel is to exist or not; in which, accordingly, the stunted, diseased and dull-witted jailer is lord, and indicates the moment at which his distinguished prisoner shall die. Natural death is suicide of nature — in other words, the annihilation of the most rational being through the most irrational element that is attached thereto. Only through religious illumination can the reverse appear; for then, as is equitable, the higher reason (God) issues its orders, which the lower reason has to obey.

Inscrutable reason of God covers for the non-reasonability of Chaos; now the principle that makes the short/narrow time/space of being liveable extends beyond the limits which make it unendurable and pacifies the beyond. Reason monitors the armistice between the logical and the absurd, the pretensions of order and its brevity/narrowness. The Chaos is baptized with a name that denies its groundlessness, and Being is excused from the need to account for itself, for its purpose and meaning. Human order is never forced to admit that it has nothing but itself to explain either its presence or its limitations; society remains secure where it rules, as long as it signs over the management of what it does not rule. It can even, for a time, keep secret its own signature on the act of renunciation, and mask its own impotence as the omnipotence of God, its own incomprehension as God's omniscience, its own mortality as God's eternity, its own insularity as God's omnipresence.

There is nothing contingent about the link between society and religion. It would be futile to go on accounting for that link by a chain of historical accidents and choices. Religion and society are one; society without religion is incomplete and doomed, unable to stand in any court. The warrant of all meanings is itself meaningless, the endorser of all purposes but itself purposeless, and unable to suppress the evidence of that incongruence, society would lose the case the moment it were called as the defendant, charged with the authorship and responsibility for its deeds.

If one cannot confront the Abyss, the best thing is to chase it out of sight. This is exactly what society/religion achieves. Society needs God, preferably a personal God, God like you and me, only infinitely more resourceful — seeing clearly order and meaning and plan where you and me can only see or suspect the denial of sense and purpose. A non-personal God, like Reason or the Laws of

## 6 Theory, Culture & Society

History, is a second-best solution: a distant second, to be sure. 'Invisible Hand' or the 'Cunning of Reason' or 'Historical Inevitability' all share with a personal God the crucial attributes of inscrutability and unaccountability — but what they leave aside unattended and unsupervised are those stubborn qualities of Being which made God necessary in the first place: first of all, the brevity/narrowness of existence, mortality, death — 'the annihilation of the most rational being by the most irrational of elements'. Where they deputize, death becomes an offence, a challenge, and an aperture through which the Absurd seeps into life; an unlockable window in the cosy yet cramped house of sensible existence opened on to the infinite expanses of non-sense. Once it 'cannot be made sense of', mortality must be belied, subjected to a cultural secrets act or deconstructed (Bauman, 1992) — and this proves to be an excruciatingly difficult task.

Without God, 'not confronting the Abyss' is not easy. What one is then staring in the face is the brute fact that, as Arthur Schopenhauer (1966: 579) noticed a long time ago — from within still exuberant and self-confident modernity — 'existence is merely accidental':

if anyone ventures to raise the question why there is not nothing at all rather than this world, then the world cannot be justified from itself; no ground, no final cause of its existence can be found in itself; it cannot be demonstrated that it exists for its own sake, in other words, for its own advantage.

What is, then, the answer to the question?

Death is the result, the *résumé*, of life, or the total sum expressing at one stroke all the instruction given by life in detail and piecemeal, namely that the whole striving, the phenomenon of which is life, was a vain, fruitless, and self-contradictory effort, to have returned from which is a deliverance. (Schopenhauer, 1966: 637)<sup>1</sup>

At the time, Schopenhauer's voice was a cry in the wilderness; or, rather, the site from which voices of that sort could be heard was cast as wilderness by the civilization still confident that it could do the job God failed, or was no longer allowed, to perform. The nineteenth-century philosophy successfully marginalized and anathematized Schopenhauer-style insights. It started with the grandiose optimistic utopia of Hegel, it proceeded by the all-bounds-out-of-bounds confidence of positivism, it ended up with Nietzsche's

confinement to a mad-house. Throughout that dreaming century (perhaps best symbolized by Count Saint-Simon, who instructed his valet to wake him each morning with the words: 'Arise, your highness, great deeds are to be done') the hope was never allowed to be extinguished that not only what is to be done will be done but that it will also become clear and indisputable that what is being done is what must be done *und kann nicht anders* ('The modern times', says E.M Cioran [1987: 35] 'begin with two hysterics: Don Quixote and Luther').<sup>2</sup> What is peculiar about the views expressed in the above quotations from Castoriadis is not their novelty (Schopenhauer said it all, and with exemplary force), but that they are no longer marginal. What used to be the voice of dissent is fast becoming orthodoxy. What has been whispered in condemned slums is now shouted in city squares, what has been smuggled in at night is now traded in the open in brightly lit shopping malls. And this difference makes all the difference.

### **Facing the Unfaceable**

Now, at long last, we 'stand up straight and confront the Chaos'. We have never done it before. Confronting the Chaos would be offputting and upsetting enough. But the novelty of the act — the total absence of all precedents to go by, be reassured by, be guided by — makes the situation totally unnerving. The waters we leapt into are not just deep, but uncharted. We are not even at a crossroads: for crossroads to be crossroads, there must be roads first. Now we know that we *make* roads — the only roads there are and can be — by *walking* them.

Or, to say the same in the language of philosophers and educators (though not the preachers, whatever remained of that category): no foundations have been found or are likely to be found for being; and no efforts to lay such foundations have succeeded or are likely to succeed. There is neither cause nor reason for morality; the necessity to be moral, and the meaning of being moral, can neither be demonstrated nor logically deduced. And so morality is as contingent as the rest of being: it has no ethical foundations. We can no longer offer ethical guidance for the moral selves, no longer 'legislate' morality, or hope to gain such ability once we have applied ourselves more zealously, or more systematically, to the task. And since we have convinced ourselves and everyone willing to listen that the case of morality is safe only if set on solid ground built by forces stronger than those of the moral persons themselves — forces that

both precede and outlive the brief/narrow time/space of the moral selves — we find it exceedingly difficult, nay impossible, to comprehend why the self should be moral and how would we recognize it to be moral when (if) moral it is.

It is one thing to believe the ethical foundations to be *not-yet*-found or *as-yet*-unconstructed, and an altogether different thing not to believe in ethical foundations at all. Dostoevsky's blunt 'if there is no God, everything is permissible' shouted out the innermost fears of the modern builders of godless (or, perhaps, 'post-divine') order. 'There is no God' means: there is no force stronger than human will and more powerful than human resistance, capable of coercing human selves to be moral; and no authority more ennobled and trustworthy than humans' own cravings and premonitions, to assure them that deeds they feel to be decent, just and proper — moral — are indeed such, and to lead them away from error in case they go wrong. If there is no such force and authority, humans are abandoned to their own wits and will. And these, as the preachers kept hammering home, can give birth solely to sin and evil, and as philosophers explained to us so convincingly, cannot be relied upon to cause right behaviour or pass the right judgement. There can be no such thing as 'ethically unfounded morality'; and 'self-founding' morality is, blatantly and deplorably, ethically unfounded.

One thing we can be sure of: whatever morality there is in a society which has admitted its groundlessness, lack of purpose and the abyss separated from it by just a brittle gangplank of convention, is an *ethically unfounded morality*. As such, it is uncontrollable and unpredictable. It builds itself up, as it may dismantle itself and rebuild in a different fashion, in the course of *sociality* — people coming together and taking their leave, joining forces and falling apart, coming to agreement and falling out, patching up and tearing down the bonds and the loyalties and the solidarities that unite them. So much we know. The rest, however — the consequences of all that — is far from being clear.

