

Reflections on Ideological Sentimentalism

by

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A doctrine can be defined as sentimental not because it uses a symbolism of the feelings or because its language is more or less emotional, but because its point of departure is determined by a sentimental motive; indeed, it can happen that a doctrine founded on a particular aspect of reality does not try to avoid appeals to sentiment, whereas on the contrary, an illusory theory inspired by passion in its very axiom affects a rational or “icy” tone and develops an impeccable logic starting from its basic error; the “headless” character of this logic, however, will not escape the notice of those who know that logic has no validity except in virtue of the soundness — physical or metaphysical — of its foundation.

If we take the example of a doctrine in appearance completely intellectual and inaccessible to the emotions, namely Kantianism—it is the very model of theories seemingly divorced from all poetry—we shall have no difficulty in discovering that its starting point or “dogma” is reducible to a gratuitous reaction against all that lies beyond the reach of reason; it is therefore a priori an instinctive revolt against truths which are rationally ungraspable and which are considered inconvenient on account of this very inaccessibility; all the rest is nothing but dialectical scaffolding, ingenious or “brilliant” if one wishes, but contrary to truth. What is decisive in Kantianism is not its *pro domo* logic and its few very limited insights, but what is finally an “irrational” desire to limit intelligence; in the result is a dehumanization of the intelligence leaving the door open to all the inhuman aberrations of our century. In short, if to be man means the possibility of transcending oneself intellectually, Kantianism is the negation of all that is essentially and integrally human. Negations on this scale are always accompanied by a sort of moral fault which makes them less excusable than if it were merely a question of intellectual narrowness: the Kantists, failing to understand “dogmatic metaphysics,” do not

notice the enormous disproportion between the intellectual and human greatness of those they label as “metaphysical dogmatists” and the illusions which they attribute to them; yet even if allowance be made for such a lack of understanding, it seems that any honest man ought to be sensitive, if only indirectly, to the human level of these “dogmatists” — what is evidence in metaphysics becomes “dogma” for those who have not the slightest clue of what it means — and this is an extrinsic argument of no small matter.

Whereas the metaphysician intends to come back to the “first word” — the word of primordial Intellection — the modern philosopher on the contrary wishes to have the “last word”; thus Comte imagines that after two inferior stages — namely “theology” and “metaphysics” — finally comes the “positive” or “scientific” stage which gloriously reduces itself to the most outward and coarse experiences; it is the stage of the rise of industry which, in the eyes of the philosopher, marks the summit of progress and of civilization. Like the “criticism” of Kant, the “positivism” of Comte starts from a sentimental instinct which wants to destroy everything in order to renew everything in the sense of a desacralized and totally “humanist” and profane world.

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Indignation against abuses brings with it the rejection of the positive principles which these abuses falsify; when sentimental reaction is given a philosophical codification, it perverts and impoverishes imagination. Error knows how to work “backstage” in order to feel comfortable; the world becomes increasingly a system of stage-settings destined to limit and distort the imaginative faculty, imposing upon it an unshakable conviction that all this is “reality” and that there is no other; that all which is outside this system is but naive and culpable “romanticism.” In the nineteenth century, and to a certain extent even since the Renaissance, people have in actual fact tried to create a universe in which there would be only man; in our time man has lost the initiative and is now slipping into a universe — or pseudo-universe — wherein only the machine is “real”; under these conditions one can no longer speak even of “humanism.” In any case, man by attributing to himself his own self-sufficient reason, cannot remain what he is; if he no longer believes in that which transcends him and if he does not place his ideals above himself, he condemns himself to the subhuman.

It is difficult to deny, if one is still sensitive to true norms, that the machine tends to make man into its own counterpart; that it renders him violent, brutal, vulgar, quantitative, and stupid like itself, and that all modern “culture” is affected thereby. This is what partly explains the cult of “sincerity” and the mystique of “engagement”: one must be “sincere” because the machine is devoid of mystery and is as incapable of prudence as of generosity; one must be “engaged” because the machine possesses no value apart from its productions, or because it demands

ceaseless surveillance and even complete “self-surrender”¹ and thus devours mankind and what is human; one must refrain from complacency in literature and art because the machine does not so behave and because in the minds of its slaves and creatures its ugliness, noise, and implacability are mistaken for “reality.” Above all, one must not have a God, since the machine has none or even usurps this role itself.²

