

Article

## Order: Divine Principle of Excellence or Perfect Death for Living Beings?

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*En arche én ho logos* – John 1:1

Order is a value highly treasured and deeply embedded in the Western worldview. Since the archaic Greeks gazed up at the night sky and noted the reliable, stable movements of the heavens, order has remained a cherished commodity in the lives of gods and humans. This paper traces the history of that beloved value and then places in question the worth of its rigorous, changeless solidity in the lives of living beings.

The words of a people's language tell much about a people's worldview: how they *find* the world; what are the points of significance that come to the fore of their world vision, which fall into obscurity; what they love and find to be beautiful; what they despise and find repugnant; how they envision their gods, where those gods dwell and where they are sadly absent and evil lurks. This is truer of the words of ancient languages than of modern scientific languages. Ancient words tend to be much richer in meaning than the terms of modern languages whose demand for scientific exactness has forced a reductionism that seeks to eliminate ambiguity.

In the ancient Greek world, one of the richest terms is *logos* (λόγος), literally meaning "word" and connecting to the verb *logein* (λόγειν), "to say or tell."<sup>1</sup> True to ancient fashion, the word *logos* denotes meanings far beyond its literal "word," a richness captured in Liddle and Scott's secondary meanings: "that by which the inward thought is expressed" and "the inward thought itself."<sup>2</sup> Logos is used to refer to anything the human mind designs. It can mean story, tale, account, argument, a speech or oration, a definition or explanation, reason or rational basis.

Logos can refer to the content of human thought in its most dependable aspect, as intuitions of a universal reason that holds true across time and space. Such logoi are captured in logical propositions or mathematical laws and principles. But logos can also be used to refer to the far less reliable content of an individual's opinions, her account of truth. Logos is part of the ancient Greek word *mytho-logein* (μυθολογειν), which means "to mythologize," to recount a legend or craft a tale that may contain some reliable intuitions of truth but makes no pretense to strict accuracy of content. Logos

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<sup>1</sup> Liddle and Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 1997), 476-477.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

is also the word for law, which encodes, in a society's prescriptions and prohibitions, a people's traditional ideas on appropriate conduct, as well as the political reasonings of states on matters of right governance. The word *logos* comes ultimately to designate "logic" but this meaning arrives only late on the ancient scene, with Aristotle's attempt to map the rigorous laws of language, the system of rules and regulations that govern linguistic structure and permit the evaluation of arguments.

Dictionary definitions demonstrate the breadth of meanings encapsulated in ancient words, but the word *logos* is richer than most terms. *Logos* has an import in the ancient Greek worldview that escapes the limits of lexiconic classification. With the Greeks, the "inward thought" attached to this word overflows its conceptual bounds. *Logos* holds compelling weight as a force or power much greater than, though reflected in, the contents of human minds. *Logos*—in its firm, constant, eternal, always true aspect—is distinguished in the ancient worldview from *doxa* (δόξα) or mere opinion, fleeting and untrustworthy.

*Logos* shows up in the "inner thoughts" of humans but it is not identical with those thoughts. *Logos* is the brilliance that occasionally flickers in human reasoning, the truth, order, or wisdom that represents the best in human intelligence. Humans access truth on occasion because the human mind has access to a great force, the *logos* which flows through and illuminates all things (to greater and lesser degrees of perfection), and steers them toward truth and right. *Logos* is grander, more respected, more imposing than individual thoughts and reasons. The Stoics bring to this insight to philosophical fruition in the notion that *logos* speaks through human minds in their highest speculations and their most accurate calculations.

Connected with truth and excellence, then, *logos* has deep ethical significance in the ancient worldview. *Logos* is an embedded force in the cosmos, a power that is good and right and just that underlies and steers all things toward their best ends. *Logos* is visible in the perfect measure that regulates the daily cycles of the sun, the orbits of the heavenly bodies, and the coming and going of the seasons. *Logos* is the archaic principle embedded in the Greek notion of *cosmos* (κόσμος "order, world, universe, ordered and harmonious whole"). The world makes sense, and the human mind has hope of accessing reliable truth because *logos* (reason) guides all things rightly.

