

Materialism Pt. 3 of 4

“Turn off your mind, relax and float downstream

It is not dying, it is not dying.

Lay down all thought, surrender to the void

It is shining, it is shining.

That you may see, the meaning of within

It is being, it is being.

That love is all, and love is everyone

It is knowing, it is knowing.”

~The Beatles, “Tomorrow Never Knows” (1966)

The upshot, so far, is that in our moral lives in a material world, everything is up for grabs.

Reactions to this varied. One was the turn to mind-altering drugs, led by such writers as Aldous Huxley (1894 – 1963) whose *The Doors of Perception* (1954) was the source of a different 1960s rock group’s name, and of course Timothy Leary (“Tune in, turn on, drop out”). Transcendent reality may not exist in the material world but can be found in your head! The 1960s hippies began to “drop acid” (LSD, lysergic acid diethylamide). Some would claim to “see God.” Acid rock was its musical expression, proclaiming mystical revelations of peace and love. Others, of course, experienced sometimes terrifying hallucinations caused by the drug’s radical altering of their perceptions. I recall from my graduate student days a past user telling me how he’d seen his stereo grow a mouth, as the music coming from his speakers took the form of two arms reaching his way as it tried to eat him. People with latent personality disorders, or just the anxiety-prone, were especially susceptible to bad experiences with LSD. Some users ended up with psychoses, or simply “burned out” from repeated usages with permanent brain damage: “acid casualties.” All of which makes the reality-is-in-your-head route a risky one to travel down!

Many of that generation's parents, however, had turned away from the problem, leaving them vulnerable to criticisms of them as morally shallow, having sold their souls to the corporate system. "If it feels good, do it" is a phrase associated with the hippies, but there was a sense in which the prevailing ethos was closer to this sort of phrase than their elders cared to admit. Convenience reigned. This was true in business, in government, in academia. If it's convenient, do it. Consider abortion, which had become an issue well before Roe v. Wade (1973). Sexual license (also a problem in some communities before the liberation movements of the 1960s) led to unwanted pregnancies; simple as that. Despite the prattling about those cases when "the mother's life is in danger," over 99% of abortions are abortions of convenience. Abortion's legal acceptability has led to the killing of over 50 million unborn babies and counting. I will not torture readers with the bizarre rationalizations feminist philosophy professors have produced (it is hard to call them philosophers with a straight face), except to note that the linguistic sleight of hand used has been intended to deprive the unborn and sometimes even the newly born of moral standing, and hence any claim on life that others are obligated to respect. The Nazis and other totalitarians did the same thing, removing those to be eliminated from the moral community.

But then again, if Benedict, Dewey, Rorty, and others are correct, then the only moral standing anyone has is what their society, or the state, gives them. What the state and social approval give, the state and social approval can take away, whether its targets are Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, etc., under the Nazis; those who resisted collectivized farming under Stalin; or the unborn in our own culture. It is possible, by this reading, that a future Christian civilization might regard this last as one of the largest and most insidious holocausts of all.

The tendency, as we have seen, has been to evade the issues, or to simply stop thinking about them. Many theologians would succumb fully to the “death of God” by the 1960s, even as their children were “finding Him” in recreational chemistry. Secularization was one of the manifestations of materialism having captured Western culture. Harvey Cox (1929 –), one of the leaders of the “death of God” movement, wrote in his *The Secular City* (1965) that secularization “bypasses and undercuts religion and goes on to other things... The world looks less and less to religious rules and rituals for its morality or its meanings.”

I recently finished one of the most comprehensive accounts I have seen of the modern, secular attempt “to live after the death of God”: *The Age of Atheists: How We Have Sought to Live since the Death of God* (2014) by British intellectual historian Peter Watson (1943 –). Watson’s account ranges across philosophy, art, poetry, literature, and science – or, more exactly, science-promotion, as he includes evangelical atheists such as Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Sam Harris, which is materialism promotion in my sense of that term. Watson is a reasonably honest thinker, and those who maintain (as I do) that materialism has no hope of providing society with a sound moral foundation and direction will find support for their views in his work. So despite the title and themes (and tediousness at times), the book merits study. At the end, Watson does not endorse mere science-promotion but rather seeks to explain why many credible authors, writers, poets and artists have found the “scientific worldview” too narrow. His answer isn’t especially satisfying.

It comes down to the idea that, given God’s absence, the “central sane activity” (title of the book’s meandering closing chapter) is “sheer wondering inquiry,” and a grasping for those lonely moments of meaningfulness and life-affirmation. Different authors have given them different names. Abraham Maslow, for example, called them “peak

experiences"; James Joyce spoke of "epiphanies"; Malroux, of "temporary refuges"; Yeats, of "brief moments of ecstatic affirmation"; Ibsen, of "flashes of spiritual value." These moments, Watson insists, can be had in loving relationships, the satisfaction of various desires, the experience of hearing an especially moving piece of music or seeing a work of art or reading poetry, or in any number of other ways including just the mundane satisfaction of a job well done.

Even if you are a secularist, are you really satisfied with this?

Study them closely, and you see that these experiences, real though they may be, are private and personal; one comes away sensing the difficulty the writers have in communicating their content to others. They are more the stuff of poetry than philosophy. They are, however, pleasant – momentary "highs" – and we are inching our way back to the possibility that psychoactive drugs can be used to trigger such experiences artificially and expand them indefinitely if the results are satisfying enough to outweigh the dangers.

All this seems like denial to me. Of the obvious. By turning away from the larger picture, the one both Nietzsche and Russell were courageous enough to face, to focus on those nice little particulars we experience or arrange for ourselves, whether in our private lives or by using recreational chemicals, we evade the important consequence of materialism:

That once you've removed God and transcendence from your worldview, there are no binding moral values, binding in the sense of being definitive and authoritative, and suggesting a lasting, inescapable, personal penalty for their violation. There is only state authority, popularity, physical pleasure, and these ephemeral on-top-of-the-world moments – all of which end in death, which the materialist understands as the permanent extinction of consciousness and personality. You cease to exist as completely as the nonexistence that preceded

your conception. Presumably after those final anxious moments before you wink out, you won't be worried about it.

Watson correctly observes that many people in secular society seem to have no problem with this. They have either rejected "religion" without further thought, or simply grew up without it. He writes:

"We need to remind ourselves ... that many people – and perhaps the quieter souls among us – see no problem in God being dead. For them his death is no source of anxiety or perplexity... [S]uch individuals are not "metaphysical types" and seek no "deep" meaning in existence. They just get on with their lives, making ends meet, living from day to day and season to season, enjoying themselves where they can, untroubled by matters that so perplex their neighbors. They have no great expectations that the big questions will ever be settled, so devote no time to their elucidation. In some ways, they are the most secular people of all and perhaps the most content" (The Age of Atheists, pp. 532-33).

Such folks blend smoothly into the majority, the masses of humanity in advanced civilization, meeting its demands on them, and no more thinking independently today than the third or so who were content with British rule in the 1770s and another third who didn't care so long as they had food on the table. If asked, they will say they have no time for such matters as these. They will vote for mainstream candidates without question, and only start asking questions when their supposed leaders send their kids off to die in foreign wars as cannon fodder, if even then. They are first veilers. While many are nice people and good at what they do, should we trust their collective judgment with matters as far from everyday experience, and as important, as whether or not one should believe in God as the source of moral valuation?

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