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Learning without Teaching: Recollection in the *Meno*

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Several of Plato’s dialogues may fruitfully be construed as contests, struggles, *ağônes*, between the character Socrates and interlocutors whom he regards as morally misguided. Since Socrates characterizes himself in the *Apology* as having been sent to Athens “by the god” (*Ap*. 23b–c, 28e, 29d, 30a, 30d–e, 31a, and 33c), he is, on his own self-understanding, a man on a mission. Although he does not profess to have moral knowledge or wisdom himself, the character Socrates sees his beliefs as being less incorrect and his priorities less irrationally ordered than those of his partners in conversation. For that reason, his mission is often a dual one: first, to encourage people to undertake the practice of philosophy and, second, to help people replace their worse beliefs with better ones.

Plato’s dialogues abound with characters whom Socrates sees as being sorely in need of his special brand of benefaction. Among them are the sophists, Hippias, Protagoras, and Thrasymachus; the rhetoricians, Gorgias and Callicles; and the rhetorician-in-training, Polus. Also included are surely Crito and Euthyphro, and probably Critias, Laches, and Nicias as well. And, of course, Meno. All of these interlocutors either quite consciously hold or are unconsciously or semiconsciously committed to morally dubious beliefs that need to be exposed and then expunged. These are the tasks that Plato assigns to the character Socrates, who often poses his notorious “What is *x*?” question less for the sake of launching a genuine search for definition than as a way of extracting from his hapless interlocutors those views that need to be challenged and improved upon. This is not to say that Socrates would not like to be given illuminating definitions of the various *x*’s he asks about, but rather that, considering the moral and intellectual caliber of many of his interlocutors, he does not expect to arrive with their help at the desired definitions. All benefaction seems destined to flow in one direction—from Socrates to the interlocutor.
When, then, Socrates asks Meno to define *aretē* (virtue or human excellence) he does so in order to subject to examination and refutation what he suspects will be a rather crude conception of it. And, as it turns out, Meno’s conception of *aretē* is rather crude: *aretē* is for him nothing more than having the wealth and power (78c) that enable one to help one’s friends and harm one’s enemies while avoiding all harm to oneself (71e). Socrates has nothing to learn from Meno; Meno, however, has much to learn.

The early part of the *Meno* recounts the struggle between Socrates and Meno over the proper conception of the nature of *aretē*. Socrates himself has probably at best only an incomplete notion of what *aretē* is but he is at least quite clear on what *aretē* is not. Meno’s first account of *aretē*, according to which there are different *aretai* for the various types of people, might be one he heard from Gorgias but, regardless of its source, it does not appear to be one to which Meno is particularly committed. Meno seems to have greater allegiance to his subsequent conceptions, namely, (1) that *aretē* is ruling others (Gorgias is explicitly the source of this one), and (2) that *aretē* is having fine tastes for power and gold and silver, along with the wherewithal to gratify and indulge those tastes. But these conceptions are not even on the right track. Socrates, to be sure, wants Meno to think critically about the nature of *aretē*. But he also wants him to replace his current inferior view of *aretē* with a better one, one that makes reference to such things as justice (*dikaiosunē*), temperance (*sōphrosunē*), and piety (*hosiotēs*).

In addition to the *agon* concerning the definition of *aretē* that is confined to the first part of the *Meno*, there is another *agon*, an *agon* concerning the nature of learning, that runs throughout the dialogue. Socrates believes that learning can take place in any one of three ways, all of which are in evidence in the *Meno*. The first way is by being taught by someone who knows. Examples of this sort of learning are found at 90a, where Socrates secures Anytus’s agreement to the idea that if their goal were that Meno become a doctor, they would do well to send him to the doctors, if it were that he become a cobbler, then to the cobblers, and so on for all other subjects for which there are teachers who charge a fee for their instruction and students who pay for it. At 94a, horsemanship, music, athletics, and “all other things that depend on skill [*technē*]” are listed among the enterprises that depend on teachers.

The second and third ways of learning differ from the first in that neither requires a teacher. The former of these involves making new discoveries on one’s own concerning something one does not know, and even, on occasion, concerning something no one yet knows. The method of
hypothesis that Socrates ascribes to the geometers at 86e-87b illustrates this sort of learning. The geometer learns by testing his own hypothesis; he does not rely on or require another geometer who already knows the solution. An additional example might be the original discovery by Pythagoras himself or by some other mathematician of the length of the side of a double-sized square. Whereas in the Meno the slave’s exercise in learning to identify the line upon which the double-sized square is constructed hardly qualifies as an instance of the kind of learning in which one makes, on one’s own, a new discovery, it nevertheless calls to mind the very first discovery of the solution to this problem, a discovery made when there was no one who already knew it, no one from whom the discoverer might learn it.

The latter of the two kinds of learning that can be done without a teacher is the recovery from within oneself of the opinions that reside in one’s soul. It is this learning process that bears the name “recollection” in the Meno. Socrates wishes to engage Meno in precisely such a learning process with respect to the question, What is virtue? He attempts to get Meno to think about what virtue is, to look inside himself for answers (all answers that can be traced to an outside source have to be checked to determine if they have also taken root inside—71d; at 77d, Meno, no doubt anticipating that Socrates will ask him to confirm that the new definition he offers quoting “the poet” is something he too believes, does so even before he is asked), to keep his answers to the current question consistent with other beliefs to which he is already committed, and to relinquish those that are not consistent and try again. Although the Meno would have us believe that Meno’s slave recovers from within his own soul the solution to the problem of doubling the square, the fact is that Socrates actually teaches the slave, relying only on the slave’s ability to speak Greek, to recognize a square and know its basic properties, to perform simple computations, and to understand and follow a proof. (Whereas what makes Meno’s proposed definitions of aretê “wrong” is that they fail to cohere with other things he believes, the slave’s proposed solutions to the geometry question are simply wrong. When what is sought is a length which, when squared, will yield 8 sq. ft., both answers the slave proposes are incorrect: his first answer, 4 ft., yields not 8 but 16 sq. ft., and his second answer, 3 ft., yields 9.)

Whereas Socrates recognizes as legitimate all three ways of learning—learning from a teacher, making new discoveries on one’s own, and “recollecting” truths that are already in one’s soul—the only sort of learning that Meno recognizes is the one that comes by teaching. He has apparently given no thought to how initial discoveries are made. And he certainly knows
nothing of “recollection.” All Meno knows is that he himself learns by being taught.

In this paper I shall identify seven instances in the *Meno* where Socrates and Meno contend over the nature of learning—that is, over whether or not there can be such a thing as learning without teaching. I shall then consider why it is so important to Socrates that Meno come to recognize a kind of learning that may be accomplished without a teacher.

The first instance of the disagreement between Socrates and Meno regarding the nature of learning is in evidence at the dialogue’s very inception. In the *Meno*’s opening passage we find Meno eagerly, urgently, seeking Socrates’ advice concerning how one can secure arete— for oneself. That Meno’s impulse is to ask a person simply to hand him the answer to what he wants to know provides a telling glimpse into Meno’s approach to learning. Note that his very first words, indeed, the first five words of the dialogue, are *Echeis moi eipein, o- So-krates* (70a1), “Can you tell me, Socrates …?” (Stephanus pagination and text of the *Meno* follow the Sharples edition, 1985.) Meno wants only to be told. He wants to listen to, to absorb, the wisdom of others. No thinking for him. No work. No mental effort beyond hearing, storing, and later recalling.

If we look at Meno’s question in its entirety (70a1–4), we can detect how entrenched in him is the connectedness of learning to teaching:

> Can you tell me, Socrates, whether aretē is taught [*didakton*]? Or is it not taught but comes by practice [*askēton*]? Or does it neither come by practice nor is learned [*mathēton*], but comes to men by nature or in some other way?

It is clear from this passage that Meno regards “taught” (*didakton*) and “learned” (*mathēton*) as virtually synonymous with one another. (The verbal adjectives *didakton* and *mathēton* can mean taught or teachable, learned or learnable, respectively.) He uses the terms interchangeably, contrasting indifferently first *didakton* and then *mathēton* with *askēton*. For Meno, learning is the flip side of teaching.

Socrates responds to Meno’s request with his characteristic profession of ignorance: he cannot oblige because he does not know what aretē is and so surely cannot say how it comes to men. Since, as he maintains, it is reasonable only for those who know (*tous eidotas*—70b7–c1) to answer fearlessly (*aphobōs*) and magnificently (*megaloprepōs*) when anyone asks a question, Socrates the nonknower will not answer. (At *Gorg.* 447c Socrates
asserts that Gorgias got the Thessalians into the habit of answering questions “fearlessly and magnificently.”) Furthermore, Socrates’ unsolicited remark that he has never yet, as he thinks, met anyone who did know (71c3–4) rather unmistakably implies that those who do answer fearlessly and magnificently certainly should not be doing so: since no one knows what aretē is, it follows for Socrates that no one should purport to be teaching it. Yet, does it also follow for him that no one should be attempting to learn it? Certainly not. What follows for Socrates from no one’s knowing what aretē is, is, on the contrary, that all should inquire into its nature. “The unexamined life,” he proclaims, “is not worth living for a man” (Ap. 38a5–6). Indeed, at the very core of the Socratic mission lies the divine mandate to get people to admit their own ignorance of ta megista (the greatest matters)—as Socrates does his. For nothing is a more stubbornly intransigent obstacle to inquiry of any kind than the mistaken belief that one knows what one does not know and, by the same token, there is no greater spur to inquiry than the recognition of one’s ignorance. Only those who know that they do not know can begin to inquire: the desire to come to know what one does not already know and, even more so, what no one as yet knows, is precisely what fuels inquiry.

Since Socrates believes that inquiry can and must proceed even when nobody knows what aretē is, no sooner does he say that neither he nor anyone he has met knows what aretē is than he proceeds to investigate, together with Meno, the nature of aretē. But Meno in what follows parrots Gorgias as much as he can. He even stands firm with Gorgias on aretē’s being the ability to rule men, despite how manifestly inadequate that answer is as an attempt to pinpoint what it is that all those who possess aretē—including not only men in their prime, but old men, women, children, and slaves—have in common. (When Gorgias is challenged to say what it is that rhetoric produces that is the greatest good for mankind, he says that it is persuasion, for persuasion is the source of freedom and the source of rule over others in one’s own city [Gorg. 452d]. This is one lesson that Meno has apparently learned well [M. 73c9–d1].) Indeed, even after Socrates expends considerable energy in attempting to instruct Meno regarding what would count as an acceptable definition, Meno can do no better than to quote someone else, this time a poet, in formulating his final definition of aretē (77b).

If we ask ourselves with respect to Meno the recollector, the one who knows not a whit more (and, in his view, also not a whit less) than what he has been taught by those he regards as wise, why such a man would come to Socrates to pose the question of how aretē is acquired, there can be but
one answer: he has as yet not found the definitive teacher. Gorgias, as Meno later tells us (95c), disavows the teaching of aretê, and although Meno claims to admire (agamai) Gorgias’s restraint, he nevertheless finds himself, as a result, without an anchor and with no idea where to turn. It seems likely, then, that Meno’s confession at 95b that, where he comes from, the men of refinement (kaloi kagathoi andres) are not of one mind regarding aretê’s teachability, and at 95c that he, like most others, is unsure about whether sophists teach it, reveals, albeit belatedly, what it was that prompted Meno to turn to Socrates at the dialogue’s start.

It is not long before Meno comes to regret the impulse that drove him to Socrates. Perhaps he had initially forgotten what he rather suddenly claims at 79e-80a to have heard about Socrates, namely, that Socrates is a perplexed man who perplexes others. Indeed, once he sees Socrates as hopelessly confused and confusing, he wants nothing so much as to extricate himself from their discussion. He challenges Socrates with a paradox designed to bring their inquiry swiftly to a close. (What has come to be known as “Meno’s paradox” is not technically a paradox. It is more accurately characterized as a series of accusatory questions.)

Meno’s paradox is the second instance of his and Socrates’ agôn over the nature of learning. Meno seizes upon the paradox as his lifeline, his only hope of escaping the sustained attacks of the hideous stingray Socrates. In effect, the paradox registers Meno’s protest against the notion of learning without teaching, specifically as it underlies Socrates’ examination of him. Probably drawing upon a sophistic paradox he has heard (at 80e Socrates appears to be attempting to reconstruct the paradox that may have inspired Meno’s words), he aims his assault squarely at Socrates (80d5–8):

And in what way will you search, Socrates, for this thing of which you do not know at all what it is? For, of the things that you do not know, just what sort of thing will you search for on the assumption that it is that one? Or even if you do happen upon it, how will you know that this is the thing that you did not know?

What Meno demands to know in this passage is how Socrates can hope to look for what he does not already know and, even if it were possible for him to look, how would he know that what he found was what he was looking for even if it was. In effect, what troubles Meno is how someone who lacks knowledge can by himself (or, one supposes, even along with some other nonknower) confirm the validity of a discovery. Indeed, confirmation is what eludes Socrates and Meno with respect to Meno’s answers thus far,
answers which certainly seemed right to Meno and which he is still not quite convinced are not right. (See 80a-b, where Meno complains about Socrates’ having numbed him in mind and speech, rendering him, someone who was previously able to speak well and convincingly to crowds about aretē, utterly unable now to give a proper answer.) What Meno believes is needed is someone who knows—a teacher would do nicely. Meno cannot see that he and Socrates actually made progress in their investigations; he does not see that he has learned anything. Negative progress apparently does not count as progress in his eyes and, anyway, nothing, not even anything negative, was definitively settled. From Meno’s point of view, something must surely be amiss if what Socrates feels they need to do at this juncture is to raise the same question anew (as Socrates says three times: at 79c3–4, c7–8, and e1–2). Meno can only be desperate to be rid of Socrates and to find himself a real teacher.

Socrates, however, is not prepared to relinquish his interlocutor just yet. Understanding full well what Meno will respond favorably to, Socrates offers him the testimony of authorities: “I have heard both men and women who are wise concerning divine things” (81a5-6). Meno’s eagerness to hear finally from someone who knows something is palpable: “Saying what?” (81a7), he asks, and then, “What is it; and who are the ones who say it?” (81a9). (So, too, at 95d3, where, when Socrates is about to quote Theognis, Meno asks, “In what verses?” [En poiōi epesin;].)

Ironically, what Socrates defends by way of appeal to authoritative experts is the idea that one learns by oneself, without an expert, by recovery from within oneself of truths known formerly, indeed, truths known always, by one’s own preexistent soul. In this second instance, then, of the agōn between Meno and Socrates regarding the manner in which one learns, Meno has challenged, through his notorious paradox, the efficacy of a method of searching that dispenses with the guidance and verification that a knowing teacher might provide, and Socrates has insisted, through the myth of recollection, that all learning comes by recovery of one’s own knowledge—no teacher required.

The third instance of this struggle follows immediately. Meno, having heard from Socrates that “what we call learning is recollection,” asks Socrates to clarify the notion that “we do not learn” (81e4–5). Note that Meno, quite remarkably, assimilates the notion that we learn by recollecting, that is, in a way other than by being taught, to the notion that “we do not learn.” Since, for Meno, there can be no learning without teaching, it follows for him that if we learn by recollecting, we do not learn. Moreover, in seeking
clarification of the recollection model of learning that Socrates has just advanced, Meno poses his question in a way that reveals his still narrow understanding of how one learns: “Can you teach me how this is so?” (81e6). Meno can only ask to be taught.

Note that Socrates, in advancing the notion that all learning is recollection, never actually said that there is no teaching. But his extreme reaction, indeed his overreaction, to Meno’s asking him to “teach” (didaxai) him, suggests how violative Socrates takes that question to be of the spirit of his recollection proposal, since at the core of recollection is the rejection of the teaching model of learning—for all learning: “For the whole of searching and learning is recollection” (81d4–5). And although Meno no doubt did speak, as he says, merely “from force of habit” (hupo tou ethous—82a5), and, as Klein (1965, 96) correctly insists, without any such pernicious intent as Socrates ascribes to him (Socrates accuses him of trying to catch him in a contradiction—82a2–3), the best he can think to do to remedy the situation is to substitute endeixasthai (show) for didaxai (teach). It is, of course, utterly outside the realm of what is possible for, or could be reasonably expected of, Meno for him now to pose his question in the only way that Socrates would find acceptable, namely, by asking Socrates to help him recover out of himself how it is that the whole of searching and learning is recollection.

The fourth occurrence of the agon emerges in the wake of the geometry demonstration with Meno’s slave. For Meno’s benefit, Socrates stages an exchange in which one of Meno’s slaves learns to double the square. Although I shall discuss later on in this paper the lesson to be derived from the geometry demonstration, it is important now to emphasize that Socrates presents Meno with two mutually exclusive characterizations of the exchange he witnesses between Socrates and the slave: either (1) Socrates merely asks questions and the slave recollects, or (2) Socrates teaches and the slave “learns from me” (par’ emou—82b7). Note that in the second of these two characterizations, the counterpart to Socrates’ teaching is not, contrary to what is often thought, learning simpliciter, but, specifically, “learning from me.” (Hoerber [1960, 89] contends that mathêton and didakton refer to very different modes of education, namely, to inward learning and to transmission from one person to another, respectively. Bluck argues [1961, 95] that the two terms are “on a par.” Neither view is quite correct, for it is not learning simpliciter but rather learning from someone that is “on a par” with teaching.) In Socrates’ view, as we have seen, there are several forms that learning can take, recollection being one of them. It is not, therefore, the slave’s learning simpliciter that corresponds to
Socrates’ teaching him, but only his learning from Socrates. We may compare Ap. 33a5-b8: “I have never been anyone’s teacher . . . I have never promised or taught any lesson to any of them. If someone says that he has ever learned from me . . . know well that he does not speak the truth.”

Following the geometry demonstration in which Socrates purportedly shows that all learning is recollection and that searching together is, therefore, hardly futile, Socrates wishes to return with Meno to their joint investigation of the nature of aretē (86c6–7); he wants to “try to seek together” what aretē is. Meno, however, has still not budged from his original conception of learning. What he would most like is “to consider and to hear” (86c9–10)—that is, “to consider” in the sense of “to hear” (taking the kai epexegetically). And, more seriously, he still wants to know whether or not aretē can be taught. That all learning is recollecting and that no learning, therefore, is a product of teaching is one lesson Meno has certainly not learned, the recollection myth and supporting geometry demonstration notwithstanding. A frustrated Socrates just gives up. Recognizing that all of his efforts to establish that the terms didakton (taught/teachable) and anamnēston (recollected/recollectable) are mutually exclusive have failed, he finally says at 87b9–c1: “but let it make no difference to us which term we use.”

Even now, however, Socrates finds ways to show that, for him at any rate, learning and teaching are not simply two sides of the same coin. After saying that good men are not good by nature, he poses the following question (89b9–c1): “Then since good men do not become good by nature, is it by learning [that they become good]?” Note that what Socrates proposes as the alternative to good men’s becoming good by nature is that they become good through learning—not that they become good through teaching. For Socrates, whatever does not just come naturally to human beings is something they need to acquire by their efforts, that is, something they need to learn. But, as we have seen, for Socrates, learning does not necessarily entail teaching; indeed, in the interests of combating Meno’s view that it does, Socrates goes to the other extreme and designs a recollection myth cum demonstration ostensibly to establish that, on the contrary, no learning comes by teaching; it all comes by recollecting. To be sure, Socrates in no way subscribes to so radical a view; he proposes it rhetorically for Meno’s sake. But even if there are in Socrates’ view only relatively few cases in which one learns without being taught, it is clear at 89b–c that he continues to distinguish learning from being taught.

Does Meno follow suit? Hardly; and here is our fifth instance of the contest between Socrates and Meno regarding learning. Meno agrees
that if good men are not good by nature then they are good through learning, but the reason he gives for agreeing to this is, as he says, that “since aretê is knowledge, it is teachable” (89c3–4). For Meno, then, aretê comes by learning because it is teachable. He unreflectively conflates “by learning” and “teachable.” Whereas it is surely true for Socrates no less than for Meno that if aretê is teachable it is also learnable, the difference between them is that for Meno there is no distinction between learnable and teachable and for Socrates there is: for Socrates, if something is teachable it is also learnable, but not everything that comes by learning must come by teaching.

Let us consider the sixth occasion of the Socrates–Meno clash. Socrates, having now seen once again that Meno recognizes no other form of learning than learning by way of teaching, nevertheless continues to try to broaden Meno’s notion of learning—albeit indirectly this time. Rather than suggest to Meno an alternative to teaching as he did earlier when he introduced the notion of recollection, he now introduces an alternative to knowledge: true opinion. If all and only knowledge is teachable, then there can be no knowledge that cannot be taught. If, then, there is to be a form of learning that does not come by teaching, there must be something that can be learned that is not knowledge. Enter true opinion. One reason, then, that Socrates introduces true opinion as an alternative to knowledge is that he wishes to open up the possibility of learning that does not come by teaching. If learning that comes by teaching culminates in knowledge, then learning that cannot come by teaching but comes only in some other way will culminate in something else. (As noted earlier, new knowledge does not come by teaching. But once it is no longer new—that is, once someone has learned it—others will generally learn it by being taught. All knowledge is teachable.)

Let us see how true opinion emerges in the Meno as a viable alternative to knowledge. In looking into the question of whether aretê is teachable, Socrates’ first line of attack is to consider whether aretê can be anything but knowledge. If it cannot, then, since all and only knowledge is teachable, aretê will necessarily be teachable. The argument seems to be progressing smoothly, when Socrates deliberately derails it. He raises doubts about aretê’s teachability in light of the apparent absence of teachers, or at least of recognized teachers, of aretê. Yet, given the “hypothesis” that Socrates had advanced, namely, that if aretê is knowledge then it is teachable and if not, not, a hypothesis that is never challenged or abandoned, the presence or absence of teachers of aretê should be, for him, strictly irrelevant. After all, the way Socrates set up his argument, the teachability of aretê depended solely on
whether it was knowledge, and its being knowledge depended, in turn, solely on whether it was good and beneficial. Yet, Socrates ultimately makes areté’s very status as knowledge depend not on whether it is beneficial but on whether it is teachable, and its being teachable, in turn, on whether there are teachers of it. If, however, what in the final analysis determines a thing’s teachability is the actual existence of teachers of it, then it is the early part of the argument that is irrelevant: since from the first Socrates’ stated objective was to test areté for teachability, he would have done far better to go directly to the question of whether or not there are teachers of areté; he need not have asked at all whether areté is good or beneficial. For our purposes, what is significant about Socrates’ challenge to areté’s teachability is that it avoids being simultaneously a challenge to areté’s learnability.