The ancient Greek worldview posits four divine elements (earth, air, fire and water), personified as gods, as the stuff from which the world comes to be made. But multiplicity, for the Greeks, represents an embarrassment of riches, a troubling many-ness. Simplicity is always preferable to multiplicity, for the Greeks, as *cosmos* is preferable to chaos; the many require a principle of order or reason to bring them into harmonious balance. *Logos* serves that crucial function, holding the cosmos intact and whole—a world, a *uni*-verse.

Earliest Greek philosophers seek to identify the governing *logos* that unifies the building blocks of existence by naming a primary ruling agent to bring the four into the reasonable harmony that grants *cosmos*; for Thales of Miletus (c.624-546 BCE) and Anaximenes of Miletus (c.585-525 BCE), one of

the sacred four is assigned the task—water and air, respectively. Anaximander of Miletus (c.610-546 BCE) holds that the ordering principle must be greater in reality and different from what is being ordered. He names the ordering principle *apeiron* (from Ancient Greek *a-peiros*, privative *a* and *πεῖρος*), literally “no-passageway” or “no way through”), by which he means a power underlying, empowering, and harmonizing the four, but beyond human comprehension.

Heraclitus of Ephesus (c.535 - 475 BCE) agrees that the ordering principle must be more profound and powerful than the elements, but refuses Anaximander’s claim that the principle is removed from human understanding. Rather, for Heraclitus, the reasonableness of things is guaranteed by reason itself, an ordering logic and a reasoning power in which humans share when they think and speak, if they perform these activities rightly; that is, if they are wise. The order of the universe is the underlying *logos*.

Heraclitus employs the term *logos* to denote the reasoned, ordered constancy that underlies and grounds the infinite flux of earthly existence. Although Heraclitus is best known for his doctrine of flux (*παντα ρεῖ* or *panta rei*, “everything flows”), references to his philosophy in ancient sources make abundantly clear that Heraclitus holds *logos* to compose a deeper reality than the flux. He counsels humans to try to comprehend the underlying coherence in things, a coherence expressed in the *logos*, the principle or formula common that holds the cosmos intact. He states:

Of the Logos which is as I describe it men always prove to be uncomprehending, both before they have heard it and once they have heard it. For although all things happen according to this Logos, men are like people of no experience, even when they experience such words and deeds as I explain. . .<sup>3</sup>

They do not apprehend how being at variance it agrees with itself.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore it is necessary to follow the common; but although the Logos is common, the many live as though they had a private understanding.<sup>5</sup>

The path up and down is the same path.<sup>6</sup>

Logos orders and steers the universe from within, according to appropriate and just “measures” (*μέτρα* or *metra*). Can the *logos* be understood by the clever gymnastics of a nimble mind, or is it revealed in glimpses of

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<sup>3</sup> Fr. 1, Sextus *adv. math.* VII, 132.

<sup>4</sup> Fr. 51, Hippolytus *Ref.* IX, 9, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Fr. 2, Sextus, *adv. math.* VII, 133.

<sup>6</sup> Fr. 60, Hippolytus *Ref.* IX, 10, 4.

divinely-inspired insight? A number of fragments imply that both faith and perseverance are required to discover the underlying truth of things in their common logos.

For Heraclitus, logos represents the unity in, and of things. It comprises the balance in the fluctuating opposites (hot-cold, dry-wet, up-down) that renders cosmos, an ordered whole despite the troubling change and flux. Heraclitus must have recognized that his doctrine of the flux, more scandalous to Greek ears, would compose his greatest legacy. This may explain why he counsels the wisdom of the logos over his word in his assertion: “Listening to the Logos rather than to me, it is wise to agree that all things are in reality one thing and one thing only” (Fr. 50, Hippolytus *Ref.* IX, 9, I).

