

Chantal Delsol

Christian Moral Realism and Universalism, Properly Understood

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Abstract: The author's primary aim in what follows is to fully articulate Chantal Delsol's critique of late modern universalism as an attempt to depoliticize the individual for the sake of replacing politics with morality. The result of this depoliticization is a quasi-pantheistic cosmopolitanism that not only effectively denies the significance of individuality, despite rhetorically lionizing it, but also undercuts the freedom of individual conscience that makes moral choice possible. Genuine political prudence and moral judgment are subsequently replaced by the rigid exactitude of a technocratic analysis that reintroduces the "clandestine ideology" it was, despite protestations to the contrary, intended to eliminate. The unhappy paradox produced by the attempt to replace the necessary limitations of political judgment with the universality of a priori moral decree is that a new set of culturally and historically idiosyncratic political attachments are surreptitiously introduced beyond the pale of reasonable debate and disagreement. Delsol's measured response is not a precipitous rejection of universalism as such but a rehabilitation of it that recaptures the Christian moral realism at its core.

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In some respects, the spirit of modernity is reflective of Nietzsche's paradoxical posture toward religion—although he enthusiastically declared the death of God, he also deeply lamented the failure of the Western world to invent a single new divinity.¹ Like Nietzsche, modernity has been characterized by both

enthusiasm and regret regarding the general detumescence of religious belief; this potentially creates new opportunities for a spiritual rebirth but also generates new possibilities for the experience of nihilistic despair. Nevertheless, what Nietzsche pined for was not a resurgence of Christianity, but an entirely new spiritual form of the will to power that explicitly discarded the repudiated age out of which it was born. He wanted to found a new modernity that could be not characterized, as it was by Hegel, as the secularization of a religious tradition it unwittingly but profoundly absorbed. From its inception, modernity has struggled with the conflict between its desire to remake itself into something entirely new and the specter of an inveterate religious eros that continues to stubbornly haunt it.

MODERN POLITICAL UNIVERSALISM

In her most recent book, *Unjust Justice*,² Chantal Delsol describes the current demand for international justice and the international institutions designed to realize it as a "demiurgic impulse" (xi) that resembles the missionary zeal of the Christian church they so enthusiastically reject. Despite their often self-congratulatory criticisms of religious certitude and the intolerance that is its predictable consequence, the advocates of international justice now peddle their own intellectually calcified Manichaeism (ibid., 40–41, 76). Though the Enlightenment touted its central commitments to plurality and individuality as counterweights to a heavy-handed universalism that typified premodern Christendom, the regnant obsession with international justice merely replaces the "old religious essentialism" with a "new essentialism" repackaged in secularized terms (ibid., 46). The advocates of international justice are so far from repudiating the undergirding motivations of the church, as they interpret them, that they actually end up articulating their consummation: "The realization of

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universal justice and world government would represent the completion or realization of the Stoic and Pauline idea of the unity of the human race" (ibid., 104).

One conspicuous debt international justice today owes to Christianity, at least in its premodern incarnation, is the emphasis on a universalism that prioritizes the essential commonality we share as human beings over our contingent differences. To the extent that these differences are most powerfully expressed in our political particularity, the notion of citizenship as specifically tied to the nation-state must be exchanged for the "transnational citizen" or "global citizen" whose only morally relevant membership is in the human race (*Unjust Justice*, 4). Augustine once defended the universality of Christianity against suspicions that it would undermine a citizen's necessarily particular and culturally contingent attachment to the state; now the spirit of globalization demands that the arbitrary character of a citizen's particularity be sacrificed before the altar of moral universality.

At the heart of Delsol's treatment of international justice, therefore, is not only an account of the many ways in which its central premises borrow from a Christian patrimony it angrily denies, but also the manner in which its appropriation of Christian universalism actually subverts its true political teaching. My primary aim in what follows is to fully articulate Delsol's critique of late modern universalism as an attempt to depoliticize the individual for the sake of replacing politics with morality. The result of this depoliticization is a quasi-pantheistic cosmopolitanism that not only effectively denies the significance of individuality, despite rhetorically lionizing it, but also undercuts the freedom of individual conscience that makes moral choice possible. Genuine political prudence and moral judgment are subsequently replaced by the rigid exactitude of a technocratic analysis that reintroduces the "clandestine ideology"³ it was, despite protestations to the contrary, intended to eliminate. The unhappy paradox produced by the attempt to replace the necessary limitations of political judgment with the universality of a priori moral decree is that a new set of culturally and historically idiosyncratic political attachments are surreptitiously introduced beyond the pale of reasonable debate and disagreement. Delsol's measured response is not a precipitous rejection of universalism as such, but a rehabilitation of it that recaptures the Christian moral realism at its core.

