

Interpretation

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Review Essay

Svetozar Y. Minkov and Bernhardt L. Trout, eds., *Mastery of Nature: Promises and Prospects*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018, xiii + 268 pp., \$65.00 (hardcover).

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Mastery of Nature is an intellectual and moral challenge for all of us who are affected by the modern attempt to govern the world through a knowledge, or discipline thereof, severed from any presupposed (“metaphysical”) end or good.¹

Latin Averroism is at home in *Mastery of Nature*, whose seventeen academic contributors,² with a few possible exceptions, contribute to the view that man must understand himself today in the light of the subhuman or unconscious, even while he takes his practical bearings from his superhuman perfection: we seem fated to be (theoretical) materialists without being able to avoid conducting ourselves as idealists.

Ralph Lerner’s preface sets the thematic stage for the volume as a whole. Lerner articulates two crucial points: (1) modernity entails—beyond the project of constructing a Tower of Babel—the seemingly unprecedented rise

¹ This is the first part of a critical essay review of the volume. The second part will appear in issue 45, no. 3 (May 2019) of *Interpretation*.

² The literary quality of contributions varies, though it is generally commendable, notwithstanding several grammatical blemishes. See, e.g., 2, 7, 32, 33, 35, 37, 45, 55, 63, 81, 126, 157, 159, and 180.

of individuality as consummation of nature (or—to remain closer to Lerner’s specialized language—as “recapitulating” man’s genetic or natural context [xi]), and (2) natural disasters forcefully compel us to entertain one of two (extremist) thoughts or dreams, either that we are morally responsible for all the physical calamities affecting us, or that we must learn to conquer nature along the lines of modernity’s enlightenment project (xiii). *Tertium non datur*—neither the biblical Job, nor the Socrates of traditional Platonism (what in *Mastery of Nature* turns out to be a merely “exoteric” Socrates).

In writing as if modern technology were the coming of age of an ancient precursor, Lerner exposes himself to the objection that antiquity has *techniques*, or “arts” involving the transformation of things, though strictly under the assumption that transformation occurs on the basis of the things’ essences or *natures* (whereby only “external” forms would be modified, on the basis of inherent forms, given the classical distinction between *morphē* and *eidōs*), and within the context of a good not subject to transformation (whether or not the transformation be prompted by more than people’s transient wishes).³ With modernity, classical arts yield to a *technology* that, no longer bent on improving means in the light of unchanging, superhuman or divine-like ends (enshrined notably in some oracular utterance), rises to define ends in terms of means (the high in terms of the low). Whence modernity’s incompatibility with antiquity’s “arts,” which were predicated on a two-world ontology, whereby our genetic context would stand at once as provisional challenge and ultimate, mysterious end. There, our lives signal an otherworldly dimension, our mortality itself points us in the direction of its immortal secrets.

To return to Lerner’s first proposition, it is not clear how or if modernity’s project transcends, in its essence, Babel’s project, insofar as *both* entail a quest to establish a new unity (Lerner’s “individuality”), displacing a prior, transcendent one. Is it not rather Genesis 11 that transcends modernity (not the other way around), by inviting critical reflection on the (given) language-bound limits of humanly achievable “unity”? Consider, for instance, Genesis 11:1 and 4, where a common language is spoken by all peoples who were everywhere the same, while separate, or prior to their coming together in building “the tower.” All peoples spoke the same tongue, so that their language was essentially the same. To echo Vico (more on this later), the first tongue was spoken “poetically,” or through poetic tropes. Now, to reach “the heavens,” one needs

³ Mansfield addresses this point on p. 16. Mastery of nature is one thing, mastery of an *art* (whether pottery, painting, or breathing), on nature’s basis, is another.

to “philosophize,” or to rise above poetry, to the status of divinity, or of creator of things themselves (not merely of tropes). Genesis critiques such a philosophizing, showing that the unity achievable by what we would call “natural philosophy” is at best a metaphoric one, not to be confused with any absolute or inalienable one. As Lerner intimates in the opening statement of his preface, the problem of our “horizontal” relation to nature (our relation to nature as surrounding environment) is rooted in the problem of our understanding of our “vertical” relation to the divine(d) root or source of nature (in Jacob Klein’s terms, “the Nature of nature”), where the origin of nature represents for all practical purposes a transcendent “authority” (what is *above* us), our relation to which grounds our relation to all of our surroundings.

If our stance towards nature depends in a fundamental way on our stance towards the origin of nature, we are left asking—possibly even beyond biblical allowances—if that origin is intelligent (purely intelligible) or blind/mechanical (susceptible to mastery). *This* is the first question we are faced with in trying to figure out how we should relate to nature.⁴

In its introduction—coauthored by three colleagues teaching in MIT’s chemical engineering department⁵—*Mastery of Nature* stands as candidate for the role of “starting point” for thinking about the “mastery of nature,” a project that, in the absence of any serious/successful/radical dissent, dominates our times (4–5); for even “the world of radical Islam” serves the nature-mastering cause (6–7).

Our authors stress the importance of asking about the political-theological origins or foundations of the enthralling but dangerous project of mastering nature, insofar as the foundations inform “the magnificent structures” built upon them (2). Mastery of nature emerges as an “omnipresent” edifice building upon technology (understood along Lerner’s lines), “influencing practically every aspect of our lives,” most notably as governments’ universal instrument of domination and possibly enslavement—a tool that, distracting us from its own moral foundations by way of co-opting us to serve their cause, impinges upon the very essence of human freedom (3).

⁴ For an intimation of this point, see the reference to “moral disposition” on p. 3. The question at hand is clearly related to the problem of atheism (compare xii and Stauffer’s pertinent remarks on p. 47).

⁵ The authors are Trout, Doneson, and Minkov: the first is professor of chemical engineering, while the second and third lecture on the relation between politics/ethics and modern science (Doneson on a full-time basis; Minkov, while teaching primarily in the Philosophy Department at Roosevelt University).

Our authors further indicate that appeals to nature fail to destabilize the mastery-of-nature project, especially insofar as nature may be conceived (e.g., following Kant, or à la Rousseau) as confirming religiously our right to master it (5).⁶

Even Hegel fails to meet the challenge of opposing nature conquering, as we gather from our authors' dismissal of Hegel's phenomenology as "neo-Platonic" or unduly metaphysical—with a tangential reference to Hegel's "'Cartesian' standpoint" (5–6)—even though Gillespie's chapter 12 will argue (moving beyond acknowledgments on p. 11) against both attributions. Nietzsche and Heidegger are supposed to fare better in responding to nature conquering, insofar as they invite a mythical "new beginning," if only presented in terms of a powerful restoration of "old philosophies" (6)—even though the two Germans are seen as failing to appreciate, as the "founders" of modernity would have, the ineluctability of human (religious) prejudice and the corresponding irrevocability of philosophers' need for prudence: early modernity can still teach us that no world will ever be brave and new enough to overcome the ancestral need for moral accountability, that is, the need to produce mythical answers to philosophical questions (7–8). Such a need seems to go a long way in spelling out what our authors hold to be "fixed" in human nature (4).

The most far-reaching suggestion the authors of the introduction offer us is that the founders of the modern Enlightenment ultimately understood and presented their technologically driven nature-mastering project (the new piety of "Science" [9]) as one transitory expression of philosophers' longer-term, if not perpetual effort to manage their conflict with nonphilosophers (7; compare Minkov on 37).

