

THE CULTURE OF DEATH AND THE CRISES OF MODERNITY

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Abstract

The vast majority of reality seems enmeshed in cyclic elements of bifurcation: day and night, good and evil, heaven and hell, black and white, life and death, etc. Often, an element is projected not just as a contrary within the gamut of opposing options, but as the inescapable adversative alternative, precluding the possibility of a midcourse or 'third force.' That is, the presence of an element portends not only the absence of its alternative, but a somewhat contrived force working to dismantle the alternative. In this sense, cultivating the "culture of death," which is deemed as the base of the crises that humanity is currently forced to endure, is antithetical to cultivating the "culture of life". Life cannot be profitably sustained in the midst of forces that pull it apart. Admitting this adversative relationship as a universal rule among bifurcating elements, though flawed in many respects, explains the persistence of racial bigotry in modern societies. In this essay, the mistreatment of blacks by whites was underlined as one of the crises of modernity. The modern penchant for abortion, euthanasia, homicide, capital punishment, unsustainable exploitation of nature, wars and violent conflicts, among others, was recognized as obvious means of promoting the culture of death. In the end, various blips currently bedeviling societies were identified as watersheds ensuing from the culture of death.

Keywords: culture of death, crises of modernity, bifurcation, abortion, racial bigotry.

Introduction

Life and death are the highest properties of being. Following ancient wisdom, being is that which is; that which exists; that which has the capacity to exist. To exist is to be, and to be is to have life or non-life. Animals, plants, bacteria, and other organisms with innate capacity to instantiate properties exist in the sense of being alive; they are living beings (things). They can engage in biological processes, and as such are naturally given to generation and decay. Rocks, water, books, tables, and similar others, because they lack internal mechanism to instantiate movement, growth, and reproduction are insentient (lifeless) beings. Being insentient means the whole gamut of entities within this category are

negatively logical. Negative logicity denotes the absence of life in a being that shouldn't possess it; it represents a mere absence of being. For example, when we say the table is lifeless, we merely restate the absence of a property in a being that is not supposed to have it. "The table is lifeless" is a logically true proposition which, in combination with others, can form a sound argument. But this cannot be true for statements as: "the table is dead"; "the stone is tired", etc. Even though insentient entities, being nonliving existents, are subject to some form of decay associated with all materiality, they are not open to generation, growth and death. Insentient beings have no ontological relationship with death.

Death is an essential property of life; a process by which every living being progresses to their finality. Ontically, there is no escaping to death by all that possess life. Ontologically, death is a privative logical being, as it signifies the privation of life in a being that previously possessed it. For example, humans and other animals are adjudged dead when they lack life which they hitherto possessed. Unlike in the case of a stone or iron, the existence of a corpse is a grim pointer to the loss of a fundamental property – life. Not only is every material life subject to death, only material lives can die. Nonliving beings do not die.

Death, being an essential property of life, certainly cannot superintend life in relation to being, since the property of a thing cannot be more significant than the thing itself. Hence, within the continuum of 'life and death,' life is of supreme value. But within the hierarchical ladder of living beings, human life tops others in value not just because of its capacity for self-consciousness and volition, but because, in some way, it "transcends" space and time.¹ Human life is at the centre of reality—of history. The manifestation of being is generally reckoned in time and space. Events of the past, whether properly recorded or not, are factual, time-bound, and are irreversibly cast on the sands of time. They can be natural occurrences like earthquakes, tsunami, thunderstorm, etc., or human activities such as the bombing of Hiroshima, World Wars, etc. Every past event remains an irrelevant datum of history that quickly fizzles into obscurity unless arranged in temporal succession by, and is interpreted in relation to man. Plants, lower animals and other living beings can neither arrange past events in sequences nor

¹ Ogbujah, C. N. 2020. "Cultivating the Culture of Life: Challenges in the 21st century Globalized World," *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities, Vol. 6. No. 5*, pp. 48-63.

ascertain their historicity. 'It is man that creates, transmits and validates history.'² Every event, every meaning has value only in relation to human life.

