

THE EMPIRE OF DESIRE

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The opposite of piety is not unbelief; it is sovereign desire.

When Pope Benedict XVI speaks of the dangers of a “dictatorship of relativism,” I find myself nodding with assent. The same holds for John Paul II’s frequent warnings about the decline of metaphysical ambition in the postmodern West. A view of human nature and social existence seems to predominate that leads to a purely technical view of reason, one incapable of discerning the larger meaning and purpose of human life. As Benedict suggested in his famous Regensburg speech, the loss of Western confidence in reason’s larger scope deprives public life of its higher purposes, and as a result our concepts (and exercise!) of authority devolve to mere expressions of power rather than as ways to discern (and order) the common good.

Is my assent justified, or am I the victim of a romanticized anti-modernism that some of my friends fear exercises too much of an influence over my mind? At first glance, the facts on the ground seem to speak against overly dire conclusions. Instead of the war of all against all, we seem to have settled into pragmatic affirmations of a fairly wide range of social constraints. Most recognize that we need economic incentives in order to promote productive behavior, as well as an atmosphere of law and order to censure and control disruptive, violent tendencies. We accept the role of the police power of the state, along with the bureaucratic regulation of a great deal of our lives. In certain respects we are positively zealous on behalf of some forms of social control. No

smoking signs, calorie-counting and resume building, exhortations to save for retirement and use condoms, anxious efforts to reduce one's carbon footprint, sharp rebukes for off-color remarks, indeed, the whole disciplinary apparatus of political correctness – all this and more testify to fact that, whether we're metaphysically ambitious enough or not, we haven't abandoned ourselves to primitive, violent, nihilistic impulses. The ease with which the postmodern West formulates and enforces norms suggests that Dostoevsky was mistaken: If God is dead, everything is not permitted. Just try to get "mankind" past our present day censors.

Yet I continue to be unsettled. True, there exist many regulatory regimes, some of which reflect a managerial ethos, others of which draw upon a therapeutic mentality, and still others that are energized by ideals of inclusive justice. However, at a deeper level, our culture sees the unmediated satisfaction of unique personal desires as the highest good. For all sorts of practical reasons, everything cannot be permitted, but it would ideal, we think, if it were otherwise. As a result, a uniquely postmodern and individualistic view of the common good has emerged. Life is better, more humane, and more just to the degree that we succeed in relaxing the grip of traditional moral authority over the interior lives of individuals so that their desires can be more freely satisfied.

Consider, for example, the paradox of the dictatorship of relativism, which so easily allies itself with the harrying mentality of political correctness. In this alliance, the sociological need for authority has a very specific role: to minimize the psychological power of moral authority. One is to be non-judgmental – one *must* be non-judgmental. So we counter the slightest hint of judgment with deflationary gestures such as "from my

point of view.” It is forbidden to forbid, and thus our moral judgments need to be transformed into expression of personal preferences.

Thus, even as we affirm the countless little disciplines necessary to ensure health, wealthy, and sensible, sustainable hedonism, we push these social mores, disciplines, and restraints to the margins of our souls, hoping to create the greatest possible inner existential freedom to craft a vision of life tailored to our own judgments about what we most want and image we need. Here we enter into the metaphysical dream of the postmodern West. What makes for happiness and fulfillment – indeed, what gives substance and power to reality itself – is an Empire of Desire. For the most part it is to this dream that our present day conceptions of the common good and our ideals inclusive justice minister.

John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty* suggests this vision of an inner, existential freedom as the great goal we should seek. In his treatise, Mill makes the important distinction between political and social liberty. The former has preoccupied political philosophers, and it involves the rights and immunities due to citizens, ones designed to limit the power of governments to coerce and control behavior. W. H. Auden once insisted, against the overuse of Shelly’s dictum about the noble power of poetry, that it was the secret police and not the poets who were the unacknowledged legislators of the world. Mill endorsed political liberty, and he undoubtedly would have been horrified by the terror apparatus of many modern governments. Yet, as he points out, culture itself can function as a coercive power that runs roughshod over the unique desires of individuals, denying them the pleasures of living in accord with their own conceptions of what will make them

happy. In so doing, he writes, a society “practices a social tyranny more formidable than many kinds of political oppression, since, though not usually upheld by such extreme penalties, it leaves fewer means of escape, penetrating much more deeply into the details of life, and enslaving the soul itself.”¹ The neighborhood scold, the local moralist, the village parson – these and other representatives of social norms are the unacknowledged legislators of Mill’s world.

