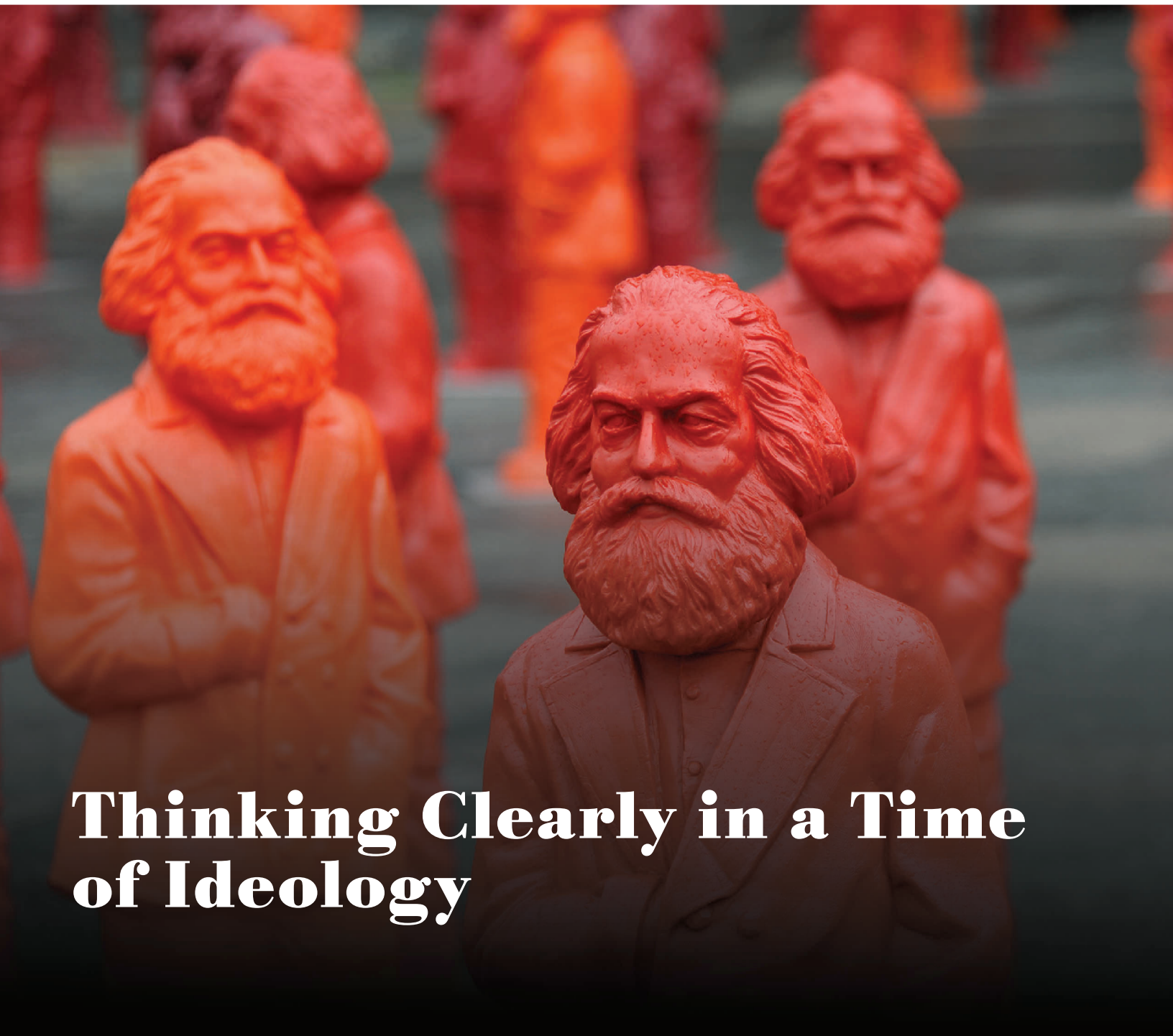


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**Thinking Clearly in a Time
of Ideology**

EDITOR'S NOTE

MICHAEL MATHESON MILLER GUEST EDITOR

I am honored to have the opportunity to serve as guest editor for this edition of *Religion and Liberty*, and delighted to have contributions from the Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish traditions.

As I reflected on a theme for this edition, one idea stuck out: the growing problem of ideology. We live in a time of volatility and uncertainty, and the combination of a polarized political climate, the COVID-19 pandemic, and overreaching Big Tech have made arguments about politics, medicine, racism, and social justice more volatile. There is also profound confusion about fundamental questions, especially about what it means to be an embodied person.

So, what do we do? How do we think clearly in a time of ideology? I think one of the answers is to cultivate humility, which helps us purify our will and our reason. One of the characteristics of ideology is an inordinate attachment to one's own theory. As Noelle Mering explains in her essay, reverence and humility before reality is essential. So is a willingness to listen to others and examine our assumptions. Additionally, consistently expanding our perspective beyond the contemporary debate is essential to give us perspective. C.S. Lewis suggested that for every new book we read, we should read two old ones — this can help avoid what G.K. Chesterton called the “degrading slavery of being a child of our time.”

A former professor of mine said something that has stuck with me over the years. Reality comes from God's mind, and philosophical language comes from our minds. No philosophical language—much less any closed ideological system will ever fully exhaust reality. Even the great St. Thomas Aquinas, after all his intellectual achievements, said his work was like straw compared to the vision that God gave him.

Avoiding ideology does not mean we lack principles. Quite the contrary. But it does mean that we need to take the search for truth seriously and be humble in the face of complexity and reality. When we do this, we open our minds and souls to be shaped by reality, and by authentic dialogue with others in the pursuit of wisdom.



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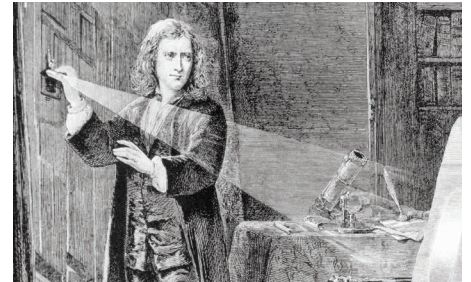
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Michael Matheson Miller

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We live in a world with digital technology that shapes and forms us more than we realize. Since most of us cannot fully opt out, we need to be thoughtful about our use. To deny the effects of digital technology is like the teenager who says music doesn't affect him: "I don't listen to the lyrics." Sure, you don't ... But even if that were true, the lyrics are the least subversive part!

Computer science is not a purely technical, empirical field divorced from any philosophical or political concerns. Computer algorithms and programs are created by human beings with specific visions of the world. These visions influence their code whether they know it or not. And the products and services shape and form us, whether we know it or not. The more time we spend online and on phones scrolling through social media, checking the news, using software, and playing games, the more we are being programmed by digital masters who shape our thoughts, ideas, desires, and our view of the world. As René Girard has explained, we don't get our desires from ourselves, but from others. Do you really want your desires and worldview shaped by Silicon Valley engineers?

One way to think about computer code is analogous to music, literature, and architecture. Philosophers since Plato have been keenly aware of how music and art shape our souls. Bach and Mozart do one thing to us. The Rolling Stones and Snoop Dog do another. Literature and poetry shape our intellects and imagination. Beautiful architecture with harmony and proportion influences in one way; neo-Stalinist or Bauhaus architecture shapes us in another. Architecture is like code. Florence is beautiful code; Brasilia is not.

We need to write better code that reflects a better philosophy of the person and society. Too often those of us with non-materialist worldviews have abdicated our responsibility in this area which has led to distorted technology. The good news is there are people working to breaking free from the current model. The developments in distributed ledger technology (blockchain) are very promising and there is much work to be done here. But we don't have wait for the perfect option. We have personal agency. We can start by using the current technology in a better way right now.

Books offer stability, renewal of American ideals

Dan Hugger

ACTON INSTITUTE

The notion that there is power in ideas is an old one. The cliché "Knowledge is power" has been traced to the late 17th-century writings of the philosopher Sir Francis Bacon.

The 19th-century historian Lord Acton believed that ideas themselves were the motive force in history, saying: "The history of institutions is often a history of deception and illusions; for their virtue depends on the ideas that produce and on the spirit that preserves them, and the form may remain unaltered when the substance has passed away."

Institutions are subject to ideological capture and this is why so much depends on the preservation of ideas outside of them.

From the insights, observations, and obscurities of history's great philosophers and historians, we see the roots of the common understanding of the importance of education and literacy to human development, flourishing social institutions, and a vibrant engagement with government.

