

Julius Evola's Philosophical Anthropology of Castes: A Metaphysics of Heroism and Transfiguration in War

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In his *Metaphysics of War* [1], Julius Evola combines a philosophical anthropology of social castes with a metaphysics of heroism and transfiguration. This combination of anthropology and metaphysics appeals to an early twentieth century European traditionalism and perennialism [2].

Traditionalists affirm perennial, primordial, universal truths discernible in all major world religions. Perennialist concerning truth, they repudiate modern Western Enlightenment assumptions about the forward march of social evolutionary progress beyond the darkness and superstition of humanity's ancient past.

As traditionalist and perennialist, Evola also embraced fascism. While many deny any necessary connection between traditionalism and fascism, Evola saw in the latter's political ideals an affirmation of natural hierarchy and order; that is, a natural hierarchy of superiority and inferiority in relation to capacities for the apprehension of perennial, universal truth.

This heady brew of traditionalism and perennialism concerning truth, hierarchy, and fascism is nowhere more apparent than in Evola's philosophical anthropology of castes. Indeed, he advances a "doctrine" concerning the "hierarchical quadripartition" of society into four separate, and decidedly, unequal castes [3].

According to this doctrine, the first caste consists of those bearing a "pure spiritual authority," the second is a "warrior" caste, the third a "bourgeois" caste, and the fourth a "slave" caste. The doctrine of hierarchical quadripartition posits an anti-progressive "involuntary fall" from each of these four castes to the next [4].

According to Evola, the four castes are anything but "artificial and arbitrary." They instead express the "primordial qualifications," the specific "truths" and functions of those sharing the same nature, interests, and vocation. They are also bound together in relations of superiority and inferiority. Hence, there is no "one single way of living one's life," no flattening of natural social hierarchy, but "several distinct spiritual ways" of life [5].

By analogy with the human organism, Evola insists a "straight and normal relationship" of the castes is undermined when slaves, bourgeoisie, or warriors take the "primary and guiding place" in the life of a civilization. A civilization's involutory fall from guidance by the first, superior, spiritually elite, caste reaches its "limit" in unnaturalness, distortion, and subversion when the "life characteristic of slaves comes to orient everything [6]."

He contends the "truth" of any civilization's fall from first to fourth caste is traceable historically through war. Evola attributes to the wartime hero a "transfiguring knowledge of life, life according to death." Even in "the final moment of his earthly life," the heroic warrior realizes the law of "a more than life." War thus has "always an anti-materialist value, a spiritual value [7]."

In war, the term "hero" is a "common denominator" concerning all four castes. Heroism embraces "different types and meanings," pertaining to each caste respectively [8]. Consistent with his hierarchical quadripartition of castes, Evola thus contends war has a quite "different face, in accordance with its being placed under the sign of one or another of the castes."

Under the sign of the first caste, war is "holy war" for "spiritual motives," establishing "a path to supernatural accomplishment and the attainment of immortality by the hero." As "ordinary" rather than holy, all other expressions of war signal a different degree of civilizational fall [9].

Indeed, under the sign of the second caste, war reduces to will and pleasure, "war for war's sake." Will and pleasure among warrior aristocrats represent a fall from the ideal of supernatural accomplishment in holy war under the first sign. However, this fall into merely willful fighting and killing as pleasure is nothing like as steep as that signaled by war under the sign of the third caste.

Under this sign, war is oriented not to aristocratic pleasure but gross material advantage, "economic and industrial order." Nevertheless, this cause of bourgeois imperialism may still offer citizen

soldiers some opportunity for transfiguration. It offers them this opportunity by tearing them away from their “routine comfortable” lives; a spiritually void “protracted existence spent consuming monotonously from the trivialities of cities [10].”

That said, under the sign of the fourth caste, the fall reaches its nadir. As revolution by slaves, war is oriented to the “destruction” of the other castes – holy elites, warrior aristocrats, and bourgeoisie. In other words, it is oriented to *flattening* the quadripartite hierarchy of castes. At this limit of the fall, “heroic experience is united, almost fatally, to an evocation, and an eruption, of instinctual, sub-personal, collective, irrational forces [11].”

However, even in such a degraded experience of the heroic, Evola insists the hero of Bolshevik revolution may “at last realize that reality is something very different.” Emerging from the eruption of revolutionary violence, such a hero gains renewed “energies” and strength of personality. Indeed, the hero achieves an “unflinching gaze” into the “truth” of natural hierarchy. Transfigured through revolutionary violence from slavishness into strength in truth, this spiritually revitalized hero becomes capable of instigating a “reconstructive revolution [12].”

Such a revolutionary project of reconstruction draws ominously upon “the ideals from which Fascism draws its inspiration [13],” the ideals of a natural hierarchy of superior and inferior. What, though, should we make of Evola’s spiritually revitalized and transfigured heroes? It is striking that his fascist hero departs radically from the stereotype of the fascist charismatic leader, as Fuher or Duce.

While appealing to natural hierarchies of race and national spirit, Hitler and Mussolini not only forged pragmatic alliances with bourgeois industrialists, but also sought imperial expansion for material or economic gain. However, at the penultimate stage of the involutory fall, such alliances with the bourgeois *third caste* would betray those ideals of natural hierarchy and order from which Evola’s draws inspiration for his distinctive version of fascism.

According to Evola, the transfigurative fascist hero emerges not during the penultimate third *but the ultimate fourth stage* of the fall, the eruption of collective irrationality and violence brought about by the slave caste, destroying, *flattening every dimension of natural caste hierarchy*. Only then does a hero emerge from the chaos of Bolshevik revolution capable of gazing unflinchingly into the perennial, universal truth of natural hierarchical order.

Evola’s embrace of fascism therefore is best understood considering his traditionalism. His vision of a civilizational fall from first to fourth caste, in some respects, mirrors the ancient Hindu doc-

trine of the Four Ages, or Yugas. This entails not a fall as much as a *cycle* from a Golden Age of Truth (Satya Yuga), through successive Ages of decline (Treta and Dwarpar Yugas) to an Age of disorder (Kali Yuga), *and back again*.

Involuntary cycle rather than fall, the Yugas mirror Evola’s conception of fourth caste collective irrationality (Kali Yuga) and of a fascist revolutionary reconstruction of natural hierarchy and order under the sign of the first ‘holy’ caste (Satya Yuga). Indeed, the fascist transfigurative hero instigates revolution in the literal sense of the word, *a full circle*, a cycling back to perennial truth, order, dharma.

Of course, this is no perfect mirror image. The Yugas are not castes specifically but rather epochs with determinate time frames. Moreover, the cycle from Satya to Kali Yuga, and back again, is not traced in Hinduism through the different types and meanings of wartime heroism pertaining to the ‘primordial qualifications’ of caste.

Nevertheless, the Yugas helps expose the traditionalist dimension of Evola’s unique, but otherwise obscure, combination of philosophical anthropology and metaphysics of transfigurative heroism. This dimension of Evola’s thought defines the possibility of a cyclical revolution *more profoundly spiritual, anti-progressive, and reactionary*, than anything that happened ‘under the sign’ of Hitlerian and Mussolinian fascism.

References

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