ESCAPE FROM NIHILISM

In 1997, a group of students at the university where I teach asked me to give a short talk about how I had returned to my abandoned Christian faith. The following version was included in The Revenge of Conscience: Politics and the Fall of Man *(1999, revised edition 2010). For a longer and more analytical account of my reversion, one which takes into account later developments too, see at this website "A Rake's Progress."*

Sixteen years ago I stood in the Government Department of the University of Texas to give a talk. I was fresh out of graduate school, and it was my here's-why-you-hould- hire-me lecture. I wanted to teach about ethics and politics, so as academic job seekers do everywhere, I was showing the faculty my stuff. So what did I tell them? Two things. The first was that we human beings just make up the difference between good and evil; the second was that we aren't responsible for what we do anyway. And I laid out a ten-year plan for rebuilding ethical and political theory on these two propositions.

Does that seem to you a good plan for getting a job teaching the young? Or does it seem a better plan for getting committed to the state mental hospital? Well, I wasn't committed to the state mental hospital, but I did get a job teaching the young. I've been asked to tell you how I became a nihilist, and I've been asked to tell you how I escaped from nihilism. Perhaps I should first explain just what my argument for nihilism was.

As I mentioned above, I made two claims: first that we make up the difference between good and evil, second that we aren't responsible for what we do anyway. My argument reversed this order, because first I denied free will. The reasoning was not very original. Everything we do or think or feel, I thought, is just an effect of prior causes. It doesn't matter that some of those prior causes are my previous deeds or thoughts or feelings, because those would be effects of still earlier causes, and if we traced the chain further and further back, sooner or later we would come to causes that are outside of me completely, such as my heredity and environment.

Second I concluded that if we don't have free will, then good and evil can't make sense. On the one hand I'm not responsible for my deeds, so I can't be praised or blamed for good or evil; on the other hand I'm not responsible for my thoughts, so I can't have any confidence that my reasoning will lead me to the truth about good and evil. Now so far it may seem that my argument was merely skeptical, not nihilist. But I reasoned that if the good for man cannot be known to man, then it cannot be offered to man as his good; for all practical purposes, there is no good.

This practical nihilism was linked with a practical atheism, for my arguments were couched in such a way that I thought they applied to God too. He couldn't escape causality either, I thought; therefore He couldn't possess confident knowledge of good and evil any more than I could. And even if He could achieve such a standard, it would make no sense for Him enforce it; trapped in causality like Him, human beings have no ultimate control over their conduct. The upshot was

that although God might exist, He would be irrelevant. I couldn't quite rule out the existence of God, but I thought I could rule out the existence of a God that mattered.

Holes Large and Numerous

The holes in the preceding arguments are so large that one can see light through them. One hole is that in order to deny free will I assumed that I understood causality. That is foolish because I didn't know what causality really is any more than I understand what free will really is. They are equally wonderful and mysterious, so I had no business pretending to understand one in order to attack the other. Another problem is that my argument was self-referentially incoherent. If my lack of free will made my reasoning unreliable so I couldn't find out which ideas about good and evil are true, then by the same token I shouldn't have been able to find out which ideas about free will are true either. But in that case I had no business denying that I had free will in the first place.

At this point two things must be clearly understood. The first: One might think that my arguments for nihilism were what led me to become a nihilist, but that is not true. I was committed to nihilism already, and cooked up the arguments only to rationalize it. The second: One might think that my recognition of the holes in the arguments were what enabled me to "escape" nihilism, but that is not true either. I saw the holes in my arguments even at the time, and covered them over with elaborate nonsense like the need to take an ironic view of reality. Good and evil just had to be meaningless and personal responsibility just had to be nonexistent. The arguments were secondary. I was determined.

