

EPHEMERA

Being a collection of essays and book reviews on the perceived gap between human aspiration and human achievement.

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The Worldly Hope men set their Hearts upon,
Turns Ashes—or it prospers; and anon,
Like Snow upon the 'Desert's dusty Face,
Lighting a little hour or two—is gone.

From The Rubaiyat of Omar Kayyam

Watermark

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

If the climate catastrophists are right, the term ‘spring cleaning’ may well have reached its ‘use by’ date. Notwithstanding the prospect of an eternal summer, I propose another season-related term, ‘autumn cleaning’, to describe that process, occurring in old age, of gradually divesting oneself of the accumulated material belongings of a lifetime. But the term could also apply, in the case of a hack writer like myself, to a vast repository of ill-sorted scribblings, both hard copy and digital. One ought to consign them to the bin now, rather than waiting for some unfortunate person, lumbered with the job of cleaning out bookshelves or removing computer files, to take on such a thankless task.

But I still harbour fond illusions that some small part of this vast outpouring may one day find a reader who gains some small benefit from reading it, even if that benefit is no more than a momentary escape from boredom. To this end, I have put together a collection of writings, most decades old, which include both published and unpublished materials. This is the third such collection, being preceded by *A Loose Canon* (2007) and *Things in General* (2024). The contents of this present volume are divided, more or less equally, between book reviews and short essays/reflections. Most of the published materials appeared in *News Weekly* magazine¹ with the odd essay from *Connor Court Quarterly*. Those magazines themselves may still be extant but the old volumes where my scribblings appear are now either long gone, or mouldering away in dusty library archives. As a consequence, much of the subject matter in these pieces is now quite dated. But in my defence, I will argue that many (if not most) of the offerings deal, *inter alia*, with permanent issues associated with the human condition. The particular catalyst (so to speak) for individual pieces may well now belong in the dustbin of history, but most of our concerns, at any given time, have their ultimate origins in more permanent matters, for we are fallible and fallen creatures, forever desiring perfection in this

¹ The reader will find constant reference to *News Weekly* in the text, as I have not attempted to substantially alter the original pieces. Some may find this annoying

life and forever falling short.

Moreover, as the Roman poet Horace astutely observed over two millennia ago, old men like me are more than a little inclined to look back to an imagined happier time of their youth and decry the present state of things. They become, as he says, 'Testy and querulous and much given to praising the way things were when they were young.' I have no doubt that this criticism can be applied squarely to what follows in this book.

And so, the subject matter of the book is a sort of literary cottage pie—made up of leftovers but given a new cover. Whether or not you find it digestible or in any way nourishing is another matter.

November, 2025

Watermark

PART ONE

Essays and Shorter Pieces

Watermark

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ON CELESTIAL POLITICS¹

The Polish-born philosopher and writer Leszek Kolakowski (1927-2009), like many European intellectuals of his era, began his adult life as a Marxist. As a schoolboy in Poland, he witnessed the Warsaw ghetto, and his father was killed by the Gestapo. It is hardly surprising that, as a young adult he became an enthusiastic supporter of communism and saw it as providing a new and permanent order of peace and prosperity. Very quickly, though, as the inexorable logic of the ideology worked itself out, the iron grip of Stalinism was to produce human misery which, both in scale and barbarity, was to eventually match and perhaps even overtake that which had preceded it.

Kolakowski, again like so many of his intellectual contemporaries, was to change his attitude to communism very rapidly. He began to criticise the system and, in 1966, was expelled from the Party. Soon after, he went into exile, occupying prominent university positions in both England and America.

He was a prolific writer, with many books and essays to his credit. As a philosopher, Kolakowski wrote important works on the history of positivism, commentaries on the philosophies of Husserl, Bergson, Spinoza and Pascal, and works on many more general aspects of philosophy, both modern and ancient. He was especially interested in metaphysics and part of his reason for studying positivism was to investigate its fruitless attempt to purge philosophy of all metaphysical content. But from quite early in his career, Kolakowski was intensely interested in religion or more precisely, in those murky areas between philosophy, science and religion. He had a knack of writing about 'the big questions' in religion and philosophy in a way that was both entertaining and lucid and, above all, accessible to the non-specialist reader. That he should have been so interested in religion is unusual for he professed no particular faith as far as I know and was widely regarded as an agnostic. Others, though, regarded him as a non-practising Christian and it is certainly true that he often defended

¹This essay first appeared in *News Weekly*, April 7, 2018

Christianity and, in particular, Catholicism.

Here, I would like to concentrate on just one essay published by Kolakowski in 1987 and entitled 'Politics and the Devil'. It takes, as its starting point, traditional Christian concepts of good and evil, particularly as we see them developed in the writings of St. Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas. Kolakowski then invites us to examine the whole of western history, since the time of Christ, as markers or way-points in the great struggle between good and evil—between God and the devil. And he does this very largely through the lens of politics.

It may, at first, seem strange—even childish some would say—to interpret history in this fashion. But then, you must have some principle of interpretation since that collection of data which constitutes history does not supply its own interpretive guide. We apply various principles to it. Marxists see all of history as part of the class struggle, whereas many others see it through the idea of progress. Indeed, the idea of progress is now the dominant approach in the secular West, hugely bolstered by some sort of primitive Darwinism. 'Every day in every way', so they tell us, 'we are getting better and better'. But, of course, what they mean is 'better off', not 'better'. In other words, they focus exclusively on our material circumstances and completely ignore our psychological and spiritual circumstances. If the latter are taken into account, then Kolakowski's methodology seems to me to be eminently sensible.

Of course, it is highly unfashionable today to speak of the devil as a reality. He is simply a cartoon character with horns, pointy ears, and a pitchfork. Even in church sermons, he is rarely mentioned. But, of course, as Kolakowski knows only too well, if you are prepared to accept 'The Good' as an objective reality—that is to say as somehow standing above mere human subjectivity—then it is difficult not to do the same with evil. Socrates may have thought that evil was mere ignorance of the Good, but history has supplied us with many highly knowledgeable perpetrators of evil deeds. *Corruptio optimi pessima*—the corruption of the best is the worst. That little motto has proved itself true over and over again through history. This, after all, is to be expected if one understands the traditional Christian idea of Satan—that he is incapable of creating but must rather rely on 'turning' creation to his own ends (I know not why Satan or Lucifer is traditionally depicted as a male, but radical feminists will no doubt be

pleased. By the same token, this should give pause to gender change advocates).

With this background, Kolakowski then turns his attention to the history of the West. The birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ obviously created problems for the devil, so he managed to initiate the early persecutions. This, of course, backfired as the blood of the martyrs became the glory of the Church. Very soon, though, the devil persuaded certain of those within the Church that they needed to assume greater and greater temporal powers—especially through politics. In the end, this split the Church—first between East and West, then many centuries later, between Catholicism and Protestantism. Round two to the devil.

But, as Kolakowski points out, during all this God was not idle. There were effective counter moves which prevented the devil from outright victory. The missionary work and charitable organisations set up by Catholics and Protestants alike was an outcome not foreseen by the devil. Another obvious move was the counter-Reformation. Still another that comes to my mind is the sacred music of J.S. Bach—hardly what the devil had planned! The defeat of totalitarianism last century might also be seen as a victory for the Good, but that victory was far from complete.

And, so it is that we see these two forces opposing each other right through history. At the moment, it seems that the devil is on a winning streak. In fact, the vehemence of the recent attacks on traditional Christian morality in the West are difficult to explain in any other way. The secular state, which came in with a promise of ‘freedom of religion’ seems to be transmuting itself into a different sort of totalitarianism—a totalitarianism which persecutes the spiritual rather than the temporal, all the while proclaiming freedom and liberty for all. A poisoned chalice indeed.

What is particularly noteworthy about this current attack on the Good is its range of activities. We tend to think of it purely as an attack on Christian morality but it is much more. In the traditional philosophy of Being, first laid down by the ancient Greeks and then greatly enlarged by the Medieval scholastics, Being had certain attributes—Goodness, Truth, Beauty, and Unity. All of these attributes are now under attack. I can think of no better example than that given by

Simon Leys (Pierre Ryckmans) in a review of Christopher Hitchens' *The Missionary Position*—an ugly little potboiler directed against Mother Teresa of Calcutta. After a very good demolition job on Hitchens, Leys ends his piece by recounting an experience of his in a city cafe.

He was at a table by himself, toiling away at some essay. The radio was blaring away with muzak, pop songs, stock market reports, football results, etc. Suddenly, and with no human intervention, the radio tuned itself to another station playing the opening bars of Mozart's clarinet quintet. The other patrons, who until this time had been chatting, drinking coffee or playing cards and were oblivious to the radio, suddenly paused their activities and turned, frowning, towards the source of this sudden intrusion. One of them quickly re-tuned the offending device and all returned to normal. Leys ends his piece with this commentary on the event:

... true Philistines are not people who are incapable of recognising beauty; they recognise it all too well; they detect its presence anywhere, immediately, and with a flair as infallible as that of the most sensitive aesthete—but for them, it is in order to be able better to pounce upon it at once and to destroy it before it can gain a foothold in their universal empire of ugliness. Ignorance is not simply the absence of knowledge; obscurantism does not result from a dearth of light, bad taste is not merely a lack of good taste, stupidity is not a simple want of intelligence: all these are fiercely active forces that angrily assert themselves on every occasion; they tolerate no challenge to their omnipresent rule. In every department of the human endeavour, inspired talent is an intolerable insult to mediocrity. If this is true in the realm of aesthetics, it is even more true in the world of ethics. More than artistic beauty, moral beauty seems to exasperate our sorry species. The need to bring down to our own wretched level, to deface, to deride and debunk any splendour that is towering above us is probably the saddest urge of human nature.

I might add here, as a postscript to that commentary by Leys, that these 'fiercely active forces', merely by asserting themselves as active forces, require a certain source which stands above mere human emotion. This was as obvious to Leys as it was to Kolakowski. And it is, I think, obvious to anyone who seriously grapples with the problem of evil in the world.

THE WAR OF THE ROSES¹

On the Disturbances in Gene Land

By the time you read these lines, International Darwin Day (February 12th) will have passed. It is a recently established Feast Day for the non-deluded. Celebrations took place in many localities including Costa Rica, where inhabitants and visitors at Sloth Creek enjoyed a day of 'Darwin, thought, reason and fun'. I would have thought that the first three activities precluded the fourth, but that's just me perhaps. They might have chosen a better-named venue too. The event is managed globally by the American Humanist Association. No real surprise there! In London, the event was chaired by Professor Richard Dawkins. No surprise there either. I have a suspicion that anyone turning up in clerical garb would not be made to feel welcome. Unless, of course, that person had a copy of Bishop Robinson's *Honest to God* prominently displayed. For Catholic clerics, a conspicuous volume of Teilhard de Chardin might just pass muster.

I mention all this by way of background. The establishment of such a secular feast day might lead you to believe that the celebration bespeaks of a united appreciation of the great man and his theory. It is not so. If you thought that the sort of verbal pugilism exhibited between Darwin's Bulldog (Huxley) and Soapy Sam (Wilberforce) was consigned to the dustbin of history, you are very much in error. Today, wars over Darwin and his theory are not just ongoing, but are of increasing ferocity. There is, however, one major difference between then and now. Soapy Sam's opposition to Darwinism was of a religious nature, but today's opponents are, for the most part, godless. This is not a battle between science and religion: it is a battle between rival factions within Darwinism. And like Legion, they are many. I hesitate to say that it is a battle within science, because I am not convinced that the various parties always argue from a purely scientific point of view. Indeed, I'm not sure there is such a thing.

In fact, the Darwin wars are really a subset of the more general science

¹This essay was first published in *Connor Court Quarterly*, Spring, 2011

wars which reached their peak a couple of decades ago. The heart of the matter is an ongoing turf war concerning the objectivity of science and what counts as being 'scientific'. Put in over-simplified terms, the old science disciplines tend to be on one side and the newer social sciences on the other. This is not just an ideological matter. Funding and status are at stake. These days, unless you can demonstrate that what you are doing is 'scientific', your likelihood of attracting funding is very low. Ask any of the refugees from the former Humanities Departments in the universities. In some respects, the science wars resemble the history wars but, as will become evident, simple comparisons are unhelpful. Although both conflicts involve what might be termed postmodern influences and a strong presence of New Left ideology, the science wars, especially as they apply to Darwinism, are more complicated and any simple characterisation of left/postmodern approaches as relativistic compared to the supposed objectivity of their opponents is quite incorrect.

Right at the start, I need to make my own position clear. Having now laboured through a good number of books/articles dealing with the general matter of evolutionary theory and its application to human nature (Wilson, Ehrlich, Dawkins, *et hoc genus omne*) I find myself in general agreement with the late David Stove, the Sydney philosopher, whose book *Darwinian Fairytales* first appeared in 1995. He had no difficulty accepting the fact of evolution, but the various theories were another matter. I concur and thereby must describe myself as a lapsed Darwinist. The term connotes not so much a total break as a slow falling away or inattention to devotional practices, and is thus far less serious than the term apostate, which usually involves some form of vigorous denial. With this distinction in mind, the reader will hopefully understand that, in classing myself as a lapsed Darwinist, I am not thereby committing myself to the ranks of the Young Earth Creationists or sundry other groups who are vigorous in their denial of evolution. I should also add that my lapsed condition has nothing to do with any religious belief although I class myself as a Christian. The Christian doctrines in which I believe have nothing to say about natural selection, genes and random mutation.

If your knowledge of evolutionary theory comes simply from watching David Attenborough on the television or reading press reports on the latest utterances from Richard Dawkins, or Daniel Dennett, or even our own Tim Flannery, then any notion of

disturbances amongst the White Coats will come as a surprise. To really get a feeling for the scope and intensity of the Darwin wars, you need to dig deeper. You could go to the various specialist scientific journals where most of the hand-to-hand fighting is taking place but this is an arduous business, made all the more tedious by the need to translate the peculiar terminology used by evolutionary biologists/psychologists/sociologists. A far better option is to search out a book where a more general account of the various protagonists might be found. Of course, it is too much to ask for a non-partisan account—they don't exist. In ordinary wars, they say, we usually get only the victor's account, but in the Darwin wars there are no victors and we tend to get many accounts. Even so, some are better than others and I want to concentrate on one example which at least has the virtue of giving a reasonably clear account of the battleground. This is *Alas Poor Darwin*, edited by Hilary and Stephen Rose and published back in 2000. There are fifteen essays by academics (most are professors) in sociology, genetics, animal behaviour, psychology, and philosophy. It is not my intention to provide a full review of the book. Rather, I wish to highlight some of the material contained in it which, I think, is critical to understanding the Darwin wars and their importance. Whilst the book is now somewhat dated, I believe most of the issues under contention are unchanged.

First, a word about the Roses. Hilary Rose is described on the cover blurb as a 'feminist sociologist', whilst Stephen has been described by an admiring colleague as 'the last of the Marxist radical scientists'. Even *The Guardian* once described him as 'a polemicist on the left'. This is a case of the pot calling the kettle red—or pink, anyway. But I have to say that the material in the book is well written and well-argued and this includes the essays contributed by the Professors Rose themselves. Both of the Roses have published widely and are well regarded by their peers. This is reflected in the fact that they were able to attract a diversity of talent in this volume, including Stephen Jay Gould and Mary Midgley. To be sure, there is a spicing of feminist/leftist analysis but I found most of the essays reasonably even-handed.

Alas Poor Darwin is a sustained attack on a particular grouping of evolutionary thought called evolutionary psychology or EP for short (one of the essays has the marvellous title *EP Phone Home*). I use the term grouping because there are many rooms in the EP mansion but their occupants are by no means a harmonious family. What justifies

the collective title of EP is a shared view that human nature (including aspects such as memory, perception and language) is a product of evolution. The brain is an information processing device that evolved way back in the Stone Age. Different neural mechanisms that we recognise today evolved in early ape-persons (I tread carefully here). More accurately, it is a product of natural selection during the Pleistocene, when our prehistoric ancestors are said to have roamed the African Savannah. What this means for us today is that our behaviour is directly linked to those neural structures that developed back in the distant past. What it also means, for the devotees of EP, is that this approach is 'scientific' as compared with what they see as the dubious status of all other approaches.

Now, if you think all of this appears to be OK, consider the consequences a little more carefully. What EP asks you to believe is that the theory explains war, male aggression, love, altruism, marriage, rape, our appreciation of beauty, our preference for landscapes with open vistas, and so on. In fact—let's be honest—it explains everything. If you think that I am exaggerating here, let me quote a couple of examples from the 'scientific' literature. Back at the turn of this century, biologist Randy Thornhill and anthropologist Craig Palmer published a book called *The Natural History of Rape*. In it, they argue that rape is an adaptive strategy by which otherwise sexually unsuccessful men propagate their genes by mating with fertile women. Here they were merely echoing the sentiments of the sociobiologist David Barash who, some twenty years earlier had written 'if nature is sexist, don't blame her sons'. The second example comes from an article published in *Psychology Today* in 2007. Here, two practitioners of EP, Alan Miller and Satoshi Kanazawa, explained why men like blonde bombshells. For clarity, it will be necessary for me to quote at a little length:

Until very recently, it was a mystery to evolutionary psychology why men prefer women with large breasts, since the size of a woman's breasts has no relationship to her ability to lactate. But Harvard anthropologist Frank Marlowe contends that larger, and hence heavier, breasts sag more conspicuously with age than do smaller breasts. Thus they make it easier for men to judge a woman's age (and her reproductive value) by sight—suggesting why men find women with large breasts more attractive.

Alternatively, men may prefer women with large breasts for the same reason they prefer women with small waists. A new study of Polish

women shows that women with large breasts and tight waists have the greatest fecundity, indicated by their levels of two reproductive hormones (estradiol and progesterone).

Blond hair is unique in that it changes dramatically with age. Typically, young girls with light blond hair become women with brown hair. Thus, men who prefer to mate with blond women are unconsciously attempting to mate with younger (and hence, on average, healthier and more fecund) women. It is no coincidence that blond hair evolved in Scandinavia and northern Europe, probably as an alternative means for women to advertise their youth, as their bodies were concealed under heavy clothing.

Bernard Levin once discussed the possibility of a new 'shortcut' symbol or word (similar in function to *sic* or *ibid*) which indicates 'I have not made this up'. Such an abbreviation applies to the above. By now, you may be getting just a glimmer of an idea why Hilary Rose, amongst many others, is not greatly enthused by these EP theories.

'But surely', I hear you say, 'these are just a few cranks at the extreme end of EP'? Not so. The crankiness goes all the way down, and for one simple reason: when you make an *a priori* assumption that evolutionary theory explains everything, you are committed to doing just that. Hence, for instance, the respected Godfather of sociobiology, E.O. Wilson, finds that our liking for pleasant gardens with lawns, water features, abundant flowers and fruiting trees and, perhaps, a distant prospect of Eton College, all hark back to the Pleistocene when we appreciated good foraging spots close to water and with a clear view of approaching enemies (in which case, I should replace Eton with the LSE). He knows, too, why men have a preference for women with high cheek bones, a thin jaw, large eyes and a shorter distance between mouth and chin and between nose and chin—we have an exaggerated view of those features in women which are indicators of youth, virginity and the prospect of a long reproductive period. Again, I have not made this up.

And now it's time to move on to some of the considerations of EP which lie outside the province of 'straight biology'. Earlier in this essay, I warned that there are no non-partisan accounts of EP. When it comes to the political ramifications of EP, the Roses have decidedly strong views. Amongst other things, they feel that EP has justified the horrendous programs of the Right. During the 1980s, they penned a

joint essay showing how sociobiology was culturally underpinning ‘the Thatcherite attack on the welfare state’. Now, we must grant them their initial feminist/Marxist positions for, in EP, there is no such thing as ‘the view from nowhere’. Even so, I do find it hard to fit Denis and Maggie Thatcher into any Darwinian picture. Denis was hardly the epitome of male aggression and Maggie was certainly not known for submissiveness. Concerning hair colour and other more delicate matters, I have no data. But, to be fair, the influence of Darwinism in politics is not without some historical evidence. Everyone has heard or read about Social Darwinism and Herbert Spencer. And everyone, including the Roses, knows that Marx and Engels were greatly attracted to Darwin’s theory. The point is that ideas have consequences, often outside their own particular field, and this is especially true of Darwinian ideas.

At a broader level, as the Roses correctly point out, the terms ‘Darwinian’ and ‘evolutionary’ are now applied to almost every province of human endeavour. We have, as well as evolutionary biology (the type species, so to speak), evolutionary medicine, psychology, psychiatry, sociology and even evolutionary economics. And, of course, we have the evolution of the universe. As for ‘Darwinian’, its features and methodologies are now invoked to explained advances in computer technology, expansion of Internet companies and even the growth and competition of rival scientific theories. What the Roses fail to mention is the enormous boost given to the whole Darwin business by the television nature shows and how, by this means, it has seeped into popular culture as a theory of everything. Darwinism is now certainly a great deal more than a theory in biology.

The baleful influence of the EP nonsense has a very long reach indeed. Jonathon Gottschall, an American literary scholar and EP fellow traveller has written on Homer’s *Iliad* (*The Rape of Troy: Evolution, Violence and the World of Homer*). Here, as he tells us, he ‘experienced the *Iliad* as a drama of naked apes ... Intense competition between great apes, as described by both Homer and by primatologists, frequently boils down to precisely the same thing: access to females’. Yet again, I have not made this up. Forget about the talking horses; forget those lines in *Book 7* (421-32) when the Trojans and Achaeans gather to bury their dead; and, especially, forget this line—‘There is nothing alive more agonised than man/ of all that breathe and crawl across the

earth'. It's all down to raping women.

As I intimated above, the real source of the Darwin Wars has little to do with straight biology, despite appearances to the contrary. The mutual detestation flowing between Richard Dawkins and E.O. Wilson (age has not wearied them) might be the stuff of legend, but it is incidental to the main game. No doubt their particular conflict has its origins in the Palaeolithic when cave-persons fought over access to food, water, mates, or a hill with a view. Mind you, both of these persons have enjoyed rich pasturage over their long careers and the concept of some sort of Darwinian struggle for scarce resources somehow doesn't ring true. No, the Darwin Wars are all about differing conceptions of the nature of scientific enquiry and, as a corollary, of scientific respectability. And it is here that a real Darwinian struggle for resources takes place—funding, university professorships, appointments to Chairs, and so on.

There are many ways to provoke a conflict between humans, not all of them recognisably Darwinian. In the olden days, it was enough to administer a gentle slap to the face with your glove. Amongst Australian drovers, as Banjo Patterson astutely observed, the surest way to ensure a fight is to curse another person's dog. For practitioners in the social sciences, the worst possible insult is to infer that what they do is not science. The EP faction, as well as many in the more traditional sciences, uses this insult regularly. Back in 1994, scientists Paul Gross and Norman Levitt published *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and its Quarrels with Science*. It was a very palpable hit and the Roses, in particular, took it hard. This was no leather glove slap but a mailed fist. Soon after, the physicist Alan Sokal published a hoax article in *Social Text*, an academic journal of postmodern cultural studies. It was another palpable hit, the scientific equivalent of the Ern Malley affair.

Now the defenders of scientific purity certainly have a lot going for them. There is a good deal of rubbish coming from social sciences. The trouble is that the forces of scientific purity have been consistently undermined by the EP crowd (who suppose that they fight under the same banner) whose own 'research' often amounts to little more than pure speculation. The examples I have quoted earlier in this essay are just the tip of the iceberg. As Hilary Rose rightly points out:

For those conscious that scholars of prehistory work with highly fragmentary evidence, from shards of bones, fossils, and very occasionally entire bodies preserved by ice or some geological quirk, the belief that late twentieth-century people can know the human psychological architecture of our early ancestors with any degree of certainty and accuracy is difficult to take seriously.

In any case, the whole attempt to reduce consciousness and mental actions to physical explanations (which is, at base, what a lot of EP is about) is fraught with problems. There have been powerful critiques of this from philosophers such as Thomas Nagel (*The View from Nowhere*, *Mind and Cosmos*) and David Stove (*Darwinian Fairytales*) and from scientists themselves. The mathematician and philosopher David Berlinski has produced a very entertaining account titled *The Devil's Delusion*.

There can be no question that the whole of the science wars and the Darwin wars in particular have had a negative influence on the standing of science in society. Hilary Rose correctly identifies this but then supposes that it has been feminism and environmentalism, working in tandem that have done much to challenge the pretensions of scientific reductionism. I would have thought that these two influences were minor compared to modern science's capacity for self harm. The self harm, in my view arises because of the consistent habit of the White Coats to make premature announcements of their successes. Every other week on the television news or in the papers, we have reports of new breakthroughs (usually cancer cures) or of new evidence confirming some impending doom—climate catastrophe, super bugs, ocean acidification, collapse of fish stocks, etc. Like the very super bugs themselves, the general populace eventually develops, via adaptation, an aversive response. People no longer take much of it very seriously. When you send out mixed messages, combining ecological catastrophism with Promethean claims of salvation via new technologies, and then fail to deliver, what else could you expect?

The premature and 'golly gosh' announcements of success or of impending doom arise for one simple reason—a Darwinian struggle for scarce funding. This is the era of short-term, results-based funding and you either produce the goods quickly or you starve. The whole landscape of scientific research has changed utterly in the last fifty years. When I began as a young research biologist in pest animal

research back in the 1960s, funding was rarely a critical issue. There were cashed-up industry funds (Wool Board, Wheat Board, Australian Meat and Livestock Corporation, and so on). CSIRO enjoyed an immensely high reputation and was well-funded. Most of the States had their own government research stations and, most importantly, there was a willingness on the part of the funding bodies to put money into long-term, basic research. For their part, the universities also enjoyed generous research funding. Like many other young graduates of my era, I was encouraged by my employer to return to the Academy and study for a higher degree. Science never had it so good.

There is a final irony in all this. Readers must now consider the awkward position confronting those fundamentalist Christians long accustomed to the ridicule of the EP mob (and their opponents) and, of course, to that of the general media (kick a Fundo for Science—or the ratings). Suddenly, they behold the spectacle of their long-time enemies falling upon each other in mortal combat. Should they rejoice or take pity? Certain of the Church Fathers were of the opinion that the spectacle of the suffering inflicted on the damned in hell would add to the happiness of the souls in heaven. But *Schadenfreude* is hardly a Christian virtue. There are theological problems—taking delight in the suffering of others is not in the spirit of *The Sermon on the Mount* or, for that matter, in the spirit of certain books of the Old Testament—Rejoice not when thine enemy falleth, and let not thine heart be glad when he stumbleth ...? (*Proverbs*). Besides, there is a more general problem for Christians, nicely summarised by Tertullian—*Omne enim spectaculum sine concussionem spiritus non est*. (There is no public entertainment which does not inflict spiritual damage). It is worth adding that he made this observation eighteen centuries before the advent of reality television and the ABC. This is a powerful argument for the efficacy of Christian prophecy—and for getting rid of the ABC.

DOVER BEACH¹

A Mordant Post-Christmas Reflection

It is bin day in our street and I am prompted to write this little reflection by the recent sight of grossly overloaded re-cycling bins full of Christmas wrapping paper, cardboard boxes, beer and wine bottles, and other such indicators of our annual binge —both monetary and the other kind. I'm sure the garbos must dread Christmas

In a largely post-Christian society, Christmas has become a great commercial spending frenzy and an outpouring of shallow emotionalism, largely bereft of any real spiritual underpinning—a festival of over-consumption. Outside of the churches, it is considered bad form to display crib scenes, these being an obvious barrier to the achievement of a truly egalitarian society where all religions (and irreligion) are equal, and any creedal preferences in this regard must remain private. The fact that our whole western civilisation owes its very existence to Christianity matters but little now. For the Holy Family, there is no room at the inn or any other public place. Indeed, it is probably bad form to use the term 'western civilisation' these days (Gandhi, when asked what he thought of western civilisation, replied that it sounded like a very good idea! I am beginning to see his point).

Sometimes, I entertain the idea that the various Christian communions in Australia ought to get together and change the celebration of the birth of Christ to a date in the middle of winter, thus leaving the celebration of 'Xmas' to the world of commerce. But of course, that would not work. The retail giants would quickly move in to exploit this new avenue of gift-giving. We easily forget that nearly all our 'gift days' were either instigated or commandeered by the retail world—Father's Day, Mother's Day, Valentine's Day, and so on. Each year, one of the first items of news immediately after Christmas Day is a report on retail sales. It usually precedes the Christmas messages from the leaders of the various Christian communions. I am writing this piece

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on Jan 4th and an item on the television news informs me that some of the retail grocery giants already have hot cross buns for sale. Here again, another custom related to the Christian religion has been so debased as to lose all its originally intended significance. The Resurrection has been supplanted by the Easter Bunny and the latter is (unfortunately) wholly immune to myxomatosis.

And yet, beneath all the tawdry tinsel and the surfeit of food and drink and present-giving, something of the former glory and beauty of Christmas remains. Families unite, and the thinning ranks at the churches experience a brief bolstering of numbers as 'submarine' Christians surface for their once-yearly visit. Carols are still sung, though many have little direct reference to the birth of Christ. One senses that, beneath all the outward trappings of secularised celebration, Christmas still provides some form of spiritual nourishment. There is that vague sense that life consists of something more than mere 'getting and spending', and that it has some sort of purpose and meaning beyond the mere biological processes of our animal natures.

In 1851, the English poet, Matthew Arnold penned a poem whilst on his honeymoon at Dover Beach. It is simply titled *Dover Beach*. The poem begins with a very beautiful description of a sea-side nightscape but then moves to a consideration of weightier things:

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle fur'l'd.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

This is probably the most quoted of all poetic excerpts dealing with the general loss of religious faith in the Western world. The irony is that Arnold himself, like so many of his well-educated contemporaries, played no small part in the general attack on traditional Christianity. And yet, there is an obvious note of remorse and sadness in his poem.

Indeed, if you wish to chart the general demise of Christian belief in the West, one obvious place to begin is in the England of the 18th and

19th centuries. And, perhaps, no-one has described the whole business better than A.N. Wilson in his 1999 book *God's Funeral* (W.W. Norton, NY & London). It is a masterly analysis by a man who, himself, had turned away from the religion of his youth and his forebears. And yet, his obvious sympathy with a religious view of the world is everywhere evident. I was therefore not surprised to learn that Wilson returned to his earlier Anglican Faith about a decade after the publication of *God's Funeral*. (see pg. 104 *et seq* in this present volume).

'We are engaged in a battle of ideas' was the oft-repeated maxim of B.A. Santamaria, the founder of this newspaper [*News Weekly*]. Wilson would wholeheartedly agree. What both men realised, in their very different ways, was the enormous influence of philosophical ideas on the lives of ordinary people. We too easily suppose that the world of the philosophers—the 'longhairs'—is quite remote from everyday life and the convictions of the ordinary 'person in the street'. It is not so. Since the 18th C, the gradual extension of public education has meant that all of us are exposed to a range of different philosophies and sociological theories. True enough, most of the great philosophers were university dons, but they taught students too. And many of those students went on to become teachers themselves. Others became journalists or, in more recent times, radio and TV commentators. This is how philosophical ideas are propagated. It is idle to suppose that such people come to their subject matter in a wholly objective way—the thing is simply impossible.

The philosophical ideas that arose in the 18th and 19th centuries were not always promulgated by philosophers. Historians and political theorists had an important part in the process too but, inevitably, one can trace their particular notions back to philosophical assumptions or ideas. In the 18th C, Wilson places particular emphasis on Edward Gibbon and David Hume. Gibbon, of course, was an historian, not a philosopher, but the whole thrust of his famous *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is anti-religious in tone. I could give dozens of examples, but this, from his account of Antonine Rome, will suffice:

The various modes of worship which prevailed in the Roman world were all considered by the people as equally true; by the philosopher as equally false; and by the magistrate as equally useful.

But most of his anti-religious venom was reserved for the early

Christians, who are repeatedly lambasted in his history. We too easily forget that Gibbon's account was, for a very long time indeed, the only easily accessible history of the Roman Empire and, indeed, of early Christianity. It influenced huge numbers of people.

The influence of David Hume in this matter of the loss of Christian Faith is too well known to require comment here. Suffice to say that, even today, prominent atheists regard him as a sort of secular saint. His attack on 'the argument from design' is trotted out in nearly all undergraduate philosophy courses as some sort of 'proof' that religious ideas are a nonsense.

There follows, in Wilson's account, a great procession of intellectuals, all having their little part to play—George Hegel, Karl Marx, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Ernest Renan, Herbert Spencer, Beatrice Webb, T.H. Huxley, Charles Darwin and, of course, Matthew Arnold. These are but a few of the names you will encounter in *God's Funeral*. Not all of the characters are unbelievers and, indeed, Wilson gives some space to those involved in the counter-attack—John Henry Newman, for example. Readers of the book may be surprised that so little space is devoted to Friedrich Nietzsche. His announcement of 'the death of God' is certainly the most quoted, but the flight from belief was already well advanced by the time of Nietzsche's 'Overman'. In a sense, all that Nietzsche did was to point out the obvious consequences—a move beyond the categories of good and evil and the inevitable deification of pure power.

It seems to me, at any rate, that behind all the bewildering array of anti-Christian philosophies arising over the last two centuries or so, there is one common thread. That common thread is the firm conviction that the human intellect, entirely of its own power, can provide the necessary basis for a stable society and a sense of self-fulfilment and happiness for the individual. This, after all, has always been the great utopian dream of the secular reformers. And yet, whilst their great programs of secular reform have, in large part, come to fruition, the results are hardly encouraging. True enough, standards of living have greatly improved, and we live longer and more comfortable lives. But suicide rates continue to climb, and the use of anti-depressant drugs has also risen sharply. If we are to adopt Aristotle's idea that the proper 'end' of a human life is happiness, then we have reason to be concerned. The theory—popular since the time of

Socrates—that better education was the key to overcoming evil in the world, has not delivered on its promise. Indeed, as many previous articles in *News Weekly* have demonstrated, the very opposite is true in many cases. Malcolm Muggeridge once opined that ‘we have educated ourselves into imbecility’, and I am inclined to agree.

And so, here we are, after yet another Christmas—a small, increasingly beleaguered band of believers harassed and menaced by the nanny state, ridiculed by our opponents, and ignored by most others. And yet, we know that our position is not new—the Faith has been under attack many times before and has emerged victorious. I very much like the motto adopted by the great Abbey at Monte Casino in Italy. It was destroyed by the Lombards circa 585, by the Saracens in 884, by the Normans in 1046, by an earthquake in 1349 and by the Americans in 1944. Each time it has been rebuilt. The motto is *Succisa virescit*—‘Cut down, it grows ever stronger’.

Whilst he was on a speaking tour in England, Mark Twain became ill and, so we are told, was even reported back in America, as having died. Reputedly, he sent off a telegram saying, ‘reports of my death are greatly exaggerated’. So it is with God.

THE LANGUAGE OF DESPAIR¹

When most country folk take a train trip to Melbourne, it is rarely for sightseeing on the way. Once you hit suburbia, for the most part the scenery consists of rusting tin fences, brick walls, weed-infested banks, and all the accumulated debris of a mechanical civilisation. What you look at from the train window is the backside of a civilisation—the bared and ugly buttocks of an industrial society. And those images of squalor never seem to change much. The rusting signal boxes, the newspapers caught up in the rank vegetation, the piles of slowly-decaying iron, were all there when I was a child. There is something timeless about suburban railway-line squalor. Even those faded signs on the walls advertising ‘Dr Morse’s Indian Root Pills’ have survived several generations of travellers. Likewise with some of the slogans: ‘Don’t Get Yanked Into War’ is still faintly visible on the brick wall, decades after I first saw it as a youngster. Some might even say that it is still relevant!

Few people would find anything uplifting in such sights. One who did was the late Michael Wharton, better known as Peter Simple, an eccentric columnist for the *Sunday Telegraph* in Britain. During the 1970s (and I cannot be more precise with the date) he wrote a little piece in his column regarding official plans to ‘tidy up’ the general environs of suburban railway lines. Part of his response to such plans goes thus:

They are miniature wildernesses, places that men have made, certainly, but places which have the pathos of all things that have once been used but are now neglected and abandoned: tangled garden-plots, rusting springs, shattered bricks, shards, books sodden by the rain and, blistered by the sun, lumps of newspaper that no one will ever read again.

The train, held up by signals, slows down in the summer heat; the wondering eye looks through the glass into those suburban jungles and finds there, as in childhood, a mysterious poetry. Who knows what strange flowers—moly, nepenthes—may grow among that

¹ Previously unpublished.

unloved, grimy undergrowth?

Perhaps it is as well this has not occurred to the official mind. Wouldn't it wish to institutionalise this sense of wonder, to incorporate it into its official system: tidy up almost all the eyesores in its own image but leave, for recreational purposes, a few *Protected Areas of Designated Suburban Railway Squalor*?

In this age of ecological correctness, I doubt that Peter Simple's view would find many adherents. And yet, there is one group of people (if one could really call them a group) that does have some real emotional connection with such railway squalor. These people are the graffiti producers. In fact, when I supposed above that the environs of the suburban rail lines exhibited a sort of timeless character, the one exception would have to be the graffiti. I speak here not of the scrawled political slogans or the dribbling obscenities (Peter Simple very tastefully describes the subject matter of this latter category as 'advice on human reproductive processes'). Nor am I concerned with those outpourings of puppy love that one sees painted on hoardings or carved into trees and park benches, arrowed hearts with 'Ginger Mick loves Doreen' or similar. Such little inscriptions are probably as old as writing itself. I am concerned, rather, with those strange hieroglyphics which fall in a sort of no-man's-land between recognisable written characters and formless doodling, or between modern art and wholly randomised angular forms. Some of us, of course, would make no distinction between modern art and wholly randomized forms, but opinions differ on this matter and I refuse to be drawn into an argument. Whatever the case, the graffiti producers of the latter categories—a sort of post literate language—seems to be a new development in the ancient ecosystem of the railway wilderness. Here is a shining example of Darwinian evolution at work.

The more astute observer—a sort of railway siding anthropologist—will be able to discern many other characteristics of this mode of human communication. In the first place, one can quite properly speak of a demography of graffiti. Its presence and abundance is demonstrably correlated with urban wastelands such as rail corridors. Furthermore, within its total range or territory, one can speak of trends in abundance or density. It works something like this. As you travel in from the most outer of the suburbs, the density of graffiti on available substrates (walls, tin fences, billboards, etc.) gradually increases until a maximum is reached in those industrial suburbs ringing the inner city. Thereafter, as one approaches the city centre

itself, the density of graffiti tends to diminish.

One other characteristic in the demography of graffiti is clearly discernible. Within its general habitat, a definite dominance hierarchy prevails. The most favoured sites, large walls or fences in full view of the travelling public, tend to exhibit the most developed forms of the product. These are often works on a massive scale, full of intricate detail and usually many-coloured. Less favoured sites such as metal signal boxes, car bodies, posts, small billboards, are colonised by more primitive forms of the work, often no more than a single scrawl made (one supposes) with a single movement of the hand. A comparison with biological colonisation is not at all out of place. The most complex and well-developed species occupy the most fertile niches whilst the lowest-order colonisers are pushed to the marginal habitats.

We need to differentiate, too, between what I will call *scriptsorial* (to coin a new word) graffiti and *pictorial* graffiti. The former is related to written text, the latter is not. There is, of course, a graduation from one to the other so that strict categorisation is not always possible. As a rule though, the pictorial form is on a larger scale, occupies the better niches, and is usually multi-coloured. Moreover, the pictorial graffiti often shows signs of real artistic ability. The colours are well chosen and well blended. The work shows some evidence of overall concept and of planning. Remembering that these larger pictorial works are probably executed under the cover of darkness and in some haste, lest the offenders be observed and apprehended, we have to grudgingly admit that production in such circumstances requires real talent.

We now come to the most difficult question of all. Does graffiti have any meaning? Let us leave aside, for the moment, the question of why it was produced. Can it be read or deciphered in such a way as to deliver a common understanding to all who study it? On first appraisal, that seems a silly notion. The stuff seems to be simply some sort of doodling by minds which have no other purpose than to deface or to establish some sort of territorial conquest—‘see that there; I did that’. One thinks of those Viking raiders of old who, having sacked some little village, were often wont to carve a rune or two on some imposing local monument.

And yet, I still have some lingering doubts. Is it not the case that, when you look at *scriptsorial* graffiti, certain shapes or certain strange

hieroglyphs seem to show up wherever you go? Sometimes, those strange scrawls seem maddeningly close to a certain English or Greek or Cyrillic character and yet, not quite the thing. They are not quite intelligible, but yet not really to be classified as random movements of a marking pen or a paint brush. A possibility begins to form in your mind. Could those strange hieroglyphs really constitute some form of primitive written language? If that were the case, then it would have to be some sort of unconscious action—a case of the writer being simply an unwitting intermediary allowing the unconscious mind to express itself. We must suppose it to be unconscious since to do otherwise would be to postulate some sort of underground ‘school’ in graffiti, where the language is taught.

Now I am well aware of certain types of graffiti which are partially legible to ordinary folk like us. The letters are simply deformed English characters which probably could be recognised with a bit of practice. Indeed, there are helpful sites on the World Wide Web which instruct the young criminal on how to produce such deformed letters with a single, curved stroke of the spray can or marking pen. These letters are not what I have in mind. I am thinking, rather, of markings which cannot be associated with any recognisable characters in any language and yet seem to be reproduced, as the same shapes, in different places at different times. It is a case of something ‘Whose worth’s unknown, although his height be taken’ as Shakespeare tells us in one of his sonnets.