At 96c1–10, Socrates lays the ground for his distinction between teachability and learnability:

Soc. But if there are not teachers, then there are not learners either?
Men. I think what you say is right.
Soc. But we have agreed that something for which there are neither teachers nor learners is not teachable?
Men. We have agreed.
Soc. Then no teachers of areté are to be found?
Men. So it is.
Soc. But if there are not teachers, then there are not learners either?
Men. So it appears.
Soc. Then areté will not be teachable?

What is strikingly peculiar in this exchange is the occurrence, twice, at c1 and again at c8, of the identical question, identically phrased: “But if there are not teachers, then there are not learners either?” Three things make this question odd. First, in stark contrast to how thoroughly Socrates prepared the case for there being no teachers of areté, he now offers no argument at all for there being no learners of it. Yet why should Meno agree, without argument, that there are no learners of areté simply because there are no teachers of it? Second, whether there are learners or not is strictly irrelevant to the teachability question, for which the only relevant consideration is whether or not there are teachers. Third, there seems therefore to be no particular point to the question so long as Meno agrees that there are no teachers of areté (c6–7): since it adds nothing, why ask this question—twice? The only reason Socrates
would be asking this question twice when there is no need for him to ask it even once is that the answer to it, his answer to it, unlike the answer he knows to be Meno’s, is no: it does not follow from there being no teachers of aretē that there are no learners of it either. Socrates gives Meno, in this sixth instance of the ongoing agon, the opportunity to consider the possibility that though aretē has no teachers it might still have learners, but it is an opportunity wasted on him.

Since for Meno if there are no teachers of aretē there are no learners either, once he begins to believe there are in fact no teachers, he begins to despair. To Socrates’ question, “Then aretē will not be teachable?” Meno replies: “Apparently not, if our considerations were correct. So I wonder indeed, Socrates, if there are no good men at all, or [if there are] in what way those who become good do so” (96d1–4). Socrates, however, experiences no comparable despair. We see that his concluding question asks only if aretē is not then teachable; it does not ask if aretē is not then learnable. Since for Socrates aretē’s not being teachable does not preclude its being learnable, there is as yet no cause for gloom. What follows for him from the conjunction of aretē’s not being teachable and the proposition that all and only teachable things are knowledge is that aretē must be something other than knowledge. It is at this point that Socrates introduces true opinion, which is allegedly, for as long as one has it, just as good a guide as knowledge. Whereas aretē would have to be teachable if it were knowledge, so long as aretē is true opinion it can be learnable without being teachable.

Note that once true opinion is introduced, Socrates no longer speaks of there being neither teachers nor learners of aretē. At 98e1–2 Socrates asks: “And if there were teachers, it would be teachable, but if not, not?” He no longer says, as he did at 96c3–4, “But we have agreed that something for which there are neither teachers nor learners is not teachable?” Nor does he any longer wonder “if there are not teachers, then there are not learners either?” (96c1, c8). Once he and Meno have moved beyond the inadequate training they presumably received at the hands of Prodicus and Gorgias respectively (96d), and are able to see that not only knowledge but true opinion as well guides men aright, there arises the real possibility that there are learners of aretē without there also being teachers.

True opinion is the seventh and final battleground for Socrates and Meno in the matter of learning. Meno resists the idea that true or right opinion can be substituted for knowledge. At 97c6–8, he protests: “Except to this extent, Socrates, that the one who has knowledge would always
turn out right, but the one who has right opinion sometimes would and sometimes would not.” But once Socrates explains that for as long as a person has right opinion he, too, would go right, Meno can no longer see any difference between the two. Meno is looking for a sure thing, something that is always reliable. He relaxes his opposition to true opinion as soon as Socrates portrays it as being just as reliable as knowledge. But, of course, true opinion is not quite as reliable as knowledge, for it, unlike knowledge, has a tendency to take flight. True opinion, unlike knowledge, requires constant vigilance lest it get away.

Socrates leads Meno and the reader to expect fully that aretē will emerge as true opinion. At 99a5, Socrates narrows to two the possibilities for how aretē comes to men; he considers only knowledge and true opinion, having dismissed both nature and the divine as potential sources. He then goes on to reject knowledge on the grounds that aretē is not teachable (99a7–8). The only source for aretē that remains viable at this point is true opinion. Yet, true opinion, though never actually discredited, is nevertheless also not explicitly declared to be virtue. Instead, it seems to vanish, and, stepping in to replace it, is good repute (99b11), eudoxia. Though often translated “true opinion,” eudoxia means nothing but good repute in the seventy-odd times that it or one of its cognates appears in the Platonic corpus. Indeed, despite its etymological and semantic relation to true opinion (doxa alēthēs) or right opinion (orthē doxa), eudoxia is not the same as true or right opinion, since it refers not to one’s own opinion, but to the opinion others have of one. (In the Meno, several people with dubious aretē-credentials are said to have good reputations. Anytus is reputed among the people to have been brought up and educated well [90b1–2]; Protagoras is said to have maintained his good reputation for the whole of his life [91e9]; even the Thessalians are hailed as eudokimoi [70a5]. And, as the Apology makes clear, Socrates regards those with the greatest reputations as “nearly the most deficient” [Ap. 22a3–4].) Furthermore, eudoxia, as Socrates goes on to describe it, seems to differ from both true opinion and knowledge (99a) in having divine rather than human origins. One can only conclude that Socrates’ implicit message is that the vanished or banished true opinion is indeed the root of genuine aretē after all; it is the human source of right guidance that is as valuable as knowledge for as long as one has it. Eudoxia is the root only of political success. (See Addendum 1.)

There are, then, to review, seven occasions upon which Socrates and Meno contend with each other over the issue of whether or not learning requires teaching. The first is at the dialogue’s inception, where Meno uses didakton and mathēton interchangeably, but Socrates proceeds to inquire
into the nature of aretē, that is, to seek to learn about it, even without a teacher. The second occurs when Meno advances his paradox challenging the validity of inquiry conducted by someone who lacks knowledge with respect to the object of the inquiry, and Socrates responds by asserting that all learning comes not by teaching but by recollection. The third instance occurs when Meno derives from Socrates’ insistence that all learning comes by recollection that there is then no learning. The fourth comes at 86c–d, where Socrates wants to try to seek what aretē is together with Meno, but Meno wants only to hear from Socrates how aretē is acquired. The fifth comes at 89b9–c1, where Socrates suggests that if aretē does not come by nature it must come by learning and Meno concurs, but only because, as he says, it has already been shown that aretē is knowledge and hence didaktōn. The sixth takes place at 96c1–10, where Socrates gives Meno the chance to see that there might be learners of aretē even if aretē has no teachers, but Meno is unable to see it. The seventh and last occasion comes with Socrates’ introduction of, and Meno’s initial resistance to, the notion that true opinion might be as good a guide as knowledge and hence, implicitly, a viable source of aretē even in the absence of teachers.

Why is it so important to Socrates that Meno recognize that one can learn in ways other than by being taught? Note that the distinction that pervades the Meno between learning and learning-by-teaching is at the core of Socrates’ way of doing philosophy—that is, by examination and refutation. He uses refutation to clear away the morass of false moral beliefs, in the hope that doing so will enable the soul’s moral truths, beliefs that are in some sense “natural” to it, to surface. Socrates, as he himself repeatedly claims, does not have knowledge concerning ta me gista, the matters of greatest importance. And, he insists, neither does anyone else. Socrates in the Apology learns two things from the testimony of the oracle and from his subsequent attempts to refute it. He learns, first, that “human wisdom is worth little or nothing” (Ap. 23a6–7). And he learns, second, that the oracle’s proclamation that no one is wiser than Socrates is intended to single out as wisest, not Socrates the man, but Socrates the type: “That one of you, people, is wisest, who, like Socrates, has come to recognize that he is in truth worth nothing as regards wisdom” (Ap. 23b2–4). That is to say that Socratic-style recognition of ignorance constitutes the height of human wisdom. If the pinnacle of human wisdom concerning ta me gista is the acknowledgment of ignorance, then there is no possibility, at least for human beings who do not transcend their humanness, to attain positive moral wisdom.

Since no one has moral knowledge, no one can teach it. Hence Socrates’ claim that he is no teacher. That he is not wise and that he does
not profess to teach are, for him, two sides of the same coin. But although Socrates does not teach, he does do something that is just outside the realm of teaching: he helps people examine their own moral beliefs and, by exposing the weaknesses in these beliefs, he tries to help people improve upon them.

People certainly do not attain moral wisdom as a result of their encounters with Socrates. But, they do learn—even if they immediately set aside what they learn and even if they fail to act on what they learn. The *Meno*’s notion of recollection goes some way toward explaining this Socratic process of learning. When taken metaphorically, recollection may be understood as the process whereby moral beliefs that are false because false to our souls and to our nature are challenged, making it possible for other beliefs to emerge, beliefs truer to our human nature, truths of our souls, truths that we need if we are to live as we ought. Socrates is particularly adept at discrediting the views he regards as false or at least at raising doubts about them in the minds of even their staunchest advocates. One of Socrates’ strategies for challenging these views involves showing that they contradict other beliefs that are more deeply rooted in his interlocutors, beliefs that are truer to the human soul. Among these beliefs are some that are fairly readily accepted by his interlocutors when he presents them: that the soul is more important than the body; that what counts is to live well really rather than merely to seem to live well; that wisdom is superior to folly; that harmony is preferable to discord. The faulty moral views that Socrates’ interlocutors embrace are frequently at odds with, and can be shown to be at odds with, these truer ones.

Recollection, then, is the *Meno*’s metaphor for what takes place in elenchus. The interlocutor is helped to bring forth truer views than those he endorses on the surface. In the *Meno*, for example, Meno is helped to see that *aretē* is the same for all types of people regardless of status or role or age or gender, and that it cannot be defined without reference to its parts or its parts without reference to it. (“Whatever comes to be with justice is *aretē*, and whatever comes to be without all such things is badness” [78e8–79a1]. Also: “Say that every action is *aretē* if it is done with a part of *aretē*” [79b9–c1].) He learns, too, that *aretē* cannot be defined in nonmoral terms, in terms of such things as power, money, prestige, or refined tastes, but must always include the dimensions of justice, temperance, or piety. (Although it may seem odd, Socrates does urge the point—though he also subsequently mocks it—that *aretē* cannot be defined apart from the particular *aretai*. Like shape which is, according to Socrates, the only thing that is always present when color is [79b9–11], so *aretē* is the only thing that is always present—since other things,
such as power, money, or prestige, are not—when justice and the other aretai are [78d8–79c7].) The belief that aretē always requires the presence of justice, temperance, or piety is not one that Meno thought he held, but Socrates was able to help him “bring it forth.” It is a view truer to Meno’s human nature, truer to Meno’s soul, than the views Meno proffered on his own.

This is not to say that Socrates’ elenctic practice involves at every turn the eliciting of the interlocutor’s truer beliefs. But, in all his engagements Socrates’ aim is in the end always the same: to defeat the false views people have come to embrace in their lives and to move them closer to views that are truer to them and to their shared human nature—views that are therefore in some sense already and always theirs. In pursuing this goal, Socrates makes good on the Delphic maxim “Know thyself” in two ways. First, by raising doubts in people’s minds about the soundness of views they hold, he helps them know their limitations. And second, by clearing away false beliefs, he helps people get to beliefs that are more truly “themselves.”

Recollection in the Meno does not, we note, yield knowledge but only, at best, true opinion. Knowledge, for Socrates, is always teachable; it always involves expertise and is verifiable. One reason the various techmata qualify as forms of knowledge is that their “products” can be tested. A carpenter, a shoemaker, a mathematician all know their subject, have proofs that will confirm the validity of their claim to know their subject, and are able to teach their subject. Carpentry is not learned by recollection: it neither brings forth the learner’s opinions nor is it in any way a matter of opinion. Moreover, once acquired, the skill of carpentry can be transmitted. This is true no less for mathematics than for carpentry (why should the slave, once he is taught by Socrates how to double a square, not be able to teach what he has just learned to another?)—though in all cases some measure of natural aptitude in the student is surely required (as Protagoras emphasizes in his speech at Prot. 327a–c). Aretē, by contrast, can be neither known nor taught. It, unlike these other subjects, is learned by “recollection,” without a teacher, and, as Socrates is painfully aware, remains, at least for all ordinary human beings, consigned to the realm of opinion. Moreover, true opinion is not secure: since in the case of aretē, no one possesses the “tether” that knowing the aitia, the cause, would provide (98a), there is nothing to prevent one’s opinions from taking flight. Nevertheless, if people wish to live well, they have little choice but to live philosophically, examining their moral beliefs and seeking to replace false ones with true ones.

Does the slave, in coming to see that a double-sized square is
constructed on the diagonal of the original square, “recollect,” even metaphorically, truths that are in his soul? Since geometry—like all other subjects besides aretē—is taught and learned, the slave may be said to have learned how to double a square but he may not be said to have recollected. What Socrates’ demonstration shows is how geometry is unlike aretē, how there is nothing comparable in the case of aretē to what Socrates is able to do with the slave. What it makes evident is that there is in geometry decisive proof, something that an investigation into aretē will never produce. Despite what Socrates says, then, the slave does not recollect but is taught. (See Addendum 2.) Socrates does not bring out truths that are in the slave’s soul but teaches him. Socrates, too, has learned geometry—presumably by having been taught—and therefore knows and can teach the slave how to double a square. And although Socrates teaches the slave in a way dressed up to mimic Socratic elenctic inquiry, nevertheless, the plain fact is that he teaches him. Since aretē, unlike geometry, is something that no mere human being can know, it follows that no one can teach it, no one can learn it from a teacher, and no one can come to know it. In the case of aretē, only “recolletion” of true opinions is possible.

Socrates cannot seriously want Meno to learn all subjects by being asked his opinions and by having them discounted seriatim. On the contrary, Socrates regularly advises people who want to learn something to consult or to be trained by experts. The latter part of the Meno, where Socrates grudgingly considers the teachability of aretē, is no less clear on this point than is any other dialogue: fathers who want their sons to learn a technē will seek out the appropriate teacher, the recognized expert in the particular field. Only aretē poses difficulties in this regard. Only in the case of aretē, therefore, does one have to learn through inquiry into and examination of one’s opinions.

Unless a person is willing to learn without a teacher, to examine his opinions or to have them examined, he can never hope to be rid of his false opinions and to attain the true opinions that constitute aretē. Unless, moreover, a person can come to acknowledge that such learning can take place and that it has genuine value even though it results not in knowledge but in true opinion, he can never hope to improve. Anyone who insists that the only way to learn is to be taught, and that nothing short of knowledge is worth having, is destined to despair of attaining aretē. It is this predicament from which Socrates labors so valiantly to save Meno.

Alas, to have his opinions examined is not Meno’s idea of learning. Meno wants to be taught by someone who knows, even as the slave was taught by Socrates. Meno does not want to be asked questions by someone
who, by his own admission, also lacks knowledge. Meno is lazy. He has no intention of expending the kind of effort that Socrates requires of him, just for the sake of awakening opinions that are themselves never secure and do not qualify as knowledge. Meno, in short, wants no part of the uncertainty that is philosophy.

**Addenda**

1. When *eudoxia* displaces *doxa alēthēs*, the hope that good men (*agathoi andres*) might benefit (*ōphelimoι*) their cities (*tais poleisin*) (98c8–9) is replaced by the assertion that politicians (*hoi politikoi andres*) (99c1) maintain theirs (*tas poleis orthousin*) (99c1–2). Note that politicians are not said to guide their cities beneficially. Instead, they are said to preserve them, using the good repute they enjoy in order to achieve success (*katorthousin*) (99c9, d4). Whereas good men (*agathoi andres*) are beneficial (*ōphelimoι*), guiding us aright in our affairs (*orthōs hēmin hēgōntai tōn pragmatōn*) (97a3–4) and directing us to act rightly (*hēgeitai tou orthōs prattein*) (97c1) through *doxa alēthēs* if not through *sophia* (97b5–7), politicians are successful men who guide us in political action (*en politikēi praxeī*) (99b2–3) and sustain our cities through the divine favor that confers upon them good repute. In the final four pages of the dialogue, subtle changes and plays on words—from *doxa alēthēs* to *eudoxia*, from *agathoi andres* to *hoi politikoi andres*, from *ōphelimoι tais poleisin* to *tas poleis orthousin*, from *hēgeitai tou orthōs prattein* to *en politikēi praxeī* . . . *hēgemōn*—signify a shift from a discussion of how genuine *aretē* comes to men to a discussion of the source of political skill and success. Although twice in the Platonic corpus, at *Laws* 12.957d and at *Phaedrus* 244b, *orthoo does clearly mean “guide aright,” on other occasions it means “uphold” or “keep upright” (*Lach.* 181a, 181b; *Tim.* 90b). In our passage, therefore, it could go either way. It is up to the reader to recognize that, for Socrates, when politicians use their popularity to achieve success, they are not likely to confer genuine benefit on their cities—even if they do strengthen and preserve them materially. (A similar assessment of the contribution politicians make to their cities is found at *Gorg.* 518–519.)

2. At 81d–e, as Socrates summarizes the lessons of the geometry demonstration, he indicates the geometry—and all other subjects—are indeed taught. In seeking to ascertain that the slave did not acquire in his present life the knowledge he now has, Socrates asks Meno: “Or has anyone taught him geometry?” He then declares that the slave “will do the same with
all of geometry and with all other subjects as well,” in the event that he has not learned these others in his present lifetime. Turning to Meno once again, Socrates asks: “Is there then someone who has taught him all subjects? You, it seems, should know, especially since he was born and raised in your household.” The startling implication of this passage is that geometry and all other subjects are taught—not recollected—and in a quite ordinary way, namely, by teachers. The question that occupies the latter part of the dialogue—Is aretē teachable and are there teachers of it?—is not one Socrates would have had reason to pose with respect to any other subject but aretē.

References


Adam Smith, the Concept of Leisure, and the Division of Labor

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INTRODUCTION

The 1776 publication of Adam Smith’s *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* heralded the beginning of a new commercial age. It overturned the assumptions of mercantilism and helped undermine the justification for empire. It helped accomplish these through the understanding that specialization through the division of labor is a crucial means by which society increases its wealth. *The Wealth of Nations* also implicitly attacks the presuppositions of classical political thought regarding the role of leisure as the basis for high culture and the necessary component for citizenship and political participation.

Quite often today, many assume that because Smith lauded the opulence and invention that result from an advanced division of labor, he ignored its darker side. Not without cause, critics of modernity such as Marx, Durkheim, and Weber claim that the division of labor results in some form of personal alienation, a greater narrowness of individual and collective understanding, and an increasingly unequal distribution of wealth and honors in the society that fosters it. However, associating Smith with an unequivocal endorsement of either the division of labor or the opulent commercial society that results from it is a grave misunderstanding, for as Donald Winch observes, the story Smith tells us about the rise of commercial society “is certainly told with a detachment that frequently borders on cynicism” (1978, 70–71).

This essay argues that while Smith holds the division of labor to be a destabilizing force in society, he nevertheless hoped commercial society could cultivate an intellectual and political class suitable to guide it. What
makes this vision possible is Smith’s understanding that people often subordinate their material self-interest to their overriding need for sympathy and recognition. First, I outline Smith’s recognition of the problems and possibilities inherent in the division of labor and the ways in which both Hannah Arendt and Josef Pieper challenge Smith’s account. Second, through a discussion of “das Adam Smith Problem” and Smith’s account of the motivations involved in choosing a profession, I develop the ways he defies easy characterization as a proponent of “economic man.” Third, I note Smith’s hopeful ambivalence about the division of labor and identify the characteristics in human nature and institutions he hoped could tame the dangers of a perfectly free market. Fourth, I discuss the two classes most crucial to his theory—politicians and men of letters—and the ways in which Smith thought they could support one another in guiding a decent commercial society. By way of conclusion, I mention some of the ways Smith’s account of leisure and the division of labor has enjoyed lasting influence, before noting some lingering problems in his thinking and limitations of his vision.

**Between the Creation of Wealth and the Degradation of Intellect**

The division of labor is central to Smith’s political economy and social theory as a whole. The result of “a certain propensity in human nature…to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another,” in due course it becomes the cause of “[t]he greatest improvement in the productive powers of labor, and the greater part of the skill, dexterity, and judgment with which it is anywhere directed, or applied” (Smith 1981, 13, 25). For example, Smith notes that through specialization, pin manufacturers find their productivity multiplied by many thousands over, and “so far as it can be introduced” into other industries, the division of labor “occasions, in every art, a proportionable increase of the productive powers of labor,” so that eventually, “[i]n every improved society, the farmer is generally nothing but a farmer; the manufacturer, nothing but a manufacturer” (Smith 1981, 15–16).

Against the period’s common desire for intentionally-created political and social institutions, Smith argues that the division of labor is a largely unintentional process, “not originally the effect of any human wisdom,” but one that nevertheless betrays a certain tacit rationality (Smith 1981, 25). By this understanding, our intellectual capacities are far too limited and society too complex for purposive action to bear much fruit in creating such a division’s social foundations. That is, Smith suggests that once political authorities establish some basic provision for civic order, often repeated
interactions among neighbors and businesses suggest a beneficial way of conducting social life that no authority could easily have imagined, much less imposed.

While he does not deny the importance of individual or collective activities directed toward a conscious end, Smith is careful to note their limits. Unlike much of Europe, it was Britain’s good fortune to “grow” institutions conducive to the commercial age (Dwyer 2005, 669–72). Accordingly, Smith denigrates the role of genius in the development of society, comparing philosophers to street porters and noting that there is less difference between them than there is among the various dog breeds. This illustrates Smith’s point that we are more creatures of our upbringing, habits, education, and employment than we would often like to imagine (Smith 1981, 28–30; Tenger and Trolander 1994, 179–80).

However, Smith is no determinist. On his account, legislators, businessmen, and individual laborers apply their insights and experiences, over time refining the division of labor; aggregated together, the individual needs and actions of each moment slowly drive society along. Smith delineates four stages of human socioeconomic life and ties each to a particular mode of living. These stages are hunting, pasturage, farming, and commerce (Smith 1982a, 14–16, 459). In every case, societies develop folkways and rules of order reflecting their basic activities. That is, how the market and society divide labor at each stage dictates in part the social arrangements and mode of living each society develops. Smith notes that the economic changes in each stage necessitate increasing political freedom, for it is only when individuals are free that they become most inventive and productive (Smith 1981, 386–89; Smith 1982a, 526). However, he also observes that the effects of the division of labor are not entirely salutary.

