

# Lesson 18

## The Mind of the Nazis

### Objective

- To examine and evaluate the rationale of the leadership of the Third Reich

### Notes to the Teacher

Renaissance humanists believed that pagan antiquity had achieved goodness and equilibrium by satisfying all natural desires. This led to the acceptance of a relative autonomy for man and his world and an independence that distanced itself from objective morality. Religion, on the other hand, argued that human endeavors had to be ordered in pursuit of higher spiritual values which were the underpinnings of civilization. With the breakdown of the Universal Church in the Reformation and the legitimate rising interest in human potential that was part of the European character from the fifteenth century onwards, a distancing occurred from the sacred supports of the civilization that, if left unchecked, would lead to disaster.

Such a catastrophe did in fact develop in the world of the Third Reich. Attitudes that could be considered objectively evil were given a position of honor and goodness. What resulted was one of the most mysterious periods of European history. From a present perspective it is difficult to understand how the German people could have supported the barbarous ideology of National Socialism. Martin Niemöller, a contemporary of Hitler, remarked, "God has put the devil in control to see what kind of people we are." Nazi leadership showed that people are easily led by persuasive argumentation that responds to accepted intellectual trends as well as historical circumstances. The issue revolved around a tension between true humanity and a mistaken sense of what is right. A world fractured by World War I with the consequent loss of identity and morality allowed a strange philosophy that was built on a misinterpretation of accepted intellectual currents represented by Darwin, Nietzsche, Freud, and Einstein to gain control and wreak untold havoc on the world.

The Nazi leadership believed in their program and convinced millions of Germans of its merit. Their enemies led by Winston Churchill saw them as "a grizzly gang of swine working their wicked will." Surely, no sane person today would accept the inherent value of their program, but in their own time many could justify its objective validity as being rooted in the best traditions of the West.

In this lesson students read a series of quotes by major leaders of the Third Reich and determine the influence of Darwin, Nietzsche, Freud, Einstein, and Machiavelli on their misappropriated thinking. They read short excerpts on the thinking of Rousseau and Robespierre, and they discuss how the pure idea of Rousseau was twisted in time in a manner similar to the Nazi's twisting of the essential ideas of Darwin, Nietzsche, Freud, Einstein, and Machiavelli.

Part B. Read the following excerpts in preparation for a discussion on how Robespierre twisted the ideas of Rousseau and how the Nazis, similarly, misused the thought of Darwin, Nietzsche, Freud, and Einstein.

Rousseau's concept of the general will has aroused conflicting interpretations. Because it is ethical in character, it seems to represent something more than the sum of individual wills—the whole appears to be more than the sum of its parts. Many, therefore, see in Rousseau a man who exalted the welfare of the nation over that of the citizens composing it, who indeed worshipped the state. Dictators have justified their totalitarianism by asserting that they have a special insight into the general will; Hitler's celebrated "intuition" is an example. The police state can be justified on the grounds that it is doing its subjects a favor by "forcing them to be free."<sup>2</sup>

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Apparently Robespierre truly believed that he could translate the ideals of Rousseau's *Social Contract* into a practical political program. Like Rousseau, he had faith in the natural goodness of humanity, in "the laws engraved upon the hearts of men." He was sure that he knew the general will, and that the general will demanded a Republic of Virtue. If Frenchmen would not be free and virtuous voluntarily, then, as Rousseau had recommended, they would be "forced to be free."<sup>3</sup>

## **Nietzsche:**

### **Morality**

In Daybreak Nietzsche begins his "Campaign against Morality".[38] He calls himself an "immoralist" and harshly criticizes the prominent moral schemes of his day: Christianity, Kantianism, and Utilitarianism. However, Nietzsche did not want to destroy morality, but rather to initiate a re-evaluation of the values of the Judeo-Christian world.[citation needed] He indicates his desire to bring about a new, more naturalistic source of value in the vital impulses of life itself.[citation needed]

In both these works, Nietzsche's genealogical account of the development of master-slave morality occupies a central place. Nietzsche presents master-morality as the original system of morality — perhaps best associated with Homeric Greece. Here, value arises as a contrast between good and bad, or between 'life-affirming' and 'life-denying': wealth, strength, health, and power (the sort of traits found in an Homeric hero) count as good; while bad is associated with the poor, weak, sick, and pathetic (the sort of traits conventionally associated with slaves in ancient times).