To live is to have the capacity to die. When Heidegger notes that "as soon as man is born, he is at once old enough to die,"³ he is simply restating the primeval wisdom that mortality is an essential property of life. Whether understood in the sense of Shakespearean 'necessary end which will come when it will come,'⁴ or Bohannan's inevitable debt which we owe life,⁵ death is inescapable to all mortal lives. So, when we decry the state of death in modern life, it is not for the inevitable natural process of dissolution resulting from life's essential property, but for the numerous and reckless means by which it occurs in contemporary cultures. Going by the human carnage in the two World Wars and other atrocious civil / interstate conflicts; going by the rate of homicide, annihilation of entire ethnic groups, and the support of strategies for easy procurement of abortion, infanticide and euthanasia; and going by the speed at which nature is unsustainably exploited—causing natural disasters, it is inevitable that the survival of humanity hangs on a precipice. Modernity revels in the "culture of death" and the ensuing crises are threatening to engulf everyone. In the following paragraphs, we shall look at the insidious ways by which the "culture of death" is cultivated as the new norm; the crises it portents to humanity; and the imperative on countering it with cultivating the "culture of life."

Cultivating the Culture of Death

Culture and death are inextricable properties of human life, regardless of one's status or location. Everyone is born into a preexistent mode of life, into a culture. E.B. Tylor's depiction of culture as entailing 'man's capabilities and habits acquired as a member of society,'⁶ indicates that culture is a human affair. Other living beings, depending on their degree of awareness, might display some features suggestive of habits and capabilities. But these features, suggestive as they may be, lack systematization, and cannot be adjudged as elements of

² Ogbujah, C. N. 2020. "Conceptual Frame of History, Science and Technology", in C. Ogbujah (Ed.). *History and Philosophy of Science and Technology, A Reader*, Port Harcourt: Pearl Pubs. Int. Ltd., pp. 13-58.

³ Heidegger, M. 1962 [1927]. *Being and Time*. New York: Harper and Row, p. 289.

⁴ Shakespeare, W. 2004. *Julius Caesar* (Illustrated Edition). Edited by B. A. Mowat and P. Werstine. New York: Simon & Schuster, Act 2 Scene 2, 35.

⁵ Bohannan, Laura. AZQuotes.com. wind and Fly LTD, 2020. 15 August 2020, https://www.azquotes.com/author/73920-Laura_Bohannan

⁶ Tylor, E. B. [1871], 2010. *Primitive Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

culture. Only humans, by reason of volition and choice, can form a people, and thus, can create culture. Culture, in its basic signification, connotes the aggregation of people. It is the way of life of a group of people.

Much as societies are distinct from each other, so do their cultures vary in the conceptualization of death. These varying conceptions, for the most part, noticeably influence their lifestyles, willingness to die for a cause, the degree to which they welcome or fear death, their expressions of grief and mourning, and the nature of funeral rites performed at death. Whereas some cultures, acknowledging death's inevitability, regard it as transition and gateway to suprasensible mode of existence (e.g. Christian culture); others, of nihilistic type, conceive it as futility—an entrance into nothingness. Jean-Paul Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, excels in this latter view. Each of these conceptions elicits behaviours with obvious implications. In one, the acknowledgement of death as a transition to a higher life imposes values which promote the inviolability of human life, the sacredness of certain rights, and virtues that mitigate behaviour in view of eschatological concerns. Since 'life is not ended, but changed', the reality of death and possibility of judgment afterwards impose on the living a certain level of responsiveness to care, love and justice. On the other hand, the acceptance of death as nihilism comes with a rejection of divinely ordained moral standards, dismissal of absolute values, and a denial of independent and generally binding ethical rules.⁷ The former admission leads to circumspection in thoughts and actions; the latter is a recipe for rudderless behaviour that imperils human lives.

The culture of death is the systemic acquiescence within societies, of actions and practices inimical to the preservation of human life. It is a sustained campaign by liberal media that blurs human sensitivity to the logic of right and wrong, destroys society's moral fibre, and fosters in its wake, behaviours that are hostile to life. There is no doubt, as Pope John Paul II noted, that "we are today confronted by a structure of evil, which takes the form of a 'culture of death.' This culture denies human solidarity and is fostered by currents that encourage excessive concern for efficiency. It is in a certain sense, a war of the powerful against the poor."⁸

⁷ Ogbujah, C. (Ed.). 2020. *History and Philosophy of Science and Technology: A Reader*. Port Harcourt: Pearl Publishers, Preface, p. vi.

