

# Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Spring 2010

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## Political Science and the Irrational: Plato's *Alcibiades*

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### THE PERSISTING PROBLEM OF ENLIGHTENED SELF-INTEREST

Plato's *Alcibiades* is the classical introductory statement to the Socratic question of the nature of man and therewith to the question of the possibility of a political science of mankind. Unlike the modern liberal tendency to attempt to rationalize the irrational element of humanity via enlightened self-interest or some derivation thereof, Plato's Socrates shows through his examination of this haughty youth the scientific reasons for the persistent and intractable roots of humanity's unenlightened political nature. That examination, which looks to the often contradictory desire for and pursuit of one's own personal advantage (as a private good) and public virtue or respectability (as the just, the noble, or common good; see Addendum 1), can thus serve as a corrective to today's undeniably effective though still problematic account of the relation between and so philosophic importance of these two often disparate goods.

Such importance, moreover, is hardly in danger of losing its sense of immediacy, that is, at least amongst political thinkers. For, as members of a discipline, political scientists have long found and will seemingly always find the need to justify how politics can possibly be subject to scientific investigation, if not in every detail, then at least in the essentials. As both commonsense and experience tell us, political science necessarily entails the study of the governance of peoples, and yet no person, let alone people, is simply rational. No one seriously needs recourse to the diatribes of an "underground man" to know this is so (Dostoyevsky 1993). But then, no one today seems to seriously need recourse to the imaginings of the political

philosophers of old either. For in the latter's utopian and so seemingly misguided thought, it seems that one might at best come across a rationalized and virtuous society that has been placed under the thumb of a presumably wise, though decidedly despotic, ruler. And so, when on these ancient grounds, one can no longer easily discern either the liberality or realism that our political thinkers and governmental institutions have brought forth with so much success, not simply in speech, but also in deed.

Indeed, such an attractive combination as ours could only begin with the supplantation of the old call for the "impossible" theoretical and/or moral virtue extolled by classical thought. It was in thus attempting to redirect political life according to new principles that the founders of the idea of liberal democracy could argue for the peoples of the world to pursue what both seems good and can be made readily available to them, i.e., provided that they listened to the new call to build upon humanity's natural desire for peace and personal prosperity (Franklin 1964, 158; Hamilton et al. 2003 (nos. 10 and 51); Hobbes 1996, 92; Kant 2003, 112; Locke 2007, 102). These founders thus spoke to what was later called the "bourgeois" that is, at least in part, present in almost every one of us.

A society so constituted is the one we all have come to know so well and whose principal operating feature is the abridgment of the great divide between the public and private via enlightened self-interest. Most are familiar with some form of this idea, be it the rational-public choice theory of a James Buchanan, the theory of justice espoused by a John Rawls, or what each of these in some manner represents: a derivation of the older and more explicit notion of a social contract based on the democratic preservation of individual rights.

Yet even given the various and wide-ranging theoretical treatments or approaches of how the liberal principles of equality and freedom may best be attained, such proponents of liberalism nonetheless seem to agree with one another that the historically contentious arguments concerning the *summum bonum* of man should no longer be made to guide political life by shaping conceptions of public virtue. For in demarcating what man believes is best for himself to the private realm, thus shielding such a belief from publicly dictating what is best for others, society can better ensure the peaceful cooperation of its equal members. Accordingly, what keeps the social machinery peacefully running in modern liberal democracies tends to be the proper institutional arrangement of checks and balances and, on the individual level, a self-reflective calculus for acquiring and maintaining

goods. Thus understood, Western society, which is and has been by and large a great *agora* for the enlightened and self-interested pursuit of privately determined goods according to public rules of sound fairness, can be studied in economic and institutional terms and so, more often than not, scientifically by political scientists and economists alike.

And yet, no one can deny the troubling evidence that, though presented from different quarters and spoken with dissimilar voices, is likewise derived from our modern project's attempted subordination of the importance of the question of the highest good. For today we find, on the one hand, a financial crisis perpetrated by those whose highest good seemingly resides in the pursuit of their own private ones, and, on the other, the rise of religious fundamentalism and its call for the subordination of all private concerns to the just and universal will of God.

As for the first problem, it is interesting for at least two reasons. First, it points to the difficulty in limiting (but also in realizing) the pursuit of the perhaps last highest good that remains for the ambitious when society has metaphysically neutralized or tacitly undermined all others. Second, it raises a potentially intriguing though hypothetical question. That is, could such greedy pursuits be consistent with enlightened principles if the men who perpetrated them could somehow have lied to and cheated others without any personal or institutional damage noticeably occurring both during and after their morally questionable behavior? It is not impossible to imagine such a situation, so that here the pursuit of the former's own good could nevertheless occur peacefully or in tandem with the pursuit of the good by the latter. But is it not arguably the case that, if the latter (or indeed anyone) were to subsequently find out that they had indeed been taken advantage of, they would in all likelihood become indignant? At issue here is the principle of the act rather than its overall economic effect so that what comes to the fore is the question, not of "damage" to one's privately held good, but rather the otherwise latent question of the violation of something higher, namely, justice. As conceivable as this possibility is, at least in principle, it is almost equally as inconceivable that those who have inadvertently revealed their financially unscrupulous ways would now openly declare that they merely regret that those who were hoodwinked by them—for example, the European Union by Goldman Sachs' involvement with, among others, the Greek government, investors by Bernie Madoff's Ponzi scheme, etc.—did not simply remain unaware of and unnoticeably damaged by this process. In other words, it would seem that what often appears as the naked pursuit of

one's private good is never as truly naked as it seems at first glance. It is, more often than not, accompanied by justification or apology, even when neither of these recourses provides for personal advantage when they are used by those who have been found out or accused.

As for the rise of religious fundamentalism both here and abroad, it certainly points to what is only a muted and much milder assumption within our largely capitalistic minds: that there are in fact some goods that we defer to or at least tacitly acknowledge as being greater than our own, e.g., (God's) justice, and that these goods, in turn, are so important for religious, political and perhaps even personal reasons, that they might very well require a noble-like act of self-sacrifice and defense against what might appear to be an ever-growing corrupt secular society that refuses to openly recognize or foster such goods.

In both these matters we are, I argue, helped by Plato and his *Alcibiades*. For not only does this dialogue in particular have the merit of being deemed *the* proper entry point to the Platonic corpus as such (Alfarabi 2001, 53-54; Proclus 1971, 1-8), it likewise presents an overly ambitious—one might say profoundly greedy—Athenian youth who nevertheless turns out to be deeply concerned with the just and the noble. The *Alcibiades*, then, elucidates the concern for one's own private good while also showing how that good relates to and is often inchoately mitigated by what appears to be an even greater good than it. Plato's dialogue can thus be said to reduce the contrary and differing ethos of the self-servingly ambitious (as is crudely exemplified today by our corrupt and/or incompetent capitalists) and the publicly moral (as is also crudely exemplified by the fundamentalist desire for austere virtue or piety) to a party of one (to Alcibiades).

I believe, in turn, that this Platonic "reduction" proves to exemplify and thereby help explain the human condition insofar as it seems to adequately account for both these contrary desires as they occur within the individual. Or rather, it can help clarify and meet the problems that arise even today, provided that the simultaneous desire to serve one's own good and to subordinate it to an even higher good (such as justice, nobility, or piety) not only belongs to Alcibiades, but also constitutes human nature itself insofar as we are "political animals" (Aristotle 1997, 1253a). If this is indeed so, then the presentation in the *Alcibiades* of the latter's unenlightened irrationality can be seen as a rational account of the reasons for that irrationality that thereby proffers a truly scientific analysis of human, i.e., political, life. Such an account, moreover, should, if successful, help equip us with the means

of at least intellectually defending ourselves against both the unenlightened pursuit of one's own "lowly" good, on the one hand, and the potential zealotry of religion's pursuit of a "higher" good, on the other.

*ALCIBIADES, OR ON THE NATURE OF MAN*

As soon as Socrates approaches Alcibiades, it becomes immediately clear from the beginning of their conversation that the youth has all the esteemed advantages of life: good looks, connections, wealth, ambition, power, and, as we find out later on and elsewhere, a natural talent for politics. Perhaps what is most striking in Socrates' introductory speech and Alcibiades' tacit endorsement of it, however, is the extent of the latter's supposed ambition. Not only does Socrates suggest that Alcibiades would rather die than be forced to simply maintain his affluent position in Greek society, he even "knows" Alcibiades would rather die than to be granted a future ascension to power merely over all of Europe. Indeed, Socrates goes so far as to attribute to the youth an insatiable desire to make known his name and power over "all mankind" (Plato 1987, 105c). And yet, what remains even more shocking than this claim is Socrates' subsequent assertion that all of this can come to pass only with his (and his god's) help (105e).

After having thus garnered Alcibiades' attention with this mysterious and presumably misplaced bravado (a bravado that follows on the heels of a band of haughty suitors who were put to flight by Alcibiades' own extreme haughtiness [103b]), Socrates proceeds to ask what the young man will possibly say to convince his fellow Athenians that he in particular should be granted the prerequisite or introductory political rule necessary for his would-be worldly success. Must not Alcibiades claim to be more competent and knowledgeable, i.e., know what is better with respect to political things, than his fellow countrymen (106c)? Of course, the answer to this question is so obvious to Alcibiades that Socrates' question must be reduced to asking both what such knowledge is about and what it is ultimately for so as to acquire any depth. Alcibiades, however, is only partially successful in meeting these requirements. For while he is able to suggest that his superior knowledge and right to rule is founded in his (superior) ability to deliberate on matters of war and peace (107d), he is yet unable to articulate what is better with respect to war and peace or what the ends of war and peace are.

The difficulty surrounding the answer to this latter question, however, is no doubt due to Socrates' tautological rhetoric (107d-109a). For even though Socrates suggests that those who have knowledge of a matter

(just as Alcibiades claims to have knowledge of matters of war and peace) must necessarily know what is both better for performing a given art and when to perform what is better with respect to that art, he confounds Alcibiades with his examples of what the “better” is. For instance, what is better for wrestling is proposed to be gymnastical (108c), while what is better in music, musical (108d). It would thus seem to follow that what is better for war and peace—and so what a man such as Alcibiades must know with respect to both war and peace—is the bellicose and the peaceable. Such a possible reply (which Alcibiades does not give), however consistent with Socrates’ examples, would only serve to highlight the fact that Socrates has hardly done anything more in defining the “better” than reiterate that which it is presumably better for.

Still, Alcibiades’ understandable confusion on the issue at hand undoubtedly gives Socrates occasion to introduce justice as that for the sake of which matters of war and peace are deliberated about (109c). It would thus seem that this introduction is occasioned in this rhetorical manner for *ad hoc* reasons. That is, it would seem that Socrates’ reasons for arguing as he here does suggest that he thought that the question of justice was, for some particular reason, of great importance to the admittedly power-hungry and ambitious Alcibiades. Of course, this procedure might very well be explained through the simple suggestion that Socrates was merely looking for a way to moderate Alcibiades’ tyrannical disposition out of his own, moral or civic concerns (Xenophon 1994, Book I, chapter 2, paragraphs 12-47). And yet, as the dialogue further unfolds, it becomes increasingly clear that Plato’s Socrates is invariably suggesting that Alcibiades’ political ambitions are themselves essentially tied to justice in another, more profound manner (Bruell 1999, 22-23). The sixty four thousand dollar question of the dialogue is how and why this is so.

But before going too far afield, it is unarguably the case that Alcibiades here responds to the question of justice’s relation to his presumed area of expertise in exactly the way one would expect someone with his haughty and hubristic character. For when asked if he would advise the Athenians to wage war against those who behave justly or unjustly, he slyly replies that “even if someone had it in his mind that war ought to be waged against those practicing the just things, he would not admit to it, at least” (Plato 1987, 109c). Perhaps not too surprisingly, then, it remains much more commonsensical to attribute Alcibiades’ political ambitions to being precisely what they appear to be: a means for satisfying his own desires and what he deems

to be good for himself (and at best incidentally so for his fellow Athenians). Any concern for justice he might have seems to be, to put it anachronistically, purely Machiavellian. If, then, this is indeed the case, then it would inevitably follow that the admittedly simple suggestion that Socrates is indeed a civic-minded moralist in his dealings with the haughty and hubristic youth is essentially correct, and that this is indeed why he introduced the question of justice in his present discussion (Plato 2001, 216d-e, 219d).

What is more, as their conversation here unfolds there is further evidence for this interpretation of Alcibiades' greedy and Socrates' virtuous intent. We thus seem to be moving ever-further away from the putative Platonic reduction of the two extremes that were mentioned before as the hallmark of both this dialogue and human nature. For even though Alcibiades is compelled to admit that he, just like everyone else, does not truly have knowledge of a "weightier" matter such as justice (Plato 1987, 106d-e, 109d-112d, 113b), he seemingly diminishes the importance of this assertion by supposing that Greeks

[l]et these matters go and consider which things will be advantageous to those practicing them. For just and advantageous things are not, I suppose, the same, but many have profited from committing great injustices, and I suppose there are others who performed just acts that were not to their advantage. (113d)

However, this latter assertion about the possible antonymy between the just and his own good is not only a perhaps nascent Machiavellianism, but, what is more important, it inevitably implies that Alcibiades in fact does have some knowledge of each of them. Yet such an implication cannot possibly be consistent. For Socrates has by now already coaxed Alcibiades into partially consenting to the proposal that one can only learn what one has discovered for one's self or been taught by another. Thus, whether one has discovered or been taught something, in order to have learned that something one must first have been made aware of one's own ignorance or need to learn it. Admittedly, Alcibiades initially resists this proposal in part by claiming that he learned justice just as he learned the Greek language, i.e., without any prior knowledge of ignorance. Socrates, however, had already gotten Alcibiades to agree that, even if such knowledge is indeed possible, this is not so for a "weightier" matter such as justice. For while it may be true that the many know the Greek language and are thus capable of teaching it, they are capable of doing so only because they are, as "knowers," necessarily in agreement with one another with respect to what they name when they name it. But

precisely because they are not in agreement on what they mean by justice when they name what is or is not just, they cannot truly be said to know what justice is. Alcibiades, then, cannot consistently claim to know such a “weightier” matter insofar as he concedes this last point while also admitting that he has neither discovered for himself nor learned from another what justice is. Thus, to the extent that he has conceded his ignorance of justice while claiming that the just is not often advantageous or good, that concession must be considered purely superficial (110b).

Recognizing this, Socrates nonetheless resumes his line of questioning in light of the criteria needed for obtaining knowledge of the “weightier” things which both he and Alcibiades have agreed to, but now with a view to the question of the advantageous or good. But of course, just as Alcibiades cannot really know the just things inasmuch as he, like the mistaken and contentious many, never really doubted that he knew what justice was, so he cannot understand of the “things that are advantageous for human beings...why they are so,” nor how they relate to justice (113e). This is but to say that, for Alcibiades, the good remains presumably just as self-evident as the just.

Because he and Socrates have by now come to loggerheads over Alcibiades’ contradictory claims concerning these matters, Socrates decides it best to broach the question of Alcibiades’ knowledge of (public) justice and its relation to the advantageous (as one’s private good) by extending their discussion to the question of whether or not some of the just things are also sometimes shameful (115a). While denying the latter possibility and admitting the coincidence of justice and nobility, Alcibiades in effect comes to assert that the just is never shameful, is always noble, and is sometimes bad. Alcibiades then connects these dots and shows that he thinks the noble things are sometimes bad and the shameful things sometimes good. Courage in war, for example, is a noble thing, while cowardice is shameful. Yet such courage can often get a person killed, though cowardice often saves. Alcibiades, then, who longs to conquer the world, tacitly admits that being a shameful coward can be a good thing and that being nobly brave a bad one (115b).

Such an admission, however, cannot help but rub him, with his world-shaking political ambition and longing for nobility, completely the wrong way. Of course, Socrates knows this and so knows that, even if Alcibiades has a “realistic” streak to him, he also remains deeply attached to what must also seem a naive political virtue such as courage precisely because that

virtue enables him to “aid a comrade or relative in war” (115b). This is why Socrates is still justified in asking if Alcibiades, despite his knowledge of the dangers of courage, still desires it and thinks it a good thing (115c). And not only does Alcibiades attest to his desire for courage (and so for nobility and therewith justice too) as something good, he even states that he would rather be dead than lack it (115d). We thus see that, on the one hand, Alcibiades believes that nobility or courage is always just, and being just it is sometimes bad because it can lead to “death and wounds.” Yet, on the other hand, we have now come to see that Alcibiades also believes nobility or courage is not only just, it is also so great a good that he would rather die than not possess it. Alcibiades, then, would rather be dead than be a coward because cowardice is such a bad thing, and yet, because courage can lead to something as terrible as death, courage too is a bad thing—one now on par with cowardice itself (115e). Alcibiades thus wants and doesn’t want what he wants. He wants to “have his cake and eat it too.”

This irrationality within the youth is nothing other than the contradiction between what he believes is good for himself (as his own private good) and what he believes is good with respect to his fellow comrades and kinsmen (as public virtue), a contradiction that he cannot resolve because he does not know if he should be simply for himself or others. Socrates, then, has succeeded in showing that Alcibiades not only lacks knowledge of the just and advantageous things, but also that he lacks self-knowledge. But for precisely this reason, his political ambition and desire also lack justification: he cannot say if it is either good or just for him to set out and do what he wants to do.

Rather than taking a moment to reflect on his life’s ambition and his own confusion, however, Alcibiades instead takes comfort in the fact that “those who practice the things of the city” are not only uneducated like him, but, unlike him, lack his resplendent nature (119b). Understandably, Socrates is put off by this intellectual and moral laziness (119c), for in giving expression to his narrowness of vision, Alcibiades also shows his narrowness of soul: he refuses to learn from Socrates, so that Socrates now has no other recourse than to denigrate Alcibiades’ natural gifts so as to lead him back to the importance of having to confront what is inscribed above the entrance to the Delphic oracle: “know thyself” (120e-124b; see Addendum 2). Thus, after having to begin once more so as to show Alcibiades’ need for an education (119d-124b; see Addendum 3), Socrates is finally able to bring the youth to the point of asking what should have been asked long ago. Alcibiades, given

his educative and, as it turns out, natural deficiencies (124d), is at this point willing to say that he wants to know in what way he can come to know what he needs to know.

Making what thus seems to be a promisingly fresh start, Socrates asks Alcibiades to tell him, in what amounts to a request for reassurance, whether or not they both “wish to become as excellent as possible.” Not only does Alcibiades declare that he wants to become excellent in virtue, but also that he wants to possess the virtues of a good man (124e). But the question still remains, of course, as to what makes a good man good. With a little prodding on Socrates’ part, Alcibiades asserts that in wanting to be good he really wants to possess the virtues of those skilled Athenians who are called gentlemen (*kaloskagathos*, meaning noble and good), those who are capable of ruling in the city (124e-125d). He thus literally attests to his desire to be “noble *and* good,” and this even though we have already seen Socrates elicit from him an admission about the contradictory and so irrational nature between the good (as his own private good) and the noble (as that which is, like justice, performed at some expense to oneself and so for the good of others). By not bothering to ask what he needs to know in order to simply be excellent, but rather what he needs to know in order to be an excellent statesman, Alcibiades ultimately shows himself to believe that a good man is essentially a political man who busies himself, not with his own private affairs, but with the affairs of others of the city. In this sense, and perhaps to our surprise, he shows himself to be emphatically concerned with justice precisely because, despite his “knowing” better, he presupposes that such service is at bottom good. One must therefore conclude that, even though Alcibiades presents himself as a more willing student of Socrates’ educative efforts once he has been shown his not so outstanding nature, he nevertheless remains closed to the most elementary questions such as “what is good?” and “what is noble?” As a consequence, he continues to resist openly examining the problematic relation that is expressed by the very Greek word for “gentleman” and so remains ever-closed to what he himself fully thinks and feels. Alcibiades still takes for granted, then, and will continue to take for granted, that even if he does not know how to deliberate for the benefit of the city or what in particular he must do for the city to be properly arranged, he nevertheless “knows” that political life and its justice are both good for his city and himself. (For reasons such as these, Christopher Bruell [1999, 38] states that Alcibiades “promises at the end of the dialogue to attend Socrates as constantly as Socrates has hitherto attended him and to ‘begin from now on’ to bestow care on justice—not to study it for the purpose of learning or

discovering it. Socrates is understandably apprehensive: Alcibiades is still unaware that he has in his way been caring for justice all along: and he still believes he knows what it is.”)

It is consequently unsurprising that Socrates again has occasion to bring out Alcibiades’ own confusion and lack of reason. For having now reduced the question of the duty of a good man to the capability to rule in the city, and after having suggested that such rule requires citizens to make friends of one another through concord, Socrates solicits from Alcibiades the further assertion that concord cannot be reached amongst those who know different things (Plato 1987, 126; see Addendum 4). But because both justice and concord arguably arise from people practicing their own things and so what they in particular know—through a sensible division of labor such as the one outlined by Socrates in the *Republic*—it now seems to follow that friendship necessarily precludes justice (128b). Alcibiades had earlier conceded that, “when men...suppose they don’t know (some matter), they hand that matter over to others,” and so had conceded that a very common and sensible form of knowledge of ignorance averts the great evils that follow from the stupidity which, among other things, brings about injustice (118a-b1). Now, however, he flatly denies that such knowledge of ignorance is possible, and, *mutatis mutandis*, compatible with concord. He is thereby shown once again to lack concord with and so knowledge of himself.

Aware of his own contradictory statements (127d), Alcibiades finally despairs of what to do or think. Socrates tries to reassure him by directing their conversation to the question of what it means to take trouble over *oneself* (128a). He thereby distinguishes between what belongs to us “externally,” e.g., shoes, etc., and “internally,” so that the proper art of taking trouble over oneself is not confused with any “external” arts. As it turns out, and sensibly so, to be able to take trouble over oneself means that one must first know what one is. Socrates thus warns Alcibiades that he, before approaching the Athenian assembly and so taking up political affairs, first train and so take care of himself by knowing what and who he is (132b; Plato 2001, 216a).

As to looking out for such self-knowledge, presumably this is best discerned and achieved while looking to a teacher who acts as a mirror to his or her pupil (Plato 1987, 132d-133a). The teacher and student in question, moreover, seem to be none other than Socrates and Alcibiades. Yet this means we are left with the unpromising suggestion that Alcibiades is uneducable, for assuming that what has transpired thus far is indicative of

what is to come, Alcibiades is and so will continue to be unable or unwilling to understand himself. Socrates has, after all, already brought out into the open an image of Alcibiades' inconsistent and confused nature, and that nature has nonetheless gone largely unrecognized insofar as Alcibiades has not questioned, let alone abandoned, his life's ambition (he has at best put it on hold for the moment).

But perhaps this is overly hasty, for Socrates certainly demurs from his possible role as teacher when suggesting that, in order to acquire self-knowledge, one should instead look to the both the divine and the thinking part of the soul which is most divine:

This part of it, therefore, resembles the god, and someone who looks at this and comes to know all that is divine—god and sensible thinking—would thus come to know himself also... In looking to the god, therefore, we shall treat him as the finest mirror, and in human things we shall look to the virtue of the soul. In this way above all, we may see and know ourselves. (133c; see Addendum 5.)

Socrates, however, not only suggests the idea that it is possible to learn about the nature of god and man, but also adds the suggestion that access to this very possibility can be found by thinking through both justice and moderation insofar as these two virtues in particular not only epitomize “a way that is dear to the gods,” but are likewise “divine and bright” (134c-d; see Addendum 6). Yet this purported and jarring link between the political virtues and the nature of the god and ourselves has seemingly descended upon the conversation rather abruptly, so much so that it is perhaps best approached with reference to an occurrence of their pairing in another Socratic work.

In his recollection of the trial and execution of Socrates, Xenophon offers in his *Memorabilia* a posthumous defense of Socrates' way of life by stating, among other things, that Socrates

did not converse about the nature of all things *in the way* most of the others did—examining what the sophists call the cosmos: how it is, and which necessities are responsible for the coming to be of each of the heavenly things... But he himself was always conversing about human things—examining what is pious, what is impious, what is noble, what is shameful, what is just, what is unjust, what is moderation, what is madness, what is courage, what is cowardice, what is a city, what is a statesman, what is rule over human beings, what is a skilled ruler over human beings, as well as about the other things, knowledge of which he believed makes one a gentleman (both noble and good), while those

who are ignorant of them would justly be called slavish. (Xenophon 1994, Book I, chapter 1, paragraphs 11 and 16; see Addendum 7.)

