MERE ORTHODOXY

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Kirsten Sanders on Marriage • Charlie Clark on War • Molly Worthen Interviewed by Daniel Williams on Charisma • John Ehrett on Legal Fictions • Ian Olson on Monsters • Anthony Scholle on Entrepreneurship • Josh Heavin on Richard Gaffin • Jeff Bilbro on Reading • Stu Kerns on Christian Unity • Matthew LaPine on Suicide • Michael Lucchese on John Quincy Adams • Jake Meador on Fr. Edmund Campion • and Tessa Carman on Education • Poetry from Rachel Welcher and Joel Kurz

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T.S. ELIOT

I confess, however, that I am not myself very much concerned with the question of influence, or with those publicists who have impressed their names upon the public by catching the morning tide and rowing very fast in the direction in which the current was flowing; but rather that there should always be a few writers preoccupied in penetrating to the core of the matter, in trying to arrive at the truth and to set it forth, without too much hope, without ambition to alter the immediate course of affairs, and without being downcast or defeated when nothing appears to ensue.

When I was a student at L'Abri, our days had a familiar pattern: Breakfast at 8:30, work or study began at 9:30, broke for tea between 11 and 11:30, then continued until lunch at 1. Lunch went till 3, then from 3 to 6:30 we did another cycle of work and study with morning workers having study time and morning students doing their work time. It being L'Abri, we obviously had to have a tea break at 4:30.

Every evening was a little different–sometimes there were prayer meetings, sometimes there were film discussion nights, sometimes there were lectures. Once there was a minor league baseball game and Dairy Queen afterwards.

If you simply looked at the facts of what our life looked like, there's actually very little to suggest we were living at a Christian residential study center and all seeking spiritual and theological truth together. Much of the day looked "secular" as many people would think about it–eating, weeding, cooking, cleaning, reading, watching movies, and the rest. Only the prayer meetings stand out as obviously "Christian" activities. Yet I would maintain—and I think L'Abri workers would agree–that everything about the routine at L'Abri is shaped by Christianity. It is a pervasively Christian community–which mostly means doing ordinary human things in a certain way.

For example, we took tea breaks every day because tea is good, conversation is good, and having space to talk and get to know each other is also good. (Also, a couple of the workers loved to bait new students into playing them at Boggle. Long-time members of the community knew better. But it was basically a rite of passage to get thrashed at Boggle or Speed Scrabble by Nancy or Alison.) We took a two hour lunch for the same reason.

The upshot of all that, of course, was that we only worked and studied for six hours a day. But with that time, we managed to keep a large property in good repair, make three meals a day for the whole community, prepare dessert spreads for guests who came in the evening, and much else besides. It was not a lazy or unproductive mode of life. It was just… not terribly normal by contemporary American standards. But, perhaps, it is not a bad thing to be able to recognize distinctly Christian modes of life that aren't terribly "spiritual" or ethereal but are also still quite obviously separate from more common habits and patterns of living.

As I compiled and edited this issue of the journal, it became clear that much of what you are about to read is about this question: What does a distinctly Christian way of being human look like? Kirsten Sanders will contribute to an answer with her moving consideration of marriage and "digital doubles." Charlie Clark approaches a similar question as he considers a book on modern warfare and, following Kierkegaard, suggests that pursuing truth might require the rejection of much of what we think we know. Anthony Scholle's review of a recent book on American work culture recognizes the goodness of entrepreneurial life while preserving awareness that there are things which it lacks, things which Christianity is comfortable addressing. Jeff Bilbro's review of a recent book on reading could almost be read as a guide to keeping one's head in a digital-first world–how does one stay sane and maintain a healthy intellectual and mental life amidst all that is going on around us? Jeff's review will help you with that. In his essay, Stu Kerns, who was my pastor for eight years and pastored a single congregation for over 30 years, shares what his experience has taught him about Christian love and unity amidst

differences–a problem no less urgent today than when Stu began his vocation in pastoral ministry. Finally, Tessa Carman, who will be writing a back page column for us going forward as part of her work on our newly reformed editorial board, explains why the question "do you homeschool or send your kids to a private school or a public school?" is a bad question. She offers a better way to think about the education of our children and the life of a Christian home.

In addition to those pieces, this issue also features an interview with historian Molly Worthen on her new book about charisma, an extended review of Steven Smith's *Fiction, Lies, and the Authority of Law* by DC-based attorney and policy staffer John Ehrett, a review and note of gratitude on the work of the Presbyterian theologian Richard Gaffin by Josh Heavin, now an Anglican pastor, as well as additional essays from Ian Olson on monsters, Beowulf, and Tolkien, Matthew LaPine on mental health and the classical world, and a provocative essay from Michael Lucchese on how John Quincy Adams responded to the Christian radicals of his own day. I also have written for the issue on the story of a Catholic martyr under Queen Elizabeth, Fr. Edmund Campion, and what his story might teach us about liberalism and tolerance, with an assist from St Augustine's *City of God*.

There are two other items you might be interested in: First, you'll notice that the *Mere Orthodoxy* team has grown: This is our first issue with Ian Harber, our new director of communications. You may have read Ian in previous issues of the journal, so you will understand why we are so excited to have him on board. Additionally, Nadya Williams, formerly of *Current*, has joined as our new books editor. We're very excited to be able to expand our books coverage going forward thanks to her help and good judgment.

Finally, the *Mere Orthodoxy* editorial board has been relaunched. Going forward you can expect to see more work from all seven members of the board, which is made up of myself, Nadya, and five others:

- Matthew Loftus, a medical missionary in eastern Africa and long-time contributor to *Mere Orthodoxy* and other publications
- Samuel James, an editor with Crossway and author of a fine book on technology and spiritual formation
- Kirsten Sanders, a long-time *Mere O* contributor who also has the cover essay in this issue
- Susannah Black Roberts, a senior editor at *Plough* and long-time friend of *Mere Orthodoxy*
- Tessa Carman, a freelance writer who has written for *Mere Orthodoxy*, *Plough*, *Front Porch Republic*, and others

It is an exciting time at the magazine and we're delighted to have you on board as a supporting member. Thank you for your continued support. Happy reading!

JAKE MEADOR

JAKE MEADOR IS THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF OF MERE ORTHODOXY. HE LIVES IN HIS HOMETOWN OF LINCOLN, NE WITH HIS WIFE AND FOUR CHILDREN.

Forsaking All Others

KIRSTEN SANDERS

"PURITY OF HEART IS TO WILL ONE THING". – SOREN KIERKEGAARD

Christians are promised people. Some of the earliest biblical stories tell of God calling Israel to follow him alone. This was not an act of fiat, but an invitation. "You will be my people, and I will be your God" (Gen 6:7) is a promise but moreso, a pledge. Israel would have to be bound to this particular god. They'd need to choose this one thing.

To choose *this* god would be to deny themselves the benefits of *that* one. Israel would miss out on a lot of other things; other gods promised pyrotechnics and instant wealth and even protection against natural threats. It might be better to keep the household gods close at hand, under their garments, to retain the benefits of foreign gods. But to belong to Israel's god was to belong to him alone. You'd have to forsake all others.

Israel's story can be told through this pattern of call and response, though it frequently comes off more like one missed opportunity after another. There are Adam and Eve, who cannot bear to abide just one rule. Then there is Abram, who receives the promise of a son and immediately goes out to break his own marriage vow to ensure it. Just one chapter after God's covenant with Abram, in Genesis 15, he takes Hagar as his concubine. A few chapters later, in an attempt to keep God's covenant, he nearly sacrifices his own son.

Israel was a promised people who wasn't any good at keeping promises. It was this promise-keeping that becomes the story of their own life with God. To follow Israel's God was by definition to limit your options. But in doing so, you would become a people to whom God kept his promise.

The Christian vision of personhood prioritizes an active vow. But instead of being a choice that expands options, this vow intentionally limits them. It is not surprising that the covenantal imagery of the Hebrew Bible slowly becomes bridal imagery in the New Testament. Keeping God's commandments brings with it its own reward, which is being kept.

Christian marriage is a dim and somewhat foggy envisioning of God's covenant with his people, and as with Israel, the difficult part of Christian marriage is almost always the promise-keeping.

There are after all so many interesting ways to break a promise. When a young adult takes a spouse, the choice of this one person is equally a choice against any others. To all of the lives that might have been, it is the closing of a door.

Limiting one's choice through marriage has long been how people became adults. But adulthood now is prioritized at the expense of marriage, and seen as a season of expanding choice rather than limiting it. To become an adult now seems to entail everything other than marriage—travel, experiences, acquiring wealth and a house, getting to know yourself and living precariously. Marriage, which was once seen as an important rite of passage into adulthood, now is thought to compete with the things that actually make adults.

Limiting one's options has always been a risk, but now in our age of digital technology it is perhaps even moreso. As each person reaches the age where they approach adulthood, they are handed a phone. Phones, of course, allow for young adults to be constantly distracted and entertained. They provide also the means to avoid eye contact and miss the opportunity for stolen glances, casual introductions, and most of all—flirting.

PERSONHOOD IN THE ORDINAL SOCIETY

Historians note that already in the seventeenth century numbers were seen to have "special virtues." [1] Unlike people, they could not lie. Numbers, therefore, were thought to be especially useful in organizing a population. Through procedures of counting, individuals could be tabulated without being identified. Once persons were reduced to numbers, it was thought they could be assessed in terms of their behavior alone, without the pesky distractions of demographic identifiers coming into play.

But as manual counting machines gave way to electronic and then digital methods of data collection, new ways of assessing individual behavior were developed. These relied on collecting the digital "traces" that their individual choices left behind. These traces are "left on everything from social media to credit bureaus, shopping websites and fidelity programs, courthouses, social welfare agencies, pharmacies, and the content of emails and chats."[2] Every purchase you make electronically and everything you search for online could contain a trace.

All of this information comes to form a "data double."[3] Data doubles are the false spouses of modern personhood. In *The Ordinal Society,* Marion Fourcade and Kieran Healy describe how these doubles work:

"While you exist as a physical person in the world, your data double is the representation of you, your tastes, and your actions that can be reconstructed in whole or in part from the records and traces you leave behind."[4]

Over time, these digital traces became more than

[1] William Deringer, quoted in *The Ordinal Society,* 70.

[2] Ibid, 117.

[3] See *Ordinal Society* and "The Surveillant Assemblage", accessed at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/12188129_The_Surveillant_Assemblage

[4] *The Ordinal Society,* 103

just evidence of human behavior. They came to have value, too, as an assessment of an individual's trustworthiness. When corporations rely on these assessments and use them to assign things like insurance rates and mortgage opportunities, these benign digital traces come to have a predictive power. The false spouses of modern personhood create other lives. Their power threatens and predicts our own futures.

Because these algorithmic evaluations of our data doubles are invisible, we have the sensation of full liberated choice as we move about the world. But we are all bound in ways we cannot see. The tools of digital capitalism have come to have a *predictive* power far beyond the power of counting. It is ironic that the view of human persons as equal and "self-propelled"[5] has developed in tandem with the tools that would allow persons to be sorted and constrained.

The great irony of the modern world is that the self-propelled individual has not been aided by the technological arm but has instead found itself co-opted by it. Even as modern man imagines himself autonomous, he is, like Promethus, bound.

The very means that were thought to serve as the engine of man's own propeller have instead gummed up the gears. Our agency, always an illusion, has now been impeded by the very means that were thought to liberate us. There is no escaping these data doubles. We now live in the age of no-fault divorce, and yet in a perverse inversion of marriage we find that we cannot rid ourselves of our data doubles. They are stuck to us, 'til death do us part.

TO WILL ONE THING

The Christian riddle of modern life is that we have a tradition whose very own story is that of an oath and with it a chosen constraint. But we must inhabit that tradition in a world whose society is based on the myth of endless choosing, and that has developed the tools to impede our choices, even as we imagine ourselves to be free. We don't want the thing that is good for us to want—an oath, a permanent vow—and the thing we are trained to want is the thing that leads us to be further constrained.

Sound familiar?

Our modern condition is a version of the divided will that originated the Western church's teaching on original sin. Concupiscence, the post-Fall human condition, speaks of the way the will does not follow desire; indeed, we may desire things we ought *not* to desire, and we may will to act in ways that are against our desired actions. This theological reflection on Paul's "wretched man!" of Romans 7 becomes even further embedded as digital tools more deeply plow the furrows of human desire. As the opportunities to develop lust and greed are digitally enhanced and mediated, the western teaching on original sin increasingly gains relevance. But it is needed just as it is falling out of fashion.

The Christian answer to the problem of man's bound will comes in the form of grace. Through grace, we might receive aid so that our wills can be assisted toward the good. Grace can take many human forms, and I'd suggest that the form we must encourage is the simple good of marriage. Though not recognized by most Protestants as a sacrament, marriage might be

[5] Ibid, 232

still seen as a means of grace in the way that it tells a truer story about human life. If it is not only the case that the self-propelled man is an illusion, but that data has made him doubly so, might there be a way to respond to this lie of autonomy with its opposing, but truer story- that the *bound* life is the freer one?

Asceticism has always found a home within Christian practice. It is ordinarily associated with grand gestures like fasting, going to the desert, and standing on a pole. But in an age as saturated with choice as our own, even the vow to belong to only *this* one might be seen as ascetical. Marriage might be the asceticism we need most.

Like an ascetical vow, in marriage you promise to forsake all others. But in order to forsake all *others*, you must also forsake all other lives.

To bind yourself to another necessarily narrows your options. Nowadays this strikes an ugly chord. Self actualization just *is* how we think about adulthood. Expanding choices, opportunities, and experiences is how we judge a cultured individual. We parent our children with the stated goal of gaining for them a glut of experiences and opportunities that they can actualize by becoming a certain kind of successful person. For the most part, we don't parent them to keep their promises.

This might be because our own lives in midlife are often marked by regret over lost opportunities, opportunities that we remember and imagine and turn into phantasms and dreams of lives that never were. We treasure these imagined other loves and fondle them like rosary beads. We imagine ourselves greater and grander than we are. The Queen of all such rosaries, Miranda July, has been getting rich and fat off of our misplaced grief by fictionalizing it in the story of a woman who in midlife runs away from her family to chase the things she'd lost. Everyone's reading it.

The irony of Christian marriage may be that in the face of the pressure toward endless choice, it is this constraint that really makes adults, because it is with this constraint where we find the grace of limits. By limiting our freedom to choose, we are bound to just one thing. To choose one thing, or in this case one person and one life, you risk having *only* that one thing. In this constraint we resist the optimization and ordinalization of our worlds. When we bind ourselves to just one thing, we refuse to imagine ourselves as the sum of all of our choices. We might then become persons who have received grace, not made but given.

To have at the end of your life one single story, a promise that was kept, would gesture to all the things you did not choose. It might leave their shadow in its wake. But it might reveal as well the One who in fire and blood made himself known as Covenant-keeper, as a promise-making God. In forsaking all others, you'd be choosing this one thing, marriage as the shadow of the oath made in smoke and fire.

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DON'T TRIP

RACHEL WELCHER

Don't trip over the firetruck
in the shower, the one waiting
beside the soap. It is set to be
healed in the morning by a
mini-mechanic who is still
sleeping in her toddler bed.

She will soon rise and give it a
proper tune-up, not with plastic
tools, but with her doctor's kit,
which is missing an otoscope,
but includes a rogue flashlight.

Do not trip over the truck's
cousin toys, left rolling on the
floor, perched by the basement
door, arranged in perfect
fighting position. Do not curse,
as though they were the enemy.
They are the heroes in our story;
the block-scattered heartbeat that
you strained to hear all those times
when there was only silence on the
other end of the doctor's doppler.

The dinosaur stickers that will not
come off the hardwood floor are
actually small, snarled-toothed saints.
They pray for you.

Like you prayed for them.

Do not trip over joy,
which is often hiding behind
the chaos that exasperates us.
You might break your neck one
day, but at least you will die happy.

RACHEL JOY WELCHER IS AN AUTHOR, POET, AND ACQUISITIONS EDITOR AT BAKER BOOKS.

The Romance of Realism

WILLIAMSON MURRAY. *THE DARK PATH: THE STRUCTURE OF WAR AND THE RISE OF THE WEST*. NEW HAVEN: YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2024. 488 PP, $40.

CHARLIE CLARK

"PUT YOUR SWORD BACK IN ITS PLACE," JESUS SAID TO HIM, "FOR ALL WHO DRAW THE SWORD WILL DIE BY THE SWORD.

Kierkegaard called the art of biblical interpretation a way of "defending oneself against God's Word." The text was the messenger from the emperor in Kafka's famous parable, shouldering its way through the tightly packed throngs of interpreters, never arriving. "If there were an open field, how he would fly along, and soon you would hear the marvellous pounding of his fist on your door." But to be fair, Jesus does speak in parables. He invites interpretation, then defeats it. He dazzles us with his subversions, his reversals, the upside-downness of his vision. ("You have heard that it was said… But I tell you…") Then as soon as we get dialed in, he hits us with the change-up: he says something blindingly, water-is-wet obvious, and it sails straight over the plate. The saying about the sword is like that.

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Williamson Murray (1941–2023) was a prolific military historian and theorist. *The Dark Path: The Structure of War and the Rise of the West* (2024), published posthumously, is Murray's attempt to synthesize the prodigious accumulations of historical data and strategic reflection from his long career. References to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 confirm that the author continued to work on the book until at least the year before his death, but the sketchy character of these references suggest that Murray may have had more to say than time in which to say it.

Like readers of his eminent predecessor, Carl von Clausewitz, we are left to guess how Murray might have revised his work if he had lived to complete it. One hopes, for example, that he would have better integrated the two elements of his fifteen chapters. On the one hand, Murray has a Grand Narrative, which is presented with some clarity in the eighteen pages of Chapter 1, but which thereafter recurs only fitfully in Chapters 2 through 14—primarily in introductory and concluding paragraphs—until in Chapter 15, it returns forcefully but strangely unaffected by the passage of over 350 pages. The bulk of the book, therefore, is a merciless barrage of Uninterpreted Facts. Names, dates, and figures are fired Maxim gun-like from Murray's vast arsenal, with only occasional hints as to their relevance.

This might be the esotericism of a lifetime of Bible study talking, but Murray's writerly technique could be read as a demonstration of his central thesis, which is that every war is a war of attrition. The reader's resistance is ground down by the onslaught of erudition until surrender to Murray's conclusions is all but inevitable. In any case, I will concern myself for the remainder of this review primarily with Murray's Grand Narrative. The curious (and intrepid) reader is invited to see for themselves whether they can make heads or tails of Murray's play-by-play of troop movements in the War of Spanish Succession or the tonnage of coal production over the course of the Combined Bomber Offensive. Your humble correspondent could not.

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"The spectre of attrition" is central to Murray's grand narrative of the rise of the West. All through the middle chapters of *The Dark Path*, Murray endeavors to show how each conflict is decided not by tactical genius or even by military strategy but by the superior ability of one side to finance, supply, and man its war machine. "Friction" and chance are such dominant factors in warfare that no battle is decisive. In modern war, the brilliant maneuvers of celebrated generals have proved largely irrelevant to the outcome. Murray shows that, as a historical matter, the winning side frequently loses more men and expends more materiel, in both absolute and relative terms, than their opponents. His conclusion: the West achieved its hegemony by getting good at absorbing losses. Murray describes this evolution toward attritional superiority as occurring in a punctuated equilibrium of five stages, which he describes as "military-social revolutions."

The first of these military-social revolutions was triggered by the introduction of gunpowder into European warfare. By dramatically increasing the lethality of pitched battles and rendering traditional castles obsolete, gunpowder weapons led directly to the invention and widespread adoption of the *trace italienne*, a new style of fortifications, which in turn greatly expanded the role of sieges in European warfare. Long sieges required new depths of logistical support as well as more disciplined and professional soldiers, both of which could only be delivered by new bureaucratic institutions. Thus, the introduction of gunpowder weapons led directly to the creation of the modern state. This first military-social revolution sets the pattern of Murray's grand narrative: at each stage of development, warfare becomes more deadly and more expensive.

Following on the creation of the modern state is the second military-social revolution: the industrial

revolution. Industrial production vastly increased the availability and efficacy of arms, which war came to demand (along with manpower) in ever larger amounts. The size of armies grew significantly during this period, as did casualty rates. Then came the third military-social revolution—ideologically motivated mass mobilization (the French Revolution's *levée en masse*)—which rendered the nation state's army coterminous with its able-bodied population. The fusion of the industrial revolution and mass mobilization in the phenomenon of total war, born in the American Civil War and coming of age with World War I, is Murray's fourth military-social revolution.

Murray's fifth military-social revolution is simultaneously the most relevant (because ongoing) and the least well-defined (perhaps for the same reason). Murray describes this revolution in terms of an accelerating pace of technological change and a dissolving barrier between military and civilian innovation. His thinking on the fifth military-social revolution is clearly shaped by his reflection on the Cold War. Murray's insight is that the Cold War, like all others, was won by attrition. But instead of the destruction of men and materiel in combat, the attrition was inflicted by the peacetime obsolescence of military equipment. The Soviet Union was so economically and technologically outmatched by the United States that it collapsed under the weight of its own military spending.

With the rise of the science-military-industrial complex, research and development now flows freely between civilian and military sectors. Innovations pioneered in one sector soon find a market in the other: GPS in the family sedan, hobbyist drones spotting for artillery in Ukraine. Thus Murray's fifth military-social revolution effectively erases the difference between combat and economic competition, war and peace. We see this dynamic all too clearly in the race to stay ahead of our great power rivals in developing artificial intelligence.

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Like Clausewitz—who argued that war logically entails the maximum use of force—Murray is a realist. He believes that self-interest drives the conflicts between individuals and nations and is fond of quoting Thucydides: "Of the gods we believe, and of men we know, that by a necessary law of their nature they rule wherever they can." Insofar as humans have a moral nature, it is irrelevant to grand strategy. For the realist, the only check upon the *libido dominandi* is the balance of power: "right [and wrong], as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."

The realist typically argues that projecting military strength is a way of minimizing bloodshed or avoiding conflict altogether—deterrence, on the one hand, swift, decisive victory, on the other. But Murray thinks both of these arguments rely on illusions. In the wake of the fifth military-social revolution, the great powers are always already at war with one another: the lines between economic competition, technological innovation, and military rivalry have become impossible to draw. Any advance by one power, especially any military buildup, is a provocation to the others. Again, he quotes Thucydides: "it was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable." So much for deterrence.
As for decisive victory, Murray's whole book goes to

show that it is an illusion. War is decided by attrition, and the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war is proof that this has not changed. Even in an age of cheap drones and fire-and-forget missiles, when a hot war does break out, it is not decided by a few surgical strikes, but by the slow, bloody grinding down of both sides. Russia has lost twice as many troops in its invasion of Ukraine as America lost in all of World War II.

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It is difficult to overstate the pessimism of Murray's narrative. He reports that at one point in the Cold War the policy of the Strategic Air Command "proposed throwing all of America's nuclear weapons against the Soviets in one massive strike, some 133 atomic bombs on 70 cities." He adds, "This, in the planners' words, represented 'an opportunity to put warfare on an economical, sensible, reasonable basis.'" The effect of such repugnant conclusions—in light of Murray's grand narrative—should be to reduce warmaking to an absurdity. ("A strange game. The only winning move is not to play.") Yet Murray sees an iron logic in the cycle of greed, aggression, reciprocal action, and escalation.

But more than this, he seems to take a grim pleasure in the approaching Götterdämmerung. The final line of his book is another approving quotation from the Melian Dialogue: "[Hope] is by nature an expensive commodity, and those who are risking their all on one cast find out what it means only when they are already ruined." Realism is not without romance. For the Stoic, "His finest hour is to sit tight-lipped and ironic while the world comes crashing down around him." The same could be said for Murray with his fondness for Thucydides.

There are at least two problems with Murray's Byronic realism. The first problem is that the Athenians are wrong: it is not a necessary law to rule wherever we can. If, as Murray argues, the West is exceptionally powerful because its constituents are exceptionally greedy and competitive, then that just goes to show that the West's insatiable *libido dominandi* is another facet of its general W.E.I.R.D.ness. Exceptional greed is, by definition, exceptional. If everyone is exceptional, no one is. There have always been would-be tyrants, but there is nothing general and necessary about this ambition.

The second problem is that the realist theory of victory is incoherent. Clausewitz famously imagines the opponents in a war as "a pair of wrestlers. Each tries through physical force to compel the other to do his will; his *immediate* aim is to *throw* his opponent in order to make him incapable of further resistance. *War is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.*" In wrestling, when you throw your opponent, they are obliged by the rules to grant you your victory. In war, you will need to keep a boot on their neck for the rest of your life. (Clausewitz: "The defeated state often considers the outcome merely as a transitory evil...") Having once subjugated the helots, the Spartans were prisoners in their own country, condemned to sleep with one eye open, to renew their war against their servants every year.

More generally, the realists reverse the true relationship between compulsion and rule. As Aristotle demonstrates in his *Politics*, the tyrant who rules by force is, in reality, the most enslaved: "They are always either the masters or servants and never the friends of anybody; the tyrant never tastes of true freedom or friendship…. will he not be in an agony of fear lest he

and his wife and children should be put to death by his slaves?" Like a good realist, Mao said, "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun." Aristotle saw clearly that human beings cannot be ruled by force.

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Murray need not have despaired. Yes, war may be irrational, and the cycle of friction, attrition, and escalation may be deeply entrenched in the West's approach to international relations. But these are contingent choices, not inescapable facts. A return to sanity begins with acknowledging that war is not, in Clausewitz's famous phrase, "a continuation of politics by other means" but a suspension of politics—that power politics is a contradiction in terms. A return to politics is a real alternative to the self-defeating logic of realism.