Or perhaps the despair is unfounded, the ignorance exaggerated. One may say: the self-constitution of society is not new, only 'news': society existed through self-constitution from the beginning of time, *only we did not know about it* (or, rather, managed to turn our eyes away from that truth). But quite a lot hangs on that 'only'. In Castoriadis's terms: while always self-constituting, society used to be until now 'self-occultating' in addition. 'Self-occultation' consists in denying or disguising the fact of self-constitution, so that society



may confront the precipitate of its own self-creation as an outcome of a heteronomous command or the extraneous order of things. Presumably, a heteronomous command is easier to follow than one's own untested project; the consequences are less difficult to bear, sufferings do not make one suffer that deeply, pangs of conscience are muffled, the salt of responsibility is not rubbed into the wound of failure (every perpetrator of crime, brought to trial and pleading innocence by pointing his finger to those 'up there' who gave the command, knows the difference very well). The agony of 'disoccultation' derives first and foremost from coming face to face with responsibility which cannot be given up and for which there are no takers.

This agony is the plight of *autonomous society*, that is, to quote Castoriadis (1993) again, 'one that self-constitutes itself explicitly. This amounts to saying: it knows that the significations in and through which it lives and exists as society are its *oeuvre* and that they are neither necessary nor contingent'<sup>3</sup> — that is, let us add, are neither non-negotiable nor coming unannounced and from nowhere. To the autonomous society, significations (also the meanings of 'being moral') do not appear groundless, though they are blatantly devoid of 'foundations' in the sense implied by ethical philosophers; they are 'founded' all right, but their foundations are of the same stuff as the significations they found. They are, also, the sediments of the ongoing process of self-creation. Ethics and morality (if we insist on separating them still) grow of the same soil: moral selves do not 'discover' their ethical foundations, but (much like the contemporary work of art which must supply its own interpretative frame and standards by which it is to be judged) build them up while they build up themselves.

Now take this new-look world, and populate it with the all-too-familiar bugbear of the normatively un- or under-regulated, lonely, 'a-social' monster of a Hobbes or a Durkheim, and there will be every reason to fear for the future of humanity. Or, rather, there would be, if not for the fact deserving to be repeated once more (and many times yet), that it is not so much the way we live together that has changed, as our understanding of how we go on achieving this remarkable feat. And so we know that as much as the heteronomous ethical foundations of humane order, the scarecrow of the a-social ogre was a fiction of the self-occultating society (in fact, the two fictions needed each other, generated each other and corroborated each other in the way the self-fulfilling prophecies do). The task of

self-creation remains as excruciatingly difficult as it used to be, but there is no obvious reason for it to be *more* difficult than before. What has changed is that we know now just how difficult the task is and suspect that no easy escape from the difficulty can be found: no subterfuge or closing one's eyes will help.

One might as well go along with Max Horkheimer, who selected Schopenhauer as 'the teacher for our time' ('There are few ideas', wrote Horkheimer in 1961, 'that the world today needs more than Schopenhauer's — ideas which in the face of utter hopelessness, because they confront it, know more than any others of hope'). Schopenhauer's

doctrine of blind will as an eternal force removes from the world the treacherous gold foil which the old metaphysics had given it. In utter contrast to positivism, it enunciates the negative and preserves it in thought, thus exposing the motive for solidarity shared by men and all beings — their abandonment. No need is ever compensated in any beyond. The urge to mitigate it in *this* world springs from the inability to look at it in full awareness of this curse and to tolerate it when there is a chance to stop it. For such solidarity that stems from hopelessness, knowledge of the *principium individuationis* is secondary. . . . To stand up for the temporal against merciless eternity is morality in Schopenhauer's sense. (Horkheimer, 1974: 83, 82)

### **Weaving the Veil**

It was a most salient characteristic of the modern spirit that it never reconciled itself to that 'abandonment', nor for a moment admitted 'hopelessness'. In this respect, it was at one with the pre-modern, theologically inclined occultation. Modern 'disenchantment' was but partial: decrying and disavowing old strategies and jaded generals, yet extolling the potency of younger officers who took their place, the need for strategy and the promise that the right strategy would eventually be produced. Priests of science replaced the priests of God; the progress-guided society was to achieve what the pre-ordained society failed to do. Doubts as to the ultimate success were recast as the critique of imperfect past. Weaknesses and errors of yesterday would be undone under the new management — and the priests of the progressive movement differed from the priests of eternal God in their continuous self-renewing. Modern critique was incomplete unless leading to the 'positive' programme; only a 'positive' critique was acceptable; however fearful and shocking, critique had to lead to a happy end. Modern critique drew its energy and its legitimation from the unshaken belief that a 'solution'

can be found, that a 'positive' programme is certainly possible and most certainly imperative. In retrospect, the lauded modern disenchantment seems more like passing the baton in the relay race of magicians. Modern disenchantment came in a package-deal which contained a new, fully operative enchantment kit.

The magic formulae were now History and Reason: Reason of history, or History as the work of Reason, or History as the process of self-purification of Reason, of Reason coming through History into its own. In those formulae, Reason and History were Siamese twins, not to be cut apart. Reason came as history, as the perpetual not-yet, as the *elsewhere* of any place and the '*some other time*' of any moment: 'reason' was a curious noun always used in the future tense — and purpose-minded present was expected to surrender to reason as it drew its meaning from the purpose it was meant to achieve, from the *project* it served. Reason-about-to-rule lent meaning to the present, which was to partake in the time-binding, future-controlling effort. Modern narrative, in Jean-François Lyotard's (1988: 36, 47) words, sought its legitimation 'in a future it was to make to come, that is in an idea to be implemented'. The immortality of hope seemed to have been assured by the inextinguishable tension between the future, always not-yet-reached, and the present, forever bringing it closer: the tension between 'the particularity, the contingency, the opacity of the present, and universality, self-determination, transparency of the future it promised'.<sup>4</sup>

Modernity was an incessant effort to fix the goals: to bind the self-same future that lent the effort its meaning. It was an effort to make sure that in the end it will be proven that it has not been in vain; to force the legitimation *in advance* to confirm itself *ex post facto*. Unlike the old, pre-modern, theological rendition of the self-occultation, the modern version could take change and uncertainty and contingency in its stride: it wrapped in the cloud of meaning not just what *is and must be*, but also what *is about to vanish* and thus could not be made sense of if not for the event of the site being cleared by its disappearance. The sense modernity wove to cover up the groundlessness of being, also of modern being, was that of *creative destruction*.

'Given the spectacle of their teeming successes', says Cioran (1987: 48–9), 'the nations of the West had no trouble exalting history, attributing to it a meaning and a finality. It belonged to them, they were its agents: hence it must take a rational course. . . . Consequently they placed it under the patronage, by turns, of

Providence, of Reason, and of Progress.<sup>5</sup> The local law of the Western civilization that called itself 'Modernity' could be articulated as universal, *felt* like universal, thanks to the universality of the embrace in which the West squeezed the rest of the human globe: it was the globality of their domination that allowed the Europeans to project '*their* civilization, *their* history, *their* knowledge as civilization, history and knowledge *überhaupt*' (Klemm, 1993: 19). Perspectives from which perceptions are made are fixed by the power differential. The object of perception is as feeble and accidental as the power to change it, or move it out of the way, is overwhelming. From the pinnacle, the objects at the bottom of the hierarchy look minuscule. To the gun-wielding pioneers colonizing America, Australia or New Zealand the land must have seemed empty — a zero point of history, a site for the fresh start and a new beginning.

