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THE UNLEARNED LESSONS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

AN ESSAY ON LATE MODERNITY

Chantal Delsol

TRANSLATED BY Robin Dick

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Totalitarianism, of whatever persuasion, emerges when we get caught up in the belief that "everything is possible." It might be worth recalling just how difficult it was to have this idea accepted, or, for instance, to remember how reluctantly the thought of Hannah Arendt was received in France. To deny that "everything is possible," to make the postulate of unlimited possibility the cornerstone of the errors of the century, was, it was said, to equate terror and utopia, or to liken the perversities of man's annihilation to ideals about reshaping human nature. To do this was unthinkable as long as ideological dreams were still so pervasive. 11

Several decades of perseverant reflection, however, finally made it possible to state openly that the idea that "everything is possible" represents the birth of the twentieth century. This little phrase, which was to reveal itself to be so terrible, essentially means two things. "Everything is possible" is a way of determining who is human: one can then arbitrarily set a boundary here or there between humans and "subhumans" and declare a particular category to be nonhuman, which is what Nazism did. "Everything is possible" is also a way of determining what it is to be human: one can then arbitrarily

decree that humans can or should live without authority, without personal secrets, without family, or without gods, which is what communism did. In fact, communism ended up adding the first consequence of "everything is possible" to the second and denied the humanity of those who made no effort to become other than they were.

12 The biblical account, which lies at the roots of European culture, proposes the appearance of a common ancestor of humanity—Adam.

Whatever the fortunes or misfortunes of monogenesis in the history of science, human unity continues to confirm itself as a structuring tradition. Saint Paul affirmed that all humans, as humans, are alike beyond the criteria of sex, social standing, or ethnic origins. The philosophy of rights later took root in this idea, which from then on was founded upon reason. But whether the postulate of human unity is founded in religion or reason, it still represents the primary idea upon which a world of relationships can be based. In its absence, separation and hatred inevitably arise. 13

The temptation to dehumanize and the historical attempts to do so stem above all from a rejection of this unity, from a questioning of it, or from troubling debates over the boundaries that define the human species. By indulging in indecision over human status—do Indians have a soul?—the Christians of Europe decimated the populations of America. Las Casas, pleading on the Indians' behalf, did not argue for human dignity (something that was well established in the Christian world). Instead, he began with the premise that Indians are indeed human, hence equal in dignity. (This also constituted the major theme in the controversy of Valladolid.)¹ Dehumanization begins with the denial of human status, with the expulsion of certain humans beyond the frontiers of the species. One cannot brand others as "undeserving" of human dignity without first branding them as "subhuman"—that is, without first dismissing them as radically other.

Perhaps human dignity is just too serious a thing to be left in the hands of men. And perhaps the biblical tale does indeed represent the only guarantee against the temptation to displace the human species. It is nothing more than a story, one might object. Yet dignity does not exist without this story, for dignity was discovered or invented along with it, and all our efforts to establish other foundations have turned out to be very poor substitutes. The creation story, which bestows meaning, guarantees human dignity better than any

form of reason ever could. For the problem is not to ensure that human dignity exists: this is the only certitude that we have. We do not need to prove it since we hold it to be above any proof. We need only assure ourselves that it does not rest on arbitrary foundations that any science claiming to be omnipotent or a *sui generis* morality might reconsider at the turn of every century. In this respect, the biblical story of creation, which raises man to the level of God's image, serves less the cause of God than the cause of humanity. To say that man is made in the image of an indescribable God is simply to guarantee the requirement that animates us: we do not want man to be treated as a thing. It is to authenticate the compelling certitude of his stature, to withdraw this authentication from rationalist inquiry. Naturally this guarantee and this authentication then become bound together in a mystery. Yet no science could ever provide us with this guarantee, the only one that really matters to us. For we do not know exactly who man is, but we are sure that respect is owed to him.