Smith argues that the division of labor’s beneficial effects result from three principal changes in each worker’s habits: First, performing the same operation or set of them causes an increase in dexterity so much greater than that of unspecialized labor that “[t]he rapidity with which some of the operations of those manufactures…exceeds what the human hand could, by those who had never seen them, be supposed capable of acquiring.” Second, the absence of transitions from one type of work to the next saves time by discouraging the laziness and sloth Smith imagined normal among country workers. Third, individual laborers specializing in one form of employment are “much more likely to discover easier and readier methods of attaining… that single object” on which they work (Smith 1981, 18–19). This enhanced
propensity to both invent new methods of production and the machinery to bolster it fosters enormous and focused creativity that helps address the pressing problems of the day. Because of these three related effects,

> every workman has a great quantity of his own work to dispose of beyond what he himself has occasion for; and every other workman being in exactly the same situation, he is enabled to exchange… He supplies them abundantly with what they have occasion for, and they accommodate him as amply with what he has occasion for, and a general plenty diffuses itself through all the different ranks of society. (Smith 1981, 22)

Nevertheless, these benefits come at a potentially steep price.

Smith insists there are intellectual and psychological costs to the division of labor, particularly in its manual, repetitive forms. Specialization is a process where individuals focus their attention on one or a few matters to the exclusion of all else. Labor inevitably shapes the mind of the worker. The habits of thought workers acquire on the job are important because they define their outlook on life. However strong the foundations of human nature may be, in repetitious employment men might lose the practice of judgment other, more varied work requires: “[t]he objects with which men in the different professions and states of life are conversant, being very different, and habituating them to very different passions, naturally form in them very different characters and manners” (Smith 1984, 200–201). Smith’s concern is that a narrow intellectual horizon at work will result in equally limited capacities elsewhere:

> The man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations…has no occasion to exert his understanding, or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur. He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become.… His dexterity at his own particular trade seems, in this manner, to be acquired at the expense of his intellectual, social, and martial virtues. (Smith 1981, 782)

While some few individuals might still work in intellectually varied occupations and maintain habits conducive to political judgment, the vast majority’s mode of life precludes this. Unused to joining with others to achieve his own ends, the worker becomes passive. Rarely facing real uncertainty and hardship, industrial labor might render him incapable of defending his nation in war. Thus, laborers might overcome the poverty and difficulty of life in rude society
only at the expense of “all the nobler parts of human character” (Smith 1981, 783–84).

Despite Smith’s worried account of how the division of labor might create dangerous social instabilities, some contemporary readers find his critique insufficient because he fails to realize just how deep the changes to social order actually are in a commercial polity. For Hannah Arendt, whenever the division of labor and the concept of specialization in one field become conceptually indistinguishable, we gravely misunderstand what making a living means. She attempts to draw a distinction between the two ideas by noting that

while specialization of work is essentially guided by the finished product itself, whose nature it is to require different skills which then are pooled and organized together, division of labor, on the contrary, presupposes the qualitative equivalence of all single activities for which no special skill is required, but actually represent only certain amounts of labor power which are added together in a purely quantitative way. (Arendt 1998, 123)

Arendt argues that people need conscious purpose for all their actions and that our rationality should find application in something better than the other-determined, instrumental ends of the workplace. One of the main difficulties of the market is its redefinition of employment from work to labor: where work implies a self-directed end, labor is merely a commodity bought and sold like any other (Arendt 1998, 126).

Having sacrificed stability, permanence, and durability for the ephemeral world of consumption, Arendt fears that the overriding social activity of labor and its simple goal of “making a living” will erase any robust notion of leisure. It erases the old cycle she (perhaps nostalgically) envisions where individuals alternate between periods of meaningful and complete work, fulfilling leisure time, and relaxation. In replacing work, the commodity of labor has become the dominant mode of understanding human activity, and this is a real problem because “[f]rom the standpoint of ‘making a living,’ every activity unconnected with labor becomes a ‘hobby’” rather than a form of necessary human activity (Arendt 1998, 128; Huizinga 1955, 173–94). Indeed, Arendt envisions having a sense of self-mastery, the need particularly in work for “a definite beginning and a definite, predictable end,” as one of the important things which fall out in a commercially driven society. Such work “has neither a beginning nor an end,” leaving those who engage in it drained and lethargic. Because of their lack of leisured reflection, individuals in this
society can develop no capacity for intentional, deliberate action, let alone a sense of their own futility. They are lost and never even realize it (Arendt 1998, 135, 143–44; Schwartz 1982).

Although the weight of his critique falls on the twentieth century’s rising totalitarianisms, Josef Pieper’s attack on the mechanization of life also calls the division of labor into question. Specifically, Pieper concerns himself with the way in which moderns fail to appreciate the roles leisure, contemplation, and intellectual activity play in the maintenance of culture. Because of this gap in understanding, moderns stand in very real danger of losing the things that give their lives meaning. For the ancients, he notes, the very notion of an “intellectual worker” would be nonsensical because intellectual activity was a “privileged sphere…in which one did not need to work” in order to maintain himself. Modern society forgets that we should work in order to have leisure, not live for the sake of work. What Pieper calls the “world of total work” replaces this vision with a mode of living where people subordinate their entire lives to other-directed, social ends (1998, 2, 6–7).

For Pieper, characterizing the life of the mind as just another form of work is problematic because it obscures crucial facts about intellectual activity. He acknowledges that “[k]nowledge in general, and more especially philosophical knowledge, is certainly quite impossible without” the necessary work of discursive thought and careful examination of ideas. However, he also argues that the notion that the acquisition of knowledge is only a form of work is a conceit:

> it expresses a claim on man and a claim by man. If you want to know something then you must work; in philosophy ‘the law is that reason acquires its possessions through work’ that is the claim on man. But there is another, subtler claim…in the statement, the claim made by man: if to know is to work, then knowledge is the fruit of our own unaided effort and activity; then knowledge includes nothing which is not due to the effort of man, and there is nothing gratuitous about it, nothing ‘in-spired,’ nothing ‘given’ about it. (Pieper 1998, 11)

The vision of “total work” fails to understand that no matter how much preparatory effort it takes a scholar to reach deep understanding, knowledge often comes to individuals as “sudden illumination, a stroke of genius, true contemplation” and simply seems to appear “effortlessly and without trouble” (Pieper 1998, 16). Put another way, Pieper fears that defining the intellectual life as just another type of work will rob it of its divine character.
Both Arendt and Pieper fear that when a proper understanding of work, one imbued with conscious ends and deeper meaning, falls away, this will leave society with only the transitory pursuit of assigned labor and the destruction of all inner life that accompanies it. Instead of philosophers and artists left to pursue their work for its own sake, the modern commercial society replaces them with trained, specialized laborers. The life of the mind loses all its special qualities. Because of this, the men of letters, a class of workers necessary to teach, to enlighten, and remind humanity of its proper place, will take their place in the division of labor and eventually become “harnessed to the social system” as functionaries in a world of total work (Arendt 1998, 167–74; Pieper 1998, 15–19).

Arendt and Pieper each argue in different ways that once total work subsumes everyday life, the loss of leisure as a forum for renewal, celebration, and faith is incalculable. Without a tie to these crucial activities, life inevitably loses meaning. While many have demonstrated that Smith is not an advocate of some crude economic man or without reservations about some aspects of the division of labor, deeper critics of modernity rarely imagine he has answers to their criticisms, and tend to ignore the non-economic motivations Smith himself provides as the central justification for his theory. Smith’s modern critics have a very particular conception of human motivation, one which privileges the need for self-mastery and deep understanding (Grampp 1948; Lamb 1973, 1974; Teichgraeber 1981; Hont and Ignatieff 1983; Dwyer 2005). This makes it necessary to address Smith’s conception of what motivates individuals in seeking employment, and it is to this subject I now turn.

**Human Motivation in the Sympathetic Society**

Over the course of his career, one of Smith’s central and recurring concerns was the concept of justice and its maintenance in a commercial society (Hont and Ignatieff 1983, 2). Modern scholars tend to occlude that fact in favor of the convenient caricature of Smith as a proponent of self-interest, rational calculation, and a division of labor as extensive and complete as possible without any concern for possible social consequences. In order to demonstrate the inadequacy of such views, this section discusses Smith’s notion of sympathy and how it connects with his broader social theory, before tracing out its implications for human motivation.

At first glance, Smith would seem to have had a radical change of heart between the 1759 publication of *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and 1776, when *Wealth of Nations* went to press (Teichgraeber 1981, 106–8). However,
the tension between these works can be resolved in part by noting the way in which Smith claims that the need for sympathy is the foundation for all human interaction. He argues that “[h]owever selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it” (Smith 1984, 9). Human beings desire nothing more deeply than approbation from their fellows and their own consciences. In properly habituated individuals, this fundamental need guides human action between both close relations and strangers.

However, Smith also notes that in society “[e]very man is, no doubt, by nature, first and principally recommended to his own care” (Smith 1984, 83–84). Because of this, we usually constrain our approbation, attention, and sympathies to those we are in closest contact with—that is, to our friends, family, and neighbors. He acknowledges that a society so closely interrelated that people act entirely from feelings of mutual affection would be a very happy one. However, it is probably only in family life that such interaction is possible, for where in any time has an entire civic community been founded on such principles (Smith 1984, 85–86)?

Smith claims that the needs of pre-commercial society are such that people without tightly woven community and bonds of sympathy cannot long survive:

In pastoral countries, and in all countries where the authority of law is not alone sufficient to give perfect security, all the different branches of the same family commonly chuse to live in the neighbourhood of one another. Their association is frequently necessary for their common defense…. Their concord strengthens their necessary association; their discord always weakens, and might destroy it. (Smith 1984, 222)

On the other hand, absent some habitual contact or need, people in commercial society lose this impulse for association in direct proportion with the state’s increasing provision for order and stability:

where the authority of law is always perfectly sufficient…the descendants of the same family, having no such motive for keeping together, naturally disperse, as interest or inclination may direct. They soon cease to be of importance to one another. (Smith 1984, 223)

Despite the persistence of mutual recognition in the neighborhood and household, when individuals move beyond family and friendships to interactions with their communities and the country as a whole, feelings
of mutual affection fade while the human hope for approbation and need for sympathy remain constant.

Scholars usually pass over the way in which Smith begins from the need for sympathy and fellow feeling, notes its relative weakness in dealing with strangers, and only then invokes appeals to self-interest, all the while emphasizing the primacy of humanity’s need for approbation. In commercial societies, there is a strange divergence of necessities: it is harder to engage the sympathies of strangers, yet at the same time people stand in ever greater need of assistance from others they do not personally know. Standing in “almost constant occasion for the help of his brethren,” the individual in commercial society must find another way to engage their attention. It quickly becomes clear that “[h]e will be more likely to prevail if he can interest their self-love in his favor, and shew them that it is for their own advantage to do for him what he requires of them” (Smith 1981, 26). While the turn to self-interest would seem to confirm the suspicions of Smith’s critics, Smith himself characterizes this as the result of psychological need as much as it is a matter of material necessity.

In the Lectures on Jurisprudence, Smith observes that the deeply ingrained human inclination to truck and barter is itself founded on an even deeper impulse to persuade others:

If we should inquire into the principle in the human mind on which this disposition of trucking is founded, it is clearly the natural inclination every one has to persuade. The offering of a shilling, which appears to us to have so plain and simple a meaning, is in reality offering an argument to persuade one to do so and so as it is for his interest.

Wealth is an enticement to engage others in one’s life, so much so that “in this manner every one is practising oratory on others thro the whole of his life” (Smith 1982a, 352). For Smith, the use of money and goods in trade is an extension of rhetoric that intertwines sympathy and self-interest in a complex fashion. Smith implies that sympathetic persuasion is the method of first resort; the appeal to others’ self-interest usually comes later, or when it is obvious persuasion alone will not suffice (Lamb 1974, 678–80; Cohen 1989, 61–62). As we will see, this holds major consequences for human motivation in commercial society.

Commerce allows people to satisfy their basic needs, but once they meet these needs, the desire for approbation leads people to seek greater wealth and status. Where communal and pastoral societies frown on self-interested behavior, in commercial society those who manage their business tend to
I nterpretation

earn others’ approbation, while failures face scorn and ridicule. Greed does not
drive men to succeed in the marketplace. Rather it is the desire for approbation
and fear of pity: “It is because mankind are disposed to sympathize more
entirely with our joy than our sorrow, that we make parade of our riches, and
conceal our poverty…. [I]t is chiefly from this regard to the sentiments of
mankind that we pursue riches and avoid poverty.” Moreover, Smith argues the
principal aim of bettering the human condition is not the satiation of material
desires. Instead, above all we want “[t]o be observed, to be attended to, to
be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency, and approbation” (Smith
1984, 50). Indeed, it is this desire that Smith ranks as a major cause of
the spreading opulence in commercial society (Lamb 1974, 678; Winch 1978,
91–93). The deception that wealth will lead them to happiness results in
ever-greater striving, and the people who engage in it

are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of
the necessaries of life, which would have been made, had the earth
been divided into equal portions, and….without intending it, with-
out knowing it, advance the interest of the society, and afford means
to the multiplication of the species. (Smith 1984, 183–85)

Opulence, then, becomes the unintended consequence of man’s need for social
approval.

Notions of sympathy and care run throughout Smith’s
writings, and if we examine such ideas as they operate in the division of labor
and employment, an interesting picture of human motivation emerges. The
deepest human motivations incline us to garner approbation and esteem.
In turn, the acquisition of wealth is a major means to that end. However, it is
by no means the only path toward such recognition. A brief digression
illustrates this. While Smith notes that only beggars would imagine relying
on benevolence for their whole subsistence (Smith 1981, 26–27; 1982a, 493),
he nevertheless ranks acts of benevolence and charity as some of the most
praiseworthy: “to feel much for others and little for ourselves…to indulge our
benevolent affections, constitutes the perfection of human nature; and can
alone produce among mankind that harmony of sentiments and passions
in which consists their whole grace and propriety.” Since it is a virtue “uncom-
monly great and beautiful” rising far above the norm, true benevolence is both
a rare and remarkable phenomenon that naturally engages the sympathies of
others (Smith 1984, 25–26). Normal men value wealth for the esteem it can
afford them, but those willing to sacrifice and care for their neighbors find
compensation in social and personal approbation (Winch 1974, 168–69).
Although for the purposes of his analysis Smith divides labor into both productive and unproductive varieties, he notes that both are crucial for the preservation of a well-ordered society. They are also morally indistinguishable, for the difference between them is that productive labor creates some “particular subject or vendible commodity,” where other professions do not. Because of this, he chastises his Physiocrat contemporaries for the “impropriety” of representing unproductive labor as somehow barren or useless (Smith 1981, 330–32, 330n, 673–74). Smith argues that the material benefits of a given profession should be commensurate with the hardships involved, the expense of learning the trade, the regularity of employment, the level of trust we place in the practitioner, and the probability of a successful career in it. At the outset of his discussion of wages, he also notes that “[h]onour makes a great part of the reward of all honourable professions” (Smith 1981, 116–17). By so arguing, Smith makes clear that in his vision not all labor is equivalent in character or esteem. He argues it is the social status of the work as much as the recompense involved that determines its desirability. Understood in this way, it becomes much easier to comprehend why individuals choose an occupation and what motivates them to continue their labors. Two examples he uses will clarify what Smith has in mind.

First, Smith argues that those entering the martial professions abandon their material self-interest in favor of an exuberant contempt for risk combined with hopes of acquiring honor and fame. He notes that “young volunteers never enlist so readily as at the beginning of a new war,” filled with dreams which rarely come to fruition, and that “[t]hese romantick hopes make the whole price of their blood” (Smith 1981, 126). Yet what makes the soldier extraordinary is that once his enthusiasm fades in the face of battle, his courage in facing death “ennobles the profession…and bestows upon it, in the natural apprehensions of mankind, a rank and dignity superior to that of any other” (Smith 1984, 239). Since it is principally the desire for recognition and not pure self-interest that motivates men, “[t]he distant prospect of hazards, from which we can hope to extricate ourselves by courage and address, is not disagreeable to us,” and interestingly, “does not raise the wages of labour in any employment” (Smith 1981, 127). The hope for honor and lasting glory is to some degree the soldier’s real reward.

Second, Smith points to the professions involving arts and letters as another case defying the ordinary expectations of self-interested, economic man. While he indicates that some natural philosophers (or “men of speculation”) can make a fortune engaged in inventing expedients that help
business, he notes for the most part those employed in the liberal arts do so more for “the respect, credit, and eminence it gives one than the profit of it” (Smith 1981, 21–22; 1982a, 354–55). Smith observes there are no pleasures more natural than those we derive from music or dance; indeed, high art such as that of the concerto provides “the mind…not only a very great sensual, but a very high intellectual pleasure, not unlike that which it derives from the contemplation of a great system in any other science” (Smith 1982b, 187, 204–5). Instead of the soldier’s glory, those who pursue the arts often do so for the simple joy and beauty of the profession.

Where the arts provide aesthetic joy, another universal tendency often sparks the pursuit of letters or philosophy, that of wonder (Smith 1985, 65):

We wonder at all extraordinary and uncommon objects, at all the rarer phaenomena of nature…and at every thing, in short, with which we have before been either little or not at all acquainted; and we still wonder, though forewarned of what we are to see. (Smith 1982b, 33)

Simple wonder is also responsible for all the progress of the human mind, for it,

and not any expectation of advantage from its discoveries is the first principle which prompts mankind to the study of Philosophy, of that science which pretends to lay open the concealed connections that unite the various appearances of nature…. The pleasing wonder of ignorance is accompanied with the still more pleasing satisfaction of science. We wonder and are amazed at the effect; and we are pleased ourselves, and happy to find that we can comprehend, in some measure, how that wonderful effect is produced. (Smith, 1982b, 51, 185)

At its best, Smith claims philosophy can provide those who pursue it with a sort of “tranquility and repose” in their pursuit of nature’s mysteries and philosophical truths (Smith 1982b, 62). Some types of natural philosophy eventually branch off into the applied acts of invention mentioned above, but all who undertake philosophical inquiry should become more than simple laborers. Philosophers must to some extent “pursue this study for its own sake, as an original pleasure or good in itself, without regarding its tendency to procure them the means of many other pleasures” (Smith 1982b, 51). Thus, passion for the endeavor itself becomes more important than any notion of self-interest or pecuniary gain.
Smith treats the clergy much the same as he does the men of letters. Having identified religion as the sole source of “effectual comfort” for those who face difficulty or injustice in this life, he then notes that while the journeyman of common trade and the curate or chaplain might be paid the same wage, it “would be indecent, no doubt” to make a comparison between the quality and sort of work they actually do (Smith 1984, 120–21; 1981, 146). Regardless of their precise endeavor, men of arts and letters should turn their attention to things of lasting importance, and attempt to share the fruits of their wonder with the rest of the world (Smith 1982b, 242–54).

Smith’s account of the motivations driving human activity in the marketplace or a chosen profession contains far more nuance than a cursory study would indicate. Because Smith frames sympathy, persuasion, and care as the driving forces that guide self-interest and make it comprehensible, “[t]he more closely one reads Smith, it seems, the less one finds homo economicus” (Cohen 1989, 61n). However, despite the fact that at various points Smith remarks on the persistent tendencies in commercial society toward honor, adventure, wonder, and philosophy, it is not clear that these ideals can persist in the face of an advanced division of labor. We must place Smith’s claims regarding these non-material motivations in tension with his earlier fears about moral degradation through specialized manual labor. Perhaps too optimistically, Smith hopes civic and political institutions might ameliorate these problems and help cultivate the higher motives toward honor and wonder. It is to these notions I now turn.

A WHIG SOCIOLOGY

Throughout his discussions of the market and morality, Smith points to a series of lasting—perhaps permanent—tendencies in human nature that society can harness to tame the deleterious effects of specialization and the rapid change of the commercial age. In particular, Smith argues that both political institutions and the church have a vital role to play in the maintenance of a decent commercial polity. It is also worth noting that Smith implicitly refers to the idea of civil society through his discussion of the need for sympathy. Working in concert, these three forces can mitigate against the dangers of the division of labor and help maintain the foundations of good social order.

Smith suggests the state needs to perform three essential functions in an age of commerce: civic defense, the provision of justice, and public works (Smith 1981, 689–723). Of the three, only Smith’s notion of
public works is particularly important to this essay, as this is where he discusses the problems of alienation and degradation stemming from the division of labor. The state should establish public institutions for all those things which though they may be in the highest degree advantageous to a great society, are, however, of such a nature, that the profit could never repay the expense to any individual or small number of individuals, and which it, therefore, cannot be expected...should erect or main-
tain. (Smith 1981, 723)

Aside from the provision of rules and support for commerce, civic defense, and law enforcement, the most crucial role the state can play is educating the populace. Because of Smith’s concerns about the loss of moral character and intellect through labor, he holds that both children and adults can benefit from some provision for education.

On the teaching of youth, Smith observes two major problems: the sad state of elite learning and the utter lack of a more basic educational provision for the bulk of society. Smith notes that private schools and universities treated the wealthy to a scholastic education, a form which had remained largely unchanged for centuries. Using the remnants of a curriculum initially created to train priests, students in Smith’s day were often taught a “few unconnected shreds and parcels” of that old course in a series of institutions whose principal purpose, it seemed to him, was to support the intellectual laziness of the masters. Such an education provided little for gentlemen and the would-be leaders of business and society (Smith 1981, 764–73). This was a danger because it is the wealthy, educated elite who “being attached to no particular occupation themselves, have leisure and inclination to examine the occupations of other people.” Smith fears that if they were unprepared or simply not guided into “some very particular situations, their great abilities, though honorable to themselves, may contribute very little to the good government or happiness of their society” (Smith 1981, 783).

Smith saw an even greater threat in the fact that the ordinary laborers normally acquired whatever small amount of education they could on their own, without aid from the community. Instead of Latin and a debased version of the old scholastic liberal arts education, he argues a program in reading and writing, along with “the elementary parts of geometry and mechanicks,” could do great good, because for Smith even a rudimentary practical education could significantly aid the understandings of the populace, and spur further invention and social improvement. By providing some small premiums as rewards for achievement, this could perhaps open the door to
higher education for a few talented youth. He also suggests that establishing a militia or some form of martial exercise might mitigate the moral effects of the division of labor as well (Smith 1981, 785–86). Together, these forces could help curb the deleterious intellectual effects stemming from the division of labor. Yet for Smith, education alone could not make men moral.

Instead of schools, Smith believes that churches would accomplish most of the instruction in manners and morals. As noted earlier, for the faithful religion provides both a consolation and “a species of instruction of which the object is not so much to render men good citizens in this world”—though he thinks it does that as well—“as to prepare them for another and better world in a life to come” (Smith 1981, 788). Smith understands religion as a strong counterweight to the moral and intellectual degradation occasioned by the division of labor. Once they were taught to read through his proposed state education and able to understand the tenets of faith themselves, Smith thought the public would find it much easier to resist “the delusions of enthusiasm and superstition, which, among ignorant nations, frequently occasion the most dreadful disorders” (Smith 1981, 788).

