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# Tocqueville's Worst Fears Realized? The Political Implications of Ralph Waldo Emerson's Transcendental Spiritualism

Bryan-Paul Frost

It's fitting that James Cameron's "Avatar" arrived in theaters at Christmastime. Like the holiday season itself, the science fiction epic is a crass embodiment of capitalistic excess wrapped around a deeply felt religious message. It's at once the blockbuster to end all blockbusters, and the Gospel According to James.

But not the Christian Gospel. Instead, "Avatar" is Cameron's long apology for pantheism—a faith that equates God with Nature, and calls humanity into religious communion with the natural world. . . .

If this narrative sounds familiar, that's because pantheism has been Hollywood's religion of choice for a generation now. It's the truth that Kevin Costner discovered when he went dancing with wolves. It's the metaphysic woven through Disney cartoons like "The Lion King" and "Pocahontas." And it's the dogma of George Lucas's Jedi, whose mystical Force "surrounds us, penetrates us, and binds the galaxy together."

Hollywood keeps returning to these themes because millions of Americans respond favorably to them. . . . A recent Pew Forum report on how Americans mix and match theology found that many self-professed Christians hold beliefs about the "spiritual energy" of trees and mountains that would fit right in among the indigo-tinged Na'Vi.

As usual, Alexis de Tocqueville saw it coming.

—Ross Douthat, "Heaven and Nature,"  
*New York Times*, December 2009

In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville delivered a blunt verdict on the increasing popularity, in democratic countries, of pantheism: "Among the different systems with whose aid philosophy

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seeks to explain the universe, pantheism appears to me one of the most appropriate to seduce the human mind in democratic centuries; all who remain enamored of the genuine greatness of man should unite and do combat against it.” For a writer whose moderation and nonpartisanship are well known, these remarks are a heavy indictment indeed. Why did Tocqueville believe that pantheism is both so alluring and so debilitating to democratic peoples? And whom precisely did he blame for the seduction? The second of these questions is easier to answer. Tocqueville singles out the Germans and the French for introducing pantheism into philosophy and literature, respectively. The editors of one of the most recent translations of *Democracy in America* indicate that Tocqueville probably has in mind philosophers such as Leibnitz, Fichte, and Hegel, on the one side, and writers such as Alphonse de Lamartine and Edgar Quinet, on the other side.<sup>1</sup>

Since Tocqueville found the democratic urge to be particularly strong in the United States, one is naturally led to wonder whether there might not be some American authors whose writings exhibit the same worrisome tendencies. This paper will enlarge on Tocqueville’s critique by studying an American essayist who, probably unwittingly, revealed in more concrete detail the full extent of Tocqueville’s fears about pantheism: Ralph Waldo Emerson.

At first glance, Emerson seems an unlikely mark for such a charge. After all, in such inspirational essays as “Self-Reliance,” he seems to champion “human individuality” and greatness, and is a severe critic of majority tyranny, intellectual apathy, and the slavish pursuit of wealth and reputation—all of which Tocqueville too denounced as unhealthy extremes to which democracy is prone. On the other hand, Emerson was also a founding member of, and chief spokesperson for, the American Transcendentalist movement, and his religious convictions had strong strains of Neoplatonic and pantheistic spiritualism. Emerson’s transcendentalism had no little impact on his political and ethical writings: indeed, his unique brand of spontaneity, intuition, and creativity was based upon an individual hearkening to the voice of God within him, a God that permeated all nature and with the aid of whom one sought to act in conformity with one’s unique calling. Emerson’s thought, it

turns out, despite its apparent support for individual greatness, rests on spiritual principles that eventually corrode, and ultimately undermine, both genuine human nobility and healthy democratic ethics. In what follows, we will attempt to uncover the political implications and effects of Emerson's spiritualism—a spiritualism whose basic tenets, as the preceding epigraph makes clear, are still very influential today.

### **Easy Answers, Unmoored Souls: The Debilitating Effects of Pantheism and Fatalism**

Tocqueville's brief treatment of pantheism (*DA* 2.1.7, 425–26) occurs as part of his discussion of the “Influence of Democracy on Intellectual Movement in the United States.” The purpose of this section is to articulate how the mind of a democratic people is influenced and shaped by democracy itself. This is an especially important topic in relation to democracy; for, as Tocqueville points out earlier in the book, democrats rely only on their own reason when judging or evaluating, and not on such factors as age, experience, tradition, class, and so on—precisely because, as egalitarians, they bow to no superior authority (*DA* 2.1.1, 403–4). One might say this about the philosophic method of Americans, who closely follow Cartesian precepts, Tocqueville says, without ever having read Descartes themselves: in America, *Je pense, donc je suis* means “I am the only one who can be relied upon to judge things which are of concern to me.”

Of course, Tocqueville knows that democrats are not all equally capable of making wise and informed decisions on their own, and they will thus turn to sources of authority and intellectual devices that will not offend their pride or undermine their fundamental belief in equality. In fact, Tocqueville argues, democrats turn to an anonymous but omnipresent public opinion to supply convenient answers and ready-made beliefs. He identifies the source of this behavior in what he calls “the theory of equality applied to intellects”: “The moral empire of the majority is founded in part on the idea that there is more enlightenment and wisdom in many men united than in one alone” (*DA* 1.2.7, 236). Indeed, democrats are particularly susceptible to rely on and trust public opin-

ion inasmuch as egalitarianism isolates and atomizes individuals from one another; consequently, to go against public opinion leaves one feeling small, feeble, and helpless (*DA* 2.1.2, 408–9). Moreover, Tocqueville explains why democrats have a tendency for general ideas and over-simplifications: these tools make thinking and judging easier, even if they inevitably compromise accuracy. This ease in thinking passes for skill, and so, overlooking the sloppiness introduced by generalities, democratic peoples become prouder of their intelligence even as they become lazier in their thinking (*DA* 2.1.3 and 4, 411–16).

Tocqueville notes, however, that there is at least one area in which dogmatic or fixed opinions and general ideas are salutary for democratic peoples, namely, in matters of religion. Religion provides the necessary counterweight to the ill effects of individual isolation or atomization and love of material pleasure—the twin dangers to which democrats are most prone. By raising one’s mind to the heavens, and by inculcating duties to one’s fellows, religion imposes obligations and responsibilities that are contrary to the desires democrats would likely pursue if left to themselves (*DA* 2.1.5, 417–19). It is in this context that Tocqueville turns to pantheism, and in this context it appears to be the culmination of his critique of democratic thought.

Democrats are attracted to pantheism for two principal reasons. In the first place, pantheism feeds the democratic prejudice to reject all traditional sources of authority and rely exclusively on one’s own reason. As everyone is part of the same, undifferentiated whole (God included!), no claim to superiority or authority can hold: human particularity or individuality is obliterated in universal homogeneity. But it is precisely the elimination of particularity or individuality that, while being so attractive to democrats, is also so dangerous. Democrats are further atomized and enfeebled as everyone is swallowed up in the whole, which encompasses all Being. As Tocqueville explains: “As conditions become more equal and each man in particular becomes more like all the others, weaker and smaller, one gets used to no longer viewing citizens so as to consider only the people; one forgets individuals so as to think

only of the species” (*DA* 2.1.7, 426). We are, quite literally, withdrawn into our own little world, and this leaves democrats all the more susceptible to the crushing and deadening weight of public opinion: indeed, public opinion might become ever more despotic as pantheism takes hold, for there is nothing—not even God Himself—that can stand as a bulwark against its dictates and demands. To use language Tocqueville will use later in part 2 of the same Volume (*DA* 2.2.2, 482: “On Individualism in Democratic Countries”): while democracy fosters the creation of atomized and isolated individuals, pantheism then eliminates the particularity of the individuals thus created.

In the second place, pantheism appeals to the desire for unity, general ideas, and single-minded explanations—indeed, it satisfies this desire as no other religious or philosophic doctrine can. By reducing all Being—God and man, visible and invisible, change and continuity—into a single *whole*, which alone is eternal and true and real, democrats generate remarkably crisp, easy, and pleasing answers when it comes to those first questions about human existence which trouble the soul (cf. *DA* 2.1.5, 418). By the same token, however, this easy solution has deleterious effects on the (already limited) intellectual capacity of democratic peoples: pantheism “nourishes the haughtiness and flatters the laziness of their minds” (*DA* 2.1.7, 426) in the same way as all general ideas do. But pantheism is more problematic than this. By collapsing the material and immaterial world into a single whole, pantheism inadvertently collapses, or even eliminates, the tension between the duties and obligations we owe to others and to heaven, on the one hand, and the earthly desire for material well-being and pleasure, on the other hand. Tocqueville is hardly so sanguine as to believe that this tension could ever be overcome. He cautions religions that they should neither try to uproot the desire for well-being (the implication is that this desire is generally stronger than the desires proper to religion) nor try to provoke unnecessary conflicts with generally accepted public opinions. Nevertheless, by keeping this tension alive and well, democratic society is able to enjoy the salutary effects of religion and avoid the spiritual degradation to which

democracy is prone. In sum, pantheism both exacerbates the worst effects of what Tocqueville describes as “individualism” and undermines the salutary effects of religion on a democratic people.

One peculiar aspect of Tocqueville’s discussion is that it is not quite clear whether pantheism is a philosophic doctrine or a religious system, or both, or neither. Tocqueville describes pantheism as both a “doctrine” and a “system,” and in the latter case, he once indirectly implies that it is a “philosophic system.” He never states, however, that it is a “religious” doctrine or system. Nonetheless, Tocqueville also seems to oppose pantheism to philosophy per se, as when he says that the “Germans introduce [pantheism] into philosophy,” and that “[a]mong the different systems with whose aid philosophy seeks to explain the universe, pantheism appears to me one of the most appropriate to seduce the human mind in democratic centuries” (*DA* 2.1.7, 425–26). Could it be that pantheism is a sort of secular religion, a sort of middle ground between Christianity and atheism? And if this is true, then would not the growing strength of pantheism be one indication that a people are moving away from religion properly speaking? In this respect, it is important to note that Tocqueville concludes the chapter preceding his discussion of pantheism, “On the Progress of Catholicism in the United States,” with this prediction:

It is one of the most familiar weaknesses of the human intellect to want to reconcile contrary principles and to buy peace at the expense of logic. Therefore there always have been and always will be men who, after having submitted some of their religious beliefs to an authority, want to spare several others and let their minds float at random between obedience and freedom. But I am brought to believe that the number of these will be smaller in democratic than in other centuries and that our descendants will tend more and more to be divided into only two parts, those leaving Christianity entirely and others entering into the bosom of the Roman Church (*DA* 2.1.6, 425).

To the extent that pantheism is not a religion—to the extent that pantheism signifies the near absence of true religious conviction—then a people embracing pantheism will be prone to moral and political

servitude, as Tocqueville tried to show a bit earlier in the text.

When religion is destroyed in a people, doubt takes hold of the highest portions of the intellect and half paralyzes all the others. Each becomes accustomed to having only confused and changing notions about matters that most interest those like him and himself; one defends one's opinions badly or abandons them, and as one despairs of being able to resolve by oneself the greatest problems that human destiny presents, one is reduced, like a coward, to not thinking about them at all.

Such a state cannot fail to enervate souls; it slackens the springs of the will and prepares citizens for servitude.

Not only does it then happen that they allow their freedom to be taken away, but often they give it over.

When authority in the matter of religion no longer exists, nor in the matter of politics, men are soon frightened at the aspect of this limitless independence. This perpetual agitation of all things makes them restive and fatigues them. As everything is moving in the world of the intellect, they want at least that all be firm and stable in the material order; and as they are no longer able to recapture their former beliefs, they give themselves a master (*DA* 2.1.5, 418).

Since pantheism appears to loosen religious sentiment, the widespread acceptance of this "doctrine" among a democratic people might well indicate that they are becoming enervated and susceptible to bondage in the form of political salvation. Thus, although Tocqueville claims that new religions cannot be easily established in democratic times (for no one is willing to submit to an "intellectual authority" which is "outside of and above humanity" [*DA* 2.1.2, 408]), pantheism can be established, precisely because the source of its belief is not outside of humanity, but within it, and because it is not really a religion as Tocqueville understands the term.

We can round off our consideration of Tocqueville's ideas about the effects of democracy on the thought of its citizens by looking briefly at his discussion of the tendencies of democratic

historians, a topic he said he would discuss at the beginning of the chapter on pantheism. Democratic historians, he says, are prone to underestimate or ignore the role of particular causes—that is “great men”—in the course of history. He finds the root of this tendency in democracy itself.

When . . . all citizens are independent of one another, and each of them is weak, one finds none who exert a very great or above all a very lasting power over the mass. At first sight, individuals seem absolutely powerless over it, and one would say that society advances all by itself—by the free and spontaneous concourse of all the men who compose it (*DA* 2.1.20, 470).

Historians who adopt this attitude tend to think that history has a sort of inevitable motion that cannot be regulated by human agency.

When any trace of the action of individuals on nations is lost, it often happens that one sees the world moving without discovering its motor. As it becomes very difficult to perceive and analyze the reasons that, acting separately on the will of each citizen, in the end produce the movement of the people, one is tempted to believe that this movement is not voluntary and that, without knowing it, societies obey a superior, dominating force (*DA* 2.1.20, 471).

Such a force seems nearly impossible to resist, and belief in it leads first to the conclusion that human freedom is illusory, and then to the deduction that individuals are not responsible even for their own actions, let alone for the actions of their nation.

Even if one should discover on earth the general fact that directs the particular wills of all individuals, that does not save human freedom. A cause vast enough to be applied to millions of men at once and strong enough to incline all together in the same direction easily seems irresistible; after having seen that one yields to it, one is quite close to believing that one cannot resist it (*DA* 2.1.20, 471).

If the notion of such an irresistible force were to gain widespread

currency in the thought of a democratic people, society would simply grind to a halt due to the general belief that no one is strong enough to take any action that matters, any action that can push back against the tide of history. The very possibility of human greatness would fade out, because the freedom that nourishes that possibility would no longer present itself to the mind.

Historians who live in democratic times, therefore, not only deny to a few citizens the power to act on the destiny of a people, they also take away from peoples themselves the ability to modify their own fate, and they subject them either to an inflexible providence or to a sort of blind fatality. . . .

If this doctrine of fatality, which has so many attractions for those who write history in democratic times, passed from writers to their readers, thus penetrating the entire mass of citizens and taking hold of the public mind, one can foresee that it would soon paralyze the movement of the new societies (*DA* 2.1.20, 471–72).

In summary: Tocqueville understood that living in democratic times could lead to modes of thought that would be highly detrimental, both for the freedom of the individual and for the freedom of the whole people. In particular, the doctrines of pantheism and fatalism dispose people to subservience: the first because it enhances individualism and weakens the moral force of religion; the second because it eliminates the feeling that the individual has any agency in, or responsibility for, the course taken by events. If Tocqueville is right, then anything that assists the spread of pantheism and fatalism will present a danger to democratic societies.

### **Emerson's Transcendental Spiritualism**

In order to understand the political implications of Emerson's spiritualism, and to see if that understanding leads to precisely the consequences that Tocqueville feared, it is first necessary to lay out Emerson's views on transcendentalism, in particular, and on Christianity, in general. Our effort here will be focused on showing that Emerson's spiritualism is remarkably similar to Tocqueville's pantheism.

### *Transcendentalism*

Although Emerson is often referred to as one of the principal innovators of American Transcendentalism, in his essay “The Transcendentalist” (1843), he denies that transcendentalism is a new or original school of thought. In fact, he says, the roots of transcendentalism—which he also calls idealism—are as old as thinking itself, and it is one of only two modes of thinking.

As thinkers, mankind have ever divided into two sects, Materialists and Idealists; the first class founding on experience, the second on consciousness; the first class beginning to think from the data of the senses, the second class perceive that the senses are not final, and say, The senses give us representations of things, but what are the things themselves, they cannot tell. The materialist insists on facts, on history, on the force of circumstances and the animal wants of man; the idealist on the power of Thought and of Will, on inspiration, on miracle, on individual culture. These two modes of thinking are both natural, but the idealist contends that his way of thinking is in higher nature. He concedes all that the other affirms, admits the impressions of sense, admits their coherency, their use and beauty, and then asks the materialist for his grounds of assurance that things are as his senses represent them. But I, he says, affirm facts not affected by the illusions of sense, facts which are of the same nature as the faculty which reports them, and not liable to doubt; facts which in their first appearance to us assume a native superiority to material facts, degrading these into a language by which the first are to be spoken; facts which it only needs a retirement from the senses to discern. Every materialist will be an idealist; but an idealist can never go backward to be a materialist (*RE* 81).<sup>2</sup>

Whereas a materialist (*e.g.*, John Locke) acknowledges the independent existence of an external world accessible through sense impression and confirmed through experience, a transcendentalist or idealist (*e.g.*, Immanuel Kant) privileges his own consciousness

and intuition, arguing that the “external world” is mental or spiritual, and is only apprehended or revealed through an individual, self-conscious mind. The transcendentalist does not dispute that objects are perceived by the senses; rather, he questions whether sense perception is an accurate, complete, and final representation of the object in itself.

After arguing that the materialist’s confidence in the solidity of facts and figures is ill founded, Emerson makes the following comparison:

In the order of thought, the materialist takes his departure from the external world, and esteems a man as one product of that. The idealist takes his departure from his consciousness, and reckons the world an appearance. The materialist respects sensible masses, Society, Government, social art and luxury, every establishment, every mass, whether majority of numbers, or extent of space, or amount of objects, every social action. The idealist has another measure, which is metaphysical, namely the *rank* which things themselves take in his consciousness; not at all the size or appearance. Mind is the only reality, of which men and all other natures are better or worse reflectors. Nature, literature, history, are only subjective phenomena. . . . His thought—that is the Universe. His experience inclines him to behold the procession of facts you call the world, as flowing perpetually outward from an invisible, unsounded centre in himself, centre alike of him and of them, and necessitating him to regard all things as having a subjective or relative existence, relative to that aforesaid Unknown Centre of him (*RE* 82–83).

While Emerson’s transcendentalist appears at first glance to be wholly sovereign and self-determined, he is also open to influences or forces from without—albeit influences of a certain sort:

The Transcendentalist adopts the whole connection of spiritual doctrine. He believes in miracle, in the perpetual openness of the human mind to new influx of light and power; he believes in inspiration, and in ecstasy. He

wishes that the spiritual principle should be suffered to demonstrate itself to the end, in all possible applications to the state of man, without the admission of anything unspiritual; that is, anything positive, dogmatic, personal. Thus the spiritual measure of inspiration is the depth of the thought, and never, who said it? And so he resists all attempts to palm other rules and measures on the spirit than its own (*RE* 84).

In order to develop a more detailed image of the transcendentalist, we must attempt to concretize Emerson's elliptical remarks about "spirituality." What—or who—is this "Universe" which "beckons and calls" the transcendentalist from inactivity "to work," which issues him the "highest command," and with which he seeks some sort of "union" (*RE* 91 and 95)? Emerson refers to this deity or highest principle in a variety of ways with no discernable difference in meaning: in the essay "The Over-Soul" (1841) alone, he uses the terms "Unity," "Over-Soul," "the eternal ONE," "Highest Law," "Supreme Mind," "Maker," "Divine mind," "Omniscience," and "God" quite interchangeably. All of these terms seem to refer to a transcendent spiritual force that permeates and animates all existence—both human and non-human nature, organic and inorganic—and that binds and unites everything together in a pure and sublime oneness or wholeness.

We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one (*RE* 237).

Every individual is contained within this whole, and although the ultimate source of both our being and the whole is unknown or hidden, before its power our soul is laid bare and we are revealed for who we are.

The Supreme Critic on the errors of the past and the present, and the only prophet of that which must be, is that great nature in which we rest as the earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere; that Unity, that Over-Soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other; that common heart of which all sincere conversation is the worship, to which all right action is submission; that overpowering reality which confutes our tricks and talents, and constrains every one to pass for what he is, and to speak from his character and not from his tongue (*RE* 237).

Our communion with and access to this deity is through our own soul, which Emerson states is neither an “organ,” nor a “function,” nor a “faculty”: the soul is the unpossessed and unpossessable “background of our being” which transcends time and space. If a man is the “facade of a temple wherein all wisdom and all good abide,” the soul would be a light shining from within or behind this facade, illuminating all and giving direction to our will and intellect; and when we allow the soul to “have its way through us,” intellect becomes genius, will virtue, and affection becomes love (*RE* 238–39).

The perception and disclosure of truth in and through the soul—“an influx of the Divine mind into our mind”—is what Emerson calls “revelation.” Although revelation varies in both its intensity and character—from the transfiguring to the tepid, from the prophetic to the prosaic—all persons have the capacity to be so moved, and all persons who are so moved belong to the same general class of individuals, whether they be a Socrates or a St. Paul. One reason for this vast resemblance among “prophets” is that the “nature of these revelations is the same; they are perceptions of the absolute law” (*RE* 243–44). Unfortunately, the precise content of this law is not articulated—indeed, it cannot and should not be articulated. Revelation does not occur through words, nor does it respond to our questions.

Revelation is the disclosure of the soul. The popular notion of a revelation is that it is a telling of fortunes. In past oracles of the soul the understanding seeks to find

answers to sensual questions, and undertakes to tell from God how long men shall exist, what their hands shall do and who shall be their company, adding names and dates and places. But we must pick no locks. We must check this low curiosity. An answer in words is delusive; it is really no answer to the questions you ask. . . . Men ask concerning the immortality of the soul, the employments of heaven, the state of the sinner, and so forth. They even dream that Jesus has left replies to precisely these interrogatories. Never a moment did that sublime spirit speak in their *patois*. To truth, justice, love, the attributes of the soul, the idea of immutableness is essentially associated. Jesus, living in these moral sentiments, heedless of sensual fortunes, heeding only the manifestations of these, never made the separation of the idea of duration from the essence of these attributes, nor uttered a syllable concerning the duration of the soul. It was left to his disciples to sever duration from the moral elements, and to teach the immortality of the soul as a doctrine, and maintain it by evidences. The moment the doctrine of the immortality is separately taught, man is already fallen. . . .

These questions which we lust to ask about the future are a confession of sin. God has no answer for them. No answer in words can reply to a question of things (*RE* 244–45).

We must apparently rest content with Emerson's assurances that, if we "forego all low curiosity" and live in the infinite present of today, these questions will somehow be answered or resolved through the silent workings of the soul. The key to existence is an almost child-like innocence, simplicity, and authenticity, complete honesty with oneself and with others, utter openness to the Over-Soul and consequently all creation through it; being insincere, sophisticated, or double in any way indicates disharmony in the soul and distance from God.

These remarks naturally raise the question as to whether Emerson's deity is a caring or providential being. To begin with, in what sense would one pray to this entity? Certainly, Emerson does not understand prayer in any ordinary or traditional sense.

He describes his notion of prayer in “Self-Reliance”:

In what prayers do men allow themselves! That which they call a holy office is not so much as brave and manly. Prayer looks abroad and asks for some foreign addition to come through some foreign virtue, and loses itself in endless mazes of natural and supernatural, and mediatorial and miraculous. Prayer that craves a particular commodity, anything less than all good, is vicious. Prayer is the contemplation of the facts of life from the highest point of view. It is the soliloquy of a beholding and jubilant soul. It is the spirit of God pronouncing his works good. But prayer as a means to effect a private end is meanness and theft. It supposes dualism and not unity in nature and consciousness. As soon as the man is at one with God, he will not beg. He will then see prayer in all action. The prayer of the farmer kneeling in his field to weed it, the prayer of the rower kneeling with the stroke of his oar, are true prayers heard throughout nature, though for cheap ends (*RE* 147–48).

Those who pray or beg to attain some selfish end (material goods or worldly success) falsely assume a separation between themselves and the divine; those who express regret or recite creeds display an “infirmity” of the will or intellect (*RE* 148). Properly speaking, prayer is the act of a healthy, self-reliant individual contemplating or celebrating the existence of God within his soul, and it can be manifested in the simplest actions.

Nonetheless, Emerson’s deity is more than a transcendent spirit animating existence, for he also affirms that God the “Maker of all things and all persons stands behind us and casts his dread omniscience through us over things” (*RE* 242–43). This supreme creator, however, is not the God of the Old Testament, but the divine mind or soul of Plotinus and the Neoplatonists: the world is an emanation or overflow from the divine mind; all creation is contained within this whole, and all the variety in nature is encompassed within this unity (*RE* 18ff., 118–19, 252ff., 293). Although the divine maker can apparently choose to inspire specific individuals, and although

he sent Jesus into the world (albeit not in the sense of his being the son of God), God does not perform miracles in any ordinary or traditional sense of the word. Christianity's moral doctrines and not its miracles are what move Emerson to belief, and the attempt to convert others through miracles is a spiritual abomination: genuine conversion comes through genuine instruction, and this is strictly a matter of free internal acceptance, without any external compulsion whatsoever (*RE* 67–69, 106–8, 237). The greatest miracle of all would seem to be the shattering and transfiguring beauty of the universe as well as the immutable natural laws that govern its operation. At all events, whatever the precise character of this personal and mystic union with the Over-Soul, it seems ecstatic, ineffable, and utterly compelling; it is much more a matter of the heart than the intellect; and it does not rely on traditions, institutions, and rituals.

Ineffable is the union of man and God in every act of the soul. The simplest person who in his integrity worships God, becomes God; yet for ever and ever the influx of this better and universal self is new and unsearchable. It inspires awe and astonishment. How dear, how soothing to man, arises the idea of God, peopling the lonely place, effacing the scars of our mistakes and disappointments! When we have broken our god of tradition and ceased from our god of rhetoric, then may God fire the heart with his presence. . . .

Let man then learn the revelation of all nature and all thought to his heart; this, namely, that the Highest dwells with him; that the sources of nature are in his own mind, if the sentiment of duty is there. But if he would know what the great God speaketh, he must 'go into his closet and shut the door,' as Jesus said. God will not make himself manifest to cowards. He must greatly listen to himself, withdrawing himself from all the accents of other men's devotion. Even their prayers are hurtful to him, until he have made his own (*RE* 248–49).

Although much more could certainly be said about Emerson's transcendentalism, it seems clear from this overview that, at least from Tocqueville's perspective, Emerson's "religious" system or doc-

trine exhibits precisely those characteristics Tocqueville had described about pantheism: the material and immaterial world is encompassed in an undifferentiated unity or whole to which we are inextricably and inexplicably linked.

Having briefly discussed Emerson's transcendentalism, let us now turn to the question of whether it exhibits some of the dangerous characteristics that Tocqueville feared. Does Emerson's spiritualism, for example, nourish "the haughtiness" and flatter "the laziness" of our minds in the same way that all general ideas do? A strong indication is Emerson's doubt, in "The Over-Soul," about whether everyday language can capture the deity's essence:

Every man's words who speaks from that life must sound vain to those who do not dwell in the same thought on their own part. I dare not speak for it. My words do not carry its august sense; they fall short and cold. Only itself can inspire whom it will, and behold! their speech shall be lyrical, and sweet, and universal as the rising of the wind. Yet I desire, even by profane words, if I may not use sacred, to indicate the heaven of this deity, and to report what hints I have collected of the transcendent simplicity and energy of the Highest Law (*RE* 237–38).

Clearly, Emerson thinks that language, unaided by divine inspiration, cannot convey divine insights. In fact, he suggests in the Harvard Divinity School Address of 1838 that the very attempt to communicate religion has an inherently corrupting effect. Historical Christianity, for example, has fallen away, he says, from the true message of Jesus.

Historical Christianity has fallen into the error that corrupts all attempts to communicate religion. As it appears to us, and as it has appeared for ages, it is not the doctrine of the soul, but an exaggeration of the personal, the positive, the ritual. It has dwelt, it dwells, with noxious exaggeration about the person of Jesus. The soul knows no persons. It invites every man to expand to the full circle of the universe, and will have no preferences but those of spontaneous love (*RE* 68).

Similarly, in "Self-Reliance" (1841) he also faults "all philosophy" in its attempt to inquire into the divine source of such entities as life, being, justice, and the soul.

We lie in the lap of immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity. When we discern justice, when we discern truth, we do nothing of ourselves, but allow a passage to its beams. If we ask whence this comes, if we seek to pry into the soul that causes, all philosophy is at fault. Its presence or its absence is all we can affirm. Every man discriminates between the voluntary acts of his mind, and his involuntary perceptions, and knows that to his involuntary perceptions a perfect faith is due. He may err in the expression of them, but he knows that these things are so, like day and night, not to be disputed (*RE* 141–42).

It would seem that certain subjects are off-limits to philosophical speculation because to communicate one's findings profanes the subject matter and is thus a sacrilege. Ultimately, Emerson's religious understanding might be ineffable or untranslatable because it rests on an entirely individual, and therefore inherently subjective, communion or experience. Emerson's religious system or doctrine is sweepingly comprehensive, but he relieves us from having to think about its specifics by cutting off all philosophic discussion. Thus Emerson forces his spiritual ideas to be extremely simple and general.

But it is precisely this generality which, while appealing to lazy minds, also leaves people without any real answers to those fundamental questions of human existence that Tocqueville sees as critical in religious dogma. Without answers to those questions, democratic intellects expose themselves to all sorts of dangers. Although Emerson claims that questions concerning the immortality of the soul, providence, and the afterlife are not properly asked of, or answered by, his deity, Tocqueville has warned us that the democratic soul will become enervated or even paralyzed over time by seeking answers to all these deep questions, and then become ripe for political and moral enslavement.