I suppose we have a sort of precedent for graffiti as unconscious language in that strange case of William Butler Yeats and the ‘automatic writing’ of his wife, which led to the publication of *A Vision* in 1926. More pertinent, perhaps, is that scholarly work on cultural ethnology and mythology, *Hamlet’s Mill*, by Giorgio De Santillana and Hertha von Dechend (Nonpareil Books—D.R. Godine, New Hampshire, 1977). Here the authors present some very interesting data on the unconscious transmission of certain universal elements of myth. Meaning can be transmitted without understanding. We have that on the good authority of Aristotle who defined an esoteric doctrine as one which is learned long before it is understood.

Here then is a golden opportunity for all those young and budding students of language and ethnology padding about the Groves of Academe. Get yourself a research grant to travel around the world,

photographing graffiti. When you get back home, compare all of your material and look for some common symbols. If you are successful then, without doubt, you will achieve a status comparable to that of Sir James Frazer. You will have discovered a new language and a new, universal tribe. You may even be able to translate this language. The world will be your oyster. If not, well you will have had a good holiday at any rate—and all at the taxpayers' expense. Mind you, I could be years behind the running with this suggestion. Some American museum of modern art has probably commissioned such a study and, even while I write this, distinguished academic journals are probably moderating an intense debate in the 'correspondence' columns. After all, Peter Simple did briefly mention a rather shadowy figure called 'The Master of Paddington' whose works in graffiti are avidly sought by just such museums.

But let us leave aside for the moment such matters of intrinsic meaning, interesting though they are. How is one to interpret all this graffiti stuff in terms of human behaviour? I am not a psychologist or sociobiologist, but I do have a theory. I propose that the occurrence and relative abundance of what I will call 'traditional' or 'old fashioned' graffiti is simply a direct and tangible manifestation of human anxiety, human frustration, and of a sense of hopelessness. It is, in short, a sort of index of spiritual sickness. For most of us surely, meaningful work is the only way in which the innate desire to create, to express ourselves, can be satisfied. In those industrial suburbs where the factories of Gradgrind and Co. have not yet become fully automated, the soul-destroying activities of human machines on production lines prevents any normal expression of art. The ancient idea of work as craft is gone. But the artistic desire burns on and, finding itself thwarted at every natural opening, finally expresses itself in the diseased form of graffiti. The crippled intellect, deformed by the blight of unemployment or the mindless, robotic actions of the production line, slouches out under the cover of darkness to relieve itself in this manner. It is a sort of defecation of the intellect.

Now this sort of explanation might do for the sorts of graffiti that I observed along suburban railway lines in former times. But things have changed in the graffiti scene over the last two decades. here is a new breed of graffiti and it is not necessarily produced by sick people. It is more commonly produced by hip people. According to the New South Wales Government's *Graffiti Information Service*, one type of graffiti has

come to dominate the practice over the past twenty years. This is the graffiti which 'forms an integral part of an entrenched sub-culture called Hip Hop'. It is difficult to give a brief summary of what Hip Hop entails. One element consists of the performance of certain types of music where human voices talk over the beat of the music or where elaborate sound mixing is used to produce 'stuttering' or scratching effects. This is a sort of auditory, dithyrambic, graffiti. Another element is break dancing where the participants engage in vigorous athletic contortions and whose exponents, I am told, included Michael Jackson. I have not personally witnessed such dancing but have it on good authority that the actions resemble those of a Hottentot wench under the influence of cantharides; an apostasy of the dance perhaps, to misquote Wagner. But 'Spraycan Art' or 'Writing', which is how these folk quaintly refer to graffiti, is also part of the Hip Hop culture.

Earlier in this essay, I made the assumption that graffiti of the unintelligible type is a relatively recent development. That may be a dangerous assumption. We must at least entertain the possibility that such a mode of expression—an attempted relief from intellectual despair—may be as old as human history. We have an account in the ancient literature of the shipwrecked Aristippus and his men being swept up onto the Rhodian Shore. They have no idea where they are, and they are gripped by that fear associated with all unknown places—'here there be tygers'. Then, in the sand, they see markings—unintelligible but clearly of human origin. And so Aristippus delivered up a line which has now become a commonplace in the history books: 'Let us be of good hope, for indeed, I see the traces of men'. I sometimes imagine that what he saw was an early example of graffiti. Perhaps some outcast from the nearby city, some youth recently made jobless as a result of a new shipment of slave labour, had scrawled his frustration and sense of hopelessness upon the sand.

Even more shocking thoughts come to mind. Readers of this piece will no doubt recall a number of recent television programs dealing with the development of *Homo sapiens*. It started with Jacob Bronowski and Sir Kenneth Clark, then everyone else jumped on the bandwagon. Certain early cave drawings from whatever *lithic* period are given as evidence of our 'coming of age' as it were. This interest in self-expression, they suppose, really marks out the beginnings for civilised humankind. I think you know what I am about to say, so I'll just set the scene for you. It is a starlight night sometime in the Neolithic era. The

tribal elders are up on the hill with the young initiands. They stand between two great rocks placed there to mark the positions of the setting sun at the summer and winter solstices. The lesson in astrogeography is about to begin and the chief teacher points to a constellation of stars we know as Ursa Major. Tomorrow afternoon, it will be basic geometry. Down below, meanwhile, two spotty-faced youths recently ejected from the class for sub-standard work, creep into a storage cave under the cover of darkness. One holds aloft a sputtering torch. The other carries a crude pot, possibly made from a Pterodactyl skull. It contains red ochre and some lumps of charcoal. They are clearly up to no good.

Watermark

A DOG'S LIFE¹

Reflections of a Grey Nomad

Like many of the caravan parks we have visited recently, this one has a large sign out front saying 'Dogs Welcome'. And I am currently sitting beside my camper trailer watching the caravan folk walk past with their dogs. They are heading for the special dog exercise yard. The latter seem to have taken over from children's playgrounds. There again, there are not many children in evidence here. As they walk by, the dog owners with their charges on special extendable leashes, passers-by stop to admire the dogs and make conversation. 'Isn't she beautiful! How old is she?' 'How do you get her coat so shiny?' 'Is she a purebred?' One of the smaller, fluffy dogs has a pink ribbon tied on her head (of course, I only assume she is female—one must be careful these days).

Walking past the serried ranks of four-wheel drives in the park, I notice that quite a few have those 'stick-figure' families stuck on the back window. Dogs and cats are always included because they are nowadays considered to be part of the family. Your 'nuclear family' in fact, consists of mum, dad, child, plus cat or dog. Families swap photos of their dogs on Facebook. Once, when mum or dad dragged out the family photo album, you knew you were in for a session of baby photos. Now its dogs or cats. And, of course, once the new family member arrives, it's soon time to enrol them in puppy school. Here they will be taught obedience. Funny that, because human children are taught just the opposite—to 'do their own thing'.

Yesterday we drove down town for a coffee. The cafe had a special 'doggie corner' outside, equipped with a drinking bowl and fountain. You could, if you so wished, buy your dog a puppachino. After all, why should they miss out when you are enjoying your latte and cake? Let's not discriminate. As Peter Singer says, that's speciesism. When a dog arrives, the cafe owner comes out with a special 'doggie treat'. 'It's on the house' she says. People come over to talk to the dogs and stroke them. One or two even take out their smartphone for a doggie snapshot.

¹ First Published in *News Weekly*, Feb 23, 2019 (J.C. Casey *nom de plume*)

If you wish your dog to look its best, then you will need to have it—sorry, him or her—groomed at regular intervals. There are now mobile dog wash and clipping services all over the country to keep your family member looking (and smelling) at his or her best. By the way, I use the terms ‘his’ and ‘her’ fully cognisant of the probability that there are transgender dogs out there being forced into these stereotyped roles. Very soon, I suspect someone will launch a crowd-funded campaign for the recognition of canine gender fluidity. It’s something Charles Darwin overlooked in his work but, then again he was an upper class British snob.

But, of course, in this fallen world of ours, even our treasured pets get ill from time to time. They, like us, are of corruptible flesh. Then it is time to head off to the vet. And I hope you have taken out your pet insurance, because this will be an expensive business. A major operation could cost you thousands. Even a snake bite could set you back several hundred. No doubt the vets are loving all this. It certainly beats driving out to some remote dairy farm on a winter's night to assist a cow with a difficult birth—standing in the mud and cow dung with your arm inserted into the poor beast's rear end. There are easier ways to make a quid.

By the by, I can remember back to a time when vets called themselves simply ‘Mr’ or ‘Miss’ etc., but then they voted to call themselves ‘Dr’. And that's quite understandable if your patients are regarded as members of human families. I predict, though, that some vets will soon revert to ‘Mr’ or ‘Ms’ etc. because they will become specialists—orthopaedic surgeons, eye specialists, etc. They will need to distinguish themselves from their lowlier brothers and sisters (sorry, I'm gender stereotyping again). The men will wear three-piece suits and the ladies pleated skirts. Their inner-city consulting rooms will have brass nameplates on the doors and the waiting room will have leather chairs and *Vogue* magazines to read.

But let us suppose the worst, and your treasured family member dies, despite the best effort of all the specialists at the animal hospital. You can, at this distressing time, engage the services of your local pet funeral parlour and, later, have the ‘loved one’ interred at your local pet cemetery. For all I know, there may well be grief counsellors specially trained in this area. If there are not, there soon will be. It's a market waiting to be exploited. Somewhere or other, I am prepared to bet that

there will be a 'forward thinking' Christian pastor who does special pet funeral services and gives long homilies on St Francis of Assisi with the wolf of Gubbio, and St Paul of Thebes with his raven.

Now, you may accuse me of being a hopelessly old-fashioned bigot, still living in a past age when dogs were regarded as faithful animals and 'man's best friend' but, most assuredly, not as family members. And I must plead guilty as charged. It's not so much a question of living in the past or having 'old fashioned' views. I simply cannot understand the modern attitude towards pets. Put quite plainly, it seems to me that pets are now surrogate children. It is an extraordinary business. At the very time when human birth rates in many parts of the western world are near or below replacement rates and millions of unborn human children are killed annually, dog and cat ownership has soared. And, by the by, I have never heard of abortion clinics for dogs and cats. No, no. Puppies and kittens are far too valuable.

Some years ago now, I came across a book first published way back in 1896. It was called *Rat Catching for the Use of Schools*. The author, a Mr H.C. Barkley, was a railway engineer but had obviously done quite a bit of rat catching in his youth. His textbook, he explained, was aimed at young boys who would otherwise be doomed to sad lives as public servants or, even worse, as politicians 'given to making speeches when parliament was not sitting'. Far better that they be given the opportunity of a real and honourable job—that of a rat catcher.

A good deal of the book is concerned with the subject of ratting dogs and, for this game—as he says—the shorter the pedigree, the better the dog. Now I mention Mr Barkley because the man was an obvious dog-lover. Indeed, in this regard he was a sentimental sop. In the introduction to his book he tells us that all his human characters are fictions but that the dogs are not. Flash, Grindum, Pepper, and Chance are all real and he recalls them with great fondness. But he also tells us that his dogs are to be treated as dogs, not as humans. They should be allowed to live dog-centred lives, not forced to live human-centred ones. In this sense the man is a good Aristotelian. And dogs, he says, should be taught to come to their masters, not the other way round. Furthermore, Barkley insists that they should not be allowed inside the house. He is prepared to make an exception for Grindum, but the

circumstances are extraordinary. Grindum came to him in the company of two small children abandoned by their father (who had earlier killed their mother). The terrified children could only be coaxed into the house if their beloved Grindum came with them.

Well, I'm with Mr Barkley. I like dogs very much and still remember all my childhood rabbiting dogs. But I like them as dogs, not as humans.

Watermark

I WISH I HAD SAID THAT¹ On the Art of Quoting

There is a famous anecdote concerning the painter James McNeil Whistler and Oscar Wilde. After a particularly witty remark by Whistler, Wilde said 'I wish I had said that'. 'You will, Oscar, you will' replied Whistler. Here, in this little quote, we have one of the reasons why quotes are so often used. They can serve to make some point more succinctly or, perhaps with more force or more wit than we are able to do with our own laboured prose. Not that Oscar Wilde was lacking in that ability.

But there is an art in using quotations and, like most arts, is something that comes with experience. This is most easily demonstrated by reference to a common problem with student essays. Very often, secondary and tertiary students, when they are called upon to write an essay on some topic, resort to the use of many long quotations because they lack that ability to put down their own original thoughts in writing. And, of course, they may not have a sufficient grasp of the subject matter to form an opinion in any case. They simply put down other peoples' opinions and link them with a sentence or two of their own. The ability for discursive writing requires background knowledge and that comes with experience.

And so, as one reads more widely, one's stock of useful quotations increases. These days, of course, it is possible to bring up an array of quotes via Google without any need to rely on memory. But, again, there is still the problem of choosing from amongst many alternatives proffered. In any case, the choice of quotations given on the internet sites very often reflects the compiler's own taste and, in this regard, can be quite restrictive.

In general terms, quotes should be used sparingly and then only to reinforce or embellish some point already established. A common shortcoming—and I am guilty of it myself—is to use a quote (or several quotes) as a sort of proof in lieu of proper argument. I might

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quote C.S. Lewis or Dr Johnson, thereby supposing that their agreement with my particular proposition is all that I require to prove my point. But they are fallible, like the rest of us. Recall that famous story concerning Dr Johnson and his *Dictionary*. A lady inquired as to why he had defined 'pastern' as 'the knee of a horse'. 'Pure ignorance, Madam', Johnson said.

Where do most of our well-known quotes come from? If we were to compile some sort of citation index, I think the Bible would be at the top of the list—most probably the *King James Version*. Next, I suppose, might be Shakespeare (in the Anglosphere in any case). After that, it becomes more difficult to rank the sources. Dr Johnson would rank highly, as would the Romantic poets. But, of course tastes change. One hundred years ago Homer and Virgil would have been much more widely quoted because Latin and Greek were more widely taught. That is not the case today. This is a great pity, for these languages lend themselves so beautifully to the short quote, often used as a motto. Can you remember your school motto? My first school had the motto *Servabo Fidem*—I will keep the Faith. However, the most apt motto known to me is itself a quote from a longer motto to be found in St Paul's Cathedral. The memorial for Sir Christopher Wren, buried in that Cathedral, reads *Si monumentis requiris circumspice*—If you seek his monument, look around you. The motto I have in mind is to be found at the School of Forestry in Creswick, Victoria. It is situated in the bush and surrounded by well-kept plantations. It reads simply *Circumspice* (look around you)! One word says all that needs to be said.

Poetry is particularly suitable for quotes because it generally manages to say in a few words what a piece of prose might say in many. Moreover poetry is memorable—we tend to retain it in our memories much more easily. But memorising poetry seems to be somewhat neglected at school these days. Older readers of this piece will remember their school readers or poetry anthologies with fondness and will, no doubt, be able to reel off many lines from Tennyson or Keats or Banjo Patterson. But, of course, tastes differ and what one person might regard as eminently quotable another might regard as pedestrian at the best. Here, of course, I can quote an old Latin adage—*De gustibus non est disputandum*. In modern parlance, one person's majestic waterfall is another person's hydro-electric opportunity.

Even so, certain sentences or lines, by their sheer beauty, are universally acknowledged as being eminently quotable. Think, for instance of Homer's 'rose-fingered dawn' or 'wine dark sea'. Is it not remarkable that some of the most beautiful descriptions of nature come at the very dawn of Western literature and have never been surpassed for their beauty? Here, I might recount a little discovery of my own. Many years ago, I was obliged to read certain of the works of the early Church Fathers, in particular the 'three Cappadocian's'—St. Basil, St Gregory of Nyssa and St. Gregory Nazianzus. Buried amongst these sometimes heavy theological scripts was a series of letters between these great men and their close friends. In one of these letters, Gregory of Nyssa is struggling to describe the beauty of his monastery location. His mountain, he says, even surpasses the beauty of the Poet's (i.e Homer's) Mount Neriton in Ithaca of which he says is 'far seen with quivering leaves'. It is difficult for me to communicate to the reader, the effect of those five words upon my imagination. You have to imagine the weary sailors first catching sight of their beloved Ithaca as Mount Neriton appears in the far distance. As they come closer its tree-clad slopes 'quiver'. It is that word 'quivering' that does all the work because, if you know your Homer, you will know that all of nature for Homer was actuated by spiritual forces—trees had their Dryads and they quiver with spiritual energy. A pagan notion? St. Augustine did not think so. In his great commentary on the *Book of Genesis* (*De Genesi ad Litteram*) He says, inter alia: 'As the creative will of a sculptor hovers over a piece of wood, or as the spiritual soul spreads through all the limbs of the body; thus it is with the Holy Ghost; it hovers over all things with a creative and formative power'.

Finally, I might venture some advice to younger readers who are interested in my subject matter. Whenever you come across what strikes you as a memorable line (or lines) write it down and record the source as well. Years ago, I purchased a nicely bound book of blank pages and began populating those pages with quotes. Nowadays, I use a digital reader and simply bookmark my quotes. My latest entry was only two days ago. It is from that fine American commentator on religious and philosophical matters, David Bentley Hart. Here is his suitably sarcastic remark on the propensity of many moderns to discount the past:

... our benighted ancestors—those poor slouching brutes who invented philosophy, the plastic arts, the hospital, Doric columns, flying buttresses, stained glass, and all the rest of that savage

gallimaufry of gauds and baubles ...

But of course, in all that appears above, I have one final request—'don't quote me on that'!

Watermark

BEAUTY AND THE BEHOLDER¹

The provincial city in which I live, Bendigo, has just acquired (on loan) a statue of Marilyn Monroe which is three stories high and stands in our city park. On days of inclement weather, the citizens of Bendigo can take shelter under her flowing dress and, should they be so inclined, peer up at her nether regions. None of the local feminists have complained, as far as I know. This 'installation' is all part of a forthcoming Marilyn Monroe Exhibition to be staged by the local art gallery. The gallery curator, Tansy Curtin, admits that 'it does tread a fine line between fine art and kitsch'. However, she goes on to point out Australia's 'great love affair' with large sculptures, bringing to our attention, the Big Prawn, the Big Crayfish, the Big Banana, etc. In line with the Exhibition, The La Trobe University Campus at Bendigo is to offer a fully accredited elective subject, *Exhibiting Culture: Marilyn*.

I have no doubt that the forthcoming Marilyn Monroe exhibition will be a great success. Previous ventures along similar lines have brought huge crowds to Bendigo. The art gallery people up here know how to pull a crowd. Whether or not they have the same acumen in relation to judging artistic merit is another matter. To be honest I am in no position to pass judgement upon their choice but then neither, I suspect, is anyone these days. For it seems to be the case nowadays that the only measure of artistic merit is popularity. And this brings us directly to that thorny question of exactly how we are to make judgements concerning artistic merit.

We could start with a comparison. Not far from the Marilyn Monroe statue in Bendigo, perhaps 500 metres as the crow flies, is the Sacred Heart Cathedral. Begun in 1896, the cathedral was not completed until 1977. Built in the Gothic style it is, by comparison with the great European cathedrals, a dwarf. Nonetheless, its imposing spire, tipped by a three tonne bronze cross, rises 86 metres into the sky and is visible throughout the city. Like its European counterparts, it has its fierce gargoyles, its carved foliage, its impressive pipe organ, its relics and,

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above all else, its sacred geometry. Its great bells (a recent acquisition) ring out the Angelus each day to a largely indifferent or ignorant audience. It is filled with great works of art. The *cathedra*, or bishop's chair, is hand carved from Austrian oak by the Tyrolese wood-carver Ferdinand Stuflesser of St Ulrich, Groden. There are beautiful tapestries hanging from the walls, chalices of silver and gold, and richly embroidered vestments. True enough, it attracts its quota of tourists, for it is part of the local touring circuit, but you may be sure that the Marilyn Monroe exhibition will attract a far greater number. And so, you are left to wonder just how a demountable steel and aluminium structure fashioned in the likeness of a 1950s film star and sex symbol, can not only measure up artistically to a cathedral, but can draw more public interest—especially on Sundays (and in Lent)!

It is a feature of most modern treatise on aesthetics that they inform the lay reader on just about every aspect of the field except the very aspect that the non-specialist wishes to pursue, namely, the possibility of objective standards in the appreciation of beauty. The difficulty in arriving at some shared conception of beauty is certainly not a new one: the phrase *De gustibus non est disputandum* dates back a very long way indeed, perhaps to the Middle Ages. Of course, back then, they may have limited their observations purely to what they might have termed 'lower' tastes. Certainly, from the 18th C onward, the question of objectivity in the judgement of art—which I here equate with the judgement of the beautiful—becomes a very problematical one indeed. And yet there is an obvious difficulty in deciding that beauty is merely a subjective thing for, in that case, the very concept of beauty would not be communicable. Whatever the theorists might say, each of us does have some notion of beauty and, to some extent at least, we can communicate and share that notion with others.

The key concept which differentiates the modern view of beauty from ancient views lies in what the famous 18th C philosopher Immanuel Kant calls 'disinterestedness'. Kant wants to draw a sharp distinction between moral judgements and judgements relating to beauty. To judge an action to be morally good is to become aware that one has a duty to perform the action, and to become so aware is to gain a desire to perform it. But the awareness involved in judging an object to be beautiful is a disinterested awareness because it does not involved us in any consequent action of duty. Other 18th C moral philosophers took much the same view—Hume, Shaftesbury and Hutcheson being

prominent examples. They differed from Kant in that they viewed all pleasure as ‘disinterested’, even the pleasure of some virtuous moral act.

This move of the 18th C philosophers had the effect of cutting off the metaphysical base which had, hitherto, underpinned the notion of the beautiful for, in earlier times, the contemplation of Beauty was anything but disinterested. In the West, that metaphysical base dates back to ancient Greece and it continued throughout the Christian era up until the Reformation. We could begin with the Pythagoreans for whom Beauty was intimately associated with mathematics—ratios and proportions and, indeed, numbers themselves. Even today, you might hear or read of a mathematician who praises another for his or her ‘elegant’ or ‘beautiful’ solution to a particular mathematical problem.

With Plato, the concept of the beautiful is clear—Beauty is one of the Forms. However, beauty in art and poetry is another matter altogether. Indeed, Plato has a very low opinion of poets, artists and playwrights, and the most that one might say of their productions (on a positive note) is that they are very poor imitations of those Forms which they struggle to represent. For all that, we might say of any earthly scene or of any artistic production, that its merit or otherwise consists entirely on its ability to transmit to us, the boundless beauty of that Form which it struggles to represent.

The medieval Schoolmen, following on from Aristotle, based their theory of beauty on the concept of being. A thing is not fully beautiful until it achieves all that its nature calls for, that is to say, until it fully realises its kind of being. In his *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas identifies three attributes required for the full realisation of beauty—integrity (or completeness), clarity and proportion. Clarity refers to the degree to which an entity—a being—is able to radiate its brilliance of form whilst proportion refers to the harmonious arrangement of parts within a being in relation to its end.

Now these older conceptions of the beautiful stand in stark opposition to the more modern notion of ‘disinterestedness’. The former require of the recipient an active involvement. The contemplation of the beautiful is a means of achieving the ultimate goal of union with The One or, for Christians, a portal for Grace and, ultimately for union with Beauty itself in the Beatific Vision. All beauty

has a Divine referent. This is as true for Homer as it is for Aquinas. All of Homer's images of nature shimmer with the Divine and all of nature operates through Divine intention. Within a Tradition, be it early Greek religion or medieval Christianity, the concept of beauty was, therefore, a shared understanding which relied on an objective truth. Beauty did not reside in the eye of the beholder but came from elsewhere, and it was the business of the human intellect or human soul to discern that beauty and render it intelligible to us.

One of the unintended consequences of the Reformation was to destroy this earlier notion of metaphysical Beauty and to replace it with a much more sterile and puritanical view of nature. The aesthetic and the moral, hitherto closely aligned, now opposed each other. To take wilful pleasure in nature or human images of nature was almost sinful. This was the Reformers' reaction to what they saw as the excesses of medieval and Renaissance Christianity. Greek philosophy was to be shunned for, in their eyes, it had infected the pure simplicity of the Gospels and led humanity astray. It is from this base that the 18th C philosophers proceed. Their new theories of aesthetics do away with metaphysics and in its place they seem to imagine another sense organ, not unlike those dealing with smell or sight, which receive and transmit Hume's 'tastes' or 'sentiments'.

And this, in short, is why nearly all modern works on aesthetics discuss everything except the possibility of objective judgements in the arts. Most modern commentators in this field produce weighty tomes on 'intentionality', 'response theories of art', 'art objects', etc. There are long discussions on Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, and on Duchamp's *Readymades* and *L.H.O.O.Q.* (a cheap reproduction of the Mona Lisa upon which he painted a moustache and beard). I find the stuff pretty much unreadable. It opens the flood gates to the banal, the ugly, the offensive and, yes, the satanic. Beauty has long been banished and we might like St. Augustine cry out in our loss: "Too late have I loved you, O Beauty of ancient days".

One of the most curious consequences of this loss is the fervour of disbelievers when it comes to the appreciation of Beauty. Militant atheists are almost always at great pains to let you know just how much they love Bach's *B Minor Mass*, or the great Icon paintings or 'the numinosity of the night sky' (as that arch atheist Phillip Adams once exclaimed). They want, nay, demand that you appreciate just how

redundant any metaphysical view of Beauty is. They are perfectly capable of experiencing the highest feelings of emotion, passion, etc. without any need of some higher referent. But this, it seems to me, is entirely false. The experience gained from listening to, say, the *St Matthew Passion* must surely be of a heightened order for a serious Christian believer. When we come to that famous passage where Peter denies Christ for the third time, then repents his actions, the words and music of the famous aria *Erbarme dich, mein Gott* must surely evoke a response from a believer which differs from that of an unbeliever. The former deals with a real and very personal sorrow and repentance, because the subject matter is a revealed Truth, not just a story. Peter's is the very predicament of the believer, who so often denies Christ in his or her own life. And this, surely, is Bach's very position too. For goodness sake, it is why he wrote the work! This, of course, is vigorously denied by many non-believers.

Ethics (in the traditional sense) and aesthetics are two very different things. The great Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges once wrote a famous short story, *Deutsches Requiem* where a former commandant of Tarnowitz Concentration Camp, Otto Dietrich zur Linde, gives us his thoughts on Shakespeare and Brahms whilst he awaits execution:

I wish anyone who is held in awe and wonder, quivering with tenderness and gratitude, transfixed by some passage in the work of these blessed men—anyone so touched—to know that I too was once transfixed like them—I the abominable.

It is easy to see why the position of the more militant unbeliever is so rigorously expounded because it gets to the very heart of the issue at stake in aesthetics. If there is, indeed, a real inspiration (taking that word in its original meaning) involved in great works of art and a metaphysical reality at work in our appreciation of such art—the Form of Beauty—then the whole modern approach to art is on very shaky ground indeed. But that is not all that is at stake. If we are to accept Beauty as an expression of the Good, then how are we to interpret so much of modern art which seeks to actually deface the Good? I am thinking here of works like Andre Serrano's *Piss Christ*, of artists who seal their own excrement in a can and exhibit it as a work of art, or of those who fashion their 'artwork' in horse faeces. Those who do believe in the reality of the Good must, I think, entertain the corresponding reality of the satanic, however it might be represented. If, for instance you believe with Aquinas that Beauty involves clarity,

proportion and integrity, then the exhibition of a blank canvass (or, as in one case, a blank studio) as a work of art is a deliberate attack on the notion of Beauty. You are urged to contemplate the very negation of Being.

Of course, it is highly unfashionable to speak of Satan these days. 'Enlightened' Churchmen give him a wide berth and he is pretty much reduced to a comic strip character with horns and an arrow head on his tail. The difficulty arises when we attribute a reality to the Good for then the Socratic idea of evil as mere ignorance will hardly account for deliberate attacks on the Good. 'But surely' you say, 'the Marilyn statue is just a bit of fun'. That depends entirely upon your perspective. Looking down from his Cathedral tabernacle, the Author of Being and of Beauty might very well have another image in mind when he sees Marilyn. He might see your delight, charm, amusement, etc as being similar to that expressed by those onlookers who enjoyed the sight of the bull of Phalaris and the charming music emitting from its mouth. The brazen bull of the tyrant Phalaris, so the story goes, was hollow and, inside it the tyrant's victims were slowly roasted alive. By ingenious contrivances, the screaming of the agonised victims came out of the bull's mouth as a pleasant melody. But, if you are a 'modernist', I don't want to frighten you. Think of this essay as just another 'expression' or 'representation', and all those nasty thoughts will evaporate. Disinterest—that's the ticket!

LORD GIFFORD, NIETZSCHE, AND THE PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY¹

The Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh University were financed by Lord Gifford (1820-1887) as part of his will, and began the year after his death. He was a prominent judge in Edinburgh and much in demand as a public speaker in the latter part of his life. The terms of his will concerning these lectures stipulate that they must, in some way, contribute to our understanding of natural theology. Inter alia they state:

I wish these lectures to treat their subject [knowledge of God] as a strictly natural science, the greatest of all possible sciences, indeed, in one sense, the only science, that of Infinite Being, without reference to or reliance upon any supposed special exceptional or so-called miraculous revelation. I wish it considered just as astronomy or chemistry is

Gifford's approach to natural theology is very much in tune with the general optimism shown in the Victorian era concerning the ability of human reason—or at least, the human reason of a well-educated Englishman—to establish 'facts' about the moral and spiritual order no less reliable than those of chemistry, physics and astronomy which had proved so enormously successful and self-validating. Most importantly, Gifford and his educated contemporaries regarded moral philosophy as something entirely separate from theology. It was, for them, just one more field of 'scientific study' in which endeavour they had no doubt, indubitable laws or principles concerning the human moral order could be demonstrated, purely by the exercise of human reason.

In 1987, the well-known moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre was invited to give the Gifford Lecture(s) and the substance of these talks was later published as *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy and Tradition*. The title is not immediately self-explanatory but

¹ Paper given to *Bendigo Philosophical Society*, March, 2023

will become so as we proceed. First, though, it will be necessary to say something about MacIntyre himself.

MacIntyre is a Scottish born (1929) philosopher who has had a long and distinguished career, lecturing in both the USA and the UK. As a young postgraduate, he became interested in Marxism, like so many young intellectuals of his day. Indeed, his first book, at 24 years of age was *Marxism: An Interpretation*. Not surprisingly, the revelations concerning the Stalinist Labour Camps, which came to light in the West with the publication of Solzhenitsyn's books, caused him to rethink his allegiances. Even so he has not totally repudiated all of the Marxist canon, arguing that many of Marx's reflections on capitalism held some force.

MacIntyre has always had a special interest in moral philosophy and, indeed, part of his early attraction to Marxism stemmed from the injustices he perceived in working class England. Although initially seeking answers via the current philosophical trends (he was a student of Freddie Ayer, and avidly read most of the philosophers of his day), he gradually came to the view that the varied forms of analytical philosophy being pursued were unable to supply a rationally based account of human morality. The key problem he saw was one of incommensurability. That is to say, the various camps in moral philosophy could not really talk to each other or make any progress because each argued from different premises—neo-Kantians against utilitarians, against rights theorists, and so on.

He then turned to Plato and Aristotle, having studied them in his student years. He became particularly interested in Aristotelian teleology and the notion that philosophy was actually a craft, no different to that of cabinet making or stone-masonry. One needed to learn the craft under the guidance of a Master, and one needed to achieve certain standards of excellence that had already been supplied by past experts. So, for instance, to take our example of the cabinet maker, the master might put before the apprentice the detailed drawings of Thomas Chippendale's *The Gentleman and Cabinet Maker's Director*. The apprentice was then to judge his or her own work not by his or her own standards of excellence (for they could be in error) but by the best of what had been achieved in the past. In other words, what had been achieved in the tradition of cabinet making. This goes some way to explaining one of MacIntyre's most famous aphorisms 'I

can only answer the question "What am I to do?" if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?' And the story chosen by MacIntyre was a version of the perennial philosophy, so named because its principles, often ignored, derided or actively put down, continue to arise throughout history, albeit in different forms.

This broadly Aristotelian approach MacIntyre applied to moral philosophy, and it led him to publish his most famous book, *After Virtue*, in 1981. It immediately became a top seller and has now gone through three editions and who knows how many printings. It has been translated into virtually every major language on earth and is still regularly quoted. The central thesis of the book is that, despite the incommensurability pertaining to the philosophies of the various camps, they continue to act as if their respective stances were all entirely rational. What MacIntyre recognised in these conflicting accounts were bits and pieces of an earlier intact moral tradition which had survived after a fashion but was now without any real context. His famous analogy was to a well-known science fiction story, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, by Walter Miller.

MacIntyre continued this general line of inquiry in several further books, one of which, as already indicated, was the substance of his Gifford Lectures. When he was chosen to give these lectures, his first move was to undertake a detailed study of Lord Gifford and of the general milieu in which he operated —the intellectual climate, so to speak. And that climate, in brief, was the high point of the idea of Progress, a general view dating from the 17th C, which saw in the history of the West, a gradual ascent of human knowledge and human achievement beginning with the primitive savage (still extant in parts of the New World) and reaching its culmination in the well-educated Edinburgh or London gentleman of the late 19th C. Of course, it all came crashing down a few decades later in the mud of Flanders and the 'monstrous anger of the guns' but, in the 1880s, there was a good deal of self-congratulation and confidence. Eliot's *Waste Land* lay ahead.

To further demonstrate the demise of this 19th C optimism, MacIntyre asks us to consider the status of the university lecture in his own time, as against that of the late 19th C. If we think of the Bendigo Philosophical Society as it existed in William Gay's time, the speaker,

merely by virtue of being chosen as the speaker, was assumed as the canonical figure for that subject. There was no question of arguing with the content of the lecture (other than clarification or amplification) since it was assumed to be the end product of rational enquiry, and the latter was the ultimate standard. Today, of course, as I stand here, there will be disagreement not only with my portrayal of MacIntyre and his theses, but with the theses themselves. Moreover, that disagreement will not be of a unitary nature but will reflect the heterogeneous philosophical views held by different members of the audience—views which are entirely incommensurate with each other and with that of the speaker. And yet, of course, we go on pretending that we are having a rational debate!

The confidence of these late 19th C savants was epitomised in the 9th Edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* which appeared around the time of Gifford's death. This explains why MacIntyre uses the word 'Encyclopedia' in his title. Here, gathered in a series of hefty tomes, was an authoritative account of the world and all it contained. It had been Lord Gifford's earnest hope that God, too, could be considered as a scientific datum, a concept wholly amenable to rational analysis. The same was true of the whole moral order which, he felt sure, could be derived from strictly scientific principles, and did not necessarily require religious beliefs of any kind. Here, MacIntyre makes the interesting point that you will search in vain for any word or term in earlier language systems that could be translated as 'morality' (as the Victorians construed it). There was no such word. It was an invention of the Enlightenment as a substitute for the intact virtue-based system of traditional Christianity. The most notable attempt to produce a 'scientific' account of morality was by Henry Sidgwick (1838-1900) and, as MacIntyre tells us, his fruitless attempt led him to conclude that 'where he had hoped to find a cosmos, he found only chaos'. In other words, he could find no common ground, no objective data, to reconcile the various extant views on the moral order. It was a chaos.

But, at the very time that the Gifford Lectures were inaugurated, another and very different approach to moral philosophy was being promulgated. In 1887, Nietzsche published *On the Genealogy of Morals*, and it was a direct attack on the Encyclopedists and all their beliefs. Now, of course, as an Aristotelian, MacIntyre cannot really align himself with Nietzsche's take on 'the will to power', but he nonetheless admires his witty and barbed comments and his very

readable style. After attempting to read Kant, Nietzsche is a breath of fresh air! Moreover, Nietzsche's dismissal of the whole Encyclopedia project is not without force. Nietzsche, in effect, thumbs his nose at these so-called 'rational' rules of morality. 'Why should I believe in the Categorical Imperative?' he says, and, indeed, there is no good answer. Nietzsche puts into question the whole basis of the moral order as conceived by the Victorians and their belief that reason is self-grounding. As MacIntyre says: 'Nietzsche did not advance a new theory against older theories; he proposed an abandonment of theory'.

In his lectures, MacIntyre spends a good deal of time discussing Nietzsche's stance and looks for ways in which it might be discredited. This, to me, seems unnecessary. After all, if we were to apply Nietzsche's approach to moral philosophy, there would be no moral order, merely some milder form of the Dionysiac Frenzy. One thinks of *The Bacchae* and the women of Thebes tearing apart King Pentheus. The Nietzschean will to power is the direct opposite of *The Sermon on the Mount*. Its practical consequences were famously laid out for us in the Melian Dialogue from Thucydides *History of the Peloponnesian Wars*. When the conquered Melians were about to be enslaved or put to the sword, their leaders implored the Athenians to show mercy. Their answer has reverberated down through history:

Of the Gods we believe and of men we know that, by a law of their nature, wherever they can rule they will. This law was not made by us; we did but inherit it and will bequeath it to our children. And we know that if you were in the same position as us, would do as we do.

It goes without saying that Thucydides, all that time ago, included this episode because he knew the actions of the Athenians to be wrong.

But I think MacIntyre's purpose here is to have Nietzsche and the post-Nietzscheans (he spends a lot of time dealing with Foucault) standing for the whole movement of relativism in general, so that the debate really centres about whether morality is an objective or a subjective business. This is the nub of MacIntyre's concern and one can discern its lineaments in all of his books, from *After Virtue* onward. Nonetheless, Nietzsche is necessary for MacIntyre, because his critique of the whole Enlightenment Project brings into question the assumed self-validating nature of human rational enquiry. Reason cannot lift itself up by its own bootstraps, so to speak.

So, MacIntyre's quest now is to look for some other approach which might provide a solid basis for a moral order. This, he argues can be found in that version of the perennial philosophy championed by Aquinas but relying heavily on Plato and Aristotle. This choice too, refers to a development which was concurrent with both the 9th edition of the Encyclopedia and with Nietzsche's new book. Here he refers to the Encyclical *Aeterni patris*, put out by Pope Leo XIII in 1897. In this letter, the Pope urges for a return to the Christian philosophy of the high Middle Ages. Here, as I suggested earlier, philosophy is treated as a craft in exactly the same way as other crafts such a cabinet making. In this approach teleology takes pride of place and truth is not simply assumed but worked towards just as an apprentice works towards his or her master-piece. Aquinas' *'Questiones'* attempt no more than to promulgate 'the best argument so far'. However, Like Plato in the *Republic* and *Gorgias*, one needs a certain disposition or ontological 'ground zero'. Reason is not self-grounding as the Encyclopedists supposed. We will return to this later.

But there is another reason attracting MacIntyre to the approach taken by Aquinas. Recall that, in the 13th C, medieval scholars trained in the Augustinian tradition, were suddenly confronted with an entirely new and alien philosophy, that of Aristotle, coming to them via the Islamic scholars of that era. Now, they could not simply dismiss it out of court. As C.S. Lewis tells us in *The Discarded Image*, they were 'bookish', by which he means that any written text coming from the past could not simply be ignored or altered to fit in with their own theology and philosophy (something that the Victorian savants of Gifford's day did with gay abandon—and ignorance). Somehow or other it had to be accommodated on its own terms. This was the great achievement of Aquinas.

What this requires, according to MacIntyre, is that one must first fully enter the alien philosophy and attempt to show its shortcomings from within its own resources. At the same time, one's own philosophy must be able to demonstrate that its solution to that shortcoming is demonstrably better, more reasonable, and more in line with the actual circumstances of a human life. This, perhaps, explains why MacIntyre spends so much time discussing the ideas of both the Victorian rationalists and their Nietzschean and post-Nietzschean opponents. He must find, from within their own resources, good reason to discard their ideas.

Now, in the case of the Nietzscheans and post-Nietzscheans, he thinks he has found this in their problematic handling of the identity of the self. The faithful Nietzschean will avoid any possibility of being stereotyped, of being identified with some definite theoretical stance. But, of course, merely by communicating his or her ideas to others, the Nietzschean must use the conventions of language, for starters. There again, merely by defending the Nietzschean position, one has dropped back into the Encyclopedists mode of advancing argument, etc.

Now this part of MacIntyre's argument I find quite difficult to follow and I make no apologies for my lack of intellectual power. I will say, however, that even at its simplest, MacIntyre's prose is extraordinarily difficult to follow much of the time. Some of his sentences run for half a paragraph or so and are replete with clauses, sub-clauses, and sub-sub-clauses. All this with a minimum of commas and semi-colons! One is reminded of what Wittgenstein said of someone's prose—'like dancing in treacle'.

When it comes to the Encyclopedists, MacIntyre's task is much simpler. Their assumption of the universality of what they take to be rational enquiry is completely misguided. Even their confidence in the 'hard data' of the physical sciences and the subsequent 'laws' flowing from them (which they took as their model of the idea of progress) would soon be called into question by the likes of Thomas Kuhn.

One of MacIntyre's approaches here is quite novel and deserves some comment. He notes the extraordinary interest taken by the late 19th C savants in the taboo practices of the Polynesians. Drawing heavily on the work of Franz Steiner, he supposes that their interest is due in no small part to their own set of taboos centred about etiquette and 'morality'. They, of course, saw the 'primitive' taboo system of the Polynesians as some sort of embryonic system of 'true morality' which had come to full maturity in their own time.

