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Today's offering in our Timeless Essay series affords our readers the opportunity to join Claes Ryn as he explores the philosophical origins of modernity and of the modern man. —W. Winston Elliott III, Publisher

Intellectuals of very different persuasions relate many of society's present troubles to so-called “modernity.” In that respect, traditionalists and postmodernists are in broad agreement. A problem with both groups is that they typically define “modernity” in a reductionistic manner, as if the modern world were moving in a single general direction. They exclude from the definition whatever is appealing to them. Modernity actually contains opposing potentialities, encompassing, among other things, lingering and evolving ancient beliefs and practices. Sometimes modernity is arbitrarily assumed to be ending or to have been superseded, yet what is called postmodernism is easily shown to share important elements with what it is believed to be supplanting. It has much in common, for example, with a seminal figure like Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

If the complexity of historical reality ultimately defies convenient classifications, one may still, for certain analytical purposes, usefully isolate currents of thought, imagination, and morality that bear a marked family resemblance and that can be described as distinctively modern, as distinguished from “classical” or “medieval.” Indeed, it is the purpose here to identify and examine a certain cultural dynamic within the modern world. That dynamic has been a powerful source of change in the last two centuries and is an important origin of present difficulties, but it has not received the close attention that it merits. The aim in analyzing this cultural force is to arrive at a better understanding of our predicament and of what remedies correspond to our problems.

The cultural dynamic in question has profoundly changed the way in which Western man sees himself and the opportunities of human existence. It had gained sufficient power more than two centuries ago to begin transforming societies. It has manifested itself somewhat differently according to time and place, but its basic characteristic pattern has remained the same, and it continues strongly to affect Western society. Examining this cultural force is a key to understanding the history of the last two hundred years and the social crisis in which we find ourselves today. The following analysis will suggest the great importance of this force, but it is not intended to deny the significance of other influences.

In current academic debates modernity is most especially associated with the Enlightenment and rationalism. That these have profoundly affected the modern world is beyond dispute. What needs to be better understood is that we move closer to the heartbeat of modernity if we look behind its ideas to the kind of imagination that they express. What is replacing the classical and Christian outlook in the West is certainly a new *Weltanschauung*, one often rationalistic in appearance, but we miss its main source of influence and inspiration if we focus narrowly on abstract ideas. What most deeply shapes typically modern man and guides even his more strictly philosophical efforts is a new way of imagining the world.

Imagination Orients Ratiocination

Before describing the modern cultural dynamic it may be helpful to explain in a preliminary way the emphasis that is being placed on the imaginative/aesthetic dimension of life and to indicate how imagination and rationality are both different and intimately connected. A fuller view of their relationship will emerge from the larger discussion to follow. A closely related subject, the role of will and character in shaping what we believe, will also be taken up later.

Conceptual formulations presuppose acts of imagination or, to use a term that can be used synonymously, of intuition—moments of concrete vision. The imagination does not, as once believed, passively receive sense impressions that are combined into images. It is an active, visionary power, giving a fundamental, if non-ideational, coherence to life. Most generally, the imagination constitutes an overall sense, concrete and experiential, of what life is like. Such intuition precedes thought in the sense of systematic reflection, ideas, and definitions. Before we can reflect, there must be imaginative wholes upon which to reflect. Whenever we set forth an idea or a definition, to say nothing of an entire ideology, intuitively integrated experience of life steers the effort, giving us a sense of proportion, structure and possibility. Our most fundamental perception of life is coherent not primarily by virtue of intellectual concentration, although systematic critical reflection is also a way of laying hold of existence. Our view of life hangs together—“makes sense”—first of all through the continuous work of the imagination. The latter creatively integrates experience, turning it into a whole. Our overall sense of reality, of what life is like, is at bottom imaginative vision, the imagination continually synthesizing our past with our present. Imaginative states may be more or less consonant with the “real” world—the world in which we act—but, whatever their quality, pre-conceptual, intuitive, concrete vision orients and colors our thinking, no less so in philosophy than in ordinary life. It is on the basis of intuition that we formulate ideas. Whether those ideas can be said to be valid, “true to life” in some sense, has everything to do with the kind of imagination that informs them.

Examining the imaginative basis of theoretical formulations is always important to discerning their meaning. In the case of the modern dynamic of interest here, the imaginative component is especially illuminating. It is in the arts that we find some of the best evidence regarding the meaning of the evolution of Western society in the last two hundred years.

The following analysis will show how the imagination shapes the individual and society, but of course, the imagination is not understood to be functioning in isolation or autonomously (except in the limited sense that its operations within the human consciousness are *sui generis* and are creative of new vision). Of special interest in the present context is that personal character gives human beings particular intuitive predilections. The transformation of the imagination that will be examined here is intimately connected with a transformation of the moral life, so that we may refer to the dynamic in question as moral-imaginative.[1]

Two Contrasting Views of Life

We look in vain for a historical turning point, after which it might be said that this new cultural trend had acquired decisive influence. The old

classical and Christian outlook is deeply rooted; it has not entirely disappeared even today. Neither can we point to particular individuals in the modern world whose personalities are entirely clear-cut embodiments of the new moral-imaginative momentum. All human beings contain both old and new. Much neurosis in contemporary society is intrinsic to the cultural dynamic under investigation, but additional anxiety and confusion are due to individuals' harboring not only that dynamic but other strains of personality with which it is incompatible.

