

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Winter 1994–95

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individuals \$25
libraries and all other institutions \$40
students (four-year limit) \$16
Single copies available.
Postage outside U.S.: Canada \$4.50 extra;
elsewhere \$5.40 extra by surface mail (8 weeks
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Payments: in U.S. dollars AND payable by
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Composition by Eastern Composition, Inc.,
Binghamton, N.Y. 13905 U.S.A.
Printed and bound by Wickersham Printing Co.,
Lancaster, PA 17603 U.S.A.

Inquiries: Patricia D'Allura, Assistant to the Editor,
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Discussion

Strengthening Social Contract Theory

Jeffrey Reiman, *Justice and Modern Moral Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), xiv & 322 pp., \$35.00 cloth, \$16.00 paper.

WILL MORRISEY

Instability bedevils modern moral philosophy. Whereas Aristotle lends nobility to materialism, ballast to religions, Machiavelli debases the one and poisons the other, yet ends in self-deification. Machiavelli's morality offers the spectacle of reductive 'realism' yoked to overweening ambition. In modern moral philosophizing every Hobbes has his Rousseau, every Hume his Kant, every Hegel his Marx, every Schopenhauer his Nietzsche. With contradictions so acute, syntheses need to be jerrybuilt in unending succession, as hopes for salvation chase an ever-receding horizon called 'growth.'

Jeffrey Reiman shares the modern philosophers' materialist naturalism and political atheism. He rejects the irrationalism of the moderns who come after Marx, insisting that "the most important truths of morality can be identified by the natural reasoning faculties of human beings" (p. ix). Without rationalism, "right becomes indistinguishable from might," one synthesis that cannot be salvific—at least for morality. Justice is the portion of morality that entails requirements, obligatory force; it therefore both undergirds and enjoys primacy among "other moral ideals" (p. ix). Morality binds; rational morality replaces the binding that is religion.

Reiman's investigations discover a tougher version of Rawlsian social contract theory, one well worth considering and far superior to many of its now-fashionable competitors—relativism, the airier Kantianisms, 'idealistic' distortions of Marx and democratic distortion of Nietzsche, pragmatisms dappled and motley. Reiman's theory is not free of problems, but these issue from modernism itself and are not easy to overcome.

"[A]ll moralities depend" upon the difference between might and right; "if we cannot know this, then we cannot know that the very project of trying to get our fellows to act morally is anything more than just pushing people around" (p. 1). Subjugation is pushing people around, "any case in which the judgment of one person prevails over the contrary judgment of another simply because it

can and thus without adequate justification for believing it should” (p. 2). Such justification can only come from reason. Unreasonable beliefs can do nothing in the end but fight it out, appeal to might (if in the guise of providence). The elimination of subjugation is “the inner wisdom of the social contract tradition in moral thinking” (p. 2), a tradition requiring government by consent instead of by force and fraud.

Accordingly, justice is “the set of principles regulating behavior that it would be reasonable for all human beings to accept to best protect themselves against the threat of subjugation each poses to the others” (p. 4). Natural justice applies always and everywhere human beings exist, whether or not they belong to the same civil society; social justice applies wherever people work cooperatively to produce benefits. Justice in both forms *requires*, involves reasons for restraint—self-restraint and social restraint in circumstances when desires conflict. The need for justice arises on the grounds so forcefully described by Hobbes: Different individuals have conflicting desires and judgments; they act to execute those desires and judgments; therefore, they need a set of principles upon which they can agree, for safety’s sake. “What they do not differ in . . . is their desire to live according to their judgments, no matter how different”; “only appeal to the principles that it would be reasonable for all to adopt as protection against having their judgments thwarted can answer the call for justification and thus overcome the suspicion of subjugation” (p. 6). As with ‘early modern’ moral thought generally, this line of reasoning will hold, within the horizon of the moral tradition, so long as thinkers do not propose a more ambitious moral program whereby personal safety or “peaceful coexistence” (p. 7) begins to seem a poor substitute for the radical transformation of human nature, collectively (Marx) or in certain individuals (Nietzsche).

