

The Affirmation of Life: from Chaos to Self-Creation*

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The article is concerned with the process of self-creation or humanisation as it is conceived by Paul Valadier. The latter is himself indebted to Nietzsche's idea of self-creation. Such an idea of humanisation resists dominant notions of becoming as spontaneous, pre-given or pre-determined. The author maintains that the say-yes to the body requires a minimum desire for life, i.e. a creative will that is strong enough to accept reality in its totality. She first reconstructs the process of self-creation, then explains why and how such humanisation is thwarted in our present contexts, and finally considers the ways in which Christianity can respond to the weakness of the will.

Introduction

Under the powerful influence of naturalism, some sort of Rousseauism, and romantic materialism, it may be tempting to believe in the spontaneous acquisition of individualities or personalities, by just responding to emotions, instincts, or the body. Such a belief, argues Paul Valadier (1933), a Nietzsche scholar, French Jesuit, philosopher and theologian, is based on a flawed understanding of the human (body), and prevents the humanisation of humans. Here I examine his conception of humanisation that also takes into account the specific predicament of our contemporary Western contexts. The French thinker is indebted to Nietzsche's idea of self-creation as starting with the acquiescence to the body. This say-yes to the body presumes a minimum desire for life, that is, for one's humanity in its totality. Contrarily to what it may seem, this desire for life and acceptance of one's humanity is not simply, necessarily and constantly present. Instead, it is the fruit of a continuous, painful education, in the broad sense of the term. It is this very desire for life that Valadier sees to be missing in our contemporary Western contexts that tend to be dominated

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by nihilism, that is, by a will too ill to recognise life in all its dimensions and contradictions, including ageing, suffering, illness, evil, and death. It is too weak to accept alterity.

I believe that Valadier's thinking reveals refreshing conceptions of the affirmation of the body, of life, and of values, which can appeal to both Christians and non-Christians. Christianity, according to him, has the potential to arouse the appetite to live if the Church takes the Nietzschean critique seriously. Valadier, whose interpretation of Nietzsche differs from most dominant ones, agrees with Nietzsche's criticism the anthropocentrism of Christianity, as manifested in its historically significant versions. Anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism, indeed, fail to recognise the luxuriance of the real and the otherness of the divine. However, he rejects Nietzsche's rationalistic analysis of the origin of Christian values and his biological explanation of the origin of the human that begs the existential question. Christianity, on the other hand, does announce the gratuity of the origin of human life, God being Life itself. The French philosopher retains Nietzsche's say-yes to life, his benediction of life, his openness to the reception of the divine, but does not think that the aristocratic, rigorous atheism that is open to the divine can be maintained by the majority without turning into the belief in unbelief. In what now follows, I will reconstruct the process of self-creation; explain very briefly why and how such humanisation is thwarted in our present contexts; and finally sketchily consider the ways in which Christianity can respond to nihilism.

1. The transformation of chaos

Valadier agrees with Nietzsche that to create ourselves, or to be superior to what we are, is our *nature*. The end of humans is to become masters of the chaos in themselves, to give it form. Chaos is not used in the romantic and nihilistic sense of the term, nor does it have a static meaning. However, it does express confusion and disorder, and can be best compared with a labyrinth¹. Reality is such a labyrinth, by excess rather than by lack of form, while chaos is in every human being from the very beginning of every human life. The insight into the need for, and possibility of, continuous transformation is of course not peculiar to Nietzsche, but is also very Christian. Nietzsche's metamorphosis of the will has its parallel in Christianity with respect to Christian conversion. Such perspectives run

¹ P. Valadier, *Nietzsche et la Critique du Christianisme*, Éd. du Cerf, Paris 1974, p. 571.

counter to naturalistic theories of the human and of morality; the latter rest on what Valadier perceives as dangerous and naïve anthropologies that presume the innocence of the human, thereby trivialising the existence of evil. But they also implicitly deny a particular greatness of humans, which lies in their being invited to follow up the initial act of gratuitous creation, that is, to be like their Creator (*sicut dei*).

Valadier discerns two elements in Nietzsche's account of self-creation. Firstly, the individual has to desire his/her own humanity, that is, to accept becoming, the errors of both senses and reason, and death itself. The say-yes to this chaos does not entail passivity or fatalism, but the willingness to be more than chaos, to surpass oneself. This makes the second element necessary, namely, the end, ideal or finality in relation to which he/she can shape these experienced contradictions and reach an internal unity. By acquiescing to their bodies, individuals accept to see the totality of the humanity that they carry, including its chaos, and, as Valadier notes, its morbidities. Even the Word of God, he recalls, addresses itself to the human in its totality. The recognition of the overabundance of reality, both inside and outside oneself, is not sufficient. Finality it does need to provide the form that is inherent to all creations. This is what a value does. Hence, a value has to allow us to live and humanise ourselves. In this sense, a value is neither just the result of taste and preferences nor an imposed ideal that is independent of the individualities of persons.