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In the same connection, it is impossible not to pause over the question of democratic and anti-theocratic ideology; this is a matter of crucial importance. A social theory, founded — as a reaction against particular abuses — on a desire for liberty, and imparting a disproportionate character to this claim in disregard of the real possibilities and interests of the individual, may develop without any dialectical inconsistency and thus give the impression of a perfect objectivity; the success of an ideology of this kind is explained by the fact that men who are unaware of the profound reasons of our terrestrial situations and for whom principles are merely “abstractions,” allow themselves to be convinced by the violent voicing of a partially legitimate cause, without asking themselves if the ideology that is added to it is true or false; because we are hungry, the inaccessible date palm is a thief, and always has been. The passionate impulse — even when reasoning “coldly” — takes no account of the fact that a partial truth becomes false when one takes it out of its total context and imparts to it, by isolating it artificially, a quasi-unconditional significance.

In reality, the outward liberty of creatures is relative or conditional and cannot be otherwise; what tradition seeks to realize — and does realize to the extent permitted in our world of approximations — is a kind of balance between individual terrestrial freedom and the chances of celestial salvation; if one believes in eternal life, then a liberty which is disproportionate in relation to particular individual potentialities, and consequently compromises particular chances of salvation, is clearly not more desirable than a privation of liberty which does not compromise them. It is from this angle that one should consider whatever in traditional civilizations—if it is not a question of abuses—offends in too absolute a manner the sensibility of individualists who

¹ If it be objected that the same was true of the crafts of old, we would reply that there is a notable difference, in that these occupations displayed a properly human and thus contemplative character, and on that account entailed neither the agitation nor the oppression characteristic of the machine age.

² We would stress that in speaking of “God” we have in mind, not a concept which would be contrary — or inasmuch as it would be contrary — to Buddhism, but the “nirvanic” Reality which underlies all traditional concepts of the Absolute. It is this Reality which in the Mahayana expresses itself by the universal *Dharmakaya*, or in other words, by the *Ādi-Buddha*. In Japanese terms, the same function attaches to *Amitabha* (*Amida*) or *Vairochana* (*Dainichi*), according to the respective schools.

believe in nothing, or whose belief has no bearing on their intelligence and imagination; we say “too absolute” since it is normal for “legitimate” or “inevitable” ills to offend the sensibility of just men; but it is abnormal and in any case illegitimate that men draw erroneous conclusions from their own sensitivity.

The experience of the deceptive “liberty” which is propounded as an end in itself or as “art for art’s sake” — as if one could be really free outside the truth and without inward liberty! — this experience, we say, is only in its beginning phase, although the world has already reaped some of its bitter fruits; for everything still human, normal, and stable in the world survives only through the vitality of ancestral traditions — of “prejudices” if one so prefers — whether it be a matter of the West, molded by Christianity, or of any Nilotic or Amazonian tribe. To have some idea of what the free man of “tomorrow” might be like, the man starting from zero and “creating himself”³ — but in reality the man of the machine which has escaped from his control — it suffices to take a glance at the very “existentialist” psychology of most youth. If the profound and “subconscious” imprints of tradition are removed from man, there remain finally only the stigmata of his fall and the unleashing of the infra-human.

Logically, democracy opposes tyranny, but in fact it leads to it; that is to say: since its reaction is sentimental, — otherwise it would be centripetal and would tend towards theocracy, the only guarantee of a realistic liberty — it is merely an extreme which, by its unrealistic negation of authority and competence, inevitably calls forth another extreme and a new authoritarian reaction, one which this time is authoritarian and tyrannical in its very principle. The democratic illusion appears above all in the following traits: in democracy, truth is what the majority believes; it is the majority which practically speaking “creates” the truth; democracy itself is true only insofar as—and as long as—the majority believes in it, and thus it carries within itself the germs of its suicide. Authority, which one is obliged to tolerate on pain of anarchy, lives at the mercy of the electors, hence the impossibility of being able to truly govern. The ideal of “liberty” makes a prisoner of the government, a prisoner constantly obliged to follow the interests of various pressure groups; the electoral campaigns themselves prove that the aspirants to authority must dupe the electors, and the means of this dupery are so vulgar and stupid and constitute such a degradation of the people that this alone should suffice to reduce the myth of modern democracy to naught. This does not necessarily mean that no form of democracy is possible; but then it is primarily a question of communities of limited size — especially nomadic ones — and also of an inwardly aristocratic and theocratic democracy, and not of a secular egalitarianism imposed upon large sedentary populations.