⁸ John Paul II. 1995. *Evangelium Vitae*, 12, Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

At the base of this culture is the dismissal of absolute values. The notion of absolute value imposes a universal standard with respect to, at least, certain behaviours pertaining to the “rights”: the right to life, to freedom of religion and worship, to association, etc. None of these rights can be suppressed without inflicting harm to universal standards. In its embrace of left-liberal ideologies, postmodernism relativizes reality, and accepts as true and valuable only that which suits the whims of the individual. The individual, rather than the society, becomes the arbiter of taste. Instead of being treated as a microcosm whose paths must agree to societal norms for validation, an individual is considered as a macrocosm with seemingly unlimited rights that often diminish the value of general norms. In the end, postmodernism removes objective restraints to character, and instead, imposes a somewhat relativistic blueprint that affords individuals unfettered license to the pursuit of particular and personalized interests and goals. Having construed liberty for license, there is no barrier to the exploration of the ‘man of the new age’, including exploring more than a thousand ways of extinguishing life. The upswing in cultivating the “culture of death” has its roots in modernity’s penchant for ethical relativism.

Death is a universal phenomenon for all humans, but its time and manner are sacred to cultures and traditions. In some cultures, there are certain conditions under which the loss of life is termed *taboo*. In Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* for instance, reading through what befell Okonkwo for inadvertently killing the sixteen year old son of Ezeudu at the latter’s funeral, one comes off with the glowing idea that even pre-scientific Africa unmistakably condemned homicide.⁹ Whether deliberate or accidental, shedding of innocent blood polluted the land and must be met with serious punishment. The age-long universal acceptance of the sanctity of life impels many cultures to denounce deliberate actions that result in its abrupt termination. Such actions as abortion, murder, suicide, etc., have long been regarded as *taboos*, and culprits treated with disdain. Depending on cultures, their occurrences are rebuffed either in kind (in the sense of ‘an eye for an eye’), or by banishment from society (see Okonkwo’s experience), or by being subjected to rigorous ordeal for ‘ritual cleansing’, or by discarding their bodies irreverently (in case of suicide). But in recent times, due to modern influence undercutting human transcendence associated with death, cultural values and heritage have undergone modifications, leading to considerable changes on how people approach the subject of death and dying. It is difficult for

⁹ Achebe, C. 1958. *Things Fall Apart*. New Hampshire: Heinemann Ltd., p. 87.

society that discards “essential” realities to structure arguments in defence of life, or not to promote the “culture of death.”

Dimensions and Corollaries of Death Culture

Conflict is an intrinsic and inexorable part of human nature. Individuals and groups experience it in their day-to-day living without qualms. But the resort to violence is a major cause of death in conflicts. Right from the first battle in recorded history (between Sumer and Elam in c. 2700 BCE), contending armies of opposing groups have generally resolved political disputes on the battlefield.¹⁰ The history of Mesopotamia, the early Dynastic period of Egypt, the Zhou Dynasty in China, the rise of Carthage, the ascendancy of Rome, or that of any other nation show that individuals, states, or political factions have gained sovereignty over regions by war and bloodshed. Thus, the preponderance of war deaths, by no means, is a modern phenomenon. What is novel is that modernity, through scientific-technological innovations, has not only equipped humans with weapons of mass destruction, but has simplified diverse means by which death can happen. If this were combined with the penchant for abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, arms (especially nuclear) race, unsustainable exploitation of nature, gene modifications (especially in plants that have the potential to cause disease and harm), and the glamorization of suicide by faith groups, then even sceptics will shudder at the dangers that lie ahead. In a time when inviolable rights of the individual are championed by liberal governments and media, the right to life, especially at its very vulnerable moments (birth and death) is under siege.