Ideas of individual liberty and the dignity of the human person are at the heart of any truly advanced civilization.

These ideas are complex, and although much of our social life is mediated through the bonds of family, church, community, and citizenship, this is a dynamic process. A fixed tradition is also needed to faithfully transmit the legacy of civilization to our posterity.

Literature serves this purpose. It is the place we may turn when times are troubled and there is a need to reaffirm our commitments to human liberty and dignity by returning to their greatest proponents and most articulate expositors.

Is America a Christian nation?

Sarah Negri

ACTON INSTITUTE

It is well known that America's Founding Fathers did not establish a national religion. The founding documents they left behind, however, while safeguarding religious pluralism, express an adherence to the Christian faith that was almost universal among Americans.

Some 250 years later, can we still call America "Christian"? Have the content and expression of American Christianity changed since the Revolution?

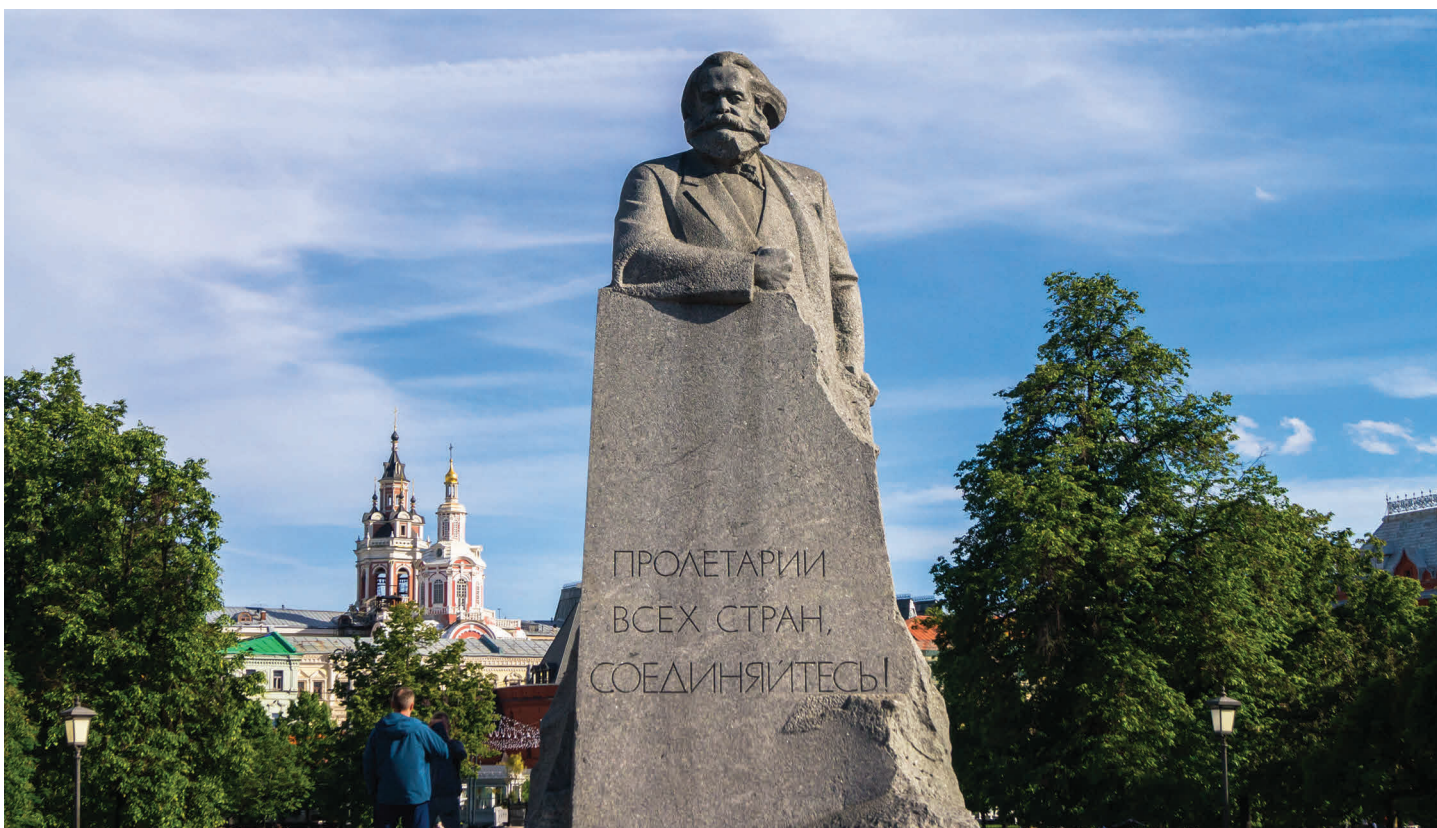
In 1840, Alexis de Tocqueville noted that "Although the Christians of America are divided into a multitude of sects, they all look upon their religion in the same light." He observed a unity of faith and practice between denominations in America—arguably a positive outcome of pluralism.

However, this accord of religious ideas reveals the first seeds of a worrisome trend, one which Jacques Maritain noted in 1958: "religious inspiration...holds, in actual fact, for a number of individuals who have slipped away from religious faith, though it can obviously preserve its vitality only if in many others it is not cut off from living religious faith."

Recently, this danger of faith being a unifying but empty force has gone from hypothetical to real. Peter Berger pointed out in 2008 that "Most Americans ... have a somewhat vague and broadly tolerant form of religion," and that the mentality of "I am religious, but I cannot identify with any existing church or religious tradition" is now prolific. While most Americans may still profess belief in God, there is widespread ignorance of the fundamental content and traditions of the Christian religion. The watering down of religion in the name of toleration has particularly affected morality.

What is the solution? Can today's America, with such a rich heritage of religious freedom, rediscover authentic Christianity and revitalize a largely amoral culture?

The key is to see our Christian faith as more than just a unifying principle and begin emphasizing its transcendent, redemptive, and sacrificial content. Only when we commit to following Christ individually, only when we rediscover, in the words of Maritain, "the fire of true love and the life of divine grace," can the expression of that faith in the public square reestablish a moral society.



ESSAY

On the Resilience of Ideology

Carlo Lancellotti

Those of us who have reached a certain age remember the time when a popular cliché declared the “end of ideology.” The idea was first formulated in 1960 in a book of the same title by Harvard sociologist Daniel Bell. For the next few decades, the idea that ideologies were a phenomenon of the past, and that they were fading away, remained popular among intellectuals. It seemed to find its final confirmation in the collapse of the Soviet Union and the decline of communism as a worldwide political movement. Today, however, the idea that ideologies are fading seems naïve. A cursory look at today’s major cultural-political movements in Europe and North America shows that they are often highly ideological, in the sense that they tend to embrace rigid theoretical narratives, which claim general explanatory power and are more or less impervious to experience. An obvious example is racial politics in the U.S. The pragmatic and “moral” approach of the old civil rights movement of the 1960s, rooted in the experience of the black church, has been largely replaced by a formalized theoretical discourse (most famously “critical race theory”) with Marxist and post-structuralist roots. Similar trends can be easily recognized in the movements rooted in the sexual revolution, e.g., in the polemics against the “patriarchy” or various types of “norma-

tivity.” As usual, ideological movements on the left have produced echoes on the right, in white supremacist or neo-nationalist groups or in “incel” culture. Arguably, the most enduring and influential right-wing ideology in the U.S. is Randian libertarianism, which really never went out of fashion, although its proponents seem rather unaware of its ideological character.

In fact, as a European living in the U.S. for many years, I like to complain that often Americans (especially on the “liberal” side) are not fully aware of the nature and inner workings of ideological thinking in general. Their understanding of ideology tends to be fairly generic, as if the word just denoted any general cultural-historical vision applied to politics and did not represent a specific historical-philosophical development. Here, inspired by the works of eminent thinkers from the last century such as Augusto Del Noce, Hanna Arendt, and Luigi Giussani, I will argue that, in fact, ideology is a very specific phenomenon tied to deep historical-philosophical currents. I will begin with a very brief overview of the historical origins and definition of

the term *ideology*, and suggest that the expansion of ideological politics is a typical development that accompanies the secularization of previously Christian societies. Then I will discuss a couple of essential features of ideology as a *forma mentis*, and finally I will comment on how one should respond to it.

