

# The Carroll-Cupitt Duet on Humanism

by: Douglas Lockhart

*Every stimulus which reaches a place on the cerebral cortex results in a rush of blood to that spot, by means of which nutriment is conveyed to it. The brain-cells decompose these substances, and transmute the stored-up energy in them into other forms of energy, namely, into ideas and motor impulses. How an idea is formed out of the decomposition of tissues, how a chemical process is metamorphosed into consciousness, nobody knows; but the fact that conscious ideas are connected with the process of decomposition of tissues in the stimulated brain-cells is not a matter of doubt.*

Max Nordau

*Degeneration* (1895) p. 47.

*With the end of the Enlightenment the spell breaks. The clear and distinct light of naive Reason is eclipsed ... Humanism's second movement has started its decent into oblivion. Reason survives, but without honour, and it turns nasty. In its prophets a new unconscious current surges, driving Reason to profane and to mock. All that was fine and beautiful and good in Western culture is turned upon, with malicious intent. The demons awake and grope towards the surface. We have entered the period of the wrecking.*

John Carroll

*Humanism, The Wreck of Western Culture* (1993) p. 133.

*Some experiences are caused by something deeper than language.*

Robert Forman

'Riding the Ox Back Home' (2014) p. 112.

## Max Nordau's Mystical Hobbyhorse

In the year 1895, Dr. Max Nordau published *Degeneration* (*Entartung*) in Germany, a book dealing with the notion of degeneracy in society, a term

previously developed in the 1880s by Professor Caesar Lombroso, a psychiatrist and criminologist, a theory conceived in the 1850s by Dr. Benedict Morel in relation to a general weakening of mental resolve in certain social groups. Morel's reasoning was based on pre-Darwinian, Lamarckian ideas of evolution, Nordau's on social phenomena creating, in particular, pathological conditions in relation to the arts. Nordau's theoretical stance was later taken up by the Nazis and developed, alongside eugenics programs, into a philosophy advocating the purification of art, the sterilisation of the unfit and, finally, the blanket extermination of those who would corrupt future generations. Nordau's 1895 book caused a sensation in Germany, the first English editions sheer astonishment when they appeared in the 1920s. The scene was set for social disaster on a vast scale, the reasoning behind notions of individual and collective degeneracy supported by scientific attitudes which, at the time, seemed quite plausible.

Nordau's book was dedicated to Professor Lombroso, whose efforts, we are told, had been fertile in such diverse areas as psychiatry, criminal law, politics and sociology.<sup>1</sup> Momentarily self-effacing, Nordau soon informs Lombroso and his disciples that "there is a vast and important domain into which neither you nor your disciples have hitherto borne the torch of your method - the domain of art and literature."<sup>2</sup> He, Nordau, will do this on their behalf, for degenerate artists are not always easy to identify due to the admiring mob: those who applaud their efforts are often equally insane, imbecilic or demented, the anti-social element in both being the result of brains *shattered by undetected mental disturbance*.<sup>3</sup> The tendencies and fashions in art and literature were proof enough of this, the capricious emotions evoked by such art indicative of a shallow and incompetent subjectivity mirrored in those who thought them artistically substantial. Not to mention the capricious emotions out of which such art works were themselves generated, no proper scientific criticism being available to right the wrong of their production. Unlike literary criticism, scientific criticism was not dependent on the emotions of the individual; it was firmly based on the psycho-physiological elements from which all art works were known to arise.<sup>4</sup>

This startling dedication to Professor Lombroso is the beginning of a medically-based rant that continues for 560 pages in the English edition, a truly remarkable study of intuitions and ideas reflecting what would become, by 1933, an almost standard conception of reality in Germany. And not only in Germany.

The whole of Europe would be infected with variations on the general theme of social, racial and mental degeneracy. Nordau would however take this argument one step further and interpret all forms of degeneracy in terms of a general mysticism, a state of mind for which he perceived a distinct psychology of behaviour. Perceiving this general mysticism as one where "the subject imagines that he perceives or divines unknown and inexplicable relations amongst phenomena [and] regards them as symbols, by which a dark power seeks to unveil or, at least, to indicate all sorts of marvels",<sup>5</sup> he equates religious mysticism with the mysticism of degenerate artistry and dismisses all such experiences in terms of an excess of emotion *caused by* the experience itself. And all the result of odd psycho-physiological experiences [white noise and psychic mush] dressed up in recognisable words to which the mystic gives "a meaning wholly different from that which [is] generally current".<sup>6</sup>

But Nordau is not altogether insensitive to the shared human condition, for he adds, "In one part or another of his mental field of vision, each of us therefore is a mystic ... everyone forms shadowy, unstable presentations."<sup>7</sup> There is however one sure way of telling the mentally healthy individual from that of the mystic/hysteric: "The healthy man is in a condition to obtain sharply defined presentations from his own immediate perceptions, and to comprehend their real connection. The mystic, on the contrary, mixes his ambiguous, cloudy, half-formed liminal representations with his immediate perceptions, which are thereby disturbed and obscured."<sup>8</sup> That, he contends, is all there is to the business of deciding who is sane, and who is pathologically disabled in their expression of scientific, artistic, or religious ideas. On this basis Nordau's own sanity is of course assured, for if there was ever an advocate of clarity and precision over that of mystic utterance, it is surely he.

