

### A DISCOURSE ON MENTALITY<sup>38</sup>

The word mentality refers to the moral design of the human species and can explain both the character of an individual and the sentiments and actions of a whole nation or even the events, catastrophes and undertakings of a whole century. The concept of mentality, which is to be understood as a collective one, is actually far more applicable to the way of thinking and acting of a number of individuals because it denotes an expression that stigmatises the collective spirit (in the sense that it represents moral qualities, be they positive or negative). The concept of mentality, in the current meaning of the word, is not applicable to the spirit of an individual, because if an individual were so endowed, his mentality would be so exceptional that it could be referred to with another term.

I would like to take note that we are not sufficiently interested in mentality. Every epoch, every nation has its own mentality, and every man, excepting men of genius or prominent personalities, belongs to a determined mentality. A century's place in universal history depends on its mentality, as the mentality of an epoch can give a plausible explanation of prodigies accomplished, losses sustained, of progress realised and of menacing decadence. But of mentality, this mentality which determines so much, which decides the destinies of individuals, nations and even continents (for today mentality does not only determine the character of a nation but that of entire continents), seeing that the world is now divided into continents and no longer into countries, one speaks but casually of mentality as if it were of secondary interest instead of being the most decisive factor of the family on man.

The politics of a country must be adapted to its mentality and it is useless to hope that it will accept the politics imposed upon it. This is why a regime that is very successful in one country could be disastrous in another, even its closest neighbour. This is one proof among many others that it is mentality that creates everything and upon which everything depends. The mentality of a continent, of a people, a region or city, for cities also have theirs (I am touching on subtleties here), the mentality of people and places, I say, should be watched more closely than the state of public health. To be able to control and identify oscillations in public mentality there should be special functionaries, "mentalist" doctors who could impose quarantine in cases of urgency when they have found dangerous cases, of the same intensity as diphtheria, scarlet fever, small-pox, cholera or the plague, for moral diseases are all, without exception, very contagious and can easily become epidemics.

How much better things would be if men took at least as much care of the public's moral health as they do its physical health, for one must admit that progress in hygiene has often saved us from great calamities. But these doctors of moral hygiene with absolute powers exist only in my imagination, which, let us hope, is prophetic.

Europe by the force of circumstance will have to become a moral hygienist for the most terrible consequence of this war, the one which will take the longest time to repair, is the outrageous mentality that took hold and that does not even represent the remnants of the sad pre-war mentality, but is instead a horrifying newborn child whose parents are crime and cupidity, nurtured by indolence.

As I have said before, mentality is the moral design of different human groups. How do groups belonging to the same mentality form? Are they composed through social classes, nations or race? I do not think that today one can say that any given social class has its own mentality; it would be more exact to say that it is arbitrarily attributed with a specific mentality. Thus in our mind exist models of mentality that refer to the

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38 G. de Chirico, *Discorso sulla mentalità*, signed "Isabella Far" in *Commedia...*, cit., pp. 227-232. Published in English here for the first time.

bourgeois, peasants, noblemen, etc. Evidently such models were created little by little according to experience and observation. But even if any specific mentality was originally limited to some determined class as a consequence of marriages, inheritances or a reverse of fortune, the mentality of one class penetrated into another and so, today, the mentality of classes is purely symbolic. The same has happened in our epoch among peoples and races, this has been made easy and has developed thanks to rapid means of communication and the consequent contact between men of different countries. The fundamental traits of mentality are the same everywhere among so-called civilised people. It is only when one has fully grasped this levelling out of mentality across the world that one can understand the enormous importance of mentality and its influence on the course of everything that effects us on this earth.

Now let us study more closely the mentality of our epoch and the development of present day mentality.

The question many ask is: how could such a war have been possible? How did it come to this war that is ruining Europe and even the world? The only answer to these questions is the following: all this happened because of the mentality reigning since the last war and even earlier, which excluded all idealism as if it were a ridiculous old fashioned phenomenon, not understanding that idealism is our greatest protector. The idealist is a man who loathes the phenomenon of evil, loathes evil for evil, in and of itself, and not only when he suffers from it personally; in this way the idealist is a far-seeing materialist. Idealism is the only thing that can prevent evil and save us from disaster. When evil appears it spreads very rapidly and strikes even those who think themselves very far from it and in safety. Historically, men have given proof of their incomprehension of this truth. Egoism, a bad quality created by evil, brings evil upon us. Small, personal and blind egoism is dangerous whereas idealism that cares for the good of others, for the good of all, fights against evil wherever it encounters it, by limiting it and often eliminating it completely. For some time now, unfortunately, the idealism of romantic epochs has given way to super-egoism and to mean, terrible short-sightedness. Thus we ended up witnessing incredible things, such as countries led by criminals of the worst sort to whom "20<sup>th</sup> century selfishness" has given free reign. And then came the suffering! And what suffering! Whence did it come? Perhaps the Antichrist chose to come with his acolytes and live on our earth to instil the sciences of hell? We have seen evil, that evil which Jesus Christ tried to circumscribe, to narrow down, to make disappear completely; we have seen this evil pouring all over Europe and beyond, carried along by millions of its followers. This is the most terrible fact of this terrible war and it is not spoken of enough and even not spoken of at all.

