

CONSUMER MATERIALISM AND CHRISTIAN HOPE.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (1988)

In modern literature, the graphic arts, cinema and theatre, a predominantly gloomy picture of man is the fashion. What is sublime and noble is suspect from the start; it has to be yanked off its pedestal and seen for what it is. Morality is only hypocrisy, happiness no more than self-deception. Suspicion is the authentically moral stance; unmasking deception is its greatest achievement. Criticising society is a duty; indeed the dangers which threaten us cannot be shown with sufficient cruelty and violence. It is true that this disposition towards the negative is not without limits. There is also a duty at the same time to optimism which cannot be offended without paying the price. Should anyone, for example, venture the opinion that not everything in the spiritual development of modernity may be correct, that in some essential areas it may be necessary to return and reflect upon the common wisdom of the great cultures, obviously he has chosen the wrong kind of criticism. For he finds himself confronted all at once by a determined defence of the fundamental judgements of modernity, namely that the basic line of historical development is progress and thus the good lies in the future, nowhere else; and not all the delight in negativity may seriously call this into question.

The particular discord within modern social criticism clearly becomes manifest in the radically contradictory responses with which prevailing opinion reacted to the two events which were perceived last year as being the starkest moral challenges to our society. The first was the misfortune of Chernobyl. Those who would be considered enlightened could not describe the danger of these events in terms drastic enough. They had to see a colossal menace looming over all living things and only the complete abandonment of atomic energy could be the right answer to it. The other event was the rapid advance of the new viral disease, AIDS. There is no doubt that many more people will become sick and die from AIDS than have already died in the wake of Chernobyl, and that the danger posed by this new scourge of mankind stands nearer the door of each individual than does the peril presented by nuclear power plants. Nonetheless, whoever dares to say that mankind ought to refrain from that inordinate sexual licence which gives AIDS its effective power is put on the sidelines as a hopeless obscurantist because of his public attitude. Such an idea can only be deplored and passed over in silence by the enlightened of today. From all of this, it is apparent that there are today permissible and forbidden types of social criticism. The permissible kind, however, goes no further than to the threshold of society's fundamental judgements which may not be put into question.

The moral problems of our time - an attempt at diagnosis

The topic which I have chosen certainly requires the kind of reflection which will not be intimidated by such a taboo. To be sure, it would be an incorrect turn-around to view our society, and its moral situation all told, in shades of darkest grey alone. We should not allow ourselves to be influenced by the superficial duty to optimism imposed by certain trends. But even less should we succumb to the temptation to ignore the positive elements in the make-up of our time. Naturally, it cannot be our purpose here to give an exhaustive account of the moral figure cast by our age. Our reflection intends to locate that which is supportive and healing, that basic guideline by which one can live through the present and thus unlock the door to the

future. We are inquiring about the characteristic elements of our time so we can learn what hinders access to the right way and what helps it. And so, I am not speaking in this first part of my analysis about defects or virtues, which there have always been and probably always will be. We are dealing rather with the characteristic signs of our time. On the negative side, two elements catch our eye, elements which do not belong to other epochs in the same way: terrorism and drugs. In a positive vein, there is a strong moral consciousness exerting its influence, a consciousness which focuses essentially upon values in the social sphere: freedom for the downtrodden, solidarity with the poor and the disadvantaged, peace and reconciliation.

The problem of drugs

Let us try to consider these phenomena with a closer look. I remember an argument which I had with several friends in Ernst Bloch's home. The discussion had come by chance to the problem of drugs which then - the late 1960s - was first beginning to make its appearance. Someone asked how it could be that this temptation should suddenly crop up and why, for example, it apparently did not arise in the Middle Ages. Everybody was agreed that it would not be sufficient to answer that the areas of cultivation then were just too far removed. Phenomena like the appearance of drug abuse are not to be explained by such superficial circumstances. They originate from deeper needs or wants upon which depends the further problem of providing for them too. And so I ventured the thesis that there was obviously not that spiritual emptiness then which one seeks to fill with drugs; or, in other words, the thirst of the heart, of the inner man, found an answer then which made drugs unnecessary. I still remember the shocked indignation with which Mrs Bloch reacted to this suggested solution. From the vision of history which dialectical materialism had given, it was next to sacrilege for her to think that bygone ages might have been superior to our own in matters of more than little consequence. In the Middle Ages, which were a time of oppression and religious prejudices, it was impossible that the deprived masses lived happier lives of interior harmony than in our time which has already advanced some distance along the road of liberation. The whole logic of 'liberation' would thus collapse. How then is the process to be explained? The question remained without an answer that evening.