The quote from *Degeneration* heading this essay captures the scientific spirit in which Nordau thought and wrote, and if one thinks back to Steven Pinker's neuroscientific claims for consciousness<sup>9</sup> (see my essay "Fatalistic Determinism 2"), then one can pinpoint the beginnings of such thinking with a some accuracy. This is not to equate Pinker's overall philosophy of the "human" with Nordau's ungoverned prejudices, that would be foolish in the extreme. It is, rather, to show evidence of concept continuity from Nordau to Pinker on this particular issue, a level of continuity Pinker may not be aware of. And there is a

further point of agreement between these men: neither Pinker nor Nordau can actually explain how thoughts and ideas arise from physiological processes in the brain - that is just a logical assumption based on, well, previously erected logical assumptions. This brings us to the quote by John Carroll following that of Nordau's where he talks of Humanism's *second movement* as having started with the eclipse of *naive Reasoning*, a form of reasoning belonging to the Enlightenment which, one has to assume, he identifies as Humanism's *first movement*. As he links this second movement with the wrecking of Western civilisation, one surely has to ask with what he equates this graphic change in perspective.

### First- and Second-Stage Humanism

John Carroll's study of humanism's decline is described by his publisher as "this bracing, muscular study of humanism's rise to pre-eminence and its headlong tumble into contradiction, exhaustion and inertia." Present-day humanism has let us down, the placing of William James' mature psychological reflections in the tradition of Western philosophy the result of interpreters having been usurped by humanism's second phase, a descent described by Carroll as a *descent into oblivion*.

John Carroll is a Cambridge trained sociologist of repute with a clutch of books to his credit, his claim that humanism eventually descended into oblivion a fairly unique perspective given how humanism is generally perceived. But he is not on his own; others have noticed and commented on the progressive hardening of Humanism's evolving vision,<sup>10</sup> although not quite with the vehemence exhibited by Carroll. Only D. H. Lawrence's incandescent prose measures up to Carroll's rhythmic onslaught; they are as one in their condemnation of the West's *schockless timidity*, its *inert busyness*, its *destitution in the midst of plenty*.<sup>11</sup> So writes Carroll on page one of his Prologue, and from there on in he tracks our descent into cultural oblivion with a searing eye. Everything about society, art and science opens up before him; we are laid bare, challenged to look and see what he can see, and what he sees is Reason in the service of a new myth that has failed in spite of an initial magnificence. Having

progressively demolished all of its competitors, first-stage Humanism is said to have "turned against itself and in its insatiable hunger devoured its own heart."<sup>12</sup>

Max Nordau's vision of the descent of Western society towards oblivion is of course based on exactly the opposite view; the destructive element for him is not Humanism as it has evolved in some degenerative second stage, it is rather the inbuilt mysticisms of *naive reasoning* that are at fault: Enlightenment thinkers had allowed the shadowy side of the human mind to accompany Humanism's rise to full explanatory power. For Nordau, Humanism's second stage is *his* stage, the stage that will save Western civilisation from the stupidities of naive reasoning, the stage of science's rooting out of every last vestige of degenerate thinking based on the interpretative excesses of subjective experience. For Carroll, conversely, second-stage science found itself *left to its own logic*, and because of that logic was forced into a cultural vacuum and *sealed off from moral issues*.<sup>13</sup>

Replacing the all-knowing Christian God with the limited wit and wisdom of ordinary human beings was a necessary move given Christianity's superstition-laden beliefs and behaviour, but to then inflate the power of the human will beyond decency was problematic. Carroll does not use the phrase "beyond decency", but it is implied when he says: "Here is not only a radical inflation of the power of the human will, but a new conception of being, of what it is to exist, of what it is that exists."<sup>14</sup> The "I am that I am" of God had been replaced by the human "I", by a sense of self that would progressively dominate the scene and accrue to itself an endless system of credits. But it was a shift in perception carrying an existential challenge: how to live without God and not lose *sense of being*. This "lost sense of being" was however necessary in that human beings, if they were ever to experience anything of their own depths, had to realise the difference between *sense of being* and *making sense of being*. There almost had to be an emptying of the self through inflation for the question of what had never properly registered to properly register. God as *primal being* had, in the past, been the fall-back position, but human beings were now facing a totally new and unexpected challenge: how to acquire *sense of being* as an experience over against *making sense of being* as an exercise of mind. Using the analogy of Archimedean leverage, Carroll asks if an entirely human order can replace the divine order and become its own rock, if it can become its own *still-point* in the universe. That is an interesting choice of words. He is of course using "still-point"

in the sense of leverage, in the sense of finding a *place to stand*, a place that would *not move under our feet*.<sup>15</sup> But he is also, perhaps unconsciously, using "still-point" in another sense altogether: a point of conscious stillness beyond the chatter of our own mind. The divine order would, in time, be replaced with ourselves as Prime Mover, but that would prove too disorienting a task for the human mind to handle; we would quickly descend towards hubris and begin to unravel even as we ascended potentially towards the stars.

