

HOW NIETZSCHE CONQUERED AMERICA

Ideas have consequences. They also have pedigrees. But by the time an idea gains wide acceptance, its origins may be murky, even invisible. Today, it is safe to say, few Americans suspect that an underlying premise of their own current popular culture—the notion that right and wrong are matters of individual judgment—stems from a late 19th-century revolution in German philosophy. The chief revolutionary: Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). In his view, as the strictures of traditional religion faded, all moral absolutes had become relative. Philosopher Allan Bloom here argues that Nietzsche's famed "transvaluation of all values" has infiltrated the New World via academe, with unhappy effects most Americans only dimly comprehend.

by Allan Bloom

When, early in his first term, President Reagan called the Soviet Union "the evil empire," right-thinking persons joined in an angry chorus of protest against such provocative rhetoric. At other times, Mr. Reagan has said that the United States and the Soviet Union "have different *values*" (italics added), an assertion that the same people greet at worst with silence and frequently with approval.

I believe Mr. Reagan thought he was saying the same thing in both instances. The different reaction to his different words introduces us to the most astonishing phenomenon of our time, all the more astonishing in being almost unnoticed: There is now an entirely new language of good and evil, originating in an attempt to get "beyond good and evil" and preventing us from talking with any conviction about good and evil.

Even those who deplore our current moral condition do so in the very language that exemplifies that condition. The new language is that of *value* relativism. It constitutes a change in our view of things



A drawing of Friedrich Nietzsche by David Levine.

moral and political as great as the one that took place when Christianity replaced Greek and Roman paganism.

A new language always reflects a new point of view. The gradual, unconscious popularization of new words, or of old words used in new ways, is a sure sign of a profound change in peoples' articulation of the world. When Anglican bishops, a generation after the publication of Hobbes's *Leviathan* in 1651, spoke of the "state of nature," "contracts," and "rights," it was clear that Hobbes's words had conquered the ecclesiastical authorities. They were no longer able to understand themselves as they once had. It was thenceforward inevitable that the modern archbishops of Canterbury would have no more in common with the ancient ones than does the second Queen Elizabeth with the first.

What was offensive to contemporary ears in Mr. Reagan's use of the word "evil" was its cultural arrogance, the presumption that he, and America, know what is good not only for themselves but for the rest of the world. The political corollary is that he is not open to negotiation with the Soviets. The opposition between good and evil is not negotiable and is a cause of war. Those who are interested in "conflict resolution" find it much easier to reduce the tension be-

tween "values" than the tension between good and evil.

The term "value," meaning the subjectivity of all belief about good and evil, serves the simple quest for self-preservation. And this longing to shuck off constraints and have one peaceful, happy world is the first of the odd affinities between our American world and that of turn-of-the-century German philosophy in its most advanced form, given unconscious expression by the critics of the president's speech (and, on other occasions, by the president himself!).

But there is a second side to the coin. People deeply committed to "values" are admired. Their intense belief, their caring or concern, their believing in *something*, is the proof of autonomy, freedom, and creativity. Such persons are the contrary of easygoing, and they have standards, all the more worthy because they are not received from tradition, and are not based on a reality all can see. Nor are they derived from thin rationalizing confined to calculation about material interests. The heroic and artistic types, antibourgeois to the core, dedicate themselves to ideals of their own making.

Thus our use of the new "value" language leads us in two opposite directions—to follow the line of least resistance, or to adopt strong poses and fanatic resolutions.



But these are merely different deductions from a common premise. Values are not the product of reason, and it is fruitless to seek them in order to find the truth or the good life. The quest begun by Odysseus and continued over three millennia has come to an end with the observation that there is nothing to seek. This alleged fact was announced by Friedrich Nietzsche just over a century ago when he said "God is dead."

