

Interpretation

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A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

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Inquiries ***Interpretation, A Journal of Political Philosophy***

Department of Political Science

Baylor University

1 Bear Place, 97276

Waco, TX 76798

email interpretation@baylor.edu

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WILL MORRISEY

wmorrisey@outlook.com

Our contemporaries incline to reduce politics to subpolitical categories—race, class, gender, power. Mark Blitz resists this parade of idols, reclaiming the indispensable link between the human capacity to reason in speech and the human capacity to join with others in the task of self-government. He clearly sees the impediments which have been erected to hinder this effort; while his subtitle mentions nature, the criterion for political judgment among ‘the ancients,’ it equally mentions phenomena, a distinctly ‘modern’ locution, often used to blur or to deny the distinction between nature and convention. On the contrary, he argues, the ‘phenomena’ of political life have a nature, and “to explore the nature of political phenomena is equivalent to exploring what is reasonable about them,” since the term ‘nature,’ for human beings at very least, “is the correlative of reason” (1). Correlation means not only relating our thoughts about things to the things themselves but relating our actions to those thoughts. Each of Blitz’s chapter titles begins with the phrase “The Nature of”: the nature of practical action, freedom and rights, power and property, virtue, what is common, and goods. In each instance, he intends to connect politics to nature by means of reason, itself the distinctive characteristic of human nature.

By the “nature” of a thing, Blitz means “what in it we do not produce, what is common or pervasive in it, and what is essential to it” (1). In identifying the nature or essence of a thing we identify “what is always there that is important, not trivial, and that forms the thing’s other characteristics,” what distinguishes it from other things (1–2). What is natural is “unmade, general, and essential”; this is “what reason qua reason seeks to know,” going

beyond sense impressions of particular physical things and classifying them into kinds (2).

But does politics have a nature? Is political life not conventional, man-made? Not simply, or even at its core: “political life serves an understanding of what can be good, pursued by actions that are more or less just.” *If* “what is good and just are natural and reason can know them, politics need not and, indeed, cannot be irredeemably conventional.” This is not to say, on the other extreme, that politics is or can be entirely aligned with goodness and justice, given the stubborn persistence of “what is particular and impure” in all human life, and in all humans. Rather, “my goal is to bring out what is rational in what is contingent, or not simply rational, in us.” This goal does not encompass all of politics, given the complexity of our particularities and impurities, which vary from time to time, from place to place, interacting with other times (past and future) and other places (near and far). This is another way of saying that political life cannot achieve mathematical certainty and precision; it leaves room for “disputability in judgment and choice” (2). Attempts to remove disputability in judgment and choice from political life do not end well, even if firm judgments and choices must be made in every political community. Nonetheless, the inadequacy of mathematical or apodictic reasoning in approaching politics does not consign politics to the sphere of irrationality. “The central political phenomena are speech- or opinion-laden and are thus open to becoming conceptually understood” (164n8).

Who cares? What makes “political phenomena” worth our attention, indeed worth philosophic attention? Because our lives are diminished when we do not pay sufficient attention, as seen in opposing but complementary syndromes of the antipolitical ‘politics’ we suffer now: a passive moral relativism or lassitude on one hand and self-righteous, self-interested, impassioned self-assertion on the other. And failure to attend to human nature as manifested prevents us from intelligently addressing the potential of technology, and therefore of technologists, to alter human nature, “to reduce everything human to the molecular and mathematical, perhaps, indeed, to make us over” (3). Before doing that, might it not be better to understand the human nature we seek to alter in the terms in which we present that nature to one another—as social and political beings?

Hence we need clarity of thought about political things. To achieve clarity, we need to find some sort of “initial intelligibility” (5). The very notion of intelligibility has attracted considerable philosophic dispute. The good news here is that the dispute is indeed considerable, thinkable. To begin this

inquiry, the quest for some “indubitable or certain beginning”—Cartesian, Lockean, or some other kind—“may not be the correct starting point.” “It is not evident that certainty is the appropriate goal for truly understanding the matters we are studying” (6). Here, such recent thinkers as Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, Leo Strauss, and Jacob Klein prove helpful in their insistence in recognizing “the importance or inevitability of beginning not from supposedly timeless yet in fact inherited concepts but, rather, from one’s own immersion in one’s own world.” Given the very sharp disagreements on the cognitive status of one’s own world seen in the writings of those thinkers, such a beginning “does not presume that thought must remain relative to one’s time and place” (7). Still, “the need to begin from things as we deal with them, our reliance on ordinary practical intelligibility, shows the importance of grounding all our concepts in ordinary contexts and ultimately, I will argue, in political ways of life” (7–8).

Way of life: this is one of the four dimensions of what Aristotle calls a *politeia* or regime, along with the purpose, the rulers, and the ruling “forms” or offices of the political community. Of these, Blitz has chosen the one most “near to hand,” as Heidegger would say, consisting of the “particular activities and contexts” informed by an “understanding of justice or righteousness” that gives those activities and contexts their direction. “Justice, moreover, embodies and serves an understanding of happiness, excellence, what is good, and what is appropriate.” This in turn suggests that any particular regime or way of life, “however close knit,” “cannot encapsulate experience fully,” as human beings “can observe moderation and courage” and other virtues, to say nothing of vices, “apart from the orders within which we practice them.” “This dialectic or spiral of the closedness of a way of life and openness to what is independent from it indicates the complexity of human experience, and the possibility of exploring matters theoretically” (8). This raises the question, and the questionability, of the opinions that prevail in a given political community, questions arising from within it, within a framework of “law and culture, or in divine writings and priestly control,” even as they point beyond it, beyond both the city, the *res publica*, the public thing (in modernity, usually the state), and the regime that rules it, profoundly influencing the minds and hearts of its residents (166n19).

In order either to defend or to attack a given regime, one must take action. Therefore, “my first effort is to investigate practical activity and the place of context in understanding it,” especially “the power of opinion,” our

inclination to “live our lives primarily within what we take for granted and do not explore,” our “common sense” (11).