Indeed, one wonders whether Tocqueville would even consider

Emerson's spirituality to be a religion at all inasmuch as it refuses to provide answers about primary questions. At the very least, by collapsing the tension between the material and immaterial world, Emerson seems to have undermined what Tocqueville sees as the salutary effect of religion on a democratic ethos, namely, promoting duties to others and limiting the unbridled pursuit of wealth. Of course, there is nothing in Emerson's spiritualism that encourages the opposite tendencies, and Emerson says on more than one occasion that the mere pursuit of wealth is slavish. Nevertheless, absent any sort of "divine sanction" or "divine punishment" to deter those who might be tempted to forego their obligations to others, one wonders how Emerson's transcendentalism, over the long run, could fully support a healthy democratic ethos when democratic passions run so clearly in the opposite direction.

### *Unitarian Christianity*

This assessment of Emerson's spiritualism needs some amplification. After all, Emerson was (however briefly) a Unitarian minister, and therefore his rather "unorthodox" transcendentalism must be understood in the context of his more "orthodox" Christianity. Certainly any complete account of Emerson's religiosity must give due weight to his understanding of Christ and Christianity; but, as we shall see, even when this is taken into account, it is difficult to reach conclusions that differ much from our previous assessment.

Let us begin with Emerson's sermon called "The Lord's Supper," delivered on Sunday 9 September 1832, in which Emerson argues that a close reading of the New Testament indicates Jesus never intended the Eucharist to become a permanent institutional ritual of the Church; and even if he did intend it, the ritual is actually harmful to the genuine religious sentiment Jesus intended to instill (*RE* 99–109).<sup>3</sup> But even aside from these claims, Emerson finds the most persuasive case against the Eucharist in the aversion which he has to the symbolism of the bread and the wine, which he refers to as "the elements":

Passing other objections, I come to this, that the use of the elements, however suitable to the people and the modes of thought in the East, where it originated, is

foreign and unsuited to affect us. Whatever long usage and strong association may have done in some individuals to deaden this repulsion, I apprehend that their use is rather tolerated than loved by any of us. We are not accustomed to express our thoughts or emotions by symbolical actions. Most men find the bread and wine no aid to devotion, and to some it is a painful impediment. To eat bread is one thing; to love the precepts of Christ and resolve to obey them is quite another.

The statement of this objection leads me to say that I think this difficulty, wherever it is felt, to be entitled to the greatest weight. It is alone a sufficient objection to the ordinance. It is my own objection. This mode of commemorating Christ is not suitable to me. That is reason enough why I should abandon it. If I believed that it was enjoined by Jesus on his disciples, and that he even contemplated making permanent this mode of commemoration, every way agreeable to an Eastern mind, and yet on trial it was disagreeable to my own feelings, I should not adopt it. I should choose other ways which, as more effectual upon me, he would approve more. For I choose that my remembrances of him should be pleasing, affecting, religious. I will love him as a glorified friend, after the free way of friendship, and not pay him a stiff sign of respect, as men do those whom they fear. A passage read from his discourses, a moving provocation to works like his, any act or meeting which tends to awaken a pure thought, a flow of love, an original design of virtue, I call a worthy, a true commemoration (*RE* 106–7).

Because every religious ritual has the potential to impinge upon the autonomy and independence of the soul—upon its freedom to choose the manner and method of worship—no ritual or form can ever be declared inviolate and sacrosanct.

Freedom is the essence of this faith [*i.e.*, Christianity]. It has for its object simply to make men good and wise. Its institutions then should be as flexible as the wants of men. That form out of which the life and suitable-

ness have departed should be as worthless in its eyes as the dead leaves that are falling around us (*RE* 108).

To hold onto outmoded rituals is to betray the very purpose of Christ's crucifixion, for Jesus was sent to deliver mankind from religions in which ritual forms are more important than personal transformation.

That for which Paul lived and died so gloriously; that for which Jesus gave himself to be crucified; the end that animated the thousand martyrs and heroes who have followed his steps, was to redeem us from a formal religion, and teach us to seek our well-being in the formation of the soul. The whole world was full of idols and ordinances. The Jewish was a religion of forms; it was all body, it had no life, and the Almighty God was pleased to qualify and send forth a man to teach men that they must serve him with the heart; that only that life was religious which was thoroughly good; that sacrifice was smoke, and forms were shadows (*RE* 108).

In the end, Emerson himself will judge the worthiness of all traditional ceremonies, conventions, and customs—even those that Jesus might have specifically ordained.

Emerson's departure from the traditional institutions and doctrines of Christianity is even more pronounced in his Harvard Divinity School Address, in which he identifies two fundamental errors in the administration of the Christian church. He describes the first in this way:

It [historical Christianity] has dwelt, it dwells, with noxious exaggeration about the person of Jesus. The soul knows no persons. It invites every man to expand to the full circle of the universe, and will have no preferences but those of spontaneous love. But by this eastern monarchy of a Christianity, which indolence and fear have built, the friend of man is made the injurer of man. The manner in which his name is surrounded with expressions which were once sallies of admiration and love, but are now petrified into official titles, kills all generous sympathy and liking (*RE* 68).

The Church's obsession with the personality of Jesus distorts and vulgarizes his teaching by claiming that he was the son of God.

Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul. Drawn by its severe harmony, ravished with its beauty, he lived in it, and had his being there. Alone in all history he estimated the greatness of man. One man was true to what is in you and me. He saw that God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his World. He said, in this jubilee of sublime emotion, 'I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me; or see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think.' But what a distortion did his doctrine and memory suffer in the same, in the next, and the following ages! There is no doctrine of the Reason which will bear to be taught by the Understanding. The understanding caught this high chant from the poet's lips, and said, in the next age, 'This was Jehovah come down out of heaven. I will kill you, if you say he was a man.' The idioms of his language and the figures of his rhetoric have usurped the place of his truth; and churches are not built on his principles, but on his tropes (*RE* 67–68).

The Church fails to understand that Jesus was a prophet not because he was divine, but because he alone saw the divinity of all men.<sup>4</sup>

The second great error of the Church is a consequence of the first: by regarding Jesus and his message as an historical figure who established the religion in the far distant past, the living spirit is extinguished from present worship. By failing to make the soul in all its glory the foundation of religious instruction, contemporary preachers (unintentionally, to be sure) smother the joyous temperament in their congregations that characterizes genuine piety. This, in turn, corrodes the faith of the nation as a whole. Rehearsed rather than inspired, doctrinaire rather than personal, formal rather than uplifting, monotone rather than celebratory, "historical Christianity destroys the power of preaching, by withdrawing it from the ex-

ploration of the moral nature of man” (*RE* 73). Emerson offers his auditors a vivid sampler of the sorts of “moral” subjects whose absence in American churches causes people to think twice about participating in public worship:

In how many churches, by how many prophets, tell me, is man made sensible that he is an infinite Soul; that the earth and heavens are passing into his mind; that he is drinking forever the soul of God? Where now sounds the persuasion, that by its very melody imparadises my heart, and so affirms its own origin in heaven? Where shall I hear words such as in elder ages drew men to leave all and follow—father and mother, house and land, wife and child? Where shall I hear these August laws of moral being so pronounced as to fill my ear, and I feel ennobled by the offer of my uttermost action and passion? The test of the true faith, certainly, should be its power to charm and command the soul, as the laws of nature control the activity of the hands—so commanding that we find pleasure and honor in obeying. The faith should blend with the light of rising and of setting suns, with the flying cloud, the singing bird, and the breath of flowers. But now the priest’s Sabbath has lost the splendor of nature; it is unlovely; we are glad when it is done (*RE* 71).

The power and the beauty that Emerson demands from vital religion are missing from most modern Christianity.

What does Emerson recommend to repair this situation?

I confess, all attempts to project and establish a Cultus with new rites and forms, seem to me vain. Faith makes us, and not we it, and faith makes its own forms. All attempts to contrive a system are as cold as the new worship introduced by the French to the goddess of Reason—to-day, pasteboard and filigree, and ending to-morrow in madness and murder. Rather let the breath of new life be breathed by you through the forms already existing. For if once you are alive, you shall find they shall become plastic and new. The

remedy to their deformity is first, soul, and second, soul, and evermore, soul (*RE* 77–78).

Emerson thus does not advocate the creation of “new rites and forms” but the spiritual reinvigoration of those forms already at hand. As for the current generation of preachers, they must stride forward in a spirit of fierce independence from all traditional authority, maintain the most rigid personal integrity and virtue, and be open to the sublime wonder and limitless potential in man—which is the true gospel of Christ, and is as alive today as ever (*RE* 75–78). Emerson’s views were so unorthodox that many of the faculty members at Harvard publicly denounced the speech. He was not invited back to speak at his alma mater for some thirty years.

Two features of Emerson’s heterodox Unitarianism are particularly significant in the context of the questions we are pursuing. First, his absolute reliance on his own judgment exemplifies the practice he recommends to everyone: the individual alone is the sole judge in matters of religious doctrine and form. What the individual determines to be satisfactory is necessarily so, and that judgment is sufficient in itself. Second, Jesus’s fundamental message, according to Emerson, fully supports transcendentalism (and, we maintain, pantheism): we are to find and worship the god within all of us.

What sort of religious reform could proceed from Emerson’s appeals? He may have wanted spiritual revival within the Church, but achieving that revival on his terms would require the rejection of so many aspects of traditional, orthodox Christianity that one wonders just what sort of “church” would remain. All things considered, Emerson’s iconoclastic Unitarian Christianity imparts a unique flavor to his pantheistic spiritualism, but since it remains pantheism at bottom, it still promotes the dangerous effects that Tocqueville feared.

### **The Individual as Supreme Lawgiver**

The foregoing discussion has concentrated on the first aspect of the Tocquevillian critique of Emerson’s spiritualism—how its generality and simplicity flatters the democratic intellect. We must now ask about the second aspect: What effect does Emerson’s spir-

itualism have on individuality and the capacity of individuals to remain free? We approach this question by examining Emerson's teaching about the source of individual actions and judgments—especially moral and ethical judgments.

Throughout his writings, Emerson insists that the transcendentalist is a self-legislating individual: there is no law or commandment that is unconditionally binding upon him. And there is no institution—no government, no church, no society—that is worthy of his respect and allegiance unless, as is said in “The Transcendentalist,” it “reiterates the law of his mind” (*RE* 83). The transcendentalist's conduct is not governed by deliberation or experience, but by intuition, spontaneity, and trusting one's instincts—even, it seems, when one can give no rational account of them. Only spontaneous action—which is receptive to and motivated by the prompting of the divine voice within—is genuinely obedient to God. By becoming the channel through which the divine makes itself manifest, we shed all gross vanity and pretension while simultaneously solidifying and strengthening our own character.

A little consideration of what takes place around us every day would show us that a higher law than that of our will regulates events; that our painful labors are unnecessary and fruitless; that only in our easy, simple, spontaneous action are we strong, and by contenting ourselves with obedience we become divine. Belief and love—a believing love will relieve us of a vast load of care. O my brothers, God exists. There is a soul at the centre of nature and over the will of every man, so that none of us can wrong the universe. It has so infused its strong enchantment into nature that we prosper when we accept its advice, and when we struggle to wound its creatures our hands are glued to our sides, or they beat our own breasts. The whole course of things goes to teach us faith. We need only obey. There is guidance for each of us, and by lowly listening we shall hear the right word. Why need you choose so painfully your place and occupation and associates and modes of action and of entertainment? Certainly there is a possible right for you that precludes the need of balance and

wilful election. For you there is a reality, a fit place and congenial duties. Place yourself in the middle of the stream of power and wisdom which animates all whom it floats, and you are without effort impelled to truth, to right and a perfect contentment. Then you put all gainsayers in the wrong. Then you are the world, the measure of right, of truth, of beauty (*RE* 176).

By keeping our soul open to the ebb and flow of the Over-Soul, we will be made privy to the truth; we will become genuinely moral by attentively listening to the poetry of our own heart, which is itself a reflection of the poetry of the universe and its animating spirit. Emerson replaces the ancient injunction “know thyself” with “trust thyself,” because the latter contains or is the means to the former (*RE* 133).

Emerson’s celebration of individual intuition, integrity, and spontaneity is stated perhaps nowhere more succinctly and powerfully than in his most famous and inspirational essay, “Self-Reliance” (1841). Like Moses, Plato, and Milton, we must learn to heed the flash of genius when it ignites within us, trusting, almost child-like, that God has a purpose in our work and that divinity does not traffic in counterfeit forms. But if God urges us to listen to our heart, society does not, and the more we become accustomed to the ways of the world, the more our native light of genius grows dim (*RE* 132–34). Two problems arise from this tension between God and society: conformity and consistency. Regarding conformity, he considers it nearly impossible to resist:

[T]he discontent of the multitude [is] more formidable than that of the senate and the college. It is easy enough for a firm man who knows the world to brook the rage of the cultivated classes. Their rage is decorous and prudent, for they are timid, as being very vulnerable themselves. But when to their feminine rage the indignation of the people is added, when the ignorant and the poor are aroused, when the unintelligent brute force that lies at the bottom of society is made to growl and mow, it needs the habit of magnanimity and religion to treat it godlike as a trifle of no concernment (*RE* 137–38).

Regarding consistency, Emerson downplays its importance, and argues that sincerity, over the long run, will exhibit its own logic and integrity: “Your genuine action will explain itself and will explain your other genuine actions. Your conformity explains nothing” (*RE* 139).

Emerson highlights these two problems because they, more than anything else, undermine the self-trust necessary to act spontaneously or instinctively. Self-trust is the source of all spontaneous and ingenious action.

The magnetism which all original action exerts is explained when we inquire the reason of self-trust. Who is the Trustee? What is the aboriginal Self, on which a universal reliance may be grounded? . . . The inquiry leads us to that source, at once the essence of genius, of virtue, and of life, which we call Spontaneity or Instinct. We denote this primary wisdom as Intuition, whilst all later teachings are tuitions. In that deep force, the last fact behind which analysis cannot go, all things find their common origin. For the sense of being which in calm hours rises, we know not how, in the soul, is not diverse from things, from space, from light, from time, from man, but one with them and proceeds obviously from the same source whence their life and being also proceed. We first share the life by which things exist and afterwards see them as appearances in nature and forget that we have shared their cause. Here is the fountain of action and of thought. Here are the lungs of that inspiration which giveth man wisdom and which cannot be denied without impiety and atheism (*RE* 141–42).

To those who might argue that overstressing individual self-reliance in this way could well have injurious effects on society’s necessarily collaborative structures—such as government and the family—and could delude a person into committing atrocities in the name of “intuition” and “spontaneity,” Emerson’s response in this essay is unaccommodating: So be it.

I remember an answer which when quite young I was prompted to make to a valued adviser who was wont

to importune me with the dear old doctrines of the church. On my saying, "What have I to do with the sacredness of traditions, if I live wholly from within?" my friend suggested—"But these impulses may be from below, not from above." I replied, "They do not seem to me to be such; but if I am the Devil's child, I will live then from the Devil." No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution; the only wrong what is against it. A man is to carry himself in the presence of all opposition as if every thing were titular and ephemeral but he (*RE* 135).

Emerson holds that we must give expression to the unique incarnation of the divine within us. We must not continue to be the predictable herd animals that we are at present: conformity—not self-reliance—is the real threat to a vibrant political and civic life. Indeed, ignoring the divine voice within us, since it is the sacred source of all life and wisdom, is true atheism and impiety. Self-reliance thus turns out to be God-reliance—if by "God" is meant the divine voice within as you interpret it (*RE* 141–45).

It is here, with all probability, that Tocqueville would find the most dangerous implications of Emerson's spiritualism: he forthrightly rejects any moral guidance that comes from without and demands that individuals judge for themselves. Of course, it is precisely this celebration of individual autonomy that causes many to classify Emerson as a staunch "individualist"—not in Tocqueville's derogatory sense as applied to someone withdrawn into himself, but in the complimentary sense of someone who, opposing mass opinion and fashionable trends, stakes out his own ground. Emerson is certainly aware, as we have seen, of the force exerted on the individual by majority opinion. But he does not believe, as Tocqueville does, that individuals left to be their own moral legislators and lawgivers become atomized and isolated in society, leaving them more susceptible to the tyrannizing and homogenizing effects of public opinion. To Emerson's mind, individuals must rely on themselves rather than on traditional sources of authority if they

are going to be genuinely moral and have the strength to withstand mass opinion.

Notwithstanding Emerson's contagious optimism, one question persists throughout his discussion of the individual as judge and executor of his own laws: How does one distinguish between inspiration and madness? Even if we are all part of a greater whole, what standard can be employed to determine whether someone has correctly "received" and spontaneously acted upon the moral law? Why could someone not simply claim that his subjective experience points to an entirely different philosophical system than Emerson's? How would Emerson refute such a claim?

In the first place, Emerson suggests that everyone knows the truth of what he is saying in the depths of his own heart. If we would be honest with ourselves, if we would return to our better thoughts and listen intently to the sublime whisperings of the soul, we would understand as he understands, and act authentically as he acts authentically.

If you are true, but not in the same truth with me, cleave to your companions; I will seek my own. I do this not selfishly but humbly and truly. It is alike your interest, and mine, and all men's, however long we have dwelt in lies, to live in truth. Does this sound harsh to-day? You will soon love what is dictated by your nature as well as mine, and if we follow the truth it will bring us out safe at last.—But so may you give these friends pain. Yes, but I cannot sell my liberty and my power, to save their sensibility. Besides, all persons have their moments of reason, when they look out into the region of absolute truth; then will they justify me and do the same thing (*RE* 146).

In the second place, Emerson refers several times to a moral sense or sentiment in all men which commands and forbids actions, and which is rooted in or is coextensive with the Divine Mind. But while Emerson acknowledges the existence of a conscience, it neither seems to be in command, nor are its laws capable of articulation. For Emerson, the moral universe is accessible by all of us subjectively, but it cannot be formulated into any sort of objective ethical code:

The sentiment of virtue is a reverence and delight in the presence of certain divine laws. It perceives that this homely game of life we play, covers, under what seem foolish details, principles that astonish. The child amidst his baubles is learning the action of light, motion, gravity, muscular force; and in the game of human life, love, fear, justice, appetite, man, and God, interact. These laws refuse to be adequately stated. They will not be written out on paper, or spoken by the tongue. They elude our persevering thought; yet we read them hourly in each other's faces, in each other's actions, in our own remorse. The moral traits which are all globed into every virtuous act and thought—in speech we must sever, and describe or suggest by painful enumeration of many particulars (*RE* 64).

And finally, in the third place, Emerson claims that spontaneous action is so compelling that its example almost compels imitation: by being law unto oneself, one becomes a universal legislator.

A healthy soul stands united with the Just and the True, as the magnet arranges itself with the pole, so that he stands to all beholders like a transparent object betwixt them and the sun, and whoso journeys towards the sun, journeys towards that person. He is thus the medium of the highest influence to all who are not on the same level. Thus men of character are the conscience of the society to which they belong (*RE* 331).

If this is true, however, it is hard to square with Emerson's insistence on autonomy. How can individuals be true to themselves by following someone else's law? If the law were universal, then it would make sense to follow the example of a virtuous person. But this contradicts Emerson's belief in the individual divine voice that speaks to each person uniquely.

By having us be our own lawgivers, by asserting that "[o]ur spontaneous action is always the best" (*RE* 264), is Emerson not unwittingly advocating indulgence in our worst passions? In the essay called "Circles," he tries to defend himself against this charge:

And thus, O circular philosopher, I hear some reader exclaim, you have arrived at a fine Pyrrhonism, at an equivalence and indifferency of all actions, and would fain teach us that *if we are true*, forsooth, our crimes may be lively stones out of which we shall construct the temple of the true God!

I am not careful to justify myself. . . . But lest I should mislead any when I have my own head and obey my whims, let me remind the reader that I am only an experimenter. Do not set the least value on what I do, or the least discredit on what I do not, as if I pretended to settle any thing as true or false. I unsettle all things. No facts are to me sacred; none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker with no Past at my back (*RE* 260).

This very convenient disavowal of setting an example sidesteps the effect of Emerson's teaching on others; he does not want to take responsibility for the behavior that might be unleashed or justified by his doctrine of self-legislation. Not everyone's spontaneous impulses and private intuitions would lead to the sort of fortunate and moderate choices that Emerson seems to make.

If we return now to Tocqueville's democratic man seeking moral guidance in an egalitarian society, we see that Emerson has nothing to offer him. The evaporation of human individuality in the Over-Soul, the directionless invocation to look to one's own inner divinity, and the refusal to take responsibility for one's example in the world all leave democratic man in the lurch. It is no wonder that he turns to public opinion for moral guidance.

### **The Ambiguity of Politics**

One way to temper the debilitating effects of majority opinion, in particular, and the spiritual trajectory of the principle of equality, in general, is through political activity. Over and over again, Tocqueville shows us how civic engagement at the local level can help to cure the ills to which democracy is prone. In respect to the particular issues of this essay, civic participation and institutions help to prevent our slide into individualism. We are unable to withdraw

into our own world of family and friends when we must take part in various community activities. Civic engagement also tempers our rage for general ideas: when we are practically engaged, we see the necessary limitations of such ideas. Emerson, however, in many ways discourages political activity—and perhaps necessarily so. The rapturous inner life of the transcendentalist likely makes all political activity seem paltry and pale.

In “The Transcendentalist,” Emerson observes that these individuals are both solitary and lonely. They are solitary because nothing that society can offer appeals to them: whether it is popular entertainment or commercial competition, they see most of what excites society as little more than drudgery and thoroughly degrading in comparison to their talents. They are lonely because the human fellowship they seek is so acute and fervent that few persons could satisfy or endure the demands of such a relationship: tolerating neither frivolity nor hypocrisy, they are seen by most persons as rude, shallow, or simply ridiculous (*RE* 87–90). But if Emerson’s transcendentalist is indifferent toward such things as the accumulation of riches and wealth, so too is he indifferent toward politics in almost all its manifestations. From the great political debates of the day to the building of empires to the prospect of rule, the transcendentalist finds little in this petty arena to tempt him from his solitude.

But their solitary and fastidious manners not only withdraw them from the conversation, but from the labors of the world; they are not good citizens, not good members of society; unwillingly they bear their part of the public and private burdens; they do not willingly share in the public charities, in the public religious rites, in the enterprises of education, of missions foreign and domestic, in the abolition of the slave-trade, or in the temperance society. They do not even like to vote. . . .

What you call your fundamental institutions, your great and holy causes, seem to them great abuses, and, when nearly seen, paltry matters (*RE* 90).

Emerson does not deny that there are great and holy causes—albeit far fewer than most imagine—but by the time a potentially worth-

while cause reaches the political arena, it has been prepackaged and predigested for public consumption. Since the transcendentalist attitude is a blanket critique of political life, Emerson rightly concludes that this outlook will strike society as threatening. The disdainful aloofness from the world of those who hold such beliefs, together with their willingness to abjure the public burdens that make community possible, seem like a direct accusation of society; and society will not remain indifferent, but will retaliate against this challenge to what it holds dear. But despite the fact that society treats these individuals as outcasts, and despite the fact they seem to perform no useful occupation, Emerson insists that they are the moral touchstones by which to judge whether “the points of our spiritual compass” are true. Society therefore has an interest in them and a duty to “behold them with what charity it can” (*RE* 95).

To the extent that Emerson hopes to improve American society, he directs his appeals for moral reform at the individual and not the group: there is little or no salvation through political activity unless the individual himself has first been spiritually transformed. In the essay “New England Reformers” (1844), he points out two problems in attempting the former before or without the latter. First, all political reforms tend to be partial:

I conceive this gradual casting off of material aids, and the indication of growing trust in the private self-supplied powers of the individual, to be the affirmative principle of the recent philosophy, and that it is feeling its own profound truth and is reaching forward at this very hour to the happiest conclusions. I readily concede that in this, as in every period of intellectual activity, there has been a noise of denial and protest; much was to be resisted, much was to be got rid of by those who were reared in the old, before they could begin to affirm and to construct. Many a reformer perishes in his removal of rubbish; and that makes the offensiveness of the class. They are partial; they are not equal to the work they pretend. They lose their way; in the assault on the kingdom of darkness they expend all their energy on some accidental evil, and lose their sanity and

power of benefit. It is of little moment that one or two or twenty errors of our social system be corrected, but of much that the man be in his senses (*RE* 406–7).

In another way the right will be vindicated. In the midst of abuses, in the heart of cities, in the aisles of false churches, alike in one place and in another—wherever, namely, a just and heroic soul finds itself, there it will do what is next at hand, and by the new quality of character it shall put forth it shall abrogate that old condition, law, or school in which it stands, before the law of its own mind (*RE* 408).

Emerson here disparages piecemeal efforts at social change as futile or misguided given the enormity of the task. By contrast, “a just and heroic soul” will be able to abolish the old condition through the force of his character and actions in the here and now.

Second, reformers overestimate the power of associations or numbers. Groups are no better or worse than the individuals who make them up, and unhealthy individuals make unhealthy groups: indeed, the more united and efficacious a group is politically, the more it will require its members to compromise their unique individuality, forcing out those of superior talent (*RE* 407–10).

These new associations are composed of men and women of superior talents and sentiments; yet it may easily be questioned whether such a community will draw, except in its beginnings, the able and the good; whether those who have energy will not prefer their chance of superiority and power in the world, to the humble certainties of the association; whether such a retreat does not promise to become an asylum to those who have tried and failed, rather than a field to the strong; and whether the members will not necessarily be fractions of men, because each finds that he cannot enter it without some compromise. Friendship and association are very fine things, and a grand phalanx of the best of the human race, banded for some catholic object; yes, excellent; but remember that no society can

ever be so large as one man. He, in his friendship, in his natural and momentary associations, doubles or multiplies himself; but in the hour in which he mortgages himself to two or ten or twenty, he dwarfs himself below the stature of one (*RE* 408–9).

Thus, Emerson's aim is not political but private, an attempt to unify our presently disharmonious souls. "The problem of restoring to the world original and eternal beauty is solved by the redemption of the soul" (*RE* 38). "This revolution is to be wrought by the gradual domestication of the idea of Culture. The main enterprise of the world for splendor, for extent, is the upbuilding of a man" (*RE* 55–56). How this domestication will occur without radical political changes (*e.g.*, in the education system [cf. *RE* 410–11]) is not clear. In sum, it would seem that Emerson's rapturous spiritualism casts a long shadow over politics and political activity: civic engagement is neither an Aristotelian fulfillment of our nature nor a Tocquevillean means to maintain its health.

### **A Corrective to Democratic Historians**

In conclusion, it is necessary to point out that there is at least one area where Emerson's philosophy is in harmony with Tocqueville's, namely, in his deep appreciation for the power of great individuals and individual action. In his essay on Abraham Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation, or in his address commemorating the anniversary of the end of slavery in the British West Indies, one does not read about immutable and unseen forces propelling men ahead on the unstoppable current of history. In this respect, at least, Emerson's celebration of the individual is the same as Tocqueville's.

Nonetheless, this celebration of individual initiative and independence is coupled with yet another potentially worrisome aspect of Emerson's writings. Just as he conceives the individual as the standard in judging the rectitude of an action and the worth of an institution, so too he conceives of the new American nation as a standard in judging its own needs. America must emancipate itself from the tyrannizing effects of a slavish veneration of the "mind

of the Past” (*RE* 46)—especially Europe’s aristocratic past—in all its incarnations: history, philosophy, art, architecture, and literature. Although this call for originality can already be seen in the opening paragraph of Emerson’s first book *Nature* (1836), perhaps the most stirring expression of this sentiment is his Harvard Phi Beta Kappa address, “The American Scholar” (1837), which Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes called “our intellectual Declaration of Independence” (*RE* 3, 846). The moment some form of the past is declared perfect or inviolate, then the present generation will atrophy and cease thinking and creating—it will become a satellite of the past rather than its own solar system. The genius of an age is lost when it passively accepts the dogmas of the past and does not actively seize upon and articulate its own creative principles: “The English dramatic poets have Shakspearized [sic] now for two hundred years” (*RE* 47). Indeed, we must not subordinate our own thinking to the thinking found in books:

Undoubtedly there is a right way of reading, so it be sternly subordinated. Man Thinking must not be subdued by his instruments. Books are for the scholar’s idle times. When he can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men’s transcripts of their readings. But when the intervals of darkness come, as come they must—when the sun is hid and the stars withdraw their shining—we repair to the lamps which were kindled by their ray, to guide our steps to the East again, where the dawn is. We hear, that we may speak (*RE* 48).

Books should be used to guide the scholar back to the light of his own inspirations.

Emerson is not rejecting the past outright. His frequent praise of past philosophers and authors and poets demonstrates this. Instead, he wants to challenge what he calls the backward—that is, conservative—tendency of all institutions to defend some ancient authority and to use this as an excuse for not moving forward.

The soul active sees absolute truth and utters truth, or creates. In this action it is genius; not the privilege of here and there a favorite, but the sound estate of every

man. In its essence it is progressive. The book, the college, the school of art, the institution of any kind, stop with some past utterance of genius. This is good, say they—let us hold by this. They pin me down. They look backward and not forward. But genius looks forward: the eyes of man are set in his forehead, not in his hindhead: man hopes: genius creates (*RE* 47).

The past must come alive for the present and speak to its concerns and circumstances. If it fails to do this, then it need not be studied and must not be revered. Discard the relics of the past or reanimate them—if Greece or Rome or Constantinople or Paris or London do not speak to us, we need not worry: someone or something else will (*RE* 115–17, 120, 130–31, 140, 150–51, 272–73).

