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Interpretation
A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY
www.interpretationjournal.com

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Subscriptions
Subscription rates per volume (3 issues):
Individuals $29
Libraries and all other institutions $48
Students (four-year limit) $18
Single copies available.

Payments: in U.S. dollars and payable by a financial institution located
within the U.S.A. (or the U. S. Postal Service).

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Printed by Sheridan Press, Hanover, PA, U.S.A.
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ISSN 0020-9635
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When Plato began to compose his dialogues, he entered a realm of public discourse whose central themes and terms had already been established by a variety of literary genres, as well as by the civic institutions and traditions in which these genres were embedded and the shared history on which they reflected. Plato’s first readers would have tried to situate his philosophical dramas within an interior space of the soul that was characteristically Greek, yet also distinctively Athenian—a space defined on the one hand by Athenian historical experience, primarily that of the Peloponnesian War and its aftermath, and, on the other, by a vast array of well-crafted words, including the epic poetry of Homer and Hesiod, the tragedies and satyr-plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, the comedies of Aristophanes, the histories of Herodotus and Thucydides, the philosophical writings of Parmenides and Heraclitus, the political speeches of Pericles and Cleon, and the orations of Isocrates and Lysias. Plato’s appreciation of the extraordinary richness of this conceptual and imaginative space is reflected in the inventiveness with which he adapts the literary tradition for his own philosophical purposes, a practice that led Friedrich Nietzsche to characterize the dialogues as “a mixture of all extant styles and forms” (Nietzsche 1967, 90).

If Nietzsche intended to imply that Plato combined literary genres in a haphazard or offhand manner, he missed the mark. The structure and substance of a single Platonic dialogue may nevertheless reflect diverse literary antecedents. The Republic is a case in point. Among other things—this list is hardly comprehensive—the Republic engages, by way of adaptation,
imitation, or refutation, the myth of Gyges in the *History* of Herodotus, Aristophanes’ *Clouds, Assemblywomen*, and *Birds*, and Lysias’s speech *Against Eratosthenes* (Howland 2004a, 2004b, 2005). Perhaps most noteworthy, however, is Plato’s philosophical appropriation of Homer. For considered as a whole, the *Republic* reveals itself to be a philosophical epic modeled on the plan of Homer’s *Odyssey* (Howland 2004a).

The relationship between the *Republic* and the *Odyssey* is the subject of a seminal article by the late classicist Charles Segal (Segal 1978). Both of these texts, Segal noted, involve “the search for a coherent world order,” and both present us with a large, unifying vision of reality. Both depict the soul’s struggles as it journeys across the “open sea” of life, confronting death not only literally, but also in the form of a multiplicity of seductions that threaten to destroy its humanity. Both tell of a voyage to the land of the dead that furnishes the wisdom needed to make one’s way, in Segal’s words, “out of the darkness and confusion of the transient, contingent goals surrounding human life [and] toward the truth of life’s essential and permanent character,” and so to return at last to one’s proper home (Segal 1978, 317, 334). These points of resemblance are secured in large measure by the employment of shared myths and literary motifs that Segal brings to light in this and other studies of the *Odyssey*. These include the myth of a journey to, and return from, the afterworld; the myth of passage though a realm of enchantment and fantasy, where the return to reality is symbolically marked by the transition from sleep to wakefulness and by the loss of one’s clothing; and the recurring imagery of arduous voyages across water and from regions of darkness (such as caves) into the light of day (Segal 1974, 1962).

Segal suggests that Plato has both a pedagogical and a philosophical reason for deploying the archetypes of myth in depicting philosophy as an epic quest. By giving Socratic philosophizing an aura of “heroic seriousness and epic majesty,” this strategy makes the philosophic life a plausible and attractive competitor for the attention of morally and intellectually serious young souls. What is more, myth “is the language of the adventures of the soul,” and, Segal speculates, “it may be that only through myth and mythical images can the soul ultimately be known” (Segal 1978, 329, 334).

Plato’s adaptation of Homer is a subject of virtually inexhaustible richness. In returning to this topic, the present essay hopes to shed light on a problem that emerges when one reflects on the Odyssean character of the dramatic and mythological dimensions of the *Republic*. I refer to the problem of human homelessness, which the *Republic* presents in a
manner that differs in crucial respects from the way Homer frames the issue in the *Odyssey*. The inquiry undertaken in the following pages, in turn, furnishes a key to understanding Plato’s use of myth in the *Republic*, for it is primarily in response to the problem of human homelessness that he fashions what we may call the mythology of philosophy.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE *REPUBLIC*: ARGUMENT, DRAMA, NARRATIVE, MYTH

On the level of philosophical argument, the *Republic* begins as an inquiry into the nature of justice that soon expands into an investigation of the best life for human beings (344d–e). Thrasymachus and Glaucon argue that a life of injustice is more choiceworthy than a just life. In order to refute these claims, Socrates proposes to study the soul by way of the analogy of the city (368e–69a). This leads him to distinguish between healthy and sick regimes. The healthiest regime is unfortunately a city fit for pigs (372d); the best of the distinctively human regimes will therefore be a compromise between health and humanity, and will emerge from the process of purging a “feverish” regime of the sort one finds anywhere and everywhere—a regime marked by erotic longing and thumotic or spirited aspiration to power and glory (372e–73e). Because the best regime will be ruled by philosopher-kings, inquiry into the city leads to reflection on the nature of the philosopher and the highest objects of philosophical inquiry, the Ideas or Forms and the Good. Even the best regime, however, retains a trace of sickness just insofar as it incorporates *erôs* and *thumos*; it will therefore inevitably decline (545d–46a). Socrates accordingly proceeds to explore the manner in which political decline is driven by a dynamic relationship between various types of character on the one hand and forms of regimes on the other.

Even this extremely abbreviated and incomplete overview of the argument of the *Republic* suffices to indicate the dialogue’s interest for students of ethics, political philosophy, philosophical anthropology, and metaphysics. Yet what this overview does not disclose is that the dialogue’s argument is embedded within its dramatic action, and cannot be adequately evaluated apart from that action.

On the level of drama, the *Republic* begins with Socrates and Glaucon going down to the Piraeus, the port of Athens, to observe the inaugural religious festival of the goddess Bendis. On the way back up to the city, they are stopped by Polemarchus and persuaded to come to the house
of his father, Cephalus, where they intend to dine with friends and then spend the evening watching more of the all-night festival. Instead, Socrates starts a philosophical conversation that makes everyone forget about these plans. The discussion soon takes on a life of its own; Socrates’ defense of justice is challenged first by Thrasymachus, and then, just when Socrates thought he was “freed of argument,” by Plato’s brothers Glaucon and Adeimantus (357a; quotations from the Republic are drawn from Bloom 1968, sometimes with slight modifications). The latter interruption prompts Socrates to return to the examination of the soul, this time by way of the analogy of the city. Having purged the feverish city and used the regime of guardians, auxiliaries, and workers to illuminate the tripartite structure of the well-ordered soul, Socrates is again interrupted—this time by Polemarchus, who wants to hear more about the arrangements pertaining to women and children in the city in speech (449a–c). Polemarchus’s request leads to a digression that takes up books 5, 6 and 7, in the course of which Socrates describes what he calls the Kallipolis or “noble and beautiful city,” the regime ruled by philosopher-kings. The Kallipolis exists only in speech; its actualization depends on chance (592a), and its decay, which Socrates describes in books 8 and 9, is inevitable. However, Socrates manages over the course of the evening to fashion a small philosophical community in deed, a community in which the love of wisdom at least temporarily displaces the desires for food and entertainment that brought him and his companions together in the first place. Even Socrates’ fiercest opponent, Thrasymachus, whom he verbally trounces in book 1, is ultimately drawn back into the conversation and becomes a “friend” (498c–d; 450b).

Unlike the Kallipolis, the community of discourse that forms around Socrates in the home of Cephalus is sustained by neither force nor lies, noble or otherwise. Rather, it is rooted in philosophical erōs, and nourished by the free play of dialogue. Diskin Clay describes the paradoxical relationship of argument and action as follows: “the closed, austere, guarded, and blinkered society of the guardian caste exists in a context that appears wide open to development, to challenge, to reconsideration, and to doubt” (Clay 1988, 21). The dramatic action of the Republic thus radically undermines any attempt to consider its argument as an independent and internally complete set of philosophical reflections.

This is not the only way in which the dialogue’s drama colors the meaning of its argument, for the conversation of the Republic takes place against a bleak backdrop of political violence and impending death. The dramatic date of the Republic cannot be precisely determined, but must be
prior to the end of the Peloponnesian War (Nails 1998). In the aftermath of the war, the Athenians suffered under the brutal regime of a group of oligarchs known as the Thirty. During their eight-month rule in 404–403, the Thirty, who executed some fifteen hundred Athenians (Krentz 1982, 79; Strauss 1986, 54–55; Munn 2000, 231), ruined the family of Cephalus and put to death several of the men present in the Republic, including Polemarchus (Lysias, “Against Eratosthenes,” in Lamb 1957), Niceratus (Krentz 1982, 79–80; Munn 2000, 230–31), and possibly also Cleitophon (Rahe 1977, 198). The Thirty were ultimately defeated in the battle of Munychia in the Piraeus, a battle, one historian speculates, that may have claimed the life of Glaucon (Munn 2000, 239, 416 n. 46). In any case, Socrates was executed under the restored democracy; the anger of the returning democrats was no doubt aroused by his association with some of the leaders of the oligarchy, including Plato’s relatives Critias and Charmides (Xenophon, Mem. 1.2.12; Munn 2000, 425 n. 33). (Critias was the cousin of Plato’s mother and leader of the oligarchs; Plato’s maternal uncle Charmides was one of the Ten who governed in the Piraeus under the Thirty [Krentz 1982, 92]. Plato’s kinship with Critias and Charmides is charted at Welliver 1977, 51, following Davies 1971.)

The thunderclouds of war gathering on the horizon of the Republic seem to emphasize the fantastic nature of the noble and beautiful city in speech in comparison with the ugly reality of Athenian politics. This dramatic setting gives the questions at the center of the Republic—the nature of the best life and the form of the best regime—a strong sense of urgency. Philosophy, Socrates suggests at the very end of the dialogue, can save us as we journey through life and cross the threshold of death (621b–d). One wonders: did it save Polemarchus, or Glaucon, or any of Socrates’ other companions who were soon to complete this journey? What ultimately matters, Plato suggests, is not philosophical arguments in themselves, but their meaning for the lives we actually live. And that meaning, or rather, the problem of meaning, is in large measure communicated within the Republic by the relationship between the argument of the dialogue and its dramatic action.

This is not all, for the Republic gains psychological, and indeed religious, depth and power from Plato’s use of mythical archetypes to structure its dramatic action. These archetypes—including descent to, and return from, the afterworld, a dangerous journey across the sea, and a voyage through a realm of fantasy that culminates in a return to reality—allow us to see in the story of Socrates and his companions the universal and timeless patterns of the soul’s confrontation with the forces of death and dissolution in
its quest for ultimate reality and meaning. What is more, the story (muthos: 376d) that these archetypes help Plato to tell in the Republic differs from earlier accounts of the soul’s adventures in ways that bear directly on the central issues of the dialogue. In this respect, the muthos of the Republic proves to be indispensable to its logos (for an extended reflection on the philosophical significance of muthos in the Republic, see Howland 2005).

PHILOSOPHY AND THE QUEST TO THE AFTERWORLD

The motif of descent is introduced in the first word of the dialogue: katebēn, “I went down.” “I went down to the Piraeus yesterday with Glaucon,” Socrates says, as he begins to tell the story of the Republic to an unnamed audience (327a). Piraeus means “Beyond-Land,” specifically, the land beyond the river thought to have once separated this region from the rest of Attica (Brann 1989–90, 8–9). In Homer and Hesiod, Hades is bounded by Ocean and the River Styx; in the Myth of Er with which the Republic concludes, the land of the dead lies beyond the river of Carelessness. The association of the Piraeus with Hades is strengthened by the fact that Bendis, the goddess whose festival Socrates and Glaucon have come to the Piraeus see, is a deity of the underworld; the torch-race and all-night vigil in her honor, which take place in the Piraeus concurrently with the dialogue, “are enactments of the continuing life of the sun’s light and of the promise of the sun’s renewal after its descent into the realm of perpetual night” (Rosenstock 1983, 220–21). Descent into and ascent from the underworld is also a recurring theme in the Republic’s various myths and images, including the story in book 2 of Gyges’ ancestor, who descends into the earth and returns with a magic ring, the Cave Image of book 7, and the Myth of Er in book 10. Er, we recall, died in battle, went down as an observer into a place Socrates identifies with Hades (619a), remembered what he saw there, and returned to the land of the living to make his report. Here the narrative, dramatic, and mythical structures of the Republic converge, for Er’s tale is the mythical analogue of Socrates’ descent to the Piraeus to see the sights, his return to Athens, and his narration of “yesterday’s” adventures. The Myth of Er ends when Er awakens at dawn on his funeral pyre, and we may well imagine that it is around dawn when Socrates finishes narrating Er’s tale—the very time at which the all-night Festival of Bendis also concludes.

The foregoing associations indicate that, while the conversation of the Republic takes place, metaphorically, in the dark region of Hades, it ends with the promise of rebirth in the domain of light and life. The Republic as a whole, and the Myth of Er in particular, thus reflect the structure of
mystery initiation, a religious ritual of death and subsequent rebirth that helped initiates to confront the terrors of death and that promised blessedness in the afterworld. The popular Eleusinian mysteries reenacted the mythical abduction of Kore (or Persephone) by Hades, god of the underworld, and the search for Kore by her mother Demeter. Like the adventures of Er and the conversation of the Republic, the mysteries required an initiate to undertake a disorienting journey through night and darkness, to engage in strange deeds and listen to strange speeches, and to behold fearsome and fantastic sights; the initiation was concluded at dawn, with a return to light (Burkert 1983, 248–97).

Insofar as the Republic accomplishes the philosophical equivalent of mystery initiation, it prepares us for death. What does this mean? Socrates suggests that Er’s tale can save us as we cross the threshold of death, and he connects the saving power of this tale with philosophy. But Socrates approaches death, and the challenge it poses, from the opposite direction of the mystery initiate. In Er’s tale, death is but a prelude to reincarnation; to prepare for death is thus to prepare to choose a new life, along with the punishment or reward that follows from this life in the afterworld. Socrates explains that, if we are persuaded by Er’s report—which is to say, if we are persuaded by Socrates, “holding that soul is immortal,” as he says, “and capable of bearing all evils and all goods”—then “we shall make a good crossing of the river of Forgetfulness and not defile our souls” (621b–c). The crossing to which he refers, however, is not that from life to death. It is rather the return from the afterworld to life—the crossing of the disembodied soul as it enters into a new incarnation. Hence philosophy, Socrates suggests, saves us not so much from the terrors of death as from the terrors of life, and from the forms of death—including the dispersion or disintegration of the self and the dissolution of our humanity—that we may encounter in life.

In the afterworld, Er observes disembodied souls, fresh from a thousand years of heavenly reward or hellish punishment, choosing new lives from among a great many patterns or paradigms. A soul that in its previous incarnation was virtuous “by habit, without philosophy” selects a miserable life of tyranny; the soul of Odysseus, which “from memory of its former labors . . . had recovered from love of honor,” chooses “the life of a private man who minds his own business” (619b–d, 620c). Socrates remarks that he who “always philosophizes in a healthy way” will be best prepared to select a happy life (619d–e). Prior to their reincarnation, all souls are compelled to drink of the river of Carelessness in the plain of Forgetfulness. While every other soul consequently “forgot everything,” Er alone was forbidden to drink. His tale was
thus “saved and not lost,” Socrates explains, “and it could save us, if we were persuaded by it” (621b–c). The phrase “if we were persuaded by it” is followed immediately by the words “if we are persuaded by me”; Socrates thus identifies Er’s tale with the preceding night’s conversation, the story of which he saves by a prodigious act of recollection. In narrating the Republic, Socrates has himself effectively laid out paradigms of lives among which his auditors may perhaps choose. These include the lives, explored on the level of argument, that he associates with various regimes—the philosophic, tyrannical, timocratic, oligarchic, and democratic. Socrates remarks in book 9 that the proper judge of the misery or happiness of the tyrant—and, by extension, of anyone else—is “he who is able in thought to enter into a man’s character and to see through it” (577a). But thanks to Socrates’ powers of recollection, we readers may also enter into, and see through, the lives of the characters displayed in the drama of the dialogue and in its myths—including the very different characters of Socrates, Cephalus, Glaucon, Thrasymachus, and the ancestor of Gyges.

The myth of a quest to the afterworld is very old. It appears in the Mesopotamian epic Gilgamesh, the earliest written versions of which date from about 2000 BCE. Even in this ancient epic, the value of the quest is understood to consist in the wisdom it yields for living life, wisdom that is transmitted by telling and retelling the story of the quest itself. Part of this wisdom has to do with our mortality. When Gilgamesh’s friend Enkidu dies, he is inconsolable. “Now what is this sleep which has seized you?” he asks Enkidu. “You have turned dark and do not hear me!” (Kovacs 1989, 70). Fearing his own death, Gilgamesh seeks out his ancestor Utnapishtim, the survivor of a great flood who was given eternal life by the gods. In order to reach Utnapishtim and learn his secrets, he must journey on the road along which the sun passes through the netherworld at night. He must then cross an expanse of water, including the Waters of Death. Having braved these hazards, Gilgamesh submits to a final test. Utnapishtim challenges him to remain awake for six days and seven nights, but sleep, the image of death in life, overcomes him immediately—a failure that proves his lack of fitness for immortality. “What shall I do?” Gilgamesh asks Utnapishtim. “Wherever I set foot there too is death!” (Kovacs 1989, 105). Utnapishtim consoles Gilgamesh with a plant that will restore youth, but he loses it on his homeward journey.

Gilgamesh’s experiences earn him the epithet “He Who Has Seen Everything,” the words with which the epic begins. Even though he is two-thirds divine, Gilgamesh fails to elude death. Yet he preserves the memory of his story by inscribing it on lapis tablets, thereby guaranteeing that his tale,
together with his hard-won knowledge of man’s ineluctable mortality, will not be lost (Kovacs 1989, 3–4).

Quests to the afterworld are reflected in various Greek legends, including those of Orpheus and Heracles; for readers of the Republic, the most important of these is Homer’s tale of Odysseus. Like Gilgamesh, the Odyssey is an epic in which the hero returns home after passing beyond the boundary of death. This process of return unfolds in three stages: Odysseus’s adventures in the fantastic realm of monsters, goddesses, and dead souls, during which he loses all of his companions; his sojourn among the Phaeacians, whose godlike freedom from cares, pain, and toil betoken their distance from things human; and his return to the real, violent world of Ithaca. The wandering Odysseus encounters death in many guises. Death comes to be linked with darkness, sleep, and forgetfulness, and is particularly associated with caves—including the dark, cavelike harbor of the cannibalistic Laestrygonians, the island caves of the Cyclops and Calypso, and the cavernous region of Hades. Life, correspondingly, is associated with light, wakefulness, and recollection.

For Odysseus, to live means not merely to exist but to return home. In order “to save his life [psuchê, literally, “soul”] and bring his comrades home” (Odyssey 1.5), Odysseus is compelled to cross the sea to the underworld, so that the shade of the prophet Teiresias may instruct him on his journey (unless otherwise noted, quotations from the Odyssey are drawn from Fagles 1996; the Greek text is cited by book and line number). Odysseus returns from Hades equipped not only with the knowledge of how to get home, but also with deeper insight into the value and fragility of life. One suspects that the vision of phantom existence he is vouchsafed in the underworld helps him to steer clear of the various forms of living death that present themselves over the course of his journey, just as he has already resisted the honeyed, memory-laundering drugs of Circe and the Lotus Eaters—potions that make men lose all desire and thought for their homelands (9.94–97, 10.314–22). In the end, Odysseus is able to save himself, but not his comrades, just as Gilgamesh was unable to save his friend Enkidu. In part, this is because Odysseus is no less immune to sleep—no less mortal—than Gilgamesh was. When he nods off within sight of Ithaca, his shipmates, driven by greed and envy, open the bag of winds that Aeolus had given him and cause the ship to be swept back out to sea (10.31–55). The fate of his men is sealed when he falls asleep while they devour the forbidden Cattle of the Sun. Like Gilgamesh, however, Odysseus is rescued from the ultimate oblivion associated with death.
by the telling and retelling of his story. And like the epic of *Gilgamesh*, the *Odyssey* implies that its protagonist’s well-earned wisdom may, in another sense, save us as we confront a multiplicity of dehumanizing seductions and terrors on the broad sea of life.

The *Republic* is an odyssey in its own right. It is an extended journey that unfolds against the backdrop of the sea, the primary image of chaos in the Platonic dialogues. The movement of the *Republic*’s *logos* or argument metaphorically involves sailing (394d), numerous descents into dark, cavelike regions, being shipwrecked and forced to swim through the sea (441c, 453d), and, finally, being cast upon an unfamiliar shore by great waves—in this case, the three waves of paradox in book 5. What is more, the dialogue begins and ends with allusions to Odysseus’s adventures. Its very first words echo the beginning of Odysseus’s narration for Penelope of his descent into the underworld: “I went down [*katebên*] into the house of Hades” (23.252). Its last words, as we have seen, mention the soul of Odysseus. This is not unexpected: in introducing the Myth of Er, Socrates puns that it is not a “tale of Alkinoos [*Alkinou*],” the King of the Phaeacians, but of Er, “a strong [*alkimou*] man” (614b). And in the middle of the dialogue, in the Cave Image, Socrates quotes the shade of Achilles when he tells Odysseus that he would rather be a serf to a poor man on earth than ruler over all the dead (516d). The effect of this quotation is to link the situation of non-philosophical human beings with that of the shades in Hades, and to link the philosopher, whose quest for wisdom enables him to transcend the cavernous horizons of the cities of men, with Odysseus.

**Homecoming and Homelessness in the *Odyssey* and the *Republic***

Here we begin to glimpse the essential nature of Plato’s adaptation of Homer. The *Odyssey* lends itself to philosophical appropriation because it is on one level a voyage of deepening self-knowledge, in which the hero’s homeward journey involves a growing understanding of the whole of human experience and the rejection of ways of life that fail to recognize, and recollectively to internalize, the most significant elements of that experience. In connecting the philosopher and the fate of the *logos* with Odysseus and his adventures, Plato suggests that in the *Republic* Socrates narrates a new, specifically *philosophic* odyssey. Prior to philosophizing, Plato implies, the soul, like Odysseus, wanders in a kind of no-man’s land suspended between life
and death. To move through this no-man’s land is to encounter disoriented and fragmented souls—souls that fall far short of being genuine selves, if by this term we mean independent, reflective beings that can fairly claim responsibility for their own actions. The Republic begins and ends with a display of such deficient human beings: the soul that chooses first in the lottery of lives in book 10—the one that jumps at the chance to live as a tyrant, and subsequently denies all responsibility for his foolish choice—hearkens back to the picture Plato draws in book 1 of Cephalus, whose youthful enslavement to bodily appetites has, in his old age, given way to a visceral and self-obsessed fear that closes him off from philosophical reflection (Howland 2004a, 57–63).

Socrates’ encounter with Cephalus sets the tone for all that follows in the Republic, for the dialogue is a record of Socrates’ critical exploration of the alternatively threatening and seductive panoply of unexamined lives and his repeated attempts to overcome the antiphilosophical challenges they represent. Along the way, Plato opens up the prospect of a kind of “homecoming” for human beings—not a literal, physical homecoming but a homecoming of the soul, figuratively represented as its emergence from the darkness of the cave into the light of the Good and the presence of the Ideas or Forms.

A home is, among other things, a domain of refuge and rest to which one is attached by affection and a deep sense of belonging, of being in one’s proper place. According to Socrates, our “first home” (tēs prōtēs oikēsēs) is the cave, in remembering which the philosopher who has succeeded in ascending to the light “considers himself happy for the change” (516c). As we shall see directly, the soul of the philosopher finds respite from longing when it comes to know the Ideas and the Good. This soul “comes home” in another sense as well, for in emerging from the cave it becomes aware of the whole of what is as the context within which the full extent of its former disorientation becomes clear, and, more positively, of the community of Ideas as the ultimate measure of the adequacy of our “first,” human communities.

While space prohibits a full exploration of the philosophical significance of the Ideas and the Good (concerning which see Brann 1980 and Lachterman 1989–90), we must note their status as objects of erotic aspiration and as principles of order for soul and city alike. The striving of the philosophical soul is the backdrop against which the Ideas first come into view. In book 5, Socrates introduces the philosopher as a lover of wisdom whose “insatiable” erotic attraction to “the sight of truth” makes him eager “to taste every kind of study” (474d–75d). Knowledge of the Ideas, the unchanging, unitary “looks” or “forms” of which the many phenomena are images or
likenesses (476a–c), nourishes and completes the philosopher’s soul:

It is the nature of one who is really a lover of learning to strive for what is, and he would not linger by each of the many things that are opined to be, but would go forward and would not lose the keenness of his passionate love [erôs] or desist from it until he should touch the nature itself of each thing that is with the part of the soul that is suited to lay hold of such a thing, and it is the part akin to it that is suited. Having drawn near it and coupled with that which truly is, and having begotten intelligence and truth, he would know and truly live and would be nourished and thus cease from labor pains, but not before. (490a–b)

The soul of the philosopher is erotically drawn to “that which truly is” as its natural end and complement. Its encounter with what is leads to pregnancy, and issues, after a period of labor, in the virtue of intelligence (nous) and in truth, which together make it possible both to know what truly is and to live in harmony with this knowledge. The fulfillment of philosophical longing thus produces order within the psyche.