In fact, soon after contact with European civilisation, the real significance of the taboo (which was a positive and not a negative constraint), was lost to the Polynesians themselves and continued on without any real referent. In precisely the same way, MacIntyre argues, the late 19th C Encyclopedists held to fragments of a once unified concept and supposed this to be their 'rational' moral system. That unified concept, of course, was the theological and philosophical

formulation of the high Middle Ages, exemplified in Aquinas. This had been destroyed by the forebears of the Encyclopedists, beginning with late medieval nominalism, Descartes, and finally, the Reformers. One could sum it up in four words 'the destruction of metaphysics'.

We must now return to MacIntyre's schema for viable moral order based on his reading of Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas. He notes that in this system, two ideas are paramount. The first is that one must have some point of departure, some ontological given. This is not entirely spelled out by the early Greeks (although they do hint at it), but it is spelled out by Aquinas. Here, rather obviously, it is the Christian Revelation. That, we might say, is the warrant for Truth. Of course, in other traditions (MacIntyre's 'stories') the warrant will be different (but perhaps not at the highest level—I cannot here discuss the view of people like Schuon).

The second necessary feature is that of the Tradition itself—the carefully accumulated store of knowledge, endlessly added to and improved but never entirely perfected. As I remarked earlier, the *Summa* of Aquinas was a series of statements, objections and answers which were always open ended. It is the best account so far, just as the cabinet maker might say 'this is my best chair so far'. What matters is that there is a goal toward which I am oriented, a set of rules which will help me to get to that goal. Moreover, I have had the benefit of a teacher, one who can lead me to consider not 'my best chair', but 'the best possible chair'. And here it is critically important to delineate between my best (which may not be anything like the real best) and 'the best possible'. For my conception of the best chair could well be in error. To reach the truth, you must be part of a story.

After delivering his lectures, first in the UK then in America, MacIntyre sat down to write his book. He noted that, in the process of delivering the lectures, the audience, though polite, not only could not agree with much of what he proposed but could not agree amongst themselves as to what he should have said. Even more telling, the audience in the UK had an entirely different set of objections to those in the USA. Here was proof (if any of such was needed) of the dire state of decay in which philosophy, particularly moral philosophy, now finds itself.

This state of affairs is reflected in the very choice of Gifford lecturers

over the years. Anyone who cares to look at the list will observe that the subject matter runs the whole gamut of possible philosophical positions, and often has only the remotest connection to Lord Gifford's enterprise.

Today, MacIntyre is an old man in his nineties¹. Up until a few years ago he was still giving lectures but I think he may have now hung up his intellectual 'bovver boots'. I confess that I admire the man, not so much for what he believes, but for his lifelong commitment to answering his own question : 'How should I live'? That quest has led him to places where he would rather not go had his overriding quest for answers not compelled him. One might say that in embracing Thomism he was forced to his knees by the sheer weight of his intellect.

Watermark

¹ MacIntyre died in 2025

THE HOURS HAVE LOST THEIR CLOCK¹

A Reflection on Modern Politics in the West

My title is not original, but comes from a translation of a poem by Vicente Huidobro, a Chilean poet from the early part of the 20th C. I have no idea of the original context but, for my purposes, it serves admirably to introduce a discussion on the loss of meaning and the loss of the notion of truth in the modern West.

In a recent two-part essay in *News Weekly*, I advanced the thesis that the traditional notions of the terms ‘liberalism’ and ‘conservatism’ no longer serve any useful purpose and that we must look beyond that political divide if we are to fight for the survival of what we once called ‘The Western Tradition’. Since the Christian religion once stood front and centre of that Tradition, we must begin by considering a series of critical questions concerning that relationship.

The first and obvious question to ask is whether or not a truly secular society, Western or otherwise, can persist over the long term in the absence of any transcendent truths—that is to say, in the absence of any shared notion of a Truth which stands above and beyond mere human subjectivity? That is simply another way of asking whether religious belief in some form of transcendental order is essential for the long-term survival of any society. You may think the question is redundant since most of the West has operated politically as a secular society for the last two or three hundred years (opinions vary as to more precise timelines). But a few centuries is as nothing in the long march of Western history from Pre-Socratic Greece to our own age. Over that time, we have seen a myriad of political schemes and civilisations come and go. Older readers may remember Lord Byron’s *The Ocean* from their schooldays:

Thy shores are empires, changed in all save thee:
Assyria, Greece, Rome, Carthage, what are they?
Thy waters washed them power while they were free,
And many a tyrant since; their shores obey
The stranger, slave, or savage; their decay

¹ First published in *News Weekly*, May, 2020

Has dried up realms to deserts: ...

If the first question is answered in the negative, we must then ask just what general form a religious belief system needs to take in order to undergird (but certainly not govern) a truly stable and civil society. In this first part of a two part essay, I propose to address the anterior question—the possibility of a fully secular society. And I propose to answer in the negative.

While it is true that successful secular democracies in the West have been with us for at least two centuries, the general moral and ethical assumptions undergirding such political systems have, for the most part, been Christian assumptions based around the dignity of each human person. People in courts swore an oath on the Bible, and parliamentary sittings began with a prayer. The American Founding Fathers spoke of 'One Nation Under God'. These customs and background assumptions were, so to speak, simply part of the general atmosphere and rarely questioned (except by a minority of intellectuals). But in the last fifty years or so, all that has changed. We have now entered a period of radical subjectivity where the very notion of truth itself has almost disappeared. The postmodernist game of 'seeing through' long-held beliefs has finally brought us to a situation where everything is relative, and the postmodern thesis itself, is hoist on its own petard.

So how is a social and political order to operate under such conditions? What, exactly is the source of moral and ethical decision-making in an atmosphere where all 'truths' are relative? From Kant and earlier, through to John Rawls, there have been many attempts to erect some set of moral 'laws' which is entirely separate from religious belief systems. The failure of these replacement systems has been eloquently pointed out by Alasdair MacIntyre (*After Virtue*) and others. In fact, it was none other than Nietzsche who gave the two-fingered salute to such schemes. His simple answer was 'Why should I obey you'? Indeed, in terms of our predicament today, Nietzsche was 'the canary in the mine', so to speak. As MacIntyre said, you only have two choices—Nietzsche or Aristotle (he would now say Nietzsche or Aquinas).

If, then, there can be no truly secular and rational basis for agreement on such matters as gender identity, the status of the traditional family, the status of marriage, the status of the unborn (to take just a few

examples) how are governments to proceed? In making judgements on these and other matters, from whence do they draw their principles?

For we must remember that from the time of Hobbes and Locke, through Kant and up to our own age, some form of 'social contract' has been front and centre of the political order—individuals consent to give up their natural freedom to obtain the benefits of political order. Now this presupposes that such a political order is preferable to mob rule because the former is a sort of substitute for Plato's ideal Philosopher King. A certain wisdom is called for in the drawing up of a just political order—a wisdom beyond the resources of the disparate mob existing, as Plato says, 'in an infinite sea of dissimilarity'.

For Plato, of course, the Philosopher King had access to that superior wisdom which resulted from a contemplation of 'The Good'. In the Christian centuries that followed, Plato's 'Idea of the Good' was identified with God and the Judaeo-Christian order. In our own time, all that has been wiped away—banished as a form of tyranny over the freedom of the individual.

So, to repeat the question, from whence do our rulers obtain that wisdom necessary to rule us? Regrettably, the short answer seems to be 'from public opinion' (a lot of it either uninformed or poorly informed and lacking careful analysis). In other words, from the mob in Hobbes 'state of nature'. Of course, the political parties will deny this. 'We draw up our political platform and then take it to the people, so that our deliberations are anterior to mere 'public opinion'. But this is nonsense. They are, all of them, busy polling away months before any election to get a sense of the public mood. Policies are then adjusted accordingly.

But this begs another question: From whence does the voting public get its opinions? Traditionally, our view of the world was formed first by our upbringing—the home environment and the examples and advice of or parents. Then, such views were generally reinforced by our schooling—there will be *News Weekly* readers old enough to remember the old school readers with their stories and poems concerning such things as duty, faithfulness, patriotism, sacrifice, and so on. True enough, at tertiary level it might be that such ideas were subjected to a closer scrutiny, but generally with the aim of placing them on a more rational basis and demonstrating their superiority over

certain other possible modes of human existence.

I hardly need to point out that such a situation no longer prevails. Beginning first in the universities of the 1960s (I was there and saw it), radical new ideas, quite antithetical to the established order, were disseminated and took hold. Many of those students who imbibed such ideas went on to become teachers and so, the radicalism was disseminated. Others became journalists, commentators, writers, politicians and, yes, even members of the clergy. And so it is today that we are reaping the bitter harvest of those ideas. It is little wonder that some two and a half thousand years ago, wise old Socrates opined that the worst possible harm one could do to anyone —far exceeding the most cruel tortures and hideous deaths was to make someone else less just. Not long afterwards, Epictetus, a Roman slave (first century, AD), had this to say of teachers and others charged with the philosophical education of young minds:

The affair is momentous, it is full of mystery, not a chance gift, nor given to all comers. You are opening up a doctor's office although you possess no equipment other than drugs, but when or how these drugs are applied you neither know nor have ever taken the trouble to learn. Why do you play at hazard in matters of the utmost moment? If you find the principles of philosophy entertaining sit down and turn them over in your mind all by yourself, but don't ever call yourself a philosopher

The end result of this great revolution has not been the installation of some new and supposedly 'better' system of human existence, not even communism, fascism, scientism, etc, but a pathetic nihilism or a withered form of pragmatism—a complete abrogation of any duty to think through to the first principles of human existence. There are no first principles, no 'ends' to strive for. There is just 'Me, Now' and my animal nature with its primal instincts and fears. Hobbes' denizens in 'the state of nature' endured a life that was 'nasty, brutish, and short'. Ours is increasingly 'meaningless, psychotic, sophisticated and long'. Take your pick.

So here we are today, taking our opinions from talk-back hosts, media surveys (surveying mainly prejudice), the gutter press, Facebook idiocy and the Twitterati. All promise a dispassionate analysis of the facts, but they have already abolished all notion of Fact, other than the most basic scientific fact the sort of fact that cannot contribute in any way to the formation of value. And nearly all of them have an agenda to

'do down' what came before and most especially to 'do down' traditional Christianity. The contemporary Christian Lites are OK though, because they are, in fact, the 'useful idiots' in this great struggle. There is only one goal for all these modern character-types and that is to abolish all limits. Everything, every mad philosophy or anti-philosophy is up for grabs, as long as it serves to obliterate the past and any concept of some Higher Good.

Before I end this tirade against the *Zeitgeist*, the influence of one other character-type must be mentioned. This is The Great and Generous Benefactor, from the ranks of the super-rich. If newspapers were once called the Fourth Estate (now, the Deceased Estate, alas), The Great and Generous Benefactors must surely rank as the Fifth Estate. These are the those super-rich characters—many from Silicon Valley, whose vast war chest of excess funds (some probably exceeding the gross national product of smaller countries) can be spent on whatever strikes their fancy—advancing the cause of the LGTBQ+N brigade, fertility control in 'undeveloped' countries, banning coal, saving whales, saving koalas, etc. In short, whatever they wish. They are, almost entirely of a super-progressive mindset—Tradition is their enemy. Money, as they say, is power, and these people have it in spades. They can pay, not just to influence public opinion, but to engineer it.

So here we are, those few of us who still believe in the Tradition, labouring through that great Slough of Despond, like some battered and weary brontosaurus at the end of the Jurassic epoch. Is there any hope? Only one.

In chapter six of *St John's Gospel*, Jesus preaches some harsh words and many of his followers desert him. He turns to Simon Peter and the other remaining few and asks whether they would leave too. 'Lord', said Peter, "To whom should we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life". This is not just a nice story. It is an event in Sacred Time, eternally relevant. And, as Blake said: "Truth can never be told in such a way as to be understood and not be believed". Our task is to deliver the understanding.

And so, in the second half of this essay, I want to examine just how the Christian Churches might respond to our predicament. And I particularly want to focus on the Catholic Church. Not just because I lay claim to being a Catholic myself, but because it is the largest

Christian communion in Australia, with a huge responsibility in the preparation of young minds; other than the various State Governments, it is the largest education provider in the country.

In the first part of this extended essay, I proposed that the a fully secular state could survive in the long term only if it had access to some objective notion of truth. A subjective notion of truth, I argued, must inevitably lead us back to the chaotic, Hobbesian 'state of nature'. Historically, both in the Christian West and in most other great civilisations, such an objective notion of truth was delivered by religious belief. Indeed, it is true of just about any civilisation, tribal or otherwise, that its central *raison d'être* came from some notion of a religious truth.

We no longer have such an agreed notion in the West, and so the question arises as to how some notion of an objective truth might be rekindled in such a way as to once again provide a sort of foundation for a truly civil society without the imposition of any form of a 'confessional state'. And so, in proposing this return, I am not at all suggesting that everyone must profess the Christian Faith—or any other faith for that matter. Rather, I have in mind that sort of arrangement proposed by T.S. Eliot in his *The Idea of a Christian Society*. Or better, perhaps, that sort of philosophical Christian Platonism which, for non-Christians, demands no fidelity to doctrine or worship but only some general agreement concerning the principles of what was once called 'the Perennial Philosophy'.

In fact, I believe that any strategy on the part of the churches to 'turn back the clock', as it were, is bound to fail. We are beyond that sort of recovery in my view, for the hours have lost their clock. Our only option now, as I see it, is to return to absolute first principles and in the first instance, not to demand that objective truth be taught as a necessity, but rather as a possibility. Some words of Rafaello Carboni (*The Eureka Stockade*) come to mind:

Listen to me—The lie, like the whirlwind, clears itself a royal road, either in town or country, through the whole face of the earth. The fool in his heart says, 'There is no God.' The truth, however slow, step by step, like a little child, someday, at last, finds a footpath to light.

Then the righteous flourish like a palm tree. [Here translated from the Latin]

What is meant by the term 'Perennial Philosophy'? At its core is the notion of Being—the idea that the very first principle of all philosophical thought is a contemplation of the reality of Being. So, the first and greatest truth is that Being is—a notion first recorded by Parmenides of Elea some two and a half thousand years ago. Christians, Jews and Muslims, all of whom are 'people of the Book' will know of this truth from Exodus 3 —the famous episode of Moses and the burning bush, where the voice of God says 'I AM'.

From this apprehension of Being (for 'not being' is literally unthinkable) there comes a logical development of ideas leading to what are termed 'the transcendentals of Being'—Truth, Goodness and Beauty. It is beyond my scope, competence and available space to explicate this development, but I direct the interested reader to a well-known and easily read book by Daniel J Sullivan, available through St. Paul's Press or Amazon and other online sources: *An Introduction to Philosophy: The Perennial Principles of the Classical Realist Tradition*. I also recommend an equally well-known book by Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*. (<https://www.ignatius.com/The-Unity-of-Philosophical-Experience-P2532.aspx>). A good library (if such an entity still exists) should also have these books.

When I say that we must start again from the beginning because 'the hours have lost their clock', I mean that what has happened in the period between say, 1950 and today, represents not just a period of decay or development in the Churches (depending on whether you are a progressive or a traditionalist), but a paradigm shift—a change so profound that the two corresponding systems are utterly incommensurable. This of course, was the famous proposition of Thomas Kuhn apropos scientific knowledge. And, in moral philosophy, it was the equally famous proposition of Alasdair MacIntyre.

Let me now shift my focus specifically to the Catholic Church for the reasons I foreshadowed in the first part of this essay—it is still the largest Christian communion in this country (nominally at least) with a huge investment in education. In what follows here, I am indebted to the writings of the American scholar Michael Hanby. In an important essay back in 2018 (*First Things*, Nov.) he spelled out this

paradigm shift in the Catholic Church and identified its essence as being the process of de-Hellenisation of Christian theology (with corresponding influences on liturgy and other matters). What he means by de-Hellenisation is precisely what I have alluded to in the paragraphs above—abandonment of the notion of Being as foundational and the 'Transcendentals'—Truth, Goodness, and Beauty as arising logically from a contemplation of Being.

Now, of course, denizens of the new paradigm will immediately leap upon me with cries of 'medievalism', but this entirely misses the point. What I am trying to enunciate is not 'medieval', it is eternal and immutable. That is my point in going back to absolute first principles. Only here lies any hope of a connection between the two paradigms. For, as Hanby says (quoting the great Italian Catholic scholar, Augusto Del Noce), 'the essence of de-Hellenization is the loss of the superiority of the immutable over the changeable'. And, of course it is precisely this superiority which invests this world with inherent meaning and intelligibility. These are the very things we need to make sense of the world and its proper governance.

So how is the Church to proceed? In the first instance, it cannot simply walk away from the problem and, like Rousseau 'retire to the woods'. Neither can it interpret 'The Benedict Option' as doing much the same thing. It has to engage with the world, however difficult that might be in these times.

Obviously, we cannot expect schoolchildren to understand the metaphysical principles attending the contemplation of Being. Neither, for that matter, would they make much sense to many adult churchgoers. So, perhaps the place to begin is with liturgy. Here, I first need to re-trace my steps and go back to the concept of Being. When Moses encountered the I AM of the burning bush, he hid his face and was frightened. 'Fear of the Lord', indeed, is a correlate of God's utter transcendence, holiness and 'otherness'. It has been beautifully expressed by the great pioneer scholar of what we might call 'the religious mode', Rudolph Otto. An encounter with some great, unspecified spiritual power which Otto calls 'the numinous', induces that state which he calls '*Mysterium tremendum et fascinans*'. By this he means that in the presence of the numinous we feel, at the same time, a certain fear and awe, but also a deep attraction, even a sense of being loved.

Now, to go back to Hanby, when we lose that sense of the utter transcendence of God, so too do we lose what was once called 'Fear of the Lord'. That loss, as Hanby says, is most conspicuous in much of the modern liturgical practice. Here, he is particularly scathing, citing 'saccharine pieties, sentimental pop music, therapeutic homilies, and drive-through Communion lines'. If you are to inculcate in children, and in a Sunday congregation, any sense of what it really means to come into the direct presence of the Author of Being itself, then the liturgy and ritual must convey that sense of 'the numinous'. And it's hard to do that with rock music and cardboard love hearts.

In other words, one cannot simply convey the entirety of the Christian message in terms of God's love alone (based, as it often is, on a purely human plane—'God friended me'). It must, at the same time, convey that sense of utter transcendence, power, majesty and awe. In so doing, it is just possible that the 90+ percent of children who walk out the church door at the end of their schooling, never to return, might become some lower percentage and the Church congregations—very largely a handful of the old, the lame and the halt—might swell again (I know what the progressives say, 'quality not quantity', but was it not Voltaire who said that God was always on the side of the big battalions or, at least, on the side of the straightest shooters?).

Meanwhile, at the Catholic Universities, some consideration might be given to the proper re-institution of metaphysics as the core of philosophy and, indeed, of philosophy itself as being accorded its rightful primacy at the centre of the curriculum. The purging of all metaphysics from philosophy began a long time ago. John Locke supposed that philosophy should act as no more than a 'clearing house' for the sciences—ridding them of metaphysical rubbish. The Logical Positivists went a step further, proposing that metaphysical statements were, in fact, entirely meaningless. A whole army of philosophies, each one combating the other, have come and gone since. Being remains. And so it is absolutely silly to suppose, for instance, that one could do a PhD in science without some philosophical underpinning. The truths of science, after all are contingent truths (despite what Dawkins et al have to say). In order to come to some 'scientific truth', you must first examine from whence such a 'truth' derives, and for this you need to philosophise. That used to be why a PhD was called a PhD.

And so, in conclusion, only when Christians can 'leaven' Western society in Eliot's sense, might we hope to restore that sickly child, Western democracy. For it was Christianity which stood as midwife to Western civilisation and all of its achievements. One thinks immediately of Tennyson's *Morte d Arthur* and that line—'I perish by this people which I made'. Indeed, it might be that such restoration is impossible and that some other form of governance comes to pass. In that event, it is critical that the values associated with the Christian Gospel are incorporated into such a system so that the dignity and freedom of the human person is upheld. To do that, though, would require a proper understanding of what human freedom really entails. That cannot be done without reference to the *Philosophia perennis* and to the Christian tradition. Not, at any rate, if you believe that there is, in the Western tradition, something worth saving. If not, welcome to the Global Village, Cyberia, and 'the infinite sea of dissimilarity' where your body enjoys boundless freedom but your soul is microchipped.

WILLIAM BLAKE AND THE GENDER STUDIES INDUSTRY¹

Jorge Louis Borges once wrote a little piece of fiction entitled *On Exactitude in Science*, where the story line pointed to an inverse relationship between scientific exactitude and utility. The fictional example was that of a map-making guild in some long-departed empire where, as the author supposed, the science improved by such rapid strides that a map was eventually produced to the scale of a mile to a mile. Its users, however, found it to be somewhat cumbersome and it was eventually abandoned.

In many modern departments of human knowledge, I want to propose quite the reverse sort of relationship between knowledge and utility. That is to say, the less we know about a particular entity, the greater is our certitude concerning its origins and its nature and, concomitantly, the more useful this lack of data becomes. By way of example, consider all those documentaries on television giving us, at long last, the 'facts' concerning such matters as the origin of the universe, the origins of life, how the Pyramids were built, and so on. How incredibly useful have these grand explanations been to the media programmers and producers! This phenomenon is by no means restricted to scientific knowledge. In almost every other department of modern knowledge, the same relationship seems to hold, viz. the fewer facts we have, the more detailed and final are our explanations. Indeed, if anything, the business is much further advanced in the humanities than in the sciences. I have chosen, for the remainder of this essay, to give just one example from the former category, that of interpreting the life and artistic output of William Blake.

You will find Blake quoted with approval by Californian hippies, by advanced churchmen, by mad anarchists, by sober conservatives, and most especially, by militant feminists. Add to this a veritable army of Freudians and Jungians (especially the latter) with their deep, psychological insights and, inevitably, the gender studies crowd. In

¹ Previously unpublished

fact, modern commentaries on Blake have been almost entirely taken over by the gender studies crowd. Gender studies is where it is at.

And yet, we have very little detailed knowledge of Blake's life. He was largely ignored or dismissed in his own lifetime. Nearly all our primary data comes from Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake*, first published in 1863. Blake had already been dead for forty years by this time, and largely forgotten. If he was remembered it was usually as 'mad Blake'.

Anyone who has read Gilchrist's Blake will realise that the compilers relied heavily on the reminiscences of others—the recollections of those of Blake's friends still alive in the 1850s. If we add to Gilchrist's Blake any new information contained in Crabb Robinson's *Reminiscences*, and in Geoffrey Keynes' carefully collected *Letters of William Blake* and *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, we pretty much exhaust the primary records. It is the totality of these meagre gleanings which has provided the raw materials for a veritable Blake industry today. Of course it is not so much the facts concerning Blake and his life that provide grist for the mill but, rather, the content of the poetry and prose produced by the man. Here, the term 'poetic licence' takes on an entirely new meaning, and all of those strange visionary utterances that Blake gives us are subjected to the most bizarre and fantastic interpretations, far outstripping the sometimes weird and incomprehensible productions of the original author. This is only possible, of course, because we know so little of what Blake said and did outside of his artistic productions and his largely business-like letters to friends and benefactors. When he did attempt to give some sort of exegesis regarding his symbolism, one has to say that it was rarely clear enough to give some unequivocal explanation.

Despite all this, it is the case that there is in Blake's work some special quality which draws us to him. He will always be popular with people of a certain sensitivity. There is incredible beauty in some of the poetry, mixed with that childlike simplicity we more often associate with the great saints of the Church. There is also that prophetic edge to his work which, however strangely it may be presented, impresses itself upon us. We can understand why he railed against Bacon, Hume and Locke because, deep down, we know that their philosophies fail to assuage our spiritual hunger.

Among the first to adopt Blake as a true prophet was that super-

aesthete of the Victorian era, Algernon Charles Swinburne. Christian-hater, promoter of sexual licence, and the Mr Naughty of his era, Swinburne found in Blake's poetry a sort of apologia for his own views. Swinburne's analysis of Blake, in fact, could well be regarded as the primogenitor of the modern plague of 'gendered' or 'sexual' analyses of Blake. Of course, not all Blake scholars of the last century or so have been of this mould. When Yeats and Ellis published their *Works of William Blake: Poetic, Symbolic, and Critical* in 1893, Yeats remonstrated with the earlier biographers and interpreters for having neglected the spiritual symbolism in Blake. But Yeats, too, had a tendency to regard all natural impulses as good, just like Swinburne. There are other Blake commentators who seek to place the artist firmly within an older tradition, but not necessarily the Christian tradition. Kathleen Raine (1908-2003) was such a one. For Raine, who published *Blake and Tradition* in 1969, Blake was the disciple of an Ur-religion—a timeless religion which, though set in a sort of Christianity, was in fact much wider in its scope and incorporated elements of Neo-Platonism and Greek Mystery Religions.

Many other Blake commentaries date from roughly the same time period as Raine, and operate within the same general framework of sober scholarship—David Erdman's *William Blake: Prophet Against Empire* (1954), Northrop Frye's *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (1947), and S. Foster Damon's *A Blake Dictionary* (1965). All of these, it may be said, are scholarly works with a particular interest in Blake's use of symbols, his sources, and so on. Of course, they differ in their approach to Blake. Erdman, for instance, concentrates on the social and political aspects of Blake's work, whilst Damon is much more interested in Blake's use of symbols, his allusions to Scripture, etc.

Despite all their shortcomings, most of the earlier commentaries on Blake (before his appropriation by the gender studies mob) shared at least one common belief. They did believe that Blake was a mystic, however differently they might have applied that term. But to say that Blake was a mystic raises two very large questions. Firstly, mysticism itself is one of the most abused words in our language, and we ought to clear what we mean when we employ the word. No-one has put it better than Evelyn Underhill in her *Mysticism* (1911), the standard work in this area:

Mysticism ... has been used in different and often mutually exclusive senses by religion, poetry, and philosophy: has been claimed as an excuse for every type of occultism, for dilute transcendentalism, vapid symbolism, religious or aesthetic sentimentality, and bad metaphysics.

... Broadly speaking, I understand it to be the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendental order; whatever be the theological formula under which that order is understood.

Of particular importance in the above quotation is the term 'theological formula' because the true mystic always operates within some religious tradition. There is no unmediated transcendental order.

The second difficulty relates to the incommunicability of the mystical experience. If Blake was a mystic, then he cannot properly communicate his visions to others because it is the unvarying mark of the true mystic that he or she is unable, in the final analysis, to convey their experiences in mere words. Of necessity, they are forced back to incomplete analogies and inadequate metaphors.

Now, when you read Underhill's account of mysticism, it is clear that the principal concern of the mystic is to reveal or reflect the experience of union with the Divine, and that expression is almost always in terms of love. Invariably, the analogy used is the human love between a man and a woman. As Underhill says:

It was natural and inevitable that the imagery of human love and marriage should have seemed to the mystic the best of all images of his own 'fulfilment of life'; his soul's surrender, first to the call, finally to the embrace of Perfect Love. It lay ready to hand; it was understood of all men ...

A great deal of the imagery in Blake revolves around this notion of a union made in love, and let us immediately add that Blake's use of this imagery often takes him outside the bounds of that moral order traditionally associated with human sexuality. You have two alternatives to explain these excursions. The first, and traditional explanation is that Blake is simply using the imagery in much the same way as it has been used by the saints and mystics of the Church. We need to recall that Blake is striving, however inadequately, to represent the human body as Platonic Form or 'Divine Idea'. That is to say, Blake strives to give us, in pictures or words, that intellectual idea by

means of which we recognise 'man-ness' and 'woman-ness'. If he tends to emphasise male musculature or the voluptuous curves of the female form, it is purely for this reason. It is the same with all of his imagery. As Chesterton says, Blake is an artist 'of the solid line' whose images are super-real—there is no hint of vague impressionism in Blake.

But, of course, few would accept that explanation today. The second alternative is the one taken by most modern scholars of the 'gender' school—to regard Blake as a pioneer of the sexual revolution and to relate his poetry directly to those sorts of sexual images which present themselves to what Underhill calls 'the prurient imagination'. And so we come to that vast army of modern Blake scholars, all rendering his output in terms of 'gender analysis', and luxuriating upon his images of male and female in much the same way as a pervert gazes on a clothesline of women's underwear. Coventry Patmore once wrote of such people that 'they often feed the swine of their lusts with the pearls of their perception; they look on the bared splendours of Purity with eyes of the untransfigured passions ...'

Here, I must confess that my background reading has been limited. My shortfall here is not due to any laziness or desire to block out any views of Blake which I find contrary to my own. Rather, it is one of sheer revulsion. Reading this stuff is a sort of literary coprophagy. This literature, as it seems to me, is entirely destructive and will have a malign influence on all who read it, especially young people.

In 1982, in a much-cited essay entitled 'Dangerous Blake', W.J.T. Mitchell supposed that the 'old' way of reading Blake—the way of Yeats, Raine, Frye, Erdman, etc.—might soon change. The assumption of a deep symbolism, of a real spirituality was, perhaps, a bit too sober and too 'religious' for the new-look humanities departments. He prophesied that 'we are about to rediscover the dangerous Blake, the angry, flawed Blake, the crank ... the sexist, the madman ... the tyrannical husband ...' etc. Perhaps there was a danger that, unless things were cranked up a little, the whole Blake studies scenario would run out of energy. More likely, I think, was the growing unpalatability of a Blake who showed real evidence of traditional religious belief (however unorthodox). A new-look Blake was needed. Well, regrettably, that prophecy of Mitchell's came true with a vengeance.

The business seems to have kicked off with some of the earlier feminists who actually predated Mitchell's piece, and may well have influenced him. In 1973, one Irene Tayler published an essay entitled 'The Woman Scaly'. It begins by reproducing a little epigram from Blake's note book:

A Woman scaly & a Man all Hairy
Is such a Match as he who dares
Will find the Woman's Scales scrape off the Man's Hairs.

Not really Blake at his best, but as the barber says in *The Man from Ironbark*, 'Twas just a little harmless joke, a trifle overdone'. Not so for Ms Tayler. The 'hairy youth' is 'a spirit of rejuvenating energy and revolution' whose dominion heralds the return of Adam into Paradise. The 'woman scaly', so we learn, is an obstacle to this end, producing henpecked husbands, oppressed peoples, and a fallen humanity. Her scales place her in company with the devil, and fishiness (scales—get it!) means that her home is the sea. Are you still with me?

As you might have predicted, certain other feminists took issue with Ms Tayler, and a rash of published material appeared. These 'studies' then gradually condensed around the newly emerging gender studies industry. Since then, the output has been prodigious. Let me allude to just a few titles: *Blake and Homosexuality*, Christopher Hobson (2000), *William Blake and the Body*, Tristanne Connelly (2002), *William Blake and Gender*, Magnus Anskarsjo (2006), *William Blake and the Daughters of Albion*, Helen Bruder (2007) [feminist analysis]. Here, I must not forget a particularly choice example, *Why Mrs Blake Cried*, by Marsha Schuchard (2006). She cried, you see, because of Blake's desire to take concubines in sanctified sex, along the lines of the Patriarch Abraham (Blake was a bit early for Brigham Young). Just to bring you up to date, I should add a new title to this oeuvre, *Sexy Blake*, (2013), edited by the same Connelly and Bruder mentioned in my list above.

As I say above, my reading of this stuff has been limited but I did force myself to read one such volume, Magnus Anskarsjo's *Blake and Religion*, 2009. I had, of course, hoped to find there some treatment of Blake's rather idiosyncratic treatment of Christianity. Not much of that I'm afraid. Instead we get the sort of exegesis you might expect from people who are hell bent on finding, in every line of Blake, sexual imagery of the grossest kind. Even Swinburne was not guilty of this sort of thing. I don't wish to offend the sensitive natures of *News*

Weekly readers with the earthy details, but I do need to show you just how far these people will go in pursuit of their mad obsessions. Many readers who admire Blake's poetry will remember these lines:

The sword sung on the barren heath
The sickle in the fruitful field
The sword he sung a song of death
But could not make the sickle yield.

Now, all you ignoramuses who are under the impression that this is Blake's innocent re-modelling of the 'swords into ploughshares' idea (Isaiah 2:3-4) or something similar, need to read Anskarsjo. 'The sword', he tells us, 'denotes the penis, and the sickle the vagina'. He goes on: 'This piece is loaded with sexual frustration and unfulfilled desire; in spite of strong efforts the speaker is not allowed to make love with his fancied object'.

Reading Anskarjo, you immediately see what so excites the diseased imagination of these later Blake interpreters (I refuse to use the word scholar). A couple of decades ago it was discovered that Blake's mother had earlier connections with the Moravian Church. Now the Moravian Church is a very old Protestant Church which came to England in the 18th C. For a short time in its history, a minority of its disciples held rather strange views on human sexuality, and these have been eagerly pounced on by the Blake gender studies crowd. Before this, they managed to get some mileage out of Swedenborgianism, but the Moravians offered a far more fertile (no pun intended) hunting ground. The possibility that Blake himself might have been influenced by the more extreme views of some of the Moravians opens enormous vistas of eroticism and uninhibited sexual activity. What a boon!

There are two ways of viewing the love between a man and a woman—spiritually and carnally. The great theologians of the Western tradition managed a synthesis of these two aspects—the spiritual and the physical—which elevated the relationship to the sacramental level. The gender studies crowd are determined to destroy this image and to drag human sexuality down to the level of rutting animals. The current attack on marriage is all part of the deal. As you might imagine, nearly all the purveyors of this stuff are university lecturers and their mad theories are being force-fed into young people at that very time when the latter are most vulnerable. Millstones and deep water come to mind.

We have not seen the end of the modern Blake industry. There are many books yet to be written –Randy Blake, Transsexual Blake, Blake and the Phallus, Blake and Satanism etc. Indeed, by the time you read this, some of them WILL have been published. Sooner or later, someone will discover that Blake had a dog, or cat, or pet sheep, and then you may expect even worse. When Blake spoke of 'dark, satanic mills' perhaps he was delivering a prophecy and a judgement concerning the modern university. If you, like me, enjoy Blake's poetry, then this stuff is likely to provoke a mood of helpless anger, for nothing much can be done to stem the tide. But then, perhaps it is simply enough to feel a sense of sorrow –

For a Tear is an Intellectual Thing
And a Sigh is the Sword of an Angel King.

Watermark

MENCKEN ON MACHEN ON LIBERALISM¹

The American journalist and commentator H.L. Mencken (1880-1956), was commonly referred to as 'the sage of Baltimore'. Even today, his biting one-liners are still widely quoted. He is perhaps best remembered for his witty coverage of the 'Scopes Monkey Trial' and for his spirited opposition to Prohibition. A committed atheist, Mencken was no friend of religion and frequently wrote disparagingly about its followers. Here, for instance is part of what he wrote in the *American Mercury* in March, 1930.

No, there is nothing notably dignified about religious ideas. They run, rather, to a peculiarly puerile and tedious kind of nonsense. At their best, they are borrowed from metaphysicians, which is to say, from men who devote their lives to proving that twice two is not always or necessarily four. At their worst, they smell of spiritualism and fortune telling. Nor is there any visible virtue in the men who merchant them professionally. Few theologians know anything that is worth knowing, even about theology, and not many of them are honest.

For this reason it is surprising, to say the least, that in early 1937 he wrote an obituary for the Rev J. Gresham Machen, in the *Baltimore Evening Sun* which was full of praise for the man. Machen was an American Presbyterian theologian and Professor of New Testament at Princeton Seminary between 1906 and 1929. He wrote many books and articles but perhaps his most famous was *Christianity and Liberalism*, first published in 1923. In this book he specifically targeted the modernist movement within American Presbyterianism for preferring to fight their battles in what he termed 'a condition of low visibility'. He was here referring to their reluctance to employ clear-cut definitions in religious matters and to fully face the logical implications of religious views. And he knew very well why there was such reluctance: 'May it not discourage contribution to mission boards? May it not hinder the progress of consolidation, and produce a poor showing in columns of Church statistics?'

¹ Previously unpublished

But he knew, equally well, where such a position would lead his church:

The type of religion which rejoices in the pious sound of traditional phrases, regardless of their meanings, or shrinks from 'controversial' matters, will never stand amid the shocks of life. In the sphere of religion, as in other spheres, the things about which men are agreed are apt to be the things that are least worth holding; the really important things are the things about which men will fight. In the sphere of religion, in particular, the present time is a time of conflict; the great redemptive religion which has always been known as Christianity is battling against a totally diverse type of religious belief, which is only the more destructive of the Christian faith because it makes use of traditional Christian terminology. This modern non-redemptive religion is called 'modernism' or 'liberalism.' Both names are unsatisfactory; the latter, in particular, is question-begging. The movement designated as 'liberalism' is regarded as 'liberal' only by its friends; to its opponents it seems to involve a narrow ignoring of many relevant facts.

This was a bold stance by Machen and it made him very unpopular. He became more and more isolated from his liberalising brethren. In Mencken's words he was unable 'to square the disingenuous evasions of Modernism with the fundamentals of Christian doctrine'. Eventually it led to his founding of his own seminary, the Westminster Theological Seminary, and of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. History has, of course, proved Machen to be essentially correct in his diagnosis. Most of the Protestant communions are now in a state of disarray on doctrinal matters and their flocks have become ever smaller, divided up as they are into 'a thousand jarring sects'.

Of course, Mencken's praise for Machen's stance had nothing to do with religious belief per se. As Mencken says in his obituary column: 'I stand much more chance of being converted to spiritualism, to Christian Science or even to the New Deal than to Calvinism, which occupies a place, in my cabinet of private horrors, but little removed from that of cannibalism'. Rather it was a question of consistency and of accepting the dictates of reason once a particular set of primary assumptions were taken. And one of the primary assumptions of Christianity is the notion of Holy Writ as God's Word. As Mencken says of Machen:

He denied absolutely that anyone had a right to revise and sophisticate Holy Writ. Either it was the Word of God or it was not

the Word of God, and if it was, then it was equally authoritative in all its details, and had to be accepted or rejected as a whole. Anyone was free to reject it, but no one was free to mutilate it or to read things into it that were not there. Thus the issue with the Modernists was clearly joined, and Dr. Machen argued them quite out of court, and sent them scurrying back to their literary and sociological Kaffeeklatsche. His operations, to be sure, did not prove that Holy Writ was infallible either as history or as theology, but they at least disposed of those who proposed to read it as they might read a newspaper, believing what they chose and rejecting what they chose.

Mencken did not share the primary assumptions of Christianity but he was more than prepared to defend those who did so, provided they went about the business in a consistent and logical way. This was to his great credit, for here was the same famous newspaper columnist who had described the religious followers of William Jennings Bryan as 'the simian faithful of Appalachia'. Moreover, he made it quite explicit in his obituary to Machen that his own position was that of a 'friendly neutral'. However much he had lambasted religious believers in the past, his target was the inconsistency they had shown in their various stances. He did not challenge their basic beliefs because, as he well knew, they were not amenable to refutation via the standard sort of human reasoning. They were prior to reason:

It is my belief, as a friendly neutral in all such high and ghostly matters, that the body of doctrine known as Modernism is completely incompatible, not only with anything rationally describable as Christianity, but also with anything deserving to pass as religion in general. Religion, if it is to retain any genuine significance, can never be reduced to a series of sweet attitudes, possible to anyone not actually in jail for felony. It is, on the contrary, a corpus of powerful and profound convictions, many of them not open to logical analysis. Its inherent improbabilities are not sources of weakness to it, but of strength. It is potent in a man in proportion as he is willing to reject all overt evidences, and accept its fundamental postulates, however unprovable they may be by secular means, as massive and incontrovertible facts. (my emphasis)

These postulates, at least in the Western world, have been challenged in recent years on many grounds, and in consequence there has been a considerable decline in religious belief. There was a time, two or three centuries ago, when the overwhelming majority of educated men were believers, but that is apparently true no longer. Indeed, it is

my impression that at least two-thirds of them are now frank sceptics. But it is one thing to reject religion altogether, and quite another thing to try to save it by pumping out of it all its essential substance, leaving it in the equivocal position of a sort of pseudo-science, comparable to graphology, 'education,' or osteopathy.

Let us now return to the reasons behind the upsurge in modernist ideas within the churches. In the first place, as Machen points out, there were concerns that the churches were becoming irrelevant in the modern world, and as a result, were losing followers. They needed updating. Traditionally, it had always been the case that the task was to modify the world so that it better conformed to the Christian ideal. Now it was a case of modifying the ideal so that it conformed to the world. And increasingly, that world is merely a world of sensory appetites. Even before the time of Christ, this was not the way we viewed things. For Plato and Socrates and for the early Greek tradition in general, there was always a certain opposition between the material and the spiritual. Mere sensory existence stifled the powers of the intellect.

In this whole matter of faith and reason, there is a curious contrast between the modern purveyors of science-as-religion (Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens and others) and the modernisers of religion. In the case of science, at least as it is popularly represented, there is a corpus of dogma which is sacred and cannot, under any circumstances, be questioned. You can think of this in the same way that our ancestors thought of key religious doctrines. Contrariwise, for the modernists in religious matters, no dogma is set in concrete and we must re-examine everything in the light of 'progress'. This is exactly opposite to the way that it should be. If I were, in this magazine or anywhere else, to voice my doubts concerning the veracity of say, Darwinian Theory, there would be an immediate outcry and many indignant letters to the editor. It is an article of scientific faith. And yet, the whole edifice of science and progress in science rests totally upon our willingness to question everything. This is why scientific theories are called theories. There was once a time when the geocentric universe was held to be just as factual as we now hold Darwinian evolutionary theory to be factual. It was Karl Popper who advanced the idea of the need for 'falsifiability' in science. In other words, if a scientific theory is such that no possible set of data, no possible theoretical difficulty, can call it into question, then it is not a scientific theory at all but an article of faith.