We may also stress the following: it can happen that a man is intelligent and competent, or that a minority is; but it cannot happen that the majority is intelligent and competent—or “more

³ And creating the truth at the same time, of course.

intelligent” or “more competent”; the adage *vox populi vox Dei* has no meaning except in a religious framework which confers a function of “medium” on the crowds; they then express themselves not by thought but by intuition and under the influence of Heaven, unless it is a matter which any sane-minded, God-fearing man would be competent to speak on, so that the feeling of the majority coincides in any case with what may be called “the good.” It is clear that a people as a collective vehicle of religion possesses a positive character — all religions testify to this — and is thus instinctively right in the face of pernicious and impious exceptions;⁴ and also, from a somewhat different point of view, its “fanaticism”---despite its abuses---represents a centripetal and regulating force. A people is what it is, both in good and evil; it has not the virtues of the “center,” but it may have those of the “totality,” on condition that the “center” determine it. Besides, the word “people” itself admits of two meanings: it denotes either the majority, as distinguished from the intellectual and aristocratic elite, or the total or integral collectivity, comprising the majority and the elite at one and the same time; in this latter sense, it is self-evident that the government — apart from its celestial origin — derives from the “people” itself and that the chivalric and sacerdotal elite are an expression of the popular genius.

Let us include here a word on “free thought,” or more exactly on the quasi-moral obligation currently placed upon all men to “think for themselves”; this demand is incompatible with human nature, for the normal and virtuous man, as a member of a social and traditional collectivity, is normally aware of the limits of his competence. One of two things is possible: either the man is exceptionally gifted on a given plane and therefore nothing can prevent him from thinking in an original way, which he will moreover do consonantly with tradition---in the traditional worlds which are the only ones that we have in mind here---precisely because his intelligence enables him to grasp the necessity of this consonance; or the man is of average or mediocre intelligence, either on some particular plane or in a general way, and then he will defer to the judgments of those more competent than himself, which in his case is the most intelligent thing he can do. The unfortunate habit of detaching the individual from the intellectual hierarchy, or in other words, of individualizing him intellectually, is a violation of his nature and amounts practically to the abolition of intelligence and also of the virtues, without which real understanding cannot be fully actualized. It only leads to anarchy and to the codification of the inability to think.

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A very “contemporary” variant of the ideological sentimentalism which we have in mind, one that is prevalent even among “believers,” is the demagogic obsession with purely “social”

⁴ It can also be mistaken when it is a question of phenomena lying outside of exoterism, even though there is an aspect of esoterism that is anchored in the people, notably in the handicrafts.

values. Formerly, when everybody was religious, poverty preserved the poor from hypocrisy, or from a certain kind of hypocrisy; in our time, poverty too often leads to unbelief and envy—in countries which have been industrialized or affected by the industrialist mentality—with the result that the poor are no better than the rich; the hypocrisy of one side is answered by the impiety of the other. It is profoundly unjust to prefer this new shortcoming of the poor to the habitual—and traditionally stigmatized—shortcoming of the rich and to excuse the impiety of the former because of their poverty without excusing the hypocrisy of the latter because of their riches; if the poor are victims of their state, the rich are equally so of theirs; if poverty confers the right to impiety, riches confers the right to a pastiche of piety. If the one side is to be pitied spiritually, the other is to be pitied and excused on the same grounds, all the more that the difference between them rests solely on completely exterior and easily reversible situations, and not on anything fundamental in the nature of man; the poor are to be preferred only when they are better than the rich through their spiritual sincerity, their patience and their secret heroism—such poor always exist, as also rich men who are detached from their riches—and not when they are worse by their unbelief, envy and hatred. The Christians persecuted by Nero suffered far more grievously than any underpaid workmen of today, without some theology thereby granting them the right to cease believing in God and to scorn His Law; tradition has never admitted this kind of economic blackmail addressed to God.

All told, three questions determine the human problem, in spite of humanitarian and progressivist sentimentalities: if all men were exempt from material cares, would the world be saved? Assuredly not; for evil resides above all in man himself, as experience proves.⁵ If all men set themselves to supplying the needs of others with regard to their physical well-being conceived apart from religion, would the world be saved? No, certainly not, since the very root of the problem would remain untouched. If all men thought of God, to the point of forgetting their own well-being, would the world be saved? Yes, certainly; “and all these things shall be added unto you,” says the Gospel, which is to say that the reform of man would ipso facto bring about a reform of the world, and even a beneficial reaction on the part of the whole cosmic environment.