Socrates develops the latter suggestion a little later in book 6, when he indicates that the order and integrity of the Ideas furnish a pattern for the internal structure of the soul. “A man who has his understanding truly turned toward the things that are,” he explains,

has no leisure to look down toward the affairs of human beings and to be filled with envy and ill will as a result of fighting with them. But, rather, because he sees and contemplates things that are set in a regular arrangement and are always in the same condition—things that neither do injustice to one another nor suffer it at one another’s hands, but remain all in order [kosmôi] according to reason—he imitates them, and, as much as possible, makes himself like them. (500b–c)

“The philosopher,” Socrates concludes, “keeping company with the divine and the orderly … becomes orderly and divine” (500c–d). Conversely, he implies, the soul that looks “down” toward human affairs—one thinks here of the prisoners and puppet-masters in the cave, who attend exclusively to the chaotic struggle for “honors, prizes, and praises” that unfolds in the play of shadows below them (516c–d)—is likely to be “filled with envy and ill will,” and to reflect the disorder and injustice of the spectacle by which they take their bearings. Such is the soul of Cephalus, a soul driven by the “frenzied,” “savage,” and “mad” masters of corporeal desire to commit injustices of the sort that make an old man “reckon up his accounts” and even wake from sleep in fright (329c–d, 330d–e).
Like the Ideas, the Good initially comes into sight in connection with human desire. Socrates tells Glaucon that the Good is what every soul pursues “and for the sake of which it does everything.” Yet the soul “is at a loss about” the Good, “and unable to grasp just what it is” (505d–e). A clue to its nature is furnished by its image, the sun, which as “the source of the seasons and the years” (516b) imposes an ordered pattern of visibility and growth in the natural world that allows each thing to manifest itself individually, and all things together. So, too, that the Ideas stand together as an ordered whole or kosmos, and thus constitute a community, is the work of the Good—“the source,” as David Lachterman puts it, “that enables the Forms to fit with one another in the way that bests suits each and all of them,” thus “giv[ing] the intelligible domain its intactness, its integrity.” In particular, the Good allows the Forms to show forth in the intrinsic character they already possess, and thus “enables each and every one of them to do the work for which it is suited by its own inherent nature” (Lachterman 1989–90, 156–57, emphasis in original). The Good is furthermore the ultimate source of wholeness within the microcosms of soul and city as well as the cosmos itself, for it is only by imaging the community of Ideas that the soul and the city come to possess the integrity of a well-structured ensemble of harmoniously functioning parts. “A city could never be happy,” as Socrates puts this point, “without having its outlines drawn by the painters who use the divine pattern” (500e)—that is, by the philosopher-kings who have emerged from the cave and are able to see the Ideas in the light of the Good.

In setting forth his conception of a philosophical homecoming, Plato plays on the connection between intelligence and homecoming that Homer develops in the Odyssey. This connection is nicely illustrated in an episode in book 10 of the epic. The witch Circe gives Odysseus’s shipmates “wicked drugs / to wipe from their memories any thought of home” (10.236) after which she turns them into swine. When her drugs fail to work on Odysseus, she observes that no other man has ever withstood her black magic, but that his mind cannot be overcome by charms (10.339). Circe’s remark suggests that noos or nous, the unenchantable “mind” or “intelligence” that distinguishes Odysseus from his foolish and impulsive comrades, is essential to his nostos or “homecoming.” Philological evidence confirms this suggestion, for noos and nostos seem to be derived from a common Indo-European root *nes-, meaning something like “return to light and life” (Frame 1978, esp. 34–80). In the Republic, as in the Odyssey, intelligence plays a crucial role in the soul’s homeward quest. As we have seen, human beings are largely in the dark about the good they are seeking; their disorientation is reflected in the
situation of the prisoners in the cave, who are, as Glaucon remarks, “strange” or atopos—literally, “out of place” (515a). Only the philosopher is able to emerge from the gloom and riot of the cave into the sunlit uplands of truth and being, in whose presence he satisfies his most fundamental desire and “knows and lives truly” (490a–b). And to see the Ideas in the light of the Good, as the philosopher does, is to exercise the power of nous (508d).

Were this the end of the story Socrates tells in the Republic, we might conclude that this philosophical homecoming of the soul is Plato’s solution to the problem Glaucon points out of the placelessness or atopia of human beings. Such a conclusion would be premature. In fact, the notion that human beings might have a “home” and could find a way to “be at home” turns out to be far more tenuous and uncertain in the Republic than it is in the Odyssey.

To see why, let us begin with the problem of homecoming that Odysseus confronts in the Odyssey. There is no equivalent in Homer to the Platonic distinction between the soul’s “first home” in the cave and its proper “home” in the intelligible domain of being. Insofar as human beings have a home, Homer locates it in the sphere of everyday existence—the bright, living surface that fascinates the gods and evokes nostalgia in the departed shades of the underworld. In the Cave Image, Plato explicitly reverses Homer’s evaluation of human existence: in comparison with the upper world to which philosophy gives us access, everyday life resembles the pitiable condition of the dead in Hades (516d). We may note in passing that Socrates prepares for the introduction of the Ideas by insisting that the gods do not quarrel with one another, do not lie, are never overcome by laughter, never change shape and are the cause of all good things (377e–89a). Philosophy, which requires that there be stable, intelligible structures that answer to the inquiring mind, would seem to be impossible in a world where a goddess, disguised as a man, could turn into a bird and fly away (Odyssey 3.371–72).

For Odysseus, coming home means returning to the Ithaca he so fondly remembers. The problem he confronts has multiple dimensions, but two are foremost: Odysseus has to find a way back to his island, and then he must reclaim the home he has lost. Accomplishing these two tasks requires Odysseus to put into play all of the resources of mind and character at his disposal. Some of these resources are, broadly speaking, moral and intellectual, as when he boldly tricks the Cyclops Polyphemus or patiently endures the provocations of Antinoos. Others are more technical, as when he fells and splits timber, bores and wedges planks, and riggs the craft that will see him safely away from Calypso’s island, or when he devises the tactics of battle he
will deploy against the much-superior numbers of the suitors. This point is worth dwelling on. Odysseus is skilled in the arts of destruction as well as construction, and both sorts of arts are crucial to his success. As is suggested by Odysseus’s description of how he fashioned his marriage bed from a tree-stump, he has a home on Ithaca only because he has made a home there; so, too, the process of reclaiming his home will involve remaking it.

What this entails is suggested by the passage in book 21 in which Telemachus prepares for the contest of the bow:

First he planted the axes, digging a long trench,
one for all, and trued them all to a line,
then tamped the earth to bed them. Wonder took
the revelers looking on: his work so firm, precise,
though he’d never seen the axes ranged before.

(21:120–23)

Telemachus is truly his father’s son. The handiwork he displays with the axes, his craft of giving form to material objects, is part and parcel of the work of killing men in battle. Odysseus cannot begin to rebuild his life on Ithaca and reclaim his kingship without clearing the ground of the weeds that have sprung up in his absence. First the suitors must be sent packing to Hades. Then, after the killing is done, the halls must be scrubbed and rinsed and purified with fire. All of this is preliminary not only to Odysseus’s resuming his rightful place at Penelope’s side, but also to the political work of reconciling the Ithacans to the loss of two generations of young men, one at Troy and another in the halls of their own king—a task whose extraordinary difficulty is suggested by Homer’s resort to the deus ex machina intervention of Athena and Zeus in the last lines of the Odyssey in order to end the fighting between Odysseus and his townsmen.

I do not wish to overemphasize my point. For however much Odysseus has to work to make a home on Ithaca, it is also true that Ithaca has made him. The rocky island is no place for horses, Telemachus tells Menelaus; its rough terrain is native to goats—tougher and more sure-footed animals (4.605–8). “A rugged place, a good nurse of men,” Odysseus tells Alcinoos, “no sight is sweeter to me than Ithaca” (9.27; this is the translation of Lombardo 2000). I leave aside the question of how much satisfaction Odysseus will derive from this sweet sight, or whether, as Tennyson suggests in his poem “Ulysses,” he will be overcome by wanderlust, “. . . yearning in desire / To follow knowledge like a sinking star.” The point is, Ithaca belongs to him and he belongs to Ithaca. Odysseus has come home.
We turn back now to the Republic. Like Homer, Plato makes it clear that the soul bears the impress of the place of its birth and growth. But for Plato, the habits and affections of the soul are not so much formed as *deformed* by its initial home. The cave is merely a first home, in part because it does not cultivate just and well-ordered souls or support the fulfillment of the distinctively human desire for wisdom. Yet so extensive is the psychic disorientation introduced by our subterranean existence that the deplorable condition of our souls is generally unperceived. In book 7, Socrates compares the situation of a youth who begins to philosophize with that of a *hupobolimaios*, a child that has been raised by “pretended parents” and later makes the shocking discovery that it has been adopted (537e–538c). The youth’s “pretended parents” are the *nomoi*, the laws, customs, and traditions of the regime in which he has grown; the search for his true parents is akin to the philosophical quest for his true home. Only the genuinely philosophical soul, however, is capable of erotic ascent; unless the cave can be refashioned in the light of knowledge of the community of Ideas, the non-philosophical many are condemned to a life lacking integrity and wholeness—a life of disorder and, as the Myth of Er makes clear, of profound dissatisfaction as well (see below). What is more, even the philosopher, having managed to ascend from the cave, nevertheless returns to it (516e). I take this to be an indication that he has, in a crucial sense, never left the cave. The soul of the philosopher may climb up to contemplate the eternal truth of the Ideas and the Good, but the philosopher as a whole human being—an ensouled body whose existence is woven into, and of, the fabric of a particular time and place—necessarily remains below. The mind of Socrates flies far and wide in the inner space of thought and imagination, but Socrates the man lives and dies in Athens. In sum: although the philosophical home of the soul is eternally present and need only be discovered, the actual homes of philosophers and non-philosophers alike must—as in the *Odyssey*—be made by the labor of man. The challenge Socrates wrestles with in the Republic is therefore to refashion the violent and chaotic life of a city like Athens so that it may reflect the goodness and order of the Ideas.

In the Republic, the work of making a suitable home for human beings takes place, as we have noted, against a dramatic backdrop of war and looming civil strife that is reminiscent of the situation in Ithaca. Although this work unfolds in speech, and not in deed, as in the *Odyssey*, the stages of the Republic’s *logos* track those through which Homer’s Odysseus passes in the course of his adventures. The regime that first emerges from the “purging” of the feverish city of book 2 is ruled by guardians who are assisted
by auxiliaries. This regime, which is completed in book 4 and which Socrates associates with Adeimantus (427c), is separated from the Kallipolis by the three waves of paradox of book 5, the greatest of which is the assertion that philosophers must rule. As commentators have noted, the logos thus makes a transition analogous to that undergone by Odysseus when, in book 5 of the Odyssey, he leaves the island of the goddess Calypso and the “unreal, dreamlike world of monsters and enchantresses” (Segal 1962, 17) and takes to the sea (Brann 1989–90, 22; Segal, 1978, 329; Planinc 1991, 277–79). Three great waves push Odysseus into a detour where he arrives at Scheria, the island of the Phaeacians. Socrates’ elaboration of the Kallipolis in books 5 through 7, we recall, is an expository detour into which he is forced by his companions.

These Homeric parallels point toward the radical deficiencies of both the city of Adeimantus that is completed in book 4 and the Kallipolis (which Socrates associates with Glaucon: 527c). During his years with Calypso, Odysseus spends his days “gazing out over the barren sea through blinding tears” (5.84). Odysseus’s deep depression arises from his experience of a kind of living death: Calypso’s name underscores the sense in which she “covers over” (kaluptei) or “buries” him by detaining him at her cave. In the words of one scholar, “Kalypso is oblivion” (Dimock 1974, 412); thanks to her, Telemachus has the impression that the gods have “wiped [Odysseus] from the earth like no one else before” (1.241). Like Calypso and her island, the beauty of the city of Adeimantus is superficial. This city, in which men are tamed like animals, molded like putty, and dyed like wool with politically salutary beliefs (377b–c, 416a, 430a–b), and in which even the rulers lack philosophy, is evidently a dark and cavelike place: it cannot be explored, Socrates says, without “an adequate light” inasmuch as it is “steeped in shadows” and “hard to search out” (427c, 432c). Like Calypso’s island, the city of Adeimantus offers a life that is no life—an existence that frustrates our deepest human longings.

Glaucon’s Kallipolis, however, is no less defective than Adeimantus’s regime. Once again, the Homeric parallel is instructive. The Phaeacians, who are said to be “close kin to the gods” (5.35), used to reside in Hyperia or “Overland”; having fled the violence of their neighbors the Cyclopes, they now live on the island of Scheria, or “Cut-Off Land” (6.4, 6.8). These names are suggestive of their remoteness from the ordinary cares and necessities of human life. The Phaeacians inhabit a paradise where fruit is always in season and where sport offers the greatest glory a man can attain (8.159–64). Not all sports, however, for the Phaeacians eschew the manly and painful contests of boxing and wrestling. “But we can race like the wind,” King
Alkinoos tells Odysseus, “we’re champion sailors too, / and always dear to our hearts, the feast, the lyre and dance / and changes of fresh clothes, our warm bath and beds” (8.246–49). The lives of the Phaeacians—largely free of pain, but also of the seriousness and significance that comes from a sustained engagement with the realities of death, war, and suffering—are both more and less than human. The same can be said of life in the Kallipolis, where human beings are reared in pens like animals and manipulated by “a throng of lies and deceptions” (459c), but where the god-like rulers, far from being philosophers or lovers of wisdom like Socrates, are actually wise. The Phaeacian rulers Alkinoos and Arête—literally, King “Mighty-Mind” and Queen “Prayed-For”—provide a Homeric analogue to the humanly impossible hegemony of intellect and virtue in the Kallipolis. Socrates’ account of the Kallipolis is thus itself the tale of Alkinoos that is somehow superseded by the Myth of Er (614b).

Although he could have married the beautiful Phaeacian princess Nausicaa, Odysseus feels compelled to leave Scheria. So, too, the defects of the Kallipolis can be remedied only by exploring the sources and implications of its remoteness and in this sense “returning” to human life. The descent from the Kallipolis in the second half of the Republic, together with Socrates’ shift in focus from the nature of the best regime to the problem of individual salvation, accomplishes precisely such a return to human reality from what Socrates calls the “dream” of the just city (443b). Socrates’ tour of actual regimes in books 8 and 9 makes it clear that the community cannot be saved along with the individual, as he had initially hoped (497a). The Kallipolis, he proclaims, is at best a heavenly paradigm or pattern “for the man who wants to see and found a city within himself” (592b). The mythical correlate of the dialogue’s return to reality is the sleeping Odysseus’ nighttime voyage from Scheria to Ithaca, which, like the Republic itself, concludes at dawn (13.93–95).

The preceding reflections make it clear that Homer’s Odysseus is able to accomplish—by means of spirited endurance, cunning intelligence, and technical skill, as well as the timely assistance of sympathetic deities like Athena—what his philosophical counterpart in the Republic is not. Socrates recognizes that all actual regimes are defective. Because these regimes inculcate disorder and injustice in the souls of their citizens, and furthermore teach them to regard the man who “knows and lives truly” with suspicion and ill-will (516e–17a), the philosopher cannot regard them as anything more than a first, fundamentally deficient home. For their part, non-philosophers are doubly out of place in the cave of everyday life: with no sense of what a just
and well-ordered soul looks like, they are unable even to recognize their own disorientation. In the *Republic*, Socrates responds to these two dimensions of homelessness by attempting to craft a decent human habitation not in deed, as Odysseus does in the *Odyssey*, but merely in speech. Even in this, he fails. Plato’s adaptation of the *Odyssey* effectively underscores this point: the philosophical work of attempting to fashion a suitable home for human beings parallels Odysseus’s adventures in the fantastic realm of monsters and goddesses and his sojourn in the transitional domain of the Phaeacians—not his labors upon returning to the real, violent world of human existence in Ithaca.

Plato’s understanding of the problem of homelessness differs from that of Homer in yet another way. The return to human reality in the *Republic* unfolds over the course of books 8 and 9. In the place of Odysseus’s defeat of the suitors and reunion with Penelope—a story that takes up the entire second half of the *Odyssey*—Plato gives us the Myth of Er, which tells not of the achievement of a long-sought goal and a rest from exertion, but of the perpetual roving of the soul between this world and the afterworld. For as we have seen, the afterworld Er describes is not the soul’s “final and eternal home,” as Segal would have it (Segal 1978, 323) and as it clearly is in both *Gilgamesh* and the *Odyssey*. It is rather a sort of grand concourse where souls arrive, make connections, and depart for their next destinations. According to Plato, the soul is essentially a wanderer, an Odysseus without an Ithaca; it therefore does not have a proper place or “home” so much as a proper *path*.

This Platonic conception of the afterworld as a kind of waystation makes possible a radical reevaluation of the accomplishment of Homer’s Odysseus. As told by Homer, the story of Odysseus is one of great, if not unqualified, success. Odysseus makes a name for himself in war, prevails over monsters and witches, brings home riches, teams up with his grown son to defeat his enemies, and reclams his faithful wife and his kingdom. This is a full and satisfying life, Homer suggests, if ever there was one. Yet according to the Myth of Er, even Odysseus’s heroic life is not a humanly choiceworthy one. Er reports that the soul of Odysseus, mindful of its former labors, had “recovered from the love of honor”; it is delighted to find the life of a private man who minds his own business, and says that it would have chosen this life even if it had drawn the first lot (620c–d). While Er does not make it clear whether this soul’s “labors” included punishment in the afterworld for the injustices of its previous life (cf. 619d), its love of honor was evidently a species of internal disorder. Homer’s Odysseus in any case fails to measure up to the standards of justice Socrates sets forth in book 1, when he persuades Polemarchus that “it is
not the work of the just man to harm either a friend or anyone else . . . but of his opposite, the unjust man” (335d; cf. Howland 2004b). For even the putative virtue of patient endurance that Socrates praises at 390d, where he quotes *Odyssey* 20.17–18, serves only to allow Odysseus to achieve the heroic ideal of manliness by inflicting full vengeance upon his enemies. In spite of his soul’s misgivings, Odysseus’s former life seems nevertheless to have been the best of a bad lot: all the other human souls Er identifies by name—those of Orpheus, Thamyras, Ajax, Agamemnon, Atalanta, and Epeius—are so deeply disappointed with their previous lives that they choose either to become animals or to change their sexes.

In fine, the Myth of Er implies that the challenge of living a humanly worthwhile life is enormous. As Er observes, the process of choosing a new life results in “an exchange of evils and goods for most of the souls” (619d). Far from feeling themselves to be “at home” in any incarnation, most souls seek only to be rid of their past modes of existence. Their journey from this world to the next and back again is nothing but an unending series of bad choices and disappointments.

**Conclusion: The Mythology of Philosophy**

The preceding reflections serve only to underscore the importance of philosophy as a means, not of communal, but of individual salvation. For if the philosophical vision of the Ideas and the Good is of little or no use in remaking the human world, it may at least furnish a compass by which the individual soul can steer its course as it moves through life. According to Socrates, the man who “always philosophizes in a healthy way,” and who has a modicum of luck as well, has a reasonable chance of being happy in this life and of “journey[ing] from this world to the other and back again not by the underground, rough road but by the smooth one, through the heavens” (619d–e). The saving power of philosophy, in turn, is contained in the story or myth (*muthos*) that Er and Socrates have saved—the story of human beings collectively striving for illumination in the hope that a deeper understanding of the soul and the implications of its choices will help them to live better lives. Such is the story of Socrates and his companions in the *Republic*, a tale given dignity and grandeur by its employment of the mythical archetypes of epic quest.

To speak of the mythology of philosophy is by no means to imply that philosophy is, in a derogatory sense, merely a “myth.” It is rather to
identify the most fundamental elements of the narrative through which Plato attempts to convey his expansive and powerful vision of what it means to lead a philosophical life. The mythology of philosophy evokes nostalgia, insofar as deprives us of the dream of really and truly feeling ourselves at home anywhere in life. The only exception to this rule is represented in the Republic by the philosophical community that coalesces all too briefly around Socrates. The existence of this community underscores the irreducibly political character of Socratic philosophizing, but it should not distract us from the point that the individual must ultimately think for himself, and so can be saved only by himself. Being a soul is a restless business, and, as the actual fates of Socrates and his companions attest, it is a dangerous one to boot. Yet in teaching us who we are and, in a broad sense, what we must do, the mythology of philosophy promises to restore us to ourselves. This means: to have a plan, a sense of where one has been and where one is going, and to be able to confront each new adventure with the calm self-possession of an Odysseus or, better yet, a Socrates. This is the consolation the mythology of philosophy holds out for us wandering souls.

References

An earlier version of this article was delivered as the Dennis A. Georges Lecture at Tulane University in April of 2006. I would like to thank Professor Jane Carter and Tulane’s Department of Classical Studies for the invitation to speak on Plato and Homer, and to express my appreciation for the anonymous referee’s thoughtful criticisms.


Shakespeare and the Politics of Honor: Purpose and Performance in *Julius Caesar*

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Judge of the splendor of a nation, by the insignificance of great individuals in it.

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

**Introduction**

Today we are not likely to assess a nation’s political life in terms of its “splendor” or lack thereof, perhaps preferring instead to employ the more clinical term of “health,” with the effect that one may speak, for example, of “a healthy democracy.” In attempting to account for diminutions or enhancements of political health, we may be just as little inclined to attribute primary responsibility for effecting such changes to “great individuals.” Wariness about assigning too much weight to single individuals (great or otherwise) as agents of political change is not, of course, a contemporary phenomenon. For instance, in the course of reflecting on the gradual decline of republican Rome from greatness into corruption and finally to ruin, Montesquieu urges against laying the blame for this collective process of slow-motion suicide at the feet of any particular individual: “…the republic was crushed. And we must not blame it on the ambition of certain individuals; we must blame it on man—a being whose greed for power keeps increasing the more he has of it” (1965, 107–8). Since the republic was “destined to perish,” it mattered little who “dragged [it] to the precipice”; if it had not been one person, it would have been another (108). Ultimately, the fall of Rome appears to be an example of the general maxim that “Nature has given states certain limits to mortify the ambition of men” (61).

For Montesquieu, one of the ways in which “nature” mortifies the ambitions of particular individuals is through the ambitious actions of
other individuals. Yet in his discussion of the role of Brutus in assassinating Julius Caesar (which action he did not consider to have been an effective means of staving off the ruin of the Roman republic), it seems that Brutus was led to kill Caesar not solely by ambition, but because the moral, prudential, legal and affective constraints that might have hindered him from doing so were undone by a more compelling force:

It was an overpowering love of country which—taking leave of the ordinary rules for crimes and virtues—hearkened only to itself and saw neither citizen, friend, benefactor, nor father. Virtue seemed to forget itself in order to surpass itself, and it made men admire as divine an action that at first could not be approved because it was atrocious. (Montesquieu 1965, 110–11)

Here, Brutus’s love of country seems to function as a means of attaining detachment from the exclusive concern for his own virtue, except that this virtue “forget[s] itself in order to surpass itself,” thereby serving its own ends and not incidentally, attracting the admiration of others at the same time (see Addendum 1). In asserting his political virtue, Brutus simultaneously asserts his freedom from the constraints of “ordinary rules for crimes and virtues,” which are as much political as they are moral and legal. Thus, an act committed in this spirit could conceivably be construed as being antipolitical, since the political virtue (or passion) of love of country, in order to surpass itself, must forget itself (which means forgetting its political nature).

When we consider Brutus in the context of Shakespeare’s fictive representation of him in Julius Caesar (the play that Nietzsche described as Shakespeare’s best tragedy) we note an even more marked tension between the political and the antipolitical aspects of Brutus’s action and of his character. Hannah Arendt identified Shakespeare’s Brutus as an exemplar of free political action (1968, 151; see Addendum 2). More recently, it has been argued that Brutus acts in the spirit of “self-authorized agency” (Mahler 2005, 193) and that the play charts “Brutus’s emergence into political agency” (Kahn 1997, 99). Kahn also refers to Brutus’s “emergence into Roman virtue” (1997, 79) to describe the process through which Brutus enters into the conspiracy to kill Caesar, prompting the question of whether “Roman virtue” and “political agency” are to be viewed as synonymous terms in this context. For Dennis Bathory, Shakespeare’s representation of Brutus provides us with “a remarkably contemporary look at the dilemmas of the political reformer/revolutionary” (1996, 238). Brutus has been represented as being “eminently a political animal” (Bloom 1996, 94); he has also been described as being a “naïve” (Rabkin 1973, 114), “unrealistic” (Garber 2004, 412), and even an
actively antipolitical figure who “heralds the rise of a postrepublican, apolitical or antipolitical moral virtue” (Blits 1993, 56; see Addendum 3). Brutus’s stunning lack of political prudence has been much remarked upon and criticized (see Addendum 4).