Admittedly, the first major element of the culture of death in modern society is war. War is the resort to the use of force or armed violence by nations or groups, in the pursuit of opposing interests. From ancient times till the present, wars and violent conflicts have claimed incredible number of lives. It has led to deaths of combatants, and mass murder of unarmed civilians, displacement of entire populations, and the formation of refugees. The carnage of war in modern times, epitomized in the two World Wars, the Nigerian Civil war, the Rwandan genocide, the Rohingya massacre, the Somali civil war, the DRC atrocious conflicts, the Iran-Iraq war, the Afghan War, the ongoing Civil Wars in Yemen and Syria, the war on terrorism, etc., makes a child’s play of wars in ancient and

¹⁰ Mark, J. J. 2009. “War in Ancient Times”, 2 September 2009, [website], <https://www.ancient.eu/war/>, (accessed 21 August 2020).

medieval times. Conservative estimate puts the number of lives lost to wars in the 20th century alone above 160 million.¹¹

While the number of war fatalities in the Americas is relatively low in comparison to other places, the cold war between the US and Russia / China led to unprecedented arms race. Today, the quantity of conventional and non-conventional arms stockpile by these nations is capable of destroying the whole world multiple times over. The availability of firearms and lights weapons has greatly eased the process of mass shootings, homicide, and suicide. According to Shields, between 1968 and 2011, nearly 1.4 million people died from firearms or 'one-sided' conflict in the United States of America.¹² By my analysis of recent data covering from 1990 to 2019 released by *Gun Violence Archive (GVA)*, the US cumulatively lost about 1.08 million lives to 'non-state' violent conflicts within the thirty year period.¹³ This excludes death counts from neighboring countries like Brazil, Mexico and Colombia which are well versed in drug cartels and gun violence. Indeed, there is no gainsaying that wars and gun violence have caused staggering economic disruptions, deprivations, dislocations, and human misery. They are prime architects in modernity's cultivation of the culture of death.

Added to the carnage of wars and violent conflicts is the threat from modern rejection of traditional objective values. Traditional values uphold the sanctity of human life from conception to death, and prohibit all forms of interference in its natural progression. Actions are considered moral if and only when they conform to some independent objective norm or standard imposed by nature. This was the sense captured in Kant's deontological ethics. But the claim to individual liberty and choice in modernity's neoliberal projects manifestly rejects all forms of standards from the "external world." With individual subjectivity, scientific rationalization, and a waning emphasis on religious worldviews as key features of modernity, neoliberalism couldn't go beyond subjective views in its search for values. In contrast to medieval thinking, individuals, not God or Being are the centers of reality, and reserve the rights to determine the course of their

¹¹ McNamara, R.S. and Blight, J.G. 2001. *Wilson's Ghost: Reducing the Risk of Conflict, Killing, and Catastrophe in the 21st Century*, New York: Public Affairs.

¹² Shields, M. 2012, cited by Louis Jacobson, 2013. *POLITIFACT, The Poynter Institute*, [website], January 18, 2013, <https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2013/jan/18/mark-shields/pbs-commentator-mark-shields-says-more-killed-guns/>, (accessed August 21, 2020).

¹³ Ogbujah, C. N. 2020. "Wasted Resources, Towards an Assessment of the Human and Social Costs of Conflicts", in C. N. Ogbujah & A. Egobueze (Eds.). *Peace and Conflict Studies: An Anthology*, in Press.

group or social class is immune. Although psychologists may, through description of mental states of agents of self-harm, give clues to explain the upsurge of this malady, the overriding risk factors for suicide attempt and suicide ideation are rooted in: a) the rejection of eschatology, and b) strong belief in personal autonomy and choice. By ignoring the feelings of loved ones, suicidal behaviours are utterly selfish acts with strong roots in relativism that usually views death as gateway to nihilism. In contrast, research shows that people, who participate in religious services once a week, with strong eschatological feelings, are five times less likely to commit suicide than those who do not.¹⁸ In other words, religious convictions and practices do help people foster a sense of hope, meaning, and purpose even in the midst of adversity, and in consequence, have reduced the rate of suicide in societies.