Practical actions are those taken for reasons other than knowledge, simply; they aim at knowledge “embedded in the activity itself,” requiring not only thought but experience (12). Practical actions are contextual, involving “the interrelations among the things to which one is attending, which are largely ordered in terms of their purpose.” “Common sense” is constituted to a great extent in naming things, thereby bringing out the relevance of things and fixing their “meaning” in terms of the actions for which we intend to use them (14). Thus “truth about much in practical affairs is not ‘certainty’ in the Cartesian, mathematical, or scientific sense” (15). “Meaning” itself has “two fundamental elements”: intelligibility or description and guidance (16). With regard to intelligibility, we thereby see *that* the child is kicking the ball and *why* he is kicking it. In this sense, “a meaning is an explicable or rational fit that allows it to be intelligible,” free of self-contradiction. With regard to guidance, meaning “tells us what is important” about an action, how it affects, compels, or engages us, why we devote ourselves to it. Clearly, meaning understood as “guiding, orienting, intelligibility” connects us with opinions about “justice and goodness” (17). And we will want to know how meaningful activities, understood as just or unjust, good or bad, interrelate in an overall regime. Because our understanding of activities and regimes seldom if ever achieves apodictic certainty, it amounts to knowledge of probabilities, of likelihoods. It might be added that what we now call ‘conspiracy theories’ or master plots amount to attempts to make the uncertain certain. We would all like to be ‘in the know, for sure.’ It is part of the beginning of political wisdom not to indulge this desire too far.

The relations among these probabilities include personal relationships. Common sense in a particular context, very much including a political regime, involves “the general sense one has of others’ trustworthiness and reliability, the character and ordinary practices one implicitly expects on which one depends in business, politics, and elsewhere” (18). Is this street safe for me to walk down? Can I confide in you and trust your promises? This kind of common sense constitutes the social bonds that unify the political community. Frayed or severed, they cause faction, even civil war. They can be reinforced or weakened by prior regimes or ways, especially “the religious and traditional ways...that precede civic regimes.” These habits of mind and heart, as Tocqueville calls them, provide “an implicit understanding or meaning...composed from a sense of goodness and justice,” which forms the ineluctable starting point of philosophizing (20).

Mind and heart are not identical, so “a good moral education may differ from a good intellectual one” (21). The cultivation of the moral sense derives from our “embedded expectations” about our regime, derived from that regime, as “expressed here and now in our particular affairs” (22). In the American regime, opinions about equality and liberty, to say nothing of the pursuit of happiness, “govern what we can say respectably”; those who intend to change the regime will attempt to re-channel what we can say respectably about those opinions. Indeed, “public discussion is increasingly governed by a presumption in favor of the identical respectability and availability of all modes of living that do not question this equal propriety,” making “proper distinctions difficult to state and defend publicly,” as such distinctions are now “seen only as assertions of power” (23). Even the realms of art and of intellect have been classified as “cultural ‘products,’” and thus expressions of the will to power, in a sort of democratized or egalitarian deformation of Nietzsche’s thought (24). “This is the chief problem of our culture” now (170n20).

The fact that the American regime *has* changed since the time of the American founders adds to the evidence that it, like all regimes, does not perpetuate itself. As noted, every regime retains a degree of openness to thoughts not consistent with the thoughts it commends. This is why political founding is possible in the first place. “Founding institutes a form and an end that derive from what is general,” not specific to the existing regime, “even if not simply understood.” A common source of political foundings is the tension between or among various social groups, “rich and poor, above all,” which “keeps this basic awareness” of possibilities beyond the regime “alive” in the minds of citizens (26). Another source of such innovation is war; another is “the press of desire” for things not offered within the existing regime; still another is statesmanship, which discerns possibilities not realized within the regime. “Plato likens statesmanship to weaving, medicine, gymnastic training, piloting, architecture, and other arts,” weaving “the virtues of several” of the arts together, defending the existing regime but also altering it, making it more durable (27).

Statecraft takes a ‘modern’ turn when statesmen, or would-be statesmen, turn not so much to religion or to natural right as the source of moral and political authority but to an account of the course of events, that is, to ‘history,’ as that source. Recourse to history may look to scientific discovery, novel religious revelation, or “new drives and passions” (28), sometimes thought to follow an orderly, rationally discernible pattern (as in Hegel and Marx), sometimes following no pattern at all, arbitrary. Blitz suggests that even this might actually be understandable in terms of the ‘ancient’ understanding;

for example, “perhaps we can explain the source of religion sufficiently naturally,” a point to which he will return in his later discussion of reverence. At any rate, “it is not evident that we need to account for what seems to be new in historicist terms” (29).

Another form of historicism, devised by the aforementioned Heidegger, locates human historicity not in a set of laws of historical development but in “factic” life, our immersion in our “particular existence” here and now. From the fact that “we always already exist in a world of meaningful things,” as Blitz readily admits, Heidegger goes on to claim that “my possibilities are always transmitted in a historically limited fashion,” one so limited by that “world” or “context” as to make us blind to anything else (29). (Hence, perhaps, Heidegger’s insistence that one can properly philosophize only in one of two languages, Greek and—conveniently enough—German.) To this, Blitz replies that our contexts or regimes “also carry their grounds before me in a manner that detaches me from here and now (myself and us) at the same time that I am immersed in them,” that this “movement is not only horizontal or historical but vertical, too,” and “always incomplete,” beckoning us “beyond finite heritage” (30). To be sure, “every regime limits certain possibilities,” but “it cannot do this simply; what may be good or just more generally announces itself,” over the din of the loudspeakers. This goes for individuals and also for political communities. “Heidegger’s connecting all our possibilities to a particular people rather than also to what is more cosmopolitan than (and may conflict with) my people is an important intellectual ground of his support for the Nazis. In contrast to Heidegger’s view, the ‘temporal’ properly includes the aspiration to perfection and completeness; it includes what I will examine in what follows as the erotic as well as the spirited” (31).

In sum, practical activity has a certain nature. It entails “the purposes and orders that form and direct what we expect”; it extends to “the way of life in which we live” and “the character, virtues, or pious ways” the regime “promotes”; this way of life is formed by “the approach of what allows things to be good” and “the justice that seeks to achieve goods,” thereby enabling us to rank the elements of our way of life. And this way of life is never “strictly rigid,” inasmuch as “we can attempt to examine its elements and activities on their own,” that is, beyond the intellectual and moral limits of the regime (32).

But is our practical activity determined by chance or some form of necessity? If not determined freely, by what criteria should we act? Blitz moves to a discussion of the nature of freedom and rights.

