

# The Collapse of Transcendence

PABLITO A. BAYBADO, JR.

The quest for meaningful existence determines man's personal and historical progression. The history of philosophy shows that the foundation and validity of meaning is based on the perceived and systematized understanding of human nature. This becomes readily apparent when we review the "modern way of doing philosophy." According to Aldo Tassi, the modern condition is highly influenced by Hume and Kant.

The framework for the thinking to be found in these philosophies is established in the eighteenth century, especially in the works of Hume and Kant. These two philosophers turn Western man's self-understanding in a new direction. From the perspective of their thought it becomes possible to understand what had been happening for the two previous centuries and, at the same time, to anticipate the shape of things to come in the next century and a half.<sup>1</sup>

Hume and Kant are responsible in the shifting of doing philosophy from the "workings of nature" to the "workings of man". This contribution changes the spirituality of the modern era from imitation of nature to the domination of nature. In the modern period, man becomes the center of history because all things "are constituted in reference to him, or more precisely, in reference to

---

<sup>1</sup> Aldo Tassi, "Modernity as the Transformation of Truth into Meaning," *Readings in the Philosophy of Man*. ADMU, 21.

his experiences and his reflections upon them.”<sup>2</sup> In the final analysis, the world influenced by Hume and Kant is one that is dictated by the perceived ‘human nature’. Dominion over nature means that man’s behavior, needs, motives and lifestyle as a whole must be in conformity with the principles of human nature. “These principles of human nature which serve as the foundation for the natural and human sciences are the underlying pre-suppositions which make possible all human knowledge and rational behavior.”<sup>3</sup>

As a result, the modern man finds himself, in the words of Alexander Koyre, that he has “lost his place in the world, or more concretely perhaps, lost the very world in which he was living and about which he was thinking, and had to transform and replace not only his fundamental concepts and attributes, but even the very framework of his thought.”<sup>4</sup>

The lost world of man signifies a decline in his humanity. Man’s humanity has been abridged and restricted by the nature that he has designed for himself. In the same manner, man can no longer recognize the authentic status of the other and the world at large for they are meaningless and non-existent unless they conform and are constituted in his “nature”. The anthropocentric spirituality of the modern period, therefore, has caused the collapse of the transcendental dynamics of human reality.

The two manifestations of this anthropocentrism are the rationalist and materialist traditions.

#### A. THE RATIONALIST TRADITION

Rene Descartes initiated the era of rationality. In his famous dictum, *cogito ergo sum*, thinking becomes existence and existence becomes thinking. Reason becomes man, in so far as what distinguishes man as man is his reason. Thereby, in his search of

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Koyre. *From the Closed to the Open Universe*. (Baltimore, 1957), p. 2.

that which is certain and distinct, Descartes did not allow the least irrationality to thrive. Reason becomes the determining factor of all his endeavors, the ruling concern of his life.

From the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the history of philosophy can be interpreted as "an attempt of universal synthesis, a reduction of all experiences, all that is reasonable to a totality wherein consciousness embraces the world, leaves nothing outside of itself, and thus becomes absolute thought."<sup>5</sup> Reason becomes the messiah illuminating even the darkest corner of reality. This is the greatest project of the Enlightenment. Absolute thought presented everything as clearly as in the broad daylight. Consequently, Enlightenment is seen as a crystal ball where even a dot is not visible; history has perfected itself already.

But the 20<sup>th</sup> century experiences of wars, famine, discomfort and restlessness have bracketed this claim of reason. He "who cannot hate is no man, and history is made by men," wrote Oswald Spengler in the *Duties of the German Youth*.<sup>6</sup> Reason becomes enigmatic, and is subjected to a grave questioning.<sup>7</sup> In our century, the understanding of man as a rational animal furnishes no genuine enlightenment. One simply finds it difficult not to doubt whether the wars, terrorism, extreme poverty, etc going on around the globe are works of rational beings. Furthermore, the dailies no longer astonish us with the news of brutal killings, rape and even child abuses. Added to these is the continuous degradation of our natural resources perpetuated mainly by the educated. In short,

---

<sup>5</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, translated by Richard Cohen. (Quezon City Philippines: Claretian Publication, 1982), p. 75.

