<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Article Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>147</td>
<td>John S. Treantafelles</td>
<td>Socratic Testing: <em>Protagoras</em> 310a–314b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>175</td>
<td>Waseem El-Rayes</td>
<td>The <em>Book of Religion</em>’s Political and Pedagogical Objectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>199</td>
<td>Marco Andreacchio</td>
<td>Reading <em>Inferno IV</em> as Key to Dante’s <em>Comedy</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>221</td>
<td>Chris Barker</td>
<td>Freedom in Shakespeare’s English History Plays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>253</td>
<td>James Carey</td>
<td>The Pleasure of Philosophizing and Its Moral Foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>283</td>
<td>Jürgen Gebhardt</td>
<td>Hermeneutics and Political Theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>305</td>
<td>Gregory A. McBrayer</td>
<td><em>The Major Political Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau</em>, translated and edited by John T. Scott</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>309</td>
<td>James Fetter</td>
<td><em>Reason, Tradition, and the Good: MacIntyre’s Tradition-Constified Reason and Frankfurt School Critical Theory</em> by Jeffery L. Nicholas</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Socratic Testing: *Protagoras* 310a–314b

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Introduction

Socrates as inveterate “questioner” is a familiar figure in the history of political philosophy, the paradigm of what a philosopher is and what it means to philosophize by questioning. Less familiar however is Socrates as “tester,” with purpose to his questioning, yet equally paradigmatic of what a philosopher is and what it means to philosophize by testing. Although his questioning appeared to be sanctified by divine commandment issuing from the Delphic oracle (*Apology* 21a–22b), Socrates’s testing was entirely self-induced, perhaps his clarification of divine intent, but in any case rarely made explicit in Plato’s dialogues. Unrecognized as a tester Socrates easily escaped the inclusion of that charge in the general indictment against him, whereas his well-known and self-described reputation as a questioner easily branded him a teacher, and therefore justified the indictment’s accusation of “teaching.”

But if testing is an instrument of teaching, designed to raise awareness in the mind of the one tested some issue not exhausted by the previous examples given in the questions asked, then Socrates would come dangerously close to confirming long-held suspicions about him as one of the teaching sophists—the very group he tried to distance himself from as much as possible at his trial. Or can someone like Socrates be a tester without necessarily being a teacher too? Plato’s *Protagoras* may provide us an answer. For in this dialogue above all others Socrates clearly conducts himself as a “tester” throughout, and, by his own admission, expressly so in his conversation with Hippocrates, a rather impetuous youth desperate for sophistic lessons.
And Socrates does this while at the same time decrying the profession of the teaching sophists, even though he will presently convert them into testers themselves, that is, more like the philosopher himself.

This essay accordingly examines what I am calling the “Hippocrates section” of Plato’s *Protagoras* from this perspective of “Socratic testing,” not in order to resolve the question of virtue’s teachability, the ostensive subject of the dialogue, but to understand the activity of philosophy and those engaged in it by testing others. Present if only by allusion are antecedents of philosophical themes addressed in subsequent dialogues, and brought forth with all seriousness in the days surrounding Socrates’s trial and execution. In *Protagoras* Plato has seen fit to mark philosophy’s dramatic entrance onto the world stage in the distinctive form of Socratic testing, arguably the earliest antecedent, and onto a stage already crowded with the champions of sophistry, for whom testing evidently was not fundamental to their pedagogy. If a maxim of Socratic philosophy is that the learnable is not necessarily teachable, then immediately prior to challenging the sophists to prove virtue is teachable “in speech,” Socrates demonstrates “in deed” by testing Hippocrates that the real burden rests with the student as learner rather than the teacher as inculcator. If the entire sophistic enterprise of teaching virtue is thus put into question, then the possibility of the just city ever coming into being “in deed” has been irretrievably compromised.

By saying “world stage” rather than Athens simply I mean to suggest that Plato has dramatically disclosed to readers of *Protagoras* a feature of Socratic philosophy his Athenian public in general and Socrates’s jurors in particular would never learn about, especially as the latter deliberated about his fate; namely, that Socrates was in some manner a tester, that more was involved in his questioning than simply exposing to people their ignorance, however much he seemed to argue only that at his trial. If Socratic testing antedates the oracle’s judgment on Socrates’s wisdom, then the Hippocrates section would be the secular or terrestrial defense of philosophy in its engagement with the nonphilosophical world. Here, it is Protagoras who is proclaimed by all for his wisdom (310d–311a), not Socrates, and where the sophist will prophesy oraclelike that Socrates will someday become renowned for wisdom (361e).

But did not Plato effectively make public to his Athenians as well as to the world Socrates’s effort to test people by posing questions when, at the beginning of *Protagoras*, he makes Socrates rehearse his just-concluded meeting with Protagoras to his companion and those attending him? Not
exactly. For the companion is not simply the “public.” Unfortunately this has been obscured by a common mistranslation and misunderstanding of a question the companion asks Socrates, and which not only has inspired some erroneous arguments about the companion’s interests, but has falsely accused Socrates of lying to Protagoras. These must be corrected, not only for a better understanding of the companion and his question, but because Socrates’s reply to it begins not with Protagoras, as one might expect, but with the Hippocrates section, where testing makes its first appearance on Plato’s world stage.

In order to understand the philosophical importance of the Hippocrates section we must first recognize its setting within the entire Protagoras, then identify and correct the translation mistake, which in turn will prompt more thought about the addressees of the dialogue, in particular, the companion himself. For we cannot exclude the possibility that if Hippocrates undergoes a Socratic test, the companion does as well, and most importantly, any reader of Plato’s Protagoras. After all, it is Plato who is addressing his readers through the medium of Socrates talking with one or more interlocutors. Indeed, in the most fundamental sense, all of Plato’s dialogues are tests of the readers themselves.

The Central Setting of the Hippocrates Section

The Hippocrates section occupies a rather unique place in the Platonic corpus. For unlike some of Plato’s other dialogues—the Republic and Gorgias come readily to mind—the reason Socrates accompanies a friend or companion to witness an event or speak to some notable individual is rarely detailed as much as it is in his conversation with Hippocrates. And yet Plato could have easily begun Protagoras in the narrative mode of the Republic, with Socrates saying something to the effect “I went down with Hippocrates, son of Apollodorus and brother of Phason, to see Protagoras who was staying at Callias’s house.” Regardless, the philosophical importance of Socrates’s role as a “tester” in this section is not well recognized in the literature on Protagoras.¹ But if we consider the Hippocrates section in light

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¹ In fact the tendency is to dismiss this short Hippocrates section and even the shorter section preceding it as simply ministerial, serving only to bring Socrates and the great sophist Protagoras together. See Michael Gagarin, “The Purpose of Plato’s Protagoras,” Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association, no. 100 (1969): 135. One edition of Plato’s dialogues offers a brief but nonetheless striking dismissal: unless readers are interested in fifth-century Greek social and intellectual life they are encouraged to bypass most of the dialogue and instead to concentrate on the last part where philosophy presumably begins in earnest. See Edith Hamilton and Huntington
of the entire dialogue another picture gradually emerges. *Protagoras* divides easily into three distinct sections, with the Hippocrates section as the central conversation in the dialogue. First, there is Socrates’s brief enacted conversation with his companion (and some undefined others), wherein Socrates is willing to narrate his just-concluded meeting with Protagoras (309a–310a). Second, there is the Hippocrates section, wherein Socrates describes the circumstances leading to his meeting with Protagoras (310a–314e), and which I will divide into three parts. As will be shown, after their opening exchanges in part 1, there are in fact *two* different conversation parts with Socrates and Hippocrates, each addressed and settled in a different manner, with the latter part proving to be the only completed conversation in the whole *Protagoras*. In other words, in a dialogue famous for its aporetic character, the sense of helplessness that permeates once an impasse arises, there is nevertheless embedded within it a conversation—a *logos*—that is in fact completed, arguably the pinnacle and most important conversation of the dialogue by its very completion. Unlike the provisional end to part 2, Socrates will emphasize the completion of the *logos* at the end of part 3. If the movement from a testing to a *logos* is understood as an ascent from the more physical in parts 1 and 2 to the more intellectual in part 3, then from the centered Hippocrates section a descent marks the third and final section, comprising the bulk of the

Cairns, eds., *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 308. If this Hippocrates section is recognized at all, it is to analyze the questions Socrates asks: C. C. W. Taylor, *Plato: Protagoras* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 64–68; or to defend Hippocrates’s answers against questions designed to silence rather than persuade him on the merits: John Beversluis, *Cross-Examining Socrates: A Defense of the Interlocutors in Plato’s Early Dialogues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 245–56. Largely unknown as a historical figure, perhaps even a literary construction by Plato, there is nevertheless some evidence to suggest that Hippocrates was a nephew to Pericles himself, which, if accurate, would itself justify a closer examination of this overlooked section. See Debra Nails, *The People of Plato* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), 169–70. Moreover, Plato’s generous use of dramatic and comical scenes throughout the dialogue is taken as proof that *Protagoras* is one of his earliest works, presumably lacking the metaphysical and epistemological depth found in Plato’s more mature works. See J. C. B. Gosling and C. C. W. Taylor, *The Greeks on Pleasure* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), 66–67. However, *Protagoras* may be the “first” of Plato’s works in more important respects than the order in which he presumably wrote them. See Laurence Lampert, *How Philosophy Became Socratic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 2, 21–24, and Joseph Cropsey, *Plato’s World: Man’s Place in the Cosmos* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), ix–x. Worse still, these obtrusive dramatic and comical scenes can be understood as ever threatening to overshadow Plato’s philosophical argument. See B. A. F. Hubbard and E. S. Karnofsky, *Plato’s Protagoras: A Socratic Commentary*, with foreword by M. F. Burnyeat (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 68; or worst of all as a dialogue with no serious philosophical intention. See Shannon Dubose, “The Argument Laughs at Socrates and Protagoras,” *Tulane Studies in Philosophy*, no. 22 (1973): 15–21; all of which point to a work desperately in need of revision, for example, to reintroduce Hippocrates at the end of the dialogue, whom Plato had apparently forgotten along the way. See H. D. F. Kitto, *Poiesis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 284.
dialogue, wherein Socrates will discuss the question of virtue’s teachability with Protagoras, the other sophists, and other notables (314e–362a).

A Translation Correction

Next I must identify and correct the aforementioned mistake the literature makes about the companion’s question and Socrates’s motives, for as noted, this bears directly on the rest of the dialogue, including the Hippocrates section. Well into the third section, and at its very end, Socrates tells Protagoras he has some appointment, now long overdue (compare 335c with 362a), and must now depart, leaving the fundamental question of virtue’s teachability in aporia, raised but unresolved. His imminent meeting with the companion is wrongly taken to be a chance meeting, I would argue, because of a mistranslation and misunderstanding of a Greek word that makes it appear Socrates really had no pressing business at all. Translations of Protagoras 310a have the companion ask Socrates something to the effect, “If you are not busy why don’t you narrate your meeting to us,” to which Socrates readily concedes, giving the impression that he had just lied to Protagoras about some pressing appointment. But in the Greek text the companion asks Socrates something very different, to the effect, “Unless there is some reason you cannot relate your meeting, please tell us,” or, more literally, “Unless something prevents you,” or more ominously and, I believe, best expressing the tone of the companion’s question, “Unless something forbids you, please relate your meeting.” The word the companion uses, kōluei, is never used in Greek to ask, to suggest, or to imply that someone is busy, but rather that there is some obstacle or impediment in the way, as, for example, when Parmenides queries Socrates how each idea, being one, can nevertheless be in each of the participant objects, Socrates responds, “What prevents it?” (Parmenides 131a). The more common and conventional Greek way to suggest or imply one is busy uses the familiar ascholia, or ou scholē,

2 Unless otherwise indicated all translations and transliterations are mine.


4 This correct usage of the word can also be found in Plato, Theaetetus (142a–143b, 190d, 209a), Republic (439c–d), Phaedo (108e), and Cratylus (384b); in Aristotle, Metaphysics (1007a10) and Politics (1101a15); in Thucydides (1.142); and in Xenophon, Memorabilia (2.6.26).
meaning “without leisure,” the former which Socrates in fact uses to excuse himself from his conversation with Protagoras (335c), and the latter which the eunuch doorkeeper earlier uses to turn Socrates and Hippocrates away from entering Callias’s house (314d). As to the unmistakable difference in meaning between these two words, “prevent” and “busy,” that they cannot be exchanged for each other in Greek at least, Socrates’s own juxtaposition of the two words in the same sentence provides incontrovertible proof: in the *Apology* (39e), the guilty verdict now rendered, Socrates says that while the officials are “busy” nothing “prevents” him from speaking to those jurors who voted to acquit him. We will have reason to revisit this passage shortly.

Nevertheless, let us assume for the moment that the companion does in fact ask Socrates to relate his meeting with Protagoras unless he is busy. Then it is possible Socrates lies to the companion as well as to Protagoras, or perhaps to neither of them, frustrating any effort to determine if there is a lie or where indeed the lie “lies.” Stated differently, if Plato makes Socrates lie to Protagoras about an overdue appointment the lie is not exposed by anything Plato makes the companion ask Socrates. But at about the midpoint in the dialogue (335b) Socrates tells the companion that Protagoras grew uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation, and that he now appeared unwilling to continue. Concluding that it was no longer worth his while, Socrates appears to fabricate an appointment as an excuse to leave. But where would that leave Hippocrates? Was it not for his sake that they approached Protagoras? Would Socrates be willing to abandon Hippocrates to the wolves? (See *Sophist* 231a.) Moreover, how can Plato justify constructing a dialogue in which philosophy in the form of Socratic testing makes its debut on the world stage by irresponsibly casting one of the city’s inexperienced youth to these predators? Did Plato blunder? As I will argue later, Plato may have had good reason for making the companion and therefore any reader of *Protagoras* overlook the fate of Hippocrates altogether, although he had given us as well as the companion ample warning when he said, “Well, then, listen” (310a, my emphasis). We are on notice: a test is at hand.

For the moment at least, the companion’s opening words, and the inference he draws, one can argue, imply that Socrates is indeed the appointment, albeit a late one: “Socrates, where have you been?” (309a). Else-

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5 See also Plato, *Theages* (121a), *Phaedo* (58d–e), *Euthyphro* (6c), *Theaetetus* (172d), and *Hippias Major* (281a).


7 Contrary to what some have suggested, the companion therefore would have no reason to “accost”
where Plato has made it dramatically clear when a chance meeting between
Socrates and someone else is about to take place: at the beginning of Phae-
edrus (227a) he makes Socrates ask Phaedrus where he has been and where he
is going, implying that Phaedrus is not someone Socrates is waiting to meet;
and at the beginning of the Lysis (203a) Hippothales asks Socrates virtually
the same question. By contrast, the companion does not ask Socrates “and
where are you going?”

A Privileged Audience

Even so, the companion has not fared well by the literature
on Protagoras. But when correctly understood, his “prevent/forbid” question
does suggest a level of intellectual curiosity that elevates his motivation for
posing the question far above those who would discount it as mere gossip or
entertainment value, or attempt to dismiss him as largely undistinguished,
a virtual nobody. Why would Socrates spend time with someone like that?
Fortunately, Plato has provided some clues to think otherwise.

The companion is accompanied by a slave as well as some
others, all of whom have the leisure time to attend to Socrates’s narration.
Along with the intellectual nature of the question this suggests a level of sub-
stance and means far above the average Athenian citizen. Indeed, for most
Athenians, even those with slaves, work consumed so much of their time that
leisure and independence were regarded as “Utopian.” Simply stated, the
companion and those with him are not representative of the public. More-
over, Plato’s recorded Socratic conversations were always between Socrates

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8 In Plato the dramatic action usually takes place near or at the very beginning of his dialogues. See L. R. Lind, “Movement in Plato’s Dialogues,” Classical and Modern Literature 18, no. 3 (1998): 183.
10 Coby, Socrates and the Sophistic Enlightenment, 20.
and promising but often misguided young men (Hippocrates included), or some distinguished visitor like Protagoras, the elites of society, but never with craftsmen or common people. \(^{12}\) With the addressees of *Protagoras* in mind, Socrates’s recounting of his conversations evidently was intended—dramatically speaking—only for members of that privileged group. Nothing prevented him from revealing his whereabouts and doings to them. To be sure, in *Protagoras* they and they alone were made aware of Socrates’s testing intentions. It is only at his trial, many dramatic years later, hard upon his conviction, that Socrates can now say “nothing prevents” him from speaking to the common people, evidently for the first time, to the jurors that voted to acquit him, that is, to the public (*Apology* 39e, the aforementioned passage revisited). Socrates’s whole private and public career was bracketed by that concern. It is in Plato’s *Protagoras* that Socrates offers his first response to it by rehearsing for a privileged few not only his meeting with the sophist Protagoras, but the event that initiated it: Hippocrates’s early morning arrival.

**The Hippocrates Section**

We begin by observing that the Hippocrates section is also bracketed, here by dramatic and comical scenes that distinguish it and set it apart from the beginning and the rest of the dialogue. In fact, as early as the nineteenth century classical scholars had already recognized Plato’s *Protagoras* above all his other dialogues for its extraordinary and skillful display of such scenes.\(^{13}\) Rather than obstacles to Plato’s argument, or signs of his immaturity, I would argue instead that these very scenes serve as didactic rhetorical tools, although their employment in Plato’s dialogues has not been well understood.\(^{14}\) In fact, there is a close affinity between Plato’s dialogues and the works of the Old Comedy masters, but especially Aristophanes. To put it more assertively, Plato’s presentation of Socrates is in striking contrast to Aristophanes’s presentation of Socrates.\(^{15}\) That this is especially true of the Hippocrates section can be seen in Plato’s adaptation of a comical stage motif often found in both Old Comedy and Aristophanes: door knocking.\(^{16}\)

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\(^{16}\) Ariana Traill, “Knocking on Knemon’s Door: Stagecraft and Symbolism in the *Dyskolos*,”
Yes, door knocking. Plato has unmistakably bracketed the beginning and the end of the Hippocrates section with dramatic and comical scenes of door knocking. Aristophanes’s play most closely related to Plato’s _Protagoras_ in this respect is the _Clouds_, wherein Socrates is comically portrayed as a hapless tester.

Notwithstanding the suggestive tone of the companion’s question, the implied discretion necessary when sophists are involved, for the moment at least Socrates’s willingness to narrate his meeting with Protagoras, and even to introduce Hippocrates as the cause thereof, disarms his companion’s concerns, and this despite the impression that meetings with sophists are secretive by nature, most likely shameful, and therefore not meant for public dissemination. In fact, Plato portrays Socrates and Protagoras as being familiar enough with each other to suggest previous but undisclosed conversations between them (consider 361e). No formal introductions were necessary here. And his portrayal of Hippocrates as desperate for Socrates’s recommendation as the best way to join Protagoras also implies some already existing personal relationship between Socrates and Protagoras. But it is only at their present meeting that Protagoras will expound on his openness as sophist (317b), thereby giving Socrates the warrant to reveal without necessarily betraying what is essentially a private meeting. Absent that warrant would the world have ever learned of Hippocrates’s embarrassment and blush at the mere thought of becoming a sophist during an even more private conversation with Socrates?

What Socrates’s narration exposes will not be any convenient or even strategically placed lie, or some selfish concern for his own good counsel, but rather the nature of sophistry itself, which otherwise would have remained obscure had Plato not juxtaposed Socratic testing with these sophists to introduce the _Socratic Enlightenment_. When properly under-

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17 Another door-knocking scene occurs in the _Symposium_ (212c–e) when a drunken Alcibiades and his boisterous group arrive.

18 Lampert, _How Philosophy Became Socratic_, 79–81.


20 In reaction to the sophists, as well as the pre-Socratics, the Socratic Enlightenment can be understood as a movement of “restrained practical expectations,” an “Enlightenment of residual doubt,” and the “reconciliation of man to his cosmos,” without necessarily dispiriting his nobility. See Joseph
stood the companion’s “prevent/forbid” question identifies the antecedents to an ongoing and problematic relationship between the few wise and the many unwise, and how best to address it, here as well as in subsequent dialogues. For Protagoras that relationship is necessarily complicated by the powerful few in every city, forcing sophistry to disguise itself as one among the various arts to avoid detection, a strategy doomed to fail, according to Protagoras (316d–317c). For Socrates, only when philosophers become kings, or kings philosophize, will that problem ever be resolved. But we are a long way from Plato’s *Republic* here.

**PART 1: PHILOSOPHY ENGAGES THE NONPHILOSOPHICAL WORLD**

Socrates describes Hippocrates to his companion as the son of Apollodorus and brother of Phason, and will soon introduce him to Protagoras as coming from a “great and wealthy family” (316b). Referring to one’s brother in a patronymic description is a rather unusual way to introduce someone in the ancient Greek world. It will not be necessary to introduce Hippocrates to Protagoras that way, presumably because itinerant sophists would not be familiar with local family relations. Besides, Phason is not interested in Protagoras. For the companion at least, more information about Hippocrates was necessary to identify him, although members from a family with that reputation should be easily recognized. In any case, the companion does not appear currently informed on Athenian intellectual trends: he does not know Protagoras has been in town for three days, whereas Hippocrates and Phason, as well as Socrates, already know that big event. That some among the privileged class know while others do not is itself a revelation about the guarded world in which sophists must move, and about which Protagoras will presently give testimony. Hippocrates’s good fortune to know may be due to a possible kinship with Pericles. (See note 1.) But the absence of any independent historical evidence of Hippocrates’s achievements, including his brother’s, leaves the impression that the family’s greatness did not carry through to its progeny. If Hippocrates and his family are historical figures, then Hippocrates’s obscurity would be one more example to challenge Protagoras’s claim that virtue is teachable. Human goodness then would be distributed disproportionately by some obscure formula administered by nature, perhaps by divinity, or as we might say randomly or perhaps geneti-

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cally, but in all cases irrespective of family relations. Protagoras will explain it. Can he as a sophist do better? Protagoras will profess it.

Even more remarkable is that Hippocrates carries a staff and uses it to knock rather forcefully on the door early that morning. Although staffs were common male accoutrements in the ancient Greek world, we find only one other reference in Plato, in the *Greater Hippias* (292a), where such a staff could be used to strike Socrates. Be that as it may, banging on doors with a staff may mark Hippocrates as an aggressive type of person, which he certainly is; or the staff may be an aid in walking in darkness, which would suggest Hippocrates is also a dependent type of person, which as we will see he certainly is. To explain his recent absence Hippocrates tells Socrates he had been away in Oenoe attempting to capture his escaped slave Satyros (perhaps because he had been on the receiving end of those strikes one time too many?). More remarkable still, only in *Protagoras* does Plato ever reveal the name of any slave, although unnamed slaves play various roles in other dialogues. Oenoe, an Athenian fortification located on the frontier between Athens and Boeotia, near Megara and Plataea, and mentioned nowhere else in Plato, is an oblique reference to some of the early causes of the Peloponnesian War. That frontier remained disputed territory, and evidently was a convenient place for escaped slaves like Satyros to seek refuge. According to Thucydides (1.139), Megara’s willingness to harbor escaped slaves was a contentious issue for the Athenians.

Doubtless, Plato carefully places Socrates’s dramatic world debut as a tester in the shadow of the Peloponnesian War. His detailed account of the itinerant sophists and other foreigners gathered at Callias’s house demonstrates that traveling between cities was still possible despite growing hostilities. By contrast Plato locates Socrates in some undefined place when he meets the companion and the others with him. And as he begins the narration Socrates does not reveal exactly where he was or what he was doing when Hippocrates arrived. Here the literature on Plato’s *Protagoras* draws two erroneous inferences about Socrates’s whereabouts and

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22 On the use of staffs as weapons to strike someone see Thucydides 8.84; Xenophon, *Anabasis* 2.3 and *Hellenica* 6.2.


doings: almost without exception it assumes that Socrates is (1) at home, and (2) asleep.\textsuperscript{26} Plato however has planted clues here and elsewhere to suggest otherwise. Those clues are revelations about the nature of philosophy itself.

Is Socrates at home? He reports to the companion that someone opened the door for Hippocrates (310b). Someone? Obviously, there is at least one other person present with Socrates, wherever he is. In this context, someone, in Greek \textit{tis}, probably refers to a slave who opens the door.\textsuperscript{27} Did Socrates have a slave at home? Given his vaunted poverty that is highly unlikely. More importantly, that this cannot be a Socrates “domesticated” is proved by considering the dramatic date of the dialogue. Set in about 432–433 BC, just before the start of the Peloponnesian War, Socrates would have been about thirty-six years old.\textsuperscript{28} Some thirty-plus dramatic years later references will be made in the \textit{Apology} (41e) and \textit{Phaedo} (116b) to Socrates’s young sons. (A third son is described as older.) Needless to say, Socrates could not have been married with young sons at the time he met Protagoras and still have young sons at his trial and end of life. With the entire Platonic corpus in mind, for the sake of philosophy Plato never portrays a domesticated Socrates “at home” in any dialogue, although at the end of the \textit{Symposium} (223d) Socrates can be described as homeward bound. If Socrates “dwelled” anywhere it would certainly be in the marketplace, where, in all likelihood, he meets the companion and those with him.\textsuperscript{29}

What about a sleeping Socrates? Hippocrates, who somehow knows where Socrates can be found that early, also knows something about his habits; without waiting to be announced he rushes in immediately as the door opens and shouts, “Socrates, are you awake or asleep?” (310b). And Socrates easily recognizes his voice despite the darkness: “This is Hippocrates.” But to whom does Socrates say this? Himself? To others present?

\textsuperscript{26} See for example Catherine H. Zuckert, \textit{Plato's Philosophers} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 218; and Beversluis, \textit{Cross-Examining Socrates}, 246. Such is desire to place Socrates at home, as well as asleep, that “at home” can mean communal living. See Coby, \textit{Socrates and the Sophistic Enlightenment}, 26. However, there is no textual evidence to support such living arrangements for Socrates.

\textsuperscript{27} Denyer, \textit{Protagoras}, 68.


\textsuperscript{29} Whereas Plato can dramatically portray Socrates physically present in the home of others, here, in Callias’s home, for example, metaphorically speaking, philosophy has no home. Consider the discussion on philosophical sects in Strauss, \textit{On Tyranny}, 194–96.
More importantly, with the entire Platonic corpus in mind, for the sake of philosophy Plato never portrays Socrates asleep in any dialogue, that is, with one exception: only in the Crito (43a–c), where Socrates is imprisoned and “prevented” from pursuing his life’s work, is he ever found sleeping, and even then he would rather be awake. Perhaps we should also include the Phaedo (117b–e), where the jail attendant instructs Socrates to walk about after taking the execution drug until his thighs feel heavy, then lie down that the drug takes its effect, which he does. Here Socrates is really and finally asleep! Until that moment it was Socrates the gadfly who tirelessly and endlessly worked to awaken the city from its somnolent state, much like a large lethargic horse in need of constant prodding (Apology 30e–31b). Thus Hippocrates’s dramatic entrance finds Socrates to be awake and on a skimpous, a small couch or pallet, possibly a bed. It is the sophist Prodicus who will be found lying down wrapped in many covers (315d).

These two corrections bring to light the moral and intellectual discipline of the philosopher as he engages the nonphilosophical world, only intimated in part 1 by Socrates’s deeds, but about which he discloses more in the moments before his execution: that in pursuit of wisdom the philosopher must abstract from the body, indeed, must depreciate the body and all its afflictions that obstruct that search (Phaedo 64c–66b). Does the Platonic Socrates, on the world stage as it were, ever sleep, eat, drink, or have a home? The meal promised in the Republic is never served. And when Socrates is actually shown on stage drinking anything, it is the poisoned drug that ends any and all afflictions his body could suffer. Must we then conclude that the scant evidence Plato presents of Socrates’s deeds as a family man, married with children, argues more for his civic duty than love of his own, including procreation? In Protagoras, Socrates must be somewhere, but he is not at home, certainly not asleep, for no man is worth much while asleep (Laws 808b). It is Hippocrates who will need food and sleep before he can seek out Socrates’s help (310c–d).

If the answer to the question about Socrates’s physical needs—home, food, sleep—is no, or even overwhelmingly negative, and yes to the question about his limited obligations as man and citizen, then with Socrates as the paradigm philosopher before us, in order for us to be both

30 The Symposium (175c) is an exception. There all begin eating, absent Socrates. When he finally arrives it is reported in the past tense that Socrates ate and made libations with the others (176a). Only near the very end is Socrates shown drinking with Agathon and Aristophanes from a shared jug (223c).

31 Cropsey, Plato’s World, 183.
good and wise, virtuous in other words, we would have to reach a state of wisdom or knowledge so pure that the condition itself would be beyond the most elemental needs of the body imposed on us by nature. It should be noted that the battle against those basic necessities contemplates the conquest of nature itself, within human nature, a thought that will resonate deeply among the modern thinkers to come, but which was already known to be problematic in the speeches and deeds of Plato’s Socrates. Although Socrates never offered the philosophical life as a model for society at large, its bearing on the limited prospects of virtue’s teachability here, as well as for the just city in the Republic, recommends a very sobering ethos: that absent any claims to apodictic truth, or precisely because of such claims, the practical human response to them must be endless testing of those claims. At its humanly best philosophy would be that morally fortified human activity in which each of us continuously and endlessly tests the other without becoming dispirited or necessarily collapsing into some form of misology.

Plato’s dramatic portrayal of Hippocrates as rash and impetuous occurs during a time when the sophists emerged to give voice to the rapid changes taking place in long established social and political institutions. As those changes spread the authority of the patriarchic family weakened under the stress. In a dialogue with so many firsts, Plato makes Socrates invoke that patriarchic authority to admonish Hippocrates’s foolish behavior while silently pointing to its weakened condition (313b). By the time Plato’s Republic takes place, the family will have so weakened that only its reconstitution on foundations of communism could save society at large. Here, in Protagoras, Plato makes Hippocrates inadvertently divulge the family’s weakness when he explains why he arrived so early that morning. It was only after dinner the night before, after he returned from pursuing his slave, that Phason told him Protagoras was in town. In other words, he learns about Protagoras only late and intentionally outside the hearing range of his father, who, if made aware of his son’s intentions would have immediately ended the matter then and there with severe admonishments. Fear of paternal retribution prevented Hippocrates from arriving at a more civil time. It would seem Hippocrates’s father, like so many notable Athenian fathers, was so preoccupied with his

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32 Ibid., 182–86.

33 I am grateful to Joseph Cropsey for this insightful observation. As Cropsey notes in his discussion on Theaetetus, “It is Socrates’ purpose here as it is everywhere to teach the ethos of philosophy rather than its doctrines” (Cropsey, Plato’s World, 35).

own fortune or other people’s affairs that he grew detached from his sons and their activities, even their education (see Laches 178a–180b). And what about Socrates? Would he not also be implicated as a negligent father? Yes, but for very different reasons. In the Apology (23c), in obedience to the god as he understood his divine commission, Socrates neglected his city’s affairs as well as his own, leaving him in terrible poverty, and presumably unable to provide for his family, to say nothing about any household slave. So he must implore his jurors to see to his sons’ proper upbringing. If he truly believed that virtue was not teachable, that even the great Pericles could not educate his charges (319e), did Socrates then generate children out of some perverse understanding of civic obligation that looked only to their generation but not to their amelioration?35

But in Protagoras Socrates will invoke family authority however weakened to chastise Hippocrates for not consulting his father, relations, and others near him about his intentions. That reference to his father points to the absence of his father’s influence. The absence of any authoritative fatherly figure continues even at Callias’s house. There Socrates will observe how Callias emptied out a storeroom his father Hipponicos once used in order now to accommodate all the visitors (315d). If the Greek word for storeroom, tameion, can also mean “treasury” here, then Plato has dramatically portrayed Callias squandering his family wealth on sophists.36 And with no father figure present Protagoras will easily claim inheritance of that position by seniority (317c). When all are finally assembled together Socrates will reintroduce Hippocrates simply, without any reference to his father. Only after the sophist’s great performance does Socrates refer to Hippocrates by his patrimony (328d). In this respect Plato’s Protagoras is more radical or extreme than even his Republic, where the aged father figure Cephalus is at least present and involved in the discussion before finding a convenient excuse to dismiss himself (331d). It is certainly more radical and extreme in that Socrates will seriously question what he will take for granted in the Republic: virtue’s teachability.37

35 This disturbing thought would confirm Meletus’s remarkable assertion that the laws and everyone else except Socrates make the young noble and good (Plato, Apology 24d–25b).

36 In the Apology (20a–c) Socrates notes that Callias had spent more money on sophists than all others combined.

After Hippocrates explains his recent absence, and Protagoras’s arrival as the cause of his early morning visit, Socrates observes in him “courage” and “vehemence” (310d), in a quite physically agitated and excitable condition, prompting him to ask, “Has Protagoras done you an injustice?” With the juxtaposition of “injustice” and “Protagoras” Plato makes Socrates invoke the common prejudice against the sophists: they mutilate and corrupt their pupils (Meno 91c). Yes! Hippocrates laughs, Protagoras is guilty because only he is wise but does not make me wise! Inadvertently, Hippocrates raises an issue that is addressed later in the dialogue (364b) and also in the Republic (540a): What obligation do the few wise have to the many unwise? In the Republic the wise are obligated to rule the unwise. But here, for the moment at least, it looks as if wisdom and injustice bear some relationship to each other, and to which Protagoras implicitly points when he asserts the many are just but not wise (329e), but in any case the rule of which would not obviously be in the interest of justice. Protagoras claims to teach “good counsel,” how best to manage one’s household affairs, and how to be most powerful in speech and deed in the affairs of one’s city (318e–319a). Most powerful does not necessarily mean most just.

The pairing of courage and vehemence in Hippocrates is a rather unusual conjunction. In the Republic (439c–442c) courage is easily paired with spiritedness, not vehemence. Indeed, vehemence as the physical and agitated expression of the bodily passions (love, hunger, thirst) belongs to the irrational part of the soul. Having already established the calculating part Socrates then moves to establish the third and last part of the soul, the spirited part. With Hippocrates however Socrates makes no argument about the parts of the soul and how they might be damaged by a sophist. From Cratylus (404a) we learn that vehemence is linked to madness as an affect of the body, both of which are not conducive to virtue. And from Phaedo (68c and 108a–b) we learn that courage is the trait of those who despise the body and live in philosophy, whereas vehemence is the excitement of the passions as the soul flutters about desirous of bodily affections. Hippocrates may demonstrate courage in pursuit of the sophist Protagoras, but if his body language is any index to his mental acumen, it certainly augurs poorly for him as a potential learner of something that may not be teachable but only learnable. Vehemence here seems to play the role of spoiler that spiritedness plays in the Republic. Both are evidently obstructions to virtue’s inculcation.

Absent family admonition Hippocrates will lean on public opinion to defend his actions: “All praise the man, Socrates, and say he is
the wisest at speaking” (310e). Socrates however will undermine public opinion by revealing its inconsistencies, and he will chastise Hippocrates using harsher and more explicit admonishments than he could respectfully use when patriarchic authority was in question. Hippocrates at that point will have nowhere to turn but within himself. And there a glimmer of hope will appear as his unfounded confidence will have been exposed and replaced with the characteristic Socratic disposition at the moment he asks the “What is...?” question. With those stern words Socrates provisionally ends the testing rather abruptly, and suggests instead they now proceed to Callias’s house. Along the way, in part 3, a different discussion, a logos, will command their undivided attention.

But before all this transpires Socrates playfully incites Hippocrates’s impetuousness: give Protagoras money, persuade him, and he will make even you wise. Money is not the issue; convincing Protagoras is, and that is why Hippocrates seeks out Socrates. He is familiar enough with Socrates to mention his escaped slave Satyros, implying Socrates has some ongoing interest in this master-slave relationship. And as witness to many of Socrates’s interrogations he probably concluded that Socrates was indeed persuasive but not necessarily wise. After all, how can someone claiming knowledge of ignorance be considered wise? Lest they miss Protagoras altogether Hippocrates insists they leave immediately. Not so fast, Socrates replies; given the time of day they should instead walk about in the courtyard until daylight, then depart. But why move outside? Were there others inside besides that someone who opened the door for Hippocrates? Or, lest he boil over, did Socrates want Hippocrates to wind down a bit by walking about? If Hippocrates’s physically agitated state is in any way an insight into his moral and intellectual state, then his condition must be repaired before he can recognize and correct his mistakes, in other words, before he can benefit from any instruction.

**Part 2: Testing Hippocrates’s Resolve (311b–314c)**

Accordingly, Socrates reveals to his companion a more important if not the real reason for delaying their departure: he wants to test Hippocrates’s ῥόμη, his might or bodily strength, or what we can call his nerve or resolve. Part 2 of the Hippocrates section commences with the testing of an unsuspecting Hippocrates. We know from the *Apology* (21c–23c) that Socrates questioned all strata of Athenian society to confirm the Delphic oracle’s judgment of him as he understood it. But his questions to
Hippocrates are designed to test his resolve, an unrivaled event in the Platonic corpus; for it is only in this part of the Hippocrates section that Plato explicitly portrays Socrates as a tester of someone’s resolve, indeed, long before the word “philosophy” is actually spoken in the dialogue, in fact, twice only, and both times quite ironically (335d and 342a–b).

Now, in administering a test the tester does not necessarily believe the arguments employed in the test itself (*Theaetetus* 157c). Indeed, much later in *Protagoras* (341d) Socrates will suggest that the sophist Prodicus was only testing Protagoras’s ability to maintain an argument, that he did not endorse any of the arguments he used; and a few pages later Socrates will speculate whether Protagoras was in effect testing him, offering the sophist the opportunity to state his own position on the matter; and in the end an anthropomorphized *logos* will get the last laugh when all that testing has produced an unexpected result (361a). But with Hippocrates Socrates does not test his argumentative skills, but, as is evident from his physical appearance, the strength of his conviction, his resolve in pursuing wisdom from Protagoras. By rescuing an Athenian youth from imminent corruption Socrates proves his long-standing civic loyalty to Athens and his future jurors. But I believe Plato’s Socrates has a more immediate goal in mind: he wants to take the measure of a very ambitious youth and if necessary deflect him from a career in politics for which he was ill suited, but now dangerously armed with sophistic rhetoric if he got his way. Whereas the first reported conversation between Socrates and one of Athens’s youth presents Socrates as a defender of the local and ancestral, the looming presence of Alcibiades (the subject at the very beginning of the dialogue) and Critias in Socrates’s informal circle could only reinforce the fears many had of his corrupting influence.

Walking now in the courtyard Socrates’s testing compels Hippocrates to realize what would happen to him if he studied with Protagoras. If he went and paid money to his namesake, Hippocrates of Cos, Hippocrates would become a physician, or if to Polycleitus or Pheidias, a sculptor. In each case he would pay and become an expert in and practice the vocation of his teacher. What about Protagoras? Besides “wise man” what other name is he called? When Socrates enumerated these artisans to identify their vocations for Hippocrates he excluded the physician Hippocrates and replaced the sculptor Polycleitus with the poet Homer. The addition of Homer as well as the omission of Hippocrates is instructive. By grouping Protagoras with the poets and sculptors Plato directs us prospectively to the *Republic* (595a–601a), where Socrates will assign sophistry to the imitative
arts, far removed from the truth, with Homer himself coming under severe scrutiny for his inability to educate human beings. Of course, Socrates excluded Homer from his first listing of artisans that Hippocrates could approach because he was already dead for hundreds of years. But could not Hippocrates approach Homer through his written works? And to become what? A poet? A good human being? If, as Socrates insists later in *Protagoras* (347e–348a), we cannot question a text, then I surmise that Plato in a mode of self-reflection anticipated how future generations would judge his works, knowing well that if they could not question him by dialogue, they nevertheless could learn from his dialogues to question and test themselves as well as each other.

Responding to Socrates’s question by invoking public opinion Hippocrates says everybody calls Protagoras a sophist. To study with Protagoras then means Hippocrates will become a sophist and practice the vocation of sophistry, a realization that causes him to blush right at daybreak, enabling Socrates to witness his dramatic physical change: from an agitated condition visible in the dim light to shame in the emerging sunlight. Hippocrates confesses that, if it is anything like the previous examples, he would become a sophist himself. Poor Hippocrates! His resolve starts to buckle under his shame as he begins to confront an emerging *aporia*. Socrates grasps the moment and presses on: “before the gods, would you not be ashamed to present yourself to all Greeks as a sophist?” (312a). Yes, he admits, if he must say what is really on his mind. Not just the Athenians, but all Greek public opinion has turned on Hippocrates, the very opinion he invoked and relied upon to defend his pursuit of Protagoras.

Let us be precise on what causes Hippocrates to blush: Socrates did not ask him if he would be ashamed to become a sophist, but rather if he would be ashamed to present himself to all Greeks as a sophist. Socrates knows there are secret sophists, countless ones according to Protagoras (316d). But why is sophistry so shameful? According to Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1128b10–1129a1), shame is an emotion found in the young that prevents them from doing base actions. Why is sophistry a base action and therefore shameful? In the same way that young men can admire the works of Polycleitus and Pheidias, or the products of perfume makers and dye makers, yet no high-minded youth would seek a career as a sculptor or perfume maker and dye maker (see Plutarch’s *Pericles* 1.4–2.3), accordingly, public opinion can praise a sophist’s wisdom and yet still despise his profession. Why? Plato’s *Euthyphro* (3c–d) offers us a clue: Athenians really do not
care if someone is clever, so long as he does not teach his wisdom to others and make them like himself. When that happens anger and jealousies are unleashed, something Protagoras must and will address. The implicit thought here is that fathers prefer to teach and educate their own sons, even if artlessly and ineffectively, with admonishments whenever their sons transgress (Sophist 229e–231a). A more effective way would first remove the obstacles to learning, the greatest being ignorance of one’s ignorance, or alternatively, to know that one does not know, with questions intended to expose to the stubborn ones that the beliefs they fervently hold and judge sound are really problematic or full of contradictions. Once realized a sense of shame overcomes them and forces an introspective eye to open. In effect they are made to participate in their own self-reconstruction, which is to say they teach themselves by internalizing their self-dissatisfaction while simultaneously becoming mild to others, in the event becoming more civilized; all of which could not happen unless some interrogator deployed his art or skill. And what is that art? In the Sophist (231a), with Socrates as a silent auditor, the art described is not the expected Socratic method but noble or well-born sophistry.38

In spite of Socrates’s life-long protestations to the contrary have philosophy and sophistry dissolved into each other? Apparently so if we look prospectively to arguments in the Sophist. But if we look retrospectively to its antecedents in part 2 of the Hippocrates section we find a significant difference. Fathers and sophists alike embrace one and only one mode of correction: fathers admonish, sophists question, both proceeding without additional supplements. With Hippocrates, however, Socrates embraces both methods, an early and tacit demonstration on his part that neither mode described in the Sophist is sufficient by itself to affect needed changes in the recalcitrant ones. Thus, in the mode of the sophist Socrates first poses questions causing Hippocrates’s blush and self-realization of his aporetic condition. An attractive solution quickly emerges allowing the young man to save face, but not without its own consequences, leading Socrates to proceed now in the mode of an admonishing father with warnings of imminent dangers to his soul.

To salvage Hippocrates’s dignity Socrates redirects his ambition away from a career in sophistry, hence political, and towards a nonvocational education “befitting a private and free man” (312b), a liberal education. Instead of becoming an effective speaker and doer in the affairs

of his city Hippocrates will become socially responsible, a good and effective citizen who knows his place in society. What a relief! But this too is fraught with dangers: without knowing what a sophist is Hippocrates would be exposing his soul to all kinds of risks. Improperly taught, not only does the ruling art corrupt the soul, but evidently so does the ruled art when it is improperly taught. The word “soul,” psychē, is mentioned no fewer than ten times here. Hippocrates thinks he knows, but what he says is so vague that it can apply to all artisans: “A sophist is knowledgeable in wise matters” (312c). This popular understanding according to Aristotle can apply to anyone excellent in any art or craft, and he gives as examples the wise sculptors Polycleitus and Pheidias (Nic. Eth. 1141a7–15). Hippocrates tries again: a sophist is a master (epistatēs) at making one a “clever speaker,” an important revision of his earlier statement that the sophist Protagoras is the “wisest” at speaking (310e). This helps, but when Socrates asks Hippocrates what exactly is that knowledge the sophist has and with which he makes another a clever speaker, the young man can no longer say. Hippocrates has now lost all his resolve.