One meaning of freedom is to be unbound, either in a good way—poised for choice and action—or in a bad way—lost, wanting direction but having none. Another meaning of freedom is to be self-directed, self-ruling. This suggests that “freedom’s openness and self-direction occur in relation to activity and thought and the intelligibility that makes these possible.” We want to know where we are freely going, and why, and to be able to sustain our freely chosen actions, “not to be battered from side to side” by forces not our own. Freedom “involves self-binding,” the capacity to stay the course we have set for ourselves or to “leave the path” if and when we so choose (34). Isaiah Berlin’s well-known distinction between “positive” and “negative” freedom, between freedom to do something and freedom from something, must be supplemented with a teleological point: that we want freedom to choose the actions and goods towards which we direct ourselves or are hindered in directing ourselves.

“Another central experience of freedom is its necessity,” by which Blitz means that we cannot avoid choosing because we are human. “To be free is a necessary or essential component of what we are,” a point succinctly expressed some decades ago by Henry Kissinger, who titled one of his books *The Necessity for Choice* (34).

In view of these observations, full exercise of our freedom may require us to submit to unfreedom. That is, in order to achieve what we freely intend to accomplish, we may well need prior restraint: if I freely choose to cross the street, please grab me if I am about to step out in front of an oncoming truck, lest I never get to where I want to go; if I freely choose to learn Latin, please put me under the authority of someone who knows how to teach me. “The goods one feels, experiences, and enjoys are linked to the soul that masters them,” and that soul must be ordered in a certain way, often by taking on a set of habits, in order to obtain the ends it chooses (36).

Stated formally, “freedom is our movement and direction toward and unhindered immersion in accessible things, together with our movement toward and unhindered immersion in their initial and continuing intelligibility and guidance, that is, their meaning” (36). Politically, this means that “we must...consider goods and the common good more fully in order to grasp toward what the soul’s full movement, its direction, unencumbered readiness, and attentive binding are oriented” in terms of our public life, our regime, which after all sets many of the conditions of action (37). The regime of liberal democracy, with its “free political institutions,” serves “the free and equal self-directed attempt to satisfy desire.” Hence its “liberal” or free

character, featuring a government that limits itself, or rather is limited by the sovereign, self-governing people, “employing and enhancing the character I need to execute and secure my freedom, and by advancing self-government.” Freedom of religion, of speech, and of self-government generally will require a degree of unfreedom, of “excellence of speech or reason,” including some degree of the rule of reason over desire, the rule of speech over force. This freedom “is not limited to liberal political freedom” but also “points to liberal education” (37). All of this suggests that freedom rightly and comprehensively defined necessitates a way of life or regime—not necessarily a modern liberal democracy, but surely not a tyranny, ‘ancient’ or ‘modern.’

How one understands or defines the basis of freedom will vary, and Blitz stipulates a capacious range of definitions. For the classical political philosophers, freedom means, primarily, a rightly ordered soul participating in civic rule; for the moderns, freedom means primarily freedom of thought and action, certain rights exercised in civil society within the framework of a centralized state. But freedom might also concern “not only the classic soul or the one who holds rights but also the transcendental will in Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche, and Heidegger’s *Dasein*.” Whereas “for the classics... the abilities of soul have full or proper natural uses and objects,” the abilities of the transcendental will “are linked to what they productively shape or to that in which they are freely immersed as material to shape.” For Kant, this means “the self-effected moral ought or Idea”; for Nietzsche, creating and overcoming, for Heidegger, “fated being,” but for all of them freedom is still “poised and self-moving immersion in what is (for these thinkers) most open or available” (38).

Against freedom, some thinkers claim several doctrines of determinism. These may be material, historical, divine, psychological, sociobiological, or economic. One often hears such doctrines asserted regarding matters involving “criminal blame” (40); Tom Dooley may well hang down his head and cry, not out of guilt but out of being buffeted by circumstances he could not have controlled. To these claims, Blitz opposes the ineluctable fact that almost always one’s actions *present themselves* as choices. For example, “One cannot (or cannot yet) even fully describe what happens in thought, in virtuous action, or complex emotion at the molecular level, let alone show how it determines the other.” Our judgments may be determined in some way, but “making the statement and expressing the judgment” cannot account for the meaning of the judgment, tell us whether they are right or wrong, good or bad, beautiful or ugly (42). “The virtuous act qua virtuous act has meaning apart from and no meaning strictly in terms of the material, which is at best

a condition of but not equivalent to the motive or ground of what we must describe and approach in some other way” (43). David Hume’s celebrated distinction between “Is” and “Ought,” predicated on the claim that nature is only purposeless matter in motion, does not require us to convince ourselves that our manifest sense of being able to make choices has no reality. There is no sufficient reason to permit ourselves to be talked out of it.

“Arguments to this effect are made with special force by Heidegger,” quite apart from his malign political opinions. We understand ourselves as open to being, an openness that “belongs to our temporality or finitude, the fact that we are not eternal or outside of time but always project a future, bring forward a past in doing so, and are immersed in a related present.” Our resoluteness, our decisiveness, in this moment bespeaks our freedom to take responsibility for ourselves and for our understanding of the “entities” behind, around, and before us (43). Heidegger “means to show that freedom from, freedom for, self-determination, self-legislation, and standing within and freely choosing good and evil are grounded in the free openness of being as he understands it.” Being itself opens itself to our choosing. In Heidegger’s words, “Determinism denies freedom, and yet by denying it, already must presuppose a certain idea of freedom,” namely, the freedom to deny freedom. “Therefore,” he continues, determinism “remains outside of freedom from the start” (44). Blitz concurs to some extent, writing that “because of the irrelevance for choice of believing all outcomes to be determined, current and future arguments about determinism should not affect one’s practice” (46). For example, when Aristotle defines distributive justice as “equal to equals and unequal to unequals,” it is “hard to see how the meaning and fact of this just distribution are caused by the power of what the material can effect or condition rather than limiting and in that sense directing the material” (47).

“The fullest expression of freedom would involve recognition of and unhindered immersion, explicit directedness, and lingering movement within the fullest context, the fullest ends and intelligibility” (47). Such freedom can be seen in the philosophic life, in greatness of soul, and in the full (Madisonian) responsibility of the liberal statesman; citizens generally exercise it in thought, in speech, and in a certain kind of learning, liberal education.