<sup>6</sup> Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, "The Duties of the German Youth," an abridge edition by Helmut Werner, and English abridge edition prepared by Arthur Helps from the translation by Charles Atkinson. (New York: The Modern Library, 1962) p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> Hegel's deification of reason resulted actually in the devaluation of the human person. In his idealistic pantheism man as an individual human being appears now as the "trick of nature" only an insignificant moment, a temporary period of transition, a contingent element in the eternal process of evolution of the Absolute Reason, Logos. Frederick Patka, *Existentialist Thinkers and Thought*. (New York, Citadel Press, 1966), p. 16.

human beings have not been able to fully manifest their rationality. At best, therefore,

[o]ne could here introduce the notion, current today, of project and say that the essence of a rational animal enters into the very project of making a human being behave as a rational man. In this way, "rational animal" is no longer applicable to every human being. Its very form implies a negation of what is specifically human. It substitutes – without the very one who expresses it being aware of the substitution – a certain nature, a certain complex, meant to define biologically that mysterious reality, the human being, of whom, after all, one could speak only with propriety in the singular.<sup>8</sup>

Rather, man becomes man not through his reason alone. Reason belongs to the many projects human beings must actualize. Since rational animal is the product of that which makes him man, Enlightenment will have to recognize also that at the heart of its Light there is also darkness.<sup>9</sup> And this darkness is dramatically shown in the disgust Faust experienced when he learned that he would remain as he was in eternity.

How futile it has been to have amassed  
A treasury of human thought and knowledge  
Even when I finally stop and rest  
I feel no source of renewed strength in me;  
I have not grown one with stature,  
I am no nearer to the infinite.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Gabriel Marcel, *Problematic Man*. Translated by Brian Thompson. (Herder and Herder Inco., 1967), p. 25.

<sup>9</sup> According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant. Its aim which is emancipatory knowledge turns out to involve itself firmly with the question of power which complicates and perhaps even restricts its emancipatory quality, all because, it abstracts the world and human beings. Richard Kearney (ed.) *Twentieth-Century Continental Philosophy*, pp. 482-592. Read also *Irrational Man*, p. 279.

<sup>10</sup> John Wolfgang Von Goethe, *Faust I and II*.

## B. MATERIALIST TRADITION

Max Weber's analysis of the meaninglessness of the Modern age is brought about by Protestantism and the Ethos of Modern Capitalism.<sup>11</sup> The condition brought about by these factors is aggravated by the contribution of modern science. Although these factors are primarily contributed by the Western Tradition, they attain a universal significance and value. Nothing today is pure and original, for in one way or the other, the influences of the Western Culture are very prominent. Hence, understanding the modern age is impossible outside the periphery of the Western Culture. The Western problem is ultimately becoming our problem.

No one, even if he should live in the most and least disturbed corner of the globe, can escape the disquieting effects of the revolutionary transformations which human civilization is now undergoing. The most astute leaders of the thinking of the East and West are well aware that the "modern" crisis affects not only certain sectors or aspects of life and civilization but their totality and thus the total existence of man.<sup>12</sup>

### 1. *Protestantism*

Martin Luther used *Beruf* (Calling) in a sense which it never had before. What Luther means by this word is clear; he is thinking of the labor of the secular. Everyday, life as a God-appointed task is a calling. However, the secular life that Luther is referring to involve necessarily the idea that the proper performance of such a secular task is a religious obligation. A

---

<sup>11</sup> This contention follows the assertion of the book *Protestantism and Capitalism: The Max Weber Thesis and its Critics*, edited by Robert Green. This is a compilation of analysis, critiques and interpretation of Max Weber's thesis, *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*, translated by Talcott Parsons. The first part of the book is the original account of Weber as derived from this thesis on pages 13-14, 16-27. The succeeding papers are mainly analyses and criticisms by other authors.