Our moral certitude overwhelms and goes beyond our rational knowledge. If our present time no longer accepts this mystery of man in the name of faith, then let it at least accept it for the sake of the proven consequences of its rejection. Let us not believe that we will avoid future tyrannies by endlessly rehashing the memory of past tyrannies. We will do so, rather, by legitimizing the certitudes that can prevent further fragmentation between human groups—whatever factors may lead to it. Feeling remorse and blaming our ancestors will never suffice unless we also reflect on the causes. The repetition of a crime is avoided only by exposing the subterranean foundation that gave rise to it, by undoing its hidden dynamics. The

Any selection that separates the more human from the less human—or, to use current terminology, *persons* from *unpersons*—is the consequence of man's control of his self-definition. If we decide to take control of the definition of what it means to be human, to turn it into a possession of ours, to define it according to our historical or

ideological whim, then we break man himself. This appropriation of man's definition engenders what we clearly recognize as catastrophes. The obligation of respect forces itself upon our conscience; we do not invent it; it serves as a foundation and is not founded. This obligation includes the unity and specificity of the species, without which it turns against itself: we are not the arbiters of the definition of man. In this regard, we find ourselves in a situation of dependence, at least if we do not wish to reject what clearly seems to us to be what is most worth saving in this culture.

The force of human catastrophes compels us to meditate upon the obscure weight that sinks utopias: a truth about man that limits the omnipotence of the will in the drive toward perfection. We cannot reshape humanity according to our will. The horror that grips us as we look back upon the spectacle of the twentieth century shows us that a mysterious order has been subverted. The task before us is not to stop denouncing the extermination of human beings and societies—far from it: our task is to trace to its origins the denaturing of human beings that was extermination's call to arms. The obligation to reckon with an incorrect understanding of mankind thus becomes a moral obligation—so long as we admit, having drunk the bitter cup down to its dregs, that utopias sow death. We are limited in what we can realistically hope for. The category of what is possible imposes itself upon us, and our recognition of this fact is the prerequisite for any reconstruction. This prerequisite reduces us, then. It

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does not tell us to what extent nor how far it reduces us, but at least it forces us to reflect on the impossible, to be mindful of our limits. There is something in the human that endures. If the *new man* of Chernychevsky³ turns out to be a murderous dream, then the investigation into what man is becomes heavy with meaning.

There will be no post-totalitarian future without a clear and well-argued rejection of everything that built the anti-worlds of the twentieth century. The future will not take shape without the loss of illusions, which are laid to rest only by a clear-minded examination of experience.

To respect man does not mean to respect a concept, but rather a being who has specific needs. To hold man in contempt, as did the totalitarian utopias, is to disdain precisely that which man needs in order to be man. Respect for human rights translates into a respect for human needs that are known to exist; it does not spring from the invention of the human by those who would create worlds to suit their whim. Antiutopian hope is anchored in a human world that is not *invented* but *recognized*, including its needs and dreams, which hope protects and expands. It seeks to recognize and rescue that without which humans perish in despair.

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The totalitarian spirit will never really be tamed and vanquished without a return to experience as a necessary corrective to the urge to experiment. These two cognitive processes involve our relationship to reality. Experience embraces the real; experimentation wills to possess the real. Experience has its eyes open; experimentation has a tight grip on things. The European Faustian spirit is constantly moving back and forth between these two poles, the one serving the other, for experience alone would mean blending passively into the world, while experimentation alone would produce mad and manu-

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factured worlds. Only the use of both approaches, each serving the other, makes possible the kind of transgression that is not profanation. Only the recognition of the validity of experience can erect barriers at the edge of the inhuman chasms of experimentation. To experiment is to be closed within oneself and one's own bare will. To experience is to embrace being—but this movement of the mind has left us. It will have to be relearned, like a lost art.

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Communism counted on and hastened the disappearance of religions, but in contemporary democracies religions are disappearing

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on their own. Communism may have decreed that politics would ultimately disappear, but in today's world civic life is denigrated by citizens who stay away from the polls. Communism did everything it could to break down community and hierarchical bonds, encouraging even family members to inform on one another; these bonds are now undone by indifference. In other words, we have not really broken with this recent past; our world is an extension of it. It is as if the nihilism of late modernity were pursuing the uncompleted work of utopian ideologies.