The specifically modern form of self-occultation was the perception of the world as a frontier; modernity is, first and foremost, a *frontier civilization*. It can survive only as long as some frontier is still left as a site for the promised, hoped for, beginning; or, rather, as long as the world allows itself to be perceived — and, above all, treated — as a frontier. 'The West', says Castoriadis (1991: 196–7), 'is a slave to the idea of absolute freedom', understood as 'pure arbitrariness (*Willkür*)', 'absolute void' yet to be filled with qualities. Whatever can be done, must be done. It is the *ability to act*, not the action itself, that counts in the first place — the content of action, the purpose of action, the consequences of action being secondary.

Modern existence is only ostensibly purpose-oriented. What truly matters is the self-confidence derived from 'having the means' — since it is the trust that one can go on trying (that no failure is definitive) which feeds the 'history is the progress of reason' type of self-occultation. Thus contrary to its self-awareness and/or self-aggrandizing propaganda, modern civilization is and always has been not *action*-oriented, but *ability-to-act*-oriented. That ability, though, was the joint product of the tools one can muster and the resistance of the raw material (that is, the readiness of the stuff to be treated as raw material): of the power differential, in short. It is reasonable to suppose that the flattening out of the power differential between the West and the rest was among the principal reasons of the history-, progress-, project-oriented version of self-occultation running out of steam; of the crisis of modernity; of the advent of postmodernity; of the growing willingness to admit that

not only is Being underpinned by Chaos and Absurdity rather than pre-ordained Order and Meaning, but it is going to stay that way for the duration, and nothing we can do will change it.

### **The Veil Pierced**

Modernity once deemed itself *universal*. It now thinks of itself instead as *global*. Behind the change of terms lies a watershed in the history of self-awareness and self-confidence. Universal was to be the rule of reason, the order of things which would replace slavery to passions with the autonomy of rational beings, superstition and ignorance with truth, tribulations of the drifting plankton with self-made and thoroughly monitored history-by-design. 'Globality', in contrast, means merely that everyone everywhere feeds on the Mac-Donald's burgers and watches the latest made-for-TV docudrama. Universality was a proud *project*, a herculean mission to perform. Globality, in contrast, is a meek acquiescence with what is happening 'out there'; an admission always tinged with capitulation even if sweetened with a 'if you can't beat them, join them' self-consoling zeal. Universality was a feather in philosophers' caps. Globality exiles philosophers, naked, back into the wilderness from which universality promised to emancipate them. In David E. Klemm's (1993: 18–19) words:

[A] law is built into the competitive system of global economy, which ends up making the philosophical discourse quite irrelevant: maximise economic benefits. This law plays the role of norm for directing and constraining action, not by appealing to truth but by determining actual outcomes of life. The law itself selects the successful from the failures, along the lines of a kind of economic Darwinism. The appeal to truth cannot challenge the law . . .

In other words, it does not matter what philosophers say or do not say, however strongly they would wish the opposite to be the case, and however stubbornly they insist, from Hegel to Habermas, that history and modernity, and above all history progressing/maturing to its modern stage, is a philosophical problem — a task *waiting* (even if, as Habermas believes, it does not know or would not admit that) for philosophical adjudication. Chaos and contingency, which were to be chased away beyond the borders of societal islands of rational order, are back with a vengeance; they rule inside what was meant and hoped to be the safe house of Reason, managed by legislated law, not the law of nature — and when they rule, the sages are demoted from the high table of history-makers to the menial

jobs of court chroniclers. To add bafflement to humiliation, it is not at all clear that the high table itself has survived the shift from universality to globalization (or, rather, the unmasking of universality as globalization; or debasing the project of universality as the practice globalization). Society no longer pretends to be a shield against contingency; in the absence of powers strong and willful enough to seriously attempt the taming of the wild beast of spontaneity, society itself turns into the site of chaos — battlefield and/or grazing ground for the herds each pursuing its own route, though all in the same search of food and secure home. Chronology replaces history, 'development' takes the place of progress, contingency takes over from the logic of plan that was never to be. It is not the philosophers who failed to place the groundless and contingent being on secure foundations; it is rather that the building gear has been snatched from their hands, not in order to be given to others, less deserving and trustworthy, but to join the dreams of universal reason in the dustbin of dashed hopes and unkept promises.

The demotion of legislators would provoke political anger; the dismantling of legislative process breeds philosophical despair. It is not just that the hoped-for lasting marriage between truth and power ended up in divorce; much worse than that, the philosophers' truth ran short of eligible bachelors to be married to; there seems to be no escape from spinsterhood. Simply, there are no powers in sight eager to don the 'enlightened despot' mantle sewn by the philosophers for the truth's bridegroom, however desperately one may seek them or sniff them out in the tribal chiefs — today's rebels not yet unmasked as tomorrow's petty tyrants (for those who display the latter inclination, Cioran [1990: 18, 4, 74] has the following warning: 'a definition is always the cornerstone of a temple'; all 'fiery eyes presage slaughter'; 'the man who proposes a new faith is persecuted, until it is his turn to become a persecuter: truth begins by a conflict with the police and ends by calling them in'). The post-modernist (as distinct from postmodern) discourse of the philosophers in the grip of legislative nostalgia follows faithfully the agenda of all narratives of frustration. Predictably, it is the carriers of the news whose blaming is heaped with venom, while the news itself is strenuously rebutted or disdainfully dismissed.

In doing so, philosophers blame reality for not rising to the standard of guided rationality they set at the horizon of progressive history. In fact, what has happened is that the processes set afoot with the advent of modernity, misread as a progress towards

co-ordinated and/or guided (universal) rationality, gave birth to the multitude of unco-ordinated and self-guided (local, parochial) rationalities which turned into the principal obstacle to universal rational order. At the far end of the modern saga looms Ulrich Beck's 'risk society', which can hope, at best, that some local, and globally risky, initiatives will be undertaken in time to limit the harm left by yesterday's local, globally damaging, undertakings.

The 'sour grapes' feeling reverberates in the often voiced opinion that our present age is afflicted and enfeebled by the petering out of the ability of 'forward thinking', and in particular by the waning of utopias. One wonders, though, whether the diagnosis is correct; whether it is not the fading of a certain *kind* of utopia that is bewailed here, concealed in the overly generalized proposition. Postmodernity is modern enough to live by hope. It has lost little of modernity's boisterous optimism (though philosophers are unlikely to partake of it; too few crumbs they find under the festive table — not much room has been left for their skills and credentials in the specifically postmodern vision of 'new and improved' future). Postmodernity has its own utopias, though one may be excused for failing to recognize in them what one has been trained to seek and find in the kind of utopia that spurred and whipped modern impatience with the forever imperfect realities of the present.

Joe Bailey describes well the two mutually complementary post-modern utopias: that of the wondrous healing capacity of the free market, and that of the infinite capacity of the 'technological fix'. The first, neo-liberal utopia visualizes the paradise of the fully liberated, deregulated market competition which unflinching finds the shortest and cheapest way to riches and happiness. 'Basically society is seen as a *natural* order in which satisfactory social institutions arise unintentionally. Interference, conscious design via planning and "politicization" of social provision are all seen as dangerous disruptions of a spontaneous social order.' The second, the technological utopia, 'states that social, political and even moral problems of society are susceptible to a technical solution, that progress in all spheres is only guaranteed by technological change and that the society in which we now live is accelerating into new qualitative improvements through technological development'. Bailey (1988: 73, 75, 76) concludes: 'These are prominent, and, I would suggest, powerful new utopias which project an optimism into public discourse. More, they dominate and colonise optimism.'

