

# interpretation

a journal of political philosophy

volume 4/2

winter 1974

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martinus nijhoff, the hague

edited at

queens college of the city university  
of new york

# interpretation

a journal of political philosophy

volume 4

issue 2

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interpretation is a journal devoted to the study of political philosophy. it appears three times a year.

its editors welcome contributions from all those who take a serious interest in political philosophy regardless of their orientation.

all manuscripts and editorial correspondence should be addressed to the executive editor

## interpretation

building g101 - queens college - flushing, n.y. 11367 - u.s.a.

## *subscription price*

for institutions and libraries Guilders 36.— - for individuals Guilders 28.80

one guilder = ab. \$ 0.42

subscription and correspondence in connection therewith should be sent to the publisher

martinus nijhoff

9-11 lange voorhout - p.o.b. 269 - the hague - netherlands.

ATHEISTIC FREEDOM AND THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY  
FOR THE SUPPRESSION OF SAVAGE CUSTOMS:  
AN INTERPRETATION OF CONRAD'S  
*HEART OF DARKNESS*\*

HARRY NEUMANN

In Plato's *Republic* Socrates denounces poets who unearth hidden passions which his utopia wishes to suppress.<sup>1</sup> By publicizing interdicted cravings, these intellectuals undermine publicspiritedness. Unlike ordinary citizens, their attachment to the prevailing morality is not jeopardized once they discern the skeletons in its closet. Instead, they champion its forbidden or illicit side. Thus their fight with unsophisticated, old-fashioned morality is a family quarrel between the same morality's noble and its repulsive forms. Indeed the intellectuals seem more loyal than others to that morality, since they, unlike pious citizens, embrace its ugly, repellent forms.<sup>2</sup>

Philosophers, however, take their insight into the questionable foundations of the regnant morality as grounds for doubting its worth. Unlike old-fashioned citizens, they do not shun those questions but believe that intellectuals should question the value of the shocking side of the predominant orthodoxy instead of defending it against suppression by traditional faith and morals. From a philosophical standpoint, both intellectuals and traditionalists are defenders of the prevailing orthodoxies. The philosopher's belief in his ignorance of the true value of the orthodox morality is responsible for his neutrality in the war between its traditionalist and its sophisticated defenders. Depending on circumstances, he supports one or another of these warring camps.<sup>3</sup>

In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad or his Marlow are not philosophers but intellectuals in the sense just defined. On their horizon, the affirmation of Western morality's illicit underground presents itself as a triumph of wisdom and ethics, far more noble than its puritanical repression or

\* This article was assisted by a research fellowship from the Earhart Foundation.

<sup>1</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Republic of Plato* (New York, 1968), pp. 433-34.

<sup>2</sup> Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber*, trans. H. H. Garth and C. Wright Mills (New York, 1958), pp. 147-48: "We realize today that something can be sacred not only in spite of its not being beautiful, but rather because and in so far as it is not beautiful. You will find this documented in the fifty-third chapter of the book of Isaiah and in the twenty-first psalm. And, since Nietzsche, we realize that something can be beautiful, not only in spite of the aspect in which it is not good, but rather in that very aspect. You will find this expressed earlier in the *Fleurs du Mal*, as Baudelaire named his volume of poems. It is today commonplace to observe that something may be true although it is not beautiful and not holy and not good. Indeed it may be true in precisely those respects."

<sup>3</sup> Harry Neumann, "Is Philosophy Still Possible?" *The Thomist*, XXXVI (1972), pp. 545-65.

“tepid skepticism” about its value (pp. 72-73).<sup>4</sup> By “Western morality” I mean the authoritative ethics in governments which derive their right to govern from the consent of the governed. This definition includes all important modern regimes, Nazi as well as Communist and liberal democratic. No less than Jefferson or Lenin, Hitler insisted that his rule was legitimized by the consent or will of the people (*Volk*). Consequently he (like his Communist and democratic opponents) ridiculed the Japanese theocracy as unenlightened superstition, for there the people existed for the sake of their divine emperor, whose legitimacy was not dependent upon their consent; in fact, his will or consent was responsible for their legitimacy.