To establish what is distinctive to this moral-imaginative impetus, it is helpful to recall a few prominent characteristics of classical and Christian man. These traits may, for convenience's sake, be called "pre-modern," "classical," "Christian," or "religious." It goes without saying that Greco-Roman civilization was very different in important respects from Christianity, but as one contemplates what is now replacing them both, one is struck by what they have in common regarding the understanding of human nature and society.

Premodern man, especially Christian man, had modest expectations of life. The Greeks thought it possible to elevate human existence through effort, especially moral-intellectual effort, but the Delphic admonition to know thyself included a reminder that man is not a god. What humans are able to achieve is limited by ignorance and other flaws. Wisdom, said Socrates, is knowing how little you know. Christianity stressed original sin. Due to man's fallen state, life on earth is inevitably full of trials and tribulations. For Augustine, happiness was possible only through divine grace and was reserved largely for the life to come. In emphasizing the ravages of sin, he seemed at times to discount the higher possibilities of human existence. Thomas Aquinas and others put more stress on the potential for worldly perfection, but sin continued to limit man's capacity. Conscience mercilessly exposed man's moral weaknesses, calling for repentance.

Given the awareness of sin and the inclination to be self-critical, religious man did not regard suffering as unexpected or even undeserved. According to Augustine, sinful human beings had no reason to be indignant about such misfortunes as bad government. Who were they to complain? Feeling himself not undeserving of misery or damnation, the Christian considered such well-being and happiness as came his way as examples of divine grace, as reasons for gratitude.

If premodern man felt his own weaknesses acutely, it was partly because he measured himself by high moral standards. The ethics of an Aristotle or a Cicero look ascetic to our own contemporaries. The Ten Commandments might seem to be sufficiently demanding, but Christians who would try fully to embody the "otherworldliness" of the Sermon on the Mount held themselves to an even higher standard. To compound his burden, religious man tended to blame self for problems around him. His moral shortcomings were his own; no one but he could improve his character. He should strain to the utmost to do so. And even if he made some progress, plenty of remaining imperfections would require yet more effort. Christians believed that moral-spiritual betterment was made possible by divine grace, but they felt a deep personal obligation to make the best of their own lives and to shoulder responsibility for neighbor.

It is time to sketch the moral-imaginative dynamic that has undermined and often replaced the kind of personality that has just been described. Although modernity contains other and contrasting elements, it may be permissible to call the new type of person simply "modern man." His demeanor is very different from that of premodern man. Far from discounting the opportunities of a worldly existence, this person entertains great expectations. Francis Bacon was only one of the first to believe in endless progress. He thought that, with the disappearance of old superstitions and a full application of the methods of experimental science, a vastly improved human existence would be possible. The Enlightenment extended these expectations. The hope for a new and better world was not necessarily based on faith in science and reason. The most fundamental longing, discernible behind scientism itself, was for a basic transformation of human existence, for a great liberation, expansion and deepening, making life infinitely more satisfying. Rousseau is but an early and prominent example of one who believed that classical and Christian civilization was based on a profound misconception and who also believed that the resulting oppression can be ended and that mankind can achieve a new, superior existence.

Modern man does not regard a good life as an undeserved gift. He is more likely to see it as an entitlement. Human beings, so it is asserted, have rights. The "natural rights of man" proclaimed by such theorists as Locke and Rousseau have been made more elaborate and specific in our own century by the United Nations. For taking the trouble to be born, human beings have rights to food, housing, health care, etc. There has been no announcement of corresponding duties.

Although demanding his rights, modern man places no particular demands on his own person. He is not inclined to see anything wrong with self. In the words of that reassuring slogan, "I'm OK, and you're OK," Rousseau proclaimed the goodness of man already in the eighteenth century, dismissing the doctrine of original sin as an affront to human nature. What is to blame for life's deep and numerous disappointments is not some flaw or perversity within man or nature but oppressive, distorting social institutions and conventions. The remedy, Rousseau argues, is for humanity to cast off the chains that harness its goodness.

We come here to a great problem facing modern man. With all his rights and expectations, modern man must still live in the existing, historical world, and that world stubbornly remains the kind of place it has always tended to be: a mixture of ups and downs and full of imperfections. The difficulty for modern man, given his high hopes, is that he will experience the disappointments of a typical human life, suffer his share of unfairness, economic pressures and illness. People close to him will die. Society will display greed, intolerance, ruthlessness, and crime. There may be wars or other painful social disruptions. Much of life will be merely boring.