So long as churches avoid politics and the state shows little or no preference for any specific faith, a wide variety of denominations can healthily proliferate. In polite society, interactions among them would result in a sort of “philosophical good temper and moderation” in their members (Smith 1981, 793–94). Because of the moral instruction provided by churches and the salutary habits of faith, Smith notes that even in a large center of commerce, an individual can find a place and a home. In contrast to the easy “profligacy and vice” of solitary city life,

[h]e never emerges so effectually from this obscurity, his conduct never excites so much the attention of any respectable society, as by his becoming the member of a small religious sect. He from that moment acquires a degree of consideration which he never had before. (Smith 1981, 795–96)

And while the rules of these communities may be harsh, they provide the meaning in life which isolated laborers might previously have lacked.

Finally, Smith’s reliance on a theory of sympathetic interaction constitutes a rudimentary theory of civil society. He argued that when men come together and observe one another’s actions, they can have a salutary moral effect on one another. Without this social check, men quite easily turn beastly. This sense of fellow feeling provides the impetus for a set of mutual
good offices which individuals cannot normally find in the marketplace, but naturally expect in fellowship with one another (Smith 1984, 13–16; 1981, 27). This intimation of civic associations is especially apparent in Smith’s discussion of neighbors:

Even the trifling circumstance of living in the same neighborhood, has some effect [of fellow feeling]. We respect the face of a man whom we see every day, provided he has never offended us. Neighbors can be very convenient, and they can be very troublesome, to one another…. There are certain good offices, accordingly, which are universally allowed to be due to a neighbor in preference to any other person who has such a connection. (Smith 1984, 224)

For good or ill, mutual contact and action for specific purposes creates a series of “contagious effects” that transmit habits of behavior through entire social groups, and these folkways either teach and multiply the capacity for combining, or ruin it entirely.

While at times he examines both religion and education from a purely functionalist perspective, Smith also notes the ways in which a passionate faith or sense of wonder is necessary for both churches and schools to do their work. Having proposed two major social institutions that utilize the innate propensities men have toward imagination and approbation, Smith points to the means which could stem some of the deleterious effects of the division of labor. However, as his worries about elite education indicate, these institutions require leadership and common sense. This is the subject of my next section.

An Unstable Balance: Politicians and the Men of Letters

Smith never sets out a systematic or well-developed theory of who should rule; this may have something to do with the fact that none of his works are strictly political in nature. While in *The Wealth of Nations* he presents a detailed sketch of the institutions he thought were necessary for the persistence of a decent commercial society, he says very little about just who is to lead and counsel such a polity. Just as the division of labor unleashes many potential difficulties, it is through the cultivation of a specialized political and educated class that he hopes to attenuate these difficulties. While he places his greatest hopes in liberal political institutions, Smith nevertheless intimates they are not enough for a truly good polity (Winch 1978, 177–83). Thus, “[t]he superior wisdom of the good and knowing man” should play some important part in directing the affairs of state (Smith 1982a, 338).
However, Smith’s best political teaching flows from his skepticism toward grand, totalizing schemes applied to government. It is striking that through the course of Smith’s exposition we learn more regarding who should not be trusted with political power than we do about the sort of people in which a commercial polity can place their faith. Just as the state should not prefer one form of religion over another, it is clear that clergy should not attempt to rule. Noting that “[t]imes of religious controversy have generally been times of equally violent political faction,” Smith observes that struggling political factions often try to capitalize on this by enlisting the aid of one church’s leadership (Smith 1981, 791). English history provides a cautionary tale:

The clergy of this particular sect having thus become complete masters of the field, and their influence and authority with the great body of the people being in its highest vigour, they were powerful enough to over-awe the chiefs and leaders of their own party, and to oblige the civil magistrate to respect their opinions and inclinations. Their first demand was generally, that he should silence and subdue all their adversaries; and their second…that they should have some share in the spoil [of victory]. (Smith 1981, 792)

In no small part because of England’s experience with ecclesiastical institutions, Smith is wary of blending church and state power. While religion is a necessary component of any well-ordered society, the political demands of an empowered clergy can be quite dangerous. He suggests that if conscience and not force governed religious belief, “it would probably…have been productive of the most philosophical good temper and moderation with regard to every sort of religious principle” (Smith 1981, 793).

Smith saves his harshest rhetoric for the mixing of commerce and politics. He presents the problem rather starkly: businessmen cannot help but engage in conspiracy against the public whenever they meet (Smith 1981, 145). In his systematic demolition of the mercantilist system, Smith observes that even when businessmen conquer whole nations, they “are, it seems, incapable of considering themselves as sovereigns, even after they have become such” (Smith 1981, 637). Even if men of commerce are not directly involved in politics, Smith notes that caution is in order:

The interest of the dealers, however, in any particular branch of trade or manufactures, is always in some respects different from, and even opposite to, that of the publick…. The proposal of any new law or regulation of commerce which comes from this order, ought always to be listened to with great precaution, and ought
never to be adopted till after having been long and carefully examined, not only with the most scrupulous, but with the most suspicious attention. It comes from an order of men, whose interest is never exactly the same with that of the public, who generally have an interest to deceive and even to oppress. (Smith 1981, 267)

Given their difficulty with distinguishing between public and private, proper and improper activity, active businessmen should be disqualified from politics because their potential for corruption is simply too great (Winch 1978, 98–99).

While those currently engaged in the work of business or religion should remain apart from the political world, Smith indicates that other presumptively wiser and more public-spirited men of affairs should lead. In the context of a longer discussion of how Greece and Rome educated their citizens for rule (Smith 1981, 771–81), he suggests these would not be philosophers, but rather those well-educated gentlemen who decide to apply their talents “in good earnest to the real business of the world” (773). Who might these people be and what would motivate them to enter into public life? Smith is not clear on the former point. However, given the rest of his discussion of these subjects and strong reticence to include men of commerce or establish a truly ecclesiastical government, it is easy to imagine Smith endorsing some variation on the Burkean natural aristocracy where a mix of leisured nobility and self-made men guide society (see Addendum).

As for the motivations of these public-spirited men, recall that Smith is clear that material self-interest is not the only force driving the division of labor and choice of employment. Noting his claim that “[h]onour makes a great part of the reward of all honourable professions,” and tying it to the notion that our most fundamental desire is to seek approbation and avoid disapprobation, we can infer that the public servant’s motivations lay primarily with the honor and esteem their offices confer (Smith 1981, 116–17). While in a discussion of great leaders, Smith refers to the sort of “man whose public spirit is prompted altogether by humanity and benevolence,” for the most part he recognizes that a mix of selfish and charitable feelings guide men to seek public service (Smith 1984, 232–34). Following this reasoning, if they are not motivated strictly by benevolence, the glory and attention which political power brings those wielding it would be more than sufficient to attract many to public office. The language with which Smith abuses those who mix public office with private business and state with religion informs us that he was well aware of the dangerous temptations of government authority and very concerned that the state place checks on them (Smith 1981, 637, 792–94).
Smith also suggests that once “placed in some very particular situations,” philosophers and men of letters, as people with broad and deep understandings of a wide variety of affairs, could contribute to “good government or happiness of their society” (Smith 1981, 783). While both the politicians and men of letters possess the sort of unifying minds which society stands in perpetual need of, each group specializes to a degree in either action or contemplation. In such a situation, these “dissimilar geniuses” can divide the labor of rule and counsel, guiding society’s affairs justly through the cultivation of salutary habits and refined moral sentiments (Smith 1981, 30; Rosenberg 1965, 134; Cohen 1989, 69–70).

Given a proper elite education reformed somewhat to deal with modern rather than scholastic concerns, Smith suggests that in concert with other social institutions such as religion and civil society, politicians and men of letters could justly lead society through the commercial age. However, particularly in times of civil unrest or crisis, a danger emerges from this arrangement. Philosophers and their followers are forever at risk of falling prey to an excessive love of their own ideas, and desire to turn them into reality regardless of the practical costs. A good statesman knows that not all ideas are fit to become policy. Again, here one of Smith’s principal virtues as a social thinker lay in his cautionary note regarding our tendency to subordinate the rights and lives of human beings to naked abstractions. Instead of striving for the impossible, “when he cannot establish the best system of laws, he will endeavor to establish the best the people can bear” (Smith 1984, 233).

Nevertheless, this is a tenuous position to maintain. Government employs men of speculation and letters to refine the understanding of those in power, but as proponents of ideas about what the state should do, the great danger is that an advisor grows into a mere “man of system,” an ideologue apt to be very wise in his own conceit; and is so often enamoured with the supposed beauty of his own ideal plan of government, that he cannot suffer the smallest deviation from any part of it. He goes on to establish it completely and in all its parts…. He seems to imagine that he can arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as the hand arranges the different pieces upon a chess-board. (Smith 1984, 234)

It is not the pretension to theoretical advice that damns the men of system, for all politics requires some theoretical notions of what is possible, and more importantly, good. Rather it is their single-minded imperviousness toward the practical matters of policy:
Some general, and even systematical, idea of the perfection of policy and law, may no doubt be necessary for directing the views of the statesman. But to insist upon establishing, and establishing all at once, and in spite of all opposition, every thing which that idea may seem to require, must often be the highest degree of arrogance. (Smith 1984, 234)

Implicitly, then, we can see how Smith would applaud a reformed elite education designed to humble potential men of system and convince them of the true limits of the human mind.

There is no doubt that Smith’s estimation of the intellect—even that of a genius—was far less optimistic than many of his contemporaries’. His suggestion in the second volume of *Wealth of Nations* that properly educated intellectuals can be of enormous help to the commonwealth if allowed to advise the powerful recognizes society’s need of men able to compare and combine observations, facts, and ideals, rendering their “understandings, in an extraordinary degree, both acute and comprehensive” (Smith 1981, 783). For those who already have a tendency to be enamored with their philosophy, this is a weighty responsibility. Thus, society needs to guard its intellectuals carefully. Precisely because of their potential to do great good but also much harm, elsewhere Smith emphasizes the extraordinary weakness of human reason.

Smith goes to great lengths to point out our mental limitations by proving that the intentional power of genius did not create the division of labor, the progress of national opulence, or many of the best institutions of the state (Tenger and Trolander 1994, 178–84). Rather, these were products of slow social change, and only much later improved or refined through the application of conscious human intelligence (Smith 1981, 25). Intellectuals are not very different from ordinary people in raw ability: “[t]he difference between the most dissimilar characters, between a philosopher and a common street porter, for example, seems to arise not so much from nature, as from habit, custom, and education” (Smith 1981, 28–29). It is only over time and with divergence of employment that “[t]he difference of talents comes then to be taken notice of, and widens by degrees, till at last the vanity of the philosopher is willing to acknowledge scarce any resemblance” (Smith 1981, 28). Intellectuals always stand in need of reminders about the limitations of reason’s capacity to transform human affairs. Noting the necessity of bold and combining minds, we must remember that “[s]mart people are uniquely capable of producing noxious ideas” (Lagerfeld 2004, 29).
As it argues for institutions which would help to maintain good qualities in the populace and higher virtues in the political and intellectual elite, Smith’s teaching is guardedly hopeful about the possibility for checking the extreme tendencies inherent in any commercial society. The delicate balance he thought necessary between public-spirited rulers and men of letters without “system” indicates he did not see the existence of good government as a normal state of affairs; his focus on who should not rule suggests that Smith places his confidence more in the manners and morals of the people at large. For the most part, society can muddle through as it always has.

Conclusion

Smith is quite clear that in an advanced commercial society, autonomous, self-directed political action, such as Arendt hoped for, would be the province of the very few, if it is granted to any at all. It is also obvious that his philosophy does not contain a single vision of the public good. Insofar as critics of modernity view either of these as a requirement of any well-constituted polity, they are right to assault Smith’s ideas. His is a liberal theory where many purposes, plans, and intentions coexist and collide in economic, civic, and political spheres—and it is a vision in which the state has a fairly limited, strictly delineated set of roles.

Moreover, Smith provides answers to at least two other criticisms levied by Pieper and Arendt. Smith fuses political economy with his social and moral philosophy, meaning his concern is as much with what the best constituted polity looks like as it is with whether such a vision is practically possible. In a world without the ignoble practice of slavery, there can be no class of citizens entirely freed from concerns of making a living. Pieper and Arendt’s shared belief that the various forms of human expression must remain fully privileged spheres may be unrealistic in a world without an entirely leisured class (Smith 1982a, 410–11). In a free, commercial society, leisure either falls away or is redefined entirely; such a social order almost precludes the concept of an autonomous leisured class. Smith hopes to encourage the next best thing in a cultivated political and intellectual class that might help guide society without reverting to a classical notion of leisure and the fully servile class required to support the leisured citizenry.

Arendt fears that the conceptual blending of work with labor would homogenize all forms of human effort into a simple commodity with no greater value than that provided for in the marketplace. Yet Smith is quite adamant that not all labor is functionally—much less morally—equivalent, and devotes some effort to thinking about what institutions could guard
against this. Smith’s compromise is to point to the complexity of human motivation and, ultimately, to the basic human propensity to wonder and our deep need for approbation—two passions which often incline men to less economically rewarding but more fulfilling employment. However, the notion that honorable professions are in large part their own reward must be set against their capacity to support those who choose to pursue them. Even if this means people only rarely join professions entirely for their own sake, the reward for noble forms of employment is still, nevertheless, more than merely pecuniary (Smith 1981, 116–28, 330–32; 1982a, 354–55).

Pressed to its logical limit, though, Pieper rightly notes the division of labor will lead to a destruction of classical leisure and a subordination of all higher things to some social end. While Smith clearly appreciates the danger that his commercial polity might succumb to an untrammeled division of labor, he deals with these problems only sporadically throughout his writings, and in today’s post-industrial world his suggestions for how to overcome them often seem woefully inadequate to the task. Sixty years after Smith published Wealth of Nations, Alexis de Tocqueville would most successfully draw out the hopeful ideals of a vital commercial society latent in Smith’s writing and transcend them. While Smith also acknowledges the ultimate possibility of a death of civic vitality through the fragmentation of communities into alienated laborers, he notes that the human condition points us toward ultimate questions and drives us to wonder—things which no form of labor can eradicate entirely.

Addendum

Burke writes (1992, 168), “A true natural aristocracy is not a separate interest in the state, or separable from it…. It is formed out of a class of legitimate presumptions, which, taken as generalities, must be admitted for actual truths.” Among the traits of this class, Burke counts the following: “To stand upon such elevated ground as to be enabled to take a large view of the wide-spread and infinitely diversified combination of men and affairs in a large society; To have leisure to read, to reflect, to converse…. To be led to a guarded and regulated conduct, from a sense that you are considered as an instructor of your fellow-citizens in their highest concerns, and that you act as a reconciler between God and man…. To be a professor of a high science, or of liberal and ingenious art—To be amongst rich traders, who from their success are presumed to have sharp and vigorous understandings, and to possess the virtues of diligence, order, constancy, and regularity.”
REFERENCES


Beyond Historicism:
Collingwood, Strauss, Momigliano

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Philosophy of history, history of philosophy, history of historiography: these are the “labels” that may be used to describe, in simplified fashion, the fields of research within which Robin George Collingwood, Leo Strauss and Arnaldo Momigliano revisit historicism. But which historicism? There exist, as is well known, numerous and contrasting (even “national”) versions of “historicism,” from Wilhelm Dilthey to Friedrich Meinecke, from Benedetto Croce to Eugenio Garin. Moreover in speaking of historicism one cannot speak solely of the past: today there exist, above all in the Anglophone and German worlds, a variety of debates about the methods of historical research (debates about, for example, the history of languages, historiography as rhetoric, the history of concepts, the history of effects, metaphorology) which evidently have continued to refine the conceptual and interpretative instruments of classical historicism. Such is not, however, the theme of the present essay, which intends to limit itself to treating of two circumscribed questions. On the one hand, it intends to present a first discussion of the theoretical relations among the three authors under consideration, relations which have not always been kept in mind by the critical literature. But beyond this eminently “scholarly” aspect, the present essay intends to contribute a reflection on a theme which certainly cannot be considered “overcome” by the theoretical and methodological conclusions reached by the most recent versions of historicism: in essence, the theme of the universalistic tension which, in different ways, seems to dominate the researches of Collingwood, Strauss, and Momigliano. All this, naturally, not with a view to reasserting a now untenable model of ethnocentric universalism, endowed with self-sufficient meaning and dogmatically “necessary,” but with a view to reflecting philosophically on the status of historical contingency which, within an historicist perspective, risks leading to theoretical, and, consequently, ethical-political
Interpretation. The problem consists then in redefining the relation between change and permanence, between particularism and universality, between tradition and truth (Altini 2004).

1. THE PROBLEM: THEORETICAL QUESTIONS AND RELATIONS

In 1967 Arnaldo Momigliano published, in the pages of *Rivista storica italiana*, a brief essay on the relation between classical political thought and hermeneutics in Leo Strauss (Momigliano 1967b). Beyond analyzing the genesis and the characteristics of Strauss’s thought—midway between classical Greek philosophy, *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and German thought—the essay is guided by one particular theme: the Straussian critique of historicism. To this end Momigliano concentrates his attention on an essay of Strauss (Strauss 1952a) on *The Idea of History* by Robin George Collingwood (Collingwood 1946), and highlights the close connection, within the Straussian discourse on modernity, among anti-historicism, critique of contemporary (above all neopositivistic) social science, recovery of classical political philosophy and hermeneutics. In this regard, Momigliano seems to look with favor on the fundamental aspects of the Straussian critique of Collingwood, above all with respect to the relation between criticism and interpretation and regarding the category of progress, whose problematic character becomes evident in the concept of *reenactment* which attempts to combine the “reality” of the past, the demands of the present and the correctness of historical research:

Collingwood asserted that every historical period has an historical thought that corresponds to it and which is absolutely valid for that period: he held, further, that every historical research is relative to the present, i.e. to something by definition foreign to the interests present to the men of the past. Strauss objects that there is no point in questioning a thinker of the past, if his problems are not still our problems and if therefore we are not ready to admit the possibility that, for example, Plato was right. This implies an at least provisional subordination of one’s own research to the research of the thinkers of the past, who may be right. And this subordination in turn means that one must follow Plato in his way of thinking; one must accept, at least provisionally, the limits that he sets himself, the way that he has of presenting his arguments. History of thought is, then, for Leo Strauss an attempt to regain a level of thought that has been lost […]. It follows, too, that interpreting Plato is different from criticizing Plato: interpreting Plato means remaining within the limits of Plato’s directives, whereas criticizing him means going
beyond those directives. To pretend to judge the past from the point of view of the present is already to presume that the present offers a point of view superior to the past. The true thinker must keep open the possibility that he lives in an age that is inferior to the past. (Momigliano 1967b, 1165–66)

Apart from certain reservations about the Straussian method of historical research (in particular, as to whether there is a direct causal relationship between the hermeneutics of reticence and the principles of classical political philosophy: Momigliano 1967a), Momigliano underlines the importance of certain aspects of that method (for example, the question of the reticence of philosophic texts), pointing to the difference between *epoch* and *thought* (explicitly against Collingwood) as one of the strong grounds for the revisiting of historicism. Naturally, in these pages on Strauss—as on other occasions (Momigliano 1960c, 1980, 1992)—Momigliano has occasion to evaluate as well Collingwood himself and his historical methodology. Many are the themes in question: among others, the correspondence between epoch and thought, the dependence of historical research on the interests of the present, the difference between criticism and interpretation, the reinterpretation of historicism. And it is on this last point in particular, above all with reference to the position of Benedetto Croce, that Momigliano adopts a critical tone toward Collingwood, reproving him for passing over in silence his evident cultural debts to the Italian philosopher. Indeed, in the guise of a neutral review of historical studies and of the process of “historicization” of humanism in England, Momigliano’s *La storia antica in Inghilterra* (Momigliano 1980) contains numerous accusations of incoherence and imbalance with respect to Collingwood’s autobiography (Collingwood 1939). But beyond criticisms of a personal or scholarly character (Momigliano 1980, 761–62), the deeper cause of Momigliano’s distancing himself from Collingwood probably resides in different interpretations of the relation between philology and history, and of that between history and philosophy—as represented in a difference regarding the method of historical research:

*The philosophy of historical method is not [...] the philosophy of history in the sense of an ordered and univocal exposition of the development of the world or of humanity. Philosophy of history in this sense is found in every school of thought that tends to become dogmatic, and it is found in Hegelian idealism insofar as the latter claimed to be a definitive philosophy [...]*. The investigation of the *nature of historical method*, on the other hand, was in large part elaborated by those who opposed Hegelian apriorism, by philologists and historians like Humboldt, Boeckh, and Droysen. By their
theories of historical science (probably through the mediation of Croce and in any case in a manner parallel to Croce) Collingwood was essentially inspired. He became notorious among his archeologist colleagues for his continual insistence upon the principle that one finds only what one is looking for, and therefore every excavation must start from the clear formulation of the problem that one wants to resolve by the excavation itself. This principle [...] often led Collingwood to find in his excavations exactly that which he desired to find, i.e. to fall into gross errors. In fact, in this way one neglects the obvious truth that one is excavating in the past, whether with the pen of the philologist or the hoe of the archeologist, not only to resolve problems already formulated, but to open the doors to the infinity of reality, which always transcends all problems that have been already formulated; and woe to the historian who refuses to see what he is not looking for. But the theory of historical research as “question and response” [...] has all the same the merit of insisting upon history as research, and not as mere narration or description, in a country like England which has a splendid tradition of narrative historiography [...]. Even here Collingwood is not revolutionary: he simply exaggerates, to the point of error, a movement of intense transformation in which the problematic nature of historical research is ever more recognized, without however the necessity of invalidating the great English quality of “knowing how to narrate.” (Momigliano 1980, 764–65, italics mine)

In the eyes of Momigliano, Collingwood’s work—if correctly read through the lens of the legacy of Croce—represents the clearest example of the difficulties which beset a philosophy of history that wishes to be accompanied and guided by careful historical research and historiography.

2. PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY AND HISTORY OF PROGRESS IN ROBIN GEORGE COLLINGWOOD

It is not easy to identify the central reference-point of the thought of Robin George Collingwood, especially if we consider the great variety of the disciplines in which he was interested (philosophy, history, aesthetics, archaeology, etc.) and of his theoretical perspectives (midway between the Oxonian traditions of Bradley and Moore and the continental perspectives represented by Croce and Gentile). Still, it does not seem rash to identify in the philosophy of history the element in which is primarily concentrated the originality of his theoretical position and in which the idealistic perspective helps to redefine a new concept of history. In the (posthumous) volume The Idea of History, Collingwood traces the various phases of Western
culture with respect to historical knowledge, from the classical Greeks to the early twentieth century, underlining their essential philosophic and scientific inadequacy. Even without analyzing in detail Collingwood’s specific criticisms of the thinkers and traditions of the past, from Herodotus to Voltaire, from Tacitus to Herder, from Thucydides to Kant, it is possible to observe how the English thinker tends to construct a history of thought understood as a history of progress which accounts for conceptual changes (and value systems of an epoch) on an historical basis (Collingwood 1946, 228–35): in this sense, progress is not simple change, but concrete realization of values and of scientific knowledge on the historical plane (Collingwood 1946, 321–34). Collingwood’s antipositivistic historical science vindicates the specificity of historical knowledge, as distinct from every form of natural science. Against the realistic English tradition and against every objectivist model of interpretation, Collingwood does not consider an historical event as a “datum,” as a “fact,” but as a “meaning” that can be obtained only through the logic of the question-and-answer: the subject becomes an active element in historical research precisely through his own historical conditioning—seeing that historical knowledge cannot be simple “reflection,” i.e. knowledge in the abstract, but knowledge concretely situated in space and time. History is not a retelling of events or a chronicle of change, because the historian is not interested in events as such, but in events in so far as they are expressions of thoughts (Collingwood 1946, 217–18). The connection between the historian and the men of the past is not, therefore, constituted by memory or by temporality, but by a common participation in a single “mind” which exists in so far as it realizes itself in history:

The historical process is a process in which man creates for himself this or that kind of human nature by recreating in his own thought the past to which he is heir […] The historical process is itself a process of thought, and it exists only in so far as the minds which are parts of it know themselves for parts of it. By historical thinking, the mind whose self-knowledge is history not only discovers within itself those powers of which historical thought reveals the possession, but actually develops those powers from a latent to an actual state, brings them into effective existence […]. History does not presuppose mind; it is the life of mind itself, which is not mind except so far as it both lives in historical process and knows itself as so living […]. Thought is therefore not the presupposition of an historical process which is in turn the presupposition of historical knowledge. It is only in the historical process, the process of thoughts, that thought exists at all; and it is only in so far as this process is known for a process of thoughts that is one. (Collingwood 1946, 226–27)
History is history of thought only in so far as it is history of the “historical mind” and self-knowledge of the mind (Collingwood 1946, 286–88, 302–15): in consequence, nature cannot enter into history unless in a mediated form. In this sense, the independence of history from nature is a source of human freedom—especially if history is, as with Croce, understood in an ethical-political sense and not as economic-social history. Historical research as critical thought is possible only where there exists “selection,” i.e. autonomy from the historical “datum.” Naturally this idealistic model of philosophy of history is explicitly contrary to the idea of uniform and recurring historical laws (present, for instance, in Comte, Marx, and Spengler) which originate in the confusion between “explaining” and “understanding” and give an erroneous judgment of the relations between science of nature and science of mind: this model, moreover, in defending a conception of the mind which knows itself through historical knowledge, offers itself as a fundamental alternative to every attempt at naturalistic, mathematical, and scientific reduction of historical knowledge (Collingwood 1946, 249–82). The humanistic and antipositivistic character of historical research is made still more evident by the fact that history is history of human things and of intentional human actions endowed with meaning; it is not classification of natural events: nature exists in history only in so far as it is recognized as such by the awareness of the historical actors. It is no accident that, for Collingwood, the understanding of an historical fact consists in ascending from “fact” to thought, i.e. from external to internal—by means of a conception of cause which must not be identified with that of “law” (whether natural or psychological), or of (empirical) induction, typical of the tradition of the natural sciences of the early twentieth century, but with that of “intent.”

History is possible only where there exists imaginative inference, i.e. a mediation between the philological and the philosophical, between document and interpretation: although fact and document do not cease to be real data, they exist in a dimension external to that of the interpreter; they are included in the activity of historical thought not solely as documents relative to the past, but as “experiences” of thought relived in the present. The historian does not understand human action by means of generalizations and above all does not find facts ready-made for extraction and analysis, but reconstructs the internal aspect of human actions through an active process of thought which, by means of questions, assembles and evaluates the sources from which he may obtain answers, making use of his own “imagination a priori,” which recomposes evidence and documents in an historically significant framework (Collingwood 1946, 231–49). True historical knowledge is not, then, merely
internal, nor merely external: history exists when an action of the past is rethought and relived (reenacted) with respect to the intentions of the actor as well as his motivations, beliefs, and reasonings. The history of thought, and therefore all history, is the reenactment of past thought in the historian’s own mind:

The historian, investigating any event in the past, makes a distinction between what may be called the outside and the inside of an event. By the outside of the event I mean everything belonging to it which can be described in terms of bodies and their movements [...]. By the inside of the event I mean that in it which can be only described in terms of thought [...]. The historian is never concerned with either of these to the exclusion of the other. He is investigating not mere events (where by a mere event I mean one which has only an outside and no inside) but actions, and an action is the unity of the outside and inside of an event [...]. For history, the object to be discovered is not the mere event, but the thought expressed in it. To discover that thought is already to understand it [...]. All history is the history of thought. But how does the historian discern the thoughts which he is trying to discover? There is only one way in which it can be done: by re-thinking them in his own mind. The historian of philosophy, reading Plato, is trying to know what Plato thought when he expressed himself in certain words. The only way in which he can do this is by thinking it for himself. This, in fact, is what we mean when we speak of “understanding” the words [...]. The historian not only re-enacts past thought, he re-enacts it in the context of his own knowledge and therefore, in re-enacting it, criticizes it, forms his own judgement of its value, corrects whatever errors he can discern in it. This criticism of the thought whose history he traces is not something secondary to tracing the history of it. It is an indispensable condition of the historical knowledge itself. (Collingwood 1946, 213–15)

All thinking is critical thinking: the thought which reenacts past thought, therefore, criticizes them in reenacting them. Collingwood re-elaborates, then, idealism and historicism, proposing a model of philosophy of history centered on the superiority of the present: the historian can reproduce thought and meaning by means of the method of question-and-answer, which in turn can overcome the apparent contradiction between the autonomy of historical knowledge and the necessity of the document, between exteriority and interiority of the “fact” and of the document. Naturally, all this does not mean that the historian must limit himself to reproducing the emotional states of the men of the past or surrender to the charm of their
minds: precisely because the practice of history is active, it is also “criticism” and not simply a “copy” (“criticism” signifies here recreating the past with a view to purposes that may be entirely different from those of the past). Nevertheless, the imagination (at once historical and a priori) which founds its method on question-and-answer does not exempt the historian from the necessity of scientific rigor, just as, on the other side, the claim of objectivity cannot be an obstacle to the re-elaboration of historical problems in the present, i.e. to the transformation of interpretation into criticism. Given that the past exists as spiritual reality only in the mind of the historian who relives it, thought exists only in the historical process and this process is historical only in so far as it is known by thought: in Collingwood there is thus achieved not only the unity of history and historiography, but also that of history and philosophy, since the present from which the historian views the past is not the present of eternity, but the present of historical time. In this sense Collingwood’s philosophy is an historical philosophy understood in a double and complementary sense: on the one hand, the understanding of philosophical problems proceeds from an historical point of view; on the other, the understanding of the nature of history proceeds from a philosophical point of view.

Naturally there exist difficulties in such an attempt to reconcile internal and external, imagination and document, subject and object, fact and thought, idealism and realism, historicism and metaphysics. Such difficulties are evident in numerous theoretical passages in The Idea of History: in Collingwood’s conception of the relations between epistemology and psychology, in his idea of “imagination a priori” (which renders problematic the identity of logic and theory), in his conception of reenactment (i.e. of the identity between the acts of thought of the historical agent and the acts of thought relived by the historian) and in his metaphysical-speculative conception of thought understood as being at once subjective and objective, permanent and contingent, universal and particular. At this point becomes clear the idealistic heritage of Collingwood with respect to the atemporality and the impersonality of both the objects of thought and the acts of thought—an atemporality and impersonality which is at odds with his historicism and which makes it difficult to distinguish between psychology and logic. And it is these difficulties—especially as regards their consequences for philosophic historiography—upon which will be fixed the critical gaze of Leo Strauss.
3. Philosophy and History of Philosophy in Leo Strauss

Leo Strauss was all his life a careful reader of classical texts: from Spinoza to Maimonides, from Plato to Hobbes, from Xenophon to Machiavelli, his studies never failed to analyze the form in which these texts were written (Strauss 1952b). It does not seem entirely out of place to define his work as a personal history of political philosophy, even if one must remember that his historical researches do not dwell solely on typical themes of scholarly literature, but comprehend theoretical reflections relative to the main categories of political philosophy. Most of Strauss’s scientific production is in fact permeated by a singular copresence of philosophical reflection, hermeneutical investigation and historical reconstruction, mixed with antipositivistic and antihistoricistic criticism: in many cases, Strauss seems to philosophize by reconstructing minutely the structure of certain texts of the past, drawing lines of dialogue and genealogical trees among philosophers so as to provide for the construction of new historiographical paths; while, at the same time, his mode of writing history of philosophy is clearly founded upon a specific conception of philosophical activity (Altini 2001). Indeed, a problem of inadequacy of the bases of historical information transforms itself immediately into a problem of theoretical knowledge, and vice versa, the inadequacy of the form of theoretical knowledge available renders difficult, if not impossible, an adequate historical understanding. Philosophy and history of philosophy are certainly not the same thing; however, in an epoch of crisis the history of philosophy can perform certain goals and functions of philosophy: besides, the very idea of the history of philosophy presupposes that certain fundamental philosophical problems remain the same through the various epochs. The understanding of the relations between philosophy and history of philosophy in the thought of Strauss cannot be separated from a reflection upon his conception of hermeneutics (with particular reference to the reticence of philosophical writing), which leads to a radical distinction between history and historicism (Strauss 1959, chapters 1 and 2).

Among the texts in which Strauss confronts in greatest detail that modern confusion between history and philosophy which is at the origin of the various versions of contemporary historicism, one may point especially to his long discussion of Collingwood’s The Idea of History, of which he analyzes various aspects, from the idea of progress to the Greek conception of history, from the relation between history and philosophy to the idea of the equality of epochs, from the role of the imagination in historical thought to the
relation between criticism and interpretation. In the volume of Collingwood there emerge clearly the affinities among the different formulations of scientific history, epistemology of history and philosophy of history, all closely tied to the idea that all thought is historically conditioned. The point of view of the historian is therefore without universal validity or objectivity: given that the philosophic thought of all epochs, being in essence an expression of the spirit of its own time, is equally true, every form of knowledge is relative only to the present, and above all every truth is valid only in its own historical period (Strauss 1952a, 561–66). Given that the main argument for historicism presupposes the existence of a plurality of planes of historical-cultural reference, all equally legitimate, every form of theoretical understanding presupposes a specific plane of historical reference within which it may be located. However, precisely because starting from the experience of history any teaching may be justified, the argument for historicism cannot ground itself on an historical experience, but rather on a philosophical analysis which demonstrates the essential and “natural” mutability of the categories of thought: the experience of history must be subjected to a careful critical analysis. But in Strauss’s interpretation, it is precisely in the failure to provide such a demonstration that historicism manifests, in self-contradictory fashion, its own meta-historical and dogmatic character: in affirming the essential historicity of thought, historicism affirms its own historicity, and thus the provisional character of its own validity. In the very moment in which the historicist asserts the meta-historical truth of his own theses he admits, contradicting those very theses, that thought can grasp a universally valid truth: his manner of argument is founded therefore on a particular interpretation of philosophical knowledge that is certainly not justified, but merely masked, by the historical data on which this interpretation rests (Strauss 1953, chapter 1). Consequently, according to Strauss it proves necessary carefully to examine the characteristics of historical research implicit in the philosophical position of contemporary historicism, precisely because there exists a fatal distance between historical meaning and historicism (Altini 2000, chapters 2 and 6):

The same belief which forced Collingwood to attempt to become a historian of thought, prevented him from becoming a historian of thought. He was forced to attempt to become a historian of thought because he believed that to know the human mind is to know its history, or that self-knowledge is historical understanding. But this belief contradicts the tacit premise of all earlier thought, that premise being the view that to know the human mind is something fundamentally different from knowing the history of the human
mind. Collingwood therefore rejected the thought of the past as untrue in the decisive respect. Hence he could not take that thought seriously, for to take a thought seriously means to regard it as possible that the thought in question is true. He therefore lacked the incentive for re-enacting the thought of the past: he did not re-enact the thought of the past. (Strauss 1952a, 575)

In Strauss’s eyes, Collingwood’s philosophy of history is not only epistemology of history, but also and especially metaphysics of history: the apparent relativism present in the consideration of the historically conditioned character of all thought proves to be, on the contrary, a form of imperialistic dogmatism. The historical understanding that is possible in the present is in fact, for Collingwood’s modern historian, superior both to the historical understanding possible in the past and to the way in which the thought of the past interpreted itself, given that the thought of the past can be known only by means of reenactment, i.e. through a form of criticism (Strauss 1952a, 560–61, 566–74). The thought of the past is then studied starting from an historicist presupposition (at once relativistic and dogmatic) which is utterly foreign to that very thought. In Strauss’s interpretation, Collingwood’s philosophy of history aims, through the organic unity of the “total” experience of the modern historian (Strauss 1952a, 564–66), at the accumulation of knowledge which tends to form a universal philosophic history in which the materials furnished by the past are understood and evaluated from the privileged point of view of the present. The result is the legitimizing of the idea of progress and the creation of a “perspectival” model of history, tied only to a specific tradition—its own, here and now—which, as a result of the lack of attention to what is different, is incapable of understanding in their specificity facts and ideas of the past. In this sense, the opposition between non-historical classical philosophy and modern historical philosophy renders visible the reversal of the relation between history and philosophy, characterized by the abandonment of the distinction between philosophical problems and historical problems: with the reformulation of the historical character of modern philosophy, philosophical problems have been transformed by Collingwood into “historical” problems relative to the future. For Strauss, on the other hand, to avoid remaining the prisoner of an historical subjectivity not justified from a philosophic viewpoint, it is necessary to abandon the attempt to understand the past in the light of the present. Collingwood holds that it is possible to understand an author better than he understood himself; such understanding, however, which goes so far as to claim to be the true understanding, is marked by a prejudice that is decidedly anti-historical. In Strauss’s eyes, historical understanding means understanding the way in which an author of the past
interpreted himself. We cannot be seriously interested in the past if we consider the present, on principle, superior to the past: whatever may be our motive for approaching historical and historiographical problems, we must at least provisionally accept the coordinates with which the thinkers of the past worked and try to understand those coordinates in their original, authentic meaning before criticizing them. *Understanding* must precede *criticism* (Strauss 1952a, 581). The historian of philosophy must not substitute his own ideas for those of the authors he interprets, and must not claim to judge their ideas without having understood them: to write history of philosophy means, for Strauss, to try to recover lost forms of knowledge. There exists then the possibility of recovering spaces of objectivity in historical research, above all the possibility of understanding correctly the texts of the authors of the past, just as they intended them to be understood: if he does not wish arbitrarily to confound criticism with interpretation, the historian of thought must, at least to begin with, subordinate his own questions to those to which his sources tried to respond. Naturally, Strauss is aware of the fact that, in a certain sense, every *interpretation* is some sort of *criticism*: the very choice of a theme, of an author, of a text as important is an act of criticism that precedes interpretation. But this does not mean they are the same thing; interpretation and criticism are not only distinguishable but even separable. In this sense, interpretation necessarily precedes criticism:

> History as history, as quest for the understanding of the past, necessarily presupposes that our understanding of the past is incomplete. The criticism which is inseparable from interpretation is fundamentally different from the criticism which would coincide with the completed understanding. If we call “interpretation” that understanding or criticism which remains within the limits of Plato’s own directives, and if we call “criticism” that understanding or criticism which disregards Plato’s directives, we may say that interpretation necessarily precedes criticism because the quest for understanding necessarily precedes completed understanding and therewith the judgment which coincides with the completed understanding. (Strauss 1952a, 583–84)

The historian of philosophy cannot avoid an initial act of loyalty toward the object of study, because he must consider the real possibility of learning something of substantial philosophic importance from the study of the thinkers of the past, rather than from the study of the thinkers of the present. We can understand the philosophy of the past only if we are willing to learn something not only *about* the philosophers of the past, but *from* them: in some cases, the study of classical texts may be the only possible way to recover
an awareness of fundamental philosophical problems. This possibility becomes concrete reality in the present epoch, characterized for Strauss by the profound intellectual crisis of the West, whose solution requires a form of “emancipation” from modern philosophy. Besides, the very history of philosophy is a product of the modern world, a history which only after Hegel assumed philosophical significance. The historian of philosophy is responsible not only for the correctness and objectivity of his own research, but also and especially for bringing to light the long duration, or better the permanence, of philosophic problems, i.e. of the question of the truth. Historical understanding cannot help comparing itself with the philosophical question: the most important problem remains always the philosophic truth, so much so that the historian of philosophy must in some sense “convert” to philosophy (Altini 2000, chapter 3).

4. History, Historicism, and History of Historiography in Arnaldo Momigliano

In 1955, in Turin (Italy), there took place a discussion between Nicola Abbagnano and Arnaldo Momigliano on the theme of the language of the historian. On that occasion Momigliano, while indicating a logical similarity between ordinary language and historical language, also identified the difference between the two models of knowledge in question, i.e. between historical (“indirect”) knowledge and empirical-perceptive (“direct”) knowledge:

The difference is in the difficulty for me in obtaining the information that establishes the fact […]. As the distance in time grows and the actors change, there grows the difficulty of explaining and there arises the problem of establishing what has happened […]. Generally speaking, historical research begins when either establishing the facts or explaining them requires a study of documents. In certain cases establishing a fact and explaining it take place together […]. But in the majority of cases the historian is in the position either of establishing facts without being able to explain them or explaining facts previously established. (Momigliano 1960a, 365–66)

Beyond the specific theoretical problem related to the mode of knowledge, there emerges here a question constitutive of the craft of the historian, the relation between “fact” and document, whose analysis requires a continual reassessment of historiographical techniques; most useful to this end has been the progressive interconnection among interdisciplinary perspectives in historical research (archeology, anthropology, etc.), perspectives which have
certainly helped liberate historical research from the “cult of words” (Momigliano 1984a). For Momigliano research in historical methodology is a discussion about the correct way of gathering and interpreting sources and documents through which we can establish, even if only inferentially, a relation with the past that is “mediated” by the reconstruction of the processes which have transmitted that same past and those same documents: since the historian does not invent “facts,” if there are no documents (i.e. the only real “events” whose traces are visible to the historian), there is no history. The aim of the historian lies in recognizing how to locate the document (and therefore, in some measure, also the “fact”) in its exact context of space and time. Single documents cannot be treated in an isolated fashion, for the historian cannot content himself with establishing the origin and aim of the documents, but must understand as well the sequence of events within which the documents are situated. The historian chooses his theme, his documents, his hypothesis and his method: in this sense, every historical research represents a choice of problems to resolve through asking questions of the sources, to the end of understanding what happened in a given moment to a given individual or a given group. The true difficulty of such research consists then in the relation between the definition of facts and their interpretation.