Freedom implies motion. Motion concerns not only “physical matters” but politics, soul, and thought, all of them meaningful, purposeful (49). “The free movement of the soul,” for example, “is oriented to things in their meaning—what is good about them (their goodness) and our expectations about their availability, that is, how one can move or proceed toward them, how they can

be distributed, and their possible independence” (50). To elaborate this point, Blitz turns not to Heidegger but to Plato—specifically, to Socrates’s account of *erōs* and *thumos*. Love is needy, desiring union with the beloved, but it can also be observant; that is, it may not wish “to incorporate, use, or join with” the beloved “as if it has no independence but, rather, to be together with it as the very thing it is,” to admire, to “liv[e] up to the perfection one admires and wishes to be with,” transporting the lover and uplifting him without the desire to “merely combine.” And when a lover does want to combine with the beloved, he “distinguishes the one loved from all others,” intending that a loving pair will form, in turn distinguishing themselves from all others (51). In this, love moves from “something that seems complete to what is more complete”—a couple, a family, eventually a political community (52).

For its part, “spiritedness is also a movement,” not of combining or admiring but of “separating, identifying, protecting, and, even, withdrawing”—movements regarding lovers and those persons, ideas, or things they love. We associate spiritedness with anger, pride, self-defense, “and hence with rights,” since “rights are grounded in reverence for what is inviolable in oneself.” Politically, spiritedness “defend[s] courageously what it separates, if it is just and good” and attacks or defends against what seems to threaten one’s independence (52). If aiming at the unjust and evil, however, spiritedness may seek “dominance of oneself alone, one’s name, what one does not share” (52–53).

When it supports the understanding reason seeks, love “tends to see things in their wholeness,” seeing distinct things in right combination, now or in the future. When it supports understanding, spiritedness “tends to see things as recalcitrant, unyielding, perplexing single units and necessities,” inclining toward attempt “to absorb or agglomerate them into a more expansive unit or one,” as in mathematics and “the modern conquest of nature” or other forms of manipulation. “When the dialectic of the movement of *eros* and spiritedness accompanies thought, it seeks eventually to bring them together,” with the virtue of *eros* being moderation, the virtue of spiritedness being courage (53). Both are connected, or at least should be connected, to freedom, although in their vicious forms they tyrannize the souls in their grip.

Returning to the regime that justifies itself in terms of freedom, Blitz addresses the familiar notion of rights, which “we often call...our freedoms.” “A right is a deserved authority, mastery, freedom, or choice,” an “authority, ownership, mastery or freedom to dispose of or to direct” (55). “My right is my authority,” my deserved claim freely to direct, master, lead, or guide myself, and therefore seen in what the Declaration of Independence calls the

consent of the governed (56). In terms of the Declaration, certain individual rights are authorities by nature primarily, rightly instantiated in human custom and in law but ordained by the laws of Nature and of Nature's God. The "democracy" part of liberal democracy means that rights so conceived shall be equal, under law. Such rights most especially turn out to be right concerning desires everyone shares, what Locke identifies as pleasure or "the relief from unease," that low but solid ground upon which all of us stand, even philosophers.

Other forms of authority include parental authority, natural at least until the child reaches maturity and also an important conduit of traditional authorities including religion, class, and occupation. The ground of parental authority is "care, attention, love of one's own, and, for a while, greater knowledge and experience" (56). Beyond that, the natural right/authority of consent or rational assent should prevail. A difficulty has arisen, however, with the institution of a ruling class of professional administrators, the asserted rule of a few based on "expert knowledge of ways and means" to accomplish public actions; nevertheless, under liberal democracy the many retain the authority to set the purposes administrative experts undertake to fulfill. "Indeed, the ordinary grasp of these goals may be superior to the experts' opinions" (57). Still another form of authority is legitimacy, which focuses not on means or ends but on origin, whether it be monarchic or aristocratic birthright, election, or appointment.

Natural rights imply equality of some sort, inasmuch as we see that other human beings have by nature the same power of self-direction that we enjoy. We see this most clearly when it comes to "satisfying desires," as "such goods are most clearly equal" and "most visibly separable from the mass spirituality and otherworldliness against which modern thinkers rebelled." But not all desires are created equal. "Securing equal individual rights as the heart of justice is coordinate with understanding goodness as what relieves unease" (58). Thus, "in the American world of John Locke," "rights are not found in a mysterious world of freedom separated from ordinary human motives and facts," as they are in the Kantian realm of noumena. But neither are they found in "mere calculation," as argued by the early Utilitarians. Rights are found in "the truth of human self-direction and inviolability" (59). To see that is to involve the spiritedness described by the 'ancients' along with desire and security—that low-but-solid preoccupation of the 'moderns.'

The sense that our rights are unalienable or inviolable derives from our sense of, and love for, 'our own,' "the experience of one's separateness and

unity.” My own includes my body, but it also includes my thoughts and emotions; even when I am “lost in thought” this “is still *my* being lost in thought” (60, italics added). “My own is first or primarily the experience of the movement of separation that freely directs the things and powers one masters or controls,” an “experienced movement of pushing away from or enclosing and absorbing.” Blitz identifies spiritedness as “the ground of this understanding” in nature while remarking that the development of it in individuals “differs in different regimes” (61). Regimes founded on natural and civic equality will incline both to emphasize the development of a strong sense of individual rights while at the same time centering citizens’ attention on the “average, universal, or equal way” of interpreting those rights, not on the noble way of interpreting them seen in many monarchies and aristocracies. This liberal but perhaps especially democratic interpretation of spiritedness “connects the self to goods and pleasures that it is difficult to doubt” (62).

Human nature being more than bodily and material, however, even in liberal democracies, “individual rights also speak to reverence for the individual” as part of the ground of equal authority. “Such reverence is the experience of attention to what is high in oneself, what gives one pause in dealing with oneself, in relation to goods and what is high in them.” This in turn “speaks to the role of reason in directing our powers,” reason being both a distinctively human characteristic, and therefore ‘high,’ while also being universal in human beings as such, and therefore universal. “Rights interpret this reverence in a certain way—in an egalitarian way with egalitarian goods.” Even our passions are intellectual “in the sense that we experience them together with reason, with combining, separating, and directing.” This makes *opinion* “important in experiencing justice, goodness, and virtue,” and in comparing one way or set of ways to another and questioning our own ways (62). “Reverence belongs to the noetic passions,” that is, to the higher passions, those more likely to find guidance in reason. Rights generally “belong to the experience of honoring oneself, one’s separateness in deserving honor,” thus in spiritedness, the part of the soul that craves honor, respect. Rights “combine one’s spirited separateness as the one who asserts, wills, and chooses with the erotic movement toward excellence or perfection” (63).