Postmodern utopias are anarchistic — only seldom anarcho-syndicalistic. They envisage a world with rights without duties, and above all without rulers and *gens d'armes*, except such as are needed to guarantee a secure stroll on the promenade and prevent the shopping bags from being snatched. They put their trust in the wisdom of absent reason. They militate against design, plan, sacrifice in the name of future benefits, delay of gratification — all these rules of thumb of yore, deemed effective thanks to the assumption that the future can be controlled, bound, forced to conform to the likeness painted in advance, and hence what one does now matters for later — is 'pregnant with consequences'. Postmodern wisdom recognizes only one planning, of the type called 'family planning' (called so perversely and duplicitously, in truly *newspeak* style, as its essence consists precisely in preventing families from being created) — one preoccupied with the *prevention* of 'pregnancy', with the cleansing of acts from consequences as if the new axiom was the exact reversal of the old one: namely, that it is not so much the actors who bind the future, as the future which binds and constrains and oppresses the actors. The spontaneity of the world which postmodern utopias conjure up makes nonsense of all concern with the future except the concern with being free from concern with the future — and able to act accordingly.

The chaos and contingency which modernity spent two centuries to occlude from the business of life is not just back in the field of vision, but appears there (perhaps for the first time so blatantly, and for so many) naked, without cover or adornment, and without shame that would prompt it to seek clothing. Groundlessness is no longer the guilty, shameful secret of being for which society tried its best to repent and atone. It is hailed instead as the beauty and joy of being, as the sole ground of real freedom. Postmodernity means dismantling, splitting up and deregulating the agencies charged in the modern era with the task of pulling the humans, jointly and individually, to their ideal state — of rationality and perfection, of rational perfection and perfect rationality. Postmodern utopias want us to rejoice in that dismantling, to celebrate the surrender of (demanding, stretching, vexing) ideals as the final act of emancipation.

It is not at all clear how the cause of morality, goodness, justice can be seriously promoted in a world which has seemingly come to terms with its own groundlessness, does not seem to mind it anymore and is little perturbed by the absence of agencies charged with the



task of keeping the Chaos at bay. No wonder that ethical philosophy is losing its nerve, and prefers to stay inside the enchanted circle of learned commentaries on the ancient texts to their traditional, but now increasingly adventurous and unpopular, business of ethical legislation and adjudication. Having taken a good look at the current intellectual preoccupation on both the left and the right of the political spectre, Castoriadis found an 'appalling ideological regression among the *literati*'.

Defining and legislating is always, overtly or indirectly, a critique of the extant reality — and the present reluctance to do either coincides, not by chance, with almost total extinction of critical thought — indeed of the ability to imagine, let alone suggest, a type of society different from the one seemingly left today without a plausible and viable alternative. 'The present period is thus best defined as the general retreat into conformism', concludes Castoriadis (1992), with sadness and anger; but even he, demanding an injection of new life into the fast-wilting project of social and individual autonomy, ends up with an observation not so different from the opinion blamed (and with good reason) for the numbness and ideological impoverishment of the present-day *literati*: 'New political objectives and new human attitudes are required, of which, for the time being, there are but few signs.'<sup>6</sup>

### **The Veil Torn Up**

Even if it is responsible for the 'bad press' presently blighting and crippling all determined ethical commitment, the widespread and prospectless blindness to alternatives seems more a symptom than the cause of ethical weariness and caution. The reticence of ethical arbitration seems to stem from genuine uncertainty as to the merits of the 'chaosgate' operation in the specifically modern form in which it has been conducted heretofore. While certainly successful in establishing numerous local islands of order, that operation neither managed to keep chaos out of bounds (or out of mind, for that matter) nor did it secure the hoped-for 'ethical progress'. On reflection, the medicine looks no more, perhaps less, prepossessing than the ailment it was meant to heal. 'The general progress of mankind', both in the sense of effective control over the elemental, contingent and potentially disastrous, and in the sense of growing social and individual autonomy, simply failed to arrive — while the effort to bring it about bore quite a few poisonous fruits. The question any reflective mind must be haunted by is whether the effort could bring

other than poisonous fruits. Until there is a plausible answer to that question, it is not immediately obvious that 'ideological regression' is a matter of betrayal or cowardice rather than prudence and a sense of responsibility. As Jean-François Lyotard put it, 'after these two last centuries we have become more sensitive to the signs which imply an opposite [to progress] movement. Neither liberalism, economic or political, nor the diverse forms of Marxism emerged from those gory centuries without incurring a charge of crimes against humanity.'

Two doubts more than anything else sap the ethical confidence and self-righteousness of the West. The first is the suspicion, stubbornly refusing to be dispelled, that Auschwitz and the Gulag (much as the later, and quite recent, resurgence of the resentment of strangers, in its many forms ranging from ethnic cleansing through surreptitiously applauded assaults on foreigners and up to the publicly applauded 'new and improved' anti-immigration and nationality laws) were legitimate products, rather than aberrations, of the characteristically modern practice of 'ordering by decree'; that the other face of 'universalization' is divisiveness, oppression and a leap toward domination, while the allegedly 'universal' foundation all too often serves as the mask of intolerance to otherness and a licence for the smothering of the alterity of the Other; that, in other words, the price of the project of humanization is more inhumanity. The tentacles of this doubt reach deep — in fact to the very heart of the modern project. What is being questioned is whether the marriage between the growth of rational control and the growth of social and personal autonomy, the crux of modern strategy, was not ill-conceived from the start, and whether it can ever be consummated.

The second doubt is similarly fundamental; it concerns another essential assumption of the modern project: that modernity is an intrinsically universal civilization, indeed the first civilization in the long, tormented history of mankind which is fit for global application. The corollary of that belief was the self-portrayal of the modern part of the world as 'advanced' — as a sort of an avant-garde which blazes the trail for the rest of mankind to follow; ruthless eradication of 'pre-modern' ways of life at the most distant corners of the globe could be then seen as an overture to a truly global unity of equal partners, a sort of Kantian *civitas gentium*, guided by *jus cosmopoliticum* — a federation of free peoples pursuing the same values and sharing in the same ethical principles. All

these closely correlated creeds suffered ill the test of time. The signals are multiplying that, far from being endemically universal, modern civilization is eminently unsuitable for universal application; that the *necessary* condition of its buoyancy in some places is the devastation and impoverishment of other localities — and that it may well run out of steam once it runs short of localities on which to damp the waste of the order-building and chaos-conquering at home. To quote Lyotard (1988: 116, 118, 124) again:

humanity is divided into two parts. One confronts the challenge of complexity, the other confronts the ancient, terrible challenge of survival. This is perhaps the principal aspect of the failure of the modern project. . . .

It is not the absence of progress, but on the contrary the development — techno-scientific, artistic, economic, political — which made possible the total wars, totalitarianisms, the widening gap between the riches of the North and poverty of the South, unemployment and the 'new poor' . . .