Momigliano criticizes numerous historiographical models which characterize the contemporary intellectual panorama; from the idea that history is simple rhetorical narration indifferent to the question of truth (Hayden White) to the idea that history, understood as reenactment, is “history of progress” (R. G. Collingwood). Moreover, underlining the problems implicit in an historical model which maintains a rigid separation between intellectual history and cultural history (Leo Strauss) or which is “anti-sociological” (Paul Veyne), Momigliano intends to draw our attention to the fact that the historian has before him not “facts” but documents. The true theme of the discussion about how to write history, after historicism, ought to be, then, the defining of a new relation between “facts” and documents: with the dissolution of the classical borders between history, philology and antiquarianism, every philological problem is analyzed in a context of historical events, just as every problem of historical documentation can be resolved only through the interpretation of texts, i.e. through philology:

The historicization of philology and antiquarianism means merely that the philologist is now always conscious of standing before facts that are historically conditioned, just as the antiquarian and the historian are conscious of standing before documents that it is necessary to interpret. But historical conditions, interpretive
methods remain to be determined in relation to the researchers’ own experience and to the nature of the object under study […]. The fading of philology and antiquarianism as sciences separate from history does not imply their absorption in history as traditionally understood, but the constitution of a new historical method, by far more complicated than that which our predecessors really had, for the interpretation of documents and their integration in an historical situation. (Momigliano 1960b, 477)

In Momigliano the distinction between historical research and historiographical research serves to clarify the historian’s work, his ethical and civic ideals, his cultural and religious conditionings, his critical choices with respect to the past, made in light of the problems of the present. In the conviction that the history of historiography can help define and resolve historical problems, Momigliano undertakes a theoretical defense of the truth of historical research against every attempt at the reduction of history to ideology or rhetoric. In this sense, for every historical problem taken under examination, one must try to know also the history of that problem (i.e. the forms of its continuity or discontinuity, the tradition to which it refers, the innovation which it represents, etc.): the historical problem cannot be separated from the historiographical problem, for in every return to the past one finds reasons which lead to conclusions about the present through a reinterpretation of the past founded on documents (Momigliano 1984b). The history of historiography is then an essential part of historical research, seeing that it forces the historian to keep always in mind the historicity of his own problems and instruments. The history of historiography helps the historian to avoid committing a fundamental error, that of confronting directly a reconstructed past without retracing the history of the way in which that same past has been transmitted and reconstructed:

The inevitable corollary of historicism is history of historiography, as a way of expressing the consciousness that historical problems have themselves a history. This has however produced books whose sole aim is to demonstrate that every historian and every historical problem is historically conditioned—with the added banality that even a verdict of this type on the part of the historian of historiography is historically conditioned. Such an expression of relativism, in my judgment, is indefensible. The history of historiography, like every other historical research, has the aim of discriminating between true and false. As a type of intellectual history which claims to examine the results obtained by an historian, it must distinguish between solutions of historical problems which do not convince and solutions (= hypotheses; models; ideal types) which deserve to be reformulated and developed. (Momigliano 1984b, 464)
In the manner of Croce, Momigliano accepts the requirement of finding in the present the origin of his own historical examination: the historian reconstructs the “facts” of the past (and in particular the connection between texts and contexts) while examining them in relation to the problems of the present, without however assuming that the two contexts are directly comparable. But in contrast to Croce, he underlines the importance of the encounter between historiography and history of historiography, reassessing the role of the antiquarian method (understood above all as a tool for an anti-relativistic reconsideration of historical research in the epoch of historicism) and stressing a heavy reliance upon the document for the construction of historical research: history, as *history of change*, is practical, not logical knowledge, which develops through “empirical selections” of the available materials. The historian, naturally, must distinguish between the verification of the facts in light of the evidence (distinguishing between direct and indirect sources) and their interpretation. His work will be judged not so much on the basis of his cultural presuppositions, as on the basis of his specific expertise in the utilization of documents for the investigation of the individuality and the truth of the “fact.” Precisely because the historian is not an ideologue, historical research, understood as investigation of the truth of the facts of the past, requires the combination of logical categories and ethical categories (Momigliano 1985, 57–59, 73–74). The perspective of Momigliano thus distances itself as much from historicism (which implies a danger of relativism) as from positivism (according to which there exists an objectivity of history which “writes itself”):

What we call “historicism” is a situation which emerges from this process of selection, explanation and evaluation. More precisely, historicism is the recognition that each of us sees past events from a point of view determined or at least conditioned by our individual, changeable location within history [...]. Its roots lie in that extension of historical interpretation to all aspects of human life (and truly to the universe itself) which is characteristic of the nineteenth century. Historicism is not a comfortable doctrine, because it implies a danger of relativism. It tends to undermine the historian’s trust in himself [...]. The problem is how to situate ourselves in relation to this task of discovering facts and of making them form part of a scheme with a view to understanding and evaluating them, if we ourselves are part of the historical process that we are trying to understand. If writing history implies that we choose the facts that interest us by following certain criteria—or that we try to discover new facts by following certain interests—these criteria and these interests imply already a choice of universals or of generalizations,
following which we wish to classify and understand the facts. We cannot understand and evaluate the facts without placing them in relation to categories and general values, but we would not be able to begin to choose (or to discover) the facts without having in mind some value or some general category to which we wish to refer the facts [...]. The facts make sense only when they become part of a situation or of a process, but the choice of facts depends on the situation which from the beginning we represent to ourselves (call it hypothesis, or model, or ideal type). Moreover, to give importance to certain facts in light of a certain situation or process is equivalent to attributing a value to these facts. History is always a choice of facts which form part of a static or dynamic situation which appears worthy of being studied. (Momigliano 1984b, 456–58)

Momigliano directs his critical gaze upon all contemporary historians who found new models and new historical interpretations in the absence of documentation, and upon the basis of insufficient knowledge and ambiguous materials: in this way historical research loses the necessary criterion (at once ethical and theoretical) for distinguishing between the certain, the probable, the possible and the incredible. The duty of the historian is not that of discovering the (scientific) “cause,” but is that of finding a “measure” between document and hypothesis, so as to avoid apriorisms, apologisms and judgments not founded upon the processes of change within historical “situations.” And all this so as not to obscure the borders of historical research, which moves between the two poles of the verification of the facts and the interpretation of the facts that have been verified, while always having to remember the distinction between true and false: “Non basta far delle domande intelligenti per essere uno storico intelligente: occorre scoprire documenti, dare risposte” (“It is not sufficient to pose intelligent questions to be an intelligent historian: it is necessary to discover documents, to answer questions”—Momigliano 1960c, 350). The historian must arrive at “certain” knowledge about the past, not false figments of the present, because he is the witness not of the present or of the future, but of the truth. In this sense, it is very imprudent of an historian to go in search of “similarities” between the past and the present, or to pose questions, for example, about the Greek gods such as the Greeks themselves would not have understood. But how then can we evaluate the impact of certain questions upon the Greek world if not even the classical historians were conscious of these questions? And how can we produce satisfying descriptive and explanatory models if the classical historians are no longer the acknowledged guides for knowing the tendencies and characteristics of Greek society? Against Strauss, Momigliano admits to writing a
history different from that of Thucydides and to drawing inspiration from current problems, not from the ancient sources. But against Collingwood, Momigliano asserts that it is in any case crucial for the historian to try to reconstruct and understand the “facts” that have occurred in the past and not in the mind of the historian (and still less must he understand those facts in the light of an improbable directionality of history, whether tied to its beginning or its end): in this sense the difficulty of research consists not only in interpreting that which we have available, but in interpreting that which, more or less evidently, is lacking and that part of the past which is different from the present. The historian may bring to his research his personal choices, his subjective experiences, and his political, religious and cultural convictions, but he may not abuse sources and documents, issuing ideological judgments or anchoring himself to a tradition. Every document must be treated on its own terms, without forcing upon it comparisons, inferences, and deductions, because the histories of the historians must be true. History is a useful, but not sufficient, condition for action: in this sense history is, and must remain, knowledge of the past—and not a facile substitute for religion or politics—just as the historian is, and must remain, a researcher, not an advocate, ideologue, or prophet. From this point of view there is evident a strong concern regarding the relation between document and “fact,” i.e. regarding the value of the truth inherent in the interminable process of historical research, verifiable through a severe examination of the data. The historian does not have “facts” before him but documents which, though they are the sine qua non of historical work, are not “facts.” The historian is not only an interpreter of sources, but also and especially an interpreter of those past realities about which the sources furnish us with information, devoting continual ethical attention to distinguishing—without “absolutism,” but at the same time refusing every form of “minimalism”—the true from the false:

All the work of the historian is on sources [...]. And yet the historian is not an interpreter of sources, though he interprets them. He is an interpreter of that reality of which the sources are the approximate signs or the fragments. The historian finds in the letter the man who wrote it, in the decree the legislative body which issued it in precise circumstances; he finds in the house him who inhabited it, in the tomb the faith of the group to which the deceased belonged. The historian interprets documents as signs of men who have vanished. He finds the meaning of the text and of the object which he has in front of him because he understands it as if it still belonged to that past situation to which it in fact belonged. The historian transfers what survives into the world that does not
survive. It is this capacity to interpret the document as if it were not a document, but a real episode of a past life, which finally makes the historian [...]. The historian understands men and institutions, ideas, faiths, emotions, needs of individuals who no longer exist. He understands all this because the documents which he has in front of him, duly interpreted, present themselves as real situations. The historian understands the dead as he understands the living. (Momigliano 1984a, 484–85)

Translation by David Levy

REFERENCES


The Politics of Encroachment: Thomas Mann’s Critique of Democracy

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Addressing a crowd of students in the Beethovensaal in Berlin in 1922, Thomas Mann proclaimed that German democracy, “so far from being an offense to nature or a logical impossibility, is as a compound organically correct, as correct as perhaps only one other combination could be—I mean, ‘the German people’” (Mann 1942, 18). This statement, taken from his speech titled “Of the German Republic” (“Von deutscher Republik”), signals a radical departure from the position he staked out only a few years earlier, in the crucible of World War I. In his longest and most important wartime work, Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man (Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen), Mann repeats, ad nauseam, that democracy, more than any other regime type, is uncongenial to the German people.

Like his other wartime essays—“Thoughts in War” (1914) and “Frederick and the Grand Coalition” (1915)—the Reflections (published in 1918) represents Mann’s attempt to mount a defense of the fatherland against the withering attacks of allied journalists and, more profoundly, Mann’s response to his brother Heinrich’s thinly veiled attacks on his, Thomas’s, moral integrity. The Reflections is a brooding, personal polemic, replete with sarcasm, irony and no small amount of exaggeration. These characteristics led the noted Mann scholar, T. J. Reed, to observe that “[t]he suddenness and vehemence of [Mann’s] national commitment…and the sophistical arguments he was driven to in his own justification make this the low point of his career as a critical intellectual” (Reed 1996, 179). One must keep in mind that Mann’s Reflections is, as he suggests in its prologue, a mixture of seriousness and ambivalence. In the Reflections Mann habitually employs quotations from other writers or “authorities” as if he were substituting them for dialogue in a novel—making it difficult, with certainty, to pin down the author’s own voice.
Thus, as we embark on a study of Mann’s attitudes toward democracy expressed in the Reflections, it is important to heed Ülker Gökberk’s warning to avoid an overly simplistic identification of Mann with every quoted authority in his work:

Mann’s claim that a residue of role-playing can be detected throughout [the book], even if the whole matter was quite serious for him, supports the assumption that he had not fully adjusted to this new discourse. The allusion to role-playing indicates that Mann has not abandoned artistic premises as he enters a realm which demanded direct engagement with the events of the time. Mann himself realizes the problematical aspect of this new task and admits that the Reflections, a political confession, retains in spite of the nonfiction mode in which it is written, a “poetic sophistry” that Mann attributes to his artistic identity. He sees a paradox in this discrepancy, but leaves all further speculation aside. An all-too-often clichéd reception of the Reflections does little to acknowledge this paradox. What is worse, the German-nationalistic theses of the book have been frequently attached to the person Thomas Mann in an uncritical fashion. (Gökberk 1999, 72)

Nonetheless, the Reflections, in spite of its rhetorical excesses and ambiguity, is an extremely valuable document for historians of political thought, and this for at least three reasons. First, it eloquently crystallizes many of the themes and concerns of a conservative strand in the German political tradition—one that is pessimistic, anti-parliamentarian, and acutely aware of the tensions between politics and the “realm of the spirit” (music, art, religion, philosophy, etc.). Furthermore, studying the work is crucial for understanding the complexity of Mann himself, for, despite the fact that he became an (at first reluctant) apologist for the Weimar Republic, then a brilliant and formidable enemy of the Nazi regime, and, finally, a spokesman more generally for democracy and democratic principles during his time in exile in the United States, he never disavowed the Reflections but stood by its basic analysis of German culture and politics. Last, but not least, the Reflections stands as a valuable reminder of democratic societies’ negative propensities—toward arrogance, materialism and imperialism—against which we must guard ourselves in this era of “globalization” and its attendant democratization.

The Vagaries of Voting

In the late imperial period, Mann’s skepticism about democracy was shared by many intellectual luminaries, including Franz Naumann, Walther Rathenau, and Max Weber (Kohn 1960, 262-305). But our focus is on
Mann, and one way to demonstrate that he harbored serious doubts about democracy in 1918 is to survey his comments about theories of representation, which run the gamut from an avowal of aristocratic voting systems to a cautious and resigned acceptance of limited political participation for the masses. In democratic regimes, the prevailing body of law by which a country is governed is supposed to accurately reflect the will (and safeguard the rights) of the *demos*, the people. Therein lies the problem for Mann: in his estimation, the veritable will of the people—a quasi-mystical entity—is not easily discerned. Plumbing the depths of this “primitive,” communal conscience, to the degree that it is possible, requires a culturally developed intuition. This communal will, in other words, is not adequately rendered by counting individual votes. Instead, if a nation can be likened to a “mythical individual” (*BU*, 108; *GW*, 12:150), offers Mann, then its will may best be defined as its fate—that is, the way a people, a slumbering giant, rises to meet historical challenges. The will of the people, then, is more akin to a subconscious force or movement. Rejecting the notion that a people’s will is the mere sum of its parts (a tallying of individual preferences), Mann cites Paul de Lagarde approvingly: “The people do not speak at all when the single individuals speak who make up the people. The people only speak when national character…becomes vocal in the individuals: that is, when the consciousness of a common basic tribal nature of all the individuals awakens and clearly sees its relationship to great historical events…. The people remain completely silent on individual laws and individual administrative measures, even if one seeks and receives their opinions, man by man” (*BU*, 108–9; *GW*, 12:151).

Having made his point about the opacity of the “tribal voice,” Mann does realize, as a practical matter, that some form of representation is necessary in every regime. Whatever form representation takes, he claims, it must revolve around the fulcrum of justice. Justice, he believes, demands that we give each person his or her due. In a country possessing the “intellectual disparities” of a Wilhelmine Germany, therefore, a multivote system is recommended, for it would take into account “accomplishment, age, degree of education, and intellectual rank, as well as whether one had sons and therefore had not only an egotistical-personal interest in the formation of the state but also a farther-looking one…” (*BU*, 194; *GW*, 12:268). Such a system, says Mann, would be relatively more just than universal suffrage, and relative justice, as in “all human efforts,” is all that can be hoped for (*BU*, 194; *GW*, 12:268).

Nonetheless, Mann knows that the juggernaut of democracy cannot be impeded; the triumph of mass politics in the modern age will not
abide a multivote system, for the masses espouse a rival conception of justice: “[T]he more thought-through, aristocratic, ingeniously graduated and inventive in its approximation to justice such a voting law would be, the less it would be able to seem to be the right one to the masses, who, you see, only consider the most simple, the clumsiest, and the most primitive type of justice, the one that without much ado gives everyone the same, to be the right one” (BU, 194; GW, 12:268). Given the historical situation, where it is no longer politically feasible ‘to give to each his own,’ Mann concedes that “nothing else remains but to give everyone the same” (BU, 194; GW, 12:268).

The somber chord struck in the preceding paragraphs, however, must be balanced by other statements in which Mann recognizes legitimate claims to political participation by the multitude. Although the Reflections is replete with derisive comments about abstract formulas of enlightenment politics—e.g. the claims of universal human rights or the call for equality—it also, in the tradition of German historicism, evinces a keen sensitivity to cultural difference and to the peculiarities of various states’ political development. Interestingly, this historicist bent of the Reflections sometimes cuts in an unexpectedly progressive direction; for example, it yields the conclusion that the colossal social, economic and technological changes at the beginning of the twentieth century will necessitate the political transformation of regimes, Germany’s included. Among the social changes Mann adduces are Germany’s introduction of “democratic educational institutions of general obligatory schooling” and the participation of large portions of the population in military service (BU, 240; GW, 12:330). As the educational tide rises and as more and more citizens are called upon to render service in defense of their country, “rights” of political participation become difficult to deny. “Truly,” states Mann, “it would not be very fitting for a German today to dispute the right of the German people, the hero of this war [WWI], to take part in and to have a voice in the life of the nation” (BU, 267; GW, 12:367). After all, Mann is in basic agreement with Nietzsche’s dictum that “[i]f the object of all politics is to make life bearable for as many as possible, then these many as possible should logically decide what they understand to be a bearable life” (BU, 239; GW, 12:329). It is in this practical mode, as opposed to speculation on the ideal, that Mann declares his intention to vote, for example, to rescind the Prussian three-class voting system—an electoral model in which the wealthy “few” and a “somewhat larger minority” of middle-income voters commanded two-thirds of the votes for the electoral college, “while the vast majority…were only able to cast the last third of votes” (Fulbrook 2001, 126).
Summing up, there are two threads that run through Mann's seemingly contradictory remarks about political representation and participation. The first thread is his recognition that the people should have a voice in government and that they are, ultimately, sovereign: “If it [greater participation in governance] is truly a demand of the people, then it has ceased to be a mere demand. The Volksstaat is nothing to be granted; it is here when the people are here who think and perceive of the state in this way” *(BU, 196; GW, 12:271).* The Volksstaat denotes a positive politicization of the people, allowing for a “more popular formation of...public institutions, a more passionate, genuine and growing intimacy of the relationship between nation and state” *(BU, 197; GW, 12:272).* Therefore, as an issue of fairness, Mann believes that young Germans who carried the war effort deserve a greater share in governance (if that is what they want) and, as a historical matter, that the conditions of modernity are pushing Germany inexorably toward democracy. For these reasons, he insists, he is not “fighting democracy” per se. What Mann abjures—and this is the second, *dominant* thread—is that Germany should become a democracy in the “Western” sense *(BU, 197; GW, 12:272).*

It is Mann’s pejorative use of the term democracy, the “Western-style,” that we will examine in the remainder of this essay. Specifically, we will attempt to identify the deep sources of Mann’s opposition to democracy that color his perception of democratic practice. Though the Wilhelmine government was far from ideal, Mann seemed generally content with the Imperial Constitution, which sought to “preserve the interest of the whole and to remove administration from the tumult of party campaigns”—a regime in which “special knowledge, talent, and professional training were considered indispensable for the assumption of office” *(BU, 218; GW, 12:301).* As we have observed, Mann could abide a constitution that allowed for greater participation, a more popular formation of institutions. Indeed, under the Constitution of the German Empire that Mann supported, deputies to the lower chamber or *Reichstag* were directly elected by equal manhood suffrage—though the power of this body, it must be admitted, was no match for the Emperor and the indomitable Chancellor for much of the imperial era, Otto von Bismarck. Thus, as a narrow *constitutional* matter or as a question of sovereignty, Mann was prepared to accept democracy in the uniquely German form of a Volksstaat. The point of contention, and this is decisive for Mann, appears to be the negative characteristics he associates with *democratic political culture.*
Interpretation

UNPOLITICS: THE ARTIST AND BURGHERLY LIFE

In a chapter of the Reflections entitled “Irony and Radicalism,” Mann identifies an important kinship between art and politics and thus the possibility of reconciling Germany’s artistic and burgherly culture with a democratic political culture. This linkage, observes Harvey Goldman, is that art and politics “occupy a similar position in the moral economy of life—the artist and the politician, and also the burgher and Germany are ‘in the middle’” (Goldman 1992, 112). Extolling art, Mann explains that “its mission lies in maintaining equally good relations with life and with pure intellect, in being at the same time conservative and radical; it lies in its central mediating position between intellect and life” (BU, 421; GW, 12:571). Mann continues: “But here is also, if anywhere, the relationship, the similarity, of art to politics: for politics, too, in its way, takes a mediating position between pure intellect and life, and it is not worthy of its name if it is nothing but conservative or radically destructive” (BU, 421; GW, 12:571). Both art and politics “concretize,” instantiate, incarnate; the artist and politician, to be successful, must both possess highly developed powers of judgment—the ability to relate the general to the particular, the idea to material reality. In Kantian terms, both works of art and the Rechtsstaat are, in an important sense, phenomenal expressions of the noumenal.

Yet this relationship between art and politics, as Mann’s phrase, “if anywhere [wenn irgendwo],” suggests, is actually quite limited. “It would be a misunderstanding,” contends Mann, “to want to make the artist into a politician because of this situational similarity; for the artist’s task of awakening the conscience of life, and of keeping it awake, is not at all a political task, but much more a religious one” (BU, 421; GW, 12:571). Though the skilled politician will engage in diplomacy and will be a master of compromise, politics is distinguished by the necessity of choice. One path or one policy will have to be selected over another, and, therefore, the artist alone will be able to strike the ironic or ambiguous pose vis-à-vis alternative perspectives. The politician will eventually take a stand, and as we will see, if he or she is a “good politician,” in Mann’s sarcastic sense, will inevitably overreach and encroach upon the artist’s “religious task.”

Chief among the defects of democratic political culture, Mann asserts, is its tendency to make life exclusively public. Indeed, Mann constantly equates “democratization” with “ politicization”: “[D]emocracy is not only political, it is politics itself” (BU, 190; GW, 12:262). It is this tendency to make all of life public, a threat to the private realm of the spirit that leads Mann to assert that art and politics are antagonists. And, it is clearly the artist
in Mann that bristles at politics’ intrusion upon his domain. The artist surveys life in all its richness, complexity and ambiguity, whereas the goal of the politician, intimates Mann, is simply not to “contradict” himself. If he has identified a particular country or party as a foe, the politician is reluctant, nay almost prohibited to pay the enemy a compliment or to admit that his own side evinces similar diabolical tendencies. On the domestic front, politicians and their bureaucratic assistants build cases for policies—currency reform, trade agreements, tax increases, etc.—and all evidence or information that may support alternative policies must be rebutted. Above all, what is prized in the political arena is consistency and clarity of vision. An aesthetic approach to life, however, embraces a broader spectrum of views, facts and feelings. Authorship, relates Mann, “has always seemed to me to be a witness to and an expression of ambivalence, of here and there, of yes and no, of two souls in one breast, of an annoying richness in inner conflicts, antitheses and contradictions” (BU, 9; GW, 12:20). It is this fuller draught from life’s diverse well that marks one as an “esthete,” that is, not in the “pejorative, dandyish sense” but as one who can abide, even revel in, contradiction.

And it is precisely this last characteristic of an esthete—the lack of “seriousness,” the fondness for “dialectics,” the habit of treating points of view as “playthings” (BU, 165; GW, 12:229)—that rouses the suspicion of the politician. Schiller, to cite just one of Mann’s esthetes, praises peace, in his *Bride of Messina*, “in the most ingratiating of words, compares it to a lovely boy resting by a quiet stream, surrounded by frisky lambs, luring sweet tones from his flute—but who uses—or misuses—his very next breath to speak of war with the same poetic dedication, declaring that it, too, has its honor, calling it ‘the mover of human fate,’ then breaking out into [a] song praising human butchery…” (BU, 161; GW, 12:223). The point, says Mann, is that Schiller is being an esthete here, not a politician. Suppose Schiller had called all pacifists “cowards and snivelers,” imagines Mann, then he would have been a “false politician, an enemy of humanity to be combated” (BU, 161; GW, 12:223-24). Conversely, had he decried war and celebrated freedom, he would have “acted as a good, enlightened and praiseworthy politician” (BU, 161; GW, 12:224).

