

Interpretation

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“Social justice” has become one of the most widely used phrases in our moral and political discourse, despite the fact that no one quite knows what it means. More precisely, its definition seems to shift according to the person using the term. In *The Mirage of Social Justice* (1973), F. A. Hayek describes his own frustration at trying to pin down its meaning. Exasperated by a futile effort, he concludes that the concept is “entirely empty and meaningless.” His subsequent attempt to expose social justice as a moral fraud has had little discernible effect. Devotion to social justice continues to grow and gain strength, particularly in academia. A frustrated Hayek observed: “It is not pleasant to have to argue against a superstition which is held most strongly by men and women who are often regarded as the best in our society, and against a belief that has become almost the new religion of our time (and in which many of the ministers of old religion have found their refuge), and which has become the recognized mark of the good man.” Hayek concluded that social justice, much like religious superstition, can neither be defined nor refuted. The source of the concept is in the imagination and passions, which is precisely why it retains so much power in political discourse. The conceptual vagueness allows the passions to do the work of identifying the injustice, like scouts or spies, and afterwards, theory comes to their service.

Conceding much of Hayek’s analysis, Michael Novak argues that the main problem with social justice is confusion about the modifying term

“social”: “the term ‘social’ no longer describes the *product* of the virtuous actions of many individuals, but rather the *utopian goal* toward which all institutions and all individuals are ‘made in the utmost degree to converge’ by coercion. In that case, the ‘social’ in ‘social justice’ refers to something that emerges not organically and spontaneously from the rule-abiding behavior of free individuals, but rather from an abstract ideal imposed from above.” The addition of the term “social” to the concept of justice implies that justice is not a product of individual deliberation and choice, but rather the establishment of an unjust system that exacerbates the distance between social classes.¹ Novak suggests that rather than abandoning the concept altogether, we use it as a means to revisit and relearn the older conversations about the meaning of virtue and justice. Social justice can be deepened and amended to include this older tradition, an outcome that will surely benefit all interlocutors.

To these formidable critiques of social justice, we may add another important work, *The Idol of Our Age*, by Daniel J. Mahoney. A professor of political science at Assumption College, Mahoney has established himself as among the most important interpreters of modern statesmanship. His books cover a wide variety of statesmen and political theorists, including Charles de Gaulle, Raymond Aron, Bertrand de Jouvenel, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, as well as several books on the origins of liberalism. Mahoney is not only a student of political philosophy, but also a student of revelation and a serious Catholic. This combination makes his critique of social justice unusually profound and interesting. To borrow Mahoney’s description of Pierre Manent: he is “that rare Christian who appreciates that Christians, too, are political animals, and not first and foremost ‘citizens of the world’” (14). Unlike Hayek, Mahoney is not taken aback by the seemingly religious devotion that social justice inspires in its adherents. Moreover, because he sees social justice as part of a covert effort to subvert Christianity, Mahoney does not share Novak’s optimism that social justice can be rehabilitated. Safe to say, Mahoney comes to bury social justice, not to praise it.

To understand Mahoney’s account, we begin by noting his point of departure. Unlike Novak, Mahoney does not begin with an outline of ancient virtue and its very skeptical account of pity. Both Plato in his *Republic* and Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* offer substantial critiques of pity. Pity is spontaneous

¹ See Michael Novak, “Defining Social Justice,” *First Things*, Dec. 2000; see also Michael Novak, Paul Adams, and Elizabeth Shaw, *Social Justice Isn’t What You Think It Is* (New York: Encounter Books, 2015). Another helpful account is Ernest L. Fortin, *Human Rights, Virtue and the Common Good: Untimely Meditations on Religion and Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997).

and without deliberation; it tends, for example, to discriminate haphazardly, applying most easily to those who resemble us. In contrast to justice, pity cannot be a virtue. Nor does Mahoney begin with an account of the early modern philosophers who reduce Christianity to a single teaching, namely, that of *caritas*. Spinoza was among the first to make this project explicit, and Rousseau further refined it to the teaching of compassion. Mahoney certainly knows these things and they do enter into his account. He chooses to begin instead with an analysis of the nineteenth-century sociologist Auguste Comte and his “religion of humanity.”



The choice of Comte reminds one of Leo Strauss, who also chose Comte to begin his course “Introduction to Political Philosophy.”² Comte’s positivism is not identical with contemporary social science. The claims, for example, that social science must be value free or that statements about what ought to be cannot be derived logically from a statement about what is, are foreign to Comte’s view that science could answer questions about the good. Nonetheless, Comte’s confidence that social science finally provides a basis for unlimited political and social progress is widely shared. The value of studying Comte’s analysis is that it allows us to revisit foregone conclusions. Comte is valuable precisely because we no longer share his confidence in the progress of reason or the ability of social science to replace philosophy.