Lyotard's (1988: 141) conclusion is blunt and damning: 'it has become impossible to legitimise development by the promise of the emancipation of humanity in its totality'. Yet it was exactly that 'emancipation' — from want, 'low standard of life', paucity of needs, doing what the community has used to do rather than 'being able' to do whatever one may still wish in the future ('able' in excess of present wishes) — that loomed vaguely behind Harry Truman's 1947 declaration of war on 'underdevelopment'. Since then, unspeakable sufferings have been visited upon the 'earth economies' of the world in the name of happiness, identified now with the 'developed', that is modern, way of life. Their delicately balanced livelihood which could not survive the condemnation of simplicity, frugality, acceptance of human limits and respect for non-human forms of life, lies now in ruin, yet no viable alternative is anywhere in sight. The victims of 'development' — that true Giddensian *juggernaut* which crashes everything and everybody that happens to stand in its way — 'shunned by the advanced sector and cut off from the old ways . . . are expatriates in their own countries' (Sachs, 1992).<sup>7</sup> Wherever the juggernaut has passed, know-how vanishes replaced by the dearth of skills, commodified *labour* appears where *men and women* once lived, tradition becomes an awkward ballast and a costly burden, commons turn into resources, wisdom into prejudice, wise men into bearers of superstitions. Not that the juggernaut moves of its own accord, aided and abetted by the crowds of its future victims eager to be crushed; it is pushed from behind,

surreptitiously yet relentlessly, by uncounted multitudes of experts, engineers, contractors, merchants of seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, tools and motors, scientists of research institutes and native as well as cosmopolitan politicians in search of prestige and glory. Thus the juggernaut seems unstoppable, and the impression of unstoppable makes it yet more unstoppable. From development, 'naturalized' into something very close to a 'law of nature' by the modern part of the globe in its desperate search for the virgin blood of which it needs a constant supply in order to stay alive and fit, there seems to be no escape. But what in that 'development' is developing?

One may say that what is most conspicuously 'developing' under 'development' is the distance between what men and women make and what they appropriate and use to stay alive (however the 'staying alive' may translate under the circumstances). Most obviously, 'development' develops dependency of men and women on things and events they can neither produce and control nor see and understand. Other humans' deeds send long waves which, when they reach people's doorsteps, look strikingly like floods and other natural disasters — like them they come from nowhere, unannounced, and like them they make little of foresight, cunning and prudence. However sincerely the planners may believe that they are, or at least can be, in control, and however strongly they believe that they see order in the flow of things — for the victims (the 'objects' of development) the change opens up the floodgates through which chaos and contingency pour into their, once orderly, lives. They feel lost now where once they felt at home. For the planners a *disenchantment* — for them *enchantment*; a mind-boggling mystery now wrapping tightly the once homely, transparent and familiar world. Now they do not know how to go on; and they do not trust their feet — not steady enough to hold to the shifting and wobbly ground. They need props — guides, experts, instructors, givers of commands.

This is not, though, what is understood as 'development' in the economic and political narratives. There, development is measured by the volume of products consumed — by the scope of effective demand for goods and services. For all practical intents and purposes, development occurs when that scope increases. In a characteristically pleonasmic reasoning, this is represented as a progress in the satisfaction of needs (as Robert E. Lane [1993] of Yale University points out, for the orthodox economists 'satisfaction with something is revealed by the very fact that it was bought,

regardless of the joy or sorrow that something may bring or of alternative uses of a person's time and effort outside the market' — so that it goes without saying that people buy what they need and that they buy it *because* they need it); a reasoning which glosses over the vast problem of the offer preceding demand and commodities 'buying' their own prospective customers, of the wants being in the same way industrial products as the marketed goods deemed to satisfy them. The unspoken premise which makes the above equation credible — even 'evident' — is that happiness comes in the wake of the satisfaction of desires (a belief with strong commonsensical roots, in spite of being repeatedly discredited by a chain of eminent thinkers from Schopenhauer to Freud). The conclusion of the syllogism, based on one tautological and one false premise, is that development is necessary and desirable and ethically correct because it increases the volume of human happiness; and in another bout of circular reasoning, the conclusion is over and over again corroborated by the statistics of increased income and volume of trade in the 'developed' part of the world.

Surveying the available findings about the level of life-satisfaction as perceived and defined by those supposed to be satisfied, Robert Lane (1993) comes to a conclusion jarringly at odds with the orthodox economic wisdom:

Studies in advanced economies show, as one would expect, that for every thousand pounds increase in income there is, indeed, an increased sense of well-being — but only for the poorest fifth of the population. Beyond that, there is almost no increase in people's satisfaction with their lives as income levels increase. . . . [I]n the US and England there is only a trivial and erratic relationship. The rich are no happier than the middle classes and the upper middle class is no happier than the lower middle class. Beyond poverty and near-poverty levels of income, if money buys happiness, it buys very little and often it buys none at all.

Increased income adds happiness to life only among those who are in poverty; but as all statistics show it is precisely these people in poverty who may expect little income increase as the result of 'development'; if anything, their ranks grow, and their relative share in the old and new riches falls (and let us note first of all that it is the 'development' itself that re-casts frugal existence into 'material deprivation', thus producing, rather than resolving, the socio-psychological 'problem of poverty' in the form deployed in its self-legitimation). Those whose happiness may increase thanks to a

greater income have the least chance of expanding their gains, while those who do earn more (and spend more) fail to notice that their well-being improves . . .

And finally, there is the 'snake eating its tail' phenomenon, more visible by the day as the growth so buoyant during post-war reconstruction grinds to a halt and the magnanimity of yesteryear is fast translated from the language of ethics into that of economics and redefined as 'counter-productive'. One can expect the grand vision of the world-wide development making *everybody* modern and happy to sink without trace in the quicksands of local protectionisms, the universal scramble for a greater share of vagrant and restless capital — and national governments' efforts to steal other peoples' jobs and dump abroad home unemployment. On all accounts, little is left to galvanize faith in the old creed of emancipation-through-development and to keep alive the old hope that at the far end of the development saga an orderly, rationally designed and managed world awaits.

### **Morality Uncovered**

Modernity knew where it was going and was determined to get there. The modern mind knew where it wished to arrive and knew what it needed to do to find out how to get there. If modernity was obsessed with self-legislating and the modern mind was a legislative mind, it was not for greed or imperial appetites, but for arrogance and self-confidence. Global imperialism and unbound voraciousness were but the pragmatic reflections of the mind-boggling task of conjuring up an order where chaos ruled, and to do it by its own efforts, with no external help and no guarantee of success other than its own determination. That task called for cool heads and powerful hands. Much needed to be destroyed on the way, but that destruction was creative. Ruthlessness was needed to pursue and reach the goal, but the loftiness of the goal made mercy into a crime and unscrupulousness into humanitarianism. The shining prospect of health required medicine to be bitter, the dazzling project of universal freedom called for a close surveillance and strict rules, the radiant vision of the rule of reason forbade trusting the rational powers of those destined to bask in its benevolence.

One may say that the legislative obsession is the feature of all civilizations ('this was a world that had been civilised for centuries, had a thousand paths and roads', wrote Michael Ondaatje in *The English Patient*, meaning that one can recognize a civilization

by travellers following laid tracks and tracks being laid to be followed), but only modernity recognized itself as civilization, called itself that name and made a consciously embraced destiny out of its discovered fate (and only retrospectively construed of its others as inferior variants of itself, thus presenting its own particularity as a universal modality — much as the education-obsessed pedagogues of the Enlightenment appointed old wives and parish priests their predecessors in the history of the teaching profession). Modernity defined itself as *civilization* — that is, as an effort to tame the elements, to create a world that would not be like that if not for the work of creation, an artificial world, an art-work world, a world which like any work of art must seek and build and defend and protect its own foundations. Unlike other civilizations, modernity legislated itself into legislation — legislation as a vocation and duty and a matter of survival.