Now in the mode of an admonishing father Socrates reprimands Hippocrates for his foolish behavior. If he was determined to do something regarding his body Hippocrates would certainly consult his friends and relations for advice before proceeding. But regarding his soul, more precious than his body, and on which all his well-being depends, Hippocrates consults neither his father, his brother, nor any of his companions (among which Socrates includes himself), but instead is willing to spend his and all his friends’ wealth to get involved in a relationship of which he has absolutely no understanding. Rather than answer the question, “What is the knowledge of the sophist?” Socrates continues his fatherly admonishments, now in the manner of a consumer advocate: the sophist is a merchant or retailer of goods that nourish the soul, praising everything he sells regardless of its effect on the buyer. When buying goods for one’s body experts can be consulted for their safety before applying or ingesting them. But when the matter involves buying goods for one’s soul a “physician of the soul” must be consulted, some person who knows which goods are useful and which are useless for the soul. The danger is greater here, for unlike the goods of the body, the goods of the soul cannot be examined after they are purchased, but must be ingested immediately, damaging or benefiting the buyer on the spot. The physician of the soul appears to have come to light first as an arbiter in the buyer-beware marketplace of the free exchange of ideas.39

39 On the assent of the political philosopher from an arbiter to a knower simply, see Leo Strauss, What
The knowledge the sophist has, and which presumably would answer the question Hippocrates cannot, seems connected to the nourishment of the soul. Here Hippocrates finally shows some promise in his self-understanding when he asks for the first time the familiar Socratic “What is…?” question: “What is the soul nourished with?” (313c). “Lessons,” Socrates responds, then come the admonishments already noted. Hippocrates of course will have a lot more to say in that undisclosed logos ahead in part 3. But it is instructive that the last words the world ever hears him speak directly make him sound like a Socratic, if a fledgling one at that. Nonetheless, his undisclosed words are about to make him sound like a sophist as well.

But instead of stating what the sophist’s knowledge is Socrates abruptly ends the testing, saying they should instead consult their elders because they are too young to resolve, or literally, to take apart (dиеl-esthai), so big a matter. But Socrates did not engage Hippocrates in making fine distinctions but in testing him without him knowing it. Did he inveigle Hippocrates into thinking they had been engaged in some kind of discourse all along? Just at that moment when a discourse might have started by raising the “What is…?” question Socrates abruptly ends it provisionally by stating they are ineligible to pursue the matter because of their youth. Would a discourse on the question “What is a sophist?” have proceeded differently than a testing that led up to that question? The trilogy of dialogues, of which the Sophist is a part, lies many dramatic years ahead.

Can Socrates really be serious about consulting elders? Would they not respond typically in the manner Anytus did when asked about the sophists (Meno 91c)? Or is Socrates saying there is a wisdom that comes only with age? As we often hear and say, “older but wiser.” If wisdom is a part of virtue and can be gained only through a complete life, then virtue would be in large part unteachable. That would be devastating for Hippocrates, who naively thought wisdom could be purchased for a price. But instead of seeking their elders Socrates announces it is time to proceed to Callias’s house, where they will find other sophists, and many other wise men, all of whom they can consult. Perhaps lost on Hippocrates here is Socrates’s implicit revelation that one can be wise without necessarily being a sophist. With this abrupt turnabout Socrates summarily signals the dismissal of the elders and

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40 In the Republic (328e) Socrates asks the elder Cephalus the only question he himself could not answer: What is it like to be old?
their patriarchal authority. The physician of the soul will not be found within their ranks. If their wisdom or authority is rooted in the supernatural, then presumably the physician of the soul will not be found in the realm of the divine either, certainly not among its earthly proxies. Invoking patriarchic authority while quietly exposing its weakened condition, then dismissing it and its supernatural foundation, is indeed a Socratic tour de force, and a fitting debut for the Socratic Enlightenment in all its implications.

Evidently Socrates had established enough, though only provisionally, through testing Hippocrates that he could speak to the companion in the manner of the Athenian assembly: Doxan hēmin tauta, “So resolved” or “So decreed” (literally, “These things seeming to us”) that they then started off for Callias’s house (compare Republic 328b). Socrates does not explicitly say whether Hippocrates passed or failed the test of his resolve. But the fact they proceed suggests Hippocrates has been immunized sufficiently by the “What is…?” question that any potential danger would be minimized. Surely his high regard for Protagoras has been tempered: whereas before he was the wisest speaker, now he is simply a clever speaker. Besides, although Hippocrates may not know it, we may assume the physician of the soul attends him the entire way. But our expectations must be tempered by the fact that no such physician was identified, that Socrates never referred to himself, to philosophy, or to the philosopher-king in such terms, and that this is the only explicit reference to the physician of the soul in the entire Platonic corpus. Additionally, a physician of the soul suggests that something is being taught, like all the other arts. Virtue should therefore be teachable. But Socrates claimed he never taught anybody anything.

In any case, along their journey Socrates’s confidence in Hippocrates’s transformation may have grown commensurate with his growing self-awareness, a moral and intellectual rehabilitation in him that began where his earlier shaming and admonishing left off. In the third and concluding but undisclosed part of the Hippocrates section Plato provides only a glimpse of that transformation, no direct statements, no accompanying vehement body language or physical change to mark it as would a blush, but in its implication perhaps the most important part, as it were, the peak of the dialogue. And there someone does in fact hear what was said. To that concluding part we now turn.
PART 3: AN UNDISCLOSED LOGOS (314C–E)

Socrates now reports their arrival at Callias’s portico where another door-knocking scene concludes the Hippocrates section, just as an earlier door-knocking scene began it in part 1. He also reports that they became engaged in a discourse about some argument or speech, peri tinos logou dielegometha, that came upon them along their journey, but does not reveal one word of what was said. He does however emphasize something about the nature of that discourse that is most noteworthy: “Now in order that it would not be unfinished, but having finished it completely, we would thus go in, we stood in the portico and discoursed until we mutually agreed with each other.” Here we find the only completed conversation in the entire Protagoras. Unlike the testing which Socrates ended provisionally, ostensibly because their youth disqualified them, and unlike the rest of the dialogue that follows (descends) ending in an impasse ostensibly because of some pressing appointment, Socrates and Hippocrates now conduct a discourse resolved to carry it to a mutual conclusion. Here a transformed Hippocrates patiently stands engaged in discourse, only a door separating him from the object of his desire: no forceful knocking, no rush to enter the house, no body language worth reporting. By this discourse alone Socrates quietly reveals that he ended his testing of Hippocrates on a pretense (see 314b), for otherwise their youthfulness should have thwarted their progress here as before. Did he intentionally leave his meeting with Protagoras in an impasse with another pretense? As I argued before, Socrates’s brief conversation with the companion cannot implicate Socrates in any lie, and there is no other textual evidence that proves Socrates conclusively lies, and only a suggestion that the companion may indeed be that appointment.

With their discourse now drawing to its completion Callias’s eunuch doorkeeper just within overheard enough of it to conclude that here were some more sophists. Notice that Socrates says “We knocked,” but does not identify which of the two actually did, perhaps because resolved as they were at the start of their journey, and now in complete accord, they acted as a unit. Nor does Socrates say whether Hippocrates’s staff was employed, which now seems long forgotten. Upon opening the door the eunuch doorkeeper proclaims, “Aha! Some sophists. He is busy,” then immediately slams the door shut with all the strength he could muster. “We knocked again,” but this time with the door remaining shut a reply comes from within: “Human beings,” he says in a very condescending tone, “did you not hear that he has no leisure?” Pleading their case Socrates says they have not come to see
Callias, nor are they sophists, that they come in need of Protagoras, that there is nothing to fear, and that he should announce their arrival. After a few lingering moments the door opens and they are finally admitted.

Socrates attributed the doorkeeper’s irascible mood to the tedious task of constantly opening and closing the door for those arriving to see the sophists. If true that would mean they could have arrived much earlier than Socrates had led Hippocrates to believe. But Socrates needed an excuse to delay their departure in order to conduct his test. Once admitted they were soon followed in by Alcibiades and Critias, who apparently had no trouble getting past the doorkeeper. Is Socrates’s explanation consistent with the facts? Or is he drawing attention away from what was actually said in their discourse as the real cause of the doorkeeper’s behavior? Socrates also gave the impression their discourse came upon them more or less by chance. But would they have stood in the portico that long to conclude a random and presumably unimportant conversation when Protagoras was just inside? To be sure, Socrates’s conversations had a way of meandering unexpectedly (or so it would appear), with his interlocutors soon discovering they were forced to give accounts of themselves in the process (*Laches* 187e–188a). Did Socrates draw attention to that discourse only to obscure its significance by blaming a temperamental doorkeeper for making a terrible mistake? But even that emasculated servant could figure out they sounded like two sophists talking. Hippocrates, who at first desired to be a sophist by any and all means, then having recoiled when Socrates’s testing exposed the shameful and dire consequences, became engaged with Socrates in an intellectual discourse that, for all their efforts, now marked him as a member of that disreputable profession. If not Hippocrates, certainly Socrates could never escape that moniker “sophist.”

**Conclusion**

In the central Hippocrates section Plato introduced the public persona of philosophy in the form of “Socratic testing,” with Socrates as philosophy’s paradigmatic tester and Hippocrates as his first recorded test case, in order to demonstrate how philosophy’s disciplined calling engaged the nonphilosophical world, when, I might add, it could not otherwise rule it in the form of the philosopher-king. As witnessed in Socrates’s conversational testing of Hippocrates, that persona first appeared as a consumer advocate intervening in defense of a weakened but conspicuously absent patriarchal authority, the latter only to be dismissed rather abruptly and replaced by a suppositious craftsman, the “physician of the soul.” In the course of that
testing Hippocrates experienced a dramatic transformation, proceeding from a nescient knower to an embarrassed inept, then ascending from a self-conscious questioner to a competent interlocutor, the latter Socrates’s undisclosed contribution and improvement over the modes of fathers and sophists. If the outcome arrived at was due in large part to Socrates’s conduct as a tester, then he could justifiably have been identified as one of the teaching sophists. If however the outcome was due in large part to Hippocrates’s conduct as a learner, then Socrates could rightfully claim he never taught anybody anything, while leaving open the possibility that he taught by example rather than by precept, and therefore should never have been confused with the teaching sophists. Knowing the details of that completed but undisclosed logos could certainly help us understand the issue. Short of that, the Hippocrates section did reveal antecedents to abiding philosophical issues that engaged Socrates in his life’s work. But the section also revealed Socrates’s protreptic statement that our traditional and authoritative guides to human goodness fall short by the light that Socratic philosophy casts on them. With the entire Protagoras in mind, Plato evidently constructed the Hippocrates section to demonstrate the inculcation of something—call it virtue or human goodness—just prior to making Socrates question Protagoras and by implication the pedagogy of all the sophists that it could be done at all, or at least by a process fit to be called “teaching.”

If the testing of Hippocrates succeeded in the sense that he is now mindful of his ignorance concerning matters affecting his soul, that before he attempts to rule others he should first learn to rule himself, he is nevertheless more isolated than he realizes. That craftsman, the physician of the soul, may be the one thing needful, but he is nevertheless as rare as the philosopher-king. Perhaps even more so; for unlike the formulaic expression “philosophers become kings, or kings philosophize,” that Socrates conjures in the Republic to describe the philosopher-king, he offers no such formula to describe the physician of the soul, who he is or how he becomes that craftsman. If the prospects for achieving virtue writ small in one individual are so daunting and improbable, how much more difficult would they be to achieve virtue writ large in a city? Is the physician of the soul the antecedent of the philosopher-king? However that is decided, in the immediate context, a logos in part 3 evidently replaces and produces the desired effect that only a physician of the soul or a philosopher-king could if one were readily available. Sophistry may offer some promise, but the third section of the dialogue that follows will put it under such Socratic scrutiny, and end in aporia, that sophistry, like patriarchy, will prove inadequate to the task.
So, absent apodictic truths, Socrates tested, and tested tirelessly: here at the start of his public career with Hippocrates and the other sophists, no doubt through countless tests unreported by Plato, and finally to his imprisonment and impending execution ending that career, where Socrates confessed a desire to test a lifelong recurring dream that set him on the philosophical road, but about which now he had second thoughts as he prepared to enter that other life (Phaedo 60e). If his legal conviction now prevented him from testing others, he could still continue testing himself. “Socratic testing” evidently is the bridge that joins the philosopher’s public persona and obligations with his private intellectual pursuits into one lifelong project.

Perhaps it is only fitting that an aporetic dialogue purposely seals forever the only completed discourse in it, as it seals forever in the balance the fate of one of its interlocutors. By leaving Hippocrates’s fate undisclosed Plato’s Socrates compels us to reconcile the rarefied plane to which human thought aspires with the knowledge that our human nature precludes us from ever living there. That eunuch doorkeeper may represent the extremes to which human ingenuity can devise scientific methods to overcome nature, in modern terms, to conquer nature. But the ancient reports on the benefits of emasculated servants according to Plato are somewhat equivocal (Laws 694d–695c).41 In any case, it must be acknowledged that while the ancients saw in nature the source of our human perfection on the plane of thought, they also saw in that same nature the obstacles to realizing our human virtue individually as well on the plane of politics.42 Diligently pursued “Socratic testing” allows us the benefit of living in both worlds without forsaking either. Nothing prevents it.

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41 See Xenophon, Cyropaedia 7.5.60–64; Herodotus 8.105.1–2; and Plato, Alcibiades I 121d and Republic 479c.

42 Cropsey, Plato’s World, 185–86.
The Book of Religion’s Political and Pedagogical Objectives

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Abstract: This paper identifies and explores in detail two objectives for Alfarabi’s Book of Religion. The first objective is political and aims to reconcile religion with philosophy. This objective is addressed to the political and religious leadership of the larger political community. The second objective is pedagogical and aims to show how taking seriously the claims of religion (and especially of virtuous religion) is an essential component of philosophic education. This objective is addressed to those inclined toward the philosophical way of life.

It is true that a little philosophy inclineth man’s mind to atheism, but depth in philosophy bringeth men’s minds about to religion.

—Francis Bacon

The whole Midwest is Lutheran. Even the atheists in the Midwest are Lutherans. The God they don’t believe in is Luther’s God.

—Garrison Keillor

It is recognized among scholars of medieval philosophy that Alfarabi (870–950), as the founder of Islamic political philosophy, has set himself the task of reconciling, in the court of public opinion, religion with philosophy.¹ This is to say that part of Alfarabi’s objective in his political

¹ See, for example, Charles E. Butterworth, “Alfarabi’s Goal: Political Philosophy, not Political Theology,” in Islam, the State, and Political Authority: Medieval Issues and Modern Concerns, ed. Asma Afsaruddin (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011); Christopher A. Colmo, Breaking with Athens:
teachings was to show how the philosophic way of life is not a danger to religious life and religious devotion, and hence not a danger to the political community. Alfarabi is seen to argue that philosophy, far from being a danger to the political community, is in fact essential to its well-being, and consequently to the well-being of the religious way of life.

The *Book of Religion* (*Kitāb al-Milla*) bears witness to the scholarly insight into this important political objective by Alfarabi (BR, 5–6). But there is another aspect to Alfarabi’s argument in the *Book of Religion* that does not seem to be given due attention by scholars: his attempt to show how the study of religion, the taking seriously of its spiritual and moral claims on the individual, is an essential component of the philosophic activity. Alfarabi is not only concerned with the question of reconciling philosophy with those who are religiously devoted, but he is also concerned with reconciling the study of religion with those inclined to the rational way of life or, more precisely, those inclined to philosophy. Alfarabi has not only a political objective in the *Book of Religion* but also a pedagogical one that argues the need for the study of religion. This pedagogical objective is addressed to those individuals who, drawn to the promise of a rational (and perhaps contemplative) way of life, are of the opinion that the life of philosophy is superior to the...
religious way of life. This does not necessarily mean that these individuals are contemptuous of religion and piety. Many might see the political utility of religion and its necessity for the masses. Some might even see a certain nobility in the pious way of life; but this does not change the fact that, for them, religion is a lie regardless of its nobility, and hence is of no use to them. The *Book of Religion*, this paper argues, is partly addressed to these individuals, explaining that there is more to religion than simply its political utility. Through the *Book of Religion*, Alfarabi illustrates how a philosophy, a love of wisdom, is wrongheaded when it fails to take seriously the spiritual and moral claims religion (and more precisely virtuous religion) makes not only on the political community, but also on the individual. Such a philosophy is wrongheaded because it fails to see the extent to which the individual is part of the political community and part of the religion that makes the community. Accordingly, this philosophy is errant (cf. *BR*, 1 and 4).

In support of this thesis, this paper is divided into three parts. The first part provides more content to the contention that, for Alfarabi, the pursuit of wisdom (i.e., philosophy) requires serious examination of religious claims, and especially the claims of the virtuous religion. These claims concern the divine origin of the universe and of all that is included in it; that the universe is divinely ordered and just; that there is spiritual hierarchy in the universe; that this spiritual order gives meaning to intellectual and moral hierarchy in the world human beings find themselves in; and that the common good and happiness exist (cf. 2–3 with 19–27). This part shows how, according to Alfarabi, the concern with examining religion is born out of the need to understand the problem of virtue, the problem of happiness and its relation to the common good, and the concern with understanding the self. The second part of this paper illustrates how Alfarabi’s pedagogical objective (as outlined in part 1) unfolds in the *Book of Religion*. As will be seen below, the way to comprehend this objective begins with a focus on the individual exemplifying the embodiment of human virtue, real or imagined. This individual is the first ruler of a community, its lawgiver. In looking at the different kinds of virtuous rulers, the reader is directed to consider the problem of virtue as presented through the contrast between the virtuous first ruler and the ignorant rulers. In thinking about the knowledge that the virtuous first ruler possesses and that the ignorant rulers lack, the reader is directed to the problem of happiness and its relation to the common good. And finally, in thinking about the virtuous ruler’s knowledge of happiness and the common good, the reader is moved to consider what makes the human soul whole and complete (i.e., a perfect unity) and what relation this has with the belief
in the virtuous religion. The third part of this paper focuses on the question of the virtuous religion, and what kind of unity it possesses that is lacking in the common religious experience as understood by Alfarabi. This part illustrates how the concern with the question of the virtuous religion is central to the problems of virtue and happiness both for the individual and for the political community. This part shows how, according to Alfarabi, the limitation of the traditional view (the legalistic and theological view) ought not to mean the dismissal of the religious experience altogether. As argued below, without articulating and understanding the question of virtuous religion—as the standard by which all religious experience is judged, according to Alfarabi—political science, the practical approach to the problems of virtue and happiness, cannot accomplish its task.

**Part I: Religion and Wisdom**

The reader of Alfarabi’s *Book of Religion* is immediately introduced to the idea that religion consists of opinions and actions. These opinions are determined and restricted by a community’s first ruler intending a purpose either for the sake of this community or by means of this community (*BR*, 1). What is the relationship between the opinions and the actions? One thing is certain, that the opinions are supposed to give coherence to the actions, for the opinions explain why people ought to do what they are instructed to do, or at the very least explain the consequences of following or not following what they are instructed to do (*BR*, 2–3). As is shown later in this paper, Alfarabi suggests that in general, people practice religion as opposed to living it. This means that there is a disconnect between the opinions they supposedly believe and the actions they perform in fulfillment of these beliefs. It seems that they do not reflect on and do not live the religious/spiritual purpose for the sake of which they supposedly do what they do. They accept what they are supposed to accept and they believe that they act accordingly. Of course, how well people perform what they are supposed to perform is often seen as an expression of the strength of their beliefs. But does this practice, however well performed, reflect true conviction in the virtue of one’s religion? Or is this conviction a product of an accident of birth and excellent performance of its actions little more than blind belief? These questions, and others like them, call on those who are reflective to subject their religious beliefs to rational examination. These questions, which Alfarabi wishes his readers to take seriously, are part of the argument that reason should not be viewed as incompatible with a life of faith and paves the way for reconciling religion with philosophy (i.e., allowing reason to function beyond
the limitations imposed by the practice of jurisprudence and divine theology; cf. \textit{BR}, 9–10 and \textit{ES}, 4–5). But, as will be seen below, these same questions are intended as stepping stones in making the argument to those drawn to the promise of philosophy to become aware of the extent to which the life of faith shapes their own moral and intellectual outlook (and this despite the fact that they do not “practice” religion).

In what follows, this part outlines three interconnected reasons Alfarabi provides in support of the argument that rational examination of religious opinions and actions is essential to the well-being of the life of faith. It also shows, in broader outline, how these same reasons are intended to speak to those who deliberately take distance from the life of faith. In speaking to these individuals, Alfarabi attempts to show them how the search for an alternative way of life, if possible, requires a deeper consideration of the power of that life they reject.

A reason why religious belief and practice needs to be subject to rational examination relates to the fact that all religions (even divine ones: \textit{BR}, 1) have a human agent or teacher as the medium for its message to the wider political community. This human agent or teacher, according to Alfarabi, is a community’s first ruler who prescribes to his people opinions and actions restricted with stipulations. But the varieties of religious teachings experienced in the world indicate, at least to the believer, that not all first rulers are virtuous. Alfarabi confirms this observation by affirming that some first rulers are deceptive while others are errant, and by indicating that all first rulers who are not virtuous are ignorant (\textit{BR}, 1). This doubt regarding the assured virtue of first rulers is an invitation to reason about what constitutes the virtue of the first ruler, an examination that begins with the opinions and actions that embody this virtue (cf. \textit{ES}, 5). But this rational examination of the virtue of the first ruler ought to be of concern not only to those religiously devoted, but also to those who feel distant from the religious experience. At the heart of the first ruler’s virtue, according to Alfarabi (and as discussed in detail below), is his knowledge of genuine happiness and

\footnote{This is the kind of argument that prepares the way for someone like Ibn Rushd (Averroes) (1126–1198) to make the case that the “Law makes it obligatory to reflect upon existing things by means of the intellect, and to consider them; and consideration is nothing more than inferring and drawing out the unknown from the known; this is syllogistic reasoning or by means of syllogistic reasoning, therefore, it is obligatory that we go about reflecting upon the existing things by means of intellectual syllogistic reasoning. And it is evident that this manner of reflection the Law calls for and urges is the most complete kind of reflection by means of the most complete kind of syllogistic reasoning and is the one called ‘demonstration’” (Averroes, \textit{Decisive Treatise and Epistle Dedicatory}, trans. Charles E. Butterworth [Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2001], 2–3).}
its relation to the common good. The first ruler’s prescribed opinions and actions provide access to knowledge about these things and hence a unique opportunity to engage with the problem of happiness and its possible relation to the larger good of the political community.

A second reason for subjecting religious opinions and actions to rational investigation is closely related to the concern with the larger good of the political community and the requirements for unity as part and parcel of that good. Political unity requires religion to present its opinions in a manner accessible to all members of the community. This means, according to Alfarabi, that religion has to use the language of rhetoric and dialectics in order to communicate its message to the wider public (BR, 6). But the best that rhetoric and dialectics provide, Alfarabi maintains, are “likenesses to truth,” especially concerning “theoretical things” (BR, 2 and 4). Accordingly, those concerned about the virtue of their religious belief need to apply reason in order to judge the extent to which these beliefs (opinions) approximate the truth. As Alfarabi puts it, they need to ascertain, through primary knowledge or demonstration, the truth of the prescribed opinions (BR, 4). So it seems clearly beneficial for those who take the virtue of their faith seriously to apply reason (self-reflection) to the prescribed opinions of their religion. But, according to Alfarabi, it is also beneficial for those who, through a measure of deliberation, take distance from religious belief and practice to be more thoughtful regarding the prescribed religious opinions. After all, for those who seek the truth, the prescribed opinions in religion are what they first experience as representation of the truth, especially concerning the problem of the common good and happiness (cf. BR, 1–2 with 11).5

A third reason that Alfarabi provides for the need to subject religious opinions to rational examination is a logical extension from the previous point. Politics for Alfarabi, at least as he makes the argument in the Book of Religion, does not exist independently of religious opinions and actions. For Alfarabi, rational reflection on the one (religion or politics) requires rational reflection on the other (politics or religion); for a man of faith, personal salvation in the world to come requires correct opinions and actions in this world (cf. ES, 1 with BR, 2). This, in turn, requires concern with the well-being of the community (the problem of the common good), which means concern with politics. Put differently, to be concerned with religious matters means to be concerned with politics. If this speaks to the benefit of

5 See also ES, 1 and Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics I.1.
applying reason to religious opinions and actions, it can also speak to the need to examine religion even for those who feel distant from the religious way of life. If indeed human beings are political by nature, and religious opinions and actions, according to Alfarabi, are what makes a community possible, then those concerned with a fundamental understanding of politics need to subject religious opinions and actions to rational examination; for who they are, what they want to be, their likes and dislikes are formed and reformed by being a part of a community that is born in and shaped by the religious view.

If these three reasons—the concern with virtue, the concern with the truth of the common good as well as happiness, and the understanding of the self—fail to capture the attention of those who are drawn to the promise of the rational way of life, then Alfarabi introduces another issue that reemphasizes the importance of these reasons for taking seriously the claims of religion: the proper intellectual and political environment for philosophy and the cultivation of the philosophers.

As a rule, philosophers are not spontaneously generated like weeds. The truly philosophical, according to ancient and medieval philosophers, are a rare breed of human beings possessing unique and singular qualities. But these qualities need a proper environment, along with cultivation and guidance, in order to flourish (ES, 3). This guidance, this cultivation, could benefit from study under the tutelage of other philosophers; through the instruction of exceptional teachers of philosophy; or through reading and engaging with the books of philosophers. But this theoretical instruction in philosophy is not (as it seems) enough to make the naturally gifted philosophical; for philosophy (as it seems) is not just putting knowledge in the soul, but also a way of life that is informed by this knowledge. It is a way

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7 As one would assume Plato learned from Socrates, and Aristotle learned from Plato. Moses Maimonides (1135–1204) was supposedly inspired to write *The Guide of the Perplexed* in order to address the intellectual needs of his pupil, Rabbi Joseph, “and those like [him].”
8 As Alfarabi did with respect to the works of Plato and Aristotle; as Ibn Rushd did with respect to the works of Alfarabi, Plato, and Aristotle; and as Maimonides did with respect to the works of Ibn Rushd, Alfarabi, Plato, and Aristotle.
9 According to Maimonides, it is exceedingly hard to teach others what one supposedly knows: “Know that whenever one of the perfect wishes to mention, either orally or in writing, something that he understands of these secrets, according to the degree of his perfection, he is unable to explain with complete clarity and coherence even the portion that he has apprehended, as he could do with the other sciences whose teaching is generally recognized. Rather there will befall him when teaching another that which he had undergone when learning himself. I mean to say that the subject matter
of life that lives and breathes what it believes or knows is true. As it would be said today, it is not just theory, but it is also practice. And just as studying the books of medicine does not make one a perfect physician, reading the books of the philosophers does not make one a philosopher (cf. ES, 1). Philosophy requires something else; it requires one to live and to experience life, the better to understand the theoretical. It requires, among other things, examining healthy and unhealthy ways of living and being (cf. BR, 14c). What better way, from Alfarabi’s perspective, to begin this examination than with inquiry regarding religious opinions and actions. This beginning is essential, that is, not arbitrary or simply convenient. Take for example the fact that the philosophic way of life is concerned with the question of happiness, and that it even seems to promise the attainment of happiness to those who follow its way. The only other way of life that promises such happiness is the religious way of life. Philosophy cannot be sure about the attainment of happiness without first examining religious claims regarding this very question. In addition, there is the fact that the individual is a product of the political community, a fact that means he cannot be sufficient unto himself, he needs the community for the fulfillment of his physical needs as well as for the fulfillment of his potential as a human being (BR, 13). According to the Book of Religion, for a political community to exist as a community it requires religious covering, the purpose of which is to provide harmony and order (BR, 1 and 2). A religious covering gives purpose to the community and it promises rewards to those who follow its teachings and promises punishment to wrongdoers. The turn to philosophy by those in the community naturally inclined to its charms might very well arise out of dissatisfaction with the religious (pious) way of life. This is a dissatisfaction that might be born out of the feeling that this way of life does not live up to the ideal it promises. Alfarabi seems to suggest that this dissatisfaction speaks to a standard of virtue that is prephilosophic (primary) and is absorbed from the very religious beliefs whose practice one finds dissatisfying. The standard here is the standard of virtue that demands excellence in belief and practice. In the face of what is observed as a disjunction between beliefs and practice in the larger public, this standard leads some to intensify their beliefs (and practice)

will appear, flash, and then be hidden again, as though this were the nature of this subject matter, be there much or little of it” (Moses Maimonides, The Guide of the Perplexed, trans. Shlomo Pines [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963], 1:8).

10 In his Muqaddima, Ibn Khaldun maintains that this is a well-known teaching by the philosophers, a teaching that he finds “undemonstrated.” See Muqaddima I.72–73.
to the level of fanaticism, while moving others to abandon altogether the religious way in search for an alternative that would satisfy the longing for happiness. It is this standard for virtue, absorbed from religious beliefs, that Alfarabi asks to be examined.

**PART II: THE PROBLEM ACCORDING TO ALFARABI**

In trying to understand what Alfarabi says to those drawn to the rational way of life, one needs first to understand how he addresses them. Alfarabi addresses them by addressing the topic or subject that most animates them: philosophy and, most importantly, the philosopher whom they believe is the embodiment of human virtue. The *Book of Religion*, like other political writings by Alfarabi, speaks of the common identity between the philosopher, on the one hand, and the “king in truth,” the “virtuous first ruler,” the “lawgiver,” or the “Imam,” on the other. And so, in speaking about first rulers and lawgivers, Alfarabi speaks about philosophy and the philosophers, and, consequently, speaks to the philosophically inclined.

What does the *Book of Religion* say about the identity of the lawgiver and the first ruler? Alfarabi speaks mostly in generalities regarding possible divine gifts as well as happy coincidences of nature and nurture that make it possible for the lawgiver, the first ruler, or the king in truth to come into being (*BR*, 14a–14b and 14d; see also *ES*, 3). But beyond these generalities, Alfarabi points to two specific things that seem to be necessary markers for first rulers and lawgivers. First, this ruler possesses an understanding that ultimate human happiness (whether for the individual or the community) is politically dependent (*BR*, 1; see also *ES*, 1). This understanding, which is rational according to Alfarabi, is accessible to many rational human beings, but is not enough to make the many potential lawgivers. This is true for at least one reason, which happens to be the second explicit marker of a first ruler that Alfarabi points to: the rhetorical abilities necessary to persuade the political community of what is conducive to their happiness (real or imagined) (*BR*, 6).

Alfarabi opens his *Book of Religion* with at least two intriguing claims. First, no matter how small or large a community—in the true sense of the word “community”—may be, it requires religion that defines its

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purpose to exist as a community. Second, any religion (millâ) worthy of the name has a human medium or source, and this medium or source is the community’s first ruler. From these two claims—the necessity of religion in human social organization, and its necessarily human dimension—Alfarabi proceeds to articulate what distinguishes a virtuous religion from an ignorant one. There seems to be a clear black-and-white distinction between the virtuous religion and the ignorant one: the virtuous religion is one that is established by a virtuous first ruler who understands and knows what ultimate happiness is, and who—through the determined and restricted opinions and actions he prescribes for the community—seeks it as a genuine common good, that is, a good that is truly good for him, as a lawgiver, as well as good for those to whom the laws are given (BR, 1). The ignorant ruler, by contrast, does not know or understand what ultimate happiness is, and seeks—through determined and restricted opinions and actions he prescribes for the community—instead of genuine happiness, one of the ignorant goods (BR, 1). But if there is a clear black-and-white distinction between the virtuous and the ignorant religions, there are shades of grey when it comes to evaluating the ignorant religions. All ignorant religions share the fact that they were established by ignorant first rulers, who are essentially ignorant of true happiness. But these ignorant rulers differ from one another, according to Alfarabi, with respect to two things: first, the end for which they establish religion, and second, the target for whom they seek that end (BR, 1).

According to Alfarabi, every religion, or, at the very least, every religion that forms the basis of a large and self-sufficient community (such as a city, a nation, or a group of nations), has a view of an afterlife in which ultimate happiness can be attained. This otherworldly happiness is what makes possible life in this world. This account of ultimate happiness is always given by the first ruler of the community. In the beginning of this treatise, Alfarabi describes two types of first rulers, namely, a virtuous first ruler and three kinds of ignorant first rulers. In giving an account of these ignorant rulers, Alfarabi states:

If [the rulership of the first ruler] is ignorant, then in what he prescribes [1] he seeks only to obtain, for himself by means of [everyone under his rulership], one of the ignorant goods. . .to win that good, be happy with it to the exclusion of them, and make those under his rulership tools he uses to arrive at his purpose and to retain in his possession. Or [2] he seeks to obtain this good for them to the exclusion of himself, or [3] both for himself and them; these two are the most virtuous of the ignorant rulers. If that rulership of his is errant, in that
he presumes himself to have virtue and wisdom and those under his
rulership presume and believe that of him without him being like that
[in fact], then he seeks that he and those under his rulership obtain
something presumed to be ultimate happiness without it being truly
so. If his rulership deceptive, in that he purposely strives for that with-
out those under his rulership noticing it, then the people under his
rulership believe and presume that he has virtue and wisdom; on the
surface he seeks in what he prescribes that he and they obtain ultimate
happiness, whereas underneath it is that he obtain one of the ignorant
goods by means of them. (BR, 1; emphasis and numerals added)

Of the three kinds of ignorant first rulers, there is one that
uses people as tools by which he obtains for himself one of the ignorant
goods—these being every earthly thing that human beings perceive as good—
including health, well-being, wealth, pleasure, honor, glory, and conquest.
Then there are two other kinds of ignorant first rulers who, when compared
with the first ignorant one, are the more virtuous of ignorant first rulers.
Why more virtuous? Answer: in legislating the opinions and actions of reli-
gion, both kinds of first rulers show deep concern for the interest of the ruled.
The difference between the two “most virtuous of the ignorant rulers” is that
one ruler privileges the good of the ruled over his own, while the other seeks
through his legislation the common good with the ruled. Alfarabi does not
rank the two “most virtuous of the ignorant rulers,” but as he continues his
description of the different types of rulers, Alfarabi drops from consideration
the ruler who privileges the good of the ruled over his own, focusing instead
on the one who believes himself (and is believed by his followers) to know
what is good for himself and those under his rulership—this is what Alfarabi
calls an “errant” rulership (BR, 1). In order to understand why Alfarabi drops
from explicit consideration the second kind of first ruler, one needs to take
note of what else he says about the ignorant rulerships.

Alfarabi began with three kinds of ignorant rulerships,
one that seeks the good of the ruler at the expense of the good of the ruled,
one that seeks the good of the ruled to the exclusion of the good the ruler,
and one that seeks the good of both the ruled and the ruler. In dropping
the second type of ignorant rulerships, Alfarabi leaves the reader with two
kinds of ignorant rule: a simply “deceptive” one, and a simply “errant” one.
A simply deceptive rulership is one in which the first ruler seeks, on the sur-
face, “in what he prescribes that he and [the ruled] obtain ultimate happiness,
whereas underneath it is that he obtain one of the ignorant goods by means of
them.” A simply errant rulership, on the other hand, is one in which the ruler
“presumes himself to have virtue and wisdom and those under his rulership presume and believe that of him without him being like that [in fact], then he seeks that he and those under his rulership obtain something presumed to be ultimate happiness without it being truly so” (BR, 1).

And so, there is a deceptive ruler who does not believe in “ultimate happiness,” but who uses this notion to gain the obedience and service of the ruled; and there is also an errant ruler who does believe in a confused notion of “ultimate happiness,” and who uses it effectively to gain what he and the ruled believe to be the common good.

But where does the ruler that privileges the good of the ruled, as he conceives it, over his own fit with respect to the difference between the simply deceptive and the simply errant rulerships? Since this rulership does not exploit the service of the ruled for the sake of the ruler, it is, along with the errant rulership, more virtuous than the deceptive rulership. But insofar as it does not believe in the ultimate good that it promises the ruled, it shares something in common with the deceptive rulership, although it does so for the benefit of the ruled. Despite its apparently noble objective, this kind of rulership still is, along with the errant rulership, an ignorant rulership. In this kind of rulership, the ruler gives the people something to live for, and hence makes bearable for them the suffering of this world, but he himself cannot partake in this good. And this is, in a way, self-contradictory. In creating the condition for political harmony in the community, the ruler is identifying with something greater than himself, something which motivates him to create a noble lie. And yet he himself cannot find solace in this life, as indicated by the fact that he puts the good of others ahead of his own. He does not examine the nature of that good. Perhaps like Aristotle, in the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he accepts as an article of faith that “even if [the human good] is the same thing for an individual and a city, to secure and preserve the good of the city appears to be something greater and more complete: the good of the individual by himself is certainly desirable enough, but that of a nation and of cities is nobler and more divine.”12 But unlike Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he does not go on to investigate why this good is believed to be nobler and more divine.13 As will be seen next, examining the nature of the good begins, according to Alfarabi, with examining religion.


13 The more virtuous of ignorant rulers is the closest thing in this treatise to Alfarabi’s account of the virtuous person who is part foreign to his ignorant city and who is likened “to an animal that happens
PART III: RELIGION AND THE VIRTUOUS RELIGION

From the point of view of the religious person (and especially from the point of view of law and jurisprudence) religion consists of two clear parts: opinions and actions. This division could be termed the traditional division of religion, and it allows the jurist, for example, to reduce the complex religious teaching into manageable parts. Accordingly, as Alfarabi declares, “the science of jurisprudence has two parts: a part with respect to opinions and a part with respect to actions” (ES, 4).

The art of jurisprudence is that by which a human being is able to infer, from the things the lawgiver declared specifically and determinately, the determination of each of the things he did not specifically declare. And he is able to aspire to a verification of that on the basis of the purpose of the lawgiver in the religion he legislated with respect to the nation for which it was legislated. (ES, 4; emphasis added)

But this traditional division, which facilitates the task of the jurist, also leads to the compartmentalization of the religious experience, creating a barrier between opinions and actions. This is clearly witnessed in Alfarabi’s careful description of the task of the jurist in both chapter 5 of the Enumeration and the Book of Religion (ES, 4 and BR, 9–10). The investigation by the jurist of either opinions or actions—even if he is a specialist in both these areas—is independent of his investigation of the other. According to Alfarabi, to “infer” actions that the lawgiver did not specifically declare does not require a study of the opinions that the lawgiver declared specifically and determinately. In fact, and as strange as this may at first sound, it is not even necessary for the jurist to be thoroughly experienced in the lawgiver’s declared opinions in order for him (the jurist) to establish “the basis of the purpose of the lawgiver,” with respect to the actions “in the religion he legislated” (BR, 9).

Dividing religion into two neatly separate realms of opinions and actions is also what dialectical theology does, according to Alfarabi: “The art of dialectical theology is a disposition by which a human being is able to defend the specific opinions and actions that the founder of the religion declared and to refute by arguments whatever opposes it. This art is also divided into two parts: a part with respect to opinions and a part with respect to actions” (ES, 5). What chapter 5 of the Enumeration and the Book of Religion teach is that there is a clear division of labor when it comes to the traditional study of opinions and actions, as is clearly seen in the division of...
labor between jurisprudence and theology. An individual could be an expert in both parts of jurisprudence, as well as in both parts of theology, but his expertise in any part of either field of inquiry does not depend on his expertise in both fields of inquiry.  

Yet, following Alfarabi’s argument, this traditional division of religion into opinions and actions is contrary to the view of philosophy. Philosophy divides religion, especially virtuous religion, into a theoretical and practical parts—a division that happens to be after philosophy’s own image and likeness:

Thus virtuous religion is similar to philosophy. Just as philosophy is partly theoretical and partly practical, so it is with religion: the calculative theoretical part is what a human being is not able to do when he knows it, whereas the practical part is what a human being is able to do when he knows it. (BR, 5)

In order to understand the significance of this difference between the traditional and the philosophical division of religion, one needs to look at how this treatise first divided religion (see figure 1).

Figure 1: The traditional division of religion

The traditional way of dividing religion into two neatly separate realms of opinions and actions separates opinions about theoretical things (such as prophecy: cf. BR, 1) and about voluntary things (such as the

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14 “If it happens that there is a certain human being who has the ability to do both matters, he is a jurist and a dialectical theologian. He defends them insofar as he is a theologian, and he infers them insofar as he is a jurist” (ES, 5).
biographies of prophets) from proper actions of worship or praise of prophets. It is a division that relates, in the “opinions about theoretical things,” the divine nature of justice, and relates, in “the opinions about voluntary things,” how certain divinely inspired people encompassed this divine message of justice, as well as instructs, in the legislated actions, how the community ought to praise (i.e., value) justice and act justly (BR, 2).

Philosophy, in its division of religion into theoretical and practical parts, expands its practical part to include not only actions but also opinions about voluntary things. After all, these are opinions that a human being can do (i.e., imitate or pattern his life after) once he learns them (see figure 2).

Figure 2: The division of religion according to philosophy

In investigating the actions of religion (or virtuous religion), practical philosophy does not stop at acts of worship and civic acts; it also includes, under this investigation, opinions about voluntary things. In investigating whether actions of religion are virtuous or not, practical philosophy does not stop at what the first ruler has determined and prescribed with stipulations regarding actions, but it goes on to investigate in this relation opinions about the first ruler himself, what is unique about him and what he shares in common with other virtuous first rulers (cf. BR 2 with 14a).

According to Alfarabi, the division of religion into a calculating theoretical part and a practical part makes it easier (in a way) to identify
the part that is fundamental in making the distinction between the virtuous religion and the errant one: “Now any religion in which the first type of opinions does not comprise what a human being can ascertain either from himself or by demonstration and in which there is no likeness of anything he can ascertain in one of these two ways is an errant religion” (BR, 4).

This reading is consistent with Alfarabi’s discussion of the difference between virtuous rulership and ignorant rulership. Recall that an ignorant rulership seeks one of the ignorant goods, whereas virtuous rulership is one that seeks ultimate happiness that is truly happiness. Opinions about happiness, Alfarabi informs in section 2, are included in the first part of opinions, those about theoretical things: “Then there are some that describe death and the afterlife and, with respect to the afterlife, the happiness to which the most virtuous and the righteous proceed and the misery to which the most depraved and profligate proceed” (BR, 2).

But the division between the theoretical and practical parts of the virtuous religion is not as clear-cut as the division between actions and opinions. There is a much more obvious and stronger link between the theoretical and the practical parts of religion than in that division which sees religion as composed of opinions and actions. This “stronger” link is not based on the fact that there are “opinions” in both parts of religion; rather the link is the fact that the practical part of religion also deals with happiness, as is seen in the following description of the voluntary opinions: “Among the second type of opinions are those that describe [exemplary men] . . . in former times; and those that relate what they had in common, what good actions were characteristic of each one, and where their souls and the souls of those who followed and emulated them in cities and nations ended up in the afterlife” (BR, 2).

But why would happiness be such a significant link? In the first section of the Book of Religion Alfarabi argues that whether or not the determined and prescribed actions aim at ultimate happiness is what makes the difference between virtuous and ignorant rulership. And in section 4 he argues that the difference between virtuous and errant religion is based on whether or not the claims in the theoretical part of religion can be ascertained by means of primary knowledge or by demonstration. In section 5, Alfarabi provides more information that is relevant to this question.