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Derision—the weapon of negation, armed laughter—may correspond to a new project of re-naturing man without the use of terror: everyone will now shape his or her own nature, each of us will invent the existence that suits us best. The postmodern ethic consists in legitimizing experimentation on oneself, on the condition that it is voluntary. In totalitarianism's "everything is possible," which had no recourse other than violence, we think that it is only violence that is dangerous. We must therefore bring about this "everything is possible" through other means. Late modernity still believes that we can do anything we want with man, on the condition that it be done in freedom: the same ideology is still at work, but in a different form. Of course it is true that totalitarianism is monstrous because of

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the terror it practices, but the root of its error is every bit as frightening: the certitude that, as far as man is concerned, "everything is possible." This certitude is shared by the totalitarian and democratic societies of late modernity alike, for it borrows its source from the religion of progress that gave birth to them all.

14 It is quite possible that what is most important for us is precisely what cannot be proved: for example, the intrinsic dignity of every human being. This paradox becomes clearly visible when the rational systems of modernity give rise to acts that we cannot help but see as human catastrophes. This tendency leads us to take up the defense of scruples (from the Latin *scrupulous*, or little pebble), which bother the moral conscience like pebbles lodged in a shoe. Such doubts about the rightness of an action to be undertaken reveal the difficulty of embodying moral precepts in concrete existence. They may, as is true in the case in point, represent the last remnants of conscience after customary or historical morality has been, or is about to be, thrown out the window. Scruples are what resists the will to transform or destroy morality. They show up in the writings of Darwin and the first advocates of eugenics at the end of the nineteenth century: basic reason, they say, would have us not prolong or even destroy the lives of "undesirables," and yet our scruples keep us from doing so; thus, civilization is rushing toward its ruin.⁹ Scruples here rest on no clear foundation, the thinking of the time rejects them, and social analysis demolishes them. They represent a tiny and contemptible obstacle to grandiose undertakings. But it is precisely these seemingly insignificant objections which must be listened to, for they are bearers of the meaning—albeit sometimes unfathomable and irrational—of our common existence. The one who sweeps away our last scruples, the one who presides over the auto-da-fe of scruples, is Hitler.

58 Since World War II, an obsession with "civilized barbarity" has reigned in Europe. It is a legitimate obsession, and if certain ecological currents of thought prefer animals to man, it is because, in the course of the twentieth century, man revealed himself to be more cruel than animals. What has been forgotten is that man becomes civilized through the cultural architecture of myths, norms, and laws. Totalitarianism made humanity barbarous by depriving humans of their cultural world. Nazism uprooted the foundation of the culture

59 of dignity by rejecting the unity of the human species; communism rejected the expressions of this culture without replacing them—law and morality are bourgeois, hence to be eliminated. It arrived at barbarity through the annihilation of properly human requirements, for a society without laws and morality ends up forgetting the very foundations of its humanity and therefore treats some men like animals.

The very term *condition* signifies that man does not escape all determination. He is not a free agent; he carries ballast. The contemporary individual believes he is capable of inventing whatever it is he wants to be, and takes himself for God. In this respect he has inherited that ideology which thought it could reinvent humanity, cast off the ballast of constraints, and play the demi-urge. Contemporary individualism represents the continuation, in solitary form, of the utopian dream.

To "raise" a child, in its most concrete sense, is to help him emerge from the naked and unspoken tragedy into which his birth has thrown him; and to give his wound a meaning. Of course, this meaning will be incomplete and always too meager, but it will make of him an upright being in spite of the tragedy and the wound.