Slave-morality, in contrast, comes about as a reaction to master-morality. Nietzsche associates slave-morality with the Jewish and Christian traditions. Here, value emerges from the contrast between good and evil: good being associated with charity, piety, restraint, meekness, and subservience; evil seen in the cruel, selfish, wealthy, indulgent, and aggressive. Nietzsche sees slave-morality as an ingenious ploy among the slaves and the weak (such as the Jews and Christians dominated by Rome) to overturn the values of their masters and to gain power for themselves: justifying their situation, and at the same time fixing the broader society into a slave-like life.

Nietzsche sees the slave-morality as a social illness that has overtaken Europe — a derivative and resentful value which can only work by condemning others as evil. In Nietzsche's eyes, Christianity exists in a hypocritical state wherein people preach love and kindness but find their joy in condemning and punishing others for pursuing those ends which the slave-morality does not allow them to act upon publicly. Nietzsche calls for the strong in the world to break their self-imposed chains and assert their own power, health, and vitality upon the world.[39]

### **The Death of God, Nihilism**

The statement "God is dead," occurring in several of Nietzsche's works (notably in *The Gay Science*), has become one of his best-known remarks. On the basis of this remark, most commentators[40] regard Nietzsche as an atheist; others (such as Kaufmann) suggest that this statement reflects a more subtle understanding of divinity. In Nietzsche's view, recent developments in modern science and the increasing secularization of European society had effectively 'killed' the Christian God, who had served as the basis for meaning and value in the West for more than a thousand years.

Nietzsche claimed the 'death' of God would eventually lead to the loss of any universal perspective on things, and along with it any coherent sense of objective truth.[41] Instead we would retain only our own multiple, diverse, and fluid perspectives. This view has acquired the name "perspectivism".

Alternatively, the death of God may lead beyond bare perspectivism to outright nihilism, the belief that nothing has any importance and that life lacks purpose. As Heidegger put the problem, "If God as the suprasensory ground and goal of all reality is dead, if the suprasensory world of the Ideas has suffered the loss of its obligatory and above it its

vitalizing and upbuilding power, then nothing more remains to which man can cling and by which he can orient himself." [42] Developing this idea, Nietzsche wrote *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, therein introducing the concept of a value-creating Übermensch. According to Lampert, "the death of God must be followed by a long twilight of piety and nihilism (II. 19; III. 8). [...] Zarathustra's gift of the superman is given to a mankind not aware of the problem to which the superman is the solution." [

### **Will to power**

An important element of Nietzsche's philosophical outlook is the "will to power" (der Wille zur Macht), which provides a basis for understanding motivation in human behavior. But this concept may have wider application, as Nietzsche, in a number of places, also suggests that the will to power is a more important element than pressure for adaptation or survival. [44] In its later forms Nietzsche's concept of the will to power applies to all living things, suggesting that adaptation and the struggle to survive is a secondary drive in the evolution of animals, less important than the desire to expand one's power. Nietzsche eventually took this concept further still, and transformed the idea of matter as centers of force into matter as centers of will to power. Nietzsche wanted to dispense with the theory of matter, which he viewed as a relic of the metaphysics of substance. [45] One study of Nietzsche defines his fully-developed concept of the will to power as "the element from which derive both the quantitative difference of related forces and the quality that devolves into each force in this relation" revealing the will to power as "the principle of the synthesis of forces." [46]

Nietzsche's notion of the will to power can also be viewed as a response to Schopenhauer's "will to live." Writing a generation before Nietzsche, Schopenhauer had regarded the entire universe and everything in it as driven by a primordial will to live, thus resulting in all creatures' desire to avoid death and to procreate. Nietzsche, however, challenges Schopenhauer's account and suggests that people and animals really want power; living in itself appears only as a subsidiary aim — something necessary to promote one's power. In defense of his view, Nietzsche appeals to many instances in which people and animals willingly risk their lives in order to promote their power, most notably in instances like competitive fighting and warfare. Once again, Nietzsche seems to take part of his inspiration from the ancient Homeric Greek texts he knew well: Greek heroes and aristocrats or "masters" did not desire mere living (they often died quite young and risked their lives in battle) but wanted power, glory, and greatness. In this regard he often mentions the common Greek theme of agon or contest.

