

Purity in Political Thinking

ABSTRACT

Purity is a value that appears usually at the periphery of political theory. There is, however, a growing interest in it within experimental sciences. But they usually discuss it in terms of disgust and their conclusions tend to associate purity with conservatism. A more thorough analysis of purity is needed at which I make an attempt here. It will be shown that purity is a very rich value, with deep roots in our religious, moral, and intellectual traditions. After taking stock with the richness of this value within the political context it will be concluded that contemporary radicalism (either leftist or rightist), environmentalism, political and moral liberalism and conservatism are all very sensitive to the value of purity, if only to its different aspects, hence political theory has every reason to reconsider not only its significance but also the consequences of there being a common, axiological ground of otherwise highly opposing political views.

KEY WORDS: PURITY, CLEANLINESS, POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

I. Introduction

My purpose is to show how the value of purity (and its kinship: chastity, flawlessness, spotlessness, cleanliness, being impeccable, immaculate etc.) works in politics. The assumption is that once we begin to focus on values, especially those that have not (yet) inspired full-blown philosophical conceptions similar to justice, for instance, and we put aside principles and axioms for a while, then we may gain a more profound insight into the nature of politics and discover that notwithstanding the sharp controversies among champions of various political theoretical conceptions, there is still a solid ground of common value experiences. Thus liberals and conservatives, socialists and environmentalists, radicals and moderates express their experience of, and concern with, purity in different forms and usually without reflecting on it directly but this is not a evidence of its insignificance. On the contrary, such common experiences constitute an immense reservoir for mutual understanding and appreciation. Values have their own, admittedly limited yet real and sometimes powerful, authority over us which may flow from both their nature and the more accidental properties they acquire in our various experiences of them. This kind of authority may be more or less strong. We can assume, however, that its strength is relative to the potential of the particular value to bear and carry on meanings and contexts acquired in various value spheres. What Silke-Maria Weineck writes about Carl Schmitt's famous idea of the politization or secularization of theological concepts seems true for values as well: „How does a concept become pregnant, that is, fecund, heavy, rich with possibilities?“ She then suggests that „a term's fertility can be measured by its metaphorical potential, its capacity to accrue, over time, all the implications that have been transferred to and from it.”¹

The structure of the essay is simple. First I wish to briefly survey the religious, moral, and intellectual contexts of purity. No 'definicion' of purity will be offered as the main idea is to describe it as richly as possible, relying on historical understandings of it and some phenomenological observations. Second, certain characteristically political positions, views, attitudes will be surveyed in a way that helps us most to highlight some aspects of purity.

II. The Value of Purity

¹ Invisible Person: Schmitt and the Master Trope of Power, *The Germanic Review*, 3 (2009): 199-221, p. 201.

2.1. From cleanliness to purity

We are usually very much concerned with cleanliness. Our sense of it is conditioned socially right from the first moments of our life but it is arguable that there is a biological instinct behind these norms as well, since a number of other species are equally sensitive to the 'cleanliness' of their environment and of themselves.² Our biological existence is often dependent on observing the difference between clean and unclean materials, objects, surroundings. This is, of course, no more just instinctive and a matter of obscure social traditions. Natural sciences claim to have found the causes of many diseases against which we can protect ourselves best by keeping ourselves clean. Further, the authority of natural sciences is today being immensely exploited in a similar vein by gurus of healthy life who teach us how to purge our bodies from toxins (inner dirt) by fasting and other practices.

Of course, from a historical perspective it was not science but religion whose authority justified these norms. It was mainly religious rituals that sanctioned and preserved them, thus it was religion that provided the most comprehensive and traditional contexts for the value of purity. There is no need to go into detail and compare these various contexts. Just a precursory overview of them is sufficient to establish the central status of purity for all great religions. Of course, religions are not just about human affairs. Cleanliness has assumed a sacred, spiritual quality in them, becoming a transcendent value.³ The spiritualization of cleanliness and becoming a more subtle value occurred in different ways which cannot be even condensed here either, therefore let me use a metaphor instead: especially within monotheistic religions there has been a transition from bodily cleanliness, from the *purity of body* and especially of the hand to the *purity of the heart*. Kierkegaard's essay on it has been especially influential. Simply put, the purity of the heart consists in willing one thing, ceasing to be double-minded. But it is more than that. Coming to the essence, he, too, recurs to a metaphor. This is the sea and the deep waters. From purity flows transparency, he writes, and transparency generates depth. A relation establishes itself here, the one between the sea and the heaven, the sea yearning for heaven and heaven reaching out to the sea.⁴ Purity is thus accompanied and illuminated by holiness, simplicity, depth, constancy, calmness and transparency.⁵

Another well-known feature of purity as it appears within various religious contexts is chastity,⁶ either in the form of virginity or of a temporal abstinence or of a well-ordered and exemplary nuptial relationship.⁷ This may, again, have certain biological roots but in many religions it becomes highly spiritual. Chastity, and especially virginity, represent

² The biological roots of our concern with cleanliness is also stressed by Virginia Smith, *Clean: A History of Personal Hygiene and Purity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. The book does not advance a theoretical thesis but provides a vast number of examples and customs of how different people in different ages and cultures tried hard to be clean.