And so, we have a curious reversal in the nature of our beliefs. In the case of science, what we now regard as 'scientific facts' are held as articles of faith and any attempt to question them draws immediate criticism. They are the sacred and infrangible dogmas of modernity. On the other hand, articles of religious faith are now regarded as little more than hypotheses—all are able to be modified or re-interpreted according to the needs of the day. Think of Bishop Robinson and *Honest to God* or, perhaps, of the theology of Bultmann.

To these charges, the modernists will simply claim that they have no wish to alter the 'basics' of Christianity, merely the accumulations of doctrine and dogmas that have crept in over the centuries. They wish to return to the purity of the original Christian message—a message of simple love and forgiveness. Very soon, though, they find that such abstract notions need to be rendered usable in the real world and to do so, we are continually called to make judgements. This was the experience of the Church Fathers in the early centuries of Christianity and it continues to this day. These judgements, if they are to be anything more than mere subjective assessments (or, perhaps, emotive judgements as per A.J. Ayer and the Positivist school), need guidelines based on something that sits above mere human subjectivity. This is why a great body of doctrine and dogma built up over the centuries. And so it is that amongst a great many modern clerics of the various Christian creeds, you tend to find an embarrassed silence on issues such as euthanasia, abortion, surrogacy, and so on. They are between a rock and a hard place, just as Machen's critics were. And Mencken was quick to draw attention to this:

That, it seems to me, is what the Modernists have done, no doubt with the best intentions in the world. They have tried to get rid of all the logical difficulties of religion, and yet preserve a generally pious cast of mind. It is a vain enterprise. What they have left, once they have achieved their imprudent scavenging, is hardly more than a row of hollow platitudes, as empty as [of] psychological force and effect as so many nursery rhymes. They may be good people and they may even be contented and happy, but they are no more religious than Dr. Einstein. Religion is something else again—in Henrik Ibsen's phrase, something far more deep-down-diving and mudupbringing. Dr. Machen tried to impress that obvious fact upon his fellow adherents of the Geneva Mohammed. He failed—but he was undoubtedly right.

For those who are not prepared to see the issues directly in terms of

religious belief, there is another way of presenting the matter, and no-one has done it better than Phillip Rieff in *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*. He puts the matter this way:

A culture survives principally, I think, by the power of its institutions to bind and loose men in the conduct of their affairs with reasons which sink so deep into the self that they become commonly and implicitly understood—with that understanding of which explicit belief and precise knowledge of externals would show outwardly like the tip of an iceberg. Spiritualizers of religion (and precisians of science) failed to take into account the degree of intimacy with which this comprehensive interior understanding was cognate with historic institutions, binding even the ignorant of a culture to a great chain of meaning.

Rieff casts his arguments in the language of sociology but it is clear that he is referring, in the above quote, to religious belief. In *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, his main target is the Freudians and their successors. Their secular therapies of analysis and 'release' which supposedly unburden the individual from the oppressive weight of human existence in a contingent universe, are utterly powerless when it comes to the provision of some sense of community—of belonging. Moreover, as Rieff points out elsewhere in his book, that sense of belonging to some wider whole provides the only means of reconciling the individual against the sheer terror of an indifferent universe. In this regard, the current level of suicide, particularly youth suicide, as well as the massive use of anti-depressive drugs, is very sobering indeed.

It is the particular value of rules and 'interdicts' as cohesive forces, binding the individual to a shared culture and its institutions, which Rieff stresses. It is these institutions which, historically, saved us from the 'destructive illusions of uniqueness and separateness'. Here it is useful to recall the social philosophy of J.S. Mill and his insistence, contra Rieff, that the individual should be subject only to such rules as will prevent him or her from harming others. The possibility of other restraints on conduct as having a positive role in society is simply not considered. In fact, the whole history of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thought in this area is one of indifference or antagonism towards traditional moral rules. Even religious believers like Kant wish to place morality on a scientific, rather than a religious footing.

And yet it is these very rules and 'interdicts', these very doctrines and dogmas, which the modernists seek to modify or neutralise in the name of 'bringing the Church into the 21st Century', or some such. They fail to understand that what Rieff calls 'the renunciatory mode' is essentially a positive and not a negative asceticism and its purpose is 'aimed fundamentally at a liberation of the highest powers of personality from blockage by the automatism of the lower drives'. Indeed, the religious modernists are themselves now best thought of as psychological therapists. Their religious message of relief from 'medieval laws' and clerical hierarchies is exactly parallel to the Freudian or post-Freudian analytical attitude. Their purpose is to unburden us from the sense of sin and from commitments of all sorts, to free us as individuals, and to give us what Rieff calls 'a manipulative sense of well-being'. This, he says, is the unreligion of the age. In a much-quoted one-liner, Rieff explains that 'Religious man was born to be saved, psychological man is born to be pleased.'

Just as liberalism in religious matters is ultimately self-defeating, so is political liberalism. This point has been made by commentators as varied as Michael Polanyi (*Meaning*), Leszek Kolakowski (*The Self-Poisoning of the Open Society*), and Malcolm Muggeridge (*The Great Liberal Death Wish*), to name just three. At bottom, these two aspects of human existence—the religious and the political—are inescapably linked together, sometimes positively and sometimes negatively. At the moment we are seeing the playing out of the last phase of a negative link between the two. The remaining rump of traditional belief in the various Christian communions, but especially in Catholicism, is being relentlessly pursued by the political liberals in the name of 'inclusiveness', 'equality', and other related nostrums. Our age, as Polanyi says, 'is racked by the fanaticism of unbelievers'.

It's not that traditional religion is being destroyed, rather it is being cunningly drained of all vitality. Indeed, the outward edifice will remain and will appear to offer 'business as usual'. With brilliant insight, Rieff presaged that future, the future of what he terms 'psychological man', and which has become our reality:

In the emergent culture, a wider range of people will have 'spiritual' concerns and engage in 'spiritual' pursuits. There will be more singing and more listening. People will continue to genuflect and read the Bible ... but no prophet will denounce the rich attire or stop the dancing. There will be more theatre, not less, and no Puritan will

denounce the stage and draw its curtains.

... The wisdom of the next social order, as I imagine it, would not reside in right doctrine, administered by the right men ... but rather in doctrines amounting to permission for each man to live an experimental life. ... All governments will be just, so long as they secure that consoling plenitude of option in which modern satisfaction really consists. In this way the emergent culture could drive the value problem clean out of the social system and, limiting it to a form of philosophical entertainment in lieu of edifying preachment, could successfully conclude the exercise for which politics is the name. ... Psychological man, is likely to be indifferent to the ancient question of legitimate authority ... so long as the powers that be preserve social order and manage an economy of abundance. ... Psychological man in his independence from all gods, can feel free to use all god-terms; I imagine he will be a hedger against his own bets, a user of any faith that lends itself to therapeutic use.

You can recognise, in Rieff's vision of the future, the exact philosophical position of the late Richard Rorty, the philosophical spokesman for modern, secular liberalism in America. He was once asked whether his anti-metaphysical program of 'self-creation' could work in the absence of some unifying, metaphysical base—in other words, whether a wholly secular and subjective culture could produce enough of a civic community to protect democratic society against collapse. This was his short answer:

I think the answer is [yes] only if there is enough money around. That is, if there is economic expansion and the hope of further equality of opportunity for members of the society, then I think a civic community does not need the churches and it can get along with the poets and the scientists. I suspect the churches are going to stage a comeback as the money decreases. I shall regret both the shortage of money and the return of the churches.

If you check the available short biographies of H.L. Mencken on the internet, you will find that he had quite a soft spot for Nietzsche. The commentators regard this as a very negative thing, but I tend to disagree. Like the present-day philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre, I see Nietzsche as the 'canary in the mine'; that is to say, his particular genius was to accurately portray the aftermath of the death of God. To be sure, his mad vision of the *Übermensch* and his depiction of Christianity as 'the slave morality' is thoroughly distasteful, but he was quite right

to point out that once Divine Authority is removed from the scene, mere human schemes of moral philosophy are very laughable matters. Why should anyone feel compelled to abide by their strictures? This, of course is precisely the point made, albeit in a different way, by Rieff. I think Mencken had some sense of this too. He had little time for American liberal democracy as an ultimate ideal, and for the great drive towards that sort of equality which abhors the very idea of any form of hierarchical order:

Off goes the head of the king, and tyranny gives way to freedom. The change seems abysmal. Then, bit by bit, the face of freedom hardens, and by and by it is the old face of tyranny. Then another cycle, and another. But under the play of all these opposites there is something fundamental and permanent—the basic delusion that men may be governed and yet be free.

Watermark

PLATO AND THE LARGE HADRON COLLIDER¹

Every other month or so there is news of yet another and even stranger ‘particle’ discovered by the Large Hadron Collider (hereafter, LHC). Unscientific folk like myself might have been forgiven for supposing that the discovery of ‘the God particle’ some time ago signalled the end of the grand quest but no, it seems that even the identification of the elusive Higgs Boson (the ‘God particle’ according to the press reports) is not the end of the story. Which greatly pleases me in a way, because I find the whole enterprise hugely amusing and entertaining.

First of all, there is the LHC itself. What a marvellous name! Mind you, there is a hint of menace there. Costing untold millions of dollars and secreted underground near the Franco-Swiss border, the LHC is not the sort of thing you would want to collide with on a dark night without a fat cheque book and a good rating from Standard and Poors.

Then we come to the various ‘particles’, now over fifty in number. In my youth, the atom was supposedly made up of protons, electrons, and neutrons, all whizzing about. Nowadays, all manner of exotic particles and forces have supplanted this older, simplistic model. Such is their number that the scientific folk have found it necessary to adopt a sort of Linnean classificatory system. We could begin with fermions, which are further subdivided into quarks and leptons. The quarks (the name was pinched from James Joyce), no less than the leptons, are further subdivided into six species —up, down, strange, bottom, top and charm (I kid you not). The leptons include our old friend the electron, the muon, the tau, the electron neutrino, the muon neutrino and the tau neutrino. But, as they say on those TV ads, there’s more!

As well as these ‘matter particles’, there are ‘force carriers’—a whole tribe of bosons of which the Higgs is but a member. There are photons, gluons (from Star Trek, perhaps?), Z-bosons and w bosons.

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The bosons are an unfortunate bunch. Being neither bottoms nor bosoms, they occupy a sort of anatomical field of indeterminacy. No wonder they eluded discovery for so long. I daresay by the time I finish writing this article, newer members will be added to this already large family of subatomic entities as the LHC ‘slouches toward Bethlehem’ to give birth to what its enthusiastic supporters suppose will be the very nub of things.

But even within this burgeoning ecosystem of particles and forces, all is not well. For this ‘standard model’ (the name given to this collection of particles and forces) does not sit all that well with the other great modern explanatory system—the theory of General Relativity. Both are needed, but both cannot be true (inasmuch as the word ‘truth’ has any meaning today) at the same time. Of course, it may well be that one day some sort of reconciliation is achieved, and we have a unitary explanatory system. Exactly what, though, would it explain?

This brings me directly to Plato. Two and a half thousand years ago, at the very birth of what we once proudly called ‘western civilisation’, Plato posed the very same question to himself as that posed by our latter day LHC enthusiasts and Webb telescope barrackers: ‘What is the ultimate explanation of things?’ His answer—as valid now as it was then—was ‘the idea of the Good’. In short, there was no answer to be found by interrogating matter but, rather, you must interrogate your own intellect and exactly how it apprehends being—the very existence of things and of your own being. To quote the famous Plato scholar of last century, Francis Cornford:

You cannot, by taking visible things to pieces, ever arrive at any parts more real than the whole you started with. The perfection of microscopic vision can bring you no nearer to the truth, for the truth is not at the further end of your microscope. To find reality you would do better to shut your eyes and think.

The whole business is like peeling an onion to get at the very core of the thing. You finish up with a mere collection of shells—and tears. And yet, the idea persists, in the popular media at least, that one day we will arrive at some mechanistic understanding of nature and the cosmos which ‘explains everything’. Just the other day, I saw a headline on one of those annoying ‘pop-ups’ which seem to arrive unbidden on my computer screen: ‘The Webb Telescope may allow us to look back to the Big Bang—the very beginning of the universe’.

Let us suppose, in a moment of idle fancy, that the telescope can indeed, locate the very limit of the supposedly expanding universe. What might eventuate if they focus just beyond this point? It is conceptually difficult to think of nothing. And why, pray, was there a 'big bang' anyway? Certain pundits speak knowingly of a multiverse or pluriverse etc. and thereby suppose that this will proffer some sort of explanation. As if being can be so divided. If such alternate universes were to exist, they must necessarily belong to a single order of being, else we could not even conceive of them. All we do, basically, is to elongate the causal chain.

Other and similar 'online' articles have headlines that are no less nonsensical: 'Can an infinite universe arise from a finite point?' Or this one: 'How the physics of nothing underlies everything'. The latter goes on to tell us that '[physicists] have encountered a growing multitude of types of nothing. Each has its own behaviour, as if it's a different phase of a substance. Increasingly, it seems that the key to understanding the origin and fate of the universe may be a careful accounting of these proliferating varieties of absence.' The violence that such writing does to language is almost beyond comprehension. There are category errors here so gross as to take reason captive and paralyse criticism. We may as well ask as to whether the sun wears braces or the moon suffers from constipation.

But the basic error in all of this is to suppose as these science popularisers do, that 'science' occupies some ontologically neutral position and that the 'scientific method' simply deals with 'facts', free of all metaphysics. So what is a 'fact' and just how is such an entity established? To quote Michael Hanby: 'there is no metaphysically neutral starting point from which science can lift itself up by its own intellectual bootstraps' [Hanby, Michael. *No God, No Science*]. Both Plato and Aristotle knew this, but our modern science popularisers are almost certainly ignorant of anything written by such 'primitive' folk.

This is not to suggest that scientific enquiry is futile and should be abandoned. All of us have benefited in some way from advances in scientific knowledge. The problem arises when 'science' is invoked to answer questions which are ontologically prior to its own enterprise. These are properly the province of metaphysics and theology. Strictly speaking, science deals in effectiveness, not truth. In fact, as Hanby has eloquently demonstrated in *No God, No Science*, modern science as it is represented by people like Christopher Hitchens and Richard

Dawkins, carries its own metaphysical and deviant ‘theological’ baggage:

Irreducibly metaphysical judgements as to the nature of being, form, time, space, matter, cause, truth, knowledge, explanation, wholes, parts, and the like are the starting point of science, not its conclusions. Because they are apropos of being qua being, these judgements are not merely presupposed at the origins of scientific inquiry where they may thereafter be bracketed out. Since what is true of the whole is by definition true of every part, they permeate the entire enterprise and are operative inside of every subsequent judgement.

Modern ‘scientific’ atheism, purely because it needs the concept ‘God’ against which to erect its own contrary model is, *ipso facto*, ‘theological’. Here is Hanby again:

More simply, science is intrinsically related to theology because one cannot identify the object of scientific inquiry—namely, nature—without simultaneously distinguishing it from that which is not nature—namely, God—and without giving tacit specification to the character of this ‘not.’ This is confirmed by a fact which we have already noted: ... conceptions of nature determine in advance what sort of God is allowed to appear to thought and consequently, the range of meanings that can be intelligibly attached to ‘creation.’

Let us now return to Plato. At the very heart of the issue concerning the validity of the ‘scientific’ view is the simple question of faith. It is, in a sense, an act of faith to believe in the validity of your own reasoning. The scientist and polymath, Michael Polanyi puts it this way:

(W)e cannot ultimately specify the grounds ... upon which we hold that our knowledge is true. Being committed to such grounds, dwelling in them, we are projecting ourselves to what we believe to be true from or through these grounds. We cannot therefore see what they are. We cannot look at them since we are looking with them. They therefore must remain indeterminate.

But the sort of ‘faith’ invoked by both Plato and Aristotle is very different from that invoked by the science popularisers. In his famous ‘divided line’ analogy (*Republic*), Plato takes us through the various levels of human knowledge, from mere opinion through to ‘knowledge of the Good’. That last step to the ‘knowledge of the Good’, is beyond mere reasoning and in

the realm of an intellectual assent. Aristotle, too, supposes that 'the indemonstrable first principles of being qua being which are at the ontological root of every science, command faith (*πιστειν*, *pistein*) understood ... in the sense of the 'yes' implicit in our reception of the world as it 'communicates itself' immediately to our understanding. Aristotelian *pistis* is a kind of trust, a willingness to receive the world on its own terms that is constitutive of cognition as such.' [Hanby]. In other words, 'Truth moves us by nothing more basic than itself.'

And this, incidentally, is why those religious believers who seek to refute their atheist opponents by disputing scientific evidence or proffering alternative scientific explanations completely miss the point. They are unwittingly operating within the 'rules' set by their opponents. This approach will always fail.

In order to take up arms against the hubris of what Hanby calls 'extrinsicism', we must return to that Christian philosophy of being which had its early roots in ancient Greece and its full elaboration in the Christian centuries which followed, starting with St. Augustine and reaching its zenith in the high Middle Ages with St. Thomas Aquinas and the Schoolmen. It is no accident that the secular savants of the 17th and 18th centuries directed most of their attacks on the philosophy of the Schoolmen, for only when the traditional notions of causation and of teleology were abolished could modernity erect its wholly materialist substitute. With the abolition of formal and final causes (regarded contemptuously as 'occult' properties), the way was now clear for Baconian science to 'interrogate' nature and treat the latter as mere substrate. And yet the same science now calls on us to develop an 'ecological consciousness'. How? Having deprived nature of all forms of intrinsic value, we have no means of meeting the need, short of some shallow and wholly subjective emotionalism. It was the strange, prophetic voice of William Blake—considered mad by his peers—which conveyed the truth of the matter:

The atoms of Democritus
And Newton's particles of light
Are sands upon the Red Sea shore,
Where Israel's tents do shine so bright

But perhaps the last word should rest with Hanby who rightly points out that natural theology does not begin with the Greeks and Egyptians and end with the *Bridgewater Treatises*. It begins with thought and does not end.

THE TWO HERETICS¹

R.H. Tawney and Hilaire Belloc

The political commentators are still struggling to explain the phenomenon of Donald Trump. But it seems that, not just in America but in many other countries as well, ‘populist’ figures bereft of any real policy-making skills, are on the rise. In short, a great many people are showing their dissatisfaction with ‘mainstream’ political parties and the rise of mavericks like Trump in America, Corbyn in Britain and even our own Clive Palmer is material evidence of this dissatisfaction.

More and more commentators are now coming to the view that the root cause of this dissatisfaction is what the American commentator Christopher Lasch once dubbed ‘the age of diminished expectations’. Back in 2012, the American political scientist Charles Murray published *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960—2010*. In that book, Murray produced a mass of evidence to show that that the great American dream of equal opportunity for all had failed. There are now two classes in America—the very rich and the rest (many of whom are becoming poorer by the day). This book, which aroused much controversy at the time, was followed in 2014 by Joel Kotkin’s *The New Class Conflict*. Like Murray, Kotkin, charts the rise of two new dominant classes—the ‘technical Oligarchy’ (largely situated in Silicon Valley) and the ‘Clerisy’ (the policy, media and academic elites). The rest—what used to be called ‘middle class America’ are in a phase of diminished expectation and, not surprisingly, they are venting their anger towards their traditional political masters, Democrat and Republican. Hence Trump.

The problem is that anyone who suggests that this state of affairs is due, in any way, to the unhindered operation of ‘market forces’ is labelled either as a ‘socialist ratbag’ or a ‘romantic fool’. The ‘free market’, with its promotion of rampant consumerism is regarded as sacrosanct—even if it leads to the quaintly named ‘sub-prime’

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mortgage scandal. What particularly upsets the defenders of this system is any suggestion that questions of moral propriety are involved. We are asked to accept the proposition that 'the market' is morally neutral.

Many decades ago, two prominent historians, R.H. Tawney (1880-1962) and Hilaire Belloc (1870-1953), challenged such a view. Their work in this area is hardly ever mentioned today. I doubt that any young student of economic and social theory today has read Belloc's *The Servile State*, or Tawney's *The Acquisitive Society*. Indeed, if you do manage to find reference to either work, it will almost always be in the form of negative comment—Tawney a naive socialist, and Belloc as a hopeless romantic with fairy tale visions of a society based on the notion of distributism. Now it is certainly true that Tawney was, for a time, a member of the British Labour Party and of the Fabian Society, but to label him simply as a 'socialist' (and therefore, by implication, a Marxist, Communist, Fellow Traveller, etc. etc.) is ridiculous. Likewise, to label Belloc as 'anti-capitalist' (and, again, by implication a socialist) just because he maintained that one could have a capitalist system which was, indeed, a servile state, is to wholly misunderstand his approach to social and economic matters. Nonetheless, today both Tawney and Belloc (but especially the former) are regarded as heretics by all sides of politics.

In fact, what underpinned the ideas of both Tawney and Belloc was a deep commitment to the proposition that the Christian Gospel had application in all areas of human life—including economic and political matters. Both were committed Christians who were convinced that the Christian religion had a role to play in public affairs. Underpinning that conviction was their idea that the human person, and human work itself, was possessed of a certain dignity and worth because it was divinely ordained. Human work ought to provide for the worker, a pathway or means toward the proper conduct, and goal or *telos*, of a human life.

For Belloc, both socialism and capitalism were problematical because both systems placed the means of production into the hands of a minority at the expense of the masses. In capitalism, land and capital are controlled by a small number of powerful business people, whilst in socialism that same power was held by a small number of politicians. In these scenarios, the vast majority of citizens had little

control over their own economic fortunes. This led Belloc to define the 'Servile State' as follows:

That arrangement of society in which so considerable a number of the families and individuals are constrained by positive law to labour for the advantage of other families and individuals as to stamp the whole community with the mark of such labour we call the Servile State.

To clarify and somewhat narrow his definition, Belloc went on:

That society is not servile in which men are intelligently constrained to labour by enthusiasm, by a religious tenet, or indirectly from fear of destitution, or directly from love of gain, or from the common sense which teaches them that by their labour they may increase their well-being.

A clear boundary exists between the servile and the non-servile condition of labour, and the conditions upon either side of that boundary utterly differ one from another. Where there is compulsion applicable by positive law to men of a certain status, and such compulsion enforced in the last resort by the powers at the disposal of the State, there is the institution of Slavery ; and if that institution be sufficiently expanded the whole State may be said to repose upon a servile basis, and is a Servile State.

To put these ideas into a modern context, we might imagine the position of, say, an automobile worker in some large factory. The international company which owns the factory announces that it is an uneconomic investment and decides to close it. The worker here has no input into this decision. Again, think of a small irrigation farmer growing produce under contract for a large food processing company. The owners of the company decide to close it because of poor returns on investment. Here again, the worker has little or no say in the decision. In both these situations the worker cannot exercise free choice in relation to his or her labour—it has been taken away from them. Hence Belloc's notion of 'compulsion' as against 'enthusiasm', 'religious tenet', love of gain', etc.

Belloc's proposed solution—a sort of third way between socialism and capitalism, was the notion of distributism. The idea here was to arrange the production of goods in such a way as to maximise personal ownership. Worker co-operatives are an obvious example. Distributism is underpinned by another principle, that of subsidiarity. Put briefly, the principle of subsidiarity demands that no larger

economic, political or social unit should perform a function which can be carried out, with equal efficiency, by a smaller one.

Tawney's proposed solution to the economic ills he saw about him was to promote Christian Socialism. There is, it is true to say, a certain naivety in his hope that a largely secularised population in the industrialised West would take any heed of the Christian Gospel message in their public life. Nonetheless, one can only admire his stance as a Christian. What particularly informed Tawney's view of the world was his prodigious knowledge of European history (the same can be said for Belloc). Tawney had traced the fortunes of human societies from medieval times through the Renaissance and Reformation and saw in that history, the gradual dissociation of Christian morality from the sphere of economics. The transformation of usury from a serious sin to a respectable trade was for Tawney a negation of the Gospel message. It is fitting perhaps that I end with a pertinent quotation from his *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, published in 1926. The modern reader might note, in passing, Tawney's magnificent command of the English language, reminiscent of a Dr Johnson or an Edward Gibbon:

Few who consider dispassionately the facts of social history will be disposed to deny that the exploitation of the weak by the powerful ... has been a permanent feature in the life of most communities that the world has yet seen. But the quality in modern societies, which is most sharply opposed to the teaching ascribed to the Founder of the Christian Faith, lies deeper than the exceptional failures and abnormal follies against which criticism is most commonly directed. It consists in the assumption ... that the attainment of material riches is the supreme object of human endeavour and the final criterion of human success. Such a philosophy, plausible, militant, and not indisposed, when hard pressed, to silence criticism by persecution, may triumph or may decline. What is certain is that it is the negation of any system of thought or morals which can, except by a metaphor, be described as Christian. Compromise is as impossible between the Church of Christ and the idolatry of wealth, which is the practical religion of capitalist societies, as it was between the Church and the State idolatry of the Roman Empire.

...The language in which theologians and preachers expressed their horror of the sin of covetousness may appear to the modern reader too murkily sulphurous; their precepts on the contracts of business

and the disposition of property may seem an impracticable pedantry. But rashness is a more agreeable failing than cowardice, and, when to speak is unpopular, it is less pardonable to be silent than to say too much.

With those words of Tawney's still resounding in your mind, you might, then, forgive my own rashness in suggesting that both he and Belloc had something useful to say about our present political and economic climate.

Watermark

INFLATIONARY LANGUAGE¹

Status, Value, and the University

The late Victor Borge, musician, entertainer and comic genius, died in the year 2000. He was ninety one years old. Among his many creations was an account of a domestic situation in which he ‘inflated’ each mention of a number so that ‘once’ became ‘twice’ and so on. Here is an excerpt:

Twice upon a time there lived in sunny Califivenia a young man named Bob. He was a third lieutelevenant in the U.S. Air Fiveces. Bob had been fond of Anna, his one and a half sister ever since she saw the light of day five the second time. And they were both proud of the fact that two of his fivefathers had been among the creninetors of the U.S. Constithreention.

I sometimes think that the Danes gave us the irrepressible, inflationary, Victor Borge to make up for having earlier given us the melancholic, deflationary, Søren Kierkegaard. It’s just a theory!

I was reminded of Borge’s account just a couple of days ago when an ambulance went past our door, siren screeching and lights flashing. On the side was written the word ‘Paramedic’. Here, I reflected, is inflationary language of another sort. People who operated ambulances were once called ambulance drivers or ambulance officers. Now they are paramedics. It sounds so much more technical and important. Likewise, there are no farmers these days, only people in agribusiness or agrotechnologists (like that marvellous Peter Simple character, Seth Roentgen). There are no septic tank desludgers only businesses in environmental services, no knackereries only organic recyclers, and no pawnshops only cash converters. Hack writers like me are no doubt called ‘freelance literary practitioners’ or some such. Actually, I am a retired rabbit poisoner, so my correct modern title is probably Animal Damage Control Operator. And, of course, I didn’t kill things— I ‘managed populations’.

¹ Previously unpublished

While this trend is a general one, it is most noticeable in the education industry. There are very few schools left nowadays. They have all been converted to colleges and their physical locations, once simply called 'grounds' are now 'campuses'. This means, of course, that those institutions that were once colleges have found it necessary to move up in the pecking order so as to avoid being identified with their once lowlier cousins. They become 'senior secondary colleges'. Meanwhile, the old trade schools have become institutes and the institutes have become universities. Even the kindergartens are involved in this inflationary language stuff. A while back, our local rag carried a story of a 'graduation ceremony' from a local kindergarten (now called 'pre-school centres' of course). The tiny tots were all decked out in gowns and mortar boards and each received that all important roll of paper. This is all true and I have not exaggerated in any way.

But, of course, this trend is not an open-ended business—you cannot inflate to infinity. The buck has to stop somewhere. In the education industry, the endpoint is reached with the universities. They have nowhere higher to go. The inevitable consequence is a sort of vocational traffic jam with a huge range of human activities all mixed up at the end of the road and milling about with nowhere to go. Thus courses in medicine or in analytical philosophy will be jostling against courses in podiatry, outdoor education (this is not a 'hedge school'), and business studies. At this stage, certain enraged readers will have already picked up their pens to protest, in the strongest possible terms, against my obvious showing of elitism, chauvinism, etc. etc. Let me ease their troubled minds. I am not suggesting that a PhD in say, podiatry, is less worthy than a PhD in nuclear physics. I have no way of measuring such worth. That's part of the problem. What I am suggesting is that the term 'university degree' has now changed so utterly as to be devoid of virtually any meaning at all. If we can have degrees in nature tourism, podiatry, and nursing, why not in plumbing, cabinet making, taxidermy, and home birthing? Do the nature tourists and nurses consider themselves a cut above the plumbers? I hope not, because if so, I will be picking up my pen to protest against their elitism. Do they want to tell me that the business of nature tourism, for instance, is far more intellectually demanding than that of plumbing? If so, they might like to come and talk to my plumber mates who are trying to keep up with the latest building code regulations, instruction sheets for solar-assisted hot water units, etc. Getting approval for a new septic tank system is now of the same order of

difficulty as writing a treatise upon, say, the doctrine of the Trinity, or the half-life of quarks.

The whole thing has reached the point of madness. Unless we can agree on some set of criteria for the demarcation of educational responsibilities, the farce can only get more pronounced. One possible solution is for those areas of study traditionally associated with universities for the last five hundred years or more to demote themselves and form separate institutions called 'schools'. Their staff would, of course, have to accept lower wages, lower general status, and the loss of brightly coloured academic dress (gowns, mortarboards, and associated paraphernalia). They would also have to attract full fee-paying students because, initially at any rate, no government would touch them with a twenty-foot pole. In other words, this might not be a goer, to put it rather mildly. And yet, some move will be necessary if we are to avoid a situation where every human occupation requires a university degree. Of course, it might be possible to get the current holders of the title 'university' to move up to 'duoversity' (páce Victor Borge) so as to free-up the old name. 'Diversity' has already been spoken for, unfortunately. Indeed, there's probably a uni course with that name.

There are many, detailed, structural, and procedural matters which impinge upon the proper functioning of an education system and I am not qualified to suggest improvements in these areas. Come to think of it, as a retired rabbit poisoner, I am not qualified to give opinions on any matter outside the dietary preferences of *Oryctolagus cuniculus* and its tolerance to certain substances! But I want to suggest that, in the matter of education and its role in society, there are certain commonsense principles and certain observations which require no great scholarly learning and no more than a very general understanding of the human past.

In fact, what fuels the current silliness is well known and it has been written about in this online site and elsewhere ad nauseam. It is a preoccupation with a sort of frenzied democratisation of all aspects of human endeavour. The people involved are the modern 'Levellers'. The old 'Levellers' were a Puritan sect in England during the period of the Civil War. Cromwell suppressed them rather vigorously, but I doubt that he could even dream of the possibility of a secular version turning up a few hundred years later. The mere suggestion that some

young people may be capable of higher intellectual achievements than others sends them into fits of apoplectic rage and they reach for their tomes on equal opportunity legislation. Mind you, they are not always consistent in this respect. 'Your levellers', said Dr. Johnson, 'wish to level down as far as themselves; but they cannot bear levelling up to themselves'.

The curious thing is that tradespeople and other degree-deprived workers have absolutely no thoughts along these lines. On the contrary, they consider themselves immensely superior to the 'eggheads' or 'nerds' in every way. They point to the fact that such people are often completely impractical and wholly reliant on others to look after them. Why, some tradespeople will even tell you that boffins need assistance with the very simplest practical actions of human hygiene. Of course, the 'tradies' describe the shortcomings in more direct terms than I have been able to do here.

To my mind, the supposed need for fully democratised learning across the board and dramatic changes to some existing or earlier system of education arises, in part, from a total misunderstanding (or ignorance) of the traditional systems involved in the organisation of human work and of the way in which the natural subordination of human activities was understood in earlier times. It arises, too, from the very nature of secular democracy itself, but I will deal with that theme later. We hear calls to 'correct the injustices of the past'. But our past was not always unjust in the matter of education and careers. What characterised this earlier organisation, right from medieval times, was a system of what I will call parallelism. Questions of superiority or inferiority simply did not arise in the way that they do today. If we take the trades, for instance, the guild system of masters, journeymen, and apprentices afforded a career path which 'paralleled' the university system. Indeed, in some cases, the master craftsman was deemed to have a much higher status than that of university teachers. For instance, in the massive, four volume, *History of the University in Europe* (ed. Walter Rüegg), the example is given of master-builders in university towns. Their responsibilities afforded them a status in society which could call forth the envy of university teachers. I wonder how many people today have reflected upon the origin of the word masterpiece?

In the modern era, of course, all that changed. We may want to say that education and employment opportunities have changed for the better

but I think it at least possible to argue that job satisfaction for many people today is hardly a matter upon which we should be congratulating ourselves. It is easy enough to see just how the changes came about. For instance, the loss of the old trade schools and the radical alteration of the traditional apprenticeship system partly accounts for the push towards some alternative system of acquiring status. Not all that long ago, a person could take great pride in belonging to a particular trade because terms like 'Master Builder' or 'Master Butcher' really did carry weight in the community. The trade was a vocation for which one trained long and hard under the guidance of a master. Leaving aside the obvious impact of industrial age and the factory system, part of the blame for the destruction of this system rests with the evolution of the do-it-yourself handyperson and the supply of ever more idiot-proof or pre-fabricated products. The expert is no longer needed. A Master Builder now spends most of his or her time on the telephone arranging for the 'subbies' to put all the prefabricated bits together with their pneumatic nail guns and fast-grip glue. Let me recount a true story in order to highlight just how much our general attitudes have changed in this regard over the last sixty years.

Many years ago, one of my work colleagues was a man who had been trained as a cabinet maker in Europe. Why he became a rabbit poisoner is another story. He underwent a very long and difficult apprenticeship under a very stern and exacting master. For the first year of his apprenticeship he was not allowed to use any wood working tools and was given the most menial of tasks. Eventually, he was shown all the secrets of the trade and was allowed to build pieces of furniture on his own. This man told me that, in his little village, the simplest little home repair job was always left to a qualified tradesperson. No-one would think of fixing his or her own door handle for instance. This principle of action extended right down to the provision of coffins for the dead. It was inconceivable that the undertaker should screw down the coffin lid. This had to be done by the person who had made the coffin. As you might have guessed, this happened to be one of the first major responsibilities given to my cabinet-maker colleague. The corpse in question belonged to a village dignitary who happened to be fairly rotund and my friend had underestimated in regard to height of the coffin. When it came to screwing down the lid, he found that he had to sit on top of it and apply his screws against considerable pressure. Being a small village, it

was customary for everyone to attend the funeral. The coffin-maker was required to walk behind the coffin during its procession from the church to the cemetery. My friend then recounted the circumstances in this fashion (I will not attempt the accent): ‘All of the others were praying for the man’s soul, but I was praying for the screws to hold’.

Our dilemma today is not just in working out just how the education of our young should be organised to maximise the potential in each and every student. It is also how human endeavour and human achievement should be valued. The question of who should be allowed to enter a university and what should be taught at such a place is obviously not a new one. It must have arisen at the very same time as the emergence of the universities themselves. Why were the four typical faculties of the medieval university the artes, medicine, law, and theology? Why not the technological sciences, the artes mechanicae? As Walter Rüegg points out, neither the demands of society, the subject itself, nor the classification of the sciences in general, can explain the persistence of the patterns of four faculties of the medieval university into the nineteenth century. Rather, the adherence to this particular schema seems to be the result of what might be called ‘natural selection’. As Rüegg says, ‘faculties emerged only where there were previously schools which transmitted knowledge as a public good and where attendance was basically open to everyone capable of performing at the required intellectual standard’. What gave meaning to the system was the fundamental significance of the amor sciendi—the concept of intellectual integrity, broad learning, and conceptual clarity. These qualities, rather than perceived social needs determined the structure of the university. The university was the institutional form of the amor sciendi. The standards set themselves, as it were.

The idea of knowledge as a good in itself has, for the universities, been almost entirely obliterated. Knowledge is good only insofar as it can contribute to the Gross National Product. That is to say, ‘good’ is merely a contingent value, not an absolute one. This is another reason why teaching in all sorts of human occupations has gravitated towards the universities. If the universities can make a quid out of it, or demonstrate to government that the nation will make a quid out of it, then it is ‘good’ and will be taught without any reference to its suitability as a university course. Contrariwise, it is not very difficult to understand why the traditional subjects of the artes liberales are under the hammer today. They do not perform well under the strict

economic system of cost-benefit analysis.

It is in the word value, I think, that we come to the nub of the problem. The push for 'equality of outcomes' (that weasel phrase) and university degrees for all is merely the symptom of something much deeper—the loss of meaning and of objective value. Most modern conservatives/liberal democrats (the two terms are virtually interchangeable today) say all sorts of nice things about 'the Western Tradition', the positive value of religious belief, the existence of Truth, and so on. But, because they are pluralists you cannot run them to ground on these issues. If you did run them to ground, they would no longer be pluralists. Thus, religion is good while it stays private and Truth is something of a homeless creature whom you greet fondly but at a distance, lest you are forced to declare your colours and invite it indoors. For some form of Truth standing beyond the human order, there is no room at the inn. It is no longer even a possibility because it would entail some limits to pluralism and to the autonomy of the individual.

There is, in human affairs, a great battle of ideas. A major role of the university is to 'adjudicate' in this debate, as it were. But it cannot do so without reference to unvarying principles—each argument needs to be tested against such principles. If the principles are not in place, then the role of the university is otiose. For me, at any rate, there is no escape from what many others will see as a shocking reversion to the superstitions of the past for, in the last analysis, those principles are not derived from human experience but are revealed in religious traditions. That, at any rate was how the matter was seen in the West for something like two millennia. And I place some value on the weight of history. Indeed, that is precisely what the word 'conservative' stood for until the modern liberals took it over.

Now you can see why I was a rabbit poisoner.

A.N. WILSON AND THE HOUND OF HEAVEN¹

Francis Thompson, the Catholic poet who gave us that much admired poem *The Hound of Heaven*, was born in the Victorian era and the circumstances of his own troubled life broadly reflect the era in which he lived. Always shy and nervous, he suffered a mental breakdown, became addicted to opium and, for a number of years, lived 'rough' on the streets of London. This was the age of anxiety, notwithstanding W.H. Auden's later poem bearing such a name which characterised post-war Britain in that way. At the very least, if the period between the wars was to be characterised as 'the age of anxiety', then we may truly say that the preceding Victorian era was a sort of *praeparatio evangelica* for what was to come. And perhaps no-one has better described the anxieties and contradictions of that age than the British writer and commentator, A.N. Wilson. But more of that later.

Wilson's own spiritual journey through life has been one of seeming contradictions too. Somewhat like the celebrated Vicar of Bray, he has undergone several conversions. As a youth he was an Anglican and even studied for the Anglican priesthood. Then he became a Catholic, but certain aspects of Vatican II displeased him, and he returned to Anglicanism. In 1989 he announced himself as a born-again atheist, this latter move roughly coinciding with his divorce and remarriage. He continued to believe in that faith system (for it is a faith with its own creed and its own secular saints) until 2009 when, in an article in *The New Statesman*, he announced his return to the Christian religion.

Readers may be forgiven for suggesting that this latest move, too, may simply be a temporary one until Wilson discovers one or other of the eastern religions or, perhaps, Madame Blavatsky. However, I think not. Wilson is an older and a wiser man now and he has, over those years traversed a huge range of religious literature from St Paul through to our own age. He has also put the rise of atheism under his critical gaze, and it is here, especially, that he has gradually come to see that the emperor has no clothes. I can do no better than to quote him directly here:

¹ First published in *News Weekly*, Aug 6, 2022

My departure from the Faith was like a conversion on the road to Damascus. My return was slow, hesitant, doubting. So it will always be; but I know I shall never make the same mistake again. Gilbert Ryle, with donnish absurdity, called God 'a category mistake'. Yet the real category mistake made by atheists is not about God, but about human beings. Turn to the 'Table Talk' of Samuel Taylor Coleridge—'Read the first chapter of Genesis without prejudice and you will be convinced at once . . . 'The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life'. And then Coleridge adds: 'And man became a living soul.' Materialism will never explain those last words.

But, of course, Wilson's literary output over a long career (he is still hard at it) generally reflects his particular religious outlook at the time of writing. So, for instance, his biography of Hilaire Belloc (published in 1984) was, to say the least, not well received by Belloc fans (I am one but have not read the book). His 'biography' of Jesus (1992) was in that now familiar vein of 'the historical Jesus'. Ever and anon, the quest for 'the historical Jesus' turns out to be a quest for the particular Jesus that I can feel comfortable about and who does not keep troubling my conscience. Alas, the Hound of Heaven is not like that. You cannot chain Him up or corral Him. Neither can you train Him to obey your wishes. And, as Thompson knew, just when you think you are safely free of Him, there He is, just behind you, padding along silently. In the end, such faithfulness, such loyalty cannot be resisted. And so, eventually, the Hound caught up with Wilson. In the end, as C.S. Lewis said, you have two choices: you either believe that Jesus Christ is truly the Son of God, or you believe that he is a raving lunatic. There is no middle ground here. And Wilson, by the way, also penned a biography of Lewis. Here again, Lewis fans were underwhelmed to say the least.

