

Interpretation

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Book Review

Harry Neumann, *Liberalism* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 1991), xxiii + 336pp., \$29.95.

“*Ich bin der welt abhanden gekommen*” : A Book About Nothing

PAUL A. BASINSKI

Fort Hays State University

Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask and he will tell you the truth.

Oscar Wilde

At the beginning of my essay on Harry Neumann's book must stand the familiar words from that sad, suicidal figure of the nineteenth century, a man truly poised between being and nothingness, Heinrich von Kleist:

Not long ago I became acquainted with the Kantian philosophy—and I now have to tell you of a thought I derived from it, which I feel free to do because I have no reason to believe it will shatter you so profoundly and painfully as it has me. We are unable to decide whether that which we call truth really is truth, or whether it only appears to us to be. If the latter, then the truth we assemble here is nothing after our death, and all endeavor to acquire a possession which will follow us to the grave is in vain. If the point of this thought does not penetrate your heart, do not smile at one who feels wounded by it in the deepest and most sacred part of his being. My one great aim has failed me and I have no other.

I can't help thinking of Harry Neumann when I read these words. A decade or so ago his great aim at an undying truth failed him, and he hasn't been the same since. His meditations on the end of political philosophy are the series of essays collected in his book *Liberalism*. I want to try and explain what it is Neumann believes, and how, if correct, his analysis undermines our very conception of liberal democracy. Undermines, that is, at least so far as liberal democracy requires some larger philosophical justification for its existence.

I

Liberalism, liberal democracy, culminates in nihilism. This is the core of what Neumann tries to get at in *Liberalism*. The title as such is a play on

words, since the book isn't at all about "liberalism" as the term is frequently understood. Rather, the essays are about what happens when the freedom offered in a liberal democracy is carried to its ultimate conclusion. What occurs is moral nihilism, the belief that reality is only what we experience, and that moral disputes are irresolvable for lack of a transcendent standard through which to adjudicate them. And concomitantly, although he never analyzes social problems in America as Bloom did in *The Closing of the American Mind*, one feels that Neumann believes that most of the hideous dilemmas of late capitalism are in some sense a consequence of this moral nihilism or excess of freedom.

As with Francis Fukuyama and others, Neumann has apparently exposed the raw nerve of democracy, its fatal flaw. That flaw is that free-market-oriented majoritarian governments are great at delivering "the goods," but ultimately lack sufficient justification for their existence, or human existence in general. Lots of TV sets and cars but no "more perfect union." Our civilization has become almost wholly quantitative, at the expense of an understanding of the qualitative ideal of the good life—more is better and he who has the most is best.

Neumann's contribution to this familiar argument is to radicalize it. He is a nihilist, but he is not liberal. Neumann simply isn't comfortable with the numbing, silly postmodernism of the American regime. Unlike Milan Kundera, Umberto Eco, Richard Rorty, and so many others, he refuses to glamorize nihilism as the "unbearable lightness of being." Neumann experiences the loss of God, not as liberating or uplifting, but as "the great dread."

Whereas the very thought of a purposeless universe winding down into entropy hardly causes my students to bat an eye, Neumann, to the contrary, comprehends that grim abyss and is repulsed by it. Like Leontius, he cannot avert his glance from the horror. This great idea, his romantic confrontation with the Nothing, makes Neumann's works rather shrill and rebarbative, although no less lacking in a tremendous fury tinged with poignancy.

Man has lost his God, or as Neumann prefers to put it, never had one. We are thus unwilling to "accept reality for what it unfortunately is" (p.198).

So what is reality, that is, the world of common sense and experience, according to Neumann? In a word: nothing. But, like Kleist, Neumann believes that without a God or some Platonic good to give weight and substance to life, existence is merely "a chaos of empty experiences" (p.116) partaken in by temporarily individuated consciousness. Human action is as baseless as the random evolutionary experiences that took eons to give rise to mankind. Unlike the liberals he despises, then, Neumann will not let us have our cake and eat it too. If there exists *no* suprasensory ideal to ground human existence, then all human beliefs, from feminism to Freudianism, are mere prejudices. And in this sense, the work of political philosophy—its grappling with the truth regarding the weightiest political matters—becomes mere play, utterly superfluous. Neu-

mann, if correct, would put journals like *Interpretation* out of business, as well as sink the whole Straussian enterprise, at least as that enterprise is construed by Harry Jaffa and others as the restoration of natural right to its proper role in our national life.

Let's look more carefully at Neumann's arguments to make sure we understand the radical subjectivity portrayed in the book.