Western contempt for Japanese theocracy arose from the belief that individuals should not be subject to moral authorities which they do not freely choose to accept. Legitimate acceptance depends solely upon individual choice, not upon some natural or divine compulsion which precludes free consent. In this paper, moralities dependent for their acceptance upon that freedom are called atheistic. Atheism thus understood need not deny the existence of gods or moral standards. The crucial point is the atheist’s insistence that his reason or will is not governed by standards whose authority he is not at liberty to reject.

I suggest that atheism springs from the opinion that the individual’s reason should emancipate itself from the morality authoritative in his regime. Once emancipated, he can strive for an impartial evaluation permitting him to accept or reject that morality on its own merits. However, the belief that men should attempt this emancipation is itself questionable.<sup>5</sup> Consider Genesis (2:16-17). If its value is not demonstrable, the faith in its worth arises from an atheistic assertion of will and not from impartial insight. That self-assertion is the hallmark of what this paper calls atheism. For atheists, belief in the existence of divine or natural standards is subordinate to an unwillingness to recognize any authority which denies the right of self-determination. Atheists may believe in gods, but not in gods which preclude this right.<sup>6</sup>

Atheism, the crime for which Socrates was executed, emerged with Greek philosophy or science. Of course, it appears as atheism only to men skeptical of that philosophy’s claims to demonstrate the justice of rational emancipation from the gods of one’s city. This paper assumes—never forgetting that it *is* an assumption—that atheistic self-assertion and not impartial reason have informed European or Western civilization since its birth in Socrates or some other Greek. Mr. Kurtz, the hero (or anti-hero)

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. R. Kimbrough, rev. Norton crit. ed. (New York, 1971). All references are to this edition.

<sup>5</sup> Neumann, “Is Philosophy Still Possible?”

<sup>6</sup> Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (Chicago, 1952), pp. 99-100; Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, 1952), p. 92; Harry V. Jaffa, “The Case against Political Theory,” *Equality and Liberty* (New York, 1965), pp. 220-29.

of *Heart of Darkness*, is that civilization's moral triumph: "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (p. 50).

Marlow, the narrator of *Heart of Darkness*, begins his description of Kurtz with a discussion of a pre-atheistic regime, the Rome which conquered Britain (p. 6). He contrasts Roman exploitation of British savages with European imperialism in Africa. The fundamental difference is the regnant morality of the two civilizations. Since the Roman's ultimate moral authorities, his gods, were concerned solely with Rome's happiness, Roman consciences experienced no qualms about ruthless exploitation of foreigners: indeed, Roman civic piety encouraged it. On such an horizon, loving one's enemies appears atheistic. However, modern or atheistic morality is concerned with the right to self-determination of individuals which are believed to be morally independent of any communal bonds. Indeed, these bonds are interpreted as the free creations of morally autonomous individuals. Thus atheists justify support for democratic, Communist, or Fascist regimes by appealing to moral concerns common to all liberated individuals. Consequently, their moral exhortations are universal; they tend to stress common human goods and not the self-aggrandizement to which in fact atheistic morality does subordinate all common goods.<sup>7</sup>

Marlow knows that any atheistic regime, whether imperialistic or anti-imperialistic, needs the siren song of lofty ideas to enlist support for its crusades: "An idea at the back of it . . . and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to" (p. 7). In a variant reading, he envies Romans the narrow civic piety responsible for their lack of concern with such propaganda, those "pretty fictions" designed by atheists to seduce others into their heart of darkness (p. 7). His revulsion at the "philanthropic pretense of the whole concern" (p. 25) causes his respect for Kurtz's abandonment of that pretense.

