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Understanding this Dire Historical Moment – an Essay

Abstract:

The purpose of this essay is to explain this extraordinary historical moment – through the crises that constitute the malaise of modernity and the root cause of this malaise – modernity’s flight from the ascetic norms. But although worthy, this historical method cannot explain *why* history appears to be hastening. To explain this, we must peel away visible history, to uncover the hidden *metaphysical* causes underlying this dire moment. The main thrust of this essay is to explore these metaphysical causes – by understanding this historical moment as a cusp between two epochs, but also as a witness to the turning of the Great Spirit of History. Conjured by a combination of this conjunction, and a divine *Kairos*, it cannot help its turbulence. This essay has three sections: (1) The Malaise of Modernity; (2) The Root Cause of this Malaise – Loss of the Ascetic Virtues; (3) Understanding History and this Dire Historical Moment.

Keywords:

historical moment, dire, modernity, ascetic norms, conjunction, *Kairos*

Even a cursory glance at a newspaper should suffice to convince us that the world, as a whole, is at an extraordinary historical moment. The foremost essence of this unique watershed moment is *fruition*. For, its main purpose seems to be to bring to fruition all latent human iniquities, shoring them up, cramming them into a short span of time – as if accelerating the pace of history – but not of time. For, although ever flowing – because it is subject to transience – time is structurally constant. As a metaphysical sentinel, objective time cannot alter its pace. What seems like time hastening, therefore, is the pace of history accelerating upon the relatively static substratum of time – its racing empiricism, perhaps the foremost sign of the direness of this historical moment. Like a fast motion movie rushing past on a static screen, the chimera of history, appears to be galloping upon the backdrop of the time it is immersed in.

The main purpose of this essay is to understand this dire historical moment. But to do so, we must first ask what makes this moment dire. In short, we must understand the malaise of modernity and the nature of its myriad crises.¹ We must also understand

1) Applying “modernity” or “late modernity” to the contemporary West is problematic, even if envisaged in Foucauldian terms, “as an attitude than as a period of history” – that is, as a set of worldviews (each with its historical lineage) rather than as a period of history. The West is no longer modern in the literal historical sense of the term. For, as Habermas said, “Modernism is dominant but dead.” Moreover, “modernity” means something entirely different for Europe’s former colonies, which suffered brutal Western intrusions into their very different streams of history. Different civilizations experience different concurrent tracks of history. Thus, in the last century, while the West experienced “postmodern” consciousness, Europe’s former colonies experienced a culmination of colonial and neocolonial historical forces that catapulted them into a new era, through contact with an alien, crisis-ridden, nihilistic, and dominating West that also bestowed the natural sciences and the scientific spirit. As a result, they experienced an *accelerated* history that combined the “pre-modern” (often feudal) with “modern” and “postmodern” consciousness.

Moreover, the first two decades of the twenty-first century have witnessed even greater acceleration in world historical forces. We are caught in the maelstrom of tectonic historical shifts that are changing the world every day. This makes it yet more difficult to apply “modernity” to the contemporary West. To represent these fast-shifting worldviews that have beset the world since the start of this century, perhaps “post-post-modern” or Zavarzadeh’s “metamodern” are more apt. Yet, insofar as historical forces are causally connected, “post-postmodern” or “metamodern,” and their precursors (“postmodern,” “late modern,” and “modern”) are related – with the prior lingering in the posterior. Moreover, all these eras are joint heirs of long-lasting historical strains from prior centuries that have forged the current West – and through colonialism and neocolonialism, the current world. We are still suffering the aftermath of moral mistakes and nihilism from centuries ago.

But for the purposes of this essay, “post-postmodern” or “metamodern” become linguistically awkward when applied to our current global turpitude – and to Western worldviews that have forged our world since the middle of the last century. I therefore use “modernity” and “modern” (instead of “post-postmodern” or “metamodern”) for the sake of literary ease. Using these terms, more in their global colloquial sense, than in their empirical-historical sense, I apply them to the worldwide fruition of past forces that are culminating at this extraordinary historical moment. Zavarzadeh, “The Apocalyptic Fact,” 69, 75; Habermas, “Modernity versus Postmodernity,” 6; Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?,” 39.

the root historical cause of this malaise – which is modernity’s flight from the ascetic norms. Yet although worthy in some contexts, this historical method is inherently limited. At best skin-deep and shallow, it scratches the surface, merely *describing* the problem at hand – instead of explaining why history appears to be hastening at this threshold of the twenty-first century. To understand this seeming alacrity, we must peel away visible history, to uncover the hidden *metaphysical* causes underlying this extraordinary moment.

The main thrust of this essay is the metaphysical insight that this historical moment cannot help its turbulence – because it is a cusp between two historical epochs, but also a witness to the turning of the Great Spirit of History.² Conjured by a combination of this conjunction and a divine *Kairos*, this moment cannot help but shore up a tidal wave of crises – through its author and instrument – the modern self. This essay, therefore, has three sections: (1) The Malaise of Modernity; (2) The Root Cause of this Malaise – Loss of the Ascetic Virtues; (3) Understanding History and this Dire Historical Moment.

The Malaise of Modernity

That this historical moment is dire, is evinced by the multiple crises shoring up simultaneously – conjuring a world that seems to have lost all sanity. If the twentieth-century saw multiple wars and genocides, stretched over a length of time, then the twenty-first appears to be cramming multiple crises (many with roots in the twentieth) into this short, extraordinary historical moment. From the death throes of the structured democracy to the onset of authoritarianism, from the dying embers of liberalism to the rise of the far right, from cruel hi-tech wars to the global refugee crisis, from rising racism, xenophobia, and ruthless deportations of undocumented immigrants to our collective indifference to the despair of the genuine refugee, from an iconic status of money and runaway materialism to the climate crisis, from the moral to the utilitarian (and its strategic thinking) – above all, from a rules-based global moral order, based on truthfulness, to an immoral order based on untruthfulness (as evinced by the lawful lawless-

2) In this essay, upper case letters are used for some words (like Truth, History, etc.) – for honorific emphasis and literary effect.

ness, scams galore, moral cynicism, mendacity, conspiracy theories, and morally blind expediency of our times) – the world appears to have lost all sanity. Never before has it seen as high a worldliness, or as rapid an empiricism. Never before have human delusion, will-to-power, and egocentrism been as extreme as they are today. Never before have the passions ruled the world as much as they do now. We live in a world convulsed by lust, greed, anger, hatred – passions that conjure a dark cloud of unknowing.

