

# THE SUBJUNCTIVE OF POTENTIALITY—A MEDITATION ON SOME WORDS BY ROBERT MUSIL PUSHING AGAINST THE RHETORIC AND REALITY OF NATIONALISM

*Posted on October 13, 2019 by Andrew Brown*



## READINGS

### **Matthew 5:43-45 NRSV**

*[Jesus said:] You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be*

children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

**From *The Gospel in Brief* by Leo Tolstoy, (Harper Perennial, 2011, p. 41)**

The fifth commandment. *In the previous law it was said: do good to your own people and do harm to the foreigner. But I say to you: love not only your own countrymen, but also the people of other nations. Let others hate you, let them attack you and insult you; but you must praise them and do good to them. If you are only good to your own countrymen, then you are like everyone else who is good to their own countrymen; and it is because of this that wars occur. But you should treat all nations equally, and if you do, you will be the sons of the father. All people are his children, consequently all people should be your brothers. And so, this is the fifth commandment: Keep the same law in regard to other nations that I have asked you to keep amongst yourselves. For the father of all people there is no such thing as different nations, there are no different kingdoms either: all are brothers, all are sons of the one father. Don't create differences between people based on nations and kingdoms.*

**From the opening of chapter 5 of Robert Musil's (1880–1942) 1700 page long unfinished modernist novel in three volumes and various drafts called 'The Man Without Qualities' which he wrote between 1930–1943:**

*The Man Without Qualities of whom we are speaking . . . had passed the first test of his character when he was still on the borderline between childhood and adolescence: it was in a school essay on a patriotic theme. German children simply were taught to despise Austrian children's wars, and to believe that French children were the descendants of enervate debauchees, running away in their thousands whenever a German Landwehrmann [something akin to a member of the Home Guard] with a big beard so much as walked up to them. And with the roles reversed, and all desirable alterations made, exactly the same is learnt by French, Russian and English children, who for their part have also often been on the winning side. . . . In Austria however, this was a little more involved. Although, of course the Austrians had also been victorious in all the wars of their history, after most of these wars they had had to surrender something,*

*Such a state of affairs starts one thinking; and in his essay on 'Love of Country' Ulrich wrote that anyone who really loved his country should never think his own country the best. And then, in a flash that struck him as particularly beautiful, although he was more dazzled by its brilliance than able to see what was going on in the light of it, he had added to this suspect sentence a second, to the effect that even God probably preferred to speak of His world in the subjunctive of potentiality. . . for God makes the world and while doing so thinks that it could just as easily be some other way. He had been very proud of this sentence but perhaps he had not expressed himself quite intelligibly, for it created a great stir, and he was almost expelled from the school. No decision was reached*

*simply because the authorities could not make up their minds whether his audacious remark was to be regarded as defamation of the Fatherland or blasphemy.*

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## ADDRESS

### **The subjunctive of potentiality—a meditation on some words by Robert Musil pushing against the rhetoric and reality of nationalism**

Last week I looked with you at Jesus' parable of the mustard seed and, to we twenty-first century city dwellers, the surprising first-century fact that Jesus was suggesting the kingdom of God/heaven was like pungent and fiery shrub with dangerous take-over properties which also attracted birds into areas of cultivation where you did not want them. Indeed, it was perceived to be such a problematic plant that its planting was prohibited in Jewish Palestine. You will recall that I suggested Greta Thunberg and the 'School Strike for Climate' movement was, perhaps, an appropriate twenty-first century example of the kind of thing Jesus envisaged the kingdom of God/heaven would look like.

I hope that, if nothing else, this example served as a reminder that Jesus' teachings were often very radical challenges to the religious, political and social status quo of his own time and that his challenges continue to remain relevant even down unto our own day where our so many of own religious, political and social status quos clearly need to be challenged and overturned as vigorously as Jesus overturned the tables of the money-changers and traders he found in the temple at Jerusalem two-thousand years ago.

This is just one of the reasons why, albeit always in an appropriately critical fashion, I continue to take Jesus as my own central religio-political exemplar; not as God, of course — that has always struck me as a wholly unbelievable claim of Christianity — but, instead, as an exemplary, courageous and often exceptionally insightful and wise brother to us all, a true 'primus inter pares', first among equals.

For various reasons this week connected with various events in the news another of Jesus' teachings has been right at the forefront of my mind, namely the passage from Matthew about loving one's enemies (Matthew 5:43-45). Being a great admirer of the Russian novelist, Christian anarchist and pacifist Leo Tolstoy I nearly always juxtapose the gospel texts I'm reading with the interpretations he offers us in his own 'Gospel in Brief'. I don't always wholly resonate with his take on what Jesus might have meant by this or that teaching — as was the case last week — but, more often than not, I do. On this occasion I do concur with Tolstoy and, like him, I think it is legitimate to expand the meaning of Jesus' teaching outwards from our inter-personal encounters to the encounters experienced in the wider geopolitical sphere where nation state

meets nation state and to say boldly that ‘there is no such thing as different nations, there are no different kingdoms either: all are brothers [and sisters], all are sons [and daughters] of the one father [or mother, or god, or nature]’ and that, therefore, we mustn’t ‘create differences between people based on nations and kingdoms.’

As a person committed to the cosmopolitan ideal implicit in Jesus’ teachings about the kingdom of God/heaven, in my own life I take the teaching we are considering today to be axiomatic by which, to be clear, I mean I take it as if it were assuredly true and that, therefore, I can trust it as a starting point from which to make further arguments about how I think we should best proceed together religiously, politically and socially in this highly complex, plural world. (The word ‘axiom’, remember, comes from the Greek *axiōma* (ἀξιωμα) meaning ‘that which is thought worthy or fit’ or ‘that which commends itself as evident.’)