<sup>12</sup> Kurt F. Reinhardt, *The Existential Revolt*. (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1964), p. 1.

calling is thus the obligation to live a religious life within the sphere of the secular.<sup>13</sup>

Calling, in that sense, has a double and mutually exclusive effect: to "glorify God and enjoy Him forever,"<sup>14</sup> on the one hand, and "to be in the world but not of it"<sup>15</sup> on the other. The former implies an unconditional resignation to the will of God based on the Scriptures. The Scripture becomes the sole locus of encounter between man and God. Anything other than the Scripture becomes ordinary entity subject to the will and wishes of human beings. The latter, therefore, does not mean a world-affirming attitude. The world does not have value; it is primarily there to serve man's purpose and wants. Protestantism then is both an attempt to encounter God face-to-face<sup>16</sup> and a call for a progressive life through hard labor.

As a result, the craving to encounter God face-to-face separates man away from the intimacy with nature. Nature no longer mirrors the greatness and beauty of God. All accepted intermediaries between God and humanity become void and inessential. Not even rituals or sacramental grace, nor church, nor human help of any kind avails here. Man stands in the presence of God in awful isolation. Weber calls this spirituality the *disenchantment of the world*, that is, emancipation from sacramental magic.<sup>17</sup>

In Protestantism, therefore, nature is despiritualized. The images and symbols accorded to it have been neutralized. In this way, it unveils nature as a realm of objects hostile to the spirit and to be conquered by puritan zeal and industry.<sup>18</sup>

Since all intermediaries between God and man have been eliminated, there arises a tremendous emphasis upon individua-

---

<sup>13</sup> Robert Green, p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> William Barrett, pp. 24-29.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Green, p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> William Barrett, p. 27.

lism.<sup>19</sup> Individualism means that man confronts God alone by himself and that he becomes the center to be served in the demystified universe.

Interpersonalism becomes impossible because all relations have been depersonalized. Sociality, therefore, is inessential in protestant's religious life. If we are to enjoy God forever and not succumb to creaturely pleasures, we are to live with a "depersonalized and therefore rationalized view of love to our neighbor, and ceaseless activity within the sphere of the secular in order to bring the secular within the final aim of life."<sup>20</sup>

To sum up, Protestantism, first, places all the weight of its emphasis upon the "irrational datum of faith"<sup>21</sup> as the only bridge which connects man to God. Secondly, by doing so, he severs himself not only from earth but also from his fellow human beings. In this direct relationship with God, William Barrett sees an impending danger which is now culminating in our age.

To be sure, in all of this the aim was progress, and Protestantism did succeed in raising the religious consciousness to a higher level of individual sincerity, soul-searching, and strenuous inwardness. Man was impoverished in order to come face to face with his God and the severe and inexplicable demands of his faith; but in the process he was stripped of all the mediating rites and dogmas that could make this confrontation less dangerous to his psychic balance.

.....

A secular civilization leaves him more starkly naked than the iconoclasm of the Reformation had ever dreamed. The more severely he struggles to hold on to the primal face-to-face relation with God, the more tenuous this becomes, until in the end the relation to God Himself threatens to become a relation to Nothingness.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Robert Green, p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>21</sup> William Barrett, p. 27.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 27-29.

## 2. *The Spirit of Modern Capitalism*

According to Max Weber there is no problem with Capitalism. Capitalism as an economic system is common to many countries and has always existed where exchange of goods is present. He defines a "capitalist economic action as one which rests on the expectation of profit by the utilization of opportunities for exchange."<sup>23</sup> What makes it problematic though

[is] not the development of capitalistic activities as such, or capitalism in trade, in war politics or administration as sources of gain. It is rather the origin of the bourgeois capitalism with its rational organization of free labor, or in terms of cultural history, the problem is that of the origin of the Western bourgeois class and of its peculiarities, a problem which is certainly connected with that of the origin of the capitalistic labor.<sup>24</sup>

The cultural historical problem that Weber speaks of is related to the Protestant's work ethics which is to conquer nature with puritan zeal and industry. He claims that though they are not quite the same thing, Protestant ethics jibes with the spirit of modern capitalism. In fact, William Barrett calls it a conspiracy because, together with science, they largely and definitively form part of the experiences of meaninglessness and fragmentation of the modern man.