Yet, good and evil being one among the countless metaphysical pairs of opposites, they must always co-exist.³ For, as Vivekananda said – “Good and evil are inextricably combined, and one cannot be had without the other.”⁴ This means, good rushes in wherever there is great evil – a reassuring thought that implies hidden benedictions in our crisis-ridden current historical moment. Given the scale of evil in these crises, however, the goodness that rushes in to compensate, manifests itself perhaps more through the presence of great personages, than through morally virtuous events. For, moments like this are particularly propitious for the birth of saints, whose very presence purifies the collective consciousness.

Yet, despite its many surface moral and non-moral empirical benedictions – like the structured democracy, the safeguarding of human rights, the Promethean Fire of modern technology, historically unprecedented levels of prosperity and globalism, and so forth – modernity seems like a counter-axial age that has abandoned wisdom, faith, and contemplation – in exchange for the corporeal, the technical, and the utilitarian. Rife with inner contradictions and polarities, modernity itself is a historical paradox. For, even as it carves individuality, rescuing the “I” from the prison-house of the traditional “we,” vesting it with volition – modernity encourages the “I” to dilute itself, through passions and desires. Moreover, it thwarts self-knowledge, by burying the “I” in new forms of the “we” – namely, a labyrinth of beguiling identities and groups. Even as it organizes these contrived communities (some of them, virtual) through a self-conscious human will – rather than through the silent footfall of history and the destiny it bestows – modernity destroys traditional and natural communities, to carve the “I” out of the “we.”

3) According to Vedānta, the realm of immanence is plagued by the metaphysical pairs of opposites, that include good and evil.

4) Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, vol. 7, 102.

But besides its overall verve of irony and self-contradiction, modernity is paradoxical in four further areas:

1. First, this self-contradictory character is especially pronounced in the realm of religion, where modernity heightens our numinous longings, even as it inspires rebellions against “organized religion” – especially in Western civilization. Notwithstanding his soul-searing cynicism, modern Western man is driven by a hunger for truth that makes him rebel against the twin pharisees of religious fundamentalism and an ostentatious, unquiet, capitalistic religiosity that puts heaven itself on sale.

The sum result is a paradoxical admixture of mysticism and its opposite – a strange atheism that rises like a phoenix from the ashes of rebellion against “organized religion.” Moreover, the former (mysticism) is, paradoxically, the indirect cause of the latter (atheism). For, one cause of this revolt against religion is modern man’s numinous longing to experience the Divine directly. Yet, thwarting and tempering this highest aspiration, is his reckless, reactive atheism – to be distinguished from the truth-seeking skepticism of the agnostic.⁵ Given its historically unprecedented scale of worldliness, modernity drowns us in a burning cynicism that engenders this strange atheism. While cynicism has always existed, everywhere – its modern expressions are intellectual and systemic.

2. A second paradox lies in modern man’s approach to death. For, capitalistic hedonism makes him death-denying – even as it heightens his death instinct, through an impassioned descent into the body that has supplanted what Pope John Paul II (in his papal encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*) called a “culture of life,” by a “culture of death.”⁶
3. A third paradox lies in the fact that modernity synthesizes, even as it divides. Connecting humanity through a set of corporeal-utilitarian-axiological universals

5) Unlike the thoughtful agnostic – a seeker who rejects conventional religiosity for the sake of truth – the modern atheist is not necessarily a seeker. Having descended into inordinate body-consciousness, he drowns in cesspools of cynicism and subjectivity that signify radical departures from truth. If healthy skepticism characterizes the agnostic, then a cataclysmic cynicism characterizes the modern atheist.

6) John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, paragraph 50.

that unify, through the free-market economy, technology, and global protest-politics – yet, modernity divides, by unleashing discordant forces of individuation that separate humanity into distinct warring wave-lengths – causing undue egotism and unrest that trap us in the subjectivity and particularity of identities.

Of such fissures, the most significant, perhaps, is the axiological-ideological divide between the mirroring opposites of the political left and right – which divide the terrain of ethics between themselves – both missing the holism and perfect balance of Conscience. If the left focuses on social ethics, then the right emphasizes personal ethics. If the left betrays the self through the deracinating passions, then the right succumbs to an impassioned narcissism that makes it recoil into an entombing self. Drenched in cynicism, the “progressive” left fights social injustices – but at the cost of higher faith and belief. Drenched in blind faith that ignores injustices within religion, the right draws its personal ethics from a puritanical-credulous religiosity – but at the cost of critical discernment. Often the left and right manifest themselves through two distinct movements and their respective ideologies – spiritually cynical politically progressive movements, committed to ethical correctness, vis-à-vis, movements of traditional religiosity that can be politically naïve.

The ideological gulf between those who have *experienced* belief in the First Principle, and those who have not – is yet another fissure of modernity – alongside its corollary and result – the further fissure between those who have understood true chastity and libidinal discipline, and those who have not. Although existential – hence, perennial – this fissure and its corollary are more pronounced under modernity. For, the sexual revolution has all but obliterated our understanding of the supernal virtue of chastity – as transcendence of body-consciousness.

Like parallel lines that never meet, these distinct wavelengths are ever sundered – dividing the impassioned realm of politics into mutually hostile ideological groups that make us lose sight of our shared humanity. Almost the only way to bridge these seemingly irreparable barriers, is to transcend all ideological extremes – by returning to the Voice of Conscience, and its wisdom.

