

Vol. 2 No. 1 Spring 2023

# PIETAS

A Journal of Tradition, Place, and Things Divine



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Cicero's Rhetoric of Philosophical Political Engagement in the Preface of *De Re Publica*

by David T. West

Virtue on Display: Ethics in Aristotle's Rhetoric

by Allison Postell

Russell Kirk on the Moral Imagination and Literary Studies

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Robert Frost and Donald Davidson: the Past, War, and Memory

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*Cicero's Legacies in European Social and Political Thought, ca. 1100 - ca. 1550*

by Joshua J. Bowman



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## Letter From the Ciceronian Society



*"Cicero discovering tomb of Archimedes," by Paul Barbotti (1853). De Agostini Picture Library / Getty Images.*

We begin this spring issue of *Pietas*, the peer-review journal of the Ciceronian Society, with reflections on Cicero in his capacity not just as statesman but also lawgiver. Father Claude Pavur, associate editor at The Institute for Advanced Jesuit Studies at Boston College, sent us the following thoughts on Cicero's political philosophy:

In the *Tusculan Disputations* (I.64), after mentioning the inspired discoveries of different geniuses (such as mathematicians, astronomers, inventors of language, writing, politics, and conveniences or protections for daily life), Cicero rises to a compelling vision of philosophy, one worth preserving for meditation and guidance:

As far as I am concerned, even these rather celebrated and distinguished achievements appear to involve something of a divine force—so I simply must imagine that some kind of transcendent spiritual inspiration lies behind the deep, rich song that poets pour forth, or that eloquence flows with some kind of superior force as it abounds in ringing words and richly meaningful ideas. But

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philosophy, the mother of all arts—what is it but a gift of the gods, as Plato says, or as I say, something that they have contrived? It has educated us first to their worship, next to human rights grounded in the fellowship of humankind, and then to moderation and spiritual greatness. This very thing has expelled the fog from our minds, as it were, so that we might see everything above, below, first, last, and in-between.<sup>1</sup>

Here, linked in a single comprehensive vision, are poets, orators, and philosophers. The power behind their activities is divine. But philosophy has a special place. It is foundational and generative and nurturing: it is “the mother of all arts” (*omnium mater artium*). In this vision it is a fountainhead of culture, both corporate and individual: It has educated us to devout religion (*illorum [deorum] cultum*), then to a universal idea of justice situated within the fellowship of human society (*ius hominum, quod situm est in generis humani societate*), and also to a spiritual maturity in both moderation and greatness (*modestiam magnitudinemque animi*). Finally, it is something that endows us with a clear and comprehensive consciousness (*caliginem dispulit ... ut omnia ... videremus*), so that we have some idea of the height and depth and length and breadth of whatever there is for us to know—from the alpha to the omega, one might say. Those aware of how wayward humankind always tends to be might best realize how much we stand to gain from cultivating some version of this inspired Ciceronian vision, integrating faith, justice, culture, spiritual and intellectual maturity, restraint and greatness of soul. Philosophy promotes a rightly-ordered, conscious bond with the divine, with the world, and with our fellows, near and far. In a distinctive way, it makes for pietas.

Father Pavur’s words provide a fitting introduction to our first feature article by David T. West, “Cicero’s Rhetoric of Philosophical Political Engagement in the Preface of *De Re Publica*,” which addresses how Cicero may have integrated these studies. Cicero, he argues, encourages not mere political engagement—a notion that required no justification to most of

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<sup>1</sup> *Mihi vero ne haec quidem notiora et illustriora carere vi divina videntur, ut ego aut poetam grave plenumque carmen sine caelesti aliquo mentis instinctu putem fundere aut eloquentiam sine maiore quadam vi fluere abundantem sonantibus verbis uberibusque sententiis: philosophia vero, omnium mater artium, quid est aliud nisi, ut Plato, donum, ut ego, inventum deorum? Haec nos primum ad illorum cultum, deinde ad ius hominum, quod situm est in generis humani societate, tum ad modestiam magnitudinemque animi erudit, eademque ab animo tamquam ab oculis caliginem dispulit, ut omnia supra infera, prima ultima media videremus.*

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his readers—but a particular form of public involvement characterized by individual moral restraint in the pursuit of the public good. By promoting philosophy, Cicero encouraged his readers to study in their leisure as well as pursue public life, to the end of creating a morally reformed ruling class that could reinvigorate seriousness in an era of decline in Roman morality. For this moral reform he stealthily combined ethical doctrines from Greek philosophy with noble images drawn from Roman tradition in order to imbue the reader with higher motives for political participation. Cicero’s aim, writes West, was “ultimately to establish the secret rule of wisdom.” If this was Cicero’s project, then we may compare it with Aristotle’s teaching at the end of the *Politics*. Professor Daniel O’Toole recently commented to me that Aristotle’s turn to the leisured education in Book 8 was a way of tempering the imperialistic urges that accompany political life in Book 7. This in turn reminded me of Leo Paul de Alvarez, who used to call Book 7, Chapter 3 the “anti-Machiavellian chapter.” Following a consideration of the “most choiceworthy way of life” (1324a25), we learn that activity does not have to be effective. Aristotle’s concept of motion, as opposed to modern spatio-temporal or physical motion, is that of *ens actu*, which does not mean “action” but the *activity* of being at *rest*: the highest concentration of a being’s possibilities.

Aristotle is the subject of our next piece, “Aristotle’s Virtue on Display: Ethics in Aristotle’s Rhetoric.” Allison Postell challenges the view that Aristotle’s teachings on rhetoric are devoid of any natural standard of the good but are merely observations that might help the rhetorician use emotion to direct his audience. She investigates Aristotle’s claim that “character [*ēthos*] is almost, so to speak, the most authoritative form of persuasion,” given the seeming contradiction that in the *Rhetoric* he disparages rhetorical appeals to *ēthos* and *pathos* as beneath the true art of rhetoric, which should be based on appeals by *logos*. Treating the scholarly positions that Aristotle’s rhetoric is amoral, vicious, or a mere instrument of politics, she argues that “a rhetorical appeal by *ēthos* springs from a style of *logos* specific to rhetoric,” and for this she looks to a specific treatment of the enthymeme, in which a teleology guides *logos* and *ēthos* in Aristotelian rhetorical theory.

Our next two feature articles come from the American tradition. Darrell Falconburg, in “Russell Kirk on the Moral Imagination and Literary Studies,” shows how Kirk’s traditionalism developed and applied Edmund Burke’s concept of the “moral imagination” for the purpose of reading literature. Kirk, not just a political thinker but also a bestselling

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fiction author, believed that the purpose of literature is closely related to the universal quest for meaning, tradition, and a greater understanding of human nature. It has the important purpose of educating both the reader and the commonwealth, hence it cannot be reduced to the narrow-minded concerns of ideology. At its best, great literature passes down the moral imagination, teaching us what it means to be human and uniting us to a tradition that contains the wisdom of generations.

One might say that it is the poet above all who maintains tradition. Thomas H. Hubert, in “Robert Frost and Donald Davidson: the Past, War, and Memory” provides a careful reading of these two great American poets and the traditions they sought to preserve in memory. In our own American education, the forgetting of the 750,000 slain on the battlefields of the Civil War is a forgetting of what makes a people what it is. Hubert describes the now built-up ground on which the Battle of Nashville was fought: “Thousands of people hurtling at 70 miles per hour each day through Nashville on Interstate 65—which runs through a portion of the battlefield—doubtless never realize the significance of the terrain on either side of that major artery.” Thus, after Davidson’s move north, the southern poet was not amazed by northern academics’ acceptance of his own tradition, but by their willful forgetfulness of their own: “But the real issue for ... Davidson,” writes Hubert, “is not his unreconstructed status but the alienation of his academic associates from their own history.”

Many thanks to our reviewers. In this issue we review Timothy W. Burns’s *Leo Strauss on Democracy, Technology, and Liberal Education*, Slavoj Žižek’s *After Lenin*, Will Arbery’s *Heroes of the Fourth Turning*, and Cary J. Nederman’s *The Bonds of Humanity: Cicero’s Legacies in European Social and Political Thought, ca. 1100 - ca. 1550*.

On the above theme of remembrance of tradition, we offer the final word to the sage Cicero himself. In 75 BC he was appointed to the office of quaestor in western Sicily, where he rose to fame for his justice and great oratory in the prosecution of the corrupt governor Gaius Verres. With the rule over that province on his mind, he refused to compare the “horrible, wretched, and abominable” life of its most famous tyrant, Dionysius of Syracuse, with “the lives of Plato or Archytas, men of learning and truly wise.”<sup>2</sup> Rather he contrasted the life of the tyrant with “a humble little man from that same city,” the great mathematician Archimedes.

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<sup>2</sup> Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, V.64.

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Cicero inquired of the inhabitants where the tomb of Archimedes was located. But the people, to his surprise, had not only forgotten the tomb of their “most brilliant citizen,” they had forgotten the man himself; indeed, “they categorically denied *his existence*.”<sup>3</sup> According to tradition, the tomb could be identified by its inscription, “which stated that a sphere along with a cylinder had been set up on the top of his grave”—the request of the interred sometime before his murder at the hands of one of the Roman soldiers who breached the city walls almost one hundred and fifty years before. Searching for the grave, Cicero wandered among the ancient tombs. Near the Agrigentine Gate, he saw a small column slightly protruding from the undergrowth. It was “enclosed all round and covered with brambles and thickets,” and upon it “was the figure of a sphere and a cylinder.”

And so began the reclamation:

Many men were sent in with sickles that cleaned and made the place accessible. And when a passage to the place was opened, we approached the pedestal fronting us. The epigram was traceable with about half the lines legible, as the latter portion was worn away. So you see, the noblest city of Greece, once even the most learned, would have been ignorant of the tomb of its most brilliant citizen, had it not been shown to them by a man from Arpinum.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Cicero, *Tusculanae Disputationes* V.64 (my translation, emphasis added): “Non ego iam cum huius vita, qua taetrius, miserius, detestabilius excogitare nihil possum, Platonis aut Archytae vitam comparabo, doctorum hominum et plane sapientium: ex eadem urbe humilem homunculum a pulvere et radio excitabo, qui multis annis post fuit, Archimedes; cuius ego quaestor ignoratum ab Syracusanis, cum esse omnino negarent, saeptum undique et vestitum vepribus et dumetis indagavi sepulcrum.”

<sup>4</sup> Cicero, *Tusculanae Disputationes* V.65–66.



# Cicero's Rhetoric of Philosophical Political Engagement in the Preface of *De Re Publica*

David T. West

*Recent discussion of Ciceronian constitutionalism has focused on Cicero's efforts to revive the governing structure of the mixed regime as a solution to the crisis of the late Republic, neglecting the moral and philosophical aspect of his envisioned reform of Rome's ruling class and his rhetorical strategies for advancing it. In De Re Publica, Cicero endorses the traditional republican regime, but in the preface of Book 5 he laments its disappearance due to the loss of the men who formerly defended it: since these men were themselves formed by a constitution now lost, how can such men, and the constitution, be restored? Limiting myself to the preface of the first book, I argue that Cicero strives to bring back the right kind of men in three ways: he disproves Epicurean quietism as self-defeating, shames decent men into embracing the risks of engaging in politics on behalf of the traditional regime by casting them as Epicureans, and encourages the ambitious to engage in politics from motives drawn from philosophy with the aim of moderating the potentially destructive passion for glory. In importing these novel motives from Greek philosophy, Cicero makes use of a brilliant rhetorical strategy of ethos, initially casting himself as contemptuous of philosophy; he also disguises their philosophical provenance by attributing them to Roman tradition. The cumulative effect of these arguments is the establishment of the secret rule of wisdom and a new role for republican rhetoric in the context of the philosophic dialogue.*

“That man of outstanding intelligence and erudition, Plato, thought that states would at long last be happy only at such time as either learned and wise men began to rule them or if those who ruled were to concentrate all their efforts on learning and wisdom.”<sup>5</sup> - Cicero, *Letters to Quintus* 1.29

Recent discussion of Ciceronian constitutionalism has focused on Cicero's efforts to revive the governing structure of the mixed regime as a solution to the crisis of the late Republic,<sup>6</sup> overlooking the moral and philosophical aspect of his envisioned reform of Rome's ruling

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<sup>5</sup> *Atque ille quidem princeps ingeni et doctrinae Plato tum denique fore beatas res publicas putavit si aut docti ac sapientes homines eas regere coepissent aut ii qui regerent omne suum studium in doctrina et sapientia collocarent* (Latin text taken from Cicero: *Letters to Quintus and Brutus, Letter to Octavian, Invectives, Handbook of Electioneering*, tr. D.R. Shackleton Bailey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002)). Cicero has nearly translated Plato *Letter* 7.326b verbatim; cf. Plato *Republic* 5.473d. Translations in this paper are my own, except where otherwise noted.

<sup>6</sup> See most notably Benjamin Straumann, *Crisis and Constitutionalism: Roman Political Thought from the Fall of the Republic to the Age of Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016) and Jed W. Atkins, *Cicero on Politics and the Limits of Reason: The Republic and Laws* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

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class and his rhetorical strategies for advancing it. In *De Re Publica*, Cicero endorses the traditional republican regime in the first two books, but in the preface of Book 5, he eventually acknowledges its disappearance in his own time due to the loss of the kind of men who formerly defended it:

‘The Roman state rests on the mores and men of old’... But our own era, after it had inherited the republic like a remarkable picture that was nevertheless starting to fade with old age, has not only neglected to restore it using the same colors as before, but has not even taken care to do the bare minimum of preserving its outline and surface brushstrokes, so to speak. For what remains of the ancient mores on which he [the poet Ennius] said the Roman state rested? We see that they are so outdated and forgotten that they are not only not cultivated but are no longer even known. Again, what shall I say about the men? For the mores themselves have perished through the dearth of men. (*Rep.* 5.1)<sup>7</sup>

Since the men with republican mores were themselves formed by a republican constitution now lost, how can such men of such mores, and with these the constitution, be restored? Shedding light on this question is one of Cicero’s chief aims in writing *De Re Publica*. It has long been recognized that one of Cicero’s main themes in this unsatisfyingly fragmentary work is the figure of the ideal statesman, who comes up in several extant passages.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, in a private letter to his brother, Cicero himself describes the work as “a dialogue ... on the best constitution and the best citizen” (*sermo ... de optimo statu civitatis et optimo cive*, *Letters to Quintus* 3.5.1). But Cicero is not interested in merely giving a theoretical description of the kind of man he would like to see in the Republic; we should also expect to find the great orator employing his rhetorical skills to convince his reading audience to embrace his ideal of statesmanship. If the right kind of man has been lost, it stands to reason that Cicero’s reading audience must consist largely of the wrong kind of

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<sup>7</sup> *Nostra vero aetas, cum rem publicam sicut picturam accepisset egregiam sed iam evanescentem vetustate, non modo eam coloribus eisdem quibus fuerat renovare neglexit, sed ne id quidem curavit ut formam saltem eius et extrema tamquam lineamenta servaret. Quid enim manet ex antiquis moribus, quibus ille dixit rem stare Romanam? quos ita oblivione obsoletos videmus, ut non modo non colantur, sed iam ignorentur. Nam de viris quid dicam? mores enim ipsi interierunt virorum penuria.* Quotations of the Latin text of Cicero’s *De Re Publica* (hereafter *Rep.*) in this article are taken from Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Re Publica; De Legibus; Cato Maior De Senectute; Laelius De Amicitia*, ed. Jonathan G. F. Powell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); likewise, citations of book and paragraph numbers from *Rep.* follow the numbering in Powell.

<sup>8</sup> In *Rep.*, Cicero at times calls this ideal statesman the *prudens* (2.67) and at others the *rector* (5.4) or *moderator rei publicae* (5.2; cf. 1.45). On the Book 5 fragments treating the *rector/moderator*, see James E. G. Zetzel, *The Lost Republic: Cicero’s De Oratore and De Re Publica* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022). The bibliography on the *rector* is vast: see Powell, “The rector rei publicae of Cicero’s *De Republica*,” *Scripta Classica Israelica* 13 (1994): 19–29 and Jonathan Zarecki, *Cicero’s Ideal Statesman in Theory and Practice* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

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man, who need to be turned in the right direction. And yet scholarship has neglected the motives Cicero presents for statesmanship in the work, which vary in accordance with the different types of men addressed, nor has it investigated his rhetorical strategies for encouraging readers to engage in politics in accordance with his model of an ideal statesman who is also a philosopher.<sup>9</sup>

Limiting myself to the preface of the first book, I will argue that Cicero strives to bring back the right kind of men for republican government in three ways. First, he disproves Epicurean quietism as self-defeating. Simultaneously, his critique of Epicurean political abstention serves to shame decent men into embracing the risks of engaging in politics on behalf of the traditional regime, as Cicero holds out traditional Roman motives for serving the state. Finally, Cicero encourages ambitious men to engage in politics from motives drawn from philosophy with the aim of moderating the potentially destructive passion for glory. In importing these novel motives from Greek philosophy, Cicero makes use of a brilliant rhetorical strategy of ethos, initially casting himself as contemptuous of philosophy; he also disguises their philosophical provenance by attributing them to Roman tradition.

### I. TARGETS OF CICERO'S ANTI-EPICUREAN DIATRIBE IN THE PREFACE OF BOOK 1

#### A) EPICUREANS WHO REJECT BOTH POLITICS AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

In general, Cicero's apology for participation in public life in the preface of Book 1 is directed only on a superficial level at Roman Epicureans who had completely withdrawn from politics. The paucity of this type among Cicero's contemporaries obviates the need for him to dedicate his remarks in the preface, let alone the work as a whole, to the primary purpose of persuading a few apolitical Epicureans to embrace public life. The only people in this category attested by the historical record are Cicero's friend Atticus and his literary contemporary Lucretius; perhaps Catullus could be added as an intellectual lacking political ambition (though not necessarily an Epicurean). Doubtless there were others, who have

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<sup>9</sup> On the duty of this statesman to continuously pursue learning and engage in philosophic contemplation, see *Rep.* 2.69, 3.5, and the "Dream of Scipio" (e.g. 6.24 and 6.33); see also Scipio's praise of the philosophic life at *Rep.* 1.26-29 (see L. Perelli, "L'Elogio della vita filosofica in de re publica, I, 26-29," *Bollettino di studi latini* 7 (1971): 389-401). Powell, "Second Thoughts on the Dream of Scipio," *Papers of the Leeds International Latin Seminar* 9 (1996): 13-27 and Wilfried Stroh, *Cicero: Redner, Staatsmann, Philosoph* (München: C.H. Beck, 2008), 63 suggest that the *rector* is the Roman republican version of Plato's philosopher king; Walter Nicgorski, *Cicero's Skepticism and His Recovery of Political Philosophy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 205-43 delineates Cicero's ideal of "the Socratic statesman."

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remained in obscurity due to their very withdrawal. In any case, a politically withdrawn mode of life was foreign not only to the Roman ethos in general, but also to Roman Epicureanism in the late Republic, as we know of a number of elites who identified with Epicureanism, such as Piso and Cassius.<sup>10</sup>

Besides, Cicero's arrogantly dismissive tone and slandering of Epicurean doctrine are hardly designed to be persuasive to the mind of an Epicurean philosopher thinking through the matter. To Epicurean withdrawal, Cicero opposes the example of Cato Maior, who "preferred to be tossed about in these tempestuous waves into ripe old age rather than to live very pleasantly in that tranquility and leisure" (1.4) so eagerly sought by the Epicureans. But in framing this contrast as a choice between duty and self-indulgence, Cicero provides an extremely ungenerous characterization of the philosophic life of Epicureans. He portrays this life not as dedication to the life of the mind or even the pleasures of the mind, but simply as a desire "to live very pleasantly" (*iucundissime vivere*, 1.4) and a surrender to the "enticements of pleasure and leisure" (*blandimenta voluptatis otiique*, 1.1). By implying that Epicureans are lazy and live only for sensual enjoyments, he is hardly engaged in a good-will attempt to understand Epicurean philosophic ideals on their own terms (as by contrast he

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<sup>10</sup> Following the groundbreaking work of Arnaldo Momigliano's "Review of Benjamin Farrington: Science and Politics in the Ancient World," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 31 (1941): 149-57, recent scholarship has demonstrated how common it was for Roman Epicureans to participate in politics in the late Republic and beyond: see esp. Catherine J. Castner, *Prosopography of Roman Epicureans from the Second Century B.C. to the Second Century A.D.* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1988); Miriam Griffin, "Philosophers, Politics, and Politicians at Rome," *Philosophia Togata I: Essays on Philosophy and Roman Society*, eds. Griffin and Jonathan Barnes (New York: Clarendon Press, 1989) 1-37; "Piso, Cicero, and Their Audience," in *Cicéron et Philodème: la polémique en philosophie*, eds. Clara Auvray-Assayas and Daniel Delattre (Paris: Editions Rue d'Ulm, 2001), 85-100; David Sedley, "Philosophical allegiance in the Greco-Roman World," in *Philosophia Togata I*, 97-119; Yasmina Benferhat, *Cives Epicurei: Les épicuriens et l'idée de monarchie à Rome et en Italie de Sylla à Octave* (Bruxelles: Collection Latomus v. 292, 2005); Geert Roskam, *Live Unnoticed (Lathé Biosas): On the Vicissitudes of an Epicurean Doctrine* (Boston, MA and Leiden: Brill, 2007); Jeffrey Fish, "Not all politicians are Sisyphus: what Roman Epicureans were taught about politics," in *Epicurus and the Epicurean Tradition*, eds. Fish and Kirk R. Sanders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 72-104. However, on *Rep.* as an extended response to the philosophical views and way of life advocated by Lucretius in *De rerum natura*, see Emanuela Andreoni, "Sul contrasto ideologico fra il *De re publica* di Cicerone e il poema di Lucrezio (la genesi della società civile)," in *Studi di poesia latina in onore di Antonio Traglia* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e letteratura, 1979), 1:281-321. On Cicero's anti-Epicureanism in the prefaces of *Rep.* and the "Dream of Scipio," see J. Fontaine, "Le Songe de Scipion premier Anti-Lucrèce?" in *Mélanges de archéologie e d'histoire offerts à André Piganiol*, ed. Raymond Chevalier, 3 vols. (Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N., 1974), 3:1711-29); T. Maslowski, "The Chronology of Cicero's Anti-Epicureanism," *Eos* 62 (1974): 56-65; K. Büchner, *M. Tullius Cicero, De re publica: Kommentar* (Heidelberg: Winter Verlag, 1984); Cicero, *De Re Publica: Selections*, ed. Zetzel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) passim; Powell, *Laelius, On Friendship and The Dream of Scipio* (Warminster: Liverpool University Press, 1990); Zetzel, "De Re Publica and De Rerum Natura," in *Style and Tradition: Studies in Honor of Wendell Clausen*, eds. Peter Knox and Clive Foss (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1998), 237-44, Matthew Fox, *Cicero's Philosophy of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007): 105-6, Walter Englert, "Epicurean Philosophy in Cicero's De Republica: Serious Threat or Convenient Foil?" *Etica & Politica* 16, no. 2 (2014): 253-66.

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may be seen to do in *De Finibus* 1-2) and to show them where they err. Cicero's overall attitude toward Epicureans in this preface is one of contemptuous dismissal. As I shall argue in section B below, Cicero's general tendency in this preface not to engage with Epicurean ideas seriously or even to name them suggests that his attack on *voluptas* and *otium* are also intended for another, larger group who have nothing to do with philosophy of any kind, for whom sensuality and idleness have become chief pursuits instead of dedication to the Republic.<sup>11</sup>

However, despite the invective tone that pervades the preface of Book 1 as a whole, one passage in particular gives evidence of an attempt to convince Epicureans of the folly of their views on rational grounds. Here Cicero seems especially concerned to draw the minority of contemporary Epicureans who are actually abstaining from public life to the study of politics as a first step in the direction of political participation. Cicero confronts the Epicurean argument that the wise man will only engage in politics when compelled (*coegerit*) by a "crisis," a concept he clearly indicates by the hendiadys *tempus et necessitas* (1.10). But is this argument Epicurean? Some scholars have seen in this passage an attack not on Epicurean withdrawal, but on Socrates's argument in Plato's *Republic* that the philosopher will only return to the Cave of political life when compelled by a necessity (*anagke*).<sup>12</sup> However, it is clear that the notion of engaging only in a crisis has an Epicurean rather than Platonic tenor, for several reasons. First, while in Plato's *Republic* Socrates speaks of the need for some as yet undetermined form of compulsion or persuasive argument (7.520-521a),<sup>13</sup> the emphasis in Cicero is on dire political circumstances that compel participation. The initial occurrence of *tempus* (or Greek *kairos*) in the hendiadys underlines this sense, and when Cicero refers to this idea a bit later he speaks only of *tempora* by which the

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<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Zetzel, "De Re Publica and De Rerum Natura," 244, argues that "Epicurean attitudes, while useful as a focus of attack, were so absurd that their falseness could simply be assumed." He suggests that attacking Epicureanism was a foil providing Cicero the opportunity to present his own political ideals, especially in contrast to philosophers in general who believe the contemplative life is superior to the active life (237-38, 241-44). In fact, philosophers in general have often been assumed to be Cicero's target: see R. W. Sharples, "Cicero's Republic and Greek Political Theory," *Polis* 5, no. 2 (1986): 32-33, Zetzel, *De Re Publica: Selections*, and Norbert Blössner, *Cicero gegen die Philosophie: Eine Analyse von De re publica 1.1-3*. Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, Philologisch-Historische Klasse, no. 3. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001), 212-13, whose suggestion that Cicero viewed non-participating philosophers as the greatest threat to the Republic is quite an exaggeration.

<sup>12</sup> See Atkins, *Cicero on Politics and the Limits of Reason*, 35, who, having stated that the attack concerns Epicureans (28), suggests that the attitude condemned resembles the philosophers in Plato's *Republic* who will only rule out of necessity (citing Plato *Rep.* 520c in 35n66).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. 7.539e-540b6 and 1.346e-347d.

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philosopher would be compelled (*temporibus cogeretur*, 1.11).<sup>14</sup> Secondly, Cicero has already linked the notion of participation under necessity to the Epicureans by using similar language when he described how *those* people (*isti*) thought Cato the Elder a madman (*demens*) for engaging in politics “although no necessity compelled him” (*cum cogeret eum necessitas nulla*) and he could have enjoyed “a most pleasant life of tranquility and leisure” (*in illa tranquillitate atque otio iucundissime vivere*, 1.1). Third, Seneca tells us that Epicurus said “the wise man will not enter public life, except if something comes up” (*non accedet ad rem publicam sapiens, nisi si quid intervenerit*, *De Otio* 3.2).<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, in Plato’s *Republic*, even in the case of the philosophers who will have to be “compelled” to return to the Cave, they will have already gained prior political experience in Socrates’s program (7.539e2–540a4), but as Cicero proceeds with his argument, we see that philosophers in this context are criticized precisely on the grounds that they lack prior experience, and would thus be of no use to the state in a crisis. Cicero argues that participation in a crisis logically requires the prior pursuit of a political career, or at least political philosophy. An Epicurean who waits for a crisis to begin concerning himself with politics will neither be in a position to render aid without having previously gained some status in the state through a political career, nor sufficiently knowledgeable and experienced to deal effectively with a crisis even if suddenly offered political power. He illustrates the first part of this claim with rhetorical questions that refer to the example of his own career: could any greater emergency (*necessitas*) ever occur than the Catilinarian conspiracy that arose during his consulship? And how could he have helped the state if not for his status as consul, itself dependent on his previous pursuit of a political career? (1.10). Cicero’s own plan of life (*vitae cursus*, 1.10) shows that political ambition is necessary for the benefit of the community, since it leads to the acquisition of political experience and, in a regime with a democratic element such as Rome’s, to the possibility of gaining positions in which one can be of service to the state. The second part of his response catches Epicureans in a self-contradiction: they claim that knowledge of political affairs belongs only to those who have experience of them, yet they also put themselves forward as qualified to engage in politics in

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<sup>14</sup> When Cicero critiques Plato by name in *De Officiis* 1.28 for “thinking that they [philosophers] will engage in politics only if compelled to do so” (*eos ne ad rempublicam quidem accessuros putat nisi coactos*), Cicero makes no mention of a crisis (*tempus* or *tempus et necessitas*) but only of indeterminate compulsion (*coactos*).

<sup>15</sup> Both Cicero in *Off.* 1.28 and Seneca quoting Epicurus in *De Otio* 3.2 use the phrase *accedere ad rem publicam*, but Cicero pantomiming Plato has *nisi coactos* while Seneca’s Epicurus says *nisi si quid intervenerit*.

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a moment of crisis (1.11). The inevitable conclusion to be drawn, Cicero suggests, is the need of the philosopher to prepare himself for political service in the most crucial times by means of prior political experience in less turbulent circumstances (1.11).

In making the case that the philosopher needs political experience, Cicero is arguably inspired by Plato, as his response to Epicurean political indifference in matters of both theory and practice implicitly calls for a return to the study of political philosophy initiated by Plato and Socrates, the ultimate founder of the Greek philosophic schools (cf. *Rep.* 3.5). Plato's political philosophy in the *Republic* deals not only with the question of the best form of government but also with the question of the two lives, and explores the idea of the philosopher turned politician. Cicero could be seen as using Plato's *Republic* to correct Epicurus, since Socrates argued in the *Republic* that while it would indeed be desirable for philosophers to rule, his Guardian-philosophers should be required after their initial youthful education in philosophy to gain practical experience through involvement in administrative and military affairs from the age of thirty-five to fifty (7.539e2-540a4)<sup>16</sup> before the completion of their philosophic education and subsequent government of the entire city (7.540a4-b6). Admittedly, Roman readers not intimately familiar with Plato's writings, probably the vast majority, would not see Cicero pitting Plato against Epicurus in this context, naturally assuming from Cicero's emphasis on his own life that he is contrasting his own Roman practical-mindedness with Epicurean flights of theoretical fancy. But well-read Roman Epicureans very well could have recognized the implicit contrast between Epicurus's political teaching and Plato's reflections on philosophy and politics in his own *Republic*. Moreover, it is often assumed that Plato was hostile to the notion of pursuing a political career and that Cicero singles out Plato for criticism in this context, but in addition to the evidence against this assertion from the *Republic* itself, we should also consider the fact that Plato's students were very much active in politics.<sup>17</sup> In contrast to Epicurus, Plato understood

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<sup>16</sup> “After this you'll have to take them back down in to that cave again, and they'll have to take up military posts and other positions of command suitable for the young (καὶ ἀναγκαστέοι | ἄρχειν τά τε περὶ τὸν πόλεμον καὶ ὅσα νέων ἀρχαί) in order not to fall behind the rest in experience (ἐμπειρία)...’ ‘How long a time do you set for this?’ he asked. ‘Fifteen years,’ I said” (Plato, *Republic*, trans. Chris Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 1:197). For this point, see also Sedley, “Philosophical allegiance in the Greco-Roman World,” 271.

<sup>17</sup> See Glenn R. Morrow, *Plato's Cretan City: A Historical Interpretation of the Laws* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 7–9.

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that the philosopher would need practical experience to rule well, and he clearly held political life in high esteem.

Thus Cicero may be seen selectively drawing from Platonic philosophy such notions as he deems useful and applicable to the contemporary Roman situation. In this case, Cicero adopts the idea that a philosopher will be in a position to benefit the state as ruler only if, in addition to his superior philosophical outlook, he has also acquired some degree of political experience prior to assuming the highest positions in the state. While in Plato's *Republic* this idea was found in the context of a discussion about an imaginary city whose ultimate realization was portrayed as a near impossibility, in Cicero's *Republic* it is considered as applicable to the real world of the Roman republic. And so as the author of the preface of the first book, Cicero adopts the same practice as his character Scipio of embracing an idealized form of the real (cf. *Rep.* 2.21–22, 2.52).

Cicero's correction of the Epicureans by means of Plato is most pronounced, however, in the preface's invitation to the study of political philosophy. Cicero offers Epicureans an opportunity to become political even while still at leisure—they can begin seeking theoretical knowledge of political affairs as an important object of study prior to gaining the additional desideratum of practical experience: “I would think that the wise man should be especially careful not to neglect this science of political affairs, since he ought to prepare all things, since he cannot know whether he will at some point need to use them” (1.11).<sup>18</sup> Cicero follows up this exhortation based on logical considerations with an appeal to the authority of other philosophers:

If there are any who are moved by the authority (*auctoritate*) of philosophers, let them pay attention for a while and heed those whose authority (*auctoritas*) and glory among learned men are the greatest. In my view, even though some did not themselves administer the state (*rem publicam*), nevertheless, since they inquired and wrote a great deal about the state (*de re publica*), they have discharged a certain duty to the state (*rei publicae*) (*Rep.* 1.12).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Arbitraver hanc rerum civilium minime neglegendam scientiam sapienti, propterea quod omnia essent ei praeparanda, quibus nesciret an aliquando uti necesse esset.*

<sup>19</sup> *At tamen si qui sunt qui philosophorum auctoritate moveantur, dent operam parumper atque audiant eos quorum summa est auctoritas apud doctissimos homines et gloria; quos ego existimo, etiam si qui ipsi rem publicam non gesserint, tamen, quoniam de re publica multa quaesierint et scripserint, functos esse aliquo rei publicae munere.*

## CICERO'S RHETORIC OF PHILOSOPHICAL POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Through repetition of the terms *auctoritas* (twice) and *res publica* (thrice) in close proximity, Cicero builds up the prestige of political philosophers at the same time as he forges a strong connection between philosophy and politics in the mind of the Epicurean reader. In addition, Cicero subtly mingles his own authority with the authoritative example of these philosophers to promote the validity of political philosophy with the emphatic *ego existimo* which fronts the thought.

In these words, Cicero also implies to his learned Epicurean audience that the authoritative example of Plato among philosophers ought to lead them to reevaluate the place of politics in their studies. After all, what better description than the preceding could there be of Plato himself, who apart from attempts to serve as a philosophic adviser to Dionysius and Dion (on the testimony of the *Letters*), generally avoided participation in public life while nevertheless frequently thinking, writing, and teaching about politics? Admittedly, Cicero's use of the plural *eos* encourages the reader to think of multiple individuals, and commentators have suggested that Aristotle could also be placed in this category, and perhaps even Zeno the Stoic, who also wrote a *Republic*.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, the chief inspiration for the present work and its title is evidently Plato and his immortal *Republic*, not the Stoic Zeno or even Aristotle with his *Politics* or, among his exoteric works, the dialogue *On Justice*. Above all, Cicero proposes Plato, who was disengaged from political activity but active as a political thinker, as an authoritative Greek model for the imitation of philhellenic Roman Epicureans indifferent to the science of politics (*rerum civilium ... scientia*, 1.11).

Another important implication of Cicero's argument to the Epicureans about political philosophy is that he allows for a second-best form of political engagement, and in this regard Cicero presents himself to the Epicureans as a model for imitation. This concession was also a necessary part of Cicero's *apologia* for his policy at the time of generally avoiding politics in preference for leisure,<sup>21</sup> an answer to potential detractors who might decry him as a

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<sup>20</sup> In the catalog of his philosophic works at *Div* 2.3, Cicero himself suggests that he has Plato and the Peripatetics in mind in this passage, describing the subject of *Rep.* as follows: "a large topic, and a part of philosophy given a very rich treatment by Plato, Aristotle, Theophrastus, and the whole Peripatetic household" (*magnus locus, philosophiaeque proprius a Platone, Aristotele, Theophrasto totaque Peripateticorum familia tractatus uberrime*). Note that while the rhetorical emphasis of the passage seems to be on the Peripatetics, Plato nevertheless holds the first place.

<sup>21</sup> For Cicero's general avoidance of politics and public controversy at this time, see *Letters to Quintus* 3.5.4-5 (Oct. or Nov. 54 BC): "I really am drawing myself away from every political burden and am dedicating myself to literature ... and in sum, as you advise, I am completely turning to leisure and tranquility" (*abduco equidem me ab omni rei publicae*

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hypocrite for condemning Epicurean withdrawal while seeming to practice it himself. Cicero answers this charge in various ways throughout the work and simultaneously makes himself a model of modified political engagement, both in the preface and through his character and chief interlocutor Scipio. The first part of the answer occurs in the preface's argument for political philosophy, where we have seen him distinguish between two forms of civic responsibility: *ad rem publicam adire* and *aliquis rei publicae munus* (1.12).<sup>22</sup> At the end of the preface, it becomes obvious that Cicero is now chiefly practicing the latter form of engagement when he claims that his past experience in the former type should make him an authority as a political writer: "Since in my own case I have ended up attaining something worthy of being remembered in administering the state, and a certain ability for explaining the rationale of political affairs, I have turned out to be an authority not only because of experience but also by dint of enthusiasm for learning and teaching" (1.13).<sup>23</sup> Given the stranglehold on the state by the triumvirs Caesar, Pompey and Crassus at the time (54 BC), it is by writing on political affairs that Cicero himself engages in a second-best form of public service.<sup>24</sup>

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*cura dedoque litteris ... et in omni summa, ut mones, valde me ad otium pacemque convertito*). It was earlier in this same letter (3.5.1) that Cicero described his ongoing work on *De Re Publica*.

<sup>22</sup> Cicero also calls political philosophy a *munus* at 1.11 (cf. *rationes civitatis... id munus*), and uses the designation *rem publicam gerere* for active politics (1.11).

<sup>23</sup> *Quoniam nobis contigit ut idem et in gerenda re publica aliquid essemus memoria dignum consecuti, et in explicandis rationibus rerum civilium quandam facultatem, <evenit ut> non modo usu sed etiam studio discendi et docendi essemus auctores*. In this way Cicero rivals Plato and Aristotle, striving to outperform them by adding to the pursuit of political theory both the accomplishment of something significant as a statesman and the knowledge acquired by this practice, which in turn allow for a superior political theory; cf. Laelius' comments on Scipio's procedure at *Rep.* 2.21-22. See E. Asmis, "The Politician as Public Servant in Cicero's *De Re Publica*," in *Cicéron et Philodème*, 110-11, on Cicero's desire to improve upon his Greek predecessors as a political theorist. William H.F. Altman, *The Revival of Platonism in Cicero's Late Philosophy: Platonis Aemulus and the Invention of Cicero* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 1-3, commenting on Quintilian's claim that Cicero was *Platonis aemulus*, points to Cicero's embrace of active politics as his chief manner of rivalling Plato.

<sup>24</sup> Later on, in a letter written to Varro during his second period of forced leisure, Cicero was to establish this same rationale even more expressly for himself and his philosophic friends, adducing the authoritative practice of ancient Greek political theorists (*doctissimi veteres*; cf. *Rep.* 1.12, *quorum summa est auctoritas apud doctissimos homines*): "Only let this be fixed: to live together in our pursuits, from which before we sought only pleasure, but now also safety; not to fail, if someone wants to summon us, not only as architects, but also as builders for building up the republic, and rather, to respond to the summons with swiftness and joy; if no one should make use of our labor, nonetheless both to read and write "Republics" and, if less so in the senate house and the forum, then in letters and books, as the most learned of the ancients did, to devote ourselves to the republic and to explore questions about customs and laws" [*modo nobis stet illud, una vivere in studiis nostris, a quibus antea delectationem modo petebamus, nunc vero etiam salutem; non deesse si quis adhibere volet, non modo ut architectos verum etiam ut fabros, ad aedificandam rem publicam, et potius libenter accurrere; si nemo utetur opera, tamen et scribere et legere πολιτείας et, si minus in curia atque in foro, at in litteris et libris, ut doctissimi veteres fecerunt, navare rem publicam et de moribus ac legibus quaerere.*] (*Fam.* 9.2.5, trans. Yelena Baraz, *A Written Republic: Cicero's Philosophical Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press,

### B) PLEASURE-SEEKERS OR "EPICURES"

Given how few politically withdrawn men there were in Cicero's day even among the Epicureans, Cicero's attack on Epicureanism raises the suspicion that he has another target in mind. Epicurean quietists were a very small portion of his reading audience in comparison with contemporary Romans who were holding back from courageous action on behalf of republican government out of fear or self-interest rather than philosophic principle, but whom it would not be diplomatic to name directly.<sup>25</sup> By means of a phony war of words against Epicurean philosophers, Cicero tries to get these men to look at themselves in the mirror and see themselves as Epicureans, to see themselves in the people being condemned, thus tactfully avoiding naming them directly. This strategy also plays to their anti-philosophic prejudices, and accounts in large part for Cicero's polemical case for the inferiority of the philosopher to the politician in the preface of a philosophic work. Since these men are not particularly inclined to the intellectual life—they are not among "those moved by the authority of philosophers" (1.12)—Cicero seeks to move them to political action through appeals to the traditional Roman cultural code, principally Roman manliness—the original and traditional meaning of *virtus*—and generous patriotism framed as the fulfillment of duty toward one's country.

#### 1) APPEALS TO ROMAN *VIRTUS*

Cicero shames this audience by implicitly imputing cowardice to them and recalling them to the courage shown by the *maiores*. We are missing the first part of the preface as it has come down to us, but when it picks up we find Cicero enumerating brave military feats by great Romans of the past followed by the domestic political activity of Cato Maior amidst the storms of domestic politics (1.1). In describing Cato's rejection of private ease for public life, Cicero draws a contrast between the pursuit of one's own health and that of the republic. Cato could have "enjoyed himself in leisure at Tusculum, a health-giving (*salubri*) place

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2012), 84). For commentary on this passage, see Baraz, 84–86 and Leah Kronenberg, *Allegories of Farming from Greece and Rome: Philosophical Satire in Xenophon, Varro, and Virgil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 89.

<sup>25</sup> In taking on this audience, Cicero repeats one of his strategies from the speech *Pro Sestio* given in 56 BC: see esp. sections 23 and 138. The existence of such men can be divined from that same speech (delivered just two years before Cicero began composing *De Re Publica*) in which he lamented that "the good are for some reason more slow to act, and having neglected the beginnings of developments are ultimately stirred to action at the last moment by dint of necessity itself" (*Sest.* 100).

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nearby,”<sup>26</sup> but instead he decided to follow the way of “countless *viros*,” “each of whom proved to be a cause of this community’s well-being (*saluti*)” (1.1). Note the use of the gendered *viros* (cognate with *virtus*) as opposed to mere *homines* to describe these manly Romans who pursued public life.<sup>27</sup> Those who criticize Cato as a madman are designated with the nicely indeterminate *isti*, usually thought to indicate Epicureans or philosophers in general who prefer the contemplative to the active life. Indeed, *isti* does refer to both these groups, but the relatively small number of such individuals in late Republican Rome suggests Cicero may be using these easy targets to speak to others as well. In particular, the example of Cato’s avoidance of his villa at Tusculum stands out for its resonance with Cicero’s frequent complaint in the letters to Atticus from the early 50s about the “fish-pond hatchers” who avoid political conflict in the senate by retreating to their villas, probably including aristocratic *optimates* such as Lucullus and Hortensius; Lucullus is even known to have had such a villa at Tusculum itself. Cicero may also have such aristocrats in mind when he exhorts the reader not to listen to those who sound the trumpet to retreat, but to “hold fast to the course that has always been followed by every excellent man” (*teneamus eum cursum qui semper fuit optimi cuiusque*) (1.3). Although *optimus quisque* seems to refer to the aristocratic class that traditionally gave the state its leaders, Cicero intends to expand the group designated by this term to include “new men” of the equestrian class, in accordance with Cato’s example and his own.<sup>28</sup> For when introducing Cato, Cicero describes him as (1.1) “a new man, and unknown (by whom all of us who are intent on the same matters are led, as by an exemplar, to hard work and manliness).”<sup>29</sup>

The imagined objection that political involvement will lead to suffering creates the image of a reader who has withdrawn from politics due to a lack of manly courage. Once again, the identity of the critics who supposedly advance this objection is deliberately left vague; they are simply “those who argue the contrary” of what Cicero has said up to this point (1.4).<sup>30</sup>

This indeterminacy allows Cicero to address any reader with similar thoughts, whether this

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<sup>26</sup> *licuit Tusculi se in otio delectare, salubri et propinquo loco.*

<sup>27</sup> *innumerable viros, quorum singuli saluti civitati huic fuerunt.*

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *Sest.* 136: “And you, young men ... together with [the nobles], I exhort you, who can obtain nobility by your character and virtue, to pursue the way of life (*ratio*) in which many *new men* have prospered with both honor and glory.”

<sup>29</sup> *homini ignoto et novo (quo omnes qui eisdem rebus studemus quasi exemplari ad industriam virtutemque ducimur).* For a study of the concept of *virtus*, see Myles McDonnell, *Roman Manliness: Virtus and the Roman Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>30</sup> *qui contra disputant.*

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reader is inclined to philosophy or not. This particular critic is said to argue against participation in public life because of its labors and risks to one's personal safety. The mere formulation of these objections, so contrary to the ideal of manly courage that was part and parcel of the *mos maiorum*, is meant to cast shame on whoever might agree with them, and Cicero adds to the humiliating effect by interrupting to point out the cowardice inherent in such thoughts even as he formulates them:

Reasons opposed by those who argue the contrary are first, the labors which must be undergone in defending the state—a light burden, of course, for anyone responsible and hard-working, and which ought to be despised not only in such great political matters as these but also in ordinary pursuits or duties or even business affairs; to this the dangers to one's life are added, and a base fear of death is opposed by these people to brave men—to whom it normally appears a more miserable thing to waste away in the natural course of old age than to be given an occasion to give up their life for their fatherland, as opposed to giving it up to nature, which they would have had to do anyway (*Rep.* 1.4).<sup>31</sup>

The validity of these objections is undermined by the commentary Cicero embeds within the passage, establishing political engagement as the responsibly hard-working (*vigilanti et industrio*), courageous (*fortibus*), manly (*viris*), patriotic (*pro patria potissimum reddere*), and magnanimous (*vitam quae tamen esset reddenda naturae*) thing to do. A contrast is drawn with the envisioned reader, whose hesitation over labor or danger is depicted as the mark of an indolent, cowardly, effeminate, self-absorbed, and petty-minded person. Most of these contrasting characteristics are implicit, but one of them, cowardice, is expressly stated when Cicero refers to “a base fear” (*turpis formido*) of death. The choice of *formido* for “fear” (rather than *timor* or *metus*) also forms a nice contrast with *fortibus viris* (“brave men”) which follows.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *His rationibus tam certis tamque illustribus opponuntur ab eis qui contra disputant, primum labores qui sint re publica defendenda sustinendi—leve sane impedimentum vigilantibus et industrio, neque id solum in tantis rebus sed etiam in mediocribus vel studiis vel officiis vel vero etiam negotiis contemnendum; adiunguntur pericula vitae, turpisque ab his formido mortis fortibus viris opponitur: quibus magis id miserum videri solet, natura se consumi et senectute, quam sibi dari tempus ut possint eam vitam quae tamen esset reddenda naturae, pro patria potissimum reddere.*

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *Tusc.* 4.19, where Cicero relates Stoic distinctions between different kinds of fear: “they define ... ‘*formido*’ as a lasting fear” (*definiunt... formidinem metum permanentem*). Cicero’s dismissal of the fear of death repeats an idea from the *Pro Sestio*, that the brave man, realizing that everyone is destined to die eventually, considers it more miserable to endure old age than to give his life bravely for his country (*Sest.* 47).

