

On Nihilism ... Utopianism

MH editors

Our modern world is a fraught one, and the ideas and experiences by which we live and the decisive events of life which we confront almost daily demand our attention and deliberate consideration. The world of ideas has never been far from the world of concrete, daily life, but the particular set of issues we face now requires a renewed inquiry into the dynamic interplay of idea and person, and the processes by which a person comes to an intellectual or ideological stance. For with the loss or diminished presence of various inherited forms of life and thought—forms of living and thinking—and the increasingly widespread thin individual sense of self, we note a rising level of attraction to strong expressions of authority that, although related to death in complex ways, seem to offer a stability lacking elsewhere for many people. This stability is fraught with danger, for it nearly always involves a deep disregard for select others, different individuals or groups—a disregard that blurs the boundaries of life and death in world-changing ways. When a tradition of life or thought is narrowed into a stance of stable certainty, it loses its capacity for difference and growth, and comes to occupy a rigid, defensive state characterised by a strong sense of embattlement or entitlement. In order to deal with the complexities of the world, it tends towards increasingly reduced definitions of self and other, and favours abstract ideas over concrete life. This basic stance indicates an inability to cope with uncertainty, nuance, and complexity, and one wonders if it isn't common to most or all contemporary forms of identity and political adherence.

In general, we can say without exaggeration that we live in an era marked by multiple crises. Religious and political fundamentalism, terrorism, war, and forced mass emigration coexist with dying traditions, loss of community, an increasingly stressed relationship with the material world (environment, food, energy production, etc.), and a significant shift of everyday life to the online world. These (and other) crises condition individual life in two related ways we want to set out here. First, in the general tendency to have our way of thinking—our intellectual temperament—marked by 'crisis-time', to the extent that our habits of mind have grown accustomed to relying on drama, opposition, and excitement, and grown unaccustomed to those ideas and events which do not partake of the excitement of spectacle or the drama of finalities and proposed solutions. Second, the loss or recession of healthy traditions, cultures, and communities means that individuals have a meagre or absent supra-personal context for comprehending strong, decisive events. Insofar as this is the case, manifestations of authority are measured primarily by an individual's own experience, for there are increasingly fewer larger healthy and established meaningful contexts and traditions which significantly deepen everyday life. Without a larger meaningful context by means of which discernment may be cultivated, the individual is left alone and struggles to differentiate between appropriate and fundamentalist forms of authority as they come to light. In this context, personal identity (who I am) and integrity (how I comport myself) become frangible and thus volatile—'strong' events or experiences may alter one's sense of self in decisive ways, and integrating these 'strong' events or experiences into one's own understanding of other events and experiences may prove beyond one's individual capacity.

When discussing these matters in our time the conscientious thinker ought to take note of a widespread (though not ubiquitous) tendency in recent and contemporary scholarship in the humanities at large to see particular ideas and works through the prism of a certain critical trajectory that occurred in parts of Europe over the last several hundred years—a prism that favours the significance of, say, the Renaissance over medieval art and life, or the Enlightenment over the Protestant Reformation, or secular developments over religious concerns, or poetic modes of artistic making over prosaic forms. This trajectory almost inevitably leads through the Romantics to the triumvirate of Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud, and what follows in their converged wake. While we refrain from making any immediate claims regarding the validity and usefulness of such a prism and trajectory, we want to note two sequent thoughts. First, the enduring need—when addressing any critical stance or way of thinking—to discern what are its guiding absolutes or ‘ultimate’ reference points, for and insofar as these absolutes (reference points) become a constellation of intellectual coordinates in the light of which thinking operates or a critical tradition is informed (in-formed, inwardly formed), which then translates into the lived reality of a community (whether scholarly, political, religious, etc.) and the people of which it is comprised. Second, to qualify the first, the enduring need to discern the ‘nature’ of specific constellations of intellectual coordinates—to determine to what extent they are ‘open’ to what lies beyond their own particular set of insights, and thus may become part of a larger cultural dialogue in the course of which they may be augmented, deepened, or adjusted, or conversely, to what extent they are ‘closed’ to what lies beyond their own purview, and thus remain in a position of certain insistence without measure or quarter.