80 Fundamentally, the demanding reality from which the contemporary individual seeks to detach himself is his own insufficiency. The human being who lived in ancient societies knew very well that he could never be self-sufficient. His world gave him laws, took care of him, and recognized him in his role. The major error of late modernity is to believe that the way of progress is the way of individual self-sufficiency. In this sense, it is still drawing from the utopian well-spring. To leave ideological utopias behind would mean to recognize more clearly man's constitutive insufficiency. Then the way of progress would be the way of expanding individual responsibility. The problem for the modern subject is not to achieve greater independence by erasing his own finiteness, but to better come to terms with his finiteness and that of others by deliberately involving himself in his world.

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Any form of coherence entails renunciation because it cannot tolerate contradiction. It is shaken by imposture. It is nourished by memory. The subject who is faithful to himself lives his history. The ephemeral individual renounces nothing. His own history remains foreign to him: he admits to living successive lives. The contemporary individual, even as an adult, remains an unstable adolescent characterized by his scattered desires, his contradictory opinions, his obliviousness, his irresponsibility, and his constant clamoring for things he has done nothing to deserve but to which he feels entitled. In fact this is why he has such low self-esteem. To the extent that there has to be a minimum of coherence before self-love is possible, how can we reckon with something that is essentially shapeless? The man of holistic societies existed as a member of a group. The contemporary individual is no longer part of an existing group, but neither has he become a self. His mirror reflects no image.

Thomas Mann described the young fascists of his time as lined up in closed ranks under a common banner and ceasing to be subjects, as having relinquished control over their personal selves. They

“are unaware of culture in its highest and deepest sense. They do not know what it means to work toward oneself. They no longer know anything about individual responsibility, and find all their satisfaction in collective life. . . . A facility that leads to the worst of lapses. This generation desires nothing more than to take leave of its own selfhood. . . . The ideologies it clings to, like *the State, socialism, the greatness of the fatherland*, are in no way essential to it: They are merely pretexts. The only goal is euphoria; one must rid oneself of one’s self, one’s own thought, of morality and of reason in general.”⁴ This was the message: to seek to free the subject from his questions, to try to supplant the disquieting expectations that shape the identity of the autonomous subject, is nothing but an abduction of being, a denaturing of humanity. It is the equivalent of a lobotomy, or of drugging someone in order to deprive him of his faculties.

The fundamentalists of any religion lend themselves to the same kind of abdication of the self. Mann called these human shadows the “new Huns.” Time has passed since Mann’s era. The subject he had hoped might appear, able to “work toward himself,” has not yet been born, except perhaps quietly, without fanfare, among the central European dissidents of the anticommunist resistance. Western societies rightly condemned Mann’s new Huns, but they have nonetheless failed to foster the emergence of a genuine subject. For the humanism that stood up to the century’s totalitarian regimes was occupied exclusively with dismantling things, with overthrowing points of reference, so that further fanaticisms might be prevented. In the process, it produced an individual who flees himself in a different way. His schools are scarcely interested in developing the conscience, nor in forging responsible or civilized minds, but are devoted more to anchoring the child even further in the society of the spectacular—the “open school”—that is, in flight from the self. Mann shuddered when he observed the fascist youth; he would have felt the same way reading about the various acts of school violence today. Our societies are producing a new generation of Huns, not through ideology but through nihilism. In both cases, a process of depersonalization is at work.

92 Totalitarianism was devoted to the work of destroying personalities. We have attributed this depersonalization to fanaticism, which kills the individual conscience. Under totalitarianism, the subject resembles the man in the crowd described by Gustave Le Bon: he is a superficial being, that is, a being of emotions and moods. Unable to find within himself a sense of reason, which judges and questions, he is rendered permanently incapable of depth by the repetition of propaganda, which invades homes and permeates every moment of everyday life. Totalitarian man is capable of the worst crimes because, in essence, he has been robbed of his conscience. But Ionesco was intent on portraying this same loss of self in contemporary society.