As Mill elaborates upon the mechanisms of social tyranny, he describes in commonsensical fashion the ordinary functions of a normative culture: the self-evident, almost unconscious expectations of inherited customs that make up an elaborate system of “morality, taste, or propriety.” Against this overbearing power we need a different set of rights and immunities, a set that conduces to the creation of a social liberty that will allow individuals to engage in what Mill famously described as “experiments in living.” We are social animals, which makes us vulnerable to the power of society to define our lives. The goal of liberty, therefore, should be to limit the soul-shaping power of culture as well as restrain the police power of the state. We should no more allow the customary moral judgments of our neighbors to penetrate into the private sanctuary of our consciences than permit the magistrate to willy-nilly invade our homes and impound our property. We need a social liberty as robust as political liberty, indeed perhaps more so. For only with social liberty can we avoid enslavement to what Marxists call “false consciousness,” the condition of inner and often self-policed bondage that makes political liberties empty.

¹ Elizabeth Rapaport, ed., (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1978), p. 4.

Mill offers utilitarian justifications for his expansive notion of social liberty. In view of the inevitable fallibility of all human judgments about what constitutes the best way to live, he argues that it is wise for us to tolerate a variety of options so that the truth might win out in a free marketplace of ideas. Elsewhere Mill suggests that societies become rigid and moribund when bound too tightly by conventional mores, and thus a greater openness tends to renew and revitalize culture. These arguments, however, are secondary. Mill's affirmation of social liberty (and its ongoing appeal) relies upon deeper assumptions about human flourishing. Aside from particular actions that involve harm to others, Mill presumes that "individuality should assert itself" (p. 54), not just because the expansion of a purely personal dimension leads to the kind of creativity that is "the chief ingredient of individual and social progress," but also because a fuller expression of individuality is "one of the principle ingredients of human happiness" (p. 54). Mill champions "the free development of individuality" for its own sake. People should be able to follow their lights, and in so doing realize the intrinsic goods of "spontaneity" and "originality."

As is the case with his utilitarian reasons in favor of self-expression, Mill adduces other considerations that obscure the role that the sheer expression of individuality plays in his defense of social liberty. He makes a number of arguments against mere social conformity. As any casuist would agree, principles must always be tailored to particular circumstances and unique personal capabilities. Moreover, mechanical obedience hardly inculcates an understanding of moral principles, thus preventing a person from becoming an intelligent and active participant in the moral life. Here, Mill slides back in a

utilitarian direction: an efficient, vital, engaged society requires a degree of moral innovation and flexibility.

These observations and others are true enough in their own right, but Mill builds into his theory an antagonism between society and individuality that reflects a deeper conflict between form or law and desire. Society gives us models for the good life, images of what is noble and worthy of imitation that guide, discipline, and shape our desires. Mill allows for the social formation of individual desires, but only grudgingly so and according to strict limits, because he ascribes intrinsic value to the immediate, undisciplined condition of our spontaneous individuality, while assigning only instrumental value to social habits of cooperation and self-restraint. We are most ourselves when we are unfettered, unformed, and natural, free to live in accord with our desires, a view of human flourishing not surprising in light of the guiding assumption of Utilitarianism. As a result, Mills tacit view of the common good begins to come clear: “In proportion to the development of his individuality, each person becomes more valuable to himself, and is, therefore, capable of being more valuable to others” (p. 60).

This view now predominates, largely defining what it means to be a liberal in America. Now old new ideas about progressive education trade on Mill’s juxtaposition of society and individuality, which reflects the underlying view that the percolating realm of personal intuition, impulse, and instinct has an intrinsic value that ends up being compromised and stifled by social forces that give shape or form to human personality. These views have become so commonplace that we no longer notice them. As a result, the view of the common good today tends toward antinomian ideals. Society is more just

and more in accord with the highest good, more fruitful and more “progressive,” insofar as moral considerations recede and interfere less and less with desire.

Again, there are further qualifications. According to Mill, the harm principle justifies the socialization and control of impulses that might do damage to others. Just what counts as harm and how it is to be prevented remains an open question, something to be determined by psychologists, sociologists, criminologists, and other experts. Mill does not seem to anticipate this bureaucratized approach to the common good, because he thinks that the notion of harm is self-evident. But he does anticipate the inflexible mentality of political correctness. One is justified, he writes, in efforts to inculcate “rigid rules of justice for the sake of others” (p. 60). It’s precisely the sentiment that leads to coercive policies that require “reeducation” of those whose social attitudes are deemed “oppressive.”

