

## Modernity on Endless Trial

*Leszek Kolakowski*

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**Leszek Kolakowski : Modernity on Endless Trial** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Modernity on Endless Trial:

58 of 61 people found the following review helpful. meditations on the struggle between tradition and progress By Ian K. Hughes Twenty-four essays by philosopher Leszek Kolakowski ( Univ of Chicago / Oxford ) comprise the totality of "MODERNITY ON ENDLESS TRIAL", a volume divided into 4 parts: I. "On Modernity, Barbarity and Intellectuals" II. "On the Dilemmas of the Christian Legacy" III. "On Liberals, Revolutionaries and Utopians" IV. "On Scientific Theories" The book in its entirety is an examination of the ceaseless argumentation among opposing ideas

that has propelled and sustained that part of Western Tradition expressed in "the pluralist society". In his brief forward he submits his essays as-"semi-philosophical sermons in which...to point out a number of unpleasant and insoluble dilemmas that loom up every time we attempt to be perfectly consistent when we think about our culture, our politics and our religious life...these essays are not edifying. They are rather appeals for moderation in consistency..."True to form, Kolakowski consistently refuses the knife-point threat of "either/or" ultimatums, exploring the mutually antagonistic yet symbiotic struggle between tradition and progress. Select quotations from his essays will not do the author justice but may perhaps give some evidence of his train of thought:"It would be silly, of course, to be either 'for' or 'against' modernity tout court, not only because it is pointless to try to stop the development of technology, science and economic rationality, but because both modernity and antimodernity may be expressed in barbarous and antihuman terms". ( MODERNITY ON ENDLESS TRIAL ) "Ultimately we may say the Europe's cultural identity is reinforced by her refusal to accept any kind of closed, finite definition and thus she can only affirm her identity in uncertainty and anxiety... The choice between total perfection and total self-destruction is not ours; cares without end, incompleteness without end, these are our lot. Thus, in the doubt which Europe entertains about herself, European culture can find its spiritual equilibrium and the justification for its pretensions to universality"( LOOKING FOR THE BARBARIANS ) "It is difficult to protect democracy by democratic means; difficult, but feasible on condition that democracy has the resolute will to defend itself. Tolerance is not necessarily indifference; the pluralist order is obviously founded on the recognition of particular values, and is not 'value free' or neutral; also, the indifference of the law presupposes no neutrality of values; it is anchored in a social philosophy. In order to defend itself, the pluralist order should voice those values ceaselessly and loudly. There is nothing astonishing or outrageous about the fact that within the pluralist society, the defenders and enemies of its basic principles are not treated with exactly the same indifference; it is quite possible to treat them differently without harming citizens' rights or the principle of tolerance. A pluralism that acquired from its own norms carelessness about its existence and made it a virtue would condemn itself to death."( THE SELF-POISONING OF THE OPEN SOCIETY ) "I admit to speak in defense of the conservative spirit. However, it is a conditional conservative spirit, conscious not only of its own necessity but also the necessity of the spirit which opposes it. As a result, it can see that tension between rigidity and structure and the forces of change between tradition and criticism, is a condition of human life- a thing its enemies are seldom prepared to admit...Culture, when it loses its sacred sense, loses all sense. With the disappearance of the sacred, which imposed limits to the perfection which could be attained by the profane, arises one of the most dangerous illusions of our civilization- the illusion that there are no limits to the changes that human life can undergo, that society is 'in principle' an endlessly flexible thing, and that to deny this flexibility and this perfectibility is to deny man's total autonomy and thus to deny man himself... If it is true that in order to make society more tolerable, we must believe it can be improved, it is also true that there must always be people who think of the price paid for every step of what we call progress. The order of the sacred is also a sensitivity to evil- the only system of reference that allows us to contemplate that price and forces us to ask whether it is exorbitant."( THE REVENGE OF THE SACRED IN SECULAR CULTURE ) "The general conclusion of these remarks might sound somewhat banal but, not unlike many banalities, worth pondering. It says that the idea of human fraternity is disastrous as a political program but is indispensable as a guiding sign... It is likely that two kinds of mentality- the skeptical and the utopian- will survive separately, in unavoidable conflict. And we need their shaky coexistence; both of them are important to our cultural survival. The victory of utopian dreams would lead us to a totalitarian nightmare and the utter downfall of civilization, whereas the unchallenged domination of the skeptical spirit would condemn us to a hopeless stagnation, to an immobility that a slight accident could easily convert into catastrophic chaos. Ultimately, we have to live between two irreconcilable claims, each of them having its cultural justification.( THE DEATH OF UTOPIA RECONSIDERED ) In this collection of essays Leszek Kolakowski displays not only intellectual acumen but a certain level of humility expressed in clear, jargon-free thought. And, as a "bonus", the justifiably serious tone of the book is given relief in a couple of parody pieces, which reveal the author's sense of dry humor. As a contrast to the ( variously valuable ) examples of thinkers along more partisan "conservative/progressive" lines, Kolakowski acts as a kind of "referee", momentarily separating the "combatants" in a contest that, one perceives, were it to cease, no society worth living in would exist. 11 of 12 people found the following review helpful. Excellent introduction By farinel This wide ranging collection of essays is an introduction to a major XXth century thinker. Utterly lucid, he draws on philosophy, theology, and a deep knowledge of modern history to trace the seeds of "modernity" and their fruits, good and bad. His encyclopedic knowledge of both Christian thought and Marxism gives him a unique position to examine both how we got to where we are and to see the flaws in most unexamined assumptions. Unfortunately, they broke the mold. Will we ever see his like again? He must be talking to Isaiah Berlin in the Elysian Fields and I'd love to overhear it. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars By Customer Absolutely brilliant.. with that funny edge that only Leszek has.. Much gratitude..