Dividing religion into a theoretical part and a practical one is what, following Alfarabi’s description, makes religion “similar to
philosophy”: “just as philosophy is partly theoretical and partly practical, so it is with religion” (*BR*, 5). He then goes on to explain the full implication of this similarity:

[1] The practical things in religion are those whose universals are in practical philosophy. This is because the practical things in religion are those universals made determinate by stipulations restricting them, and what is restricted by stipulations is more particular than what is pronounced unqualifiedly without stipulations. Therefore, [2] all virtuous laws are subordinate to the universals of practical philosophy. [3] The theoretical opinions that are in religion have their demonstrative proofs in theoretical philosophy and are taken in religion without demonstrative proofs. (*BR*, 5; numerals added)

This is what makes Alfarabi conclude that the two parts of “which religion consists are subordinate to philosophy.” According to Alfarabi:

Something is said to be part of a science or to be subordinate to a science in one of two ways: either the demonstrative proofs or what is assumed in it without demonstrative proofs occur in that science, or the science comprising the universals is the one that gives the reasons for the particulars subordinate to it. [4] The practical part of philosophy is, therefore, the one that gives the reasons for the stipulations by which actions are made determinate: that for the sake of which they were stipulated and the purpose intended to be obtained by means of those stipulations. Further, [5] if to know something is to know it demonstratively, then [6] this part of philosophy is the one that gives the demonstrative proof for the determined actions that are in the virtuous religion. [7] And since it is the theoretical part of philosophy that gives demonstrative proofs for the theoretical part of religion, [8] it is philosophy, then, that gives the demonstrative proofs of what the virtuous religion encompasses. (*BR*, 5; numerals added)

What this argument clearly shows here is the centrality of the question of happiness to philosophy in general and to the practical part of philosophy in particular. For although the question of happiness is not the only subject that the theoretical part of religion deals with (in fact it is the last opinion it describes), happiness is the most important question for practical philosophy, since it is the first problem that political science investigates, according to Alfarabi (*BR*, 11; but cf. *ES*, 1 and 3).

The first practical problem that confronts the political community in the absence of a true king is the problem of actions: “it will be necessary—concerning everything done in the cities under rulership of the predecessor—for the successor to follow in the footsteps of the predecessor with
respect to what he determines.” This is the work of the jurist whose main task is “to make a sound determination of each thing the lawgiver did not declare specifically by extrapolating it or inferring it from the things he determined by declaring them and to verify that on the basis of the lawgiver’s purpose in the religion he legislated.” This task will not come about successfully, Alfarabi states, unless the jurist’s belief “in the opinions of that religion is correct and he possesses the virtues that are virtues in that religion” (BR, 9; emphasis added). In other words, it is not enough that the jurist has the ability “to infer, from the things the lawgiver declared specifically and determinately, the determination of each of the things he did not specifically declare” (ES, 4). It is not enough because this inference needs to be informed by the purpose of the lawgiver in the religion he legislated with respect to the nation for which it was legislated. Note that the requirement here is that the jurist be religiously virtuous—not virtuous simply.

Section 10 of the Book of Religion shows how difficult, if not impossible, the task of the jurist is. But even if the jurist, by some extraordinary skill and talent, is successful in his task, it is not clear that the final outcome of the jurist’s work would be optimal for the political community (that it is in keeping with the lawgiver’s intention). That is to say, it is not clear that the sound inference of actions would be productive of sound actions. Set aside the question whether it is possible for a human being to meet all the eight requirements that a jurist “must have,” according to Alfarabi, in order to be successful jurist, and focus instead on what is clearly problematic or unsound about the task of the jurist.

First, even though an important requirement of the jurist is that “his belief in the opinions of that religion is correct and he possesses

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15 In section 10 of the Book of Religion, Alfarabi lists eight requirements that a jurist must have in order to succeed in his work as a jurist. These requirements are (1) exhaustive knowledge of all actions declared specifically by the lawgiver (in words and deeds); (2) cognizance of laws that was first legislated and then replaced by the first ruler; (3) cognizance of the language spoken by the first ruler and the customary ways in which people of his time used their language; (4) cleverness at recognizing the meaning intended by an equivocal name in the context in which it is used, as well as at recognizing equivocalness in speech; (5) cleverness at recognizing when an expression is used in an unqualified sense, whereas the intention of the speaker is more restricted; when an expression taken literally has restricted meaning, whereas the intention of the speaker is more general; and when an expression is used in a restricted, or general, or unqualified sense, whereas the intention of the speaker is what it means literally; (6) cognizance of what is generally accepted and what is customary; (7) a capacity for grasping similarities and differences in things, as well as a capacity for distinguishing what necessarily follows something from what does not; and (8) that the jurist find out the lawgiver’s utterances for everything he legislated in speech, and his actions for whatever he legislated by doing it rather than by uttering it.
the virtues that are virtues in that religion” (BR, 9), as a jurist he has to approach religion as composed of two equally coherent realms that can be equally understood on their own terms. This is why it seems possible for a jurist to make sound inference of actions without recourse to opinions, and vice versa, to make sound inference of opinions without recourse to actions (BR, 9–10). A jurist can be expert in both actions and opinions, but, again, determining what is sound with respect to one has little or nothing to do with what is sound with respect to the other. And so the community of believers needs to trust that its jurists are true believers in the opinions of its religion, and that they are virtuous in the actions of this religion, but that faith and that virtue do not seem to bear directly on the ability of the jurist to perform his tasks. In performing his task, the jurist reinforces the division between opinions and actions.

Second, the criterion for inferring sound actions, according to Alfarabi, is for the jurist to “follow in the footsteps of the predecessor with respect to what he determines; he should not do anything differently nor make any alteration, but should let everything the predecessor determined remain the way it was” (BR, 9). The idea here is to preserve whatever good condition the first ruler has left his community in for as long a time as possible. But this is a very imperfect solution to a very serious political problem. In determining the opinions and actions for a community, the first ruler, the virtuous king, must take into consideration the particular circumstances of time and space within which the community exists—above all he needs to appeal to what the community understands with respect to “generally accepted or persuasive things” (BR, 6). Put differently, at least part of what makes the virtuous religion virtuous are actions “determined and restricted with stipulations” (BR, 1) in harmony with the requirements of place and time. What the art of jurisprudence does is preserve the unity of the community, through preserving the legacy of the first ruler’s law, but it cannot preserve the virtue of these laws.

Third, in inferring sound actions the jurist must be informed by “the lawgiver’s purpose in the religion he legislated with respect to the nation for which it was legislated” (BR, 1). Set aside for now how the lawgiver’s purpose (or the first ruler’s purpose) is not necessarily the same thing as the lawgiver’s purpose in the religion. How does the jurist become informed in the “the lawgiver’s purpose in the religion”? Answer: he comes to be informed in this purpose through inferring it from the laws that the lawgiver has determined. But as it turns out, this approach provides precious little regarding
knowledge of the lawgiver’s purpose as a first ruler—the purpose that determines whether the religion is virtuous or errant. And this stands to reason, since jurisprudence “about the practical matters of religion” comprises only things that are particulars of universals that are outside of religion. So, again the work of the jurist (informed by purpose of the lawgiver in the religion he legislated) can be productive in preserving the unity of the political community, but this work would be a poor substitute if one needs to know whether this community is virtuous. To know this, one needs to turn to political science and theoretical science, for they contain the universals that compose the two parts of religion.

What does political science do? “Political Science investigates happiness first of all.” Thus begins section 11 of the Book of Religion and thus begins the new theme of political science to the end of the treatise (i.e., the discussion begins and continues for twenty-one sections). Why begin with happiness “first of all”? In investigating happiness, political science investigates the ultimate end that every founder, every first ruler, promises his community. It investigates the end that gives meaning to determined opinions and actions that the first ruler prescribes to his community; this end explains to the people why they ought to believe in the opinions they are supposed to believe in and why they should do the actions they are supposed to do. And what is the result of this investigation? It is that, yes indeed, there is such a thing as happiness, but it is if two kinds: “happiness presumed to be happiness without being such, and happiness that is truly happiness” (*BR*, 11). What distinguishes the two?

The latter is the one sought for its own sake; at no time is it sought in order to obtain something else by it; indeed, all other things are sought in order to obtain this one, and when it is obtained the search is given up; it does not come about in this life, but rather in the next life which is after this one; and it is called ultimate happiness. Examples of what is presumed to be happiness but is not such are affluence, pleasures, honor and being glorified, or anything else sought and acquired in this life that the multitude calls goods. (*BR*, 11)

So it turns out that the ultimate happiness that the first ruler promises and for the sake of which the political community exists is otherworldly. Political science takes seriously the claims of religion, and in doing so, takes these claims to their ultimate conclusion. It “brings about cognizance” that, yes indeed, as religion claims, the ultimate happiness human beings seek is otherworldly, that none of the things sought in this world, which “the multitude calls goods,” can bring about the hoped-for happiness.
Having brought about cognizance of the two types of happiness, political science turns next to investigate “the voluntary actions, ways of life, moral habits, states of character, and dispositions until it gives an exhaustive account of all of them and covers them in details” (BR, 12). Two questions need to be asked here. First, why would political science see the investigation of the voluntary “things” as logically following the investigation of happiness? Second, how does political science investigate the voluntary things?

A provisional answer to the first question would be as follows: since the outcome of the first thing that political science investigates was to bring cognizance that ultimate happiness, which the first ruler promises, does indeed exist—that not all rulers are sincere in making this promise, or are misinformed as to the true reality of what they promise, and that ultimate happiness should not be confused with what the multitude believe it to be—the next logical step seems to be to investigate what can be done to produce or attain this happiness: that is, to investigate the “voluntary things” (actions, ways of life, moral habits, state of character, and dispositions). How should human beings act, what path should they take in life, how should they treat their fellow citizens and fellow human beings, and (perhaps above all) how can they transform their inner qualities (malakāt) in order to obtain ultimate happiness? And so, in sum, the belief in ultimate happiness (which political science brings cognizance of) is followed by the desire to know how it can be obtained—the desire to know what ought to be done, which assumes that what ought to be done can be done, that it can be subject to volition, requires the investigation of the voluntary things.

If this is so, then one needs to understand how political science investigates the voluntary things. According to Alfarabi, political science is not merely capable of enumerating the “voluntary things,” but it is actually able to give “an exhaustive account of all of them and covers them in details” (BR, 12). But considering the fact of the seemingly infinite possibilities of what is and can be done, of the moral choices that confront the individual, how is political science able to cover in detail and give an exhaustive account of what seems to be as inexhaustible as the numbers, combinations, and contexts of the individuals and peoples who “possess” and “do” them? The answer to this question seems to be as follows: political science cuts through all the noise and clutter of the plethora of human actions, activities, and moral choices by focusing its investigative energies on that which is much more manageable to study than the multitude of particular actions, that is, by focusing on the opinions that supposedly inform these actions. In other words, political
science investigates the voluntary actions, ways of life, moral habits, states of character, and dispositions by investigating the opinions about the voluntary things which form the second type of opinions specified in religion. From the point of view of political science, these opinions about voluntary things (about prophets, kings, leaders, and followers) are much, much more than stories and moral anecdotes. They are “practical opinions,” the kind that “a human being is able to do when he knows it” (BR, 5). If the first type of opinions specified by religion give the teaching about happiness, the second type can teach how this happiness is, or can be, attained. These opinions about “voluntary things,” which political science investigates, explain what prophets do, what makes kings virtuous, and what makes rulers righteous; how leaders lead to the right way and to the truth—how the past shows them to be all part of a long chain of succession. It describes what they shared in common as prophets, as virtuous and righteous men, and what is unique about each and every one of them. It explains the fate of the souls of these individuals and the fate of the souls of those who set these individuals as their exemplars and guides. It also explains what makes a king depraved, a ruler profligate, and communities ignorant; how leaders lead to errant ways, and how the past shows they all are part of a long succession. It describes what these individuals shared in common as depraved, profligate, and errant men. It describes the fate of the souls of these individuals and the fate of the souls of those who used them as exemplars and guides (BR, 2). Next, these opinions turn to the present and describe the contemporary virtuous kings, righteous men, and leaders of the truth, describing what they have in common with those who went before and what good actions are characteristic of them. And then, there are the opinions that give an account of present profligate rulers, errant leaders, and the inhabitants of ignorant communities in the present time. Then it describes what they have in common with “those who went before, what evil actions are characteristic of them, and where their souls will end up in the afterlife” (BR, 2). Without the study of religion and religious opinions, Alfarabi seems to argue, it is not possible for political science to complete its essential work.

Conclusion

As argued in this paper, the Book of Religion has at least two main objectives. The first is political and aims to make the case for reconciling religion with philosophy. The main audience for this objective is the political and religious leadership that have genuine concern for the well-being of the larger political community. In making the case for the involvement of
philosophy in politics, the *Book of Religion* does not deny the important role religion plays in making possible the unity and virtue of the political community. The *Book of Religion* does not also deny that jurisprudence—the highest political art according to traditional political authority—plays (along with theology) an essential role in preserving the unity of the community in accordance with the original intention of its lawgiver. But Alfarabi, through his *Book of Religion*, raises serious doubts regarding the ability of jurisprudence (and theology) to preserve the virtue of the political community. For this objective to be achieved there is no substitute for philosophy, and especially political philosophy. Political philosophy is needed because it can look beyond the particular laws that the lawgiver legislated—laws that are bounded by the particular circumstance of the time and place the lawgiver finds himself in—and discover the universals that guide the purpose of these laws.

A second objective in the *Book of Religion* is pedagogical and aims to make the case for taking seriously the claims of the virtuous religion. The main audience for this objective is those individuals who are inclined toward the rational way of life, the life of philosophy, and it teaches them that the genuine pursuit of wisdom has to go through the study of religious faith and practice. The *Book of Religion* explains how religious faith is part and parcel of being human and that one cannot understand humanity, and hence one cannot fully understand oneself, insofar as one is part of this humanity, without taking seriously the claims of religion. Yes, religion is subordinate to philosophy, Alfarabi says, but this does not change the fact that the road to philosophical certainty (if possible) begins by examining religion.
Unmasking Limbo: Reading *Inferno* IV as Key to Dante’s *Comedy*

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ut Deus sit naturae artifex, homo Deus artificiorum

I. Preamble to the Problem of Limbo

And if they were before Christianity / they did not render praise to God dutifully (e s’è furon dinanzi al cristianesmo / non adorar debitamente a Dio)

—*Inferno* IV.37–38

Philosophy…whose proper reason is hidden in the most secret recesses of the divine mind! (Filosofia…la cui propria ragione è nel secretissimo della divina mente!)

—*Convivio* IV.30.vi

“Limbo” remains a stumbling block for contemporary Dante scholarship as a whole. At the very least, the significance of Limbo with respect to Dante’s entire *Comedy* remains unclear and controversial. According to the three currently dominant scholarly readings, in his representation of Limbo Dante (1) piously, if only imperfectly, conformed to Christian orthodoxy; (2) irreparably and unjustifiably departed from Christian orthodoxy; or (3) superseded medieval Christianity as a precursor of modern Christian
theology and its concurrent emphasis on “subjectivity.” Yet there are textual grounds to doubt all three readings, even beyond the work of Cantor and Fortin and other “esoteric” readings of Dante as justifiably heretic.

1 Amilcare Iannucci, “Dante’s Limbo: At the Margins of Orthodoxy,” in Dante and the Unorthodox: The Aesthetics of Transgression, ed. James Miller (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), 63–82, attests to all three readings, preferring the third. Iannucci assumes that “Dante uses theology to further his poetic ends, ends which are, in turn, driven by his firm faith-convictions” (72); or that the poet’s “profound faith-convictions” (73) move him to portray Limbo as a “Greek tragedy of necessity” (74) in the context of an emancipating “inspired poetry,” which, de facto, would be replacing Christian medieval theology with a nondenominational, popular spirituality (74–75, after John Ahern, “Singing the Book: Orality in the Reception of Dante’s Comedy,” in Dante: Contemporary Perspectives, ed. Amilcare A. Iannucci [Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1997], 214–39). Dante’s departure from medieval orthodoxy could then be conceived as signaling the “evolutionary” or “historical” nature of orthodoxy: Dante’s departure from one “historical instantiation” of orthodoxy might be in tune with orthodoxy’s own historical transformation. Accordingly, in recent decades, the reading of Dante as anticipating modernity has been given a distinctive “semiotic” (and thus postphilosophical and decisively anti-Platonist) slant, whereby Dante emerges as a poet who, though still tied to medieval theological beliefs, is already treading in the direction of postmodern literary criticism. Exemplary in this respect are Zygmunt G. Baranski, “Dante’s Signs,” in Dante and the Middle Ages: Literary and Historical Essays, ed. John C. Barnes and Cormac Ó Cuilleanáin (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1995), 139–80; Teodolinda Barolini, The Poetics of Dante’s “Paradiso” (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010). Of the four, Mazzotta adheres least strictly to the demands of semiotics, often enriching semiological considerations with literary-historical excursuses. Other scholars, while still reading Dante as advancing in the shadow of postmodernity, emphasize sociotheological problems, or a (universal) “secular spirituality.” Exemplary are Ruedi Imbach, Dante, la Philosophie et les Laïcs: Initiations à la Philosophie Médiévale (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1996); Christian Moevs, The Metaphysics of Dante’s “Comedy” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) ; and, on behalf of a global-historical Islam, Gregory B. Stone, Dante’s Pluralism and the Islamic Philosophy of Religion (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) (after Miguel Asín Palacios, La escatología musulmana en la Divina Comedia [Madrid: Real Academia Española, 1919]).

2 Paul A. Cantor, “The Uncanonical Dante: The Divine Comedy and Islamic Philosophy,” Philosophy and Literature 20, no. 1 (1996): 138–53; Ernest L. Fortin, Dissent and Philosophy in the Middle Ages: Dante and his Precursors, trans. Marc A. LePain (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002). Cantor in particular presents Dante as Averroist in a poetic disguise. No doubt one can find Averroes in Dante’s works, but these notoriously draw upon innumerable sources, making use of them in the interests of a “transcendent” end. Reducing Dante to any theological or philosophical personality is to do a disservice to the inherent vitality of Dante’s works, or to Dante’s capacity to rise above all doctrinal denominations. The philosophical quest for “sources” points to the community of eternal ideas directly, not to any historical determination (Inferno IV.115–20).

3 On Dante as “sectarian” heretic, see, e.g., Luigi Valli, Il Linguaggio Segreto di Dante e dei “Fedeli d’Amore” (Rome: Optima, 1928); and René Guénon, The Esotericism of Dante (Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004). “Sectarian” readings tend to rely heavily on “evidence” supplied to Dante’s texts from without, rather than drawn out of them. The extraneous evidence is then used to link fragments (sometimes solitary “keywords”) from Dante’s texts in order to “prove” Dante’s particular allegiance to one sect or another. In this respect, the reason tying Dante’s words together is fathomed as something in need of being supplied to Dante’s otherwise disconnected words ex machina. Nor is this hermeneutical shortcoming averted by intellectual historians (for whom “reason” belongs to a history, or to “History” singulare tantum) and semiotists (for whom reason is a myth devoid of substance), since in the former case Dante’s texts signify a context their author could not have been fully aware of, whereas in the latter case the texts signify ad hoc only themselves qua bundles of free-floating
Possibly the most vexing question concerning Dante’s Limbo pertains specifically to the status of ancient or pagan philosophy and poetry vis-à-vis the Christian revelation. In *Inferno* IV, which is the Canto Dante dedicates to Limbo, noble pagans including great philosophical personalities appear—in the company of Averroes—blissfully indifferent to Christianity and Christ’s Harrowing of Hell. Averroes’s presence confirms the difficulty of accounting for the presence of Saladin, the notorious opponent of Christian crusaders. To say the least, not all the noblemen of Limbo are unaware of Christianity’s Good News. But in fact, given the stated “familiarity” (132) the philosophical noblemen enjoy with each other, it is reasonable to conclude (as we must, e.g., in the light of *Purgatorio* VII.34–36) that they are all and even all-too-well aware of the Christian context in which they remain “suspended” (II.52, IV.45, 73: it is not clear if the noble inhabitants of Limbo are “possessed by” or “possessing” their context). Yet, as far as we can tell, they are not in the least disturbed by their “failure” to partake in Christ’s salvific plan. Why not? And why would Dante, as Christian explorer of Limbo, not try to convert his philosophical brethren to a faith that might fulfill their deepest longings? Or, if he did make such an attempt—e.g., in the course of his secretive conversation with fellow pagan poets (103–5)—why would he conceal it from his reader? What is more, why would Dante ask the shadow of a pagan “mind reader,” his master Virgil, to make him certain about the Christian faith (46–48)? What could an uncertain pagan, former “rebel” (*ribellante*) against the Christian God (I.125), ever say that would make Dante certain
about his faith? Is the wayfarer’s uncertain Christian faith to be confirmed by Virgil’s reassurance that the noblemen of Limbo are altogether sinless (and thus unneedy of divine judgment), or that the sinfulness that Christian orthodox theology attributes to them is merely circumstantial or “by birth” (V.1–12)? Or do the wayfarer’s interests lie—as he suggests, e.g., in Inferno I.130–35—not in any beatific vision, but in the vision of religious authority’s highest seat and of “ancient spirits” apparently pained by it (114 and 116, anticipating IV.25–28; see also III.72–74)? Is there a significant difference between wanting to be certain in one’s faith and wanting to be certain “about that faith that wins every error” (47–48, after 37–42; italics added)? Is Dante supposing or inviting his reader to suppose that pagan magnanimity may be a theological error that the Christian faith cannot overcome?

II. Limbo Unmasked

We return to Dante’s Limbo by way of clarifying the status ancient philosophy or pura philosophia holds for the Apollonian comedian (Paradiso II.8). In conceding that Dante is an eminently Apollonian or untragic thinker, we have not yet shown that Dante is an essentially Christian thinker.

To understand Dante as Apollonian thinker is, first of all, to recognize his distance from the teaching upheld most notably by ancient tragedians that suffering or pain (pathos) teaches wisdom. Socrates had questioned the “wisdom” of tragedians, suggesting that he understood tragedy better than tragedians understood it (notwithstanding the tragedian’s intimations of otherworldly redemption—as with Oedipus at Colonus). For

7 Iannucci, “Dante’s Limbo” (esp. 68–72) highlights various incongruities between Dante’s “unorthodox” account of Limbo and Christian theology’s “orthodox” counterparts. For instance, whereas according to Christian orthodoxy Limbo is situated in the anti-Hell, with Dante it is situated in the underworld’s “first circle,” thereby remaining formally beyond salvation. On the basis of Dante’s account, it would be very difficult, if not impossible, for theological orthodoxy to justify Christ’s capacity to beatify any soul out of Limbo (as he does in Inferno IV.55–61; see also Paradiso XX.43ff.). Which is more, theological orthodoxy could hardly accept that Virgil departed from Hell, or that pagans remain—not unlike the muse of Inferno II.85–93—eternally unscathed by any punishment. But in fact, on account of Christian orthodoxy pagans should not be in Limbo in the first place.

8 Possibly the closest Dante’s Virgil comes to ancient tragedians’ lesson is his suggestion that divine justice spurs “those who die in God’s ire,” “so that the fear [of God] turns into desire” (sì che la tema si volve in disio: 126). Yet—aside from the fact that here fear, rather than pain, teaches a lesson—insofar as the “desire” in question anticipates the desire “devoid of hope” of Inferno IV.42 (it is perhaps a mere coincidence that 42 multiplied by 3 is 126, and that Inferno III.126 anticipates verse 42 of its subsequent Canto), and insofar as III.124 echoes the desire for knowledge expressed by the wayfarer in III.72–74, it is reasonable to conclude that Virgil is now referring to his reader’s own text-based shift from fear of divine retribution to the desire of noblemen who fear no punishment, properly because they are poetically immune to it (compare II.85–93 and IV.40–42).
the Apollonian philosopher by antonomasia, pathos has at best a merely cathartic function within a broader philosophical context. Pain that does not clear the way for philosophy is senseless.

Medieval Christianity places a “rock” over Socrates, so that pathos is now conceived within the context of biblical expectations. The Christian aufheben of Sophocles and the Apollonian Socrates yields wonderful fruits, though at the dire price of eclipsing the original valence of tragedy and therewith the original problem in response to which Socratic philosophy emerges in the first place. Both Socratism and Christian (medieval) theological orthodoxy agree that ancient tragedy is not the best answer to the question of how we ought to live: the tragic life is neither the best nor the most “authentic” life. Yet Christian theology and Socrates disagree as regards the nature of the limits of tragedy. For Christianity incorporates within its soteriological vision the ancient tragedian’s diagnosis of the fundamental frailty of man in the face of fateful necessity (ananke). Socrates rejects that diagnosis. Whereas Christianity’s “good news” depends upon a special divine revelation redeeming us from death, or raising us into a life of ecstatic devotion (whereby fateful necessity is believed to be one with the unfathomable will of a supremely good God), Socrates’s “good news” is that redemption from death is possible even in the absence of any divine revelation and therefore even in defiance of any obligation to believe in any divinity’s existence. Again, whereas Christianity stands or falls on the Resurrection, for Socrates “the afterlife” is at best an expendable extension of philosophy.

In order to ascertain with precision where Dante stands on the question of the limits of tragedy—whether with Socrates or with Christianity—we must return to Dante’s writings insofar as they provide us the best or most reliable available clues concerning Dante’s understanding of this most urgent problem: how are we to live now?

Dante’s extant formal statements on the distinction between tragedy and comedy are found in Epistle XIII.29 and in the De Vulgari Eloquentia (hereafter, DVE). With respect to its matter, tragedy is “in the beginning marvelous and peaceful, but in the end or upon its resolution it is filthy and horrific” (in principio est admirabilis et quieta, in fine seu exitu est fetida et horribilis). With respect to its style (stilus), tragedy, being the loftiest of poetic modes, treats of the highest things, namely, human ends: of health or the body’s “salvation” (Salus), of the will’s “love” (Amor), and of intellect’s “virtue” (Virtus; as well as of “things we conceive as deriving from them, as long as they are not accidentally defiled”: DVE II.4.v–vi). Where these three
“ends” are hierarchically ordered, so as to signify intellectual virtue Dante will portray moral virtues, which in turn will be signified by physical virtues (compare Convivio IV.17.xii; Purgatorio XVI.88–102; and Paradiso IV.19–60). Yet, Dante left us a comedy, rather than a tragedy. His answer concerning the nature of tragedy is not followed by a formal discussion of comedy, but is his own Comedy, which, however, transcends formal distinctions between tragedy and comedy, incorporating within itself the tragic “style” it formally attributes to Virgil (Paradiso XXX.22–24, after Inferno I.79–87, XX.113, and XXI.2). In the light of Convivio and DVE, are we to understand that Dante’s Comedy incorporates and transcends tragedy by placing the low (means) in function of the high (ends), or by making the low signify the high, if only gradually? A positive answer might be supported by the consideration that the Comedy is an ascent from the obscure wilderness (selva oscura) of Inferno I.2 to the uniform motion of the heavens of Paradiso XXXIII.144–45. Yet the Comedy does not end with the elevation of the low (our “earthly” means of life) to the heavens; it does not resolve the vulgar in the sacred. The wayfarer’s final leap of the will (137–39), anticipated in Inferno II.3–6, is a solitary one that leaves all worldly things beneath itself by conforming to a bolt of lightning (un fulgore: Paradiso XXXIII.141–42), or a sudden recognition: Icarus’s foolish flight/leap (the folle volo made famous by Ulysses) is redeemable if power (posa) is “geometrically” transferred from the lofty imagination (l’alta fantasia: 142) or the hope of heights (Inferno I.54) to virtue or the desire of heights (compare Paradiso XXXIII.142–45 and Inferno II.10–12, 127–38).

Dante as new Daedalus succeeds geometrically or through poetic calculation in overcoming the distance between the means and ends of life, and thus in “measuring” the distance between the circumference of the universe and its center (133–48). The distance between the human painted effigy (131) and its natural “background”—or the one between the nobile castello and “the other side” of the darkness it is seemingly buried in—is physically unconquerable, but it may be occupied, not collapsed, by the poet’s virtue—his strength of mind, tying the means of understanding to the understanding simpliciter. Making oneself eternal “in this life” is not an impossible task.9

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9 In Inferno XV, Brunetto Latini—whom the wayfarer hails as “the dear and good paternal image” of the man who, “in the world” in time, used to teach his spiritual son how man can make himself eternal (83–85; compare XXIII.37–39, where Virgil is “mother”)—claims to live beyond his bodily death in his book, entrusted as “Treasure” (precious not merely as per its title) to Dante, suggestively so that the wayfarer may win the war against death (II.4) beyond all nominal appearances (XV.85, 119–20, 124 and XVI.22–27). Cantor, “Uncanonical Dante,” 145–46, proposes that for Dante, after Averroes, we have access to eternity in the sense that, in reading dead men’s books, we can enter into dialogue
The problem of tragedy intimated in the very first Canti of the *Comedy*, most notably in relation to eternal damnation (our “second death,” or *seconda morte*), finds a preliminary, if only tacit, extended treatment in *Inferno* IV. Here, Dante encounters noblemen or *viri* who respond to the description the Florentine gives in *DVE* of tragic poets. These poets do not appear to be “tragic” with respect to their proper “matter,” but with respect to the “matter” or obscurity in which they are “suspended,” or “lost” (*perduti*: 41 and 80, after I.54), though they remain overtly indifferent to or unmoved by it. In all other respects, the noblemen that Dante “finds” in Limbo are neither tragic nor Christian. We begin to learn of them where the *Comedy*’s wayfarer (Dante’s self-transposition into the “wild wilderness” or *selva selvaggia* of his poem) indicates that

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based on listening
  there never was a lamentation if not of sighs
  which made the air eternal tremble;
  and that came about from pain without martyrs’ torments,
  which had the swirling crowds, which were many and grand,
  of infants and of females and of noblemen.
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*(Inferno* IV.25–30)

We find ourselves in an abysmal valley (*valle d’abisso*) that “was both obscure and deep, and cloudy” (*oscura e profonda era e nebulosa*: 10). In abysmal darkness nothing can be discerned by mere sight (11–12), so that we remain in effect blind and consequently easily mistaken with regard to appearances (13–21). Most importantly, the wayfarer fails to distinguish infants and females from noblemen, prompting Virgil—whose will (*volere*) is by now one with that of his student (II.139–40)—to voice his will (*vo’*) that Dante know and be aware of his right to know (31–33) the distinction between infants and females, on the one hand, and noblemen, on the other (anticipating the distinction intimated in 62–63 between sacred and vulgar history).

We are reminded obliquely of a passage from Dante’s *DVE* (II.7.ii), where the poet calls for discerning the “virile”/“virtuous” words of noblemen from the “smoky”/“superficial” words of infants and females (not properly *ladies* or *noblewomen*): only the first of the three have real depth; they alone do not disappoint our loftiest expectations. Accordingly, though all of the people who would seem to be visually indistinguishable from each

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with them concerning permanent problems. In this context—Cantor contends—we are to understand the “eternal” condition of the noble inhabitants of Dante’s Limbo.
other (25 after 13) in the swirling crowds or vortexes (turbe) of Limbo “are sinless”—in the respect that they now appear to have lived in a “wilderness” or selva outside of the bonds of sacred law (34, 65–66)—one significant distinction may be gleaned from Virgil’s account (whereby “night vision” is made possible via poetic speech, or by attending to the “long” sense of words; cf., e.g., 19–24 and 67–69): whereas, as far as we can tell and notwithstanding the theological expectations of Christian orthodoxy, the infants and females of Dante’s Limbo died simply unbaptized before Christianity (comparing 37, 62–63, and III.7), the noblemen of Limbo died outside of Christianity’s sacred history and indifferent to any Christian obligation to adore a divinity (34–38; compare 129). Among these noblemen, not in the company of religiously pious pagan “females”—yet neither in the absence of noblewomen (121–28)—stands “suspended” Virgil himself (37–42).

Had Limbo’s noblemen died under Christianity, their “reward” in the underworld would have been filled with martyrs’ torments (28), since with the advent of Christianity the conditions for salvation from the “blind world” (cieco mondo) of anonymity (compare 13 and III.32–42) have become more stringent than in classical antiquity, when one could be rewarded with renown simply by poetically or outwardly adoring or “singing the lauds of” a divinity, no matter how false and deceitful (compare I.71–75 and IV.38). To be baptized under Christianity is to be “submerged” by Christianity’s waters:10 it is not merely to be obliged to sing the lauds of a divinity according to pagan norms, but to believe what one sings (where the “adorar debitamente a Dio” of verse 38 entails a bondage of mente/mind to debito/debt), or to love the object of one’s divining praise.

Unlike weeping and hapless infants and females (26–27), noblemen such as Virgil—men who lived outside of Christianity—are “found lost” in Limbo not merely because they were not baptized, but because they did not bow to any obligation to adore a divinity in their heart: they remain extraneous or no more than peripheral to any sacred history (52–63). As heroes extolled by poetic lore (cf., e.g., 130–33 and 123 after I.71), Limbo’s “great spirits” (spiriti magni: 119 after 32), both noblemen and noblewomen, would seem to be especially fortunate to have defied religious authorities outside of Christian theologians’ jurisdiction. For now and eternally, their defiance may be excused by the fact that it was directed at “false and deceiving Gods” (including “in part” Saladin’s unnamed Allah: 129). Indeed, who

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could be justly expected to love a false and deceiving God? Yet even if a rebellion had been waged, as it was by Virgil, against the emperor of the heavens (I.124)—i.e., Fortuna (cf. VII.73–96)—it would have remained artfully, not to say Averroistically, covert (compare IV.51, 144, VII.91–93, and I.119–21), taking advantage of the Christian belief that its enactors did not “know” the God against whom they rebelled (131). Their supposed ignorance would not suffice to save them, but it would to convince God to leave them alone.

Christian authorities “grant” Virgil the liberty of living eternally the philosophical life of desire devoid of hope (IV.42)—of a desire for eternity independent of any special revelation or divine gift—as long as it won’t interfere with the demand placed upon us in a Christian Age to privately believe beyond doubt what we may otherwise reluctantly profess in public (36 and 48). Yet Dante or Dante’s God raises Virgil to transcend the limits of Limbo. If only tacitly and indirectly, and thus covertly—though also and most importantly, providentially—the pagan does interfere with the demands placed by Christian orthodoxy upon ancient philosophical poetry. He does so at first by rising above the contents of poetic lore (including philosophers’ theological personae), and in this respect by regaining the honor of “metaphysical” poets who, thanks to their “mode” of being (75), are capable of walking on water with ease (108–9) or of rising with equal ease to the heavens of the mind—“in a locus open, luminous and lofty” whence the contents of the poetic mind may be contemplated with ease, or even ecstatically (compare 80–81, 94–96, 108–9, 115–20).

Followed by his Florentine student, Virgil regains his place above the one reserved for him in a Christian context, not in spite of, but by taking advantage of, his Christian fame. In Dante’s “life” (77), Virgil is renowned in the company of the “great shadows” or grand’ ombre of four ancient poets (80–81, 83): sovereign sword-yielding Homer, “another” Horace characterized as satire, Ovid being “third,” and Lucan who is “last” (86–90). Our wayfarer acquires a distinct vision of these “four great shadows” upon hearing from Virgil that the honorable people the Florentine had already “discerned in part” (71) as many (74) are “the one honored famed people” (l’onrata nominanza: 76, after 72 and anticipating 92).

III. The onrata nominanza and its context

Dante’s Limbo is a twofold world characterized by a distinctive chiaroscuro, where poetry marks the divided line between the quiet light of contemplation and the “trembling” darkness of religious fear (68–69, 82,
150–51; compare I.19–21). The Canto or enchanting “song” (canzone, as the cantio of the DVE) Dante dedicates to Limbo is Inferno IV and cardinal to our accessing the luminous dimension of Limbo is the onrata nominanza—four great poetic shadows that speak as one “beautiful school” (83, 92–95). Their images are unified “nominally” (nel nome) through a “lonesome voice” (voce sola) in the respect that they emerge on one poetic way or in a heavenly mental image or poetic mind that Dante “sees” above distinctions (91–96; compare 78, 115–17 and 1–6). No less than Dante’s own persona “at war” (II.3), the images of “the beautiful school” are unified in writing in Dante’s own unerring poetic mind (I.86, II.76; compare Vita Nuova XXV.8): not the persona or ego of the wayfarer, but its authorial, impersonal mind is the unifying form of the Comedy’s poetic journey (compare II.6 and IV.145); in the poetic or active mind alone do speech and image, or hearing and seeing, coincide (II.5–8, IV.147). For the human mind—no less than the Logos or visibile parlare of Purgatorio X—is capable of “writing” on two registers at once, making us “hear” what we “see” by speaking within itself (103–5, after 51). This way, speech is the articulation of an image that ultimately is the mind itself—a form that “speaks” tacitly or in silence.

The images of Dante’s poetic mind give authority or nominal honor to Dante qua image or appearance of intellectual virtue (97–100, after I.82 and 86–87; II.9–12; see also IV.131–33). The honor that belongs to the mind beyond the confines of the luminous aura of authority is attributed to the mind’s persona within those same poetic confines. In Inferno IV, this persona is raised by its own mind’s provisional images of authority, from “sixth” or last place (102)—where sovereign Homer is apparently, though not literally “first”—to “second” according to Virgil’s prediction on account of which Virgil himself “shall be first” (15; compare 95–96 and I.86–87; on sovereignty, see IV.46 and 88). But Virgil’s literal prediction falls short of Dante’s own prediction or prophecy, so that just as the “Saturnine” Virgil of the Aeneid replaces the “Jovial” Homer11 as “lord of the highest song” (segnor de l’altissimo canto), so does Dante’s “comedy” replace—or revive—Virgil’s philosophical “tragedy” (comparing the scienzia e arte of 73 and the scientia et ingenium of DVE II.1.viii) by drawing “the highest” out of “the lowest”—as lux ex tenebris or ex fulgore (69–72): the last shall be first in the process of reconciling all.12

11 For an extended examination of this conscious replacement, see Jacob Klein, “On Dante’s Mount of Purgation,” Cesare Barbieri Courier 7, no. 2 (Spring 1965): 24–33.

12 The need for “reconciliation” is bespoken by Dante’s selection of poetic authors. While Virgil tries to replace mythical Homer as supreme guide in practical or political life, Horace, best known to
It is through ancient poetry as converging in the person of Virgil that Dante’s poetry rises outside of ancient poetry’s jurisdiction as celebrated by Christian theology (150–51 after 77). But first poetry must return to itself, if only provisionally, by way of reminding us of its ancient abode. Followed by his faithful student, Virgil returns among the authoritative shadows of ancient poets by way of reacquiring the authority or autonomy he had apparently lost, or that he had lost in the eyes of many (compare I.30, 60–63). As an early commentator of the Comedy suggested in reference to Virgil, “departed was his shadow from the memory of peoples, and now in [Canto IV] it returns” (partita era la sua ombra de la memoria de le genti, e ora per questo libro vi torna).

By serving the interests of Dante’s quest, Virgil returns—if only briefly—to “ownership” of his poetic voice, having long been reduced to a “famous sage” (famoso saggio) in the Christian context against which he had previously rebelled (I.89, 125). Virgil’s “return” to Limbo is qualified by poetry itself as a reuniting with poetry’s self-ownership or lofty authority, even above the nominal honor or fame (74, 76, 115) that “separates” (diparte) great poetic personalities from “other” lesser poets who honor them (75, after I.82). The great shadows of fame are thus separated in accordance with the loftiest poet’s monarchic desire, insofar as it ascends above poetic images to rule them from the heavens of a sovereign mind (IV.93–96, anticipating
Dante’s soaring, in 115–20, to contemplation, or inward vision, or vision of the contents of the poetic mind).

The world over which great ancient poets have jurisdiction appears as a fresh, green pasture (111)—clear echo of Virgil’s Elysian Fields—within a circular cosmos reminiscent in structure of its Christian counterpart (Paradiso XXII.134, 148): the latter’s “seven spheres” echo the seven circulations of “lofty walls” around the former (Inferno IV.107). But whereas the Christian paradise appears outside of darkness, the ancient or pagan garden is now hidden within darkness, “defended around by one beautiful stream” (difeso intorno d’un bel fiumicello: 108), namely the stream of poetic verses. The valence of “seven” must then be twofold—in one case pointing “outwardly” or physically, whereas in a properly poetic manner or “mode,” pointing “inwardly” to the realm of ancient poetry. Yet upon “poetically” entering the “noble castle” (nobile castello: IV.106) of Limbo, the Comedy’s wayfarer finds himself on a stage enabling him to ascend above it so as to behold the realm of poetry as a whole. Dante’s mind takes precedence over Virgil’s persona (and through him, over all six exponents of Limbo’s onrata nominanza, including Virgil and his student) as true “eagle” of poetic legislation (95–96 and DVE II.4.xi)—anticipating the monarchic, “earthly” Latin “M” (the emme at the end of a Latin terram anticipating the “vernacular” terra of Paradiso XXVII.140) that in Paradiso XVIII.93 Dante’s own intervention, or its “true fruit” (vero frutto: 148, after 126 and anticipating XXVIII.87), is to come prior to the nominal replacement of spring by January, reversing an error of the past (compare XVIII.91–93, 113, and XXVII.142). On the basis of this error, or erring from the “right” (diretta: 147) way, false promises of salvation (XVIII.127–32) obscure our natural endowments and physical rewards through a perverted reading of religious authority as inimical to our desire’s genuine flourishing (133–36; compare 129). Dante’s intervention is to restore a right understanding of religious authorities before the Church’s “false fruit” succeeds in obscuring spring altogether, or in misleading us into mistaking an “ill example” (malo esempio: 126) for poetry’s true spring (as the “mind” of 118).