In spite of these dimensions, Mill’s basic vision of human flourishing and the common good remains intact. His implicit anthropology divides the human soul into two distinct parts: on one side are desires and impulses, the seat of individuality, on the other are principles and restraints that emerge as a result of social conditioning. As he works his way to the conclusion of his defense of individuality, the dichotomy between spontaneous desire and the authorities that shape desires into particular forms becomes more and more explicit. Good qualities such as “energy,” “strength of character,” “mental vigor,” and so forth emerge from the incalculable inner realm of desire and impulse, while the bad qualities such as “mediocrity,” “mechanical,” “merely traditional,” and “commonplace humanity” stem from the influence of society. In spite of his countless qualifications the general picture comes clear. When Mill writes, “The

initiation of all wise and noble things comes and must come from individuals” (p. 63), he is tacitly affirming that desire – its unhindered expression and satisfaction – constitutes the highest good. It’s a view that Bentham stated with his usual blunt clarity: The quantity and intensity of pleasures desired and felt defines the highest good.

Mill differed from Bentham and anticipated the transition from a modern to postmodern way of thinking, because he recognized how difficult it can be to remain loyal to desire. As we have seen, his sociological sensibilities led him to ascribe tyrannical power to society, so much so that it penetrates our consciousness, creating repressive feelings of guilt and shame. Modern sociologies may detail the modes of penetration and their psychological forms differently, but the basic dynamic remains the same. This presumption about the soul-shaping power of society explodes, as Mill seemed to have realized, the Enlightenment dream of human freedom based on reason. Reason remains in the orbit of social authority; therefore, if we seek true freedom we need to revise Kant’s slogan. We are not to think for ourselves, for at the end of the day, we cannot. Our thinking will be shaped by society. But we can feel for ourselves; we can desire for ourselves.

Mill was not consistent, and he did not complete the transition from reason to desire. As have so many modern liberals who have come to recognize the shaping power of culture, he did his best to balance a hermeneutic of suspicion with a defense of reason, most famously in his distinction between higher and lower pleasures. It’s a distinction latent in all forms of Utilitarianism. As a theory of morality, Bentham’s view of the primacy of desire and pleasure creates a great deal of conceptual pressure. The theory presumes a view of the human condition in which desired pleasures define the good. And

yet, as a method for answering moral questions, Utilitarianism requires reflection in accord with the principle of the greatest good for the greatest number, a calculation that satisfies no obvious desire and gives no immediate pleasure. As Mill intuited, the solution involves positing a rational desire for justice that operates at a “higher” level than our usual desires.

Kant saw consequences of a modern, naturalistic anthropology more clearly. Without a teleological conception of nature, there is no escape from the me-centered perspective of desire. Therefore, he cordoned off a slender domain of morality that he rigorously separated from all concerns about pleasure. There reason reigns over our conceptions of the highest good. Kant rejected all forms of eudemonism in ethics with a haughty confidence that his readers will immediately affirm that only a rational desire for universality should govern their moral lives. Mill was infinitely more humane, and as a result he preserved an *ad hoc* role for reason that is intermixed with sentiment and desire. He adverts to progress, freedom, justice, and other Enlightenment god terms in order to maintain his equilibrium.

Mill’s balancing act has continued in mainstream American liberalism. John Rawls did so with an effort to re-motivate a desire for the sort of universality that one finds in Utilitarianism and Kantian moral theory, but not by positing a separate domain of reason, but instead by describing the way in which, given the role of luck in life, we have self-interested interest in disinterestedness. Martha Nussbaum re-capitulates Mill’s *ad hoc* strategy of juggling liberal god terms, fusing desire with reason in a “we want” and “we don’t want” public philosophy that reinforces the liberal consensus. Richard Rorty

did the same sort of juggling, but even as he affirmed liberal sentiments he denounced as an illusion the idea that one can avoid rhetorical gamesmanship.

Whatever one thinks of these efforts – even though I very often disagree I find myself admiring Rorty, for both his moral sensibilities and his critical intelligence – one cannot help but recognize that they have become more difficult for contemporary liberals than for Mill. Moral terms have been absorbed into the Empire of Desire. Nietzsche: moral concepts disguise the will to power. Marx: moral categories reflect class interests. Durkheim: moral convictions stem from a desire for social belonging. Freud: the superego is energized by repressed instinctual desire. In each instance, we are drawn into an atmosphere of critical suspicion, one definitive of modern cultural theory. What seems like a dictate of reason is, in fact, a solidified form of re-circulated desires that has been sanctified by culture as authoritative.