Now let us see how men could have declined in such a way and also let us see how to return back, for I believe that not a single man that has a minimum of intelligence could be so crazy, so lacking in consciousness and criminal to suppose that one has the right to go onwards instead of tentatively attempting to backtrack. We know perfectly well that the point has been reached where man has no more the right to call himself by that name. Almost twenty centuries of Christianity have past and human nature has not become nobler. For, let us speak frankly, what difference is there between a pagan Athenian citizen of the age of Pericles and a Christian roman citizen of this age of Bonomi's government or any other citizen of any other city on earth? The difference is that the Athenian citizen of old was in all ways superior to any citizen of today. This is the sad evaluation we can make. Is it final? What men, I say men and not automats and animals, can live without hoping for a glimmer of light on the darkest horizon? Will this point of light appear? Otherwise what shall men do, those who saw and lived through the frightful passage of that tempest of fire and terror, but when lightening lit up the dark reminding a suffering humanity that light still exists in the distance and that it can

return like calm after the storm? How many people have the illusion that the sun will return and they will be able to take up their usual life perhaps even enjoying it more!

For many the storm has passed and yet after the joy of the first moment they are amazed to see that rays of the sun are veiled and sad. What is happening? Has the demon contaminated us with its spirit? Perhaps he has made us heir to a mentality of evil, egoism, ambition and avidity, as this is the existing and predominating mentality? Will the state of things change and those men who in the deluge of evil were saved by miracle, washed up on the shore of idealism, will they be able to crush with a steady hand the immorality of Europe? I speak of Europe and Europeans for the salvation of Europe can only come from Europe itself and by its own means.

Before this war wickedness was still to a certain degree passive, now it possesses a dynamic force worthy of better aims. Humanity destitute of moral dogmas changes rapidly into a herd of wild beasts. In Europe and elsewhere moral principles have long been forgotten. Moral principles were created when man ceased to be purely animal (I say animal and not bestial for that he has remained) and if these principles were created in such remote times it is because they were necessary, as they are now and always will be. Yes, before this war, which has devastated Europe, moral consciousness was low, very low. The word idealism provoked a smile of contempt and compassion for those imbecile, old-fashioned idealists. Thus innocent people could be ill treated, persecuted and assassinated, the only reaction being speeches and outcries so much easier and more comfortable than a loyal fight. With unconfessed satisfaction, such as a man feels upon seeing one of his peers who is sick, whilst he is in perfect health. This is what everyone said to themselves: "luckily this is all very far away; as long as we are not touched by it, let us not get mixed up in questions which are none of our business"! This is how this gigantic association of rogues could form and be led by the greatest criminal in history and how these monstrous criminals could poison the moral sense of men and stimulate the development of their worst instincts. Do you believe that in the last century a similar return to barbarism of a country situated in the heart of Europe could have taken place? Certainly not, for all honest men would have arisen in mass to crush the germ of such aspirations and such criminal theories. But we did nothing about it. Everyone waited blindly for their turn to be treated badly, persecuted and assassinated, which, by the way, they deserved to be. What can have been the reason for all this if not the mentality which formed itself in the world after the other war, that mentality void of all true sense of humanity and idealism, where everyone thought only of his own small selfish personal interests or rather, what he believed to be his interest?

The only reason for the catastrophe, which of course everyone explains in his own way, is that the mentality that installed itself as ruler in the years following the war of 1914 was undeniably lacking a moral base. It corroded the body of our Western culture, leaving but an empty shell. The lack of foundation, this decadence of our European culture was firstly felt in art which is the surest barometer. Just as art was no longer art, but a parody, a gruesome and tragic comedy, in the same way other privileges of the human spirit were replaced by surrogates, or at best, by shadows of the grand sentiments and thoughts of the past. Who could distinguish good from evil and who cared anymore for similar knowledge?

How well this state of mind was understood by Hitler's gang! This gang did not hesitate to exploit such absurdity, causing evil to be taken as good, crime for patriotism and heroism, as well as theories of a criminality never before seen for a kind of new religion. Men of today, without dogmas, moral base or intelligence accepted this evil, absurdity and criminality in life as they had already accepted it in art.

Modern art is responsible for the decadence of the moral and spiritual qualities of man in our epoch. We can say that no other epoch has succeeded (not in penetrating, as this is impossible) but in positioning evil,

absurdity, stupidity so near to those sublime things of the spirit which are the different forms of art, as our epoch has by means of modern art.

The total decadence of spirit and morals of these last years, which we honestly cannot deny, has its origin in the creative powerlessness of a small group of men who, seeing themselves wanting in talent and finding themselves in the impossibility to follow the way of the great masters, proclaimed that the ideals and values of their forefathers had expired and been surpassed, and wanted to replace them with mediocrity draped with phrases about high spirituality. It was the first step on the ladder that led down into the abyss. The other steps followed: nullity, incapacity, stupidity, all of which could only find refuge in the absurd. Thus the spiritual ground, prepared by artists without talent and intellectuals without intelligence, could be exploited by men of action of our unfortunate age, men who did not hesitate to profit from the weakened intelligence their contemporaries. This is how and why men, whose brains were already unhinged by the absurd activity of the phenomenon of modern art, unique in its kind, accepted any thing or idea as they knew not how to criticise, analyse or refuse to obey a current trend. We must never forget that modern art was accepted with docility by the whole world and in result, the human brain, used to blind obedience, absorbed likewise the mad and criminal theories of Nazism and fascism which echoed loudly and had influence more or less everywhere provoking, in the best of cases, but tacit indifference instead of awakening horror and revolt.

To finish my discourse on modern art and to avoid misunderstandings I must add that modern art, though it is almost exclusively of the worst possible quality, has produced a small number of works (especially in painting) in which the phenomenon of revelation has manifested itself and which are thus works of value. But it is dangerous to put the public in touch with this particular phenomenon, just as one cannot make popular songs out of the poems of Nietzsche. One must be very strong and very intelligent to venture into metaphysical realms of revelation, otherwise one finishes up as modern intellectuals have in craziness, stupidity and the absurd.