Harvey Mansfield's "Machiavelli and the Discovery of Fact" is our volume's first of sixteen chapters. A general irony underscoring Mansfield's chapter is that it approaches modern science in the manner its author sees modern science approaching nature: as *fact*.⁷ Modern science is not approached "from

⁶ While our authors read Rousseau reasonably as having radicalized the Enlightenment by critiquing it on its own basis, Rousseau's deeply troubled, not say "misanthropist," late writings are at odds with our authors' conclusion that Rousseau ended up "rejecting technology and capitalism in favor of serene resignation." Would it be fairer to state that Rousseau fosters the severing of virtue/reason from truth (the Enlightenment message is supposed to be *true*, even if *inhuman*), and that, by remaining unwilling to give up on either, Rousseau appeals to virtue/reason in "metaphorical" terms, as a partial consolation in the wake of the rise of a truth indifferent to anything properly human?

⁷ Though identifying antiquity's *facta* with "deeds as opposed to speeches" (rather than with "truth as opposed to imagination" [22]), Mansfield remains silent with regard to the ancient "poetic" sources

within,” or “sympathetically,” but “scientifically” (in a Machiavellian fashion, one dare say) “from without”—as “what is purely given” (16; compare 234n9: with Machiavelli, “forms are imposed on matter rather than recognized in it”). The result of this approach is the arguably oversimplifying conclusion that “the purpose of modern science is to see nature as pure fact.” For it turns out that the modern scientist rejects “perfecting facts” in favor of isolating them, “in order to liberate the intelligence” of the scientist (16). Thus does the “purpose” of modern science emerge as a mere *means* to a higher end—what Mansfield further refers to as liberation from “suffering” (17).

Isolating nature is only the first step to liberating the intellect from suffering: we need to isolate nature in order to set out to actually conquer it. Modern science’s alleged purpose consisting of the isolation of nature *from man* (from our interpretation, choice, etc.) is a means to the higher end of conquering nature, yet not merely by isolating man (the reverse side of the coin of nature’s isolation)—for conquest requires active engagement. What is needed is the *transformation* of both man and nature (again, for the sake of “liberation”), or the *synthesis*—through the very activity of “conquest”⁸—of man and nature, spirit and matter (Aristotle’s *hulē*), mind and flesh, *whatever* the synthesis in question may turn out to amount to, or *mean*. The *meaning* of modern science would then be obscure, as opposed to being as clear and distinct as Mansfield suggests. In this respect, at least, the “Cartesian” surface of Mansfield’s text conceals a dimension that is so far from being clear and distinct that it resents the otherworldly.

Not only modernity, however, is, for Mansfield, framed by a life-affirming will to conquer; modernity’s religious background (namely, Christianity) is, too. Accordingly, Mansfield’s allusive reading of religion as resentfully camouflaged or distorted will to power (18, echoed by Minkov [36] and Stauffer [44]) leaves no space for Christ’s *perfecting* nature, if only by making

of modernity’s “fact,” that is, to the *factum*, or that which is “accomplished,” and thus “certain,” and thereby represented as “true.” On this question, Vico’s 1710 *De Antiquissima Italorum Sapientia* is illuminating. Compare Vico’s 1744 *Scienza Nuova*, “Of the Elements,” 47. Vico shows that antiquity’s *factum* (“fact”) is as bound to the *verum* (the true) as modernity’s facts are to the (modern) imagination.

⁸ Mansfield’s discussion obscures the *telos* of modern thought, omitting any reference to the “Hegelian” consummation of modern reason. As Hegel’s discovery of *Absolute Logic* shows most emphatically, what is emptied of inherent or “ahistorical” meaning is not merely the nature “exposed” by modern empiricists, but also the equally evolving abstractions produced by modern rationalists for the sake of controlling *res extensa*, nature bereft of any and all heavenly roots. Just as nature must be finally discovered as a perfect machine, so too must our ever-mutating language(s) be finally converted into one terminal—both universal and concrete—language that, as a “perfect model,” would be entirely fit for the perfect machine. Therein—in what Hegel proclaims as the self-realization of Spirit—would Galileo’s Enlightenment prove to be a fulfilled promise.

providential use of conquest. The very Christian notion of *Logos* as redemptive “coinciding” (to echo Nicholas of Cusa’s *coincidentia oppositorum*) of alpha and omega (well beyond Nietzsche’s secular “eternal return of the same”) undermines the thesis that for Christianity conquest is an end in itself.

Mansfield’s decisively modern reading of Christianity’s divinity as masking its all-too-human genesis anticipates (if masks are expendable) Mansfield’s reading of Christianity as unwitting stepping-stone for Machiavelli’s supposed divorce of truth from the imagination—where Mansfield reads Machiavelli as appealing to an “effectual truth” cut off from the imagination, religious or otherwise (21–22).

Machiavelli does speak (e.g., in the opening of chapter 15 of his *Prince*) of “following” or “going back to” a concrete truth, rather than to what it is imagined to be; yet, contrary to what Mansfield indicates, Machiavelli does not posit an opposition between truth and imagination. Instead, he sets out to replace an “old” imagination—which on Machiavelli’s account entails a regrettable reification of truth—with a new one that is one with truth itself. Where “effectual truth” is produced or aimed at as an “effect,” Machiavelli is proposing to abandon the imagining of *unrealizable* things (or not to conceive truth as an eternal given), in favor of bringing about realizable things, *without* denying that we should imagine realizable things. Contrary to what Mansfield suggests, Machiavelli’s “realizable things” are not cut off from the imagination. What Machiavelli is inviting is, we might say, a “new imagination,” or rather a *primordial* mode of imagination, whereby the Florentine rejects imagining unrealizable things, in favor of imagining realizable ones. Far from abandoning the imaginary, Machiavelli is drawing the imaginary within human reach. Indeed, truth is now (imagined to be) ultimately “in the making,” so that knowledge is power: as Mansfield himself would agree, for Machiavelli, to know truth is to make it. (Machiavelli’s lesson would pertain equally to nature and to man.)

Mansfield himself sees Machiavelli as teaching that to know the world is to act upon it; therein lies the core of Machiavelli’s synthesis of Aristotle and Lucretius (22–23). With the Florentine, we can know “the” world, as it is given to our senses, properly because there is no “other world.” To make up for its absence, we have recourse to Machiavelli’s “virtue,” without which there could be no knowledge of *this* world.

Though for Machiavelli the unhinging of our everyday, practical life from eternal bonds opens the door to the new “virtue” of a “prince” who is

beyond good and evil, on Mansfield's reading the modern world inaugurated by Machiavelli ends up—most notably in the guise of “science” as “substitute for religion,” if not as consummate religion—betraying its founding father by rebinding man to a nonhuman authority (25 and 29). Modernity's early flight from superhuman necessity ends in a flight into subhuman necessity.

In our volume's chapter 2—“The Place of the Treatment of the Conquest of Nature in Francis Bacon's *On the Wisdom of the Ancients*”—Svetozar Y. Minkov highlights the “religious” character of modern Baconian science. Modern science stems from a particular understanding of Christianity, which is supposed to be interested in forgiveness more than in justice (31, 33, after 26). Here Minkov echoes Mansfield, remaining silent about Christianity's apocalyptic “second coming” or Final Judgment. A fundamental feature of modernity, consisting of modernity's partial reading of Christianity, is thereby taken for granted (rather than presented critically), foreshadowing a general critique of modernity on modern grounds.⁹

In secularizing Christianity, Minkov's Bacon presents us with a utopian “New Atlantis”—Bacon's “open” society—that is as unrealizable as it is merely instrumental to Bacon's own philosophical life (31 and 235n6). The passage Minkov depicts from Christianity to its Baconian secularization or modernization is smooth, yet only insofar as its account ignores that in (premodern) Christianity ecumenicism serves as preface to a return to the primacy of hierarchies, both earthly and heavenly: Minkov's allusive insinuations notwithstanding, premodern Christianity (especially in the person of its Doctors) is as far from modern neo-Epicureanism as it is from renouncing political life (or Judaism, for that matter).