4. Finally, nowhere are the paradoxes of modernity more pronounced than in the domain of human love. Even as it destroys, with impunity, larger loves and the

human relations they involve – especially family and community – modernity bestows a futile thirst for romantic love, alongside obsessive “love” for material objects and addictive substances. Succumbing to the temptations that come with inordinate prosperity, we engage in idolatrous, unrequited love for soulless material things that cannot love us back. Yet, modernity also bestows universal forms of *agape*.

Modern market forces, and the greed that fuels them, constitute a centrifugal force that dissipates civil society, diluting human relations and destroying intimacy, thus exacerbating the alienation that forges the isolated-atomized individual. Incapacity for attachment now masquerades as detachment. Inundated in an ocean of trauma and pain caused by a holocaust in human relationships – modern man longs for a chaste *contained* intimacy that engenders sincere abiding friendships. Destroying in us, the thirst for greater forms of immanent love – like affection, personal hospitality, love of family and community, and so forth – modernity creates a vacuum in human relations that renders the thirst for romantic love futile. Although mutually exclusive, materialism and human love impact each other. For, inordinate materialism destroys in us the capacity for loving other human persons. Conversely, we become materialistic when starved of human love. Yet, modernity also bestows an *agape* toward human and non-human sentient beings – especially disadvantaged groups and animals. Even as we engage in factory farming, we turn to animal pets, when human love fails us.

An added historical paradox lies in the fact that modern man combines his search for love, with a destructive sexual revolution – described by Sorokin, as a “peculiar revolution” with “odd characteristics.”⁷ What makes this paradoxical is the fact that love and lust move in opposite directions – so that love vanishes as lust takes over. Today, we seek love and friendship more through bodily intimacy – than through shared ideals, duties, and responsibilities. Given its corporeality, “bodily love” is an inherently futile oxymoron. Already futile in an existential sense, the search for “love” through bodily intimacy becomes still more futile under modernity. Modern man’s descent into the body, therefore, adds to the futility of his search for romantic love.

7) Sorokin, *American Sex Revolution*, 3.

The crisis of modernity expresses itself in further ways. An admixture of a shopping mall and a hospital, the modern world combines inordinate desire with its natural corollary – which is the epidemic of therapy inevitable, when unchecked desire morphs into addiction, causing mental imbalances that render us homeless. Feeding these desires are the passions that rule modernity – especially lust, greed, anger, and hatred. Having lost inwardness and faith, we supplant religion by psychology, and the confessor by the therapist – thus turning iniquities into pathologies to be treated through medication and therapy. Thanks to the deracinating passions, we are profoundly homeless – despite our technologically advanced habitats and historically unprecedented levels of prosperity. The unhoused who wander the streets, stand not only as a rebuke to the rich, but also as an emblem of modern man’s inner homelessness – to be distinguished from his perennial existential homelessness forged by nomadic Time and Transience.

Inordinate desire hastens the wheels of empiricism, so that alacrity becomes the defining motif of our times. Although disciplined temporally by our schedules and calendars, we are always chasing time. Driven by this over-hasty empiricism, modernity comes with multiple crises that fracture consciousness (individual and collective) – from the trenchant claw of materialism to its prime results – which include, not just the iconic stature of money, or the veneration of the billionaire, but a suicidal self-reification, through a profane monetization of ontology. This last happens when we gauge a person’s value, solely in terms of his financial worth – to the neglect of his immortal being. Indeed, no betrayal could be greater than this self-sale, which has valorized the billionaire as the hero of modernity – a direct result of our irrational-idolatrous adulation of money. The breakdown of the covenant of the family has transformed money into a necessary (albeit inanimate) friend. Nevertheless, money remains a mere instrument that possesses no intrinsic value. It therefore does not merit adulation for its own sake.

The same may be said of the broader genre of wealth – of which, money is a species – that it possesses no intrinsic value. Thus, Aristotle says in *Nicomachean Ethics*: “Wealth obviously is not the good we seek, for the sole purpose it serves is to provide the means of getting something else.”⁸ Moreover, happiness does not come from “lavish” materialism: “Yet, though it may be true that a man cannot be completely

8) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.5, 31. Citations are by book and chapter numbers. Thus, Book I, Chapter 5 is I.5. Page numbers are included in footnotes.

happy without external goods, it must not be thought that a man who is to be happy will find it necessary to have them in lavish measure.”⁹ Centuries later, Vivekananda speaks of the futility of material felicity: “External happiness is material and the supply is fixed; so that not one grain can be had by one person without taking from another. . . . Material happiness is but a transformation of material sorrow.”¹⁰

Reaching beyond money and wealth, modern materialism (to be distinguished from feudal materialism) – understood as inordinate attraction to forms of matter – is irrational. That we need to anoint every occasion with totemic material merchandize, that ATM machines have become the minted altars of modernity, that our worth lies in the scale and quality of our material possessions, that we engage in a futile, destructive, unrequited love for soulless material things and for the simplest of all material forms – namely, money – all these signify a runaway materialism that is destroying not just the planet, but the human soul.

The main *political* result of modern materialism is not just the gap between the rich and the poor, but the power vested in the businessman-billionaire, who brings with him, a perpetual shadow of plutocracy. Of Plato’s “three primary classes of men” – lovers of wisdom, honor, and gain¹¹ – the lovers of gain have supplanted the lovers of wisdom, to rule the world.

Modern materialism has brought other problems as well – a jaded sense of wonder, a suicidal climate crisis, a creeping utilitarianism that serves as the defining *zeitgeist* of our Frankensteinian deification of technology, a historically unparalleled descent into the body that subordinates self-respect and self-control below a thoughtless pleasure-principle, and a literal-minded, corporeal cosmology. These last three deserve further elaboration:

1. The *zeitgeist* of technology overpowers us with the presence of the utilitarian – an omnipresence that threatens to overwhelm the moral. The sum result is a moral crisis that reveals itself in our severance of strategies from moral principles – a severance analogous to that of aesthetics from ethics.

9) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X.8, 308.

10) Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, 102.

11) Plato, *Republic*, IX, 581c, 453.

2. Besides loss of self-control and self-respect, what else has our descent into body-consciousness brought us, but a predatory society plagued by heartache, trauma, broken families and communities, unrelenting cynicism, subordination of ethics below aesthetics, an explosion of desire, a proliferation of addictions, and addiction to therapy? Causing decline, not just from philosophical to instrumental reasoning, but from rationality as such, to the bodily realm of emotion and sentimentality – descent into the body has decimated the modern self. How does it cope with this loss of philosophical rationality? What does it substitute for reasoning? Not just shared customs, conventions, and the common consensus – but also a philosophically blind historical approach that explains the present simply in terms of the past – without unravelling the mysteries of the present through reasoning.
3. Driven by materialism and scientism, modernity expresses its greatest profanity, perhaps, in its literal-minded, corporeal cosmology. The great sages of the world saw the heavens as an ocean of portents and symbols, reverberating with the quietude of divine responses to human prayers – a sacred sea saturated with divinity. Thus, Plotinus (ca. 204/5–270 A.D.) says: “Into this heaven at rest let it imagine soul as if flowing in from outside, pouring in and entering it everywhere and illuminating it: as the rays of the sun light up a dark cloud, and make it shine and give it a golden look, so soul entering into the body of heaven gives it life and gives it immortality and wakes what lies inert.”¹²

In stark contradistinction, modern man commodifies the heavenly bodies to resources brimming with profit-potential. When he feels mystical, he goes on literal physical spaceflights. He does not dive inward to meditate on eternal verities. Given his barren scientism (bereft of wisdom), he looks for extraterrestrial life in outer space. Instead of connecting with the heavenly bodies through a numinous sense of wonder and oneness, he resorts to imagination to seek kindred spirits in space aliens. Impervious to the portents and divine missives in the starry heavens – he beholds the heavenly bodies as no more than opportunities to scrutinize and colonize the cosmos. His sense of wonder jaded by materialism, modern man – whether scientist, businessman, or space tourist – engages in literal space travel.

12) Plotinus, *Ennead V*, (V.1.2), 15, 17. Citations from the *Enneads* are numbered without chronological order (in parentheses). Thus, V.1.1 replaces V.1(10).1. Page numbers are included in footnotes.

But materialism is not the only malaise of modernity. Others include – increasing violence against women and minorities, genocide, the hi-tech war, and a perpetual risk of nuclear apocalypse. The main manifestation of these malaises lies – not just in external events – but in their source – which is the crisis-ridden modern self. For, the deracinating passions decenter this self – transforming it to the retching soul that serves as the hallmark of modernity.¹³ Signifying the multiple crises of the modern self, the *retching* of the retching soul comprises, not just its overall incontinence, but its undue-unquiet discursiveness – a centrifugal loss of self that betrays the still point within itself.

Having lost our anchor in Conscience, we have succumbed to the utter superficiality of our age – as evinced by our puerile faith in the visible, the discursive, the material, and the literal. That the intellectual serves as the sage of modernity is perhaps the greatest sign ever of the catastrophic character of this age. We are impressed by the mere words of intellectuals – to the neglect of their underlying spirit, or the being behind the words. Hypocrisy, therefore, rules our times. We appoint judges by their CVs – not by their wisdom or personal sense of justice. Having supplanted the contemplative mind, by the calculating mind of advanced capitalism, we have lost the capacity for reflective philosophical language. Instead, we use strategic, instrumental, philosophically nihilistic verbiage. What is worse – we apply such utilitarian speech and terminology even to that which is inherently philosophical and contemplative. Thus, modern parlance speaks of moral virtues as “skills” – not as “the result of a completed process of purification,” as they were for Plotinus.¹⁴ We “manage” the passions. We do not sublimate or control them.

Having succumbed to the passions – we subordinate mind below matter – descending not just into the body, but into the larger black hole of materialism that makes us reify even insights into forms of property, thus fragmenting consciousness into broken shards of self-exteriorization. Lust makes us not just sever aesthetics from ethics, but elevate it above ethics. Dictating almost every aspect of his daily life, modern man’s clamor for corporeal beauty tyrannizes – leading to a cult of youth-worship

13) In this essay, “soul” in “retching soul” is used in a strictly literary sense – as a figure of speech. For, the individual is the self – which is distinct from soul.

14) Plotinus, *Ennead I*, (I.2.7), 145.

that fears old age and death. Our retching eye reifies all that is living, and our fragmented consciousness fractures its grasp of the empirical world – through the statistical gaze, which knows it piecemeal. Indeed, no age has been shallower than ours. Yet, no age has been more sympathetic. Meaningless wafers of sympathy rule almost every human interchange.

Given these paradoxes – especially their mixes of good and evil – modernity is not so much a conundrum, as a validation of Vivekananda’s insight that “there is *no progress* without corresponding digression.”¹⁵ For, we combine epic levels of techno-business progress with the deep regress of the afore-mentioned crises – all this yielding a counter-axial age. A dark trinity therefore haunts this age, especially Western modernity – materialism-militarism-concupiscence. Yet, what seems like this antithesis of an axial age, is more likely, a gateway to the next macro-cycle of history and its powerful axial age – a Golden Age of Truth.