³ On this link see L. L. Preston, R. S. Ritter, „Cleanliness and godliness: Mutual association between two kinds of personal purity,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 6 (2012): 1365-68. The classic research on purity in terms of historical anthropology is Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, London, New York: Routledge, 1966.

⁴ S. Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*, Ch 11. Available at <http://www.thegod720.com>.

⁵ John Kekes in his criticism of Kierkegaard disregards the religious nature of his description and interprets in mostly in moral terms. This is certainly a legitimate way of reading it, and Kekes' worry about the potential tyranny of purity as understood by Kierkegaard as a simplistic, monistic zeal for willing just *one* thing is *morally* and also *politically* understandable. But Kierkegaard's metaphor itself suggests that purity is more complex, is wider and richer than a single principle or maxim. Abandoning double-mindedness does not amount to converting to simple-mindedness. J. Kekes, „Constancy and Purity,” *Mind*, October 1983, 499-518.

⁶ *Medieval Purity and Piety: Essays on Medieval Clerical Celibacy and Religious Reform*, ed. M. Frassetto, New York: Garland Publ. Inc., 1998).

⁷ Purity and chastity were connected already in ancient Greece. See A. Mullin, „Purity and Pollution: Resisting the Rehabilitation of a Virtue,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 3 (1996), 509-24.

transcendence on the one hand and in the form of private or communal sacrifice they elevate the person or the community to the level of divinity on the other hand. Purity in chastity receives a sacrificial shade of meaning. It is a sort of substitution for blood. Instead of cleansing by real blood, a sort of white blood is used here. By referring to sacrifice and to the concern of the gods with human cleanliness all religions make purity appear in a deep opposition to unholiness, to the world of gods. Purity becomes a human experience that is instrumental to realizing, understanding, appreciating holiness, the sanctifying power of gods. But purity as a value is also a divine quality. For whatever the gods touch becomes pure.⁸ Purity is thus both a direct experience of cleanliness and an invisible result of a visible divine action, that of touching. Hence, holiness may remain inaccessible to human beings but purity can bring them closer to it. Purity becomes a value experience that takes them, takes us, from a very practical concern to an utterly spiritual experience.

2.2. Moral purity

Chastity lived in a non-virginal form is already a moralized version of purity. It connects up purity with values such as order,⁹ orderliness, righteousness, decency, honesty and loyalty (paraphrasing Kierkegaard, to will not one thing but one person). The more moralized purity becomes, the more it is associable with living without sins. Impurity, on the contrary, means sinfulness. The moralization of purity is not a novel phenomenon, as many texts of the Old Testament urge the Jews to go beyond observing ritual purity for its own sake and relate the general imperative of being pure to their personal moral standing, calling often for a moral conversion (however, breaching certain ritual norms remains a moral sin).¹⁰ The New Testament reinforces these admonitions and confirms the strong connection between impurity and sinfulness. But there is a shift of emphasis here, from the *purity of action* to the *purity of intention*. The latter is sufficient to make one pure, as the story of Mary Magdalene tells us. She washed Jesus' feet, but it was not the action of purifying that counted. It was her inner state, her intention to purify another person by her tears of remorse which purified *her*.¹¹ It is, thus, no more just actions through which moral purity is achieved. An inner conversion, serious repentance, accepting faith, that is, a decision may make us pure. This typically Christian interpretation of moral purity is brought almost to the logical end in Kant.¹² He makes his moral theory rest on good will, that is, our capacity to choose and remain firm on the side of the right. He writes that „good will is good because how it wills – i.e. it is good in itself.” Should the will be rendered completely impotent by nature, it would still „sparkle like a jewel all by itself.”¹³ The mere intention, even if no action follows or can follow from it, is

⁸ „Mythic violence is bloody power over mere life for its own sake; divine violence is pure power over all life for the sake of the living. The first demands sacrifice, the second accepts it.” W. Benjamin, „Critique of Violence,” in *Selected Writings Vol 1*, ed M. Bullock, M. W. Jennings, Cambridge (Mass.), London: The Belknap Press, 1996: 250. On Benjamin's indebtedness to Kant concerning purity see C. Salzani, „Purity (Benjamin with Kant,” *History of European Ideas* 4 (2010): 438-47.

⁹ A. Mullin writes that „Purity most basically is about order, both social and personal” (*Purity and Pollution*, 510). Though in many social movements such as the Cathars and Puritanism (both terms stem from purity) this aspect of purity is quite evident, purity as a value is much richer in aspects which, as I am about to demonstrate, influence social and political life in ways other than being concerned with order.

¹⁰ The difference between ritual and moral purity in the Hebrew Bible is explored by Hyam Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality: The Ritual Purity System and its Place in Judaism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

¹¹ Thomas Hardy added to the title of his novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* the subtitle *A Pure Woman*. Purity here most probably refers to an inner moral strength or integrity which may not be realized and appreciated by the world.