Excellence might aim at the sublime or the beautiful, or both. The sublime sublimates all else to the holy. In admiring someone or something holy, we mix admiration with awe and fear. By admiring the beautiful, especially in philo-sophia—the wondering love of, the eros for beautiful wisdom—the soul “lacks fear.” “The ‘holy’ is what one protects in its beauty, purity,

separateness, nobility and wonder rather than simply possessing it, and this protection is then also compatible with knowing and admiring it, which is erotic” (64). Rights combine these two understandings of excellence, as when we become indignant over being ‘used’ and we insist on being recognized for our efforts. “One sees this in Locke’s understanding of value as coming almost exclusively from human effort, not from nature, and in Hegel’s understanding of property” (64–65).

Blitz identifies three “elements in instituting and securing rights.” The first is to seek the source of “one’s own authoritative self-direction and assertion” in “what deserves to be revered rather than bowing down to priests as the only guardians of the pure.” This evidently links the modern sense of rights to Protestant religion rather than to Catholicism. The second, as mentioned, is to connect rights to “meeting ordinary desires and producing ordinary pleasures,” the relief of “unease.” The third is virtue, “in particular responsibility” (as James Madison so clearly sees), responsibility “understood as protecting rights” (65).

“Virtue specifies the character one needs—the human type one needs—fully to enjoy justice and goodness in a regime.” Responsibility is the liberal-democratic virtue equivalent to, but not identical with, the magnanimity, the greatness of soul, upheld by Aristotle and exemplified by so many of the heroes of antiquity. Magnanimity “is higher than responsibility but less equal,” more aristocratic, “and the good with which it deals is not a momentary resting but a kind of burgeoning and expansiveness” (66). Responsibility comports with liberal democracy because citizens in that regime readily expect their elected representative to ‘respond’ to their rightful demands, and typically insist that all of their fellow citizens ‘take responsibility’ for their own actions under the rule of law, whereby everyone is to be equally protected.

Self-government, then, to be sure, but how shall one understand the responsibilities of the ‘self’? By what standards shall one judge it? Rights, yes, but also a sense of not only what an individual self is, by nature, but also of what it can become, the extent to which it can be brought to embody the most distinctively human dimensions of that nature—the end(s), the purpose(s) of that nature. Further, “this judgment involves understanding the full use of the powers” seen in the individual, “oriented to one’s way of life and, ultimately, to the true whole that any way of life, any order of justice,” any regime, “imitates.” Finally, our standard of judgment involves “seeing what most fully allows the other elements in one’s regime—the virtues and

other ends of individuals—their natural independence” (67). Even in liberal democracies, founded upon natural rights which inhere in individuals, we discover the ineluctably political character of human beings.

Blitz will continue his consideration of virtue. Before that, however, he addresses an element of politics which enables the virtuous and the unvirtuous to take actions in accordance with the standards they wish to enforce: power, something “central to any political discussion” (69). Power, he observes, means not only coercive force but also ability, as when we say of someone that he has outstanding intellectual powers. Such powers or abilities provide those favored by the possession of them to acquire property, thereby widening the range of their natural powers. The unequal distribution of natural powers results in unequal distribution of property. This, notoriously, leads to disputes over whether the existing distribution of property within a political community is just.

First and often foremost, power is strength. It “involves speed and force—movement—that tends to destroy or break up (separate)” but also may “may hold fast against destruction and may then reassemble or put together” (70–71). Considered as strength, power might be concentrated, as when we describe an odor as powerful; it may also be expansive, as when a river floods.

Second, as mentioned, power is ability—for example, a hummingbird’s power of hovering. “How full the gathering of something’s ability is, moreover, is a central measure of its excellence, although not its only one” (74). This means that power is not necessarily a morally neutral phenomenon, since excellence in human beings obviously betokens goodness of one sort or another. And although goodness at, say, swinging a baseball bat and hitting a ball has no intrinsic moral significance, the purpose of that activity implicates us in the question whether playing baseball is a good activity for human beings to undertake. (I once read about a recently arrived European immigrant to the United States who, upon witnessing a baseball game, warned the young men in his congregation against becoming “a crazy American runner.”)

A distinctively human power is speech or reason. This suggests that “our powers...are not efficient causes but, rather, the defining elements in what we do, especially once we see this in the light of our perfections” (75). Speaking and reasoning are as central to political life, and are as much powers, as is coercive force. Both involve considerations of justice, as “proper power is measured concentration on proper tasks or movements that allows one and others to follow their natural inclinations and, consequently, sometimes to

improve their immediate inclinations,” whereas “improper force is destroying something’s form or independence, controlling and misdirecting not only its own abilities and inclination, but its unity itself” (77).

Political philosophers have had a thing or two to say on this. For Hobbes and Locke, “a power is a means to what helps relieve unease or satisfy desires,” a quest that “ceaseth only in death,” as Hobbes famously contends (*Leviathan*, chap. 11). This move by modern political philosophers splits power “from specific abilities connected to specific forms, areas, and completions”—that is, it is in line with the rejection of the idea that human nature has a *telos* or purpose distinct from other animal species (77). These philosophers advocate “moving things away from their natural inclinations and separating and putting them together as one chooses,” manipulating the control “of any motion or of things in motion as one sees fit.” The conquest of nature is an act of the human soul reconceived as a “free self,” a “calculating self” intent on self-motion and autonomy “from all claims that are not authoritatively chosen” by other human beings in contractual association with one another (78).

In this, modern liberal democracy resembles “classical democracy” in being based on liberty and equality. It differs from classical democracy in its “greater denigration of pride, honor and nobility, the reduction of full virtue, the justification of the utility and not only beauty of scientific knowledge, the abolition of slavery, the civic equality of women, the favoring of economic expansion, the narrowing and equalizing of pleasure, the permitting of toleration, the (relative) separation of the private from the public, the existence of representation, and, starting with Locke’s separation of powers, the utility of internal clash or dissent within government” (78). An extensive list, one deriving from the initial move, namely, the substitution of the self, which aims at its own commodious preservation, for the soul, which aims at that, but even more at honor among men and even honor before God—salvation, not mere self-preservation. What satisfies the self “is only what is for myself and my security with no independent excellence in things.” “What common ground could there be” between that and “classical nobility” (79)? Hence Nietzsche’s rebellion against earlier moderns, one that remains, however, within the framework of power, now understood as creativity, “not as making new products, but as ordering and reordering,” for “treating as one’s own creation what has been fated for one historically” (81).