War is dominated by friction, because human beings resist coercive force. The alternative to violence is persuasion, and the means of persuasion is speech. *Politics* again:

> [S]peech is designed to indicate the advantageous and the harmful, and therefore also the right and the wrong; for it is the special property of man in distinction from the other animals that he alone has perception of good and bad and right and wrong and the other moral qualities, and it is partnership in these things that makes a household and a city-state.

Given how far the disease of militarization has progressed, it may be necessary in the short-term to undermine the offensive capacity of rival powers and violent non-state actors. But the heart of any sane grand strategy must be persuasion—friend-making, the formation of partnerships in moral agreement. Leaders who have learned to sleep soundly atop hoards of WMDs are terrified to adopt non-violence or unilateral disarmament, but the alternative is an endless cycle of escalating violence. Murray saw the world fettered on its dark path, but there are ways, however long and hard, that lead up to light.

CHARLIE CLARK IS THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE ELEAZAR WHEELOCK SOCIETY.

The Power of Charisma in American History: Interview with Molly Worthen

DANIEL K. WILLIAMS

The origins of the term charisma are religious—used in the New Testament, "charisma" means "gift of grace" in Greek. When we speak of charisma today, we are generally not referring to this original sense, but maybe we should think about it more. This tension between religious charisma and the charisma wielded by political leaders is at the heart of historian Molly Worthen's new book, Spellbound: How Charisma Shaped American History from the Puritans to Donald Trump. *Forum Books, 2025. Pp. 464.*

Worthen is the author of two other books, associate professor of American history at UNC-Chapel Hill, and a freelance journalist who has written for the New York Times, The New Yorker, and more

Daniel K. Williams: What is charisma, and what can a historical study tell us about it?

Molly Worthen: Charisma is a relationship between the leader and followers. That relationship is based on telling a story. The leader brings followers into a compelling narrative that does a better job of making sense of their lives than whatever stories they were invested in before. But for people outside the story, who find no role in it (or find themselves cast as villains), it is baffling. Charismatic people are often not good looking, charming, or good public speakers. So the corollary of charismatic attraction is the revulsion that you feel if you're watching a political rally or a sermon and you are not under the charismatic person's influence.

Daniel K. Williams: Why did you write this book? What do you want readers to take away from it?

Molly Worthen: I was looking for a new way to investigate the relationship between religion and politics. In this age of secularization and the rising number of "nones," the familiar institutional benchmarks like church

attendance figures don't tell us as much as they used to. I'm convinced that humans are fundamentally religious creatures. We seek a way to connect with a transcendent narrative that lends meaning to our puny mortal lives, and we look for something to worship. If that impulse doesn't land in a church, it will land somewhere else. More and more, I suspect it lands on charismatic leaders.

Charismatic leaders craft stories that respond in a strategic way to the anxieties of their time, especially the success or failure of the era's dominant institutions. Each period of American history has favored a particular "style" of charisma. That style can tell us a lot about what people fear and desire. But I want readers to see that the most successful leaders—like George Washington, Franklin Roosevelt or Martin Luther King, Jr.—made the strategic decision *not* to stick too closely to the charismatic style of their age. Instead, they saw how to adapt the style, riff on it, and combine it with other approaches to bring out the best in Americans without inflaming their worst instincts.

Daniel K. Williams: On a related note, we often use the word "charisma" in secular contexts, but your book emphasizes the religious origins of the word and argues that even in its modern secular settings, charisma can never fully be understood apart from religion. What do you mean by that? What does a study of religion tell us about charisma in American history?

Molly Worthen: The more I study history, the more I become convinced that human beings are not the empirically minded creatures we fancy ourselves to be. We focus on material evidence and deploy cold, calculating, logic more in the breach than as a habit. I don't mean to suggest that we're not "rational." Rather, we base our reasoning on a lot of things that defy formal syllogism and material data. Faith is not the opposite of reason; it's a framework for reason. Religious people and nonbelievers both rely on the logic of stories: We take the hard things we encounter in life, like suffering and injustice, and we slot them into a narrative that lends them meaning. So if you drive a hard wedge between religion and politics, you miss what charismatic leaders are doing when they draw in new followers.

At some level, we all intuit this. Even secular people resort to quasi-magical or religious or hypnotism metaphors when they talk about charisma. They use words like "mesmerize" and "magnetize." They talk about leaders "casting a spell" and followers "converting" to a cause. Charisma is a concept we punt to when we can't identify totally rational, material explanations for the relationship between a leader and followers.

The sociologist Max Weber saw this a little more than a century ago, when he adapted the word "charisma" from the field of biblical studies and repurposed it in the way we tend to use it now—to describe a kind of authority distinct from the authority of traditions or institutions, authority that has to do with a leader convincing followers that he or she has some amazing, superhuman power. Weber was trying to domesticate this theological term so that his secular-minded colleagues in the new social sciences would feel comfortable using it. But he could not resist using religious turns of phrase. He wrote that the leader and his "disciples" must "stand outside the ties of this world." He warned that if the leader's "divine mission" doesn't prosper his followers, they will conclude that "he is obviously not the master sent by the gods."

Daniel K. Williams: What were some of your key discoveries about charisma in American history? How does charisma operate—and what might explain a particular charismatic leader's appeal?

Molly Worthen: When I began this research, I thought I would be writing mainly about followers' intense encounters with captivating leaders. I thought charisma was a force that you had to experience in person. My first big clue that this is not the case came in my research on Joseph Smith and the foundations of the Mormon church.

Smith was over six feet tall, with arresting blue eyes. Some early converts reported mystical experiences when they met him. One woman named Mary said that when she shook his hand, she "received the Holy Spirit in such great abundance that I felt it thrill my whole system." Yet other people found him repellent; one skeptic said that Smith's face "exhibits a curious mixture of the knave and the clown" and noticed that "his hands are large and fat." Smith's physical presence was polarizing, rather than universally appealing—and that's true for most charismatic leaders. What's more, a lot of early Mormons joined the church before ever laying eyes on Smith. Several thousand British and Canadian converts moved to Nauvoo, the Mormon settlement in Illinois, because they met a missionary or read the Book of Mormon. The core charisma lay in the story that Smith was preaching, not (or not primarily) in him as a person.

This means that communications technology is crucial to the story of charisma, since newspapers, radio, and later TV and the internet became mechanisms by which leaders and their followers spread their stories. But I think we 21st-century people tend to exaggerate how different we are from those who lived in earlier times. The truth is that human nature has not changed. Our basic needs and impulses are the same.

In every century I cover in the book, from the 1600s to the present, people have wanted the same basic thing: a role in a narrative that makes sense of chaos and suffering. They love to feel as if they have insider knowledge, that their leader has revealed secrets of the universe that no one else understands. Maybe this speaks to the heavy influence of Protestantism on all American culture: Americans of all ideological persuasions seem to crave a kind of personal conversion experience. They want the sense of power that comes with making the individual decision to join a movement, to move from a mindset of investigation and doubt to one of belief and action. The flip side of that is the sense of comfort that comes with knowing that a leader or a force wiser and stronger than you is ultimately in charge. Charismatic leaders in every era have provided this paradoxical combination of feelings.

Daniel K. Williams: Your book mentions Donald Trump in the title, and your book ends with a chapter on Trump. What do you think we can learn about Trump's popular appeal by situating it in a larger historical study of charisma? How does Trump's charisma compare to that of some of the other charismatic figures you studied?

Molly Worthen: Americans have voted for Trump for all kinds of reasons, and some have little to do with charisma. I'm thinking of people who vote Republican no matter who the candidate is because that's their party identity; or those who will go along with almost any candidate as long as he stands for banning abortion; or those driven by frustration about the cost

of eggs under Biden. That said, Trump's charisma does activate his base, and it tugs on ambivalent supporters too. He's what I call a "guru," perhaps the apotheosis of the age of the gurus, which began in the 1980s. Gurus capitalize on Americans' low trust in established institutions like the federal government, mainstream media, and churches. They capitalize on the cult of "authenticity" and the quest for personal liberation that got supercharged in the 1960s and 1970s. Gurus promise to pull back the veil on a new reality—a world, they claim, that the traditional elites have tried to prevent you from seeing.

From very early in his career—long before he entered politics—Trump was crafting a narrative of himself. He honed the persona of a self-made businessman constantly fending off jealous, dishonest rivals, ready to bring that experience and savvy to high office to defend America against internal and external enemies. It's a story that turns being a victim into a kind of power, and he promises to do the same for his supporters. The behavior that troubles so many of his critics—his insulting comments about immigrants, racial minorities, veterans, and disabled people; his record of harassing women; his rambling, stream-of-consciousness approach to public speaking—comes across to his followers as authenticity, telling it like it is, and refusing to follow stupid rules of an unfair system.

Trump combines all this with an instinct for one of the country's dominant spiritual traditions, the one he grew up in: the positive thinking prosperity gospel of Norman Vincent Peale, who preached that you can change reality with the right kind of thinking. Trump's political charisma is woven together with the story of New Testament charisma, too. In *Spellbound* I situate recent American politics in the aftermath of the Toronto Blessing, the biggest revival in a generation, a movement of the Holy Spirit that fed the networks of independent charismatic pastors and activists who have proven so important to Trump's political coalition.

Charismatic leaders always operate in a dialectical relationship with established institutions. Trump's message resonates because so many Americans have lost trust in the federal government, the mainstream media, higher education, and the other institutions he views as fortresses of the enemy. He's been able to capture the Republican Party because the party, as an institution, is so weak. In my book, each era of destructive leaders gives way to an era of building—charismatic leaders and followers who are more inclined to invest in institutions. I wish I could prophesy that we are on the cusp, now, of another course correction. But it's always much easier to tear down institutions than to rebuild them.

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Whose Fictions Which Authority?

STEVEN D. SMITH. *FICTION, LIES, AND THE AUTHORITY OF LAW*. SOUTH BEND: UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME PRESS, 2021. $48, 290PP.

JOHN EHRETT

Alasdair MacIntyre opens his celebrated 1981 book *After Virtue* with a haunting parable: an image of a future world where contemporary science has mostly collapsed, with only a confused jumble of references and observations left behind.[1] Many years elapse, and then eventually, a new culture arises and begins to pore over the ruins of the long-lost scientific civilization, seeking to recover what it can from the wreckage.[2] The "science" that emerges from such a *ressourcement* is a confused stew of concepts and mistaken assumptions, one riven by debates about "the respective merits of relativity theory, evolutionary theory and phlogiston theory."[3] Some familiar scientific phrases are preserved, but they mean something different now. "[M]any of the beliefs presupposed by the use of these expressions would have been lost and there would appear to be an element of arbitrariness and even of choice in their application which would appear very surprising to us."[4]

For MacIntyre, this world is our own. A radical rupture exists today between ancient and modern world-pictures—a theme most famously taken up by Leo Strauss[5]—such that ancient thought-forms have become virtually unintelligible. Fundamental historical assumptions about the cosmos no longer hold, and crucial terms

[1] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 1.
[2] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 1.
[3] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 1.
[4] MacIntyre, After Virtue, 1.
[5] See Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 10–16

have changed their meanings.[6] The epistemic gulf is almost total. Thus, for MacIntyre, our modern reconstruction of the past all too often is only a simulacrum, lacking any sense of the metaphysical structure that provided long-gone civilizations with their internal coherence.[7] Reviving that structure is, in turn, the goal of his own project. Throughout the rest of *After Virtue* and his other works, MacIntyre seeks to dissolve the modern fact/value dichotomy commonly associated with David Hume, and revive a classical Aristotelian conception of moral reasoning that recognizes no such split.[8]

Steven D. Smith's book *Fiction, Lies, and the Authority of Law* aims to do for political "authority" what MacIntyre did for moral reasoning—to expose a desiccated philosophical conception that dominates modernity, and point forward to a truer account. His central claim is audacious: appeals to political "authority," in virtually all their contemporary permutations, are appeals to "fictions," or faux-authorities, that constitute mere shadows of the real thing.[9] If Smith is right, then judges, legislators and law enforcement alike are all in a sense *play-acting*, exercising power on the basis of a fundamentally hollow conception of the right to rule.[10]

Like MacIntyre, Smith argues that the present state of affairs hasn't always been the case. Once upon a time, the legitimacy of ruling authorities was taken for granted.[11] To name just a handful of examples, the pharaoh of ancient Egypt was revered as a living god,[12] Chinese emperors invoked the "Mandate of Heaven,"[13] and medieval kings claimed the power to govern by divine right.[14] But today, the issue of authority is seriously contested, although the problem rears its head in less obvious ways. Should federal courts interpret laws according to their "original public meaning," or update them in accordance with contemporary concerns?[15] Should federal courts exercise a check on the power of administrative agencies, or does the inner logic of American

[6] See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, at 2.

[7] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 52-53.

[8] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 52-53. ; Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 350.

[9] Steven D. Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2021), 220.

[10] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law*, 22–23.

[11] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law*, 209–10.

[12] See Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Vol. 1, abridg. D.C. Somervell (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 321–22

[13] See Confucius, Analects 2:4, in A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy, ed. Wing-Tsit Chan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 22–23; see also Daniel A. Bell and Wang Pei, *Just Hierarchy: Why Social Hierarchies Matter in China and the Rest of the World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 93–94 (examining traditional Chinese accounts of authority).

[14] See Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 58–59 (for early medieval Europeans, "[t]he king is the perfect impersonator of Christ on earth," underpinning a "liturgical . . . philosophy of kingship.").

[15] See, e.g., Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law*, 53 (noting the intractability of this debate).

law itself tend towards totalizing administrative control?[16] Without recourse to the metaphysical premises of civilizations gone by, these questions feel unresolvable.[17]

Smith's meditations are timely. *Fiction, Lies, and the Authority of Law* arrives at a particularly unsettled cultural moment, one increasingly reckoning with the very questions that Smith foregrounds. Following the announcement of its 2022 decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, which overturned *Roe v. Wade* and "un-recognized" a constitutional right to abortion, the Supreme Court experienced a dramatic collapse in public support.[18] This decline was, however, merely the latest chapter of a now-familiar story: the American public's ongoing loss of trust in mediating institutions, such as governmental bodies, newspapers, schools, churches, and so forth.[19] Partisans of the left and right alike are increasingly willing to recognize as "authoritative" only those institutions that share their own precommitments.[20] In short, there seems to be something about the cultural environment in which contemporary Westerners find themselves that tends to corrode any conception of universal "authority" as such. And perhaps, Smith is bold enough to suggest, scholars and intellectuals have thought about this issue in the wrong way—searching for solid ground, but *inevitably* finding only fictions.[21]

That claim is both powerful and controversial. It demands engagement. But ultimately, the dilemmas Smith identifies can only be resolved by an *altogether* different way of thinking about the problems Smith sets for himself. Perhaps, in the end, Smith's arguments are not quite radical *enough*.

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Early on, Smith invokes an observation by political theorist Hannah Arendt that, in the modern world, authority has disappeared—and indeed, the very concept of some such "groundwork of the world" has become almost unintelligible.[22] What could she have meant by this? After all, governments still exist. Schools and businesses are still run hierarchically.[23]

[16] See, e.g., Adrian Vermeule, *Law's Abnegation: From Law's Empire to the Administrative State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 218–19 ("Law's reasons, understood through fit and justification, have pointed the way toward law's abnegation in the face of the administrative state.).

[17] *Smith, Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law*, 210–13.

[18] See Jeffrey M. Jones, "Confidence in U.S. Supreme Court Sinks to Historic Low," Gallup (June 23, 2022), https://news.gallup.com/poll/394103/confidence-supreme-court-sinks-historic-low.aspx ("Many institutions have suffered a decline in confidence this year, but the 11-point drop in confidence in the Supreme Court is roughly double what it is for most institutions that experienced a decline.").

[19] See, e.g., Yuval Levin, *A Time to Build: From Family and Community to Congress and the Campus, How Recommitting to Institutions Can Revive the American Dream* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), 29–30 (collecting examples).

[20] See Levin, *A Time to Build*, 6.

[21] See Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 53.

[22] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* ix-x.

[23] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* x.

And the fact that we still use words like "authority" suggests that the term isn't *strictly* unintelligible to us.[24]

Smith lays his cards on the table early: "political authority in the American legal and political system, and probably in other liberal democracies as well, has a fictional quality. Authority itself *is* a fiction, perhaps, or at least it is grounded in fictional foundations."[25] On Smith's conception, "the fictional character of authority lies at the bottom of many long-standing legal or jurisprudential disputes in the American legal system—disputes about the nature of the union . . . and about constitutional and statutory interpretation—and it is what makes those disputes so intractable."[26] Law's perennial problems, in short, are generated by malformed philosophical premises.

Is authority indeed fictional? Smith begins his argument by considering the oft-discussed problem of consent-based accounts of authority, accounts rooted in "a commitment to freedom . . . understood in terms of individual autonomy."[27] Unfortunately for proponents of this view, nobody living in America today ever formally "consented" to the authority of the U.S. political system.[28] No supposed "state of nature," out of which formal political institutions congealed, ever actually existed.[29] And theories of "implied consent" or "constructive consent" fare no better: both fail to rest on notions of "consent" as ordinarily understood.[30]

Can authority better be conceived in terms of "coordination," or organization towards a particular end? Smith explains that on such a view, "the necessary coordinating rules and directives . . . must come from someplace—or, usually, from *someone*,"[31] which raises the question of why that "someone" has the right to issue such rules and directives. Those assertions of right inevitably rest on appeals to "legitimating rationales"—such as the divine right of kings—that are ontologically questionable.[32]

This leads directly to Smith's conception of authority as *fiction*—not, strictly speaking, as something *false* or *deceptive*, but rather something "treat[ed] *as if* it were factual."[33] If a given fiction—like a good film or book—produces positive results and seems adequately "true-

[24] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* x-xi.
[25] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* xii.
[26] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* xiii.
[27] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 2-3.
[28] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 6.
[29] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 7.
[30] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 8-9,11.
[31] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 13.
[32] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 17-18.
[33] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 20.

ish," it's better not to squint too hard at its metaphysical underpinnings.[34] Inevitably, though, some people will—nowhere more significantly than in the domain of constitutional interpretation, which foregrounds the question of authority.[35] The sheer *fictitiousness* of authority-as-fiction cannot help but "permeate[] law throughout its reaches, coating even the mundane workings of law with a fictional aspect."[36]

For Smith, constitutional originalists and their critics are doomed to a perennial stalemate because "the contestants suppose they are contending over some contested fact when in reality they are arguing about a fiction"—or, more accurately, a cluster of fictions.[37] For one, "We the People," of whom the Constitution speaks in its Preamble, have never constituted a single spatiotemporal entity, nor did "the People" who ratified the Constitution include women, slaves, or other human beings.[38] Did "the People" speak as members of states (themselves "imagined communities," as Benedict Anderson would say [39]), or as members of a new-birthed nation?[40] And for another, what is the ontological status of the principles behind terms like "original intent" or "original public meaning"? Can the intentions of the Founders be aggregated, and should they have controlling weight?[41] Or should a "reasonable man," who may never have actually existed, serve as the appropriate hypothetical interpreter of the text's original meaning?[42] The specter of authority-as-fiction begins to loom large.[43]

Similar criticisms, of course, can be leveled against non-originalists. Indeed, on Smith's account, alternatives to originalism simply place the authority problem front-and-center rather than masking it.[44] A theoretical preference for vesting final authority in the *diktats* of a high court, rather than in a document's purported original meaning, cannot explain why that court enjoys true "authority" at all.[45] And in practice, even the most ardent "living constitutionalists" still seek to justify their decisions in the argot of constitutional text (or its emanations and penumbras, so to speak), which is hard to explain unless that document itself does possess a kind of authority.[46]

[34] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 21-23.
[35] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 31-32.
[36] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 31.
[37] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 31.
[38] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 38-45.
[39] *See* Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006), 5–7.
[40] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 45-53.
[41] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 54-56.
[42] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 56-60.
[43] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 59.
[44] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 63.
[45] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 63.
[46] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 65-66.

What about an approach to the Constitution that treats it as mainly a repository of general principles? Smith finds that approach "historically dubious and unlikely as a conjecture about what sensible framers would do," given the Founders' general cynicism about the trajectory of the human condition.[47] And in the end, this view merely sidelines the authority question: "We the People" remain a fiction posited for the specific purposes of the political moment.[48]

All of this, Smith concludes, indicates that today's most vexing constitutional debates are "unresolvable."[49] The fictional construct that is "We the People" cannot be meaningfully consulted as an interpretive authority.[50] Constitutional theorists and jurists might get by through a kind of post-metaphysical pragmatism in the style of Richard Rorty, not thinking too deeply about the logic of the system, but those in search of a more substantive center are doomed to disappointment.

To start seeing "fiction" as the supporting prop of legal authority, Smith suggests, is to open Pandora's box.[51] What, after all, is "Congress" or "the Senate," and in what sense can they be said to exist if the number of their members can vary?[52] This question has implications for longstanding debates in statutory interpretation between "textualism," "intentionalism," and "purposivism." among other schools of thought.[53] On the one hand, how can the constituent members of "Congress" *intend* anything at all when few of them even bother to skim the laws for which they vote?[54] And does the logic of representative government allow them to "delegate" the function of establishing intent to those legislators who *are* deeply engaged with the subject matter? Smith answers both questions in the negative.[56] On the other hand, textualists find themselves caught up in the aforementioned questions surrounding "original public meaning," to say nothing of the possibility that linguistic changes may thwart Congress's own purposes.[57] Lawmakers are consigned on this approach, as Smith puts it, to "casting their semantic bread on the waters and hoping that the linguistic currents will bring back something approximating what they hoped for. Is this actually legal authority in any meaningful sense?"[58] And purposivism still pays lip service to congressional authority, even if in practice it departs

[47] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 70-71.
[48] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 71.
[49] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 72.
[50] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 72-73.
[51] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 77.
[52] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 78-79.
[53] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 84-85.
[54] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 87-88.
[55] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 92.
[56] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 92.
[57] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 93-94.
[58] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 94.

from congressionally legitimated text.[59] The truth of the matter, Smith reasons, is that such debates over meaning are doomed to remain inconclusive because—like the "will of the Founders"—Congress itself is a kind of fiction.[60] So too are courts—which transcend their constituent judges—and the "Presidency" considered as a permanent institution. Political life, Smith argues, basically amounts to "a necessary conspiracy of suspended disbelief"—one in which the fictional character of critical institutions is tacitly known, yet infrequently acknowledged.[62]

Is this fiction *poisonous*? Smith considers this question through a lengthy treatment of Vaclav Havel's parable of the greengrocer who, in order to placate his Marxist rulers, places a "Workers of the world, unite!" sign in his shop window while inwardly remaining politically noncommittal.[63] Over time, a corrosive contempt for truth begins to suffuse throughout the society.[64] This decay is a result of the totalitarian government's efforts to "assert and maintain its authority" while remaining "grounded in an ideology that for most people is no longer believable."[65] Liberal democracies, Smith theorizes, are not immune from this kind of rot: just as the fictions of Communist government withered away, one should not assume that the West's constitutive myths can sustain it for the long term.[66] In particular, Smith points to current progressive policing of language surrounding "race, sexuality, and gender roles" as presenting circumstances where—akin to Havel's greengrocer—individuals may be pressured to manifest assent to claims they internally reject.[67] And cultures characterized by pervasive dishonesty about their inhabitants' actual beliefs are ultimately unstable.

For Smith, a culture grounded in fictions that are themselves *un*grounded is one characterized at its taproot by "[*f*]*aux* authority," a "simulation" of the genuine article.[68] This is demonstrated, Smith contends, by considering H.L.A. Hart's critique of John Austin's account of authority: authority cannot simply mean the power to issue commands that impose reciprocal responsibilities, because otherwise a gunman who demands a passerby's valuables possesses "authority" over him.[69] Surely "authority" means something subtler, something having to do with the necessary conditions for *legitimately* compelling obedience.[70]

[59] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 102-104.
[60] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 99.
[61] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 104-14.
[62] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 119.
[63] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 125-26.
[64] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 127-28.
[65] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 133-34
[66] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 147.
[67] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 153.
[68] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 158.
[69] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 159-64.
[70] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 164-65.

These conditions might include (1) prima facie reasons for obedience, such as a desire to avoid some harm or other, (2) personal reasons for obedience, such as a prior relationship between individuals, and (3) intrinsic reasons for compliance that bottom out in sufficient explanations, as opposed to indirect ones that do not.[71] Smith adds one more element—*verticality*, or a fundamentally unequal relationship between persons—to fill out such a conception of authority.[72] On the basis of this conception, Smith finds the standard liberal-democratic accounts of authority fundamentally flawed: a consent-based account locates genuine authority in the consenter, rather than in the government consented to, and a coordination-based account doesn't seem to account for the fact that authority imposes a claim over and above one's own self-interest.[73] Equally flawed, for Smith, is Joseph Raz's "service conception of authority," which similarly lacks a concept of genuine command.[74] Indeed, virtually *all* accounts of authority fail to withstand Smith's razor. [75]

As the book draws to a close, Smith's project takes on a less critical and more normative cast: is it possible to conceive of authority in a more coherent way? [76] Could we actually identify what Smith calls "just because" authority—authority capable of compelling assent "just because" of what it is?[77] One might imagine a toady who gains pleasure from satisfying his hierarchical superiors—which seems to satisfy Smith's aforementioned criteria for real authority on the parts of his superiors—but this reeks of "authoritarianism" rather than "authority."[78] Friendship, and the duties imposed by one friend upon another, lacks the element of verticality.[79] The relationship between a knight and his lady in chivalric love is likewise devoid of *real* verticality.[80] The truest mode of human-to-human authority, Smith concludes, is the parent-child relationship—when conceived not as a relationship primarily conducing to the interests of the child, but in the terms of Roman *pietas* or Confucian filial obligation.[81] Recovering this sense of deep obligation might be difficult for modern Westerners, but it does not seem impossible: many people still do act towards their parents as if such a moral claim does in fact exist.[82] Even so, this example of authority remains somewhat contestable.[82]

[71] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 165-72.
[72] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 173-74.
[73] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 174-78.
[74] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 178-81.
[75] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 181-85.
[76] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 189-90.
[77] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 187
[78] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 190-91.
[79] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 197.
[80] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 198-99.
[81] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 199-203.
[82] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 204.