I have read many of Wilson's essays but only one of his books. That book was *God's Funeral*, published in 1999. The publication date tells us that Wilson was an atheist when he wrote the book and, of course, the title says it all. Or does it? Most Christian commentators greeted the book with dismay and indignation when it first appeared but, in fact, it is anything but an anti-Christian book. You need to look past the title and delve into the book itself. The title, in fact, was borrowed from Thomas Hardy and was there ever an unbeliever as hesitant and uncertain? Well, Matthew Arnold maybe. To be sure, Wilson fires many a broadside at believers (particularly Catholics), but the collateral damage to atheism is enormous.

In *God's Funeral*, Wilson parades before us a huge cast of characters who each strode the stage for their brief moment and, for all their supposed 'objectivity', and commitment to 'facts', were often susceptible to all sorts of madcap beliefs, fads and downright deceptions. Here I cannot resist quoting Wilson on G.B. Shaw (hardly an example of intellectual acuity but, nonetheless a very public atheist):

For all the fervour with which Shaw was read by young socialists in the early years of this century, his political and religious stances seem no more than absurd garments, like the celebrated all-in-one Jaeger suit, as a way of playing to the gallery, delighting, in part by shocking, the bourgeoisie on whom his fortunes as a stylish middlebrow playwright depended.

The one-piece, yellow Jaeger suit which Shaw donned for his father's funeral (to demonstrate his hatred of the man—Samuel Butler style) was purchased from a con man of that name who swore that the woollen garment 'drew out poisons from the skin'. Shaw believed him and yet denounced Edward Jenner's discovery of vaccination as 'a mere stunt... nothing short of attempted murder'. Wilson parades many other atheist crackpots before our eyes—Auguste Comte with his 'religion of humanity' and his saint Clotilde, for example—and writes about them with a stiletto dipped in sulphuric acid. Truly, as Chesterton said, those who disbelieve in God will believe in anything.

And, taken as a group, what a sad and morose bunch they were, those Victorians—Arnold on Dover Beach, Housman and his 'remorseful day', and poor old Hardy, weeping at God's funeral. Even the early photos show a dejected looking bunch—the long-faced J.S. Mill looking like a man who has just lost his life savings on a slow nag, and the wistful-looking Herbert Spencer of whom Beatrice Webb wrote 'There is no life...so inexpressively sad as the inarticulate life of Herbert Spencer'.

Indeed, I would go as far as to say that Wilson's detailed analysis of the major figures in the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment 'project' for the abandonment of religion (he begins with Hume) was a major factor in forming his decision to return to Christianity. Wilson is an intelligent man. He has read and understood a good deal of modern philosophy. He knows that modern empiricism—the god of atheism—has its limits and that it cannot answer 'the big questions'.

Here he is on Hume and epistemology:

But Hume and the other British empirical philosophers of the eighteenth century have left a question in the air: how do we know anything? By what criterion can we claim that this proposition is verifiable and that not? Is there any infallible means of distinguishing truth from falsehood., or even of knowing what we mean when we say I know, or I think?

Wilson then goes on to say, 'No one in the history of philosophy has ever found satisfactory answers to them'. Well, sorry old chap, I beg to differ. What about Plato and Aristotle? What about St Thomas Aquinas? Now it is highly significant that Wilson's book on the supposed death of God makes no mention of Aristotle, and the only mention of Plato is in reference to his Victorian translator, Benjamin Jowett, plus an entirely predictable entry dealing with homosexuality! Aquinas gets a handful of one-liners. In short, Wilson completely ignores the whole of the Christian perennial philosophy. Of course, the Wilson of 1999 would probably reply that the arguments of Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas were religious arguments, not philosophical ones. So how is the line drawn and upon what authority is it drawn?

This, to my mind, is highly uncharacteristic of Wilson. In what I have read of him, I find him to be willing to give two sides of a story, and to explore all avenues and their consequences. In short, I believe him to be honest. I can only suppose that he decided to ignore the perennial philosophy because he knew little about it. But, of course, it is significant that most modern philosophy and, indeed, modern science, never starts at the beginning. The starting point is always in media res. Neither science nor the various breeds of modern empiricism designed to support it can lift themselves up by their own bootstraps and Wilson knows this. The absolute starting point is always avoided.

It is highly unlikely that A.N. Wilson will ever read this short essay but if he does, then I suggest that he gets hold of a book by Michael Hanby entitled *No God, no Science*¹. There he will find the ontological base he needs. For what Hanby does, inter alia, is to show that atheism itself is a theological concept at base and science, if it is to claim its findings as truths, can only do so by reference to the first principles of

¹ See page 194 of this present book

human knowledge—in short, by reference to Being. It cannot dodge metaphysics—that very same metaphysics that the 18th C savants and their Victorian heirs consigned to the rubbish bin of history. Without a metaphysical base, all else is illusory. This ultimate Truth is destined to be found and lost over and over—as in Wilson's case. That is why it is called the perennial philosophy. But perhaps Wilson has, by now, arrived at the very ground of things and, with God's grace, will remain there 'at the still point of the turning world'.

Ever and anon a trumpet sounds, From the hid battlements of
eternity. (*The Hound of Heaven*)

Watermark

PASCAL WITHOUT PRESSURE¹

Car drivers or bicycle riders who have experienced flat tyres will be familiar with the kilopascal, the decimal unit of air pressure. The unit derives its name from the famous French scientist, Blaise Pascal (1623-1662). As will be evident from the dates, his life was tragically short but, in addition to a brilliant scientific career, Pascal wrote on philosophical and theological issues, many of them hugely relevant to our own troubled times. Other than letters to various people (he was a controversialist and embroiled in the Jansenist debate), Pascal left us a collection of short notes and reflections published posthumously as *Pensées* (Thoughts). These notes and reflections were intended to be ‘fleshed out’ into a book—a defence of the Christian religion, but Pascal died before he could elaborate on the notes.

Nonetheless, *Pensées* has long been regarded as one of the great literary works of the Western canon. The range of topics covered is colossal—God, infinity, death, the nature of the universe, the limits of reason, the meaning of life, human psychology, to mention just a few. *Pensées* is akin to a dictionary of quotations and any writer interested in philosophy and theology will almost certainly have the *Pensées* on his or her bookshelf. It is also an excellent bedtime book because, unlike novels which often demand long readings at any one time, you can open the *Pensées* anywhere and begin reading. Even if you read the whole work several times in this haphazard fashion, each new visit will deliver up some new insight. Writers find it to be a marvellous source of quotes for their own works.

The most famous episode in the *Pensées*, (often placed as an Introduction—it was not part of his normal notes) takes up only a paragraph or so, but it describes (as best he can describe such an episode) some sort of vision of God. The description that Pascal wrote down on a piece of paper he subsequently sewed into the hem of his shirt. It is often called his ‘Night of Fire’ and it changed his life. He was always a practising Catholic, but this vision imbued his Faith with a deep fervour. Here is the first half or so of the description,

¹ First published in *News Weekly*, March 25, 2017

translated from the French:

This year of Grace 1654, Monday, November 23rd, day of Saint Clement, pope and martyr, and others in the martyrology, Eve of Saint Chrysogonus, martyr, and others; From about half past ten at night, to about half after midnight, Fire. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, Not of the philosophers and the wise. Security, security. Feeling, joy, peace. God of Jesus Christ *Deum meum et Deum vestrum ...*

The other very famous excerpt from *Pensées* is usually called Pascal's Wager. It has delighted and angered thinkers from his time until ours. His argument, here rather crudely condensed, is as follows: God either exists or he does not. You must choose one or other option (Pascal will not allow you to opt out of the wager). If he exists, you have everything to gain, If he does not, you have nothing to lose. The choice, therefore, is obvious. Now, this pitifully brief account of the Wager may not appear to be much to us, but it was ground-breaking at the time because here, Pascal is employing the methodology used today in probability theory and decision theory. Pascal, of course, did not need the Wager to ground his own Faith. It was more of a sort of intellectual exercise to put to others.

But what most delights the casual reader is the marvellous way in which Pascal can describe human foibles and human types. Here is a little note about an 'intellectual' rather full of his own oratorical powers:

The doctor, who speaks for a quarter of an hour after he has said all he has to say, so full is he of the desire of talking.

The parrot's beak, which he dries though it is clean already.

The analogy to the parrot is perfect. Certain radio 'talkback' hosts come to mind!

Here is another little reflection:

Set the greatest philosopher in the world on a plank really wider than he needs, but hanging over a precipice, and though reason convince him of his security, imagination will prevail. Many will scarce bear the thought without a cold sweat.

The next time you see a university graduation procession, or a group

of judges entering a court, you might bring to mind this reflection from Pascal:

Our magistrates are well aware of this mystery [power of Imagination]. Their scarlet robes, the ermine in which they wrap themselves like furred cats, the halls in which they administer justice, the fleurs-de-lis, and all their august apparatus are most necessary; if the doctors had not their cassocks and their mules, if the lawyers had not their square caps, and their robes four times too wide, they would never have duped the world, which cannot resist so authoritative an appearance.

A bit harsh, perhaps, but not without a grain of truth.

For me, though, one of the best sections of Pascal's work is that concerned with diversion—our need to occupy ourselves in some way—hobbies, games, hunting, etc., so as to ward off boredom and ennui:

Imagine any situation you like, add up all the blessings with which you could be endowed, to be king is still the finest thing in the world; yet if you imagine one with all the advantages of his rank, but no means of diversion, left to ponder and reflect on what he is, this limp felicity will not keep him going; he is bound to start thinking of all the threats facing him, of possible revolts, finally of inescapable death and disease, with the result that if he is deprived of so-called diversions he is unhappy, indeed more unhappy than the humblest of his subjects who can enjoy sport and diversion.

For Pascal, the quest for diversion is by no means an improper activity—most of us simply cannot do without it. Rather, the problem is that we seek diversion as an end in itself. As Pascal says: 'The trouble is that they want it as though, once they had the things they seek, they could not fail to be truly happy. This is what justifies calling their search a vain one'.

Diversion is simply a tactic to stave off anxiety about our condition. It does not solve the problem for us. The whole point of Pascal's arguments concerning the true nature of the human condition is to show us that without some overarching, transcendental goal, we will never be truly at peace with ourselves. We can obtain partial relief by occupying our minds with other things, but sooner or later, the 'big questions' intrude. For Pascal, only by humbly recognising our

position of ignorance and seeking divine help can we hope to obtain real peace of mind.

In our own age, there are two particular approaches to diversion. The first is a sort of vaccination against the reality of our condition via massive exposure to a harmless version of the real thing—like an inactivated-virus vaccine. Each day, the television screen or the tabloid page brings with it hundreds of images of death, suffering and destruction from around the world. These images come to us in the comfort of our own homes and without the slightest degree of actual danger to us. Moreover, to better placate any possible fears we may have, such horrific images are interspersed at random with wholly benign or pleasurable ones. Thus, a shot of starving children in some refugee camp will be followed by a story on a beauty contest or a new drug to combat obesity. These images are brought to us not to arouse our pity, to disturb us, or stir us into action. On the contrary they are simply there for entertainment—for spectacle. The overall effect is to blunt our sensitivities to both the good and the bad aspects of what it means to be a human. I say good and bad because the proper appreciation of one cannot be had without a proper appreciation of the other. Somehow or other, we have managed to disengage our higher emotions from our senses and replaced them with the mere capability of distraction, this being the price we pay for being protected from reality.

The second approach, vindicating Pascal, is our inordinate reliance on diversion as a survival strategy. There is a grim earnestness about it. The latest fantasy movie is specifically designed to provide us with an alternative reality. In the latest action movie, the hero or heroine confronts all our terrors and triumphs over them—on our behalf. Every effort is made to reproduce or re-make reality into something more palatable and, it goes without saying, 'more real'. We might recall the 'Feelies' in *Brave New World* where a love scene on a bearskin rug attracts the admiring comment: 'every hair of the bear reproduced'. And it is in *Brave New World* that Huxley gives us the ultimate diversionary device—*soma*. The idea of a substance which would relieve us of the burden of being human is, of course, as old as civilisation. Homer's Odysseus forbids his men to partake of the lotus fruit because it will prevent them from 'thinking of home'. But only in our own era has the idea of chemical happiness really started to have mass appeal and mass application. There is a thriving university

industry in 'happiness research'.

For those who have not read *Pensées*, I recommend the book as a sort of medicinal draft against the mad diseases of post-modernity. You can buy the Kindle edition for less than a dollar. A modern potboiler of a novel will cost you fifteen. This, in itself, says something about the way that the modern age values its literary heritage.

Watermark

THE PAST IS A FOREIGN COUNTRY¹

Once had the idea of producing a short anthology comprised entirely of the beginning sentences of well-known novels. Some of the great writers are able, in their opening sentences, to give a sort of omen or portent of what is to come. Consider, for instance, Melville's *Moby Dick*, whose opening sentence is a bare three words – 'Call me Ishmael'. We know, instantly, that this will be a book which includes some sort of biblical theme and will have some deeper meaning than the general story-line indicates. Or, an even more famous example from the opening of Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* – 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair...!'

But, for the age in which we now live, I think that the opening of L.P. Hartley's *The Go-Between*, sums up our situation precisely: 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there'. Hartley was, of course, referring to the reminiscences of a single person, but his short aphorism stands as a perfect summation of our own times. No other period in history has so dismissed the past as our own. It is true that during the heady years of the Renaissance and the so-called Enlightenment which followed later, the whole medieval period was not just ignored but actively condemned. But even here, the history of ancient Greece and Rome was greatly admired and actively studied.

I do not suggest that history is no longer studied at schools and universities or that we are uninterested in history. On the contrary, we now have a TV channel called 'The History Channel' and there is a huge interest in genealogy. No, the past is a foreign country to us because we can only examine it through a very narrow lens or more precisely, two narrow lenses – the idea of progress and the ideas of popular evolutionism. We imagine that all past eras are merely a sort of lead-up to our own and this, in turn, leads us to suppose that we are

¹ First published in News Weekly, July 1, 2017

more ‘civilised’, more ‘advanced’ and more ‘peace-loving’ than our ancestors.

By way of example, in 2011, the evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker produced a very popular book entitled *The Better Angels of Our Nature*. Pinker argued that the last century was probably the most peaceful in history, with proportionally fewer deaths to warfare and violence than any previous period. In short, we are becoming more peaceful. There were a few dissenters when the book appeared, but, by and large, it was enthusiastically received and was shortlisted for major awards. Both liberals and conservatives applauded it. Indeed, such was the enthusiasm that the University of Edinburgh, in 2013, asked Pinker to deliver the prestigious Gifford Lectures on that very topic.

Such is Pinker’s conviction that our own era presents ‘a shockingly happy picture’, that he is able to dismiss (via statistical sleight of hand) the Great War (est. 15 mill. killed), Stalin’s rule of terror (est. 20 million), the Second World War (est. 55 million), Mao’s regime in China (est. 40 million), and so on. I could fill at least another page with atrocities of the 20th Century. You will note too, that I have left out the appalling carnage of unborn infants in more recent times—something conveniently overlooked by Pinker. But, such is the nature of our view of the past that all this is as nothing compared with medieval witch burning, the Wars of Religion, and so on. Here, the actual numbers involved pale into insignificance when compared to the barbarities of the 20th Century. Even the Black Death, where estimates of 75 to 200 million deaths are sometimes given, could probably not measure up to the killings of the 20th Century and it, remember, was not the result of ‘man’s inhumanity to man’, but the result of a disease agent.

Moreover, I wonder if Pinker’s supporters ever stop to consider the psychological situation of humanity today and not just the material circumstances of modern life. Are people ‘shockingly happy’? I think not. A significant proportion of the population takes anti-depressant drugs and suicide rates are alarmingly high. Of course, when you put this situation to them, they reply by saying that ‘if our ancestors had access to anti-depressants they would have taken them’ or ‘of course suicide rates were low back then, because people were scared of eternal damnation in hell if they took their own life’. In short, no argument will convince them to change their attitude to the past.

Our problem can be more simply stated. When we now delve into some book of ancient history and read there of wars, of horrific crimes, of slavery, of rape and pillage, we immediately project our own situation back to those times. We particularly bring to the interpretation of the past our own modern view of human freedom but, for the ancients, their notion of freedom was quite different to ours. In other words, we have lost the ability to immerse ourselves in the past without bringing along a great deal of modern baggage. We forget, too that the very reasons that ancient historians recorded terrible events was because they thought them horrific too. Anyone who has read Homer's *Iliad* with even an ounce of attention will note just how the horror of each death on the battlefield is conveyed to the reader. Each of the slain, Homer reminds us, had a mother, or wife, or daughter, and so on. Even the very spirits of nature—the Nereids of the sea – are drawn in to the lamentation and grieving. And yet, the American writer and evolutionist, Jonathan Gottschall can dismiss the *Iliad* as little more than 'a drama of naked apes—strutting, preening, fighting, and bellowing their power in fierce competition for social dominance, beautiful women and material resources' (*The Rape of Troy*, 2008).

The very best historians of the past are always those who can immerse themselves in their era of study as if they were part of that civilisation under study, not onlookers. This is why C.S. Lewis, is such a good historian of medieval literature and why Helen Waddell can give us such an absorbing account of the early Desert Fathers. For the average lay person though, perhaps the best way to come to some understanding of the past is to choose personal accounts from some distant era and try to gauge not the material circumstances of the time, but the social and psychological ones. Here, perhaps, I could make a specific recommendation.

Just off the west coast of Ireland and close to the Dingle peninsula lies a small group of islands known as the Blasket Islands. Until recent times, the largest of these was permanently inhabited, and the physical and social conditions of those inhabitants had changed little for hundreds of years—no electricity, no phones, no cars, no newspapers, and no shops. They, like the generations before them, eked out an existence by fishing and a little agriculture. Their island was pounded by winds and storms and crashing waves. So what were their lives like? We are fortunate to have a first-hand account in a book by one Maurice

O'Sullivan, translated from the Gaelic and titled *Twenty Years a-Growing* (1953). When you read this book (it has been reprinted many times and is easily found), you will instantly realise that, even though these people endured enormous hardships and dangers, they were for the most part, happy and lived fulfilling lives. They sang and danced, told stories and above all else, loved their island home. I am sure they would regard our modern, largely urbanised existence as being horrible beyond endurance. They would have a great deal of trouble trying to understand how we should choose to live as we do. And, I confess, so do I.

Watermark

THE KNIFE OF SERPENT HORN

The Origins and Nature of Ecology as a Scientific Discipline

Lynn Thorndike's massive *History of Magic and Experimental Science*, published in eight volumes between 1923 and 1958, is one of the lesser-known but nonetheless important reference books for modern scholars interested in the history of science, and of its early relationship to magic. I confess that I have only briefly dipped into the work, but one little piece of information has always stuck in my mind. Buried somewhere in this massive work is an account of a magical 'knife of serpent horn' which had the singular benefit of signalling to its owner that his/her food had been poisoned. Now, this seems fair enough for your average medieval warlord, but in this case, the knife was reputedly owned by Pope John XXII (1249-1334). Some readers might argue that he was a warlord anyway, but this does not seem to be the case. Perhaps it was a gift he could not refuse, or simply a precaution against Salmonella in poorly prepared food!

And this brings me directly to my main subject. Could it be that the course of science, so carefully charted through the centuries by Thorndike, is now devolving, as it were, such that we are now heading back to 'the knife of serpent horn' days? Professor Garth Paltridge thinks so. A few years ago he published a book titled *The End of Science: How the Climate Change Debate is Compromising Science*.¹ Now I am not sufficiently familiar with the subject matter to comment on this specific area of science (or lack of it), but there is the related area of ecology which certainly interests me, and it is upon this that I would now like to direct my attention.

Before proceeding further, it is worth noting one curious thing about ecology. The physical sciences for the most part, manage to conduct their enterprises without any need for overt political action. There is no political physics or political chemistry. Why then, amongst all the

¹ Connor Court Publishing, Ballan, 2009.

physical sciences, should the study of ecology be so closely associated with politics? There are now 'Green' political parties in many countries, including Australia, and their whole *raison d'être* centres upon ecological concerns. Part of the answer, I believe, has to do with the history of the origin of ecology as a science, and with a particular elaboration of the subject matter beyond what might be regarded as the normal parameters of the scientific method. It is this elaboration of ecology beyond the realms of standard scientific inquiry which, to me, entails a fundamental paradox. So what is ecology, how did this field of study come into existence, and is it in danger of devolving into magic or a form of pantheistic religion?

First, some history. A marriage between evolutionary theory and German Romanticism might seem to be a rather incongruous alliance but that is exactly how ecology, both as a word and as an idea, had its genesis. The place to begin is with the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. This may seem an unlikely starting point for one of the consequences of Kant's philosophy was to erect an impenetrable barrier between things in themselves and human experiences (noumena and phenomena). But this had a very interesting sequel. Those German philosophers who followed Kant, especially Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, tended to interpret Kant's transcendental idealism in such a way as to elevate the self-conscious subject as the constructor of all reality. An effect of this was to erect systems of philosophy which presented huge, lofty visions and which eschewed the much more arid field of analytical philosophy. Thus was German romantic philosophy born. Arthur Schopenhauer, a contemporary of Hegel's, expressed some of his ideas in terms that were to anticipate evolutionary biology (e.g. survival of the species rather than of the individual) and it was only a matter of time before some biologist would make a connection between these strands of Romantic philosophy and the science of biology.

The German biologist Ernst Haeckel (1834 -1919) was strongly influenced by these trends and sought for some means of expressing all human experience in biological terms that were more in keeping with the age of science and especially with the newly emerging field of evolutionary theory. In a sense then, he reversed the Romantic notion of the human mind as a world creator but retained the general penchant for the lofty vision. It is worth noting here that Haeckel thus has some claim to being the first socio-biologist. He was, in his day,

both hugely popular and hugely controversial. As an indication, in 1895, a mountain in the Californian Sierras was named after him. His supporters (though not without some reservations) included such disparate figures as V.I. Lenin and Rudolph Steiner. One of his main research interests was embryology, and it was Haeckel who coined the now famous (or infamous) term 'ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny'. By this he meant that the development of the embryo in animals actually repeats the evolutionary path of that particular species. Not surprisingly, he was greatly interested in Darwin's *Origin of the Species* but preferred a version of Lamarckism (inheritance of acquired characteristics) rather than Darwin's approach. Like many modern-day socio-biologists, Haeckel's 'science' sometimes went well beyond the available facts and often comprised little more than conjecture. Indeed, some of his published drawings in embryogenesis were shown to have no basis in fact. Nonetheless, much of his other work in biology was quite sound.

In 1869, Haeckel coined the word oekologie to describe the relationship between organisms and their general environment. This word, in turn, he derived from the Greek oikos meaning 'household'. His intention was to promote an idea of the natural world as a sort of well managed and integrated household—a self-managed household. This is how the English word ecology came into being. In 1905, Haeckel founded a group called 'The Monist League' to further promote this view and to give it both a quasi-religious and a political standing. The Monist outlook combined a scientifically based ecological holism with völkisch social views. Indeed, there is a very strong link between this early German view of ecological holism and National Socialism. It is an inescapable fact that *Blut und Boden* contained strong elements of ecological thinking. This link has been studied in some detail by Daniel Gasman¹ and many other authors. There is also a prodigious array of secondary literature which deals, inter alia, with the interrelationship between early German 'Green' ideology and Nazism. A word of warning though; some of these accounts come from those who are anxious to discredit all forms of evolutionary theory. As such, they often lack intellectual rigour and are prone to using selective quotes in support of their ideas. Moreover, it should not be assumed that political ecology will always be Fascist in nature. Both left and right wing ideologies might theoretically embrace

¹ Gasman, D., *The Scientific Origins of National Socialism*, Transaction Publishers, 1971.

such a view. Importantly too, modern political ecology often concerns itself with global issues, not national ones.

It is significant that Haeckel and the Monist League campaigned vigorously against all forms of traditional religious belief, but especially against Catholicism. This strongly suggests that the Monist view was religious in nature, and that the God of cosmic life-force was a jealous God who would brook no contenders. Further elaboration of the Monist philosophy is difficult, for it seems always to be couched in very general terms, and heavy on rhetoric and emotion, but rather light on details. Certainly though, it seems to contain elements of Bergson's 'life force' and Comte's 'positive religion'. Significantly, Haeckel, like Comte, believed that all human behaviour was ultimately reducible to biological laws. In short, he supposed that holistic ecology was a cosmology—an overarching theory through which all things were to be explained. Where Haeckel and the German Monists differed from Comte was in their overt depreciation of the human enterprise. Here, it is worth quoting Gasman:

... for the Monists, perhaps the most pernicious feature of European bourgeois civilization was the inflated importance which it attached to the idea of man in general, to his existence and to his talents, and to the belief that through his unique rational faculties man could essentially recreate the world and bring about a universally more harmonious and ethically just social order. [Humankind was] an insignificant creature when viewed as part of and measured against the vastness of the cosmos and the overwhelming forces of nature.¹

This depreciation of the human and the concomitant deterministic view of human nature hold the key as to why ecological views almost invariably lead to both political action and antagonism towards traditional religious views. Here, I stress the word traditional because there are a great many 'new age' religions or quasi religions which embrace holistic ecological views. Indeed, within the mainstream Christian Churches, too, there are progressive elements striving toward the same end. The more radical expression of 'Creation Spirituality' such as the writing of Matthew Fox in America constitutes an example.

Political action is the obvious outcome of any view which holds firstly, that humans as merely intelligent apes are entirely responsible for their

¹ *Ibid.*

own destiny and secondly, that such destiny can be wholly manipulated by purely human action. Consider these words from the Australian philosopher, John Passmore:

Only if men see themselves, I should rather argue, for what they are, quite alone, with no one to help them except their fellow-men, products of natural processes which are wholly indifferent to their survival, will they face their ecological problems in their full implications. Not by the extension, but by the total rejection, of the concept of the sacred will they move towards that sombre realisation.¹

And yet, there appears to be a conflict at the very heart of this idea. If we are products of natural processes, from whence comes our freedom to make real choices regarding our future survival? In ecological holism, humans are simply part of something called the Web of Life (the actual title of a recent school textbook on ecology). Since all other parts of this 'web' are ultimately governed by physical laws, including the 'laws' of evolution, it seems to me inescapable that all human behaviour must therefore be regarded as being determined ultimately, by 'the laws of nature'. What then becomes of the notion of human freedom? I know of no more masterly account of this problem than that supplied by Reinhold Niebuhr. Commenting first upon the human ability for reflection such that the human spirit stands continually outside itself in terms of infinite regression (thinking about thinking about thinking ...), he goes on:

The self knows the world, insofar as it knows the world, because it stands outside both itself and the world, which means that it cannot understand itself except as it is understood from beyond itself and the world.

This essential homelessness of the human spirit is the ground of all religion; for the self which stands outside itself and the world cannot find the meaning of life in itself or the world. It cannot identify meaning with causality in nature; for its freedom is obviously something different from the necessary causal links of nature. Nor can it identify the principle of meaning with rationality, since it transcends its own rational processes, so that it may, for instance, ask the question whether there is a relevance between its rational forms and the recurrences and forms of nature. It is this capacity of freedom which finally prompts great cultures and philosophies to transcend rationalism, and to seek for the meaning of life in an unconditioned ground of existence.²

¹ Passmore, J., *Man's Responsibility for Nature*, Duckworth, 1974.

² *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Nisbet & Co., 1941.

There have been attempts by sociobiologists to solve this problem but, in every case known to me, the proffered solution is unconvincing. Here for example is E.O. Wilson on the subject:

The self, an actor in a perpetually changing drama, lacks full command of its own actions. It does not make decisions solely by conscious, purely rational choice. Much of the computation in decision making is unconscious—strings dancing the puppet ego. Circuits and determining molecular processes exist outside conscious thought. They consolidate certain memories and delete others ... The hidden preparation of mental activity gives the illusion of free will. ... Free will as a side product of illusion would seem to be free will enough to drive human progress and offer happiness.¹

Wilson actually agrees that, in the last analysis, his view of human nature is deterministic. But this in no way perturbs him because he can simply argue that, given the extraordinary complexity of the brain and of mental processes, we could never get to a fully demonstrated, deterministic account: 'Because the individual mind cannot be fully known and predicted, the self can go on passionately believing in its own free will'. The philosophical difficulties entailed in Wilson's account are legion, but it will here suffice to mention just one from the account given above: If 'circuits and determining molecular processes exist outside conscious thought', how can Professor Wilson be so confident of their existence? And so it is, from Haeckel's day until our own, that holistic ecology can go on believing in a deterministic biology and yet maintain that humans have a real choice in determining their future. Hence the call to political action.

It is important here to note that the religious justification for ecological awareness and ecological action does not suffer from this internal contradiction. The freedom involved in Niebuhr's account of human nature given above is a real freedom, and the ensuing responsibilities are therefore quite clear. Humans are uniquely responsible, not just as mere 'nodes' in the Web of Life, but as self-conscious custodians. In a sense, the religious form of ecological awareness places a much greater onus on the individual human than could possibly be the case in a wholly materialistic account.

But there is yet another way in which we can approach some understanding of the dangers inherent in popular usage of the word

¹ Wilson, E.O., *Consilience*, Random House [Vintage Books], N.Y., 1998.

ecology. Consider the following three sentences:

- 1. Little is known of the ecology of this species and much more scientific investigation is needed.*
- 2. A spokesperson said that the ecology of the area was under threat.*
- 3. Human activity is now adversely affecting the ecology of the planet and we need to live in a more environmentally sensitive way.*

A casual reading might suggest that the word ecology in each of these three sentences was referring to the same scientific process or thing, but a more careful analysis will, I think, make it clear that in each sentence, the word is being used to describe quite separate processes or things.

In the first example above, ecology is being used in what I would regard as the normal, scientific sense. When scientists study the various ways in which particular organisms interact with one another and with their environment, they are investigating the ecology of these organisms. These interactions may be quite complex but they are, at least in theory, measurable in some real way. This is the least problematic use of the word. Strictly speaking, the science of ecology is purely a descriptive or experimental method of obtaining knowledge about the interactions between different organisms and the interactions between organisms and their environment. As such we might say that it has little or no philosophical, ethical or political content. Ecologists may, of course, draw certain inferences from their data, or make certain predictions based on the data, but as scientists they do not make any wider judgements—judgements which go beyond the actual content of their findings or logical inferences from such findings.

It is important here to note that ecology as a science, differs from most other physical sciences in yet another respect. In physics and chemistry, for instance, the scientific laws involved are usually what we call process laws—that is to say, laws which permit the inference of all past and future states of a given system, given the values for the relevant variables at any one time. This is not the case in the science of ecology. The reason for this is that most biological interactions are not closed systems but are subject to a huge range of external influences. To illustrate the difference, we could bring to mind a simple chemical reaction between two elements or compounds. When copper is added

to sulphuric acid under conditions that can be fully specified, the two entities combine in an unvarying way and in strict proportions, to produce copper sulphate. However, when two living organisms interact, they do so within a hugely complex environment, and a huge number of variables may influence the outcome. Some of these variables may be unpredictable or unmeasurable, and many different outcomes are possible. All this, of course, does not invalidate ecology as a science. Biologists can still derive much useful information by studying biological systems, and they normally do so by limiting the number of variables involved and by appropriate use of statistical probability. Indeed, the use of statistical methods is a hallmark of ecology and nearly all findings are accompanied by some statement of probability. Invariably though, there is some measure of uncertainty, and it is really a question of agreement between scientists as to what level of probability constitutes a valid conclusion from the data.

In example 2 above, the word ecology is being used in a far broader way, and the question of value is involved—some inhering quality is assumed to be in danger. Ecology here denotes some sort of harmony or balance. But the particular nature of this harmony or balance is very difficult to measure in any ‘scientific’ way without making a number of rather ‘unscientific’ assumptions. Moreover, the general idea of harmony in nature has now been firmly rejected. Today, scientific ecologists do not regard homeostasis as a fundamental property of ecological systems. There is no harmony at the community level. Disturbances such as fire, flood, and disease outbreaks change the course of succession, and are more or less random events. Thus, for instance, it is very likely that patch burning by early Aboriginals in Australia permanently altered the structure of some vegetation communities. Disturbances are largely unpredictable in time and magnitude. The general approach to ecology involved in this particular usage of the word goes well beyond the normal methodology of modern science.

In the final example, the word ecology now seems to carry some moral or ethical implications for us as human beings. Moreover, the whole of our planet is now seen as having this inhering quality or principle called ecology. It is much more than the aggregate of interacting processes between species and their total environment. Note, too, that we are enjoined to take action as beings whose particular mode or organisation of existence threatens this inhering quality. We are, in

some sense outside of nature because if we were in it, anything that we do is, by definition, natural. In short, ecology now has political implications as well as moral and ethical ones.

As mentioned, in the second and, by inference, the third of my example sentences above where the word ecology is used, a question of value arises. What constitutes such value? Almost universally, the answer given to this question is diversity—the species richness of the area. Indeed, ecology and diversity have almost become interchangeable terms today. On casual examination this seems fair enough but, given its obvious importance, it is worthwhile examining this concept of diversity in some more detail. We need to be absolutely clear as to what it entails. If we take diversity as the critical measure of ecological 'health' (as is certainly done in popular ecology), then it follows that in any two habitats, the one with the greater array of species will be considered more 'healthy' or 'stable'. Why? I can find no suitable answer to this question in the 'laws' of biology, but I can find one in the history of philosophy.

A world in which there existed one angel and one stone, St Thomas Aquinas supposed, was 'more complete' than a world containing just two angels. Here, Aquinas was repeating a much more ancient idea, the history of which has been carefully elaborated by Professor Arthur Lovejoy in *The Great Chain of Being*.¹ It turns out that this idea, in the West at least, had its genesis in the works of Plato. In the *Republic*, the *Timaeus*, and certain other dialogues, we are introduced to two fundamental and opposing notions—the Idea of the Good as a self-existing, self-sufficing Absolute and the idea that this Absolute, in order to fully express all possibilities of being, must also become the dynamic source of the diversity in the expression of being as we experience it in our world of space and time.

The critical passage here comes from the *Timaeus* when the main character, Timaeus, explains the motive for the creation of the world:

Let us therefore state the reason why the framer of this universe of change framed it at all. He was good, and what is good has no particle of envy in it; being therefore without envy he wished all things to be as like himself as possible.

In Lovejoy's succinct phrases 'the concept of Self-Sufficing Perfection,

¹ Harvard Univ. Press, 1936.

by a bold logical inversion, was ... converted into the concept of a Self-Transcending Fecundity.' Now, if not to Plato himself then certainly to the Neo-Platonists who followed him, what this meant was that the ideal Absolute, in order to be ideal, must express all possibilities of being in order to be beyond all possibilities of enhancement or diminution. The later Platonists, and particularly Plotinus, took Plato's account of the formation of the visible universe a step further. Where Plato says that God, 'being ... without envy ... wished all things to be as like himself as possible', they interpret this to mean that God 'overflows' with goodness and so acts to produce a world of diversity and order.

As Lovejoy points out, Plato's account of the Divine and his explanation of the material world and its origin was to have an enormous impact on the future path of philosophy and theology in the West. Working from Plato's basic premises, later thinkers developed what Lovejoy calls 'the principle of plenitude'. In producing the various kinds of things in the Cosmos, the Good must cover every possible 'type' of existence. That is to say, every possibility must be realised. You have a self-sufficient unity expressing itself in the manifold of the created order. It is this very principle which informs the modern, popular view of ecology, most evident in terms such as 'ecosphere', 'green planet', 'Gaia' and 'spaceship earth'. Ecological holism may claim to reject Plato's metaphysics, but it embraces the material consequences of such a metaphysical view.

And so, by way of conclusion, I want to argue that while the study of ecology is a valid and useful science, it does have many limitations imposed by the very nature of the subject matter, by its origins and by the human propensity to automatically derive some form of unity (ecological holism) from a world of plurality. The central concept in holistic ecology is a philosophical/religious one. In short, as much as they might deny it, holistic ecologists have appropriated a metaphysical or religious idea and attempted to give it an exclusively scientific basis. This is why Haeckel in his day and Richard Dawkins in our own, have been so vehemently opposed to the notions contained in traditional religious belief. It is also why ecological concepts give rise to controversies and why the bemused layperson has need of some magical implement like Pope John's 'knife of serpent horn' to separate scientific fact from political opinion and personal philosophy. History has shown that, under certain conditions, political ecology can turn

into a very poisonous affair indeed. It did so in Germany between the Wars and it is always possible that some new and virulent form will arise in the future. That is why science needs to conduct itself with great caution and with scrupulous attention to possible sources of error or unfounded assumptions.

Watermark

MICHAEL POLANYI, PLATO AND PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE¹

Michael Polanyi (1891-1976) is one of those notable figures from the 20th C who deserves to be much better known today than he is. True, there is a very active Polanyi Society today (<https://polanysisociety.org/>), but in the general literature on matters scientific and philosophical, he has been largely ignored. This is despite the brilliance of his mind, the extraordinary range of his scientific discoveries and, most importantly, his unique approach to epistemology—the general problem of what we can know and how we can know it. Put in simple terms it is that which allows us to say, along with Bishop Butler ‘a thing is what it is and not another thing’.

But Polanyi’s books (there are several) are generally not well known, despite their erudition, their extraordinary range, and the novel ways in which they approach the subject of human knowledge. Part of the problem is the general reluctance by ‘mainstream’ philosophers (if such a category can still be said to exist), to entertain the possibility that a famous chemist and polymath could really add to the harvest of philosophical knowledge. True enough, they are prepared to admit mathematicians into their fold, but research chemists are another matter. And this is especially the case when such a research scientist is arrogant enough to question the central place of reductive scientific enquiry in the matter of gaining real knowledge. For the most part, the general trend of philosophy has been to follow in the steps of John Locke and declare that the purpose of the philosopher was ‘to provide the services of an under-labourer in clearing the ground a little and removing some of the rubbish which lies in the way to knowledge’.

And yet there are several well-known philosophers and allied commentators of our own era who do quote Polanyi quite frequently and indeed, invoke many of his ideas in support of their own work. Eugene Wigner, a colleague of Polanyi in Berlin, and Thomas Nagel come to mind immediately, but many others have relied on his work,

¹The 2025 Sworder Presentation for the Bendigo Philosophical Society

either explicitly or implicitly. It is very likely, for instance, that Thomas Kuhn was influenced by Polanyi's approach in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

Born in Hungary in 1891, Polanyi studied medicine in Germany, served as a young physician in the First World, then switched to the 'hard' sciences. A secular Jew by birth, he left Germany for Britain in 1933, thereby avoiding the Holocaust. His sister, Sophie and her family were not so lucky.

A polymath of extraordinary ability, Polanyi made important discoveries in the properties of colloids, in x-ray crystallography (his discoveries here paved the way for Watson and Crick and their description of DNA), in the adsorption of gases, and many other fields. However, these profound discoveries were somewhat overshadowed by the achievements of a whole bevy of his contemporaries (many of whom he knew well)—Einstein, Niels Bohr, Max Plank, Madam Curie, Schrodinger, Heisenberg, Fritz London, and many others. He was a big fish swimming in a school of whales!

Although he continued to produce outstanding research in chemistry in England until about 1948, Polanyi turned more and more to scholarly writing focused on the philosophy of science and politics, economics and, eventually, philosophy. There is little doubt that this change in direction came about because of his immersion in all those momentous events in the Europe of the early and mid-20th Century—the rise of Nazism and Fascism, two world wars, the Holocaust, the Stalinist repression in norther Europe, and so on. Here, he saw the supposed idea of science as a pure and noble search for truth hideously distorted in the name of various ideologies. Lysenko's perverted Darwinism being a case in point.

One could say that, in a sense, Polanyi came to occupy that no-mans-land between pure science, philosophy and theology. The extraordinary range of his thought in these areas was reflected in the many and varied prestigious lecture series he was invited to give at various times in his later career. He gave the Gifford Lectures in 1951-2, the Duke Lectures in 1964, and the Wesleyan Lectures in 1965. Add to this a huge list of occasional papers and at least five books still in print (to my knowledge).

But his influence spread much wider than this because he had a wide circle of friends from an equally wide field of human endeavour—scientists, poets, theologians, historians and many others. As an example, he belonged to a small group called ‘The Moot’, which met regularly. Members included Carl Mannheim, T.S. Eliot, Christopher Dawson, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, John Middleton Murray, and Alec Vidler. As will be evident from this list of prominent persons, the chief shared interest here was in aspects of religious belief and the moral order.

As to his own personal beliefs in the area of religion there seems to be much confusion. In 1919 (age 28) he was baptised into the Catholic Church (a necessary step in order to marry Magda, the doctoral candidate with whom he had fallen in love, and in order to pass as a Christian in Germany). At various times he proclaimed that he was a Christian believer and, indeed, you will see this claim made in numerous articles associated with his work. However I am inclined to the view held by the co-author of the first biography of Polanyi, Martin Moleski, S.J. who feels that whilst Polanyi certainly said he was a Christian on numerous occasions, from a strictly formal point of view, some serious doubt arises. He was certainly sympathetic to the religious view (taken broadly) but the strict adherence to a particular creed would, I think, have been felt by him to be a bridge too far and, perhaps, a restraint on his extraordinarily wide-ranging investigations. One has the impression (or at least I do) that Polanyi was somewhat coy regarding what might be called ‘ultimate explanations’. Perhaps he felt that to show his hand fully here would be to alienate himself from mainstream science or, for that matter, from mainstream philosophy.