The wrecking of Western civilisation as seen by Carroll takes place with the end of the Enlightenment and Humanism's turning on itself with *malicious intent*.<sup>16</sup> The purging had begun; old scores were being settled. Christianity would continue more or less as before, but as modernist attitudes formed, its pronouncements would be heeded less and less. For Carroll, the spell is finally broken with Napoleon's defeat in 1789, the cultural ideals of the Enlightenment all but abandoned by 1815. Humanism's earlier political ideals will shatter, the Industrial Revolution complete the breakdown through technological innovation and factory organisation. The material life of the West will be transformed by new money and equally new processes of work and leisure, the Enlightenment revitalised by a middle-class, liberal-rationalist front bearing a new authority.<sup>17</sup> Carroll builds a thorough and convincing picture of what he perceives to be the roots of a cultural wrecking not perceived by those engaged in it as Nietzsche's *death of God* turned into Dostoevsky's *everything is permitted*.<sup>18</sup> All is mockery. Mockery followed by nihilism, then by resistance against nihilism, then by the acceptance of the inevitability of nihilism.<sup>19</sup> Resignation reigns. The human is no longer the centre of anything; we have dissolved into ourselves as process and disappeared from sight. Nihilistic modernity is upon us, science's last rite uttered over the human condition. Who will hereafter raise high the image of man?" cries Nietzsche's Zarathustra. There is no reply.

John Carroll nominates Edward Munch's painting *Madonna* as the sorry outcome of it all. Munch's Madonna is naked, he tells us. Her long black hair swirls crazily. A red beret mimics a halo. Red lips and black closed eyes convey "a dreamlike vortex of helplessness and death." This is the antithesis of Mary the Madonna in Raphael's painting; the holy vocation of motherhood has been transformed into a Madonna framed by spermatozoa, a hideous embryo nestling at her side. The mission of culture is now not to enchant, but to disenchant; life is

no better than death. All there is left to paint is the *nothing*.<sup>20</sup> This is ironic, for what Munch had captured in his painting was not actually nothing; it was a terrible *something* difficult to define. And accomplished, all of it, by our own gargantuan efforts, our willful, multi-levelled attempts to release ourselves from the shackles of Christianity's iron-like grip. Escape from that grip had been absolutely necessary, of that there was no doubt, but it had come at considerable cost. Second-stage humanism was a humanism of direct *confrontation*; the earlier, gentler, first-stage form rendered obsolete. The man/God relationship was no more; at least not for intelligent, well-informed people. The idea of a "ready-made world laid on for us by God [into which we were] predestined to fit" had been overthrown by the realisation that we could build our own system of objective knowledge and trust in it as we had once trusted in God.<sup>21</sup>

John Carroll and Don Cupitt merge at this point, Cupitt the philosopher running a similarly constructed argument to that of Carroll's in *Mysticism after Modernity*,<sup>22</sup> albeit one more in tune with the hard-edged scientific philosophy of Steven Pinker and Max Nordau. In historical terms, Cupitt sees exactly what Carroll sees, but he perceives the whole breakdown between man and God, between man and religion, between man and mysticism as not only inevitable, unavoidable and uncorrectable, but as offering science's blank, cruel, pointless universe as some kind of reward. Bowing to the inevitability of scientific/philosophical nihilism, he sees no good reason to resist its meticulous onslaught, and out of this resignation, this *emptiness*, he offers what can only be described as a *Gospel of Despair*, the centrepiece of which is an attack on mysticism. But if Cupitt is anything, he is thorough. He, too, notes Humanism's early-on change of focus, and he links that change to liberal democracy having emerged from absolute monarchy. Faith in the possibility of human liberation was on the cards, he tells us, but it was a liberation fraught with danger. Optimistic Humanism (first-stage Humanism) ended with the embryonic modern self becoming "ever bigger and more demanding"; an overreaching of the self by the self that in its maturity would *suck the world dry*.

