

# Interpretation

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# Interpretation

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

Department of Political Science

Baylor University

1 Bear Place, 97276

Waco, TX 76798

*email* [interpretation@baylor.edu](mailto:interpretation@baylor.edu)

## Leo Strauss on the Rejection of Natural Right by the Social Sciences: A Lecture for a Course on Natural Right Delivered at the University of Chicago\*

EMMANUEL PATARD

INSTITUT CATHOLIQUE DE PARIS

*emmanuelpatard@gmail.com*

### EDITORIAL PREFACE

The manuscript by Leo Strauss edited below is preceded in the file (Leo Strauss Papers, box 7, folder 1), which contains material about natural right for his courses at the University of Chicago, by a scrap of paper bearing the title (in Strauss's handwriting): "Natural Right 1951 Elaborated." This mention suggests that it was meant for a course on natural right announced at the University of Chicago for the Autumn quarter, 1951.<sup>1</sup> However, the following passage from a letter by Strauss to Joseph Cropsey on March 2, 1950 (LSP B4 F5), indicates that it is likely to be somewhat older:

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\* I thank Nathan Tarcov and Jenny Strauss-Clay for their permission to publish my edition of this manuscript, as well as Svetozar Minkov and Timothy Burns for their comments.

<sup>1</sup> See George Anastaplo, "Leo Strauss at the University of Chicago," appendix A, "Preliminary Roster of the Strauss Courses Scheduled by the Political Science Department, The University of Chicago, 1949–1967," in *Leo Strauss, the Straussians, and the American Regime*, ed. Kenneth L. Deutsch and John A. Murley (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 14. Leo Strauss gave several courses on the general topic "natural right" at the University of Chicago: Autumn quarter, 1949 (whose specific content is not known); Winter quarter, 1954 (mainly on David Easton, historicism, Burke, Paine, Marx, Nietzsche; very brief references to Ruth Benedict appear on pp. 28 and 66, and to Dewey pp. 100, 107, 196, 201, 233, 270, in Jerry Weinberger's digital edition, Chicago, Estate of Leo Strauss, 2022); Spring quarter, 1959 (mostly on Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*); Autumn quarter, 1962 (mainly on Ernest Nagel, Nietzsche, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Thomas Aquinas) (see <https://leostrausscenter.uchicago.edu>).

As for your idea to compare Aristotle's ethics with a modern teaching, it might be helpful to consider Dewey's *Human Nature and Conduct* which (very unwittingly) comes surprisingly close to Aristotle and is at the same time completely blind to the problems, awareness of which would have led Dewey to embrace Aristotle. I gave here two lectures on Dewey in which I explained this more fully.

Leo Strauss discusses here Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture* and, mainly, John Dewey's *Human Nature and Conduct*.<sup>2</sup> The problem raised by Benedict's book, argues Strauss, can be stated as follows: How can we know what is naturally right if each culture has a standard of its own? There must be room for objective judgment, in order that anthropology, as a form of objective thought and a part of Western culture, can study other cultures without bias, and even judge them. This would presuppose, according to Benedict, the existence of a "rational social order" fostering intelligent action and progress; the standard of judgment should be human happiness. Why then does she reject natural right? Since her position is grounded on Dewey's, his position is subsequently addressed by Strauss.

Strauss presents as Dewey's starting point the success of the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, which created a dualism by destroying teleological natural science while maintaining teleological moral science. Endless motion, infinite desire, rejection of final end and hence of natural law, are the basis of Dewey's doctrine. A fixed end would lead to the depreciation of the variety of life, and therefore of happiness. Dewey tried to synthesize Epicurean insistence on present satisfaction with utilitarian passion for reform and philanthropy. All knowledge is social and historically conditioned; therefore no norm can be universally valid. Dewey himself, however, makes universal statements about all moral situations. There is one ultimate purpose for human action, which "is to set free and to develop the capacities of human individuals without respect to race, sex, class or economic status."

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<sup>2</sup> Leo Strauss had already dealt at length with Dewey, on the basis of *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, in a course at the New School for Social Research, "Philosophy and Sociology of Knowledge," for the summer session 1941. He published only a short review of *German Philosophy and Politics* (see below, note 79). Relevant discussions of anthropology and social science in general appear in Leo Strauss, "The Frame of Reference in the Social Sciences" (ca. 1946) and "Note on 'Some Critical Remarks on Man's Science of Man'" (dated Dec. 24–26, 1945), in "Leo Strauss on Social and Natural Science," ed. Svetozar Minkov and José A. Colen, *Review of Politics* 76, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 622–27 and 627–33; "Social Science and Humanism," in *The State of the Social Sciences*, ed. Leonard D. White (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 415–25; "Relativism," in *Relativism and the Study of Man*, ed. Helmut Schoeck and James W. Wiggins (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1961), 135–57 (at 148–49 there appears the same quotation from Dewey's *Human Nature and Conduct*, 2nd ed. [New York: Modern Library, 1930], vii, as below, p. 3 recto).

Strauss concludes his examination by discussing Dewey's "historicism." According to Dewey, all human thought is historically conditioned; habits and customs fix its boundaries. No moral teaching could then claim absolute validity. However, "his historicism is mitigated by the belief in progress," that is, "the belief that modern natural science makes an absolute progress beyond all earlier human attempts at orientation in the world." His answer to the moral problem, as distinguished from that of present-day social science, is therefore meant to be final. The text ends with a laudatory comparison of Dewey with Max Weber.

## LEO STRAUSS

### NATURAL RIGHT<sup>1</sup>

#### BENEDICT, *PATTERNS OF CULTURE*<sup>2</sup>

2 p. 2 beg.<sup>3</sup> all thought depends on *custom*, hence: there cannot be knowledge of what is *naturally* right—what people *call* natural right, are simply the basic prejudices of *their* culture. Since all thought depends on custom, there is no reason to consider *our* thought or *our* culture superior to primitive thought or primitive culture → tolerance.

<sup>1</sup> Leo Strauss Papers, box 7 folder 1, the University of Chicago Library, Special Collections. Series of five numbered sheets written with a pen, preceded by a scrap of paper indicating: "Natural Right 1951 Elaborated." The pagination of the original document has been inserted within brackets throughout the text printed here. Underlined portions of text in the manuscript have been italicized. Abbreviations have been developed without comment (the abbreviation "p." stands for "paragraph"). Crossed-out portions of text on the manuscript appear between chevrons in the footnotes. All the footnotes are the work of the editor.

<sup>2</sup> Leo Strauss quotes from the second edition (New York: New American Library, 1946). The name "Benedict" is consistently written with a *k* instead of *c* throughout the manuscript.

<sup>3</sup> "No man ever looks at the world with pristine eyes. He sees it edited by a definite set of customs and institutions and ways of thinking. Even in his philosophical probings he cannot go behind these stereotypes; his very concepts of the true and the false will still have reference to his particular traditional customs."

33 p. 2.<sup>4</sup> Cultural relativism: each culture has standards of its own: it cannot be *judged* in terms of *our* culture<sup>5</sup> 206 p. 1<sup>6</sup> —Yet: anthropology is a part of *our* culture, and anthropology is capable of viewing cultures *objectively*, whereas the other cultures, *lacking* anthropology, *absolutize* themselves. Objectively: without bias in favor of our own culture. We can understand other cultures better than they understand themselves: 114 p. 3.<sup>7</sup>

Difficulty: *all* thought depends on custom—but *some* thought is *objective*—the dependence of thought on custom would seem to be less important than that X (which cannot be custom) which enables thought to become objective. In other words, there is a certain discrepancy between the equal respect for *all* cultures (tolerance) and the rejection of subjectivity (intolerance). —But we are able, not merely to describe and analyze the various cultures

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<sup>4</sup> “The truth of the matter is rather that the possible human institutions and motives are legion, on every plane of cultural simplicity or complexity, and that wisdom consists in a greatly increased tolerance toward their divergencies. No man can thoroughly participate in any culture unless he has brought up and has lived according to its forms, but he can grant to other cultures the same significance to their participants which he recognizes in his own.”

<sup>5</sup> “Cultural relativism . . . 206 p. 1” is written at the bottom of the first page, with a mark indicating that it should be inserted here in the text.

<sup>6</sup> “The three cultures of Zuñi, of Dobu, and of the Kwakiutl are not merely heterogeneous assortments of acts and beliefs. They have each certain goals toward which their behaviour is directed and which their institutions further. They differ from one another not only because one trait is present here and absent there, and because another trait is found in two regions in two different forms. They differ still more because they are oriented as wholes in different directions. They are travelling along different roads in pursuit of different ends, and these ends and these means in one society cannot be judged in terms of those of another society, because essentially they are incommensurable.”

<sup>7</sup> “Sex is not well understood in the pueblos. Little realistic attention, in Zuñi at least, is directed toward it, and there is a tendency, familiar enough to us in our own cultural background, to explain sex symbolism by some inappropriate substitution.”

in an objective fashion, we can even objectively *judge* of them: 29 p. 2–3;<sup>8</sup> 31.<sup>9</sup>

This presupposes: that there is such a thing as “*a rational social order*”—i.e. an order in which revisions of previous assumptions are made, not blindly and violently, but intelligently and peacefully: 9 p. 3.<sup>10</sup> This amounts to a *condemnation* of the cultures characterized by “rigidity,” i.e. of practically all cultures but our

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<sup>8</sup> “War is, we have been forced to admit even in the face of its huge place in our own civilization, an asocial trait. In the chaos following the World War all the wartime arguments that expounded its fostering of courage, of altruism, of spiritual values, gave out a false and offensive ring. War in our own civilization is as good an illustration as one can take of the destructive lengths to which the development of a culturally selected trait may go. If we justify war, it is because all people always justify the traits of which they find themselves possessed, not because war will bear an objective examination of its merits.

“Warfare is not an isolated case. From every part of the world and from all levels of cultural complexity it is possible to illustrate the overweening and finally often the asocial elaboration of a cultural trait.”

<sup>9</sup> “There are even quainter notions, from our standpoint, associated with warfare in different parts of the world. For our purposes it is sufficient to notice those regions where organized resort to mutual slaughter never occurs between social groups. Only our familiarity with war makes it intelligible that a state of warfare should alternate with a state of peace in one tribe’s dealings with another. The idea is quite common over the world, of course. But on the one hand it is impossible for certain peoples to conceive the possibility of a state of peace, which in their notion would be equivalent to admitting enemy tribes to the category of human beings, which by definition they are not even though the excluded tribe may be of their own race and culture.

“On the other hand, it may be just as impossible for a people to conceive of the possibility of a state of war. Rasmussen tells of the blankness with which the Eskimo met his exposition of our custom. Eskimos very well understand the act of killing a man. If he is in your way, you cast up your estimate of your own strength, and if you are ready to take it upon yourself, you kill him. If you are strong, there is no social retribution. But the idea of an Eskimo village going out against another Eskimo village in battle array or a tribe against a tribe, or even of another village being fair game in ambush warfare, is alien to them. All killing comes under one head, and is not separated, as ours is, into categories, the one meritorious, the other a capital offense.”

<sup>10</sup> “That is true, and the fact that the varieties of culture can best be discussed as they exist in space gives colour to our nonchalance. But it is only limitation of historical material that prevents examples from being drawn rather from the succession of cultures in time. That succession we cannot escape if we would, and when we look back even a generation we realize the extent to which revision has taken place sometimes in our most intimate behaviour. So far these revisions have been blind, the result of circumstances we can chart only in retrospect. Except for our unwillingness to face cultural change in intimate matters until it is forced upon us, it would not be impossible to take a more intelligent and directive attitude. The resistance is in large measure a result of our understanding of cultural conventions, and especially an exaltation of those that happen to belong to our nation and decade. A very little acquaintance with other conventions, and a knowledge of how various these may be, would do much to promote a rational social order.”

own. A clear contradiction—how can it be resolved? How can we reconcile the idea of “rational social order” with “cultural relativism”? How can we reconcile the idea of intelligent social action with the rejection of natural right?

a) different *natural* conditions → different *rational* orders—e.g.

numerical relation of males, females  monogamy  
polygamy . . .

Rejected by anthropology: societies living in the same type of natural environment, have entirely different social orders . . .

b) there is a large variety of desirable human traits—e.g. simplicity and sophistication; apollonian and dionysiac. . .—but it is impossible to adopt them together: some are incompatible with the others—one has to make a *choice*—but this choice is always made *in advance* (primacy of habits): difference of equally legitimate selection of desirable traits → different rational orders, all of them important. 205 p. 2<sup>11</sup> 227 p. 2 – 230 p. 1.<sup>12</sup>

But: the various social orders are not rational without a specific effort. They are based on a certain selection, on a certain preference which is as good as any other—yet: they *deny* this relation—they declare the selected traits to be *all-important* and the only traits *deserving* preference. Now, these traits may very well be dangerous, if over-emphasized, and they may be changeable and modifiable without any harm to the society in question → need for

<sup>11</sup> “The segment of human behaviour which the Northwest Coast has marked out to institutionalize in its culture is one which is recognized as abnormal in our civilization, and yet it is sufficiently close to the attitudes of our own culture to be intelligible to us and we have a definite vocabulary with which we may discuss it. The megalomaniac paranoid trend is a definite danger in our society. It faces us with a choice of possible attitudes. One is to brand it as abnormal and reprehensible, and it is the attitude we have chosen in our civilization. The other extreme is to make it the essential attribute of ideal man, and this is the solution in the culture of the Northwest Coast.”

<sup>12</sup> “The problem of social value is intimately involved in the fact of the different patternings of culture. . . . The situation had to reach a breaking-point before relief was possible.”



*objective appraisal*: 230 p. 2 vers. fin.;<sup>13</sup> 231.<sup>14</sup> By<sup>15</sup> what *standard* should this judgment be guided? Human happiness, of course. → minimum of suppression:

- a) greatest possible toleration of variety—cf. 242 p. 316
- b) change of institutions if conditions have changed.

*I.e.: a rational social order is an order that is tolerant and flexible.*

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<sup>13</sup> “The possibility of orderly progress is shut off because the generation in question could not make any appraisal of its overgrown institutions. It could not cast them up in terms of profit and loss because it had lost its power to look at them objectively. The situation had to reach a breaking-point before relief was possible.”

<sup>14</sup> “It is not yet possible to discuss capitalism in the same way, and during wartime, warfare and the problem of international relations are similarly tabu. Yet the dominant traits of our civilization need special scrutiny. We need to realize that they are compulsive, not in proportion as they are basic and essential in human behaviour, but rather in the degree to which they are local and overgrown in our own culture. The one way of life which the Dobuan regards as basic in human nature is one that is fundamentally treacherous and safeguarded with morbid fears. The Kwakiutl similarly cannot see life except as a series of rivalry situations, wherein success is measured by the humiliation of one’s fellows. Their belief is based on the importance of these modes of life in their civilizations. But the importance of an institution in a culture gives no direct indication of its usefulness or its inevitability. The argument is suspect, and any cultural control which we may be able to exercise will depend upon the degree to which we can evaluate objectively the favoured and passionately fostered traits of our Western civilization.”

<sup>15</sup> Manuscript: <On the basis of an ultimately arbitrary preference> By

<sup>16</sup> “The individuals we have so far discussed are not in any sense psychopathic. They illustrate the dilemma of the individual whose congenial drives are not provided for in the institutions of his culture. This dilemma becomes of psychiatric importance when the behaviour in question is regarded as categorically abnormal in a society. Western civilization tends to regard even a mild homosexual as an abnormal.”

Now, this notion of a rational social order is alien to practically all cultures but our own: 251 p. 2;<sup>17</sup> 252 p.2;<sup>18</sup> 253 p. 3;<sup>19</sup> 257.<sup>20</sup>

It is easy to see that to make other cultures rational is tantamount to destroying them: magic taboos etc.: they are incapable of *intelligent* change.

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<sup>17</sup> “No society has yet attempted a self-conscious direction of the process by which its new normalities are created in the next generation. Dewey has pointed out how possible and yet how drastic such social engineering would be. For some traditional arrangements it is obvious that very high prices are paid, reckoned in terms of human suffering and frustration. If these arrangements presented themselves to us merely as arrangements and not as categorical imperatives, our reasonable course would be to adapt them by whatever means to rationally selected goals. What we do instead is to ridicule our Don Quixotes, the ludicrous embodiments of an outmoded tradition, and continue to regard our own as final and prescribed in the nature of things.”

<sup>18</sup> “In the second place, an increased tolerance in society toward its less usual types must keep pace with the self-education of the patient. The possibilities in this direction are endless. Tradition is as neurotic as any patient; its overgrown fear of deviation from its fortuitous standards conforms to all the usual definitions of the psychopathic. This fear does not depend upon observations of the limits within which conformity is necessary to the social good. Much more deviation is allowed to the individual in some cultures than in others, and those in which much is allowed cannot be shown to suffer from their peculiarity. It is probable that social orders of the future will carry this tolerance and encouragement of individual difference much further than any cultures of which we have experience.”

<sup>19</sup> “To a certain extent, therefore, civilization in setting higher and possibly more worth-while goals may increase the numbers of its abnormals. But the point may very easily be overemphasized, for very small changes in social attitudes may far outweigh this correlation. On the whole, since the social possibilities of tolerance and recognition of individual difference are so little explored in practice, pessimism seems premature.”

<sup>20</sup> “In the fields of both sociology and psychology the implications are fundamental, and modern thought about contacts of peoples and about our changing standards is greatly in need of sane and scientific direction. The sophisticated modern temper has made of social relativity, even in the small area which it has recognized, a doctrine of despair. It has pointed out its incongruity with the orthodox dreams of permanence and ideality and with the individual’s illusions of autonomy. It has argued that if human experience must give up these, the nutshell of existence is empty. But to interpret our dilemma in these terms is to be guilty of an anachronism. It is only the inevitable cultural lag that makes us insist that the old must be discovered again in the new, that there is no solution but to find the old certainty and stability in the new plasticity. The recognition of cultural relativity carries with it its own values, which need not be those of the absolutist philosophies. It challenges customary opinions and causes those who have been bred to them acute discomfort. It rouses pessimism because it throws old formulae into confusion, not because it contains anything intrinsically difficult. As soon as the new opinion is embraced as customary belief, it will be another trusted bulwark of the good life. We shall arrive then at a more realistic social faith, accepting as grounds of hope and as new bases for tolerance the coexisting and equally valid patterns of life which mankind has created for itself from the raw materials of existence.”

→ superiority of modern Western civilization → natural right of every human being to the pursuit of happiness = natural right of every human being to pursue happiness *as he conceives of happiness*—anarchic consequences, need for society → *minimum* of repression: these social orders are unjust which deny that right to any human being without good reason: which reasons are good and which are bad, to be determined by social science.

The practical demands of Benedict are defensible only on the basis of natural right—natural right of a *particular kind*—of a kind compatible with the greatest possible diversity of cultures and *within* cultures. No single fact adduced by her contradicts that natural right. On the contrary, her whole idea of anthropology as an *objective* study of cultures which *objectively* supports improvements of the various cultures, is *based* on this notion of natural right.

1 verso

*Objective* anthropology: a kind of thought by virtue of which man liberates himself from the custom in which he is brought up → man can rise<sup>21</sup> *above* his culture → he can grasp what is right by nature.

Why then does she reject natural right? Probably, because she assumes that natural right is incompatible with variety and flexibility—but is she not *inflexible* as regards the desirable character of variety and flexibility?

There exists an alternative interpretation of anthropology. One can say: the notion of a rational social order = tolerant and flexible order is itself not more than a Western prejudice—not more than *our* irrational preference not intrinsically superior to those of headhunters etc. But if this is so, why should we not adopt other preferences, Nazi preferences e.g.? There would seem to be even a *necessity* for doing this: once we realize that our basic principles are based on blind choice, we cannot really *believe* in them any more—we cannot wholeheartedly *act* upon them—we cannot *live*: reason *weakens* our adherence, our loyalty—the more we cultivate reason, and hence skepticism, the less are we able to be members of *any* culture → obscurantism.—We cannot eat the cake and have

<sup>21</sup> Manuscript: raise

it: we cannot preach cultural relativism and expect intelligent social action.

But let us not be rash. After all, Benedict's position is only a minor outwork of a formidable fortress. Her views are a combination of those of John Dewey on the one hand, and those of Dilthey and Spengler on the other. Dilthey-Spengler: "historicity"—all human thought is historical—in particular, modern natural science is only one possible interpretation of the physical universe—not intrinsically superior to, say, any magic interpretation—in particular, tolerance and similar notions are elements of Western civilization and cannot be foisted upon alien cultures.<sup>22</sup> No progress.<sup>23</sup> Dewey on the other hand believes in the essential superiority of modern natural science to any other interpretation of nature.

We should first turn to Dewey and see what we can learn from him about natural right.

Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*.<sup>24</sup>

General characterization of his position: Insistence on "empirical" and yet a peculiar "abstractness." Abundance of metaphors and paucity of examples. How? Empirical = method of natural science: this method must be applied to the study of human affairs → human life is to be understood as a natural process in the way in which natural science views natural processes. Now, there is no a priori certainty that human life viewed in this way shows the same features as human life as viewed in the daily business of life. A *truly* empirical procedure would start from a conscientious and exact analysis of human life or action as we actually experience it while living and acting, and see *then* to what extent the methods and results of natural science can be relevant for action. Dewey's

<sup>22</sup> See Leo Strauss, "The Living Issues of German Postwar Philosophy" (1940), in *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, by Heinrich Meier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 118ff.; "Historicism" (1941), in *Toward "Natural Right and History": Lectures and Essays by Leo Strauss, 1937–1946*, ed. J. A. Colen and S. Minkov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 76. Strauss dealt at length with Dilthey in "History of Ideas: Its Nature and Function" (1949), a summer course at the University of Chicago.

<sup>23</sup> "No progress" is written below the line; a stroke directs to this place in the text.

<sup>24</sup> Strauss quotes from the second edition of this book (New York: Modern Library, 1930).

objection: dualism. But: a *certain* dualism is inevitable, for: man is, as Dewey admits, the *thinking* animal, distinguished from all other living beings in this practically *decisive* respect; a premature concern with unity may lead us to minimize or to misinterpret this decisive difference. And besides: we do not have a divine revelation to the effect that dualism is wicked or absurd.

Abstractness > dogmatism = acceptance of unexamined premises > dependence on a *tradition*: Dewey does not start with the *elementary* questions. Characterization of that tradition: modern natural science<sup>25</sup>—mechanistic—deterministic → dualism of necessity and freedom → attempt to overcome that dualism by “creative evolution”: indeterminacy, emergence of the unpredictable . . .

2 recto

At any rate: the scientific revolution of the 17th century is the model for Dewey’s moral philosophy—his starting point is the manifest *success* of that revolution and the manifest *failure* of moral philosophy—what is more natural than to demand that moral philosophy should be *reconstructed* in the spirit of the 17th century scientific revolution?—What is the meaning of the 17th century revolution? And what consequences should be drawn from its success in regard to moral philosophy?

The<sup>26</sup> basic issue concerns the character of *motion*. The predominant (Aristotelian) view was: all motion is motion *from X to Y*—in particular *from* a certain state *to* a certain state in which motion comes to rest (e.g. from the fertilized egg to the adult animal, but also: fall of heavy bodies which *tend* to the earth, their *natural* place.)

All motion is directed towards an *end*. The case of man is only a specific case of natural beings in *general*: all human motions tend towards *one* end in which they come to rest, that end being happiness. The 17th century scientific revolution destroyed teleological physics including teleological biology: it did *not* destroy the notion that human life and action is directed towards *one* end,

<sup>25</sup> The words “scientific materialism’ Whitehead” are written in pencil above the line, without mark of insertion.

<sup>26</sup> An opening bracket has been added in pencil before the first word of this paragraph (cf. below, note 32).

a *fixed* end. Hence, a peculiar dualism characteristic of modern philosophy: a non-teleological natural science and a teleological moral science. This dualism can be overcome only by the rejection of teleological moral science.

*Connection between “the end” and natural law:* man cannot reach his end but by means of a certain kind of voluntary actions: the end absolutely requires, or determines, these actions: these actions are the content of natural law. Cf. Hooker I 150 p. 2;<sup>27</sup> 177 p. 2;<sup>28</sup> 182 p. 1 and 2.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> “All things that are, have some operation not violent or casual. Neither doth any thing ever begin to exercise the same, without some fore-conceived end for which it worketh. And the end which it worketh for is not obtained, unless the work be also fit to obtain it by. For unto every end every operation will not serve. That which doth assign unto each thing the kind, that which doth moderate the force and power, that which doth appoint the form and measure, of working, the same we term a Law. So that no certain end could ever be attained, unless the actions whereby it is attained were regular; that is to say, made suitable, fit and correspondent unto their end, by some canon, rule or law. Which thing doth first take place in the works even of God himself.” Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (London: Dent, 1907).

<sup>28</sup> “A law therefore generally taken, is a directive rule unto goodness of operation. The rule of divine operations outward, is the definitive appointment of God’s own wisdom set down within himself. The rule of natural agents that work by simple necessity, is the determination of the wisdom of God, known to God himself the principal Director of them, but not them that are directed to execute the same. The rule of natural agents which work after a sort of their own accord, as the beasts do, is the judgment of common sense or fancy concerning the sensible goodness of those objects wherewith they are moved. The rule of ghostly or immaterial natures, as spirits and angels, is their intuitive intellectual judgment concerning the amiable beauty and high goodness of that object, which with unspeakable joy and delight doth set them on work. The rule of voluntary agents on earth is the sentence that Reason giveth concerning the goodness of those things which they are to do. And the sentences which Reason giveth are some more some less general, before it come to define in particular actions what is good.”

<sup>29</sup> “But the nature of Goodness being thus ample, a Law is properly that which Reason in such sort defineth to be good that it must be done. And the Law of Reason or human Nature is that which men by discourse of natural Reason have rightly found out themselves to be all for ever bound unto in their actions.

“Laws of Reason have these marks to be known by. Such as keep them resemble most lively in their voluntary actions that very manner of working which Nature herself doth necessarily observe in the course of the whole world. The works of Nature are all behoveful, beautiful, without superfluity or defect; even so theirs, if they be framed according to that which the Law of Reason teacheth. Secondly, those Laws are investigable by Reason, without the help of Revelation supernatural and divine. Finally, in such sort they are investigable, that the knowledge of them is general, the world hath always been acquainted with them; according to that which one in Sophocles observeth concerning a branch of this Law, ‘It is no child of to-day’s or yesterday’s birth, but hath been no man knoweth how long sithence’ [*Antigone*, v. 456]. It is not agreed upon by one, or two, or few, but by all. Which we may not so understand, as if every particular man in the whole world did know and confess whatsoever the Law of Reason doth contain; but this Law is such that being proposed no man can reject it as unreasonable and unjust.

If “the end” is rejected, “natural law” is rejected → a new type of moral doctrine, sketched by Hobbes and Spinoza: the fundamental fact is endless motion, of the same character as infinite rectilinear motion, viz. infinite desire, a desire that ceaseth only in death.<sup>30</sup> “Ends” are *products* of desire (not: desires are elicited by the end); “ends” are, as it were, points at which desire is stopped (stopped rectilinear motion turns into circular motion: this is “fruition”—Hobbes).<sup>31</sup> But the stops are only temporary → life is a sequence of desires; what comes to an end, is in each case, not motion or desire, but the *direction* of motion or desire. Ends are steps *in* activity, not ends *of* activity → happiness is not a state of repose, not the end of action, but a certain *kind* of acting.

This is the *basis* of Dewey’s doctrine. He *deviates* from Hobbes-Spinoza in this: that Hobbes and Spinoza still believed that a *universal* moral doctrine is possible—they thus reintroduced the notion that there is *one* end of human action; they thus were led to accept the idea of natural right, if in a particular form: they certainly accepted the view that there is *one universally valid law of reason*. Dewey wants to do *consistently* what Hobbes and Spinoza did inconsistently: if, as they held, life is continuous change, there cannot be one law: a law applicable to one moment, will precisely because it fits *that* moment, be inapplicable to the next.

Dewey rejects natural right because he rejects any fixed ends.<sup>32</sup>

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Again, there is nothing in it but any man (having natural perfection of wit and ripeness of judgment) may by labour and travail find out. And to conclude, the general principles thereof are such, as it is not easy to find men ignorant of them. Law rational therefore, which men commonly use to call the Law of Nature, meaning thereby the Law which human Nature knoweth itself in reason universally bound unto, which also for that cause may be termed most fitly the Law of Reason; this Law, I say, comprehendeth all those things which men by the light of their natural understanding evidently know, or at leastwise may know, to be beseeming or unbeseeming, virtuous or vicious, good or evil for them to do.”

<sup>30</sup> An allusion to Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 1.11: “in the first place I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death.”

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Hobbes, *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic*, part 1, *Human Nature*, chap. 25, 4.

<sup>32</sup> A closing bracket has been added in pencil after the full stop of this sentence (cf. above, note 26).

1) *He rejects fixed ends in the first place because fixed ends are incompatible with the essential character of life as change and variety and hence with happiness.*

Fixed ends are incompatible with life—a) they are universal, and every situation, every action is *unique*; b) they are fixed, and life is constant *change*.

Every fixed standard leads to a *depreciation* of life—for life in its variety cannot possibly live up to such standards → asceticism, other-worldliness, unhappiness in *this* life, i.e. the only life there is. Any fixed ends are *beyond* action, not *in* action: even “the utilitarians set up pleasure as such an outside-and-beyond.” (223). There is danger even in the idea of progress: it draws away our attention from the present, and hence from life, to a distant, vague good that can never be reached *because* it is vague. —What is incompatible with life, is incompatible with happiness—for happiness is a certain character of life. We desire to be happy, to find satisfaction in this life, in the present: this desire is threatened by fixed ends.