¹² Needless to say that Kant's philosophy, even its purity-aspects, cannot be reduced to his moral theory. As an Enlightenment philosopher, he was deeply committed to the purity of philosophy itself (Pure Reason).

¹³ I. Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals*, <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/pdf/kantgrou.pdf>. Tr. by J. Bennett, pp 5-6.

the perfect and unsurpassable instance of purity. The metaphor of jewel, again, makes an unmistakable reference to purity.

Nietzsche, the harsh critic of Judeo-Christian morality, was very much aware of the importance of purity in making a life lived under guilt, subjected to self-discipline, in the hope of external redemption, appear to us attractive. Further, his relentlessly genealogical criticism of modern, seemingly non-Christian social ideals points out the continuity of Christian morality just in terms of purity. We need and strive for social ideals, attaining of which needs efforts, self-discipline, and failure to attain them causes guilt. But even he cannot really overcome the call of purity. Though never in a 'pure' form such as Kantian ethics does, he, too, offers us a way of becoming pure through 'becoming,' perhaps through 'authenticity,'¹⁴ through getting rid of guilt and shame, to clean ourselves in the dirty waters of society.¹⁵

Kantian *purity of will*, Nietzschean *purity of becoming* are notions born out of a moral perspective on human life. A third notion is '*reflective purity*,' a notion embedded in virtue ethics. John Kekes explains it partly by criticizing Kierkegaard's monistic view of purity and contrasting it with an individually designed pattern of good life. Once we have managed to set up such a pattern and succeed in following it, so to speak, easily and spontaneously, in a way positively enjoying it, then we can be called to have a pure life. On this interpretation the value of purity is enriched by values such as calmness, satisfaction, rejoicing, a kind of homogeneity, not in the sense of single-coloredness but in the sense of the integrity and coherence of a conscious pattern.¹⁶ Obviously, this view has an artistic, aesthetic feature, making life lived in a moral way also life lived in an aesthetically valuable way as well.¹⁷

2.3. Pure form and pure reason

At the very roots of Western philosophy we find the idea of the Pure Form, of the notion that there is a world of absolute light, that is, of purity. The quest for purity in thinking has not ceased ever since. In some sense, the Cartesian attempt to find an absolute ground for truth and certainty by the method of systematic doubting and getting rid of the prejudices of childhood reminds one of the ritual of getting off our dirty clothes one by one. Coming to a very different conclusion on the importance of the senses, yet exalting reason to the same extent, Baron D'Holbach, for instance, also blames prejudices and the resulting errors for the misery of philosophy and mankind, and proposes the same treatment of making ourselves intellectually clean again.¹⁸ Generally, the Enlightenment tradition regards superstition its

¹⁴ A. Mullin is, again, the most explicit here: „authenticity is the twentieth-century descendant of the virtue of purity” (*Purity and Pollution*, 510). Again, such claims are not entirely false, I think, but too bold.

¹⁵ More on Nietzsche's views on purity see Robbie Duschinsky, „Nietzsche: Through the Lens of Purity,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, Issue 41 (2011), 50-64.

¹⁶ E. Kelly attributes a similar view to Nikolai Hartmann. Purity is close to simplicity and innocence ('be like children!'), in a sense, being pre-moral. But an adult's moral life is more complex. Hartmann realizes this and adds that striving for purity as such is morally hardly desirable, if not impossible. Purity thus remains for us basically a negative value, that is, a value that warns us when impurity appears. *Material Ethics of Value: Max Scheler and Nikolai Hartmann*, *Phenomenologica* 203. Springer: 2011, esp. pp. 148-150.

¹⁷ There may be, following Kekes' thoughts, a pattern of life which is directly about purity. Such was, for instance, the life of Henry Heinz, the founder of the Heinz Company. His principles of producing safe food by prescribing absolute cleanliness during production and sale, and living a morally and religiously good life coincided almost literally. In an age when conservation technology was relatively underdeveloped, causing serious diseases and even deaths, observing the norms of cleanliness was obviously a direct moral concern. But for Heinz the issue was also a religious one. Gabriella M. Petrick sums this up: „For Heinz, creating a successful business that fortified people through pure and safe food glorified God as much as spreading God's word through Sunday schools and other missionary activities” (p. 43). See „'Purity as life': H. J. Heinz, religious sentiment, and the beginning of the industrial diet,” *History and Technology*, 1 (2011), 37-64.

¹⁸ Paul Henri D'Holbach, *The System of Nature*, several editions.

archenemy and looks at it less as a mental defect or error, and more a flaw, a detestable and abominable material of which human minds must be purified.

Whereas for Plato the knowledge of the pure form is, in principle and to the elect, attainable, the Kantian notion of the 'Ding an sich' conveys the image of untouchability where this property is not just a barrier to human comprehension but also has something prohibitive about it. By touching we pollute, we contaminate (whereas the touch of the gods is purifying). Though reason is our only means to achieve understanding, there is something seductive and therefore impure about it. Reason itself needs discipline, otherwise it not only misses the target but becomes corrupt. By disciplining, sanitizing his reason the Kantian philosopher in a deep sense does exactly what priests did by purifying themselves before encountering (and never conquering) the holy.

