

# **ICARUS FALLEN: THE SEARCH FOR MEANING IN AN UNCERTAIN WORLD**

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November 4, 2023

It is easy today to see that Western civilization has hit the skids. Twenty years ago, when the French political philosopher Chantal Delsol published *Icarus Fallen* (the English translation of a work first published in French in 1996), it was not so clear. The signs were all there, and the truth that the Enlightenment scheme had failed was not obscure. But the obvious conclusion, that we should terminate the experiment, was far from mainstream. What is good about this book is that its analysis is incisive and insightful, and thus its prophecies have proven largely accurate. What is bad about this book is that it too quickly rejects the wisdom of the past, and instead calls for that most fatal of projects, a new anthropology of man.

Delsol has published prolifically, though little in English. Two years ago, in French, she published a book titled *The End of the Christian World*. This occasioned a variety of commentary, mostly on the Right, because Delsol, apparently herself a practicing Catholic, is extremely pessimistic about the future of Christianity. Her basic point in that book is that just as the turn to Christianity in the late Roman Empire was part and parcel of a massive civilizational change—meaning not a political change but a way of seeing the world, a radical shift from paganism to Christianity—so we are also living through such a change. Our change, however, is essentially a reversion, to a new paganism, intolerant of Christianity and its beliefs, but very much having its own required beliefs.

We will return to this pessimism, and to Christianity. But first, of *Icarus Fallen*. The 1990s and early 2000s, in America, felt very different from today. Sure, there were problems, but all were surmountable. America was the world's hegemon, and always would be. Freedom everywhere was on the march, our leaders and philosophers told us; no need to inquire closely what freedom meant. The idea one might question the Enlightenment was crazy—after all, in its very name, given to us in a totally non-propagandistic manner, it showed that it had brought us light and banished darkness. Science was on the verge of curing all diseases. Democracy would soon be universal. What was not to like?

Quite a bit, it turns out. Everything, in fact. Delsol refers to our society as that of “late modernity,” and her work as a “sociology of the mind,” an attempt to analyze the “malaise” that fell over the West in the second half of the twentieth century. She analogizes our position to that of Icarus, had he lived when he fell from the sky, rather than drowned, and then returned to the Labyrinth, to ponder his situation. “He has to go back to normal life after having thought himself capable of attaining the sun, the supreme good.”

Seduced by the lies of the so-called Enlightenment, Western man thought he could transform man and society to achieve a “radiant future,” even perfection. But it was not so, and that Delsol saw this nearly thirty years ago, at the apogee of Western triumphalism, speaks to her insight. Meaning and identity had begun to be stripped from us, a process that has only accelerated in the years since. What results is a narrow, cramped vision of what man can and should be—although Delsol also refers to this as mere slumber, a “waiting for certainties to appear.” Regardless, when Icarus returns, as it were from exile, not only has he failed to reach his goals, but he also does not recognize the world he left behind.

In the first half of the book, Delsol offers cogent analysis. Western man is adrift, because he has lost both his anchors. Religious belief is no longer the wellspring of meaning, the reason for man to live in a way that transcended himself. And when he tried to substitute temporal utopias, those also failed, and so his search for meaning has proved meaningless. Yet he cannot accept that his life has no meaning. Once, given his frames, simple existence stood for something beyond the individual. But existence is no longer such a sign because it has no “exterior referents.” Existence is life, true, but since man defines himself in his quest for meaning, it is a life unmoored and unsatisfying.

For all of the history of the West, a man’s meaning derived from how he navigated the inherent conflicts of life, “between need and scarcity, authority and freedom, good and evil, life and death.” These antimonies were seen as unalterable, part of human nature. But the Enlightenment sold us the idea we could transcend all conflicts, in areas as diverse as religion, politics, and economics, and thereby perfect mankind, in both his external manifestations, and in his internal happiness, through total freedom. This was sleight-of-hand, because conflicts were not really

eliminated, rather they were relativized, and it was false, because neither perfection nor happiness resulted. Yet the vision was most seductive, and man's new meaning became the abolition of the conflicts that had driven all his prior meaning.

However, this is a negative definition of meaning, and a positive definition is needed for the good life. The usual attempt, following Enlightenment doctrine, to solve this problem was to regard freedom as defining the good life. The more freedom, the more good. But this is false; "freedom is nothing but an empty form awaiting content." Without responsibility, there is no meaning, and if this is not recognized, man "destroys himself by mistaking the means for an end." When existence points to nothing outside of self, man becomes obsessed, most of all, with prolonging life. Thus, rejecting religion does not ultimately lead to replacement by new referents, because those referents, of temporal perfection, are mirages and chimeras. Rather, it leads to alienation and nihilism.