Emerson sees some encouraging signs of intellectual liberation in the growing prevalence of “the near, the low, the common” as a new subject of literature (*RE* 57). He saw that contemporary writers and artists were beginning to expand the range of their interest beyond traditional high subjects to include the more mundane:

The literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life, are the topics of the time. It is a great stride. It is a sign—is it not?—of new vigor when the extremities are made active, when currents of warm life run into the hands and the feet. I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic; what is doing in Italy or Arabia; what is Greek art, or Provencal minstrelsy; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. Give me insight into to-day, and you may have the antique and future worlds. What would we really know the meaning of? The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the glance of the eye; the form and the gait of the body; show me the ultimate reason of these matters; show me the sublime presence of the highest spiritual cause lurking, as always it does lurk, in these suburbs and extremities of nature; let me see every trifle bristling with the polarity that ranges it instantly on an eternal law; and the shop, the plough, and the ledger referred to the like

cause by which light undulates and poets sing; and the world lies no longer a dull miscellany and lumber-room, but has form and order; there is no trifle, there is no puzzle, but one design unites and animates the farthest pinnacle and the lowest trench (*RE* 57–58).

Because the lowest objects are bursting with the same sublime soul as the highest, they can be made the focal point of a literary and spiritual renaissance appropriate for this new era and new nation. At the end of the day, Emerson applauds the fact that the same egalitarian political movements, which both raised the “lowest class in the state” and gave new dignity and respect to the “individual,” are now fostering an appropriate egalitarian literature (*RE* 43, 57–58). Emerson here reveals what Matthew Arnold calls his remarkable “persistent optimism” (*RE* 846) in the potential of each and every individual to become a fully realized human being: he repeatedly affirms that all men have “sublime thoughts” (*RE* 76); that all possess a “native nobleness” (*RE* 242); that all are wise; that all are latent prophets; that all have the potential greatness of George Washington and Julius Caesar; that all carry within a “miniature paraphrase of the hundred volumes of the Universal History” (*RE* 267). Even genius is less a matter of innate ability and more a matter of art and arrangement, and of giving free reign to the divine, which is in all of us (*RE* 411ff.). As Henry David Thoreau rightly said in his journals about his friend: “In his world every man would be a poet, Love would reign, Beauty would take place, Man and Nature would harmonize” (*RE* 847). We are left to wonder, however, whether Emerson’s suspicions of the past, coupled with his new emphasis on “the near, the low, the common” in literature will, over time, help to sustain his celebration of genuine human greatness, or eventually undermine and distort it in a predictable but unhealthy democratic fashion.

## NOTES

1. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. and trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 425–26, hereafter cited in the text as *DA*, followed by volume, part, chapter, and page number. In general, I have used this translation

throughout, although I have checked it against the French original for accuracy. See also the four-volume, bilingual, historical-critical edition of the same, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010).

2. References to Emerson's works are from *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Modern Library, 2000), hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *RE*. All emphasized words in quotes are contained in the original. For details on his life and times, readers may consult with profit Gay Wilson Allen, *Waldo Emerson: A Biography* (New York: Viking Press, 1981).

3. Emerson was ordained as the Unitarian pastor of the Second Church of Boston in 1829. In June 1832, his grave reservations concerning the sacrament of communion reached a crescendo, and he asked the Church if he might stop administering it in its present form. After considering his petition, the members of the Church were unable to grant it. Because Emerson would "do nothing which I cannot do with my whole heart" (*RE* 109), he judged it best to resign as pastor, and he stated his reasons for doing so to the congregation in the sermon we are about to discuss. Although Emerson continued to give sermons to various churches throughout his life, his service at the Second Church was his first and last appointment as a permanent pastor.

4. Emerson also suggests the likely cause of this error. It was only natural that a soul as "great and rich" as Jesus's, falling among a "simple" people, was bound to overwhelm them. They were thus not able to see that Jesus's true message was that they needed to discover and make manifest the gift of God in their own soul and not that Jesus was the son of God Himself (*RE* 69). Given the simplicity of the "primitive Church," Emerson is very hesitant to adopt any of its doctrines or practices. The early Christians not only refused to shed their "Jewish prejudices" but they were rarely enlightened by the example of Christ himself. Emerson thus concludes that "[o]n every other subject succeeding times have learned to form a judgment more in accordance with the spirit of Christianity than was the practice of the early ages" (*RE* 105).

**“At the Very Center of the Plenitude”:<sup>1</sup>  
Goethe’s Grand Attempt to Overcome the 18<sup>th</sup> Century;<sup>2</sup>  
Or,  
How Freshman Laboratory Saved Goethe  
From the General Sickness of his Age**

We have failed to restore to the human spirit  
its *ancient right to come face to face with nature.*

—Goethe<sup>3</sup>

Nature has become the fundamental word  
that designates essential relations . . . to beings.

—Heidegger<sup>4</sup>

Goethe teaches *courage* . . . that the disadvantages  
of any epoch exist only to the fainthearted.

—Emerson<sup>5</sup>

### **1. Incidental Thoughts, Fruitful Life**

To everyone: Welcome! To our freshman in particular: a special Welcome!

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: We know him first as a poet and playwright—seniors will read his *Faust* next week. Yet there is another Goethe that is less well known but who, from his own point of view, is of equal, if not greater consequence,<sup>6</sup> the Goethe who spent his life studying nature—botany, zoology, geology, meteorology, theory of color—and is known, in this regard, for his work in morphology. I would like to speak about this lesser known Goethe tonight.

There are two subtitles to this evening’s lecture “At the Very Center of the Plenitude.” The first is given to it by Friedrich Nietzsche, the second, my own curious invention. The first is “Goethe’s Grand Attempt to Overcome the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.” As we will see, from Nietzsche’s perspective Goethe was a philosophical thinker of the highest order who inherited, as we all do, ideas from previ-

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ous generations and thinkers, ideas that he thought were ill conceived and needed to be rethought. Thanks to these ideas, we had become, according to Goethe, “blind with seeing eyes.”<sup>7</sup>

Similarly the second subtitle, “How Freshman Laboratory Saved Goethe from the General Sickness of his Age.” This clearly reflects our unique studies here at St. John’s. Here too we see something of greater moment than we might first have seen. Here we will have a chance to see that his life’s work studying nature—as seen in the paper that we read in freshman laboratory—has a far greater significance than just “science,” great though this is in its own right.<sup>8</sup> For Goethe the study of nature was the necessary antidote to a growing tendency—“sickness” he called it—that needed to be countered for the sake of our lives and health.

Goethe’s thinking, though philosophical, is not systematic, and that means there’s no one place where his deepest thinking is to be found. Just the opposite, his profoundest thought is to be discovered throughout his works, and not just in his major works, but minor ones too, often just jottings here and there, on slips of paper, in the margins of books, the corners of newspapers, in brief letters, in short wherever occasion found a suitable surface for pen and ink to secure for a time his emergent thoughts. These were often then collected into “maxims and reflections,” sometimes inserted as the thinking of one of the characters of his novels, sometimes collected under his own name.

These occasional thoughts will provide much of the material for tonight’s talk. But incidental thoughts are not necessarily insignificant thoughts.<sup>9</sup> Not unlike flotsam and jetsam, thoughts appear throughout our day. Are these daily musings ‘distractions of the moment’ or ‘disclosures of moment’? Such irrepressible thoughtfulness and imagination gives added dimension to the thin linearity of time. A day punctuated by the wondrous, sparked by light, is not just another day. Daily discovery is meat not spice, nourishment, not just flavoring. And its joy is invigorating. The mundane is thereby transformed. Thinking happens.

One such collection of thoughts is a book of selected conversations by his secretary Johann Peter Eckermann, a man of no small talent, who took it upon himself to record for posterity per-

sonal conversations he had with his world famous employer during the last nine years of his life. These are intermittently and imperfectly recorded, often self-conscious, sometimes seem contrived, and are frequently without a definite outcome. There we find observations about passing acquaintances, deliberations about the wine list for the evening dinner, plans for journeys to be taken, personal estimates about famous and not so famous authors and statesmen, latter-year reflections and regrets about his youthful writings, plans for the reconstruction of the local theater that had burned down, conversations with his patron the Grand Duke of Weimar, observations about his wife and children, expressions of hope and disappointment about friends, frustrations about works of his that had been overlooked or were under appreciated. But throughout the rich array, there emerge as well recurrent themes and persistent questions of consequence.

The same author mentioned above, Nietzsche, says the following: "Apart from Goethe's [own] writings, and *in particular Goethe's conversations with Eckermann*, the best German book there is, what is there really of German prose literature that it would be worthwhile to read over and over again?"<sup>10</sup> "The best German book there is," worth "reading over and over again"? Hardly on the face of it.

Though perhaps prone to hyperbole and "philosophizing with a hammer," Nietzsche was not prone to misrepresentation. What could he mean by such exaggerated praise? Perhaps what is remarkable is not the book per se, but what is portrayed therein? Perhaps what is notable is not its ultimate literary value—the book is not on our program—but the attempt to record a life that is in no way ordinary? Indeed, even through Eckermann's eyes we glimpse new possibilities for a human life that aspires to what is extraordinary, a fullness of possibility rarely seen. We glimpse a paradigm of a fully engaged, ever creative, wholesome fecundity. In short, we see philosophy as a way of being in the world, not as a book bound between leather covers.

## 2. "Everything Nowadays is *Ultra*"

In 1825, late in life, Goethe wrote a letter to his friend, the composer Zelter, in which he reflected on the character of life as it had

come to be lived in their lifetime:

Everything nowadays is *ultra*, [he writes] *everything is being transcended continually in thought* as well as in action. *No one knows himself any longer; no one can grasp the element in which he lives* and works or the materials that he handles. Pure simplicity is out of the question; of simplifiers we have enough. Young people are stirred up much too early in life and then carried away in the whirl of the times. Wealth and rapidity are what the world admires. . . . Railways, quick mails, steamships, and every possible kind of rapid communication are what the educated world seeks but *it only over-educates itself and thereby persists in its mediocrity*. It is, moreover, the result of universalization that a mediocre culture [then] becomes [the] common [culture].

He then adds ruefully: “We and perhaps a few others will be the last of an epoch that will not soon return.”<sup>11</sup>

According to Goethe, a radical transformation of our way of being has taken place: 1) a change in the character of human thought and action, 2) a change in our knowledge of ourselves, 3) a change in our sense of place, and finally, 4) a change in the character and efficacy of education.

“Everything nowadays is *ultra*”: As early as the beginning of the nineteenth century, what was coming to characterize human life—and thereby change the face and depth of human experience—was the speed (*die Voloziferishe*) at which life was lived, a hitherto unheard of, dizzying and disorienting pace such that young people—but not only—could only be *caught up* in “the whirl of the times.” “Being caught up” means living some other life than one’s own, being inauthentic.

“Railways, quick mails, steamships”: Ever faster communication changes the lived dimensions of life: *time quickens, distance collapses*. There is no delay between an event and its hearing. “It’s as if we were right there.” A leisurely walk is replaced by a carriage ride, thereafter by a train ride, then a jet plane, and now by . . . a transporter (or at least in our imaginations). The wait for “news” from the pony express, a telegram, a phone call, a pager continues to shrink. Our e-mail pings or our blackberry vibrates: we hear about

an event “as it happens” no matter the distance. Life, in short, is lived in fast forward. Goethe asks “Who can possibly keep up with the demands of an exorbitant present and that at maximum speed?”<sup>12</sup>

This matter of life’s ever accelerating pace is not a philosophically indifferent one for Goethe. “The greatest misfortune [*Unheil*] of our time,” he says elsewhere, “which let’s no thing come to fruition, is that *one moment consumes the next*.”<sup>13</sup> While the speeding up of things may assist us in “keeping informed” and “staying in touch,” it also *subtracts* from other essential dimensions once thought definitive of human life. It makes certain things more difficult, if not impossible, specifically those things that *take time*, for example, those that require slow assimilation and acclimation, above all human learning and experience. It takes time *away* from thoughtful reflection and other possibilities of human carefulness. For time and leisure (*skolē*) are the proper gestational home of reflection, philosophy and human care.

We hear too that our thought processes are affected: “everything is transcended in thought [as well as in action].” We have somehow been made to think differently. We live at a new level of abstraction, beyond the immediate, simple, obvious, primary world, such that we no longer even understand “the element in which we live.” What could this mean?

And most curious of all, Goethe says “No one knows himself any longer.” How is this even possible? Elsewhere he says: “Learning fails to bring advancement now that the world is caught up in such a rapid turnover; by the time you have managed to take due note of everything, you have *lost your self*.”<sup>14</sup> Are we not always the same no matter our circumstances?

Education too is thereby affected. It is suggested that we might even become “*over-educated*,” *mis-educated*, that education itself has become, somehow, distorted. He reflects: “For almost a century now the humanities have no longer influenced the minds of men engaged in them.”<sup>15</sup> Rather than distinction, we have mediocrity; rather than a high culture, we have an ordinary one. What then of the rewards of “perspective,” “balance” and “excellence” once thought the outcome of an ennobling education?

The “whirl of the times” has only accelerated many, many fold

since 1825. The author could not possibly have envisioned the pace at which we live our lives today. To be sure, on first hearing, one might be inclined to take the above observations as the grumbling of a man seeing the world pass him by (empty biographism). We might, however, also take this as notice to think better about the character of our lives in our *ultra-ultra* world.

### 3. “The General Sickness of the Age”

Life is our lot rather than reflection.

—Goethe<sup>16</sup>

Goethe’s exclamation that “nowadays . . . no one knows himself any longer” clearly needs further consideration. How could this be? Don’t we know ourselves?

Throughout the modern disciplines—the physical sciences, history, even poetry and literature—was a growing trend, evident to Goethe, to what he called “subjectivity.” Juniors and seniors will remember, in the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes’s identification of the “ego” as the primordial truth about which we alone can be immediately “certain.” The immediate evidence of this self-intuition then provides the standard of truth for all else, now thought true only if “clearly and distinctly” conceivable to us. Odd though this may sound, this new self-certainty leads to our world being reconceived as “the *external* world,” about which we can now have only a small measure of certainty and that of its radically stripped down mathematical qualities. To be sure, this made a “modern science” of such a world possible, yet it gave us a new definition and sense of self that was problematic.<sup>17</sup> This excessively polarized and reduced view of the ego as “subject”—understood as standing “over against”<sup>18</sup> some bare objective world—is what Goethe meant by “subjectivity:” polarized, withdrawn, exiled to its own interior world, and thereby alienated from any sense of world in which it could feel itself integrated or at home.<sup>19</sup>

For Goethe the consequences of this influential (nay, fateful) redefinition of self are nowhere better seen than in his own vocation, poetry. We have all heard the caricature of the modern “romantic” poet: a suffering recluse, retreating to his Paris garret, whose only truth is his inner pain. But for Goethe there is, unfor-

tunately, an element of truth to be found therein: He observes: "All the poets [today] write as if they were *ill* and the whole world were a lazaretto [leper colony]. They all speak of the woe and misery of this earth and the joy of a hereafter: all are discontented. . . . This," he adds, "is a real abuse of poetry."<sup>20</sup> "I attach no value to [such] poems."<sup>21</sup>

From Goethe's perspective, "whoever descends deep down into himself will always realize he is only *half a being*,"<sup>22</sup> and being half will discover there limited resources for creativity. "A subjective nature has soon talked out his *little internal material* and is at last ruined by mannerism [that is, excessive affectation],"<sup>23</sup> he notes regretfully. "Such people look at once within; they are so occupied by what is revolving in themselves, [that] they are like a man in passion, who passes his dearest friends on the street without seeing them."<sup>24</sup> With reduced openness to the world around them, they have become "blind with seeing eyes." This excessive one-sidedness, and consequent risk of self-absorption, Goethe named "the general sickness of the present age [*heutigen Zeit*],"<sup>25</sup> and led Doctor von Goethe to his famous diagnosis: "What is Classical is healthy; what is Romantic is sick."<sup>26</sup> Sick? Unhealthy, unproductive, foundationless, and ultimately untruthful. We lose our fullest selves.

Goethe thus found himself standing at the point of the divide where, for all our efforts to think about each separately, subject and object were being ever more pulled apart. This experiential breach was of fundamental concern because, when either is over-polarized—when the *soul* is diminished as an isolated, worldless ego (psyche), *res cogitans* or when the *world* is diminished as external, even foreign, barren *res extensa*—both subject and object are diminished for want of their natural correlate. If I may indulge in a somewhat dramatic image: like a man standing between two horses pulling him apart, Goethe found that—for the sake of health<sup>27</sup>—he had everything he could handle to keep himself and the world whole.<sup>28</sup>

Goethe himself thus resisted being "caught up in his time;" he was not a "romantic." As he said, "my tendencies were *opposed* to those of my time, which were wholly *subjective*; while in my

*objective efforts*, I stood alone to my disadvantage.”<sup>29</sup> His “objective efforts”? How could he resist the subjective tendency?

#### 4. “The Element in which we Live”

In all natural things there is something *wonderful*. . . .  
So we should approach the inquiry . . . without aversion,  
knowing that in all of them there is something  
*natural and beautiful*.  
—Aristotle<sup>30</sup>

Surprising though it may seem to some, the answer is *nature*. Thus it is apt that the Goethe we first meet is *not* the poet but the Goethe who spent his whole life researching “the element in which we live,” that is researching into nature. It is this “objective” involvement that saved him from the excesses of his—and our—time, not to mention giving him “the most wonderful moments of his life.”<sup>31</sup>

So, what *is* nature?—OK, a simpler question.—What *is* a plant? Which grammatical form best names its being, a noun or a verb (or a gerund, a verbal noun)? By plant do we intend a static state or an activity alive with change, something that has grown or some process of growth?<sup>32</sup> Clearly we need to name *both—form that is also in the process of self-formation*. “Growth is the point of life.”<sup>33</sup>

For us here in the Southwest, sumac, oak, aspen, pinõn, mallow and mullen are different kinds of plants. The principle at work is the same throughout the stages of the life cycle of a mallow, for instance, from seedling to flowering, fructifying plant. Hence we name it *one* thing—a mallow—despite all these various stages and differing formal manifestations.<sup>34</sup>

But it is not only this individual plant that is before us, so is the species “mallow,” and even further so is the kingdom “plant,” and these, as Goethe will insist, *not* as abstract concepts in the mind but *somehow in the living instance itself*. Thus Goethe sought to account *for plant life as such*, despite the dizzying fact that they take infinitely many and wondrously different shapes. Sumac, aspen, mallow are in “inner essence” still “plants.”<sup>35</sup> What is needed in this view is to identify the *unifying principle* at work (not “underlying”) in each and every form at whatever stage of growth and complexity they might be. But how to do so? And how

to find a language that captures this universally active principle of forms forming themselves?

To do so Goethe had to depart radically from his contemporaries and from their analytical approach. But in so doing this departure brings him closer to us. We can see this at the outset of the *Metamorphosis of Plants* that we read in freshman laboratory, where he appeals, not to results of the latest scientific journals, but to our own untutored experience. He begins: “*Anyone who has paid a little attention to plant growth. . .*”<sup>36</sup> This means that we, ordinary human beings, still have access to *a realm of primary significance*, one not to be diminished as “pre-scientific,” if what is meant thereby is “pre-insightful.” Rather we, you and me, have *deep access* into what is before us.<sup>37</sup>

Indeed he is critical that, with all our education and learning, we may on the contrary be *closing ourselves off* from this primary level of our experience. He often referred to a passage in one of his early plays to illustrate *this eclipse of experience by theory*:

[A]s it is said in my *Goetz von Berlichingen*, that the son, from pure learning, does not know the father, so in science do we find people who can *neither see nor hear, through sheer learning and hypothesis*. Such people look at once within; they are so [pre-] occupied by what is revolving in themselves, that they are *like a man in passion*, who passes his dearest friends in the street without seeing them. [Rather] the observation of nature requires a certain *purity of mind* that cannot be disturbed or preoccupied by anything. . . . It is just because we carry about with us a great apparatus of philosophy and hypothesis, that we spoil all.<sup>38</sup>

“Like a man in passion”: Ideas, no less than passions, can take hold of our minds, preventing us from seeing what might otherwise be evident and thereby preventing us from attending to our primary experience.<sup>39</sup> So overwhelming are our present-day theoretical pre-occupations that—in one of his most shocking statements of all—Goethe claims that we no longer even concern ourselves with nature. “That nature, which is our [modern] concern, *isn't nature any longer*,” he says.<sup>40</sup> Extraordinary!

What has been lost, in Goethe's view, is a sense of the wholeness of wholes and the interrelatedness and integration of all things, in short, *Nature* (capital N). This loss is the necessary consequence of any approach wherein wholes are but "by-products"<sup>41</sup> of uncoordinated, underlying, isolated forces and elements ("matter in the void"). Looking at things in terms of their parts—elements, simples, particles, atoms—analytical ways of thinking stumble in the face of the Humpty Dumpty problem: how to put the whole back together again.<sup>42</sup> If we begin with parts, we end up with reconstituted conglomerates, aggregates, bunches, but the wholeness of things, the integral reality, remains a secondary phenomenon, a mystery, if not an accident.<sup>43</sup> Here too we've become "blind with seeing eyes."

Juniors are soon to read and seniors will remember Descartes's famous experiment with the wax at the end of *Meditations* II. There Descartes places a piece of fresh bees wax near a burning candle, whereupon it melts and loses its original color and smell, texture and shape (i.e. primary as well as secondary qualities), that is loses all its original properties but *res extensa*, mere extension (though this changes too). This experimental method is designed to bring us to see what is "elemental" (if not fundamental). Descartes then proceeds to claim that by "an act of intuition of reason" he—and we—would know this transmogrified, charred lump in front of us to be *the same thing* as before his infernal experiment. He asks, *who would not so conclude thus?* (Aristotle, for one) Well . . . if that were a plant, and not an amorphous hunk of bees wax, *who would concur with Descartes* that what remains is the same as what was put to the flame?<sup>44</sup>

The analytical flame dissociates or separates what originally was together. It "kills." So this method.<sup>45</sup> The disfigured, deracinated, blackened carcass of the plant is anything but, the living whole, nowhere to be found. The mass of matter lying before Descartes is "the same" only if life and death are not different, and if form is not an active principle but a derivative by-product. With this "lethal generality"<sup>46</sup> we lose—and lose sight of—"the spirit of the whole," as Goethe would say. For this reason, he claimed as well that the modern approach—*subjectively* predisposed to take

the objects of our experience in such a reduced way—loses its claim to “objectivity.”<sup>47</sup>

The question for Goethe—and for us—is whether and how we can recover the whole. Is it still possible to begin elsewhere, think differently such that the whole is retained along with its manifold parts? Can we yet begin where we naturally begin, with what is “first for us” (Aristotle), with integral wholes?

## 5. Our Ancient Right

The spirit of the actual is the true ideal.

No one who is observant will ever  
find nature dead or silent.

—Goethe<sup>48</sup>

Goethe thus sought “another way,” in order, as he said, “to restore to the human spirit, *its ancient right to come face to face with nature.*”<sup>49</sup>

He asks: “What does all *our communion with nature* amount to . . . if we busy ourselves with analyzing only single portions, and do not feel *the breath of the spirit* that dictates the role of every part and restrains or sanctions all excess through an immanent law?”<sup>50</sup> Thus “phenomena once and for all must be removed from the gloomy empirical-mechanical-dogmatic [torture] chamber [*Marterkammer*],” he said, “and [be] submitted [rather] to *the jury of [common human understanding]*.”<sup>51</sup> But how are we to do this, to return to “common human understanding”?

Since apparently we can live in more than one world, Goethe makes his bid—“naively” yet knowingly<sup>52</sup>—to reclaim nature as our home-world. “If we are *to rescue ourselves from the boundless multiplicity, atomization and complexity of the modern natural sciences,*” he says, “and *get back to the realm of simplicity,* we must always consider [this] question: how would Plato [or any non-modern] have reacted to nature, *fundamentally one unity as it still is,* how would he have viewed what may now appear to us as its greater complexity?”<sup>53</sup> We need to remove what “now” stands in the way.<sup>54</sup> We need somehow to shuck off our modern predisposition to see all things as artificially reconstituted<sup>55</sup> and see our world, rather, as one might whose vision was

not so refracted. But how?

Mindful that “*the first stages of a discovery leave their mark on the course of knowledge,*”<sup>56</sup> Goethe first seeks to reorient us. To begin with, “anyone who has paid a little attention” has to acknowledge that our primary and original experience of things is *otherwise* than we’ve been brought to conceive. “In nature,” he said, “*we never see anything isolated: everything is in connection with something.*”<sup>57</sup> Any account, then, of our experience must *begin here with the unity and interrelatedness of all things.* Herein lays Goethe’s unified field theory: “I abide by what is *simple and comprehensive,*” he says.<sup>58</sup> (This he also calls his “stubborn realism.”<sup>59</sup>)

As we heard, a certain kind of *undisturbed purity of mind*—clarity, breadth of survey, attention to manifest differences—is the pre-requisite to any genuine openness. In the garden, along a path, in the laboratory, we need first *to see the things themselves*, to recognize the ways and means that the *plant* [or whatever our object] uses,<sup>60</sup> “to follow *it* carefully through all *its* transitions,”<sup>61</sup> in short, “to *follow* as carefully as possible in the *foot-steps* of nature.”<sup>62</sup> “In the process,” he says, “we become familiar with certain requisite conditions for what is manifesting itself. From this point of view *everything gradually falls into place under higher principles and laws* revealed *not to reason* through words and hypotheses, but to our intuitive perception [*Anschauung*] through phenomena.”<sup>63</sup> In this way, our relationship to things is *not* at first “speculative,” but what Goethe calls “practical,” that is grounded in the concrete experience of individuals and the real.<sup>64</sup> (Here have we a *model* of openness and extreme care that will serve us well, not only in the laboratory, but throughout our work at the college.)

Given this, given observation that is undertaken with a “truly sympathetic interest,”<sup>65</sup> a remarkable transformation can then begin. We can be moved to *insight*. In an often quoted passage from the *Introduction* to his *Outline of a Theory of Color*, Goethe addresses this process of *natural ideation*. He writes:

An extremely odd demand is often set forth but never met . . . that [bare] empirical *data* should be presented

without any theoretical context. . . . This demand is odd because it is useless to simply look at something. *Every act of looking [naturally] turns into observation, every act of observation into reflection, every act of reflection into the making of associations: thus it is that we theorize every time we look carefully at the world.* The ability to do this with *clarity of mind*, with self-knowledge, in a free way, and (if I may venture to put it so [he adds]) with *irony*, is a skill we need in order to avoid the pitfalls of [modern scientific] abstraction.<sup>66</sup>

Nature converses with us. Like any organic transition, thought is the natural and continuous outgrowth of its prior condition, the fruit of concrete experience. As such we are naturally led to a higher integration through “the practical and *self-distilling processes of common human understanding.*”<sup>67</sup> “We theorize every time we look carefully at the world.”

When we are able to survey an object in every detail, grasp it carefully and reproduce it in our mind’s eye [he reflects, then] we can say we have an *intuitive perception [Anschauung]* of it in the truest and highest sense. We can [rightfully] say it belongs to us.... And thus the particular leads to the general [as well as] the general to the particular. *The two combine their effect in every observation, in every discourse.*<sup>68</sup>

As much as we take the lead in inquiry, then so too are we *led* by what we are inquiring into. *Experience is bi-directional.* Subject-object; object-subject. True sympathetic observation results in the recapitulation in our summary imagination of the originating principle. The object becomes for us as it is in itself. In this way the object “belongs” to us as much as we, in communion, belong with it. Our *natural correlation* is thereby reestablished, the Cartesian subjective reduction of experience is offset, if not reversed, and a kind of renewed *originality* is returned to human experience, widening and opening our purview<sup>69</sup>, whereby we might be thought once again to come “face to face” with nature. Our ancient right is thereby restored.

## 6. The Original World

. . . the sublime tranquility which surrounds us  
when we stand in the solitude and silence of nature,  
vast and eloquent.  
—Goethe<sup>70</sup>

A living thing cannot be measured  
by something external to itself.  
—Goethe<sup>71</sup>

This *reunion* of observer and world—we should say *union*—is possible because of a unique human faculty—one out-rightly denied<sup>72</sup> or at least overlooked by other modern thinkers—but to which Goethe again and again returns our attention. As we read: “When we are able to survey an object in every detail, grasp it carefully and reproduce it in the mind’s eye, we can say we have *an intuitive perception* of it in the truest and highest sense.” This capacity for concrete, summary “intuition,” *intuitive perception*, *Anschauung*, is our faculty for experiential wholes wherein the actively unifying principles at work in the world manifest themselves. Deny it and we have no wholes. They are not deduced, inferred, or synthesized. We do not have to go beyond or behind<sup>73</sup> the phenomena to see these at work. These are made known to us at the level of our primary experience. We “see” them.

There’s a famous story: At a meeting of the Society for Scientific Research in Jena there was a “fortunate encounter” between Goethe and the poet Friedrich Schiller—whose poetry at the time Goethe thought too romantic, too subjective. Goethe sought to explain to him his own attempt to articulate such a principle whereby the natural plenitude of plant life might be accounted for. His “idea” was, he admits, “*the strangest creature in the world*,”<sup>74</sup> wherein the whole range of plant formation might be seen as “stemming” or “derived” from an aboriginal form that was in this regard the formal progenitor of the whole kingdom. Goethe named this the *Urpflanze*,<sup>75</sup> the original or originary plant.<sup>76</sup>

Schiller’s first response to this suggestion reflected his philosophical background, in particular his indebtedness to Kant. “This is *not* an observation from experience,” he said, “This is an *idea*.”<sup>77</sup> Schiller could not see what Goethe claimed he *saw*. He was disin-

clined—as we may be—to grant that this was anything but a “regulative idea” constructed by reason to help it organize its experience, not a principle at work in the world organizing the phenomenal array of plant forms. It was merely an idea, merely “subjective.” For him and for Kant, it couldn’t be anything more, as in their view phenomena are themselves constituted by consciousness and are thus not things in themselves.