The character of Shakespeare’s Brutus is something of a Rorschach test that suggests a wide range of ideas about how to understand actors who seek to effect political change through extraordinary (and extra-legal) actions. He has been variously understood as being analogous to a terrorist, a “freedom fighter” and a noble if rather insufferable proto-Kantian idealist who attempts to import his moral principles into politics with disastrous results. He has also been compared to various real-life political figures, including George W. Bush (see Addendum 5). Scholars have depicted Brutus as the epitome of disinterested, public-spirited virtue, but also as a self-deceived pawn “whose pride in his family name” ultimately leads him to commit “a crime that provokes a disorder in the Empire that will prevail until Octavius eventually defeats Antony” (Peterson 1965, 19). Above all, he has been viewed as a character whose actions are guided and informed by honor (Garber 2004, 412; Alvis 1990, 126–40; Rebhorn 1990, 88; Goldberg 1989, 171; Traversi 1988, 21; Council 1973, 60–73; Shalvi 1972, 120–23; Foakes 1968, 62). As I shall discuss, accounts of what honor consists of in the play vary widely. Shakespeare indicates that honor can represent a set of aesthetic or poetic (and amoral) demands for “good form” just as easily as it can amount to or point towards a code of “moral etiquette” and a standard of “virtuous action” (Council 1973, 61; see Addendum 6).

Does the implied conflict in Brutus’s character between moral virtue (which distances itself from politics) and political virtue (which causes individuals possessed of it to assert themselves through public, visible action) exist for Shakespeare, or is it a construct of criticism? What role does honor (which is neither a strictly moral virtue nor a necessarily political one) play in the conflict between the political and antipolitical aspects of Brutus’s putative “emergence into political agency” (Kahn 1997, 99)? Shakespeare emphasizes the extent to which political action in the play is informed by “the poetics of honor” (see Addendum 7). In doing so, does he imply that Brutus’s action should be judged primarily by the quasi-aesthetic criteria of greatness rather than in terms of political efficacy or “self-authorized agency” (Mahler 2005, 193)? This paper consists of an attempt to understand Shakespeare’s representation of political action in Julius Caesar in light of questions about the politics and poetics of honor, not in the interest of anachronistically retrojecting
contemporary issues into his thought but, rather, in the interest of finding out what we can learn from Shakespeare on this topic (see Addendum 8).

I shall argue that Shakespeare raises the possibility that poetry (understood in the broad sense) has a central role to play in this context, suggesting that his concept of poetic or dramatic “performance” (II.i.134) is as important to his representation of political action as is his understanding of political “cause” (II.i.134) or “purposes” (II.i.224). The play offers an account of political action that stresses the element of performance and attests to the “theatricality of the political” (Baines 2005, 140; also D’Amico 1992, 67; Goldberg 1989, 164–76). Here, my objective is to show that Shakespeare’s representation of honorable political action should be understood with reference to the demand of honor for public, dramatic displays of itself (see Addendum 9). Despite the frequency with which scholars have discussed the play’s treatment of honor and “honourable action,” its political significance has never been clarified. This is especially problematic given the weight that Shakespeare places upon honor as motive for political action throughout his entire oeuvre, particularly in the tragedies and in the history plays (see Addendum 10). In discussing honor as it is represented in Julius Caesar, scholars have generally dealt with it as being a dependent function of idealistic moral virtue, on the one hand, or as a cover-up for self-love, political ambition, and an excessive concern for reputation, on the other (on the relation between honor, amour propre and amour soi see Terraillon 1912).

In Julius Caesar, honor is represented as being the “precipitating motive” for Brutus’s action (Lordi 1976, 178–80). Through his consideration of the way in which Brutus’s honor (both as a citizen and as a man) informs the assassination of Caesar, Shakespeare raises the Aristotelian question of how honor mediates between the conflicting demands of individual, moral and political goods (Ward 2001, 71) and reflects upon the capacity of honor to resolve the conflict between public and private goods. His treatment of honor as a “precipitating motive” for political action is deeply ambivalent. Shakespeare subjects the idea of a politics of honor to a sustained critique, showing how honor creates a split between the “purpose” and the “performance” of actions that are inspired by it. Although honor functions in Julius Caesar as a formal virtue, rather than a morally substantive one, Shakespeare suggests that it points toward forgetting the self on behalf of some larger good, even if, like Montesquieu’s political virtue, it may forget itself in order to surpass itself and to obtain recognition. Ultimately, Shakespeare implies that a politics that ignores honor’s demand for the reward of public
recognition and its aspiration toward disinterested virtue, and fails to exploit that demand for political ends ensures its own demise. I shall begin by explaining the central political issues in *Julius Caesar* before turning to a more extended discussion of Shakespeare’s representation of the role of honor in prompting action aimed at political change, with a focus on the events of Act I and Act II that lead up to the assassination itself in Scene I of Act III.

**The Decline of Republican Virtue**

Generally speaking, the political problem presented by *Julius Caesar* is that of a republic that is no longer capable or perhaps, no longer convinced of the necessity of retaining its identity as a republic. Scholars have described the political life of Rome depicted in *Julius Caesar* in terms of an unsteady and tumultuous period of transition in-between two worlds—namely, that of the Republic that was dying and that of the Empire that was to come. In the midst of the transition between the senescent republic and the nascent empire is the looming and enigmatic figure of Caesar. He has been invested with so much honor and power that there is not enough left to go around for others. Cassius suggests that Caesar “doth bestride the narrow world / Like a colossus” while “petty men / Walk under his huge legs and peep about / To find ourselves dishonourable graves” (I.ii.134–37). By contrast to Caesar’s world-spanning range of movement, that of his fellow Romans is suggestive of insects scurrying around at his feet. Their reduced capacity for individual action is due to the fact that Caesar is supremely possessed of the capacity to effect his will through his own action and that of others to whom he delegates authority. He causes others to move and to be moved, rather than being moved himself by external causes.

In the first act of the play, Caesar is compared to a bird whose feathers must be plucked, lest his figurative range of movement be expanded even further. The “feathers” are the trophies with which Caesar’s statues (and, by extension, Caesar himself) have been invested. In stating that the statues should be denuded of their decorations, Flavius remarks that “[t]hese growing feathers plucked from Caesar’s wing, / Will make him fly an ordinary pitch, / Who else would soar above the view of men, / And keep us all in servile fearfulness” (I.i.73–76). Stripped of the external signs of honor with which he has been decorated, Caesar will move at the level of “ordinary” men, suggesting that he can be brought back down to earth by the same people who raised him above the view of his peers. If he soars above other men, it will be because he is

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honored by them, not because of some intrinsic power in him. Paradoxically, in rising to the height of visible public honor, Caesar risks moving out of the range of sight. Once unseen, in this figurative sense, his power would be cause for “servile fearfulness” on the part of the people moving about below him. Being all but invisible, his power (and his person) would be virtually invulnerable. In the first act of the play, it appears that Caesar stands to be invested with still more honors (I.ii.133) including that of a crown.

Under the tyrannical or proto-tyrannical rule of Caesar, the possibilities for honorable political action on the part of Roman citizens other than Caesar are virtually nil. Worse, it is not apparent that even if presented with liberty, the citizens of Rome would be motivated to take action to restore the republic. As more than one scholar, in the course of commenting on the play’s less than flattering representation of “the vulgar” (I.i.71) has indicated, the “rag-tag people” (I.ii.257) make their first appearance in the play as fickle, “idle” (I.i) and “entirely passive” (A. Barton 1988, 85) creatures and go downhill from there. At the beginning of the play, the aristocrats as well have been reduced to relative inaction, their resistance (if resistance it may be called) limited for the time being to “groaning underneath this age’s yoke” (I.ii.61).

Throughout the play, Shakespeare reminds us that it is the skewed distribution of honor in the declining republic that has led to this state of affairs. As the play begins, Caesar is being honored by the common people for his victory over the sons of Pompey at Munda. Murellus, a tribune of the people, complains that Caesar’s victory is hardly cause for rejoicing: “Wherefore rejoice? What conquest brings he home? / What tributaries follow him to Rome / To grace in captive bond his chariot wheels? / You blocks, you stones, you worse than senseless things!” (I.i.33–36). The commoners of Rome are too unfeeling to be ashamed of their inability to render honor where honor is due. They are utterly insensible of the fact that Caesar’s victory did not redound to the greater glory or honor of Rome, but to that of Caesar himself. Murellus implies that the honor which Caesar receives is incommensurate with that which he deserves. Foreign captives would have “graced” the victory because they would have been a material sign of Caesar’s benefits to Rome. In signifying their approval of Caesar’s victory, Murellus warns the people that they are insulting “Pompey’s blood” (I.i.52) and that Rome will be held answerable for this insult by the gods: “Run to your houses, fall upon your knees, / Pray to the gods to intermit the plague / That needs must light on this ingratitude” (I.i.53–56).
Since Murellus cannot depend upon the people’s defective sense of shame (nor, it would seem, on their sense of honor), he appeals to their fear of vengeful gods, suggesting that the only corrective action that can be taken to ward off the threatened plague is for the people to plea for mercy in the privacy of their houses. His fellow tribune, Flavius, suggests that the commoners go to the banks of the Tiber and “weep [their] tears” (I.i.59) into the river. The crowd is made to disperse from the streets of Rome without a word, causing Flavius to remark that “[t]hey vanish tongue-tied in their guiltiness” (I.i.63). The “guiltiness” of the commoners reduces them to silence in the public sphere. A more damning portrait of the disrepair into which the republican ideals of shared public speech and action have fallen is hard to imagine.

Rome, as it appears in the beginning of the play, is a disordered place, in which it is not clear who people are, or what their proper work is (I.i.5–12). Scholars have attributed Shakespeare’s representation of this disorder to his sense of the pervasive failure of Roman republicanism. Andrew Hadfield defines the political context of the play as “a dying and perverted republican Rome that has lost the ability to inspire its citizens to behave virtuously” (2005, 167–68). The Roman republican virtues or quasi-virtues that are in danger of being corrupted or even degraded into non-existence include “austerity, pride … public service” and “devotion to [the] city” (Cantor 1976, 37). The two “worlds” of republic and empire are understood to represent two conflicting conceptions of virtue and of political action, at least on the level of ideals. As Cantor puts it, the “sense of serving a cause larger than oneself is the cornerstone of Romanness in the Republic,” while the cornerstone of the Empire that is to come is, he suggests, private satisfaction (1976, 38–40).

Hadfield suggests that one sign of the decline in the “shared public culture” of the “toxic mixture of decayed republicanism and emergent tyranny” that is Caesar’s Rome is that the characters of the play are divided “into small groups whispering secrets to each other” (2005, 171). Hadfield’s failure to adequately distinguish between emergent empire and tyranny aside, it does appear to be the case that political action has gone behind doors and been reduced to private speech. Under Caesar, private speech cannot be translated into visible public deeds with impunity. Blits argues that whereas the vigorous “public realm” of the Republic “allowed men to rise above their merely private concerns while at the same time devoting themselves to something they could love as their own [i.e., their country], the relatively impoverished public sphere of the empire “reduc[es] public causes to private causes” (1993, 56).
In effect, Blits’s complaint is that the beginning of the empire represents the end of politics, with politics being construed of as the “public action” that allows for “noble victories” won on behalf of “public concerns” and the national welfare (1993, 57–58). Under the sway of what one might call the antipolitics of empire, Blits argues that “nobility becomes internalized and, thought to dwell wholly within the actor himself, is understood in separation from or in opposition to political action” (57). He suggests that the upshot of this internalization of nobility and its severance from political action is a new conception of honor which is defined by intentions rather than effects: “Since intentions are everything the actions of an honorable man are just simply because he is honorable. They are and remain honorable whatever their consequences or success” (58).

Blits argues that Brutus’s sense of honor is not directed toward the political end of the action taken on behalf of the general good. This implies a sense that Brutus’s honor has swerved away from what it should be ideally. What sort of ideal of honor is implied in his critique? How is Blits’s account of what he sees as Brutus’s morally and politically deficient sense of honor to be understood in the context of the different versions of honor that have characterized particular civilizations and cultures? Without exploring this question at length or engaging in excessive generalization, it is worth briefly noting that across many different times and cultures, honor functions both as an inward “quality of character” (Hunter 1997, 517) and an outward matter of reputation, reward and assessment of one’s own worth by others (Jeudon 1911; Pitt–Rivers 1966, 21; Speier 1989; Stewart 1994, 12–23; Lendon 1997, 30–106; C. A. Barton 2001). Honor can provide a “standard of conduct” (Trees 2002, 53) and a “motive for virtuous action”; it can also signify the publicly conferred recognition of such action (Council 1973, 15–19; also Watson 1960). Generally speaking, codes of honor dictate a formal etiquette of action rather than the specific moral or political ends of action (thus making possible the existence of “honor among thieves”).

Arguments such as that of Blits, which criticize forms of honor that are not clearly allied with virtue, seem to reflect a concern that honor should ideally function as something more than a formal code of etiquette for action. In effect, honor should spring from and aim towards the civic-minded marriage of moral and political virtue. Blits’s critique of Brutus’s ostensibly deficient version of honor carries with it the implicit suggestion that honor should retain the connection to political prudence and public accountability that is allowed for (but not dictated by) the concern of honor for
the opinion of others. When honor is aimed at virtuous and ambitious actions that receive public rewards, either in the form of enhanced reputation or in more tangible forms of recognition, it becomes a means to an end that bears some connection to a common good (Lowenthal 1997, 135). Absent a sense that honor is as much “the reward for virtuous actions” (Council 1973, 12) as it is a matter of honorable intentions, honor has the capacity to become antipolitical out of disdain for any norm other than that of honor (Garber 2004, 412; Traversi 1988, 21).

By Blits’s account, the decline of republican virtue leads to politically valuable honor being made into something that is, if not identical with “antipolitical moral virtue” (1993, 56), very close to it. Brutus’s honor points towards “the practice of moral virtue that disdains political results” (59). In becoming exclusively bound by a concern for pure intention, honor loses its value as a source of political action. While Blits’s important point that Brutus’s honor has become detached from a public-spirited concern for political ends is entirely accurate, it is not at all clear that his honor points him away from political virtue in the direction of moral virtue. I would argue that Brutus is primarily guided not by what Blits calls “an ethics of intention” (55) but by an amoral code of honor, which is as much concerned with performance as it is with purpose or intention. Brutus’s code of honor is not static; it changes throughout the course of the play as he attempts to formulate a plan of action and to act out honor’s dictates. To say that concern for performance gradually outweighs and blurs his honorable intentions is not to say that Shakespeare does not depict those intentions as being honorable to begin with. In attempting to act honorably, Brutus’s concern for the manner in which his action is to be performed and the form of the action itself ultimately overwhelms the purpose to which it was originally attached. It is important to remember, however, that Brutus’s honor initially points him in the direction of political action on behalf of “the general good” (I.ii.85). Shakespeare suggests that, tragically, his honor cannot sustain the action it inspired towards that end.

The Politics of Honor

When we initially encounter the character of Brutus, he is in the process of refusing a request to participate in the communal act of watching the ceremonial race that is the highlight of the feast of Lupercal. His first words in the play are “Not I” (I.ii.26). When pressed, he claims that he has no interest in games, lacking as he does “some part / Of that quick spirit that
is in Antony” (I.ii.29). In expressing his wish to retire from the scene, he is confronted by Cassius, who complains that he “ha[s] not from your eyes that gentleness / And show of love as I was wont to have” (I.ii.34). Brutus admits to having turned inward, suggesting that he is preoccupied not with concern about public affairs, but with private “passions of some difference, / Conceptions only proper to myself” (I.ii.40–41). His focus on “himself at war” (I.ii.46) has led him to neglect making “shows of love to other men” (I.ii.38–47). Brutus is no longer capable of keeping up appearances in his own eyes, much less those of other people. Cassius laments that Brutus cannot see his own “hidden worthiness” (I.ii.57), suggesting that “many of the best respect in Rome” (I.ii.59), in contemplating the unhappy state of the republic under Caesar have thought of “noble Brutus” and wished that Brutus could see himself as they do. He lays the groundwork for his appeal to Brutus’s honor by seeking to convince Brutus that he acts under the scrutiny of honorable men of “the best respect in Rome,” whose good opinion is worth having.

Cassius tries to tie several different compliments and suggestions together into one narrative thread. He begins with the suggestion that Brutus lacks self-knowledge. Specifically, he does not know how noble and worthy he is. Men whom Brutus respects are aware that the republic is in very bad shape. When they think of Brutus, they wish that he could recognize that he is uniquely fit to take action aimed at throwing off “this age’s yoke” (I.ii.61). That “yoke” is embodied in the person of Caesar. The dangerous import of Cassius’s message is not lost on Brutus, but he rejects the flattering hint that he needs only to look into himself to discover this “hidden worthi-

ness” (I.ii.57): “Into what dangers would you lead me, Cassius, / That you would have me seek into myself / For that which is not in me?” (I.ii.63–65). Their dialogue is interrupted by the sounds of shouting, causing Brutus to ask, “What means this shouting? I do fear, the people / Choose Caesar for their king” (I.ii.78–79). This is just the opportunity that Cassius has been waiting for: “Ay, do you fear it? / Then must I think you would not have it so” (I.ii.80–81). At this point, Brutus suggests the outline of the conflict out of which will emerge his decision to kill Caesar. He explains to Cassius that he does not want Caesar to be king, but that he “love[s] him well” (I.ii.82). Yet he hastens to give the impression that if Cassius has something in mind that pertains to “the general good” (I.ii.85) of Rome, then he is engaged. Here is the first invocation of honor in the play, and it appears as a prompt to action taken on behalf of the general good.
What is it that you would impart to me?
If it be aught toward the general good,
Set honour in one eye and death i’ th’ other,
And I will look on both indifferently,
For let the gods so speed me as I love
The name of honour more than I fear death. (I.ii.84–89)

As Lewis Mott has indicated, the meaning of this passage depends upon a pun involving the double meaning of honor. The “honour” that is set in one eye refers to “high rank, dignity [and] distinction” (1897, 160). Brutus’s claim, then, is that presented with any task pertaining to “the general good,” he will not be swayed either by the prospect of attaining honor or the fear of death. His love for “the name of honour” (meaning in this latter instance, as Mott suggests, honor as a character trait) outweighs his concern for reward and his fear of punishment by death. It points him toward acting on behalf of the common good without regard to personal consequences. The “name of honour” can be used to identify causes other than itself as honorable.

Here, at least on the level of rhetoric, honor performs its ideal function of binding together the “the particular and the universal” with the effect of showing the way that one may serve the individual and the general good at the same time (Ward 2001, 80). Lordi (1976, 179) argues that “Brutus’ concept of honor … is public and unselfish, and thus appropriate to his heroic image of himself as one willing to sacrifice his life to secure the general good of his country.” In this particular instance, Brutus’s honor dictates a preference for (although not the absolute priority of) “the general good,” perhaps reminding us of the commonplace that honor can serve as a supplement to or, if necessary, a partial replacement for virtue (Addison 2004, 50). Yet the tilt of honor towards serving “the general good,” as opposed to the strictly personal good, is a formal, rather than a moral inclination; the meaning of honor as a motive for political action depends on the merits of the cause that calls it forth. Unlike the standard of moral virtue simply, which demands that agents (both individual and collective) “act out of some larger motive than the convenience, safety and well-being of themselves” (Cropsey 1977, 173), political virtue (which honor more closely resembles in this sense than it does moral virtue) can reconcile the “smaller” motives of self-love and self-interest with the “larger” motives of love of country and concern for “communal interest” (Ward 2001, 81).

When Cassius replies by saying “I know that virtue to be in you, Brutus” (I.ii.90), he implies that Brutus’s love of honor is itself a virtue, to be distinguished from the “outward favor” (I.ii.91) that he possesses in
addition to his inward qualities. Cassius seizes upon Brutus’s mention of his love for the “name of honour” and makes it the centerpiece of a narrative aimed at seducing Brutus into joining the conspiracy against Caesar. He claims that “honour is the subject of my story” (I.ii.92) but as Council (1973, 62) points out, the story he proceeds to tell has nothing to do with the “general good” that honor seeks. Cassius severs honor from the cause of the “general good” with which Brutus had assumed it was allied and attempts to turn it into an ally of the desire for absolute equality (Rebhorn 1990, 87). His version of equality, like his concept of honor, appears to be founded on personal envy. He avows that “for [his] single self,” he would rather die than “live to be / In awe of such a thing as myself. I was born free as Caesar, so were you; / We have both fed as well, and we can both / Endure the winter’s cold as well as he” (I.ii.95–99). Insofar as Caesar is “such a thing as myself” he is not a proper object of awe and not a fit recipient of the exorbitant honors he has claimed for himself. Of what does Caesar’s likeness to Cassius and to Brutus consist? First, that they were all born free—they began as equals in their common possession of freedom. This prompts the question of whether he means that they were born free by virtue of nature or by virtue of the fact that they were Roman citizens. If Brutus, Cassius and Caesar are to be judged as equally undeserving of special honors because they are alike in the most important respect (in that they were equally born free) then on what alternative basis are they to be distinguished from each other and singled out for honors?

Cassius seeks to deny that Caesar should be held in awe on the grounds that Brutus and Cassius were born into freedom just as much as he was. Beyond that, he suggests that Caesar is like his peers in that he possesses a body that is in need of food and that has the capability of enduring physical discomfort. At this point, his attempt to make honor a friend of equality (or the particular form of equality that may govern relations between like persons) begins to break down. Having diminished the distinctions between Caesar and Brutus and Cassius, he is led to build them up again, because the impact of his story about honor depends upon establishing the fact that Caesar has been given honors he does not deserve and suggesting that there are other more legitimate grounds upon which honors should be distributed. Here, the problem of honor, in the sense of honor as public reward, is coincident with the problem of justice. The force of Cassius’s complaint depends upon a tacit assumption that the distribution of honor to Caesar has been unjust and that his honors should be redistributed to other men (such as himself). Cassius reminds Brutus that “[w]e have both fed as well [as Caesar], and we can both / Endure the winter’s cold as well as he” (I.ii.98–99). The gist of the anecdote that
Cassius proceeds to recount, however, is that he is physically stronger than Caesar, not that they are equal. He suggests that there is a discrepancy between Caesar’s bodily weakness and the awe in which he is held by men who do not realize that they may be stronger than he is in this respect.

Cassius relates that at some point in the past, Caesar dared him to go swimming in the Tiber River on a “raw and gusty day” (I.ii.100). Somewhere in the middle of the river, Caesar’s strength failed him and he had to call out to Cassius to rescue him, lest he sink. In describing how he pulled Caesar out of the river, Cassius compares himself to “Aeneas, our great ancestor, / [Who] [d]id from the flames of Troy upon his shoulder / The old Anchises bear” (I.ii.112–14). The less than subtle implication is that it is Cassius who is deserving of honors fit for a hero, rather than the “tired Caesar” (I.ii.115). Yet for all of his physical weakness, Caesar is “now become a god, and Cassius is / A wretched creature, and must bend his body / If Caesar carelessly but nod on him” (I.ii.116–18). Cassius does not consider the possibility that the fact that Caesar accomplished his feats despite his physical shortcomings makes his achievement more rather than less impressive. This is especially odd given that Cassius elsewhere emphasizes that it is “strength of spirit” (I.iii.950) that is the sign and guarantor of human freedom. Here, Cassius implies there should be a correlation between bodily power and the reward of honor (in the form of reputation and “awe”). By this standard, he finds it amazing that Caesar should “get the start of the majestic world / And bear the palm alone” (I.ii.130–31) when he is like “a sick girl” (I.ii.128) in terms of his physical constitution.

Once again, the colloquy of Cassius and Brutus is interrupted by the sound of shouting. This time, Brutus has a good idea of what the shouting is about: “I believe that these applauses are / For some new honours that are heaped on Caesar” (I.ii.132–33). The interruption reinforces the urgency of the point that Cassius has just made about Caesar being the recipient of honors that are not due to him, and gives Cassius the opportunity to take a different tack in his ongoing story about honor. Whereas he had previously focused on honor in terms of “my single self,” he is now interested in defending the honor of the human race: “Men at some times are masters of their fates. / The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars / But in ourselves, that we are underlings” (I.ii.138–40). In this passage, the honor of the human race is related to the capacity to master natural forces, rather than being governed by the movement of the stars (see Drakakis 2002, 87; also Mahler 2005, 190). When people refuse to master their fates, they diminish the honor of human beings in general, reducing themselves to “underlings” (or even to playthings of capricious gods,
as in *King Lear* IV.i.36–37). Cassius draws back from his brief excursion into the ontology of agency and shifts the discussion to a direct comparison between the names of Brutus and Caesar. Speaking of “Caesar,” he asks Brutus: “Why should that name be sounded more than yours?” (I.ii.142). This question may be translated as: “Why is Caesar more honored than you are?” Cassius cannot come up with any reason why this should be case, which, in his view, reflects badly on the current predicament of Rome. By feeding the reputation of Caesar, Rome has caused him to grow to unnatural and even monstrous (I.iii.77–78) greatness, which is itself a source of shame.

Cassius appeals to the injured honor of the time in which they are living:

...Age, thou art shamed!
Rome, thou hast lost the breed of noble bloods!
When went there by an age since the great flood
But it was famed with more than one man?
When could they say, till now, that talked of Rome,
That her wide walks encompassed but one man?
(I.ii.149–54)

Who is responsible for the shame of the age and for Rome’s loss of “noble bloods”? Cassius invokes the authority of tradition to suggest that “[t]here was a Brutus once” (I.ii.158) who would have gone to extremes to defend his own honored status in the face of a threat to it by “one man” who would reduce other men to being his inferiors. His reference, of course, is to Lucius Junius Brutus, forebear of Brutus himself, slayer of the Roman king Tarquinus Superbus and founding father of the Roman republic. The implication is that just as there was a Brutus once who redeemed Rome from the shame of living under the sway of one man, so there could be another Brutus who could do the same thing but on an even greater scale, since there has not been an “age since the great flood” when Rome “encompassed but one man.” Brutus is not yet prepared to commit himself to attempting to imitate and surpass the “other” Brutus, but he has a good idea of what Cassius has in mind for him (I.ii.162).