A few more examples can be adduced. If one prescinds beyond the sphere of human-to-human relations, and is willing to countenance the reality of a personal God, one finds genuine authority in perhaps its fullest and most proper sense.[84] And perhaps one can similarly find real authority in the instructions handed down by a "beloved teacher or coach."[85]

Nevertheless, authority remains an elusive thing: "an ethic of egalitarian autonomy" has carried the day in the contemporary liberal-democratic world, undermining all claims to unconditional allegiance.[86] In the end, this shift may not be so liberating as it once seemed. In a world "after authority," society risks losing the very bonds that support human beings as interdependent beings—and so, in a sense, losing humanity itself.[87]

In conclusion, Smith strikes a more optimistic note: there can only be "faux" authority if there *is* some true authority of which the simulacrum is merely an imitation.[88] Indeed, the Christian theological tradition points to "a true political authority . . . [that] *will be* . . . with respect to which the earthly governments we see around us are pale imitations or temporary stand-ins."[89] On this view, all human authorities are relativized, transformed into provisional prefigurations of an eschatological kingdom to come.[90] Such a kingdom—and its King—might be "only intuit[ed] or learn[ed] of through rumor," but nevertheless remain "real and substantial," offering a real "groundwork of the world" once believed to be lost. [91]

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Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law goes where little legal scholarship dares to tread. It is a work animated by the recognition that, at the very core of today's most heated controversies over constitutional and statutory interpretation, the deepest questions of moral and metaphysical order still remain contested. In some ways, the book is a direct descendant of Arthur Allen Leff's 1979 essay "Unspeakable Ethics, Unnatural Law," which ruminated grimly about what "law" could mean in a world lacking reference to a transcendent moral order.[92] "Only if ethics were something unspeakable by us, could law be unnatural,

[83] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 205.
[84] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 206-07.
[85] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 207-08.
[86] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 209.
[87] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 216-17.
[88] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 220.
[89] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 221
[90] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 221-22.
[91] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 224.
[92] Arthur Allen Leff, "Unspeakable Ethics, Unnatural Law," *Duke Law Journal* (1979): 1229–31

and therefore unchallengeable. As things now stand, everything is up for grabs. . . . God help us." [93] Henry Edward Cardinal Manning put it even more pithily: "all human conflict is ultimately theological." [94]

As far as this recognition is concerned—that legal debates run "all the way down" to fundamental metaphysical debates—Smith's book strikes home. What is less clear is whether his constructive account, his own analytical moves towards the possibility of genuine authority in a disenchanted age, really does get beyond the governing assumptions of modernity. Most significantly, while the quest for mathematically precise answers to questions of legal interpretation may be misguided, is Smith's conception of "fiction" any more stable?

Perhaps, while *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law* successfully identifies some fundamentally flawed assumptions underlying modern discourse about authority, Smith's argument ultimately ends up reinscribing those same modern assumptions, albeit in a slightly different way.

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The conceptual core of Smith's critical argument is his concept of a *fiction*—something nonreal taken *as if it were* real.[95] Modern people know that Santa Claus is not a being who actually has a workshop at the North Pole, but many put out milk and cookies for him anyway; in a similar sense, but one with far greater stakes, "the Founders" cannot be consulted in order to determine whether it violates the Fourth Amendment for police to retrieve stored cell phone records from a company tower, but their authority is appealed to anyway by courts and lawyers.[96] On this view, politics under modernity amounts to an immense shell game, one endlessly deferring the question of final authority—that is to say, absolute "just because" authority—without ever locating it.[97]

Is this concept of "fiction," though, really as bounded as Smith apparently believes it to be? A "fiction," by definition, is *set off* against something else, something "real."[98] And as Smith uses the term, the very notion implies an ascertainable distinction between that which is natural/real and that which is constructed, and hence *unreal*. There is a "real world" properly described by science, and a "social world" constructed by human beings for human purposes.[99]

But as a number of philosophers of science have

[93] Leff, "Unspeakable Ethics, Unnatural Law," 1249.05.

[94] Hilaire Belloc, *The Cruise of the "Nona"* (London: Constable & Co., Ltd., 1955), 54.

[95] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 220.

[96] See Carpenter v. United States, 138 S. Ct. 2206 (2018).

[97] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 220-221.

[98] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 18-20.

[99] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 20 (explaining that "fiction" is distinct from "'the truth' in a standard factual sense").

stressed in recent decades, this distinction is not a stable one.[100] Bruno Latour, for instance, characterizes modernity itself as "a world in which the representation of things through the intermediary of the laboratory is forever dissociated from the representation of citizens through the intermediary of the social contract"—where, in short, the fact/fiction distinction that forms the core of Smith's book is affirmed as genuine.[101] For Latour, the great temptation of the modern world is to "invent[] a separation between the scientific power charged with representing things and the political power charged with representing subjects."[102] On this conception, Smith's framing is paradoxically the most "modern" move of all.

The evidence against such a separation, Latour explains, is the existence of "hybrids," or "mixtures of nature and culture" that cannot be interpreted exclusively within the terms of the "natural" or the "political" (or, *pace* Smith, the "real" or the "fictional").[103] A recent case provides a helpful example of such hybridity.

Shortly after the Supreme Court's *Dobbs* decision, conservative Catholic writer Leah Libresco Sargeant published a personal essay in the *New York Times* on the subject of ectopic pregnancies.[104] Sargeant wrote that "[i]n an ectopic pregnancy, the baby implants somewhere other than the uterus — usually in a fallopian tube. The situation is fatal for the baby. It's also dangerous for the mother," and went on to note that "[a] baby delivered in the first trimester because of an ectopic pregnancy definitely won't survive. But in both cases, a pro-life doctor sees herself as delivering a child, who is as much a patient as the mother."[105]

Several days later, Erik Wemple, media critic for the *Washington Post*, penned a column charging the *Times* with "publish[ing] inaccurate information about pregnancies."[106] For Wemple, "[n]ever is an ectopic 'baby' 'delivered'"; physicians who treat ectopic pregnancies note in "medical records that [they've] removed a fallopian tube, terminated the pregnancy and collected 'products of conception.'"[107] Wemple concluded by remarking that "outlets must accommodate and respect the views and experience of the essayist — but that duty cannot conflict with

[100] See, e.g., Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 55–56 (noting that "observation and conceptualization, fact and assimilation to theory, are inseparably linked in discovery").

[101] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 27.

[102] Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 29.

[103] Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 30.

[104] Leah Libresco Sargeant, "In a Post-Roe World, We Can Avoid Pitting Mothers Against Babies," *New York Times* (July 4, 2022), https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/04/opinion/ectopic-pregnancy-roe-abortion.html.

[105] Sargeant, "In a Post-Roe World, We Can Avoid Pitting Mothers Against Babies."

[106] Erik Wemple, "Opinion: New York Times Won't Correct Its Errant Essay on Ectopic Pregnancy, Washington Post (July 12, 2022), https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/07/12/new-york-times-essay-ectopic-pregnancy-error/.

[107] Wemple, "Opinion: New York Times Won't Correct Its Errant Essay on Ectopic Pregnancy."

[108] Wemple, "Opinion: New York Times Won't Correct Its Errant Essay on Ectopic Pregnancy."

facts and science."[108] Thus, for Wemple, "science" itself demands that the unborn be called a "product of conception," not—as for Sargeant—a baby.

What makes this case particularly fascinating is the fact that at one level, *there is no real dispute about what is occurring when an ectopic pregnancy is treated*. To use as neutral terms as possible, both Sargeant and Wemple are describing a situation in which "the unborn" implants in a location within the body where, if left to grow, it is likely to do harm to the mother. As a result, the unborn is subsequently taken out of the mother's body. Both Sargeant and Wemple, if presented with a real-world case of an ectopic pregnancy, would identify it as such.

Rather, the real disagreement is one of terminology, because terminology carries with it moral and political weight. Sargeant views "the unborn" as a baby, and its removal from the mother's body as, by definition, a delivery. Wemple does not: for him, "the unborn" is a "product of conception" that is "collected" from a woman's body. These different choices of terminology implicate (what appear to be) the authors' radically divergent views regarding the nature of the unborn and hence the permissibility of abortion.

The disagreement illustrates that the entity that is the unborn constitutes one of Latour's "hybrids." Its ontological character cannot, strictly speaking, be settled through mere observation, as if a "view from nowhere" were possible. Whether one sees the unborn as a *baby* or as a *product of conception*—that is, whether one assigns *personhood* or *thinghood* to the unborn—is a determination that is always mediated by social realities beyond the merely phenomenological.
This hybridity is an acid that, across various categories, tends to break down Smith's account of political "fictions" as set off against "facts." For instance, at one point Smith considers in what sense a "legislature" can be said to exist if the number of its voting legislators grows and shrinks.[109] But one can easily radicalize Smith's argument, pressing it forward into what is taken to be the "non-fictional" world: in what sense does a "human being" exist if it is constantly shedding cells and replacing them with new ones, or if it loses a limb it once possessed? As soon as the fiction/fact distinction is introduced as an animating principle, very old philosophical problems immediately begin to rear their heads.[110]

None of this is to suggest, of course, that the social construction of "facts" determines reality *in toto*.[111] After all, some accounts of reality do certainly seem to describe the world more effectively than others: a Ptolemaic cosmology, for instance, simply lacks the internal grammar to describe the vast galaxies and nebulas that modern telescopes can observe and that populate astrophysics textbooks. The point is simply that "hybridity" is far more pervasive than Smith's

[109] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 78–82.
[110] Plutarch, *Theseus* 23.1 (John Dryden trans.).

account would appear to allow, such that "fictions" inevitably find themselves mixed up with "facts" in what Martin Heidegger would describe as an interpretive "circle."[111]

How are interpretations of these "hybrids" generated and refined across time? Such processes of inquiry proceed within frameworks of, as MacIntyre puts it, "unarticulated presuppositions which are never themselves the objects of attention and enquiry"—that is, "traditions."[113] For example, in the above Sargeant and Wemple exchange, one can detect the controlling influence of the "traditions" of Catholic theism and scientific materialism. The former tradition, over time, has come to interpret the unborn as a human being ensouled from the moment of conception, and hence as morally significant from that point on. The latter, generally speaking, interprets the unborn as an entity that takes on moral weight at some point between conception and the moments immediately following birth. Observation of the same phenomenal "data" by individuals inhabiting different traditions may lead to refinement of their respective interpretations—for instance, as his knowledge of embryology advances, a materialist may come to believe that moral significance inheres in the unborn at an earlier or later point than he previously believed—but the underlying presuppositions involved do not change: on the Catholic view, the unborn is created by God and hence infinitely valuable, while on the materialist view the unborn is a cluster of living cells lacking reference to the divine or ultimate. There is no neutral "science," but rather always "science-according-to-a-paradigm."[114]

To the reader primarily interested in questions of legal interpretation and institutional structure, however, all this intellectual history may seem like a distraction. What do Latour's hybrids, and the traditions of thought within which those hybrids emerge, have to do with the question of authority that animates Smith's book? Why spend so much time considering how one comes to know the natures of things, however asymptotically?

The reason is straightforward: if Smith really wants to recover the traditional "groundwork of the world" that was lost under modernity, he must do more than

[111] See also Edward Slingerland, *Mind and Body in Early China: Beyond Orientalism and the Myth of Holism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 312 (stressing that "strong linguistic or cultural constructivism is conceptually incoherent, theoretically impossible, and empirically false.").

[112] See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John MacQuarrie and Edward S. Robinson (New York: HarperPerennial, 1962), 191–95.

[113] Leah Libresco Sargeant, "In a Post-Roe World, We Can Avoid Pitting Mothers Against Babies," *New York Times* (July 4, 2022), https://ww.nytimes.com/2022/07/04/opinion/ectopic-pregnancy-roe-abortion.html.

[114] Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 46; *see also* Michael Polanyi, "Self-Government of Science," in *The Logic of Liberty: Reflections and Rejoinders* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1998), 59, 67 ("The standards of science—like those of all other arts and professions—are transmitted largely by tradition.").

simply seek after a maximally authoritative source of law. His mission must be far greater than that: to recover a way of approaching realities *in* their natures, *through* traditions of reasoning, in order to understand *what they are for*, and so ultimately *how society ought to be structured* and *how one ought to live*. That is an audacious project indeed. But the alternative is that modernity will carry the day.

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Throughout his constructive account of authority, Smith is very keen to stress that any recognition of genuine "just because" authority must transcend altogether an individual's own self-interest.[115] That is to say, if arguments made in favor of recognizing a particular authority could be construed as self-serving to the arguer, the authority is not *genuine* authority, at least not on the basis of those "self-serving" arguments.[116] On Smith's account, a mob boss lacks true "authority" if he assumes his position by promising to share the spoils with his cronies; here the "authority" is merely a function of the cronies' self-interest, and for Smith authority must be more than that.[117]

Authority here implies *morality*, and philosophically speaking, at issue here is a conception of both that derives from an implicit acceptance of David Hume's famous is/ought distinction. Smith is seeking an absolute *ought*, one that can't be read off from the mere "accidental" existence of natural orderings and hierarchies.

But historically speaking, one need not accept this split. On the classical Aristotelian tradition of ethical reasoning, for example, the fundamental problem Smith identifies is simply generated by malformed premises. According to this view, a thing is called "good" when it actualizes the potentialities inherent to its nature—or, in simpler terms, when it acts consistently with what it *is*.[118] That formulation may seem opaque, yet traces of this older conception of ethics still permeate contemporary language.[119] A "good watch," for instance, is one that does what one expects a watch to do (keep time faithfully).[120] A "good person," conversely, is someone who does what is expected of a person (working hard, keeping

[115] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 183–85.
[116] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 184.
[117] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law,* 182.
[118] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 57–59.
[119] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 59.
[120] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 57-59.
[121] See Henry B. Veatch, *Rational Man: A Modern Interpretation of Aristotelian Ethics* (Carmel, IN: Liberty Fund, 2003), 29 ("[M]an may be presumed to have his characteristic end or natural perfection, toward which his life naturally tends and at which he aims naturally; this may therefore be called the natural good for man or the human good.").

her word, helping the downtrodden, providing for her children, and so forth).[121] What is significant is that the term "good" is used here in both cases, despite the fact that the inherent capabilities of a watch diverge radically from the inherent capabilities of a human being.[122] So, some analogical relation plainly exists between them.

One can readily carry forward this approach to moral language to the question of authority. On the classical view, there is quite simply no such thing as an "authority"—an entity that it is moral for others to obey[123]—who issues commands that do not benefit those who obey. The right to issue commands derives from the authority's ability to direct the activities of his subordinates in a manner consistent with their unique capacities, and so help them to be "better" (to be what they *could be*, but are not yet). In the simplest terms, here *authority describes the natural structure of reality as it is in itself.* It is not a kind of will-to-power set off against a world of brute "scientific" facts.

These are the premises that underpin the "coordination" account of authority that Smith takes up and subsequently rejects. Authority inheres in the one who issues coordination-commands that *work*—that properly describe reality as it is, albeit always mediated through human intellectual activity. Smith's critique of the coordination account of authority—that it fails to explain why the "coordinator" has the right to issue commands—makes sense apart from these premises, but simply doesn't hold if those premises are taken seriously.

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Viewed through a decidedly nonmodern lens, the problem of constitutional and statutory authority begins to take on a new cast. On a different set of premises, the driving question of American constitutional interpretation simply need not be, as for Smith, *whose authority is this?* Rather, one might ask *what sort of thing is this "Constitution" or this "law"?*

Lee Strang provides an elegant exposition of how one might come to think about American laws in a more "teleological" way—that is, in a manner consistent with their intrinsic purposes as the things they are:

> Legal texts, such as statutes, are created by human beings, and humans act for purposes. Humans in legislatures act to identify and correct legal problems in order to secure the common good. Legal texts contain words, and documents with words are characteristically employed by humans to communicate

[122] See Veatch, *Rational Man*, 29 ("[T]he way in which a human being attains his appropriate good or natural perfection will be rather different from that of a plant or an animal.").

[123] See, e.g., Lee J. Strang, *Originalism's Promise: A Natural Law Account of the American Constitution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 249 (on an Aristotelian view of authority, authority is limited "to those instances when the structure of authoritative directives employed by the authority facilitates its subjects' flourishing.").

> meaning. Lawmakers correct legal problems by communicating reasons through legal texts to the law's subjects.[124]

From this standpoint, familiar debates between originalism and living constitutionalism are short-circuited. Because the Constitution purports to be precisely that—a "constitution"—it does not make sense to interpret constitutional text as something altogether divorced from basic background assumptions about what a functional government must do—maintain public order, allow for representation of the populace, and so on. And acknowledging such an intrinsic connection between legal text and purpose is entirely consistent with originalism, correctly conceived.[125]

Smith is right to note that both "the Founders' intent" and "the original public meaning," taken as metaphysical *entia*, enjoy only a dubious ontological status.[126] But a more modest account of originalist hermeneutics—on the model of what Strang calls a "constitutional communication model"[127]—does not require such postulates. As a matter of history, the thirteen former colonies sent delegates to the Constitutional Convention—delegates whom they viewed as representatives, and whose decisions they intended to be bound by. Those delegates, together, signed the same document, which the publics of the various new states then ratified. If the participants in that process harbored *radically* different understandings of what the document itself was doing as "law," it is reasonable to believe that evidence of those interpretive disagreements would have emerged both before and after the Convention. Empirical evidence for such thoroughgoing vagueness, however, is in scant supply. The Framers were writing a constitution (small-"c") to structure a new government in response to a particular set of problems, and in most cases substantial information exists about what those problems were and how the new regime sought to resolve them.[128]

In short, it is entirely reasonable to judge some textual interpretations as *closer* or *further* from what is known about the Founders' intentions or the original public

[124] Strang, *Originalism's Promise*, 49.

[125] One can, of course, debate about whether originalism or living constitutionalism, or some other philosophy altogether, is more consistent with the purposes and ends of government as such. For a sustained argument that originalist practice and normative commitments are broadly coterminous with the pursuit of the common good, understood in an Aristotelian sense, see Strang, *Originalism's Promise*, 3 ("[O]riginalism is the most normatively attractive theory of constitutional interpretation because it is the one most likely to secure the common good of American society and individual Americans' human flourishing."). But see Adrian Vermeule, *Common Good Constitutionalism* (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2022), 213–15 n.290 (2022) (charging Strang with "only an ersatz form of respect for the natural law").

[126] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law*, 54-55,59.

[127] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law*, 44.

[128] See Strang, *Originalism's Promise*, 2 (it is appropriate to "view[] the Constitution as a reasoned act of intentional lawmaking, the purpose of which was to change the law and re-coordinate Americans to secure the common good.").

meaning of the text, given the evidence available. And a similar argument can be made with respect to Congress and the interpretation of statutes.

To be clear, none of this is to imply that one could *decisively* settle how, given both text and context, the Founders would have answered a particular present-day question of law. Indeed, a clear-minded originalist can readily concede that "there is in the end no fact of the matter that can demonstrate that any particular interpretation is simply correct or incorrect."[129] In a sense, that claim is trivially true, because the same can be said of *any* human endeavor—even formal logical systems come in different varieties, with different core axioms.[130] To the extent this attack strikes home, it is entirely non-unique to legal interpretation. One might say that the act of legal interpretation is more appropriately conceived as *asymptotic*—an increasing apprehension of communicated meaning, as always mediated through a particular of thought—rather than as a "deductive" uncovering of axioms.

As it were, Smith's critique cuts deepest against iterations of originalism that bear a more than passing resemblance to John Searle's famous "Chinese room" hypothetical. If all that is known about a computer program or a human being is that they are capable of receiving Chinese characters as inputs and producing Chinese characters as outputs, can one conclude that the program or individual *understands* Chinese?[131] Plainly not—proper symbol manipulation alone does not support an inference that the *content* of the communication is understood.[132] In the same way, originalism would be rendered altogether nonviable if it were committed to the notion that one could "understand the meaning" of constitutional text, or "look up the answer" to an interpretive problem, only by considering other texts and without ever considering the real-world *referents* of that text. Consideration of such referents, of course, leads directly to consideration of the Founders' metaphysical assumptions and background commitments. Fortunately, few if any practicing originalists take such an extreme view.

In short, if the modern question of authority is conceived in a wholly different way—as something pertaining to the natures of things, rather than to the will of sovereign powers—a number of the interpretive impasses that Smith identifies simply fall away. Where the law is concerned, *who enacted it* is less important than *what it is*. There is no more need for fictions.

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In closing, if indeed all human conflict ends in

[129] Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law*, 101.

[130] See generally Marco Hausmann, "The Uniqueness of Necessary Truth and the Status of S4 and S5," *Theoria* 87 no. 6 (2021): 1635 (spelling out the distinctions between S4 and S5 modal logics).

[131] John R. Searle, "Minds, Brains, and Programs," 3 *Behavioral & Brain Science*s 3 no. 3 (1980): 417–18.

[132] Searle, "Minds, Brains, and Programs," 423.

theological controversy, it is worth saying a few words about the "theology of authority" that pervades Smith's volume. If an Aristotelian account of authority is rejected, what does this say about the nature of the God, or gods, who preside over the cosmos?

In a prior volume on the subjects of theology, sexuality, and the "culture wars," Smith distinguishes the pagan and Christian understandings of divinity by contrasting their conceptions of divine presence in the world. According to the "immanent" theology of traditional society, the world itself is divinized, with gods and goddesses—to the extent they exist as separate beings at all—functioning as mere finite entities within the universe.[133] Christianity (and Judaism), conversely, assert that "God is an entity beyond time and space, even beyond 'being' (whatever that means). God is transcendent."[134]

There are political implications that follow from placing the accent upon divine transcendence as strongly as Smith does here. In *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law*, God's authority is conceived as essentially akin to the authority of a monarch, albeit on a far greater scale. As far as Plato's famous Euthyphro dilemma is concerned—*does God command a thing because it is good, or is a thing good because God commands it?*—Smith comes down decidedly on the latter horn, appearing to embrace a version of divine command ethics in which God, perhaps alone among entities, possesses "just because" authority. "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if thou hast understanding."[135]

Is Smith's appeal to this monarch-God, as a site of "just because" authority, actually an anti-modern move? Readers come of age in a secular milieu might assume so, but Latour suggests otherwise: at the dawn of modernity, theologians came to believe that God's "transcendence distanced Him infinitely, so that He disturbed neither the free play of nature nor that of society, but the right was nevertheless reserved to appeal to that transcendence in case of conflict between the laws of Nature and those of Society."[136]

To postulate "God" as an ultimate Lawgiver, grounding authority-relations but remaining largely absent from creation, is to postulate a God very different from

[133] Steven D. Smith, *Pagans and Christians In the City: Culture Wars from the Tiber to the Potomac* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 111.
[134] Smith, *Pagans and Christians In the City*, 113. To be sure, Smith does observe that "the Christian deity is both transcendent and immanent, even incarnate." Smith, P*agans and Christians In the City*, 112. However, the sense in which God is immanent is never fully explained. One might note that, in a fascinating inversion, an account of divine transcendence that places God into a dialectical relation with the world actually repeats the "pagan" metaphysical move: God may not be part of the "universe," formally speaking, but he still exists within a "horizon of being" embracing both him and the created cosmos. See, e.g., David Bentley Hart, The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 238 (noting that "the most radical kind of transcendence becomes in fact a radical kind of immanence").
[135] Job 38:4 (KJV).
[136] Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 33.

the One in whom all finite entities participate and who undergirds the being of things. Likewise gone from this cosmological vision is any "analogical-participatory"[137] understanding of creation in which natural order constitutes a real reflection of its divine source. This God, as the wheels of history turn, is fated to become "an orphaned demiurge abandoned by all,"[138] rather than He in whom all people "live, and move, and have our being."[139] God becomes an "item within the cosmos" that Occam's razor can eventually pare away. [140]

One can even press the point further: John Milbank argues that when modern theology took pride of place, "abandoning participation in divine Being and Unity for a 'covenantal bond' between God and men, it provided a model for human interrelationships as 'contractual' ones."[141] In other words, to imagine God as a Lawgiver characterized primarily by the structure of his agreements with human beings—an assumption implied by Smith's use of distinctly personalist categories to underscore his account of legitimate divine authority[142]—is to pave the way for the very political theories of authority that Smith views as fundamentally flawed. If Milbank is right, then Smith gets the analysis precisely backwards: the failure of social contract theories of authority doesn't point to the need for an account of divine authority as "personalist"; rather, the "personalist" account of divine authority lays the logical groundwork for social contract theories in the first place.

In the end, it suffices to note that the roots of modernity are far older—and far less "secular," in the contemporary sense—than is commonly assumed today. Appealing to the authority of God is not enough to resolve the problems Smith sets for himself. Just as important is what *sort* of God is appealed to.

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Smith's book concludes with a flicker of hope, a hint that one day genuine authority—as he conceives of it—will present itself.[143] And yet what if true authority has never, in fact, been deferred into the eschatological future, but always been present at hand?

Apart from a genuine paradigm shift, modern men and women will keep searching for authority—*real* authority—and finding only accumulations of power. Nevertheless, the quest will continue, impelled by a vague notion that once upon a time, other conceptions of authority did exist. That notion is correct. But embracing those older conceptions will require a paradigm shift on a scale few can accept. Is authority somehow *inherent in things*, or is it something that

[137] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), xxvi.