As can perhaps be gleaned from the comments above, Socrates' "other way" of conversing about the nature of all things or first principles is carried out and sustained by looking to our everyday ideas about political things. In some way, then, the latter shed light on the former. Of course, in Socrates' time the nature of all things or first principles of the cosmos were expressed in political life through the belief in and worship of the gods. It is therefore not overly surprising to read the Xenophontic suggestion that Socrates' political philosophy consisted in an examination of the divine as the root of all things through an examination of political opinions. It would thus seem that Socrates' proposition to Alcibiades, that self-knowledge requires knowledge of the divine and therewith knowledge of one's place in the cosmos, is no mere anomaly, but rather goes straight to the heart of Socratic political philosophy itself. Now, as for what Socrates himself claims to already know about the nature of the divine in the *Alcibiades* in particular, it is, as we have already seen, said by him to act "justly and moderately" (Plato, *Alcibiades* 1987, 134d).

As for the second of these two terms, moderation or the attribute of moderation as such, throughout the *Alcibiades* Socrates has argued that it is a virtue or quality that is bound up with the question of the still sought-after self (133c-134b, 134e, 135a-c). As for the just, it is inextricably tied to the question of our need for knowledge of the good, a good that has so far come to light as being either for one's self or the city. Accordingly, what is primarily required is an examination of these two sometimes disparate goods (see Addendum 8). By carrying out this examination of the just and the good in particular, one is subsequently able to attain an understanding of moderation as well, if only because moderation as self-knowledge necessarily issues from the knowledge of what is both "inside" and "outside" one's self (130e-131a). That is, self-knowledge necessarily follows from the examination of justice because that examination pertains to one's own private good and the city's. Knowledge of the just (and therewith the good) thereby provides the passkey or rather is the passkey that, in issuing in self-knowledge and moderation, also makes clear attributes belonging to and so an essential portion of the nature of god. Such an examination, moreover, is precisely what we have been conducting all along and which occurs throughout the entire *Alcibiades*. For that reason, the problems in the *Alcibiades*, or rather the problems with Alcibiades in particular, reflect the principal problem

of morality as such and so how one's own good problematically relates to it. (Accordingly, or for this very reason, this principal problem necessarily extends itself to the problematic nature of the gods themselves insofar as the problematic yet divine nature of justice necessarily reflects, because it comprises a part of, the nature of those very gods.) It is thus by virtue of thinking through the problem of justice as service to others, and so, for example, the justice-like courage that consists in aiding one's own comrades and kinsmen, that Plato's Socrates indicates that the only way Alcibiades' "understanding" of both justice and the good (as his private advantage) can be guaranteed to coincide and thereby seem to be unproblematic is if his sacrifice does not go unnoticed by these just and moderate gods (105e, 124c; see Addendum 9).

This is all to suggest, then, that Alcibiades can only seem to cure his persisting confusion if his belief that his noble desire to be willing to perform self-sacrifice is truly and necessarily beneficial to him because of the workings of divine intervention or providence. This step, however, he is unwilling to explicitly take, in part, it seems, because it might reduce the allure of nobility, but also because, as has been seen throughout the dialogue and even in the *Symposium*, Alcibiades genuinely senses that the relation between justice and the good—and so belief in the providential gods—is inherently problematic (see Addendum 10). However this may be, one may nonetheless say that the truth of the irrationality in Alcibiades' heart is firmly rooted in his desire to both give himself up to something greater than himself and to prove that in doing so he is worthy of compensation, e.g., is better than his rivals. But this is also to say that, insofar as the subtitle of the *Alcibiades* is *On the Nature of Man*, the truth of the irrationality of Alcibiades is presumably the truth of our own irrationality as well.

It would thus seem that the key implication of the conversation that has unfolded between these two interlocutors is that human nature can presumably remedy its contradictory desires of "giving up and getting" only through the care and intervention of the gods themselves. Accordingly, even morality itself, and our attraction and concern with it as something good in itself and for us, can only be fully soluble with such gods.

And yet, such a conclusion, it seems, must necessarily remain aporetic, if only because the gods' possible introduction still leaves the following moral problem (already alluded to above): those who piously perform self-sacrificing acts can no longer be understood to be really "sacrificing" anything at all. Indeed, those who are morally upright seem to have also assured themselves, whether truthfully or not, that their respectable deeds

will also lead to, at least in the long run, the fulfillment of their own private good. This, however, is to ultimately concede that the difference between the moral and immoral is simply reducible to the mere difference in the speed of delivery of that which *appears* to be genuinely good to each of these parties. Accordingly, Socrates' examination of the problematic nature of public and private goods seems to lead one to the conclusion that even if there are such caring gods, they cannot, insofar as they are truly just, justly blame and so punish those who "impiously" pursue their own good directly. Or conversely, these gods cannot justly praise and so reward the "pious" for indirectly pursuing these very same goods. But then, such gods can no longer be properly understood as being what they are often presented as being at all: both just *and* providential (see Plato's *Hipparchus*; Bartlett 1994, 143-55; and Strauss 1997, 122).

In this way, the *Alcibiades* not only shows the insoluble tension between one's private good and public virtue, it also points to a reinterpretation of justice that is compatible with the former though fundamentally different than the nobility that belongs to the latter. What, then, are we to make of nobility? It seems that, just as the providential gods have fallen away in this account, so too has nobility. Could this mean that, just as the caring gods issue from a combination of what one might impossibly wish for, so too does nobility? Are not these gods themselves, after all, the very embodiment of the noble?

However this may be, in having seen the spuriousness behind the putative resolution to this impossible combination, one is thereby provided with the *reason* for its impossibility. One is, moreover, able to provision for oneself a *moral* defense for consistently living according to the results of that examination. Socrates, then, may be said to provide, for both theoretical and moral reasons, the means for an "all too human" defense of the philosophical life even if that life should happen to be confronted by either moral or "theoretical" demands issuing from those who, for example, claim that there are not only just and interventionist gods who are "first principles," but gods who might likewise demand our unthinking obedience and piety (see Addendum 11).

#### CONCLUSION

By offering this miniature presentation of the classical defense of philosophy, the *Alcibiades* makes room for the need and authority of human reason. For in so doing, it provides an insight into what are and

remain permanently “unenlightened” characteristics of humanity that cannot simply be waved away so long as morality and the gods—and our longing for either one or both of them together—cannot be waved away either. It thereby illustrates our political nature and so the human condition which, in the essentials, often wants to, by hook or crook, “have its cake and eat it too.” In this sense it makes sense of or provides for a rational account of the irrational in man. Accordingly, it is also able to expose the implications of and reasons for the naturally conflicting desires that beset all of human or political life.

As can hopefully be seen, this is not without importance for us here and now, for in indicating what a sound defense of both the justice and the life of the mind looks like and requires, the *Alcibiades* enables us to also defend democracy before the charges of those who are morally opposed to the liberal principle of self-government. As such this defense also makes room for political self-determination on terms which even enemies of liberalism (such as fundamentalists) can at least “theoretically” agree to, e.g., God’s justice. Such a defense from the principle of justice, however, also requires as its corollary a thoroughgoing examination of what goodness is and so how one can achieve it for oneself. For even though justifying one’s own pursuit of the good can be theoretically and morally sound, this fact does not make the question “what is good?” arbitrary or merely self-evident. One cannot, after all, rest satisfied with that which only seems good but is not truly so. For, as Socrates states elsewhere, though the many “would do, possess, and enjoy the reputation for things that are opined to be just and beautiful, even if they aren’t,” when it comes to good things “no one is satisfied with what is opined to be so, but each seeks the things that are, and from here on out everyone despises the opinion” (Plato 1991, 505d). We have, I believe, all already had our share of unenlightened greed.

The foregoing defense of the liberal right to lead one’s own life, then, does not thereby give license to do whatever one wants to do or entail that “everything is permissible.” Instead, this justification requires the reexamination within our liberal society of the question of what constitutes *the* good life. For it is only by confronting our profound desire for answering this further question that we can then hope to properly educate ourselves and, perhaps, our fellow citizens to true virtue. In this hope we have Socrates as our example, for not only does his radical critique of morality avoid the dictum “everything is permissible,” it also avoids rejecting the “undemocratic” idea of the good life. Indeed, Socrates’ critique is precisely what leads

to his constant care for and questioning of what is, among other things, truly good, noble, pious, and just. It leads him to what he undoubtedly understands to be *the* good life (Plato 2002, 38a). And this care, in turn, is compatible with his attachment to and defense of his own, democratic Athens:

If I were to care, Theodorus, more for those in Cyrene, I would be asking you about the state of affairs there and whether any of the young there make geometry or something else of philosophy their concern. But as it is I don't, for I'm less a friend to those there than to these here, and I'm more desirous of knowing who of our young are expected to prove good and able. (Plato 1986, 143d)

#### ADDENDA

1. Though I imply in this paper that the desire for public virtue is synonymous with the desire for justice and nobility, thus often conflating the latter two, I do recognize the important differences between them. However, justice, like nobility, also requires restraining the pursuit of one's own particular interests in favor of the common good, albeit in more mundane matters like filing one's taxes rather than risking life and limb for country. But even in granting this difference between the two, it nevertheless appears that the seeds of nobility—as self-sacrifice—still remain present in justice. If this is indeed true, then understanding nobility as the justice-like courage that Alcibiades is attracted to aids the understanding of justice in its more ordinary sense much as understanding what is higher helps one understand what is lower (see Strauss 1997, 138). The subsequent examination of Alcibiades, then, even though it is an examination of a rare individual, still sheds light on what is means to a typical person concerned with justice.

2. This is a denigration only in the sense that Socrates puts Alcibiades' advantages into a greater perspective that cannot help but illustrate that the latter is in many respects lacking when compared to men such as Artaxerxes.

3. This second attempt by Socrates to get Alcibiades to concern himself with education consists in what Steven Forde calls the “royal tale” (Forde 1987, 222-39). It aims at substituting Alcibiades' *thumos* for *eros* so that victory through excellence (which is based in an erotic rather than spirited longing) is prized over mere victory (227 and 232). Forde thus understands the “royal tale” to culminate in the pursuit of true excellence or the excellence of “the good man simply, [which] Socrates and Alcibiades agree, is the man who is able to rule” (233). Forde rightly contends that the ability to rule firstly requires knowledge of ruling one's self and so requires

self-knowledge as taking trouble over oneself, i.e., taking trouble over one's soul (234, 236). Accordingly, "self-knowledge seems to provide the avenue at least to knowledge of one's proper relation to 'possessions' [even] more remote than one's body, to 'belongings of one's belongings'" (236). Self-knowledge thus leads to "the knowledge of politics derived from it" (237). Yet even if this is true, such knowledge may only be the necessary rather than the sufficient condition for political success. Forde thus suggests that the parallelism between ruling oneself and others is perhaps only "idealized" (237-38). I, however, shall shortly treat of this "idealization" as stemming from Alcibiades' own desire to make synonymous the good with the justice-like courage of nobility and, proceeding from this difference in interpretation, argue against Alcibiades undergoing a "transformation derived from a change in understanding the political categories" (238)—*pace* Forde, as it rather seems to me that Alcibiades' "transformation" or "understanding" is essentially missing or superficial.

4. Socrates would here seem to have in mind "weightier" things and thus imply that lacking such knowledge, which the many admittedly do, necessarily entails living in an unjust community of discord. Likewise, the subsequent reference to the earlier discussion of concord belonging to those who are aware of their ignorance implies, because such awareness only concerns technical things belonging to artistic practices, that even Socrates' and Alcibiades' ancient city is in many respects run like a great *agora*.

5. As for the insertion of this part of the text by either Eusebius or Stobaeus and how it is nonetheless of a piece with the rest of Plato's work, see Bluck 1953, 46-52.

6. Though Gary Alan Scott admits that Socrates' "introduction of the divine element here suggests that even relationships between friends or lovers must be guided by something beyond the two lovers or fiends if improvement is truly and continuously possible" (Scott 2000, 97) he does not then indicate that this guidance requires the examination of these (nor any) political attributes of god nor how this examination bears on the question of self-knowledge. He instead points to the example of Socrates' own "conversational practice" of questioning his interlocutor's beliefs, but without indicating how that practice offers a resolution to his interlocutor's confusion. He does not show, then, how the *Alcibiades* itself provides a resolution to Alcibiades' own particular *aporia* (102ff.).

7. Emphasis mine. As to Socrates' own "idiosyncratic" understanding and interest in nobility, see Blanchard 1994, 671-96.

8. Scott seems to confound Alcibiades' ignorance of this disparity with Socrates' rhetorical strategy of catering to this very ignorance when stating, "Throughout their conversation, Socrates has been trying to show Alcibiades that there is no difference in type between governing oneself, managing a household, and ruling over others in the city" (Scott 2000, 109). Of course, if Alcibiades' own ignorance is based on his insistence that public life constitutes the good life, then Socrates can only continue to cater to that assumption by drawing upon "the isomorphism between taking trouble over oneself and taking trouble over the affairs of the city" (Scott 2000, 108-9). Yet Scott is somewhat unclear on the issue, for even though he is aware of Socrates' rhetorical strategies (162), he does not make clear whether Socrates actually believes his isomorphic proposal is theoretically sound or unsound. Scott does ultimately suggest, however, the soundness of that proposal when he asserts "Nothing in anything Alcibiades says at the end of the dialogue supplies a reason for Socrates' (negative or unhopeful) judgment about him" (116). As this essay has hopefully shown, it is precisely because this isomorphism is untenable and that Alcibiades refuses to question it that Socrates says what he says at the end of the dialogue. Thus it is precisely by examining this *putative* parallelism that one is then able to resolve, in a way that Scott does not, Alcibiades' *aporia*.

9. Socrates' advice and promise of benefitting Alcibiades is always buttressed by the promise of Socrates' god's help so that the difficulties the latter is experiencing throughout the dialogue (in his examination of the good and just or noble) are, for their resolution, thematically dependent on that god. And though divine intervention is in no way an explicit theme of this dialogue, I see no other possible way for the good and just or noble as Alcibiades' "understands" them to be made "fundamentally compatible" with one another except through such divine intervention or care.

10. On the difficulty of conceiving of rewarding and punishing Greek gods according to justice and injustice, see Plato 1991, 330d-e, and *Euthyphro*.

11. The philosophical examination, then, of the just, the good, and the noble, and therewith the examination of the question "*quid sit deus?*" is why political philosophy is also called "first philosophy" and so why

it culminates in the knowledge of ignorance or self-knowledge that comprises a political knowledge of both god and justice.

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## Creation as Parable in Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*

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In his Introduction to the *Guide of the Perplexed* (quotations from the *Guide* are from Pines 1963, occasionally modified slightly), Maimonides tells his readers that both the Account of the Beginning (Genesis 1), which he identifies as physics, and the Account of the Chariot (Ezekiel 1), which he identifies as divine science or metaphysics (*Intro.*, 6, 9; also 1.34:77; in his rabbinic works: *MT*, *Yesodei haTorah* 2:11, 4:10-13; *Commentary on the Mishnah*, *Hagigah* 2:1), are parables. It is perhaps unsurprising that Maimonides regards the Account of the Chariot as mythical or symbolic: since Ezekiel has a vision, what he sees is, in some obvious sense, imagistic and thus in need of decoding. But why does Maimonides say that the account of creation in Genesis is a parable? It contains no images per se. The language is quite plain. There is what seems to be a straightforward account of how the world came into being—it is not, after all, an account of how one man saw it or dreamed it, nor does it appear in a book of parables. And although to be sure we cannot know what it means to say that “God spoke and the world was” (as the *shaharit* liturgy puts it), there is nothing manifestly “parabolic” about it. The aim of this paper is to discern what it means for Maimonides to regard as a parable something that is not manifestly one. The Account of the Beginning, inasmuch as it lacks the features of dreams and visions, contains no poetic or metaphorical language, and does not obviously point beyond itself, qualifies as one such parable. (My understanding of parable as a narrative whose literal sense is symbolic of, stands for, or simply corresponds to, and thus stands *in* for, something else differs from Josef Stern’s [1998, 10] broader one, according to which it denotes anything—not only texts but commandments—that has multiple layers of meaning. As I shall point out

a bit later, Maimonides says in his Introduction to the *Guide* that when the Midrash speaks of “the words of the Torah” as parables, it does not mean to include within that designation “ordinances concerning the building of tabernacles, the lulab, and the law of four trustees” [11].)

In setting forth his ends in composing the *Guide* Maimonides cites as his first purpose that of explaining “the meanings of terms in the prophetic books,” and as the second, that of “explaining very obscure parables occurring in the books of the prophets, but not explicitly identified there as parables” (Intro., 6). Parables that do not announce themselves as parables, Maimonides observes, pose a special danger to the “ignorant” or “heedless,” since such a one “might think that they [the parables] possess only an external sense, but not an internal one” (Intro., 6). Maimonides’ concern, then, in the *Guide* is to explain not all parables but specifically those that are both very obscure and not evidently parables.

By strictly delimiting the parables whose meaning he wishes to elucidate Maimonides indicates that it is the Account of the Beginning that is the *Guide*’s main concern. For it is the account of creation that is both obscure and not evidently a parable; the Account of the Chariot, by contrast, is only obscure; there can be little doubt that it is a parable. Moreover, should we wish to include in the divine science the matter of the Torah’s anthropomorphic representations of God, these are probably not best characterized as parables at all; they can be treated under the rubric of Maimonides’ first purpose, that of explaining “the meanings of terms in the prophetic books.” There may well be other both obscure and less than apparent parables that Maimonides treats in the *Guide*—the Adam and Eve narrative, for example, might qualify—but there is good reason to suppose that these others are not Maimonides’ main preoccupation. For, if we look at the other two places in the *Guide* where Maimonides states his purpose in this work (2.29:346 and 3, Intro., 415), we see that it is “to explain what can be explained of the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot.” Whereas this might seem at first to be a distinct third purpose (see S. Harvey 1991), on reconsideration it clearly is not: since both the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot are parables, it follows that explaining them and explaining parables are one and the same thing.

It may seem that there is yet another problem here, for, whereas the first purpose of the *Guide* according to the Introduction is the clarification of terms and only the second the explanation of obscure parables, in the Introduction to Part 3 and in 2.29 the explanation of parables that is said

to be Maimonides' "first purpose" is said to be the and "chief aim," respectively. It is likely, however, that the sense of "first" in the *Guide's* Introduction is its chronological one—and indeed, the first thing Maimonides does in the *Guide* is explain terms. The "first" that appears in the Introduction to Part 3, however, surely means first in importance, and is thus equivalent to 2.29's "chief." We are in fact told at 2.30:348 that "first" is an ambiguous term: in one of its senses it signifies priority in time, in another, it means a principal principle. Surely in yet a third it means first in importance.

Considering that Maimonides in his Introduction informs the *Guide's* readers that this work contains only "chapter headings" and that "even those are not set down in order...but rather are scattered and entangled with other subjects..." (6), we may justifiably proceed to collect the relevant assertions from various parts of the *Guide* and conclude that (1) the kind of parable that chiefly occupies Maimonides is the kind that is not obviously a parable, (2) his intention is to explain what can be explained of the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot, and (3) the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot are parables. If we then add to these the observation that (4) the Account of the Chariot is a parable that is "explicitly identified as a parable," what emerges is that it is primarily the Account of the Beginning that Maimonides will be explaining in the *Guide*. What exactly Maimonides means by "explaining" a parable will become clearer at the paper's close.

In light of Maimonides' declaration that one of his two primary intents in the *Guide* is to explain biblical parables that are obscure *and* not evidently parables, the new distinction he draws (*Guide*, Intro., 12) between parables in which each term is significant and parables in which it is the larger whole that matters can have only secondary significance. Indeed, the examples Maimonides uses to illustrate respectively the two types of parable distinguished in this new way are both parables of the evident type and hence not illustrative of parables that are explicitly his main concern in the *Guide*. The first is a dream, and the second appears in a book that contains what are essentially parables: the biblical book Proverbs. For each, Maimonides provides a rather open and thorough analysis: in the case of Jacob's vision of the ladder upon which angels ascend and descend (Gen. 28), a parable in which, as he claims, each term is significant, that analysis can be found in two passages, 1.15:41 and 2.10:272; and in the case of the parable of the harlot in Prov. 7, which is one in which not every term merits careful attention, the analysis is found in the Introduction (13). With respect to the

parable of Jacob's ladder, Maimonides in the first passage (1.15:41) interprets it to signify that God is stably and permanently at the top of the ladder; that the individual who ascends apprehends Him; and that the angels are prophets. Furthermore, Maimonides explains, the prophet, after apprehending as much as he can (climbing as high up on the ladder as he can) descends to govern and teach the people, where descent is directing one's thought "toward a very mean object." In the second passage (2.10:272), Maimonides considers the parable anew. Here, in connection with the importance of the number four, he discusses the number of rungs on the ladder (concluding, after raising the question of whether there were four or seven, that there were four), and the number of angels (also four). He then explores several features of the vision itself: the breadth of an angel (one-third of the world), and the three parts that compose the world: the separate intellects (the angels), the bodies of the spheres, and finite matter (bodies subject to change, those beneath the sphere). With respect to the parable of the harlot Maimonides understands its lesson to be that "man should not follow his bestial nature," that is, the material nature which he shares with other creatures.

Despite its lesser importance for the *Guide's* overarching project, the distinction between parables in which each word is laden with meaning and those in which that is not the case secures for Maimonides the interpretive freedom to treat either way those parables he does choose to discuss. In particular, whenever not all elements of a biblical parable easily fit the Torah's deeper meaning as he sees it, he can emphasize those parts that do, and marginalize or disregard altogether those parts that do not.

Maimonides was indeed roundly criticized by a number of eminent medieval Jewish biblical exegetes for the liberties he took with the text. Alarmed by Maimonides' radically allegorical approach, Abarbanel was moved to exclaim: "In truth, it is infidelity and a grave sin to contradict the plain sense of the [biblical] verses; if this is what we do to them this leprosy will spread to all verses and result in interpretations that contradict their [i.e. the verses'] true intent" (commentary on Hos. 1). Nahmanides chastised Maimonides for allowing his philosophical beliefs to supersede the actual meaning of the Torah: "These things contradict the text. It is forbidden to listen to them—and certainly to believe them" (commentary on Gen. 18:1). And in modern times, the Vilna Gaon remarks in *Shulhan 'Arukh, Yoreh De'ah* 179:6:

All those who came after Maimonides differed [with him with respect to his allegorical interpretive method]. ...Philosophy is mistaken in a

majority of cases when it interprets the Talmud in a superficial manner and destroys the literal sense of the text. One should not think, however, that I, in any way, Heaven forbid, actually believe them or what they stand for. Rather, it is the case that everything written proceeds according to its literal sense yet all of these things have within them a hidden essence—not the meaning of the philosophers who toss [the literal sense of the text] into the refuse, but the [inner essence] of the masters of truth.

Although the above passage refers specifically to the interpretation of Talmudic texts, it applies as well to the biblical text. As Eliyahu Stern explains (2008, 19-23, with notes), the Vilna Gaon often interpreted the Torah's text figuratively, but believed at the same time that no word in it is solely aesthetic or poetic. The Vilna Gaon would thus be objecting specifically to Maimonides' distinction between parables in which each word requires interpretation and parables in which some terms may be regarded as poetic embellishments. So, for example, whereas the Vilna Gaon follows Maimonides in rejecting the implausible notion that Jonah was literally eaten by a whale and survived inside its stomach for days on end, reading it instead as an allegory about the human soul, his hermeneutic differs from Maimonides' in that it never ignores the specific wording of the Jonah text. On the contrary, the Vilna Gaon justifies and explains the meaning of each and every word and verse, offering an account of why it, and it alone, could have been employed to express the allegorical idea in question. Maimonides, by contrast, as we see, permits himself, when he deems it appropriate, to omit from his allegorical accounts those elements of the text that strike him as superfluous or imprecise. (I thank Eliyahu Stern for his helpful elucidation of the Vilna Gaon's hermeneutic divergence from Maimonides.)

Let us, then, suppose that Maimonides' most pressing aim in the *Guide* is to explain the obscure parable that is not obviously a parable, namely, the Account of the Beginning. That the issue of the world's creation or eternity is the primary concern of the *Guide* should not take us by surprise. For, not only does Maimonides devote considerable space in the *Guide* to this matter, but he also makes it clear that the very character of the world depends on it: if the world is created it is a world of miracles, hope, and fear; if not, it is fully natural: there are no miracles, and there is no reason to hope for reward or to fear retribution (2.25:328).