Minkov's reading of Christianity as precursor of Baconian modernity is crowned by an account of the latter as holding that nature can be manipulated precisely because of its lack of proper telos or meaning. (Evidently modern science does not seek any original meaning of nature, even as meaningless nature acquires “meaning” or significance for man: belief that life/death is inherently meaningless weighs heavily on modern politics [34–35].) It is man or spirit that gives meaning to nature (if only by “discovering” one that “fits” nature), thereby harmonizing, as Minkov shows and as Hegel's lesson confirms, “philosophy with society,” that is, mind with body. Bacon's project, or “new science,” should be understood “historically,” as embracing the

⁹ Is it by accident alone that Minkov refers twice to the “thirty-one” parts (“fables and parables”) of Bacon's *On the Wisdom of the Ancients*, on p. 31?

progressive secularizing of thought, evolving into a terminal *scientific* adaptation of what is highest (the mind) to what is lowest, the senses (cf. 35–36), lest the two remain in conflict with one another. It is for the benefit of both mind and body that both are to be transformed (via destruction; though Minkov focuses on that of nature alone [38] he hints at an eventual need to “replace” old scientific certainties, as once-cherished idols, with new ones [42]).

Overall, the “new science” either seditiously replaces (36) or oversees traditional religions, as *the* true bond between the spiritual and the material, thereby dethroning—as we may deduce from Minkov’s argument—religion understood as bond between the divine and the human, that is, between the perfectly spiritual and the imperfectly spiritual—between indeterminate and determinate *form*. The rise of modern science *as* ultimate religion would then entail the view that matter is originally, though not inevitably, formless or unformed (34). What is original is no longer God, but unformed matter (35), so that religion should be understood as binding, not man to a divinity above him, but a divining man to a material underpinning the human. (Men who do not divine or philosophize are supposed to be vulgar and malignant [36].)

The new piety (and sentiment of pity) personified by modern science—or Nietzsche’s Christian morality without a Christian God (35)—is supposed to serve as antidote to the otherworldly excesses, or authoritativeness, of Christianity (40): even as modernity’s technology is a mode of flattery, Bacon justifies it as necessary evil working hand in hand with revolutionary-seditious propaganda and Machtpolitik serving the self-interest of Baconian man (36). Whether or not the world invited by Bacon could ever turn against its Father by mistaking itself as an end in itself is a “Nietzschean” problem Minkov leaves us with in prophesying the genesis of “a super-technocratic tyrant” (42).

Devin Stauffer’s chapter 3—“Hobbes on Nature and Its Conquest”—lends indirect support to Minkov’s reading of Bacon by arguing that for Hobbes the modern Leviathan is not a solution, insofar as it does not overcome or purge itself of the “nature” *within* man (44). In making use of nature to establish an unnatural society, modern man fails to entirely domesticate nature, whereby untamed, dangerous nature remains at the very heart of Hobbes’s Leviathan. More specifically, modernity fails to extinguish heroic desire for a good beyond any peace guaranteed by modern society (45). The “rational” society, into which Hobbes calls “nature” to enter (keeping in mind that for Hobbes our departure from our “state of nature” entails, not an abandoning of nature, but a co-opting of nature to serve unnatural ends), falls short of

full realization (46–47).¹⁰ Nevertheless, our sole Providence is the human one best incarnated by the Leviathan (44, 48), to the extent that it makes rational use of nature (passions) (45–46), trying to free our passions from Christian promises (“crippling delusions”), as well as from the Platonism (or more generally speaking, ancient naiveté, or even man’s tendency to seek glory) that nourishes or inspires them (46–47).¹¹

Stauffer’s Hobbes is no Christian at heart: his profession of a Christian faith is as false (47) as the “mechanistic materialism of his natural philosophy” geared towards “enterprise” (47) is incompatible with “reverence or gratitude” (there is none towards a universe of bodies moved solely mechanically, by other bodies [48]). Hobbes’s man emerges “for fundamentally accidental reasons” (48; clearly, then, no Hegelian “absolute logic” guarantees the emergence of mankind). Man can “think of what he can do with something once he has it,” and not a priori, because man’s capacity and his very thinking consist of a modification of unconscious nature: thought amounts to a mode of physical motion, couched in a universe of other modes (48–49).

What a “body” actually is remains for Hobbes a mystery (a “black box” [50]), even as “bodies” is considered “the most plausible answer” to the question of the foundation of our perceived world, as well as of our thought (51). Hobbes does not need to claim to know definitely that nature is a mindless

¹⁰ Stauffer’s account of Hobbes’s critique of heroism tackles especially “desire for glory,” without considering that, not only Caesar, but Socrates as well—the philosophical hero—prompts quarrel and is thus a threat to (conventional) peace (44–45).

¹¹ It is not clear that Hobbes is as free from Christian influence as Stauffer would have it. On Hobbes’s “indebtedness” to Christianity, see Vico’s *Scienza Nuova*, “Of the Elements,” 31, which helps us understand both Hobbes and the limits of Stauffer’s reading. Vico suggests that, in the attempt to free himself from Christianity, Hobbes failed to notice that there is a valid philosophic sense of otherworldliness that had been obscured by Christianity’s shift of interest from pagan politics to universal politics, or a sinful “mankind” (one towards which we ought to feel, thereby, charitable). Christianity is the basis of Hobbes’s ignoring that man is *naturally political* in the sense that his life is piously bound to a *closed society*, as opposed to being bound “charitably” to a transpolitical “society of Mankind” (*società del Gener’ Umano*). It is Christianity that “moves” Hobbes to place political philosophy in the service of “the whole society of Mankind,” that is, to manage “scientifically” the universal mankind that the Christian revelation had supposedly failed to save from political strife. In Hobbes’s new political universe, religion can no longer be trusted, unless it is privatized as fuel for an ideology. Religion or its divinity can be no more natural to man than is politics, which no longer stands, for the modern, as it had for classical antiquity, as poetic middle term between man in his worldly condition and divine transcendence. Divine transcendence is now a mere façade for Hobbes’s new, “scientific” Society.

Vico’s lesson bears directly upon the question of nature’s mastery, insofar as Hobbesian secularism emerges as entailing the “life-affirming” abandoning of a classical understanding of worldly life as essentially poetic, or oriented towards the otherworldly or death. For the secularist, the otherworldly can be no more than a mask of worldly interests begging to be unmasked. To be enlightened is to realize that there is no life *in* death (no right in nature), no soul prior to its incarnation.

body in order to advocate the project of subjecting nature to a Hobbesian mind. While the possibility of a divine, suprahuman will beyond a mechanistic universe is *volens nolens* open (51), it is at once practically inconsequential, insofar as the modern will (and its technological projection aiming at confirming the world as object of our manipulation)—a will to *displace* any other possible will as lord over nature—affirms itself independently of any metaphysical uncertainty concerning the ultimate inexistence of a will above that of Hobbesian man (52–53). The Hobbesian will is a hero striving to rule over nature, *whether or not* he may need to dethrone some God along the way.

Stauffer's reading of Hobbes is crowned by the argument that for Hobbes the advances of modern technology contribute to any knowledge we may have (had) that nature is, for all practical intents and purposes, subjectable, or vulnerable to our manipulation: modern technological progress exorcises from modern science—"the new physics"—the suspicion or fear that we may be incapable of exercising control over nature, including our own (53 after 44). It is thus misleading to read, as many have, Hobbes's formal placing of science in the service of power (*scientia propter potentiam*) as expressive of Hobbes's final interest: even if *initially* our knowledge is too uncertain to confirm that it is an end in itself, our power is supposed to finally confirm our knowledge (53).