The Root Cause of this Malaise – Loss of the Ascetic Virtues

What are the ascetic virtues that lead to the ascetic values – and what purpose do they serve? These supernal virtues come at two levels – with the lower leading to the higher. The lower ascetic virtues of self-control, temperance, and chastity – lead to renunciation (the highest) – and to its weaker expression, detachment (which is the converse of addiction). Almost all problems of modernity can be traced to a graphic loss of these cardinal virtues, and to the passions that have rushed in to fill the vacuum left by their loss. For, the ultimate cause of the myriad external crises of modernity are the human passions that fuel them. If greed causes capitalism and the climate crisis, then lust causes patriarchy and the crisis of gender. By sublimating the pleasure-principle, the ascetic norms help us let go of the world. By sublimating our lower desires, they prepare us for life. By imbuing us with renunciation, they prepare us for death. The ascetic virtues and values, therefore, serve three purposes – purificatory, metaphysical, and salvific. Cleansing us of encrusting materialism, they purify the modern eye of its reifying habits. Sunk in the thralldom of matter, this eye projects itself onto the exterior world, reifying all that it beholds. Practice of the ascetic virtues, cleanses

15) Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, vol. 8, 384.

this eye, making it metaphysically objective, weaning it away from the empirical world, and thrusting it inward and upward, toward what Plotinus called the divine “One” “beyond being” and “before all things”¹⁶ – thus fulfilling the existential-salvific purposes of these life-saving virtues.

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle flanks each moral virtue (which he posits as the qualitative analogy of the quantitative arithmetic mean, or average) by two associated vices, or “two forms of badness” (a qualitative excess and deficiency).¹⁷ Moreover – “sometimes an extreme bears a certain resemblance to a mean”¹⁸ – meaning, one of the two vices (excess or deficit) resembles the virtue. Applying Aristotle and treating the ascetic virtues as a collective moral virtue (mean), we may conclude that they are flanked by two corresponding vices – with hedonism, the excess vice, and puritanism, the deficit vice. Of the two, puritanism resembles the ascetic norms *superficially* – but caricatures them. Puritanism is a vice because it coerces, even as it distorts these ascetic norms. As gifts of the divine One, these norms presuppose volition. They must always be chosen – *freely*.

Of the ascetic virtues, chastity stands out, as perhaps, the most significant. For, it serves as a bridge between the lower and highest ascetic virtues. Only the arduous labor of voluntary sublimation leads to true chastity, which exceeds mere sexual chastity. For it means the libidinal discipline and continence that conquer *all* bodily appetites. Moreover, this overarching chastity, which is a *voluntary* virtue bestowed by self-control and sublimation, is entirely distinct from carnal forms of corporeal “chastity” forced upon women by puritanical-patriarchal regimes. The most significant of all ascetic virtues, chastity matters – not just for its intrinsic worth as the highest, most difficult level of self-control – but because it is the bridge that leads to renunciation – the highest ascetic virtue. How? By fructifying to this supernal monarchical virtue that ushers the soteriological freedom that presupposes transcendence of all earthbound desires. Always inspired – never coerced – the ascetic virtues and values serve as the purest, most potent panacea for the passions that magnify desires to addictions, thus manifesting the deepest crisis of the modern self.

16) Plotinus, *Ennead V*, (V.4.2), 149.

17) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, (II.6), 66.

18) *Ibid.*, (II.8), 72.

As the historical harbinger of modernity, the West (especially United States of America) has been the hardest hit by the aforementioned travails of modernity, to understand which, we must first diagnose their root historical cause – which is, Western civilization’s historically unparalleled flight from overt expressions of the ascetic virtues and values – especially self-control, moderation, chastity, and renunciation of the myriad expressions of modern materialism. This flight has at least two related historical antecedents – first, Western civilization’s decline from religion to science – or from inner Truth (which governs religion) to the exteriorized correspondence notion of truth (which governs the natural sciences and the scientific spirit).¹⁹ The main implication of this first descent is a second descent – namely, Western civilization’s decline from the overt contemplation inherent in religion and wisdom – to the covert contemplation inherent in its scientific spirit.

Historically speaking, this loss of the overt ascetic virtues began, perhaps, with Europe’s descent in truth, through its scientific revolution (ca. 1540–1700) – from the higher inner Truth – whose “immediate and supreme source,” for Plato, is the Idea of the Good²⁰ – to the lower correspondence notion of truth – which, Russell says, is according to the view “commonest among philosophers” – “some form of correspondence between belief and fact.”²¹ It is this lower truth that forges the scientific spirit. The main *visible* result of this descent in truth is technological thinking – the final frontier of a fully exteriorized scientific spirit. The main *invisible* result of this descent is the graphic loss of inwardness that has sunk us in the thrall of the metaphysical pairs of opposites – so that we swing from extreme to extreme. A sacrifice at the Altar of History, Western civilization has had to pay the highest price ever, through this descent – all for the sake of fulfilling its historical purpose of bringing modernity to the world. But the lingering light of its saints and savants has left the West, with a keen sense of ethics, and stellar virtues – especially its teleological virtue of justice (despite the West’s historical travesties of justice).

19) In this essay, higher “Truth” is interior – while lower “truth” is exterior – with upper case “T” for inner Truth, and lower case “t” for lower truth.

20) Plato, *Republic*, VII, 517c, 379.

21) Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, 190.

Not just a sacrifice, this descent in truth is also providential. Having lost inwardness, modern exteriorized man needs to be pegged to the facticity of the world, through the correspondence notion of truth – in order to rectify himself by the compass of this evidence-based external truth. Western modernity has provided the scientific spirit the world needed to grasp this lower truth with accuracy.

Notwithstanding our digital interconnectedness, the world today is polarized between the stark contraries of capitalistic hedonism and religious puritanism – with both missing the balance of the ascetic virtues – but in two different ways. If hedonism flouts them openly, puritanism represses desires, thus caricaturing the ascetic virtues, which sublimate desires.