Finally, leaving epistemology and arriving at aesthetics as a philosophical discipline, we may refer to Aristotle and his notion of catharsis, itself etymologically rooted in the concept of purity. Contested as it is, the conception is clearly different from Plato's principles of education. Aristotle's idea of purification through emotional education is more generous and open than Plato's idea of purification through philosophical inquiry, available only to the few. But the roots are common. Generally, the concept of purity implied here is related to a complex education of one's self, including not only our mind but also our senses, spirit, emotions and taste. In this Aristotelian context, purity gets linked up with sincerity, courage, moderation, decency, prudence, and, ultimately, wisdom. It is as if purity were the value through which other values become visible. Since visibility in practical matters, including virtues, is a matter of doing something, e.g. practicing a virtue, possessing purity boils down to being able to see clearly what needs to be done and what is at stake. Whereas within the religious context purity was an instrumental value to understand holiness, for philosophy (the love of wisdom) purity is an instrumental value to understand wisdom.

Purity of hand and heart, of action, intention, and will, of reason and sentiments, and of life, are all meaningful concepts, grounded in rich traditions. Hence in its halo, so to speak, we find an embarrassingly wide spectrum of values ranging from holiness, calmness, serenity, depth, transparency, innocence, simplicity, moral impeccability, intellectual clear-sightedness, direct understanding, satisfaction, joy, a well-ordered virtuous life. Developing a full philosophical account of purity would need, accordingly, a tedious research. My aim here is only to explore the various forms this value, by having penetrated different value realms and being saturated with aspects of a wide range of other values, has taken on in modern politics. For precisely this reason purity is still a powerful motive in politics which is, in this sense, much less modern than we usually think. By concentrating on values we discover the striking continuity of modern politics with a world often thought to have sunk. And we may then reasonably doubt that political theories which claim to have discovered a rupture, an epic break between classical and modern periods of politics are really entirely or essentially right.

III. Purity in Politics

It has been less political science and more experimental sciences that have begun to explore the connections between purity and political preferences. Recent studies have found that especially through mobilizing the feeling of disgust conservatives are more prone to be concerned with purity.¹⁹ The effect works in the reverse way as well. By reminding people of sanitation, cleanliness, however gently, revealed or actual preferences and views of the respondents on certain social issues, but especially on sexual matters, tend to become more

¹⁹ Inbar, Y., Pizarro, D.A., Bloom, P. "Conservatives are more easily disgusted than liberals." *Cognition and Emotion* 23 (2009): 714-25.

conservative.²⁰ Again, by way of reminding conservatives of purity and putting certain liberal issues such as the protection of the environment into a context where it is linked to disgust,²¹ conservatives can be converted to the cause more easily than otherwise.²² These are indeed interesting results but given the vastness of purity-related values and issues the political philosophy of purity must be more encompassing.²³

3.1. Radicalism: fire, blood, golden and iron

In radical views, including those of socialists or rightist revolutionaries, purity appears usually indirectly albeit powerfully, often in only symbols, rhetorical and other gestures. I shall distinguish four major images and metaphors that I find particularly well-suited to convey some of the relevant aspects of purity. These are fire, golden, blood and iron. Each image is embedded in an enormously rich tradition, mainly shaped by religions and the religious connotations of purity. Blood and fire are dynamic (and ancient) metaphors of purification whereas metals convey the image of purity in a static, immovable form. Sometimes the two types of metaphors are integrated. Think of the refining process of golden by fire. Fire is the purifier and the golden is what becomes pure but as golden it is already the purest metal. The idea is to cleanse and wash off what makes us impure so that natural purity may shine forth undistortedly. These images stress those aspects of the value of purity which present it to us as something simple, innocent, original, natural, direct, straightforward, the opposite of which is what is complicated, ambiguous, unequivocal, civilized, customary, habitual, indirect, illusory.

Fire, in particular, is both absolutely pure and the perfect purifier. Whatever survives fire must be perfect and in one sense equal to it. Whatever fire consumes is impure. Pure golden is just frozen fire. It is the essence, simple yet powerful, neither needing, nor suffering any evidence and any opposition. All kinds of political radicalism strive for such a simplicity, a direct vision of the good and final. The contents may be very different, yet it is just by this aspect of purity that various forms of utopian thinking and utopias themselves display some striking similarities. In utopia, there is no future because there is no need for it. The visio beatifica, seeing no more dimly but face to face, is when and where faith and hope cease, being no more in need. Once we have survived fire (the political Purgatory) we ourselves become frozen fire, that is, golden. But first we must be purified by fire. Political radicalism tends to embrace violence and force, revolution and war, as a transitory but necessary phase of social development. The dynamic aspect of purity – fire – is what purifies, and the static

²⁰ E. G. Helzer, D. A. Pizarro, „Dirty Liberals!: Reminders of Physical Cleanliness Influence Moral and Political Attitudes,” *Psychological Science*, published online March 18, 2011.

<http://pss.sagepub.com/content/22/4/517.full.pdf+html>

²¹ On an experimental research on the relationship between whiteness and purity in the context of disgust see G. D. Sherman, J. Haidt, G. L. Cloire, „The Faintest Speck of Dirt: Disgust Enhances the Detection of Impurity,” *Psychological Science* (Sage Publ. Inc.), 12 (2012), 1506-14.