Good and evil now for the first time appeared as "values," of which there have been a thousand and one, none rationally or objectively preferable to any other. The salutary religion-based illusion about the existence of good and evil had been definitively dispelled. For Nietzsche this was an unparalleled catastrophe; it meant the decomposition of culture and the loss of human aspiration. The Socratic "examined" life was no longer possible or desirable. The philosophical way of life had become simply poisonous. In short, Nietzsche

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with the utmost gravity told modern man that he was free-falling in the abyss of nihilism. Perhaps after having lived through this terrible experience, people might hope for a fresh era of value creation, the emergence of new gods. Or so Nietzsche thought.

Modern democracy was, of course, the target of Nietzsche's criticism. As he saw it, rationalism and its egalitarianism were the contrary of creativity; daily life was for him the civilized *reanimalization* of man; nobody really believed in anything anymore, and everyone spent his life in frenzied work and frenzied play so as not to face the fact, not to look into the abyss.

Nietzsche's call to revolt against liberal democracy was ultimately more powerful than Marx's. And Nietzsche added that the Left, socialism, was not the opposite of the special kind of Right that was capitalism, but rather its fulfillment. The Left meant equality, the true Right inequality. Nietzsche's call was from the Right, but a new Right transcending both capitalism and socialism.

But in spite of this, the latest champions of modern democratic or egalitarian man find much that is attractive in Nietzsche's understanding of things. It is the sign of the strength of the notion of equality and of the failure of Nietzsche's war against it that he is now more influential on the Left than on the Right.

This may at first appear surprising. Nietzsche, after all, looks toward the extraordinary, not the ordinary, the unequal, not the equal. But the democratic man requires flattery, like any other ruler, and the earliest versions of democratic theory did not provide it. Political thinkers and politicians, notably Alexis de Tocqueville, justified democracy as the regime in which very ordinary people were protected in their attempt to achieve very ordinary and common goals. It was also the regime dominated by public opinion, where the common denominator set the rule for everyone. Democracy presented itself as decent mediocrity superior to the splendid corruption of older regimes.



But it is quite another thing to have a regime—the one Americans now have—in which all the citizens can be thought to be at least potentially autonomous, creating values for themselves. A value-creating man is a plausible substitute for a good man, and some such substitute becomes practically inevitable in a society dominated by pop relativism. Very few people, finally, can think of themselves as either evil or nothing. The respectable and accessible nobility of man is to be found not in the quest for or discovery of the good life but in creating one's own "life-style," of which there is not just one but many possible, none comparable to another.

All this has become everyday fare in the United States. The

most popular schools of psychology and their therapies take value positing as the standard of healthy personality. Woody Allen's film comedy is nothing but a set of variations on the theme of the man who does not have a real "self" or "identity," and feels superior to inauthentically self-satisfied people because he is conscious of his situation and at the same time inferior to them because they are "adjusted." This borrowed psychology turns into a textbook in Woody Allen's film *Zelig* (1983), which is the story of an "other-directed" man, as opposed to an "inner-directed" man, terms popularized during the 1950s by David Riesman's *Lonely Crowd*, borrowed by him from his analyst, Erich Fromm, who himself absorbed them from a really serious thinker, Nietzsche's heir, Martin Heidegger.

I was astounded to see how doctrinaire Woody Allen is, and how normal his way of looking at things—which has immediate roots in the most profound German philosophy—has become in the American entertainment market. One of the links between Germany and the United States, psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, actually plays a cameo role in *Zelig*.



Zelig is a man who literally becomes whoever or whatever is expected of him—a Republican when with the rich; a gangster when with Mafiosi; black, Chinese, or female when with blacks, Chinese, or females. He is nothing in himself, just a collection of roles prescribed by others. He inevitably enters into psychiatric treatment, where we learn that he was once "tradition-directed," i.e. from a family of silly, dancing, rabbinical Jews.

"Tradition-directed" means to be guided by old values, usually religious, which give a man a role that he takes to be more than a role, that is, a reality and a place in the world. It goes without saying that, in Allen's view, a return to that old mode of adjustment and apparent health is neither possible nor desirable. One is supposed to laugh at the dancing Jew, although it is not clear whether from the point of view of alienation or health.