Considering that I do not subscribe to the worldview of materialism, I maintain that my thesis from that time on has been ever more vindicated. But it does have to be concretised. In this regard, the thought of Ernst Bloch could ever offer a helpful start. For Bloch, the world of fact is evil. The hope principle means that man energetically opposes facts. He recognises himself as obliged to overcome the evil world of facts in order to create a better world. I would say that drug abuse is a form of protest against facts. The one who resorts to drugs refuses to come to terms with the world of facts. He looks for a better world. Drugs are the result of despairing of a world which is experienced as a prison built of facts in which man cannot long endure. Naturally many other things enter here as well: the search for adventure, going along with the crowd, what others do, the enterprise of pushers and so on. But the heart of it still is the revolt against a reality perceived as a prison. The grand 'trip' which people look for in drugs is a perversion of mysticism, the warping of the human desire for immortality, the 'no' to the impossibility of overcoming the immanent, and the attempt to enfold the limits of one's own being in the eternal. The patient and humble adventure of asceticism, which, step by step, climbs nearer to the God who is coming down to meet man, finds itself replaced by the power of magic - that is, the magic key of drugs - the moral and religious path is set aside for that of technology. Drugs are the pseudomysticism of a world which no longer believes but which

cannot for all that shake off the yearning of the soul for paradise. Drugs are therefore a warning signal with deep reverberations: they not only reveal the vacuum in our society which its instruments cannot remedy; they point to an interior longing in man which breaks out in perverted form if it does not find its true satisfaction.

Terrorism as a moral problem

The point of departure for terrorism is closely related to that of drugs. Here too we find initially a protest against the world as it is and the demand for a better one. Terrorism is in its roots a kind of 'moralism', to be sure a misdirected moralism which turns into a cruel parody of the true aims and methods of the moral person. It is no accident that terrorism has had its beginnings in the universities and among young people drawing fresh, heightened inspiration from religious thought, here again, in the context of modern theology. Terrorism was, in the first instance, a religious enthusiasm diverted to earthly concerns, a messianic expectation translated into political fanaticism. Belief in the hereafter had been shattered or in any case had become irrelevant. The yardstick of other-worldly hope, however, was not given up. It was applied instead to the present world. God was no longer looked upon as one really acting in history; but, as in the past and indeed from the beginning, the fulfilment of his promises was still sought after. 'God has no other arms than our own' - that meant that now the redemption of these promises can and must be taken care of by ourselves. Loathing for the spiritual and emotional emptiness in our society, longing for the wholly-other, the claim to an unconditional salvation without limits or restrictions - this is the religious component, in a manner of speaking, within the phenomenon of terrorism. It is this religious component which gave terrorism the momentum of a passion which goes to any length, which gave it its uncompromising stance and its pretence to the idealistic. All this becomes quite dangerous based as it is upon the decisive worldliness of its messianic hope: the unconditional is required from what is contingent, the eternal from what is finite. This internal contradiction points out the real tragedy of the phenomenon in which the sublime vocation of human beings is transformed into an instrument of the great deception, the 'big lie'.

The lie within the promise of terrorism, however, was hidden from its average participant because of the alliance between religious expectation and the spirit of the modern intellectual. This consists first of all in the halting of all traditional norms of morality before the tribunal of positivist reason, getting to the bottom of them and proving them to be unfounded. Morality does not lie in present existence but in the future. Man has to fashion himself. The only moral value there is lies in the future of society when we will get everything we do not have now. Morality in the present consists in working for the sake of this future society. The new standard of morality says, then: whatever serves the bringing about of this new society is moral. And what serves it can be determined by the scientific methods of political strategy, psychology, and sociology. The 'moral' becomes the 'scientific': morality no longer has a 'phantom' goal - heaven - but a realisable phenomenon, the new age. In this way the moral and the religious have become realistic and 'scientific'. What more does one want? Is it any wonder that sincerely idealistic young people have felt themselves challenged by such promises?