2 verso

Dewey asserts that this view is akin to Epicureanism; but Epicureanism lacks “social outlook” or “sympathy with the experiences of all sentient creatures” (205); “it contemplated good of withdrawal rather than of active participation.” (292). Dewey tries to combine the Epicurean insistence on present satisfaction which consists in present enrichment of ourselves, with the utilitarian passion for reform and philanthropy. Yet, both Epicureans and utilitarians recognized universal ends: Dewey’s synthesis requires the abandonment of the basic principle common to both positions which he tries to synthesize.

*Limitation of this argument:* could it not be that reason recognizes fixed ends? → widespread unhappiness in this life—but is this not a fact? And is it so certain that happiness is *the* criterion (cf. Kant)? The *decisive* argument is that which disproves the *possibility* that reason can *apprehend* fixed ends—which disproves it by an analysis of *reason* or *thought*.

2) Dewey rejects any fixed ends as incompatible with the character of thought as experimental and historical.



Natural right is meant to be an eternal or immutable rule. It presupposes that this rule can be grasped by the human mind—i.e. that the human mind is capable to rise above *any* particular situation, that there is something in man that allows him to grasp what is universally and eternally true and hence not an object of empirical knowledge: a faculty of intellectual perception.

Dewey rejects this notion on account of its “dualistic” implications. Dewey:<sup>33</sup> The mind depends on habit, and habit on custom, i.e. on *social* conditions, on *historic* conditions (86f.; 124f.) “Habits are conditions of intellectual efficiency . . . they *restrict* the reach of the intellect, they fix its boundaries. They are *blind*ers that confine the eyes of the mind to the road ahead. They prevent thought from straying away from its imminent occupation to a landscape *more varied and picturesque but irrelevant to practice*. Outside of habits, thought works gropingly, fumbling in confused uncertainty. . .” (172).<sup>34</sup> This is not the whole story: “Habits become negative limits because they are first positive agencies . . . habits formed in the process<sup>35</sup> of exercising biological aptitudes are the sole agents of observation, recollection, foresight and judgment. . .” (175f.). Habits, that is, *illumine*<sup>36</sup> our way—but they illumine *always* a *restricted* sphere. Hence, all knowledge is socially conditioned, historically conditioned, i.e. limited in its truth to historical situations. Hence, no *norm* can be universally valid: every norm is a projection originating in a particular situation, improving on a specific historic actuality (23; 30f.) “Moral judgment and moral responsibility are the work wrought in us by the social environment.” (316) In order to handle the always unique situation,<sup>37</sup> we do need generalisations. The generalisations however are not more than tested probabilities: they are the products of past experience, *abbreviations* of past experience and therefore necessary tools for recognizing the *present* situation in its uniqueness as well as in its reasonableness with former situations; they are of

<sup>33</sup> “Dewey:” here is written in pencil above the line, with a mark of insertion.

<sup>34</sup> Strauss’s emphasis. Dewey wrote “Outside the scope of habits.”

<sup>35</sup> Dewey wrote “... in process...”

<sup>36</sup> Manuscript: Habit, that is, illuminates

<sup>37</sup> Manuscript: <gener> situation

*hypothetical* value. —In this sense, Dewey could recognize the Ten Commandments.

3 recto But what about *Right* in particular? “Right is only an abstract name for the multitude of concrete demands in action which others impress upon us, and of which we are obliged, if we would live, to take some account. Its authority is the exigency of their demands, the efficiency of their insistencies<sup>38</sup> . . . the right can become the road<sup>39</sup> to the good only as the elements that compose this unremitting pressure are enlightened, only as social relationships become themselves reasonable.” (326f.). There is no *natural* right—all right = social pressure—but: there is a need for distinguishing between bad and good right (e.g. Nazi and democratic right) = distinction between unreasonable and reasonable social demands: but no universally valid criterion of reasonableness—all criteria are, in the bad case, the products of past experience and subject to future revision ad indefinitum.

*The basic premise of Dewey: the dependence of thought on historical conditions—historicism = denial of possibility of final thought of universal validity.* This position is of relatively recent origin. Dewey is aware of this. He expresses his sympathy with Hume, but he deviates from Hume because Hume did not see that the concrete manifestations of human nature are shaped by diverse cultures—Hume “thought and wrote before the rise of anthropology and allied sciences” (vii, 93).<sup>40</sup> “our leading proposition that social customs are not direct and necessary consequences of specific impulses, but that social institutions and expectations shape and crystalize impulses into dominant habits.” (122). “Man is a creator of habits”: 125 [>Burke → historical school].<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> The words “[the gangster!]” are written in pencil at the bottom of the page with a mark indicating this place in the text.

<sup>39</sup> Dewey wrote: “the right can in fact become the road.”

<sup>40</sup> “Interest in progress and reform is, indeed, the reason for the present great development of scientific interest in primitive human nature. If we inquire why men were so long blind to the existence of powerful and varied instincts in human beings, the answer seems to be found in the lack of a conception of orderly progress.”

<sup>41</sup> A closing bracket is written in pencil at the end of the paragraph.

*No unqualified<sup>42</sup> relativism*: the fact that all human thought is related to historical situations,<sup>43</sup> does not mean that there cannot be intrinsic superiority of one thought system to the other (or of one social situation to another)—e.g. our Western thought at its best is *superior* to all earlier thought at its best, because it is based on a wider and more trustworthy experience—there is progress—but in order to establish the fact of progress, we do not need an extraneous ultimate goal, but merely a comparison of our thought with that of earlier ages or of other cultures.

The problem as it appeared on the basis of Benedict: how to combine cultural relativity with rational social order? Dewey's solution: the culturally relative necessarily enters any rational order and makes that order *itself* culturally relative.<sup>44</sup>

3) *Dewey's allegedly provisional view of morality bears witness to Aristotle's allegedly final view of morality.*<sup>45</sup>

Dewey admits the necessity and possibility of *principles* as *rational* principles, i.e. as principles whose superiority to alternatives is susceptible of *proof*; although he insists on their *provisional* character. What are these principles?

Right = social pressure—but: difference between reasonable and unreasonable social pressure: *reasonable* social pressure is the reward to the *good*. What then is the good? The good differs from situation to situation, but still, there would be complete chaos if *nothing* general, nay,<sup>46</sup> universal could be said about *the* good. Dewey admits this, at least by implication, for he tells us what he believes to be the good. “Good consists in the meaning that is experienced to belong to an activity when conflict and entanglement of various incompatible impulses and habits terminate in a unified orderly release in action. This human good (is) a fulfillment conditioned upon thought. . .” (210). “Good, happiness,

<sup>42</sup> Manuscript: <absolute> unqualified

<sup>43</sup> Manuscript: <studies> situations

<sup>44</sup> This paragraph is enclosed in brackets written in pencil.

<sup>45</sup> Manuscript: <A. Natural Law:>

<sup>46</sup> The manuscript could also read “say” here.

is found in the present meaning of activity, depending upon the proportion, order and freedom introduced into it by thought as it discovers objects which release and unify otherwise contending elements." (212). "purposes or ends in view (are) means to unification and liberation of present conflicting, confused habits and impulses." (229). "the only good which can fully engage thought (is) present meaning of action." Yet, "the present is complex. . . It is enduring, a course of action, a process including memory, observation and foresight. . . It is of *moral* moment because it marks a transition in the direction of breadth and clarity or in that of triviality and confusion. Progress is present reconstruction adding fullness and distinctness of meaning. . ." (281). "good is always found in a present growth of significance in activity." (293).—Let us try to interpret these statements.

3 verso

Good = happiness or satisfaction. Continuous satisfaction is impossible: every satisfaction is followed by *new* dissatisfaction or troubles—in fact, every satisfaction *breeds* new conflicts and thus sets *new* tasks, makes possible new efforts (288).<sup>47</sup> General character of dissatisfaction or trouble: conflict between habits (= customary or traditional ways of response) and impulses. Both habits and impulses are *essential* to the human situation: without habits, no society, no order, no predictability; without impulses, no originality, no *life*. It is equally necessary that there should be *conflict* between habits and impulses. Now, up to a certain time, the normal procedure was the *suppression* of impulses; the tension between habits and impulses led to violent outbursts. But once man became aware of this state of things, once he realized that the earlier standards = habits have no absolute sanctity, but can be modified in the light of changing conditions, the conflict can be overcome by *intelligent* reconstruction or reform (101).<sup>48</sup> The *third* element in morality is intelligence or<sup>49</sup> thought.

<sup>47</sup> "Positive attainment, actual enrichment of meaning and powers opens new vistas and sets new tasks, creates new aims and stimulates new efforts."

<sup>48</sup> "We realize how little the progress of man has been the product of intelligent guidance, how largely it has been a by-product of accidental upheaval, even though by an apologetic interest in behalf of some privileged institution we later transmute chance into providence. . . . Instead of constantly utilizing unused impulse to effect continuous reconstruction, we have waited till an accumulation of stresses suddenly breaks through the dikes of custom."

<sup>49</sup> Manuscript: <and> or

The impulses are “natural,” the habits “conventional”—but this does not mean that the impulses are eternally the same in all men regardless of difference between individuals and societies: all impulses are responses to specific situations, to specific habits and hence “historical.” With the change of habits, new “primitive” impulses emerge (155, 131–132).<sup>50</sup> Both habits, impulses, and hence their intelligent reconciliation are “historical.”

The situation of conflict between habit and impulse as *the* dissatisfaction determines the character of *the* satisfactory solution: looking at the presumable *consequences* of both the habitual and the impulsive line of action, we strike a balance between the claims of habit and impulse: that balance that is *most* satisfactory—that requires a minimum of suppression (for suppression can never be wholly satisfactory). But: the real good is<sup>51</sup> not so much the foreseen consequences which are not wholly within our control, or the ends, but the act itself. It is this activity that enriches us: it makes us true selves or personalities. The successful resolution of the conflict between habit and impulse leads to our *growth*: it is this growth rather than the external success that counts.

Dewey asserts “the primary significance of the unique and morally ultimate character of the concrete situation.” “A moral situation is one in which judgment and choice are required antecedently to overt action.” We note that this is a description of *all* unique situations. But this is not all: “Wide sympathy, keen sensitiveness, persistence in the face of the disagreeable, balance of interests enabling us to undertake the work of analysis and decision intelligently are the distinctly moral traits—the virtues

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<sup>50</sup> “As conditions are continually changing, new and primitive activities are continually changing, new and primitive activities are continually occurring”; “The indefinite multitude of particular and changing events is met by the mind with acts of defining, inventorying and listing, reducing to common heads and tying up in bunches. . . . Complicated provinces of life have been assigned to the jurisdiction of some special instinct or group of instincts, which has reigned despotically with the usual consequences of despotism. Politics has replaced religion as the set of phenomena based upon fear; or after having been the fruit of a special Aristotelian political faculty, has become the necessary condition of restraining man’s self-seeking impulse.”

<sup>51</sup> In the manuscript, “is” was written and then corrected to “are.”

or moral excellencies.” (*Reconstruction* 163f.)<sup>52</sup> We see that Dewey has a whole catalogue of virtues which, at least potentially, enter *every* moral situation. Moreover, Dewey does not say, and he does not imply, that these virtues are virtues only in a particular historical epoch—that narrowness of mind ever was, or ever could be, something praiseworthy. —In short: Dewey makes universal statements about *all* moral situations and about the *one* spirit which *ought* to control *all* moral situations. It is only another way of saying the same thing when Dewey asserts that the *purpose* with a view to which we have to deal with all unique situations is *identically* the same: “Government, business, art, religion, all social institutions have a meaning, a purpose. *That* purpose is to set free and to develop the capacities of human individuals without respect to race, sex, class or economic status.”<sup>53</sup> “. . . *the supreme* test of the political institutions and industrial arrangements shall be the contribution they make to the all-around growth of every member of society.” (*Reconstruction* 186).<sup>54</sup> There are then ultimately not infinitely many purposes according to the number of situations, but there is one ultimate purpose—whose realization of course requires, in each individual case, individual decisions and individual means.<sup>55</sup>

4 recto Dewey’s contention amounts to this: all men seek happiness = to get what they desire → conflict → restriction → formation of social habits: suppression of all desires or impulses that conflict with habits. The habits express themselves in principles that are thought to be final and sacred. Suppression of impulses → unhappiness—still, suppression works for some time—but conditions change: the conflict between impulse and habit becomes more frequent → violent outbursts, inconsiderate changes, enormous waste of moral capital. Finally man realizes that *no* principles are final, that constant modification and readaptation is legitimate and necessary: for the sake of happiness. At the same time, he realizes that it is not so much the *result* of intelligent compromise between

<sup>52</sup> John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (New York: Holt, 1920). Cf. Leo Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1959), 72.

<sup>53</sup> Strauss’s emphasis.

<sup>54</sup> Strauss’s emphasis.

<sup>55</sup> Manuscript: decisions and <means> individual means.

habit and impulse, as this activity of adaptation itself<sup>56</sup> that creates genuine satisfaction.

I.e.: all men seek happiness—happiness consists in virtues and intelligent activity—this activity rather than its results or any ends outside-and-beyond this activity constitutes happiness and hence *the end*. This is *identical* with the *Aristotelian* view: happiness = εὖ πράττειν.<sup>57</sup>

“As long as any social impulse endures, so long as activity that shuts itself off [from other human beings] will bring inward dissatisfaction” → the happiness of *others* is as satisfactory as that of oneself: “good is the same in quality wherever it is found, whether in some other self or in one’s own.” (293) “Happiness is not something to be sought for, but is something now attained, even in the midst of pain and trouble, *whenever recognition of our ties* with nature and *with fellow-men* releases and informs our action.” (265)<sup>58</sup> We cannot be happy if we do not<sup>59</sup> *recognize* our ties with other<sup>60</sup> human beings, and if we do not *act* upon the recognition. → we cannot be happy but *through* intelligent and virtuous action—nay, we cannot be happy but *in* intelligent and virtuous activity.

Clearly, a single intelligent and virtuous action does not suffice: intelligent and virtuous activity must become *habitual*. This habit has its opposite: unintelligent and vicious activity. These habits are fundamentally different from the habits which Dewey alone discusses. It is obvious that Dewey<sup>61</sup> does not support a constant compromise between the habit of<sup>62</sup> intelligent and virtuous activity on the one hand,<sup>63</sup> and foolish and inhuman impulses. Dewey

<sup>56</sup> “itself” written before “of adaptation” (a stroke indicates that the order should be reversed).

<sup>57</sup> “Acting well” (cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1095a18–20, 1098b20–22).

<sup>58</sup> Strauss’s emphasis.

<sup>59</sup> “not” is written in pencil above the line, with a mark of insertion.

<sup>60</sup> Manuscript: others

<sup>61</sup> Manuscript: <a habit> Dewey

<sup>62</sup> “the habit of” is written in pencil above the line, with a mark of insertion.

<sup>63</sup> “on the one hand” is written in pencil at the end of the line.

admits also<sup>64</sup> *in fact* a fundamental distinction between moral habits (virtues and vices) and morally neutral habits (customs)—

Dewey agrees then *in fact* with Aristotle's crucial thesis: that there is *one* end of man as man, and that this end consists in intelligent and virtuous activity. Accordingly, he must *in fact* recognize natural right of one kind or another: he asserts in fact<sup>65</sup> that there is a natural right of everyone to "all-around growth." His analysis of human nature leads him to the conclusion that only through such growth and in such growth can man find satisfaction or happiness. Now, what is necessarily required for human happiness, is *absolutely* justified, is *intrinsically* right,<sup>66</sup> is by nature right. In other words, if, as Dewey says, right ought to be the road to the good, the right as it ought to be, or the rational right is that which leads to *the* good, viz. all-around growth or enrichment of all. That this right was not always known, does not detract from its natural character: as little as the truth of the Newtonian laws depend on their discovery by Newton. Accordingly, we are justified in *rejecting* societies as basically unjust which do not recognize the said natural right.

Why then his violent attack on the whole philosophic tradition, especially on Aristotle? Why does Dewey not see that he holds up *one* end to *all* men? Because he believes that the traditional teachers held this view: that by knowing the one end, one has solved the practical moral problem. But: φρονησις → εकाστα.<sup>67</sup> Dewey sees *only* the problem of the unique situation: he forgets what is common to *all* situations. Why can he forget it? Apparently because he considers it very easy, not only to *realize* that happiness consists in intelligent and virtuous activity, but, above all, to bring oneself into the shape in which one *can* have the firm and settled intention to treat each unique situation as intelligently and humanly as possible. The one end in its oneness does not come to his attention because he underestimates man's *resistance* to that end. He takes that end too much for granted. He does not

<sup>64</sup> "also" is written in pencil above the line, with a mark of insertion.

<sup>65</sup> "in fact" is written in pencil above the line, with a mark of insertion.

<sup>66</sup> "right" is written in pencil above the line, with a mark of insertion.

<sup>67</sup> practical wisdom → particulars (cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1143a25ff.).



pay sufficient attention to the fact that “Video meliora proboque deteriora sequor.”<sup>68</sup> He believes that he has overcome the basic resistance by allowing in each case considerable<sup>69</sup> consideration to the claims of impulse—but: a) the strength of the demands of impulse in general; b) his optimistic assumption that “we,” i.e. all men, are equally satisfied by the happiness of others as by our own happiness: he believes that his thoroughly this-worldly end does not demand any *sacrifice*, any *self-denial*, any *harsh discipline*—whereas it is obvious that a very great effort is required in order to *become* what Dewey wants us to *be* = viz. intelligent, thoughtful, considerate, humane. Very few people will live that way, and perhaps no men will *always* live that way. That is to say: *the satisfying activity transcends most actual activity*; it has the character of a rarely achieved *goal* → dualism between right life and actual life, or the ideal and the real. And Dewey wishes to avoid all dualism.

There is another possibility: that what Dewey demands of man, is so little, that practically no effort is required to arrive at it—that he understands by the good men the well-adjusted conforming<sup>70</sup> philistine who is a little bit “socially sensitive.” But since he himself rejects philistinism and conformism,<sup>71</sup> we do not have to criticize this ideal which is indeed practically identical with the actual.

*Dewey fails to see that he in fact upholds one end of man because he does not see the moral problem in all its complexity.* He sees the danger to intelligent and virtuous action in conformism, routine, rigidity, vested interests, false theories—he does *not* see the danger arising from selfishness and sloth: the need for moral *awakening* as distinguished from *information*. I doubt whether he says anything on *guilt*. He underestimates the power of *evil*. He does not discuss adequately<sup>72</sup> the problem<sup>73</sup> created by the phenomenon of suffering just<sup>74</sup>—i.e. by the fact that intelligent and virtuous

<sup>68</sup> “I see and esteem the better, but follow the worse” (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 7.20, Medea speaking).

<sup>69</sup> Manuscript: <full> considerable

<sup>70</sup> “conforming” is written above the line, with a mark of insertion.

<sup>71</sup> “and conformism” is written above the line, with a mark of insertion.

<sup>72</sup> “adequately” is written above the line, with a mark of insertion.

<sup>73</sup> Manuscript: <fact> problem

<sup>74</sup> Strauss might here be thinking of the German formulation for an Old Testament

activity may be accompanied and even followed by misery. Nor does he pay sufficient<sup>75</sup> attention to the fact that there is no direct harmony between happiness and freedom: many people find their happiness in the protection by rigid customs—their happiness is *menaced* by freedom—Dewey is unaware of the *anguish* that goes with freedom. If he had seen the profound *obstacles* to happiness as he understands it, he would have seen that it has a normative, transcendent character.

Dewey does not discuss the problem of natural law or natural right in these terms. He discusses it under the heading “*the ideal*.” He rejects the view that there can be *one* ideal. According to the view that he rejects, “the ideal is . . . a goal of final exhaustive, comprehensive perfection which can be defined only by complete contrast with the actual. Although impossible of realization and of conception, it is still regarded as the source of all generous discontent with actualities and of all inspiration to progress.” Yet, “instead . . . of serving to organize and direct effort, it operates as a compensatory dream. It becomes another ready-made world.” (260f.) The *sound* view: “the ideal is . . . the product of discontent with conditions.” (260) → infinite<sup>76</sup> variety of ideals. “Every end that man holds up, every project he entertains is ideal. It marks something wanted, rather than something existing. It is wanted because existence as it *now* is does not furnish it.” (259)

But: 1) is the demand for habitual intelligent and humane action *ever* 100% fulfilled? is it not *always* “wanted”? → *one* ideal.

2) Dewey does not think that only a small minority of human beings is capable of habitual intelligent and humane action → is a society of men where *all* people are brought up in such a way that they will act intelligently, humanely, an *absurdity*? is this not “a goal of final, comprehensive perfection”? But, it will be objected, there would not be *final* perfection, because there would be *progress* from generation to generation—but *this* kind of non-finality was granted by Plato himself in regard to his “Republic.”

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figure, “der leidende Gerechte.”

<sup>75</sup> “sufficient” is written above the line.

<sup>76</sup> Manuscript: infinity

3) if the demand for habitual intelligent and humane action is never *fully* realized, it will *always* be transcendent—far from operating as a compensatory dream, it will give the most basic *direction* to all effort.

We can go a step further and say that it is easy to discern Dewey's *social ideal*. "Variety is . . . of the essence of life, making a difference between the free and the enslaved." (308) "Upon an empirical view, uncertainty, doubt, hesitation, contingency and novelty, genuine change which is not mere disguised repetition, are facts." [Hence, satisfaction can only be found in freedom from rigid rules.] "Variability, imitation, innovation, departure from routine, experimentation . . . it is these things that are precious to us under the name of freedom." (310) Now, it is obvious that not *all* societies are equally favorable to freedom thus understood: *only liberal* societies, and in fact liberal *democracies*—more particularly, liberal democracies which live up in fact<sup>77</sup> to what liberal democracy is "in theory" (65f., 72). True liberal democracy is Dewey's *ideal*. He can afford to be distrustful of "*the ideal*"<sup>78</sup> as something transcending actuality because he is so lucky as to live in a liberal democracy. In any other form of society, he would *long* for liberal democracy as *the best* social order. Situations are thinkable, and even actual, in which liberal democracy would work only "as a compensatory dream," and quite justly so: it is *good* to be a bad citizen in a bad polity. Dewey's rejection of the ideal > Hegel: the actual = the rational.<sup>79</sup> But Hegel was honest, i.e. he did not deceive himself: he limited the equation (actual = rational) to the millennium.

In short, Dewey's description of moral action *implies* an answer to the question of the right social order: exactly as in Aristotle.

#### 4. Dewey's historicism.

We have compared Dewey's doctrine with Aristotle's without considering the fact that Dewey asserts that all human thought

<sup>77</sup> "in fact" is written in pencil above the line, with a mark of insertion.

<sup>78</sup> Manuscript: <ideal> "the ideal"

<sup>79</sup> Cf. John Dewey, *German Philosophy and Politics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Putnam, 1942), 26. Leo Strauss reviewed this book in *Social Research* 10, no. 4 (1943): 505–7, reprinted in *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 279–81.

is historically conditioned (mind > habit > social conditions)<sup>80</sup> and hence never final whereas Aristotle asserts the possibility of the opposite. Hence, it would seem that, according to Dewey, his moral teaching does not claim more than *provisional* validity.

a) Dewey's teaching meant to be provisional—the best *up to now*—*possibility of future surprises*: the emergence of the wholly unexpected is of the essence of life—but: *can “the best up to now” be established without transcending history? without supposing some final knowledge?*

Dewey claims that his doctrine makes a definite *progress* beyond all earlier doctrines (especially Epicurus and utilitarianism)—his historicism is mitigated by the belief in progress: for all practical purposes, this is the belief that modern natural science makes an absolute progress beyond all earlier human attempts at orientation in the world. Now, one cannot speak of progress without assuming a *goal* of progress, an *end* of progress, a goal *transcending* the progress. Dewey denies<sup>81</sup> this: the fact of progress can be established without looking beyond the historical process, and even without looking toward the future: a comparison of modern natural science with, say, Aristotelian natural science or the magic of primitive peoples shows the absolute *superiority* of modern natural science. But superior with a view to *what?* Control of nature → technology. But is this *the* aim of all intellectual orientation regarding the universe? We have to *know* this in order to *see* the absolute superiority of modern natural science. Dewey does “know” this: science is essentially a tool in the service of life and not the effort to discover *the* truth → an allegedly or really *final knowledge* is *presupposed* for establishing the fact of progress. As regards Dewey's own contribution, viz. moral philosophy, Dewey establishes the superiority of his teaching by measuring the earlier doctrines by this general standard: in order to be sound, a moral teaching must be in accordance with human nature—this criterion would apply to *all* moral teachings, past or future: no future surprises would make it doubtful that man is in need of

<sup>80</sup> The text in parentheses is written above the line in pencil, with a stroke directing to this place in the text.

<sup>81</sup> Manuscript: <would> denies

a moral teaching that is in accordance with human nature: here, too, Dewey in fact claims *final knowledge*.

b) Dewey's *answer* to the moral problem is *in fact* meant to be final: he takes it for granted that *as long* as there will be human beings, human happiness consists in such solutions (= intelligent and humane activity). 5 verso

c) Why does Dewey then *contend* that all human thought, and hence his own, is radically<sup>82</sup> historical and hence in no way final?

Thought must be understood as a *product* of life: otherwise it would require an *independent* source → dualism. Therefore: thought is in every respect dependent on life. More specifically: thought depends on *habits*, and not merely on sense-perception, imagination and other “psychic” processes. A “sensationalist” psychology “cuts human nature off from its natural objective relations” with others (85) and it denies the crucial significance of the unconscious. Habits in their turn depend on social, and hence on *historic* conditions. Without habits no thought: habits *illumine* the road ahead—i.e. they illumine always a *restricted* sphere which *varies* from society to society, from age to age. Habits “*restrict* the reach of intellect, they fix its boundaries. They are *blinders* that confine the eyes of the mind to the road ahead.” (172)<sup>83</sup> This implies: we *can* know that the knowledge accessible to us now, is limited. More than that: we can know that the knowledge accessible to *man as man*, is and *always*<sup>84</sup> *will* be limited. And *this* knowledge is *final*: it is not restricted to a particular historical situation. We can see *something without* blinders. Dewey goes on to say: habits “prevent thought from straying away from its imminent occupation to a landscape more varied and picturesque but irrelevant to practice. Outside of habits,<sup>85</sup> thought works gropingly, fumbling in confused uncertainty” (172). This means: we know *something* of the world *beyond* our blinders: “more varied and picturesque”—

<sup>82</sup> “radically” is written above the line with a mark of insertion.

<sup>83</sup> Strauss's emphasis.

<sup>84</sup> Manuscript: <will> always

<sup>85</sup> Dewey wrote “Outside the scope of habits.”

it is *uncertain* knowledge as regards the details—but our *general* knowledge of its character is of *decisive* importance for *practice*: it enforces the need of staying within the limits of habits.

To drop metaphors, we see in each case, not only the unique situation or a number of unique situations, but what is essential to *all* situations → we see *the* end of man (or we know what the essence of happiness is) and we see what type of social-political order is most conducive to happiness.

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Dewey's thought is not unqualifiedly historical or relativist. In particular, he believes that the science belonging to *our* culture is intrinsically superior to all corresponding things in other cultures. He also believes that the scientific study of human nature and human affairs will culminate in value-judgments. Present-day social science in this country shows many traces of Dewey's influence. But, on the whole, present-day social science is more skeptical: it tends to assume that the scientific study of social things will *not* lead to value-judgments: it assumes a basic heterogeneity of values and facts.<sup>86</sup> This means that present-day social science is not likely to grant to "natural right" as much as Dewey implicitly grants. We may say that Dewey's thought belongs to an *older* structure of Western thought than does present-day social science. There is only one other thinker comparable to Dewey in influence to whom this prevalent attitude of present-day social science can be traced: Max Weber.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Cf. "Philosophy and Sociology of Knowledge," 1941 (Leo Strauss Papers, box 6, folder 9), § 3 "Sociology of knowledge" in pragmatism, fol. 1 verso: "The characteristic difference between sociology of knowledge and pragmatism is then this: sociology of knowledge has a more skeptical attitude towards science than has pragmatism. This difference is due to the influence on sociology of knowledge of a) Bergson (science grasps only one aspect of "reality") → Scheler and b) radical Marxism (Lukacs → Mannheim)"

<sup>87</sup> See Leo Strauss, "The Social Science of Max Weber," *Measure: A Critical Journal* 2, no. 2 (Spring 1951): 204–30; the complete text appeared in Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), chap. 2.

## Speaking Differently: The “Many-Saying” Politics, Music, and World of Homer’s *Odyssey*\*

REBECCA LEMOINE

FLORIDA ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY

*rlemoine@fau.edu*

**Abstract:** Why, in Homer’s *Odyssey*, does the infamous Cyclops bear the name “Polyphemus” (“many-saying” or “many-voiced”), and why are two other characters—the Ithacan assembly and bard Phemius—described as “polyphemian”? This essay argues that Polyphemus’s name makes sense once we notice that he alone of the Cyclopes “speaks differently.” Through the figure of Polyphemus, the epic awakens us to the wondrousness of the capacity for humans to speak in their own, separate voices, reminding us that we could have been constituted otherwise. In calling the political assembly and bard “polyphemian,” the epic consequently provokes contemplation of the age-old dilemma of freedom of speech: the tension between the desire for a community that speaks with one voice, and the desire for a plurality of voices. Ultimately, the *Odyssey* implies that the freedom to speak differently is essential to the flourishing of human life, even if it allows for political instability.