Progressivism is the wish to eliminate effects without wishing to eliminate causes; it is the wish to abolish calamities without realizing that they are nothing other than what man is and that they necessarily result from his metaphysical ignorance or his lack of love of God. Account must also be taken of this: God cannot first “take an interest” in the well-being of creatures, since He wants their souls and their imperishable good and not the transitory things of the

⁵ In economically supersaturated countries, imbued with social idealism and “humanitarian” psychoanalysis, the moral problem is in no way solved; privileged youth shows itself capable of crime without having the excuse of poverty.

material world; if God also wants our earthly well-being it is not because He regards it as an end in itself, but because a certain happiness is the normal condition of man who, however, is essentially created with a view to eternal values; God takes interest in our well-being to the extent that we may profit from it in view of Him, and not otherwise; but outside this “interest” — if this word be permissible here in a provisional way — God “sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.” Together with bread, truth must be imparted, since “man shall not live by bread alone”; hunger together with truth is better than an easy life with error. Well-being is there to serve our ultimate ends as clay is there to make vessels.

Some people readily accuse of “selfishness” the contemplative preoccupied with his salvation, and maintain that instead of saving oneself one should save others; but this is firstly hypocritical and secondly absurd because, on the one hand, it is not from excess of virtue that those who argue thus refuse sanctification, and on the other hand, it is impossible to save others, since one can only know and will with one’s own knowledge and one’s own will; if it is possible to contribute to saving others, it is only by virtue of one’s own salvation. No man has ever been of service to anyone by remaining attached to his own faults out of “altruism”; whoever neglects his own salvation certainly will save no one else. To mask passions and spiritual indifference behind good works is a proof of hypocrisy.

The social interest can only be defined in terms of the truth; it is impossible to define truth in terms of the social.

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Too often one hears the reproach of “sentimentality” leveled at those who protest, not against some necessary evil, but against some baseness; this reproach, even if it accidentally coincides with the truth from a purely psychological point of view, is however completely unjustified when it intends to reduce intelligent reactions to their possible emotional concomitants. For: that the strong attack the weak is sometimes an unavoidable evil and even in certain respects an effect of a natural law,⁶ provided that the means used not violate the norms of nature as in mechanized wars, and provided that force not serve intrinsically false ideas, which would be yet another anomaly but that the strong should crush the weak by means of an interested hypocrisy with its accompanying baseness is neither natural nor inevitable, and it is gratuitous and even infamous to label as “sentimentalism” all opinion which condemns these methods; political “realism” may justify violence, but never villainies. But there is not only this

⁶ We are referring above all to tribal or feudal wars, or wars of expansion of the traditional civilizations. Some will object that there have always been machines and that a bow is nothing else, which is as false as to claim that a circle is a sphere or a drawing is a statue. Here there is a difference of dimensions whose causes are profound and not merely quantitative.

alternative; there are still facts which, without being in themselves either necessary evils or turpitudes properly speaking, are rather due to a distressing and senseless thoughtlessness, abuses brought about by prejudice, convenience, lack of imagination, and unconscious habit; such things are inevitable, not in the particular but on the whole, the collective man of the “dark age” being what he is. In this case, to be distressed by a particular happening does not necessarily imply a reprehensible sentimentality; what would be so is to be indignant against the very existence of such phenomena within an ancient civilization and to wish to destroy the latter for the sake of abolishing the happenings in question.

When we set out to compare Antiquity with our own times two extremes are noticeable: on the one hand we have the abstract and marmoreal hardness of the ancients, founded on the law of natural selection and on the aristocratic virtues of gods and heroes, and on the other hand we have the democratic excesses of our day, such as the reign of inferiors, the cult of mediocrity and vulgarity, the sentimentalist protection, not of the weak, but of weakness and defects,⁷ the psychological softness towards all forms of laxity and vice, immorality upheld in the name of “liberty” and “sincerity”, stupidity and idle chatter masquerading as “culture,” the scorn of wisdom and the neutralization of religion, and then the misdeeds of an atheistical science that leads to overpopulation, degeneration, and catastrophe. Now these aberrations allow us, if not to condone the faults of the ancients, at least to understand their fundamental outlook; it will then be realized that there are no grounds for unconditionally condemning this outlook in itself in the name of a so-called “moral progress” such as in reality only leads to the opposite excesses, to say the least.⁸ Like all dreams, that of egalitarianism presupposes a fragmentary world made up exclusively of honest people who think only of kneading their bread in peace without being molested either by wolves or by the gods; now the wolves are to be found within the “good people” themselves, and as for the gods, abettors of “fanaticism,” it suffices to put them aside for devils to come in and take their place.