Ideology's Marxist Roots

Today not many people remember that the word *ideology* was born in the early 19th century, at the end of the French Enlightenment, and became attached to a minor philosophical movement, that of the *Idéologues*, whose most important representative was Antoine Destutt de Tracy (1754–1836). He coined the word *ideology* to denote, essentially, a naturalistic and materialistic theory of ideas, viewed as the byproducts of sensations. By a curious circular movement in intellectual history, de Tracy's understanding of ideology as a "science of ideas" resurfaced, in a certain sense, in the 20th century, when the "human sciences" (e.g., sociology, anthropology, etc.) made a renewed claim that they could conduct a "scientific" study of ideas as expressions of material circumstances. Back in the 19th century, however, the word *ideology* did not really take off in its original meaning. Instead, the term was adopted by Karl Marx, who gave it a rather different sense and launched it on a new and successful career, so to speak.

Most famously in his (and Engels') book *German Ideology*, Marx used the word to indicate a "super-structural" system of ideas, detached from "the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life." In this negative sense, ideology *hides* the "actual life process" under a cloud or (typically, religious) ideas, and by so doing protects the social *status quo*. Accordingly, the communist revolution coincides with dissipating this false ideology and embracing "the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things." As Augusto Del Noce explains (in his essay "At the Origins of the Concept of Ideology" in *The Age of Secularization*), "for Marx ideology means abstract philosophy, philosophy of pure ideas, speculative philosophy that takes part in historical reality as a justification for a given historical order. Therefore, it is distinct from true philosophy

which is, indeed, practical philosophy, but realizes human universality."

However, it is important to note that in Marxism "true philosophy" takes a new and very different meaning, which actually makes it indistinguishable from ideology if ideology is understood in the more general sense of *thought directed at political action*. As Del Noce also says in *The Problem of Atheism*, "the distinction between the two makes sense if one defines philosophy as the consideration of the eternal categories of being, and ideology as a means to act in the present. But Marx's philosophy cannot but replace the categories of the *eternal* and the *contingent* with those of the *past* and the *future*" and this results in a "complete reduction of philosophy to ideology—i.e., with the disappearance of the idea of truth vis à vis the spirit of power." From the perspective of rigorous atheistic materialism, "ideas—including that of human emancipation—are reduced to instruments to be used as purely material devices" to operate "change." The result is that philosophy and revolutionary ideology become identified because philosophy is always the instrument of a party. The following passage by Del Noce is worth quoting in full because it describes a mindset that is still very common today:

The reduction of the idea to instrument of production ... implies the disappearance of the distinction between philosophy as contemplation or self-awareness and ideology as a practical instrument to act on the world, and the consequent absorption into ideology of all cultural productions. That is, the distinction between truth and falsehood is not carried out outside of ideology but within it: one can distinguish between reactionary ideologies, which justify and thus falsify the given reality, and progressive and liberating ideologies. In sum, according to Marx there is philosophy that presents itself as such and actually is just ideology, because it only enters history as the consecration of a certain given order, falsified as sacred, or at least as natural and immutable; and there is, instead, ideology that openly declares itself as a political and partisan stance, because it wants to change the world and not simply contemplate it, which is truly philosophy, because it expresses the direction

of history in its unfolding. In connection with this we understand the oscillations in his language between the pejorative and the positive meaning of the word; we understand the distinction between "true consciousness" and "false consciousness."

These remote Marxist origins of the concept of ideology already illustrate its deep philosophical, or indeed theological, roots. After all, the eclipse of the idea of truth, and the simultaneous embrace of the idea of power, are just aspects of the eclipse of the idea of God. Marx denies the existence of eternal and transcendent truths and values, and affirms the instrumental character of ideas. If there is no Truth greater than us, ideas are just tools that we develop and use. Since he operates in a post-Christian context, however, his atheism still maintains the notion that man transcends nature and has the power to fully humanize it, transforming the world through his action (a notion that was foreign to antiquity). The combination of these two factors results in a form of discourse that is entirely "practical" in the sense that "it enters the historical process as an instrument for action," and above all for political action. In short, I would like to suggest that ideology is the natural *modus cogitandi* of what Del Noce calls "post-Christian" (or "positive") atheism. Next, I will briefly review some of the specific features of this type of thought.

Ideology in Action

We have seen so far that ideology arose historically as the replacement of philosophy (as contemplation of eternal truths) by a form of knowledge focused on political transformation, which had its first paradigm in Marxist revolutionary thought. Now, I am going to comment on three essential characteristics of ideological thought. These characteristics are easily recognizable in all its historical expressions, which have marked the history of the 20th century, starting with the Soviet revolution of 1917, followed by Italian Fascism and Nazism, and then by the ideologies of the modern West. I will refer, besides Del Noce, to two authors who in their own lifetimes faced mass ideological movements, and not surprisingly came (independently of each

other) to very similar conclusions: Hanna Arendt and Luigi Giussani.

1) The first key characteristic is what could be called the *abstractness* of ideological thought. In its drive to change the world, ideology utterly disregards the feedback coming from experience and operates by pure logical development. This point is beautifully illustrated by a passage from Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*:

An ideology is quite literally what its name indicates: it is the logic of an idea ... As soon as logic as a movement of thought—and not as a necessary control of thinking—is applied to an idea, the idea is transformed into a premise [and] a whole line of thought can be initiated, and forced upon the mind, by drawing conclusions in the manner of mere argumentation. This argumentative process could be interrupted neither by a new idea (which would have been another premise with a different set of consequences) nor by a new experience. Ideologies always assume that one idea is sufficient to explain everything in the development from the premise, and that no experience can teach anything because everything is comprehended in this consistent process of logical deduction. The danger in exchanging the necessary insecurity of philosophical thought for the explanation of an ideology and its Weltanschauung is not even so much the risk of falling for some usually vulgar, always uncritical assumption, as of exchanging the freedom inherent in man's capacity to think for the straight jacket of logic with which man can force himself almost as violently as he is forced by some outside power.

When the purpose of thought becomes the domination-humanization of reality (power and not truth), its greatest source of power is logical consistency and self-sufficiency, not verification by experience. To be more precise, ideology recognizes an empirical verification of sorts, but it is not correspondence to existing reality but rather the ability to change it. Therefore, raw logic becomes the only possible internal operating criterion. Arendt's comment about the loss of freedom is also very important. While the association between ideological thought and totalitarianism is well known, often peo-

ple do not grasp that the loss of political freedom is in some sense a "secondary" effect that reflects the prior loss of freedom of the ideologue himself, who is a prisoner of the inexorable logic of his ideology.

2) The second characteristic is the necessary *partiality* of ideological thought. Logic needs to start from some premise, and the choice of premise necessarily leaves out some other aspect of reality. Once one postulates that history is driven by class struggles, or that the cause of all of women's problems is the patriarchy, or that undisturbed market dynamics always leads to the most desirable outcomes, or that white supremacy is the defining factor of American history etc., all other aspects must be ignored. This point is expressed very clearly in Chapter 11 of Giussani's *The Religious Sense*:

Ideology is a theoretical-practical construction developed from a preconception. More precisely it is a theoretical-practical construction based upon an aspect of reality—even a true aspect — which is taken unilaterally in some way and ultimately made into an absolute for the sake of a philosophy or a political project. And, since ideology is built upon some starting point of our experience, experience itself is used as a pretext for an operation determined by extraneous and exorbitant concerns. For example, in front of the "poor" one can theorize about the problem of poverty. But the concrete person with his or her wants is marginalized once he or she has been used by the intellectual as a pretext for his or her opinions, or by the politician to justify and publicize his own actions. The views of intellectuals, which the powers that be find convenient and take up as their own, become common mentality by means of the mass-media, schools and propaganda. Rosa Luxemburg, with visionary lucidity, stigmatized such a process as "the creeping advance of the theoretician" which gnaws at the root of and corrupts every authentic impetus to bring about change.

An ideological thinker attempts to organize all of reality on the basis of some partial truth, which he logically develops into a universal instru-

ment of interpretation and (ultimately) of domination. By doing so, he typically ends up disregarding the effective welfare of concrete human beings. Furthermore, an ideologue's steadfast allegiance to such "preconception" makes any form of dialogue impossible and, in a democratic system, must result in a complete ossification of political discourse that ironically prevents real change.