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### 2) APPEALS TO ROMAN *PIETAS*

In addition to the tactic of shaming the non-participating, non-philosophic Roman reader for lacking the manliness displayed by his ancestors, Cicero also exhorts this reader to public service by appealing to his sense of *pietas*. He calls for imitation of the *mos maiorum* and advances the view that political involvement is a duty owed in justice to the *patria*. One way he appeals to Roman tradition is by adducing the example of previous Roman statesmen.<sup>33</sup> For instance, when the extant portion of the preface to the first book begins, we find Cicero accumulating the names of those who served Rome by fighting against Carthage (1.1). Cicero clarifies the lesson to be derived from their example in the exhortation “let us hold to the course which has always been followed by every excellent man (*optimi cuiusque*)” (1.3).

A second aspect of Cicero’s appeal to the non-philosophic reader’s sense of *pietas* consists in arguments that encourage this reader’s feelings of patriotism. Cicero suggests that we owe public service as a form of repayment to the *patria* in exchange for its having given us birth and education (1.8). Cicero engages in an extended metaphor: the *patria* is personified as a father who, having begotten his children, educated them, and provided them with peace and safety, is owed support in return (*alimenta*). The argument relies on unspoken assumptions about the obligation of children to care for their parents in old age. This sense of *pietas* toward one’s parents, particularly one’s father, was especially strong in Roman culture. Furthermore, since an inclination to love one’s parents is something natural and pre-rational—we love our parents simply because they are ours—portraying Rome as a parent has the effect of stirring up natural feelings of love simply because Rome is the reader’s home country.<sup>34</sup>

## II. DRAWING ROMAN POLITICIANS TO PHILOSOPHIC STATESMANSHIP

But the majority of arguments for political engagement in the preface of *De Re Publica* give the impression of being addressed to elites already engaged in politics and intent on gaining distinction, or, among the very young, those intent on the same purpose. The primary purpose of the preface and of *De Re Publica* more generally thus emerges as the encouragement not of mere political engagement—a notion that requires no justification to

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<sup>33</sup> On Cicero’s use of the *maiores* as *exempla* more generally, see Henriette van der Blom, *Cicero’s Role Models: The Political Strategy of a Newcomer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 61–148.

<sup>34</sup> Similar appeals to *pietas* toward one’s ancestors and the fatherland are found in the “Dream of Scipio.”

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the majority of his contemporary readers—but of a particular form of public involvement characterized by individual moral restraint in the pursuit of the public good.

It is by promoting philosophy that Cicero aims to create a morally reformed ruling class. This promotion of philosophy has two sides. One aspect is the promotion of contemplative pursuits in general, encouraging readers to study philosophy in their leisure time in tandem with public life, a project Cicero takes up in the body of the work itself.<sup>35</sup> The other aspect is already evident in the preface of the first book, and consists in Cicero's promotion of specific ethical doctrines drawn from Greek philosophy on the basis of which he encourages the reader to engage in politics. Cicero thus strives to imbue the reader with higher motives for participating in politics that are meant to supplement and ultimately replace traditional Roman motives such as the pursuit of glory, manliness, and patriotism.

What I particularly wish to bring to light is just how subtle Cicero's rhetorical strategy is. He achieves his aims incrementally, and without pursuing them too openly lest he lose the sympathy of this segment of his audience. Indeed, his rhetoric proves a classic example of *ars celans artem*. Scholars have been misled by Cicero's pose of hostility toward philosophy in the preface of *De Re Publica*.<sup>36</sup> Doubtless, Cicero does not call for full-time dedication to philosophy, which is to remain an occupation of leisure, and yet his goal is to bring statesmen to pursue public life for ethical motives derived from philosophy, and ultimately to embrace philosophic pursuits as an essential complement to their public activity. At the time he was writing from 54–51 BC, with the Roman Republic at the mercy of a developing rivalry between Caesar and Pompey and hurtling toward civil war, the moderating influence of the

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. 5n.

<sup>36</sup> Many have claimed that Cicero argues for a complete rejection of philosophy in favor of politics: see E. de Saint-Denis, "La théorie cicéronienne de la participation aux affaires publiques," *Revue de philologie* 12 (1938): 193–215; Olof Gigon, *Die antike Philosophie als Massstab und Realität* (München: Artemis-Verlag, 1977), 275–315; Büchner, *M. Tullius Cicero*, 79–94, 265–77; Blössner, *Cicero gegen die Philosophie*; Fox, *Cicero's Philosophy of History*, 105–10; Silvia Gastaldi, "Vita politica e vita philosophica nei proemi del De republica di Cicerone," *Etica & Politica* 16, no. 2 (2014): 379–94. For a more balanced position that argues Cicero seeks to unite political and philosophic life and to justify the proper place of each, see Eckart Schütrumpf, "Cicero's View on the Merits of a Practical Life in De republica 1: What is Missing? A Comparison with Plato and Aristotle," *Etica & Politica* 17, no. 2 (2014): 395–411; A. Grilli, *I proemi del De re publica di Cicerone* (Brescia: Paideia editrice, 1971); C. Lévy, "Philosophical Life versus Political Life: An Impossible Choice for Cicero?" in *Cicero's Practical Philosophy*, ed. Nicgorski (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press), 58–78; Atkins, *Cicero on Politics and the Limits of Reason*, 27–31; Zarecki, *Cicero's Ideal Statesman*, 31–34.

philosophic life and of moral philosophy on political ambition had never been more needful for Rome.<sup>37</sup>

#### A) DEVALUING PHILOSOPHY: A RHETORICAL STRATEGY OF ETHOS

In addition to the goals I have already described in Cicero's attack on Epicureans and epicures in the preface, this attack serves a parallel but different rhetorical purpose in its address to the class of readers I am now considering, namely Romans prejudiced against philosophy. To gain this reader's good will, Cicero begins with a rhetorical strategy of ethos, intentionally giving the impression of being hostile to philosophy himself. In a general comparison of the value of philosophy and statesmanship, he repeatedly suggests that the former is inferior (*Rep.* 1.2-3, 10-11). But this is in fact a *captatio benevolentiae* to put the majority of his reading audience at ease. In her analysis of the cultural context in which Cicero embarked on a more comprehensive philosophic project in the 40s BC, Yelena Baraz has shown that a significant portion of Roman readers found philosophy objectionable as a pursuit.<sup>38</sup> Baraz analyzed the prefaces of the 40s for Cicero's strategies for winning over his readers to the validity of philosophy as a pursuit. Cicero has to deal the same problem in the preface of his first philosophic work; but unlike the prefaces of the 40s, where this concern is more openly acknowledged,<sup>39</sup> in *De Re Publica* Cicero's first step in promoting philosophy is to seem to attack it.

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<sup>37</sup> On this effect of the philosophic life, see *Rep.* 1.16-29. In *A Written Republic*, Baraz treats Cicero's justification of philosophic activity in the philosophic works of the 40s BC, and she posits a fundamental difference in attitude toward philosophy in the works of the 50s BC, suggesting that in *De Re Publica* and other works written in the 50s BC, Cicero took the position that philosophy was of "limited utility" (17). Likewise, Perelli, *Il pensiero politico di Cicerone: tra filosofia greca e ideologia aristocratica romana* (Florence: Bibliotheca di cultura 170, 1990), argues that Cicero allows no serious place for the influence of philosophy on the Roman regime, since Cicero was simply seeking to restore the aristocratic republican regime of Scipio's time (though Perelli sees an exception to this attitude in the preface of Book 3). By contrast, Zetzel, *Cicero: On the Commonwealth and On the Laws* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), xi, suggests the rationale for my approach: "Cicero's project in the 50s [was] an attempt ... to provide a more rigorous philosophical model for Roman public behavior and institutions than had previously existed." Thus in the 50s BC, Cicero embarked on a project to improve Roman politics through philosophy that he would eventually pursue on a larger scale in the 40s.

<sup>38</sup> Baraz discusses the widespread prejudice against philosophy in Rome at 3-4 and 13-22. Cf. Griffin, "Philosophers, Politics, and Politicians at Rome," 18-22; I. Gildenhard, *Paideia Romana: Cicero's Tusculan Disputations. Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society, Supplementary Vol. 30.* (Cambridge: The Cambridge Philological Society, 2007), 7-83, and Atkins, *Cicero on Politics and the Limits of Reason*, 29-31.

<sup>39</sup> See the prefaces of *Fin.* 1 and *Tusc.* 2. A longer rebuttal of philosophy's detractors was apparently to be found in the *Hortensius* (cf. *Tusc.* 2.4).

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Cicero adopts a pose of hostility to philosophy in order to give the impression that this work will maintain a thoroughly traditional, Roman focus on political and pragmatic issues. For example, as we have seen, Cicero uses his typical anti-Epicurean terminology to suggest that philosophy is a self-indulgent, private activity that neglects public duties (*in illa tranquillitate atque otio iucundissime vivere*, 1.1). But as I have argued, this passage can also be seen, and is indeed used, as a criticism of withdrawal from politics for any number of reasons, without necessarily referring to philosophy. So Cicero proceeds to make a more obvious criticism of philosophers as such, suggesting that their conversations about virtue lack practical effectiveness in comparison with the action of the politician. “Those people” merely “make noise” about virtue in their corners (*isti in angulis personant*, 1.2), while statesmen lead citizens to the practice of virtue by establishing an educational regimen, customs, and laws (1.2). Cicero has slightly adapted a line from Plato’s *Gorgias* uttered by Callicles (485d),<sup>40</sup> who gives perhaps the single greatest indictment of philosophy in the Western tradition prior to Nietzsche. Adopting the persona of the notoriously anti-Socratic and hard-headed Callicles serves to strengthen Cicero’s strategy of ethos, increasing the Roman reader’s confidence that Cicero shares typical Roman concerns about the uselessness of philosophy. At the same time, Cicero’s allusion to Callicles might signal to readers favorable to philosophy that he is not being entirely honest about his own views. Sending a subtle message to fellow learned readers that he, the politically active Cicero, has read his Plato, would seem to undercut his supposed contempt for philosophy as something useless.

His argument for the superiority of statesmanship to philosophy starts from the premise that while other arts or skills are constituted by being known, virtue consists entirely in its being put into practice or “use” (1.2).<sup>41</sup> This premise is later echoed in similar language by Laelius, a character whom Cicero often uses to articulate the anti-philosophic prejudices of the sort of reader he wants to reach: “[Learning] the theoretical subjects which make us useful

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<sup>40</sup> Zetzel, *Cicero: De Re Publica*, 99, notes a contrast: “whereas in Plato Callicles’ philosopher is ‘whispering’ in the corner, C.’s opponents are here speaking loudly.”

<sup>41</sup> “Although an art of which one makes no use can still be retained by one’s very knowledge of it, virtue lies entirely in its use” (*Etsi ars quidem, cum ea non utare, scientia tamen ipsa teneri potest, virtus in usu sui tota posita est*, 1.2). Significantly, Cicero will go on to contradict this argument and suggest that virtue can indeed be known prior to being put into practice in the preface of Book 3. The argument is also implicit here in the preface of Book 1, though in a very subtle form.

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to the city: I think that this is ... the greatest proof or duty of virtue” (1.33).<sup>42</sup> Cicero adds the example of the Academic Xenocrates, who in effect admitted that he was only able to lead a few people to virtue: “They say that even Xenocrates, a noble philosopher and among the best, when asked what his students were learning, answered ‘to do of their own free will what they were compelled to do by the laws’” (1.3).<sup>43</sup> Cicero concludes that the statesman’s superiority is manifest, given his ability to “compel everyone by the power of his office and by the threat of punishment held out by the laws to do what the philosophers by their words are scarcely able to persuade a few people to do” (1.3).<sup>44</sup> Cicero strengthens his persona as a traditionalist Roman who views philosophers with contempt by quoting from Ennius, the authoritative epic poet of Roman tradition: “For my part, just as I think that ‘great and powerful cities,’ as Ennius calls them, should be esteemed more than villages and forts, so in my view those who preside over these cities by their wisdom and authority ought to be counted as far superior in wisdom itself compared with those who lack experience of every public affair” (*Rep.* 1.3).<sup>45</sup>

In this comparison, Cicero is affecting contempt for philosophers, whom he likens to rural backwaters in comparison with grand cities, who stand for statesmen. Furthermore, based on the analogy, the implicit point of comparison between the two lives seems to be the amount of fame one can achieve. Since traditionalist Romans esteemed fame and glory as unquestionable markers of worth, Cicero cleverly works in this appeal to their prejudices as well. From an analogy that concerns size and fame, Cicero squeezes out the baseless conclusion that statesmen are wiser than philosophers. It is indeed plausible that statesmen are wiser in terms of the arts of governance, but not necessarily in every respect: experience in government does not presuppose or imply acquaintance with all other branches of

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<sup>42</sup> *[Discendas] eas artes quae efficiant ut usui civitati simus; id enim esse... maximumque virtutis vel documentum vel officium puto.* A bit earlier than this remark, Laelius comes across as even more obviously Calliclean than the Ciceronian persona of the preface in positing a hard line of separation between philosophy as youthful education and politics as the occupation of a man: “As for those little arts of yours, if they have any value, it’s that they sharpen somewhat and (if you will) stimulate the minds of boys, so that they can in turn learn greater matters more easily” [*istae quidem artes, si modo aliquid, valent ut paulum acuant et tanquam irritent ingenia puerorum, quo facilius possint maiora discere.*] (1.30; cf. Plato *Gorgias* 485cd).

<sup>43</sup> *Quin etiam Xenocratem ferunt, nobilem in primis philosophum, cum quaereretur ex eo quid adsequerentur eius discipuli, respondisse, ‘ut id sua sponte facerent, quod cogerentur facere legibus.’*

<sup>44</sup> *Qui id cogit omnes imperio legumque poena quod vix paucis persaudere oratione philosophi possunt...*

<sup>45</sup> *Equidem quemadmodum ‘urbes magnas et imperiosas’, ut appellat Ennius, viculis et castellis praeferendas puto, sic eos qui his urbibus consilio atque auctoritate praesunt, eis qui omnis negotii publici expertes sint longe duco sapientia ipsa esse anteponendos.*

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theoretical and practical knowledge. Cicero's claim only works if one unduly restricts the meaning of wisdom to experiential knowledge of government, as Cicero does here.

All these arguments assuredly do demonstrate the necessity of statesmanship and political life and the inadequacy of philosophy by itself to change the world, but that is not their primary purpose vis-à-vis Cicero's anti-philosophic readers, who need no persuading in this regard. The purpose they serve for this kind of reader is rather a certain reassurance that the author shares their prejudices. They are made to feel that the work they have begun to read entitled *De Re Publica* will not be a purely theoretical or "Greek" investigation into political questions. Indeed, Cicero's need to do this is all the greater if, in fact, as textual scholars generally hold, he had stated earlier in this same preface to the first book that he was "Plato's companion regarding the state" (Pliny *NH praef.* 22).<sup>46</sup> If this placement of the fragment is correct, Cicero would need to convince his anti-philosophic audience that this initial declaration of allegiance to Plato still leaves the author Cicero firmly in the Roman camp on the side of practical experience and political involvement by contrast with Plato and Socrates. The preface's elevation of politics and denigration of philosophy forms part of an exercise in persuasion by means of ethos: it contributes to Cicero's crafting of a persona that this portion of his audience would find sympathetic and likeable.<sup>47</sup>

The rhetorical employment of authorial ethos is even more evident in Cicero's portrayal of himself in the preface. He is careful to appear eminently political and interested in philosophy only inasmuch as it is centered on political questions. First, he calls attention to his identity as a prominent Roman statesman. He refers to his own consulship, exile, and

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<sup>46</sup> The whole testimonium reads: *non Tulliana simplicitate, qui de re publica Platonis comitem se profitetur*. Esther Bréguet, *Cicéron: La République*, 2 vols (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1980), Fr. 1.3, K. Ziegler, *M. Tulli Ciceronis Scripta Quae Manserunt Omnia*, Fasc. 39, *De Re Publica* (Stuttgart: Bibliotheca Teubneriana, 1969), Fr. 1.1b, and M. Pohlenz, "Cicero De Re Publica als Kunstwerk," in *Festschrift R. Reitzenstein*, eds. E. Fraenkel and H. Fränkel (Leipzig and Berlin, 1931), 70-105, assign the fragment to the preface of *Rep.* 1. The most recent editor, Powell, *M. Tulli Ciceronis: De Re Publica, De Legibus, Cato Maior de Senectute, Laelius de Amicitia* (Oxford: Bibliotheca Oxoniensis, 2006), declines to take a position himself, simply listing the passage among the *Testimonia, Apud alios auctores*, 17 (see 369).

<sup>47</sup> In a similar way, Cicero will later present his alter-ego Scipio as initially denigrating the theoretical speculation of Greek philosophers who lacked the political experience of Romans (1.36). And yet it turns out that it is not such theoretical speculation that Scipio rejects, but rather the method used by the Greeks: Scipio states that Plato's abstract speculation did in fact illustrate the principles of political affairs. What Scipio professes to find faulty in Plato is his method of using an imaginary state to illustrate those principles; he will "cap" Plato by using the concrete example of a real state to illustrate the same principles. Thus Scipio actually reproduces the theoretical speculation of Plato regarding political matters, but by means of a different method. See Nicgorski, "Cicero's Focus: from the Best Regime to the Model Statesman," *Political Theory* 19, no. 2 (May 1991): 235-36, Atkins, "Cicero on the Relationship between Plato's Republic and Laws," 25-29, and Powell, "Cicero's Reading of Plato's Republic," 51-56, in *Ancient Approaches to Plato's Republic*, ed. Anne Sheppard (London: University of London, 2013).

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return (1.6-7) and alludes to his illustrious accomplishments in general (1.13). Secondly, he is careful to fashion his authorship of the present work on a political subject as having the same moral value as engagement in politics. He sets forth the idea that those who have written about politics have also performed a useful service to the state (1.12). Cicero then presents himself as uniquely qualified to serve the state in this way due to the knowledge he has acquired through both theory and practice (1.13).<sup>48</sup> Cicero thus claims to excel other political writers inasmuch as his work will be informed by his own real-world political experience. Therefore, in crafting his persona as a writer, Cicero emphasizes his identity as a man of practical experience. This authorial persona, coupled with the reassuring criticisms of philosophers, helps Cicero win the traditionalist reader's confidence and trust. It also misleads this reader into thinking that the work is concerned exclusively with politics. It disarms him in the face of Cicero's insinuation of philosophy's value and of the value of specific philosophic doctrines.

### **B) PROMOTING—AND DISGUIISING—MOTIVES DRAWN FROM THE STOICS AND PLATO**

Even as he attacks philosophy as politically ineffective and gives the impression of being a Roman traditionalist, Cicero subtly promotes motives for political involvement derived from Greek philosophy. In this section, I will show that Cicero draws on Stoic ideas to assert that there is a natural human impulse to practice *virtus*, and that he also includes the Platonic motives of fulfilling a debt owed in justice to the country that gave us our education, and of engaging in politics in order to avoid the penalty of being ruled by bad men.<sup>49</sup> Cicero thus strives to transcend and replace traditional Roman motives for political involvement. The genius of Cicero's method lies first in the way he embeds these arguments in the context of an extended polemic against philosophers, and secondly, in the suggestive, and indeed deceptive, association of these motives with the *mos maiorum*. This strategy allows him to associate the authority of tradition with concepts that are derived from Greek thought and thus foreign to the Roman ethos.

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<sup>48</sup> Cf. 19n.

<sup>49</sup> Asmis, "The Politician as Public Servant in Cicero's *De Re Publica*," focuses on Cicero's opposition of Stoic to Epicurean ideals in the following passages. Certainly Cicero prefers Stoicism for its greater compatibility with Roman ideals of public service in general, but I am arguing that the more fundamental contrast at work is Cicero's opposition of Stoic and Platonic ideals to the traditional Roman aspiration of gaining *gloria* through *virtus*.

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Cicero's general strategy for inculcating conviction in these philosophic ideas involves disguising the philosophic provenance of these very arguments by incorporating them into a highly rhetorical passage that reads more like invective oratory than a philosophic treatise.<sup>50</sup> He begins by making an argument that is loosely based on Stoic *oikeiosis* theory, according to which human beings have a natural social impulse. This impulse is manifested in the desire to care for others in ascending order, starting with one's own offspring and family relations, branching out toward fellow citizens, and ultimately extending to the whole human race.<sup>51</sup> In keeping with these Stoic ideas, Cicero grounds public service in man's natural inclinations and suggests that the great Roman statesmen of the past were impelled by nature to perform their services to the state rather than out of desire for prestige. Having named several such individuals from previous generations, he says he could name others from more recent times but will refrain from doing so lest he give anyone cause to complain that family members have been overlooked (1.1). This catalogue is concluded with the following authoritative assertion: "I lay down only this: that so great a necessity for virtue has been given to the human race by nature, and so great a love for defending the well-being of the community, that this force has overcome all the seductive charms of pleasure and ease" (*Rep.* 1.1).<sup>52</sup>

By placing this statement of principle at the end of a list of Roman statesmen, Cicero implies that the *maiores* were motivated to perform their services to Rome by a natural impulse. He appropriates their authoritative example and colors it with ethical motives derived from Stoicism. There is no mention of ambition for glory and fame, which surely were among the prime motives of so many public men.<sup>53</sup> While the content of *virtus* is still in line with the Roman ideal of courageously taking on the burden of public service for "the well-being of the community," this service has been sundered from its traditional motive. Instead, there is supposedly an overwhelming inclination to *virtus* and an *amor* for defending the state that arise from nature (*a natura*).

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<sup>50</sup> On Cicero's view of the philosophic style as milder in tone than the contentiousness of public orations, see *Leg.* 1.11.

<sup>51</sup> Cicero places a more detailed account of this theory in the mouth of Cato in *De Finibus* 3.

<sup>52</sup> *Unum hoc definitio: tantam esse necessitatem virtutis generi hominum a natura tantamque amorem ad communem salutem defendendam datum, ut ea vis omnia blandimenta voluptatis otique vicerit.*

<sup>53</sup> See Blössner, *Cicero gegen die Philosophie*, 232–36, for commentary on this passage. He contrasts the motive Cicero offers here, a natural *necessitas virtutis*, with the traditional glory motive Cicero openly espouses in *Pro Archia* 28–29, and with the argument based on a firm hope of immortality at *Tusc.* 1.32–33. There is of course to be found also in *Rep.* an argument for engagement based on immortality, especially in the Dream.

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These inclinations and sentiments are therefore universal and not limited to Rome. Cicero proceeds to amplify these notions: “And since we are seized most of all by an enthusiasm to increase the resources of the human race, and to render human life safer and more prosperous by our prudent efforts—and we are stirred to this resolve by the goads of nature itself—let us hold fast to the course that has always been followed by every excellent man...” (*Rep.* 1.3).<sup>54</sup> This time, nature is practically personified as a driver holding the reins with which he urges an animal forward. Human beings are seized (*rapimur*) by an innate enthusiasm (*studemus*). With these expressions, Cicero argues for a natural human passion for serving the public. Cicero is evidently developing the earlier claim that nature has implanted in mankind an *amor* for public service. But significantly, the object of this passion is not one’s own glory, but the advantage of one’s fellow man. The advantage in question is specified as safety and prosperity, which are then expanded by their application to human beings in general (*generis humani ... vitam hominum*). Scholars have suggested that Cicero is arguing here for Stoic cosmopolitanism, but this is debatable, since the purpose of the universalizing terms could simply be to establish the claim that the inclination to public service is natural and common to all human beings.<sup>55</sup> In any case, Cicero is promoting an altruistic ideal of public service based on Stoic ideas.<sup>56</sup> One should act for the benefit of others in accordance with nature’s dictates, a principle that replaces the traditional Roman view of public service as a means to the private good of personal glory. While, as in the first passage, this replacement is disguised by the insinuation that Roman statesmen have traditionally acted on the basis of such altruistic motives, in the second passage quoted above, an artificial connection between Stoic ideas and the *mos maiorum* is forged by the concluding exhortation to imitate the examples of the past. This exhortation employs the traditional language of Roman politics to suggest that the state’s aristocratic leaders (*optimus quisque*) have always (*semper*) adhered to the altruistic vision just described.

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<sup>54</sup> *et quoniam maxime rapimur ad opes augendas generis humani, studemusque nostris consiliis et laboribus tutiorem et opulentiorum vitam hominum reddere, et ad hanc voluntatem ipsius naturae stimulis incitamus, teneamus eum cursum qui semper fuit optimi cuiusque...*

<sup>55</sup> For studies of Cicero’s cosmopolitanism, see Eric Brown, “Stoic Cosmopolitanism and the Political Life,” PhD diss. (University of Chicago, 1997); Thomas Pangle, “Socratic cosmopolitanism: Cicero’s critique and transformation of the Stoic ideal,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 31, no. 2 (June 1998): 235-62; Asmis, “The Politician as Public Servant in Cicero’s *De Re Publica*”; Melanie Subacus, “*Duae Patriae*: Cicero and Political Cosmopolitanism in Rome,” PhD diss. (New York University, 2015).

<sup>56</sup> For this interpretation, see Asmis, “The Politician as Public Servant in Cicero’s *De Re Publica*,” *passim*.

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Cicero's notion of public service as the fulfillment of a natural impulse to defend the community shines forth even more clearly in the contrast between this preface and his public speech *Pro Sestio* on the question of exile. To illustrate the principles just laid down in the preface of *De Re Publica* (i.e., a natural impulse to virtue and to love of the community), Cicero confronts an objection to public service that alleges the labors and anxieties that inevitably attach to it (1.4-6). Just as in *Pro Sestio*, Cicero here anticipates an objection based on the possibility of exile at the hands of an ungrateful citizenry, but whereas in that speech he was eager to promise the rewards of glory before one's contemporaries and with posterity, here at the outset of *Rep.* he tries to detach the reader from such motives and expectations. In a list of statesmen who suffered exile or rejection at the hands of an ungrateful citizenry, Themistocles and Opimius<sup>57</sup> again make their appearance, but he lists many more Romans than he did in *Pro Sestio*: "the exile of Camillus, or the unpopularity of Ahala, or the hatred against Nasica, or the expulsion of Laenas, or the condemnation of Opimius, or the flight of Metellus, or the most bitter fall of Gaius Marius" (1.6).<sup>58</sup>

Cicero thus readily admits, unlike in *Pro Sestio*, that when it comes to statesmanship, no good deed goes unpunished, and suggests that his readers should not expect glory and gratitude but rather public humiliation and rejection. Nor does he mitigate the suffering of these public figures by pointing out that they were eventually vindicated, whether during their own lifetime or with posterity.<sup>59</sup> While he does point out that he himself ultimately garnered glory from his exile and return and could console himself with the thought that good citizens appreciated his efforts (1.7), unlike in *Pro Sestio* he admits that this "happy ending" was in no way guaranteed,<sup>60</sup> and insists that he would have been satisfied even if things had turned out differently: "But even if, as I said before, it had turned out differently, how could I complain, since nothing happened to me that was unforeseen or more serious than I had

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<sup>57</sup> For analysis of Cicero's use of Opimius as an exemplum in his corpus as a whole, see van der Blom, *Cicero's Role Models*, 208-13; on Themistocles and other Greek exiles, see 213-16.

<sup>58</sup> *Nam vel exilium Camilli, vel offensio commemoratur Ahalae, vel invidia Nasicae, vel expulsio Laenatis, vel Opimi damnatio, vel fuga Metelli, vel acerbissima Gai Mari clades...* Contrast the readiness to give Roman examples here with *Sest.* 140, where there is merely a compressed allusion to "other" republican statesmen (*ceteri*). The account in *Sest.* also lacks pathos: in *Rep.*, he calls attention to their ills.

<sup>59</sup> Contrast *Sest.* 140.

<sup>60</sup> In *Sest.* 50-52, Cicero argues that his recent exile should not deter anyone from courageously standing up for the Republic because his recall from that exile shows that republican statesmen can ultimately count on the support of the citizenry.

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expected as a result of such great deeds as were mine?”<sup>61</sup> Rather, a sufficient reward for his service was the certainty that he had preserved the common safety: “[when] upon laying down my consulship I had sworn an oath in an assembly with the Roman people that the republic had been preserved, I easily compensated for the anxiety and trouble of all injustices endured” (1.7).<sup>62</sup> Developing this idea, Cicero insists: “I did not hesitate to place myself in the path of the most serious storms and almost of the thunderbolts themselves for the sake of preserving the citizens, and through my own dangers to provide a communal tranquility for the rest (*commune reliquis otium*)” (1.7).<sup>63</sup>

This idea of “the statesman’s burden” for the sake of the public’s *otium* is familiar from *Pro Sestio*, as commentators have noted.<sup>64</sup> But there is an important difference that should not be overlooked. In *De Re Publica*, Cicero is downplaying the chief motive for such endurance that he had held out in the speech: glory arising from recognition by one’s grateful fellow citizens, whether contemporaneously, posthumously, or both. Thus, in *De Re Publica*, Cicero aims to show that public service should be naturally generous, and not mercenary. Faithful to his persuasive procedure thus far, he also enlists the great statesmen of the past in the service of his ideal. By capping a list of statesmen and their misfortunes with his own example, he subtly imputes to them his same motive of desiring to preserve the common safety. The *auctoritas* of the *maiores* and of Cicero himself (who like the *maiores* was doubtless moved by other motives besides natural love for others) is in this way marshalled to promote a more altruistic motive for political engagement derived from Stoic thinking.

Cicero also seeks to replace the glory motive with motives taken from Plato but not expressly attributed to him. The first such motive is the conviction that, as a matter of justice, we owe public service to our country as to the parent who gave us birth and raised us. The persuasiveness of this Platonic notion derives from its proximity to traditional Roman patriotism, from which it is nevertheless distinct:

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<sup>61</sup> *Sed si aliter, ut dixi, accidisset, qui possem queri, cum mihi nihil improvise, nec gravius quam expectavissem, pro tantis meis factis evenisset?*

<sup>62</sup> The beginning of this sentence is lost, but the basic sense has been plausibly reconstructed: [*\*\*\* cum ... rem publicam ...] salvam esse consulatu abiens in contione populo Romano idem iurante iurassen, facile iniuriarum omnium compensarem curam et molestiam.*

<sup>63</sup> *non dubitaverim me gravissimis tempestatibus ac paene fulminibus ipsis obvium ferre, conservandorum civium gratia, meisque propriis periculis parere commune reliquis otium.*

<sup>64</sup> See Zetzel, *Cicero: De Re Publica*, 106, comparing *commune otium* with *Sest.* 138-39.

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For our fatherland has not begotten or educated us on the condition that it should not expect any repayment for support (so to speak) from us, and that it should only serve our comfort, and provide a safe refuge for our leisure and a tranquil place for rest; but rather on the condition that it should lay claim for itself, for its own utility, the majority of, and most capable parts of, our intelligence, talent, prudence; and that it should leave to us for our own private use only as much as it retains as a surplus (*Rep.* 1.8).<sup>65</sup>

In my discussion of appeals to Roman *pietas* above,<sup>66</sup> I noted that the metaphor of the fatherland as parent would naturally resonate with Roman cultural norms. But as commentators have observed, the notion of owing repayment to our country as to a parent who gave us our education also recalls an argument from Book 7 of Plato's *Republic*, as well as Plato's *Crito*.<sup>67</sup> In the *Republic*, Socrates says they will persuade their philosophically educated guardians that it is just for them to return to the Cave to rule because they owe their philosophic education to the city; in the *Crito*, Socrates imagines the laws of Athens chiding him for refusing to accept the verdict of the city that nourished and educated him. Although the Romans in Cicero's audience, unlike Plato's guardians, have presumably not received a philosophical education from their city, nevertheless they have been educated by Rome, whose protection created the conditions in which they could be brought up. There is, moreover, another Platonic intertext to this passage, from one of the letters to Archytas:

But as to you, they reported that you think it a heavy trial not to be able to get free from the cares of public life.... But this also you must bear in mind, that none of us is born for himself alone; a part of our existence belongs to our country, a part to our parents, a part to our other friends, and a large part is given to the circumstances that command our lives. When our country calls us to public service it would, I think, be unnatural to refuse; especially since this means giving place to unworthy men, who enter public life for motives other than the best (Plato, *Letter IX*, 357e3–358b1).<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> *Neque enim hac nos patria lege genuit aut educavit, ut nulla quasi alimenta exspectaret a nobis, ac tantummodo nostris ipsa commodis serviens tutum perflugium otio nostro suppeditaret et tranquillum ad quietem locum; sed ut plurimas et maximas nostri animi ingeni consili partes ipsa sibi ad utilitatem suam pigneraretur, tantumque nobis in nostrum privatum usum, quantum ipsi superesse posset, remitteret.*

<sup>66</sup> See section I. B 2 above.

<sup>67</sup> Plato *Rep.* 7.520b; see *Crito* 50a–52d, esp. 50d5–e7 and 51c6–d5, on one's nurture and education at the hands of the city. On the rareness of the word *alimenta*, see Zetzel, *Cicero: De Re Publica*, 106, who also claims that "Cicero's concept of duty to the fatherland is much more active than Plato's, *Cr.* 51c"; cf. Büchner, *M. Tullius Cicero*, 88.

<sup>68</sup> Translation by Morrow, "Letters," in *Plato: Complete Works*, eds. J.M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 1634–76.

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Cicero imitates the general notion that we have not been born to serve our own private interests alone.<sup>69</sup> In particular, Cicero's discussion of *partes* argues for an intertextual connection with Plato's *Letter 9*. Cicero has taken up Plato's assignation of "parts" of ourselves to different duties, though Cicero further specifies what Plato calls our "existence" according to our faculties (*nostrī animī ingeni consili*). He also alters the Platonic passage by creating a binary opposition between the two objects toward which these faculties may be directed: private or public use. This rhetorical simplification serves the needs of the present argument before the present audience. He is at pains to bring about a change in basic orientation toward the public instead of a self-interested attitude that renders a person unwilling to serve if there is no glory to be gained. Further, by personifying the *patria* as a parent to whom one owes the obligation of providing sustenance in his or her old age, Cicero plays on Plato's assertion that it would be "unnatural" to refuse public service to our country. Indeed, there is good reason to think that Plato considered such refusal unnatural because our country is similar to our parents, since Plato places obligation to country first on his list, immediately before parents.

Furthermore, Cicero blends this philosophic argument about fulfilling a natural obligation to one's country with the argument that the safety of the community as a whole depends on the willingness of individual statesmen to disregard consideration of their personal safety, a point he previously made in *Pro Sestio*.<sup>70</sup> But in using a philosophic argument to bolster this vision of self-sacrifice for the common benefit, Cicero is choosing to emphasize a different motive than he had in the speech. While in *Pro Sestio* the chief motive he emphasized was "striving after the good opinion of good men" (139) and the related need to uphold one's own *dignitas* (23), in the present work, he places the accent on duty to one's country regardless of personal gain.<sup>71</sup> Cicero implies that it would be unjust to refuse to serve.

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<sup>69</sup> Zetzel, Cicero: *De Re Publica*, 106, commenting on this passage (*Rep.* 1.8), notes that "at *Off.* 1.22 C. cites Pl. *Epist.* 9.358a for the doctrine of our responsibility to country and fellowmen." But as I argue in what follows, Cicero, although he does not cite that Platonic letter directly here (1.8), seems to be engaging with it.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. *Sest.* 139: "But those who strive after the good opinion of good men, which alone can truly be called glory, ought to seek leisure and pleasures for others, not for themselves" (*qui autem bonam famam bonorum, quae sola vere gloria nominari potest, expetunt, aliis otium quaerere debent et voluptates, non sibi*). See also *Sest.* 99–100.

<sup>71</sup> *Sest.* does contain an appeal to one's basic obligation to one's country and fellow citizens, but even this appeal is coupled with the recompense of glory given by that country and those citizens, a theme pursued throughout the speech (138): "But my whole speech is addressed to ... those who think they have been born ... for their country, for their fellow citizens, for praise, for glory" (*sed mihi omnis oratio est ... cum iis, qui se patriae, qui suis civibus, qui laudi, qui gloriae ... natos arbitrantur*).

## CICERO'S RHETORIC OF PHILOSOPHICAL POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

He aims to change the thinking of the otherwise politically ambitious in his audience who might be deterred from participation if they were to judge that glory before their peers and the people was no longer attainable. Cicero's teaching is that even without glory as a reward, there is still an obligation to serve the country. Retiring into one's own private concerns and enjoyments runs contrary to justice, which is an obligation stemming from our natural relationship with the country in which we have been born.

In a second major argument that draws on Plato in the preface, Cicero mingles Roman political vocabulary with Platonic ideals to promote engagement in politics, moved by what he implies are the most just of motives: to avoid the punishment of being ruled by bad men, and to protect the republic from them. He makes these points in direct response to arguments against engagement attributed to those who "make excuses for themselves to enjoy their leisure more easily" (1.9).<sup>72</sup> The vagueness of their identity suggests they are a foil for a point Cicero wants to make to some other unnamed audience. These people supposedly object that it is "not proper for a free man, while struggling against morally degraded and monstrous adversaries, to endure the blows of their verbal abuse or the painful expectation of injuries that are not to be endured by a wise man" (1.9).<sup>73</sup> The objector appears therefore to consider himself a free man and wise. *Sapiens* might denote a philosopher—Cicero's Epicurean bogeyman once again<sup>74</sup>—but in this context, it seems rather to signify a prudent person, someone with basic good sense who realizes it is foolish knowingly to expose oneself to the attacks of hateful and hate-filled people. This objector also holds that a person loses his freedom if he is constantly embroiled in political struggles; he seems to identify his *libertas* with the right to enjoy uninterrupted *otium*.

Cicero responds that such thinking is in fact not good sense. For through lack of involvement, one exposes oneself—and the whole state—to the mistreatment of the *improbi* that one thought he could avoid by remaining withdrawn: "Just as if for men who are good, brave, and endowed with magnanimity, there could be any more just reason for entering political life than not having to obey wicked men, and not allowing them to tear the republic

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<sup>72</sup> *quae sumunt sibi ad excusationem quo facilius otio perfruantur.*

<sup>73</sup> *neque liberi [esse] cum impuris atque immanibus adversariis decertantem vel contumeliarum verbera subire vel exspectare sapienti non ferendas iniurias.*

<sup>74</sup> The reference cannot be to the Stoic *sapiens* because the Stoic ideal viewed politics as a duty (see e.g. *Fin.* 3.54 and *Tusc.* 5.70).

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apart” (*Rep.* 1.9).<sup>75</sup> Cicero’s answer indicates that political engagement is the sensible thing to do; it is also necessary to guard one’s freedom, and that of others. The response also attributes the classic republican virtues of bravery and magnanimity to those who take action. The ambitious reader already considers himself free, sensible, manly, and magnanimous. So Cicero uses the foil and the response to flatter such a person. But he also identifies this person as one of the *boni*, who must act to defend himself and the state against the *improbi*. The argument thus suggests to the reader that brave men are on the side of the *boni*. This politically charged word denotes Cicero’s allies in the fight for republican institutions, the opponents of the triumvirate and of the seditious tribunes who aid them. Cicero therefore plays on the reader’s sense of himself to gain him as an ally for the republican cause. But he has also implicitly undermined the Roman honor motive by proposing two new considerations for the Roman elite to follow. As to the first consideration, Cicero has imported an argument about motivation for rule from Plato’s *Republic*: “The good ... do not wish to serve for honor, for they are not ambitious. So they must have imposed on them in addition an obligation and a penalty.... But the most serious aspect of the penalty, if they are not themselves willing, is to be ruled by someone inferior” (1.347b-c).<sup>76</sup> To this reason, which is fairly self-interested, Cicero has added the just motive of defending the state from being harmed by others. The first reason, in the context of Plato’s *Republic*, is conceived as an argument directed at good men who are “not ambitious.” But the portion of Cicero’s audience to which he chiefly directs these remarks is quite the opposite. Cicero speaks not just to a few philosophers in his audience disinclined to rule, but to a large body of men who see themselves as eminently practical, and are ambitious for public honors. These men are not in fact yet “good” because they lack the philosophical motivations to which he wants to lead them. Thus he tries to make men good by telling them what *boni* do: they engage not out of thirst for honors, but with a desire to prevent a fundamental disorder which is also contrary to their own interests, presumably to their own safety—the oppressive rule of evil over good. To this reason from Plato, Cicero adds the motive of acting in the interests of

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<sup>75</sup> *proinde quasi bonis et fortibus et magno animo praeditis ulla sit ad rem publicam adeundi causa iustior, quam ne pareant improbis, neve ab eis dilacerari rem publicam patiantur.*

<sup>76</sup> Cf. Plato *Letter IX*: “When our country calls us to public service it would, I think, be unnatural to refuse; especially since this means giving place to unworthy men, *who enter public life for motives other than the best*” (trans. Morrow, “Letters”; emphasis mine). Such refusal is unnatural apparently because it would be unnatural for the base to dominate the noble.

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everyone else, the *res publica*. Furthermore, denoting such considerations as *iustior* suggests that the argument from earlier in the preface that one owes *alimenta* to the *patria* represents a lower form of justice. It is therefore truer to the nature of justice to act with the motive of preventing a fundamental disorder—the evil ruling the good—and in order to shield others from the harm the evil would otherwise be free to inflict. Cicero will gladly make use of many arguments to gain his end—any tool in a fight—but here is our first indication that the different motives offered may be ranked.

### III. CONCLUSION

In fact, these two motives contain in germ the substance of two notions of justice that Cicero will further develop as the work proceeds: justice as the harmonious order obtaining between reason and the passions (Laelius's teaching in Book 3), and justice as defending others from harm regardless of the cost to oneself (Scipio's teaching in the Dream). In the body of the work, Cicero ultimately suggests that justice within the state is a sort of harmony among the different social orders modulated by the statesman.<sup>77</sup> The bridge from individual to political justice, therefore, is the philosophic statesman, the very figure whom we have seen him inspiring the reader to emulate in the preface, who (as the reader will eventually learn) combines these two notions of justice in his own life with the goal of producing exterior harmony in the state.

We have seen that in the preface of *De Re Publica*, Cicero embarks on the promotion of an ideal of philosophic statesmanship by assuming the persona of a conventional Roman politician that puts the majority of his readers at ease and makes them more receptive to the philosophic ideas subtly introduced. Cicero's method of gradually insinuating philosophically derived ethical motives for serving the state while rhetorically casting them as traditional Roman ideas suggests that his aim is ultimately to establish the secret rule of wisdom. Conventional Roman morality has been lost, but its rhetorical appeal still holds sway and is used to draw the reader without his even realizing it into a new philosophically grounded moral system for reviving republican politics.

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<sup>77</sup> See 2.69 and 6.21; in the latter passage, the Sun as *dux et moderator* appears to be a thinly veiled symbol for the *rector* or *moderator rei publicae*.

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This secret rule of wisdom is to be achieved, therefore, through Ciceronian rhetorical tactics that hold up the ideal of the philosophic statesman, represented in the body of the work by appealing figures from Roman tradition such as Scipio and Laelius, whom the reader is gradually invited to emulate. Ever striving through learning and philosophic contemplation to obtain the interior harmony of the subordination of the passions to reason, the statesman should by example and action promote that same harmony in the state. But unless Cicero can convince his fellow Romans to pursue politics at all, and to pursue it on the model just described despite ingrained prejudices against philosophic activity, that vision for political justice will remain nothing but a dream. Cicero's *De Re Publica* is not simply an argument in favor of republican government: it is a rhetorically charged call to action aimed at raising up a new class of philosophic men to revive the now-defunct Republic.

The rhetorical nature and purpose of this philosophical dialogue also suggest that Cicero devised a new role for rhetoric under the *de facto* tyranny of the first triumvirate that dominated Rome during the 50s BC. When the clarion call of his speech *Pro Sestio* (March 56) to take action against the enemies of the Republic proved fruitless upon the renewal of the triumvirs' agreement (April 56), Cicero turned from republican oratory, now precluded, to philosophic writing as the means of carrying on the fight for republicanism.

In contrast to his public speeches, however, in the trio of dialogues written from 55-51 (*De Oratore*, *De Re Publica*, and *De Legibus*) he would ultimately call conventional Roman morality into question. Although starting from that morality as a means of reaching his readers, he would employ his rhetorical skills to affirm the greatness of the Republican constitution while promoting philosophic pursuits as a means of reforming and transforming the Roman ruling class into the kind of men with the knowledge and noble motives that could bring back the Republic.