Stauffer's account is convincing, even as it is vexed by a few crucial interpretative lacunas. For while it initially refers to Hobbes's rejecting "desire for glory" as a permanent threat to peace—one impervious to being "channeled in peaceful directions" (45)—it does not consider that Hobbes's own project is, in and of itself, at once glorious and heroic (whether or not Hobbes himself would speak of it in such terms), especially in the light of the tremendous obstacles it faces. Stauffer is silent also about the old difficulty of knowing if our "control" over nature is not merely an offshoot of nature (whereby nature would be controlling itself by evolving into human beings [48–49]), but an outright *delusion* nature uses to control *us*.

Finally, Stauffer's chapter ends with an allusion to "the most challenging alternative" to the Hobbesian project. It is not entirely clear whether that alternative is best incarnated by the Bible, or by Socrates.

In Stuart D. Warner's chapter 4—"Devising Nature in Descartes's *Discourse on Method*"—we find that, by way of designating the point of departure for his novel quest for knowledge, Descartes strategically replaces "the Book of Scripture and the Book of Nature" with "myself, or else...the great book of

the world”: insofar as “myself” is not the divine creator of “Nature,” nature yields to “the world” (i.e., the one and only one, tacitly excluding the otherworldly), “which has been inscribed by human artifice” (55–56). Having studied the world, however, Descartes dismisses it as a realm of fictions retraceable to “myself.” Accordingly, Descartes replaces all commitments or “promises” (including Christian ones) that place freedom in the hands of a divine authority with Descartes’s own promise to place all things in function of freedom (62–64).

Descartes’s subversive departure from Christianity notwithstanding, by relying always on *some* “customs, conventions, and common opinions”—the most liberal ones—as opposed to none, Warner’s Descartes assumes a Socratic stance, placing himself as a critical thinker in the very midst of political life, as opposed to projecting himself above it (59, 63). Thus is Descartes supposed to retain a cardinal concern with prudence as guide in ordinary living.

Yet, if only for the “benefit” of nonphilosophers, does Descartes not project himself into a *method* purportedly standing above all human differences so as to best apply to all, as supreme *guide* in practical living? Does Descartes not set out to gradually replace, at least for most of us, the need for virtue with a need to follow the “Cartesian method” in *all* things? Does he not invite a progressive alienation of political life, or liberty, from its ground (philosophy’s “nature”) as a truth (what is beyond all prejudice) accessible only via virtue classically or Socratically understood as entailing intimate engagement with properly human affairs? What is more, Warner’s Descartes seems to be *compelled* to tread a Socratic path, whereas Socrates sees his “second sailing” in terms of what we might call a *felix culpa*, whereby our political fictions emerge as blessing in disguise (consider, e.g., Plato’s *Apology* and *Phaedo*: not only does Socrates cherish his ignorance, but he shows himself to be even grateful for his death sentence).¹²

On Warner’s account, there seems to be no ultimate dividing line between classical antiquity and modernity’s progressivism. Yet a deep dividing line comes to light as we reflect upon the question of power. Is man’s birth (or fall into this world) best redeemed by his making of things—by his constructing shelters, ever more powerful defenses against this world’s perils and means of overcoming its natural limits? Or is it instead best redeemed by his rising to his original ground or otherworldly homeland, by “purging” himself of all conceit and thereby rendering the things he makes ever more “poetic” or

¹² Compare, e.g., *Phaedo* 66d–68b and *Apology* 22a–b.

“useless/powerless”—ever more reflective of a world of *ends*, as opposed to one of means? In this latter case, our creations (“art”) would serve as reminders of our divined origin (consider, e.g., the relation between *anamnesis*—as addressed notably in *Meno* 86b—the Lethe river in the context of the Myth of Er, and *good* poetry, in Plato). Our creations would point “backward,” imitating the divine agency (“Nature”) grounding the constitution of the natural world, yet again not presuming that this primal agency is to be understood above all in terms of *power*, but as a mystery transcending the very notion of power. Such a mystery begs for a reflective, critical *interpretation* allowing us to discern, exposing us to, or again raising us back to, mystery as the true nature of the agency that all of our “art” imitates.¹³

The crucial question that Warner’s arguments beg is whether man is born for power, or for something transcending power—something that would render the meekness or “poverty” of Socratic investigation not merely a “second best” vis-à-vis monistic omnipotence (the Cartesian dream, as we might dub it), but *the* best way for us to relate to reality, beyond any and all Self.¹⁴

Warner exposes himself to further objections when relating Descartes to ancient Stoicism. Warner characterizes the third maxim of Descartes’s *Discourse* as having strong Stoic leanings. Indeed, “the philosopher with whom Descartes ends has no interest at all with the reformation of the world or transformation of nature” (66). To be sure, Descartes had spoken of trying always to conquer himself rather than fortune, and to change his desires rather than the order of the world. Yet Descartes explains his third maxim in terms of grounding the conquest of the world in our independent powers alone, as opposed to powers depending upon a higher authority, such as that of God presiding over angelic messengers. In order to build his argument, Warner cites a statement by Descartes concerning ancient Stoicism, while omitting its original critical *antecedent*, which reads as follows: “For, since our will does not naturally bring itself to desire things other than those that our understanding presents to it as somehow possible...” Descartes is in effect suggesting that ancient Stoics were *wrong* in assuming that “all the goods outside of us [are] equally removed from our power” (66). However, what interests Descartes here is that Stoics were praiseworthy for heralding a standard independent of the world, even though they were wrong insofar as our will *can* conquer the world, for it

¹³ On “mysterious being,” see Leo Strauss’s 1962 “Why We Remain Jews,” in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, ed. K. H. Green (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 328–29.

¹⁴ Socratic “selflessness” emerges further as we contrast Descartes’s aiming at “instruction” (67) and Socrates’s questioning the very notion of instruction.

is not fundamentally or originally, *purely* independent of the world. As Jacob Klein showed well, Descartes's *ego* is altogether *in* and *of* this world—of the world it can, to some extent at least, conquer.¹⁵

A central accomplishment or aim of *Discourse IV* is to convince us of (1) the primacy of what is “clear and distinct” over what is “confused and obscure,” and (2) the identity of being and existence or becoming (*être* and *exister*), whereby man's *being* coincides with God's, *as if* what is *very* certain were at once *perfectly* certain, as opposed to being merely probable. Now, what is very certain to us is being-in-*this-world*, or survival (“the preservation of health” [72]), as opposed to any otherworldly or *pure* being. Warner's concluding arguments confirm this point: Descartes expressly *feigns* a scientific-technological world in which we would be creators of all order by creating or devising “laws” universally applicable to nature (70–72). Our so-called “laws of nature” would be, for Descartes, nothing but the rules that certain philosophers devise for the benefit of all men, specifically to carve *and conquer* a world out of natural chaos, a world in which man could feign himself God.

Beyond or rather behind this Cartesian project of conquest, however, Warner finally sees Descartes as a pure philosopher, one who “affirms that a life spent cultivating his reason in pursuit of the truth is the very best of occupations” (72). Yet in citing Descartes, Warner omits reference to a significant trait by which Descartes's project distinguishes itself from, say, the Socratic life. Returning to the divined source of our world (“the truth”) entails, for the Frenchman, gaining *power* over the world to whatever extent made possible by Descartes's *method*.

Diana J. Schaub's chapter 5—“Montesquieu, Commerce, and Science”—centers on the rise of the modern self-creating “Self” (82, 84). Schaub's curious use of terms of praise for Montesquieu foreshadows her slightly subdued concluding welcoming of a contemporary world scene in which commerce makes of womanly frivolity and vanity the most outstanding virtues (80, 83).