15 See Fortin, Dissent and Philosophy in the Middle Ages, 137.
In Dante’s poetic context, all of our “sins” (**peccata**)—the “seven **Ps**” of **Purgatorio IX.112**—serve providentially as “seven doors” (**sette porte**) through which we may access poetry’s green pastures (**in prato di fresca verdura: Inferno IV.111**), if only to rise above them as self-moving authors (compare 115–17 and **Paradiso XVIII.109–11, 118**; compare further 107–8 and 35–36: whereas the seven “pagan” doors of Limbo are above water or on “the other side” of water, baptism, being the sole “door” to the Christian faith, is by definition underwater or submerged). Likewise, the legal “sacred history” of Christianity introduced by **hearsay** in **Inferno IV.52–63**—a history beginning from one first father alone and ending with many who are made blessed (55 and 61)—serves as prelude for the **vision** (119 after 32) of a poetic soteriology that is only in part related to the Bible (129) and that begins **physically** with a woman in the company of many (121) and ascends, through those who battle with a sword (as in **Purgatorio XVIII.127**) for a peace and liberty (**Inferno IV.125–27**) occasionally by women (128),¹⁶ to the seat of philosophy (where the couple “Socrates and Plato” stands in Dante’s own vision—**vid’ iō Socrate e Platone**—as regal-Homer’s philosophical counterpart: 134–44). Whereas “sacred history,” through law and obedience (57), ends in the gift of bliss (61), the “vulgar history” of paganism ends ostensibly in Averroës’s making of “the great commentary” to Aristotle, the philosopher who is

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¹⁶ Verse 128 lists four ancient Roman women (**not mere females**) renowned for their civil virtue: (1) Lucretia, whose honorable suicide moved Lucius Brutus to found the Roman Republic by exiling Lucretia’s rapist and overthrowing his father, the tyrant Tarquinius Superbus; (2) Julia, who, as long as she lived, stood in the way of a military confrontation between her father Caesar and her husband Pompey; (3) Marcia, known for her faithfulness to her husband, Cato Uticensis (the notoriously honest Stoic statesman who, as staunch republican, had opposed Caesar and who, in **Convivio IV.28.xx**, is likened to the biblical God); (4) Cornelia, daughter of Scipio the African and mother to the liberal statesmen Gaius and Tiberius Gracchus (as a widow, Cornelia befriended philosophers). Prior to verse 128, we hear of three other women—matriarch Electra (121), princess Camilla (124 after I.107) and the Amazon queen, Pantaclipa (124): the first stands at the beginning of a history of conflicts beginning with Troy and ending in armed and lonesome Caesar’s rapaciousness; the second and third women appear in the same verse, before a king (Latinus) sitting with his daughter Lavinia (anticipating Aristotle’s “sitting” in a family setting), who was to become Aeneas’s last wife and mother to his son Silvius, through whom would extend the authoritative lineage leading to Caesar. Thus are made manifest the heterogeneous sources of empire, but also two modes of governance, that of the tyrant (who violates or attempts to overcome nature) and that of the monarch proper (intimating the proper seat of philosophy). Accordingly, verse 128’s final “lineup” of women includes Caesar’s daughter Julia, seemingly cut off from her father and following the appearance of “that Brutus who hunted [away]” the tyrant Tarquinius (127; echoing the “greyhound” that in I.109 “shall hunt [away]” the “she-wolf”). Does Caesar (who was murdered by **another Brutus**) stand as a tyrant replacing earlier “natural-monarchic” rule, which in turn anticipates a philosophical rule? Is the Roman Empire an obstacle obscuring the **natural** nexus Monarchy-Philosophy? The fact that none of the women **named** in **Canto IV** would count as mere females (30) suggests that what in a **Christian theological context** may appear as the vortex of nature (25–30, after III.106–20), in the **context of Virgilian poetry** is a **civil world** well ordered to philosophy (IV.121–32). Yet, in **Dante’s context**, the first context serves as occasion for the recovery of a proper understanding of Virgil’s context (III.126).
everywhere honored in the Middle Ages as “the master of those who know” (’l maestro di color che sanno: 131).17

Dante’s emphasis on Aristotle’s notorious designation calls to mind Dante’s own adoption of Virgil as master of someone who does not know, or at least of someone who pretends not to know (as Socrates), or of someone who credits others for his own knowledge (as Plato). It is in the context of Dante’s own “Virgilian” journey that Aristotle sits in a philosophical family (seder tra filosofica famiglia: 132, mirroring the sedea of an ancestral king in 125–26), rather than soaring above it. And though we read that “all admire him and all do him honor” (tutti lo miran, tutti onor li fanno) in the respect that, somehow, they all “comment” upon him (comparing the fatto of 133 and the feo of 144), Dante spends no time admiring or honoring Aristotle, but at once departs from all of the Stagirite’s “admirers,” led by his own master, Virgil, “through another way” (per altra via), to explore the darkness in which the idyllic scene of Canto IV is cast.18

Virgil’s tacit primacy, not only over Homer, but over all other poetic great personalities, including those of statesmen and philosophers, is made manifest in an action allusively, even cryptically, anticipated in speech,
when Virgil himself warns his student that the master “shall be first” and the student “second” (io sarò primo, e tu sarai secondo: 15). The closing verses of Canto IV confirm to the reader that Virgil’s warning was correct: Dante shall indeed follow his “wise leader” (savio duca). But how we are to understand the mode of Dante’s following is a problem the answer to which is articulated throughout Canto IV, or after Virgil’s initial prophecy. If Virgil as philosophical poet tacitly replaces the prephilosophical poet Homer, is Dante to follow or imitate his teacher by replacing philosophy with a postphilosophical poetry, or Christian theology? Our reading suggests otherwise, since in Canto IV, not to speak of the Comedy as a whole, the theological context of Christian orthodoxy, or more simply the God of Christianity, is replaced by Dante’s own mind as distinguished from Dante’s personality or his personal soul. To be sure, in ascending to the heavens of his poetic or active mind (in Aristotelian terms, a nous poiētikos), our wayfarer leaves out the whole sacred history of Christianity. What Dante’s mind contains here is merely a “wild” history—a veritable spiritual wilderness (selva...di spiriti spessi: 66)—that begins with myth and ends with philosophy, or rather with Averroes’s “great commentary” on the supposedly greatest philosopher (or even with philosophy in the context of poetry, or with a memory of the philosophical life). Yet Dante’s “omission” serves as convenient occasion for a return to “sacred history,” which, considered from within Limbo, appears or disappears in the dark, obscured in or by religious fear (150–51). If Dante is to succeed in his original intent (primo proposto) to rise as a lonesome philosophical counterpart of Saladin (compare II.3–4 with IV.129) from a wilderness (selva) obscured in its sacred valence to Apollonian heavens (I.2, 29, 35–41, 54, 60; II.134–38), then Virgil’s “mode” or poetic “style” (stilo), which Dante takes for himself (86–87), and which entails a “turn” from prephilosophical poetry to philosophical poetry or poetry moved by philosophy, may help the author of the Comedy lead the way in turning back to philosophy by drawing “sacred history” under the jurisdiction of a human nous poiētikos. “Philosophy regained” rebels against its segregation and alienation from the sacred, by advancing outside of its glorious strictures, to examine the deepest mysteries of the Christian faith (as our wayfarer does most notably in Paradiso XXXIII). Yet first Dante must somehow justify his quest in the face of a postphilosophical poetry that denies him rational access to the contents of faith, and that goes as far as to invite us to forsake doubt-open-to-truth and bow fatalistically before fearsome appearances (XX.86–93, XXI.142, and XXII.1, 27; compare Inferno III.94–108 and Purgatorio XVI.88–102). Our incapacity to rise above the sacred, as we can above the vulgar or profane, is no proof of our incapacity to probe the
sacred.19 Considered as a whole, the *Comedy* itself serves as justification for Dante’s endeavor, as for the philosophical life he chose to live (as per his 1315 *Epistle* XII, inter alia), in spite of the many religious men who would want to make nonphilosophical use of philosophy (*Convivio* III.11.x): wanting to be more than noblemen (*Paradiso* X.130–32), they are likely to end up being less than infants (whether as the “mad sheep” of V.80, or as the “fish” alluded to in I.67–72).

A “detour” is required with respect to a classical poetic ascent to Parnassus, especially since the ascent is no longer reputed as either right or true. The *Comedy*’s wayfarer must extend his way to explore the conditions of possibility for his ascent—for an ascent that thereupon is to proceed via a descent. Dante’s ascending advance (*andare*) remains mediated by a reflective return (*venire*), so that poetic soaring serves as prelude for philosophical diving.20 Otherwise, the poetic soaring must remain “suspended” in a darkness indifferent to it, just as it is indifferent to the darkness. Dante’s *Comedy* embraces both, exploring the abysmal hiatus separating our lofty ends and the “low” or “vulgar” means of life. Accordingly, the *Comedy* is not composed simply in the “illustrious vulgate” (*volgare illustre*) appropriate for pure or formal tragedies. Rather, the *Comedy* itself is an ascent to the “lost” or “obscured” nobility of the vulgar, in the sense that the work raises us to recognize its essential mode of communication “between the lines” as an underlying “language of virtue.” For the *Comedy* is replenished with humble speech appropriate for comedies (“inferior” with respect to tragedies), whereas the “illustrious vulgate” is appropriate for purely aristocratic or heroic poetry that is sung (or formed by “harmonious speech ready to be recited melodically”: *DVE* II.8.vi) and that in singing “ascends” to the heavens of “virile” virtue, having “filtered out” the “popular”/“corporeal” (II.3, 4.v–xi, 6.vi–viii, and 7.ii–v). The *Comedy* would be a tragedy (as with Brunetto Latini)—it would end in an overt defeat comparable to that of Dante’s Ulysses’s “foolish flight” (*folle volo*)—if it did not conceal its illustrious speech, its true nobility, beneath the veil of strange/vulgar humble verses and in the shadow of prestigious authorities.21 Dante “humbles” himself in the *Comedy,*

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20 The interplay of “going/advancing” and “coming/returning” is most evident throughout *Inferno* II.

so as to “condescend” to the reader (not unlike the God of Paradiso IV), in
the attempt to raise him to virtue, instead of leaving him behind or below in
the wilderness of uneducated senses.

On Dante’s account, Brunetto Latini remains “municipal” or pagan insofar as he fails to speak in the shadow of authorities allowing him to conduct his educational enterprise (the “Treasure” Latini entrusts to Dante in Inferno XV.119) without being devoured by the “she-wolf” of Inferno I. The “beast” does not want men to rise above mortality; it prohibits them from undertaking the “flight” (volo) from the body to a mind unfettered by illusions; it even condemns the flight as “foolish” (folle), as unjust and false.22 The way (via) of ancient poetry appears now in the dark and distorting “light” of its condemnation. Reduced to “municipal” poetry, ancient poetry is not recognized as having the right to ascend to the pinnacle of Parnassus or to converse with the gods of Olympus (as in Latini’s Tesoretto or Tesoro). In order to reacquire his “ancient” right, the poet must wage a “war” (guerra) against the “she-wolf” or its damning judgment. The poet’s war is against death in its twofold valence, as that of the body and as that of poetic virtue (la seconda morte of Inferno I).

It would be folly for Dante to wage a war directly against the she-wolf. “Another way” (altro viaggio) is required to defeat the beast—a way by which poetry makes prudential use of the beast as vehicle for a return to poetic contemplation (exemplary is Inferno XXXIII). Municipal or pagan poets had not achieved this, whether because they had no need for Dante’s achievement (as in the case of pre-Christian poets), or because they underestimated the threat of the “she-wolf.” Neither “Brunetto Fiorentino” (Latini) nor the radically anticlerical fratelli d’amore (“Brotherhood of Love”) achieved what Dante does.23 Yet Brunetto himself taught Dante that we can

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22 When, in Inferno I, the “upright way” (diritta via) is “marred/lost” (smarrita) and “the truthful/genuine way” (la verace via) is abandoned, evidently we are given to understand that “the way” is now erroneously regarded as unjust and as false.

23 On the fratelli d’amore, see Valli, Linguaggio Segreto. The Christian love of God serves as cornerstone for all theological readings of Dante. Yet Dante’s references to love present certain difficulties for theologians, beginning with the poet’s silence concerning God’s love for poets in particular: in the Comedy, divine love moves not poets but stars and planets (nor is “moving” equivalent to “creating”). Thus, for instance, in the final verses of Paradiso (XXXIII.143–45) the poet’s desire (il mio disio) allows itself to be “turned” back onto itself completely as a hypostatized “will” (il velle) by a “love that moves the sun and the other stars/planets,” echoing Inferno I.18–19, 36–40 (where heavenly bodies are poetic entities, or beautiful fictions) and VII.67–99: the only way the poet as ancient architect (compare 133 and 139) finds to traverse infinity (137–38), or to win his war against death (Inferno II.3–4), is by projecting his desire into an eternal mind reminiscent of Aristotle’s “unmoved mover.” Only then may the poetic mind emerge as Deus artificiorum. Far from being moved by God, Dante’s poetic or
achieve eternal glory in this life only where we are in possession of *dignitas* or publicly recognized authority, if only by writing in the shadow of prestigious personalities—such as “clergymen / and literati great and of great fame” (compare DVE II.2.ii–v and *Inferno* XV.84–87, 101–14). This *dignitas* Dante sets out to acquire indirectly, or in poetic personae (most notably in *Inferno* III), taking advantage of the fact that under Christianity Virgil has become a “famous sage” (the *famoso saggio* of *Inferno* I). In the *Comedy*, Dante takes

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Creative desire, taking advantage of divine ire (141), casts itself strategically into the role of divine love. Nor does Dante claim to be inspired by God’s love, especially where theologians are more likely to surmise that he does—e.g., in *Purgatorio* XXIV.53, where the *Amor* Dante speaks of can be none other than the intellectual love of the *Vita Nuova*, and so “love” in a properly poetic context, or the sweet love of the *fratelli d’amore* (compare 51 and 57; for a recent theological reading of these verses, see Vittorio Montemaggi, “Contemplation, Charity and Creation *Ex Nihilo* in Dante’s *Commedia*,” *Modern Theology* 29, no. 2 [April 2013]: 81). But furthest from Dante’s own voice is the conclusion that philosophy is an error interfering with the Christian ascent from carnal love to purely spiritual love. Such is the conclusion theological readings of the *Comedy* are likely to reach when stumbling upon passages such as *Purgatorio* XXX.115–31. In reading this passage, Pamela Williams, *Through Human Love to God: Essays on Dante and Petrarch* (Leicester, UK: Troubador, 2007) (inter alia) presents Dante’s early love of Beatrice (as evoked in the *Vita Nuova* literally, or as “carnal” (3–4). Williams reaches her conclusion by relying upon a questionable interpretation of *Purgatorio* XXX.115–17 as beginning to suggest that, in his youth, Dante swore by carnal love until he went astray by loving philosophy (most notably in the *Convivio*). Williams presents *Purgatorio* XXX as teaching that carnal love leads us to spiritual love without any need for the false way of philosophy (see esp. XXX.127–31). Yet in the Canto in question, Beatrice identifies Dante’s “way that is not true” (*via non vera*: 130) as one that follows false images of the good (*imagini di ben seguendo false*: 131). In this context, the death of Beatrice coincides with the death of poetry (after the *morta poesi* of *Purgatorio* I.7), or of properly poetic allegory, or of a proper understanding of “flesh” (the sensory) as veiling a hidden intent (compare XXX.127 and 67–69). The death of poetic allegory marks an obscuring of the philosophical sense of the sensory. What Beatrice describes as “untrue way” (*via non vera*) can be no more than a philosophy cut off from poetry, or a philosophy that no longer interprets appearances in a poetic context (as it had in classical antiquity, fully conscious of the illusory nature of “images”): only upon regaining full access to ancient poetry (Virgil) as its proper stage can philosophy avoid following, or being coerced into following, false (poetic) images, missing the “long” (metaphorical) sense of words (131, 136–41). Far from being a youthful error, philosophy is the way that discerns the false from the true. Consequently, the problem intimated by Beatrice in *Paradiso* XXX.127–31 must pertain to a replacement of classical poetry with a “literal” context presupposing the ascent of poetry from the carnal to the purely spiritual. Dante would then have turned away from the “new poetry” of Christianity, not in spite of but self-consciously and properly because of its pure spirituality. Accordingly, in 130–31 Beatrice suggests, not that Dante errs in pursuing philosophical studies, but that philosophy becomes untrue in a “Christian” context that replaces “the allegory of poets” with theological literalism (which then appropriates for itself all allegorical speech). The “false images” of verse 131 must be Christian images insofar as they are not interpreted rationally or philosophically in a poetic context. Yet in the *Comedy* Dante proves that ancient poetry can be revived as proper context for philosophical interpretation, not in spite of Christianity, but precisely insofar as Christianity’s “images” qua images are no truer than those of pagan antiquity. Whatever mystery theologians may believe that their images reveal, the *Comedy* approaches it as a problem for philosophical doubt-open-to-truth. Suprarational, revealed mysteries are tacitly replaced by the mystery or hiddenness of intelligibility open to doubt, so that the *Comedy* finds itself in perfect agreement or harmonious continuity with the concluding verses of *Convivio*, where we read that philosophy’s reason is hidden in the deepest recesses of divine providence. Key to the providential journey of the *Comedy* is the rational prophecy of *Convivio*. 
for himself the honor that “other” or Christian poets have bestowed upon the ancient pagan (82–87).

In borrowing Virgil’s honor, Dante raises it to heights Christian theology admits for no pagan. In more than one sense, Dante summons Virgil to transcend the boundaries of his luminous oasis so as to explore the darkness in which it is set, if only so that we may regain access to a light that is not lost in darkness, or a reason that turns to darkness as key to our self-understanding. Limbo’s lesson will prove of paramount importance in Paradiso, as we face the temptation of heavenly bliss. By the time the wayfarer faces it, he has already been crowned master or self-moving poet. He is now fully aware that darkness is not merely that which is left outside of the light, but that which lurks within the light, as a snake in Adam’s Garden—not to speak of the snake hiding in Dante’s own “Virgilian” selva (compare Inferno IV.118–20 and VII.82–84, echoing Virgil’s Eclogues III.93: latet anguis in herba). Nowhere more than in Paradiso are we to remain alert against insidious menaces, no matter how glorious our purported vision. To ignore this lesson is to ignore Paradiso’s very marrow, to which already the first verses of Canto I draw our attention, provided we do not follow translations by Dante’s “postphilosophical” readers. Paradiso I opens with a finely articulate warning precisely against the fideism of those who are likely to mistake Dante’s allegorical warning for the reassurance of a theological literalist:

The glory of him who moves everything traversing the universe, penetrates and glows in one part more and less elsewhere. In the heaven that grasps more of its light was I, and I saw things that to retell neither knowledge nor power has he who descends thence above; for approaching what it desires, our intellect sinks into itself by so much, that behind [it] memory cannot go.

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26 Paradiso I.1–9. Dante’s original text reads, “La gloria di colui che tutto muove / per l’universo penetra e risplende / in una parte più e meno altrove. / Nel ciel che più de la sua luce prende / fu’ io, e vidi cose che ridire / né sa né può chi di là su discende; / perché appressando sé al suo disire, / nostro intelletto si profonda tanto, / che dietro la memoria non può ire.” Hollander’s translation reads, “The glory of Him who moves all things / pervades the universe and shines / in one part more and in another less. / I was in that heaven which receives / more of His light. He who comes down from there / can neither know nor tell what he has seen, / for, drawing near to its desire, / so deeply is our intellect immersed / that memory cannot follow after it.”
Being key to verse 1, the term “moves” deserves special emphasis suggesting that the “him” addressed moves the heavens, as opposed to creating them (esp. ex nihilo). What is moved in verse 1 is “tutto” (“the Whole”), rather than “all things” taken particularly (in their manifoldness): everything is moved together, so that the movement in question is “general” in character (as in the final verses of the Comedy and in Inferno VII). Compare “per l’universo” (Paradiso I.2) and the “per una selva oscura” of Inferno I.2, where the poet “reinvents” himself traversing a “wilderness” (selva) that is his own poem. On the sense of “one part,” see the references to “part” in Inferno IV. Dante is suggesting that the more one part is illuminated, the more its “background” remains in the dark. The “light” of verse 4 is not simply/directly God’s own, but of his glory. In this respect, it can blind us, as the refracted aura of authority penetrating in one part or another of the Whole, distracting us from everything around it. As per verse 4, unlike the “receives” that we find in Hollander (inter alios), Dante’s prende is active. Verses 5–6 indicate that those who descend from the heaven of light evidently lack knowledge and power once they are “down here,” in relative darkness. In our world, it becomes evident that those who claim to have risen to the heavens have neither knowledge of them, nor the power required to report on them authoritatively or convincingly (the power would have to be bestowed upon a heavenly agent; on the “reporting/retelling” in question, see Inferno I.10). In fact, as our intellect (Paradiso I.8 suggests the singularity of what is one for all) unites itself to its object of desire, it buries itself in itself, forgetting itself. The object of intellective desire appears here as a mirage that we do not properly know (though we may believe we know it) and which we have no power to reach. Accordingly, memory or the (imagined) image of the highest object(s) of desire survives only at a distance, or where we do not foolishly bury ourselves into our object of desire (as Narcissus).

The Comedy’s final words on the power of memory/imagination are found in the concluding verses of Paradiso (XXXIII), where the imagination is transposed into the heavens. Dante’s corrective to Narcissus is “geometrical” (133). Dante’s flight is that of the architect Daedalus (Narcissus’s father): a poetic calculation enables Dante to fulminously (141) convert his desire into its object or divined consummation by turning the lofty or theological imagination (l’ alta fantasia: 142) back onto itself, so that it is no longer assumed to follow or lag behind the object of desire. Instead, the imagination’s finite power is transferred or tacitly attributed to Fortuna, the love that moves heavenly bodies. The newly empowered imagination goes ahead of our intellect to create a fully credible or convincing illusion—a
fiction that theologians suppose to be beyond question. This way, the last verses of Paradiso invite us to reconsider Paradiso 1.9, which, though usually read as indicating that imagination cannot follow intellect, may also mean the reverse, namely, that our intellect has no power to follow theologians’ imagination. Though memory may not reach our intellect “from behind,” it may easily surpass it. Whether or not one may then want to follow our “transfigured” fantasia to its ultimate abode is a question that the Virgil of Inferno 1.118–23 leaves open.
Freedom in Shakespeare’s English History Plays

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Though the worlde and conscience be at debate / Yet the worlde wyll I not despise / The worlde fyn-deth men all thynge / And dothe me grete servyse.

—The World and the Child, Anonymous (1552)

I. Introduction: Politics between the Mirror of Princes and the Mirror of Penitents

Students read Shakespeare’s plays to learn about politics and office, love and friendship, and other great themes of human life. This education is the core of the “Shakespeare myth,” which is that Shakespeare educates the complete human being—man, woman, and citizen. In this paper, I provide support for the truth of this myth by challenging the suggestion that the Shakespeare of the 1590s is a traditional theist who accepts

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2 Conversion is the “theatre of St. Paul,” who is the “miror and pattern of all converts and penitents” (Montagu, Miscellanea Spiritualia, quoted in Alison Shell, Shakespeare and Religion [London: Methuen, 2010], 26–28).


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the divine machinery of providential history, a secularizing Machiavel, or a protorepublican advocating living together as equals under the rule of law. Instead of these Shakespearian simplifications, I present Shakespeare as a philosophical liberal who is interested in legitimacy, stability, participation, security, and the place of the individual within society, but not in a way that requires the complete enlightenment of his age’s political forms and religious life, or that denies enlightenment altogether.

The presumption of many scholars is that Shakespeare does not have much to contribute to political theory. As Martin Dzelzainis notes, Shakespeare is “a nonentity” in the history of political thought. Nevertheless, there has been a nearly fifty-year uptick in interest in Shakespeare as a political thinker. Three different approaches to Shakespeare’s political thought can be distinguished within this growing literature. One approach excavates what Andrew Hadfield has called the “ubiquitous republicanism” of the seventeenth century, and ties Shakespeare’s political preferences with these early indications of republican tendencies. A somewhat different approach considers Shakespeare’s political contribution to lie in what he says about the various crises of succession and religion that animated political life throughout Elizabeth’s reign. Yet another group of writers is concerned primarily with the political philosophy dramatized in the plays.

This paper falls roughly within the latter group of works. But in order to account for Shakespeare’s political philosophy in a way that is not deaf to contemporary political and philosophical context, I reopen an old scholarly question concerning the tension between secular and providential history. The best place to explore this tension is in Shakespeare’s English history plays, which offer the most sustained account of the meaning that lies

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behind historical change. In my reading of these plays, Shakespeare offers a deep, sympathetic, but ultimately critical response to the secular, antiprovidentialist history that becomes the foundation of modern liberalism. E. M. Tillyard supplies the core idea of providentialist historiography, where the narrated events reflect a providential order requiring that virtue is rewarded and vice is punished, even if, in the thesis as it has been modified by other scholars, Shakespeare can’t quite himself believe in the moral order that he portrays. The main alternative to thinking of Shakespeare as a providential historian is grounded in the works of Niccolò Machiavelli. Machiavelli’s thought has become synonymous with the view that Christianity has caused the modern world to misunderstand politics, and in particular that politics is misunderstood because of a Christian misreading of history (D I Preface, 6; D II.2, 131). Machiavelli’s brand of humanism focuses on making room

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8 Shakespeare’s two tetralogies (Richard II, I and 2 Henry IV, and Henry V; 1, 2, and 3 Henry VI and Richard III) cover English history from 1398 to 1485. If you include King John and Henry VIII, Shakespeare covers the period from 1216 to 1533, with gaps in the years 1216–1398 and 1485–1520.


12 Tim Spiekerman, Shakespeare’s Political Realism: The English History Plays (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001). This work is perhaps the most comprehensive study of Machiavelli’s presence in the English history plays. The tension developed here between providentialist and Machiavellian history is widely noted (e.g., E. M. W. Tillyard, The Elizabethan World Picture [New York: Vintage Books, 1960], 8).

13 Machiavelli’s major works will be cited as D for The Discourses on Titus Livy and P for The Prince, followed by chapter (Prince) or book and chapter numbers (Discourses). Where required, book and chapter numbers will be followed by page numbers keyed to the following editions: Niccolò Machiavelli, Discourses on Livy, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Machiavelli, The Prince, ed. and trans. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

There are many alternative approaches to providentialist history that do not focus on Machiavelli’s influence. Some scholars emphasize the reformed conscience’s impact on Shakespeare’s development of interiority. For Robert Hunter, Shakespeare and the Mystery of God’s Judgments (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1976), the reformation is necessary but not sufficient for the development of Shakespearean interiority. Martha T. Rozett, The Doctrine of Election and the Emergence of Elizabethan Tragedy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) also argues that the believer’s preoccupation with God’s election and the Calvinist’s lack of assurance produces interiority within Elizabethan drama (38). John S. Wilks, The Idea of Conscience in Renaissance Tragedy (London: Routledge, 1990) places Shakespeare within the continuous development of Jacobean tragedy from Renaissance morality plays. For Shell, Shakespeare and Religion, religious morality has a place in Shakespeare’s dramatic world but is “something less than a master-narrative.” Other approaches locate Thomas More as the educator of Shakespeare (Charles A. Hallett and Elaine S. Hallett, The Artistic Links between William
for the energetic acquisition of this-worldly glory, but as I shall show below, increasing man’s glory requires sapping the authority of God, undermining providential history, and denying the commitment to otherworldly goods.¹⁴

Machiavelli’s vivere politico does not, however, simply deny the sacred in order to energize political actors; instead, Machiavelli uses the rhetoric of providentialism in order to add appeal to his project.¹⁵ I argue that Shakespeare understands the Machiavellian approach to history not merely as the replacement of what Machiavelli calls “Heaven disarmed” with armed men, but instead with a new political religion that encourages active men, or that replaces Heaven disarmed with Heaven armed.¹⁶ To anticipate the argument, Machiavelli realizes that a completely secular account of the world as the interplay of necessity and chance does not promote political action, and so he humanizes this world, personifying, to cite one memorable example, fortune as a woman that can and should be conquered (PXXV, 101). Although leading accounts of secularization do not systematically account for Machiavelli’s works,¹⁷ this should not deter Shakespeare’s reader from considering what Shakespeare has to say about Machiavelli, and to ask whether Shakespeare, whom we propose as a serious political thinker, takes Machiavelli’s challenge to providential history seriously.

In order to pursue Shakespeare’s critical appropriation of Machiavellianism, one must first answer a prior question: Is Machiavelli properly understood when he is presented as a liberal and as the founder of modern liberal politics? Machiavelli’s republicanism has been the focus of

Shakespeare and Sir Thomas More: Radically Different Richards [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011]) or emphasize other humanistic, rhetorical, and Tacitean influences, for which see below.

¹⁴ Contextualist accounts also dwell on Shakespeare’s use of Machiavelli. For example, Hadfield, Shakespeare and Republicanism, 10, reminds us that there were two queens in the realm for three-quarters of Elizabeth’s reign; in Shakespeare and Renaissance Politics, 36–77, Hadfield refocuses the question of what “Machiavellian” virtue is by contextualizing the question of virtue within doubts about the identity of “true and false sovereigns.”

¹⁵ For an account of the “Realm of Politics” which bears some resemblance to my own, see Erskine-Hill, Poetry and the Realm of Politics, 5. For the vivere politico, denoting the life concerned primarily with politics as opposed to religious or other ethical claims, see Maurizio Viroli, “Machiavelli and the Republican Idea of Politics,” in Machiavelli and Republicanism, ed. Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner, and Maurizio Viroli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 152–61.


scholarly debate for centuries, with prominent voices like that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau defending Machiavelli as a good republican against the often (but not always) religiously inflected arguments made by anti-Machiavels such as Innocent Gentillet and Frederick the Great. In recent decades, Machiavelli’s contributions to republicanism have become a keystone of the Cambridge School’s defense of civic republicanism and republican noninterference or republican nondomination.\(^1\) The fundamental idea of J. G. A. Pocock is that the “Aristotelian” paradigm of “all civic humanism” is achieved through Machiavelli’s revival of the classical republic, although this revival “militarizes” virtue because Machiavelli thinks that modern republican citizenship cannot foster or promise the fully participatory life without such militarism.\(^1\) Following early modern progenitors like Marchamont Nedham and James Harrington, Quentin Skinner’s Neo-Roman argument holds that it was Machiavelli who reintroduced the ancient conception of liberty as freedom from living in the power of the lord (\textit{in potestate domini}).\(^1\) Interpreters of Machiavelli within the Cambridge School have therefore come to hold that modern, Machiavellian republicanism, based on the juridical distinction between slave and freeman codified in the Roman laws of persons, proposes a pathway not only to the enjoyment of negative liberty in general, but also to the key republican value of freedom from domination.\(^1\)

In his pioneering but controversial work \textit{Thoughts on Machiavelli}, Leo Strauss interprets Machiavelli’s liberalism in terms of how well a state achieves security and stability, a capacity that \textit{tends} to be republican


\(^1\) Quentin Skinner, \textit{Liberty before Liberalism}, 36–47. Pocock, \textit{Machiavellian Moment}, 40–41, argues that manly civic virtue shapes \textit{fortuna} as form acts on matter, and that the citizen makes himself through action into the political animal that “he was and should be by nature.” Quentin Skinner, “The Republican Ideal of Political Liberty,” in \textit{Machiavelli and Republicanism}, ed. Bock et al., 293–309, questions the paradoxical “need to serve a certain sort of society in order to become most fully ourselves.” Developing Skinner’s basic thought, Philip Pettit argues that the core element of republicanism is the negative liberty of nondomination, the “rich old idea of liberty” characterized by Pettit as the ability to look an authority figure in the eye (Pettit, \textit{Republicanism}, viii, 49).

\(^1\) Skinner, \textit{Liberty before Liberalism}, 37, 39.
but does not have to be (Thoughts, 288). “Machiavelli’s use of Livy is misunderstood,” Strauss writes, “if republics or republicanism is taken to be the sole or even the chief theme of the Discourses” (317n51). Instead, in Machiavelli’s “impartial advice to all parties and persons to acquire when they can,” Machiavelli himself transcends membership in the sect of republicans or monarchs to become the teacher of both, and it is this ambivalence concerning forms that is distinctive of modern, liberal politics. Machiavelli’s ambivalence about forms collapses the distinction between a criminal and a noncriminal tyrant, and between the “public-spirited founder of a republic and the selfish founder of a tyranny” (272–73). Moreover, it denies the need for citizens’ public-spirited “change of heart” such as one expects to find in a civic republican (or in a Christian) writer (281). But why does Machiavelli write his works to foster political liberalism, if he is not motivated by a patriotic or a republican project? Strauss characterizes Machiavelli’s aim as the “highest freedom” as well as the “highest glory” (267–68, 244, 282, 286–88). In Strauss’s interpretation of Machiavelli, the “highest freedom” is the freedom of the “most excellent man” who achieves immunity to the power of chance through “knowledge of ‘the world’” (290). The second “highest freedom” comes from standing as one alone (uno solo) at the head of new political orders, as Machiavelli explicitly invites the ambitious to do (D I.9, 28–30). The former liberty speaks to the broadest ambition of the imagination and makes sense of the desire to author the great works of political philosophy, while the latter appeals to the practical ambitions of those who desire to lead the men that stand directly in front of them.

In Shakespeare’s English histories, the tension between the highest liberty of the thinker and the ambitious liberty of the leader of men is made more overt than it is in Machiavelli’s writings. Although Shakespeare and Machiavelli both accept that the desire for the higher liberty is often put to use in service to the very prosaic aim of security, Shakespeare is the one who asks directly about the justice of this arrangement. While Machiavellian liberty as true, thoroughgoing independence, desirable as the only thing truly worth having, and learned by observing “the things of the world,” is never criticized by Shakespeare, Machiavellian political liberty is criticized in the history plays as being incompletely informed about just that world that it claims to know better than anyone else. For Machiavelli, knowing

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23 E.g., D II.1 and III.43; Harvey C. Mansfield, “Strauss’s Machiavelli,” Political Theory 3, no. 4 (1975): 372–84; Strauss, Thoughts on Machiavelli, 263.
the “things of the world” does not mean just knowing the bits and atoms of nature: “states and religions, or ‘mixed bodies’ as distinguished from simple bodies (i.e., ‘natural bodies’), also are included among the things of the world” (Thoughts, 17). But Shakespeare explicitly criticizes the completeness (and perhaps the candor) of Machiavelli’s account of the complex social world, in which Machiavelli praises men for seeking glory, even when the pursuit of glory shows itself to result in exhaustion, injury, burden, and death. As Avery Plaw writes, Shakespeare presents Machiavellian “realism” as consuming life rather than fulfilling it.24

Shakespeare’s contribution to political liberalism consists in a sharper, un-Machiavellian focus on the why and wherefore of ambition, and in particular on Machiavelli’s intentional confusion of these higher and lower liberties. In what my interpretation picks out as some of the most important lines of the English history plays, Shakespeare’s most Machiavellian character, Richard III, dramatizes the self-contradiction behind Machiavellian liberalism. Shakespeare’s deformed and denatured Richard III is said to desire to rule over others to “the death of all the world” and “all the world to nothing” (Richard III, I.ii.119, 232). Shakespeare puts these lines in the mouth of the man who claims to be able to educate Machiavelli himself (3 Henry VI, III.ii.181). By explicitly identifying Richard as a competitor of Machiavelli’s, and by putting the language of world denial in Richard’s mouth, Shakespeare suggests a sort of “performative contradiction” in Machiavellianism: those who want to rule the world also want to negate or to deny it, Shakespeare suggests. This (admittedly) odd characterization of the Machiavel calls into question Machiavelli’s success in studying and knowing the ways of the world (P XV, 61). Does Shakespeare’s Richard not actually know the world? Does Machiavelli fail to do so?

One can, of course, simply dismiss these questions by saying that Shakespeare is a poet as well as a religious man, and that it is his presentation of Richard’s Machiavellian ambition that is confused, rather than the Machiavellian ambition itself. One could also say that the unworldly portrayal of Machiavellianism is made in language suited to an audience educated in medieval prophecy and eschatology, or even that Shakespeare bends ideas to fit dramatic or metrical requirements. However, besides slighting Shakespeare’s intelligence and craftsmanship, easy solutions ignore the differences in self-presentation and self-understanding between characters

such as Henry V and Richard III, and make it difficult to take Shakespeare’s historical reflections seriously, and for no better reason than because his medium is the drama rather than the treatise. Instead, any charitable reader should ask why Shakespeare chose to level this particular criticism in the person of this particular character. If the interpretation offered here bears weight, the answer is that the Machiavellian Richard is shown not to have thought sufficiently about the reasonableness of the desire for glory. Shakespeare’s criticism is that modern, Machiavellian humanism is ultimately confused about what liberty is.

The question of influences brings up one final preliminary question: Just how well did Shakespeare know Machiavelli? Scholars like Roe and (much earlier) Weissberger argue that Shakespeare could not help but know Machiavelli well. Others are less certain, while still others, anticipating the approach of the present paper, look not so much to Machiavelli’s reception history as to the agreement and disagreement between the political theories of the two thinkers. According to this latter view, the question of reception and knowledge does not need to be answered with precision. What matters is not how well Shakespeare knew Machiavelli’s works, but instead whether Shakespeare saw in Machiavelli a real alternative to providentialism. Machiavelli’s major works must “[fill] the gap between the seemingly unconnected denials” of providence that are found in Machiavelli’s writings, as Leo Strauss argues, for without such a connected chain of reasoning against the authority of otherworldly powers, Machiavelli’s antiprovidentialist “political teaching as a whole would be baseless” (Thoughts, 203). In the absence of

25 While it is also undeniable that “reason of state” arguments, which pose a challenge to both civic humanism and Christian accounts of the virtuous life, do not begin and end with Machiavelli (Hadfield, Shakespeare and Renaissance Politics, 4), and that one could properly make an alternative account which focuses on Tacitism and the renewal of skeptical thought in the early modern world, it is also true that by naming Machiavelli, Shakespeare nods to the fact that Machiavelli has tried to take responsibility for the chain of reasoning that is now popularly known as “Machiavellianism” rather than Tacitism or Marsilianism (e.g., Mansfield, Machiavelli’s Virtue, 276; D III.6.1, 218).

26 As Roe argues, the 1602 translation of Gentillet’s 1576 book Discours Contre Machiavel would have been the only English-language printed source for Machiavelli’s major works until the 1640s, but this certainly does not mean that Shakespeare did not read a compendium, a manuscript translation (first available in 1584) of the Italian text, or a French or Latin translation (John Roe, Shakespeare and Machiavelli [Woodbridge, UK: Brewer, 2002], 3–11).


28 Wolfgang Clemen, A Commentary on Shakespeare’s “Richard III” (Abington, UK: Routledge, 2005), 62n2. For Clemen, it is the version of Machiavelli created by Gentillet that Shakespeare knew.

an argument against providence or its equivalent, the Machiavellian project to teach others about the way the world actually works, free from superstition and vain darkness, necessarily fails and becomes a vain Enlightenment hope rather than the secure foundation of the Enlightenment.\textsuperscript{30} My inference, acceptable or not, is that Shakespeare saw that Machiavellian morality requires a nontheistic basis, and responded to Machiavelli’s political ethics as a serious alternative to providentialism.

The next section of this paper provides a schematic overview of freedom in the English history plays. I briefly examine the chronology of events from Richard II to Richard III in order to show how the theme of liberty as independence is deepened by contrasts drawn between these two plays and Henry V, which, in this reading, is the centerpiece of the two tetralogies. Section III examines Shakespeare’s presentation of the Machiavellian desire for independence by focusing on Richard’s dramatic presentation of his desire to rule as one alone (uno solo), to use the Machiavellian phrase. Section IV presents Shakespeare’s trenchant criticism of Christianity’s presence in what Thomas Hobbes called the external forum (in foro externo), testing through an analysis of the famous “wooing scene” (where Richard, then Duke of Gloucester, woos Anne Neville, the widow of the slain Prince of Wales) the allegation that Christianity weakens the liberal agent and enables tyranny. Here, the aim is to show that despite Machiavelli’s and Shakespeare’s criticisms of Christianity, the power of Christianity is accepted by both authors. Finally, Section V examines Shakespeare’s criticism of Machiavelli’s teaching on the conscience by distinguishing between the natural and the religious conscience. This section shows that Shakespeare’s Machiavelli asserts that the latter is reducible to the former. In my conclusion, I argue that the Shakespearean criticism of Machiavellian liberty presented in this paper adds to our understanding of modern liberalism by showing that the desire for independence stands in tension with modern, citizens’ liberty.

II. The English History Plays and the Desire for Freedom

Shakespeare’s politically minded readers have interpreted the two tetralogies as retributive providential history, as Machiavellian lessons in policy, as contemporary political commentary, and as attempts to subvert or sustain political ideologies. As noted above, this section deals only with the first two interpretations: the English histories as providential history or as Machiavellian “history by example.”

The disagreement between the two different approaches to providentialism is captured nicely in John of Gaunt’s “scepter’d isle” speech in Richard II. Gaunt’s speech celebrates “This royal throne of kings, this scepter’d isle / This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars / This other Eden, demi-paradise…This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England” (II.i.41–67). The strictly providentialist account of history interprets the subsequent ills of the realm as punishments for the usurpation of the divinely sanctioned king’s crown. In support of this interpretation, Shakespeare shows that it is consequential, both politically and morally, to defy divine right: the land suffers civil war when divine right is interrupted, and the individuals involved in the usurpation are troubled by their consciences, as, for instance, in the case of Henry IV, who promises to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to compensate for his moral error. On the other hand, Shakespeare’s dramatic context sharply contrasts “this England” with the actual England of Richard II. As Shakespeare’s Richard II argues, political actions cannot “wash the balm off from an anointed king,” and yet rapacity, inordinate liberality, and the pressures of flatterers on the court add up to a remarkably poor England. In Shakespeare’s presentation, the ultimate deposition of Richard II by Henry Bolingbroke, later Henry IV, seems like political relief as much as transgression. Likewise, the punishment of England is something that occurs during as well as after Richard II’s poor rule, which suggests a regress of errors or the inscrutability of God’s will.

If God punishes England for a specific English wrong, Shakespeare does not make any attempt to clarify whether this is so in the ambiguous Richard II. For the reasons noted above, the emphasis on divine will may be more persuasively read as the guiding thread of the first tetralogy—the three plays of Henry VI, and Richard III. The chaotic disorder of the realm in these plays can be construed as a direct consequence of impious usurpation, which crime is visited upon successive Lancastrian kings until the machinations of Richard III, the “scourge of God,” a “persecutor” and “executioner” (in the
words of Shakespeare’s Henry VI) that was “ordained”—as Richard himself says—to clear the slate for the foundations of the Tudor dynasty. In this reading, the usurper Henry IV is a moral low point in the histories, and Henry V is an improved version of his father, a “peak” preceding the descent into the erring vision of England dominated by the Machiavellian Richard III.31 Of course, the problem with this reading of the plays is that Henry VI, criticized throughout the second tetralogy for an overly pious lack of policy, is not helped by his piety and is harmed by his lack of policy. If the providentialist reading was Shakespeare’s intended lesson, the anti-Lancastrian “scourge of God” seems to hold the pious and impious alike in the same contempt, which is a justifiable position to take only if Shakespeare thinks that the usurpation of Richard II’s throne is so wicked that it taints Henry IV, V, and VI with an equally indelible blot.

The alternative interpretation of the two tetralogies is the “Machiavellian” interpretation. In this interpretation, a faulty prince (Richard II) steals the patrimonies of his subjects, just as, in the case of Edward IV, the sovereign steals his subjects’ women (3 Henry VI, IV.iii.36–40; P XVII, 67). Richard II’s impolitic acts unsettle the realm and prompt a coalition of the nobles to rebel, led by the exiled Bolingbroke and aided by Northumberland (Henry Percy), the “ladder” up which Henry Bolingbroke climbs. The remainder of Shakespeare’s account of Henry IV’s reign charts the dynamic of mobilization and sectarian conflict, beginning with Henry IV’s inevitable falling-out with the Percys, who, having brought him to power, judge that they can take it away. This conflict is won by the forceful Henry IV and his forceful and duplicitous son, who conceals himself behind a mask of debauchery only to show his true political talents when the opportunity is ripe. After the splendid reign of Henry V, during which he busies “giddy minds / With [successful] foreign quarrels,” Henry V’s early death and the

31 As Paul Cantor has argued, Henry V is the perfect Machiavellian prince despite not being able to master fortune and his own early death (Cantor, “Shakespeare’s Henry V: From the Medieval to the Modern World,” in Perspectives on Politics in Shakespeare, ed. John Murley and Sean Sutton [Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006], 13, 28). If the argument made in this paper holds, it also applies to the more visibly successful Henry V. The question of Shakespeare’s intent in presenting Henry V as he does may hinge upon what is involved with Henry’s becoming “more myself” (III.2.93; see also Graham Bradshaw, Misrepresentations: Shakespeare and the Materialists [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993], 112–24; Terry G. Sherwood, The Self in Early Modern Literature [Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2007], 126–27). Montaigne discusses the value of knowing how to belong to oneself, and self-belonging’s tension with the successfully political life is perhaps the theme of Henry V (Michel de Montaigne, “Of Solitude,” in The Complete Essays of Montaigne, trans. Donald Frame [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1965], 178). Whether self-cultivation is consistent with a single model of excellence, with honor, and with the direction of the father are key questions raised by Shakespeare.
dissension during Henry VI’s minority result in the loss of France, the murder of the realm’s protector, Gloucester, and civil war. Stepping into the power vacuum is Edward IV, who is duped into ordering his own brother executed, and whose other brother, Richard, takes the opportunity to kill off all his competitors until Richard is nearly the last man standing. This brief overview of the English histories suggests that Machiavellian insights into acquiring and maintaining power are the keys to success and failure, and that the usual Machiavellian policies (using one’s own arms, ruling from within the land, using overwhelming force) are the efficacious ones.

If we read the first tetralogy in the Machiavellian way ("history as policy"), Shakespeare’s account of the War of the Roses can be read as an indictment of narrowly and crudely self-interested individualism. The Duke of York desires to assure his own position after the treason of his father, Richard, Earl of Cambridge; the Duke of Suffolk is an amorous and treacherous aspirant to rule as well as the de facto power behind Henry VI; the cardinal of Winchester (Henry Beaufort) is motivated by personal hatred for the protector, Gloucester; and Warwick, the “kingmaker” makes kings in a realm where good reasons for supporting and sustaining political ambitions have given way to personal agendas. Ironically, there are well known Machiavellian reasons for putting down such competing claims through eliminating bloodlines and using severity, but, once again, it is unclear whether Shakespeare’s War of the Roses shows the results of Machiavellism or cases where Machiavellian manipulations were improperly used or even left underused (P III, 9; VIII, 37–38; XVII, 65). As England declines from the poetic unity described by Shakespeare’s Gaunt and fleetingly captured by Henry V, and vibrates with the anarchic politics of the War of the Roses, all loyalty and all political commitment are made to seem partisan. At an earlier point in the English histories, Shakespeare depicts a realm in which there is still place for the man who speaks and acts “in honour / Led by the impartial conduct of my soul,” as the Lord Chief Justice says in 2 Henry IV. The newly minted Henry V (the same man who had physically abused that same Chief Justice) affirms that justice should be executed in a “bold, just and impartial spirit,” in the very act of subordinating himself to the Chief Justice whom he had earlier wronged.