Only from this closer perspective can one see the devil's foot upon the whole business and hear the sneer of Mephistopheles: 'The future creates what is moral'. By this standard even murder can be 'moral'; on the way to humanity even the inhuman has to serve. This is basically

the same logic which states that for 'really top-notch scientific results' even embryos may sometimes be sacrificed. And it is the same concept of freedom which lectures us that it ought to lie within the realm of woman's personal choice to destroy a child who stands in the way of her self-fulfilment. Thus, terrorism proceeds undiminished upon somewhat more sublime battlefields today with the full blessing of science and the enlightened spirit. True, the brutal terrorism of those who would change society has been condemned in western countries: it has too greatly threatened the habits of life in these societies and the immorality of its morality has become all too conspicuous. But a real prevention of its root causes has not yet taken place. One can even look at it in such a way as to remain untroubled by its outbreak in the faraway lands of the third world which lie at a safe remove from us. And still, as before, it is practically immoral not to recommend the typical slogans for the third world, even if one might not gladly see them applied in one's own circumstances. Partisanship for militant liberationist ideologies appears as a kind of moral compromise in the sense that one allows things to go well for oneself and would like to see nothing essential changed. The practice of terrorism, thank goodness, has been extensively reduced in Europe once more. Its spiritual foundations, however, have not been overturned, and, as long as this is so, it can erupt anew at any time.

The new turning towards morality and religion

And so the question comes to be framed in a positive way: what is the true converse to those spiritual foundations which we have outlined so briefly? Where exactly does the defect lie? Before we get to the bottom of this question, however, we have to complete our stock-taking of present day society. We said that there were two outstanding negative phenomena, the advancement of drug abuse and the threat of terrorism, and that there was, on the other hand, a positive phenomenon as well, an intense, new desire for moral values like freedom, justice, and peace. Can an answer to the menace of our age possibly come forth from this? First of all, we have to determine whether these values, out of all those on the horizon, are largely identical with the values which the champions of the movements of violence have proclaimed and hail as their goals. Abuse, of course, does not discredit the value as such. What is new among numbers of young people today is that these goals are now projected upon the plane of concrete political and social action, and thus they are stripped of their irrational and violent character. Ideologies have been cast aside and so one can directly recognise what is good once more. In point of fact, this may be welcomed as an element of hope: God's profound message can be smothered and distorted in man. Nonetheless, it is constantly bursting forth anew, working a way out for itself. Also pertinent in this context is the fact that a new yearning for recollection, for contemplation, for the truly sacred, indeed for contact with God, is becoming evident.

To this extent energies have been coming forth which permit us to have hope. But just as the source has to be tapped so that its waters do not simply ooze away, so the impulses of purification and order are required so that these energies come to have their true effect. The new religious aspiration can easily be deflected into the esoteric. It can evaporate in sheer romanticism. There are two ever-present hurdles difficult for it to get over: it seems hard to take on the continuity of a permanent discipline, a straight way, which does not allow itself a detour from the primary road of the will and intellect for a quick gratification of one's feelings. Even harder than this appears the channelling of such desire into the communion of life of an 'institution' of faith, in which religion as faith has become the way and the form of a community. Where this double hurdle is not overcome, though, religion degenerates into a

pleasurable escape and exhibits no community and no moral power which obliges the individual. Reason and will quit its service; all that is left, then, is feeling, and that is too little.

These new moral impulses are likewise threatened in the same way. Their exposed flank is the widespread defect in the values of individualistic ethics. The vision is directed towards the large scale and the totality. Certainly, it should be recognised that the turning to fringe groups is often an expression of a personal willingness to help which discharges the desire to serve and be of assistance in wondrously worthy ways. On the whole, however, this is to be viewed rather as a weakness in one's personal and motivational make-up. It is easier to demonstrate for the rights and freedom of one's own group than to practise in everyday life the discipline of freedom and the patience of love for those who suffer, or to bind oneself for all of life to such service with the sacrifice of the greater part of one's individual freedoms. It is astonishing that the desire to serve has been visibly and decisively weakened in the Church too: religious communities, dedicated to the care of the sick and elderly, attract hardly any new vocations. The preference is to engage in more ambitious 'pastoral' ministries. But what is really more 'pastoral' than an unpretentious life lived in service to those who are suffering? For these kinds of service, though, there is an important professional credential required - without a deep moral and religious foundation, they get frozen into mere technical procedures and no longer perform what is crucial for the human being.