Most remember the Cyclops of Homer’s *Odyssey* as the cruel, one-eyed giant who trapped Odysseus and his men in his cave and proceeded to make a gruesome snack of them. He is also remembered as the oaf whom Odysseus outwitted with his cunning decision to respond “Noman” when asked his name so that, later, when Odysseus and his men drive a sharp, flaming beam of wood into his eye, the Cyclops can only futilely cry out that “no man” has wounded him. Finally, some remember him as the son of Poseidon who

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cast the curse that led to Odysseus's prolonged, trouble-filled journey back to Ithaca.

While unforgettable for myriad reasons, the Cyclops is *not* typically remembered for his verbal capacity. Yet his name, Polyphemus, calls attention to this ostensible aspect of his identity. Usually taken to mean "much spoken of / famed" or, in the right context, "he of the many prophecies or curses," "Polyphemus" is a compound formed from *polu* ("many") and *phēmē* ("saying"), yielding "many-saying" or "many-voiced."<sup>1</sup> Given the significance of names in the *Odyssey*, this implies that the essential or defining trait of the Cyclops is his discourse, which is characterized by manyness.<sup>2</sup> Interpreters frequently remark how ill-fitting this name, in its most literal translation, is. As John Heath observes, "The land of the Cyclopes is *not* the land of *logos*."<sup>3</sup> Unlike the rich musical tradition of the Phaeacians or even the vitriolic dialogue found in Odysseus's native Ithaca, the land of the Cyclopes stands out, by comparison, as primitive in many respects, including the use of language. Indeed, of all the races encountered in the *Odyssey*, the Cyclopes least seem to exhibit the manyness that Plato's Socrates allegedly finds so problematic in the *Republic*. Instead, they live the simplistic, self-sufficient existence reminiscent of inhabitants of Socrates's first city in speech.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Polyphemus himself seems like an odd exemplar of manyness. As Barbara Clayton notes, "In general there is nothing particularly 'multiple' about Polyphemus. In fact, there is a certain monolithic singularity to him: he lives alone, he has a single eye, and, in the case of his plans for Odysseus and his men, he shows a

<sup>1</sup> The LSJ entry for *poluphēmos* offers the following possible translations: "abounding in songs and legends," "manyvoiced, wordy," and "much spoken of, famous." Given the difficulties with attributing bard-like qualities to Polyphemus, most scholars have favored the third possibility, arguing Polyphemus's fame derives from the *Cyclopeia* itself. Yet, as Egbert Bakker points out, the standard term for "fame" in Homeric poetry is not *phēmē*, but rather *kleos*. Egbert J. Bakker, "Polyphemos," *Colby Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (2002): 135–50.

<sup>2</sup> The importance of names is reiterated throughout the *Odyssey*. See, for example, the story behind Odysseus's (real) name (19.399–409). Names, particularly that of Odysseus, are often withheld in the *Odyssey* to protect the people they represent. See Norman Austin, "Name Magic in the *Odyssey*," *California Studies in Classical Antiquity*, no. 5 (1972): 1–19. Odysseus sharing his own name may be what gives Polyphemus the power to levy on him the curse that causes him to arrive in Ithaca late, having lost all his companions, in another's ship, and finding trouble at home. See Calvin S. Brown, "Odysseus and Polyphemus: The Name and the Curse," *Comparative Literature* 18, no. 3 (1966): 193–202.

<sup>3</sup> John Heath, *The Talking Greeks: Speech, Animals, and the Other in Homer, Aeschylus, and Plato* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 81.

<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Republic* 372e. Patrick Deneen also draws this connection. Patrick J. Deneen, *The Odyssey of Political Theory: The Politics of Departure and Return* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 99–100. In Plato's *Laws*, the Athenian Stranger classifies the Cyclopes' power structure as the earliest form of political regime, a "dynasty" (680b–c).



single-mindedness of purpose.”<sup>5</sup> It almost seems, then, as if Homer was being tongue-in-cheek in assigning the boorish Cyclops the name “Polyphemus.”

The puzzle is compounded by the fact that the adjective “polyphemian” describes two other characters in the *Odyssey*: “the many-saying assembly” (*agorēn poluphēmon*) of the Ithacans (2.150) and the “many-saying singer” (*poluphēmos aoidos*) Phemius (22.376).<sup>6</sup> While these echoes of Polyphemus’s name may escape the notice of modern audiences reading in translation, they would have stood out to ancient audiences, who experienced the tale only as an oral story sung by a bard. For their part, Homer scholars have not failed to note these uses of “polyphemian.” Indeed, several have traced the Cyclopean nature of the Ithacan suitors.<sup>7</sup> To a lesser extent, scholars have also elucidated the link between Polyphemus and Phemius.<sup>8</sup> The relationship between Polyphemus, the Ithacan assembly, and Phemius remains underexamined, however. Homeric scholarship tends to focus, instead, merely on two legs of the triangle. Even in his extensive study of the Cyclops’s name, Bakker devotes only one page to discussing the connection to Phemius and does not consider the relationship between all three occurrences of the name.<sup>9</sup>

What could the poem be suggesting by casting the Cyclops, the Ithacan political assembly, and the bard Phemius as “many-saying”? This essay argues that Homer’s *Odyssey* weaves these three entities together to provoke

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Clayton, *A Penelopean Poetics: Reweaving the Feminine in Homer’s “Odyssey”* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), 30. Carolyn Higbie likewise underscores the irony of Polyphemus’s name given his isolation from his fellow Cyclopes. Higbie, *Heroes’ Names, Homeric Identities* (New York: Garland, 1995), 12.

<sup>6</sup> Except where noted, quotes from the *Odyssey* come from the translation of Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2000). Line numbers refer to the Greek text of Homer, *The Odyssey*, ed. A. T. Murray, 2 vols., Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann, 1919). Here I deviate from Lombardo’s translation, as it does not capture the echoes of Polyphemus’s name (indeed, he omits the adjective describing Phemius).

<sup>7</sup> Zdravko Planinc provides a particularly thorough examination of the polyphemian aspects of the Ithacan suitors, especially as manifested through Polyphemus’s “this-worldly equivalent,” the lead suitor, Antinous. The Ithacan political assembly scene is discussed only somewhat briefly, however (183–84). As for Phemius, while Planinc mentions him twice (181, 182), neither mention refers to the use of the descriptor “polyphemian.” Zdravko Planinc, “Socrates and the Cyclops: Plato’s Critique of ‘Platonism’ in the *Sophist* and *Statesman*,” in *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, vol. 31, ed. Gary M. Gurtler and William Wians (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2016), 159–217.

<sup>8</sup> Clayton notes, in a single passage, the connection between Polyphemus and the bard Phemius, arguing that Polyphemus shares the bardic trait of blindness but is “someone who weaves together clever words in spite of himself: an unwilling, or at least an unwitting, bard.” Clayton, *Penelopean Poetics*, 30.

<sup>9</sup> Bakker, “Polyphemos,” 142–43.

contemplation of the age-old dilemma of freedom of speech.<sup>10</sup> It does so through the pivotal figure of Polyphemus, who serves to awaken us to the wondrousness of the existence of free speech by prompting reflection on the literal capacity for humans to speak apart from the rest of the community. This often taken-for-granted ability, the epic shows, yields serious consequences for political life. Specifically, it creates a major quandary for humans to navigate: the tension between the desire, on one hand, to have a community that speaks with one voice, and, on the other, to have a plurality of voices. Ultimately, by suggesting that the bard's "many-voiced" nature connects him to the divine, the epic implies that the freedom to speak differently is essential to the flourishing of human life, even if it allows for political instability.

My argument proceeds in four parts. Part 1 establishes the *Odyssey's* preoccupation with manyness, both in terms of the diversity of ways of life found throughout the world and the multiplicity within a single person. Homer's emphasis on this theme, from the beginning, implies that Polyphemus's name bears deep significance. Part 2 then turns to the *Cyclopeia*, arguing that this scene reveals that the name "Polyphemus" makes sense from the perspective of his fellow Cyclopes. Unlike other members of his race, Polyphemus possesses the capacity to speak in his own distinct voice, to contradict others, and to play with the ambiguities of language. Drawing on this understanding of Polyphemus as "many-saying," I examine the applicability of "polyphemian" to the Ithacan assembly (part 3) and the singer Phemius (part 4). These latter two sections show that, like the Cyclops, both the assembly and the bard "speak differently," albeit to different degrees. I conclude by suggesting that the epic's exploration of the capacity and freedom to "speak differently" resonates beyond the internal dynamics of a single community, offering a powerful defense of "manness" in the broader human community.

## 1. MANYNESS IN HOMER'S *ODYSSEY*

Manyness figures as a—if not *the*—central theme of the *Odyssey* from the beginning. Addressing the Muse, the poet entreats her to speak of the "much-turned [*polutropon*] man, who has much [*polla*] wandered" and of "the many [*pollōn*] men whose cities he saw and whose mind he came to

<sup>10</sup> Of course, in the archaic Greek world of monarchies and aristocracies, free speech was not a developed concept. Nevertheless, substantial evidence suggests that, even in Homer's time, some measure of free speech was practiced. This topic is treated at length, in part using passages from Homeric epic, in Kurt A. Raaflaub and Robert W. Wallace, "People's Power' and Egalitarian Trends in Archaic Greece," in *Origins of Democracy in Ancient Greece*, ed. Kurt A. Raaflaub, Josiah Ober, and Robert W. Wallace (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 22–48.

know, and who experienced at sea many [*polla*] pains in his heart” (1.1–4).<sup>11</sup> The repetition of *polus* (“many”) four times in the first four lines of the *Odyssey* establishes the poem’s preoccupation with manyness. Specifically, these lines highlight the manyness of Odysseus and his experience of manyness in the world. The adjective *polutropos* (“much-turned”) occurs only one other time in Homeric epic, again applied to Odysseus (*Od.* 10.330).<sup>12</sup> Manyness is therefore the characteristic chiefly of Odysseus. As the story proceeds, Odysseus will exhibit manyness time and again as, like gods and goddesses, he adopts manifold disguises and voices. If, given his role as the titular character, Odysseus represents the epic’s chief topic, then the *Odyssey* is fundamentally concerned with manyness.

The *Odyssey*’s focus on manyness is further confirmed through the range of settings it explores. As Charles Segal notes, unlike the *Iliad*, which “creates essentially one landscape, the austere war-world of Troy,” the *Odyssey* “operates with almost the opposite technique. Instead of concentration and exclusion, it uses expansiveness and exploration.”<sup>13</sup> Odysseus’s encounters with various peoples—from the aggressive Laestrygonians to the passive Lotus-Eaters—lie at the narrative’s core, driving the characterization and plot forward. Although questions abound relating to the composition date and authorship of the *Odyssey*, the poem as it has come down to us suggests that ancient audiences, if not the tale’s original hearers, took interest in issues related to increased interaction with foreigners. Odysseus’s quintessential question upon approaching an unknown people—whether they are god-fearing and hospitable, or savage and lawless—reflects such an interest in understanding an unfamiliar world and musing on the potential benefits and pitfalls of overseas travel, suggesting the poem was likely composed during a time of significant exposure to foreign lands and peoples.<sup>14</sup> In any case, the

<sup>11</sup> Here I rely on my own translation, which better captures the prevalence of the adjective *polus*.

<sup>12</sup> The epithet is also used twice for Hermes in Homeric hymn (*h. Merc.* 13 and 439), perhaps indicating Odysseus’s role as a Hermes-like character. Pietro Pucci, *The Song of the Sirens: Essays on Homer* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 23.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Paul Segal, *Singers, Heroes, and Gods in the “Odyssey”* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 3–4.

<sup>14</sup> Scholars generally date the written form of the *Odyssey* to the eighth century BCE, though nothing regarding the epic’s composition can be certain. Based on this assumed date, Carol Dougherty asks, “Is it an accident that the *Odyssey* is especially interested in the worlds beyond Greek shores, interested in exploring the nature of relationships (commercial and colonial) between Greeks and peoples overseas, at exactly the moment when its audience is settling those shores and establishing trade contacts throughout the Mediterranean?” Carol Dougherty, *The Raft of Odysseus: The Ethnographic Imagination of Homer’s “Odyssey”* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 11.

*Odyssey* internally displays interest in exploring the existence of myriad ways of life as exhibited through the diversity of human communities.

Relatedly, the *Odyssey* expresses interest in manyness through its many reprises of the theme of *xenia* or hospitality. Commonly translated as “guest-friendship,” this well-documented practice of formal, often heritable relationships with people from other cities involved expectations of reciprocated behaviors of hospitality on the part of both guest and host. To violate these rites of hospitality was to commit an act of impiety, for Zeus, god of strangers, oversaw these relationships. Unlike other versions of the tale of Odysseus’s encounter with the Cyclops, Homer’s is imbued with the theme of *xenia*.<sup>15</sup> Polyphemus violates the customs of traditional Greek guest-friendship at every turn: he is not present to greet his guests when they arrive; he rudely asks who they are rather than deferring such questions until after his guests have freshened up and been wined, dined, and entertained; instead of offering his guests a meal, he makes a meal of them; instead of offering them wine, he drinks their wine; the only gift he offers is to eat “Noman” (Odysseus) last; and he prevents his guests from leaving rather than helping them on their way. The poem allows even contemporary readers to discern these violations of hospitality by presenting numerous positive models of hospitality prior to the Cyclopes scene, such as the kindly reception of Telemachus at Menelaus’s house.<sup>16</sup> By depicting various iterations of *xenia* as well as the possibility of treating guests in defiance of this framework, Homer’s *Odyssey* again displays fascination with the diversity present in the world.

From the manyness of the title character, to the multiplicity of places and peoples crucial to the unfolding of its plot, to the amount of detail devoted to showing how different societies respond to encounters with diverse others, the *Odyssey* displays significant interest in “manyness.” Yet, we might ask, what orientation does it convey towards all this multiplicity? On one hand, if Odysseus embodies the qualities of the quintessential hero, then

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<sup>15</sup> On Homer’s introduction of the theme of Greek hospitality to the traditional folktale and its significance, see A. J. Podlecki, “Guest-Gifts and Nobodies in *Odyssey* 9,” *Phoenix* 15, no. 3 (1961): 125–33; David Eugene Belmont, “Early Greek Guest-Friendship and Its Role in Homer’s *Odyssey*” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1962); and Justin Glenn, “The Polyphemus Folktale and Homer’s *Kyklôpeia*,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, no. 102 (1971): 135–44.

<sup>16</sup> Homer’s audience would have been deeply familiar with rites of hospitality, such that even minor deviations in some of the hospitality scenes would have been noticed and would have told them something about Odysseus’s predicament and the character of his hosts. Homer’s audience surely would have been aware, then, that the Cyclopes episode reverses all the traditional rites of hospitality. Steve Reece, *The Stranger’s Welcome: Oral Theory and the Aesthetics of the Homeric Hospitality Scene* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993).

manyness would seem, *prima facie*, to be a positive. Indeed, manyness serves him well on multiple occasions. For instance, according to Helen of Troy, Odysseus's adoption of a disguise allowed him to enter the camp of the Trojans, slaughter many men, and leave with much information to report (4.240–58). Odysseus's ability to exhibit Protean-like manyness by taking on another identity thus plays a significant role in the Greeks' victory at Troy. More tellingly, this quality aligns Odysseus with immortal gods and goddesses, who can present themselves or others in any form they wish. Athena, for one, transforms herself into human beings of all ages and sexes and uses her powers to make Odysseus look like everything from a god (6.227–46) to a beggar (13.397–438). Without Athena's powers of transformation, Odysseus would never have made it home or reclaimed his kingship. Hence, manyness appears essential to the establishment of order. On an individual level, it is a capacity that bestows substantial power.

Yet manyness does not always work to the Greeks' advantage. Perhaps appropriately, manyness is arguably cast as an ambiguous good. This is alluded to early in the story when King Menelaus recounts his struggle to pin down Egyptian god Proteus as he took on various shapes (4.455–59). Unlike singularity, manyness can be difficult to control. Later, in Odysseus's tale, the goddess Circe's powers of transfiguration nearly result in Odysseus's men being permanently transformed into pigs (10.237–43). While gods and heroes might be justified in using manyness to their benefit, manyness can be problematic when the hero is on the other end of it. Scylla, the multi-headed monster who devours six of Odysseus's men, serves as another case in point. Though fascinating, venturing out into the unknown and encountering a diverse array of beings—some of whom can transform themselves or others into multiple things—can be quite dangerous, as Odysseus's wanderings make clear. It is not anomalous, then, that the name “many-saying” is bestowed on one of the epic's villains, for manyness at times seems to create obstacles. What, however, does it mean to be “many-*saying*” and why is this an *apropos* name for a Cyclops? As the next section will argue, the key lies in understanding Polyphemus in relation to his fellow Cyclopes.

## 2. POLYPHEMUS AND THE ONE-VOICED CYCLOPES

When Odysseus and his men come to the land of Cyclopes, they first notice smoke, the sounds of sheep and goats, and “the voice of them” (*autōn te phthoggēn*) (9.167). The use of the singular for the word translated as “voice”—rather than the plural, *phthoggai*—implies the Cyclopes speak with

one voice.<sup>17</sup> It stands to reason, however, that Odysseus and his men may at first perceive the voices of the Cyclopes as a murmuring mass owing to their distance from them. After all, according to Odysseus, the Cyclopes “have no assemblies or laws but live in high mountain caves, ruling [*themisteuei*] their own [*hekastos*] children and wives and ignoring each other” (9.110–12). If no common laws exist but rather each Cyclops rules his own household as he wishes, then presumably the Cyclopes can speak individually and issue commands that might differ from those laid down in the homes of other Cyclopes. Yet the story provides no direct confirmation of this; for all we know, the Cyclopes give identical orders without any awareness that they do so. Rather, as Odysseus’s tale unfolds, the epic again presents the Cyclopes (Polyphemus excluded) speaking as one. In response to Polyphemus’s cries for help, we hear “they asked” (*eironto*) what ailed him and then, hearing his response, “they answered” (*apameibomenoi*), “they proclaimed” (*agoreuon*), “they spoke” (*ephan*)—every verb referring to the Cyclopes speaking employs the plural number (9.400–414). By all indications, the Cyclopes speak together, as a unit, when they ask if a mortal has harmed Polyphemus and when they say that if no man has hurt him, then his sickness must come from Zeus and he therefore ought to pray to his father, Poseidon. If Cyclopes can speak independently, then why does Odysseus only ever present them speaking en masse, with Polyphemus alone portrayed as speaking independently, in a voice separate from that of the group?

One might argue that the depiction of the Cyclopes as a “they” speaking in unison could simply be an inconsequential choice undertaken for the sake of good storytelling. That is, perhaps the poet found it necessary only to capture the gist of what the Cyclopes said to Polyphemus, not their individual responses, and thus perhaps these lines indicate nothing about the Cyclopes’ capacity for individual speech. There are three reasons to think otherwise. First, given the meaning of Polyphemus’s name (“many-saying”), it seems significant that the only time the other Cyclopes speak, they seemingly do so with one voice. Second, the epic is at pains in other respects to indicate Polyphemus’s individuality relative to the rest of the group, which further suggests the contrast between the speech of the Cyclopes and that of Polyphemus is purposeful. We are told, for one, that Polyphemus “pastured his flocks

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<sup>17</sup> Most scholars, Lombardo included, prefer the translation “their voices.” While an accurate rendering, I suspect there is something significant about the use of the singular instead of the plural. Unfortunately, it is difficult to confirm whether this was deliberate or simply the typical construction. At 12.198, the “voice of the Sirens” (*phthoggēs Seirēnōn*) also employs the singular for “voice,” but since they too sing in unison, this does not clarify anything.

off by himself, and lived apart from others and knew no law” (9.181–83). He is also the only Cyclops identified by name. Lastly, even if we grant that the poet did not intend to imply that Cyclopes are incapable of independent speech, it is nonetheless curious that the Cyclopes all share the same essential reaction. As will become clear in the next section, the contrast between the Cyclopes’ response to Polyphemus and the Ithacans’ response to Telemachus could not be starker: the Cyclopes speak as one while the Ithacans clash in disagreement. If not in private, then at least in public, the Cyclopes speak as a united community. When they come together as a race, the Cyclopes are not only one-eyed; they are one-voiced.

The Cyclopes are one-voiced except, that is, for Polyphemus. Interestingly, we first learn Polyphemus’s name when his brethren inquire about the cause of his cries (9.403). Whether he received this name from them or his father or some other source, it is significant that Homer introduces Polyphemus’s name through the voice of the Cyclopes.<sup>18</sup> In doing so, he invites audiences to think of how Polyphemus’s fellow Cyclopes must perceive him. What could it mean that, to them, he is known as “Polyphemus” or “many-saying”? If the Cyclopes are in fact one-voiced, then Polyphemus’s name may serve as an indication of his ability to speak differently, in his own voice. Polyphemus may have earned the moniker because, unlike his brethren, he speaks independently in the presence of others outside his household.

Bound up with the capacity for independent speech is the possibility of contradiction. Within the tale at least, the one-voiced Cyclopes only ever agree with each other. Polyphemus, by contrast, displays the ability to disagree with or contradict his fellow Cyclopes. The epic supplies a pointed demonstration of this. Early in Odysseus’s account, Polyphemus tells Odysseus, “You’re dumb, stranger, or from far away, if you ask me to fear the gods. Cyclopes don’t care about Zeus or his aegis or the blessed gods, since we are much stronger” (9.273–76). Yet, when Polyphemus later tells his fellow Cyclopes that “Noman” is killing him, they respond, “If no man is hurting you, then your sickness comes from Zeus and can’t be helped. You should pray to your father, Lord Poseidon!” (9.410–12). Apparently, it is not the Cyclopes who are impious; it is Polyphemus. This discrepancy shows that Polyphemus can describe the beliefs of Cyclopes in a manner opposite to how they themselves present their beliefs. With the ability to speak independently from the group comes not merely the ability to say something different, but the ability

<sup>18</sup> This seems deliberate, as there were earlier opportunities at which the name could have been supplied.

to say something that contradicts the group's speech. From the perspective of his fellow Cyclopes, Polyphemus's "manyness" in speech thus manifests itself in the ability to deviate from the party line, so to speak. Simply put, Polyphemus can express ideas the rest of the community would likely regard as falsehoods.

Examining Polyphemus's discourse more closely, it further becomes clear that, relative to his fellow Cyclopes, Polyphemus possesses a better understanding of the manyness of language itself and how to use that to his advantage. That is, he displays at least an elementary awareness of the fact that a single word or phrase can contain multiple layers of meaning. A clear instance of Polyphemus stretching the meaning of words arises when he promises to give Odysseus a "guest gift" (*xeinion*) in exchange for learning his name (9.356). The Cyclops makes this promise after Odysseus gives him a sample of wine as part of his scheme to drive a stake into the Cyclops's eye, presenting the wine as a kind gesture in the hope that the Cyclops will pity them and send them home. Whereas someone more naive than Odysseus might assume the Cyclops has been won over by the wine and genuinely intends to give them a gift, Odysseus knows better. Instead of letting down his guard, he lies and tells Polyphemus his name is "Noman"—a lie that later plays a key role in enabling the men's escape. It turns out he was right not to fall for the trick, for the Cyclops twists the word "gift" to mean the act of eating Odysseus last (9.368–70) and, later, the act of calling upon the vengeful Poseidon to "help" Odysseus on his way home (9.517–35)—hardly "gifts" at all. Polyphemus shows here that the word "gift" can be applied both to things the guest does and does not want.

Polyphemus also displays understanding that the same words can be used to serve many different purposes. For instance, when he asks where Odysseus left his ship, Odysseus, as narrator of the story, says, "Nice try, but I knew all the tricks and said: / 'My ship? Poseidon smashed it to pieces'" (9.281–83). By indicating his awareness that Polyphemus was trying to trick him, Odysseus suggests that whereas others might view this as an innocent question, he perceives it differently. He suspects that, in asking where his ship is, the Cyclops is really saying, "Tell me where your ship is so I can destroy your only means of escape." Fortunately, because Odysseus detects the sinister subtext to the Cyclops's question, he knows not to respond honestly. Polyphemus was banking on Odysseus being too naive to realize that sometimes others have ulterior motives when they speak, and through this displays an understanding of the multiplicity of uses to which a particular set of words might be put.



As these examples show, Polyphemus's speech is also "many-saying" in that he plays with language to try to trick others. To be sure, his fellow Cyclopes are not wholly naive; they recognize the existence of "trickery" (*dolōi*) (9.406), the same word Odysseus uses to refer to Polyphemus's attempt to entice him into giving up the location of his ship. The Cyclopes themselves never employ any verbal trickery in this scene, however, nor do they catch the trick Odysseus has pulled by identifying himself with the name "Noman." To be fair, Polyphemus does not catch on to this particular "trick" either. Nonetheless, he repeatedly demonstrates the ability to play similar verbal tricks and, in this respect, places himself closer to the cunning Odysseus than do his fellow Cyclopes. Hence, though the name "many-saying" may seem unfitting for a Cyclops, when juxtaposed with his fellow Cyclopes, we can see why Polyphemus merits this name.

### 3. THE POLYPHEMIAN ASSEMBLY

If Polyphemus's name refers to his capacity to speak differently from the group, to contradict, and to play with the ambiguities of language, then how might this allow us to make better sense of the echoes of the Cyclops's name in Homer's descriptions of the Ithacan political assembly and bard Phemius? Let us begin by examining the scene in book 2 where Odysseus's son Telemachus summons the Ithacan assembly. Not coincidentally, this scene is brimming with direct references and allusions to Polyphemus. First, the poem primes audiences to think about the horrific, local effects of Odysseus's faraway encounter with Polyphemus by depicting lord Aegyptius, the first to address the assembly, visibly weeping in mourning for one of his sons who died in the Cyclops's cave (2.15–24). A bit later, after a fiery speech by Telemachus, the assembly spies a pair of eagles drifting on the wind. As soon as they come directly over the "polyphemian" (*poluphēmon*) assembly, the eagles begin furiously beating their wings and "looking down on the heads of all with death in their eyes" before savaging each other's craws with their talons and veering off across the city and the houses of those gathered below (2.146–54). When the prophet Halitherses interprets this as a sign that Odysseus is near and that the suitors and many other Ithacans will soon meet a grim fate, the suitor Eurymachus chastises him for trying to rile up Telemachus with false prophecies. In a manner reminiscent of Polyphemus's insistence that Cyclopes do not fear the gods because they are better than they, Eurymachus declares, "We fear no man [*ou tina*], no, not even Telemachus with all his big talk" (2.199–200). Though unbeknownst to Eurymachus himself, or to first-time readers or listeners of the tale, this line has a double

meaning: the intended meaning that the suitors fear no one, and the foreshadowed meaning that the suitors fear Noman (*Outis*), that is, Odysseus. Just as Polyphemus did when he spoke of “Noman,” Eurymachus engages in unconscious wordplay when he speaks of “no man.”

As other scholars have argued, the conspicuous references to Polyphemus throughout this scene work to identify the suitors as the Ithacan version of the Cyclops. Like Polyphemus, they have been (figuratively) “eating” a man by consuming his food and depriving him of his livelihood, as Telemachus himself insinuates (2.75). Moreover, like Polyphemus, they display insolence and arrogance. Again like Polyphemus, they will soon be outwitted and conquered by the cunning Odysseus. The Cyclopean tendencies of the suitors could not be clearer. But what does it mean for the assembly to be described, specifically, as “many-saying”? That is, what might paying attention to the *discursive* aspect of the Cyclops’s identity help us understand about the Ithacan political assembly and, perhaps, political deliberation in general?

Above, I argued that Polyphemus’s name is best interpreted as a reference to his capacity for independent speech, contradiction, and cunning use of language. Turning now to the assembly, we can see that it too possesses these traits. Those gathered do not speak with one voice; rather, various individuals speak in their own, unique voices. While it may seem obvious to observe that human beings can speak apart from the group, the example of the Cyclopes reminds us that we could have been constituted otherwise. Furthermore, the capacity to speak for oneself brings with it serious consequences that a one-voiced race simply would not face. As the gathering of the assembly demonstrates, this capability allows for disagreement to arise. On one hand, we hear the suitors contradicting Telemachus’s presentation of them and opposing his wishes, and on the other supporters like Mentor pointing the blame not only at the suitors, but at the silent majority who condone the suitors’ behavior through their unwillingness to speak up (2.235–41). Though the assembly commences with some measure of decorum, as the scene unfolds, we are left with the impression of merely a raucous group unable to be persuaded to get on the same page. The problem lies, then, not only in the suitors’ Cyclopean, cannibalistic behavior, but in the entire Ithacan population’s polyphemian communication. Just as the “many-saying” Cyclops expresses views that contradict those of his fellow Cyclopes, the Ithacans speak in contradiction to one another. In this context, it is hard not to wish the Ithacans were only able to speak as one, all in support of Telemachus.

The Ithacans also display the polyphemian capacity to play with the multiplicity inherent in language. In Telemachus's opening speech, he admits that, in a battle with the suitors, he would lose. Yet, in encouraging the Ithacans to "fear the wrath of the gods, who may yet turn against you," and then following this with an appeal to Zeus and Themis, the goddess "who calls and dismisses assemblies of men," Telemachus vaguely hints the gods are on his side (2.66–69). His speech therefore presents itself as a plea, but carries the intimation of a powerful warning, again showing that words can convey multiple meanings. For their part, the suitors also make use of the ambiguity in language. Antinous, the only one daring enough to challenge Telemachus after his speech moves the whole crowd to pity, defends himself and the other suitors by recasting their unjust actions in the language of justice. On his account, it is not the suitors whom Telemachus should blame, but rather his own mother. Penelope asked them to wait until she finished weaving a shroud for Laertes, claiming she feared the Achaean women would reproach her if she let her father-in-law go to his death without a shroud. The suitors, persuaded by this appeal to their "manly honor" (*thumos agēnōr*), thus became the victims of her clever ruse to unweave the shroud each night so that years would stretch on without her being forced to marry (2.103). Antinous's narrative puts a positive spin on the suitors' actions, portraying them as justified in their behaviors considering how Penelope has been "torturing" them; if they left now, he implies, it would be a mark on their manhood (2.115). Just as Polyphemus reframes the act of devouring Odysseus last as a "gift," Antinous reframes the act of eating Telemachus out of house and home as a matter of the suitors maintaining their "honor."