Its current ascendancy notwithstanding, the defects of an international juridical system intended to replace the sovereign nation-state as the arbiter of justice are clear enough. Because of this system's aggressive dismissal of national sovereignty, international courts undemocratically ignore the promulgated law (and the culture and consent out of which those laws are born) of the states that are the recipients of its justice. Since these courts work outside the parameters of any particular juridical context, they provide no recourse to the accused once their verdicts are handed down. Furthermore, the claim to universality is patently false: not all transgressors of international law, however amorphously or clearly defined that body of law is, are equally subject to its enforcement. In fact, what makes

international justice most obviously unjust, according to Delsol, is precisely this selectiveness with respect to the offenders it pursues; at the very least, it must turn a blind eye to nations too powerful to be subjected to its judgment. For the most part, these courts only target those criminals "who can be apprehended because they belong to countries that find themselves in a weak and dependent position" (*Unjust Justice*, xvii). International justice is unjust because its purported universalism is a sham: its particular moral commitments merely masquerade as universal law but more closely resemble a "sort of private vengeance of the kind that one would find in the state of nature before the emergence of the law" (ibid.).

The contest between the authority of the sovereign state and international law is often presented as essentially a legal one to be negotiated by lawyers, as if transforming (or defending) the whole of the political order is a matter of purely technical competence. However, Delsol argues that the fundamental disagreement is really between the universality of morality and the particularity of politics. The crux of the longing for international justice, Delsol contends, is the "secret dream of Western Europe since at least the twentieth century, the dream of replacing politics" (*Unjust Justice*, 102). The recalcitrance of political life to elimination is the most serious obstacle to a system of international law; the declaration of a universal morality requires a denial of all competing particular claims to comprehend the good, and the denial of politics is a "denial of plurality" (ibid., 36). The case for international law, therefore, is based on a kind of hypergeneralized Marxism (ibid., 3). It is not the fact of economic division but all political division that must be erased for there to be world justice; there will never be justice until we achieve a "morally homogenous state" (ibid., 5). Delsol succinctly captures the line of logic: "If we were all refugees there would no longer be any national or partisan disputes" (ibid., 83).

It is important to note that Delsol's philosophical defense of the centrality of diversity to political and moral life is not the standard genuflection before contemporary multiculturalism. Multiculturalism explicitly celebrates the differences between cultures only after reducing them to a kind of epiphenomenal cultural baggage disconnected from our true selves—as if to say that beneath the various cosmetic cultural disparities is the genuine unity of the human race. In this way, one's culture is taken to be another option on the ever expanding menu of choice for the autonomous individual, rather than an expression of our *givenness*, or an indication of the limitations placed on the free construction of the self. Multiculturalism, therefore, is a thinly disguised proclamation of anthropological unity: there is a diversity of cultures that properly warrants our curiosity, as long as that theoretical wonder does not translate into a practical legitimization of moral and political particularity.

Delsol interprets diversity both as a necessary precondition and consequence of genuine political life—the substantive differences between us create a multiplicity of cultures, each of which resists facile revision. Instead of reducing our cultural context to a theatrical set that can be changed in between the acts of life or completely

discarded, she considers culture to be the necessary “dwelling” for beings who are “straightforwardly specified by inscription in the particular” (*Unjust Justice*, 82). Every culture “belongs to the world via geographical and historical particularities,” “depends upon its own particular circumstances and situations,” and is “defined by the specific space it occupies” (*ibid.*). To reject the fact of our particularity is to “dis-incarnate humanity, to compel it to live in abstract kingdoms” (*ibid.*, 86). It is impossible to replace culture with universal laws, because the two are so distinct that “they belong to different orders” (*ibid.*, 49).