Having been led to expect a satisfying life, happiness even, modern man looks in vain for the world to deliver on the promise. His daily life is often painted in rather drab colors or grays, sometimes in black. Since his actual existence falls far short of his hopes, he begins to feel mistreated, cheated of his due. He soon nurses a grudge against life. He starts to suspect, and is encouraged by ideologues to believe, that he is being deprived of his entitlement. Each new disappointment intensifies a feeling of betrayal. The time comes when society—indeed, all of human existence—appears to him unjust and oppressive, as if manipulated by sinister forces. Rousseau gives early and paradigmatic expression to the modern feeling of disappointment and defeat. Toward the end of his life he writes, "I was created to live, and I am dying without having lived." He bemoans having to give back to his maker a host of "frustrated good intentions."^[2]

Rousseau and the Dream of a New World

If we wish to understand the kind of outlook that began to replace classical and Christian civilization in the West, we do well to study Rousseau. He is convinced that he has seen more deeply into human nature than has any previous observer and that he has discovered the secret of happiness. But the world as it is is unfriendly to that truth and to him personally as the messenger. Especially in his later autobiographical writings, Rousseau expresses his deep hurt at being wronged by life in general and at having been "cast out" from society—this despite his being, by his own account, "the most sociable and loving of men."^[3] He has not been treated as he thinks befits a person of his deep insight and benevolence but feels himself the victim of cruel persecution. He takes to a paranoid extreme a dissatisfaction with life that was to become chronic in the modern world.

Starting in the eighteenth century, a mood of daydreaming develops into a richly orchestrated theme in the cultural life of the West. With others in tow, artists begin to escape from a world increasingly perceived as depressing. In poetry, fiction, painting, music, etc., one can study a growing tension between what exists and something infinitely more satisfying.

In the imagination, as distinguished from the historical world in which we act, anything is possible; the annoying limitations and complications of actual life can be put aside. The dreamer can make for himself an existence according to his own wishes. Humanity has always sought relief in daydreams from the pressures or the boredom of the moment, but now daydreaming ceases to consist of short and transient flights of the imagination. It expands into elaborate and recurring visions of life transformed. Daydreaming with its unrestricted glories becomes an almost constant reminder of the dreariness of daily existence, repeatedly luring the person away. The dream begins to overflow the all-too-disappointing world where action takes place. The vision comes to seem more important—more real. Modern man would rather live in his dream than in the world of practice. What begins in the imagination of the artistically inclined soon is translated into schemes for transforming society. The imagination having revealed the possibility of a wonderful existence, why put up with life as it is?

The imagination becomes for Rousseau an almost constant refuge from what he considers the tyranny of society. He repeatedly recalls two months spent on an island in the lake of Biene in Switzerland. It was, he writes, a time of “blissful indolence,” of drifting according to the impulse of the moment. But the happiness of complete freedom that he knew on that lake is being ruthlessly denied him by existing society. Mankind is persecuting him personally and “will never let me return to this happy sanctuary.” Rousseau consoles himself that “at least they cannot prevent me from being transported there every day on the wings of imagination.” “Were I there, my sweetest occupation would be to dream to my heart’s content. Is it not the same thing to dream that I am there?”[4]

Starting a powerful trend in Western culture, Rousseau attributes greater significance to life lived in the imagination than to the world of action. “I abstain from acting,” Rousseau writes.[5] He gets to taste real life in his pastoral reveries. Modern man’s flight from the concrete practical responsibilities of the here and now, specifically, from the duty of making the best of self and caring for family and neighbor, assumes different forms depending on the personality of the dreamer. What is common and constant is the longing for glorious fulfillment, and the theme that some fundamental change is necessary for happiness to become possible: “Life would be so much better, if only... If only I could get a fresh start, real life would finally begin.” Artists in the last two centuries have provided a sense of exciting new possibilities, a change of scenery, transporting us, for example, to sunny fields, delightful picnics in the grass, glittering water, flowers, beaches, palm trees, mild breezes, lightly clad women. Who does not want to follow?

Rousseau’s notion of a new society is based on an imagined human past when life was truly “natural.” That past bears little resemblance to what is known of human history. Significantly, the author of the immensely influential *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* tells his readers in one of the opening paragraphs that his “investigations” into the past “should not be taken for historical truths, but only for hypothetical and conditional reasonings.” As if to concede that mankind’s actual past does not support his assumptions about human nature, he writes, “Let us, therefore, begin by putting aside all the facts, for they have no bearing on the question.”[6] Rousseau’s readers are invited to change their view of man and society in the light of his imaginative construction of the past, one that is unencumbered by demands for historical accuracy. Uncomfortable facts of human experience must not be allowed to interfere with beguiling possibilities.

Rousseau’s deep alienation from existing society permeates all his writing. Already in the *First Discourse*, he attacks the “vile and deceitful uniformity” that condemns man to “perpetual constraint.” Everywhere society suppresses naturalness. “Without ceasing, politeness makes demands, propriety gives orders; without ceasing, common customs are followed, never one’s own lights.”[7] Such comments are indistinguishable from Rousseau’s ubiquitous autobiographical theme, in the words of *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*: “I have never been truly fitted for social life, where there is nothing but irksome duty and obligation.”[8] Happiness is possible only if the individual can be free of restraint. He writes of a short period of happiness in his youth: “I was perfectly free, or better than free because I was subject only to my own affections and did only what I wanted to do.” He remembers with joy “when I was myself, completely myself, unmixed and unimpeded, and when I can genuinely claim to have lived.”[9] Since being “unmixed” and free of all restraint is out of the question in the world of action known to man, Rousseau has constructed the sharpest possible contrast between happiness and what now exists.