32 My concern for loyalty and for the Machiavellian insight into the inescapability of partisan politics is explored in an interesting manner in the debate over the character of Kent in King Lear. Kent presents himself as a loyal subject whose heart simply cannot endure (or change with the times) once Lear has gone; a revisionist reading paints Kent as a rebel and a subversive (Michael McShane, “Kent’s ‘Obscurred Course’: A Covert Coup Attempt in 2.2–4 of Shakespeare’s King Lear,” Interpretation 38, no. 3 [2011]: 205–42).
But as the plays wear on, personal desires and fears seem to render allegiance to the land, or to the Lancastrian and Yorkist parties, or to any sect, entirely insecure. By the end of *Richard III*, Richard’s solipsism seems defensible in the face of the unreality of any potentially legitimate coalition or claim to participate in a legitimate government, and Shakespeare seems to have offered a thoroughly secular, political account of the collapse of political order.

However, Shakespeare raises important criticisms of the Machiavellian prioritization of the city over the soul by implying, on several occasions, that politics cannot be practiced in a manner that is consistent with an individual’s happiness. Fathers and sons are famously politically divided during the bad days of the War of the Roses, leading to the unnatural occurrence of fathers killing sons and sons killing fathers in *3 Henry VI* (II.v.55–124). Crucially, when necessity finally forces Shakespeare’s characters to confront the full value of their lived lives, they face this sight with indecision and regret. In the case of both Hotspur in *2 Henry IV* and Warwick in *3 Henry VI*, for example, they rhapsodize about the bait-and-switch of politics, wherein men seek glory and rule and in doing so give up their lives. In the case of Henry IV, he has won the crown with pains and this victory seems only to result in further pains (*2 Henry IV*, V.iv.194–222). In Warwick’s case, the kingmaker acquires no more land than his “body’s length.” Similarly, in Henry V’s famous ceremony speech (IV.1.281–335), he praises the life of the day-laborer who works in the light of the sun, and, able to sleep soundly, “never sees horrid night.” In all these speeches Shakespeare implies that the motive out of which a stable balance of power ultimately emerges—the desire for rule—invites psychic and physical pains that often outweigh its pleasures. Richard II, who falls further from complete assurance about the meaning of rule than perhaps any other Shakespearian character (*Richard II*, III.ii.83–88), puts the problematic tension between human ambition and human limitation most succinctly:

> I live with bread like you, feel want,  
> Taste grief, need friends: subjected thus,  
> How can you say to me, I am a king?  
>  
> (III.ii.175–77)

33 “I believe that the greatest good that one may do, and the most pleasing to God, is that which is done for one’s fatherland” (Machiavelli, letter of April 16, 1527, quoted in Mansfield, *Machiavelli’s Virtue*, 344n42).

34 “Why, what is pomp, rule, reign, but earth and dust?” (*3 Henry VI*, V.ii.27).

35 “And, but for ceremony, such a wretch / Winding up days with toil and nights with sleep / Had the fore-hand and vantage of a king” (*Henry V*, IV.i.329–31).
If this is not exactly an argument for republican self-government, it certainly calls into question the propriety of assigning sovereignty to the fallible body of an individual. It also presents a contrast with Machiavellian history, since Machiavelli emphasizes the storehouses of prudence and energy that are in all of his acquisitive readers. Shakespeare dramatizes not only the urge to acquire but also moral and prudential considerations militating against any and all political acquisitiveness (P IX; D I.58, 117–18).

The inference one draws from the English history plays is that political liberty does not consist solely in the acquisition and maintenance of power. If Machiavelli presents political history as an alternation of modes of conduct that can and should change to suit the times, Shakespeare highlights the high, human costs of the process that Machiavelli praises, and of being the type of man that Machiavelli praises. Liberty in Shakespeare’s dramatic world, then, is not simply liberty to become a useful tool of the impersonal workings of a “perpetual republic.” As the exhausted laments concerning the false gold of “ceremony” pile up, Shakespeare reminds his reader of the limits on our joy in possession and therefore of the un-Machiavellian limits on acquisition. To simple or vulgar Machiavellians, Shakespeare asks: What is it that we know about the “things of the world” when we have read and understood Machiavelli? In the next section, I argue that Shakespeare presents his political theory as one that is importantly concerned with the happiness and the peace of the souls of individuals. Still, I will argue that his criticism of Machiavellianism is an internal criticism, designed to accommodate the care for the soul within or at least alongside Machiavelli’s insight into the necessity of controlling the partisan cycle of regimes.

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36 D III.17, 22; Mansfield, Machiavelli’s Virtue, 56, 121. On the subject of the perpetual republic, Mansfield writes: “No single state within Machiavelli’s system can last forever, but the whole can be perpetual because the various fortunes, or the fates, of its members have been anticipated by Machiavelli” (Machiavelli’s Virtue, 121).


38 One might characterize Shakespeare’s rhetoric about the importance of the individual’s happiness as “softer” and Machiavelli’s emphasis on the competitive treatment of ourselves and others as “harder.” For the distinction between the harsher rhetoric of Manlius Torquatus and the softer approach of Valerius Corvinus, see D III.22, 264–68, and Christopher Nadon, Xenophon’s Prince: Republic and Empire in the “Cyropaedia” (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 21–23.
III. Machiavellian Motives: Independence

In the preceding section, the distinction between Shakespeare’s English histories as providential history and as Machiavellian reason of state (*ragion di stato*) was rendered problematic by Shakespeare’s consideration of values extrinsic to the direct advancement of the state, such as peace of mind. The concern for peace of mind, the emphasis on individual happiness, may undermine the desire for glory and security upon which Machiavellianism relies—at the least, seeing Hotspur’s death from his own point of view is sobering, whereas being shown Remirro de Orco’s death from Cesare Borgia’s point of view in the *Prince* is, in a way, empowering. Machiavelli suppresses Shakespearian criticisms of the active, political life. If the aforementioned Shakespearian examples can be interpreted as accounting for the failures of the Machiavellian understanding of political life, then it may be said that Shakespeare’s Richard can indeed “set the murderous Machiavel to school.”³⁹ Shakespeare’s Richard is perhaps the character in the English histories that most fully explores the practical side of his own desire for freedom, although he does so by living out an interpretation of liberty as ruling over others rather than by thinking about the meaning and value of that liberty.

Richard III’s Machiavellianism is not a matter of the “stage Machiavel’s” penchant for force and fraud, but dramatizes what we might call the “worldview” of Machiavellianism. For Shakespeare’s England, Machiavelli’s preference of patrimonies over “paters” served as a rhetorical commonplace.⁴⁰ The particular trope of the fox and the lion, which Machiavelli uses to describe the education of the prince, became a favorite of Renaissance audiences.⁴¹ The character of Shakespeare’s Richard III offers even more grist for the philosophical mill. In a bravura display at the end of the *Henry VI* plays, Richard, Duke of Gloucester, first describes how he will attain his “soul’s desire,” the English crown: his “golden time” (*3 Henry VI*, III.ii.143–4).⁴² As noted at the beginning of this paper, Richard’s optimistic

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³⁹ Richard III is Shakespeare’s only systematic attempt to explore Machiavellian policy under its own name. The other references to Machiavelli in the plays are found in *1 Henry VI*, V.v.74 (to Alençon) and to the Host in *Merry Wives of Windsor* III.i.93. For Alençon, see Erskine-Hill, *Poetry and the Realm of Politics*, 24, 47.


⁴¹ Andrew Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Renaissance Politics*, 81.

⁴² A search of Early English Books Online indicates that the phrase that can be used of many different circumstances, including virginity, a fortunate situation, the acme of youth, or salvation. *See Macbeth*
view of his secular attainments requires or at least rests upon a radical inver-

sion of the here-and-now world: “I’ll make my heaven to dream upon the
crown,” Richard argues, “and, whiles I live, t’account this world but hell” (III.
ii.168–69). Shakespeare’s Richard concludes that from the “torment” of not
knowing how to find his way to the crown, he will “free himself” or “hew
[his] way out.” In the right-side-up world, we expect Richard to claim to
achieve the place that he deserves; but, in the world of uncertain values and
false kings, Richard presents himself (and perhaps all political actors) as
inhabitants of a living hell, as lying imposters like Sinon, and as “not know-
ing” how to be happy.

If the Richard of 3 Henry VI is ambitious but not clearly or
reasonably so, Richard’s characterization in Richard III continues Shake-
spere’s probing inquiry into what a liberating ambition would look like.
Richard first appears in the first scene and act of this play with the stage
direction solus, which is a unique beginning in Shakespeare’s corpus. In the
first speech of the play, Richard again argues, as he did in 3 Henry VI, that
since he cannot love, he is “determined to prove a villain.” But, as one critic
asks, determined by what or whom? Is it by providence or necessity, or by
the audience or by his own ambition? One may argue that it is his nature,
deformed and unnatural, that “determines that he will seek vengeance
against nature for its crime against him.” But, just as Richard’s complaints
about Edward IV’s behavior and the derangement of “degree” provide an

for the “golden round” (I.v.29); 2 Henry VI for the “golden mark I seek to hit” (I.i.241).

43 “And I,—like one lost in a thorny wood / That rends the thorns and is rent with the thorns / Seeking
a way and straying from the way / Not knowing how to find the open air / But toiling desperately to
find it out,— / Torment myself to catch the English crown / And from that torment I will free myself /
Or hew my way out with a bloody axe” (3 Henry VI, III.ii.181–97).

44 In Thomas North’s Elizabethan translation of Plutarch’s Lives, Alcibiades is described as a chame-
leon who “could put upon him any manners, customs or fashions, of what nation soever, and could
follow, exercise, and counterfeit them when he would, as well the good as the bad.”

45 Rex solus may be intended here, which is a term used to contrast the king alone with the authority
of the King-in-parliament after the 1530s, for which see G. R. Elton, ed., The Tudor Constitution:
Documents and Commentary, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 14. In Shake-
spere’s corpus, there are several occasions when characters enter or remain solus, especially if they
must do or say something that doesn’t bear surveillance (e.g., Richard II’s prison speech on fortune’s
slaves in Richard II, V.iii). “The history of King Lear acted at the Duke’s theatre / reviv’d with altera-
tions by N. Tate” of 1681 places a variant of the Bastard Edmund’s speech at the beginning of the play,
where the stage directions indicate that he is solus. McGrail, Tyranny in Shakespeare, also points out
the unique opening of Richard III.

46 Harry Berger Jr., “Conscience and Complicity in Richard III,” in Richard III: Authoritative Text,

opportunity and an excuse for rebellion, we have only words to prove the extent of Richard’s deformity. The judicious reader notes that arguments about the destruction of “degree” are often partisan attacks on the legitimacy and title of a competitor.\textsuperscript{48} Similarly, in his first soliloquy Richard may blame the natural order so that the audience is less inclined to hold him personally responsible for his crimes. Richard’s theme is solitary self-direction, but his actual practice is constantly to manipulate others, and perhaps (why not?) even the audience.

Throughout the play, Richard is presented as acting with and through proxies and allies, but always for his own ends. He merely uses others as temporary expedients without ascribing any essential dignity to their own interests and aims. Even Buckingham, Richard’s “other self” and “council’s consistory” (II.ii.150), cannot keep pace with him, which results in Buckingham’s rebellion and ultimate execution (IV.ii.43). Richard, that is, holds Buckingham to be his “other self” until Buckingham balks at being Richard’s instrument in the killing of the two princes in the tower, and yet still seeks to be assured that he will achieve the lands of Hereford. In a great speech delivered upon the occasion of his murder of Henry VI, Richard has the following to say in explanation of (and exhortation to) himself:

\begin{quote}
I that have neither pity, love, nor fear…
I have no brother, I am like no brother;
And this word love which graybeards call divine,
Be resident in men like one another,
And not in me: I am myself alone.
\end{quote}

(3 Henry VI, V.vi.68–83)

Shakespeare’s Richard denies love, nature, and fellowship. Machiavelli’s ambition to be alone is concealed within the worldly, social aim of pursuing glory, but they are analogous aims. In his major works, Machiavelli stresses the importance of being a sole founder (\textit{uno solo}, in \textit{D I Preface}, I.9, and \textit{P XXIII}).\textsuperscript{49} Machiavelli himself has “decided to take a path as yet untrdden by

\textsuperscript{48} Hall asserts that Edward IV could have ruled peacefully, if it wasn’t for Richard, while both More and Shakespeare present several claims against the justice of Edward’s reign (Edward Hall, \textit{The Union of the Two Noble Families of Lancaster and York}, ed. Richard Grafton [Ann Arbor, MI: Scolar, 1970]). See also “Edward IV’s Title to the Throne Declared in Parliament (November 1461)” and “An Act for the Settlement of the Crown upon Richard III and his Issue, with a Recapitulation of his Title (January or February 1484),” which accuse Edward of ruling “so that this land was ruled by self-will and pleasure.” These documents are reprinted as an appendix to Mortimer Levine, \textit{Tudor Dynastic Problems, 1460–1571} (New York: Allen & Unwin, 1973), 132–33, 135–37.

\textsuperscript{49} See also D III.35.2 and other references (for which see the glossaries of the editions of the \textit{Prince} and \textit{Discourses}). Pocock (\textit{Machiavellian Moment}, 187) does not give the notion the same resonance
anyone,” and he counsels that his founders “should contrive to have authority alone.” To self-reliant men he writes: “those defenses alone are good, are certain, and are lasting, that depend on you yourself and on your virtue” (P XXIV, 97). To have and to use others as equipment for your gain is one thing; to depend upon them is politically dangerous. Machiavelli’s solus wants to achieve political discretion to act in whatsoever manner he wants, free from intervention. Hence, the “new modes and orders” described in Prince XV–XIX, and the willingness to be “altogether bad” (D I.27.1, 62–63), are Machiavellian discoveries or inventions presented to his readers as pathways to the proper type of independence.

Machiavelli stresses the theme of being alone despite or because of the fact that even his most mentally self-possessed princes don’t appear to have undertaken a complete political refounding. Machiavelli says both that Cesare Borgia does everything right and also (and more subtly) that he is a tool of the church and his father (P VII, 27, 29, 31, 46). Machiavelli himself encourages captains to take their share of the glory, even encouraging his own readers to realize his projected “perpetual republic.” Does Shakespeare count as one of that army of interlocutors and propagandists, confirming Machiavelli’s foundational vision of modernity even as he makes it more appealingly humanistic? Shakespeare is more blunt in reminding his readers of the wide ditch between liberty and happiness, while Machiavelli conceals this gap behind traditional appeals to Roman virtue, Italian patriotism, and the desire for political liberty. Shakespeare presents the successful as complicit in their own delusion, giving fleeting voices to characters like Warwick and Hotspur; Machiavelli, as noted, does not allow Cesare Borgia to speak directly to the reader, and we are instead told by Machiavelli that Cesare could have outdone himself by imagining his own father’s death and by taking further control of the church. We are told, that is, how to see the opportunity offered by Cesare’s political example, and to use it better (P VII, 28; D III.6, 222). Machiavelli’s bloody disputants, like T. S. Eliot’s “attendant lord,” are sufficient to “swell a progress” but they suggest to the reader of Machiavelli that the reader can do better, while in Shakespeare the Machiavellian suggests that something is lacking in the political life. Could what is

as Strauss and Mansfield. John of Florio’s sayings of Antonio Guevara, published in 1578, explain the Machiavellian point succinctly: “A little after he sayth in prayse of God, I say, and confesse, that there is but one only God creator, because he created al the worlde…& man ought not to woorship but one onely God, for even as the worlde was created by one onely, so all creatures ought to woorshy one only: for even as a Prince wyll not grant that another shal be called Prince in his Realme, so wyll not God that any other God shal be worshipped in al the worlde” (Florio, First Fruits, which yield Familiar Speech, Merry Proverbs, Witty Sentences, and Golden Sayings [London, 1578]).
missing be the life of religion, which Machiavelli manipulates but in which he hardly seems to believe?

IV. The Weakness of the Modern World

Religion In Foro Externo: Anne’s Wooing

In the previous two sections, Richard III and the English history plays provided evidence against reading Shakespeare as a vulgar historian of political success or failure. Shakespeare presents his cycle of history plays as a critical engagement with Machiavelli’s attempt to control the cycle of regimes, one in which the individual is given a place to speak on his own behalf, and does so against the primacy of the political life. In the next section, the famous wooing scene from Richard III is interpreted as a reflection on Christian belief in order to examine whether Shakespeare’s Richard is constrained (or enabled) by Christian belief.

In act I, scene ii we are introduced to Anne, who was married to King Henry VI’s son, Edward, before Richard killed both the son and the father. In this famous wooing scene, which Shakespeare fabricates (rather than borrows from his source material), Shakespeare develops what seems to be a rather pointed criticism of Christianity. In my reading, the significance of the exchange between Richard and Anne is, primarily, to offer a version of the “Christianity as the source of political weakness” argument that has become traditional (D II.2, 278). Richard will use Christianity to gain what he desires, meaning that the humble, loving moral orientation of the true believer prepares the believer to be conquered. This is in fact what happens to Anne, and Shakespeare shows that Richard’s realization that he can invoke religion to suborn believers transforms him from one bearing arms to one willing to give up his arms precisely to the one whom he will later kill (as he does both with Anne, and, later, with the young Duke of York). Like Machiavelli himself, Shakespeare’s Richard realizes that religious rhetoric can be used to attain political goods, like security, rather than to support the ambitions of the clerical authorities of the medieval world (P XVIII, 70).

An obvious, excluded alternative is the extremely complex character of Falstaff, who is himself a Lollard (Sir John Oldcastle, as argued in Ellen Caldwell, “‘Banish All the Wor(l)d’: Falstaff’s Iconoclastic Threat to Kingship in Henry IV,” Renaissance 59 [2007]: 219–47); a liar who takes credit for the death of Hotspur, and who is resurrected from his pretended death; and who, in a comparison pointed out by Harold Bloom and many others, bears a marked resemblance to Socrates in his actual death scene.

Roe, in contrast, thinks the scene is primarily about the manipulation of ungovernable instinct (Shakespeare and Machiavelli, 17–29).

For the weakness of those that Christianity seeks to defend, see Calvin’s attack on the Epicureans (Institutes III.19).
“Lady, you know no rules of charity,” Richard accuses Anne, “which renders good for bad, blessings for curses” (I.i.66–67). Richard raises a tough question with his accusation: on the grounds stated, should anyone be charitable? In Richard’s gloss, the law of Christian charity is consistent with forgiving Richard for his villainy, but even Richard is surprised by his successful suit to win Anne’s affections. In his speech, which memorably begins, “Was ever woman in this humor woo’d? / Was ever woman in this humor won?” he reflects that Anne has every reason to reject him, and presumably Richard himself respects those reasons. But, Richard concludes triumphantly, he can have her, like he will have his future crown, “all the world to nothing!” The hyperbolic conversion from grieving wife to charitable dupe and ultimately to Richard’s wife does actually “inspire” Richard to think that he has more power to change people’s minds and motives than he had previously thought possible. The subsequent lines, “Shine out, fair sun, till I have bought a glass / That I may see my shadow as I pass,” reminds readers of Plato’s *Republic* of the low epistemological ranking of shadows, but also (in this specific case) of their persuasiveness. Rhetorical shadow-play works. From a soldier, then, Richard’s successful wooing transforms him into something of a lying priest, one who is able to get people to do what he wants simply by asking them to do it, appealing under cover of religion to the truer motives (namely, vanity, fear, hope for gain, or security) that they do not want to admit.

The capacity of speech to turn the world upside down, allowing force to be ruled by fraud, is further explored in the wooing scene. In their wrangling over whether Richard was in fact the murderer of Edward, Prince of Wales, and Henry VI, Richard says to Anne: “Your beauty was the cause of that effect,” meaning the murder, which beauty caused him to dream “the death of all the world” (I.i.119, 121). As a Christian, Anne is open to the suggestion that Richard “slew them not” (her husband and his father)—that they live, as she mockingly replies, in some way (I.ii.87). She believes that salvation opens the door to a new life, as Christian scripture alleges, and concedes the possibility that Richard repents and has grown humble. But perhaps she is most desirous of noble protection for the duration

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53 Ellen Caldwell has explored aspects of the theme of this paper as they occur in *Henry V*. “Banish all the world,” she argues (of Falstaff’s reflections on his own importance to Hal), is a reformationist rebuke of the false “iconography of the Lancastrian monarchy” (Caldwell, “Banish All the Wor(l)d”).

54 See, broadly, his precursors: Archbishop Scroop in 2 *Henry IV* (I.i.258–61) turns “insurrection to religion”; also, Winchester in *I Henry VI* (I.i and III.i) matches York’s and Gloucester’s ambition and fraud.
of the dynastic struggles? Uncharitably, we may conclude that her beliefs or hopes that the world can be transformed by will are the precondition of the world for Richard to “bustle in.”

To generalize this Machiavellian observation, the “weaker” characters in Richard III have their opportunities imposed upon them by other characters.\(^{55}\) So, for example, Richard asks Queen Elizabeth, whose two sons Richard has already killed, for the hand of her daughter (I.iii.15–16; D III.12). He argues that she should forget their killings as water under the bridge, and instead look to the security of her surviving daughter. Elizabeth’s response is: “Shall I forget myself to be myself?” (IV.iv.435, emphasis added). Richard’s answer, which inverts Prince Hal’s decision to remake his lower self in the light of the higher, is yes. It is for the weaker characters to accept these necessities rather than to choose to put themselves into a situation where they can achieve as much happiness as one can. The *ne plus ultra* of this criticism of weakness is Henry VI, a weak king who is ultimately murdered by Richard. Henry VI is offered as a not unsympathetic portrait of the unsuitability of unvarying piety and (a certain form of) moderation in the pursuit of rule. But as one historian says, the War of the Roses is not about issues of dynastic succession, it is about the weakness of a bad king: the dynastic claims raised during the War of the Roses did not predate that war, and the “unrightwise usurper” would probably have maintained his rule if he was “halfway competent.”\(^{56}\) Shakespeare makes much of Henry VI’s pious but ineffectual rule, and even has Henry provide a self-justifying laundry list of his lovable virtues (including pity, mildness, mercy, fiscal restraint, and moderation) before Shakespeare has him stunningly and abruptly decide to retire from politics (3 Henry VI, IV.viii.41–47). Both this exit and the preceding character development of Henry VI are criticized as the sort of weakness that arises in the absence of knowledge about the stark realities of the world, one of which is that pity, mildness, mercy, and other “virtues” are often political vices.\(^{57}\)

In sum, Richard counsels Elizabeth, the woman whose children Richard has killed, not to “harp” on that string because “it is past” (IV.iv.285). The same idea is captured by the offer of marriage to Anne, whose

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\(^{57}\) The fates of Bardolph, Pistol, and Falstaff in Henry V suggest the inescapability of political rewards and punishments, as does the marriage of Catherine and Henry at the end of that play. There are other suggestive vignettes, such as the induction by Falstaff of militia members, in 2 Henry IV.
husband and father-in-law he killed. What matters is what can be changed. As Queen Margaret is made to say in 3 Henry VI, “what cannot be avoided / ’Twere childish weakness to lament or fear” (V.iv.37–38). But Margaret’s reductive arguments get their comeupance in her own subsequent misery, inviting the reader to consider whether it is weakness to fear repeating the same mistakes, and whose “necessity” is being imposed upon the “weaker” characters. In a similarly skeptical spirit, one should ask how free the “stronger” (rather than the weaker) characters are. After all, isn’t the whole story of Richard, Duke of Gloucester, a tragic account of a completely clear-sighted man who gets himself in trouble by willing himself into a situation where he thinks he will achieve the maximum possible happiness—his “golden time”?

**Prophecy: Religious Speech In Foro Externo**

One way to consider the question of how much and how far we can will our own happiness is to examine the status of prophecy and conscience in Richard III. Both conscience and prophecy offer predictions and retrospections concerning the quality of our actions. The most important providential prophecy in Richard III is Margaret’s curse, itself a response to the Duke of York’s curse in 3 Henry VI (I.iii.186–232). In it, Margaret prophesies a bad end for those she claims have wronged her: Edward IV will die by “surfeit,” and the Prince of Wales by violence; Edward’s wife, Queen Elizabeth, is sentenced to extended mourning for her children and to disgrace; Rivers, Dorset, and Hastings are prophesied an early death by “accident”; and Richard himself will be gnawed by the “worm of conscience.” All these predictions come true except for the death of Dorset, which does not figure in Richard III.58

There are other important signs and prophecies in Richard III that are given a credible connection to the actions of the characters, of which two will be mentioned here. The first is the prophecy Richard introduces at the beginning of the drama to convince his brother, King Edward IV, to imprison their brother George, Duke of Clarence (“by G / His issue disinherit should be”). This prophecy comes true when Richard, Duke of Gloucester, usurps the throne after killing Edward IV’s sons. A second, powerful example of prophecy at work is Lord Stanley’s dream that the boar (meaning Richard) will kill Stanley. Stanley perceives the danger that he is in,

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58 Clemen, A Commentary on Shakespeare’s “Richard III,” 54. Buckingham also announces before his death that Margaret’s curse has come to pass although she merely warned him about the dangers posed by Richard. The stage directions of 3 Henry VI, which suggest that Rivers, Dorset, and Hastings were not present at the death of Margaret’s son Edward, cast doubt on the justice of Margaret’s curse.
and he chooses to relate that danger to a potential ally, Hastings, by sending to him a messenger describing what that messenger calls his “dream” (III. ii.16). In Thomas More’s History, Hastings coarsely responds that “it is plain witchcraft to believe in such dreams.” Shakespeare more moderately has Hastings say that he is surprised that Stanley trusts the “mock’ry of unquiet slumbers” (III. ii.25). More’s editorial comment is apposite: “A marvelous case it is to hear either the warnings of that he should have voided or the tokens of that he could not void.” More presumably means that signs should provoke thought even when they cannot be considered evidence in the strict sense of the term. Shakespeare, although he does not provide his own editorial comments, shows just how correct Stanley’s “soul” is, and how gullible Hastings is for thinking he was in the good graces of the king, and for ignoring the signs to the contrary.

If the aforementioned examples show that dreams and prophecies are not without meaning in Shakespeare’s world, the invocation of conscience also has political consequences. King Edward, for example, wants to see the unity of Lancaster and York before his death, and so asks Queen Elizabeth’s faction to swear “perfect love” towards the Yorkist faction (II.i). This speech is entirely inefficacious, but when Buckingham is caught out in rebellion, he points to the breaking of the oath he swore to Edward IV as a cause of his downfall (V.i.12–15). In prison, Clarence is tortured by his own guilty conscience in a memorable speech, claiming that his guilt is “lengthened after life” through horrific dreams, putting him in the “hell” that Richard also felt himself to inhabit. Clarence did side with the Lancastrian faction in 3 Henry VI, thus perjuring himself, but, as a repentant Edward IV says after Clarence is executed, his crime was one of “thought” rather than of deed. In conscientious dialogue with oneself or with others, it is efficacious to have broken one’s oath even if oaths are not sufficiently powerful to cause active self-restraint. Thus, we should infer that dreams, prophecies, and portents matter, psychologically, as (at some point) do curses. As described above, the weak characters all admit that their failures mean that Margaret’s curse has come true. Moreover, weak characters try to prophesy and curse, and, it seems, to impose their own justice upon those agents who are outside of their control. The mild-mannered Anne curses Richard. Henry VI is killed by Richard in the middle of a long-winded prophecy about Richard’s fate.

The Enlightenment attempt to disabuse early modernity of the belief in prophecies, curses, and the like is thus problematized by Shakespeare’s apparent insistence upon including, allowing, and perhaps propagating the anti-Enlightenment rhetoric of curses, prophecies, dreams, and ghosts.\(^{60}\) As one historian of prophecies in this period notes, prophecy had value and effect: it is like history made into poetry.\(^{61}\) Developing this same point, Marjorie Garber writes that an “absolute rejection of the irrational is a fatal misjudgment in the world of Richard III.”\(^{62}\) While not making an equivalency between history, prophecy, and Christian belief, Shakespeare seems to contend that all of these are relevant to political life, insofar as political life is driven by beliefs expressed in a shared iconography that is much wider in scope than what we now include in the sphere of public reason.\(^{63}\) As noted above with reference to Machiavelli, the social world is a complex one, and prophecies and providential narratives may also be numbered among “the things of ‘the world.’”

V. Counter-Machiavellian Motives: The Conscience’s Call In Foro Interno

The threads of Shakespeare’s discussion of political consequences of religious signs can be tied together if we infer that Shakespeare affirms Machiavelli’s insight into the omnipresence of “confusion of the brain” while accusing Machiavellians of just that confusion. By dramatizing rather than by ignoring and largely overruling the call of the conscience, Shakespeare offers a better, more moderate account of our desire for liberty, one which takes into account how we fall prey to the call of conscience.


\(^{63}\) Mary Bonaventure Mroz, *Divine Vengeance: A Study in the Philosophical Backgrounds of the Revenge Motif as It Appears in Shakespeare’s Chronicle History Plays* (New York: Haskell House, 1941); E. Pearlman, *William Shakespeare: The History Plays* (New York: Twayne, 1992). In passing, a partial response to the “republican” Shakespeare argument may be made by noting that there is no attempt to theorize citizenship under the equal, general rule of law in Shakespeare’s histories (Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Renaissance Politics* and *Shakespeare and Republicanism*). Alvis also notes the surprising absence of parliament in the English history plays, and Spiekingman (Shakespeare’s Political Realism, 169) points out the absence of Magna Carta from *King John.*
Analyzing Machiavelli’s defense of the liberty of the sole founder requires an anatomization of Machiavelli’s often difficult arguments concerning religion, morality, conscience, liberty, virtue, chance, and necessity. When seen as a whole, religion and the “less fundamental theme” of morality are characterized by Machiavelli as “confusion of the brain” (Thoughts, 232, 208, 217; D III.6, 228–29). Machiavelli conveys an important part of his complex teaching by describing conscience not as the feeling of wrong that is instilled by a punishing and rewarding god, but instead in terms of the shared knowledge and fears of conspirators. Dwelling on one of Machiavelli’s Roman (non-Christian) examples, Strauss notes that Latin conspirators against the Romans had “awareness (coscienza)—of many things which they [the Latins] had done against the will of the Romans” (Thoughts, 194). The Latins “were fearless not because the Romans had been most unjust to them or because they trusted in the justice of their cause, but because they had awareness (conscientia) of their power on the one hand and of the power of the Romans on the other” (Thoughts, 195). Strauss assimilates both types of awareness under the rubric of “conscience,” intending to show that Machiavelli’s conscience, where “man judges by himself and in solitude as to what he ought to do,” is equivalent to the voice of rational fear and rational confidence. Such conscientious warnings need, in Machiavelli’s teaching, to be protected from reverence for any external authority, whether god or man, because those who claim to speak in a different and higher language, and thus to deserve such reverence, are lying. All the things that are worth fearing are intelligible to human beings by the free use of human reason.

Applying this interpretation of Machiavelli to Richard III, one could infer that Shakespeare’s Richard III loses the Battle of Bosworth because he has failed to mobilize the people by getting them to heed his commands to fight against Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond. Percy’s forces stand and watch the battle, and Stanley’s forces do not fight for him. The Machiavellian lesson that you need others truly to be yourself has not been properly executed by Richard. This is not surprising, because, as Blunt says, there are only those around Richard who fear him, and, although fear may be more reliable than love in the relations of princes to their subjects (P XVII), Richard is not capable of cornering the market on fear (V.ii.20). Although he has tried—for example, by playing on the fears of Edward IV concerning

64 There is a parallel in Hamlet IV.vii.127–28.
Clarence, on Hastings’s fears of the queen’s party, and, most obviously, by seizing George (Stanley’s son) as hostage in order to extract Stanley’s loyalty at Bosworth—he is unable to rule by fear alone, and to make his threats represent the “effectual” truth, whether by spectacular or concealed executions (P VII, 29–30; XV, 61). He was more successful, despite the misgivings stated at the beginning of the play, by playing the (fraudulent) lover.

This failure seems to show that Richard is simply not a good Machiavellian, and that he fails to execute Machiavelli’s plan with sufficient thoroughness. But this “Machiavellian” style of criticism, implying that we should simply find a better prince to imitate, and that everything truly is knowable and manipulable, is at odds with the very searching criticism of uno solo to which Shakespeare puts his Richard. In other words, it may be sufficient in some contexts and for some purposes to say that Richard should have seen his own plan through to its completion by, among other things, the immediate execution of Buckingham or by disarming him with false friendship, and also by the heinous killing of Stanley’s son or by some other temporizing response to Stanley’s doubts. But the ultimate worth of Richard III’s executions of a Machiavellian plan must be judged by the quality of the plan that is being executed. As argued above, it is not clear that a Machiavellian plan is a good plan.

The textual crux where Shakespeare’s anti-Machiavellian intervention is most clearly presented is in the narration of Richard’s auto-machia (to borrow a phrase from Shakespeare’s near-contemporary, George Goodwin). When Richard finds himself to be truly alone, he is possessed of (or by) a surprisingly bad conscience. Instead of merely abiding silently or thoughtfully with his possible failure, Richard haunts himself with ghosts—

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66 In Holinshed’s version, Richard addresses his troops and companions, admitting a “wicked and detestable deed” (Raphael Holinshed, Shakespeare’s Holinshed: An Edition of Holinshed’s Chronicles, 1587, ed. Richard Hosley [New York: Putnam, 1968], 263), but arguing that he has expiated it; that Richmond is weak and a Welshman; and that he leads a weak bunch of Frenchmen and outlaws. Richmond, in contrast, underscores the justice of his cause (265), and argues that this will cause men to switch sides in battle. Instead of recording him asking for a horse, Holinshed has Richard refusing a swift one to bring him away from the battle (268). Shakespeare’s account parallels Holinshed’s insofar as Richard argues against conscience while Richmond argues that the conscience’s authority and his political intentions align.

67 Thus, Henry V’s parallel decision to kill the French prisoners at Agincourt appears to distinguish Henry V from Richard III.


69 “I sing my SELF; my Civil Warrs within / The Victories I howrely lose and win” (Goodwin, quoted in Sacvan Bercovitch, The Puritan Origins of the American Self [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975], 19).
almost prompting the question: How *solus* is Richard? In the most amazing
speech of the play, he exclaims:

Richard loves Richard; that is, I and I.
Is there a murderer here? No.—Yes, I am.
Then fly.—What, from myself?—Great Reason why:
Lest I revenge.—What, myself upon myself?
Alack, I love myself.—Wherefore?—For any good
That I myself have done unto myself?70

(V.iii.161–67)

In Richard’s self-accusation, he invokes the Apostle Paul as witness to his fear,
although in his ambiguous fashion Shakespeare also describes the guilty con-
science’s accusation as one being made in “a thousand several tongues,” as if
the number of accusers and not their quality made the accusation decisive.71
Finding himself weakened nearly beyond any capacity to continue, Richard
cries for the salvific intercession of Jesus,72 who will forgive him for what he
has done even if he did it in full confidence and with full moral knowledge
of the consequences. Reading Richard’s speech, one could think that Shake-
speare vindicates religion by showing that only religious awe imposes limits
on the tyrannical will. But, in these lines, Shakespeare presents Richard as
a somewhat sympathetic or tragic figure rather than simply someone whose
fate should reassure us that the wicked are punished. Instead of reassurance,
Richard’s worries provoke real questions concerning the justice of Richard’s
God and the value of the religious conscience. As readers of Shakespeare, we
are clearly meant to avoid falling into the type of internal debate and civil
war from which Richard suffers, but what is the proper understanding of the
conscience that Shakespeare proposes?

Identifying the aim of Machiavelli’s fight with the Aristotelian-
Christian tradition helps to put Shakespeare’s criticism of Machiavellianism
in perspective. According to the tradition, Christian liberty is dual: it consists

70 See 2 Corinthians 7:11 and Rozett, *Doctrine of Election* for the theme of self-revenge. As Rozett
notes, the last of the stages of repentence described in 2 Cor. 7:11 is revenge upon oneself. She also
cites Bradbook for the notion that the revenger ironically takes on the role of God, revenging himself
upon himself.

71 Earlier, Richard invokes Saint Peter (III.iv.81 and I.i.138; I.ii.34, 39). The alteration may mean
nothing, or it may reflect Richard’s growing sense of Christian accusation. (See footnote 2 for Pauline
accusation as the theater of conversion of penitents. See also III.ii.75 for the oath, “by the holy rood,”
which may reflect worries about painful punishment.) Calvin cites conscience’s “thousand witnesses”
as an “ancient proverb” (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge

72 “Have mercy, Jesu!—Soft! I did but dream / O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me!” (Richard
III, V.iii.194–95).
in freedom from the carnal law, as Paul argued in Romans 7:4; and it also gives reasons for obeying the temporal powers of the world: Romans 13 is often cited.73 Glossing this tension between the authority of God and human freedom, Leo Strauss reads Machiavelli as defending a flexible, “natural” alternation between the practice of virtue and vice, reflecting the useful “fact” that there is no authority of God, and that responding to absolute religious commandments marks a “confusion of the brain.” In the antithesis of Calvin’s position on the conscience, the Machiavellian call of the conscience is no more than a call to fear other men where it is necessary.74 Thus, Calvin writes: “Hence a law is said to bind the conscience, because it simply binds the individual, without looking at men, or taking any account of them” (emphasis added). In his summary of Machiavelli’s teaching on the conscience, Strauss characterizes Machiavelli’s interpretation of the natural conscience as a “kind of prudence which is frequently indistinguishable from mere calculation of worldly gain.”75 As Romans 2.14–16 argues, conscience can either excuse or accuse, and Machiavelli’s intention is to excuse the sins that are necessary and to accuse only impolitic crime.76 By recasting the authentic voice of the conscience as one that heeds fearful premonitions of this-worldly harms, Machiavelli indirectly fights against Aristotelian nature and Christian voluntarism by excusing necessary sins and accusing unnecessary ones, whether unnecessary acts are “vicious” acts such as cruelty improperly used or “virtuous” acts such as liberality and generosity misused. If it was given full expression, this bourgeois conscience would spell the death of Aristotelian moral character as well as the death of the Christian conscience.

It is this politicized and bourgeois conscience that Shakespeare finds partially unsatisfactory. His criticism reaches its height in Richard III, who is a perfectly Machiavellian character precisely because he fails to execute the true project of philosophical citizenship. Although it is difficult to pin down exactly how Shakespeare conceives of citizenship, citizenship, for Shakespeare, clearly does not mean standing alone, vulnerable to attack, and wishing to trade your earthly kingdom for an animal (Richard III,

73 On Christian liberty, see the thirty-nine Articles of 1571, especially Article X, and Calvin’s Institutes, III.19 for the notion of “two worlds,” over which “different kings and different laws can preside” (Institutes of the Christian Religion, 141).
74 Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 142; Strauss, Thoughts on Machiavelli, 240–41.
75 Thoughts on Machiavelli, 196; Mansfield, Machiavelli’s Virtue, 26.
V.i,v.7–13). It does not mean being a tool of others’ plans and needs, and it does not mean denying the efficacy of the religious conscience to which one ultimately falls prey. To employ theoretical language that Shakespeare may well not approve, Machiavelli offers a new interpretation of voluntarism, this time oriented on the corporeal rather than the otherworldly—willful materialism replaces willful spiritualism. In contrast, Shakespeare teaches a more moderate reformation of the desire for liberty in the English history plays in two ways. First, Shakespeare implies that the antiprovidential project mounted by Machiavelli does not prove its claim that the only aim of human action is political success. Second, Shakespeare reminds the ambitious individual who is willing to “set my life upon a cast,” as Richard III is, that evidence that the control of chance can be achieved through direct political action is thin. Whether Shakespeare’s criticisms of Machiavellianism rely on a doctrine of the soul and its reception of a natural law remains ambiguous. What is dramatized in Richard III is instead a hesitant endorsement of enlightenment, one that exposes the dangers of unreflective willfulness as well as the attractiveness of getting your own intellectual way, “all the world to nothing.”

VI. Conclusion: A Moderate but Modern Shakespeare

In the character of Richard III, Shakespeare argues out the two great themes of the English history plays: religion and politics. Shakespeare’s most Machiavellian character responds to traditional, providential history by adapting the notion of a providential history to his own conception of political necessity. He exhorts men to serve their true selves, meaning their lower selves. This version of ordered liberty is a recognizable aspect of the modern liberal project, but it is not republican in any simple way: it is not based on recognizably republican elements of government, such as the rotation of offices or the equal liberty of subjects under law, or on democratic values like dignity or the primacy of the voice of the people (D I.58). Instead, the cycle of regimes remains balanced through controlled transgression, or what James Madison’s Federalist, No. 51 much later describes as ambition “made to counteract ambition.” This form of agonistic republicanism depends, in Machiavelli’s exposition of it, upon the closure of political life to the belief in any life that is higher than the political. The philosophic life is caught up in the Machiavellian dragnet as merely another form of “ambitious idleness” (D

77 See McGrail, Tyranny in Shakespeare, for the argument that Richard’s denial of natural right forces him to seek a liberated “self” rather than rejoice in a rational soul aware of its proper place in the cosmos.
I Preface). In its closing off of these competing ways of life, Machiavellianism resembles an imagined realm, an artificial island or a “third Rome” where the life of the soul and of the mind is instrumentalized for the sake of political liberty. Still, the modern orientation can be described as liberal because it does offer the most accessible and stable understanding of citizens’ security, the sine qua non even of the contemplative life. The liberal way of life requires what Thomas Hobbes later calls “rational fear,” the suspicious ability to read signs, and a sense for what it is that humans usually desire. It excuses many of the actions that we seem to do from wickedness, instead relating these deeds to intelligible motives such as profit and honor. It makes wickedness comprehensible to human prudence, however perverse or bloody, and, demystifying human motivations, exposes the ugly but all-too-human reasons behind the ire of a character like Margaret or the hopes of a character like Anne.

Shakespeare seems to offer two competing but equally plausible readings of providence in the history plays. In the one, retribution dominates the deeds and the consciences of those that transgress against God’s will, leading to a chain of slaughter that ends in Henry VII’s accession. In the competing interpretation, human retribution follows as the consequence of failures of the right man to rule in the right way. Shakespeare’s criticisms of Machiavelli clarify the indeterminacy of divine and natural right by suggesting that Machiavellianism is a sophisticated attempt to outsmart religious authority and to reject a natural hierarchy in the name of the autonomous individual who can defensibly claim to rule just because he has seen through the pretensions of clerics and has the prudence to organize brawn after his own spirit. If my reading of the English history plays is correct, Shakespeare thinks that the highest freedom of independence cannot be achieved in the Machiavellian way. It is only available for the thinker in thought, for a philosophic poet or a philosopher, but not for an active man whose worldly ambitions would require the murder of everyone, including his own self, to achieve the liberation of that self. Searching for liberation through politics only seems to lead to tyranny, both over oneself and over others.