Although human beings necessarily belong to a particular culture, international justice is “de-localized, de-temporalized” (*Unjust Justice*, 86). Sometimes the viability of international law is justified by dint of reference to a world culture, but Delsol considers this a meaningless abstraction: “There is no universal space—the global village is at best a metaphor” (*ibid.*, 85). If culture presupposes a shared common ground necessary for political commerce, then the real diversity of peoples in the world precludes the possibility of a world culture. According to Delsol, the very notion of international law is radically incoherent, because “every positive law is rooted in a culture” and there is no world or international culture (*ibid.*, 49). Although we can “try to render the particular more habitable,” it is impossible for us to “live in the universal” (*ibid.*, 85). International law presupposes an account of human life and political experience that reduces man to a colorless abstraction, leaving him “deterritorialized,” thereby “saturating him with indeterminateness” (*ibid.*). If there is no cosmopolitan community, there is no cosmopolitan man; a true appreciation of individuality in its concreteness requires an account of the irreducible particularity that makes for each individual’s culturally influenced perspective and attachments.

For Delsol, the basic legitimacy of law is “founded in its appropriateness for the culture to which it applies, that is, upon societal acknowledgement” (*Unjust Justice*, 50). The problem Delsol brings to light is not merely that, in the absence of world culture, no catalog of laws could appropriately capture anything even resembling a *consensus gentium*. A deeper issue is that the coercive imposition of international law presupposes a morally comprehensive view that transcends the partiality of all national laws. In trying to decisively untether itself from the particularity of politics, the cause of international justice inevitably “effaces the distinction between law and morality” (*ibid.*, 39). However, as Delsol argues, although each “positive law is a particular attempt to embody the just, no law is perfectly just” (*ibid.*, 50). The law is, therefore, “inspired by morality” but always assumes the more modest function of representing the “mediation between morality and power” (*ibid.*, 41). In contradistinction to the Enlightenment’s original commitment to an epistemologically humble respect for plurality and the political divorce of opinion and power, late modernity immoderately attempts to “liberate” us from the particularity that necessitates plurality in the first place (*ibid.*, 83). Since such a morally synoptic view, one that provides access to a complete versus merely partial comprehension of the good, would require “truly godlike wisdom,” the final realization of

international justice requires the “end of human history, the definitive exit from the human condition” (*ibid.*, 111).

Thus, the problem, as Delsol diagnoses it, is not merely the necessary particularity of every positive law but also of every moral perspective. The establishment of universal law requires the final discovery of a philosophically demonstrable universal morality, which always eludes our reach:

We can recognize the objectively bad or objectively good event in extreme situations. But the positive universal that defines the Good inevitably remains insufficient. We cannot grasp anything in its totality. We can grasp only flashes, echoes, remnants of a total Good, which always remain an object of promise and faith. Our certitude, even if we clearly perceive the path it takes, remains incomplete, mixed with the finiteness that constitutes our being.⁴

Delsol sometimes blurs the line between the “morally absolute” and the “morally relative” so much that it seems as if she denies the possibility of any measure of objectivity (*Unjust Justice*, 19). Even the Holocaust’s “terrain of horrors” requires a nuanced assessment of its many “gradations of evil” and “degrees of complicity” (*ibid.*, 26), just as the mass murders of Rwanda are inexplicable except by “situating them in their history, their customs, their culture” (*ibid.*, 86). Although our moral judgments are always in some way conditioned by their variable circumstances, even those who share a comparable context should cautiously withhold assertoric evaluation: “only the individual can morally judge himself” (*ibid.*, 91). In other words, Delsol’s deference to context and her rejection of moral judgment unencumbered by particularity sometimes create the impression that moral judgment is entirely relativized or rendered solipsistic. One could argue that, in an effort to counterbalance late modernity’s overemphasis on a denuded, abstract conception of morality, Delsol goes too far in wedding the legitimacy of moral judgment to an irreducibly personal perspective.

However, Delsol is exceedingly careful to point out that a principled sensitivity to the concrete particulars of any moral event “does not mean the gravity of crimes is simply relative to the situation in which they were committed” (*Unjust Justice*, 53). In fact, Delsol unambiguously rejects the view that “the truth consists in the mere addition of various points of view” and affirms that there “certainly are interpretations that are more accurate and adequate than others” (*ibid.*, 66). A crime itself might reasonably be considered objectively heinous, but our judgment of the criminal must appropriately consider both his mitigating circumstances and our limited moral and philosophical horizon. Just as a criminal’s transgression must belong to a cultural narrative written in a specific time and space, the cultural parameters that define our intellectual perspective preclude any legitimate claim to unadulterated objectivity. The exercise of judgment, therefore, is always an expression of our own partiality as judge and of the elusive totality of the object of our judgment; the criminal is not simply reducible to the act of the crime (*ibid.*, 86). As Delsol explains:

In true judgment, in judgment that is just, we do not only judge an act. Nor do we judge the person in his entirety, because no one can comprehend (much less judge) him in his entirety. God alone can do that. What we can do is to judge the act of this person acting in this situation. (*Ibid.*)

In the place of true judgment or prudence, the defenders of international justice satisfy their hunger for rational certitude and analytical specificity with mere competence. The “adherents of techno-politics” (*Icarus*, 116) understand competence as a kind of “administrative rationality” (*ibid.*, 120) that “expresses itself in the “the clarity of its reasons” and “knows no murky waters” (*ibid.*, 117). Competence attempts to reduce the world of politics, always a “mix of obscurity and clarity” (*Unjust Justice*, 27), to mere technique and therefore cannot “address the real political questions” (*Icarus*, 118). The choice of competence over prudence is based on a “rejection of politics as an uncertain activity” and attempts to “eliminate chance” by remaking the “intellectual navigation” of political decision into a science (*ibid.*). The compulsive desire for certainty and rational control prioritizes quantitative analysis over the “common sense, intuition, and experience” (*ibid.*, 116) of prudence because of its preference for a homogenized subject of investigation. To admit not only the great diversity of peoples and cultures but also of political and moral affairs would render the enigmatic human person uncongenial to scientific study.⁵

By way of contrast, prudence is the “ability to steer a difficult course through the tortuous world of action” (*Icarus*, 118). Prudence, more akin to wisdom than logical analysis, is an “alchemy that combines keen perception, experience in dealing with people, common sense, judgment based on memory, intuition of the unspoken, moral conscience, and knowledge of events” (*ibid.*). The “prudent man,” according to Delsol, is “both lucid and modest,” “knows the mediocrity and uncertainty of the world,” “distrusts his own prejudices,” and is “never entirely sure about anything” (*ibid.*, 116). The illusion of objectivity that guides the competent man deludes him into seeking solutions that “he imagines as almost tautologically leaping out of the problem itself” (*ibid.*). Because the prudent man understands the distinction between the “truly reasonable” and the “merely rational” (*Unjust Justice*, 36), he “proposes an answer that is more like a suggestion and imposes itself only because a decision must be made” (*Icarus*, 117).

The central delusion of technocratic competence is that the “so-called rational neutrality of technocratic government” (*Icarus*, 108) allows it to remain “neutral, or innocuous, with regard to values” (*ibid.*, 114). However, Delsol argues that “there are very few decisions concerning the general interest that are unrelated to underlying conceptions of existence” (*ibid.*). Delsol denies that questions of political means are separable from the moral priorities of the community within which they arise: “All these questions relate to values; that is, they draw upon different ideas of the good, and, ultimately, different notions of happiness” (*ibid.*). Techno-politics, therefore, is begotten from a reductionist account of political choice: “Every political act is a choice that calls for the concrete manifestation of certain references, even if these references are neither named nor conceptualized” (*ibid.*, 109). Moreover, techno-politics is also based on an abstract caricature of political cognition: although we rely on our intellect as a “repository of knowledge” for the act of political

deliberation, our intellect alone is incapable of exhaustively comparing all the competing values any such deliberation presupposes (*ibid.*, 114).

From the perspective of the technocrat, these underlying conceptions, or worldviews, are either the remnants of a now obsolete prescientific view of human affairs or belong to questions of ultimate purposes or ends that, thanks to modern liberalism, are easily compartmentalized and separated from the questions of political means. However, although technocracy “considers all worldviews obsolete and superfluous,” it only operates under ignorant “pretenses to certitude” (*Icarus*, 111) and the “guise of science” (*ibid.*, 114). In fact, the consequence of technocratic governance is the establishment of a “clandestine ideology” or “correct thinking ideology” (*ibid.*, 109) that imports the “rule of hidden particularities” through the back door (*Unjust Justice*, 57). Techno-politics, however furtively, always “favors one worldview over the others”; because it falsely proclaims both its own neutrality and indubitable scientific support, it inevitably devolves into a “politics without tolerance” (*Icarus*, 109). Rather than avoiding debate regarding the fundamental questions, this “vision-less politics” actually “cuts short debate about the future” and “deprives itself of a pluralistic consideration of worldviews” while naively (and sometimes despotically) attempting to achieve a “pluralism without concrete plurality” (*ibid.*, 111).