Convinced, rather, that he had identified the *objective* generative source of all plant forms, Goethe replied: “Then I may rejoice that I have ideas without knowing it, and *can even see them with my own eyes!*” For Goethe, perception and reason, as moments of a natural process, are *not* disparate faculties, but *continuous*. Thus this, and all other *Ur*-phenomena, immanent and at work throughout our experience, are real and hence must be available to us on the primary level of common human understanding.<sup>78</sup> He wonders: “Why should it not also hold true in the intellectual area that through an intuitive perception of eternally creative nature we may become worthy of *participating* spiritually in its creative process?” He thus insisted that he could *see* with his eyes something to which others seem to have become *blind*.<sup>79</sup> (Despite this fundamental difference, the two became close friends.)

But more needs to be said about this “strangest” of all creatures that holds, in Goethe’s words, “the secret of the creation and organization of plants” (or any family of phenomena). As we mentioned earlier, Goethe’s interests were vast and not restricted to botany; he also did research in osteology or bone formation. Indeed it was Goethe who discovered the role of the intermaxillary bone, the missing link that allowed zoologists to connect man and ape anatomically. In a passage from his work *On Morphology*, we see most clearly the point of origination of his thinking concerning *Ur*-phenomena:

The distinction between man and animal long eluded discovery. Ultimately it was believed that the definitive difference between ape and man lay in the placement of the ape’s four incisors in a bone clearly and physically separate from other bones. [Goethe provides the link.] . . . Meanwhile I had devoted my full energies to

the study of osteology, for *in the skeleton the unmistakable character of every form is preserved conclusively and for all time.*<sup>80</sup>

The developmental history of an organism is *not past*; rather the history of successive generational transformations is preserved and encapsulated in the fullness of any present form. Just as osteogeny can now be seen to recapitulate phylogeny, so more generally can any such morphological account. This “pregnancy”<sup>81</sup> of the present form allows of a new kind of thinking to uncover the *Ur*-principle at work, a reverse thinking that “traces the phenomena [back] to their [empirical] origins.”<sup>82</sup> (This is the first methodological principle of the new science of morphology<sup>83</sup>).

In another context he reflects on this *Ur*-principle, now also called an “archetype”: “an anatomical archetype will be suggested here, a general picture containing the forms of all animals *as potential*, one which will guide us to an orderly description of each animal.”<sup>84</sup> The *Ur*-principle is thus a kind of omni-potential in conversation with its environment and out of which the whole polymorphic metamorphosis issues. “All is leaf.” As such these are *not* ideas in the usual sense of Plato or Kant, neither separate nor abstract. Rather they are like ideas in enabling us to give an account of the unifying principles at the origin of the plenitude. They are like ideas, as well, in that they might serve as a kind of “formula” providing a way to generate new forms— if only in imagination.<sup>85</sup> The “derivation”<sup>86</sup> is not of hypothetical but real possibilities. Though they are *more like* the *eidos* in Aristotle, an active principle embodying the manifold fruitfulness of nature, here however “the secret of the creation and organization” of the family of forms. (He sometimes called it *entelechy*.<sup>87</sup>)

Thus whatever the family of phenomena—botany, osteology, geology, meteorology, color—*Ur*-phenomena emerge. We come to see the unifying principle, the spirit “that dictates the role of every part and restrains or sanctions all excess through *immanent law*.” From this “empirical summit,<sup>88</sup>” all things can be seen as unified. Thus we have order out of chaos,<sup>89</sup> integration where we might otherwise have discontinuity. The plenitude is comprehended.

Therefore when you pick up Goethe's *Metamorphosis of Plants* to read, or any of his other writings on nature, do not close yourselves off when hearing its foreign language, rather attempt to hear its new voice and direction for the understanding of nature, "the element in which we live." Whether, indeed, Goethe has bequeathed us a *fruitful path* by means of which our ancient right might be restored or whether it is but a *false portal*, is for each of us to determine for ourselves.

## 7. Against Self-knowledge

Everything that liberates our mind  
without at the same time imparting  
self-control is pernicious.

—Goethe<sup>90</sup>

Where are *we*, then, in the midst of all this? Is there a lesson to be learned about ourselves from this "other way of studying nature"? As we've seen there are *two unities* that are reestablished by Goethe's way of thinking: there's the unity of wholes that had been fragmented, and the unity of observer and world that had been alienated. Let us think more about the latter.

This unity of observer and world means that, *like any organism*, man cannot be known, nor know himself, apart from his world—his environment—which sustains him and of which he is an integral part. Given the polarized, inauthentic, and diminished sense of self that is the consequence of the divorce of the "ego" from its world in modern thought, it is understandable, then, that to Goethe "no one knows himself any longer." This led him to his famous—if at first shocking—remark concerning the Delphic oracle: "I must admit," he said, "that I have long been suspicious of the great and important sounding task: 'know-thyself.' This has always seemed to me a deception practiced by a secret order of priests who wished to confuse humanity with impossible demands, to divert attention from activity in the outer world to some false inner speculation."<sup>91</sup> Self-knowledge—or what we take to be such—can be misleading, indeed disabling.

But how can we make it truthful . . . and enabling? As we would expect, for Goethe the success of our efforts to know ourselves depends on the degree to which we are willing to extend

ourselves beyond ourselves. “Man is by all his senses and efforts directed to externals—to the world around him ,<sup>92</sup>” he stresses, and thus “the human being knows himself only insofar as he knows the world; he perceives the world only in himself and himself only in the world.”<sup>93</sup> This brings to mind his earlier observation: “Whoever descends deep down into himself will always realize he is only half a being;” this thought was then completed with “let him find . . . a world . . . and he will become whole.”<sup>94</sup> In short, that we might be *drawn out* of our overly self-polarized existence, we need to reestablish ourselves once again as *worldly beings*, fully engaged with and in our natural correlate “the outer world.”

Thus he answers the question “How can we learn self-knowledge?” in this way: “Never by taking thought but rather by action.”<sup>95</sup> This reply should not surprise us, for it was our history that our very attempts to *think* about ourselves and the world brought us to this unnatural polarization. Thus it is “activity in the outer world” alone that is necessary to restore a balanced polarity and healthy equilibrium. We see this in Goethe’s own “objective activity”:

Without my attempts in natural science, I should never have learned to know mankind [including himself] as it is. In nothing else can we so closely approach pure *contemplation* and *thought*, so closely observe errors of the *sense* and of the *understanding*, the weak and strong points of *character*. All is more or less pliant and wavering . . . but nature understands no jesting; she is always true, always serious; always severe . . . the errors and faults are always those of man. The man incapable of appreciating her, she despises; and only to the apt, the pure and the true, does she resign herself and reveal her secrets.<sup>96</sup>

Here we see Goethe learning lessons from nature that once were thought the fruit of introspection and the study of the human sciences. The book of nature, as other texts, can serve as an occasion for self-reflection. “The apt, the pure, and the true” learn about themselves and other human beings as they self-critically open themselves up to new fields and methods. The earlier passage, “For almost a century now the humanities have no longer influenced the minds of men engaged in them;” comes to mind. It is followed by:

“it is a real piece of good fortune that nature intervened, drew the essence of the humanities to itself and opened to us the way to a true humanitarianism from its side.”<sup>97</sup> The study of nature can thus be a *liberating study*, freeing us from the burden of blinding conceptions and enabling us to return to our original worldliness wherein we, once again, can open ourselves to our fullest possibilities. In this way, the study of nature is properly a *liberal art*.

## 8. The Grand Attempt

Where do we meet *an original nature*?  
Where is the man with *strength* to be true,  
and to show himself as he is?  
—Goethe<sup>98</sup>

Finally, certain questions emerged earlier about our modern way of life. How are we, given the “demands of an exorbitant present,” not to get “*caught up*” in the whirl of our times and to reclaim a sense of *productive leisure*? For Goethe the answer is . . . nature, whose rhythms, it was once thought, could not be accelerated, and through our study of which intimations of timeless self-sameness might prove a refuge and shape our own being in the world. How are we to regain a *footing* “where everything is in flux of continual change”? Here too, the answer for Goethe is nature, our home world, whose inherent lawfulness, as evidenced in the unities of life forms, can thus provide a secure base upon which to take our next steps. How are we to *know ourselves* more completely? Nature is especially needed here to offset our tendency to over self-involvement and to return us to our original fullness of being. And how are we to *educate* ourselves more truthfully? Since modern education only brought us, in Goethe’s view, to become “blind with seeing eyes,” he sought in nature a complement—not to mention an *antidote*—whose truthfulness would bring us “to see with seeing eyes” that fullness of view, perspective and measure that is the proper fruit of serious study. Our question: can our own sustained reflection on these questions, beginning with freshman laboratory, lead to lessons such as these as well?

By way of conclusion I would like to quote Nietzsche one last time. Toward the end of his life (1889), he himself tried to capture in one of his aphorisms “the European event” that was Goethe.

This distillation lives up to his well-known boast that he “wrote whole books in one sentence,”<sup>99</sup> though in this case he is somewhat more loquacious, for it took him a whole paragraph to epitomize this extraordinary life:

*Goethe*—not a German event but a European one: a grand attempt to overcome the eighteenth century through a return to nature, through a going-up to the naturalness of the Renaissance, a kind of self-overcoming on the part of that century.—He bore within him its strongest instincts: sentimentality, nature-idolatry, the anti-historical, the idealistic, the unreal and revolutionary. . . . He called to his aid history, the natural sciences, antiquity, likewise Spinoza, above all practical activity; he surrounded himself with nothing but closed horizons; he did not sever himself from life, [rather] he placed himself within it [that is, “at the very center of the plenitude”]; nothing could discourage him and he took as much as possible upon himself, above himself, within himself. What he aspired to was *totality*; he strove against separation of reason, sensuality, feeling, will (—preached in the most horrible scholasticism by Kant, the antipode of Goethe); he disciplined himself to the whole, he *created* himself. . . . Goethe was, in an epoch disposed to the unreal, a convinced realist; . . . Goethe conceived of a strong, highly cultured human being, skilled in all physical accomplishments, who, keeping himself in check and having reverence for himself, dares to allow himself the whole compass and wealth of naturalness, [one] who is strong enough for this freedom. . . . A spirit thus *emancipated* stands in the midst of the universe with a joyful and trusting fatalism, in the *faith* that only what is separate and individual may be rejected, that in the totality everything is redeemed and affirmed—*he no longer denies*. . . . But such a faith is the highest of all possible faiths: I have baptized it with the name . . . *Dionysus*.—<sup>100</sup>

Those who’ve read more widely in Nietzsche will recognize this last act of baptism as extraordinary: *there is no higher, nor deeper, nor more original mode of being* for Nietzsche than this aboriginal

and creative life force that he identifies in the person of Goethe: 1) this rare independence from it's times, 2) this extraordinary, if circumspect, positivity, 3) this unlimited and deep interest in all things, 4) this secure groundedness in practical, concrete reality, 5) this insistence on our original, primary experience, 6) this noble distance from suffering, 7) this incomparable sense of measure, and of course 8) this Olympian *courage*. If not Dionysus, then what name or word would be appropriate?

Goethe and Nietzsche saw that we moderns have a hard choice before us: between disaffection and engagement, between cynicism<sup>101</sup> and wonder. Goethe somehow was able to affirm life, to say YES!<sup>102</sup>

So we ask you tonight to consider this figure, how he might move you to "discipline yourselves to the whole" and summon the natural fecundity of your inherence.

And we ask you tonight "to place yourselves within life," to seek out what is primary and original and, daring to speak the language of discovery, to speak "poetically."<sup>103</sup>

And we ask you tonight to "make time" for thoughtfulness, that you transform the mundane with the joys of daily discovery, that your life be rich and your days not ordinary ones.

One last comment: Eckermann observed that even until Goethe's last days (that is, into his eighty-third year), he was continually learning. May this be so for you as well.

Thank you.

## NOTES

1. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Maxims and Reflections*, #337; also #664 (hereafter *MR*). Given as the annual Friday night "Dean's Lecture" to open the thirty-seventh academic year at St. John's College, Santa Fe. See *MR* #864. This talk is a further development of work begun in 1986 (see Levine, "The Political Philosophy of Nature, A Preface to Goethe's Human Sciences," (hereafter *Political Philosophy*) *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 11 [1986]: 163-178). It was Thomas McDonald who introduced me to the work of Eric Heller and Karl Löwith, and all three who introduced me to the depth of Goethe's thinking; my debt to them continues. For the ambiguity and greatness of Goethe's "grand attempt," see Johann Peter Eckermann, *Conversations with Goethe*, trans. John Ox-

enford, (London: E. P. Dent, 1951 [1850]) (hereafter *ECK*), October 20, 1828.

2. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols, Or How to Philosophize with a Hammer*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1968 [1889]) (hereafter *TI*), 102.

3. "Analysis and Synthesis" (hereafter *AS*), in *Goethe, Scientific Studies*, (hereafter *SS*), ed. and trans. Douglas Miller, Vol. 12 of *Goethe: The Collected Works* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 48. The publication of this collection of Goethe's disparate scientific works has provided a new occasion for further reflection about his "grand attempt."

4. Martin Heidegger, "On the Essence and Concept of *Phusis* in Aristotle's *Physics* B, 1," in *Pathmarks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) (hereafter *Phusis*), 183.

5. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Goethe; or, the Writer," in *Representative Men* (New York: Marsilio, 1995 [1850]), 195.

6. *ECK* January 4, 1824, May 2, 1824, February 18 and 19, 1829.

7. *ECK* February 26, 1824.

8. *ECK* March 1, 1830.

9. *Outline of a Theory of Color* (hereafter *OTC*), in *SS*, #743; see also note 21.

10. Nietzsche, "The Wanderer and His Shadow," in *Human all too Human, A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1986) Vol. II, Part II, #109, 336.

11. Letter to Zelter, June 7, 1825; in Löwith, Karl, "The Historical Background of European Nihilism," "The Fate of Progress," *Nature, History, and Existentialism, and Other Essays in the Philosophy of History* (Evanston, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1966) 4, 156-7; *From Hegel to Nietzsche, the Revolution in Nineteenth Century Thought*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 27-8, 177-181 (hereafter *HN*); also *MR* #480.

12. *MR* #474.

13. *MR* #479.

14. *MR* #770.

15. *HN*, 226.

16. "The Enterprise Justified," in *On Morphology*, *SS*, 61.

17. The ego or modern self is doubtful of all but bare existence, where even the externality, the worldness of the world, is in question.

18. For an interesting reflection on the problem of the subject-object polarity, see Heidegger, *Phusis*, 188.

19. A modern irony: man is least at home in a world of his own conception.

20. *ECK* September 24, 1827.

21. *ECK* September 18, 1823. By contrast, all of Goethe's poetry was insistently "occasional," that is objectively motivated: "The world is so great and rich, and life so full of variety, that you can never want for occasions for poems. But they must be *occasioned [poems] [Gelegenheitsgedichte]*: that is to say, *reality [Wirklichkeit]* must give both impulse and material. A particular event becomes universal and poetic by the very circumstance that it is treated by a poet. All my poems are occasioned poems, suggested by real life, and having therein a firm foundation." A radically different orientation and tone is apparent here. See also January 29, 1826 and *MR* ##337, 393, 119.

22. *MR* #935.

23. *ECK* January 29, 1826: also *MR* #1119.

24. *ECK* May 18.24.

25. *ECK* January 29, 1826.

26. *MR* #1031; *ECK* May 2.1829.

27. A comparison with Nietzsche is appropriate here.

28. *ECK* March, 14, 1830; also December 21, 1831; and "Significant Help Given by an Ingenious Turn of Phrase" (hereafter *ITP*), in *SS*, 39.

29. *ECK* April 14, 1824; also "The Content Prefaced," (hereafter *CP*) in *On Morphology*, *SS*, 67, and *HN*, 6-7.

30. *On the Parts of Animals*, I.v. 645a16, 19-27.

31. *Fortunate Encounter* (hereafter *FE*), *SS*, 18.

32. "The Germans," Goethe notes, "have a word for *the complex of existence* present in the physical organism, *Gestalt* [or structured form] . . . [whereby] an interrelated whole is identified, defined, and fixed in character. But if we look at all these *Gestalten* [all these forms], especially *organic* ones, we will discover that *nothing* in them is permanent, nothing is at rest or defined—*everything is in flux of continual motion*. This is why the Germans frequently and fittingly make use of [another] word *Bildung*

[formation] to describe [both] the end product and what is in process of production as well.” “The Purpose Set Forth,” in *On Morphology, SS*, 63. 33. *ITP*, 40.

34. *CP*, 69; also Eric Heller, “Goethe and the Idea of Scientific Truth,” in *The Disinherited Mind* (hereafter *Heller*) (New York: Meridian, 1959), 10.

35. *Metamorphosis of Plants* (hereafter *MoP*), in *SS*, 60, 67.

36. *MoP*, 76.

37. *OTC* #743.

38. *ECK* May 18, 1824; also January 17, 1830.

39. This is the “modern cave.” We may not be disposed at first to include the philosophers among the “opinion makers” parading above and behind the chained onlookers in Plato’s cave (*Republic* VII). But they are word-smiths and as such we are indebted to them for our language and lenses as well; see also Hegel, “Preface,” *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), #33, 19-20: “In modern time the individual finds the abstract ready made . . . . Hence the task nowadays consists . . . in freeing determinate thoughts from their fixity so as to give actuality to the universal and impart to it spiritual life.”

40. *MR* #1364.

41. Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, II.

42. “These attempts at division also produce many adverse effects when carried to an extreme. To be sure, what is alive can be dissected into its component parts, but from these parts it will be impossible to restore it and bring it back to life.” See “The Purpose Set Forth,” in *SS*, 63. The natural plenitude is now compounded exponentially by the analytical dissolution or decomposition of wholes; cp. Heidegger’s characterization that the original “atomic bomb” is to be found here in our modern analytical disassociation or explosion of all things into bits, parts and particles. See Martin Heidegger, “The Thing,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 168.

43. And thus the diminished reality of those who think that a home is bricks and mortar, and humans their chemical makeup.

44. Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, II, AT, 19-34. How someone could even think this is worth further thought.

45. A science that had given up trying to explain our experience was simply incomprehensible—not to mention infuriating—to one so firmly

rooted in the actual (“at the very center of the plenitude”). “The Extent to Which the Idea ‘Beauty Is Perfection in Combination with Freedom’ May be Applied to Living Organisms,” in *SS*, 22; also *ECK* September 2, 1830; see also Goethe’s longstanding debate with the Newtonian school and their tendency to substitute secondary for primary phenomena; *OTC* #176, 718.

46. “The Enterprise Justified,” in *On Morphology*, *SS*, 61.

47. In this regard one might want to compare Goethe’s and Nietzsche’s respective attempts to “stave off the nihilistic consequences of modern science” See David Lawrence Levine, “A World of Worldless Truths, An Invitation to Philosophy” (hereafter *Worldless Truths*) in *The Envisioned Life: Essays in Honor of Eva Brann* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry, 2008), 163.

48. *OTC* #158.

49. *AS*, 48.

50. *ECK* September 2, 1830; also *Heller*, 16.

51. *MR* #430: *gemeine Menschen verstand* (not “common sense”); cf. “Empirical Observation and Science,” (hereafter *EOS*) *SS*, 25.

52. “Naively”: see Levine, *Political Philosophy*, 163-78.

53. *MR* #664; also *ECK* January 29, 1826: “People always talk of the study of the ancients; but what does that mean, except that it says, *turn your attention to the real world.*”; see also *OTC* #358. Yet as we shall see Goethe is not an ancient but seeks to carve out a middle position between ancient and modern science. While there is deep agreement with Aristotle about our experience of nature in terms of wholes, there is disagreement about what is eternal. In making form eternal, Aristotle, he said, was prone to “precipitousness.” By contrast, for him it is the process, not the form, which abides. “Everything is in flux of continual motion.”

54. “There *is no worse mistake* in physics or any science than to treat secondary things as basic and . . . to seek an explanation for the basic things in secondary ones” (*OTC* #718). It’s as if we were “to enter a palace by the side door” and thereafter base our description of the whole on our first, one-sided impression. See “General Observation” (hereafter *GO*), *SS*, 42 and *OTC*, 160); also, #177, 716 and its application to the “grievous” Newtonian error at #176.

55. See Heidegger, *Phusis*: “The act of self-unfolding emergence is inherently a going-back-into-itself. This kind of becoming present is *phusis*. But it must *not* be thought of as a kind of built-in ‘motor’ that drives something, *nor* as an ‘organizer’ on hand somewhere, directing the thing.

Nonetheless, we might be tempted to fall back on the notion that *phusei*-determined being could be *a kind that makes themselves*. So easily and spontaneously does this idea suggest itself that it has become normative for the interpretation of living nature in particular, a living being has been understood as an ‘organism.’ No doubt a good deal of time has yet to pass before we learn to see that the idea of ‘organism’ and of the ‘organic’ is a purely modern, mechanistic teleological concept, according to which ‘growing things’ are interpreted as *artifacts that make themselves*. Even the word and concept ‘plant’ takes what grows as something ‘planted,’ something sown and cultivated” (195), and “But is not *phusis* then misunderstood as some sort of *self-making artifact*? Or is this not a misunderstanding at all but the only possible interpretation of *phusis*, namely, as a kind of *techne*? This almost seems to be the case, because modern metaphysics, in the impressive terms of . . . Kant, conceives of ‘nature’ as a ‘technique’ such that this ‘technique’ that constitutes the essence of nature provides the metaphysical ground for the possibility, or even the necessity, of subjecting and mastering nature through machine technology” (220).

56. *GO*, 42.

57. *ECK* May 12, 1825; also *AS*, 48.

58. *ECK* April 11, 1827.

59. *FE* p. 20.

60. “The Influence of Modern Philosophy,” (hereafter *IMP*) in *SS*, 28.

61. *MoP* #77.

62. *MoP* #84.

63. *OTC* #175.

64. *EOS*, 25.

65. *OTC* #665. There are times when Goethe seems to anticipate Husserl’s phenomenological approach, in particular in “The Experiment as Mediator Between Object and Subject” [hereafter *EMOS*], in *SS*, 16, and *IALO*, 22, where the rigor and thoroughness of something like “eidetic variation” seems to be proposed. The question is living form: “We cannot find enough points of view nor develop ourselves enough organs of perception to avoid killing it when we analyze it,” that is, multiple adumbrations may give us a kind of whole but at the risk of rendering the outcome a ‘mental composition’ (as in Kant). It would be interesting to see how Husserl and Heidegger treat life in its original vitality. See also *OTC* #166.

66. "Preface," *OTC*, 159. We've taken the liberty to add the specification "modern scientific" to abstraction. Throughout his *OTC* Goethe addresses the problems of scientific cognition and its tendency to excessive abstraction (##310, 716, 754, and p. 162). For Goethe, as for Hegel, this tendency is consequential and reckless. See note 52.

67. *EOS*, 25.

68. "Polarity," in *SS*, 155; *OTC* #175; Letter to Herder, May 17, 1778 (in *Heller*, 10).

69. *OTC* #732 ("expanded empiricism").

70. "On Granite," in *SS*, 132.

71. "A Study Based on Spinoza," in *SS*, 8.

72. Despite Kant's denial of such a human faculty in his *Critique of Teleological Judgment*, Goethe found a window of opportunity. He wrote that Kant had "a roguishly ironic way of working: at times he seemed determined to put the narrowest limit on our ability to know things, and at times, with a casual gesture, he pointed beyond the limits he himself had set." The passage in Kant that Goethe alludes to reads thus: "We can . . . think [of a kind of] understanding which [unlike our discursive one is] . . . intuitive, [and] proceeds from the synthetical-universal (the intuition of the whole as such) to the particular, i.e. from the whole to the parts. . . . It is here not at all requisite to prove that such an *intellectus archetypus* is possible, but only that we are led to the idea of it—which too contains no contradiction—in contrast to our discursive understanding, which has need of images (*intellectus ectypus*) and to the contingency of its constitution." However, Goethe then drew the opposite conclusion: "Why should it not also hold true in the intellectual area that through an intuitive perception of eternally creative nature we may become worthy of participating spiritually in its creative process?" he wonders. "Impelled from the start by an inner need, I had striven unconsciously and incessantly toward primal image and prototype, and had even succeeded in building up a method of representing it which conformed to nature. Thus there was nothing further to prevent me from boldly embarking on this 'adventure of reason' (as the sage of Königsberg himself called it)." "Judgment through Intuitive Perception" (hereafter *JIP*), in *SS*, 31-2; also *EMOS*, 11-17. Cf. Kant's "aesthetic normal idea" in *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, §17.

73. *OTC* #177; if we deny this faculty of intuitive perception we have no real wholes.

74. Letter to Herder, May 17, 1787: “I am very close to discovering the secret of the creation and organization of plants. . . . The crucial point from which everything else must needs spring. . . . The *Urpflanze* is to be the strangest creature in the world. . . . After this model [visual formula] it will be possible to invent plants ad infinitum, which will all be consistent...would possess an inner truth and necessity. And *the same law will be applicable to everything alive*” (Heller, 10). Also OTC #175, “Polarity,” in SS, 155.

75. *Urpflanze* is often translated as “symbolic plant.” While this rendering might be helpful if we keep a strictly Goethean notion of symbol in mind (as in MR #314), this translation more often misdirects us if it suggests to the reader either a mental abstraction or a literary device. Rather it seeks to embody the manifold fruitfulness of nature “in potential” (“Outline for a General Introduction to Comparative Anatomy, Commencing with Osteology” (hereafter *GICA*), in SS, 118).

76. “All is leaf.” *MoP* #119; OTC #120.

77. *FE*, 20; *ECK* November 14, 1823.

78. Letters to Schiller, February 10, 14, 1787 (in Heller, 20).

79. Hegel too—who otherwise was well disposed to Goethe’s project, indeed helped Goethe see how it fit into the larger scheme of the development of ideas—Hegel too nevertheless failed to see the *Urpflanze* as anything but an abstracted archetype (See Hegel, *The Letters*, trans. Clark Butler and Christiane Seiler [Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984], 681-711; *HN*, 11).

80. *CP*, 68-9. And we read in the *Metamorphosis of Plants* of the calyx that it “betrays its composite origins in its more or less deep incisions or divisions.”

81. *ITP*, 41.

82. OTC, 166. This may sound like ‘deconstruction,’ yet we would have to consider whether it represents a true break with analytical thinking, as Goethe seeks to do here.

83. *CP*, 69. Just as it led to his “discovering” the *Ur*-principle of the plant kingdom, so Goethe is led in his other studies to “postulate” one for the mammal family: “In the process I was soon obliged to postulate a *prototype* against which all mammals could be compared as to points of agreement and divergence. As I had earlier sought out the archetypal plant I now aspired to find the archetypal animal; in essence the concept or idea of the animal.”

84. *GICA*, 118.

85. Letter to Herder, May 17, 1787; *OTC* #175; "Polarity," 155.

86. *ITP*, 41 (" . . . my whole method relies on derivation").

87. Aristotle's *eidōs* is not subject to metamorphosis. On the other side, in Darwin the metamorphosis of form is not an unfolding of immanent form but the haphazard "evolution of species" and creative adaptation on the part of active wholes becomes "random selection." See note 51. My thanks to John Cornell for his helping me think this through.

88. *OTC*, #720.

89. *OTC*, #109.

90. *MR* #504.

91. *ITP*, 39. Also "If we take the significant dictum '*know thyself*' and consider it, *we mustn't interpret it from an ascetical standpoint*. It does not by any means signify the kind of self-knowledge advocated by our modern hypochondriacs, humorists, and '*Heautotimorumenoi*' [self-torturers], but quite simply means: pay some attention to yourself, watch what you are doing so that you come to realize where you stand *vis-à-vis* your fellows and the world in general. This needs *no psychological self-torture*; any capable person knows and appreciates this. It is good advice and of the greatest practical advantage to everyone (*MR*, #657)." He objects only to those isolating tendencies of the subjective sciences and psychologies that are heir to the fateful alienation, if not divorce, of the ego from the world.

92. *ECK* April 10, 1829.

93. *ITP*, 39.

94. *MR* #935; the whole passage reads "let him find a girl or a world, no matter which, and he will become whole." This is typical (see Eric Heller, "Goethe in Marienbad," in *The Poet's Self and The Poem*, (London: Athlone Press, 1976).

95. *MR* #442 ("Try to do your duty and you'll soon discover what you're like."); also ##770, 935; *ECK* January 29, 1826.

96. *ECK* February 13, 1829.

97. *HN*, 226; also *ECK* October 18, 1827: In a conversation with Hegel about the potential for modern sophistry of the "dialectic disease," Goethe says: "Let us only hope that these intellectual arts and dexterities are not frequently misused, and employed to make the false true and the true false. . . . *The study of nature preserves me from such a disease.*

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For here we have to deal with the infinitely and eternally true, which throws off as incapable everyone who does not proceed purely and honestly with the treatment and observation of his subject. I am also certain that many a *dialectic disease* would find a wholesome *remedy* in the study of nature.”

98. *ECK* January 2, 1824; also March 12, 1828.