Prominent also, in the promotion of the culture of death are the unsustainable exploitation of natural habitat and the unguarded exploits in “genetic carpentry.” Within the class of resources, Mother Nature tops everything. Whether in providing land, which is the base for all economic resources, or in providing essentials for living organisms to grow and thrive (ecological resources), modernity has maximized nature’s invaluable goods for human sustenance. But because of greed, power grab, and flaws in the hypothesized capitalist perfect world of competitions, there is growing unsustainable exploitation of nature, as can be seen in ‘fracking’ and other forms of drilling that generate pollutants, logging, deforestation and sundry activities that decrease biodiversity and cause climate change, as well as the recurrent test of atomic bombs by “rogue” nations. All these have the potential to destroy world drinking water supplies, pollute the environment, contribute to greenhouse gases that are responsible for global warming, and activate earthquakes that trigger tsunamis. The recent spike in “natural disasters” and the wreck humanity is forced to endure, are testaments to modernity’s tangle with this culture. To reduce or mitigate these disasters, Eboh pointed at the need for scientists to enhance nature without suppressing, dominating, and harming it, in the sense of ecofeminism. For her, since ecosystems provide tremendous services to humanity, we must, in dealing with them, use an ethic of care to replace that of domination, if we hope to get reprieve from nature.¹⁹

¹⁸ VanderWeele, T. J.; Li, S.; Tsai, A. C. and Kawachi, I. 2016. “Association Between Religious Service Attendance and Lower Suicide Rates Among US Women,” *JAMA Psychiatry*, 73 (8): 845-851.

¹⁹ Eboh, M. P. 2001. “Ecofeminism: A Politico-Revolutionary Discourse,” *Journal Of Gender Studies*, Vol. 1. No. 3, pp. 22-30.

personal lives. Actions and events must be interpreted not from “impractical universal standards” foisted by traditional philosophy, but from the free choice of individual agents. As with Heraclitus’ “man is the measure of all things” mantra, the individual is given the sole power of ascription: of the things he says that are, that they are; of the things he says are not, that they are not. The thinking is that within the gamut of values in personal lives, nothing trumps individual feelings.

This form of ethical relativism is the basis for much of modern support for abortion, euthanasia, suicide, willful homicide and other queer behaviours that promote the culture of death. In medieval culture as in African traditional life, the willful removal of the fetus from the womb was considered an abominable crime. Culprits were severely penalized not just to deter others, but to unmistakably affix society’s stamp on the inviolability of life. Life, being entrusted to us sacred, must be preserved with every sense of responsibility. Through the light of reason, everyone open to goodness can grasp from natural law, the sacred value of human life from conception to death, and can affirm the right of every person to have this sacred value respected with utmost care.¹⁴ But with the landmark U.S. Supreme Court judgment in January 22, 1973, on *Roe v. Wade* case,¹⁵ in which a pregnant woman’s liberty to choose to have abortion was affirmed, the balance of the trajectory began to tilt in favour of pro-choice. A woman, by law, was permitted to procure abortion both for medical and “cosmetic” reasons. This judgment reshaped not only American politics, values, and lifestyle, but those of the whole world, prompting an avalanche of decisions legalizing abortion across the globe.

At the moment, the problem is no longer how to grant women near unlimited right to choose abortion, as this is apparently settled by most positive laws. The burning issue is rather how to strongly criminalize and shame any one that musters courage to challenge this machine of death. Those who fight for life (pro-lifers) have become objects of ridicule, enduring shaming campaigns from liberal media, and being regarded as misogynists and bigots by academics. Under the garb of inclusivity, pro-lifers’ business outfits are facing threats of shutdown for refusing to violate their consciences in not providing abortion insurance for staff. But more disheartening is that the foot soldiers in this fight do not always receive enough cover from their supposed Generals. In an interview to the *Crux* released

¹⁴ John Paul II. 1995. *Evangelium Vitae*, 2, Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

¹⁵ *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973).

on August 28, 2020, Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia—President of the Pontifical Academy for Life, perhaps, in display of political correctness, did not have qualms warning faith-groups against turning the pro-life cause into an ideological weapon in the run-up to the US elections. One wonders, as Mirus queries, how a struggle against a “virus” that ‘snuffs out the lives of people, in addition to defying the natural law in ways that seriously undermine the family and, therefore, the entire social order,’ can be accused of being tangled with ideology.¹⁶ Meanwhile, as the internal squabble continues, governments are investing heavily on the production of drugs that can help pregnant women eliminate fetuses without recourse to hospitals. In the end, if we align this with the current practice of vaccine production with fetal tissue, it becomes clearer that modernity forcefully validates the “culture of death”.