In addition to Schopenhauer's psychological views, Nietzsche contrasts his notion of the will to power with many of the other most popular psychological views of his day, such as utilitarianism, which claims that all people fundamentally want to be happy (Nietzsche responds that only the Englishman wants that), and Platonism, which claims that people ultimately want to achieve unity with the good or in Christian neo-Platonism, with God. In each case, Nietzsche argues that the "will to power" provides a more useful and general explanation of human behavior.

### **Übermensch**

Another concept important to an understanding of Nietzsche's thought is the Übermensch (variously translated – often without regard to the gender-neutrality of the German word Mensch, which means "human being" – as superman, superhuman, or overman). While interpretations of Nietzsche's overman vary wildly, here are a few of his quotes from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

I teach you the overman. Man is something that shall be overcome. What have you done to overcome him? [...] All beings so far have created something beyond themselves; and do you want to be the ebb of this great flood, and even go back to the beasts rather than overcome man? What is ape to man? A laughing stock or painful embarrassment. And man shall be that to overman: a laughing stock or painful embarrassment. You have made your way from worm to man, and much in you is still worm. Once you were apes, and even now, too, man is more ape than any ape...The overman is the meaning of the earth. Let your will say: the overman shall be the meaning of the earth...Man is a rope, tied between beast and overman--a rope over an abyss...what is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end..."

### **Eternal return**

Nietzsche's view on eternal return is similar to that of Hume: "the idea that an eternal recurrence of blind, meaningless variation—chaotic, pointless shuffling of matter and law—would inevitably spew up worlds whose evolution through time would yield the apparently meaningful stories of our lives. This idea of eternal recurrence became a cornerstone of his nihilism, and thus part of the foundation of what became existentialism." [47] Nietzsche was so impressed by this idea, that he at first thought he had discovered a new scientific proof of the greatest importance. He gradually backed off of this view, and in later works referred to it as a thought-experiment. [48]

### **Darwin**

#### **Political interpretations**

Darwin's theories and writings, combined with Gregor Mendel's genetics (the "modern synthesis"), form the basis of all modern biology.[144] However, Darwin's fame and popularity led to his name being associated with ideas and movements which at times had only an indirect relation to his writings, and sometimes went directly against his express comments.

#### **Eugenics**

Darwin was interested by his half-cousin Francis Galton's argument, introduced in 1865, that statistical analysis of heredity showed that moral and mental human traits could be inherited, and principles of animal breeding could apply to humans. In *The Descent of Man* Darwin noted that aiding the weak to survive and have families could lose the benefits of natural selection, but cautioned that withholding such aid would endanger the instinct of sympathy, "the noblest part of our nature", and factors such as education could be more important. When Galton suggested that publishing research could encourage intermarriage within a "caste" of "those who are naturally gifted", Darwin foresaw practical difficulties, and thought it "the sole feasible, yet I fear utopian, plan of procedure in improving the human race", preferring to simply publicise the importance of inheritance and leave decisions to individuals.[145]

Galton named the field of study Eugenics in 1883, after Darwin's death, and developed biometrics. Eugenics movements were widespread at a time when Darwin's natural selection was eclipsed by Mendelian genetics, and in some countries including the United States, compulsory sterilisation laws were imposed. Following the use of Eugenics in Nazi Germany it has been largely abandoned throughout the world.[V]

## Social Darwinism

Taking descriptive ideas as moral and social justification creates the ethical is-ought problem. When Thomas Malthus argued that population growth beyond resources was ordained by God to get humans to work productively and show restraint in getting families, this was used in the 1830s to justify workhouses and laissez-faire economics.[146] Evolution was seen as having social implications, and Herbert Spencer's 1851 book *Social Statics* based ideas of human freedom and individual liberties on his Lamarckian evolutionary theory.[147]