What results is a black market in conflicts, where suppressed conflicts reappear in new forms. Relativize religion as a personal choice, and new sects arise. Relativize evil by creating the new category of mere personal "values," and new (more destructive) definitions of evil arise, such as violations of "equality." What we get are "ersatz phenomena" which "express the human condition in a wildly distorted way." Icarus has returned home, but he is lost. And worse, he is disappointed, angry, because what he hoped for has not come to pass.

Delsol then turns to what is downstream of this loss of meaning. We are no longer interested in truth. Fear of falsehood has been replaced with fear of evil; we have "the good without the true." Instead, we fear truth. Objective truth is replaced with pure subjectivity, which is no truth at all. Objective evil exists for moderns, however, and it is any philosophy which claims to embody truth. Nearly all of such philosophies are right-wing; Communism gets a brief mention, but as Delsol recognizes without discussion, claims of truth are, in the modern era, monopolized by the Right. Objective good for moderns, however, does not exist, for that "would naturally entail obligation, and this would necessarily limit individual freedom. Thus, morality has been reduced primarily to the act of identifying evil."

This belief in objective evil necessarily conflicts, though it is not often admitted, with the belief in subjective and relative morality. "Our era is singularly dogmatic, in spite of its slogans of relativism and tolerance. It not only forbids certain opinions but mandates the acceptance of certain ideas." Objective good therefore reappears, in the spontaneous rise of verities no man is allowed to question, such as "human dignity" (meaning, again, the Enlightenment program of emancipation and egalitarianism), "democracy," and "environmentalism." That these "goods" are justified only by individual satisfaction, and are thus free-floating, derived from nothing, and therefore wholly illegitimate, is simply ignored.

Morality has therefore disappeared, or rather, been transmuted into a mere inquiry as to whether an individual is fulfilling himself. This results in complacency, and slavery to what pleases a man. This "legitimizes and recognizes all thoughts, all behavior, and all ways of life—on the condition, of course, that they do not oppose complacency itself. . . . Thus, the highest virtue of our time is open-mindedness." This open-mindedness denies any exterior point of reference; it is emancipation made flesh. And if the good is defined as what pleases, the bad must be what "displeases or terrifies." This is an emotional, not a logical or rational, judgment. (Delsol never mentions it, but the desire for emancipation and egalitarianism is the direct cause of our society's hyperfeminization, including the exaltation of emotion as a basis for making decisions.) Whatever one thinks of this method of determining morality, it cannot form a framework for a society, because by definition it is subjective and individualized. In fact, the man who thinks his morality is generally applicable is dangerous and must be subdued—not by violence, Delsol says, for she wrote long before 2023 when state-endorsed violence against wrongthink and wrongthinkers is common, but by mockery and exclusion from polite society.

Nonetheless, a permissible general morality has emerged in the modern world. Delsol admits that this is somewhat contradictory to her claim that all morality has been relativized and individualized, and she identifies the source of this permissible morality as a type of apostasy, an inversion of the prior morality of the West, which was essentially Christian. (This is apparently the theme she develops in her 2021 book.) Once again, we return to emancipation and egalitarianism as the pillars of the new morality, reinforced with "collective resentment." (Delsol

mentions colonialism, but a better current example is hatred directed at successful whites.)

Finally, in the second half of the book, titled "The Urgent Need for a New Anthropology," we get Delsol's thinking on solutions, along with the deterioration of her book. The end of worldviews, and of aspiration, and the fear of decision-making suggest that we have entered an era of technocratic, as opposed to prudential, governance (not outlined but presumably a reference to the managerial state first identified by James Burnham). Rights are sacralized; the demand for (unearned) dignity replaces the demand for (earned) honor. Both have the aim of personal grandeur, but they are very different, as is the society they produce. Rights expand limitlessly, because they have no limiting principle, and are based in emotion.

Delsol seems to be reaching for the correct, if ancient and obvious. "[H]appiness should really be defined as a balance of opposites: liberty and responsibility, security and risk." But this is the apogee of *Icarus Fallen*, which rapidly falls apart in its second half. The reader's eye twitches as he reads on. "Progress, no longer equated with the exponential development of certain gains, must rather be defined as the continuing perfection of humanity as it continues to reveal itself, and the continuing perfection of humanity as revealed through a constant inquiry into what constitutes happiness." We need a "constant refining of the definition of happiness, grounded in a better anthropology." "[O]nly an unceasing anthropological quest can give us a better chance to discover just which avenue progress should take."