Even spirituality would get caught up in this fiasco; religious experience, too, would end up on the menu in terms of a *fattening up of the self in its own estimation*. A well-rounded self would become the aim, epicures of self-hood and *connoisseurs of mysticism* working together subversively as late as the 1960s.<sup>23</sup>

Cupitt the philosopher has of course put his finger on the pulse of something important, but it is Carroll the sociologist who will pull the whole edifice into sharp philosophical focus by drawing attention to the subtle change of attitude required to displace God and become our own Prime Mover. A new conception of "being" is abroad, the realisation of what it means to exist, and what it is that exists, beginning to dawn on the human mind. For Cupitt, sense of existence seems to be purely a philosophical question devoid of any meaningful experiential dimension; for Carroll, it seems potentially otherwise, but does not realise its potential in his prose.

Edward Munch's Madonna painting subtly captures what happens when *sense* of being is threatened, or extinguished, and it is through paintings and painters that Carroll builds his case for a 19th century demolition of culture that in the late 18th century he sees as a desecration of the female form in Goya's *Maja Nude*, and in the late 19th century by Manet's "shocking masterpiece, *Olympia*." The classical constraints of Titian and Rembrandt are abandoned for what Carroll sees as "frigid flesh and a brazen stare" in Goya's work, and "unblinking indifference" in Manet. Other great artists are mentioned in this context, but these two suffice to make Carroll's point: a self-referencing cultural trend in painting was underway that would result in Munch's *Madonna*, and a decade later in Duchamp's *Urinal*.<sup>24</sup>

In direct contrast to this is Max Nordau's 1895 contention that it is painters and poets and writers of subjective stamp who can be identified with an ongoing weakening of the human will. Nordau finds the whole pre-Raphaelite movement in England guilty of degenerate mysticism, of decadency, and without hesitation applies this same standard to what he terms the mystification of the French Symbolists, the uncertain aesthetics of Tolstoism, the emotive, self-interrogative quality in Ibsenism, and the megalomania of the Richard Wagner cult. Many, if not all, of those individuals and artistic movements would become representative of a great artistic flowering across Europe, but as John Carroll points out, and I think correctly, these same times perfected a dangerous second-stage Humanism through which perceptions of self, other and world underwent radical change.

So on the one hand we have Max Nordau's optimism over second-stage Humanism's rapid advancement, and on the other Cupitt's and Carroll's pessimism over a promising first-stage Humanism that has given birth to a dangerous second-stage egoism. Yet both men are, in the end, optimistic, well,

sort of optimistic in their evaluation of where we're headed. For Cupitt, there is the possibility of reconciliation through "The old topic of the soul's relation to God [having been] transposed into a new key, involving a much more bodily and more emotional response to Nature and to natural forces",<sup>25</sup> and for Carroll the possibility of a Second Reformation through which "[A] restoration of Western culture will again ... draw on the great sources of authority from the past."<sup>26</sup> What either of these visions mean in concrete terms is difficult to determine, for in the end neither man pays attention to what may be the two key questions: (1) What does it mean to *know one's self* and, (2) What does it mean to *be*? Carroll nudges those questions in his text, but does not follow through. Cupitt addresses them, peripherally, and dismisses them. When all is said and done, however, it is those particular questions that concern us in our quieter, more reflective moments. Whether to *be or not to be* is the question that keeps on cropping up, and it is a question closely linked to our conception of what it means to be a self.

### Disconnected Inwardness

At this point it is necessary to return to Max Nordau's disturbed and disturbing vision of what constitutes a sensible reality, for he has no doubt as to what constitutes the self, or about the nature of those who speak of the mind's profound depths. All such talk is the result of an incapacity for social adaptation, he tells us; it is an arrested development of mind and it constitutes a form of anarchy in relation to the ego. Which of course shows up in decadent works of art as a defining principle. When speaking of "ego", however, Nordau does not mean some psychological complex around which consciousness functions in terms of time and space; he means "sensations of the vital processes in all parts of the body" from which raw self-consciousness arises. Sense of self resides in our having a body, and in the body's internal processes, there is *no other sense* of self apart from those murky processes - rational processes are of an altogether different order. To imagine otherwise is to *imagine* something into existence that does not in any meaningful sense exist. Only sensory experiences of the external world are real, and as such they should take precedence over internal sensations. Internal sensations should never be allowed to *morbidly intensify and disrupt conscious awareness*.<sup>27</sup>

From this simple premise, although with many an embellishment, Nordau damns the writings of religious mystics and artists in whom he detects, or thinks he detects, such morbidity, and with a verve that is sometimes breathtaking in its audacity, proceeds to castigate anyone and everything so perceived. The pre-Raphaelites and the Symbolists and all the rest of them are talking mystical gobbledygook, he tells us; their talk of "depth" is a form of mental vertigo that causes things to appear deep and profound when they are in fact nothing of the kind. Baudelaire, Rossetti, Verlaine, Swinburne, Zola, Victor Hugo and many another are perceived in the same light, their fame a symptom of a degenerative mental condition spreading throughout society. And religious mysticism is no different; it, too, is the result of mental confusion at the somatic level. It is all just a confused manner of thinking which, because of our natural inclination to make sense out of words, produces arbitrarily chosen meanings as a matter of course. A sensible, properly developed rational life necessitates that we disconnect ourselves from all such inner imaginings and rely wholly on the external world for stimulation.