## Virtue on Display: Ethics in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*

Allison Postell

One of the great discoveries in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is the enthymeme, the rhetorical *sullogismos*. In the opening chapter of the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle states that the enthymeme is the "body of persuasion" and the strongest of the convincing arguments; it is the achievement of the rhetor's special use of *logos*.<sup>1</sup> Given the pride of place afforded to enthymematic *logos*, it is puzzling to discover that of the three forms of persuasion—*logos*, *pathos*, and *ēthos*—Aristotle claims that "character [*ēthos*] is almost, so to speak, the most authoritative form of persuasion."<sup>2</sup> The claim is all the more surprising given that, in the opening of the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle disparages rhetorical appeals to *ēthos* and *pathos* as beneath the true art of rhetoric, which should be based (solely?) on appeals by *logos*. This initial murkiness pertains not only to the role that *ēthos* plays relative to other forms of persuasion, but also to the substance of rhetorical *ēthos*: will an appeal to character "succeed" if it persuades the audience, regardless of whether the character appeal is virtuous or representative of the rhetor's true character? Put another way, is rhetoric an amoral art? If not, what must the rhetor know about ethics for there to be a successful appeal by *ēthos*?

The existing scholarship diverges widely on this question and can be divided into five main views.<sup>3</sup> One view holds that the Aristotelian rhetor is either amoral or vicious. For instance, Whitney J. Oates claims Aristotelian rhetoric moves into a "realm of amoralism, if not immoralism."<sup>4</sup> The moderate view maintains that there is some connection of rhetoric to ethics and politics; however, this connection is not guaranteed or all that clear. This is due to ambiguity regarding the knowledge rhetoricians have of ethics and politics, and how rhetoricians begin their arguments with popular opinions, rather than what ethics and politics

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. George A. Kennedy, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1354a16, 1355a9.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1356a16-17. The terms refer, in order, to reason, emotion, and character.

<sup>3</sup> See John M. Cooper, "Ethical-Political Theory in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*," in *Aristotle's Rhetoric: Philosophical Essays*, ed. D.J. Furley and A. Nehamas (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 193-210; Stephen Halliwell, "Popular Morality, Philosophical Ethics, and the *Rhetoric*," in *Aristotle's Rhetoric: Philosophical Essays*, 211-30; W. J. Oates, "Evidence from the *Rhetoric*," in *Aristotle and the Problem of Value* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963); Troels Engberg-Pedersen, "Is There an Ethical Dimension in Aristotelian Rhetoric?" in *Essays on Aristotle's Rhetoric*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 116-41; Robert Wardy, "Mighty Is the Truth and It Shall Prevail?" in *Essays on Aristotle's Rhetoric*, 56-87; M. H. Wörner, *Das Ethische in der Rhetorik des Aristoteles* (Freiburg: Alber-Reihe, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> Oates, "Evidence from the *Rhetoric*," 351.

know to be true. This position is illustrated by Stephen Halliwell's claim that the Aristotelian rhetor's "engagement with popular morality will sometimes, non-accidentally, succeed in contributing to the realization of the human good."<sup>5</sup> The ambiguous nature of the rhetorician's knowledge is present in John Cooper's position that Aristotelian rhetoric begins with common opinions (*endoxa*) but does not rise to the level of scientific truth, though there is a continuity between *endoxa* and truth. Cooper argues that the rhetorician who successfully appeals to *endoxa* "stands in the same relationship with truth" as one who has scientific knowledge.<sup>6</sup> At the other end of the spectrum are those who maintain the Aristotelian rhetor is fully virtuous and persuades others in light of his knowledge of the good. For example, Markus H. Wörner claims Aristotle's rhetor is "an *epiēkēs*, an *agathos*, a vir bonus."<sup>7</sup>

Others maintain there is no clear answer to the question because passages from the *Rhetoric* are ultimately in conflict, with some passages suggesting rhetoricians should only persuade others of good, while other passages claim that rhetoric is just as much the art of the sophist as it is the virtuous person. Robert Wardy argues for this position, concluding that "there is no firm answer" to whether Aristotle rejects the sophistry illustrated in Plato's *Gorgias*, and "the surprising thing is that his own handbook, time and again, subordinates truth to victory," despite Aristotle's own claims that rhetoric ought to pursue truth.<sup>8</sup> Another claims the ethics of the *Rhetoric* is supplied from outside the art itself. From this view, Troels Engberg-Pedersen argues that Aristotelian rhetoric is practiced within a language-game of "truth discovery" whose aim is "to arrive at judgments in ethical and political matters that [are] true."<sup>9</sup> Engberg-Pedersen argues that language-games ground the ethical orientation of Aristotelian rhetoric.

I argue that a rhetorical appeal by *ēthos* springs from a style of *logos* specific to rhetoric. Rhetorical appeals by *logos* are enthymemes, proofs that are neither syllogisms nor demonstrative, but nevertheless logically persuasive. Through the enthymeme, *ēthos* surfaces in the rhetorician's choice of where to begin her arguments and how well she conveys her goodness and good will toward the audience. These conceptions of *logos* and *ēthos* enable

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<sup>5</sup> Halliwell, "Popular Morality, Philosophical Ethics, and the *Rhetoric*," 228.

<sup>6</sup> Cooper, "Ethical-Political Theory in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*," 208.

<sup>7</sup> Wörner, *Das Ethische in der Rhetorik des Aristoteles*, 24; cf. 193.

<sup>8</sup> Wardy, "Mighty Is the Truth and It Shall Prevail?" 81.

<sup>9</sup> Engberg-Pedersen, "Is There an Ethical Dimension in Aristotelian Rhetoric?" 124.

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us to assess the broader question about ethics in Aristotle's theory of rhetoric. What is most persuasive will be, for the most part, what comports with what is truer and better by nature. Thus, a framework of naturalism guides *logos* and *ēthos* in Aristotelian rhetorical theory.<sup>10</sup> To this extent, there is an ethical dimension to the *Rhetoric*, but it is not supplied from within the art of rhetoric proper. Rather, it comes from the natural teleology that informs the art.

In this sense, Aristotle's rhetoric is an amoral art: rhetoric, considered in abstraction from the larger normative framework in which it is embedded, has no ethical orientation. At the same time, this point should not be taken too far. Just as form cannot be separated from matter in natural substances, rhetoric cannot be separated from its normative context. To say that Aristotelian rhetoric is amoral is ultimately only an abstraction, for in practice there are always normative ends that supply the art of persuasion with its material. And in this sense, Aristotelian rhetoric is not amoral; it is deeply guided by a broader metaphysics of natural goodness that serves as its frame.

I conclude by arguing that Aristotle's theory of rhetoric responds successfully to dilemmas that beset his predecessors: his rhetorical theory offers a way to explain how rhetoric is not a form of sham philosophy, as Socrates claims in Plato's *Gorgias*. Rhetoric is not reducible to philosophical dialectic, nor are appeals to *ēthos* and *pathos* based on the subjective power of the rhetorician. *Ēthos*, while not reducible to *logos*, has a rational component whose successful use is partly determined by how well it comports with natural goodness. This enables Aristotle to have a positive theory of rhetoric that is informed by, but not reducible to, reason: a notable departure from Platonic rhetoric in particular.

### ARISTOTLE'S PREDECESSORS AND THE PROBLEM OF RHETORIC

Aristotle inherited a tradition mixed with criticism and support of rhetoric. While philosophers were frequently skeptical of rhetoric's legitimacy, the sophists embraced it. Aristotle's views of rhetoric seem to be, in part, a response to the competing claims of his predecessors. While the *Rhetoric* endorses the legitimacy of the art, its reasons for doing so differ from those of its traditional defenders. We turn now to an overview of this debate.

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<sup>10</sup> By "naturalism" I mean the view that nature itself is laden with goodness; as such, ethical goodness is a kind of natural goodness.

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On one side, there are those who argue that rhetoric is not a legitimate art; rather, it is a sham form of philosophy. Representative of this view are Parmenides, Zeno, and Plato. Parmenides's goddess declares, "You must hear everything, both the unmoved heart of persuasive truth and the opinions of mortals, wherein there is no true conviction."<sup>11</sup> The goddess tethers persuasion to truth, and opposes this to opinion, which has no tie to truth or legitimate persuasion. She suggests that true conviction aligns with reality itself and declares that "persuasive *logos* and thought about the truth" stand in opposition to "mortal opinions" that come from "the deceptive arrangement of ... words."<sup>12</sup> The goddess opposes true *logos* with deceptive mortal opinions and suggests that the way to truth and legitimate persuasion is through *logos* alone; succumbing to appeals to pathos or *ēthos* are at best distractions.

Zeno also offers a relevant challenge:

Against the person who said, 'Don't give your verdict until you have heard both sides,' Zeno argued as follows: The second speaker is not to be heard whether the first speaker proved their case (for then the inquiry is at an end), or they did not prove it (for this is tantamount to their not having appeared when summoned, or to their having responded to the summons with mere prattle). But either they proved their case or they did not. Therefore, the second speaker is not to be heard.<sup>13</sup>

According to the proper understanding of what it means "to prove" something, Zeno concludes that it is impossible to have a debate, if "to prove" means "to derive a conclusion by valid argument from true premises that are known to be true." If conclusions of valid proofs must necessarily be true, opposing speakers argue for opposite conclusions, and opposite conclusions cannot both be true together, then two speakers on opposite sides cannot both prove their case.<sup>14</sup> If Zeno is correct, then rhetoric is not only restricted to *logos* alone; all meaningful speech is restricted to only one side of an argument.

Plato also formidably challenges the claim that rhetoric is a legitimate art. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates attacks the sophist's claim that rhetoric is an art, while the *Phaedrus* argues that the truest form of rhetoric springs from a philosopher who has attained knowledge not only of the subject under discussion, but of the whole of reality. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates asks Gorgias

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<sup>11</sup> Parmenides, Fragment 1. See Wardy, "Mighty Is the Truth and It shall Prevail?" 56-57.

<sup>12</sup> Parmenides, Fragment 8; cf. Wardy, "Mighty Is the Truth and It Shall Prevail?" 57.

<sup>13</sup> Plutarch, *On Stoic Self-Contradictions*, 1034e, in Miles Burnyeat, "Enthymeme: Aristotle on the Rationality of Rhetoric," in *Essays on Aristotle's Rhetoric*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (California: University of California Press, 1996), 88.

<sup>14</sup> Burnyeat, "Enthymeme: Aristotle on the Rationality of Rhetoric," 88.

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to define rhetoric. Gorgias and Socrates ultimately define rhetoric as the art of persuasion pertaining to the just and the unjust that creates belief in an audience by a speaker who does not possess knowledge of his subject matter.<sup>15</sup> Socrates argues that this definition entails that rhetoric is useless. The person who possesses knowledge of the subject can persuade more credibly on account of that knowledge, instead of relying on the rhetorician's substanceless flash.

Because only the ignorant are rhetoricians, rhetoric also turns out to be an ignoble counterfeit to politics, the inquiry into what is just and unjust.<sup>16</sup> Socrates likens rhetoric to the production of junk food: the dessert might taste good when served by the rhetorician, but it will rot the insides of those who consume it. Instead, one must turn to "true rhetoric," which turns out to be philosophy. By this description, Plato's Socrates advances the view that rhetoric is not an art. The philosopher who seeks wisdom through dialectic is the one most capable of legitimate persuasion.

Each of these philosophers advances a claim about *logos* that undermines rhetoric's legitimacy. Parmenides contrasts *logos* with mere opinion, claiming that truth cannot spring from opinion (which is the springboard for Aristotelian rhetorical arguments). Zeno argues that it is impossible to arrive at the truth through a public debate, asserting that *logos* only pertains to one side of every question; all that is needed are logical arguments for one side. Plato's Socrates maintains that rhetoric only operates in the absence of knowledge, making it philosophy's counterfeit. As such, Aristotle's tradition consciously developed arguments against the legitimacy of rhetoric as a virtuous art, let alone an art.

By contrast, the sophists defended the nature and power of rhetoric, but they imported a problematic view of truth and goodness into their defense. Gorgias, in his *Encomium to Helen*, suggests that *logos* is unfettered by objective standards,<sup>17</sup> a view that Protagoras openly professed: "Of all matters, humankind is the measure, concerning not only those things which are, but also those things which are not."<sup>18</sup> On this view, arguments are but one variety of subjective attempt at persuasion. Appeals to virtue or philosophical argument are just various ways to exercise power, and the philosophers delude themselves by believing they

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<sup>15</sup> Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. James A. Arieti and Roger M. Burns (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2007), 454b.

<sup>16</sup> Plato, *Gorgias*, 463b; cf. Wardy, "Mighty Is the Truth and It Shall Prevail?" 57–58.

<sup>17</sup> Gorgias, *Encomium to Helen*, §8; cf. Wardy, "Mighty Is the Truth and It Shall Prevail?" 57.

<sup>18</sup> Plato, *Protagoras*, 80 B1.

are grasping at non-subjective truth. Rhetoric is the art of harnessing this power of persuasion, which ultimately comes from the power of the speaker, not the speaker's ability to understand and effectively convey what conforms to nature.

With this debate in mind, if Aristotle wants to defend a noble conception of rhetoric, it seems he will have to defend it against both the philosophers and the sophists. Against the philosophers, he will have to show that rhetoric is an art separate from philosophical dialectic. If successful, he will then have to show that appeals to *logos* are not the only legitimate forms of persuasion: appeals to *ēthos* and *pathos* are part of the art as well. Against the sophists, he will have to show that persuasiveness has a mooring outside of the rhetorician's subjective power. We turn now to relevant passages in the *Rhetoric* that motivate Aristotle's account.

### ***APORIAS IN THE RHETORIC***

The *Rhetoric* does not offer a straightforward explanation of whether rhetoricians need virtuous character to craft persuasive appeals by *ēthos*. Moreover, while the book's very existence suggests that rhetoric is a legitimate art, an explanation is needed for why rhetoric is not merely a perversion of philosophical dialectic. Numerous passages in the *Rhetoric* initially seem to conflict on these issues.

On the one hand, it seems that virtuous character is not a prerequisite for rhetorical success, and that rhetoric itself is intrinsically morally neutral. Aristotle defines rhetoric as "an ability in each [particular] case to see the available means of persuasion."<sup>19</sup> This ability includes the capacity to see what is true and what resembles the true as well as the capacity to prove opposites. It is an ability open to virtuous rhetors and cunning sophists alike. Aristotle further states that "sophistry is not a matter of ability [*dunamis*] but of deliberate choice [*proairesis*],"<sup>20</sup> suggesting that rhetoric is an amoral art that can be used virtuously or viciously depending on a choice external to the art. As more evidence of its mercenary nature, rhetoric also has no definite subject matter. It is simply an ability to procure arguments.<sup>21</sup> Also, the *Rhetoric's* description of *ēthos* as a means of persuasion often refers to the character a rhetor merely appears to have, and this appearance may only run skin

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<sup>19</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1355b24-25.

<sup>20</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1355b15; cf. 1355a13-14, 1355b2-7, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1144a230; 1355a34.

<sup>21</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1356a32-33; cf. 1355b31-34 and 1358a10-21 which states that rhetoric deals with "common" premises (*koīna*) shared by several areas of discipline.

deep. Even *logos* seems cut off from any ethically substantive telos. Enthymemes work because people are persuaded when they suppose something has been demonstrated, but people can be wrong in their suppositions, particularly because enthymemes fall short of being scientific demonstrations.<sup>22</sup> These passages suggest that the rhetorician's available means of persuasion have no internal direction toward virtuous ends. If so, appeals by *ēthos* are just one more tool of this amoral art.

On the other hand, Aristotle claims that rhetoric is "like some offshoot [*paraphues*] of dialectic and ethical studies (which is rightly called politics)."<sup>23</sup> He then uses an analogy to illustrate how rhetoric involves "seeing the available means of persuasion": as the goal of medicine is not health, but promoting health as much as the situation affords, so the goal of rhetoric is not persuasion, but persuading as much as the situation affords.<sup>24</sup> Medicine is intrinsically ordered toward health, so it would seem that rhetoric is intrinsically ordered toward the ethical and the just. The *Rhetoric* also argues that appeals grounded on what is "true" and "better" are more likely to succeed. Aristotle states that "the underlying facts are not equally good in each case; but the true and better ones are by nature always more productive of good syllogisms and in a word, more persuasive."<sup>25</sup> These passages suggest that Aristotle's rhetorical theory does have an ethical orientation, that some kind of virtuous *ēthos* is an ingredient for rhetorical success.

I aim to show that these groups of passages are ultimately reconcilable. The reason why has to do with rhetoric's special use of *logos*, the enthymeme.

### RHETORICAL *LOGOS* AS "DEGENERATE DEDUCTION"

Given the centrality of *logos* to the rhetorician's artistic appeals, it is surprising that Aristotle does not explicitly define "enthymeme." The term first appears at 1254a11-16, which states that the enthymeme is the body of proof in a speech. In this section I will argue that the two dominant ways of defining Aristotle's enthymeme are incorrect.<sup>26</sup> The first way defines an

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<sup>22</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1355a5-6.

<sup>23</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1356a34-35.

<sup>24</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1355b8-9.

<sup>25</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1355a34-35.

<sup>26</sup> For a survey of the scholarship pertaining to both definitions, see M. B. Burnyeat, "Enthymeme: Aristotle on the Logic of Persuasion," in *Aristotle's Rhetoric: Philosophical Essays*, eds. David J. Furley and Alexander Nehamas (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 3-10.

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enthymeme as “a syllogism with a missing premise.” William Hamilton uses the following example to illustrate the definition:<sup>27</sup>

Every liar is a coward; Caius is a liar; Therefore, Caius is a coward.

On this view, the syllogism can be turned into an enthymeme by omitting the major premise, the minor premise, or the conclusion:

| 1. Omit major premise                                                                                                                                             | 2. Omit minor premise                                                                                                                                                    | 3. Omit conclusion                                                                                                                                          |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p style="text-align: center;">Caius is a liar;</p> <p style="text-align: center;">_____</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Therefore, Caius is a<br/>coward.</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Every liar is a coward;</p> <p style="text-align: center;">_____</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Therefore, Caius is a<br/>coward.</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Every liar is a coward;</p> <p style="text-align: center;">And Caius is a liar.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">_____</p> |

By suppressing part of the syllogism, the enthymeme supposedly draws the audience into the speech by making them fill out the missing part of the argument, and the rhetor avoids having to say parts of the argument that would make the speech unnecessarily pedantic.

A second group advances a different definition. Drawing from *Prior Analytics* and *Rhetoric*, they define an enthymeme as “an incomplete *sullogismos* from likelihoods or signs.”<sup>28</sup> The strength of this definition is the numerous passages where Aristotle directly links the enthymeme to probabilities and signs.

By contrast, I argue that an enthymeme is a kind of reasoning about contingent matters, where the decision of the audience impacts the outcome of the issue under consideration.

The nature of this kind of reasoning reveals that what is true in a rhetorical situation may be

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<sup>27</sup> Those who strictly follow Aristotle’s requirements for a syllogism will reject the example, since it deploys a singular term “Caius” instead of a universal. See Sir William Hamilton, “Lecture XX,” *Lectures on Logic*, ed. Rev. H. L. Mansel and John Veitch (Edinburgh and London: Blackwood, 1860), found in Burnyeat, “Enthymeme: Aristotle on the Logic of Persuasion,” 3. This definition of the Aristotelian enthymeme was notably endorsed by many logic books, including Irving Copi, *Introduction to Logic*, 4th ed. (London and New York: Collier Macmillan, 1972), and the popular Edward Meredith Cope, *The Rhetoric of Aristotle, with a Commentary*, ed. John Edwin Sandys, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1877); it also has interpretive roots dating back to Philoponus. See M. Wallies, *Ioannis Philoponi in Aristotelis analytica priora commentaria*. Commentaria in Aristotelem graeca XIII 2 (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1905) and Burnyeat, “Enthymeme: Aristotle on the Logic of Persuasion,” 6.

<sup>28</sup> See Aristotle, *Prior Analytics*, 2.27, 70a10; *Rhetoric*, 1.2.14, 1357a32-33; 1.3.7, 1359a7-10; 2.25.8, 1402b13-20. For the scholars defending this definition and a developed criticism of these passages as evidence for a technical definition of enthymeme, see Burnyeat, “Enthymeme: Aristotle on the Logic of Persuasion,” 6, *passim*.

indeterminate and difficult to discern, due to the contingent nature of the course of action under deliberation and the legitimate reasons that can be given for accepting divergent conclusions. Contra Zeno, it may be possible “to prove” that more than one course of action is reasonable to pursue, and enthymemes reason about these kinds of cases. Moreover, the contingent nature of enthymematic content reveals that there is an ethical dimension to discerning which proof is best. A prudential ability to see what is best accompanies the ability to craft successful enthymemes.

To begin, it is well known that Aristotle provocatively opens the *Rhetoric* by claiming, “Rhetoric is an *antistrophos* to dialectic.”<sup>29</sup> The *Rhetoric*'s opening statement puts rhetorical *logos* on equal footing with philosophical dialectic. There are several reasons why dialectic and rhetoric are counterparts: neither has a definite subject matter, and both are abilities for procuring arguments.<sup>30</sup> Both take their premises from *endoxa*, or claims that are favorably received.<sup>31</sup> This differs from the much more stringent starting point of scientific deductions (*apodeixis*).<sup>32</sup> Thus, Aristotle couples rhetoric with dialectic because they are distinct from scientific deduction that begins with self-evident axioms and ends with necessarily true conclusions.

Though rhetoric and dialectic are not capable of scientific demonstration, Miles Burnyeat compellingly argues that they do successfully craft arguments of a more relaxed form. The *Rhetoric* claims it is possible to demonstrate a conclusion from a subject's relevant facts, or *what are taken to be* the facts.<sup>33</sup> Such a demonstration is possible “whether the speakers argue in a more precise or in a more relaxed way.”<sup>34</sup> Rhetoric's form of a relaxed argument is the rhetorical *sullogismos*, or the enthymeme. Aristotle states, “I call enthymeme

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<sup>29</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1354a1.

<sup>30</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1356a32-33; cf. 1355b31-34 and Engberg-Pedersen, “Is There an Ethical Dimension in Aristotelian Rhetoric?” 128.

<sup>31</sup> In rhetoric, the *endoxa* belong to people who need to deliberate. In dialectic, the *endoxa* belong to people who are used to deliberation. See Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1356b32-1357a1; cf. Burnyeat, “Enthymeme: Aristotle on the Rationality of Rhetoric,” 99.

<sup>32</sup> A *sullogismos* in scientific deduction (*apodeixis*) flows from premises that are true, primary, immediate, better known than, prior to and explanatory of, the conclusion demonstrated from them (Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, 71b20-25). In other words, for *apodeixis*, there exists “an explanatory demonstration in which a necessary truth is shown to follow necessarily from necessary and self-explanatory axioms,” whereas “a dialectical *sullogismos* is specified as one that proceeds from premises that are reputable (Aristotle, *Topics*, 100a27-30)” (Burnyeat, “Enthymeme: Aristotle on the Rationality of Rhetoric,” 94, 95).

<sup>33</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1396a3-33; cf. Burnyeat, “Enthymeme: Aristotle on the Rationality of Rhetoric,” 96.

<sup>34</sup> Burnyeat, “Enthymeme: Aristotle on the Rationality of Rhetoric,” 96-97; cf. *Rhetoric* 1396a34-1396b1.

rhetorical *sullogismos*, example rhetorical *epagōgē*.<sup>35</sup> Burnyeat notes that in this passage, Aristotle:

equates enthymeme with *sullogismos* and example with *epagōgē*, when, and only when, these occur in a rhetorical speech rather than in a dialectical discussion.... The framework for the account is a logical claim that, of necessity, there are two and only two ways to show something. *Sullogismos* and *epagōgē* (roughly and for the moment: deduction and induction) are an exhaustive division of proof to which, consequently, rhetorical proofs must correspond (1356b 7-9).<sup>36</sup>

This comparison of rhetorical *sullogismos* to *epagōgē* is not meant to show that the enthymeme is a syllogism with a missing premise.

When Aristotle speaks of the enthymeme as *sullogismos*, then, he means that a conclusion is demonstrated in a looser sense than is meant by his definition of *sullogismos* in the *Topics* or *Prior Analytics*, which have much stricter requirements for validity.<sup>37</sup> A rhetorical *sullogismos* (1) has a conclusion that results from the premises and (2) is distinct from them, but (3) the connection of premises to conclusion need not be exceptionless.<sup>38</sup> Burnyeat argues that this looser conception of *sullogismos* “is a deliberate attempt by Aristotle to fashion a concept of degenerate deduction that can be applied to contexts where conclusive proof is not to be had.... ‘[R]easonable inference’ is the notion Aristotle aims to develop for the study of rhetorical argumentation.”<sup>39</sup>

As a “relaxed” proof, the subject matter of enthymematic *logos* does not lend itself to certainty, so its argumentative conclusions are only probable. Aristotle’s description of *logos*

<sup>35</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1356b4-5; cf. “Enthymeme: Aristotle on the Rationality of Rhetoric,” 97. Prior to Aristotle, enthymemes were “considerations one is swayed by when reflecting on an issue where conclusive argument is not to be had” (Burnyeat, “Enthymeme: Aristotle on the Rationality of Rhetoric,” 93). Aristotle is the one who articulates the style of reasoning that contributes to this persuasion (Burnyeat, “Enthymeme: Aristotle on the Rationality of Rhetoric,” 100).

<sup>36</sup> Burnyeat, “Enthymeme: Aristotle on the Rationality of Rhetoric,” 97. Enthymematic terms are not universals, nor do they fit the conditions of first principles detailed in the *Posterior Analytics*.

<sup>37</sup> Aristotle, *Topics*, 100a25-27: “A *sullogismos* is a discourse [or: argument] in which, certain things being posited, something different from the things laid down necessarily results through the things laid down.” The *Prior Analytics*’ slight variation states that it is “a valid deductive argument in which the premises...provide a logically sufficient justification for a conclusion distinct from them” (24b18-22). Burnyeat, “Enthymeme: Aristotle on the Rationality of Rhetoric,” 95, explains, “Aristotle defines *sullogismos* as a valid deductive argument in which the premises (note the plural) provide a logically sufficient justification for a conclusion distinct from them. The notion of *apodeixis* can then be defined by adding further conditions on the premises.” This entails that an enthymeme should not be defined as a “rhetorical syllogism” or a “syllogism missing one premise.” It is not a syllogism in the above senses at all.

<sup>38</sup> Burnyeat, “Enthymeme: Aristotle on the Rationality of Rhetoric,” 99. As such, enthymeme is a kind of *sullogismos* (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1400b37) where there is no certainty to be had (1356a7-8, 1357a1-2), yet a judgment must be made (1358a36-1358b8, 1377b21-1378a6, 1391b8-20, 1420b2-3) and things can be said on either side (1402a31-34).

<sup>39</sup> Burnyeat, “Enthymeme: Aristotle on the Rationality of Rhetoric,” 99, argues that *sullogismos* should be translated as “valid argument” and never as “syllogism” to avoid confusing it with the stricter syllogistic requirements of *Topics* and *Prior Analytics* (96).

in the *Rhetoric*, then, is the attempt “to find terms and techniques to make *this sort of argument* amenable to systematic study.”<sup>40</sup> The kind of validity that applies to rhetorical *sullogismos* does not have to do with apodeictic necessity (as is the case with scientific demonstration), but with what happens for the most part. Rhetorical *sullogismos* turns not on what is necessarily true, but on what is reasonable. Rhetoric’s subject matter makes it such that there are genuine reasons that can be offered on both sides of the argument. Thus, Aristotle argues for a position beyond the horns of Zeno’s dilemma: rhetoricians can offer relaxed proofs about things that cannot be conclusively demonstrated and where there are reasons that pertain to both sides of the question. This partly explains why *logos* alone does not always persuade: rhetorical *logos* can cut in many directions.

This style of *logos* operates within its own proper context. The goal of rhetoric is persuasion, not teaching, and the rhetorician does not need to be an expert on the subject matter at hand. This is unlike dialectic, where the subject matter is more universal (for example, trying to discover the definition of justice) and teaching is the goal.<sup>41</sup> By contrast, a rhetorician who possesses expertise would not have an advantage in her ability to persuade, since demonstration is not interchangeable with persuasion. Instead, persuasive speech begins with the particular *endoxa* of the audience.<sup>42</sup> Rhetoricians also use truncated “proofs,” not long demonstrations, that they deliver to an audience that is generally morally good.<sup>43</sup> The long argumentation required for exact knowledge is unsuitable for audiences who generally cannot follow them.<sup>44</sup> Arguments must have few premises and make easy, quick comprehension possible.<sup>45</sup> Audiences are often deliberating about what to do in a time-sensitive circumstance, so a truncated argument is best for persuasion.

Thus, rhetorical *logos* operates in the following context: with a rhetorician who can be a non-expert, and who aims at persuasion, not teaching; rhetoricians begin with the *endoxa* of an audience who is generally good and speak about a particular course of action whose

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<sup>40</sup> Burnyeat, “Enthymeme: Aristotle on the Rationality of Rhetoric,” 93. Cf. *Rhetoric* 1354a1–11. Aristotle also claims elsewhere that some demonstrations can be “more relaxed” (*malakōteron*) than others (*On Generation and Corruption* 333b25–26; *Meteorology* 1026b13; cf. Burnyeat, “Enthymeme: Aristotle on the Rationality of Rhetoric,” 95).

<sup>41</sup> Engberg-Pedersen, “Is There an Ethical Dimension in Aristotelian Rhetoric?” 122. The main features of the rhetorical context are stated at 1357a1–22, and the distinction between rhetorical and dialectical *sullogismos* is restated at 1395b22–1396a3; cf. Burnyeat, “Enthymeme: Aristotle on the Rationality of Rhetoric,” 99–100.

<sup>42</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1355a24; cf. *Physics* 199b28, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1112a34–1112b9; 1355a24.

<sup>43</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1404a7–8, 1403b34.

<sup>44</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1357a1.

<sup>45</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1419b21, b10.

outcome the audience can affect with its decision and for which reasons can be given on either side.

### TRIPARTITE CHARACTER

We turn now to the *Rhetoric's* account of how *ēthos* emerges from enthymematic *logos* and this general rhetorical context. Appeals by *ēthos* aim to persuade the audience to trust the rhetorician. A good appeal will put the audience “in the right frame of mind,” making them “friendly and placable,” not “angry or hostile,” “indifferent or annoyed.”<sup>46</sup> While he uses the same word, *ēthos* can refer to three different objects. First and primarily, there is “display character,” the presentation of character that the rhetor conveys to her audience. Second, there is “audience character.” Third, there is the rhetor’s “true character,” which encompasses who the rhetor really is, whether or not she chooses to convey that to her audience. While all three senses of character are essential for Aristotle’s theory, the second and third senses are subsidiary to display character.

Aristotle explains the success of display character as follows: “[*Ēthos* is persuasive] whenever the speech is spoken in such a way as to make the speaker worthy of credence; for [the rhetor’s audience] believe[s] fair-minded people to a greater extent and more quickly, on all subjects in general and completely so in cases where there is not exact knowledge but room for doubt.”<sup>47</sup> The primary function of display character is to make the audience believe that the rhetor is trustworthy and good at deliberation. Though character is not the only mode of persuasion that Aristotle describes as trustworthy, there is a distinctive way in which display character appears to be so: trustworthy display character occurs when the rhetor appears to have prudence (*phronēsis*), virtue (*aretē*), and good will (*eunoia*).<sup>48</sup> The rhetor’s task is to discover the ways in which he can seem to have these qualities.

To do this, rhetors must study the “audience character” that surfaces most clearly from the audience’s choices. The rhetor can thereby infer who her audience is and tailor her ethical appeals accordingly. If she misjudges or, out of ignorance, presents a display character that is unappealing, her use of *ēthos* will not be persuasive and will incite suspicion and the appearance of unfriendliness instead.

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<sup>46</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1378a1–7.

<sup>47</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1356a6–8; cf. 1354a4, 1355b8, 1356a30–33; 1358a2–35.

<sup>48</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1378a8–10. The audience can also trust logical demonstration (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1366a10–11).

## VIRTUE ON DISPLAY: ETHICS IN ARISTOTLE'S RHETORIC

The display character the rhetor crafts surfaces in the *logos* of rhetorical speech. Returning once more to the *Rhetoric's* definition of *ēthos*, Aristotle states, “[There is persuasion] through character whenever the speech is spoken in such a way as to make the speaker worthy of credence,” especially “in cases where there is not exact knowledge but room for doubt.”<sup>49</sup> In other words, display character surfaces *through* speech.<sup>50</sup> This manifestation of display character must be both clear and inconspicuous.<sup>51</sup> If the rhetor were to claim overtly how virtuous and trustworthy she thought herself to be, the audience would find the appeal unpersuasive because it would not appear in the speech naturally. Like the character of a virtuous person is displayed through the actions of her life that are the result of the choices she has made, so display character must reveal itself in the action of a speech resulting from the choice of rhetorical appeal by *logos*. As Eugene Garver states, “Reasoning [in speech] is what reveals character.... It is the speaker’s argumentative and deliberative ability that creates *ēthos* as a by-product.... It is that act of deliberation that the audience trusts.”<sup>52</sup> *Ēthos*, then, is not a cosmetic application sitting on the surface of the body of persuasion that is *logos*. If the enthymeme is the body of persuasion, an appeal to character is the blood: it runs through the body and is a vital component to the life of the organism.

A rhetor’s ability to convince the audience she has good sense is important, given that the starting point of the argument is not a necessary, self-evident truth. Because any number of *endoxa* could be the starting point for persuasion, the audience must trust the judgment guiding the speaker’s argument. The rhetor’s *ēthos* also persuades the audience the rhetor has good will and virtue. This engenders a kindly disposition in the audience that is more than a mere manipulation of the audience’s subrational feelings. Emotions have a rational component in Aristotelian psychology.<sup>53</sup> This entails that a rhetorician can artfully persuade the audience’s emotions rather than manipulate them by verbal force. It also explains why it would be a mistake to try to reduce rhetoric to enthymematic *logos* alone.

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<sup>49</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1355b23–24.

<sup>50</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1395a30–31; cf. 1408a37–38.

<sup>51</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1417b5–7.

<sup>52</sup> Eugene Garver, *Aristotle's Rhetoric: An Art of Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 151, 192–93.

<sup>53</sup> See Martha Nussbaum, “Aristotle on Emotions and Rational Persuasion,” in *Essays on Aristotle's Rhetoric*, 303–23. By contrast, Engberg-Pedersen’s view seems to be that appeals by *ēthos* and pathos are “regrettably necessary” for audiences that are not persuaded by *logos* (“Is There an Ethical Dimension in Aristotelian Rhetoric?” 125–26).

**ASSESSMENT: IS RHETORIC AN AMORAL ART?**

We are now positioned to see how Aristotle's naturalism can harmonize the apparently dissonant passages about *ēthos* with which we began. I argue that there is an ethical framework that surrounds, but does not inherently belong to, Aristotelian rhetoric. Aristotle's use of analogy when describing the ethical dimension of rhetoric suggests this, as does his account of persuasion.

I turn first to an analogy illustrating that rhetoric has an ethical orientation. In *Rhetoric* 1.2, Aristotle states, "[Rhetoric's] function is not to persuade but to see the available means of persuasion in each case, as is true also in all the other arts; for neither is it the function of medicine to create health but to promote this as much as possible; for it is nevertheless possible to treat well those who cannot recover health."<sup>54</sup> The analogy to health makes clear the contrast Aristotle draws between "persuasion" and "seeing the available means of persuasion in each case." The contrast is not between *actively persuading* an audience as opposed to *thinking about* what means one could use to persuade. Rather, the contrast is between achieving the best possible outcome, *regardless of one's actual situation*, and achieving the best possible outcome *given one's actual situation*. Like the actual practice of medicine tries to restore a given patient to the greatest state of health possible in her circumstances, rhetoric seeks to persuade, but always in light of what is possible, given character of the audience and the circumstances of the rhetorical moment. The analogy suggests that rhetoric does have an ethical orientation: like medicine aims at health, not disease, rhetoric aims at persuading the audience of what is virtuous, not vicious.

Second, there are limits to what rhetorical prowess can achieve: rhetoric is not an all-powerful force that can achieve whatever outcome it desires, no matter the circumstances:

In addition, it is clear that it is a function of one and the same art to see both the persuasive and the apparently persuasive, just as it is the function in dialectic to recognize both a syllogism and an apparent syllogism; for sophistry is not a matter of ability but of deliberate choice of specious arguments. In the case of rhetoric, however, there is the difference that one person will be called *rhētōr* on the basis of his knowledge and another on the basis of his deliberate choice....<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1355b9-12.

<sup>55</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1355b12-20.

Rhetoric involves seeing “the persuasive” and the “apparently persuasive.” At first glance, this calls into question the analogy to health. What is “apparently persuasive” would be what appears to be healthy, but is in fact unhealthy. If rhetoric *as rhetoric* deals with what is “apparently persuasive,” is it not amoral?

That one is a sophist on account of his choice rather than his ability does not help settle the matter. In dialectic a “dialectician” is one who uses valid “syllogisms,” while a “sophist” chooses to use invalid “apparent syllogisms.” In rhetoric, a “*rhētōr*” can be *either* one who knows what is persuasive and what is apparently persuasive, *or* one who chooses the persuasive and avoids the apparently persuasive. In other words, the term “*rhētōr*” is more ambiguous than “dialectician.” It does not have the inherently ethical orientation that the term “dialectician” has, though the passage does not rule out the possibility of using the term to refer to a virtuous speaker. Thus, we have here some evidence for an ethical orientation, but nothing conclusive.

Moreover, what is “persuasive” is itself complex. Four passages reveal why:

(1) “[H]umans have a natural disposition for the true and to a large extent hit on the truth; thus an ability to aim at commonly held opinions [*endoxa*] is a characteristic of one who also has a similar ability in regard to the truth.”<sup>56</sup>

(2) “[T]he true and the just are by nature stronger than their opposites, so that if judgments are not made in the right way the true and the just are necessarily defeated by their opposites. And this is worthy of censure.”<sup>57</sup>

(3) “[O]ne should be able to argue persuasively on either side of a question, just as in the use of syllogisms, not that we may actually do both (for one should not persuade what is debased) but in order that it may not escape our notice what the real state of the case is and that we ourselves may be able to refute if another person uses speech unjustly.”<sup>58</sup>

(4) “None of the other arts reasons in opposite directions; dialectic and rhetoric alone do this; for both are equally concerned with opposites. Of course the underlying facts are not equally good in each case; but the true and better ones are by nature always more productive of good syllogisms and, in a word, more persuasive.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1355a16–18.

<sup>57</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1355a24–25.

<sup>58</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1355a34–36.

<sup>59</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1355a45–47.

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The passages reinforce similar points: First, what is “true” is “better” and (or because it is?) in accord with “nature.” Second, what is true, better, and by nature is more persuasive. There is an apparent tension between these claims and the claim that “[p]ersuasion occurs through the arguments [*logoi*] when we show the truth *or the apparent truth* from whatever is persuasive in each case.”<sup>60</sup> The former claims that persuasion is connected to truth, nature, and what is best. The latter claims that persuasion attaches to what the audience perceives as true, and audiences can be wrong.

I suggest the tension can be resolved by looking to the naturalism affecting this general account of rhetoric. The selected passages assert what Aristotle defends elsewhere: what *is* by nature is coextensive with what is better. What makes a thing *be* is marked by what that thing has the natural potential to do. For the most part, natural potential unfolds into actual capabilities as a thing grows. A substance’s nature determines its range of potentials. For example, penguins naturally have the potential to keep warm in frigid water, but they do not have the potential to echolocate. For human beings, actualization is additionally determined by choices.

The more highly coordinated a substance is (both relative to its own natural potential and relative to the capabilities of other substances), the better it is. A thing is better than it would otherwise be if it has more highly coordinated activity. Actuality comes in degrees, and those degrees mark the degree of natural goodness a thing possesses. For example, a photosynthesizing plant that actively turns its external physical environment into energy engages in highly coordinated activity that leads to its own flourishing. This activity means the plant can *do* more than the dirt that surrounds its root system. Aristotle asserts that a qualitative ascription of “better” applies to the plant over the dirt due to its greater actualization. A thing’s given nature determines what it has the potential to do, and this degree of its coordinated activity—its state of actualization—marks its goodness. Moreover, that this life force is “good” is a metaphysical feature that applies to the plant *qua* plant; it is not a reflection of one’s subjective view of the good of the plant. My suggestion is that this underlying metaphysics of goodness and its attendant teleology is why Aristotle repeatedly claims in the *Rhetoric* that what is best by nature is also what is persuasive. If flourishing is bound up with our natural goodness, and we are in some sense attracted to what is naturally

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<sup>60</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1356a23–25.

good, then audiences will generally find claims that comport with natural goodness to be persuasive.

As such, rhetoric is always practiced in the context of human deliberation about the best course of action regarding a practical matter. Rhetorical contexts concern human beings, who have a nature that formally directs their state of flourishing. This teleology affects what people find attractive and persuasive, and it supplies the rhetorician—from outside the art proper—with the fodder for crafting persuasive appeals—which are inside the purview of the art of rhetoric. Rhetoric's natural context, in other words, supplies rhetoric with its ethical orientation. This is how we make sense of Aristotle's repeated claims that rhetors ought to pursue what is just, that what is true and just is always more persuasive, and that audiences have a natural ability to recognize such appeals.<sup>61</sup> If natural goodness frames the art of rhetoric, then rhetoric can be the art that sees the persuasive and the apparently persuasive *while also* having an orientation toward the ethical and the just.

Rhetoric, then, has both a moral and amoral dimension. Considered as an art in abstraction from the context in which it always occurs, it is an amoral art. However, its amorality is only an abstraction. In practice, rhetoric always occurs in a natural context that supplies it with an ethical orientation. Just as it is an abstraction to consider the matter of a natural, bodily substance apart from its form, it is an abstraction to consider the amoral art of rhetoric from its naturally good context.

## CONCLUSION

The *Rhetoric* offers a coherent and compelling account of persuasive speech in light of its rival alternatives. Unlike Parmenides's goddess, who distinguishes philosophical logos from the 'mere words' of common opinions, Aristotle carves out a legitimate place for "relaxed logos," the logos of the rhetorical enthymeme that begins with *endoxa*. The theory of rhetoric that emerges is grounded on *logos* but is not reducible to formally valid argumentation, and it rises above mere pandering or power-motivated deception.

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<sup>61</sup> Engberg-Pedersen, "Is There an Ethical Dimension in Aristotelian Rhetoric?" 124, comes closest to making this claim by calling Aristotelian rhetoric a language-game whose setting is "a case of search for factual, ethical, or political truth." However, the framework of a language-game is far less substantive than the ethical naturalism for which I am arguing. Wardy, "Aristotle and His Predecessors on Mixture," in *The Chain of Change: A Study of Aristotle's Physics VII* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), claims there is a connection of Aristotle's "dialectical method as an instrument for discovering absolute truth" to his "philosophical biology," but he does not make an explicit connection to rhetoric.

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Because rhetorical moments occur in concrete circumstances for which legitimate reasons can be given on both sides, the *Rhetoric* also maintains, against Zeno, that there are “proofs” that can be given on both sides of a debate. The ability to know what proofs will be most persuasive will depend on the rhetorician’s prudential ability to recognize the proclivities of his audience, the naturally best ends that apply to his topic, his ability to see powerful and brief reasons for pursuing those ends, and his ability to convey those views effectively. A speaker’s true *ēthos* and artistic appeals to *logos*, *pathos*, and *ēthos* each contribute to this ability.

Finally, while Socrates claims in the *Gorgias* that rhetoric only persuades in the absence of knowledge, the *Rhetoric* is more optimistic about the connection between *endoxa* and truth. The content for rhetorical arguments springs from the non-scientific *endoxa* that correlate with ethics and politics. In this sense, rhetoric does persuade in the absence of *scientific* knowledge. Yet common opinion and what human beings generally find persuasive are not necessarily opposed to such knowledge. The *Rhetoric*’s epistemic optimism about *endoxa* springs from Aristotle’s metaphysics of goodness. In general, common opinions will have some core content that aligns with what is true and naturally good, and this is why people hold these opinions in the first place. Appeals to *ēthos* and *pathos* that comport with natural goodness will likewise stand the best chance of persuading. As such, there is nothing untoward about a rhetor who begins with *endoxa* and crafts short arguments to persuade a general audience. The art of rhetoric is precisely what enables groups like this to deliberate well in concrete, time-bound circumstances. Practical contexts require that not all inquiry is confined to philosophical debate, and it is a strength of Aristotelian rhetoric that there is a form of *logos*-based persuasion that operates outside of these boundaries.

A successful rhetorician will generally have to operate within these same confines of natural goodness, not because the art of rhetoric requires it, but because the broader context in which rhetoric is practiced requires it. At the same time, the tie of rhetoric to natural goodness safeguards against the most cynical, sophistic view that words are tools of force whose content is subjective and whose purpose is to give the rhetorician power. The sophist turns out to doubly err, first by considering rhetoric to have no ethical framework, and, second by misunderstanding the telos of human nature to be power rather than virtue. As

such, the *Rhetoric* successfully preserves the integrity of the art of rhetoric by showing how it is neither sham philosophy nor mere sophistry.

I have argued that Aristotle's statement that rhetoric is about "seeing the available means of persuasion" is about sharpening the ability to see how to effect goodness in concrete situations. Because rhetorical *logos* involves cases where "there is room for doubt" and where there can be legitimate reasons given on both sides of a question, one needs good judgment to choose one's premises. This prudential judgment springs from the rhetorician's *ēthos*, not *logos*.

At the same time, because nature only works "for the most part," the *Rhetoric* can also accommodate rhetorical shortcomings. Common opinion is not always correct, and appeals by virtuous display character will not always win the day. An audience may, due to their own vice or ignorance, be unpersuaded by a virtuous display character.<sup>62</sup> It is also possible for a rhetorician to persuade using a virtuous display character that does not represent her true character. Knowing how to appeal to what the audience believes is a good character does not guarantee the rhetorician is good. A rhetor's selection of *endoxa* can be mere cleverness and not prudence. However, the framework of natural goodness that surrounds the *Rhetoric* implies that, for the most part, virtuous appeals will be more successful and prudence will be the surest way to craft one's display *ēthos* and enthymematic *logos*. This stands even if there is no guarantee that the rhetor's display of good sense and virtue is genuine. On the whole, however, the scales are tipped in favor of rhetorical appeals to and by virtue. In this sense, rhetoric is an "offshoot of dialectic and ethical studies (which is rightly called politics)."<sup>63</sup> The rhetor need not have scientific knowledge of ethics or politics, but he should know the *endoxa* about them.