The rational organization of free labor by the bourgeois capitalist makes capitalism a new phenomenon in our age. This means that Capitalism, in order to persist, must control internally and externally all the possibility of oppositions.<sup>25</sup> This spirit is manifested in two factors: money-making obligation and leisure sacrifice.

The differences between modern Capitalism and past capitalism are only qualitative and not quantitative. In all ages, love

---

<sup>23</sup> Robert Green, p. 2.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Kearney, p. 481.



of money has not been changed. What makes modern capitalism peculiar and problematic, however, is that it "*enjoins not the love of money but the obligation to make money.*"<sup>26</sup> This obligation gives an ethical responsibility to the individual to make money, more money. It is only in the element of obligation and responsibility that Weber sees the most significant difference between modern capitalism and the forms of capitalism current in past ages.

Consequently, cardinal virtues such as compassion, love and mercy cease to be virtues. The new ethical norm is progress: all human qualities that serve progress become virtuous.<sup>27</sup> This ethos drives man to ceaselessly indulge himself in designing and redesigning his capitalistic enterprise to improve production and gain more profit. In other words, the rational organization of labor is an attempt to reduce the laborer's creativity and personality into a mere equipment or instrument of production. The drive to control all factors of production is needed to expect a constant lucrative profit. Henceforth, the ethos to make money and *more money* in the end becomes irrational. This attitude is no longer human. Furthermore, this sense of responsibility is not even native to man's instinct.<sup>28</sup>

The second factor is the consequence of the first. Man tends to live a frugal and rationally ordered life in keeping with this aim. He designs a method, a structure which enables him to live. In other words, he controls himself, up to a certain extent that he impoverishes his humanity in order to win over the very aim of his ethos. Sacrifices are entailed. The leisure of living and the spontaneity of human existence are also sacrificed. Everything, even his joys and leisure, is reduced to the expectation of profit. Life, therefore, is subordinated to its capitalistic ethos.

---

<sup>26</sup> Robert Green, p. 7. (*italics mine*)

<sup>27</sup> Erich Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope: Toward a Mechanized Technology*. (USA and Canada: Harper and Row Publishers, 1968), p. 83-84.

<sup>28</sup> Erich Fromm's analysis of the development of Capitalism leads him to conclude that the experiences it entails are not "human", p. 83-84. Read also *Protestantism and Capitalism*, p. 10.

### 3. *Concurrence of the ethos of Protestantism and Capitalism*

The responsibility to make more money is not far different from obeying one's "call". At the root of these two (ethos of Protestantism and capitalism) lies a common ground. Both have the unrelenting urge to conquer nature and make a prosperous living out of it. From this close relationship it is clear

...that [in] the whole development [of Protestantism,] the decisive thin is the idea of "calling", that is, of the methodically disciplined mode of life within the sphere of the secular. The more intense the life calling, the more God is honored; the more consistently such a life is lived, the more sure one can be of salvation. All this works out into an intensified industriousness, into the mood for work, and the natural economic result is riches. The most earnest adherents of the disciplinary ideal of Protestantism thus come to serve the interests of Capitalism.<sup>29</sup>

No one has ever asserted that Capitalism is the direct product of Calvinism. We can, however, say that both possessed a certain affinity for each other, that Calvinistic ethic of the "calling" and of work, which declares that the earning of money with certain precautions is allowable, was able to give (Capitalism) an intellectual and ethical backbone, and that, therefore, thus organized and inwardly supported it vigorously developed, even though within the limits of anti-mammon.<sup>30</sup>

### 4. *Contribution of Science*

The achievement of science and the advancement of technology serve as the arm of capitalism and Protestantism. They heighten the ethics of work and intensify the desire to make more money. This is the reason why Barrett claims that these three concur in contributing to the malady of the modern man.

