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## Prologue: The Five Great Ills

Opinions alter, manners change, creeds rise and fall, but the moral laws are written on the tablets of eternity.

—James Anthony Froude<sup>1</sup>

Since its origin, civilization has been marked by five great ills—ecological exploitation, military aggression, economic inequality, political oppression, and spiritual malaise. Our precivilized ancestors, however, should not be idealized or romanticized. Their lives were arduous, their habits often squalid, and their mores sometimes savage. Violent death was common. Nor were they ecological angels: before they learned to live in balance, they exterminated fauna and ravaged flora.<sup>2</sup> Yet despite the charges that could be levied against them, they eventually evolved ways of living in harmony with the earth and with each other. Above all, they enjoyed what the pioneering anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan called “the liberty, equality, and fraternity of the ancient Gentes,” the memory of which still lingers in the collective consciousness of the human race.<sup>3</sup> Finally, they possessed a natural religion without doctrines, priests, or churches—the famous *participation mystique*, which connected them to the cosmos and gave meaning to their lives.

From this perspective, the rise of civilization constitutes a Faustian bargain or even a tragic fall from primal grace. When human beings abandoned the ecological niche in which they had evolved, they left a state of natural plenitude, however rough, for a life of toil in field and mine. They became more numerous and prosperous but less healthy.<sup>4</sup> The technological means that they used to enrich themselves also harmed nature and turned war from a blood sport into a vehicle for conquest or extermination. Liberty was replaced by authority, equality by hierarchy, and fraternity by disunity. The many, who had once lived in small bands as kinsmen and equals, became subject to the few—to the emperors, kings, and tyrants who expropriated the wealth they produced. Natural religion gave way to organized religion, whose priests, rites, and doctrines served mostly the oppressors' interests, even as they gave some solace to the estranged denizens of the ancient cities. In short, the indisputable advantages of civilization were purchased at a high price.<sup>5</sup>

Much of this was apparent to the philosophers and statesmen who created the modern world, but their diagnosis of the disease—and therefore their proposed treatment—was flawed. They sought to cure two of the five great ills (economic inequality and political oppression) by intensifying two others—ecological exploitation and military aggression. As a result, the modern age is marked by the ethos of the conquistador. Scientists master nature in their laboratories so that engineers can build arsenals and factories, manufacturers can make arms and goods, and soldiers and merchants can dominate the lands and markets of the world.

These thinkers were driven by a quest for power—for dominion over nature, which would foster dominion over the

world. But as Lord Acton famously said, power corrupts, and the more absolute the power, the worse the corruption. Indeed, power seems to drive men and women mad, with hubris being the worst symptom of the disease.

The response of the Enlightenment *philosophes* to the fifth great ill was equally problematic. They set about liberating men and women from clerical religion because they detested the venality, inquisitorial zeal, and reactionary politics of the established church, and they succeeded all too well in crushing Voltaire's *infâme*. When the babe of morality was thrown out with the bathwater of superstition, the consequence was a process of demoralization that began slowly but has now become a rout.

This demoralization has three aspects—the corruption of morals and mores, the undermining of morale, and the spreading of confusion—and has resulted in the loss of almost all sense of honor, duty, and responsibility. Solidarity, too, has eroded, as individuals and groups engage in a winner-take-all struggle for power and wealth. However gluttoned with goods people in rich countries may be, they feel that they are subject to a vast, impersonal, out-of-control system that gives them the vote, that mostly abides by juridical rules, but that denies them real liberty and equality. Fraternity is not even an issue. Last but not least, because God is dead and only instrumental reason counts, all authority and orientation have been overthrown—so men and women have lost not only their intellectual and spiritual bearings but even the means by which to take them.

The five great ills of civilization therefore have become evils that threaten the continued existence of human society. Ecological exploitation has degenerated into the systematic and

ruthless abuse of nature, causing an accelerated degradation and depletion of our natural milieu. We ourselves have begun to suffer certain inconveniences, and our grandchildren stand to inherit a poisoned and impoverished planet. Indeed, as the age of petroleum draws to a close, the material basis for an advanced technological culture capable of supporting billions of people in sprawling megacities is by no means assured.

Similarly, military aggression has escalated into potential holocaust, as weapons of mass destruction are ever more widely disseminated. And wars are no longer fought by brave warriors and wily generals who meet face to face on a battlefield but by military bureaucrats and technicians who risk nothing as they rain electronic death on remotely seen enemies—or unarmed innocents.

In the same way, our economic system has vastly amplified the scope and scale of economic inequality. Despite a general rise in material well-being, wealth is radically maldistributed, and billions of people continue to live in destitution and misery. In addition, the rich command resources unimaginable to ancient kings, so the rod by which deprivation is measured has grown enormously.

Nor has political oppression vanished. Even in states where the principle of liberty is well established, the burden of bureaucratic regulation becomes ever more minute, all encompassing, and suffocating. Traditional liberties are being eroded in the name of expediency in efforts to defend national security and fight terrorism, crime, drugs, and tax evasion. A sphere of privacy hardly exists anymore. Meanwhile, democracy is mostly a sham: either money rules, or remote policy elites in cahoots with powerful economic interests make all the important decisions.

Lastly, spiritual malaise is pandemic. As a result, demoralized individuals must struggle to keep their psychic footing. Many resort to diseased methods of coping, not only physical addiction to drugs, alcohol, and tobacco but also psychological addiction to eating, entertainment, gambling, pornography, sex, shopping, and sports. Many simply cannot cope. The armies of social workers and psychotherapists may help a handful of individuals, but they can do little to save society, which becomes fertile ground for every form of mania.