This is not to say, however, that Maimonides thinks that in a universe that is eternal there is no room at all for the Law (the Torah). Rather, it would seem, he recognizes two distinct conceptions of the Law that

correspond to the two alternative accounts of the origin of the world. On the one hand, there is the Law that eternity is said to destroy “in its principle,” the kind for which creation serves as a foundation (2.25:328). This Law is one that was itself miraculously revealed and contains miracles understood as instances of supernatural disruptions of the natural order. On the other hand, Maimonides appears to clear a space for a second kind of Law, one that is fully natural, when he exclaims: “unless—by God!—one interprets the miracles figuratively also, as was done by the Islamic internalists” (2.25:328). Whereas eternity destroys in its principle the Law that is suffused with the miraculous and thus keeps alive all “hopes and threats,” it can serve at the same time as the foundation for a natural Law, one that is compatible with a world that exists “in virtue of a necessity,” in which “of necessity everything must remain permanently as it is according to its nature,” and in which “it is impossible that a thing from among the existents should change as far as its nature is concerned” (2.19:302-303). Creation is then a critical—indeed *the* critical—question for Maimonides, because it determines not only the nature of the world and God’s relationship to it but the nature of the Law as well.

It is the contention of this paper that Maimonides does not regard any parable—or either of the Torah’s two accounts, the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot—as genuinely illuminating on its own. For parables, in Maimonides’ view, do not of themselves disclose their deeper meaning: the truth as known by reason must be imposed on them, and they have nothing to add to the store of truth discovered by reason alone. As he says, it is “the perfect man, who is *already informed*” who will comprehend the Account of the Beginning otherwise than will the multitude “in accord with the capacity of their understanding and the weakness of their representation” (Intro., 9). Although parables that are “not explicitly identified as parables” pose a greater danger to the uninitiated reader and therefore are in greater need of being flagged, no parables taken in their external sense and apart from truths known otherwise by reason are useful. In the case of the more evident parables, only once one has gained understanding does one know how to interpret the terms and images used in them so that they accord with—and do not contradict—the truths of physics and metaphysics. In the case of the parables that are not imagistic and hence not readily recognized as parables, it is the developed intellect that enables one to disregard wholly their surface meaning—so that it cannot interfere with or conflict with the truth, that is, with the mostly “negative” truths concerning what God is not and cannot be. None of the scriptural parables is, however, sufficient on its own for disclosing the truth.

In my view, then, Maimonides thinks the man of understanding will engage in eisegesis—he will import into the text ideas that originate outside it—and not merely in exegesis, in approaching the Torah's parables. As he says at 2.2:254:

Accordingly in whatever chapter you find me discoursing with a view to explaining a matter already demonstrated in natural science, or a matter demonstrated in divine science, or an opinion that has been shown to be the one fittest to be believed in, or a matter attaching to what has been explained in mathematics—know that that particular matter necessarily *must be a key* to the understanding of something to be found in the books of prophecy, I mean to say of some of their parables and secrets. The reason why I mentioned, explained, and elucidated that matter would be found in the knowledge *it* procures us of the Account of the Chariot and the Account of the Beginning or would be found in an explanation that *it* furnishes of some root regarding the notion of prophecy or would be found in the explanation of some root regarding the belief in a true opinion belonging to the beliefs of Law. (Emphasis added.)

The “secular” sciences hold the key, then, to the interpretation of parables.

Two passages in the *Guide* might be thought to suggest otherwise, to suggest, that is, that for Maimonides it is the Torah that must in the final analysis serve as our guide to truth (I thank Josef Stern for bringing these passages to my attention): 1.2:24 and 3.13:453. In the first of these Maimonides calls the Torah “the book that is the guide of the first and last man,” and mocks the individual who engages in theoretical speculation. On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that the individual Maimonides mocks is one who has been prematurely dismissive of Scripture, failing to appreciate (probably because he is too busy drinking and copulating and has not devoted sufficient time and effort to proper reflection) that the Torah—in this case its account of Adam's sin—may be read in such a way that it does not contradict, but rather supports, the notion that intellectual wisdom is superior to practical wisdom, and that it is actually teaching that Adam, as a result of his sin, was in effect demoted rather than elevated, punished rather than rewarded. I think it is fair to say that unless one had given much thought to these matters independently of one's reading of Gen. 3, one would never arrive at the interpretation Maimonides foists upon it (with some help from Onqelos). In the second passage Maimonides calls the Torah “that book which guides all who seek guidance.” Yet here, too, Maimonides interprets the Torah in conformity with the dictates of reason, and not at all as the Torah would be understood if taken on its own terms. He cautions against

taking the Torah in its external sense, and argues that should the text suggest that “something sublime has been made for the sake of something inferior to it,” the text’s apparent sense is to be disregarded in favor of the independently known truth that any benefit to an inferior thing simply “follows necessarily from the nature of the sublime [one]” (3.13:454).

It might be instructive in this regard to consider what Maimonides says in a letter to Samuel ibn Tibbon (Marx 1935, 380) concerning the relative merits of Plato and Aristotle:

All the writings of Aristotle’s teacher Plato are difficult and composed in parables. One has no need for them, for the writings of Aristotle suffice, and we need not deal with the books of those who preceded him. Aristotle’s intellect is the height of human intellect, apart from those upon whom the spirit of God rests. (Translation mine.)

Why do we need Plato and his parables, Maimonides seems to be asking, if we have the plain-talking, truth-transmitting Aristotle. If Aristotle’s straightforward works obviate the need for Plato’s imagistic writings, might they not similarly render otiose the Torah and *its* parables? To be sure, Maimonides would not say the same with respect to the Torah’s ethical and ritual prescriptions—as he tells us (Intro., 11), these alone in the Torah are not to be treated as parables. But these ordinances do not teach or aim to teach any sort of physical or metaphysical truth. Indeed, so concerned is Maimonides with truth even in the face of the Torah’s apparent divergences from it, that although he labors valiantly to explain and excuse the anthropomorphic language the Torah uses for God, he nevertheless also quite explicitly blames it for causing the mass of men to believe in God’s corporeality (see *Guide* 1.31:67, 1.51:114, 1.53:119). Indeed, he often expresses a clear preference for Onqelos’s Aramaic translation to the Torah’s original precisely because it, unlike the Torah itself, avoids promoting the view of God as bodily. (Maimonides mentions Onqelos approvingly in the *Guide* roughly two dozen times [see especially 1.27, 1.48, and 2.26], though he almost always [with two notable exceptions: 2.30:354 and 3.45:575] modifies Onqelos’s translations in some way. Only once is he openly critical of Onqelos—at 1.66:160-61—with regard to the biblical phrase “written with the finger of God” [Ex. 31:18].) Maimonides, it seems, would warn against taking the Torah as a reliable purveyor of truth, whether through its stories or through the terms it employs.

Maimonides in the *Guide*’s Introduction (11-14) has recourse to a series of four parables to elucidate the relationship between *peshat*, or the straightforward meaning of the surface text, and the secret, deeper meaning

of the text, its presumed true meaning. (For a full discussion of these four parables and their implications, see Weiss 2008.) Although he presents the four as if they all say more or less the same thing in different ways, the fact is that they differ significantly from one another in their implications. Close attention to them reveals that they are ordered in such a way as to build successively toward a rather startling view of the relationship between the Torah text's *peshat* and its hidden meaning. The first parable, which compares the words of the Torah to a cord by which the cool but remote waters of a well can be reached, suggests that the *peshat*, the text's surface meaning, has instrumental value; whether or not it might have intrinsic value as well is left unaddressed. In the second parable, in which the *peshat* is compared to a taper which, though almost worthless in itself, is nevertheless valuable for finding a lost pearl, Maimonides grants the taper—and hence the *peshat*—instrumental value but explicitly denies it intrinsic value: it is worth, he says, a mere issar. In the third parable, a pearl lies hidden in a dark house that is full of furniture, and the only way it can be found is by the lighting of a lamp. Here the *peshat* is the analogue of the dark furniture-filled house, so that it now not only has no intrinsic value, but it lacks even instrumental value. Moreover, one would have to conclude that, according to this parable, the *peshat* occludes the text's deeper meaning if “an act of understanding,” the analogue of the lamp, is required to penetrate through it to the text's secret. The final parable likens the *peshat* to a setting of silver filigree, and the Torah's hidden meaning to the golden apple encased within it. Although both are beautiful, Maimonides says, gold is more beautiful than silver. Moreover, Maimonides makes the point that the apple, when seen at a distance, appears to be solidly silver. It would seem, then, that not only is the silver filigree not instrumentally helpful for discerning the golden apple within, but it deceives all but the most judicious into believing that there is no apple but a silver one. It is not wholly off the mark to see Maimonides at last, in this final parable, according the surface text intrinsic value insofar as he compares it to silver. Yet for Maimonides the *peshat*'s intrinsic value does not lie in advancing truth but rather in enhancing human associations—that is, in improving both individual moral character, on the one hand, and social and political relations among people, on the other. Although *peshat* is, therefore, beautiful in its way—as beautiful as silver—it nevertheless conceals the truth from ordinary people and even fools them: it causes all but those with the keenest vision to believe that *it* is the truth and that there is no deeper and more genuine truth.

It is true, to be sure, that on at least one occasion Maimonides speaks of views that improve social relations as “correct” opinions: at *Guide* 3.28:512, he says that certain beliefs are necessary for political welfare—for example, “the belief that God becomes violently angry with those who disobey Him and that it is therefore necessary to fear Him and to dread Him and to take care not to disobey”—and when he proceeds to consider by contrast the “correct opinions” concerning the whole of being, he calls these latter the “other correct opinions” (*sāir al-arā al-ṣaḥīḥah*). And immediately following, at 3.28:513, Maimonides speaks of commandments that might be necessary for “communicating a correct opinion [*ray ṣaḥīḥ*] that ought to be believed *either* on account of itself or for the acquisition of a noble moral quality.” Yet, among the “correct” politically salutary beliefs is “our belief that He, may He be exalted, is violently angry with those who disobey Him and that it is therefore necessary to fear Him and to dread Him and to take care not to disobey,” (3.28:512), a belief whose patent falsity Maimonides had earlier unequivocally affirmed (*Guide* 1.55:128-29). Maimonides thus encourages the masses to embrace beliefs that are, strictly speaking, false, views that are “correct” only in the sense that they are useful and beneficial from a moral and social or political point of view. Another instance of this Maimonidean approach may be seen, for example, in his *Commentary to Sanhedrin 10* (commonly known as *Pereq Heleq*), where he identifies the target of Avtalyon’s warning in *Avot* 1:3, “Sages, mind your words!” as Antigonos Ish Sokho, who famously said: “Do not be like servants who serve the master for the sake of reward; rather be like servants who serve the master not for the sake of reward” (*Avot* 1:11). Although Maimonides undoubtedly shares Antigonos’s view, he nevertheless evidently does not approve of its being promulgated to the masses.

It is also true that both the gold and the silver are called “*hokhmah*,” wisdom (Intro., 12). Yet, there is no more reason to assume that all forms of *hokhmah* are the same than that all metals are (see 3.54 for the four senses of *hokhmah*). As Maimonides interprets the Adam and Eve parable in 1.2, “knowing” good and bad is very different from “knowing” true and false. And although Maimonides has recourse to a peculiar circumlocution in his characterization of the internal meaning as containing “wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerned with the truth as it is,” it seems likely that Maimonides’ intention here is to indicate that the internal meaning or, perhaps, the very recognition that there *is* an internal meaning, is useful for fostering belief in what is known to be true through reason. The external meaning is anything but useful in this regard.

A similar lesson may be derived from another occasion on which Maimonides compares silver to gold. In *Guide* 1.59, Maimonides cites approvingly a story from the Talmud (BT, *Berakhot* 33b; *Megilah* 25a) that tells of a certain *sheliaḥ zibbur* (prayer-leader) who embellished the rabbinically prescribed formula for praising God with additional encomia of his own and was sharply reprimanded by R. Ḥanina. R. Ḥanina compared the man's excesses to the offense one commits when one praises a king for having a million silver pieces when what the king actually has is a million gold ones. Maimonides notes the far greater gravity of this qualitative insult as compared with the merely quantitative one of praising a king for having one thousand gold pieces when he actually has a million. Thus, to say that *peshat* is like silver while the truth that lies beneath it is like gold implies not that *peshat* is merely somewhat less valuable with respect to truth than the deeper sense that lies within (a mere quantitative difference), but rather that its value lies elsewhere (a qualitative difference). Indeed, with respect to truth the *peshat* is of no value at all; if anything, it obscures the truth.

Maimonides indicates in yet another way that *peshat* is a hindrance to truth. When he lays out the *Guide's* two purposes (Intro., 6), he says, as we have seen, that the first purpose of the *Guide* is to explain certain problematic words in the Torah and the second is to clarify the hidden parables in the Torah, that is, the parables that are obscure and do not announce themselves as parables. Confusion can be dispelled, according to Maimonides, "if we explain these parables to him [i.e., one who truly possesses knowledge] or if we draw his attention to their being parables" (Intro., 6; emphasis added). In other words, all that is needed in order for the reader to be set straight is for him to be alerted to the fact that the hidden parable is a parable; that recognition alone will suffice to remove the perplexity. But, how can that be? Presumably, because once the reader sees the parable for what it is he will not be constrained by it; he will be able to look past it, through it, to the truth it contains. Making sure his point is not lost, Maimonides returns to it at the end of his treatment of the matter of parables (Intro., 14):

In some matters it will suffice you to gather from my remarks that a given story is a parable, even if we explain nothing more: for once you know it is a parable, it will immediately become clear to you what it is a parable of. My remarking that it is a parable will be like someone's removing a screen from between the eye and a visible thing. (*Guide*, Intro., 14)

This screen, like the apple's coating of silver filigree, is an obstruction—so far at least as truth is concerned.

In Maimonides' discussion in *Guide* 1.71 of creation—in particular, of the *kalam* approach to the question of the origin of the world—there is yet a fifth parable, which, though not precisely a metaphor for the relationship between the Torah's *peshat* and deeper or hidden truth, actually takes us to the next step. For in the fourth parable, in which the Torah's literal text is like silver filigree, the *peshat* has apertures through which a wise and philosophically trained reader might peer and see the golden apple within, even though to those at a distance the apple would appear to be solidly silver and the gold within would remain undetectable. The Torah's secrets, then, are not, in this parable, quite sealed off; they are accessible at least to some. Indeed, one interesting feature of the silver filigree is that it retains the shape of the golden apple even as it covers it. (This feature of the silver filigree was pointed out to me by Edward Halper.) What the fifth parable adds is the dimension of what the Rabbis did to further safeguard—and conceal—the Torah's truths. As Maimonides says in the Introduction: "The Sages, may their memory be blessed, following the trail of these books, likewise have spoken of them [the natural matters] in riddles and parables" (7). Maimonides notes that the Rabbis were reluctant—and, in his view, rightly so—to commit to paper even the legalistic science of the law, and so were understandably even more hesitant to convey in writing the mysteries of the Torah, electing instead to transmit them orally, and only sparingly, wise man to wise man. All that can be found in the Talmud and midrashim, Maimonides tells us, are "slight indications and pointers." And he goes on: "These are, as it were, a few grains belonging to the core, which are overlaid by many layers of rind, so that people were occupied with these layers of rind and thought that beneath them there was no core whatever" (1.71.176). The Rabbis, it seems, not content to have the deeper truth of the Torah remain a golden apple covered with silver filigree, took it upon themselves to extract only a few grains from its core—thereby blotting out all traces of the core's shape—and to encase these grains not with a porous overlay but with a rind, that is, with something thick and impenetrable. Moreover, they did their encasing not with just a single rind, but with many layers of rind, thereby making it impossible to detect that there was beneath them any core at all.

If the Account of the Beginning in the Torah is indeed a parable as Maimonides says it is, then the Torah's text is a coating that covers up the truth though it contains apertures through which the wise might peer and glimpse the truth within. But, as Maimonides indicates in 1.71, the truth about the origins of the world has been far more hermetically sealed at the hands of the Rabbis. Not feeling sufficiently assured by the penetrable

*peshat* whose relation to the truth is as silver filigree to golden apple, they heaped layer upon layer of non-porous coatings on the few grains of core they extracted. Their goal was clearly to keep people so engrossed in the layers of rind that they would not suspect that there lay beneath them a few grains, and certainly not that these few grains trace their own origins back to a solid core. As Maimonides says in 3.43, with respect to the midrashim: “Those who understand their [the Sages’] discourses” see these midrashim as “political conceits; they are not meant to bring out the meaning of the text in question” (572-73). There are some among those who imagine that the Sages indeed intend to explain the meaning of the text in question who therefore accord to the midrashim “the same status as traditional legal decisions.” There are others who, recognizing that what the midrashim say “is not the meaning of the text in question,” simply ridicule the midrashim. In truth, however, a midrash “is a most witty poetical conceit” by means of which the Sages seek to instill “a noble moral quality,” supporting it “through reference to a biblical text, as is done in poetical compositions” (573).

The *Guide*’s Introduction contains a similar analysis of the various approaches to midrash: “an ignoramus... would find nothing difficult in them, inasmuch as a rash fool, devoid of any knowledge of the nature of being, does not find impossibilities hard to accept. If, however, a perfect man of virtue should engage in speculation on them, he cannot escape one of two courses: either he can take the speeches in question in their external sense and, in so doing, think ill of their author and regard him as an ignoramus—in this there is nothing that would upset the foundations of belief; or he can attribute to them an inner meaning, thereby extricating himself from his predicament and enabling himself to think well of the author whether or not the inner meaning is clear to him” (10). Note that here, too, as in the case of the parables of the Law, in order to think well of the midrashim it is sufficient to recognize *that* they have an inner meaning; one need not know what the internal meaning is.

Let us turn now to 2.25, where Maimonides defends his professed belief that the world was created (see also 1.71, 2.6, 2.13, 3.10). (The question of whether Maimonides sincerely believed the world was created or secretly harbored an Aristotelian belief in the world’s eternity has generated voluminous discussion. Among the pivotal scholarly contributions to this question are Klein-Braslavy 1968; W. Harvey 1981; Dunphy 1989; Ivry 1982; Wolfson 1973; Ravitsky 1966; Nuriel 1964; Hyman 1987; Glücker 1959; and Loberbaum 2002.) That there has been no definitive demonstration of

eternity *a parte ante* constitutes Maimonides' first reason for advocating the literal reading of the Account of the Beginning. (Maimonides argues in 2.15 that Aristotle failed to offer a demonstration of eternity and was aware of his failure to do so.) Had there been such a demonstration, Maimonides says, he would have interpreted figuratively the Scriptural passages that imply creation just as he does those that imply divine corporeality. Since, however, throughout the *Guide* Maimonides presents himself as walking in the footsteps of the Rabbis, it is not possible that he believes, as he claims to, that, in the absence of a definitive demonstration of eternity, the words of the Torah affirming creation are to be taken literally. For, as we have seen, Maimonides supposes that the Torah is, except with respect to matters of law (Intro., 11), a collection of parables, that is, of things that are to be read figuratively. (Only when Maimonides is at his most defensive—that is, in his “Essay on Resurrection” [Halkin 1985], where he fends off the suspicion that he does not believe in the resurrection of the dead—does he say that he adheres to the Torah's literal sense unless it is utterly impossible to do so, as in the case of the corporeality of God. As he explains, once having admitted creation, he no longer has grounds for rejecting any miracle, including bodily resurrection [228]. It is noteworthy, however, that, even when thus in apologetic mode, Maimonides admits the importance to him of interpreting the text in conformity with reason and the natural: “I try to reconcile the Law and reason, and wherever possible consider all things as of the natural order. Only when something is explicitly identified as a miracle, and reinterpretation of it cannot be accommodated, only then do I feel forced to grant that this is a miracle” [223].) Maimonides indeed says explicitly several times that the account of creation (“the Account of the Beginning”) is a parable (Introduction: 7, 9; cf. 2.17:298, 2.27:333). In advocating the literal reading of Scripture here, Maimonides is, like the Rabbis, encasing the truth in rind, thereby ensuring that people become enmeshed in the rind and miss the core. Yet, to encourage everyone to read Gen.1 literally is to dissolve the distinction Maimonides draws in the Introduction (9) between “the perfect man who is already informed,” on the one hand, and the multitude, on the other.

Maimonides' stated second reason for preferring the creation view is that, since there *is* no demonstration to the contrary, it is best to avoid the Aristotelian eternity view which threatens the very foundations of the Torah (see, too, 2.13, 2.23, 2.30). (The belief that God is corporeal, though suggested by a literal reading of the Torah, is demonstrably false and, furthermore, has no moral or social value to recommend its adoption. Other demonstrably false beliefs, however, such as that God gets angry, are “silver”:

they do have such value, and Maimonides encourages their acceptance.) Aside from how repugnant Maimonides finds the practice of embracing a view because its alternative threatens some other view one wishes to preserve at all costs (see 1.71; also 2.23), it is important to ask which “foundation of the Torah” an eternal universe threatens. As Maimonides tells us, it threatens the possibility of miracles. And the value of miracles is that they sustain our hopes and fears (2.25:328). Without creation there can be no miracles, and without miracles, there can be nothing to hope for or to fear. Maimonides believes, of course, that the philosopher, the superior human being, lives beyond hope and fear (see his *Code, Laws concerning Repentance*, 10:1, 10:3). He believes, too, that Abraham, in being prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac, acts out of love, “without hope of reward or fear of punishment, and [in the recognition] that love and fear of God is alone the right motivation for action” (*Guide* 3.24). It is only the masses who require hope and fear in order to conduct themselves properly—indeed Maimonides explicitly permits them to worship God out of hope and fear even though doing so is hardly ideal (*Code, Laws concerning Repentance*, 10:5)—and so it is only they who need miracles and only they who need creation. Creation is silver because it sustains a belief that enhances the moral, social, and political life of ordinary people; but it is not gold—it is not true. (Maimonides, in his *Book of Commandments*, lists fearing God as fourth among the 248 affirmative precepts. It derives from Deut. 6:13 and 10:20: “The Lord, thy God, shalt thou fear.”) Fear of God is not to be confused with fear of punishment. As Maimonides defines fear of God in the *Code, Laws concerning the Foundations of the Torah* 2:2, it is man’s shrinking back in recognition “that he is but a small, lowly, dark creature who, with his inferior and meager mind, stands before Him who is perfect in His knowledge.” The notion of fear of God is perhaps best captured in King David’s utterance: “When I consider Thy Heavens, the work of Thy fingers.... What is man that Thou art mindful of him?” (Ps. 8:4, 5).

At the end of *Guide* 2.25 Maimonides poses the following questions that he claims are more difficult to answer on the assumption that the world is eternal than on the assumption that it is created: why did God bestow prophetic revelation on one man rather than on another; why did He give the Torah to one particular nation and not to all; why did He choose to legislate at one particular time rather than at another; why did he entrust a particular prophet with one miracle rather than another; what was God’s aim in setting forth the Torah; and why did He not implant the observance of the commandments in human nature. Maimonides states that on the creation assumption one can simply dispose of these questions by saying: “God wanted

it this way” or “This is what God’s wisdom required.” But, he contends, on the eternity assumption one must have recourse to “unseemly answers in which there would be combined the giving the lie to, and the annulment of, all the external meanings of the Law with regard to which no intellectual man has any doubt that they are to be taken in their external meanings” (329-30). Yet, Maimonides, as we have seen, is not methodologically disposed to interpret the Torah as literally as possible. Moreover, for at least some of the questions on this list Maimonides furnishes naturalistic answers, consonant with the eternity assumption. For example, to the question, why did God choose a particular prophet rather than another, Maimonides’ answer is that prophecy devolves upon one who has perfected himself morally, spiritually, and intellectually (see 2.32). To the question, why did God not implant in human nature the observance of the commandments, his answer is that free will is itself a feature of human nature (see 2.48). For the rest, Maimonides’ answer might be that there is no answer, that the world follows its natural course without divine intervention. Indeed, it is the assumption that the world was created—along with its corollary that events need not have occurred as they did—that causes us to wonder why particular things are the way they are. (See Weiss 2007.) There is nothing to wonder at if everything is necessary, for so long as the grand scheme reflects God’s wisdom, all that is part of it is “best” as it is (even if His wisdom and goodness surpass human understanding).