The new society about which Rousseau dreams will not receive its cohesion from difficult and protracted moral struggle and self-discipline on the part of citizens. That notion belongs to an ancient but wholly mistaken conception of human nature. The political order that Rousseau envisions will flow spontaneously from man’s true nature once society has been cleansed of traditional structures and refounded on the basis of equality. Liberated, “unimpeded” nature will then shape society, as once it formed the happy but primitive state of nature. It will give the people a common purpose, a “general will.” True popular rule is incompatible with constitutionalism. As the spontaneous force of nature, the general will can manifest itself only in uninhibited freedom.

Before illustrating further the modern mood of daydreaming, it should be underscored that humans have always sought solace in the imagination. It is hard to be always handling the pressures and responsibilities of life. There is a time and even a need for relaxation. We look out the window, think ahead to dinner with a special friend, take some time off from work, have a drink. We take little vacations from ordinary life. But then, back we go to our obligations, perhaps refreshed and reinvigorated. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, escape from the present ceases for many to be a brief interlude and becomes a steady accompaniment of daily life. The daydream becomes the vantage from which to judge existence.

If Only . . .

In all of the arts, we may study modern man’s deepening disgust with things as they are and his desire for radical relief. One of the best literary examples of the modern moral-imaginative dynamic is the central figure in Gustave Flaubert’s novel *Madame Bovary* (1857). Flaubert tells the story of Emma, a pretty young woman who marries Charles, a physician. They live in small-town northeastern France. She has long been a reader of romantic novels, which have fed a dreamy personality. Charles is not the kind of dashing person that is depicted in her novels, but she married him willingly, and he loves and is utterly devoted to her.

Still, Emma feels from the very start that her married life does not satisfy her deepest longing. Charles tries in every way to please her, yes; he has steady character, and the townspeople like him, yes. But she finds him plodding, unimaginative, stolid. He passed his medical examinations only with difficulty. He practices very cautious medicine, afraid as he is of killing his patients. In comparison with dreams that begin to flood her mind, Charles and her life, in general, are a growing disappointment. He is of a piece with the stifling provincial life that surrounds her. Charles and the local yokels are an affront to her fine sensibilities. How very different life might have been. Soon she is thinking about “meeting some other man.” She imagines what the husbands of her old friends at school must be like. Why is Charles so much less? He “might have been handsome, witty, distinguished, attractive, as, doubtless, were all the men her friends from the convent had married.” While she is stuck with Charles in a rural town, they are undoubtedly living thrilling lives. “In the city, with the street noises, the

hum of the theaters, and the lights of the ballroom, they were living lives in which the heart expands, in which the senses blossom. But her life was as cold as an attic with northern exposure, and boredom, that silent spider, was spinning its web in all the dark corners of her heart.”[10]

Emma exhibits just the moral-imaginative disposition that, in one form or other, would permeate Western culture. As Flaubert’s novel describes her: “Everything that immediately surrounded her, the dull countryside, imbecilic petty-bourgeois people, the mediocrity of existence, seemed to her an exception in the world, an unusual accident in which she found herself trapped, while beyond it the immense world of happiness and passion extended itself as far as the eye could see.” In her imagination, the world beyond, represented by Paris, seems to her “something sublime”—a “world of ambassadors,” “gleaming parquet floors,” “salons paneled with mirrors,” “vast intrigues,” “dresses with bustles,” and on and on.[11]

The more Emma lives in her daydream, the more darkly disappointed she becomes when Charles appears. The greater her desire to escape, the deeper her disgust with actual life; and the deeper the alienation, the greater the need to flee yet again. Precisely because of her hopes for consummate fulfillment, the imperfections of the present fill her with bitterness. Even Charles’s loving kindnesses become intolerable. His belief that he is pleasing her seems “an imbecilic insult.” “Was he not the obstacle to all happiness, the cause of all this misery, the sharp buckle, as it were, of the intricate strap that was binding her on all sides?” Emma’s sense of life is that of myriad modern individuals: “At one and the same time she wanted to die and to live in Paris.” [12]

The rest of the novel need not be summarized here. Emma looks to other men for fulfillment. New suffering is finally followed by catastrophe, not just for her but for her family. But it is important in the present context to take special note of one dimension of her character. Contrary to the predisposition of an earlier Western personality type, it does not really occur to Emma to have modest expectations or to blame herself for her misery. She looks everywhere except self for the source of her unhappiness. Her lover Rodolphe, a local squire, is more calculating and cynical than she has yet become, but in voicing his resentment against society he is also expressing hers and that of countless others in the modern world. He says to Emma: “Doesn’t this conspiracy of society revolt you? Is there one ounce of feeling that it does not condemn? The noblest instincts, the purest emotions, are persecuted and slandered, and if two poor souls finally meet, everything is organized so that they cannot unite.” [13]