If I am right then, contrary to what the present scholarship claims, Aristotle does provide a coherent and discernable response to the sophistic and philosophical alternatives to rhetoric. He has nuanced views about the kind of *logos* that pertains to persuasive speech, about natural goodness, and about how appeals by *ēthos* operate in this context. Taken together, I have argued that these positions entail any given rhetor is not necessarily amoral,

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<sup>62</sup> Wardy seems to deny this. He interprets the *Rhetoric's* claim that "because the true and the just are by nature stronger than their opposites" then failure to defend the true and the just "is worthy of censure" to mean that rhetorical losers are guilty of "stupidly squandering the advantage conferred on them by the rightness of their cause" (59; cf. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1355a26-27).

<sup>63</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1356a30-33.

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vicious, or virtuous. However, the art of rhetoric occurs within a natural context that means its right use is oriented toward virtue.

In summary, when Aristotle says, “[C]haracter is almost, so to speak, the most authoritative form of persuasion,” he appears to mean that character is authoritative because it establishes the bond of trust between the rhetor and the audience, thereby disposing the audience to be persuaded by enthymematic appeals. While character enters the rhetorical scene indirectly, through the body of the speech, initial trust in the rhetor’s authority disposes the audience to appreciate appeals by *logos*. Rhetorical situations require audiences to make judgments, which require good deliberation about immediate practicalities based on limited information. Audience members generally find themselves in a state of epistemic uncertainty, not being experts in the matter at hand. As a result, the audience is most likely to accept reasons given by those they trust. This trust comes from the rhetor’s display character as revealed in the body of the speech. If the audience and rhetor are both well formed, appeals by virtuous display character should be, in Aristotle’s word, “authoritative.”

At the same time, Aristotle is right to qualify his statement about the authority of display character. While the audience’s trust in the rhetor is powerful, it nevertheless surfaces through *logos* and disposes the audience to trust the conclusion drawn by the rhetor’s central kind of appeal: enthymematic *logos*. Appeals to *logos* remain at the heart of the *Rhetoric*’s teaching, and it is fitting that this is so. It is *logos*, after all, that most fully grasps what nature is and explains the epistemic optimism Aristotle places in common opinion and the reasonableness of appeals to *ēthos* and *pathos*. When tied to an effective display character and an audience capable of being persuaded by a virtuous appeal, rhetoric is a powerful art indeed.

# Russell Kirk on the Moral Imagination and Literary Studies

Darrell Falconburg

*This paper explores Russell Kirk as a conservative thinker who has insight not only into political thought but also the purpose of literary studies. As a man of letters, Kirk wrote extensively on the role of literature in shaping and passing down the moral imagination. Indeed, Kirk developed and applied Edmund Burke's concept of the "moral imagination" to the purpose of reading literature. This concept of the moral imagination, coined in Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France, suggests that the purpose of literature is closely related to the universal quest for meaning, tradition, and a greater understanding of human nature. For Kirk, literature has an important ethical purpose for both the human being and the commonwealth, and hence it cannot be reduced to the narrow-minded concerns of ideology. At its best, great literature passes down the moral imagination, thereby teaching persons what it means to be human and uniting them to a tradition that contains the wisdom of generations.*

## INTRODUCTION

Dr. Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind* (1953) earned him the reputation of a leading public intellectual of the twentieth century and a father of post-war American conservatism. As the *New York Times* wrote four years after his death in 1994, Kirk traced the history of conservative thought in Anglo-American civilization, thereby giving conservatives "an identity and a genealogy" that "catalyzed the postwar movement."<sup>1</sup> After publishing his magnum opus, Kirk earned a living primarily as an independent man of letters, authoring twenty-six non-fiction works, three novels, three collections of short stories, and thousands of essays and book reviews.<sup>2</sup> Today he is acknowledged as one of the most important conservative thinkers in American history, for without him, the conservative movement in this country would not have developed and flourished in the way that it did.

However, I do not here explore Russell Kirk's contributions to the American conservative movement, as great as they may be. Instead, I explore the relationship between Kirk's conservatism, the imagination, and literary studies. It should be noted that scholars

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<sup>1</sup> Patricia Cohen, "Leftist Scholars Look Right at Last, And Find a History," *The New York Times*, April 18, 1998, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/04/18/arts/leftist-scholars-look-right-at-last-and-find-a-history.html>.

<sup>2</sup> For these statistics and more background on Kirk, see Lee Trepanier, "Reflections on Russell Kirk," *Humanitas* 32, nos. 1 & 2 (2019): 5-13.

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have already written about the role of imagination in Kirk's conservatism.<sup>3</sup> Some literary scholars have even considered him to be related to the long history of imaginative writers who emphasize moral elements in literature.<sup>4</sup> Building on the insight of these scholars and others, I further consider Kirk's ideas about the purpose of reading literature. Although he did not put it this way, Kirk wanted to read literature without imposing onto the text the array of ideological "isms" that serve as "lenses" of literary interpretation. Instead, Kirk suggested returning to a more traditional approach to reading, one that allows the great authors to speak to us, giving us the wisdom that they, in their turn, received from reading those who went before them. For Kirk, great literature passes on the moral imagination, thereby conveying what it means to be human and uniting those who are living to a tradition that contains the wisdom of generations.

### RUSSELL KIRK'S IMAGINATIVE CONSERVATISM

Before exploring Russell Kirk's idea of the moral imagination in relation to literary studies, a clarification should be made about the nature of Kirk's conservative thought. Kirk's conservatism was something more than a mere political expression, for it went beyond practical politics and drew from the wellspring of the moral imagination. Even Kirk's magnum opus, *The Conservative Mind*, which gave new life and vigor to the conservative movement in America, was not intended to be a manifesto of policy positions. Instead, as

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<sup>3</sup> For a handful of the most notable treatments of Russell Kirk's life and contributions to conservatism, see George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (1976; repr., Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2017); James E. Person, *Russell Kirk: A Critical Biography of a Conservative Mind* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1999); W. Wesley McDonald, *Russell Kirk and the Age of Ideology* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2004); Gerald J. Russello, *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2007); John M. Pafford, *Russell Kirk* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013); For the most recent book-length treatment of Russell Kirk's life and thought, see Bradley J. Birzer, *Russell Kirk: American Conservative* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> For example, James Vanden Bosch, "Moral Criticism: Promises and Prospects," in *Contemporary Literary Theory: A Christian Appraisal*, ed. Walhout and Ryken (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 26, claims that Kirk can be counted among the "moral critics" of literature. Furthermore, Benjamin G. Lockerd connects Kirk's idea of the moral imagination to the history of literary theory. Within his paper, Lockerd does not suggest that Kirk is innovating or creating a literary theory per se. Instead, Lockerd claims that Kirk's theory of imagination has much in common with the literary theories of thinkers like C.S. Lewis and others. Kirk's theory of imagination led him to believe that good literature "trains the heart" and helps guard readers against the "defecated rationality" of thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau. For more, see Lockerd, "Introduction," in *Eliot and His Age: T.S. Eliot's Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century* by Russell Kirk (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2008); "Introduction," in *Enemies of the Permanent Things: Observations of Abnormality in Literature and Politics* by Russell Kirk (1984; repr., Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2016); "The Truth of Beauty," *The Imaginative Conservative*, July 5, 2016, <https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2016/07/truth-beauty-educating-moral-imagination.html>.

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Kirk said, it was a way to “wake the moral imagination through the evocative power of humane letters.”<sup>5</sup> Western civilization is in a crisis, but the solution is not to be found in political action alone. Although practical politics have a role, the deeper solution lies in the renewal of a religious and cultural conservatism that seeks to reinvigorate Western culture through the humanities.

In fact, it is impossible to understand Kirk’s conservatism without first acknowledging the role of imagination in informing his political thought. Referencing Russell Kirk’s imaginative conservatism, James M. Wilson writes that “its representative figures have been great writers; it emphasizes what Kirk called the imaginative nature of reality and moral judgment; and it ultimately reconciles reason and morality within the field of the dramatic, the poetic, the beautiful.”<sup>6</sup> The conservative emphasis on the imaginative nature of reality goes at least as far back as Edmund Burke, the founding father of Anglo-American conservatism, who wrote a treatise on aesthetics in 1757 called *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. For Burke, political thought is grounded on an understanding of aesthetics, and conservatism is grounded on a love of the beautiful. As Wilson puts it, Burke’s greatest insight was his recognition in the modern world of a “fundamental unity of being and beauty” as well as “reality and aesthetics.”<sup>7</sup> In this way, it is important to remember that Kirk, following Burke, understood that conservatism is both political and imaginative.

Russell Kirk’s *The Conservative Mind*, the greatest single expression of his conservative thought, was not a program of policy positions to be held by readers. To the contrary, it was a biographical list of mostly British and American theologians, philosophers, poets, statesmen, and men of letters who shared belief in what Kirk called the six “canons” of conservatism. Such thinkers included Edmund Burke, the first thinker described in Kirk’s magnum opus, as well as thinkers like John Adams, Alexis de Tocqueville, Orestes

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<sup>5</sup> Russell Kirk, *The Sword of Imagination: Memoirs of a Half-Century of Literary Conflict* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Conservative Classics, 2002), 166.

<sup>6</sup> Wilson’s article is autobiographical, yet it is helpful for anyone interested in the subject of Kirk’s conservatism and its relationship to literary studies. As a poet and literature professor, Wilson does an excellent job making thoughtful connections between conservatism, the imagination, and literary studies. Kirk is referenced in a few locations in Wilson’s article, and Kirk’s shadow is present throughout. See James Matthew Wilson, “The Drama of Cultural Conservatism,” *The Point*, September 3, 2010, <https://thepointmag.com/politics/the-drama-of-cultural-conservatism>. This article was incorporated into Wilson’s important book on this subject, which discusses the relationship between conservative thought and beauty. Wilson’s book deserves serious attention from anyone interested in the relationship between intellectual conservatism, aesthetics, and literature. For more, see James Matthew Wilson, *The Vision of the Soul: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in the Western Tradition* (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Wilson, “The Drama of Cultural Conservatism,” *The Point*, September 3, 2010.

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Brownson, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Nathaniel Hawthorne, John Henry Newman, Irving Babbitt, George Santayana, and T.S. Eliot. Kirk's initial six canons went as follows:

- 1) Belief in a transcendent order, or body of natural law, which rules society as well as conscience. Political problems, at bottom, are religious and moral problems....
- 2) Affection for the proliferating variety and mystery of human existence, as opposed to the narrowing uniformity, egalitarianism, and utilitarian aims of most radical systems....
- 3) Conviction that civilized society requires orders and classes, as against the notion of a "classless society." [...]
- 4) Persuasion that freedom and property are closely linked: separate property from private possession, and Leviathan becomes master of all. Economic levelling, [conservatives] maintain, is not economic progress....
- 5) Faith in prescription and distrust of "sophisters, calculators, and economists" who would reconstruct society upon abstract designs. Custom, convention, and old prescription are checks both upon man's anarchic impulse and upon the innovator's lust for power....
- 6) Recognition that change may not be salutary reform: hasty innovation may be a devouring conflagration, rather than a torch of progress."<sup>8</sup>

Nowhere does Kirk argue that conservatism should be reduced to a narrow list of policy positions, and nowhere does he recommend political action as the first and most important way to renew Western culture. Rather, the above canons of conservative thought represent the culmination of the "wisdom of humanity." The conservative, like Burke, is someone who

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<sup>8</sup> Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway Editions, 2019), 7-9. Kirk's initial publication of this book in 1953 did not include a chapter on T.S. Eliot. This was added in the second edition of the book which replaced Santayana with Eliot in the subtitle.

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defends ancient wisdom, who says old things in new ways to “fit the time.”<sup>9</sup> Kirk’s conservatism did not reject practical politics, but it also did not look to it as a savior of civilization. Practical politics, Kirk knew, must be supplemented with works of imaginative and cultural renewal. To borrow the words of Bradley Birzer, conservatism served as “a means, a mood, and an attitude to conserve, to preserve, and to pass on to future generations the best of the humane tradition” rather than to defend a particular political agenda or party.<sup>10</sup> Kirk was certainly a political thinker, but he did not begin his political thought with policy solutions to immediate problems. Instead, like Burke and others within the great tradition of Western politics, he first considered the nature of society, culture, and human nature.<sup>11</sup>

Given the nature of Kirk’s conservatism, it is no surprise that he had much to say about the purpose of reading great literature. Kirk frequently addressed the issue of a modern West that stands in peril, as well as the duty of teachers of humane letters to promote imaginative renewal. The West is in crisis in part because those currently living have neglected their responsibility to conserve and renew the inherited body of humane letters that nourishes human life with the wellspring of the moral imagination. In this way, Kirk’s comments on the purpose of reading were put forward within the context of an imaginative conservatism that sought to preserve the best of Western culture. His views on literary studies were, at their core, an extension of his conservative thought and of his belief that the moral imagination should be defended by conservatives in the modern world.

### RUSSELL KIRK’S MORAL IMAGINATION AND LITERARY STUDIES

Central to Russell Kirk’s political and literary thought is his concept of the “moral imagination.” This phrase was first used by the eighteenth-century statesman Edmund Burke in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) to describe what was under assault by the society-wrenching ideology of the French revolutionaries. Burke is best known as a

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<sup>9</sup> Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Birzer, *Russell Kirk*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Russell Kirk was a political thinker, but his political thought was deeply influenced by the wellspring of the humanities. As Edward E. Ericson writes, “When Kirk describes the purpose of *The Conservative Mind*, he says that ‘he meant to wake the moral imagination through the evocative power of humane letters’ and thus that this book, though often approached as a political manifesto that gave rise to a whole movement, the American conservative movement, in fact belongs to the category of *belles lettres*. And so, he describes himself as ‘more poet than professor.’ He is, in sum, a literary man—or, in an older term seldom used nowadays, a ‘Man of Letters.’” For more, see Ericson, “Solzhenitsyn, Russell Kirk, and the Moral Imagination,” *Modern Age*, October 8, 2014, <https://isi.org/modern-age/solzhenitsyn-russell-kirk-and-the-moral-imagination>.

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political thinker, yet he was likewise someone who placed imagination at the forefront of his political thought. When discussing either his conservatism or views on literature, Kirk often referenced Burke's *Reflections*, clarifying that his own idea of the moral imagination had its origin with Burke. As such, it is fitting to cite at length one of Kirk's favorite excerpts from Burke:

All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the superadded ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a *moral imagination*, which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked, shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion.

On this scheme of things, a king is but a man, a queen is but a woman; a woman is but an animal, and an animal not of the highest order. All homage paid to the sex in general as such, and without distinct views, is to be regarded as romance and folly.... On the scheme of this barbarous philosophy, which is the offspring of cold hearts and muddy understandings, and which is as void of solid wisdom as it is destitute of all taste and elegance, laws are to be supported only by their own terrors, and by the concern which each individual may find in them from his own private speculations, or can spare to them from his own private interests.<sup>12</sup>

Burke associated the moral imagination with the “sentiments which beautify and soften private society.”<sup>13</sup> It is by means of the imagination that a person can understand reality and find both beauty and meaning within it. Moral principles embody themselves in historical circumstances and in a tradition, and it is by means of the imagination that such principles are intuited. Without the moral imagination, a human being will not be able to know who he really is—a person whose existence in political society is a historical and moral existence. The human being, Burke taught, is not merely the free and rational individual of the *philosophes*. A person without the moral imagination will be deprived of the enduring truths that give order and meaning to human life and, in the end, will become miserable. Eventually, as Wilson puts it, a person without the moral imagination will become cut off from “tradition, community, order, intellect, and the sacred.”<sup>14</sup>

Commenting on this excerpt from Edmund Burke's *Reflections*, Kirk defined the phrase “moral imagination” as the “power of ethical perception” which can see beyond “the barriers

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<sup>12</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. L.G. Mitchell (1790; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 77-78.

<sup>13</sup> Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 77-78.

<sup>14</sup> Wilson, “The Drama of Cultural Conservatism,” *The Point*, September 3, 2010.

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of private experience and momentary events,” especially as this power is “exercised in poetry and art.”<sup>15</sup> The moral imagination can thus be understood as the ability to intuit the relationship of the self to both the past and the transcendent, informing persons that there is more to reality than personal experience and private rationality. Since it unites persons to the past and to God, the moral imagination promotes “right order in the soul and right order in the commonwealth.”<sup>16</sup> The moral imagination is not the gift of one person, nor is it something that can be attained if a person relies only on his own individual experience or rationality. It is instead the work of “centuries of human consciousness” across space and time.<sup>17</sup> Without the moral imagination, Kirk implied that persons will be unable to discover the meaning of their life or the human flourishing that they seek.<sup>18</sup> One might even say that Kirk’s conservatism as well as his entire life work was, at its core, an attempt to reawaken the moral imagination in the modern world.

Jonathan Jones unpacks the phrase moral imagination in a 2009 article in *First Things*, further clarifying the term as it is frequently used by Kirk. Jones’s definition is helpful for anyone who wishes to better understand what Kirk meant by the phrase:

It can be defined as a uniquely human ability to conceive of fellow humanity as moral beings and as persons, not as objects whose value rests in utility or usefulness. It is a process by which a self “creates” metaphor from images recorded by the senses and stored in memory, which are then occupied to find and suppose moral correspondences in experience. An intuitive ability to perceive ethical truths and abiding law in the midst of chaotic experience, the moral imagination should be an aspiration to a proper ordering of the soul and, consequently, of the commonwealth. In this conception, to be a citizen is not to be an autonomous individual; it is a status given by a born existence into a world of relations to others. To be fully human is to embrace the duties and obligations toward a purpose of security and endurance for, first and foremost, the family and the local community. Success is measured by the development of character, not the fleeting emotions of status. Thinking “sacramentally,” (meaning humans are connected with a sacramental order of creation, a configuration of the mind in communion with the divine and beyond the rational) this is a sense that nature was created in such a manner that humans can draw “true analogies,” wisdom inaccessible by scientific method. Lived experiences, registered in memory and conjured through other experiences, can be interpreted

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<sup>15</sup> Russell Kirk, “The Perversity of Recent Fiction: Reflections on the Moral Imagination,” in *Redeeming the Time*, ed. Jeffrey O. Nelson (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2006), 71.

<sup>16</sup> Kirk, “The Perversity of Recent Fiction,” in *Redeeming the Time*, 71.

<sup>17</sup> Kirk, “The Perversity of Recent Fiction,” in *Redeeming the Time*, 71.

<sup>18</sup> Kirk, “The Perversity of Recent Fiction,” in *Redeeming the Time*, 71.

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through imagination so that memories may become images, analogous to the experience.<sup>19</sup>

Central to the moral imagination is the recognition that human beings are more than mere political or economic agents participating in elections or the economy. It is for this reason that Kirk warned conservatives against “over-indulging their fascination with economics,” and it is thus no surprise that Kirk’s career was not concerned exclusively with legislative or economic causes.<sup>20</sup> The moral imagination reminds persons of the “ethical truths” discernable amid seemingly chaotic experiences. It reminds them that they are not “autonomous individuals” but instead spiritual beings in communion with each other and with God. Jones implies in his definition that the moral imagination helps persons to live fully human lives, remembering that they are lower than the angels yet higher than the animals in a great chain of being. The moral imagination drapes persons with the power of ethical perception that unites them to one another and to eternity.

According to Birzer, Kirk’s idea of the moral imagination was inseparable from “the mythologies” passed down from generation to generation. The great storytellers of the West had built on each other, drawing from a source higher than any one of them, from a source “unknown and perhaps unknowable.”<sup>21</sup> As Kirk himself put it, the moral imagination was the gift of writers like “Plato and Vergil and Dante,” all of whom drew from centuries of human consciousness and expressed the moral imagination afresh from age to age.<sup>22</sup> Birzer notes that Kirk could have added “Sophocles, Aristotle, Thucydides, Tacitus ... Cicero, Hesiod, Shakespeare, Dryden, Pope, Chesterton, Lewis, Tolkien, O’Connor, and Bradbury” to this list of thinkers who passed on the moral imagination with particular vigor, who gave their generation a “sense of wonder.”<sup>23</sup> It is worth emphasizing here that the majority of these

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<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Jones, “Defining the Moral Imagination,” *First Things*, July 1, 2009, <https://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2009/07/defining-moral-imagination>.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted by Gleaves Whitney, “The Swords of the Imagination: Russell Kirk’s Battle with Modernity,” *Modern Age* 43, no. 4 (Fall 2001): 316.

<sup>21</sup> Birzer, *Russell Kirk*, 241-42.

<sup>22</sup> Kirk, “The Perversity of Recent Fiction,” in *Redeeming the Time*, 71. It is worth noting that Kirk does not consider Plato a “projector of fantastic schemes, but instead a man intent upon opening other men’s eyes to the higher realities of human existence.” Rather than being an advocate for political utopianism, Plato is considered by Kirk to be a man who “endeavored to renew the vitality of Greek society by deepening its religious understanding.” He sought to recover “order in the soul” and “order in the polis,” and is thus considered one of the great authors who passed down the moral imagination. For more, see Kirk, *The Roots of American Order* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2003), 75-77.

<sup>23</sup> Birzer, *Russell Kirk*, 241-42.

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thinkers who passed down the moral imagination were storytellers, either historical or imaginative. Kirk would agree that it is largely through stories that the moral imagination is passed down, for it is in stories that meaning and universal truths are communicated. What many conservatives perceive as the decline of Western civilization, in other words, is inseparable from the decline of the story.

Kirk knew that great literature cultivates the moral imagination, yet bad literature cultivates worse kinds of imagination. He therefore contrasted the moral imagination with two others: the idyllic and the diabolic. The first of these, the idyllic, is promoted by bad literature and literary theory tainted by ideology. The idyllic imagination can be understood as the ideological imagination, the kind formed by political fanaticism and the desire for utopia.<sup>24</sup> The idyllic imagination was coined by Irving Babbitt in reference to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Enlightenment political philosopher whose writings influenced aspects of the French Revolution. For Kirk, Rousseau's idyllic imagination can be defined as the kind which "rejects old dogmas and old manners" and "rejoices in the notion of emancipation from duty and convention."<sup>25</sup> Although Kirk did not put it this way, it might be added that the idyllic imagination belongs to those who reduce the purpose of reading literature to discovering material or political forces behind the creation of a literary work. In other words, the idyllic imagination belongs to literary critics whose primary interpretive lens is that of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. These critics wish to strip literature of its capacity to convey universal truths about human nature and the place of the human being within the cosmos. Instead of valuing a piece of literature for its beauty and truth, such critics wish to deconstruct a text from the standpoint of an "ism."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> For Kirk, "ideology" is not a synonym for "ideas" or "principles." Ideology is a precise term to describe the political fanaticism and political "abstraction" denounced by Edmund Burke and thereafter by the Anglo-American conservative tradition. The ideologue, according to Kirk, believes that society can be transformed into a utopia by means of positive law and central planning. Rather than looking to historical experience and imagination, the ideologue theorizes abstract ideas and tries to engineer society accordingly. In contrast, conservatism is not an ideology but instead an approach to understanding the civil social order. For more, see Kirk, "The Drug of Ideology," in *The Essential Russell Kirk*, ed. George A. Panichas (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2007), 348-49.

<sup>25</sup> Kirk, "The Perversity of Recent Fiction," in *Redeeming the Time*, 72.

<sup>26</sup> Kirk criticizes Marxist critics and writers for devoting their talent "almost exclusively to the service of state propaganda and the Communist Party's interests." Marxist critics of literature, like other literary critics with the idyllic imagination, do not believe that literature can reveal universal truths about reality or human nature. Instead, the function of literature for the Marxist critic is to "reflect the class struggle and the mission of the writer to advance the cause of the proletarian revolution." Such critics replace the search for truth with an attempt to impose a political ideology onto the text. See Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things: Observations of Abnormality in Literature and Politics* (1984; repr., Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2016), 72-73.

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Second, the moral imagination can be contrasted with the diabolic, a concept discussed by T.S. Eliot in *After Strange Gods*. As something distinct from the moral imagination of Western civilization and the idyllic imagination of Rousseau, the diabolic imagination delights in the perverse, subhuman, violent, demonic, sensational, and pornographic.<sup>27</sup> Referencing Eliot, Kirk wrote that the diabolic is the imagination of authors and critics who have no ability to discriminate between good and evil. The diabolic imagination strips human beings of their dignity, convincing them that they are not made in God's image. Instead, as Gleaves Whitney puts it, the diabolic imagination teaches that human beings are merely an accident, a mere "collocation of atoms" who are "striving for pleasure and shrinking from pain." If the idyllic imagination is captured in the thought of Rousseau, says Whitney, then the diabolic imagination is captured in the thought of Marquis de Sade.<sup>28</sup> According to Kirk, the diabolic imagination is what controls popular television and media, making many films and popular images "nastily pornographic."<sup>29</sup> In the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, modern men and women cannot escape pornographic portrayals of sex, sensational violence, and despair in popular literature and the media. Describing the triumph of the diabolic imagination, Kirk quoted W.B. Yeats: "The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned."<sup>30</sup>

With this idea of the moral imagination in mind, as well as the idyllic and diabolic, it is possible to see how the moral imagination relates to the purpose of reading great works of humane literature. For Kirk, the purpose of literary studies is the "expression of the moral imagination."<sup>31</sup> Put differently, "the end of great books is ethical—to teach us what it means to be genuinely human." Here Kirk conveyed the layered and vital task of humane letters in the formation of society and the human being. He did not, of course, believe that literature should be reduced to being a means of moralizing without regard for the quality of the writing itself, as critics of Kirk's moral vision of literary studies might assert. Instead, conveying the moral imagination through great works of literature requires beautifully and skillfully depicting human nature. For Kirk, cultivating the moral imagination is a far more noble purpose for literature than the many idyllic or diabolic purposes underlying many books

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<sup>27</sup> Kirk, "The Perversity of Recent Fiction," in *Redeeming the Time*, 72.

<sup>28</sup> Whitney, "The Swords of the Imagination: Russell Kirk's Battle with Modernity," 317.

<sup>29</sup> Kirk, "The Perversity of Recent Fiction," in *Redeeming the Time*, 72-73.

<sup>30</sup> Kirk, "The Perversity of Recent Fiction," in *Redeeming the Time*, 73.

<sup>31</sup> Kirk, "The Perversity of Recent Fiction," in *Redeeming the Time*, 73.

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published today, such as engaging in political awakening or providing sensual pleasure. This ancient humanistic purpose of literature was acknowledged by virtually all men and women of letters before the twentieth century. “Until very recent years, men took it for granted that literature exists to form the normative consciousness,” wrote Kirk. Literature exists “to teach human beings their true nature, their dignity, and their place in the scheme of things.”<sup>32</sup>

James Vanden Bosch writes in *Contemporary Literary Theory: A Christian Appraisal* that Kirk’s idea of the moral imagination relates to a traditional school of “moral criticism.”<sup>33</sup> According to Bosch, all “moral critics” share one fundamental concern. That is, they are concerned with the universal moral value of literature and, relatedly, with how literature moves a person to act in his or her daily life. As Bosch puts it, they care to one degree or another about “the moral standard employed, the effects of literature upon an audience, and the nature of literature.” Although he did not himself develop it, Kirk’s writings on the moral imagination and literary studies mirror a traditional school of moral criticism. He was concerned with the moral principles communicated through a piece of literature, and he was also concerned with the effect, whether good or bad, that literature will have on readers.<sup>34</sup> For Kirk, to have a good effect on readers, literature should teach persons about the human experience. Thus, great works of literature are intended to humanize—to convey universal knowledge about “what it is to be fully human.”<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, the names “humanism” or “humanities” imply this humanizing purpose of great literature. Kirk noted that Irving Babbitt pointed out that the word humanities is derived from the Latin *humanitas*, an “ethical discipline, intended to develop the truly human person, the qualities of manliness, through the study of great books.”<sup>36</sup> The humanities are about human beings, especially their nature and the abiding questions about which they have always wondered. As Paul Krause defines it, the humanities range from the higher discipline of philosophy, the handmaiden of theology, down to the lower disciplines of literature, history, language, and the fine arts. Properly understood, the humanities are something that conservatives seek to preserve. Again, as Krause writes, conservatism seeks to preserve the

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<sup>32</sup> Kirk, “The Perversity of Recent Fiction,” in *Redeeming the Time*, 73.

<sup>33</sup> James Vanden Bosch, “Moral Criticism: Promises and Prospects,” in *Contemporary Literary Theory: A Christian Appraisal*, ed. Walhout and Ryken (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 26-27.

<sup>34</sup> Bosch, “Moral Criticism: Promises and Prospects,” in *Contemporary Literary Theory: A Christian Appraisal*, 34.

<sup>35</sup> Kirk, “The Perversity of Recent Fiction,” in *Redeeming the Time*, 74.

<sup>36</sup> Kirk, “The Perversity of Recent Fiction,” in *Redeeming the Time*, 74.

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best of culture. Yet anyone who loves culture must also love the humanities, which are the wellspring of culture. The death of the humanities, including great works of literature, really does mean the death of one's cultural patrimony, and it ultimately means the "death of the human."<sup>37</sup>

Quoting William Hamilton, Kirk therefore held that "man as an end" is the object of humane literature.<sup>38</sup> In this way, Kirk placed the human being as an end in himself rather than a means to an end. The primary purpose of reading great literature, wrote Kirk, is the "cultivation of the person's own intellect and imagination, for the person's own sake."<sup>39</sup> Great literature does not promise a good career or lots of money, yet it does teach what it is "to be a true human being, living within a moral order." According to Kirk, "great humane literature, joined to the religious impulse, has brought about what Pico della Mirandola called the 'dignity of man.'" Great literature reminds persons that they are "only a little lower than the angels," that they are made with dignity, and that they are worth cultivating for their own sake.<sup>40</sup> According to Kirk, such literature has a positive effect on civilization because it "searches the human heart" and finds in it "laws of moral existence" that separate human beings from the lower animals.<sup>41</sup>

In suggesting that literature reveals universal truths about what it means to be human, Russell Kirk's thought mirrors a traditional literary theory with roots stretching all the way back to the ancient world. In his *Poetics*, for instance, Aristotle wrote that literature "is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of

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<sup>37</sup> Paul Krause, "In Defense of the Humanities," *The Imaginative Conservative*, July 14, 2019, <https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2019/07/defense-humanities-paul-krause-timeless.html>. It should be noted that Kirk was steeped more in history and literature than in philosophy, even if philosophy is a "higher" discipline in a common Western understanding of the humanities. Kirk's mind was more historical and literary than it was purely philosophical. It is imagination, not reason, that has primacy in Kirk's thought. Kirk did, however, have an admiration for "philosophical historians" like Eric Voegelin, Christopher Dawson, John Lukacs, and others who combined "historical fact" with "a philosophical approach to the past." Such thinkers, as Gerald Russello puts it, attempted "to plumb the mysteries of the human condition." For more, see Russello, "Russell Kirk's Historical Imagination," *The Imaginative Conservative*, February 6, 2015, accessed online, <https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2015/02/russell-kirks-historical-imagination.html>.

<sup>38</sup> This was said within the context of a discussion on the purpose of liberal education in general, but the statement applies aptly to the purpose of reading literature as well. See Kirk, "The Conservative Purpose of Liberal Education," in *Redeeming the Time*, 42.

<sup>39</sup> Kirk, "The Conservative Purpose of Liberal Education," in *Redeeming the Time*, 43.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Russell Kirk, "Humane Learning in the Age of the Computer," in *Redeeming the Time*, 127.

<sup>41</sup> Kirk, "The Perversity of Recent Fiction," in *Redeeming the Time*, 75-76.

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the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singular.”<sup>42</sup> Literature, then, uses the particulars of a story to instruct persons about universal moral laws. Like Aristotle, Kirk understood that literature gives readers models of human nature, using the examples of greater and lesser characters to show something timeless about what it means to be human. Benjamin Lockerd argues that Kirk’s idea of the moral imagination mirrors an often-forgotten school of literary theory that includes thinkers like Horace, Aristotle, Dante, Sir Philip Sidney, T.S. Eliot, C.S. Lewis, and others, all of whom believe that there are universal moral truths that literature helps readers to discern.<sup>43</sup> Although Lockerd does not use the phrase “moral criticism” to describe Kirk’s approach to literature, he makes an argument like that of Bosch. Although Kirk did not himself develop any sort of literary theory, his ideas about the moral imagination and humane literature certainly do mirror the school of “moral criticism” developed by some of the above-mentioned thinkers.

In suggesting that literature is great when it imparts moral truths to readers, it is important to clarify that the moral effect is not the only one by which we judge the quality of a literary work. That great literature “delights and instructs” was implied by Aristotle and, centuries later, stated explicitly by the Roman poet Horace.<sup>44</sup> Literature must also be beautiful and aesthetically excellent or else it will fail to engage readers. Kirk acknowledged the importance of aesthetic excellence in literature, establishing himself as an accomplished fiction writer, penning three full-length novels and numerous short stories. It can be argued that Kirk’s fiction is another of his attempts to renew the moral imagination in readers. For whatever reason, some people are surprised to learn that Kirk had success in the literary world, leading Kirk to note in his memoir *The Sword of Imagination* that many readers assumed there were “two scribbling Russell Kirks: one who wrote grave historical and political works and essays for the literary and scholarly journals, and another who wrote *Old House of Fear* and published uncanny tales in *London Mystery Magazine* and in *Fantasy and Science Fiction*.”<sup>45</sup> Yet for those who understand the role of imagination in his political thought, Kirk’s literary endeavors come as no surprise. Kirk did not earn success in the literary world because he

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<sup>42</sup> Aristotle, *On Poetics (De Poetica)*, ed. Mortimer J. Adler and Philip W. Goetz, trans. Ingram Bywater, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., vol. 8, in *The Great Books of the Western World: The Works of Aristotle* (repr., Chicago, IL: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1990), 686-87.

<sup>43</sup> Lockerd, “The Truth of Beauty,” *The Imaginative Conservative*, July 5, 2016.

<sup>44</sup> Horace, *Ars Poetica*, *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69381/ars-poetica>.

<sup>45</sup> Kirk, *The Sword of Imagination*, 251.

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preached conservatism through fiction but rather because his fiction was compelling. As Kirk put it, “imaginative persuasion, not blunt exhortation, commonly is the method of the literary champion of norms.”<sup>46</sup>

Great literature delights because it is beautifully written, skillfully showing what it means to be human. The writer may sometimes “write much more of what is evil than of what is good; and yet, exhibiting the depravity of human nature, he establishes in his reader’s mind the awareness that there exist enduring standards from which we fall away; and that fallen human nature is an ugly sight.”<sup>47</sup> It is often the case, in other words, that great literature shows ugliness and evil, yet not in celebration of them. Beneath such depictions of the grotesque and evil in our fallen nature is a disclosure of the reality of moral norms. Kirk knew that great literature helps readers see the truth about their own condition, even if their condition is fallen. A particularly striking example in the twentieth century comes from Kirk’s favorite contemporary writer, T.S. Eliot, whose poem *The Waste Land* describes the waste land of modern life. This poem shows fragmented images of the modern world, but beneath these fragmented images is a timeless depiction of the nature of man. Kirk explains this point in *Eliot and His Age*, claiming that “human nature is constant” and that “the same vices and the same virtues are at work in every age.”<sup>48</sup> Kirk would have agreed with Sir Roger Scruton who, in reference to *The Waste Land*, wrote that there is a universal nature to beauty. The human being needs beauty to feel at home in the world, said Scruton, and he or she needs beauty to see beyond this world to a place where our “immortal longings and our desire for perfection are finally answered.”<sup>49</sup>

It should be noted that Kirk emphasized the relationship between great literature, the moral imagination, and religious belief. In particular, the moral imagination opens readers up to religious belief, revealing to them the moral struggle of human existence. As Lockerd points out in his introduction to *Eliot and His Age*, Kirk “considered the idea that sound

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<sup>46</sup> Kirk, “The Perversity of Recent Fiction,” in *Redeeming the Time*, 75.

<sup>47</sup> Kirk, “The Perversity of Recent Fiction,” in *Redeeming the Time*, 74-75.

<sup>48</sup> Kirk, *Eliot and His Age: T.S. Eliot’s Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century* (1971; repr., Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2008), 69.

<sup>49</sup> Roger Scruton, *Beauty: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 145. Beauty and the moral imagination are also the topic of a recent article by Jared Zimmerer, “Beauty, Order, and the Moral Imagination: The Aesthetics of Russell Kirk,” *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 24, no. 4 (Fall 2021): 88-115, who argues that Kirk can be considered someone whose writings consistently allude to the role of imagination and beauty in human life.

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religious belief makes for good imaginative writing but found the relationship between the two more complicated.” The good writer shows readers what it feels like to adhere to a religious belief, and he often shows these beliefs by embodying them, like Dante did, in the literature itself.<sup>50</sup> For example, the moral imagination reminds readers of the reality of Original Sin. Yet the idyllic imagination of Rousseau often views human nature as perfectible, unaffected by the reality of sin. As Lockerd suggests, the idyllic imagination promises that earthly utopias can be brought about by “rational ideological programs,” yet such promises almost always result in disorder and violence. The moral imagination, in contrast, passes on a less utopian view of human nature and a more realistic portrayal of human existence in literature. Recognizing that fallen humans cannot be perfected, it does not promise an earthly utopia by means of political action and revolution.<sup>51</sup>

Flannery O’Connor, like T.S. Eliot, is another contemporary writer whose moral imagination was not friendly to utopianism. According to Kirk, O’Connor agreed with T.S. Eliot that the poet’s advantage “is to be able to see beneath both beauty and ugliness; to see the boredom, and the horror, and the glory.”<sup>52</sup> O’Connor was not a progressive or sentimentalist, nor was she a fan of utopian political programs that promise Heaven on Earth. “A good man is hard to find,” said Kirk, quoting the title of one of O’Connor’s stories, for in “Adam’s fall we sinned all.”<sup>53</sup> Man’s fallen nature cannot be reversed by tearing down old institutions, customs, and traditions in search for a future utopia. Fallen man, stained by pride and original sin, cannot save himself through political activism or overthrowing an old order. Evil in the world should be resisted, but resistance to such evil will only find success when persons once again make God the center of their existence. Like Eliot, O’Connor depicted the reality of man’s nature and the decaying condition of the modern world, and, again like Eliot, she knew that religious faith is needed for man’s earthly existence to be tolerable. Above all, she knew a fundamental truth about the human being that Kirk developed throughout his life: that order in the soul and order in the commonwealth develop in parallel

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<sup>50</sup> Lockerd, “Introduction,” in *Eliot and His Age: T.S. Eliot’s Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century* by Russell Kirk (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2008), xx-xxiv.

<sup>51</sup> Lockerd, “Introduction,” in *Eliot and His Age*, xx-xxiv.

<sup>52</sup> Kirk, “Criminal Character and Mercy,” in *The Essential Russell Kirk*, ed. George A. Panichas (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2007), 341.

<sup>53</sup> Kirk, “Criminal Character and Mercy,” in *The Essential Russell Kirk*, 342.

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fashion. Without moral order in the soul, in other words, there can be no order in the commonwealth.

For Kirk, the moral imagination and its relationship to literary studies is complex and a worthy subject of consideration. Yet Kirk's views on literature and the moral imagination are not just something fit for academic writing or commentary but are something of even greater value when lived out, when they shape real people and enrich their actual lives. In addition to writing about great literature, and in addition to writing imaginative literature himself, Kirk often read aloud to his visitors and his family. In a tribute after her father's death, Cecilia Kirk Nelson wrote that her father understood the significance of stories. In particular, she wrote that great stories "feed man's imagination," even if they do not always mean to. Although stories are "primarily to entertain, good stories simultaneously embody an understanding or a glimpse of truth. In conveying wisdom and providing insight, they reveal what it means to be human." Cecilia's father was able to awaken in her the moral imagination at a young age by immersing her in humane literature, thereby teaching her "the enduring qualities of human nature." In addition, great literature was able to impart to her a "cultural legacy" that included the "wisdom of generations."<sup>54</sup>

Cecilia's comments about the purpose of great literature mirror the views of her father. In his pamphlet "Humane Literature for Young Readers," Kirk reiterated that great literature has no guarantee of bringing about "material success or earthly power."<sup>55</sup> What great literature guarantees is far more important and meaningful, instead providing greater knowledge about "what it means to be a real man or a real woman." Put differently, it "helps us to develop into full human beings." Kirk encouraged readers to consider the preface to Hans Christian Andersen's "The Snow Queen," in which Andersen discusses the splintered mirror of distortion and mockery. If we raise one or two generations deprived of the moral imagination that great literature nourishes, then civilization will soon be victim to the freezing Snow Queen's palace. As Kirk put it, if men and women "have languished too long in that permafrost, not even little Gerda's sacrificing love may redeem them."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Cecilia Kirk Nelson, "A Literary Patrimony," *Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal*, November 13, 2011, <https://kirkcenter.org/best/a-literary-patrimony/>.

<sup>55</sup> Russell Kirk, "Humane Letters for Young Readers" (1979), *The Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal*, <https://kirkcenter.org/kirk-essay-humane-literature-for-young-readers/>.

<sup>56</sup> Kirk, "Humane Letters for Young Readers" (1979), *The Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal*.

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### RUSSELL KIRK, TRADITION, AND LITERARY MORALS

Russell Kirk's idea of the moral imagination has a complex and noteworthy relationship with literary studies. Yet it is important to remember that Kirk's ideas about literary studies were put forth within the context of a conservative thought that valued the moral imagination. For Kirk, the conservative is someone who seeks permanence rather than reckless change in society. Unlike the progressive, conservatives today do not look forward to the glories of a perfect future. Instead, the conservative relies on "custom, habit, and established institutions."<sup>57</sup> As James M. Wilson puts it, modern Anglo-American conservatives view themselves as "voices of truth, goodness, and beauty drowned by the tide of modern revolution."<sup>58</sup> In a certain sense, then, Kirk's idea of the moral imagination helps establish a conservative and non-ideological approach to reading literature.

Indeed, Kirk's ideas about the moral imagination and literary studies provide a critique of the present assumption that ancient wisdom cannot speak to the modern world. Wilson describes the conservative underpinnings of Kirk's political and literary views:

It was Burke's genius to recognize in the modern context this fundamental unity of being and beauty, reality and aesthetics, which partially explains what he intended in coining the phrase, "the moral imagination." He saw the modern world coming into being along simpler lines—a mechanical rationalism, a utilitarian ethics, a "procedural" aesthetics that valued only force and efficacy, neglecting custom, ritual and all other accouterments of received traditions. The conservative tradition has itself constituted the punctuated, uneven development of these insights in the face of liberal modernity's continuous march toward a society without a past, a rational order disencumbered of inheritance, a rationalism that knows nothing of the heart much less of the intellect's higher aspirations. Burke, thus, gave us "culture," a concept by which modernity could be critiqued for its failure to receive the sacred cultus of the past and its failure to cultivate with care the legacy of past and present in hopes of securing it for future generations. While any people may have a culture, it is the conservative who truly understands what "culture" means.<sup>59</sup>

Hence, Kirk's idea of the moral imagination was a response to the march toward what many perceive as a utopian future, yet what is really a dystopian world without a cultural inheritance. The utopian, who seeks to engineer society and separate the current generation

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<sup>57</sup> Kirk, "Permanence and Change" (1989), *The Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal*, <https://kirkcenter.org/kirk-essays/kirk-essay-permanence-and-change>.

<sup>58</sup> Wilson, "The Drama of Cultural Conservatism," *The Point*, September 3, 2010.

<sup>59</sup> Wilson, "The Drama of Cultural Conservatism," *The Point*, September 3, 2010.

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from the past, risks endangering the “patrimony of civilization.”<sup>60</sup> Such persons want to rush forward to a future without the misery and injustices of the past, and they want to do so by tearing down old norms and institutions. Almost three decades after Kirk’s death, “woke” and “cancel-culture” fanaticism is increasingly common, promising an earthly utopia and seeking to dismantle the Western canon. Yet the “rash endeavor to break through into an imagined future of universal happiness” is a dangerous one, for utopian revolutions result, eventually, in widespread misery. The “abstract cult of Progress,” which holds that the new is necessarily preferable to the old, represents a threat to the survival of a culture.<sup>61</sup> Great literature, however, stands athwart the cult of Progress by uniting modern persons to a tradition. Kirk knew there are times of historical progress, and he would most certainly concede that the modern world has in many ways progressed. But there are also times of decline, especially in the spheres of religion and culture, and such decline inevitably comes when a civilization forgets ancient wisdom.

Kirk’s idea of the moral imagination relates to Edmund Burke’s idea of an “eternal society.” For Burke, what we call “society” includes all people who are born into a particular place and who find themselves in a web of relationships that extend across time. Again, one of Kirk’s favorite lines from Burke’s *Reflections* is worth quoting at length:

As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born. Each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primeval contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher nature, connecting the visible and invisible world, according to a fixed compact sanctioned by the inviolable oath which holds all physical and all moral natures, each in their appointed place.<sup>62</sup>

By uniting the present and past as well as the visible and invisible world, the moral imagination helps to ground persons in a tradition, one that is contractually binding on all parties. As Kirk put it, commenting on Burke’s *Reflections*, “this immortal contract is made between God and mankind,” as well as “between the generations that have perished from the earth, and the generation that is living now, and the generations that are yet to come.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Kirk, “Permanence and Change” (1989).

<sup>61</sup> Kirk, “Permanence and Change” (1989).

<sup>62</sup> Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 96-97.

<sup>63</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 17.