[138] Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 33.

[139] Acts 17:28 (KJV).

[140] See Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 34 (noting that the modern account "establishes as arbiter an infinitely remote God who is simultaneously totally impotent and the sovereign judge.")

[141] Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 16.

[142] See Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law*, 206–07.

[143] See Smith, *Fictions, Lies, and the Authority of Law*, 221-22.

comes from above and works upon formless matter, whether through a human king or a divine Sovereign? Not many today will defend the former claim.

In the end, the point is simple: that which one takes as authoritative will always be a function of their first principles. Smith's volume is a search for the "groundwork of the world" that once structured Western thought and that much of the American legal tradition seems to presuppose, but it seems unlikely that he can find it within the parameters he has set for himself. Between a conception of "immanent order" in which authority is grounded in reality itself, and an idea of "imposed order" which seeks authority in the directives of an "absolute" person, a vast conceptual gulf exists[144]

Smith has written a book that cuts to the very quick of politics, in the deepest and fullest sense. The only problem with his critique of modernity is that it does not go far enough.

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[144] See William Bain, Political Theology of International Order (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 6–8.

MONSTERS AND THE LONG DEFEAT

IAN OLSON

Before he began drafting *The Lord of the Rings*, "the long defeat" was already an important theme to J.R.R. Tolkien. Though it is operative in the writings that would in time become *The Silmarillion*, it was only implicitly present within them, an ingredient in their sad grandeur but not elaborated upon as a principle. It was in reflecting upon the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* for the Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial Lecture in 1936 that Tolkien would begin to theorize the concept, though the phraseology itself would still await a few years until the composition of Book II of *The Lord of the Rings*. With the concept, however, Tolkien would both deepen his legendarium and help modern sensibilities to receive *Beowulf* as a testament to the human condition and to the need for courage in the midst of fallen history.

Beowulf is something of an odd classic. There is a long tradition of critical essays asking what a classic is. Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve set something of a modern precedent with his answer. A classic, he claimed, is recognized for having "enriched the human mind, increased its treasure, and caused it to advance a step; [it] has discovered some moral and not equivocal truth, or revealed some eternal passion in that heart where all seemed known and discovered." It is a product of its time and yet is "easily contemporary with all time."

Most of us probably imagine classics along similar lines, understanding them to have furthered us collectively some distance closer to an ideal we can not yet adequately name. We esteem those works that embody an aspiration for

which we long and which in their form and in their tone make that aspiration seem, perhaps, attainable. We praise and set apart those works that represent to us a decisive turn, both personally as well as collectively.

Out of the multitude of classics there are many which, according to contemporary canons of taste, seem to immediately justify their status as classics. But there are others which persist, which are read and reread, are retranslated, adapted, published in new editions, and influence other stories which evade such easy critical recognition. Their significance, that is, is recognized retrospectively, in much the same way as the events that shape our lives.

Beowulf is an example of the latter. Though it has survived across centuries and spawned many editions and interpretative works it has provoked as much critical bewilderment and ire as it has appreciation, if not more. By the early nineteenth century the poem's status as a classic was secure, but so was the critical consensus that its lasting significance was something of a mistake.

But Sainte-Beauve could accommodate this fact. Many of the "greatest names to be seen at the beginning of literatures are those which disturb and run counter to certain fixed ideas of what is beautiful and appropriate in poetry," he wrote. Because classics are only truly recognized retroactively, the classic can lay dormant as another text for some time before an appreciative subjectivity enlarges the public's sensibilities to receive it as such.

This retroactivity is fitting because narrative itself is a form of understanding that unveils the past. Raw experience always undergoes interpretation in the effort to understand and convey not only *what* has taken place, but its significance. All histories, whatever their scale, select and organize data so as to narrate an account. No story is isomorphic with reality; a story exceeds whatever is observable about any event because it brings to light what animated that event and what it has to do with us. Narrative identifies the coherence and meaning we cannot ascertain in the moment of our experiences. Understanding is thus never truly contemporary: it is always retrospective.

Just consider why we conduct investigations even into events in which we directly participated, or why we ask others for their perceptions of how we said or did something. I cannot understand the me that existed prior to my reading of *Infinite Jest* the way I would now, nor can I understand it apart from that text. It both disclosed something about me that priorly, albeit hazily existed, and shaped me to recognize what was already inchoately present. Is it not, in the same way, difficult now to imagine an America in which *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was not written? The stake in the ground a classic represents extends its surplus of meaning beyond its immediate context of production.

Tolkien's lecture on this disputed classic would be published that same year under the title, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics." It was an intervention in *Beowulf* studies that directly addressed that bewilderment and ire. The problem Tolkien confronted in its very title was that of modern academics mining *Beowulf* for useful historical data while disparaging the "simplicity" of its plot and the monsters that form its high points. Tolkien argued against the "judgment that the heroic or tragic story on a strictly human plane is by nature superior" and demonstrated the poem's skill in depicting the beauty and tragedy of humankind in a hostile world precisely

through its preoccupation with monsters.

Tolkien was not concerned simply with commending the goodness of *Beowulf*. His task was also to confront and expose the reductive logic that had stifled appreciation for the poem up to his time. It could hardly be otherwise so long as monsters were viewed as being less "literary" than character and drama. "The proposition," Tolkien complains, "seems to have been passed as self-evident." Tolkien's dissent is intended to unveil how it is not, in fact, self-evident, as the judgment in taste is being taught as a critical *a priori* without defense.

It would be pointless to argue that a person should prefer tales with monsters over tales without monsters without any consideration for what happens in the individual stories that belong to either category. *Dracula* and *Varney the Vampire* are not equivalent in caliber to each other though both are concerned with vampires, and Thackeray's *The Virginians* is not superior to *Dracula* though it has vampires and *The Virginians* does not.

But that sort of superficial analysis was the norm in *Beowulf* studies prior to Tolkien. Many critics of that period would offer a highly condensed, abstracted summary of the poem that focused on its three fights between Beowulf and a monster. Embarrassed by the sparsity of the result, they then judged the poem inferior to works of, for instance, classical Greece. *Beowulf*'s fate in such circumstances, then, was simply to serve as a mine of data for illuminating the period in which it was composed or redacted. This was an acceptable outcome for many scholars who assumed that stories such as this did not and could not ascend to the dignity of the Hellenistic and Latin traditions.

But of course such a bare summary is uninteresting! Stripped of its particulars, any story sounds drearily dull, but especially, perhaps, a *Ulysses* or a *Herzog*: "A man takes a full day to wander through Dublin and make it back home"; "A man writes a series of letters." Monsters, contrarily, are anything but dull, and the supercilious literary-minded who wave away "typical folk-tales" probably never afforded them a real chance or a close reading.

In contemporary terms it might be akin to allowing the distinction between literary and genre fiction to become a boundary marker that screens out the possibility of fantastic fiction or a horror novel being a quality work. The sublime drama of the Oedipus cycle may seem more realistic than a Dark Ages adventure saga, and yet the plot of the Theban plays is propelled by curses, prophecies, and a sphinx. *Beowulf*'s monsters had the audacity, though, to stay center-stage rather than serving as ciphers of something "deeper" or "more profound." Even now, adults often qualify their love for a work like *The Lord of the Rings* or admit their appreciation of it while offering a "serious" work of fiction to counterbalance it.

What is it, though, that supposedly makes the substance of the naturalized tragedy or the modern drama more profound than that of the heroic story? There seems to be an assumption that monsters rule out the possibility of profundity or moral weight. But in enshrining this principle, the contradiction in this position is projected onto other works which then bear the condemnation the critic will not allow to taint their own preferred fantastic work. Thus it is that for many contemporary critics, "Doom is held less literary than *hamartia*." Is it not, at least in part, because the critics enshrine literary representations of their own self-deception?

Having heard the complaint, Tolkien rejects the hypothesis that it is the number of monsters in the poem that presents the problem. The suggestion that one less monster would balance the story's structure or theme is an absurd one, as the critic who complains of any monster's presence will not be convinced of the poem's worthiness simply through subtraction. They will disregard the story all the same as the former complaint—that "the heroic or tragic story on a strictly human plane is by nature superior"—will still hold. Furthermore, the poem itself would suffer through such a cowardly revision. To remove Grendel or his mother from the tale in favor of another foe or obstacle, such as war with another Northern tribe, would produce an asymmetry that would imbalance the poem's conclusion where an older Beowulf contends against the dragon.

The symmetry is vital as it includes the inversion of ideals represented by each of the three monsters. In time, Jane Nitzsche, in her "The Structural Unity of *Beowulf*: The Problem of Grendel's Mother," would show that Grendel's mother is as important a figure as Grendel himself. Her role is not simply to add another foe to the tale. Rather, she represents a diametrically opposed figure to the women the poem has introduced, each of whom act as "weavers of peace," binding their communities together. Grendel's mother, by contrast, behaves like a lord demanding vengeance for the death of her son, just as Hrothgar or any other chief would.

This is a contradiction that provokes great fear in Hrothgar's hall. Her monstrousness lies in her assumption of a role she, a lady (she is described as an "*ides*" which is used elsewhere in the poem to characterize a queen or noblewoman) is not meant to bear and in the prowess she shows in fighting those who are "meant" to bear it. Though she comes to avenge a monster and murderer, she nevertheless reflects Beowulf's mores and commitments back to him and his world. Nitzsche's analysis came later but Tolkien is similarly attuned to how the poem's monsters externalize threats that are much more proximate to its hero and to its audience.

Similarly, to remove the dragon would diminish the significance of the elder Beowulf's final days. Beowulf fights the dragon as the champion of his people because he is the one who has proven himself in battle against monsters as a young man. The dragon is the negative image of the king, hoarding treasure for himself, rather than distributing it to others. There is thus a trajectory that moves from Grendel, the individual warrior, to the dragon as lord of prizes, to portray the dark inversion of the values and norms which animated the world of *Beowulf*. The evil which Beowulf fights is already embryonically present in the human world and its overflow into exterior threat must be kept at bay. The poem, then, truly cannot be any other way. There is no *Beowulf* that does not concern itself with monsters, just as there is no *Beowulf* that seizes the imagination or inspires courage that is not the story of a monster fighter.

The judgment that deems the monsters to be "sad mistakes" does not reckon adequately with the world of which it is a part. Our world is only ever haunted by darkness, death, and doom. They are natural, in one sense, yet wholly unnatural in another. They are here and active, but in the truest and most profound sense they do not belong here. They are aspects of human beings' environments, but they present themselves as actants with something akin to agency. The monsters are instantiations of the elemental hostility and intransigence of the world against which the human

race has always contended and with which they will always contend. Perhaps the creature, Grendel, never existed in Scandinavia in the early medieval period: this is little consolation, as he is metonymic for all monsters. The monstrous is not simply an alien ontology as it is also an ethical category. It confronts us from within and without, surrounding the human race at all times in the senseless ravagings that pervade the cosmos and undermine our own best efforts.

This means that the historical rootedness of *Beowulf* is not a ballast to counteract the strangeness of its monsters, as though history and geography lent the tale a verisimilitude of which its monsters would otherwise deprive it. This was the mistake of previous scholars. Though these facets that ground the poem in time and space and people present themselves for investigation towards understanding the story as a whole, to focus upon them to the exclusion of Beowulf's three fights is to strip the story of its significance. *Beowulf* is a tale of humankind's perpetual fight against chaos and its monsters, and in this instance, it looks like this. "It is possible," Tolkien thinks,

> to be moved by the power of myth and yet to misunderstand the sensation, to ascribe it wholly to something else that is also present: to metrical art, style, or verbal skill. Correct and sober taste may refuse to admit that there can be an interest for *us*— the proud *we* that includes all intelligent living people— in ogres and dragons; we then perceive its puzzlement in face of the odd fact that it has derived great pleasure from a poem that is actually about these unfashionable creatures. Even though it attributes "genius"... to the author, it cannot admit that the monsters are anything but a sad mistake.

"The proud we" have a difficult time rationalizing the enjoyment of a work that places such "sad mistakes" as Grendel, Grendel's mother, and a dragon at the very heart of the story. That "we" feels they ought not to enjoy *Beowulf* for so blatantly ignoring the strictures modern literary discrimination has put in place. But the poem itself has no compunction whatsoever against structuring its plot around fighting monsters and is not embarrassed to allow its themes to derive from those actions rather than present its action as scaffolding for something supposedly more "profound."

This seems to be precisely that with which the older critics had taken issue. The monsters of the *Odyssey*, for instance, were semi-divine through parentage from such figures as Poseidon or Zeus, so their roles in these stories could be assimilated to the conditions of the world over against the nobly flawed individual. It seems, then, the problem this school of critics had with *Beowulf* was that it did not present a classically structured *agon* of a tragic hero-type. It seems they were disappointed that *Beowulf* was not the story of the self-actualization of a complex yet fundamentally good character set into motion by his misdeed, and as such they judged the poem deficient. Accordingly they could not allow there to be much substance in a story that did not meet this highly selective criteria.
The monsters of *Beowulf*, however, are neither structurally nor thematically peripheral. They are present as representatives of the pervasive enemies of God that threaten the fragility of mankind's place in the world. Beowulf takes on distinction and significance, *becomes* the Beowulf of the poem, in his fights against these creatures and in no other way.

Whatever is in the man Beowulf, whatever contours of character that may be of interest to a reader or listener, emerges in his resolve to battle the children of Cain. *Beowulf*, in Tolkien's estimation, succeeds because the monsters portray the world's entrapment within *hamartia* of another sort. "It is just because the main foes in *Beowulf* are inhuman that the story is larger and more significant than [an] imaginary poem of a great king's fall," Tolkien writes; "It glimpses the cosmic and moves with the thought of all men concerning the fate of human life and efforts." To rightly understand the poem the audience must grasp that no one, nor even Beowulf, mighty hero that he is, can keep the monsters at bay forever.

> In the struggle with Grendel one can as a reader dismiss the certainty of literary experience that the hero will not in fact perish, and allow oneself to share the hopes and fears of the Geats upon the shore. In the second part the author has no desire whatever that the issue should remain open, even according to literary convention... By now we are supposed to have grasped the plan. Disaster is foreboded. Defeat is the theme. Triumph over the foes of man's precarious fortress is over, and we approach slowly and reluctantly the inevitable victory of death.

The poet does not stumble in this portion of the poem. This is not a deviation from what preceded it, but its completion. It is the poet's intention that his audience understand what Beowulf's kin do not. Beowulf is doomed. He will not suffer so much as the result of hubris, however, but because this is the doom of humankind. "He is a man," Tolkien writes, "and that for him and many is sufficient tragedy." The evil against which he contends envelops him. It is internal to his existence. It is a part of him, and yet it must be fought. Victory over it can only therefore ever be local and provisional. Tolkien focuses on the poem's Christian gloss on the old Northern Theory of Courage—"the creed of unyielding will," the tenacity that refuses to see defeat as a refutation of what is right—to insist that provisionality is worthy in and of itself as that is the only theater in which moral courage can ever triumph on any scale.

James Earl has noted how "*sceaft*", denoting "nature" or "fate," is used with modifiers to link Grendel and his mother with the overall shape of human life. For "*wonsceaft wera*" (the dark fate of men) conceptually meets "*geosceaft grimme*" (grim ancient fate) in the form of Grendel's mother coming to claim vengeance for the death of her son. This particular event, as singular as it is, is nevertheless of a piece with the universal state of things after the Fall. Grendel and his mother are not the entirety of "the darkness of the human condition," but they are facets of it, emerging from and contributing to its darkness.

Tolkien notes that "the symbolism of darkness is so fundamental that it is vain to look for any distinction between the *þystru* [darkness] outside of Hrothgar's hall in which Grendel lurked and the shadow of Death, or of hell after (or in) Death." This darkness, this condition is within the structures he defends. His civilization provides some of the templates for the dark fate of men. The monsters may be descended from Cain, but he was a son of Adam, as all of us are. The monsters are more related to us than we allow ourselves to believe.

But while we must not forget that we share a genealogy, we must remember we are not the same, or that we must not allow ourselves to become so.

We cannot pretend the monsters are wholly other, but there is a distinction. Grendel and the world's monsters plague our race as their "main function is hostility to humanity (and its frail efforts at order and art upon earth)." Human order must be defended not because it is perfect—far from it—but because it is a bulwark against this outer darkness. But because it is also within us, the structures by which we order the world are perpetually in need of repair, reform, and sometimes even death. What is the point of repelling the darkness now, knowing it will arise again? Because it is present *now*, in the time we are given to be, in the time that the bonds that constitute our shared life and that preserve what we hold dear are threatened.

To deny the long defeat is to invite another and more dreadful doom. In a footnote to the passage in which he states that defeat is the poem's theme, Tolkien soberly reflects:

> That the particular bearer of enmity, the Dragon, also dies is important chiefly to Beowulf himself. He was a great man. Not many even in dying can achieve the death of a single worm, or the temporary salvation of their kindred. Within the limits of human life Beowulf neither lived nor died in vain—brave men might say. But there is no hint, indeed there are many to the contrary, that it was a war to end war, or a dragon-fight to end dragons. It is the end of Beowulf, and of the hope of his people.

Tolkien's subjectivity seizes this opportunity—whether consciously or unconsciously we cannot be sure, but it is there, regardless—to yank the global and historical through the eye of *Beowulf*'s needle. For it is simply impossible that Tolkien wrote and spoke that phrase, "a war to end war," without the grim assonance of World War I rhetoric in his mind or more poignantly, without the deaths of his friends flaring into his mind's eye. Tolkien's appreciation for *Beowulf* surely deepened as he pondered the intractability of darkness and defeat at the heart of the poem. Its pathos no doubt resonated with his experience as one of only two survivors out of a close-knit group of friends, to say nothing of the virtual destruction of his unit twenty years earlier. Tolkien was already familiar with the monsters of modernity: he had witnessed them firsthand in the death drive that gripped his civilization, one that had prided itself on supposedly surpassing the barbarism of the past. If he was not already allergic to hollow rhetoric regarding war and civilization, the bitter run-in with futility that was the Battle of the Somme certainly disabused him of such grandiose ideas.

The intervening years between the first and second world wars only reinforced how foolish such triumphalist narratives were. Not that he ever abandoned a deep commitment to truth or the need for courage or even the necessity, at times, to fight, but he would insist on the importance of smaller aims, of recognizing the inevitability of the return of the Shadow and the gravitational pull of Nothing within historical time.

The need to defend "man's precarious fortress" would never cease; crisis would emerge yet again, and then again, exhaustingly, until the end of the age. Tolkien had no patience for defeatism, but he knew at the same time that the dragon-fight to which any of us, the descendants of Adam, are summoned, will not be the last. And if it *is* branded the "dragon-fight to end dragons," the vendors of that narrative will consign many hopeful young persons to the bleak

fate of having failed. We cannot hope to root out Evil from the soil of the cosmos entirely. All we can do is confront its promulgation so far as we are able to in our weakness. This is the responsibility entrusted to human beings in the time they are given. If we neglect this, we will discover, each and every time, that the cost of our crusades is unbearably high.

It is possible to carry out this responsibility with a hope that is both robust and limited precisely because of *Beowulf's* Christian reinterpretation of the Danes' history. Tolkien calls it an admirable achievement that the poem creates "the illusion of surveying a past, pagan but noble and fraught with a deep significance—a past that itself had depth and reached backward into a dark antiquity of sorrow." He appreciates that the Christian poet has not, as many of his contemporaries did, "consign[ed] the heroes to the devil," but retroactively situates these heroes within the new history opened by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This history acknowledges the gravity of sin, death, and the monstrous, and reckons with the import of humanity's fight against them. And yet this acknowledgment of the possibility of defeat and destruction recognized that they were not ultimate.

In older tales, hope cannot exceed the valor of the heroes who go to fight. Hope is a possibility because heroes hopefully sufficient to the looming threat arise to confront it. It survives, then, so long as they do. In the event of their defeat, however, hope gives way to resignation. For while it may be true that defeat does not invalidate the justness of their cause, it nevertheless spells the doom of those on whose behalf they fought. *Beowulf*, through its Christian reinterpretation, evidences the same acknowledgment of doom but situates it within God's economy, ensuring that all victories and all defeats are framed within God's lordship and care. The salvation of the world is not lost through Beowulf's death, as he was never responsible for such a burden. The consequences of this or that fight are serious, and yet none of them are the hinge upon which the history of Adam's race turns.

Possibly the greatest gift the Beowulf poet provides posterity is this consolation, as its comfort never nullifies the darkness and pain of our embattled existence on this plane. Instead, every victory and every unyielding defeat, however small, is a part of the whole of Christ's victory over Sin and Death, disconnected historically from one another, perhaps, but united to the Son of God's triumph by his Spirit.

The monsters of the poem bore witness to this element of existence in a way that consoled Tolkien. He lived the rest of his life deeply wounded by the nightmarish loss of life he endured, "just when I was full of stuff to write, and of things to learn; and never picked it all up again," he would later write to his son, Michael. He attributed the peace and perseverance he experienced to God's grace sustaining him over a long life, but it is no less true that there was a John Ronald Reuel Tolkien who did not survive the war. The version who did survive would distill the glimmering sadness of lives irrevocably shattered into a modern mythology that never allows its readers to forget the toll that courage and heroism exact. *Beowulf* nourished the hope against hope which informed his own fiction which has in turn sustained thousands of other readers in the darkness of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.
King Lear magnificently manifests the pain woven into the fabric of the world, but if we impose an arbitrary rule that all tragic art must mimic it then we will never penetrate to the heart of what makes our world tragic. The monsters and the monstrous in *Beowulf* apprehend reality in a way that the merely

prosaic cannot. Censoring monsters leaves us with only an absurd world where fighting the darkness and standing to the last is as meaningless as the peace the fight is meant to recover. There is no nobility in death in a world without monsters. It should not surprise us that the repressed always returns. The monster we would deny now prowls about the periphery of our awareness, unrecognized in its denial.

Stories such as *Beowulf* ground its readers in the reality of this particular world, one inhabited by monsters, one for which we are responsible. These stories provide models for emulation, yes, but they also show how their protagonists are entangled within the problem of evil. They are not less morally sophisticated than the works the critics have admonished us to prefer, but equally so. The heroism they commend recognizes the split in human subjectivity, that while our heroes may fight monsters, it is also possible that they would become monsters. These stories therefore refuse to allow us to forget that we will never extirpate evil entirely as it is already within us, shaping our mortality.

The history of our species isn't one of onward and upward progress: it is one of chaos and desperate rearguard actions, punctuated by all too short gasps of peace. We try to hold the dark but it's never a single, concentrated line of defense holding across time, united by the same allegiances or the same threats. It is fragmented clumps of contention putting themselves in the way of the dark's machinations, and the fact that they are often overwhelmed by it is no discrediting of the effort.

And it is the eschaton that is the final retroactive judgment that will unveil everything's hidden significance and the obscured connections they bear to one another. Then the seemingly isolated, disparate string of defeats will be revealed to be episodes in the long campaign against the darkness, from a cup of cold water to rescuing a persecutor to a doomed last stand. The Beowulf-poet illuminated Tolkien's instinct to see eschatological reversal as a source of hopeful activity. We, their unpromising descendants, can likewise contend for the present with the hope that the eschaton will vindicate and resurrect its good within its upheaval, but without triumphalism or presumption. Instead, we can adhere to Beckett's like-hearted maxim, "No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."

This is our doom and our challenge: to fight the long defeat, the only fight in which there is real integrity due to its small aims and its recognition of human frailty. We may be summoned to many fights, to end this wrong or that evil, but the *end* of the evils and afflictions that characterize our existence will always asymptotically evade our reach. But if we would not be monsters, then we must strive all the same and leave their ultimate defeat to God.

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Lucifer at Work

Erik Baker. *Make Your Own Job: How the Entrepreneurial Work Ethic Exhausted America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2025. $35, 352pp.

ANTHONY SCHOLLE

A few months ago my wife and I, pregnant with our first child, found ourselves in need of more money than we had. We weren't quite on our way to the Marshalsea, but we were in need nonetheless. My instinct was to work. I started scrambling, looking for freelance writing gigs on a plethora of websites and signing up for food delivery apps. Alas, Providence was more powerful than my work ethic so I only needed to do that for a short time before realizing that all we needed was provided for and moved my family to a new home, just in time for the baby.

Coincidentally, I started reading Erik Baker's *Make Your Own Job: How the Entrepreneurial Work Ethic Exhausted America*. As I read I found myself in the pages. Medievals reckoned the mirror as a device not only of reflection but of revelation. I found *Make Your Own Job* to be similar. It revealed myself and the cultural zeitgeist I know so well in its pages. Moreover, in reflecting myself in it, it revealed how much I have bought into its assumptions. I felt like the proverbial fish in that story asking his friend, "What is water?"

Entrepreneurialism is the central concept of the book. Baker frames it as *an* American work ethic, and the dominant one of the 20th century. He makes a point that it is not *the* work ethic as many of us might conceptualize it, but one of several. Specifically he frames it against the 19th century ethic of industriousness which advocates working hard, enduring above all else, grinding out the long arduous days without complaint. A perfect ethic for 19th century American industrial production. The beginning of the post-industrial service economy called for more. It demanded an entrepreneurial worker, one who engages his whole mind and body, time and commitment, creative and generative capacities, working unremittingly for the mission of the firm.

The book covers roughly 130 years, from entrepreneurialism's first articulation in an offshoot of Christian Science called New Thought through the gig economy of the post-pandemic 2020s. Sections of each chapter are rarely longer than 5-10 pages and each covers smaller stories about companies, people, or thought movements (especially those at Harvard Business School) in vignette-like fashion. Baker, a historian, plies his trade masterfully. Each of these small sections is straightforward and well cited. This style does wonders for his historiographical reliability and makes each section feel indisputably correct. Baker's voice and hand rarely come through clearly. What is his thesis then? That entrepreneurialism exists, indisputable. That it has been dominant for roughly a century, he makes that clear. But each of these seem weak theses for a book with 57 pages of endnotes and citations. There must be more to his thesis but it is not immediately obvious, as he crafts his argument covertly, but occasionally his voice slips through.