Michael Polanyi had two sisters and two brothers. One brother was the famous economist Karl Polanyi, and Michael’s own son, John, was to become the recipient of the Nobel Prize in chemistry. The whole Polanyi clan seem to have been blessed with extraordinary talents and intelligence. Michael Polanyi died in 1976, having witnessed two world wars, Nazism and Stalinism, the rise of the ‘Great Liberal Death Wish’, the hegemony of ‘scientism’ and finally, the revolt of the young in the turbulent 1960s. All these events influenced his later writings.

In many of the Platonic Dialogues, but especially in the *Meno*, we have

those recurring questions put by Socrates – 'What is virtue?' 'Can it be taught?' 'If we have no knowledge of a particular subject, how can we possibly learn of it since we are not in a position to judge between a right and a wrong solution?' Of course Plato, through Socrates, uses these questions to advance his ideas concerning anamnesis, the idea that we come into this world as pre-existent souls with full knowledge and discernment, but immediately begin to lose it at birth. Recall those beautiful lines in Wordsworth's *Intimations Ode*:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!

Those familiar with the Platonic *Dialogues* will recall the 'slave boy' episode in the *Meno*. To demonstrate that 'we know more than we can tell' (Polanyi's famous by-line) Socrates asks a slave boy, who has had no formal education whatsoever, to solve a problem concerning the correct method to double the size (area) of a given square. With a little help, the boy comes up with the right solution which is, of course, to base a side of the new square on the diagonal of the old one. From whence came this knowledge?

This particular problem concerning 'hidden' knowledge was of great interest to Polanyi, not just as a general problem in philosophy, but more especially as a possible element in moral philosophy—the 'Idea of the Good' must pervade all of our attempts in the acquisition of knowledge. For we must remember that Polanyi had witnessed the 'scientific' outcomes of the totalitarian state where a naked science devoid of any system of morality (for science is supposedly deaf in these matters) was put to use in the oppressive practices of the State. Polanyi was especially shocked to observe how 'scientists' like Lysenko, were to champion patently false ideas in evolutionary theory (the inheritance of acquired characteristics) to satisfy their political masters.

As so it was that Polanyi began to think deeply about that process or those processes by which we gain knowledge and by what means we might ascribe validity to them and use them in the pursuit not just of extending that knowledge, but of extending human freedom and human dignity. I think it can be said, in a general sort of way, that the predominant epistemological theories floating around in Polanyi's earlier career were either crudely empiricist or rationalist in nature, with empiricist theories leading the field. Polanyi was deeply critical of the empiricist idea of Locke's 'percepts' somehow or other arranging themselves into concrete ideas. The empiricist approach, he said, 'was like a man taking off his spectacles in order to examine them more closely'. In other words, it was making prior use of the very process you hoped to investigate. A rather circular affair.

Polanyi's investigations quickly led him to a surprisingly simple but overlooked aspect of the acquisition of knowledge, namely that much of it is accomplished without our explicit awareness. He called this 'tacit knowledge' (from the Latin *tacere*—to be silent or secretive). The simplest way to explain it is by example and here I find that Polanyi, very much like the late Wittgenstein, was a master in explaining difficult concepts via simple examples.

Consider a blind person, finding his or her way along the street by use of one of those canes with a white ball at the end. The person in question uses the stick as a sort of probe, finding obstacles, or perhaps decoding those large white dots one now sees at pedestrian crossings and so forth. The important thing to note here is that such a person has his or her primary focus on the end of the cane and, in a very real sense, 'feels' at this point. Of course, all the work is actually done 'behind the scenes' as we may say, where the hand is grasping the cane. Here slight changes in pressure or direction of forces are presumably conveyed via the nervous system to the brain and processed there. Polanyi calls the end of the cane the 'focal point' of awareness, and the hand as the 'subsidiary' point.

He gives many other remarkable examples, but I will here deal with only one. All of us are familiar with recognising some friend or acquaintance in a crowd. We might be waiting at an airport or train station and there suddenly spot the familiar face amongst many thousands of other faces. However, if we were then asked to explain in detail how we were able to recognise that face, we are pretty much

at a loss. We know that it has something to do with detailed aspects of the physiognomy of the face, but we cannot quantify these aspects in any real way. This is tacit knowing. Even more remarkable, the face of the person we identify might be exhibiting one or other of many moods—consternation, happiness, sadness, surprise, and so on—yet we are easily able to make the identification. Is this not remarkable? Certain readers might say that facial recognition software can easily achieve such a feat but we need to remember that it can only do so by way of a huge database of ‘other’ faces. We do not operate in that way.

And so it is that Polanyi is able to at least partially replace Plato’s innate ideas (associated with anamnesis) with tacit knowing. True enough, it is not a full replacement, but it certainly takes us some distance down the road. Even so, we are left wondering just where this ‘tacit knowing’ comes from. Is it acquired (more or less without us noticing) via experience and learning, or by some other process? As far as I can judge from reading Polanyi, this tacit knowing is acquired and not innate, but it is gained in a sort of unconscious way. Here, Polanyi gives the example of a traditional artisan (say woodworker) teaching an apprentice. Let us take the example of using a hammer to drive a nail (a favourite of Polanyi’s). The master may be able to give explicit instructions to the pupil (‘hold the nail upright, bring the hammer head down in an arc’) but other subtle movements, not really noticed by the master, will be observed and copied (unconsciously perhaps) by the student. Because these gestures are subliminal, it is important that the process of acquisition be unconscious. As Polanyi says: ‘These hidden rules can be assimilated only by a person who surrenders himself to that extent uncritically to the imitation of another’. He then goes on to make a very important point: ‘A society which wants to preserve a fund of personal knowledge must submit to tradition’. Yea, verily!

These investigations led Polanyi to assert that all knowledge is personal in nature—a collaboration between the knower and the known. They also led him to his most famous dictum—‘we know more than we can tell’. Hence, scientific positivism—the idea that all ‘scientific’ knowledge is somehow wholly objective and ‘out there’ (independent of the observer) is fundamentally erroneous.

As you might have expected, Polanyi was not content to leave the whole idea of tacit knowing within the general realm I have outlined

above. He saw that it could be applied with great effect to the whole area of semantics – the meanings we are able to ascribe to things. Here, I intend to limit myself to just one area, that of our use of metaphor.

We seem to be able to make sense of quite complex metaphors – those which reference matters quite disparate from the ‘normal’ lexical use of words. Polanyi, a great admirer of the poetry of his friend T.S. Eliot, gives us these lines from *Four Quartets* (‘East Coker’):

The wounded surgeon plies the steel
That questions the distempered part.

Here is a reference to the Atonement and Christ’s redemptive power, and those with some background knowledge of the Christian religion will recognise it, even though it has been presented to them in such a ‘strange’ way.

But even with metaphors or expressions which seem, at first, to be entirely nonsensical, we can nearly always ascribe a meaning to them. Polanyi gives this seemingly nonsensical example:

‘Colourless green ideas sleep furiously’

But, as he says, it is easy to see that ‘green ideas sleep furiously’ may mean simply that ‘immature ideas foster violent dreams,’ and with a little trouble one should be able to account also for such ideas being colourless.

This extraordinary ability is not easy to explain in terms of the usually accepted ‘norms’ of the mechanisms involved in human learning. Moreover, as Polanyi points out, it is commonly known that metaphors, like jokes, lose their effectiveness if they are explained in detail. We know that a semantic integration is destroyed if we switch our attention from its meaning to that of which it is the meaning—in other words, from the point of focal attention to the subsidiaries which bear on that focus.

In much the same way, if we now switch our attention back to ‘performative’ acts like hammering a nail or, perhaps, playing a piano, we can see that if we make the conscious effort to switch our attention from the ‘focal point’ (the hammer-nail interface or the Chopin Etude) back to the ‘subsidiary’ (the hand-handle interface or the individual

piano keys) the whole performance is destroyed.

One area in which Polanyi's description of tacit knowledge may well have contemporary relevance concerns the argument as to whether a computer may, in theory, replace or even excel a human brain. This area is now being hotly contested with the recent arrival of 'AI' and with the utterances of people like Elon Musk, who would turn us all into cyborgs if there was a quid in it.

But for me personally, the most important part of Polanyi's extensive writings is that which deals specifically with the shortcomings of reductive science in the area of biology. Since the early days of the scientific revolution, we have become accustomed to supposing that simple biological organisms can be investigated in much the same way that we investigate other natural phenomena, that is, by dismantling more complex entities into simpler ones. Amongst the early enthusiasts for this approach (scientific determinism/reductionism) was Pierre-Simon Laplace (1749-1827) and Polanyi singles him out as an exemplar of this approach. Thus, Laplace wrote that:

We may regard the present state of the universe as the effect of its past and the cause of its future. An intellect which at a certain moment would know all forces that set nature in motion, and all positions of all items of which nature is composed [read atomic particles], if this intellect were also vast enough to submit these data to analysis, it would embrace in a single formula the movements of the greatest bodies of the universe and those of the tiniest atom; for such an intellect nothing would be uncertain and the future just like the past would be the present to it.

In our own day, science popularisers such as E.O. Wilson and Richard Dawkins have taken a similar approach, albeit without the same breathtaking scope. Nonetheless, they do suppose that, ultimately all natural phenomena are susceptible to a 'scientific' explanation, even if our intellects are presently incapable of grasping such explanations.

Polanyi highlights the unfounded assumptions in this deterministic/reductive model and gives many examples of how and why it cannot provide that certainty of 'objective knowledge'. For instance, the extrapolation of evolutionary theory to cover the emergence of life is fraught with problems. Consider (he says) the 'evolution' of DNA, a

hugely complex molecular aggregate acting as a ‘carrier’ for the genetic code. Very obviously for evolution to occur, DNA (or some very similar complex molecule) must be present *ab initio*. But the chances of such a precise collocation of atoms/molecules arranging themselves in the correct order is so incalculably small as to defy all human reason. Even in the simplest bacterium, the number of possible base sequences (the code carriers) in a single chromosome is in the millions (Polanyi claims about 20 million). Not only do the millions of these components need to come together in the right order, but they must also be able to maintain this order against the tendency for disintegration (entropy and the Second Law of Thermodynamics). This ‘patterning’ of components is made possible by the operation of something that Polanyi calls ‘boundary conditions’. One could think of them as something like a blueprint used by a builder.

Polanyi also employs an approach called emergence. Simply stated, emergence theory postulates that one cannot ‘reduce’ a more complex state to a series of simpler ones because the process is non-reversible. In other words, when a higher state emerges from a simpler one, some new ‘quality’ (I can think of no other useful term) comes into being. This, to my mind, inescapably involves the concept of some form of teleology (= purpose or goal) in living organisms. In other words, there seems to be some ‘directedness’ in matter which allows for the evolution of complexity. I note that this idea is shared by the American philosopher Thomas Nagel (*Mind and Cosmos*¹), although I can find no reference in the latter’s book to the earlier writings of Polanyi. At the very end of his book Nagel states that:

The teleological hypothesis is that these things may be determined not merely by value-free chemistry and physics but also by something else, namely a cosmic predisposition to the formation of life, consciousness, and the value that is inseparable from them.

But both Polanyi and Nagel stop short of explaining how such a ‘directedness’ or ‘cosmic predisposition’ in matter comes about. My guess is that neither of them want to venture on to the dangerous ground of intelligent design. I can understand this in the case of Nagel since he openly states that he has no religious beliefs. The case is not quite the same for Polanyi, since he did claim to be a Christian and, therefore, the notion of a transcendent Reality must surely be

¹ Nagel, Thomas. *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False* (p. 123). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

considered. This is not to invoke any sort of absolute determinism in biology, but rather to suggest some form of underlying and higher-order metaphysical base upon which matter patterns itself to produce increasing levels of complexity.

That said, I find Polanyi's account of the whole phenomenon of religious belief, modern, ancient and archaic, somewhat 'on the fence' as it were. True, he is highly critical of the modern empirical approach and the absurd claims of so-called 'objective' scientific knowledge, but one has the sense that he wants to have the best of both worlds. This is reflected in the many controversies, still burning away amongst some members of the Polanyi Society, regarding the nature of his religious convictions. Some regard him as being a devout Christian, others doubt that very much.

It is not for us, however, to make some final judgement on this matter—that is between him and God. What matters for us is that great treasure of ideas he bequeathed to us and which, for each of us, helps us on our own personal journey of intellectual discovery. The ancient Athenians had Socrates constantly questioning their accepted account of things and we have Polanyi assuming a similar role in our own era. Such 'gadflies' are a necessary part of a well-functioning community of thinkers. Read Polanyi and get stung!

PART TWO
BOOK REVIEWS 2016-2023

Watermark

NOTES ON THE DEATH OF CULTURE¹

Essays on Spectacle and Society

by Mario Vargas Llosa, Faber and Faber, London, 2015. 227pp.

'When I hear the word 'culture', I reach for my revolver'. These words, often attributed to Hermann Göering, have come back to haunt us because, nowadays, a great many people regard 'culture' (in the old sense of the word) as having been usurped by something which, indeed might give us cause to reach for a gun! Amongst those with such concerns is Mario Vargas Llosa, the Latin American author and Nobel Prize winner who is also the author of this collection of essays under review.

The title of his new book is a direct reference to a famous essay by T.S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948). At that time, Eliot sensed that the old definition of culture encompassing such things as religious belief, the appreciation of artistic beauty and a certain refinement of manners—a rising above our animal natures, was fast disappearing. Using this work as his springboard, Llosa then proceeds to dissect a civilisation in which everything is reduced to spectacle. 'Culture', he says, 'is entertainment and what is not entertaining is not culture'. And so, all aspects of public life are presented in the media, especially television, as so many 'bites' of entertainment. Here in Australia, a typical news bulletin will contain reports of a nervous stock market, the injuries of some football stud, sex maniac on the loose, the sexual antics of some film starlet, massacres in some far off theatre of war, birth of a dog with two heads—and so on. All this mixed up in juxtaposition and presented as a sort of homogenised pap, designed specifically for entertainment and nothing more. No one item is to be regarded as more important than another. Malcolm Muggeridge coined the term *Newsake* for this phenomenon, since it does to public information and public education exactly what Muzak does to real music—turns it into a sort of comfortable background ambience. It makes no demands on us and, like Orwell's *soma*, deadens

¹ First published in *News Weekly*, Jan 30, 2016

us to the reality of our situation.

The author goes on to dissect many of the social phenomena of our age—the debasement of art, the increasing drug problem and the disappearance of the true intellectual as a sort of moderator of ideas. Part of Llosa's book is given over to a discussion of the importance of authority in its many forms, whether it be the authority of teachers at school or, perhaps, the authority of great literature. The title of the chapter 'Forbidden to Forbid' exactly portrays the postmodernist attack on all forms of traditional authority. However, this chapter ends on a rather discordant note, because the final essay in this chapter deals with the right of civil authorities to curb religious practices. Llosa homes in on the wearing of the veil by Islamic girls in French schools. Here we see a different side of Llosa—his strident secular humanism. He concludes this essay by stating that 'the Islamic veil should be banned in state schools in France in the name of freedom'. We might ask: 'whose freedom'? As it happens, I read this chapter on the same day that news arrived of the attempt to drag Archbishop Julian Porteous before the Tasmanian court because he allowed the distribution of literature supporting the idea of traditional marriage in Tasmanian Catholic Schools.

In fact, Llosa's insistence that religious belief must remain entirely private becomes much more obvious in the second half of his book. He begins with a chapter (three short essays) on 'The Disappearance of Eroticism'. While Llosa does make the necessary distinction between eroticism and mere animal lust, his defence of eroticism is entirely unconnected with the traditional view of human love between a man and a woman. The ideal expression of eroticism, he tells us 'would be for the boundaries within which our sex lives unfold to broaden sufficiently for men and women to act freely, exploring their desires and fantasies without feeling threatened or discriminated against ...' One can just imagine a lecherous old Freudian psychologist delivering this insight to an attractive young female patient! Indeed, Philip Rieff, in his magisterial work on post-Freudian psychotherapy, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, attacks the very notion put forward by Llosa, and points to the importance of traditional restraints in this area.

But it is in the last chapter of the book, titled 'The Opium of the People' that Llosa really develops this theme of the nexus between

secularism and freedom. Like any number of modern commentators from what passes for the modern conservative fold (read worried liberal), Llosa has some good things to say about the importance of religion provided it stays away from the public square. Indeed, there is an evident awkwardness in his prose as he vainly attempts to defend non-specific religious belief, while undermining it at the same time. He is like a man 'dancing in treacle' to use a felicitous phrase I read somewhere. But he shows his true colours when it comes to a discussion of a court case in Bavaria, the outcome of which was the banning of crucifixes (showing the body of Christ) in public schools. He thinks this was a very good decision and he further opines that if the State does not maintain a rigorous secularism, it is in perilous danger of losing its freedom because, he says 'no church is democratic'. He goes on:

Churches would ... cease to exist if they were flexible and tolerant and prepared to accept the basic principles of democratic life, such as pluralism, relativism, the coexistence of contradictory truths, the constant mutual concessions required to arrive at a social consensus.

It seems to escape Llosa's attention that the very problems of modernity he rails against in his essays are a direct consequence of such 'basic principles' as pluralism, relativism, consensus morality, etc. Furthermore, in the history of the West, the Christian religion was the very catalyst for a view of the human which emphasised personal dignity and freedom. To suppose that you can drive religion from the public square and then rely upon it to keep society together is wishful thinking. As C.S. Lewis once said in this regard:

In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.

And this is precisely what has happened to Llosa. His new book joins a vast throng of similar books all bemoaning the fate of the Western Tradition. But we all know the problems. What we want is solutions. Without religion in the public square, there are none.

THE DEMON IN DEMOCRACY¹

Totalitarian Temptations in Free Societies

By Ryszard Legutko, Encounter Books, NY, 2016.

In 1989, Francis Fukuyama published his famous essay entitled ‘The End of History.’ Here he argued that, with the break-up of the Soviet Empire (then just beginning), the political system of liberal democracy would ultimately triumph over all others. Even those who disagreed with his thesis—and there were many—rarely disagreed with the notion that such an outcome would be highly desirable. Yet, a little over a decade earlier, one lone voice did sound a warning against liberal-democratic triumphalism. That lone voice was Alexandr Solzhenitsyn and he announced his misgivings in his famous Harvard Address:

Two hundred or even fifty years ago, it would have seemed quite impossible, in America, that an individual could be granted boundless freedom simply for the satisfaction of his instincts or whims. Subsequently, however, all such limitations were discarded everywhere in the West; a total liberation occurred from the moral heritage of Christian centuries with their great reserves of mercy and sacrifice. State systems were becoming increasingly and totally materialistic. The West ended up by truly enforcing human rights, sometimes even excessively, but man's sense of responsibility to God and society grew dimmer and dimmer.

Is it not remarkable that a man who had spent years in Soviet labour camps should speak out thus against the generous freedoms of Western democracies? And yet subsequent events in the West over the ensuing forty years or so have proved him right.

This important new book by Ryszard Legutko is in the tradition of Solzhenitsyn and, not surprisingly, Legutko is himself a dissident who managed to get out from the oppressive PPR regime in Poland in the 1970s. Like Solzhenitsyn, what Legutko has to say will be highly unpalatable to those who see modern liberal democracies as the

¹ First published in *News Weekly*, April 8, 2017

desired endpoint for all human society. For what he says, in effect, is that communists and liberal democrats share a number of common and undesirable features. These features he discusses under five headings—history, utopia, politics, ideology and religion.

The communist view of history is well known. Marx had written of a glorious future where the state would ‘wither away’ and citizens would enjoy unparalleled peace, prosperity and leisure. This, he supposed, would all come about by some inexorable law of history. The liberal-democratic version of history is not so clear-cut in invoking universal laws, but it does indeed have a vision and that vision is most clearly seen in Fukuyama’s thesis mentioned above. Legutko discusses this historical determinism in some detail and brings out the remarkable similarities between the communist historical vision and that of the liberal democrats.

Leading naturally from some form of historical determinism comes the concept of a future utopia, clearly evident in the extravagant claims of the Marxists, but less well-defined in the liberal democratic end-state. The means by which this glorious end-state will be reached involves political action and, here again, Legutko brings out remarkable similarities between the two seemingly opposed systems. Ideology, as seen by the Marxists, is a sort of background or environment which governs human opinion. They portray the liberal democratic system as having inculcated certain views within its citizens, which they suppose to be their own, but are actually those which underpin capitalism. The system creates the ideology. The Communists had for their ideology ‘the class struggle’ but we have an array of ideologies including, most especially in latter years, gender and sex. But, perhaps our overarching ideology, shared with the Marxists, is that of ‘progress’—the idea that we are improving ‘every day in every way’. Finally, Legutko discusses the role and the fate of religion in the two opposing systems. The persecution of religious believers in the former Soviet Union is well known as, indeed, are the reasons for this persecution. The god of dialectical materialism is a jealous god indeed. But religious persecution under a liberal democratic system seems almost a contradiction in terms. Here again, Legutko brings out some similarities between the two systems and the more subtle ways in which religion in the West has been banished to the private sphere. Legutko can speak with some authority for he himself was taken to court some years ago after commenting negatively on the petition of a group of students seeking to remove crucifixes from public schools.

Critics of Legutko will, no doubt, accuse him of ingratitude. After all, in post-communist Poland he has enjoyed positions of power and influence. He is a professor of philosophy at Jagellonian University in Krakow. He has served as Minister of Education, Secretary of State in the Chancellery of the late President Lech Kaczynski, and Deputy Speaker of the Senate. He is currently a Member of the European Parliament and a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee. Why bite the hand that feeds you? But Legutko is not an opponent of liberal democracy. What he attempts to do in this book is to show that no system of human political organisation will convey us to some utopian future or deliver us from those familiar vicissitudes of human nature that have been our lot over the course of human history. Today's liberalism, like communism, promotes the old Enlightenment dream that Man is in total control of his own destiny and can engineer that destiny wholly through his own resources. That dream, of its very nature, is anti-religious, and the increasing involvement of the state in matters previously held to be in the province of a religiously-inspired moral order can only lead to the extirpation of religion in the 'public square'. Moreover, it is increasingly obvious that the various secular systems of morality established during and after the Enlightenment are not up to the job. Utilitarians argue with Kantians and both argue with 'Rights-based' moral crusaders. Who do we follow?

All this, of course, is done in the name of 'freedom' and 'equality', but the freedom and equality is restricted only to those who hold to the secular, liberal democratic line and confine their religious beliefs to themselves. There can be no freedom to deviate from the party line. For the party says 'we will force you to be free like us'.

OUT OF THE ASHES¹ Rebuilding American Culture

By Anthony Esolen. Regnery Publishers, Washington D.C, 2017.

Among classicists, Professor Anthony Esolen is well-known for his acclaimed translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. However, Esolen has also written many books dealing with the general Christian heritage of the West and of its demise in our own times. This new book, *Out of the Ashes*, deals with the social, cultural and religious decline in America (but relevant throughout the Western world) and the ways in which it might be regenerated.

"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" said George Santayana, and Esolen takes up this theme in exploring the current situation in America. Of course, he is well aware of the general tendency that all of us have, as we grow older, to suppose that civilisation is going to the dogs. Just before the time of Christ, the Roman poet Horace (in the *Ars Poetica*) proposed that, when a man becomes old, he likewise becomes 'testy and querulous, given to praising the way things were when he was a boy, to play the critic and censor of the new generation'. But Esolen has two answers to this general dismissal. Even if it were not true that our civilisation was in decline, then surely, pointing out some of its current failures is a good thing. But Esolen believes it is in real decline and his second point is simply this: we know from the past that many great civilisations have died, so why should we think ourselves as being somehow immune from decay? Furthermore, we know from history exactly what sorts of things lead to the decline of civilisations and those sorts of things, Esolen maintains, are very much in evidence today.

The last decade or so has seen the publication of many books dealing with the deterioration of our shared culture. What sets Esolen's book apart is its lively style, its author's prodigious knowledge of history and, most of all, the way in which the subject matter is reported. For

¹ First published in *News Weekly*, Feb. 24, 2018

instance, Esolen actually takes you back to the classroom of a small public school on Prince Edward Island (Canada) in the year 1895 to see what the young children were learning at that time. He then contrasts that with what is being taught today and asks the reader to decide, on the evidence provided, which system of instruction better prepares young children for a happy and fulfilling life.

Using examples of this sort throughout, Esolen examines the decline in the status of human work, the decline of the family home as the primary nurturer of human life, the loss of the sense of beauty in the world, and many other aspects of what we might term a fully-realised human life. Some of his topics are surprising. For instance, he places a great deal of emphasis on the importance of physical games and 'play' for children. His reflections here, immediately recalled to my mind—as it will to many older *News Weekly* readers—schoolyard games like 'tag', 'release', 'cops and robbers', and many others. These games, we ought to remember, were handed down from one generation of children to the next and adults had little or no part in their transmission. They are now gone, replaced almost entirely by computer games.

Esolen writes from a Christian viewpoint and, in the main, for a Christian readership. All of his arguments are underpinned by a Christian theology. This raises an important question not directly considered by Esolen in his book, although it is implicit in his arguments. That question is simply whether any civilisation can persist over the long term without reference to a religious tradition which, of its very nature, provides an absolute reference point for a set of moral and ethical standards. It is sobering to remind ourselves that the secular state—to which we are now so accustomed—is only a few hundred years old. There are no guarantees that it can deliver on its promises in the longer term. A fully secular morality is a very dubious enterprise and no-one has better exposed its weaknesses than the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (*After Virtue* and subsequent books).

There is, I think, one shortcoming in Esolen's account. While he is able to depict our problems in a very engaging and forthright manner, his call for a return to an earlier moral and social order presupposes that we can turn back the clock. This is a doubtful proposition. In the first place, the percentage of practising Christians in the West has declined enormously in the last 50 years. If, indeed, we are to rise again 'out of

the ashes', in the manner he proposes, then a massive resurgence of believers will be required. That, of course, may well happen, but the record of history suggests that, if it does happen, it will do so in some entirely unexpected manner. It will not be a simple 'return' to some earlier state of affairs. And, this very uncertainty has given rise to another suggested stratagem for rescuing the West—the 'Benedict Option'. This is the title of a recent and highly publicised book by another American Christian writer, Rod Dreher. In fact, the title of Dreher's book was suggested by the very last paragraph of Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*. Having demonstrated the inability of modern secular moral philosophies to replace what came before them, MacIntyre reminds us of those early Christian eremites who, sensing some turning point, left the decaying Roman Empire and went into the wilderness to set up their own communities. He then ends his book with these words:

If my account of our moral condition is correct, we ought also to conclude that for some time now we too have reached that turning point. What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope. This time however the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament. We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict.

Perhaps both approaches will be necessary—an attempt to arrest the decline and turn it around and, at the same time, a strategy to survive the new Dark Age.

C.S. LEWIS ON POLITICS AND THE NATURAL LAW¹

By Justin Buckley Dwyer and Micah J. Watson, Cambridge University Press, 2016

'Of the making of books' said the scribe in Ecclesiastes, 'there is no end'. This is, no doubt true and no more so than in the case of books about C.S. Lewis. Each year seems to bring forth one or more new books about some aspects of Lewis and/or of his writings. It is hardly surprising. In the area of general Christian theology and philosophy, not to mention his ever-popular children's books, perhaps no other twentieth century author in the English speaking world has enjoyed as much popularity as Lewis. Most of his books have been in print continuously for almost three quarters of a century. Add to this the continuing popularity of his science fiction trilogy, and you begin to understand why new books about Lewis and his ideas keep on appearing year after year.

The title of the book under review here indicates that the subject matter will deal, in large part, with Lewis's politics. Given that Lewis himself had little interest in politics and is on record as saying so, the authors have set themselves a seemingly impossible task. Indeed, they admit that Lewis had very little to say, at least publicly, about politics. Nonetheless, they wish to argue that, implicit in a great deal of Lewis's writings is a political philosophy which (they claim) has affinities to the political writings of John Locke (1632-1704) and, to a lesser extent, of John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). This would have Lewis as being liberal in political outlook. This, to me, seems a very doubtful proposition, but, of course, much depends on one's particular interpretation of the word 'liberal'.

In any case, the great value of this book—and it is a very valuable book for anyone interested in Lewis—lies not in its commentary on Lewis's 'hidden' politics, but in its excellent summary of Lewis's

¹ First published in *News Weekly*, March 10, 2018

general philosophy and especially on his ideas concerning natural law. In fact, only one chapter in the book deals specifically with politics and the rest are very largely concerned with the subject matter of Lewis's better-known books, especially *The Abolition of Man*. This makes the book extremely valuable as a sort of primer for those not familiar with Lewis's writings on Christianity and its relation to philosophy, especially moral philosophy. At the same time, devotees of Lewis, who are already familiar with most of his better-known works in this area will find many new insights—clear connections between Lewis's 'serious' works and his children's books and science fiction books. Especially important here is the commentary on *That Hideous Strength*—the third of his science fiction books.

'A week is a long time in politics' said Harold Wilson many years ago, and I cannot help wondering whether, in the short time that has elapsed since the publication of this book, the authors would wish to make the same claims today regarding Lewis's politics. It seems to me that, in the last two years, critiques of liberalism have become much more prevalent—not just from liberalism's old enemies, but from many of its former adherents. The problem lies not with the general idea of maximising personal freedom and enhancing tolerance of other views (in the tradition of Locke and Mill), but in supposing that this will be a sort of self-regulating system which benefits all. No-one put it better than that crusty old journalist, H.L. Mencken:

Off goes the head of the king, and tyranny gives way to freedom. The change seems abysmal. Then, bit by bit, the face of freedom hardens, and by and by it is the old face of tyranny. Then another cycle, and another. But under the play of all these opposites there is something fundamental and permanent—the basic delusion that men may be governed and yet be free.

In fact, secular liberalism, as envisaged by J.S. Mill and others, suffers from what one might regard as a sort of auto-immune disease. Many years ago Leszek Kolakowski wrote an important essay entitled 'The Self-Poisoning of the Open Society' and, at about the same time, Malcolm Muggeridge wrote of 'The Great Liberal Death Wish'. More recently, Ryszard Legutko published his *The Demon in Democracy* (reviewed in *News Weekly* last year). In all of these works, the inherent problems of a *laissez faire* liberal democratic system are exposed and, just as Mencken said many years ago, the great 'liberalisers' are shown

to become tyrants themselves. Lewis himself was very aware of the problem too. Even the authors of this new book on Lewis admit this. 'Ethical, intellectual, or aesthetic democracy is death' said Lewis. He also supposed that 'democracy always in the end destroys education' (both these quotes come from the book).

One can understand why Dwyer and Watson wish to establish Lewis as a liberal. America (they are both Americans) was largely founded upon that tradition. But we too easily forget that the liberalism of the past did not jettison its Christian heritage and it was precisely for this reason that it worked so well - the old Christian moral framework served to curb its tendency towards excesses. With that framework now in tatters, the whole edifice is decidedly shaky. Lewis could see the looming problem.

In summary, *C.S. Lewis on Politics and the Natural Law* is a very worthwhile acquisition for anyone interested in C.S. Lewis and his ideas. However, the contention of its authors that Lewis was some sort of closet liberal, holding ideas associated with the political philosophies of John Locke and J.S. Mill, is a dubious one to say the least.

SIMON LEYS: NAVIGATOR BETWEEN WORLDS¹

By Philippe Paquet transl. by Julie Rose. Latrobe University Press/Black Inc., 2017, 664pp.

Simon Leys was the pen-name adopted by the Belgian-born scholar and sinologist, Pierre Ryckmans who moved to Australia in 1970 and subsequently became an Australian national. He died in Sydney in 2014.

The title of the book has been carefully chosen because Ryckmans was indeed a skilled navigator between three cultures—those of the 'New World' (Australia), Europe and China. As it happens he was also a keen sailor and undertook many sea voyages. It might also be said of him that he was amongst the last of the true European intellectuals—that is to say, a person of immense learning who greatly valued the cultural and religious heritage of the West. At the same time, he developed a keen interest in China, particularly in its calligraphers and poets. He was an accomplished translator, both of Chinese and French.

When he was 20 years old, the young Ryckmans undertook a trip to China with a group of fellow students and was immediately attracted to the 'otherness' of Chinese culture. He was later to describe this as 'the other pole' of human society. His enthusiasm for the then fledgling Revolution in China quickly waned as the true nature of its oppression of the people became evident. In this one sees a remarkable parallel with the young Malcolm Muggeridge in the Soviet Union. Ryckmans was later to become a strident critic of the Maoist regime and an important source of real information concerning the regime when, for the most part, other journalists believed the falsehoods they were fed.

Writer and teacher, indefatigable traveller, translator and public intellectual, Ryckmans led an extraordinarily full life. So much so that Philippe Paquet took over 600 pages to deal with it adequately. For this

¹ First published in *News Weekly*, June 2, 2018

Paquet has been mildly criticised by some reviewers of his biography, but anything less could not have delivered an adequate account of this extraordinary man. Ryckmans himself had said that 'a good biographer basically just provides the material for a trial in which the final judgement is handed down by the reader: the mission of the first, then, is to deliver the second a file containing information that is as full and accurate as possible'. This is precisely what Paquet has attempted. It is true that many of the characters who appear in the book belong to a past era and to a European intellectual community with few ties to Australia. Nonetheless, it makes fascinating reading, for you begin to see just how effortlessly Ryckmans strode the world's stage without any hint of self-aggrandisement. Indeed, Ryckmans normally kept a very low profile. Even though he taught in Australian universities for over twenty years (Kevin Rudd was one of his pupils) and published many important books and essays in that time, he remained relatively unknown in the wider community.

For *News Weekly* readers, perhaps the most important sections of Paquet's book deal with Ryckmans' defence of the traditional moral order associated with Christianity. I have already mentioned Ryckmans' spirited defence of Mother Theresa of Calcutta in a recent *News Weekly* piece (April 7, 2018). Pierre Ryckmans and his wife Chang Hanfang, were devout Catholics. Indeed, many commentators have drawn parallels between G.K. Chesterton (and Hilaire Belloc) and Ryckmans in this regard. He was never afraid to publicly defend the traditional notion of marriage and family, or to speak out against euthanasia. As an example, he once published an open letter to the former Governor General, Bill Hayden, who in 1995 had intimated that euthanasia might be a good option to avoid what he saw as the indignity of senility. Hayden had also spoken out against the traditional concept of marriage. This incensed Ryckmans who spoke of the institution of marriage as 'the most enduring and successful experiment in the entire cultural history of mankind. As for euthanasia, Ryckmans supposed that its supporters (Hayden included) had 'forsaken the very principles of civilisation and crossed the threshold of barbarity'.

When Kevin Rudd, as prime minister, had proposed a national referendum on same sex marriage (defeated in 2013), Ryckmans wrote a letter to *The Australian* in which he proposed a startling solution. The present system, where priests and ministers of religion were able to act

as marriage celebrants should cease forthwith. Secular 'marriage' should be replaced by some form of legal civil union carried out solely by secular agents for the State. Such a union could be between two males, two females, two females and a male, and so on. There would be no restrictions. For those people who held to the traditional, sacred nature of marriage (as did Ryckmans), they must first go through the business of a 'civil union' (as a legal requirement) then immediately 'go to their respective churches, synagogues, mosques and temples to receive the supernatural support they deemed essential...' This, for Ryckmans, was the only way that the traditional notion of marriage could be saved. Marriage would then become a wholly religious affair and the various churches had every right to maintain and defend its traditional form. The state had no business in the affairs of God. For this reviewer, at any rate, the idea has great merit and I can only hope that when the Catholic Bishops of Australia meet for their much anticipated *Plenary Council* in 2020, it will be high on their agenda. Alas, I think not!

Simon Leys, the alter ego of Ryckmans, came into being with the publication of *The Chairman's New Clothes*, a powerful indictment of the Cultural Revolution in China. Originally published in French in 1971, an English edition came out some years later. It was probably a wise move to adopt a pseudonym. In August 1967, he had witnessed the assassination of a so-called 'traitor', Lin Pin, the host of a satirical radio show popular in Hong Kong. The pseudonym also avoided what we might term 'diplomatic difficulties' for Belgium. But even in the West, this new book by Simon Leys was to prove a hot potato. Many western intellectuals refused to believe that the Maoist regime was as Leys had painted it. Indeed this reviewer can remember back to that era and to the popularity, on the campus of Melbourne University, of Mao's *Little Red Book*.

Towards the end of his life, Ryckmans became more and more concerned at the increasing bureaucracy which seemed to encroach from all sides. It was particularly evident in the universities and this caused him, on more than one occasion to deliver a polemic against them. His idea of a university was similar to that of John Henry Newman—a place where young minds could develop. Instead, it had become merely a degree factory where intellectual achievement was less important than equality of outcome—degrees for all!

It is impossible in a short review like this, to give an adequate account

of Paquet's biography. At the end of his book, it takes six pages of tight text to merely list a bibliography of Ryckmans' prodigious literary output. Some of the better known titles include *The Death of Napoleon* (a very successful novel), *The Wreck of the Batavia* (a careful, historical account of the wreck and its awful aftermath), and two collections of essays, *The Halls of Uselessness* and *The Angel and the Octopus*. Unfortunately, many of his works are only available in French.

Although his talents did not go unnoticed in Australia—in 1996 he delivered the ABC Boyer Lectures—it remains a fact that his talents were much more widely appreciated in Europe. He was the recipient of numerous prestigious literary awards in France. And yet, late in life his relationship with Belgium, his country of birth, was soured by a long and painful battle over the refusal, by Belgium authorities, to grant a passport to one of the Ryckmans's sons, Marc. Incredibly, this battle lasted until 2013 when the Belgian courts pronounced in the Ryckmans's favour.

For those *News Weekly* readers unacquainted with the writings of Leys/Ryckmans, I recommend his essay collection *The Angel and the Octopus*. This will give readers some appreciation of the enormous range of his interests, as well as introducing them to his biting satire, his wise reflections on the human condition and, not least, the sincerity of his Christian faith. There are essays on the modern university, Chinese calligraphy, on interpreting Chinese newspaper 'reports' and 'facts' (in the Maoist era), on Don Quixote, Balzac, Orwell, and Evelyn Waugh, to mention just a few. There is even a reflection on cigarette smoking which will occasion apoplectic rage in the ranks on the anti-smoking zealots.

Finally, I should pay tribute to Julie Rose for her excellent translation of the biography into English. It was no small task to produce a translation of such a detailed book. Leys, I am sure would have approved. He himself had produced a translation, into French, of the great American seafaring classic, *Two Years before the Mast*, by Richard Dana. Ryckmans journey through life had much of the same character as a great sea voyage for, as Hilaire Belloc was to say 'It is true of the sea, here as everywhere, that it is the symbol of life, and of our ceaseless duties, and of death. We must never expect long quiet in the business of our life, nor any long security in any passage of the sea'. That provides an excellent summary of the life of Pierre Ryckmans.

FREUD: THE MAKING OF AN ILLUSION¹

By Frederick Crews. Profile Books, London, 2017, 746 pp.

The Royal Society, dating back to the 1660s, adopted as its motto the Latin phrase *Nullius in verba*. The usual translation is 'take no-one's word for it'. The founding members (who included Robert Boyle and Sir Christopher Wren) were indicating, via this motto, that the correct procedure for scientific enquiry was careful investigation and the accumulation of verifiable facts, not the acceptance of mere hearsay or uncorroborated evidence. Scientific 'breakthroughs' needed to be reproducible and able to be tested independently.

The generally acknowledged founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, paid little heed to such requirements, preferring his own 'insights'. And yet, in his own day he was feted as a great 'scientist of the mind'. It is true that, in recent decades, the adulation of Freud has waned somewhat as his successors struggled to deploy his methods with any appreciable success. Nonetheless, he is still highly regarded in many circles, despite the dubious nature of his work. Just read his Wikipedia entry.

This new book on Freud by Frederick Crews gathers together a mass of data, some of it not before published, which proves beyond any reasonable doubt that Freud was ... well, a fraud! It is a devastating account which carefully dissects the sometimes contradictory accounts given by Freud himself, as well as by others of his contemporaries. The material in the book is mostly confined to an assessment of Freud as a scientist and has relatively little to say on the wider issues around the use of psychotherapy. It is, therefore, something of a specialist scholar's book and not the sort of tome commended for light bedside reading. At over 740 pages, it requires some determination to read from cover to cover!

From very early in his career, Freud showed a marked tendency to

¹ First published in News Weekly,, July 28, 2018

overestimate his own abilities and to draw unwarranted conclusions from a very meagre set of data. And, indeed, very often the data was not his own, but that of someone else. In the 1880s, for instance, after reading of the investigations of others, the young Freud began to champion the use of cocaine as a cure-all for a vast variety of human ailments. Incredibly, this included its use to combat morphine addiction! Freud began taking cocaine himself and regarded it as a sort of miracle drug.

In late 1885, Freud received a grant which took him to Paris and the famous Salpêtrière hospital. Here he met the acclaimed neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot and this association was to launch Freud into the murky waters of psychoanalysis. He very quickly established himself as an 'expert' in this then fledgling 'science'. By 1895 he had published *Studies in Hysteria*, where the now famous cases of Anna von Lieben, Fanny Moser and Ilona Weiss would be showcased. As Crews points out, however, each of these three treatments was aborted after the patient either experienced no cure or the symptoms worsened. Indeed, Anna von Lieben was to conclude that the whole business was simply a racket to enrich Freud at her expense. In another famous case discussed by Freud (but not conducted by him)—that of 'Anna O' (Bertha Pappenheim), Crews concludes on the basis of evidence supplied that her strange behaviour was the result of addiction to chloral and morphine, both administered as a cure!