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This contract is like a “covenant” binding upon all, and nobody has a right to break it. If someone does break it, then everyone in society suffers as a result. Indeed, Burke held that society is not merely made up of individuals who are currently living. Instead, society is made up of those “who are living, those who are dead, and those who are yet to be born.”<sup>64</sup>

If someone breaks this eternal contract between the dead, the living, and the unborn, then the consequences will be severe. As Burke warned, if this law of continuity is broken, “nature is disobeyed, and the rebellious are outlawed, cast forth, and exiled, from this world of reason, and order, and peace, and virtue, and fruitful penitence, into the antagonist world of madness, discord, vice, confusion, and unavailing sorrow.”<sup>65</sup> This is the punishment of the modern world, remarked Kirk, precisely because we moderns have “thrown away the literary heritage of the past” and have “broken with the moral and social prescription of traditional civil social existence.”<sup>66</sup> The continuity of great literature is one of the most important influences that unite one generation to another. Yet most teachers of literature have forgotten or rejected this important influence of literature, wrote Kirk, and hence they have ceased to acknowledge their duty to promulgate an inherited body of learning. The eternal contract has been broken due to what may be called the “treason of the English teacher.”<sup>67</sup>

Kirk’s idea of the moral imagination therefore relates to a point made by T.S. Eliot in *Tradition and the Individual Talent*. Eliot believed that great writers have the whole of past literature in their bones, and they are aware of the “larger mind which transcends the private mind.”<sup>68</sup> Eliot’s moral imagination was shaped by his adherence to literary tradition – to the “mind of Europe” and to the mind of his own country. Eliot held that the great author writes “not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.”<sup>69</sup> An author’s significance relates not just to giving voice to those who are living but also to those who are dead. Tradition, which can also be called the historical sense, is a “sense of the timeless as well as

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<sup>64</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 17.

<sup>65</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 62.

<sup>66</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 62.

<sup>67</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 62. Here Kirk is probably alluding to Julien Benda’s *La Trahison Des Clercs* (1928), translated into English by Richard Aldington and titled *Treason of the Intellectuals*.

<sup>68</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 48.

<sup>69</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 48.

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of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together.” It is this historical sense that the great author successfully captures. In writing great literature, an author with the moral imagination realizes that he does not write in a historical vacuum as an autonomous individual. Instead, a great author writes in relation to the eternal society, which links God and mankind, as well as each generation, to each other.<sup>70</sup>

Indeed, it is worth repeating that Kirk’s understanding of the purpose of literature was greatly influenced by T.S. Eliot. Even *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, Kirk’s book on literature and politics, gets its name from Eliot. In the title of this book, Kirk references the “permanent things” of human existence, the unchanging patterns and norms of human nature that are necessary for civilized life. Following Eliot, Kirk believed that:

There are certain permanent things in society: the health of the family, inherited political institutions that ensure a measure of order and justice and freedom, a life of diversity and independence, a life marked by widespread possession of private property. These permanent things guarantee against arbitrary interference by the state. These are all aspects of conservative thought, which have developed gradually as the debate since the French Revolution has gone on.<sup>71</sup>

When Eliot and Kirk defended the permanent things, they defended the needs that must be met if human civilization is to flourish. It is the task of the modern conservative, equipped with the moral imagination, to defend the permanent things of human existence. Kirk taught that conservatives believe in moral standards and in the existence of an enduring moral order. It is thus the aim of the modern conservative to conserve the permanent things, in part by means of preserving the literary and religious heritage that has been handed down from past generations. Eliot’s powerful influence on Kirk can be seen by the fact that *Eliot and His Age* was among the books that Kirk was most proud of. It was Eliot, after all, who “perceived his age more poignantly than did anyone else in the republic of letters” and who established himself as “the principal champion of the moral imagination in the twentieth century.”<sup>72</sup> Kirk’s genius was not only his political thought but also his insight into culture and literature, which was influenced significantly by Eliot.

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<sup>70</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 48.

<sup>71</sup> Quoted by Lee Edwards, “The Marriage That Shaped American Conservatism,” *The Intercollegiate Studies Review*, August 20, 2019, <https://isi.org/intercollegiate-review/marriage-shaped-american-conservatism/>.

<sup>72</sup> Kirk, *Eliot and His Age*, 4.

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Kirk often described the importance of literature and the related role of teachers in transmitting ancient wisdom to new generations. As Kirk put it, the Western world must once again realize the “necessity of an elevated and uninterrupted literary tradition to sustain civilized existence.”<sup>73</sup> Without literary influences that promote continuity between present and past, civilization will soon fall apart. Kirk quotes Burke, claiming that in only a few generations civilized culture will “crumble away, be disconnected into the dust and powder of individuality, and at length dispersed to all the winds of heaven.”<sup>74</sup> Hence, Kirk asserts that it is the “high duty” of men and women of letters as well as of teachers of literature to remember the social importance of the Western literary tradition. In fact, Kirk argued that teachers of literature have a greater duty than even the politician in preserving the eternal society. It is literature, not practical politics, that provides the “cement of society” upon which old and new generations can together stand. Literature transmits “to every rising generation, century upon century, a body of ethical principles and critical standards and imaginative creations that constitutes a kind of collective intellect of humanity, the formalized wisdom of our ancestors.”<sup>75</sup> This is especially true in our current Western world where political and religious institutions no longer provide civilizational continuity. In a time when political and religious institutions are weakened, the responsibility of teachers of humane letters grows even greater, since they become, at times, one of the only means through which old wisdom is transmitted from one generation to another.<sup>76</sup>

Kirk also identified a relationship between literature, the moral imagination, and the natural law. According to this view, literature is an important way to reawaken an imagination that is aware of moral truths beyond the realm of private opinion. Along with revealed religion and received custom, literature reawakens the imagination to a “normative consciousness,” to the laws of human nature, which remain permanent. There are, in other words, standards against which behavior can be measured, and these standards extend beyond the subjective opinion of a single person or generation.

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<sup>73</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 61.

<sup>74</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 61.

<sup>75</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 63.

<sup>76</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 6.

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Kirk's definition of "norm" clarifies what great literature helps pass down:

When I write of a "norm," I do not mean a "value" merely. A value is the quality of worth. Many things are worthwhile that are not normative. When most writers nowadays employ the word "value" as a term of philosophy, moreover, they mean "subjective value"—that is, the quality of being worthwhile, of giving pleasure or satisfaction to individuals, without judgment upon the intrinsic, absolute, essential merit of the sensation or action in question; without reference to its objective deserts.... A norm has value, but has more than value. A norm endures in its own right, whether or not it gives pleasure to particular individuals. A norm is the standard against which any alleged value must be measured objectively.<sup>77</sup>

A norm, then, is not simply an opinion or a belief held by many people. To the contrary, it is a universal moral truth, passed on from one generation to the next, ignored by many writers in the modern world who try to put their worldview on the unstable ground of multiculturalism and moral relativism. Norms are truths that are timeless, universal, and sanctioned by a source higher than private opinion. For Kirk, there are certain moral laws for human beings that exist independent of personal opinions. "Though men may ignore or forget the norm," suggested Kirk, "still that norm does not cease to be, nor does it cease to influence men."<sup>78</sup> These universal norms are learned over time, not invented by an individual's private rationality or decreed because they have social utility. They are not merely the "fabrications" of previous generations but instead are the universal body of truths that have been discerned through the generations.<sup>79</sup>

Great literature awakens the moral imagination by showing persons the human experience and the norms of human nature. "By definition," said Kirk, "human nature is constant." The nature of the human being does not change, and it cannot be perfected by means of utopian political programs. "Because of that constancy," wrote Kirk, "men of vision are able to describe the norms, the rules, for mankind."<sup>80</sup> As Benjamin Lockerd points out, Kirk upheld the natural law tradition in moral philosophy, which maintains that some actions are consistent with our unchanging human nature and that other actions are not.<sup>81</sup> Lockerd continues: "Kirk names some of those norms: charity, justice, freedom, duty, temperance,

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<sup>77</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 8.

<sup>78</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 3.

<sup>79</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 3.

<sup>80</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 29.

<sup>81</sup> Lockerd, "Introduction," in *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, iii.

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prudence, fortitude. In a healthy society, individuals will attempt to live by these permanent norms of moral action, and the laws of the land will give support to citizens as they make that attempt.”<sup>82</sup> As Kirk wrote, “there exist law for man and law for things,” and in a healthy society these natural laws are recognized by citizens and legislators alike.<sup>83</sup> It is in part from a literary tradition that persons receive the moral imagination and, along with the moral imagination, knowledge of the laws of human nature.

### CONCLUSION

Russell Kirk was a conservative man of letters, and it is for his influence on the American conservative movement that he is usually remembered. Those familiar with the history of American conservatism know that Kirk played an important role in the resistance to progressivism in the twentieth century. Indeed, *The Conservative Mind* and the intellectual movement that this book helped inspire would eventually bear political fruit in the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. Eventually, Reagan even bestowed on Kirk the Presidential Citizens Medal for his contributions to American life. Of course, the influence of Kirk can also be seen in other political events, including the 1964 campaign of Barry Goldwater and the 1992 campaign of Patrick Buchanan.

In addition, Kirk will also continue to be remembered for the ways he recognized the relationship between politics and imagination. The conservative, he taught, must defend the norms and standards that have been the concern of poets and literary men from Homer onward. Throughout his career, Kirk followed in the footsteps of Edmund Burke, the father of Anglo-American conservatism and a statesman whose politics were grounded on an imaginative understanding of life. Specifically, Kirk developed Burke’s concept of the “moral imagination” and applied it to the purpose of literary studies. For Kirk, literature takes on an importance of great magnitude, reminding people what it means to be truly human. Literature becomes an important source of the moral imagination—an important countercurrent to ideology, to utopianism, and to the various attacks on the human person presented in the modern world.

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<sup>82</sup> Lockerd, “Introduction,” in *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, iii.

<sup>83</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 29.

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The moral imagination can be revived today through efforts to invigorate America's cultural and literary heritage. Such renewal is achieved by means of the arts and humanities, which serve to invigorate the imagination and combat the forces of cultural and political decay. In the Age of Augustus, for example, it was Virgil and his fellow poets who more than anyone invigorated the moral imagination in the Roman people, thereby combatting the forces of cultural and political disintegration around them. The renewal of the moral imagination must come prior to the renewal of the civil social order, since, as Kirk often remarked, order in the soul and order in the commonwealth are intimately related. The imagination of a people influences their sense of reality and of the meaning of life, thereby affecting the way that they think and act in the world around them. The imagination of a people therefore signals what will eventually become of the civil social order. As Kirk would say, "imagination, given time, does rule the world."<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, 115.

# Robert Frost and Donald Davidson: The Past, War, And Memory

Thomas H. Hubert

“For the life of the dead consists in the recollection cherished of them by the living.”—Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Philippics*, IX

The New Englander, Robert Frost (1874-1961), and the Southerner, Donald Davidson (1893-1968) were both political-cultural conservatives who, nevertheless, wrote from different perspectives conditioned in part by their respective regions. They were also friends who for some thirty years met each summer at the Bread Loaf School in Vermont beginning in 1931 and continuing until Frost’s death. If their views of the past, of war in general and the Civil War in particular, along with other issues, differ dramatically, they do so in part on account of obvious cultural and personal influences.

They each sought in his own way, in both poetry and prose, to rescue the past in general, and war in particular, from the ordinary passage of time, various distractions, and sheer indifference. Moreover they sought to articulate what it—*The War*—meant for those who lived through it and also what its meaning is for the present and posterity. What it meant for each poet himself is yet another consideration engaged by this essay (It makes no attempt to offer a comprehensive explication of Frost’s or Davidson’s views on war. As for Frost, that has already been admirably done by others cited later in the text).

A comparison of a few relevant works by each poet will illustrate how each advanced his own point of view with considerable artistry and at the same time acknowledged at least some merit in opposing views and values.<sup>1</sup> My purpose here is not to serve as a referee with a view

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Frost wrote fifteen or so poems which either take war as a subject or employ military images. The ones I consider here are “The Gift Outright,” “The Lost Faith,” and “The Black Cottage.” The comparable ones by Davidson are “The Sod of Battlefields,” “Lee in the Mountains,” and “Late Answer: A Civil War Seminar.” While Frost and Davidson as poets may not have directly engaged in a dialogue over issues pertaining to war in general or the Civil War in particular, yet from an esthetic perch afforded by time and distance we might imagine such a conversation taking place between them. That is, in a sense, what this essay attempts to do.

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toward reconciling such conflicts in one direction or another. Nor is it to articulate a detailed, interpretive critique of the work of the two men leading to a final poetic or political judgment. Rather, my intent is simply to compare and contrast their poems along thematic lines: most particularly the meaning of the past and the meaning of war in that past and its relevance to the present. A summary evaluation of their respective contributions will in closing be appropriate.

For both of our subjects the past is, in Faulknerian terms, never really past, unless of course one—or a whole people—forgets it, ignores it, or simply chooses to let it slip away. The poet often serves in the role of memory keeper, as an imaginative complement to the historian. The question for each poet is *what* exactly is to be remembered and *how* is it to be presented here and now and for the future? The “how” of that question will not have a simple, literal, historical answer. For a Donald Davidson, as an Unreconstructed Rebel, the answer will partake of myth as embedded partly in the pre-War South. And for the Yankee Frost the past, in particular that of the American War of 1861-65, while not “mythical” in the same sense, will carry a burden of storied meaning that even a Southerner can acknowledge and honor.<sup>2</sup>

What is of vital concern in any event is that the past—its cause, its moral dream, its meaning—especially as embodied in war not be lost for future generations. The two poets, differing in so many other ways, are on the same page on this point.

That each poet has a different understanding not only of the American past but of war itself should not be surprising. Some biographical narrative about each man will help to sort out that and other variants. While personal history does not answer all pertinent questions, it has a clear and direct bearing on each poet’s work. Robert Lee Frost, to use his full name, was indeed named by his Copperhead father after General Robert E. Lee. Will Frost as a teenager during the Civil War left home in Lawrence, Massachusetts to join up with the Army

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<sup>2</sup> The term *myth* may call for brief comment. It refers here to a symbolic narrative, containing notable personages and events, which may appear to be larger than life, but its main function lies in conveying meaning and purpose relating to a people. While this is hardly an adequate definition of the term, it will serve to distinguish it from a more common usage to designate something merely fictional. Davidson’s “Meditation on Literary Fame” helps to illustrate the difference: “Happy the land where men hold dear/Myth that is truest memory,/ Prophecy that is poetry,” *Poems, 1922-1961* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1961), 24. Cited throughout by page number in parenthesis.

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of Northern Virginia but was detained by the police in Philadelphia on his pilgrimage and sent back to angry parents.<sup>3</sup>

The mature Robert Frost later reflects trenchantly on General Lee and his strategic failings during the War, an assessment that is strikingly similar to that of Davidson's friend and fellow poet, Allen Tate. Here is Frost in a letter to a friend: "Lee was the tragic figure of a fighter who never saw anything beyond winning battles. His vision wasn't large enough for a whole war or even a campaign.... I am touched by Lee, so noble in character, so brilliant and punishing a smiter in the field, but so lost in the larger things of statesmanship and strategy.... [He would] have it out in Virginia win or lose.... He was parochial."<sup>4</sup>

As for Donald Davidson, his family connection to the War was mostly on the distaff side. His maternal grandmother Rebecca had lost two male friends to the Southern cause, one of whom (a fiancée) she had seen executed in cold blood by Yankee soldiers. It was a story her grandson was to use in "The Sod of Battlefields." Her family, residing in Chapel Hill, Tennessee, owned land adjacent to that of the Forrest family, kinfolk of Nathan Bedford Forrest, who grew up in Mississippi. Her father Elisha, along with his two sons, served with Forrest all four years of the War. During Reconstruction, Davidson's father and mother, both schoolteachers, met at a school in Mooresville where he was principal, married in 1892, and subsequently moved to Campbellsville where Davidson was born the next year.<sup>5</sup>

Regarding war in the twentieth century, specifically World War I, Robert Frost and Donald Davidson travelled two very different roads. Between 1912 and early 1915, Frost was in England associating with various literary figures of the period and tending to the publication of his first two books of poems, *A Boy's Will* and *North of Boston*, by an English publisher. Frost, 43 years old in 1917, never saw military service. Davidson by contrast, was

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Royden Winchell, "The Southernness of Robert Frost," *Sewanee Review* 119, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 91. Will Frost's exact age during his Confederate adventure is a bit of a mystery.

<sup>4</sup> Frost to Sidney Cox, c. July 9, 1934, *Selected Letters*, ed. Lawrance Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 411-12. It was during this same period (1933-34) that Davidson was writing and revising his "Lee in the Mountains," which he shared with Tate and Caroline Gordon. Here is Tate in much the same vein as Frost on Lee as general in April of 1929: "Lee's state rights provincialism ... led him to prefer doing his duty to winning the war—his duty being to Virginia alone," *Lyle-Tate Letters: The Correspondence of Andrew Lyle and Allen Tate*, ed. Thomas D. Young and Elizabeth Sarcone (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), 21. Frost also takes Lee to task on the issue of loyalty: "You have to ask yourself in the end, how far will you go when it comes to changing your allegiance," *Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1995), 800. It is clear that Frost means to imply that Lee went too far in changing his. This assumes, of course, that Lee's primary allegiance was to the Union rather than to Virginia—a moot point.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Royden Winchell, *Where No Flag Flies: Donald Davidson and the Southern Resistance* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 7-8.

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commissioned a second lieutenant in 1917 at the age of 24, spent time in both England and France in Co. E. 324th Infantry of the 81<sup>st</sup> Division of the U.S. Army. He saw combat in France during the ten months of his tour of duty there and after the Armistice spent the next seven months awaiting transport home. During that time Davidson recalls reading Frost's early poetry by candlelight while living with a peasant family in the Cote d'Or. Both the military experience and the reading of Frost's work were to remain with him for many years to come.<sup>6</sup>

The two poets entertained comparable, yet contrasting, views of the phenomenon of war and its purposes considered in historical terms. The poems themselves tell much of the story, but a brief overview may be useful. War for Frost was one of the key agents of nation building and national identity throughout American history. Accordingly, he has little use for pacifism in principle, as James Dubinsky notes in an essay also tracing the influence on Frost of William James's "The Moral Equivalent of War" (1910). The very idea of a "cold" war was unnatural to the poet.<sup>7</sup> It may in fact seem that Frost prefers war to peace as a permanent condition of existence, quite apart from what is deemed necessary to fulfill the country's destiny.

Davidson also addressed war in the context of the country's history, but with a regional difference. Yet, like Frost, he wrote in *The Tall Men* (1927) his own version of the "land realizing westward" before the older poet wrote his, "The Gift Outright" (c. 1941). In this mythopoeic poem, he celebrates frontiersmen and soldiers like John Sevier and Andrew Jackson "Whose words were bullets" (117).<sup>8</sup> These are the very kind of men that some critics would choose to relegate to the dustbin of history as benighted barbarians. Davidson's most memorable war poems are focused, however, on the Civil War and how it is to be

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<sup>6</sup> Winchell, *Where No Flag Flies*, 32-47; "Donald Davidson's Notes for an Autobiography: The Early Years," ed. M. Thomas Inge, in *The Vanderbilt Tradition: Essays in Honor of Thomas Daniel Young*, ed. Mark Royden Winchell (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 210. Davidson recalls how hard it was to become a civilian again and doubts whether he "ever quite fully became one."

<sup>7</sup> James Michael Dubinsky, "War and Rumors of War in Frost," *Robert Frost Review*, Fall 1995, no. 5 (1995), 1-2; Louis H. Miller, "William James, Robert Frost, and the 'Black Cottage,'" in *Frost Centennial Essays III*, ed. Jac Tharpe (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1978), 368-81, also comments on the influence of James on Frost in relation to war. If Frost is *not* a war monger as Dubinsky claims, he seems to me to come awfully close. Regarding the Cold War, see Peter Stanlis, "Acceptable in Heaven's Sight: Robert Frost at Bread Loaf, 1939-1941," *Centennial Essays III*, 300; and Frost himself, "On the Cold War," *Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays*, 901.

<sup>8</sup> For commentary on "The Long Street" in particular and Davidson's legacy as a poet more generally, see David A. Hallman, "Donald Davidson's 'Long Street': An Agrarian's Conservative Testament," *Southern Literary Journal* 16, no. 2 (Spring 1984): 63-80.

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remembered and interpreted. He sees that War as the defining event of the Southern experience. As an unreconstructed traditionalist he reads it through the lens of the defeat and destruction of much that he—and his ancestors—held dear. To Davidson, it was a war fought for a good cause, including freedom from political tyranny by a developing power state (a theme touched on in “Lee in the Mountains”). The country for which his people went to war was the Confederacy.

Frost and Davidson first became personally acquainted when Frost gave a poetry reading at the Centennial Club in Nashville in the fall of 1928. Following a reception at a wealthy Belle Meade home, Davidson and his wife played host to Frost for the rest of the evening. Beginning in 1931, Davidson began teaching during the summer at the Bread Loaf School of English where by then the older poet had been a fixture for some time. Over the years they became close and remained so until Frost’s death in 1963.<sup>9</sup> In varied ways, they were kindred spirits not only in their poetry and as memory keepers, but politically as well. They both could be described as Jeffersonian Democrats, although when Davidson once asked Frost what kind of democrat he was, the older poet playfully replied “a G-D Democrat”—a “God-awful Disgruntled” one, he explained.<sup>10</sup>

Frost was attuned to the racial turmoil in the early Civil Rights period in the South and apparently sympathetic to Davidson’s view of events as they unfolded. Davidson recalls a reading that Frost gave at Bread Loaf around July of 1957 in which Frost emphasized the theme of “insubordination” as a particularly American trait. Following the reading, Frost coyly remarked to Davidson, “You’ve been ‘insubordinate’ down there!” and subsequently asked if he thought that Washington would send troops to the South, to which Davidson had no ready answer at the time.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike Frost, Davidson in time departed measurably from his role as poet and became a political activist in the cause of maintaining racial segregation. On June 30, 1955, the Tennessee Federation for Constitutional Government was formed with Davidson as

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<sup>9</sup> Winchell, *Where No Flag Flies*, 341. Frost was to return to Nashville in 1944 for another reading and was a guest at the Davidson home on Fairfax Avenue. Probably unknown to Davidson during the Fugitive period, Frost had done a fellow Fugitive Poet a service by putting in a good word to Henry Holt regarding the publication of John Crowe Ransom’s *Poems About God* (1919).

<sup>10</sup> Peter Stanlis, *Robert Frost: The Poet as Philosopher* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2007), 270.

<sup>11</sup> Davidson, “Preface,” *Southern Writers in the Modern World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1958), ix-x. For more on Frost’s Southern sympathies, see Winchell’s *Where No Flag Flies*, 343 and his “The Southernness of Robert Frost,” 103-104.

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president. Depending on one's political leanings, one may assess Davidson's involvement in that effort in different ways. One, of course, concerns the morality—or rather the immorality—of racial segregation, which today no credible persons of standing openly promote. Second, the effort was arguably a futile cause from the start and a colossal waste of time. Third, and relatedly, I would suggest that in assuming such an activist role, Davidson violated his calling as poet and in doing so drained energy that would have been better spent on his true vocation. Professor Michael Jordan makes the case that Davidson, in contrast to his fellow Agrarians, believed the poet should concern himself with social and political matters. It is a valid point, to be sure, and by the same token, as Mark Malvasi asserts, Davidson, while admitting the risk that art could descend into propaganda, believed it might be justified given the cultural and social stakes. Even so, the choice of such a risk does not justify, it seems to me, taking the next step into activism per se, even for what one perceives as a compelling cause.<sup>12</sup>

As for the issue of race relations in the US today, the pendulum has swung so far in the opposite direction—that is away from open bigotry—that anyone who publicly makes what is perceived as a racially insensitive remark, let alone a slur, is readily condemned and often threatened with the loss of livelihood. This shift, however, did not begin yesterday. Winchell records part of a conversation he had with Robert Penn Warren's daughter concerning Davidson in 1993, the gist of which was that she condemned him as a racist whose name was not spoken in their home.<sup>13</sup> The choices today in such matters can, I think, be reduced to two: one can excoriate other people for offensive words and actions and totally write them off; or one can acknowledge flaws and failings in others, both trivial and serious, and yet commend what remains worthy in them. Many of us, imperfect creatures that we are, would prefer the latter course—at least for ourselves.

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Jordan, "Donald Davidson: The Poet as Citizen," *Modern Age* 36, no. 1 (1993): 63; Mark G. Malvasi, *The Unregenerate South: The Agrarian Thought of John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Donald Davidson* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 212, 223. I will concede that there might indeed be a worthy cause in which one would be justified in assuming an activist role, such as genocide or sex trafficking, etc. Davidson's anti-integration stance surely does not qualify. My larger point is simply that the artist who engages in activism risks abandoning and potentially corrupting his or her main office. Tate writes to Lytle in 1959: "He [Davidson] thinks of his anti-desegregation activities as a continuation of the Agrarian Cause, to which the rest of us are traitors" (*Lytle-Tate Letters*, 284). In November of 1962, Tate wrote to Davidson that he did not see how the Federal Government could be opposed in the matter of integration. The answer, for Tate, was for the South proactively to assume the work of integration but to do so gradually: Tate to Davidson, *Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate*, ed. John Tyree Fain and Thomas D. Young (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1974), 386.

<sup>13</sup> Winchell, *Where No Flag Flies*, 298.

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But despite Davidson's social-political position and actions especially during the Civil Rights period, we see in some of his poetry a more complex historical vision and a greater openness to others' views than we might expect. Among his poems to be considered here are "The Sod of Battlefields," "Lee in the Mountains," and "Late Answer: A Civil War Seminar." Comparable poems by Frost which pertain to either war in general or the Civil War in particular are "The Gift Outright," "The Lost Faith," and "The Black Cottage."

"The Gift Outright" (1941) may serve as a touchstone poem and a good place to begin in that, besides being the best-known of the poems being examined, it treats directly both war and Frost's view of its central purpose.<sup>14</sup> Recited from memory at the Kennedy Inauguration—when Frost could not see to read the text of the poem written for the occasion—it is an inescapably public, yet cryptically condensed, locution by a decidedly public poet-citizen. More to the point, it is a poem about nationhood and how it is achieved. It is achieved partly through the agency of war—not just one war, of course, but through many such "deeds of war" (l. 13). Part and parcel with those deeds was the necessity of a self-giving "outright." It was through both that the land "vaguely realized westward" and became a country.

Historian Daniel J. Boorstin in a remark that seems virtually a gloss on the poem observes that "a great resource of America was vagueness"; it was a source of strength and progress. In short, there was no overarching, comprehensive envisioning of what the nation would look like politically, geographically, culturally, and so on. Michael Manson similarly observes that the British colonists did not set out to make a nation, but in the act of revolt they changed both their destiny and identity.<sup>15</sup> From Frost's perspective, war as a tool of nation-building, along with the military muscle that conducts it, is self-vindicating, given its results. In the poem composed specifically for that historic day, he wrote: "Our venture in revolution and outlawry/Has justified itself in freedom's story/Right down to now in glory upon glory."<sup>16</sup> It seems clearly a case for Frost of Manifest Destiny.

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<sup>14</sup> Frost, *Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays*, 316, 437, and 897.

<sup>15</sup> Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The National Experience* (1965; New York: Random House, 2002), 219. The author adds: "The nation would long profit from having been born without ever having been conceived." The *conception*, in other words, develops in the process of becoming. Manson adds that Frost agreed with William James: we "believe truth into being." Michael L. Manson, "Trying to Find the Right Genre for Genocide: Robert Frost and 'The Vanishing Red,'" *Robert Frost Review*, no. 13 (Fall 2003): 87.

<sup>16</sup> Frost, *Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays*, 436. In "On Talking Poetry," Frost says of "A Gift Outright" itself that it was about "a pursuit of nationality," coupled with the concept "that we've got to belong to what belonged to us" (*Collected*

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How cogent a claim that is will be measured by where a reader rests on the political spectrum. A Donald Davidson for one would likely take issue with it. After all, it was just such a national, military juggernaut that brought ruin to the South. A twenty-first century progressive would also find such a claim highly offensive, if for different reasons. A major one would be the utter destruction of Native American civilization. According to one critic, Frost in the occasion's tailor-made poem ("doggerel," he calls it) injects a few barbs, both gentle and not so gentle, against America's pretensions and historic military related actions. The poet did so on the assumption that few in his audience, hardly identifiable as serious students of the medium, would catch his drift anyway. In addition, the critic makes a case for viewing "The Gift Outright" itself as "far less a positive statement of nationalism than has hitherto been assumed."<sup>17</sup> In any event, both the recited poem and the occasion of its presentation were together a remarkable act of poetic memorialization, regardless of how exactly one sees Frost's own position.

In an early poem, "The Lost Faith" (1907), the poet considers how the passage of time erodes collective memory of the past and consequently challenges the living to recover it and its meaning. The subject is the Civil War dead who gave their lives for a cause, a dream. The cause, of course, is nationhood that embodies most importantly the principle of freedom. War, for better or worse, like nothing else focuses personal and collective attention on what is significant and, hence, what is to be preserved. If a cause is not fittingly memorialized, a people is poorer for it. Implicit in the poem is the assumption that the best memorials to valor expended in the cause of freedom are not those set in stone but rather in words, especially in poetry. Moreover, the dead who sacrificed all deserve the very best that a nation can give them.<sup>18</sup>

The poet acknowledges at the outset that the heroic dead of war have been honored with flowers and shrines. But those may miss the essential point: "But for the cause that was to them so dear,/Where shall it be so much as justly told/What that cause was?" That is, what was the meaning to them of their sacrifice? And what is its meaning to those living now,

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*Poems, Prose, and Plays*, 822). Regarding World War I, he was divided. In September of 1914, he professes to Sidney Cox that he loves the war, but three months later, writing to the same recipient, he is not so sure, acknowledging that he is not called to die in it, *Selected Letters*, 134, 147.

<sup>17</sup> Hamida Bosmajian, "Robert Frost's 'The Gift Outright': Wish and Reality in History and Poetry," *American Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (January 1970): 96-97.

<sup>18</sup> Frost, *Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays*, 512-14.

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combatants or non-combatants? It was in one formulation a fight for “one law of love/One equal people under God above!” Yes, but there are those by the Gulf (that is, the Deep South) who scoff at the notion, asking, “How can all men be free/How equal, when God made them wheat and chaff?” The insertion of this question, as well as the tensional quality of the poem as a whole, is evidence of the dualism that runs throughout much of Frost’s best poetry.<sup>19</sup> (To some extent, we see it also in Davidson’s.) That dualism does not, however, mean being stuck on the horns of a dilemma.

The issue raised by these Southerners will not finally deflect the poet from his point. The dream, along with the still small voice (I Kings 19:12, A.V.) that reminds one of it, is stronger than the natural, physical, differences referenced by the scoffers. The earth may still be “unredeemed,” and the dream—the poet hopes—may yet return again and be “terrible in its own cause; /As when it swept the skirts of Malvern Hill” and “crouched in wait as deadly still/On Gettysburg’s low height.” The dream is deathless, but the risk remains that with each passing generation it could be lost. It could fade, “Not while we slept, but while we strove too much” in lesser causes. The poet’s witness is itself a stay against that loss. But one question is whether poetry as a reservoir of memory is adequate for that task or just another reed in the wind. The answer depends in part on the status of the poet and his poetry in the society for which he writes. True when Frost wrote, even truer today.

“The Black Cottage” (1914), with its reference to the widow’s having “given outright,” anticipates the Inaugural poem and its theme of nation building and national identity.<sup>20</sup> At the same time it recalls the principle of freedom and equality central to “The Lost Faith.” In contrast to that poem, however, the Minister as spokesman in “The Black Cottage” serves as foil to the true meaning of the War and the widow’s witness to it. He stands in judgment of her but does so with inadequate understanding or insight. For her, the sacrifice of her husband’s life, as well as her own loss, is significant not in terms of “Union and

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<sup>19</sup> Stanlis, *Robert Frost*, 1-12. While the dualism evidenced in Frost’s poetry may be a strength, some readers may take issue with what appears to be Frost’s too-easy resolution of the conflict between American nation-building and the violence necessary to effect it. Christopher Dawson in a commentary on St. Augustine notes that the saint saw “the kingdoms of the world founded in injustice and prospering by bloodshed and oppression,” *Dynamics of World History*, 326. The passage Dawson cites is from *The City of God*, XIX, viii. What I have called “dualism,” Yvor Winters, in a still-valuable essay, “Robert Frost: Or, the Spiritual Drifter as Poet,” *Sewanee Review* 56, no. 4 (Autumn 1948): 564-96, sees as a major weakness in his work. It is characterized by sentimentalism, a distrust of reason, and a lack of religious conviction, all stemming largely from Frost’s Romantic influences.

<sup>20</sup> Frost, *Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays*, 59-62. “The Black Cottage” was collected in *North of Boston* (1914); “The Gift Outright” was written about 1941 and collected in *A Witness Tree* (1942).

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Emancipation.” That much he sees. But the principle of freedom and equality for all, which for her justifies her loss, is one the Minister seems prepared to concede as debatable at least: “Each age will have to reconsider it” (l. 70).<sup>21</sup> By contrast, those who give the gift outright do it once and don’t look back.

We might concede, however, that his public role has prevented him from assuming a firm, consistent position. He has had to relate as pastor to both the old woman with her fixed, traditional views and the liberal young. He admires her stance, but “to measure how far fifty years have brought us” (ll. 45–46) is in fact to mark how allegiance to her values has generally diminished in the present world. He shares those values but does so ambivalently. His dividedness, as we see toward the end, leads him to confecting a fantasy of sorts, “as monarch of a desert land” in which he could then preserve the eternal verities. But it is a dream that could never take root in the real world. As such, it counts for little.

In short, the Minister is not for Frost a spokesman who can articulate for posterity the cause, the dream that must be preserved. The pastor is wobbly not only about the cause but about the history behind it, as we see in his reference to two key Civil War battles.<sup>22</sup> The poet, as the silent listener in the poem, accomplishes that end by indirectly allowing the reader to see the Minister’s inadequacy. He has thus created a poem that presents the War’s meaning on a poignantly human level that, at least here, transcends the concept of national identity, so vital to Frost. Through her loss—that is, through her sacrificial gift—the Widow understands, as the Minister cannot, the importance and the price of adhering to a core principle.

The same War represents for Donald Davidson a different cause, a different dream, in short, a decidedly different personal and historical perspective altogether. Whereas for Frost war means achieving the country’s destiny, for Davidson war—the Civil War in particular—challenges those of Southern heritage not only with how to remember the War and honor those who fought in it but also how to live here and now in light of the meaning drawn from that heritage.

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<sup>21</sup> In support of Frost’s distancing himself from the Minister, a view I assume, Jonathan Barron cites an October 1914 letter to Sidney Cox: “I am not bound to defend the minister you understand,” “A Tale of Two Cottages: Frost and Wordsworth,” in *Roads Not Taken: Rereading Robert Frost*, ed. Earl J. Wilcox and Jonathan Barron (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 150. For the full text, see *Selected Letters*, 138.

<sup>22</sup> Fredericksburg (December 11–15, 1862) was an overwhelming victory for Lee and the Confederacy; Gettysburg (July 1–3, 1863) was a major defeat for Lee and the Confederacy and was later seen as marking the turning point of the War. The name of the battle in which the Widow’s husband died would not have been lost on her.

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To understand Davidson's view of the matter, it is necessary first of all to distinguish between his views on race, on the one hand, and his vision of what the Southern past possesses of universal human value, on the other. If for him and others in the South race at that time was a central factor, it certainly was not the only one. And while it is commonplace to attribute racism to Southerners alone, such a practice cannot easily withstand clear evidence of that sin as found in those on the north side of the old surveyor's line. The irony embedded in remarks by William James following the occasion of the 1897 dedication of the Saint-Gauden monument of Robert G. Shaw and his black soldiers in Boston is embarrassing at the least: "The thing that struck me most in the day was the faces of the old 54<sup>th</sup> soldiers ... with such respectable old darkey faces, the heavy animal look entirely absent, and in its place the wrinkled, patient, good old darkey citizen." The comment appears in a letter to his brother Henry five days after William himself had given one of the addresses at the event.<sup>23</sup> My point here is not to absolve Davidson from the charge of racism but simply to state what should be obvious: 1) the sin of racism knows no geographical boundaries and 2) that sin does not itself invalidate other contributions the sinner may make, whether philosophic or poetic.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to explicate comprehensively Davidson's agrarian views, let alone those of his Nashville associates. But a few representative remarks by him may suggest what Davidson and others found worth defending in the Southern tradition, a tradition formed long before the War and severely threatened by it and its aftermath well into the twentieth century and beyond. In his appreciation of this legacy, he is well positioned to write both his war poems and his apologetic prose. Here is Davidson, looking back, in his 1957 Mercer lectures:

In *I'll Take My Stand* ... we chose to describe [the South's cause] as a conflict between Agrarianism and Industrialism.... For brevity, I might call it the cause of civilized society, as we have known it in the Western World, against the new barbarism of science and technology controlled and directed by the modern power state. In this sense, the cause of the South was and is the cause of Western civilization itself.

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<sup>23</sup> William James to brother Henry, June 5, 1897, *The Letters*, II, ed. Henry James [son] (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920), 61. The oration James himself delivered is an eloquent masterpiece of public commemoration. Two of the James brothers, Bob and Wilky, fought on the Union side. Wilky was, in fact, a colonel in Shaw's regiment and was severely wounded in the same attack on Ft. Wagner (SC) in which Shaw died. See William James, "Chronology," *Writings: 1902-1910*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1987), 1325.

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In the 1930 symposium, Davidson and his colleagues may be seen in part as mounting a counterattack upon Leviathan in its political, cultural, and technological manifestations. It is a counteroffensive looking both backward and forward. But their response also included economics in its most fundamental sense as a mode of life:

We wanted to get away from mere expedients and get down—or get up—to first principles. We were saying that life should determine economics and not economics life. Our quarrel was not with industry or science in their proper role, but with industrialism as a tyrant enslaving and ruling science itself, and with it religion, the arts, education, the state, thus reducing all principles to one principle, the economic, and becoming a destroyer, ready to break the continuity of human history and threatening the very existence of human society.<sup>24</sup>

Following the general principles laid out by Davidson and his fellow Agrarians, to inject a brief aside, Wendell Berry of Kentucky has concretely implemented their ideas in terms of actual farming and in his writing—both expository and fictional—over an extensive career. While owing much to them he makes at least one fundamental critique. Their approach, he argues, was marked by a lack of practicality, along with too much cultural (“Old South”) abstraction and myth-making. *I’ll Take My Stand* “mostly ignores also the difficulty and the discipline of farming....”<sup>25</sup> Looked at another way, his evaluation—which is not entirely just—may simply reflect the fact that he himself was able to practice farming as a way of life and to write about agrarian principles relative to one particular locality. Thus, he does not fall into what he refers to as their “absentee agrarianism.”

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<sup>24</sup> Donald Davidson, *Southern Writers in the Modern World*, 45, 57–58. Davidson’s remarks here are at once both polemical and retrospective. For a more concrete representation of Southern life and traditions, as contrasted with their Northern counterparts, see Davidson’s title essay in *Still Rebels, Still Yankees* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), 231–53. Davidson’s contribution to the 1930 symposium, “A Mirror for Artists,” addresses the problem of producing and handing down worthwhile art in an industrial society, which sees it as just another commodity to be bought and sold: “A Mirror for Artists,” in *I’ll Take My Stand*, Introduction by Louis D. Rubin, Jr. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 28–60. Finally, the reference to Leviathan in my text evokes Davidson’s own book of essays incorporating the term, which references the famous work of Thomas Hobbes on the “Matter, Form, and Power of a Commonwealth.”

<sup>25</sup> Wendell Berry, “Imagination in Place,” *Wendell Berry: Essays, 1993–2017*, ed. Jack Shoemaker (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2019), 468. Another essay in this volume in which the author references the Nashville Agrarians is “The Whole Horse” (a title owed to Allen Tate’s “Remarks on the Southern Religion” in *ITMS*). Also of interest is Berry’s essay on “The Civil War,” the balanced treatment of which could be compared to Davidson’s “Late Answer.” Finally, Allan Carlson, “Wendell Berry and the Twentieth-Century Agrarian ‘Series,’” in *Wendell Berry: Life and Work*, ed. Jason Peters, 96–112 (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2007), traces the development of Berry’s relationship with the group. Carlson singles out another essay in which he discusses them extensively, “Still Standing” (106).

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It should be clear that Davidson's cause is a strikingly different affair than Frost's in "The Lost Faith" and "The Black Cottage." If for Frost, equality and freedom are core principles worth engaging in warfare to defend, for Davidson it is the latter, and only in the sense of freedom from tyranny imposed by the state and industrialism, that is worth fighting for—even if the fight is in the modern period only polemical. Equality of people as people for Davidson is self-evidently a chimera, a product of wishful, abstractionist thinking. That said, natural equality—or inequality—is not to be confused with equal treatment before the law. And his viewpoint, shared by other Southerners and non-Southerners alike, is hardly one determined by racial attitudes alone. Davidson's understanding of human inequality as a given of human existence is illustrated, for example, in a passage of *The Tennessee* in which he delineates the social classes of the state in the nineteenth century: the yeoman farmer, the big planter, the "poor white" (or more accurately the frontiersman, who mostly hunted and did not farm), and the Negro. For Davidson, it is not a state of affairs to be "fixed" by big government.<sup>26</sup>

"The Sod of Battlefields," first collected in *The Tall Men* (1927), is written in a supple blank verse which may owe something to Frost's own poems in that form, such as those of *North of Boston* (1914). Combining narration and commentary relating to the Civil War as it unfolded practically in Davidson's back yard, it takes as main reference points the Battle of Nashville (December, 1864), along with two striking, violent episodes drawn from family lore.<sup>27</sup>

In lieu of a full analysis of the entire poem, a few additional comments can draw out key points relative to the theme of war and memory. Davidson's aim here is to transmute history into poetry and myth. More fundamental than this effort, though, is simply the rescue of the past per se, a past that not only recedes year by year but is threatened by commercial, municipal development that obliterates historic battle sites.

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<sup>26</sup> Davidson, *The Tennessee: The New River: Civil War to TVA* (New York: Rinehart & Co., 1948), I, 299–302. The problem with Davidson's position in the twentieth century and later, of course, is that it is impossible to justify it from a legal, constitutional—let alone ethical—perspective that supports the funding of public schools and regardless of race. The landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) definitively settled that issue legally, of course, despite the prolonged resistance to the implementation and enforcement of the law in society itself. Davidson and others sought to defend their position in part on the grounds of states' rights, a valid principle within limits to be sure. But it is one that has only too often been associated with extraneous and suspect motives, racial discrimination being one of them.

<sup>27</sup> Davidson, *Poems*, 126–32 (passages cited are referenced parenthetically by page number). See also Davidson, "The Center That Holds," in *So Good a Cause: A Decade of the Southern Partisan*, ed. Oran P. Smith, (Columbia, SC: Foundation for American Education, 1993), 222, for a prose account of the events related in the poem. The poem originally appeared in *The Tall Men* (1927) and again in *Lee in the Mountains* (1938). "The Last Charge," *Poems*, 47–49, also treats of the Battle of Nashville.

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Although it was one of the last major battles of the historic conflict, very little of the terrain over which the battle of Nashville was fought has been preserved. It is largely covered over by various commercial and real estate developments, including Davidson's own Vanderbilt University, along with that of Belmont University. Some monuments and historical markers are scattered throughout the area of the battle, as well as a few historical buildings of note. Thus, a reconstruction of the battle itself depends largely on the written historical record, a good map, and a robust imagination. Awareness of this state of affairs—only indirectly alluded to in the text—paradoxically enriches a reading of the poem. Thousands of people hurtling at 70 miles per hour each day through Nashville on Interstate 65—which runs through a portion of the battlefield—doubtless never realize the significance of the terrain on either side of that major artery. The highway is itself is thus a perfect symbol of Davidson's representation of the destruction of both historic sites and memory of them.

The speaker, who apparently recounts a tour of the historic battlefield, contrasts the old men who remember this and other battles with those who see merely a "Whirl of meadows flashed on the speeding eyes" (126). The latter, unlike the veterans, have never known battle and remember only "moments by names, places by monuments" seen on a driving tour (127). The speaker, however, recalls family stories of Yankee violence against his kinfolks and neighbors: confiscation of livestock, barn burning, and the shooting of three unarmed Confederates in cold blood. Memory of this sort is what Davidson's friend Tate in his "Ode to the Confederate Dead" named "knowledge/Carried to the heart[.]" These are the kinds of incidents that may or may not get reported in the official, historical record, but they remain nevertheless a critical component in the experience of war for many. The astute historian passes over them at risk to the integrity of his or her craft.

Today, however, "The sod of old battlefields is washed/Clean of blood." For some that may augur well: The descendants of Confederate soldiers "learn/ About Abe Lincoln.... The Union is saved.... One is American now" (131), and so on. However, we also have now the "pig's conception of the state," as one expression in Davidson's mind of the New Deal, a program Frost looked at critically as well. Davidson here shifts modes, from poetry drawn from history, to blunt polemics. Whether driven by "sectional bitterness," as Winchell suggests, or not, it represents the risk of propaganda that the citizen poet can so easily fall

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into.<sup>28</sup> That Davidson falls into it here and elsewhere is hardly debatable, a lapse to which the poet himself seems largely indifferent.

Finally, the narrator returns to the motif of the past lost in a welter of development. The tour guide singles out Battery Lane, a significant site on the battlefield: "I suppose there's a tablet [and] ... off yonder through the trees ... [is] the new paint factory" (131). The feckless guide had lost his bearings even before he began. But the narrator remembers. In a quasi-mystical passage at the end, he, like Frost's inspired speaker at the close of "The Lost Faith," offers his own floral tribute of praise and memorialization. The past is never really past as long as one can envision the dead "walking suddenly alive in a new morning" (132). The question will remain for some at poem's end whether Davidson has effectively created such a vision.