According to Comte, there are three stages in the intellectual development of humanity: the first and most primitive stage, which Comte tellingly refers to as “theological,” presents man as asking questions about meaning and purpose in nature. In an effort to resolve these questions, we project will onto nature so that through religious practice, we can retain at least partial control over our fate. The theological account is replaced by abstract forces in the second or metaphysical stage of human development. In this way, Comte dismisses the conflict between Athens and Jerusalem as preliminary stages, characteristic of humanity’s intellectual childhood. The occasional efflorescence of theology,

² See Leo Strauss, *On Political Philosophy: Responding to the Challenge of Positivism and Historicism*, ed. Catherine Zuckert (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018). Strauss begins with Comte to show how political science gradually lost confidence in its ability to identify the good or tell us how to live. The claims about the progressive development of human thought do not stand up to the historical record. Moreover, the view that social science would produce lasting peace and prosperity was exposed in the twentieth century as a fraud. Rather, its commitment to a value-free enterprise made it morally obtuse, unable to provide any standard of justice or right. By reevaluating Comte, Strauss hopes to revitalize political philosophy.

such as the flowering of Catholic thought in the Middle Ages, cannot withstand the attacks by modern philosophy and science.

Real progress is achieved, according to Comte, only when religion and philosophy are overcome in the final or positive stage of humanity. Our intellectual maturity is measured by our willingness to recognize the irrelevance of questions about our origins and purpose. Natural science has already made great progress, not only with its discoveries of the workings of nature but also in showing the irrelevance of philosophical and theological queries regarding human happiness. The final science to be developed is sociology or a science of man that explains science itself as a human activity. This positive science would allow man to develop his rationality to its fullest extent and develop a peaceful and prosperous future.

Mahoney's account of Comte focuses on two distinct but complementary elements of his analysis: the suppression of inquiry into any transcendent element of reality and the rejection of politics. Comte argues in part 1 of his *System of Positive Philosophy* that revelation fails in its efforts to promote morality because it does not provide knowledge of such a standard. Instead, it relies on claims of imaginary metaphysics and theology. In their place, Comte proposes substituting "the love of humanity for the love of God" (9) and cultivating a "social feeling" in its place. The religion of positivism is humanitarianism, that is, the love of humanity rather than God. Citing Pierre Manent, Mahoney points out that Comte's religion of humanity would never "have attained its empire over our souls if it did not appear as the extension and the consequence, perhaps the effectual truth, of Christianity, of the religion of the neighbor" (13). Humanitarianism and social justice rely on Comte's theology, his religion of humanity, to advance its agenda and rule willy-nilly the modern democratic soul. Mahoney's thesis is that such humanitarianism is not only a profound distortion of Christianity, but also the single greatest threat to its modern flourishing.

The claim that humanitarianism or social justice subverts Christianity may shock many contemporary readers. How can a notion of distributive justice rooted in compassion produce results so hostile to Christianity? To begin with, Mahoney argues, Comte's atheism is "more thoroughgoing than what usually goes by the name" (8). Comte does not wish merely to deny the existence of God. He seeks also to suppress all metaphysical and theological questions as illegitimate and meaningless. Moreover, Comte took great pains to conceal his atheism or, what is the same thing, make it more palatable. He knew that his project relied on the inheritance of Christianity even as it

subverted it. So he sought substitutes that resemble the older faith. Just as Robespierre sought to create a “Cult of the Supreme Being” complete with new festivals and a revolutionary calendar, Comte anointed himself the new “high priest” of humanity and set out to create a new catechism and calendar for positive religion (10). The fact that this part of his project is largely forgotten is a testament to his success. We no longer need his peculiar theology to accept his (godless) humanitarianism.

Comte’s atheism is part of his broader hostility to Christianity, the full extent of which was exposed by Eric Voeglin. The conditions of progress in the Comtean scheme require the suppression of the soul’s longing for something that transcends the self. The harsher expression of this project is totalitarianism, the softer account appears as humanitarianism. Comte believed that if he could substitute altruism for *amor Dei*, he would thereby alleviate suffering in this world. As for evil, Comte denied that it had any more hold on man’s soul than the love of God. He never wavered in his faith that scientific and social progress would mitigate, and ultimately eliminate, evil. Mahoney does not flinch in his verdict on Comte’s distorted and partial account of the soul: “He is blind to the depths of the soul. His account of a completely mundane ‘spiritual order’ is thus deformed by a naïve faith that believes history will simply leave evil behind in the new positive age. Comte’s is the most superficial of anthropologies, since it is ignorant of the drama of good and evil in the human soul” (10). Humanitarianism may resemble Christianity, but the belief in progress requires a great deal of suppression, so that man forgets both transcendence and the reality of sin or evil in the human condition.