It was typical of Freud's career that he would leap from one 'miracle' cure to the next—cocaine, electrotherapy, hypnosis and, most famously, therapy to expose and deal with supposed 'repressed' desires or feelings. His supposed Oedipus Complex—the unconscious sexual desire of a young child for one or other parent—is perhaps the best known of all Freudian concoctions.

Crews' new book covers all of these developments in enormous detail and with copious references. This makes it a rather tedious read at times, but Crews evidently feels that an exhaustive account is the only way to finally dispel the myth of Freud as a great scientist and innovator. Unfortunately, from time to time, Crews himself displays a less than scientific rigour in exposing Freud as a fraud. For instance, he devotes a good deal of space to a discussion of Freud's association with Minna Bernays, his wife's sister. There is a good deal of circumstantial evidence that Freud had an 'affair' with Minna Bernays.

Indeed there is a suggestion that she fell pregnant as a result of the liaison and had an abortion. Now, all this might be true, but it has little bearing on the position of Freud as a great 'scientist of the mind'. Crews would of course argue that this betrayal of his wife points to a more general duplicitous behaviour and is, therefore, relevant. But, if he is to criticise Freud for publishing unsubstantiated data, he must look to his own back yard too.

Crews has been roundly criticised by some commentators for what they see as a 'hatchet job' on Freud but, in his defence, it is surely reasonable to expose poor science and fraudulent reporting when it occurs in such an important area as human psychology. It is a pity, though, that Crews has spent so much time on exposing Freud the man and so little on the legitimacy of Freudian psychoanalysis and on the long-term consequences of Freudianism.

In dealing with great historical figures, there is always the question as to whether such people are merely products of their age or, rather, are the initiators or catalysts for some major new development in the history of human ideas. In Freud's case, I would argue that he was a person whose ideas perfectly suited the age in which he lived. Many people wanted to believe in his ideas simply because they offered some sort of substitute for the traditional religious ideas concerning the human person and the proper conduct of a human life. The secularisation of the European mind, consequent upon the Enlightenment and its aftermath had, by Freud's time, reached a sort of critical mass. It is important, too, that we consider the widespread loss of meaning and a growing sense of hopelessness associated with the terrible conflicts of the First World War. Indeed, the Australian academic, Martin Casey, has written of the importance of Freud in this regard (*Meaninglessness: The Solutions of Nietzsche Freud and Rorty*, Lexington Books, 2002).

But even in his own day, perceptive critics could see the shortcomings of Freud's general ideas concerning the human psyche. For instance, the brilliant critic and satirist, Karl Kraus (1874-1936) savagely attacked the whole notion of psychoanalysis. He famously defined psychoanalysis as 'that mental disease for which it regards itself as therapy'. This further suggests that Freud's message had little to do with the truth but everything to do with supplying a more acceptable secular alternative to traditional religious ideas. Perhaps no-one has

better understood the significance of this shift in our understanding of the human condition than the American commentator Philip Rieff whose *The Triumph of the Therapeutic—Uses of Faith after Freud* (1936) is a brilliant analysis of the whole phenomenon of psychotherapy. Drawing upon Rieff's early analysis, the present day philosopher of ideas, Alasdair MacIntyre, supposes that the 'therapist' is one of today's 'iconic' types, along with the manager and the aesthete. Each of these 'types', he suggests, share a common trait—other human persons are treated (by them) as simply means to their ends. The traditional Christian notion of each human life constituting an 'end' in itself, is gone. Thus, all today's posturing regarding the 'rights' of the individual and of 'personal choice' is without substance. Once the sacred nature of human life is abandoned—as it certainly was by Freud—then the real basis for a proper notion of individual human rights is lost.

In summary, Frederick Crews new book should not be paid to any notion that Sigmund Freud was a brilliant and careful scientist and that his particular uses of psychotherapy represent any sort of great medical advance. It is an important new book for the specialist scholar but, perhaps a little too detailed for the lay reader. Moreover, from the point of view of the average *News Weekly* reader, it fails to address the more important aspects of the whole phenomenon of psychotherapy. After all is said and done, the psychotherapist's couch is the secular substitute for the confessional and Freud himself, the secular substitute for a Church Father or, indeed, a Saint. Little wonder that Crews new book created a good deal of hostile comment.

FREEDOM FROM REALITY¹

The Diabolical Character of Modern Liberty.

By D.C. Schindler. Notre Dame Press, Indiana, USA, 486pp.

A friend who had persuaded Dr Johnson to accompany him to a musical concert noted that the great man was somewhat inattentive. 'This is a very difficult piece', said his friend. 'I wish it had been impossible' replied Johnson. This new book by D.C. Schindler is, likewise, a very difficult read but, unlike Johnson, I wish it were not so. I say this because of the importance of the subject matter, not just as an academic exercise but as a much needed analysis of the disastrous path of modern liberalism which offers not just an in-depth critique, but a way out of the mess we are in.

Schindler's account of modern liberalism goes back to basic metaphysical principles and this is why the book will be a difficult read for the average layperson (as a retired rabbit poisoner I am most assuredly in this category!). For it is the case that traditional metaphysics has been almost totally abandoned by philosophers since the time of Locke and Hume. Just because metaphysics (the science or study of being) deals largely with abstract entities, it is a grave mistake to suppose that such entities are therefore 'unreal' or unimportant. On the contrary, they go to the very heart of our understanding of the world around us and especially to our understanding of human social and political organisation.

When the early Greek philosophers began to muse upon the nature of the cosmos, they formed various theories as to the constitution of the world around them. Some thought everything could be reduced to fire, others to water. It was Parmenides of Elea (circa 500BC) however, who came up with the right answer. What everything had in common, he realised was being. From this basic concept that being is the absolute starting point of all philosophy, the ancients went on to derive a series of logical conclusions. For instance, being must be

¹ First published in *News Weekly*, Aug.25, 2018

absolutely complete in itself since anything that could be added to it would still be being.

For being thus conceived in the abstract, as it were, Plato and Aristotle (in their different ways) quickly realised that the being of material things in our everyday world was anything but eternal, immutable, and so on. Such things participated in being to the degree possible by their particular natures. There was, in other words, a hierarchy of being. Furthermore each thing 'strives', as it were, to attain the fullness of being available to it. A small seedling tree, for instance, became a sapling and then a mature tree, able to reproduce itself and this represented its proper 'end'. And this 'end', in fact, was an appropriate definition of 'the good' available to it. Applied to human beings, Aristotle proposed that the end-point was happiness and that such an end could only be achieved by the practice of the virtues. Importantly, a certain sort of freedom was required in order to reach the goal. That freedom was the freedom to rise above our baser instincts and pleasures so as to achieve our goal. Only under such a conception of freedom could the virtues be practised and a human life lived to the full.

This ridiculously inadequate account of traditional metaphysics will, I hope, nonetheless set the scene for Schindler's arguments in his new book. For readers requiring a more substantial but easily readable account, I recommend Daniel J. Sullivan's *An Introduction to Philosophy* (Tan Books, Illinois, 1992).

Schindler begins at the other end of the history of philosophy by showing us just how modern philosophy has completely reversed the traditional concept of freedom. To do this, he chooses the philosophy of John Locke (1632-1704), one of the 'giants' of early modern philosophy. He chooses Locke for two reasons. Firstly, Locke is generally regarded as 'the father of liberalism'. Secondly, Locke's philosophy was immensely important in shaping the thinking of the American Founding Fathers, and Schindler is an American, writing primarily for an American audience.

What Locke does, perhaps with the best of intentions, is to reject this earlier conception of freedom, unhitching it from any notion of 'the good', and attaching it instead, to a notion of individual power. In other words, liberty implies an 'empowering' of the individual over

and against traditional restraints (which themselves, offered a different sort of empowerment.). Locke was very likely influenced in making this move because of the disastrous history of religious wars in Europe. This more secular account of individual liberty, so he thought, would prevent such things happening again. Alas, what it has done instead is to bring us to where we are today with a rampant individualism now challenging all forms of traditional authority.

And this brings us to the rather startling subtitle of Schindler's book—'the diabolical character of modern liberty'. It is important here to understand exactly what Schindler means by 'diabolical'. He is using this word as the exact opposite of 'symbolical'. The etymological derivation of 'symbol' comes from the Greek verb *sym-ballo*—to join together. In the pre-modern era, symbols were tokens of the good 'that stands at the origin as first cause, and so have a certain aptness for a fundamentally generous and generative unity'.

By contrast, *dia-ballo* means to divide or to set at odds. Schindler characterises the diabolical as being essentially negative (and I take this to mean that my 'liberty' is at the expense of someone else), and as being a mere image substituting for reality. As a corollary, it tends to render appearance more decisive than reality. It is also 'soulless' in the sense of lacking an animating principle of unity. Finally, it is self-destructive. Many decades ago, Malcolm Muggeridge published a perceptive essay entitled 'The Great Liberal Death Wish'. It has all come to pass.

The perceptive reader will note that many of the terms used by Schindler have a theological as well as a philosophical aspect. The 'Good' for instance is surely another word for God. But Schindler has been very careful so as to avoid the obvious criticism that he is using philosophy as a Trojan horse for his Catholicism. Without doubt, many critics will bring to this book a particular logical fallacy that C.S. Lewis called 'Bulverism'—one accuses an argument of being wrong on the basis of the arguer's identity or motive, but these are strictly speaking irrelevant to the argument's validity or truth.

To bring this whole business back to the everyday experience that we are accustomed to, rather than the dense language of the scholar, we need think no further than some of the slogans about us today—'my body, my choice', for instance, or 'marriage equality' or 'freedom to

choose my gender'. These are, all of them, an attack on that view of human nature which prevailed, in the West from at least 400 years before the time of Christ up until our own era.

And so, what can be done? Here I'm afraid, Schindler gives some pointers but no real 'road map', as it were. It was one of the favourite sayings of B.A. Santamaria that 'we are engaged in a battle of ideas'. Just as the modern view of morality and human nature can be traced back to certain philosophical ideas, so to must the remedy come from that quarter. And this is why Schindler's book is so important. He has, in this book, laid out the argument. Others must now take it up. It may appear like an impossible task but there are precedents. Many decades ago, the Scottish-born philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre published *After Virtue*, a spirited defence of traditional virtue-based ethics. It was an enormously important book and has had a major influence in the area of modern moral philosophy. Schindler's book is, in my view, of similar significance.

The difficulty for Schindler lies in the fact that most modern scholars have a dearth of knowledge in this area and are so thoroughly immersed in 'the spirit of the age', that they will simply ignore the book without making any serious attempt to understand it or counter its arguments. They will simply cry 'medievalism'. 'I have found you an argument', said Dr Johnson to one of his opponents, 'but I cannot find you an understanding'. Truth, though, has a way of prevailing in the end and I might conclude with a little quote from Raffaello Carboni in his account of the Eureka Stockade (his original was in Latin):

The lie, like the whirlwind, clears itself a royal road, either in town or country, through the whole face of the earth.

The fool in his heart says, 'There is no God.'

The truth, however slow, step by step, like a little child, someday, at last, finds a footpath to light.

Then the righteous flourish like a palm tree.

WHERE WE ARE¹ **The State of Britain Now**

By Roger Scruton. Bloomsbury Publishing, UK, 2017, 237 pp.

Roger Scruton must count as one of the most prolific writers in the modern-day conservative tradition. He has published over 50 books, on subjects as wide ranging as general philosophy, aesthetics, green ideology, music appreciation, religion and politics.

This new book is an attempt to delineate the political identity of Britain post Brexit. It does not present arguments for and against Brexit (although I sense that Scruton has sympathy for the 'leavers') but, rather, seeks to understand how some form of national identity and cohesion might be achieved amidst the turbulence of post-Brexit Britain. As such, it might seem, on first sight, to have little relevance to us here in Australia. However, once you dip into the book, it is clear that many of his themes are directly relevant to our own situation.

Scruton begins by attempting to define the character of the British people. Here, he is clearly influenced by the writings of George Orwell and acknowledges his debt in this respect. There are a number of themes that he touches on here—a general charitableness, a sense of trust, of neighbourliness, and of cooperation, being the most important. He has in mind here 'ordinary' people and not the elites—the 'little platoons' that Edmund Burke identifies. He acknowledges that these qualities may have arisen as the result of an earlier and widespread application of the general Christian message but wants to maintain that, in post-Christian Britain, the remnants of these ideals remain as a sort of spiritual residue. These remnant qualities, he maintains, are signs of hope for the future. Like Orwell, he believes that 'the British people are essentially without religious belief, even though retaining a core of Christian feeling'. I am not so sure that, in the absence of belief, such qualities can be maintained in the longer-term.

¹ First published in *News Weekly*, Nov. 17, 2018

Scruton then moves on to the question of nationalism and national identity. He points to a radical distinction between two 'types' of people—the 'anywheres' and the 'somewheres' (the phrases are borrowed from David Goodhart in *The Road to Somewhere*, 2017). As the names suggest, the 'somewheres' have a definite attachment to place, whereas the 'nowheres' can operate and feel at home anywhere. This, of course, is related to the concept of 'global community'. There is an obvious reference, too, to the European Union and the idea that any form of 'local' nationalist feeling is detrimental to the functioning of that Union. Later, he introduces us to another and similar classification—the 'oikophiles' and the 'oikophobes'. The latter terms denote respectfully, those who have an attachment to 'home' and those that do not. By 'home' he means much more than just a sense of place. He includes patriotic sentiment, a sense of history, a love of inherited customs and so on. As a rule of thumb, ordinary folk in Britain tend to be oikophiles whilst the elites tend to be oikophobes.

For Scruton, the importance of national attachment is that it 'has made citizenship possible and enabled people to exist side by side, respecting each others rights, despite radical differences in faith, and without any bonds of family, kinship or long-term local custom to sustain the solidarity between them'. And here he draws a contrast with certain other countries where other notions such as 'brotherhood' replace citizenship and, as a consequence, political instability is rife.

But perhaps the most important chapter in Scruton's book deals with political freedom. He traces the history of the English legal system from Saxon times, through *Magna Carta* and onward. As he says, 'From the earliest times the Common Law has been an instrument in the hands of the ordinary citizen, wherewith to combat oppression'. Here, the question of accountability looms large: '...British people have the unshakeable belief that anyone who, in the hierarchy of decision-making, has power over others, is also accountable to those others for the way that power is exercised'.

He goes on to list some of the ways in which ordinary citizens have the legal ability to oppose unjust laws or unjust treatment by those in authority over them. Indeed, there also exists a system of equity which grants 'equitable remedies' when the existing laws can do nothing to help. He refers to the whole system of British Law as a 'bottom-up approach'—one which has a remarkable degree of flexibility. The law

emerges from the myriad small decisions and is sensitive to the concrete circumstances that produce them. Scruton contrasts this approach with the whole legal apparatus of the European Union where such flexibility is rarely on show. In a lighter moment, he quotes Leszek Kolakowski: 'In England, everything is permitted unless it is forbidden; in Germany, everything is forbidden unless it is permitted; in France, everything is permitted even if it is forbidden; and in Russia, everything is forbidden, even if it is permitted'. Scruton believes that this British attitude to the law is deep-rooted and that it remains as a positive sign for the future of the country. I must say, I am not so optimistic, but I hope he is right.

Scruton then turns to the impact of globalisation on Britain. In fact, a process of globalisation has been in train since the discovery (by Europeans) of the New World. However, that process has now vastly accelerated, not least because of the new digital technologies. One of the important outcomes has been what Scruton terms the 'network psyche'—young people, in particular, see themselves as belonging to networks rather than to places. As he says 'Their location is not a place, but a set of instructions for ignoring it'. Nonetheless, in all of the negativity associated with the 'network', there is still the fact that young people wish to belong and to identify with something, however nebulous and tenuous that something might be. Here Scruton sees an opportunity:

The network psyche enjoys a 'view from nowhere'. Its vision of belonging is also beamed from nowhere, and those that share that vision will come to earth only when they have found a place, custom and neighbourhood that inspires them to belong. Trust does not come easily along a network, though fake trust can be tweeted in a flash from one end of it to another.

What is missing from the network psyche then, in any real sense of trust, attachment and safety. Perhaps, Scruton writes, the risk to which we are put by networks can be partly allayed by encouraging people to take responsibility for their lives and to join in the 'little platoons' of neighbourliness.

In his last chapter, Scruton attempts a sort of road map for the future of Britain. He maintains that the most important project ahead is one of conciliation with the Germans and the French through whatever way presents itself—cooperative business ventures, education, culture

and foreign policy. He then moves on to the problem of immigration policy—a hot issue during the lead-up to Brexit. Inevitably, this takes him to the issue of radical Islam. Correctly, in my view, he identifies one important reason for the whole immigration debacle—the failure of the British education system to adequately address the needs of the vocational and technical education required to produce a skilled and semi-skilled workforce. The figures are staggering. In 1973, there were 250,000 apprenticeships. At the time he wrote his book, this had declined to 50,000. At the same time, universities were bursting at the seams. In 1984, 14 percent of teenagers went to university: now the number is 48 percent. This is patently absurd.

Many of the issues discussed by Scruton are applicable to our own situation. We too, face a sort of crisis of national identity, albeit of a slightly different sort. But we too, have inherited the British system of law and, this perhaps, gives us some reason for hope. If enough people who believe in the values of trust, of ‘neighbourliness’, and of the importance of the ‘little platoons’ of ordinary folk, then the opportunity given us by that Law, may yet save us. But, above everything else, what we need and what Scruton emphasises right throughout the book is the simple notion of oikophilia—the love of our particular place and culture and history. That, after all, was the central theme of the first great epic story of Western civilisation—Homer’s *Odyssey*. When Odysseus’s men wish to join the Lotus Eaters, his main concern was that they would ‘forget their homeland’. And his own journey was a journey home. We all need an Ithaca.

LIBERAL SHOCK: THE CONSERVATIVE COMEBACK¹

Ed. William Dawes et.al. Connor Court Publishing, 2019, 368pp.

This new book from *Connor Court* joins a growing number of recent publications concerned with the evident and mounting problems associated with liberalism as a political idea and as an ideology. In all, there are twenty essays, most by well-known national and international commentators. In addition, there is a Foreword by Peter Hitchens and a long Introduction by William Dawes. In his Foreword, recounts an episode in 2013 when he appeared on the ABC's 'Q &A' programme. This really sets the tone for the whole book because it demonstrates the impossibility of rational argument with what now appears to be a majority of 'commentators' whose liberal ideology has assumed all the characteristics of a religious belief system.

The title of the book is rather odd. I would have thought it almost impossible to shock a modern liberal-minded person, since their whole agenda is directed toward 'shocking' the conservative mindset. 'Liberal Shock', therefore, is an oxymoron. Likewise to speak of a 'Conservative Comeback' seems to suggest that a conservative counter-attack is gaining ground. I'm not at all sure that this is so. Indeed, I'm not at all sure that such a comeback is at all possible without some radical new approach, quite outside the old boundaries to which we are accustomed. The old boundaries, as Alasdair MacIntyre has so ably demonstrated (*After Virtue* and other works), have long since been appropriated by liberalism so that we have liberal liberals, conservative liberals, green liberals, socialist liberals, and so on.

The *Introduction*, rather oddly set out as four separate chapters, provides a useful background history of liberalism as a political idea and an analysis of the rather strange concept of a supposedly 'conservative' Liberal Party in Australia. As Dawes points out, the distance between the ideas of J.S. Mill (usually regarded as the 'father' of liberalism) and

¹ First published in *News Weekly*, Jan 25, 2020

those of Edmund Burke (the great champion of conservative thought) is not just vast, but unbridgeable. And yet, in one of the later chapters, Tony Abbott does attempt to sketch out just such an alliance. As much as I admire his loyalty to his old Party, I'm afraid I do not share his confidence in such an alliance.

Many of the essays deal with quite specific topics which are really end-products of liberalism. For instance, Catherine Priestley writes on euthanasia, while Bill O'Chee writes on commercial surrogacy. Other essays deal with the failures of the modern education system, with drug use, and with the campus rape culture. Indeed, the range of topics is so broad as to render the job of the editors (Dawes was assisted by Catherine Priestley and Michael Warren Davis) rather difficult. This explains why each essay in the collection is preceded by a few sentences from the editors, detailing its relevance.

For this reviewer, at any rate, the most important essays in the collection are those dealing directly with the philosophy (if one can call it that) of liberalism and why, of its very nature, it is destructive of human culture and human society. This, of course, is hardly a recent discovery. It is now almost forty years since Malcolm Muggeridge gave us 'The Great Liberal Death Wish' and Leszek Kolakowski penned his essay on 'The Self-Poisoning of the Open Society'. However, much water has passed under the bridge since then and I'm sure that both Muggeridge and Kolakowski would be truly astonished by the situation today, where a rampant and degenerate liberalism has morphed into a sort of soft totalitarianism. The so-called 'freedom of the individual' has, in fact, ceded more and more power to central governments and to the legal system.

In addition to straight 'political' analyses, there is also an important essay by Adam Creighton on liberal economics. This outlines the myth of the 'free' market. It details the culture of corporate greed, the nature of modern banking, and the poor understanding of the long-term consequences of privatising important public assets. Here I cannot resist a small quote from Creighton:

It's a little bizarre when governments brag about how much they've sold utilities for because the sale price, obviously, reflects how much the new owners think they can get away with squeezing out of customers. His essay is peppered with such small but not unimportant reflections

on the nature of the modern economic system in the liberal West.

But the stand-out essay of this collection (and acknowledged as such by the Editor) is a contribution by James Wilson titled simply 'Beauty and the West'. You may ask: 'What's that got to do with liberalism?' As Wilson points out, modern conservative thought which draws largely on a tradition going back only two centuries or so (Edmund Burke published *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in 1790), tends to discount more ancient conservative ideas which he (Wilson) terms 'the Christian-Platonist tradition'. Here, he paints with a broad brush, including in his classification ideas which are commonly associated with the Aristotelian/Thomistic tradition as well. Once this is understood, the notion of Beauty as an ideal and an overarching teleological principle in human affairs becomes more easily associated with general political ideas, and the absence of such a principle with our current malaise.

Put simply, Wilson argues that such a traditional religious/philosophical view is indispensable for any sustainable and just society in the West. It is not my intention here to elaborate further on Wilson's approach or to detail his arguments. That task would require a separate essay itself. Far better that you read Wilson's account for yourself. Even if the interested reader of this review buys the book for this single essay only, he or she will be richly rewarded. This is perhaps the only essay in the book which offers a real alternative (we might call it a 'third way') to an otherwise stale territory of political ideas, most of which have long since been contaminated by a pervasive and anti-metaphysical liberalism.

An essay by Roger Kimball, towards the end of the book, discusses the relevance of the recent surge of 'populism' and 'nationalism'. I put both terms in inverted commas to indicate that today's media pundits generally use the terms pejoratively. This is a useful essay and offers some hope for a resurgence of true conservative values. However, Kimball is rightly cautious of placing too much hope in this area.

Part of any approach to construct a viable alternative to the dominant liberal ideology must include an emphasis on the traditional human family as the first and greatest social unit. In the book under review, only one essay deals with the importance of the family. It is written by the former politician, John Anderson, who correctly identifies the

family as providing the basis of a true human freedom. One would have hoped that, in a collection such as this, much more attention would have been directed towards the family as the basic and indispensable social unit of human society. Again, we might have hoped for one or more essays dealing directly with the principle of subsidiarity—the devolution of power down through a hierarchical system. This, after all, constitutes a true empowering of the individual. Also missing from the collection is any real attention to the nature and purpose of human work. In our society, work for many people is simply a necessary evil and they are, in effect, slaves to an economic system which views human labour simply as an 'input' in the system of production. For instance, the volume would have benefited greatly by one or more essays detailing the traditional notion of human work as set out in the great encyclical of John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens* (1981).

Even so, this volume of essays provides a very useful resource for all those interested in reclaiming the traditional notion of a human person and of re-affirming the nature and purpose of human life. I commend the book to *News Weekly* readers and especially recommend the essay by James Wilson as providing the sort of approach to our present dilemma which would be consonant with the general approach of the vast majority of *News Weekly* readers.

THE POLITICS OF THE COMMON GOOD¹ **Dispossession in Australia**

By Jane R Goodall, New South Publishing (Univ NSW Press) Sydney 2019, 291 pp.

'Most schemes of political improvement', said Dr Johnson, 'are very laughable things'. To which one might reply that they are only laughable whilst remaining theoretical. If they happen to be put in to action, they are usually tragic. Witness Communism in the former USSR and Maoist China. Nothing to laugh about here when you consider the tens of millions that perished in the 'improvement'. But Johnson had a point. To suppose that, merely by re-arranging the nature of a political system, one can permanently change the nature of our lot, is the stuff of fantasy. Even those who do not believe in the concept of original sin will at least concede that humanity is made of 'crooked timber'—a description of Immanuel Kant, later taken up by Isaiah Berlin. Of course, the point was first made by Plato nearly two and a half thousand years ago, but we are slow learners. We consistently suppose that we can, out of our own resources, create some sort of heaven on earth—a case of trying to 'immanentise the eschaton', in the memorable phrase of Eric Vogelin.

But, I suspect that Jane Goodall, the author of this new book on the political scene in Australia, is just such an ardent believer in the old socialist dream. And so, the title of her book—so enticing when I first read it—turns out to be something of a Trojan Horse. The term 'Common Good' is most commonly found in Christian social teaching, and especially in Catholic social teaching where the term carries a metaphysical as well as a purely practical meaning. For Goodall though, it is simply another way of stating the familiar socialist dream. Traditionally, the 'Idea of the Good'—to use Plato's phrase—necessarily implied an objective Reality standing outside and above the mere subjectivity of the human mind. You will find none of this in Goodall's book.

¹ First published in *News Weekly*, Nov. 30, 2019

Instead, she gives us her own exemplars of the common good, assuming that these examples will prove her thesis that, left to their own devices (i.e. free from the malicious operation of right wing capitalists), human communities will opt for co-operative actions engendering 'the common good'. Those exemplars include such disparate entities as pre-European Aboriginal societies (no mention, of course, of endemic tribal warfare), the Diggers of 17th C England, and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Goodall might have given us the example of the only long-term 'socialist' system that has stood the test of time—that of the monastic orders in Christianity. But, of course, we must not condone 'the opium of the masses'. There is no 'Benedict Option' for Goodall.

To be sure, much of Goodall's criticism of the present economic and social order in Australia is well placed. There is a widening gap between rich and poor and much of the problem can be laid squarely at the feet of the modern liberal-capital ethos. It turns out that Adam Smith's 'invisible hand'—the notion that free-wheeling capitalism will benefit everyone and that individual greed is a good thing—is a pipe dream. But Goodall wants to blame every evil on capitalism. Here is a small sample:

The market in its unbounded wisdom has brought us the obesity epidemic, the smoking epidemic, the vast masses of waste plastic on our oceans, coal-fired power and global warming, the destruction of the Great Barrier Reef, slave labour in the garment industry and the live export trade.

I would have thought, based on the evidence to hand, that the socialist experiment in both the USSR and China produced more environmental damage than that seen in the free world. I seem to recall also, that smoking levels are higher in Communist China than just about anywhere else. Live exports, too, were a speciality of the former USSR, but they were human carcasses, rounded up in Black Marias and 'exported' to the gulags. But that, of course, would spoil a good story for Goodall.

In fact, the central problem with Goodall's thesis is her refusal to consider the basis for an individual responsibility concerning 'the common good'. There is an underlying assumption that ordinary folk like you and I will always opt for 'the common good', given the opportunity. But this is Disneyland Socialism. Here, I can do no better

than to quote the *Encyclopedia Britannica* in its discussion of the term 'common good':

In the modern era the emphasis has been placed on the maximisation of the freedom of the individual, as consumer and property owner discovering that freedom in the private domain of liberalised markets rather than as citizen achieving the common good in the public domain

This, I believe, is an entirely accurate analysis of the root cause of the problems which Goodall correctly identifies but incorrectly attributes entirely to capitalism. The problem, in short, is not with political or economic theory, but with human nature itself.

Some time ago in *News Weekly*, I reviewed a book titled '*Freedom from Reality*' and written by D.C. Schindler. It is Schindler's contention that the modern notion of human freedom is radically at odds with the traditional notion of 'the common good', because the former promotes a destructive individualism whereas the latter concentrates on an Aristotelian notion of freedom—a freedom to attain the higher good. And this higher good can only be properly realised within a communal setting. True freedom is attained by rising above our mere animal natures.

In fact, the unpalatable truth is that, without some notion of 'the good' as an objective reality, standing above and beyond the individual human mind, there can be no shared goal towards which all of us aspire. That reality, for most of the history of the West, was the Christian God. Today, we revert, instead, to various forms of emotivism masquerading as objective moral and ethical truths. And, eventually, as we are now seeing all around us, we will arrive at Hobbes' 'state of nature' where there is 'Warre of every man against every man'.

And so, in conclusion I cannot recommend Goodall's book as providing a useful and measured critique of our current social, political and economic pathologies, even though I might agree with her identification of those particular pathologies. Indeed, were I not so meek and forgiving, I would be more inclined to agree with Dorothy Parker's recommendation concerning a novel she had just read: 'This is not ... to be tossed aside lightly. It should be thrown with great force'.

THE GREAT KOALA SCAM¹

Green Propaganda, Junk Science, Government Waste & Cruelty to Animals

By Vic Jurskis, Connor Court Publishing, 2020, 138pp

Let me begin with a declaration of non-objectivity! Any retired scientist who quotes Miguel Cervantes on the first page of his work is almost certainly worth reading. There! I've exposed my bias. And like the great Don himself, Vic Jurskis has suffered 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'. Well, not fortune exactly, but rather the slings and arrows of hostile reviews, publication knockbacks from scientific journals, and deliberate snubbing from many other scientists engaged in his line of work—the relationship between forest ecology and bushfires. Part of that ecology led Jurskis to undertake a study of the koala and, especially, the link between koala population fluctuations and bushfires.

I think he might agree that, in retrospect, it was a bad choice of animal. In the first place, Jurskis was a forester [NSW Forestry]—one of those evil people whose entire career is dedicated to the destruction of the planet. To even suggest that a forester could carry out valid scientific investigations is a heinous crime. To suggest that he could do so when the focus of his investigation was koalas makes him subject to an anathema sit. After all, this is Australia's most emotively charged species, with its teddy-bear face and 'cuddle me' demeanour. Jurskis would have been far better off if he had chosen to study tiger snakes, blowflies or dog ticks.

And, of course, to study the koala without the mandatory background 'fact' that the species is on the brink of extinction, is a form of *Lèse-majesté*, a capital offence against the majesty of the Australian Koala Foundation and its various fellow travellers.

But that is precisely what Vic Jurskis did. He made no prior

¹ First published in *News Weekly*, June 27, 2020

assumptions but, rather, delved into the historical records and carried out his own studies on the animal. This led him to a series of conclusions which can be briefly summarised as follows: In pre European Australia, koalas almost certainly existed in low densities. They are solitary animals with large territories and they can move large distances within these territories. One of the reasons they occurred in naturally low densities (as do many other Australian mammals—especially smaller ones) is that their preferred food is fresh, succulent gum leaves and, in stable, mature forests, these are in short supply. The young leaves they need for proper nutrition are more commonly found, (in quantity) in regrowth after bushfires or other interventions favouring the growth of new, soft leaves. When major disturbances such as megafires occur, the fresh, young regrowth that is a natural consequence, causes huge population irruptions of koalas and overpopulation often occurs, with the obvious consequence of high mortality via starvation and disease.

Now it is quite possible that Jurskis is wrong in his observations and analyses. It could be that some other explanation better suits the available evidence. That, after all, is what allows science to flourish as a discipline. But his opponents need to demonstrate his errors and put forward valid scientific evidence in support of any such demonstration. Now, as far as I can see from Jurkis' extensively referenced work in this book, such a demonstration has not been proffered. Instead we get what C.S. Lewis once termed 'Bulverism'—a logical fallacy in which judgement is made on the basis of perceived motives. You assume your opponent is wrong because of his or her perceived motives. But, as Lewis points out, 'you must show that a man is wrong before you start explaining why he is wrong'.

Where supposedly 'scientific' evidence is massed against Jurskis, most of it is of doubtful provenance. You cannot do proper population surveys on koalas by mail-out surveys, for instance, because not many people spend their days looking up into the foliage of gum trees. Some of the 'science' is not just doubtful, it is genuinely hilarious. Jurskis quotes such a 'scientific' paper with the title: 'Use of expert knowledge to elicit population trends for the koala'. It has SEVENTEEN authors! One of those authors is an 'elicitation expert!' 'What the hell is that?', I hear you say. The paper explains: 'A quantitative, scientific method for deriving estimates of koala populations and trends was possible in the ABSENCE (my emphasis) of empirical data on

abundance'. Say no more. I have visions of an elicitation expert conjuring up data via his or her Ouija board. I want you to imagine just how his opponents would have regarded Jurskis if it was he who used 'elicitation' as a scientific technique. He would have been derided. Welcome to the post-truth world of science!

Now, in order to prosecute his case, Jurskis has presented a good deal of data in this book which is slow going for the lay reader. Much of it relates to his repeatedly unsuccessful attempts to get his work accepted and published. Other of it deals with the overt politicisation of the whole koala scene. As Jurskis points out, the koala has been an extremely useful 'leverage' animal to prevent the commercial utilisation of forests and, indeed, to prevent their proper management.

Underlying the whole of Vic Jurskis' account is a first-order philosophical question. He does not specifically pursue this in his book, but it is implied. That question has to do with the role of humans in nature and, more specifically, what the term 'management' means. In Green philosophy, humans are just another species—a trousered or skirted ape—that has gone haywire, and is now doing its best to destroy the planet. I can speak with a little experience here. Many years ago, I was lecturing to a group of young people studying resource management at the tertiary level. Just to try them out, I set this question: 'Humans are the greatest pest species on the planet. Do you agree or disagree. With only two or three exceptions, all agreed!

If you are serious about management, it implies that you will actually manage, not just put up signs, write management strategies, position papers, etc etc. Management means hands on interference, hands on manipulation of an ecosystem. To date that only seems to occur, in the case of koalas, at the tail end of population explosions when the animals are easily seen, their destruction of habitat is obvious and they are sick or dying. Then, the useless strategy of relocation is employed, at great cost, and yet another 'scientific review' is commissioned. As Jurskis is able to point out, with data, a big percentage of the relocated animals die.

Jurskis' approach to management is the judicious use of fire (his earlier book is titled *Firestick Ecology*) and livestock grazing where that is feasible. Both these approaches are vehemently opposed by Green ideologues.

The reader must make up his or her own mind as to the validity of Jurskis' arguments and claims. I, for, one, think his arguments are valid and backed up not only by historical data (there is a great deal of it in the book) but by his own extensive observations, gleaned from a working lifetime in the bush. His stand is courageous and defiant. He knows that he will never defeat his detractors and this book is therefore something of a parting shot. He reminds me somewhat of Dr Johnson who, when he exposed a literary fraud (The *Ossian* poems), received a threat on his person. He replied with these words '...I hope I shall never be deterred from detecting what I think a cheat, by the menaces of a ruffian.'

Watermark

SURVIVING THE FUTURE¹

Culture, Carnival and Capital in the Aftermath of the Market Economy

David Fleming [Ed. S.Chamberlin], Chelsea Green Publ, Vermont, USA. 2016. 279pp

'Examine everything;', says St Paul in his first letter to the Thessalonians, 'hold on to that which is true'. Now, of course St Paul is here referring pre-eminently to matters of Christian faith, but his teaching nonetheless has the character of a universal axiom. The problem is that, in these troubled times of ours, establishing the truth of any secular matter is no easy task. Anyone who bothers to compare the 'factual' news analyses coming from, say, the ABC with the same news items from, say, *Sky News*, will understand the sort of problems I am referring to. The truth, it seems, has many versions.

And so, it was with St Paul's advice in my mind that I turned to the task of reading this book under review. Had the book been sent to me a few months back, before the Wuhan virus, I doubt that I would have bothered reading it. After all, it was written by a prominent Green writer and I am not well disposed toward your average Green activist. The various encomia contained in the cover blurb, were nearly all from Green-orientated commentators. It was also predicated on the supposition of some impending ecological crisis, and climate change, ocean acidification, etc., all loomed large. Nonetheless, I noted that the late Sir Roger Scruton—a bastion of conservatism—had kind things to say about the book. Moreover, a casual flick through the pages quickly indicated that this was no ordinary piece of Green apocalyptic writing. Its focus was on a way forward, and its vision was anthropocentric, not eco-centric as is the case with most other Green writing.

And so, most importantly, this book is centred about practical ways to foster human flourishing after what Fleming called a 'climacteric'—a

¹ First published in *News Weekly*, July 25, 2020

stage in our present economic, political and social order where the stability of the whole system is especially exposed 'to a profound change in health or fortune'. And, of course, the ravages of the Wuhan virus have presented us with just such a 'climacteric'. Fleming, naturally enough, could not have predicted this. His 'climacteric' was envisaged in more or less standard Green scenarios—oil depletion, global warming, etc. But this does not detract from many of the positive ideas he proposes for the future of human societies. What matters is not the cause of the 'climacteric', but how we respond to it. And a big part of that response is the need to radically re-examine our notions of 'the market economy'—a point which has been reiterated in recent issues of *News Weekly*.

First, something about the author. David Fleming (1940-2010) was a UK writer and thinker who played significant roles in the genesis of the UK Green Party, the Transition Towns movement, and the New Economics Foundation in the UK. This present book under review is actually a much shortened version of Fleming's magnum opus, *Lean Logic*—a book written in the manner of cross-linked encyclopaedia entries. What the editor of this current volume has attempted is a more conventional presentation of Fleming's ideas in a standard narrative style.

Fleming can rightly be called a polymath. What we see in this book is clear evidence of a man with a keen interest and deep understanding in almost every department of human endeavour—politics, history, literature, economics, philosophy, religion, the arts, and the sciences. The range of his readings in these areas is prodigious. There are thirty four pages of notes in this abridged edition of Fleming's book and the bibliography covers some 450-500 authors. Most Green-oriented writers focus narrowly on science and political and economic theory, but in Fleming, you will find that poets and their kin are quoted as often as population theorists. The thoughts of the 'ploughman poet', John Clare, are just as important as Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. And, in another uncharacteristic approach (for a Green thinker), history and the need to connect with our past is immensely important for Fleming.

For *News Weekly* readers, the importance of this book lies in its analysis of the so-called 'free market' and of the 'global village', the consequences of which are now all too visible in the wake of the

Wuhan pandemic. Fleming's insistence of the primacy of local communities is also directly in line with the long-held principles of this newspaper and its parent body. And so, there is much in this book which will strike a chord with older readers who will remember back to the days when we were accused of fostering the notion of 'three acres and a goat'. But now the idea of self-sufficiency—at least in certain important areas—has come back upon us with a vengeance.

True enough, Green philosophy in general tends to take the question of self-sufficiency and turn it into actual subsistence—a bridge too far, perhaps. But Fleming's notion of what he calls 'the lean economy' has a great deal going for it. The lean economy is one which is:

held together by richly-developed social capital and culture, and organised around the rediscovery of community. It is a fusion of society and economics, based on presence and cooperation in a slack social order, building from small groups and household production, through the neighbourhood and community in its many forms, to the nation. It sustains solutions.

Fleming's use of the term 'slack social order' requires some explanation. What he means, essentially is that producers will not always want to provide their goods and services in the most efficient (i.e. cost-effective) way. For instance, a question of local loyalty may arise. Indeed, Fleming here quotes Garrison Keillor and the fictional town of Lake Wobegon: 'You need a toaster, you buy it at Co-op Hardware even though you can get a deluxe model with all the toaster attachments for less money at K-Mart in St. Cloud. You buy it at Co-op because you know Otto...' Now, of course, Lake Wobegon is not a fictional town at all. I grew up in just such a country town and the sense of community that one gleans from *The Prairie Home Companion* is not a fiction at all. It is a description of a real and flourishing local community which once existed in small towns all over this country, as well as on the American prairies. They are now, for the most part dead or dying.

I cannot, in this short review, cover the full scope of Fleming's book, but something needs to be said about the concept of 'carnival' as the author understands it. It is closely linked with the idea of culture, but goes further in seeking to ritualise and celebrate the human-nature interaction. Fleming uses many examples from history and these

include Feast days, processions and other celebrations embedded in the yearly cycle. Many of these celebrate human work in nature. Unfortunately, Fleming's Green philosophy tends to go into overdrive here and he attempts to link such events—prominent in Medieval times—to a sort of Dionysiac nature worship or mere indulgence of the senses. Indeed, he makes a direct comparison of the Greek god Dionysus with Christ. This I found offensive. For a person as well read as Fleming, I find it hard to excuse such deliberate ignorance of the Christian Gospels. Even Nietzsche would take issue with Fleming here.

Likewise, Fleming's treatment of human sexuality is underwhelming to say the least. Eros is celebrated in a whole chapter, but the word marriage occurs but three times in the entire book. He is happy to quote both George Herbert and Richard Crashaw in support of his views on Eros, neglecting to point out that both of these poets were devout Christians. It doesn't add up.