If the conflict between art and politics (democracy) was simply a matter of opposing interpretive stances—the one aesthetic, embracing complexity and contradiction, the other political, emphasizing the necessity of choice or decision-making and oriented toward persuasion and electoral success—then artists and politicians could agree to disagree, affirm each other’s unique vocations and go their separate ways. But ultimately, for Mann, there is
more at stake, namely the value of liberty. From Mann’s artistic or aesthetic point of view, what is wrong with politics is that it is often terribly reductionist; it severely restricts the artist’s freedom, his intellectual canvas. Artists, of course, have almost always had to adjust to the demands (some subtle, others not) of political and economic power. Whether carving reliefs in stone for an Assyrian king or composing songs for a petty ducal court, artists have had to express themselves within the confines of their patrons’ tastes. Modern economic relations, however, seemed to hold promise for the artist’s liberation from overt control of a system of patronage. Nevertheless, the ideological bent of modern democratic politics, Mann fears, will jeopardize this new-found liberty. The twentieth century, declares Mann, is showing signs of taking after the eighteenth…. It tries to forget ‘what one knows of the nature of the human being’—in order to adapt him to its utopia. It adores ‘the human being’ completely in dix-huitièm fashion; it is not pessimistic, not skeptical, not cynical and—most of all—not ironical…. Reason and heart are again foremost in the vocabulary of the times—the former as a means of bringing ‘happiness,’ and the latter as ‘love,’ as ‘democracy’…. And art must propagate reforms of a social and political nature. If it refuses, judgment is passed upon it: critically it is called aestheticism; polemically, parasitism. (BU, 14; GW, 12:26-27; emphasis added)

In Mann’s case, it should be noted, the judgment he incurred was especially injurious because it came primarily from “civilization’s literary man,” his older brother, Heinrich. Indeed, this accounts for much of the vitriol in his political writings. For the party of what Mann referred to as the “New Passion,” i.e. writers like his brother Heinrich and the French novelist Romain Rolland, there was only one appropriate use of literary talent, namely to serve “democracy…political enlightenment and the humanitarianism of happiness” (BU, 16; GW, 12:29). Steadfastly eschewing limitations placed on artistic and intellectual freedom, or the “politicization of art,” Mann embraced a more aesthetic version of humanitarianism—one that included enlightenment and irrationalism, compassion and brutality, peace and war—and defended the inveterately unpolitical “German l’art pour l’art” (BU, 230-31; GW, 12:317). This understanding of humanism is perhaps most poignantly rendered in the famous “vision” of Hans Castorp, a character in Mann’s novel The Magic Mountain. Commenting on his vision, Castorp wonders at the inextricable combination of higher and baser desires that are present in the human psyche: “The great soul of which we are a part may dream through us, in our own manner of dreaming, its own secret dreams, of its youth, its hope, its joy and peace—and blood sacrifice” (Mann 1984, 495).
Mann’s critique of democratic culture, however, does not end with his claim that it narrows the compass of artistic expression, that it politicizes creative output. Extending his polemic further, Mann contends that *democratic politics is incompatible with the artistic temperament and the necessary conditions of artistic production*. When Mann conjures up an image of the quintessential German artist, it is to the German burgherly culture of late medieval Nürnberg that he turns, to the “burgherly intellectual” and “metaphysical handworker” (*BU*, 80; *GW*, 12:114). And what are the distinctive characteristics and attitudes of such German artists, those masters of the medieval guild? “The person engaged in artistic activity,” says Mann, “is most deeply imbued with a regard for ability and mastery, with a disgust for bungling: sovereign mastery of the subject seems to him the prerequisite of all art, for to him, art is the absorption of the material by the form. Is it surprising that he [the German artist] was only too ready to succumb to the German dogma of the ‘expert’ and to fall prey to political quietism?” (*BU*, 218-19; *GW*, 12:301). The artist’s (of which Mann is one) admiration for skill and competence and his aversion to “bungling” helps to illuminate Mann’s own anti-democratic and anti-political stance. Indeed, one could argue that Germans’ historical experience was dominated by highly bureaucratic Imperial or Prussian styles of governance and that many Germans, not just “burgherly-artists,” were content with efficient administration and were deeply skeptical and contemptuous of the much more tumultuous process of parliamentary politics, a chronic problem faced by the fledgling Republic that rose from the ashes of World War I.

To achieve a high degree of professionalism, of course, requires great concentration and attention to detail. Interruptions and disturbances are unwelcome occurrences in the scholar’s library or master’s workshop. As implied above, burgherly-artistic mastery normally presupposes certain ideal social-political conditions, above all social tranquility, *Ordnung*. “I do not want politics,” intones Mann, “I want objectivity, order and decency. If this is philistine, then I want to be a philistine. If it is German, then in God’s name I want to be called a German…” (*BU*, 189; *GW*, 12:261). Politics—the world of parties and partisanship, of bargaining and shifting coalitions, of endless parliamentary wrangling and legislative gridlock, of electoral convulsions and the alternation of political platforms and policies—will never ignite the passions of the burgherly artist for whom the state should be “something technical more than spiritual, a machine to be supervised and taken care of by the experts” (*BU*, 107; *GW*, 12:149). According to Mann, Schopenhauer is exemplary in this respect, having chosen “the old German
verse, ‘I thank God every morning that I don’t have to worry about the Roman Empire,’ for his motto” (BU, 93; GW, 12:131).

This way of interpreting Mann places him at the crossroads of a debate in German historiography about the so-called Sonderweg—the notion, popular among post-war social scientists and historians (and, in nascent form, embraced by some of Mann’s contemporaries, including his brother Heinrich), that the rise of Nazism was intimately tied to the aberrant German course of development, one that followed a different trajectory than those of other Western liberal democracies:

Thus we have an answer to the German question: Fascism succeeded because of the persistence of illiberal, authoritarian structures in state and society; these structures [such as the power of the East Elbian Junkers, army, and civil service] endured because the German bourgeoisie, unlike its British and French counterparts, was incapable of sweeping them away in a process of successful bourgeois revolution.... [T]his incapacity developed because in Germany the bourgeoisie never formed itself into an independent class capable of destroying feudalism and of building a society that was capitalist and liberal in the full sense of these two terms. (Blackbourn and Eley 1984, 73)

There is not room in this essay to adequately address the multi-faceted debate about the veracity of the Sonderweg thesis; suffice it to say there have been critics. For instance, though they believe it possesses some explanatory value, David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley believe it is flawed in important respects. These two historians argue that the thesis presumes, uncritically, that there is a “correct” path to liberal democracy, namely the one taken by Britain and France, though critical historical analysis reveals as many similarities as differences among these states. Most important, it does not properly attend to the “unfolding of an authentically bourgeois society in nineteenth-century Germany, looking especially at property rights and ideas of competition, the rule of law, the emergence of voluntary associations and public opinion, and new patterns of taste, patronage, and philanthropy” (Blackbourn and Eley 1984, 13). In short, according to Blackbourn and Eley, the German bourgeoisie are not as “abject” and absent as this thesis purports.

Whatever the merits or flaws of the Sonderweg thesis as a tool of historical analysis, it is interesting to observe that, in the early twentieth century, the notion that the German nation had traveled a path distinct from those countries that eventually comprised the Entente was viewed favorably by many Germans—represented a positive analogue to the more negative (later
twentieth-century) version of the Sonderweg idea. And it is in the context of this traditional narrative about the peculiarity (and, indeed, the superiority) of the German “way” that Mann’s political ideas in the period of the Great War achieve their resonance. M. Rainer Lepsius describes this political worldview—what he refers to as the “authoritarian conception of political order”—in the following manner:

This authoritarian conception of political order was not only a carry-over from imperial times, a nostalgic resentment against the present state of affairs, believed to be caused by the Allied reparations and political mismanagement, and anxieties of the middle classes toward Socialist reforms. It was deeply rooted in a widespread intellectual conviction that there was a distinctly German road to modernity, which was not to follow the lines of the West. This conception had a number of long-standing leitmotifs: power should be wielded by an elite of virtue and competence, not by functionaries of the impersonal parliamentary mechanisms; social conflicts should be solved by reason of the public good rather than settled by compromises of conflicting interests; integration should be achieved by national commitment and a quest for community, not by particularistic interest mediation and institutionalized procedures; and the state should have ultimate authority and moral dignity in regard to the autonomous forces of society and the individual pursuit of goals. These ideas coalesced in a distrust of democracy and the free organization of social interests and in the belief in state intervention and constitutionally secured elite authority. It should be made clear that such a concept of political order was neither totalitarian nor Fascist: it did not call for a Unitarian mass movement but for a cooperation of social units in their own right (berufständische Ordnung); it did not believe in a military policing of society but in the authority of welfare-oriented paternalism…. These ideas were formed in the course of the nineteenth century under the impact of industrialization and the French Revolution. (Lepsius 1978, 36-37)

It would be a rather simple task to map the majority of Mann’s political preferences that we have thus far encountered onto the ideological framework sketched by Lepsius. However, it is important to remember that when Mann finally became convinced that this ideology was being espoused by enemies of the German people, he abandoned much of it (implicitly if not explicitly) and turned his formidable intellectual powers to the task of shoring up the Weimar republic. Nonetheless, while his politics veered toward democracy, he never repudiated some of his fundamental criticisms of democratic political culture and he attempted, in his later writings, to explain how
some aspects of democracy that he found particularly defective might be repaired (or avoided) and made congenial to German tastes and interests.

**Unpolitics’ Silver Lining: A Constructive Critique of Democracy**

Whereas many of the ideas we have encountered heretofore could be characterized as “reactionary,” there are elements in Mann’s critique of democratic politics that cannot be so easily dismissed. Indeed, Mann is at his best, transcends the limitations of his cultural horizons, when he focuses his critical faculties on the malady of democratic hubris. Fundamentally, what underlies Mann’s critiques of democratic politics is a controversy about the good life. Contra Aristotle, Mann denies that the *polis* is the terminus of the good life. Instead, he makes it abundantly clear that the realm of the “spirit” is the locus of life’s meaningful pursuits: “The truth…[is] that there is a sphere that is undoubtedly superior to the state and to political life, that sphere to which art, religion, the humanities, and all deeper morality belong, a sphere of the most personally characteristic values and accomplishments” (*BU*, 178; *GW*, 12:247). This is a classic paean to German “inwardness” and it stands diametrically opposed to the “goods” of democratic politics—civic virtue and material well-being. “I think,” counters Mann, “that the most important aspects of the human spirit—religion, philosophy, art, poetry, science—exist beside, above, and beyond the state, and often enough even against it” (*BU*, 107; *GW*, 12:149).

These rival conceptions of the good life define, in large measure, the *fraternal* conflict between Thomas and Heinrich and the *military* conflict between Germany and “the West.” The dynamics of these conflicts, as Mann interprets them, is that the democratic forces of “civilization” have attacked Germany and, at the personal level, assailed Germany’s patriotic (though, again, unpolitical) spokesman, i.e., Mann himself. Interestingly, Mann’s interpretation of events leads him to a discourse on imperialism. According to Mann, the excessive narrowing or *contraction* of artistic and intellectual themes and projects, wrought by the literary and diplomatic agents of democracy, are accompanied by an imperious *magnification* of the political master plan. Turning to Dostoevsky for inspiration and insight, Mann sympathizes with the view that the political dream was first hatched by the Romans and, though it has undergone several mutations, has spread inexorably. Following his Russian guide, Mann explains, in a fascinating passage, the course of the “Roman idea…[b]eginning in ancient Rome with her concept of a universal unification of mankind and her belief in the practical realization
of this concept in the form of a world monarchy. This formula died, he [Dostoevsky] said, but not the idea; for the idea was that of the European people; their civilization has developed from it, and they exist solely for its sake (BU, 25; GW, 12:42). This “idea of the European people” received several different incarnations—the Catholic Church (i.e., of the Latin West, not the more de-centralized Eastern Orthodox), the bourgeois revolution of 1789 and, what was most relevant for Dostoevsky, socialism (BU, 26; GW, 12:43).

However, it is the democratic, French, and revolutionary bourgeois version of the political idea that infuriates Mann the most. He selects a caustic passage from Max Scheler to illustrate his point about the arrogance of democratic politics and its tendency to impose its values on others:

But since the Napoleonic wars, what she [France] has considered to be precisely her special, foremost national mission, is to realize this specifically French concept of ‘human rights’ and of historical stability not only within her borders, but also to spread them over the world, to fill the world and all other nations with them. But this mission has been invested with the completely special Gallic value quality of the splendor of national glory (gloire), you see, of a ‘leader,’ ‘teacher,’ and ‘educator’ of the human race—this is France’s idea of a national mission. But France has always overlooked in the most naïve manner imaginable that precisely this demand and principle makes its bearer aggressive and warlike in the most extreme way, aggressive against all nations that have another idea of their mission that France does not respect, or that, because of their own national spirit, will not submit to France’s leadership. (BU, 132; GW, 12:183)

With Mann’s wholehearted endorsement, Scheler reminds readers that France, at least since the time of Napoleon, has been viewed by the people east of the Rhine as an “aggressor.” Though France may be, at the time of the writing of the Reflections, one of Germany’s actual enemies, the larger context should not be forgotten; Mann’s France, just like Dostoevsky’s Rome, stands more broadly for a specific set of values (democracy, internationalism, a French-revolutionary notion of equality and human rights) and attitudes (naïve optimism, hypocrisy and imperialism). In Mann’s polemic, France is everything, Gott sei Dank, Germany is not.

Where, then, does this leave Germany? The question of Germany’s destiny and calling is, in fact, inextricably bound with Mann’s meditations on politics and democracy. Though he does not accept the proposition uncritically (BU, 27-28; GW, 12:45-46), Mann generally agrees with Dostoevsky that Germany’s unique role is one of protest. That is, if France
is unquestionably associated with revolution, Germany is forever the land of the *Reformation*. And in Mann’s estimation, the difference is profound. While both Germany and France resisted a kind of tyranny—in one instance the Catholic Church, in the other the *ancien régime*—revolutionary France alone transformed the absolutism of monarchy into the equally aggressive absolutism of democracy. By contrast, in Germany the Reformation *liberated* the spirit but *limited* the political impulse: “The Reformation was admittedly a democratic event: for the emancipation of the layman is democracy…. But Luther’s most original and profound impact, too, was of an aristocratic nature: he perfected the freedom and self-authority of the German human being by internalizing them and thus removing them forever from the sphere of the political argument” (*BU*, 202; *GW*, 12:279). In his choice of the term “aristocratic,” Mann was clearly influenced by his reading of Nietzsche. For Mann, explains Goldman, “‘aristocratic’ means free, self-determining, self-willing. It stands for a self that is self-moving, autonomous, and possessing dignity” (Goldman 1992, 115). Indeed, as we have witnessed throughout our survey of the *Reflections*, Mann’s ambivalence toward politics is grounded in his conception of the individual (in particular, the German, artistic, burgherly individual) who is more “aristocratic” and moral—that is, more focused on internal freedom, dignity and *Bildung*—than liberal and political.

Thus, what is palpable in Mann’s *Reflections* is the sense of *encroachment*—on the artist’s freedom and integrity and on the German way of life. The dramatic German response to this encroachment is the Great War: “[T]he intellectual roots of ‘the German war,’ as it is called with every possible justification, lie in Germany’s inborn and historical ‘protestantism,’ [and it is] essentially a new outbreak, perhaps the grandest, the final one, as some believe, of Germany’s ancient struggle against the spirit of the West, as well as the struggle of the Roman world against stubborn Germany” (*BU*, 29; *GW*, 12:48). The “struggle,” of course, did not end with the Treaty of Versailles, but continued, albeit with a new resonance, during the reign of the National Socialists.

However, there is perhaps no greater measure of the political metamorphosis that Germany has undergone since the collapse of the Third Reich than the anachronistic ring of Mann’s words, “Germany’s ancient struggle against the spirit of the West,” for, ironically, the *Bundesrepublik* has become the cornerstone of the European Union, and in the international arena, one of the most vocal and respected proponents of “French-revolutionary” values.
REFERENCES

All references to Mann’s *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* employ the abbreviation *BU* (*Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*) plus a page number in the translation. Also, each citation provides the page number(s) for the primary German collection of Mann’s works—*Gesammelte Werke* (*GW*), plus the volume number. Publication information can be found below.


John Locke and the Biblical Foundations of Modernity

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Dr. Kim Ian Parker, Professor of Religious Studies at Memorial University of Newfoundland, has written a significant new book on the relationship between the Bible and modern political philosophy. In *The Biblical Politics of John Locke*, Parker contends that “the Bible was an important component in [Locke’s] political outlook and, far from providing Locke with only the semblance of orthodoxy, it provides him with the pre-eminent account of human nature” (p. 1). Parker argues competently in favor of his thesis in a book which, despite certain weaknesses, contains much solid learning. Mainstream Locke scholars will certainly find it informative, and Straussians should find it challenging in a constructive manner.

Political interpretations of the Bible have been a central interest of Parker’s for many years. Inspired by Eugene Combs and Kenneth Post at McMaster University, where he did his graduate work, Parker has produced a series of valuable explorations. His Ph.D. dissertation in Hebrew Bible was a “close reading” of the biblical story of Solomon, with an eye upon certain political themes; it was published as *Wisdom and Law in the Reign of Solomon* (Parker 1993). The germ of the book under review here, however, was Parker’s M.A. thesis on Filmer’s and Locke’s use of the Bible. While working on that thesis, Parker became convinced that there was a positive connection between the Bible and the foundations of modern liberal democracy, and he has explored the connection in published works since, including *Liberal Democracy and the Bible* (Parker 1992), a collection of essays (by Parker and others) on biblical themes in the thought of early modern thinkers such as Hobbes, Locke, and Kant. The book under review presents Parker’s latest
formulation of the Bible–liberal democracy connection.

Parker’s book is clearly addressed to a dual audience: the “mainstream” Locke scholars (historians, philosophy professors, and political scientists), who are not naturally inclined towards a “hermeneutic of suspicion,” and the Straussians, who are. Parker’s appeal to mainstream scholars (such as Richard Ashcraft, Maurice Cranston, and John Dunn) is in evidence throughout the book, in his copious citations of their work in the endnotes, in his frequent quotations from their writings in support of his points, and in the generous compliments he pays to them. He sees himself as a laborer in the same vineyards as these scholars, and it is primarily for their benefit that he has written his book. On the other hand, his concern to address the Straussian interpretation of Locke is obvious, not only from a few explicit references and allusions to Strauss and his followers in the text, but also from numerous remarks and references in the endnotes. This concern is not merely incidental, but to some extent drives Parker’s research: in demonstrating the importance of the Bible for Locke’s political thought, he wishes to show that the Straussian account of Locke’s use of the Bible is wrong. Indeed, Parker’s intention to negate the Straussian account is plainly alluded to in the thesis statement quoted above: the words “far from providing Locke with only a semblance of orthodoxy” are aimed primarily at the Straussians.

By the “Straussian” account Parker means primarily Strauss’s chapter on Locke in *Natural Right and History* (Strauss 1953), but he mentions also Thomas Pangle, Michael Zuckert, and Peter C. Myers (155n3), as well as Richard Cox and David Foster (179n28), and responds to some of their points, albeit only in the notes. He tends to treat Straussian thought on Locke as monolithic, which may be a mistake. Whereas Strauss and the Straussians to whom Parker refers often seem to treat Locke as a sneaky subverter of Biblical thought, and as a morally suspect “modern,” Harry Jaffa is a Straussian who seems quite favorable to Locke on the whole, regarding him as a modern who has preserved much of the truth of the ancients. Jaffa has also drawn attention to the Declaration of Independence, a document which appears, at least on the surface, to base modern liberal freedoms upon the existence of the Creator God of the Bible, and thus to support Parker’s thesis. Of course, it may be that Jaffa’s account of the relationship between Locke, the Declaration and the Bible is finally incompatible with Parker’s. The point is not that Jaffa and Parker entirely agree, but only that Parker is unfairly broad-brushing with the term “Straussian.” For the purpose of this review, however, Parker’s narrower understanding of “Straussian” is sufficient.
Parker’s attempt to refute the Straussians is indirect. Instead of devoting his book to a negative proposition (i.e., that the Straussians are wrong to say that Locke’s use of the Bible is unorthodox, self-contradictory, and insincere), he devotes it to the positive proposition that Locke’s political thought rests in part upon fundamental assumptions about human nature which are found in the early chapters of Genesis. Parker doubtless believes that if he can establish the positive connection between Locke and Genesis, the refutation of the Straussians will follow by implication. The strategy is logical, and it allows Parker to write the book as a piece of research rather than a sustained anti-Straussian polemic. This makes it possible for those who are uninterested in Parker’s disagreement with the Straussians, or who are not well-versed in Straussian readings of Locke, to follow Parker’s argument.

**Parker’s Argument in Outline**

The book comprises an introduction, five chapters, and conclusion. The introduction is a plea for scholars to pay more attention to Locke’s use of the Bible. Parker begins by noting that in Locke’s private library of over 3,600 titles, there are 870 books (almost a quarter of the total) on theological subjects, as compared with only 390 on politics and only 269 on philosophy (1, 155n1). This fact, combined with other evidence of Locke’s lifelong preoccupation with theological matters in general and the Bible in particular, makes it odd that so few Locke scholars have investigated Locke’s use of the Bible. To be sure, Parker notes, many Locke scholars have remarked upon Locke’s frequent biblical references, but “few have considered their overall importance to his philosophical outlook as a whole” (1). They have not raised the question whether Locke’s political thought might be in some way dependent upon his biblical exegesis. This is a serious lacuna in Locke scholarship, because, if Locke’s political theory and Locke’s views on human nature are linked to key biblical texts (especially Genesis 1-4), then liberalism in its formative period would seem to owe something to the Bible (2).

The first chapter, “John Locke: A Lifelong Interest in the Bible,” documents Locke’s interest in Christianity in general, and the Bible in particular, throughout his life and writings, published and unpublished. The thrust of the chapter is that the Bible was a work Locke studied in great depth over several decades, and that it was a work that Locke cared deeply about, not simply a literary front for his philosophical doctrines. Locke engaged in extensive conversation and correspondence with both British and Continental theologians of all stripes, and the theological books in his personal library are filled with marginal notes revealing his preoccupation with religious matters.
Towards the end of the life he produced *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, an extensive defense of his own somewhat unorthodox but apparently heartfelt understanding of the Christian religion, and he spent a good part of his last years working intensely through the letters of Paul, making paraphrases and detailed notes, which were published posthumously in 1706 (34). Parker’s contention here is not that Locke was orthodox, but only that he was at least a liberal type of Christian, and that the form of liberal Christianity he espoused was deeply influenced by a careful reading of Scripture. For this contention Parker makes a strong *prima facie* case.

The second chapter, “Reason, Revelation and the Fall,” attempts three things: to explain (based on Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*) Locke’s concerns about the difficulty of obtaining *any* certain knowledge; to investigate the consequences of this difficulty for Locke’s developing thought in the area of biblical hermeneutics; and to show how Locke’s hermeneutical principles contributed to his more liberal and tolerant version of Christianity and his final rejection of the orthodox doctrine of the Fall. The first problem for Parker in this chapter is Locke’s “less-than-clear relation between reason and revelation” (37). Parker works on the assumption that Locke wrote with perfect frankness about that relation, and thus, when Locke has “problems” in “articulating the nature of reason and revelation” (37), Parker seems inclined to the view that the problems in the articulation arise out of Locke’s intellectual difficulty with the subject-matter, rather than from Locke’s need to handle certain topics with delicacy. Thus, he dodges most of the difficulties posed by Locke’s early Essays on the Law of Nature, remarking only in passing upon “problems in the inferences Locke draws in both the early Essays and in his later Essay” (41). There is no mention of Strauss’s detailed critique of Locke’s *Essays on the Law of Nature*, even though Parker is well aware of it: Strauss’s essay “Locke’s Doctrine of Natural Law,” is the only essay on Locke in *What Is Political Philosophy?* (1959), a work cited in Parker’s bibliography. To be fair, Parker may be justified in declining to present a lengthy critique of Strauss’s essay, since Parker’s book is on Locke’s use of the Bible, not Locke’s doctrine of natural law; still, since Strauss’s essay bears on the question of Locke’s sincerity about Christianity, Parker’s failure to even mention it seems like an evasion. On the other hand, the rest of the material in this chapter is handled fairly well. After indicating Locke’s rejection of biblical “proof-texting” and his adoption of the core insights of what would later be called the “historical-critical” method of biblical interpretation, Parker provides a thorough and excellent discussion of Locke’s understanding of the Fall (50–65). Parker shows that Locke moved steadily away from his Calvinist
upbringing, and eventually completely abandoned the doctrine that the Fall resulted in the inheritance of an intrinsic moral depravity. For Locke, the result of the Fall was simply the loss of immortality, with all the physical and moral difficulties that this loss entailed. Locke’s rejection of the Augustinian-Calvinist tradition, in favor of a simpler and less embellished reading of the Genesis story, had great political implications. It meant that political theory should not start from the staggering assumption of man’s absolute depravity, but from the less onerous assumption that human beings are simply fallible, no better and no worse than their first father, Adam. True, men can be selfish and vicious, but they need not be, if they are properly educated in virtue and social life. Human beings are malleable and sin can to some extent be educated out of them, as they learn to follow the precepts of the law of nature (57). Further, this education does not require the repressive rule of an absolute monarch, but only the firm but gentle rule of a government freely chosen by the people (55).