3) Finally, ideological thought is necessarily *agonistic*. It achieves its practical efficacy by identifying an "enemy" as part of its preconceived narrative. As Del Noce also says, "Ideology is such in as much as it thinks 'against'—that is, it serves the purpose of setting one part of reality in opposition to another." It is very typical of ideologues to think that there are only two ways of thinking, theirs and that of their opponents. They pursue power by classifying people according to partial categories (classes, races, identities) and setting them in an all-explaining opposition, in which one side represents evil and oppression, and the other innocence and justice. This attribution of moral fault by mere participation in a group is the reason why ideologically thinking is always potentially violent, and can act as a powerful multiplier of violence, as was famously observed by Solzhenitsyn.

Responding to Ideology

Finally, a few thoughts about responding to ideology, in light of the previous remarks.

First of all, it cannot be overemphasized that ideological thought needs to be recognized as such. Today this is far from obvious, because one of the dominant ideological strands in the West after World War II has been what Del Noce calls "sociologism" (or "scientism"), which essentially denies that there is any meaningful distinction between philosophy and ideology. As he explains, "for contemporary sociologism ideology means a group's historical-social expression, as a spiritual superstructure of forces that are not spiritual at all, like class interests, unconscious collective motives, and concrete conditions of social existence. Accordingly, the progress of the human sciences will lead to social science, which, as the full extension of scientific reason to the human world, will finally achieve the complete replacement of philosoph-

ical discourse by scientific discourse.” In practice, this view has often led to a great fallacy: the notion that pragmatism and a technological orientation discourage ideological thinking. In fact, since ideology is a fundamentally practical orientation (ideas as tools to change the world, not to understand it), instrumentalism in education turns into potential ideologues the more generous souls, those who want to use ideas to “make a difference” in society rather than just “succeed” individualistically. The sociologistic understanding of ideology was also the reason why many people incorrectly predicted its demise. They thought that ideologies were associated with certain social conditions typical of the early 20th century, and would disappear as society moved on. As I tried to argue here, ideology is a philosophical-religious phenomenon that characterizes Western (post-Christian) secular modernity, and will keep reappearing in new forms as long as secular modernity itself endures.

Secondly, one cannot respond to an ideology in *cognitive-theoretical* terms, as one would respond to a philosophical doctrine, i.e., by pointing out internal contradictions or disagreements with observation. Once again, an ideologue is motivated by the desire to effect change and will dismiss as “abstract” all arguments about the truth or internal consistency of his doctrines. However, an “honest” ideologue will start doubting his ideology if he is shown that in actuality it is not producing the effects it was supposed to produce. Del Noce famously formulated the concept of the “heterogenesis of ends” of an ideology, meaning that “its exhaustion has a particular structure: it does not merely cease, but it backfires, it becomes an instrument of

the opposite side.” In the case of Marxism, that meant that by denying “vertical” transcendence and permanent ethical values, it facilitated the rise of a more extreme form of bourgeois culture, freed from the fetters of Christian or Kantian morality. But the same phenomenon can be observed again and again in recent Western history. The anti-repressive ideology of the sexual revolution ultimately led to unprecedented levels of sexual exploitation. Libertarian individualism has led to the greatest expansion ever of the power of the state, by weakening all intermediate forms of social belonging. As we speak, it appears that in some places ideological anti-racism is bringing back forms of racial segregation and conflict that seemed to belong to the past. This type of contradiction can reveal to an ideologue the partiality of his or her ideology and suggest that in fact comprehending the world has to take priority over changing it, and that “reality has rights” that cannot be infringed upon without paying a steep price.

But what if the ideologue is not “honest,” in the sense of being so possessed by ideology and by thirst for power that he or she is out of reach for any type of persuasion? In this case ideology can only be resisted. Resistance can take many forms, of course, but at the most basic level it simply has to do with refusing to compromise one’s intellectual integrity under the pressure of power. Since ideology operates, as Del Noce says, “by leaving out some part of reality,” it is automatically defeated when somebody has the courage to point out that the “left-out part” is still there. Thus, the great weapon that disarms even the worst ideologue is not a clever argument or a forceful confrontation, but the sim-

ple decision of adhering to our personal experience, to common sense. Ideology is first of all a corruption of reason and requires its purification as the ultimate response.

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NOTES

1 Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology* (Glencoe IL, Free Press, 1960).

2 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. C.J. Arthur (New York, International Publishers, 1970), 47.

3 *Ibid.*, 57

4 Augusto Del Noce, *The Age of Secularization* (Montreal: McGill’s-Queen University Press, 2017), 190.

5 Augusto Del Noce, *The Problem of Atheism*, (Montreal: McGill’s-Queen University Press, 2021), 227.

6 *Ibid.*, 138.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*, 264.

9 *Ibid.*, 177.

10 This does deny the fact, of course, that religious narratives also can be used as ideological tools, just like anything else. A classic example is the ideology of the Action Française, but think also of some recent forms of political Islam.

11 Hanna Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Inc., 1994), 469–470.

13 Luigi Giussani, *The Religious Sense* (McGill’s-Queen University Press, 1997), 95–6.

13 Del Noce, *The Problem of Atheism*, 177.

14 In several passages of *The Gulag Archipelago*.

15 Del Noce, *The Age of Secularization*, 191.

16 *Ibid.*, 179.



ESSAY

Thinking in an Age of Ideology

Michael Matheson Miller

We live in an age of ideology. The world is complex and hard to understand, so we look for a theory that can help make sense of things. This is understandable. Throughout history, people made sense of the world through cultural and religious traditions. But as the world has become simultaneously more connected and more secular, as our awareness of complexity has increased while religious and cultural traditions have weakened, people now exist with a heightened sense of uncertainty. Many of us are unmoored, finding it harder to make sense of the world—and making it more attractive to latch on to simple explanations. This need, along with several other influences, has created the conditions for increased ideological thinking and an inability to consider different perspectives.

Ideology, of course, is not new. The 20th century was a battlefield of competing ideologies such as Nazism and communism. And while ideological fervor was quelled for a time, many of the conditions that fomented ideology remained, and ideological thinking infects us all—right, left, secular, or religious. Here we find ourselves only one generation after the end of the Cold War and the supposed “end of history,” and people are still grasping for some theory of everything.

What is ideology and what are its sources? Ideology is not merely a set of ideas or principles that one believes in. We all have that to some extent, and it is essential to live one's life. By ideology I mean a theory that purports to explain reality. One way to understand it is: Ideology is the opposite of philosophy.

Philosophy—*philo-sophos*—is the love of wisdom and the pursuit of truth. A philosophical attitude approaches reality and tries to understand it. It is open to being shaped by reality and reverence before being. Ideology, on the other hand, tries to fit reality into its preconceived idea. The Greek myth of Procrustes provides a good image of ideology. Procrustes was a monster who had a hotel with a one-size bed. If the guest was too short for the bed, Procrustes would stretch him out to make him fit; if he was too small, he would cut off his head or his feet to make him fit. Nassim Nicholas Taleb uses this image to explain the side of effects of contemporary social planners.

This is not to say that ideology has no philosophical basis. Often it begins with an insight. Karl Marx, for example, saw the problems of the working classes and tried to understand them. But with ideology, philosophy is ultimately dispensed, and theory trumps reality. One of the hallmarks of ideology is the suppression of questions. Intellectual coherence no longer matters when ideology reins. As Eric Voegelin and others have noted, when pressed with questions about parts of his theory that did not cohere, Marx argued that this was no longer a question for “socialist man.”

G.K. Chesterton uses the image of the maniac—the man who moves from a genuine insight, which is why ideology is so attractive, to seeing this as the key to all of reality. This idea becomes a dogma that cannot be challenged. Though it may appear highly rational and internally coherent like Marxism or Darwinism, it ultimately rests on an erroneous premise, e.g., philosophical materialism or class struggle that is no longer held by reason and the intellect. It is an attachment of the will and desire. Think of an unreasonable prejudice like racism. The idea that one race of people is inferior to another simply because of skin color is clearly irrational when seen from the outside. But for the racist, it all makes sense. And

anything and everything can be used to bolster his position. The same is true with communism. This is why, no matter how much we show someone that communism fails, it does not matter, because the theory—the idea—is an attachment of the will. Reason cannot reach the ideologue, and ideology ultimately becomes violent because it cannot withstand questions. This is why the East German communists had to build a wall in Berlin to keep everyone inside the workers' paradise.

Nor is this to say that philosophy never comes to solid conclusions about reality. Aristotle argues in his *Metaphysics* for the immutable law of noncontradiction: A thing cannot both be and not be at the same time and in the same respect. But where a philosophical attitude can lead us to firm views about the nature of reality, its openness to being and the search for truth always allows for refinement and the encouragement of questions. A philosophical attitude is not merely skeptical. Philosophy argues that we can in fact know things, but that we must be humble in recognizing that our knowledge may be partial, whereas with ideology there is a hubris that claims it has discovered the key to reality.