To all the moderns, Blitz rejoins that power has limits. It aims at some result, whether proper or improper. That goes both for power as strength and

power as ability. This fact compels one to return to the question of *telos*. And thus back to virtue.

“The question now is whether this orientation to proper use is also true of our other distinctive powers” (82). Each of the twelve virtues enumerated in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* “deals with the passion or good in question in a measured way: one seeks, enjoys, or deals with it in the right way, at the right time, for the right reason, with the right people, as measured by practical reason.” “Our virtuous choices and actions involve measured thought and, therefore, point to properly measured thought” (83). Measured thought means rational thought; “human experience is inseparable from reason,” the human power which enables us to make distinctions, to consider both our ends and the means by which we intend to secure those ends (84). Power as strength finds its limit in (for example) exhaustion; power as ability finds its limit in nature, as when a boy figures out that he will never play first base in the majors. Both also find a limit in ends, which are rationally discernible and rationally open to question, to discernment, to making distinctions.

Regimes set purposes and ways of life, bringing out some virtues (if bad, some vices) and pushing others into the background. The virtues fostered by ancient regimes often conduced to “noble action,” to “beautiful purposes and satisfactions.” “These satisfactions and purposes differ from the restlessness of modern desire,” fostered by the ways of life in modern regimes (85). Blitz does not judge modern regimes lacking in virtue altogether. They do not admire greatness of soul, but they do admire responsibility, its equivalent “in liberal democracy.” More widely, “the liberal democratic virtues of industriousness, tolerance, and civility differ in their generality from political and military effort, piety, and aristocratic friendliness or noblesse oblige” (86).

Many of the modern virtues center on property—so much so, that James Madison argues that even as we have a right to property, we have a property in our rights. Material property “is especially interesting” to Blitz “because it is a visible place where we humanize ordinary material (most clearly the land and what grows on it), where we transform it or take it up into what is human, where we limit, rearrange, and even to some degree bring out and develop its elements and give them added meaning” (87). Further, in order to protect property, we must engage in political life, raising questions about justice, rightful ownership.

For the classics, just ownership means fitting property to nature, assigning the bigger coat to the bigger boy, the smaller coat to the smaller boy. This

standard also may be seen in Locke, particularly when he addresses human relations outside of civil society, as when he argues that a people that uses more land than it needs is rightly pushed off that land by another people whose land is overpopulated, or even one that can use the land more efficiently, in a more civilized manner. “But who in practice is to judge this?” Plato’s Socrates recommends the rule of the wise, but does so ironically, knowing that “the wise are not simply wise” but wise primarily in their knowledge of their own ignorance “and, consequently, would not wish to spend time distributing property (or other goods and opportunities), which they would do inadequately in any event.” The same problem arises with the rule of the virtuous, as seen in “the actual aristocracies or semi-aristocracies that have existed in fact in Great Britain and Europe” (89).

A more down-to-earth justification of property roots possession in “being oneself, being one’s own”—that Madisonian property in one’s rights—“or in what one needs to be one’s own rather than in better or best use” (89). Everyone “wants good things for oneself, not only for the one who uses them best” (90). That is the kind of property right more readily secured in practice. It does so in large measure because, in defending what is my own, I quickly recognize that I must grant a reciprocal right of self-defense to others, lest they gang up on me and strip me of my possessions. Liberal democracy is the modern regime that encourages that way of life, tying property to equality and establishing laws that prevent property from being seized by force. This sets reasonable limits on both property ownership and property use.

What about the properties of bodies? “The body is not a mere physical appendage or tool, for I feel, see, use, own, and occupy. This is why violations of the body are violations of the person.” The body is “soul-diffused.” As body, it requires property to “meet necessity”; as the locus of a soul, it needs to use property well, “to use virtuously” (92). “The experience of things that brings out their powers and properties depends on what allows these activities to occur or to be developed. This is primarily a country’s way of life, its law or justice and the understanding of what can be good to which it is directed. This is one reason why political-philosophical matters are so central” (93).

Having discussed virtues as they relate to political life, Blitz turns to “the nature of virtue” itself. “Virtue of character is an important purpose or element of political life because it is a vital way we deal with and control goods,” along with law and technical skill. What we regard as virtue or good character is inflected by our regime as a way of life, embodying as it does “a view of the right way to act and behave.” The several schools of ethics

today—‘deontological,’ ‘consequentialist,’ and so on—emphasize a section of this more comprehensive understanding of virtue and of ethics. At the same time, no regime “can fully control the experience of its members and citizens,” much as the rulers may try (95). Opinions about what virtue is are susceptible of reasoned scrutiny, in and across regimes.

Blitz divides his own effort at such scrutiny into three topics: virtue in relation to goods; virtue in relation to various regimes; and virtue in relation to morality generally. “The basic experience of virtue” occurs as we live our lives with other people, noticing that they, and we, are better or worse at the tasks they undertake (96). Children quickly form judgments of their parents’ parenting; they ‘talk back.’

Virtues, taken together, constitute virtue, or character. Character “concerns the way one deals with goods and passions.” Aristotle argues that ethical virtue, good character, in action “constitutes happiness” because virtue “enjoys and deals with what is good” (96). For him, “the most complete or beautiful use of our powers to enjoy the basic goods” is what happiness consists of (96–97). For moderns, and especially modern Americans, Aristotelian virtue might well be supplemented by religious virtue—faith, hope, and charity being quite different from, if not contradictory to, courage, moderation, wisdom, and justice—and by the virtues of liberal democracy, responsibility and industriousness among them. However broadly or narrowly conceived, virtue nonetheless “depends on the truth and breadth of our experience and understanding of human powers, and their orientation to what exercises and engages them fully” (97). Children do indeed talk back, but it will take time and thought and habituation to bring them to the point of talking back intelligently. “Acquiring virtue and using the mind take time and are not automatic” (98). Parents retain their say in such matters.