The problem of technocratic competence, therefore, generates a paradox: it simultaneously manages to be excessively universal and excessively particular. It is excessively universal insofar as its insistence on scientific certainty requires a homogenization of the subject it scrutinizes. In grand Procrustean fashion, the concrete human being of our ordinary experience is wrenched from the particular political and cultural context that defines him and that makes possible, however imperfectly, the expression of his genuine eros for the universal. Since this stale science of man requires a reduction of man to his scientific components, he is resigned to a theoretical exile, to live as an abstract being in abstract spaces. Man is transformed into the concept of man, and his own experience of himself is denied in favor of an intellectual construction. The homogenization of man, insofar as it contradicts and thereby undercuts the legitimacy of the fruits of his self-reflection, condemns man to a permanent state of self-alienation or self-oblivion. Man’s perception of himself stands in perpetual need of correction from a technocratic elite that not only paternalistically regulates his political liberty, but also reminds him of who he really is and why he could never know that on his own.

Techno-politics also paints a picture of man that is so unyielding and particular that his political life is disconnected from the values, or the general worldview, that infuse his individual choices with meaning: “The flight from worldviews in the political realm generally corresponds to the flight from meaning” (*Icarus*, 111). This truncated account of human life reduces human behavior to technical minutiae that are objectively measurable and susceptible to reliable prediction. Our reflection on the meaning of human existence is narrowly circumscribed to include only the calculations of clear and distinct objectives,

rather than more general and complex purposes; man is reduced in economic analysis to his comprehension of and search for the maximization of utility. This is why Delsol argues that techno-politics “always goes hand in hand with a politics of special interests” (ibid., 109): besides offering a specific worldview it is incapable of articulating or even acknowledging, techno-politics can only speak the impoverished language of interests. Ultimately and necessarily, real decision making involves an element of what Delsol call “aspiration” (ibid., 114), or the desire to “create a better society” that can only be cultivated and understood in light of a worldview that houses our deeper preferences and values.

Whether the horizon of man’s political experience is reduced to mechanical minutiae or expanded into an indeterminate universality, the technocratic view of man is an affront to his dignity, because it boldly denies his permanent mysteriousness, the “enigma of his existence” (*Unjust Justice*, 81). According to Delsol, “The thinking species is destined to tragedy, in the sense that the questions it eternally poses never find a definitive answer” (ibid., 71). The crux of technocratic competence is either that such questions are essentially meaningless, or that it truly has discovered the definitive answer that renders gratuitous all further inquiry into and genuine respect for the proposals of others. In this “technical-minded and banausic world in which we live” (*Icarus*, xxvii), man lacks both depth and complexity; the tools of social science are enough to completely decode the riddle of man. The sad and dark insight of the technocratic view of man is that he does not seem to be worth the effort. The heart of techno-politics turns out to be microcosmic of the heart of late modernity; both deny the “tragic” dimension of human life, in the benign sense Delsol gives the term.

For all her searching criticisms of the formless universality demanded by the advocates of universal justice, Delsol never rejects the basic human eros to grasp the universal, either on the individual or the societal level. In fact, she repeatedly affirms that the basic desire behind international justice, the “will to unification” (*Unjust Justice*, 73) or the desire for the “unity of the human race” (ibid., 104), is “doubtlessly” (ibid., 113) a “legitimate hope” (ibid., 104). Despite the dominant interpretation of each particular culture as entirely arbitrary and contingent, “each political form believes it is universal” (ibid., 67). Even further, Delsol weaves the promise of universality into the fabric of every culture’s orientation: “[a] state naturally has a responsibility to assist its people in progressing to a higher stage of civilization” (ibid., 50). So fundamentally human is the longing for some measure or glimpse of the universal that the “aspiration to escape from particularity characterizes man as a moral being” and is a function of the “elevation of the soul” (ibid., 60).

CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL UNIVERSALISM

Even though the “death of the gods has relegated all authority to the sphere of immanence” (*Unjust Justice*, xvi) in modern times, the notion of world government clearly

has historical roots in the Christian idea of the spiritual unity of the human race. However, although the realization of universal justice and world government is intended as a political goal to be achieved in human time, Christian cosmopolitanism “affirmed this unity in the ontological order, not the political order” (ibid., 104). In other words, the Christian recognition of the partiality of all cultures and of every human interpretation of the good is not meant as an imprimatur to erect a perfectly universal moral order, but rather as a reminder of the limitations of all human aspirations. The universal ideal of perfection in its Christian incarnation is meant to chasten our immoderate attempts to establish a secular political paradise here on earth. In this way, Christian universality is always tempered by the Augustinian bifurcation between the City of Man and the City of God. The City of God provides the ideal of moral perfection that issues in “moments of elevation and inspiration that indicate humanity’s aspirations” (ibid.), but the City of Man is our dwelling place, in all its moral and political limitations.