A friend-- may he forgive me for quoting him -- thinks my dismissal of my previous rationalizations as elaborate nonsense seems too pat. Is it really that simple? The answer is that yes, it really is that simple. In my present opinion (though not my opinion of sixteen years ago), modern ethics is going about matters backwards. It assumes that the problem of human sin is mainly cognitivethat it has to do with the state of our knowledge. In other words, it holds that we really don't know what's right and wrong and that we are trying to find out. Actually the problem is volitionalit has to do with the state of our will. In other words, by and large we do know the basics of right and wrong but wish we didn't, and we are trying, for one reason or another, to keep ourselves in ignorance. Is this an *ad hominem* argument -- that because my motive was bad, my nihilism must have been false? No, it is a diagnosis, with myself as case in point. My nihilism was false because it was self-referentially incoherent. (There may exist versions of nihilism which are false for reasons other than self-referentially incoherency, but I am speaking only of the version I held myself.) The motive was bad because although I knew this to be the case, rather than give up the nihilism I embraced the incoherency. What you have to do with the sort of fellow I once was isn't to tell him what he doesn't know (because he really knows it), but to blow away the smokescreens by which he hides from the knowledge he has already.

Motives for Nihilism

Then how did I become a nihilist? Why was I so determined? What were my real motives?

There were quite a few. One was that having been caught up in radical politics of the late 'sixties and early 'seventies, I had my own ideas about redeeming the world, ideas that were opposed to the Christian faith of my childhood. As I got further and further from God, I also got further and further from common sense about a lot of other things, including moral law and personal responsibility.

That first reason for nihilism led to a second. By now I had committed certain sins that I didn't want to repent. Because the presence of God made me more and more uncomfortable, I began looking for reasons to believe that He didn't exist. It's a funny thing about us human beings: not many of us doubt God's existence and then start sinning. Most of us sin and then start doubting His existence.

A third reason for being a nihilist was simply that nihilism was taught to me. I may have been raised by Christian parents, but I'd heard all through school that even the most basic ideas about good and evil are different in every society. That's empirically falseas C.S. Lewis remarked, cultures may disagree about whether a man may have one wife or four, but all of them know about marriage; they may disagree about which actions are most courageous, but none of them rank cowardice as a virtue. But by the time I was taught the false anthropology of the times, I wanted very much to believe it.

A fourth reason, related to the last, was the very way I was taught to use language. My high school English teachers were determined to teach me the difference between what they called facts and what they called opinions, and I noticed that moral propositions were always included among the opinions. My college social science teachers were equally determined to teach me the difference between what they called facts and what they called "values," and to much the same effect: the atomic weight of sodium was a fact, but the wrong of murder was not. I thought that to speak in this fashion was to be logical. Of course it had nothing to do with logic; it was merely nihilism itself, in disguise.

A fifth reason for nihilism was that disbelieving in God was a good way to get back at Him for the various things which predictably went wrong in my life after I had lost hold of Him. Now of course if God didn't exist then I couldn't get back at Him, so this may seem a strange sort of disbelief. But most disbelief is like that.

A sixth reason for nihilism was that I had come to confuse science with a certain world view, one which many science writers hold but that really has nothing to with science. I mean the view that nothing is real but matter. If nothing is real but matter, then there couldn't be such things as minds, moral law, or God, could there? After all, none of those are matter. Of course not even the properties of matter are matter, so after while it became hard to believe in matter itself. But by that time I was so disordered that I couldn't tell how disordered I was. I recognized that I had committed yet another incoherency, but I concluded that reality itself was incoherent, and that I was pretty clever to have figured this outeven more so, because in an incoherent world, figuring didn't make sense either.

A seventh and reinforcing reason for nihilism was that for all of the other reasons, I had fallen under the spell of the nineteenth-century German writer Friedrich Nietzsche. I was, if anything,

more Nietzschean than he was. Whereas he thought that given the meaninglessness of things, nothing was left but to laugh or be silent, I recognized that not even laughter or silence were left. One had no reason to do or not do anything at all. This is a terrible thing to believe, but like Nietzsche, I imagined myself one of the few who could believe such thingswho could walk the rocky heights where the air is thin and cold.

But the main reason I was a nihilist, the reason that tied all these other reasons together, was sheer, mulish pride. I didn't want God to be God; I wanted J. Budziszewski to be God. I see that now. But I didn't see that then.

The Stupidity of the Intelligent

I have already said that everything goes wrong without God. This is true even of the good things He's given us, such as our minds. One of the good things I've been given is a stronger than average mind. I don't make the observation to boast; human beings are given diverse gifts to serve Him in diverse ways. The problem is that a strong mind that refuses the call to serve God has its own way of going wrong. When some people flee from God they rob and kill. When others flee from God they do a lot of drugs and have a lot of sex. When I fled from God I didn't do any of those things; my way of fleeing was to get stupid. Though it always comes as a surprise to intellectuals, there are some forms of stupidity that one must be highly intelligent and educated to commit. God keeps them in his arsenal to pull down mulish pride, and I discovered them all. That is how I ended up doing a doctoral dissertation to prove that we make up the difference between good and evil and that we aren't responsible for what we do. I remember now that I even taught these things to students; now that's sin.