In sum, we should regard the Ithacan assembly as illustrative of Cyclopean (or, more accurately, Polyphemian) tendencies not only on account of the suitors' attitudes and behaviors, but also with respect to their communication. In connecting the Ithacan assembly with Polyphemus, Homer invites audiences to reflect on how the "many-saying" nature of political assemblies, and perhaps human beings more broadly, poses obstacles. In this case, the "many-saying" assembly cannot agree to solve the problem afflicting Telemachus's household, hence the problem remains. Is the message, then, that we ought to follow in Odysseus's footsteps by using violence to eliminate the problem of "many-sayingness"? As argued in the next section, this conclusion might follow if it were not for one troublesome fact: the adjective "polyphemian" is applied not only to the Ithacan assembly, but also to the bard Phemius.

#### 4. THE POLYPHEMIAN BARD

Odysseus describes Phemius as polyphemian in book 22, after the bard rushes to his knees and begs him to spare his life, proclaiming, “You will regret it someday if you kill a bard—me—who sings for gods and men. I am self-taught, and a god has planted in my heart all sorts of songs and stories, and I can sing to you as to a god” (22.345–49). Phemius then calls on Telemachus to corroborate his story that he did not entertain the suitors by choice, insisting, “there were too many of them; they made me come” (22.353). Telemachus vouches for Phemius, as well as the herald, and so Odysseus spares both Medon and Phemius, whom he calls “the many-saying singer,” declaring, “Now you know, and you can tell the world, how much better good deeds are than evil” (22.371–74).

What makes Phemius a “polyphemian” singer in Odysseus’s eyes, and why would he compare an “innocent” man he has just spared to the man-eating Cyclops he boastfully blinded? Returning to the tripartite understanding of what it means to be “many-saying” developed from the earlier analysis of the Cyclops, we find that Phemius seems both to fit and not to fit these criteria. First, though he “speaks” (i.e., sings) literally in his own voice, this capability faces severe limitations, depending on the context. As seen throughout the epic, the bard sings only at the pleasure of others. If those with authority ask him to sing a particular tale or to stop singing—as happens when the Phaeacian king initiates a pause in Demodocus’s singing—he must obey this request. In fact, the bard does not need explicit requests; as Telemachus observes, audiences always want to hear the latest song and the poet must bear their desires in mind.<sup>19</sup> In essence, the bard serves as a musical mouthpiece for the society, particularly its most dominant voices. Thus, given that the Ithacans are depicted as “many-saying,” it is no surprise their bard reflects this many-sayingness. Moreover, in a broader sense, a bard such as Phemius also becomes “many-saying” in that, when the Ithacan suitors are in charge, he must sing what pleases them, while under Odysseus’s rule he must sing a different type of song.

Similarly, while the bard possesses the ability to contradict others or express disagreement, this capability, too, is limited in practicality. In one sense, we see that Phemius’s music does not universally please. He can, then,

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<sup>19</sup> This is perhaps contradicted by the Phaeacians, who take pleasure in hearing a song “already famed throughout the world” (8.73–74). Given their isolation, this song may be new to them, however. Regardless, the point still holds that poets must know their audience and what they desire to hear, whether familiar or new.

to some extent, say what others would rather he not say. Penelope, for one, becomes upset by Phemius's song choice, begging him to play something else (1.337–45). As this shows, the same song, while enjoyable to some, may not be enjoyable to others. We can imagine how the tale of the Cyclopes itself would be received in Ithaca. Whereas the Phaeacians take great pleasure in hearing this tale, it would not please Aegyptius; for him, his son's dire fate would not, as in the court of Alcinous, be "enjoyed as after-dinner entertainment."<sup>20</sup> Yet, even if some might find the bard's music disagreeable, his music must nonetheless satisfy whoever has greater authority. If he gratifies those with power over him, then he is treated well, but, if he refuses, then he risks verbal abuse, physical abuse, exile, or worse. When relating the story of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, the epic directly mentions the possibility of exile for a bard who displeases: "And with her was a singer whom Agamemnon, when he left for Troy, had strictly ordered to guard his wife. But when the gods doomed her to be undone, Aegisthus took the singer of tales to a desert island and left him there for the dogs and birds" (3.262–71). At the same time, if the bard does the bidding of an unjust political regime instead of standing up to it, then he may find himself at risk when a new regime replaces it, as Phemius does upon Odysseus's return. The musician thus occupies a precarious position in archaic Greek society. He plays a key role in helping to shore up the power of others, but he never knows if this will ultimately go well for him or not.

While Phemius's ability to speak independently and to contradict his audience may be constrained, what about his capacity to play with the many-ness of meaning? Since antiquity, scholars have speculated on the content of Phemius's song in book 1. Some argue that he must have pandered to the suitors by singing of Odysseus's death.<sup>21</sup> Others contend that the allusion to Athena's vengeance upon the Greeks for Ajax's rape of Cassandra (1.327) insinuates that Phemius intends his song as a critique of the suitors for pursuing an impious marriage.<sup>22</sup> Yet, as Oliver Thomas convincingly argues, all that we can say for sure is that "the poet leaves both the contents and motivations of Phemius's song tantalizingly vague; he prompts us to explore them without providing the materials for an answer."<sup>23</sup> In doing so, Homer, as bard, himself

<sup>20</sup> G. E. Dimock Jr., "The Name of Odysseus," *Hudson Review* 9, no. 1 (1956): 67.

<sup>21</sup> Most recently, see Jesper Svenbro, *La parole et le marbre: Aux origines de la poésie grecque* (Lund: Klassiska Institutionen, 1976), 19–21.

<sup>22</sup> Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists*, trans. Charles Duke Yonge (London: Bohn, 1854), 1.24.

<sup>23</sup> Oliver Thomas, "Phemius Suite," *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, no. 134 (2014): 99.

plays with the ambiguity of language. He thereby shows one respect in which a bard might be fully “many-saying.” Even if constrained to sing what others find pleasing, he still possesses the ability to convey a variety of intentions or messages through his songs. Just as Polyphemus twisted the meaning of the word “gift” to suit his perverse intentions, the bard can engage in subtle wordplay while still conceivably presenting himself as unintentionally contradicting the prevailing political regime.

Given the musician’s power to communicate subversive messages, why would Odysseus spare Phemius? He expressly wants Phemius to sing henceforth of “how much better good deeds are than evil,” yet the musician’s ability to convey different meanings leaves open the possibility that Phemius will tell an entirely different tale about good and evil, one unfavorable to Odysseus’s rule. The answer seems to lie in Phemius’s warning to Odysseus that if he kills him, the gods will disapprove. Through this, the *Odyssey* signals that the singer’s “many-saying” nature is divinely ordained.<sup>24</sup> As Phemius himself maintains, a god has planted in him various songs and stories. The bard must therefore be spared even if he is a threat to earthly authority because he is, in essence, a divine vessel. We cannot forget the *Odyssey*’s opening line: “Speak to me, Muse. . .” The divine Muse likewise moves the poet Demodocus to sing (8.73). While the poet’s mortal audience restricts his ability to sing freely, ultimate control over his voice lies with the gods, who enable him to “speak” differently from the prevailing truth of the regime in power. Telemachus’s assertion in response to Penelope’s criticism of Phemius’s song choice confirms the supremacy of divine authority: “Singers are not responsible; Zeus is, who gives what he wants to every man on earth” (1.347–49). If the bard speaks differently, that too is the will of the gods in the Homeric worldview. The bard’s ability to convey multiple messages through music provides, it seems, a safeguard for ensuring that the divine can speak even when mortal leaders wish to hear a different song.

## CONCLUSION

Dionysius of Halicarnassus described Homer as “the poet above all others many-voiced” (*poluphōnotatos hapantōn poiētōn*).<sup>25</sup> One could take this as

<sup>24</sup> On doublespeak as a divine capacity in the ancient Greek tradition, see Jessica Elbert Decker, “I Will Tell a Double Tale: Double Speak in the Ancient Greek Poetic Tradition,” *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy* 25, no. 2 (2021): 237–48.

<sup>25</sup> Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *De compositione verborum*, in *Dionysii Halicarnasei quae exstant*, vol. 6, ed. Ludwig Radermacher and Hermann Usener (Leipzig: Teubner, 1929), XVI. For further evidence of Homer’s ability to “speak to at least two different audiences,” see Timothy W. Burns,

an observation of the multitude of voices represented in Homeric epic. Like staring into the seemingly endless reflection of images created by two facing mirrors, the *Odyssey* contains voices within voices.<sup>26</sup> Audiences encounter not only the mysterious voice of the bard narrating the epic tale, but within the tale dozens of other narrators, many of whom themselves adopt a plurality of voices. Summing up the manyness of voices in the epic, Lillian Doherty writes, “The sheer number and variety of internal narratives in the *Odyssey* make the prospect of cataloging them a daunting one.”<sup>27</sup>

Beyond the presence of a multitude of characters’ voices, the *Odyssey* is arguably many-saying in yet another sense: it relates stories from many different places. This makes sense given that bards “were among the first to break the primeval rule that a man lives, works and dies within his tribe or community.”<sup>28</sup> As traveling performers, bards helped audiences experience events taking place in faraway lands, allowing them to picture peoples and places they might never experience firsthand. To achieve this goal, they often incorporated the stories of other peoples into their own music. From the *Epic of Gilgamesh* to *Arabian Nights*, such strong parallels exist between the *Odyssey* and earlier folktales from throughout the world, especially the Near East, that Homer’s engagement with these tales is generally acknowledged. The Cyclopes story itself serves as an example.<sup>29</sup> In its very composition, the *Odyssey* thus blurs the line between what is local and what is foreign, encouraging its audience to explore the many voices of humankind and to consider whether the “many-saying” nature of the world might also be divinely ordained. As my argument in this essay would suggest, in doing so, it sublimely moves its audience to grapple with ideas they, like the Cyclopes, express with one voice.

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“Philosophy and Poetry: A New Look at an Old Quarrel,” *American Political Science Review* 109, no. 2 (2015): 336.

<sup>26</sup> The recursive nature of the *Odyssey* is sometimes described using the literary term *mise en abyme* (“placed into the abyss”). Italo Calvino argues that the story of the *Odyssey* repeats itself within its own framing, as narrators such as Proteus and the Sirens begin to sing what looks like the song of the *Odyssey* itself. Odysseus’s return is thus already inscribed in the story before it even “begins.” Italo Calvino, *The Uses of Literature*, trans. Patrick Creagh (Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1986), 135–45.

<sup>27</sup> Lillian Eileen Doherty, *Siren Songs: Gender, Audiences, and Narrators in the “Odyssey”* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 128.

<sup>28</sup> M. I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus* (New York: Viking, 1954), 36–37.

<sup>29</sup> On the *Cyclopeia* as an amalgam of foreign folktales, see, e.g., Denys Page, *The Homeric Odyssey: The Mary Flexner Lectures Delivered at Bryn Mawr College Pennsylvania* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1955), chap. 1; Douglas Frame, *The Myth of Return in Early Greek Epic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1978), 44–46; and Emily Blanchard West, “An Indic Reflex of the Homeric *Cyclopeia*,” *Classical Journal* 101, no. 2 (2005/2006): 125–60.





## Zarathustra's Task and the Promise of Contemplation

LORRAINE SMITH PANGLE

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

*lorraineangle@austin.utexas.edu*

**Abstract:** The problem of philosophy's proper task is the central question driving the drama of Nietzsche's protagonist and alter ego in the book he would call his deepest book, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. This struggle leads Zarathustra ultimately to the thought that a wise man's highest purpose is to achieve and exemplify an unbounded affirmation of all that is, or creative contemplation of the cosmos, an idea that he long resists but finally embraces in the important and little-studied chapter "Before Sunrise." In examining why this solution is so promising for Zarathustra, this article uncovers an unexpected kinship between Nietzsche's thought and ancient thought; in examining why this solution is ultimately unsatisfying to him, it sheds light on both the limits of that kinship and important ambivalences in Nietzsche's most self-reflective and self-critical hero.

The problem of action and contemplation is a crucial one for all political philosophers. Each of them has sought both a retreat for solitary contemplation and a way to influence the world; each has recognized a tension between these goals, yet each has understood the tension differently and has taken a different approach to navigating it. At one pole is Plato, who compared the city to a cave, the discovery of the truth to an ascent to the light of the sun, and the philosophic life to a journey to the isles of the blessed, yet somehow found himself more than once on the boat to Sicily to advise the tyrant Dionysius. At the other pole is Machiavelli, who yearned for a political life and grieved his fall from favor, yet cherished the quiet study he entered reverently in pure robes to commune with the wise men of old. A noble attempt to combine

action and contemplation in equal measures ended when the head of Thomas More fell from the chopping block. While the Enlightenment promised to close the breach by bringing the light of the sun into the cave and bringing philosophy to the relief of man's estate, Nietzsche was not the first though perhaps the most profound of those who judged the Enlightenment's ultimate effect on life to be devastating, arguing that it destroyed the horizons humans need to thrive and ushered in the death of God. Yet Nietzsche too wrestled with the problem of action and contemplation, from his early aspirations for cultural influence to his contemplative but also therapeutic retreat in his middle period to his final teachings that the philosophers of the future must be legislators.

One especially rich and underexplored vein of reflection on the problem runs through Nietzsche's masterpiece *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. This work is usually read as an enigmatic and poetic presentation of Nietzsche's mature philosophy through the sayings of a wise sage. While each of its speeches is indeed full of provocative insights, the book is less well understood as the drama of Nietzsche's alter ego's unfolding odyssey of self-discovery and self-criticism, a drama that turns upon his struggle with the problem of wisdom's proper task.<sup>1</sup> Zarathustra embodies an especially intense version of Nietzsche's yearnings for a radical transformation of the world that he finds broken and longs to redeem. As the story opens he has spent years in solitary reflection but has grown tired of it, finding that it fails to satisfy his deep desire to be active in the world in a generous, self-expansive way. Zarathustra's dissatisfaction with the most rarified form of contemplation is summed up in the chapter "On Immaculate Perception": contemplation that seeks only understanding is too passive, too pale, too desiccated to satisfy the deepest human yearnings for full, challenging, creative, procreative life. The imagery and language of the story assimilate Zarathustra much more to Jesus or to an ambivalent Old Testament prophet, charged with a mission of reform, than to a contemplative philosopher. Yet another strand of imagery is distinctly Platonic, hinting at another powerful current in the work. On the first page Zarathustra emerges from his cave to the light of the sun. Like

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<sup>1</sup> Following a problematic tendency to try to distill consistent doctrines from the profusion of Nietzsche's often contradictory statements across many works with little attention to deliberate paradox or to context, most scholars have either treated *TSZ* as a poetically presented series of doctrines or ignored it entirely. Characteristic is the view of Arthur Danto in *Nietzsche as Philosopher: An Original Study* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), who denies any "ordered development" or "direction of argument" to the book (19–20). Those who take its literary qualities seriously in their own right still tend to find no continuous plot through the first three parts: see, e.g., Kathleen Higgins, *Nietzsche's Zarathustra* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987).

the philosophers in the *Republic*, he cherishes a life not of public service but of conversation with a few friends in a retreat Nietzsche intriguingly calls the “Blessed Isles.”<sup>2</sup> True, Zarathustra feels called to leave his friends for a renewed solitude and his final trial at the end of Part II, much as Jesus retreats to the Garden of Gethsemane before the great painful climax of his mission among men. But instead of that trial Zarathustra reports a vision he has already had and then, steeling himself for suffering (*TSZ* 2, “On Involuntary Bliss”), he instead experiences a peak moment of joyful contemplation in “Before Sunrise.” In this moment of contemplating and accepting the whole cosmos and all of humanity just as they are, he finds what is arguably the best solution to the problem of his own life’s task as he has come to understand it, and even a promising realization of what he at first conceived of as the task of a future “overman,” that of redeeming human life from its bondage to nonsense and accident.

This article will attempt to demonstrate, then, that *TSZ* is a richer and more subtle drama than has been generally appreciated, a drama that is partly about attempts to win and educate followers but mainly about Zarathustra’s unfolding awareness and self-awareness; that the problem of action and contemplation lies at its heart; that this is a problem that Zarathustra does not fully solve; and that the work when read in this way provides especially honest and rich reflections on Nietzsche’s own wrestlings with this problem. I will argue that Zarathustra’s contemplative withdrawal has two stages with two distinct motives. First, in retreating to the Blessed Isles with his friends, he turns away from the rabble that is not ready for his message and from the vulgar noise of modern mass politics. But second and more important is Zarathustra’s deepening discovery that there is something unhealthy and reactive precisely in his wish to change the world, that there is something twisted even or precisely in his wish to serve, and that the greatest deed he can perform is quite possibly the non-deed of a quiet, contemplative acceptance of the whole. I will then look closely at the underexamined chapter “Beyond Sunrise” in which this latter solution is adumbrated—a solution uniquely Nietzschean but with some surprisingly Platonic resonances. Finally, I will offer some hypotheses on why Zarathustra ultimately finds contemplation unsatisfying and how his ambivalence about it helps explain the book’s inconclusive ending.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Peter Groff illuminates the classical resonances of Nietzsche’s name for the islands in “Zarathustra’s Blessed Isles: Before and after Great Politics,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 52, no. 1 (2021): 135–63.

<sup>3</sup> While many have observed the dramatic character of *TSZ*, few have read it as an internal drama of self-discovery and self-criticism. The two who have done so most fully are Robert Pippin in “Nietzsche: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*,” in *Introductions to Nietzsche*, ed. Robert B. Pippin (Cambridge:

## THE DRAMA OF ZARATHUSTRA

As Zarathustra struggles with his oscillating desires to retreat from and to try to redeem humanity, the latter impetus carries him down many false paths. Emerging from ten years of solitude, he begins by trying to preach in public as Jesus did, but quickly he concludes that “I am not the mouth for these ears” (*TSZ* I, Prologue, 5),<sup>4</sup> and turns instead to seeking disciples by ones and twos. But for all the compelling things he has to say to them, his life as a teacher even of select disciples is disappointing as well. Twice at the end of Part II, just before he leaves the followers to whom we never see him return, he shakes his head in dismay at how little they understand (*TSZ* II, “Poets,” 239; “Soothsayer”; cf. “Great Events”).<sup>5</sup> Zarathustra’s frustration is in part that of many prophets who find their followers unprepared for their message. But a deeper problem lies in Zarathustra’s own ambivalence. He of course wants his followers to understand him well, as few or none of them do, but he also wavers between wanting to keep them as disciples and assistants who, as he puts it, will write “my will” on “my tablets” (*TSZ* III, “Involuntary Bliss”) and wanting them to find their own wisdom. If they do the latter he is also not quite clear on whether they should become his partners in a shared project or rival creators who would overturn his teachings for other teachings entirely. This wavering is in fact just one domain of what proves to be

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Cambridge University Press, 2011), 152–72, and Heinrich Meier, in *What Is Nietzsche’s Zarathustra?*, trans. Justin Gottschalk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021). While Pippin does not focus on contemplation per se or comment on the chapter “Before Sunrise,” Meier understands the tension between action and contemplation, or Zarathustra the prophet and Zarathustra the philosopher, to be key to the story. Meier’s interpretation is especially helpful in stating this problem so powerfully and pursuing it so persistently. On his reading Zarathustra discovers himself to be not a poet, prophet, or legislator but a philosopher whose true task is theoretical, and the drama of the text centers on his freeing himself from the constraints of poetry, from his hopes for the future, and from the tendency of both resentment and the will to power to infect philosophy. Laurence Lampert offers a good critique of these conclusions in “On Heinrich Meier’s *What Is Nietzsche’s Zarathustra?* A Philosophical Confrontation,” *Interpretation* 48, no. 3 (2022): 379–96, at the heart of which is a compelling account of “The Dancing Song,” its connection to “On Self-Overcoming,” and the centrality of the insight into the will to power. Lampert himself, in *Nietzsche’s Teaching: An Interpretation of “Thus Spoke Zarathustra”* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), interprets *TSZ* as a drama of *discovery*, in which Zarathustra learns the truths of the will to power and the eternal return, but he considers these teachings to provide the basis for a satisfactory synthesis of the contemplative and world-transformative impulses within Zarathustra, and even his yes-saying and tragic impulses. I agree with Meier that the tensions are far more serious and persistent and that they drive the drama of the story far more than Lampert allows. But where Meier ultimately finds a clear resolution to the key questions in favor of pure contemplation, I find enduring and revealing ambivalences.

<sup>4</sup> All quotations from *TSZ* are taken from *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1954), with occasional emendations.

<sup>5</sup> Lampert notes Zarathustra’s growing distance from his followers in Part II of *TSZ*: see *Nietzsche’s Teaching*, 80, 83.

the true, internal drama of the book, as Zarathustra fights his own demons, makes his own discoveries, and overcomes his own limitations. The important dialogues in the book are between him and his own soul, his two lovers Wisdom and Life, his solitude, his stillest hour, the sun, night, heaven, his own youth, and a panoply of magical and comical characters who in different ways echo or ape him and seem to represent different aspects of himself. At the heart of this drama, and bound up with his discovery of the will to power, as I will argue in this section, is his progressive confrontation with his own spirit of nay-saying or resentment.

Just as Zarathustra struggles to find followers and to guide them towards independence, he struggles with his own hopes. Dismayed by the decline of modern man and the threat of humanity's total collapse into the last man, Zarathustra yearns to prepare the way for the overman, a great redeemer who will usher in a great noon, or perhaps a new dawn. Of the overman himself he speaks in glowing but enigmatic terms. He will be as high above us as we are above the apes, yet he will be true to the earth. He will embody the spirit of lightness and play, yet he will end the reign of chance and nonsense that has so far characterized all of human history. All of this is not only hazy but apocalyptic, a problem for one who proclaims that we must give up otherworldly dreams, learn to love the earth, and say yes to what is.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Zarathustra's account of the overman seems contradictory: the overman will be the one leader (or unified cadre of leaders) who will "throw a yoke over the thousand necks" of the beast that is human valuing to give humanity "one goal" (*TSZ I*, "Thousand and One Goals"), but somehow the *overmen* will also be diverse, competing, thronging "on a thousand bridges" to the future, and climbing to vast heights with endless "contradictions among the steps and the climbers" (*TSZ II*, "Tarantulas"). Now perhaps Zarathustra is just confused. Throughout Part II, however, there are in fact repeated hints that he is becoming aware of the problems we have noted and is beginning to reconsider his understanding both of the overman and of his own self-sacrificial impulse to devote himself to bringing the overman into being. This rethinking is driven above all by his growing understanding of the will to power. Let us trace some of the signposts Nietzsche provides for it.

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<sup>6</sup> Bernard Reginster argues that the haziness of this notion is not a problem because what is really valuable is not achieving the overman but having something to strive for: see *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 245. Whether hazy ideals are not still especially dangerous remains a question.

At the start of Part II, Zarathustra reflects on the problem of hazy ideals: “God is a conjecture; but I desire that our conjectures should be limited by what is thinkable. Could you think a god? But this is what the will to truth should mean to you: that everything be changed into what is thinkable for man, visible for man, feelable by man.” To be sure, he says this precisely in the context of calling on his followers to help him “create” the overman. But he adds that “the poets lie too much,” an enigmatical and pregnant thought to which he will return (*TSZ II*, “Blessed Isles”). Soon thereafter, still proclaiming the overman, but now beginning to reflect more deeply on his insight of the will to power (*TSZ I*, “Thousand and One Goals”), Zarathustra offers his image of many contending overmen, explaining as “the secret of all life,” known to “the wisest,” that “struggle and inequality are present even in beauty, and also war for power and more power” (*TSZ II*, “Tarantulas”). Then he turns this thought of progressive struggle and overcoming on himself. Life simply is will to power, he says now; which means dynamic and unending overcoming and self-overcoming. “Whatever I create and however much I love it—soon I must oppose it and my love; thus my will wills it” (*TSZ II*, “Self-Overcoming”). Thus we are not altogether unprepared when he casts doubt on his own creation, the overman. The poets, he says again, “lie too much,” this time counting himself among them. To be sure, the truth is elusive and it takes a poet’s creative insight to capture it, yet poets go beyond what is necessary. “We poets,” Zarathustra says, are prone to imagining that nature herself is in love with us; “we” are prone to muddying our waters in order to seem deep; “we” put our “motley bastards” on clouds “and call them gods and overmen” (*TSZ II*, “Poets”). As Zarathustra tires of being a poet and turns to a new and deeper level of self-exploration, is he also preparing to turn away from his hopes for the overman, then, at least in the form of a future savior who will transform the world once and for all? This possibility is at least lent support by the sharp reduction in references to the overman after this point in the book.<sup>7</sup>

Closely tied to Zarathustra’s growing understanding of the will to power is another current of reflections running through these chapters on the attractions of devotion and self-sacrifice, which gradually comes to sight

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<sup>7</sup> For the idea that Zarathustra retreats from his early hopes for the overman, see esp. Pippin, “Nietzsche: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*,” 153, 167; Meier, *What Is Nietzsche’s Zarathustra?*, 39, 59, 70. But this remains a distinctly minority view; for a recent defense of the overman as serious project see Paul S. Loeb, “Genuine Philosophers, Value-Creation, and Will to Power: An Exegesis of Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil* §211,” in *Nietzsche’s Metaphilosophy: The Nature, Method, and Aims of Philosophy*, ed. Paul S. Loeb and Matthew Meyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 83–105.

as disguised or “crooked” expressions of the will to power (*TSZ* II, “Self-Overcoming”). Zarathustra begins his mission eager to give himself to his children, to his project, and to the future overman. In his last speech in Part I he proclaims as a new, highest virtue the “gift-giving virtue,” praising his followers’ yearning “to become sacrifices and gifts,” who take only because they are insatiable to give (*TSZ* I, “Gift-Giving Virtue”). Early in Part II Zarathustra voices again his desire to sacrifice himself to his love (*TSZ* II, “Pitying”), but in the next chapter he acknowledges that he has a certain kinship with self-denying, life-denying priests. Next, reflecting on the rabble, he wonders whether it was his nausea that “created wings” for him to fly to higher spheres to escape them (*TSZ* II, “Rabble”). Then, reflecting on the resentful, reactive preachers of equality whom he portrays as tarantulas, he acknowledges that “the tarantula, my old enemy, bit me” (*TSZ* II, “Tarantulas”). To what extent is his own project just a reaction against the majority of degenerate human beings that he despises but finds so powerful? Then he observes the habit of famous intellectuals to serve the people, moved by the impulse of virtue to seek out the object of dedication that will benefit most from its service. “And verily, you famous wise men, you yourselves have grown with the spirit and virtue of the people.” But what these famous wise men do not understand is what spirit is: “Spirit is the life that itself cuts into life: with its own agony it increases its own knowledge. . . . And the happiness of the spirit is this: to be anointed and through tears to be consecrated as a sacrificial animal” (*TSZ* II, “Famous Wise Men”). Is Zarathustra’s own impulse to serve humanity more similar to the impulse of the famous wise men than it might at first seem?

At this point comes “The Night Song,” and in it Zarathustra’s thoughts take a sharp turn. He finds himself thirsty among fountains, a lover yearning to be loved, a giver lonely in his giving and tired of his own overflow. Pouring himself out for others is not happiness; later his Solitude will call it forsakenness (*TSZ* II, “Return Home”). On the heels of this meditation comes the very different “Dancing Song.” This, too, is a love song, expressing Zarathustra’s tangled loves for both life and wisdom. But this song he prefaces by chastising the god Cupid, who tempts us to lose and forget ourselves in love, and though he imagines himself sinking into the unfathomable, Zarathustra in fact begins to find his footing. Life is changeable but not unfathomable; life herself confirms to Zarathustra that she and his wild wisdom look just the same. If he has not captured the final truth about life, he has come very close, grasping the reason why we love life—that we love to love and to will—and the reason for life’s very changeability—that, as she herself has taught him, life is “that which must always overcome itself” (*TSZ* II, “Self-Overcoming”).

To be sure, at the end of “The Dancing Song” Zarathustra doubts himself, and in the following “Tomb Song” he mourns the other hopes and dreams that have proved unfounded. But in “On Self Overcoming” Zarathustra confidently proclaims to “the wisest” that he has unlocked the riddle of life as will to power. Even the will to obey grows out of will to power: where the weaker are persuaded to serve the stronger, they do so “in order to be master over what is weaker still.” And “where men make sacrifices and serve and cast amorous glances, there too is the will to be master.” The will to procreate, the drive towards what is higher, the sacrifice of life itself, “all this is one, and one secret. . . . Life sacrifices itself for power” (*TSZ* II, “Self-Overcoming”). In keeping with this thought, Zarathustra will say later that what he “once called the gift-giving virtue” is better characterized as the yearning of what is high when it “longs downward for power”: it is the will to power itself (*TSZ* III, “Three Evils”).