Perversely, “contemporary European universalism wants to realize here and now the Pauline ontology that grounded the unity of the human race” (*Unjust Justice*, 76). Since the modern secular version of this unity is encouraged by the practical expectation of its realization, its characteristic tendency is to dismissively deny the differences between cultures, between peoples, and between various and competing interpretations of the good. All indications of human diversity are understood to be obstacles to a final unification, and this political (versus spiritual) eschatology legitimizes all kinds of coercive measures in its name. The fact of political and cultural plurality is an offense to the political understanding of unity; it is evidence of inveterate limitation in an age driven by the impulse toward rational control. In the modern version of the unity of humanity, there is no distinction between the City of Man and the City of God because there is no God—no higher frame of reference to chasten our intemperate longing to make the ideal fully real. This is why, according to Delsol, a “world government would only be a grotesque—and no doubt violent—caricature of the Catholic Church and of Stoic cosmopolitanism” (ibid., 105).

Whereas contemporary universalism is typified by the spirit of expectation, Christian universalism is marked by hope. The problem for modern universalism is that the “very expectation of success betrays its own presuppositions,” that a “spiritual postulate requires a spiritual response”: it misguidedly attempts to “immanentize a spiritual good” (*Unjust Justice*, 105). According to Delsol, the abbreviated horizon of a thoroughly temporal worldview makes a proper appreciation of the distinction between the real and the ideal difficult:

They wanted to give it concrete form and content, to make it visible and real. The unity of the human race became an idol to fashion rather than an ideal that one has to pursue without respite. The idolater is the one who confuses categories. And he confuses them because he has forgotten that he is a human being, in the Latin sense of *humus*: soil, earth, ground. (Ibid.)

The superior realism of Christian universalism thus first comes to light in regard to the relation between hope, as the animating spirit of the unity of humanity, and patience, which seems to be recommended by hope. If modern universalism is motivated less by hope than by expectation, then its central disposition is impatient haste. It is far too demanding to recognize that any “universalization of the good is not a matter of political construction but of the slow work of transmission” (*Unjust Justice*, 117). Following Simone Weil, Delsol describes impatience as a “form of the idolatry of the good” (*ibid.*, 116). Since the ideal in Christian universalism is understood as an elusive spiritual good that provides guidance but eludes full practical instantiation, it accepts the fact that one “cannot will the good immediately, without the mediation of time” and that “moral development requires . . . passing through experiences, regrets, and sorrows” (*ibid.*). Delsol goes as far as to suggest that a genuine realism presupposes a distinction between spiritual and worldly horizons:

It is, however, difficult to see how the destruction of idols could be accomplished without openness toward the spiritual. The suppression of spiritual referents is precisely what conferred on secular referents their abusive status as absolutes. The return of spiritual referents alone would make possible the destruction of idols: idolatry cannot be avoided except through the recognition of transcendence. (*Unlearned Lessons*, 167)

Likewise, a kind of obtuse moral Manichaeism is the consequence of narrowing our purview to the merely immanent. In denying ourselves a properly transcendent referent for the appraisal of worldly affairs, we risk, however unknowingly, importing properly spiritual categories into the domain of an otherwise secularized political life. In contradistinction to the Christian view, which holds that “evil emanates from humanity and is woven inextricably into the human fabric” (*Unlearned Lessons*, 182), international justice introduces the notion of “metaphysical crimes” (*ibid.*, 181), discrete “metaphysical monstrosities” (*Unjust Justice*, 27), and the “intolerable-in-itself” (*ibid.*, 86), which creates a rigorous separation between the innocent and those responsible for evil. This distinction is a “secularization of the distinction between heaven and hell” and is “eminently dangerous,” because it creates the impression that there are human beings who are simply good and those who are simply “unworthy” (*Unlearned Lessons*, 175–76). At its core, this constitutes a denial of the Christian concept of original sin, which teaches that “evil was shared by all human beings without exception” (*ibid.*, 171). The belief in pure, unadulterated evil in human form “reintroduces a spiritual category in a world unencumbered by God and devoted to the secular” (*ibid.*, 181). Modern idealism thus seems to be the result of a distorted interpretation of transcendence: “It is as though Western societies, which cannot do without transcendence, have placed it entirely within the sphere of radicality in the form of the absolute evil of extermination” (*ibid.*).