It is worth noting that but four chapters later, in 2.29, Maimonides reverses himself with respect to taking the Torah text in its external sense on the matter of creation. And perhaps he does so not only there, but even earlier, that is, even before 2.25, for he says: “All these assertions are needed if the text of Scripture is taken in its external sense, even though it must not be so taken, as shall be explained...” (2.17:298). Although Pines suggests that the explanation Maimonides refers to here is the one found in 2.30 where he discusses creation as a temporal act (298, n.8), it is highly unlikely that Maimonides’ warning against taking Scripture literally, including with respect to creation, can be confined to just this one aspect of it. For, first, it is significant that Maimonides’ point in this passage of 2.17 is that his preceding arguments for creation—perhaps the strongest he has—are only required if Scripture is read literally. (These arguments contend that one cannot infer from the way something is in a mature state how it was in the gestational state.) Second, Maimonides makes it clear that figurative—not literal—reading is the default mode for parables; and creation, he tells us in the Introduction in no uncertain terms, is a parable. Third, in 2.29, Maimonides cautions against teaching others what one understands about creation except “in flashes.”

As he says, creation harbors secrets, mysteries (see, too, 1.76), things one is forbidden to explain openly. How likely is it that these hidden mysteries are limited to creation's being a temporal act?

Having warned his reader in 2.29 that creation is one of the great mysteries whose secrets it is forbidden to divulge, he concludes that therefore not everything in the Torah's account should be taken literally. Although it is true that Maimonides says only that "not everything" in the text of the Account of the Beginning (presumably Gen. 1) should be read literally, he could hardly be expected to say here that "nothing" in the text should be read literally, having just explicitly advocated in 2.25 that the creation account be taken in its most literal external sense. Furthermore, if there were only very little in the Account of the Beginning that is not to be taken literally, this would not adequately explain why "the men of knowledge" were "chary of divulging [the truth] with regard to it," or why the Sages would have "expatiated on its being kept secret and on preventing the talk about it in the presence of the vulgar" (2.29.346-47). Thus, even though in the following chapter, 2.30, Maimonides re-affirms his commitment to creation, he makes a point of saying in 2.29 that "the external sense of these texts leads either to a grave corruption of the imagination and to giving vent to evil opinions with regard to the deity, or to an absolute denial of the action of the deity and to disbelief in the foundation of the Law." (Indeed, Maimonides implicitly signals that he supports creation even in 2.29 itself, where he says he agrees with Aristotle on only half his view, that is, on the eternity of the world *a parte post*, presumably disagreeing with him on the other half, the eternity of the world *a parte ante*. See, too, 1.71 and 2.23, where Maimonides warns against tendentious reasoning yet still affirms his belief in creation.) Maimonides insists, moreover, that those who lack knowledge of the sciences should refrain "from considering these texts merely with the imagination... it is obligatory to consider them with what is truly the intellect *after* one has acquired perfection in the demonstrative sciences and knowledge of the secrets of the prophets" (347; emphasis added).

In Maimonides' warnings against reading the Torah's text literally we see that for him there is no less danger in taking the Torah in its literal or external sense than there is in failing to do so. Reading the Torah figuratively poses a danger to those whose intellects are weak, but reading it literally is perilous for those who are philosophically and scientifically sophisticated. In order for these latter individuals to remain within the fold, they must be able to see the Torah's deeper meaning, its true science. For, as

Maimonides says in the Introduction, the man who does not allow himself “to be drawn on together with intellect” would perceive “that he had brought loss to himself and to his religion” (6). One whose intelligence is perfected cannot but feel that he has done a disservice to himself and to his religion if he abandons reason for religion’s sake.

Maimonides’ remarks concerning the dangers of abandoning reason, as well as his observation at 2.25:328 that were eternity demonstrated the Torah could more easily be metaphorically interpreted in light of this truth than it could in light of the truth of God’s incorporeality, suggest that he wished to assure those who subscribe to the Aristotelian eternity position that they, too, have a place in the community, and indeed that they occupy the most exalted place. So, too, all Maimonides’ attempts to reconcile Aristotelian views with Scripture are best construed as attempts to assure the philosophically inclined that they need not abandon the Torah, though they ought not to look to its surface text to provide truths that are best gotten elsewhere. A case in point might be 3.13:455, where Maimonides offers an interpretation of Job 4:18-19. The biblical verses read as follows: “Behold, he puts no trust in his servants; and his angels he charges with folly: how much more those who dwell in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust, who are crushed before the moth?” Taking “servants” to mean spheres, Maimonides contends that the verses teach that the spheres have no trustworthy existence. And he goes on: “For, according to our opinion, they are made; according to the opinion of those who prefer the doctrine of the eternity of the world, they are caused. And their part in existence is not trustworthy or fixed if compared to Him, may He be exalted, the absolutely necessary being.” Maimonides’ assertion that the point is valid either way might well serve as an assurance to one who leans toward the eternity view that he need not on that account be dismissive of the Torah. Another such assurance may be found at 1.71:181, where Maimonides implies that the eternity of the world need not spell the end of prophecy.

Indeed, if we exclude from consideration Maimonides’ endorsement in 2.25 of the literal interpretation of the Torah’s Account of the Beginning, if, that is, we take seriously instead his repeated repudiations of the literal interpretation of biblical parables, it begins to seem very probable that he sides with Aristotle on the question of the world’s origins. For, despite his own efforts to argue for the creation thesis, he openly concedes that “the opinions held by Aristotle regarding the causes of the motion of the spheres—from which opinions he deduced the existence of separate intellects,” while

not demonstrated, “are, of all the opinions put forward on this subject, those that are exposed to the smallest number of doubts and those that are the most suitable for being put into a coherent order” (2.3:254). Maimonides immediately goes on to say that “these sayings also are in harmony with many sayings of the Law and, more particularly, with what is explained in the generally known midrashim.” Strikingly, Maimonides concludes this passage by saying that he will set forth Aristotle’s opinions and proofs “so that I may cull from them what agrees with the Law and corresponds to the sayings of the Sages, may their memory be blessed.” Maimonides is telling us here, in effect, that although he will affirm only those Aristotelian opinions and proofs that are consonant with the Torah and the Midrash, nevertheless, Aristotle’s opinions and proofs remain generally, and not only on those occasions when they accord with Scripture and the Rabbis, “those exposed to the smallest number of doubts.” (Chapter 2.3 is a very short one that makes only this single point.)

In closing, let us ask what we are to make of Maimonides’ assertion in the Introduction to Part 3.415 and in 2.29:346 that the *Guide*’s first purpose and chief aim is to explain the Account of the Beginning and Account of the Chariot. If indeed he, following the Rabbis, does not intend to reveal what is not to be revealed and does not think the Torah’s account can be regarded as literally true (as, as we have seen, he indeed says at 2.29.346), what is it that Maimonides will explain? A second look at Maimonides’ statement shows that in both places he promises to explain only “what can be explained,” that is, he has no intention of openly revealing what must remain hidden, that is, the true secrets, those mysteries that it is forbidden for one person to reveal to many others. We should not, then, expect anything that Maimonides conveys openly to be an explanation of the secrets and mysteries of the Account of the Beginning or the Account of the Chariot: the explanation of those things will be itself hidden and only hinted at. It might even be the case that Maimonides is playing on the ambiguity in the phrase, “to explain what can be explained” (*tabyīn mā yumkin tabyīnihi*), which may signify either that Maimonides is prepared to explain all that can be explained of the Account of the Beginning and Account of the Chariot, or that his intent is only to identify just what there is—and just how little there is—in the Account of the Beginning and Account of the Chariot that can (or may) be explained. If Maimonides’ purpose in the *Guide* is to indicate just how tight the restrictions are on what may be openly divulged about these mysteries, perhaps the contradiction between his explicit endorsement of creation as literally presented in the Torah, on the one hand, and his general

disparagement of the literal interpretation of parables, on the other, successfully serves his end.

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## Questioning Northrop Frye's Adaptation of Vico

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### PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT OF FRYE'S CONTENTIONS

The late Northrop Frye (1912-1991) stands out as one of the most acclaimed and influential literary critics of the twentieth century. Among the authors from whom Frye acknowledged to have drawn inspiration we find the political philosopher Giambattista Vico (1668-1744). But Frye's appreciation of Vico came with significant reservations. While Frye found Vico useful to the extent that the Italian philosopher could be very freely adapted to Frye's literary vision, beyond that point Frye would not "buy" what Vico had to say. While being fully aware that his adaptation of Vico did not coincide with the philosopher's overall theoretical position, Frye set out to put some elements of Vico's work to use outside of their original argumentative setting.

In his volume *Words with Power* (Frye 1992), Frye contends that Vico:

(1) discovered "the principle that all verbal structures descend from mythological origins" *so that* "what is true for us is what we have made": "What is true for us is a creation in which we have participated, whether we have been in on the making of it or on the responding to it" (82; cf. xii, 24, 29, 37, 135, 185);

(2) taught that "communication from an unknown world began with a thunderclap, taken by early men (then giants) to be the voice of God. They dashed terrified into caves, dragging their women behind them, and thereby instituting private property" (112);

(3) believed that history is cyclical, or that it moves in a "cyclical rotation" (121, 164).

While Frye welcomes (1) in an unqualified manner, he consciously adapts (2) and (3) to harmonize with his general understanding of life. But does Vico really teach what Frye states he does? And ultimately, does Frye's teaching make more sense than Vico's own?

Frye's *Words with Power* refers to Vico as "the first modern thinker to understand that all major verbal structures have descended historically from poetic and mythological ones," adding however that, like Schelling (followed by "Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell, and several Freudian, Jungian and other psychological studies"), "Vico had limited interest in the continuous social function of literature, and he paid little attention to the principle that makes it insistent" (xii). Frye's contention is best understood in Frye's own powerful terms:

To summarize briefly my central thesis on this point: *every human society possesses a mythology which is inherited, transmitted and diversified by literature*. Comparative mythology is a fascinating subject, but it is quickly exhausted as a scholarly study if it remains simply a configuration of patterns. It is generally understood that it needs to be grounded in psychology or anthropology: it is much less understood that *its central and most important extension is into the literature (along with the criticism of literature) which incarnates a mythology in a historical context*. In the opposite direction, a literary criticism that cuts off its own cultural and historical roots in mythology becomes sterile even more quickly. Some forms of it stop with an analytic disintegrating of texts as an end in itself; others study literature as a historical or ideological phenomenon, and its works as documents illustrating something outside literature. But this leaves out *the central structural principles that literature derives from myth, the principles that give literature its communicating power across the centuries through all ideological changes. Such structural principles are certainly conditioned by social and historical factors and do not transcend them, but they retain a continuity of form that points to an identity of the literary organism distinct from all its adaptations to its social environment*. (Frye 1992, xii-xiii; emphasis added)

Apparently Vico did not adequately appreciate literature's continuous social function as an historical incarnation of archetypal, mythical structures (on Frye's understanding of "archetypes," compare Frye 1990, 95-114, 131-57; 1965, 167 and 409). Frye's contention is tied to his argument against Vico's alleged teaching that history is cyclical:

*Vico had worked on a theory of history according to which society goes through three different stages: a poetic age of the gods (a mythical age), an aristocratic age of the heroes, and a democratic age of the*

people. In his day there had been no permanently successful example of a democracy, so *Vico assumed that after going through those three phases, society went into a ricorso, and did the whole thing all over again*. He said too that there was a language for each of these stages: for the age of the gods there was a hieroglyphic language; for an age of the heroes, a hieratic language; and for an age of the people, a demotic language. These languages were all forms of writing because Vico believed that people communicated by signs before they could talk. *His theory is bound up with a rather curious mythology* according to which the original inhabitants of the world before the flood were giants who carried on in a very unseemly manner until they were terrified by a thunderstorm, after which they dashed into caves dragging their women behind them. So began private property. [...] *It seemed to me that Vico's distinction was something that one could adapt, although it would have to be a very free adaptation. I won't buy his ricorso, at least not in the form in which he gives it*. I don't think that people communicated by signs before they could talk. At the same time I do feel that this conception of three phases of language which have some kind of relationship to hieroglyphic, hieratic, and demotic might make a certain sense. (Frye 2000, 24; emphasis added)

On Frye's reading, the problem with Vico is his lack of openness to the future: Vico does not appear to have realized that, if all human knowledge and understanding is grounded in myth, we are not *ipso facto* condemned to fall back into *sheer* myth, insofar as myth finds its catharsis, its redemption, or continuous incarnation in literary production and its "criticism"—a criticism entailing the extraction of literature's archetypal structures through which literature's mythical powers may be brought to enrich our lives (Frye 1965, 111). If words are born "with power," it is only through the refinery of criticism that words' raw, mythical power becomes suitable fuel for spiritual empowerment, i.e. for the empowerment of the human will, and thus for a life lived with utmost intensity (*ibid.*, 15, 192).

Admittedly, in Vico we find no such outlet. Throughout his *magnum opus*—*Principi di Scienza Nuova d'Intorno alla Comune Natura della Nazioni* (hereafter, *SN44*)—the very term "future" or any cognate thereof never appears. Even what is "new" (*nuovo*) in Vico's work is nothing substantially new. On Vico's word (following the Roman Seneca), what is "new" about his work is what is *always* new, i.e. what appears as new in every age (compare *SN44*, Bk. V.3, last paragraph, and *SN30*, "Idea of the Work," par. 38). The very title of Vico's *Opera* inverts the terms of Galileo's title, "New Science" (*Nuova Scienza*), thereby emphasizing, "new," as the particular or special aspect of the universal subject of *science per se* (compare *ibid.* and

SN44, “Of the Elements,” XVI, XLVII). While, following the Aristotle of medieval scholasticism, Vico reads “science” as necessarily pertaining “to universal and eternal things” (*de universalibus et aeternis*; SN44, “Of the Elements,” XXII), Vico’s *scienza* is not knowledge of the eternal *sempliciter*, but of the civil dawn of eternal things—of a birth divined in the fables of authoritative “Theologian Poets.” Accordingly, the *Scienza Nuova* presents itself as a “civil, reasoned theology” of its own principles or origins, which are merely “certain” or poetic for the imaginative faculty we have in common with beasts, but “true” “in God” (*ibid.*, “Idea of the Work,” par. 2, and Bk. II, Introduction, “Of Wisdom Generally,” par. 3; compare *Risposta 1711*, part 2, par. 1-3; SN44, “Of the Elements,” LIX; “Of the Method,” par. 1; SN30, Bk. IV.12.iii: “Corollary,” last par.).

Vico remains critically bent upon origins—at every turn of argument showing that all attempts to resolve the origins of civil society into the product of human ingenuity result in relapses into “barbarism” (*barbarie*), or in the utter demise of the will (SN44, “Of the Elements,” XLII; “Of the Method,” par. 2; Bk. II.1.ii, §7; Bk. II.2.vi, §4; Bk. II.2.vii, §1; Bk. II.3, par. 1; “Conclusion of the Work,” second sentence). The *ricorso* or “recurring-course” that Frye finds in Vico is inseparable from the *corso* or “course” characterizing the nature (*natura*) or birth (*nascimento*) of civil things: Vico’s *ricorso* (never in the plural) is the diastole of a systole for civil society, understood as a living unit or “nation” (compare *De Antiquissima*, “Dedication,” *Risposta 1711*, part. 3, par. 14; and SN30, Bk. II.5.viii, par. 3). Hence, with Vico, speaking of origins is tantamount to speaking of “the common nature of nations” out of which emerge all human customs (SN44, Bk. I.104). Not by chance is the *Scienza Nuova* bent upon demonstrating the originally *civil* meaning of “fables” (*favole*): the supposedly “mythical” or “fabulous” (*mithicae = fabulosae*) origins of civil society are “civil” (*civili*; cf. *inter alia*, SN44, “Idea of the Work,” par. 5; Bk. I.1 and 22; “Of the Elements,” LIV; Bk. II, preface; and Bk. III.1.v, par. 1). In reality, there can be no development of civil society from a mythical age into a human or rational age.

The distinction between the “three ages” that Frye welcomes as Vico’s special contribution to modern literary criticism is nothing more than a heuristic tool Vico borrowed from what he calls the “conceit” (*boria*) of ancient Egyptians’ imagination (*ibid.* and SN44, Bk. I.1, par. 8). On account of the imagination of nations, the origins of civil society are private property—or, to speak with the Godfather, *cosa nostra*: “our own business.” Vico’s account of civil society finds private property, an imaginary *suum*

providentially foreshadowing the mind's property, as a primordial form of delusion (SN44, "Of the Elements," VII, XIII, LXIII; "Of the Method," 2; Bk. II.1.ii, §1; Bk. II.5, par. 2; *De Uno*, Bk. I, Ch. LVII, LXIII.10, and LXXV.2). The deluded imagination of the first nations, compounded with the equally deluded imagination of the Learned (*Dotti*) of those same nations, sustains the belief that civility is originally imposed by someone upon someone else, with the implication—drawn emblematically by Epicureans—that outside of every particular "self" there is only Chaos (*Cao*; compare SN44, Bk. II.7.i, and SN30, Bk. IV.12.iii: "Last Proofs of the Truth of these Principles," last par.). Vico's response to such views points to a *civil* coincidence of the private and the common: while everyone *believes* or *imagines* himself *in private* as "rule of the universe" (*regola dell'universo*), the belief or image in question is truly *common*. It is common for all men to "sense" reality *in private*, or "in the body" (compare SN44, "Of the Method," par. 5, and "Of the Elements," XIII). The interstice between men is not chaos, but an *order* without which no communality of private utilities would ever arise. Men *commonly* partake *in private* or imaginatively in an order of things they ordinarily remain ignorant of (*ibid.*).

What ties men together in civil society is an *activity* or perfect *faculty* that always transcends the physical imagination of men (*ibid.*, "Conclusion of the Work," par. 3-4). This activity is disclosed to us as what is "for all, Jove"—namely a divined objective-form of physical motion (*Riprensione*, par. 1, and SN44, "Of the Method," par. 2). Vico's "Jove" is the heavenly boundary of our imagination and thereby of "the universe of human sense" (compare *Vico Vindiciae*, §6; SN44, "Of the Method," par. 1-3; and SN44, "Idea of the Work," par. 3-4). Above all, Jove is the defining-limit or over-arching "natural royal law" (*legge regia naturale*) of *nations*: "Jove" is *natural* to every unified, independent civil society. The *true* Jove is not the mythical product but the civil *limit* of the imagination: the *true* Jove, i.e. the true God, is the Jove that Christianity recognizes in the Hebrew Bible, namely the unimaginable God of civil religion (SN44, Bk. II.3, par. 1; "Of the Elements," XXVII; "Of the Method," par. 5; *De Constantia Philologiae*, Ch. XX.113).

On Vico's account, the order we *can* be aware of—and *are* aware of as long as we remain pious (*ibid.*, "Conclusion of the Work," last par.)—is not limited to what we make: all artificial order depends upon and partakes in a "natural order" irreducible to words (*ordo naturalis*; *De Uno*, Bk. I, Ch. CLII.7-CLIII). Admittedly, man as union of mind and body—i.e. as a "something" individuated by the mind (cf. e.g., *De Antiquissima*, Ch.

I.3)—has no “science” (*scienza* or *scientia*), but only “conscience” (*coscienza* or *conscientia*) of the order of nature, insofar as to possess science or pure knowledge of something is to contain that something’s elements (compare *ibid.*, Ch. I.1-2, and *SN44*, “Of the Principles,” par. 2). Men do not contain the constitutive elements of that which is “between” the private imaginative worlds of men—of the world of “things themselves” (*res ipsae*; *De Antiquissima*, Ch. V.5, last par.). That which transcends the world of the imagination is what all men “divine” or “intend” in object-forms, the cause of which they are impiously tempted to attribute to themselves. But for each of us and so for each nation, these object-forms ultimately converge into one, insofar as thought naturally tends towards uniformity and universality (*SN44*, “Of the Elements,” XIII, XXII, XLIII, XLVII, LXIII). The ultimate impiety is that of the “atheist” who believes in his heart that he himself is the author of the object-form in which all other object-forms of experience converge (compare *SN44*, “Of the Principles,” par. 6; Bk. II.3, par. 1-2; “Conclusion of the Work,” par. 2 and 4; *Risposta 1711*, part 3, par. 11). The Author of the natural order transcending our imagination cannot be the *human* mind (which authors only its own illusions *qua* illusions), insofar as it leaves the elements of all things outside of itself, but one infinite Mind (determined with Christianity as “Queen free and absolute of Nature”—*SN44*, “Idea of the Work,” par. 2; compare *ibid.*, “Idea of the Work,” par. 3, *De Uno*, Ch. XXXVIII, LVI, LXXIX, and *De Ratione*, Ch. IX), the very *being* (*essere*) of our *existing* (*esistenza*; *Risposta 1712*, part. 3). All that our private minds commonly retain, grasp or conceive on their own is an image or figment of the imagination (compare *SN44*, “Idea of the Work,” par. 1 and *SN30*, “Of the Principles of this Science,” par. 1). Yet, the world of lies we commonly imagine partakes in a world beyond the imagination, just as existence partakes in being. For it is true that we feign our world, but we do not feign it merely as we wish: our wishes are based on an order that we do not feign (compare *SN44*, “Idea of the Work,” par. 2; “Conclusion of the Work,” par. 3-4; *De Uno*, Bk. I, Ch. CLII; on the world of the imagination as “cave” or *grotta* of lies that are providentially redeemed, see *SN30*, “Of the Principles of this Science,” par. 1-2). Now, *this* order—which properly speaking is the fullness of order—is “metaphysical” in the respect that it transcends the “physical” world of the imagination; this “metaphysical” order is ordered or authored by “something” that is not formed by anything, and that is thus not a body. This “something,” Vico calls—after medieval Scholasticism—“most pure mind” (*purissima mens*) or “perfect reason” (*perfecta ratio*; *Oratio II*, par. 8).

That which transcends our imagination, we divine, intend or surmise as “something”—*one* most perfect “Entity” (*ens*)—beyond all other finite and thus imperfect “something’s.” That perfect “something” will be the only *true* Entity (*De Antiquissima*, Ch. I.1-2), in the light of which all other entities will appear almost *false* (compare *SN44*, “Of the Elements,” XLVII; *De Antiquissima*, Ch. I.2, par. 9; and *Risposta 1711*, part. 3, concluding paragraphs); for we intend the metaphysical always and only in the “geometrical,” as something posited outside of the physical (*Risposta 1712*, part 4, par. 10). But that which is “set aside” outside of the physical is, literally, a *parola* (from *parabola*), a “mental word” or a word pointing to properties of minds and wills (*SN44*, “Of the Elements,” LXIII and Bk. II.2.i, par. 1). In this respect, the origin or nature of speech is “silent” or “mute,” as are the *ideas* of the mind constituting the “mental dictionary” (*dizionario mentale*) common to all “spoken” tongues—a dictionary belonging to the “ideal eternal story” (*storia ideale eterna*) presupposed by all temporal stories (*ibid.*, “Of the Elements,” XXIII). All spoken temporal speech presupposes one eternal, *mental* speech as its underlying ground: the “order of words” (*ordo verborum*) partakes in a silent order. Far from being lost in Chaos (which in reality is but a “confusion of seeds”—*SN44*, Bk. II.7, par. 1—and thus a confused mind), words are originally disclosed in the mind, as *ideas*. The first or *truly natural* world is the world of pure ideas. It is only where the mind reverses itself (*si riversa*) upon itself in “self-love” or love of its own (*amor propio* or *philautia*—compare *SN44*, “Of the Method,” 2, and *De Uno*, Bk. I, Ch. XXVIII, XXXIII), that ideas are “impiously” assumed to be relative to a particular author, as private properties uprooted from things themselves to serve as instruments imposed ad hoc (*a placito*) on all objects of sense (cf. e.g., *SN44*, Bk. II.2.iv, par. 1 and 8).

Somehow, man’s impiety presupposes piety; his “corrupt nature” (*natura corrupta*) presupposes an “integral nature” (*natura integra*; *De Uno*, Ch. XIV, XXI, and XC). But even in his corruption, man is not utterly lost. An “eternal lamp” (*lume eterno*) shines through the darkness of his ignorance, namely God in the *certain* guise of divine or divined providence (*SN44*, “Of the Elements,” CXIII and *De Uno*, “Principium,” §4). Wherever the human mind seeks the “author” or true source of its undetermined being, it finds “something” to abide and stop in—something to rest its faculty or “volition” in (*SN44*, “Of the Elements,” IX). By reflecting piously upon this “something,” the mind finally reaches the Idea of God, or God as the perfect convergence of all mental object-forms (compare *ibid.*, “Idea of the Work,” par. 2 and 4; Bk. II.3, par. 1; “Conclusion of the Work,” par. 4).