Montesquieu emerges as a complex thinker distancing himself from modernity in the very act of securely reaffirming its core. “Clear and distinct” variety is promoted over all that is “obscure and confused”—ultimately, death, or the night of life, as it were. Obscure and confused death can be conquered in the name of a new “foundation” myth, necessary illusion, or “prejudice,”

¹⁵ See especially Klein's *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra*, trans. Eva Brann (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968).

namely the Self or “me,” existing in private under laws (75–76, 79–80). Old dreams (not least of them, those of premodern monasticism) are replaced by a new, powerful one: an apolitical “me” empowered in the role of foundation of political life. In responding critically to Christianity’s otherworldliness, Montesquieu would be setting out to restore the dignity of political life, albeit on an apolitical basis entailing a mechanistic understanding of nature (77, 79–80). If this is so, far from returning to a Platonic-Aristotelian conception of the roots of political life and order, Montesquieu would be replacing the biblical Garden of Eden with a Hobbesian “state of nature” (77), thereby presenting politics (and man) as autonomous of any metaphysical dimension (78).

We are far, here, from any return to pre-Christian classics. Even the appeal to “moderation”—Montesquieu’s own “method” (78)—should not be mistaken for a sign of conservatism: what moderation entails now is the Machiavellian creation of “happy mixtures’ of virtues and vices” (74–75, 84). It is these “enlightened” mixtures (presupposing liberation from the “superstitious” belief that political affairs are metaphysically significant), rather than any divinely grounded virtues (not to speak of divinities themselves), that allow modern man to conquer premodern man, or Europeans to vanquish pre-Columbian empires (78–79).

Yet the (Machiavellian) success of modernity endangers modern man himself (his very “me”), by exposing *all* fictions to the apolitical truth underlying them; whence the importance Montesquieu accords to commerce—in Schaub’s terms, “the music of modernity”—insofar as it renders our societies cohesive in the act of distracting us from the material vortex underpinning them (79–81).

Ramified distraction is crucial to the thriving of modernity, which stands or falls on its capacity to relativize mores by transplanting them onto the plane of a comparative discourse of global proportions (83). Accordingly, Schaub’s positive account of Montesquieu’s project and its recent developments—incarnated, for example, in the “Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest” of our entertainment-society (83–84)—falls short of spelling out the project’s dark core, namely, the reinvention of “religion” (via the critique of traditional religions) in the guise of a commercial bond through which monastic selves scramble restlessly to flee obscure and confused nature, that is, death. Yet, where we conceive untamed nature as concealing dangers, but no eternal treasure, what else could we be expected to do other than flee death scornfully to embrace the secular, playful pretense of deathless life?

Weinberger's chapter 6—"Bacon and Franklin on Religion and Mastery of Nature"—is devoted to confirming the claim it begins with, namely that "Franklin was America's first full-blown Baconian" (84). The claim, however, remains unconvincingly supported.

At the heart of Weinberger's discussion stands the question of human nature, or more specifically of the relation between virtue and truth. Yet the question of human nature emerges only via that of religion, or more specifically Christianity.

On Weinberg's account, Bacon and Franklin agree that the source of religion is "the ineradicable human hope that we will get what we deserve in life" (with the understanding that for Bacon we actually deserve nothing) (95). Religion implies, after all, belief in an afterlife, or in the immortality of the soul. Now, for Weinberger's Franklin this belief is irrational; likewise, we have no reason to believe in any natural right, not to speak of otherworldly justice (93).

In a similar vein, Weinberger writes as if the view attributed to Bacon on account of which Christianity establishes a "complete separation of reason and faith" were fair (88). The supposed basis for such a claim is Christianity's upholding of a mystery of faith beyond the reaches of human reason (87). Nothing is said of medieval Christianity's elevating divine truths above the reaches of human reason or choice precisely by way of rejecting any separation of reason and faith, a separation entailed by the doctrine of "two truths" explicitly condemned by the medieval church: for the likes of Saint Thomas, far from being cut off from humanity, what is above our reason (namely, the reason, science, or logic of existence, or the hiatus between the indeterminate and the determinate) competes our reason mysteriously, mystically, secretively, or in "otherworldly" fashion; the mystery we are called to trust in coincides with the divine origin or fullness of our reason—the *logos* that is "in the beginning," or in the divine head (*bereshith*, after the opening of the Hebrew Bible).

We are here at the antipodes of modernity's formal separation of reason and faith as stepping stone for secular reason's progressive domestication of faith. Thus, for instance, on account of Weinberger's Bacon, at the last stage of its development, modern science *might be* capable of overturning any and all claims to the miraculous as deceiving means to support the authority of "a jealous god," that is, of the consummate mask of a priestly elite jealous of its own authority (89–90). Though, to be sure, the overturning in question would be dangerous, in principle it would be possible where divine selfishness was

to be exposed as an ineluctable, all-too-human trait. The critique of religion advances, in other words, through a critique of man, showing that “we are naturally selfish” (90). Otherwise put, Bacon would try to understand what man is by returning to what is below man, rather than to what is above him.

Not unlike preceding chapters, Weinberger’s manifests a tendency to present uncritically an author *as if* he were fundamentally right, or right about what matters the most (91). Thus, for instance, Weinberger does not even hint at any possible counterargument to the Bacon he reads as reducing the question of evil, and thereby of law, to one of ignorance.¹⁶

Weinberger further refers to Franklin as rejecting the Christian doctrine of original sin as absurd, not to say monstrous, insofar as it entails—thus goes the argument—one man’s being guilty for another’s guilt (91). Nothing is said about the fact that, at least ever since Saint Augustine, the Catholic Church has strenuously sustained that every man sins *in Adam* (likewise in Saint Paul, e.g., in Romans 7:15, our will’s corruption presupposes an intellectual corruption). As a matter of fact, in his 1735 argument partially cited by Weinberger, Franklin does not contradict in the least Catholic doctrine, allowing us to read Franklin as objecting to certain contemporary (most notably Presbyterian) interpretations of a premodern doctrine. Indeed, to be specific, Franklin speaks not of “the doctrine of original sin” (Weinberger), but of “*our lost and undone State by Nature, as it is commonly call’d, proceeding undoubtedly from the Imputation of old Father Adam’s first Guilt*” (“A Defense of Mr. Hemphill’s Observations,” art. 2). Franklin’s statement

¹⁶ Leo Strauss shows, most notably in *The Argument and the Action of Plato’s “Laws”* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), how already Plato himself successfully critiques the (Gnostic?) reduction in question (a reduction Plato had already envisioned for us in his *Politeia*). Human vice is simply irreducible to human knowledge. Otherwise put, we have access to no knowledge that can spare us all vice. The problem of penal law makes especially evident the impossibility of teaching (or learning) virtue (however one might conceive knowledge), even where we acknowledge our ignorance, or the fact that most people don’t know what they want (and thus what they are doing). Something in us prevents us from learning what we want, from departing from ignorance—something that is not ignorance and that somehow causes us to err (in both senses of the term), perhaps even and most ironically, to seek virtue through vice, or knowledge through ignorance. On the positive function of vice, see further the statement Strauss cites from W. E. H. Lecky’s *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe*, vol. 2 (1883) as a heading for “Persecution and the Art of Writing,” in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 22. On the relation between knowledge and evil, compare Leo Strauss, “Why We Remain Jews,” in *Leo Strauss: Political Philosopher and Jewish Thinker*, ed. Kenneth L. Deutsch and Walter Nicgorski (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994), 63–64: knowledge and goodness do not necessarily go hand in hand. To return to Plato, Socrates presents himself at once as ignorant (he is sure that he does not know) and as virtuous (he is sure that his way of life is irreproachable); his “apology” points directly to the ultimate independence of virtue from knowledge that, in terms of “recollection” (*anamnesis*), may be either acquired or lost.