The process by which Brutus is gradually drawn into the conspiracy picks up after Casca informs Cassius and Brutus that Caesar was offered a crown by Antony, which he refused, but apparently with some regret (I.ii.216–86). He also tells them that Murellus and Flavius “for pulling scarves off Caesar’s images are put to silence” (I.ii.285). So intent is Caesar upon maintaining his monopoly on honor and signs of honor that even the tribunes’ attempt to symbolically strip images of him of material tokens of honors
merits their being “put to silence.” The republic has reached such a state of crisis and poor health that it is not clear who is more sick: Caesar, or the people who are taking no action to stop him from being crowned (I.ii.253–55). By this point, it has become apparent to Cassius that his project of seducing Brutus into joining the conspiracy has some chance of success. In Brutus’s absence, he mentally addresses him: “Brutus, thou art noble: yet I see / Thy honourable mettle may be wrought / From that it is disposed. Therefore it is meet / That noble minds keep ever with their likes; / For who so firm that cannot be seduced?” (I.ii.307–11).

The implicit answer to this question is “No one.” Here, the fact that Brutus is made of “honourable mettle” is as much a source of temptation to Cassius to seduce him into acting out his plans as it is a source of protection against being seduced (Council 1973, 63). We are led to ask if Brutus is actively assuming political agency or being wheedled, cajoled and goaded into it. Shakespeare refuses to represent the process by which Brutus becomes a political actor in simplistic terms. Brutus does indeed take the initiative for defending liberty under the guidance of his sense of honor, but he is also partially seduced into it. Cassius, recognizing that Brutus’s “honourable mettle” predisposes him to taking into account the opinion of men whom he honors, decides to have a number of letters written and thrown into Brutus’s house through the window. These letters will be written “[a]s if they came from several citizens, / Writings all tending to the great opinion / That Rome holds of his name—wherein obscurely / Caesar’s ambition shall be glanced at” (I.iii.316–18). The suggestion is that Cassius knows that directly attacking Caesar’s ambition would be less effective than glancing at it. Once he has fortified and secured Brutus’s opinion of his own honorable name (which is also the name of his illustrious forebear) that will suffice to endanger Caesar’s stranglehold on power and monopoly on honor.

When we next encounter Brutus, it is within the privacy of his own home. Shakespeare does not represent Cassius’s bogus letters as playing a decisive role in fixing Brutus’s resolution to undertake the political action of killing Caesar. (Neither, however, does Brutus arrive at the conclusion that Caesar must die through the exercise of prudential deliberation or moral reasoning.) It is important to note Brutus has not yet received or read the letters when he concludes that the only way to stop Caesar is to kill him: “It must be by his death: and for my part / I know no personal cause to spurn at him / But for the general. He would be crowned: / How that might change his nature, there’s the question” (II.i.10–13). As Bloom (1996, 91) points out,
Caesar “already holds all the real power of a king” apart from a crown and a title. The crown and the title are signs of honor that would remind everyone of the power he already possessed. Brutus fears that Caesar’s nature would be changed by receiving these honors. The question of how people change when they receive particular sorts of honors is on his mind, rather than the threat to freedom posed by tyranny or the purity of his own intentions. Brutus concedes that Caesar’s judgments have been guided by reason rather than his passions (II.i.20–21), but if he is allowed to attain “the upmost round” (II.i.24) of honor, it seems that that might change. This is, to put it mildly, not the strongest moral and political case that could be made for killing Caesar. Shakespeare pointedly fails to highlight the question of justice in order to focus attention on the play’s substitute for justice, which is its code of honor (conceived of in this respect as a guide to action and a standard for it).

When, just after this, Brutus receives the letters that his servant Lucius finds in the window, they only serve to add the emotional luster imparted by flattery to the icily cold assent which he gives to the death of a man whom he theoretically loves. The verdict that “it must be by his death” is not made after an agonized argument with himself about Caesar’s merits and demerits; nor does Brutus invoke his love for Caesar, the veracity of which Shakespeare gives us no reason to doubt. Regardless of its veracity or intensity, that love is not invoked here as a factor in Brutus’s decision. That Brutus’s resolution in favor of Caesar’s death is coldly stated and crudely reasoned (such reasoning apparently occurs after the fact; he begins his speech in II.i.10–34 by stating the conclusion that Caesar must die) does not mean that Shakespeare seeks to represent Brutus himself, taken all in all, as an affectively deficient and logically inept moral reasoner. Rather, he may be suggesting that Brutus makes his decision based on a narrow range of considerations that do not reflect the range and complexity of his motives, the nobility of his concern for the good of Rome or the passionate nature of his affections.

The letter appeals to Brutus’s honor in the form of his name, which is a sign of his ancestor’s honor as much as his own. It presents the opportunity to kill Caesar as an occasion for self-knowledge and self-awakening.

“Brutus, thou sleep’st; awake and see thyself....”

“Shall Rome, et cetera.” Thus must I piece it out:
Shall Rome stand under one man’s awe? What Rome?
My ancestors did from the streets of Rome
The Tarquin drive, when he was called a king.
“Speak, strike, redress.” Am I entreated
To speak and strike? O Rome, I make thee promise,
If the redress will follow, thou receivest
Thy full petition at the hand of Brutus.

(II.i.46–58)

What is at stake here is the question of Rome standing under one man’s awe. Brutus’s aim is to eliminate Caesar as an object of the city’s awe. As Shakespeare indicated in the first act of the play, the people may be known by the objects of their honor and awe, even when all other means of identification, such as visible signs of occupation, are missing (as in I.i.5–15). The people are not picky as to whom they honor—Caesar will do as well as Pompey. Shakespeare suggests that the city must be in awe of something. If Caesar is to be removed by Brutus, who or what will take Caesar’s place as an object of awe and a recipient of honor? Brutus does not consider this question. He vows that he will take action in the form of speaking and striking, but he subtly separates the prospect of his own political speech and action from the question of “redress,” which is a matter of corrective justice. He will act “if the redress will follow,” which hints that redress will not necessarily follow upon his speaking and striking as night follows day. He takes no responsibility whatsoever for restoring distributive justice to Rome, such as he might do by pledging to preside over the redistribution of honor in the wake of Caesar.

Shakespeare emphasizes Brutus’s belief that through preventing Caesar from being crowned (by killing him), he will re-affirm the honor of his ancestor and implicitly “awake” to realize the dictates of his own honor (Goldberg 1989, 172). His honor has existed in the eyes of others (“many of the best respect in Rome”) but not in his own eyes to the extent that it has prompted him to act. He is called upon to “see [him]self” through the vehicle of political action, which seems to promise self-disclosure and self-knowledge. At the same time, he recognizes that “[b]etween the acting of a dreadful thing / And the first motion all the interim is / Like a phantasma or a hideous dream… the state of man, / Like to a little kingdom, suffers then / The nature of an insurrection” (II.i.63–69). One of the signs of his inward civil strife is that in the process of formulating the details of the conspiracy to kill Caesar, the governing faculty of his sense of honor is gradually severed from his concern for the general good with which it had previously been intimately allied (I.ii.84–89).

When Cassius and the other conspirators show up at Brutus’s house to put together their plans, all except Cassius have “their hats … plucked
about their ears / And half their faces buried in their cloaks” (II.i.73–74), making it impossible for Brutus to see who they are. He asks Cassius: “Know I these men that come along with you? (II.i.89). Cassius assures him that “there is no man here / But honours you, and every one doth wish / You had but that opinion of yourself / Which every noble Roman bears of you” (II.i.90–93). The fact that noble Romans honor Brutus should prompt him to honor himself (and them) by living up to their opinion of him. Brutus appears to be ready to do just that. Once in front of his fellow “noble Romans,” Brutus represents the plan to kill Caesar in very different terms than he did to himself when he was alone. From this point forward, he assumes control of the conspiracy, even daring to reject Cassius’s suggestion that they should swear an oath. He makes the point that if “the face of men / The sufferance of our souls [and] the time’s abuse” (II.i.113–14) are “motives weak” then they should not bother proceeding: “break off betimes, / And every man hence to his idle bed. So let high-sighted tyranny range on / Till each man drop by lottery” (II.i.115–18).

Living under tyranny means that one may lose one’s life at random (“by lottery”) upon the whim of the tyrant. Against this threat of living under the threat of random death, Brutus argues that honor should risk everything, including life, on furthering its cause of deliverance from tyranny. Death would not be random but supremely meaningful under these conditions. “What need we any spur but our own cause / To prick us to redress?… And what other oath, / Than honesty to honesty engaged, / That this shall be, or we will fall for it?” (II.i.122–27). Here, as Daniell (Shakespeare 1998, 242n126) points out, “honesty” may be glossed as “honour.” Whereas Brutus had previously indicated that “redress” would follow upon his action of speaking and striking (II.i.55–58), here the conspirators’ main aim is “redress,” which amounts to justice.

Against Rabkin (1973, 108) who argues that Brutus refuses to take “an oath which merely ornamets an action conceived in honor and love of country” on the ground of its meaninglessness, Blits argues that Brutus rejects an oath because “the conspirators must do nothing that would belie virtue as their only concern” (1993, 45). Blits’s argument is much the stronger of the two, except that he stresses the moral aspects of the virtue that Brutus is trying to protect from “the compromising appearance of prudence” (49) rather than the amoral virtue of honor that is actually engaged in this context. Brutus is extremely concerned with maintaining the virtue of their enterprise, but more for the sake of the good form dictated by honor, than for the sake of morality.
Brutus warns against tarnishing the “mettle of our spirits” as much as staining “the even virtue of our enterprise.” The “cause” of the conspirators is linked to, but not identical with their “performance,” and he wishes to protect both from being formally (and aesthetically) diminished by considerations of necessity and prudence.

Blits is entirely correct that Brutus “seeks fame and glory for his honorable motives” (1993, 48), but he neglects the fact that Brutus is concerned with the category of “performance” as much as he is with the virtue of their “cause.” By itself, honor is not deterred from acting nobly on behalf of ill-considered or even immoral causes because it allows for the split between cause and performance, whereas moral virtue, in the fullest sense, would forestall or prevent such a split. What moral virtue tries to bind together (cause and performance), honor is willing to let fall apart. As Arendt suggests, Brutus is proposing to attempt to recover the possibility of freedom from tyranny through political action (1968, 151). If moral virtue were the primary consideration in this context, it would theoretically act as a constraint on and a guide to the manner in which the proposed political action was to be carried out. Blits’s point is that Brutus is exclusively concerned with moral virtue, and that his moral virtue is defective because in its obsessive concern with its own purity of intention it does not serve as a constraint or a guide to political action. What appears to Blits to be defective moral virtue, however, may not be moral virtue at all, but amoral honor. Honor, like the “antipolitical moral virtue” (1993, 56) that Blits has in mind, disdains prudence, but not for moral reasons. Prudence bespeaks a concern for necessity that threatens the principle of disinterested nobility and, as I shall suggest, the greatness or splendor of honor in action depends upon ignoring mundane necessity.

Brutus frames the consequences of breaking the conspirators’ mutual promise in terms of the guilt of their shared Roman blood (“every drop
of blood / That every Roman bears, and nobly bears”), not in the damage to their intentions. If their blood is the source of their intentions, then how is their action to be conceived of as being moral? Brutus is worried about the danger of dishonoring their descent, which has nothing to do with their morality. This impression is heightened by what may be the most significant passage in the play, in terms of its sustained representation of the conflict between aesthetics, politics and morality as guides to public action. Brutus is attempting to defend his position that Antony should not be killed along with Caesar:

Our course will seem too bloody, Caius Cassius,  
To cut the head off and then hack the limb—  
Like wrath in death and envy afterwards—  
For Antony is but a limb of Caesar.  
Let’s be sacrificers but not butchers, Caius.  
We all stand up against the spirit of Caesar,  
And in the spirit of men there is no blood.  
O that we then could come by Caesar’s spirit  
And not dismember Caesar! But, alas,  
Caesar must bleed for it! And, gentle friends,  
Let’s kill him boldly, but not wrathfully:  
Let’s carve him as a dish fit for the gods,  
Not hew him as a carcass fit for hounds.

(II.i.161–73)

This is not the voice of defective morality, or of a fatally misguided purist concerned with his inviolate intentions, but of a mind given over to concern for the poetic category of performance at the expense of the moral or political argument for assassinating Caesar. He posits a figurative contrast between “gods” and “hounds” as the potential beneficiaries of the sacrifice of Caesar; the people (neither gods nor hounds) of Rome are conceived of as spectators of the sacrificial ritual (II.i.178). In this speech, the conspirators’ cause is their envisioned performance as “purgers” (rather than as murderers). Murder (in the form of assassination) is an eminently political act for which one may be held morally responsible; purgation is a religious or a medical act that appeals to a standard that is ostensibly beyond morality and politics alike. Brutus is placing the conspirators’ action in the superpolitical context of purgation not out of a prim insistence that they behave morally, but out of a rejection of morality as the standard by which their action is to be judged.

Brutus conceives of the proposed sacrifice of Caesar as a ritual process aimed at the spirit, which includes the body and its blood only incidentally. The import of “carving” up Caesar’s body as opposed to hacking it
apart suggests something akin to the act of creating a sculpture or cooking a special meal (hence, the allusion to a “dish fit for the gods”). It should be stressed that morality is irrelevant to this process. Carving a body is not morally different than hewing it “as a carcass fit for hounds.” What matters here to Brutus is the form of their action, not the moral content of it. Contra Blits, Brutus is not aiming at “moral transparency” (1993, 50) but at moral oblivion. The ritual decorum he aims at is not coincident with moral virtue, defective or otherwise.

Shakespeare’s unsettling suggestion is that a performance that has become untethered from its cause (or attached to a highly immoral cause) but is splendidly carried out is as satisfying a prospect for the honorable Brutus as a performance taken on behalf of a cause such as the common good. His mien is hardly mournful—if anything, it is rather sprightly. He gives the conspirators instructions on how they should manipulate their emotions in carrying out the assassination in a tone that is slightly reminiscent of Hamlet instructing the actors to lend temperance to their use of the passions in performance (Hamlet III.ii.4–8).

...let our hearts as subtle masters do,
Stir up their servants to an act of rage
And after seem to chide 'em. This shall make
Our purpose necessary and not envious,
Which so appearing to the common eyes,
We shall be called purgers, not murderers.

(II.i.173–79)

Brutus’s reference to the manner in which “subtle masters” deploy their passions to create particular illusions reminds us that theatrical performers were known as “masters” (as in Hamlet II.ii.424). Brutus is instructing the conspirators to model their political action after that of theatrical performance. He is not interested in purity of heart—the conspirators’ hearts may not be pure, but that means that they can be spared being implicated in the action that they instigate. The heart can stir parts of the body (as the servants of the heart) to action and then “seem” to chide those parts (presumably the hands) that carried out the heart’s instructions. Brutus’s aim is not to make the performance seem to be morally acceptable but to make it seem necessary, which is to say, beyond the control of morality. Judged in a Machiavellian light, his action is extremely virtuous in its deference to the necessity of making his action appear to be necessary in the “common eyes” (II.i.178) of the people. A necessary action is not “envious,” but neither is it morally purposive in the sense of aiming at disinterestedness (Blits 1993, 50).
To the extent that we may speak of purposiveness in the context of this speech, it would mean not moral or political purposiveness but something like Kant’s concept of aesthetic “purposiveness without purpose [Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck]” (2000, 77). Brutus’s intentions for the assassination of Caesar are not morally pure or designed to give the impression of moral purity; they are morally indifferent. Hence, we are not surprised that while Cassius urges the conspirators to “show yourselves true Romans” (II.i.222), Brutus gives them a pre-performance pep talk:

Good gentlemen, look fresh and merrily.  
Let not our looks put on our purposes,  
But bear it as our Roman actors do,  
With untired spirits and formal constancy.  
(II.i.223–26)

In the speech in which Brutus expressed his disdain for the practice of making oaths, he spoke of the “even virtue of our enterprise” (II.i.132) meaning the steady or consistent virtue of their actions. By this point, his concern for “even virtue” has been divested of its hint of morality and transmuted into an interest in “formal constancy,” suggesting that the “virtue” that Brutus had in mind in the earlier passage was the formal virtue of honor rather than the substantive virtue of morality or justice.

The impression that the moral and political purpose of the conspiracy has been trumped by a concern for performance is heightened by the dialogue that Brutus engages in with a latecomer to the conspiracy, Caius Ligarius, who shows up a while after the other conspirators have left. So inspired was he to join up with whatever enterprise Brutus has in mind that he came to see him even though he is sick. Lucius announces his arrival in terms that suggest that his sickness is the most notable thing about him: “Here is a sick man that would speak with you” (II.i.309). Ligarius indicates that his illness is of peculiar nature, in that it can be dispelled at a word from Brutus: “I am not sick if Brutus have in hand / Any exploit worthy of the name of honour” (II.i.315–16). As it happens, of course, Brutus has just such an exploit at his immediate disposal: “Such an exploit have I in hand, Ligarius, / Had you a healthful ear to hear of it” (II.i.317–18). Although, as we have seen, the enterprise he has in hand no longer has any necessary connection to moral and political virtue, it is still “an exploit worthy of the name of honour.” Ligarius is strongly moved by Brutus’s words, although it is not exactly clear why this should be the case. He makes a dramatic announcement:
By all the gods that Romans bow before,
I here discard my sickness. Soul of Rome,
Brave son, derived from honourable loins,
Thou like an exorcist hast conjured up
My mortified spirit. Now bid me run
And I will strive with things impossible,
Yea, get the better of them. What’s to do?
(II.i.319–25)

According to this passage, Brutus is honorable because he is “derived from honourable loins,” not because he known to be capable of honorable actions. His honor is something like a magical power, capable of conjuring up mortified spirits and curing sick men in an instant. It is ascribed honor, not achieved virtue. Ligarius is ready to “do I know not what: but it sufficeth that Brutus leadeth me on” (II.i.332–33). In answer to Ligarius’s question of what they are going to do, Brutus responds in the most expansive terms imaginable: “A piece of work that will make sick men whole” (II.i.326). When Ligarius then asks “But are not some whole that we must make sick?” (II.i.327), Brutus replies by saying “That must we also” (II.i.328). The performance that is to come has an all-expansive general purpose and no particular purpose at all. It is aimed at making sick men (not just Romans) well, but it does not demur at the prospect of making whole men sick, thereby canceling out its attachment to the purpose of restoring health. The project of making men whole is not political action aimed at political ends, but a superpolitical effort that ignores the difference between the (private) sickness of men and the (public) sickness of Rome. The action Brutus proposes is so all-encompassing (making sick men whole) that is almost by definition self-defeating, absent “a piece of work” that is also a miracle of sorts. One might reasonably argue that the act of associating Caesar is of considerable moral and political substance, but Brutus does not present it to Ligarius as such. In this context, their work appears as an attempt to strive with things impossible simply for the sake of getting the better of them, but it is still “an exploit worthy of the name of honour.”

In this, the last scene in which we hear from Brutus as leader of the conspiracy before the assassination of Caesar, Brutus says absolutely nothing about the objectives of liberty, freedom from tyranny and enfranchise-ment. It might be pointed out that Brutus is being a good soldier by trying to rally the spirits of his troops (in the kerchief-wrapped, ailing person of Ligarius) rather than giving a point by point account of the broader goals that are at stake. Even if this dramatic context is acknowledged, it is not clear why
the political goal of liberation from tyranny is not mentioned, while the non-political goal of making sick men whole while making others sick is presented (albeit rhetorically) as being the substance of their work. Shakespeare may be satirizing the inflated rhetoric used by leaders to prompt participation in collective political action, but he may also be commenting on the extent to which the action in question has become severed from its status as politically informed and goal-directed action. Brutus is no longer merely an actor; he now appears as something of a magician, with the spirit he has “conjured up,” Ligarius, appearing as his distinctly earthbound Ariel. As Ligarius announces that he will do Brutus’s bidding, whatever it may be, the sound of thunder is heard and Brutus speaks the last words that we will hear from him before he speaks to Caesar on the Ides of March, which are “Follow me, then” (II.i.334).

CONCLUSION

What are we to make of Shakespeare’s representation of honor as a motive for political action in *Julius Caesar*? To recount, we have seen that Shakespeare considers the Aristotelian possibility that honor can mediate between individual and general goods and that the principle of honor can inspire individuals to take the initiative in seeking to recover the possibility of political action. In *Julius Caesar*, the sort of political action that needs to be recovered is the future-directed process through which multiple actors (rather than just one man such as Caesar) submit themselves to public judgment in seeking to effect the general good. Theoretically, this process offers would-be political actors a “competitive arena” in which they can aim toward the general good, even while seeking to “achieve mastery, to erect colossal statues to their own memory, or to put on the play of assassination so that future ages may celebrate them” (Rebhorn 1990, 86). It is not clear that Shakespeare views honor as a happy mean between a concept of moral virtue that is centered on purity of intention and a concept of political virtue that is centered on public-spirited concern for the common good. As a formal virtue, honor can accommodate both small, self-centered motives and larger, public-spirited motives at the same time, but Shakespeare suggests that its bias towards the latter is due to its aesthetic distaste for smallness, rather than its moral inclinations. Shakespeare shows us how honor can tolerate and even encourage the divorce of moral and political purpose from poetic or dramatic performance of action for its own sake.
The meaning of honor in relation to the political action it informs changes throughout the play. Throughout the first two acts of the play, Shakespeare’s represents the decline of Brutus’s honor from a motive for action on behalf of the general good (I.ii.85–89) into a means of enticing witless followers into serving him with blind loyalty, in deference to his descent from “honourable loins” (II.i.321). This decline culminates in the portrait of Brutus as a figure who does not question Ligarius’s identification of him as a faith healer possessed of magical powers. The same character who worried about the extent to which taking an oath would stain the “even virtue” of the conspirators’ enterprise expresses no worries that blind zeal and ignorance will corrupt the same cause. It should be emphasized that Shakespeare’s depiction of this decline does not signify the construction of a case against Brutus (or against the honor that he represents), but rather a patient exploration of the limitations of honor (considered as both a principle and a passion) isolated from prudence as a motive for political action. Shakespeare offers a sustained consideration of the risks of honor as a “guide to action,” given the ease with which honor encourages divestment from sources of guidance external to itself (such as a standard of justice).

If the damning representation of honor’s decline into a vehicle of will unfettered by the constraints of morality or a concern for the general good that we see in the first two acts of the play is Shakespeare’s last word on honor, then we might imagine that he is suggesting that honor-driven action should be discouraged. A reasonable goal might be to cast honor into disfavor by representing its inability to inspire effective political action rather than impotent displays of political virtuosity. Is this what Shakespeare is doing in *Julius Caesar*? Should the play be read as an attempt to address the challenge of keeping those possessed of honor from hurling themselves towards “glorious” self-sacrifice, stupid self-immolation or the amoral indulgence of the aesthetic preference for performance and redirecting them towards harmless practices, or ideally, to action taken on behalf of the general good?

It is true that, on one level, the effectual truth of Roman honor is Roman suicide. It is also true, however, that personal honor is the motive that causes Brutus to take action to recover the possibility of republican liberty and republican honor. Shakespeare presents the assassination as being a grave and momentous event, not as an empty ritual. Whatever the apolitical or antipolitical motives were that may have informed it, the assassination has a political significance of its own. Honor is a dangerous motive in this context, but an indispensable one as well. Shakespeare suggests that honor is the only
motive left to the dispirited and passive Romans that can inspire them to seek to recover their freedom, when all other motives have sputtered out and resistance has been reduced to “groaning” under tyranny (I.ii.61). Shakespeare’s chastened and sharp-eyed account of honor is not purely critical. He deliberately refuses to make instrumental efficacy the primary standard by which the central political action of the play is to be assessed. If the assassination of Caesar were exclusively to be understood with a view towards practical questions of strategic logic, efficiency and efficacy, the play that centers around this quintessentially inefficient, impractical and inefficacious act would be some sort of grim absurdist farce and Brutus its ludicrous anti-hero.

Painfully obvious though the obtuseness, short-sightedness and political imprudence that characterize the decision-making process leading up to the assassination itself are, they are ultimately beside the point. While the play offers a critique of political actors who focus on the greatness of their own performance at the expense of the political cause on behalf of which they are ostensibly acting (thereby reducing their attempt at political agency to irrelevant performance art) it also presents a case for a non-instrumentalist view of political action. Antony’s famous tribute to Brutus at the end of the play would reflect nothing but Antony’s damning lack of judgment if Shakespeare’s primary intent in writing Julius Caesar were to criticize ineffectual, imprudent and self-deceiving political actors such as Brutus. Judged cynically, or assessed strictly on practical grounds, that is more or less what he amounts to, but the play strongly rejects the assumption that he is defined solely by his failure, egregious though it is. Brutus’s honor is not less valuable within the fictive moral and political world of the play just because it points toward his eventual destruction at his own hands. It is his honor that spurs him to take action on behalf of the general good (II.i.85) and inspires the other conspirators to enlist him in their enterprise; the fact that they fail to save Rome from itself is not presented as being more important than the fact that they tried.