Is then Emma entirely to blame for her own misery? Or is she the victim of a misbegotten marriage and a stultifying society? It is not necessary to determine the extent of Emma’s own culpability to recognize her moral-imaginative inclination as an impediment to making the best of life as it tends to be. Even if it is granted, not implausibly, that Emma finds herself in a less than desirable marriage, despite her own and society’s original judgment, and that her social environment is uninspiring or worse, these factors, by themselves, do not adequately explain her growing despondency. In the end, her own character and her corresponding imaginative predilections are what make her despair virtually inevitable. Disinclined to accepting and coping with disappointment and to seizing chances for happiness available to her within the social setting that she has chosen, she will be satisfied only with a life that places no obstacles in the way of glorious satisfaction. She fluctuates between dreams of permanent elation, on one side, and dejection in the face of what exists just around her, on the other. It is in the very nature of her desire for fulfillment that it should be defeated by a life that sets limits—however favorable may be her own actual circumstances.

A Personality Divided Against Itself

It might seem far-fetched and paradoxical to connect the modern dreams of a marvelous new world with cynicism and bitterness. And yet the interplay between these seeming opposites is integral to the moral-imaginative dynamic under examination. On the one hand, modern man uses his imagination to an unparalleled extent to evade the hard and painful task of moral responsibility up close: He always dreams of happiness on entirely different, far easier terms, of a life that can satisfy all of his pent-up desires. As long as he indulges this imagination he is intoxicated, inspired. But just as often the dark side of life seems to him to be all there is, and he despairs of happiness. Bitterness and pessimism torture him.

The coming together of these two moods is not paradoxical or puzzling. On the contrary, they are inseparable. They are two sides of one and the same modern personality. That personality moves, for fully intelligible reasons, between elation and dark depression. The person is up, or he is down, rarely in-between, and the swings tend to get more violent. This is because every romantic-utopian flight of imagination aggravates resentment against the world as it is, and the more disappointing the actual world appears, the greater the desire for imaginative solace. The personality splits, not in the sense of dividing between unrelated and sharply different orientations, but in the sense of fluctuating between contrasting moods that condition and presuppose each other.

Modern man becomes—in fact, he makes himself—a manic-depressive. The latter term is being used here in a humanistic-philosophical manner, partly in protest against the kind of psychologism that tends to reduce the individual to a product of forces he cannot control, one whose mental abnormalities are assumed to have biochemical or other external causes and therefore to be subject to corresponding remedies. The manic-depressive temperament under scrutiny is self-generated, which is not to deny that it sometimes blurs into what is commonly called mental illness. To see how this temperament is formed, it is helpful to ask: who is the cynic, that person who sneers at life and suspects all others of having the foulest of motives? Who is he but the disillusioned, repeatedly disappointed dreamer, a person who bears other human beings and life, in general, a deep grudge for defeating his cherished longings? The artificial exhilaration created by the romantic imagination must inevitably bring on grim resentment. Rousseau is as usual paradigmatic, alternating between euphoric raptures and paranoid fits. Persons of similar temperament may tearfully sympathize with his suffering, as has been the case with many generations of his readers. From the point of view of the older Western moral and aesthetical sensibility, his misfortune looks largely self-inflicted and even well-deserved.

From Dream to Politics

Unfortunately, these mood-swings have meant suffering not only for a few beautiful souls of artistic bent. They have become the hallmarks of a new culture, which has given rise to new ideas, including political ideologies. One does not have to look far for examples of the manic-depressive temperament in politics. Rousseau himself sets the pattern. The manic or utopian strain in his political thought comes through in his vision of the release of man’s true nature and the transformation of life. His famous phrase “man is born free” suggests the possibility of a glorious new society, but his very next words about man’s current predicament express the depressive dimension of his ideology: “everywhere he is in chains.” [14]

Convinced of the purity of his own heart, Rousseau persuades himself that only a conspiracy can explain his being subjected to endless

suffering. He writes of himself that, although he is the best of men, he has been “cast out by all the rest.” Exhibiting in advanced form the paranoia that later appears in *Emma*, *Rodolphe*, and so many others, Rousseau writes of his fellow men: “With all the ingenuity of hate they have sought out the cruellest torture for my sensitive soul.” [15] His egocentricity knows no bounds. It is Rousseau against an unfeeling, perverse world, as it is *Emma* against the constrictions of society.

In the French Revolution, the manic-euphoric mood is manifest in the vision of a future society: “freedom, equality and brotherhood.” The depressive mood seizes, among other things, upon the vile oppression of traditional French society. And because the monarchy and the aristocracy conspire against the oppressed, the guillotine must do its work.