Law stood between order and chaos, human existence and animal free-for-all, habitable and uninhabitable world, meaning and meaninglessness. Law for everybody and for everything: also for everything anybody may do to anybody else. The incessant search for ethical principles was a part (an expectable part, an inexcusable part) of legislative frenzy. People had to be told of the *duty* to do good and of doing their duty as goodness. And people needed to be prevailed upon to follow that line of duty, which unless taught or goaded or coerced they would hardly do. Modernity was, and had to be, the *age of ethics* — and it would not be modernity otherwise. Just as the Law preceded all order, ethics preceded all morality. Morality was a *product* of ethics; ethical principles were its means of production; ethics was the technology of moral industry, good was its planned yield, evil its waste or sub-standard produce.

If ordering and creation were the battle-cries of modernity, deregulation and recycling are the catchwords of postmodernity. Meditations on the Nietzschean 'eternal return' fill the blank pages of the guidebooks from which the story of progress has been deleted. We are still going, but we no longer know where to; we cannot be sure whether we move in a straight line or run in a circle. 'Forward' and 'backward' have lost much of their meaning, unless they apply to short trips and confined spaces where the curvature of time-space can be for a moment forgotten. The new is but a recycling of the old, the old is awaiting resurrection and dusting-off to become new. (There is no mortality, not in the sense of once-and-for-allness, of no return, of irrevocability; there is just the

disappearing act, the temporary falling into oblivion — being forgotten, which means being put in cold storage to be reclaimed when need be. But without mortality there is no immortality either, not in the sense of forever, of permanence, of no ageing nor falling into obsolescence — only an instant immortality, immortality *for an instant*, as given to the vagaries of fate as mortality once was. And so there is little to earn, gain, win — nothing to spur one into the effort of mastering fate, conquering the blight, preserving the ephemerical, making the transitional durable. Mortality cannot become revocable without rendering immortality revocable as well.) History falls apart; once more, as before the dawn of modernity, it is more like a string of events, rather than a cumulative process. Things happen, instead of following and binding each other. Yet unlike in pre-modern times, there is no superior mind nor higher force to *make* them happen, to deputize for the absent bonds between them.

In the time-space of episodes and localities *phronesis*, practical know-how, takes over from objective truth; concern with the ability to move on replaces the worry about foundations; and rules of thumb put paid to universal principles. In that time-space, any but until-further-notice and within-these-limits legislation is vanity (and totalitarian nightmare). And so there is no room left for ethical legislation, except for the nostalgia-soaked hideaways of academia.

For everybody used to consider morality as the end-product of ethical industry (that is, for all of us habituated to think of morality in such a way), the end of the age of ethics (that is, the age of *legislating for morality*) announces the end of morality. With the production lines phased out, the supply of goods will surely dry up. After the world kept within bounds by God's commandment, and another administered by Reason, here comes a world of men and women left to their own shrewdness and cunning. Men and women let loose . . . loose men, loose women? Life, once more, nasty, brutish and short?

This is what the fear-mongering age of legislation prepared us to expect. The strategy of order-building inevitably spawns a no-alternative, a without-us-a-deluge policy. It is always *our* type of civilized life, or barbarism. A replacement for this order is total randomness, not another order. Out there is jungle, and jungle is frightening and *unlivable* because in the jungle *everything is allowed* to happen. But even the jungle has a law; even the chaos it epitomizes in the fear-mongering campaigns of self-glorification is



ruled by 'the law of the jungle'. True, each venture in order-building is self-centred and arrogant, intolerant of other exercises of that kind. But in the age of built-up orders and of order-building, the entity most difficult, nay impossible, to imagine was a world, however awful and horrifying, in which there was no 'order' — however spurious, contorted or perverse (just as it was difficult to imagine 'superstitions' without bad teachers or indiscipline without ringleaders of dissent). We are now confronting the unimaginable: not the questioning of one set of legislated principles in the name of another set — but the questioning of the very legislating of principles as such. A jungle deprived even of the jungle law, morality without ethics — this is not just the prospect of replacing one morality with another; not even of promoting a wrong kind of morality, based on false principles, or on not-universalizable, backwoods or backwater principles. This is the unthinkable prospect of society *without* morality.

Legislators cannot imagine an orderly world without legislation; the ethical legislator or preacher cannot imagine a moral world without a legislated ethics. In their terms, they are right. Little wonder that it takes such an enormous effort to envisage the vocabulary in which to conceive of, articulate and discuss the moral issues of the post-ethical, post-legislative human condition; even less wonder that such an effort meets with vehement intellectual resistance and all too often has powerful mental blocks to combat.

And yet it is solely because of the modern promotion of the 'no morality without ethical law' principle that the *world without ethics* seems to be necessarily — by the same token — *a world without morality*. Try to shake off the mental sediments of that promotion, delete the identity mark forced between morality and the ethically-legislated-morality — and it may well occur to you that with the demise of effective ethical legislation morality does not vanish, but on the contrary — comes into its own. It may well be that the power-assisted ethical law, far from being the solid frame which protected the wobbly flesh of moral standards from falling apart, was a cage that prevented those standards from stretching to their true size and passing the ultimate test of both ethics and morality: that of guiding and sustaining inter-human togetherness. It may well be that once that frame has fallen apart, the contents it was meant to embrace and contain will not dissipate, but on the contrary will gain their own solidity, having now nothing to rely on but their own inner strength. It may well be that with attention and authority no

longer diverted to the concerns with ethical legislation, men and women will be free — and obliged — to face point blank the reality of their own moral autonomy — and that means also of their own moral responsibility. It may well be that in the same way modernity went down in history as the *age of ethics*, the coming postmodern era is bound to be known as the *age of morality*.

### **Ethical Laws, Moral Standards**

Whatever passes as 'good' or 'bad', explained Friedrich Nietzsche, has something to do with hierarchy, superiority and inferiority, domination and rule. There is no 'natural', intrinsic relationship between certain conduct and goodness (for instance, 'there is no *a priori* necessity for associating the word *good* with altruistic deeds'); the link needs to be decreed first to be seen. And those who have the power to decree and make the decree hold do:

the judgment *good* does not originate with those to whom the good has been done. Rather it was the 'good' themselves, that is to say the noble, mighty, highly placed, and high minded who decreed themselves and their actions to be good, i.e., belonging to the highest rank, in contradistinction to all that was base, low-minded and plebeian. It was only the *pathos of distance* that authorised them to create values and name them . . .

The basic concept is always *noble* in the hierarchical, class sense, and from this has developed, by historical necessity, the concept *good* embracing nobility of mind, spiritual distinction. The development is strictly parallel to that other which eventually converted the notions *common*, *plebeian*, *base* into the notion *bad*. (Nietzsche, 1956: 160, 162)

At the beginning there was the aristocratic gesture of self-assertion and self-distancing; arrogance and contempt conceived the distinction between noble and common, which in turn gave birth to the good and evil. The beginning was, indeed, a *gesture*; perhaps an unthinking gesture, emanating from the exuberant powers of those who had the strength and the will to decree their own ways as worth preserving; and who felt no guilt for being what they are, and no need to apologize for it. Aristocratic values, says Nietzsche (1956: 171):

grow and act spontaneously, seeking out their contraries only in order to affirm themselves even more gratefully and delightedly. Here the negative concepts, *humble*, *base*, *bad*, are late, pallid counterparts of the positive, intense, and passionate credo, 'We noble, good, beautiful, happy ones'.<sup>8</sup>

As long as it remains such a happy, carefree, confident and contented gesture, aristocratic affirmation of itself as value knows of no rules. Rules are always external and seldom affirmative: they want those to whom they are addressed to change, to be different than they are. They stem from the twin assumptions that 'man *ought* to be thus and thus' (Nietzsche, 1968a)<sup>9</sup> and that at the moment he *is not*. But it is precisely the contentment with the things as they are, with being oneself, that pours life juices into the aristocratic idea of goodness. Such an idea has no need for rules; if anything, it celebrates the rule-less-ness, as *freedom* to do things (synonymous with the *power* to have things done). One may say, therefore, that Nietzsche's portrayal of the primeval (in his view 'natural', inborn, undistorted) aristocratic vision of good and bad is one of morality without ethics, spontaneity of goodness and goodness of spontaneity that resent and shake off all codification by rules.