In fact, the weakest part of the book concerns the place of religion in a well-functioning human society. In this book (admittedly an abridgement of Fleming's original), religion receives only nine pages. It is as if religion is simply a manifestation of a well-ordered society. Fleming should know that the very genesis of the civilisation to which he belongs is inextricably linked to the Christian religion. Those qualities of pre-industrial western societies which Fleming extols developed precisely because of the Christian religion. To be fair, Fleming does realise that the form of modern capitalism which we have is deeply antithetical to many aspects of the Christian religion and he does have an understanding of how the genesis of the acquisitive society was a sort of unintended consequence of post-Reformation Puritanism—along the lines of Max Weber's famous thesis.

Other parts of the book simply push the standard Green agenda and this is why, at the head of this review, I quoted St Paul on the need to sift and evaluate. Fleming's summary dismissal of nuclear energy is, to me, not well documented and seems particularly one-sided. Likewise, the tendency to call up what I will call 'The Noble Savage Argument', hardly does the book justice.

But, for all its weaknesses this is an important book. One does not have to be a Green apologist to appreciate the many thoughtful

arguments and insights contained within it. For those of us with an interest in the traditional Christian notion of a well-ordered society, the book can be used as a sort of reference work—exactly as Fleming first envisaged it in its original ‘encyclopaedia’ format. It is replete with carefully crafted and ‘standalone’ insights, eminently suited for quotation. Here for example, is Fleming on the nature of the large-scale state:

The large-scale state, dazzled by its good intentions, saw itself as provider; iconic liberties engaged our attention while regulation closed in; economic competitiveness usurped other standards. While democracy has advanced, the part we ordinary citizens have played in the making and sustaining of the places and communities we live in has diminished. Never has so much been decided for so many by so few.

We stand now, at an important juncture in our history. Up until this time, anyone who dared to question the adequacy of the market economy was immediately howled down as a socialist or communist. That is understandable enough. During the whole period of the Cold War, the sheer repulsiveness of totalitarianism blinded us to the possibility that our own politico-economic system might have its own shortcomings. With the collapse of the Berlin Wall, free-market capitalism emerged as the triumphant victor and Francis Fukuyama triumphantly announced 'The End of History'.

But it was not the end of history and the much vaunted freedoms we supposed to be ours have turned out to be not ‘free’ at all. Like Esau, we have sold our birthright for a mess of pottage. Now is the time to take St Paul seriously. Alternatives must be examined. For all its shortcomings, this book will aid us in that task.

DEATHS OF DESPAIR AND THE FUTURE OF CAPITALISM¹

By Anne Case and Angus Deaton, Princeton University Press, 2020, 312pp. Hardcover

'Knowledge is of two kinds', said Dr Johnson. 'We know a subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information upon it'. This book under review supplies that second kind of knowledge. It assembles and dissects a vast body of detailed statistics on the mental, physical, economic, and political health of the USA. For that reason, it is not the sort of book for light bedtime reading. Nonetheless, it is written in simple layperson's language and most of the data are presented in easy-to-comprehend line graphs.

The book is written by two heavyweight economists, both emeritus professors at Princeton. But this is not predominantly a book about economics. It is, to state the matter as concisely as possible, a book about the American soul—singular and aggregate. And the American soul is ill.

As the title suggests, the main focus is upon those deaths attributable to either suicide, drug overdose or alcohol abuse—deaths of despair. There have been many other books dealing with the pathologies of modern America, and some have been reviewed in past issues of *News Weekly*. The most famous of these earlier books, perhaps, was Charles Murray's *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010* (pub. 2013). Other titles spring to mind—for instance Joel Kotkin's *The New Class Conflict* (2016). This present book shares with many of these earlier books the common theme of widening class divisions in America—the haves and the have nots. But, strange as it may seem, it took two economists, not social scientists, to dig beneath the surface data and look at psychological manifestations of this great economic divide. Their decision to focus on despair was, I think, a brilliant stroke. After all, it was Aristotle—almost at the very beginning of Western civilisation—who correctly surmised that the proper end of a human life was happiness. Everything else is secondary. And

¹ First published in *News Weekly*, Oct 31, 2020

happiness cannot be directly equated with wealth or even with health. It is something far more difficult to pin down and measure.

Why does any of this matter to us here in Australia?' you may ask. Well, as recent events show, when America itches, we tend to scratch with her. If you want any proof, think of the recent Black Lives Matter protests—they were immediately taken up here. The truth is that for much of the Western world, America is the bellwether. Wherever she goes, we tend to follow, sometimes with a bit of a time lag. And when the bellwether heads in the general direction of the abattoir, then we ought to at least reflect upon our own situation. There is too, a further consideration. This book was written before the appearance of the Wuhan virus. The prodigious economic damage caused by the disease can only further exacerbate the pathologies noted by Case and Deaton, not just in America, but throughout most of the world. For, as always, it will be those at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum who are hardest hit. 'For every folly of their princes', said Horace, 'the Greeks feel the lash'. It is an old, old story.

The book can be roughly divided into two parts. The first nine chapters deal with despair—its manifestations and causes and its unequal division between the haves and the have nots. The rest of the book, a further seven chapters, deals with the relationship between these social pathologies and the economic background within which they manifest themselves. It ends by asking the question: 'Why is capitalism failing so many?'

When the authors look closely at the data on suicides, drug use and alcoholism they find that it is, overwhelmingly, a feature of the less well educated. Their data shows an enormous divergence between those who have a four-year college degree and those that do not. As they point out, 'the four-year college degree is increasingly dividing America'. Deaths attributable to suicide, drugs and alcoholism have now increased to such an extent that they have effectively negated the long term trend of constantly falling death rates in America. Keep in mind that the figure for life expectancy at birth is constantly touted as one of the greatest achievements of free-market capitalism since the beginning of the 20th C.

There are many surprising findings in this book. One is the above-mentioned fact that the bulk of the epidemic of deaths is to be found

in non-Hispanic white Americans without higher education. In some sense, what this group is now experiencing bears similarities to the plight of African Americans in the 1970s and 1980s. And this same 'at risk' group is the one that exhibits most of the features that contribute to a life bereft of meaning and purpose. Here, it is worth quoting directly from the book:

For Americans without a bachelor's degree, marriage rates are in decline, though cohabitation and the fraction of children born out of wedlock continue to rise. Many middle-aged men do not know their own children. They have parted from the woman with whom they once cohabited, and the children of that relationship are now living with a man who is not their father. The comfort that used to come from organised religion, especially from the traditional churches, is now absent from many lives. People have less attachment to work; many are out of the labour force altogether, and fewer have a long term commitment to an employer who, in turn, was once committed to them, a relationship that, for many, conferred status and was one of the foundations of a meaningful life.

There are many other important findings in this book, far too many to accommodate in a short review. However, I might highlight just a few. The authors are particularly critical of the behaviour of large drug companies in America and of those doctors who are all too ready to prescribe dangerous opioid drugs as a sort of universal panacea. Some of the drug statistics in this book are truly frightening. Let me adduce a few examples:

'By 2012, enough opioid prescriptions were written for each American adult to have a month's supply ... (There were) 17,087 deaths from prescription opioids in 2016 ... Opioids prescribed by physicians accounted for fully a third of all opioid deaths in 2017, and a quarter of the 70,237 drug overdose deaths that year. This overall number is greater than the peak annual number of deaths from HIV, from guns, or from automobile crashes. It is greater than the total number of Americans who died in Vietnam.'

One other important finding concerns the levels of pain reported by different segments of American society. Pain, of course, is a difficult thing to measure as different people probably have different tolerance levels. Nonetheless, survey after survey in the US has delivered a consistent trend. Not only are middle-aged white Americans of a

lower educational status more prone to 'deaths of despair', they also consistently report higher levels of pain in their lives. The authors offer several possible explanations, but none are entirely convincing.

The second half of the book deals with matters which might come under the general heading of administration and governance. The authors are highly critical of the American healthcare system. They claim it is excessively costly and inefficient to boot. And, of course, as you would expect, the people who are the big losers in this area are those on lower incomes.

Many other matters are examined—the failure of unions to adequately represent the workforce, the loss of a work ethic, falling wages and so on. And so, by the time we get to the final section of the book, the authors are now in a position to ask the question: 'Why is Capitalism Failing so Many'? And the short answer is ... greed. Greedy corporations have accumulated market power that is increasingly used against both workers and consumers. The consolidation of smaller businesses into mega-businesses has also led to less competition. The net result has been a re-distribution of income from workers and consumers to managers and the owners of capital. This is very largely because antitrust laws are not well enforced and the big players can successfully lobby governments to protect their interests.

The authors, by the way, are not closet socialists or anarchists. They believe in capitalism and point to the huge benefits it has provided to the American people over a very long period of time. But now, their investigations have led them to conclude that it is in drastic need of a major and cathartic overhaul. It is failing the people whom it is supposed to benefit. It is no longer a meritocracy where an individual, purely by dint of hard work, zeal and enterprise, can rise to the top of the pile. Rather, it has all the hallmarks of a plutocracy—government by the wealthy at the expense of the poor.

But, despite the overall excellence of this book in telling the story of the demise of the Great American Dream, it falls down in one critical area. When I first received the book, I immediately went to the index and looked at the entries under religion. Only five pages of the book deal directly with the influence of religion on psychological health. There are brief mentions on five or six other pages. That's it. And even when the authors do mention religion, they speak only of its

'comforting' effects. True, they do point to a relationship between loss of belief and things like stable family life, but it is all rather cursory.

The big question that they do not ask is this: Is it possible to redeem or reform capitalism within a purely secular environment? That is the question that has loomed over capitalism in the West for decades now. Up until the 1960s or thereabouts, it was possible to view capitalism against the background of its hideous alternatives in the USSR and Maoist China. Also, up until that time there was still sufficient of the old Christian 'moral capital', to keep the capitalist ship on course, even if religious belief was waning. Capitalism did, for a long period, deliver 'The Great American Dream'.

But now, most of the traditional checks and balances that allowed the system to work have been systematically dismantled under the banner of a pathological individualism which pits human against human. Under the guise of 'freedom of the individual', the robber barons have descended 'like a wolf on the fold'. Against their depredations, the secular society—bereft of any notion of objective moral truth—can erect nothing more than a feeble hedge of subjective moral philosophies which are wholly inadequate to the task. That they are inadequate to the task was brilliantly pointed out by Alasdair MacIntyre nearly four decades ago. And his analysis is even more valid today than it was then.

And so, this reviewer does not share the optimism of Case and Deaton regarding the future of 'The Great American Dream'. Optimism, at the end of the day, is a matter of faith, and there is a world of difference between mere 'faith' and Christian Faith. In a secularist setting, optimism is a very doubtful enterprise. As Arthur Schopenhauer once said, 'a pessimist is an optimist in full possession of the facts'. He has a point! I much prefer the approach taken by a new breed of (mainly) young Christian philosophers and theologians who argue that we must step entirely outside the liberal political order under which the West now operates, and I hope to say more on this new breed of thinkers in future *News Weekly* articles.

One final point. If you are looking for this book in your local bookshop, it will be very hard to spot, even if you have 20/20 vision. The dust cover is matt black and the printing is gloss black. The title can only be read when the book is held directly under a bright light. I

don't know what possessed the publishers to proceed in this manner. It reminds me of something that Hegel said about the philosophy of his contemporary, Fichte (which Hegel thought was unintelligible)—'It is the night when all cows are black'.

Watermark

THE CUNNING OF FREEDOM¹ **Saving the Self in an Age of False Idols**

By Ryszard Legutko, Encounter Books, NY, 2021. 194 pp.

My friend and erstwhile mentor, the late Roger Sworder, once introduced me to his 'rapid' method of assessing the worth of any book claiming to be a philosophical text. Upon receipt of such a book, he would turn immediately to the index and there scan the entries under 'P'. If Plato failed to get a mention, then the book was almost certainly not worth the trouble of a detailed reading. It could be safely discarded. You may regard this as merely the quaint habit of an academic eccentric but no less a philosopher than A.N. Whitehead once famously wrote that 'the safest general characterisation of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato'. Any new philosophy or variant reading of an earlier philosophy must first demonstrate that it has adequately demolished Plato's account. No-one has yet done so.

Roger would have shown great interest in this volume under review because Ryszard Legutko has gone back to the fountainhead of traditional western philosophy (Plato, Aristotle and their later Christian interpreters) to produce an eminently readable account of the true nature of human freedom and the associated notion of what constitutes the self in what he calls 'an age of false idols'. To be sure, many other authors have dealt with the pathologies of modernity—a number have been reviewed in *News Weekly*—but none have gone directly to the heart of the matter so expertly as Legutko.

One of the reasons has to do with the author's own background. Legutko is Polish and, therefore, he knows exactly what it means to be 'unfree'. The People's Republic of Poland, under the iron fist of the Soviets, provided for him a sort of baptism by fire. And yet, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent triumphant entry of liberal democracy in Poland and elsewhere, Legutko quickly realised that the

¹ First published in *News Weekly*, June 12, 2021

new 'freedom', was not really true freedom at all. There was, as he told us in an earlier book, a 'demon in democracy'.

Now, you might easily dismiss his concerns in this matter as being simply those of some academic philosopher far removed from the exigencies of 'real life' politics and policy-making. But, in addition to being a professor of philosophy at Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Legutko was a former Minister of Education and Secretary of State in the Chancellery of President Kaczynski. At present, he is a member of the European Parliament. In short, he is no academic theorist. He has witnessed firsthand the decline of freedom under the new liberalism.

Legutko begins his account by outlining several 'types' of freedom. He starts with negative freedom—a type of freedom that I have previously categorised in a *News Weekly* piece as 'freedom from'. It is, in essence, a freedom from any form of coercion. He then moves quickly to what he calls 'absolute freedom'—one extreme of negative freedom. The word picture he presents is that of Robinson Crusoe on his island—a wretched solitude. He might be absolutely free to do as he pleases, but such freedom comes at a price for it precludes social interaction (such interaction would necessarily put some limits on absolute freedom). Since such a freedom would be an unbearable burden for most people (we are, after all, social animals), perhaps we could opt for 'maximum freedom' as a more realistic option. This is closely allied to the sort of freedom promulgated by J.S. Mill: 'The sole end for which mankind are (sic) warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection.' But, here again, such an outlook concentrates on the individual qua individual. It is akin to Rousseau's conception of the 'Noble Savage' living happily in 'the state of nature'. Well-functioning human societies, though, are a great deal more than a simple aggregation of totally free individuals and the associated notion of natural equality is far from self-evident.

Indeed, I can quote a personal experience here which bolsters Legutko's case. As a young undergraduate, I spent a couple of long vacations picking fruit on an orchard in Shepparton, Victoria. The owner was a returned soldier—a tough, wiry character who, I suspect, may have been a Changi survivor. On hearing that I was a university student, he said: 'I suppose you reckon you are a cut above the rest of us then?' Anxious to show my egalitarian principles I answered with

Gandhi's words; 'All men are born equal'. This reply did not impress him at all. He glared at me and replied: 'they might be born equal but the don't bloody-well die equal'. I was suitably chastened.

I cannot here reproduce all aspects of Legutko's account but one short quotation will serve to highlight the problems associated with the modern, liberal view of freedom. He asks us to consider the notion of a typical 'multicultural' community anywhere in the west:

It is a society of Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, and atheists; heterosexuals, homosexuals, innumerable genders and , nationalities, many ethnic backgrounds; conservatives, liberals, socialists, anarchists, communists ... pornographers, priests, hedonists, and moral ascetics—all of whom respect a common set of rules.

But, of course, such a society cannot form some sort of harmonious whole. 'Two loyalties—one particular to one's own community, the other to an infinitely open system—cannot be reconciled. Each community has a different understanding and evaluation of society's values'. Indeed, each group will have a differing notion of freedom and of human nature.

Legutko then goes on to consider another aspect associated with the modern, liberal view of freedom. This is the notion of 'rights'. People talk of 'natural rights' and 'inalienable rights' but by virtue of what, exactly do we have such rights? There is huge confusion here and Legutko traces the history of such notions in order to clear away some of the debris.

Having pointed out the myriad problems associated with the various notions of negative freedom, Legutko then goes on to consider positive freedom—what I call 'freedom for'. He begins with the traditional notion of freedom—what we could call Platonic freedom, for it has been famously depicted for us in the figure of Socrates. 'The unexamined life', Socrates said, 'is not worth living.' It is to Plato and Socrates, in particular, that we owe the traditional notion of the ascendancy of the soul over the body. This understanding of human nature carried through into Christendom and informed every aspect of human life. The life of the mind was infinitely more important than the life of the body and it was proper for the former to guide the latter. Here is where true freedom resides.

Legutko then proceeds to show us how this traditional notion of 'mind

over matter' eventually gave rise to the university and the concept of a well rounded individual. Here, as you might expect, he quotes John Henry Newman. Included in the account is what I regard as a rather cursory summation of traditional virtue ethics and how this system relates to the concept of the well-rounded person. The well-known and highly acclaimed account by Alasdair MacIntyre, for instance, is not mentioned.

As a consequence of the Reformation and the later Enlightenment, this traditional notion of the well-lived life lost its force and in tracing its demise, Legutko deals at some length with Max Weber's thesis in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

There follows a series of reflections on the traditional notion of freedom (and its modern antithesis) in three different human 'types'—the entrepreneur, the artist and the aristocrat. Again, Legutko shows us just how the traditional notion of freedom enhances the achievements of each 'type' and leads to some greater good.

But it is the last section of his book which really sets Legutko apart from the myriad other commentators on the pathologies of modernity. For here, he shifts the emphasis on freedom to a consideration of various notions of the self. What constitutes the self? Am I merely a bundle of psychological drives or am I something more? Perhaps my 'self' is more akin to a dressmakers dummy, adopting particular modes as required by external circumstances. Or again, I might ask as to what extent I am truly responsible for my own actions. We are all familiar with those excuses one hears from time to time: 'He's normally a good boy, I don't know what got into him'. Or perhaps an accused man addressing the judge and jury: 'It wasn't me that did it—it was my hormones (or drugs, or alcohol, etc).

In a true and well-functioning notion of human freedom, there is always a strong notion of the self as the captain of one's soul (and, of course, of one's body). And it is just here that so much of modernity misunderstands the true notion of freedom. Once a strong notion of the self is lost (as it is in so much of modernity), so too is any really understanding of human freedom. All of this is discussed by Legutko using examples from the various 'isms' of our own time, and referring us back constantly to Plato, Aristotle and the classical tradition.

If, in 2021, you only purchase one book, this is the book to buy.

NO GOD, NO SCIENCE?¹

By Michael Hanby. Wiley, NY, 2013. 456 pp.

Michael Hanby's *No God, no Science?* was first published nearly a decade ago, so this review is somewhat dated. In my opinion, it is the finest defence of traditional Christian philosophy to appear this century. The reader may well ask, in that case, why I had not reviewed it earlier. The answer is simple. It had not come to my attention. Now that it has, I intend to deal with it in two parts, the first being as it were, a general background to the subject matter and the second part digging a little deeper into Hanby's analyses. Of necessity, part of my discussion in this first section falls outside the content of Hanby's book but is nevertheless important to put the whole project in some context.

The reason Hanby's book had not come to my attention is that it was not well publicised, and it was not well publicised for two reasons. First, it is a difficult book to get your head around. With over 450 pages of heavy philosophy (encompassing traditional metaphysics as well as the philosophy of science) and theology, it is not a book for light bedtime reading. Hanby is a polymath and is equally at home when dealing with Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas as he is when dealing with the latest trends in evolutionary biology, particle physics, and the like. Add to that his vast knowledge of the great theological works of the Church Fathers (early and late) and of the many papal encyclicals, etc. Theologians and metaphysicians tend to have their own peculiar vocabulary, as do molecular biologists, particle physicists, and so on. Hanby can 'talk the talk' here, but ordinary readers (like this reviewer) struggle.

The second and most important reason that Hanby's book has received relatively little attention is because many (if not most) modern readers immediately assume an equivalence between the terms 'traditional philosophy' and 'out-of-date'. Because Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas knew nothing of DNA, photons, mitochondria, etc, it is taken for granted that their philosophy and theology must also be outdated,

¹ First published in *News Weekly*, Feb. 18, 2023

simplistic or just plain wrong. But this is to immediately assume that the only true knowledge is modern 'scientific knowledge'. On what grounds? Here, it is useful to quote Hanby:

Scientific premises are ultimately self-justifying, if only *a posteriori*. This is to say then that scientific inquiry does not depend upon any form of rationality 'higher' than itself but is rather the final basis upon which other forms of rationality, including one's initial metaphysical assumptions, may ultimately be justified. Natural science, in brief, is first philosophy which ultimately pulls itself up from the 'empirically given' by its own intellectual bootstraps.

In short there is no 'Archimedean Point' outside nature which can provide some ultimate reference, some ultimate test of truth. The scientist, purely by virtue of being 'in nature' is forced to make some metaphysical assumptions (perhaps unwittingly) before pronouncing on what he or she terms 'factual'. Now, Aristotle and the Schoolmen certainly knew this to be the case, but modernity, in its assumed 'sophistication' (I use the word advisedly) fails to realise it. The intellectual ability of the ancients was no less developed than ours. On the contrary, they explored to the very limits of human reasoning, leading the noted philosopher A.N. Whitehead to reflect that all philosophy consists in 'footnotes to Plato'.

How did such a modern 'forgetting' of this perennial philosophy take place? The answer is complicated, but we may discern two main historical influences. The first and most obvious was the breakdown of medieval philosophy in the late Middle Ages. Here, I can do no more than direct the interested reader to Etienne Gilson's account (*The Unity of Philosophical Experience*). The second was the Reformation. Perceiving their role was to 'clean out the Augean Stables', as it were, the reformers and those educated followers who came after them (think of Francis Bacon), directed their most vehement criticism upon what they saw as 'Romish excesses'. Chief of these so-called 'excesses' was the writing of the Schoolmen. To give the reader some measure of the animosity here, I can do no better than quote from Macaulay's famous *Essay on Lord Bacon*:

In the fifth century Christianity had conquered Paganism, and Paganism had infected Christianity. The Church was now victorious and corrupt. The rites of the Pantheon had passed into her worship, the subtleties of the Academy into her creed. In an evil day, though

with great pomp and solemnity,—we quote the language of Bacon,—was the ill-starred alliance stricken between the old philosophy and the new faith...

...Many causes predisposed the public mind to a change ... But it is chiefly to the great reformation of religion that we owe the great reformation of philosophy. The alliance between the Schools and the Vatican had for ages been so close that those who threw off the dominion of the Vatican could not continue to recognise the authority of the Schools. ... [the Schoolmen] promised what was impracticable; they despised what was practicable; they filled the world with long words and long beards; and they left it as wicked and as ignorant as they found it.

If you wanted to name just two persons who epitomised the great rejection of Tradition and of the Perennial Philosophy (I will explain this term later), the first would be Descartes (1596-1650) and the second, Bacon (1561-1626). Of Descartes and his 'hyperbolic doubt' Hanby says that it was

an act of intellectual self-mutilation so violent that the unbridgeable chasm which it forges between thought and world, matter and meaning, and ultimately, his essence as sheer will and his body as extended malleable 'stuff' will be felt down the centuries.

Bacon was no less dismissive of the past. His aim was to bring heaven down to earth to be enjoyed in this life. This, he called 'the relief of man's estate'. Macaulay gets it exactly right when he says (in praise of Bacon):

The aim of the Baconian philosophy was to provide man with what he requires while he continues to be man. The aim of the Platonic philosophy was to raise us far above vulgar wants. The aim of the Baconian philosophy was to supply our vulgar wants. The former aim was noble; but the latter was attainable.

The new attitude to knowledge is perfectly summed up in the motto of the Royal Society (founded soon after Bacon's death) —*Nullius in Verba*. This, we usually translate as 'Take no one's word for it'. In modern parlance, we might say 'Show me the data'.

And so philosophy, once the proud handmaiden of theology, became little more than an aid to the new science. Indeed, John Locke (1632-1704) expressly tells us of his work as a philosopher that:

It is ambition enough to be employed as an under-labourer in clearing the ground a little and removing some of the rubbish which lies in the way to knowledge.

By knowledge, of course, he means scientific knowledge. The rubbish is metaphysics! This theme has continued down the centuries to our own era when forms of empiricist philosophy still take pride of place.

Now it is true that not all modern philosophy has completely jettisoned its past. The phenomenology of Husserl, for instance, seeks to break away from modern reductionism and considers just what it means to be a 'being in the world'. One could quote many others—Heidegger and Gadamer come to mind. Even amongst the scientists, there are those who can see that a wholly 'material' approach cannot give adequate answers to the meaning and purpose of life. Here, one could single out Michael Polanyi.

Returning now to the subject matter of Hanby's book, he has chosen to use Darwinism as his chief example of a scientific theory purporting (in the minds of many) to offer some sort of 'ultimate explanation'. I hasten to add that Hanby is not a 'new earth creationist' or 'anti-evolution'. Rather, he seeks to take the debate to a much higher level. He is not particularly interested in the details of the theory. Rather, his attitude is somewhat more akin to that of William Blake:

The atoms of Democritus
And the Newton's Particles of Light
Are sands upon the Red Sea shore,
Where Israel's tents do shine so bright.

What Hanby seeks to avoid are the sorts of arguments which form the mainstream of the current anti-Darwin crusaders and to argue from quite different premises. For there is a particular genre of writing which I will designate (without impiety) as 'God versus Science' or, perhaps more narrowly as 'God versus Darwin'. The general topic has generated an enormous volume of books on both sides of the supposed 'debate'. I say 'supposed' for, in fact, it is not really a debate at all but a series of statements from entrenched positions.

On the one hand, we have the Darwinian zealots—E.O. Wilson, Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, and many others. On the other are those who believe they have found chinks in the Darwinian armour

and direct their attacks at these perceived weak points. In fact, most of them have already adopted the same intellectual armoury as their opponents and, precisely because of this, cannot defeat them. Here we might think of the many books written over the last two decades on Intelligent Design, on the ever-changing 'data', concerning human origins, and on certain recent research which sits awkwardly within the Darwinian schema. I hardly need to add that most (but not all) all the contestants on this side of the debate are religious believers. Contrariwise, the Darwinian fundamentalists are mostly atheists.

It is an unedifying debate and totally non-constructive for the reason I have given above—both sides are operating with what they suppose are 'scientific facts'—some sort of ontological bedrock. Very few (if any) of the contestants are prepared to investigate just what the term 'scientific fact' entails, and most seem to believe that scientific inquiry does not depend upon any form of rationality higher than itself. Indeed, as indicated earlier, they believe that all other forms of rational inquiry rest ultimately upon 'science', this being the final basis upon which they all depend.

Hanby shifts the goalposts entirely. He first notes that the supreme error of the scientific reductionists (and many of those opposing them) is to 'reduce being to history, God to a finite object, nature to artifice, and creation to manufacture'. Furthermore, he insists that without an adequate conception of God, real science is doomed. These are bold and somewhat perplexing statements. I will enlarge upon them shortly. Before doing so, however, it would be as well to explain a few terms which crop up on nearly every page of his book.

The first is metaphysics. Put simply, it is the general study of being in all of its aspects. It concerns the first principles of any thing that presents itself to our intellect. The next term is ontology. This is that part of general metaphysics which deals with the fundamental nature of reality. Importantly, these two terms deal with both material things and non-material things such as souls. We might even include numbers in our consideration here since they are a good example of something without a material existence and yet we cannot say they are non-existent (Bertie Russell, that famous atheist of the early 20th Century, thought they 'must be intrinsically something').

Although metaphysics is implicit in the writings of the pre-Socratic

philosophers and of Plato, we normally associate its early exposition with Aristotle. Indeed, one of the books of Aristotle is called *Metaphysics*, but that name was given to it much later in history.

Aristotle's treatment of metaphysics was taken up by the medieval schoolmen, most notably St. Thomas Aquinas, and greatly expanded to serve as a useful aid to theology. It was the great achievement of Aquinas to reconcile the philosophy of the Greeks with the Christian religion. This Christian philosophy flourished in the High Middle Ages and has continued to re-emerge down through the centuries. That is why traditionally minded Christians still refer to it as 'The Perennial Philosophy' (there are, of course, versions of this philosophy in other religious traditions, but it would be wrong to suppose that they are fully interchangeable and somehow sit 'above' religious revelation). It is perennial because it cannot be dismissed or replaced, simply because a consideration of being lies at the heart, the very root, of all our intellectual inquiries.

This is the general philosophy taken up by Hanby and applied to the modern world, specifically to the scientific reductionism of our own time. With this short (and admittedly inadequate) background, we might now proceed to some of Hanby's conclusions.

When Hanby says that Darwinism 'reduces being to history' he means that the actual being of any organism—its unity and 'interiority'—is subsumed under the processes by which it has arrived before our experience. In other words, its evolutionary history. The organism is simply the sum total of its genes and their transmission through time (although Darwin had no knowledge of genes when he wrote). In short, the organism disappears. This has important consequences in nature conservation, but I cannot elaborate here.

Next, we must consider Hanby's idea of reducing God to a finite object. By this, he seems to mean that the Darwinists, even when they deny the concept of a God, need such a concept as a sort of foil or antagonist against which to operate their theories. They need a negative idea of God. But even well-meaning Christians are guilty of such a reduction. Here, one of the chief culprits is William Paley, according to Hanby. This is a surprising claim, given that most of us regard Paley as a witness for the defence. After all, he was a Christian and argued in favour of a creator God. The problem with Paley is that

he treats God as some sort of omnipotent manufacturer, fashioning the world of time and space so that creation itself consists in little more than a vast series of artefacts. His God is a sort of contriving God. Paley, in fact, sets the scene for Darwin who now merely has to substitute an artificer God with a 'natural' process. Paley, in short, has no concept of the immediacy and 'givenness' of being. Neither does he have any concept of the utter transcendence of God—his total 'otherness'. Here we might reference the great Hindu tradition of contemplating the Divine by deliberate negation—*neti, neti*, not this, not that. God is above all human description. For Christians, of course, the Incarnation and Redemption, present the very opposite pole, and these two poles, held in a sort of *coincidentia oppositorum*, lead us to the utter gratuity of being—the giftedness of creation.

Reinforcing the idea of nature as artefact is modern scientific reductionism. Since the time of the scientific revolution, the way in which we study nature is to break it down into parts, study those parts, then make conclusions based on some sort of re-assembly. Analysis trumps synthesis and the actual organism (I confine myself here to living things) disappears. Its being evaporates. It is merely a sophisticated machine—a conglomeration of parts. There is, admittedly, some dim recognition of this in the more recent writings of the developmental biologists. They can see that the mere positing of DNA codes, etc. does not answer the problem of how the totality of an organism's development can be chemically transmitted. I cannot develop this theme here, but the interested reader should consult Michael Polanyi's *Meaning* (1975) for an elaboration of the problem.

In the perennial philosophy, each organism is not only its own 'project', so to speak, but it also has its own 'end' towards which it strives. In other words, it has a 'sake'. This, we call teleology, and nothing has caused more headaches to Darwinian fundamentalists than teleology. According to the Darwinian scriptures, nature is blind, and everything is down to chance (witness the title of one of Dawkins's books, *The Blind Watchmaker*). And yet such fundamentalists can hardly utter or write a sentence that does not include some aspect of teleology. They cannot, for instance, say that teeth are for chewing, legs for walking or eyes for seeing. It is *streng verboten*. But, of course, they do say these things all the time because it is impossible to give some functional description of anything without recourse to teleology. This led J.B.S. Haldane (a noted scientist) to quip that "Teleology is like

a mistress to a biologist: he cannot live without her but he's unwilling to be seen with her in public.'

Here, it is worth reflecting on the moral implications of maintaining that all living things possess a 'sake'. What this does is to give to such organisms an intrinsic value. Without this, they have value only insofar as we dictate it. In other words, they have only instrumental value — value to us. I can recall, back in the early days of the environmental movement, many learned papers attempting to prove that nature had intrinsic value without recourse to teleology. All these attempts failed. In similar vein, when the supporters of proposed new national parks or wilderness areas put their case to governments nearly all of them were forced, in the end, to justify the protection of such areas by reference to their recreational worth to humans. This often finished up in dollar values—the economic gain to local communities due to increased tourism.

Returning now to Hanby's treatment of modern science, he claims that its purported 'truths' are not truths at all, but rather measures of effectiveness. This is really a consequence of the Humean legacy in philosophy where the traditional notion of efficient causality was thrown out and replaced by mere repetition of instances masquerading as cause. The replacement of truth by effectiveness leads inexorably to the replacement of truth by power or persuasion. Here I can give an example from my own experience as a former biologist.

Some decades ago now, there was a concerted effort by some conservationists to protect the Dingo, a wild dog which was probably introduced to Australia some 4,000-7000 years ago from Asia (anyone who has visited Hong Kong and taken a stroll through any of the 'Country Parks' there, will have seen the animal. To the eye, at least, it is identical to our Australian Dingo). Dingoes and wild dogs (hybridised with domestic dogs) are serious predators of sheep and have been controlled since the time of European settlement. Some conservationists, anxious to preserve (not conserve) the animal, carried out studies which produced 'facts' to show that the Dingo was a distinct sub-species, *Canis lupus dingo*. Since the animal now had its own sub-specific status, they argued that it was 'endangered' and must be protected. This is despite the fact that the animal interbreeds freely with domestic dogs- the traditional means of allocating specific

differences since Noah took 'two of each kind' on his Ark. Fortunately, this attempt to garner public support by publishing supposed 'scientific facts' was not widely adopted, and I note that a recent paper in the Australian Zoologist, returns the animal to its correct Aristotelian identity—*Canis familiaris dingo*!

A true science, Hanby argues, is only possible if it has access to the resources offered by metaphysics and theology. Otherwise there is simply effectiveness masquerading as truth. He is not suggesting that theology should dictate terms to the scientists. Rather the search for truth in science must begin with our awareness of being as act and not mere process. Science has a legitimate field of enquiry quite separate from theology, but its ultimate reference point will always come from some point above its own field of activity. Otherwise, there can be no such thing as real 'scientific truths'.

All of the above finally brings Hanby to the very crux of his whole argument—the overriding importance of the doctrine of *Creatio ex nihilo*. There is a good deal of very heavy theology here and I confess that I have trouble following the line of Hanby's argument. It seems, however, that a full consideration of what is entailed in this doctrine, will give due weight to the utter transcendence of God whilst, at the same time emphasising the giftedness of creation. What we have, finally, in the Christian Revelation is a full exposition of something seen by the early Greeks 'through a glass darkly'. When Plato, in the *Timaeus* asks himself the question 'why did the creator make the world?' his short answer is 'because he was good'. And yet, the early Greeks could never really resolve the problem of a perfect God and (to them) an imperfect world. The Christian Revelation gave the answer in the form of the Incarnation and Redemption, the ultimate expression of Plato's 'Good'.

I will round off this review with a short excerpt from the fragments of Parmenides (circa 500 BC)—perhaps the earliest philosopher of Being in the Western canon. The translation is from the late Roger Sworder, a mentor and friend of this reviewer:

You must say and think that what is is. For being is and nothing is not. These things I bid you ponder. For this is the first road which I forbid you to take, and next there is the one which mortals wander down, knowing nothing, two headed. For an impossibility directs the

wandering mind in their hearts. They are carried along deaf, blind and aghast, uncritical crowds by whom being and not being are thought to be the same and not the same. And of them all the path is backward turning. (Fragment 6).

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MORAL MATTERS A PHILOSOPHY OF HOMECOMING¹

By Mark Dooley, Bloomsbury Academic, London and New York, 2015, 209pp.

Were it within my power, I should like to impose a moratorium on the publication of all new books dealing with post-mortem analyses of liberalism. It's not that such books are inaccurate, or misleading, or poorly written. Quite the reverse. The problem is that the subject has been done to death over the last couple of decades. 'Everyone complains about the weather', said Mark Twain, 'but nobody does anything about it'. This is exactly the situation with the failed narrative of modern liberalism. Here, I must own up to my own complicity in this surfeit of writings on the failures of liberalism.

Mark Dooley's *Moral Matters* is yet another analysis of liberalism but, in its defence, I have to say that his approach and his subject matter differs significantly from most other post-mortems of liberalism.

In the first place, Dooley zeroes in on the digital world and shows exactly how a preoccupation with cyberspace has disconnected us from the real world and real human society. Many of us, he says, are not citizens of the real world, but citizens of 'Cyberia'- the immaterial world of the internet. We are, in fact, not citizens at all, but netizens.

Secondly, by focus sing his concerns on the notion of homecoming, Dooley refers to the traditional notion of the human person as an essentially social animal. This idea dates back to Aristotle's definition of man as *zoon politicon* – a polis-dwelling animal. Our true home on this earth is within a community of other humans and the modern, liberal idea of hyper-individuality goes directly against the natural impulse of community life and all that such life entails.

An important part of Dooley's philosophy of 'homecoming' concerns

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itself with the family unit and the family home as the proper form of human nurture, especially the nurture of the young. It is within the family environment that the prerequisites for proper human flourishing are introduced and maintained. Dooley also expands the notion of 'home' to include such things as patriotism and pride in one's country, as well as the notion of the natural world as a 'home' requiring good management. Here, he refers back to the ancient Greek word *oikos* or 'good housekeeping' [from whence comes our modern word 'ecology'].

In fact, if one reflects upon what Dooley has to say, it is evident that he stresses the need for our connection to the Real, and here, it is worth harking back to a book I reviewed in *News Weekly* about twelve months ago titled *Freedom from Reality*. The central issue with modern liberalism is its entirely false view of human freedom. It is essentially a freedom from and not a freedom for. That is to say, its emphasis is upon 'freeing' the individual from each and every commitment to proper community life. Such commitments are perceived as restraints when, in truth, they are exactly the opposite – they free us to attain our full potential both as individuals and as members of a shared society.

In pursuing his various themes, Dooley relies heavily upon the writings of the late Roger Scruton. However, some other of his influences are less obvious. One such influence is the philosophy of G.W. F Hegel (1770-1831) whose writings he clearly holds in high regard. Indeed, he pits many of the ideas of Hegel against a whole raft of postmodern philosophies, but especially against the ideas of Jacques Derrida.

The book is well written and well presented, free of jargon and easily understood by any non-specialist reader. Whilst Dooley does give some generalised accounts of how we might begin to recover from that Slough of Despond which is modern liberalism, the book is more of a diagnosis of an illness rather than a prescription for a cure. Here and there, we get hints of just how we might go about that process of escaping from Cyberia (a clever neologism which immediately reminds us of Siberia and the Gulag camps) and reconnecting with the real world. For instance, the tending of a garden will serve to re-connect us to the world of nature around us and give us some sense of that traditional notion of humans as custodians or 'viceroys' of nature. However, what we really need in this age of post-liberalism is a detailed practical guide as to how we might escape Cyberia— one which

gets down to specific and achievable recommendations.

Such guides, alas, are in short supply. Rod Dreher's *The Benedict Option* is certainly a step in the right direction. We need to cease bemoaning the current state of affairs and begin that difficult process of recovery. And so, lest I am myself accused of mere negative criticism, I will finish this review by offering one small avenue of hope, based upon my own experiences over the last few decades. Now, of course, the usual catch cry of anti-liberal writers (including Dooley) is 'return to religion' but, in the current atmosphere, such a prospect is not likely. We may have to start further back—a return to the possibility of religion.

I want to begin by quoting from Russell Kirk's *Eliot and His Age: T. S. Eliot's Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century*. In discussing Eliot's spiritual journey, Kirk says inter alia: "To have lost one's certitude in an order spiritual and an order temporal, during the years of school and college and university, had been a commonplace experience ever since the beginning of the eighteenth century. To lament this loss and to search for curious substitutes had been a widespread game among men of intellect during the latter half of the nineteenth century". Now, I feel sure that many *News Weekly* readers will connect with Kirk's observation here. It was certainly my own experience as a young undergraduate.

In Bendigo, where I live, a group of former students and staff of a specific course at La Trobe University (Studies in Western Traditions—now defunct) has re-instituted *The Bendigo Philosophical Society*, first formed in 1897 by the poet William Gay. Now, whilst the general aim of the Society is merely to foster an interest in the philosophical, literary and artistic achievements of the past, our monthly meetings attract quite a number of young people whose quest is just that as mentioned by Russell Kirk in the quote above.

The Society has no particular 'agenda' and no religious or political affiliations. It is merely a group of people, both old and young, holding widely disparate views on political, religious and other matters. Nonetheless, all of us have a certain respect for the past and a desire to better understand the human condition. Few of its members, I suspect, hold modern liberalism in high regard—quite the contrary. If nothing else, our monthly meetings and presentation of papers by

members has exposed younger members in particular, to the achievements of the past, and to the weaknesses of modern relativism and hyper-individualism.

I am certainly not suggesting that such a specific model should be instituted elsewhere. Our particular circumstances, after all, were unique. However, there are many other similar approaches that would have the same endpoint of exposing younger minds to the achievements of the past and to the notion of true freedom – the freedom to fully attain one's human potential. A book club might achieve such a goal just as well as a philosophy group. So too, might an art appreciation group. For those with no interest in such matters, even a gardening group would serve a useful purpose of giving alienated individuals some sense of belonging and some opportunity to re-connect to the world of nature.

In essence then, what we must aim for is not a return to some imagined pre-liberal order but rather, merely to create an environment where 'the big questions' are allowed to expose themselves. That is the very first step.

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