²² Y. Anwar: „Conservatives can be persuaded to care more about the environment, study finds,” Report on a recent study at Berkeley University, December 10, 2012, *Berkeley News Center* .
<http://newscenter.berkeley.edu/2012/12/10/conservatives-environment/>

²³ A more political theoretical interpretation is: P. Hatemi, R. McDermott, „Policing the Parameter: Disgust and Purity in Democratic Debate,” *Political Science and Politics*, 4 (2012): 675-87. The paper also demonstrates, inadvertently, that without a philosophical analysis of certain concepts like purity experimental sciences with their single focus (purity understood in terms of avoiding disgust) may exert an unfortunate influence on the discussion. It is to the authors' credit, however, that they try to expand the topic and argue, for instance, that conservatives and liberals are not as easily separable as experimental psychology suggests, namely, that conservatives are more concerned with purity, especially moral purity. Rather, conservatives have a different, more encompassing moral focus. In my interpretation, the narrower moral focus of liberals, or the *narrowing of the focus* is just another sign of a sensibility towards the value of purity (purism of principles – see later in this paper).

aspect – golden – is what remains, namely, the undistorted and straightforward radiance of purity.

Blood is a more complicated metaphor. We can distinguish between two interpretations. The one is about being purified by,²⁴ the other is about the purity of, blood.

The original Christian idea of being purified *by blood* was both a reflection on the Old Testament's rituals that, as was explained above, had both a narrow religious meaning and an morally extended meaning. Impurity and moral sins were both meant to be washed off by bloody sacrifices. In Christ, Christian theology asserts, such sacrifices reached their final point. God and mankind are finally reconciled and all personal sins have been cleansed, if only potentially. John's *Revelations* refer to the martyrs who washed their robes in the Lamb's blood, alluding to this double meaning. (Self)-sacrificial blood cleanses us from our sins but only because the Lamb's blood had been shed to make our sacrifice effective.

Though in later Christianity martyrdom ceased to be an option to the majority of the faithful (yearning for it, however, did not),²⁵ the notion of being purified by blood and blood-shedding has been reinforced just in modernity. In the national anthem of France, the first and paradigm secular state of what was once Christendom, we find the curious line about the impure blood of tyranny which is, however, an ample material to water the furrows. We use the metaphor of bloodbath, *Blutbad*, and aptly, many of the French revolution's scenes, from the scaffolds to the systematic extermination of the Vendée population, have been burnt to our imagination not just as bloody events but as rituals of cleansing, of bathing almost literally, over which priestly figures like Saint-Just, the Angel of Death, and Robespierre preside. The striking force of being attracted by such apparently premodern, if not 'superstitious,' practices is partly explainable by the persistent strength of the value of purity, in its moralized form. For much horror and violence can be made acceptable once we concentrate no more on the purity of action but on the purity of the intention. This is perhaps why so many people think of the Jacobins as 'pure' people (who meant it right), and, again just perhaps, agree with them in their hearts that blood was somehow 'necessary' to wash away tyranny, misery, injustice, and other political and social sins.

Many rightist thinkers have similarly relied heavily on the image of blood, though following the other interpretation. This is the purity *of blood*, a precious value to be preserved. In history, purity of blood was achieved by controlling marriages. It was a privilege and a defining feature of the nobility. It also had a moral aspect, too, insofar as the purity of blood was considered to be a precondition of preserving and nurturing ancient virtues. But in the 19th century, with the onslaught of mass politics, this value became as widely desired as that of equality and liberty, though escaping the attention of political theorists. For the rise of nationalism can hardly be explained fully without taking into account this hidden yet forceful desire for the most cherished privilege, if not the essence, of nobility. From now on, all citizens are noble because they are born to be members not of a family but of a nation thought of as being one *body*. The blood that circulates in it must be pure on which the health of the whole depends.

Since nations cannot marry, they are not sequences of generations, but exist, as it were, eternally, the notion of their health understood in terms of the purity of blood can be linked to anything. It is perhaps most directly dependent on the purity of the language. Or of

²⁴ It is necessary to note at least in a footnote that the appearance of blood has not always had a positive meaning, such as purification. On the contrary, certain types of bleeding was considered in many cultures as impure or as making the person, especially women, impure. Certain actions of bloody killing also caused impurity. Cain could never wash off his mark of having murdered his brother. One may consider such cases as examples of blood as a sign but not the cause of impurity.