But freedom of the noble is, let us observe, un-freedom of the common; spontaneity of the high and mighty reverberates as alien, uncontrolled fate of the low and powerless. No wonder that the counter-morality of the 'humble and base' appeals to rules: it cries for the rules, constraining rules, hand-binding rules — rules whose coercive might would make up for the impotence of the dominated. Nietzsche sniffs out in all rule-bound morality, in all ethics, a conspiracy of the slaves. It was, says Nietzsche, the rancour of resentful, jealous yet impotent slaves that challenged and in the end sapped the aristocratic equation between good, noble, powerful, beautiful, happy and favoured-of-the-gods and pushed through the contrary idea that 'only the poor, the powerless, are good; only the suffering, sick, and ugly, truly blessed'. It is just the weak, the ordinary, the untalented, the impotent, who invented rule-guided morality and go on using it as a battering ram against true morality of the noble.<sup>10</sup>

Nietzsche identifies all ethics — all rule-bound morality — with the lowly and the downtrodden, since he conceives of their polar opposite, the aristocracy of will and spirit, as having no use for rules; Nietzsche's aristocracy asserts itself, it becomes itself — the nobility that it is — through disregard and disdainful rejection of the levelling up pressure of the 'norm'. It was, though, the aristocracy of fenced manors and walled castles that served Nietzsche as the prototype for his model of nobility: cut off from the *hoi polloi* in life and thought, infinitely remote and neither building nor needing to build bridges over the abyss that separated them, attending

to no communication from the common and the base, nor feeling the need to communicate anything to them. Such aristocracy was free to construe its opposite — a pure projection of disengaged, carefree thought, not the object of practical engagement — and do it perfunctorily and unthinkingly without fear of the consequences of error.

The modern elites which replaced it did not have such an advantage. From the start of the new era, they were entangled and locked in the twists of the master/slave dialectics, dependent on the pliability of the 'masses' for their own privilege and mindful of the need to reassert that privilege so that the masses could go on casting them as an elite of the masters. Like the aristocracy of old the modern elite were rulers, but unlike that aristocracy they had to be also teachers, guardians and wardens to found and sustain their rule. Their political and economic domination had to be endorsed by spiritual hegemony. Not for a fleeting moment could they forget the presence of the masses; errors of judgement could be costly, their consequences irreparable, lapse of vigilance suicidal. The modern elite could not afford the playfulness, the childlike, self-centred and lighthearted gaiety of the old elites. This was no longer a game — not an adventure of free-roaming errant knights, nor the troubadour's poetic fantasies. Domination was now a no-joking, deadly serious matter. It was a full-time job, calling for high skills and constant concentration.

It was the elites, the dominant, who now needed rules — strict rules, preferably unambiguous rules, enforceable rules, effective rules. They needed ethics — a code of rules for everyone and every life occasion; rules ubiquitous, reaching every nook and cranny of the dominated space, steering or arresting, as the case may require, every move of whoever inhabits that space. Nothing and nobody could be left alone, to itself, to chance. That much the dominant needed to secure, to perpetuate their domination — to bind and control the dark forces emanating from unruly and erratic masses, to 'tame the beast', to hold in check the *mobile vulgus*. They needed, though, a Law of a kind which would present the order of their domination — the order that is their domination and can be nothing else — not in terms of their own peculiarity, but in terms of universality of the principles which make the dominant dominant and the dominated dominated and oblige them to stay such. And so they needed an ethics well and truly grounded, universal or universalizable, and beckoning to the authority of Reason — that

wondrous faculty like no other, that pronounces on the matter only once and recognizes no right to appeal.

It is, on the contrary, the dominated who feel no need for the rules. The dominated would hardly feel the inclination to account for their lives in terms of universal and principally arguable 'oughts'. It was always the case that the rules, framed by the dominant as postulates of Reason, would resurface at their end of the line as brutal force and 'blind necessity'. The dominated felt more as if they were buffeted than swimming; pushed rather than moving freely; 'having to' rather than choosing. The question of whether there was a pattern in the series of the 'musts' and 'no avoidings' and the question of rationality or irrationality of that pattern is, from the perspective of the dominated, a purely academic matter, and the dominated are known not to be given to academic pastimes. Were the dominated to theorize the universe they live in taking their own life experience as the benchmark, they would not end up with an elegant code of ethical principles and moral injunctions, but with a tangled mesh of cross-purpose forces and no-questions-asked inevitabilities.

It could well be an illusion of their appointed and self-appointed spiritual guides, that in the modern era, which happened also to be the era of capitalism (and if not of capitalism, then of totalitarianism), 'the masses' chose, embraced and *followed* 'values', and thus their conduct could be explained by the fact of that choice. Such a view imputes to 'the masses' more freedom of manoeuvre than they ever had and could have. 'Ordinary' men and women with 'ordinary' measures of resources and power seldom faced in their life situations a genuine choice between values. As Joseph A. Schumpeter (1976: 129–30) observed long ago,

whether favourable or unfavourable, value judgments about capitalist performance are of little interest. For mankind is not free to choose. This is not only because the mass of people are not in a position to compare alternatives rationally and always accept what they are being told. There is a much deeper reason for it. Things economic and social move by their own momentum and the ensuing situations compel individuals and groups to behave in certain ways whatever they may wish to do — not indeed by destroying their freedom of choice but by shaping the choosing mentalities and by narrowing the list of possibilities from which to choose.

The collapse of ethical legislation, the event so horrifying for the philosophers, educators and preachers, may have well have passed

unnoticed for those many for whom life was all along the string of 'musts' rather than 'oughts', necessities rather than principles. Much like before, the many are more often pushed around than walking — and even if they walk, they aim where they expect the next push to goad them. As before, they are seldom given time to sit down and ruminate about principles; survival is the name of the game, and the survival in question is as a rule survival till the next sunset or the one after next. Things are taken as they come, and forgotten as they go. For those many, ethical principles did not vanish; they were never there in the first place. The philosophers' loss of nerve and the cacophony of sermons and allurements that replaced the philosophers' universal law makes little change. People do not get less moral than before; they are now 'immoral' only in such an ethical/philosophical sense which, if applied to their real life practice, would oblige us to describe them as 'immoral' also in the bygone era of high ethical hopes.

People sunk up to their ears in the daily struggle for survival were never able, nor felt a need, to codify their understanding of good and evil in the form of an ethical code. After all, principles are about the future — about how much that future should differ from the present. By their nature, principles fit well the 'disembedded', 'unencumbered', self-constructing, self-improving modern individual, who got the basic worries of staying fed, shod and sheltered until next morning off his chest and thus may dedicate his or her time to 'transcending' all that; principles may help to prevent the transcendence from running out of hand. Survival, on the contrary, is essentially conservative. Its horizon is drawn with yesterday's paints; to stay alive today means not losing whatever it was that secured livelihood yesterday — and not much more than that. Survival is about things not getting worse than before.