Heraclitus’ advice is generally ignored, and he continues to be taught in Introductory Philosophy classes as the “philosopher of the flux.” However, Kirk and Raven, in their definitive text, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, affirm the fundamental status of the logos in Heraclitean philosophy, in the conclusion of their chapter on Heraclitus:

In spite of much obscurity and uncertainty of interpretation, it does appear that Heraclitus’ thought possessed a comprehensive unity. . . . Practically all aspects of the world are explained systematically, in relation to a central discovery—that natural changes of all kinds are regular and balanced, and that the cause of this balance is fire, the common constituent of things that was also termed their Logos.<sup>7</sup>

Parmenides of Elea (early 5th century BCE), younger contemporary of Heraclitus, appreciates the confusion that the two Heraclitean doctrines—logos and flux—incite, so he writes in conscious opposition to put to rest Heraclitus’ doctrine of the flux. Going beyond Heraclitus’ claim that logos underlies all change and multiplicity and holds the universe in harmonious balance, Parmenides insists that change *is not*. Echoing Heraclitus in Fragment 50 (cited above), Parmenides asserts that talk about and belief in change is simply a human mistake. How does Parmenides, a human being himself, discover this god’s-eye truth? Parmenides’ didactic proem, *On Nature*, describes a dream in which Parmenides ascends to the heavens to meet “the goddess” who initiates him into secret knowledge about the true nature of reality.

The poem describes a dream in which the youthful Parmenides is borne heavenward on a chariot attended by maidens of the sun. The divine emissaries guide him on a journey along the highway of Night till they bring him to the massive Gate of Night and Day, which is barred shut. The key is in the keeping of *Dike* (Justice), but the maidens persuade the god to unlock the gate and let them pass. Onward into the Day the chariot rolls till it arrives at

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<sup>7</sup> G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 212.

the palace of the goddess, who welcomes and instructs Parmenides in the two ways of knowing: the “Way of Truth” and the “Way of Seeming.” She tells Parmenides:

Come now and I will tell thee—and do not hearken and carry my word away—the only ways of enquiry that can be thought: the one way, *that it is and cannot not be*, is the path of Persuasion, for it attends upon Truth; the other—*that it is not and needs must not be*, that I tell thee is a path altogether unthinkable. For thou couldst not know that which is not, nor utter it; the same thing exists for thinking as for being. That which can be spoken and thought needs must be; for it is possible for it, but not for nothing, to be.

. . . One way only is left to be spoken of, that it *is*; and on this way are full many signs that *what is* is uncreated and imperishable, for it is entire, immovable, and without end. It *was* not in the past, nor *shall* it be, since it *is* now, all at once, one, continuous; for what creation wilt thou seek for it? how and whence did it grow?

The goddess counsels Parmenides, on an argument solidly grounded in the logic of identity and non-contradiction, that single, immutable ordered Being is all that can reasonably exist. Parmenides has taken the logic of the cosmos one step farther than his predecessor. Where multiplicity is illusion and change is overcome, order and harmony no longer require an “underlying” sponsor, but logos comprises the very being of the One.

The love of logos, the ordering principle for the cosmos, is fundamental to the Greek worldview and testifies to the Greek sense of the world as sacred, profoundly ordered, and harmonious. Whether posited as the law that grounds existence, change, and multiplicity, or as the holistic One of all that is, the logos is older and more powerful than created things, more real and more morally reliable than the gods. The Greek assumption that an ordering power, a reason, a logos, orders all existence for the good persists throughout the ancient world and grounds the Western understanding of the world. This assumption also undergirds all scientific inquiry in the West. We trust that scientific investigation is a worthwhile pursuit and its conclusions reliable because we are convinced that the universe is reasonable, governed by natural laws that are constant, immutable, and logical.

By contrast with these founding assumptions about the goodness of order and simplicity, the Greeks also bequeath to the Western world the idea that disorder and multiplicity are evil states of being. This assumption is consistent with the worldview of an ancient warrior class of princes and kings, themselves named “the good” or *aristoi* (*ἀριστοί*). When the world was in a good state, everything fit neatly into its place in the whole, the kings ruled, the women cooked, the peasants and worked, and the neighbors kept to

themselves. These values will show up again in Plato's *Republic* in the features that keep Socrates' simple city in peaceful harmony: mind your business, do your own job and leave your neighbor alone (Rep. 2.372a-d). The simple city needs no standing army and no police force, because there is no undue accumulation of wealth in this simple bartering community. No one oversteps the bounds of simple needs and pleasures.