In “polic[ing] the border between might and right,” justice’s “task is to determine the things that can be done in the name of other moral beliefs” (p. 8). “Only reason can require in a nonsubjugating way” (p. 8); reason is not only logic, “the capacity to make correct inferences from propositions,” it is also the ability “to size up facts for what they are and what they imply, and to identify the best means to some end, and, in general, to distinguish what we should believe from what we merely do believe” (p. 9). What we call a free or nonsubjugated will is “the capacity to reason about how one should act and to perform an act *because* this reasoning indicates that this action is what one should do” (p. 10). Justice provides the foundation of all further moral reasoning. Without this foundation, social contract theory floats in the air and can be made to crash—as seen in the many refutations of Rawls.

Justice as reason’s answer to subjugation is unique as a contractarian theory [Reiman observes], because we do not start by characterizing the contracting situation as an imaginary place and then work back to current reality [as seen in modern moral philosophers from Hobbes to Rawls]. We start from current reality

and derive the features of the contracting situation from the conditions necessary to pose the question of whether subjugation is occurring currently. (P. 13)

The problem of subjugation entails recognition of the “subterranean political dimension of morality” (p. 14). Reiman never loses sight of the need for individual and political liberty, neither of which implies anarchy. “A true morality spells out the conditions under which human beings may rightly govern other human beings” (p. 14). To Reiman, as to the American founders, consent always means reasoned assent, assent to coherent conceptual constraints and to the physical constraints derived from them.

Reiman believes Descartes to be the founder of modern moral philosophy, the thinker who replaced the “I am” of the Biblical God with the human “I think, therefore I am.” Cartesian doubt replaces faith, as “his own reason becomes a thinker’s highest authority” (p. 25). Perhaps because Reiman does not acknowledge Machiavelli as Descartes’ predecessor, he does not see that Cartesian *method* replaces human doubt not so much with authoritative discovery as with Godlike production, a *willful* quasi-creation known because the creator best knows and best rules his own creation. This is so to speak the princely or tyrannical aspect of modern moral philosophy, and it gives modernity its hard-edged carapace as distinguished from its soft and wellfed underbelly.

Be this as it may, Reiman understands Cartesian method as primarily a road to rational assent. Modern social contract theory, inaugurated by Hobbes, attempts to bring this principle of rational assent to politics (p. 27). The problem with Hobbes’s theory is its recourse to a sovereign “whose power is not subject to the rational judgment of his subjects” (p. 32). Locke’s objection, that the sovereign thus becomes a remnant of the state of nature, an agent of war, is vitiated by his recourse to Christianity, a recourse Reiman overhastily takes to be a sincere “reliance on revelation” previously invalidated by Descartes (p. 35). This is not the place to squabble with Reiman’s Locke scholarship; suffice it to say that the image of the pious Locke has been seriously questioned by such scholars as Robert Horwitz and Nathan Tarcov. The more important question for our purposes here is to ask, Why did Locke have need for such recourse? If he merely wanted to guard himself against attacks by the powerful and pious of his day (he was not entirely successful), then what does this need (and his middling success in meeting it) tell us not only of his own historical circumstance but of political circumstances always and everywhere? Could it be that rationalism in politics has distinct practical limits, that *political* atheism therefore has some serious disadvantages, not least of all to the atheist? Or did Locke intend something more by his recourse to Christianity than self-preservation? Could he have viewed with skepticism the likelihood of a general enlightenment or popular political rationalism? His plans for educating the class of gentry differed from his plans for educating others: temporary expedient and first step on the road to universal enlightenment, or permanent arrangement?