Within the course of history, while postmodernism trivializes life, ethical relativism privatizes death. This privatization undermines the culture of transcendence and social responsibility, where death signifies the gateway to eternal bliss or damnation. As thus privatized, death no longer acquires social character that hitherto produced communal responses through collective signs and rituals practices.¹⁷ It becomes a personalized affair, instigated often at individual whims. Thus, besides support for abortion, the privatization of death gives impetus to sundry decisions that are hostile to life, as in suicide and euthanasia, or actions that dishonour the dead, as in “defilement” and/or “mutilation” of dead bodies. It has never been easier and seemingly “fashionable” to commit suicide than it is in modern times.

In late March 1997, 39 members of the Heaven’s Gate Church, California, following bizarre teachings of their founder Applewhite, engaged in the infamous mass suicide that shook the whole world. Being glamourized as heroic response to debilitating conditions, many in this generation embrace suicide as the new norm. From America to Africa, and to all the continents of the world, there is growing penchant to snuff out one’s life at the slightest provocation, or assist others in doing so, if they so request. In this epidemic of suicide, no age

¹⁶ Mirus, J. 2020. “Archbishop Paglia buries the abortion issue...again”, [website], Aug 28, 2020 <https://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/archbishop-paglia-buries-abortion-issueagain/>, (accessed 30 August 2020). Here, Mirus was livid with Paglia - President of the Pontifical Academy for Life, for using the “seamless garment” rhetoric to deflect the zeal of those fighting for the sacredness of life.

¹⁷ Mellor, P. A. and Shilling, C. 1993. “Modernity, Self-identity and the Sequestration of Death”. *Sociology*. Vol. 27, No.3, pp.411-431.

At the moment, there is crazy potential in gene editing and the acquisitive drive for ecological resources such as food, water, sunlight, and space. For instance, the unethical change of embryos by a team of scientists in China led by He Jiankui in 2018, has left the children it begat to identity crisis and other psychological problems in future. Again, to increase nutrition and gain competitive edge in production, researchers exploit discoveries in biotechnology and genetic engineering. Admittedly, these have improved the quantity of food production and reduced commodity prices, following the law of demand and supply. But compared to the humungous hazards created along the way, the assumed gains from the quantum of food production are trivial. Gene modifications, especially in plants, have given rise to often oversize and tasteless *GMO* products with potentials to cause diseases and harm. The prevalence of cancers, viruses and bacteria in modern lives is a testament to the downside of “genetic carpentry.” Even if brushed aside as a conspiracy theory, experts are keen at unraveling the role of a virology lab at Wuhan, China, in the emergence of COVID-19 pandemic that has recently taken nearly a million lives.

Modernity’s Crises: Any Hope for Survival?

The early usage of the term *modern* which dates back to the 5th century was for something that “belongs to the present-day”, with no causal positive inference. To be modern simply, was to be current. By the 1700s, its meaning came to be linked with development at different historical epochs, especially with the one following the Renaissance, in which the achievements of antiquity were surpassed.²⁰ Thus, whether taken in the sense of post-medieval history of the world, or the Euro-American culture arising from the Enlightenment, modernity refers to the socio-cultural and intellectual condition that helps the development of new formats for new thoughts, giving rise to innovative ways of thinking, writing, and behaving. Its defining characteristics include, among others, disenchantment with sacred and metaphysical underpinnings in life and culture; secularization; alienation—isolation of the individual from systems of meaning; individualism; subjectivism—turning inward for definitions and evaluations of

²⁰ Delanty, G.. 2007. "Modernity," in G. Ritzer (Ed.). *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, 11 vols. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing.

truth and meaning; democratization; and mechanization of means of production arising from developments in science and technology.²¹

Granted that modernity has brought apparently magnificent benefits to humanity, especially in the areas of healthcare, education, communication, transportation, nourishment, habitation, security, sanitation, and electricity, the attendant watersheds are too significant to be ignored. Beginning with the atomic bombs dropped at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the ensuing nuclear armament; to the Holocaust, terrorism and various genocidal events; from ecological degradation, to the hazards of gene modifications, there are indications that modernity's 'weapons of success' are fraught with devastating blips. In her work, *History and Philosophy of Science and Technology*, Eboh railed on modernity's technological excesses, pointing at widespread environmental crises and ethical banality of genetic engineering, identity crises of clonal offspring, and the futility of nuclear armament. For her, water pollution, for example, threatens aquatic life, and when aquatic life is threatened, man's life is equally threatened because of life's dependence on it. "By his unbridled technological search for creature comforts and military might, man became a spoiler."²²