The love of *logos*, or reasoned, harmonious order is a feature fundamental to the Greek worldview. The distinguishing features of the *logos*—order, reason, stability, simplicity, changelessness—are seen as the most desirable qualities to which all people and things should aspire. Plato has Socrates recommend to the highest souls the study and imitation of the heavens, with their constant cycles and their fixed seasons (*Republic* 6.500c). Where order, reason and stability are beloved, chaos, ignorance, and change are reviled. Evil, in the ancient world as in the modern West, is associated with that which reason (*logos*) cannot control, what escapes the limits of the law (*logos*), what ruptures the comfortable boundaries of definition (*logos*)—the limitless, the immeasurable, the ungraspable, the chaotic.

In the Greek mind, overstepping one's limits is the worst human crime, causing offense to the gods and delivering hardship—disorder—to the human world. *Hybris* is the name the Greeks give to that state of overblown pride or arrogance that is evident in human beings who overstep their rightful measure (*metron*) and forget their proper place in the whole of things. Perhaps the best (and most humorous) example of *hybris* is lodged in the myth that Plato places in the mouth of the comic poet Aristophanes in the dialogue, *Symposium*. The tale opens with Aristophanes' hilarious description of an original human state. The poet tells that humans in their original state were:

globular in shape, with rounded back and sides, four arms and four legs, and two faces both the same, on a cylindrical neck, and one head, with one face one side and one the other, and four ears, and two lots of privates, and all other parts to match. They walked erect, as we do ourselves, backward or forward, whichever they pleased, but when they broke into a run, they simply stuck their legs straight out and went whirling round and round like a clown turning cartwheels . . . bowling along at a pretty good speed.<sup>8</sup>

These funny round creatures, whirling around backwards and forwards, furnish but a comic backdrop for a fresh telling of the classic tale of the fall of human beings from the grace of the gods. Aristophanes recounts the human offense culminating in the fall:

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<sup>8</sup> *Symposium* 189e-190a.

And such, gentlemen, were their strength and energy [of the globular humans], and such their arrogance, that they actually tried . . . to scale the heights of heaven and set upon the gods.<sup>9</sup>

The fall is tragic-comic. Zeus does not wish to destroy the human race because the gods enjoy human sacrifices, but he must “put an end to the disturbance” and curb the offensive arrogance of these cheeky round creatures. He decides to weaken each one by half by splitting it in two parts, “as you or I might chop up sorb apples for pickling, or slice an egg with a hair” (*Sym.*190de). Apollo helps to accomplish the dirty deed, turning the faces round to the front, so that the sad, torn little half-creatures can walk upright on one set of legs. But the sorry creatures in their new broken form wander about tormented and yearning, mourning the loss of their primeval wholeness.

The punishment sounds comic but resonates a serious pathos in its ancient Greek audience. It underscores the crucial importance of humility in human lives, and recalls that when humans over-reach their lowly positions in the power chain of existence, tragedy follows swift and hard. Aristophanes’ account of Love in the *Symposium*’s debate of that topic ends in uproarious tragedy, as each of the two parts of the once-whole being, lost without its natural mate, goes about “questing and clasping” and clinging desperately to all the wrong partners. The sorry scene rings true for the reader, reminding us what melancholy, pining fools we can make of ourselves when we are in love.

For the Greeks, hybris is the greatest evil of the human world because like earthquakes and tidal waves in the natural realm, hybris oversteps the due measure that guarantees harmony and peace. The wrath of the gods will descend without fail upon the arrogant upstart human who gets too big for his mortal britches. Humans must learn to be reasonable, and practice appropriate measure in their desires and their actions.

Plato posits reason and stability in the gods and other heavenly beings and objects alone. In the *Phaedrus* myth of the Feast of Being, human souls falter and fail. The gods are redefined as compliant, amenable rulers who keep to their unique domains and parade in harmony (246d&ff.). Humans aspire to true knowledge of excellent things but only the “orderly gods” make the steep ascent to the heavens where souls are nourished on beauty, justice, temperance, and “the veritable knowledge of being that veritably is” (243e). Humans have the troublesome quality of *phthonos* (greed, egoism, avarice) that causes them to struggle with each other, grasp and claw for their separate interests, and ultimately fall from the heavens to a degraded existence on earth.