These two elements cannot be separated, and in fact they are the two sides of the same coin, if we properly understand the acquiescence to the body. The acquiescence to the body can in principle provide us with the necessary finality, if self-creation or the individual desire for life is not detached from the human community. Valadier recalls the tautological truth that human bodies are born out of other human bodies; bodies, by definition, mediate. The acquiescence to the body therefore takes place not in a vacuum, but within a social complex or society that is itself constituted and maintained by particular ethos (plural), that is, embodied conceptions of justice, goodness, and beauty. This means that, by acquiescing to one's body, one also acquiesces to the relationships that are mediated by bodies, and by acquiescing to these relationships, one absorbs in a way the values that constitute these relationships. Valadier gives the example of the relation between child and parent. This relationship, which he calls *strong* or symbolic because it involves the heteronomy of the parent, confirms the good of life; it is a kind of language that transmits to the child the desire to live. The child is made to feel that it is good to be, and that it is good and beautiful to create one's humanity.

2. Contemporary defeatisms

From the above, it is quite clear that the will or desire to create one's own humanity neither arises spontaneously nor is constantly present, but instead needs to be continuously fed. The will is indeed not *neutral*: it has to be formed in such a way that it may desire life and correspondingly be strong enough to commit to a laborious process of humanisation. In Valadier's works, the will is used interchangeably with desire. The weak will is therefore not a neurological defect but a moral while *moral* is nothing else than human or existential. Similarly, the strong will is not one that strives after power or dominion. On the contrary, it is the weak will that has recourse to reifying ideals to simplify plural reality to something that it can (literally) grasp. Hence, authoritarianism, be it moral, political, theological or scientific, stems from the weakness of the will². The indisputable truth, objective and incontestable, that it propounds stems from a desire that is contrary to that for overabundant life. The weak will or nihilism characterises our present age; it is what Valadier considers to be the greatest ill of our epoch³. Its symptoms are the widespread indifference, pessimism, despair, and doubt that he perceives in our contemporary European contexts.

In agreement with Nietzsche, Valadier defines nihilism as an *illness of the will*: the will is incapable of bearing *chaotic reality* (including the human), and refuses the process of self-creation. The sign of the weak will or of nihilism is not that «nothing has meaning, that everything is carried by a *flux of nothingness*»⁴. People still find different spheres of life *meaningful*. But, they are incapable of *engaging* themselves, to say yes to them. Such a commitment is of course not blind and definitive, the metamorphosis of the will being continuous. In order to prevent values from becoming external unities that cover naught, the person has to constantly ask him/herself: what does the will precisely desire in what it wills⁵? The weak will, being too weak, is incapable of such continuous assessment and tends to content itself with immediate experiences or with «unities imposed from outside to give itself a unity that it has lost or cannot reach by its own forces»⁶. Hence,

² P. Valadier, *Inévitable Morale*, du Seuil, Paris 1990, p. 57.

³ P. Valadier, *L'Église en Procès. Catholicisme et Société Moderne*, Calmann-Lévy, Paris 1987, p. 134.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁵ P. Valadier, *L'Anarchie des Valeurs*, "Cultura: International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology", 5 (2006), p. 96.

⁶ P. Valadier, *Lecture croyante de la culture et de la vie du jeune dans le cadre d'une école catholique*, Conference "La Mission d'Eduquer: Témoigner d'un Trésor Caché" (European Committee for Catholic Education, Rome 2001).

as Valadier says, the «adventure of love [turns into] temporary and repeated trials... and religious pilgrimage into butterflying». According to him, it is the domination of the defeatist “what for” (“what is the point of...”) that promotes «the quest of immediate satisfaction, the only thing that is credible and supposedly non-deceiving»⁷.

Though the *death of God*, that is, the collapse of the theistic order, including pre-given meanings, does not necessarily lead to such a continuous state of unrest and disarray, the anarchy of values does disorientate individuals. The condition of unordered values doesn't need to be a problem, since the strong will can re-order them in and through the process of self-creation, which starts with the acquiescence to the body that is related to other bodies; and, as I said above, the will (or desire for life) is strong enough if it has been constituted in and through values carried by these relationships. The strong, creative will is capable of continuous self-assessment, and hence of discernment regarding humanising (high) and dehumanising (low) values. Nihilism is therefore reinforced by isolating wills, or by weakening, discrediting, and even eliminating the channels through which they are structured. The weakness of the will in turn makes it difficult for individuals to engage themselves, in a critical and self-assessing way. As a result, a vicious circle is maintained. The causes of this state of affairs are multiple, and here can only be mentioned: the dominance of incorrect anthropologies that underlie theories or ideologies, and inform practices; consumerism; the dominance of naturalism and scientism; technocratic and scientific politics.