99. *TI*, #51.

100. *Ibid.*, #49; cf. *MR* #864.

101. *ECK* January 2, 1824; letter to Zelter, June 18, 1831 (in *HN*, 27).

102. See also *ECK* January 24, 1825, October 12, 1825; February 1, 1827; October 18, 1827; February 12, 1827; *MR* ##191 and 1121. See Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, *passim*. This affirmation is what Nietzsche found most admirable, indeed he was envious of this, for it was not available to him. See “Afterword: Goethe and Nietzsche,” in Levine, *Worldless Truths*, 163-65.

103. “A More Intense Chemical Activity in Primordial Matter,” *SS*, 137.

## Special Section: Justice

### *Editor's Note*

In November of 2012, O. Carter Snead, Professor of Law at Notre Dame Law School and Director of the Notre Dame Center for Ethics and Culture, invited five tutors from St. John's College in Annapolis to speak at the Center's thirteenth annual fall conference entitled *The Crowning Glory of the Virtues: Exploring the Many Facets of Justice*.

The following five papers were delivered on a panel session, together with a sixth: "The Relevance of Lay Views on Punishment to Criminal Justice" by Christopher Slobogin, Professor of Law and Psychiatry at Vanderbilt Law School. A greatly expanded version of the paper was published the following month: Christopher Slobogin and Lauren Brinkley-Rubinstein, "Putting Desert in its Place," 65 *Stanford Law Review* 77 (January 2013). The article can be accessed online at the following URL:

<http://www.stanfordlawreview.org/sites/default/files/Slobogin-65-Stan-L-Rev-77.pdf>

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## The Actual Intention of Plato's Dialogues on Justice and Statesmanship

Eva Brann

Cicero famously said of Socrates that he was the one who brought philosophy down from heaven to earth. This must be some other Socrates than the one of the Platonic dialogues, perhaps Xenophon's of the *Memorabilia*. After all, even the comic Socrates of Aristophanes's *Clouds* is a meteorologist, a watcher of the heavens, though he does it hoisted up in a basket, butt up. Of course, he is a sky watcher, since that is where the vaporous and loquacious Clouds—Aristophanes's comic version of the Forms—are to be found. Perhaps it would have been more accurate to say that Socrates connected earthly matters, such as politics, to the invisible heavens, the realm of the forms.

There are three Platonic dialogues overtly and extendedly concerned with politics. The first, the second longest of all the dialogues, is the *Republic*, in Greek *Politeia*. It bears the subtitle, added in antiquity, "On the Just." The second is the *Statesman*, in Greek *Politikos*; its ancient subtitle was "On Kingship." And the third, the *Laws*, *Nomoi* in Greek, subtitled "On Legislation," is by far the longest.

In the *Republic* Socrates is both narrator and main interlocutor. In the *Statesman* he is the originating occasion of the dialogue but not a participant. He sits it out as an auditor, perhaps at times somewhat skeptical; the leading speaker is a visitor, or stranger, from Elea, Parmenides's hometown. Finally, the *Laws* don't even take place in Athens but in Crete, and Socrates doesn't appear at all, though there is an anonymous visitor, a stranger from Athens. Who doubts that the *Laws* is a work of practical politics, in fact the mother of constitutions? As the Athenian says: "Our *logos* . . . is of cities, and frameworks and law-giving" (678a). Perhaps we might even say that the farther Socrates is from a dialogue the more it is merely earthly.

When I speak, in my title for this brief talk, about "The Actual Intention" of the first two of these dialogues, I imply that in them

all is not as it seems. Here is Rousseau's opinion of the *Republic*, taken from the first book of his *Émile*: "Those who judge books merely by their titles take this for a treatise on politics, but it is the finest treatise on education ever written." And, indeed, the central books of the ten that comprise the *Republic* are taken up with the ontology, the philosophical framework, that must underlie education, and with the ensuing education itself. To be sure, the education discussed is that of the philosopher kings who will found and maintain that best *Politeia*, the civic framework with which the *Republic* is concerned (473c).

And yet again, neither this civic framework for the best city, which will be superintended by the philosopher kings, nor its justice is actually the intended topic of the *Republic*. For recall that this city is devised as a model writ large of the soul (368d), a model from which we can conveniently read off the nature of *individual, internal* justice. The book we call the *Republic* rests on are two tremendous assumptions: One is that political frameworks—not only the best but even more strikingly the worst—are analogous to, enlarged projections of, the soul. And the other, even prior one, is that the soul ought to be our first topic of inquiry, and it is only on the way to it that we discover political ideals: Psychology absolutely precedes Politics; Souls make States.

Thus it would be a fair argument to say that the particular political justice which is generally understood to be the peculiar contribution of the *Republic* is, in fact, a civic construction meant in the first instance to incorporate a notion appropriate to internal, psychic justice. For the three castes of the best city are delineated in such a way that the famous definition of justice as "doing one's own business," which falls out from the community's constitution, is applicable to the soul as Socrates conceives it. In other words, the just city is built from the first to be an enlarged soul.

Let me outline how Socrates makes it work. These castes are functionally defined, each by its own specific task within the city. Moreover, they form a hierarchy of command and responsibility such that any one caste's transgression is in fact rebellion, factional strife. Such internal dissension is, however, nearly the worst fate—as any Greek knew or should have learned in the course of the

Peloponnesian War (Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, 2.82)—that could befall a political community, because it is the prelude to tyranny. To reiterate: for Socrates, the maladjusted and dysfunctional soul is the antecedent cause of political evil.

It is to me an unresolved problem whether Socrates was in politics the anti-egalitarian he is sometimes accused of having been. In his demeanor, and what matters more, his conversations, he seems as populist as possible, not much impressed by smart young aristocrats about to go to the bad, like Critias, Charmides and Alcibiades; moreover, in the *Republic* he says of a democracy that it's "handy for searching out a *politeia*" (577d)—which happens to be what he himself is doing right then, down in the city's most democratic district, its harbor. The solution to the problem depends on how we look at the *kallipolis*, the "fair city" that he's found or made: Is it and its justice a serious political proposal, on a par in earnestness with Aristotle's *Politics* in antiquity or Locke's, Montesquieu's, and Rousseau's works at the beginning of modernity? In view of the motive for the constitution of Socrates's city, that is a reasonable question.

To lend my exposition some specificity let me give you the briefest reminder of the model city, both as best and as paradigmatic for the soul—and let me once more anticipate the result: The human soul too will be a hierarchy of functional parts, and it too will sport the virtues displayed by the city, now operating in individual human beings much as they did in the community.

At the bottom of the city's castes, then, are the craftsmen and tradesmen whose business it is to perform their particular work well and profitably, and to attend just to those assignments and no other. Beyond that, they are pretty free and prosperous, and thus satisfied. They are without a *specific* caste virtue other than competence, for they are driven by appetite rather than character. But they *are* the class for the particular operation of the most encompassing virtue, *justice*. Justice is the virtue of the part and the whole, of each part *doing its own thing* and thereby preserving the integrity of the whole. (*Temperance* is another non-specific virtue, that of agreeableness in the sense that each caste is accepting of its position in the hierarchy.)

The middle caste consists of the warriors who guard the city, and it is the training ground of kings. This caste is defined by their spiritedness, and it is the locus of honor, the source of a soldier's satisfaction through danger. These warriors do have a particular virtue, *courage*.

The ruling caste is comprised of the philosopher kings, whose virtue is *wisdom* and in whom the intellectual part, thoughtfulness, dominates. Their satisfaction is the highest; their happiness is subject to interruption by the duties of governing. This hardship is, however, alleviated by their affection for the young they teach—and by a more selfish fact: that the city is essentially *set up to protect philosophizing*, one of quite a few signs that all is not as it seems in this *Republic*.

There are certainly some other odd, even bizarre, aspects to be observed in this political device. Its strict hierarchy of command is inverted in respect to prosperity; the lowest caste, the craftsmen and merchants are the rich ones, the warriors are allowed no wealth. At the end of the books on the construction and the deconstruction of this city, we're told outright that it is "a model laid up in heaven" for anyone to look at who "*wishes to found himself; he'll practice its politics only and no other*" (592b; italics mine). In other words, we really have all along been participating in soul-construction rather than city-construction. But oddest is the notion that the governors of this "fair city," the philosopher kings, *don't want* to rule it—indeed, this reluctance is a criterion of fitness.

In fact, the education is set up so as to cancel political ambition—indeed, to capture the love of future kings for another realm, to alienate them from the earthly city. For they are to have a carefully graduated program of learning, elevating them beyond the world of appearances into the world of forms, the world of pure trans-earthly being. That's why Cicero's dictum that I began with—about Socrates bringing philosophy down for the heavens to the earth—sounds so, well, inept.

In particular, the study that is the capstone of the education, that levers the learner into this world of being and drags him out of the terrestrial slime, is *dialectic* (531 ff.), of which more in a moment. Now for Socrates—to the astonishment and disgust of a

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practical statesman like Jefferson, who waded contemptuously through the “whimsies” and “nonsense” of the *Republic* (to Adams, July 15, 1814) – the study of supra-worldly forms, of beings, is the proper foundation for government. This is especially the case insofar as statesmanship is concerned with the virtues of justice, temperance, courage, and wisdom. For obviously, to properly locate these in the city, in the civic community, it is necessary to know them. But to know them is not a matter of empirical research but of dialectical (that is, ontological) inquiry, a matter of the study of beings as beings, the study of Being itself. So the education does, after all, have a political purpose—*if* we agree that ethics, the inculcation and preservation of virtue, is the end of the *polis* and its *politikoi*, the civic community and its statesmen. I do not think any contemporary citizen, attached to our Madisonian tradition, *can* really agree—nor wholly disagree—and that is one of the many reasons why the *Republic* is indispensable to political inquiry. For it raises the question of justice in this original way: Is justice in the sense of the *Republic*, as the proper adjustment of the faculties of the soul—in particular the ready subordination of the lower parts to reason—the condition for political unity and civic peace? From this question falls out a whole slew of problems: Can we commit ourselves to a psychology of faculties such as those involved in the Socratic psychic constitution? And if so, is the adjustment of the functions and their subordination to reason a persuasive analysis of psychological soundness? And if so, does it follow that the adjustment is a political—or even a social—task? And if so, can a democracy produce government wise enough to accomplish these psychic adjustments, to induce virtue?

Before going on to the *Statesman*, I want to return to Rousseau: Is the real business of the *Republic* indeed education, rather than politics? Socrates never says so explicitly, nor can he, since the program there presented is not *just* an education for leadership loosely speaking, but very specifically the education of kings—and, as Socrates makes very clear, of queens (540c). It is an education very specifically geared to the *Republic's polis*—although it will, amazingly, become *the* general model of higher, liberal education, lasting until the middle of the last century.

Nevertheless, I think Rousseau is right. Indeed, some aspects of this “fair city” have been politically and socially realized: the equality of men and women and (to some extent) the community of marriage partners and children. But by and large it has remained, blessedly, “a pattern laid up in heaven,” for it has its repulsive aspects. Its educational program, on the other hand, has, as I said, cast loose and become viable even in a democracy, because what is nowadays called its elitism is not an intellectually integral part of this kind of learning. In fact, the college where my two translation partners and I teach, St. John’s College, is a remarkably close incarnation of it, and it revels in its intellectual egalitarianism. That is one more element in an argument that *political* justice is not the actually intended topic of the *Republic*.

So now to the dialogue called *The Statesman*, a conversation to which Socrates only listens. Here, at one point, things become startlingly explicit. Near the very middle of the conversation the stranger makes an announcement under the form of a rhetorical question asked in that throwaway tone that alerts the reader of dialogues to a crucial turn. It concerns the ostensible search for the true statesman. “Has it been proposed,” he asks, “for the sake of this man himself rather than for our becoming more dialectical about all things” (285d)? And the answer is: plainly for learning to think dialectically. We thought we were learning about governing well; it turns out we are involved in a logical training exercise using a universally applicable technique—dialectic, the expertise of dividing and collecting subjects by terms.

Socrates is, once more, not a participant in this conversation, and this dialectic is not quite *his* dialectic. His dialectic was a way by which apt students, through being questioned cleverly and answering carefully, had their opinions, their mere assumptions about the way things are, demolished and then reconstituted, so that they might be led up into a solid knowledge of the true sources of these things. It was, in short, an ascending way of learning. The stranger’s dialectic is a method that works the other way around. From a tacitly assumed overview of the whole, the accomplished dialectician makes divisions (*diareseis*). When he has arrived at what will in later time (when this method has turned

into the technique of classification) be called the “lowest species,” he goes back up, making a collection of terms. These add up to a definition. Many of our students begin by thinking that that is what Socrates does when he philosophizes—he makes definitions. Of course a collection of terms is not what Socrates looks for when he asks, say, the question, “What is justice?”—but it is a preparation for an answer.

Is definition-making, however, what the Elean Stranger believes to be the profitable end product of the dialectic for which the statesman is only an example? No, nothing so unsubtle, as I’ll try to show in a minute.

Not that this more subtle use of division is likely to have satisfied the auditing Socrates. We three translators of the *Statesman* express this sense of his skepticism by our assignment of the last speech of the dialogue. Someone says: “Most beautifully . . . you’ve completed for us the kingly man, stranger, and the statesman.” Now the stranger’s interlocutor in the *Statesman* is a young man who is also called Socrates. There is some question among scholars whether the older or the younger Socrates speaks this valedictory line. We thought our Socrates, the older one, couldn’t have thought it, and so he didn’t say it.

Here is what the stranger does with the dialectical art of division. First, the whole dialogue is a composition of divisions. To see its handsome design, that of a tapestry, it is helpful to work through its dialectical episodes and the way they are sewn together, like the pieces of a figured robe. The beauties of this dialogue are not imaginatively visual but logically structural; this text is a texture. But this cloaklike characteristic is not just a stylistic formalism. It signals that this new dialectic is a craft that produces practical results. Its physical exemplification, and the great metaphor of the dialogue, is *weaving*, cloak-making in particular. And making intertwined, protective, enveloping compositions turns out to be *the royal art*, the discerning and composing craft of the statesman. This is no transcendently derived wisdom, but a technical expertise. For the subject of the *Statesman*, as contrasted with the *Republic*, is unambiguously political; it is concerned with human herds. However, from the vantage point of the king of

crowds, of herds, the internal relations disposing the soul of an individual human being, which are the concern of the *Republic*, recede; they lie below the royal oversight. And with that distance diminishes the interest in justice, which was, after all, the right relation of the soul's parts. So justice is indeed no big concern of the statesman, be it of the man or of the dialogue named after him.

So the statesman, who is, thus, not a philosopher king but an expert ruler, sees each soul from afar as displaying one permanent characteristic. My colleague Peter Kalkavage will point out the exceedingly interesting consequences for statesmanship of what he discerns and what, again as a consequence, true statesmanship must be. It is, its royal denomination notwithstanding, an expertise much closer, I think, to our idea of politics than the philosophical rule of the *Republic*.

Then what happens to the stranger's startling claim, with which I began my remarks on the *Statesman*? How can the dialogue's real purpose be an exercise in dialectic when it will be shown to be so precise and practical a doctrine about managing multitudes?

Well, the *Statesman* is neatly reflexive. It is, one might say, a self-reentrant dialogue. For by relentless dialectical division the stranger establishes the precise location of the statesman in the whole economy of crafts and sciences, materials and products, regimes and rulers, virtues and vices. And in the course of doing that, he is indeed also giving a lesson in the method of division to young Socrates. It may even be that his teaching actually has more effect on a finer young man who is also present, a second silent listener, one of old Socrates's two favorite partners in inquiry, namely Theaetetus (the other being Glaucon in the *Republic*).

Then here's the denouement: The art of dialectic, the ability to distinguish perspicaciously the parts of any subject, an art for which weaving is a very precise figure, is the true statesman's expertise. Statesmanship, then, is the craft of setting up a civic framework, a loom upon which the citizens of various temperaments, here the warp and woof, are interwoven into a cloaklike

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texture, which represents at once the body politic *and* its protective cover, as if to say that a well-interlaced citizenry will wrap itself in its own constitution for security.

On this conclusion old Socrates may, after all, have smiled. For among the Greeks weaving is always a women's art, and that women might match men as rulers is a teaching of his *Republic*. So ends the *Statesman*, a dialogue that sets forth a doctrine of governing which requires an expertise for which participation in the dialogue is itself the training.

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## Reflections on Justice in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*

Chester Burke

The last book of Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* is entitled "A Judicial Error" because Dmitri Karamazov, the eldest Karamazov brother, is incorrectly found guilty of murdering his father Fyodor. Nearly all the spectators in the packed courtroom are stunned by the verdict, despite the fact that most of them had assumed that Dmitri had indeed committed the murder. Only his brother Alyosha, his recently captivated love Grushenka, and his other brother Ivan are certain of Dmitri's evidence—Alyosha, because of the innocence on Dmitri's face when he said he hadn't done the deed; Grushenka, because "Dmitri isn't the sort of man who would lie" (683);\* and Ivan, despite his loathing of Dmitri, because he visits Fyodor's illegitimate son Smerdyakov the night before the trial and forces him to confess to the murder. Later that night, Smerdyakov commits suicide. Ivan's testimony becomes worthless when, suffering from brain fever, he goes mad on the witness stand, claiming that the only witness to this stunning revelation is the Devil.

The first chapter of this final book is entitled "The Fatal Day." In the paragraph that concludes the previous chapter, Alyosha says to himself, "Yes, with Smerdyakov dead, no one will believe Ivan's testimony; but he will go and testify . . . God will win!" (655) Having heard these three powerful words, "God will win," the reader is thrown into the human drama, that is, the trial. How can the truth emerge from such a gigantic public spectacle, in which every one of the participants has entered with his private opinions and passions? Dostoevsky characterizes the spectators, standing "in a closely packed lump, shoulder to shoulder" (657), as having been

\* Page references are to Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2002).

enflamed by impatience. The women favor Dmitri's acquittal and the men, many of whom have been personally insulted by Dmitri, wish to see him punished. The prosecutor, Ippolit Kirillovich, trembles at having to oppose a famous Petersburg defense attorney, whom he feels has overshadowed him since their younger days in Petersburg. He believes that everything is at stake in this trial, both for himself and for Russia. Fetyukovich, the famous defense attorney, exudes an air of confidence. The reader may feel a little uneasy when Dostoevsky describes his eyes as small and inexpressive: "his physiognomy had something sharply birdlike about it, which was striking" (660-61). The material evidence with which the reader is so familiar, wrenched from its living context, is on display in the middle of the courtroom.

The prosecutor, known for (and sometimes ridiculed for) his passion for psychology, puts together an account that seems to make sense of all the facts, even though the defense attorney, having digested the situation with astonishing rapidity, is able to discredit many of the witnesses. Readers take delight in this passage, because they have previous knowledge of these witnesses and the ugliness of their souls. The prosecutor tells the compelling story of Dmitri finishing "a poem" (717) that culminates in the murder of his father, the stealing of 3,000 rubles, and running off madly to find his lover Grushenka, only to relinquish her to a man who abused her as a young girl. The defense attorney then accuses the prosecutor of writing his own novel, of being a psychological poet whose psychology is two-pronged and therefore equally capable of proving a given statement of fact and its opposite. He masterfully shows that only the totality of the facts—and not a single one of them in isolation—speak against his client.

Though he claims to demonstrate the limitations of psychology, the defense attorney is in fact a far better psychologist than the prosecutor. He argues persuasively that there was no money, no robbery, and no murder—at least no murder committed by Dmitri. Seeing far deeper into Smerdyakov's soul than most, the defense attorney gives good reasons why Smerdyakov could have killed his natural father.

Only the reader has the privilege of having witnessed Dmitri, filled with loathing in front of his hateful father, pulling out a brass pestle from his pocket—and then not using it. Why didn't Dmitri kill his father? "God was watching over me then," Dmitri used to say afterwards. This is another reference to a divine intervention that seems to have no place in a court of justice. (Recall Alyosha's "God will win!") Due to Fetyukovich's skill in destroying each part of the whole accusation, there is, however, a reasonable chance that Dmitri will either be released or at worst given minimal punishment. But in the chapter entitled "A Sudden Catastrophe," Dmitri's spurned lover Katya, ready to sacrifice her honor for his brother Ivan, who has just been carried out of the court suffering an attack of brain fever, comes forward with a letter from Dmitri that she has been withholding. She presumably intends to use the letter to save Dmitri, despite the fact that he has stolen 3,000 rubles from her—the entirety of which she thinks he has spent in a single drunken binge with her rival Grushenka that night before the murder. In this letter, written just two days before the murder, Dmitri says that he will get hold of the money he has stolen from her, even if he has to rob and kill his father to do so. The reader knows that Katya asked Dmitri to send these 3,000 rubles to a relative in Moscow, though she fully believed at the time that he would spend the entire sum on Gurschenka. Two other facts must be remembered: 1) before the events of the novel, Dmitri lent Katya 5,000 rubles to cover up a financial indiscretion committed by her father; 2) Dmitri (who did not in fact steal the 3,000 rubles from his father) spent only half of Katya's 3,000 rubles during his wild night with Grushenka. He retained the rest in a packet tied around his chest, uncertain whether to return the unspent half to Katya (thus removing half of his disgrace), or to keep it for the opportunity of running off with Grushenka.

It is only natural that the reader should be confused by the intricate adding and subtracting of monetary sums. Dostoevsky, always in need of money himself, deftly uses sums of money to show how human beings struggle to regulate equality, honor, pride, and justice among themselves.

But back to the letter. This suddenly revealed document, an apparent blueprint of the murder, gives “mathematical significance” (619) to the prosecutor’s case. And though the words “mathematical significance” are a clear signal to readers of Dostoevsky that whatever is certain in this way is certainly not true, it is equally certain that a jury will be very unlikely to yield a verdict of not guilty in the face of such evidence.

Aware of the difficulty of achieving a verdict of not guilty, and despite having just produced his own “demonstration” that there was no money, robbery, or murder, Fetyukovich (whose name in Russian suggests the words “jerk, drip, sourpuss”) addresses the jury, changing his tone and his approach: “I have it in my heart to speak out something more to you, for I also sense a great struggle in your hearts and minds. . . . Forgive my speaking of your hearts and minds, gentlemen of the jury, but I want to be truthful and sincere to the end.” “I do not renounce one iota of what I have just said, but suppose I did, suppose for a moment that I, too, agreed with the prosecution that my unfortunate client stained his hands with his father’s blood” (741).

This begins the second part of Fetyukovich’s summary to the jury. Dostoevsky entitles the chapter “An Adulterer of Thought,” without any comment on this astonishing title. Since the corpse of a father is the only fact in the case that could speak against his client, Fetyukovich tries to show that Fyodor was not at all a father. He masterfully summarizes the most poignant scenes in the novel in order to paint Fyodor in the worst possible light. He shows why it would have been completely natural for Dmitri to have beaten and killed his father (who is in truth not a father) with the fatal pestle (which the reader knows was not even the real murder weapon) without intention or premeditation. “Such a murder is not a murder. Such a murder is not a parricide, either. Such a murder can be considered parricide only out of prejudice” (747). The attorney then invokes a passage from the gospel according to Matthew, and compares Dmitri’s plight to that of Christ. The most terrible punishment, but the only one by which Dmitri’s soul will be saved, would be for the jury to overwhelm him with mercy. Only then would

Dmitri—horrified by his deed—which, according to the defense attorney’s earlier argument, Dmitri had not done)—realize that he was guilty before all people.

Fetyukovich “adulterates thought” by fabricating a dangerous novel (“novel upon novel,” shouts the prosecutor [748]), a concoction that is all the more wicked because it is a false image of Father Zosima’s teaching. And, more important, it is the opposite of what Dostoevsky has spent his whole life attempting to articulate. Only the prosecutor, “breathless, inarticulate, confused” and “shaking with emotion” (748), has the courage to respond. Of course his response will receive no sympathy from the mass of spectators, especially the mothers and fathers, who have amazingly enough become enraptured by the words of the adulterer. Though the prosecutor is vain and beaten down by a failed life, though his superficial psychology prevents him from understanding the motives and actions of the human beings right in front of him, he knows with certainty that one cannot kill and not kill at the same time, that one cannot praise and immortalize a man who murders his father, and that a false image of Christ and religion have been fabricated by his talented competitor. The reader is easily irritated by the just response of this pathetic man (the prosecutor will himself die soon after the trial) to a powerful and dangerous speech that is arguing for a new understanding of human justice, one that includes a notion of mercy which could only be found in God or in the heart of an individual human being.

I have pointed out that Dmitri, the prosecutor, and the defense attorney have all been accused of acting out novels. By his subtle but powerful use of chapter titles, Dostoevsky himself takes the harshest stance toward the defense attorney. The Russian word for “adulterer” (or “fornicator”) is a variation of the word for “lover.” Fetyukovich, who claims to be able to feel “invisible threads that bind the defense attorney and the jury together,” whom everyone, including himself, expects to pull off some kind of miracle by proving Dmitri innocent when he is guilty, ends up by “proving” Dmitri guilty when in truth he is innocent. His call to regenerate not only Dmitri but also Russia herself is met with rapture and enthusiastic weeping among the spectators, and the reader too is likely to be

sympathetic. When he pleads with the jury to show mercy to Dmitri even if he did kill his father, he shows himself not to be a seeker of truth but to be unjust—indeed, an adulterer of thought. He is unjust because he portrays Christ as an enlightened and compassionate liberal rather than the Son of God, who died in order to save human beings from the power of sin.

We can detest Fyodor Karamazov in the depths of our souls. We can pity the children that he brought into the world. We can wish that he were dead and wonder why such a man is alive. But we cannot excuse the man who killed him. That man, Smerdyakov, hangs himself from a nail on his wall with a brief note saying that he alone is responsible for his own death. This extreme isolation is what Dostoevsky sees as the dreadful future of a world that denies God. Instead of hanging an icon or image of God on the wall, we will end up destroying ourselves. Dostoevsky the novelist, committed to real justice and truth, cannot allow the jury to be won over by this adultery of thought, even though what results is a momentary injustice in a court of law. By entitling the next chapter “Our Peasants Stood Up for Themselves,” he shows that he is pleased that the peasants (who comprise half of the jury) are not seduced by this highest and ultimately most dangerous form of seduction. Though their verdict was incorrect, the peasants understood a deeper truth and rightly stood up for it. Their hearts rejected false novels.

But the real novel ends several months after Dmitri receives his sentence. It ends with the burial of a ten-year old schoolboy, Ilyusha. Dmitri had gravely insulted Ilyusha’s father, a retired and drunken officer known as the Captain, by dragging him out of a tavern and across town, pulling him by his wispy beard. Desperate to provide for his family—his wife and older daughter are crippled and ill—the Captain was employed by Fyodor, assisting him in shady financial dealings. One of them was to buy up Dmitri’s promissory notes so as to bring him to financial disgrace. Seeing his father publicly humiliated, the young Ilyusha begged Dmitri to forgive his father, “rushing up to everyone asking them to defend him, but everyone laughed” (192). When Ilyusha’s schoolmates heard about the incident they teased him mercilessly. The next day

he angrily threw stones at them, but he himself received a great blow to the chest. He came down with a fever, and died two days after Dmitri was sentenced for the murder he did not commit.

Given Dostoevsky's masterful juxtaposition of scenes and events, it would be easy to connect Dmitri's punishment with the death of this young boy. As the proud and angry Katya says to Alyosha, "Dmitri committed a rash and unjust act, a very ugly act" (193). She commissions Alyosha to give a large sum of money to the Captain in recompense for this act. The attempt at justice (in truth Katya, herself recently injured by Dmitri, considers herself a fellow sufferer) does not work at first. The Captain initially takes the money, imagining a way out of abject poverty for himself and his miserable family. But suddenly, shaking and tearful, flings down the money at Alyosha's feet. He will eventually take not only this money, but much more from the generous, though proud, Katya. But his son will nonetheless die and the doctors will not be able to cure his family.

It was not unlikely that the previously consumptive Ilyushka's life would have been short. But that is not the point. All of us are continually doing harm to our fellow human beings. While it does not seem possible that any system of justice could regulate the damages, we humans are always trafficking amongst one another, exchanging goods and money in an attempt to achieve some kind of fairness.

"Each of us is guilty in everything before everyone, and I most of all" (289). This puzzling statement, lying powerfully in the background of the novel, is said repeatedly by Father Zosima throughout the novel. I have tried to show that Fetyukovich's version is a dangerous adulteration of this claim. Dmitri, Ivan, Smerdyakov, and even Alyosha can be held responsible for the death of their father. Yet only one human being killed Fyodor and it is the responsibility of the legal system to find and punish that human being. Dmitri had previously thrown his father to the floor and brutally kicked him, suspecting that Fyodor was hiding Grushenka from him. Though drunk, he had written the damning letter. Ivan had tacitly given Smerdyakov permission to kill Fyodor by leaving town on the day of the murder; even worse, he had spent

much of the night before his departure listening for sounds in the house, unconsciously anticipating and desiring that someone would come and kill his dreadful father. Alyosha, distracted by the death of his hero Zosima, and overwhelmed with grief by the dishonor of Zosima's rotting corpse, had forgotten to keep in contact with Dmitri. But Smerdyakov, having spent his entire life serving a family whose members he despised—except for Ivan, whose respect he craved—understood the character of these Karamazovs, at least in its baser aspects. He was able to set up a scenario in which it would be possible for him to kill Fyodor, who trusted him, and then steal the 3,000 rubles for which Dmitri had claimed he would risk all. With this money, Smerdyakov imagined that he could start a new life. And only Ivan could get Smerdyakov to confess—Ivan, who, though he hated bitterly both his father Fyodor and his brother Dmitri, had a conscience deeper than he himself knew. During their conversation about the murder, Smerdyakov comes to understand the emptiness and dishonesty of Ivan's thoughts, though he understands nothing of Ivan's heart. And in that understanding about his former idol, he gives up on life, which had never offered him anything but pain and misery. Smerdyakov—far cleverer and wiser than even the most observant reader could suspect—sees that Ivan is more like his father than any of the brothers.