Let me say immediately that Nordau is not altogether wrong in some of his assessments; some are perfectly sensible, or verge on the sensible. The problem arises when he lumps together things that do not belong together and manufactures an explanation out of them to explain yet other areas of unrelated experience. He believes himself to be doing the right thing according to strict scientific principles, and he is, in his own way, it's just that his scientific principles work either partially, or not at all, in relation to some fields of enquiry. Some fields of enquiry require other sensibilities, and Nordau's sensibilities are only of one kind - mono and monochrome. He is a black and white rationalist, and proud of it. He is convinced that everything in the universe will eventually give way to rational explanation, and on many levels of investigation he is correct to think so. But there's a hole in his reasoning, and like a black hole it sucks everything into its orbit of influence. The black hole is of course his quite inaccurate conception of what "mysticism" is in itself, a term become an epithet that he uses throughout his book to denigrate whatever he disagree with. Or does not understand. Armed with an elaborate array of scientific facts and theories from all of the major disciplines, he relies on a jaundiced view of mysticism and uses it indiscriminately when faced with what he considers to be *subjectively* experienced views or opinions. For he has realised what no one else has: degeneracy of mind is a much

more widespread phenomenon than first thought. It is not only to be found in aberrant sexual behaviour and in anarchic political attitudes, it is also clearly detectable in religion and in the arts. There are mystical degenerates everywhere, and their mysticism has to do with misconstrued morbid inner experiences. Religious mystics are at the head of this queue, but the arts are not far behind, the unfortunates who follow their mutually degenerate leads equally tainted. He addresses the question of those unfortunates thus:

The effect of the mystical method of expression on people who allow themselves to be bewildered is for this reason a very strong one. It gives them food for thought, as they call it; that is to say, it allows them to give way to all kinds of dream-fancies, which is very much easier, and therefore more agreeable, than the toil of reflecting on firmly outlined presentations and thoughts admitting of no evasions and extravagances.<sup>28</sup>

Becoming ever more specific, Nordau then tells us that the toil of reflecting on firmly outlined presentations of thought avoids weak-minded associations and allows the mind to "exploit the association of ideas in the best possible way [and] impart the greatest sharpness and clearness to all representations".<sup>29</sup> Any thought not compatible with this process should be "rapidly and firmly" suppressed. Only by such a methodology can the *true relations among phenomena* be discovered.<sup>30</sup> (my italics) It is a matter of weak attention versus strong attention; strong, selective minds are luminous, mystically-oriented minds are a den of shadows.<sup>31</sup> And this applies to both the mystic and to those who are easily influenced by their meaningless utterances; although it is possible for better minds to fall under the same baleful influence. A technologist who has given way to mysticism will worry over the possibility of the *perpetuum mobile*, an astronomer so afflicted turn to astrology, a chemist to alchemy, a mathematician to squaring the circle.<sup>32</sup> And there are of course diseased, defective brains with their own kind of mysticism, a weakness in attention that leaves them at the mercy of their own inner demons. It is however the artist and the religious person who deserves the closest scrutiny, for they are often held in

high esteem, it being assumed that they have access to realms of unusual understanding. Nordau flatly disputes this claim; those are the two categories he nominates as being most susceptible to subjective distortion and derangement.

Attitudes have changed since Nordau's time; at least they appear to have changed. We no longer consider artistic creativity a subversive activity, well, not until it is blatantly confronting. When that happens we put it down to the artist making some kind of social comment through his/her art form, or to a conscious/unconscious discomfort with elements of society. Madcap ideas and theories are recognisably madcap and can be dismissed, religious visions, auditions and mystical pronouncements ignored and treated as of little interest or relevance to the modern world. We have grown up and got rid of the old superstitions, settled down to a basically sane perception of self, other and world. So the question we started with still pertains: To what exactly is John Carroll referring when he speaks of Humanism's *tumble into contradiction, exhaustion and inertia*? If Western society is now all grown up and mature, what does he really mean when he says "We are gathered here to bury a myth, a myth that has failed." If we're now all grown up as we believe ourselves to be, in what way exactly has Western society failed? Carroll's answer is, as we saw earlier, inherently contradictory: putting man at the centre of the universe and attempting, with all our might, to keep him there.

The core strength of first-stage Humanism was its repudiation of Christianity and its consciously meddling God, the strength of second-stage Humanism (if you accept there was a second stage) a progressive, evidence-based confirmation of that stance which, with ever greater precision, cleared the ground for intellectual development on all levels of inquiry. Max Nordau may have become a bit screechy in his acclamation of Humanism's strengths, but he was not all wrong in his deductions. A growing confidence in the discriminatory powers of the human mind was inevitable, Nordau's vehement rejection of everything even vaguely subjective the tenor of physicalist theory as it has evolved into our own time. Which, to hardly anyone's surprise, has resulted in a radical re-evaluation of the self's messy subjectivity, a subjectivity harbouring the illusion that it is itself an entity in its own right. There is no such entity, we are, it seems, but the stuff of our own perceptions and cognitions functioning as an artificial unity.