With characteristic panache, Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari sum up the critical tropes of late modernity: “The truth is that sexuality is everywhere.”² By their way of thinking, which turns out to be far more widespread than their particular formulations, social phenomena are configurations of desires expressed and evoked. The “does” and “don’ts” that we feel as the constraining and shaping power of social authority are simply the desires of others redirected back upon – and re-energized by – our desires. We mobilize our armies of metaphor to give social weight to our desires (Nietzsche), and we mystify the whole process because our anxieties about anomie lead us to want very much to believe in truth (Durkheim). As Jacques Lacan put it in one of his vatic utterances: “In

² “We Always Make Love with Worlds,” quoted from *Beyond the Body Proper: Readings in the Anthropology of Material Life*, Margaret Lock and Judith Farquhar, eds, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 430.

truth, we make reality out of pleasure.”³ Although too much a shallow rationalist to recognize the metaphysical implications of his moral theory, Bentham was right. Our images, pursuits, and experiences of pleasure define our world; the ever surging, ever churning river of desire is the fundament of all reality.

Because the Empire of Desire governs our metaphysical dreams, insofar as postmodern philosophy attains metaphysical self-consciousness, it expresses its loyalty to reality by adopted an antinomian sensibility that make the spontaneous flow of desire more real than any stable cultural form. And insofar as the good accords with the deepest truths of reality, the greatest flux of desire becomes the greatest good—Mill’s notion of a spontaneous expression of the self, while evil involves limitation, discipline, and restriction, that is to say law (*nomos*) or form. It is with this vision of the highest good that postmodern liberalism now operates.

Norman O. Brown’s grandiose, speculative, urgent, and influential reflections in *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (1959) provide a useful illustration of the antinomian character of the Empire of Desire.⁴ Brown’s muse was Sigmund Freud, a figure whose quasi-scientific, quasi-mythological way of thinking

³ Seminar VII, p. 225.

⁴ Herbert Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization* (1955) offers another helpful example of the transformation of the progressive imagination. By Marcuse’s reading, the Marxist notion of class struggle fails to see the deeper dialectical conflict of human history, which takes place between erotic desire and its unnecessary repression by cultural norms (the “performance principle”). See, also, Marcuse’s *Essay on Liberation*, written in the full flush of the “68 experience.” In most respects, Marcuse’s analysis was more influential, because more attentive to social realities. Brown’s theological personality, however, led to more dramatic metaphysical pronouncements that expose more clearly the dreams of the Empire of Desire.

provided Brown with the ideal conceptual instruments for conjuring the new metaphysical dream of our era. By Freud's way of thinking, the human person is caught in a painful bind akin to Mill's picture of the individual at odds with society. The psychic energy for life comes from instinctual desires, the so-called Id. Against the anarchy of primitive desires, Freud's psychoanalytic theory posits the existence of the Ego, the structured reality of our conscious lives that emerges from the way in which the instincts are given enduring forms by culturally mediated repressions that we internalize.

Freud held out no hope that our instinctual desires can be freely expressed, and in this sense and in spite of his demystification of moral and cultural authority, he remained a pro-nomian thinker, someone for whom form-giving law played a positive rather than negative role. The repressive limitations of instinctual desires, thought Freud, provide the fundamental basis for civilized life, at most we can manage but never eliminate the antagonism of anarchic desire and moral authority. However, like so many optimistic American readers of Freud, Brown deemed this acquiescence to the inevitable necessity of self-attacking repression intolerably pessimistic. We should not be satisfied, Brown thought, with the grim project of trying to manage the unending Cold War between the vigilant Ego and the all-desiring Id. In order to avoid this outcome, Brown read Freud metaphysically rather than therapeutically.

Freud faced a puzzling fact. What would seem to be the most natural and vital dimension of the soul – instinctual desires – ends up controlled and dominated by moral ideals and cultural norms. Where do these norms gain their power? By and large the typical solutions appeal to versions of what might be called the Cunning of Nature. The repressive limitations on instinct somehow constellate to allow for their more enduring

satisfaction. Socio-biologists, for example, formulate just-so stories that claim to show how the collective flourishing of the human genome miraculously transmits psychic energy to moral and cultural forms that repress individual instinctual impulses. Freud, however, was interested in unpacking this transmission of psychic energy rather than simply assuming it. In his clinical experience, he saw neurotic patients whose degree of repressive self-discipline seemed oversupplied with moral energy. This led him to hypothesize that the self-limiting imperatives of the superego are energized by the very instincts they repress. According to Freud's theory, therefore, culture attains its power over us because the congeries of instinctual desire that animate our unconscious selves are constantly refreshing and renewing the psychic potency of the repressive structures that seek to organize, discipline, and direct our lives. In other words, culture is engorged with an erotic desire, circulating desire back upon itself in the form of social norms that tell us "do this" and "don't do that."