---

<sup>29</sup> Robert Green, p. 18.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. XI.

The achievement of science appears to be a very good project. It reduces the need for living energy and makes life comfortable and easy. On a deeper level, however, science and technology pave the way for the thinking machine by replacing human thought.<sup>31</sup> Thereby, man becomes a passive ingredient of the technological society. His desires and needs are conditioned and dictated by a well-organized and mechanized industry.

In a highly technological and industrialized country there evolves the dehumanization of individuals.<sup>32</sup> The society becomes a mega-machine. It is completely organized and homogenized in such a way that every individual functions like a machine wherein they act and live like its parts. Hence, man's passivity is, in practice, characterized as *homo consumens*, that is, an environment is created for him to have more and use more. Consequently, man experiences existential insecurity.<sup>33</sup> He becomes a thing because the grand machine dictates his meaning and dignity.

Where the ethos of making money is at work, modern science collaborates with it, for it is only through science that capitalism is able to maximize profit and minimize expenditures. This ethos is justified and made more intense by the "calling" of Protestant spirituality. In all these, the aim is simple: to improve the material well-being of man to the fullest.

This grand conspiracy results in the stripping of the spirit of nature, the depersonalization of society and the impoverishment of the self, which becomes an object to be harnessed for the sake of material progress and development.

---

<sup>31</sup> According to Erich Fromm, Industrial Revolution has happened twice already in the history of men. The first revolution is characterized by the replacement of living energy with mechanical energy (17<sup>th</sup> Century Industrial Revolution). The Second is the replacement of human thought with thinking machines, p. 26.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>33</sup> Kurt Reinhardt, p. 8.

### C. THE MODERN CONDITION

The collapse of transcendence is caused mainly by materialism and rationalism. They have stripped off from man his interrelationship with himself, his fellow man, the world and God. As a result, modern man lives a solitary and meaningless existence.

#### 1. *Solitary existence*

The modern man exists by himself alone. Everything is placed and explained within the structure he has designed in order to be able to achieve his aim. This means that he has dominion over and above all things. For this reason, his religion is no longer a faith in God, but a faith in money. The desire to live in material abundance supersedes the spiritual dimension of man.

Modern civilizations are gravely threatened because the perennial values of intellectual and moral verities have increasingly been divorced from the realities of matter and nature, so that, material reality, deprived of the guidance of right reason and a rationally enlightened will, is being handed over to the blind forces of chances and the biological urges of the will to power.<sup>34</sup>

At this point, there exists a similarity between the degeneration of the modern condition and the fall of the Roman Empire. As St. Augustine described the Romans:

I must speak also of the earthly city – of that city lusts to dominate the world and which, through nations bend to its yoke, is itself dominated by its passion for dominion.<sup>35</sup>

The passion for dominion is a characteristic common to the modern man and the Romans. Dominion is the rational of all things around man including himself. Roman virtues then are self-centered and self-serving. For this reason, the fall of Rome is not caused by the God of the Christians but by the rottenness of its culture.

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> *City of God*, Bk. I, preface.

The gods created by the Romans and the culture created by the modern man did not protect them from degeneration and destruction. Indeed, they are the culprit of their downfall and suffering respectively. Augustine, in his critique of the Roman god, says:

And what had Minerva herself first lost that she should perish? The guardians of her statue? To be sure, once they were slain, Minerva could be taken away. It was not the effigy that guarded the men, but the men who guarded the effigy. For what earthly reason was Minerva worshipped as the protector of the land and people, when she could not even protect the guards of the temple.<sup>36</sup>

In the same manner of reasoning, modernity created a culture, i.e., a system of human nature, to live comfortably. But his modern day experiences show that the system is already outdated and obsolete. Instead of changing the system, it is the system that is in control of human beings. As a result, the Roman empire fell; the modern man lives miserably and unhappily.