Because he takes Cartesian method to be a means of discovery, not of willful production, Reiman can assume that modern moral philosophy aims at an impersonal moral authority independent of the one who makes moral assertions. His equivalent of the state of nature—he calls it “the natural context”—is the state of moral doubt, of “doubt[ing] the validity of claims to moral authority” (p. 42). He distinguishes very sharply between might and right to the extent of distinguishing moral duties or requirements from moral recommendations. An example of a moral recommendation is, ‘Be courageous!’—an imperative that cannot be strictly binding because its enforcement would undermine its very nature as rationally *willed* risk-taking. This overlooks the morally educative role that force often plays, however. Rigors ‘force’ courage (or cowardice) out of people—the reverse side of the old adage, “Power shows the man.” If your family or country is endangered, is courage not a duty? Sensitive to the moral dimension of political liberty, and far from heedless of the moral dimensions of restraint, including political restraint, Reiman is uneasy with the moral underpinnings of (immediately) nonmoral acts such as physical restraint. This comes from his thoroughgoing moral rationalism, his stalwart refusal to accept habituation as a valid moral enterprise.

. . . the Cartesian challenge seems to hurl us into an endless circle: We need political authority because we cannot depend on people’s rational judgments [as in the Hobbesian state of nature], and we can only depend on political authority as if it is subject to people’s rational judgment. The way out lies in showing that we can depend on people’s rational judgments to hit upon the structure of valid moral authority. (P. 35)

There is a ‘low but solid ground’ that is *also* fully rational, a ground that will underlie a workable social contract consented to by all. Cartesianism requires the sweeping away of all habits, opinions, and conventions, not the rational ascent *from* them. Cartesianism distrusts habits, opinions, and conventions as sources of rational thought, albeit imperfect sources. The modern founding, whether political or ‘intellectual,’ requires a *tabula rasa* upon which to construct new modes and orders. Reiman may underestimate the willfulness of this project and therefore overestimate its rationality.

Consider, for example, his own recourse to existentialism. Reiman takes it as a fact that human beings have foreknowledge of their own eventual deaths and that this knowledge “transforms living into a *life*,” that is, requires us to distinguish between living well and living poorly, goads us to live a life that “compensates for the endless darkness on the other side” (p. 43). This is of course the Aristotelian distinction between mere life and the good life. But it is Aristotle filtered through Heidegger and somewhat the worse for the strain. André Malraux, who spent his life thinking about death in its variety of occasions and senses, concluded that the question of the meaning of life would be no less poignant if man were immortal, although death does give the question some

urgency. Life, not death, poses the question. Malraux borrows his most famous novel title, *La condition humaine*, from Montaigne and Pascal; not death but individuality and reason (as defined broadly by Reiman) account for the “natural fact about human beings”: their possession of a “sovereign interest” in “liv[ing] the life they want to live” (p. 49). Notice the typically modern voluntarism that now gets into Reiman’s teaching, which had subordinated the will to reason. Mistakes in identifying one’s sovereign interest are not objective but only incorrect predictions about what will best satisfy the person as judge of his own desires and author of his actions. “[C]oerced actions cannot really serve my sovereign interest unless I come to embrace them as my own” (p. 53). Evidently, reason can identify justice, the moral condition of the rest of morality, but it cannot identify a hierarchy of ends consonant with a human nature or way of life. Citing Aristotle, Reiman declares that “reasoning is being free” and that “reasoning is our being” (p. 57), that the sovereign interest is the “is” that commands our “oughts” (p. 58), the core of subjectivity, the fact that “spans the fact-value divide” (p. 18). Because this reasoning is so to speak situated outside of social and political life (thanks to the Cartesian method that requires the mental elimination of conventions and opinions), however, the rationality of human *nature* is foundational only. “As the Greeks well knew, freedom is conformity to reason, not violation of it” (pp. 70–71), but the *natural* scope of reason’s authority is limited to an egalitarian guard against subjugation, against “limit[ing] people in the pursuit of their sovereign interest” (p. 72), self-defined and limited externally only by the requirement that its definition and the actions resulting from it do not interfere with the sovereign interests of others. Reiman senses the problem here, adding that the Platonic virtues (courage, moderation, wisdom, and justice) “amount to the conditions . . . that best enable everyone to lead the life he judges that he desires” (p. 82). But this may be rather more ambitious, because more egalitarian, than the formulation in Plato, who does not expect a *polis* full of such prodigies of moral achievement.