Political regimes also have their own say, in speech (persuasion) and in action (punishment). “The *nature* of all virtues, some more clearly than others, is that they require a political community” (emphasis added). That is because acquiring virtue and using the mind do indeed take time, are not automatic, and therefore will need the support of the regime within which such cultivation takes place. Further, all of the virtues have implications for the survival and prosperity of the regime: courage “has a natural, spirited, basis” but the battlefield courage needed to defend a regime and the country it rules requires training and public support (99). The same goes for moderation and the other virtues. A given regime will point the intellectual and affective attention of its citizens to particular kinds of virtue by directing

them on a particular way of life. During the Cold War, the American citizen was not Soviet man; the constellation of virtues that made up the regime's conception of virtue or character inclined the citizens of the one regime in one way, the subjects of the other regime in another, forming very different character 'types' within the respective populations. "Virtues are connected to different regimes for three central reasons: the understanding of justice that constitutes the regime, the basic experience of good that is involved with the regime and its virtues, and the nature of the 'I' and freedom coordinate with the regime" (101–2).

With respect to morality, Blitz distinguishes it from ethical character or virtue, although it is of course related to that. Morality consists not so much in the enjoyment of goods as in "restricting one's actions in order to benefit others but not necessarily oneself." In this way, morality "is close to law as a command followed by punishment for disobeying the command" (104). Morality and law are in turn related to the virtue of justice, which concerns both the distribution of goods within the community (which may or may not coincide with my own full enjoyment of them), and punishment, which may or may not be 'for my own good.'

One moral system influential in liberal democracies for more than a century is Kant's. Kant grounds moral law "on the freedom of equal individuals as those who have rightful individual authority, those who deserve equal respect" (105). Blitz criticizes Kant, doubting that our fundamental moral convictions are self-evident and denying Kant's claim that freedom means "the universal legislating that Kant has in mind, since any number of contradictory things could be universally legislated" (for example, prohibiting or commending theft, as Hegel remarks). Kant also tends to define pleasure "in the narrow or utilitarian sense" brought forth by his philosophic rivals in his own time (107). Arriving at the right moral conclusion becomes a matter of applying a rule-based *procedure* as the guarantee of moral behavior. As a consequence, in political life Kantian morality tends to separate law-abidingness and legal administration "from its purpose—advancing the common good—and increasingly [towards] strict proceduralism." Such an ethos in turn inclines toward administrative statism, a form of aristocracy or perhaps oligarchy, not toward the political rule liberal democracy attempts to cultivate in modern states. "On the whole, liberal democracy, its ground in natural rights, its characteristic virtues, and its predating the absolute moral law of Kant and his successors, is a superior and less fantastic combination of proper choice, satisfaction, and each individual's inviolability" (108).

Moral proceduralism thus obscures “the major question to which the virtues point,” the “degree and status of their truth.” If virtues vary from one regime to another, how can we decide which, if any, really do fit the nature of things, including human nature? “What are the beautiful things or true honors, or the true fears and satisfaction?” (109). Enter the Platonic dialogues, wherein such questions animate the interlocutors, not always leading to apodictic conclusions. “The discussions bring out the important fact that what is virtuous and what the virtuous objects are become more visible once we consider the imprecision and unclarity of any opinion we have of virtue, or our experience of it” (110). Aristotle does not fail to overlook this, although moderns, perhaps intent on rivaling the certainties of religious conviction, attempt to overcome it. In failing, they frequently call morality and virtue themselves into question.

As a result, the finest eroticism declines. In accepting uncertainty in moral judgment, the ancients leave the soul open to yearning, to striving for a perfection we cannot reach. “One cannot fully merge with the beautiful, the good, and the whole of things”; “always incomplete,” we feel the presence of “greater beckoning wholes” (112–13). Even in the mild and egalitarian air of liberal democracies, “one cannot be fully responsible,” fully virtuous as we stand on the low but solid ground. A degree of acquaintance with the older philosophers may alert one to that. Otherwise, self-satisfied souls without longing will prevail, entranced with their own technical proficiencies but merely blinking at the stars. “The virtues are initially and for the most part connected to political regimes, or ways of life,” and insofar as the liberal democracies foreclose the experience of greatness of soul or the experience of humility under “divine authority” along a pious way of life, they diminish the persons they intend to protect from those they describe as overbearing aristocrats and fanatic priests (113).

This leads Blitz to move from the nature of virtue to the nature of “what is common”—the *res publica*. To be a member of a polis, empire, feudal society, or modern state means first to be presented with certain things held to be good by the political community, second to find “equal and unequal distribution of tasks, opportunities and goods and their fit or working together, what is proper to be done, by whom.” Both of these features of political communities require “virtue and law.” “Together, the fit of tasks and opportunities to achieve certain goods constitutes what we hold in common in a way of life,” a regime, which characterizes but is not the same as the political community, which could have any regime and indeed may undergo regime changes, over

time (115). Among the “commonalities” seen in “the public thing” are organizations, endeavors, “goods that we can produce only in common” such as victory in war or in soccer and orchestral music, public honors and, depending upon the regime, ruling offices (119). Commonalities shape the character of those who partake in them, making “understand[ing] virtue and why it is good” the “core issue” in Aristotelian political science (121).

The regime of liberal democracy in the characteristic modern ‘public thing’ separates the state from civil society; in that regime, “economic, intellectual, artistic, and religious life is primarily private and the state regulates or tries to ensure equal opportunity but does not direct it.” This separation originates with the philosophic founder of *lo stato*, Machiavelli, and is elaborated by Hobbes and Locke. They replace “the classical city or political community” with exactly this “difference between state and society, and ‘states’ need not be governments; governments are not politics’ only or primary venue” (122). This tends to liberate the desires from moral control by governmental authorities, a move intended to unfetter the human capacity to master fortune and nature and to unfetter governments from priestly control. What binds modern states together, aside from force (which can and often does defeat the purpose of liberalism by crushing individual and civil-social enterprise), is patriotism.

Patriotism is not the same as the public good. “My own, our own, our good, and my good differ” (123). As “the political love of, the political attachment to, one’s own,” patriotism may well attach itself to the existing regime, but then it may not; the American revolutionaries considered themselves patriots (124). More, the patriot will attach himself, remain loyal to, “practices, conventions, and the current and accumulated opinions about what the justice and goodness of our way of life actually mean” (125). And it almost always attaches itself to the land, to our own *country* experienced as our home. Patriotism should also be distinguished from nationalism, which in modernity typically refers to ethnic and linguistic commonalities. Blitz again points to Heidegger as the preeminent philosophic theorist of nationalism, who “thinks of authentic politics primarily in terms of the people, the political analogue to the authentic individual” (126). At the same time, Heidegger is an atypical nationalist, one who held “race and space” to be “significant not as physical or biological causes but as factors made meaningful when they are taken up into people’s pursuit of possibilities” (126–27).