While "The Sod of Battlefields" succeeds to a degree in presenting the problem of a past threatened by development and an indifference to history, the text does not, I would suggest, concretely dramatize what it is about that past that is worth preserving and honoring. Perhaps only those who have an emotional, personal, connection to it already are in a position to appreciate what the poem is about. To be sure, any poet must rely on certain assumptions being in place in order to write at all. That may also be the case with the next poem to be considered, if to a much lesser degree.

"Lee in the Mountains," a dramatic monologue, is not so much concerned with recovering a threatened past as it is in presenting one of the South's major historic figures in a moment of crisis, along with its partial resolution.<sup>29</sup> That it also succeeds as an eloquent memorialization of Lee is in a sense a by-product. Yet to accuse Davidson and other traditionalist Southerners of "hero worship," as has been done ad infinitum, is both disingenuous and misguided. On more than one occasion, the poet himself addressed the motif of the hero in opposition to views of historians like Burton J. Hendrick, who requires that the Lee legend be strictly "rational" and "scientific." That is, heroes must be reduced in status to such a point that they are no longer heroes at all. To say that Davidson revered Lee is to state the obvious, which is not, of course, to be equated with "worship," an action directed fittingly only to the Deity. Marion Montgomery argues that Davidson raises "Lee by

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<sup>28</sup> Winchell, *Where No Flag Flies*, 111.

<sup>29</sup> *Poems*, 43-46. Written between 1933-34, "Lee in the Mountains" appeared in the 1938 volume of the same title.

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a homage of the imagination to heroic magnitude, more substantial than myth.” That author cites Michael Polanyi from his *The Study of Man*: “We need reverence to perceive greatness.” Without reverence, and without its attendant humility, the critic will likely be inclined to cut the great man down to a certain size—his own.<sup>30</sup>

Yet if that were all that the poet was about, the poem would be much less engaging. As William Pratt notes, it presents “a quiet scene of retreat and reflection after all the battles are over” sometime between 1865–70.<sup>31</sup> The reflection itself, however, is troubled, conflicted. The passage treating Lee’s memories of his father (ll. 19–46) serves as a poignant parallel to his own situation after the War. *Fils* like *père* may in worldly terms be deemed a failure. In the eyes of the men who appointed him president of Washington College, in the eyes of his young charges, and in the hearts of many others, he is a father figure without parallel. His own father’s failure was marked by disgrace; that of the son is signed by sacrifice and heroic suffering.

Thus, the central conflict centers on the tension between Lee’s fallen status—he is now a “criminal” exiled from his home—and his weighty responsibility as leader of the young men at the college where he serves as president. He is burdened in this role both by the consciousness of his defeat as a military leader and by the punitive measures of Reconstruction: “Ground by heels of little men, /Forever maimed, defeated, lost, impugned?/And was I then betrayed? Did I betray?” (45).

Added to this conflict is the prospect, briefly imagined, of resuming the fight on the kinetic level: “If it were said, and a word should run like fire ... the sunken flag would kindle on wild hills...” (45). But it is in fact only a dream, one that must not, cannot assume reality again. The sacred cause is now at rest and no flag flies (43–44).

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<sup>30</sup> Davidson, “American Heroes,” *Attack on Leviathan: Regionalism and Nationalism in the United States* (1938; New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1991), 213. Davidson critiques Hendrick’s *The Lees of Virginia* (1935). Montgomery, *The Prophetic Poet and the Spirit of the Age: Why Hawthorne Was Melancholy, III* (LaSalle, IL: Sherwood Sugden & Co., 1984), 154. The recent removal of the Lee statues in Charlottesville and Richmond, Virginia drew two (at least) remarkably different responses. See Joseph R. Stromberg, “A Suburb to Nothing,” *Abbeville Institute*, February 16, 2022. Also, Nora McGreevy, “Charlottesville’s Robert E. Lee Statue Will be Melted Down, Transformed Into New Art,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, Smart News/History of Now, December 10, 2021. One minor irony related to the Smithsonian’s report on the Charlottesville case is the strong advocacy of that Institution’s establishment in 1846 by a Mississippi Congressman who would later serve as president of the Confederate States of America. See William J. Cooper, Jr., *Jefferson Davis*, American (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 117. History is complex, nuanced, fractious—at least for some. For the author of the Smithsonian article it is indisputably simple and clear: “Lee led thousands to their deaths in a war waged in the name of preserving slavery.”

<sup>31</sup> William Pratt, “Donald Davidson: The Poet as Storyteller,” *Sewanee Review* 110, no. 3 (2002): 418.

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In contrast to “The Sod of Battlefields,” notes Winchell, this poem is full of “passion and conviction,” but they are rendered in a powerful dramatic form that lifts it far above polemic, satire, and propaganda. Allen Tate had written Davidson in January of 1934 to commend it as one of his finest, contrasting it with earlier work that had been too “argumentative and documentary.” What is remarkable about Tate’s praise of the poem is not only his own disaffection with Lee but also Davidson’s sharp criticism of Tate earlier for his treatment of the past in his “Ode to the Confederate Dead”: “And where, O Allen Tate, are the dead? You have buried them completely out of sight.... What is going to happen if the only poetry you can allow your conscience to approve is a poetry of argument and despair?” Tate is quite capable, however, of recognizing merit when he sees it, even if he could not write in the same expansive mode and despite his animus against the General himself.<sup>32</sup>

The ending, beginning with “Young men the God of your fathers,” shifts to a high rhetorical tone, representing the kind of chapel meditation that Lee probably gave on numerous occasions and as such is a fitting reconciliation of the conflict engaged at the outset. Robert E. Lee, justly honored as he was by his former soldiers and current students has still a special role to play, if only as one man among many. Stoically enduring with other Southerners, young and old, the harsh conditions of post-War Virginia, he points to where real hope for the future lies. The sacred cause for which the South fought may have gone down to defeat, but the God of our fathers is faithful now and always. He will not forsake or deny his children nor their children to follow, “Unto all generations of the faithful heart” (46).<sup>33</sup>

While these closing lines are spoken by the protagonist of the poem, we cannot miss the fact that the poet who wrote them is not a detached observer of his character but rather an engaged *witness* of Lee, his cause, and his plight. He presents through the General the cause

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<sup>32</sup> Winchell, *Where No Flag Flies*, 178. *Literary Correspondence*: Tate to Davidson, January 19, 1934, 290; and Davidson to Tate, February 15, 1927, 186–87. In fairness to Tate, it should be noted that what his protagonist in the “Ode” confronts is not an inability to recover the past as such but rather the *heroism* the dead represent, whether in his imagination or in present-day reality. See also *Lee in the Mountains: An Essay and a Bibliography*, ed. Thomas Daniel Young and M. Thomas Inge (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1965), 5.

<sup>33</sup> Tate, writing to Davidson a year before the agrarian symposium of 1930 was published, asserts, “There is no such thing as a lost cause. There are permanent forms of truth which, under varying conditions of time and place, may be made pertinent,” *Literary Correspondence*, February 18, 1929, 224. Tate, who alludes in this letter to an essay on the problems of humanism he is working on—solicited by T. S. Eliot—is likely echoing Eliot’s comment on lost causes in “Frances Herbert Bradley” (1927).

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of the South as sacred, just as the cause of the North was for the old lady in “The Black Cottage” sacred, if not unequivocally so for the Minister. Whatever one finally makes of the image of the Deity evoked here, one thing is abundantly clear: the situation of Lee cannot be properly interpreted outside the frame of reference provided by Christian revelation. And this is so no matter how we might choose to resolve the conundrum stated with pensive balance by Mr. Lincoln in his “Meditation on the Divine Will” (1862): “each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God.”<sup>34</sup>

It is also true that a Robert Frost, whose work also cannot be fully appreciated without reference to Christianity, could never articulate a statement of belief so undivided, intense, and passionate as that of Lee/Davidson here. His dualism, whether looked at positively or critically, would preclude it, as that of Davidson does not. For the latter, the South’s defeat is not a sign of God’s judgment upon that people. In the mystery of Providence, the poet through the voice of Lee affirms that He can never forsake his children, nor theirs, as long as they remain faithful. And, again, that communal perspective at the same time undoubtedly represents the resolution of his own particular, tragic condition in the aftermath of the War.

Unlike “The Sod of Battlefields,” “Lee in the Mountains” is not particularly concerned with the ravages of time. In its complex, subtle, dramatic portrait of Lee at a critical juncture, it manages rather to memorialize both the man and his cause in a tensional yet eloquent fashion. It is Davidson’s masterpiece as poet. Yet one question that hangs in air in the consideration of this poem today is whether the reputation of Lee as *hero* will survive in a recognizable form, given both the passage of time and the project of historical revision always afoot, one that has accelerated most energetically in the last decade alone.

“Late Answer: A Civil War Seminar” takes us to a very different academic setting at a more recent and irenic period.<sup>35</sup> It is based on Davidson’s long experience at the Bread Loaf School of English, which he found to be more congenial than the environment of Vanderbilt and, hence, a respite from it. His dilemma in the poem, as Winchell observes, is that he

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<sup>34</sup> Abraham Lincoln, “Meditation on the Divine Will,” *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings, 1859–1865* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1989), 359. We note in contrast to the “Meditation” that Lincoln in the Second Inaugural (1865) is, unsurprisingly, much more decided and polemical about what the role of the Deity had been in the War (686–87). For Southerners in general and Davidson in particular, this poem and others must also be read with reference to philosophical Stoicism, which for them is the classical half of their world view. The Almighty is merciful and providential, but life, fraught with suffering, must be endured with fortitude.

<sup>35</sup> “Late Answer” was first published in *The Long Street* (1961), a collection extending from 1945 to the year of its publication.

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finds himself a traditionalist Southerner among Northern colleagues, who apparently are not traditionalists of any stripe. The immediate setting is likely the faculty club.

But the real issue for the speaker—clearly Davidson—is not his unreconstructed status but the alienation of his academic associates from their *own* history.<sup>36</sup> They don't seem to mind having an outspoken Johnny Reb in their midst, but what they cannot abide is yet another rehashing of the Civil War, which apparently he wants to press upon them. His insistence is the germ of the poem. Please, they say, no more “nostalgia” and “absurd monuments”; just accept “historical process” (52). Condescendingly amused at him, one (“Dartmouth”) asks for a rendition of the Rebel Yell, in response to which Davidson reflects: “How could he learn what history books forbade?” (53). It is here that the poet touches on the core issue. History for these men, to the extent that it is preserved, seems “shut in books” alone (53). But history is more than that for the speaker; it is also living memory passed down orally from family to family in much the same way that traditions are passed down in pre- or non-literate cultures. It is a version of history that those who use only “logical eyes might never see” (53).

The speaker's concern does not stop there, however. His Northern associates, if they will, just might recover the historical sense of “knowledge/ Carried to the heart” in relation to other, earlier wars—such as Troy (the first line of the following passage echoing *Aeneid*, II, 624) and the American Revolutionary War—as well as that of 1861–65:

Yet a burning roof, kin dead long ago,  
If you could weep, would give you right to know  
The sound of valor where it dwells with sorrow.  
Did you hear it rousing once at Saratoga?  
Or when the Highland dead at Ticonderoga  
Lay naked to the stars? (54)

To touch history in this manner, and to be touched by it, is not to indulge in mere nostalgia and sentimentality. It is to access the past in the round, in its fullness. For history is

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<sup>36</sup> Winchell, *Where No Flag Flies*, 149, 335; M. E. Bradford, “A Durable Fire: Donald Davidson and the Profession of Letters,” in *Generations of the Faithful Heart: On the Literature of the South* (LaSalle, IL: Sherwood Sugden & Co., 1983), 131.

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not merely what happened to other people; it is the story, elevated to the status of “myth,” in which we all share and by which we are affected and moved, if we are open to it. As the poet tells his Bread Loaf compatriots:

We mourned with you then in brotherhood  
And I'll weep with you now for those whose names  
Burn on your monuments like altar flames (54).

Representative names in this passage allude to those who died in Civil War battles: Truman Lane in The Wilderness, Stillman Smith at Ft. Donelson, and Captain Samson at Cold Harbor. It is not likely that his Yankee confreres came around to appreciating Davidson's devotion to the South's “ancient Cause” (53). A more interesting question is whether in time they became attuned to his sense of history as more than the written record, an academic endeavor, the purview of scholars alone.

Whatever the answer to that question, at least one New Englander, one with qualified Southern sympathies, could readily understand what Davidson was about, even if he—Robert Frost—could not affirm his friend's particular cause. For he himself had quite another cause to affirm in poetry that likewise sought to go beyond the historical record and touch the life behind it. In the poems considered here, we see both poets in different ways and from varying perspectives, making a valiant effort to recover the past—especially the past acted out in war—to assess and affirm the meaning it had for those who lived it and also its significance for those who have followed, those alive today. It is in the witness of the men and women as rendered in the poets' imaginations—the widow in “The Black Cottage,” the Southern and Yankee boys asleep in battlefield graves, and the troubled meditation of General Lee—that we can hear what they heard, see what they saw.

Such imaginative representation does not violate the historical record but completes, enriches, and preserves it for today and for generations to come. At their best, Frost and Davidson give us varied and complex visions of the past in relation to war and prompt us to the duty of discerning how the truth of things stands. We should accept no less than what they have offered.

## What is at Stake in the Question of Technology?

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Review: *Leo Strauss on Democracy, Technology, and Liberal Education*, by Timothy W. Burns (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2021), 201 pp. Hardcover, \$95.00.

Because I cannot do justice to all of the many reasons for reading Tim Burns's excellent book on Leo Strauss, I will try instead to say why I think the book is especially helpful to readers of Strauss, in particular, those readers who see in Strauss the resources for understanding and responding to various problematic features of Western liberalism.

Burns renews Strauss's relevance for us by showing that Strauss's work, contrary to many prevailing "Straussian" conceits, is built up deliberately around the theme or problem of technology. More specifically, Burns shows compellingly that the question of technology lies at the heart of Strauss's understanding of what is at stake in the difference between ancient and modern political philosophy. On Burns's reading, technology is, therefore, crucial both for understanding Strauss's appraisal of modernity—including the ostensible crisis or decline of liberalism—and for seeing clearly why it is that Strauss, and not other, more prominent critics of modernity like Nietzsche or Heidegger, is perhaps best suited to framing a practical response to certain problematic features of political liberalism and technological culture.

In what follows, I will re-state in summary form, and with my own emphasis, these three key features of Burns's book:

- (a) How Burns pictures the problem of technology in Strauss's understanding of the history of philosophy, especially its place in differentiating ancient and modern positions, including, importantly, the moral differences that inform their respective stances.
- (b) How Burns sees Strauss's sense of the contributions of technology to the problems afflicting Western liberalism.
- (c) The core elements of Burns's articulation of Strauss's practical response to the main deficiencies of liberalism, especially those exacerbated by technology.

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In my own view, social and political theorists in general, and Straussian thinkers in particular, have underplayed or even ignored problems related to technology and economy. This was perhaps less true during the Cold War, when there was pressure to reckon with Marx. But in the last sixty or so years, at a time, ironically, of sharp technological acceleration, there has been a dearth of the kind of high-quality, synoptic thinking that connects the problems of the age to the perennial problems of the tradition. Burns's book, along with other notable efforts, moves toward remediating this deficiency.<sup>1</sup>

I will say, however, that Burns's effort is, in some ways, still preliminary to a more complete encounter with the theme of technology and politics in ancient and modern thought. I don't mean this as a criticism. I mean only to point out objects for future consideration. It seems to me that a more thorough and critical assessment of the adequacy of Strauss's response to liberalism would require further and extensive reflection on the history and effects of industrial economy and technology, particularly those effects that were *not* clearly prepared for by modern thought, and those that have most impacted the conditions for liberal education.

### PHILOSOPHICAL STAKES

On the whole the view has prevailed that democracy must become rule by the educated, and this goal will be achieved by universal education. But universal education presupposes that the economy of scarcity has given way to an economy of plenty. And the economy of plenty presupposes the emancipation of technology from moral and political control. The essential difference between our view and the classical view consists, then, not in a difference regarding moral principle, not in a different understanding of justice: we, too, even our communistic coexistents, think that it is just to give equal things to equal people and unequal things to people of unequal merit. The difference between the classics and us with regard to democracy consists exclusively in a different estimate of the virtues of technology. But we are not entitled to say that the classical view has been refuted. Their implicit prophecy that the emancipation of technology, of the arts, from moral and political control would lead to disaster or to the dehumanization of man has not yet been refuted.  
—Leo Strauss, "What Is Political Philosophy?"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> There are some exceptional treatments of the theme of technology in the Straussian literature. Two outstanding volumes are *Mastery of Nature*, eds. Svetozar Y. Minkov and Bernhardt L. Trout (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), and *Technology in the Western Political Tradition*, eds. Arthur M. Melzer, Jerry Weinberger, and M. Richard Zinman (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1959), 37.

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According to Burns, the view on technology that Strauss here attributes to the ancients pertains, not only to democracy, or more precisely, to the variance in the ancient and modern estimation of democracy, but—as the last lines of the quote suggest—to a core difference in the valuation of technology as such. For Burns, this quote captures both Strauss’s insight into ancient moderation, including especially the ancient stance against innovation, while also conveying Strauss’s own worries about the effects of the modern rejection of this stance. As Burns will argue, Strauss not only brought to light the underpinnings of what we might call “ancient technological conservatism,” he also agreed with it, and took very seriously the possibilities of contemporary “disaster” and “dehumanization”—including the problems affecting the stability of liberalism—as sources of its vindication (see especially 2, 4, 13–14, 19, 21, 29).<sup>3</sup>

To better understand Burns’s view on how the question of technology helps us to sharpen our sense of the difference Strauss points to above, we’ll start by noting a fundamental agreement that Strauss claims is shared by both ancients and moderns.

For Strauss, it is the harshness and improvidence of nature that sets the primary features of the human situation. This is true for ancients and moderns alike (105, 128). Human survival, not to say human flourishing, depends decisively, therefore, on human resourcefulness, including especially our capacity for *techné* and other products and effects of practical reason. The ancients and the moderns agree, then, that technology is basic to the human condition; what we recognize as our “humanity” or “humanness” is ineluctably bound up with its emergence and unthinkable apart from its influence.

Despite this agreement, however, the ancients did not countenance, let alone pursue, a course of technologically oriented science. To the contrary, many of the ancients were happy to encourage preexisting forms of contempt for the practical arts. Moreover, authors like Plato and Aristotle went very far to obscure their understanding of our “beginnings,” choosing instead to present nature as a sort of standard and even as a quasi-providential force. Nature for the classics is “teleological.” Or to put it differently, what stands behind teleology is an unwillingness to picture nature as an enemy, a set of conditions that needs to be overcome or mastered. The ancients—including even the atomists and other non-Socratics—

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<sup>3</sup> For Strauss on ancient technological conservatism, see *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, especially 290–99 (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1958).

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put forward and would not relinquish the notion that man can live “naturally,” or that humans can live well within limits, indeed, that there is a goodness *given* in external limitation, and that humans must acknowledge limit as a primary condition for living well, even or especially their mortal limits (2-3, 33).

For the ancients, then, there is a deep and revealing connection between “learning how to die” and learning how to live well. One of the premier features of such a life is that it seeks especially to access or to recover the goods that are available to it and that are genuinely “one’s own.” These goods are defined against other goods that are unnecessary or that require extensive external support. The life that seeks one’s own good grows wary, therefore, of promises of future goods, especially those that appeal to hope and other false and compensatory forms of pleasure. Those few who live in the genuine awareness of death push hope to the margins of life, perhaps eliminating it altogether, or at least its most mendacious forms (96-98). This effect pertains to all promises of “good” in superlative or transcendent form, whether the source is religious belief or the optimistic projections of technological innovation.

Despite being fully aware of the harshness of our beginnings, the ancients are unwilling, therefore, to relinquish “natural goodness” precisely because this notion helps set the path toward seeing the idea of “nature” for what it is and for what it isn’t. And it is the goodness of this path of learning that, for Strauss, perhaps most of all grounds the ancient insistence on moderation, and especially their unwillingness to support the project of technological science and industry. Although they are perfectly aware of the importance of technology to civilization and, in particular, the genuine goods that civilization affords, they do not believe that our humanity, or its most satisfying possibilities, consists in the activities of mastery, but rather in the fullness of “clarity,” “awareness,” “contemplation,” or “*theoreia*.” Mastery, however necessary, is not our most vital expression, and only produces effects and artifacts that are multivalent and, therefore, unstable in their utility. Even the grand artifices and workings of civilization are, for the ancients, variable in their effects; and if even the best regime is imperfect and vulnerable to decline, civilization cannot simply be “good in itself,” let alone the product of some progressive historical trajectory (147; see also 127 and following). The awareness and understanding of beginnings is, for the ancients, correlative with the awareness and understanding of the meaning of cataclysm (8, 15, 40-44, 105, 122).

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This is not to imply that the ancients were utterly detached or removed from political life. To the contrary. For Strauss, this awareness was compatible with wanting to help stabilize political life and to promote the possibilities it affords. Though we should add that the philosopher's motivation to act, or its psychological complexion, differs considerably from the motives of those non-philosophers who are most susceptible to his influence. There is enough connection between them, however, to enable the philosopher to promote certain moral virtues, especially moderation, while remaining consistent with his sense of human excellence, the grounds of the goodness of his way of life, and the dangers posed by expansive growth.

For their part, the moderns disagree generally with the ancient or classical response to the human situation. Yet in saying this, I'm being somewhat misleading. To be more precise, I should say that each of the modern political philosophers disagrees variously with his sense of the ancient or classical alternative. For as Burns makes clear, one of the key implications of Strauss's path-finding through esotericism is that we are fundamentally uncertain whether *any* of the moderns understood *any* of the ancients in the highest possible terms (96–97, 112–13, 132, 143, 147–49). Or as Devin Stauffer notes in a recent talk, we simply don't have access to the kind of literary encounter between ancients and moderns that would most clarify their sense of their own positioning on the disputed terrain.<sup>4</sup>

Now, the question of understanding across the tradition (or its absence), though it might seem disconnected from the problem of technology, is tied directly to the problem's illumination of the stakes of philosophical difference. As Burns shows us, not only is the degree of genuine engagement between moderns and ancients unclear, the moderns in fact urge us to question their understanding of the ancients in and through their literary strategies, including especially the aims of the so-called "enlightenment" and the technological science it promotes. Or to put the matter here in somewhat different terms: the moderns' approach to writing does not evince a grasp of or fully attempt to duplicate both Socrates's reasons for (a) turning away from natural science toward a study of the human things; and (b) the full rationale informing Socrates's approach to communication (questioning and refuting) and, subsequently, the Socratics' approach to writing, including particularly their unwillingness to

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<sup>4</sup> See Stauffer's remarks on the "Ancients' Critique of the Moderns," Claremont Institute, American Political Science Association, December 18, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vmArgN0Bz8w>.

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emphasize human vulnerability. This is not to say that Strauss thought that somehow the moderns rejected esoteric writing. Far from it. All of the leading moderns practiced artful writing of some kind. The difference, however, shows up, not in the means, but in the ends of their literary projects. For the ancients, esoteric structure leads the reader into ever deeper encounters with their “cave of opinion,” and, thus, always points to the salience of the philosophic life. For the moderns, by contrast, starting especially with Machiavelli, esotericism is a means of recruiting the reader into adopting a specific stance or posture, one defined primarily by antipathy toward the church and its legacy of classical appropriation. To the extent that modern authors seek to generate a conspiracy of subversion, they write much more openly about the harshness of nature, including human vulnerability to fortune and the need for artificial supports. And while there is in the moderns a resistance to providence that is similar to the ancients’, especially in its focus on the primacy of the human good, the moderns place much more emphasis on political, economic, and technological innovation as the main sources of deliverance—not *theoria*, but *praxis*, will, for them, enable true liberation and power. Modern esotericism, therefore, is more overt and frank about our material deprivation precisely because it seeks to cultivate support for a new approach to mastering the conditions of human life (4-11). And insofar as their writing is fixed to this “ideological” end and does not supply the kind of education necessary for a true reckoning with our “bad beginnings,” the moderns produce some warrant for suspecting that they themselves have not undergone such an education or one that is sufficiently similar to provide the appropriate contrast to the ends of their enterprise.

This warrant is supported further by the fact that, according to Strauss, the ambitions of the modern effort range well beyond the unseating of Christian intellectual authority. The leading moderns wanted to found and develop a new kind of political reality, one that fused politics, science, and technology into the workings of a new civilizational substrate, something far more stable and prosperous than anything known to the archaic or classical worlds. Even if we grant, therefore, that the moderns had the highest motives and sought to recover the possibilities of philosophy from the ossified schools of Christendom, their practical objectives and especially the means by which they undertook their projects—including their modified esotericism or “propaganda” and the public subordination of theoretical science to practical or technological science—supply, in themselves, warrant enough to return to our

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initial doubts as to the adequacy of their engagement with the ancients.<sup>5</sup> These doubts are further affirmed by Strauss's willingness to characterize the motives, not just of the targeted reader, but of the key philosophers themselves as reflecting "passion," "ire," and "disappointment in providence" (33-34n24).<sup>6</sup> We cannot trust, therefore, and even have some reason to distrust, that the moderns truly disagree with the ancients, especially with their deepest reasons for moderation and its concomitant "technological conservatism." For how can there be true disagreement if there isn't first genuine understanding? On Strauss's view, then, or at least this is what I take Burns to be emphasizing, the modern willingness to countenance technological mastery, both as a means and as an end, is itself a possible, if not likely, sign of a failure of understanding; in particular, a failure to re-constitute the Socratic education, especially in relation to moral psychology and the problem of hope (see especially 9, 91-102 with Chapter 5 as a whole). Consequently, modern technological politics, both implicitly and explicitly, *appeals to an unwarranted optimism*. Or to make a similar point, despite their greater openness about the harshness of life and greater urgency about the need for mastery, the moderns are unduly hopeful about the outcomes they seek, which correlates with their failure to provide a sober reckoning with the question and problem of nature, or at least one that matches the Socratic effort.

In guiding us via technology to Strauss's appraisal of these core differences between ancient and modern thought, Burns also helpfully shows that Strauss's view of the tradition, especially the modern turn, sets him apart from *all* other prominent critics of modernity. Most critics, even those who Strauss favors and who come close to his own views, tend to see modernity as either (a) a result of the secularization of Christianity (e.g., Tocqueville, Löwith, Voegelin), or (b) as an unfolding of ancient rationalism: Socratic rationalistic optimism, as in the case of Nietzsche; techne-based rationalism, as in the case of Heidegger. The failure to appreciate the full complexity of the modern or Machiavellian turn, including its literary dimensions, and, importantly, its conscious or unselfconscious discontinuity with the ancients correlates, for Strauss, with an underappreciation of the founding-character of the

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<sup>5</sup> On this point see Burns's remarks in response to Stauffer, especially his helpful sketch of Machiavelli ("Reply to Devin Stauffer," *Interpretation* 48, iss. 3 (Summer 2022): 360-72); I recommend also Stauffer's very helpful review of Burns's book in the same issue (347-50). For more scholarly response to Burns, see the recent symposiums on his book published in *Review of Politics* 85, iss. 1 (Winter 2023) and *Perspectives on Political Science* 52, iss. 1 (2023), both of which contain helpful replies from Burns.

<sup>6</sup> Burns, "Reply to Devin Stauffer," 370.

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first wave of modernity and the persistence of a residual hopefulness or optimism, especially in the capacity of the intellectual or the enlightenment to alter “culture” (49–51). Burns is particularly effective and clear on how this critique pertains to Heidegger; indeed, the contrast that Burns builds up between Strauss and Heidegger is one of the highlights of the book.

### MODERN PROBLEMS

Strauss’s assessment of the difference between ancient and modern thought includes his appraisal of modern politics, especially modern liberalism. As Burns shows, while Strauss was certainly a friend to liberalism, and was especially grateful to the American regime, he was, nonetheless, as a forward observer of the problems of liberalism, highly attuned to its deficiencies. Indeed, Strauss’s ability to be of help to liberalism reflected the extent to which he did not share its perspective.

For Strauss, there are two related problems with liberalism that feature in Burns’s discussion and that I want to emphasize. The first is the problem of runaway technological and economic growth; and the second is the failure of liberalism to govern itself in such a way that it remains admirable and viable to those who want politics to be serious and meaningful. There are several ways to connect these two problems, but the ligature that Burns features and that I want to highlight runs as follows.

Because much of the public justification for the goodness or “progressive” character of modern politics consists in the bounty of its technological yield, modern regimes tend to drift into a pattern of emancipatory freedom, which favors economic growth by increasing the scope of marketplace permissiveness and tolerance for innovation. The resulting regime type is what Strauss refers to generally as “mass democracy” (9) or “democratic mass society” (21). Mass democratic politics take their character, not so much from the institutions of popular governance, but from the levelling effects of mass culture: “mass culture is a culture which can be appropriated by the meanest capacities without any intellectual effort whatsoever and at a very low monetary price” (19–20).

Now, even though Strauss saw in liberalism certain possibilities for excellence or for a higher expression of enlightenment, he worried—like Nietzsche and Heidegger, among others—that mass democracy would lead ultimately to something like “dehumanization,” “the

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last man,” or “the approach of the world night”: “cultural” de-formation resulting from “the interplay of mass taste with high grade but strictly speaking unprincipled efficiency” (1-2, 4, 13-14, 69).

On the basis of this problem alone, Strauss seems close to concluding that the trade-offs entailed by liberalism stack up negatively, perhaps even decisively, against it. In order to make the civilizational shift, modern politics needed to open education and opportunity to the people; these moves were essential to its legitimacy or moral justification. But for Strauss, while liberalism was able to accomplish much in the way of material relief, comfort, and fairness, it couldn't provide these goods while maintaining enough of pre-liberal decency to stave off the coarsening effects of mass culture. When seen in connection with the second problem I mention above—the eclipse of excellence—the case against liberalism, for Strauss, tips even further toward being closed. As Burns points out, it would be one thing if modern liberalism actually made good on the promise to supply a sturdy civilizational substrate. But our reality is quite different. Not only do we now have to manage the social and environmental costs of technological innovation, many of which were unintentional and only emerge downstream from the marketplace, but the drift of all of this growth increasingly alienates precisely those types who might otherwise be the most serious and competent members of the political class. In shutting down, whether intentionally or not, the avenues of traditional seriousness and virtue, mass democracy smothers the possibilities for great and thoughtful action, undermining thereby the highest forms of participation and compensation available to those who would labor and sacrifice on its behalf. But in straining and failing to remain admirable, mass culture becomes increasingly and invariably contemptible; and when enough of the young and serious start to see the ideology and the gross materiality of technological yield as poisonous to their well-being, conditions ripen for spiritual revolt. Burns is especially compelling in showing how Strauss's “German Nihilism” fixes on this problem—liberalism's failure to sustain admirable politics—as a major deficiency, both in its own right and as a primary source of instability. As Burns also demonstrates, a full appreciation of this problem further supports the warrant, noted above, for doubting the adequacy of the moderns' putative engagement, let alone disagreement, with the ancients (35, 101, 112-13).

**PRACTICAL RESPONSE AND CONCLUSION**

While Burns presses effectively the relevance of Strauss's appraisal of the dangers endemic to liberalism and mass democracy, he is also emphatic that Strauss did not believe that these problems were necessarily fatal to all higher possibilities. This is especially true of political greatness, particularly the kind of magnanimous statesmanship epitomized in the life and work of Winston Churchill. Strauss praises Churchill in very high terms, even despite (or because of) his political failures. But the value of Churchill's example extends beyond the realm of action into his writings, particularly his history of Marlborough, which Strauss recommends as essential reading to all students of politics. Churchill's example and achievements, impressive perhaps at any time, are, for Strauss, exceedingly important for our time. For as Burns shows, Strauss thought that the living example of Churchill helps address directly the problem posed by serious but spiritually disaffected youth. Had the young Germans of the interwar period met a man like Churchill or met teachers who understood the possibility and meaning of Churchill, they might have been deterred from the excesses of revolutionary politics (73–83).

The place of Churchill in Strauss's response to liberalism helps, thus, to illustrate its general character: Strauss seeks to promote greatness and excellence, and the respect for both, but without also firing the impulse to revolution. And though he had serious reservations about how far his influence might go in achieving these effects, Strauss believed that, through teaching and through writing, the most helpful thing he could do was to cultivate an "aristocracy within democracy" that would—as a function of its own elevated awareness—recognize and pursue excellence without challenging directly the legitimacy of liberalism itself. To the extent that Strauss was successful or, more importantly, to the extent that he could see the first fruits of his effort, he could reassure himself that the downward drift of mass culture had not yet smothered all longing related to seriousness. Or to make a related point: Strauss not only proves that seriousness is still possible, he creates the space for the kinds of encounters that keep alive the pre-liberal or non-liberal alternatives. By challenging students and readers to confront the foundational problems, including the tensions endemic to the basic responses to the human situation, Strauss opens up a sympathetic engagement with the worlds of our premodern inheritance: the mythic, the classically political, the biblical, and the philosophic. It is in and through restoring and enlivening these possibilities,

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and also the tensions between them, that Strauss most contributes to the cultivation of Western vitality. For it is precisely the same tensions driving Western dynamism that liberalism most threatens with technological eclipse.

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It is difficult for me to determine, finally, the extent to which Strauss and Burns are accurate in their description and analysis of “the modern project.” This term conjures a sense of mutual understanding, shared intentionality, and concerted effort that gives me pause, especially in light of the challenges involved with understanding—as they understood themselves—any one of the leading moderns. With that said, I have seen for myself enough of what Strauss identifies as “mastery” or “technology” in the work of said moderns to be persuaded by what I understand of his reading of the modern turn. I don’t think that Strauss’s picture of modernity should be accepted on authority, but for those students who want to work at seeing it for themselves, Burns is an extremely helpful guide. Without question, Burns’s book is one of the best books on Strauss that I have read.

I am somewhat wary, however, of Burns’s recapitulation of Strauss’s understanding of the anti-religious or anti-theological dimension of the modern project, especially the strong, “eliminativist” version Burns puts forward here and elsewhere. I don’t mean to dispute that, starting with Machiavelli, there was a united effort of some kind to modify or neutralize European Christianity. But Burns sometimes seems to claim more than this, that the moderns wanted a completely godless world (52, 56–57, 161).<sup>7</sup> And while I see Burns’s (and Strauss’s) reasons for subordinating the claims of the moderate enlightenment to its radical form, I don’t think that this articulation of motive is always helpful in recovering the theological dimensions of modern thought, nor am I persuaded that it is sufficient as a summary of the essence of Strauss’s views on the matter. I want to add also, that, in the case of Francis Bacon, one of the most important moderns, especially regarding technological science, I do not think it is sufficient to claim that Bacon intends simply to subordinate theoretical science to applied or technological science. This formulation fails to capture fully

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<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Burns, “Bacon’s New Atlantis and the Goals of Modernity,” in *Socrates and Dionysius: Philosophy and Art in Dialogue*, ed. Ann Ward (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), particularly 74–78.

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Bacon's philosophical ambition and, more specifically, how Bacon himself pictures the kind of theoretical advances he thinks, rightly or wrongly, experimental science will enable, especially in contrast with Aristotelianism, which limits itself to the manifest genera or kinds.<sup>8</sup>

As regards Burns's restatement of Strauss's practical response to liberalism, I can't help but wonder whether Strauss's approach needs to be modified or updated in light of certain social and technological changes that have occurred in the last fifty or so years. To be more specific, I wonder whether our increasing reliance and unthinking dependence on various technologies, together with the normalization of certain, once radical, emancipatory freedoms, has so intensified mass-mindedness that any encounter with "great books" or "liberal education" is likely to founder on the shoals of unseriousness.

Now, on the one hand, I can appreciate that Strauss's strategy, at its core, must remain the same to achieve the desired results in awareness. Either students have a moving encounter with the fundamental questions or they don't. But part of what motivates my concern is a problem that Burns points to but does not really address: insofar as Strauss believes that the seriousness necessary for aristocratic education includes sympathetic engagement with nobility and greatness on the one hand, and, in addition, the Socratic critique of the same, on the other, it seems possible, if not likely, that the power of the Socratic critique might preempt or distort the kind of encounter Strauss intends. This risk, it seems to me, is even likelier in our context because of the way that technological dependence reinforces the ambient individualism of liberalism. Or let me put it this way: there is a rhyming echo between liberal individualism and the Socratic concern with one's good; and because the former colors the moral context of education today, it is increasingly difficult to stage the kind of tension that would make meaningful Socrates's dialectical engagement with moral virtue. More needs to be done to sharpen the bite of this sort of encounter, lest the student simply fold their "education" into one of many curated "experiences" or "identities." Now more than ever, technology encourages *and protects* precisely the conditions for unseriousness Socrates describes in book 8 of *Republic*, where democratic drift leads to and justifies lives of random superficiality. Unless, or so it seems to me, technology itself—or contemporary technological society, including its assumptions and

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<sup>8</sup> For those interested in learning more about Bacon's philosophical ambition, I commend highly Tobin Craig's recent talk: "The Philosophic Ambition of a Technological Science" ([youtube.com/watch?v=HS8OckO8XOM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HS8OckO8XOM)).

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its habits—is challenged, in addition to the cogency of prevailing liberal norms, liberal education will increasingly turn out “great books aesthetes” and “socratized liberals” instead of helping to shape a genuine elite. But even this may have little effect; many students today have the sense that liberalism so thoroughly suffuses our culture, that, even if they see into its problems, it is hard for them to be fully open to the critique because they cannot conceptualize a way of life that can be meaningfully informed by some non-liberal alternative. At this point, one wonders whether, or to what extent, liberal education itself needs to incorporate a serious encounter with the *contemporary* alternatives to liberalism. Not to inspire revolutionary hopes, but to clarify the landscape of possibility, especially for those who see increasingly little room for political or institutional action, let alone greatness, and want to at least consider whether alternative forms of life, work, education, and community building might make more sense. Considerations of precisely this kind are, I think, more pressing than ever if liberal education is going to help produce some part of the political class that is clear enough to itself about the problems of technology and liberalism to manage effectively the trade-offs entailed by technological governance.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> My thanks to Andrea Kowalchuk, James Guest, Travis Hadley, Shilo Brooks, Jason Lund, and Alex Priou for helpful discussion, suggestions, and critical feedback.

## Leo Strauss on Liberalism and Nihilism

Daniel O'Toole

Review: *Leo Strauss on Democracy, Technology, and Liberal Education*, by Timothy W. Burns (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2021), 201 pp. Hardcover, \$95.00.

Timothy Burns's *Leo Strauss on Democracy, Technology, and Liberal Education* is one of the best studies yet of the thought of Leo Strauss. The appeal of Burns's book is that it takes up Strauss's reflections on our modern civilizational crisis. It aims to show how Strauss can help us understand the deepest sources of that crisis and how we might navigate if not overcome it. Yet Burns also intends to clarify the genuine character of political philosophy as Strauss understands it—meaning Socratic or classical political philosophy—and distinguish it from modern, *politicized* philosophy, science, and thought. It's this latter task that constitutes the real heart of the book.

Burns doesn't sugarcoat what the classics thought it best to sugarcoat. In this, he amplifies what Strauss already presents with a certain degree of boldness. Such candor is justified by the extent to which the Western philosophical tradition—through both scholastic syntheses and modern polemics—makes it nearly impossible for modern readers to grasp the true core of classical rationalism by their own lights. Such candor is also justified, I believe, by the simple fact that presenting isn't the same as vindicating the harsher aspects of classical rationalism. Readers may yet conclude that the more hopeful Biblical view can withstand the challenge posed by the more austere classical view, or, contrary to what Strauss and Burns seem to suggest, that some fruitful synthesis between the former and elements of the latter can be worked out. On its own, however, classical rationalism maintains a rather sober, almost bleak, view of man's place in the whole. The classical philosophers came to believe it most likely that the only eternal things in the universe are the blind necessities that govern it. That means that the immortal gods and divine sources that are supposed to sustain our communities and moral commitments are rooted in mere myth, and that all the works of man—his efforts to realize a noble, just, lasting home on earth—are fated like everything else to decay and death. Man cannot attain or even partake of the immortality he so longs for.

One of the great virtues of Burns's account is that it brings out progressive liberalism's failure to grasp what the significance would be if man's origins truly were godless and chaotic. Burns shows this in his fourth chapter through an analysis of Strauss's detailed, devastating review of a book by Eric Havelock, which attempts to read the assumptions of progressive liberalism into Pre-Socratic and sophistic thought. Yet according to Strauss, all of the classical philosophers and scientists—whether Socratic or not—essentially agreed about man's original natural condition. In the broad classical view, nature hardly provides for man; man is compelled to fend for himself in his natural, needy condition. Not only must he develop technical arts, but he must also commit brutal acts of injustice against his fellow man if he's to survive. To live more decently, man needs civilization. But in calling on men to live justly, civilization must conceal from man his imperfect beginnings. It must hide from him the original terror. According to the traditional authorities that constitute civilization, man's origins are in fact a golden age, where the gods provide for him. They teach that man was never compelled by necessity to commit acts of injustice; rather, the evils he confronts in the world around him in the present are the consequences of the generations of men having *freely chosen* to become vicious and commit acts of injustice. The principal reason that civilization must deceive man about his real origins is that the force of the laws that hold civilization together depend on men believing in their own moral culpability (103–6). Burns could have also stressed the way in which traditional authorities trace their regime's laws to divine lawgivers or to lawgivers who have learned from the gods: only the gods can truly claim the authoritative wisdom that can establish a people's way as the right way.<sup>1</sup> And only the gods can make justice, nobility, and virtue into the sources of transcendent and intrinsic fulfillment that we hope they are. As Burns rightly notes, belief in universal moral standards, in something like Plato's ideas, is already implicit in the traditional moral framework (148). In any case, in all of these ways, civilization deceives man; it partly helps him satisfy his natural needs, especially his biological needs, but it also partly conceals nature and inhibits man from fully satisfying his genuine natural needs. Indeed, civilization is sustained and constituted by opinions, many of which are false opinions, concerning the nature of the world and our needs.

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<sup>1</sup> See Ian MacFarlane, "Liberal Education as the Recovery of Classical Moral and Political Reasoning," *Perspectives on Political Science* 52, no. 1 (January 2023): 9–10.

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Whereas Strauss shows that classical philosophy makes thematic the mythological and ultimately conventional character of the traditional teachings that guide civilization, he believes that liberals fail to fully appreciate what's at stake in the distinction between nature and convention. Early modern liberals were overly confident in our ability to squarely face the ugliness of our origins and then derive rational conventions in accord with our genuine natural needs. Later progressive liberals, such as Havelock, are too quick to believe that conventions develop organically in response to our changing historical needs. That's to say, liberals tend to be overly confident in the harmonious relationship between nature and convention, and hence they fail to confront what Strauss calls the "problem of civilization" (see 155–64). This leads them to defer excessively to the claims made by man's conventions and to place too much confidence in man's conventions. By investing so much in what man makes, they tend to lose sight of man's concern with the whole and his longing for eternity—and so they tend to forget the ultimate futility and insignificance of human affairs in light of the whole and of eternity. Burns is fond of referring to what Strauss says of Hobbes: "Somehow the experience, as well as the legitimate anticipation, of unheard-of progress within the sphere which is subject to human control must have made him insensitive to 'the eternal silence of those infinite spaces' or to the crackings of *moenia mundi*." Strauss traces the constriction of man's vision from the Enlightenment to subsequent developments in modern thought. In later historicist thought, "'History' ... fulfils the function of enhancing the status of man and of his 'world' by making him oblivious of the whole or of eternity."<sup>2</sup>

In connection with this, we note here that Burns finds striking similarities between Strauss's assessment of progressive liberal thought and his assessment of Heideggerian existentialism. Burns persuasively argues that Strauss's main criticism of Heidegger is that he loses sight of philosophy's concern with the eternal, because he doesn't sufficiently appreciate the way in which the human world looks beyond itself. Since he doesn't grasp the precise character of conventional authority and the problem with it, he doesn't think that thought can or should ultimately seek to liberate itself from historical forces, which, in the classical view, must inevitably fall far short of wisdom. Heidegger's existentialism "presents one's historical situation or fate or particular political, legal, or historical situation—or what to the

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<sup>2</sup> Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 175–76; see Burns, 42n6, 50–51, 51n17, 112, 122.

ancients, including the pre-Socratics, is convention—as that which must be freely embraced by anyone who would live a ‘resolute,’ actively engaged existence” (163).

In traditional life, conventional authority is political, moral, and religious in character. It is constituted, above all, by divine law. It reflects man’s concern with his place in the broader universe and promises to satisfy his longing for providential support and immortality. Genuine political philosophy emerges out of the normal, pre-theoretical awareness we find within the horizon of convention and divine law. It starts by taking seriously the claims and concerns we confront in communal, political life. Burns quotes an unpublished lecture by Strauss on John Dewey that nicely shows the origin of the philosophic question of the right way of life:

The question of the whole policy of the country can be said to be the most serious question. It is a question, as is shown by the fact that there are different parties, different trends. If that question is clarified, it is the question of what is the right aim of living together? what is the standard with reference to which all actions and institutions are to be judged? This most serious question is the primary justification of “quest for truth.” It is from this question that the philosophic tradition, the tradition founded by Socrates, starts. (94-95)

Hence the question of the community’s ends leads to the question of man’s ends simply, and this inquiry according to Strauss entails discovering “knowledge of human nature,” which “in its turn requires knowledge of the place of man in the universe.” In this way, our original *practical* orientation gives way to a *theoretical* orientation or attitude—“i.e. the attitude guided by the interest in knowing only” (95-96).