The moral Manichaeism that international justice embraces is a rejection of moral realism: “Manichaeism is the architecture of reduction” (*Unlearned Lessons*,

171). Rather than follow Solzhenitsyn’s view that the line between good and evil runs through the heart of every human being, international justice splits the world into those who perpetrate evil and those who innocently suffer it. There are no gradations of guilt and responsibility, no shades of moral gray; such nuances would be born out of recognition of the moral complexity of human life and of the human person. Because the guiding principle of international justice is temporal perfection, it has no choice but to become a “form of angelicism” (*Unjust Justice*, 128) that seeks to purge the world of evil once and for all to make it safe for those who have no share in it.

From the Christian perspective, the human being is a “mystery” and therefore “remains irreducible to categorization” (*Unlearned Lessons*, 178). The “mysterious mixture” that is the human person is an expression of “infinite complexity” (*ibid.*). Man is a “fathomless well, impenetrable thickness, which no one can reduce to an act or a trait, any more than membership in a particular group” (*ibid.*, 179). Delsol says that, to avoid the dangers of a reified moral Manichaeism, we require a “postulate of an original evil inherent in the human condition” that will allow us to sidestep the “mistake of demonizing or sacralizing any earthly phenomenon” (*ibid.*, 186). Modernity, particularly in its later versions, abandons the self-moderation that seems to come with a recognition of one’s ultimate finitude: “To live with finiteness calls for both attentiveness with respect to beings—even one’s worst enemy—and distance with respect to things—even from one’s perfect achievement” (*ibid.*). The deliberate narrowing of our political horizon, or the systematic flight from spiritual transcendence, crowds out the possibility of embracing our finitude. True resignation requires a spiritual frame of reference, and in its absence there is only angry remorse.

Modernity’s departure from moral realism is never more obvious than when it comes to its difficulty accounting for the individual human being. In a way, it is utterly devoted to the individual: “The primacy of the individual over any universal is the governing principle of late modernity” (*Unlearned Lessons*, 154). In many respects, the pillar of modernity’s universalism, the philosophy of human rights, has as its “cornerstone the dignity of the human person” (*ibid.*, 173). However, Delsol maintains that the central currents of late modernity have vitiated the individual: “modern arrogance has brought it [the individual] to ruin” (*ibid.*, 85). The central problem of modernity regarding the individual is his suffocating enclosure between two tendencies: the tendency of a featureless universalism to homogenize man into an abstract idea and the tendency of human rights discourse to reduce man to his material or biological existence. We are either liberated from our particularity or entirely circumscribed by it; we are either pure particularity or the radical transcendence of particularity. Despite its celebration of the individual, modernity is utterly incapable of providing an account of the real human person and of our unvarnished moral and political experience.

In Delsol’s account, “man is the imperfect being who imperfectly directs himself towards perfection” (*Unjust Justice*, 61). Despite our ineluctable imperfection, we are

always oriented by the dream of perfection: man is a particular being who only understands his particularity or partiality because of his participation in the universal, no matter how limited. Modern universality has the double problem of either undercutting the uniqueness of each individual by depriving him of his particular determinations or of making immanent the dream of perfection so that it becomes the object of a political program. From the perspective of modernity, man turns out to be either nothing or a god. Thus, we are confronted by the “absurd alternative” of modernity: “we now have to choose between adherence to redemptive universals or the protection of a body devoid of spirit” (*Unlearned Lessons*, 158).

The establishment of international justice turns out to be radically inconsistent with the uniqueness of the individual human person: “The identification of the singular human being with a universal culture therefore would be equivalent to lessening him, perhaps even destroying him” (*Unjust Justice*, 84). To be even more precise, “international law wars with individual conscience” by trying to replace it with a univocally applied moral law (ibid., 83). Our “interiority” is tied to the “mystery of the human being” (*Unlearned Lessons*, 187); the free operation of the individual conscience is the deepest expression of our moral depth and complexity as unique beings. The modern project to deny our interiority and lay bare and make fully public the nature of human morality is tantamount to denying our uniqueness, allowing our individuality to be swallowed up by the generality and transparency of universal law.