All of this prepares us to understand Zarathustra’s strange comment in “On Poets” that “since I have come to know the body better . . . the spirit is to me only quasi-spirit.” The spirit that yearns to give or to sacrifice itself, to cut into itself, or even to create something to which it can bow down is not the deepest thing in us; it is only that deepest thing in disguise, walking on crooked paths. And it is the culmination of this current of thought, together with the current of thought that has been calling into question the coherence of the idea of the overman, that prepares Zarathustra for his statement that the poets who “put their motley bastards on clouds and call them gods and overmen” “lie too much” (*TSZ* II, “Poets”).<sup>8</sup>

Where does this fresh, frank embrace of the will to power leave Zarathustra? He has taken an important step towards accepting and affirming what he is and towards accepting and affirming life in all its competitive, creative dynamism, without imagining that it is his task to suffer so that something decisively different and better may ultimately come about—but only one step. As he grows weary of the spirit of the poet, he feels an even heavier weariness and sense of futility creeping over him. Does the will to power not mean that every achievement is bound to be overturned, in an endless churning succession of revolutions and counterrevolutions? Does it not then mean the futility of every hope? Futility is the message of the soothsayer who now appears to him, proclaiming that all that is must be overcome and die. In his nightmare

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<sup>8</sup> Lampert, who seeks always to harmonize Zarathustra the poet with Zarathustra the philosopher, interprets this speech as merely Zarathustra’s test of one of his disciples (*Nietzsche’s Teaching*, 129).



vision that follows, “life that had been overcome looked at me out of glass coffins” (*TSZ* II, “Soothsayer”).

But it is not only and not even primarily the transience of things that troubles Zarathustra as he thinks through the implications of the will to power for the meaning of time. He begins his reflection on time in the next chapter with the observation that when he looks at the present and the past of man, he sees nothing but “fragment and riddle and dreadful accident”; hence he yearns to be—indeed he proclaims himself to be—“a creator . . . and a bridge to the future” that will redeem these accidents (*TSZ* II, “On Redemption”). Here Zarathustra makes no mention of the overman as a future redeemer to which he himself is only herald. With his embrace of the will to power, Zarathustra is now conceiving of himself not as forerunner but as creator.

But in this new self-understanding he finds himself also “a cripple at the bridge.” What is his impediment? He does not quite say, but what he goes on to speak of suggests the following knot of problems. If our deepest drive is a drive simply to acquire and to discharge power, a desire simply for overcoming and self-overcoming, how can that goal escape being arbitrary? How, then, will our overcoming not be defined by reaction and no-saying towards what exists, since overcoming as such is no-saying? Finally, if our deepest yearning is simply the impulse to overcome, how can we avoid resenting whatever we did not create, do not control, and are simply forced to accept? This is the reason for Zarathustra’s strangely extreme claim that the spirit of revenge goads us *whenever* we encounter the “it was,” or “the stone that we cannot move,” experiencing it as a “dungeon” (*TSZ* II, “Redemption”). Will as pure will has no bounds because it has no natural *telos*, and having no bounds, it rails at all that it did not create. This is the chief problem of time as Zarathustra expounds it, more powerful and deeper than the sadness that what we care about must pass away, which certainly also makes an appearance in these chapters but is not the crux of them.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Here I follow Thomas Pangle’s argument that it is essentially what proclaims itself as permanent and the past as such that the will rails at according to Zarathustra: see “The ‘Warrior Spirit’ as an Inlet to the Political Philosophy of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra,” *Nietzsche-Studien* 15 (1986): 171–72. Pippin stresses Zarathustra’s resentment at the way the past constrains him by shaping him without his consent: “Irony and Affirmation in Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*,” in *Nietzsche’s New Seas*, ed. Michael Gillespie and Tracy Strong (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 54. Martin Heidegger, however, takes the spirit of revenge primarily as revenge against transience; he sees the positing of eternal ideas as the great act of revenge, and Zarathustra’s and our true task as learning to accept transience and say yes to it in the right spirit. According to Heidegger, Nietzsche never successfully escaped the spirit of revenge: “Who Is Nietzsche’s Zarathustra?,” *Review of Metaphysics* 20, no. 3

It is willing that liberates, Zarathustra finds, and true liberation would come only if one could will the all, past as well as present and future. “For that will which is the will to power must will something higher than any reconciliation, but how shall this be brought about? Who could teach it also to will backwards?” he asks in almost his last speech to his followers (*TSZ* II, “Redemption”). At this moment he suddenly looks shocked and falls silent: here we seem to have the first inkling that willing and proclaiming the eternal return is his life’s task. But this is a task that Zarathustra never completes. He senses perhaps that humanity is not ready for his strange teaching. Perhaps more seriously, he senses that he is not ready for it himself.

#### BECOMING THE OVERMAN

The drama of the latter half of *TSZ* is Zarathustra’s own struggle to come to terms with the teaching of the eternal return and with the purported insight that lies behind it, the necessary interconnection of all things, and in so doing to overcome his own spirit of no-saying, his spirit of gravity, and his susceptibility to the spirit of revenge. But might this not be the most important human task altogether, in his developing understanding? This possibility fits with a curious idea that emerges as the discussion of the eternal return unfolds, namely, that becoming the overman *is* just a matter of digesting or spitting out one’s spirit of heaviness and nausea, and of fully affirming the complete interdependent whole of all that was and is and must be.<sup>10</sup> This thought is conveyed through Zarathustra’s story of the shepherd who bites off the head of the snake that is choking him, the triumphant conclusion to his first, harrowing account of the eternal return (*TSZ* III, “Vision and Riddle,” 2). In his intimate encounter with what is most vile and nauseating, the shepherd takes into himself “all that is heaviest and blackest,” spits it far away, and leaps up “no longer shepherd, no longer human—one changed, radiant, laughing.” The shepherd has become the overman. But gradually it becomes clear that the shepherd is none other than Zarathustra as he comes to terms with his own most “abysmal thought” (*TSZ* III, “Involuntary Bliss”), or as he elaborates much later, with “that monster that crawled down my throat and suffocated me,” the thought that “eternally recurs . . . the small man,” and that even man’s “best” and “greatest” is “all too small” (*TSZ* III,

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(1967): 422–24, 427.

<sup>10</sup> As Nietzsche writes in *Ecce Homo*, “Zarathustra once defines, quite strictly, his task—it is mine, too—and there is no mistaking his meaning: he says Yes to the point of justifying, of redeeming even all of the past.” *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 308.

“Convalescent,” 2). To bite off the head of the snake is to allow the ring of time to close—for “every ring strives and turns to reach itself again” (*TSZ* II, “Virtuous”)—or to accept that there is no head, no direction, no final purpose to human life, and to accept that “the center is everywhere” (*TSZ* III, “Convalescent,” 2). Is not what Zarathustra bites off and spits out, then, his own nausea with what is and his corresponding hope to give humanity a new course and meaning? If so, precisely to accept *this* dismal truth is to be liberated. In the moment of affirming life in the right spirit one transforms oneself, overcomes the spirit of revenge and the spirit of gravity, redeems everything, and becomes the overman to the extent that that is possible.<sup>11</sup> This would seem to be the lesson that Zarathustra draws or struggles to draw or glimpses but recoils from drawing, in a great shuddering hesitation that characterizes the whole second half of the book. But for at least a crucial moment, in the two chapters that follow the revelation of the eternal return, Zarathustra does ponder the possibility that achieving this affirmation of life is his task, his fulfillment, and his happiness.

In “On Involuntary Bliss,” Zarathustra returns to an old desire to turn his back on happiness and “offer himself up to all unhappiness,” for the sake of a hazily conceived great, final struggle of testing and self-overcoming. But in trying to rouse himself to this Herculean effort, he feels slipping over himself a deep, quiet, contemplative happiness which he views as a temptation—whether to lapse into some self-deception or to evade some hard task he does not say—a happiness he perceives as smooth-tongued and flattering, treacherous in its beauty, overtaking him unsought and even against his will before he is ready for it, or perhaps before he thinks he has earned it. Zarathustra is drawn in both directions, but it is the latter that at least for a time wins out that same night, in the fascinating chapter “Before Sunrise.”

#### “BEFORE SUNRISE”

In the quiet before dawn, Zarathustra communes with the beauty and the wisdom of heaven. Contemplation as he experiences it now is not the pale, moon-like, envious gaze of those who strive for immaculate perception or pure selflessness, but something joyful and expansive, entailing a grasp of heaven’s loftiest heights and of abysses of light “deeper than day has ever known.” Such contemplation is creative and generative. In affirming and

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 305: in the figure of Zarathustra “man has been overcome at every moment; the concept of the ‘overman’ has here become the greatest reality.”

blessing the world, contemplation gives it meaning and security and even makes it fully a world. Zarathustra proclaims,

I have become one who blesses and says yes; and I fought long for that and was a fighter that I might one day get my hands free to bless. But this is my blessing: to stand over every single thing as its own heaven, as its round roof, its azure bell, and eternal security; and blessed is he who blesses thus. For all things have been baptized in the well of eternity and are beyond good and evil, and good and evil themselves are but intervening shadows and damp depressions and drifting clouds.

What precisely is Zarathustra giving the world in gathering it under his contemplative gaze?<sup>12</sup> In his dialogue with his Solitude soon afterwards he gives further hints: here with her, Solitude tells him, “all things come caressingly to your discourse . . . for they want to ride on your back.” He echoes her: “Here all being wishes to become word, all becoming wishes to learn from me how to speak” (TSZ III, “Return Home”). Or as Nietzsche puts the same thought more prosaically in *Beyond Good and Evil* 21, “In the ‘in-itself’ there is nothing of ‘causal connection,’ of ‘necessity,’ or of . . . rule of law. It is we alone who have devised cause, sequence, for-each-other, relativity, constraint, number, law, freedom, motive, and purpose; and when we project and mix this symbol world into things as if it existed ‘in itself,’ we act once more as we have always acted—*mythologically*.”<sup>13</sup> It is humans who in contemplating the world give it its articulate structure, its ordered regularity, its quantities and qualities, its division into kinds, its unity as a whole. Already before his announcement of the eternal return Zarathustra said to his followers, “what you have called world, that shall be created first by you: your reason, your image, your will, your love shall thus be realized” (TSZ II, “Blessed Isles”). Later he suggested to “the wisest” that this is what they are indeed striving to do: “A will to the thinkability of all beings: this *I* call your will. You want to *make* all being thinkable, for you doubt with well-founded suspicion that it is already thinkable. But it shall yield and bend for you. . . . That is your *whole* will, you who are wisest: a will to power” (TSZ II, “Self-Overcoming,” emphasis added). Or, as Nietzsche says in *BGE* 9, “philosophy is the most spiritual/intellectual [*geistliche*] will to power.”

<sup>12</sup> Lampert understands Zarathustra to be giving it the “eternal security” of affirming and hence somehow ensuring its eternal return, but Zarathustra is silent on the eternal return here, and a closer look at this speech and at others that echo it suggests that something different may be at work.

<sup>13</sup> Translations from *BGE* are taken from *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1992).

The depths of the heavens in the pale light before dawn, in which neither sun nor star is visible, allows Zarathustra a glimpse of the undifferentiated source of all things that precedes human articulation. It is unbounded and indefinite, yet it lends itself to definition and articulation: Zarathustra's human soul and the all-encompassing heaven he addresses are akin.<sup>14</sup> As he puts it a little later, reporting a dream he had at the same pre-dawn hour,

Measurable by him who has time, weighable by a good weigher, reachable by strong winds, guessable by divine nutcrackers: thus my dream found the world. . . . How did it have the patience or the time to weigh the world? Did my wisdom secretly urge it, my laughing, wide-awake day-wisdom which mocks all "infinite worlds"? For it speaks: "Wherever there is force, *number* will become mistress: she has more force."

How surely my dream looked upon this finite world, not inquisitively, not acquisitively, not afraid, not begging, as if a full apple offered itself to my hand . . . thus the world offered itself to me. . . . As if delicate hands carried a shrine towards me, a shrine open for the delight of bashful, adoring eyes, thus the world offered itself to me today; not riddle enough to frighten away human love, not solution enough to put to sleep human wisdom: a humanly good thing the world was to me today, though one speaks so much evil of it. (*TSZ* III, "Three Evils")

Thus Nietzsche suggests again that the world is knowable—not the "true world" of the pure mind or of divine revelation, but the humanly accessible world of experience, brought to clear articulation by the human mind. With this Nietzsche comes close to an important if underappreciated strand in classical thought, not the doctrine of the separate ideas as the true beings taught by Platonism, but the suggestion explored and powerfully articulated in Plato's dialogue on knowledge, the *Theaetetus*, where Socrates is silent on the doctrine of the separate ideas, takes with utmost seriousness the Protagorean idea of radical flux, follows Protagoras in warning against the idea that beings exist "themselves by themselves" apart from us, and offers a rich exploration of the possibility that beings and their class characters and qualities and quantitative relations are constituted by the interaction between our minds and what we experience. Precisely in doing so, however, he refutes Protagoras's extreme relativism through a careful analysis of both common experience and common opinion, showing that the world is not mere flux and that we share the same world; surrounding and informing this analysis is the work of the mathematician Theaetetus, whose science sheds light on the universal necessities of thought, although as Socrates shows it cannot

<sup>14</sup> See Meier, *What Is Nietzsche's Zarathustra?*, 97.

give infallible knowledge of the beings.<sup>15</sup> The difference between Plato on this reading and Nietzsche is one of degree. Where Nietzsche finds only “a little reason . . . scattered from star to star,” and proclaims that all things fundamentally “dance on the feet of chance,” Socrates and his followers discover in the world illuminated by mind a knowable nature, divided into discrete kinds and governed by discoverable necessities of a kind, even if those necessities are not in any world that exists “itself in itself” but are in the world as experienced by perceiving, thinking beings.

In Zarathustra’s pre-dawn contemplation, the idea at the heart of the teaching of the eternal return resurfaces in soberer form. In one sense the eternal return is simply an expression of the human will to affirm the whole, a will that *would wish* to have the whole again and again, were it up to us to choose.<sup>16</sup> Zarathustra now celebrates life in just this spirit, free of the resentment that drove his quest for an overman to overturn the whole disappointing spectacle of humanity hitherto. He has become the laughing shepherd.<sup>17</sup> To be sure, the eternal return as a literal teaching accomplishes something more: it solves the problem of our being the product of conditions we never chose, and worse, the problem of all life, thought, purpose, and meaning being the product of blind, lifeless forces, which modern science teaches with such dispiriting effects on the human heart. For if we could choose and will the whole, we could then choose the preconditions for our own existence. This is a solution, however, that comes at the cost of straining credulity. But in its own way the insight of “Before Sunrise” in fact accomplishes this, too. Human contemplation as Zarathustra articulates it is a key cause of each thing’s coming fully into existence and of the whole, including its past and future, being truly a whole or a “world” at all. Contemplation likewise allows us in a sense to touch eternity, not by giving us endless returns to life but

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<sup>15</sup> For a good exposition of this approach to reading the *Theaetetus*, see Robert Bartlett, *Sophistry and Political Philosophy: Protagoras’s Challenge to Socrates* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> Consider the question Nietzsche poses when he first introduces the eternal return in GS 341: “How well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to crave nothing more fervently than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?” For an overview of interpretations of the eternal return, which have come to center on this hypothetical meaning, see Neil Sinhababu and Kuong Un Teng, “Loving the Eternal Recurrence,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 50, no. 1 (2019): 106–24. For an alternate reading, see Paul Loeb, “What Does Nietzsche Mean by ‘the Same’ in His Theory of Eternal Recurrence?,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 53, no. 1 (2022): 1–33.

<sup>17</sup> As Leo Strauss suggests, contemplation that culminates in pure acceptance is also in a sense the will’s highest self-overcoming: “The highest form of the will to power turning against itself is acceptance of the whole, and that means the whole is divine . . . the peak of the will is acceptance.” Leo Strauss, *On Nietzsche’s “Thus Spoke Zarathustra,”* ed. Richard Velkley (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 211.

through the contemplation of all time. All of this raises the question whether the teaching of the eternal return might not be an exoteric version of this teaching about the power of contemplation at its best. This thought is supported by the fact that in his more sober *BGE*, Nietzsche alludes to the eternal return only once, in aphorism 56, which falls in the chapter on religion, and even there he puts it in conditional terms, as perhaps only the expression of a life-affirming embrace of what is.

This suggestion on the true status of the teaching on eternal return is supported further by the fact that here, at his most contemplative, Zarathustra not only never alludes to it but develops a thought about necessity and chance that cuts directly against it. Zarathustra has been finding it so difficult to come to terms with the idea of eternal return for precisely the reasons that make the teaching so attractive to the spirit of gravity: the heaviness of the thought that everything that rises must fall, that there is nothing new under the sun, indeed that, as the fatalists say, “everything is written.” Now, however, he calls into question the premise that alone purported to prove the truth of the eternal return, the claim that all things are knotted so tightly together by causality that the whole course of history is fixed in a course that is bound endlessly to repeat. If necessity itself is not found in the bedrock of being but is a human imposition, might it not be equally true and more life-affirming to say that all things “dance on the feet of chance”?<sup>18</sup> Indeed, is not the door open to wondering whether necessity itself is not the work of the spirit of gravity? And indeed Zarathustra will ultimately say that it is (*TSZ* III, “Old and New Tablets”).<sup>19</sup>

This reflection, however, brings us full circle, and up against a much-debated question of Nietzsche scholarship: What kind of claim to truth is Nietzsche (or his Zarathustra) making? As Zarathustra measures and articulates the world with his daylight wisdom, is he grasping real truth about the

<sup>18</sup> Hans Ruin observes the kinship between the power of chance as Zarathustra embraces it here and the indefinite, emerging, coming-into-being character of the light of day that Zarathustra is celebrating in the moments before dawn: “Saying Amen to the Light of Dawn: Nietzsche on Praise, Prayer, and Affirmation,” *Nietzsche-Studien* 48, no. 1 (2019): 99–116.

<sup>19</sup> Thus I go further than most scholars, who treat the embrace of chance in “Before Sunrise” as merely a denial of divine purpose and not a questioning of necessity: see, eg., Stanley Rosen, *The Mask of Enlightenment: Nietzsche's “Zarathustra”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 191; Samuel IJsseling, “Nietzsche's Yes and Amen,” trans. Ryan Drake and Herman Siemens, *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, no. 22 (2001): 39; Meier, *What Is Nietzsche's Zarathustra?*, 98, 119. Focusing on Nietzsche's idea of *amor fati*, IJsseling reads his yes-saying as entirely a matter of embracing necessity, and Meier connects all knowledge with necessity, but this chapter suggests openness to something more profoundly mysterious and fluid at the center of things.

world as it is? Or is he just dreaming that he is, while the core of being remains “deep—and deeper than day has ever known” (TSZ III, “Sunrise”)?<sup>20</sup> “Before Sunrise” suggests that the nature Zarathustra is rapturously contemplating is *both* accessibly akin to us *and* profoundly mysterious, making possible “a little wisdom,” but fundamentally beautiful, inspiring, and fluid. The world invites but smiles at human categories and calculations; Zarathustra’s wisdom and life look the same but are not the same; his wisdom is somehow his own, yet changeable and perhaps unfaithful; such truths as we can find are neither simply universal nor eternal. The proper response to all of this, the truest response, is not writing treatises but contemplating life as we might a piece of music, and interpreting it in a spirit that shares as much with poetry as with philosophy, a spirit that Nietzsche in turn expresses poetically when he shows Zarathustra singing and dancing.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> In this debate, Heidegger attributes to Nietzsche a series of surreptitious metaphysical claims about the true world in *Nietzsche*, trans. David Krell, 2 vols. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991); Kaufman an empirically based correspondence theory of truth in *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 5th ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); Danto in *Nietzsche as Philosopher* a utilitarian theory; and postmodernists a denial of any serious truth claims altogether. Alexander Nehamas in *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985) and Maudemarie Clark in *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) offer strong rebuttals of the metaphysical, pragmatist, and postmodernist readings. Clark in her influential study defends a “commonsense correspondence theory,” arguing that at least in his last works Nietzsche conceives of truth in terms of a straightforward, unproblematic realism shorn of any metaphysical claims about a world of “things in themselves.” Brian Leiter takes this view further to defend a “naturalism” in which truth for Nietzsche is found in the methods and insights of modern natural science: *Nietzsche on Morality* (London: Routledge, 2015). Qualifying the correspondence theory and naturalism of Clark and Leiter, Richard Schacht makes helpful suggestions on the way thinking is more than physical or deterministic in “Nietzsche’s Naturalism,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 43, no. 2 (2012): 185–212, and Nehamas on the way it is necessarily perspectival and interpretive in “Nietzsche on Truth and the Value of Falsehood,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 48, no. 3 (2017): 319–46. Christa Davis Acampora takes especially seriously Nietzsche’s repeated suggestions even in his late works that the human mind does extensive and even creative work in constituting the world, for example through mathematics: “Naturalism and Nietzsche’s Moral Psychology,” in *A Companion to Nietzsche*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (London: Blackwell, 2009), 314–33. In a more skeptical vein, R. Lanier Anderson argues that understanding for Nietzsche is a kind of interpretation that invariably involves falsification in the way that it simplifies and orders the indeterminate flux of sense data: “Nietzsche on Truth, Illusion, and Redemption,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 13, no. 2 (2005): 185–225. Dirk Johnson makes the intriguing suggestion that Nietzsche’s embrace of science is especially akin to ancient science in the way it illuminates the one world of our experience in a fundamentally skeptical spirit: “Modern vs. Ancient Science: Discussing Maudemarie Clark’s *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*,” *Nietzsche-Studien* 42, no. 1 (2013): 243–55. On the whole, however, contemporary scholars seem to me to underestimate both the deep strain of skepticism running through Nietzsche’s writings and his suggestions on the constructive and even creative character of human thought.

<sup>21</sup> The analogy of contemplation to musical appreciation is suggested by Higgins, who also writes, “Imagery is not a rhetorical enhancement of [Nietzsche’s] writing, but a fundamental condition of the way he thinks” (*Nietzsche’s Zarathustra*, 180, 13).



This creative, artful response that life elicits allows Zarathustra to achieve the spirit of lightness and play that he has been yearning for. Instead of bewailing the reign of nonsense and accidents in human history (*TSZ* I, "Gift-Giving Virtue," 2), or recoiling in horror from the "fragments and limbs and dreadful accidents" that he finds around him (*TSZ* II, "Redemption"), Zarathustra now embraces chance and even finds it divine—divine in the radiant, graceful, life-giving way that he divines divinity should be, and not in the life-denying way that "divine will" and "divine purpose" have been taken in the past, oppressing humanity with their teaching on absolute value and good and evil and sin and the shabbiness of this world compared with the world to come. Chance, by contrast, is innocent, open-ended, and rife with new possibilities, especially when humanly understood and embraced. "Over all things stands the heaven Accident, the heaven Innocence, the heaven Chance, the heaven Prankishness. . . . This freedom and heavenly cheer I placed over all things like an azure bell when I taught that over them and through them no 'eternal will' wills" (*TSZ* III, "Sunrise"). In these lines Zarathustra captures the spirit of a human thought that is at once insightful and creative, that instead of imposing something alien on the world, skillfully interprets it, with what is arguably at once a more powerful account of experience than has yet been offered and a more life-affirming one. Although insight and creativity cannot be simply separated here, we may say that the former occurs especially in Zarathustra's identifying the fundamental importance of flux and chance and the latter in his endowing them with life-enhancing innocence and a spirit of play. But insight is itself creative: being or becoming speaks through Zarathustra as he brings his reason to illuminate it, and in being illuminated by him it comes fully into its own. In assuming this spirit of lightness, Zarathustra ceases to be the burden-embracing camel or the fierce, no-saying lion of the desert and becomes at least momentarily the child envisioned in "The Three Metamorphoses," who is "innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred 'Yes.'" Such creative contemplation is true to life in its fertility and truly affirmative in a way that fierce self-overcoming never can be.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Michael Gillespie claims that the spirit of lightness embodied by the child in "The Three Metamorphoses" was only a provisional ideal that Zarathustra has rejected in favor of the superman, a "mature and diamond-hard individual" who can arise only through a "crucible of war and destruction": "Slouching toward Bethlehem to Be Born": On the Nature and Meaning of Nietzsche's Superman," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, no. 30 (2005): 57, 63. Birte Loeschekohl proposes that the camel, lion, and child stages are all valuable and that the most important thing is not to get stuck in any one of them: "Nietzsche's 'Great Politics' and Zarathustra's New Peoples," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 51, no. 1 (2020): 26. To both I would ask whether the lion's no-saying is of equal merit in Nietzsche's eyes with yes-saying, and whether the best human being would wish for himself the blinkered awareness of

Contemplation as Zarathustra engages in it now is also generous in the highest way. It sets an example that does not constrain; it produces no new dogmas or prohibitions. Zarathustra succeeds in turning himself into what he earlier hoped his followers might someday become, “a living lighthouse of invincible life” (*TSZ III*, “Involuntary Bliss”). In doing so he finds joy and gives it. As he puts it a bit later, “With rope ladders I have learned to climb to many a window; with swift legs I climbed high masts; and to sit on high masts of knowledge seemed to me no small happiness: to flicker like small flames on high masts—a small light only and yet a great comfort for shipwrecked sailors and castaways” (*TSZ III*, “Spirit of Gravity”).<sup>23</sup> Zarathustra reaches such contemplation through active self-overcoming: he has fought hard, he says, to get his hands free to bless. But this is not the self-overcoming of the so-called gift-giving virtue, inspired by an emulation of the overflowing sun, engendering a yearning to go out in flames of self-sacrifice, and resulting in the complaining emptiness of the “Night Song.” In his pre-dawn contemplation that gives without taking and without self-sacrifice, Zarathustra has in this sense too found a wisdom “deeper than day has ever known” (*TSZ III*, “Sunrise”).

In sum, Zarathustra wants to bring together an acceptance and celebration of life in all its majestic complexity, probing self-reflection, deep seriousness in an important project, a spirit of lightness and play, clear judgment, and fertile, life-giving generosity. Might it not be contemplative philosophy alone that can unite all of these things? In discovering this possibility and discovering his happiness in it, Zarathustra comes surprisingly close to experiencing and appreciating philosophy in a classical spirit. To be sure, Zarathustrian yes-saying goes beyond Socrates’s quiet acceptance of necessity; Zarathustrian playfulness has a harder edge of mockery; and Zarathustrian creative contemplation brings even more to the work of constituting the world than Plato and Aristotle quietly suggest philosophy does, in the primacy they both give to the forms as the most important causes of the beings. Yet the commonalities with classical Socratic thought are important

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either the camel or the lion.

<sup>23</sup> In sharing his vision that restores the world to its innocence and makes it again a suitable home for humans, Lampert suggests, Zarathustra is beginning to fulfill the project that Nietzsche had framed as “the dehumanization of nature and the naturalization of man” (*Nietzsche’s Teaching*, 173–77). The naturalization of man seems indeed to be a goal here, but Lampert misses the creative aspect of contemplation in speaking of the dehumanization of nature. And for Lampert this project ultimately depends on Zarathustra’s becoming a legislator: he does not see “Before Sunrise” as exploring a separate, contemplative path.

and perhaps even deeper than the differences. Has Zarathustra solved his problem by rediscovering ancient insights?

But if he has, he will not be able to rest satisfied with them, as we shall see. And already in this chapter lurk ominous shadows over Zarathustra's joyful affirmation: the clouds of "constraint, purpose, and guilt" that he tries to "smile down" upon but admits he once hated with a hatred that he now turns upon itself, still hating; the clouds of all "mediators and mixers" who "have learned neither to bless nor to curse from the heart"; the belief in "good and evil" that he proclaims is nothing but "intervening shadows and damp depressions and drifting clouds" but that he cannot affirm.<sup>24</sup> Pure contemplation breaks radiantly between these clouds, but the clouds remain.

#### ZARATHUSTRA'S RETREAT

Even before Zarathustra reaches home we see him drawn back to ordinary human communities, ostensibly to study them but in fact to make new speeches, to meet with fresh rebuffs, and to ask himself again, "Why do I speak where nobody has my ears?" (*TSZ III*, "Virtue That Makes Small"). He falls again into nausea, even if he learns better to pass by those who nauseate him. Further ambivalence comes in "On Old and New Tablets." Zarathustra still cannot return to his followers whom he left at the end of Part II and will never rejoin; he is still waiting for he knows not what. But already he is looking beyond these disciples into far distant futures and yearning to give all humanity a new goal by becoming a new legislator. In this chapter he sits, "surrounded by broken old tablets and new tablets half covered with writing," but he is not able to complete his task (*TSZ III*, "Old and New Tablets," 1). What impedes him?

Zarathustra finds himself especially perplexed by the problem posed by his archenemy the spirit of gravity. "He who will one day teach men to fly will have moved all boundary stones; the boundary stones will fly up into the air before him, and he will rebaptize the earth—'the light one'" (*TSZ III*, "Spirit of Gravity"). Banishing or levitating boundary stones is of a piece with transcending belief in good and evil and embracing human freedom and creativity. Yet Zarathustra wants to inscribe new tablets with new sacred

<sup>24</sup> Lampert offers a helpful gloss on the meaning of these clouds, although he claims that they are dispelled in *TSZ III*, "Yes and Amen Song," missing the ways in which Zarathustra reveals their persistence even there, for example in proclaiming himself able to "love even churches and tombs of gods" only when "the sky gazes through their broken roofs with its pure eyes" (*Nietzsche's Teaching*, 175; *TSZ III*, "Yes and Amen Song").

commandments. Are not all lawgivers' tablets a kind of fixed boundary stone and the work of the spirit of gravity, inasmuch as all laws necessarily simplify, constrain, threaten, and encourage beliefs about good and evil? In striving again to "carry together into One what in man is fragment and riddle and dreadful accident" and in striving to prepare the soil for "one truth" to be born (*TSZ III*, "Old and New Tablets," 3, 7), Zarathustra would seem necessarily to oppose the freedom and creativity of others. Likewise, he argues that "the greatest danger for all of man's future" is "the good and the just," who fight for the established ways against innovators. But does every legislator not aim to create a strong people who will revere and defend its established laws and customs (*TSZ I*, "Thousand and One Goals")? Does every strong people not oppose free spirits (*TSZ II*, "Famous Wise Men")? Perhaps this problem could be overcome if Zarathustra were content that there be at least moments of liberation from old strictures and absolutes, at least a few individuals who see the folly of the belief in good and evil, at least occasional great, creative legislators, and an ongoing cycle of new creations and subsidings into settled ways. But evidently the spirit of lightness, the hope for new dawns, and liberation from old gods and from belief in good and evil are gifts Zarathustra wishes to bring to the entire world. Somehow there must still be boundary stones, yet somehow they themselves must fly. Zarathustra sits contemplating this most paradoxical wish without knowing how to constitute a people on this basis.