Not everyone accepts the above definition of human sentience, and none more so than its advocates as they go about their daily lives. That much has been admitted. To perceive ourselves in such rudimentary terms would, if allowed to fully register, be a disabling exercise. And that raises the thorny issue of what subjective experience is in itself, what it means to have a subjective impression of having a self. In contradistinction to this approach, John Carroll postulates the possibility of a Second Reformation based on a Renaissance type enthusiasm for life, a "simple zest for life [and] the buoyancy of existence" as exhibited by the Renaissance mind.<sup>33</sup> It all seemed so simple back then, so exciting, so refreshing, so eminently sensible and uncomplicated to dismantle God and get on with the job of sorting out the whole sorry affair of where human beings had gone wrong. Then, without warning, had come what Carroll describes as the Kierkegaardian disconnect from *inwardness*,<sup>34</sup> a description he ties into our notion of having lost sense of God as Primal Being, and our being forced to rely on our *own sense of being* to survive. But alas, *inwardness* in this sense was forbidden as we advanced along the path of *making sense* of being, the "I" of our existence having come to dominate psyche through the limitations of language. What then, one has to ask, might the root of that renewed enthusiasm be? From whence cometh joy when all has been reduced by the god Reason to ashes? Certainly not through the conceptual extinguishing of self. Or through *sense* of being dismissed as no more than psychic mush mashing. For is that not first-stage Humanism *devouring its own heart* as Carroll suggests? If so, then any hope of our recovering the joys of life must surely lie in the very place the angel of Humanism has been set up to insure against re-entry, namely, our *sense* of inwardness, our perhaps not-so-messy subjective sense of our own existence.

From being the centre of the Humanistic universe we are, now, in the process of being demoted to the level of perceiving/feeling biological machines, the very heart of the Humanistic model replaced by beings to whom, and within whom, *sense* of being has become as nothing.

### **Paradox of the Conscious/Unconscious Matrix**

The psychologist Bruce Mangon classifies the psychologist Stephen Katz's dour, postmodern assessment of mystical inwardness as "applying the most standard,

narrow and lifeless forms of analytic/linguistic philosophy to mystic utterances." In Mangon's view, analytic philosophy is "inherently alien to the problems raised by mysticism", Katz's use of language "resistant to capturing mystic insights." What we had to do was put *experience* back into the analysis of mysticism. Experience was primary; linguistic analysis secondary. The language of mysticism was evocative, not descriptive; it was paradoxical, and as such not conducive to meaning as generally understood.<sup>35</sup> Mangon is at this point referring to the published conclusions of fellow researcher Robert Forman,<sup>36</sup> conclusions he is in sympathy with over against Stephen Katz's hyperlinguistic theory of mystical experience.<sup>37</sup> There are, Mangon believes, truths not easily understood in some mystic utterances, truths *reflected* in language, not *imprisoned* in language, truths that are the result of encounters with an all-pervading unity. That brings us back to the self and what self might be in itself, for as Mangon notes, "the problem of unity is the great leitmotif of cognitive research".<sup>38</sup> To recognise the validity of inwardness is, therefore, to recognise the validity of the self, not as an entity, or as a personality or ego, but as a *condition of psyche* affording something over and above that of making meaning. There is, in other words, a shading of experience in inwardness that can carry us right to the edge of meaning-making, then beyond meaning-making if we dare let *sense* of existence intensify beyond the usual boundary of registered somatic experience. The white noise of somatic experience is real enough, but that is all it is, *white noise*; beyond that inchoateness is a whole other territory within which the unimaginable can become imaginable, and manageable. This is what Nordau, Katz, Cupitt, Pinker, and all the other hard-headed advocates of linguistic superiority have failed to grasp; there is, even in ordinary, intermittent, everyday experiences of inwardness, the potential for varying levels of experiential knowing that a language-bound system cannot account for. And it is not that such experiences are incompatible with language, it is, as Mangon astutely notes, that such experiences *serve to stop us from supplying content*.<sup>39</sup> That, really, is all there is to creativity and to so-called mystical experiences, except that some forms of the latter are so intense they shift awareness wholly from the temporal dimension of experience to that of the non-temporal.

At basic levels of creativity, difficult questions may spring open and reveal unexpected answers as temporality flickers and dims; at more intense levels

whole vistas of comprehension may unfold as William James attests; and at the most intense levels reality itself may appear to break open and divulge its hidden, all-encompassing unity - a unity in close alignment with our own.