What follows is that whatever moral judgements might be made by people overwhelmed by the task of survival, tend to be negative, rather than positive: they would take the form of condemnation, not exhortation, proscription rather than prescription. As Barrington Moore Jr (1979) found out, the downtrodden throughout the ages were morally aroused by the experience of *injustice*, rather than any prospective model of justice with which they wished to replace the shape of quotidianity; and they experienced as unjust whatever was the *departure* from the oppression they faced daily and routinely, however severe and inhuman that 'habitualized' misery could be and how 'unjust' it could be proclaimed when sized up by some abstract

'objective' principles of decency. Moral indignation was prompted by driving the screw of oppression a notch or two further down, rather than by the disaffection with the daily level of oppression, which was unmasked, exposed and stood condemned by a forward-looking project of perfect justice. On that view of 'popular morality' leaning on benchmarks rather than principles, Axel Honneth (1992) commented that it implies the need to seek the structure of popular morality through manifest 'standards for moral condemnation':

the social ethics of the suppressed masses contains no ideas of a total moral order or projections of a just society abstracted from particular situations, but is instead a highly sensitive sensorium for injuries to intuitively recognized moral claims. . . . [T]he inner morality of the consciousness of social injustice can be grasped only indirectly on the basis of standards posed by the moral disapproval of social events and processes.

If one is to trust the seminal discovery of Barrington Moore, popular morality at no time resembled the code of universal principles at which true ethics, according to modern philosophy, ought to aim. It does not mean that 'the masses' were strangers to moral sentiments and moral sensitivity and had to be taught morality or forced to be moral. It only means that whatever morality they might have had was by and large neither enhanced nor diminished by the experts' efforts to install the heteronomous principles of the good/evil distinction.

Hence, let us repeat, the crisis of ethics does not necessarily augur a crisis of morality; even less obviously does the end of the 'era of ethics' herald the end of morality. A convincing case could be constructed on behalf of the opposite supposition: that the end of the 'ethical era' ushers in the 'era of morality' — and that postmodernity could be viewed as such an era. Not in the sense of being 'more moral' than the principles-seeking and universality-promoting modernity; not in the sense of simplifying moral choices or making moral dilemmas less haunting; not even in the sense of making the life of morality easier, facing the odds less awesome and resilient than before. One may say that postmodernity is an 'era of morality' in one sense only: thanks to the 'disocclusion' — the dispersal of ethical clouds which tightly wrapped and obscured the reality of moral self — it is possible now, nay inevitable, to face the moral issues point blank, in all their naked truth, as they emerge from the life experience of men and women, and confront moral selves in all their irreparable and irredeemable ambivalence.

Paradoxically, it is only now that actions appear to the moral selves as matters of responsible choice — of, ultimately, moral conscience and responsibility. On the one hand, inside the polyphony of diverse, often dissenting, voices and conflicting, shifting loyalties which mark the 'deregulated', fragmented postmodern condition, it is no longer credible that the divide between good and bad has been predetermined leaving to the acting individual alone the task of learning and applying an unambiguous ethical principle suitable for the occasion. On the other, the blatant contingency of being, the episodicity of life occasions and the instability of each and every aspect of social existence result in the fast-changing standards of 'normalcy' which once — when solid and persistent — offered the benchmark against which injustice, the violation of the 'normal' and 'habitual', could be measured, thereby confirming in a round-about way the stable and 'objective' standards of popular morality. Both sources of heteronomy of moral behaviour seem to be drying up. The denizens of the postmodern era are, so to speak, forced to stand face to face with their moral autonomy, and so also their moral responsibility. This is the cause of moral agony. This is also the chance the moral selves never confronted before.

## Notes

This article is part of *Life in Fragments* (Blackwell, forthcoming).

1. Hegel served Schopenhauer as the epitome of all attempts to belie the ultimate vanity — groundlessness — of being; the author of the most elaborate, standard-setting attempt to enthrone Reason in the controlling seat vacated by God was dismissed by Schopenhauer (1974: 96) as 'a commonplace, inane, loathsome, repulsive, ignorant charlatan, who with unparalleled effrontery compiled a system of crazy nonsense'.

2. At that era, says Cioran (1987: 55, 63) 'even her [Europe's] doubts were merely convictions *disguised*'. Much unlike in the present one: 'The ancient historian who remarked of Rome that she could no longer endure either her vices nor their remedies did not so much define his own epoch as anticipate ours.'

3. Castoriadis (1993) hails the advent of autonomy as the chance of humanity. What it comes to replace is, after all, the jarring inhumanity of all assumptions of heteronomy: 'the true Revelation is the one from which we have benefited, our society is the sole true society or is society par excellence, the other ones do not truly exist, are lesser, are in limbo, are in expectation of being — of evangelization'.

4. In contrast, says Lyotard (1988: 39) 'postmodernity is the end of the people-king of histories'.

5. If 'a definition is always the cornerstone of a temple', 'the god in whose name one no longer kills is dead indeed' (Cioran, 1990: 18, 172). When a civilization stops defining, erecting temples, killing in the name of a god, and reverts to defensive battles — when 'Life becomes its sole obsession' instead of being a means of realizing the values the civilization had committed itself to serve — the era of decline is entered



(1990: 111). It happens when the sense of fatality dawns; nothing can be done to improve the world as a whole, 'no more collective crusades, no more citizens, but wan and disabused individuals' who 'abandon themselves now to a frenzy of small claims' (Cioran, 1987: 49). The fruit cannot be made juicier; there is no certainty that juice will be flowing tomorrow; let everybody do their best to squeeze the fruit to the last drop. Such a sense of fatality, complete with its 'everyone for himself' consequences, descends upon civilizations to which, one may say, history 'belongs' no more.

6. In Castoriadis's (1992) view as long as the alternative attitudes do not show, 'it would be absurd to try to decide if we are living through a long parenthesis, or if we are witnessing the beginning of the end of Western history as a history essentially linked with the project of autonomy and codetermined by it'. This intellectual indecision is, however, precisely what makes many a commentator condemned by Castoriadis so reticent of commitment. One can comment that legislating for reality without reality stretching itself towards what is being legislated for it would not necessarily augur well for the 'project of autonomy' and might not usher in a kind of alternative society Castoriadis has in mind.

7. See also particularly the entries by Gustavo Esteva, Vandana Shiva, Majid Rahnema, Gerald Berthaud and Ivan Illich in this remarkable, passionate yet closely argued book (Sachs, 1992). See also the perceptive discussion of the book (Schwarz, 1992).

8. The happy-go-lucky spontaneity of aristocratic self-confirmation makes even the contempt for the common, its other and less prepossessing face, benign and but half-serious:

There is in all contempt too much casualness and nonchalance, too much blinking of facts and impatience, and too much inborn gaiety for it ever to make of its object a downright caricature and monster. . . . They did not have to construct their happiness factitiously by looking at their enemies, as all rancorous men are wont to do (Nietzsche, 1956: 171-2).

9.

[E]ven when the moralist merely turns to the individual and says to him: 'You ought to be thus and thus' he does not cease to make himself ridiculous. The individual is, in his future and in his past, a piece of fate, one law more, one necessity more for everything that is and everything that will be (Nietzsche, 1968a: 46)

10. Nietzsche's is not an impartial analysis of ethical history, of course. His purpose is partisan, guided by the commitment to the salvage from the ruin of what he considers to be the original, pristine, aristocratic self-assertion that loftily dismisses all critique of itself as vulgar and dastardly expression of *ressentiment*. To the readers of *Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche (1968b: 114-15) had the following advice to give: 'One must be superior to mankind in force, in *loftiness* of soul — in contempt . . .'. And the following summary of his own positive morality: 'What is good? — All that heightens the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself in man. What is bad? — All that proceeds from weakness. What is happiness? — The feeling that power *increases* — that a resistance is overcome'.

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