But I freely (if sadly) acknowledge that, although this teaching of Jesus is for me a worthy, fit and self-evident one, it is not so for a goodly part of humanity, either in the past or today. Many, many people in this country and around the world remain all too willing to let themselves become convinced about their own nation’s putative, unique and unparalleled greatness and genius. As most of us are aware this conviction has been and is often given extra force and weight by being combined with a strong belief that God himself (and it generally has been a male God) made it so. The technical word for this is ‘exceptionalism’ and examples exist of it everywhere and in all political and religious traditions.

I know of few better expressions of how this tendency continues to be taught to us and our children than the short passage you heard earlier from Robert Musil’s (1880–1942) 1700 page long unfinished modernist novel in three volumes and various drafts called ‘The Man Without Qualities’ which he wrote between 1930–1943.

For those of you who don’t know it, ‘The Man Without Qualities’ has sometimes be described as being one of the most significant novels of the twentieth century. It’s not a novel with a straightforwardly conventional plot but rather a ‘story of ideas’, which are explored in the context of the [Austro-Hungarian monarchy’s last days towards the end of the First World War](#). This was a febrile period of European history when old centres and certainties could no longer hold or be held. In our own British and Irish context we need only recall the famous opening of [Yeats’](#) ‘The Second Coming’ which was written in 1919, i.e. at the same time in which Musil’s novel was set:

*Turning and turning in the widening [gyre](#)*

*The falcon cannot hear the falconer;*

*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;*

*Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.*

Given this it will, perhaps, come as no surprise to you that Musil's book is filled with existential ideas and themes, particularly those concerned with the values of truth and opinion and how society might organize itself. It's hardly controversial to note that the fin de siècle themes found in the novel resonate strongly with us in our own day and age.

Indeed, I'm somewhat distressed to look around me today and, alas, see too many people once again deliberately teaching and being 'taught to despise' other nations. As I have already indicated, there were many examples of this during the week with the most high profile of them being seen in [the Turkish offensive into north-east Syria in order to attack the Kurds](#). But, for me, the immediate, local trigger was [Arron Banks' utterly despicable 'Leave.EU' tweet which, visually speaking, deliberately referenced wartime propaganda posters by showing a photo of the German Chancellor Angela Merkel standing with her arm aloft beside which was printed the text 'We didn't win two world wars to be pushed around by a Kraut'](#).

As I hope you are fully aware there are many scurrilous newspapers and social media sites both here in the UK and around the world that are deliberately encouraging this tendency on a daily, if not hour by hour basis and, like Ulrich in Musil's novel, '[s]uch a state of affairs starts one thinking'.

With Jesus' axiomatic teaching in mind, especially as it appears through the concentrating lens of Tolstoy's interpretation, I found myself starting to think just as young Ulrich had thought, 'that anyone who really loved his country should never think his own country the best.'

As I was sitting at my desk beginning to write this address I found myself experiencing a similar theological flash of insight as that experienced by Ulrich at his own school desk, namely, the thought that (were God to exist)

> 'even God probably preferred to speak of His world in the subjunctive of potentiality. . . . for God makes the world and while doing so thinks that it could just as easily be some other way.'

Now, as most of you know, as a species of a-theist, I'm very, very careful about how I bring God (or rather talk about God) into my Sunday addresses. But one needs to be almost infinitely more careful when it comes exploring talk about God in connection with nations and peoples. This mix

is nearly always utterly toxic and I loathe, detest and fear even the merest hint of ‘God is on my (or our) side’ rhetoric, a rhetoric which is always and only nasty, nasty, nasty.

But Musil’s genius in this passage from his novel is, I think, to bring God (or a certain kind of talk about God) into play in the context of nationalism in a fashion that has long seemed to me to be helpful and creative.

As most of you will know, in English the subjunctive mood is used to form sentences that express wished-for, tentatively assumed, or hypothetical states of affairs, rather than things that the speaker intends to represent as true and factual. Ulrich expresses his feeling that God’s word of creation would (probably) be delivered in the subjunctive mood, a way of creating the world in which, because things could always have been different, things are always-already left open to become different from how they once were, and/or currently are.

Ulrich’s conception of reality (God) is, therefore, a subjective one, the world is made such that it ‘could just as easily be some other way.’

Now I happen to think (and feel) that if more people could be persuaded to start living by this conception of reality (God), living by the subjunctive of potentiality, then the path to a better, more tolerant and creative world would be considerably smoothed and we would see many more ways begin to appear through which all nations could come to be treated equally and all people could more easily begin to show up to us as being, not our enemies but truly our brothers and sisters.

But it remains damnably hard to encourage people to entertain this thought either as theologically expressed (through certain ways of talking about God) or as politically expressed (through certain ways of talking about love of one’s own country).

To be honest, I don’t much care, and I’m happy to make it clear that my remarks today are consciously designed to upset the tables upon which are found for sale both our old conceptions of nationalism and our old belief that there exists some of all powerful monotheistic creator God who has chosen for all time one nation, one people and one morality as being better than all the others. I am as certain as I can be that these old concepts are errant and dangerous pieces of nonsense.

I also want to be clear that I do love my country, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (and in particular the little bit of it that is [East Anglia](#)), but I think I do this best by fully acknowledging that it is not, and never will be the best country in the world (although I trust I might always be able to do better in all kinds of ways); and, as if it were possible for a non-, even a-theist like me to say it, I would also love God, and I think I show would best be able to show my love to God by understanding God could have made (and will still make) everything, but

everything mind you, differently.

Naturally, I realise that by following Jesus', Tolstoy's and Ulrich's example some people will be unable to make up their minds whether my remarks today are to be regarded as defamation of my country or blasphemy against God. Of course, in my opinion, they neither defame nor blaspheme.