The weak side of the present moral starting point lies first of all in the feebleness of individual ethics' ability to motivate. Something deeper lies behind this: moral values have lost their evidence in a technological society and, as a result, any compelling claim they may have had as well. They are everyone's objectives for which one may be enthusiastic, even passionate. But it is not reasonable that they place an obligation on me, if the effect on me would be negative, if my own freedom and personal happiness are thereby threatened. These objectives therefore are generally ineffective and the public *élan* with which they are given prominence and steadfastly defended in various speeches is probably compensation for the failure to realise them in the concrete. And so we have come back once more to the question we posed as to where exactly the defect begins in that type of moralism which ends up in terrorism. Because this defect is also the real root to almost all the other problems of our time, its implications reach far beyond the areas haunted by terrorists.

Elements of a response

The essence of morality

Let us try to make our way gradually towards the facts of the case. I said that what is moral has lost its evidence. Only a small number of people in modern society will believe in the existence of commandments come from God; and still fewer are convinced that these commandments - if there are such - are handed down without error through the Church, through the religious community. The idea that another's will, the Creator's will, has a call upon us and that our being becomes as it should be through the harmony of our will with his will is a concept foreign to a great part of mankind. In any case, the function of having put the 'big bang' into operation remains odd for God. The idea of his being active in our midst or of man being under his will seems to most to be a naïvely anthropomorphic image of the divine by which man himself is over-rated. Now the concept of a personal relationship between God and Creator and each individual person is certainly not missing from the religious and moral history of humanity; but it is limited in its pure form to the realm of biblical religion. What was first of all common

to all of premodern mankind, however, lies really along the self-same line: the conviction that in man's being there lies an imperative, the conviction that man does not devise morality itself by calculating expediencies; rather he comes upon it in the being of things.

Long before the outbreak of terrorism and the invasion of drugs, the English author and philosopher, C S Lewis, called attention to the grievous danger of the abolition of man which lies in the collapse of the foundations of morality. He thus gave stress to humankind's justification upon which the continuance of man as man depends. Lewis shows the continuance of this justification with a glance at all the great civilisations. He refers not only to the moral heritage of the Greeks and its particular articulation by Plato, Aristotle and the Stoa. These intended to lead man to an awareness of reason in his being and from that to insist upon the cultivation of 'his kinship of being with reason'. Lewis also recalls the idea of the *Rta* in early Hinduism, which asserts the harmony of the cosmic order, the moral virtues and the temple rituals. He underscores in a special way the Chinese doctrine of the Tao: 'It is nature, it is the way, the road. It is the way in which the universe goes on. ... It is also the way in which every man should tread in imitation of that cosmic and supercosmic progression, conforming all activities to that great exemplar' (*The Abolition of Man*). Lewis refers as well to the law of Israel, which unites cosmos and history and intends above all to be the expression of the truth about man as much as the truth about the world.

An appreciation of the great civilisations discloses differences in detail, but starker by far than these differences is the great common strain which reveals itself as early evidence of the human business of living: the teaching of objective values which are manifest in the being of the world; the belief that there are attitudes which are true in accord with the message of the 'All', and therefore good, and that there are other attitudes as well which are contrary to being and thus are wrong for good and for all.

Modern mankind has been persuaded that human moral values are radically opposed one to another in the same way that religious are. In both cases the simple conclusion is drawn that all of these are human inventions whose absurdity we can finally detect and replace with reasonable knowledge. This diagnosis, though, is extremely superficial. It hooks on to a series of details which are set up in random fashion, one next to the other, and so it arrives at the banality of its superior insight. The reality is that the fundamental intuition concerning the moral character of being itself and the necessity for harmony between human existence and the message of nature is common to all the great civilisations; and thus the great moral imperatives are also a possession held in common. C S Lewis expressed this emphatically when he said:

This thing, which I have called for convenience the Tao, and which others may call natural law, or traditional morality, or the first principle of practical reason, or the first platitudes, is not one among a series of possible systems of value. It is the sole source of all value judgements. If it is rejected, all value is rejected. If any value is retained, it is retained. The effort to refute it and to raise a new system of value in its place is self-contradictory.