Zelig's own health is restored when he becomes "inner-directed," when he follows his real instincts and sets his own values. When *Zelig* hears people say that it is a nice day, when it manifestly is, he responds that it is not a nice day. So he is immediately clapped in a mental institution by those whom he previously tried to imitate and with whose opinions he is now at war.

Woody Allen's haunted comedy diagnoses our ills as stemming from value relativism, for which the cure is value positing. And his great strength is in depicting the self-conscious role-player, never quite at home in his role, interesting because he is trying so hard to be like the others, who are ridiculous because they are unaware of

their emptiness. But Allen is tasteless and superficial in playing with his Jewishness, which apparently has no inner dignity for him. And where he fails completely is in his presentation of the healthy inner-directed man, who is neither funny nor interesting.

If Allen's art is ultimately shallow and disappointing, it is because it tries to assure us that the agonies of nihilism are just neuroses that can be cured by a little therapy and a little stiffening of our backs. Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* (1941) is Dale Carnegie with a bit of middle-European cultural whipped cream on top. Get rid of capitalist alienation and Puritan repression, and all will be well as each man chooses for himself.

In politics, in entertainment, in religion, everywhere, we find the language connected with Nietzsche's value revolution, a language necessitated by a new perspective on the things of most concern to us. Words such as "charisma," "life-style," "commitment," "identity," and many others, all of which can easily be traced to Nietzsche, are now practically American slang, although they, and the things to which they refer, would have been incomprehensible to our fathers, not to speak of our Founding Fathers.

A few years ago I chatted with a taxi driver in Atlanta who told me he had just gotten out of prison, where he served time for peddling dope. Happily he had undergone "therapy." I asked him what kind. He responded, "All kinds—depth-psychology, transactional analysis, but what I liked best was Gestalt." Some of the German ideas did not even require English words to become the language of the American people.



What an extraordinary thing it is that high-class talk from what was the peak of Western European intellectual life, in pre-Hitler Germany, has become as natural as chewing gum on American streets. It indeed had its effect on this taxi driver. He said that he had found his identity and learned to like himself. (A generation earlier he would have found God and learned to despise himself as a sinner.) The problem lay with his sense of *self*, not with any original sin or devils in him. We have here the peculiarly American way of digesting Continental despair. It is nihilism with a happy ending.

This popularization of German philosophy in the United States is of peculiar interest to me because I have watched it occur during my own intellectual lifetime, and I feel a little like someone who knew Napoleon when he was six. I have seen value relativism and its concomitants grow greater in the land than anyone could have imagined. Who in 1920 would have believed that Max Weber's technical sociological terminology would someday be the everyday language of the United States, the land of the Philistines, itself in the meantime be-

come the most powerful nation in the world? The self-understanding of hippies, yuppies, yuppies, panthers, prelates, and presidents has unconsciously been formed by German thought of a half-century earlier; Herbert Marcuse's accent has been turned into a Middle Western twang; the *echt Deutsch* label has been replaced by a *Made in America* label; and the new American life-style has become a Disneyland version of the Weimar Republic for the whole family.

So my studies have led me ineluctably back to the half-hidden and thrilling origins of all this, providing me a standpoint from which I look in both directions, forward to our evolving American life and backward to the profound philosophical tradition, with the most ambiguous intellectual, moral, and political consequences. Knowledge of this fascinating intellectual history is required in order to understand ourselves. It will also allow us to consider real alternatives—if only intellectual historians could be persuaded that the intellect has an effect on history, that, as Nietzsche said, “the greatest deeds are thoughts,” that “the world revolves around the inventors of new values, revolves silently.” Nietzsche was such an inventor, and we are still revolving around him, although rather squeakily.

I got my first look at this scene at the midpoint of its development, when American university life was being revolutionized by German thought, which was still the preserve of earnest intellectuals. When I came to the University of Chicago in the mid-1940s, just after the war, terms like “value judgment” were fresh, confined to an elite and promising special insight. There were great expectations in the social sciences that a new era was beginning in which man and society would be understood better than they had ever been understood before. The academic character of the philosophy departments, with their tired and tiresome methodology and positivism, had caused people interested in the perennial and live questions about man to migrate to the social sciences.