appears to be directed against a contemporary habit of using the Bible to explain guilt irrationally (cf. Franklin's "undoubtedly") in terms of a Puritan, Hobbesian-like "State by Nature,"¹⁷ or of an ineluctable ancestral crime. Franklin's objection (yielding the conclusion that "Moral Guilt is so personal a Thing, that it cannot possibly in the Nature of Things be transferr'd from one Man to Myriads of others, that were no way accessary to it" [ibid.]) is entirely consonant with the ones raised by Saint Augustine against pagan errors. Why, the bishop of Hippo appeals (exoterically) to the notion of original sin precisely by way of rejecting a pagan belief that guilt is inherited merely materially as an ancestral stain (see, for instance, *City of God* XIII.3, XIV.20, XVI.27, XXI.12). For Augustine, every man concurs in Adam's erring as every particular of one and the same kind is affected by a mutation in that kind: Adam's erring is, thus, not *another* man's erring, but the erring of the human *kind*, or the erring of every man as man. Nor can the Catholic Church leave matters at "sinfulness," insofar as the source of Adam's primal infraction remains rather obscure. Adam including every man present in him does not fall into sin because of any prior sin, or because of *his* evilness. The moral upshot of the story is that evil is irreducible to the human, or that it is humanly ineradicable. Again, Saint Augustine notoriously insisted that the graver our problems are, the more powerless we are to solve them.

Weinberger says nothing about a political justification for the church's doctrine of original sin, in spite of the doctrine's confirming the necessary bond between law and natural right or justice: what is at stake is law's right to punish people for their evildoing, or to prevent them from getting off the hook by appealing to their ignorance. The Christian doctrine of original sin is, politically speaking, a defense of the very law Bacon appeals to as basis for his critique of revenge (90).

Finally, and most importantly, Weinberger writes about his authors as if the Catholic doctrine of original sin were not bound to the doctrine of a "more original" blessing: the Christian revelation (entailing that we are all saved by grace, or that through Christ God loves man prior to man's loving God) signals, perhaps above all, that no man is condemnable for an original sin *as such*, since Christ has paid that "debt" for all of us, just as he purified our "nature" (immaculate in Mary). Our original sin turns out to be a *felix*

¹⁷ On the affinity between Puritanism's "State by Nature" and Hobbes's "State of Nature," see, for instance, Paul Downes, *Hobbes, Sovereignty and Early American Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 101–2.

culpa,¹⁸ or essentially a stepping stone—the price to pay, as it were—a preface to the Incarnation,¹⁹ and thereupon to a logocentric or “rational” (in premodern terms) ascent back to mind in its absolute purity. Far from condemning us for an inherited sin, Christianity dispels all prejudicial obstacles to our mind’s journey (*itinerarium mentis*, to speak with Saint Bonaventure) into the divine one understood as *mens purissima*.

The Christian revelation suggests that while we are legally/morally guilty for the fruits of our natural ignorance (yes, Goebbels was really, not merely-nominally evil), we are not guilty absolutely, or “in God’s eyes”: just as the worst criminal does not really know or see what he is doing (Luke 23:34), so is our degeneracy, the pathway to evil, our gradual abandoning of our proper being, or our biographical departing from what is supremely good, never what we want, but the risk we may be willing to take for the sake of a higher, more encompassing *good* (reading Romans 7:18–20 in the light of Galatians 2:20).²⁰

While following Bacon in concluding that science cannot openly refute faith (92)—where religion cannot be overcome, but channeled, in the best of cases, powerfully into “the modern scientific project” (96)—when it comes to questions of good and evil, Weinberger’s Franklin is ultimately a selfish utilitarian, a “smart opportunist” involved in manipulative “wise and pragmatic political engineering” (95–96). The distinction between virtue and vice is supposed to be ultimately groundless; likewise, slavery is bad merely insofar as it “degrad[es] but free labor” (94), that is, because it does not serve modern man’s self-interest, or libertarianism. Not virtue, but liberty as embodied in modernity’s “mastery of nature” project, or “free labor” in its modern sense is what “frees us from [slavery]” (94), while defining our very humanity.

For Weinberger’s Franklin, man’s primal error consists of believing in something like human dignity and its defensibility: there is nothing within man worth defending; nor is there any just cause worth fighting for, with the

¹⁸ Augustine, *Enchiridion* 8.27. The medieval theological notion of “happy fault” entails, not the necessity of sin or evil, but the necessity of a divine primacy over all evil. Accordingly, original sin depends upon and fails to eliminate an original blessing, including that of Adam’s freedom. While not being destined to remain in his Father’s garden, neither was Adam destined to sin.

¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, Q. 1, Art. 2. Aquinas’s argument is consonant with Augustine’s appeal to a *felix culpa*: the Incarnation *turns* the sin (fault against the good) into a means for good *even prior* to the fault’s occurrence. This is not to say that there could have been no Incarnation without sin, but that all evil presupposes and feeds off of a good corruptible nature that uses its corruption (via incorruptible nature) as a means to recover its integrity.

²⁰ The evil that man uses, according to Machiavellian modernity, to transcend all origins, is supposed to replace the evil that Christianity’s God uses to invite all men to Himself as the original Good presupposed by all evil.

exception of that of the self-empowering knowledge of nature (96). We are thus left not with mere moral relativism, but with moral relativism presupposing and pointing back to a common or “natural duty” (95): charitable or “enlightened” selfishness. Thus, where, in a cited letter to his son, Franklin speaks of “natural duties which precede political ones, and cannot be extinguished by them,” Weinberger claims his author “had to mean the ties of the heart” (95). Yet, in the sentence preceding the one cited, Franklin had referred to his son’s claim to have been moved by duty to his king and regard for his country. Are we to conclude that, on Franklin’s account, political idealism is but a mask for interest in blood and soil? Weinberger faces here an unsettling difficulty. For Franklin’s notion of “natural duties” (however conceived) would seem to entail (pace Weinberger) one of natural *rights*, in turn entailing an irreducible one of “natural right” in the singular. Surely this would be the case if Franklin were the modernist that Weinberger makes him out to be. On the other hand, for ancient materialists there is no such thing as a natural duty. Perhaps, however, Franklin is writing as a premodern idealist of sorts, one for whom natural duty entails natural right.

Where Franklin refers to “natural duties” (evidently, *unchosen*) preceding and inextinguishable by any and all “political” allegiances—“a disagreeable subject” he drops (in the sentence immediately following the ones cited by Weinberger)—is Franklin not retracing, in the language of duty, conventional right (such as that of the king over his subjects) to *unalienable* natural right (such as that of the father over his son), or viewing the former in the light of the latter? To be sure, in *appealing* to natural duty, Franklin does not seem to read his natural right as implicating liberty to *impose* natural duty upon his son. He thereby suggests that there are natural limitations to what is right (and thus, too, good) *by nature*, such as for a son to honor his father, notably beyond any respect owed to a king.

Franklin may be read as aiming at once at defending the primacy of natural right over conventional right, and at inviting critical reflection upon the necessarily *given* essence of right. We should then not conclude—as Weinberger does—that Franklin is inviting resignation to viewing right as essentially irrational or senseless—as if we could subject all duties and rights to our choice, or ingenious creativity.²¹ The essence of right, much as the bot-

²¹ According to Weinberger, Franklin rejected the doctrine of natural right as entirely nonsensical (93). Weinberger seems to take the validity of his claim for granted, leaving it inadequately supported by a question Franklin formulated at the age of twenty-six in speaking of justifying the deprivation of a right. That very same question may easily be read as suggesting precisely the meaningfulness of natural right. See Kevin Slack, *Benjamin Franklin, Natural Right, and the Art of Virtue* (Rochester, NY:

tom of the human soul, may be simply irreducible to any instrumentalization or “mastery,” be this carried out in the name of Man, God, or Science.²² At the same time, we are left asking if the irreducibility of “inexplicable” right to our choice may not direct us to an *end* equally above choice—an end *by nature*, an end truly worth fighting (living or dying) for, far beyond the scope of “the modern scientific project.”