Reiman’s egalitarian optimism is at the center of his critique of Hobbes, the victim of his own “assumption of natural moral discord” (p. 87), resulting in the war of all against all. This assumption, Reiman contends, is self-fulfilling. “[W]e can undermine Hobbes’ argument if we can replace the assumption of natural moral discord with that of natural moral agreement” (p. 88)—roughly, Rousseau’s project, but with reasonableness substituting for compassion. Only reason provides both the potential solution to conflicting moral assertions and the rigor of requirement morality needs. Other candidates—the sentiment of benevolence, the greatest good of the greatest number, the desire for justice as a means to happiness or the perfection of the individual’s natural capacities, the call for collective self-interest, and the Kantian criterion of universalizability—all lack teeth. They cannot *require* anyone to desire what he does not immediately desire (and so prevent cheating around the edges). Or, in the case of Aristotelian perfectionism, it presumes a well-articulated, stable human nature

that does not exist; human beings, in Reiman's view, simply do not have essential purposes or functions, only reason, which is instrumental to individual's self-chosen and defined sovereign interests. Kantian universalizability is even flimsier: ". . . [A]s if guilt at immorality were no more than regret over committing a logical self-contradiction. Only a philosopher could believe such a thing" (p. 112).

The reasoning that constitutes morality is more than logic. Moral reasoning recognizes the fact of the sovereign interest not by logical analysis but by the cognitive (not sentimental) act of imagining oneself into other human subjects, all of which equally share a sovereign interest even if each particular sovereign interest differs from one human subject to another. "Morality is reason's passion" (p. 113), that is, a rational *eros* that enables us to enter into other human subjects and know them to be beings like ourselves in this crucial respect. "The plurality of persons implies that there are facts one can only comprehend in an undistorted way by identifying with them," by imaginatively having the "first-person experiences" of other human subjects, by "feeling the sovereignty of the other person's sovereign interest" (p. 115). To be reasonable involves logic *and* "acting as far as I can in light of the real nature of the facts," whose nature, in the case of human beings, can only be approached through imaginative participation in their subjectivity (p. 116). Reiman calls this act of moral reasoning "respect" (p. 116). It is a democratic or egalitarian argument:

Those who, like Nietzsche, think that without God there is no morality fail to see that without God there is still human reason. Without the judge, the jury of peers remains. (P. 118)

But without God or a natural hierarchy, how might one distinguish between, say, a jury of peers and a jury of pears, that is, skulls full of mush that judge Socrates to be their peer? More pertinently because more in Reiman's terms, why should this imaginative identification with others' sovereign interests—an identification that, Reiman quickly remarks, does not make those interests one's own—"make me want to act in light of what matters to us both" (p. 118)? "I endorse the ends of others for them just beyond the boundary of my own ends," limiting "the imperious claims" of my own sovereign interest (pp. 119–20). But why does this induce me to *approve* of their claims or, for that matter, my own? Why is the "natural equality of all human subjects" seen in the "equal *urgency* of all the sovereign interests with which I identify" (p. 120)? Contentless urgency may not much impress me, particularly if I concede in advance that the various contents are unjudgeable, except insofar as they might tend to subjugate others. "Endorsing the truths of others' personal imperatives *is* endorsing the truth of moral right" (p. 124): Yes, but am I not likely to want something more than an assurance that moral right exists in the form of something so indefinite as the results obtained by perceiving the universality of moral urgency?

