

Notes on Rosen Chapter 9
Dunster House Faculty Dean Residence
2nd Floor Office
Wednesday November 8, 2023
5:45 a.m.

To begin with, here's an outline of the sections in chapter 9. Note that, since this is the longest chapter in the book, the session for today will go only through the end of section 7, ending on p. 291. Next week, we will discuss the final four sections of chapter 9 and cover the Afterword as well.

1. After Immortality	(261-307)
1.1. The Comet	(261-267)
1.2. The Last Man	(267-269)
1.3. Burke and Conservatism	(269-272)
1.4. Mill	(272-276)
1.5. The Modern Epicurean	(276-282)
1.6. The Extinction of Value	(282-287)
1.7. "The Despair of Our Age"	(287-291)
1.8. Religion outside the Limits of Reason Alone	(292-296)
1.9. The Prince of This World	(296-300)
1.10. Society as a Deceptive System	(300-302)
1.11. Lisbon and Auschwitz	(302-307)

Overview

This chapter extends an idea that has been central to MR's interpretation of Kant and the German Idealists – the idea that a central aspect of their work involves a move from the importance of personal immortality to the importance of historical immortality. MR aims to show that this idea, this *doxa*, was quite common in late 18th century France and that it ran across political lines from Mill on the left to Burke on the right. He finds it even in 20th century Marxists like Trotsky and Castro, in anti-colonialists like Fanon, and in figures as diverse as Mary Shelley (268), George Eliot (274-5), Walt Whitman (275), Coleridge (281-2), and many others. The position seems to be resisted only by modern Epicureans (276-8) like, for instance, Derek Parfit. But MR argues against Parfit's view of the self (279), as well as Moore's related discussion of the impersonal preference for the beautiful world over the ugly world in *Principia Ethica*, by endorsing something like Heidegger's notion of phenomenological time as necessary to any conception of the world (279-282). He disagrees with R. M. Hare, however, that we cannot even conceive of the "annihilation of values" (282ff) but wonders what could lead us there. He canvasses a sociological answer to this question that ties the modern "drive to dominate and control others" with the advent of "modern technology" (284), but without taking a stand on that he offers two questions (284):

1. Is the annihilation of values (at least in part) a *philosophical* issue?
2. Why should the idea of the extinction of humanity threaten to bring the extinction of values with it?

He promises answers to those two questions (what are they?) before ending our reading for today with a discussion of the "impoverishment of life" as "an inescapable theme of modern Western

culture” (287), and he sketches an explanation of it that combines “three, connected, diagnoses” (289-91). These are:

1. The consequences of the decline of the idea of personal immortality itself.
2. The conflict between the contending drives for explanation and justification (as a struggle against the alienation of arbitrariness), on the one hand, and the drive to overcome the alienation of loneliness, on the other.
3. The challenge of moral diversity.

I’m hopeful that in the final sections of this chapter we will see how these three diagnoses combine to explain the impoverishment of life characteristic of modern Western culture.

1. The Comet (261-267)

Summary

This section returns to the theme of historical immortality as a “substitute for the consolations of personal immortality in an afterlife” (267), but he introduces it this time through an 18th c. debate on the significance of art that took place between the encyclopedist Denis Diderot and the sculptor Étienne Falconet. Falconet wonders how it would affect the working artist if she learned that, in a thousand years, the earth would be annihilated by a comet. Falconet says that it wouldn’t matter at all. Diderot disagrees. For him, this kind of knowledge would bring an end to art altogether, and nobody would be motivated to do anything but “plant cabbages” (262). There are several interesting moves in the debate (262-3), but MR ends the discussion of it with Diderot’s extension outside the world of art to the world of ethical and political judgments as well. In the context, Diderot claims, posterity offers “not just fame by justice” (263). Turning to a brief discussion of virtues and inadequacies of Carl Becker’s 1932 book *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*, MR uses its final chapter to cull passages from Diderot’s contemporaries to justify the claim that a view like Diderot’s, about the importance of the future to the present, was widely held. He mentions Condorcet and Mme. Roland, both victims of Robbespierre and the Jacobins, as well as Saint-Just, Robespierre’s closest ally, to show that the view was not generated by any political ideology. He concludes by suggesting that later Marxists, such as Trotsky and Castro, held it as well.

Interesting Passages Cited

Questions

1. How does the debate between Diderot and Falconet relate to Scheffler’s discussion of the “doomsday scenario” in his 2013 book *Death and the Afterlife*. As John Cottingham says, in his [review](#) of Scheffler’s book, the “afterlife” here doesn’t mean anything like “personal existence after death.” Instead, it just names the assumption that many of us find very natural, that *the world* and *normal human life* will continue after we die. The “doomsday scenario,” like Falconet’s comet scenario, is meant to put pressure on this assumption so that we can test our intuitions about how our conceptions of value and significance stand up without it.

Comments

2. The Last Man (267-269)

Summary

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Questions

Comments

3. Burke and Conservatism (269-272)

Summary

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Questions

Comments

4. Mill (272-276)

Summary

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Questions

Comments

5. The Modern Epicurean (276-282)

Summary

Interesting Passages Cited

Questions

Comments

6. The Extinction of Value (282-287)

Summary

Interesting Passages Cited

Questions

Comments

7. “The Despair of Our Age” (287-291)

Summary

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Discussion in the Session