One can reject all of Freud's theories, but one must recognize that the basic structure of his account makes explicit what modern theories of the self and society must presume if they are to claim the status of social science. It's not possible to say that the normative demands of society emerge from a rational recognition of purposes embedded in the natural order, for nature has no final causes, only efficient ones. (It was Kant's genius to see this problem clearly, which is why he focused moral reasoning on the project of determining the final cause of reason itself – universality – rather than reflection on the final cause of human nature.) Therefore, it follows as a matter of principle that a social scientific account of culture, including morality, must be rooted in desires. With characteristic bluntness, Brown draws the obvious metaphysical

conclusion: “The essence of man consists, not, as Descartes maintained, in thinking, but in desiring” (6).

The revolutionary and distinctively postmodern agenda of *Life Against Death* flows from Browns’ explicit affirmation, indeed celebration, of the fact that Freud’s theory of culture (and although Brown does not say so, all other modern theories as well) gives metaphysical primacy to desire. Traditional views see “the body” as subordinate at best. Our desires play an important role, for they move the soul. But desires are ordered toward something higher, because the human body participates in a hierarchical or “raising” reality. For example, as Plato observes in the *Phaedrus*, we are erotically attracted the beautiful body of another person, but we intuitively sense that our desire will not be fully satisfied, for human bodies age, decay, and lose their alluring qualities. So we raise up our desires, if you will, relishing the beauty of statues that are made of enduring marble. Yet even this will not satisfy the soul, thinks Plato, and so we take a further and final step, transforming our erotic desire for beautiful bodies and statues into contemplation of the very idea of beauty, which is timeless, unchanging, and will never fail to satisfy us. Bodily desire thus follow the luring power of the forms that raises them up to intellectual delectation. In this view, desire gratefully receives the perfecting, hierarchical power of the eternal forms.

Aristotle had a less dreamy view of our participation in the raising or hierarchical potency of reality. Or perhaps, more accurately, he adopted a more ambitious view, one that includes rather than transcends the worldly direction of bodily desire. Our desires are capable of being trained or cultured toward habits that serve a rational end. Subjected to the disciplining power of cultural norms, desires can be channeled into lasting and

noble patterns of satisfaction, the virtues. This discipline is not at odds with our desires, because Aristotle preserves Plato's view of reality as infused with a raising, hierarchical potency. But instead of placing that potency above, as it were, where it serves as an elevating, purifying and disembodied principle, Aristotle saw the hierarchical potency active in particulars. Everything is ordered toward an end that structures reality. Stones fall, trees grow, animals propagate. As rational animals, human beings participate in this perfecting tendency consciously and actively, primarily by way of culture-making. We legislate for ourselves, bringing our powers of reason to bear to the task of ordering our instincts toward their proper ends. For this reason, culture perfects our natural, instinctual selves, which is why the man most thoroughly disciplined by fitting norms is the happiest man. His habits accord with – participate in – the raising, hierarchical potency of reality.

The need for external discipline plays an even stronger role in the Christian tradition, which joins the forward-driving potency of divine providence to the upward-drawing potency of the Platonic view of reality. St. Augustine recognized that original sin perverts our desires, making them stubbornly ordered toward the downward-turned and present-oriented goals of self-love. Redirecting and retraining perverted desires requires the disruptive and invading pedagogy of grace (“born again”). Moreover, Augustine saw that we are destined for something higher than the natural nobility of Aristotle's well-trained soul. Fellowship with God extends beyond our natural capacities, and therefore the pedagogy of grace must be supercharged. Faith, hope and love stretch the soul. They are, as St. Thomas puts it, supernatural virtues. The disciplining power of grace pierces the heart of the believer, reordering the inner springs of desires to bring

them into accord with the law of love, which is the inner life of God himself. In this way, the main lines of the Augustinian/Thomistic view of human flourishing marries the emphasis on pedagogy that one find in Aristotle with the lure of a fulfilling union with the Eternal that one finds in Plato.