With this argument in hand, Reiman revives Kant's criterion of universalizability. *Given* the nature of human beings as ends-in-themselves, embodiments of particular sovereign interests, it now makes sense to say that the test of duty is whether the maxim of our action can be stated as a universal law without self-contradiction. I am quite sure that Kant's categorical imperative cannot be redeemed, even with Reiman's proviso. It is of course true that the maxim, "Thou shalt not steal," is a perfectly universalizable maxim. Unfortunately, so is the maxim, "Thou shalt steal." Reiman argues that to permit stealing would be to permit others to steal from me, and this "would bring my will into contradiction with itself" (p. 134). Not at all. To say, "Thou shalt steal," is not to say, "Thou shalt prevent others from stealing from thyself." Rather, it is to rival the highest flights of communist morality: "From each according to his inability to protect his property, to each according to his ability to steal." I have heard that cadets at one of the American military academies routinely steal one another's hats, and have great sport at it—perhaps a civilized imitation of the plunderings Spartan boys were encouraged to undertake. Without endorsing Nietzsche's suggestions that the war of all against all might be a great and species-improving joy, one can say that it could surely be a logically consistent one, especially given unanimity of respect for sovereign interests. Perhaps too much so: Reiman says, "One can respect one's adversaries or even one's enemies without having sympathy for their ends or actively adopting them," by "making way for the other to promote his ends rather than by actively promoting them oneself" (p. 136). But if the ends of the other make him my enemy, why should I make way? And if his ends are innocuous, why would he be my enemy, or even my adversary? "[R]espect is a certain honor paid to the other's values because they are his" (p. 136). Why is this a reason to respect or honor something? Why does the mere possession of a "value" require anyone to honor it—even the possessor?

The social contract consists of those principles all individuals would be reasonable to accept, not all those they do in fact accept. The social contract therefore limits our actions "at that point at which all can pursue their sovereign interests to the maximum compatible with the same for everyone" (pp. 141–42). It enables human beings to establish what Kant calls the "kingdom of ends," "the systematic union of rational beings through common laws" (p. 144). The Golden Rule in either its negative or positive formulation is "a nearly universally accepted test of morality" (p. 147), and this fact "answers the Hobbesian challenge: The trust upon which human society is based is well-placed" (p. 153). To borrow one of Reiman's ripostes, only a philosopher could believe such a thing. It is surely more likely that social trust rests on natural needs for child-rearing, food-gathering, and self-defense from other human societies, rather than on some maxim of morality that real people too often admire from afar.

This abstraction from nature (albeit in the name of nature) leads Reiman to

overemphasize liberty. This may be seen in his description of the first of his five “principles of natural justice” (p. 157), “compatible liberty.” Compatible liberty combines noninterference—each allows in others the same degree of liberty he wants for himself—with self-defense against violations of noninterference. One might suppose this prohibits abortion, inasmuch as adults, having once been born themselves, cannot consistently deny that right to others. But, having emphasized the possession of a consciously-held sovereign interest as the foundation of morality, Reiman argues that only those who have a “caring awareness” of their own lives enjoy the right to life (p. 165). “The loss of the fetus’s life is not and cannot be a loss of something that matters to the fetus” (p. 166); it has arrived at no sovereign interest and is therefore not a person. Consistent with this, Reiman admits that infants too have no “natural moral right to life” (p. 169), although in their case he generously hastens to think of some social reasons not to allow them to be killed. To claim that a human life is valuable because an individual embodies certain valuable *traits*, Reiman argues, will not do. We then would have to increase the number of human lives ad infinitum, banning not only abortion but contraception and sexual abstinence. We also could replace an individual with one of equal value, leaving individuals with no protection. Neither of these contradictory arguments withstands a moment’s examination, as it is obvious that the mass proliferation of human beings would result in deaths sooner or later, and there is no precise way to establish that any one human being is of equal value to another. Reiman also advocates euthanasia for “the irretrievably comatose” (p. 169), a point recalling the fact that fetuses and infants are not irretrievably comatose and therefore might well not be treated like those who are.