In the final analysis, the Romans and the modern man are suffering the same thing, i.e., restlessness. Their life is the absence of peace and freedom. As a consequence, life is mired by injustices, sufferings and pains.

In losing religion, man lost the concrete connection with a transcendent realm of being; he was set free<sup>37</sup> to deal with this world in all its brute objectivity. But he was found to feel homeless in such a world, which no longer answered the needs of his spirit. A home is the accepted framework which habitually contains our life. To lose one's psychic container is to be cast adrift, to become a wanderer upon the face of the earth. Henceforth, in seeking his own human completeness, man would have to do for himself what he once had done for him, unconsciously, by the Church, through the medium of its sacramental life.

---

<sup>36</sup> *City of God*, Bk. I, Ch. 2.

<sup>37</sup> William Barrett, p. 25.

The case of the modern man is not a hopeless condition though. Renewal of existence is still possible. Life can be renewed as expressed by Augustine in these words: "... You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rest in you.... Lord let me call you by believing in you, for you have been preached to us."<sup>38</sup>

## 2. *Finitude and Meaninglessness*

The different historical forces abridged human beings to his finitude. Finitude means that "there is no objective reality independent of the knowing subject, and there is no way to break through the belt of subjectivity into a region of transcendent metaphysical reality."<sup>39</sup> Wholeness of being entails the recognition of anything that is within the human reality because all these participate in man's being. In this totality lies the finitude of man, for which even the reality of transcendent is dearly immanent. In short, this existential horizon is an autonomy perfected, the triumph of subjectivity.

Human finitude is the lack of the "beyond" in human reality. Finitude is a matter of human limitations, and limitations involve what we cannot do or cannot be. In a sense, human reality is where absurdity, naiveté, and uncertainty blend with joy and certainty. Man must live recognizing this lack as his very nature and not transcend to any magical and fictitious realm. If man attempts to take refuge in a transcendental world, then he escapes his own being; he leaves human reality.

Finitude, however, is not the sum of our limitations; rather, the fact of human finitude brings us to the center of man where positive and negative existence coincide and interpenetrate to such an extent that a man's strength coincides with his pathos, his vision with his blindness, his truth with his untruth, his being with his non-being. And if human finitude is not understood, neither is the nature of man.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> *Confessions*, Bk. 1, Ch. 1, No. 1.

<sup>39</sup> Frederick Patka, p. 15.

<sup>40</sup> William Barrett, p. 190.

The integral man, then, recognizes the complete finitude of man with all its complications and manifestations. Man lives as an "insecure" existence being under the constant tension created by bio-spiritual conflict immanent in his constitution. Man finds himself in the situation of the "suspense", that is, a situation of being torn apart by the polarity of psycho-somatic nature, each part demanding the satisfaction of related needs and wants without a final equilibrium ever to be achieved. Existence is a condition of unbalance, unrest, anguish and ambivalence.<sup>41</sup> His meaningful existence lies in his incompleteness which serves as his pseudo-completion. At the heart of this "incompleteness" he is free to wander according to his own liking because he has achieved his full autonomy. Man is free to make or unmake himself, forever positing his primacy and priority. Consequently, his being does not include the being of others and the being of the world.

Since the triumph of subjectivity causes the demystification of the world, the modern attitude, then is characterized by the inability to recognize the beauty of the world in itself. Because of this, Mircea Eliade calls for a reverse demystification. He says:

We have to 'demystify' the apparently profane worlds and languages of literature, plastic arts, and cinema in order to disclose their "sacred" elements.... In a desacralized world such as ours, the "sacred" is present and active chiefly in the imaginary universes. But imaginary experiences are part of the total human being, no less important than his diurnal experiences. This means that the nostalgia deciphered in so many literary and plastic works, reveals man's longing for a total and definite renewal, for a *renovation* capable of changing his existence.<sup>42</sup>

In short, the harmony between man and the world and not man over and above the world makes authentic existence possible. □

---

<sup>41</sup> Frederick Patka, p. 36.

<sup>42</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion*, p. 126.