According to Delsol, our uniqueness is the sine qua non of our personal dignity: “If a being loses its specificity, it loses its dignity” (*Unjust Justice*, 62). This is why Christian anthropology “ties the value of a being to his unique singularity” and why God prefers a “harmony” of unique individuals to a pantheistic unity of indistinguishable persons under the banner of a comprehensive universalism (ibid.). Because the “inalienable dignity of the human being is founded upon his exceptionality” (*Unlearned Lessons*, 187) any moral realism that seeks to do justice to our uniqueness as individuals must acknowledge this irreducible singularity. Although modernity acknowledges that each human being is necessarily a combination of eros and logos, its temporal and immanentized universality depersonalizes logos and banalizes eros. Our logos is detached from the cultural context and personal perspective that separate true human reason from mere computational rationality, and our eros is rendered all too human, substituting the expectation of immanent satisfaction for a spiritual hope elicited and tempered by the elusiveness of the divine.

Historically speaking, it is certainly the case that the “concept of personal eternity” has been instrumental in “helping to establish the human being as an irreplaceable, unique being” (*Unlearned Lessons*, 187) and that the “rejection of the Biblical personal God has paved the way for the abolition of the personal subject” (ibid., 193). The “religions of transcendence” bind human beings together through the spiritual unity of the human race but also preserve the uniqueness of each individual as a creation of God by “offering him eternal life after death as a unique person,”

a personal immortality that does not dissolve the self into some impersonal cosmic or natural whole (ibid.). For Delsol, what is at stake here is the proper “interpretation of human rights” that will never “guarantee the dignity of each human being unless they are grounded in an understanding of man that ensures his uniqueness” (ibid., 194). If the goal of modernity is to encourage a democracy that is a “society of unique persons endowed with free wills and minds” then it might require a “monotheism that preaches personal eternity, one in which each irreducible being survives in his irreducibility” (ibid., 195).

CONCLUSION

Unjust Justice is the third book in a trilogy “devoted to the spirit of late modernity” (*Unjust Justice*, xi). In this trilogy, Delsol distinguishes between the “true” or “real” Enlightenment of early modernity and its betrayal by the abusive ideologies of its successor (ibid., 34). For Delsol, the “true destiny of the Enlightenment is to accept the plurality of cultural worlds, because it is aware that no single culture is capable of grasping the whole truth” (ibid., 66). Delsol never encourages simply abandoning modern thought; rather, she suggests that modernity contains within itself the necessary equipment for an autoreformation. Our current circumstances, therefore, warrant some measure of reasonable hope, and, in some sense, hope is always a possibility for beings who are necessarily erotic. Still, it is possible for humanity to “refuse to hope for anything and content itself with meaningless chaos and a purposeless history” (ibid., 9–10). Our prospects for success seem contingent on the marriage of hope with the acceptance of our imperfection that paradoxically is the best guarantor of our dignity as unique human beings. Instead of angrily denying the debts modernity owes to its Christian patrimony, Delsol recommends that we acknowledge the many ways in which our present success is a result of this inheritance and the many ways our future depends on its renewal.

NOTES

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ: or How to Philosophize with a Hammer*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, ed. Michael Tanner (New York: Penguin Classics, 1990), 19.

2. Chantal Delsol, *Unjust Justice: Against the Tyranny of International Law*, trans. Paul Seaton (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2008). Further references to this work will be in parenthetical citations as *Unjust Justice*.

3. Chantal Delsol, *Icarus Fallen: The Search for Meaning in an Uncertain World*, trans. Robin Dick (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2003), 83. Further references to this work will be in parenthetical citations as *Icarus*.

4. Chantal Delsol, *The Unlearned Lessons of the Twentieth Century: An Essay on Late Modernity*, trans. Robin Dick (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), 163. Further references to this work will be in parenthetical citations as *Unlearned Lessons*.

5. Cf. Leo Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1959; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 39–40. Delsol’s distinction between prudence and competence, in many ways, borrows from Strauss’s discussion of the “charm of competence.” It is worth noting, however, that Strauss rejects the opposite charm of “humble awe” in favor of a philosophy that “refuses to succumb” to either one of them. Although this is not the place for a protracted discussion of the difference, Delsol’s understanding of philosophy (and humble awe as well) is a significant departure from Strauss’s view, which comes to light if one compares their very different interpretations of human eros and its relation to eternity.