There were two writers who generated real enthusiasm—Sigmund Freud and Max Weber. (Karl Marx was revered but, as had been true for a long time, was little read and did not provide inspiration for dealing with the problems really facing us.) Although it is even now still insufficiently appreciated, Freud and Weber were both thinkers who were profoundly influenced by Nietzsche, as is obvious to anyone who knows Nietzsche and knows what was going on in the German-speaking world at the turn of the century. In a strange way, during the first three decades of the 20th century, they divided up Nietzsche's psychological and social concerns between them. Freud concentrated on the id, or unconscious, the sexual as the motor of the most interesting spiritual phenomena, and the related ideas of sub-

limation and neurosis. Weber was most concerned with the problem of values, the role of religion in their formation, and community. Together Freud and Weber are the immediate source of most of the language with which we are now so familiar.

Everyone knew that they were German thinkers, and that the professors teaching them at Chicago, Columbia, and other universities were a mix of German refugees from Hitler (notably those allied with the Frankfurt-based Institute for Social Research during the 1920s) and Americans who had either studied in Germany prior to Hitler or who had learned from these emigrés. It was not a problem to any of them that these ideas were German. Freud and Weber were part of that great pre-Hitlerian classical tradition, which everyone respected. Nietzsche himself was not at that time very respectable because his thought seemed to have some discomfiting relation to fascism, and many of those who had favored Nietzsche in the Anglo-Saxon world (where he had had his greatest direct influence on artists) had not been sufficiently alert to the dangers of fascism and anti-Semitism (although Nietzsche himself was the very opposite of an anti-Semite). The fact that German thought had taken an anti-rational and anti-liberal turn with Nietzsche, and even more so with Heidegger, was evident. But this was simply repressed, and a blind eye was turned to their influence on their contemporaries.



My professors, many of whom were to become very famous, did not tend to be philosophical. They did not dig back into the sources of the new language and categories they were using. They thought that these were scientific discoveries like any others, which were to be used in order to make further discoveries. They were very much addicted to abstractions and generalizations, as Tocqueville predicted they would be. They believed in scientific progress and appeared (there may have been an element of boasting and self-irony in this) to be convinced that they were on the verge of a historic breakthrough in the social sciences.

These teachers were inebriated by the unconscious and by "values." And they were also sure that scientific progress would spur social and political progress. All were either Marxists or New Deal liberals. By the late 1940s, as they saw it, the war against the Right had been won domestically at the polls, and abroad on the battlefield. The question of principle had been resolved. Equality and the welfare state were now a part of the order of things, and what remained was to complete the democratic project. Psychotherapy would make individuals happy, while sociology would improve societies.

I do not believe any of these professors noticed the darker side of Freud and Weber, let alone the Nietzsche-Heidegger extremism

lying somewhere beneath the surface. Or rather, if they did notice, they found it of autobiographical rather than scientific interest. It is amazing to me that the irrational source of all conscious life in Freud, and the relativity of all values in Weber, did not pose a problem for them and their optimism about science.

Freud was very dubious about the future of civilization and the role of reason in the life of man. He certainly was not a convinced advocate of democracy or equality. And Weber, much more thoughtful than Freud about science, morals, and politics, lived in an atmosphere of permanent tragedy. His science of society was formulated as a doubtful dare against the chaos of things, and values certainly lay beyond its limits.

This is what the very precarious, not to say imaginary, distinction between facts and values meant. Reason in politics leads to the inhumanity of bureaucracy. Weber found it impossible to prefer rational politics to the politics of irrational commitment; he believed that reason and science themselves were value commitments like any other commitments, incapable of asserting their own goodness, thus having lost what had always been most distinctive in them.

Weber, along with many others in Germany under Nietzsche's influence, saw that all that Western democrats cared for was threatened by his insight and that we were without intellectual or moral resources to govern the outcome. Weber realized that we require values, which in turn require a peculiar human creativity that is drying up and in any event has no cosmic support; scientific analysis itself concludes that reason is powerless, while dissolving the protective horizon within which men can put a value.