II

Neumann believes that no governing principles exist—divine or otherwise—to guide us on our sojourn through the world. We are alone, with no hope or redemption from anyone or anything. Neumann's entire philosophical edifice stands or falls on this unprovable belief. But like that other great unfathomable mystery, his writings are no less profound for their inability to be scientifically verified.

In spite of his facade of square-jawed toughness that "obliges" Neumann to present nihilism's awful truth, he is basically a reactionary who believes that the pre-Enlightenment cosmos was infinitely preferable to the nihilistic chaos of so much of today's world. He desperately wants there to be some sort of divine grace hovering over our lives, but his integrity will not permit him the comfort of such beliefs.

This is the great appeal of his work; indeed, Neumann's point of departure is the basis for any serious political philosophy today. One cannot philosophize in our age and not take into account The Nothing.

Why is there something rather than nothing? is the great question around which all others revolve in our postmetaphysical age. As the ancients' starting point was nature, the medieval mind's God, our modern heuristic building-block is nihilism. As Neumann states: "Modernity arises from the conviction that what is perceived or thought has no existence independent of perceiving or thinking. One's immediate awareness of something is not an awareness of it existing in itself, as the ancients believe. Ancient thought seeks to account for this independent existence—which it takes to be obvious—by positing a natural (ancient) or divine (medieval) order which cannot be altered by human will or interpretation. Modern rejection of either type of permanent constraint on human freedom (liberalism) is manifest in Spinoza's condemnation of [theology] . . ." (p.217).

This raises the question: If reality is nihilistic, then was Heidegger right in assuming that we have no ground to stand on, nothing permanent to root ourselves in? To all serious minds this is the dilemma of our age, and all speculations not somehow bound up in it, so Neumann feels, are spurious or cowardly.

The most revealing essay in *Liberalism* is the first chapter, "Political Philosophy or Nihilist Science?" Taking his cues from Schopenhauer, Neumann

plainly lays out his understanding of nihilism. He calls nihilism “science,” sometimes nihilist science. His thinking is cast in the mold of the oft-neglected Schopenhauer, that great mind who was the first to synthesize the awful consequences of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature*, and the *Discourses* of Rousseau, as well as the epistemology of Locke and Berkeley. His conclusion: nihilism is reality, political philosophy its window dressing. (One thinks of that terrible moment in Oliver Stone’s film *Platoon* when the disfigured sergeant proclaims: “I am reality.” No one challenged him.) This is the challenge of Neumann’s work, as he says in the essay on Carl Schmitt, published as an appendix to *Liberalism*: “no theology, no morality, if no morality, no politics.”

Neumann’s book quietly shouts: nihilism is reality; liberal democracy leads to the abyss! And yet both the left and the right fight this conclusion—the former in the name of some delusional, unbounded freedom, the latter in the name of God.

III

What horror is it that Neumann has unearthed? His finding is that “Science itself is the simple realization that whatever is experienced—a self, a world, the law of contradiction, a god or anything else—is nothing apart from its being experienced” (p.2). Our world is literally *our* world. “This reality revealed by science is nihilist consisting quite literally of nothing, of empty interchangeable nothings, experiences or methods” (p.3).

Simply put, Neumann believes that nihilism has pulled the metaphysical ground out from under mankind. Man has nothing to stand on, to ground himself in, if reality is not underpinned by some suprasensory ideal. Living, judging, dying—all human activity becomes mere process or experience. We simply float, unattached to anything that can give our lives more than temporary or transitory meaning.

The only thing that can make life seem temporarily real and displace the paralyzing veil of nihilism is passion or desire. Desire, at any rate, feels real, hence more substantial than nothing. The primary political passion, moral indignation, then, is the driving force behind all human thought and action. Hatred is the beginning and end of politics and the political; that is, the communal world cannot exist without this drive. In the most intriguing pronouncement in his book, Neumann writes: “Reality (nature and human nature) is apolitical, nihilist; human desire is not” (p.176). If you want to avoid nihilism, pursue your passions. All else, especially the attempt to give moral meaning to human desire, is just a dream.

So the very task of political philosophy and the motive behind the life work of Leo Strauss and his best students—including most of the impetus behind this

journal—is exposed as a fraud. Political philosophy’s object, to uncover an unchanging moral ground which can serve as the basis to check desire and spiritedness, is chimerical. The venture of political philosophy itself was an always vain attempt to cover up all that life could ever be—pure purposeless desire, passion, amounting in the end quite literally to: nothing.