Perhaps even more serious than Zarathustra's struggle with the spirit of gravity is his struggle with the spirit of the poet. He confesses again, "I am ashamed that I must still be a poet"—evidently not only because he is telling what he knows to be fictions but also because his own vision of things is infused with an intoxicating prophetic rapture (*TSZ III*, "Old and New Tablets," 2). As the next paragraph suggests, his poetizing is especially concerned with the way he conceives of all coming-to-be as the dance of gods. Are his divinization of the world and his teaching of the eternal return poetic impositions on himself as well as on others? If so, his legislative project entails a retreat from the highest clarity of the free spirit.<sup>25</sup>

Zarathustra's characteristic compassion and nobility both feed into his desire to divinize the world, fueling the pull towards self-sacrifice. In "On

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<sup>25</sup> On the fundamental ambiguity between the spirit of the clear-eyed free spirit and the spirit of poetic and worshipful philosophy in Nietzsche's thought, see Leo Strauss, "A Note on the Plan of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*," in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 175–76 and 179.

Old and New Tablets” he speaks of his yearning to go to men once more: “I want to go under, dying; I want to give them my richest gift. From the sun I learned this: when he goes down, over-rich, he pours gold into the sea out of inexhaustible riches, so that even the poorest fisherman still rows with golden oars. For this I once saw and did not tire of my tears as I watched it.” He confesses that “we” who are “firstlings” all “bleed at secret sacrificial altars,” that “all of us burn and roast in honor of old idols,” and that “even in ourselves the old idol-priest still lives who roasts what is best in us for his feast” (TSZ III, “Old and New Tablets,” 3, 6).

Zarathustra never succeeds in inscribing his tablets or in returning to his followers, but neither can he recover the lucid equanimity of “Before Sunrise.” In “The Great Longing,” he regains enough clarity to see what is wrong with his own impulse towards lamentation. He proclaims himself happy and desirous only of others to whom he might pour out his happiness, but he finds himself wanting to weep over their absence. Still he resists: “Is not all weeping a lamentation? And all lamentation an accusation?” Hence he tells his soul to sing. His task now seems to be not legislating, not proclaiming the overman or the eternal return, but reflecting deeply and singing about his experience until he becomes the golden bark “around whose gold all good, bad, wondrous things leap”: again he glimpses the possibility that his own most thoughtful acceptance of life as he finds it can benefit others simply by its example.<sup>26</sup> Yet at the end of the chapter he is still waiting for an unnamed vintner who will harvest his over-full vines “with his diamond knife.” This yearning for something painful is again suggestive: evidently he sees suffering and sacrifice as a necessary part of a noble life, in spite of his recognition that what he wants to sacrifice himself for is “an old idol” and in spite of the fact that the spirit of tragedy that attracts him is incompatible with the yes-saying that he has judged best.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Jeremy Fortier reads this chapter as revealing Zarathustra’s achievement of a stance of self-sufficiency, in contrast to the prologue or the night song, arguing, “this is the proper context for the thought of the eternal return, which Zarathustra is now finally able to confront and affirm: as part of a reflection on the self, by the self, for itself.” Jeremy Fortier, *The Challenge of Nietzsche: How to Approach His Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 122–23.

<sup>27</sup> This slippage is Nietzsche’s own. In a letter to Heinrich von Stein of December 1882, commenting on the heroic spirit of cruel self-sacrifice, he writes, “I have in myself too much of this ‘tragic’ complexion to be able not to curse it. . . . What I desire most, then, is a high point from which I can see the tragic problem lying beneath me.” In *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Christopher Middleton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 197.

## CONCLUSION

Just as Zarathustra cannot quite settle down on one view of the best life, Nietzsche himself could not quite finish this book and be done with it. Ending it initially at the conclusion of the third part, he then added a fourth, in which Zarathustra is still waiting for the right moment or the right sign to return to humanity and become its great teacher. Part IV includes a curious chapter called “Noon,” in which the hour arrives that Zarathustra has been proclaiming as the climactic moment of the world—and he sleeps through it. But does he miss it, or does he now interpret midday correctly, in the speech of acceptance that he delivers to himself in a dream, not as a future time of world transformation but as a presently available time of individual enlightenment and happy acceptance of the whole?<sup>28</sup> In some way he does do the latter, if only in his dream, but as soon as he awakens he scolds himself for his idleness. This scene contains no clear resolution in favor of the contemplative life or in favor of a self-sufficient view of happiness, but also no decisive rejection of them. Perhaps this indecision is due to his own flaws that Zarathustra acknowledges with unprecedented frankness in the fourth part: his susceptibility to pity and nausea, his softness, and above all his temptation to return to piety. Does Nietzsche mean for us to conclude, then, that Zarathustra’s inability to stay with the insights of “Before Sunrise” is the result of weaknesses that beset Zarathustra and himself as Zarathustra’s prototype, as gifted modern souls who have been infected in unhealthy ways by Christianity and by democracy?

But if Nietzsche invites this critical view of his protagonist and of himself, he suggests that there is something deeper behind his rejection of pure contemplation. What he has Zarathustra say in the chapter on legislation that comes late in Part III, “the best should rule; the best also want to rule,” Nietzsche reiterates in his cooler and more critical *BGE*: the philosophers of the future must give meaning to the world by giving all of humanity a direction (*TSZ* III, “Old and New Tablets,” 21; *BGE* 211). It is this task that Zarathustra wants to undertake and cannot give up the hope of undertaking, and even if he is not equal to it himself, he still judges it the highest human task. Why can he not relinquish it, given the promise he has found in contemplation, in self-sufficiency, and in acting as a beacon and example, as well as the pitfalls that he has come to see in legislating and ruling?

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<sup>28</sup> This is Fortier’s reading of the chapter (*Challenge of Nietzsche*, 123).

In part what is at work here is Nietzsche's unique understanding of human nature. Nietzsche identifies the core human drive not as a yearning to know or a yearning for eternity but as will to power, a claim that he evidently intends as a true insight and not merely Zarathustra's poetizing. As much as making sense of the world may be one activity of the will to power and even the most spiritual or intellectual one, it is not the whole of what the will to power seeks, and even in seeking to make sense of the world it never stops doing this *as* an exercise of power. This gives the activity a fundamentally different character from the quest for knowledge that Socrates characterizes as erotic.<sup>29</sup>

In part, Zarathustra's rejection of mere contemplation is based on a new view of nature simply. Nietzsche considers the creation of radically new meanings possible because nature is much more indeterminate than previous philosophers have thought, but the other side of this view is that nature, because of its indeterminacy, gives us less to contemplate. Perhaps there is really no knowable nature at all, but only an opaque, mysterious flux, to which we give names and words, imagining that we are grasping something of being. Zarathustra intimates as much in "The Return Home," in a passage we quoted before, in which his Solitude drops a dark hint that we did not quote: "Here all things come caressingly to your discourse *and flatter you*, for they want to ride on your back." Zarathustra develops this thought in "The Convalescent." When his animals tell him that "the world awaits you like a garden," and that "all things have been longing for you," inviting him to take a stance of appreciative receptivity to nature, he regards their words as delightful but treacherously seductive. We might well wish the world were a garden, open to our admiring gaze, inviting us to lose ourselves in the beauties and wonders of what is outside of us. Contemplation would be a charming activity if that were so. But the story the animals tell, Zarathustra insists, is an illusion. "Chatter on," he tells them: "Are not words and sounds rainbows and illusive bridges between things which are eternally apart? . . . For every soul, every other soul is an afterworld. Precisely between what is most similar, illusion lies most beautifully; for the smallest cleft is the hardest to bridge. For me, how should there be any outside myself? There is no outside. But all sounds make us forget this. How lovely it is that we forget" (*TSZ* III, "Convalescent"). Zarathustra has sunk into despondent doubting of his own creative contemplation: perhaps what he thought he achieved in "Before

<sup>29</sup> But for an interesting argument, against Heidegger, that Zarathustra's love of knowledge still partakes in a way of the ancient spirit of philosophic eros, see Waller Newell, "Zarathustra's Dancing Dialectic," *Interpretation* 17, no. 3 (1990): 416–32.

Sunrise” was only a dream; perhaps the world is not something any of us can illuminate for others. Words create a dual illusion, he now reflects, luring us into believing that the truths we discover are in the world itself and that we all experience the same world. Not only is there is no world in itself, but there is no single world of shared human experience. All sense is up to us to make for ourselves. How far Nietzsche ultimately wants to push this insight—how far he even could push it without its ceasing to be an insight—is a great question; suffice it to say that at this period and perhaps until the end he finds this thought more compelling than any philosopher has since at least Protagoras.

It is here that we see perhaps the deepest difference with Socrates, whose dialectical method is designed to test and confirm that we do inhabit a shared world that we can fairly call nature, governed by regularities that we can cautiously call necessities. That approach has in turn important implications for Socrates’s relations with others. It allows him to say that so long as he can win agreement with the one person he is talking with, he is content to let the rest of the world and its contrary opinions go; it allows him to gather true friends in a shared quest, if only a few. The philosopher in the Socratic understanding is not solitary, but he is more independent than the poet who needs a public and the lonely singer Zarathustra with his oscillating desires to be alone with heaven and his own insights, to win disciples, and to inspire other creators who will break with him, none of whom can be a true friend. And loneliness is the other side of Zarathustra’s “love of man” which drives his desire to smash, overturn, and rebuild.

If nature itself is elusive, all the more elusive is any natural standard of high and low, as keen as is Zarathustra’s sense and taste for high and low.<sup>30</sup> This situation creates a problem for Zarathustra as he tries to achieve and even to give satisfactory definition to his desired end of yes-saying. As we have seen, in “Before Sunrise” he strives to accept all that is, not in a grim, heavy spirit of resignation or in a wavering spirit, but with joy. Later he expresses a wish to say yes with judgment and discrimination, criticizing the indiscriminating spirit of the “omni-satisfied” who say “Yea-Yuh” like an ass to everything, but the only standard that he finds to oppose them with is a standard of taste (*TSZ* III, “Spirit of Gravity,” 2). Later still he shows how deep the distaste is that prevents him from joining in the cheerful yes-saying of his eagle and serpent, the bright, shallow projections of his courage and wisdom.

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<sup>30</sup> It is this difficulty that Strauss especially points to when he says that nature has become a problem for Nietzsche, yet he cannot do without it (“A Note on the Plan of Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*,” 183 and 190).



Zarathustra's animals are confident in affirming and content to accept that "everything dies, everything blossoms again; eternally runs the year of being" (*TSZ* III, "Convalescent"). Zarathustra senses that there is something too easy, too unheroic about their equanimity; he sees his own task of accepting the whole as higher, harder, and nobler—a matter of thinking what is most terrible through to its depths and turning the blackest denial of life into life-affirmation.<sup>31</sup> And what is most terrible for him, what grieves him to the point of wanting to abandon life, is seeing that "even the greatest man and the smallest man" are "all-too-similar to each other," and "even the greatest all-too-human": he again despairs over the paltriness of *all* humanity hitherto.

In all these ways, just as Zarathustra both gropes for and denies a natural standard of high and low, he both accepts and refuses to accept the central claim of the eternal return, the inter-entailment of everything in a single, ring-like, goalless whole. If it is up to us to make sense of the world for ourselves, why rest content with seeing and interpreting and accepting? If nature is as indefinite, elusive, fluid, and malleable as Zarathustra finds it, surely we can transform human nature for the better. Thus even as Zarathustra listens to the animals' contemplative chatter, he proclaims that "man needs what is most evil in him for what is best in him—that whatever is most evil is his best power and the hardest stone for the highest creator" (*TSZ* III, "Convalescent"). Without a project of transforming human life and lifting it to what he considers a radically new level, Zarathustra finds it impossible to accept and will all that is. His yes-saying, his ability to will the whole spectacle of being and life as it has been, again seems to depend on his being able to will all these fragments and cripples *as the stone out of which a better future is to be hewn* (*TSZ* II, "Blessed Isles"). Zarathustra's acceptance of the nonsense and accident he finds in the world turns out to depend on his belief in the better future that all of this *must* at least for a time make possible—must because the alternative is intolerable, and must because he himself is there to will that future.

If this is right, Zarathustra retreats from the cogent but limited project of philosophic contemplation to the fractured but boundless project of world transformation because he cannot bear to leave things as they are: he

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<sup>31</sup> IJsseling stresses the way the best kind of affirmation must come through experiencing and negating the will to negation ("Nietzsche's Yes and Amen," 38). Reginster argues that affirmation for Nietzsche requires even and especially affirmation of suffering, as an essential aspect of life, willing, and especially creativity (*Affirmation of Life*, 229–35). If I am right that Zarathustra glimpses the problem with the desire to embrace suffering in "The Night Song" and elsewhere, Reginster may be right that Nietzsche never decisively repudiates it.

is overcome by his own pity, which flows from his love of mankind, and his own nausea at what is base and deformed, which flows from his intense love of the noble. If the sources of these passions are admirable, the expressions of them are dangerous. They are of a piece with the fact that when Zarathustra resolves to sing and to give up his lamentation, since “every lamentation is a reproach,” still what he sings of is his longing for a great generous, self-sacrificing deed of self-overcoming. Although Nietzsche is famous for calling the cheerful Socrates plebeian, might Socrates not reply that Nietzsche’s noblest creation Zarathustra is in fact insufficiently noble in lacking the greatness of soul needed to free himself entirely from tearful, reproachful grieving over the state of the world—and hence from his hopes for revolutionary improvement? Zarathustra’s difference with Socrates does not lie in any greater determination to discover and strive for what is best of all that life allows. His difference lies in his lamenting the paucity of what life gives us and in refusing to be reconciled to it even when he cannot see clearly what else might be. If so, this betrays a certain softness of soul, easy to miss for all Nietzsche’s stridency. But that softness is likely due not only to the Christian impulses he finds within him, but also to his understanding of the fluidity and elusiveness of being. Unlike in the case of Socrates, the disgust and outrage and pity Zarathustra feels at the inadequacies of humanity are never disciplined by any felt necessity to come to terms with necessity.

## Review Essay

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Mary P. Nichols, *Aristotle's Discovery of the Human: Piety and Politics in the "Nicomachean Ethics."* Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2023, x + 344 pp., \$65.00.

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WILL MORRISEY

HILLSDALE COLLEGE (RETIRED)

[wmorrisey@hillsdale.edu](mailto:wmorrisey@hillsdale.edu)

If, as Aristotle famously remarks, human nature centers between beasts and gods, and since he writes extensively about beasts (their parts and their movements) but not so much about the gods and since, furthermore, human conceptions of the divine orient human moral and political life, should the reader of the *Nicomachean Ethics* not pay close attention to what the philosopher has to say about the divine? Yet few recent commentators have done so, until now. In this careful, richly textured commentary, Mary P. Nichols undertakes the Aristotelian task of correcting the balance.

For her frontispiece, she selects a passage from book 5: "Reciprocity holds the city together, our reciprocating not only harm for harm but also good for good. Shrines to the Graces are therefore placed along the roadways, to foster doing good in return, for this belongs to gratitude. One ought to help in turn one who has been gracious, and even to initiate reciprocal giving" (vi). Aristotle thus takes Hesiod's three *Charites* or Graces, named Joyfulness, Shining, and Bloom, and gives them a political dimension Hesiod does not suggest, a dimension that recalls not only Aristotle's classification of man as a political animal but his description of the relation of husband and wife

(here, Zeus and Hera, parents of the Graces) as the nucleus of political life proper, as distinguished from rule of parents over children and of masters over slaves. To discover the human is to discover politics, reciprocal rule, as exemplified by the ways of the divine. “A good human life,” Nichols writes, “which reflects both the virtues and the limitations of the human, would therefore neither deny the human connection to the divine nor try to eliminate the distance between the two” (1); a good human life is pious, in that sense. And “a good political community has, in turn, the task of supporting such a life by encouraging human achievement, and we can judge it by how well it does so.” Indeed Aristotle’s “references to the gods and to the divine support human activity and achievement” aiming at happiness, the purpose all human beings strive for (2).

In so striving, human beings make mistakes. In considering magnanimity or greatness of soul, which looks to be the crowning moral virtue, “Aristotle warns against its assumption of divine-like perfection”; instead, he “attempts to turn the great-souled individual to friendship,” another form of reciprocity (2–3). This must be done because unlike “other natural beings, who develop their ends by nature, unless chance or human activity divert them,” human beings “must acquire” the ethical virtues “by their own efforts” (2). In undertaking those efforts, and again unlike beasts, “we wonder at the divine,” looking up from our own lives, as Odysseus and his crew mates navigated by the stars (2). Looking up enables us to “look ahead” with better guidance than we would receive by simply looking inward, consulting only our hearts and desires—those foolish and contradictory counselors, as another philosopher observed. Looking up does not, however, mean going up. There is the good and indeed the best for human beings, but it is not the same as the complete good, the good of the whole. “It is in that gap that Aristotle made the discovery of the human that he contributes to philosophy,” the “unique place of the human within the whole” (3). Even the wisest of men, the ones Aristotle calls the most self-sufficient, “are not simply self-sufficient,” and the wisdom of the wise consists partly in understanding that, and in accepting that condition gracefully, that is, with “gratitude and joy” (5).

And with reciprocity: “I attempt to show that divine knowing as well as beneficence is a model for politics, while divine beneficence as well as knowing is a model for philosophy” (6). Piety understood in this sense “is not one virtue among others” but the foundation of “our striving for the good, as manifest in the various virtues Aristotle discusses” (7). In her commentary, Nichols proceeds as Aristotle does, “not merely presenting conclusions

he has reached about human life,” in the manner of divine revelation, but by “showing how he has reached them” (8). Philosophers remain human, unZarathustrian.

Dividing her book into eight chapters placed between an introduction and not a conclusion—nothing final—but some “afterthoughts,” Nichols attends to “the question of self-sufficiency of the political life” in her commentary on book 1 (8); ethical virtues as “habits” in her commentary on books 2 and 3 (9); “how our virtues develop through living with others” (book 4) (10); justice and charity, both elements of reciprocity or gracefulness (book 5); the intellectual virtues of prudence and wisdom and their relation to philosophy (book 6); the contrast between human strength and divine perfection (book 7); instances of reciprocity in friendship, family, the political community, and philosophy (books 8 and 9); and the relationship of the human with the divine (book 10). Her afterthoughts consist of some (indeed) gracious suggestions on how to understand modern liberal institutions and practices “on different grounds” than we moderns prefer. “For Aristotle, the challenges of political life can summon the moral and intellectual excellence of which human beings are capable, without leading to the dogmatism and fanaticism that liberal theorists sought to avert” and without succumbing to an equally dogmatic secularism (17).

Such a commentary ought to be read in the spirit in which it is offered, consulting each of Aristotle’s ten “books” or chapters along with Nichols’s observation, reciprocally. Accordingly, it would be as silly as it would be futile to offer a summary of her observations; better to identify certain of those observations that set her commentary apart from the others—the Nicholsian distinctives, so to speak.

Although she begins her account of Aristotle’s initial discussion of the good (*to agathon*) with the opening of the *Ethics*, where he explains that all arts, inquiries, actions, and choices aim at the good, she quickly reminds her readers of the passage in the *Metaphysics* 1072b, where he designates “the highest good as the divine, or god” (21). The cosmos “is like a divine gift that aligns with our capacities to receive it,” while at the same time requiring human beings themselves to exercise those capacities (21). Aristotle leaves it open “whether the highest good is something separate from the cosmos or its very order” (1075a). According to the *Ethics*, the highest good of *human* nature, happiness (*eudaimonia*), might come “from divine allotment or in

some other way” (1099b).<sup>1</sup> To inquire into these matters, in Nichols’s words, we must “keep our longing and thinking alive” (21). That is, we must exercise our distinctively human capacities.

We do so within a political community, which fosters our virtues through habituation, accomplished largely through obedience to the laws set down by that community. “Only then can we deliberate and choose how to act, gaining freedom from the very laws that form us” (21). In this, the *Ethics* is a book that educates its readers—“political throughout, even if it leads beyond politics” (22). While the art of politics is indeed the architectonic art, aiming at the highest, the most comprehensive good, for its citizens, it does not order human life perfectly. The highest good, what is truly beautiful, is “pursued and chosen apart from its serving some other good, apart from its utility,” and it “is not subordinate even to the political community,” however well ordered that community may be (26). To refine our understanding of that good, Aristotle writes the *Ethics*, which suggests that there are two “most architectonic” arts: the work of the statesman and the work of this philosopher (23). The statesman’s architecture proceeds by means of habituating laws; Aristotle’s architecture proceeds by arguments illustrated by examples, which provide an intellectual rather than a habitual form of experience. If the statesman educates the young by habituation through the intermediary of law, “Aristotle offers the experience needed by the inexperienced,” by the young, by inviting them to think more clearly (29). No prophet or divine lawgiver, “Aristotle does not understand ‘by himself,’ for he both learns from others and shares what he learns with them”—another instance of reciprocity (34). In a way, then, philosophizing on ethics and politics is itself political in the strict sense, graceful and therefore divine. “As Aristotle’s own investigation in the *Ethics* proceeds, we too ‘theorize’ along with Aristotle” (36). Both statesman and philosopher encourage friendship—the political friendship of citizenship, deliberation in common aiming at the common good, or intellectual friendship, dialogue aiming at discovering the truth.

To theorize is to put the wisdom the philosopher loves, that he longs for, ahead of even the reciprocity of friendship and of politics. “It is pious to honor the truth first,” Aristotle stipulates, “especially for a philosopher” (*Nic. Eth.* 1096a). To honor truth before friendship is not to dishonor friendship but to refine it, inasmuch as my friend needs to know the truth as much as I do. “This is the first time that Aristotle mentions philosophy in the *Ethics*, and

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<sup>1</sup> Translations of Aristotle here and throughout are those of Nichols.

he appeals to it to defend why he does what he does," as a philosopher. Moreover, "this is the only time in the *Ethics* that Aristotle calls something 'pious' or 'holy,'" thereby "connect[ing] piety with his own philosophic activity and way of life" (37). Indeed, he quickly moves to condemn "unholy crimes" as degradations of the human nature he seeks better to understand (38).

Very well, then, what is the happiness we all long for? "Happiness completes the other goods we seek," since the good we need to attain happiness must be chosen before we can attain happiness itself (44). We choose the lesser goods "for the sake of" happiness, Aristotle writes (1097b), and Nichols observes that the phrase "for the sake of" is a translation of the Greek *charin*, a word etymologically related to *chairein* (to delight in) and *charis* (grace, graciousness). It is "almost as if we choose goods that grace us with happiness, as if happiness were a sort of grace that accompanies good choices." We experience this delight, this joy, this grace "less as a product of our activity than as a gift that comes along with it" (44). The reciprocity grace entails being one dimension of political life, happiness for political animals cannot amount to the self-sufficiency of individuals. "Happiness is possible only for one who does well the work or task that belongs to a human being qua human," qua political—reciprocating, graceful—animal (45). But politics requires choice, and choice (as distinguished from impulse) requires reasoning. The distinctively human work or task, then, is activity, the *energeia*, of the human soul in conformity with reason. And "like the human work itself, as he defines it, Aristotle's own work in the *Ethics* is a work of his soul accompanied by reason" (47). Insofar as he reasons, Aristotle can reach not only beyond himself but beyond his time, making himself immortal, divine, as far as *possible* for a human being. Happiness is not a gift of the gods or a matter of chance, as "it cannot be simply bestowed upon us"; "we must make it our own" by engaging in virtuous activity *and* being aware of what virtuous activity is, since being unaware would make us less than fully human (53). We become aware of virtue as virtue by the struggle within each soul between its distinctively human dimension, reason, and the nonrational dimensions of the soul, which often oppose reason but also can obey it. "Aristotle's work will constitute the model for a politics that fosters self-rule and supports happiness in a way that the lawgivers of Crete and Sparta"—widely reputed to be among the most virtuous cities—were "unable to do" (59).

What are the virtues, the strengths of soul without which we cannot be graced by happiness? Aristotle addresses this question in his second and third books. As strengths of soul, they cannot amount merely to obedience

to commands, whether parental or governmental, even if the commands are just. “Aristotle’s discovery that character differs from the habits that engender it lies at the heart of his *Ethics*, whose title means literally ‘those things that involve character.’” In making this discovery, Aristotle himself displays intellectual virtue, “build[ing] on common opinion” but not merely following it and, indeed “attempting to instruct and educate it” (62).

He does not even follow the authority of the first political philosopher, Socrates, who associates virtue so closely with knowledge. On the contrary, “the end in asking about virtue is not to know what virtue is, but to become good, and that requires doing virtuous deeds,” an exercise that “yields ‘greater truth’ (1107a28–34) about virtue, and about the beautiful, the just, and the good,” registering “a better claim to ‘philosophizing’ (1252b1–2, 1181b15)” than the Socratic approach. “There is no virtue unless those actions come from ourselves”; thus, one must “understand virtue and character as a human being’s own when their origin and so much of their development depend on external factors” (64). “The truth of human life,” which the moral and political philosopher seeks and the statesman needs to understand in order to rule rightly, “involves both self-rule and dependence on others” (65). Self-rule is the rule of reason in our actions; perfected through habit, virtues are dispositions or characteristics, known to be good by reason but crucially reinforced by steady action over time. It is not only by thought but “by action that we come to know the world,” knowing “what sort of beings we are and what sort of world we live in.” Those who merely speak of virtue, those “who take refuge in words should not suppose they are philosophizing,” having “miss[ed] the truth one learns from acting” (68).

At this point, Aristotle introduces his account of the several virtues as means between extremes—courage as the mean between cowardice and rashness, for example. “Aristotle’s introduction of virtue as a mean may be the most obvious way in which he revises—and both moderates and elevates—common parlance about the virtues” (69). Common parlance about the virtues identifies them with obedience to commands, including divine commands. This suggests that Aristotle also moderates and elevates common parlance about divinity. Nichols emphasizes the way in which Aristotle not only substantially expands the Socratic-Platonic list of four virtues but identifies virtues which as yet have no names and names them. “He fashions new words out of previously existing ones and puts words to new uses to reveal there is more in what is known to us than of which we are aware” (72). He does not invent, much less “create” new virtues; he gives articulation to



human intuitions. "Virtues are rooted in passions that most of us experience, and they consist in our becoming properly disposed toward them rather than in rejecting them altogether" (73). To become properly disposed toward our passions is first to reason about them, then to put these passions, so refined and improved, into action, but the very act of reasoning, bringing them under the rule of reason, includes giving them accurate names, finding a right *logos*.

Equipped with such a *logos*, we can then make choices of actions instead of acting impulsively, under the sway of what is rightly called blind passion. "Choice occurs only after deliberation"—very much out of our own deliberation, not from commands that enter our souls from outside (77). We must think about those commands, too, along with thinking about our passions. "Aristotle's connecting ethical virtues with both habit and choice offers a middle ground between tracing one's character to one's community and tracing it to one's own choices and actions. We do not control the beginning as much as we might like, but we do control what comes after the beginning more than it might seem" (81). And political rule itself encourages this, inasmuch as no good legislator rules only by force but also by persuasion, leaving an opening for thought among citizens under the rule of law.

Aristotle's first example of a virtue, courage, in its purest form occurs not in political life but in battle. Civic courage, aiming at honor, is a dilute form of courage, whereas battlefield courage aims exclusively at the beautiful and the noble quite apart from any reward beyond the beauty and nobility of the act itself. What, then, is the beautiful? Nichols seems to say that beauty in an action is something "complete in itself, not moved by nor subordinated to anything outside itself." In this, "the act of courage is the paradigm of a free act" (85) and battlefield courage, risking life itself, showing human nature acting not "for" anything but displaying self-rule in the face of fear of personal oblivion. If so, this is the closest Aristotle gets to Kant, although unlike Kant he never departs from nature but rather affirms it. With respect to divinity, Nichols follows Ann Charney, who understands Aristotelian courage respecting the gods as the means between excessive fear of the gods, which would lead to "paralysis because of the vastness of the unknown," and the rashness brought on by the belief that one is "loved by the gods," expecting their protection in any circumstance.<sup>2</sup> Nichols adds that "atheism, paradoxically, might have a

<sup>2</sup> Ann Charney, "Spiritedness and Piety in Aristotle," in *Understanding the Political Spirit: Philosophical Investigations from Socrates to Nietzsche*, ed. Catherine H. Zuckert (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988).

similar effect as the belief in the gods' unbounded reign" (88), resulting in the secular fanaticism of some "revolutionaries."