None of this was peculiar to Weber or comes simply from his distressed personality, which he had at least partly because of the bleak perspective that lay before him. There is no doubt that "value relativism," if it is believed in, takes one into very dark regions of the soul and very dangerous political experiments.

But on enchanted American ground the tragic sense has little place. The early proponents of the new social science, such as sociologist Talcott Parsons, gaily accepted the value insight, sure that their own values were just fine.

It was not until the 1960s that the value insight began to have its true effects in the United States, as it had had in Germany 30 or 40 years earlier. Suddenly a new generation that had not lived off inherited tradition, that had been educated in philosophical and scientific indifference to good and evil, came on the scene representing value commitment and taught their elders a most unpleasant lesson.

The image of this astonishing Americanization of the German

pathos can be seen in the smiling face of Louis Armstrong as he belts out the words of his great hit "Mack the Knife." As most American intellectuals know, it is a translation of the song "Mackie Messer" from *The Threepenny Opera* (1928), a monument of Weimar Republic popular culture, written by two heroes of the artistic Left, playwright Bertolt Brecht and composer Kurt Weill. There was a strange nostalgia among many of the American intelligentsia for this moment just prior to Hitler's coming to power, and Lotte Lenya's rendition of this song has long stood with Marlene Dietrich's singing "Ich bin von Kopf bis Fuss auf Liebe eingestellt" in the *Blue Angel* as the symbol of a charming, neurotic, sexy, decadent longing for some hazy fulfillment not quite present to the consciousness. Less known to our intelligentsia is a story in Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (a book well known to Brecht) entitled "On the Pale Criminal," which tells of a neurotic murderer eerily resembling Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, who does not know, cannot know, that he committed a murder out of a motive as legitimate as any other and useful in many important situations, but delegitimized in our pacific times: He lusted after "the joy of the knife."



This scenario for "Mack the Knife" is the beginning of the supramoral attitude of expectancy, waiting to see what the volcano of the id will spew forth, which appealed to Weimar sophisticates and their American admirers. Everything is all right as long as it is not fascism! With Armstrong taking Lenya's place, as Mai Britt took Dietrich's, it is all mass-marketed and the message becomes less dangerous, although no less corrupt. All awareness of foreignness disappears. It is thought to be folk culture, all-American, part of the American century, just as "stay loose" (as opposed to uptight) is supposed to have been an insight of rock music and not a translation of Heidegger's *Gelassenheit*. The historical sense and the distance on our times, the only advantages of Weimar nostalgia, are gone, and American self-satisfaction—the sense that the scene is ours, that we have nothing important to learn about life from the past—is served.

This image can be seen in our intellectual history, if only one substitutes Mary McCarthy for Louis Armstrong and Erich Fromm for Lenya, and so on through the honor roll of American intellectuals. Our stars are singing a song they do not understand, translated from a German original. They are having a huge popular success with unknown but wide-ranging consequences, as something of the original message touches something in American souls. But behind it all, the master lyricists are Nietzsche and Heidegger.

My insistence on the Germanness of all this is intended not as a know-nothing response to foreign influence, the search for a German

FIRST HAPPINESS, THEN VIRTUE

Friedrich Nietzsche once accused a fellow philosopher of sentimentality, charging that "preaching morals is as easy as giving reasons for morals is difficult." Beginning with his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche devoted his entire career to examining the foundations of Western morality.

The man who would proclaim the death of God as well as the end of Western metaphysics was himself the son of a Lutheran minister. Born in Rocken, Prussia, in 1844, he was, by all accounts, a precocious if frail youth and, later, a painfully shy recluse known for his quiet, professorial manner. Illness plagued the mature Nietzsche, and the strong medications he took for his migraines and insomnia only made him weaker. After briefly teaching philology in Switzerland, he spent most of his life searching for salubrious climates in which to write. Nietzsche's personal preoccupation with health unquestionably contributed to his conviction that the real goal of philosophy was to create a stronger people, epitomized by his ideal, the Superman. Tragically, in 1889, he went mad and remained so until his death in 1900. The ironies were not limited to his lifetime. Later named as one of the ideological forerunners of Nazism, he had, in fact, bitterly attacked anti-Semites, including his former mentor, composer Richard Wagner.