Modern humanism rejects as heteronomous the Christian vision of the pedagogy of grace given by God and administered by the church. It also sets aside the metaphysical commitments of Greek philosophy. Nonetheless, modern humanism remains pro-nomian, which means that in some form or another it retains the basic dynamic of hierarchical raising. Our desires must be trained to serve a higher purpose. For example, Kant thought that our power of reason had an intrinsic raising potency toward the universal. Insofar as we come to recognize this hierarchical tendency within our reason, we can use the critical principle of universality to transform external commandments into an internal law that the person can accept as his own: the categorical imperative. Later Romantics were uneasy with the way in which Kant's emphasis on universality bleaches out individuality, and they placed an accent on feelings rather than reason. The deepest moral law, therefore, is to be true to oneself. Even with the tenuous notion of authenticity, however, the consensus remains intact. The flow of our experiences and flux of our desires needs to be hierarchicalized, if you will, which means being brought into accord with my "true self." Thus, whether Rationalist or Romantic, for modern humanism a principle or law for the self somehow emerges from within the self – from reason, experience, or a lightening flash of self-possession – and it replaces the heteronomous law that is sanctioned by traditional or divine authority. In each case, although often antagonistic to old authorities, the varieties of modern humanism continue

to share with classical views a common fundamental view of human flourishing: the flux of desire must be stamped by a deeper, truer form.

Not surprisingly, in Brown's view, none of these hierarchical, pro-nomian views of human flourishing are satisfactory, for they all invert the true essence of man, treating the endless flow of desire as something to be disciplined, thus dooming the human person to the conflict of life ("the body") against death ("repression"). Brown's goal in *Life Against Death*, therefore, is not to replace a corrupt set of disciplining cultural norms with another, not even with the nebulous norm of authenticity. Instead, disciplining norms—which is to say culture itself—becomes the great enemy of the human essence. This is true whether the principles the govern desire are inherited (Aristotle) or divinely given (Augustine) or critically reformed (Kant). What Mill leaves implicit Brown makes explicit. The very notion that we need norms to flourish reflects, Brown insists, a collective neurosis. A true humanism, he argues, must be loyal to the fundament of human reality: desire in all its primitive, polymorphous perversity.

Culture means cultivation. It involves hierarchical movement, raising up natural potencies and guiding them toward specific ends. Brown grasped and affirmed the anti-cultural implications of his antinomian vision. We should forsake the repressive, habituating project of culture and embrace "that simple health that animals enjoy" (311). The destruction of civilization -- "the abolition of repression" -- becomes the great imperative against imperatives. We should no longer try to live accord with the projects of competition, and domination. Nor, for that matter, should we allow ourselves to become slaves to the ideals that Mill often recommends: progress, equality, or even freedom. All these notions and any other standard for life involve directing desire to an

end or purpose. Against this temptation, Brown hopes for a post-cultural mode of existence, one that lowers rather than raises. We should remain loyal to what is real – to the ever-changing thrusts of instinct – and this requires resisting the illusion that there is some goal or purpose that brings life into focus. Our goal, therefore, becomes life in “the mode of unrepressed bodies.” We need to cultivate a “Dionysian or body mysticism” that simply seeks and finds satisfaction as an undifferentiated biological mass, “the body” (307-310). This unmitigated loyalty to our essence as instinct-driven animals will usher in the End of History, trigger “the resurrection of the body,” and establish the timeless, unchanging, antinomian Empire of Desire.

It’s easy to make fun of Norman O. Brown. His appeals to the “dialectical metaphysics of hope” can sound hopelessly jejune. Nonetheless, Brown’s mobile metaphysical imagination allowed him to recognize the larger implications of Mill’s vision of the common good as diminished cultural authority, and he drew the obvious conclusions in bold, prophetic strokes. Today we no longer take Freud very seriously, but nonetheless we tacitly accept his basic analysis of culture and its relation to desire. Postmodern cultural theory teaches that social norms and cultural ideals are nothing more than the extruded and solidified manifestations of primitive dimensions of the human psyche: sexual desires, will-to-power, a lust for domination, and so forth. Even our selfish goals – to look thin or dress for success – are analyzed as social constructs energized by manipulative advertising designed to stimulate our erotic or egocentric desires, always for the sake of satisfying a capitalist desire for profit. All norms,

including those we impose on ourselves, slowly sink into an alien, endless, and conceptually more primary circulation of desire.