In our own century, communism has inspired its followers with the dream of a classless and stateless society in which human beings will finally develop the full range of their potential in perfect freedom. The drudgery of boring, mechanical, routinized work will be overcome. But that wonderful future stands in sharp contrast to a darkly depressing present: ever worsening exploitation, greed, cruel competition, misery, and alienation. So abominable is capitalist society that revolution is inevitable. In Marxism, the conspirators against liberation are the owners of the means of production, the bourgeoisie. Needless to say, realizing the dream will necessitate suffering. Something so great cannot be born without birth pangs. The communists turn ruthlessly against opponents. “If you want to make an omelette, you have to break some eggs,” says Lenin. The paranoia that forms an integral part of the manic-depressive dynamic leads to the discovery of enemies not just among the capitalists. Stalin comes to see enemies of the people everywhere, even within the Communist Party. Never-resting vigilance against counterrevolution sends millions to the Gulag. As is typical of the manic-depressive ideological movements, the inspiring vision is all benevolent concern for the downtrodden, but the actual practice is almost unbelievable inhumanity.

National Socialism rejects the egalitarian assumptions of Rousseau and Marx, but it seeks its own kind of radical liberation from what exists, and it follows the same manic-depressive pattern. Its inspiring vision, its great Daydream, is the Thousand Year Reich, the future reign of the Aryans. The Aryans will inspire a national renewal, restore racial purity and dominate inferior peoples. But the present situation is radically different, depressingly so. The German-Nordic race and culture are everywhere being polluted. We come here to the Nazi version of the sinister conspiracy. Behind all the perversity and decadence is an inferior but cleverly scheming alien race. Again, the paranoia permits no respite in rooting out enemies.

One could illustrate at length how the modern moral-imaginative dynamic has affected various aspects of society. The “split” personality of modern man manifests itself across the religious, moral, intellectual, aesthetical, and political landscape. Often it is masked or moderated somewhat by lingering older attitudes and beliefs, but it is ultimately incompatible with the old classical or Christian view of man and with any similar understanding of the human condition.

Western man has not learnt much from this large body of evidence, not even from the great man-made disasters of this century, including two world wars and the extermination of millions of human beings—disasters which can be shown to be substantially related to the moral-imaginative disposition under discussion. To head off such catastrophes in the future Western man resorts to boosterish affirmations of human “rights” and campaigns of “never again,” while the deeper causes of the inhumanity and suffering are left largely unexplored and unattended. This failure to face uncomfortable facts bespeaks a stubborn willfulness and is striking proof of moral-imaginative escapism within the Western world. Our society remains strongly attracted to that temperament. Many continue to attribute moral superiority to people with ambitious and allegedly beautiful visions for remaking human existence. Despite that fact, it is often asserted today that we have entered upon an era of greater realism and sobriety and that we are moving beyond ideology. Intellectual strife will peter out, assert many intellectuals, for mankind has finally discovered the form of socio-political existence whose superiority and salvific powers will soon be recognized by all: democracy. But no special powers of discernment are necessary to recognize here another ideology—we may call it democratism—and to recognize yet another manifestation of the modern daydream. In its more dogmatic form, democratism reveals fully the familiar pattern: “The world would be such a wonderful place, if only.” Remaining obstacles to a democratic world must be removed, by force if necessary. Away with all conspirators against the good of mankind!

The Needs of Our Own Time

It does not follow from this analysis of modern man that premodern man is necessarily his superior in every respect. The classical and Christian views of life had their own considerable weaknesses and blind spots. A strong case can be made that Plato’s disdain for the ordinary world and his corresponding political idealism showed a misguided reluctance to address and seize the actual opportunities of human life. And did not Augustinian Christianity in its heavy emphasis on the fallenness of the world and on man’s dependence on divine grace similarly undermine efforts to elevate human existence?

If premodern man can be said to have sometimes avoided constructive effort under the guise of high philosophy or pious spirituality, he did not lose sight of the most stubborn of all obstacles to moral and social progress: the lower inclinations of the human self. The modern moral-imaginative dynamic evinces an egregious escapism insofar as it is reluctant to recognize any limits to man’s realizing his fondest visions, as if man could lift himself imaginatively by his bootstraps. Such willful evasion of basic facts of human experience can only produce disastrous consequences for the individual and society.

Among those who shape our culture, it is still common to ignore in one form or other the historically known preconditions of social harmony and individual happiness and to indulge the imagination of escape. There is strong resistance to the idea that human beings are torn between higher and lower potentialities and that therefore protracted self-discipline is of the essence of building up a truly satisfying existence. Postmodernism is for the most part shot through with a Rousseauistic desire for liberation. Its emphasis is on demasking and exploding what are considered oppressive structures, not on identifying patterns of humanizing discipline, as if achieving a worthwhile existence were only a matter of removing obstacles to our desires. Because the evasion of the moral crux of the matter remains strong in universities, entertainment, media, and the arts, we may face new and worsening troubles.

What then could make a difference? The escapist imagination is pulling us away from a strengthening of character and a renewed willingness to confront the self and the world as they tend to be. It is the imagination that manages to give such a beguiling form to a spirit of moral lassitude. Since it is the imagination that is luring Western man away from the urgent but demanding responsibilities that are personal and immediate, is the solution perhaps to try to suppress it? Plato took a dim view of the imagination and trusted only what he called reason. Puritan and other iconoclastic Christians condemned imaginative distractions, preferring the pure word of God. Modern rationalists advise that we rely on reason alone. But reason, whatever we mean by that term, does not operate in an imaginative vacuum. It is oriented by an underlying imaginative view of human existence.