3. Christianity's call to Life

The weak desire for life is the major obstacle to self-creation. The challenge is therefore to arouse this desire, so that the human may want life for itself, may find the *meaning of life* in life itself, and may try to live it as justly and beautifully as possible. Contemporaries, says Valadier, need to be exhorted to “get up and walk”, like the paralytic in biblical texts. According to him, Christianity can open contemporaries to the values of things and of themselves, by enabling their entry into the universe of gratuity, so that they can relate to *What surpasses* them, to a *Life* that appeals to them without their being able to dominate it⁸. In other words, the Christian community has to propose Christian transcendence, has to represent (or be the sign of) the

⁷ P. Valadier, *Le Mal Politique Moderne*, “Etudes”, 394 (2001), p. 205.

⁸ P. Valadier, *L'Eglise en Procès*, p. 73.

One who does not let itself be appropriated, manipulated, or exchanged. Christianity, according to Valadier, can provide this vital energy because «the One whom [the Christian community] announces as pure gratuity and unconditional Love, has accepted in Christ to give himself up to the interplay of signs [the world]»⁹. The Christian community therefore has to propose the message that «gratuity is, that it is the source of all gift and of all life»¹⁰. Such a message resists the dominant logic of appropriation, of the indiscriminate exchangeability of humans, values, and things.

«The Christian message – notes Valadier – does not replace modern freedoms but instructs them, guides them... suggests that the circle of death is not fatal, that birth and resurrection are probably a promise for all»¹¹. Precisely because the Christian message of gratuity is a universal one (i.e. concerns everyone, Christian or non-Christian), the Church cannot keep it for itself. As Valadier says, the Church cannot avariciously keep the promise of life for itself; spirit (or leaven) has to become embodied in a culture, society, or democracy¹². At the same time, the believer cannot *impose* his/her own *faith* onto others, as, for instance, Paolo Flores d'Arcais fears, without contradicting his/her alleged *belief*. The power that is thereby used belongs to the *Prince of the World*, not to the Church. Christianity is much more capable of proposing a transcendence of inspiration and dynamism than accepting to occupy the designated place in the separation of domains (i.e. State and Church), because the only power that it has is that of non-power, that of the crucified, namely, the power of gift and forgiveness. This means that the Church, the community of believers, has to refuse to play the game of the weak will that tries to fixate God as foundation.

Christian transcendence is not vague, but very concrete: it proposes a future to humanity beyond failures and death, «at the very heart of social exchange»¹³. Valadier stresses how the Church has to be *publicly* present according to the *logic of incarnation*, and because of the particular context in which it finds itself. It has to give itself to the *world*, without spectacle. Interestingly enough, he holds that it has the responsibility to guarantee and protect political life; it has to revitalise slumbering democracies and lifeless States¹⁴. Hence, it should not wait for a so-called *Christian civilisation* and expect politics to make this possible. Christian transcendence prevents de-

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

¹¹ P. Valadier, *Le Pardon en Politique*, "Projet", 281 (2004), p. 72.

¹² P. Valadier, *L'Église en Procès*, 136.

¹³ P. Valadier, *Du Spirituel en Politique*, Bayard, Paris 2008, p. 89.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

mocracies, human and social bodies from slumbering and withdrawing into themselves. In this respect, Christian thinking regarding sin and redemption feeds a wisdom that can resist conformism and the trivialisation of evil. It awakens reason and teaches that historical institutions can degenerate. This also means that the Christian community has to re-articulate embodied values that threaten to get lost and distorted. Such reminder also involves recalling the symbolic structures through which humans and societies relate to nature, to others and to themselves. The community of believers can, for instance, provide alternative understandings of the human and of justice.

To sum up, self-creation, humanisation, or morality, as it is conceived by Valadier, is a lifelong project that involves, and results in, the acceptance of an overabundant reality, both *inside* and *outside* the human. The perceived need for, and possibility of, such humanisation itself depends on an anthropology that includes the two faces of humanity, an expression that Valadier borrows from Hannah Arendt. By recalling how the desire for life, that is, the will, sways between life and death (naught), Valadier resists theories and practices that encourage solipsism with the corresponding dehumanisation. Individuals learn to desire their humanity and that of others through their bodies and the relationships that the latter mediate. These relationships (social body) are channels of values. In our contemporary contexts, these channels are weakened and perverted, which partly explains the weakness of wills and the corresponding incapacity to accept alterity and contradictions. The community of believers can help contemporaries to want life and values for their own sake, and perhaps even more importantly, to want themselves in and through the logic of gratuity, the contrary of the dominant logic of appropriation. However, as Valadier warns, the opening to gratuity does not automatically ensure the deliverance from nihilism: the will of both the *believer* and the *non-believer* continues to sway between the openness to gratuity and the taste for naught. Vigilance and the readiness to continuously re-create oneself are at all times necessary.