Reiman’s treatment of the other four principles of natural justice are more realistic. “Private ownership of the body is the nerve of liberalism” (p. 171); hence liberals’ rejection of sumptuary laws, corporal punishment, and invasions of privacy. Of external things, possessions supporting the needs of the body, as long as those things do not injure others’ bodies, are justly protected. The principle of trustworthiness is essential to enabling everyone to pursue his sovereign interest, although it is permissible to lie to an evildoer in order to prevent him from violating the sovereign interests of the innocent. The principle of intergenerational solicitude, obligating us to care for the young and the old, rests on our debt to those who cared for us in childhood and will care for us in old age. Finally, and most impressively, Reiman describes the principle of just punishment, which is sternly retributivist. It combines the *lex talionis* with deterrence. No sentimental humanitarian, Reiman calls the *lex talionis* “the law enforcement arm of the Golden Rule” (p. 195)—doing unto others as they have done unto you. Only retribution “can restore lasting relations of mutual respect” between the criminal and his victim by annulling “the criminal’s assertion of authority over”—his subjugation of—“his victim” (pp. 193–94).

Social justice poses difficulties that parallel those of natural justice. Society

consists of a set of legal, political, and economic structures, “channels into which [the individual] must fit his normally rationally self-interested behavior” (p. 214). These are forms of force, and therefore to be suspected of subjugation. Just social structures are those “it would be reasonable for all people to agree to in the natural context” (p. 213).

Social contractarianism assumes that human beings have the ability consciously to change society. This assumption comports with the modern opinion that “all of nature [is] a great machine to be made over in the service of human goals” (p. 226). Cartesian method applies to society, and reform begins not with thought about existing institutions but with thought that escapes these institutions: exposing society-as-second-nature as conventional and changeable, then thinking about how natural justice can best be brought into a social context.

Natural justice cannot be ‘socialized’ intact. Any social contract legislates for a particular society, not all mankind. The restrictions imposed by a social contract will go beyond those of natural justice, but, to be just, restrictions must compensate citizens with benefits not available in the state of nature. The negative liberty of the natural condition will be supplemented by the positive liberties of the social condition.

Reiman concentrates on economic structures, evidently regarding the best legal and political structure to be, in most instances, “constitutionally limited majoritarianism” (p. 236) of one sort or another. He finds the currently available economic structures much less satisfactory and discusses them at some length. Neither contemporary capitalism nor contemporary socialism comes sufficiently close to natural justice and avoids subjugation. His “labor theory of moral value” states that “economic distributions should first be considered neither as distributions of goods or money but as distributions of the labor that has gone into producing those goods, to which money then gives the bearer title” (p. 244). The moral dimension here is that labor is “life itself spent” (p. 246), and therefore a major element of each individual’s sovereign interest. Capitalism offers freedom of commodity exchange but does not in practice liberate individuals from subjugating social relations. Neither, in practice, has state socialism. Capitalism is “unprecedentedly liberating” in the struggle against nature, as Marx himself admits (p. 257). State socialism has been much less impressive, fouling the environment more while producing fewer goods and poorer services. Socialism would be superior to capitalism “if and when people are actually capable of controlling their political agencies so effectively that public control of property does not become a means of worse oppression than private control” (p. 257). Reiman accordingly endorses a more ‘participatory’ form of democracy than now exists anywhere. This again comports with his Enlightenment egalitarianism.

Reiman weakens his argument on economics by accepting Marx’s absurd theory of ‘surplus value’ (pp. 248–49), which claims, in effect, that capitalists

do not labor and which ignores the experience embodied in business structures and practices followed by capitalists. Precisely these structures and practices enable capitalism to work better than state socialism. To his credit, Reiman leaves it open as to whether a less coercive economic system could exist.