With these thoughts in mind, we may ask: on either side of life and underlying the meaningful forms we inhabit and live as human beings is – what? –something? –nothing? This basic and enduring question may be deepened for us through the temporal and metaphysical inquiries of nihilism and utopianism—intellectual and spiritual stances which critically engage with the ways we affirm or gainsay our familiar yet different worlds.

Nihilism may be construed as a casting (as with a fishing line, or by way of a sculptor’s tools) back to a place before form, from which one may reconsider and perhaps reconfigure the present. The powerful image of modern nihilism begins in the nineteenth century; named by Turgenev and examined by Dostoevsky and Nietzsche (among others), it was a literary inquiry into the political and theological grounds of recognisable cultural rebellion whose points of reference and limits linger in significant ways in our cultural-historical present. However, this ‘modern’ constellation of works and ideas is also determined for us by a long philosophical tradition—one that harkens back, in the West at least, to the Greeks who sought to make sense of form and chaos, and forward to Leibniz’s question (reiterated by Heidegger et. al.) of ‘why something rather than nothing?’ This fundamental question is shared by the major world religions and their accounts of cosmic and human genesis and telos. This multifaceted heritage of nihilism—the question of *nothing*—informs our contemporary scene and conditions our ideas of origins and ends, cultural continuity, sense and purpose of form, grounds of individual meaning in life, attitudes towards death, and the future of the environment.

Utopianism, in contrast to nihilism, may be construed as a casting (as in fishing or sculpting) forward to a place beyond or after recognisable form, from which one may fulfill or supersede the present. Etymologically utopia means ‘no place,’ and this original

connotation of the fantastic has grown in strength historically as the term shifted from an ancient and post-Renaissance focus on physical space to something akin a 'state of mind'—a private dreamland refuge from historical and personal horrors or vacuities realised in more modern art and consciousness. Interestingly enough, the relinquishing of the idea of *finding* a (physical) utopia involved in the *internalisation* of the idea brought about a troubling and often devastating urge to *make* a utopia in time and space—a concomitant *externalisation* of the idea that a place may exist where one's particular vision of how the world ought to be becomes true. This form of utopia is found frequently in religious and political regimes or movements that seek to justify inhumane actions (of disdain, marginalisation, exile, repression, murder, genocide, etc.) through reference to a promised paradisiacal state—a utopia—which will become real here on earth or after life here ends. The terrible cast of this mindset is in turn addressed by writers of dystopian fiction who discerned only a derelict and stricken world at the heart of fantasy elevated over reality (in this way)—whether that fantasy took religious, political, racial, historical, or hypertrophic, entertaining form, despite the fact that it could be prompted by feelings diversely understood as hope, love, desire, fear, malaise, despair, or boredom. We see aspects of this in contemporary projections of utopia in the different worlds of modern finance, power, fame, or notoriety.

We might distil this critique to a simple question: why make an image of something different to reality at all? This question touches the essence of all artistic making, but it must not be understood solely in the light of a negative sense of utopianism, which is only one aspect of the human imagination, and which should be considered alongside things like dream, nostalgia, satire, or grotesque realism.

Finally, noting how easy it is to become wholly critical of notions of nihilism and utopianism, we want to stress that these two ideas are not merely forms of resignation, absence, or spiritual frustration; they may also be seen as ideals—absolutes, guiding ideas—which, rather than simply shut down the present, may offer new or different and potentially productive grounds for contemporary thought. Both nihilism and utopianism may be considered as forms of resistance to a purported finality of meaning—of ultimate determination of a person's or thing's identity and purpose. This is to see in nihilism and utopianism a freeing element; to see them as conditions for *saying something*. To have this in mind is to admit that although by and large utopia is a transfiguration of form and nihilism a disfiguration of form, each term is rich enough in implication and application to warrant serious, sustained thought.