Rationalism is often a version or a close ally of escapism, in spite of the claim of many rationalists that they are sober critics of dreaminess

and illusion. From the time of Francis Bacon, one may study how visions for transforming society and the world blend with a belief in human intelligence and science. A dream of radical change has often sought expression in a belief in social engineering. The inspiring vision is obviously marked by utopian imagination, and the latter subtly affects also the understanding of reason itself, producing a faith in Science as the solution to the problems of mankind. True, some rationalists scoff at the gullibility of utopianism. For them, real intellect is quick to unmask unrealistic vision. But are not rationalists of that kind often romantics themselves, only romantics of the disillusioned, defeated kind? Is not their intellect permeated by the cynicism of an imagination that is increasingly stuck in the depressive mode? Hiding behind this type of intellectualism is a romantic whose experience of life has made him expect only the worst from human beings. Who has not encountered the sarcastic, deprecating critic who relies on what he considers the cold intellect. To this kind of person, efforts really to improve life appear futile. No less than the utopian rationalist does the cynical rationalist feel himself excused from the kind of personal moral effort that begins with making the best of self and one's own circumstances. Considering the huge challenge of the bigger picture, what could be more beside the point? Both types of rationalists are unwilling to recognize the real limits and opportunities of man's historical existence.[16] The cynic exaggerates the limits and discounts the opportunities, the utopian does the reverse. In the end, they are, again, much the same person.

Ideas give conceptual expression to a basic intuition of what life is and can become. Really to change a person's mind means changing his imagination. What is still needed, on a large scale, are efforts to expose the modern imagination of daydreaming for what it is. For too long those who set the tone in our intellectual and cultural life have gotten away with presenting their dreams of liberation as benevolent and noble. It is essential to expose the inhumane and potentially diabolical nature of such panaceas. Far from deserving admiration, these visions should fill us with foreboding. Democratism is no exception, although its potential for ruthlessness may not be obvious in its more moderate advocates.

At its core, the modern moral-imaginative dynamic is a rebellion against whatever interferes with our favorite desires. It is an expression of a great self-indulgence. We do not want to rein in our desires, and the imagination helps us to justify living as we would like to live. The imagination assists us in disparaging and avoiding the nagging, onerous moral conscience that calls our desires into question.

Besides moral conscience, the fundamental obstacle to realizing our fondest dreams is historically existing reality itself. The modern dynamic is a willful evasion of that obstacle. It tries to undo the real terms of human existence, including the need to accept our primary duties as human beings. A chief responsibility of the individual is not to inflict too much of his own conceit and arbitrariness on others. The longing for liberation here discussed is a desire for unlimited self-indulgence. Under the guise of pretty phrases about a better world, many are trying to throw off outer as well as inner checks. Some barely bother to deceive themselves regarding their innermost motives but advance their noble-sounding schemes in a blatant, cynical pursuit of power. At the extreme, the visionary wants the entire world to cater to his desires.

The emphasis here on the escapist dimension of the modern imagination must not draw attention away from the fact that this kind of imagination, although morally evasive and expressive of illusory possibilities, sometimes inspires individuals of great willpower. These individuals act boldly as well as imagining boldly. Their action is not restrained by moderating, humanizing imagination. On the contrary, their uninhibited action is justified by the need to realize a glorious vision. That such agents for a better world for mankind should often act with utter ruthlessness should, in light of the preceding analysis, not be surprising. The extravagant modern imagination does, after all, emanate from a personality that does not want to submit to restraint.

Intellectual criticism of this self-indulgence, though indispensable, is insufficient. It is not possible to defuse escapist imagination with no imagination. This is the case whether the escape is predominantly of the utopian or the cynical variety. Human beings, including self-described rationalists, live in the end according to hopes and anxieties that form in the imagination. Their innermost orientation of will is projected, as it were, onto the screen of the imagination. It is there that a desire receives its concreteness, its experiential texture. It is there that future glories can be contemplated and tasted. It is precisely this **vividness of the imagination that makes a desire so powerful.**

None of what has been argued here must be construed as a case for trying to reduce the role of the imagination. That role will always be prominent in shaping the future. Attempts to starve the imagination in order to give greater scope to reason are perverse and self-defeating. The proper concern is for imaginative discipline and realism. In some forms, the imagination poses great dangers, but in other forms, it is indispensable to improving society and the individual. Without the visions of artists and others, social and personal life threaten to become stale and inhospitable to needed change. Romanticism has often put the imagination to utopian, self-indulgent use, but it has also taught us the centrality of the imagination in orienting human life. To recognize the dangers of uninhibited, utopian imagination is to recognize the role that imagination of a different kind can play in elevating existence.

