

Beyond Hubris

by Juliana Geran Pilon

Modernity on Endless Trial

by Leszek Kolakowski

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The University of Chicago Press;
304 pp., \$24.95

With disarming and hardly disingenuous modesty, Polish humanist Leszek Kolakowski describes his new anthology, *Modernity on Endless Trial*, as a loose collection of “semi-philosophical sermons” written over the course of a decade or so, purporting to offer no original philosophy. He adds, as an apparent afterthought, that he views them as conscious, deliberate appeals for “moderation in consistency”—an idea for which he, a very much former Marxist, confesses a long-standing fascination. In fact, these intellectual cameos are sophisticated attempts to struggle with some of the most difficult and interesting challenges to our culture; their style is so elegant and refreshingly clear as to delight even the reader who on occasion may take exception to some of the author’s conclusions.

The book is divided into four parts: modernity, barbarity, and intellectuals; the dilemmas of the Christian legacy; liberals, revolutionaries, and utopians; and scientific theories. In more or less logical order, these categories embrace the question of what modernity is (or is not), together with two related epistemological-sociological questions: should modernity be placed in the dock at all, and if so, who is qualified to judge it? (Certainly not the self-righteous but usually deeply flawed intellectuals, whom the equally contemptuous Solzhenitsyn has called “the smatterers.”) Kolakowski further explores the contribution of religion and the role of faith; the shortcomings of utopias, revolutions, and politics generally; and finally he offers a transcendental—and quixotic—critique of

all ideology, including the self-righteously “scientific” kind.

To begin with, he lays to rest the idea that “modernity” is something to be for or against insofar as the development of technology and economic rationality are concerned. Kolakowski’s chief fear is that, in the name of modernity and a mystical sense of “progress,” we shall witness the disappearance of what he calls “taboos,” defined by him as “barriers erected by instinct and not by conscious planning,” whose function is nothing less than the preservation of social life. “Various traditional human bonds which make communal life possible, and without which our existence would be regulated only by greed and fear, are not likely to survive without a taboo system,” Kolakowski argues; on this pragmatic ground, he is prepared to defend them.

On the one hand, Kolakowski unequivocally attacks reason as a moral guide, since what he takes to be “the normal sense of ‘rationality’” allows for—indeed invites—nominalist relativism. Thus he bluntly and clearly asserts that “there are no more rational grounds for respecting human life and human personal rights than there are, say, for forbidding the consumption of shrimp among Jews.” Yet this proposition flies blatantly in the face of the natural rights theory of Immanuel Kant, whom Kolakowski in another essay correctly and emphatically praises.

The essay “Why Do We Need Kant?” is in fact a particularly astute rendering of the German philosopher’s rather complex rationalist ethics. Kolakowski appreciates that the classical doctrine of natural rights asserts that each human being is by his nature unequivocally entitled to fundamental rights and that people are ends in themselves—ideas that, contrary to other, less sophisticated naturalist theories, emphatically do not belong to an empirical concept. Kolakowski regards as essential the appreciation that the

ethical understanding of humanity derives legitimately from neither anthropological nor historical research, but is rather substantiated morally. And Kant, of course, derived that moral ground from practical reason.

On this issue, Kolakowski is tentative. While noting that moral substantiation *can* be obtained through postulating absolutely autonomous principles of practical reason, and hence might not have to rely on religious tradition, he avoids taking a stand on the matter by noting simply that its resolution is “another question.” One senses that Kolakowski has great sympathy with Kant’s rational moral justification on a purely intellectual—which is to say, rational—level. Yet Kolakowski seems to lean away from it in the end, for the Dostoyevskian reason that human beings are not equal to this kind of rationality, and that without God, to echo the great novelist, “anything is possible.”

Kolakowski fears the human penchant for invoking “rationality” to dismiss age-old traditions—a tendency to which intellectuals especially are prone—and invoke certainty and ideology in the service of grand illusions whose result is terror and destruction. Having witnessed the tragedy of his own country, the monstrosity of Nazism followed by the horrors of communism, Kolakowski will forever appreciate the danger of inhumanity in the name of deceptively lofty but in fact barbarous principles. The result, in his case, is a skepticism that has turned dogmatism into its opposite: an apology for balance, for tradition, for pluralism at all costs—even at the cost of abjuring philosophy. Kolakowski appears to have been stunned into forgiveness and tolerance.

Sympathetic to the forces of novelty and, for lack of a better term, “modernity,” Kolakowski deplors the “spirit of technology” and believes that Christianity alone has the power to shield man from the evils of despair on the one hand and *hubris* on the other.

"The choice between total perfection and total self-destruction is not ours; cares without end, incompleteness without end, these are our lot."