The relation between atheism's pretty fictions and Kurtz's final nightmare resembles that between the loftiness of his original report to the ISSC (the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs) and his later subscriptum to it:

He began with the argument that we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, "must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings—we approach them with the might as of a deity," and so on, and so on. "By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded," etc., etc. From that point he soared and took me with him. The peroration was magnificent, though difficult to remember, you know. It gave me the notion of an exotic Immensity ruled by an august Benevolence. It made me tingle with enthusiasm. . . . There were no practical hints to interrupt the magic current of phrases, unless a kind of note at the foot of the last page, scrawled evidently much later in an unsteady hand, may be regarded as the exposition of a

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche* (Pfullingen, 1961), II, p. 198.

method. It was very simple, and at the end of that moving appeal to every altruistic sentiment it blazed at you, luminous and terrifying, like a flash of lightning in a serene sky: "Exterminate all the brutes!" [p. 51].

Mr. Kurtz here reveals the atheism informing Western civilization's pretty fictions. In the absence of that revelation, men storming barricades in the name of those fictions appear to be "emissaries of light . . . weaning ignorant millions from their horrid ways . . . emissaries of pity and science and progress. . . . We want for the guidance of the cause entrusted to us by Europe, so to speak, higher intelligence, wide sympathies, a singleness of purpose" (pp. 12, 25-26). The ISSSC's claim to these lofty qualities (except for its obvious singleness of purpose)<sup>8</sup> is atheistic propaganda intended to devalue the "horrid ways" of pre-atheistic regimes such as the ancient Romans or African tribes, for those regimes preclude atheistic liberation since their tribal or civic piety does not permit its devotees to experience themselves as free to reject its divine authority. Freedom of choice has no place in tribal or civic piety for which only fellow citizens who share that piety count. Thus the pious Romans who ruthlessly exploited Britain perceived themselves primarily as Romans and only secondarily, if at all, as human beings. In their eyes, only slaves, men without a tribal or civic religion of their own, were primarily human beings.

Ancient citizens piously traced their written and unwritten laws back to lawgivers who were gods or received their laws from gods. Consequently they saw themselves not as autonomous individuals but as subordinate to their sacred families and cities. Emancipation from those bonds was inconceivable to them. Only atheists would claim such freedom. Only gods who permitted or encouraged atheism would create men capable of it. For such gods, a man's free acceptance or rejection of their authority is the prerequisite to true piety.<sup>9</sup> They prefer free atheistic rejection of their authority to the denial made by civic piety that citizens are at liberty to reject its authority. Thus both atheists and the gods who

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<sup>8</sup> Edmund Burke, *Burke's Politics*, ed. J. Hoffman and P. Levack (New York, 1949), p. 466: "In the French Revolution . . . the philosophers had one predominant object which they pursued with a fanatical fury: that is, the utter extirpation of religion. To that every question of empire was subordinate. They had rather domineer in a parish of atheists than rule over a Christian world. Their temporal ambition was wholly subservient to their proselytizing spirit, in which they were not exceeded by Mahomet himself." Milton, *Paradise Lost*, I, 254-63: "The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a heaven of a hell, a hell of heaven. / What matter where, if I be still the name, / And where I should be, all but less than he / Whom thunder hath made greater? here at least / We shall be free; th' Almighty hath not built / Here for his envy, will not drive us hence. / Here we may reign secure, and in my choice / To reign is worth ambition, though in hell / Better to reign in hell, than serve in heaven."

<sup>9</sup> Harry Neumann, "Milton's Adam and Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor on the Problem of Freedom before God." *The Personalist*, XLVIII (1967), pp. 317-27.

are possible in atheistic regimes would subscribe to the ISSSC's revulsion at the "horrid ways" of tribal and civic piety.

Freedom, and specifically intellectual freedom, is atheism's core. What one does with one's freedom—whether one supports democratic, anarchist, Communist, or Fascist regimes—is less important than its adamant determination to undermine the belief in moral authorities which preclude atheistic liberty. Western propaganda glorifies this freedom, encouraging one to overlook its bestial forms. Men acquainted with Communist and Fascist terror hardly need Kurtz's Africa to discover atheistic freedom's heart of darkness. Yet why condemn any use of freedom, including Hitler's and Stalin's, if that freedom itself, and not its products or its justifications, is the ultimate court of appeals? Should not atheists despise such condemnations as relapses into a now-discredited past governed by tribal and civic superstition?

Does not fear of punishment or disgrace preclude full atheistic use of one's freedom, preventing the unleashing of the lusts forbidden by unenlightened tastes?