²⁵ In certain hagiographies, we read about the saint's habit of drinking from the washing water of the sick (as long as she could) which is, of course, not about ignorance but a sort of deliberate martyrdom of being purified by the most impure thing.

the race. Or of the emotions. Or of the land and soil. Remember of the movement of Blut und Boden, the Heimatkunst, but also the French counterparts in the works of Gobineau, Barrès and also Bourget: the idea of the pure and innocent peasantry clashing with the cynical, money-mongering, dirty urban capitalism. This is the land where the blood of our fathers was shed which consecrated it, made it holy and pure: that is the former image of blood. But the land and its innocent inhabitants are themselves the blood that enlivens the nation: that is the other image. Anything that pollutes it is potentially lethal. Urbanization, the patterns and norms of urban environment, urban capital, and especially the direct appearance of urban people in the countryside have often been regarded as polluting, infecting what had been pure. In Germany and Central Europe these images have been made portentous by linking up urbanization with an alien race, mostly the Jews who have been often portrayed as being dirty, stinking, impure. Obsolete and repugnant as all this may sound to enlightened ears but, once again, the call of purity is unmistakable here. And since the concern for health has not decreased a bit, on the contrary, the somatic aspects of purity constantly reappear, though sometimes in clandestine forms, in political thinking and sensibilities which insist on the difference between healthy and unhealthy, normal and abnormal (sane and insane), natural and unnatural, fertile and barren, open/transparent and closed/opaque, deep and shallow, constant and temporary. These various distinctions converge on the surface of purity/impurity as captured by the purity of blood.

Finally, there is the image of purity conveyed by iron. When some rightist movements came to embrace the idea of the revolution and got radicalized, especially in Germany, the more traditional and antirevolutionary parts of thinking about purifying the nation's blood were dropped. There was still a concern about healthiness being threatened by decadent arts (which called for a fire to get rid of, again, much as in a ritual of purification), and there was still a Romantic-rural strain in Nazism, but the warmth and dynamic flow of blood as a bath has been balanced by the coldness and ruthless finality of iron. There is a purism of machines, of robots, of mechanisms, of Taylorian capitalism, of modern warfare, which Nazism heartily incorporated in its ideology. Think of the guillotine, the symbol of the greatest leftist revolution: it already prefigured and symbolized the unity of blood and iron, of warmth and coldness, of life and death, and was extensively used by Nazi Germany, too.²⁶ The coldness of iron is especially suitable to capture calmness, depth, untouchability and other related aspects of purity.

And this helps us make sense of the final goal of Nazism, if there is such a thing at all, which is the purity of blood brought to the logical end, namely, to purify the nation of anything that can pollute it, including everything that is human. After all blood has been shed only bloodless and absolutely clean machines survive and the impurity of blood is a possibility ruled out for ever. The grandiose demonstrations, uniforms, gestures, militarized and formalized social norms, and, indeed, the absolutely antihuman conception of the extermination camp, are integrated in a single image of the machine. This is no more the healthy body of the nation, rather, this is the nation made of pure steel. Purity here becomes once again a divine feature, though in a strange, secular way as the images of an iron society and a steel nation suggest a superhuman, *übermenschliche* entity.²⁷

²⁶ It is remarkable that the infamous law „zur Verhütung erbkranken Nachwuchses“ (for the Prevention of Offsprings with Hereditary Diseases) was passed in the Reichstag on the 14 July, 1933, the emblematic day of the French Revolution.

²⁷ One may recall Heinrich von Kleist's essay on the Marionettentheater where the mechanical dance of the dolls is said to be perfect and thus divine, compared to the imperfect dancing of humans. In the Museum for Hygiene in Dresden, for the occasion of the Second Hygiene World Exhibition in 1930, a most spectacular „Gläserner Mensch“ (transparent man) was designed, to be followed by the figure of the Transparent Woman in 1936. The intention may have been humanist, the context much less so. Material transparency becomes here an invocation of divine-mechanical purity.

3.2. *The spot on the face of the Earth*

Should we think that such kind of superhuman, or rather, beyond-human images of society are characteristic of an extreme Right (possibly also of an Orwellian extreme Left), we would be mistaken. There is a similar paradox, with similarly ghastly consequences, behind one of the defining mainstream sensibilities of the modern age, the concern over polluting the environment. The paradox is that in its most consistent version environmentalism can hardly avoid the conclusion that the chief enemy, the ultimate pollutor of nature is the human race.

As the experiment cited above suggested, conservatives proved to be more friendly to the environmentalist agenda once a direct experience of disgust and uncleanness was linked with the political issues. But a concern over cleanliness is obviously a characteristic feature of modern civilization, not just of conservatism.²⁸ And as was also suggested, these concerns are sanctioned in a secular society by the authority of science, and no more of religion. *What* is clean and *how* cleanliness is best achieved and sustained is told us by science. There is a constant, prevalent aversion of dirt and filth, and the cleaner our environment is, the more unbearable a single spot appears to be. Without a wholesale sanitation of our lives we feel we cannot be sane.

However, the more we are concerned about cleanliness, the more we are polluting the environment, scientists tell us, since we must use more and more water, energy, artificial cleaning materials to keep up our standards. Science plunges us into a desperate situation because our cleanliness and the health and cleanliness of nature appear to stand antagonistically related to one another. 'Sustainable development' looks only a verbal compromise since the norms of sustainability are indeterminate. The growing concern about the environment compels us to admit that we are the spot, the flaw, the blemish, on the face of the Earth. Man is the essence of impurity, much like the filthy *and* unnatural yahoos in Swift's vision (where the horses are small in number and live happily and harmoniously *within* nature). The anguish over human development and its destructive consequences is massively supported by the transposition of the value of purity, from its form of cleanliness of the human environment to its more traditional and forceful form of transcendent purity of nature understood as innocence, uncorruptedness, healthiness, vulnerability, happiness, self-satisfaction.²⁹ One major source of the power of environmentalism is surely its rediscovery of an ancient admiration for purity.