Besides the denial of transcendence, the second element that Mahoney argues is characteristic of Comte’s analysis is the rejection of politics. Again, Comte relies on a superficial resemblance to Christianity, with its account of paradise, to appeal to religious believers. Comte holds that man can bring heaven down to earth if only we can overcome the obstacles to universal unity and peace. Specifically, to realize the promises of the religion of humanity, man needs to see beyond the particular requirements of citizenship and faith and detach himself from nations and churches. Here, Mahoney draws on Raymond Aron’s analysis of Comte in his *Main Currents of Sociological Thought* as well as the analysis of Aron’s student Pierre Manent. Manent summarizes this element of Comte’s humanitarianism:

Peace and unity belong to the natural condition of mankind; conversely its fragmentation into separate political bodies solicitous

of their independence is the toxic fountainhead of everything that is wrong in human circumstances. Thus, the right thing to do, the worthy enterprise, is to bring about the pacification and unification of humanity through the erasing or weakening of borders, the acceleration of the circulation of goods, services, information, and human beings, the fostering of an ever stronger and wider fellow-feeling among countries and people. (ix)

The humanitarian view rejects the value of one's particular way of life or education in order to broaden our focus on the well-being of others. The unification of humanity demands that we abandon loyalty to our particular communities or nations. The cosmopolitan citizen of the world substitutes for such loyalty the celebration of diversity, on the ground that all cultures are equally worthy of respect. This view so dominates our political culture that although we seldom refer to Comte or the religion of humanity, "Comte remains a ruler of souls" (9).

That no such universal community has ever existed, apart from cities in speech, does not bode well for this political project. Revelation points us toward universal redemption, but it never suggests that this is the provenance of political life. Philosophy, too, creates cities in speech, but these are instructive for discovering the limits rather than articulating serious means to the goals of politics. Nonetheless, the humanitarian view advances in the West because of its resemblance to the Christian teaching of *caritas*. If love of our fellow is the highest good, then citizenship appears to betray that sacred commitment by favoring some (citizens) over others (noncitizens). Can a pious Christian be a good citizen?

Mahoney suggests that humanitarianism inculcates contempt for citizenship while Christianity avoids this pitfall by confining the dream of a universal community to a redemptive vision ineluctably attached to a transcendent reality. By denying Christianity's transcendence and rejecting politics, humanitarianism leads us to a cul-de-sac of false choices: Christianity or citizenship; *caritas* or patriotism; transcendence or progress; politics or redemption. The notion of social justice offers a facile if illusory way out of this trap by presenting the effectual truth of Christianity as humanitarianism.

Mahoney claims that the humanitarianism of Comte is the "idol of our age." But unlike the idols of former times, this idol is hidden behind the mask of *caritas*, so that smashing it appears to be a frontal attack on Christianity. As a result, many well-meaning Catholics are tempted to pursue the ideology of humanitarianism at the unwitting expense of their Catholicism. In a

respectful but nonetheless critical chapter on Pope Francis, Mahoney outlines the tendency among Catholics such as Dorothy Day to balance their work for the poor with a “troubling vitriolic hostility to a market economy and a militant pacifism that denies the legitimacy of self-defense against totalitarian aggression” (107). The Pope too “tends to confuse humanitarian concerns with properly Christian ones. He tends to give a one-sided ‘progressivist’ reading of Catholic social teaching, radicalizing the Church’s criticisms of the market economy and failing to reiterate its serious reservations about socialism in its various forms” (112).

The political consequences of conflating humanitarianism with Christianity are the result of even more profound theological confusion. Mahoney readily admits that charity or the love of one’s neighbor is “the greatest theological virtue.” The success of humanitarianism is that it has been able to hijack this virtue to a sense of compassion and fellow-feeling. Christianity provides a rich source of reflection about the pursuit of the common good despite the challenges of sin and “the tragic dimensions of the human condition” (13). Humanitarianism ignores this teaching in favor of “free-floating compassion.” Such a substitution is possible only in a democratic age, when what Pierre Manent calls “the feeling of the same,” the “vague but powerful sentiment of a common humanity,” appears as the final, human form of Christianity (13). Detached from communities, faith, or nations, this abstract love of humanity demands little from its adherents other than a vague feeling of sympathy derived from democratic homogenization. The actual love of one’s neighbor as commanded by scripture is far more difficult.