The joy of killing . . . and why not? The mind of man is capable of anything—because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future. What is there after all? Joy, fear, sorrow, devotion, apathy, valor, rage . . . you can't understand. How could you?—with solid pavement under your feet, surrounded by kind neighbors ready to cheer you or to fall on you, stepping delicately between the butcher and the policeman, in holy terror of scandal and gallows and lunatic asylums . . . . These little things make all the difference [pp. 36-37, 50].

For Conrad, the more the respect for non-atheistic morality declines, the more atheistic licence comes into its own. Kurtz in Africa, far from accustomed restraints, found that "there was nothing on earth to prevent him from killing whom he jolly well pleased" (p. 57). The solitude of the wilderness uncovered the abyss of freedom within his atheism. Had he never come to Africa, he might have been fooled by the altruistic propaganda glorifying martyrdom for the sake of human self-determination, the rights of man. In commenting upon the heads which Kurtz had impaled on stakes around his house, Marlow notes that

they only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts . . . whether he knew of this deficiency himself I can't say . . . . But the wilderness had found him out early . . . . I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude—and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core [pp. 58-59].

Mr. Kurtz came to regard the whole universe as his property to be dealt with at his pleasure:

You should have heard him say, "My ivory, my intended, my station, my river, my—" everything belonged to him . . . but that was a trifle. The thing was to know what he belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own. That was the reflection that made you creepy all over [p. 49].

Marlow considers Mr. Kurtz's atheism inhuman unless moderated by internal checks (pp. 22, 26-27, 32-34, 42, 49-50, 58-59, 67-69). However, no rational basis for checks exists if morality's true ground is liberty unfettered by prior restraints. Consequently, Marlow believes it fortunate that most advocates of freedom as the ground of virtue fail to comprehend their commitment's abyss. "The inner truth is hidden—luckily, luckily" (p. 34). Aware of this problem, a Platonic clerk who glorifies the ISSSC's messianic zeal nevertheless refuses to practice what he preaches: "I am not such a fool as I look, quoth Plato to his disciples" (p. 11).<sup>10</sup> Marlow's aversion to lies (p. 27) is moderated by his refusal to deprive Kurtz's fiancée of the illusion which ennobles her life: "bowing my head before the faith that was in her, before that great and saving illusion which shone with an unearthly glow in the triumphant darkness from which I could not have defended her... from which I could not even defend myself" (p. 77).

Marlow's "triumphant darkness" is not self-subsistent; it arises from the atheistic refusal to acknowledge any moral authorities which would preclude unbridled self-indulgence. If those authorities are natural, then atheism is an unnatural effort to conquer nature, a rebellion against nature. In that case, atheism degrades what is naturally experienced as good to the level of edifying lies. Yet the charge that it is contrary to nature rests upon the assumption that unchecked self-determination is unnatural. Thus both atheism and the case against it seem to spring from unproved opinions which, if accepted as true, become noble or ignoble lies.

Faith in the truth of what atheism despises as pretty fictions is the remnant of pre-atheistic tribal or civic piety in regimes dedicated to the destruction of that piety. Such faith almost invariably fails to discern its conflict with the liberty which it claims to justify. For atheistic freedom justifies anything from intellectual emancipation to cannibalism, from Socrates and Jesus to Lenin and Hitler. Mr. Kurtz finally comprehends what readers of *Heart of Darkness* usually fail to grasp. Far from being in conflict with the ISSSC's lofty endorsement of human freedom, his cannibalism is its moral triumph. In his "extremist" pursuit of liberty (p. 74), Kurtz practices what the ISSSC preaches.

Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor rightly notes that most people abhor the consequences of atheistic freedom and censures Jesus for founding a religion dependent for its acceptance on man's freedom. To the Inquisitor and the dying Kurtz religions of this sort seem inhuman. Probably for similar reasons, Tacitus characterizes Christians as haters of mankind (*Annals* 15:44). Kurtz both embraces his freedom and reviles it. Since some of his passions—especially those which formed him prior to his African odyssey—were not fully atheistic, they opposed the boundless freedom of atheism. Thus Marlow "saw the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear, yet struggling blindly

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Glencoe, Ill., 1958), p. 327, n. 287.

with itself" (p. 68). Appeals to Kurtz's less atheistic passions were frustrated by the strength of his newly acquired atheistic cravings, and no appeal in the name of atheism's altruistic fictions could carry much weight:

The awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts . . . had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations. . . . I had to do with a being to whom I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low. I had to invoke him—himself—his own exalted and incredible degradation. There was nothing either above him or below him. . . . He had kicked himself loose of the earth, of every restraint [p. 67].

On Marlow's horizon, Kurtz's last words ("The horror! The horror!") were sparked by true self-knowledge. Furthermore, Marlow discerns moral greatness in them:

He had summed up—he had judged. "The horror!" . . . it had the appalling face of a glimpsed truth—that strange commingling of desire and hate. . . . It was an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions. But it was a victory. That is why I have remained loyal to Kurtz to the last [p. 72].

If morality's essence is freedom and not obedience, Kurtz's last words may well signify moral victory. Few have been so alive to atheism's capacity to uproot men from all earthly ties. Atheism's hegemony is responsible for what Heidegger calls homesickness (*Heimweh*), the pain of that rootlessness.<sup>11</sup> This pain becomes global as Western morality discredits the last remnants of tribal and civic piety. At best, those remnants are lumped together with the ennobling illusion which Marlow encouraged in Kurtz's fiancée. At worst, they are scorned or patronized as "disadvantaged," "deprived," or "backward" peoples. Marlow discerns only "superstition . . . some kind of primitive honor" in the restraint preventing some hungry cannibals from devouring him (p. 42). Interpretations of this sort spring from the opinion that atheistic self-determination is the true ground of morality. All powerful contemporary regimes subscribe to this opinion, although only Marxists officially recognize the atheism informing Western civilization since its origin in Greek thought.

If Conrad agrees with Marlow's ascription of self-knowledge and moral triumph to the dying Kurtz, he thereby shows his Greek or atheistic prejudice. To be sure, traditionalists attached to atheism's pretty fictions may censure Conrad's glorification of Kurtz just as Socrates condemned poets who exposed the lack of nobility in his utopia's noble lies. However, denunciation of Kurtz in the name of man's right to self-determination misses the point, if Kurtz is the perfect embodiment of that right. The real question is not whether Kurtz misused his freedom but whether that

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<sup>11</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Martin Heidegger zum 80. Geburtstag von seiner Heimatstadt Messkirch* (Frankfurt am Main, 1969); Leo Strauss, "Philosophy as Rigorous Science and Political Philosophy," *Interpretation*, II (1971), p. 5.

freedom, however used, is good. To comprehend this question, one must pay serious attention to the strongest case against that freedom. One must leave regimes whose main struggle is between old-fashioned defense of atheism's pretty fictions and sophisticated glorification of its hideous depths and embark on historical studies centering around the conflict between Socrates and his Athenian accusers. In particular, one must strive to free one's mind of atheistic prejudice if grasp of the worth of the accusation of the Athenians is to emerge.

Socrates' accusers perceived the atheistic implications of the philosophical devaluation of non-atheistic pious attachment to noble or ignoble lies and unenlightened prejudices impeding human freedom. The question of the rightness of the condemnation of Socratic atheism by pious Athenians remains *the* question of Western civilization. That civilization emerged with Greek thought and culminated in what Marlow calls Kurtz's moral victory. So long as Western man's question remains questionable, the issue should not be prejudiced in favor of Socrates or Kurtz, for Plato's Socrates is to Conrad's Kurtz as atheism's noble exterior is to its heart of darkness. Is not skepticism the proper response to both atheism's Socratic and its Kurtzian forms, however difficult such detachment may be for Western moral tastes? Probably philosophers strive to embrace this skepticism, while intellectuals such as Marlow and Kurtz shun its tepidity (p. 71). Perhaps something of this philosophical effort is implied by the Platonic clerk's praise of the ISSSC's business at a distance and his refusal to engage directly in it (p. 11).