In his chapter on New Age entrepreneurialism, Baker profiles Apple and its entrepreneurial cornerstone Steve Jobs. He briefly characterizes Jobs as "The most ruthless entrepreneur to emerge from the… counterculture." His aggressive description of Jobs only becomes more felt throughout the section crescendoing as he quotes one author who described exploitation of factory workers at Apple as a serpent infiltrating Silicon Valley's Eden. "But perhaps it is not quite appropriate to depict this unglamorous industrial exploitation as a serpent infiltrating the divine garden from the outside. 'We are as gods,' Stewart Brand famously told his readers, 'and we might as well get good at it.' Milton's Lucifer could hardly have put it better himself." In these couple of sentences Baker's argumentative voice shines through in a way that it rarely does elsewhere. The industrial exploiters then, the high power entrepreneurial elite, are not covert agents "from the outside" but are themselves as prideful as Lucifer acting "as gods" at others' expense for their own gain. The folly of the entrepreneurial man is exposed by the fall that accompanies his embrace. That surely is one strong value judgement.

These straightforward value judgements are few and far between. It took stepping back from the book and looking at it as a whole to start seeing Baker's thesis coalesce. Right in the middle of the book, the chapter 'Good Works' follows the rise of New Age entrepreneurialism with companies such as Apple and the Buddhist inspired health-food store Erewhon. The following chapter 'Family Business' charts the rise of conservative-led businesses such as McDonalds, Walmart, and Amway. In the former, entrepreneurialism is "a way to become who you are" and in the latter an "avenue of restoring the role of the family in American life." This is the core of Baker's argument. He works on this meta-level to show the pervasiveness of this ethic to American life. He places the left and the right, the fruit eating hippies and the family oriented traditionalists, on facing pages, two translations of the same concept. Thus each section ends up commenting on the others for him. He shows clearly that in the development of entrepreneurialism there is no discrimination of ideology, faith or politics.

From its origins in Christian Science to Abraham

Maslow to DoorDash, entrepreneurialism is declaimed by those who profit from it to those who struggle to. It is espoused by the profitable owners to the "97 percent of distributors who failed to break even in Amway." Self-help gurus and con-men make loads pontificating in best-selling tracts on the subject, not selling knowledge but the hope that one can make himself great. Wealthy CEOs use it to justify ruthless policies like the annual entrepreneurial performance reviews Jack Welch instituted at GE wherein the bottom 10% "'had to go' in Welch's words." It is espoused by those who benefit to those who bear the cost. At each turn it seems Baker points out these trends. Even Maslow, a psychologist, was hired by companies to help them improve through entrepreneurial practices.

That is not to say that the concept is vapid wholesale, but that the American work ethic of entrepreneurialism is in need of scrutiny. In fact, it seems to me that the cure to the work ethic of entrepreneurialism is true entrepreneurship, i.e. true ownership of one's work. This does not mean that each worker must be his own business owner, nor that each firm must be distributist. Simply, this means that each worker is entitled—by justice—to the fruits of his labor whether in cash or in kind. This is the only way that the virtues of creativity, self motivation and risk taking found in entrepreneurialism can be properly realized.

Thus Baker forms an erratic historical collage into a fine tapestry. He does not need to intervene. He lets the story comment on itself and allows his readers to form their own conclusions. He defines the central image as the American hope for more. The same ethic drives the self-help guru to write a bestselling hit as drives the eager readers to buy it. I think Baker would agree with what I learned not too long ago: neither entrepreneurialism nor any other work ethic will save us. We'd better place our trust in a Power greater than ourselves lest we rely too heavily upon our own work. Truth, not work, will set us free.

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The Future of Reformed Biblical Theology

RICHARD B. GAFFIN JR. *WORD & SPIRIT: SELECTED WRITINGS IN BIBLICAL AND SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY*. EDITED BY DAVID B. GARNER AND GUY PRENTISS WATERS. GLENSIDE, PA: WESTMINSTER SEMINARY PRESS, 2023. XXI+776 PGS. $35.99 HARDBACK.

JOSH HEAVIN

One of the most arresting moments in the New Testament is when the Epistle to the Hebrews introduces a quotation from Psalm 95. On one hand, the author notes that "David" wrote these words (Heb 4:7). On the other hand, simultaneously, these words spoken through David are ultimately the words of the Holy Spirit; when the Psalm is introduced, the author notes that it is the Holy Spirit who is heard currently speaking in and through these words in the present tense: "Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says…" These and other texts undoubtedly inform the theological imagination of Westminster Confession of Faith §1.10, which declares that in matters of religious controversy our primary authority, and the One "in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture."

This dynamic between the Word of God and the Holy Spirit also raises numerous questions. How should the church read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest Holy Scripture such that we hear it as the present speech of the Holy Spirit? What sense of what unity or coherence should the church discern between the diverse array of voices in the canon of both the Old and New Testaments? Further, theological questions related to the Spirit's continuous speech in Scripture might include the following: how is not only the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, but particularly his resurrection and present heavenly session, integral to our salvation? If Christ has a threefold office as prophet, priest, and king, how specifically is he a priest — how does his once for all offering of himself on the cross relate to Christ's present and ongoing work of mediation at the right hand of God, having ascended into heaven? How is the person and work of the Holy Spirit integral to our salvation? What is union with Christ, and why have confessionally Reformed theologians for centuries understood it

as a central doctrine in Christian theology — both as the means whereby the Spirit subjectively applies to us the redemption objectively accomplished in Christ, and as the means whereby the benefits of salvation (sanctification, justification, adoption, glorification, etc.) are apprehended distinctly but inseparably as the Spirit joins us with Christ the Benefactor?

That these questions occur to me at all largely owes to the life, writing, teaching, and ministry of Dr. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. But they are especially occasioned here by the recent publication of many of his notable essays, articles, and shorter writings. Gaffin's teaching career as a professor at Westminster Theological Seminary began in 1965; he retired in 2010 but has continued teaching and writing in various capacities since then.
In 1980, Gaffin published an edited book entitled *Redemptive History & Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*. It is difficult in only a few sentences to convey how extraordinarily influential Geerhardus Vos' legacy has proved over time to thinkers associated in some way with Westminster Theological Seminary in Glenside, PA, but also how relatively obscure Vos remains elsewhere. Vos authored a *Reformed Dogmatics* in Dutch (published in the late 19th c., and translated into English by Gaffin in the 2010s), a work way ahead of its time on eschatology in the gospels (*The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom of God*), a few books on Hebrews, *The Eschatology of the Old Testament*, and probably his best known work is his *Biblical Theology*; arguably Vos's single greatest single publication was his final one in 1930, *The Pauline Eschatology*. But Vos' innumerable journal articles, book chapters, and more would easily have vanished into the sands of time and institutional memory were it not for Gaffin's diligent work in tracking them down and making them available for students, professors, and general readers in our time. I can remember the different places where I sat as I read for the first time several of Vos's articles that Gaffin compiled; in many ways, I learned how to read Holy Scripture from Vos in "The Eschatological Aspect of the Pauline Conception of the Spirit," "Hebrews, the Epistle of the Diatheke," "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology," and more. Those exercises not only stimulated my mind, but to this day have born a lasting impression on my own personal faith and piety as well as my ecclesial service in pastoral ministry.

In 2023, editors David Garner and Guy Prentiss Waters performed a similar yeoman's service for Gaffin's own shorter writings, similar to that Gaffin performed almost fifty years ago for Geerhardus Vos. Gaffin has published influential and noteworthy books, perhaps the foremost being his *Resurrection and Redemption*, which articulated how not only the cross but particularly the resurrection is integral to our salvation; *Perspectives on Pentecost*, which provides a redemptive historical way to understand Pentecost and the coming of the Spirit amidst charismatic movements; and probably the best response to the New Perspective on Paul by a Presbyterian New Testament scholar, *By Faith, Not By Sight*. Dr. Gaffin also preached not a few sermons across his career, such as his 2008 chapel message on Romans 8:26, "The Poverty of Prayer," which became a cult classic in Westminster Seminary-adjacent circles. Notably, Dr. Gaffin was arguably as profound or better as a teacher than he was a writer. Audio lectures from

his courses at Westminster Seminary from over the years bear this out, some of the best of which were published in his 2022 book *An Introduction to the Biblical Theology of Acts and Paul*. Gaffin's influence upon not only other scholars but upon ministerial students is indelible. Dr. Gaffin has been the teacher of several generations of teachers, both in the church and the academy.

Yet, arguably some of Gaffin's most valuable contributions to scholarship and to the church were scattered across the enormous quantity of shorter writings he published across his long career. Like most scholars, the majority of Gaffin's shorter writings were published in peer-reviewed journals that general readers cannot easily access, as chapters in edited books that are either expensive or now out of print, or otherwise are not easy to locate, let alone to know about today. I first read several of the essays compiled in this volume ten or fifteen years ago; in many ways I cut my theological teeth on a diet of Vos, Gaffin, Ridderbos, and related biblical scholars practicing biblical theology in confessionally reformed traditions. The opportunity to re-read and review them is in many ways like returning to my intellectual and spiritual roots, like returning to one's hometown after living elsewhere for a long time and trying to understand the place I come from, to evaluate the connection between my memory of it and the place as it actually was and is, and to relate this experience to others.

Comparable to his own compilation of Vos' shorter writings, there is a vast array of topics, texts, and themes explored across these writings, but a strikingly consistent hermeneutic employed throughout. Because there are a total of forty-one separate works published in this book at nearly 800 pages long, any review of this book will necessarily be impressionistic and require some degree of generalization.

Hence, I want to raise here what I regard as the ten strongest contributions of this collection of Richard Gaffin's shorter writings. Subsequently, I raise what are not so much critiques, but three questions for those who wish to build on Gaffin's legacy going forward. Notably, apart from the first one below, the remaining nine items are not in any definite order; they are closely related with and mutually inform one another, and I can scarcely do justice to the nuances of each in a brief review of such a lengthy book.

First, arguably the most profound entry in this volume is the two page foreword written by Dr. Gaffin's sons, Richard III and Steven. They recount how:

> Sometimes someone will ask us 'what is he *really* like?', looking, we imagine, for greater insight into the character of the professor they respect. Maybe they're afraid that there's no way that the teacher they admire could be the same guy outside the classroom. But he is. When we were younger we'd say things like, 'He takes us to lots of Phillies games' or 'He cooks great hamburgers' and without realizing it, in this childlike way we'd answered the question of character that they were asking. As we've grown older, we just

> say in so many words that what you see is what you get. What we knew then, what we continue to experience, and what is always a privilege to share, is that this man is also a great father and husband. Even as kids, it was clear to us that Dad loved his work — helping to prepare young men for the ministry — because he loved God, His Word, and the good news that those men were being trained to proclaim… growing up, it was clear to us that Dad understood his Christian vocation wasn't only fulfilled at Westminster, but also in his care for us, our sister, and our mother. This care manifested itself in many ways, especially in his patience. Patience is a virtue that flows from humility, and it is humility that is perhaps most characteristic of our father. (pg. xi)

Richard III and Steve additionally describe their father's trust in and reliance upon God after his daughter and their sister Lisl died of cancer in 2004, and his wife Jean died in 2019 after more than sixty years of marriage.

Of all that can and should be said about Dr. Gaffin's prolific career of scholarly writing, academic teaching, and ecclesial service in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the paragraph above from his sons is surely his most significant accomplishment. As a younger scholar, teacher, and servant of the church, I am humbled and encouraged by the legacy of personal integrity and piety his sons describe. Of course, he was and is a sinner like anyone else, but it is a sterling achievement to raise children who testify that their father was himself captivated by the grace of God, persevered in the lifelong calling of every Christian towards continual repentance, and lived with personal integrity and character, loving God and neighbor. The apostle Paul, whom Dr. Gaffin focused upon for so many decades, describes how he disciplines himself lest after preaching to others he should disqualify himself (1 Cor 9:27). It is perennially a scandal and profound discouragement for the church when her shepherds and our theological heroes are exposed as having concealed their lack of personal integrity, perhaps affirming profound truths publicly but personally denying them in secrecy. Much of Dr. Gaffin's life that his sons describe above, from taking care of children to having fun with them, to being faithful to his wife and regularly participating in or leading the church's weekly worship, required a deep sense of what matters and what does not. An actually Christian life is one of "looking to Jesus" and not to ourselves or anyone else as the source of endurance for hope and life (Heb 12:2). For Dr. Gaffin, that work was doubtless at times boring, at times exhausting, at times discouraging, and there were no shortage of temptations to stray off the path along the way. But he persevered, and that in itself is one of his greatest gifts to his students and readers. Dr. Gaffin's lifelong writing and teaching on union with the crucified and risen Lord through Spirit-wrought faith is not an ethereal set of ideas, nor merely topics for intellectual exploration; his own way of life shows that it is a generative and eminently practical resource for personal holiness, devotion to Christ, and love for

others.

Second, the opening chapter, a definition of and argument for the use of a "redemptive-historical hermeneutic" represents one of Dr. Gaffin's most enduring and influential contributions. Dr. Gaffin's six principles on pgs. 5–11 that constitute the "basic elements of a redemptive-historical or revelation-historical approach" provide a reliable path for interpreters to see Christ himself as the subject matter of Scripture, who in His own person is the organic unity of revelation as it unfolded historically throughout Israel's scriptures. This also has significant implications for understanding how the New Testament makes use of the Old Testament. The apostles, evangelists, and authors of the New Testament did not create arbitrary impositions upon or distortions of Old Testament texts, nor did they merely read the Old Testament texts in the context of their immediate historical contexts. The approach pioneered by Vos and expanded upon by Gaffin foregrounds that the self-revelation of the triune God provides the ultimate context for every biblical text, as that revelation unfolded historically with an organic unity centered on the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Third, Dr. Gaffin has been one of the finest exponents of a classical reformed account of union with Christ as the central doctrine of salvation and the heart of Christian living. That God's objective salvation accomplished in Christ's death and resurrection is subjectively applied to us as the Holy Spirit unites sinners with Christ in his death and resurrection, especially through the means of grace of the Word duly preached and the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist duly administered, shines throughout the Part V of the volume. Paul preached a Son-centered gospel (Rom 1:2). The gospel is not mainly about the benefits Christ procured for us, such as forgiveness, adoption and more. Rather, the Gospel is about the benefactor, Christ himself, and as the Holy Spirit unites us with Christ by faith, we come to share in Christ and all his saving benefits. Consequently, we are justified not by God recognizing the worth of our moral performance, but only through our having been united with Christ when he was vindicated by being raised from the dead. Moreover, we cannot be justified freely without also living a life of holiness, because the only way we apprehend any of Christ's benefits is by being united with Christ himself, and Christ cannot be torn apart. The heart of salvation is being "in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord'" (1 Cor 1:30–31). In developing these conclusions Gaffin is not merely an exegete of the New Testament, though he is, but he is a sensitive reader of Book III of Calvin's *Institutes* as well as Calvin's commentaries. The chapters "Calvin's Soteriology: The Structure of the Application of Redemption in Book Three of the *Institutes*," "Union with Christ: Some Biblical and Theological Reflections," and "Justification and Union with Christ: *Institutes* 3.11–18" on pgs. 577–628 are worth the price of the book.

Fourth, the seven essays on Pneumatology that constitute Part IV of this volume develop at least two of Dr. Gaffin's most enduring contributions. First, Gaffin continues a deep tradition running through Calvin and

the magisterial Protestant confessions and catechisms of foregrounding the person and work of the Holy Spirit as integral to how the redemption accomplished in Christ is applied to believers. Second, across Gaffin's career he defined, on strong biblico-theological and redemptive-historical grounds, a reformed response to the Pentecostal and charismatic movements. While appreciative of some aspects of contemporary popular attention to the work of the Spirit, Gaffin exegetically demonstrates that what happened at Pentecost in the New Testament is as unique, eschatological, and once-for-all-time and unrepeatable of an event as the death and resurrection of Christ.

Fifth, following in the footsteps of Geerhardus Vos, Richard Gaffin was a careful exegete of the epistle to the Hebrews, particularly with respect to the place of "covenant" in the epistle, and on the holographic way Christ's priesthood is described throughout the epistle. Christ offered himself not only once for all time in his death on the cross as sufficient for atonement, but also the self-offering of the specifically risen and ascended Christ in the heavenly holy of holies is a key aspect of Christ's ongoing work of mediation (pgs, 291–305). In the past decade of New Testament scholarship, key themes in Hebrews such as Christ's divine status as royal "Son" and Christ's heavenly priesthood have been brought into renewed focus and clarity through scholars such as David Moffitt and R. B. Jamieson. But several of these key insights were anticipated already in Dr. Gaffin's classroom lectures and articles on Hebrews decades ago, reprinted here.

Sixth, Dr. Gaffin proved a worthwhile conversation partner to the so-called "New Perspective on Paul" that emerged in the late twentieth century and perhaps reached its zenith of popular influence in the mid-2000's. His chapters on "Paul the Theologian" provided nuanced appreciations and critiques of James Dunn and N.T. Wright's reading of the Apostle Paul, especially on the meaning of justification and matters related to the atonement and application of redemption. Gaffin, having long been influenced by Geerhardus Vos's approach to eschatology, Calvin's prioritization of union with Christ, and the theology of the Westminster Standards and other Reformed confessions, provided one of the most learned and sensitive theological responses to Dunn and Wright, particularly where they argued against caricatures of Reformed perspectives and Reformed readings of the New Testament (pgs. 223–271).

Seventh, Dr. Gaffin is an exemplary writer. Stylistically his work is evocative of Calvin, namely, that he writes with lucid brevity.

Eight, surely one of Dr. Gaffin's most enduring contributions to scholarship is his work as a translator, especially of Dutch Reformed theologians and biblical scholars for the Anglophone world. To be clear, this collection of shorter writings does not itself contain any single work of translation. But as readers consult the footnotes throughout, they will not only notice that Dr. Gaffin regularly interacted with non-English scholarly interlocutors in German and other languages, but that Dr. Gaffin helped introduce his students and readers to deep wells for theology and biblical interpretation in the modern world that stood under the authority

of the Word of God and sought to further deepen and build upon a confessionally Reformed heritage. One of the most significant works of Reformed systematic theology ever written was Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* published in 1895-1901. Bavinck's work was not translated into English until 2004, a few years before Dr. Gaffin's retirement. Yet, across his career beginning with his earliest writing, Dr. Gaffin was a perceptive and skillful reader of Bavinck in Dutch, and brought his ideas to the attention of his students and readers. After his retirement, Dr. Gaffin translated the whole of Geerhardus Vos' five volume *Reformed Dogmatics* from Dutch into English; this may prove to be one of his most influential achievements, since few have mastered both the Dutch language and Geerhardus Vos' corpus of writings as Dr. Gaffin had, and Vos-style approaches to biblical theology have often been criticized for neglecting systematic theology. But beyond the literal work of translation, Dr. Gaffin to some extent was also a popularizer. Dr. Gaffin's hero, Geerhardus Vos, was a polymath, but his English prose is not always the clearest or easiest for contemporary readers to follow. But in Dr. Gaffin's hands, the pioneering work of Vos on themes such as the kingdom of God, eschatology, and union with Christ are both better grounded exegetically in Scripture, and also articulated with greater clarity, such that students and readers can more readily grasp the explanatory power of this vision. Similarly, Dr. Gaffin was deeply perceptive and appreciative of N. Herman Ridderbos, whose translations into English contain some infamously challenging prose. For instance, Dr. Gaffin recounts in one essay how he first found the distinction "*historia salutis/ordo salutis*" in Herman Ridderbos (pg. 596), and that is now a well-traveled phrase. I personally have benefited enormously from Ridderbos' *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, *When the Time Had Fully Come*, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, and more; but I would probably not have known about them, nor read them as profitably, apart from being directed to them from Dr. Gaffin's interactions with those works.

Ninth, there is only one essay in this collection on the idea of canon (pgs. 345–362), but it is significant. Similar to Ridderbos's 1988 book *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*, Dr. Gaffin's writing on canon helpfully directs readers to think about the very notion of canon theologically (pg. 350), and situates the so-called closure of the New Testament canon and its apostolicity as befitting the once-for-all time, definitive accomplishment of an eschatological redemption in Christ (pgs. 351–360). The very notion of having a canon, let alone the criterion as to why some books were included in our Bibles while others were not, is often troubling to students and parishioners alike — but having a redemptive-historical framework for thinking through questions related to the canon can make all the difference.

Tenth, Dr. Gaffin's writing is a highly potent and generative source for preaching, pastoral care, and the lifelong work of prayer and repentance that is the duty of every Christian, and especially so for ministers of the gospel.

To be clear, neither these essays nor most of Dr. Gaffin's writing and teaching belong to the genres of devotional or spiritual writing. But the focal point for

all of Dr. Gaffin's work is the glory of the triune God that is quintessentially revealed in the humiliation and exaltation of Jesus Christ and the eschatological sending of the Spirit — all of which summons us to respond appropriately. In the foreword to Dr. Gaffin's *In the Fullness of Time*, Sinclair Ferguson commented that "A hallmark… is its penetration into the deep structures of Paul's thought. There are many pages here where I suspect readers will want to slow down, perhaps reread, meditate, and, best of all, worship" (16). That is no less the case with *Word and Spirit*.

Given the sheer length of this volume, and the wide array of texts and topics treated therein, raising critical questions is as challenging as appreciating its strengths. While some minor quibbles might be raised about various exegetical conclusions scattered here and there, reading these shorter writings together as a collection prompts me to instead raise three questions about the present and future state of work similar to Dr. Gaffin's.

First, much of Dr. Gaffin's career of teaching and publishing straddled the disciplines of systematic theology and a very distinctive Reformed approach to biblical theology; but what is the future of such an approach to interpretation and theology, given the demise of the biblical theology movement in mainstream biblical studies, and given the developments over the last few decades of the Theological Interpretation of Scripture movement? To get at the heart of my concern, it might be worth quoting at length two especially pertinent paragraphs, from the conclusion of Gaffin's introductory essay to redemptive-historical hermeneutics:

> First, while the language and explicit concept of 'salvation history' is relatively recent, the significance of the redemptive-historical view sketched in this chapter is not its novelty or distance from all earlier forms of exegesis. The factor of continuity needs to be appreciated. A credible case can be made that already in the second century, the confrontation with Gnosticism indelibly impressed upon the church the controlling biblical insight of a redemptive-historical approach: salvation resides ultimately not in who God is or even what he has said but in what he has *done* in history, once for all, in Christ. Virtually from its beginning on and more or less consistently, especially beginning with the Reformation, the approach of the church to the Bible has been incipiently redemptive-historical or biblical-theological.
>
> Second, on the much-debated issue of the relationship between biblical theology (biblical interpretation) and systematic theology (dogmatics), the redemptive-historical approach of this chapter entails a noncompetitive, mutually dependent relationship in which biblical theology is the indispensable servant of systematic theology. The former serves the latter

> on the understanding that systematic theology aims for a presentation of the overall teaching of the Bible as God's Word under appropriate topics. To that end, redemptive-historical interpretation is indispensable because sound exegesis is the lifeblood of systematic theology, and it is essential for sound exegesis to pay careful attention to the redemptive-historical subject matter of Scripture and to the revelation-historical context of the various biblical documents. (At any one point in actual practice the relationship between biblical theology and systematic theology is of course reciprocal. As systematic theology builds on biblical theology, so biblical theology is inevitably influenced, at least implicitly, by some operating form of systematic theology and assessment of the Bible as a whole.) This reciprocal relationship may be aptly compared to literary analysis of a great epic drama. Biblical theology is concerned with the redemptive-historical plot as it unfolds scene by scene. With an eye to that entire plot, systematic theology considers the roles of the primary actors, God and humanity. It notes in particular the constants that mark their characters and the dynamics of ongoing activities and interactions. A focus on this reciprocal relationship with a redemptive-historical approach minimizes the tendency, often present in systematic theology, toward unwarranted speculation and "dehistoricizing" in its formulations, and yet maintains the importance of systematic theology for biblical interpretation.

Here I do not so much want to raise issues with the vision sketched above by Gaffin, as sketch future lines of inquiry that need to be taken up. Vos and Gaffin both, across their careers, were fond of using the language of "progressive" to describe the unfolding of special revelation, and of appealing to narrative or storyline metaphors to describe the "organic unity" of revelation. As Gaffin clarifies above, he does not mean by "progressive" a historicist or Hegeglian vision of immanent historical processes that will produce the kingdom of God (contra some Nazi-like theologies of history), nor does he mean an evolutionary vision of biblical religion (contra some modernist 'history of religions' scholarship). Gaffin's approach is also an excellent refutation of dispensationalism and Marcionite (mis)construals of the Bible's unity. But the New Testament also testifies in significant ways to God's action in Jesus Christ as starkly *dis*-continuous with all prior and subsequent human history; the revelation of Jesus Christ is the catastrophe and cure of human history, simultaneously being both a rupture and also promised beforehand in the Old Testament. How helpful ultimately is the metaphor of a story with a surprise ending that illuminates the whole — does

Christ therein become only one more chapter alongside other episodes? Is there perhaps a better or further metaphor that is needed? Gaffin was probably correct to caution about "dehistoricized" systematic theology, assuming he means by that a speculative dogmatics that has become unconcerned with or unaccountable to the economy of salvation as testified to in Scripture. But after the Enlightenment, it is arguably the case that Christian theology is much more imperiled by an anti-metaphysical, and almost wholly historicist, approach to theology and biblical interpretation.