Western man is especially susceptible to ideology because of the deep influence of the Jewish and Christian traditions. This is quite complex, but one example is the idea of linearity of time—that time has a beginning and an end, and it is going toward an eschaton where the Messiah will set everything aright. This idea has penetrated deep into the Western psyche. Even when the West became secularized, this idea of the perfect kingdom remained, but instead of being realized by the Messiah, it will now be realized through a technical, political solution. The kingdom of God can be realized by man. Eric Voegelin calls this the “immanentization of the eschaton.” We saw it in its most virulent forms in communism and Nazism.

Yet despite the collapse of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, strong ideological tendencies still remain in the West. Alexander Solzhenitsyn identified a deep-seated philosophical materialism in the West that was not radically different from its Soviet counterpart in its view of man and God. And in the early 1990s, Joseph Ratzinger argued that

though the Soviet Union fell, relativism did not die but combined with a desire for gratification to form a potent mix, and that “we must of course be aware that Marxism was only the radical execution of an ideological concept that even without Marxism largely determines the signature of our century” (Joseph Ratzinger, *A Turning Point for Europe*, Ignatius Press, 129–130).

The Conditions for Ideology

There are several key conditions for ideology. One, as I have noted, is simply the complexity of reality. Human beings don't like complexity, and ideology provides the comfort of a sure answer. Another is the temptation of the philosopher to hubris. A genuine insight becomes the key to understanding everything. Other important influences that may sound counterintuitive include empiricism and relativism, and the influence of thinkers such as Freud, Marx, and Darwin, whose explanations of the world normalized the idea of a theory of everything. Let me address each of these in turn.

Relativism

In a homily just before he was elected Pope Benedict XVI, Joseph Ratzinger, said that we live under what he called a “dictatorship of relativism.” At first glance, this is counterintuitive. After all, relativism seems to be a theory of tolerance and lack of hubris in the face of absolute questions. But it does not turn out that way. Relativism is a rejection of truth; it ultimately closes the door to philosophy. Because there is no truth outside the mind, it is no longer possible to quest for wisdom. Relativism closes us off from being shaped by reality. Our minds and our ideas become the arbiter of truth and reality. Ideology is all that is left. Education becomes reduced to indoctrination. Relativism can only be a dictatorship, because instead of liberating the mind, it traps it in ideology.

Empiricism

Similar to the problem of relativism is that of empiricist rationality or positivism. Empiricism holds that in order for something to be reasonable—within the realm of reason—it must be empirically verifiable. This creates two major problems: First, the empiricist position is incoherent on its own terms.

The claim itself cannot be empirically verified. It is merely an assertion that, when questioned, has no answer. It must be rejected, or questions must be suppressed. The apparent exultation of reason is itself irrational on its own terms. It is ideological: It tries to fit reality into its own framework. Nor can it demonstrate why reason is good or why rationality is better than irrationality.

Second, empiricism takes the most fundamental human questions—love, beauty, goodness, right, wrong, forgiveness, mercy, and justice—and relegates them to outside the realm of reason because they are not empirical. Love is thus reduced to a chemical reaction. Mercy is simply self-care. And as Ratzinger has noted, this causes a major problem for politics. Politics, he argues, is “in the realm of reason,” with the goal of creating a just society. But if justice is just an ephemeral feeling separated from reason, then politics is reduced to efficiency and ultimately power. Empiricism mixed with relativism sows the seeds of ideology and ultimately violence, since any objection must be suppressed through coercion and force.

Theories of everything

The third major influence in our ideological age is the predominance of theories of everything, especially in thinkers like Marx, Freud, and Darwin. These are some of the most influential intellects of the modern period, and each of them presented the world with powerful tools that purport to explain reality. Marx's theories explained politics, economics, and human action through class and power, and promised a perfect society of equality and the withering away of the state. Freud's theories explained human relationships as manifestations of subconscious sexuality and desire. And Darwin explained not only the origin of man, but psychology and society through evolution and natural selection. Today there are major disciplines like evolutionary sociology and psychology that use Darwinian and neo-Darwinian frameworks to explain everything from love, marriage, and family structure to economics, art, and culture. Each of these theories captivated the minds and imaginations of modern people and provided a framework of how to understand the world.

The power of *the theory of everything* is so captivating that even those who reject such explanations almost feel the need to provide their own theory of everything to refute it. As a Catholic, I have seen this ideological tendency manifest among serious Catholics. Several times I've proposed the idea that while I believe Catholicism to be true and a reliable guide to operate in the world, it is not a theory of everything. The reaction was a reticence and discomfort to admit this. "But Catholicism does give us the answers ..." Well, it gives us some, but it does not explain everything. And I don't just mean chemistry or mathematics. It doesn't provide a clear map of how to organize society. The resistance to this assertion, and I feel it too, is the sense that if we do not have our own theory of everything, we can't compete in the tournament of ideas. Critiquing Marx or evolutionary psychology is not enough. We feel we need to have our own full-fledged alternative. This is how the ideological nature of our age can infect us.

Is Religion Ideology?

This leads to a serious question. Is religion different from ideology? Is not religion a type of ideology that purports to explain the world? There is always a temptation for religion to become an ideology, especially when it gets connected to politics. But properly understood and practiced, religion is not ideology, because by its very nature it is open to revelation. Religion is a simple response to reality. It may not be correct, but like philosophy, religion is a response to something *outside itself*, whereas ideology is a closed system. As John Paul II wrote:

The truth made known to us by Revelation is neither the product nor the consummation of an argument devised by human reason. It appears instead as something gratuitous, which itself stirs thought and seeks acceptance as an expression of love.
(Fides et Ratio)

Second, and here I am addressing Christianity, though I think it applies equally to Judaism, religion does not claim to explain everything. God creates and calls us to participate in, and complete creation. We have to figure things out on our own. We have to use

our intellects to engage in philosophical and scientific discovery. There is no full solution to the problem of life.

Third, it is not utopian. Jesus does not proclaim to be a technical messiah who solves all the problems of evil, sin, suffering, and death through political means. Indeed, the message of the gospel is that Jesus dies for our sins and defeats death. But as we see in the Gospels, he had to rebuke his disciples numerous times for their attempt to make him king, for their attempt to make him a technical messiah. The Gospels do speak of the final times when Jesus will come again and establish the Kingdom of God. But in the meantime, we are called to participate in his redemptive work, and there is no perfect ordering of society that will solve the problems of life. That is only something that God himself can arrange. From the builders of the Tower of Babel to the French Revolution, the Nazis, and the communists, the desire to create heaven on earth is a recurrent theme. But Christianity rebukes the idea of a utopian political order.

As Ratzinger observed in *Truth and Tolerance*:

Within this human history of ours the absolutely ideal situation will never exist, and a perfected ordering of freedom will never be achieved. An ordering of things that is simply ideal; that is all around right and just will never exist. Wherever such a claim is made, truth is not being spoken. ... Everything else, every eschatological promise within history fails to liberate us, rather it disappoints and therefore enslaves us.

Fourth, while Christianity does proclaim certain absolute truths, dogmas, and doctrines, and requires submission of the intellect and will, it does not suppress questions. The asking of questions and wrestling with complexity is embedded in the Jewish and Christian traditions, from Abraham's and Moses' discussions with God to the debates in the Talmud, as well as the disputation method of medieval theologians such as Maimonides and Thomas Aquinas. And while this rule has not always been adhered to, any attempt to compel belief is a departure from the original vision of Christianity and its intrinsically voluntary character.

At its core, ideology is an attachment

of the will to an error that will admit no challenge to it. Thus, while it can be highly "rational" in a self-contained manner, it rejects truth and a broad vision of reason, while Christianity affirms them. John Paul II illustrated this well:

Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth—in a word, to know himself—so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves.

So, yes, we must always be on guard against making religion into an ideology. But because of its openness to reality and revelation, as well as Christianity's affirmation of reason and its rejection of man as the measure of all things, religion can be the antidote to the ideological temptation that poisons our time.

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Ideology as Unreason

Samuel Gregg

As anyone who has spent time in the world of ideas knows, the word *ideology* is ubiquitous. For some people, it's simply shorthand or a synonym for their political philosophical beliefs. When they refer to "their ideology," they mean their conservative, liberal, socialist, traditionalist, integralist, or corporatist philosophy (or some combination of two or more of these positions) of what the political, social, and economic order should be.