94 We sought to crush the fanaticism of earlier certitudes by disestablishing certitudes as such. In the second half of the century, the guardians of our points of reference stopped protecting what they had in their care. What happened on a large scale was what Kafka tells of in his *Letter to Father*: the father did not transmit his religious faith to his child because he no longer knew how to justify it, and because in his own life, faith had become no more than a 'succession of meaningless rituals.' Today, not only religious rituals,

95 but cultural knowledge, the legitimacy of institutions and politics, the taboos of child-rearing, right down to the customs of basic manners have been deemed meaningless, out of fear of the oppression they might cause. The guardians of the mind, panic-stricken at having been labeled "tyrants" by a few leading intellectuals, and little able to offer real legitimization for their habit-ridden thought, have stopped teaching. In the wasteland grows a society of individuals without depth, without their own ideas, without habits of questioning, without distance from themselves, yet who all the while assert their sublime liberty.

99 Subjectivism, which produced both twentieth-century totalitarianism and contemporary individualism, issues from a subject who is self-sufficient. Lacking nothing, he draws from himself everything he needs in terms of meaning and purpose. Sovereignty is autarky, or self-sufficiency. In his self-founded sovereignty, the subject attaches value to what he draws from within himself. But he then finds himself prone to indulge in all the excesses of solipsism. It is precisely this self-sufficiency that the dissident contests, this conviction that the alpha and the omega are within oneself, this pretension of rivaling the absolute.

119 The self-sufficient man lives in a prolonged instant, because he lacks an imagined future. He lives in repetition, and goes from the same to the same, like a prisoner serving a life sentence. The perpetual present is a cell, too narrow to contain reparations and forgiveness, and consequently too narrow to contain failure. At times, the perpetual present plunges the individual into boredom, if his gaze is not cast beyond the horizon of the self.⁹

121 The self-founded individual has nothing to look forward to: he believes he already possesses everything.

The self-sufficient individual resembles the individual that Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor might have created: complete, he is thus liberated from his freedom and from the anxiety of achieving his own completeness. The authentic subject has an intimate sense that he is incomplete, only half-created. Marie Balmory writes that the creator in Genesis stayed his hand before completing his work, leaving it unfinished: the only way to confer freedom.¹¹

171 Repentance is inner conversion. To understand that, one must step out of the mindset of the dispenser of justice. To change one's beliefs, to reverse oneself, is a process of the mind that owes something only to the conscience and the will. Like the process of believing, repentance cannot obey an external command or yield under an external threat. No one can force someone else to believe, as life amply demonstrates. Similarly, no one can force someone else to repent. Prevailing opinion, elevated to a form of power, is today imposing repentance under the threat of ostracism, a sign of the

72 confusion between genuine repentance and the recognition of wrongdoing, of the equation of moral fault with scientific error. As if a moral wrong were not entirely a matter of personal conscience! The same reasoning that makes the punishment of Serbs a police operation—objective and mechanical, draped in officiality—makes a travesty of repentance, turning it into a mechanism operated by external controls. This is depersonalizing, a denial of the moral conscience and the uniqueness of moral wrong as an act perpetrated in the depths of the self and with the self as judge. Mandatory repentance is totalitarian in manner, similar to the confessions extorted during history's darkest trials. In such cases, the wrong represented a crime against the party or its ideology, against official institutions or orthodoxies, rather than a crime against the Good, which no one possesses.

The contemporary vulgate has turned repentance into a public statement conceded out of fear, a display of renunciation. This implies the ultimate negation of the subject, even his destruction, because he is cut off from the very roots of his greatness—that is, from his ability to reemerge from the muddy waters into which his wrong had plunged him. True repentance, on the other hand, means a reversal of the self that takes place in the shadows of a reflective conscience: it is to abandon and let go of the "old" self; it is the inner death of a self that has since been transformed. Repentance is possible only through the slow and painful inward journey that overturns rationalizations, accepts shame, and transforms it into a new hope. It is possible only in a culture that recognizes the importance of the individual conscience. Only the person as subject can repent and convert. When I feel shame, it is *I* who am ashamed: this is how the subject is revealed.