Yet, despite puritanism resembling the ascetic virtues superficially, it is hedonism – especially Western hedonism – that is likely to lead the return to the ascetic norms. Having witnessed the calamities (inner and outer) caused by abandonment of self-control and moderation, having tasted the emptiness of name, fame, and instant intimacy, and having succumbed to the limitless appetites that modernity inspires, and technology actualizes – the West is sated by the pleasure-principle, which puritanism cannot sublimate because it distorts the ascetic norms. More than puritanism, therefore, hedonism – despite its open contravention of these higher norms – is likely to lead us to the golden sunrise of a voluntary return to a collective yearning for the ascetic virtues and norms, which alone possess the power to restore and replenish this earth, reinstate the family, and forge a genuine moral community. For, hedonism's destruction of self and society is likely to spur in us a voluntary longing for the *perennial* ascetic norms.

Having discussed these norms, we now need to understand why they are *perennial* and what it means to lose sight of them. Inasmuch as the purpose of human life is essentially salvific, and the ascetic norms help us reach our soteriological potential, providence has seen to it that they are perennial. Insofar as they exist for the purpose of detaching us from earthly life, so we can return to the divine One, even as we move laterally toward death – the ascetic norms *need* to be perennial. The potential for these norms, therefore, is inherent in human nature. In fact, we are metaphysically structured to facilitate this salvific return to the One. Thus, the universe itself is structured for the eschatological purpose of returning all beings, through cycles of reincarnation, to their universal home in Plotinus' One. Moreover, nomadic Time and

Transience rule the universe for the purpose of forcing detachment from the empirical world, thus enabling our eschatological return to the One. The ascetic norms serve the same purpose of weaning us away from inordinate attachment to the empirical world, through a soul-deadening worldliness. They are therefore *perennial*. Whether overt or covert, they cannot be obliterated.

But we can lose sight of them – with devastating consequences. Forgetfulness of the One causes oblivion of the life-saving ascetic norms – inundating us in an opiating worldliness that drowns us in a sensate life that conjures an opaque cloud of unknowing. Moreover, as Plotinus says, this forgetfulness inculcates loss of self (through self-contempt and idolatrous “love” for earthly things):

What ... has made the souls forget their father, God, and be ignorant of themselves and him? ... Since they do not any more see their father or themselves, they despise themselves through ignorance of their birth and honour other things, admiring everything rather than themselves, and, astonished and delighted by and dependent on these [earthly] things, they broke themselves loose as far as they could in contempt of that from which they turned away.²²

No longer finding the ascetic norms in ourselves, or in a modern culture wrung dry of contemplation – we succumb to the unbridled desires and passions that exacerbate egotism and the will-to-power – thus heightening the death instinct and making us increasingly war-prone and cult-prone. Our flight from the ascetic norms, and the resulting descent into the body have robbed us of wisdom and higher faith – giving rise to false prophets who exploit our spiritual emptiness. Having abandoned temperance, we are addicted to soulless material things. Our limitless greed – and the vengeance that comes with greed – have fomented increasingly cowardly, unheroic, utilitarian forms of the hi-tech war. The passions that cause addictions culminate in an inauspicious death instinct that makes us hasten to death even as we cling to life, for want of the virtue of renunciation. The sum result is a culture of death that mocks a culture of life.

22) Plotinus, *Ennead V*, (V.1.1), 11, 13.

Our collective loss of the overt forms of the ascetic norms has wrought a damage that far exceeds the few providential benefits modernity has bestowed. One main result of this loss is our historically unparalleled descent into the body – followed by a conglomeration of other mimetic descents that echo this primary descent – adding to the acute superficiality of our times, and forging the retching soul characteristic of modernity. Caused by our loss of the ascetic norms, and the resulting passions that enervate the self, diluting it, and making it retch outward – this primary self-hemorrhaging is exacerbated by other reifying-diluting mimetic descents, or secondary self-exteriorizations that manifest themselves through a whole host of descents that further dilute the self – (1) from the individuated self, to a mosaic of shared identities; (2) from consciousness and self, to the brain; (3) from the moral, to the utilitarian, the aesthetic, and the legal; (4) from the sage, to the intellectual; (5) from a contemplative, wisdom-laden, inward mind, to the calculating mind of capitalism that forges a hasty rootless empiricism, devoid of wisdom and inwardness; (6) from inner wisdom, to external discursive knowledge, and further below, to information and its reification as data; (7) from duty to desire; (8) from freedom to licentiousness; (9) from moral idealism, to a mindless pragmatism, severed from roots in idealism; and finally (10) from the scientific spirit (already an exteriorizing descent from inner Truth), to technological thinking (a further exteriorizing descent).

In fact, modernity exteriorizes the perennial ascetic norms themselves, even as it externalizes the self to the retching soul. Seizing these norms from the depths of the human soul, it flings them out in their lower secular forms, embedding them in political causes that resist reification – like righteous forms of feminism, anti-racism, anti-ageism, anti-classism, and so forth. Being perennial, the ascetic norms still prevail – but in covert secular forms. Thus, sincere *praxis* of righteous forms of anti-ageism and anti-racism, should reduce the heightened body-consciousness that fuels youth- culture, ageism (a carnal corollary of youth-culture), and racism. The same may be said of righteous forms of feminism – that they sublimate and reduce the violent body-consciousness inherent in patriarchy. Righteousness matters – for these same movements, when unrighteous and ideological, betray the ascetic norms. Thus, carnal forms of feminism, which protest (in vain) carnal forms of puritanical “chastity” – lose sight of genuine, voluntary chastity, which, in the heterosexual context, should be the very essence of feminism.

Modern man's collective loss and betrayal of the ascetic norms should not surprise us. As challenging as they are, these rarefied norms are hard to achieve. They are, therefore, historically rare – especially at the collective level. The Pendulum of History, therefore, tends to swing between hedonism and puritanism – always missing the balance of the ascetic norms, which transcend both. Even so, modernity remains historically unique in how far it has departed from these norms. Never before has the world sunk into as low an all-entombing body-consciousness – by succumbing to the exorbitant hedonism that forges the retching soul. The sum result is a paradoxical age, which, on the one hand, carves individuality, and on the other, decimates this self, through desire-laden ontological losses that destroy inwardness, causing the undue self-exteriorization of the retching soul. The greatest of all modernity's inner contradictions, therefore, lies this innate irony – that it destroys the very self it forges – by hollowing it out through desires and temptations.