Burns’s accounts of political philosophy’s examination of moral and political opinions and its relationship to ancestral tradition and religious belief are among the finest parts of the book (see 37-51, 91-106). I wonder, though, whether he goes too far—as Strauss does at times—in portraying political philosophy as a mere preliminary stage of inquiry that legitimates philosophy or science proper. It seems to me that our serious studies are always animated, at least in part, by a concern with understanding what’s good for us and what our ultimate fate is. We privilege the study of the nature of man and his political existence as well as the study of the overarching nature and origins of the universe as whole, because these studies bear the greatest importance for our lives.

But however this may be, why has the experience of the moral and political things that give rise to philosophy become so distorted for us? Why do we no longer encounter the world in the normal way—under the authority of divine law? In his introduction and treatment of the opening chapters of *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* on liberal education, Burns shows how it is that Strauss thought that modern thought transformed our world and brought about our philosophical and political crisis. Modern politics dismantles aristocracy and places the state on a secular, rationalist, and popular foundation. For the classics, the best though highly imperfect safeguard for decent politics was to give some decisive share of the rule in the regime to a class of gentlemen aristocrats who've been liberally educated and can devote serious time to study and political service. But of course, this requires securing for them a life of leisure by securing their large landed estates and relieving them of the need to work for their wealth. The classical preference accepts an economy of scarcity where the vast multitude is arbitrarily confined to a life of slavish labor, sustaining the leisure of the ruling class.

The modern transformation seeks to rectify the many injustices that this arrangement, even at its best, must depend upon. It seeks to replace the economy of scarcity with an economy of plenty, and this requires the unleashing of capitalism and technological progress. Burns calls particular attention to the underappreciated fact that Strauss stresses in numerous places that the decisive difference between the ancients and moderns concerns their stance toward technology (see 2 ff.). The former recognize the benefit of particular technological developments, especially for warfare; but with an eye toward maintaining reverence for established laws and customs, they insist on the careful political supervision of which technological developments are permitted or not. The latter embrace technological experimentation and invention and expect state and society to adjust accordingly. The acceptance of such ongoing, often tumultuous change requires enlightenment. It requires philosophers and intellectuals to make a popular defense of science and for science in turn to earn popular support by enhancing our material wellbeing. As a consequence of these efforts, modern society treats science not primarily as a *theoretical*, somewhat-questionable pursuit, but as an emphatically *practical*, beneficial technological pursuit.

Yet the modern transformation doesn't succeed in ushering in the rule of a liberally educated demos—a “universal aristocracy”—or even a liberally educated “natural aristocracy”

that represents the people in the government. Rather, it brings to power an industrial, commercial elite. The spirit of technological progress and acquisition comes to pervade the whole society. Very few, even among the elite, learn to embrace a life of leisure. In some sense, it becomes even harder to provide a genuine liberal education amidst modern plenty and mass politics. In his discussion of liberal education in modern times, Strauss notes that sensible liberals saw a need to educate a gentlemanly class in the classics. But with reference to *The Federalist*, he gently shows that the type of men who will govern in modern republics will tend to be men who rise up through the modern economy—merchants, wealthy landlords, and men of the learned professions, especially lawyers—and that they won't have the same inclination and capacity for liberal learning as their classical counterparts.<sup>3</sup> This difficulty is compounded by the fact—indicated by Strauss, and nicely brought out by Burns—that modern politics displaces that other great source of moral formation: religious education.

But alas, some elite must govern, even in modern mass politics. Can we provide that elite with the requisite liberal education for governing well? This is the consideration Strauss ultimately takes up in his second *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* essay on liberal education. Liberal education can mean no more than “the endeavor to found an aristocracy within democratic mass society.”<sup>4</sup> It can never become universal but “will always remain the obligation and the privilege of a minority,” and we shouldn't “expect that the liberally educated will become a political power in their own right. For we cannot expect that liberal education will lead all who benefit from it to understand their civic responsibility in the same way or to agree politically.” Strauss makes clear that a liberal education involves the reading of great books, but he says more about what it is not—technocratic, positivistic, specialized—than about its proper political content. He suggests that its ultimate outcome will be a wisdom that's inseparable from moderation. Indeed, he hopes that “it may again become true that liberally educated men will be politically moderate men.” This may allow them to “again receive a hearing even in the market place.” They'll apparently see that “wisdom requires unhesitating loyalty to a decent constitution and even to the cause of constitutionalism.” “Moderation,” Strauss says, “will protect us against the twin dangers visionary expectations from politics and unmanly contempt for politics.” Yet Strauss also counsels moderation in

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<sup>3</sup> Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 16–17; see Burns, 52–54.

<sup>4</sup> Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 5, 10.

our expectations of what liberal education can do: “In thinking of remedies we may be compelled to rest satisfied with palliatives. But we must not mistake palliatives for cures.”<sup>5</sup>

It’s hard to read Strauss’s discussion of liberal education or Burns’s account of it and think it could make much of any difference in our political world today. How could we even hope to provide a sizeable enough minority with a real great books education, let alone expect that that education could form an aristocracy in democracy with any real force? One is struck by the gap between the harsh—perhaps at times overly harsh—characterizations of liberal democracy that one can find in Strauss and Burns and the remedy and political temperament they recommend for coping with it. On the other hand, one might find an even greater gap between reality and remedy if one finds that one no longer lives under a decent constitution. In such circumstances, doesn’t the cause of constitutionalism and the manly acceptance of politics require much bolder political activity—perhaps an effort to change or re-found one’s regime—than what political moderation as most people understand it allows? In such circumstances, isn’t the confidence that things will work out, or that they’ll remain decent enough, itself a form of immoderation—a sort of muted yet still visionary expectation that our political progress renders tyranny and barbarism problems of the past? Finally, in light of the weakness of the aristocracy within democracy that liberal education could ever hope to produce, one might even be tempted to wonder whether we should seek to restore real aristocracy to modern politics through some kind of radical political action.

It’s with these thoughts in mind that we consider the subject of Burns’s third chapter, Strauss’s “German Nihilism” lecture, which he delivered during the Second World War. For it’s there that Strauss considers the Conservative Revolutionaries of interwar Germany—the thinkers who sought to overthrow modern liberal democracy and who paved the way for Germany’s embrace of Nazism. This lecture has attracted a great deal of attention recently, both from those within or sympathetic to today’s far or “dissident” right and from those who fear and loath it. It’s tempting when reading Strauss’s lecture to downplay either how sympathetic Strauss is to the German nihilists or his criticisms of them. Burns does neither. He sees that they sought to recover the genuine rootedness and moral seriousness that are undermined by liberalism and its ideal of the open society. Serious moral life is only possible within the closed society, where men are called to sacrifice themselves. The open society is

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<sup>5</sup> Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 22-25.

based on a lie—there can never be a truly open society—but the nihilists correctly saw that the attempt to realize it liberates amoral self-seeking and indulgence and undermines morality. Burns provides a nice elaboration on why the opposition between moral seriousness and the open society is unavoidable:

The root of nihilism was ... *love of morality* seen as threatened by the principles of modern society, and the lack of moral seriousness, including the lack of a certain confrontation with mortality, that that society engendered. The open society—toward which, we must note, liberal societies tend even more today with the movement from liberal toleration to “diversity and inclusion”—precludes sacrifices and steadfast devotion to a distinctive, common way of life held to be good and worthy of devotion. The open society declares all former common ways of life mistaken, accepting only truncated or boutique versions of what were once parts of a vibrant, particular way of life held to be worthy of sacrifice; it accepts only “cultural” echoes of those ways manifested in textiles, gastronomy, and music, as its markets call for them, but carefully vetted for evidence of hatred of the other, or “phobias.” The open society, the liberal society outlined for the first time by Hobbes, says, “to get along, go along,” or “better to switch than fight.” It is cosmopolitan, eschewing oaths, sacred principles and customs, a serious way of life, things to which we bow, stand in awe or revere, to which we subordinate our own interests, and which one stands ready to defend with one’s life. (76–77)

In the “German Nihilism” lecture, it’s not difficult to see that Strauss agrees to some considerable extent with the nihilists’ spiritual objections to liberalism. As a young man he revered Nietzsche, the philosopher who most influenced the thinkers of the Conservative Revolution, and for a time Strauss seems to have sympathized with the political thought of that movement. As is evident from his 1932 critique of Carl Schmitt’s *The Concept of the Political*, he didn’t embrace the irrationalism or bellicosity that could be found on the right. Yet he also there calls for “a radical critique of liberalism.” That “urgent task” can “be completed only if one succeeds in gaining a horizon beyond liberalism,” as Schmitt did not.<sup>6</sup> And indeed, though Burns doesn’t mention it, it’s well-known now that in 1933 Strauss wrote a letter to Karl Löwith in which he affirms his commitment to “right-wing principles”—to “fascistic, authoritarian, *imperial* principles”—in opposition to liberalism. He denies that Nazism’s intolerance toward Jews like himself discredits the former and necessitates a turn toward the latter. “There exists no reason,” he says, “to crawl to the cross, to liberalism’s

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<sup>6</sup> Strauss, “Notes on Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*,” in Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political: Expanded Edition*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 122.

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cross as well, as long as somewhere in the world there yet glimmers a spark of the *Roman* thought”—and he refers approvingly to Caesar’s and Virgil’s teachings on imperial rule.<sup>7</sup>

But then did Strauss abandon his sympathy for fascism at some point in the following years? He hoped for an Allied victory in the war, and his lecture on the German nihilists makes clear that they did ultimately deserve to be called nihilists. In order to see why, I think it’s helpful to sketch out the argument of the latter half of the lecture. Nihilism in the precise sense, Strauss explains, is “the rejection of the principles of civilisation as such.” Civilization is “the conscious culture of humanity,” which means “the conscious culture of reason.” Since “human reason is active, above all ... as practical reason, and as theoretical reason,” the two pillars of civilization are morals and science or philosophy.<sup>8</sup> The German nihilists didn’t only reject liberalism and communism; they didn’t only seek to destroy modern civilization. They finally turned against the conscious culture of reason that is the core of civilization as such and in its place sought to elevate war and conquest. The warrior as warrior became the highest type for them, and the military virtues the highest virtues. They could no longer see that peace is the end of war. But “war is a destructive business. And if war is considered more noble than peace, if war, and not peace, is considered *the* aim, the aim is for all practical purposes nothing other than destruction.”<sup>9</sup>

Strauss traces the nihilists’ destructive passion back to the tradition of German militarism, and he traces that back to German romanticism and idealism. Its core was really a moralistic passion. More than any other Western people, the Germans rebelled against the lowness of bourgeois liberalism and its morality of enlightened self-interest. For this, Strauss credits their thought greatly: “against that debasement of morality, and against the concomitant decline of a truly philosophic spirit, the thought of Germany stood up, to the lasting honour of Germany.” But German philosophers took the healthy love of nobility to its unhealthy, destructive extreme: they “insisted on the *difference* between the morally good and self-interest” and between the noble and the useful; “they insisted on self-*sacrifice* and self-*denial*; they insisted on it so much, that they were apt to forget the natural aim of man which is happiness; happiness and utility as well as commonsense became almost bad names in

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<sup>7</sup> Strauss to Karl Löwith, Paris, May 19, 1933, trans. William H.F. Altman, in Altman, *The German Stranger: Leo Strauss and National Socialism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 227.

<sup>8</sup> Strauss, “German Nihilism,” eds. David Janssens and Daniel Tanguay, *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 26, no. 3 (Spring 1999): 364–65.

<sup>9</sup> Strauss, “German Nihilism,” 369.

German philosophy.” Courage or military virtue became preeminent precisely because it’s “the only unambiguously nonutilitarian virtue.” German philosophy thus belittled the concerns of our mundane world. It “created a peculiarly German tradition of contempt for commonsense and the aims of human life, as they are visualized by commonsense.” This moral zeal was supposed to mark the revival of the classical spirit. German philosophy had initially attempted to synthesize the pre-modern and modern ideals. The failure of that synthesis led to the more radical effort “to purify German thought completely from the influence of the ideas of modern civilisation, and to return to the pre-modern ideal.” But even that effort could not truly recover the pre-modern ideal: “the pre-modern ideal was not a *real* pre-modern ideal, but a pre-modern ideal *as interpreted* by the German idealists, i.e. interpreted with a polemic intention against the philosophy of the 17th and 18th century, and therefore distorted.”<sup>10</sup> As a consequence, German nihilism was animated by an excessive and distorted love of the noble. If early modern thought is overly utilitarian, romantic thought reacts too strongly against it and goes too far in the opposite direction. The genuine classical view appreciates the complex and tension-ridden ways in which human beings are moved both by a love of the noble and by worldly self-interest.

At the end of his lecture, Strauss holds up the English, surprisingly, as the defenders of “the eternal principles of civilisation.” The English, not the Germans, best partake of the classical spirit. Even though the modern ideal was originated by English (and Scottish) philosophers and scientists, “the very Englishmen who originated it, were at the same time versed in the classical tradition, and the English always kept in store a substantial amount of the necessary counterpoison.” Their leading universities, Oxford and Cambridge, better preserved “the pre-modern ideal, the classical ideal of humanity,” than anywhere else. What makes the English superior to the Germans is their “very un-German prudence and moderation not to throw out the baby with the bath, i.e. the prudence to conceive of the modern ideals as a reasonable adaptation of the old and eternal ideal of decency, of rule of law, and of that liberty which is not license, to changed circumstances.”<sup>11</sup> A major reason for Strauss’s rejection of German nihilism, we might say, is that its underlying romanticism inevitably leads to visionary expectations from politics, and those expectations drive men to

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<sup>10</sup> Strauss, “German Nihilism,” 370–72; see also Burns, 108–110.

<sup>11</sup> Strauss, “German Nihilism,” 372–73.

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destroy the traditions that are essential for civilization. Strauss seems to have concluded that the conservative liberalism of the English, by contrast, presents a decent model for politics in the modern world.

One might question Strauss's estimation of just how much counterpoison the English still had left, and one might wonder whether he really thought through what kind of spiritual toll the World Wars were taking on them. But even still, if one takes him at his word, one notices just how qualified his endorsement of their conservative liberalism really is. He praises the English more in spite of their modern principles than because of them. And he closes his lecture on a note which Burns doesn't discuss and which would startle most readers today:

It is the English, and not the Germans, who *deserve* to be, and to *remain*, an *imperial* nation: for only the English, and not the Germans, have understood that in order to *deserve* to exercise imperial rule, *regere imperio populos*, one must have learned for a very long time to spare the vanquished and to crush the arrogant: *parcere subjectis et debellare superbos*.<sup>12</sup>

In his final draft, Strauss cut the following line he had written from the very end: “not the way of Ariovistus”—the Germanic king who battled Caesar—“but only the way of Caesar and Augustus is the road to empire.”<sup>13</sup> The Latin line he quotes is from Virgil's *Aeneid*, and it's the very same line he mentions in his 1933 letter to Löwith. Strauss resisted the nihilistic temptation, but at the same time he never really embraced the liberal approach to politics or abandoned his preference for the pre-modern approach to politics. Even in the midst of the war, he apparently still retained his affinity for “the Roman thought”—for imperial rule, if not for fascism.

The peace Strauss made with liberal democracy seems to have been the consequence of his political moderation. He saw a real threat from Nazism during the Second World War and from communism during the Cold War, and he thought that their totalitarianism, militarism, and lawlessness made liberal democracy, whatever its vices, clearly preferable to them. The principal advantage of liberal democracy is its adherence to the rule of law. It limits the rule of the unwise, and its scheme of representation dimly approximates the rule of gentlemen. Thus Strauss came to the view that “liberal or constitutional democracy comes

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<sup>12</sup> Strauss, “German Nihilism,” 373.

<sup>13</sup> Strauss, “German Nihilism,” 378n31.

closer to what the classics demanded than any alternative that is viable in our age.”<sup>14</sup> In his day at least, he judged that radical action to return to some genuinely aristocratic, pre-modern form of politics wouldn’t succeed and would do more harm than good. But this qualified defense of liberal democracy doesn’t preclude the possibility that new circumstances could arise in the modern world that would make such a return viable and desirable again. For us, this issue becomes more and more relevant to the extent that liberal or constitutional democracy becomes liberal or constitutional in name only—that is, to the extent that lawlessness and unrepresentative government replace our older constitutional regimes. Honest students of classical political philosophy can disagree about the extent of our decline, but they understand that the rule of law will break down at some point. They understand that all regimes come to an end—they eventually succumb to some kind of regime change, if they’re not destroyed outright—and ours in the modern West are no exception.

Still, one can hardly imagine something like classical aristocracy or the mixed regime returning to the modern world any time soon. In fact, what’s far more likely is that the world will grow more oligarchic and despotic and more anarchic and dysfunctional at the same time. To the extent that some sort of “classical” alternative arises it may take a rather authoritarian or illiberal form. Most of us hope that self-government can be saved, but if the worst trends continue, and more people and more people feel that their lives and livelihoods are threatened, many will prefer “Caesarism”—the term Strauss uses for the kind of post-constitutional, post-republican despotism that befits a corrupt people.<sup>15</sup> It’s thus an open question whether a revival of classical politics, considering the various forms it could take, would mark any sort of improvement over the liberal republics of the older America and Britain. It may well be the case that the best we could hope for is a revival of some of the traditionalism, lawfulness, and moral seriousness that persisted under that older liberalism before they came under assault by progressive liberalism for being “illiberal” or “fascistic.”

It must be said that Burns’s Strauss doesn’t much wrestle with the question of the regime in this way. The essays Burns explores show the essential weaknesses and sources of dissatisfaction in liberal democracy. “German Nihilism” further shows the dangers of an irrational if noble-minded right-wing revolt against it. Yet the simple fact is the right doesn’t

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<sup>14</sup> Strauss, *On Tyranny: Corrected and Expanded Edition, Including the Strauss-Kojève Correspondence*, eds. Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 194–95.

<sup>15</sup> See Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 178–80.

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pose a serious threat to our politics and to what remains of the rule of law. Despotism and violence in the name of antifascism, not fascism, are where the real threat lies. In his “Remarks on the Continued Battle for the Soul of the Nation” before Independence Hall, President Biden said that those who make up the populist right—“MAGA Republicans”—“represent an extremism that threatens the very foundations of the republic,” that they “do not believe in the rule of law,” that they “thrive on chaos,” that they “spread fear and lies ... for profit and power,” that they “promote authoritarian leaders,” that “they fan the flames of political violence,” and that they are “committed” “to destroying American democracy.” Biden’s words are ominous because he speaks for the regime and the ruling class and signals their intent to silence political opposition and their confidence in doing so. For regime critics on the right, the danger isn’t that many of them will live up to Biden’s wild exaggerations, but rather that they’ll lose themselves in a political romanticism that prevents them from confronting our challenges realistically or leads them to disengage from practical politics altogether. To his credit, Burns doesn’t draw the lesson from “German Nihilism” that we should fear that the Nazis are staging a comeback. As he reveals in the final paragraph of the book, he understands that the primary source of nihilism today comes from the left-wing identity politics, which attacks freedom of speech and science and which “stands against modern constitutionalism and moves in the direction of a new, secular despotism” (184–85).

This is correct, though it misses the other half of our political sickness: the prominence of an oligarchy whose rise is partly attributable to the modern developments Burns treats in his early chapters and partly to the construction of the modern progressive state. Likewise, as I indicated above, it seems to me that the remedies (or palliatives) for our problems that Burns draws out of Strauss are a good start but are ultimately insufficient. Aside from promoting education in the great books and a commitment to constitutionalism, Burns suggests we need to restore serious religious traditions, a classical moral-political way of reasoning which resists ideology and the politicization of philosophy, and the habit of looking to models of human greatness in men like Winston Churchill. Now about Churchill, I must confess that it seems to me that Burns exaggerates his significance in Strauss’s thought in general and in “German Nihilism” in particular. Strauss claims in the lecture that whereas the young German nihilists weren’t impressed by the technical arguments they heard from their opponents, they would have been impressed if they had heard a statesman who spoke

as Churchill did in 1940.<sup>16</sup> But I think it's a stretch to take this to imply that Churchill's example could have persuaded them to support modern democracy rather than seek its destruction (73; see also 74, 80, 82-83, 101). There are limits to what greatness can achieve.

But my bigger concern is that Burns's Strauss seems overly averse to mixing philosophy and politics. The great books of political philosophy, both ancient and modern, to which Strauss pointed his students have a great deal of practical guidance to offer us beyond teaching the perils of progress. They can help us to better grasp what kind of regime we have, what its evils are, what remains good about it, what its prospects are, and how it compares to its rivals. They can help us to think through not only how to preserve our regime but how we might improve or alter it if we have to. They can help us think more clearly about justice—and free us from the endless and nihilistic pursuit of “social justice.” Furthermore, the cause of constitutionalism in the modern world is inseparable from the arguments of modern political philosophy. We need to look to the ancients and the moderns both to help us think through how to direct and limit state power, and what kinds of freedoms we should and shouldn't permit. All of this is to say, students of political philosophy have a role to play in helping guide political action even if they cannot or will not aspire to rule directly. It's all well and good to talk about aristocracy within democracy cultivated by the study of the great books. But when we appreciate what Strauss and Burns show us about our civilizational sickness and the potential for catastrophe induced by developments in modern politics, thought, and technology, and when we look at the world around us with clear eyes, a sharper picture of the kind of aristocratic class we want comes into focus: what we seek is a politically shrewd counter-elite, one which has been liberated from the poisonous orthodoxies of our day and which understands the true nature of our oligarchic ruling class and the modern state. Liberal education today therefore requires a rigorous education in history and modern politics—one which cuts through the progressive mythology of the last century or so—as well as an education in the great books. For its reach to be politically powerful, its champions will need to build political support for it and fight to protect it from the regime.

I'm well aware that Strauss did not call for philosophical politics in quite the manner I've indicated. I believe this is partly because he was always more concerned with recovering and preserving philosophy than he was with the broader political world. But I also believe that

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<sup>16</sup> Strauss, “German Nihilism,” 362-63.

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the condition of what we're still calling "liberalism" appeared differently in his time than in ours. At any rate, Strauss wasn't as soft as many would like to believe. In his first book on classical political philosophy, he offers a nice thematic statement for his work as a whole. He says that Socratic rhetoric "is based on the premise that there is a disproportion between the intransigent quest for truth and the requirements of society, or that not all truths are always harmless. Society will always try to tyrannize thought."<sup>17</sup> Thus the interests of thought and of society are far from harmonious, but they are interconnected. Thought cannot ignore the threat posed to it by society. And it would seem to follow that in certain circumstances, in order to preserve itself, thought must help save society from itself. That is, it must take a stand for civilization—for the conscious culture of reason. When Strauss returned to that first book on classical political philosophy years later, he sketched out the tyrannical state that the modern left aspires to build. One might modify some of the details today—replacing the sole tyrant with a tyrannical class, for instance—and one should keep in mind the particular context in which he provides his sketch. But nonetheless, the essential point remains relevant and reminds us of what's at stake in politics:

To retain his power, [the Universal and Final Tyrant] will be forced to suppress every activity which might lead people into doubt of the essential soundness of the universal and homogeneous state: he must suppress philosophy as an attempt to corrupt the young. In particular he must in the interest of the homogeneity of his universal state forbid every teaching, every suggestion, that there are politically relevant natural differences among men which cannot be abolished or neutralized by progressing scientific technology. He must command his biologists to prove that every human being has, or will acquire, the capacity of becoming a philosopher or tyrant.... [T]he cause of philosophy is lost from the start. For the Final Tyrant presents himself as a philosopher, as the highest philosophic authority, as the supreme exegete of the only true philosophy, as the executor and hangman authorized by the only true philosophy. He claims therefore that he persecutes not philosophy but false philosophies.... [In former ages,] since there was no universal state in existence, the philosophers could escape to other countries if life became unbearable in the tyrant's dominions. From the Universal Tyrant however there is no escape. Thanks to the conquest of nature and to the completely unabashed substitution of suspicion and terror for law, the Universal and Final Tyrant has at his disposal practically unlimited means for ferreting out, and for extinguishing, the most modest efforts in the direction of thought.... [T]he coming of the universal and homogeneous state will be the end of philosophy on earth.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 27.

<sup>18</sup> Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 211-12.

## Lenin Lived, Lenin Lives, Lenin Will Live—Again?

Dominick Sansone

Review: *Lenin 2017: Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through*, by V.I. Lenin, edited and introduced by Slavoj Žižek (London, UK: Verso, 2017), 186 pp. \$19.95.

Upon its publication, *Lenin 2017* ostensibly set out to provide an intellectual framework for understanding theoretically unexpected geopolitical developments that were occurring not in 1917, but rather in the present day. It is easy to forget that at the time of the book's release in the latter half of the 2010s, the international left was spiritually shaken in a way that it had not been since the collapse of European communism nearly thirty years earlier. And yet, according to Žižek, it also found itself at a moment that "uncannily resembled" the rise of Leninism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century (xv). The stated purpose of the collection is therefore to examine the reflections of the Bolshevik leader in the wake of the October Revolution so as to help the modern left understand the "missed opportunities" of 1917 (xv). Slightly less than two-thirds of the text is composed of a number of Lenin's theoretical writings, letters, and speeches from the early post-revolutionary period until his death in 1924. The remaining one-third consists of a nearly eighty-page introduction by Žižek, as well as a fifteen-page afterword. As the book's central focus is to connect the experience of Lenin with the present day in order to inspire radical change, this review will first examine Žižek's central thesis as laid out in his introduction, followed by his decision to include certain selections of Lenin's work, and conclude with a critical analysis of Žižek's presentation of historical events, as well as take a closer look at the general motivations behind his decision to release *Lenin 2017*.

The goal of Slavoj Žižek's writing is to inspire radical sociopolitical change that abolishes all existing value hierarchies and fundamentally reorients the manner and meaning of human association. In pursuit of this end, he often celebrates political violence—past, present, and future. But he is nonetheless an honest radical (at least for the most part). His intent is not hidden. Besides being theoretically consistent, not to mention an undoubtedly gifted writer and powerful thinker, he is a man committed to forming a revolutionary consciousness in the intellectual types that are drawn to his work. Žižek released *Lenin 2017*, as he has every

work in his canon, as an unabashed man of the left. This review, despite generally disagreeing with that ideology, aims to take his intellectual position seriously.

### LENIN THE IDEAL

At first glance, the book seems to be a standard practice of Soviet apologetics: Salvaging the communist project from the administrative ogre Stalin by celebrating the name and legacy of Lenin (supplemented, of course, with plenty of allusions to Trotsky). Upon closer examination, however, it becomes apparent that the intention was not to simply engage in a mere glorification of Lenin the man, but rather Lenin as (subjective) representative of the revolutionary ideal in the historical dialectic. In his introduction, Žižek explains that the left in 2017 was approaching a moment of crisis. The Social-Democratic welfare state had failed—and would continue to fail—to enact the institutional change that is demanded by authentic liberation (xxix). Yet, the inability for our “politico-ideological constellation” to produce real solutions to transnational issues such as those pertaining to “ecology” and “emancipated sexuality” would create the circumstances, both material and psychological, for the rise of a new radical and revolutionary movement (xiv, lxi). Operating within a corporate capitalist economic system and liberal democratic political superstructure, however, the contradictions of the current order would first induce a reactionary backlash to the internationalism of global capital (i.e., a resurgent nationalism). The dialectical antithesis of the old left’s failure would therefore necessarily be the rise of a “rightist populism” (xxix).

This was not an unreasonable assessment. The 2016 election of Donald Trump as well as the Brexit vote, not to mention the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea through military force and the subsequent separatist wars in Eastern Ukraine—the latter two specifically referenced by Žižek in support of his thesis—certainly seemed to indicate a nationalist response to rampant internationalism (xv–xx, xxx). For Žižek, even the European Union is considered as “a tool of global capital [being used] to dismantle the welfare state” (xxix). All of this, however, was necessary according to the existing dialectic. The conditions for true liberation could only be brought about through an upheaval in the structural basis of society. Žižek works within a Hegelian framework in which the existing circumstances of the given stage of historical development create the necessary conditions for the subsequent order. In keeping with Marx, he also largely acknowledges that this general process can be ascertained

through examining the economic mode of production and the contradictions inherent to it. His unique methodology additionally utilizes a modern psychoanalytic lens (informed primarily by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan) to intellectually dissect the sociopolitical superstructure (i.e., the existing power structure that dictates the manner and mode of human interaction in a given society) that rests upon that economic foundation. Understanding the theoretical scaffolding for his thought is therefore essential to make sense of both Žižek's methodology of interpreting current affairs and how he forms his thesis for potential future developments (expanded upon further below).

Returning to 2017, Žižek perceived in the temporary triumph of populism the fertile womb from which a genuine leftism could then emerge. But it would be the task of a Lenin-type figure, acting as representative of the revolutionary ideal, to first properly ascertain the objective conditions of the historical situation. Responding to the reactionary backlash of the Social-Democratic model's breakdown, the subsequent synthesis would be the rise of an actually radical movement. By engaging in a Freudian psychoanalytic process of remembering past traumatic events, the modern left could glean from Lenin's experience the means by which to begin the process of "re-actualising" communism for the present day (xiii). The repeat of, and not the return to, Petrograd 1917 would allow them to face the "resistance" that was the unfortunate turn to Stalinism and the subsequent Soviet disaster (xv). The latter, previously an obstacle, could then be transformed into "the very resort of analysis, and this in turn [would be] self-reflexive in a properly Hegelian sense: resistance is a link between object and subject, between past and present" (viii).

The subsequent result is that the terror of communism and its 1989 collapse could now be therapeutically "worked through" in the psychoanalytic sense (vii-viii). Otherwise, the continued "false remembering" of the Soviet experience dooms the modern left to repeat it (xiii). According to Žižek, this "working through" enables one to transcend the standard right versus left interpretation of the October Revolution (i.e., the horrors of the Soviet Union that proceeded from the Marxist seizure of power were baked into the Bolshevik cake versus if only Trotsky had won the battle of succession, the true legacy of Lenin would have been secured, and with it an authentic socialist state) (xv). The question of whether the Stalinist threat was inherent to the October Revolution becomes irrelevant. Even if the historical conditions at the time fated the Soviet project to a descent towards the authoritarian

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bureaucratism represented by Stalin's rise to power, the modern left could still learn from (not to mention lament) "an authentic emancipatory vision condemned to failure by its very victory" (xiii).

Žižek therefore takes care to explain that the turn to Stalinism and the proceeding terror have no bearing on whether or not the Bolshevik seizure of power was justified (indeed, his call to "repeat" Petrograd 1917 is essentially a call for revolution). Lenin himself is presented as having been largely aware of the difficulty of implementing a program that would create the necessary conditions for a viable socialist state. Selected texts include him discussing the industrially underdeveloped and culturally backwards circumstances that the communists were presented with in early twentieth-century Russia. Yet, as Žižek intends to stress, Lenin never wavered from his belief in the inevitability of Marxist liberation.

### EFFECTIVE PRAXIS

In the section "Notes on the Texts," Žižek states that his method for selecting the various pieces was to "present Lenin's attempt to surmount the problems confronting the Soviet state at the end of the [Russian civil] war." However, he makes an exception in his decision to include the last two seemingly unconnected letters since they "render palpable not only Lenin's desperate effort to fight to the end but also the painful personal stakes of his last struggle."

The first of the selected texts sets the tone for the book: namely, revolutionary perseverance through unforeseen developments and overcoming unfortunate setbacks. In a 1921 letter to M.F. Sokolov, the Soviet administrator in charge of overseeing the management of territory seized in the Polish-Soviet War, Lenin responds to Sokolov's implication that the Bolsheviks should be able to simply tear out all of the existing bureaucratic features in the state apparatus (1-3). Sokolov naively believed that a socialist economy would then naturally arise from the ashes of the bourgeois-capitalist structure. Lenin explains to him that despite their frustration over the difficulty in cultivating the necessary revolutionary mindset, a proper understanding of the objective conditions in "a peasant country" requires patience and gradual reform. He then reaffirms the fact that although the present stage of historical development in Russia may not be ripe for socialist economics, this had no bearing on the rightfulness of seizing power (3).

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This general theme, balancing (or adapting) the demands of theory with specific historical conditions, is the focus in all of proceeding texts selected by Žižek (besides the last two). Close to the first 100 pages in the book are composed of a number of Lenin's speeches and letters justifying the 1921 introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP). Žižek in his introduction specifically draws attention to the section "Notes of a Publicist: On Ascending a High Mountain" (xxvi). In the latter, Lenin makes the analogy between the Bolsheviks' revolutionary endeavor with a mountain climber charting a new path up a rock face. There may come a time when the climber needs to partially descend back down the path that he has come up in order to reevaluate the best way to proceed even further up the mountain (29-30). Onlookers, doubting the climber and rejoicing in his missteps, will revel in this fact. The NEP's apparent retreat from socialist economics and the introduction of minor features of a market economy were seen by some as proof of the Bolsheviks' failure. "This is exactly where we [the left] are today, after the 'obscure disaster' of 1989," explains Žižek (xxviii). In order to present a viable communist project that can serve as a true alternative to global capitalism, going back to the mountain climbers starting point (i.e., Lenin's seizure of power) is once again necessary so as to "choose a *different* path," and proceed forward in an appropriately dialectical manner given the present circumstances (xxix).

Turning from analysis of economic factors, the remaining texts that Žižek chooses to include are primarily focused on Bolshevik engagement with a culturally and educationally deficient Soviet populace. The central theme of these selections is Lenin's attempt to wrestle with the challenge of building socialism among a people largely lacking in revolutionary consciousness. While the traditional Marxist economic concerns are left to the reform implementations of the NEP, the task of preparing a workable socialist state is therefore also perceived to be one of generating the proper psychological conditions among the citizenry. In keeping with Žižek's own intellectual framework of modern psychoanalytic thought synthesized with more orthodox Marxist views on class relations, the latter half of the book appears to be emphasizing Lenin's personal realization that the relationship between the sociopolitical superstructure and the economic mode of production upon which it sits may be more mutually influential upon one another than previously believed (in comparison to orthodox Marxism, in which the former is overwhelmingly dictated by the latter). The reason for focusing so sharply on the challenges of adapting theory to objective conditions are

covered below under the subheading “Searching for a Hero,” but here it will suffice to say that Žižek is intently concerned with the question of praxis and the fact that all effective political action requires breaking the confining chains of dogmatic theory.

Beginning with Lenin’s “‘Last Testament’: Letters to Congress,” the question of social reorganization concerns itself with the actual individuals who are staffing the state apparatus. Creating widespread revolutionary consciousness among the citizenry required having genuine members of the working class—not just the Bolshevik Party as proletariat vanguard—integrated into the “administrative machinery” of the state (117). Pages from Lenin’s diary express his changing focus away from the realm of economics and towards the people’s “deficiencies” in literacy, education, and culture (122, 138–140). General social organization of the peasantry, including the formation of state-sanctioned cooperatives in the countryside, is presented as a medium for further cultivating the aforementioned revolutionary consciousness necessary for liberation; specifically, this meant dispelling the false illusions of otherworldly prosperity bestowed by religion (127–128). “There is ‘only’ one thing we have left to do and that is to make our people so ‘enlightened’ that they understand all the advantages of everybody participating in the work of the cooperatives, and organizes [sic] participation” (130).

Lenin also castigates pedantic Marxists who refuse to understand the nature of “revolutionary dialectics,” in which Marx himself (according to Lenin) is said to have acknowledged the demand for “utmost flexibility” in times of revolution (137). The last of Lenin’s selected writings (before the unrelated final two) demonstrate a leader who has come to the realization that bureaucracy is now, and will remain for the foreseeable future, indispensable to the burgeoning Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The question instead becomes one of advantageous reorganization, and staffing the various administrations of the state apparatus with the right individuals—i.e., “irreproachable Communists” (153).

The penultimate text is a letter in which Lenin harshly scolds Stalin for having spoken rudely to Nadezhda Krupskaya (Lenin’s wife) during a phone call (167). Krupskaya had been keeping an incapacitated Lenin abreast of political news, which was expressly forbidden by the Central Committee based on the medical recommendation of Lenin’s doctors.<sup>1</sup> Stalin, busy aggrandizing power and maneuvering himself as the sole successor to Lenin, had an

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Service, *Lenin: A Biography* (UK: Macmillan, 2000), 463.

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obvious interest in keeping the latter in the dark to his political machinations, and subsequently lashed out harshly against Krupskaya for her insubordination. The last letter is in reference to an affair concerning a group of Georgian communists (169). After being accused of acting like an imperial emissary, the Bolshevik Sergo Ordzhonikidze physically beat up a member of the latter group. Stalin's subsequent protection of Ordzhonikidze enraged Lenin and led him to castigate Stalin in writing. These letters were dictated on both the day before, as well as the day of Lenin's death, and clearly demonstrate the difficulty brewing between him and his soon to be successor. Besides taking up a good amount of the book's introduction, this subject—the Stalinist turn—is additionally the primary theme of the afterword.

As stated above, Žižek presents his argument—in which the protagonist, Lenin, wrestles with the unforeseen challenges of founding a (post) Revolutionary state—with the intention of “working through” the unfortunate experience of the Soviet Union. By going back to the Bolshevik seizure of power, the “resistance” of the USSR's downfall is used to re-actualize communism for the present day. What does this actually mean? Clearly, by examining the selection of texts, Žižek attempts to make the argument that the descent towards bureaucratism and the impending implosion in 1989 was not only something that may have been inherent in the revolution given the dialectical progression of history, but that Lenin himself had come to realize this fact and subsequently adjusted his political goals accordingly. By analyzing the thought of Lenin in the aftermath of October 1917, Žižek means to demonstrate the communist vision—not as it turned out, but as it could have turned out—through the eyes of the revolutionary ideal in one of its greatest historical forms. This is how the Soviet project, with all of its potentialities still intact, can be transformed from trauma-induced “resistance” directly into a tool for re-actualizing communism for the modern revolutionary moment.

### SEARCHING FOR A HERO

This is the theoretical reasoning which Žižek provides as justification for presenting *Lenin 2017*. However, the argument cannot be separated from the general theme that is being expressed through the various selected texts: the need to concentrate on the objective conditions at the time, and to prepare the people psychologically for liberation. This means

fundamentally reorienting views on culture and religion, as well as overhauling education. Žižek is eager to point to Bolshevik efforts at implementing social initiatives that were radically different from the established tradition. For instance, he mentions that in addition to the introduction of universal healthcare and social-security benefits, “women’s rights were [also] greatly increased through new laws designed to wipe away centuries-old inequalities” left over from the Czarist regime—although this is rather questionably cited from a Wikipedia page on Ukraine in the 1920s (xvii).

The leftist attempt to undermine traditional Western culture and change public attitudes on social issues does not seem like a revelatory insight. Yet considering the aforementioned context of “re-actualizing communism for the present day,” presenting Lenin in this way is integral to Žižek’s thesis. The realization that the psychological state of the public must be made ready for liberation leads to the conclusion that only an enlightened people could have made the Soviet project work. The Stalinist threat may have been inherent to the Bolshevik Revolution, but that was only because the citizenry was not properly conditioned at the time of the seizure of power. The lesson for the modern left is clear: patience and persistence is needed in changing public attitudes. This next time around, with the proper consciousness, the communist vision will succeed.

Why did Žižek feel the need to relay this specific message at this point in time? The centennial of the October Revolution is certainly part of the answer, but his full motivation for publishing the book must also be considered in light of the events in the lead up to 2017. Žižek is a man who writes with political action in mind. Perhaps most famous for cultural analysis, his work attempts to understand historical conditions in all domains of human association so as to (purportedly) identify the dialectical contradictions and inspire revolutionary change. Effective praxis is always the primary consideration—theory without political implementation is useless. Therefore, at the time of his editing *Lenin 2017*, the international left did not just need a theoretical framework for analyzing previously unforeseen political events: it needed hope. It shouldn’t be underestimated how genuinely demoralized the latter group was in the second half of the 2010s. There was a palpable moment of utter panic as their ostensible arc of progress seemed to continually bend not towards leftwing equity and Social Justice, but rightwing tradition and the return of national sovereignty. As he does in all of his writing, Žižek in *Lenin 2017* adapted a concept to meet

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the practical political demands of the present moment.<sup>2</sup> 100 years after the birth of the Soviet Union, the return to Lenin was meant to present one of the left's greatest political figures as a man dealing with unforeseen obstacles. Theoretical analysis aside, he appears as a normal human persevering through hardship, and demonstrating undying commitment to the revolutionary endeavor even in the face of setbacks. Žižek is attempting to inspire the international left to keep fighting for the hopes of their sought after tomorrow, despite the temporary triumphs of the world's Trumps and Brexits (not to mention its Stalins).

However, Žižek's political intentions can at times lead him to dip into the realm of exaggeration. Consider his portrayal of Lenin as a champion of national sovereignty. In the introduction, Žižek attempts to draw a direct line from Stalin to current Russian President Vladimir Putin, particularly in regard to Ukraine and "Great Russian chauvinism" (xix-xx). Lenin is presented in opposition as a defender of self-determination for the variegated peoples of the Soviet Union. In reality, "self-determination" for Lenin was primarily a programmatic slogan.<sup>3</sup> Similar to Trotsky, the question of a "Union of Soviet Socialist Republics" was not confined to the former Russian Empire, but was rather an aspirational project for all of Europe (and eventually the world).

Further, Lenin's focus on imperialism as the end result of the internationalization of capital led him to see national liberation movements as key to the downfall of the planet's capitalist empires. The debate with Stalin over Ukrainian and Georgian incorporation into the RSFSR was a question of administration and logistics, not one of principle regarding the nature of "independence."<sup>4</sup> To state that this was imagined as meaning total political self-determination in Ukraine or Georgia free from the control of the Politburo sitting in Moscow (at least prior to the full realization of communism), would be entirely contrary to Lenin's Marxist revolutionary ideology.<sup>5</sup> It cannot be separated from Lenin's belief in spreading the revolution westward—a fact which Žižek himself is eager to emphasize in order to theoretically disconnect Lenin's teachings entirely from the policy of "Socialism in One

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<sup>2</sup> See two of his most recent publications on the Covid pandemic, *Pandemic!* (Cambridge: Polity, 2020) and *Pandemic! 2* (Cambridge: Polity, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Cohen, *Bukharin and The Bolshevik Revolution: A Political Biography, 1888-1938* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 36-38.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Service, *Lenin: A Biography*, 452.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Service, *Lenin: A Biography*, 413.

Country” implemented by Stalin (xlvi). Allowing for political units that included common language and tradition would provide for easier dissemination of Marxist literature and educational initiatives, expediting the process of forming a class consciousness that would fundamentally destroy any semblance of the nation-state and dissolve all arbitrarily defined borders. Žižek, if speaking honestly, knows that there is little connection between the notion of Ukrainian “independence” envisioned by Lenin and the current nationalist elements that are fighting in opposition to Putin at present.

Still, this attempt to glob on to the current leftwing hot button issue and make it indicative of the inevitably approaching revolution is not necessarily a weakness. Even if one were to disagree with his jargon-heavy theoretical analysis, it is much harder to critique Žižek’s acumen as a political actor of the left. Putin is a reviled figure among the latter today, as much for his perceived anti-LGBT legislation as for his foreign policy excursions. Linking him to Stalin aids the project of salvaging the world’s first socialist state from its bloody descent into political oppression and economic failure—pretending that Ukrainian nationalism was a founding feature of that socialist state even more so. Crafting a feasible narrative in which the fight against Putin in Ukraine is synonymous to Lenin fighting for socialism against Stalin’s reactionary politics is testament to both Žižek’s commitment to his cause as well as oratory skill. Much like Lenin before him, he understands that political change is made by those who have the mental acuity to understand the current historical conditions that predominate at a given time, the qualities of leadership that attract loyalty, and the courage to risk life and limb when the opportunity for action presents itself.

*Lenin 2017* was written at a time when the international left felt as though its back was up against the wall. For this reason alone, it is worth reading now, five years later when the political situation has largely been reversed. Post-Covid supranational decision-makers have accelerated their attempts to birth a new order from the womb of international circumstances that were largely orchestrated by those with a similar humanist worldview to that of Žižek—as much as he may want to pretend to be a contrarian voice against today’s primary power holders. Like all acolytes of Marx, both believe in an alchemic human nature in which a base material can be transformed on mass into some fundamentally different product. Real efforts have additionally been made to centralize energy decision-making in order to fight climate

change—also advocated for by Žižek.<sup>6</sup> The implementation of leftwing social policy has additionally been kicked into overdrive. Žižek’s desire for transnational “sexual emancipation” is surely underway when the LGBT agenda has been injected into every facet of life in the Western world. Likewise, every elementary school age child is in one way or another baptized in the religion of identity politics, and raised on the activist tenets of anti-racism. All of these developments exponentially sped up after the writing of this book.

Žižek’s theoretical analysis in *Lenin 2017* provides one interesting perspective in helping to answer this question. However, even for those of us who deny the Hegelian-Marxist dialectical progression of history, a closer look at the motivations for the book reveals a more enduring feature of political life: the need for hope, and the timeless reality that in the final analysis, it is the courage of men that charts the course. As Žižek closes out the final paragraph of his afterword:

We navigate today in uncharted territories, with no global cognitive map – but what if this is hope, an opening to avoid totalitarian closure, like Saint-Just for Milner? What if we read the couple Lenin/Trotsky as a repetition of the couple Robespierre/Saint-Just—who are, or could be, today’s Lenin and Trotsky? (182–83).

Indeed, even though we may consider the politics associated with these names to be anathema, the question rings loudly for the conservative right in 2022: What men will rise up for us, and seize the mantle of defending Christian morality and Western culture against the “totalitarian closure” of this new Tower of Babel, the only true act of revolution in our own day?

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<sup>6</sup> For example, see Žižek, “Yes, it is a climate crisis. And your tiny human efforts have never seemed so meagre,” *Independent*, September 29, 2019. After arguing that individual efforts to act responsibly towards the environment are largely futile in fighting off ecological ruin, Žižek cites the need to raise “more pertinent global questions about our entire industrial civilization.” He concludes his article by citing Lenin’s question, “What is to be done?” His implied answer in the final sentence is telling: “A strong global agency is needed with the power to coordinate the necessary measures. And does such the need for such an agency point in the direction of what we once called ‘communism’?”