78 Strauss, Thoughts on Machiavelli, 255; Sullivan, Machiavelli’s Three Romes, 9.
79 Stephen Greenblatt, Shakespeare’s Freedom (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010) argues, too modestly in my view, that Shakespeare’s goal is artistic autonomy rather than independence of thought. It seems that a truly liberated poet can and should enjoy artistic autonomy and freedom of thought. For the poet’s ability to combine liberating detachment and knowledge of the things of the world, which may be the only (realistic) way of combining freedom of thought and artistic autonomy, see Leo Strauss, Liberalism Ancient and Modern (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 85.
Shakespeare’s political theory has been ignored by the majority of thinkers writing on the foundations of modern liberalism, to the detriment of that theory of freedom and to the understanding of its historical origins. Shakespeare does not make any systematic appearance in the standard histories of political thought, and, more surprisingly, is not a presence in the most important accounts of the development of autonomy and of the self.80 This is doubly surprising because so much of our language and ethical orientation is the product of Shakespearian education. Above, I have focused on the highest freedom as a political question. But if the interpretation developed in this paper is persuasive, Shakespeare offers a very serious account of the limits of personal autonomy as well as the limits of our encumbered selves in Richard III. Indeed, one could identify this care for the self as a dominant theme in the Shakespearian corpus as a whole. A few sketchy remarks can bear out this claim. As Macbeth says, “I dare do all that may become a man / Who dares do more is none” (Macbeth I.vii.45–46). Macbeth thinks of himself as “whole” and “founded on a rock,” but he quickly discovers what it is to exceed those limits by shattering that rock. One of the more interesting if not the most thoughtful of Shakespearian characters promises to “stand / As if a man were author of himself.” This quotation is not from Richard III; the lines are spoken by Coriolanus, who has been asked to “stand for his place” before the multitude, showing his scars in an ironical attempt to gain personal authority on the shoulders of the crowd. But Coriolanus is able to sustain the thought of autonomous existence for less than six lines of the play, and he’s physically kneeling before his matriarch within sixteen lines of his promise.81 These Shakespearian reflections on individualism are indeed “warnings” and “tokens” to marvel at. Coming at a time when Renaissance humanism, skepticism, political upheaval, and the Reformation had radically altered the relations between citizen, man, and political community, Shakespeare’s fundamental criticisms of Machiavellian independence serve to remind us to think for ourselves. By reminding us of how little we know about the human good, Shakespeare punctures Machiavellian commonplaces that seem authoritative and does so without substituting one worldview for another. This is the core of the education lampooned by the moniker “the Shakespeare myth.”


81 Coriolanus V.iii.36; Greenblatt, Shakespeare’s Freedom, 109.
The overarching theme of classical political philosophy, according to those who have contributed most impressively to its recovery, is the best regime. The best regime is the regime in which the comprehensive political good is most successfully realized, the regime in which its members live the best lives of which they are capable. But different human beings possess different capacities, and they are ruled by different desires. What is the best life for one is not the best life for another, and the comprehensive political good, whether envisioned in speech or realized in deed, is not homogeneous. In raising the question of the best regime in full seriousness, the classical political philosophers raise both the specifically political question of how the different constituents of this regime can be harmonized and the specifically philosophical question of what the best life is simply. The answer they give to the latter question is that, though a life lived in the pursuit of wisdom is not the only good life, it is much the best life, the most choiceworthy life, for those who have what it takes to live it. The classical political philosophers do not just wish to give this answer, however. They wish to argue in favor of it.

Philosophy is the quest for knowledge regarding the fundamental cause or causes of the whole, its constitution, and man’s place within it. This quest gives rise to pleasures that do not cloy and depend less on circumstances beyond one’s control than do other pleasures. The manifest solidity of these pleasures, including their duration and their relative purity and freedom from pain, suggests that the attempt to replace opinion with knowledge about the questions that human reason of its very nature poses
to itself is, all things considered, the most pleasant activity available to man. Those who think that this is so are led to raise the question whether it is the desire for pleasure itself, however refined and specifically human, that actually motivates the choice to engage in philosophy, or whether it is something else. I shall argue that it is indeed something else, not accidentally but as a matter of logical necessity. Before beginning my argument, however, I need to justify a term that I shall be employing.

In Plato’s Republic, Socrates says that the soul of every single man (psychē henos hekastou) is divided into three parts. One of these he calls the learning-loving and philosophical (philomathes...kai philosophon) part.¹ Aristotle says similarly that all men—not just many of them and certainly not just a few of them, but all of them—by nature desire to know.² Plato and Aristotle would, of course, hardly deny that in most people the philosophical part of the soul does not get developed very far and that the desire to know only occasionally prevails over the other desires. Moreover, philosophy itself is understood by Plato and Aristotle to constitute a whole way of life, and those who live this life are few in number. Accordingly, in what follows I shall speak not of philosophy but of philosophizing, not of philosophia but of philosophein.³ By philosophizing I mean no more than trying to understand matters of enduring significance by puzzling over them thoughtfully, in solitude or in the company of others. I leave entirely to one side the enormous question whether philosophein ever attains, or even can attain, genuine sophia regarding the world, our place in it, and its ultimate ground. And so I also leave to one side the question whether philosophizing tends toward theism or atheism.

Philosophizing is indeed pleasant, at least to those who are not so insecure in their theism or so insecure in their atheism that they experience anxiety whenever they sense that reason is on the move and, as reason, is altogether indifferent to their anxiety. But what is the character of this pleasure? In considering this question, which is said to be a concern of political philosophy,⁴ I shall speak to points made by Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and others. I shall not proceed chronologically, however. I begin my

¹ Plato, Republic 580d2; 581b5; cf. 435e2. See Phaedrus, 279a 9: “For by nature, my friend, some sort of philosophy dwells in man’s thinking” (physēi gar, ὁ ϕιλέ, enesti tis philosophia tēi tou andros dianoai). The incessant “Why?” asked by very young children attests to the truth of Socrates’s claim.

² Aristotle, Metaphysics 980a20.

³ Aristotle, Metaphysics 938b1–3; Nicomachean Ethics 1105b16–19; Politics 1279b11–16, 1331a14–17.

⁴ Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics 1153b1.
consideration of this question neither with the ancients nor with Thomas, but with a philosopher who is despised by many who admire the ancients and by many Thomists as well. I begin with Kant.

1. Kant’s Disjunction of Pleasure and Duty

Early in the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant presents an argument that I summarize as follows. There are two possible determining grounds of choice. One of these is the desire to attain a feeling of pleasure from the act in which one chooses to engage. The other is the desire to act according to a rational principle that has the character of law, to do what it commands because doing so is intrinsically good, whatever feeling it may give rise to. The first determining ground is what Kant calls the lower faculty of desire, which we share with irrational animals. The second is the higher faculty of desire, which is nothing other than practical reason itself. Because man is not only a rational being but a finite one as well, he has inclinations to act according to the lower faculty of desire in opposition to the higher faculty of desire. But action in accordance with reason is ipso facto obligatory. It is a matter of duty, something one owes to oneself as a rational being. By virtue of the lower faculty of desire we wish to feel good. By virtue of the higher faculty we wish to be good. Kant thinks that there is a difference between feeling good and being good. I shall abbreviate the two determining grounds of choice as pleasure and duty. For Kant, there is no third.

Whether reason by itself and independently of the desire to feel good can actually determine the will is the guiding question of the first part of the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Kant answers this question in the affirmative. Reason by itself determines the will when one chooses to act solely on maxims that could in principle be acted on by all rational beings without thereby generating a practical contradiction, that is, situations in which the ends aimed at by the maxims could not be realized.

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6 See Kant’s definition of an imperative, and thereby of obligation, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Book 1, §1 Explanation, Remark, in *Werke*, 6:126.

7 Kant does not think that there is anything wrong with acting according to the lower faculty of desire except in cases where doing so is ruled out by the higher faculty of desire.

8 By a maxim Kant means only a subjective principle of action, such as to go for a run three times a week, or to memorize one good poem per month. Every maxim aims at an end. The ends of these two maxims are, most likely, physical fitness and having a stock of poems on which to reflect when books are out of reach. Reason allows us lots of leeway in choosing our maxims, some of which could be
The first and much controverted version of Kant’s categorical imperative, “Act only according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law,” is a canon for maxims.\(^9\) As expressed, it is not a directive to perform a specific act. It offers no guidance for concrete decisions other than telling us, categorically, not to base our decisions on maxims that, if universalized, would not be able to realize their ends.\(^{10}\) The second version of the categorical imperative, which Kant thinks is equivalent to the first version,\(^{11}\) is “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, both in your own person and in the person of another, always at the same time as an end, and never merely as means.”\(^{12}\) And this version of the categorical imperative gives rise to ends that are also duties. These duties, which are characterized by wide latitude and thereby allow for some discretion in deciding how they are to be fulfilled, are not merely formal. They are self-perfection and working for the happiness of others.\(^{13}\) Self-perfection, which includes philosophizing for those who have the ability and the opportunity to philosophize, is as much an achievement of the higher faculty of desire, of practical reason, as is beneficence.

Kant argues that in assessing whether the ground of a particular choice is duty or pleasure, it makes no difference what the source of pleasure happens to be, whether it derives from stimulation of the senses or from the activity of the mind. Considered simply as a ground of choice, all pleasure is essentially of the same kind. One pleasure differs from another quite idiosyncratic. What reason does not allow, however, is acting on a maxim that, were everyone else to act on it, could not achieve its end, for example, writing bad checks to get cash. If everyone wrote bad checks to get cash no one would accept checks at all, and so no one would be able to get cash by writing them. According to Kant, a maxim that could not achieve its end if universally adopted is irrational and thereby immoral as well.


\(^{10}\) It is the nature of reason, as distinct from judgment, to make its pronouncements (to the philosopher and the nonphilosopher alike) in the language of universals. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 357; B 364–65; cf. B 172 and note “a” on that page.

\(^{11}\) That these are but two versions of the same imperative means that each implies the other. The demonstration of their mutual implication is based on the distinction between a person and a thing, succinctly expressed in the following passage: “Everything in nature works according to laws. Only a rational being has the ability to act according to the idea (Vorstellung) of laws, i.e., according to principles, and thereby has he a will” (*Werke*, 6:41; cf. *Critique of Practical Reason*, Book 1, §7 Corollary and Remark, in *Werke*, 6:142).

\(^{12}\) *Werke*, 6:61.

\(^{13}\) Kant’s detailed account of what is involved in self-perfection and beneficence is found neither in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* nor in the *Critique of Practical Reason* but in the “Doctrine of Virtue” of the *Metaphysics of Morals* proper. There one discovers that Kantian ethics is not the empty formalism it is frequently alleged to be.
The Pleasure of Philosophizing and Its Moral Foundation

only in its duration, intensity, or closeness of association with pain. Kant recognizes that there is an essential difference between pleasure on the one hand, and a rational principle or argument on the other. The former is felt whereas the latter is not felt but understood. Still, pleasure typically accompanies understanding, and this pleasure can be compared with a merely bodily pleasure. For all pleasures as such have something in common. It is the feeling of agreeableness (Annehmlichkeit), whatever the source of the pleasures.

If the determination of the will rests on the feeling of agreeableness or disagreeableness that [a man] expects...it is all the same to him through what means of representation (Vorstellungsart) he is affected. The only thing he considers in making a choice is how great, how long-lasting, how easily obtained, and how often repeated this agreeableness is.14

Kant does not take issue with the claim that intellectual pleasures are by and large more refined, more enduring, more accessible, and less dependent on chance than are bodily pleasures. For that is to say no more than that, in these respects, intellectual pleasures are more pleasant than the coarser bodily pleasures. If a human being were to philosophize for the sake of the pleasure he anticipated this activity to give rise to, his choice would be morally on a par with the choice to pursue bodily pleasures. If, however, the reason a human being philosophizes is that he considers philosophizing to be something he owes to himself as a rational being, to be a duty, then the ground of his choice to philosophize is something different toto caelo from anticipated pleasure.15

That one philosophizes as a matter of duty does not necessarily mean that one does so only reluctantly. Our word “duty” is derived from the Latin debitum—what is obligatory, what ought to be done. There is nothing in the concept of duty that implies its performance must be more painful than pleasant. In some circumstances doing one’s duty can be quite painful indeed, but in other certain circumstances it can be quite pleasant.

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14 *Critique of Practical Reason*, Book 1, §3 Corollary, Remark 1, in *Werke*, 6:130. (Cf. Plato, *Protagoras* 356a7–356b1.) Kant does not consider different pleasures in terms of their relative degrees of purity because this issue does not affect his central point.

15 Kant argues that in the experience of the beautiful as distinct from the merely pleasant, the judgment that the object is beautiful precedes and is the ground of the pleasure we take in the object (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §9, in *Werke*, 8:295–98). If Kant is right about this, then he is right a fortiori that the pleasure one takes in the often laborious activity of philosophizing, or for that matter in mathematics, natural science, and other inquiries, follows and presupposes the recognition that one has come to understand something, that this understanding is good, and that one is the better for it.
One is aware of having done the right thing for the right reason, and this awareness is pleasant, even on those occasions where the pain is much more acutely felt than the pleasure.¹⁶

This fact gives rise to an objection that Kant addresses in the *Metaphysics of Morals*: one does one’s duty only because of the pleasure one anticipates from doing so. The dutiful person, so the objection goes, is as much a hedonist as anyone else. He just does not know himself well enough to acknowledge this fact. Kant’s response to this objection is that one takes pleasure in doing one’s duty only because one is aware that doing so is intrinsically good. It is the conviction that one has done something worth doing for its own sake that gives rise to the subsequent feeling of pleasure. Kant calls this kind of pleasure “moral pleasure.” He distinguishes it from what he calls “sensibly dependent pleasure.”¹⁷

Although moral pleasure, considered merely as a feeling, is not essentially different from sensibly dependent pleasure, there is still a cardinal difference between the two, a difference not of feeling but of causal efficacy. Whereas sensibly dependent pleasure can serve as a determining ground of choice, and does so exclusively for the consistent hedonist, moral pleasure cannot serve as a determining ground of choice. It can be felt only if duty, done for its own sake, is the determining ground of the choice. It is a manifest contradiction to say that one does one’s duty for its own sake, yet only for the sake of the pleasure that one envisions to result from doing so.¹⁸

Kant recognizes that one cannot adopt and act on a *maxim* for its own sake. For it is the very nature of the maxim to aim at an end beyond itself. For example, one adopts and acts on the maxim to do one’s grocery shopping after work on Fridays not for the sake of this maxim itself but for the end of acquisition and consumption. On the other hand, subjecting one’s maxim to the strictures of the *categorical imperative* is doing one’s

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¹⁶ Kant overstates the matter when he says that doing our duty can reduce happiness, and hence pleasure, to less than zero. As long as one is conscious of doing or having done one’s (perhaps quite painful) duty, some feeling of pleasure, however slight or evanescent, is present in the satisfaction that accompanies this consciousness.

¹⁷ Kant, Preface to the “Doctrine of Virtue” of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Werke*, 6:505–6. This argument of Kant’s bears restating because it exposes a recurrent fallacy present in all attempts to debunk morality as closet hedonism.

¹⁸ To the common objection that we simply *cannot* do our duty for its own sake, that we can do our duty *only* for the sake of an extrinsic reward, for anticipated pleasure either in this life or in another one, Kant would respond that this claim is not at all self-evident; and he would ask for a proof of it, with premises unambiguously stated.
duty for its own sake. We do not thereby do away with what Kant calls “our boundless longing for happiness,” with what could be called with greater precision “our boundless longing for pleasure.” We only place a “restriction” on this longing: we refrain from acquisition by way of shoplifting, even if we are virtually certain we can get away with it. We exercise this restriction for one reason only: doing so is the way a rational being ought to act.

2. Pleasure and Progress

Kant’s reasoning sheds some light on the question of why we choose to philosophize and why we take pleasure in philosophizing. I propose the following. It is not that we consider philosophizing to be good because we take pleasure in it. Rather, we take pleasure in philosophizing because we think this activity is intrinsically good.19 The conviction that philosophizing is intrinsically good, whatever feeling it may give rise to, is the determining ground of the choice to philosophize. But Kant has said that the only two possible grounds for determining choice are duty and pleasure. If he is right about that, and if pleasure is not the determining ground of the choice to philosophize, then we have a disjunctive syllogism, the conclusion of which is that the determining ground of the choice to philosophize must be duty, albeit a duty of wide latitude.20 This syllogism is incontestably valid. But is it sound? That is, are its premises true? Kant seems to have thought so. Would the ancients have thought so as well?

Before addressing this question, let us consider two passages by the greatest twentieth-century philosopher to speak to it, a philosopher who generally sides with the ancients against the moderns, and against Kant in particular, namely, Leo Strauss. In the first passage, from Natural Right and History, Strauss states something that is obvious though, as far as I can tell, overlooked or underestimated by his followers.

From the point of view of hedonism, nobility of character is good because it is conducive to a life of pleasure...it is not good for its

19 Something can please us in three different ways. (1) If the feeling of pleasure presupposes no antecedent judgment about it one way or another, it is brute (immediate) pleasure. (2) If the feeling of pleasure presupposes an antecedent judgment, it is not brute pleasure, but a rational (founded) pleasure. (2a) If the feeling of pleasure presupposes the judgment that what gives rise to the pleasure is good, then it is moral pleasure. (2b) If the feeling of pleasure presupposes the judgment that what gives rise to the pleasure is beautiful, then it is aesthetic pleasure. There is then a most intimate relation, though not one of identity, between moral pleasure and aesthetic pleasure. Kant calls beauty “the symbol of morality” (Critique of Judgment, §59, in Werke, 8:458–63).

20 There are a variety of paths on which one can set out to fulfill the duty of self-perfection. Philosophizing is one of these paths. It is not the only path.
own sake. According to the classics, this interpretation distorts the phenomena as they are known from experience to every unbiased and competent, i.e., not morally obtuse, man. We admire excellence without any regard to our pleasures or to our benefits. No one understands by a good man or man of excellence a man who leads a pleasant life....The phenomenon of admiration of human excellence cannot be explained on hedonistic or utilitarian grounds, except by means of ad hoc hypotheses. These hypotheses lead to the assertion that all admiration is, at best, a kind of telescoped calculation of benefits for ourselves. They are the outcome of a materialistic or crypto-materialistic view, which forces its holders to understand the higher as nothing but the effect of the lower, or which prevents them from considering the possibility that there are phenomena which are simply irreducible to their conditions, that there are phenomena that form a class by themselves.21

The admiration of excellence is associated with some degree of pleasure—as admiration always is—but it would make no sense to say that we admire someone so that we might feel pleasure.

In the second passage, from On Tyranny, Strauss states something not so obvious, something that, taken together with the first passage, speaks directly to the question of why one chooses to philosophize, and why the determining ground of this choice is not the desire for pleasure.

Socrates ultimately leaves no doubt as to the fundamental difference between the good and the pleasant. No man can be simply wise; therefore not wisdom, but progress in wisdom is the highest good for man. Wisdom cannot be separated from self-knowledge; therefore, progress toward wisdom will be accompanied by awareness of that progress. And that awareness is necessarily pleasant. This whole—the progress and the awareness of it—is both the best and the most pleasant thing for man. It is in this sense that the highest good is intrinsically pleasant....What else is the pleasant consciousness of one’s progress in wisdom or virtue but one’s reasonable and deserved satisfaction with, and even admiration of, oneself?22

21 Leo Strauss, Natural Right and History (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 128 (emphasis added).
22 Leo Strauss, On Tyranny, rev. ed., ed. Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 101–2 (emphasis added). See 130n43, conclusion. Strauss says there that justice is not intrinsically pleasant. But is it not the case that the just man, even when experiencing physical pain as a consequence of his justice, enjoys some measure of satisfaction in knowing that he has done what is just? And is this anything other than the pleasant consciousness of one’s progress in moral virtue, a progress that gives rise to “one’s reasonable and deserved satisfaction with, and even admiration of, oneself”? In the last sentence of the paragraph on p. 102, Strauss says that Xenophon in the Hiero has posed “the question as to whether the demands of virtue cannot be completely replaced...
What one admires in oneself is not the pleasure of self-admiration, which would be absurd, but one’s progress. The consciousness of progress is the necessary ground or foundation of the pleasure and wholly conditions it. And one could hardly make progress in wisdom, of all things, without recognizing both that one is progressing and that this progress is good, intrinsically good.

According to Kant, the pleasure attendant upon doing one’s duty for its own sake is distinct from and founded on the recognition that doing one’s duty is intrinsically good. According to Strauss, if I have interpreted him correctly, the pleasure attendant upon making progress in wisdom is distinct from and founded on the recognition that making progress in wisdom is intrinsically good. In each case the recognition that something is intrinsically good, intrinsically worthwhile, is both the necessary and the sufficient condition for taking pleasure in it. Making progress in wisdom, or philosophizing, is pleasant because when we philosophize we are aware that we are living thoughtfully and that living thoughtfully is how we ought to live. The pleasure to which philosophizing gives rise seems, then, to fall squarely within the class of what Kant calls “moral pleasure.” Such is the implication of Strauss’s suggestion that the pleasant consciousness of one’s progress in wisdom or virtue is nothing other than “one’s reasonable and deserved satisfaction with oneself.”

As for the pursuit of something solely for the feeling of pleasure it gives rise to, even Kant holds that such a thing is immoral only when the pursuit happens to conflict with the guidance of reason. Otherwise there is not anything about the pursuit of pleasure simpliciter that deserves condemnation, though there is not anything about it that deserves admiration either, to say nothing of respect. The reason why Kant thinks the human good cannot be pleasure alone is not that it would thereby be something merely selfish, but that, as a mere feeling of agreeableness, it would not be something specifically human.


24 Philosophizing gives rise to pleasure, but it is itself not a kind of pleasure. Pleasure is a feeling and philosophizing is a quest. The concept of pleasure no more enters into the definition of philosophizing, or of philosophy, than it enters into the definition of obligation in general.

25 We note that Strauss does not speak of making progress in pleasure, or of the consciousness of making progress in pleasure, or, least of all, of admiring oneself for having made progress in pleasure.

by, or reduced to, the desire for pleasure, if for the highest pleasure.” Strauss does not say here how Xenophon would answer the question that he has posed. But the logic of Strauss’s impressive interpretation leads one to infer that Xenophon would answer that the demands of virtue cannot be completely replaced by, or reduced to, the desire for pleasure, even for the highest pleasure.
3. An Implication of Asserting That the Good Is Pleasure Alone

Contrary to what one might initially think, the claim that the good is pleasure alone does not imply that it is merely selfish. John Stuart Mill, who really does make this claim, reasons as follows. One who understands pleasure to be the good will try to realize as much of it as possible: the more pleasure the better. But a greater quantity of pleasure can be more fully realized for a multitude of human beings than for oneself alone. Hence it is only reasonable for a man who understands the human good to be pleasure, and the more pleasure the better, to attempt to realize it for a multitude of human beings rather than just for himself. Indeed, if the only way he can realize a great amount of pleasure for a multitude of human beings is by foregoing his own pleasure, it follows according to Mill that he should forgo it.

Starting from the premises that the good is pleasure alone and that pleasure exists in greater and lesser quantities, Mill concludes in favor of what one might call “altruistic hedonism.” Altruistic hedonism is more rational, because it is more consistent, than ordinary hedonism. Mill’s conclusion, however, is not that altruistic hedonism is better than selfish hedonism because it is more rational than selfish hedonism. For then reason, and not pleasure, would be the standard of the good. Altruistic hedonism is better than selfish hedonism only because it produces more pleasure than selfish hedonism, even if only a rational being can recognize this fact.

Mill’s conclusion is so unexpected and so apparently paradoxical that one might suspect it of being a sophism. Mill was probably one of those thinkers whom Nietzsche had in mind when he spoke of the “English-mechanistic doltification of the world” (Welt-Vertölpelung) that is motivated by the desire to minimize pain and suffering. But, as Nietzsche must have realized, Mill was a competent logician. For Nietzsche, the problem with Mill’s argument is not that it is formally invalid, but that it is unsound.

26 “Pleasure, and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends” (J. S. Mill, Utilitarianism [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007], 55).

27 “The utilitarian standard…is not the agent’s own happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness altogether; and if it may possibly be doubted whether a noble character is always the happier for its nobleness, there can be no doubt that it makes other people happier” (Mill, Utilitarianism, 59). “By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain” (ibid., 55).

Nietzsche resists the conclusion by denying the initial premise. Nietzsche denies that pleasure is the human good.

The singular merit of Mill’s argument is that it forces the determined hedonist who wishes to resist its altruistic conclusion not to deny but rather to reformulate its initial premise. “The human good is not pleasure simply. Rather the human good is my pleasure.”29 It is not easy to see how anyone could reason, in private or in public, to the claim that the human good is his pleasure in such a way that he would convince the rest of us that he was right about this. Selfish hedonism can be asserted, just as it can be asserted that the good is essentially one’s own good.30 But reason cannot be enlisted in support of these assertions. For reason is not a respecter of persons.

4. Plato and Aristotle on Pleasure—Some Observations

In Book 9 of the Republic, Socrates groups human beings into three types (genē): the wisdom-loving type (philosophon), the victory-loving (philonikon) type, and the gain-loving (philokerdes) type. There are, he says, three forms of pleasure, one associated with, or underlying, each of these types.31 Socrates then imagines a disputation between these three types of men regarding the ways of life they live and the pleasures associated with them. The dispute is solely about what constitutes living most sweetly, that

29 Robert Bartlett, “Plato’s Critique of Hedonism in the Philebus,” American Political Science Review 102, no.1 (February 2008): 150, says that “for the hedonist who knows what he is about or who is no fool, his concern with ‘the good’ is altogether selfish: ‘the good’ is indeed pleasure—my pleasure! Hedonists seek in all things to maximize their own good” (the emphasis, the presence of quotation marks surrounding “the good,” and the absence of quotation marks surrounding “their own good” are in the original). Bartlett says that Mill “jumps without argument from the point of view of the selfish individual hedonist to that of someone concerned…with the good of the whole.” Mill indeed leaves his argument unexpressed in the passage that Bartlett quotes on this page, but the concluding “therefore” implies an argument. Mill’s argument, a simple but nonetheless ingenious one, is spelled out above. Mill has not just “assumed,” as Bartlett charges, that “the best life will of necessity be a just or moral one.” The real problem with Mill’s account is that in distinguishing a superior quality of pleasure from a great quantity of pleasure (Utilitarianism, 55–56) he gives the impression of reverting, contrary to his intention, to something like Kant’s conception of moral pleasure as founded on a good that is distinct from pleasure.

30 It is not clear just what the latter claim, which one occasionally hears these days, is supposed to mean. If put forward as a definitio boni it is obviously defective in form: the definiendum reappears in the definiens. If the unexpressed assumption is that one’s own good is pleasure, it can be countered that one’s own good consists less in pleasure, or even life, than in integrity. The latter, which is a matter less of feeling good than of being good, is so much one’s own good that, unlike life and pleasure, one cannot be deprived of it without one’s own consent. Cf. Nicomachean Ethics 1095b26–27, 1169a1–2.

is, most pleasantly and painlessly, with all considerations of noble versus shameful, and better versus worse, left to one side.

Socrates says that all three types of men, beginning in childhood, have tasted something of the pleasure associated with gain. They also have some experience of the pleasure that comes from being honored (presumably for some victory or other), and, up to a point, even the pleasure that comes with learning (which Socrates momentarily substitutes for wisdom). But only the lover of wisdom, the philosopher, has tasted the pleasure associated with the “beholding of being” (hē tou ontos thea). The philosopher, then, is the most experienced judge of the different kinds of pleasure. His judgment is that, “of the three pleasures, the most pleasant would belong to that part of the soul with which we learn; and regarding the man among us in whom this part rules, his is the most pleasant life.”32 Shortly afterwards, Socrates says that “the pleasure of the other men is neither entirely true, save that of the thoughtful man, nor pure.”33 The thoughtful man’s pleasure is entirely true. Socrates does not say that it is entirely pure. He does argue, powerfully, that the thoughtful man’s pleasure is purer than are the pleasures enjoyed by the lovers of gain and of honor. But an argument developed in the sequel shows that the thoughtful man’s pleasure cannot be entirely pure.

Pleasure that arises by way of relief from pain, Socrates says, is not pure pleasure, and this holds for pleasures that attend the filling up of an emptiness, such as, in the case of the body, hunger and thirst, and in the case of the soul, ignorance. Compared to the man who moves from the emptiness of hunger to the fullness that comes with eating, the man who moves from the emptiness of ignorance to the (relative) fullness of knowledge participates more in pure being (ousias katharas metechei). For, he says, what this man knows is immortal and true. Compared to the pleasures having to do with the care of the body, the pleasures having to do with the care of soul are associated with a purer object.34

It does not follow, however, that this association with a purer object causes the pleasures having to do with care of the soul to be purer than every bodily pleasure. The pleasure of philosophizing is less bound up with pain than are the coarser bodily pleasures, to be sure, though some of the latter are, while they last, more intense than the pleasure of philosophizing, and

32 Rep. 583a2.
34 Rep. 584c1–2, 585b8, c2–d2.
in that respect are greater as well. But the preeminently pure pleasures that
Socrates mentions, the pleasures least associated with pain, are the pleasures
of smell. These, he says, “without prior pain, suddenly become extraordi-
narily great and, on ceasing, leave no pain behind.” The unanticipated smell
of flowers, of pine needles after a heavy thunderstorm, or of autumn leaves is
not preceded by any pain at all.

Is the same true of philosophizing? Not quite. Philosophiz-
ing, and learning in general, is a progressing from knowing less to knowing
more. To that extent, it is accompanied by the mixed pleasure and pain of
desire not immediately fulfilled. Even the undeniable pleasure of suddenly
apprehending, say, the conclusion of a Euclidean proof is associated with
the preceding effort of thinking through the argument in support of it. It is
thereby associated with pain, which, however so faintly felt, is inseparable
from effort. A pure intellect, an intellectual intuition or intuitive intellect,
which would know its object nondiscursively and hence without effort, would
experience a pure pleasure, a pleasure unmixed with any pain whatsoever.
But that is not the kind of intellect we have. In the act of understanding
(noēsis), as distinct from the activity of discursive thinking (dianoia) that
characterizes learning, we arguably do experience a pleasure that is not
accompanied by pain. But the effortless act of understanding, as we expe-
rience it, is pleasant in part because it is experienced as a relief from the
preceding effort of discursive thinking.

In choosing to philosophize one chooses to engage in an
activity in which pleasure is necessarily mixed with some measure of pain.

35 Rep. 584b5–10. See Adam’s note on a pertinent fragment of Heraclitus (Republic of Plato, 2:351). The
souls in Hades, though purified of what is corporeal through death, still retain the sense of smell.
36 Note the quantifier hapasan at Gorgias 496d4.
37 The pleasure that one experiences in proving a Euclidean proposition is a pleasure that follows from
recognizing (1) that a certain relationship follows necessarily if unexpectedly from something else,
and (2) that one understands this relationship. Note the enunciation of the final proposition in the
Elements: “To set out the sides of the five figures (i.e., the regular solids) and compare (them) with one
another” (tas pleuras tôn pente schēmatōn ekthesthai kai sygkrinai pros allēlas) (Book 13, Proposition
18; from the Greek text of J. L. Heiberg). The study of the Elements is consummated in the contem-
plation of a complex truth, and hence also in reasonable and deserved self-admiration for having
managed to apprehend this truth.
38 Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics 1154b26; Metaphysics 1072b14–24.
39 After philosophizing at great length, even Socrates becomes fatigued. And fatigue is incompatible
with pure pleasure. See Jacob Klein, “About Plato’s Philebus,” in Lectures and Essays (Annapolis: St.
40 See Nicomachean Ethics 1173b17 for a possible counterview, depending on how one translates
mathēmatikai [hēdonai].
Anyone who thinks that he philosophizes, and struggles to understand what the great minds have to teach, solely because he longs for purity of pleasure needs to ask himself why he does not spend his time strolling around an arboretum or flower garden instead.41

At the beginning of Plato’s Philebus, the character Protagoras agrees to take over and defend Philebus’s thesis that the good is pleasure and enjoyment,42 in contest with Socrates’s thesis that thoughtfulness (to phronein), understanding (to noein), and other activities of the mind are better than and preferable to pleasure.43 Late in the dialogue Socrates suggests that neither knowledge without pleasure nor pleasure without knowledge is possible.44 Pleasure could exist without knowing in the deepest sense of the word, though there could be no pleasure, not even a bodily pleasure, if one were not aware of it at all. On the other hand, knowing cannot exist without pleasure either, for knowing necessarily gives rise to some degree of pleasure, however slight.

We are reminded here of Aristotle’s formulation that pleasure perfects (teleioi) the activity of thought (dianoia) and contemplation (theoria). But, as Aristotle points out, pleasure does not perfect thought in the same way that the object of knowledge does. For the known object perfects thought by turning it from potential understanding to actual understanding.45 Pleasure, however, is a supervening perfection (epigignomenon ti telos).46 When

41 David Bolotin, “Leo Strauss and Classical Political Philosophy,” Interpretation 22, no. 1 (1994): 133, writes, “In exhorting ourselves and one another to be virtuous, or to resist the path of easy pleasure, we tell ourselves and one another that virtue is good for us, or that it is the core of our true happiness” (italics in the original). This sentence occurs in the middle of a complex paragraph that bears reading and rereading as a whole, as does Bolotin’s entire essay. I am interested here, however, only in the expression “easy pleasure.” For it implies that there are difficult pleasures, and the sentence suggests that they are more choiceworthy than the easy pleasures. The pleasure of philosophizing is one of the difficult pleasures. It is not, then, a pure pleasure.

42 The absence of a definite article before “good” in Socrates initial statement of Philebus’s thesis (11b 5; cf. Seth Benardete, The Tragedy and Comedy of Life: Plato’s “Philebus” [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993], 1–2 and n4) is made up for when he restates Philebus’s thesis near the end, this time with the definite article before “good” (t’agathon: 66d7–8).

43 “The Philebus begins with the question concerning the good life—is it the life of pleasure or the life of the mind? The conversation reported in the Philebus thus seems not merely to follow from but to complete that related in the Republic” (Catherine H. Zuckert, Plato’s Philosophers: The Coherence of the Dialogues [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009], 385).

44 Plato, Philebus 63b7: ouطة pany ti dynaton out’ ôphelimon.

45 Nicomachean Ethics 1174b20–24.

46 Nicomachean Ethics 1174b34. Though a pleasure naturally arises from thinking according to reason—and from acting according to reason as well—the relation between the two is not one of identity but of founding (thinking) and founded (pleasure). Spinoza seems to posit, I think unconvincingly,
the intellect and the intelligible object come together, there is already a perfection, namely, the perfection of actual understanding. The perfection that is pleasure supervenes upon, and presupposes as its foundation and occasion, the perfection that is actual understanding. It is not that philosophizing is good because it gives rise to pleasure. Rather, it gives rise to pleasure because, and only because, it is already good.

In the *Philebus*, Socrates says much the same thing. Pleasures follow upon virtue entire (*sympasa aretē*) as though she were a goddess and they were her attendants. Socrates calls these pleasures “true pleasures.” He notes without elaboration that Philebus has spoken not only of “true pleasures” but of “true and pure pleasures.” Just as in the *Republic*, so in the *Philebus* Socrates recognizes that certain bodily pleasures—he also mentions in the latter dialogue the unanticipated pleasures of smell—rival the pleasures of the mind in purity. In fact, they surpass the pleasures of the mind in purity, for reasons we have already considered.

The contest with which the *Philebus* began, the contest between thinking and understanding (*noein*) on the one hand, and pleasure on the other, ends with Socrates declaring neither pleasure nor intellect (*nous*) to be the victor. The victor is what he calls “measure” (*metron*). But Socrates adds that intellect, which he places three degrees away from measure, is closer to it than pleasure “by the ten-thousandth degree at least” (*myriōi ge*), that is to say, by a virtually infinite degree. How is this possible, given that, as Socrates argued earlier in the *Philebus*, neither understanding by itself nor pleasure by itself, but only the two together, comprise the complete human good? Understanding, the act of the intellect, is virtually infinite in its superiority to the pleasure accompanying it because the recognized goodness of understanding is the source of that pleasure. And so, if someone asks us

47 *Philebus*, 63d1–64a4.
48 *Phlb.* 51e1; cf. 53b9–c2: “it suffices for us to understand at once that every small and slight pleasure, cleansed of pain, would turn out to be more pleasant [!], and truer, and more noble than an exceedingly great pleasure.”
49 *Phlb.* 66a4–8; 67a5–12.
50 *Phlb.* 67a11. I have reproduced Benardete’s translation of *myriōi ge* (*Tragedy and Comedy*, 85). *LSJ* renders *myrios* as “numberless, countless, infinite” (s.v.; see also notes I.4.b. and II).
51 The “mixing” of thought (*phronēsis*) and pleasure that Socrates undertakes, beginning at *Philebus* 59d1, is not a mishmash of the two. It is a “beautiful” mixing (60a2, 61b8, 61d1, 64e6), governed by “measure” (64d1–65a1).
what we are aiming at in our often laborious study of, say, the Republic or the Philebus, we answer, naturally, humanly, and correctly, that we are aiming at understanding something important, not that we are aiming at feeling pleasure, even though, again, such understanding as we are able to achieve does indeed give rise to pleasure.52

**Scientia propter voluptatem** as a formulation for what motivates philosophizing is as alien to the greatest philosophers of antiquity as is **scientia propter potentiam**.53 In the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle says that there are many things that “we would take trouble to possess. . .even if they brought us no pleasure at all.” The examples he gives are “seeing, remembering, knowing, and the virtues.”54 It is not the pleasure perfecting these things that causes them to be choiceworthy, for they are already choiceworthy.55

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52 See Gorgias 521d8. Socrates says that the *logoi* he engages in are “for the sake of the best [pros to beliston], not for the sake of the most pleasant [to hēdiston].”

53 Allan Bloom, in the interpretative essay that accompanies his translation of the Republic, writes, “The quest for pure pleasures is the motivation of a higher kind of free man who no longer has to worry about the necessary. But this quest can only be fulfilled through philosophy. . .Only philosophy is pure pleasure” (Allan Bloom, The Republic of Plato [New York: Basic Books, 1968], 425). Bloom’s claims here are dubious. What motivates “a higher kind of free man”—assuming that this is the philosopher or protphilosopher—is strictly speaking not the quest for pure pleasures, or for any other pleasures, but the quest for wisdom. Contrast Bloom’s statement with the following statement of Strauss’s: “the wise. . .must be compelled [to rule] because their whole life is devoted to the pursuit of something which is absolutely higher in dignity than any human things—the unchangeable truth” (Natural Right and History, 151).

54 Nicomachean Ethics 1174a4–6: peri polla te spoudēn poiēsaimeth’ an kai ei médemian epipheroi hēdonēn, hoion horan, mnēmoneuein, eidenai, tas aretas echein. (Cf. 1097b2–5.) The first three members of this list are, considered in themselves, effortless or almost effortless. This is not true for the fourth member, the virtues (tas aretas). They are habits (hexeis), and some of them require effort and thereby a measure of pain to cultivate. Aristotle’s use of the plural here, without qualification, implies that the moral virtues as well as the intellectual virtues are intrinsically choiceworthy, independently of the pleasure they give rise to. Note the expression *pasan aretēn* at 1097b1–5. Cf. 1040b4–6.

55 Strauss draws attention to what he calls “the open secret of [Plato’s] Philebus: the highest good: *theoria* plus *hédonē*,” in “Reason and Revelation,” in Leo Strauss and the Theological-Political Problem, by Heinrich Meier (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 162. There is nothing particularly shocking about this “open secret,” provided that the character of the “plus” is properly understood. Thomas Aquinas would concur with Strauss, though not without a qualification: *omnes appetunt delectationem, sicut et appetunt bonum: et tamen delctationem appetunt ratione boni, et non e converso* (Summa Theologiae I-II, q. 2, art. 6, ad 3). Pleasure is repute in something good, but it is not simply identical with that good (I-II, q. 34, art. 2–4). For man, the highest good is knowing the first cause of things, and this knowing gives rise to pleasure (I-II, q. 3, art. 5; art. 8). Even Kant understands pleasure to be a constituent of the highest good: morality “plus” happiness (Glückseligkeit—of which pleasure is, for him, the prime constituent) (Critique of Practical Reason, Book 2, Chapter 2, in Werke, 6:242–43). But these two thinkers, and the Socrates of the Philebus and Aristotle too, understand this conjunction not to be a simple “sum,” but a relation of cause and effect. The passage I quoted earlier from On Tyranny, 101–2, suggests that Strauss himself does not understand *theoria* plus *hédonē* to be a simple sum, but a relation, an *irreversible* relation, of cause and effect.
Here is another passage by Strauss, in the “Restatement” appended to On Tyranny, that speaks convincingly to this issue.

The argument of the [i.e., Xenophon’s] Hiero implies the question of whether the philosophic life can be understood in hedonistic terms. It implies that it cannot be so understood because the rank of the various kinds of pleasure ultimately depends on the rank of the activities to which the pleasures are related. Neither the quantity nor the purity of the pleasure determines in the last resort the rank of human activities. The pleasures are essentially secondary; they cannot be understood but with reference to the activities.56

This fine statement is not Strauss’s last word. He continues it as follows.

The question as to whether the activities or the pleasure are in themselves primary has nothing [!] to do with the question as to whether someone who engages in an activity is prompted to do so primarily by the intrinsic value of the activity or by the pleasure which he expects to enjoy as a consequence of the activity.

Not so. These two questions have everything to do with each other. Perhaps Strauss suspects that his argument is gravitating toward a species of “moralism.” And indeed it is.

Earlier in his “Restatement,” Strauss writes, “It is practically impossible to say whether the primary motive of the philosopher is the desire for admiration [from competent judges] or the desire for the pleasures deriving from understanding.”57 And yet what he says shortly afterwards implies, correctly, that these alternatives are not exclusive. “The philosopher’s dominating passion is the desire for truth, i.e., for knowledge of the eternal order, or the eternal cause or causes of the whole.” If, as it seems reasonable to suppose, the philosopher’s “dominating passion” is identical with his “primary motive,” then this passion is neither desire for the admiration of others, except as a measure of confirmation that he understands the truth, nor for the pleasures of understanding, including self-admiration. The primary motive of the philosopher is desire for “knowledge of the eternal order, or the eternal cause or causes of the whole.” This knowledge has “intrinsic value” for the philosopher.

56 Strauss, On Tyranny, 204 (emphasis added). See also Natural Right and History, 151, where Strauss suggests that “striving for knowledge of the eternal truth is the ultimate end of man.” If striving of any kind is the ultimate end of man, this end cannot be pleasure.

57 Strauss, On Tyranny, 197. Strauss is engaging with Alexandre Kojève’s criticism in the paragraph from which this quotation is excerpted.
Needless to say, we receive pleasure from activities of the mind that are less exalted than philosophizing, for example, from the study of mathematics, natural science, history, and other activities that can be regarded as ancillary or supplementary to philosophizing. But the pleasure we take in these activities also presupposes the recognition that they are good. The priority of the recognition that inquiry is good over the pleasure to which inquiry gives rise is evident upon reflection, though its logical priority is more evident than its temporal priority. The recognition, or judgment, that progress in learning is good need not be, and typically is not, made explicitly. But it is made implicitly, naturally, and rapidly.58

Consider the opening of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Though every choice and every act, as distinct from unintentional motions such as falling, aim at some good, one does not explicitly judge, much less say, every time one acts or chooses, that one’s act or choice is aiming at some good. In picking up my coffee cup, for example, I do not say to myself, “I am picking up my coffee cup now because I am aiming at some good.” But if Aristotle is right, then even this little act aims at some good, real or merely apparent. And he is right. For if I am asked, “Why did you just pick up your coffee cup,” I can give a *reason*, and in elaborating it I will be led to say, sooner or later, and correctly, that I was aiming at some good. The same is true regarding more deliberate acts and choices, such as setting out to study a Platonic dialogue. Even there one rarely judges or says, “This choice and action aim at some good.” But the judgment is made implicitly, for without it there could be no aiming, least of all in the case of study. Because the pleasure of inquiry is a pleasure of the mind and not a bodily pleasure, and because it can even be experienced simultaneously with bodily pain, the cause that gives rise to it has to be a mental rather than a bodily cause. And that mental cause is precisely the recognition that inquiry is good, that it has “intrinsic value.”59

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58 Thought moves more rapidly than anything else in the world. It is possible, however, to slow thought down and make one’s reasoning explicit. In fact, this is the proper business of logic: not to speed up thought but to slow it down so that fallacies are less likely to go unnoticed.

