

The Revolution in Western Thought

Quietly, irrevocably, something enormous has happened to Western man. His outlook on life and the world has changed so radically that in the perspective of history the twentieth century is likely to rank - with the fourth century, which witnessed the triumph of Christianity, and the seventeenth, which signaled the dawn of modern science - as one of the very few that have instigated genuinely new epochs in human thought. In this change, which is still in process, we of the current generation are playing a crucial but not yet widely recognized part.

The dominant assumptions of an age color the thoughts, beliefs, expectations, and images of the men and women who live within it. Being always with us, these assumptions usually pass unnoticed - like a pair of glasses which, because they are so often on the wearer's nose, simply stop being observed. Ultimately, assumptions which underlie our outlooks on life refract the world in ways that condition our art and our institutions, the kinds of homes we live in, our sense of right and wrong, our criteria of success, what we conceive our duty to be, what we think it means to be a man or woman, how we worship our God or whether, indeed, we have a God to worship.

[Most of the trends of Western man's thought appeared first in the Greek philosophers - logic, mathematics, and natural sciences, Plato's interest in the Ideas that give meaning to things, and Aristotle's interest in the things themselves, but Greek thinking ended in a basic skepticism concerning the world, meaning and morals.]

From the fourth century triumph of Christianity through the Middle Ages and the Reformation, the Western mind was above all theistic. Virtually without question all of life and nature were assumed to be under the surveillance of a personal God whose intentions toward man were perfect and whose power to implement those intentions was unlimited. . . . it does not follow that they understood or even presumed to be capable of understanding the dynamics of the natural world. Christian man lived in the world as a child lives in his parent's house, accepting its construction and economics unprobed. Not until the high Middle Ages was a Christian cosmology attempted, and then through Greek rather than Biblical inspiration, following the rediscovery of Aristotle. . . . the Christian outlook [assumed] that reality was focused in a person, that the mechanics of the physical world exceed our comprehension, and that the way to our salvation lies not in conquering nature but in following the commandments God has revealed to us.

[The Renaissance revived an interest in nature and the consequence was modern science. . . with patience the structure of the universe could be brought into marvelous focus. . . [with] practical rewards. Drudgery could be relieved, health improved, goods multiplied, and leisure extended. As these benefits are considerable, working with intelligible nature began to overshadow obedience to God's

will as a means to human fulfillment. . . God was eased towards thought's periphery. Not atheism, but deism, the notion God created the world but left it to run according to its own inbuilt laws. . . the modern outlook [presupposed] that reality may be personal is less certain and less important than it is ordered. . . [that] man's reason is capable of discerning this order as it manifests itself in the laws of nature. [and] the path to human fulfillment lies primarily in discovering these laws, utilizing them where this is possible and complying with them where it is not.

The reason for suspecting that this modern outlook has had its day. . . is that reflective men are not longer confident of any of these three postulates. Frontier thinkers are no longer sure that reality is ordered and orderly. If it is, they are not sure that man's mind is capable of grasping its order. Combining the doubts, we can define the Postmodern mind as one which, having lost the conviction that reality is personal, has come to question whether it is ordered in a way that man's reason can lay bare.

It was science that induced our forefathers to think of reality as primarily ordered rather than personal. But contemporary science has crashed through the cosmology which the seventeenth -to- nineteenth-century scientists constructed as through a sound barrier, leaving us without replacement. . . physics has cut away so radically from our capacity to imagine the way things are that we do not see now the two can get back together. . . a world at odds with our senses and with our imagination, where . . man's sense of order cannot be resolved by refinements in scale . . . a radical disjunction between the way things behave and every possible way we try to visualize them. . . the sense of the cosmos has been shaken by an encyclopedic skepticism.

Existentialism and Analytic philosophy are the two dominant movements in the twentieth century. . opposite poles, but both doubt reality has an absolute order which man's understanding can comprehend. [Philosophy] has reminded us that to be human precludes an objective and impartial overview of things. . . to be human is to be finite, conditioned, and unique. No two persons have had their lives shaped by the same forces of genetic, cultural, historical, and interpersonal forces. Life is full of contradictions and incongruities. . . a world that defies lucid and coherent exegesis . . without objective reality [focused instead] on the individual struggling for self realization . . . in a world out of focus.

(excerpts from Beyond the Post-Modern Mind, Hustin Smith)