All existing systems fall short of social justice, which Reiman conceives as a modified form of John Rawls's "difference principle." The difference principle holds that any social inequalities are justified only insofar as they benefit the least advantaged. "An inequality is only justified if the shares of the worst off cannot be improved by increasing it" (p. 262). The difference principle wins consent by Rawls's famous thought-experiment, "the veil of ignorance," which asks us to imagine ourselves into an "original condition" in which we do not know what our own convictions, abilities, and class will be within civil society; without knowing these things, Rawls claims, we will prudently guarantee our own survival by positing the difference principle as the *sine qua non* for entering society. Rawls's argument falls victim to the obvious objection that it assumes each would be contractor to be rather a mouse, timidly protecting himself against the worst while eschewing the possibility of winning the stake and becoming top dog in a hierarchic structure. The late Allan Bloom laughed that Rawls has formulated a first philosophy for the Last Man.

Reiman sees the point and avoids it by ruling out gambling in the original condition, on the grounds that gambling "undermines the capacity of the contract to yield principles that exclude subjugation," which is itself excluded by reason (p. 272). Adding the prohibition against gambling to his labor theory of moral value, Reiman redeems Rawls's theory from its fuzzy egalitarianism. The labor theory of moral value helps to accomplish this end by recognizing that not all labor is created equal: Some people are more talented, more productive, than others, and they *are* entitled to greater rewards, so long as the rewards they earn also result in a net advantage to their inferiors. That is, a productive individual may require from the less productive a greater amount of labor in exchange for more goods. This will satisfy the less productive person, not subjugate him, *if* he receives more goods from the productive individual than he did before. As economists and politicians say, it is a 'win-win' situation. It differs from the free market exchanges of capitalism in that it permits only the smallest incentive (return in labor) to the more productive that produces a benefit (return in goods) for the less productive. The revised difference principle is "neutral between capitalism, socialism, and communism"; whichever is just at a given time and place will depend upon the degree to which a society has triumphed over scarcity. Politically, the issue turns on the degree to which a society has triumphed over subjugating hierarchies, the degree to which each citizen's share in sovereignty (of which wealth is *one* element) has been maximized.

Despite these improvements, it is hard not to hear the echo of Allan Bloom's mot. Reiman concludes, "I am convinced that eventually the worldview of

natural science will be accepted as a complete ontology,” that is, “a fully reductive materialism” will prevail (p. 309). As for a major competing “world-view,” Reiman gives it what he takes to be its due: The Jews are indeed a ‘chosen’ people—‘chosen’ by nature, “selected because the survival value of mutual trust is greater even than the possession of political power” (p. 311). Naturalism can sustain reverence if we identify “the sacred” with the omnipresent and omnipotent “natural universe itself” (p. 312). But if materialism is true, and trust is the true survivalism, does this not tend to collapse the distinction between might and right by making right merely a more cunning form of might? And if we are to believe the natural universe sacred, does this not mean that, given the Second Law of Thermodynamics, God is dying? Nietzsche’s insistence that God is dead will then be followed by Malraux’s insistence that man is dead, or dying. Both moral judge and moral jury are out, or on the way out, a process surely hastened by a political egalitarianism that mimics the entropy of the cosmos even as it claims to be mastering nature—a nature it calls “sacred.” Spinoza is more consistent; he does not traffic in reverence or respect.

Ontology aside, Professor Reiman has written with considerable intelligence and care, refurbishing social contract theory at a time when rationality, particularly the concept of reasoned assent, is pilloried by posturing opportunists in and out of academia. It is refreshing to hear some kind words for Descartes, Hobbes, and some of the other great founders of modern moral philosophy, men far superior to their supposed critics (and unwitting successors) of today. If there are some problems with the project the first moderns founded, the necessary ameliorations may have to come from sources other than themselves, and much less from so-called postmoderns. Reiman has performed the important service of presenting modern moral philosophy in a most sophisticated manner, integrating modern ‘realism’ and ‘idealism’ more successfully than Rawls.