This obviously differs from the Americans’ understanding of “We the People” as a “self-chosen and gathered” assemblage ruling themselves by a

self-designed supreme law of the land, itself under the authority of the laws of Nature and of Nature's God. As Americans, "we are embedded in a particular country, but this embeddedness exists in a circle that opens up and out to questions of truer justice and excellence" (127). In this, Americans replicate by design the natural tendency of human beings to form families, which Aristotle identifies as the first form of association in which political relations occur. "Our first loving aspiration is to elevate ourselves to another, or to be together with them and then to be attached to what is joint, the child. . . . This first openness and loyalty, this first combining of man, woman, and child, is crucial as the ground for other openness, however much the development of the I, the separateness of the couple, or the direction of further excellence depends on one's overall way of life." The contemporary plans and experiments to alter the nature of human beings will "not [be] possible without goods being given up, restricted, or distorted—love, loyalty, family, and freedom in various venues—that we also need for what is higher and more complete." That is, once the modern attempt to conquer nature extends in some systematic and effective way to individual human bodies, the material foundation of the family, bound together initially in bodily desire, likely will destroy more than it gains. "What will be restricted in our aspirations, freedom, and pride by the attempt to completely master and reform the body?" (131).

As his last topic, Blitz addresses the nature of goods. What is good guides actions because it is choiceworthy, worth being guided by; what is more, by their nature, goods provide a measure for actions, requiring us to consider what actions are likely to conduce to our securing them. In so acting, we develop other goods, namely, the capacities needed to secure the goods we lack. In acquiring those goods we move toward perfecting ourselves and the conditions in which we live.

What about real goods acquired by bad means? Can there be a "perfect crime," a good way of doing evil? Not really. "The perfect crime does not use our full powers, it harms others' goods excessively, and it is unlikely to achieve the full pleasure that is one of its goals, let alone satisfy still other ends." In contrast, "when Plato and Aristotle claim that the philosophical life is best they mean that it uses all our human powers most completely, is oriented directly to the unchanging whole without detracting from others, and is pleasant." And although "statesmanship is not directed to the whole simply, as philosophers seek to understand it," "a statesman's life or a life of ethical virtue is excellent or best" in that it is "a full if not altogether complete

and pleasant use of our powers that also aids others' excellence in a common enterprise"—as Charles de Gaulle was wont to say, a grand design (135).

Why, then, is the good disputed? Blitz identifies seven ways in which we interfere with our perception of it. First, 'we moderns' exhibit an egalitarian distaste for ranking goods and the pleasures associated with their pursuit and possession. Second, "the complexity of pleasure," which may range from philosophic inquiry to drug-induced euphoria, "makes choice, especially common choice, difficult." It has finally become easy to legalize and to commercialize once-illegal drugs and gambling, activities inducing stupidity and indebtedness—that is to say, dependence instead of self-government—in a citizenry rendered increasingly incapable of citizenship because lacking in the virtues that make citizenship a possible way of life. "If there is no public justification for excellent or exceptional powers fully used," if egalitarian lassitude pervades the minds and hearts of citizens, "it can be difficult for these [powers] to flourish" (138).

Third, freedom and individuality are as complex and potentially confusing as pleasure. "Because we are free, we are free to ignore, reject, and make mistakes"—to misuse our reason by, among other things, failing to engage it in the task of "forming desire, spiritedness, and our passions." "Attempts to live a life that ignores reason—drugs, alcohol, sloth—ignore our powers and fall short of satisfying them." This makes it difficult for individuals freely "to acknowledge what is better, to and for themselves," especially since what is good for me is never the good simply but must be adjusted to my own capacities and interests, as well as to the resources available to me, which may be scarce—a fourth source of confusion, raising as it does difficult questions of distributive justice (139).

Fifth, reason entails speech, and speech can be deceptive. Speech "often allows fraud to triumph." "The history of religious obsession and political terror makes this clear" (140). Opinion and sentiment are manipulable by clever persons who hold out hope, inspire fear, or demand obedience to themselves by invoking long-standing customs. Sixth, and in opposition to long-standing custom, is doubt and rebellion, which may be raised by speech but also by the "incompatibility [which] exists among several activities that use our abilities and are pleasurable," contradicting our existing way of life (141). As religiously minded persons have long understood, certain kinds of music lead to certain kinds of dancing.

Finally, and notoriously, notions of goodness vary from regime to regime. “In each case, our human choice begins within a form of justice, a presentation of what can be good, and our correlated characteristics” (143). Regimes set that framework of choice. And even within those limits, one still needs to address the problem of the imprecision of measuring and judging what good is, and what is good. “The most basic criterion is the fullest use of our powers, primarily speech or reason, but also the reasoned experience of passions and ordinary goods”; understanding the good and what is good is a “noetic and discursive” exercise performed within “a just whole,” not a matter of mere calculation at the service of passions (145). However, the natural standard discoverable by our reason and speech “is both advanced and complicated by one’s pride in self-direction, by spirited self-defense and protecting some level of individual inviolability and fair treatment.” As a college professor, Blitz holds out education as “the central element that makes proper choice more likely,” although it is likely that he does not assume that the college classroom is necessarily the best or the only place for such education (146).

Such a liberal education requires leisure. We Americans “have a good degree of that,” Blitz remarks, drily. What we lack today, thanks to the egalitarianism fostered by civil-social democracy, is a sense of excellence, except when it comes to activities which give us immediate pleasure, such as watching athletes or listening to musicians. At the same time, Blitz cannot recommend “communities that are or claim to be aristocratic (or religiously aristocratic),” as these are either fraudulent or present other dangers, including habits of subservience (146). He offers a threefold approach to the issue: “first, individually, the fullest or most virtuous use of our powers and the education that allows and develops this; second, basing this use and education on the natural meaning of trust, love, family, friendship, and limits in resources; and, third, doing this in a community grounded on equal individual choice and pride, on trust whose expectations rest on these virtues and meaning and on understanding our powers and their truly excellent use” (147). In effect, he would embed the ‘ancient’ or ‘classical’ virtues in civil society, especially through educational institutions, broadly conceived. The existence of a civil society in the modern state, one that is most vigorous in modern states with liberal democratic regimes that protect civil society from overbearing governmental supervision, might serve as a means of resistance to the more dangerous features of modernity, including the radical conquest of human nature proposed by ‘transhumanists.’

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