

*Memory & Identity: Personal Reflections* by Pope John Paul II  
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That any man should produce a book such as this is remarkable. That it was produced by a man in extreme old age and in the throes of what turned out to be his last illness verges on the miraculous. Here John Paul II reveals himself not just as a shepherd and father to a billion Roman Catholics but as the most percipient philosophical theologian writing today.

This is a book about Christian basics and it begins by squaring up to the problem of evil in the modern world. For a hundred years the world has been oppressed by massively destructive wars, genocides and tyranny. The sheer horror of these events usually calls from contemporary commentators the epithet “medieval”. By contrast, John Paul shows that the beginning of so much of our present distress has its origin in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries – the so-called Age of Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment began with a huge shift in perspective. Medieval philosophical philosophy began with the being of God and deduced or inferred its conclusions from there. That is, philosophical theology, anthropology, sociology and all the sciences were rooted in metaphysics. Beginning with Descartes, this metaphysical foundation was set aside and the basis of human knowledge began with speculative reasoning. As the Pope says:

“After Descartes, philosophy became a science of pure thought. Both the created world and the Creator remained within the ambit of Descartes’ ‘I think, therefore I am’ as the content of consciousness. God was reduced to an element within human consciousness and so God was no longer considered to be the ultimate explanation for human beings”.

In saying these things, John Paul puts himself in the company of two of the best minds of the last century: Ludwig Wittgenstein and C.H.Sisson. In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein exposes Descartes’ “I think, therefore I am” as a piece of philosophical nonsense. He does this chiefly by means of what has become known as the private language argument. For Descartes even to begin to be able to say “I think, therefore I am” he would need a language. And language is by definition public. Therefore “I think, therefore I am” is an impossible place from which to start a programme of philosophical speculation.

These are profoundly serious matters, so it is always something of a treat when a great mind expresses his views about them in the form of an amusing aside. The philosopher Anthony Flew told me that in 1949 he was at a meeting of the Moral Science Club in Cambridge where the speaker began his talk by quoting Descartes’ “I think, therefore I am”. Wittgenstein turned to Flew and in a loud whisper said, “That’s a bloody silly place to start!”

C.H. Sisson said, “The ‘therefore’ of Descartes now looks like a confidence trick”. And so it is. It is a tautology which seeks to prove its point by a piece of mere repetition: the “I” whose existence Descartes is seeking to prove is simply assumed by the “I” who asserts it. Wittgenstein again: “It is as if a man should buy several copies of the same newspaper to find out if what it says is true”.

Upon this profound error, leading to a fundamental shift in perspective from the being of God to the speculation of human reason is constructed the origin of so many of our contemporary ills. The primacy of the “I” led to the false supposition that human beings are the arbiters of morality. The Pope writes:

“If man can decide by himself without God what is good and what is bad, he can also determine that a group of people is to be annihilated”.

Of course, the Enlightenment philosophers believed it impossible that any modern, reasonable person would ever wish to perpetrate evil. Rousseau is very explicit about this:

“Man is naturally good, loving justice and order. There is absolutely no original perversity in the human heart, and the first movements of nature are always right”.

It is astonishing that anyone with half an eye on the course of human history – or even with the occasional inward glance – could have written such rubbish. But this was the message of the Enlightenment philosophers who made it plain that there was no use for religion in the modern world – that, in fact, religion is precisely that thing which always holds back human *progress*.

Voltaire said,

“Religion must be destroyed among respectable people and left to the mob for whom it was made”.

The great evils of our time have come about through the misplaced attempt to explain the world on the basis of Descartes’ mistake and the other mistake which was the Enlightenment philosophers’ assertion of humankind’s innate goodness. Once people abandon their fundamental belief in the being of God and the metaphysical and moral perspective which that belief gives, then disastrous consequences are bound to follow. This is simply because false perspectives cannot produce truth and goodness. Here is the brutal working out of all those biblical sayings about a house being built on sand not being able to stand and the Devil as the Father of Lies.

The truth is that the totalitarian tyrannies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, their gulags and their genocides, were built on the very notion of Enlightenment and Progress. They were based on the false belief that man is the origin of his own being and the arbiter of his own morality. The godlessness of these tyrannies was not accidental: their crimes were perpetrated in the name of atheism. John Paul adds:

“We cannot remain silent regarding a tragic question that is more pressing today than ever. The fall of the regimes built on ideologies of evil put an end to the forms of extermination in the countries concerned. There remains the legal extermination of human beings conceived but unborn. And this extermination is decreed by democratically elected parliaments which invoke the notion of civil progress for society and for all humanity”.

This is the result of the shift in perspective which began with Descartes and discovered its moral credentials in the Enlightenment. John Paul asks the big question:

“Why does all this happen? What is the root of these post-Enlightenment ideologies? The answer is simple: it happens because of the rejection of God as Creator and consequently as the source determining what is good and what is evil”.

Diagnosis of a dread disease is one thing – but is there any hope of a cure? The Pope prescribes it, not only for his worldwide Catholic flock but for the future of all humanity:

“If we wish to speak rationally about good and evil, we have to return to St Thomas Aquinas, that is to the philosophy of being. All our analyses implicitly presuppose the reality of the Absolute Being and also the reality of being human – that is being a *creature*. If we do not set out from these realist presuppositions, we end up in a vacuum”.

In this short book, Pope John Paul II has given us a tract for our times and a recipe for the cure of our woes. Here is deep wisdom in the plainest language. He speaks with authority – not as the scribes.