It is fair to say, however, that Nietzsche invited misinterpretation. His 10 great books—including *Human, All-Too-Human* (1878), *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), and *Toward a Genealogy of Morals* (1887)—were full of charged images and symbols, by turns lyrical and rigorously analytical, and almost always deceptively ironic. To make matters worse, he preferred quick aphoristic observations, held together by a subtle, almost invisible structure, to straightforward linear argument. And many of his notions were not merely reactionary but provocatively so: "Go to woman? Take thy whip!"

There is no simple distillation of Nietzsche's philosophy. He believed that Western culture was at a stage of crisis; that men and women now lived under a moral code—an amalgam of Judeo-Christian teachings and progressive liberal principles—that ran directly counter to human instincts; that democracy, by ennobling the average, was fundamentally decadent; and, therefore, that a revolution in thinking, reinstating the noble as the good, was the West's only hope for regaining its vitality. But each of these notions was hedged by subtle qualifications. Philosopher Walter Kaufman, perhaps Nietzsche's most vigorous proselytizer in America, explains: "Morality and religion teach that if you are good, you will be happy. Nietzsche argues that virtue is the effect of happiness or that vice is bred by unhappiness—a commonplace in the 20th century but not in the 19th."

Yet those American academics who transformed Nietzsche into an advocate of egocentric hedonism did him a disservice. In fact, Nietzsche maintained that true happiness could be attained only through accomplishment, through heroic self-transformation by means of creative work. And he held that only the most self-disciplined and imaginative would succeed.

intellectual under every bed, but to heighten awareness of where we must look if we are to understand what we are saying and thinking, for we are in danger of forgetting.

The great influence of a nation with a powerful intellectual life over less well-endowed nations, even if the armies of the latter are very powerful, is not rare in human experience. The most obvious cases are the influence of Greece on Rome and of France on Germany and Russia.

But it is precisely the differences between these two cases and the example of Germany and the United States that make the latter so problematic for us. Greek and French philosophy were universalistic in intention and fact. They appealed to the use of a faculty potentially possessed by all men everywhere and at all times. The adjective in *Greek* philosophy is only an inessential tag, as it is in *French* Enlightenment. (The same is true of *Italian* Renaissance, a rebirth that is proof of the accidental character of nations and of the universality of Greek thinkers.) The good life and the just regime they taught knew no limits of race, nation, religion, or climate.

This relation to man as man was the very definition of philosophy. We are aware of this when we speak of science, and no one seriously talks of German, Italian, or English physics. And when we Americans speak seriously about politics, we mean that our principles of freedom and equality are rational and everywhere applicable. World War II was really an educational project undertaken to force those who did not accept these principles to do so.



But German philosophy after Hegel (1770–1831) cast doubt on them, and there was some relationship between German politics and German thought. That school of 19th-century thought called historicism has taught that the mind is essentially related to history or culture. Germanness is, according to later German philosophers, an essential part of them. For Nietzsche and those influenced by him, values are the products of folk minds and have relevance only to those minds. The possibility of translation itself is doubted by Heidegger. For him the Latin translations of the Greek philosophical terms are superficial and do not convey the essence of the translated text.

German thought tended not toward liberation from one's own culture, as we had earlier thought, but toward reconstituting the rootedness in one's own. Thus we Americans are like the millionaire in *The Ghost (Geist) Goes West* who brings a castle from brooding Scotland to sunny Florida and adds canals and gondolas for "local color." We chose a system of thought that, like some wines, does not travel; we chose a way of looking at things that could never be ours and had as its starting point dislike of us and our goals. The United

States was held to be a nonculture, a collection of castoffs from real cultures, seeking only comfortable self-preservation in a regime dedicated to superficial cosmopolitanism in thought and deed.