### The Derailment of Humanism

In closing this essay I would like to explore some of the religious issues in relation to Humanism's core value, namely, the *human*, and the undeniable fact that this vital element in Humanism's success story has been eroded to a point where it no longer serves its original purpose. Human beings have ceased to be the centre of attention in the way they once were; they are now experimental objects subject to the attention of other humans to whom the mental life of human beings has little significance. The private, "first-person" life of humans has been swapped for "third-person" narratives of the human in relation to physiological events and processes, the whole idea of inwardness studiously ignored. Person-centred psychology has survived among a few recalcitrants, but on the whole it has been replaced by mainstream scientific psychology, Freud's earlier attempt at a scientific approach perfected beyond anything he ever imagined. And with a twist; he too was discarded, depth psychology, or depth psychiatry, as it was also known, eventually pushed aside with the publication of J. B. Watson's manifesto of radical behaviourism in 1913. A distinct change of attitude was taking root among psychologists, the psychology of "mental life" as advocated by Freud, Janet and Jung exchanged for a "science of behaviour" that refused to use terms such as "consciousness", "mental states", "content", "introspectively verifiable images", and such like. The new buzz words were "stimuli" and "response", *prediction* was now the name of the game.<sup>40</sup>

First-stage Humanism spawned Christian Humanism; that is, Christians of the Renaissance with liberal tendencies who wished to bring intellectual integrity back into Christian exegeses. What these Christians did not realise, however, was that they would be called upon to choose between their faith and a fast-developing scientific secularism.<sup>41</sup> Free-will was in the offing, and free-will spelt disaster for Christianity on a whole series of levels. The central problem, as articulated by John Carroll, was that free-will was "reason" by another name. The moment a human being started to reason he/she had exercised free-will and

could never be the same again.<sup>42</sup> Free-will and the death of God were all but synonymous terms; the torch of human reason could not but reveal that the heavens were, well, empty. Which made the choice stark: it was the darkness of faith or the lighting up of life without God, which, for Martin Luther, was the equivalent of gaining nothing at all.

Luther's Reformation, although aimed at a restructuring of the Roman Church, was also aimed at Humanism's doctrine of free-will, for it was there he detected the greater threat. Allow free-will to blossom, and by necessity it would be used to denounce God as *unfair*. This is again Carroll speaking, and his soundings strike me as accurate: investigation of God would automatically unravel God by dint of life's obvious injustices. Permit such thinking to take root and the "I am" of God would, as Carroll suggests, be under threat from the "I am" of his creature; a creature within whom lodged Eve's and Adam's desire (which was surely a sin in itself prior to the act) to *eat from the tree* of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and become as *all-knowing* as God. That's the crux of the whole sorry business: free-will was a replaying of Adam's imagined sin, Reason the 'Devil's whore'<sup>43</sup> after which Adam had craved. And living a good life was not enough of a compensation; even morality could not save one from due punishment if faith in the quality of God's reasoning was missing. The Humanist *nothing* was just around the corner, and Luther sensed it, as could the Protestant reformers who came after him.

The contradiction between the two systems lay in how they each perceived inwardness, Calvin's tormented puritanical view of interiority being in direct contrast to that of humanism's as it shrugged off the supposedly indelible stain of our first parents' sinful inheritance. For Humanists, free-will was an escape route from Catholicism's doctrinal clutches; for Calvinists, who considered themselves already free from those clutches, it was the spur to beat Humanism at its own game and put God back in charge of the human mind. And cleverly, as it turned out, for Calvinism's doctrine of salvific predestination (salvation or damnation bequeathed by God on an individual without their consent) annulled free-will and set the religious clock back to zero, its tantalisingly humanistic definition of conscience - *that which does not allow man to suppress within himself what he knows*<sup>44</sup> the basis for a later *free-for-all* in Scriptural interpretation.

That had never been Calvin's intention; his definition of conscience was no more than the assertion that God had placed a capacity for truth in the human heart, and that this God-given truth necessarily corresponded to the dictates of Scripture as defined by the new spiritual elite. As Protestant protestations spread across Europe, however, so also did the growth and development of other sub-elites. Christianity was about to splinter further, then further still, and that splintering would give birth to what would become the Christian equivalent of free-will, the almost anarchic right of every individual, or group of individuals, to read Scripture and think whatever they wanted to think about Jesus, God, the Church, and the whole of Christian history. Which is to say that free-will flourished within Protestant Christian ranks by default, and that this curious development resulted in a further splitting of the Christian camp into Bible-soaked fundamentalist sects and, eventually, into lighter evangelical forms and the beginnings of serious Christian scholarship on two levels: that of Christians attempting to find their spiritual roots in Christianity's distant Apostolic past, and Christians immersing themselves in secular Biblical scholarship in the hope of better understanding their faith's Jewish origins.