59 Note the distinction Socrates makes between pleasures associated with the body, which are easy to come by and occur immediately (*parachrēma*), and pleasures that follow upon learning and other activities that involve a measure of effort (*Memorabilia* II.1.19–20, IV.5.10–11; cf. Plato, *Protagoras* 353c1–d4, 355b2, 359b8–360a4). Strauss writes that “[Socrates’s] continence regarding pleasures of the body stems from his awareness of a more lasting pleasure, namely, the pleasure going with one’s belief that one is successful in one’s work or that one is growing in virtue” (Leo Strauss, *Xenophon’s Socrates* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972], 28). (Strauss supports this observation with an apt reference to *Memorabilia* IV.8.6, which is prefigured by 1.6.8–9 and II.1.19, and is supplemented by IV.8.11.) The “belief” that Strauss speaks of here is the judgment, or the result of the judgment, that success in work and growth in virtue are good. Note his contrast between “the bodily pleasures and...the very great pleasures following virtuous activity” (115, emphasis added).
The arguments of Plato and Aristotle that we have been considering do not add up to a refutation of hedonism across the board but only of any hedonism, ancient or modern, that commends certain activities that only give rise to pleasure because they are antecedently recognized as intrinsically good. Philosophical hedonism, whether ancient or modern, is particularly vulnerable to criticism on this score. The brute hedonism of a nonspeaking animal is invulnerable to criticism.\(^6^0\)

I am not unaware of the possible objection that I have rather grossly oversimplified Plato’s and Aristotle’s views of the relation between pleasure and the good. After all, Plato doesn’t speak in his own voice, and most of what he presents Socrates as saying consists of questions posed to his interlocutors. As for Aristotle, surely it is significant that he employs expressions such as “it seems” all over the place in his discussion of pleasure (as, in fact, he does elsewhere as well). Is it not possible that I have read Plato and Aristotle too literally and therefore not literally enough? Perhaps. But Plato and Aristotle advance impressive arguments for a subtle but sharp distinction between the intrinsic good of philosophizing and the pleasure that follows or supervenes upon it. Unless these arguments can be shown to be unsound there is no reason to assume that they are not advanced in full seriousness, or that they are just pedagogically or politically salutary veils concealing a deeper and not so salutary teaching from inattentive readers and possible persecutors.

6. Kant’s Disjunction Revisited

Let us return to the claim advanced by Kant that pleasure and duty are the only possible determining grounds of choice. Plato and Aristotle seem to be in agreement with him that what motivates one to philosophize is the recognition that philosophizing is intrinsically good, granted that its goodness is enhanced by pleasure (as a supervening perfection).\(^6^1\) Still, it might seem odd to say that, for Plato and Aristotle, the choice to philosophize is a matter of duty, for they are not supposed to be moralists. Perhaps

\(^{60}\) Early on in the dialogue that bears his name, Philebus tries, more or less successfully, to check out of the conversation (12b1; cf. 19a2–10, 28b5), and somewhat later may even doze off (Jacob Klein, “About Plato’s Philebus,” 331–332). Whether the argument of that dialogue really succeeds in refuting hedonism is questioned on interesting grounds by David Bolotin, “Socrates’ Critique of Hedonism: A Reading of the Philebus,” Interpretation 13, no. 1 (1985): 12–13. I think, however, that Seth Benardete hits the nail squarely on the head: “Hedonism has been so thoroughly refuted that pleasure’s demotion to fifth place [culminating at 66c4–d2] can only be a sop to Philebus” (Tragedy and Comedy of Life, 238).

\(^{61}\) The question whether we would philosophize if we found doing so to be exclusively painful is wrongly posed. To the extent that philosophizing is accompanied by an awareness of progress in understanding it is necessarily accompanied by some feeling of pleasure.
Kant’s disjunction, pleasure or duty, is not exclusive. Are there any possible candidates for a third determining ground of choice, distinct from these two?

There are not many. One might say that we philosophize because doing so makes us happy, happiness being what we aim at, ultimately, in everything we do. And, according to Aristotle, this has to be the truth of the matter. But then, also according to Aristotle, happiness is an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue. Pleasure does not enter into his definition of happiness, but virtue does. So, to say that we philosophize because doing so makes us happy is to say little more than that we philosophize in order to be in accord with virtue. And to try to separate doing something because it is in accord with virtue from doing something because it is in accord with duty is to make a distinction without a difference.

One might say that we philosophize simply because we love to do so. But that is only to say that we love to love wisdom, and this formulation does not get us very far. Aristotle briefly entertains the possibility that something might be loved simply because it is useful. But he immediately reduces the useful to some good or some pleasure for which it is useful. The useful is not loved for its own sake. What is loved for its own sake is either the pleasant or the good. Aristotle, like Kant, presents these two as distinct, and he does not present a third that is not reducible to the one or the other. Since he says that we would pursue knowing even if (per impossibile) it brought us no pleasure at all, and since philosophizing is for the sake of knowing,

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62 Because reason (or rational principle—logos) very much enters the definition of virtue, of moral virtue no less than of intellectual virtue (Nic. Eth. 1106b35–1107a2, 1138 b22, 1139a5–17), it thereby enters the definition of happiness as well (1097a20–25, 1098a13–18). Aristotle does say that a life of virtue is essentially pleasant (1099a6–8; cf. 1098b20–23). But, as he makes amply clear, such a life is essentially pleasant because it is good, and not the other way around (1099a13–31). After all, Aristotle says that pleasure can corrupt (1140b17). To my knowledge, he never says that reason or virtue can corrupt.

63 Because Aristotle defines happiness as an activity of the soul in accord with virtue, and because he understands pleasure itself to be an activity, one might suspect that he is hinting in his definition that happiness is pleasure, more precisely the pleasure that accords with virtue, and most precisely the pleasure that follows upon the best virtue, which is intellectual virtue. But virtue, whether intellectual or moral, is not an activity. It is a habitus, and the primary activity of this habitus is the virtuous act. The pleasure one takes in performing the virtuous act is, as Strauss says in a passage we quoted earlier, “essentially secondary.”

64 Cf. Strauss, Natural Right and History, 163: “it is our duty to make the highest activity, as much as we can, the most urgent or the most needful thing.”

65 The formulation that we philosophize because we love wisdom gets us nowhere at all.

66 Nicomachean Ethics 1155b17–20. The same reduction to pleasure or to a good distinct from pleasure that holds for the useful would obviously hold as well for the advantageous, the helpful, the profitable, and even the beneficial (from bene-facere).
Aristotle must think that what motivates philosophizing is not a desire for what is pleasant but a desire for what is good, for a good that is not identical with pleasure. And so we return to the question of what the goodness, as distinct from the pleasure, of philosophizing consists in.

Aristotle points toward an answer to this question. The man who most truly loves himself is different from the man who is popularly reproached for loving himself. The latter, according to Aristotle, is guided by passion, the former by reason. Since to be guided by passion amounts to making the desire for pleasure per se the determining ground of choice, the natural inference is that, for Aristotle, being guided by reason amounts to making something distinct from the desire for pleasure the determining ground of choice. Let us call it “the good.” If this inference is correct, it follows that the good implies rationality as much as pleasure implies feeling, for Aristotle no less than for Kant. Philosophizing is good because it is an activity preeminently guided by reason. Aristotle, it seems, is in basic agreement with Kant that thinking and acting in accord with reason, not feeling, is the unconditioned condition of the human good. Though Aristotle says that pleasures are activities (energeiai), and hence an end as well, he also says that certain pleasures have something further as their end. These are the pleasures “of those who are being led [tōn agomenōn] toward the perfection [teleōsin] of [their] nature.”

But, one might respond, perhaps one chooses to philosophize neither for the sake of pleasure, nor out of duty to perfect one’s nature as a rational being, but solely to exult in the overcoming of obstacles to one’s will. In the case of philosophizing, the obstacle to be overcome is ignorance. Ignorance, however, is an obstacle to the will only because it is an obstacle to wisdom. Nietzsche writes, “Abstract thinking is for many a toil—for me, on good days, a feast and a frenzy [ein Fest und ein Rausch].” Why does Nietzsche experience abstract thinking as a feast and a frenzy? Why wouldn’t any other willfully decided-upon activity be equally a feast and a frenzy?

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67 Nicomachean Ethics 1113a30–b1, 1174a4–11. Cf. 1172b26–35.

68 Nicomachean Ethics 1168b28–1169a18. Note the relation between nous and logos at 1168b35–1169a1. The nous is the best part of man (1177a12–22). More than anything else it is man (1178a8). And yet the nous as fully active is not one’s own private possession (De anima 430a10–25).

69 Nicomachean Ethics 1105b21–24.


Nietzsche says that philosophy is the most spiritual (or most mental—geis- tigste) will to power. The philosopher tests his strength and rejoices in overcoming ignorance. But he feels this overcoming as pleasant—as a feast and a frenzy—only because he recognizes that he has overcome something that is worthy of overcoming, or in only slightly more moral language, something that he ought to overcome. Nietzsche would, to be sure, object that “ought” has nothing to do with it. It is a matter not of “ought” but of “will.” Assuming, however, that this decisionism is reducible to neither the desire to be in accord with reason nor the desire for pleasure—an assumption that one can doubt—its basis, as an act of mere will is “fatal to any philosophy.”

In trying to see if there is, contrary to what Kant says, a third determining ground of choice in addition to the anticipation of pleasure, on the one hand, and moral principle, on the other, one more possibility needs to be considered. This possibility is nature. One philosophizes not just for the sake of pleasure, but not as a matter of duty either. One philosophizes because it is natural to do so. Fair enough. But what is meant by “nature” here? The nature of modern mathematical physics: a nonteleological system of matter in motion where greater physical force always prevails over lesser physical force? Hobbes’s state of nature? Spinoza’s conatus? Kant’s complex of phenomena standing under architectonic laws prescribed to it a priori by the understanding? Hegel’s dialectically developed logical idea having gone forth freely into pure externality? Nietzsche’s will to power? Those who say that a man philosophizes simply because it is natural for him to do so probably have in mind none of these things but something like Aristotle’s conception of nature: a general teleological order, of which man’s own teleological orientation is but a local though most remarkable manifestation. Since, however, the conception of nature as an all-embracing teleological order has been seriously called into question by modern science, the claim that a man philosophizes simply because it is natural for him to do so makes good sense only by referring the choice to philosophize to the nature of man himself, that is, to the essence of man—whatever may hold for the essences of subhuman entities.

72 Beyond Good and Evil, §10, in Sämtliche Werke, 5:22.


74 Cf. Natural Right and History, 7–8.
6. The Appetite of Reason

The essence of man, or human nature according to the premodern philosophical tradition, is rational animality. Though irrational animals feel pleasure, they do not philosophize. Man’s choice to philosophize is rooted in his rationality. At first glance, philosophizing seems to be an activity of speculative reason alone. But the choice to philosophize, qua choice, occurs under the direction, indeed at the instigation, of practical reason. In fact, philosophizing, to the extent that it does not consist solely in the apprehension of truth, which is wisdom \textit{simpliciter}, but in striving to apprehend truth, is motored throughout by an appetite that is specific to reason, the rational appetite.

According to Thomas Aquinas, the will is precisely this appetite of reason. Speculative reason and practical reason are not two different powers of the soul, but one only. They are one and the same reason in two different employments, for Thomas just as for Kant. According to Thomas, these two employments are reciprocally related. Practical reason necessarily employs the \textit{speculative} principles of identity, noncontradiction, and the excluded middle in order that its commands be self-consistent at the most elementary level. And speculative reason necessarily employs the \textit{practical} precept that ignorance is to be avoided or, put positively, that knowledge, as constitutive of the good of reason—the \textit{bonum rationis}, in Thomas’s language—is to be pursued. To say that one philosophizes according to nature

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{75} Thomas Aquinas, \textit{Super Sententiae}, lib. 2, d. 30, q. 1, art. 3, ad 4; \textit{Summa Theologiae} I-II, q. 6, introd.; q. 8, art. 1, co.; q. 56, art. 5, ad 1; cf. art. 3, q. 19, art. 2, co. See Kant, \textit{Critique of Practical Reason}, Book I, Ch. 1, Theorem 3, Remark 1, in \textit{Werke}, 6:131–33. Compare Aristotle, \textit{De anima} 432b5–8 and 433a8–31. According to David Hume, “Reason is, and ought [sic!] only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them” (\textit{A Treatise of Human Nature}, 2.3.3.). This view is shared by neither Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, nor Kant. (Socrates seems to have thought that it is not even possible for knowledge, which is of course an achievement of reason, to be dragged about like a slave: \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} 1145b24; cf. \textit{Protagoras} 351e10–352c10).

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Summa Theologiae} I, q. 79, art. 8; art. 11.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{77} Devin Stauffer writes of the “extraordinary” conclusion, in the \textit{Republic}, “that the rule of reason in the soul, which comes to mean philosophy, is the truest practice of justice. It is also a conclusion that shows how large is the gap that ultimately emerges between Plato and Kant” (Stauffer, \textit{Plato’s Introduction to the Question of Justice} [Albany: State University of New York, 2001], 133). Now, whereas Kant would surely disagree that philosophy \textit{alone} is the rule of reason in the soul, he would insist just as much Plato that the rule of reason is the “truest practice of justice.” The gap between Plato and Kant would then seem to turn on their different conceptions of reason, its nature, operation, and scope. We know quite well what Kant meant by reason from the First and Second Critiques and from his lectures on logic. How well do we know what Plato meant by reason?

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Summa Theologiae} I-II, q. 94, art. 2, co. Cf. \textit{Summa Theologiae} I-II, q. 50 art. 5, ad 3; q. 80, art. 1, co.; II-II, q. 1, art. 3, ad 1; and \textit{Quaestiones Disputatae de Virtutibus}, q. 2, art. 2, co.: “Nam proprium
is to say that one philosophizes under the guidance not only of speculative reason but of practical reason as well.

In fact, the very first concrete precept of natural law that Thomas Aquinas presents is that one avoid ignorance.\(^79\) This precept is founded in part on the natural inclination we have “to know the truth about God,” or as Strauss puts it in a sentence we quoted earlier, to know “the eternal order, or the eternal cause or causes of the whole.” As rational beings we have a natural inclination to know minimally whether God exists or not and, if he does exist, how he is related to our world. And knowing the latter also requires that we know something of the truth about our world. The precept mandating that ignorance be avoided then mandates not only properly theological inquiries but inquiries into nature, mathematics, ethics, and related areas as well.\(^80\) Few if any people can know the fullness of truth about these things, and this is the chief reason why Thomas expresses the precept negatively as “avoid ignorance.” Avoiding ignorance is, as Kant would put it, a duty of wide latitude. A lot of discretion is allowed in deciding exactly what ignorance to avoid. But the latitude that characterizes this precept does not deprive it of its obligatory character. Through this precept, our own reason categorically commands us not to squander our capacity for understanding in idleness, distraction, and the unrelenting pursuit of entertainment. It is our own reason that commands us to live thoughtfully. And philosophizing, for those who are able to engage in it, is one way, though it is not the only way, of living thoughtfully.

By construing the principle of avoiding ignorance as a precept of natural law, has Thomas presupposed a divine lawgiver? He has not. Our awareness of natural law, and hence of duty as well, is nothing other than the natural awareness of the principles and operation of our own altogether natural reason in its practical employment. To be sure, Thomas argues that our finite reason, in its speculative no less than in its practical employment, must have God’s infinite reason as its ultimate cause. But that argument

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\(^{79}\) *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 94, art. 2, co. In this article, Thomas also calls the first principle of practical reason a precept. It is not, however, a concrete precept, but a formal one.

\(^{80}\) *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 94, art. 2. This precept does not authorize, much less mandate, pursuing knowledge about the banal and sordid features of our world, the fascination with which impedes, rather than complements, pursuing knowledge of the truth about God. On *curiositas* as *concupiscencia oculorum*, see *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 77, art. 5. Curiosity is something quite different from wonder (*admiratio*), in spite of being commonly mistaken for it (*Summa Theologiae* I, q. 12, art. 1; I-II, q. 32, art. 8; cf. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §36).
is not the ground of our immediate awareness of the primary precepts of natural law, including the precept commanding us to avoid ignorance. These precepts, Thomas explicitly says, are self-evident (per se nota). The existence of God, on the other hand, is not self-evident.81 According to Thomas, it must be demonstrated. Our knowledge of the primary precepts of natural law is then, for Thomas, more cognitively certain than our knowledge of the existence of God, a fact that by itself deflates the received criticism that Thomas grounds our awareness of these precepts on natural theology, which itself is only revealed theology in masquerade.82

Natural law is neither a merely agreed-upon or inherited convention (nomos) nor a revealed commandment (mitzvah) issuing from the inscrutable, not to say blind or tyrannical, will of God. According to Thomas, natural law is a rule issuing from natural reason itself, just as the moral law is for Kant.83 But though the awareness of natural law does not rest on theological presuppositions, it arguably has theological implications. These implications are not immediate, however. And they can be resisted; whether successfully or not is a matter of dispute.

7. The Moral Foundation

Several objections to the whole line of argumentation we have been following, and the disjunctive syllogism underlying it, suggest themselves. In the first place, it might be said that the determining ground of the choice to philosophize is neither the intrinsic goodness of philosophizing nor the pleasure that is anticipated to arise from philosophizing, nor is it some third thing distinct from these two. Rather it is these two together: neither by itself but, rather, both together, intrinsic goodness and pleasure. But Aristotle

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81 Summa Theologiae I-II, q. 94, art. 2, co.; cf. I, q. 2, art. 1.

82 See Strauss, Natural Right and History, 164. I have addressed this criticism at length in my book, Natural Reason and Natural Law: An Assessment of the Straussian Criticisms of Thomas Aquinas, currently under review for publication.

83 Thomas understands law in general to be a rule of reason, eternal law to be the divine reason whereby the world is governed, and natural law to be the participation of the eternal law in the rational creature, who through his own reason is able to govern himself (Summa Theologiae I-II, q. 90, art. 1, co.; q. 91, art. 1, co; q. 91, art. 2, co.). According to Strauss, “moral man as such is the potential believer” (Leo Strauss, “The Law of Reason in the Kuzari,” in Persecution and the Art of Writing [Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1952], 140). Moral man “as such” is not moral because he is a believer. He is a believer because he is moral. According to Strauss, then, man’s morality is rooted not in his belief but in something deeper than his belief. According to Thomas Aquinas and Kant, man’s morality, just like his philosophizing, is rooted in his reason and nowhere else. This is true even if man’s reason is created by God, a claim that, to repeat, Thomas thinks can be proved, and that Kant thinks cannot be disproved.
claims that we would choose an activity such as philosophizing even if it did not give rise to pleasure. If he is right, then it is confusing at best to assert that it is the *intrinsic* goodness of philosophizing *only* in combination with its supervening pleasure that determines the choice to philosophize.

A second objection is that framing the issue before us in terms of the choice to philosophize is misleading if not tendentious. Perhaps one does not actually *choose* to philosophize at all. Perhaps one just finds that one *must* philosophize. That’s what is meant by saying that one philosophizes neither in order to feel pleasure nor as a duty, but by nature. Philosophizing happens automatically, like it or not, but in either case as a matter, not of choice, but of a necessity deeper than any freedom. And nature is just this necessity.

Now, to be sure, one sometimes gets a philosophical problem on one’s mind and cannot let it go. One might even feel tormented by it. But that only confirms Thomas Aquinas’s claim that reason has an appetite of its own. Even the very wonder out of which philosophy is understood by Plato and Aristotle to originate is possible only for a rational, though finite, being. Reason is teleological, because reason as such desires knowledge. And it aims at knowledge of its very nature, unless impeded. Still, philosophizing as distinct from initial wonder does not take place automatically. It involves deliberating and weighing alternatives: what books to read, how much time to give to a particular philosopher and to his critics, whom to talk with about one’s thoughts, and so forth. These things do not just happen to us. We deliberately choose to do them, however this choosing has to be understood.

Without going here into the vexed issue of how choice can be free, I note only that even Plato and Aristotle seem quite comfortable employing the vocabulary of obligation and ought, such as *chrē* and gerundive-like expressions such as *haireton* and *prakteon.*[^84] Strauss himself does not hesitate to use the word “ought.” And “ought”—“should”—as well—implies not just “can,” as is frequently said today. “Ought,” typically when used with respect to the past, and almost always when used with respect to the present and future, implies “might not” as well, and hence an absence of necessitation.^[85]

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[^84]: The word *haireton* should sometimes be translated as “chosen,” simply. But sometimes it can only be translated as “choiceworthy.” See Terence Irwin’s discussion of this term in the glossary to his translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics,* 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), 319.

[^85]: This is especially evident when one deliberates about what one ought to do. Though Robert Bartlett wishes to dissociate Plato’s teaching from “moralism” of any stripe (“Plato’s Critique of Hedonism in the *Philebus,*” 141, 143, 147), he himself says, impressively and in the very first sentence of his essay,
Whatever variant of determinism one might be wedded to as a matter of theory or faith, one cannot in one's actual deliberation and discourse about action avoid thinking and speaking as though the future is not fixed, that it could turn out this way rather than that, and that which way it turns out is in some measure the result of our choosing. This fact hardly disproves determinism. But it strongly suggests that we do not know, indubitably know, that determinism is true. And it should go without saying that if free choice cannot be indubitably known to be impossible, and if the related concept of deserving something is meaningful—and, as we have seen, Strauss himself thinks it is meaningful—then the Straussian critique of the moral presuppositions of belief in revelation, indeed, even belief in the bare possibility of revelation, loses most of its force.

A third objection to the line of argumentation I have presented is that in locating the choice to philosophize in a precept of natural law I am overlooking the fact that natural law, unlike natural right, plays no role in Aristotle’s ethical teaching, and that it is tacitly ruled out by Plato, according to whom the rule of wisdom is superior to the rule of law. I am not, however, overlooking this fact. I am ignoring it. For I am not persuaded that Plato and Aristotle penetrated more deeply into the principles, evidence, and operation of practical reason, and the way practical reason sustains the operation of speculative reason, than did Thomas Aquinas. Furthermore, though Aristotle indeed says that not only conventional right but natural right as well is changeable, the whole sphere of right (or justice—dikē), is limited to one’s relation to others. It does not, according to Aristotle, concern one’s relationship to oneself. Natural law, then, is broader than natural right, because it regulates one’s relation to oneself as well as to others. Even if all principles regulating one’s relation to others were changeable—and such a thing, though certainly alleged often enough, has never been conclusively demonstrated—it still would not follow that all principles regulating one’s relation to oneself are changeable. That philosophy is the most choiceworthy way of life for those who have the ability and the opportunity to live it is a principle that neither Aristotle nor Plato would dispute. Though this principle is limited in scope—only some people are in a position to philosophize—it is

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86 “The practical [good] is what is capable of being otherwise” (De anima 433a30–31). Cf. Nicomachean Ethics 1139a14, b8, 1140a32; On Interpretation 19a7–b4.

87 Nicomachean Ethics 1134b24–34, 1130a3–8.
nonetheless exceptionless and unchangeable within its scope. For those who
are able to philosophize, doing so is something they owe to themselves.88

But right on this point a fourth objection can be raised. Even
if it is the case that what motivates the choice to philosophize is the intrinsic
goodness of doing so, it does not follow that philosophizing is engaged in as
a duty. But since Kant has not yet been refuted in his claim that duty and the
pleasure exhaust all possible determining grounds of choice, and since the
second is ruled out by Plato and Aristotle as well as by Thomas and Kant,
we are left only with the first unless, as seems unlikely, a third determining
ground of choice can be found that is as clearly distinct from these two as
these two are from each other.89

However, one might persist, even if the pleasure of philoso-
phizing consists in the awareness that one is progressing, and even if this
pleasure depends on the antecedent conviction that progress in wisdom is
intrinsically good, that still does not mean that this good is a moral
good. But why not? All activities that are pursued for their own sake as intrinsi-
cally good rather than for the feeling of pleasure they give rise to, whether
these activities relate to others or to oneself only, are on the same plane by
virtue of the character of their motive, whether we choose to call this motive
“moral” or not. To do or pursue something because one understands it to be
intrinsically good, independently of whatever pleasure it may give rise to, is
to act in accordance with the dictates of practical reason, for both
Thomas and Kant.90 It is reason itself that tells us, indeed commands us, to
think consistently, just as it commands us to act consistently. Consistency,
whether in thinking or in acting, is integrity. Serious thinking about serious
matters, the thinking that is constitutive of philosophizing, is not without
an ethical motivation, which is to say, a moral motivation.91 There is then an

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88 Without the conception of natural law one could not owe anything to oneself. See Summa Theolo-
giae I-II, q. 100, art. 5, arg. 1; ad 1. Owing something to oneself is not a figure of speech. It is a fact that
we rightly recognize when, if only in the privacy of our own minds, we own up with the appropriate
measure of shame to having thought or acted irrationally (Summa Theologiae I-II, q. 87, art. 1, co; cf.
Nicomachean Ethics 1128b28).

89 To the objection that Plato and Aristotle do not have a word for “duty” (though consider Aristotle’s
use of to deon at Nicomachean Ethics 109425 and 1107a4—cf. Pericles’s use of ta deonta in Thucydides
2.43), it can be countered that they do not have a word for “moralism” either.

90 I am inclined to think that Plato and Aristotle would grant this as well. Any solid evidence to the
contrary would, I think, prove only that they did not understand practical reason, or reason in gen-
eral, as well as did Thomas and Kant.

91 It is generally agreed that Cicero came up with the word “moral” (moralis). See the opening of De
fato as the text has come down to us. Cicero explicitly equates mores with the Greek ēthos, and he
The underappreciated affinity between philosophy and “moralism,” even if “der Philosoph liebt die Moralisten nicht.”

Kant’s general argument that one would not take pleasure in doing one’s duty for its own sake unless one were antecedently convinced that doing so was intrinsically good is sound. The only reason philosophizing seems not to be morally obligatory is that it is, on the whole, so much more pleasant than painful. But this pleasure, as Aristotle persuasively argues, is a secondary perfection. The primary perfection is the operation of reason itself, that is, the act of a natural habitus that is distinctive of our humanity. It is self-evident to a rational being that thinking in accordance with reason is good; and the same is true of acting in accordance with reason. The two go together to make up the bonum rationis, which is the proper good of man, “one’s own good” to the extent that one is rational and not an animal merely. The very pleasure of philosophizing has a moral foundation. It is moral pleasure exactly as the old moralist Kant defined moral pleasure. For it is, and is experienced as, deserved pleasure.

uses moralis as an adjective modifying that part of philosophy that is concerned with ethics. Thomas Aquinas uses moralis and ethicus interchangeably, as does Kant with moralisch and sittlich.

92 Nietzsche, Preface to The Case of Wagner, in Sämtliche Werke, 6:11.
I. There is only one political science: hermeneutical political science

A few years ago, the editors of a volume on “interpretive social science” propagated the “interpretive turn” in social science and tried to “inspire practitioners and students of social inquiry to violate the positivist taboo against joining evaluative concerns with descriptions of facts.” According to the editors, “the interpretive turn refocuses attention on the concrete varieties of cultural meaning, in their particularity and complex texture, but without falling into the traps of historicism or cultural relativism.” In this respect, interpretative social science involves a reflexive, that is to say, a theoretical, posture toward sociohistorical reality. This posture is called “interpretation.” It is carried out according to specific principles and methodological procedures that, from the multifaceted realm of human existence, extract a concept of “truth” concerning the constitution of the sociohistorical world and the human condition—both considered in the context of a reflection on reality in the most comprehensive sense of the term.

Interpretive science is, in this sense, hermeneutical science. As noted above, the interpretive turn in social science is intended to offer

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1 The author would like to thank Charles Butterworth of the University of Maryland for all his help and assistance on the piece.


3 Ibid., 6.

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an intellectual and scientific alternative to the mainstream social science of verification. Of course, it remains an open question whether this is not just another futile attempt to bring an end to “normal” social science’s domination of the field. But the public standing of the latter may have suffered a bit more today than in it has in the past owing to its persistent failure in recent times to predict and understand the fundamental changes of the global world. In a rapidly changing world, normal political science continues to misinterpret such important phenomena as the sudden demise of the communist states, the resurgence of politico-religious movements, and the failure of democratic and economic experiments in non-Western societies. Many years ago, Charles Taylor pleaded for an interpretive political science and argued that the categorical restrictions of mainstream science are a severe handicap and prevent us from coming to grips with important problems of our day which should be the object of political science. We need to go beyond the bounds of a science based on verification to one which would study the inter-subjective and common meanings embedded in social reality.4

The ongoing frenzy of activity that ranges from more refined theory modeling to attempts to develop still more rigorous methodologies, to repeated calls for a reorientation in political science, seems to be driven by the unconscious fear that the discipline is becoming scientifically irrelevant. To the defenders of a “social scientific understanding of politics,” hermeneutic science moves beyond the boundaries of science when it violates the axiomatic belief in the observer-independent world “about which a researcher may systematically discover true facts and reject false ones.” On the basis of such a belief system, the discipline has turned into a sectarian community of the enlightened. As American political scientist Andrew Rehfeld recently explained to unreconstructed political theorists:

if political theorists believe that social science cannot be done in the mode of natural science…it is unclear why they would want to remain in a discipline with so many scholars who believe it can be and who are dedicated to pursuing [sic] that aim. So even if the critics are right, and social science is not “science” at all, the complexity argument does not defend political theory’s inclusion in a discipline dedicated to a scientific study of politics: rather it justifies its emigration out of it.5


To such notions, Taylor has remarked critically: “The profound option of mainstream social scientists for the empiricist conception of knowledge and science makes it inevitable that they should accept the verification model of political science and the categorial principles that this entails.” This is true insofar as a conscious decision for a certain scientific understanding of politics is involved.

But, I would argue, this is only part of the story. The fact is that this seemingly “scientific” notion of political science that has crystallized into the self-interpretation of the discipline is grounded in a general complex of meaning that also harbors far-reaching theoretical interpretations. Because these interpretations are based on fundamental ideas of Western, that is, primarily Anglo-Saxon, self-understanding, they precede all empiricist methodological issues. This can be seen clearly in Samuel Huntington’s sober analysis of the theoretical content of American political science—currently the dominant modality of the discipline:

There is not an American science of politics; there is a democratic science of politics, which developed first and fullest in the United States because the United States was the first and fullest democracy in the modern world. That science is a universal science to the extent that democracy is a universal system of government.

Huntington’s presidential address of 1987 might overstate the case a bit, but a closer look at the central theoretical categories that guide even the most “scientific” research in the discipline bear out the truth of his interpretation.

The tacit and consequently unquestioned universality of the hermeneutical underpinnings of mainstream political science is clearly revealed in the methodologically rejuvenated comparative science of politics that results in a “theory of political development which places the Atlantic-type polity at the summit of human political achievement.” This overlapping of the self-understanding of Western society and the categories of political science justifies itself in terms of the canonized history of political theory that originated in nineteenth-century liberalism and embodied the idea of historical progress from Hellenic beginnings to modern constitutional democracy.

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6 Taylor, “Interpretation and Sciences of Man,” 41.
8 Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man,” 42.
This hermeneutical exposition of a developmental history of political theory appealed to the historical confirmation of the self-evident truths of the modern Western polity as they were documented by the godfather of the new Anglo-Saxon academic theory discourse, William A. Dunning, in his *History of Political Theories* (1902–20) and reaffirmed by the American George H. Sabine, author of the Anglophone world’s most popular political theory textbook, *A History of Political Theory* (1937). Sabine and the plethora of authors who followed him proclaimed that

liberalism may be understood, with good historical justification, as the present-day culmination of the whole “Western political tradition” and as “the secular form of Western civilization.” In this broad sense liberalism would be practically identical in meaning with what, in popular political usage, is more likely nowadays to be called “democracy.”

This self-assertive hermeneutics has an impact on the conceptual apparatus of “normal” political science and—I think rightly—harks back to the citizen-centric notion of Athenian politics and the attendant theoretical interpretations of Plato and Aristotle and their Roman and Christian students. This legacy preserves the more or less tacit assumption of human nature being the lynchpin of all interpretive understanding of politics in Western political thought—at least as far as it resonates with the famous observation in the *Federalist*, No. 51: “but what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature?”

In the course of the scientific advancement of the discipline, however, the traditional idea of civil government supported by a historicist hermeneutic was wedded to the classical European state-centered and power-centered interpretation of politics as seen, for example, in Max Weber’s social science. In modernity, the state holds the monopoly on the use of force, and Weber’s understanding of politics is closely tied to his concept of the “political association” (*politischer Verband*) that successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory. “Politically” oriented action is social action insofar as it aims to influence the leadership of the political association in terms of the appropriation, expropriation, redistribution, or allocation of governmental powers. Postwar American political science subjected Weber to semantic Americanization (with the help

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of Talcott Parsons), but retained his central idea of political rule: the authoritative domination of the ruler over the ruled. In David Easton’s functionalist system-analysis, a democratically watered-down Weberianism establishes the defining property of politics: “a social action qualifies as political insofar as it is related to the authoritative allocation of values for the whole society as it is influenced by the distribution and use of power.”¹¹ Today authors like Rehfeld carry this Weberian legacy even further, indeed to the extreme of claiming that the only genuine object of political theorizing is “the use, or potential use, of power over people.”¹²

Thus, Western political science is remarkably Janus faced: on the one hand, its commitment to liberal democracy promotes the normative project of a civic culture that sustains the institutional framework of a self-governing citizenry; on the other hand, it is based on the power-centered understanding of domination and the Weberian epistemology that goes with it—its European positivistic stance merging with homegrown American scientism. Taylor’s critique of normal political science is based on his understanding of a genuine hermeneutical science of politics. But here my focus is on the more general thesis that we have to deal with an implicit clash of hermeneutics because the dominant paradigms of normal Western political science are built on tacitly held and practiced interpretations that blend the two major historical traditions of the political into a self-descriptive unity, without however differentiating between the two traditions. This self-understanding of political science identifies itself with the predominant self-interpretation of modern Western society and, with the help of an empiricist methodology, transforms this societal self-interpretation into an observer-independent social system that simulates the phenomenal world of natural science.

Eric Voegelin points to the theoretical fallacy that is at the base of this interpretative restriction: “A theory that insists on discussing politics in terms of Anglo-Saxon democracy cannot deal adequately even with the Western national states, and not at all with the political organization, e.g., of Asiatic civilizations.” He concludes that it must separate what is “essential from the historically contingent and...break with the habit of treating the institutions of a particular national state at a particular time as if they

truly manifested the nature of man.”13 Taylor’s argument for a hermeneutical science draws on this anthropological principle, and he writes:

we have to think of man as a self-interpreting animal. He is necessarily so, for there is no such thing as the structure of meanings for him independently of his interpretation of them; for one is woven into the other. But then the text of our interpretation is not that heterogeneous from what is interpreted; for what is interpreted is itself an interpretation; a self-interpretation which is embedded in a stream of action. It is an interpretation of experiential meaning which contributes to the constitution of this meaning.14

Meaning-generated experiences translate into intersubjective individual meanings that in turn articulate shared meanings in terms of the “common reference world” that conditions all public life and constitutes the “basis of community.” Societal self-interpretation makes up the common world. “But the very idea of something which is in the common world in contradistinction to what is in all the individual worlds is totally opaque to empiricist epistemology.”15 The restrictions of “methodological individualism” do not allow for common worlds of meaning and thus they eclipse the ultimate constituents of community building.

Therefore, as Taylor contends, science has to proceed hermeneutically: “its most primitive data would be readings of meanings…: the meanings are for a subject in a field or fields; they are moreover meanings which are partially constituted by self-definitions, which are in this sense already interpretations, and which can thus be re-expressed or made explicit by a science of politics.”16 But as to the characteristics of this scientific explanation of the preexisting pluralist realm of meaning, Taylor confines himself to the quest for a semantic that would express understanding across cultures and societies beyond their respective self-interpretations. He argues:

the adequate language in which we can understand another society is not our language of understanding, or theirs, but rather what one could call a language of conspicuous contrast. This would be a language in which we could formulate both their way of life and ours as alternative possibilities in relation to some human constants at work in both.17

15 Ibid., 40.
16 Ibid., 52.
Taylor does not draw the conclusion that explaining the historical field of human self-interpretations by understanding them would amount to a hermeneutically controlled philosophical theory of politics. If, as Taylor maintains, the language of perspicuous contrast were the extended language of human possibilities, it would have to bring into focus the structure of human existence, because what is constant in the history of humankind is human nature itself.

In his radical critique of modern hermeneutics the dissident Straussian Stanley Rosen poses the question “whether a theory of interpretation is possible on theoretical grounds.” In his highly problematical and somewhat idiosyncratic “reading,” the whole hermeneutical enterprise signals the “decay of theory into interpretation,” as evidenced by the deconstructive hermeneutics of postmodern intellectuals. Rosen interprets the history of modern hermeneutics from the vantage point of the specific political and speculative phenomenon of postanthropological deconstructivism in order to dismiss all hermeneutical grounding of the reflexive, that is to say philosophical, theory of human affairs.

As the scope of hermeneutics has expanded...the two original sources of hermeneutical meaning, God and man, have vanished, taking with them the cosmos or world and leaving us with nothing but our own garrulity, which we choose to call the philosophy of language, linguistic philosophy, or one of their synonyms. If nothing is real, the real is nothing; there is no difference between the written line of a text and the blank spaces between them.

This suggests a developmental logic of modern hermeneutics that is unwarranted. Indeed without a point of reference, interpreting the common world of human meaning results in deconstructivist absurdities.

Rosen is correct to say “if there is no human nature that remains constant within historical change, and so defines the perspectives of individual readers as perspectives upon a common humanity, then reading is impossible.” But he is not willing to acknowledge that these perspectives are part and parcel of an interpretative discourse that links political theory philosophically and historically to hermeneutics in order to understand modernity in terms of a reflexive modernity. Rosen would deny even the possibility

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19 Ibid., 161.

20 Ibid., 146.
of such an interpretative discourse as demonstrated by his critique of Leo Strauss’s political philosophy as an Enlightenment-style rhetoric—a critique that turns Strauss into a quasi Nietzschean entangled in hermeneutics and misreading the perennial philosophy that Rosen wants to defend. However, such a position begs the question whether a philosophical theory of politics, rightly understood, is not dependent on modern hermeneutical scholarship that is in the pursuit of the very themes of the perennial philosophy. After all, over the ages and across cultures, it has articulated some essential truths about human being and social order—albeit not in a catalogue of normative propositions or prescriptions.

II. Hermeneutics and the human condition

It remains to be seen whether the calls for a rejuvenated interpretive social science will be heard. In view of the current interest in hermeneutics, a renewed discussion of the theoretical grounding of hermeneutical science may indeed be in order. This requires reflection on the questions that have been at the forefront of scholarly discourse on the modern hermeneutical project of Geisteswissenschaft since its beginnings in Germany in the work of Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and the latter’s students. The responses to these questions differed and differ in form and substance across the social and historical fields that derive their disciplinary identity (cognitive, historical, and social) from the hermeneutic modality of the scholarly pursuit of knowledge which is distinguished from the modalities of research in the natural sciences. Of course, the conflict is still raging and, as we have seen, especially in political science.

What is at stake, according to Gadamer, who is without a doubt one of the most influential proponents of modern hermeneutical science, is “the self-understanding of man in the modern age of science.”21 This is “because even though in what the human sciences contribute to human self-understanding they do not approach the natural sciences in exactness and objectivity, they nonetheless do contribute to human self-understanding insofar as they in turn are based on human self-understanding.”22 Gadamer’s seminal exposition of a “philosophical hermeneutics” revises and reformulates the central tenets of the original German project of a philosophical scholarship that is epistemologically grounded in a synthesis of philosophical

self-reflection and historical understanding and which purports to reconcile
the idea of objective knowledge with the notion of the irreversible experience
of the historicity of human existence—the hallmark of modernity. Neither
here nor in the closer look at the defining characteristics of a hermeneutical
science of the human that follows am I concerned with the intricate com-
plexities of the hermeneutical paradigm itself. Rather, my concern is with the
question whether the implicitly interpretive science of politics can reasonably
be confronted with the quest for a hermeneutically informed philosophical
type of politics. The point requires serious consideration because Ger-
man Geisteswissenschaft never reflected on political reality and consciously
excluded theorizing on the political per se, notwithstanding the fact that it
was bound up with the ancient philosophical tradition. As a result, it was
political only by implication.

The formation of modern hermeneutics as a science in its
own right was loosely connected with the German predicament in the era
of the great revolutions that shattered the traditional political and spiritual
orders and brought forth a realignment of social and political forces. In an
age of widespread moral and intellectual uncertainty, of crumbling authority
and diverging philosophical schools, the cultural elites were confronted with
the disintegration of community in a nation that depended heavily on cul-
tural unity because the attempts at political unity had failed. Hermeneutical
science translated the heterogeneous interpretive claims of theology and clas-
sical philology into one unified interpretative science. It was to provide for an
authoritative understanding of the sociohistorical world that would safeguard
the cultural traditions of society and secure the ethical unity of the shared
cultural life by virtue of a universally valid self-interpretation of human-
being. The specific character of German hermeneutics comes to the fore in
Dilthey’s original critique of the moral and political sciences. He disparages
the positivistic adaption of French and English social science to the model of
the natural sciences and goes on to diagnose the more fundamental defect of
traditional political science in Robert Mohl’s science of the state—the Ger-
man equivalent of western European liberal theory. According to Dilthey, in
the present situation the moral and political sciences acquire true theoretical
relevance only if they develop into a science of ethics (Wissenschaft der Sitten)
in cooperation with other sciences; their practical relevance stems from their
involvement in the struggles, threatening dangers, and volatile movements of
life in society. Dilthey transforms moral and political science into a science
that, in the last analysis, focuses on the moral world that is grounded in the scientific construction of an objective system of morality (Sittlichkeit).23

It is beyond the scope of this paper to present Dilthey’s multilayered and, in many respects, contradictory project of Geisteswissenschaft. It was intended to reconcile the postulate of objective knowledge with the historical notion of relativity that was caused by the all pervading consciousness of the historicity of human existence— the hallmark of modernity. A Geisteswissenschaft made up of all sociohistorical disciplines would accomplish this task by means of an epistemological synthesis of philosophical self-reflection and historical understanding that would produce a unified hermeneutical logic of research for the humanities. The a priori of any cognition is the coherence of human life (Lebenszusammenhang), as it is given throughout the whole range of human experience. It comes to the fore in the sociohistorical world as it emerges from the unfathomable depth of life, in terms of a common spiritual world of mutual understanding being the pivot and ultimate object of hermeneutical research.

Dilthey designated this sphere of community as the realm of objective spirit (Geist) comprising all manifestations of life in the mode of objectifications of the spirit. This world of the spirit is an interrelation of effects that permanently generates values, realizes goals, and produces goods through the interaction of individuals, communities, and cultural systems. The intellectual world of the spirit constitutes the sociohistorical world in terms of these structural units in time and space. By turning toward the sociohistorical world, the reflecting human mind moves in a common spiritual world, thereby enabling man to understand and decipher the historical sediments of the spirit in the testimonies of the past. Dilthey transposed the Protestant hermeneutic of textual exegesis and literary and philosophical hermeneutics into the study of the historical world which he conceived in the manner of a text to be deciphered: “Life and history have a meaning, as do letters in a word.”24 In philosophical self-reflection the sociohistorical world, expressing the world of the spirit, attains objective knowledge of itself. Thus, through the hermeneutical logic of research, the virtually formless chaos of reality is shown to rest on an underlying and structurally ordered meaningful whole.

History is the most powerful tool for giving expression to one’s inner self and enabling it to speak and explain. Whatever man finds in himself, he can discover reflected in history because history reveals everything that is inside of man and allows him to become aware of it. Self-reflection is the foundation of knowledge about the deepest points of the *status humanitatis* and how it influences man’s view and knowledge of himself. Thus the Geisteswissenschaften constitute the deepest points in the essence of man’s inner experience.²⁵

Within the open horizon of history, the Geisteswissenschaften disclose to the modern human being the common ground of human life. In this sense, they were termed *Lebensphilosophie*.

The implicit politics of Dilthey’s hermeneutical science determined its purpose in the contemporary world: “Man’s self-reflection, society’s reflection about itself, should help to develop the strength and direction of active intervention in thought and action.”²⁶ The urgency of this call for human agency was motivated by Dilthey’s conviction that the “great European cultures” were in a state of decline: confronted with the imminent double threat of the social-democratic rise to power on one side and the Slavic barbarian aspiration to conquer Europe on the other. Thus, he saw that the task of the day was “to construct a social epoch which includes the valid features of individualism in an organized social order. Such a task requires the participation of philosophy which increases the ability to solve such problems.”²⁷ Dilthey’s science is devoted to a cultural reform that would realize the very synthesis of spirit and power, the ideal embodiment of which was a nation modeled upon the Prussian monarchical state.²⁸ Dilthey demonstrates clearly the primary intention of hermeneutics to be the social reconstruction of the cultural order of society in order to forestall an imminent decay of the existing public order, politics and the state being considered epiphenomena of the cultural world. In a sense, Geisteswissenschaft is a substitute for the defunct practical philosophy and political theory, but devoid of any clear-cut notion of the political.