The examples of supranational efforts to increase regulatory control over the entire energy sector are numerous. For example, the most recent case of it upon this writing is a deal reached by the EU on Dec. 18, 2022 for the world’s first major carbon border tax. The price of energy imports into the European Union will increase significantly while all “carbon-intensive industries” in Europe remain under the world’s most stringent emissions standards. The effect will be to increase energy insecurity while further hamstringing European industry—all at a time in which the continent is starving for energy because of sanctions against Russia.

## The Scandal of the Partial

Aaron and Mignon Thurow

Review: *Heroes of the Fourth Turning*, by Will Arbery (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 2020), 98 pp. Softcover, \$10.95.

*Later a writer must face the choice of becoming an artist or a prophet. He can shut himself up at his desk and selfishly seek pleasure in the perfecting of his own skill or he can pace about, dictating dooms and exhortations on the topics of the day. The recluse at his desk has a bare chance of giving abiding pleasure to others; the publicist has none at all.*

—Evelyn Waugh, 1955

Will Arbery's "Heroes of the Fourth Turning," which debuted off-Broadway in 2019 to rave reviews from both the right and the left, is a unique and stunningly successful play; some reviews have even suggested that the play will have an enduring greatness. That Arbery has so beautifully articulated genuine utterances of conservative thought and managed to get them voiced off-Broadway is truly admirable. One can only surmise that the incredible praise the play has received among conservatives and Catholics in particular must be due to the tremendous and genuine relief of hearing one's beloved language spoken in public again, even if haltingly, after having been so long and so violently forbidden; Arbery's anti-heroes do articulate truly forbidden things and not just the straw-man prejudices with which the powers-that-be have replaced them in the public square. Tragically, the beautiful and persuasive conservative and/or Catholic arguments remain abortive scraps that are never allowed to live and show their fruit. Arbery, whether intentionally or unintentionally, gratifies a liberal audience and deceives an optimistic conservative audience. Despite a Dostoevsky-like scenario, complete with dreams, possession, and paranormal screeching off-stage, this play is not a modern-day *Devils*. The potential beauty of the dialogue between old friends cannot overcome the play's frankly trite, nihilistic, and even somewhat juvenile tendencies. In spite of the pieces of true things spoken, the play ultimately presents a shallow view of conservatism, leaving the audience with a breathtaking cynicism about human nature and divine providence.

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Like so many plays being published now, the play has no discernible plot but relies instead on character-driven conversation. The consequences of ideas are never really worked out in action. There is no redemption or, for that matter, damnation, and all the characters, even the new president of the Catholic college whose much-anticipated arrival seemed to promise a more mature intervention, are fundamentally intoxicated losers, presumably meant to represent what we all “secretly” know is true of every human being. Reading through the play is a bit like looking through the notes of a clever college student who has attended lectures by brilliant and beautifully articulate professors. He has carefully jotted down some of their best lines, but ultimately leaves out or misunderstands essential elements of the underpinning of those arguments, while obscene doodles scattered throughout the notes further obscure the thought with his own fixations and unformed musings. The vogue, if juvenile, choice to adulterate good or serious moments with vulgar acts, crass speech, or strange, loud noises every time things get too tense or interesting may be the author’s attempt at the grotesque, but it is more accurately monstrous: it produces an incomplete fusion of bits and pieces of living argument and experience jammed together into an ugly and, frankly, unrealistic whole.

For instance, Gina, the professor, and her protegee, Teresa, both present the clearest and most compelling arguments, but both turn out to be savage, beastly people. Teresa, a Trump and Bannon-loving blogger, eschews the old-style drunkenness of her friends and favors cocaine, because she’s a cool, New York style conservative, apparently. She can glibly run on about the “scandal of the particular” when her friend Kevin asks her to give an argument for why one ought to venerate the Virgin Mary, but she treats everyone present as an object to be used or abused. Teresa’s defense of the unborn is not an argument at all, as one would expect from a true intellectual conservative, but rather a label: “abortion is murder because I say it is.” The compelling points of the abortion debate, such as personhood, the pain of a child being dismembered, and the terrible physical, psychological, and spiritual effects upon the mother are all neglected and subsumed by a shallow discussion with Emily, who wants to explain just how *nice* and *good* people are who help women get abortions. It is a straw-man presentation of a Right that hatefully labels suffering people as murderers and a Left made up of simple, loving souls. The conversation descends into complete inanity, where Emily’s

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clinging sweetness is simply a foil to the barbaric delight Teresa takes in fantasizing about humiliating Emily's pro-abortion friend in a "real" debate.

No less terrible is the professor and now president of the college, Gina, who shows up tipsy and proceeds to wax eloquent on the subject of traditional conservatism, responding to Kevin's desire for an explanation of why one might be conservative apart from Catholic belief. Her lovely description of "the space between the cup and the lip"—that place for deliberation and even gridlock—should inspire everyone there, but fails. Arbery will let no intellectually considered idea succeed, even when the voice is beautiful and poetic. Instead, we must witness Gina descend from the poetic heights to savagely attack her protegee, Teresa, for having the wrong views, going so far as to call her a slut who is "whoring [herself] to popular opinion," and to regret the clemency she once showed the girl when she was a student at the college. All this, of course, is portrayed without any real back and forth concerning her ideas at all, merely a jumbled succession of ad-hominems (from "I met him in Napa, he's a pig" to "they're all on their third wives", and even the uber-trite unsupported assertion that they're all "a bit racist"). Gina's breakdown is such a disgusting turn from the magnanimous character with whom we have been presented that it breaks the suspension of disbelief. Worse, of course, is the fact that Teresa has behaved so repugnantly throughout the play that one can imagine how the audience may even be meant to relish Gina's rebuke: "Look at you, you're worldly, you're crude, and you're *weak*. You're *one of them*." Her broadside is, itself, crude, intellectually weak, and just another ad-hominem.

For Arbery, ideas do not form actions, but only get in the way of what he assumes to be naturally good passions. Intellectuals are always hypocrites. Why? They just are. While bad ideas can certainly have the effect of weakening human sympathy, good ideas have been lauded throughout history for their power to form the soul and conscience. Yet the good ideas held by the characters in the play do not possess this power. Teresa, for instance, seems unaffected by her own argument that one ought to venerate the Virgin Mary because of the "scandal of the particular," and is able simultaneously to hold to the idea that empathy is "empty ... impossible ... self-righteous ... irresponsible and dangerous." While veneration of what is sacred in the Virgin should lead her to a more general reverence and empathy for people around her, that point is utterly lost to her, and her interlocutors do not point this out either. Furthermore, Teresa's faith and conservatism seem to be in no way reflected in

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her morality; she uses cocaine, casually dismisses the feelings of others, and generally treats people terribly in complete contradiction to what would be the natural consequence to some of the ideas she presents. Likewise, the professor-turned-college-president carries within her what Alice von Hildebrand has called “the Tabor vision,” that is, the view from Mt. Tabor at the transfiguration of Christ; she understands her duty and her calling as inspired by the transformative picture of glory, light, beauty, and she imparts that to her former students in the most poetic of terms, yet in the end, she has so little self-control that she is easily and violently provoked by Teresa’s suggestion that likens her support of Pat Buchanan to that of Trump. The ideas have not formed her character. A meaningful, mature argument within the play would demonstrate how these ideas themselves necessarily lead to such hypocrisy, if they do, rather than merely putting these ideas in the mouths of characters who happen to be hypocrites.

Although the remaining characters, Kevin (the one most drunk), Emily (the invalid), and Justin (the Marine veteran), are meant to be more endearing, they, too, must bear the weight of Arbery’s cynical theme. Kevin’s genuine doubts about pretty much everything seem compounded by his drunken desire to prompt a “big conversation”; surely, in reality, he is not quite so lost, or why would he attend daily mass three times a week back home, or work for a Catholic textbook company? Is he really wondering why he should love the Virgin Mary? Ought we to take him seriously when he says to Gina, “All we know how to do is make things Catholic. That’s all you taught us how to do. At other schools, they allow for different conclusions.” Is he really so naive as to believe that such liberality exists on other campuses? Try asserting the beauty and fittingness of the perpetual virginity of Mary in your garden variety feminist-lit class. Even so, Kevin continues with his critique:

But here, we’re in the pursuit of the same conclusion- what you want isn’t different conclusions, you want better poetry to get us to the same place. It’s all pre-determined, you’re exceptionally good at thinking deeper and more poetically into the *dogma*. You chide us for not being imaginative, but you kick us out of school for smoking a joint.

This is particularly tragic, given that the setting is based on one of a handful of schools in the country that really still seeks to form the conscience through the great ideas of Western culture. “Smoking a joint” is not an act of imagination; in fact, it’s quite the opposite! What

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legitimate argument has this school refused to entertain? If we pursue the truth, yes, we pursue the same conclusion, of course. But, again, where is the connection between idea and reality? If Arbery's imagined school stifles legitimate considerations, why should we care unless given some reason to see why real liberal-arts Catholic colleges holding these particular ideas must necessarily be similarly hypocritical? The assertion of the Catholic liberal-arts tradition is not that we must forbid undogmatic ideas in order to know the truth, but that one may have faith that when truth is rigorously sought and all ideas ruthlessly tested in debate, we will discover the truth of the tradition and, indeed, the beautiful reality of the dogma.

The fragmented conservative ideas in the "big conversation" are thrown to the wayside at the end of the play with the revelation that what really mattered was Emily's unacknowledged but intense suffering in the background. This revelation is heightened by the sudden intrusion of the supernatural into the play. To be fair, the artistry of the last portion of the play is truly interesting and engaging, filled with a kind of magical realism that signals different things to different people, but that is also its chief problem. First, Kevin relates to Teresa the dream he had back in college. Teresa, who has just swiftly and literally knocked Kevin out for beginning to reveal an embarrassing secret from her past, is leaning over him, holding him, filled with regret for hurting him, as he is coming back to consciousness. It is her one humane moment. Teresa's blow evokes a vision-like dream or memory of a dream Kevin had as a freshman, the vision which made him begin to change into the doubter he now is. Kevin has had his own kind of Sinai/Tabor vision, one that is more genial toward the relativistic place into which he has moved and is moving. In this vision he sees a blind, gender neutral or transgender "someone" carrying stones like those of the commandments down the mountain.

The stones had words on them for everything we've been missing. There are things we've been missing ... secret sacraments and commandments we forgot to follow. And they were carrying the stones down.... They didn't see us.... They just kept moving.... They... They took the stones away, and I fell asleep, I didn't tell anyone.... And that's when I started to change...

This beautiful but heavy-handed dream has a message for Teresa and for all conservatives and Catholics, and that message is this: there is no truth, or if there is, it is entirely inaccessible. This revelation is being carried by a blind being who is both male and female,

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whose pronouns are apparently “they, them.” “They” possess the words for “everything we’ve been missing.” Perhaps if “they” return, we ought to stop them, listen to them, and obey their “secret sacraments and commandments.” We may have our truth and our laws, but they have theirs, and all flow from a place of equal authority.

After the revelation of this dream, Teresa is scared, not at the thought of having missed the words of the “secret sacraments and commandments,” but that her upcoming wedding “won’t be beautiful.” She voices bizarre concern over whether or not she has been “too private” with her love, saying, “People won’t know how to celebrate me, or my love. Or just that people don’t know me, that I don’t let them know me.” These are lines one might hear from someone “coming out,” so to speak, and perhaps she is, but to put them in Teresa’s voice is puzzling indeed. How can a wedding, public celebration that it is, mean that her love is too private? Isn’t the wedding the very manner in which people will celebrate her and her love? What is she talking about, and why does Kevin’s vision lead her in this direction?

Finally, after all have departed except for Justin and Emily, the audience receives one more revelation, one final piece of resolution for all the problems in the dialogue of the play averted through devices of interruption, vulgarity, humor, and departure. We discover that the loud, intermittent, off-stage screeching which has plagued both the audience and the characters, which Justin has explained as a problem with his generator, is not actually caused by a generator at all: “When I first moved into this house, I felt the most horrible presence. It was suffocating me. I had the house blessed. Fr. Paul came and basically scrubbed it down with holy water. It didn’t help. And that screech you heard, it isn’t the generator. I don’t know what that is.”

After the only mention of a divine power of goodness, suggested in the image of holy water, the character Justin makes reference to its failure to do any good, yet this is the character who has just announced that he intends to join a monastery. If this noise is a spiritual power, he quickly dismisses its being combated by spiritual means, which are, apparently, inefficacious. And it’s not even of sufficient concern to cause him to cancel his party. In the world of Dostoevsky, or Graham Greene, or Evelyn Waugh, for that matter, prayer has power and the demonic is of real concern. Even if the power of the divine is subtle, it is still powerful and all-pervasive. But with Arbery’s world in this play, the divine is impotent and absurd, seen in the acts of praying the rosary while drunk, interrupted by vomit,

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or “scrubbing down” a house with holy water, as though holy water were some kind of cleaning solvent, a ridiculous magic potion that cannot solve the suffering of the world. We are clearly meant to see that Justin will retreat from the world and enter the monastic life not to engage it in love, but to escape.

Is this a harsh conclusion? Yes, but it is a valid one, considering the one remaining character, Emily, who is an icon of suffering throughout the play. The intellectual conversation has not only been fruitless but is actually a distraction from her very real suffering, happening on the stage for the last twenty minutes, ignored by the rest of the cast. “Why didn’t you say something?” Justin asks. “Everyone was trying to figure their things out,” Emily responds. Apart from her cloying sweetness, clearly the result of not having been damaged by the heartlessness of the intellectual life, Emily is a silent representation of the screeching noise of the suffering of humanity; she is the proper interruption in all philosophical discourse. She is also meant to point Justin toward a proper end, because she needs him.

Emily clearly loves Justin or is in love with him; it doesn’t matter which it is. But because she is suffering, she needs him, and tells him so. Not only is she suffering physically from her disease, but she suffers in another way: she alone of all the characters in the play appears to be bearing the suffering of others, a revelation the audience is to understand through her final monologue, in which she channels or is possessed by the rage and suffering of the woman in her nightmare, the woman she counseled at the pregnancy crisis center in Chicago who ended up getting an abortion anyway. We are probably meant to note suddenly that this is the only black voice to intrude into these white people’s privileged world tonight. The monologue is also a rebuke to each person she has listened to that night—to Kevin and his ideas of “merging” with those who are different from him, to Teresa who has claimed that Catholicism is a kind of panopticon, to Justin who has told the most awful children’s story, his “Grateful Acre” (akin to Shel Silverstein’s depressing book, “The Giving Tree,” but worse), to Gina who has empathy, pity, and understanding for liberals and MAGA folks alike—and the rebuke climaxes in the terrible agony of her pain. Pain, we are meant to realize, is the only truth here. Arbery wants Emily to be a new kind of Christ-figure, one who undergoes a passion to bear not the sins of the world but the suffering of it. She is the model for the audience. She hears the screams of the oppressed and does not push them away, as

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everyone has been trying to do all night long with the “screeching generator” that is not a screeching generator after all.

In the real world, the sympathy for and embrace of the other, especially the suffering whom Arbery wishes to idealize, is an action made possible by some of the very ideas he finds to be such a distraction and waste of time.

You would not have an Emily without this formation, but he makes no connection between it and love of neighbor; in fact, Emily seems only capable of this love because she has rejected the education of her friends. At the heart of Arbery’s argument, then, seems to be the idea that all of this high-minded, intellectual conversation only distracts us from and makes it harder for us to have the naturally good, sympathetic response to the suffering of others. While there is some validity to this, the failure to bring this argument into conversation with any other perspective (it’s just dropped on us *deus ex machina* in dreams and possessions and ghostly screaming) conveniently avoids a more complex understanding of how good and beautiful and true ideas help us to form and develop the ability to understand and have sympathy for our neighbors. The modern college’s rejection of rational debate and honest inquiry has not produced a generation of open-minded, loving Emilys, but quite the opposite: a bigoted mob unable to love or even tolerate human beings who entertain even the slightest deviation from their orthodoxy. It is precisely the Christian and classical ideas inculcated by the education Arbery critiques that produce the remarkable ability to love everyone, even one’s enemies. But here, at the close of the play, the nonsensical “doopy-doo” into which the conversation degrades is meant to be viewed as a more genuine and humane communication between Justin and Emily than any of the high-minded philosophy that has appeared in the text, while at the same time representing their continued efforts to avoid seeing the real suffering that is the only compelling reality in this nihilistic world.

# The Unraveling of Wyoming Catholic College

Kevin Slack

Review: *Heroes of the Fourth Turning*, by Will Arbery (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 2020), 98 pp. Softcover, \$10.95.

Will Arbery's *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* describes Rod Dreher's conservative movement as made with the slime of broken souls, yet Dreher sings its praises: it's "breathtaking." How could "someone so young write with such ... philosophical depth?"<sup>1</sup> Catholic hipsters and *First Things* find the play provocative: exactly what we need right now. The University of Dallas produced it and invited Will's father, Glenn Arbery (the president of Wyoming Catholic College), to lead a discussion. I too know about this Catholic world that Will Arbery portrays; my friends and family include Wyoming Catholic alumni.

In the play, two of those alumni, Kevin and Teresa, along with Emily (based on Will Arbery's real-life sister and not an alumnus), join a third, Justin, at his rural home for a commencement after-party. The commencement speaker, Gina Presson (based on Will's real-life mother, Virginia or "Ginny" Arbery), is both their mentor and the newly installed president of the Transfiguration College of Wyoming—a blatant stand-in for Wyoming Catholic. But reunion is the backdrop for disharmony as the characters question the value of their education and the 2016 election. In this attempt at a psychological thriller, Arbery asks how faithful Catholics could have voted for Donald Trump and what role their education played in misleading them so profoundly. For context, he situates the play one week after the "white-supremacist riot and murder in Charlottesville"; oddly, conservative reviewers tend to focus on the play's theme of suffering, or on how it gives "conservative Catholics ... a voice," but they often fail to reflect on its basic political teaching.<sup>2</sup>

Will Arbery's supposed insight is characters fleeing, or "fugue." Behind conservative opinions and confidence lurk weakness. Kevin is unnerved by an inner war with his thinly hidden lusts. He masturbates to porn and through drunken tears confesses his sexual

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<sup>1</sup> Rod Dreher, "Will Arbery's Heroes," *The American Conservative*, October 2, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Vinson Cunningham, "A Play About the Nuances of Conservatism in the Trump Era," *The New Yorker*, October 14, 2019; Sarah Salvadore, "In New Play, Conservative Catholics Find a Voice, and Nuance," *National Catholic Reporter*, November 14, 2019.

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fantasies about both women to their faces: he tells disabled Emily, “For so long I’ve wanted to bathe you”; he wants Teresa “to beat [him] up & teach [him] how to f—k.” But his weakness reflects his ambivalence, weakened again by his self-loathing for his inability to act. He questions his faith. Resentful of his Catholic upbringing, he seeks the “orgy” of all viewpoints, the “default of equality.” He dreams of fleeing to the big city, but instead reads philosophers and poets in boring Oklahoma. Justin, a combat veteran, is weakened by an actual war and so flees from the real world by applying Dreher’s Benedict Option. He can’t love a world he longs to end—“there’s nothing to love about it.” Teresa, Arbery’s villain, sees the world in black and white, despite her head-knowledge that grace comes by particular experiences. As the only strong, shameless character, Arbery must unclasp her. Confessing her fear of motherhood, she flees to Steve Bannon’s politics, a hipster lifestyle, and cocaine. She seeks clarity in moral certainty, and salvation by being a hero (thus the play’s title) in a coming imaginary civil war. Emily, physically weak, is the only character of real faith, meaning that she empathizes with the Leftists that Teresa hates. The final character, Gina, makes a late appearance. She is disgusted by her former students’ MAGA politics.

The play’s denouement is a showdown between Gina’s older conservatism and Teresa’s MAGA conservatism, followed by some plot twists that Arbery uses to round out each character. One is that Teresa and Justin had a sexual affair while at the college, but Gina intervened to prevent their expulsion. What all Arbery’s MAGA conservatives share is “hopelessness.” Those who voted for Trump are on their way out—white, Western, and Christian—and so they latch onto a substitute god, a charismatic figure or utopianism. This age-old argument of fleeing from freedom or democracy is repeated by age-old Gina in the play.<sup>3</sup> Arbery adds frequent gunshots and a loud screeching noise, falsely claimed by Justin to be a generator, to reproduce this looming uncertainty. The MAGA movement’s bravado conceals its anxiety of an unnamed object—immigration, globalism, etc. And that’s the plot.

Will Arbery certainly has the skill, but in this play he lacks the experience and empathy to apply it.<sup>4</sup> He doesn’t love his characters. They’re insects he pins to a board. He likes the shock value of his play. A politically progressive, lapsed Catholic, he parades out conservative

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<sup>3</sup> For one of many examples, see Erich Fromm, *Escape From Freedom* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 1941).

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Schuessler, “A Play About God and Trump, From a Writer Raised on the Right,” *The New York Times*, October 13, 2019: “The goal, [Arbery] said, wasn’t to convince anyone or to stir empathy” for conservative opinions; he admitted his concern that giving voice to some of those opinions might even be “evil.”

tropes from his parents' world and his former Catholicism to scandalize his progressive audience.<sup>5</sup> But don't worry, he assures, he's really one of them. In his most high profile interview with *The New York Times*, he confesses the play was born from his own call to social justice: "I personally felt a lot of anger, and perceived a lot of anger, at the people who could've made [Trump's election] happen. I ... felt like I had a responsibility to write about five of those people."<sup>6</sup> Arbery's audience will be rewarded; they'll find that each character, like some godawful rehash of *The Breakfast Club*, has some dark secret, the inner cause of why he or she is so broken. Arbery adamantly resists this reductionist psychological explanation of his characters, and one suspects it is because his own lost faith, resentment, and progressive politics seem all too well to explain the play's meaning. Indeed, one of its key features is its *impiety*: a son playing so carelessly with his own family's reputation. Every in-depth review of the play links Transfiguration College to Wyoming Catholic and pinpoints Arbery's family as the inspiration for its characters. Arbery may downplay the accuracy of his own representations, but one who borrows so openly from actual sources—proper names, positions, institutions—cannot simply retreat into artistic ambiguity when it suits him.

#### **GINA AND EMILY: ARBERY'S LESSONS ON HOW TO BE A GOOD CATHOLIC CONSERVATIVE**

Will Arbery has moral lessons for us in his favorite two characters, the soft underbelly of the play. The first is his mother, Gina, not to be confused with the real Ginny Arbery. The Ginny that I have met is lively and thoughtful; Will's Gina is a soulless dunce, a caricature used to contrast the older conservatism with the new by recycling obsolete political talking points, like "I believe in slowness, gridlock—these are the true hallmarks of democracy." But Gina's only likable for reasons Will's progressive audience would like: she's old, tired, defanged, harmless. She quotes forgotten conservatives and praises forgotten presidents like George Bush senior as "constitutionalists"; mind you, that's the Bush who signed the 1991 Civil Rights Act and 1992 Americans with Disabilities Act, labyrinths of lawless regulation. Nothing to fear here. The comparison and confrontation between Gina and Teresa only proves that Gina is a knot of contradictions—philosophically and politically she's a mess. She teaches immutable ideas for all times but frowns on Teresa's attempt to apply courses in

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<sup>5</sup> Tim Sanford, "Artist Interview: Will Arbery," *Playwrights Horizons*, January 10, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Schuessler, "A Play About God and Trump, From a Writer Raised on the Right."

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Thucydides and Herodotus to her own times: “I didn’t think you would take it this far!” Gina the *constitutionalist* hopes that Trump “gets impeached before he can re-campaign” without offering any *constitutional* reason. Despite her own past politicking for Pat Buchanan—he was okay before but is “loopy now”—her advice to the young is: “Tune it out. Say your prayers and vote Republican. Do it for the unborn. And then just be. Climb a mountain. Make a meal...” Conservatives’ rights are secure, says naive Gina, because “we have the Constitution, dear.” Gina’s confusion extends to her moral advice. She criticizes Teresa for “being ruled by emotion” before telling her to listen to her “gut instinct.” She condemns Teresa’s crudity before crudely calling her an “emotional, fire-spewing *slut*.” As a Catholic, she presumably believes in original sin but tells students to follow their natural goodness. At the peak of her naiveté, Gina asks drunken Kevin, whose “soul [she says] is in danger,” to apply for Dean of Admissions—he’d be “perfect”! What kind of school does Will Arbery think Wyoming Catholic is? He has Gina select a sexually unhinged pervert (she says, “There’s something awful in [his] eyes”) to handpick female students for the college!

Most importantly, Arbery needs his progressive audience to know that his mom is cool. She hates guns, and she definitely isn’t racist. But the new conservatives, Gina says, are “not true conservatives. They’re charlatans ... hucksters ... and honestly, darling, they’re a bit racist.” They seek to “oppress brown people and boost white people.” Gina says, “I didn’t have eight C-sections for white Western civilization, I did it for God.” Will slips in the word *white* just so we’re racist if we disagree. It’s cleaner that way. If we were to point out that for two thousand years the West was almost synonymous with Christendom, or that St. Thomas Aquinas never wrung his hands over racism and sexism, it gets much messier. Moreover, Gina is sorry as to “what [she] did wrong” to spawn such MAGA disappointments. In Arbery’s mind, Gina (despite the flaws and even harm in her pedagogy) is a good conservative because she’s quite apolitical: her politics may be reduced to reading Herodotus, and her constitutionalism means some sort of vaguely liberal and tolerant society.

Will Arbery’s other favorite character, Emily, is mentally fatigued, physically frail, and often bedridden. Her faith is her rock, and no encounter with the ugliness of others can shake it. She asks, “Why shouldn’t you be reading liberal articles, and watching non-Catholic shows? Why shouldn’t God have put grace in those places, for you to find?” Only Emily follows Teresa’s dictum that God “makes us work out our salvation through other people.”

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Christian faith is strongest, Emily argues, when it exists in cosmopolitan diversity. “It’s having to constantly open yourself and let someone else in.” Emily alone volunteers at a birth clinic to talk black women out of having abortions. She reaches for the grotesque, and “grace always accompan[ies] the grotesque. Sometimes the moments that are the most grotesque are the closest to transcendent grace.” In the final act, she is the trope of Christ, where she empathetically takes on the suffering of the world and spews it out in a long, emotional, vulgar monologue: imagine a shattered Jesus Christ rapping Pooh Shiesty while hanging on the cross.<sup>7</sup> But Arbery only uses empathetic Emily as a tool to educate his audience.

Here’s the lesson: Emily’s *absolute* empathy (while better than Teresa’s cold debates) is impossible because minority groups have particular experiences that whites can never truly feel. Emily tries to empathize with poor pregnant women as victims and defends the unborn as a form of bare preservation. Her philosophy is that all humans are good, “including people who work for Planned Parenthood, Democrats, a drag queen I know ... they’re all good.” She says of transgenders, “I don’t judge them.” Her friend who works at Planned Parenthood “is a good person. She’s kind and altruistic and she’s good.” Gina taught Emily to believe that evil resides in *patriarchy*, in males and “systems”: “The real problem is with men who abuse and rape and systems, systems that try to keep women down. The problem’s not with the women who get an abortion because they don’t know what else to do.” But in her final vulgar rant (because Arbery’s Christ dwells in the obscene interstices), Emily’s inner black woman says, “You can think of me but you cannot feel me.... You can’t fuse with me.” Emily only *thinks* that she does not judge others. She has not yet learned to accept *unconditionally*, which would mean questioning her whiteness and her faith in the possibility of absolute empathy. Of course this is just another talking point that Will Arbery has borrowed from critical theory, which rejects the ideal of absolute impartiality as a form of white western dichotomous thinking.

Central to this moral lesson is the bait and switch. By equating the Church with a teaching of unconditional acceptance borrowed from secular psychology, Arbery can then critique Catholics with terms that have no place in the tradition. Emily describes as “beautiful” Kevin’s spite for Catholic communities, “little cloisters of the righteous,” hypocritical, conformist, and sexually repressive. He blames the abuse scandals on the Church’s teachings

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<sup>7</sup> “Heroes of the Fourth Turning- final scene,” *Youtube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=El4nOPCp9h0> at 4:00.

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(instead of on homosexual grooming cults that metastasized with the teaching of unconditional acceptance). Because the problem with the Church is its isolation and fear of diversity, the solution is, in the words of Kevin, the “healthy” way of the “holy fool.... To get in there, to meld, to fuse, to engage, to dance & laugh together on the street. To live our truth, in the face of theirs. To let two competing facts exist in the same space. To imagine a heaven we can all graduate into.” But Wyoming Catholic is no such space. We find from Kevin’s dream that the genderless gods have removed the “secret sacraments and commandments” of true Christianity from the college. Emily, the Christ-figure of the play, chose not to attend.

In truth Emily’s rejection of original sin and her faith in the sacred encounter with the Other is farthest from true Christendom in its strength and glory. The consequence of this tradition-less diversity is that 66 percent of Catholics no longer believe in the True Presence of the Eucharist. Among Novus Ordo Catholics, 89 percent approve of contraception, 51 percent approve of abortion, and 67 percent approve of same-sex marriage. The problem for Catholics who would love the world (I John 2:15-17) is not Western logic; it is that the Church is not nor can it ever be a body of unconditional acceptance. It has actual conditions.

### THE FAILURE OF THE LIBERAL EDUCATION

Gina believes that a classical education preserves the Western tradition, but in the play her own students reveal that it has failed to do so. Will Arbery modeled his play after Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed*, which asks how Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky’s idealistic teachings produced Nikolai Stavrogin, a vicious pedophile.<sup>8</sup> Stepan Trofimovich is comparable to Gina, the educator of demon-possessed students. She asks them, “Six years out, tell me honestly, has the curriculum served you?” Her students agree that Wyoming Catholic has “the best curriculum.” For Teresa it “was everything.” It made Justin “who I am today”: it saved his life from his divorce, war, and sexual affair. For Kevin it was “amazing ... the only thing keeping me from ... dissolv[ing].” And like Stepan Trofimovich, Gina and her husband are “trying to like save the country”; “they’re going into the world rather than retreating.” Gina states the mission of the college: “to bear witness of Christ’s transcendent light.” Her students will be “antidotes” to the profligacy and indifference in American culture.

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<sup>8</sup> Kevin says several times that “there’s a demon in [him]”; on Dostoevsky, see Dreher, “Will Arbery’s Heroes.”

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But when alone, Emily asks Justin, “Does this school actually ... make good people?”: “Kevin is so wildly confused. And Teresa seems so cold.” Despite Justin’s assurance that they represent only 1 percent of the students (we never see the happy 99 percent), Arbery presents classical education not as preserving the West but as a cloister and even an assembly line for mangled souls. And what if he’s right? Those educated to be elites of an older stripe—all that Greek and Latin—and to cite Plato are also supposed to have cosmopolitan tastes. But what if those tastes and manners, all that profundity, conflict with the Western tradition itself? What if cosmopolitan habits corrode the conditions for liberal education, resulting in elites who, disillusioned with provincial virtue, aspire to be Kevin’s “holy fools” but lack the courage to do so and so either flee into repressed monasteries or sponsor radical politics?

But if Kevin is a symptom of a sick education, then Will Arbery is its death rattle. Unlike Kevin, Arbery had the courage to flee Catholicism for Kenyon. Precisely because Arbery embraces a godless cosmopolitanism, he can’t see its assault on the liberal education. Today he exhorts conservatives to become holy fools, to enter the progressive space and attend a “musical about a young black gay man in New York City.” But the way of the holy fool in Dostoevsky’s *Possessed* is no solution; it is meant to show the impossibility of uniting Russian Christianity with godless cosmopolitanism. Arbery’s adulterated result is a comedic farce: not one who retains the Western tradition in his soul and habits, but an urbane intellectual who, dabbling now and then in Flannery O’Connor, confuses wisdom with ambiguity in little phrases like “begotten not made,” which in the play is supposed to enlighten us about transgenderism. In the play and in numerous interviews, Arbery confuses diversity of opinion and sophomoric conundrums with profundity of thought; indeed, he treats this confusion itself as insightful. Produce some lines that contradict, let that sink in, and hmm ... profound.

This rift in the liberal education explains how the play has been received by the educated Catholics that it caricatures. Catholics who are vital, with strong spirits, don’t recognize themselves in the play’s damaged characters, and they feel no need to praise it. *Imagine a review by Fulton J. Sheen!* Trump, for many Catholics, was simply a better choice for president. There was no handwringing or confession. The Democratic Party had marked their people for destruction. In a few years, they would see mobs desecrate their churches,

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<sup>9</sup> Rob Weinert-Kendt, “Playwright Will Arbery on the restless Catholics of ‘Heroes of the Fourth Turning,’” *America: The Jesuit Review*, November 01, 2019.

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pseudo-intellectuals exploit racial division, and the president defend the administration of puberty blockers to sterilize young girls and castrate young boys. Hillary Clinton, they knew, was simply the enemy of their tradition. But Arbery cannot imagine and admits his anger toward those who are strong—who without pangs condemn their own sins and the sins of others. Thus he is a tiny prophet in identifying the putrid smell emitting from Catholic intellectuals. The real source of their anguish was not Donald Trump but the contradictions that MAGA exposed between educated Catholics' talking points and their cosmopolitan sentiments shaped by their occupations in corporate America, academia, law, and health care. As long as conservatism lost, they posed no threat to their quirky, fun LGBTQ coworkers, fashionable pro-abortion friends, and respectable colleagues. And they kept their status. Catholicism could remain in its little box, like Will Arbery's quaint, distant memories of praying the rosary. More than a few educated Catholics left the faith—they say because of Trump, Covid-19, and the hypocrisy of a politicized Church. But they had long ceased to be Catholic in their habits, even as now they show great *empathy* for BLM and LGBTQ issues. MAGA provincials only brought their hypocrisy to consciousness.

Will Arbery says he next wants to write a play about *whiteness*. Indeed *all of his plays*, he says, are about “unpacking whiteness.” Just what America needs: more thoughts by a privileged white millennial about unconscious racism. Maybe we'll hear that some of Gina's “best friends are black.” Or that whites outwardly project their inner fears of racial integration. But the most disturbing part about “Heroes of the Fourth Turning” is not its now-banal and tiresome reflections on “whiteness” but its assault on Wyoming Catholic College, which seems to be one of a few truly Catholic colleges left in America. Its president, faculty, graduates, and students do not deserve this thinly-veiled slander. Still, the president's son writes a play that portrays the college as manufacturing broken souls, and Catholic intellectuals rush to embrace it. I suspect that it's not those at Wyoming Catholic who are broken. Despite Arbery's unctuous praise of his upbringing, the whole play is an impious critique of his parents and what he deems to be their failed school of poetic imagination, which reproduced Dostoevsky's *Possessed*, this time in MAGA country. And just as Stepan Trofimovich concludes his failure as a teacher by wandering into the countryside to find the “real people” and the “true Russian life,” maybe Will's Gina is crawling through Brooklyn drag shows in search of Mother America.

## The Ciceronian Middle Ages

Joshua J. Bowman

Review: *The Bonds of Humanity: Cicero's Legacies in European Social and Political Thought, ca. 1100 - ca. 1550*, by Cary J. Nederman (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020), 240 pp. Paperback, \$34.95 / hardcover \$85.95.

The re-emergence of Aristotelian thought into Western Europe in the Thirteenth Century provoked what one political philosophy textbook called a “crisis in theological and political thought.”<sup>1</sup> The authority of the Church and the “Holy Roman Empire” was challenged, provoking theologians and philosophers to respond to the resurgence of a pagan, Greek tradition. St. Thomas Aquinas is justifiably considered the greatest of those thinkers addressing the intellectual crisis, but the result was not necessarily a triumph of either Greek philosophy or theology. It was a precarious synthesis between the Christian tradition and the work of Aristotle, who was often referred to reverently as “The Philosopher.”

Is the story of the High Middle Ages, then, primarily a struggle between “Athens” and “Jerusalem”? Is the history of political thought from the early thirteenth century to the middle of the sixteenth best understood as a conversation between Christianity and “The Philosopher”? Political philosopher Cary Nederman finds this description wanting because it overlooks important ancient sources and traditions that call into question whether Aristotle’s reemergence was really a crisis at all.

In *The Bonds of Humanity*, Nederman seeks to “generate a counternarrative that dislodges Aristotle from the pride of place accorded to him in the study of European social and political thought during its initial centuries. More specifically, concentration on Aristotelianism seems to [Nederman] to mask the importance of a figure whose impact was far more pervasive yet remains profoundly underappreciated: the Roman orator, statesman, and philosopher Marcus Tullius Cicero” (2). By the end, it is unclear whether Aristotle has been genuinely “dislodged,” but Cicero’s role in the story has been elevated considerably.

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<sup>1</sup> John Hamilton Hallowell and Jene M. Porter, *Political Philosophy: The Search for Humanity and Order* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1997), 176.

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Cicero, as Nederman and others show, was a “household name” in the Middle Ages and he was well-read by the major thinkers of late antiquity and throughout the period from the Church Fathers to the Renaissance (and beyond). Cicero’s impact – that is, the ubiquity of distinctively Ciceronian themes – was allegedly “wider and deeper” than that of Aristotle in the post-1000 A.D. intellectual development of Europe. To be sure, Nederman is not suggesting that scholars ignore Aristotle’s importance for the period, but Cicero’s hold on the Medieval mind was rooted more deeply than that of other classical sources.

More controversially, perhaps, and drawing on A.J. Carlyle, Nederman claims that *the* dividing line between ancient and modern thought can be described as the dethroning of Aristotle and the crowning of Cicero.

Persuading others of this is no easy task for the intellectual historian. Quentin Skinner famously dismissed such attempts to assign direct influence as “arbitrary...nearly always false” and “trivial” (6). Nederman adopts, then, a strategy more in line with scholars like Francis Oakley and especially that of Charles Martindale. He refers to his method as “classical reception studies,” which assume that modern Western thought “ineluctably bear[s] some marks of the classical past” (6) and that the intellectual historian’s task is to elucidate how this inheritance was appropriated and transformed in that historical context.

This does not mean that merely quoting Cicero qualifies a thinker as “Ciceronian.” Instead, Nederman outlines a distinctive Ciceronian “framework” that will endure over the time period in question. “Cicero’s framework,” he explains, “in its manifold expressions, revolves around the notion that human beings are drawn together by a set of fundamental communal bonds that impose duties upon them – a notion of *societas* or fellowship that renders them responsible toward one another” (7). How that framework emerges in particular writings can range widely, and Nederman recognizes he must “distinguish a Ciceronian thinker from one who merely refers to Cicero as an authority” (7).

Beginning in the first chapter, Nederman carefully outlines this framework. Cicero’s account of human nature here seems quasi-Lockean (my words), in that human beings are born free, rational, and capable of reflection. Individuals have an “associative urge” which is given coherence and life by means of the “divine gift” of reason, and the blessings of oratory and collaboration. The role of language is especially important for Cicero; he seems to treat “language” and “reason” as one in the same. While Nederman does not use this phrase, his

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summary of Cicero's political thought brings to mind an orator taking the place of Plato's "philosopher king," in a sense. This would also comport with Cicero's preference for action over contemplation. Furthermore, the Ciceronian foundation of language and reason are common to all human beings equally, and it is in that shared foundation, reinforced by religious observance, in which the unity of human beings can be achieved.

Reason's full potential – that is, virtue – cannot be realized in isolation, but must develop in the context of a range of relationships and associations, especially that of friendships and the republic. Humans then are not the warring beasts of Hobbes' state of nature in *Leviathan*, but more like the reasonable persons found in Locke's *Second Treatise*. Cicero arguably differs from these later modern thinkers though, not only because he does not utilize social contract theory, but also because the use of reason in a community evokes a recognition of duties rather than a constellation of fears and rights. In other words, for Cicero, human beings speaking and reasoning together will recognize individual responsibilities to humanity universally and to *particular* families, friends, and countries. When we reason with others, we can better ascertain natural laws generally and in accordance with our specific context and community. Civil laws and governmental institutions remain subordinate to natural law, to be sure, but they are also necessary supplements to achieve a just order.

The rest of the book identifies key manifestations of this framework in widely read and distributed texts of the time. This review cannot evaluate all of the texts and thinkers Nederman uses, but his selections are a mix of well-trodden scholarly ground as well as a consideration of now obscure thinkers forgotten by many historians of political thought. He examines, for example, Thierry of Chartres's commentary on Cicero's *De invention*, Rufinus's commentaries on Gratian's *Decretum*, Otto of Freising's *Chronica sive Historia de duabus civitatibus*, Aelred of Rievaulx's *De spirituali amicitia*, and the widely read *Moralium* (author unknown).

The somewhat-more-well-known John of Salisbury receives his own chapter, and is, arguably, Nederman's most straightforward example of a genuine "Ciceronian." John's work goes beyond mere quotation and exemplifies someone whose very intuition seems formed by its encounter with Cicero, especially (depending on how one reads Cicero) in his emphasis on the practical side of philosophy over the contemplative. Nederman argues further that Cicero is a regular source for John, even when the debt is not made explicit, such as in the

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latter's theories of friendship and in his attack on tyrannical governments. The wealth of evidence that Nederman can draw on to ground his Ciceronian reading of John, however, unintentionally exposes some of the weaker readings elsewhere. His earlier account of Otto of Freising, for example, merely suggests a Ciceronian debt, but it could just as easily be argued that Otto was Augustinian.

Moving to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Aristotle's dominance is often assumed to be at its highest. This is when the scholastics of the early universities had translated The Philosopher's work into Latin, resulting in its wide dissemination and use. Nederman's goal is not to dismiss this development but to show that it did not result in Cicero's displacement or neglect. "Rather," he argues, the recovery of Aristotle "reinforced" Ciceronian ideas. He goes so far as to say that Aristotle's works were often "read through a Ciceronian lens" (9). Some scholars have tried to apply this reasoning to Aquinas, though Nederman finds such readings to be misleading.

Other beneficiaries of scholastic training, though, may owe much to Cicero. Henry of Ghent apparently "conflated Cicero with Aristotle, using their texts interchangeably" (87) in his *quodlibets*. Ptolemy of Lucca is another fascinating example, where Ciceronian principles are read as being "absolutely fundamental" (93) to *De regimine principum* (which may have been initiated by St. Thomas). This reading, again, is in spite of extensive Aristotelian quotations. Ptolemy may even be said to favor Cicero's understanding of justice and the nature of a *res publica* over the more explicitly Christian account by Augustine. In a way James Viterbo's *De regimine Christiano* is later described as achieving something similar. John of Paris's *De regia potestate et papali* is also read as grounding his understanding of the "origins of human association" (100) in Ciceronian principles.

Arguably the most formidable challenge that Nederman sets for himself is to show the Ciceronian debt of Marsilius of Padua in his infamous, *Defensor pacis*. He was, after all, once describe as "a man more Aristotelian than Christian." For Nederman, Marsilius is an example of someone who may be quoting Aristotle, but who is nevertheless retaining Cicero's framework at a most fundamental level. Indeed, Nederman claims that the Ciceronian influence helps explain the "alleged gap between Marsiglio's political theory and his polemical cause" noted by other scholars.

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What about those thinkers who were writing in languages other than Latin? The French writings of Brunetto Latini, Nicole Oresme, and Christine de Pizan are taken up in chapter six as examples, and all these thinkers deserve more attention among historians of political thought, separate from Nederman's use of them here.

Finally, toward the end of the book, Nederman recalls how Cicero's works were used both in defense of imperial ambitions and as grounds for resisting them. Nederman recounts something of the Cicero v. Caesar debate that occupied some writers from the early fourteenth century through to the Renaissance (144). He looks specifically at the works of Engelbert of Admont, Silvius Piccolomini, and Nicholas of Cusa as examples of those using Cicero in defense of "world empire" (145). Bishop Bartolome de Las Casas, on the other hand, rebuked European imperialism and its treatment of indigenous peoples by appealing to Cicero's belief in the equality of human beings and their shared capacity for reason.

Nederman's attempt to recover Cicero from Aristotle's shadow in the study of Medieval political thought is a welcome correction. And it would be difficult to dispute the great orator's influence since he was so much a part of the Medieval intuition and language. It is also to Nederman's credit that he deliberately chooses cases in which his argument seems unlikely to succeed given their Aristotelian context and references. One could imagine many dissertations and scholarly articles being inspired by this book as Aristotle's dominance is increasingly questioned and nuanced.

Whether or not they were inspired by Nederman, some have already taken up a similar task, reading more modern ideas back into the Middle Ages to show that the time from Rome's fall to the Renaissance was not as intellectually, socially, and politically "Dark" as some suggest. Indeed, it would be interesting to compare Nederman's argument with that of Michael Hawley's more recent work, *Natural Law Republicanism: Cicero's Liberal Legacy* (2022).

Another topic that needs to be considered though is why the reception of Classical Greek and Roman thought is so crucial for "lightening up" the not-so-dark ages. What about the dominance of Scripture and the Christian tradition? What about Augustine? Were Cicero and Aristotle more important than the Bible and the Church Fathers in the development of Medieval political thought?

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When reading scholars like Nederman one wonders if the assumed goal of these works is a kind of “De-Christianization” of the Middle Ages to make them more palatable to a modern audience. To be sure, Nederman is not openly hostile or disparaging of Medieval Christianity; he just seems indifferent. He obviously could not trace or account for all the influences on these thinkers, but by the end it’s not clear that Cicero’s fingerprint is distinguishable from that of Christian thinkers. In other words, where Nederman sees Cicero, one might easily see the New Testament, or the writings of St. Ambrose or St. Augustine.

Nederman’s work need to be supplemented with the writings of scholars like Brian Tierney, Francis Oakley, and Eric Voegelin to acquire a fuller understanding of how that which is considered best in modern political thought does not need to shed its Christian “residue” to survive. Contemporary historians of political thought seem to prefer as secularized of a story as possible. They want to show that we can have concepts of individual rights, the rule of law, and limited representative government apart from the Christian tradition. But the more we uproot these principles from their theological and sacred foundations, the more precarious their survival becomes.

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