This demoralization was never intended by the thinkers who created the modern world. Believing as they did (and not without reason) that organized religion was an almost unmitigated evil, they sought to liberate us from religious politics—from the interference of an established church in the public affairs of the state and the private affairs of the individual. Thanks to their efforts, we in the West are no longer subject to clerical oppression or to a despotic form of spirituality, for which we must be eternally grateful.

But we have paid a steep price for this liberation. Indeed, far from creating a rational utopia, banishing superstition and exalting reason have created a spiritual void that has been filled by absurd and dangerous political, social, and economic ideologies that have often proven to be as pathological in their historical consequences as the dogmatic religions of old.

In retrospect, it may seem surprising that the *philosophes* had so few qualms about crushing the established church, one of the pillars of the existing social order. But they believed that traditional religion was dispensable precisely because they were certain that human reason, once liberated from theology,

would soon discover the moral order implicit within the cosmos—an order to which men and women, being reasonable beings, would naturally and willingly accede.

That did not happen. The secularization promoted by the Enlightenment took on a logic and momentum of its own. Rationalism displaced reason, so the only permissible natural laws were mechanical, not moral. Human beings also turned out to be far less reasonable and much more irrational than these thinkers assumed.

The triumph of secularism has had consequences that are devastating in the political sphere. A purely rational and material politics—a politics without a moral code or a vision of the good life or a sense of the sacred—is a contradiction in terms. As Aristotle pointed out, no polity can long exist as “a mere alliance” of self-interested individuals.<sup>6</sup> What makes a political community cohere is what Aristotle called “a rule of life”—that is, a shared ethos.<sup>7</sup>

But the rule of life of modern politics is that we shall have no positive rules, only negative ones that keep us from harming others but that otherwise leave us at liberty. The citizens themselves must sustain community through social institutions—churches, schools, voluntary associations, informal networks—that inculcate a shared ethos and foster a sense of common destiny. In other words, the indispensable linchpin of the modern state is civil society, for it alone supplies the cohesion that a liberal polity lacks.

Unfortunately, the process of demoralization described above has effectively destroyed the morals, mores, and morale of civil society. As a result, polity today is more and more a mere alliance of self-interested individuals who pursue their own private ends and who accept only minimal restraints on

their actions. Liberty has become license, and the social basis of the modern, liberal state has eroded away.

In effect, the project of modern politics has failed. When Hobbes took the radical step of severing politics from virtue and founding the polity on the self-interested individual, he started a movement that liberated men and women from subservience to king and bishop, but he also set in motion a vicious circle of moral decay that has all but overwhelmed civil society. The legal and bureaucratic machinery of government has grown larger and more oppressive in a mostly vain attempt to make up for social decline. We are being driven toward an administrative despotism that extinguishes both liberty and privacy because it is the most expedient way to deal with the moral breakdown caused by our basic political principles.

It is bad enough that a secular and rational politics has destroyed its own foundation and now seems bent on creating a Leviathan. What is even more dangerous is that casting men and women loose from their traditional cultural and religious moorings leaves them adrift in a meaningless cosmos, lacking clear metaphysical or practical answers to the basic problems of life.

The resulting spiritual vertigo is responsible for much of the social and personal dysfunction mentioned above and also for the calamitous history of the twentieth century. Only a few artists, philosophers, and free spirits thrive on the radical openness of cultural nihilism. The average person hates it, and if people do not get satisfactory answers to the questions of life from their inherited culture, then they will seek them elsewhere. This explains the popular appeal of the fanatical ideologies that drenched the last century in blood (and of the

religious fundamentalism that now threatens to do the same in this one).

In reality, the Enlightenment did not so much abolish religion as redirect the spiritual drive of the Judeo-Christian tradition toward worldly ends. We moderns are just as religious as our premodern ancestors, but we have chosen to worship two savage gods—Moloch and Mammon. Those who worship Moloch turn politics into a perverted religion. They try to fill the void caused by cultural nihilism with eschatological secular creeds dedicated to achieving a utopian ideal of social perfection. Those who worship Mammon turn politics into a religion of the self. They try to fill the void by glutting themselves with pleasure, exalting their own self-gratification into a moral principle and exploiting the state for selfish ends. These are both false gods. Neither ideology nor self-indulgence can satisfy the spiritual needs of human beings or make them truly happy, and both tend toward destruction.

Our secular, rational, amoral way of life is failing. Our cultural myth to the contrary notwithstanding, this way of life represents not a final progressive advance of civilization to “the end of history” but an intensification of civilization’s inherent flaws that can end only in tragedy. We must reinvent civilization so that it once again rests on a moral foundation by discovering a new “rule of life” that moderates, rather than magnifies, the five great ills. And we now have the means to do so. The epistemological and ontological revolution of the twentieth century that produced systems ecology, particle physics, and depth psychology reveals a moral order that is immanent within the scientific description of the universe. From this order—“written on the tablets of eternity”—we can derive principles that could form the basis for humane and



prudent governance. In other words, we have rediscovered the kind of natural law that the *philosophes* envisioned. We now understand, better than our Enlightenment ancestors, the means by which we can actualize these principles without resurrecting the evils of organized religion.

In this book, I begin by examining the role played by law in human society before showing that ecology, physics, and psychology all agree in pointing us toward a politics of consciousness dedicated to expanding human awareness rather than extending human dominion. Unless the means of civilization are soon directed to an end that is higher than the endless accumulation of wealth and power, then the very enterprise of civilization itself, not just our particular form of it, may not long survive.