Darwin's theory of evolution was a matter of explanation. He thought it "absurd to talk of one animal being higher than another" and saw evolution as having no goal, but soon after the *Origin* was published in 1859 critics derided his description of a struggle for existence as a Malthusian justification for the English industrial capitalism of the time. The term Darwinism was used for the evolutionary ideas of others, including Spencer's "survival of the fittest" as free-market progress, and Ernst Haeckel's racist ideas of human development. Darwin did not share the racism common at that time. He was strongly against slavery, against "ranking the so-called races of man as distinct species", and against ill-treatment of native people.[148][VI]

Writers used natural selection to argue for various, often contradictory, ideologies such as laissez-faire dog-eat dog capitalism, racism, warfare, colonialism and imperialism. However, Darwin's holistic view of nature included "dependence of one being on another", thus pacifists, socialists, liberal social reformers and anarchists such as Prince Peter Kropotkin stressed the value of co-operation over struggle within a species.[149] Darwin himself insisted that social policy should not simply be guided by concepts of struggle and selection in nature.[150]

The term "Social Darwinism" was used infrequently from around the 1890s, but became popular as a derogatory term in the 1940s when used by Richard Hofstadter to attack the laissez-faire conservatism of those like William Graham Sumner who opposed reform and socialism. Since then it has been used as a term of abuse by those opposed to what they think are the moral consequences of evolution.[151][146]

## Freud

Freud has been influential in two related but distinct ways: He simultaneously developed a theory of how the human mind is organized and operates internally, and a theory of how human behavior both conditions and results from this particular theoretical understanding. This led him to favor certain clinical techniques for trying to help cure psychopathology. He theorized that personality is developed by the person's childhood experiences.

Perhaps the most significant contribution Freud made to Western thought were his arguments concerning the importance of the unconscious mind in understanding conscious thought and behavior. Freud's advance was not to uncover the unconscious but to devise a method for systematically studying it.

Freud called dreams the "royal road to the unconscious". This meant that dreams illustrate the "logic" of the unconscious mind. Freud developed his first topology of the psyche in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) in which he proposed that the unconscious exists and described a method for gaining access to it. The preconscious was described as a layer between conscious and unconscious thought; its contents could be accessed with a little effort.

One key factor in the operation of the unconscious is "repression". Freud believed that many people "repress" painful memories deep into their unconscious mind. Although Freud later attempted to find patterns of repression among his patients in order to derive a general model of the mind, he also observed that repression varies among individual patients. Freud also argued that the act of repression did not take place within a person's consciousness. Thus, people are unaware of the fact that they have buried memories or traumatic experiences.

Later, Freud distinguished between three concepts of the unconscious: *the descriptive unconscious*, *the dynamic unconscious*, and *the system unconscious*. The descriptive unconscious referred to all those features of mental life of which people are not subjectively aware. The dynamic unconscious, a more specific construct, referred to mental processes and contents that are defensively removed from consciousness as a result of conflicting attitudes. The system unconscious denoted the idea that when mental processes are repressed, they become organized by principles different from those of the conscious mind, such as condensation and displacement. Eventually, Freud abandoned the idea of the system unconscious, replacing it with the concept of the ego, super-ego, and id. Throughout his career, however, he retained the descriptive and dynamic conceptions of the unconscious.

### **Id, ego, and super-ego**

In his later work, Freud proposed that the human psyche could be divided into three parts: ego, super-ego, and id. Freud discussed this model in the 1920 essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and fully elaborated upon it in *The Ego and the Id* (1923), in which he developed it as an alternative to his previous topographic schema (i.e., conscious, unconscious, and preconscious). The id is the impulsive, child-like portion of the psyche that operates on the "pleasure principle" and only takes into account what it wants and disregards all consequences.

The term ego entered the English language in the late 18th century; Benjamin Franklin (1706 - 1790) described the game of chess as a way to "...keep the mind fit and the ego in check"..