Beyond the physical hazards of modern life, there are psychological and moral blips which perhaps, are more insidious and deeply seeped in the cultivation of the culture of death. The penchant for individualistic ideals often results in alienation—isolation of the individual from systems of meaning. Isolation leads to feeling of rootlessness, loss of familial bonds and common values, and an inward turning for evaluation of meaning, truth and virtue. In the end, modernity is inhabited by individuals bereft of all vestiges of generally acceptable definitions of human dignity, human nature and marriage, resulting in the loss of value for human life. This is somewhat a revival of discredited epicurean attitude that spurns values, order, and finality.

Modernity, by these inherent frictions, is apparently caught up at crossroads: to accept and work with long standing cultural and religious prescriptions that have guarded humanity over millennia, or to jettison these as fantasies inhibiting innovative exploits of science and technology. The choice for the latter was

²¹ Snyder, S. L. 2020. "Modernity," in *Britannica*. [website], <https://www.britannica.com/topic/modernity>, (accessed 25 August 2020); see also "Modernity Characteristics," <https://www.3.dbu.edu/mitchell/modernit.htm>

²² Eboh, M. P. 1999. *History and Philosophy of Science and Technology*, Enugu: Snaap Press Ltd., p. 95.

inevitable, because being associated with individual subjectivity and scientific rationalization, it was a matter of time to discard traditional values, especially those with folkloric hints. Indeed, it is recommended to discard obsolete values that clog the wheel of progress, but the crises in modernity stem not from dumping supposedly useless folktales, but from the insipient diffusion of a falsely propagated clash vis-à-vis the Old and the New. The idea of bifurcating reality into an “either – or” choice continuum between culture and science, tradition and modernity grossly misleads by deceitfully injecting void as a mid-course. The absence of conciliatory midcourse(s) indicates a rejection of interaction between the Old (culture) and the New (science), which effectively forecloses the possibility of structuring a symbiotic or eclectic view of reality. This perhaps, explains why, for Husserl, modernity’s crises are epitomized in the disproportional reliance on natural sciences over human sciences.

This modern ideal of bifurcation created the atmosphere for such works as David Strauss’ *The Old and New Faith* to flourish. In it, Strauss argues that the old faith in Christian God should be substituted with a new faith in scientific powers to guide humanity, and that civilization is imperiled by any ethical or metaphysical standards that are not rooted in scientific research.²³ Having thus, consigned religious ethics to the dustbin of myth and history, the coast was clear for the flourishing of Hobbes’ political hedonism that relied on enlightened self-interest for the foundation of civil society. At the heels of enlightened self-interest, civilization suffers the loss of human affection leading to mechanization of life; loss of respect for human rights; disrespect for the dead; and sundry exploitative behaviours which have elicited revolt in nature. It is crucial that while science may have given people more control over their lives, it has neither conquered death, nor been able to provide values to guide lives. Ontologically, scientific contributions to human growth and survival are grossly inadequate. No doubt, in recurrent hazards as earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, landslides, and other cataclysmic events, humanity reaps the fruits of individualism, subjectivism, and a disdain for otherwise resplendent faith-based values.

Besides the axis of natural disasters, modern racial bifurcation boxes a chunk of humanity into a precarious corner. Rooted in the same adversative structure that inflames the struggle for supremacy between the cultures of death and life, Caucasians seem to constitute a somewhat contrived force working to dismantle

²³ Strauss, D. F. 1991, (1872). *The Old Faith & the New*. New York: Prometheus.