It is only “in God” that we come to recognize Mind in the civil world of our making; for that world could not have been made without Mind; but this Mind could not be that of Romulus, the mythical brute founder of ancient Rome. The Mind in question must be divine or divined. Ultimately, the Mind of Nations must be God—*purissima mens*. The true Author of the World of Nations is not deluded man, but God Himself guiding the makings of men beyond their selfish interests, to serve one “common good” (*ben comune*) identical with the providential conservation of Cities (SN44, “Idea of the Work,” par. 4, 10-12, 24; Bk. I.21; Bk. II.2.iv, par. 14; Bk. II.5.v, par. 1; SN30, par. 26).

THE QUESTION OF THE CONVERTIBILITY OF THE TRUE  
AND THE MADE

All of Vico’s arguments notwithstanding, Frye might object that what the philosopher *appears* to hold as “true” is to be understood as the product of his own “making”—assuming that what is true is identical to what is made. Accordingly, Frye might argue that Vico’s *Scienza Nuova* is to be read as a “poetic” or mythical narration wherein mythology (or the interpretation of myth) is indistinguishable from what is altogether mythical. After all, Vico himself indicates that “*logos*...first and properly signified ‘fable’” (SN44, Bk. II.2.i, par. 2). Indeed, the literary critic states: “We have invoked Vico’s axiom *verum factum*, that what is true is what we have made true, as an essential axiom of criticism” (Frye 1992, 135). But did Vico ever profess the unqualified identity of the true and the made?

Even beyond Paolo Cristofolini’s accurate reminder that “the *verum ipsum factum* of the *De Antiquissima* (1710) does not reappear in the axiomatic implant nor in other places in the three redactions of the *Scienza Nuova*” (2001, 15), it remains to be seen if *even* in the *De Antiquissima* Vico ever claimed that what is true is plainly identical to what is made, i.e., that we cannot understand what we do not make, or that human understanding is essentially “poetic” in the Greek sense of “fabricating.”

As if in silent anticipation of the *Scienza Nuova*, but explicitly pointing back to both “Platonic” and “Aristotelian metaphysics,” in 1710 Vico presents his *De Antiquissima Italorum Sapientia* as sketching “the design of one entire metaphysics, in which, as for the good proportion of the drawing, it is required that—given one’s writing as citizen of a republic that is Christian—the matters be treated ‘dressed appropriately’ [*acconciamente*] for the Christian religion” (*Risposta 1711*, part. 2, par. 1; cf. SN44, Bk. IV.14.

ii, par. 2). What follows in Vico's text helps shed some light on the philosopher's intention:

The origins of the vulgar Latin "spoken-terms" [*voci*] have placed before me this design, above which I have meditated thus.

With first things in mind, I establish one true that converts itself with the made [*un vero che si converta col fatto*], and thus I intend the "good" of the Schools that they convert with the "entity" [*ente*]; and thereupon I gather in God being the only True [*raccolgo in Dio esser l'unico Vero*], because in him is contained all of the made [*tutto il fatto*]; and, thereby, God [*Iddio*] is the true Entity, and abreast of him all particular things are not true entities, but dispositions of the Entity that is true. And, making this gentile wisdom serve the Christian, I prove that, since the philosophers of blind gentility estimated the world eternal and God [*Iddio*] always operating *ad extra*, they converted absolutely the true with the made [*fatto*]. But since we believe it created in time, we must take it with this distinction: that in God the true converts itself *ad intra* with the generated, *ad extra* with the made; and He alone is true Intelligence, because He alone cognizes everything, and that divine Wisdom is the most perfect Verb, since it represents everything, composing within itself the elements of all things, and by containing them, it disposes the guises, i.e. forms, from infinity, and disposing them, it cognizes them, and in this cognition of its own it makes them [*le fa*]. And this cognition of God is the totality of reason [*tutta la ragione*], of which man has one portion for his own part (whence he was said by the Latins, 'animal participating in reason'); and for this part of his own, he does not have intelligence, but cogitation of everything; which amounts to saying that he does not comprehend infinity, but he may well go about gathering it. (*Risposta 1711*, part 2: "That our own Metaphysics is accomplished over its own whole Idea [*sopra tutta la sua Idea*]," par. 3; akin to *De Antiquissima*, Ch. I.1-2)

It is only "in God" that the true *absolutely* "converts itself with" (*si converte con*) the made, whereas in man the made is merely *imaginatively* true: for while man contains within himself the "imagined world" (*mondo immaginato*) in which "he operates" (*opera*), it is God who operates "in the universe with reality" (*ibid.*, par. 4). In other words, men identifying the true with what they make are merely *imagining* or *feigning* the true: their true is poetic or *false*, as is their science (cf. also *SN44*, "Of the Elements," XLVII-L, and *SN30*, Bk. III.5, §6-9).

This being said, precisely that which in the imaginative poet is false, "in God" who is "perfect reason" (*perfecta ratio*) is true. God, not man, is the true Author (*Autore*) of things (*cose*)—of things that "exist"

according to our memory or imagination, but “are” in God (*Risposta 1711*, part. 3 and SN30, Bk. III.5, §9). Only “in God” is the existence of things *true*; only “in God” is the *being* of things gathered; for only in the whole Idea of God as “Author” (*Auctor*) or “Father” (*Pater*) do the senses enter in conatus, thereby gaining in certainty (*ibid.*). “Things” (*cose*, from *caussae*) themselves are none other than “determinations,” which ancient pre-philosophical men imagined to be sensory “deals” (*Risposta 1711*, part 1; compare SN44, “Of the Elements,” XLVII).

On account of the “vulgar wisdom” of the Latins, what is true is colloquially “made” (*factum*) in the sense of a *fact*—suggesting that, in the absence of Christianity’s certifying God, the ancients used to refrain from calling something “true” until it was a “done deal” (*negozio*), a *fact* having the force of a “contract” (*contratto*), sensed as a fateful ordinance, or *fas*: the earliest Latin peoples did not believe in “words devoid of thing” (*verba sine re*; cf. *De Uno*, Bk. I, Ch. XLVIII and CLII.1-2). The identification of something true with something *certified* or “made certain” was *necessary* in the absence of a divinely revealed law allowing men to abstract “true things” out of facts without fearing to remain empty handed: Christianity stands as guarantor of “words without thing” or of words abstracted from things. In the absence of Christianity, the words that Christianity’s authority helped rapidly rise to the heavens of intellection by leaving things behind, would lose all credibility (compare SN44, “Of the Elements,” I, XXI, XLIX, CXI). This is precisely the predicament Vico warns modern science is headed for as it makes use of Scholastic terminology while replacing the biblical God’s authority with the conscience or sentiment of the human *ego* (*De Antiquissima*, Ch. I.2-3, *Risposta 1711*, part 3, *Risposta 1712*, part 4). In the absence of the authority of Christianity’s God, modern science’s words abstracted out of facts—its “true things”—remain vulnerable to radical skepticism, appearing to non-scientists as merely imaginary entities leaving reality behind.

What modern science regards as true is true only “in God,” in the respect that real things are drawn out of sensory indetermination through the determination of an authority—“that for all is Jove” (*Riprensione*, par. 1)—under which the human conative faculty gathers existence (*esistenza*) into being (*essere*; *Risposta 1712*, parts 2 and 4, and *Risposta 1711*, parts 2-3). Accordingly, Vico identifies the perfect author with being itself: “I gather in God being the only True” (*raccolgo in Dio esser l’unico Vero*), he writes, leaving the thoughtful reader to wonder if in God Vico gathers his own being; but the doubt is soon clarified by Vico himself, who concludes

that “my essence is God” (*la mia essenza è Iddio*) who “thinks in us” (*pensa in noi*), so that “as I enter into God, that is the only and true Entity, I truly cognize not being [*io conosco veramente non essere*]” (*ibid.*). By entering into the mind of his divined Author, i.e. by *interpreting* the authority of God, “with true mind” (*veramente*) Vico acquires *conscience*, rather than *science* or knowledge (*gnōsis*), of “not being” (on “interpretation,” cf. *SN44*, Bk. II.3: “Of Poetic Logic,” iv, concluding paragraphs; and Bk. IV.7). Man’s attempt to attain to the infinite wisdom of God—his divinatory attempt to “enter into the Mind of God” (*entrare nella Mente di Dio*; cf. *Correzioni, Miglioramenti, e Aggiunte Terze*, addition to p. 223)—coincides with man’s conscience of “not being” (*non essere*), and thus of not being his own true author or creator. Precisely by being denied possession of infinite wisdom coinciding with “the totality of reason,” man remains “participant of reason”; precisely by remaining non-authoritative interpreter of authority, man acquires understanding of that of which he is not author (*ibid.*; on “the perfect mind of the sage,” see *Risposta 1711*, par. 24).

By forsaking the attempt to understand what we do not make or create (outside of ourselves), we remain entirely reliant upon the “wisdom” of the senses that is “human stolid foolishness” (*stultitia humana*; *De Uno*, Bk. I, Ch. XXVII and LXVIII.3; *SN44*, Bk. III.1.i, par. 2), whereby our understanding is haplessly determined “by the ultimate circumstances of facts” (compare *Risposta 1711*, par. 24; *SN44*, “Idea of the Work,” concluding paragraphs; Bk. IV.9.ii, and 14.ii, last par.). Herein rests the “recurring” (*ricorso*) of “the barbarism of sense” (*la barbarie del senso*) through a reflection imposing itself ad hoc (*a placito*) or dogmatically upon things (*SN44*, “Of the Elements,” XXI; “Of the Principles,” last par.; Bk. II.2.iv, par. 1-2 and second half; Bk. II.7.i, last par.; “Conclusion of the Work,” par. 2-3). Ultimately by forsaking “participation in reason” in favor of acquisition of “most certain” (*certissima*) divine wisdom, man places himself in the hands of fate (*De Antiquissima*, Ch. I.2, par. 7). For “where men in human things do not see reason, and all the more if they see it *contrary* [to their wishes or expectations], they acquiesce in the inscrutable counsels that hide in the *abyss of Providence Divine*” (Bk. IV.9.i; compare Bk. IV.9; “Of the Elements,” X; and *SN30*, Bk. II.7, par. 5).

Rather than returning to a “world eternal and God always operating *ad extra*”—whereby outside of the determination of law nothing would be held as “true” (compare *Risposta 1711*, part 2, par. 3, and *SN44*, Bk. IV.14.ii, par. 3 and 7)—Vico adapts to Christianity the “foolish” wisdom

of “blind” philosophers, i.e., of the poetic “Epicurean” or “monastic” “philosopher of the senses” (*filosofo de’sensi*; *ibid.*, Bk. II.2.vii, §6, and “Of the Elements,” V). Now, Christians “believe [the world to be] created in time” *ex nihilo*; for they believe in a divine creator that is the supra-national infinite seat of the will (*animo*), saving men from the bonds of law—a God containing all things as dispositions of his Verb, Wisdom or Authority, through which He is capable of freeing men from the limits of the civil world (compare *Risposta 1711*, part. 2, par. 3; *De Uno*, Bk. I, Ch. V-VIII and XIII). Given the overtly supra-national character of its God, Christianity draws a distinction between “what is generated” (*genitum*) and “what is made” (*factum*; *De Antiquissima*, Ch. I.3, par. 4; Ch. I.2, par. 1 and 9): “in God” or sustained by God’s authority, things are “generated” internally (*ad intra*) “from what is eternal” (*ab aeterno*), but “made” externally (*ad extra*) “in time” (*in tempore*)—whereby the Christian God confirms the “philosophical” distinction between physicality and legality, or between bodily motion and its nominal form (compare *ibid.* and Ch. VI-VII.2): while “the created true converts with the made, the uncreated true [converts] with the generated” (*ibid.*, Ch. I.1, par. 4). But “the uncreated true” (*increatedum verum*) is none other than the divine authority that political philosophy—as Vico’s own “philosophy of authority” (*filosofia dell’ autorità*)—sets out to interpret (compare *SN44*, “Of the Method,” concluding paragraphs, and “Idea of the Work,” par. 2).

On Vico’s account it is really possible for man to “enter into the Mind of God,” i.e. to partake in the totality of reason, although it is not possible for man to contain or comprehend all of the elements of things within his own mind—a feat that Christianity, no less than Vico, asserts to be accomplished in God. Things themselves (*res ipsae*) are irreducible to the “knowledge” we have of them. Indeed, though we may have a certain sense or “conscience” of nature, we cannot have rational science or true, complete knowledge of nature (compare *De Antiquissima*, Ch. I, Introduction: “*De Vero et Facto*”; and *De Uno*, Ch. LXIX.3). The only Science we may have of nature is “practical” or *poetic*, i.e. feigned, and as such essentially incomplete.

Vico’s denunciation of human wisdom as merely practical or poetic is already implicit in his denying to man God’s *perfecta ratio*, *aeterna ratio infinita*, or complete coincidence of authority/order and mind/form (compare *De Uno*, Ch. IV-VI, XVII, LXIX.3; *SN44*, “Idea of the Work,” par. 2; and *De Antiquissima*, Ch. III.2). Properly speaking, complete knowledge or Science belongs to God alone: human science or wisdom is merely poetic, rather than “reasoned.” Insofar as knowledge proper is intellection (*intelligere*

rather than *legere*) or a “reading-within,” Vico’s poetic Authors, his “Theologian Poets” (*Poeti Teologi*), merely *feign* Science, and therewith Authorship or Authority—for they hold sway over the mere “signs” of things, rather than things themselves (compare *ibid.*, Ch. I, Introduction; Ch. I.2, esp. last par.; SN44, “Of the Method,” par. 1-2). True Authority and Science entail intellection, or the perfection of reason: “in *God*, that is *all reason*, *reason* and *authority* are one and *the same thing*” (*ibid.*, Bk. IV.9.i). Having resolved its contents within its own being-form, mind is *mens purissima*, a perfectly pure mind in which Existence converts completely into Being (hence Vico’s warning that *God is*, whereas man *exists*, i.e. he is always “somewhere”—“*c’è*,” rather than simply “*è*”; *Risposta*, 1712, par. 12ff.; see also *De Antiquissima*, Ch. I.1; Ch. VI, par. 2; and Ch. VII.1, par. 2).

Yet, precisely by denying us access to real intellection or reasoned wisdom, i.e. to the consummation or end of philosophy, Vico leaves us faced with the challenge of *reading* or “going about gathering” (*andar raccogliendo*) things *outside* of our limited minds, *understanding* what we read (*De Antiquissima*, Ch. I, Introduction: “*De Vero et Facto*”; on merely imaginative reading, compare SN44, “Idea of the Work,” par. 1, and “Of the Method,” par. 6). The fact that we cannot *really* read things themselves within our finite minds—thereby converting things into the nominal sense of certainty we have of them (*De Uno*, Ch. LXXXII-LXXXIII, CLXXXV.11; SN44, “Of the Principles,” par. 5; *De Antiquissima*, Ch. VII.2)—leaves us with two permanently viable alternatives: (1) we may read things *imaginatively* within our minds, thereby feigning wisdom and authority; or (2) we can truly read, “gather,” or “collect” things outside of our finite minds, i.e. we can *reason*, not by dwelling upon, but by interpreting and thus questioning the authoritative nominal or “geometric” forms in which we commonly divine things themselves, in the attempt to access the “metaphysical” interiority of those same forms, without attempting to “impiously” replace our conventional forms of authority with any other form, and least of all with that of our private sense of certainty (SN44, “Of the Method,” par. 2; Bk. II.2.iv, concluding paragraphs; Bk. IV.7; *Risposta*, 1712, part 4, par. 10; *De Antiquissima*, Ch. I, par. 1; Ch. III and Ch. IV.11). In either case, with man, reasoning is never truly resolved in “knowledge” (*scientia* or *gnōsis*; cf. *De Antiquissima*, Ch. I, Introduction, par. 2; and Ch. I.2, par. 2): to reason is for us to penetrate the surface of things, remaining “practically” empty-handed—ignorant without pretense; not wise, though arguably honest (on “honesty,” cf. *De Uno*, Ch. XVIII); not dwelling upon, but penetrating all opinions; never resolving reason in pleasure or self-satisfaction.

Appropriating no certainty for himself, Vico's interpreter of authority attributes all wisdom to one infinite God that "to all is Jove." In this most authoritative God (*Deus Optimus Maximus*), common Author of nations, Vico articulates a thorough "critique of Authors," offering one sample of "philosophy of authority" converting human semblances into "questions" (*domande*) open to an underlying "metaphysical" world of silent understanding that eludes all imagination (SN44, "Of the Elements," Introduction and XIII; "Of the Method," concluding three paragraphs; Bk. II.2.iv, concluding paragraphs; "Conclusion of the Work," par. 3-4). Thus the *Scienza Nuova* comes to be the stage both of axiomatic authoritative opinions or *Degnità*, and of "reasonings" or *ragionamenti* (SN44, "Idea of the Work," par. 2 and throughout; "Of the Elements," Introduction). Vico's "reasonings" penetrate the axiomatic authoritative opinions, pointing reflexively to their "metaphysical" significance, and thereby to "minds" and "wills" that nobody ever made (cf. e.g., *ibid.*, LXIII).

Far from being imposed upon appearances *ad hoc* (or "*a placito*"), the true significance of appearances discloses itself through our questioning of appearances, or where we cease conceiving appearances as opaque certainties, or as ideas shut to interpretation. Though our reasoning may be partially obscured by the feigned authority of our senses, "Natural Reason" shines forth eternally from within the "dense night" of dreadful forgetfulness (SN44, "Of the Elements," CXI-CXIII; and "Of the Principles," par. 1). And since as men we fail to reduce darkness to "luminous and distinct," i.e. authoritatively defined ideas, human life will necessarily remain marked by both eternal light and temporal darkness. In turn, the mutual irreducibility of luminous authority and our natural indetermination indicates that, for man, even reasoning and the imagination remain mutually irreducible. Poetry and philosophy, as "making" and "reasoning," cannot coincide in our lives (*ibid.*, "Of the Elements," I; "Of the Principles," par. 3; "Of the Method," par. 6; Bk. II, Introduction, §2, par. 1; Bk. II.9.ii; Bk. IV.4; for a parallel discussion on "*Reason and Faith*," see SN30, "Of the Method that this Science Uses," concluding paragraph). There can be no human synthesis of reason and imagination, and thus no reduction of the understanding to what we make.

To the extent that we do not "intelligize" or read things themselves within our minds, but that we rather read things transcending our own sense of certainty, our reading can yield understanding of what we do not make, i.e. of the content of God's Mind. Through our reading or

reasoning, we partake in divine knowledge or wisdom coinciding with God's own providential conduct—the proper subject of the *Scienza Nuova* (SN44, “Idea of the Work,” par. 2). Thereby we remain contemplatively open to what we do not make, and thus also to the permanent possibility of practical knowledge of the conative faculty through which things may be said to be authored or “made” in and by God (on the coincidence of knowledge of the will with self-knowledge, see *Oration I*, par. 2); for, we do not make the faculty of making, itself. The *Scienza Nuova* is Vico's last, though by no means first, testament of the philosopher's investigation into uncreated mind as the true, eternal form of all that is temporal—an investigation that, however, does not end in what is created, but in “truth” (*verità*) as true “strength of mind” irreducible to anything made (compare *ibid.*, par. 2-3; Bk. II.1.ii, §2; SN30, “Idea of the Work,” par. 12; *De Antiquissima*, Ch. I.2 and IV).

#### THE TRUE CIVIL NATURE OF MYTH

Vico's distinction between the true and the made serves as formal stage for his “discovery of the true Homer” (SN44, Bk. III), or of the true civil nature of fables or myths, “in God” (SN44, Bk. II.5.viii, §8). The commonly supposed mythical origins of the civil world are merely *mythically* or *fabulously posited*: the imagination that feigns them coincides with the conceit of the memory that retains them (compare SN44, “Idea of the Work,” par. 1, “Of the Elements,” L; and *Risposta 1711*, part. 2, par. 19). It is only in prideful conceit rooted in ignorance that men attribute authorship of the civil world to themselves; for they could never have “made” their civil world without gaining certainty “in God”; their faculties would never have succeeded in gathering “in conatus” (*in conato*) without some kind of thought of God—if only the most primitive and fearsome (SN44, “Of the Method,” par. 2-3; for Vico's Socratic account of “ignorance,” see *De Uno*, Ch. LXVIII). The *true* Author of the civil world must be God. Why, this is precisely what all pious men believe; and this is also what all of the “Learned” (*Dotti*)—i.e., those “learned of legal doctrine” (*addottrinati*)—presuppose insofar as they “admire, venerate, and desire to unite with the Infinite Wisdom of God” (SN44, “Conclusion of the Work,” par. 4; Bk. II.2.vii).

Frye's attributions to Vico are ill founded. His claim that according to Vico, “all verbal structures descend from mythological origins” so that “what is true for us is what we have made” is falsely attributed. To begin, Vico firmly distinguishes “mythical” from “mythological”: “mythical” is the Greek equivalent of “fabulous,” whereas the term “mythological” indicates the “*interpretation* of fables” (SN44, Bk. I.1, par. 6). So Frye *might* have

a case were he to invoke the “mythical origins” of verbal structures—were it not for Vico’s arguing that the true nature of myths or fables is *civil*. The providential, “good” interpretation of fables points to a mental, non-mythical/poetic, true origin of the verbal structures peculiar to civil society (ibid., Bk. I.72; Bk. II.1, last par.; Bk. II.4, par. 1; Bk. III.1.iv; and Bk. IV.10.iv, last par.). The true upshot of Vico’s arguments is that language is *irreducible* to myth, just as civil society is irreducible to human contrivances and expectations.

It follows that Frye’s subsequent contention that according to Vico private property is rooted in a myth, is also falsely attributed. Vico firmly rejects the poetic “Epicurean” reading of civil society that does not recognize a principle of civility in nature (compare SN44, Bk. II.7.ii, par. 1; and “Of the Elements,” VIII). One of the cardinal aims, not to say *the* cardinal aim, of the *Scienza Nuova* is to demonstrate “right in nature” (*diritto in natura*), entailing the recognition that private property is grounded in natural differentiations—first and foremost, the superiority of the strong of mind over the mentally weak (compare “Idea of the Work,” par. 12 in both SN44 and SN30).

#### VICO’S “HISTORY”

Frye’s contention that Vico believed that history is cyclical, or that it moves in a “cyclical rotation,” fares no better than his contention that Vico retraces language to myth. The problem with this attribution concerning “history” is that, as Paolo Cristofolini has aptly put it, there simply is no “history without adjectives” in Vico. At the most, Vico notes that men make the “civil world” (and then, only with respect to their deluded or bodily certainty); “Vico never said that man makes history” (Cristofolini 2001, 15). What is more, Vico’s civil world is not “cyclical” in the sense intended by Frye, when he complains thus: “Well, I don’t like cycles; I think the cycle is simply a failed spiral. I think that when we come to the end of a cycle we ought to move up to another level and proceed accordingly” (Frye 2000, 29). Frye is reading “cycles” *into* Vico. With Vico we find no “cycles” in the plural. In Cristofolini’s words: “the *corsi* and *ricorsi*, neither do these have textual correspondence in Vico, who always speaks in the singular, of the ‘course that nations make’ [*corso che fanno le nazioni*], and of the ‘re-course of human things’ [*ricorso delle cose umane*]” (ibid.). Not only is the “course” Vico speaks of simply the physical or imaginary *life* of nations that accordingly “run” (*corrono*, akin to *corso*) in time, but the living course of civil things partakes, not in any chronologically or geographically extended universal or transnational “history,” but in the law or perpetual will of “mind” (*mente*): neither

“Fate” (*Fato*) or blind necessity, nor the “Chance” (*Caso*) invoked by Vico’s Epicurean nemesis (SN44, “Conclusion of the Work,” par. 3-4). It is *common* for every “national” history to *privately* partake in its own eternal *Idea*, which is its own God and Law (*nomos*). The total unfolding of the “Story” (*Storia*) Vico tells his “Reader” (*Leggitore*, akin to *Legislatore* or “legislator”) of nations does not pertain to the “particular and temporal [*in tempo*]” Story “of the *laws* and of the *facts* of the *Romans* or of the *Greeks*”; rather,

on [*su*] the *substantial identity* of intendment and *diversity* of their own modes of self-explanation, we shall have the *Ideal Story of Eternal Laws*, over [*sopra*] which run [*corron*] the *facts of all Nations*, in their own *risings, progresses, states, decays, and ends*, even if it were [*se ben fusse*]—and this is certainly false—that from *Eternity* time and again were to be born *Worlds* that were *Infinite* [*Mondi Infiniti*]. (SN44, Bk. V, concluding par. prior to “Conclusion of the Work”)

The “full-fledged” Story of nations is not disclosed *in time*, but in *Eternal Laws* or *Ideas* serving as basis for legislation (cf. e.g., *ibid.*, “Idea of the Work,” par. 17-22; Bk. II.2.iv, second half; *De Uno*, Bk. I, Ch. XLVIII; *De Antiquissima*, Ch. I.4; Cristofolini 2001, 33-50). These same *Ideas* are *commonly* (hence Vico’s “identity”) intended by men *in physical privacy* (hence the “diversity”), or through each man’s power of intendment unaided by any external intervention (compare e.g. *ibid.*, “Of the Elements,” CXIV, and *De Antiquissima*, Ch. IV.2-3). The temporal “course” (*corso*) of civil things is inseparable from their eternal “legal” basis, over which are ordered “bodies” (compare *De Uno*, Bk. I, Ch. CXL and CLII; and SN44, “Of the Elements,” XII-XVI). Why, the course of civil things emerges as a “mixture” of mind and body, or of authority and its subject (compare *ibid.*; Bk. IV, par. 1; and Bk. V, par. 2). Not accidentally, Vico’s “*three ages* [and] *three tongues*...ran-through [*scorsero*] and were spoken in the World throughout the whole time passed before [the Egyptians...] with constant, and never interrupted order of causes and effects always going through three species of Natures, out of which natures came out three species of Customs...” (*ibid.*, Bk. IV, par. 1). For “from the *same time* began the *Gods*, the *Heroes* and the *Men*; for purely *Men* were those who fantasized the *Gods* and believed their own *heroic nature* a mixture of that of the *Gods* and that of the *Men*: thus in the *same time* began such *three tongues*” (*ibid.*, Bk. II.2.iv, par. 13).