Among the greatest challenges to the practice of *caritas* is the temptation to see it merely as a solution to social or political problems. Mahoney presents Pope Benedict’s account of the temptation of Christ, which bears a certain resemblance to Dostoevsky’s presentation of the Grand Inquisitor. In both accounts, there is a tendency to interpret Christianity as a humanitarian project for the relief of suffering and material poverty, rather than as a ministering to the needs of the soul. For Benedict, this neglect of the soul explains why humanitarianism inevitably leads to further material and spiritual suffering. Citing Benedict’s *Deus Caritas Est*, Mahoney concludes that “egalitarian social justice will never replace the need for love—*caritas*—not in the lives of men or in the social order. . . . The corporeal works of mercy are essential, but ‘care of the soul’ should always have pride of place; it ‘often is even more necessary than material support’” (21).

By explaining that *caritas* is far more than a political or social doctrine, Mahoney shows why reducing the church's mission to a mere political project gravely distorts its teaching. In doing so, he begins to lay out the church's political teaching, or to be more precise, an account of politics that does not frustrate or subvert Christianity. As we have seen, the greatest threat to the church's teaching emerges from humanitarian political ideologies that deny the nonmaterial needs of the soul. To avoid this danger, Mahoney argues, the church must reject transnational political projects, particularly those that justify the unification of power in the name of humanitarianism and social justice. Mahoney has in mind not only Marxist projects, but also the European Union in its present form. (He offers a critique of "Jürgen Habermas and the Post-Political Temptation" in chapter 7.)

In place of transnationalism, Mahoney urges the church to return to its wise advocacy of subsidiarity and the recognition that "nations embody shared human concerns and enliven vigorous and humane common life" (16). The church may safeguard the longing for a universal community, but human beings live properly in families, communities, and nations. Aristotle, not Comte, is the proper starting point for the study of politics. More generally, the account of the virtues including "prudence, moderation, justice, and fortitude should continue to inform human thought and action" (17). The study of these virtues in the lives of great men and women is, for Mahoney, the heart of liberal education and an indispensable part of our political and moral well-being.



For readers persuaded by Mahoney's compelling analysis of the contemporary cave, the ever-pertinent question naturally emerges: What then is to be done? To appreciate the novelty of Mahoney's proposal, we must first consider his analysis of what he describes (borrowing from Pope Benedict) as the "listening heart." To be sure, Mahoney does not ask readers to make any leaps of faith. He presupposes only "that human beings have 'reasonable' access to an order of things above the human will" (121). That access has been cut off partly by positivism and social science as exemplified by Weber's distinction between facts and values. Mahoney calls for a return to an older, richer form of reasoning that does not ignore or dismiss phenomena that cannot be easily quantified or are inconsistent with an ideology.

The type of reason he seeks to restore does not peremptorily reject the possibility of a moral order or access to an account of the whole. Nor does it

reject the possibility that poetry may offer a more fitting way to describe our experience: “A reason that cannot speak about the drama of good and evil in the human soul, that cannot see totalitarian mendacity for what it is, that cannot call tyranny by its name, cannot apprehend the human world for what it is” (122). Contemporary social scientific reason, as Strauss argues in *On Tyranny*, proved unable to recognize tyranny, that is, it proved itself incapable of the very comprehensive political vision it claimed to possess. Mahoney cites this passage approvingly and argues that the restoration of both Athens and Jerusalem requires the recovery of a richer, broader form of reason. Mahoney describes this reason as a discerning or “listening heart,” a phrase from the book of Kings which refers to the story of the young Solomon whose sole request to God is for a heart that can discern good and evil (1 Kings 3:9).

Mahoney introduces us to a rich literature, much of it little known in the West, from the postwar communist Central and Eastern European world. He introduces the reader to the work of the Hungarian political philosopher Aurel Kolnai, including Kolnai’s 1944 essay “The Humanitarian versus the Religious Attitude” (which is included in the book’s appendix). The book also includes chapters on Vladimir Soloviev’s *A Short Tale of the Antichrist* and a full interpretation of Solzhenitsyn’s great literary and historical work *The Red Wheel*, a book which compares in scope to Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*. In addition, Mahoney offers some keen observations about Orestes Brownson, who “self-consciously repudiated ‘the religion of humanity,’” which will be of particular interest to American readers. Taken together, these chapters offer a curriculum for the exploration of a broader form of reason, one that includes the possibility of faith, or that is guided by faith to the recognition of possibilities for human transcendence.

Sadly, that curriculum is unlikely to see the light of day. The very progressivism whose sources Mahoney explores so acutely has accelerated a decline of liberal education, encouraging suppression of the free exchange of ideas under the mantle of humanitarian compassion for presumably marginalized identities. In despair, the defenders of liberal education have abandoned strategies of defense in favor of tactical rearguard actions. Mahoney’s book reminds us, among other important things, that the reinvigoration of liberal education will require the recovery of an older form of reason, one open to the challenge of revelation. It reminds us, in short, of the genuine sources from which spring compelling human ways of life.