For Rousseau, "original sin" is a deception. Man is by nature innocent and pure, as long as he has not been corrupted by culture and society. To explain this corruption, there must have been a mythic moment in time when the initial split between the innocent and the guilty appeared. He who first said, "This is mine," invented private property, and thereby signalled the advent of a group of intrinsically guilty people, responsible for the evil in the world. Rousseau, who thought of himself as the only natural and pure man to have survived perversion, predicted the eventual arrival of a group of innocents capable of re-creating the lost society. The modern understanding of scapegoating here finds its origin. A little later, Fichte firmly rejected the thesis of original sin: "It is an absurd slander on human nature to say that man is born a sinner. . . . His life makes him a sinner."³ On those grounds, he called for the construction of a "perfect system" through the fashioning of a "perfect man,"⁴ for the German people were, in his view, ontologically innocent.

The abandonment of the idea of "original sin," understood as evil rooted in our very condition, gives rise to two consequences: it becomes possible to hope for the elimination of evil, and it becomes necessary to situate the cause of evil somewhere else. A declared belief that evil can be eradicated from the face of the earth raises the question of how to accomplish this task of secular redemption. The only possible solution consists of isolating evil in certain groups—both visible and recognizable—which can then be eliminated. The founding folly of the twentieth century, latent in the philosophical candor of Rousseau and Fichte, lies in the certitude that elimination of the bourgeoisie, or of the Jews, would at last open the way for a free, just, and peaceful society.

Scapegoating can be seen as the predominant mental process of the modern age. In the old Christian society, the "good" were distinguished from the "bad" on Judgment Day. The modern ideological separation between the innocent and those responsible for evil reflects, perhaps, a secularization of the distinction between heaven and hell. It is an eminently dangerous secularization, since it then

becomes possible to single out some human beings as unworthy, as radically separated and therefore exposed to the radical contempt of the dispenser of justice. At any rate, this continuity shows just how strong the temptation always is to answer the question of evil by singling out a scapegoat. The Christian vision of hell is for similar reasons questioned by certain theologians for its Manichaeism. Gehenna may very well involve not the whole of each guilty person but the guilty part of each person.⁵

The totalitarian systems of the twentieth century were thus made possible only by a Manichaeism that splits humanity in two. The attempts to negate original evil and to create the perfect society mutually sustain each other. The former makes the latter possible, and the latter requires the former, for the will to create a society without blemish runs up against the undeniable existence of Evil. It then becomes necessary to explain why the present state of society is corrupt—a strange fact if humanity is indeed innocent. Institutions are therefore held responsible. Yet behind the institutions are flesh-and-blood human beings. The real culprits then become those who built these structures, those who justify them, those who live off them, or those who perpetuate them. With implacable logic, the presumption of original innocence, combined with the existence of concrete evil, engenders a moral Manichaeism. Certain groups will become intrinsically guilty, while all others will remain intrinsically innocent. This barbarous dichotomy results in the creation of what are termed subhumans, or “insects,” forever responsible for the evil in the world. As Solzhenitsyn wrote, “Lenin proclaimed the common, united purpose of ‘purging the Russian land of all kinds of harmful insects.’ . . . It is not possible for us at this time fully to investigate exactly who fell within the broad definition of *insects*. . . . People in the cooperative movement were also insects, as were all owners of their own homes. There were not a few insects among the teachers in the gymnasiums. The church parish councils were made up almost exclusively of insects, and it was insects, of course, who sang in church choirs. All priests were insects—and

monks and nuns even more so. . . . [T]here were indeed many insects hidden beneath railroad uniforms. . . .”⁶

The fall of totalitarian regimes should have precipitated the end of scapegoating. For that to have happened, however, it would have been necessary to substitute a new worldview for the previous one. This was not to be. The foundations of contemporary thought remain those of the same revolutionary modernity that gave rise to totalitarianism. Evil in the world has not found any other explanation. The question of why it exists remains. It still makes no sense. And so it must be located within a group whose wickedness is sufficient explanation.