What exactly Delsol means by this, and many similar phrases, is vague, and probably deliberately so. It appears to mean we should reject both religious and politico-ideological bases for meaning, because they both "sacrifice time to immortality"; "they obliterated the present, a process that totalitarianism displays to us in all its abuses." The reader begins to realize that Delsol does not see the Enlightenment as any worse than what came before; she cannot escape the frame that formed her. She is like the proverbial fish who does not know what water is, even if she is the rare fish who claims he knows what water is. She chastises religious belief over and over, instead praising the ideologies of the Enlightenment because "it was with the laudable aim of giving all value to immanence that modern ideologies denied religious eternity and

made heaven come down to earth.” Yes, this promise “turned out to be an even more tangible fraud”—but religion is also a fraud, and “the coercive way generations of sons found themselves bound to common traditions” was a great evil, for after all “so many inherited certainties, institutions, and behavior patterns turn out to be indefensible,” they “transmit ideas that lead nowhere,” “they are but empty suits of armor.”

In any case, life is now fragmented, because man has neither belief in life after death nor the conviction that he can create a type of immortality through changing the world in which he lives. In both cases, man desires a “life-work” that will live after him, whether that work is himself or his society. But death is still the all-pervasive truth. So, naturally, Delsol turns to—AIDS. The reader’s eye twitches more violently. Throughout this book, Delsol talks about AIDS as some kind of special and unique malady, one which supposedly revealed to the West that death is still here. That’s dumb. By 2003, by 1996, and far earlier, it was very clear that all AIDS revealed was that ending stigmatization and suppression of homosexuals was a huge mistake. Yet again and again, Delsol bizarrely refers to AIDS, the “unstoppable epidemic,” the example, for her, par excellence of “irrational exploding within the rational, ancient evils irrupting in the heart of a highly perfected universe.”

The reader begins to realize what the problem with this book is. Delsol cannot shake off the lie she has been indoctrinated with her whole life, that the Enlightenment was a force for good, while everything in the past was a force for bad. She complains that religious belief has been destroyed, but then reflexively chants that we are “convinced, and with good reason, that something has been gained by the venture.” She does not tell us what was gained; we are just to know she is not benighted, as someone would be who uncritically referred to premodern religious belief. We get many mentions of the “tyranny of the clergy,” “the oppression of religion,” and such claptrap. She spouts falsehoods such as “The modern will to re-create man was a reaction against the previous dominant way of thinking, [which was] often an anthem in praise of the status quo.” She rails against a fictitious “essentialism” of the pre-Enlightenment era, which she falsely claims “was at the root of the modern revolt” and was “extreme, grotesque, sometimes fanatical.” She characterizes the pre-Enlightenment approach to life as “ignorance, oppression, and the certainty of death,” and claims “essentialism doomed

itself by programming its mortal enemy." She suggests we instead realize that "the figures of being in the world are at once both structural and flexible." But that last is old wisdom, and as for the rest, her picture of the pre-Enlightenment West is simply a wholesale acceptance of the foolish lying parodies sold us by Enlightenment sophists.

Delsol is a political theorist, so one expects fresh insights about political theory, but she says nothing about politics that would not be approved by our current Regime. "Liberal democracy" is a "miracle," don't you know? "Modern democracy has without question proven its ability to make society more livable than it ever had been before. It has given to its peoples the three benefits that we assume all peoples dream of: peace, personal freedom, and material comfort. The democratic man is a fulfilled man." Having turned democracy, that is, "liberal democracy," into a false god, ascribing to it miracles in reality unconnected to it, she then offers repeated drivel, such as "it is precisely the modesty of its objectives that produces its marvelous results" and that "this unprecedented success is due to democracy's fundamental modesty and to its suspicion of utopias." This "miracle" has "provided heretofore unknown happiness," though it is threatened by corruption, "the media's self-censorship and lies," corporatism, and relativism.

It is at this point that the reader's whole body starts to spasm. If so-called liberal democracy, the apotheosis of Enlightenment poison, is so great, to what should we attribute the previous hundred pages of complaint? Delsol does not say. She does admit that democracy "fundamentally rests on personal liberty," and therefore "by definition fears defined certainties"—the core problem she has just written very many pages about. Reading between the not-very-clear lines, it seems what Delsol means to contrast is liberal democracy against totalitarian ideology. But as Ryszard Legutko pointed out some years ago, modern liberal democracy shares a great deal with Communist ideology; it is not in fact either democratic or liberal. Maybe this was just invisible in the mid-1990s—though it was visible to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in the 1970s. Then Delsol also admits that democracy, in the same way as all political systems, does not have "everlasting durability or stability." "Nothing demonstrates that its perfection will remove us from history." What comes next? Don't ask inconvenient questions, peasant. The topic is just dropped.