The *Phaedrus* myth indicates that the worldview grounded in a love of order cannot help but devalue the things of the world that change and flux and flow. In this view, human beings, with their fickle and steamy passions and their shifting opinions and ideas, and ultimately earthly existence itself, with its troubling unpredictability, comes to be seen as wanting, as more or less

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<sup>9</sup> *Symposium* 190b.

degraded and fallen. Mortal existence is a brief “prison” sentence whose fleshy, earthy excesses—disease, ageing, and death—can be overcome by the rejection of the changeable (the bodily, the passions, the appetites) and by rational contemplation of the changeless, in philosophy’s “practice of death” (*Phaedo* 82d&ff).

The West believes its values, its systems, and its traditions to be built on the Greek ideal of democracy, where differences are embraced within the common category of “the people” (the *demos*). But, as we have seen, the love of order, much older and more persistent, favors sameness and uniformity, and only tolerates the people when their troubling differences can be overcome in a common will or a common patriotism that rejects change and supports the status quo. In fact, all major thinkers in the cradle of Western philosophy are suspicious of democracy as the dangerous political system where order is constantly under threat. For the ancients, democracy represents the unpredictable, the irrational, where the dictates of reason are drowned by the cacophony of the uneducated and wayward masses, where evil demagogues toady to the fluctuating desires of ignorants to serve their own wicked designs. The Ancient Greek word for “the many” (*hoi polloi*) is still employed in modernity to voice our inherited contempt for the common people of a society. After all, the many cannot be saved from their fickle excesses, because philosophy is impossible for them (*Rep.* 6.493e&ff).

Changeability is the problem. Order is the solution. The love of order recommended to the ancients, and continues to recommend to moderns, the establishment of strong states whose laws (*logoi*) control and stabilize the discomfiting fluctuations in the opinions and passions of commoners. The myth of the “classless society” in the West veils the distinction between commoners and the wealthy and affords the illusion of a common body of folk invested in the state as “We the People.”

The love of order is deeply embedded in the Western worldview. However, as Georges Bataille demonstrates, in “Propositions on Fascism,” the order beloved by the West can be a dangerous commodity in the state.<sup>10</sup> Bataille argues in this essay that the rigorously ordered state is one of two extreme possibilities, both of which are equally problematic. The model that aspires to perfect order mirrors the timeless realm of the gods, a frozen homogeneous perfection that Bataille names “monocephalic” (from the ancient Greek for single-headed). Like a god, the monocephalic state represents a sacred entity—changeless, eternal, faultless—and these values are fixed and guaranteed by strict, legal imperatives.

At the other end of the structural spectrum resides the second extreme form of state—the acephalic (without-head) state—disordered, anarchic, and volatile. This state is seen by ordered states as a terrifying heterogeneous “primitive” life-form characterized by “uncivilized” tribal practice, mystical

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<sup>10</sup> Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, trans. by Allan Stoekl (University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 197-201.



thinking, incommensurable truths, and mad affective experience. Unreasonable. Unpredictable. Mad.

People within the acephalic social structure enjoy abundant ritual lives that offer escape from the mundane in orgiastic festivals that involve drunkenness, dancing, blood rites, wanton tortures, self-mutilation and sacrificial murder in the name of dark monster gods. Where the primitive acephalic society is referred to chaos, madness and death, the civilized monocephalic state has overcome all death. Its stable structure boasts a firm foundation where reason, life and progress can be staged.

Bataille's dichotomy of extreme possibilities provides a valuable framework that brings into focus the hidden character of global realities. Without a love for order, societies can collapse into murderous and chaotic tribalisms. But with too much love for order, another dark possibility arises. States can be seen as divine creations; their politics unfaultable, practices unquestionable, social traditions infallible, and laws imperative. Critics of the system are seen as evil outsiders, seeking to undermine the divinely-sanctioned. States must be protected against corruption by these aliens through the legalized violences of police and military.