The human being, an enigma for the ancients and a mystery for Christians, remains irreducible to categorization, whether moral or social. In this world there are neither demons nor angels; no man embodies the quintessence of Evil or the quintessence of Good. No executioner is entirely evil, no victim entirely innocent. Essences escape us. We remain a mysterious mixture, forever more complex than the categories into which we slip. The very idea of *person* expresses this infinite complexity: a fathomless well, impenetrable

thickness, which no one can reduce to an act or trait, any more than to membership in a particular group. This is why Eichmann was provided with a lawyer. Ceausescu was executed without a lawyer, because his judges belonged to the same totalitarian system as did he. When democracies equate Milosevic with Satan, with all the requisite pathos of hate, and themselves take on the role of angels of the Good, they have forgotten the mystery of being, the complexity of the enemy as a person, and their own finiteness. The philosophy of rights has then deviated from its meaning.

In reality, we all belong to the same species. We are all capable of evil, which far from excusing criminals reestablishes them as responsible subjects. Their evil does not come from a nature distinct from our own, but from a moral laxity that leads them down the path of separation and hate. On the contrary, it is the demonization of criminals that excuses them, since it relieves them of responsibility by denying that they had freedom to act.

182 We will be able to reconstruct a common world once we have admitted that evil does not have its source in a defined group, no matter what its definition might be: ethnic, social, religious, cultural, or ideological. Rather, evil emanates from humanity and is woven inextricably into the human fabric. But this certainty, the only one capable of keeping us from falling into the dangerous discriminations that foretell catastrophe, is not without heavy implications. It means that every human being is, so to speak, by nature or by inheritance capable of doing evil, but that no one is its creator. This claim is based on two premises: that man at birth finds himself conditioned by evil as well as good, and that he cannot claim total sovereignty over himself; he may approach perfection at the cost of immense effort but can never attain it. The creator of evil is not among us, for evil does not have a beginning—it simply is, and therefore neither does it have an end.

In order to reconstitute a world, if only through a rejection of the antiworlds bequeathed by the twentieth century, it is therefore necessary to stop personifying evil. A world in which we allow

183 ourselves to identify Satan is no longer a world, for the angel of good and the angel of evil can never be part of a single entity. We must acknowledge the ubiquity of evil, because the rejection of the idea of original evil gives rise to Manichaeism, scapegoating, and, ultimately, the splintering of humanity into separate species.

Nevertheless, the mental step of recognizing the ubiquity of evil seems to be extraordinarily difficult in our times. It requires a new vision of man, much different from that which has prevailed in the past two centuries. The dissidents of central and eastern Europe have been reflecting on this question for several decades and have condemned scapegoating as a philosophical deception.

The revolutions of 1989 in eastern and central Europe did not have as their sole purpose the toppling of communist governments. This goal represented only the tip of the iceberg. Their purpose was, rather, to lay to rest once and for all the foundational ideas of totalitarianism. And so what they went after was not a government or a seat of power, but the twin goals of re-creating human nature and personifying evil—ideas that are mutually sustaining. These revolutions were not “political” in the sense that their objectives were governmental, programmatic, or social: they engaged in “politics” as a consequence of deeper principles. Their real demand was above all to rise up from Manichaeism, which for two centuries had singled out those who were guilty of human evil and acquitted all the rest.

The constitutive incompleteness of man forbids him to attempt to turn perfection into reality. But he can care for what exists, and it is probably this caring that defines what is uniquely and properly human. This style of being, as it were, expresses itself in the attention man pays to the world he has inherited in order to understand that world. The world we inherit and share is full of being, in the sense that forces are at work that we did not ourselves introduce. Having focused on reinventing the world, we must now turn our gaze toward the potentialities of being. Our fascination for planning must be replaced by attending to desirable possibilities. In order to care for, improve, and clear the brush away from what exists, we must keep in check our will to begin again *ex nihilo*, loving both existence and those beings who exist. That is, we must love them more than the products of our own minds.

The failures of the twentieth century reveal who we are. We are not demiurges. We are gardeners.