Although Shakespeare refuses to view political efficacy as a wholly sufficient standard by which political action may be judged, he does offer a critique of political actors (such as Caius Ligarius) who are represented as seeking primarily to follow a leader on behalf of any cause and who refuse to exercise self-determination and self-judgment. Caius Ligarius is the embodiment of the refusal of “political agency,” in the contemporary sense of self-determined and reflective political action and the capacity for such action, even though he is indeed a political actor (on the topics of agency and
self-determined action, see Barnard 1983; MacIntyre 1999; O’Neill 2000 and Hornsby 2004). If we wish to accept Kahn’s argument that the play marks Brutus’s assumption of political agency, then we would have to expand the notion of political agency to incorporate a much wider range of motives (not all of them suggestive of self-determination) or be forced to employ much more subtle and careful distinctions between “self-authorized” political agents and political actors who are self-authorized and self-deceived, both political seducer and object of seduction. Brutus takes the initiative in shaping the conspiracy to kill Caesar, but he is goaded into doing so. He acts on his own judgment, but the terms with which he judges his intention of acting out “a dreadful thing” (II.i.63) are presented to him via Cassius’s rhetoric of political seduction. For Shakespeare, honorable actions can be prompted in part by flattery, seduction and the fear of shame as well as by more honorable motives. He does not suggest that action is worth taking simply because it bespeaks self-determination and choice, or even because it lives up to “the name of honour.” The end towards which it is directed has to be choiceworthy as well.

Shakespeare is not a proto-Arendtian who views political action as a glorious theater of public-spirited individuals revealing themselves through speech and heroic feats of prowess. He demonstrates respect for the criterion of “greatness” without suggesting that greatness or poetic splendor is all that matters in attempting to evaluate the political action of the conspirators. Shakespeare continually reminds us that such dramatic greatness as the act of Caesar’s assassination possesses is paid for in blood. After the conspirators have accomplished their task, Brutus urges them to “bathe [their] hand in Caesar’s blood / Up to the elbows and besmear [their] swords” (III.i.106–7). They are then to walk forth into the market-place crying “Peace, Freedom and Liberty” (III.i.110). Cassius, liking this gruesome suggestion that they bathe in Caesar’s blood, adds: “Stoop then and wash. How many ages hence / Shall this our lofty scene be acted over / In states unborn and accents yet unknown?” (III.i.111–12).

This model of political action suggests a grim portent of an endless process of repetition in the future as much as it does a prediction that some men will always be prompted to act on behalf of liberty (even if liberty is not foremost in their stated objectives for action). Cassius’s words do not claim that anyone (much less Rome itself) was made whole or well by the conspirators’ “piece of work,” but they imply that the need for it will arise again, and the whole scene will be “acted over” with no hint of reprieve in the future. Shakespeare allows the scene to be cast in lofty terms of momentary awe for the
“men who gave their country liberty” (III.i.118), but he also draws the scene back down to the level of bloody savagery. His representation of Brutus’s capacity for temporary moral oblivion takes into account the fact that such a capacity may be a necessary prerequisite for carrying out an assassination, rather than strictly a moral aberration. This is a sign of Shakespeare’s broader insistence upon the ineluctable complexity of human motives and the actions that are prompted by them. Brutus’s action is publicly spectacular, self-revelatory and principled, but Shakespeare indicates that it is also imprudent, short-sighted and “savage” (III.i.223). It succeeds in removing a tyrant, but not in restoring liberty, for “the causes that had destroyed the republic still remained” (Montesquieu 1965, 113). It is a half-measure at a time when only whole measures would have sufficed to restore freedom, and half-measures in this context are not only inadequate but fatal.

The forced removal of Caesar does not magically heal the broken connection between honor and the political and moral ends toward which it can be directed. The clearest suggestion that this is the case is made in the scene following the assassination of Caesar. When Brutus, presumably still bearing on his hands the evidence of his involvement in “the bleeding business” of killing Caesar, ascends into the pulpit before an audience of Romans to render “public reasons” (III.ii.7) for killing Caesar, he urges the crowd to believe in his honor and to “have respect for mine honour, that you may believe” (III.ii.14–15). Belief in his cause (and in his words defending that cause) is to be derived from a pre-existing faith in Brutus’s own honor. Having been asked to effectively suspend their judgment and to simply “believe [him] for [his] honour,” the crowd is then urged to invoke their powers of judgment and to consult their wisdom and the evidence of their own senses, in order to enhance the process by which public reasons are rendered and assessed: “Censure me in your wisdom and awake your senses, that you may be the better judge” (III.ii.16–17). How are an uncritical belief in Brutus’s honor and a critical judgment of his reasons to be combined?

At first glance, Brutus’s invitation to his assembled country-men to participate in a collective exercise of reasoning and judgment informed by wisdom and sense intimates, if only momentarily, that the restoration of a republican standard of public accountability unknown to tyranny is at hand. The great obstacle to such a standard, Caesar, is dead and liberty has ostensibly been restored. The fleeting impression that some sort of ongoing public conversation is going to be initiated is heightened by the fact that just before Brutus speaks, one plebeian remarks (in response to the comment of his peer
that he intends to hear Brutus speak) that “I will hear Cassius, and compare their reasons / When severally we hear them rendered” (III.i.9–10). Shakespeare uses the speech that follows to effectively relegate the initial impression that a public giving of accounts is going to take place to the category of an illusion. Brutus does not take advantage of such liberty as he has gained by killing Caesar to offer arguments or insights into the moral and political logic by which his action could be justified. Instead, he relies upon assertions, emotional entreaties, unanswerable rhetorical questions and an assurance that he has his dagger at hand, ready to use on himself “when it shall please my country to need my death” (III.ii.46–47). His honor-based claims appear to be at odds with the process of public reasoning.

Brutus makes no attempt to link his honor to the larger cause of justice, although he does appeal to friendship, in the form of his love for Rome (III.ii.22; see Addendum 11). Earlier, he had cited “pity for the general wrong of Rome” (III.i.170) as the cause that excused “the bleeding business” of killing Caesar (III.i.170), but pity, being even less politically inclined than honor, does not suffice to prompt political action that could actually help to restore the republic to liberty after Caesar is dead. Pity, like honor, has no necessary link to the general good. This is not to say that pity may not be directed to serve the general good, but there is no automatic process by which pity for Rome translates into political action to be taken on its behalf. Brutus’s appeal to “[his] own honour” (III.i.15) functions as a substitute for an appeal to justice and a supplement for his appeal to his love for Rome. Before Caesar died, his overwhelming presence and the threat that it posed to the honor of other Romans provoked Brutus’s action on behalf of his own honor and that of Rome. Robbed of the object for his honorable resistance, Brutus temporarily attempts to find new employment for his honor in forging a constructive relationship to Rome that is founded on his love for it, and underwritten by his honor. There appears to be no common ground between Brutus and the people who inhabit his beloved Rome (at least in the form of shared speech and public reason) upon which such a relationship might be built. Bereft of satisfying public reasons for Caesar’s death, the crowd is left with promises that they, like Antony, shall receive “the benefit of his dying, a place in the commonwealth” (III.ii.42–43).

The “place in the commonwealth” of which Brutus speaks is decidedly obscure. In this scene, words but not reasons are exchanged; it appears that honorable speech cannot create a shared “place in the commonwealth” even in the form of a verbal construction or a “discursive space.” One
plebeian wants to “bring [Brutus] with triumph home to his house” (III.i.48), while a second plebeian takes Brutus’s proposed elevation over the members of his audience to an even higher level, recommending that they “give him a statue with his ancestors,” (III.i.50). Yet another goes so far as to state: “Let him be Caesar” (III.i.51). This last response to Brutus’s speech suggests that the vacancy created by Caesar’s death is not a space in which republican honor will flourish anew, but a void that will be occupied by the empire. The people still are unclear on the question of whom they should honor because there is no longer any reliable standard of public honor to serve as a means of ranking individuals. Are they to confer honor on the basis of physical strength or force (after the fashion of Cassius in I.i.98–131), or on the basis of “strength of spirit,” or on the basis of virtuous and noble service to the city? Under Caesar, there was only one man deserving of honor, and in his absence, some alternative scale of honor will have to be devised.

Shakespeare does not suggest that the results will be promising. One of the points of his unflattering depiction of the popular response to Antony’s speech is that the people will honor whoever promises them the greatest material benefits (Bloom 1996, 83). Although Shakespeare’s representation of Rome arguably reflects his anti-democratic tendencies (as evidenced most powerfully in his depiction of the capricious, impulsive and easily duped commoners), it also suggests his sense of republican possibility. It was under the republic that individual honor could be bound to the general good of Rome through virtuous action (Lowenthal 1997, 135). Such honor as Brutus possesses at the beginning of the play is a vestige of the achievement of the dying republic, as well as a quality of character that reflects his individual aspiration toward nobility.

Under Caesar, Roman honor had only the outlet of a violent and unsuccessful attempt at revolution. Tyranny corrupted the capacity of the citizens living under it to undertake honorable political action on a regular basis (since all honor was due to only one man), but it did not eliminate the capacity of men to undertake one last, spectacular gesture on behalf of their own honor and that of Rome. Shakespeare is respectful of the grandeur of that attempt but mindful, too, of its savagery. Antony’s final tribute to Brutus is not ironic, but neither is it simply celebratory. Nature “might stand up and say to all the world ‘This was a man!’” (V.v.75–6), but in the end, it didn’t (Mansfield 2006, 19). Honor in action, taken to its height, does not compel the attention of nature or evoke tribute from it, nature being entirely indifferent to gentleness and excellence alike. Honor leaves the memory of those whom it stirred to
political action to oblivion, or in the potentially faithless hands of the poets who save them from it (see Addendum 12).

ADDENDA

1. Initially, Brutus’s exercise of virtue in killing Caesar does not secure the approval of its audience. Montesquieu suggests that it does compel admiration, but what sort of admiration is it that sees atrocious acts as something divine? The atrociousness of the assassination makes it unacceptable in moral terms, but it is ostensibly admirable when assessed according to a different register of value, one suggestive of aesthetic appreciation. The assassination can be admired “as divine” to the extent that it is viewed outside of the range of the ordinary rules for crimes and virtues. Perhaps it is admired as a performance that suggests the possibility of self-forgetting afforded by a single all-encompassing vision that blots out all other sights—of virtue that “hearken[s] only to itself and s[ees] neither citizen, friend, benefactor, nor father.”

2. Arendt’s reading of the play picks up on a question posed by Nietzsche. He asks whether Shakespeare’s “sympathy” with Brutus is best attributed to the poet’s identification with the cause of “political freedom” or whether “political freedom [was] only a symbol for something unexpressible” in this respect (1974, 151). Arendt brings up Brutus in the context of her discussion of freedom in politics. She argues that “Freedom as related to politics is not a phenomenon of will. We deal here not with … freedom of choice that arbitrates and decides between two given things, one good and one evil … it is, to remain with Shakespeare, the freedom of Brutus: ‘That this shall be or we shall fall for it,’ that is, the freedom to call something into being which did not exist before” (1968, 151). One could argue that nothing less than an abject failure to achieve instrumental goals would suffice by way of indicating the lofty disdain for success that Arendt sees as characteristic of free political action.

3. One might ask if moral virtue is not by definition “apolitical” or even “antipolitical.” Mansfield (1998, 22) observes that “[t]he ‘in-itself’ character of moral virtue that keeps it aloof from the effects of moral actions requires an abstraction from politics.” Is Blits’s concept of an “antipolitical moral virtue” a tautology?

4. Bloom (1996, 104) suggests that through his representation of Brutus’s failed attempt to restore the Republic while retaining his Stoic
morals and philosophy, Shakespeare “shows the impossibility of the direct application of philosophy to political affairs.” Pechter (1986, 63) describes Brutus as “an introvert who lives in the mind” and argues that “Brutus tries to ignore politics, but politics won’t forget about [him]” (66). Many scholars have argued that what Bloom calls Brutus’s moral idealism and “monolithic moral intensity” (1996, 101) renders him singularly unfit for political action. Marjorie Garber describes Brutus as being “[s]ubjective, introspective [and] private” (2004, 415). Richard Wilson argues that the play addresses the question of who has “possession of the initiative in the action [of controlling political discourse]” and indicates that Brutus’s poor political judgment causes the conspirators to lose that initiative (2001, 72).

5. For a discussion of the dramatic representations of Brutus as a terrorist and a freedom fighter, see Tempera 2005. Among numerous depictions of Brutus as a proto-Kantian idealist who attempts to hold political action up to the standard of morality (with uplifting or disastrous results) see especially Blits 1993 and also Zander (2005, 8) and Tempera (2005, 335). Pelling (2006, 4) strains (and fails) to find a convincing analogy between Brutus and George W. Bush.

6. Although Michael Ignatieff makes the suggestion that honor can function as a code of “moral etiquette” that defines the grounds for “mutual respect” in the context of his discussion of military honor, his insight applies to aristocratic honor as well (1997, 117).

7. I borrow the concept of a “poetics of honor” from Ter Horst 1981.

8. The fullest treatment of the politics of honor in early modern England is James 1978. Watson 1960; Shalvi 1972; Council 1973 and Alvis 1990 specifically address Shakespeare’s treatment of honor. Palmer 1982; Alvis 1990; Calhoun 1994 (esp. 268–70); Honneth 1995 (esp. 138–39); Rigotti 1998, 2000; Freeman 2001; J. M. Smith 2001; T. W. Smith 2001 (esp. 39–50); Ward 2001; Krause 2002; Trees 2004 and J. M. Smith 2005 address the political aspects of honor, offering a wide range of reflections upon honor, affronts to honor (such as disrespect) and the shame resulting from such affronts as motives for political action and “sources of political agency” (to use a phrase borrowed from Brown [2001, 3]). My treatment of honor is indebted to Blits (1993, 57–58), as my disagreement with his argument should indicate. It reflects as well the influence of Rebhorn (1990, 83). My argument differs from Rebhorn’s in that I do not take a topical approach or view the idea of emulation in terms of single-factor causality with relation to action.
9. For a comment on the need of honor to be publicly displayed through political action, see Alvis (1990, 32). On the general association of honor and public display, see Chaney (1995, 147); Lendon 1997; Ignatieff (1997, 117) and Trees (2004, 45–72).

10. On Shakespeare’s depiction of honor as a motive for action and a “guide to actions” see Council (1973, 62–65). For an undeveloped but suggestive comment that Shakespeare views honor as an irrational but essential motive for action, see Traversi’s discussion of *Troilus and Cressida*: “The Trojan devotion to honor, Shakespeare would seem to infer, is devotion to an abstraction that has no sufficient basis in reason… but… to abandon honor for its lack of rational foundation is to expose oneself to the danger of lethargy, to a rooted disinclination to act at all” (1956, 75).

11. No one mentions justice in *Julius Caesar* until Brutus brings it up in the fourth act of the play. In IV.iii.19–21, justice temporarily replaces (rather than merely adds to) the list of causes previously identified as those for the sake of which the “deed on Caesar” was done. There, justice is presented as the primary (if not the exclusive) reason why Caesar had to be killed. The action of the conspirators appears to have gone through some sort of process of moral filtration after the fact. In this passage, it seems that not even passionate concern for “the good of Rome” (III.ii.45) or pity for “the general wrong of Rome” (III.i.170) is motive enough; only justice, unaccompanied, will suffice. This impression is immediately somewhat mitigated by the fact that Brutus invokes justice in the process of warning Cassius not to pollute “the mighty space” of the “large honours” (IV.iii.25) that they had obtained by killing Caesar by giving countenance to bribery. Is it for the sake of securing and upholding their “large honours” or for justice itself (or for both) that he wishes Cassius to abstain from deferring to considerations of necessity in the form of improperly acquired filthy lucre? In any event, justice is never mentioned again after it is brought up in this brief passage.

12. On the need of poets to assert human importance, see Mansfield (2006, 19). See Shakespeare’s Sonnets 25 and 55 on the trope that only the words of poets (as opposed to the deeds of heroes or the monuments of kings) elude the tendency of nature to reduce human things to oblivion.
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My thanks to Jon D. Levenson for his generosity in reading an earlier version of this article. I should also like to acknowledge the assistance of the reader for this journal. I am indebted to him for his extremely valuable and compelling comments.


Civil Liberty and Philosophic Liberty in John Milton’s
Areopagitica

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Why should we read Milton’s defense of freedom of speech in Areopagitica? After all, our Supreme Court guarantees almost unlimited freedom of expression, and this legal guarantee is supported by our belief that exercising free speech makes us progressively more enlightened. Viewed from our perspective Areopagitica looks like a Model T Ford, a museum piece in which we see intimations of our current automobiles. While Milton opposed prior censorship, for instance, he recommended post-publication punishment for certain kinds of books, such as those guilty of libel. This much resembles our practice. But then Milton shocks us by approving harsh punishments for certain published books: “if [books] be found mischievous and libelous, the fire and the executioner will be the timeliest and the most effectual remedy, that man’s prevention can use” (Milton 1959, 569; italics added; spelling from this edition modernized throughout). The “fire” of book burning is bad enough, but in Milton’s England the “executioner” inflicted punishments on authors such as the pillory, ear-cropping, and nose-slitting (Milton 1959, 569n). Rather than a precursor of our model, Areopagitica begins to resemble a relic of ideas we reject, like a nasty chastity belt.

But rather than rejecting Milton, this information can help dispel an assumption we may bring to this book: like a good liberal of his time, Milton was trying (albeit failing) to approximate our solution to the problem of free speech. That solution assumes governments should censor as little as possible whereas citizens should have as expansive as possible a “right” to express themselves. Milton rejects both assumptions; to apply them to his book is to place it on a Procrustean bed. In effect, Milton begins from radically different assumptions than our own about free speech. Indeed, as I shall argue,
rather than viewing Areopagitica as a precursor of our “right” to free speech limiting government, we should view it as an alternative to it.

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To begin adjusting our perspective, we should note that Areopagitica never uses the words “right” or “rights” in our sense (Sterne and Kollmeier 1985, 1157, 1159). In those contexts where we expect the word “right,” Milton uses the word “liberty.” His subtitle, for instance, reads “For the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing.” We would expect “For the Right of Unlicensed Printing.” And elsewhere Milton writes, “Give me the liberty [not the “right”] to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties” (Milton 1959, 560).

So, what is Miltonic “liberty”? At first, the answer seems simple. As the subtitle reads, Areopagitica defends the “Liberty of Unlicensed Printing.” Since a license is a government-issued permit to print a book which has been approved by a government-appointed censor, Milton defends freedom to publish without prior censorship by government officials.

While this answer is true, it is insufficient, for it misconstrues both the words “license” and “liberty.” The first is ambiguous. While it does mean a written permit by governments, it also means licentious or disorderly writing by authors. Milton introduces this ambiguity the first time the word occurs in Areopagitica. Breaking off a digression where he begins to question Christian belief in immortality, he quickly segues into his first or historical argument by saying, “But lest I should be condemned of introducing license, while I oppose Licensing, I refuse not the pains to be so much Historical, as will serve to show what hath been done by ancient and famous Commonwealths, against this disorder [of license by the learned]” (Milton 1959, 493; italics added). And later, speaking of the futility of censoring only books, Milton writes, “Wisdom we cannot call it, because it stops but one breach of license, nor that neither; when as those corruptions which it seeks to prevent, break in faster at other doors which cannot be shut” (Milton 1959, 527; italics added). The folly of this attempt to censor only licentious books Milton compares to “the exploit of that gallant man who thought to pound up the crows by shutting his Park gate” (Milton 1959, 520).

Instead of such folly, Milton proposes censorship after publication of certain few kinds of books. He instances his proposal in ancient
Athens where the Magistrate (the poet claims) rightly censored after publication the following books: the blasphemous or the libelous. Exemplifying blasphemy, he adds, “the Books of Protagoras were by the Judges of Areopagus commanded to be burnt, and himself banished the territory for a discourse begun with his confessing not to know whether there were gods, or whether not” (Milton 1959, 494). Thus Milton believes openly questioning any people’s “esteemed gods” (Milton 1959, 498) a form of license by writers.

Now if the word “license” is equivocal in this book, so also, we infer, must be the word “liberty.” “Liberty of Unlicensed Printing,” thus means printing free of two things: licensing by government and licentiousness by writers. Milton’s bilateral “liberty,” then, has an Aristotelian echo of a virtuous mean moderating extremes. The government restrains exercising prior censorship and writers restrain expressing licentious ideas. A further nod to Aristotle may be the commonsensical quality of Milton’s scheme. Governments will be less inclined to censor—indeed less able to do so—when writers discreetly censor themselves. Not only ancient Protagoras but also some modern writers fail to strike this balance, as Milton subtly hints in speaking about visiting Galileo during his trip to Italy: “There it was that I found and visited the famous Galileo, a prisoner to the Inquisition, for thinking in Astronomy otherwise than the Franciscan and Dominican licensers thought” (Milton 1959, 538). But, of course, Galileo’s imprisonment was not caused by his thought but by its open expression in a book written for non-specialists, Dialogue on the Two Chief Systems (Fortin 1996, 67).

By contrast to such modern immoderation, our poet finds in antiquity the proper balance in both the Athenian magistrate’s and a learned reader’s treatment of the Greek playwright Aristophanes. Milton admits Aristophanes was “the loosest of them all,” “the malicious libeler of his chief friends,” and his plays full “of grossest infamy” (Milton 1959, 495, 523). Yet the Athenian magistrate (according to Milton) did not suppress these plays; it only forbade their public acting. In other words, the audience for these plays was limited to the literate and (Milton hoped) the circumspect. Here then is government moderation. Learned moderation, on the other side, is exercised by an ancient Church Father, John Chrysostom, who “nightly studied so much [Aristophanes] and had the art to cleanse a scurrilous vehemence into the style of a rousing Sermon” (Milton 1959, 495–96). This Christian priest, then, discreetly studied Aristophanes at a time of day when the faithful would not be scandalized by his scurrilous reading. Hence we arrive at the Aristotelian balance Milton proposes: both the magistrate and the learned moderate their
powers, the one to suppress, the other to display learning.

Milton practices what he preaches: he is discreet in giving a name to learned moderation. Only in the scholarly safety of a later Latin work did he clearly give it the name “philosophic liberty.” In his Latin Second Defense of the English People, written ten years after Areopagitica, he defends the English Commonwealth for deposing King Charles I. Since Milton was attacked personally for defending that deposing, he included an account of his life and his writings. After narrating his early life and education, he speaks of his thinking about liberty in the decade of the 1640s, during which he wrote Areopagitica:

I began to consider in what way I could contribute to the progress of real and substantial liberty; which is to be sought for not from without, but within, and is to be obtained principally not by fighting, but by the just regulation and by the proper conduct of life. Reflecting, therefore, that there are in all three species of liberty, without which it is scarcely possible to pass any life without comfort, namely, ecclesiastical, domestic or private [domesticam seu privatam], and civil; that I had already written on the first species [ecclesiastical], and saw the magistrate diligently employed about the third [civil], I undertook the domestic, which was the one that remained. But … this [domestic or private liberty] also appeared to be three-fold, namely, whether the affair of marriage was rightly managed; whether the education of children was properly conducted, lastly whether philosophizing freely would be allowed [si denique libere philosophandi potestas esset]. (Milton 1933, 131; italics added where I translate the Latin literally; brackets surround either my clarifications in English or Milton’s Latin)

So of his three species of liberty (ecclesiastical, domestic or private, and civil), Milton wrote only on domestic or private liberty during the period of Areopagitica. Subsequently Milton mentions Areopagitica as promoting the third subspecies of this liberty, “philosophic liberty”: “Lastly, I wrote, after the model of a regular speech, Areopagitica, on the liberty of printing, that the determination of true and false, of what ought to be published and what suppressed, might not be in the hands of the few who may be charged with the inspection of books, men commonly without learning and of vulgar judgment, and by whose license and pleasure, no one is suffered to publish any thing which may be above vulgar apprehension” (Milton 1933, 133, 135). And in concluding this Second Defense with both praise of and exhortation to the leaders of the English Commonwealth, the poet pleads for “philosophic liberty.” “Again, it is my earnest wish,” he writes, “that you would give
permission to those who are inclined to philosophize freely [libere philosophari], to publish at their own peril [suo periculo in lucem proferre], without the private inquisition of any magisterial censor” (Milton 1933, 237-39; italicized words are my literal translation of Milton’s bracketed Latin).

However clearly Milton names “philosophic liberty” in the scholarly safety of Latin, we find him evasive in English. “Philosophic freedom” occurs but once in Areopagitica in a playfully ironic context. Arguing that his own case against prior censorship is shared by the learned in Italy, Milton says, “I could recount what I have seen and heard in other Countries, where this kind of inquisition tyrannizes; when I have sat among their learned men, for that honor I had, and been counted happy to be born in such a place of Philosophic freedom, as they supposed England was …” And he adds, “though I knew that England then was groaning loudest under the Prelatical yoke, nevertheless I took it as a pledge of future happiness, that other Nations were so persuaded of her liberty” (Milton 1959, 537–38; italics in original). So, at least in his English work, it was those Italians, not Milton himself, who spoke of “philosophic liberty” in England.

Our playful poet is similarly disingenuous elsewhere in Areopagitica about what part of English liberty Areopagitica promotes. In his introductory paragraph, he shifts from which emotion moves him to write this book to a complicated discussion of the liberty it promotes:

Which though I stay not to confess ere any ask, I shall be blameless, if it [passion or emotion] be no other than the joy and gratulation which it brings to all who wish and promote their Country’s liberty; whereof this whole discourse proposed will be a certain testimony, if not a trophy. For this is not the liberty which we can hope, that no grievance ever should arise in the Commonwealth, that let no man in this World expect; but when complaints are freely heard, deeply considered, and speedily reformed, then is the utmost bound of civil liberty attained, that wise men look for. To which if I now manifest by the very sound of this which I shall utter that we are already in good part arrived, and yet from such a steep disadvantage of tyranny and superstition grounded into our principles as was beyond the manhood of a Roman recovery, it will be attributed first, as is most due, to the strong assistance of God our deliverer, next to your faithful guidance and undaunted Wisdom, Lords and Commons of England. (Milton 1959, 487)

This passage jumbles evasive detour with misdirection. The first sentence is resolved syntactically at “the joy and gratulation [of those] who wish and promote their Country’s liberty.” But then Milton appends a
testimony/trophy distinction, which distracts us from the liberty Milton promotes (where we thought we were headed) to the liberty allowing him to speak or write, which in turn leads to a dead end. For subsequently Milton explains the testimony/trophy distinction, first with a description of civil liberty at its best or “utmost bound,” and then with an acknowledgment that we are already at or near that bound. But if we already have sufficient liberty to address civic problems (“To which … I now manifest by the very sound of this which I shall utter”), why discuss it at such length in preference to what we lack, the still unnamed liberty for authors Areopagitica promotes?