The chain of responsibility is endless. Grushenka says in court, "It all happened because of me" (682)—claiming responsibility both for Fyodor's and Dmitri's falling in love with her. Shortly thereafter, she says of Katerina, who had tried to charm her out of loving Dmitri, "She is the cause of everything" (683). And at the time of Dmitri's arrest, Grushenka, hearing that Dmitri had supposedly killed his father, had cried, "I am the guilty one, first and foremost, I am the guilty one!" (457)

But everyone gets the problem of justice wrong, precisely because it is impossible to see clearly into the heart of another human being. Father Zosima immediately understands the danger looming before the Karamazov family in the first chapters of the novel. That is why he bows before Dmitri and encourages Alyosha to look after him. But Zosima cannot control the outcomes stemming from human nature. He can only preach "active love"—a

difficult and profound concept deserving of another talk—and he can pray.

While I do not claim that the following is a solution to the problem of human justice, I'd like to end this talk with a quotation from Father Zosima:

If it were not for Christ's Church, indeed there would be no restraint on the criminal in his evildoing and no punishment for it later, real punishment, that is, not a mechanical one . . . , which only chafes the heart in most cases, but a real punishment, the only frightening and appeasing punishment which lies in the acknowledgment of one's own conscience (64).

## Peaceniks and Warmongers: The Disunity of Virtue in Plato's *Statesman*

Peter Kalkavage

I want to begin by saying how my theme is related to justice. Plato and Aristotle often connect justice with wholeness. And it is wholeness—the whole of virtue and the whole of a political community—that is very much at issue, and at risk, in Plato's *Statesman*. Perhaps at risk as well is the wholeness of *logos* or discourse.

Plato's mysterious stranger from Elea delights in division. In the *Sophist* he uses the method of dividing genera or kinds to pin down the elusive professor of wisdom. In the *Statesman* he uses this same method, with some modifications, to show the genuine statesman and king “naked and alone by himself” (304a). But the stranger isn't all about logic. Like Socrates, he enjoys images of all sorts and regularly avails himself of their curious power to illuminate. In the *Statesman*, soon after the great myth about reversed becoming, the stranger announces the need for paradigms in inquiry. He tells young Socrates that they would do well in their search if they came up with a paradigm that would, in its small and humble way, help to reveal the magisterial form, the *eidos*, of the true king (277d).

This paradigm, as we soon hear, is *weaving* (279b). Politics is the master-art that weaves together all the other arts in the city and bends them to its high purpose. But it is not until late in the dialogue, almost at the end, that the precise meaning of the paradigm is explained. The true statesman, we discover, knows how to interweave courageous and moderate types of souls. To use the language of the paradigm, he combines the *warp* or hard woollen threads, which resemble courageous natures, with the *woof* or soft threads, which resemble moderate natures. Properly combined, these human threads produce “the web of statesmanly action” (311B). This web is the wisely constituted *polis*—the beautiful end of politics conceived as a productive art.

But the path to this beautiful end requires an account that the stranger calls “somewhat astonishing”—astonishing because it proceeds from the view that virtue is not a happy unity, in which different portions of virtue are “friendly” to one another, as the many say and as Socrates suggests in other dialogues. On the contrary, virtue has within it, and seems even to be defined by, a war between courage and moderation. The stranger is unsparing in his formulation. The two virtues, he says, “have a deep-seated enmity toward one another and maintain an oppositional faction in many of the things that *are*” (306b). The stranger, we must note, does not ask Socrates’ question: What is virtue? Instead, he posits an opposition between two forms of virtue. This opposition, more than anything else in the dialogue, defines the political art.

To illustrate his point, the stranger urges young Socrates to consider the two forms (*eidē*) that come to light when we praise things for their beauty—various doings and makings, whether of bodies or of souls (306c). We praise things that manifest “keenness and swiftness.” These can be the things themselves or their images—the swift movement of a runner, for example, or a vase painting depicting such a runner. The name for what underlies such praise is *andreia*, “courage” or “manliness.” This is the form we are admiring when we praise the keen and the swift.

But we also praise what the stranger calls “the gentle form of generation.” We praise as beautiful those actions and thoughts that are quiet, modulated, slow, and careful. The name for this form is orderliness or composure, *kosmiotēs* (307b). It refers to moderation as the virtue of keeping things measured and undisturbed. We think of things like a smooth transition in a piece of music or a soothing tone of voice. To sum up, we are thoroughly contradictory in our praise of beauty. We praise as beautiful those things that have a manly look, and we also praise the look that is opposed to manliness. Furthermore, we blame as ugly both what is opposed to manliness and what is opposed to the opposite of manliness, that is, what is opposed to moderation. We do all this, we should note, not because we are inept but because beauty itself is self-opposed.

Shifting now from things that display opposed virtues to the very natures of courage and moderation, the stranger refers to these

as “looks [*ideas*] destined . . . to be split apart in hostile faction.” He then turns to the people who have these natures in their souls, not by choice or upbringing but by nature (307b-c). Faction is here described as a feud between warring families. Members of each family judge the beautiful and the good solely in terms of their family virtue, and hate members of the other family simply because they are in the other family. This love of Same and hate of Other blinds each family to the common, if problematic, *eidos* of virtue that both families share. Each family, by virtue of its virtue, is blind to the virtue and beauty of the other. As a consequence, members of neither family really know their own virtue, since they do not know why and in what manner their characteristic virtue is beautiful and good. Because of this blindness and the mutual hate it engenders, the two families, though they live in cities, may be said to occupy, in Hobbes’s phrase, a pre-political “state of nature” with respect to virtue.

As if this situation weren’t bad enough, the stranger goes on to say that the family feud between noble types is child’s play compared with the disease that is “the most hateful of all for cities” (307d). It is here that the stranger shows why the two forms of virtue, and the two opposed types of soul, constitute the central problem of politics. Indeed, he demonstrates the urgent need of the political art in the Reign of Zeus, the era in which the world has been abandoned by its divine shepherd and guide.

The stranger gives a devastating portrait of what happens to cities that fall prey to the ethos of peace at any cost. He refers, paradoxically, to the *eros* for composure (307e)—the only appearance of this word in the dialogue—as if to say: “Look at these people, young Socrates. To themselves they seem all calm and reserved, but in fact they have a disordered desire for order. Why, they are as crazy as a man in love!” Perhaps there is also the suggestion that *eros*, for the stranger, is to be associated with what is soft or tender rather than with the sort of tough love that Diotima describes in the *Symposium* (203c-e). In any case, because of their unmeasured love of order, these people slip unwittingly into an unwarlike condition and raise their children to be similarly unwarlike. The condition spreads through the city like an infection and becomes

more virulent with each generation. Since unmixed moderation cannot accommodate itself to the aggression of an enemy, cannot rouse citizens to display a decisive and manly spirit when this is needed, the city eventually loses its freedom and becomes enslaved.

The very same result awaits the macho city that wants war at any cost and is driven by *thymos*, spiritedness, rather than *eros*. The rage for courage leads citizens and rulers to be constantly tensing up their cities for opportunities to display what they wrongly take to be the whole of virtue. Before too long, the city that idolizes courage eventually picks a fight with the wrong adversary, an enemy it can't vanquish, and so is vanquished in turn. Like the peace-loving city, the war-driven city ends in destruction and slavery (308a).

Now we normally think of faction, *stasis*, as the strife between two parties within a single city. But the stranger's view in the present context is very different. The political problem par excellence is, for him, not violent heterogeneity (for example, champions of oligarchy vs. champions of democracy) but virtuous homogeneity, the idolatry of one of two opposed virtues, either courage or moderation. To be sure, there is faction in its usual sense within the form of virtue. This is the eidetic situation, known only to the philosophic statesman. But the real-life political problem occurs when the two naturally opposed virtues are *not* simultaneously present. Hence, as the stranger sees it, the devastating political outcome of the principle "likes attract and opposites repel" is enacted on the stage of inter-*polis* relations, when a city suffers destruction at the hands of another city rather than from internal discord. The stranger is surely not unaware of the evils of faction in this latter sense—the horrors, for example, that Thucydides describes in the case of Corcyra (Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 3.82). But for the stranger this is not the central political problem, which has its source in the eidetic opposition between the beautifully tough and the beautifully gentle that pervades "many of the things that *are*." The problem is not vice, or human nature simply, or intense disagreement over which regime is best, but *virtue*, which is by nature turned against itself.

We might try to make sense of the stranger's unsettling account by citing Aristotle's distinction between natural and ethical virtue, the latter being guided by the intellectual virtue of *phronēsis* or practical wisdom, which allows the virtuous individual to avoid excess and deficiency by perceiving the mean (*Nichomachean Ethics*, 6.13). This is helpful to an extent, but it takes the sting out of the stranger's insight into why virtue is a problem. The stranger would no doubt agree with Aristotle's opinion that virtuous dispositions, when left to themselves, are dangerous, and that they need practical wisdom in order to be reliable virtues. But far more important to the stranger is the primordial dyad of courage and moderation—the dyad that defines the task of the political art. That task is not how to interweave a multiplicity of virtues in order to make them one but how to unite two naturally opposed virtues so that they may complement rather than repel one another and contribute their distinctive powers to the political web. These are toughness and flexibility, quickness and caution, forcefulness and grace.

It is tempting to say that the problem of politics, for the stranger, is that of knowing how to interweave the male and the female forms of ethical beauty. It is true that each virtue, by the stranger's account, must apply to both men and women. How else could one trait come to dominate a city's population through marriage and procreation? Nevertheless, the manliness of courage strongly suggests as its correlate the femininity of moderation. If we admit this sexual distinction in the case of the two virtues, it becomes interesting, to say the least, that the paradigm for political wisdom in the dialogue is the feminine art of weaving. This may be Plato's way of showing that, of the two opposed virtues, moderation, as the love of order and peace, is closer than courage to justice and wisdom. It may also show Plato's philosophic preference for music over gymnastic, since weaving engages in deft material harmonization. In good statesmanship, as in philosophy, grace trumps force to become the greatest force of all. This is true even for our tough-minded, methodically rigorous stranger, who tells young Socrates that the statesman and good lawgiver knows how to instill right opinions in others “by the *muse* of kingship” (309d).

The stranger proceeds to outline the education and nurture that will generate the needful thing—the artful synthesis of virtuous opposites in a coherent political whole. This whole, this web, in order to be beautiful, requires beautiful threads that have been previously prepared by means of a subsidiary art. Statesmanship, like all compositional art, is elitist: only the best materials will do. And so, there must be an artful way to determine who is fit for an ethical-political education, and who is not. This consists in observing children at play in order to see which ones show signs of a virtuous disposition, whether of courage or moderation. The stranger lays special emphasis on those who prove to be uneducable. He describes them as “violently driven off course by a bad nature into godlessness and arrogance and injustice” (308E-309A). The political art, here seen in its harsh and decisive aspect, casts them out “by punishing them with death penalties and exiles and the greatest dishonors.” And those who “wallow in ignorance and much baseness” are put into the class of slaves.

The stranger at this point explicitly connects the union of manly and moderate natures with the intertwining of warp and woof (309b), in effect closing the paradigm-web he began to weave earlier in the dialogue. The city, in order to be a durable garment suited to the protection of all those it embraces, needs both kinds of human threads: the hard and the soft. This unity of opposites requires a two-tiered system of civic education that produces two sorts of “bonds”—one higher, one lower. The higher bond is said to be divine, since it applies to the part of the soul that is “eternal-born,” the part that thinks and holds opinions. The lower, human bond is marriage, which applies to what the stranger calls “the animal-born part,” that is, the part of the soul that has to do with bodily desire. The bonds are produced successively: first the higher, then the lower. Once the higher bond of right opinion is in place, the stranger asserts, the lower one isn’t difficult to bring about (310a). This optimism presupposes that the divine bond is strong enough to overcome the greatest of all human drives—the erotic attraction that human beings have for one another and that connects them, as we hear in the *Symposium*, with the striving for immortality (207a).

The higher tier of the educational process aims at inculcating “genuinely true and also steadfast opinions about beautiful and just and good things” (309c). These opinions are implanted in both types of noble individuals. In other words, the inculcation of “one opinion about what’s beautiful and just and good” supersedes the idolatry of a single virtue and overcomes the natural impulse to welcome one’s like and shun one’s unlike. Moderate and courageous individuals will share the opinion that it is good for the city that they mingle, and bad if they don’t. In other words, they will learn to respect, if not love, a virtue higher than either courage or moderation—the virtue of justice. They will believe that they and their respective virtues are threads that must be woven together to form the political web.

I note in passing that the education the stranger describes is based entirely on the cultivation of habits and right opinion. There is no philosophic education for guardians, no turning of the soul from becoming to being, as there is in the *Republic*. The stranger’s version of a city in speech may be the work of a philosophic statesman, but it does not appear that this statesman, though possessing kingly science, is in fact a king in this city.

The stranger dwells on how the higher sort of education, which aims at the divine bond, tempers the excess in the two opposed virtues. If a manly individual takes hold of true opinions about what is good and beautiful and just, he will “grow tame and in this way be most willing to commune with just things.” Without these opinions, he will degenerate into a beast (309e). Similarly, the order-loving individual who holds these same true opinions will become “genuinely moderate and intelligent,” and the one who doesn’t will rightly be called simpleminded or foolish. The establishment of these true opinions takes place through laws and customs that apply only to those naturally suited for an ethical education. This education, the stranger asserts, is the “drug” prescribed by the ever-vigilant art of politics. It is the antidote for one-sided virtue.

At last we reach the stranger’s account of marriage, the “human bond” implanted by the political art. This bond, though lower than the other, is crucial, since the city’s continuance and well-being

depend on procreation through sexual union. We should recall that it is not courage and moderation per se that bring about political downfall but rather the gradual build-up and concentration of a single virtue through sexual generation over the course of time. As the stranger approaches his culminating definition, he gets down to the nitty-gritty of why people marry. He dismisses those who marry for wealth or power and focuses on those whose care is family and children. These are the people who marry, or who arrange the marriages of their sons and daughters, for the serious (if wrong) reason that they always choose partners who are of their own family when it comes to virtue and eschew members of the opposite family.

The political art counteracts this error, goes against nature, by compelling members of each “family” to overcome their natural repugnance for the other and to marry against type. This will prevent the spread of a single trait by producing hybrids that combine both virtuous types. The stranger does not say what home life will be like for married opposites, nor does he care. The only thing that matters, from a political standpoint, is that the virtues are mixed rather than kept separate. Of course, genesis in the Reign of Zeus is unpredictable: there will always be children whose nature duplicates that of, say, a courageous mother rather than a moderate father. And so, the political art must exercise perpetual vigilance and continually oversee marriage and sexual union. The war on nature must go on.

The needful union of opposed virtues must be enforced at the highest level of the city—that of the rulers. The stranger acknowledges that it is possible for one individual to have both virtues (311a). The monarchic city must choose this sort of individual as its supervisor. If more than one ruler is required—if the city is aristocratic—then the ruling class must have both kinds of virtuous individuals. The reason is that moderate rulers are cautious, just, and conservative, but they lack, the stranger says, the needful acuity and vigor, which would be supplied by the courageous among the ruling class. The stranger ends his “astonishing account” of virtue on a negative note: “And it’s impossible for all things having to do with cities to turn out beautifully in private and in public when

these characters [courage and moderation] aren't present as a pair" (311b).

Only one thing remains: the final definition of the web that is produced by the true statesman's knowledge. Will this web, as the stranger glowingly describes it, ever be woven in deed as it is in speech? From the stranger's perspective, it does not matter. The goal was to define statesmanship solely in terms of the statesman's knowledge or science, apart from whether he actually rules, founds, reforms, or advises (259b).

What, then, does the statesman know? Not, it seems, how to lead individuals to virtue, but how to temper the virtue they already have by nature. The statesman's wisdom is the wisdom of defence. That is why the stranger tends to dwell more on bad things to be avoided and feared than on good things to be sought and aspired to. Politics is a defensive art. It is embodied in the web that ends the dialogue. Strange to say, when we finally find the statesman "naked and alone," he turns out to be a maker of garments, which earlier in the dialogue were placed in the class of defences (279c-280a). He is the maker of the web that is both the body politic and the political cloak that defends the otherwise naked city from its enemies, the virtuous from their monomania and wrong marriages, and all its inhabitants from exposure and need. Perhaps most of all, the political web protects the city from the ravages and uncertainties of time. A good garment is one that wears well. It must protect us from seasonal extremes. The same is true of the political garment, which must defend the city not only during the winter of war and its discontents but also during the summer of peace, prosperity, and inattention.

In Plato's *Statesman*, politics appears in its true light only when it is seen in the context of the stranger's cosmic myth about the Reign of Kronos and the Reign of Zeus. The myth compels us to judge the tension-riddled, endangered life we have now by contrasting it with an earlier peaceful life that ended in disappearance rather than old age and death, that had no sex or sexual desire, and that needed neither politics nor clothes. The myth discloses what is most needful for beleaguered humanity in this our Reign of Zeus—the era that depends on the god-like statesman and shepherd

because it can no longer depend on a kindly nature and a caretaking god.

I suspect that the world for the stranger is, like virtue, fundamentally incoherent. Strictly speaking, there is no *kosmos*, no permanent world-order that grounds the inherent goodness of the virtues. Instead there are two opposed cosmic eras, two opposed directions of becoming, and two opposed forms of human life and human nature. In the Reign of Zeus—that is, in the realm of politics—the “condition of ancient disharmony,” the tendency toward degenerateness that is woven into the very constitution of the world on account of its bodily being, asserts itself (273c). That is why we need the Promethean powers of method and art—to make order where there is no order. In the *Statesman*—one of Plato’s fascinating experiments in post-Socratic philosophy—Plato tempts us to consider the grounds and implications of this modern-sounding world-view.

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## Raskolnikov's Redemption

Nicholas Maistrellis

The narrative of *Crime and Punishment* is very straightforward. An impoverished university student named Raskolnikov plans and commits a murder. The murder accidentally turns into a double murder. There follows a sequence of incidents and conversations that reveal the turmoil this act causes in the soul of the criminal. Through two conversations with a young prostitute named Sonya the murderer finally confesses his crime, first to her and then to the authorities. Finally there is an epilogue in which we are told that Raskolnikov is sentenced to a period of imprisonment in Siberia. Sonya follows him to Siberia. Remarkable things happen to him there.

Of all the four great novels of Dostoevsky—*Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *Demons*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*—it is only in this one that Dostoevsky creates a sustained dialectic with the interior life of one and only one character. Crime, on the other hand, is a theme in all the novels, but it's only in this one that Dostoevsky focuses single-mindedly on unfolding the nature of crime, together with its causes and effects in the human soul. This makes it particularly relevant to the theme of this conference. However, Dostoevsky is not as interested in criminal justice as he is in the effects of crime, first on the soul of the criminal, and finally, on the whole human community. This doesn't mean that he ignores justice. In fact, the question of Raskolnikov's debt to society occupies a large part of the book, especially in the interrogation of Raskolnikov by Porfiry Petrovitch, the investigating detective who suspects very early in the book that Raskolnikov is the murderer, and in the conversations with Sonya, the prostitute who befriends Raskolnikov. Considerations of justice are a dialectical moment in the unfolding of crime, and not the highest moment. By "dialectical moment" I mean that the claims of justice are gathered up and form part of the transformation of the redeemed criminal. These dialectical moments cannot be the highest moment of the transformation.

Now, the claims of justice could be said to be satisfied when the criminal is punished. But Dostoevsky is not interested in punishment as retribution. He thinks it is ineffective. He is interested in punishment only in so far as the demand for it arises in the criminal himself, and results in his redemption. The highest moment is when the criminal acknowledges his crime and asks for forgiveness from the whole human community. Thus, Dostoevsky's treatment is "psychological," if it is clear that by psychology one does not mean a putative science of the soul, but an attempt to get to know another human being. In his notebooks on *Crime and Punishment* Dostoevsky makes the extraordinary claim that it is the crime itself that makes Raskolnikov a moral being. "His moral development begins from the crime itself; the possibility of such questions arises which would not have existed previously."<sup>1</sup> It is impossible in a short paper to do more than give a sketch of this theme, and even this sketch will focus on only a few incidents.

Let me begin with Dostoevsky's account of crime. The commission of a crime, for him, is a sign that the criminal has separated himself from his fellow human beings. It is not the crime that separates the criminal, but some transformation in his soul which causes him to focus his attention entirely on himself. Such transformations are hard to discern. Often, even those closest to the criminal are puzzled about what is going on. Even the criminal himself is not fully aware of what is moving him. He becomes surprised at his own behavior. I think this is Dostoevsky's reason for believing that ordinary punishment is useless in reforming the criminal. Since the criminal has separated himself from society, he feels that the power of society is arbitrary and that the freedom he has given himself precisely by his separation from his fellows makes retribution merely another act of violence equivalent to his own. He both resents the power of society and despises it. Redemption cannot come from actions done to the criminal; it has to arise in his own soul.

The whole novel takes place over the span of two weeks, and the crime occurs at the end of Part I, about three days into the action. In the days leading up to the crime, Raskolnikov has stopped going out. He has stopped seeing his friend Razhumikin, and has

stopped communicating with his mother and sister. He has also stopped tutoring students. He has no income. He hasn't paid his rent for a long time. He spends most of his time sleeping in his room—a horrible garret. He eats only when Natashya, the caretaker, brings him something. He is withdrawing from the world. On the very first page of the novel, the narrator says, "He was so immersed in himself, and had isolated himself so much from everyone that he was afraid not only of meeting his landlady, but of meeting anyone at all."<sup>2</sup> Very soon, however, we are introduced to an ambiguity in Raskolnikov. At the beginning of the second chapter of Part I, we are told that he "was not used to crowds. . . . But now something suddenly drew him to people."<sup>3</sup> This is the first indication of the doubleness in Raskolnikov's soul. He separates himself from others, but he cannot do it with his whole soul. Later we will learn that it is this doubleness that makes redemption possible.

The sequence of events in Part I leading up to the murder is very important to Dostoevsky's dialectic, so I will take some time going over them. On the first day, Raskolnikov wakes up, goes out, and almost immediately visits the pawnbroker, Alyona Ivanovna, whom he is planning to murder. He pretends he wants to pawn something. Dostoevsky carefully reveals to us Alyona's poisonous, grasping character. This visit is a rehearsal of the murder, so the murder is committed twice in his soul. He assures himself of the rightness of what he is planning by reminding himself of Alyona's wickedness. By this he shows the conventional side of his character, which he despises. He then decides that he wants to be with people, and decides to go to the tavern. There he enters into conversation with Marmeladov, a civil servant and a drunkard who is deliberately destroying his own life and his family's life. Raskolnikov helps bring him home and meets his consumptive wife and hungry children. Marmeladov is the father of Sonya, the fourteen-year-old prostitute with whom Raskolnikov falls in love. When he departs, Raskolnikov leaves behind, without saying anything, most of his money. The narrator makes it clear that Raskolnikov's own generosity at this moment is unintelligible to him. He returns home and goes to sleep.

The next morning, he is given a letter from his mother that re-

counts in great detail her numerous trials, including the decision by his sister to marry someone despicable in order to escape poverty. While reading the letter, the narrator tells us, his face was wet with tears, but when he finishes, "it was pale, twisted convulsively, and a heavy bilious, spiteful smile wandered over his lips."<sup>4</sup>

Raskolnikov returns to wandering around town, and he encounters a drunk girl whose disheveled clothing had clearly been thrown on her by those who had made use of her before turning her out on the street. She is being followed by a middle-aged, well-dressed man whose intentions are obvious. Raskolnikov's first impulse is to help her. He yells at the man, and calls to a nearby police officer for assistance. He gives the officer some money for a taxi to bring the girl home when they find where she lives. The narrator then tells us, "At that moment it was as if something stung Raskolnikov, as if he had been turned about in an instant." He immediately says to the police officer, "Forget it! What do you care? Leave her alone. Let him have fun. . . . What is it to you?"<sup>5</sup> Raskolnikov now identifies with the presumed violator.

He then continues his frantic pilgrimage through St. Petersburg, and finally collapses in complete exhaustion under some bushes, where he falls asleep. He dreams a terrible dream: He is a boy walking with his father and they witness a peasant beating his horse to death, accompanied by cheers from the crowd. He tries to stop the peasant, but he cannot. He asks his father to explain, but he only replies that it is none of their business. When Raskolnikov wakes up, he exclaims, "Thank God it was only a dream!" followed almost immediately by "God! But can it be, can it be that I will really take an axe and hit her on the head and smash her skull . . . slip in the sticky warm blood, break the lock, steal, and tremble, and hide, all covered with blood . . . with the axe . . . Lord, can it be?"<sup>6</sup> He has now identified himself not with the helpless witness of the slaughter but with both the murderer and the victim, and he is horrified. He continues walking and inadvertently discovers by means of an overheard conversation that Alyona's sister Lizaveta will not be in their apartment at a certain time on the next day. He takes this as a kind of presentiment, and the narrator tells us, "He was not reasoning about anything, and was totally unable to reason;

but suddenly felt with his whole being that he no longer had any freedom either of mind or of will, and that everything had been suddenly and finally decided.”<sup>7</sup>

On the next day, the third day, he kills Alyona with an ax. Unfortunately, Lizaveta comes home unexpectedly, and he has to kill her too. He hurriedly and inexpertly steals some things and returns to his apartment. He falls asleep again. He sleeps for a very long time.

This is the account of Raskolnikov’s actions before, during, and after the crime. The main thing I want to point out is Raskolnikov’s extraordinary ambivalence: he affirms the crime and yet is horrified by it. He rejects human contact and yet seeks it. He weeps for his mother and sister, yet he is filled with spite, and so on. He cannot affirm anything in himself whole-heartedly.

Dostoevsky has structured the crime quite deliberately. In the first place, he makes Alyona an unsympathetic victim. She is greedy and selfish, and looks it. He does not want our confrontation with the issue of crime to be sentimentalized by feelings of pity for the victim. On the other hand, Lizaveta is a sympathetic character. We find that, although simple-minded, she is kind. In fact, she is friendly with Sonya. Raskolnikov murders her purely for the sake of concealment. So the disunity in Raskolnikov is mirrored in the victims. Also, it is essential to the narrative that there is no evidence against Raskolnikov. Through an improbable series of circumstances, and in spite of his own blunders, Raskolnikov escapes undetected from a building filled with people, and manages to hide what he stole before he is searched. Dostoevsky makes it clear that all this is purely by chance, and even in spite of Raskolnikov doing things that could make it more likely that he would be suspected. Dostoevsky has, in fact, constructed something like a controlled experiment in which all variables except for the feelings and reactions of the criminal are controlled. If Raskolnikov is to be found out, it would have to be by some action of his own.

We are ready now to consider the crime from Raskolnikov’s point of view. He initially gives two reasons for the crime: first, he needs the money to advance his career; second, he needs the money to help his mother and sister. He understands both to be humani-

tarian reasons. He is a very able man, and if he could advance his career, he could do valuable work for mankind. He is a very able man, and if he could advance his career, he could help his mother and sister—and especially, he could prevent the unfortunate marriage of his sister, which she is clearly undertaking for financial reasons. Contrasted with this is the fact that Alyona is a terrible person, who not only has done nothing good for anyone but, in fact, has done untold harm. Her death would be a blessing. Underlying these reasons is the idea that for the sake of humanity higher human beings can transgress ordinary moral and civil laws. In fact, Raskolnikov accepts the idea that great men do this all the time. His recurrent example is Napoleon. In fact, Raskolnikov apparently wrote an essay, which had been published, on this theme. Dostoevsky does not give his readers the opportunity to read it.

Up to this point in Raskolnikov's internal dialectic, he considers himself a great man like Napoleon or Isaac Newton, a superior person who needs to sacrifice ordinary conventions for some higher good. But the conduct of the crime continually speaks against this. The theft was botched because he didn't take the time to find the large cache of money in the apartment. He hides and keeps the money and jewels he did manage to steal, ostensibly because it would be too dangerous to spend the money or sell the jewels, but it is clear that its presence horrifies Raskolnikov because it reminds him of what he did. It becomes increasingly clear that the reasons given for the crime do not come close to revealing what is in his soul, or what he thinks is in his soul. This comes out most decisively in what he says to Sonya during their second conversation:

“I tormented myself for so many days: would Napoleon have gone ahead or not? It means I must already have felt clearly that I was not Napoleon . . . I endured all, all the torment of this babble, Sonya, and I longed to shake it all off my back: I wanted to kill without casuistry, Sonya, to kill for myself, for myself alone. I didn't want to lie about it even to myself! It was not to help my mother that I killed—nonsense! I did not kill so that, having acquired means and power, I could become a benefactor of mankind. Nonsense! I simply

killed—killed for myself alone—and whether I would later become anyone’s benefactor, or would spend my life like a spider, catching everyone in my web and sucking the life-sap out of everyone, should at that moment have made no difference to me! . . . And it was not the money above all that I wanted when I killed, Sonya; not the money so much as something else. . . . I know all this now. . . . Understand me: perhaps, continuing on that same path, I would never again repeat that murder. There was something else I wanted to know; something else was nudging my arm. I wanted to find out then, and find out quickly, whether I was a louse like all the rest, or a man? Would I be able to step over or not! Would I dare to reach down and take, or not? Am I a trembling creature, or do I have the right—”

“To kill? The right to kill?” Sonya clasped her hands.<sup>8</sup>

What did Raskolnikov mean here when he says that he committed the crime entirely for himself?