The postmodern theoretical gestures that have predominated over the last forty years express the antinomianism that Mill endorsed with careful qualifications and Brown championed as the proper metaphysical stance. These gestures are unified by a metaphysical abhorrence of law and preference for spontaneity. Terms such as “metanarrative,” “univocity,” “foundationalism,” and “presence” suggest determinative principles and authoritative truths. These concepts are drawn from the classical metaphysical vision that sees reality as energized by a hierarchical potency that gives focus, shape, and solidity to the flux of experience. Not surprisingly, as pro-nomian terms they are consistently used in postmodern rhetoric to refute, denounce, or discredit. In contrast, terms such as “difference,” “heterogeneity,” and “absence” that cut against enduring principles and stable truths are always deployed to evoke positive alternatives. “Marginality” is bathed in luminous light. “Alterity” serves as a redemptive force. I can think of no postmodern theoretical gesture that does not reflect the broad shift in the West toward the antinomian ideal. Something like Norman O. Brown’s metaphysical dream predominates.

The Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo provides a particular clear and forthright example. “Philosophy, today,” he writes in *After Christianity*, “conceives of Being as event and as destiny of weakening” (44). The modern collapse of Christianity as the source of law for the self and society seems like a failure, but it is in fact the realization of Christianity’s true spiritual genius. We are heading, he prophesies, “toward emancipation by diminishing strong structures (in thought, individual consciousness,

political power, social relations, and religion)” (91). Indirectly (and unknowingly) evoking the rich tradition of liberal Protestant theology, Vattimo suggest that this antinomian trajectory is “a transcription of the Christian message of the incarnation of God, which Saint Paul also calls kenosis – that is, the abasement, humiliation, and weakening of God” (91). Here we find a wonderfully pure expression of the metaphysical dream of our era: God himself is an antinomian. Christ does not fulfill the Law of Moses; instead, he undercuts Moses and evacuates the law of all normative power. Sinai becomes the anti-Christ.

Few contemporary academics have Vattimo’s flair for metaphysical rhetoric. However, the practice of cultural study over recent decades has been given over almost entirely to what Vattimo calls “weakening,” a trajectory that is also a lowering that shows how everything exists in an economy of desire. Norman O. Brown, for example, has a long chapter devoted to showing that “money is excrement.” The effect, clearly desired by Brown, is to disenchant the social norms of bourgeois society. I doubt that Michel Foucault ever read Brown, but his intellectual life was devoted to detailed studies of cultural norms oriented toward the same goal. Every gimcrack cultural theorist today has internalized this mode of analysis: what seems like a noble cultural ideal or elevating vision of the good life is, in fact, the intellectually sublimated form of a desire for domination, or a class interest, or heteronormativity, or what have you. In this very important respect we’re all Freudians in the way Brown suggests. Desire is the source of culture. For the most part and often in spite of ourselves, we believe, as Lacan put it, that we make reality out of pleasure.

In view of the way in which so much of contemporary thought ascribes fundamental priority to desire suggests that it's wrong to imagine, as John Paul II and Benedict and many others suggest, that our age is anti-metaphysical. Our age has a metaphysical dream. But John Paul II is right to bemoan a lack of metaphysical ambition, a theme Benedict has taken up as well. For in the Empire of Desire one looks down rather than up. Norman O. Brown promised redemption through the lowering, anti-hierarchical potency of "the body" rather than the old-fashioned, raising potency of a view of reality (or history) shot through with purposes. As a consequence a very different therapy for the soul has emerged in our time. For Aristotle or Augustine, our present unhappiness stems from our insufficient participation in the hierarchical potency of what is real, and therefore we must enter into the appropriate disciplines that order our souls to accord more fully and reliably with our final end. In the Empire of Desire, unhappiness stems from unsatisfied desires, and the proper therapy involves shedding the "hang ups" that prevent us from descending into the immediacy, ubiquity, and serendipity of desire.

The therapy of lowering and reduction to desire helps explain why relativism exercises such remarkable charm over popular intuitions about truth, especially moral truth. Desires are unstable, fluid, bubbling, and changeable. As a consequence, what the Empire of Desire takes to be the true source of reality has a paradoxically omnipotent impermanence, which the seemingly incoherent theoretical gesture of relativism (the contradiction of saying that *all* truths are relative) seeks to express. The impulse toward relativism is all the more powerful because the lowering movement of reduction to desire ministers to the ideal of equality. Any metaphysical view that envisions a hierarchical

potency at work in reality provides the basis for ranking and judging. No so a reality energized by the neediness of desire, which all sentient beings share. Everyone has preferences, to be managed, surely, and perhaps to be given priority in accord with Bentham's mathematical principle of summing up quantity and intensity, or perhaps in accord with the prudent self-interest advised by Epicurus. But, as we all know, our preferences most definitely are not to be judged, because our preferences (conscious desires) are more real than our moral principles—indeed a great deal of modern moral philosophy has presumed that our moral principles are simply preferences on stilts.⁵