Delsol is no better on society's building blocks. We are told that, as a result of the Enlightenment, both men and women saw a move from roles to functions. True enough. Thus, "a fixed society . . . gave way to a fluid society," a "change which sprang from our desire for equality." She mumbles about how the former society was "petrified" and how women were liberated as a result, and in "all sorts of activities have clearly revealed themselves to be as gifted as men." (She does not specify those activities, and the word "clearly" is always a tell that the writer knows what he's saying isn't clear at all.) Then we are told that "the benefits of this social transformation no one would contest." Well, I contest them, and I'm not nobody, even if some people say I am. The reader notes that, repeatedly, Delsol wants to have her cake and eat it too. She goes on at length, dancing around the idea that abandoning roles for functions was a mistake, but won't pull the trigger. She acknowledges that the roles of father and mother are not interchangeable, yet is unable to criticize the idea that women should have a career outside the home. She really wants roles to be much more important than they have become, but won't allow personal liberty to be reduced in any degree, because, ultimately, she is just as in thrall to unlimited personal liberty and emancipation as those she criticizes.

In fact, a great deal of Delsol's reticence about solutions seems to stem from her inability to criticize so-called feminism in any way. Feminism and the destruction it has left in its wake for more than a hundred years is the clearest example of the problems Delsol identifies in the first half of her book, yet she offers insane claims such as that because women were considered "useless servants," they were "eager to enter the world of production." This version of Betty Friedan's crazy pills just annoys the reader. Moreover, much of her criticism (more and more limited, as the book progresses) of modernity betrays a feminine, emotive approach to society. "Are we still worthy of the height of our time, when there is ethnic cleansing in the heart of Europe, agony in Africa, and fourth-world misery in our own streets?" As we've seen in recent weeks, a lot more ethnic cleansing in the heart of Europe is in fact highly desirable, and the "fourth-world misery" will then depart along with those who brought it. But that's not agreeable, and so it is anathema to those who have embraced feminized decision-making.

The rest of the book is, therefore, rather a mess. We get criticism of Islam, without the word “Islam” ever once being mentioned. We get demands for the West to never turn back to religion, traditional religion, because its religions (that is, Christianity) “impose reductionist moral codes” and are “oppressive,” “petrified in ancient and seemingly meaningless moral, doctrinal, and hierarchical structures.” What exactly we should do instead seems to be to “try to imagine the conditions for a non-oppressive religion.” Religions need instead to try “proposing beliefs and works adapted to the times,” “in which only the essence of dogmas would be retained.” We need “new spiritual journeys,” where man understands his existence cannot be perfected, in this life or the next, and that limits are part of the nature of man. We need “a different outlook and new concepts.” None of this babble is worth anything.

And, finally, we turn back to Icarus. Now that we are “disabused of the concept of utopia, can we still have hope?” Sure—if we “first grasp the depth of [our] previous errors and redefine the meaning of the struggle.” Our hope “consists of allowing what is most desirable in humanity to flourish.” What this means is again opaque, but seems primarily to mean Delsol cherry-picking what she likes about today, ascribing it falsely to modernity and the Enlightenment (she does not seem to know what “rule of law” is, for example, or anything about its history). And we must be sure to reject traditional religion (Christianity, that is to say); doing so is the most important thing. Traditional religion is “pure vanity.” “We will no longer let any orthodoxy define our limits from atop an uninhabited realm.” Instead, our “new anthropology will have experience alone as its starting point.” “We will learn about ourselves by identifying what makes us unhappy.” “Every political action will have to be based on a reflection upon happiness and its conditions.”

What to do? “We wish only to try to show that the idea of Progress is due for revision.” Heaven forbid we abandon the idea of Enlightenment-based Progress. “Certain of our achievements—and democracy probably constitutes the best example—seem so perfect that no change could possibly improve them.” The only problem is that “progress has not brought the happiness for which we had hoped.” We certainly shouldn’t question progress; we only need to figure out how to course-correct to get more happiness. “History has not kept its word”—but we can force it to.

Thus, we ultimately descend to a version of the execrable Yuval Noah Harari's scribblings, but with bigger words. Some of this can be explained by the years in which she wrote. The feel of this book is of a dead time, when it was still possible to believe the West was on track, and it was impossible to call for a wholesale destruction of what the West had become. Now, it is true that in the past twenty-five years, Delsol seems to have changed her mind somewhat. She bewails the re-paganization of the West, the rebirth of Moloch, the inevitable consequence of man's search for meaning being filtered through the premises of the Left. What is surprising is that Delsol, or anyone, is surprised. And Delsol appears to still reject any reliance on the wisdom of the past to form the future.

Maybe the metaphor of Icarus ultimately confuses, rather than clarifies. Maybe Icarus, like any individual man who fails to reach his goals and crashes lower than he began, doesn't need a new anthropology at all. Maybe he does need a new thing for a new day, instead of a mere return to the start of the cycle, but that new thing should be based on the wisdom of the past, not on some supposed new insights about his nature. Part of that wisdom is now, for him and for us, our failures. We should reject what led us to disaster, not seek some synthesis. That's the place to start, and it's not that hard—or it won't be, once the monstrosity into which we have transmuted our patrimony itself falls, or is cast down, from the sky and drowns, making us free again to seek the good and the true.