Strictly speaking, however, ideology means something rather different. This becomes clearer when we recognize that the very idea of ideology is associated with some specific intellectual developments that emerged during the various Enlightenments.

Like many Enlightenment concepts, ideology is about changing the world along lines considered to be systematic and scientific. All ideas embody some proposition for how the world should be. But ideology purports to remake human society over in much the same way as a scientist transforms an existing substance into something different by applying new elements to, and extracting others, from the subject manner.

Unlike the scientist, however, the proponent of ideology is not so interested in shifting or altering his planned approach in light of new information. For any ideology is essentially a closed system of belief, and therefore more concerned with conforming reality to the ideology, rather than the other way around. When we say someone is an "ideologue," it is a way of underscoring their rigidity in light of reality, regardless of whether that truth is economic, scientific, or metaphysical in its nature.

Science and Enlightenment

One common characteristic of the European Enlightenments was an intense focus on the scientific method and its powerful

way of revealing new knowledge about the natural world. The modern sciences first acquired the form they have today during the medieval period, especially through the efforts of individuals like Thomas Aquinas' teacher, Albert the Great. As the twentieth-century Jesuit historian of philosophy Frederick Copleston observed, a thirteenth-century theologian like Bonaventure who embraced the natural sciences as one dimension of knowledge explored the material world as "a shadow or remote revelation of its divine origin."

That link was not broken during the Scientific Revolution. People like Sir Isaac Newton and Sir Francis Bacon were deeply religious men. But subtle shifts did get underway in this period. Classical and medieval scholars weren't disinterested in transforming the world. Yet they pursued these endeavors within a context of promoting human excellence in the sense of virtuous and holy lives. With individuals like Bacon, the emphasis began gravitating toward knowing how things work in order to better humanity's condition in the here-and-now. For Bacon, the "real and legitimate goal of the sciences is the endowment of human life with new inventions and riches."

By this, Bacon didn't just have in mind the world around us. His radicalism involved elevating the scientific method's importance and using the acquired knowledge to extend humanity's dominance not only over the natural world *but over man himself as well*. This amounted, Bacon wrote in his *Novum Organum Scientiarum*, to humans regaining "their rights over nature" as we "use all our efforts to make the course of art outstrip nature." "Nature" goes beyond the natural world. It includes *human* nature and *human* society.

Lest one think that Bacon thought that this opened the door to humans being "Masters of the Universe," we should note

that Bacon insisted that what he called man's rights over nature were "assigned to them by the gift of God." These powers, he further explained, had to "be governed by right reason and true religion." This indicates that scientific experiments and the use of scientific knowledge was subject to the ethical demands of natural law ("right reason") and faith ("true religion"). We should thus pause before proclaiming that there was a radical rupture between the worlds of faith and reason in the thought of a man often portrayed as the scientific method's father.

That said, it's not an exaggeration to claim that a new canon of inquiry developed during this period. This was bolstered by the emergence of academies of science across the West, usually outside the church-dominated universities. Often modelled on Britain's Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge (founded in 1660), these academies provided settings for ideas on a given topic to be discussed dispassionately by *specialists* and, as time went on, *separately* from philosophical and theological considerations. The improvements realized through these specialized disciplines were seen in the emergence of machines such as the steam engine pioneered by the English inventor Thomas Newcomen and enhanced by the Scottish engineer James Watt. There was no greater symbol of man's emerging ability to conquer nature than the development of the hot-air balloon by the brothers Joseph-Michel and Jacques-Étienne Montgolfier. Even gravity, it seemed, was no longer a restriction.

The Science of Man

In this light, it's no wonder that people soon began to take Bacon's hint that they should start viewing themselves as objects to be improved by science. This went beyond countering the diseases that



had hitherto ensured that most people didn't live beyond the age of 30. The new science was increasingly pressed into the service of improving human societies.

The Scottish Enlightenment thinker David Hume captured this trend in his *Treatise on Human Nature*. Now that the natural sciences were established on an experimental basis, Hume proposed that it was time to start advancing the science of man via, to use the book's subtitle, "*An Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects*." Just as there were natural harmonies in the physical world to be discovered through the natural sciences, more and more people searched for similar harmonies in human society through social sciences like political economy. The goal was to use the acquired knowledge to improve the social order.

It's in this context that figures like Hume's friend and colleague Adam Smith started substantially rethinking subjects like politics and economics. Smith's most famous book, *The Wealth of Nations*, was based on almost two decades of study of societal conditions, exploration of historical sources, reflections on human nature based on external observation of people's habits, and the development of hypotheses concerning the underlying causes of people's choices and actions. Of equal importance was Smith's choice not to locate his inquiry into what leads to the sustained creation of wealth in a book about moral theory, as Aristotle might have. Smith treated his topic as a stand-alone subject, thus advancing economics as a stand-alone discipline.

Smith, however, didn't engage these subjects simply because he wanted to

better understand economic life. Smith was interested in change—and more than just the material improvements that might come from, for example, greater amounts of wealth. He was as much concerned with civilizational growth.

In summary, the social sciences pursued by scholars like Smith involved study of the conditions in which humans lived. Based on this data, they proposed hypotheses about how humans might behave in different conditions. But their general objective was to outline paths toward better societies: in Smith's case, freer, more just, and more prosperous societies. Thus, while there was a distinction between (1) the empirical aspect of their work, and (2) their moral and political goals, the former was understood as serving the latter. That was the point of doing social science.

The Corruption of Reason

So far, so good. Smith's development of economics as a distinct social science in his *Wealth of Nations* helped facilitated a revolution and made an indispensable contribution to improving human well-being. This is social science at its best.

But what happens when you start thinking you can "remake" human beings through influencing and changing the environment, especially if you think that through applying the scientific method to society, you have stumbled on some core ideas that contain *the* key to creating a perfect world? It's at this point that you have begun to wander down the path of ideology.

The word *ideology* seems to have been coined by the French Enlightenment figure Antoine Destutt de Tracy. For him, it was "the 'science of ideas', meaning the discovery and articulation of a scientifically rational system of ideas that highlighted existing irrationalities in the social structures around us and which provided a way of making these structures more rational. Karl Marx and the way in which he developed his ideas exemplify this process.

Recall, for a start, that Marx insisted that his method for understanding what was really going on in society was strictly scientific. He did not claim to be doing philosophy. Having examined society in a manner he considered entirely scientific, Marx concluded that nineteenth century capitalist societies reflected the inexorable dialectics of history and the type of class structures that emerged as a result of changes in the means of production. Everything, ranging from religion to the rise of the middle class and the subsequent eclipse of aristocracy, was explainable in these terms. On the basis of these ostensibly scientific foundations, Marx worked out an entire all-embracing system that purported to explain the whole of human existence and history.

Emphases on Marxism's scientific credentials appear everywhere in Marxist writings and rhetoric. Lenin regarded socialism as right not because it was just. It was right, in Lenin's view, because it was the most *scientifically rational* way to organize society and the economy. As far as Lenin was concerned, all that he was

doing when he seized power in Russia and sought to launch a world revolution was intervening scientifically in order to accelerate communism's inevitable arrival. The Marxist theorist and revolutionary Leon Trotsky is often romanticized as a dissenter from Stalin's policies in the 1920s. Trotsky's Marxist orthodoxy, however, manifests itself in his insistence that communists had to reshape society along more scientific lines. In a 1924 book, he specified that "Communist life will not be formed blindly ... but it will be built consciously, it will be tested by thought, it will be directed and corrected." Having extinguished spontaneity, Trotsky explained, "the human species, the sluggish *Homo sapiens*, will once again enter the state of radical reconstruction and will become in its own hands the object of the most complex methods of artificial selection and psychophysical training." It followed that "barbarian routine" would be replaced "by scientific technique, and religion by science."

Not So Scientific After all

Despite its aspirations to being scientific, Marxism turned out to be spectacularly wrong in its assumptions and conclusions. Precisely because it was an ideology, it was closed to important aspects of the full truth about reality. It could not acknowledge that free prices, for instance, were the only way to convey accurate information about the supply of and demand for thousands of goods and services. Why? Because once you accepted that, you would have to acknowledge there was no way to plan your way to communism through the state. That in turn meant there was no longer any point to the Communist Party's monopoly of power.