#### VICO’S “THREE AGES”?

The image of the “three ages” that Vico borrows from ancient Egyptian lore indicates the coincidence of three aspects of human

nature—the mental/mute, the physical/expressive, and the psycho-physical as mythological intersection of silence and speech (compare the whole gist of Bk. IV and *De Uno*, Bk. I, Ch. CLII.3). There is no progress from one to another, in time; rather, at any given time one aspect of man may be more manifest to man than others, in which case man falls prey of delusion or conceit. But human nature presupposes all three—the silent (eternal/mental), the spoken (physical/temporal), and an *original* or natural civil coincidence of the two (SN44, “Idea of the Work,” par. 11). It follows that Vico’s “ages” are *not* historical “eras.” His “three ages” are themselves borrowed from myth: they are mythical or fabulous entities, the natural *civil meaning* of which Vico sets out to demonstrate (cf. e.g., *ibid.*, “Idea of the Work,” par. 5, and Bk. II.2.iv, par. 12). The *temporality* of the “three ages” presupposes their true *eternity*: the “three ages” ultimately point to the triadic nature of the civil world, composed of what is mute (eternal ideas), what is half-mute and half-spoken (laws), and what is completely outspoken (our naked physicality; SN44, Bk. I.9 and Bk. II.4.ii, middle paragraphs), but that as such remains determined by a non-physical objective-form. Since we do not “make” our bodies, we do not make an inalienable component of civil society; and, in spite of men’s delusive tendency to assume that what they make is *eo ipso* “true,” the true fails to resolve *truth* in itself. Even the True God is not identical to *truth* proper: the Author of civil society is not identical to the *faculty* through which civil society is constituted. Cognizing God is not equivalent to attaining to His infinite wisdom (*infinita sapienza*; compare SN44, “Conclusion of the Work,” par. 4, and SN30, “Idea of the Work,” par. 12).

But in their ignorance, men pretend to be rulers or authors of the universe—“the universe of human sense” (cf. e.g., SN44, “Of the Elements,” I and Bk. II.3, par. 1; cf. also *De Ratione*, Ch. V, par. 1, and *De Antiquissima*, “Conclusion”); they thereby mistake a faculty for its seat. Through this “impious” or “atheistic” error, men look upon themselves as authorities over that which stands outside of them, as if the world “outside” of man were devoid of its own original author and order. The deluded man asserts himself, his own sense of certainty, as the author of all order; in his mad conceit he senses that outside of the reaches of his own will there is only Chaos. *De facto*, he identifies the civil or ordered World (*Mundum*) with his own private property. But being convinced by other men’s superior might that they too share in authority, the deluded man concedes that men make order through collaboration within the natural boundaries of a Nation. Yet, when even the will of one Nation fails to conquer the universe, the stolid fool (*lo stolto*) begins divining authorship in something outside of his Nation.

This “something” will be either another Nation or Chaos (*ibid.*, “Conclusion of the Work,” par. 2).

#### UNDERSTANDING ORDER IN NATURE

Vico makes no mention of any inter-national collaboration that is not sustained by an overarching authority. His account of human nature has no place for a society of nations freely collaborating with each other in the construction of a peaceful World. The highest authority we find in Vico's works belongs, not to a free coalition of nations, but to God as form of nationality. Of course, Vico is fully aware that in his times Christianity still stands as a supra-national authority tying together various nations under the yoke of its Eternal Justice (*De Ratione*, Ch. IX; *De Uno*, Bk. I, Ch. LVI). Yet, Christianity's Authority does not have the power to put an end to infra-national conflicts, just as it fails to placate man's love of his own (*amor proprio*), against which it otherwise wages war (*ibid.*, Ch. XXXVIII). Vico knows of no supra-national or international solution to the problem of Nationality or of War (*pólemos*, from *pólis*; *SN*, Bk. II.5.i, par. 2). Nor does Vico invite any political solution to the problem of infra-national conflict: the only solution to political conflicts is disclosed contemplatively “in God” as Idea-Form of nationality, and thereby in recognition of Mind as seat of the infinite wisdom or authority men seek to attain to by nature. Only in the God of civil religion do nations find themselves without attempting to define themselves through the conquest of other nations (compare *De Constantia Philosophiae*, Ch. III, XVI, and *De Ratione*, Ch. IX). Only in the divined unity of civil religion—in the one God recognized nationally as Author of physical nature—does a nation have the power to enter “in conatus,” rather than dispersing itself in the vain conquest of what is outside of itself. Only by recognizing the civility of the world outside of itself—a world commonly authored by God in private—can a nation as a whole free itself from the compulsion of imposing its own authority on the world it divines outside of itself. Failing to recognize God as Author of the world outside of their own walls, nations—no less than single men—assume for themselves the right of authorship over all that falls beyond them. Such nations fail to recognize that order and authority are *in nature* prior to being imposed *ex machina* through the Grace of foreign intervention (compare e.g., *SN44*, Bk. V.3, end of par. 2; “Of the Elements,” CXIV; and Bk. V.5.v).

The great dogmatic error transposed from the imagination of beastly brutes (*bruti*) into reflection consists of assuming that civil society is formed by injecting physical existence with intellectual dogmas—as if civil

authority and its “religion of laws” had not preceded the rise of philosophers (Bk. II, Introduction, esp. §1: “Of Wisdom Generally,” par. 3; “Of the Method,” par. 6; *De Uno*, Bk. I, Ch. LXXV.6; *De Ratione*, Ch. IX). “For over a thousand years” civil society was conserved in the absence of philosophy and thus also of “intelligible universals” (*intelligibili universalis*; cf. e.g. SN44, “Of the Elements,” XII and XLIX; and Bk. II.2.vii, last par.). The principle of civility must thus precede the rise of philosophy: civil society is irreducible to anything mediated by human reflection. Yet, civil society must also be irreducible to the selfish imagination of its selfish inhabitants (SN44, Bk. II.6, last par., and “Of the Method,” par. 2). In short, everything in Vico tells us that civil society is not the product of fantasy, and that thus precisely what people ordinarily believe themselves to know and make for themselves, namely their own lives, is an illusion—a *lie* men “feign for themselves” (*si fingono*) to conceal their own ignorance of cause (cf. *inter alia*, SN44, Bk. II.1, par. 1).

What ordinarily disturbs men is not the suspicion that there may be “another world” beyond their own, but that they may not be the gods or authors of the realm they currently inhabit. But everything in the *Scienza Nuova* contributes to awakening that very suspicion, even where the “Reader” (*Leggitore*) is invited to relive the civil world with “divine pleasure” in his bodily imagination (ibid., “Of the Method,” par. 5, and SN30, “Of the Principles of this Science,” par. 1)—lest he be tempted to seek divine-like pleasure outside of his own privacy. By seeking pleasure outside of his head, man meets the fulminous resistance of the order of things limiting all imaginations. In order to access what transcends its powers, the body, or rather the mind buried in its senses, has no other way than to rise in ideas, abstracting itself out of its own materiality (cf. e.g., SN44, Bk. II.7.i). Ultimately, only “in God” does the mind mistaking itself as body recognize itself as truly human, civil or political. In the body’s attempt to extend beyond itself, the senses are compelled to turn inwardly to divine forms in which the body may overcome “external” limitations. But in its divined forms the body unexpectedly senses its own civility or humanity; the body discovers itself as a political entity, a City unto itself, or the prototype for the City or the Nation we ordinarily identify as extending outside of our own selves (“Idea of the Work,” par. 4; Bk. I.29; cf. also “Of the Elements,” LXIV and CVII; “Of the Method,” par. 2; Bk. II.5.iii).

Only by ascending to the eternal does the body awaken to its being *mind*: what otherwise senses itself “divinely” as a mere body, awakens to its civil nature; the mythical or fabulous yields to “things themselves” (*res*

*ipsae; De Antiquissima*, Ch. V.3, par. 5, and Ch. I.3, last par.). The true author of civil society is not the body, but mind. Likewise, true freedom and authority are not exercised by the body over other bodies, but by the mind over the body. The true agent of civil liberty is not the body—which is a “necessary agent,” i.e. an agent subject to necessity—but mind as purely metaphysical, eternal seat and “free agent” of the will or conatus out of which arises the light of civil society (*ibid.*, “Of the Method,” par. 1-2; compare Bk. II.1, §2, par. 2; Bk. II.3, par. 1; Bk. II.7.i, par. 2). Freedom, and therewith civil society, is *in nature* as the mind’s exercise of authority over the body; this exercise is none other than the will that is originally or naturally free. Through freedom—the faculty that *is* man—arises the civil world. What man *makes*—his *factum*—is “true” (*verum*) only in the respect that its “agent” is Mind *simpliciter*, rather than any mind limited by the body. What is true for man is then at once *free*. But man as man *is* freedom, rather than the true agent or author of freedom (*Oration I*, par. 2; SN30, Bk. II.2.iv, opening statements of par 2; SN44, Bk. II.10.ii, par. 4; “Of the Elements,” IX and XXXIX; “Of the Method,” par. 2; Bk. II.3, par. 2; Bk. II, Introduction: “Of the Universal Deluge and of the Giants,” par. 1, second half; on the coincidence of “right” or *ius* and volition/*volontà*, see Bk. IV.14.ii). Vico’s works constantly remind us that to seek the true seat or agent of freedom—or the *Author* of the conatus—is to seek *mind*, the purity of which is “most strong” (*fortissimo*) God, in Whom alone is what is “made” at once “true.”

Evidently Vico calls us to understand something that we did not make; for man as man is *author* only by convention or in words (compare *Risposta 1712*, part. 2-3, and *Oration I*, par. 7-8). Human authorship is a partial truth or a lie, even when it is a noble or civilizing one—for in human representation at least we recognize that the seat of authority is not merely physical (compare SN44, Bk. II.3, par. 1-3; Bk. II.4.ii, par. 1-2; Bk. II.4.i, middle paragraphs; Bk. III.2.i, §16; Bk. IV, par. 1; Bk. IV.9.i: “Divine Reason and Reason of State”). The source of our freedom and understanding is no more beyond the reaches of our understanding than God is beyond the essential boundaries of our civility (compare *De Constantia Philosophiae*, Ch. I.1; SN44, Bk. II.5.i, par. 4, and “Idea of the Work,” par. 2).

Yet, in his 1980 essay “Creation and Recreation,” Frye states:

The principle laid down by the Italian philosopher Vico of *verum factum*, that we understand only what we have made ourselves, needs to be refreshed sometimes by the contemplation of something we did not make and so do not understand [...] A nature which was not primarily

a human artefact could teach man nothing except that he was not it.  
 We are taught by our own cultural conditioning, and by that alone.  
 (Frye 2000, 37)

Frye's assessment remained unaltered even in his later writings. In "The Double Vision: Language and Meaning in Religion," originally composed in 1990, Frye insists that "the axiom of the eighteenth-century Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico was *verum factum*: we understand nothing except what we have made" (Frye 2000, 185)—as if any attempt to understand Vico as a Mind that we did not "make" were nothing better than an exercise in futility.

Frye's diagnosis and prognosis stand at the farthest remove from Vico's own arguments, entitling us to suspect that Frye's understanding of Vico is based on merely indirect acquaintance with the philosopher's work. Frye's account of Vico's thought appears to rely heavily on English renderings of Vico's texts and possibly on twentieth-century appraisals of Vico, rather than on Vico's original Italian and Latin texts. Frye does not appear to be disturbed by the possibility that his representation of Vico betray lack of intimacy with the philosopher's own thought. At least in the press, Frye pays no attention to the possibility that he may have misunderstood Vico, or that what enabled him to step beyond Vico was lack of an adequate understanding of what stood before him. Had he doubted his vision, perhaps Frye would have intended that what stood before him was no molehill, but "the Olympus of the Mind" that would inevitably make any audacious conqueror stumble (*Oration II*, par. 8-9).

That which enabled Frye to appropriate the "letter" of Vico's text appears to have been something akin to what one of Vico's friendly interlocutors once spoke of as "the tyrannical audaciousness of wrong forgone conclusions"—a stance that would have prevented Frye from inquiring into the *inherent reason* or *mind* of Vico's phrasings (see Addendum 1). Ultimately, Frye's treatment of Vico is unwittingly reminiscent of the treatment Vico's dogmatic barbarian "of reflection" reserves to ancient and thus long-dead philosophical Writers (*Scrittori*), where he crowns himself as Divine Author of their world, as if their world were devoid of any original order and meaning—as if Right were not rooted in nature prior to its being imposed supernaturally (see Addendum 2).

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*Improvements, and Additions*], prepared by Vico in 1731 to be integrated into the *Scienza Nuova*; however, he would later leave the additions unpublished).

Other works cited: *Oration I and II* (1699-1700); *Vico Vindiciae* (1729); *De Constantia Philosophiae* (*On the Constancy of Philosophy*) and *De Constantia Philologiae* (*On the Constancy of Philology*), constituting Bk. II of the *De Uno*.

All sources are quoted from original Latin and Italian editions available in digitized form through the “Laboratorio dell’ISPF,” at [www.ispf.cnr.it/ispf-lab](http://www.ispf.cnr.it/ispf-lab).

All quotes are faithfully translated, rigorously maintaining the capitalization, cursives, paragraph indentations, and—as much as reasonably possible—punctuation, as prescribed by Vico for the original Italian or Latin editions of his works. Paragraphs (marked as “par.”) follow the order they have in their respective original eighteenth-century editions. All passages quoted from the *SN44* are marked by references to the index of the work’s contents found in Fausto Nicolini’s 1953 edition of Vico’s *Opere* (Milano-Napoli: Ricciardi), excluding the non-Vichian titles added by Nicolini to those of the 1744 edition of the *Scienza Nuova*.

#### ADDENDA

1. “...many beautiful things, so fitly attached to each other that never may the true of one be discerned without placing one’s eyes on that of others, [so that] a man who does not have both amplitude of mind to comprehend them all together, and the fortitude necessary to hold down the tyrannical audaciousness of our own wrong foregone conclusions, with most difficulty will be able to form of [those beautiful things] a judgment that is straight and coherent. And given that very few have been those touched by heaven [*il cielo*] with such beautiful grace and luck [*ventura*], no wonder at all if [only] few are the Approvers of [Vico’s] own wonderful work” (Father Bernardo Maria Giacco, Letter to Vico, Oct. 3, 1721, at [www.ispf.cnr.it/ispf-lab](http://www.ispf.cnr.it/ispf-lab)).

2. “...so that for my tenuous part I might contribute something to the doctrine of the natural right of gentile-peoples [*gentium*], for which I travailed [*sategi*] when setting myself aside totally, dedicated in a most deep, voluminous and variegated [*multiiuga et varia*] library of the universe of human sense, where I would unravel [*evolverem*] the oldest authors [*auctores*] of gentile-peoples, from whom only after more than a thousand

years would come forth the writers [*scriptores*]. This is the same as what Thomas Hobbes led himself to do, where among his own literary friends and contemporaries [*aequales*] he glorified himself, in no other way than this, as having stood out as the first [*principem*] in this doctrine, and for having greatly augmented philosophy: but rather falsely, however, since he did not meditate [upon] divine providence, which alone had the power to shine forth the torch of him who illuminates for himself the tenebrous origins of human things; and thus Hobbes would err-about [*pererrat*] in the most obscure night of deplored antiquity with the blind chance of Epicurus, against whose doctrines and principles I quarrel *in primis*" (Giambattista Vico, *Vico Vindictiae* [*Vico's Vindications*], §6: "Petition asked of the Fair-Willed Reader" [*Ab Aequanimo Lectore Petitio*]).

3. Cf. SN44, "Of the Elements," V: "*Philosophy*, so as to *bring rejuvenation to* [*giovare*, usually, "aid/strengthen," but here almost a pun on *Jove*, "the strongest god"—where strength is the true faculty of God to save men out of sensory indeterminacy] *the Human Generation* [*Genere Umano*—with a link between *giovare* and *Genere*, the latter term entailing "generation"] has to [*dee*, contraction of *deve*, possibly suggesting a pun on "goddesses"—given the "providential" function of *filosofia*] *raise* [*sollevare*, from *sub-levare*, but appearing throughout the SN in connection with freedom from slavery, arguably as a pun for *levare al sole*, or *raise-to-the-sun*], and *rule* [*reggere*, from *re* akin to *regere*, in the sense of "to govern/direct/sustain"—as in SN44, Bk. II.5.i; but cf. also Bk. I.43 and 83; Bk. II.2.3, §9; Bk. V.3, par. 2; "Conclusion of the Work," par. 2] the *fallen man* [*huom*, as in *humus* or "earth/land"], not *rend him his nature*, nor *abandon him* in his own *corruption*."



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Peter J. Ahrensdorf, *Greek Tragedy and Political Philosophy: Rationalism and Religion in Sophocles' Theban Plays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 192 pp., \$80.

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First the praise: Peter Ahrensdorf has written a wonderful study of the Theban plays by Sophocles. Disputing the view that the poet preaches the superiority of piety over reason, Ahrensdorf contends that the Theban plays endorse the moderate rationalism associated with Socratic philosophy; also that Socratic philosophy shares the brave pessimism reflected in Greek tragedy—or that philosophy and tragedy are not adversaries but companions. With irresistible logic and meticulous attention to textual detail, Ahrensdorf provides his readers with what may be the best interpretations to date of *Oedipus the Tyrant*, *Oedipus at Colonnus*, and *Antigone*.

Nietzsche, Plato, and Aristotle are brought in as parties to the conversation. Nietzsche is presented, familiarly enough, as celebrating Greek tragedy for its ferocious honesty in the face of metaphysical meaninglessness and its noble affirmation of human suffering; and for denouncing Socratic philosophy for its optimistic utilitarianism culminating in “last-man” decay. Less familiar, and perhaps wholly original, is Ahrensdorf’s claim that Plato rejects tragedy because its very nihilism, rather than hardening men (as attested to by Nietzsche), has actually a softening effect, though not in the sense of turning men into cowards, but of causing them instead to seek comfort in the false hopes of religion; thus the charge laid in the *Republic* is that tragedy engenders piety. About Aristotle it is said that he rescues tragedy from Plato’s critique by showing that the tragic hero’s lack of wisdom, and not chaotic nature, is responsible for the ruin that ensues, and that the purgation of pity and fear, attributed to tragedy, is what readies men to

behave rationally—or that tragedy engenders philosophy. Meanwhile Aristotle reaches out to Nietzsche by suggesting that this emotional purgation, preparatory to rationalistic control, is partial, not total, leaving in place the quite reasonable fear of death. The fear of death and the consequent longing for immortality are the connecting threads that tie the three plays and the three philosophies together.

It should be noted that Ahrens Dorf seems fully in the camp of those scholars who read Plato as an esoteric Nietzschean, that is, a philosopher who, while viewing nature as indifferent to human flourishing, has the good grace to keep quiet about it. If nature is yet a cosmos and not a chaos, its order abides in the totality, not in the parts, for nature is hostile and unjust toward human beings and their polities. Thus the Good sought after by philosophy is indeed like the Sun, a blazing orb that attracts and then incinerates. Likewise, Ahrens Dorf would seem to interpret Platonic/Socratic political philosophy as Machiavellian. For religiosity, which is declared to be false, is also acknowledged to be endemic, and so requires a statecraft that is outwardly pious while inwardly calculating. Without Ahrens Dorf ever quite saying so, Plato/Socrates, and Sophocles by extension (because tragedy is half-brother to philosophy), are understood as Nietzscheans in theory and Machiavellians in practice—albeit Nietzscheans without the sado-masochism, and Machiavellians without the impetuosity. Moderation and sobriety typify the thought of Sophocles and Plato/Socrates and serve more generally to separate ancients from moderns, who otherwise are quite similar.

The central observation regarding *Oedipus the Tyrant* is that the downfall of Oedipus is occasioned not by his hyper-rationalism (he the solver of the riddle of the Sphinx) but by his abandonment of reason in favor of piety. When the play opens, Thebes is distressed by a persistent plague causing sterility in plants, animals, and women; and Oedipus, by ordinary means, has been unable to work a cure. Although the early years of his reign saw little or no use made of omens, oracles, and seers, desperate for an answer, Oedipus sends (or recently has sent) Creon to consult with the oracle at Delphi. In so doing Oedipus puts aside his rationalism, since by the light of reason plagues are natural phenomena beyond human remedy, calling for patience and resignation; and had Oedipus only thought and acted as a rationalist, he never would have heard from the oracle that the plague was divine retribution for the killing of King Laius, a crime still unpunished and unsolved after fifteen years.

Oedipus is judged noble because of his efforts to accomplish the common good of his adopted country. But his nobility only heightens his sense of desperation, since true nobility requires that he succeed, and not just try. He therefore feels himself obliged to pursue every means of saving Thebes, including the uncovering of Laius's killer. Nobility, put to the test by necessity, leads to piety as a last resort.

Still, noble sacrifice for the good of others proves not to be Oedipus's deepest concern. Ahrens Dorf maintains—and convincingly argues—that Oedipus is actuated more by the desire that he be the savior of Thebes than that Thebes be actually saved. For after the confrontation with Teiresias, Oedipus thinks no more of Thebes but of his own innocence, forgetting to ask the lone witness to the incident at the cross-roads whether one or more killers were involved. Ahrens Dorf also notes that Oedipus welcomes news of the death of his Corinthian father, lest it somehow turn out that Oedipus is the person responsible, as was prophesized by an oracle; Oedipus tries killing Jocasta, seemingly in an effort to fulfill an oracle; and by blinding himself he does lasting harm to his sons and daughters. (Somewhat less convincing is Ahrens Dorf's contention that Oedipus leaves Corinth to further his political ambition.)

Why does Oedipus blind himself? The blinding signifies that Oedipus accepts the judgment of the gods, even to the point of applying additional punishment to himself. In return, Oedipus expects to receive everlasting life as a reward and blessing of the gods. Oedipus's turn to piety is at bottom self-interested. And because even Oedipus—the paradigmatic rational man—seeks solace in the hope of immortality, the lesson drawn by Sophocles—or by Ahrens Dorf on the poet's behalf—is that immortality is the hope of nearly every man; and that piety, therefore, is an irrepressible fact of political life requiring deft management by those in charge.

Oedipus does indeed seem divinely favored in the succeeding play. At Colonnus he is wise for being blind, whereas in Thebes he was foolish despite his sight. Sight—or reason—is unseeing, while blindness—or piety—sees all. The gods now approve of Oedipus, chastened and dependent, and at the end of the play they transport him to Hades. But the only witness of the event, King Theseus, does not exactly confirm the apotheosis; in fact, Theseus implies that Oedipus died a natural death and that his body lies buried in a secret spot. Divine judgment—which if known would settle the reason-piety debate—seems no more certain than the mystery of Oedipus's disappearance.