The creation of pseudo-science: the abolition of man

The problem of modernity, the moral problem of our time, consists in the fact that it has separated itself from this primeval testimony. In order truly to understand the process, we have to describe it in yet greater detail. It is characteristic of the scientific mind to create an abyss

between the world of feelings and the world of facts. Feelings are subjective, facts are objective. 'Facts', i.e. those things which can be determined outside of ourselves, are still and all just 'facts', bareboned details. To add to the atom over and above its mathematical determinations some further properties of, let us say, a moral or aesthetic nature is looked upon as imagination simply gone wild. This reduction of nature to demonstrable and thus pliable facts has consequences: no moral message outside of ourselves can reach us any more. The moral, just as much as the religious, belongs to the realm of the subjective; it has no place in the objective. If it is subjective, it is the composition of man. It does not precede us; we precede it and create it.

This movement of 'objectification', which 'gets to the bottom' of things and renders them manageable, recognises no limit to its being. A Comte had already put forth a principle for a kind of physics of human beings. Little by little the most difficult object of nature should become understandable to science, that is, be subjected to scientific knowledge - this most difficult object being man. Man will then be as well understood as matter already is.

Psychoanalysis and sociology are the fundamental tools for making good this postulate. One can now (so it appears) explain the mechanisms by which man came to the belief that nature might express a moral law. It is true: the completely transparent man is no longer a man at all. By the nature of such perception he can only be a mere detail; 'To "see through" all things is the same as not to see', Lewis noted. The theories of evolution crafted upon an all-embracing worldview seal the fate of this kind of vision and also try to compensate for it. Of course, as they say, there is no logic to anything or, more correctly, everything is the way it is because of the simple logic of facts.

One can even reconstruct now the purely mechanical course of the world's development in the perfect doctrine of evolution with its theories of chance and necessity. 'Evolution' makes the inference that imitation of its successes should be the new morality: the goal of evolution is survival and the perfection of the species. The optimal survival for the species 'man', then, would be the basic moral value; and the rules one makes accordingly to achieve this would be the only moral system. It is only apparent that this represents a return to eavesdropping upon the moral wisdom of nature. In reality, God's dominion is now meaningless, for evolution coming forth from itself is meaningless. It is the calculus of probabilities and power which are now in control. Morality has been eroded and man as human being has worn away with it. It is no longer prudent to ask why one should hold fast to this kind of survival.

Once more I would like to have C S Lewis put in a word. He saw this process already in 1943 and described it with keen accuracy. He discerns in it the old compact with the magician:

Give up our soul, get power in return. But once our souls, that is, our selves, have been given up the power thus conferred will not belong to us. ... It is in man's power to treat himself as a mere 'natural object'. ... The real objection is that if man chooses to treat himself as raw material, raw material he will be: not raw material to be manipulated, as he fondly imagined, by himself, but by mere appetite, that is, mere nature, in the person of his dehumanised conditioners.

Lewis raised this warning during the Second World War because he saw how, with the destruction of morality, the very capacity to defend his nation against the onslaught of

barbarism was imperilled. He was objective enough, though, to add the following: 'I am not here thinking solely, perhaps not even chiefly, of those who are our public enemies at the moment. The process which, if not checked, will abolish man, goes on apace among communists and democrats, no less than among fascists.' This seems to me to be a comment of great import: the opposing worldviews of today, have a common starting point in the rejection of the natural moral law and the reduction of the world to 'mere' acts. The measure with which they illogically hold on to the old values differs, but, at their core, they are threatened with the same peril.

The real falsehood in that worldview, for which drugs and terrorism are but the symptoms, consists in its reduction of the world to facts and in the narrowing of reason to quantitative perception. The essential in man is shoved off into the subjective and so into the unreal. The 'abolition of man' which follows from making absolute one method of coming to knowledge is the clear distortion of this worldview as well. We have man; and whoever feels compelled, on the basis of some theory he has, to pull him off into the realm of transparent, prefabricated devices, lives with a narrowed perception which what is essential hastens to oppose. If science aims for the most comprehensive knowledge in accord with reality possible, then to make absolute one method is the opposite of science. This means, in other words, that practical reason too, upon which true moral knowledge depends, is a real form of reason and not merely the expression of subjective feelings not worth knowing. We have to learn how to appreciate once again that the great moral insights of mankind are just as reasonable and true, indeed truer, than experimental findings in the realm of science and technology. They are truer because they touch more deeply upon the reality of being and they are more crucial for the existence of humanity.