their alternate—Negroids. It is hard to fathom that, in this age and time, when positive laws and the media overtly defend human freedom and equality, people have to demonstrate with banners to remind the public that “Black lives matter.” The historical racism against Blacks manifesting now and again in Police brutality, is again brought to limelight by the recent gruesome slaying of African-Americans—George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Atatiana Jefferson, Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, etc. Regardless of protests and public outcry that trailed these and similar murders, a White officer at Kenosha, Wisconsin (August 23, 2020) had the impudence to shoot an unarmed black man—Jacob Blake seven times in front of his three kids. Whether viewed as an act of a white supremacist, hell-bent on igniting a race war, or that of an overzealous officer in the line of duty, the whole scenario betrays the persistence of systemic racism in our modern world. The modern systems of law enforcement are subterfuges for consigning black lives to inhuman treatments. And if these are linked to the current ethnic cleansing in Nigeria, and other atrocities committed around the globe, it becomes clearer that monstrosity is ineluctably framed to modernism.

Conclusion

Modern societies are characterized by increase in the role of science and technology, urbanization, mass literacy, rise in representative democracy, proliferation of mass media, rise of mercantilism and capitalism, among others. With these came a fundamental shift in attitudes and behaviours. By his *cogito*, Descartes set the stage for the substitution of God and divine values with those of the human. Being now at the center of the universe, humans began to see meaning and value only in the physical and the sensual. This seeming elevation ushered in somewhat hedonistic and relativistic attitudes reminiscent of “man is the measure” platitude of antiquity. The renaissance of Heraclitus’ mantra implied the dismantling of objective reality and the “grandiose” elevation of subjective relativism. As thus relativized, the ethical values of actions are judged not in relation to some neutral norms, but only in line with individual fancies.

The culture of death pervades modern societies. Nietzsche thinks that this degeneration springs from modern natural science and the scientific study of history. These, for him, erode moral foundations by teaching relativism that promotes fluidity of all concepts, types, and species, blurring at its wake, the ontological essences differentiating humans from brutes.²⁴ He believes this trend,

²⁴ Nietzsche, F. , tr. Richard T. Grey. 1995. *Unfashionable Observations*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

though inevitable and factual, has ruinous effects that manifest now and again in “frigidity and selfishness.” Nietzsche’s views, somewhat resonate Rousseau’s earlier rejection of “enlightened self-interest” as the base for civic life, since what it does is to liberalize acquisitiveness and greed. For the city to be protected, according to Rousseau, she needs citizens with old-style virtues of courage, self-restraint, steadfastness and loyalty. Selfish / self-interested people, no matter how enlightened, are incapable of courageous acts of self-sacrifice.²⁵ Thus, to rescue modernity from the culture of death, and other issues that imperil life, we must return to ancient virtue of sobriety.

Indeed, there is no shortcut to reversal of fortunes. Leaders and the led—everyone must championed this return to ancient sobriety, by insisting on the inadmissibility of wars, much less nuclear war, as a way of resolving present and future conflicts; and bemoaning self-damaging consequences of ecological exploitation by instantiating restraint measures. We must reject and condemn induced abortion, willful murder, suicide and euthanasia as depraved agents of death; and emphasize the indispensability of morality for the survival of humanity. Modernity must be mediated by ethics, much as science must be moderated by conscience. To echo much of the items in the Seven Blunders of the World, “science without humanity or conscience can only lead to ruin.”²⁶ Truly, humanity needs a reset in order to be salvaged from the crises of diffusing “culture of death.” We must step back into the horizon of “metaphysical meaningfulness” so as to experience, once again, the best temperament with which to engage in the cultivation of the “culture of life.”

²⁵ Rousseau, J. J. 1997. *The Discourses and other Early Political Writings*, Victor Gourevitch (ed. And trans.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

²⁶ Seven Blunders of the World, originally referred to as the “7 Deadly Social Evils,” is a list that was first released by Frederick Lewis Donaldson in his sermon at Westminster Abbey on March 20, 1925. Later, on October 22 of the same year, Mohandas Gandhi published same in *Young India*, with a commentary that the list was sent by a “fair friend.” It has often been inappropriately attributed to Gandhi as the originator. See “Seven Social Sins,” URP= https://en.m.wikipedia.org/Seven_Social_Sins; cf. also Congregation for The Doctrine of Faith. 1987. *Instruction on Respect for Human life in its Origin and of the Dignity of Procreation*. Boston: St. Paul’s editions, p. 7.