Robert C. Bartlett, author of *Sophistry and Political Philosophy: Protagoras’ Challenge to Socrates* (University of Chicago Press, 2016),²³ contributes a seventh chapter—“On the Supremacy of Contemplation in Aristotle and Plato”—showing us that classical antiquity consciously rejected the project of placing knowledge of nature in the service of power over nature. There would then seem to be a conflict between antiquity and modernity, even where—as we might add in the light of preceding chapters—modernity would ultimately aim at a divine-like harmony of knowledge and power (compare 132). As Bartlett’s references to Plato’s sophists suggest, even the ancient popularization of pre-Socratic materialistic philosophy was a far cry from modern progressivism: even Protagoras (101) swore by a hero (both brave and wise) for whom the question of origins transcended that of any possible progress.

As Bartlett’s title suggests, the bulk of his chapter is dedicated to Aristotle and Plato on the question of contemplation. Bartlett’s exploration of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* leads us to the conclusion that for the Stagirite “one’s own happiness” is a common mirage requiring the caring intervention of a god (and of his priests) for the sake of its attainment: the consummation of happiness would have to entail religiously inspired moral self-sacrifice

Rochester University Press, 2017), 148; Slack’s volume includes an articulate critique of Weinberger’s reading of Franklin, presented most notably in Weinberger’s *Benjamin Franklin Unmasked* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), arguing that “Franklin was a philosopher of natural right in the Western tradition” (5). For Weinberger’s response to his most eminent critics, see further “The Real Ben Franklin,” *Claremont Review of Books* 6, no. 2 (Spring 2006), at <https://www.claremont.org/crb/article/the-real-ben-franklin/>. Following Weinberger, Nadon (*Mastery of Nature*, 112) takes it for granted that Franklin was Bacon’s “disciple.”

²² On Franklin’s rejection of modernity’s “mastery of nature,” see Kevin Slack, “Benjamin Franklin’s Metaphysical Essays and the Virtue of Humility,” *American Political Thought* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 50. Far from coinciding with Weinberger’s Baconian Franklin, Slack’s Franklin is a Socratic guide in self-knowledge (49–53).

²³ One of the lessons of Bartlett’s book (at least partly deducible from his chapter under present examination) is that once we abandon moral virtue, we lose our ends (ultimately the Good, or God), exposing ourselves to the rise of a new, fanatical or tyrannical morality (means risen to the status of ends). Such is the absolutist morality of contemporary relativists—a morality that is as senseless as is the attempt, notoriously mocked by Nietzsche, to uphold biblical morality in the wake of the biblical God’s “death.”

(107)—a life mediating that of our mortal spoils and that of eternal mind (where moral virtue alone, or as an end in itself, is the mere shadow of a higher, philosophical virtue [106]). Moral virtue or heroic self-abnegation based on the promise of an afterlife (102), or of particular divine providence, constitutes the fulcrum for any possible reconciliation between the political or “vulgar” aspirations of men (106) and divine-like philosophy (104).

Bartlett’s treatment of “moral virtue” in Aristotle allows us to conclude that the attainment of happiness entails a radical, *metanoetic* transubstantiation of man, a complete “purgation” of his “self” of all contents—a lesson the Michelangelo of the *Last Judgment* borrowed from Dante (where the ascent to the heavens of the mind is necessarily mediated). This heroic “catharsis” (transcending even the one “effected through music” [106]), this emptying out or extinction of “self,” reorients us from personal achievement to its conditions of possibility: the life of self-gain or self-assertion yields to thinking in the midst of, even spurred by, natural necessity (104–5).²⁴

Having reviewed Aristotle’s treatment of the question of happiness as *summum bonum*, Bartlett turns to Plato, with a reflection on necessity, including that of death, making understanding possible: death is transcended, not rebelliously—whether in our religious wishes or in our heroic deeds—but in thought (107), or in converting (reverting?) to the immaculate life of gods (in reference to Socrates’s *homoiosis*, Bartlett speaks of “assimilation to” or “imitation”), here understood as “the greatest possible practice of justice and piety, together with prudence, here and now” (108–9).

It is in his concluding remarks that, criticizing contemporary science’s interest in immortality, Bartlett further elucidates the meaning he attributes to “thought” (109–10). Thought of natural necessity, most notably that of death, entails “philosophical resignation...where thoughtful piety does not avail” (109; alluding, not to Heidegger’s “piety of thought” as uncritical stance vis-à-vis the march of Being, but seemingly to ancient, potentially fanatical Stoicism, if not to Christian mysticism [102]).²⁵ Are we then to understand that the alleged “divinity” of thought is a mere incentive to merely accept (105),

²⁴ Complete or divine happiness is not for *humans* to attain to. Philosophically speaking, “complete happiness” consists of pure contemplation (the activity of Aristotle’s God), which man cannot attain to for himself insofar as he fails to overcome (reliance on) the necessary material conditions (the realm of “chance”) for the pursuit of pure contemplation (104–5).

²⁵ Bartlett’s allusions are clear in the light of his preceding reference to the potential fanaticism of those equating happiness with moral virtue as an “internal” good (102), and in the light of his referring to modern “anti-theological ire” in the sentence following the reference to “thoughtful piety” (109).

beyond all idealistic impulses, that “all is in motion” (100)? Does thought *build upon* mortality, or does it cut through it, exploring its meaning? Does it merely feign to transcend death, or does it really belong to immortality? Where Bartlett’s enlightened philosopher gives up, seemingly above all, “the longing for eternity in the human soul,” are we to conclude that Bartlett’s Plato and Aristotle are, after all, esoteric materialists (100)?²⁶

Nadon’s chapter 8—“Xenophon and the Conquest of Nature”—opens with an attempt to show that, pace Leo Strauss, the ancients anticipated modernity’s aspiration to conquer nature. Nadon’s argument is based primarily on a citation from Xenophon’s *Memorabilia*, echoing Empedocles’s fr. 111. Both references present difficulties.

First, Xenophon is cited misleadingly as speaking of people “who seek to know the necessities responsible for each thing coming into being so as ‘to make winds, rains, seasons, and anything else of the sort they need whenever they wish’” (111).²⁷ Nadon will later revise Xenophon’s citation by acknowledging (if only ungrammatically) that Xenophon’s words are originally framed by a question (112). Thereupon Nadon will stress, against Strauss, that “it is by no means clear...that Xenophon’s Socrates stands against ‘the conquest of nature.’” Indeed, Nadon concludes that Xenophon is suggesting that knowledge of nature’s necessary principles may have been “for the sake of controlling” natural phenomena. Yet in *Memorabilia* 1.1.15, having specified that natural philosophers sought knowledge for the good of people (a good that is not chosen), Xenophon refers to Socrates as clearly dismissing, if not mocking, the *possibility* of a knowledge *allowing* us to be (not *for the sake of* making us into) masters of natural phenomena, and then, not according to our *wishes* (Nadon), but according to our *needs* (Xenophon’s text reads δέωνται, entailing a “binding”).

In sum, Nadon *modernizes* Xenophon’s reference to natural philosophy, which—in the original Greek—confirms the argument made by Bartlett in his 2016 book, where he argues that ancient sophistry relativizes means (morality), not natural ends or origins (the good). Xenophon’s text offers us an example of “Socratic parody” of self-forgetful “natural philosophy,” as opposed to the quest for knowledge of nature *in a human context*.

²⁶ What is at stake here is the repudiation of the view that the human soul has an eternal dimension; on “mind” as eternal dimension of soul, compare Aristotle’s *De anima* III.5 430a17–18 and *Metaphysics* Λ.3 1070a24–26.