If courage is the virtue of war, exhibited in the face of pain, moderation is the virtue first associated with the opposite circumstance, peace, and is exhibited in the face of pleasure; it is the Odysseus to war's Achilles. Odysseus exhibits moderation in feasting, that is, with regard to food and drink. The beauty of moderation exhibits completeness less in its purity than in its harmoniousness, the balance it establishes between insensibility to pleasure and the dissipation that longs for excessive pleasure. "Moreover, the pleasures of food and wine can belong to free persons, not merely to slavish ones, pleasures Aristotle (and Homer) connect with music" (89), to harmonies perceived by the ear. If bodily desires "are great and vehement," Aristotle writes, "they even knock the reasoning power out of commission"; "this is why a temperate person needs to be in harmony with reason, for the aim to which both look is the beautiful" (1199b).

Seen within the city especially in times of peace, moderation moves toward the preeminently social virtues, "the virtues of living together." Humans living together need to take care not to preen themselves as gods or descend into bestiality—politically, into tyrants or their subjects. "In book 4, Aristotle places even greater emphasis on ways in which the ethical virtues manifest the freedom possible for human beings" (91).

The virtue of liberality conduces to giving freely, the mean between stinginess and dissipation. Nichols pays particular attention to the seeming liberality of the tyrant, who gives freely but only after obtaining his wealth by seizing it from others; his "great resources come from great injustice," and "impiety is at the center or core of the tyrant's vice," inasmuch as he loots not only cities but temples, stealing even from the gods themselves (95). The virtue of munificence, located between the vices of chintziness and wastefulness or vulgarity, aims at beautiful and wonder-inspiring public works, often temples to the gods. The man of munificence might go wrong, however, if he forgets that his freedom to endow great works leads him to forget how much he depends upon others—those from whom he inherited his wealth, for example. That is, he may forget the social relations upon which he depends for his kind of greatness; he needs reminding that he himself is nothing to be wondered at. His greatness inheres more in the external works he endows, not so much in himself.

Greatness of soul is another matter. *Megalopsuchia* is the crown of the moral virtues. The great-souled man seeks the highest honor—the “greatest of the external goods”—from the most serious people, “assessing himself worthy of great things” and indeed being “worthy of them” (1123b)—achieving the mean between smallness of soul and vanity. “The great-souled individual manifests [the] human potential for freedom and the virtuous activity it makes possible, stepping back even from acting until he finds action worthy of his greatness.” In this, he is a person of both self-knowledge and justice. This notwithstanding, Nichols inclines to cut the magnanimous man down to size, warning that he “tends to forget his limits,” being “not as independent and self-sufficient as he tends to assume.” If he begins to act out of pride, he will become a figure of comedy or of tragedy. “Aristotle attempts to educate him, to remind him of his humanity”—his social and political nature—while “preserving the greatness that manifests humanity’s achievement” (100). Nichols especially worries that the great-souled man never gives himself to wonder, there being nothing great in his eyes, perhaps even including the gods. Philosophy begins with wonder, so magnanimity evidently cannot open itself to the divine. In all, Nichols prefers the courageous man, who acknowledges human limits by seeing the limit death imposes on him, even as he risks death. Aristotle might reply that the great-souled man understands that genuine honor comes only from human beings who are good, and true greatness of soul is difficult—virtuous in the sense of something acquired only by striving—because “it is not possible without the beauty that belongs to goodness” (1123a).

There is an unnamed virtue, the mean between lacking the love of honor altogether and excessive passion for it. Nichols is more interested in the next virtue Aristotle discusses, gentleness, which settles between a deficiency of anger at wrongdoing and irritability at every small infraction. A gentle person forgives readily; if the great-souled man inclines to forget favors he has received, the gentle man forgets the injuries he has sustained. “Gentleness is a virtue conducive to our living with others” (108), although it might veer toward going along in order to get along. Both magnanimity and gentleness require the virtue of justice to supplement them.

Nichols names the unnamed virtue between obsequiousness and the habit of complaint as something resembling friendship, although it is not friendship. Another word might be considerateness, the virtue of one who “will associate in different ways with people in high position and those he just happens to be around, and with those who are more or less known to

him, and similarly in accord with other differences, allotting what is fitting to each sort, choosing for its own sake to join in giving pleasure, but being cautious about giving pain, and thinking out the likely consequences—with respect to what is beautiful or advantageous” (1127a). Nichols sees in this virtue something of Aristotle himself, who may or may not know those whom he addresses in his treatise, and of course cannot know those who may read it later on. “He is not simply setting a standard for the virtuous activity of others, but he also describing one by which he himself can be judged” (110) and, it might be added, by which all those who teach or write about him may be judged.

Another such standard is truthfulness, the name Nichols gives to the unnamed virtue between the vices of boasting and habitual irony. She remarks the matter of trust that both of these forms of lying throw into question. Of the two, Aristotle is less critical of irony, that Socratic characteristic. There is irony and then there is irony: unlike the magnanimous man, who speaks with irony to the many, “Aristotle’s gracious ironist” speaks not out of contempt for others or even out of consideration for them, but out of his unpretentious knowledge of the difficulty of speaking the whole truth in every circumstance (113).

Since “in life there is also relaxation” (1126a), Aristotle next turns to a consideration of wit, that Shakespearean virtue. The playfulness of wit stays between boorishness and buffoonery. Enjoying the ambiguity of language, the witty man shows in his love of puns and other wordplay his freedom “from conventional usages that limit seeing by limiting speech” (115). This virtue, too, “resembles friendliness, which gives pleasure and pain as are appropriate” (116). This suggests a sort of justice that does not strictly follow the law—equity.

Nichols ends her account of this cluster of social virtues with the question of *aidōs*, which might be translated as shame or, if suitably refined, as reverence. Aristotle regards shame more as a passion than a virtue, blushing being no matter of choice. Shame is nonetheless a kind of mean, falling “between being ashamed of nothing (or shamelessness) and being ashamed of everything,” shyness (121). She tracks Aristotle as he finds some virtue in shame, as it “supports both confidence and deference, protecting our humanity against succumbing to the slavishness of beasts and against presuming the status of gods”—a “fitting conclusion for Aristotle’s survey of the virtues that manifest our resources for acting and our involvement with others when we do so” (121).

It is noteworthy that all of the social virtues require a sort of master virtue, justice, to guide them. Justice itself is the topic of book 5. One needs wit to understand justice because it is a word with “multiple meanings,” as is “the good” (124). In one sense, justice is the whole of virtue, insofar as justice is the lawful and the laws “talk publicly about everything” (1129b), “command[ing] the deeds of *all* the virtues and forbid[d] those of *all* the vices” (125). But there is also “justice in the particular case” under the rule of law, “which secures what is fair or equal” (125). This particular justice may be distributive—having to do with the distribution of the goods of the community—or corrective—restoring a distribution that has been violated. Complexities and indeed difficulties arise because the laws, although comprehensive or complete, cannot address each particular case. The laws must be supplemented by three “other ways” to consider justice: reciprocity, natural justice, and equity (126).

Lawful or complete justice pursues equality, whether in the distribution of goods (honors, money) in proportion to merit (“equal pay for equal work,” for example) or in correction by “restor[ing] the balance when the proportion established by the law has been violated” (128–29). Without just persons to distribute and to correct, lawful justice would become “static and idle” eventuating in “tragic conflict” among those for whom justice delayed is justice denied (132).

Reciprocity, characteristic of the Graces and definitive of political rule itself, addresses correction by inflicting legally ordained pain in exchange for illegally imposed pain—fining a thief, killing a murderer. As to distribution, one sees reciprocity in exchange, as measured by money, the medium of exchange; commerce is one of the things that “hold[] the city together” (1132b). Citizens exchange not only monetary goods but goods generally, in imitation of the Graces, in honor of whom cities place shrines in the roadway “to foster reciprocal giving, for this belongs to gratitude” or *charis* (1133a). Punitive or corrective justice “is supplemented by these feminine deities” (136), rather as husbands and wives complement one another in the household. Unlike the magnanimous man, who only wants to give and not to receive, the Graces, and good citizens imitating them, readily give and receive. Perhaps the magnanimous man is more like a king than a citizen in the “mixed regime” or *politeia*.

Natural justice also supplements lawful justice. Natural justice is equality in ruling and being ruled according to merit. “The just ruler, Aristotle tells us, derives nothing more from his ruling than his just portion equal to one’s

merit in relation to others”; he is “part of the community,” participating in the “reciprocity between rulers and ruled,” in “shared governance, in which ruler and ruled fulfill their potential as political and rational beings” (138–39). In their human nature, in this reciprocity, they avoid claims of divinity or even claims to be “conduits of divine revelation.” “Laws or conventions concerning worship must be consistent with human freedom,” that is, with deliberation and choice. “By treating natural justice as a form of political justice, Aristotle teaches that there should be limits to laws and conventions and calls upon political communities to support them”; laws commanding human sacrifice or permitting incest or adultery are “impious or unholy,” as are laws commanding human rulers to be worshiped as if they were gods (142). The standard of natural justice would substantially revise some of the legal conventions of the political communities Aristotle saw.

Finally, equity supplements lawful rule, avoiding the conditions of tragedy depicted in the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles. The discussion of equity highlights one of the most important themes of the *Ethics*, the importance of weighing circumstances when coming to a sound judgment of any action, past, present, or future. Consideration of circumstances also requires understanding of the intention of the person confronted by circumstances, “the origin of an act and the intention or purpose of the agent.” Strict application of even a just law might well prove unjust, without the “act of grace” equitable judgment is (144). Like Aeschylus, Aristotle “seeks a politics that stems cycles of violence and vengeance”; unlike the tragic poet, “he does not rely on stories of divine intervention for establishing institutions and securing their operation” (145). *His* divinities, symbolized by the Graces whose temples dot the public roadways—guiding the very way of life of the polis—“allow and encourage reciprocity among human beings” (146). As a result, tragedy disappears: “the equitable person does what is noble, without the sacrifice of his life that Achilles’ nobility required.” And so “to lovers of the beautiful, who are ready to sacrifice themselves, Aristotle will offer friendship,” as seen in the final books of the *Ethics*. “Here in his discussion of equity he offers them the ‘superior’ justice he calls equity and assigns to the equitable the beautiful work in the political community that those who take less for themselves might accomplish with less ostentation than Achilles’ sacrifice” (150).

In all, “there is less cause for indignation, for example, if politics can improve upon chance in doling out just rewards and punishments, or in structuring political activity so that citizens share rule, if it recognizes natural justice as a part of political justice, and if the laws allow their correction

by equity.” With Aristotle’s teaching in mind, young men like Glaucon and Adeimantus need not contemplate “a city that will remain only in speech” (153). And mature statesmen may learn that “ruling in the city must take into account the capacity of citizens for self-rule” (154). This concludes his inquiry into the ethical virtues, leaving the intellectual virtues for book 6.

Intellectual virtues are indispensable to achieving the ethical virtues: Without prudence and wisdom, how would one choose the mean between extremes? Wisdom, which contemplates unchanging things, guards against *hubris*, bringing men to see that they are less divine than the best things in the cosmos; prudence, knowledge of changeable things, fits actions to good ends.

Aristotle identifies three more ways to attain truth. In addition to wisdom, science and mind attend to the unchanging things; in addition to prudence art attends to the changeable things. “Inasmuch as the whole is composed of things that change or perish and those that are ‘eternal, ungenerated, and indestructible’ (1139b), the human soul that knows them must be akin to both.” That is, “the world is our home” (159). But neither is it transparent, easy to understand. “Through intellectual and ethical virtue, and not less through knowing ourselves through our deeds and sufferings and through dealing with the perplexities we encounter, the world *becomes* a home for us” (161, emphasis added). We long to know, as Aristotle writes at the beginning of the *Metaphysics*, but that longing sets before us no simple task. As old-fashioned mothers used to say in ice cream parlors, our eyes are bigger than our stomachs.

Aristotle begins with science, *epistēmē*. Mathematical knowledge exhibits a charming precision, but it is a precision that comes at the expense of a misleading equality. I can make a list and add up the correct number of items, but that tells me nothing about the nature of the items listed—their origin, their form, their material composition, the purposes which the items or the collection of items may be good or bad for. Similarly, an airtight geometric proof demonstrates the truth of abstractions, but life does not consist simply of lines. “The study of politics cannot be a mathematical discipline,” and so cannot be known precisely (164).

If politics is, as Aristotle tells us, architectonic, knowing it means approaching through art, *technē*; if politics requires knowing what to do in circumstances crucial to the flourishing and indeed the survival of the political community, knowing it also means approaching through prudence,

*phronēsis*. “Art determines what is otherwise left to chance,” bringing order, as legislators do. “Prudence guides our deliberation, choices, and actions about what is good or bad” and is exhibited by statesman and household managers. Nichols remarks that art and prudence are indeed intellectual virtues; Aristotle gives them a higher rank than Plato’s Socrates inclines to do, even going to the trouble (in the *Metaphysics*) of identifying a poet “who supports human activity rather than crush[ing] it with tales of divine jealousy” (172).

Aristotle then returns to an approach to knowledge of the unchanging things, mind (*nous*) and wisdom (*sophia*). Mind perceives the indemonstrable starting points or *archē* of things; translators also call it intellectual intuition, and a fuller account of it may be found in the *Posterior Analytics*. Science demonstrates, proves, but “there is no demonstration of the beginning points of science” (175). We trust our intellectual intuitions because we must. There is no getting around them. You cannot prove that round is not square; you can only perceive that this is so. Wisdom is the combination of the first principles discovered by mind and the demonstrative knowledge that is science. But “without access to first principles, and hence trust, wisdom is not possible—nor science” (176). Those who do not take into account all five ways of knowing are not wise, notably the philosophers who so concentrate their minds on the heavens that they fail to see what is in front of them here, down to earth.

This failure is not only a failure of attention to where we are walking but also of attention to our own souls, the way our souls work. “Book 6 is Aristotle’s book about self-knowledge” (180). Self-knowledge and piety go together, Aristotle teaches, because self-knowledge includes the knowledge that we long to know but do not know everything; we are not gods. Crucially for political life, we do not know enough to remake the world. Such philosophers as Thales and Anaxagoras, “who look up at the heavens, must also look to themselves, if only to better understand the highest, for it is that to which human longing is directed.” Anaxagoras’s science “cannot promise to make us masters and possessors of nature, for [science] begins with trust,” trust in the goodness of the cosmos as the home of man, “in contrast not only to Anaxagoras but also to Descartes, who begins with doubt instead of trust,” and whose “certainty of knowledge based on a certainty of self leaves human beings alienated from any world that is not of their own making” (181).

At the same time, prudence alone and the political life it animates will not suffice. Without “a wisdom that recognizes what is more divine than human beings,” prudent men “will tend to collapse into a cleverness at



attaining their goals and their understanding of human beings, including themselves, into one of prudential beasts.” “Aristotle’s word to the wise is at the same time one to the prudent, for he urges both to self-knowledge, the former by understanding the higher in light of their longing for the good, the latter by understanding that securing and preserving the good for a political community is more beautiful and even more divine than securing only their own. We might understand Aristotle’s thought as a pious mean that avoids the excesses of modern approaches that elevate human beings to gods (cosmos-makers) or reduce them to beasts” (182).

Political prudence consists of architectonic or lawgiving prudence and of judging; there is also the prudence of household management, which consists of three kinds of rule often seen in cities—parental/kingly, marital/political/reciprocal, and masterly/tyrannical. Ethical virtue and prudence depend upon each other. It cannot be virtuous to exercise ingenuity in pursuit of some bad purpose. But it cannot be prudent to ingeniously pursue a bad purpose, inasmuch as to succeed would be injurious. “Prudence guides the ethical virtues as much as it is guided by them, toward living well and achieving happiness in their practice” (186).

Even as he has completed his discussion of the five ways of approaching truth, Aristotle introduces “three new capacities: good deliberation (*eubolia*), comprehension (*sunesis*), and consideration (*gnōmē*),” all of which he “connects with prudence.” Admittedly, had Aristotle omitted discussing these capacities, “readers might not have noticed anything missing,” but their inclusion does serve an important purpose, Nichols maintains: “the occasion [for us] to reflect on his own activity in the *Ethics* (and therefore ours along with his), and on the ways in which it is similar or akin to prudence” (187). Good deliberation is a sort of searching, one of the first steps in making any prudent choice. In the *Ethics*, Aristotle obviously does just that, “for example, by examining what virtues constitute a good human life” (188). Comprehension or astuteness attaches to the examination of the perplexities seen in contradictory opinions and is characterized by judgment (*kritikē*) of those opinions, separating wheat from chaff. Consideration or thoughtfulness is better translated as “knowing with,” “understanding another as like himself”—a capacity indispensable to forgiveness and equity (190). All three capacities improve the crown of ethical virtue, magnanimity, by “bring[ing] the great of soul down from their height ‘to share in speeches and deeds in living together,’” while “turn[ing] the wise from gazing at the heavens

in searching for the good for themselves and others, a search that issues in 'knowing with' others and therefore knowing them as knowers too" (191).

Neither wisdom nor prudence, then, consists of the whole of virtue. To achieve virtue's purpose, happiness, a human being needs both, must strive for both. They complement one another. Although wisdom and prudence are needed in cities, "there is a good beyond prudence and beyond the political community," apprehension of which is nonetheless crucial to the well-being of the political community. Without the first principles of the Declaration of Independence, where would an invention of prudence, a United States Constitution, find its bearings? "That politics gives orders about everything in the community does not mean that it should rule the gods, just as it should not issue orders to the wise, especially those like Socrates who are wise in human wisdom and who, like the political community, defer to the divine" (195). Politics must leave freedom for piety and philosophy alike.

Book 7 marks a new beginning, a consideration of the human soul, knowledge of which deepens self-knowledge, knowledge of one soul. Nichols marks the difficulty of attaining such knowledge, calling this "Aristotle's book of perplexities," of *aporiai* (199). That politics concerns the soul may be seen in the fact that this is the one place in the *Ethics* in which Aristotle reveals his own self-knowledge as "one who philosophizes about politics" (1152b). Consideration of the human soul discloses the human need for friendship, which culminates in the highest form of friendship, philosophic friendship, which brings some human beings to "the wondrous pleasures" of philosophy (1177a). The inquiries spurred by wonder never attain perfect or godlike wisdom, however: "Human beings are not the best things in the cosmos, but they can live their lives with them 'in mind'" (199).

In so living, the human soul needs to exercise self-rule, *enkrateia*. Self-rule "contends against and controls desires contrary to reason in order to perform virtuous deeds" (200). While some persons are "good-natured"—parents readily distinguish "easy babies" from "difficult children"—"nature leaves it to us," to freely-choosing human beings, to master our powerful desires. One might say that the passions are the ethical equivalents of the natural slaves Aristotle describes in the *Politics*—beings that perceive reason and can be ruled by it, but do not themselves reason. Self-rule shows "how ethical virtue comes to be, how it is preserved, and what is involved in its practice" (201).

What are souls, these “selves” that we need to rule in order to be virtuous, fully human? Souls’ invisibility makes them difficult to study. True, actions are visible but they are not entirely reliable “indicators” of virtue or vice. “We must judge as best as we can” (208). Neither the Sophists nor Socrates provide an adequate roadmap, the Sophists because they are only pretended philosophers, Socrates because he at some points identifies virtue as knowledge, vice as ignorance. While Sophists secretly dismiss knowledge as a support of virtue, Socrates seems to ignore the fact that a soul can know very well what virtue is but fail to do the work needed to achieve it, using reason “to justify desires” not to rule them (212). It is not enough to say to yourself, Be prudent! “One who knows only that he should act as prudence determines would not know what to do” (212–13). Rather, “we must own our knowledge by using it and applying it to particular cases, especially to our own case. Only then do our actions become our own” (213). In fact, the Platonic dialogues show Socrates as a warrior as well as a knower, a man of spiritedness as well as reason. While spiritedness may overrule reason (as seen in the excessive pride Niobe takes in her children, who she claimed were superior to the gods, or in parents and dog owners, who imagine that their *babies* can do no wrong), reason cannot rule without it. If spiritedness serves the lower instead of the higher it leads to bestiality, to incest—love of one’s own raging out of decent control. Nichols understands Aristotle further to observe that child abuse is the worst kind of bestiality because it causes a cycle of abuse, imitation of parents’ abusiveness by the children, which is the exact opposite of the cycle of goodness practiced by the Graces.

Political philosophy can influence self-rule, although it cannot simply cause it, by setting down a set of teachings, which might be adapted into a set of laws, governing pleasure and pain. Pleasure and pain are conduits to the soul’s nature. This can be turned to good effect because “most people are looking not for the pleasures of a Sardanapalus, the legendary king known for his sensual indulgences . . . but for joy, blessedness,” the *charis* of the *Charites*, the Graces (221). Although pleasure accompanies the good, it is not the good itself; the happiness all humans seek is not pleasure. “Human beings understand themselves to be thinking beings, and their good to consist of using their minds,” but the pleasures should be examined by the mind, since some pleasures are beneficial, others harmful (222). There is pleasure and indeed joy in virtue, and in the reasoning that virtue entails. For human beings, unlike gods, pleasure mixes with pain, since the pleasure of exercising virtue consists in overcoming the pains caused by the passions that cloud reason. Aristotle’s word for the roadway shrines to the Graces literally

means “impediments”; the monuments to the Graces symbolize the pains the Graces overcome.

The gods enjoy pleasure unmixed with pain. In this sense, one might suggest, as Aristotle does, that “all things by nature possess something divine” (1153b). “He suggests that there is something divine not only about mind, but about life itself, just as he claimed in the *Politics* that it was impious to destroy life” (228). The measured divinity of life and of the mind makes other human beings worthy of consideration. With this, Aristotle turns to the topic of friendship.

Aristotle “spends more time on the goods [friendship] provides than on any other virtue he has previously discussed,” and friendship too has its “perplexities,” however we might wish it untroubled (231). Friendships are graceful, “requir[ing] awareness of reciprocal good will” or *eunoia*—literally, good-mindedness (232). They might be friendships for advantage or utility, for pleasure, or for sharing the good. Only the latter are likely to endure and are the best. Friendship begins in the family but points beyond it, toward the polis (“friendship holds cities together” [1155a]) and even beyond political life to self-awareness and, potentially, to philosophy (a word that has *philia*, friendship, built into it).

One of the perplexities of friendship is whether, in desiring the best for your friend, you might want him to become a god. No: if your friend were to become a god, he would no longer be himself, no longer be what he is, a human being. “A friend will wish the greatest good for his friend, not for someone else who he might become.” Nor “would we wish to become gods, for then we would lose our friend, who is good for us.” Friendship is a form of love, and those who love need; human beings, not gods, need friends with whom they pursue the good. Although this love inheres in shared humanity, friendship is not philanthropy, nor is it popularity. “In friendship, we love *someone*,” a fact that clarifies Aristotle’s previous discussion of equity, whereby a judge judges “the particular” not simply “in light of the universal,” the law, but in light of the circumstances of the case, including the intentions of the one he judges (241). One might go so far as to say that just judges are friends of a sort, even friends of the guilty, giving them what is best for them, even if that is painful, just as a good friend will criticize me if I go wrong. Like a good judge, friendship is just but equitable. Both good judges and good laws need good regimes to support them, regimes that encourage friendship to flourish.

How, then, does friendship move from the family to the city, where judges judge equitably? Parental rule is kingly, consisting of issuing commands for the good of the ruled, the children. Masterly rule is tyrannical, consisting of issuing commands for the good of the master; “there is little or no friendship between a tyrant and his subjects,” any more than there is friendship “between a master and a slave, insofar as he is a slave (1161a30–b6)” (245). Kinship of the “absolute” variety approaches tyranny, and even the best kingship is just only when the child is a child, incapable of sharing in rule. The best friends in the household are the husband and wife, who rule reciprocally, whereby “each has something to contribute, not merely to each other but to the way in which they express their love for their children,” as fathers and mothers tend to rule children in different, complementary ways (251). In so ruling, they bring their children to maturity, into shared rule not in their immediate family but in the polis. “Only with a release from the family can human beings come to develop their potential as political animals” as “political friends” (252). Political friends or citizens consists of like-mindedness, both in their relations with the regime of the polis and in their enjoyment of freedom to associate in pursuits mutually enjoyed, whether those might be hunting or philosophizing—philosophy itself being a kind of hunt. True, like-mindedness might also describe two men who both want to rule, but if both are virtuous they will share rule, and if one or both is not virtuous they are not the best kind of friends. “Such friendships are likely to be rare, for such people are few” (1156b). “Most people want what is beautiful but choose what is beneficial, and while it is a beautiful thing to do good not in order to be repaid in kind, it is beneficial to have something good done for one” (1162b–1163a).

That is to say that my good friend loves himself because “he is in agreement with himself and desires the same things with all his soul” (1166a). “The intellect chooses the best for itself, and the decent person,” the one of *eunoia*, “obeys his intellect” (1169a). But such “noble self-lovers rise above self-interest in any narrow sense, in giving so much to their friends.” As always in Aristotle, “human happiness . . . lies in the *activity* of virtue”; they compete, but in “benefiting the other, and they ‘retaliate’ a good deed by doing one in turn,” like the Graces (262). In so doing, virtuous persons prolong their good activity, making it more effective, that is, better. And in prolonging good activity, they make the polis better. In this, they fulfill their nature as human beings: “A human being is meant for a polis and is of such a nature as to live with others” (1169b).

Friendship also conduces to self-knowledge. We all have our beliefs and opinions, but “how do we know that we aren’t deceiving ourselves?” Self-deception is bad; our friend wants the good for us; he will pull us back from self-deception. “To know oneself, even or especially as someone who thinks, requires knowing another like oneself, someone who also thinks, who affects one’s own thinking, and whose thoughts one affects in turn” (265); friends “perceive together” (1170b). When both love the good, “they can become more like what they love, and they are able to become better” (271). Nichols quotes Leon R. Kass: “Aristotle brings us to understand that virtue is essential to friendship, friendship is essential to self-consciousness, and self-consciousness is essential to happiness.”<sup>3</sup> Happiness is not something one *has*. It is “a certain way of being-at-work”; like the virtues that contribute to it, happiness is not a possession but something we do, a way of life (1169b).

The final, tenth book contains “Aristotle’s final word on happiness in the *Ethics*, although as usual things are not that simple.” “We expect that Aristotle will provide a conclusive answer to the governing question of the *Ethics* as a whole: What is human happiness and what is the best way of life to achieve it”—the life of pleasure, of politics, or of theory (275)? But for Aristotle the love of wisdom and the inquiries leading philosophers closer to it seldom *conclude*. Paul the Apostle ridiculed philosophers as men who are always seeking, never finding, to which Aristotle (and Socrates) might have replied: Exactly so.

Yet neither does Aristotle necessarily hold the philosophic life to be simply superior to all the others. “Contrary to many readings, which understand Aristotle to elevate the life of the mind over the active life of politics and ethical virtue (see 1178a9), I argue that Aristotle finds the theoretical activity that belongs to humans at their best, who are ‘composite beings’ (1178a22), in a range of activities.” Both the life of theory and the life of politics, even the life of the gods themselves, “are subject to the divine influence of the Graces” (277).

Aristotle begins book 10 with the theoretical *and* political question of education, since his preceding discussion of friendship firmly places politics on the foundation of friendship, friendship on the foundation of virtue, and indicates that learning cannot occur without ethical and intellectual virtue. “People educate the young by steering them by means of pleasure and pain”

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<sup>3</sup> Leon R. Kass, “Professor or Friend? On the Intention and Manner of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*,” in *Athens, Arden, and Jerusalem: Essays in Honor of Mera Flaumenhaft*, ed. Paul T. Wilford and Kate Havard (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 26.

(1172a). That steering has a purpose: “What is most conducive to virtue of character is to enjoy what one ought and hate what one ought” (1172a). Should human beings be steered toward a life of pleasure?

Aristotle denies that pleasure is “*altogether* base” (280), as the more ascetic souls among us proclaim, but neither is it identical to the good, as the philosopher Eudoxus, whose name means “good opinion,” insists. It is true that we choose pleasure “for itself,” not as a means; in this it resembles happiness (1172b). And some pleasures are good. Still, “not every pleasure is choiceworthy” (1174a). In itself, pleasure is good, but if caused by actions that are bad or have bad effects its goodness will be undermined by those actions or effects. Pleasure is better associated with “replenishment of a natural condition,” “restoration of a deficient condition to a healthy one, learning, and sense perception (283). The last two of these pleasurable conditions please us because they give us a sense of completion “in ‘the now’” (284). At the same time, seeing (for example) a temple “in ‘the now’ reveals only the temple’s form, its beautiful structure, but not its origin or end, its past or future, those who constructed the temple and their purpose in doing so.” “The present is incomplete without the past and the future,” but the pleasure of “the now” may lead us to wonder about origins and purposes. Then again, “the now,” as experienced, hints at the eternal—the whole, “or the god, which qua eternal cannot be understood in terms of past and future, origin or final cause” (285). Pleasure is a false eternal that can put us in mind of the eternal, if the soul experiencing it is rightly educated. “Pleasure is not the good, but good is the measure by which we can judge and even rank pleasures” (286). Educators should lead students to take pleasure in good activity, life itself being “a certain kind of *energeia*” wherein each person will direct his energies toward “those things and by means of those capacities that satisfy him most” (1175a).