The answer, appropriately enough, is that Milton is moderate about learned moderation. Like John Chrysostom in the example above, he keeps his learning partially concealed. That is, Areopagitica promotes self-censorship or what has come to be called esotericism. As Thomas Pangle summarizes Areopagitica’s teaching:

> The most important censorship is, then, self-censorship on the part of philosophers, the most disturbing, but at the same time most perspicacious, thinkers. Philosophers’ activity, they well know, poses the danger of undermining the traditions, bonds, and healthy limits on thought that support the strongest lawful republican communities and the most lawfully dedicated republican leadership. Decent citizens can be deeply disorientated by philosophy, and the insights and questions of philosophy can sometimes be misused for evil ends by unscrupulous men. The philosopher who is humanely and humanly wise must take responsibility for these dangers. He must philosophize in a manner, or communicate and publicize his philosophic speculation with a caution, that accords with the gravity of the threat his questioning might otherwise pose to republican freedom and virtue. (Pangle 1992, 125–26)

Hence likewise Mary Ann McGrail claims about Areopagitica, “Milton employs the rhetorical strategies Strauss sketches roughly in Persecution and the Art of Writing” (McGrail 1997, 105). And as I have suggested elsewhere, Milton teaches esoterically in his great poetry, such as Paradise Lost (Dowling 2005, 16–37). Instead of foreshadowing our modern right to free expression, he subtly insinuates an ancient liberty which makes it a duty of the learned to moderate expression of their learning.

Admittedly this thesis is all too briefly argued here. But even if more evidence were supplied, the thesis faces two serious objections from modern readers which need response. The first concerns the genre and historical context of Areopagitica. Milton presents this work as an occasional
pamphlet addressed to the English Parliament of 1644 about its Licensing Order of 1643. Milton’s thesis quotes in italics parts of that 1643 Order as he asks his audience to “judg[e] over that Order which ye have ordained to regulate Printing. That no Book, pamphlet, or paper shall be henceforth Printed, unless the same be first approved and licensed by such, or at least one of such as shall be thereto appointed” (Milton 1959, 490–91). And the conclusion returns to this Order to recommend in its stead a 1642 Order which did not require prior licensing (Milton 1959, 569). As a pamphlet about a quotidian issue, Areopagitica (so the objection goes) seems an odd vehicle for a philosophic teaching about the perennial issue of esotericism. In other words, my thesis yokes the opposites of journalism and philosophy (Thompson 1996, 6).

But such an oxymoron rightly describes the work Milton imitates, Isocrates’ Areopagiticus, an imitation our poet affirms not only with his title but with a remark in his introduction. Answering an objection that he is without precedent in addressing Parliament as a private citizen, Milton says he follows the precedent of Isocrates and his Areopagitic speech: “I could name him who from his private house wrote that discourse to the Parliament of Athens, that persuades them to change the form of Democracy which was then established” (Milton 1959, 489). From evidence within this Greek speech we can date it in the fourth century before Christ, when Athens was ruled by an extreme democracy which overthrew the oligarchic Thirty and condemned Socrates to death (Bury and Meiggs 1975, 245–322; Hignett 1952, 232–44). Although Isocrates never delivered this speech, he modeled it on political speeches to the ekklēsia, the democratic assembly (Aristotle 1941, 1436–51). The proem or introduction argues that the public safety (hai sōtēria) of Athens is threatened because the city lacks a regime (politeia) which conducts its affairs well. The proposition argues this public safety requires a return to the “democracy of our forefathers,” a regime he vaguely associates with the seventh-century Athens of Solon and Cleisthenes. His argument for the superiority of this “ancestral democracy” is that it properly understood distributive justice, giving to each man according to his merit, not electing public officials by lot, and restricting public office to the gentleman class.

Although Isocrates’ speech superficially resembles an address to the Athenian assembly, much about it is unconventional and even deceptive. For one thing, speeches on the public safety typically located danger in the strength of an enemy outside the city and the weakness of the city’s armed forces within (Arnhart 1981, 71–72). But Isocrates argues for an internal danger to public safety, the lack of a good regime. Furthermore, Isocrates is
deceptive in describing his regime as a democracy by acclaiming the basic roles of election and audit fulfilled by the people or the “many” and by deprecating the key roles of office holding and governing limited to the propertied few:

In short, they had made up their minds that the people, like an absolute master, ought to control the public offices, punish offenders, and settle disputed points, and that those who were able to enjoy ease and possessed sufficient means should attend to public affairs like servants, and, if they acted justly, should be praised and rest contented with this recognition of their services, while, if they managed affairs badly, they should meet with no mercy, but should be visited with the severest penalties. And how would it be possible to find a democracy more just or more secure than one which set the most influential citizens at the head of public affairs, and at the same time invested the people with sovereign control of these same officials? (Isocrates 1894, 26–27)

But this final rhetorical question is deceptive. For, when stripped of its beguiling democratic rhetoric, Isocrates’ “ancestral regime” is in reality a mixed or balanced republic where both democrats and aristocrats hold some power but the latter predominate. The ruling gentlemen set the tone for life in public, as can be seen in Isocrates’ argument about the distributive justice of this regime:

And what chiefly assisted them in managing the state aright was this: of the two recognized principles of equality, the one assigning the same to all, the other their due to individuals, they were not ignorant which was the most useful, but rejected that which considered that good and bad had equal claims, and preferred that which honored and punished each man according to his deserts; and governed the state on these principles, not appointing magistrates from the general body of citizens by lot, but selecting the best and most capable to fill each office. For they hoped that the rest of the citizens would behave themselves like those at the head of affairs. (Isocrates 1894, 21–22)

This is a “democracy” in name only. For in the Greek poleis, democrats awarded the same equally to all and the mode of election was by lot. Isocrates writes ironically. For in using the form or appearance of a conventional political oration on the “public safety,” he covertly suggests Athens would be better served with a more aristocratic regime.

According to Allan Bloom, all Isocrates’ writings are characterized by such a combination of politics and philosophy. “He uses the form and subject matter of popular discourse,” writes Bloom, “and shows by his use
of them that the ordinary sorts of discussions point of themselves to issues more remote and correspondingly more profound” (Bloom 1955, 19). And Milton understood Isocrates as such an unconventional philosopher. For in his pedagogical work, *Of Education*, Milton places Isocrates with philosophic teachers such as Plato and Aristotle, not with rhetoricians such as Demosthenes and Cicero (Milton 1959, 407, 401). And, returning to Milton’s remark about following Isocrates, we find ambiguities suggesting the Athenian’s esotericism: “I could name him who from his private house wrote that discourse to the Parliament of Athens, that persuades them to change the form of Democracy which was then established” (Milton 1959, 489). Milton employs two ambiguous terms to echo Isocrates’ irony. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “persuade” means either successfully convince or merely urge; and “form” means either the appearance or the essence. These ambiguities suggest Milton read Isocrates as does Bloom: appearing to call for a democratic regime at Athens, he insinuates an aristocratic regime would better address the city’s difficulties. Similarly Milton uses the form of the political pamphlet addressed to Parliament’s licensing law in order to suggest that the problems censorship addresses would be better solved by authorial and Parliamentary restraint.

Nonetheless, even if the reader is willing to consider that Milton used the guise of a popular pamphlet to argue for moderation in public speech, he or she might pose still another objection: of what relevance is Milton’s teaching to modern liberal societies? Whatever its appropriateness to ancient Athens or early modern England, Milton’s rhetorical stratagems seem quaint in our time. We may find peculiar his concealed ambiguity about “license,” his duplicitous mention of “philosophic freedom,” and especially Chrysostom’s reading Aristophanes under the covers at night. Or to state the objection differently, even if we agree with Leo Strauss’s historical contention that older writers in non-liberal regimes practiced esoteric writing, we find it unfitting for our age. After all, we live in societies where the “civil liberty” Milton speaks of is practically synonymous with what he calls “philosophic liberty.”

But, for Milton’s view, it is problematic to conflate these two liberties. The poet does not share our belief in progress; he remains convinced of the permanent gap between the few and the many. His Sonnet XI begins by mocking his own age’s mystification at the Greek title for one of his own tracts and ends by addressing the Greek professor at Cambridge of a previous century on the persistence through the ages of such anti-intellectualism:
Thy age, like ours, O Soul of Sir John Cheke,
Hated not learning worse than Toad or Asp
When thou taught'st Cambridge and King Edward Greek.
(Milton 1957, 142–43)

The learned are very few indeed, excluding as Milton does “the mercenary crew of false pretenders to learning” in favor of “the free and ingenuous sort of such as evidently were born to study, and love learning for itself, not for lucre, or any other end, but the service of God and of truth, and perhaps that lasting fame and perpetuity of praise which God and good men have consented shall be the reward of those whose published labors advance the good of mankind” (Milton 1959, 531). The many, by contrast, have “eyes bleared and dimmed with prejudice and custom” such that they “fear … dangerous opinions” (Milton 1959, 565, 567). Whole societies are not rational enough to philosophize; thus only rare individuals can enjoy “philosophic liberty.”

Milton’s reservations about conflating civil with philosophic liberty first emerge on his title-page epigraph. Here he prints four lines from Euripides’ _Suppliants_ first in Greek and then in his own English translation. It is sometimes assumed that this translation is sufficiently accurate to stand for Milton’s teaching (Kendall 1960, 457). But the translation is not accurate nor is it Milton’s teaching. That teaching emerges, in fact, in the dialectic between Euripides’ Greek and Milton’s English mistranslation.

Euripides’ play praises Theseus’ rule of republican Athens as a virtuous mean between two vicious extremes: the defectively weak rule of Adrastus over Argos on one hand and on the other the excessively tyrannical rule of Creon over Thebes. After Argos’s defeat in war with Thebes, Creon refuses burial for the sons of the Argive chiefs slain in battle. Furthermore, Creon sends a herald to Theseus threatening war if the latter listens to some Argive mothers supplicating aid in burying their sons. Theseus and the herald fall into debate when the herald praises the tyrant’s rule as superior that that of the many. Theseus responds that a tyrant is the city’s worst enemy because he permits no equality either for redress of injury or for access to public deliberation (lines 438–441). From a corrupt Stephanus edition (Davies and Dowling 1986, 37n), Milton selects the four lines about equal access to public deliberation as the Greek part of his epigraph:

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Touleutheron d’ekteino, ei tis thelei polei
Chrēston ti bouleum’ eis meson pherein, echēon.
Kai tauth’ ho chrēzōn, lampros esth’, ho mē thelōn,
Siga, ti toutōn est’ isaiteron polei;
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A literal translation of these lines would be something like the following:

But this [is] liberty, if anyone having some useful advice
Wishes to bring [it] forward for the sake of the city.
Who wants this, is illustrious, who does not wish to
May be silent: what can be more equitable than this in a city?

In these lines, Theseus defines liberty (lines 1 and 2), distinguishes its use (lines 3 and 4), and asks a rhetorical question about that use (line 4). In the first two lines, Theseus echoes the formulaic question which opened the democratic assembly at Athens: “Does anyone having some useful advice wish to bring [it] forward for the sake of the city?” (Euripides 1975, 2:227–28; Griffith 1966, 115–38). Theseus thereby suggests Athens possesses liberty because it allows equal opportunity for public deliberation. But equal opportunity leads to unequal outcomes: some want to advise and others do not; the former receive honor, the latter may be silent. The final rhetorical question concludes that this unequal outcome is the maximum of equality or equity (Euripides’ isaieron means “more equal” or derivatively “more fair”) one should expect in a city.

Now Milton translates—or rather, mistranslates—these lines from Euripides in the following manner:

This is true Liberty when free born men
Having to advise the public may speak free,
Which he who can, and will, deserv’s high praise,
Who neither can nor will, may hold his peace;
What can be juster in a State than this?

Like Euripides’ Theseus, Milton defines liberty, distinguishes, and questions. “True liberty” exists when free-born men, “having” a desire or a duty to advise the public in fact may speak freely. Those who are capable and willing to so advise, deserve high praise; those incapable and unwilling are allowed to hold their peace. This inequality of praise and peace is the maximum of justice possible in a state.

But unlike Theseus, Milton has come to bury, not to praise republican civil liberty. “True Liberty” may be the most justice a State can achieve, but it falls short of Milton’s “philosophic liberty.” Euripides’ “anyone” (tis) becomes Milton’s “free-born men,” perhaps to remind us that Athens had slaves who were not free to speak, as well as reminding us that not everyone is equally able to speak in even liberal societies. Again, Milton has omitted Euripides’ words chrēston ti bouleum’ (“some useful or good advice”) and polei (“for the sake of the city”). These omissions suggest the difficulty of discerning whether advice is both good and for the sake of city or state.
Support for this epistemological difficulty is in Milton’s third and fourth lines. The third line’s “deserv’s high praise” mistranslates Euripides’ *lampros esth*’ (“is illustrious”); and the fourth line’s “may hold his peace” retains the Greek subjective *Siga* (“may be silent”). Milton is more realistic than Euripides’ Theseus. Capable speakers do not always receive the praise they deserve, and incapable ones are not always as silent as they should be.

So, to return to Milton’s final, seemingly rhetorical question: “What can be juster in a State than this?” For Milton, this is not a rhetorical question. The right to self-expression of which we today boast must face the objection implied in this question. Even the most liberal of societies is not made up of perfect lovers of wisdom. Even if it does not have an Inquisition; even if it allows many things to be said by many speakers; nonetheless, its justice is often defective. For the judgment of the many is unlikely to be as just as that of a more select audience of the learned communicating through self-censorship. This, then, is Milton’s teaching in *Areopagitica* about the superiority of philosophic to civil liberty—and the virtue of distinguishing the two.

This essay began by questioning the relevance of Milton’s book. We can now conclude *Areopagitica* has a particular relevance for us living in the country Alexis de Tocqueville describes in *Democracy in America*. This unflattering friend of democracy warned that where the people rule with no aristocratic class to inspire and support intellectual freedom, we find a “tyranny of the majority.” Indeed he said, “I do not know any country where, in general, less independence of mind and genuine freedom of discussion reign than in America” (Tocqueville 2000, 244). And a recent critic of America, Allan Bloom, reminds us, our nation was founded on principles propagated by political philosophers. This propagation has been so successful in teaching freedom and equality it has invaded our most private lives (Bloom 1987, 97). As Bloom argues elsewhere, it has certainly invaded our universities, which were supposed to replace the aristocratic class as our democracy’s oases of intellectual freedom (Bloom 1990, 365–87). In this mission they have failed. An American Protagoras would not be persecuted for questioning the existence of God, nor would an American Galileo be persecuted for questioning our understanding of astronomy, but—as a recent president of Harvard University discovered—he would be imprudent to raise questions about intellectual equality between men and women. So we should read Milton’s old book as a reminder of a forgotten and thoughtful alternative to our right of freedom of expression.
REFERENCES

This article grows out of two previous publications of mine. *Polite Wisdom* ends with the claim that *Areopagitica* defends “philosophic liberty,” but it neither adequately defines that term nor explains why it is important to us today. The first third of the present article attempts the first task; the article as a whole the second. The first third is a modification of a conference paper delivered at the New York College English Association Fall Conference, Nazareth College of Rochester, Rochester, NY, October 2005. The material on Isocrates’ *Areopagiticus* summarizes pages 3-9 of *Polite Wisdom*. The material on Euripides on Milton’s title page represents a considerable revision of the argument Professor Davies and I published in *Milton Quarterly*. Earlier versions of the whole article benefited from suggestions by my research student Lauren Woomer and my friend Richard H. Cox.


On What It Means to Govern All One’s Affairs
“Certo Consilio”: A Note on Spinoza’s
*Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*

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Benedict Spinoza’s Preface to the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* commences with a straightforward, though grand, declaration: “Si homines res omnes suas certo consilio regere possent, vel si fortuna ipsis prospera semper foret, nulla superstitione tenerentur” (*TTP*, 5). The claim seems quite simple: “If men were able to govern all their affairs with dependable counsel, or if fortune always bore prosperity for them, in no way would they be mastered by superstition” (see Addendum 1).

The opening sentence of the Preface to the *Tractatus* delineates three manners by which an individual may conduct his life. One may proceed on the basis of some kind of sure or reliable deliberation, that is, a dependable counsel. One may rely on fortune’s favor. Or, one may live under the sway of superstition. It is evident from the Preface and its first sentence that Spinoza regards the governance of one’s life through superstition as a manner of living that is to be avoided. Superstition is the extreme recourse for those who cannot achieve satisfaction of their interests by any other means. Indeed, superstition comes to be embraced only as a result of the fact that one lacks some kind of dependable counsel for the conduct of his affairs and because fortune does not always bring him prosperity. Accordingly, from the outset of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Spinoza suggests that there are three ways that one can live: one can embrace and rely upon dependable counsel, fortune, or superstition. It may be possible that some combination of the alternatives, or a combination of degrees of each of them, might be attempted. But the opening sentence of the Preface insinuates that the three recourses are
reciprocally exclusive of one another, and the remainder of the Preface is dedicated to showing how and why human beings ruinously succumb to superstition. Little is said in the *Tractatus* about fortune and, perhaps even more curiously, Spinoza is virtually silent about what “dependable counsel” is or what it involves. In this essay, I wish to propose what it means in the *Tractatus* to govern all things, or to govern all our affairs, *certo consilio*.

II

The first sentence of the Preface is an answer to a question that is not expressly stated: Why do human beings become superstitious? From Spinoza’s perspective, human beings by nature are subject to superstition (*TTP*, 6; see Addendum 2); though the turn toward superstition owes to a combination of factors. (1) Human beings often are driven into difficulties where their own counsel or deliberation fails them. Nevertheless (2) they still “long inordinately for the uncertain goods of fortune.” Consequently, fluctuating miserably between hope and fear, (3) they become “most prone to believing any thing whatever [and hence] the cause … which encourages, conserves, and gives rise to superstition is fear” (*TTP*, 5). Spinoza’s argument reduces to this. Man is a desirous being who seeks the satisfaction of his own desires (*TTP*, 189–90; see Addendum 3). But he also is aware that he will fail to do so on some occasions. Thus his wish or hope that the fulfillment of his desire will be realized is also cast against his fear that it will not be realized. When governance of his actions or affairs *certo consilio* yields success, one conceives himself “to abound in wisdom,” and he shuns any “who wish to give him counsel”; but when adversity prevails, such men “beseech counsel from anyone, nor is there anything to be heard that is so inept, absurd, or vain, that they would not follow it” (*TTP*, 5).

Though one may attempt to employ his own counsel or even that of another for the purpose of satisfying his desire, regardless of whether he succeeds or fails Spinoza notes that such a man will continue to seek the “goods of fortune.” Thus it may be inferred that a man presumes that he will satisfy his desires for various goods through the beneficence of fortune itself or through his own agency and planning. Yet a difficulty persists. Spinoza notes that the goods sought from fortune are not assured; and human agency itself also may be insufficient. Superstition, therefore, appears to be as worthy a recourse as any other one with respect to satisfying our desires and conducting our affairs.
In the governance of one’s affairs, the turn to superstition shares a common source with one’s turn to fortune. We hope, indeed we demand, that our desires will be satisfied. When the objects of our desires are easily obtained, without planning or deliberation, then plainly fortune is construed to favor us. Moreover, there is nothing to indicate that fortune would not or should not favor us again. Reliance on fortune is effortless. One simply anticipates, or even expects, that desirable things will happen to him. In chapter 3 of the *Tractatus*, Spinoza affords a definition of fortune in the context of his account of the Election of the Hebrews. “[B]y fortune I understand nothing other than the direction of God to the extent that he directs human affairs through external and unexpected causes” (*TTP*, 46). Spinoza’s definition of fortune is connected to his account of the ways through which a man achieves “conservation in [his] being” (*TTP*, 46). Relying on fortune is one way whereby the “direction of human affairs” may be accomplished by an individual. But in addition to fortune, which involves unexpected and hence unpredictable causes, Spinoza maintains that one may direct his affairs through his own efforts or through external assistance (*TTP*, 46; see Addendum 4). Nevertheless, experience confirms, sometimes painfully, that our hopes and desires often either are frustrated or forsaken when we rely on fortune or even our own “dependable counsel.”

Where fortune fails to deliver the goods that one anticipates, he turns to superstition. Fearful that he will not acquire what he seeks, or fearful that he will suffer what he opposes, man’s fear drives him to find a solution to his predicament through appeals to god(s) or some divine agent(s). He then regards unusual events as portents of things that will bring him prosperity or distress (*TTP*, 5). But recourse to superstition is related to one’s understanding and experience of the world. Ignorant of the order and operation of nature, superstitious men impute the satisfaction of their desires to forces, causes, or beings that are willful in their provision of the goods that individuals seek. What fortune does not yield and what planning does not provide impel men to plead, sacrifice, and promise service, worship, or obedience to whichever numen is deemed responsible for securing those things for which they long. As a consequence, men are willing to yield to any delirium, fantasy, extravagance, or omen in the hope that they may possess what they desire. “Such fear,” says Spinoza, “makes men insane”; furthermore, those men will castigate “human wisdom as vain and they will call reason blind” (*TTP*, 5; see Addendum 5).
From the opening line and the first page of Spinoza’s Preface to the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, it may be inferred that human beings embrace superstition largely because “fortune” and/or “dependable counsel” fail them when they try to acquire what they believe will serve their interests. Here it should not be inferred that a man’s dashed hope of winning one race, for example, or his unfulfilled desire to be awarded one promotion at his place of work, would of necessity drive him to espouse superstition as the only basis for the conduct of his life. Yet one cannot ignore a simple fact. The fear of failing to satisfy one’s desires is what compels one to submit to superstition as a source of hope; and that fear owes to one’s uncertainty about there being any alterative sure means for satisfying his desires or conducting his life and affairs prosperously.

In a sense, fortune and superstition are quite similar in at least one crucial respect. The turn to fortune and the turn to superstition involve an ultimate reliance upon “external and unexpected causes.” In other words, neither involves a man’s reliance on his own power to conserve himself; and neither implies a man’s use of the power of external causes for the sake of his own conservation (*TTP*, 46; see Addendum 6). One’s choice to trust either fortune or superstition as an appropriate or desirable means for the governance of his affairs means that one has forsaken his own power of agency and subordinated his conservation to external, unpredictable influences or forces. Still, if fortune always were to afford man prosperity, then man would never fall prey to superstition. Insofar as the goods obtained from fortune and the goods obtained from superstition share the same causal foundation, namely, external and unexpected causes, fortune might be conceived to be the less abhorrent sibling of superstition.

IV

Whereas Spinoza defines fortune and gives an account of the causes of superstition in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, he is almost silent about what *certum consilium* is. The word *consilium* appears nineteen times in the treatise and it is used preponderantly in connection with passages quoted from the Bible, both the Old Testament and the New Testament. For example, Spinoza refers to the breath or spirit of God as expressing the “Spirit of wisdom, counsel, [or] fortitude” (*TTP*, 22). In another place in the treatise, he notes the difficulties associated with interpreting the histories conveyed in the Bible, and he argues that one’s understanding of those histories cannot be
made to depend, for instance, on a reader actually having heard “the quarrels of Isaac or the counsels of Achitophel given to Absalom” (TTP, 78). Spinoza cites another biblical passage stating that Saul went to the Prophet Samuel “on his servant’s counsel” in order to learn where to find his lost animals (TTP, 89 and 131). It further is reported that the Apostle Paul maintained that he “gives counsel by God’s grace”; and Spinoza observes that the apostles’ “choices of their places to preach were taken on their own counsel” (TTP, 151).

From the biblical passages quoted by Spinoza, or Spinoza’s own use of the word, it is plain that consilium means “advice” or “consideration,” some manner of “consultation,” or even one’s “determination” as it affects his plans or purposes of action. Accordingly, then, “governing all one’s affairs certo consilio” would mean that one would conduct himself with determination, due consideration, requisite consultation, or deliberated plan and purpose of action. If men, in fact, were able to govern all their affairs in such a fashion, then surely there would be no need for anyone to appeal to fortune or superstition in the satisfaction of his interests. But Spinoza’s account of an instance of counsel from the New Testament proves that consilium itself may prove untrustworthy. That is, Spinoza says that a rift between the apostles Paul and Barnabas was provoked as a consequence of Paul acting on his “own counsel.”