Ahrens Dorf's central observation regarding the *Colonnus* play is that Oedipus must prove himself deserving of human protection and divine reward. Apologetics, in other words, make up the action of the play, suggesting, says Ahrens Dorf, that "if we human beings hope that the gods will reward us, we cannot simply reject reason but must have recourse to it" (57). Oedipus argues: (1) that he is not to be despised and cast out for his patricide and incest, because these actions were committed unknowingly; (2) that he is not to be punished for his angry violence at the cross-roads, because he was entitled to defend himself against the king's party; and (3) that he is piteous and deserving of favor, because others abused him deliberately, such as his parents in exposing him and his sons in expelling him. Ahrens Dorf explains that the second argument and the third are not consistent, since the second supposes that self-interest (self-preservation) exonerates, while the third supposes that the interests of others are culpable. (Of course the contradiction depends on a conflation of self-preservation with self-interest in all of its manifestations and thus on a denial of evil, which Sophocles might not intend.) Ahrens Dorf concludes that Oedipus is rational (engaged in apologetics) up to the point where reason supports his case for immortality and divine approval; after which he resorts to anger to defend his sense of desert. Oedipus is angry in the *Colonnus* play, says Ahrens Dorf, because anger "naturally gives rise to the heartening belief that justice demands that you be aided and that the unjust be punished, and hence that there be gods who favor you as you deserve and punish your enemies as they deserve" (71). Righteous indignation proves to be yet another avenue to religious piety.

King Theseus stands in stark contrast to Oedipus the wanderer. Theseus is not angry, despite suffering exile himself. He is not angry with Oedipus for his polluting crimes nor with Creon for his contemptuous bullying. Theseus understands, remarks Ahrens Dorf, that people act out of self-interest and that it makes little sense to be angry with them for doing as nature requires. Theseus's own interest, as king of an insignificant city, is to establish its reputation for piety by providing protection to Oedipus. The reputation, however, is divorced from the reality, insofar as Theseus is not particularly pious himself—e.g., he shares power with no religious authority. Theseus is calculating and calm, unburdened by anger, piety, or patriotic zeal. And yet his rationalistic rule recognizes the importance of pious hopes in his subjects and pious fears in his enemies. Thus the extension of sanctuary to Oedipus is useful to Thebes even if the gods are unmoved, uninvolved, or non-existent. Moreover, the risks incurred by offending more powerful Thebes are less serious than they appear, since the Theban royal house is torn by

strife and the city is threatened by invasion. Theseus, says Ahrensdorf, is the model of the Sophoclean statesman—compassionate, not spirited; rational, not pious. One wonders though how exemplary and complete this spirit-less statecraft actually is; for while it may befit the Machiavellian fox (Theseus as prince of insignificant Athens), it hardly befits the Machiavellian lion, whose matchless power is a cause for pride and boastful display.

Antigone and her father share one characteristic: each is noble or aspires to be, and each is self-interested, even to the point of neglecting the common good each has sworn to serve. Oedipus was more determined to be Thebes' savior than to effect the salvation of Thebes; and Antigone is more resolved to defy Creon and die herself than to accomplish the burial of her brother. And in each case self-interest is presumed to be realized in the afterlife with immortal reward bestowed on the principals by admiring gods.

The flaw in Antigone's plan is that Creon can undo what Antigone has wrought: he can order the buried body exhumed (or merely dusted off). Faithful service to Polyneices' corpse requires that Antigone follow Ismene's advice and beseech Creon to revoke his edict. This supplication Antigone cannot accept; indeed, she denounces her sister for even suggesting it. Antigone seeks to die in order that she might live, in the hereafter reunited with her family members who also have proven themselves worthy. The family reconciles the tension between self-interest and the common good; for the family is a natural community whose collective good encompasses the good of its individuals. Antigone serves herself by serving the interest of her family, by burying her brother's body in accordance with divine law.

But is the family a natural unit able to reconcile the tension between public and private interest? Not in the Theban plays, Ahrensdorf observes, and certainly not in the case of the house of Laius; for this one family is guilty of attempted infanticide, patricide, incest, attempted matricide, expulsion of the father, double fratricide, desecration of a corpse, and the denunciation of one sister by the other. Further complicating Antigone's case for choosing family over city is the embarrassing fact that Polyneices' crime against the family far exceeds Ismene's. After all, Polyneices slew Eteocles in a selfish attempt to capture the Theban crown. If Ismene is placed outside the family fold for refusing to join in Antigone's suicidal mission, then surely Polyneices is ostracized for selfishly slaying his brother—in which case Antigone is under no obligation to bury Polyneices' body. When Creon frames the problem this way, the best answer Antigone can provide is that the valuations of the gods are mysterious; to which she later adds—as an addendum

to divine law—that her dead brother deserves special treatment for being irreplaceable; husbands and children can be replaced, but not a brother once the parents are dead. Her loss is past repair; thus she has nothing to lose by sacrificing her life. The new principle at the heart of Antigone’s revision is that personal happiness counts against familial duty. Accordingly, divine law is relaxed in its rigor. But why, asks Ahrens Dorf, does Antigone not apply the principle to other aspects of life and other sources of happiness—to marriage and children of her own? Because, he answers, Antigone loves death and the promise of immortality more than she loves life and its ordinary pleasures. Extreme piety is what brings about Antigone’s ruin.

Creon is as dogmatic in defense of the city as is Antigone in defense of the family. Each believes that the gods endorse his or her opposite course of action. Each also is forced to change direction: Creon toward piety and family; Antigone toward agnosticism and despair. Creon will not push matters so far as to risk losing his only remaining son (perhaps he agrees that irreplaceable kin warrant special consideration). He relents, takes counsel from the seer Teiresias, and produces a tragedy by burying Polyneices, on Teiresias’s insistence, before rescuing Antigone, as initially planned. Rekindled piety brings doom to the house of Creon, since Haemon his son, and Eurydice his wife, both commit suicide following the suicide of Antigone.

Creon leaps from one dogmatic belief to another; Antigone, conversely, moves from dogmatism to doubt. At the end of the play she does not know what the gods approve or whether they mean to reward her or punish her for her heroic obstinacy. She kills herself—or hastens her death—because she has the courage to let go of dogmatic belief and to reason about the requirements of piety and justice and the possibility of leading a life in devotion to others. Ahrens Dorf applauds her openness to philosophical wonder (though little good it does her) and counts her the trilogy’s true hero.

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*Plato's Meno*, translated with annotations by George Anastaplo and Laurence Berns. Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2004, viii + 86 pp., \$9.95.

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The problem of how to begin a philosophic inquiry cannot be overlooked in a thoughtful edition of Plato's *Meno*. This consideration appears to have led George Anastaplo and Laurence Berns to offer a clear and lively translation of the dialogue in a volume that dispenses with the standard introductory essay; rather than aiming to teach what exactly to find in the text to follow, it plunges the reader into the dialogue without mediation. One begins (the first reading) by hearing the opinions of Meno, as well as the opinions, as Meno vouches for them, of Gorgias and Empedocles. We hear also the opinions of a slave of Meno, and of a would-be leader of the people named Anytus. Socrates himself offers certain opinions, however qualified, which the reader is free to examine. It is noteworthy also that one sees for oneself in the text (without "background" preparation) that Socrates is twice explicitly threatened—and this in a work that, as one often hears, is an "early" foray into "epistemology" and thus wholly other from political philosophy and its considerations. How could that opinion be true of a dialogue that includes investigation of the distinction between knowledge and true opinion (97a-98c)?

Most students' access to Plato's dialogue requires a reliable translation, and Anastaplo and Berns have produced one that aptly renders the Greek. Following the dialogue, the translators supply 160 always useful and sometimes quite provocative endnotes, together with two appendices. By dividing their own remarks from Plato's text and collecting them in a sequel, the translators do what they can to make it difficult, if not impossible, for the

reader to overlook the dramatic form of Plato's writing: there is nothing but Socratic conversation or inquiry for the first 46 pages.

The endnotes are clearly written and a boon to beginning students, yet such that advanced readers may well learn from them. Of special interest is the way in which the endnotes are cross-referenced such that each particular observation is amplified or altered in its implications as new or revisited contexts are taken into view. Quite a web of insights and questions results; second and subsequent readings of the dialogue will profit from the reader's practice of assembling for consideration what is artfully dispersed in 30 pages of notes. A large number of Greek terms are illuminated, which can be telling, and is indispensable for the Greekless reader. In the first three pages alone: *arête*, *didakton*, *askêton*, *sophia*, *phronêsis*, *aitios*, *gignôskein*, *to parapan*, *mnêsis*, *anamnesis*, *aporia*, *ergon*, *agathos*, *kalos*, *kakia*, *zêtein*, *ousia*, *einai*, and *eidos*. There are references to useful books and essays for further reading. The translators also number each speech in the dialogue, which is convenient (not least in the classroom), in addition to providing Stephanus numbers. The endnotes are keyed to both.

In some cases, as it seems to me, Berns and Anastaplo have decided—and some decision is not to be avoided, absolute literalness being impossible—to translate important and not unambiguous terms by English approximations that go quite some way toward accommodating the manner in which Meno appears to have understood Socrates, and to reserve for the endnotes a discussion of these terms that the serious student will wish to ponder and enjoy. In other words, the endnotes are a more integral part of the translation than the order of the text might lead one originally to imagine. Consider, for example, the notes to: 226 (82e); 404 (89c); 406 (89c) and 444 (93d) together with 288 (84d); 388 (88d); 494 (97a); 554 (99b); and 562 (99e). As one would expect, the notes reward the practice of careful attention; e.g., “Socrates does not *seem* to distinguish here” right opinion from true opinion (note to speech 502, 97b, my italics). “Correct,” “right,” various forms of “to know,” forms of “to see,” “beautiful” and “opinion” are particularly important and recurrent in the commentary.

The endnotes call proper attention to Socrates' initial definition of shape as “that which alone, of all the things that are, . . . always happens to accompany color” (speech 78, 75b), which it is fashionable to pass over, in deference to admiration for the Empedoclean or “tragic” definition, as Socrates calls it (76c-77a). Anastaplo and Berns prompt the reader to consider the kind of seeing involved in the phenomenological definition (as it might be

called) as compared both with the seeing that takes place in the geometrical demonstration and with what one sees or rather hears in listening to poetry or to testimony, in a court of law, for example. Socrates' citations from the poet Theognis are profitably examined. One is encouraged to consider how it is that the city plays the sophist and the role of imitation in the transmission of political virtue. The decisive difference between *theôria* and *praxis* with respect to the utility of true opinion is not overlooked.

The index of oaths (Appendix A) prompts one to make explicit for oneself just what an oath is, what it wants to be, and what it presupposes; this is hardly unrelated to the question of knowledge and opinion. That the oath belongs inescapably to the city has been plain or plain enough since Hesiod.

The appendix of geometrical figures (Appendix B) provides a clear and readily graspable pictorial record of a demonstration. It is teachable.



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Ronna Burger, *Aristotle's Dialogue with Socrates: On the Nicomachean Ethics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008, 320 pp., \$22.50 (paper).

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In *Aristotle's Dialogue with Socrates*, Ronna Burger invites the reader to examine the *Nicomachean Ethics* with a fresh eye, and to consider that it is perhaps not the treatise that it appears to be but rather the dialogue that Plato never wrote: a dialogue between two philosophers. To structure and animate her reading, Burger introduces each chapter with quotations from various Platonic dialogues, and proceeds to show how Aristotle is concerned with many of the same issues that concerned Socrates, which are addressed across the Platonic corpus. Probing further, in her investigation and discussion of Aristotle's argument Burger also notes the numerous times Plato and Socrates appear in the text—sometimes named directly, more often quoted without being named—and argues that these references offer a guide to the structure and argument of the *Ethics*. Perhaps most iconoclastically, Burger finds Aristotle, in the end, to be very much in agreement with Socrates on the biggest questions: what is virtue (or, what is the relation between knowledge and virtue), what is the highest or best life for a human being, and what is the true nature of philosophy. To come to see this agreement, however, takes a lot of work: following the details of the discussion carefully, noticing not only what the speeches declare about the highest activity of a human being, but how Aristotle's action of writing and presenting those speeches exemplifies the activity about which he is speaking.

As Burger leads us into the labyrinth of Aristotle's text, the first impression we get from her reading is the density and complexity of the work. Nothing is as it seems. What are often taken to be the most assertoric claims, she reveals to be invitations to question. Pointing out Aristotle's

repeated qualifications (“it is declared,” “it seems”), Burger leads the reader into an increasingly dense thicket of uncertainty and perplexities. At the same time, however, she offers light to help illuminate the way. One such illumination is the recurring bifurcatory or dyadic structure she notices that runs throughout, which guides and informs Aristotle’s dialectical examination. Perhaps the two most prominent examples of this, which also serve to divide the entire work itself into two parts, are the division between virtue of character and virtue of thought (books 2-6), and the division of rationality into practical and theoretical (books 6-10). Thus, while Aristotle declares at the beginning of book 2 that virtue is two—of character (ethical) and of thought (intellectual)—he concludes in book 6 that it is one: character *and* thought (desiring mind or intellectual desire). And, though immediately upon uniting reason and desire and declaring virtue to be one, he divides thought into two—practical *versus* theoretical—concerned with different *praxeis* and *energeiai*, his provocative linking of *sophia* and *phronesis* in book 6 and knowledge and action at the end of book 10 challenge one to consider what the truly beautiful action, the best activity for human being, might be.

If we examine these two dyads, we find two common threads, and in these two, perhaps the deepest dyad of the work. One common thread is *phronesis*. In books 2-6, ethical virtue is pursued and examined in opposition to, or at least independence from *phronesis* (intellectual virtue). In book 6, when that opposition appears to have been resolved, and the two have been brought together, with (ethical) virtue supplying the end and *phronesis* determining the means (and the mean), a new dyad appears, as Burger points out (116-20). This time *phronesis* as the virtue or excellence of practical reason stands in opposition to *sophia* as the virtue or excellence of theoretical reason. Theory stands in contradistinction to action. There is, however, a second common thread in these two dyads and that is the beautiful (*to kalon*). For both ethical virtue and *sophia* have an *eros* for and look to the beautiful. Each half of the *Ethics*, therefore, posits a division, perhaps even opposition, between *phronesis* and *eros* for the beautiful. “*Eros* for the beautiful,” however, Burger reminds us, is Socrates’ characterization of philosophy as he understands it and practices it, and *phronesis* is the name Socrates employs when he speaks of the knowledge that is (or accompanies) virtue, and the human knowledge of ignorance, which is the knowledge he claims to have. Thus, Burger suggests, at the heart of Aristotle’s *Ethics* lies the question of the relation between Socratic *phronesis* (human wisdom) and Socratic philosophy (112).

The beautiful is first introduced as the *telos* of ethical virtue (*NE* 1115b12-13; Burger, 49). It stands in contradistinction to *phronesis*, whose *telos* is the good (*NE* 1140b20-21; Burger, 71). As Burger puts it, “the beautiful proves to be, together with the just, the independent principles that show up in the manifold of particular virtues and withstand their absorption into *phronesis*: the beautiful and the just supply the force of resistance against the Socratic move that would deny the autonomy of the sphere of ethical virtue” (49). The beautiful is “independent” because it is desired for its own sake; in contrast, *phronesis*, which looks to the good, appears to be only of instrumental value.

In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates offers an account that describes the object of each individual's *eros* as the god that represents the ideal or perfection of the individual's nature. Aristotle's examination of the manifold of virtues in books 3-4 suggests the same thing. “The beautiful,” therefore, appears to be the projection of and desire for perfection and completion.

Ethical virtue, however, is limited in its origins and its scope. After all, it is identified as the excellence of the desiring part of the soul. As Burger puts it, “someone who looks to the beautiful as his end and chooses his action because of itself does not understand his character formation as a molding of passions tied to the body” (202). This would seem to suggest that the beautiful sought by the passions and named by the ethical virtues is not the true beautiful, the truly independent, self-sufficient one sought for its own sake and for nothing else (199-200). True *eros* for the beautiful must be the goal solely of mind. The harnessing of (ethical) virtue to *phronesis* ensures that the *eros* or drive of the passions will be beneficial to the individual by placing the passions under the command and guide of the good, but it does not satisfy the longing for perfection or the ideal. *Sophia*, therefore, as the excellence of (a part of) mind, *not* the passions, steps in to replace ethical virtue and looks like it will be able to succeed where ethical virtue could not. But, the introduction of *sophia* heralds a new division. In the moment when *phronesis* reins in and unites the desires and reason, *sophia* divides mind into practical reason and theoretical reason.

For a moment in book 6, Aristotle appears to unite the two. Offering the analogy of health and medicine, he declares that “theoretical reason produces happiness, not as medicine produces health, but as health itself makes a person healthy” (*NE* 1144a3-4). Happiness is the province of

theoretical reason and *sophia*; practical reason and *phronesis* have instrumental value, equivalent to the science of medicine. “The *ergon* that must be performed well for the sake of that *energeia* is accomplished, we are told, in accordance with *phronesis* and ethical virtue” (*NE* 1144a6-9; Burger, 125). Insofar as the exemplar for *sophia* is not Socrates, but the pre-Socratic philosophers (*NE* 1141b6-8; Burger, 120), we might be driven to conclude that while Aristotle acknowledges the importance of Socratic *phronesis* for the human *ergon*, he wishes to go back to the pre-Socratic philosophers for the highest end (*telos*). Burger, however, wonders whether the pre-Socratic understanding of *sophia* and the *telos* is perhaps an “imagined possession” of perfection and wisdom, and whether Socrates’ constant questioning and knowledge of ignorance might not be “the reality of love of *sophia*” (130).

*Sophia*, rooted not in the passions but in mind, can lift its sights higher than the (mere) completion or perfection of what one is lacking to the completion or perfection that stands truly alone and independent: the whole cosmos, or at least the highest things in the cosmos. What greatness of soul only dreamed of, *sophia* claims to achieve (*NE* 1179a22-32; Burger, 206, 82-87). The culmination of this view arrives in book 10, and seems to leave us with two realms: the practical (necessary, but low) realm of human concerns and human action, and the theoretical (divine and ideal) realm of the gods, the whole cosmos, and the highest things.

Burger, however, invites us to reconsider whether this is, indeed, Aristotle’s conclusion. First of all, it is not his last word. The identification of *sophia* with pure contemplation of the highest things, in complete isolation from other human beings and in complete abstraction from oneself as a human being, is followed by a very practical call to action, part of which is legislation: the establishing of good rules to train and educate the passions to provide individuals a good beginning toward becoming virtuous. Furthermore, as Burger points out, if one notes carefully Aristotle’s language (a point she has been stressing all along), the praising of the purely theoretical life is “nothing but a common opinion,” a mere speech, the likes of which he warned us against early on (206, 207-8, 52; *NE* 1105b12-14); it is also hedged with several qualifications (“seems to be,” “as it is believed,” etc.). Then, she reminds us of Aristotle’s insistence that the goal of his work “is not to theorize and to know, but to act” (208, referring to *NE* 1095a4-9). “It is necessary ... not just to know about virtue but to have and use it—unless, Aristotle adds at this late point, there is some other way we become good” (208, referring to 1179a35-b4).

If Aristotle intends, as Burger's noticing reminder suggests strongly, that he is not satisfied with two realms, practical and theoretical, but that he wishes to unite the two into a complete activity and a complete life, the question we must consider, and which Burger turns to in her concluding section, is, how are *theoria* and *praxis* to be conjoined? what might it mean to put *theoria* into action? On the one hand, "To picture the theoretical life in its purity, we must think of the gods" (203). The life of pure contemplation would appear to be the life of a god, it "is at home only on the Isles of the Blessed," and "its exemplar is Thales" (205). But this model in general does not concern itself, and Thales in particular did not concern himself, with "philosophy of the human things." That concern belongs to Socrates and Socratic philosophy. And Aristotle identifies his investigation of the highest human good, *eudaimonia*, and the best life for a human being as part of the philosophy of the human things.

At this point we must look back to the beginning and remember that a part of Aristotle's work—indeed, perhaps his entire work—involved examining speeches (*logoi*), the things people say and believe, to try to discover the truth. From early on Burger pointed out how Aristotle cited the Socratic formula "turn to the *logoi*" to critique those who take refuge in *logoi* and avoid the hard work of action. Her careful reading indicates that Aristotle means us to remember this point at the end, which, she argues, means that we are meant to apply the same caution to Aristotle's words themselves. If we do this, Burger suggests, we will walk away understanding the *Ethics* not as a treatise declaring the supremacy of *sophia* and contemplation over *phronesis* and action, but as a philosophic discussion exploring both the promise and the challenge of *sophia* and *phronesis* together for human life and human action. That promise and challenge are played out not in assertoric fashion, but in dialogue: the dialogue that Aristotle is engaging in with Socrates and Plato, but also, and in a sense more profoundly, the invitation to dialogue that Aristotle extends to the reader. And it is on this last point that Burger's book is most to be commended. For as she discovers and discloses the evidence in the text for Aristotle's dialogue with Socrates, she herself practices and illustrates how we, the readers, may enter into and engage in a philosophic dialogue with Aristotle.



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Vincent Phillip Muñoz, *God and the Founders: Madison, Washington, and Jefferson*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 242 pp., \$85 hardcover, \$24.99 paperback.

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Phillip Muñoz's excellent *God and the Founders: Madison, Washington, and Jefferson* offers us the chance to break out of the all-too-familiar battles between the strict separationists and their loyal nonpreferentialist opposition. Muñoz shifts the terrain simply by inserting George Washington into the mix of "freedom-loving colonials," in Justice Hugo Black's famous phrase, whose prominence has made Virginia the epicenter of American church-state jurisprudence. Up until now, justices and scholars, by squinting at the right time, have often believed that they saw consistent views on God and government in James Madison and Thomas Jefferson. Adding the first president to the analysis not only opens up a new Washingtonian perspective but also helps illuminate some of the real differences between Madison and Jefferson.

The first half of the volume delves into the church-state views of these framers, and Muñoz identifies three distinct philosophies. Madisonianism sees religion as a natural right, which requires "a 'religion blind' constitution, [one] that prohibits the state from taking cognizance of religion" (12). Washingtonianism, by contrast, is characterized by his conviction that "a pious citizenry was indispensable to republican government," and, therefore, "Washington consistently sought to use governmental authority to encourage religion and to foster the religious character of the American people" (50). Finally, in what will undoubtedly be one of Muñoz's most controversial arguments, he reads Jefferson's lofty principles in the light of his anticlericalism and political actions in organizing the University of Virginia, and concludes that even Jefferson would allow the state to promote religion,

as long as that religion satisfied his standards of enlightened rationalism: “Jefferson believed America to be embroiled in a battle between religious superstition and intolerance on the one hand and reason and freedom on the other. He sought to achieve a decisive victory by using state power to nurture the rational religious beliefs...and to suppress the irrational dogmas and institutions that he believed to be hostile to liberty” (116).

It is possible to pause here and quibble about whether their namesakes would fully own up to these characterizations, or question whether it is fair to settle on what Madison said (in the Memorial and Remonstrance) versus what he did (in declaring days of prayer when he was President, for example) while doing just the opposite with Jefferson, whose actions (in setting up the University of Virginia) speak louder than his words (in the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom). But Muñoz disarms this line of attack in the Introduction, where he sets out his version of originalism: “The Founders’ ideas should govern us today only to the extent that they are persuasive,” not because “a powerful elite voted for the Constitution more than 200 years ago” (5). As a result, it is less critical to fully explicate any particular founder’s entire church-state record than to identify principles of religious freedom that can compete for our—or the Supreme Court’s—attention as potential constitutional philosophies.

Muñoz then turns to the Court’s church-state jurisprudence, where he accomplishes a feat that has eluded judges and scholars alike: he finds a consistent theme running through most of the establishment clause cases—Madisonianism. Irrespective of the rationale cited by the Court in these cases, which span three score years, Madisonianism predicts the result nearly 75 percent of the time—and in one of the non-matched cases (over legislative chaplains), the Court went with what Madison actually did rather than what Muñoz’s Madisonianism would require. That is, the prevailing judicial approach to the establishment clause has given us a largely Madisonian non-cognizance standard that forbids the government from giving aid or support to religion *qua* religion, even though the Court itself has not advanced overtly Madisonian reasons. Meanwhile, Washingtonianism, and even Jeffersonianism, would put more religion in the public schools than the Court has allowed, although there would be a rationalism litmus test in Jefferson’s schools by which old-time religion would be supplanted by an appropriately enlightened faith.