The question of freedom was very important to Dostoevsky, and especially the claim that the only way for a human being to affirm his freedom is through the commission of a crime for its own sake. It is present in one way or another in all four of his major works. Think, for example, of Nikolai Stavrogin in *Demons*. Dostoevsky takes this idea very seriously, and, in fact, affirms its truth in some way. It is freedom that Raskolnikov is seeking. First, he is seeking freedom from the bounds of social conventions, and also, most importantly, from what he considers his own sentimental tendencies. This is why he has to separate himself off from other human beings, why this separation is the source of crime. I do not believe that Dostoevsky is saying that all criminals have motives exactly like those of Raskolnikov, but I do think that some separation from mankind is at work in all criminals. Dostoevsky is particularly interested in exploring what happens when someone tries to do this deliberately. After he commits the murder, Raskolnikov is still torn, but now the stakes are much higher than before. Now he has to see if he has the fortitude to affirm his crime, not as a project, but as his deed. This affirmation would be the sign that he was in fact a superior being, a free man, and not an ordinary

criminal. But he discovers very quickly that he cannot affirm his crime as he wishes. Sentimental regrets plague him. He becomes ill, and experiences an almost overwhelming desire to confess. It is this desire to confess which that exposes him to the interest of the police. He now begins to feel regret for what he has done, but this is not the regret the reader might expect. He does not regret that he has done something wrong; he regrets that he cannot wholeheartedly affirm his crime. Of course, there is a part of him that does regret the crime profoundly, that knows that he has done a terrible thing; but it takes the the entire rest of the book for Raskolnikov to acknowledge that this other part is truly himself, and not internalized convention. The doubleness we have seen in Raskolnikov's behavior is now revealed as a doubleness within himself. Through our own ambivalence, which is revealed to us as we read, Dostoevsky shows us that this doubleness is not peculiar to Raskolnikov, but is true of us as well.

The novel proper ends with Raskolnikov's confession, once to Sonya, and once to the police. He has two conversations with Sonya: the first is a rehearsal of his confession; the second is his actual confession. This behavior mirrors the commission of the murder. The confession to the police also has a doubleness about it. He goes to the police station to confess, but at the last moment runs out of the station. When he sees Sonya looking at him from the street, he returns to the police station and confesses. The novel ends with Raskolnikov's confession, but the motive for it ambiguous. Is Raskolnikov finally filled with true remorse and the desire for repentance, or is he confessing because he has failed to live up to his own view of the murder and himself? Is he simply acknowledging his failure to affirm his crime? The novel inclines us to the latter account, but it is hard to be sure.

In the Epilogue (which, by the way, does not appear at all in Dostoevsky's notebooks), we are told the Raskolnikov was sentenced to eight years hard labor in Siberia. Dostoevsky makes it clear that both spirits in Raskolnikov are still at war during his imprisonment. The narrator tells us that Raskolnikov was suffering not from remorse at the crime he committed, but from "wounded pride" at the fact that he had to confess in order to find "some peace

for himself.”<sup>9</sup> But this was not repentance. “He did not repent of his crime.”<sup>10</sup> By the end of the Epilogue, however, he does repent. How does this happen? I only have time here to give a bare sketch of this transformation.

The first and most fundamental element of the change is his love for Sonya. This love began almost from the moment he first met her. This love was not intelligible to him. In fact, it annoys him, and he tries to get rid of it, but it is clear, whether he likes it or not, that she is what ties him to life itself. In Siberia, she becomes indispensable to him.

A second element in the change arises after an extraordinary experience he undergoes while in Siberia. He discovers that all his fellow prisoners, who have had much harder lives than he, love life. “He looked at his fellow convicts and was amazed at how they, too, all loved life, how they valued it! It precisely seemed to him that in prison they loved and valued it even more, cherished it even more than in freedom.”<sup>11</sup> This experience, combined with his realization of the depth of Sonya’s love, brought about his transformation. Retributive punishment did nothing to heal his soul; but the experience of living with dangerous, desperate men who nevertheless loved life made him whole again. This experience makes him realize the meaning of the murders he committed: they were acts against life itself, and thus against all human beings. In some wholly mysterious way, this experience allows him to discover the love of life in himself.

Let me end with a brief epilogue: a story of retribution and penance related by my friend and colleague, Howard Zeiderman, in an essay about the educational work he has been doing the last fifteen years with prisoners at the maximum security prison in Jessup, Maryland. A group of prisoners were discussing a drawing as a text:

The text was a drawing by Kathe Kolwitz, *Prisoners Listening to Music*. The three prisoners depicted are skeletal, with hollow eyes—and all seemingly gripped by something. The session was not going very well and I regretted trying to use a text that connected too vividly with their situation. A number of the younger

members were clearly repulsed by the drawing. When I asked why a few who spoke often were silent, Larry answered. "It's scary looking at them. I don't want that to be me." As he finished, another prisoner, Craig, a man almost seventy years old who first served time more than fifty years before, laughed. "You don't understand nothing. They're not dying. They're gettin' past their hungers. It's the music that makes them pure—like angels. Listen—when I was young down south we had a chaplain. Every day he would play music for us. Old music, beautiful. At first we couldn't listen to it. We never heard nothing like it. Sometimes a song would last a long time, no words. But then we started to love it. We would listen like in the picture, and we'd remember things. And we'd cry. Sometimes you could hear ten men cry. And sometimes the priest would cry too. We were all together in it. But then he retired and a new chaplain came. He was different. He wanted us to see the doctors and counselors, the case workers. They would ask us questions about ourselves and make us go to classes, programs. They were working on us and the music ended. It was different. It was them against us." Correction, as Craig sensed, is entirely different from penance.<sup>12</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Fyodr Dostoevsky, *The Notebooks for Crime and Punishment* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1967), 64.

<sup>2</sup> Fyodr Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage, 1993), 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 419

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 543.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 544.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 545.

<sup>12</sup> Howard Zeiderman, “Caged Explorers: The Hunger for Control,” *The St. John’s Review* 53.2 (2012): 157.

## Justice in Plato's *Statesman*

Eric Salem

Ordinary politicians love to talk about justice, and to go on—and on—about all the just things they have done, are doing, or mean to do in the future. We see it all the time—just turn on the television, especially in an election year. But what about the genuine article, the true *politikos*, the statesman who possesses genuine political science and who practices or could practice the genuine political art? What role does justice play in such a man's thinking and doing and speaking?

A selective glance at our tradition suggests that justice plays a very large role indeed. Consider, for instance, our own founding documents—certainly works of statesmanship of a very high order. The *Constitution* bluntly proclaims in its preamble that one of its purposes is to “establish justice.” And the *Declaration* declares, among other things, that governments exist for the sake of justice—that “governments are instituted among men to secure” the *rights* to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Or consider the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle's prolegomena to the *Politics*: his treatment of justice is longer by far than his treatment of any other virtue, and second in length only to his two-book treatment of friendship—a topic that, for Aristotle, is itself deeply intertwined with matters of justice and political life. Or to move a little closer to our chosen topic, consider the *Republic*, Plato's most famous book about political affairs: all of Book I is devoted to justice, and the inquiry into the goodness of justice that begins in Book II is based on the assumption that an investigation of a well-constituted city is bound to come across justice—because well-ordered cities, like well-ordered souls, always contain it. In other words, all of these texts suggest that a fairly deep connection exists between politics and justice, and between thinking about justice and thinking about politics.

Suppose, then, we turn as novice readers to Plato's *Statesman*, which purports to be an inquiry into the nature of the statesman,

the *politikos*, and the nature of his art or science, *politikē*. Given the sketch we have just seen, we might expect the dialogue to contain a series of acute reflections on the relation between justice and the true science of politics. We might even expect the Stranger from Elea to take up again the question that Socrates had wanted to pursue further at the end of Book I of the *Republic*, the “Socratic” question, “What is justice?” In fact we get nothing of the sort. We get a strange, vast myth about the cosmos; we get an extended—some might say over-extended—account of weaving and its attendant arts; we learn that men as herd-animals closely resemble pigs, on the one hand, and chickens, on the other. But we hear next to nothing about justice.

To begin with, there is no extended discussion of justice in the *Statesman*—no discussion of what it is or whether it’s good or bad or anything else. As a matter of fact, justice-words, that is, words cognate with Greek word for justice, turn up only about *thirty times* in the *entire* dialogue. (In the *Republic* such words turn up more than two hundred times in Book I alone.) What’s more, only about half those appearances have the moral and political connotations that we ordinarily associate with the word “justice.” In fact the Greek word for justice, *dikaiousunē*, the word that is so central to Socrates’s inquiry in the *Republic* and Aristotle’s inquiry in the *Ethics*, does not appear in the *Statesman at all*. The word *injustice* does turn up, once, but it refers, not to a tendency in citizens that needs to be corrected, but to a disqualification for citizenship altogether. As for the remaining cases in the dialogue where justice-words are used with moral or political meaning, most are disappointingly conventional, while the most interesting or promising phrases appear to come out of nowhere.

What are we to make of this peculiar state of affairs? Does the relative rarity of justice-words in the dialogue point to a deep divergence between the Stranger’s approach to politics and human affairs and the approach of Socrates? Do considerations of justice simply not play a major role in his thinking about politics? Do his interests lie elsewhere? Or, on the contrary, is the Stranger’s thinking about politics shaped by a distinct conception of justice, but one that leads him to employ the language of justice sparingly?

In the end I want to suggest that the Stranger's thinking about politics *is* in fact profoundly shaped by a certain conception of justice—a peculiar one, to be sure, but perhaps no more peculiar than the one Socrates lays out in the *Republic*, and perhaps not so very different from it either. But I mean to approach this conclusion in a rather roundabout way, by first considering seriously the possibility that the Stranger is just not very interested in justice and that his lack of interest is reflected in his thinking about the science of politics. My hope is that this indirect approach will force out into the light what is distinctive about his understanding.

If the Stranger is not interested in justice, what is he interested in? Almost any page of the *Statesman*—or the *Sophist*—gives us the answer: the arts and sciences, including his own science or art of division. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates calls himself a lover of collections and divisions, and elsewhere in the dialogues he makes constant use of analogies with the arts. But the Stranger goes much further: he seems to see the whole human world as an interconnected array of always-multiplying arts, the sorting out of which into their more or less natural divisions is one of the philosopher's prime tasks. Angling and sophistry, louse-catching and generalship, doctoring and potion-making—all these arts and at least fifty more make their appearance somewhere in the *Sophist* or *Statesman*.

The Stranger's myth, his cosmic vision, helps us to understand this remarkable proliferation of arts and the Stranger's acute interest in them. During the age of Saturn, we enjoyed a carefree life under the care of the gods. With no regimes and no families, we lived on the fruits that sprang spontaneously from trees and bushes, talked with the animals, slept naked on the grass and woke up every morning feeling just a little bit . . . younger. But that time is long past. This is the age of Zeus. The world has grown harsh, the gods have withdrawn, and we grow old. We have been left to our own devices, and those devices, the first fruits of our new-age thinking, are the arts. Men need food; the arts of agriculture and herding and hunting (including the art of angling) must be developed. Men need shelter from winter cold and summer sun, from the animals that no longer like us and from . . . other men. The arts of wall-making and house-building, shoe-making and armor-crafting, rug-making and

wool-working must come on the scene. This list could go on: along with needs arise desires. Every need or desire demands a new art, and every new art demands a new sub-array of subordinate arts to provide materials to be worked up and tools to work with.

Atop this dizzying array of arts is a kind of art of arts, an *über-art*, if you will. For man the artisan is also man the herd animal, and the human herd, like all herds, needs to be tended and managed. This art or science of herd management as applied to the human herd is . . . statesmanship. Its task is neither simple nor easy. It must rule over the other arts and sciences, deciding which ones are to be learned and to what degree. To retain its purity of purpose, it must keep itself separate from the arts most akin to itself, the arts of persuasion and generalship and judging. Under certain circumstances it must engage in lawmaking. But its most difficult task has to do with the noblest natures under its sway. Just as nature left to itself, and permeated by the Other, seems to give rise to deception, and thus to sophistry (including the sophistry that masquerades as statesmanship), so too, human nature left to itself seems to give rise to two distinct and opposed temperaments: courageous natures and moderate natures. Left to themselves, these natures tend to separate from each other and, in the end, degenerate into self-destructive factions. To combat this most dangerous of threats, the statesman must become a master weaver, a webmaster of the spirit and of the body too; he must find ways to knit together the lives of the city's noblest natures. For only thus can the city become and remain a self-bound, self-sufficient whole.

This would seem to be a good time to ask what place, if any, justice has in this picture of politics and political life. The obvious answer seems to be: a place that is important, but rather small and decidedly subordinate. Human herd management would seem to differ from other forms of herd management in this: all herding involves giving commands, but members of the human herd, especially in the age of Zeus, seem to need explicit commands or prescriptions, explicit rules, to govern their communal life. These rules, which allow men in cities to get along with one another, constitute justice. Now from the point of view of citizens, especially artisan citizens going about their daily, commerce-driven lives,

such rules—we call them laws—might seem to be the most important manifestation of the political art. But they are in fact only an imperfect and secondary manifestation of that art, in part because they are riddled with imprecision, and in part because, as we have already seen, the first business and real work of the political art lies in the weaving together of courage and moderation. It would be a mistake, according to this account, to think of justice as a virtue, just as it would be a mistake to think of justice as something high, a criterion that the political art has to look up to as it goes about its business. Justice is nothing high or deep or fancy; it is nothing but the set of rules, invented by the statesman, that allow us to lead reasonably decent lives in an unfriendly world.

Is this account of justice in the *Statesman* adequate? Does it, as we say, *do justice* to the Stranger's view of justice? There are certainly a number of passages in the dialogue that lend credence to it. For instance, at one point the Stranger makes it very clear that the power of the judge is separate from, and sub-ordinate to, the art of the statesman. Then he asks if the judge

has any power more far-reaching than, in matters pertaining to *contracts*, that of discerning the things ordained as *both just and unjust* by keeping in sight whatever is *laid down as lawful* and which it received from a law-giver king (305b).

It looks here as if justice is simply identical to the legal, as it is defined by the law-giving king—that is, the statesman. This language of contracts also turns up a bit earlier, in the course of the Stranger's critique of law and its lack of precision, when he speaks of those who “supervise the herds with respect to *the just* and their contracts with each other” (294e). Once again justice seems to be equated with the contractual obligations defined by the law—and the baseness involved in dealing with matters of justice, its distance from real statesmanly activity, is underscored by the re-introduction of the language of “herds.” The text of the *Statesman* also lends support to the thought that justice is not a virtue: there is no place in the dialogue where the Stranger states or even implies that it is the statesman's task to instill justice or anything resembling

justice in the souls of his citizens. The closest we get is the suggestion very near the end of the dialogue that moderate natures tend to be more just than courageous ones, but this does not seem to be a matter of education, and in any case, “just” in this context seems to mean “cautious and therefore inclined to follow the law.” The meaning of “just” here is perfectly compatible with passages that identify the just with the legal; it simply means “law-abiding.”

Are we to conclude, then, that justice has no meaning in the *Statesman* other than a set of rules laid down by the statesman in his law-making capacity, and then turned over to a subordinate power? We might have to reach this conclusion were it not for a handful of odd passages where the Stranger seems to be pointing us in a different direction. Let me briefly go over three of them. In the first, the Stranger argues that rulers in “the correct regime” can do anything, including banishing and even killing inhabitants, “so long as they make it better from worse and preserve it as far as they’re able by using *science and the just*” (293d). In the second, which comes just as he is beginning his critique of law, the Stranger notes that law “could never, by having *comprehended what’s most excellent and most just*, command what’s best” (294a-b). And in the third, the Stranger claims that:

there is no error for thoughtful rulers, whatever they do, so long as they guard one great thing, and, by at all times distributing to those in the city *what’s most just with intellect and art*, both are able to preserve them and make better men from worse as much as possible (297a-b).

These passages share several features in common. In all of them, the just is linked to, and subordinated to, the good—either the good of the citizens or the good of the city. In addition, the just is paired with, or at least linked to, thought in some form—science in the first passage, comprehension in the second, and intellect and art in the third. Finally—and most important for the issue we are considering—in all three passages the just in these passages simply cannot be identified with what is lawful or what is defined by the law. In the first passage, the just seems to function as a

criterion or standard at least co-equal with science; according to the second, the just cannot be comprehended by law; and in the third, the just arises directly from intellect and art, without the mediation of law. Clearly then, justice or “the just” has more than one meaning in the *Statesman* and in the Stranger’s mind. But exactly what does it mean in this second set of passages? For instance, what does it mean in the peculiar phrase “science and the just”? We can’t look to the immediate context of the phrase for an answer. In all three passages the language of justice seems to come out of nowhere.

To answer this question we need to take a step back. I mentioned earlier that there are a number of places in the *Statesman* where the language of justice is used with a meaning that is non-moral and non-political. Let me add that, with one exception, which I’ll get to later, *every* appearance of this language before the “science and the just” passage falls into this category. Now in *all* of these earlier appearances, “just” and “justly” have a specific meaning and specific range: they are used to characterize speech or thought; and they refer to correctness or precision or aptness of thought or speech, as when we say, in English—as I did a little while ago—that we want to *do justice* to someone’s thought or that someone has gotten something “just right.” Now it is “precisely” *this* meaning of justice that I think we must import, and are meant to import, into the passages in question. The intellectual quality that the Stranger prizes most in his own science of division—the ability to divide well, to find a “part” that is also a “form” (262b-263b)—is also the quality that defines or gives meaning to justice. Thus when the Stranger says that rulers in the “correct regime” must employ “science and the just,” “the just” is not being introduced here as an extraneous criterion that comes out of nowhere. It rather refers to the exactness or precision of application that is implicit in the very notion of science—in this case, the science of statesmanship. Or again, when the Stranger faults the law for failing to comprehend what’s most excellent and *most just*, he is simply faulting the law’s characteristic lack of precision: because laws are necessarily universal, they cannot help but miss what is best here and now and must be inexact in their attainment of it. It should

come as no surprise, then, that the Stranger keeps referring to the “correct” or “most correct regime” where we would probably say “best regime”—the best regime is, for him, “precisely” the regime in which precision or correctness is the ruling principle.

There is another way to formulate this thought in the language of the dialogue. At the very center of the *Statesman* there is an extended discussion of the art of measurement, and at the very center of that discussion, the Stranger introduces, without much explanation, the phrase “the precise itself.” Why? It turns out that the very existence of statesmanship—in fact the very existence of all the arts that generate something—rests on the existence of something called due measure. All the arts aim to achieve or produce some good. Sometimes they miss the mark: they fall short of or exceed their aims. But when they bring about the goods they aim at, they attain what the Stranger calls “due measure.” At such moments, when they get things just right, when they arrive at due measure, the precise itself is present. But what holds for the other arts holds for statesmanship as well. Whenever the statesman, aiming at the preservation or improvement of his city or its citizens, brings about this good, he attains due measure, and in attaining due measure, he participates in the precise itself. But if I am right in thinking that, in at least a select number of passages in the dialogue, the just coincides with what is correct or precise, then at such a moment the statesman can also be said to have achieved justice. To achieve the good is to achieve justice.

This brings me to my final point. I want to bring what I have just said to bear on the most important activity of statesmanship: the weaving together of courage and moderation. I mentioned a little while ago that there is one passage early on in the dialogue where the language of justice is not used to refer to precision of thought. It occurs in the myth. Interestingly enough, precision is also mentioned but here refers to precision in the movement of the cosmos. The claim is that when the cosmos is first allowed to move on its own, it moves with precision, but over time, because of the bodily aspect of the cosmos, it gradually winds down. Everything beautiful in the cosmos comes from its composer, while everything “harsh and unjust” has its source in this “fellow nursling of

primeval nature” (273b-d). Of course this is a myth and we have to be careful about what we extract from it. Still, I cannot help but think that the Stranger is here positing something like a primal principle of disorder, a principle that is always at war with beauty, with precision of movement, with the very notion of a cosmos, that is, an ordered whole. That he associates this principle with harshness and injustice suggests that this principle is at work in the human world as well: the city is an attempt to found something like a human cosmos in the face of primal disorder, primal imprecision, primal injustice. The ordinary arts that ground ordinary life within cities are one aspect of this cosmos-formation. Each is an attempt to bring forth due measure within some specific context; each is an attempt to wrestle with its material’s resistance to being given proper form. But the greatest of such attempts is the effort of the statesman to bring forth due measure in and through his weaving together of courage and moderation. Justice in the primary sense, then, is not to be found in law-making or judging in accordance with law. Nor is it to be found in the accomplishing of this or that good thing for the city. It is found right here, in the overcoming of primal injustice, primal resistance to having a city at all. We might think of it this way: In the *Sophist*, the Stranger suggests that being is not rest, or motion, or some third thing. He suggests instead that being is the belonging together of rest and motion. But within the sphere of politics, courage corresponds to motion and rest to moderation. Where, then, and what is justice? It is not something present in the soul of the courageous man, nor something present in the soul of the moderate man. Nor is it some third thing hovering over the two. Instead, justice in the primary sense is present whenever the statesman, by thinking precisely and achieving due measure, keeps the primal dyad from falling asunder; it is there both *in* and *as* the belonging together, the being woven together, of courage and moderation.

## Getting to Know Kierkegaard Better

A Review of Richard McCombs's *The Paradoxical Rationality of Søren Kierkegaard*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013. 244 pages, \$36.00.

James Carey

On first looking into Kierkegaard, the student who has already read around in the history of philosophy or has limited his studies primarily to twentieth century philosophy, whether analytic or “continental,” is likely to find himself puzzled at several levels. He may have heard that Kierkegaard is both a Christian and an existentialist, even a founder of existentialism, and he might be interested to find out how one man can be both of these things at once. Or, doubting that one man could be both these things at once without being confused, he might be inclined to shrug him off. But then he may also have heard that Heidegger was profoundly influenced by Kierkegaard and that Wittgenstein declared him to be a “saint.” So he sets out to get a better sense of who Kierkegaard is and what he is aiming at. After reading the first few pages of, say, *Fear and Trembling*, he comes quickly to recognize that he is in the presence of an original and incisive thinker. But he also encounters obscure arguments and formulations that seem more colorful than illuminating. And sooner or later he runs up against assertions about the relation of Socrates to Christianity that seem naïve at best, perverse at worse. He begins to suspect that Kierkegaard, for all his undeniable brilliance, is in full control of neither his intellect nor his imagination. After reading a relatively accessible book such as *Philosophical Fragments* he might turn to *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* (the latter book four times the length of what it is advertised as a “postscript” to) in hopes of finding a resolution to some of the perplexities in which the former

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work left him. Instead, he finds himself by turns beguiled and exasperated by an art of writing that is both concentrated and ironic. He is not sure whether he is being led towards the truth or being manipulated. And if he has not done so sooner, he begins to wonder exactly what Kierkegaard intends by presenting some of his books, but then not all them, under pseudonyms, and in particular why one book is presented as written by Climacus and another by anti-Climacus. Can all Kierkegaard's books be understood as expressing his own thoughts? Can any of them be understood as expressing his own thoughts? Not knowing how to find an answer to these and related questions, the student may decide at this point to postpone engaging with the full sweep of Kierkegaard's project until later on, more or less indefinitely later on.

Needless to say, not all who have struggled with Kierkegaard at some stage of their studies fit the above profile. But some—I suspect quite a few—do fit it. After reading through one or two of Kierkegaard's books and probing around in a few others, they will profit immensely by stepping back from his *oeuvre* and reading Richard McCombs's *The Paradoxical Rationality of Søren Kierkegaard*. Those who have read a larger number of Kierkegaard's books will profit immensely as well. I for one can say that there is a not a single question I have asked myself about Kierkegaard over the years that McCombs's carefully argued and beautifully written book does not answer, clearly, comprehensively, and convincingly.

The title of McCombs's book expresses his general intention, which is to show that Kierkegaard is a rational thinker and that he employs paradox in the service of reason. What Kierkegaard calls "subjectivity" McCombs calls "paradoxical rationality." The provocative conclusion of McCombs's study is that paradoxical rationality reaches its perfection not in knowledge, either theoretical or practical, but in faith. In this review I will highlight only a few of the observations that McCombs makes *en route* to this conclusion.

In Chapter 1, McCombs considers evidence in favor of the view the Kierkegaard is an irrationalist and then evidence in favor of the view that he is a rationalist. He argues, persuasively, that the preponderance of evidence is in favor of the latter view. When

Kierkegaard directly or through one of his pseudonymous authors affirms what he calls a contradiction, he means not a flat-out logical absurdity but rather “a tension or an unresolved opposition” (13).<sup>1</sup> And, as Kierkegaard sees it, “when the believer has faith, the absurd is not absurd—faith transforms it” (22). Kierkegaard’s Climacus calls the Incarnation a contradiction. But, as McCombs points out, to show that such a thing is an irresolvable logical contradiction “one would need a thorough understanding of the essence of God and of temporal, finite human existence” (13). Kierkegaard is aware that this understanding is not at our disposal. The appearance of irrationality is only feigned by Kierkegaard. It is a pretense in the service of a pedagogical aim. “The human model for Kierkegaard’s incognito of irrationalism is Socrates. If Socrates ironically feigned ignorance in the service of knowledge, Kierkegaard ‘goes further’ and ironically feigns irrationality in the service of reason” (2). He “creates Climacus specifically to address and appeal to philosophical readers . . . in order to *find* such readers ‘where they are’ and to *lead* them to subjectivity” (5). Where philosophical readers “are” is not simply in their thinking but in their existing. There is, it should go without saying, more to existing than thinking.

Near the conclusion of this chapter, McCombs offers a perceptive analysis of the limitations of Johannes de Silentio, the pseudonymous author of *Fear and Trembling*. This author attempts to show to philosophical readers who regard faith as a demotic substitute for knowledge, or as a station that gets *aufgehoben* on the way to absolute knowing, that genuine faith, as exemplified by Abraham, is in fact rare, awesome in the exact sense of the word, and more difficult to achieve than any knowledge we humans can attain or pretend to. But Kierkegaard also subtly leads his readers to see that Johannes de Silentio can, or rather will, only admire faith. He will not attempt it. Faith is a task—a task that Silentio evades (24). Faith is, moreover, not merely a task but “a difficult, dangerous, strenuous, and painful duty, and human beings will do virtually anything to evade such a duty” (30). In *Fear and Trembling*, “Kierkegaard first tries to get readers to admire the greatness of faith, and then breaks the distressing news to them that the faith

that they admire is an absolute duty.” Kierkegaard has “constructed *Fear and Trembling* so ingeniously that interpretation of it unexpectedly and disconcertingly turns into self-examination” (31).

In Chapter 2, McCombs argues that subjectivity or paradoxical rationality is, like all rationality, consistency. It is consistency not just of thought, however, but of the whole person. “To be subjective means consistently to relate oneself, the *subject* of thinking, to what one thinks. It is to think about life and action, most of all about one’s own life and action, and to strive to feel, will, and act consistently with one’s thoughts” (35). Not everyone who prides himself on the consistency of his thinking aims at this more comprehensive consistency. For example, a person who holds in his thinking that everything is determined—whether by the will of God, physical mechanism, or the apparent good—and that the future is thereby fixed, nonetheless deliberates and acts, as all human beings must, on the assumption that the future is *not* fixed and that how it turns out depends in some measure on one’s choices. Such a person is not *wholly* rational no matter how impressively his theory holds together *qua* theory merely.<sup>2</sup> His speculative thinking, however consistent it may be in itself, is inconsistent with his practical thinking. Kierkegaard’s subjectivity is not so much the opposite of objectivity, an inner and private domain as distinct from an outer and public one, as it is the whole of rationality. Subjectivity comprehends objectivity as a part, assigning it its altogether legitimate, though limited, role within a properly integrated life of reason. Subjectivity, for Kierkegaard, is integrity.

It is “Kierkegaard’s belief that thinking is unavoidably interested.”(37). Objective thinkers frequently claim to be disinterested. But they are wrong. For objectivity is not without an interest: speculative reason (which could be called, somewhat misleadingly, objective reason) is interested in the true, just as practical reason (which could be called, also somewhat misleadingly, subjective reason) is interested in the good. Pursuit of the true and pursuit of the good are two pursuits of one and the same reason.<sup>3</sup> As McCombs later points out, interest derives from *interesse*, literally, “to be in between” (155). Human reason is in between the temporal and the eternal. It moves teleologically from the temporal toward

the eternal, as it moves teleologically from the conditioned toward the unconditioned and from the finite toward the infinite.

Subjective thinkers have a better appreciation of the wholeness of reason, its teleological orientation toward both truth and goodness, than do objective thinkers. Kierkegaard suspects that many who take pride in their commitment to objectivity use the search for knowledge “as a way to delay or to evade ethical action” (45). He also thinks that, “because the human will is free, the rationality of human beings—his own included—is always precarious” (75). This is true of speculative reason no of less than of practical reason. McCombs speaks of the “shaky foundations” of logic and its “liability to perversion” (60). In my view, logic *per se*—certainly its indemonstrable but self-evident first principles, such as the principle of non-contradiction—is sound.<sup>4</sup> But logical principles and rules of inference, unimpeachable in themselves, can be used to deduce questionable conclusions from questionable premises. In that way logic can assist one in rationalizing the satisfaction of certain desires that, unlike the desire for integrity in thought and action, are not intrinsic to reason and are often at odds with the *telē* of reason. “When these desires are threatened by the strenuous requirements of ethics, they fight back with astonishing cunning and sagacity, by co-opting the powers of logic for specious reasoning and self-deception” (60). And So McCombs rightly recommends “rectifying [not logic itself but] one’s use of logic” (65).