3.3. *Purism of principles*

Edmund Burke in his *Reflections* asserts that he believes in metaphysical rights but cannot see them. What he can see is only their applications, modifications, versions, and never their essence. It is like the light: we cannot see *the* light only colors. And ever since Thomas Paine first reacted to Burke's views fiercely, a split has emerged between those who claim to see only colors and those who claim to see light as it is. The context of their debate was the meaning of the Enlightenment, with Paine continuing its secular version, according to which we need to get rid of our prejudices that distort our vision and with Burke announcing his belief

²⁸ Frank Hendriks writes about the cultural, political significance of the Dutch spring cleaning: he traces this persistent custom back to the new identity of the emerging Dutch Republic. The urge that from time to time 'things must be cleaned up and order be restored' is, as he emphasizes, a more general concern that applies to democracies and debates on its ideal forms as well. See his „Purity and Democracy. Beauty Ideals and Pollution. Reduction in Democratic Reform,” *Administrative Theory and Praxis*, 1 (2011): 44-61.

²⁹ A well-known type of car advertisements is where the pure form and the pure dynamism of the car is emphasized. Often this is further stressed by the appearance of an agile species, a predator, a bird, a gazelle. Natural forms of life become connected here with the highest form of an artificial life. This is when and where the value of purity as experienced in nature gets revealed.

in the illuminative power of prejudices. The striking fact is that both sides can rely on the value of purity.

Paine's successors think today that civilized politics needs moralists and moralists are those who know the principles, be they those of justice, or the categorical imperative, or the ultimate norms emerging out of undistorted, that is, *pure* communication, á la Habermas. If principles are right, institutions and procedures will be also clear, transparent, controllable, automatic³⁰ and neutral. Unlike real human beings who are often immoral and almost never impartial, the absolute purity of principles and institutions flows from their unshakable moral righteousness. There is something divine, virginal, radiant, untouchable, and hence unpolluted, about fundamental principles (like the social contract, the principles of justice), basic rights, absolute values (like human dignity, moral equality).

It may sound provocative but the quintessentially modern notion of neutrality, especially that of the state, the institution of institutions and the enforcer of ultimate norms and principles, evokes the ancient notion of virginity, an important aspect of the value of purity. Virginity is of course not related to sexual innocence and being immaculate any more. Rather, just because the value of purity itself helps us understand it in a different way, within the wider context of chastity, a typically Christian virtue, virginity has taken on an asexual aspect as well. As I argued, it is related to sacrifice and service, and does not just denote a biological fact.

It is a commonplace thesis that the modern age in politics is, among others, characterized by the depersonification of politics and of political agency.³¹ However, depersonification is a complicated notion because the very concept of the person is a highly complex one. With equal right we may talk about the personification of the state (but also of other agents such as legal entities, a process that was started much earlier). Persons have various qualities, some of which may, others not, be applicable to legal entities and agents. What becomes applicable and what not depends on a number of further things, here I only want to point out one such relation. The emergence of the modern state was also hallmarked by great statesmen who devoted their lives to the service of the state. Many of them were priests or other dynastically unconstrained individuals. They personally may not have had a virginal life, yet their service of the state was marked by the once religiously interpreted ethos of serving something beyond normal human comprehension. (An early yet almost perfect image of this was the Virgin Queen of England...) Through them, unintentionally, the previously dynastic-biological understanding of the 'state' was transformed into an understanding of it as an asexual agent which/who, nonetheless, has not lost its human face. And this human face of the state has preserved something of the virginal, uncommitted, purely service-like attitude of its first servants.

We often talk about the state as being or as needing to be neutral. It is part of the agenda of many leftist ideologists that the modern state be actively suppressing what seems to be not only immoral but also amoral gender discrimination (simply acknowledging gender differences in education, in health care, in public utilities), hence the neutrality of the state is sometimes directly interpreted in terms of gender. But now we see that the issue is rooted deeper than that. The neutrality of the state is not just about genderlessness in terms of human rights (no discrimination between sexes), or in terms of principles (equal concern for everybody, and for every conception of the good life). It is as much about the state being

³⁰ As was argued above, there is leftist version of celebrating the purity of machines. The moderate Left does not, of course, want to eliminate humanity like the extreme Right but it also tends to put more trust in abstract, moral individuals than in concrete, politically existing persons. In other words, there is some belief in non-human powers within moderate Left as well.