In the Tractatus, the apostles are distinguished from the prophets because of their capacity to teach rather than prophesy. According to Spinoza, that capacity afforded each apostle the authority to choose the method of his teaching or preaching that would be employed. In addition, unlike the prophets who were commanded to prophesy to particular people in specific places, the apostles were permitted to teach or preach wherever each thought it best to do so. Spinoza says that on one occasion the Apostle Paul “on [his] own counsel” chose where he would take his ministry; however, Paul’s decision led to a disagreement with Barnabas who was accompanying him (TTP, 151–55). The account is related at Acts of the Apostles 15:36–40. Having gone to Antioch together, Paul recommended that he, Barnabas, and the others with them return to places where they had been preaching to see how the converted were faring. But Barnabas preferred to continue his mission by going to other places. A disagreement ensued over whether they should proceed to new locations or return to old ones. The two apostles went in different directions. The subsequent passage from the Acts of the Apostles testifies that both Paul and Barnabas proceeded in their respective missions with success. Still, Paul’s appeal to his “own counsel” must be deemed the cause of some disturbance, aggravation, or conflict with his colleague, Barnabas. Consequently, consilium...
as advice, due consideration, determined purpose, or deliberated plan of action does not guarantee the satisfaction of one’s interests, aims, or desires (see Addendum 7).

Paul wanted Barnabas to return with him to the places where they had taught or preached together. Barnabas, however, presumably on ‘his own counsel’, chose not to do so and went his own way to Cyprus with John Mark while Paul and Silas traveled to Syria and Cilicia. There is no indication in the passages from Acts, or from Spinoza’s assessment of them, that the failure of Paul’s own counsel to secure his interests led him to embrace fortune or surrender to superstition. Nevertheless, the failure of *consilium* in the “governance of his affairs” with Barnabas could invite one to opine that Paul actually did no better by his own counsel than he might have done had he appealed to fortune or superstition.

With respect to achieving success in the “governance of one’s affairs,” fortune and superstition are problematical. Neither supplies constant relief. But it is not clear yet that *consilium* affords a consistently worthy alternative. Indeed, very little is said in the treatise concerning *certum consilium*. Other than the opening sentence of the Preface, there appears to be only one other occurrence of the phrase “*certo consilio*” in the treatise. The words appear in chapter 9.

Chapters 8 through 10 of the *Tractatus* contain Spinoza’s examination of how the various books of the Bible have come to be arranged and received. In chapter 9, he devotes special attention to the first five books of the Bible and the matter of Ezra’s responsibility for the final version of the Pentateuch, as well as the marginalia that accompany it. A pressing question pertains to whether some defects in the texts were accidental or contrived. According to Spinoza, one learned tradition holds that “the readings did not happen by chance.” On the contrary, clear mistakes in the text were left uncorrected so that later students of the books could conclude that such flaws “were made with dependable counsel by the first Writers, in order that they signify something by them” (*Igitur cum hae lectiones casu non contigerint, nec tam clara vitia correxerint, hinc concludunt, haec certo consilio a primis Scriptoribus facta fuisse, ut iis aliquid significarent: TTP, 137)*.

Spinoza’s pronouncement concerns the spelling of the Hebrew word for “girl” in the Pentateuch. He asserts that the word is incorrectly spelled on all occasions in the texts of the five books except one; whereas the word is spelled correctly in the marginalia. At issue is the question
of why the error in the text was allowed to persist. Spinoza explains that competing readings were allowed to stand in order to avoid the replacement of the correct reading by an incorrect one. However, the overarching conclusion proposed by Spinoza is that the Bible has suffered a variety of impositions over time and therefore its history, sources, authors, and composition present myriad difficulties for interpreters. Hence, in many cases, it is impossible to recover the originary meanings of the texts at all (TTP, 135–36, 109–11).

Still, the present purpose is to learn about the significance of the phrase certo consilio and, based on what Spinoza asserts, I believe that one useful inference may be drawn fairly. What is said to have been done “certo consilio” is set against what might have happened “casu,” that is, “by chance.” Thus Spinoza uses the terms “dependable counsel” and “chance” as antithetical to each other. Since Spinoza maintains that “words have a fixed meaning through their use alone” (TTP, 160), we may infer that “dependable counsel” is contrary to “chance,” and by implication we may conclude that “dependable counsel” is the opposite of those things that are related to “chance,” such as fortune and superstition, which rely on external, unexpected, or unpredictable causes.

One should not conclude that Spinoza believes the claim advanced by the one tradition about the “first Writers” of the Bible. That is, he does not believe that there are profound mysteries hidden in that book (TTP, 135–36, 167). Nor does Spinoza recite what factors or reasons might have prompted the “first Writers” to take the course of action that is imputed to them by some interpreters. Still, rather than explain the episode as having happened “by chance,” Spinoza says that “dependable counsel” was involved. However antithetical to a “chance” event it may have been, the exercise of the “first Writers” on the instance in question failed to accomplish what was claimed to have been their intention. Rather than “signifying something” specific by their intentional flaws, the “first Writers” appear only to have occasioned more confusion. Acting certo consilio moved them to leave textual errors uncorrected and subsequently the errors have been compounded further over time by the misinterpretations of others (TTP, 137–41).

We remind ourselves of the sense of the opening line of the Preface: If men were able to govern all their affairs with dependable counsel, or if fortune always favored them, they would never succumb to superstition. Fortune is unreliable since it derives from unexpected, that is, unpredictable, causes or events. Fortune, therefore, is not a feasible way to govern one’s affairs (see Addendum 8). Recourse to superstition owes to a kind of panicked
Interpretation

longing that leaves one subjugated and ignorant. Furthermore, credulity is extended to almost any extreme. Superstition then cannot be a sane way to govern one’s affairs. However, it even would appear that dependable counsel does not assure one of the desired results on every occasion. So a perplexity remains.

What advantage or incentive is there to the governance of one’s affairs, or the conduct of one’s life, certo consilio? At first, it may be said that the attractiveness of “dependable counsel” derives less from what it is (for we lack a definition of it) than from what it is not. Human beings, by nature, succeed or fail and rise or fall in the throes of hope and fear. Certum consilium would seem to avoid the foolish hope prompted by fortune while it also evades the desperate fear inherent to superstition. Perhaps it is just common sense that suggests the worth that legitimately may be assigned to “dependable counsel.” That is, Spinoza commences the argument of his book with an appeal to something that he nowhere defines in the Tractatus; and that fact is at odds with his more detailed comments about what fortune or superstition means, involves, or entails. Instead, Spinoza would appear to believe that there is some general notion of what certum consilium means such that he can assume that his readers will be aware of its significance. Yet if “dependable counsel” is not defined or characterized in any formal way in the treatise, to what in general is Spinoza appealing when he declares that men would never be mastered by superstition if they could govern their affairs with “dependable counsel”? Perhaps the answer to what “dependable counsel” implies may be found in Spinoza’s account of what is “by nature” and what is “by human nature” in particular.

In chapter 16 of the Tractatus, Spinoza defines “jus et institutum naturae.” According to his account, “by the right and plan of nature, I understand nothing other than the rules of the nature of each individual, according to which we conceive each as naturally determined to existing and operating in a fixed manner” (TTP, 189). The “right and plan of nature” encompasses each and every natural thing, including human beings. As “fish possess the water and large ones eat small ones by the highest natural right” (adeoque pisces summo naturali jure aquà potiuntur & magni minores comedunt), so too human beings exist and operate just as they naturally are determined to do (TTP, 189). Each individual thing acts and lives in accordance with the highest law of nature, namely, that each individual thing “endeavor to persevere in its condition” without consideration of any other thing but itself as it is determined naturally to exist and to operate (TTP, 189).
The law by which individual things exist and operate is such that Spinoza
does not acknowledge any distinction between human beings and the other
individuals in nature. Furthermore, with respect to the fundamental endeavor
of each thing to persevere in its condition, he does not recognize any difference
between a human being who pursues that aim based on his exercise of reason
and a human being who pursues that aim based on his neglect of reason.
Whichever course is adopted by an individual in his endeavor to persevere in
his condition, Spinoza maintains that each one executes his pursuit of that
aim in accordance with the “highest right of nature.” Hence either means of
pursuing the conservation of one’s condition is by nature equal to the other.
Indeed, considering what humans beings are, Spinoza concludes that just as
“the sensible [man] has the highest right to all that reason dictates, or of living
from the laws of reason; so too, the ignorant, & feeble of sensibility has the
highest right to all that passion urges, or of living from the laws of passion”; for
“the natural right of man is determined not by sane reason, but by cupidity and
power” (*TTP*, 190; see Addendum 9).

Man is disposed by nature to a “life of passion” or to a “life of
reason,” but he is more determined to the former than to the latter. Thus it
becomes clearer why fortune and superstition often become the means
embraced by human beings for the governance of their affairs. Insensible men
seek any advantage or implore relief from any disadvantage in order that they
may be conserved. Neglecting reason, the insensitive ones credulously seize
whatever may suggest itself as a source of remedy from their predicaments. Yet
even sensible men commit blunders in judgment or make errant choices in
their endeavors to persevere in their conditions. Regardless of whether one exe-
cutes his endeavor according to the dictates of reason or according to the
urgings of the passions, Spinoza proclaims that it is a “universal law of human
nature that no one neglects what he judges to be good except that he hopes for
a greater good, or from fear of a greater damage; nor does anyone prefer evil
except to evade a greater [evil], or hope for a greater good” (*TTP*, 191–92).

In the endeavor to persevere in his condition, a man always
will be drawn toward what he regards as the lesser of two evils or the greater of
two goods; and Spinoza acknowledges that one’s judgment on such matters is
idiosyncratic. That is, an individual’s choice will be made on the basis of what
“appears to him to be greater or less” rather than on the basis of what actually
is the case. The turn to superstition or fortune or dependable counsel in the
conservation of one’s being and the governance of one’s affairs therefore is
inherently subjective. The sensible man will gauge his options for action in
In respect of what “appears to him to be greater or less” apropos his immediate circumstance and in the context of his present and/or future hopes and fears. So too, those who surrender to fortune or superstition evaluate the “greater of two goods and lesser of two evils” in their immediate circumstances and in the context of their present and/or future hopes and fears. In terms of the governance of one’s affairs, the choice of “dependable counsel” is an appeal to “sensibility” over and against any temptation to succumb to the “insensible” options for the governance of one’s affairs, namely, fortune or superstition. Moreover, the opening sentence of the Tractatus implies Spinoza’s belief that there is a certum consilium available to every human being.

Each one of us possesses a native disposition to rely on his own counsel, and if that counsel were “dependable” then no one ever would fall prey to the uncertain consequences of fortune or superstition. Thus “dependable counsel,” or sensibility, fundamentally reflects Spinoza’s awareness of the universality of natural egoism. Spinoza acknowledges that each individual attempts to conduct himself on the basis of his own experience, judgment, perspective, or learning. To some extent, one is reminded of the opening proposition of René Descartes’ Discours de la Méthode (Leiden, 1637).

Good sense is the best shared thing in the world, because each thinks it to be so well provided, that the very same ones who are the most difficult to satisfy in any other thing have no habit at all of desiring more of it than they have [Le bon sens est le chose du monde la mieux partagée, car chacun pense en être si bien pourvu, que ceux même qui sont plus difficiles à contenter en toute autre chose n’ont point coutume d’en désirer plus qu’ils en ont]. (DM, 1–2; see Addendum 10.)

It may not be amiss to suggest that Spinoza’s certum consilium is similar to Descartes’ bon sens. That is, both philosophers acknowledge the basically subjective character of each person’s habit of judgment. Moreover, both philosophers recognize that painful or disadvantageous consequences can ensue from that subjectivity, and so there will be need for correction. Or, “learning from one’s mistakes” implies that one does not repeat them. In the Discours, Descartes avers that there is “much more truth in the reasoning that each makes touching the matters that are important to him, and the consequences of which he must suffer soon after if he has judged badly, than in the reasoning of a man made in his study touching on speculations that produce no effect” (DM, 9–10). In other words, it may be said that one’s “good sense” principally involves one’s assessment of his conduct, or the “governance of his affairs,” in terms of its immediate or remote consequences for him.
Experience immediately attests whether one’s judgment was useful and successful or not; and, according to Descartes, that personal experience of involvement is superior to the idle speculations of those who seem to avoid experience. In a similar manner, Spinoza affirms that it is a “universal law of human nature” that each man evaluates his condition, chooses his course, and acts with a view to what appears to be most desirable or best to him as he perceives the matter at that time. Furthermore, if an individual believes that he has judged or chosen badly, Spinoza confirms that a person may change his mind, alter his course of action, or even renege on a promise where he reconsiders his counsel and believes that the result of his choice and action would be injurious or disadvantageous to him (TTP, 192).

When “good sense” or “dependable counsel” yields what we desire, we are satisfied with ourselves, proud, and confident. But neither bon sens nor certum consilium is infallible. Spinoza admits that sometimes men are driven into difficulties such that their own counsel fails them (TTP, 5); and Descartes’ comment about one suffering the consequences of his bad judgments shows that a man’s good sense is not flawless. Nevertheless, Descartes proposes a remedy. After conceding that one is satisfied with himself when he successfully exercises “good sense,” Descartes reminds his readers at the close of the first paragraph of part 1 of the Discours that “it is not enough to have a good mind [esprit]; the chief thing is to apply it well” (DM, 2). One can seek the satisfaction of his desires through the “simple reasoning of a man of good sense” or one may employ “a pure and solid reason as though it were had from birth.” To possess the latter sort of emended “good sense,” a man only need apply the rules of “the method for rightly conducting reason and seeking truth in the sciences” articulated in part 2 of the Discours de la Méthode (DM, 12–13, 17–19). In other words, Descartes sets a standard against which the exercise of one’s reason may be measured. In a similar vein, Spinoza acknowledges that the proper exercise of certum consilium might well involve the conduct of one’s affairs not just on the basis of what one’s simple selfish counsel might exhort (something similar to Descartes’ “simple reasoning”) but he also might judge and act in accordance with what “reason dictates” (something akin to Descartes’ more methodical “pure and solid reason”). But to what rational dictates does the man who embraces dependable counsel defer? If one’s own judgments are subjective and often erroneous, what correction for them is there? Descartes gives a solution to that problem by advocating the use of a method “for the right conduct of reason,” so as to avoid “rash and precipitate judgment.” Employing the method for the right conduct of reason promises that each man will achieve the satisfaction of his desires
with certitude. Spinoza offers no such method in the *Tractatus*. Still, I submit that Spinoza’s alternative to Descartes’ “method” is the good citizen’s sensible acknowledgement of the advantages to be enjoyed by governing all his affairs in accordance with the dictates of reason constituted by the regime in which he lives.

V

“If men were able to govern all their affairs with dependable counsel, or if fortune always bore prosperity for them, in no way would they be mastered by superstition.” With that sentence, Spinoza opened the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. Still it becomes evident that one’s own counsel, “dependable” or otherwise, may not always be sound. On the contrary, the counsel of each person is subjective; it typically derives from passion rather than reason; and therefore an individual’s native endeavor to persevere in his being ironically may cause the frustration of that very ambition or it even may contribute to his own demise.

In what sense then can “dependable counsel” be superior to relying on fortune or superstition in the conduct of one’s affairs? *Certum consilium* is superior, more desirable, and more efficacious in securing one’s goal, viz., self-preservation, when it is the collective counsel of the political authority, or the “highest power,” reflected in the democratic regime that serves the interests of its citizens, requires the ceding of some rights or powers by all citizens, and is prepared to guarantee obedience to the laws of the regime through force, if necessary (*TTP*, 192–94). A man’s ceding his right or power to some external authority would seem counterintuitive for individuals whose lives are governed more by passion than by reason. But Spinoza assures his readers that one’s yielding his power or right, even by passionate individuals, may be undertaken “easily” inasmuch as it is a “lesser evil” and, more importantly, obedience to the regime promises that for which each individual longs most, namely, peace, preservation, and security (*TTP*, 194, 202–3). In order to secure the indispensable good that is promised by the regime, viz., a secure and healthy life (*TTP*, 46–47), a good citizen will submit to the regime’s dictates even where they affect the most private matters. As a case in point, Spinoza offers the example of a regime’s authority over public religious worship. For the sake of the “peace and preservation” of the republic, Spinoza declares that one must follow what the “supreme power” dictates since “it is certain that dutifulness in respect to one’s country is the chief thing that one can fulfill” (*TTP*, 232). The sort of *certum consilium* that Spinoza advocates
then is the “dependable counsel” afforded by the supreme authority or power of a democratic regime, as it is detailed in chapters 16–20 of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. Moreover, that conclusion may be substantiated by considering how the ‘counsel of an individual’ relates to the ‘counsel of the regime.’

In chapter 17 of the treatise, Spinoza examines the practical implications of a difficulty that was noted in the previous chapter. In his account of human nature detailed in chapter 16, it was affirmed that *per ius et institutum naturae* a man will endeavor to persevere in his being by whatever means he may consider useful to himself. According to Spinoza, such means do not exclude “fights, hatreds, wrath, [or] contrivances” (*TTP*, 190). Thus, in the pursuit of his preservation, one’s own counsel may lead to faction and harm both for the individual and for the society which he inhabits. Accordingly, Spinoza asserts that the individual must conform to the dictates of the democratic regime since the regime’s purpose is to foster sociability, which is to say, its aim is to foster the conditions for securing the preservation of its citizens. Furthermore, Spinoza categorically states that a citizen’s conformity to the dictates of the regime does not involve an “enslavement of the individual.” On the contrary, inasmuch as the dictates of the democratic regime inherently encourage the better ambitions of its citizens, and the citizens choose to be members of that regime, then those ambitions are best realized when citizens embrace “the rational dictates of the supreme power.” That is, it is in the nature of a democratic government “to avoid absurd desires and to constrain men under the limits of reason, as much as it can be done, so that they may live concordantly and peacefully; if that foundation were removed the whole fabric easily goes to ruin” (*TTP*, 194, 241–42).

To demonstrate that conformity to the dictates of the regime is consonant with one’s own interest and counsel, Spinoza asserts in chapter 17 of the treatise that even if a man does something “by his own counsel” (*proprio consilio*) it cannot be concluded therefore that he does it exclusive of the dictates of the regime. That is, given the terms and conditions of Spinoza’s democratic regime, a man’s action performed in accordance with the dictates of the regime implies that “he acts from the right of the regime and not by his [own right]” whether the motive for his act be fear, hope, love, or reverence (*TTP*, 202). Perhaps more important, however, Spinoza also holds that even one’s own “good counsel” must submit to the counsel and dictates of the regime even where one’s own counsel may be superior to that of the regime.

In chapter 16 of the treatise Spinoza defines “the crime of treason” as being the endeavor of a subject or citizen to seize the right of
supreme power himself or to transfer it to someone else. Spinoza then provides an example of a treasonous act. He proposes the case of someone who quits his station and attacks an enemy without his commander’s knowledge. The consequence of the attack is a victory in the engagement which is said to strengthen the city. But notwithstanding the advantage gained by the regime, the individual who “violated his oath to the commander” merits condemnation as a traitor for the reason that he usurped the commander’s authority and power. Whatever may have been the reason for doing it, and Spinoza acknowledges that the soldier acted “with good counsel” (*bono consilio*) toward a successful and beneficial outcome, anyone who would endeavor to undermine the “right of the supreme power,” or the power(s) assigned to its representatives, is a traitor to the regime (TTP, 197). According to Spinoza, therefore, even acting on one’s own “good counsel” may be regarded as detrimental to the regime, as well as one’s own conservation, since “the preservation of the Republic is the highest good,” and only the regime can provide the conditions through which the peace, prosperity, and security of all citizens are made feasible (TTP, 192).

Spinoza’s example of the case of treason establishes that a man’s endeavor to persevere in his being requires that he submit to the dictates of the regime, in spite of the advantages or benefits that might be obtained by appealing to his own *bonum* or *certum consilium*. For the sake of sociability, peace, and as much security as may be afforded to individuals, it is both necessary and useful that the citizens follow the reasoned dictates of the regime. That is, they should adhere to the *certum consilium* of the supreme authority or power if they hope to conserve themselves and sustain a social and political condition that makes their self-preservation practicable. Because he is conscious of the useful consequences that ensue from a man’s adherence to the dictates, customs, or laws of the regime in which he lives, Spinoza can begin the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* by asserting confidently that “if men were able to govern all their affairs with dependable counsel” there would be no interest in seeking fortune’s favor nor would men succumb to superstition. Instead, governing all one’s affairs *certo consilio* would prove sufficient and, for the most part, satisfying.

**Addenda**

1. The Latin word *consilium* implies “taking counsel or consideration with others,” as well as “a conclusion drawn from due
consideration.” I will argue that Spinoza intends the word *consilium* to mean the sort of counsel that involves such “due consideration” or deliberated conclusion that will prevent the majority of human beings from having recourse to superstition.

The opening sentence of the Preface to the *Tractatus* may be translated in a variety of ways. For example, the noun *res* principally means “thing” but it also signifies a “matter” or “affair” or “circumstance.” *Regere* may be rendered “to guide,” “to conduct,” “to direct,” “to keep straight,” “to rule,” “to manage,” “to control,” “to govern,” or “to have sway or supremacy over” someone or something. But the verb also means “to keep from going wrong.” Given the purpose of the argument of the Preface, the latter sense of the verb is most apt. That is, in the first sentence there is an appeal to some kind of “*certum consilium*” as a means to forestall what can “go wrong” when one embraces fortune or superstition in the conduct of one’s affairs.

Alternative English renderings of the opening sentence of the Preface are found in R. H. M. Elwes (1951, 3): “Men would never be superstitious, if they could govern all their circumstances by set rules, or if they were always favored by fortune”; Samuel Shirley (1989, 49): “If men were able to exercise complete control over all of their circumstances, or if continuous good fortune were always their lot, they would never be prey to superstition”; Edwin Curley (1994, 6): “If men could manage all their affairs by a certain plan, or if fortune were always favorable to them, they would never be in the grip of superstition”; and Martin Yaffe (2004, xv): “If human beings could regulate all their affairs with certain counsel, or if fortune were always favorable to them, they would not be bound by any superstition.”

In the note to his translation of the sentence, Yaffe beneficially observes that the verb *tenere*, in the phrase concerning superstition, “has the double meaning of being both duty-bound and constrained.” In his Glossary entry for the word “certain,” from the phrase “*certo consilio,*” Yaffe also notes the ambiguity, perhaps the intended ambiguity, of the word *certus*. He also asks about the epistemic standing of the word *certus* in Spinoza’s sentence and wonders whether the word univocally signifies something like “sure-fire” counsel, a counsel that involves certitude, or whether it also may allow the meaning of something being “well-established” (2004, 254). The word *certus* means “resolved,” “determined,” “fixed,” “settled,” or “purposed.” With respect to moral matters, the word signifies “sure,” “unerring,” “faithful,” and “to be depended upon.” I will propose that what Spinoza intends by the word *certus* is closest to the last alternative. Hence I translate the phrase “*certo consilio*” by the
words “with dependable counsel.” I also maintain that the “dependable counsel” advocated by Spinoza is political in character. That is, in the treatise, *certum consilium* is the result of “what has been concluded by taking due consideration with others.”

2. “[O]mnes homines naturâ superstitioni esse obnoxios.” *Obnoxios* signifies liability, as in “subject to punishment,” “accountable,” “submissive,” or “servile” to someone or something. The connection between superstition (*superstitio* is “religious overawe” or “excessive fear of the gods”) and theology in the *Tractatus* bears directly on the question of the governance of our affairs. In Epistle 30, to Henry Oldenburg (1665), Spinoza mentions his composition of a treatise to combat the “impudence, authority, and prejudices of theologians.” Spinoza believes that the theologians exercise inordinate sway over the minds of the vulgar. Their power to do so owes in part to their claim to possess knowledge about the order and operation of nature. As the majority of human beings are ignorant of such things, the theologians attain authoritative status and hence exercise dominion over those who adopt their teachings. One feasible remedy to that situation is to replace ignorance, prejudice, and biased opinion with some sort of “dependable counsel” that could be used as a guard against man’s natural inclination toward “superstition.”

3. The principal desire and endeavor of any individual is to conserve himself in his being. Indeed, toward the satisfaction of that fundamental desire, Spinoza asserts that one may do whatever he believes will promote his own conservation. One legitimately may conduct himself in accordance with what “the laws of reason” dictate or in accordance with what “the laws of desire” dictate. Though the impetus to conservation of oneself may be universal, the means to it and demands of it are quite individual and subjective. A similar characterization of the matter is afforded in chapters 13 and 14 of Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*. Hobbes’ definition of *conatus* as a principle of “psychic motion” is found in his *Elements of Law*, chapter 7, paragraph 2; and his definition of conatus as a principle of “physical motion” may be seen in his *De corpore*, chapter 15, article 2. The term *conatus* does not appear in Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. However, in part 3 of the *Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata*, he defines the “endeavor” (*conatus*) of a thing to persevere in its own being as its “actual essence” (Propositions 6–7).

4. The precise form of Spinoza’s claim is threelfold. (1) Where “perseverance in being” is achieved through one’s own nature and power, then, strictly speaking, it is achieved through the “internal aid of God” since the
“power of Nature is the power of God” and the power of human nature is an expression of the more comprehensive power. (2) Where things useful to “perseverance in being” owe to causes external to human beings, then such things express the “external aid of God.” (3) Where “perseverance in being” owes to unanticipated external causes, then fortune is said to be at work. To those ignorant of the order and operation of nature, “the external aid of God” is likely to be confused with “fortune.”

5. The obvious English cognate for the Latin verb insanire is “to be insane.” But the Latin verb also means “to be of unsound, unhealthy mind,” “to be without reason,” “to be senseless,” or “to be mad.” The turn to superstition thus must be recognized as an abandonment of reason, albeit sometimes only a temporary one. Spinoza suggests that one may vacillate between reliance upon superstition and reliance upon some sort of dependable counsel or other influences, as is demonstrated by the example of Alexander the Great. When suffering from the “terror” of the unknown outcome of battle at the Gates of Susa, Curtius reports that Alexander turned to soothsayers for predictions about the conflict. After Darius was defeated, Alexander abandoned such interests. But when his situation again was unsettled, Alexander “was led back to superstition” (TTP, 6).