It was also agony. You cannot imagine what a person has to do to himselfwell, if you are like I was, maybe you canwhat a person has to do to himself to go on believing such nonsense. St. Paul said that the knowledge of God's law is "written on our hearts, our consciences also bearing witness." The way natural law thinkers put this is to say that they constitute the deep structure of our minds. That means that so long as we have minds, we can't not know them. Well, I was unusually determined not to know them; therefore I had to destroy my mind. I resisted the temptation to believe in good with as much energy as some saints resist the temptation to neglect good. For instance, I loved my wife and children, but I was determined to regard this love as merely a subjective preference with no real and objective value. Think what this did to very capacity to love them. After all, love is a commitment of the will to the true good of another person, and how can one's will be committed to the true good of another person if he denies the reality of good, denies the reality of persons, and denies that his commitments are in his control?

Visualize a man opening up the access panels of his mind and pulling out all the components that have God's image stamped on them. The problem is that they all have God's image stamped on them, so the man can never stop. No matter how much he pulls out, there's still more to pull. I was that man. Because I pulled out more and more, there was less and less that I could think about. But because there was less and less that I could think about, I thought I was becoming more and more focussed. Because I believed things that filled me with dread, I thought I was smarter and braver than the people who didn't believe them. I thought I saw an emptiness at the heart of the universe that was hidden from their foolish eyes. Of course I was the fool.

Escape Through Horror

How then did God bring me back? I came, over time, to feel a greater and greater horror about myself. Not exactly a feeling of guilt, not exactly a feeling of shame, just horror: an overpowering sense that my condition was terribly wrong. Finally it occurred to me to wonder why, if there were no difference between the wonderful and the horrible, I should feel horror. In letting that thought through, my mental censors blundered. You see, in order to take the sense of horror seriouslyand by now I couldn't help doing soI had to admit that there was a difference between the wonderful and the horrible after all. For once my philosophical training did me some good, because I knew that if there existed a horrible, there had to exist a wonderful of which the horrible was the absence. So my walls of self-deception collapsed all at once.

At this point I became aware again of the Savior whom I had deserted in my twenties. Astonishingly, though I had abandoned Him, he had never abandoned me. I now believe He was just in time. There is a point of no return, and I was almost there. I said I had been pulling out one component after another, and I had nearly got to the motherboard.

The next few years after my conversion were like being in a dark attic where I had been for a long time, but in which shutter after shutter was being thrown back so that great shafts of light began to stream in and illuminate the dusty corners. I recovered whole memories, whole feelings, whole ways of understanding that I had blocked out.

Of course I had to repudiate my dissertation. At the time I thought my career was over because I couldn't possible retool, rethink, and get anything written and published before my tenure review came up, but by God's grace that turned out to be untrue.

Defending What I Had Denied

As an ethical an political theorist, what I do now is poles apart from what I did sixteen years ago. What I write about now is those very moral principles I used to denythe ones we can't not know because they are imprinted on our minds, inscribed upon our consciences, written on our hearts.

Some call these principles the "natural law." Such as it is, my own contribution to the theory of natural law is a little different than those of some other writers. One might say that I specialize in understanding the ways that we pretend we don't know what we really do the ways we suppress our knowledge, the ways we hold it down, the ways we deceive ourselves and others. I do not try to prove the natural law, as though one could prove that by which all else is proven; I do try to show that in order to get anywhere at all, the philosophies of denial must always at some point assume the very first principles they deny.

It is a matter of awe to me that God has permitted me to make any contribution at all. His promise is that if only the rebel turns to Jesus Christ in repentant faith, giving up claims of self-ownership and allowing this Christ the run of the house, He will redeem everything there is in it. Just so, it was through my rescue from self-deception that I learned about self-deception. He has redeemed even my nihilist past and put it to use.

Many of my students tell me they struggle with the same dark influences that I once did. I hope that by telling the story of my own escape I may encourage them to seek the light.