Far from deploring his destiny away from his native Poland (having been exiled in 1968, he divides his teaching career between Oxford and the University of Chicago), Kolakowski values exile as an existential manner of being. In fact, he considers it to be the defining predicament of our time, which he views as "the age of refugees, of migrants, vagrants, nomads, roaming about the continents and warming their souls with the memory of their—spiritual or ethnic, divine or geographical, real or imaginary—homes." He knows that absolute homelessness is impossible. And yet there are entire peoples who—while remaining in their ancestral homes—have been exiled within, estranged from their own cultures, histories, and personal realities. In 1985, Kolakowski could still ask whether the entire world might be driven into internal half-exile. He finds the root of that condition in "the split between the State, which people feel is not theirs, though it claims to be their owner, and the motherland of which they are guardians." Today, there is hope for recently liberated Eastern and Central Europe. And yet the destruction of the nearly five decades that preceded liberation has left an indelible scar. Kolakowski asks: "Does God try to remind us, somewhat brutally, that exile is the permanent human condition? A ruthless reminder, indeed, even if deserved."

Kolakowski ultimately reveals himself to be romantic, one who dares to question God's motives, who even suspects them of "brutality." Yet he believes man needs to remember that his earthly existence is temporary and that he has been placed here for reasons he is not meant to understand. What makes these essays worth reading is a sense they create of their author's genuine love for mankind, with all its terrible foibles and its desire to emulate its Creator. Kolakowski reminds us of our limitations. Which is, of course, a well-deserved reminder.

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Sanity Begins at Home

by John C. Chalberg

Gentleman Rebel
by H. Stuart Hughes
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To begin on a positive note: anyone who shuddered at the prospect of a barely thirty-something Edward Kennedy in the U.S. Senate cannot be wholly without redeeming social value. The year was 1962, and H. Stuart Hughes, grandson of the 1916 Republican presidential nominee of the same surname and devotee of a SANE foreign policy, offered himself to the voters of Massachusetts as an alternative to an additional dose of Kennedy liberalism. Hughes, of course, lost by an embarrassingly wide margin. All of this and more is chronicled in a memoir that contains embarrassments apolitical.

Henry Adams this author is not. Unlike Adams', Hughes' grandfather lost his bid for the presidency. Unlike Adams, Hughes did dirty his hands by seeking elective office on his own. And unlike Adams, Hughes has written a memoir that tells us more than we need to know about the prolonged (and repressed) sexual adolescence of his "unspent" youth. Parental "scruples" regarding sexual matters have apparently "haunted" not only his childhood, but his adulthood as well. From his mother Hughes learned two lessons: avoid playing with one's "precious organs" and the "wicked prosper, so why try." A convert to atheism and socialism at the hardly spent age of 16, Hughes at least had the good sense not to try overly hard to make the world over into his unrepressed adolescent vision of the good society.

Spurning family traditions of politics and the law, the youthful Hughes preferred to remain within the cloister of academe. Then came World War II. At Amherst, Hughes had taken the Oxford Pledge. But the fall of France prompted him to vote for Wendell Wilkie and intervention in 1940. Then came the draft. Terrified at the prospect, Hughes soon discovered army life to be surprisingly tolerable.

Actually, Hughes' wartime experiences make for interesting reading—probably they constituted the high point of his life, though he would no doubt be loathe to admit as much. In fact, this memoir could be advanced as Exhibit A by advocates of compulsory national service. A secret admirer of an "ordered existence," Hughes "easily adapted" to military service. A "marginal member" of the upper class, he learned that it was like to be a "second class citizen." Nonetheless, within the military bullying was nonexistent, and one H. Stuart Hughes became "less a prig."

Impatient to become an officer, Hughes signed on with the OSS. Admiration for the Red Army was immediate and unrestrained, but Hughes insists that he was never "blindly pro-Soviet." Still, his self-defined wartime mission was to encourage the democratic left and reinvigorate the Popular Front. Nearly a half century after World War II and better than a year after the end of the Cold War, H. Stuart Hughes is still looking to revive the Popular Front.

Fancying himself to be the "only real American social democrat," Hughes set out to establish himself as a young Henry Adams in early Cold War Washington. Between visits with his aging grandfather (who at 85 ate *his* hated broccoli, because it had never occurred to him that it was within his power to ban the "offending vegetable" from his plate), Hughes read and reread *The Education of Henry Adams*, fretted over the decline of the once "sensual city," and objected to the Cold War policies of an "inadequate" Harry Truman. But the real enemy was less Truman than the "national interest." Disdainful of this "meaningless" concept, Hughes grew increasingly agitated at the developing prominence within Washington of George F. Kennan, who provided the intellectual undergirding for the Truman-inspired Cold War, and whose 1946 "Long Telegram" was little more than an "intemperate . . . outburst of frustration."

The same could be said of the second half of this memoir. Though Hughes claims to have discovered happiness in a southern California-based second marriage, he remains an unreconstructed anti-Cold Warrior. In 1991 he thinks what he thought in 1946, specifically that the Cold War