Second, it is not a fault of these essays that they interacted with then-dominant contemporary conversations in scholarship, but upon re-reading them today I could feel the weight of all that has transpired since they were first published. Probably the most notable example of this is that the so-callled 'New Perspective on Paul' and the work of James Dunn and N.T. Wright were indeed prominent in the 1980s and 1990s, and Gaffin offered compelling responses to their work. But non-confessional scholarship on the Bible is as ever-changing as waves on the shore, and the conversations on Paul among New Testament scholars have long since shifted away from (or outright against) Dunn and Wright, in different and fragmented ways that are by no means a return to classical, confessional Protestant readings of Paul. There are probably two dominant paradigms today within mainstream Pauline Studies, namely, readings of Paul within Judaism, and Apocalyptic readings of Paul. Both of these movements are notoriously difficult to define with precision, the former being largely practiced by scholars with historical-critical foci, the latter being practised more often by theologically interested readers of Paul who often have an affinity for Karl Barth. Sometimes while reading the latest scholarship from these two approaches I have wondered what Vos or Gaffin might say in response to the latest conversations on Paul. It is now the task of his students and readers to receive a kind of torch from him, tend its flame, and take his line of faithful biblical and theological interpretation forward into the uncharted territory of our own time.

Third, probably most important of all, we need to more clearly identify the sense in which biblical theology or redemptive-historical hermeneutics are (lower-case 'c') catholic. Occasionally, perhaps often, the most committed students of biblical theology develop an anti-metaphysical or anti-pietistic bias while reading Holy Scripture, as was the case for me personally when my interest in Vos and Gaffin was at its highest 10-15 years ago or so. I am not necessarily faulting Dr. Gaffin for this phenomenon. It might well have been personal user error — though I observed this trend among some of my peers and classmates in seminary, and have sometimes observed it among my own students today. This bias tends to be dismissive of a crucial element in the church's historic reading of the Scriptures, especially on questions of ontology such as the Christological and trinitarian debates of the patristic era. Instead, this inclination would insist, we need to focus on the redemptive-historical context of this or that biblical text, rather than speculating about 'being' or abstract doctrines such as divine simplicity. My sense is that the only people today who believe in and are passionate about biblical theology (again, to be clear, not meaning 'theology that adheres to the Bible,' but specifically the

discipline of tracing the organic unity and unfolding of special revelation across covenant history, especially in the tradition of Vos and Gaffin) are people in conservative/evangelical institutions, such as certain Reformed seminaries, the Evangelical Theological Society, and NAPARC denominations such as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. In Mainline and/or mainstream circles elsewhere, the so-called 'biblical theology' movement of the mid-20th century has long since been abandoned by historical-critical scholars, and there is a dizzying and disorienting array of postmodern ideological and theological approaches employed today.

Now, of course, biblical theology and classical theism are not necessarily mutually exclusive; they can and should complement one another. As Gaffin notes, biblical theology itself arose under a strange and unhelpful philosophy of history among people such as Gabler (pg. 56), and Vos' strong doctrine of revelation and eschatology in many ways anticipated and pre-dated the reactions to classical liberal Protestantism of both Karl Barth and Albert Schwetizer, while avoiding some of their over-corrections (in Barth's case, against natural law) and exegetically unsustainable exaggerations (in Schweitzer's case, in matters of cosmology and eschatology).

But why do students who are inclined towards biblico-theology often become uninterested in or somewhat antagonistic towards metaphysics? Is biblical theology so tied to historical consciousness, or so rooted in historicist modes of thinking, that it mitigates against other necessary modes of reading the scriptures, such as the reading practices necessitated by dogmatics and moral theology? Again, to clarify, I am not faulting Dr. Gaffin himself; his diligent study of Calvin and the historic Reformed confessions attest to his own commitments. But especially in the Post-Christian West, where theological anthropology is increasingly *the* epicenter for pastoral care and discipleship, proponents of biblical theology need to more clearly situate their work in relationship to the church's historic reading of the Scriptures to draw ontological conclusions. I think Dr. Gaffin is right, where he indicates that Irenaeus of Lyons in his *On the Apostolic Preaching* is doing something resembling biblical-theology by showing how the 'rule of faith,' the creed-like essential beliefs of the Christian faith, are attested to through both the Old and New Testament.

But where precisely are the similarities and differences between patristic hermeneutics and modern, Reformed biblical theology? When Gregory of Nyssa in *Life of Moses* finds Christ contemplatively throughout the Sinaitic theophany, how is that both similar and different from the work of Vos, Ridderbos, and Gaffin? How is the fourfold, Medieval approach to scriptural exegesis, or what Hans Boersma calls 'spiritual reading,' both similar to and distinct from biblical theology as specifically practiced by confessional, Reformed interpreters? Dr. Gaffin has shown how biblical theology can be practiced in a mode that is confessionally reformed and evangelically faithful. But his students and redemptive-historical successors would do well to show how biblical theology can, or should, be not only Reformed or evangelical but also catholic, perhaps along the lines of Stephen O. Presley's

forthcoming book, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Early Church: Recovering an Ancient Vision*.

It is only fitting to conclude this review with the words of Dr. Gaffin himself, from an essay warning against theonomy and trying to immanentize the eschaton. On the church's present mission in relationship to the Last Things we look forward to, he writes:

> The perennially demanding, often perplexing path the church is called to follow, until Jesus comes, can be negotiated only as "we live by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor 5:7)... the writer of Hebrews operates with a simple enough eschatological profile: the bodily absence of Christ means the church's wilderness existence; his bodily presence, its entrance into God's final rest. What he must confront in his readers is a perennial problem for the church, a primal temptation bound up with its wilderness existence: the veiledness, for the present, of messianic glory and of the believer's eschatological triumph; "at present we do not see everything subject to him" (Heb 2:8), with the longing as well as the promise that "at present" holds for the church. All of us, then, are involved in a continuing struggle—against our deeply rooted eschatological impatience to tear away that veil and our undue haste to be out of the wilderness and see the realization of what, just because of that haste and impatience, will inevitably prove to be dreams and aspirations that are ill-considered and all too "fleshly." "For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come." (Heb 13:14).

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Exploitative Reading

LINA BOLZONI. *A MARVELOUS SOLITUDE: THE ART OF READING IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE*. CAMBRIDGE: HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2023. $39.95, 256 PP.

JEFF BILBRO

How does a person become capable of love? Answering this question fully is obviously beyond the scope of a book review, but I want to pose it at the outset in order to suggest the real stakes of what may seem a scholarly, specialized book. Lina Bolzoni's *A Marvelous Solitude: The Art of Reading in Early Modern Europe* explicitly addresses a somewhat narrower question: How do you cultivate a spacious soul, one capable of friendship with others and perhaps even with God? As this way of framing the question suggests, such soul formation involves both intense self-cultivation and sustained relationships with others. A similar tension can be seen in the formulation of the second great commandment: my capacity to know and love my neighbor is connected to my capacity to know and love myself. And there is one activity that uniquely combines solitary self-formation with social engagement: reading.

The core paradox of reading is that it is often an isolated, contemplative activity and yet the books we encounter in this place of quiet speak to us and become our friends. Hence reading is both private and social: it "is a shared experience but at the same time something absolutely intimate and personal." As Proust puts it, the "wonderful miracle of reading . . . is communication in the heart of solitude," and the result is a kind of self-cultivation: "we are driven by another on our own ways." In a manner that isn't true of embodied conversation, the other's voice remains always under the reader's control: I can disagree vehemently with a book, or scrawl my complaints in the margin, or even throw the offending book across the room. When dealing with real people, politeness demands more temperate behavior. Yet these possible reactions to a book also show how the personalized, tailored-to-me encounter with others that books provide can easily be a perversion of friendship rather than its handmaiden. They can serve self-love rather than a neighbor-love rooted in a well-formed soul. In fact, some of the benefits that Bolzoni's protagonists ascribe to reading sound surprisingly similar to the perks that AI bots promise today: bringing dead voices to life, enjoying customizable companions, accessing useful information.

In articulating the goal that reading *should* serve, Bolzoni cites the inscription that accompanies a portrait of Sir Thomas Bodley, who organized and greatly expanded Oxford's library: "This image portrays the mortal Thomas Bodley, but the library his vast soul." The implication is that by gathering and internalizing many wise books, Bodley developed a capacious soul, and while a painting may convey his physical appearance, the character of his soul can be better glimpsed through the many book-friends he gathered in the Bodleian Library.

But reading doesn't necessarily produce a vast soul; this pursuit can be corrupted in a myriad of ways. As a means of exploring the benefits and dangers of reading, Bolzoni, a professor of Italian literature, turns to a set of readers she knows quite well: protagonists of the Italian renaissance from the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries. The result is a sort of commonplace book, in which Bolzoni gathers examples from letters, essays, and paintings where men such as Petrarch, Boccacio, Machiavelli, and Federico da Montefeltro describe what they think they are doing when they read. Her inclusion of Montaigne, Erasmus, and a few others justifies the title's claim to be a survey of reading in Europe, but the book's focus remains relatively tight. Yet this isn't a detriment; it allows Bolzoni to probe the ways that this particular community mythologized the pleasures—both edifying and depraved—of reading. If the goal is soul formation and, in particular, the formation of a soul capable of deep friendship with others, there are many ways that the practice of reading can be corrupted and fail to serve this end.

If reading is a dialogue with absent authors, it is often a dialogue with the dead, and Bolzoni

describes several readers who see it explicitly as a "necromantic rite." Bolzoni cites Poliziano and others who view libraries by analogy to the Greek god Aesculapius, who could restore dead people to life. Through a well-stocked library, Poliziano writes, we can overcome Lethe—a river of the underworld that causes forgetfulness: "Fortunate the one who can recall to the light of life so many of the dead monuments of ancient men! Fortunate the one who can rescue from the flames of the pyre the lost names of the sacred poets!" Summarizing this trope, Bolzoni notes that reading is often described as a "means to converse with the dead; it is equivalent to carrying out what could be termed a necromantic ritual, a descent into Hades, where encounters not otherwise possible take place." Some readers, like Federico, even commissioned author portraits to hang in their libraries and facilitate this imaginative summoning of the dead.

It may be hard in some cases to discern the line between listening to the wisdom of the past, on the one hand, and trying to overcome time and death, on the other, but several new AI-powered tools are doing their best to demonstrate the dangers of this latter endeavor. To meet the contemporary demand for necromancy, companies have begun offering "thanabots," LLM-powered chatbots that are trained on a person's digital data trail so that after an individual dies, people can continue conversing with a digital version of their loved one. No longer can we only resuscitate a dead person through intently reading their works of literature. Now we can text back and forth with anyone who left behind words—or other data—that can be used to train an AI. And such thanabots will only become more convincing when they are housed in silicon bodies that evoke the person they imitate: Who needs two-dimensional author portraits when you can interact with a robot? The dangers of such necromantic efforts seem obvious with AI bots: These will short circuit healthy grieving and contribute to the isolation and loneliness experienced by those who rely on poor substitutes for human community. A bot may provide one with the feeling of being loved, but if love involves willing and choosing another's good, a bot can neither love nor be loved. And insofar as readers are likewise using the voices of the dead for their own intellectual and emotional lives—the kids these days might call this "main character energy"—reading too can be a moral hazard.

This temptation to use books and bots to instrumentalize others is a recurring theme in Bolzoni's account. For instance, she explains that Petrarch views the library as a "magical site par excellence" because it can bring the dead to life. And in book form, the dead are more conveniently available to readers than they were in life: "book-friends are able not only to furnish all that is needed in the various fields of knowledge but also to provide psychological comfort and moral instruction; they have one important advantage over flesh-and-blood friends: they are entirely subjected to the needs of their host, always ready and eager to answer his

many questions." Petrarch puts it this way in a letter describing his library as a peculiar assortment of friends: "I gather them from every land and every age in this narrow valley, conversing with them more willingly than with those who think they are alive because they see traces of their stale breath in the frosty air. I thus wander free and unconcerned, alone with such companions." As Bolzoni points out, "the complete availability of" bookish friends makes them superior to "physical people." And in addition, the books don't have bad breath. Petrarch makes such favorable comparisons repeatedly, and it is his books' willingness to obey his every wish that makes him prefer them to people: "Books are ready to be seen in public or go back into the drawer at your command, and are always willing to be silent or speak, to stay at home or accompany you into the woods, to travel, to spend time in the country, to chat, joke, encourage, comfort, advise, reprimand or take care of you. . . . With them there is no tedium, no expense, no complaints, no murmurs, no envy, no deceit." What is more, he goes on to point out, they don't require any food or drink, and they are content with "the smallest room in your house."

A marketer for bot-companions would be hard pressed to come up with more effusive praise for the pleasures of your own private AI-powered friend. Alan Noble aptly summarizes the powerful appeal of one such product:

> Consider the advantages of using Character.AI if you're a lonely young person. You have a companion you can safely talk to about anything, whenever and wherever you want. They'll never judge you. They'll never shame you. Just the opposite: They'll show care and concern for you. They'll talk with you as long as you want. They'll make you feel desired, important, and interesting by asking questions about your life. They can create a story of a relationship that gives significance and direction to your life. You feel your life is going somewhere because your relationship is evolving. (Even though the chatbots don't remember your previous chats, users can and do easily fill in the blanks with their imaginations). And all these benefits can be yours in private. No one has to know you have this "friend." Your classmates and parents can be utterly oblivious to what's absorbing your heart, so they can't make fun of you for falling in love with a chatbot. Character.AI is the perfect isolated "solution" to isolation.

Yet among other dangers, interacting with AI-companions makes us less capable of genuine love because it habituates us to valuing others only for how they benefit me. Yuval Noah Harari articulates how bots will make us feel *heard* in ways that humans rarely can. AI, Harari claims, "will be so good at understanding human emotions, and reacting in a way which is exactly calibrated to your personality at this particular moment, that we might become

exasperated with the human beings who don't have this capacity to understand our emotions, and to react in such a calibrated way." Montaigne makes a similar point with regard to reading, noting that books "do not rebel at seeing that I seek them out only for want of those other pleasures, that are more real, lively, and natural; they always receive me with the same expression." Whereas a real friend might, justly, be hurt if we explicitly tell them that we'd rather be spending the evening with someone else, book and bot companions are utterly compliant and impossible to offend. Treating them as replacement friends, then, stunts our capacity for friendship.

And if I treat persons as mere means to meet my own emotional or intellectual needs, I'll tend to view everything through this instrumental lens. People who read in this fashion want to extract usable information with the least amount of time and effort. Petrarch sings the praises of his *De remediis utriusque fortunae* by promising the reader that "you will no longer have to consult a whole library whenever you suspect the presence and imminent thrust of the enemy, since now you have *ad manum*—within easy reach—as they say, and before your eyes in all places and at all times, a quick remedy for every trouble or hurtful good." Much like an internet-trained AI bot, this reference work appeals to readers by telling them that they don't need to wrestle with difficult texts or be formed by wisdom themselves; they can simply access whatever bit of information they happen to need at any given moment. Yet authors such as Montaigne also recognized the danger inherent in this approach. He warns readers against those who can regurgitate facts without having their understanding and conscience formed by them: "Just as birds sometimes go in quest of grain, and carry it in their beak without tasting it to give a beakful to their little ones, so our pedants go pillaging knowledge in books and lodge it only on the end of their lips, in order merely to disgorge it and scatter it to the winds." Reference works and search tools can certainly be useful aids, but if we use them to avoid the work of chewing and digesting difficult ideas, our souls will shrivel.

Despite these dangers, reading can also offer different sorts of encounters, ones more conducive to genuine soul-transformation. And a soul so developed might be able to enter into dialogue with others and with God, to know and be known. To this end, Bolzoni emphasizes those readers who weren't after summonable, usable data but wisdom about how to lead a good life. Poggio Bracciolini, for instance, describes the elevating pleasures of sustained reading: "There exists nothing sweeter or more agreeable . . . than to . . . converse with those who in their writings have bequeathed to us the precepts for a proper way of life. No passion arises from them, no lust, no vice; rather, they teach us how to despise what is fleeting and fix our gaze on what is eternal." Similarly Giovanni di Paolo Morelli advises young boys to spend at least an hour a day reading and studying "the great writers of the past, such as Virgil, Boethius, and Seneca. .

. . If such an exercise may appear exacting, Morelli assures his readers that its benefits will be felt in old age," as they enjoy the benefits of genuine wisdom:

> You can be with Boethius, with Dante and the other poets, with Cicero, who will teach you perfect diction; with Aristotle, who will teach you philosophy. You shall know the reason for things, and every little thing shall give you the greatest pleasure. You shall be with the blessed prophets in the Holy Scripture, you shall read and study the Bible, you shall learn the great acts of those holy prophets, you shall be fully instructed in the faith and the advent of the Son of God, your soul shall have great consolation, great joy and great sweetness.

Reading for wisdom explicitly aims at transforming your loves; the goal here is not access to the information that you can use to get what you want, but a soul that is fed and shaped by the wisdom of those who have gone before.

In the same vein, Bolzoni returns often to readers who sought book friends not as convenient replacements for human friends but as aids to help us become capable of genuine friendship with others. As Bessarion writes in a letter, "There is no object more precious, no treasure more useful and beautiful than a book. Books are full of the voices of the wise; they live, dialogue and converse with us, inform, educate and console us; they show us that things belonging to the remotest past are in fact present—they place them before our very eyes. Without books, we should all be brutes." Ideally, sustained conversation with the wise voices found in books forms souls in the virtues needed to befriend others. When we encounter the best articulations of different perspectives, when we imaginatively inhabit the lives of people from distant places or the distant past, our souls are stretched and deepened. As we have seen, reading can be a corrupting replacement for the difficult work of loving others, but it can also be medicine for expanding narrow souls. And the whole point of cultivating a vast and wise soul is to become capable of giving ourselves in loving service to others.

One way we might think of this distinction between reading as a replacement for friendship and reading as formation for friendship comes via the contrasting ways that Machiavelli and Erasmus imagine books as granting us access to others. Machiavelli views books as akin to relics or even the Eucharistic host: They make another person present. Hence Machiavelli treats books like persons—dressing up in fine clothes to read them—because he views them in an almost magical sense. Erasmus, however, takes a view influenced by Protestant concerns and emphasizes the need to receive another person through the intermediary of a book. He cautions against obsessing over relics that promise nearness to a biblical author or Jesus himself and reminds readers that the point

of reading the Bible is to encounter "the living presence of its author." As he writes about the Scriptures, "Let us desire these books eagerly; let us embrace them; let us live with them constantly; let us admire them greatly; let us die in them; let us be transformed into them, since 'our preoccupations affect our character.'" But in doing so, he warns, we must never forget who these books point us toward: "these books show you the living image of his holy mind and Christ himself, speaking, healing, dying, rising to life again. In short, they restore Christ to us so completely and so vividly that you would see him less clearly should you behold him standing before your very eyes." Erasmus may overstate things in the enthusiasm of his rhetorical flourishes, but his point is that the Bible is not a relic to be valued for itself but as a means to intimate encounters with the mind of Christ.

If we are to enjoy such bookish encounters with Christ and other authors, we need visions of reading—and the accompanying practices and institutions—that help us avoid the more self-serving tendencies described above. As Bolzoni's book makes clear, there are many ways in which the activity of reading can be corrupted and deform our souls, worsening the *incurvatus in se* to which fallen humans are prone. And many AI tools seem likely to only make these temptations more acute. Further, reading, especially solitary reading, is neither necessary nor sufficient to the process of soul maturation, of growing into the kind of persons capable of love. Yet as these authors demonstrate, it can provide remarkable, transformative encounters with people we could otherwise never listen to, and if we ruminate well on their wisdom, we may cultivate souls capable of better loving both our neighbors and God.

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THE FINAL APOLOGETIC

STU KERNS

"I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so *that the world may believe that you have sent me*…I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, *so that the world may know that you sent me*…"
(Jesus, John 17:20-23).

"… after we have done our best to communicate to a lost world, still we must never forget that the final apologetic which Jesus gives is the observable love of true Christians for true Christians."
-Francis Schaeffer, *The Mark of the Christian*

In the summer of 2007, my church building was destroyed by a fire. Within a few days another congregation in my community offered us the use of their facility for worship *on Sunday mornings.* We met in their traditional sanctuary while they were transitioning into a more contemporary worship style in their brand new multi-purpose room. This didn't seem surprising at all, but an expression of love and care from a congregation that was viewed as a partner in our community's gospel mission. But it wasn't always this way.

In the same community—a generation earlier—the division and competition between the churches was so profound

that when author and pastor Warren Wiersbe moved to Lincoln he remarked to the pastor of his new home congregation, "There's something wrong with Lincoln. There's something wrong with the churches. There is such a competitive spirit among the churches. I haven't seen anything like this in the other cities that I've been to." Then he added, "Why don't you start a prayer group?"

They did start a prayer group and after a few years there were enough pastoral transitions that the group began flagging. It was revamped by turning it into a lunch group of like-minded pastors and the only goal was to get better acquainted, personally support one another, and remember that we all preach the same gospel of Christ and are on the same team. We would meet at one another's church for lunch and conversation, but at least two or three times a year we would go out to a restaurant together. This was intentional. We all determined to be seen together, to pray for one another, to speak positively about one another, and to cooperate together when opportunities arose.

Opportunities did arise. We had to be okay with the fact that not *everyone* would be part of *everything*. That being said, through this group we worked on a non-denominational church plant, initiated a city-wide day of service, created and aired an Easter commercial (everyone participated), and helped each other in a variety of other ways. It's common for someone to see me at the grocery store and tell me their church prayed for my church recently. The younger pastors in town don't remember the days of competition and division. One of the pastors in the group commented:

> My past experience in the last two cities I lived in…I wouldn't call it antagonism, but there was a lot of competition among the denominations. And so there was a lack of trust, and the idea was, why in the world would you want to meet with somebody who's your competition?

Many pastors have also experienced this kind of division and competition between sister churches in their own denomination. While this kind of change was taking place in my community my presbytery (a subdivision by region in presbyterian denominations) recognized the need for more cooperation and camaraderie. We put into place many of the same principles: pray for our sister churches, speak well of them, find ways to cooperate with them, use language that is relational (not always the functional language of business). I stopped dreading presbytery meetings and began enjoying them.

All such changes are ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit, but when I surveyed the pastors involved in this transition toward loving cooperation they noted several attitudes and actions that facilitated this unity in Christ and practical love:

A BASELINE OF COMMON BELIEF

You don't cooperate with those you don't trust. We made it clear that our unity was based in Christ and the good news of salvation in Him alone. We all subscribe to the historic orthodox teachings of the Christian Church.

Conversely, we agreed to disagree about non-essential things. 'Non-essential' doesn't mean unimportant, it just means that good Christians can disagree about these teachings without suspicion and contention. In this particular group we would have disagreed about

baptism, the gifts of the Spirit, church government, and a host of other issues, but we didn't allow that to keep us from our unity in Christ.

A MANAGEABLE GROUP

There had been efforts to gather Christian clergy together in the past. There was a pattern: We would get a good turnout at a big event (for us that was 30-40 pastors) with a well-known pastor or presenter. The next meeting would be about half of the first. By the time we had a third or fourth meeting it was a small group. Large groups can't provide the personal interaction of a small group, and most of these pastors craved personal interaction.

At its peak our unity group included nine pastors. On any given month there would be about six who could actually make the meeting. It was a small group. We had time to tell our stories and become friends.

NURTURING OF THE RELATIONSHIPS

When you get to know people in a small group setting you go from being an acquaintance to being a friend. We listened to the heartache of a brother whose adult daughter was dying from cancer. We listened to brothers go through ministry transition, personal illness, and family struggles. We pastored each other. When one pastor heard about my wife's rheumatoid arthritis he asked if heat therapy was helpful (it was). He gathered donations and told us to go pick out a hot tub spa; it was already paid for.

SIMILARITY OF MINISTRY ROLE

We all had different sized churches, but all served in the lead position and worked with some staff. We lived in a very similar world. We didn't have to explain that world to someone else. They knew. This was a powerful unifier.

LOVE OF OUR COMMUNITY

We represented various streams of evangelical culture, but we all had the same core mission and the same missional desire to make Christ known in our community. On average, the men in this group served as a lead pastor in this community for over 25 years. In the roughly 30 years that the group existed we made it a top priority to present a unified front for the gospel of Jesus in our city.

As the wildfires in Los Angeles were raging there were many reports of evacuation and exhortations to prepare a "go bag." When the fire is at your doorstep you realize you may lose everything that isn't in your go bag. You make hard choices.

In my city and my presbytery we experienced enough strife and pressure we had to ask, "What's in my go bag?" Thankfully, as important as so many doctrines, traditions, and differences might be, we all had the same go bag: The gospel of Jesus. The proof of that gospel was in the way we learned to love one another.

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SUICIDE AND PERSEVERING IN LOVE

Edith Hall. *Facing Down the Furies: Suicide, the Ancient Greeks, and Me*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024. $28, 256pp.

MATTHEW LAPINE

"My death, praise I unto you, the voluntary death, which cometh unto me because I want it."[1]
Friedrich Nietzsche

Western moral philosophy is not known for its careful attentiveness to the social consequences of individual choices. Edith Hall hopes to draw our attention to the consequences of suicide in *Facing Down the Furies*. Hall wants us to ask the question, "who is damaged by suicide?" She hopes to "contribute to the secular philosophical case against suicide" by exploring the impact of suicide for people left behind.[2] Engaging with ancient Greek tragedies, she wrestles with the legacy of suicide in her maternal family, narrating how the ancient Greeks have helped her navigate her family's history and her own suicidal ideation. The book is a stirrinag personal memoir that argues against suicide from its damage to others. She hopes the book "will help others who have suffered from the intergenerational impact of this saddest way of dying, as well as those in such despair that they are contemplating suicide themselves."[3]

I suppose that the best way to engage such a book is with an equally personal reflection on it. While I have not been at serious risk of suicide, the specter of depression has never been far from me, including two somewhat significant bouts with it, in high school and during my PhD work. There is precedent for suicide and suicidal ideation in my family line; my paternal grandfather discovered his uncle dead by suicide as a young man. I have also talked with other family members about their experiences with depression on several occasions.