Nothing could be more false than to claim that the Middle Ages were as good as our era is bad; the Middle Ages were bad because the abuses which distorted the traditional principles were carried to their uttermost in relation to the possibilities of the time; without these abuses the modern reaction — the Renaissance and the Reformation — could not have happened. But compared with our times the Middle Ages were nevertheless “better,” and even “good,” given the fact that they were still ruled by principles.

⁷ The protection of the weak has always been practiced, in one form or another, in civilizations which still remain healthy.

⁸ Collectivist dictatorships have sprung from democracy and repeat its prejudices in their own fashion in the sense that they intend to realize the so-called humanitarian ideals by Babylonian means.

At every turn we are told that we must “be contemporary” in our ideas, and that the fact of “looking back” or “holding on” amounts to treason in respect to the “categorical imperative” which is our own century; but no one has ever been able to give the least justification or plausibility to this grotesque demand. “There is no right superior to that of the truth,” say the Hindus; and if two and two make four, this certainly is not so in terms of some particular time or other. Everything which goes on in our time forms part of this time, including opposition to its tendencies; the copying of Antiquity formed part of the Renaissance outlook, and if in our time some people look towards the Middle Ages or the East, one is bound to register the fact as also belonging to the period in which we live. It is the nature of things finally which determines what our time is and is not; it is certainly not for men to decide what has the right to be true and what does not.

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Philosophical “vitalism” also dissimulates — under the guise of an impeccable logic — a fallacious and properly infra-human line of thought. The devotees of “life,” for whom religion---or wisdom---is only an unintelligible, artificial, and morbid “skeleton at the feast”, overlook above all the following truths: namely that human intelligence is capable of objectifying life and of opposing itself to it to a certain extent, which fact cannot be devoid of meaning, everything having its sufficient cause; that it is by this capacity of objectification and opposition towards the subjective that man is man, life and pleasure being common also to all infra-human creatures; that there is not only life but also death, not only pleasure but also pain, of which man alone can give account a priori; that man must follow his nature as animals follow theirs, and that in following it fully he is brought to transcend appearances and to give them a significance which surpasses their shifting plane and unites them in a same stable and universal reality. For man is intelligence, and intelligence is the transcending of forms and the realization of the invisible Essence; to speak of human intelligence is to speak of absoluteness and transcendence.

Of all earthly creatures, man alone knows: firstly, that pleasure is contingent and ephemeral; and secondly, that it is not shared by all, which is to say that other egos do not enjoy the pleasures of “our ego” and that---whatever our enjoyment---there are always other creatures who suffer, and vice versa; and this proves that pleasure is not everything, nor is life. Religion and metaphysics spring much more deeply from our specifically human nature — a “supernatural nature”, precisely, in its depths — than the characteristics man shares with animals and plants.

To refute an error does not mean one ignores the necessity for its existence; the two things are situated on different planes. We do not accept error, but we accept its existence since “offenses must needs come.”

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We said that a doctrine merits the epithet “sentimental,” not because it makes use of a symbolism of the feelings or because it reflects incidentally in its form the sentiments of the writer who expounds it, but because its point of departure is determined more by feeling than by objective reality, which means that the latter is violated by the former; this specification requires a reservation in favor of the traditional doctrines, or some of them: strictly speaking, a true doctrine could be qualified as “sentimental” when sentiment is introduced into the very substance of that doctrine, while inevitably limiting the truth on account of the “subjective” and affective character of sentimentality as such; it is in this sense that Guénon spoke of the presence of a sentimental element in the Semitic exoterisms, while pointing out that it is this element which causes the incompatibilities between dogmas of different origins. But in this case, the term “sentimental” cannot mean that the doctrine itself originates in a sentimental and therefore purely human reaction, as happens with profane ideologies; on the contrary, here the marriage between truth and sentiment is a providential and beneficial concession to certain psychological predispositions, so that the epithet in question is only applicable on condition that one specifies that it concerns orthodox doctrines.

The Intellect — that kind of static Revelation, permanent in principle and “supernaturally natural” — is not opposed to any possible expression of the Real; it is situated beyond sentiment, imagination, memory, and reason, but it can at the same time enlighten and determine all of these since they are like its individualized ramifications, ordained as receptacles to receive the light from on high and to translate it according to their respective capacities. The positive quintessence of sentiment is love; and love, to the extent that it transcends itself in the direction of its supernatural source, is the love of man for God and of God for man, and finally it is Beatitude without origin and without end.