Human beings take pleasure in play, but “happiness does not consist in play” (1176b). One who dedicated his life to play would not be a *spoudaios*, an *homme sérieux*, as the French say in their aspirational moments. Such a man plays in order to be serious, in order to refresh himself. Nichols takes Aristotle’s brief passage on play in 10.6, playfully elaborating on it in a fine and philosophic jazz riff. Aristotle, she suggests, “introduced a novelty in his recapitulation about happiness, play itself, almost in the way play enters life, unplanned and without apparent purpose” (290). Play “gives us reason to trust that we are able to choose things for themselves rather than for their consequences, simply because they are worthy of choice,” as we choose “deeds of ethical virtue” for their nobility and acts of thinking for themselves, as

it were, for their intrinsic delight. “Play could be said to celebrate that this freedom and happiness are possible” and to induce us to find them in our serious activities (291). “We must play for the sake of play if we are to play for the sake of our serious work.” That is why “Aristotle includes play in book 10 alongside the deeds of ethical virtue and the activity of what is most divine in us, our minds” (292). It is the philosophic life that sees “the conjunction of seriousness and play” (293).

“If happiness is *energeia* according to virtue, it is reasonable that it would accord with the most excellent virtue, and this would be the virtue belonging to what is best. So whether this is the intellect or something else that seems naturally to rule, to command, and to possess intelligence concerning what is noble and divine, whether it itself is in fact divine or the most divine of the things in us—the *energeia* of this, in accord with the virtue proper to it, would be complete happiness” (1177a). What, Nichols asks, “are the pleasures that belong to philosophy,” that often arduous inquiry into perplexities (294)? Aristotle’s treatment of playfulness can give philosophizing a certain welcome *brio* along with a needed modesty. If one understands that philosophizing can bring him closer to the truth without any expectation of ever reaching the whole truth, one may delight in serious thinking without descending into some grim dogmatism or into the frivolity of the Sophists. “Aristotle’s god does not wonder,” being pure thought thinking itself (295). Human thinking, however, including human thought thinking about human beings—political philosophy—means both “theorizing about human beings and theorizing in the way that human beings can.” For the god, these two ways of thinking are “inseparable”; for human beings, they are related but necessarily separable, and human thinkers must retain that separation, lest they overstep or understep the humanness of their nature (297). Nichols firmly insists that not only does the *Ethics* lead us to the *Politics*, to contemplation of the distinctively political nature of human beings, but the *Metaphysics* does, too. “Philosophy that remains in the pursuit of wisdom must turn to politics” (299).

The reciprocity that defines politics returns us to the Graces. Aristotle does not think of them, or of the other gods, as poets present them. “There is no source in extant literature for the specific tasks of the Graces that Aristotle assigns to them,” and Zeus and his brothers scarcely “serve as promising examples” of the division of ruling powers (301). As for “the god,” as distinguished from “the gods,” “for the divine mind to think but itself” could mean either that the god becomes “identical with the objects of his thought”—which would make the objects of his thought “more honorable



than” the god “who has no independence from them”—or that the god “thinks himself in abstraction from any other object of thought,” making him “separate from the world,” unwise with respect to it (302n19). This parallels the perplexities Aristotle raises concerning the Platonic ideas—how can such utterly “abstracted” beings *cause* anything?—but this will not be Aristotle’s last word on the subject. It is nonetheless evident that Aristotelian piety leads him to understand the gods as more just and reasonable than the gods as poets present them.

That is, to the extent we *can* understand them. “We do not really know enough about the gods to rule out their beneficence, or to know what form their beneficence might take” (304). Therefore, we should neither “claim for ourselves an exclusive capacity for beneficence” nor assume that the gods will take care of us without any effort of our own. But “Aristotle can state his own purpose”—to write his book “not only to contemplate virtue but to act virtuously”—“even if he does not know the extent to which the highest is akin to him” (305). He acts not as if under the rule of an angry god but as if under the rule, following the example, of the Graces.

That many do not act as if under the rule of gods of any kind may be ascribed to poor education. “It is not the need for force as much as it is the need for education that explains Aristotle’s turn to politics, for the lack of education increases the need for force” (307). A tyrant will rule by fear because he has neglected to provide a good education for his subjects. “Aristotle’s new political science . . . distinguishes politics from despotism,” teaching the need for reciprocity and the need for laws that establish a genuinely civic education, and education in ruling and being ruled in turn (308). Laws come in because, unlike direct rule by persons (very much including parents in the household), the impersonality and universality of law is less likely to stoke resentment. “Those who wish their own children to become good must therefore study politics and legislation,” inasmuch as “only in considering the universal can one see what is unique about the particular, and therefore treat it in the best way possible” (309). Enacting such laws is the activity of the statesman, quite possibly one who has read the *Ethics* and the *Politics*, mindful of political regimes and of the divine, both.

“A politics in which we deliberate about the beneficial and the just fosters the activity of our minds, and therefore what is most divine in us, without collapsing politics into religion,” since “we govern ourselves, elevated by the models of divine activity of thought and beneficence that Aristotle reflects in his own work” (314). That is also the right way to think about Plato’s ideas.

“The politics to which his *Ethics* leads him is therefore not possible without piety, for it requires the activity of our minds, or what is ‘most akin to the gods,’ while accepting that we are at best only akin, since we are mortal—and hence composite beings” (315).

In her concluding “Afterthought,” Nichols gracefully does what Aristotle himself might well do, were he alive now: explain the relevance of Aristotelian piety for modern liberal political regimes, currently under attack from within and without. The Aristotelian ethical sensibility comports with such regimes: “If our kinship with the divine militates against radical secularism, our distance from the divine checks moral righteousness and impositions of religious orthodoxy” (319)—the latter being a major concern of modern liberals in their struggle to prevent the continuation of religious warfare. Since the institutions designed by modern liberals encourage politics understood as reciprocal rule, “we need less a reform of our institutions than a new way to understand them.” Aristotle understands human virtues as “manifestations of freedom” exercised by “living with others and sharing in speeches and actions”—in a word, politics (320). Church should indeed be separate from State, “but politics and religion are entangled, in the support they need from the other” (322). The Signers of the Declaration of Independence were right to appeal to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of their intentions. The Graces would smile upon American self-government and indeed upon the commerce that goes on in the commercial republic. Aristotle would agree that prudence dictates that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes, however fervently contemporary politicians call for “change.”

What needs to be faced squarely, however, is the modern state, which required something like modern liberalism if lives, liberties, and the pursuit of happiness were not to be tyrannized by a centralized ruling apparatus fortified with products of modern technology. The modern liberal insistence on individual rights held against the state, along with the complementary insistence that governments *effect* the safety and happiness of citizens, an insistence given institutional weight by such devices as representation and federalism, all derive from the necessities imposed by the modern state which crushed feudal decentralization and whatever might have remained of the ancient polis. Aristotle himself might have been skeptical of the prospects for genuine politics within an empire and might have wondered if an empire of liberty could sustain its political liberty, even with its impressive array of instruments of prudence.

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Mary Keys, *Pride, Politics, and Humility in Augustine's "City of God."* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022, 350 pp., \$80.02 (hardcover).

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DANIEL E. BURNS

UNIVERSITY OF DALLAS

*dburns@udallas.edu*

Mary Keys's recent monograph on *City of God* is a major achievement in Augustine scholarship. Augustine's texts, like other philosophical works of antiquity, are practically begging for close running commentaries to be written on them (as he and other Church Fathers wrote commentaries on various books of scripture). But surprisingly little postwar scholarship has taken up this ancient commentary-on-text tradition. Among other difficulties, that tradition presupposed a greater respect for the original author than a number of anglophone Augustine scholars have shown toward the object of their study.

Among those who might have undertaken such a commentary, even fewer have had the gumption to tackle all of *City of God* at once. Keys has done so and succeeded well. Her work thus conforms to the model of genuine humility that she rightly identifies as Augustine's own: "confident study combined with lofty yet measured expectations" (217).

Even more important than Keys's approach to the text is her selection of topic. For she insists to an unusual degree on letting her interpretation of *City of God* be guided by the very same concerns that drove the author himself in writing it. She shows clearly that, within the critique of paganism that is the work's unifying theme, a major or even central place is occupied by a Christian defense of "the virtue of humility" against its pagan detractors, both

political and philosophical (3, 81). She therefore spends her book tracking the concept of humility throughout the entire *City of God*, including in many passages where the term is not used but the concept (as she demonstrates) remains very much part of Augustine's arguments. The result is a powerful, meticulous, and persuasive reading of the work as a whole, one that brings its readers as close to the heart of Augustine's own intellectual preoccupations as any monograph has done since Ratzinger's *Volk und Haus Gottes*. This is what excellent Augustine scholarship looks like.

Ratzinger had noted that one could almost replace Augustine's own subtitle for *City of God*, "Against the Pagans," with the more specific "Against the Pagan Philosophers." For Augustine's magnum opus is also the capstone of his lifelong engagement with the pre-Christian philosophy whose strengths and weaknesses he had so acutely experienced in his own life. Keys's book stands out in the scholarship by its exceptionally profound appreciation for this particular aspect of *City of God*. Not satisfied with facile clichés about philosophic vanity, nor indeed with learned but dry textual analyses of Augustine's potential source materials, Keys insists on following Augustine's own lead by offering sympathetic reconstructions and even defenses of the philosophical positions that he targets in *City of God*. Twice she goes so far as to invent a long prosopopoeia from a dead pagan Platonist defending himself against Augustine's attacks (59, 147); the creative device is memorable and, again, very much in the spirit of the author himself. Such valuable work is a necessary preliminary to understanding Augustine's "appreciative critique" of his pagan predecessors (60n25).

Keys notes that Augustine never criticizes "true *philo-sophia*, the full and free love of wisdom" (46). He shows great admiration for those pagans who actually shared this love—who are of course (at most) only a subset of those who glory in the august name of "philosopher" (149). Genuine philosophers anticipate in a way the status of Christians in this life, playing a role in their own earthly cities while remaining a kind of permanent "pilgrims" (75). "No one philosopher has grasped all the truth, but taken together, their best insights may check error and further a fuller vision of the human heart, and even offer a glimpse of the goodness of its maker, the almighty artist" (235). Augustine also acknowledges the possibly intractable moral dilemma faced by pagan philosophers like Varro—who desired to teach the truth as best he could, saw that his fellow Romans' religious lives depended on seemingly unconquerable errors, undertook great personal efforts to bridge the gulf between philosophy and religion via reinterpretations of his city's official

theology, and was ultimately well aware of his own failure in those efforts (68, 51).

Given Augustine's task of defending humility against the vice of pride, then, it is natural for him to think most about the most plausible and attractive version of that vice, namely, the philosophic version. As Keys puts it:

Philosophic achievement in the classical tradition typically lessens social envy for lesser goods such as wealth and prestige and eschews violent means to its own eminence. It enhances self-sufficiency and counsels and habituates its practitioners to civic and moral moderation. Philosophic discoveries, moreover, are far more excellent achievements than forceful political dominance or mastery. As superior to the mere opinions held by others, philosophic truths seem in justice to afford those possessing them a greater claim to exaltation or elation. What could be so bad about philosophic pride? (87)

Keys's sympathetic procedure bears particularly rich fruit when it comes time to describe the humility that Augustine opposes to this pride. For she distinguishes carefully and subtly between true Augustinian humility and the Platonic virtue of "moderation" or "modesty" that is only an "analogue, or close relative, of humility" (27, 13, 74). A philosopher's intellectual modesty is, "in principle at least, open to humility" (102). It can even "prepare the ground for humility" insofar as it is opposed to the vice of hubris: the hubris of those who falsely "think themselves wise" (73), who fail to acknowledge our dependence on the divine source of all truth and happiness, or who are unwilling to "lower themselves before others in order to lead them to truth" (88). Ultimately, though, "to acknowledge and worship the Creator-God is the root of virtuous humility, as Augustine understands it" (186), and the moderation of a pagan philosopher by definition lacks this root.

Still, the root is not the tree. Keys's meticulous comparison of Christian humility to merely philosophic moderation would have benefited from a clear summary of the fundamental difference between them in form. For we again see the kinship and even overlap between the two when she treats the opposite of humility as "hubris" (121, 184), emphasizes that humility is compatible with magnanimity (112, 177) and even the latter's truest form (212), and describes humility as the genuine if hidden greatness (215, 228) that pursues "the excellence and felicity for which we were made" by "seeking to be divinized in truth" (155).

The precise difference between Socratic moderation and Christian humility is a thorny matter of which Augustine probably felt no need to leave

us a clear account. Fortunately, we need no such account in order to unpack Augustine's arguments about the importance of humility to our social and political life, which Keys does at length and with great success. As she puts it in what could practically serve as a one-sentence charter for all students of Augustinian political thought: "While Augustine's ultimate goal is the increase and improvement of the heavenly city's citizenry in the long generations of earthly pilgrimage, he also underscores the limited but nonnegligible benefits such citizens can offer to social life and politics in this world" (171). Repeatedly drawing out the political implications even of passages in *City of God* that hardly advertise their political relevance, she shows how, for Augustine,

virtuous humility . . . counters false divinization of self and society, and so strengthens commitment to moderation and justice among human beings. It opens persons up to a love of rightful equality among human beings; to recognition of the true merits in others; to public service performed with personal sacrifice on behalf of others and for the common good; and to the extension of one's natural familial affection and care to include the poor and abandoned of society. (39)

Even more strikingly, Keys does an exceptional job of bringing out Augustine's critiques of what he himself criticizes as "excessive humility" (42n38). This spiritual vice accords divine honors where they are not deserved, and hence fosters such deleterious social consequences as tyranny, servility, duplicity, manipulation, class warfare, and the degradation of human dignity (45, 54, 57, 67, 71, 77–80, 86, 89). Keys is perhaps motivated to highlight this aspect of Augustine's argument by her rightful concern to respond to the Machiavellian, Nietzschean, and Straussian critiques of Christian humility that appear to be the main, if unnamed, targets of her overall argument (see 236). Whatever may be true of some other Christians, it is hard to recognize Augustine's version of Christian humility in those critiques.

The book's biggest flaw is that it relies too much on R. W. Dyson's Cambridge translation of *City of God*, which is serviceable for classroom purposes but inadequate for any scholarly work of this caliber. Keys of course corrects Dyson occasionally, noting when he misses an entire phrase (82n15), or renders the Israelite king Jeroboam an atheist rather than a coward (188n12). But she sometimes follows Dyson's translation when it seems to me to distort Augustine's meaning. Examples include when Dyson's translation gives an unwarrantedly universalistic bent to a statement about the unique vocation of the Jews (178); when it extends to Christian soldiers a precept of nonbelligerence that the text only clearly applies to Christian nonsoldiers (20n6);

when it exaggerates Augustine's critique of bowing to emperors (90); when it overstates one of Augustine's accusations against Porphyry (101); when it oversimplifies the causal relation between idolatry and ignorance of God (166); when it makes Augustine's preference for a nonimperial international order sound more utopian than it is (31n25, 168n16); and when it unfairly suggests that all "the philosophers" are as such "citizens of the earthly city" (198). I have the impression that Babcock's newer translation with New City Press is more reliable.

In a book that stands out by its serious effort to do justice to Augustine's pagan-philosophic interlocutors, there is one point where Keys arguably fails to do so. In *City of God's* famous critique of the would-be self-sufficiency of Stoic *apatheia*, Augustine relies heavily on the equally if not even more devastating critique that Cicero, defending authentic Platonism against its Stoic distortion, had already formulated in his *De finibus*. I am not even aware of any way that Augustine's critique of Stoicism goes substantially beyond Cicero's. But it is at least unfair to claim that Augustine adds to Cicero "an enhanced emphasis on the other-directedness or sociability of true human virtue" (82). One would indeed be hard pressed to find any Western philosopher who emphasized our natural sociability more than Cicero. The claim is at any rate not supported by the passages Keys cites. Rather than assert, as Keys does, that "virtuous persons will be inclined to fear more for the possible losses of others than for their own," Augustine instead holds up as his anti-Stoical model the most visible emotional disturbances in the life of Christ (cf. 82), whom the Gospels do not depict sweating blood over the possible crucifixions of others. It is likewise unfair of Keys, when treating Augustine's critique of the Stoical pride that purports to find happiness even within our mortal condition, to claim that Augustine applies this critique to *all* "philosophical schools" (204–5). In fact, as she showed earlier, Augustine acknowledges that this is a disputed question among philosophers and gives credit to Apuleius for having come down on the correct side of it (82–84), as Cicero also did in the last book of *De finibus*.

In another respect, Keys is actually too gentle to Augustine's Platonist opponents. This is a welcome error, given the strong temptations today to err in the other direction, but it leads her to do an injustice to Augustine himself. For Augustine does attribute the vice of philosophic pride, if not necessarily to Plato and Cicero, at least to those of their late-antique disciples who persist in rejecting Christian faith. You do not believe in Christ, he apostrophizes these Platonists in book 10, because you do not want to; and you do not want

to because Christ is humble and you are proud. Keys is visibly uncomfortable with the *ad hominem* quality of this argument, often softening it with caveats that do not appear in Augustine's text (cf. 72, 101, 140, 231), and even suggesting repeatedly that Augustine's harshness here betrays a lack of humility on his own part (104, 190, 220; cf. 89, 99). But if it is prideful of Augustine to direct such accusations at Porphyry, what is it to direct the very same accusations at Augustine? Keys may reasonably worry whether her author is being fair once he starts psychologizing his opponents. But if any canonical author can speak with authority on the difference between the inner lives of Christian and non-Christian Platonists, and so would arguably have the right to psychologize this particular set of opponents, one might think it would be Augustine of Hippo. At any rate, a fair evaluation of Augustine's explicit and blistering critique of philosophic pride would require a more robust discussion of the Platonist texts on which he bases that critique.

Carrying on Augustine's dialogue with the Platonists in this way could, in turn, help us make further progress on some of the difficult questions that Keys's book articulates with rare clarity but never fully resolves. The struggle between Augustine and his pagan adversaries over the moral and religious significance of Platonic thought is perhaps the most fascinating intellectual debate of late antiquity, and Keys's book has done more to advance our understanding of that debate than any recent scholarship that I know of. It comes to life in her pages with striking vividness and realism. For this reason among many others, her book is an extremely valuable contribution to the literature on Augustine.



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Alex Priou, *Defending Socrates: Political Philosophy before the Tribunal of Science*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2023, viii + 184 pp., \$35.00 (paperback).

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NICOLAS DAY

TULANE UNIVERSITY

*nday@tulane.edu*

Alex Priou's *Defending Socrates: Political Philosophy before the Tribunal of Science* is a scholarly book, but not merely that. From a scholarly point of view, *Defending Socrates* is an ambitious new interpretation of Plato's trilogy *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman*: it locates the missing dialogue *Philosopher* promised at the beginning of the *Sophist* as the *Theaetetus* reinterpreted in light of the trilogy as a whole, and in the process delivers nothing less than an answer to the question of how sophist, statesman, and philosopher are related. From a not merely scholarly point of view, *Defending Socrates* is a book about political philosophy that is itself a work of political philosophy: it ingeniously shows how the problem of Socrates—his appearance as sophist, statesman, and philosopher—provides a key to the problem of contemporary nihilism, which denies the validity of any claim to have genuine knowledge of human life.

These two aspects of *Defending Socrates*, moreover, are essentially related if, as Priou proposes, contemporary nihilism originates in the early modern criticism of Socratic political philosophy. That criticism turns decisively on the question whether political philosophy must conform to, though it falls short of, the standards of precision furnished by mathematics. As Priou's book sets out to demonstrate, Plato himself had already addressed this question in the *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman*. The representative par excellence of mathematics in the trilogy is Theodorus, whose encounter with Socratic

political philosophy takes place in the *Theaetetus*. His judgment of Socratic political philosophy's inadequacy is obvious at least by the beginning of the *Sophist*, where Socrates himself appears to share that judgment. A reading of the *Theaetetus* in light of this apparent inadequacy would be fundamentally unfriendly to Socrates, but as Priou shrewdly observes, the prejudice of philosophers in favor of Socrates makes it hard to take this Theodoran judgment seriously. Curiously enough, political reflection on the problem of nihilism affords the proper starting point for an interpretation of Plato's trilogy: the way to the truth is through political philosophy.

Priou's claim that the *Theaetetus* is the missing *Philosopher* depends on its double position in the series of Platonic dialogues usually represented in this order: *Theaetetus*, *Euthyphro*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Apology of Socrates*, *Crito*, *Phaedo*. Since Plato represents the *Theaetetus* as having been narrated by Socrates to Euclides sometime after the *Sophist* and the *Statesman* (likely while Socrates was imprisoned), the *Theaetetus* appears a second time in this order sometime after the *Statesman*. But if the *Theaetetus* appears again after the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*, it can be read, Priou argues, as the missing inquiry into the philosopher promised at the beginning of the *Sophist*. The *Theaetetus* therefore has a double aspect. Priou presents the first aspect—the Theodoran interpretation—as the tragedy of Socratic political philosophy. As a tragedy, the *Theaetetus* is Socrates's failure not only to refute the Protagorean relativism he introduces, but also to ground his own knowledge claims in an account of true and false opinion. This failure makes Socrates appear to Theodorus as something less than a philosopher and motivates Theodorus to expect something more adequate from the Eleatic Stranger he brings to the conversation in the *Sophist*.

The Stranger is assigned the task of distinguishing the sophist and statesman from the philosopher. If successful, the two conversations he conducts would complete the tragic reading of the *Theaetetus* by demonstrating that Theodorus's poor opinion of Socrates was justified. But the *Sophist* and the *Statesman* also have a double aspect. On one hand, in order to satisfy Theodorus's expectations for a more measured alternative to Socratic philosophy, the Stranger presents the results of the *Sophist* and *Statesman*—namely, the definitions of sophist and statesman and the agreements that have secured those definitions—as more certain than they really are. On the other, the Stranger indirectly indicates to Socrates—above Theodorus's head—that his own solutions are illusory. This second, ironic and playful interpretation of the *Sophist* and *Statesman* prepare for the second, ironic and playful

interpretation of the *Theaetetus*. Priou asks us to imagine Socrates carefully composing the *Theaetetus* in his meetings with Euclides as providing the true understanding of sophist and statesman as appearances of the reality of the philosopher, essentially characterized by his knowledge of ignorance. Priou's interpretation of the trilogy thus draws our attention to a marvelous feature of the Platonic art of writing: the *Theaetetus* as the missing *Philosopher*, which reveals the philosopher as the knower of his own ignorance, is Socrates's own retrospective self-reflection on his own failure to know.

Priou's careful interpretations of the *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman* are too rich in detail and implications for an easy summary or an easy evaluation. Nevertheless, it is clear that, for Priou, an understanding of Socrates's encounter with Parmenides in the *Parmenides* is of decisive interpretive significance for understanding Socratic political philosophy in general and its defense against a mathematical standard of knowledge in the trilogy. *Defending Socrates* might profitably be read, then, as a sequel to his earlier book *Becoming Socrates: Political Philosophy in Plato's "Parmenides."* Priou's most extensive comments on Parmenides are in the fourth chapter of *Defending Socrates*, "Theaetetus." There, he describes how Parmenides taught the still young Socrates that the whole is accessible to human knowledge only as a whole of parts. The parts give us partial knowledge of the whole, but since the whole is not just the sum of its parts, its irreducible nature as a whole always eludes our grasp. Yet, because self-consciousness about this limitation is necessary for human knowledge, the perplexing problem of the whole has not only a negative but also a positive significance. If we are going to know anything, we must know that, in some sense, we know nothing. The refutative or aporetic character of Socratic political philosophy is thus more adequate to reality than a mathematical account that tries to explain the whole with reference to the sum of its parts. Moreover, if what might be called an "aporetic ontology" is right, then mathematical science is itself a partial understanding of the whole that must remain ignorant of the whole without self-consciousness of its own partiality. Priou's defense of Socratic political philosophy can therefore partly be understood as the attempt to show how the trilogy, properly understood, discovers this aporetic ontology as the proper horizon within which to understand mathematical science.

The ontological part of Priou's defense of Socratic political philosophy has a phenomenological counterpart in the question of why Socrates appears as sophist, statesman, and philosopher. If philosophy could be clearly understood on the model of mathematical science, it would be easy to distinguish

the philosopher from his false appearances. The philosopher would have a standard of knowledge and a method; he would argue logically on the model of geometric demonstration, with little use for analogical reasoning or rhetoric. The philosopher, on the other hand, who recognized the inadequacy of this model, would not refrain from using images and analogies, or rhetorical persuasion when appropriate, to secure a path forward for thinking. This second, Socratic philosopher will necessarily appear as a nonphilosopher to someone, like Theodorus, who presupposes that philosophy ought to be understood on the model of mathematical science. He will appear, at least at first, as a sophist. Since Socrates cannot avoid that through some unambiguous proof of his philosophical bona fides, a defense of Socratic political philosophy must start from this necessary appearance as sophistic and then try to show how and why it is mistaken.

This phenomenological defense starts from the point of view of the person who misapprehends Socrates, in order to explain that misapprehension. As Priou ably shows, it reveals, on reflection, something true about the philosopher's being as the knower of his own ignorance: his true understanding of the whole as something that eludes mathematical science makes him the real knower. By contrast, pretenders to various kinds of science that are in some sense modeled on mathematics are apparent knowers, although with their partial knowledge they will resemble the philosopher as the knower of his own ignorance. Accordingly, revealing pretenders to knowledge as appearances of the knower par excellence is a matter of exposing the partiality of their knowledge. One might call this process, by analogy with Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, a phenomenology of philosophy; Priou's interpretations of the *Sophist* and *Statesman* can be read as such a phenomenology of philosophy. On Priou's reading, the failure to define the sophist means that he must be pursued through his appearance as a kind of statesman, who provides the greatest benefit to the city. In turn, the failure to define the statesman in the *Statesman* means that he must be pursued through his appearance as the political philosopher who privately examines the laws and customs in pursuit of the truly good. Priou identifies this activity with maieutics as Socrates describes and practices it in the *Theaetetus*. The phenomenology of philosophy of the *Sophist* and *Statesman*, which exemplifies this maieutics, reveals that Socrates, in the *Theaetetus*, was the philosopher all along. Priou's defense of Socrates is accomplished by demonstrating how the trilogy itself, properly understood, vindicates political philosophy in its contest with mathematics by validating its claim to be the science of the human good.

Like his teacher Ronna Burger, to whom *Defending Socrates* is dedicated, Priou is constantly attentive to how the action of the dialogues informs their arguments. Some of his most striking and illuminating claims are a result of this careful attention. For example, in the *Theaetetus*, he draws our attention to the fact that Theodorus's praise of Theaetetus's mixture of moderation and courage is belied by Theaetetus's lack of eagerness in the face of philosophical perplexity. How can someone who so consistently loses heart at the first sign of a philosophical problem be called courageous? Yet, as Priou notes, this is the same Theaetetus who, as a mathematician, did not back down in the face of the problem of incommensurable magnitudes. Theaetetus's courage, then, seems strangely circumscribed to the domain of mathematics. This restriction, as Priou sees it, sheds light on a puzzling feature of the *Theaetetus*: the mathematicians' attraction to Protagorean relativism, which obviously threatens the strict universal and deductive necessity of mathematical truth. Since the strict standard of demonstrative truth is unproblematically applicable only to the domain of mathematics, any nonmathematical claim—for example, about the human good or the world of experience—does not seem to be knowledge at all. But if we try to explain how nonmathematical knowledge is possible by appealing to Protagorean relativism, mathematical knowledge itself becomes relativized: paradoxically, we need a standard of truth less certain than the mathematical in order to save the mathematical standard of truth. But Theaetetus loses heart, Priou observes, when it seems that he cannot know something with mathematical certainty. Therefore, Socrates needs to tempt Theaetetus with a certain answer to the question “What is knowledge?” in order to have any hope of curing him of his philosophical and psychic conflict between mathematics and Protagoras—even though Socrates knows, Priou later reveals, that this certainty is not forthcoming.

Priou's interpretation of the *Sophist* and the *Statesman* is likewise noteworthy for its close attention to the argument of the dialogues' action. For Priou, the Eleatic Stranger's appearance of having greater scientific competence than Socrates is a mask he is compelled to wear by the obligation he has taken on to distinguish sophist, statesman, and philosopher. The Stranger, it turns out, is more Socratic than he seems. Priou vividly brings the Stranger's Socratism to light by showing how he tailors his speeches to the souls of his interlocutors with a view to making them more philosophical. Theaetetus is excessively modest, Young Socrates excessively courageous. Theaetetus's excessive modesty appears as what Priou calls his mathematical isolationism—his reluctance to extend the model of mathematical science to anything beyond the realm of number and figure. By contrast, Young Socrates's

excessive courage appears as what Priou calls his mathematical imperialism—his overeager extension of the model of mathematical science beyond its proper realm. The failure to adequately define the sophist is connected with the Stranger's inability to encourage Theaetetus to search for the truth outside the realm of mathematics even if this leads to perplexity rather than certainty. Correspondingly, the failure to adequately define the statesman is connected with the Stranger's inability to moderate Young Socrates and prevent him from leaping over perplexity to secure universal intelligibility on the mathematical model. This twofold failure contrasts with Socrates's relative success in the *Theaetetus* encouraging Theaetetus to become more philosophical and persevere in the face of perplexity (despite the fact that Theaetetus never abandons what Priou calls an "arithmetical understanding of being" in the *Theaetetus*). The failure to define knowledge in the *Theaetetus*, Priou shows us, looks much less tragic in light of this psychagogic success.

In sum, as a scholarly book, *Defending Socrates* is a valuable addition to Plato studies: it closely analyzes the arguments of the trilogy in light of their dramatic form and relates them to Socrates's encounter with Parmenides in the *Parmenides*, thus illuminating the relation of these four dialogues. It also shows, in a remarkable way, how the ontological and epistemological problems of the trilogy are intimately related to the problem of Socrates—that is, to what is ultimately the political problem of the philosopher being necessarily misapprehended. As more than a scholarly book, *Defending Socrates* brings to light and exemplifies political philosophy in its independence from mathematical physics and is thus important for anyone who wishes to better understand the quarrel between ancients and moderns.

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