Intricate, unyielding systems of rules and regulations—passports, licenses, identity cards, forms completed in triplicate, travel restrictions, immigration regulations, police interrogations, surveillance of social and financial transactions among subgroups, “security” checkpoints, departments of “homeland security”—weed out the deviant until criticism has been silenced, threats of rebellion obliterated, and state evolution logically contradictory. Trouble arises in paradise when order is too highly valued. Bataille demonstrates that, as the monocephalic state increasingly closes itself off, it stifles social existence, smothers creative energies, chokes the passion from its citizen-devotees, suffocates their spiritual urges, and reduces all sacrificial activity to mundane utility. When the perfection of the structure is finally accomplished, all life has been squeezed out, all labors co-opted in servitude to the cephalus (head). This culminating stage of development of the state whose greatest love is order, Bataille finally names for the dark reality that it is—fascism.

For Bataille, history moves in endless cycles, and states, being historical entities, can be counted upon to oscillate between the two extremes. Now they come to erection as unitary gods of knowledge and power, which increasingly ossify into rigid totalities with obsessions about order and security; then they explode in hysterical, raging catastrophes, releasing the explosive liberty of life from mundane servitude. The chaotic madness will eventually recompose, drawing itself into a rigid unity, slowly heaving up its stiff divine head, and once again imposing order. Life, set free for a time in chaotic freedom, turns back upon itself, and develops “an aversion to the initial decomposition.” History moves continually from the ecstatic bliss of wanton pleasure and pain toward the stasis of unyielding order, and back again, in

eternal cycles.<sup>11</sup> Time, asserts Bataille, demands both forms in the world—the eternal return of an imperative object and the explosive, creative, destructive rage of the liberty of life.

We may not readily recognize in our states the extreme forms that Bataille describes—fascist stasis or chaotic ecstasy. Modern Western states, many readers will object, compose a golden mean between Bataille’s two economies, aspiring neither to fascism nor to a manic primitivism, but to the reasonable *metron* of golden rules. However, it is equally clear that the roots of the Western world are well planted in the fascist drive, in their love of order and changeless eternity. Hesiod and the PreSocratics, as much as Jewish and Christian myth, cite a common *arche* of the universe in the good works of a god that renders order from chaos. For the ancients, one head (*cephalus*) is far superior to many; simplicity is beautiful while “the many” compose the detestable *hoi poloi*. The foundational logic that posits order as ontologically and morally superior to multivocality remains an unquestioned assumption embedded in the Western lifeworld, recommending a single, well-ordered political obelisk, stretching high into the sky—erect, proud, rigid, unyielding—over the broadest “democratic” playing field studded with incongruous heroics.

Bataille’s theatre of cruelty, from his meditations on the sexual cruelties of de Sade to his ruminations on the colorful anuses of apes, may seem to many prudish readers a simple wanton display of the revolting. But his excesses compose a crafty and entirely pragmatic logical and moral exercise. Bataille’s scandalous writings are meant to disclose the dark underside of every order-loving monocephalic structure, every polite “civilized” human society. His philosophy explains the monstrous tortures that visit high-security prisons, the illicit sexual excesses that seep into oval offices, and the Shock and Awe bloodbath-spectacles that embarrass projects of “freedom and democracy.”

Bataille holds that states evolve from the ordered into the chaotic and back again in endless cycles. But I suggest, rather, that “civilized” societies are only ever a knife stroke away from the ritual murders of “primitive” societies, and primitive societies are, in many respects, more “civilized” than their monocaphelic counterparts. History does not simply move forward in cycles but every historical stage suppresses an internal paradox. On the dark underside of order, bound up with reason’s projects and triumphs, lurks a theater of cruelty and death, just beneath the polite threshold of “civilized” culture. Just out of the light of progress, people are torn by conflicting drives. Their love for order and timeless security is constantly troubled by dark concealed forces they suppress and deny.

The violence that floods the globe in modernity, that claims to be serving reasonable projects, such as freedom and democracy, may represent the excessive overflow of chthonic urges. Human beings crave mystical, passionate, frenzied escape from the rigorous rationality of their sciences, from the fearful red and orange alerts of their terror-stricken worldviews, from the rigid order of their politico-economic diligence, and from the numbing

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

mediocrity of their everyday lives. The more the state hardens and raises its powerful head in ordered majesty, the more we may expect the inner demons of its servile multitude to beckon them from their dreary bleakness to revel in evil's orgiastic festival. Life's erotic drives will out and fulfill themselves in deathly destructiveness and wanton joy.

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