In Chapter 3, McCombs distinguishes between traditional negative theology, which he understands to be primarily theoretical, and the negative theology of Climacus, which he understands to be primarily practical. “Climacus thinks that if anything has priority in salvation it is or would be love and not knowledge” (87).<sup>5</sup> This chapter contains helpful accounts of the Kierkegaardian conceptions of resignation and guilt-consciousness, and of Kierkegaard’s arresting formulation that “to need God is a human being’s highest perfection” (88-89; on resignation see also 106). Of course, from the perspective of Christianity all human beings need God. The *perfection* of humanity consists then not in the need, simply, but in the recognition of the need and the follow-through on what it ultimately entails: “reverence, awe, adoration, worship,

or as Johannes de Silentio calls it, "fear and trembling" (88-89). We naturally desire perfect happiness; but for Kierkegaard perfect happiness is "the good that is attained by absolutely venturing everything" (95), for it is "essentially uncertain" (98). McCombs concludes this chapter with a reflection on how Kierkegaard understands the relation between the good and one's own good. There is no "tension" between them: "one most truly loves the good by loving one's own good in the right way" (99).<sup>6</sup>

In Chapter 4, McCombs shows what Kierkegaard means by simplicity. It is "translating one's understanding . . . immediately into action" (101). Just as McCombs discloses limitations, which Kierkegaard intends his readers to recognize, in Johannes de Silentio's admiration, absent imitation, of faith, so he discloses limitations in Climacus's conception of "hidden inwardness." Climacus recognizes that there is something wrong with flaunting one's efforts at becoming a Christian. But, McCombs notes, "going out of one's way to look 'just like everyone else'" while "being very different from most people in one's heart" can stand in the way of "witnessing the truth and thus risking suffering and persecution" (112; cf. 117-118; 124). In Chapter 5, McCombs continues the critique of Climacus he initiated in Chapter 4, with the focus now on the limitations of indirect communication and its need to be complemented by direct communication. By expressing himself so obliquely and paradoxically, Climacus runs the risk of detaining the reader in the process of interpretation so that he fails to undertake the practical tasks that it is Climacus's main intention to urge him toward. McCombs intends this chapter as a criticism of Climacus, not necessarily of Kierkegaard. But because "Kierkegaard never explicitly addresses some of the vices or weaknesses of indirect communication" (115), McCombs concedes that perhaps Kierkegaard "is not adequately aware of its pitfalls and shortcomings" (117). As the chapter progresses, criticisms of Kierkegaard himself come to replace criticisms of his pseudonymous author. Though Kierkegaard recognizes that his position is one of faith and not knowledge, his employment of indirect communication does not allow much room for serious confrontation with thoughtful criticisms of Christianity. McCombs goes so far as to express a con-

cern that if Kierkegaard not only does not *know* where the full truth about Christianity lies—and no *believer* can claim to know—but is actually *wrong* about where the full truth lies, he “bears responsibility for risking the ruination of many lives” (131). More direct, and less indirect, communication would go a long way toward reducing this risk. It would leave the reader greater freedom to make a responsible decision for or against faith, being more cognizant of both the case for and the case against, in light of the very little that we humans are actually capable of knowing beyond the shadow of a doubt.

In the first five chapters of his book McCombs occasionally speaks to some of the initially mystifying albeit intriguing things that Kierkegaard says about Socrates. In Chapter 6 and 7, and also in part of Chapter 8, he treats Kierkegaard’s interpretation of “the figure of Socrates” thematically. McCombs makes, I think, as well-informed and cogent a case as can be made for the coherence of Kierkegaard’s understanding of Socrates.

In Chapter 6, McCombs shows how and why Kierkegaard presents Socrates as embodying “climacean capacity,” which is the capacity “to be a climber over boundaries and a transgressor of limits” (134).<sup>7</sup> “[T]he climacean capacity is a power of synthesizing an eternal, infinite, universal, and absolute ideal with or in the temporal, finite, particular, and relative aspects of oneself and one’s everyday life, which is to say that the climacean capacity is a capacity for subjectivity” (154). “Human beings seem to be finite, temporal, particular, and conditioned animals. And yet they also seem to be able to conceive, however inadequately, the infinite, the eternal, and the unconditioned.” (157).<sup>8</sup> As Kierkegaard sees it, “Socratic ignorance is an essential component of faith and Christianity” (135). According to the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, the *Philosophical Fragments* misrepresents Socrates “as an objective thinker, whereas he was really a subjective thinker” (139). Climacus recognizes that “if one could not discover one’s incapacity before God, then neither could one exist as a being who attempts to live in time according to an eternal ideal” (147). “[T]he *god* is ‘present just as soon as the uncertainty of everything is thought infinitely’” (151).

Whereas in Chapter 6 McCombs focuses on Kierkegaard's understanding of Socrates's ascent, in Chapter 7 he focuses on Kierkegaard's understanding of Socrates's downfall. Kierkegaard finds this downfall expressed in a striking passage from the *Phaedrus*. There Socrates confesses that he does not know himself.<sup>9</sup> And so he investigates himself rather than other things in order to find out whether he happens to be a monster (*thērion*) more multiply-twisted and lustful (*epitethymenon*) than Typhon or a gentler and simpler animal having by nature a share in a certain divine and non-arrogant (*atyphon*) allotment.<sup>10</sup> As Kierkegaard interprets this passage from the *Phaedrus*, "he who believed that he knew himself" becomes so perplexed that he cannot decide between utterly opposite self-interpretations." This is the "downfall of the understanding." Kierkegaard, through Climacus, suggests that Socrates actually *willed* this downfall (162-163).

On first hearing, this suggestion sounds like Kierkegaardian hyperbole. But, if the will is the appetite of reason,<sup>11</sup> then human reason is naturally propelled by its own appetite toward truth, including, paradoxically, the truth that human reason is not capable of answering all the questions it naturally proposes to itself.<sup>12</sup> In the case at hand, Socrates's will propels his reason toward self-knowledge; but the knowledge he attains is that he does not have complete self-knowledge. It is in this way that Socrates wills the downfall of his understanding. The will moves reason to the discovery and acknowledgment of its natural limits. This is not a merely negative development, however. For "to will the downfall of reason is to transform and perfect reason" (163). As McCombs writes in an earlier chapter, "[T]he power of reason comes to light in the act of becoming aware of its weakness" (69).

This transformation and perfection is not of theoretical reason alone, but of practical reason as well (cf. 211).<sup>13</sup> The standard interpretation of the downfall of reason is that it results in "an openness or receptivity to a divine revelation of truths that exceed the capacity of natural reason" (164). McCombs thinks that this interpretation is correct as far as it goes. But he thinks that it does not go far enough, for it places stress only on the theoretical consequences of the downfall. As McCombs argues, it has practical con-

sequences as well. “The thing that falls in the downfall of the understanding is the whole human capacity to achieve the highest human end—an eternal happiness, which includes not only joy, but wisdom and goodness as well. Consequently, the downfall is a disavowal of the pretensions that one can become good, wise, and joyful on one’s own, a rejection of the determination to rely only on oneself in striving for one’s highest end” (165).

The disavowal of these pretensions results indeed in an openness to revelation. According to Christianity, there is a revelation of truths regarding action: how to become truly good through repentance, on the one hand, and through cultivating love of God and neighbor, on the other. And there is a revelation of truths regarding being as well: that God is a Trinity of persons, without the slightest compromise to his unity but as its perfection through the unqualified love that unites the three persons, and that one of these persons became incarnate in order to save us from sin and call us toward fuller and fuller participation, through love, in the divine nature.<sup>14</sup> “[O]ne accepts revelation not in order to become a better philosopher but in order to become a better person” (165).

It should be noted that Socrates’s qualification in the *Phaedrus* that he does not “yet” know himself implies that he has not simply given up on the possibility of attaining complete self-knowledge.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, any openness to revelation that he might have arrived at is, in the absence of actual revelation, an openness only to the possibility of revelation.<sup>16</sup> But until and unless Socrates does attain complete self-knowledge, he cannot definitively know whether all so-called choice is merely a case of being determined by the apparent good, more precisely by the apparent best;<sup>17</sup> or whether, instead, man is capable of radically free choice and self-determination, including the abuse of radically free choice and self-determination that is sin. The crucial issue, then, is whether Socrates has any inkling of sin. Though “Climacus claims that neither Socrates nor anyone else can be aware of sin without revelation” he nonetheless “portrays Socrates as suspecting his sinful condition” and “as suspecting that he is misrelated to the divine owing to Typhonic arrogance” (167-168; cf. 175). Plato surely expects the reader of the *Phaedrus* to remember that Typhon was, as

McCombs says, “an arrogant, violent, and defiant enemy of the gods.” Moreover, with his hundred heads, he was “presumably not even friendly to himself” (167). A monster like Typhon cannot be happy.

We noted earlier that the interest of reason lies in its being between the temporal and the eternal, and that it moves teleologically from the temporal toward the eternal. According to Kierkegaard, it cannot reach its ultimate *telos* without supernatural assistance. This assistance becomes available only when the eternal, at its own initiative, becomes temporal “in the fullness of time.” In what Christians believe to be the historical event of the Incarnation, a synthesis of the eternal and the temporal is achieved in deed and not just in thought. The Incarnation is for Kierkegaard the paradox (146); it is the absolute paradox (219).

Assuming both (1) that neither complete self-knowledge nor complete knowledge of the whole and its ground is humanly possible, and (2) that one has heard the Gospel of Christ, Kierkegaard thinks that only two responses to what one has heard are possible: faith, which is not knowledge,<sup>18</sup> and offense, which is not doubt. Offense is “a delusion of rational autonomy”—deluded because human reason has limits and thus is not “self-sufficient.” Offense is “unhappy self-assertion”—unhappy because one asserts oneself on the basis of what one knows, deep down, is insufficient knowledge of oneself. In the human being there are “two elements in tension with one another: a desire for happiness and a desire for autonomy or self-sufficiency.” These elements are incompatible, and “one or the other of them must fall. Faith . . . is the downfall of the desire for self-assertion, while offense is the downfall of the desire for happiness” (176-177).

In Chapter 8, McCombs further explores the consequences of Kierkegaard’s conviction that there are no “public demonstrations of the answers to certain crucial questions: Is there a personal God who created and maintains the world? Does a human being have an immortal soul? Is there a best life for human beings?” (184) If by “public demonstrations” Kierkegaard means rationally accessible demonstrations, it can be countered that there *are* such demonstrations, *pro* and *contra*, on these and related matters, particularly in

medieval theology and in the reaction of modern philosophy against medieval theology. There has indeed never been universal acceptance of either theological or anti-theological arguments. But then there has also never been universal acceptance, not even by the greatest minds, of many philosophical arguments, such as, for example, the divergent arguments regarding the scope of human knowledge (think of Hume and Hegel), the relation of acts of thought to the objects of thought (think of Plato and Husserl), the relationship between the good and the pleasant (think of Kant and Mill), and the authority of reason (think of Aristotle and Heidegger). It is likely that there is no “public demonstration” on these matters because the public is insufficiently perceptive to follow the arguments. In considering a disagreement between great philosophers, say, the disagreement between Locke and Leibniz on how much our knowledge arises from the senses, one has to consider the possibility that one of the two thinkers penetrated closer to the root of the matter than did the other. It seems improbable that there will ever be universal acceptance of most philosophical and theological demonstrations. But that does not mean that these demonstrations are not rationally accessible.

That theological and philosophical demonstrations are so controverted might not be due solely to different capacities for clear thinking. McCombs highlights Kierkegaard’s conviction that character cannot be easily separated from the quest for knowledge. “[D]esires, fears, emotions, actions, and habits have an influence on what and how a person thinks, or on what a person can see, understand, know, or become aware of. In other words, some desires, habits, emotions, and actions are conducive to truth, and some are inimical to it” (192). McCombs illustrates this claim by referring to the limitations of Meno and Ivan Karamazov. “[T]he deep thinker must be a spiritual *knight* with the strength and *courage* to think *terrible* thoughts that others cannot endure to think” (193). One terrible thought, of course, is that, even if there is a first cause or ground of our finite existence, it takes no interest in us and how we live our lives. But an equally terrible thought is that we have deceived ourselves into thinking that we know this to be true when we do not, and cannot, know any such thing. *Both* terrible thoughts have to be explored.

McCombs writes, "It is hard to believe that a person who often lies to himself about his own actions and qualities, about the actions and qualities of other people, and about his social and personal relations to other people will be honest when he tries to answer the most important philosophical questions" (194; cf. 65). The examined life does not consist exclusively, or even primarily, in the reading and discussion of philosophical texts. Most of all it requires ongoing self-examination, including especially the examination of conscience that is needed to check the self-deception that is at the root of sin, including the sin of vanity, especially intellectual vanity (cf. 215). McCombs recognizes that not all intellectual endeavors are equally compromised by corrupt character. Corrupt character has little effect on "cognition of scientific, mathematical, and linguistic truths." But corrupt character can pervert "cognition of human nature and the best life for human beings" (202). Anyone who is attempting to live a wholly rational life, whether he is a believer or a nonbeliever, stands under an obligation of ongoing and unrelenting self-scrutiny.

On Kierkegaard's understanding of the close connection between theory and practice, McCombs writes, "Seeing for oneself requires acting for oneself...by one's own self-activity, at one's own risk, and on one's own responsibility. In short, autopsy requires autopraxy" (198). One gains humility, and thereby overcomes doubt through "the bitter method of trying to imitate Christ and failing" (215). Humility is notoriously misunderstood, and caricatured as well. McCombs corrects the common misunderstanding: "a meek and beaten-down milksop does not have the audacity to believe. . . . Honestly admitting one's utter weakness before God takes the greatest human strength. . . . [O]nly heroes of the spirit have the audacity to believe . . . what pride cannot tolerate and therefore willfully ignores: namely, a supreme being to whom humans ought utterly to subordinate themselves" (215). In humility, self-transcendence overcomes irrational egoism and self-importance.

Kierkegaard's project, like Pascal's and Dostoyevsky's, is obviously based on the assumption that the existence of the Biblical

God cannot be definitively disproven. But some philosophers have advanced arguments, not subjective but objective arguments, aimed at definitively disproving the existence of God, especially as one who freely reveals himself. So a non-Kierkegaardian, but not anti-Kierkegaardian, task remains for the theologian. First to examine these arguments dispassionately to assess their cogency; and then, if they are found to be less than absolutely compelling, to expose their limitations. For if a man thinks—let us assume, thinks altogether innocently—that the concept of Christ as true God *and* true man, *both together*, is a logical contradiction, then exhorting him to imitate Christ is pointless. There is still a lot left for the theologian to do at the level of objectivity.

McCombs ends his book by raising a question that some readers will have already asked themselves: has Kierkegaard merely conscripted Socrates into his project? McCombs answers in the negative. “[T]here are many passages in Plato’s dialogues in which Socrates professes ignorance, self-blame, suspicions of his own monstrosity, repentance, and in which he warns against a self-justifying egoism that undermines truth and justice. Together these passages seem to constitute a solid basis for a responsible interpretation of Socrates as a thinker who willed the downfall of his own understanding because he suspected something very like sin” (218). McCombs supports this answer with references to the telling texts. One might object that he has cherry picked the passages that support the Kierkegaardian interpretation of Socrates. But all interpretations of Plato that aim at taking the dialogic form of his teaching seriously have to come to terms with everything that is said and happens in the dialogues, including occasional observations of Socrates’s that do not fit with preconceived notions of what Platonism is supposed to be. The passages that McCombs cites in support of Kierkegaard’s Socrates are not more salutary and comforting than passages one might cite in support of someone else’s Socrates. On the contrary, they are among the most startling and disconcerting passages to be found in the entire Platonic corpus. It is the singular, though by no means the sole, merit of McCombs’s study that it forces many of us, just when we thought

that we, with the assistance of our teachers and our friends, might have finally gotten a relatively firm grasp of what Socrates is up to, to take a fresh look at the enigmatic figure through whom Plato presents his teaching.

## NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, numbers in parentheses after quotations refer to the pagination of *The Paradoxical Rationality of Søren Kierkegaard*, even where the sentence quoted is Kierkegaard's and not McCombs's.

2. Determinism cannot be known, definitively and beyond the shadow of a doubt, to be true. As David Hume has shown, the proposition, "Every event has a cause," is not an analytic judgment. It follows *a fortiori* that the proposition, "Every event has a cause outside itself," which is the thesis of determinism, is not an analytic judgment. It can be denied without contradiction. The thesis of determinism is not self-evident; and any attempt to demonstrate it begs the question.

3. This is also the view of thinkers as different as Thomas Aquinas and Kant.

4. Cf. Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* 71b20-35; 72a26-31; 72b19-2; 90b19-100b18; *Metaphysics* 1005b6-1006a10; 1011a7-13.

5. Kierkegaard seems here to be close to Gregory of Nyssa, who understands the supernatural end of man to consist not simply in a reposeful intellectual *vision* of God, but in infinite and yet unimpeded *progress*, progress in love especially. Gregory interprets the claim that we are called to become partakers of the divine nature (*koinōnoi theias physeōs*—2 Peter 1: 3-4) to imply *theosis*, i.e., becoming more and more like God. This goal, perfect love, can be infinitely approached by man, starting even in this life, but never attained once and for all, even in the next life. Perhaps surprisingly, Kant similarly understands immortality of the soul to consist in infinite progress. See *Critique of Practical Reason* Part 2, Bk. 2, Ch. 2, iv.

6. McCombs draws attention (199) to a remarkable statement made by the Athenian Stranger in Plato's *Laws*: "Truly the cause of all errors (*aition . . . tōn pantōn hamartēmatōn*) is in every case excessive friendship for oneself" (731e3-5). If Plato is expressing his own thought here, it is not easy to see how he could have held, as some seem to think he held, that *the* good is essentially one's *own* good, understood narrowly as one's own sweet pleasure.

7. As McCombs notes (173), it is likely that Kierkegaard selected the pseudonym “Johannes Climacus” (Greek, *Iōannēs tēs klimakos*, literally, “John of the Ladder,” the name given to a twelfth century Christian monk and saint, who wrote *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*) with an eye on the “ladder of love” described in the *Symposium*.

8. Whatever share irrational animals have in the eternal, there is no reason to think that they conceive of the eternal, much less concern themselves about it.

9. *Phaedrus* 229e8.

10. *Ibid.*, 229a3-a8. McCombs notes that the name Typhon can be translated “puffed up” (167). On the difficulty of complete self-knowledge, consider the qualifier *eis dynamin* at *Philebus* 63c3.

11. Aristotle, *De Anima* 432b5-8 and 433a8-31; Thomas Aquinas *Super Sent.*, lib. 2 d. 30 q. 1 art. 3, ad 4. *Summa Theologiae* 1-2 q. 6, introd.; q. 8 art. 1, co.; q. 56 art. 5, ad 1; *ibid.*, 3 q. 19 art. 2, co.; Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Book 1, Ch. 1, Theorem 3, Remark 1.

12. See the first sentence of the “First Preface” of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*.

13. Here Kierkegaard parts ways with Kant. Consider the qualification in the sentence cited in the previous note: “in one [!] species of its cognition.”

14. Cf. note 5 above.

15. See *pō* at 229e8 and *eti* at 230a1.

16. An inability to refute, and hence a consequent openness to, even the bare *possibility* of revelation would situate the philosopher *qua* philosopher in an untenable position, at least according to Leo Strauss: *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953). 75. Cf. “Reason and Revelation” (appended to Heinrich Meier’s study, *Leo Strauss and the Theological-Problem*, trans. Marcus Brainard [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006] 150, 176-177; “Progress or Return” (in Leo Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997], 117, 131. On this crucial point, however much they otherwise differ, Strauss and Kierkegaard are in essential agreement: opposition to faith cannot consistently be based on an act of faith, or on anything resembling faith.

17. *Gorgias* 466e2; *Meno* 77d8-e3.

18. John 20:29.

## Plato's Political Polyphony

A Book Review of *Plato: Statesman*. Translated by Eva Brann, Peter Kalkavage, and Eric Salem. Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2012. vii + 166 pp. \$10.95.

Gregory Recco

Continuing the work begun in their previous two translations of Plato,\* Eva Brann, Peter Kalkavage, and Eric Salem have now translated Plato's *Statesman*. In addition to the translation, the volume includes an introduction, a glossary, an interpretive essay, and two appendices. The introduction situates the dialogue in the context of Plato's works, both dramatically and conceptually, announcing its main themes and connecting it with other works—particularly its immediate dramatic predecessor, the *Sophist*, and its thematic siblings, the *Republic* and the *Laws*. The translation contains footnotes that provide pertinent literary or cultural background, references to other dialogues, and pointers to the attached glossary when particularly important words or ideas first appear. The glossary, like those in the earlier translations, is organized into meaning-clusters, groups of related or associated words that together make up one important conceptual unit of the dialogue. The selection and discussion of these words, then, constitutes a work of interpretation—or at least the preparation of material for such a work—and gives the translators a natural opportunity to discuss the rationale behind their English renderings of important Greek terms. After the glossary comes a substantial essay on the whole of *Statesman*, a thoughtful recapitulation and reflection that presents a systematic and thorough survey of questions raised in the dialogue. Finally, the appendices: the first

\**Plato: Phaedo* (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 1998) and *Plato: Timaeus* (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2001).

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graphically presents an overview in word and image of the practice of weaving which forms the dialogue's most densely intertwined "paradigm," or model, of the work of statesmanship; the second unravels and graphically portrays the various heuristic "divisions" by which the Stranger investigated questions of definition in the *Sophist* and here seeks the *politikos*, or statesman.

The translation is of very high quality—a fact that will likely not surprise readers of the team's previous two efforts. To describe its excellence I must make some preparatory remarks about what a translation is, who Plato is, and how Plato ought to be translated. And I must discuss the particularities (or rather *peculiarities*) of the *Statesman*.

The art of translation possesses, in a particularly pronounced degree, a feature that characterizes all arts: What directs the activity of artists is not their own wishes and ideas, but the necessities of the work to be done. Becoming the practitioner of an art involves a kind of surrender to something alien, namely, the determinacies of the product and the conditions of its production. In translation, this relinquishment of authority is especially evident in the very nature of the work, which consists of transplanting a thought that belongs to someone else from its native home into the foreign soil of another language while keeping it intact and alive. Because the translator does not create the being of that which he translates, his excellence consists in his ability to let the thought of another shine forth unimpeded and unaltered.

Plato's thought poses special challenges to the prospective translator, because the dialogue form in which it predominantly resides gives it a uniquely amorphous character unparalleled anywhere else in Western literature. Because of their polyphonic conversational style, the dialogues of Plato give no authoritative indication of how they are to be interpreted, no explicit endorsement of some message, so that it is quite difficult to say just what Plato's thought actually is. Without some definite notion of how to deal with this difficulty, the choices and judgments that the translator must make run the risk of being severally ad hoc and, taken together, inconsistent. But in the dialogues themselves Plato is completely silent about this difficulty. Faced with this apparent

authorial dereliction, it is tempting to conclude with a kind of misplaced strictness that the phrase "Plato's thought" *signifies* but does not *refer*, as Heraclitus nearly says of the oracle at Delphi. But this is the counsel of despair, and it leaves out the third leg of Heraclitus's saying: the oracle, who does not speak, but gives sign, *does not conceal*. Something similar must be said of Plato. Even cursory comparison of the dialogues uncovers themes that recur with some frequency. Longer acquaintance reveals how generous Plato can be to the careful reader, who discovers that the cracks in the surface form a pattern, so to speak. The latter point deserves fuller and more literal articulation, both on its own terms and because it is so often overlooked—which leads to bad interpretation and consequently to bad translation.

Many of the dialogues take on the outward form of a "Socratic" conversation, with one dialectically more experienced person taking the lead and questioning another in what seems to be a more or less directed way, so that the latter gradually takes on views suggested by the former. But the inner truth of the dialogues is that they are documents bearing witness to the event of thinking, paradoxically more akin to Thucydides's record of a great event than to Hippocrates's scientific investigation of the causes of sickness and health. The dialogues are not treatises of Socratic dogma thinly disguised as conversations, but more or less dramatized presentations of what it looks like to think. I say "dramatized" because, as I hinted above, that is where Plato's artistry lies: this is his real work, which is also something like the work of a translator.

Plato's art is to show us the event of thinking, by dramatically portraying what it looks like when it happens among human beings, in both its grandeur and its modesty. To say that thinking is such and such, or has such and such characteristics, is perhaps a fairly idle and undemanding pursuit, but to *show* it—that is, to make manifest through a single instance the structure of intelligibility that informs it and gives it life—is an accomplishment of an exceedingly high order. Somehow the dialogue must both *be* a conversation and exhibit "conversationality." Not surprisingly, the investigation of how conversing ought to take place in order to get at truth is one of those recurring themes that give the dialogues of

Plato their distinctive mark. But the exhibition of thinking as such occurs in several other, less immediate, ways. To note just one, briefly, let me point out the structure of errancy and return, or wandering and recapitulation.

In the *Statesman*, as in the *Sophist* and so many other dialogues, the tentative answers given to the guiding questions are forever turning up inadequate, coming unmoored as they are jostled by fresh contenders that look no less promising, even if they, too, ultimately fall apart. This is especially evident in the bewildering multiplicity of “definitions” that fail, by the very fact of their being multiple, to hem in or pin down the sort of men being sought in these two dialogues. The various ways in which the dialogues can acquaint us with perplexity, and thus make us feel thought’s errancy, are probably familiar to many readers. No less important, however, is a dimension of thought that tends to belong less to the one questioned than to the one doing the questioning: to put a name to it, the dimension of redemption, of making up for what has gone wrong by noticing how it has gone wrong. The dialogues are chock-full of bad arguments, wrong turns, and dead ends. But these errors never just lie there. They stand out, and were made to stand out by their author. Plato calls on us to respond more adequately than Socrates’s interlocutors and to consider how an attentive and active questioner might help things move forward from there. Giving us the opportunity to become better at thinking is a great gift that is squandered by dogmatic interpretations (and the translations founded on them), for they can see only the degree to which the things said in the dialogues do *not* form a very compelling body of theory, even as they tantalizingly hint at one. Brann, Kalkavage, and Salem understand quite well both this difficulty and other difficulties related to Plato’s portrayal of the drama of thinking; their understanding guides their choices and contributes greatly to the excellence of their translations.

In general, Plato’s artistry exists on the level of style, in the nuances of diction and register, metaphor and allusion, that reveal the character behind the thought, and give us something further to think about when the resources of the argument turn out to be insufficient to answer all our questions. In the case of Socrates, this

is well known and acknowledged, though less so for his interlocutors: it is a commonplace to mock their "dialogue" as merely a series of more or less undifferentiated assents. The characters in Plato who are generally considered to be well drawn are usually the ones who disagree, and they are considered better drawn the more vehemently they disagree with Socrates (like Callicles and Thrasymachus). The *Statesman* has neither of these advantages: its main speaker is the somewhat opaque Stranger from Elea, and its main respondent is the somewhat colorless Young Socrates. Not a very promising circumstance for the translation that seeks to reveal a Plato who is a master of style. It is the particular excellence of this translation that it is able to show us a Plato who is at work in his accustomed ways even in these changed circumstances.

The translation is above all else trustworthy. If a word or phrase jars (such as Socrates's having "mixed it up" with Theaetetus on the previous day [258a]), consulting the Greek reassures (perhaps he is meant to sound relatively informal compared with the Stranger or perhaps he wants to recall the Stranger's mixing of the *eidē*). Words whose polysemy is troublesome are rendered consistently, in a neutral and readable way that has no axe to grind. Instead of translating most replies as "Yes, Socrates," the translators make the responses both differentiated and differentiable, an absolutely invaluable aid to the close reader who is keeping watch over the fitness of the interlocutor's responses. The Stranger's humor, which verges, it is no exaggeration to say, on aridity, appears in all its understated, deadpan glory. Picture the face of a very serious old man intoning these words: "The king at least is manifest to us as one who pastures a certain *horn-shorn* herd" (265d). Even when the syntax becomes tortuous, the translation remains not only readable, but even speakable. What is perhaps most impressive is that the translation's readability does not come at the cost of overly interpretive (or inventive) construal. Heidegger said approvingly of Kant that he left obscure what is in itself obscure. In this rendering of the *Statesman*, it should be said that what is puzzling in the original remains so in translation, but because of what is said, not because of any obscurity in how it is said. The translation's simultaneous readability and faithfulness (in the fullest sense of

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that word), coupled with its generous and thoughtful supplementary materials, strongly recommend its use for classroom study by serious students, with or without some knowledge of the Greek. It should also be of interest to, and useable by, any sort of serious reader at all. In contrast to the translators' earlier editions of the *Phaedo* and the *Sophist*, this one clearly distinguishes the functions of the Introduction and the Essay, placing the latter, appropriately, after the dialogue itself. The "Essay" pithily and unpretentiously raises questions that cut to the very heart of the dialogue, questions about the nature and possibility of rational politics, and questions about the very identity of philosophy. No mere "student edition," this; the Plato scholar, too, will find much here that advances serious thinking.