Understanding History and this Dire Historical Moment

In this essay, history means – not just a period of time populated by recorded facts – but a continuum of epochs, each comprising its unique set of ages. In its palpable presence, history is inherently empirical. But – in its essence, and entirety – history is more than facts ensconced in a sempiternal stretch of time and becoming. History is a series of epochs, each with its unique sequence of ages. The doctrine of reincarnation introduces greater complexity – making history a facade of something metaphysically deeper.

In its *visible* aspects, empirical history appears through facts that express the impact of the human will and desire upon the perceptible world. Yet, this visible world is only part of the infinite realm of multiplicity – which, in its fullness, is the larger sphere of Immanence that far exceeds the empirical universe. While both history and Immanence are realms of multiplicity, Immanence is the larger womb that ensconces history. Conversely, history, which belongs to the perceptible- empirical universe, serves as a *curtain* of Immanence. When studying the ferment of history, literally and empirically – by grasping the panoramic past through mere method and dubitable facts – we forget that it is no more than a curtain that conceals the quiet flow of Immanence. With its source, the divine One, or the First Principle – which, according

to Plotinus, is “primarily self and self beyond being”²³ – Immanence includes – not just the empirical world, girded by time, space, becoming, and causation – but also the *loci* of the afterlife, which are subject to time, becoming, and causation – but not material space.

Inasmuch as Immanence is subject to the transcendental moral law, so is history. All machinations of history – even if they seem lawless – are ordered by this moral law. For, as Plotinus says: “no one can ever evade what he ought to suffer for his unrighteous doings: for the divine law is inescapable and has in itself together with the judgment already pronounced its execution.”²⁴

In essence, therefore, history is a ferment of moral reverberations, repercussions, and reparations – with a transcendental moral law governing all this chaos. Yet, although infallible, this law does not *determine* historical phenomena. For the human will remains free to enact its pageantry, upon what Hegel called the “slaughter-bench” of history.²⁵ But this freedom is not absolute. For, the overarching mandates of the divine moral law unleash the necessity that circumscribes man’s freedom.

Unfurling itself across time and space, the Great Spirit of History, therefore, expresses the *conjoint* will of the divine One and man – with the One, the noblest of all noble universals, and the Spirit of History, one among the lesser universals that descend from the One. Swinging from extreme to extreme in its sempiternal evasions of balance, this Spirit of History manifests its empirical turnings, through overt historical cycles.

For the purpose of understanding this dire historical moment, it helps to reflect on the significance of the conjunction that joins two historical epochs – and to distinguish it from *Kairos*, which is its opposite. If the conjunction is a piece of chronological time, then *Kairos* too manifests itself through time. Thus, both are immersed in time. Yet, their differences outweigh this similarity. Where a conjunction comprises a temporal conglomeration of *human* actions and events governed by the divine One, through Its transcendental moral law – *Kairos* is a garland of propitious moments which this One breathes directly into the flow of ordinary time. Propitious, providential, yet portentous,

23) Plotinus, *Enneads VI. 6–9*, vol. VII, (VI.8.14), 277.

24) Plotinus, *Ennead IV*, (IV.3.24), 109.

25) Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, 21.

Kairos serves as the moral lynchpin that orchestrates the teleological cunning of history. Using *Kairos*, to illumine with Its divine breath, both the current epoch and its temporal heir (the subsequent epoch) – the One inoculates each epoch with a handful of extraordinary “nows” – all-shining moments that cleanse the homogeneous flow of instants that comprise each epoch. Anything but a literal empirical conjunction, the divine breath of *Kairos* synthesizes two consecutive epochs in a way a conjunction cannot. Unlike *Kairos*, which unifies by transmitting the logic of the moral law that threads the current to the subsequent epoch, a conjunction is a piece of history sandwiched between two historical epochs that merely joins them literally and temporally – without *unifying* them metaphysically. Unlike the propitious moments of *Kairos*, which are beyond good and evil, the two conjunctions (preliminary and terminal) that punctuate each epoch, plus the epoch itself – are mosaics of good and evil. Enlivened by divine breath, these moments of *Kairos* usher the rarefied air of the *supra*-moral that infuses ethical purity into the flow of ordinary time. Unlike *Kairos*, which is fully divine, the conjunction of two historical epochs – although mandated by the One, and therefore auspicious – is patently *human*. Unlike *Kairos*, which vibrates with the luminous “now” it transmits to inspire the stream of mundane moments to reach their sacred potential, the conjunction laces itself with an incipient darkness that foreshadows light.

Yet, despite differences, *Kairos* is not irrelevant to the conjunction. For, a radiant sliver of *Kairos* lies embedded within each historical conjunction, which begins with an inauspicious cloud of unknowing that inundates human history in prophetic proportions – causing civilization to clash with civilization and nation to rise against nation. Like scum floating on water, our worst iniquities rise to the surface – drowning reason in cesspools of the occult – while dredging all and sundry of human sins. During such nocturnal periods of history, weak minds explode with venomous thoughts and actions – unleashing their toxic tendencies without self-control or moral reflection – yet restrained by the blind historical necessities of the moment.

Although troubling, these cloudbursts of worldliness should not perturb us. For they manifest the seismic metaphysical underpinnings of history – constituting no more than the outer symptoms of a life-saving moral dredging that issues forth from the depths of the divine One in its immanent manifestations – a scouring that cleanses every individual self, and through the self, every civilization and nation. When the worldliness of the world thus bursts forth in frenzies of desires and iniquities, it obliterates

inwardness and continence. Losing wisdom, which preserves the greatest life-force in us, we become slaves of passions that hemorrhage the ordinary self, turning it into the *retching* soul characteristic of modernity. Enervating though they might appear, the tensions characteristic of these nocturnal historical moments, therefore, are blessings in disguise. For, they portend the radiant *Kairos* that unifies two historical epochs.