²⁶ Ibid., 19:304.
Dilthey understood his work as a response to the crisis of the German Empire after 1871, whose integration was threatened by the ongoing struggle of conflicting Weltanschauungen and the destructive forces of revolution and democracy. But his Geisteswissenschaft didn’t reach the center stage of intellectual culture until after the defeat of 1918. The profound political and cultural crisis during the Weimar Republic gave new life to the quest for the grounding of intellectual life—in reality, in the hope of reaching a synthesis of learning with the realities of human existence.

The revision and reorientation in terms of Geisteswissenschaft followed, in general, different paths. First, there was Heidegger’s analysis of Dasein. Heidegger turned understanding into the primordial accomplishment of human Dasein as being-in-the-world. The early Heidegger speaks of the “hermeneutics of facticity” because understanding is an original mode of the being of human life. Heidegger’s existential philosophy dissolves not only politics but also the sociohistorical world in general into human Dasein. It might suffice to note that the implicit politics of his philosophical project revealed itself in his identification with the national-socialist movement. But it was Hans-Georg Gadamer, whose philosophical hermeneutics originally derived its theoretical stance from Heidegger, who became the key figure of twentieth-century German hermeneutics.

In Gadamer’s work, the classical hermeneutic legacy comes to the fore. “Modern consciousness—precisely as historical consciousness—takes a reflexive position concerning all that is handed down by tradition.” Historical consciousness does not blindly believe in the voice of the past, “but, in reflecting on it, places it back within the context of where it took root in order to see the significance and relative value proper to it. This reflexive posture toward tradition is called interpretation.”

This notion of interpretation is considered to be a universal concept “designed to encompass tradition as a whole,” insofar as it presents itself as a linguistic cosmos to be deciphered by the art of interpretation. As such, it is applicable to whatever is bequeathed to us by history, written and verbal traditions, spiritual and mimed expressions, as well as to transmitted forms of human behavior. The interpreter encounters human reality, that is, sociohistorical reality, filtered through “tradition” and by interpretation discovers the meanings of the past in order to blend them into the interpreter’s own hermeneutically informed understanding of the human world. Thus, the

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practitioner of hermeneutic science appropriates the traditionally transmitted “truth” and “knowledge” and integrates them into his own life practice by providing them with the “ethical know-how” of responsible reasonableness, *phronesis* in the Aristotelian sense—for Gadamer, the fundamental virtue that guides communal life. Indeed, Gadamer contends that “hermeneutical philosophy is the heir to the older tradition of practical philosophy” and its main purpose is “to justify the way of reason and defend ethical and political reason against the domination of a technology based on science.” Aristotle’s analysis of ethical knowledge is central to Gadamer’s interpretative approach to tradition, which is actually an apolitical Aristotelianism. As such, it represents a particular “tradition” of German nineteenth-century academic philosophy: *phronesis* is not the virtue that prepares the ethically informed and politically minded citizen for political agency, but a virtue that has been cleansed of the political and transformed into a hermeneutically reflected model of ethical reasoning to be applied by the “ethical consciousness” in accord with the exigencies of the concrete situation. Here, as Gadamer’s statement above seems to indicate, “implicit politics” come to the fore in his insistence that differentiating the ethical know-how of *phronesis* from technical know-how as the formative principle of hermeneutical philosophy will prepare the way for a society to be ordered by practical reason.

But in a critical account of Gadamer’s appropriation of Aristotle, Richard J. Bernstein points to the strange disappearance of classical political science as a science of principles: “What Gadamer himself realizes—but I do not think he squarely faces the issues that he raises—is that we are living in a time when the very conditions required for the exercise of *phronesis*—the shared acceptance and stability of universal principles and laws—are themselves breaking down.” Just as Aristotle saw the continuity and movement from ethics to politics, one would think that Gadamer would have seen the necessity for this continuity in his appropriation of *phronesis*. But he shies away from the question of “what is to be done when the community itself is ‘corrupt’—when there is a breakdown of its *nomos* and of a rational discourse about the norms that ought to govern our practical lives.”

Bernstein contends that the logic of Gadamer’s argument requires a prob-

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33 Ibid., 287.
ing into what he means by truth and criticism, or the “common ethical and political principles required for the virtue of *phronesis*, or into the type of *polis* or community that it demands” which is the thrust of his reflection that is to lead us beyond philosophical hermeneutics.\(^{34}\)

But Gadamer remains under the spell of Heidegger in that he conceives of human existence in terms of historicity and temporality. Thus, human-being is imprisoned in a world-immanent “hermeneutical universe.”\(^{35}\) It contains all our experiences of the world and our life insofar as it is bound up with language, on which an ontological primacy is bestowed. Based on this ontological premise, Gadamer infers an “insurmountable linguistic world scheme” that predetermines the experiences of art, philosophy, and history (politics is excluded)—in sum, all the cultural traditions that impart truth to us. The hermeneutical modality of understanding is the way of “Dasein’s being” and is realized in the communicative world of language that entails common reason, meaning, and action. Language is being in its self-display. True to the hermeneutical tradition, this philosophical hermeneutics focuses on the written word embodied in tradition. Hence it postulates the “linguisticality” of all world and life experiences and treats the entire human domain as if it were a text.

Gadamer claims that the communicative world of language embodies reason and common sense actualized in human practice. But, as proved by his reading of Aristotelian science, this notion of philosophical hermeneutics as a practical philosophy does not include the political realm even though it would have to be considered central to a hermeneutic explanation of experiences of order.

As Bernstein showed in his analysis of Gadamer’s appropriation of Aristotle, Gadamer does not think beyond the limits of his hermeneutics to an interpretative social science, and this despite the manifold insights into the working of the hermeneutical mind that he gives us. The crux of the matter becomes clear in Gadamer’s argument with Leo Strauss, who went beyond the closed hermeneutical cosmos in order to lay bare the essentials of the political science of the classic Hellenic philosophers.\(^{36}\) Gadamer rejects Strauss’s premise that it is possible to understand the thought of the past exactly as it understood itself and prior to any subsequent interpretation. But

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\(^{34}\) Ibid., 290.


\(^{36}\) Ibid., 503–7, 512.
the thrust of his contention is against Strauss’s insistence on a hermeneutical scholarship that takes the classical quest for order seriously and translates it into a principled understanding of the disoriented present. Gadamer objects to any normative conclusion being drawn from hermeneutical thinking that would postulate firm and unchanging standards for human agency in general and political agency in particular.

The hermeneutical philosophy responded to the irreversible modern experience of the historicity of human existence, and it wanted to counter the notion of the relativity of all human-beings by appealing to the meaning-generating historical spirit as it documents itself in the written testimony of humankind. But it barely saved itself from the abyss of relativity since it eclipsed the primary sphere of human self-explication that is the realm of politics that evokes a perennial quest for order counteracting the forces of historical relativity.

Only the hermeneutic commemoration of the normative posture of political evocations of order can assert the claim of hermeneutical philosophy to be a practical philosophy in that it uncovers the unwitting hermeneutical underpinnings of the very science of politics that sustains the Western idea of order. From the vantage point of a radical hermeneutics, a more or less well-intended, albeit arbitrary, moralism clothed at best in historicism seems to be left. On the other side, the hermeneutical philosophy allows for a modern approach to human self-understanding if the interpretative intentions operate on the basis formulated by Taylor that the human being is a self-interpreting animal, an *animal symbolicum* per Ernst Cassirer.37

The crucial point I wish to make is that, however motivated, the systematic filtering all human-beings out of the hermeneutical character prevents the reflexive understanding of the human predicament in terms of an authoritative interpretation of the human realm and its spheres of order that goes beyond the historical universe of self-interpretation. Such a reflexive understanding was and still is the legitimate basis for a “science” committed to the critical study of the political as it unfolds historically in humanity’s quest for a true and meaningful order. This quest takes place in the midst of perplexing experiences of disorder, and it requires that the root of human self-understanding be disclosed: the human capacity for self-interpretation and self-actualization in terms of a comprehensive theory of the political.

III. Political philosophy and the idea of an interpretive science of politics

Gadamer’s argument with Leo Strauss marks a critical juncture in the debate on an interpretive understanding of human existence in modernity. At stake is the paradigm of an interpretive science committed to a reflective analysis of human self-interpretation in order to regain a sense of the fundamental concerns of humanity and thus to reestablish the true meaning of the human condition in the maelstrom of history.

Crucial in this respect was the intellectual movement of young scholars, among them Dilthey’s son-in-law, Georg Misch, who reformulated the epistemological basis of a hermeneutical understanding of sociohistorical reality. In Misch’s reading, hermeneutical science was the “philosophical combination of anthropology and history,” and thus he signaled a new trend in the discussion of Geisteswissenschaften that finally resulted in the new theoretical approach of philosophical anthropology in the late twenties. The publication of the writings of Max Scheler and Hellmuth Plessner initiated this “anthropological turn” that claimed to weld philosophy to an empirically grounded understanding of human existence. The protagonists of the “anthropological turn” argued at a critical distance from traditional hermeneutics as well as from Heideggerian existential hermeneutics and Schmitt’s political existentialism.

It was Plessner above all who took a stand against Heidegger in 1931. He states: “The understanding of human being within the horizon of his historicity centers on the ‘primacy of the political’ for any cognition of the nature of man.” Plessner called his Power and Human Nature a contribution to the science and philosophy of politics designed to clarify the nature of the political in the midst of an intellectual and political chaos and to provide a principled guide to the political education of a confused German citizenship.

41 Fischer, Philosophische Anthropologie, 118ff.
As Fischer remarks, there were only a few scholars who shifted the focus of hermeneutical research toward the political dimension of human self-understanding. He mentions Eric Voegelin in particular, who translated Scheler’s concept of philosophical anthropology into a Geistewissenschaft of politics in his *Rasse und Staat* (1933)—a critical assessment of the race ideologies then current. These beginnings of a hermeneutical political philosophy came to an abrupt standstill on account of the national-socialist Gleichschaltung of academia after 1933. Misch, Plessner, and Voegelin were dismissed from the university. The majority of the protagonists of the “anthropological turn” demonstrated the apolitical stance of their scholarship when Heidegger, Rothacker, Gadamer, Gehlen, and Schmitt among others chose the path of opportunistic adjustment to the new regime.

It was no accident that other German scholars also departed from the closed world of classical hermeneutics and moved beyond hermeneutical philosophy to an interpretive philosophy of politics. They reacted to the political void of a science that had proclaimed itself to be the epitome of modern human self-understanding and then failed to live up to even the most modest standards of political and moral reason. “A novel social situation comes to light,” wrote Plessner in 1937. “In the face of the dissolution of a world marked by Christianity and antiquity, the human being—deserted by God and threatened with sinking into animality—is faced anew with the question of human nature and the purpose of his being human.”

Helmuth Plessner, Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, and, last but not least, Heidegger’s star student, Hannah Arendt, to name the most prominent thinkers in this respect (the Englishman Oakeshott and other kindred minds may be added), shared Strauss’s principled understanding of a science that reflects man’s experience of his humanity in the “between” of order and disorder. “The crucial issue,” asserts Strauss,

> concerns the status of those permanent characteristics of human-<br>it, such as the distinction between the noble and the base….It was contempt for these permanencies which permitted the most radical historicist in 1933 to submit to, or rather to welcome, as a dispensation of fate, the verdict of the least wise and least moderate part of his nation…and at the same time to speak of wisdom and moderation.

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The biggest event of 1933 would rather seem to have proved, if such proof was necessary, that man cannot abandon the question of the good society, and that he cannot free himself from the responsibility for answering it by deferring to History or any other power different from his own reason.44

The reflexive position toward tradition implied the interpretive recourse to those traditions that allow for a philosophical understanding of the primacy of the political; for it turned out that the eclipse of the political accounted for the philosophical inability to come to grips with the crisis that engulfed European society. There was no Geisteswissenschaft of politics. German hermeneutics disowned the political traditions of the ancients. But, as Strauss, Voegelin, and Arendt would argue, they can be recovered by interpretation, not in terms of a dogmatic appropriation of a sterile tradition, but in terms of the living force of human self-interpretation translated into a philosophy of politics that legitimates a comprehensive science of politics. Again a quote from Strauss elucidates the theoretical intentions of this science. “An adequate understanding of the principles, as elaborated by the classics, may be the indispensable starting point for an adequate analysis...of present-day society in its peculiar character, and for wise application to be achieved by us, of these principles to our task.”45

Voegelin agreed with Strauss on the foundational character of classical political science, but suggested that a restoration of political science must go beyond its classical beginnings.

One cannot restore political science through Platonism, Augustinianism, or Hegelianism...by means of a literary renaissance of philosophical achievements of the past; the principles must be regained by a work of theoretization which starts from the concrete, historical situation of the age, taking into account the full amplitude of our empirical knowledge.

He expanded the interpretative horizon of the theoretical enterprise and included the study of the global plurimorphic modality of human self-interpretation in the analytical framework of a reflexive understanding of human reality. But in the end, Voegelin also took Plato and Aristotle for his philosophical points of reference. For Voegelin, political science is an interpretive science. “The core of political science is a noetic interpretation of man, society,


and history that confronts the conception of order prevalent in its surrounding society with the criteria of the critical knowledge of order.” In this sense, political theory emerges from the hermeneutical inquiry into the manifold of meanings that are articulated in the rich body of human self-interpretation and moves through a process of critical clarification toward a rational interpretation of human order in historical form. Voegelin argues that the principle of “noetic interpretation evolved originally within the context of Hellenic philosophy and was called political science, *episteme politike.*”

At first glance, it seems problematic to view Arendt as another instance of a thinker who left the cage of hermeneutic philosophy behind to opt for a hermeneutic theory of politics. Her early scholarship was also marked by the German hermeneutic tradition, and, owing to her Heideggerian past, she had an ambivalent attitude toward the legacy of classical philosophy. Following Heidegger, she distinguished between the metaphysical otherworldliness of Plato and the worldly truth of the genuine political life represented by the Greek polis as it is revealed in Aristotle’s interpretation of polis-life. The true meaning of the political is at the center of Arendt’s understanding of the essentials of human existence. She is less concerned with the hermeneutical reconstruction of classical philosophy than with the reflexive appropriation of the historical experience of classical politics. Her interpretation of the existential meaning of politics conveys a paradigmatic model of the well-ordered human being in a common world of human agency. Politics embodies the practical truth of human existence which is the firm and unchanging measure of civility. Arendt’s hermeneutical appropriation of the classical tradition differs from the interpretative efforts of Strauss and Voegelin, but she is a partner in the common enterprise of restating the classical paradigm of a *peri ta anthropina philosophia.*

When fate brought the hermeneutic philosophers of politics to the United States, they presented *nolens volens* the dominant intellectual culture within and outside academia with the challenge of a theoretical counterposition that claimed authority in matters of reason and spirit. The academy reacted to this challenge with energetic resistance. John G. Gunnell traced the root of the conflict within political theory, and between political theory and political science, to

the intrusion of ideas promulgated by the German émigrés of the 1930s….These thinkers appeared, in the American perspective, to be

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political theorists, but their ideas had been formed in the context of German philosophy and the practical experience of totalitarianism…. Many of these individuals represented a position and orientation that threatened some of the basic premises of American political science and political theory.47

In effect, Gunnell’s observation refers to an ongoing clash about the fundamentals of political science within the discipline. Political philosophy confronts mainstream political science with its own hermeneutical presuppositions in that it brings to the fore the hermeneutical grounding of all human self-understanding in the political realm. Under the condition of the present globalization of human experience, political science is called to reflect upon the diverse complexes of order that determine the global conспектus of human models of political self-expression. This modern agenda of political science stipulates a comprehensive interpretive political science as Charles Taylor had requested it. The hermeneutical philosophy of politics reflects on modernity within modernity and therefore represents a self-reflecting modernity par excellence.

IV. Epilogue

Dilthey (and Gadamer) assert that self-reflection (Selbstbe-sinnung), because it explores the existential depth of the human being, is the innermost personal source of human self-understanding and the foundation of knowledge and reflective historical interpretation. This philosophical core of hermeneutical science acquired its true and original meaning in the course of the return to the fundamental experiences of the great spiritual figures of the founding age of philosophy. The philosophizing scholar preserved the central idea of philosophical self-reflection by returning to the original existential modality of the contemplative life in critical distance to the life of politics. According to Strauss, the philosopher provides the critical standards of order in accordance with the requirements of human excellence, but he must also transcend the limits of political life in order to pursue the true happiness of the life of contemplation.48 For Voegelin, the contemplative life is the very substance of the scholar and philosopher. Contemplation essentially “withdraws man from the entanglements in nature and society, makes


him an external observer of the world of becoming, contemplating its origins, causes, and forms in order to find its ‘where-from,’ ‘how,’ and ‘why.’” In this sense, the scholar and philosopher is of the world but not in the world. And Arendt, who often acted as a public intellectual, stated that “thinking and acting are not the same, to the extent that I wish to think, I have to withdraw from the world.”


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John T. Scott’s admirable new edition of Rousseau’s major political writings is likely to become the most widely used English translation of these works among the next generation of scholars and students, and for good reason. Scott provides masterful translations that are faithful to the texts and at the same time capture the brilliance of Rousseau’s rhetoric. The edition is thus an excellent choice for anyone who must rely on the aid of a translator for access to Rousseau’s political thought.

One of the principal virtues of Scott’s volume is that it is the first in over a quarter century to bring together the *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, the *Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality among Men*, and *On the Social Contact* in a single book. (Hackett Publishing has just issued its second edition, however, of Rousseau’s *Basic Political Writings*, which, although it offers a new introduction and annotation by David Wootton, retains Donald A. Cress’s translations from 1987 with minor revisions.) Scott’s volume follows in the spirit of excellent previously published translations of Rousseau by Judith and Roger Masters and Victor Gourevitch. Scott acknowledges his debt to these scholars and further states that any improvements he has made are at least partly due to their diligent efforts. In addition, Scott also has had recourse to Heinrich Meier’s most recent French edition of Rousseau’s *Second Discourse* (5th ed.; Ferdinand Schöningh, 2001), which was published after the Masters’ and Gourevitch’s respective
translations. Like his skillful predecessors, though, Scott aims to make clear the meaning of Rousseau’s political writings while simultaneously striving for great fidelity to the text. Scott tries to be as literal as possible, but, unlike Judith and Roger Masters, he eschews an attempt to render an English version that corresponds word for word with Rousseau’s French. The result is a marvelously readable translation.

Scott still seeks to translate key terms consistently, artfully balancing the competing needs for literalness and coherence, and thus allows the reader to come to terms with Rousseau’s peculiar vocabulary, a task Rousseau himself believed to be indispensable for understanding his thought (see his letter to Mme. d’Épinay from March 1756). For example, in footnote 51 to the Second Discourse, Scott helpfully explains the difference between _amour de soi_ and _amour-propre_, translating the former as “self-love” or “love of oneself” and the latter as “pride.” Although he also uses “pride” for _orgueil_, he makes a note whenever _amour-propre_ occurs so that the reader is able to keep track of such an important term. Scott similarly notes any departures from his usual translations of other terms. Moreover, Scott chooses, correctly I think, to translate _homme_ as “man” in the Second Discourse, in contrast to “person.” While _homme_ could indeed be translated as “person” or even “human being,” Rousseau’s usage of the term seems to vary: he undoubtedly contrasts _homme_ with _femme_ (“woman”) in the dedicatory letter, but at other times, as in the very title of the Second Discourse, Rousseau seems to be using _hommes_ to describe all human beings. Translating _homme_ consistently as “man” thus leaves it to the reader to decide which sense of the word Rousseau intends. At any rate, Scott generally includes footnotes justifying his choice of translation, allowing the reader to follow along and decide whether his decision is the appropriate one.

These examples reveal another advantage of Scott’s translation: the location and utility of his editorial remarks. Gourevitch, for example, provides insightful notes, but obscures their accessibility in the following way. He has numbered every paragraph of the text—which is a brilliant idea and extremely helpful for one working back and forth between the original French and his English translation—and the endnotes correspond to these numbers. There is, however, no indication in the text that a given paragraph contains one note, several, or none, so the reader must decide whether and when to consult the aid of the translator. Scott’s notes, by contrast, are ready to hand at the bottom of the page and informative, without being obtrusive. Keeping his interpretive remarks to a minimum, Scott generally restricts himself to explaining how he has translated the French, describing Rousseau’s examples
with which the reader may not be familiar, identifying thinkers Rousseau leaves unnamed, and providing references to books or quotes to which Rousseau alludes or directly points. These notes will be of aid to students, but they should also help Rousseau scholars make connections and draw insights that otherwise would come only with effort. In this and in other ways, Scott’s notes conduce to greater understanding of Rousseau’s seminal works on one’s own.

Scott’s introduction will be very helpful for those approaching Rousseau for the first time, and it will also be worthwhile for those already familiar with him. Scott begins with a brief account of Rousseau’s life, as is appropriate for a philosopher whose life and thought are “intertwined to an unusual degree” (xvi). (The same does not hold for all philosophers: see Jacob Klein’s brief account of Aristotle’s life in his essay “Aristotle, an Introduction”). Scott also provides brief overviews of the three works that are contained in the edition, highlighting the main theoretical and political problems of each text. The part of his introduction called “Rousseau’s ‘System’ of the Natural Goodness of Man” is particularly informative, since here Scott discusses the perennially important question of the consistency of Rousseau’s thought. The paradoxes in Rousseau’s thought are undeniable, but Scott, pace Rousseau, points out that paradoxes only seem to be contradictory: “the truth contained within the paradox becomes manifest once the appearance of the contradiction is resolved” (xx). Scott encourages the readers to attempt to resolve Rousseau’s paradoxes, and to seek out the unity of Rousseau’s thought by alerting them to the many difficult issues inherent in understanding Rousseau’s “system” without dogmatically offering definitive solutions. But perhaps herein lies another paradox: although Rousseau refers to his “system” in several works, in the Emile he claims to be a simple man, a lover of the truth, and one who has no party and no system and who laments the rage for systems that has taken possession of the writers of his age (trans. Bloom [Basic Books, 1979], 110 and 204). By raising the issues of Rousseau’s paradoxes in his introduction and encouraging the reader to try to resolve them, Scott points to the proper starting place for studying Rousseau: he is a powerful thinker who must be reckoned with directly if he is to be understood.

Scott’s volume also contains a helpful chronology of Rousseau’s life, and there are two bibliographies. The first lists the standard French and English editions of Rousseau’s works and also contains select secondary literature divided into the following subjects: Rousseau’s life, his thought in general, and then three separate sections devoted to each of the works that are included. The second bibliography enumerates current English translations
of Rousseau’s sources that Scott uses in his editorial notes. There is also an index that facilitates searching important topics, people, and places.

Scott’s volume features the original frontispieces and an English approximation of the original title pages—translations that omit this material run the risk of leaving out important indications from Rousseau himself (the aforementioned Hackett edition, for example, omits the frontispieces as well as Rousseau’s “Table of the Books and the Chapters” of the Social Contract). Upon seeing the beautiful frontispieces, the image of Prometheus at the front of the First Discourse and the engraving of a Hottentot from Histoire des Voyages at the beginning of the Second Discourse, one cannot help but wonder about their significance. Why did Rousseau choose the particular image that he chose? To take another example from the front matter, why does Rousseau choose to identify himself differently on the title page of each of the three works: why does he prefer anonymity in First Discourse, identifying himself only as “a citizen of Geneva,” why is he “Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Citizen of Geneva” in the Second Discourse, and why does he call himself “J.-J. Rousseau, Citizen of Geneva” in the Social Contract? In all three works, our esteemed philosopher identifies himself as a “Citizen of Geneva,” something he does only on the title page of those works that he believes will do Geneva honor (Second Preface to Julie ou La Nouvelle Héloïse). In what way do these three works honor Geneva? Including the frontispiece as well as the title page of these works encourages reflection on these and related questions.

There is one final compelling reason to prefer Scott’s edition to all others: as was previously alluded to, the excellent alternative translations of the Discourses and the Social Contract—the ones by Judith and Roger Masters, on the one hand, and Victor Gourevitch, on the other—are available only in separate books. For roughly the same price as purchasing either pair of those in paperback, one can purchase Scott’s hardback, a higher-quality publication that is sure to last. Since these three principal political writings are undoubtedly the works of Rousseau that are most commonly taught and read and since Scott has produced such outstanding translations in a durable, superior format, his hardback offers significant appeal. The paperback version, which is set to be published by the end of the year and contains a few minor corrections, will be an even greater value.

All in all, this is an excellent book. Scott, a preeminent Rousseau scholar whose work as editor and translator evinces a deep familiarity with Rousseau’s entire corpus, has produced a translation of Rousseau’s three major political works of which he should be proud and for which we should be grateful.
Jeffery L. Nicholas, *Reason, Tradition, and the Good: MacIntyre’s Tradition-Consti

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In this book, Jeffery Nicholas sets out to argue that reason, in order to be useful for ethical deliberation, must be both tradition constituted and tradition constitutive. In other words, reason must be defined by a given tradition, but once so defined, reason can then become a mechanism for critiquing its own tradition. He argues, as have many philosophers and scholars before him, that we, as moderns, have lost the ability to judge ends and are relegated to choosing between various means for best serving the related ends of self-preservation and domination over nature. Parroting the Frankfurt School, Nicholas further argues that modernity is characterized by the reduction of much of humanity, particularly workers, to the status of mere instruments. He lays the blame for this upon the prevalence of both formal and instrumental rationality, which, he claims, prohibit us from asking basic questions about the ends of human life and society. Echoing Alasdair MacIntyre, he proposes tradition-constituted reason as a solution that allows us to judge ends and to emancipate ourselves from the oppression that Nicholas alleges prevails in our modern world.

Nicholas thus seeks to contribute to two distinct, though, in his view, parallel philosophical “traditions,” namely, MacIntyrian virtue ethics and Frankfurt School critical theory. His ultimate objective, as outlined in the conclusion of the book, is to develop a critical philosophical anthropology that is both Marxist and Thomistic-Aristotelian, a project that he promises to bring to fruition in the successor to this work. His project is,
without question, an ambitious one, and he demonstrates the wide-ranging command of the relevant texts and debates in contemporary political theory required for completing this project.

Unfortunately, Nicholas’s actual contribution in this book is largely limited to an at times painstaking account of these texts and debates, and his own positions are often difficult to distinguish from those of MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, and, regarding his critique of modernity, Adorno and Horkheimer. For those who wish to gain a better grasp of current debates concerning the nature of reason, its relationship to tradition and language, and the validity of truth claims, this book may provide a useful starting point. It is, however, much less clear that Nicholas has improved upon previous attempts, such as MacIntyre’s, to develop a conception of tradition-constituted reason.

Nicholas’s first substantive chapter is primarily a summary of the critique of the Enlightenment and modernity provided by Adorno and Horkheimer in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and by Horkheimer in his own *Eclipse of Reason*. Nicholas accepts with limited effort to justify the Frankfurt School critique of the Enlightenment and of the supposed prevalence of instrumental rationality in the modern world.

Horkheimer in particular is an odd choice of philosophical ally and resource for Nicholas, since Horkheimer does not want to replace subjective rationality with a form of objective reason. He interprets prior objective ontologies as doing more to legitimize existing social hierarchies than to give a true account of the universe. “As systems of beliefs claiming universal truth, objective ontologies become part of a social totality in which they reflect current forms of social domination” (50).

Nicholas nevertheless claims that “Horkheimer obviously intends that philosophy uncover an objective ontology of reason that illuminates how reason is part of nature and involves the pursuit of self-preservation among other values” (52), a claim that he does not take the trouble to justify. He also provides very weak arguments for accepting Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s critique of the Enlightenment and contemporary liberalism. Nicholas claims, for instance, that “the rejection of the theory of evolution on religious grounds” (34) in certain segments of American society somehow validates the Frankfurt School critique of the Enlightenment when, if anything, it would indicate that the Enlightenment project was far less oppressive and far less successful in stamping out alternatives than Adorno
and Horkheimer claim. He also asserts with virtually no argument that the Persian Gulf War somehow justifies Horkheimer’s attack on liberalism as both tending toward, and allying itself with, fascism, because Kuwait, which the United States and a very broad coalition of nations fought the war to liberate, was and remains a monarchy (42–43). In sum, then, this chapter does little more than provide a summary of Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of the Enlightenment on the one hand and Horkheimer’s critique of the modern use of reason on the other. It does not lay the groundwork for the remainder of Nicholas’s project, which is premised upon the supposed inability of reason to judge ends in the modern world and the undesirable outcomes, namely, the instrumentalization of workers and alliances between liberalism and fascism, which purportedly arise from this defect in modern reason.

The next chapter is a dense, somewhat convoluted summary of Habermas’s conception of communicative rationality, Charles Taylor’s critique of Habermas’s conception, and the ensuing debate between Habermas and Taylor. The ostensible purpose of this chapter is to show that communicative rationality does not constitute an adequate response to Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of the Enlightenment project and, more broadly, of the use of reason in Western philosophy. This is because communicative rationality, as Taylor, summarized by Nicholas, argues, is based upon an unstated and undefended commitment to the value of discourse, the equality of participants in discourse, and the search for the better argument—that is, the argument that satisfies the intersubjectively valid criteria held by the participants in discourse. These commitments, in turn, are only sustainable within a more substantive ethical framework than Habermas is willing to accept.

This chapter does virtually nothing to strengthen Nicholas’s primary line of argument, for it serves little purpose other than to divert the reader from evaluating Nicholas’s case for tradition-constituted reason. This chapter is, however, a prime example of Nicholas’s tendency to substitute a summary of the debates between various contemporary theorists for a straightforward presentation of his own arguments. Those readers interested in the minutiae of the debate between these two well-known thinkers may consider this chapter a useful resource, but those readers looking for a cogent case for Nicholas’s version of tradition-constituted reason would be well served by skipping it altogether.

In his third chapter, Nicholas begins, after a fashion, to make his case for tradition-constituted reason. He attempts to defend the bold claim that “only with a tradition-constitutive and tradition-constituted
reason can ends be critiqued” (83). In defending this claim, however, he fails to evaluate obvious alternatives to tradition-constituted reason, most notably the philosophical attempt not only to evaluate but to derive the ends of human life from our knowledge of human nature. He partially rectifies this glaring omission in the conclusion of this work, in which he promises to develop a fusion of Aristotelianism, Thomism, and Marxism into a critical theory of society which draws upon our knowledge of human nature, among other sources, in evaluating ends. Nevertheless, Nicholas’s omission of a serious consideration of human nature at this stage of his argument is particularly striking in light of his assertion that “if we continually fail to find a solution to the problem of reason in modernity, we must look at the realm of the forsaken—we must seek a solution to the problem of reason in premodernity, upon which the instrumental, Enlightenment critique of objective reason focuses” (88).

Assuming Nicholas’s case against finding a solution to the problem of reason in modernity to be successful, this would seem to be the perfect occasion for Nicholas to begin his argument that Aristotle filtered through Aquinas, Aristotle by himself, or some other premodern philosopher or philosophical school provides the best solution for the problem of reason. Instead, Nicholas takes a different path altogether, choosing to continue his summary of the debates between various contemporary philosophers who also discuss reason.

Nicholas’s focus in this and the following chapters is on slightly modifying MacIntyre’s conception of tradition-constituted reason, by attempting to remedy a defect in MacIntyre’s thought, namely that “although MacIntyre suggests that an essential tie exists between reason and the good, he does not elucidate that relationship” (84). To justify his earlier treatment of the Frankfurt School, Nicholas argues in this chapter that MacIntyre’s and Horkheimer’s critiques of modernity largely overlap, even if their responses to modernity’s failings do not. Nicholas points out, for instance, that both Horkheimer and MacIntyre discuss modernity’s promotion of manipulative social relations and its tendency to blur the distinction between manipulative and nonmanipulative social relations. He also claims that Horkheimer, like MacIntyre, “is centrally concerned with the moral evaluation of ends” (90), a claim he does not succeed in vindicating. Nicholas then turns to a partial critique of MacIntyre’s conception of substantive reason. Although Nicholas adopts much of MacIntyre’s conceptual framework, he backs away from MacIntyre’s insistence that adherents of distinct traditions cannot
engage in substantive dialogue with one another because they do not share the same standards of justification. For example, MacIntyre, as summarized by Nicholas, asserts that Aristotle and Hume would lack a basis for dialogue with Kant, because they do not accept Kant’s categorical imperative as a standard of justification. Nicholas attempts to overcome this impasse by arguing that “the task, then, is to lay out more explicitly where they [Aristotle, Kant, Hume] disagree in their description of the singular phenomenon and to evaluate which description bears out the truth” (99).

Yet this promising start toward philosophical originality is soon overshadowed by a jarring and poorly articulated shift from discussing traditions of philosophical inquiry to a treatment of nonphilosophic, cultural traditions. Without explaining the numerous differences between the arguments of philosophers and the conventions of a given society, Nicholas discusses practices as disparate as the Lakota prohibition against land ownership and Azande beliefs about witchcraft, treating them all as if they were reasonable and describing the difficulties that Westerners and, more specifically, Protestant, proto-Lockean Englishmen would have in giving these traditions their due. His objective in this discussion is to prove that “when two communities meet, communities defined by their canonical texts and metaphors, neither community has linguistic capacity to represent the beliefs of the other tradition because it lacks the appropriate texts and metaphors to do so” (104).

Nicholas thus vacillates between accepting and rejecting MacIntyre’s incommensurability thesis, but he ultimately seems to come down on the side of accepting it insofar as it applies to radically disparate cultural traditions and rejecting or at least questioning it as it applies to the disagreements between Western philosophical schools. He does not, however, state his position in such terms at any point, leaving it up to the reader to reconstruct his revision of MacIntyre from various statements he makes throughout the chapter.

Nicholas then shifts to describing standards of reason and supplementing MacIntyre with Kuhn. He uses Kuhn’s idea of paradigms and disciplinary matrices to explain how differing traditions construct their worldviews and approach various problems. The objective of this attempted synthesis is to explain traditions, be they cultural, philosophical, or apparently even scientific, in terms of a framework of ideas or a “cosmology” (Nicholas’s term throughout his discussion of the worldviews of various traditions) that can, in principle at least, transform themselves when confronted
with situations for which they cannot currently account. Although Nicholas does not specify which traditions will and will not behave like Kuhnian scientific paradigms, he does argue that at least some cultures and philosophical schools will alter their most basic values and beliefs when faced with circumstances for which these values and beliefs leave them unprepared. Notably, however, he does not provide a single historical example of a culture changing in this manner.

Nicholas continues to develop these arguments in his fourth chapter, the stated purpose of which is to spell out the relationship between standards of reason and the good, by delving into particular traditions in order to forge “a path out of the modern impasse to a genuinely emancipatory substantive reason” (125). As in the previous chapter, Nicholas frequently switches between a discussion bordering on anthropological description of various cultural traditions and a partial evaluation of various philosophical “traditions.” He further develops his treatment of Azande witchcraft and Lakota prohibition of land ownership, which is based on Lakota beliefs about the sacred status of the land. He contrasts the latter with the English/Lockean conception of land ownership, which, as Nicholas understands it, holds that God gave man dominion over the land for the purpose of cultivating and improving it, and individual men have the right to claim, cultivate, and improve untamed land that belongs to no one. He implies, but does not rigorously defend, a strong preference for the Lakota over the Lockean framework.

The central claim of at least the first half or so of the chapter is that “exemplars of reason—of giving and asking for reasons—might include a scientific method or the Zande poison oracle, or the method a judge uses in deciding a case” (126). His point is that the scientific method and the Zande poison oracle, a practice of poisoning a chicken and determining the existence or absence of witchcraft by seeing whether or not the chicken dies, is, like the scientific method, a socially accepted manner within its tradition of justifying a conclusion. Nicholas does not, however, provide any basis, either in this chapter or at any point in this book, for convincing those who live in the Azande or similar traditions to reject the poison oracle as absurd and accept the scientific method as a reliable means of assisting us in gaining knowledge, albeit knowledge of a partial sort that is contingent upon further advances in scientific inquiry, about our world and cosmos. He does not, for instance, explain why a member of the Azande tribe should take the slightest interest in scientific understandings of disease, when he already believes he has an explanation for this phenomenon, namely witchcraft, and a reliable means of
detecting it, namely the poisoning of a hapless chicken. In light of his argument against relativism in the following chapter, Nicholas himself likely does not find the practice of poisoning chickens a credible method for determining anything, and he implies, though cannot quite bring himself to say, that traditions such as the Azande are based on false beliefs about the cosmos. Yet he goes to great pains in this chapter and this book as a whole to present even these traditions as reasonable in some sense and as thus deserving of serious consideration in a treatment of reason and its relationship to tradition.

Nicholas does, however, recognize what is ultimately at stake. He acknowledges that traditions entail a view of the cosmos, of humanity’s role in it, and of the relationship of at least the major parts to the whole. Nicholas then justifies this claim with a partial account of the cosmologies of the English, Lakota, and Azande traditions, in which he explains why the Lakota prohibition of land ownership and the Azande practice of witchcraft would appear reasonable to members of those two traditions while appearing entirely alien and unreasonable to Englishmen and, by extension, Anglo-Americans.

Nicholas also recognizes the need to get beyond descriptions of various cosmologies to an assessment of the truth, albeit with a very small $t$, of any given cosmology. He argues that cosmologies can and do change when they are found to be inadequate as a description of the world as experienced and perceived by those who previously adopted them. To illustrate this point he mentions, as if they were the same, the ancient Greek inability to conceive of something like the Christian God, and the Christian belief in the second coming of Christ, which didn’t happen as quickly as most early Christians believed it would. The first supposed inadequacy to the real world resulted in the abandonment of the ancient Greek cosmology, and the second resulted in substantial alterations to the early Christian cosmology (again his term), enabling that religion to survive despite the absence of a second coming.

After developing and further complicating this picture, Nicholas then shifts to a somewhat more direct treatment of the relationship between a tradition’s conception of reason and that tradition’s conception of the good, and he incorporates philosophical as well as cultural traditions into his analysis. Although his intent is to show that philosophical, like cultural, traditions have a cosmology, standards of reason, and so on, he makes several claims which indicate that he has failed to understand these traditions on their own terms. He argues, for instance, that “modern political philosophers conceive of human beings as atoms in a void, but Aristotle could not so
conceive them” (137). In making this claim, he overlooks Aristotle’s famous assertion in Book I, chapter 2 of the *Politics* that, although something like social atomism is a possibility, it is only a real possibility for a beast or a god (1253a25–28). In other words, Aristotle was fully aware of social atomism as an alternative to his understanding of human interdependence and the naturalness of the city, but he considered it contrary to human nature. Nicholas similarly claims that “autonomy requires a notion of will that Aristotle lacks” (142), this despite Aristotle’s extensive discussion of choice and deliberation in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

In other words, he assumes the very thing he must prove in his analysis of philosophical traditions, namely, that their adherents, including their creators, are limited by the standards of reason that define their traditions. For Nicholas, it is as if Aristotle were merely one of many interchangeable adherents of the Aristotelian tradition rather than the creator of that tradition who was perfectly aware of alternative understandings of human social relations and human agency but chose to reject them for various reasons. This, it seems, is the fundamental problem with Nicholas’s attempt to discuss both philosophical and cultural traditions as if they were roughly equivalent, and more to the point, this understanding of the supposed limits of philosophy would also preclude Nicholas himself from transcending his own tradition and providing the transhistorical, transcultural analysis he purports to provide in this book.

In spite of these defects, Nicholas does develop in this chapter a persuasive account of the relationship between standards of reason, cosmologies, and conceptions of the good, an account not found in MacIntyre and one which serves to buttress MacIntyre’s understanding of tradition-constituted reason. He explains, for example, how the Lakota’s conception of the land as our sacred mother leads not only to the prohibition of land ownership in that tradition but also to the nomadic lifestyle of the Lakota as well as their efforts to limit their hunting of various animals, and use of other natural resources, to a sustainable level. He thus shows how the Lakota cosmology, with the land at its center, leads to the adoption of a way of life that property-owning Americans, accustomed to a higher level of creature comforts and a lifestyle that has a more significant impact on the natural world, may find difficult to accept, even as, in his view at least, the depletion of natural resources may lead them to reevaluate their own tradition and seek to learn from the Lakota.
He also recognizes the overriding importance of a tradition’s conception of human nature to its conception of the good life. In an Aristotelian vein, he contends that “one cannot judge the activity of some being (human, plant, animal, or planet) as healthy or unhealthy unless one has some conception of what health is for that particular being” (150). This statement, however, avoids the most important question, that is, whether we can ascertain what, in reality, is healthy or good for a given being and, if so, why we ought to examine differing traditions rather than, as Aristotle does, begin with the common opinions of a given tradition and engage in a dialectical examination of these opinions. Why, in sum, should we be discussing tradition-constituted reason to the extent Nicholas does rather than using reason, tradition-constituted though it may be, to interrogate the nature of various beings? Nicholas does not address this question here, although the conclusion of this book implies that he may take it up in its successor.

In his fifth and final substantive chapter, Nicholas addresses the problem of relativism and claims to make the case that adopting tradition-constituted reason does not lead to the adoption of relativism. Instead of making his case directly, however, Nicholas again undertakes a convoluted explanation of various debates in contemporary philosophy interspersed with discussions of MacIntyre and Taylor along with a highly contrived account of the dialogue between Lakota and Lockeans concerning land ownership. Even so, Nicholas does have an argument which has the potential, were it more fully developed and more effectively presented, to be a devastating critique of the relativist position.

His argument runs as follows. We all have conceptual schemes, constituted by and constitutive of our traditions, through which we perceive and make sense of the cosmos. Yet these conceptual schemes must fit with the world as it actually is, and when they fail to do so, they encounter epistemological crises, either because a rival scheme/tradition can explain phenomena which they cannot, or because they run into difficulties on their own terms. At that point, either the tradition/scheme evolves to explain these newly encountered phenomena or problems, or the members of the tradition in crisis abandon it in favor of one which can solve their problem. This process progressively results in us gaining a better, more accurate understanding of the cosmos. Nicholas asserts that “this discussion contravenes relativist claims that rational progress is impossible and the perspectivist claim that the concept of truth should be abandoned, while denying the objectivist position of relying on some fixed, ahistorical, permanent ground of reason” (194).
Therein, however, lies the difficulty with Nicholas’s argument in its current form. Assuming, as he does, that the cosmos really does exist and that conceptual schemes succeed or fail based on their ability to give an account of our perceptions of the cosmos, Nicholas ought to accept a fixed, permanent, ahistorical ground of reason, namely, the nature of the cosmos itself. None of our traditions may have attained, or may ever fully attain, a complete picture of the cosmos, but the best of them will continue to search for it and will respond constructively to whatever difficulties they encounter in their search. In terms of method, Nicholas has a valid point that we do not need to have a fully elaborated account of the cosmos grounded in ahistorical, objective first principles in order to make progress. We do, however, need to believe, as philosophers from Plato onward have believed, that the cosmos is fundamentally rational and intelligible to us and further that we must continue seeking greater knowledge and understanding of it, whether or not our tradition happens to be particularly amenable to such constant questioning and knowledge seeking.

To sum up, then, Nicholas demonstrates an impressive command of the contemporary debates concerning reason and its continued validity in a postmetaphysical world. He attempts, with limited success, to synthesize the arguments of the Frankfurt School with those of MacIntyre and Taylor, and he also attempts to show that cultural and philosophical traditions both constitute, and are constituted by, reason. It is unclear, however, how this claim, and thus this book, amount to a significant advance beyond MacIntyre’s similar arguments, except in the very limited sense that Nicholas provides a more thorough anthropological account of the relationship between tradition-constituted reason and a tradition’s conception of the good than MacIntyre does. This book is thus, at best, a marginal contribution to the debates concerning reason and its grounding in various traditions, and one can only hope that Nicholas’s forthcoming elaboration of Aristotelian/Thomist/Marxist critical theory will constitute a contribution of greater value to political philosophy.
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