With history’s Nietzschean fulfillment, all ideas and ideals, the heart of moral-political life, are experienced as empty representations or concepts, cowardly efforts to hide life’s emptiness from oneself. All willing, as Schopenhauer and his student, Wagner, had noted is futile. Will shrinks from not willing. . . This horror (schrecken) at the emptiness of not willing—this *horror vacui* is the fundamental fact of the human will. The result, after the Nietzschean culmination has been frantic will to will or, in more trivial or academic terms, fanatic commitment to technology (sciences) and creativity (humanities). (P.199)

The point made here is important and requires clarification. Neumann believes that the body wants—it has desires, sexual, appetitive, cultural, etc. So reason (insight into life’s nihilism) obliges the political community to construct justifications for these desires in order to keep them under wraps. Without these justifications—nihilistic illusions—reality would be exposed for what it ultimately is: naked desire. Desire needs a goal, a telos. “Depriving the desires—any desire—of their goal, that nihilistic devaluation makes them arbitrary, meaningless” (p.39). This will not do.

In essence, this is the problem of liberal democracy at its very roots. In the quest for greater and greater human freedom, democratic regimes unwittingly disassociate the satisfaction of desire from higher human purpose. And so, human activity in liberal democracies is mighty, but ultimately signifies nothing. As Bloom so eloquently noted before his death in *The Closing of the American Mind*: “Nobody really believes in anything anymore, and everyone spends his life in frenzied work and frenzied play so as not have to face the fact, not to look into the abyss” (p.143).

Modern man is shameless. For there is nothing to shame him or inhibit him in the satisfaction of his desire. Without some hierarchy of the passions, as Strauss eloquently discussed in *Natural Right and History*, the pleasures of the ass are indistinguishable from those of human beings. We become beasts, in a perverted interpretation of Rousseau’s state of nature we “live naturally,” that is, nihilistically.

IV

The key dichotomy established by Neumann in his book is about the difference between the open and closed societies (although he prefers to see it as liberal versus illiberal thought). Illiberalism is political; it is Nietzsche’s herd

morality, a world of shared social goods, and the means to satisfy them. Liberalism, to the contrary, reflects the victory of nihilism, “and the resulting death of philosophy and politics, both of which presuppose religion, the existence of a permanent, non-arbitrary good to guide moral-political life” (p.xx). The crisis of our age, then, is more than a mere crisis of faith, if Neumann is correct. The crisis truly resides in the fact that there is nothing to believe in anymore, short of taking some fantastic leap of faith.

It is now a generally accepted fact that the Enlightenment tried, and failed, to find a rational (or purely human) justification for morality. The residual problem of this project was the unwitting dissolution of the Christian faith—and probably of all ideals. I say this consequence was unintended, because even as great a thinker as Hegel honestly believed that unassisted reason could produce a constellation of profound physical and political changes, and *still* permit mankind the luxury of a firm moral ground in Christianity. Neumann mentions Kant in this context, suggesting that

Kant’s modernity is compromised by his moralism, his determination to make this absolutely free will the basis of morality. His attempt to establish it as the only absolute or pure good is a ridiculous fusion of ancient and modern, illiberal and liberal. As mere will apart from any external, objective standards it, like everything on modern horizons, is nothing but horizon, a method, a discipline, a point of view. (P. 223)

Kant wished for a Newton of morality, who would establish a firm scientific basis for the new, secular morality. Or, imagine Thomas Jefferson and James Madison gathered transfixed around David Rittenhouse’s orrery (a device constructed to depict the movement of the planets about the sun). There stood two of the greatest minds of the day, respective authors of the American Declaration of Independence and Constitution, entranced by a scientific toy, and firm in their belief that the physical universe pictured before them clearly corresponded with a moral universe every bit as orderly and regular. How wrong these men were, how naive. To think that people would prefer to cling to religious rituals in the face of the awesome individual power and freedom opened up to them, surely this historical moment was the pinnacle of hubris. As Bergman has the Squire say of the Crusades in the *Seventh Seal*, “only an idealist could have dreamed this up.”

And so this is Neumann’s great revelation, if that’s not too strong a word. The Enlightenment, by overreaching the boundaries so delicately established throughout centuries by the church and philosophy, has left man naked. Neumann believes it is intellectually dishonest to try and cover this monstrosity of a failed modern civilization with a few creaking ideologies. He refuses to “hide his nihilist nakedness behind the protective atmosphere of humanitarian fig

leaves” (p.33). Nor will he take refuge in the comforts of democratic dogma, scientific ideology, or technological triviality. I admire his courage in making this decision—right or wrong. Perhaps, he is saying, it is high time that all of us had the courage of our true convictions. Or is Socrates right in the *Republic* when he says, “one should not be willing to tell someone in this state the whole truth” (331c)?