One of the most intriguing elements of Muñoz’s link between current establishment clause jurisprudence and these founding fathers is

that the Madisonian non-cognizance approach, which so accurately predicts modern results, has roots not so much in the Enlightenment, but, as Philip Hamburger has pointed out in *Separation of Church and State*, among the evangelical dissenters. These dissenters, and especially Virginia's increasingly numerous Baptists, were, of course, one of the primary target audiences for Madison's anonymously written Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments, which is the canonical text from which Muñoz derives Madisonianism. Yet, even among the dissenters, it was a controversial position: Virginia's Presbyterians waffled on the assessment bill that Madison opposed in the Memorial, and his non-cognizance approach was a threat to Quakers, Mennonites and others who wanted the state to accommodate their desire to be exempted from military service. So, to the extent that the establishment clause now reflects a considerable degree of Madisonianism, we have inherited a viewpoint that, in the constitutional era, was shared only by a fairly small number of dissenting Protestants. Of far greater concern among the more populous Protestant groups at the time was the purely demographic fact that no one denomination could be assured of preeminent status throughout the new nation, and it was therefore safer all around to have no national establishment than to risk the possibility that the wrong church would become the legally favored one. The non-cognizance standard Muñoz finds in Madison's Memorial and Remonstrance has been durable and long-lived, but, at the time of the founding, it was a distinctly minority view.

Not so with Washingtonianism, which was likely the dominant perspective on God and government of America's ruling class when the Constitution was drafted. There may have been lively debates over dollars-and-cents issues surrounding tax support for specific churches, but nearly all could agree that a God-fearing citizenry was essential for republican government to survive. Most states restricted public office-holding to Christians or even to Protestants, and the most contentious issue involving religion in the constitutional ratification debates was the absence of a religious test in the federal Constitution. To give Washingtonianism its demographic due, Muñoz could have added a lengthy catalogue of influential framers who supported this position, a list that would dwarf the proponents of the other two philosophies he discusses (and, interestingly, Washingtonianism would support religious litigants in establishment clause cases 100 percent of the time).

Jeffersonianism, in Muñoz's hands, becomes, in many respects, a variation on Washington's views. He too would let government promote religion; the difference is that we tend to associate Washington with conventional

forms of religiosity, whereas Jefferson would only recognize faiths whose catechisms could pass his rational-basis test. It is worth asking, however, whether Jefferson would really be as willing to apply this element of Jeffersonianism to the nation, where the religious demographics were unfavorable for his desired outcome, as to “Mr. Jefferson’s University,” where his influence was much greater. As president, Jefferson typically acted and sounded more Madisonian than even Madison did. And so, while identifying this particular strand of Jeffersonianism is a useful tool for Muñoz’s analysis, it is difficult to align it as closely with the third president’s overall church-state philosophy as the other two approaches can reasonably be linked to Madison and Washington (as Muñoz recognizes in a clever index entry titled, “Jefferson, contradictions in”).

In an important contribution to the current religious freedom debate, Muñoz describes how religious accommodation was not a particular concern of any of these framers. After a review of the three Virginians on the subject of indirect burdens—such as compulsory schooling requirements—and exemptions—whether there should be, for example, conscientious exemptions for military service—Muñoz concludes that none of them would support such constitutional rights, and only Washingtonianism would even allow legislatures to create statutory exemptions. Here the Supreme Court’s decisions to free the Amish from compulsory schooling or Jehovah’s Witnesses from saluting the flag are considerably more accommodating than the Virginia framers. In sum, it is difficult to find support from any of these three founders for insulating the devout from generally applicable laws.

In the end, Muñoz concludes that there was no single comprehensive church-state viewpoint shared by the founding generation, but, nevertheless, the framers “can serve as a rich source of ideas and understandings about religion and the proper separation of church and state” (221). The same can be said of Muñoz’s own contribution to our study of religion and the republic, which is strikingly clear and well written for someone schooled deeply in political philosophy, yet thoughtfully nuanced for one so willing to plunge into constitutional controversies. Muñoz has provided us with one of the few genuinely original contributions to a field that has felt overcrowded and redundant for several decades. That every reader will find something interesting with which to wrestle is a tribute to his ability to shed new light on old subjects in a way that provokes a much needed reawakening of the field.

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Will Morrisey, *The Dilemma of Progressivism: How Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson Reshaped the American Regime of Self-Government*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009, 278 pp., \$75.

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To understand the valuable contribution made in this work, the reader must begin in the precursor work Morrisey published in 2004, *Self-Government, The American Theme: Presidents of the Founding and Civil War*. It re-directed interpretative energies concerning the American regime. The unexpected focus on these five presidents, one of whom is Jefferson Davis (the others are Washington, Adams, Jefferson and Lincoln), set up a unique debate about the meaning of America that focuses upon the question of self-government (with liberty and equality as necessary conditions) rather than the question of the role of interests or states' rights.

Self-government is a matter of antique interest in political philosophy and "an intellectual framework that has been available for centuries" to statesmen. That so glibly stated fact invites readers to discover an "old science" in the "improved science of politics" (the actual language of *Federalist 9* in Jacob Cooke's edition, rather than a "new science of politics").

It neither disappointed nor surprised, therefore, immediately to discover that the discussion of "self-government" is rather a discussion of "virtue" than of methodologies of political decision. Morrisey derives the modern discussion of self-government from the ancient discussion of *autarchia* (self-sufficiency) and *enkrateia* (self-mastery). By this I mean not that the founders cite the usage of Plato or Aristotle. The "rational self-rule" Morrisey discovers in the usage of the founders is the political expression of the "rule of reason over the other parts of the soul."

Morrisey observed that the third part of political science, “political thought,” exercises “practical reason,” the “political deliberations” of statesmen, who, in turn, provide non-theoretic responses to the question, what is the good for this people here and now? Whether it is true that political science distinguishes itself into political philosophy (inquiry into the nature of human association), political theory (inquiry into particular regimes as regimes), and political thought (prudential reason), it remains pertinent that we observe statesmen engaged in a reasoning that implicates general theories.

Thus, Morrisey’s first work is a philosophical case study. The five presidents may be viewed separately, and therefore, on the basis of one-on-one comparisons. They may also be viewed as a series that discloses variant responses to varying urgencies. The first approach introduces the familiar questions: “Who was clearer? more effective? greater?” The second approach yields a more interesting result. For Jefferson Davis’s understanding does not merely contrast with the understanding of Lincoln, whom he opposed politically, but also stands in a certain relation to the founders and contrasts with Lincoln’s relation to the founders. Indeed, the question has been raised tacitly, whether Davis were the better heir of the founders than Lincoln. This is the particular dimension of the first work that threads through the discussion of *The Dilemma of Progressivism*. That is, the “dilemma” is that the progressives who would found anew are forced to seek recognition as heirs of the founding.

The founders, in the end, stand in judgment between Lincoln and Davis, and therefore in judgment over the contemporary dispute, whether Lincoln were a savior or destroyer of self-government. That judgment would be as “clear as the sun in its meridian brightness,” as George Washington might say. However, the picture is more complicated when we also take into account Adams (who approved the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798) and Jefferson (whose administration welcomed the first national blows against slavery but also acquired the Louisiana Territory and boosted slavery).

Morrisey’s Washington, by contrast, defends the propositions that men become self-governing by means of governing themselves and that the purpose of legislation is to foster such reliance. “Prudential reasoning is the leading form of *governing* reason...prudential reasoning moderates human passions and appetites, making them governable.” Morrisey does not say so, but this comes so close to Aristotle’s “man is by nature a political animal,” that it is fair to conclude that he reads the theme of self-government as making judgment by reason of nature essential to America. The appropriate

understanding of the American regime—as a practical political reality—therefore, is that it sponsors efforts in virtue.

The Founders' improved science of politics was unspoiled by the affectation that ancient regimes actually had virtue for their goal (*Federalist* 9, 18, and 37). The notion that their politics focused exclusively on the low or base derived from a fundamental misapprehension.

When elected to the presidency, Washington planned initially to say what America was about. His first impulse was to give a comprehensive treatise. He ultimately decided not to deliver it and put aside the lengthy draft, which revealed his own judgment of political principles and objectives. The remaining snippets of that draft constitute approximately sixty percent of the total. In them a pregnant statement describes the Constitution, observing, "I presume now to assert that better still may not be devised." This statement approached as nearly as Washington ever could to saying that it was the best, simply.

Washington's judgment rests on a few simple considerations, some of which are elucidated in the draft inaugural but others of which appear in prior and subsequent documents. Most important, surely, is what he had originally set out as the objective for the founding, namely, to provide for that peace and prosperity, that stability, which were conditions for the attainment of the fundamental objective, self-government.

Self-government does not mean majority rule—for any of the American Founders. While it includes the processes of majority rule, that is only a mechanism, a means. Self-government was a moral conception, as expressed in the Farewell, when Washington eulogized the people as "now" loving to be "one people" governing themselves.

Washington meant in this precisely what he meant in the delivered First Inaugural address, namely, that "private morality" is the foundation of "national happiness." This claim may not strike a contemporary soul as extraordinary, but most philosophers would demand to know what he meant. Did he mean that everyone has his own opinion and does what he wishes? No. He meant that this was a government in which not only the authority to govern oneself fell upon the shoulders of each, but also the success of the general government derived from placing that authority on the shoulders of each.

Here, then, is where the *Dilemma of Progressivism* becomes apparent; for Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson specifically “reshape the American regime of self-government” by discrediting the people’s claim to authority and rather figure the government as the source of the people’s success than the people as the source of the government’s success. Washington as the referee between Davis and Lincoln must, in turn, referee the claims of Davis’s and Lincoln’s successors.

Morrissey almost silently conveys this turn early in *Dilemma*, when he writes,

Can a people govern itself? Must it not almost immediately run to majoritarian passions ruling minorities without reciprocally being ruled by them—without, in a word, reasonably sharing rule? Government by consent means government by reasonable assent, government by reflection and choice instead of accident and choice. Can such government prevail among a sovereign people? (x)

Because Morrissey knows that Hamilton opposed “reflection and choice” to “accident and chance” (choice, after all, succeeds deliberation), this signals a reading of Hamilton that regards chance as choice guided merely by passion rather than reason (*Federalist* 1).

Morrissey constructs the foundations of progressivism in reference to the project(s) of modern science.

Modern science conquers fortune and nature slowly but surely; it *progresses* toward complete human freedom, now said to be human control over fortune and nature. The leader or guide shows the way toward this human mastery. He seeks not to rule by moderating passions but by fulfilling them; reason and the science it brings now serve spiritedness, or *libido dominandi*. (xvii, original emphasis)

*Dilemma of Progressivism*, therefore, consists in determining whether the architects of progressivism pursue the goals of modern science or the goals of the “improved science of politics.” And Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson are the political architects of progressivism, willingly or unwillingly.

Morrissey’s careful construction of Taft’s statesmanship demonstrates that Taft agreed with Hamilton’s caution against empowering majoritarian passion, while separating from both Roosevelt and Wilson. In that sense, the central figure in this account bears the weight of providing the counter-argument to progressivism, despite Taft’s self-understanding as a “progressive conservative.” Considerable irony attends the demonstration,

however, inasmuch as Taft ultimately furthered rather than retarded the advance of the progressivism that abandoned the “natural rights and constitutional self-government as understood by the founders” (156). While Taft opposed his predecessor’s (Roosevelt) stewardship theory of executive power and his successor’s (Wilson) progressive historicism, he nevertheless failed in the face of the political dynamics of the United States. His defeat by Wilson in 1912 represented, therefore, the political rejection of the standard of the founding, the rejection of George Washington as referee. Where Lincoln had prevailed over Jefferson Davis (embodiment of Stephen A. Douglas’s “popular sovereignty”), Taft could not prevail over Wilson (who embodied John Dewey’s “the cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy”). We conclude, therefore, that the account of these three presidents is an account of the enlarged influence of progressivism in United States politics in the context of articulate deliberations of the principles at stake.

The three accounts are wonderfully detailed and richly elaborated. Roosevelt is characterized as a statesman of genuinely liberal impulses, who sought to save the founding from conditions sufficiently changed since the founding as to require the instrumentalities of strong, central administration of government in order to preserve the “spirit of the founding,” if not its forms (89-91). Wilson is characterized as a statesman of towering but wandering intellect who embraces moral chaos as an opportunity to display political virtuosity (“democratized Nietzscheism”: 212-13). William Howard Taft is the man who, through patient and careful deliberations, as executive rather than as jurist, dialectically disclosed the deficiencies of his colleagues but eventually advanced their projects above his own.

How must Washington judge them? Each bowed at the shrine of self-government, but none advanced the cause of self-government. The sub-title of this work, “How Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson Reshaped the American Regime of Self-Government,” suggests, therefore, that Washington would identify them as saboteurs, who failed to confirm the authority of self-government as falling upon the shoulders of each citizen, and who therefore endangered all.

In this sense Morrisey describes the collapse of the regime of self-government, and the description is all the more effective inasmuch as it derives the diagnosis of collapse from the arguments of the protagonists themselves (Taft above all). When viewed against the prospects of success illustrated in the prior volume, *Self-Government, The American Theme*, this

collapse is nothing less than stunning. It constitutes an intellectual call to arms, reanimating the question of the meaning of self-government.

Throughout the founding era we encounter one theme: namely, that the idea of building a nation within the United States requires processes of self-government working hand-in-glove with a specific conception of justice (or an expectation of virtue), without at the same time lodging somewhere within the community a specific power to form individuals in virtue. That is the key. The specific conception of justice grows out of the fact that the government is put in motion by the clamant interests of the society. The political process turns upon the multiplicity of interests, though *only* in the sense that those interests and their demands set the political agenda. They set it under certain restrictions, namely, that they can virtually never accomplish their ends without coming to terms with numerous other such interests, and then only through representatives, never directly. Accordingly, one protects minorities within the society only by restraining the majority to just pursuits (the aim of Lincoln's labors). This is the antithesis of the "stewardship" view of majority rule.

Consider: virtuous human beings conduct themselves by their own lights—self-government. What happens when one cedes to someone else the putative authority to compel virtuous conduct? The subjects of such power lose occasion to conduct themselves by their own lights. Accordingly the Founders' gamble was necessary, consistent with the objective of virtue.

Washington thought the Constitution created the best government, and Morrisey's works take that conclusion seriously. But there is a proviso: the self-government that was framed by the Constitution of the United States endures only so long as private morality (even moralism?) characterizes the people of the United States. There is an implicit and necessary connection between the two. If the people cease to be decent in ordinary ways, the Constitution ceases to be benign. As Madison avers in *Federalist* 63, a popular lapse from the rule of prudent deliberation will seldom if ever be recoverable.

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Michael Curtis, *Orientalism and Islam: European Thinkers on Oriental Despotism in the Middle East and India*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 382 pp., \$22.99 (paper).

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Do the views of past political philosophers on a particular culture, religion, or region carry relevance in the times of diversity that we live in today? Michael Curtis, a former editor of the *Middle East Review*, argues that historic travel narratives and philosophical writings are helpful in understanding contemporary Muslim societies and cultural identities in what was known as the Orient. Through a detailed inquiry into the works of Montesquieu, Burke, Tocqueville, Mill, Marx, and Weber, Curtis reflects upon the genesis of the discourse on Oriental despotism, Western perceptions of the East in the history of modern political thought, and the contemporary relevance of these perceptions. In doing so, Curtis explicitly defies the post-modern criticism that Western perceptions of the East are marred by “a desire for power over the Orient, which implies a hegemonic imperialist or colonial attitude” (6). The polemical adaptation to Middle Eastern studies of the premise that “knowledge and ‘discursive practices’ are social ideologies that function as forms of exerting power and disseminating the effects of power” has been that the West has “dominated and exercised colonial or imperial rule over the Orient but also that, through intellectual means, it has created an essentialist, ontological, epistemologically insensitive distinction between a ‘West,’ materially developed and self-assured about its superior civilization, and an ‘Orient,’ which it regards as inferior, backward, and not modernized” (8). According to Curtis, this “monolithic and binary view” (9) ignores the diverse variety of literature on the Middle East, the conflicting motivations

behind Western intellectual interest in the region, and the relatively recent beginnings of worldwide Western supremacy.

Hence, Curtis maintains that the concept of Oriental despotism does not stem from ignorance or racism: “The ‘Orient’ was a reality, not a fiction devised by the West” (67). He admits the prevalence of factual deficiencies in the historic works that he examines and their authors’ use of oriental despotism as a metaphor to warn against the possibility of absolute rule in Europe. By doing so, yet at the same time upholding these works’ contemporary relevance, Curtis risks committing a fallacy that he is critical of, or assuming an ever unchanging image of the East.

Curtis’s greatest scholarly feat in this book is a balanced and insightful analysis of the European perceptions of Islamic polities in the Middle East, North Africa, and Mughal India. The bulk of his research is devoted to the six major Western European theorists who wrote on the Oriental or Islamic world at different historical periods. Despite travelogues and comparisons of the East and the West by philosophers including Machiavelli, Bodin, and Francis Bacon, Montesquieu is “the first writer to formulate in detail the concept of Oriental despotism” (73). As such, Montesquieu left a profound influence on all future discussion of the subject. According to Montesquieu, despotism is essentially Oriental in nature, and its main causes are climate, terrain, and the Islamic religion. In cold and temperate climates, “peoples have a spirit that leads to a sense of liberty and an independence lacking in the South” (83). In contrast, a hot climate produces an indolence of mind and body, timidity, and a lively imagination (which is connected to strong passion and sexuality). In despotisms, women are subdued and slavery is prevalent. Paradoxically, on the one hand, despotisms are natural to territories that lack natural defenses (86), on the other hand, despotisms are happiest when they are isolated and their people are ignorant of the possibility of free government (97). Montesquieu equated Christianity with mildness and nondespotic politics; in contrast, Islam was a religion of the sword, and its doctrine of predestination and rigid fate led to indolence, passivity, and obedience. While in other political orders, religion is a check on political power, in despotic countries “it is fear added to fear” (87). As a result, the Oriental world is socially static, politically immutable, and economically backward. Although Curtis states that “Montesquieu’s images of despotic government were less historically accurate than his analysis of the European countries with which he was familiar,” he nevertheless accepts them as a “logically compelling” description of absolute government (101).

Of the six philosophers examined in individual chapters in this book, Burke is the only one who dissociated the Orient and Islam from despotism. His thought on despotism and British rule in India is not found in a systematic treatise, but is derived from parliamentary speeches on the East India Company and in the impeachment trial which he spearheaded against Warren Hastings, the first Governor General of India. Burke claimed that its charter gave the Company the right to govern but not arbitrary power, and, as its rights and privileges were a trust, the Company must be held accountable to the British Parliament, and “it must be judged by the standard of what is good for the Indian people” (113). Burke challenged the argument, which to him appeared as a fabrication in order to justify arbitrary colonial rule, that despotism is the customary rule in Mughal India. He claimed that Islamic polities were not governed arbitrarily or despotically, thanks to the moderating influence of Islamic laws, which were binding on everyone. Curtis takes issue with Burke’s analysis of Mughal Indian history: “Burke’s picture of an idyllic period [before colonial rule], however, does not coincide with general historical analysis...” (125).

In tracing out Tocqueville’s thoughts on the Orient and French colonialism in Algeria, Curtis broaches a somewhat different intellectual figure than the author of *Democracy in America*. “Tocqueville, the constant and ardent proponent of universal freedom, cannot easily be reconciled with the advocate of colonization in North Africa” (175). Here is not the tolerant liberal but “a trenchant patriot, nationalist, even imperialist...” (144). Tocqueville supported French colonization in Algeria for three reasons. First, France would enhance its international stature as a first-rate power. Second, an international military campaign would elevate the spirits of the French people and help them stand against encroaching decadence and the softening of mores. Third, France would help gradually develop Algeria. Although Tocqueville believed in the superiority of Western values and civilization, he found racial theories to be harmful and was himself a member of the French Association for the Abolition of Slavery. He believed that France could hold on to its Algerian possessions through the establishment of a European immigrant colony. In this context, he saw violence as a sad but inevitable aspect of colonization. “For Tocqueville the balance between idealism and humanity, on the one hand, and concern for French national interest, on the other, vacillated” (174). Hence, despite brief references to the Arabs’ unpreparedness for self-rule due to the legacy of the Ottoman Empire and Islam—two sources of despotism and social immobility according

to Tocqueville—this chapter says more about French colonialism than the conditions of the Arab people.

John Stuart Mill is another European intellectual figure who supported a civilizing mission to the Orient. Curtis's treatment begins with his father James Mill, author of *The History of British India* and the chief executive officer of the East India Company in London between 1830 and 1836. The senior Mill had an enlightenment zeal for modernization, and he was critical of Indian culture in respect to religion, social arrangements, stationariness, and backwardness. Although James Mill was ignorant of Sanskrit, he disparaged Indian literature, and he was critical of British Orientalist scholars for holding a favorable opinion of Indian civilization. Curtis ties this point to his thesis: "the 'Orientalist' group of scholars and administrators varied in their specific views and policies, and to see them as part of a unified discourse, as some modern-day critics of 'Orientalism' allege, is intellectually simplistic and ignores the empirical evidence and concrete facts on which those views and policies were based" (183). John Stuart Mill worked for the East India Company in London between 1823 and 1858. Like his father, he never visited India or learned its language. According to Curtis, Mill was grappling with "whether an advanced society or developed country ought or should intervene in other countries for what it deemed desirable and humanitarian ends..." (215). Unlike his father, John Stuart Mill respected the Indian way of life, except practices such as female infanticide and communal raids which he found abhorrent to humanity, but he supported a "civilizing mission" in order "to end or reduce the inequities caused by Oriental despotism" (204). In other words, he promoted an enlightened despotism for the advancement and eventual liberation of India (209).

The chapter on Marx (and Engels) on the Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP) is another instance where Curtis successfully brings out a lesser known and challenging aspect of a major Western thinker. The AMP is Marx's description of primitive societies that are devoid of class conflict and a history that leads to the emergence of capitalism. The AMP is a challenge to the students of Marxism because it demonstrates that not all societies partake of the linear historical progress which is driven by class conflict and which ultimately resolves its inner tension with the creation of a communistic utopia. It demonstrates that, although Marx was critical of colonialism and imperialism, he saw that these phenomena could help develop non-European societies. In other words, Oriental societies, which are defined by the AMP, need an external inducement for progress because the very term denotes a

self-sustaining community that endlessly repeats itself. There is no private property and, therefore, no class conflict; land is owned by the community because only it can organize large-scale irrigation in an arid climate. However, without private property and class conflict, there is no history proper and society is stagnant. In response to contemporary critics of Orientalism, Curtis remarks that despite Marx's distinction between the despotic and stagnant East and the progressive West, he can hardly be accused of being engaged in "the imposition of power relationships" (229).

In Curtis's words, Max Weber is another social theorist who had "no postmodernist angst about attempting to understand other cultures in terms of the categories of his own culture" (259). One of the questions Weber asked was why rationality and capitalism developed in the West but not in the Orient? Although Oriental religions including Islam were responsible for political, economic, and legal irrationality, according to Weber the root cause of the difference between the Orient and the Occident was political. Weber attempted to explain Oriental despotism with reference to patrimonialism. In patrimonialism, the entire realm is "the private domain of the ruler" (270); administration is arbitrary; land is not inherited but allotted conditionally (the prebend system); the foundation of wealth is not rational profit-making but an interest in precious stones; the economy is geared to satisfy the ruler's needs; there are monopolies; regime stability depends on the military; the ruler, or the sultan, is considered to be "the father of his people" (281) or the guardian of their welfare; the social framework is rigid; and the political and religious leadership is merged. The "warrior ethic" (292) of Islam is another obstacle to the development of rationalization and capitalism in the Orient because it is antithetical to the emergence of an independent burgher class, the growth of autonomous cities, and the creation of a reliable legal framework.

Curtis offers a rich treatment of Western perspectives on the Orient in history. Of the six philosophers he treats in detail, Montesquieu and Burke were of two minds on associating the Orient with despotism, a political condition which they both deplored; Tocqueville and Mill supported civilizing missions to the Orient, but they disagreed on the particular strategy and objectives; and Marx related Asiatic stagnancy to economic infrastructure, whereas for Weber despotism was primarily a political phenomenon. Curtis's critique of the postmodernist critics of Orientalism is a balanced contribution to the debate. However, his claim about the relevance of historic Western perceptions to contemporary Eastern societies is potentially misleading. According to Curtis, except for two brief trips by Tocqueville to Algeria,

none of the six philosophers visited the Orient or spoke its languages; their arguments were based on limited and, at times, erroneous information; their works may have been partly motivated by a desire to criticize European governments by analogy; and some of their statements were dictated by the sheer logic of their intellectual constructs. Overall, their works clarify the essential distinction between the Orient and the Occident, but they also shed some light on the roots of the prevailing prejudice against Eastern people in the contemporary world. Thus, Curtis remarks on both Oriental intolerance (305) and the Jews who were expelled from Spain in 1492 only to find refuge in the Ottoman Empire (310).