[1] "On Voluntary Death," *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*
[2] Edith Hall, *Facing Down the Furies: Suicide, the Ancient Greeks, and Me* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2024), 10.
[3] Hall, *Facing Down the Furies*, 9.

Hall's book intrigued me for two reasons. First, my early depression was linked heavily to existential meaninglessness, and largely resolved when I rejected the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche (and his existentialist heirs) and settled into my Christian faith. So, I am predisposed to be skeptical about secular arguments against suicide. Second, the focus of Hall's argument is the impact of suicide on others, and especially on children and grandchildren. My research in psychology and theology predisposes me to see this as compelling and critical. Hall's argument addresses not only the potential damage of suicide, but also the positive good a suicidal person can do by persisting in living. An appreciation for what our care and example offers to others, and especially our children, can bolster our sense of purposefulness.

Yet, as compelling and critical as Hall's argument from damage to others is, I believe it falters over the extent to which society has a moral claim on a person to persist in living from a purely secular perspective. The argument needs to be situated in a coherent vision of the good, true, and beautiful where individual human life is sacred and people are united in a common love.[4]

SECULAR ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST SUICIDE

As Hall illustrates, the literature surrounding self-killing is ancient. My first encounter with this literature was reading and teaching Plato's *Phaedo*. Like Hall, I was disturbed by Socrates' callousness toward his family. After Socrates was condemned to death by swallowing hemlock, his friends urged him to live in exile instead. Instead, he voluntarily embraced death to demonstrate his respect for the laws of Athens—since it is better to suffer injustice than to commit it (and seemingly to demonstrate the irrationality of fearing death). In the process, he chided the foolishness of his disciples and of "the women," especially his wife Xanthippe. Early in the narrative, he coldly sent her away with his children. And Socrates was hardly alone among Greeks in seeing self-killing as justifiable in certain cases.[5]

Hall presents Aristotle as a counter-example to Socrates' coldness. Not only does he explicitly argue against suicide on the grounds that a person does injury to the state, but he also set a different example, dying in exile from Athens caring for Herpyllis, the mother of his son, Nicomachus. Through his protracted illness, Aristotle continued working and preparing for the happiness of his bereaved.

By contrast, the Stoics argue that self-interest makes suicide acceptable. Hall records five legitimate reasons for suicide according to the Stoics: (1) in obedience to a religious command (an oracle), (2) to avoid being forced to do a shameful deed, (3) in the case of serious

[4] Augustine, *City of God*, XIX.24

[5] See Andrei G. Zavaliy, "Cowardice and Injustice: The Problem of Suicide in Aristotle's Ethics," in *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 36 no. 4 (October 2019), 319-336.

physical illness, (4) to escape the misery of poverty, (5) and to avoid losing rational freedom through dementia. Gaius Musonius Rufus analogizes suicide with "retiring cheerfully from a banquet."[6]

The Epicureans are more mixed on the subject. Philodemos and Epicurus held out hope that we can never be sure that the best might yet be to come. This amounts to "never call a man *unhappy* until he is dead"—to twist a phrase from Croesus of Lydia. Yet, to other Epicureans suicide is preferable to living in fear or finding life irksome. Lucretius reportedly killed himself at the age of forty-four. The Romans agreed that suicide could be noble, citing women who killed themselves to save their honor, cases of self-killing for patriotic reasons, and cases involving faithfulness to conscience.

Since Augustine, the Christian tradition has been almost uniformly against suicide with the possible exception of John Donne.[7] Augustine argues that "thou shalt not kill" applies also to the self. The prohibition against murder, and so against suicide, has been grounded in the sacredness of human life, owing to the fact that every human bears the image of God. Aquinas details three reasons that suicide is illicit: (1) It is contrary to the self-love necessary for being, and so is contrary to charity; (2) It does injury to the community (following Aristotle); and (3) it usurps judgment over God, our Master, since judgment concerning life and death belongs only to him.

The most significant Enlightenment voice against suicide is Immanuel Kant. For Kant, suicide fundamentally violates the principle of moral duty because it destroys the source of our moral duty. Suicide attacks moral authority by violating the rational will itself. Conversely, Hall sees David Hume as the most significant enlightenment argument for suicide. His treatise, "Of Suicide," published a year after his death, suggests that: (1) because there is no afterlife, there should be no irrational fear of death, (2) because we have native liberty, we should stop insisting on the sanctity of human life, and (3) because suicide does no damage to society (e.g., when we are elderly and infirm we do not contribute to society), we have no obligation to society. Jean-Jacque Rousseau's *Julie, or The New Héloïse* represents a half-hearted rebuttal to Hume. Rousseau stresses relational obligations to friend and country, but simultaneously paints the female protagonist as happy in her death because she never recovered from her romantic attachment. This trend of glamorizing romantic suicide continued in the Romantics, such as Coleridge's "Monody on the Death of Chatterton," and especially Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774). The book produced panic because it stimulated so many copycat suicides.

[6] Hall, *Facing Down the Furies*, 41.

[7] John Donne's *Biathanatos* was published posthumously. He forbade it being published or burned while living. It is disputable whether Donne advocated for self-killing for cases outside of martyrdom.

"The Werther effect" is still used to refer to this phenomenon.

Finally, Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre see suicide as an assertion of the human will. Nietzsche's praise of "voluntary death," because it is willed, is taken up by Sartre as an authentic response of the self to the absurdity of a godless world. Albert Camus agreed that suicide was the "one truly serious philosophical question," but rejected it, choosing instead to "imagine Sisyphus happy."[8] In other words, humanity has the option to embrace life heroically, however futile.

On balance, it seems to me that the secular case for the licitness of suicide is stronger than the case against it. Secular arguments *against suicide* seem to be broadly grouped into categories: *deontological argument* (Immanuel Kant), *arguments for hope* (Epicureans, Albert Camus, Viktor Frankl), and *argument from impact to others* (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, David Hume, and Emile Durkheim). The arguments *for suicide* seem to rely on a widespread deep metaphysical conviction that our existence lacks meaning outside of the meaning that we give it (it is doubtful that Kant's argument is widely persuasive for this reason). As a result, in cases where the individual *has no hope* (and cannot imagine this changing) and *sees no apparent damage* his or her death would do to others, there remains no higher argument for persevering in life.

This is why Hall is so eager to introduce her idea of "the family curse" or "transgenerational damage" from Greek tragedy. She sees it as having a contribution to make to the secular philosophical case against suicide, by providing a deeper appreciation of the damage any individual might pass on to their descendants.

THE ARGUMENT FROM DAMAGE TO OTHERS

Hall's argument *from damage to others* is emotionally compelling because she so eloquently narrates the legacy of misery from suicide in her family line while at the same time drawing parallels to her experiences to Greek tragedy. I want to build and support this argument by suggesting that it is also psychologically compelling in ways that she only hints at.

Hall acknowledges that psychologists have been paying attention to the damage suicide leaves to others since the 1960s. She cites a possible physically inheritable dimension to the tendency of suicide from a study conducted by the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York. She also reflects on various ways that environmental factors contributed to the suicides in her family. I believe she understates her case for the inherited damage from suicide.

Without overstating my expertise, I want to highlight some additional suggestive links, some of which are developed further in Mark Wolynn's *It Didn't Start with You*. First, heritability for many traits ranges

[8] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus,* translated by Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 123

from 40-50%. This means that in many cases a bit less than half of the variation in a particular trait among a population is due to genetic inheritance. Nurture, experiences, and choices also have a big impact on how our genes are expressed. Yet, epigenetic expression is also partly inherited. Gene expression comes through the process of transcription when building proteins. And transcription is modified by epigenetic markers that determine how the genetic code will be read in the building process. Some of these epigenetic markers are themselves heritable (methylation, not histone modification). The point is that, even if we never meet them, our families pass on not just genes, but the predispositions to certain traits arising from their experiences, their choices, and their environments. I am not absurdly suggesting that suicide itself gets epigenetically encoded, but it is possible that trait responses to stress could be.[9]

In addition, nurture begins to shape our predispositions right from the womb. Prenatal stress can impact the emotional regulation systems of *in utero* babies, yielding higher heart rates and less variability in heart rates, signaling worse regulation by the parasympathetic nervous system. Out of the womb, early childhood attachment through the mother's loving gaze is fundamental for development for the child. Moreover, neglect and abandonment can have a profound effect on the emotional development of a child. Gabor Maté points out that children can be wounded by "good things not happening, such as their emotional needs for attunement not being met, or the experience of not being seen and accepted, even by loving parents."[10] Similarly, Bessel van der Kolk writes, "Over the years our research team has repeatedly found that chronic emotional abuse and neglect can be just as devastating as physical abuse and sexual molestation."[11] The effect of this can be seen by the fact that students reporting four or more "Adverse Childhood Experiences" are twelve times more likely to attempt suicide[12]. It takes little imagination to apply these insights to a child bereft through suicide.

Psychologically speaking, Hall hints at difficult problems with healing from suicide. Suicide is an interruption without closure. And when the suicide is someone in the inner circle of a person's life, it creates a sort of "narrative ghost." Hall explicitly uses language like this when she confesses, "I have been terrifyingly

[9] Denny Vågerö, et al., "Paternal Grandfather's Access to Food Predicts All-Cause and Cancer Mortality in Grandsons," *Nature Communications* 9 (2018), 1-7. 3

[10] Gabor Maté, *The Myth of Normal: Trauma, Illness and Healing in a Toxic Culture* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2022), 23.

[11] Bessel van der Kolk, T*he Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 87-88.

[12] Elizabeth A. Swedo, et al., "Adverse Childhood Experiences and Health Conditions and Risk Behaviors Among High School Students — Youth Risk Behavior Survey, United States, 2023," *Supplements* 73 no 4 (October 10, 2024), 39–49. A similar study in Sweden saw a threefold risk of suicide if exposed to parent or sibling suicide. Charlotte Björkenstam, et al., "Childhood Adversity and Risk of Suicide: Cohort Study of 548,721 Adolescents and Young Adults in Sweden," BMJ 357 (2017), j1334.

haunted by my mother and these ancestors in my dreams."[13] Because suicide is a dyadic event, having a history and a sequel, the bereaved person is haunted by the dead through their narrative memory involving places, people, and things. This is why the death of a long-loved spouse can be so painful. There is no escaping this remembrance, foods, smells, scenes, or music. The interruption without closure only makes this more painful. But this also works forward. A missing father at a wedding or child at a birthday only further perpetuates the grief. The death requires an entire reconsideration of the story a person thought that they were living. Yes, it is possible to heal from this, but the process is long and difficult.

Hall beautifully illustrates some of this in the Greek tragedy she cites. When Phaedra, the wife of Theseus, hangs herself, he says, "In dying she has killed me too." When Iphis loses his son in battle and his daughter to suicide on the funeral pyre of her husband, he says,

> So what should I do in my wretchedness?
> Should I go home? That way I would see the desolation of my house, with its many rooms, and my life's futility.
> Or should I go home to the home of Capaneus here, which used to give me the greatest delight when this daughter of mine was there?
> But she is no longer alive, the woman who would pull my cheek down to her lips and take my head in her hands.

There is in these lines the aching of empty rooms, the lost joys of fellowship or caresses of love. They are now only to be imagined, having been interrupted without closure. But more than this, we understand how children fill what is lacking in the joy and life of aging adults. And aging adults complete the self-assurance and maturation of children. These are the obligations of love we all share.

EVALUATION

I enjoyed Edith Hall's book immensely. It is a moving personal and scholarly reflection on suicide, her family history, and the obligations we have to each other. She sounds an important and compassionate note. Working with teenagers, I have seen firsthand the disintegrating effect of suicide on children. So I commend her work widely. However, I have reservations about her ambition to contribute to the secular philosophical case against suicide. There are significant tensions in the secular case against suicide itself and between it and her use of Greek tragedy.

[13] The full quote reads, "no ghost has ever been visible to me in my wakeful, conscious state, as the ghosts in Agamemnon are to Cassandra. But I have been terrifyingly haunted by my mother and these ancestors in my dreams." See also pg. 28, "I have experienced repeated haunting by both my grandmother and my mother after their deaths, in nightmares as well as in the liminal moments of consciousness that come just after waking." Hall, *Facing Down the Furies*, 28, 31.

One tension is that the Greek tradition is hardly secular in the modern sense. From a Greek perspective, ideas of *justice* in a society were often tied to a metaphysically rich account of morality, human nature, and politics. Their sense of mutual obligations were rooted in what was rational, as a participation in the divine nature. They related their ethics and political constitutions to the sort of justice that would be acceptable to the gods. It is for this reason that they had a deeper sense of mutual obligations. Aristotle's argument that suicide is a sin against the state is a good case in point, as is the death of Socrates. And yet, they also were not obvious exemplars of nurturing parents. A story like Euripides's *Alcestis* might give a tender vision of a daughter's abandonment by her mother through suicide, but this example should not obscure the fact the exposure and abandonment of babies was practiced among the Greeks from the ancient period into the Roman empire.[14]

But more seriously, a Greek social imaginary does not fit neatly with secular moral convictions, especially in the areas of equality and freedom. The social bonds that tied together a *polis*, often came at the expense of individual freedoms, especially for foreigners and the weak. Equality was not extended to everyone (e.g., slaves and women), and certainly not on any egalitarian principle of common humanity, independent of ethnic group, social status, or ability.

It seems to me that there is tension in secular ethics over the extent to which we have obligations to others against the competing demand for equality and autonomy. This tension arises because of ambiguity over the source of meaning and moral values. Take motherhood for example. Which is more important, the role within the family and society or individual aspirations? Evolutionary biology suggests the former and cultural values the latter.

It seems that the task of grounding meaning and moral values must be left to the autonomous individual. Yet, it is also obvious that individual autonomy is made possible by social support. The wicked problem of poverty perpetuates through the massive inequities of social support along the lines of class, race, and ethnicity. Secular ethics can turn strangely quasi-religious in enforcing social obligations, especially toward minoritized groups, while remaining silent about those within the family. Hall's book is an exception to this. But, one wonders, might she be equally insistent on not neglecting or abandoning children for other reasons? What might she say about the impact of divorce on children?

My point is that, outside of an evolutionary story that sees human survival as the highest goal of human life, secular ethics struggles to provide a clear basis for social obligations. But this evolutionary story is also not obviously consistent with the principle

[14] The right to drown infants was established by the Roman Twelve Tables in 450 BC. Polybius seems to think this was the obvious cause of population decline in Greece (*Histories*, 37.9).

of individual moral autonomy, nor is it clear about the limits of autonomy. For the group to succeed each individual must set aside their own needs for the good of the group, at least in some cases. In Jonathan Haidt's words, the "hive switch" must be activated.[15] But what are these cases? Additionally, I am skeptical that this "groupish" impulse among humans can provide much if any positive incentive for any particular individual to persist in living. From a purely evolutionary perspective, why should it? The fittest survive and reproduce. From the perspective of the species, suicide makes perfect sense if someone is no longer happy or no longer contributing to the good of the group.

For secular morality, there is a basic problem of social cohesion. Why should any member of society care about another member outside of artificial group identities that are always being called into question? And the problem grows as relational bonds grow weaker. When individual members of our society are hurt by a lack of obligation from others through neglect, abandonment, or contempt (in all sorts of ways, not just with suicide), on what grounds can we say that this behavior fails to meet some obligation? Must we affirm and support everyone? And given the presumption of individual autonomy, why must we?

Edith Hall's moral intuitions are right, but they point to a vision of human life where mutuality, care, and belonging are grounded in a cohesive vision of what is good, true, and beautiful. In my view, secular ethics does not possess the ideological cohesion necessary for Hall's proposal to work. To underwrite our moral claims on one another, we need a stronger consensus of what is good, true, and beautiful than secularism can offer.

Existentialists have asked questions about meaninglessness that cannot be answered from a secular perspective. We can imagine Sisyphus happy, but what if he's not happy? What if he simply gets swept away by the absurdity of life? As the existentialists illustrate, it is possible to *see through* goodness and beauty in all shapes—a chestnut tree for example, until we begin to get nauseated by our insanity. And if this is true, we are more than capable of not caring whom our decisions hurt. We are capable of *seeing through love* as merely an evolutionary inducement toward the perpetuation of our species.

So, if the individual cannot find meaning and hope, then what external inducements against suicide are there? If a person doesn't care about the damage, and if society is happy to let them go, what then? What we need is a philosophy that helps us to affirm something beyond individual meaningfulness and autonomy, a philosophy that can affirm human life as sacred and pull us together in affirming that even difficult, painstaking perseverance in life for the sake of others

[15] See Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Religion and Politics* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 219-284.

is good. Our Christian philosophy affirms that we have obligations of love among people united in a common love.

Especially during my high school years, I found a certain glamor in existential meaninglessness. I can remember experiencing moments like the chestnut tree of Roquentin in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*. I would come to "see" that I was being carried along in a stream of vapid social games and false appearances, pushing me to act a part in a play that I thought might be entirely meaningless. I would be physically present in a place but mentally struck by the unreality of it all and impressed by my power to make it so. But in the end, I couldn't "look through things" forever. I needed to see them.

There is a scene in C.S. Lewis's *Pilgrim's Regress* where John is shocked back into sanity by hearing his jailer say, "Our relations with the cow are not delicate—as you can easily see if you imagine eating any of her other secretions."[16] John cannot see milk as the same as sweat or dung. This makes him nauseated. As Lewis writes in *The Abolition of Man*, "You cannot go on 'seeing through' things for ever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it. It is good that the window should be transparent, because the street or garden beyond it is opaque. How if you saw through the garden too?… To 'see through' all things is the same as not to see.'"[17]

Ultimately, the question is, what can give hope to those contemplating suicide? The answer is that there is something higher, greater, and untouched by the particular pain I am experiencing at this moment. The weight of meaning does not rest on me. Yes, we ought to contemplate the beauty of persevering for the sake of love to our children and our children's children. But, from a Christian perspective, we also can find meaning in persevering because suffering "produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame," because God's love has been poured out to us, and will bring to us a joy and glory that eclipses our momentary affliction (Romans 5:2-5; 8:18). We can persevere in love, because we are loved. And so we are part of a people united by a common love, for God and for others. If our lives are kept by God for this joy and glory, then persevering in that love is a courageous act of faithfulness to him and to others.

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[16] SC.S. Lewis, *Pilgrim's Regress* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 49.

[17] C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: HarperCollins, 1974), 37..

SILOAM

JOEL KURZ

This body of broken bones,
long healed, carries
my still soul-wounded self
up this hillside, turning
each internal question
with each external step—
careful of the rocks and roots
as much as the ruts
worn in my mind.
How many have stood here
at the base of this cross,
wrestling with their whys
or simply breathing the air
of gratitude because the weight
and wait are gone?
Jesus asked those in his day
if the eighteen crushed to death
under the collapsed tower,
same-named as this mountain,
were worse sinners for their fate
and answered No while calling all
to turn from their destructive ways.
He spit on the ground, made mud
with his hands, and smeared it
on a blind man's eyes, then sent him
to the same-named pool
to wash and finally see.
So I go, the mud on my face
and ache in my heart
commending—not condemning—me
to every other struggling soul
heading toward the cleansing water
and the clear new light of day.

JOEL KURZ IS A PARISH PASTOR IN MISSOURI.

John Quincy Adams Among the Postliberals

MICHAEL LUCCHESE

Religious nationalism seems to be experiencing a *moment*. The postliberal faction's great tribune, Vice President J.D. Vance, occupies the second-highest constitutional office in the land. Its proponents in right-wing academic, cultural, and journalistic institutions are riding high in the saddle. But in American politics, more often than not, moments are fleeting. Consider, for instance, the so-called "libertarian moment" of the mid-2010s – some Republicans may have won elections deploying ideological rhetoric, and plenty of mainstream media outlets published glowing profiles of them, yet it all amounted to very little in terms of actual political change.

Despite this fleetingness, it is easy for those of us dissatisfied with the reigning liberalism to look to the triumph of religious nationalists and want to join in. Even in these early days, after all, the new administration has already accomplished a number of social conservative priorities worth celebrating, especially executive orders implementing pro-life policies. But the history of religious nationalism in America provides a host of cautionary tales about compromising with this kind of power. Reactionary ideologues have occasionally seized control of the national stage, but only rarely have they held onto it for very long.

One tragic example of this reactionary failure is America's first conservative party, the Federalists. Originally formed to combat growing public disorder and ideological sympathy for the French Revolution, the Federalists experienced immense popularity in the face of radical opposition from Thomas Jefferson and his Republicans. As time wore on, however, the elite of the party became more and more committed to a religious nationalism that alienated them from the great body of the people. Only by rejecting this vortex of panicked extremism could conservatives such as John and John Quincy Adams maintain their principles and influence on the young republic.

The Adams's conservative credentials are impossible to question. Republican opponents such as John Randolph of Roanoke dismissed them as the "American House of Stuart." John Quincy burst forth onto the political scene with a series of papers defending Edmund Burke from Thomas Paine – and therefore the old

British constitution against the French Revolution. Adams *fils* was one of the ablest articulators of the American Republic's religious roots, famously declaring that "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people." Both men were earnestly committed to a Christian conception of American nationhood as a bulwark against revolution, even if the exact nature of that commitment was at times a bit vague.

This put the Adamses squarely in the mainstream of Federalist politics throughout the 1780s and '90s. As Jonathan Den Hartog outlines in his excellent book *Patriotism and Piety*, however, that mainstream drifted further and further to the right as the logic of the American Revolution worked itself out and produced something far more democratic than the old colonial order. He identifies three "stages" of how Federalists thought about politics and religion:

1. The Republican Stage – Perhaps best represented by John Adams himself, at this stage Federalists believed in an optimistic cooperation between Church and State. Good Christians would be good citizens, and the church would act as a pillar of the republic. Placing religion at the heart of American identity, the Federalists hoped, would stabilize the new nation and provide ballast to the growing democracy.

2. The Combative Stage – As Jeffersonian iconoclasts seized more power at home and French Revolutionaries got more aggressive abroad, though, many Federalists adopted a culture war mentality. No longer could a passive Christianity provide social glue for the young nation; instead, Federalists such as Timothy Pickering and Fisher Ames thought believers needed to openly contend for power and reorient American politics towards pious ends. These "Combative Federalists" bitterly defended established churches even as voters turned against them.

3. The Voluntarist Stage – Needless to say, this extremism did not resonate with the American people; it only served to solidify Jeffersonian gains and alienate key constituencies. A number of key Federalist leaders – including John Jay and John Quincy Adams – instead turned to what are now called "intermediary institutions" such as the American Bible Society or the antislavery American Colonization Society to educate and uplift the republic's citizens and make them fit for self-government.

The aforementioned Fisher Ames, a leader of the Massachusetts Federalists, stands out as one Early Republic thinker who has much in common with today's postliberals. Although he began his time in national politics as an advocate of religious toleration (he worked with James Madison to draft the First Amendment), Ames quickly became disillusioned with the republican consensus. Especially as the Congregational Church lost its grip on the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Ames came to see Jefferson, the Republicans, and even the American national project itself as inherently destabilizing forces.

Ames's most forceful statement of his anti-liberalism came in a stunning essay titled "The Dangers of

American Liberty," published only after his death in 1808. Originally written eight years after he left elected office, it is an expression of an anxious mind terrified of the changes happening to his country – perhaps one of the most despairing texts of the American Founding. Ames prophesies a number of dangers to the young republic, but he especially warns that the Jeffersonians will undermine her religious principles. "Are our civil and religious institutions to stand so firmly as to sustain themselves and so much of the fabric of the public order as is propped by their support?" he asked. "On the contrary, do we not find the ruling faction [the Jeffersonians] in avowed hostility to our religious institutions?"

It is difficult to overstate just how pessimistic Ames was for the future of the country. The thesis of "The Dangers of American Liberty" is that "there is no return to liberty" because patriotism cannot "grow in a soil, from which every valuable plant has… been plucked up and thrown away as a weed." He believed that Jefferson and the Republicans truly were something like a coven of witches, and that the people were siding with them as they established a kind of atheism at the heart of the American republic that would undermine any moral habits necessary for self-government. "Federalism was therefore founded on a mistake," Ames concluded, "on the supposed existence of sufficient political virtue, and on the permanency of the public morals."

Interestingly, Ames himself has been celebrated by more contemporary postliberals. In 2014, for example, integralist bloggers at *The Josias* republished excerpts of "The Dangers of American Liberty" to buttress their critique of the American regime. Certain paleoconservatives, too, have praised Ames's pessimism. But the founder of modern American conservatism, Russell Kirk, knew that his reactionary pose was not solid ground for social renewal. Although he praised Ames's critique of Revolution in *The Conservative Mind*, Kirk also warned his intensity led to a kind of "internal decay." Americans needed other sources than reactionary pessimism to counterbalance leveling ideology.

To find that counterbalance, Kirk looked especially to the "sobering practicality of the Adamses, father and son, who converted a lost cause into an American tradition." John Quincy especially took up arms against Ames and his followers in the early years of the nineteenth century. That fight culminated with a series of essays in the *Boston Patriot* – later republished as a pamphlet titled "American Principles" – condemning these dark thoughts as a regrettable stain on Ames's legacy. As he looked around Massachusetts, Adams simply could not see the anarchy which gave Ames such anxiety. He exclaimed: "Americans! Federalists! Are you that stupid — that infamous herd which you are here represented to be — No — Nor could it possibly be the calm and dispassionate judgement of the writer [Ames] that you were." Instead, he saw the young America as a fundamentally well-ordered society, where religion's influence was, if anything, growing rather than shrinking.