The reason of morality and the reason of faith

Two conclusions emerge from this. The first is that the moral imperative is not man's imprisonment from which he must make his escape in order finally to be able to do as he wants. The moral imperative constitutes man's dignity and if he gets rid of it he does not become freer. Rather, he has stepped back into the world of mere devices, of things. If there is no longer an imperative to which he can and should respond in freedom, then actually there is no range for freedom any more. Moral knowledge is the true content of human dignity; but one does not come to this knowledge without at the same time experiencing it as an obligation upon one's freedom. Morality is not man's prison; it is rather the divine in him.

To illustrate the second conclusion, we have to recall once more the fundamental insight we came to previously: practical (or moral) reason is reason in its highest sense, for it delves deeper into the true mystery or reality than does experimental reason. This means, however, that Christian faith is not a limitation or a handicap for reason. Instead it liberates it at the very start for its own work. Practical reason also needs the guarantee of an experiment, but a greater kind of experiment than can be conducted in the laboratory. It requires the experiment of successful human existence which can come only with subsequent history itself. For this reason, practical reason was always ordered towards the grand enterprise of experiencing and testing the collective visions of ethics and religion. Just as science, on one hand, depends upon the brilliant breakthroughs of great individuals, so, on the other hand, the construction of a systematic ethic depends upon the particular vision of individuals who were given a glimpse of the whole. The grand ethical developments of Greece and of the Near and Far East, about

which we spoke a moment ago, have forfeited nothing in terms of the validity which lies at the heart of their assertions. We may look upon them now, however, as tributaries, which flow towards the grand river of Christianity and its explanation of reality.

Actually, the moral vision of Christian faith is not something particularly Christian; it is rather the synthesis of the great moral intuitions of humanity from a new centre which holds them all together. This concurrence of ethical wisdom is raised many times today as an argument against the binding force of the commandments delivered by God in the scriptures. One can see, so the argument goes, that the Bible does not really possess a moral wisdom, but that from time to time it adopted as its own the moral insights of the world around it. Therefore, the authority in morality would be just that which at some time in a particular age was recognised as reasonable. One has come already, then, to the cramming of morality into a simple calculus, that is, to the abolition of the moral in the real sense of the term.

It is just the opposite which is correct: the inner coherence of morality's fundamental direction, which has gradually been purified as it develops, is the best proof of its validity - the best proof, that it is discovered, not devised. Discovered - how? Here the realms of revelation and reason mesh closely with one another. These insights are discovered by some, as we said, through particular figures who made it possible to see more deeply. We call such seeing, which goes above and beyond one's own acquisition of knowledge, revelation.

What is seen in the ethical realm, however, is essentially that same moral message which lies in creation itself. For nature is not, as science in an ivory tower would have it, a kind of montage put together by chance and the laws of probability; rather, it is creation. In nature the creator Spirit expresses himself. For this reason, there are not only natural laws in the sense of physical functions; there is the actual law of nature which is a moral law. Creation itself teaches us how we can be human beings in the proper way. The Christian faith, which helps us to recognise creation as creation, is not a handicap for reason. It gives practical reason room for growth and development. The moral law which the Church teaches is not a special burden for Christians but man's defence against the attempt to reduce him to nothing. If morality - as we say - is not the enslavement but the liberation of man, then the Christian faith is the outpost of human freedom.

Man needs ethos in order to be himself. Ethos, however, requires belief in creation and immortality: that is, it requires the objectivity of the imperative and its ultimate redemption by responsibility and fulfilment. The impossibility of a human existence cut off from this is indirect proof for the truth of the Christian faith and its hope. This hope is a saving hope for human beings, even still today. The Christian may be happy in his faith; without the glad tidings of faith, mankind cannot endure in the long run. The joy of faith is its responsibility: we should lay hold of it with fresh courage in this moment of our history.