6. The passage from chapter 3 identifies a man’s own power within himself as “the internal aid of God,” and it designates a man’s use of the power of external causes as the “external aid of God.” The “external aid of God” may be said to be different from fortune or superstition for the reason that the latter two involve “unexpected” or unpredictable causes.

7. The ambiguous character of consilium in Spinoza’s treatise is mentioned by Martin Yaffe in his Glossary entry for the term (2004, 254–55) as well as in his commentary on Spinoza’s Preface in the “Interpretive Essay” (2004, 275–78). Yaffe reminds us that the word consilium allows a variety of interpretations. It can mean one’s own counsel, but it also can mean the result of consultation with others. The word can signify that which is “well established” and accepted in principle or practice.


9. I have chosen to translate the Latin word sapiens by the English word “sensible.” Sapiens derives from the verb sapere which means “to taste” or “to have flavor.” The word then also involves something “having a taste or flavor.” Subsequently, sapere comes to mean “to have a taste for” a thing, that
is, “to have taste” or “to have sense or discernment,” and so “to be sensible.” The Yaffe translation renders sapiens as “wise man” (2004, 180); the Curley translation, in the manuscript draft that I have seen, uses “wise man”; the Shirley translation also uses “wise man” (1989, 238); and the Elwes translation uses the same words (1951, 201). However, I am not confident that Spinoza intends or wishes to invoke any strict sense of “wisdom” in the passage at issue, as is entailed in the English translations of sapiens as “wise man.” That is, in Spinoza’s own teaching, living in accordance with “the laws or dictates of reason” is something that a good citizen must do in a decent regime (TTP, 73–74, 191). Conformity with that “which reason dictates, or living from rational laws” (TTP, 190) will enable an individual to maximize the success of his endeavor to persevere in his condition. Whereas one’s preservation need not presuppose or require that he be a “wise man,” it may very well require that he be a “sensible” man.

10. Acknowledgement of the universality of natural egoism is found in the works of prominent early modern philosophers, for example Thomas Hobbes: “For prudence is but experience, which equal time equally bestows on all men in those things they equally apply themselves unto. That which may perhaps make such equality incredible is but a vain conceit of one’s own wisdom, which almost all men think they have in a greater degree than the vulgar, that is, than all men but themselves and a few others whom, by fame or for concurring with themselves, they approve” (Leviathan, chapter 13, section 2; a similar claim appears in chapter 5, sections 3–5). And John Locke: “[The natural condition of man is a] State also of Equality, wherein all the Power and Jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another” (Second Treatise of Government, section 4). Locke’s account of natural equality follows his declaration in the same passage about the principal feature of “what State all Men are naturally in, and that is, a State of Perfect Freedom to order their Actions, and dispose of their Possessions and Persons, as they think fit, within the bounds of the Law of Nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the Will of any Man.” The “equal power and jurisdiction” of which Locke speaks is also “the equal power of each man to say what is right for him.” The primacy of subjective bias in one’s conceptions and judgments also is noted by Francis Bacon in Novum Organum, book 1, aphorism 49.
REFERENCES

Translations from the original Latin and French texts into English are those of the author.


Most commentators on Plato’s Gorgias focus on Socrates’ climactic debate with Callicles, all but ignoring his earlier exchanges with Gorgias and Polus. In his new book, The Unity of Plato’s “Gorgias,” Devin Stauffer takes seriously Plato’s title and offers a comprehensive reading of this important dialogue. Stauffer is among those who emphasize the dramatic elements of the Platonic dialogues (7n9, 13, 14), but his careful reading of the arguments would please even the most analytic of philosophers. Indeed, by including, rather than excluding, the dramatic features of the text, he is able to explain not only why Socrates argues as he does, but also why his companions accept problematic arguments.

The central emphasis of Stauffer’s book, and his most significant contribution to scholarship on the Gorgias, is the unity of the dialogue. Stauffer believes, and argues very persuasively, that rhetoric is the theme which runs through, and thereby unites, the dialogue. Those familiar with the Gorgias will recall that Socrates arrives just after an exhibition of rhetorical prowess by Gorgias and blames Chaerophon for forcing him to remain in the marketplace. Stauffer suggests that Socrates was delayed because he was testing the Delphic oracle’s prophecy to Chaerophon by questioning his fellow citizens (17–18). Insofar as it was precisely this kind of activity which resulted in his trial and death, it makes sense to wonder, Stauffer argues, whether Socrates sought out Gorgias to learn about the power of his art in order that he might make use of it himself, to protect himself from the accusations of those
irritated by his compulsive questioning (37–39, cf. 178–80). Developing “a friendship” and perhaps even “an alliance” with Gorgias would, of course, be in Socrates’ interest (38), but it might also be in Gorgias’s interest: The risk of teaching rhetoric without at least the appearance of a concern for justice is no small one (31, 35).

Like most other scholars, Stauffer argues that Socrates’ critique is of “autonomous or sovereign” rhetoric (157), which is directed at the satisfaction of desires (155–57). He instead proposes, and reveals the need for, a “nobler form of rhetoric” (122). However, Stauffer argues that this noble rhetoric is not depicted in the dialogue; rather, it is the Platonic dialogues themselves which serve to defend philosophy from the city’s accusations. Plato’s writing, says Stauffer, “was guided by his appreciation of the problem that the Gorgias brings to light,” that is, the philosopher’s need for a rhetorical defense (181).

Unlike most other scholars, Stauffer argues against the view that true rhetoric is aimed at the improvement of souls. The best that can be accomplished by true rhetoric, even practiced by one as gifted as Gorgias, is “taming the citizens or making them gentler” (155). True rhetoric’s “ultimate purpose is the defense of philosophy against its critics” (122) by making “the philosophic life … an object of admiration and respect” (179). The attempts to improve the souls of the interlocutors of the dialogue—Socrates’ punishment of Polus and the concluding logos-myth to Callicles—reveal the limits of rhetoric (12, 63, 134, 140, 158–60, 164, 169, 172–76). True rhetoric itself, therefore, must bow to the necessities and limits of politics and make use of flattery (160).

Insofar as true rhetoric is directed towards the defense and preservation of philosophy, Socrates, while rejecting the use of rhetoric to avoid just punishment or to inflict unjust punishment on others, does permit the use of rhetoric “when one is unjustly accused” (81). Stauffer takes this to be the novel and noble form of rhetoric that Socrates urges upon Gorgias. Despite his apparent disdain for self-preservation in chastising Callicles (145–49), “Socrates is interested in a new form of rhetoric, above all, because he is interested in somehow mitigating the danger he is in,” Stauffer argues (166, cf. 149). Pointing to the fates of four Athenian statesmen (Themistocles, Cimon, Miltiades, and Pericles), “Socrates suggests that true rhetoric shares at least one end with the rhetoric that operates through flattery: both true rhetoric and the flattering kind should keep their practitioners from falling” (155, cf. Grg. 517a).
In this way, true rhetoric differs significantly from Socrates’ true political art (166, cf. Grg. 521d7). His activity is wholly inconsistent with the kind of flattery inherent in even noble rhetoric. But even Socrates’ political art has less to do with teaching virtue than it does with removing “the convictions that the young have already received from their primary education at the hands of the city” (165). And because it has this subversive character, it must remain private and not public. Aware of the danger his attempt to improve others brings, Socrates avoids entering political life. The exercise of the political art can be safe only with the support of “an ally with great rhetorical powers and a sympathetic view of his activity and situation” (167).

Stauffer concludes that Gorgias is, in the end, an unlikely and perhaps even an unsatisfactory candidate for such an alliance (180). Insofar as Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles all emerged from their encounter with Socrates with their pre-existing convictions intact, if shaken, the failure dramatized in the Gorgias “may be seen as Plato’s way of revealing the problem to which his writings respond and of indicating the role he plays in defending Socratic philosophy” (181).

The great virtue of Stauffer’s book is its compelling presentation of how rhetoric is the unifying theme of the dialogue. However, some of his more specific arguments are less persuasive. For instance, Stauffer’s argument about the relationship between true rhetoric and self-preservation depends greatly, as he acknowledges, on how one reads the passage at 517a4–6: Is the aim of true rhetoric to avoid public downfall—that is, suffering persecution, exile, or even death—or is that no more than a fortunate consequence of practicing true rhetoric? The true rhetorician might not intend to protect himself, but he may do just that by improving the souls of his fellow citizens.

Stauffer also argues for a narrow interpretation of Socrates’ political art, emphasizing his failure to persuade his interlocutors and the tentative nature of Socrates’ own arguments. But it is possible that the limits of the political art apparent in the Gorgias are defined by the dramatic personae of Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles. They are not the only witnesses to the conversation, however, and at the end of the dialogue Socrates seems to turn away from those he is unable to convince and addresses the audience, urging further examination of what he has put forth. In other dialogues, Socrates administers “punishments” more successfully, such as the taming of Glaucon’s ambition in the Republic. As for the tentative nature of Socrates’ argument about justice in the dialogue, it is no more tentative than his argument about the ideas. Yet Socrates clings to both of these arguments despite their
shortcomings: he first proposes the argument about the ideas in his youth (depicted in the *Parmenides*) and, despite the various criticisms it is subjected to, still accepts it on his deathbed in the *Phaedo*. Likewise, Socrates clings to, and lives by, the arguments he puts forth about justice and death—at least according to his speeches in the *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*—whatever doubts he may have about them. Given the readiness with which Socrates appears to accept death, it is questionable whether its avoidance is his primary goal. Might we not instead ascribe his reluctance to enter politics to the impossibility of benefiting individuals on such a broad level?

Insofar as Stauffer begins his analysis from the conviction of Socrates depicted in Plato’s *Apology* (9–13), his conclusions raise important questions about that dialogue: if noble rhetoric serves as a defense against unjust accusations, what are we to make of Socrates’ refusal to use rhetoric in his own defense? Does Socrates’ refusal indicate some justice in the charges against him? Such an interpretation is supported by Stauffer’s presentation of Socrates’ political art as subversive of the city’s education. It is, of course, a tenable interpretation of the accusations against Socrates—but also one that not every reader will accept.

Though it takes its bearings from the *Apology*, Stauffer’s treatment is, by and large, restricted to the *Gorgias* (cf. 179). It is admirably tightly-written, but one wishes he had developed further connections to other dialogues, in particular, the *Republic*. For instance: Socrates tames and befriends Thrasymachus, offering him a role in bringing about the city in speech. But Socrates, ignoring his own warning that rhetoricians act only in their self-interest (502e), offers Gorgias nothing that could entice him into an alliance (cf. 168). What might account for the different rhetorical moves?

In pointing to such questions without answering them, Stauffer forces one to return to the rest of the Platonic corpus, whether or not one agrees with all of his conclusions. The *Unity of Plato’s “Gorgias”* is a careful and thought-provoking interpretation of a Platonic dialogue that will reward readers familiar with the dialogue and those coming to it for the first time. It is, I think, the best book yet written on a very important dialogue.

## Unmasking the Unmasker

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“Since Franklin is fun, I hope this book is fun as well,” writes Jerry Weinberger in the preface of his provocatively insightful *Benjamin Franklin Unmasked*. Yet the book is much more than fun. One is hard pressed to think of a recent work that matches Weinberger’s in terms of the comprehensiveness and energy of its treatment of the most important matters. The book’s main purpose is to uncover and spell out what Weinberger presents as Franklin’s devastatingly critical insights on “God and religion, moral virtue and morality in general, justice, equality, natural rights, love and the good life, the modern technological project, and the place and limits of reason in politics and human experience” (xv). These insights are the product of a “critical dialectical philosopher,” “who teetered on the edge of the nihilistic abyss and then, with a moral epiphany, recovered an understanding of morality and God that could and did make his life worth living” (290, 40). The heart of this “moral” epiphany, however, is not necessarily moral. In Weinberger’s account, it is not sufficient to be free “from the deranging spell of noble sacrifice” if we are not also free from “the remaining effects of that very same spell,” effects which create in us “admiration for realistic [!] public service and doing good to man” (41). Weinberger’s Franklin has, among other counsels, these two pragmatic secrets to happiness: “Anger is for fools,” and bourgeois marriage is “a safe haven for losers” (224, 109). On Weinberger’s reading, however, such life lessons are not the bitter opinions of a grizzled cynic, but the theoretical

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conclusions of a humorous, but intransigently reflective, Socratic philosopher. (I leave aside in this review the important question of whether Weinberger should have tried to show that the arguments he sometimes calls Socratic in the book are truly Socratic. Weinberger provides no analysis of any of Xenophon’s or Plato’s Socratic writings; there appear to be three footnote references to Platonic dialogues \[Alcibiades II, Apology, Euthydemus, and Phaedo\] and one parenthetical remark in the text \[Republic\].)

The central insight of the philosopher Franklin, as revealed by Weinberger, is that there is no such thing as deserving, and hence that there are no such things as vice, virtue, dignity, or evil (for example, 51–55, 149, 181–82, 227, 232, 289, 313n5, 324n53). This insight being difficult to achieve and hold on to, Weinberger’s Franklin also contends that most people will never free themselves from seeing the world in the light of confused ideas such as deserving (for example, 277, 85). Notions such as dignity and deserving are “internally incoherent ideas” and “the concepts of ‘evil,’ ‘moral virtue,’ and ‘justice’ make no sense” (269, 278, 282). Weinberger’s Franklin also rejects the notion that there are natural rights, let alone any natural duties (319, 292). The virtue of humility is logically incoherent (for example, 182, 216–17). And any high-minded notion of love—any notion of love that fosters hopes for happiness from the conjunction of beauty and sex—likewise does not escape Franklin’s critical examination (103–10; so free is Franklin from these hopes, that he is “not so ashamed as to refrain from making fun of [his late wife’s] memory in pursuit of another woman”).

Weinberger bases his claims on careful analyses of mostly brief Franklinian writings. Weinberger is encouraged in analyzing the relevant texts (texts with “moral” themes and untainted by polemical intent, 323n22) in the critical-subversive way that he does by his discovery of a “second ironic layer” in Franklin’s \textit{Autobiography} (60, 65, 290), a layer that suggests Franklin’s “deep and persistent and, we can surmise, well-grounded skepticism” about morality and religion. Some of the texts, whose surprising radicalism is uncovered by Weinberger, are “Letter of the Drum”; “The Trial and Reprieve of Prouse and Mitchel” (the last two show Franklin as exposing and mocking the follies of religious belief and hope); the “Speech of Miss Polly Baker” (which reasons that no one wishes to be weak and stupid, but all human faults arise from weakness and/or stupidity and are therefore unblameable); “A Letter from Father Abraham to his Beloved Son” (the primary aim of which is to show the unreasonableness of punishment for the sake of punishment); \textit{A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain} (an “aggressive”
Socratic refutation of the notion of deserving—Franklin would later become somewhat more cautious, 174); “That Self-Denial is not the Essence of Virtue” (exposing further the irrationalism of understanding life in terms of merit and demerit, instead of pragmatic usefulness and uselessness; see an especially vivid paragraph on the “tangle of confusions” and “gibberish” involved in the notion of the “excellence” of “pure sacrifice,” 187–88); and “A Man of Sense” (a Socratic dialogue which judges virtue and vice in the light of their contribution to “maximized happiness”: sometimes a situation calls for vice). (All of these writings can be found in J. A. Leo Lemay, ed., Writings [New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Library of America vol. 37, 1987], the edition used by Weinberger.)

Weinberger spends two chapters tracing the political implications of Franklin’s dialectical critique of morality (found above all in chapter 6 of Unmasking). Chapter 7 concerns “the political principles of the good life.” Weinberger writes that Franklin held a moderate, good-natured, pragmatic egalitarianism, and one “consistent with the critique of morality at the core of Franklin’s deepest reflections about life: no one deserves anything” (225).

Weinberger argues that Franklin’s egalitarianism is negatively determined. First, “[h]uman beings are equal not because they share an equal dignity but because they have no real claim whatsoever to deserve deference or any other good…” Secondly, human beings are “equally prone to stupidity and folly and viciousness” (251; 242, 263). This means, of course, since Weinberger’s Franklin thought himself more or less free, at least from the clutches of folly, that his fundamental teaching reveals an amazingly stark inequality. It is a “natural fact” that “[m]en in general are not and never will be ‘pragmatists’” (279; emphasis added). To be sure, one positive, but less strict, meaning of egalitarianism (the favoring of equality of opportunity) can be reconciled with this radical inequality: “Outstanding human talents can turn up anywhere” (241).

While in chapter 7 Weinberger finds Franklin to be fundamentally a Hobbesian and to differ with Hobbes only on the more or less secondary matter of the best form of government (as distinguished from the goals of government), chapter 8 argues that Franklin was even more rational than Bacon and Hobbes in his immunity to utopianism. Franklin differed from utopian rationalists such as Bacon and Hobbes insofar as he found that the deepest thing in us is the desire “to be something special,” the presence of a deep sense of deserving. According to Weinberger, Bacon and Hobbes thought that fear of death is the deepest thing in us and that we somehow invent the
idea of merit in order to seek redemption from God (274). Weinberger’s Franklin finds that Bacon and Hobbes had it backwards. It is because of our attachment to the idea of merit that we fear death. Unless Weinberger actually means something more limited (namely, the common attempt to deny that we even want what we despair of obtaining, a despair sometimes induced by a loss of belief in our merit), this is perhaps the most striking, but also most improbable, argument of the book. Perhaps it makes sense to say that hope, not just fear, is “the true source of religion.” But what is the connection between hope, or positive erotic desire, and “our sense of merit and deserving,” “the powerful moral intuitions rooted deeply in the human soul”? Weinberger, in one of his numerous frank and compellingly clear disquisitions free from direct reference to Franklin, writes that human beings can only hope for things they believe are “coming to them, what they have earned by their moral worthiness” (277). But how is this strong conclusion demonstrated? And is the idea of merit really such a deep part of us if certain individuals, such as Weinberger’s Franklin, can liberate themselves from it (individuals, moreover, who naturally get mad and sad, 223)? In any event, the suggestion that we only have hope and that we can only fear death because of a “prior sense of deserving” seems implausible to me.

It is on account of this supposed recognition of the deep rootedness of the idea of deserving that, according to Weinberger, Franklin “simply could not accept” Baconian and Hobbesian utopian rationalism, the dream of achieving “a fully rational and demystified society.” (I note in passing that this is apparently a change of mind for Weinberger concerning Bacon: see his Science, Faith, and Politics, 331–32.). It is for this reason that Franklin’s “political project of the good life” consists in nothing more than an attempt to manage or moderate, not extirpate, enthusiasm and moral indignation. The reason or ground for Franklin’s sobriety is his ability to see into, and through, our most powerful moral intuitions. But it is not clear that, or why, Hobbes, for example, failed to see what Franklin presumably succeeded in seeing: the internal inconsistency of the concept of deserving (324n53). Weinberger’s suggestion is that, for an unspecified reason, Hobbes failed “to think through moral phenomena as they are actually and commonly and most deeply experienced.” More importantly, if what Franklin presumably saw is as implausible as it seems to me that it is, we need to look for another basis for the kind of extraordinary sobriety attributed to him by Weinberger.

According to Weinberger, Franklin’s philosophical-dialectical approach to moral and political matters does not consist merely in logically
powerful, but abstract, arguments. Weinberger argues that Franklin makes these arguments deeply his own and lives by them. Franklin’s rejection of the high hopes of love results in a playfully cynical approach to women. Weinberger writes that it “matters to [his] argument” whether Franklin was an angry or indignant man (223). Weinberger then includes a lengthy footnote, directed at Gordon Wood and at understanding Franklin as a deeply angry man (314–18n27). Weinberger’s conclusion is that while Franklin was not “above all passion, including anger,” he was not “in character an angry man, such that anger was the wellspring (as it almost always is in others) of his political attachments. He was not because his critique of morality showed him the incoherence of the opinions that work with anger.” At the very least, as Weinberger says in the penultimate sentence of his book, Franklin, even when gripped by anger, was able to reflect on its “moral absurdity” and “groundless foolishness” (318n27, 292).

For my part, I wonder, if it is indeed true that most people will necessarily have to remain enslaved to “stupid dogmatisms,” from what point of view the book can be seen, at bottom, as “fun.” It is certainly unclear to whom this emphatic refutation of morality is addressed, though the dust jacket assures us that the book is “[w]ritten for general readers who want to delve more deeply into the mind of a great man and great American.” (Is there such a need for explicitness if Weinberger’s goal is the same as what Weinberger says is the most helpful result of Franklin’s writings: “He is … a helpful conversationalist who, having thought through as well as he could for himself the deepest and most pressing questions of life and never stopped doing so, helps us do the same” [290]?) It is also unclear where the lasting fun is for individuals such as Weinberger’s Franklin, once they have established that most people are guided by what are demonstrably delusions. There is a certain repetitiveness in Weinberger’s argument that “there is no such thing as deserving.” Is the fun of making fun of people’s beliefs in deserving inexhaustible?

More important, I believe, is the question whether Franklin was indeed a Socratic philosopher and whether, as such, he has been able to have enough of his desirably moderating influence on the United States and thus on the world. If “serious moderation” is not available to most, what sense does it make to try to separate cruelty from moral indignation, to teach that the victims of slavery should be spared any suffering, on the basis of the argument that no one deserves anything, including the pain or indignity of slavery (269–70)? (By this rationale, corrupt aristocracy is as just as democracy, taxes
imposed by an unrepresentative legislature are as fair as ones imposed by a people on themselves, and slavery is as just as freedom.) Does the effort of Franklin to ennoble his country and the world exhaust itself with encouraging good-natured egalitarianism and with him being “still too prudent to puncture his friend’s declared faith and dash his good wishes” (283)? Or is it already against the spirit of Franklin’s sober philosophical pragmatism for us to wonder how he might have benefited humanity? Would not Weinberger’s Franklin have mocked the concern for “doing good,” reflective as it presumably is of “the deranging spell of noble sacrifice”? In that case, is Weinberger’s focus on politics in the latter part of his book to be understood above all as an indication that Weinberger has learned his lesson from Franklin: that one should appear sincere and concerned for others, and that one should temper the true asperity of the Socratic refutations (for example, 58, 174)? In any case, Weinberger doesn’t quite seem to me to succeed in accounting for Franklin’s political activity. His suggested explanation—a miniaturized Machiavellian concern for glory—doesn’t make much sense in a man who hated bloodshed and conquest and wouldn’t make much sense in a man who thought no one, including himself, deserved anything. (For Franklin on bloodshed, consider the saying attributed to him in Lessing’s Ernst und Falk: “Whatever costs blood is certainly not worth shedding blood for.”)

I also wonder whether Weinberger, whose treatment is indeed rich and penetrating, has nevertheless shown persuasively enough that Franklin has gone through the “most deeply experienced” moral phenomena. Weinberger offers ample evidence of Franklin’s debunking of ordinary moral cant, hypocrisy, and pretense, but the evidence that Franklin himself paid enough attention in himself to what he considers the deepest longings in human beings (love and justice) is minimal. In fact, Weinberger ends up emphasizing the logical character of Franklin’s refutations (which may or may not be consistent with Franklin having written no “comprehensive formal treatises,” xv, 290). Perhaps Franklin was born naturally without much of an inclination to these radical delusions. But if so, would he have been the best judge of those phenomena as delusions? In any event, there is considerable evidence that Franklin in fact held enlightened morality in deep respect (see, for example, his comments on the death of his good friend John Fothergill in his letter to Benjamin Waterhouse of January 18, 1781 [Writings, 1031]).

Another doubt raised for me by Weinberger’s book is whether Franklin understood himself, and correctly, as the theoretically or philosophically grounded pragmatist of Weinberger’s description (as
distinguished from a pragmatist of good horse sense). (In portraying a debunkingly philosophical Franklin, Weinberger radicalizes, and appears to depart from, the sober Franklin of Gerald Stourzh’s path-breaking 1954 *Benjamin Franklin and American Foreign Policy*, the ironical, Janus-faced Franklin found in Ralph Lerner’s studies, even Harvey Mansfield’s naughty critic of self-righteous nobility in the name of a humbler republican citizenship, not to mention the realistic and deft, but still aiming at the elevation of the public, Franklin of Steven Forde’s work. For a thoughtful and moderate view of the whole of Franklin’s thought and life, one should also consider Lorraine Pangle’s forthcoming book, *The Political Philosophy of Benjamin Franklin*.)

What was the core motive of Franklin’s theoretical interest, his interest in understanding? While Weinberger’s Franklin found metaphysics to be “fun,” he gave it up (202). According to Weinberger, Franklin engaged in dialectical refutations of moral-religious individuals (since “the moral and religious impulses are inseparable,” 282) in order to push the moral believers into having doubts that God had really spoken to them (205). Franklin was already certain, on the basis of his own private logical considerations, that a “sensible” God does not provide punishments or rewards, in this world or the next. But he wanted, in addition, some external evidence for his conclusions. (It is not clear why Franklin would need this external or experimental evidence if the only thing of which he was “sure was the critique of morality and his own resulting take on God” [emphasis in the original, 205].) If Franklin did not think highly of the natural benefits and pleasures of metaphysics, and if there is no evidence that he himself felt “existentially” the possibility of a punishing God, the motivation for his dialectical refutation of believers through an undercutting of their morality becomes obscure.

Invigorating questions of this kind occur naturally upon reading such an ambitious and vibrantly argued work. It would not be surprising and it would be desirable, given the far-reaching scope and the rhetorical freshness of Weinberger’s arguments about Franklin, if this book becomes, as it has already begun to be, the center of a fruitful debate.
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