It is in the light of this background that we seek to understand our current crisis-laden, historical moment, ruled by mendacity and expediency, instead of the light of inner Truth. What makes it extraordinary, is the metaphysical insight that we are at a cusp or conjunction between two epochs – alongside its *Kairos*-seed. Trembling with the combined power of this historical conjunction, and its unique divine *Kairos*, our current moment of collective purgation shudders with iniquities that manifest themselves in the crises of the self – and through the self, the myriad socio-political and historical crises of our times – all this, a sacrifice at the Altar of History, in preparation for the next epoch – a Golden Age of Truth.

A cusp between the tapering end of the postmodern, or post-postmodern era – and the next epoch, for which, we have no name as yet – this moment is *epochal* in its seismic power to unsettle the flow of history. For, we are, in essence, in transition, from the last age of one epoch, to the first age of the next. The darkness that marks the closure of this epoch gives way to the light of *Kairos*, that leads to the next epoch – a Golden Age of Truth. From political violence to religious volatility – the tidal wave of human iniquities that threatens to choke this historical moment, therefore, should not surprise us. For, just as it is darkest before dawn, so is it darkest before the dawn of a new historical epoch, and the spiritual renaissance this darkness portends. Thus, Radhakrishnan says:

When an old binding culture is being broken, when ethical standards are dissolving, when we are being aroused out of apathy or awakened out of unconsciousness, when there is in the air general ferment, inward stirring, cultural crisis, then a high tide of spiritual agitation sweeps over peoples and we sense in the horizon something novel, something unprecedented, the beginnings of a spiritual renaissance.²⁶

26) Radhakrishnan, *Principal Upaniṣads*, 9.

If the conjunction of night and day is most auspicious, so is that between two epochs – with all auspiciousness bestowed by the *Kairos* that lies hidden within each conjunction. The dawn about to arrive encompasses not just the beginning of the next epoch, but the radiant *Kairos* that unifies the current with the next historical epoch – a mystical confluence enlivened by the breath of the divine One. Applied to our extraordinary historical moment, this means we are in so much turmoil right now because we are in a state of double transition – between two ages, and two epochs – using the bridge of *Kairos* to move from the last age or era of the current epoch, to the first age of the next epoch.

But there is a second, more mundane reason for this historical moment being extraordinary. We are perhaps also at the cusp of the turning of the Great Spirit of History, which always swings, from extreme to extreme. Forged by this Pendulum of History, our current historical mood cannot help but be complex. Purging the world of ideologies that detract from Conscience, the Spirit of History seeks to wash away all departures from Truth. In essence, a merciless searchlight for Truth, history seeks to extinguish every wayward ideology that betrays Truth. But since history expresses – not just the human will – but the *conjoint* will of God and man – it cannot reach Truth directly. Failing to eradicate all wayward ideologies, it provokes reactions in the form of counter-ideologies. As a result, history swings from ideology to counter-ideology. The Spirit of History, therefore, *oscillates*. Steadfast in its sempiternal evasions of balance, it swings from extreme to extreme – like a pendulum. Manifesting these oscillations through overt historical cycles, this Turning of History affects the multiple ages that constitute each epoch – but not the epochs themselves. For, the oscillations even out.

Applying this Pendulum of History – we are in so much turmoil right now because the Great Spirit of History is in the process of *turning* – oscillating from prior ideologies to their matching counter-ideologies. If in reaction to the excessive globalism of the past, nation-states have recoiled into postures of defensive, narcissistic nationalism, this is to be expected. If we are swinging from the excessive idealism of progressive political movements worldwide – to a mindless instrumental pragmatism (spawned by technology) – with no roots in idealism – again this is to be expected. If after decades of leftwing liberalism, we are swinging to far-right ideologies, this too is to be expected.

While the turning points of history are not necessarily auspicious, they are, for believers, overseen by divine providence. If free-will is only *seemingly* free – being tethered by golden chains to the divine will – so is politics. It may appear as if human

agency – the hallmark of modernity – conducts all politics. But to the perspicacious, an omnipresent divine One orchestrates the choir of moral actions that constitutes the slaughter-bench of history. For, the One uses the pantomime of politics to stir in us, the transcendental longing to rise to its own supra-moral summit beyond good and evil.

Conclusion

In this essay, the root historical cause of the direness of our extraordinary moment was understood to be modernity's flight from the ascetic virtues – so that the ultimate remedy must lie in returning to these virtues. But more important are the metaphysical underpinnings of this historical cause – and they lie elsewhere – not in events or episodes, but in the very machinations of history.

This historical moment is extraordinary because it is both a conjunction between two epochs and a moment of *Kairos*, which uses its purity to unify this epoch with the next. With *fruitio* for its essence – this moment hosts a culmination of the multiple crises of modernity. Portending tectonic shifts, it purges us of hidden iniquities, by exposing and dredging them – making them rise to the surface, like scum floating on water. One sign of this purgation is the worldwide turbulence we witness today. A cusp between two macro-cycles of History, this moment manifests the motions of the Locomotive of History, as it pulls out of what may loosely be called “modernity,” to thrust us forward toward a Golden Age of Truth, for which we have no formal name as yet.²⁷ A form of purification that derives from a second historical phenomenon – namely, the turning of the Great Spirit of History – our current historical turbulence is preparing us for the next macro-cycle of History and its sequence of ages. We are witnesses to the Pendulum of History, as it swings away from democratic hedonism, toward its nemesis, and contrary – which is, authoritarian puritanism.

27) See footnote 1 for the usage of “modernity” in this essay.

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