The irony is that the natural and social sciences are nowhere near as definitive in their conclusion as many imagine. For the scientific method involves (1) posing questions such as "Why is grass green?"; (2) developing hypotheses to explain why grass is green; (3) making predictions about how grass becomes green based on a given hypothesis; (4) testing that hypothesis via experiments on grass; and (5) analyzing the experiment's results to see if they fit the hypothesis. If the evidence doesn't fit the hypothesis, we need a new hypoth-

esis. If the evidence fits the hypothesis, we can pose further questions like "does chlorophyll's role in making grass green help explain other plants' colors?"

Ideology can do none of these things. For the ideologue, everything is essentially settled. The good scientist and the good philosopher, by contrast, are constantly testing everything. It's not that they don't believe that there is no truth. On the contrary, both the scientific endeavor and the philosophical enterprise are premised on the claim that there is truth, that we can know the truth, and that by building on truth, we come to expand our knowledge of the fullness of truth. Ideology, however, shuts down such endeavors, especially when they raise questions about the coherence of the ideologue's system of ideas.

In that sense, ideology really does stand in opposition to reason, or at least an expansive conception of rationality. To that extent, ideology is a type of fideism, and, like all forms of fideism, it is ultimately destructive of human life, human liberty, and human happiness.

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ESSAY

Above Us, Only Sky: How Ideology Manipulates Reality & Reverence as the Remedy

Noelle Mering

Saint John Paul II famously said that the problem with pornography “is not that it shows too much of the person, but that it shows far too little.”

The pornographer, in presenting a woman fully exposed, obscures, rather than reveals, who she is. He measures her by her usefulness and totalizes that metric as the only lens through which she can be seen.

This is how ideology works, too. What the pornographer does to women, the ideologue does to all of reality. He has no desire to contend with the world as it is, but instead seeks only to use it to support his predetermined specifications. In so doing, he crudely diminishes it.

While ideologies can come in various forms, perhaps the most pervasive and threatening one on offer today is a repackaged version of the Marxist belief that all human dynamics should be analyzed through the lens of power. Persons are sorted into binaries of oppressor and oppressed. While Marx focused on economic relationships, in the “woke movement” the filter of oppression is expanded to include gender, race, and sexuality. This further reduces and categorizes people and exponentially spreads the societal fault lines.

The woke ideologue does point to real instances of injustice, but then deifies them into an omnipresent reality that defines and explains all that is. Every person, institution, and interaction must be interpreted in a manner that reinforces oppression narratives, regardless of whether such an interpretation is warranted.

A tenet of woke anti-racist reeducation, according to celebrated author Robin

D’Angelo, is that in any given situation the question is not “Did racism take place?” but rather “How did racism manifest in that situation?” In other words, we must be trained to reframe all of reality in a way that conforms to ideology. D’Angelo is simply echoing Lenin’s point that the masses cannot of their own accord be sufficiently convinced of the depths of their oppression and, therefore, need an intellectual class continually prompting them to see in every social dynamic a fundamental struggle to either be dominated or to dominate. This is the groundwork of revolution.

Armed with this zero-sum filter, formerly nonpolitical spheres of life become battlegrounds of power: sex is political! And sports! Gardening, bird-watching, your friend’s afternoon barbecue ... everything can be targeted as problematic for the ideologue whose only precondition for seeing that something is oppressive is that it exists everywhere.

In this light, being is not something to be received but something to be manipulated.

Human Nature

This ideological manipulation of reality not only claims to expose what is prob-

lematic around us but also what is problematic within us.

Foundational to any totalitarian system is the rejection of a stable human nature. The revolution comes to each individual by attempting to remake him in the image of a progressive utopian vision. We are socially constructed, so they say, and therefore can be reconstructed through social engineering and reeducation.

This totalizing ideology becomes so psychologically coercive that political loyalties can come to replace personal ones in brutal and inhuman ways. Children trained by the Soviet Youth Movement learned to reject their old bourgeois familial piety in favor of a fervid Party loyalty. Informing on one's own parent to a murderous regime became an act of the highest honor.

Sexually transgressive activity is another way to demonstrate loyalty to ideology. The moral order is a meaningless concept for the ideologue, truth and morality being mere functions of power. Overriding one's longing for marital fidelity or even one's natural sexual inclinations is a necessary act of political liberation, albeit one that is often met with internal resistance. Male revolutionaries in the 1960s testify to having been ashamed that they were not easily able to overcome their inclinations toward homosexuality. Surely, they thought, it was a result of bourgeois repression that they were disinclined to have sex with other men. Acts of self-restraint signified a failure of ideological purity.

A contemporary manifestation of this occurs in the shaming of heterosexual men who are unwilling to sleep with transgender "women" upon discovering that they are biologically male. The ideology holds that the trans person, despite having male biology, is truly a woman if he so identifies. The straight man who rejects a transgender person as a candidate for intimacy based on that biology must then be bigoted.

For the revolutionary, every transgressive act is a flag planted for liberty—a declaration of defiance against the concept of a moral order and even of bodily reality. Our stubborn bodies, which carry the implacable logic of law and nature, are something from which we must be freed. Should a man's spoken identity as a woman come into conflict

with his bodily reality, it is the body that must be rejected in favor of the ideology. Should a woman's sexual freedom result in an unwanted pregnancy, again it is the body (hers and her child's) that must be rejected.

Ideological power is only sustained by coercing individuals to internalize its lies and live in accord with them, at the expense of living in accord with reality.

Reverence

One problem with thinking ideologically is that it reverences nothing—not our heroes nor our history, not our human nature, nor even what is real and true. Dietrich Von Hildebrand wrote that "the most elementary gesture of reverence is a response to being itself." Being docile to receive reality—to receive the world as it is given to us—is intimately connected to our ability to receive God himself.

How do we begin to think with reality in a way that compels us to reverence it? One thing we can do is struggle to see ourselves more clearly.

This is important for two reasons. Unvarnished self-knowledge is the sort of thing from which we tend to most recoil. Our egos have an endless capacity to deflect, excuse, and conceal our faults. Ideology capitalizes on this instinct to deceive ourselves. But it is in seeing ourselves with reality that we begin to become the sort of people who can see reality at all.

Secondly, if ideology is fueled in part by perpetual victimhood and the stoking of outrage at the perceived faults of others, a remedy is to contend with the faults of our selves. The person who strives to see his own inner world with clarity recoils at the prospect of presuming too much about the inner world of another. Without this perspective, those around us become cartoon renderings of heroes and villains based on surface attributes and group identification. We stop thinking deeply, and thus become vulnerable to sloganeering and propaganda. We see no need for mercy for ourselves, and so look mercilessly at the world around us.

Knowing ourselves with clarity helps us to see others with generosity. Many are experiencing the sting of division in friendships and families over the turmoil of the 2020s. Everyone—from any viewpoint—is susceptible to growing contemptuous of friends and family,

especially when the stakes are high and the consequences deeply felt. Hatred for an ideology can easily become hatred for the person espousing it, and this would be the true triumph of the very thing we think we are fighting.

We live in an ideological age and are prompted from almost every direction to use every event to further confirm us in our outrage. This provides us with an illusion of righteousness. Ideology exploits this very human tendency to find our virtue in identifying the vices of others.

The Christian disciplines of self-examination, contrition, and resolution are a corrective for this tendency. Such habits prompt us to direct our focus back to our own sins and see them, and ourselves, in light of a moral order and a merciful God.

"How can I use this person to serve my end of pleasure?" asks the pornographer. "How can I use this event, person, or tragedy to serve my preconceived political narrative?" asks the ideologue. Utopian ideology takes the scapegoating instinct, trains us in it, and then addicts us to it.

This cycle cannot be fought by simply becoming an ideologue of a different stripe. If the woke movement, like the Marxism before it, fundamentally manipulates reality, then its opposition must be disciplined in its humble reverence of it.

Ideology is compelling because it presents us with a passionate response to a real problem. That injustice exists is true. That the female body is erotic is true as well. Neither proposition comes close to being a comprehensive understanding of human persons or the world around us.

To see reality as it is, we must start with the hardest reality to face of all—that of sincerely seeing ourselves. Only then can we hope to look upon one another with humanity—with reverence for the true dignity of the other and reverence for the Being who is being itself.