Leszek Kolakowski delves into some of the most intellectually vigorous questions of our time in this remarkable collection of essays garnished with his characteristic wit. Ten of the essays have never appeared before in

English."Exemplary. . . . It should be celebrated." Arthur C. Danto, New York Times Book Review "This book . . . express[es] Kolakowski's thought on God, man, reason, history, moral truth and original sin, prompted by observation of the dramatic struggle among Christianity, the Enlightenment and modern totalitarianism. It is a wonderful collection of topics." Thomas Nagel, Times Literary Supplement "No better antidote to bumper-sticker thinking exists than this collection of 24 'appeals for moderation in consistency,' and never has such an antidote been needed more than it is now." Joseph Coates, Chicago Tribune "Whether learned or humorous, these essays offer gems in prose of diamond hardness, precision, and brilliance." Thomas D'Evelyn, The Christian Science Monitor A "Notable Books of the Year 1991" selection, New York Times Book Review a "Noted with Pleasure" selection, New York Times Book Review a "Summer Reading 1991" selection, New York Times Book Review a "Books of the Year" selection, The Times.

From Publishers Weekly Kolakowski ( The Presence of Myth ) urges caution in embracing the modern. For example, in Marxism, presumed by many to be a scientific, modernist creed, he sees "the same yearning after the archaic community" that drove Nazism. These stimulating, deeply learned essays by a University of Chicago philosopher grapple with the pitfalls of both ideological and religious systems, and the capacity of the open society to destroy itself. "Conservative," "liberal" and "socialist" are no longer mutually exclusive political positions, argues Kolakowski. Perceiving an innate human need for religion, he ponders: "To reject the sacred is also to reject the idea of evil." Along with essays on the exile as outsider, self-deceptions of intellectuals and the Christian roots of modern humanism, there are droll spoofs of philosophy ("The General Theory of Not-Gardening") and of historical scholarship ("Emperor Kennedy Legend"). Copyright 1990 Reed Business Information, Inc. From Library Journal These "semiphilosophical sermons" by a University of Chicago social theorist consider topics from markets to myth, the devil to Kantian personhood. Ten of the 24 essays have not appeared previously in English. All are clearly and intelligently written, steeped in continental attitudes but still accessible to readers of a more Anglo-American orientation. Especially notable is Kolakowski's defense of Eurocentrism: he argues that propagating the European ideal of cultural self-criticism affirms the equality of cultures without tolerating intolerance. Thoughtful lay readers and some scholars will find this volume interesting.- Bruce Umbaugh, Univ. of Maryland, College Park Copyright 1990 Reed Business Information, Inc. Language Notes Text: English (translation) Original Language: French, German, Polish