In the third chapter, “Adam and the Patriarchal Order,” Parker explains the “patriarchal” account of politics which was prevalent in Locke’s day, and against which Locke wrote. Patriarchal theory grounded absolute monarchy upon the likeness of a kingdom to a family, in which the father, the male head, had absolute authority over his wife and children. As the obedience of the children to the father was established by the Fifth Commandment (“honor thy father and thy mother”), and as the father’s rule over the mother was hallowed by tradition, so the King, who was a father writ large, had the right to absolute obedience from all his subjects. Parker covers in some detail the ancient and contemporary variations on patriarchal theory, then focuses upon Sir Robert Filmer, in whose writings patriarchal theory’s claims are at their plainest, and couched most clearly in a biblical context. In Filmer’s account, the first man, Adam, had “dominion” over all the earth, and hence absolute authority over his children, i.e., over the entire human race. This absolute authority had descended, via the institution of primogeniture (87) or rule of the eldest brother (justified by reference to Genesis 4:7, concerning the relationship between Cain and Abel), to the various Monarchs of the earth, and to refuse absolute obedience to one’s Monarch was to refuse to obey the modern representative of Adam, God’s chosen ruler. Another essential part of Filmer’s patriarchalism is the subjection of women, patterned after the subjection (85) of Eve to Adam (justified on the basis of Genesis 3:16).

In the fourth chapter, “John Locke’s Adam: The First Treatise,” Parker shows how Locke, in the First Treatise of Government, dismantles Filmer’s biblical patriarchalism. Filmer’s argument from the Bible consists
largely of a series of “proof-texts,” misread due either to prejudice or error, and strung together by some specious general political reasoning. Locke, who knew Hebrew, is easily able to dispose of Filmer’s readings by focusing upon the exact words of the text. Filmer seems unaware that Adam, in addition to being the name of an individual in the biblical story, is the generic word for “Man” in Hebrew, and Locke proves from Genesis 1.26–28 that the “dominion” to which Filmer falsely appeals is not the dominion of an individual man, Adam, over his fellow-men, but of Man the species over non-rational creatures (107-11). With similar attention to biblical detail, Locke gets the better of Filmer (or so Parker argues) on the question of the subjugation of women, by showing that God’s prediction in Genesis 3:16 indicates only the fact, not the right, of the woman’s subjugation (111–13). Parker paints Locke as a proto-feminist on the basis of this argument, and points out another “feminist” argument made by Locke in the same context: while God in Genesis 3:16 indicates that women will in fact suffer from the pains of childbirth, he places them under no obligation to endure such suffering, if a remedy for it were available (112). Parker apparently approves of this biblical feminism, as compatible with Locke’s emphasis on “rights.” Regarding primogeniture, Parker’s discussion of Locke’s refutation of Filmer is puzzling. Filmer had appealed to Genesis 4:7, and Parker, who draws our attention to this verse, does not say where Locke offers his counter-interpretation. In fact, Parker leaves us with the impression that Locke never actually dealt with that verse, but refuted primogeniture on other biblical grounds (116–18).

In the fifth chapter, “John Locke’s Adam: The Second Treatise,” Parker has to deal with the fact that biblical references are much more sparing in the Second Treatise than in the first, and that in the Second Treatise Locke appears to rely solely on reason, not Scripture, for his arguments and conclusions. Parker disagrees here with the scholarly consensus, common among both Straussians and non-Straussians, that Locke’s political theory is ultimately independent of biblical thought. Parker believes that there is a “biblical framework” (123) for the Second Treatise, a framework provided by “the bold claim in Genesis that human beings are created in the image of God” (124). Parker writes: “To be created in the image of God was, as Locke had argued in the first treatise, to be created rational (I, 30), and if human beings are created with a capacity for reason, they are born with a capacity for freedom. Their freedom is, in other words, dependent upon their being rational, which is in turn dependent on being in the image of God. . . . In the Lockean world of biblical politics . . . to be in the image of God is to be born into a state of freedom.” (124) The “biblical framework,” however, is more
extensive than this. For Parker, Locke’s God is a generous, beneficent deity, who “is not interested in condemning humanity so much as directing it towards its own best interests” (146). Thus, through the sentence of labor decreed by God in Genesis 3, and through the directive in Genesis 1 to subdue the earth, mankind learns to appropriate the fruits of the earth, to institute property, and to build prosperous civil societies upon the ensuing wealth (134). In Locke’s reading of Genesis, God contrives to bring good out of the Fall, rather than to use the Fall to limit man to a state of ungovernable depravity.

Where Calvin and Augustine could draw nothing political from the Fall but the need for wickedness to be ruled by strong central authority, Locke saw the Fall as an opportunity for men to assert their reason and full moral responsibility, to improve their lot economically and learn to live in accordance with natural law. From this it follows that “The remedy [against corruption] is for society, not just the individual, to grow into adulthood and to throw off the shackles of paternal dominion and to allow freedom, equality, and reason to flourish” (146). According to Parker, Locke’s reading of Genesis, though unorthodox, is not radically out of line with the “plain sense” (146) of the text. For Parker, as for Locke, Genesis does not put man down, but raises him up.

Parker summarizes his findings in the conclusion. The traditional doctrine of the Fall corresponded with “patriarchal” assumptions about the need for absolute monarchical rule. Parker writes: “If the theory of original sin were a proper account of human behaviour, people could not be trusted to act righteously, or morally, by themselves, and therefore needed the strong arm of civil authority to keep them in line” (147). Against this theologico-political position, Locke asserted his own: a textually-based doctrine of the Fall which accepted the imperfections of human beings, but paved the way for their intellectual, moral and political improvement. In Parker’s words: “If there were no such thing as original sin and humans were not under the necessity of sinning constantly, magisterial crackdowns were unnecessary to curb wickedness—in fact they would succeed only in provoking subjects to further rebellion” (148). And if there were no such thing as original sin, “human beings were free and responsible individuals who could be expected to act reasonably with minimal coercion” (148). Locke’s re-reading of Genesis enables him to see human nature in a new light, and in this light liberal democracy is shown to be the best political expression of biblical theology. It is true, as Parker ruefully remarks at the end, that later developments in modern thought “ultimately left Locke’s scriptural framework in tatters” (153); nonetheless, the biblical roots of the original form of liberalism are there to be seen.
REMARKS ON PARKER’S THESIS

Parker’s thesis will be of value to mainstream Locke scholars. He brings to the discussion of Locke an extensive knowledge of the Hebrew Bible and the history of biblical interpretation, and this should serve as a valuable complement to the expertise of Locke scholars, whose training is in other areas. In this regard, however, he could have done much more.

Both in his discussion of the interpretation of the Fall, and in his recounting of the Locke-Filmer debate, Parker rarely brings his own understanding of the Bible to bear. He is content, for the most part, to describe how the Bible was traditionally read and how Locke differed from that reading, or how Filmer read the Bible and how Locke disagreed with him, without even attempting to establish in a rigorous way who has the correct, or at least the better, reading of the Bible. The furthest Parker usually goes in this regard is a casual endorsement here and there; e.g., a brief opinion that Locke got the better of Filmer, or that Locke’s exegesis of the Fall may be closer to the text of Genesis than the orthodox interpretation. In those few cases, Parker offers little in the way of justification for his opinion. In one spot only (107) does he refer to the details of the Hebrew to support Locke’s reading, but even here the argument is sketchy, and will not be easily understandable to those Locke scholars who have no background in biblical exegesis. (The fact that Parker uses untransliterated Hebrew in this passage does not help the non-Hebrew reader, either.) Since Parker is trying to supplement the world of Lockean scholarship with his biblical training, why does he not offer more of the riches of that training?

In fact, this work would have greatly benefited from a final chapter which was solely exegetical, i.e., a chapter in which Parker laid out for the reader his own interpretation of the political high points of the early chapters of Genesis. Such a chapter, complete with a discussion of crucial Hebrew terms and how they were sometimes mis-rendered into English in Locke’s day, would have helped to establish a coherent picture of Genesis, into which the reader could fit the randomly scattered “proof-texts” offered by Locke, Filmer, and others. In addition, such a chapter would establish Parker’s own hermeneutical principles and particular conclusions, so that the reader could better assess where Parker is coming from when he takes sides with Locke over Augustine or Filmer.

About Parker’s specific thesis, i.e., that Locke’s political theory is not simply justified by quotations from the Bible, but actually rests upon the
account of human nature given in the Bible, there is much that one could say. Parker’s argument seems to rest on two premises: (1) that Locke was sincere in his interpretation of the Bible; and (2) that Locke’s interpretation of the Bible as a “liberal” document is substantially correct. I will address the first point in this section, and reserve the second point for the final section of the review.

Certainly Parker makes a strong case that Locke, however unorthodox he was, was still a Christian of a kind, and took the Bible seriously until the end of his life. In support of Parker, I suggest a contrast with Hobbes, who is often thought of as an unbeliever. Unlike Hobbes, who in his retirement translated the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* to keep busy, Locke in his retirement translated and paraphrased the Epistles of St. Paul. Unlike Hobbes, Locke carried on an extensive private correspondence all his life with Christian theologians, including amateur theologians like Isaac Newton. Unlike Hobbes, whose remarks on Christianity and the Bible are almost wholly directed towards political ends, Locke has many remarks on the spiritual and ethical dimensions of the Bible, especially the New Testament. Despite the similarity between the political doctrines of Hobbes and Locke, it is much easier to envision Hobbes as an atheist, than it is to see Locke as one. Unless we assume that Locke was deceiving not only the readers of the *Essay* and the *Two Treatises*, but also all of his personal correspondents, and unless we are prepared to believe that an infidel would have spent months of the waning years of his life doing detailed exegesis of texts which he believed were filled with superstitious falsehoods, it is sensible to conclude that Locke was at the very least a latitudinarian Christian, perhaps a Socinian. And if we grant that Locke was a Christian, even of a very liberal sort, then we cannot rule out the possibility that he took his Biblical exegesis seriously. This is especially the case if, as Parker asserts, Locke’s Biblical exegesis is on some points better textually grounded than the orthodox exegesis which it seeks to replace. Against this conclusion, however, there is the argument of Strauss, to which I now turn.

**Parker vs. Strauss: Is Modernity Biblical?**

Leo Strauss has always written ambiguously about the relationship between the Bible and modernity. Sometimes he writes as if the great division in Western Thought is between the Greeks and the Bible, on one hand, and modern science and enlightenment, on the other. At other points he writes as if the great division is between Athens and Jerusalem, Athens representing reason and philosophy, hence criticism and science, and Jerusalem representing revelation, hence faith and tradition. At still other points he seems to be making a less explicit distinction between Judaism and Greek
thought on the one hand, and Christian and modern thought on the other. Under this last distinction, the Bible, including both the New Testament and the Hebrew scriptures (the latter being read through Christian eyes), would have a major role in the generation of modernity. Which of these distinctions is the really important one for Strauss? I suspect that Strauss’s varying depiction of the crucial divisions is partly pedagogical, and that the division that he emphasizes frequently depends upon his intended audience (popular or learned, Jewish or general) and his overall purpose in a particular piece of writing. Certainly it is not my intention here to seize upon one of these divisions, and say that this one, and only this one, is Strauss’s real teaching. Rather, I wish to focus upon the division which he employs in his best-known discussion of Locke, in *Natural Right and History* (Strauss 1953, 202-51). In this discussion, Strauss ignores any potentially significant differences between Judaism and Christianity, and treats “the Bible,” “the Old Testament,” “the New Testament,” and “Christianity” as belonging to the same sphere of thought. He then contrasts this Christian or biblical thought with the thought of Locke. That is, he argues that parts of Locke’s thought are incompatible with important parts of Christian theology, and with certain crucial premises of the Old and New Testaments. He further argues that Locke was well aware of the incompatibility. Since Strauss contends that Locke was decidedly a “modern” rather than an “ancient,” Strauss is arguing, by implication, that crucial parts of the Bible or of Christian theology are incompatible with modernity; modernity, in the main, cannot be said to be “biblical.” Strauss’s thesis is then incompatible with Parker’s. Strauss’s Locke is modern not only because he departs from Plato and Aristotle, but also because he departs from the Bible and Christianity. Parker’s Locke is modern because he departs from Plato and Aristotle (and medieval theology and patriarchalism) in the name of the Bible. Strauss’s Locke is modern and non-biblical; Parker’s Locke is modern and biblical.

It is at first sight surprising that Parker, in a book on Locke’s biblical thought, would not have offered a detailed response to Strauss’s remarks, which, if correct, would seem to prove fatal or severely damaging to his thesis. As mentioned earlier, however, this is in line with Parker’s strategy: if Locke can be shown to have used the Bible sincerely and correctly to ground liberal modernity, then Strauss’s arguments must somehow be wrong, and it is not necessary to refute them. This approach cannot be satisfying to those of us who respect (even if we do not entirely agree with) Strauss’s critique. If we have two different lines of argument, one seeming to prove that Locke wrote a sincere and plausible interpretation of the Bible, and another
seeming to prove the opposite, the arguments must be made to confront one another. Parker avoids the confrontation.

I will not go into Strauss’s arguments in great detail here, but merely highlight a few of the ones that go completely unanswered in Parker’s account of Locke. The Old Testament offers the categoric imperative: “Honor thy Father and thy Mother”; Strauss shows that Locke’s “natural law” argument about duties towards parents amounts to: “Honor thy Father and thy Mother if they have deserved it of you” (Strauss 1953, 219). Jesus forbade divorce for any reason other than unchastity; Locke’s “natural law” argument implies that the conjugal relation need not be for life (Strauss 1953, 217). Locke says that the entire law of nature is found in the New Testament in a way that is clear, plain, and easy to understand, but asserts that it is a law of nature that a government “must not raise taxes on the property of the people without the consent of the people, given by themselves or their deputies,” and does not supply any passage in the New Testament where this law of nature can be found (Strauss 1953, 214). All these arguments, and many more, would seem to show that Locke is an insincere reader of the Bible, or an incredibly bad reader of the Bible, or both. They would seem to indicate, therefore, that a link between the Bible and Lockean liberalism is implausible. Does Parker not need to answer this line of argument? I think he does, but I also think I know why he does not.

Parker self-consciously limits his study of Locke’s use of the Bible to Locke’s use of the early chapters of Genesis. It is in those chapters of the Bible that Parker believes that the source of modern liberalism can be found. Parker confuses the issue by speaking as if the teaching of Genesis, properly understood, is the same as the teaching of Christianity, properly understood, but in fact there is no reason why this should be the case. In fact, Parker’s skeletal argument, by which he establishes that Locke is more correct than Filmer or the believers in original sin, does not require any Christian theology at all, or even the New Testament. It requires only a “close reading” of Genesis. The fundamental rules for the close reading of Genesis used by Parker are: (1) Do not make any claims about what the text means that are not found directly in the text, or cannot easily be derived from it; (2) When tradition (Christian or Jewish) says that the text means one thing, but the plain sense of the text, or what can easily be derived from it, says that the text means something else, the plain sense of the text trumps tradition every time. Based on these rules, Parker believes that the following teaching of Genesis (which I will make more explicit than Parker does) emerges.
Man is created, male and female, in the image of God, as a rational being, with dominion over the creatures, and the right to subdue the earth. All men and women partake of the image of God and share in the dominion. As there is no basis in Genesis 1:26-28 for any political distinction between men and women, women must therefore be accorded equal political freedom and equal political rights. (Locke himself did not fully develop the equality of women based on these verses, but Parker sees Locke as setting out towards feminism on the right scriptural track.) When Adam and Eve “fall” in Genesis 3, they do not stain their descendants with original sin; they simply lose their immortality. (Locke’s abandonment of the doctrine of original sin is in line with the plain teaching of the text, which simply says that for their disobedience the man and woman will surely die.) People are therefore not inherently perverse and wicked (as per medieval and Reformed theology), and they are not in need of a harsh, omnipotent monarch to govern their sinful proclivities. Rather, they are inherently weak, vulnerable, and hungry, but capable, by labor, of acquiring property, wealth, and the conveniences of life, and capable, by employing their God-given reason, of learning the natural law, which contains principles of ethical life and political self-government. The subjugation of women which occurred historically after the Fall was predicted but not endorsed by Genesis; men have no natural “right” to command women; similarly, labor pains are a nuisance of fact, not divine punishment; women are not bound by any natural “law” to submit to labor pains, if they can find some way of avoiding them. The God of Genesis is not cruel, and does not delight in female suffering. Later on in Genesis (though Parker does not get to those stories in this book), we see that slavery is not ordained by God, but predicted by a man, Noah; we see also that primogeniture is a human institution, not a divine one, because sometimes God’s candidate (e.g., Jacob) for a divine blessing is the younger son, whereas man’s candidate (e.g., Esau) is the elder. In all of this we see that Genesis is opposed to a key element of traditional theology (original sin), and key elements of conventional political systems such as patriarchy. Genesis is therefore a radical book, a shatterer of comfortable religious and social conventions. It is anti-traditional, and when read by people like Locke, it prepared the way for modernity. Thus far, Parker and Locke can hold their own against Strauss.

The problem is that the Bible is not just the book of Genesis. The Bible, for Locke, includes the New Testament, and the New Testament includes Paul. Paul does not read Genesis in the way that Parker and Locke read Genesis. Indeed, as Parker shows, Locke had to go into contortions to try to explain away some of Paul’s statements on original sin
(63-64). Locke’s ingenious efforts, as represented by Parker, seem forced and unconvincing. This does not mean that they are insincere, but it does mean that we do not need to accept Locke’s attempt to soften Paulinism. If we read Genesis through Pauline eyes (as orthodox Christians technically must), Genesis does seem to teach the connection between a Fall and an inherited human sinfulness which stains all human endeavor. Strauss, then, is from his point of view right: Locke was trying to avoid the teaching of traditional Christianity.

Parker has Strauss’s objection on this point partly covered. He grants repeatedly throughout his book that Locke was not orthodox. He contends only that Locke is biblical. If orthodox theologians are not truly biblical, reasons Parker, if they feel free to add all kinds of unnecessary doctrines which are not found in the text, so much the worse for them. In fact, in one endnote (179n28), Parker expresses a degree of indignation at some Straussianists, whose orthodox reading of the Bible seems to accept that female labor pains are a divine curse upon women. Parker apparently finds these Straussianists sexist and gratuitously cruel (see also 179n29). The true biblical teaching, Parker contends, presents a beneficent God who treats all his human creations equally. Liberal modernity was based not upon a rejection of the Bible, but upon the recovery of the original Bible from underneath the traditional mass of patriarchal, authoritarian commentary.

What Parker fails to deal with, however, is all the rest of the Bible. Does the Locke/Genesis view of human nature, or of democratic politics, match what is found in the book of Judges, or of Kings, or of the Gospels, or of the Pauline Epistles, or of Revelation? Strauss’s detailed arguments would seem to show that it does not. Even if we allow Locke his unorthodox reading of Genesis, Locke’s overall biblical exegesis remains problematic. His political theory, while perhaps inspired by certain biblical teachings, is incompatible with other biblical teachings. Liberal democratic modernity, then, is not derived so much from biblical teaching, as from a selected subset of biblical teachings.

This, however, is not an unimportant discovery. If Parker is right, then, even granting all of Strauss’s objections to Locke’s inconsistent use of the Bible, at least some part of the biblical teaching was instrumental in the overthrow of pre-modern, patriarchal, authoritarian political orders. In that case, to the extent that one regards liberal democracy as a good thing, the Bible deserves some of the credit for it.
It seems to me that Parker needs to take his results from this book and build upon them, by giving us a new interpretation of biblical political thought. Setting aside Locke and Filmer, setting aside all polemics against the Straussians, Parker should write a book about the biblical account of human nature and the implications of that account for politics. In such a book he will have to go beyond Genesis 1-4, much further into the Bible, and to employ his expertise in holistic readings of the Bible to sketch out a biblical political theory, or, if you will, a theologico-political teaching based on a substantial portion of the Bible. For in the last analysis, the debate between Parker and the Straussians is theoretically unimportant, because it is purely historical. It is concerned with the motives and hidden beliefs of people like Locke. What is theoretically important is (1) whether the Bible has a coherent political teaching (“orthodox” or not), and (2) whether that political teaching is true. Parker is as well equipped as anyone to undertake such an exploration.

The irony here is that such an exploration of the Bible could be justly regarded as inspired by Strauss himself. In his two extended essays on Genesis, “Jerusalem and Athens” (Strauss 1983) and “On the Interpretation of Genesis” (Strauss 1981), Strauss gives us samples of a purely textual approach to the Bible, an approach which in principle is independent of traditional Jewish and Christian readings, and is in fact capable of challenging them. Strauss does not take full advantage of the radical, non-traditional potential of the method of reading he employs, but that potential is there. To some extent that potential is actualized in the work of Robert Sacks, one of Strauss’s students, who wrote an extensive commentary on Genesis (Sacks 1990) based on Strauss’s principles of reading. It is actualized again in the work of Combs and Post, in their book on the theologico-political teaching of Genesis 1-11 (Combs and Post 1987), which itself arose out of their engagement with the writing of Strauss and with an early draft of the commentary of Sacks. Parker in turn was taught by Combs and Post, who introduced him to the biblical writings of Sacks and Strauss. His method of reading the Bible has therefore been decisively influenced by Strauss and by writers influenced by Strauss. If he is able to continue with his work, and to sustain distinctly un-Straussian conclusions about the politics of the Bible, it will be through the use of distinctly Straussian methods of reading the Bible.

Parker has written a stimulating book, an original book, a useful book, and, in several respects, a good book. He is capable of writing an even better one, one which will take us much further into the political depths of the Bible. Let us hope that he will do so.
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