

Icarus Fallen : The Search for Meaning in an Uncertain World
a lecture by Chantal Delsol
Given at the Intercollegiate Studies Institute
March 10, 2004

Some years ago, I planned to work on the contemporary mind. I wanted to try to understand, at least if it were possible, the behaviour and the thoughts of my contemporaries. The latter is strange in many ways. For example: why does contemporary man so much like to exhibit his intimacy in front of others? Why does his morality come mostly from the emotions? Why does he consider that biological life is the highest value to be defended? Why is he only concerned with the short-term future? Why is his time always reducing while the space in which he evolves is always extending?

Each era develops specific ways of thinking because of events and feelings that characterize it. It seemed to me that the main and dominant feeling of our era is one of disappointment. And that is why my first book about that question started by the story of Icarus.

Do you remember the story of Icarus? To escape from the labyrinth he flies up on a pair of waxen wings, but, in spite of the warnings he receives, he comes too close to the sun. The wax melts, dropping him into the sea, where he drowns. Now let us imagine that young Icarus manages to actually live through this ordeal: he falls back into the labyrinth, where he finds himself horribly bruised but still alive. And let us try to imagine what goes on in his head after this adventure. He has to go back to a normal life after having thought himself capable of attaining the sun, the supreme good. How will he get over his disappointment?

Today we find ourselves in a similar situation. For the last two centuries, in order to escape from the labyrinth of mediocrity, we have believed ourselves capable of radically transforming man and society. The philosophy of Progress has promised us since Condorcet to eliminate war, disease, and need, and various ideologies have announced a “radiant future”. We have just come to the realization – via the revelation of human disasters in the East, and here through the reappearance of poverty, illiteracy, war, and epidemics – that these hopes were in vain. We have fallen back down to earth where we must re-appropriate our human condition. But along the way we have lost the key of understanding, and we no longer recognize this mediocre world, nor do we know its meaning.

Western man at the beginning of the 21st century is the descendant of Icarus. He wonders into what kind of world he has fallen. It is as if someone has thrown him into a game without giving him the rules to play. When he asks around for the instructions, he is invariably told that they have been lost. He is amazed that everyone accepts to live in a world without meaning and without signature, where no one seems to know either why he lives or why he dies.

I have written three books to make an inventory of this deception, similar to that of Icarus. The first book is named *Icarus Fallen*, and has just been published on the press of ISI Books. The second, *Eulogy of Singularity*, is translated in English under the title *The Unlearned Lessons of the Twentieth Century: An Essay on Late Modernity* and forthcoming in the Crosscurrents series. The third evokes a special example of our mentality: it is a criticism of international justice, and it is going to be published in France next September.

Here I would like to point out some specific aspects of the analysis given in this book, only to propose some examples.

First of all: the sense of existence. Contemporary man does not know why he is living (and this is why he does not know for which ideal he could die). There is here an explanation: all the ancient truths have developed several sorts of terrorism. The religious certitude gave birth to the Inquisition. In the 20th century, many young men, at the beginning innocent and pure, were able at the end to torture other men in the name of their ideological faith. And today, since September Eleventh, we see young Muslims capable of executing many innocent people in the name of their faith. So, any faith frightens us. We are prone to think that any certitude is dangerous. We prefer not to believe in anything. I propose an ancient story to explain this. Remember Abraham? God asked him to sacrifice his son Isaac. It was a crime against morality, but an act of faith and Abraham preferred faith to morality. We have too many examples of this sort of action. So, for us, morality is the only important thing, but truth does not matter.

This explains why we live to defend moral values (human rights), but these moral values are deprived of any foundation (the foundation of moral values is a truth, for example, a religious or ideological truth). And this explains why our morality is so specific. We don't know exactly why an action, a way of behaviour, is good or bad: we don't have any exterior criteria. So, for us, a bad action is only an action that provokes our indignation. A good action is only an action that provokes our admiration. We have a morality derived from emotions. So our morality is incoherent, erratic, and we can't explain to others our moral certitudes: we can only insult or abuse (I will give an example: some years ago, in France, many politicians claimed to forbid the existence of free radio that told young children sexual horrors. But all the media were against them, in the name of freedom of media. A few weeks later, the same free radio spoke ironically about Auschwitz: then, the same media demanded the prohibition of this radio station. So, freedom of the media had its limits, but these limits were determined only by the degree of indignation).

The effacement – or even the collapse – of the sense of existence, and the refusal of truth in favor of morality, corresponds to a new relationship to historic and personal time. Our grandfathers – and until maybe 50 years ago – had a concept of the length of time beyond the time of their biological life. If they were faithful men, they believed in eternity. If they were ideological, they believed in a “radiant future,” which was a sort of temporal eternity. And moreover, our grandfathers often lived in order to organize and sustain institutions that were more lasting (durable) than themselves (family, company, association, for example). But contemporary man has no idea of the duration of time. He has lost the certitude of eternity, he has lost the will to work for a traditional institution, and the simple idea of a “radiant future” makes him laugh. So, he only possesses his biological life. This is why health, beauty of the body, daily pleasure, have become so important today. He thinks it would be a shame to sacrifice even a bit of his short life to a very doubtful long life. It is why the contemporary man refuses to think about death.

The man described by Kierkegaard, who builds a sumptuous castle and then lives in the gatekeeper's quarters, or even in the doghouse, will some day gather about himself all that remains of his clairvoyance, and will draw up the plans for a house of truly human proportions. The children of Icarus will no longer demand bread, as they did two centuries ago, nor dreams, as they did a century later, but rather **truth**, which represents the only foundation upon which an ethics no one can do without can be built. For no one can seek the

good without defining it. All hope is built upon knowledge. And no society can respect a man of whose particularities it is ignorant. Our main exigence is today to meditate about anthropology.