What is necessary, then, in the effort to counter escapism is the non-escapist imagination. The latter is no less imagination, but it is not as prone to the distorting illusions of either conceit or cynicism. It expresses life in a more balanced, penetrating fashion. It conveys new possibilities of life without ignoring the dangers and constraints of human existence but also without succumbing to preoccupation with what is warped and sordid. **Truly great art is never didactic, but it helps us understand who we are.** It attunes us to the real world and prepares us for acting within it.

Without that kind of imagination, intellectuals claiming to remedy our present difficulties will spin abstractions that do little to wean us from **our most fundamental and destructive addiction, our disinclination really to confront the life we face.** Indeed, their ideas will be only new versions of the problem. For instance, much traditionalist-sounding theorizing today—advocating a return to “virtue,” “justice,” “values,” and the like—is anachronistic and glides past actual historical circumstances. It, too, is suffused with romantic avoidance of concrete opportunities and is yet another example of the need for reorienting imaginative vision.

The great art of the past sometimes reacted against degradations and indignities in the present, and it conveyed man's true humanity in some way, but, unlike so much romantic art, it was not a denial of historical reality. It affirmed life's higher potential in often acute awareness of the limits of our existence. The present arbiters of culture often do their best to discredit works of that kind, but such art can, if made accessible again, still have a cathartic effect.

Does this argument attribute undue importance to imagination and the arts? Do not the great affairs of politics and economics and practical matters generally wield far greater influence? **It is certainly possible that our own situation might be suddenly and profoundly affected by unexpected and unsettling world events—war, economic depression, pestilence, or the like. But how human beings would react to disasters depends on the quality of their imagination, which will dispose them to one kind of action rather than another. In human conduct, there is no getting around the decisive influence of how we imagine ourselves and the world.**

So our greatest need may be for art from our own time that speaks powerfully and penetratingly to our predicament. Such art would be rooted in a strong sense of the moral terms of human existence and would thus be related to a stirring of moral conscience and character.

There is one problem: Great art, to say nothing of great character, cannot be ordered up the way think tanks and foundations may order up policy studies, conferences, and research projects. Real art is a miracle, which may appear when and where we least expect it. But we need and wait for such miracles.

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Notes:

- [1] For a full discussion of the epistemological issues of the present argument and for a more extensive and systematic definition of terms, see Claes G. Ryn, *Will, Imagination and Reason* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1997).
- [2] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1979), II, 37-39.
- [3] *Ibid.*, 27.
- [4] *Ibid.*, 90-91, 103.
- [5] *Ibid.*
- [6] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Second Discourse in The Basic Political Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 38.
- [7] Rousseau, *First Discourse, Basic Writings*, 4.
- [8] Rousseau, *Reveries*, 103.
- [9] *Ibid.*, 153-54.
- [10] Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (New York: Signet, 1979), 63.
- [11] *Ibid.*, 75-76.
- [12] *Ibid.*, 118, 77.
- [13] *Ibid.*, 150.
- [14] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract in Basic Writings*.
- [15] Rousseau, *Reveries*, I, 27.
- [16] For a discussion of the connection between the imagination of “sentimental humanitarianism,” and belief in science, see Irving Babbitt, *Literature and the American College* (Washington, D.C.: National Humanities Institute, 1986 [first published in 1908]).

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Claes G. Ryn is Emeritus Professor of Politics at the Catholic University of America (C.U.A.) and Distinguished Senior Fellow and Founding Director at the Center for the Study of Statesmanship at the same university. Dr. Ryn taught also at Georgetown University, the University of Virginia, and Louisiana State University. In 2012 he was named Honorary Professor at Beijing Normal University. He was a doctoral and undergraduate student at Uppsala University in his native Sweden but took his Ph.D. at Louisiana State University. His many books include *America the Virtuous: The Crisis of Democracy and the Quest for Empire*; *A Common Human Ground: Universality and Particularity in a Multicultural Age*; *Democracy and the Ethical Life: A Philosophy of Politics and Community*; *Will, Imagination and Reason: Babbitt, Croce and the Problem of Reality*; and the novel *A Desperate Man*, a moral-political drama. His book *The Failure of American Conservatism and the Road Not Taken* is forthcoming from Republic Book Publishers. Dr. Ryn was for 35 years Co-Editor of the academic journal *Humanitas* and was Chairman and co-founder of the National Humanities Institute, President of the Academy of Philosophy and Letters, and President of the Philadelphia Society.

One Comment

Alvin J Wolf Jr Aug 27, 2018 at 8:20 pm - [Reply](#)

It must be something more glorious than coincidence that, having this whole thing having been started through creation, and having our pumps primed with inclinations of what's true, good and beautiful, that which seems to satisfy beyond the challenges of bearing up is found in acts of personal creation—children, music, writing, building, inventing, et cetera, etcetera, et cetera, even gardening, a garden [once fallen, twice claimed] watered by the mist of gratitude. To put aside the psychological traps and answer the invitation to join in acts of creation likely is His peace and joy.

<https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2018/08/imaginative-origins-modernity-life-daydream-nightmare-claes-ryn-timeless.html>