³¹ See, for instance, Quentin Skinner, „The State,” in *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*, T. Ball, J. Farr, R. L. Hanson (eds), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989: 90-131.

elevated to the level of virginal perfection from where the *dirty issues* of gender and discrimination, where the two are inherently tied to one another, are eliminated for good.³²

3.4. *Purism of practices*

Even if Burke looked like philosophically insane, that is, polluted, unsanitized, in Paine's eyes, for instance, and he indeed proudly announced to believe in the dirty prejudices, there is still a sense of purism in his exaltation of traditions, the difficult art of governing, and in the fine balance of social forces. Put differently and metaphorically once again, what matters for Burke and the Burkean conservatives is the purity of the colors. Since the metaphor of light and its purity is useless in social practices and in governing, the relevant contrast to the purity of the colors is their pointless, aggressive mingling which cannot but result in a homogeneous yet repulsive material of social reality which is best compared to an opaque, undistilled kind of water. The opposite of an ordered, albeit unconstructed, organic texture of colors is not the physical unity of colors, that is, white which suggests light as well but greyness. Greyness is the inevitable outcome of dissolving everything in everything else, making men women and women men, humans animals and animals humans, the low high and the high low, marriage friendship and friendship marriage, writing speaking and speaking writing; making all past and future present, all distances short, all communications loud, and the like. This is basically the perfected stage of dullness and indiscriminateness of the democratic public culture Tocqueville observed and predicted in and about America. We can well imagine Burke being abhorred by the sight of such an overpouring of greyness and discover, once again, the basic aversion of getting impure by being immersed in such a muddled, roiled flood of social reality.

On a more constructive, affirmative level we find some conservatives celebrating purity in terms of an Aristotelian approach to developing and having a good, that is, rich, enjoyable, flourishing life. A Nietzschean interpretation of purity as 'becoming,' as overcoming the dullness and meanness of the philistine life is perhaps an extreme, unpersuasive version of self-constructivism but a less egotistic version of reflexive purity that John Kekes, for instance, recommends³³ in which there is not a single catharsis of becoming pure once and for all but there must be a series of such events, a whole process of self-education, might look more attractive. Exploiting the former metaphor here we may interpret well-lived individual lives as the representations of a particular shade of color. Applying some ontological categories here we might say that purity is a second-order property of every color and as such it may never become an object of direct sensation. In principle each shade of color is repeatable, a universal, yet in practice they are hardly repeatable. The metaphor should not be overstressed, of course. No life is reducible to or summarizable in terms of, a single slogan, leitmotif, aphorism (a single shade of color). What is important is the singular, unrepeatable architecture of a well-lived life, similar to an aesthetical masterpiece. Or perhaps a piece that is not necessarily an unsurpassable achievement but a modest, well-ordered, examined, coherent whole. Purity in this contexts amounts to a value, perhaps a virtue, that results from a gradual self-purification, a process of purging ourselves not of everything that does not fit a single principle or motive but of everything that is evil, dull, vulgar, dirty, corruptive, and even unholy. In other words, purity here shines forth in its complexity,

³² I want to mention the neutralization of language by means of political correctness only by passing. There is much more to be said here, the only remark that fits my general purpose here is that whereas conservatives may find certain practices (homosexual relations and actions) disgusting and impure, liberals may have a similarly profound aversion of 'disgusted conservatives.' Calling someone 'homophobic' seems to mobilize disgust through language, and not through practices, but perhaps with equal efficiency. Hence, disgust and purity/impurity may not be typically 'conservative topics.'

³³ Kekes, *Constancy and Purity*.

through its various aspects that it acquires in its encounters with and relations to other values and whereby it is itself distinguishable from them. Purity itself ceases to be a simple value, with a homogeneous nature or essence, and appears to be a complex value, capable of reflecting the richness and depth of the wholeness of human existence.³⁴ Kierkegaard's metaphor of the calm and deep sea becomes here less a symbol of transparence and more of mystery. Yet purity is present in both.

IV. Conclusion

Many political and moral philosophers favor clear-cut principles and well-structured edifices of reasoning from axioms to conclusions about how to set up institutions, decide issues, and determine the priority of norms and values. Nothing compels us, however, to assume that values, for instance, are always strictly structured or need a priority order to make social cooperation possible. Such a structure seems necessary to secure the cohesion of deliberatively and purposively formed political ideologies and organizations. A more phenomenological approach to values which brackets the needs of ideologies is capable of discovering hidden or less conspicuous aspects of various values. Such descriptive analyses are not without political theoretical implications. If the role of purity in political thinking and acting is really more significant and more complex than most theorists assume, which I hope to have demonstrated here, then the lesson is that irrespective of our political tastes or affiliations, value orderings and favorite principles and axioms, we have much more in common than we usually think. It follows that the 'tyranny of values' is in fact a very beneficial feature of the world, and that the axiological structure of the different value spheres is more complex and full of surprises than commonly presumed.

³⁴ Discussing Nicolai Hartmann's account of purity, E. Kelly concludes that the simple purity of childhood and the complex, hard-acquired purity of adulthood are different but still genuine instances of purity. The latter aspect is the „attainment of moral purity” which „requires the transformation of one's own *Ordo amoris* through the acquisition of new moral insight, and overcoming the particular ego-cravings that distort one's moral vision” (*Material Ethics of Value: Max Scheler and Nicolai Hartmann*, *Phaenomenologica* 203, DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-1845-6_7, 149).