I am tempted to conclude with a long, plaintive sigh. I do not see how we can read the Bible as the Word of God when our dreams are under the administration of the Empire of Desire, although there are plenty of biblical scholars who do so, as well as postmodern savants newly fascinated by St. Paul. Indeed, I have little doubt that with the right postcolonial élan one can turn the Sermon on the Mount into a form of imperialist discourse. Even good, old-fashioned historical-criticism can do the trick, distinguishing as it does between what is old in the Gospels (the Judaic or Hebraic elements) from what is new and kerygmatic. If the bible can be subdued, then what about the great teachers of the Church? St. Bernard? His desire for God is such an obvious sublimated eroticism (or perhaps not so sublimated, wink, wink). St. Bonaventure, St. Thomas, Dante, Luther, Calvin? Each slowly slides into his ideological role among the interests and power-

⁵ See, for example, responses to Susan Wolf's basic criteria for meaningful activities: deep personal involvement and intrinsic worthiness. Nobody doubts the need for existential investment, but many stumble over the notion of worthiness – an intrinsically hierarchical conception that conjures up the usual postmodern nightmares. Susan Wolf, *The Meaning of Life and Why It Matters*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

relations of his era, and each awaits his Erik Erickson. So I have no obvious riposte, no moment of dialectical one-upmanship, no revealing point to make. Even the lordship of Christ can be drawn into the Empire of Desire, as Paul Tillich, Gianni Vattimo, and others demonstrate. One cannot argue with metaphysical dreams.

Indeed, one cannot even explain them. When it comes to the Empire of Desire, some point to nominalism. Without an analogy of being, we are told, our conception of reality becomes one-dimensional. Others focus on Francis Bacon and the way in which modern science reduces nature to a mechanical machine of efficient causes. Still other say that the Reformation triggered an anthropocentric turn that eventually disenchanting the universe. I'm not competent to sort out these diagnoses, which in any event are complimentary rather than contradictory, for they point to metaphysical thinness of one sort or another, a thinness that reflects the modern turn away from the hierarchical potency of reality. But here I must pause and refrain from these larger thoughts. I'm deeply skeptical of our impulse to open up anything of consequence along a single seam – and certainly not something so consequential as our metaphysical dreams.

Therefore I want to end inconclusively. Recently, I decided to read E. M. Forster's *A Room With a View*. I remembered having enjoyed the movie, which was suffused with an enrapturing visual sensuality, and I felt slightly inadequate for never having read Forster, or at least not his novels. Upon finishing I found myself shocked by Forster's preachy tendencies. In the penultimate chapter, after the vatic utterances of the elderly Mr. Emerson have freed Lucy Honeychurch from her captivity to social images of propriety, Forster writes: "He had robbed the body of its taint, the world's taunts of their

sting; he had shown her the holiness of direct desire” (p. 311). *The holiness of direct desire* – I had no idea that Forster was capable of such cant.

But I suppose that was part of his genius. When his novels were published, readers vibrated to such pronouncements. Forster seems to have said something smart, well-read, and intelligent people very much wanted to believe, or perhaps already did believe, so much so that they overlooked the silly way in which he simplified life – beautiful young people doing what they desire in flowering gardens. Or maybe his readers didn’t overlook the simplifications, but rather gloried in them, for they clarified and intensified a metaphysical dream. They wanted to believe in the Empire of Desire (Brown’s call to Life) because the old metaphysical dream of our humanity dignified by participation in a raising, hierarchical reality had come to seem an endless nightmare (Brown’s image of Death).

So perhaps I’m wrong. I’m not entirely sure that it is the dream of an Empire of Desire that fills our mind. Perhaps there are instead nightmares of a destroying angel that worry our sleep. In all honesty, when it comes to Forster’s pronouncements, I haven’t met many true believers, certainly not among the resume-building meritocrats produced by elite American education. We’re not great believers in desire, which is why Norman O. Brown seems so silly. But fear of soul-shaping discipline? Yes, I’ve encountered that—in myself as well as in others. So maybe desire rules by default, because we’ve lost confidence in the humanizing power of disciplining moral truth that promises to give determinate shape and direction to our souls. Therein lies the challenge. How do we transform our nightmares of soul-crushing authority back into a metaphysical dream of

life ennobled by obedience to something beyond ourselves, something greater, something higher.

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