The super-ego is the moral component of the psyche, which takes into account no special circumstances in which the morally right thing may not be right for a given situation. The rational

## The Mind of the Nazis

Part A. The Nazis twisted the intellectual tradition of the West to suit their propaganda. Their assumed link with recognized authorities of the past gave them credibility. Read the following quotes from major Nazi leaders. Beside each one indicate which of the following individual's influence is "reflected" in the statement: Machiavelli, Robespierre, Bismarck, Darwin, Nietzsche, Freud, and Einstein.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. "Gods and beasts, that is what our world is made of."  
—Adolf Hitler
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. "And in the last analysis, success is what matters."  
—Adolf Hitler
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. "In my will it will one day be written that nothing is to be engraved on my tombstone but 'Adolf Hitler.' I shall create my own title for myself in my name itself."  
—Adolf Hitler
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. "What luck for the rulers that men do not think."  
—Adolf Hitler
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. "Afterwards, you rue the fact that you've been so kind."  
—Adolf Hitler  
(3 days before his death)
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. "We should go down in history as the greatest statesmen of all time or the greatest criminals."  
—Joseph Goebbels
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. "What matters is not so much what we believe, only that we believe."  
—Joseph Goebbels
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. "It is not propaganda's task to be intelligent, its task is to lead to success."  
—Joseph Goebbels
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. "Put pressure on your adversary with ice cold determination. Probe him, search out his weak spot, deliberately and calculatingly sharpen the spear, hurl it with careful aim, where the enemy is naked and vulnerable, and then, perhaps say with a friendly smile, 'Sorry, neighbor, I can't help it!'"  
—Joseph Goebbels
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. "We must be decent, honest, loyal, and comradely to members of our own blood and to no one else. Whether the other peoples live in comfort or perish in hunger interests me only in so far as we need slaves for our culture . . . We Germans, who are the only people in the world to have a decent attitude toward animals, will also adopt a decent attitude to these human animals, but it is a crime against our blood to worry about them and bring them ideals."  
—Heinrich Himmler
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. "It is the curse of the great that they have to step over corpses to create new life."  
—Heinrich Himmler

- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. "The idea of National Socialism is an accomplishment of the human soul that ranks with the Parthenon, the Sistine Madonna, and the Ninth Symphony of Beethoven."  
—Alfred Rosenberg
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. "Hitler is simply pure reason incarnate."  
—Rudolf Hoess
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. "I am what I have always been—the last Renaissance man, if I may be allowed to say so."  
—Hermann Goering
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. "Guns will make us powerful; butter will only make us fat."  
—Hermann Goering
- \_\_\_\_\_ 16. "When I hear anyone talk of culture, I reach for my revolver."  
—Hermann Goering
- \_\_\_\_\_ 17. "If people say that here and there someone has been taken away and maltreated, then I can only reply, 'You can't make an omelet without breaking eggs.'"  
—Hermann Goering
- \_\_\_\_\_ 18. "Brutality is respected. The people need wholesome fear. They want to fear something. They want someone to frighten them and make them shudderingly submissive. Why babble about brutality and get indignant about tortures? The masses want them. They need them. They need something that will give them a thrill of horror."  
—Ernst Roehm
- \_\_\_\_\_ 19. "I am completely normal. Even when I was carrying out the task of extermination, I led a normal family life and so on."  
—Rudolf Hoess  
(Commandant of  
Auschwitz)
- \_\_\_\_\_ 20. "Believe me, it wasn't always a pleasure to see those mountains of corpses and to smell the perpetual burning."  
—Rudolf Hoess
- \_\_\_\_\_ 21. "I was an expert on migration problems."  
—Adolf Eichmann
- \_\_\_\_\_ 22. "I have regret and condemnation for the extermination of the Jewish people, which was ordered by the German rulers, but I myself could not have done anything to prevent it. I was a tool in the hands of the strong and the powerful and the hands of fate itself."  
—Adolf Eichmann<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jonathon Green, ed., *The Book of Political Quotes* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982), 27-235 passim.