

## CHRISTIAN SOCIAL THOUGHT

### Meaninglessness: The Solutions of Nietzsche, Freud, and Rorty

**M. A. Casey**

Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2002 (149 pages)

Imagine a society in which nothing is publicly recognized as inherently worthwhile. Would such a situation be desirable, or even possible? Three thinkers—Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and Richard Rorty—have answered both questions in the affirmative. They are all responding, according to M. A. Casey, to a crisis of meaning in Western civilization. With the increase of material abundance in the West there was not only an expansion in the freedom of the individual but also the dissolution of communal life, the decline of the Christian faith in forming culture, and the rise of pluralism in systems of value. Life is now fragmented, but there remains a need for a single truth. Can such a need be overcome? Can there be a culture that recognizes itself as meaningless at its core? In *Meaninglessness: The Solutions of Nietzsche, Freud, and Rorty*, Casey examines the social embodiment of the subjects' respective philosophies, a culture wherein the question of meaning no longer occurs.

Casey's book offers an incisive and clear treatment of these three solutions to the problem of meaning. Nietzsche is the crucial figure of the book, and the death of God is the crucial moment; it sets the paradigm within which the radical bypassing of meaning can be understood. The death of God is the destruction of Christianity, the recognition that there is no eternal truth and that therefore everything is permitted for man. This limitless freedom is conditioned only by the incapacity to make unconditional valuations. Nietzsche anticipates the superman who can embrace meaninglessness as

the source of power. Power becomes the ultimate meaning in society; the superior power determines what is and is not true.

Freud starts with the same premise of meaninglessness as does Nietzsche. Echoing Nietzsche's division between master and slave, Freud believes that the strong are those who can accept the meaninglessness of life while the weak need the consolation of therapy. Freud is concerned with the survival of this social order. In order to have a society and avoid anarchy, the elite must offer the masses compensation for their instinctual renunciations. The creation of illusions of meaning celebrated by Nietzsche serves this purpose. Freud also emphasizes the impossibility of the superman and the ultimate overcoming of meaning. In lieu of a final cure, the unending process of therapy becomes all-important.

Casey's examination of Rorty is particularly apropos to the book's goal of sketching the social embodiment of meaninglessness, because Rorty's purpose is to realize a "post-metaphysical culture." What is striking in Casey's exposition is the role of state power, especially in regard to the sharp contrast between Rorty's formal idea of truth as discussion and the content of his morality, viz., avoiding cruelty. Rorty admits that the prohibition against cruelty has no grounding in truth and is utterly a product of contingent circumstances. Therefore, it is only a "request"; there is no higher reality to which one can appeal in the face of horrible cruelty against others. Casey, however, brings out the fact that Rorty's idea of truth—whatever comes out of discussion is to be considered "true"—brooks no such tolerance. Rather, it cuts off any further discussion about the nature and source of truth and authority. These and other metaphysical questions must be made unintelligible through a shift in perspective. Only the power of the state can fill the gap between the ideal of a post-metaphysical culture and its realization. If the truth gained through discussion is the avoidance of cruelty, but at the same time it is impossible in principle to convince anyone to avoid cruelty by a rational appeal, that which remains is force. This is not merely physical coercion but socialization as the regulation and formation of our lives to ensure that everyone is made to be attentive to the sufferings of others.

Of course, the promotion of sympathy for others is less likely to be pursued than is the prohibition against metaphysical questions, in particular questions concerning the source of rightful power and authority. The prohibition against cruelty cannot be used to pass judgment on the powerful because it is a contingent fact lacking truth-value. Rorty has, in fact, made the supremacy of those holding power absolute. For a post-metaphysical culture it can only be the struggle for power that has meaning. Horrible suffering is inherently meaningless and can be re-described so as, then, to be disregarded.

While Casey's well-written book offers an excellent presentation of Nietzsche, Freud, and Rorty in their progression, his conclusion—that a meaningless culture requires radical human diminishment—unfortunately echoes Huxley's mistake: It leaves unquestioned the possibility of a post-metaphysical culture and instead focuses on its description. This approach neglects the idea of culture as inherently meaningful;

a “meaningless culture” is, in fact, a contradiction in terms. The promotion of this chimera is only the endorsement of a culture’s destruction. The question is whether society can survive the obliteration of culture, and, if it is the case that ultimately a society exists because its citizens find it worth defending, then the elimination of cultural sources of meaning destroys society. In the meantime, to hold as an absolute truth that there are no absolute truths, as Rorty does, is to uphold the limitless power of the state. Without a rich cultural life, government cannot be limited.

—Philip Harold  
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## Political Visions and Illusions: A Survey and Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies

**David T. Koyzis**

Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003 (281 pages)

In this well-argued discussion, David Koyzis challenges readers to consider whether their political worldview is an accurate vision or whether it is susceptible to being classified as mere ideology. Following an opening chapter that sets forth his proposal, he then tries five competing modern political theories by that thesis. He discusses and critiques liberalism, conservatism, nationalism, democratism, and socialism.

Koyzis displays his view of ideology in the first chapter. While doing so, he compares ideology to idolatry, noting that many modern ideologies reprise certain ancient idolatries. The assumption that an idol “has the capacity to save us from some real or perceived evil” (15) is then compared to ideologies that bear similar utopian expectations—and that are fatally flawed in their efficacy to deliver. The first chapter provides a valuable survey of the ways that various sociologists use or abuse ideology. Koyzis avers that “ideology is a type of false consciousness” and that as such it is “rooted in the biblical category of idolatry” (22). He identifies the characteristics of ideology as (1) inescapably religious, (2) immanentistic, (3) ineffective in providing salvation, and (4) ends-driven instead of principle-driven. Prior to analyzing the major ideologies, Koyzis announces the tests he will employ. In this work, he intends to try worldviews by their (1) creational basis, (2) treatment of correct aspects of nature—correct in themselves but perverted by deification, (3) inconsistencies, (4) explanations for the source of evil, (5) location of salvation, and (6) support for a proper role for politics in society.

In his opening critique of liberalism, also styled “the sovereignty of the individual,” Koyzis provides a fine history of the term. He is sensitive to modern tendencies to demonize “the *L* word” and thus shows that thinkers from Locke to Rawls may comfortably share this ideological den. Included in his discussion are both the recent, statist form of liberalism and economic liberalism (or capitalism). Koyzis is at his best in this chapter when he defines the stages of liberalism’s evolution, especially identifying