Our desire for the German things was proof we could not understand them. Whether "value relativism" is harmonious with democracy is a question that is dealt with by never being raised. Social scientists deny that thought, especially serious thought, could have had anything to do with Hitler's success in 1933. But the pre-Hitler Weimar Republic also contained intelligent persons who were attracted, at least in the beginning, to fascism, for reasons very like those motivating the Left's ideologues—that is, by reflections on autonomy and "value creation." Once one plunges into the abyss, there is no assurance whatsoever that equality, democracy, or socialism will be found on the other side.



Why, then, could *ideas* contrary to American *ideals* so easily take root? Pierre Hassner, a French political scientist, once asked whether the fantastic success of Freud in America was due simply to the fact that so many of his disciples took refuge from Hitler there and were very effective propagandists, or whether there was some special need for Freud in a country he did not much care for.

As a Chicago boy, I was always particularly struck by the fact that Marshall Field III, the scion of the great merchandising family, the archetypical success story of what Weberians call the Protestant Ethic, was psychoanalyzed by Gregory Zilboorg, one of the earliest influential Freudians in the United States, and emerged as an ardent supporter of left-wing causes who lost fortunes on liberal newspapers. There was evidently much more going on in the store's basement than we had suspected. Was there something that the American self-understanding had not sufficiently recognized or satisfied?

Once Americans had become convinced that there is indeed a basement to which psychiatrists have the key, their orientation became that of the *self*—the mysterious, free, unlimited center of our being. The dominant idea of our time is that all our beliefs issue from the self and have no other validation.

Although nihilism and its accompanying existential despair are hardly more than a pose for Americans, the language derived from nihilism has become a part of their educations. As a result, Americans today pursue happiness in ways determined by that language. They possess a whole arsenal of terms for talking about nothing—caring, self-fulfillment, expanding consciousness, and so on, almost indefinitely. Nothing determinate, nothing that has a referent, as we saw in Woody Allen and Riesman.

There is a straining to say something, a search for an inward-

ness that one knows one has, but it is still a cause without an effect. The inner seems to have no relation to the outer. American nihilism is a mood, a mood of moodiness, a vague disquiet. It is nihilism without the abyss.

Nihilism as a state of soul is revealed not so much in the lack of firm beliefs as in a chaos of the instincts or passions. People no longer believe in a natural hierarchy of the soul's varied and conflicting inclinations, and the religious and social traditions that provided a substitute for nature have crumbled.

Nietzsche believed that the wild costume ball of the passions was both the disadvantage and the advantage of modern life. The evident disadvantage was the decomposition of unity or "personality," which in the long run would lead to psychic entropy. The advantage Nietzsche hoped for was that the richness and tension present in the modern soul might be the basis for comprehensive new world-views that would take seriously what had just been consigned to a spiritual ashcan.

This richness, according to Nietzsche, consisted largely in thousands of years of inherited and now unsatisfied religious longing. But this does not exist for young Americans today, because their poor education has impoverished their longings, and they are hardly aware of the great pasts that Nietzsche was thinking of. What they do have now is an unordered tangle of rather ordinary passions, running through their consciousnesses like a monochrome kaleidoscope. They are egotists, not in a vicious way, not in a way of those who know the good, just, or noble and selfishly reject them, but because the ego is all there is in present theory, in what they are taught.

We are a bit like savages who, having been discovered and evangelized by missionaries, have converted to Christianity without having experienced all that came before and after the revelation. The fact that most of us never would have heard of Oedipus if it were not for Freud should make us aware that we are almost utterly dependent on our German missionaries or intermediaries for our knowledge of Greece, Rome, Judaism, and Christianity; that, however profound that knowledge may be, theirs is only one interpretation; and that we have only been told as much as they thought we needed to know. It is an urgent business for one who seeks self-awareness to think through the meaning of the intellectual dependency that has led us to such an impasse.