²⁷ “Necessities” are to be understood here as “means,” or more specifically, “material and efficient causes” (113).

Socrates's clear dismissal is illuminated by Empedocles's fr. 111, which Nadon misquotes to suggest that the Greek invites his interlocutor to conquer nature. In the original text, writing in the first person, Empedocles promises, "for you alone do I achieve all this" (μούνῳ σοὶ ἐγὼ κρανέω τάδε πάντα). Nadon translates this as "for you alone will accomplish all this" (246n3). More importantly, however, Empedocles is hardly inviting a "conquest of nature" in any *modern* sense, but (as his other fragments suggest—see, e.g., fr. 110) an activity—mystical, rather than "technological"—absolutely conditional upon one's *return* to the good (or, to speak with Socrates, one's *homoiōsis*, or "assimilation" to *the* good), understood in terms of the original necessities or *natures* of things.²⁸

There is nothing especially esoteric about Socrates's own investigation of the natural constitution of things if he turns to "nature" (unconventional reality) *in the medium* of human things (exemplary is Socrates's turn to *logoi* in the *Phaedrus*, *after* having dismissed learning from trees), as opposed to returning to nature *after* having studied human things exhaustively, as Nadon argues, as if man were a mere "supplement" of nature (114–15), as opposed to being its constitutional and interpretative key.²⁹ Nadon seems to take it for granted that the world or universe is constituted aside from man's essence. Indeed, man's ends are supposed to be contrary to nature's ends: art is supposed to replace nature, rather than completing its work (115–16 and 120–21). This conclusion is articulated in keeping with the assumption, spelled out by Lerner's preface, that practical life is faced with only two alternatives: either we passively acquiesce in the face of all physical calamities, or we must strive to violate nature. Either absolute continence, or rape.

At the end of his chapter Nadon returns to Strauss's claim that the ancients rejected the very prospect of a conquest of nature, claiming that, following in Xenophon's steps (121), "Strauss misled his twentieth-century readers into believing that the classics, or at least Xenophon, simply opposed

²⁸ See also chapter 12, p. 176, where Gillespie stresses that "the end of ancient science was...participating in the eternal or divine."

²⁹ At first glance, Plato's Myth of the Cave (*Republic* VII) may seem to suggest that knowledge of natural things is gained by departing from human things. Yet, when read in the light of Plato's Socrates, Plato's Cave allegory suggests that the struggle to ascend to unconventional truth is a viscerally ethical one: the truth allegorically envisioned or cast outside of the City qua "cave" is a truth discernible only from within the City as "temple." Compare Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 125 and 240–41; "Restatement on Xenophon's Hiero," in *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 126–27; "The Problem of Socrates" (1970), in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 142; and *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 13.

the conquest of nature as destructive of humanity” (120). In the twenty-first century, however, we may find ourselves “in other times and circumstances,” where men are so distrustful of man’s capacity to conquer nature that Strauss himself would have counseled and encouraged it, *provided* the “popularization of philosophy or science” left space for the religious foundations of civil life and order (121).

In sum, on Nadon’s account, Strauss and, more generally, ancient Socratism aspired to conquer nature secretly, fearing that the universalizing of the scientific quest to conquer nature would undermine its social-political conditions.

In the light of the aforementioned difficulties, Nadon’s argument emerges as misleading. When Strauss spoke of his classics as rejecting the very prospect of conquering nature as “preposterous” (Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 178) he did so keeping in mind antiquity’s essential conservatism, or its standing for the primacy of origins over any possible progress (see, e.g., Strauss’s “Progress or Return?”). For Strauss, no less than for Socrates, “law” would not be merely an instrument to keep at bay essentially selfish men—men whom Nadon presents as naturally desiring to conquer nature (implicitly contradicting Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 980a21)—lest they drive themselves to anarchy.³⁰ For the Socratic critic of natural philosophy, *even* aside from the problem of science’s popularization, the universe of human creations (not least of them, Plato’s literary testament) stands as a mirror/stage for reflection upon questions concerning the ultimate nature of things.³¹ The primary or “theoretical” fault of natural philosophy is not that it seeks permanent intelligible necessities, but that it seeks them over and above the universe of human and divine things. Natural philosophy mistakes “heavenly” reifications of political matters as ultimate reality, taking its own concrete or immediate conditions of possibility—the human element—for granted, or treating it as expendable, as if we had cognitive access to any “nature” mechanically constituted independently of our thought; as if nature were simply or superficially laid out before

³⁰ In Nadon, Xenophon, and by extension Socrates, stands for a mechanistic conception of nature (116–17) coupled with an appeal to religion as means to reinforce state authority, lest a “universal meritocracy”—as worst instrument of despotism—destroy all civism (117–18). Religion is understood as a necessary evil to be cherished publicly, lest the dire evil of anarchy ensue. For (as Machiavelli would teach), religion confirms “the rule of law” that keeps in check the universal selfishness of men, thereby allowing us to believe in a “common good” that, in reality, is a pie in the sky (118–19).

³¹ Consider, for instance, how, in Plato’s *Apology*, Socrates (playfully) ascends to questions of the highest importance by “exploring” the vast array of people and their doings to be found in his city of Athens. Socrates finds that the various producers he encounters do not seek, let alone know, the *meaning* of their production: they do not retrace their respective arts to fundamental questions, and thus, we might say, to infinity.

us; or, to return to our reading of Lerner, as if our “horizontal” relation to nature did not depend essentially upon our “vertical” relation to “the Nature of nature,” or rather, Platonically speaking, to our divine-like soul.

Our objection is raised in keeping with Strauss’s reminder that “nature” was first *invented*³² by philosophers seeking a world beyond conventional (both legal and moral) restraints. At some point, Socrates realized that he had nothing to learn from trees (*Phaedrus* 230d–e), or that human *logoi* and the “poetic-political” life shaped by them remained the indispensable vehicle of knowledge of their unconventional ground (258b–260a)—their own divine-like depths, the very depths that natural philosophers had sought by fleeing the polis or all ethical commitment to it. To return to Michelangelo’s Platonic *Last Judgment*, what destroys humanity is not knowledge of what stands outside of our “garden” of religiously grounded conventions, but the foolish attempt to gain such a knowledge *unpoetically*, as if the hiatus between the finite or determinate and the infinite or indeterminate were quantifiable.³³ Science devoid of poetry must be folly. No wonder, then, that the Platonic pious objection to “natural science,” or Socrates’s critique of Sophists, is bound to the question of the proper function of poetry, as well as, perhaps, of dreams.³⁴

³² In “Progress or Return: The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization,” *Modern Judaism* 1, no. 1 (May 1981): 17–45, Strauss invites us “to go back behind [the philosophical] discovery or invention of nature” (40). “Nature” is invented by natural philosophers in the respect that they envision a “heavenly” world beyond all authority. This is the world that Socrates, to paraphrase Cicero, draws back down into the polis, inviting us to heed transcendence as seated in immanence. “Nature” is thenceforth to be understood as accessible only through the City, or piously.

³³ Michelangelo’s purgatorial, poetic vision of moral “self-abnegation” mediates two regions of being, preparing us to receive Michelangelo’s testimony of the primacy of an Apollo-Christ over the martyr-painter’s own stripped-off skin: man rises to the heavens in the sense that an “old-skin” lives, nay dies, for a presupposed eternal identity.

³⁴ On the question of dreams, compare Dante’s *Comedy*, where the author projects himself into a dreamer, and the *Zhuangzi*’s “Butterfly Dream” parable, where Zhou dreams of a butterfly fluttering in blissful ignorance of an awakened Zhou (who knows the butterfly as his self-projection).