Four centuries have passed since this vast and hugely complex process got underway, today's fracas between all of the above groups signalling, I believe, the beginnings of a third-stage Humanism, the challenge of which is the acknowledgment and investigation of the West's blatant drift towards a science-based, philosophy-supported nihilism, plus liberal Christianity's parallel descent towards a relativised faith in, well, hardly anything at all. This tells us that Luther's and Calvin's fears were not without foundation, and that the idea of there being something in us that understands more than we consciously know ourselves to know, may not be as silly as it sounds. Inwardness, in this sense, is back on the agenda, it's psychological implications only now beginning to form.

#### References and Notes:

- 1) Nordau, Max, *Degeneration*, Introduction, translated from the German, William Heinemann, London 1920. First published in 1805. p. vii,
- 2) Ibid.
- 4) Ibid, p. viii.
- 5) Ibid, p. 45.
- 6) Ibid, p. 46.

- 7) Ibid, p. 69.
- 8) Ibid.
- 9) Pinker, Steven, *The Blank Slate*, Allen Lane/Penguin Books, 2002, p. 41.
- 10) Lockhart, Douglas, *The Mind's Dark Webb*: (Not yet published)
- 11) Carroll, John, *Humanism*, Prologue, Fontana Press 1993, p. 1.
- 12) Ibid, Prologue, p. 2.
- 13) Ibid, p. 133.
- 14) Ibid, p. 3.
- 15) Ibid, p. 2.
- 16) Ibid, p. 133.
- 17) Ibid, pp. 133-135.
- 18) Ibid, p. 136.
- 19) Ibid, p. 138.
- 20) Ibid, p. 136.
- 21) Cupitt, Don, *Mysticism after Modernity*, Blackwell Publishers 1998.p. 17.
- 22) Ibid, pp. 16-17.
- 23) Ibid, p. 14.
- 24) Carroll, John, *Humanism*, (as above) pp. 136-137. Owen Richardson's review of Humanism in 'The Weekend Review' of February 19-20, 1994 is a vehement rejection of both Carroll's writing style, and his scholarly methodology. I think Richardson has been a bit hard on Carroll's misgivings about humanism. Yes, the language is sometimes overblown, but it is not inaccurate, and there is a real sense in the book of someone trying their hardest to work something out that continually evades him. Don Cupitt gives much the same impression in *Mysticism after Modernity*, but in my opinion both men fail in the end to offer anything substantial to offset, what to them, are well-grounded fears and intuitions.
- 25) Cupitt, Don, *Mysticism after Modernity*, (as above) p. 140.
- 26) Carroll, John, *Humanism*, (as above) p. 229.
- 27) Nordau, Max, *Degeneration*, Introduction, (as above) pp. 256-266.
- 28) Ibid, p. 59.
- 29) Ibid.
- 30) Ibid.
- 31) Ibid.
- 32) Ibid, p. 60.
- 33) Carroll, John, *Humanism*, (as above) p. 230.
- 34) Ibid.
- 35) Mangon, Bruce, 'Language and Experience in the Cognitive Study of Mysticism,' *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1994, p. 250. Note also F.C.T. Moore's contribution in this area when he tells us that "Bergson bring[s] us back, as

often, to experience. Before doing philosophy, one must live." Referring to this statement in *Bergson: Thinking Backwards*, Moore presents Henri Bergson's penetrative approach to the problem of "analysis versus experience", and in alignment with Mangon concludes that experience is primary, linguistic analysis secondary in that analysis is a dismemberment, or segmentation of experience resistant to acknowledging its experiential base. (pp. 125-129)

- 36) Forman, Robert, 'Mysticism, Language and the *Via Negativa*' *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1994. See also Forman's 'Riding the Ox Back Home, The Nature of Everyday Mystical', *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 3-4, 2014. (p. 105) where he describes his response to Steven Katz, Robert Gimello, Wayne Proudfoot, and others, in terms of their having "tapped the postmodern view, developed to analyse a range of "ordinary" experiences [and concluded] that much or all of our experiences are in part shaped and determined by our background of words, assumptions, and beliefs. And religious experiences, [which are] shaped primarily by our religious backgrounds." Forman continues thus: (p. 106) "I don't want to repeat my arguments about why such an event [a Pure Consciousness Event] is not shaped by our language and assumptions. But basically, because one is aware of no specific content, one brings no words or mental objects to mind on the back of which language or belief might waft in to play a constructive role. [The Pure Consciousness Event] is not created, formed, shaped, or mediated by the ordinary constructive processes of language, assumptions, or beliefs."
- 37) Mangon, Bruce, 'Language and Experience in the Cognitive Study of Mysticism,' (as above) p. 250,
- 38) Ibid.
- 39) Ibid.
- 40) Kelly, F. Edward & Emily Williams Kelly, *Irreducible Mind*, Introduction, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007.p. xvii-xviii.
- 41) Carroll, John, *Humanism*, (as above) p. 4.
- 42) Ibid, p. 50.
- 43) Ibid, p. 51.
- 44) bid, p. 56.