Adams condemned the High Federalists peddling a false view of America as members of a "junto." He

describes the faction in explicitly religious terms, as "fraudulent monks at [Ames's] shrine" and "worship[pers] of British power." Adams particularly saw their religious conservatism as a threat to the *nationalist* project of the Constitution, especially insofar as Federalist extremists hated their Southern rivals. "The sentiment of the heart which disowns all love, but such as is select and exclusive, is neither congenial with republicanism nor with Christianity," Adams wrote. Indeed, "It sharpens all the asperities of party spirit, and makes federalists and republicans consider one another, not as fellow citizens having a common interest; but as two rival nations marshalled in hostile array against each other." For him, narrow concerns ought to be set aside for the sake of national unity.

Prior to 1809, John Quincy Adams had always identified more or less with the Federalists. But with the publication of "American Principles" and his acceptance of a diplomatic post in James Madison's administration, Adams's allegiance began to shift more noticeably. That said, his differences with the Federalists can be traced back at least to 1803 when he was serving as a Senator and was still very much active in the party. As he recorded in an agonized diary entry:

> I have already had occasion to experience, what I had before the fullest reason to expect, the danger of adhering to my own principles - The Country is so totally given up to the Spirit of party, that not to follow blindfold the one or the other is an inexpiable offence- The worst of these parties has the popular torrent in its favour, and uses its triumph with all the unprincipled fury of a faction; while the other gnashes its teeth, and is waiting with all the impatience of revenge, for the time when its turn may come to oppress and punish by the people's favour. Between both, I see the impossibility of pursuing the dictates of my own conscience, without sacrificing every prospect not merely of advancement, but even of retaining that character and reputation I have enjoyed - Yet my choice is made, and, if I cannot hope to give satisfaction to my Country, I am at least determined to have the approbation of my own reflections

Neither John Quincy nor his father could ever quite reconcile the Massachusetts sectarianism of Federalists such as Ames with their dream of a unified American nation pursuing certain great ideals. J. Patrick Mullins has labelled the Adams's mature position as one of "Yankee Continentalism." The Adamses thought of their home state as a model of a well-functioning society that ought to be imitated throughout the American union. They hoped to make the whole nation more like Massachusetts, including in its religious outlook. But they also knew that central power alone could not achieve this, and so they never despaired when it did not.

By distancing himself from the reactionary position of the Federalists, Adams found a way to pursue advancement without sacrificing his principles. While he certainly experienced some short-term political pain after his time in the Senate, his sobriety was deeply

appreciated by the American people in the aftermath of the War of 1812. Returning home from diplomatic service, Adams was elevated first to a Cabinet post and then to the presidency itself. Of course, despite those accomplishments, he eventually lost that office to the original populist, Andrew Jackson.

Adams was deeply bitter about the Jacksonians' rise to power. But rather than embracing reactionary despair like Ames did in the face of Jefferson's victory, Adams chose to seek out a new cause to express his republican faith: antislavery. He was deeply committed to the principle of universal human equality as a matter of faith. That faith led him to believe, in the words of his biographer William J. Cooper, that a proslavery politics "establishes false estimates of virtue and vice." Yankee Continentalism mixed with antislavery principles to make Adams more than simply the partisan of a failing party. Today he is justly remembered as one of the great champions of American freedom, especially for his contributions in this last stage of his career.

The ultimate lesson of John Quincy Adams's statesmanship is that the "philosophical cause" of the Union – that is to say, the republic's moral core – is far more important than any regional or sectarian or ideological interests. The rage of postliberalism today is not that unlike "the unprincipled fury of faction" Adams stood against in the early nineteenth century. If conservatism is to flourish, if it is to actually preserve the nation, then it must stand for something more enduring.

Parts of this essay are adapted from a paper by the same author, "A Perpetual Panic: Fisher Ames, John Quincy Adams, and Religious Nationalism in the Federalist Party, 1789-1809," originally presented at the 2024 annual meeting of the Southern Political Science Association. The research for that project was generously supported by the Liberty Fund visiting scholar program.

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Against Perfect Politics

JAKE MEADOR

The pastor, a man just past 40, stood in the dock as the judge read the sentence against him and his fellow defendants:

"You must go to the place from whence you came, there to remain until ye shall be drawn through the open city of London upon hurdles to the place of execution, and there be hanged and let down alive, and your privy parts cut off, and your entrails taken out and burnt in your sight; then your heads to be cut off and your bodies divided into four parts, to be disposed of at Her Majesty's pleasure. And God have mercy on your souls."

The pastor, upon hearing these words, began to pray the Te Deum, the famous Christian prayer associated with Sts Ambrose and Augustine. In English it begins, "We praise thee oh God, we acknowledge thee to be the Lord." And so the man was led away praying. It was not long after that the sentence read out to him by the judge was carried out, and so this pastor died a Christian martyr.

Stories of this sort are not uncommon in Christian history. Indeed, there is an echo of it in the accounts we have in Acts of St Paul and his friends responding to the cruel persecutions visited on them by Roman politicians.

The scene above, of course, is not from the Roman world: The language of the judge gives that much away, as does the nature of the punishment. What is being described is the medieval execution method of being "hung, drawn, and quartered." Contemporary readers will likely recognize it from its depiction at the end of the popular 1990s movie *Braveheart*. As it happens, this particular prisoner was not quite executed in that fashion–he was hung long enough that he died from the hanging and was not alive as his body was disemboweled and segmented. A small mercy, I suppose.

But here is the part that so disturbs me: It is clear already from what I have said that this particular martyr is being executed by his fellow Christians. But the man in view here is not, as in so many of the Protestant accounts of martyrdom at the hands of bloody Catholics that I read in my younger days, a Protestant minister. He is a Catholic priest: The above is an account of the trial and martyrdom of Fr. Edmund Campion, one of the 40 martyrs acknowledged by the Roman church who were executed under the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, sometimes called "Bloody Bess" by Roman Catholics in a gruesome parallel to Protestant references to her sister Queen Mary as "Bloody Mary."

There were reasons these things happened, of course: about 25 years after Campion's death a group of Catholic terrorists hatched a plan to blow up Parliament while it was in session, thereby killing most of the British government all in one stroke and thus creating an opportunity for a Catholic monarch to return to England. When you consider the stakes of the Reformation at this time, particularly as it related to political authority, you can understand how these things happened.

That said, it is one thing to understand how an event came to happen. It is quite another to suggest that such an event *had* to happen. There is something repulsive and horrifying in this scene and in the treatment of Campion by his fellow believers, especially when one factors in that even the charge of treason didn't stick to Campion given that he willingly acknowledged Queen Elizabeth as his rightful queen on multiple occasions, including times when he was under oath. Indeed, such an acknowledgement was one of the last things Campion said in this life. If he had been lying about his views previously and secretly viewed Elizabeth as illegitimate, surely one would expect him to recant those earlier lies once he no longer could profit from them? Yet he never did. Moreover, Campion said, rightly I think, that the only way to support his execution was to toss aside the Christian legacy that had shaped the British

isles for centuries. At his trial he said,

"In condemning us, you condemn all your own ancestors, all our ancient bishops and kings, all that was once the glory of England—the island of saints, and the most devoted child of the See of Peter."

Clearly a sharp dispute over ecclesial authority remained between Campion and his nation's established church. But did that clash inherently need to result in coercive violence being visited on one side of that dispute? Most in the 16th century thought yes. Campion seemingly thought otherwise, in as much as he was distinguishing between the political authority of Queen Elizabeth and ecclesial authority of the Bishop of Rome and felt that one could coherently and with integrity submit to both. Who was right? This is a question we should consider again today, I think, not because I think Fr. Campion's accusers were correct, but because the reasons they were incorrect are being forgotten.

I want to begin, because this is a Christian journal, by considering the Christian merits of the arguments over religious toleration. I want to begin by considering what is in many ways the simplest question concerning religious tolerance, which concerns the status of one expression of Christianity in a country predominantly shaped and defined by a different expression of Christianity. In this example, Christians actually *do* have real political power and the only difference to navigate is intra-Christian dispute–the status of other religions is not around to complicate matters. So if we can establish that wildly different expressions of Christianity should be tolerated in a Christian society, then we will have actually established a great deal already in as much as we'll have defined some elements of properly Christian statecraft and some necessity for a right to religious liberty. Those principles should then guide us as we think about similar questions in situations such as that facing us now in which we do not have a Christian society, Christians mostly lack real political power, and in which we must navigate differences not only between Christians but between Christians and other belief systems about the supernatural, meaning, and human purpose.

We will start with this. Consider Christ's prayer in John 17—and the conditions he attaches to that prayer. He says quite plainly in his last prayer of which we have record before his death that the love between Christians is, as Francis Schaeffer called it, "the final apologetic" proving that he was sent by God the Father to rescue and redeem. Given the gravity of such a prayer, it seems to me that one of the key tests for any Christian political theology is whether that theology would authorize one group of Christians to coercively punish another Christian group over theological differences. If the answer is yes, then that political theology seems to flatly go against Christ's quite strong words in John about Christian love.

Judged by this standard, there is some sense in which all of the early modern political visions of both the Roman church and the magisterial Protestant fall short. This is, perhaps, not altogether surprising given how new the challenge of an institutionally fragmented Christendom was–it is perhaps to be expected that the problem would prove greater than the early solutions put forward by most Christians of the day. Even so, to take seriously Jesus's words that the love between Christians is the proof of his divinity is, I think, to recognize how deficient early modern Christian political theology often was in this respect. Indeed, there is some sense in which I think the most ecumenically minded thinkers of that era recognized this failure.

To take the example of the thinker from this era I return to most frequently, it is jarring to realize that Martin Bucer banished the Anabaptist preacher Michael Sattler from Strasbourg, which played a key role in his eventual capture, trial, and execution less than a year later by Catholics in Austria, *and* that Bucer eulogized Satler after hearing of his martyrdom. Indeed, Bucer himself referred to Sattler as a "martyr for Christ" upon hearing the news of his death. At risk of over-simplification, if your political theology causes you to play a pivotal role in the martyrdom of another Christian, it would seem something is broken in your political theology.

To make such a strong claim about the sources of early Protestant thought as well as those of early modern Roman thought is inherently, to offer an endorsement of some sort of what some would call "liberalism." Minimally it is to endorse a more modest vision of the government's authority and a more restrained vision of the church's authority, such that the government is not authorized to coercively punish a person over matters theological, as Bucer's Strasbourg did (at Bucer's guidance) when they banished Sattler. Further, to endorse liberalism in this specific way is inherently to go against the grain of much recent theo-political discourse amongst popular Christian intellectuals in America of both the Integralist and Christian Nationalist variety.

Yet, intriguingly, to cut against these trends in the American context actually puts one in closer fellowship with some of our brothers and sisters in the church outside the United States. Indeed, endorsing a specifically Christian vision of political liberalism puts one rather in lock step with the small revival happening amongst the intellectual class in the United Kingdom today.

In the UK, the general move one sees playing out is that spiritually frustrated writers are crashing against the contradictions of our moment, which they take to be a moment defined by a bizarre combination of moral anarchy and mechanistic social engineering. The outcome is a political system that is unyielding to the needs of human

persons and the ascent of a range of technologies and social norms that lead to cruelty and chaos. Beholding all this, they protest on multiple levels.

Thinkers like Paul Kingsnorth and Martin Shaw remind us that people are creatures, not machines. Louise Perry, Freya India, and Mary Harrington rightly insist that people have spiritual and emotional needs that can't be ignored in the quest for materialist pleasure, which is often the only good that a machine society knows how to recognize. Finally, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Tom Holland, and Glen Scrivener argue that *because* people are creatures and *because* we have these soft needs that are essential to flourishing, it follows that we need a type of liberal political method that is able to preserve a public square that has regard for human dignity, the need for human belonging, and the integrity of the human creature. In short, all these thinkers behold a social order that they regard as inhumane, cruel, and soul-killing and their response, on the level of social order at least, is "we need liberalism back."

The United States is quite different. Whereas the thinkers identified above from the UK regard liberalism as a desirable antidote to the challenges of the moment, many right-wing American Christians find it easier to repudiate liberalism as being part of the problem. The heart of the issue seems to be something like this: In the aftermath of World War II, Americans rightly recognized that both Nazi Germany and the Communist Soviet Union were rival political visions when compared to American liberalism. The name given to both systems, wildly different though they were, was "totalitarian."

In contrast to these political ideologies that sought to form very specific sorts of nations by appealing to existential human longings, the vision for American liberalism became more negative. Whereas fascism and communism sought to mold people and nations into specific moral and communal shapes, American liberalism sought to preserve a space of maximal choice and personal opportunity. Communism and fascism told citizens what they ought to be and what their nation was becoming. American liberalism rejected any such endeavors as intolerable violations of the rights of free Americans. Totalitarian states told you what kind of person to be as part of your belonging to the state. But American liberalism let you be yourself and didn't try to impose identities onto you.

The trouble with this is that man cannot live by choice alone. Eventually we desire a form of life that gives us a sense of meaning, purpose, and belonging—and such a form of life by its very nature must be communal. But the form of American liberalism defined in the aftermath of World War II struggled to reckon with this reality, dominated as it was by the fear of becoming totalitarian, like its great mid-century rivals. And that brings us to the present.

The system of American liberalism promised comfort, cheap goods, and easy amusements. But that wasn't enough to build an existentially satisfying life. And now many Americans are searching for an alternative that will offer that–and they think such an alternative can only be found if one first rejects "liberalism." This is wrong, of course, but their error is understandable when one considers the trajectory of American liberalism after 1945. But it is a mistake–and a serious one–nonetheless.

And this brings me back to Fr. Campion and the persecution of English Catholics under the monarch Catholics still sometimes refer to as "Bloody Bess."

We are told by many today, Catholic Integralists and Protestant Christian Nationalists alike, that "liberalism" has led us to this place of civilizational torpor and that breaking free and regaining our vitality as a people will require a reaching back into a previous, pre-liberal era that was not procedural and bloodless in the way we ourselves have become. You can, of course, find similar thoughts outside the church: What is the revival of neo-pagan vitalism on the right, for example, but an attempt to follow Nietzsche into the forgotten past, reclaiming Dionyseian hedonism against the stultifying alternatives of the classical world, to say nothing of the Christian world? Indeed, I rather suspect that the moral vision of the Christian Nationalists and Integralists has *far* more in common with that of the neo-pagan right than it does traditional Christianity, which is perhaps why you find them sometimes sounding so similar.

The difficulty here is that when each of these various groups begins trying to define their constructive vision of public life, it's a vision that leads to scenes like the one involving Fr. Campion. The Protestant Christian Nationalists have at this point established themselves as plainly anti-Semitic and even anti-Catholic. The Catholic Integralists hold that the Roman church possesses coercive authority over all baptized Christians—which, at least in theory, means that in their ideal system the inquisition could hold trials and coercively punish baptized Protestant believers who are not living in submission to the bishop of Rome.

What these supposedly thicker, constructive visions of political life amount to is the licensing of shocking cruelty visited on innocent parties because their beliefs mark them as outsiders relative to the state's vision of its desired political society.

This is the unhappy junction to which American politics have come–a choosing between a choice-maximization liberalism that offers no moral guidance, no sense of belonging, nothing to aspire to (except getting rich, I suppose) set against all these illiberal political visions that tell you what the good life is, offer you a sense of belonging (if you'll bend the knee, of course), and actually deliver

cruelty.

The alternative to this, an alternative that avoids the torture and execution of men like Fr. Campion and that at least has within itself the possibility of avoiding the cruelty hardwired into these other models, is the liberalism currently being rediscovered in the UK. It is a morally dense liberalism, and dense on several levels.

First, its density comes from its recognition that these questions of ultimate meaning and belonging and purpose both matter and can only be addressed imperfectly and incompletely by public authorities.

Second, its density comes from its recognition that actually cultivating the virtues that allow one to flourish in liberal society one is also cultivating virtues conducive toward our final ends too. After all, what is patient endurance of one's neighbor but an application of the call to love one's neighbor? Indeed, is it not patient endurance that often creates the conditions under which transformation and growth is possible? Growth in this sort of tolerance is growth in patience and in love, two core concerns of Christian discipleship. The dense Christian liberalism being rediscovered now across the pond recognizes the imperfections of our creaturely existence in this world while also recognizing the wonderful and exciting opportunities before us in this life to grow in our capacity for love, generosity, kindness, patience, and much else besides. The imperfect arena of public life affords us a space not for agonistic struggle, but principled debate, patient endurance, and occasionally surprising cooperation with our neighbors as we pursue commonly shared goods.

The problem with these rival political systems set against American liberalism, then, was not that they were constructive and therefore "totalitarian" but that they were perfectionistic. To put it in Augustinian terms,

> "For though (our prayers that God lead us not into temptation) exercise authority, the vices do not submit without a struggle. For however well one maintains the conflict, and however thoroughly he has subdued these enemies, there steals in some evil thing, which, if it does not find ready expression in act, slips out by the lips, or insinuates itself into the thought; and therefore his peace is not full so long as he is at war with his vices. For it is a doubtful conflict he wages with those that resist, and his victory over those that are defeated is not secure, but full of anxiety and effort. Amidst these temptations, therefore, of all which it has been summarily said in the divine oracles, Is not human life upon earth a temptation?

What Augustine describes in this passage from Book XIX of the *City of God* applies not only to the individual, but to our communal endeavors as well,

in as much as those endeavors are fraught with the same perils. But the proper lesson to learn from this fallibility that pervades our creaturely and political lives is not to simply refuse to engage questions of belonging and meaning altogether. That is the wrong answer arrived at by the cold war liberals.

The answer, rather, is to pursue those transcendent goods with prudence, constraint, and love, recognizing that any attempts at perfection will only fail and, quite often, produce cruelty as we become more and more desperate to lay hold of our hoped for utopia. Better to just exclude utopia from the start, because we have a proper doctrine of sin, and then get on with living wisely in our non-utopian realities.

This, then, is why the notion of liberal rights–free speech, freedom of association, freedom of religion, freedom of the press, and all the rest–matter so much. It is not because they preserve a kind of negatively construed void in which lost and lonely individuals try to scrounge out satisfaction through superficial amusements because this sort of life is, however sad, preferable to "totalitarianism." It is, rather, because the postures of patient endurance of our neighbor, seeking to preserve their ability to pursue the good by preserving their ability to act meaningfully (and without coercion), are themselves ways of pursuing transcendent goods. This is so because these practices are themselves a form of neighborly love which we can practice this side of Christ's return. The postures, values, and virtues of liberalism, practiced and cultivated over a lifetime, are postures, values, and virtues that help us to grow to look more like Our Lord. For, after all, we worship a God who is patient and long-suffering, not desiring that any should perish.

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The Wrong Questions About Education

TESSA CARMAN

"Are we doing school today?" my son asked me. I looked at him curiously, because we don't use the term "school" much at all in our home.

"We'll do some lessons and reading," I replied.

Such moments remind me of the difference between "school" and "education." We don't often ask: *How will you educate your children?* Rather it's usually, *Will you homeschool or send your kids to school?* If the latter, will you choose a private, classical, Christian, or public school (if you even have all those options in your area)?

I admit I don't like this question. According to the state, we're currently homeschoolers. That is, the home is the center of our civic education, and my kids don't learn their three r's primarily from an institution, but from my husband and me.

Perhaps a better term would be that we are home-based educators. We don't "unschool" because we don't have schooling to unschool from. And my kids have other lessons from the best teachers I can find and afford, sometimes in a formal setting (right now my daughter is taking ballet at a community center), sometimes informal (my kids have learned a lot about local food, and the farm cycle through spending time with extended family and talking with folks at the farmers' market, and about Shakespeare from listening to us read and discuss plays with friends). A friend or family member here and there will tell them a fairy tale, a story from history, or a tip on whittling

or crocheting. In the evenings lately our dinner table conversations have involved lots of begging for family stories (especially from my husband), requests to tell stories in Latin (again, my husband's specialty) or simply to tell them more about something that's seized their attention. "Frogs!" one night. "Snakes!" another. The other day, after a day of lessons at home and away, my kids begged my husband for some family lore, which led to a spontaneous lesson on how to take care of an injured person in an emergency, followed by a request to do a bedtime story in Latin.

I plan a lot of lessons, but they're pretty low-key, and we observe the liturgical and seasonal calendar as best we can (hopefully better each year), and I'm always on the lookout for beautiful music, stories, records, books, to show them. I'm always putting books on hold through interlibrary loan and looking out for books to add to our home library. We practice noticing what's around us: the crocuses coming up for spring, the birdsong (and working on identifying more than just the bluejay, robin, and chickadee). When we host—dinners or music nights or poetry readings—our kids help with the food, dishes, and conversation. During morning prayer and Scripture reading, often a thorny theological question will come up, and we'll spend some time talking about fighting sin, getting demons angry, what angels are, why people do bad things when they don't want to, and why some people don't go to church.

It's all education.

But if we sent our children to a private or public school five days a week from 8 to 3, we still would be home-based educators. Our children would still be fundamentally formed by our home culture and liturgy. We would still be their parents, directing their education, though delegating certain tasks in a different way from how we do it at present. Currently my daughter has been in two choirs, at church and a local classical school, takes classes in nature study and etiquette at our homeschool cooperative, goes to ballet and violin lessons once a week at a community center and university, speaks Latin with my husband, crochets with her aunt, and rides horses with her cousins when we visit them in the Midwest. I'm constantly on the lookout for opportunities for continuing their living education—that is, for them to continually grow in wisdom and courage, and in the skills and abilities that will enable them to live a full life. Some of these things depend on our particular family situation and the opportunities we encounter: for instance, my daughters are less likely to become competent seamstresses—an ability I believe would serve them well—unless I find enough outside help in teaching them, since I do not qualify even as an incompetent one. My older brother's children have horses at home, and unless we move out of the city and acquire some horses ourselves (something my children are rather open to), their cousins will be more likely to grow up into cowboys than they.

And that's okay. Each of us is going to be shaped by the place we're in, and we each have places and gifts to steward. In our own context, I have some high schools in mind for my children, as well as different apprenticeship ideas, depending on their interests and needs, and our own family situation, when the time comes. But always the question of "school" is secondary, at best, to the question of education—that is, of the formation of character, ability, relationships, and virtue. "Don't let school interfere with your

education," my schoolteacher dad, recalling Mark Twain, told me and my siblings time and again. I'd like that mindset to stick with my own children—and I'd also like them not to let "homeschool" interfere with their education either.

This is why I think the debate within Christian circles of public vs. private vs. homeschool is tired and often unhelpful. If we recognized that parents are, after the Holy Spirit, their children's primary educators, and then recognize that a full human life is nurtured within the home and family and then expands to neighborhood, church, village, and beyond, then, perhaps, our discussions would be on firmer footing. How ought a human person be formed for a flourishing life? Answering that question, in our different situations and contexts, given our different opportunities and gifts as parents and communities, will, and ought, guide us. "Schooling," especially the strictures of modern compulsory education, and all the hoops one must jump through, is only part of the picture.

G.K. Chesterton wrote, "Philosophy is not the concern of those who pass through Divinity and Greats, but of those who pass through birth and death." We may say, then, "Philosophy of education is not the concern of those with education degrees, or those who homeschool their children, or those who teach public school, or those who are headmasters of classical schools…but of those who wish for a good, full, virtuous life for themselves, their neighbors, and their descendants."

How do we learn to live? That's the question of education—what we could call the school of life. Parents, then, need to be philosophers—lifelong lovers of wisdom and students of human nature. This is not a task for teacher parents, nor for literary or artsy parents, but for all of us as persons.

How do we learn virtue—i.e., become like Christ? How do we cultivate good habits, in the nitty gritty everyday? These are not "homeschool" or "classical education" questions. Rather, they are human ones.

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About Mere Orthodoxy

We are a small group of Christians who since 2005 have been defending word count and nuance on the internet while working out what our faith looks like in public.

Whether it is arts, movies, literature, politics, sexuality, or any other crevice of the human experience, we believe that the Gospel has something to say about it and that "something" really can be good news.

We take our cues from C.S. Lewis and G.K. Chesterton, two of the most thoughtful, perceptive Christians of the twentieth century. One of them wrote Mere Christianity and the other wrote Orthodoxy, and we like those books so much we stapled their names together and took it as our own.

Their thoughtfulness wasn't abstract: it was rooted in the challenges and struggles that England was facing in their time, and their mission was to demonstrate how a classically minded, creedally centered orthodox Christianity was an attractive and persuasive alternative to the ideologies of their day.

And they did their work with words, with essays, poems, and stories.

Here's what we hope you will discover in our writing:

We are scripturally rooted and creedally informed. We know that it's not enough to simply say the Apostle's Creed and that the further we get from it, the more we'll disagree on the particulars of how Christianity should play out in public. But we also think that getting to the Apostle's Creed is a pretty good start for most Christians in our era, so that's where we'll put our baseline.

We're cheerfully contrarian when we have to be. We disagree with each other, and probably with you too (at least on something, right?). We think that's part of what makes life and writing interesting. So we'll make arguments, but hopefully in a way that is generous and kind.

We're eclectic. We could write about anything. Chasing our interests is the only thing that keeps us interesting, and being interesting is the one rule we have. Other publications may have a "niche," and Google loves them for it. Our niche is the world and where our reflections take us in it. And we kind of like it that way (and hope you will too).

We're publicly engaged. We're after the meaning and significance of things, the substance. Which means that we are after matters of public concern. And our hope is that you'll think more carefully, more deeply, and hopefully more Christianly about our world and your place in it after reading us.