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ESSAY

The Tower of Babel: The Problem of Devarim Achadim

Curt Biren

In the 16th century, Belgian artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder painted one of the most famous renderings of the Bible's Tower of Babel. He portrayed the tower as a gargantuan edifice of bricks and mor-

tar, under construction, with its top above the clouds, reaching toward the heavens. The project's royal leader is in the foreground with workmen at his feet feigning subservience. Within the painting itself, construction seems to be proceeding methodically, but successful completion is noticeably in doubt—perhaps reflecting Bruegel's own concerns about technological overreach and the political abuse of power. The large painting is a monumental achievement. Yet the meaning of the tower in the Bible is far more monumental. It not only brings into question the perennial yearning for the ideal society; it also demonstrates the need for what we now call ethical monotheism.

The story of the Tower of Babel in the Old Testament is surprisingly short—just nine verses in total. However, despite its brevity, its meaning is incredibly important, occurring at a critical moment in the Biblical narrative, right between two seminal events. First, the flood that re-cre-

ates the world with Noah, the righteous man of his generation; and second, God's establishment of His covenant with Abraham, the father of Judaism and ethical monotheism.

The story begins in Genesis 11:4 with the observation that “the whole earth was of one language and of common purpose.” The people, after settling all in one place, say:

Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed across the whole earth.

Displeased with this, God descends and says:

Behold, they are one people with one language for all, and this they begin to do! ... Come, let us descend and there confuse their language, that they should not understand one another's language.

And God dispersed them from there over the face of the whole earth, and they stopped building the city.

Commentaries on the story are numerous, but two stand out. The first takes the view that God was upset with man's hubris, with his arrogant attempt to create a godless heaven on earth, with the aim of replacing God with a human creation of godlike proportions. The *Chumash* published by Art Scroll suggests that there was a rebellion led by Nimrod, the preeminent hunter of the day, "to build a tower ascending to Heaven and, from it, wage war against God." The JPS *Jewish Study Bible* echoes a similar concern, noting that the text reflects "a keen sense that technology poses grave dangers when it is not accompanied by reverence for God." Leon Kass, too, has a similar interpretation in *The Beginning of Wisdom*, where he observes that "the tower ... must be seen as a presumptuous attempt to control or appropriate the divine."

A second notable interpretation is that God disperses the people across the land because He's not pleased with their attempt to create a unified borderless world with one language. On its surface, God's displeasure may seem odd, as the idea of a unified borderless world can sound appealing. Not surprisingly, many people today look to international institutions like the United Nations as vehicles for peace and mutual collaboration. Yet, with the Tower of Babel, the Bible appears to be offering a cautionary message about international governance, one echoed in recent times by Winston Churchill. In a speech given in the aftermath of the Second World War, Churchill said that, while he hoped the UN could become "a true temple of peace in which the shields of many nations can someday be hung up," he worried it might end up being "a cockpit in a Tower of Babel." Moreover, the biblical story appears to convey a message that's completely contrary to one of global unity. In order to limit the effects of man's evil inclinations, the Bible suggests, we ought to live not as one global community but rather as distinct peoples, with distinct languages and cultures and traditions. As Daniel Gordis explains in "The Tower of Babel and the Birth of Nationhood" (*Azure*, No. 40, 2010), the story is "an eloquent

argument in favor of the ethnic-cultural commonwealth—a precursor of sorts to the modern nation-state—as an indispensable condition for human freedom and self-realization."

While these two perspectives offer critical insights, there's another interpretation that's perhaps even more important, especially today. It requires a bit of textual analysis based on the Hebrew words *devarim achadim*—"one common vision"—but the exegesis ultimately leads to the importance of ethical monotheism as the antidote to a dangerous and recurring human predilection.

Let's remember from the story that after God confounds the people's language and disperses them across the land, He then pursues a completely new approach—a new covenant with Abraham and his descendants—upon which God's hopes for humankind will rest. Why was this necessary? After all, if God's aim, after the flood, was to ensure that man fill the earth with separate communities with distinct languages—as a means to rein in man's evil inclinations—then, with the dispersion after the Tower of Babel, that was being accomplished.

What then is it about the tower that's so disturbing that requires this completely new approach with Abraham? Upon careful review, there is one other plausible explanation. The text states that the people, in addition to being of one language and settling in one centralized place, were of "one common purpose." The actual words are *devarim achadim*. The Hebrew has no simple translation, so as a result the words have been variously translated—as "one common purpose," "common speech," "one speech," "common words," "the same words," and "uniform words." However it is translated, the words seem to connote "one common vision."

The tower was a human design representing a grand social scheme to create a prospering society based on one common vision. This, on its face, does not seem so unreasonable. Many aspire to the common good, to find common ground, to work together collectively for society as a whole. Moreover, to yearn for such a common purpose would seem to be endemic to the human condition. There have been over the years many social ideologies comparable to the Tower of Babel that try, with one common vision,

to make society look a certain ideal way. Yet the story is telling us that the attempt to impose such common visions is fraught with problems.

The most malevolent example of such social schemes in recent times is Marxist communism, which led to horrific abuses by its authoritarian rulers, not to mention the murder of nearly 100 million innocent lives. How did communist leaders justify all the inhumane treatment of their fellow man? As Juliana Geran Pilon observes in her book *The Utopian Conceit and the War on Freedom*, they believed that

they were engaged in the creation of an exceptionally praiseworthy, morally and historically superior social system, hence they were entitled to use all and any means that promised to bring about this ideal state of affairs.

Today there are many other variations of social ideologies that entail common visions of an ideal society—from utilitarianism to egalitarianism to socialism—often sounding quite benign. Notwithstanding their seemingly laudable aims, they all raise troubling questions.

First is the problem of knowledge. Even assuming some common vision, do we have the ability to understand society, with all its complexity, to put in place centralized plans aimed at some desired outcome? Reflecting on the hubris of the idea, Adam Smith, in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, observed that this type of societal planner "is apt to be very wise in his own conceit ... He seems to imagine that he can arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as the hand arranges the different pieces upon a chess-board."

Friedrich Hayek, expressing his own skepticism about economic planning in *The Fatal Conceit*, wrote: "The curious task of economics is to demonstrate to men how little they really know about what they imagine they can design."

Moreover, in our pursuing a common vision, it's dangerous for a central planner to prescribe what we ought to do—because it might not align with our human nature. Sociology, psychology, and economics can illuminate much about the contours of the human being and human society, but they cannot, as sciences, tell us what the goals of our society should be nor what the ends

of our lives should be. Yet many gravitate with ease from making observations about people and society to prescribing what society should ideally look like.

British economist Wilfred Beckerman discusses this precise issue in his book *Economics as Applied Ethics: Fact and Value in Economic Policy*. Beckerman highlights the important distinction between “normative” and “positive” propositions. “A ‘normative proposition’ is an ‘ought’ proposition ... like ... ‘we ought to raise taxes on fattening food.’” A “positive proposition” is an “is” proposition. For example, “other things remaining equal, the demand for apples is inversely related to their price.” Focusing on “ought” versus “is,” Beckerman references David Hume who “was highly critical of a widespread tendency to jump too readily from the latter to the former.” Beckerman laments that, within his own field of economics, this tendency “is still widespread.” In fact, he says, the main object of his book “could be seen as an attempt to fight against its widespread persistence in the analysis of economic policy.”

Yuval Levin, in his book *Tyranny of Reason: The Origins and Consequences of the Social Scientific Outlook*, expresses similar concerns. Tracing the history of the social sciences back to Auguste Comte, the father of sociology, Levin notes, “Comte was not worried about the difficulties of jumping from ‘is’ to ‘ought.’” For Comte, scientific laws, “derived from the scientific observation and analysis of society, would point the way to the proper arrangement of society, and then men of science would undertake the task of actually reorganizing (or engineering) society to fit the pattern demanded by nature.” Today, regrettably, as Levin observes, “the social scientific outlook does, as a general principle, accept a number of Comte’s suppositions regarding the discoverability of laws behind the fabric of societal life.”

The apparent hubris is troubling. Even more, the implications are alarming. While a society committed to one common vision, planned according to some social scientific theory, may seem to offer great potential, it entails the very real peril of driving out any semblance of pluralism, any consideration of the voices and rights of those in the minority, any checks and balances designed to limit the reach of those in power. As Levin sums up, “The idea that

society functions by natural rational laws ... is inherently tyrannical.”

Additionally, in our attempt to implement some grand social scheme aimed at a common vision, there will inevitably be a conflict with our normative, moral values. This conflict can, at first, seem odd. After all, do not our visions for society reflect our values and morals? Such social visions, however, are by definition consequentialist. Their goals are to identify the right consequences, the right outcomes, the right state of affairs, and then to devise policies and programs that will create that desired state of affairs. This may sound reasonable, but there’s a huge potential issue. There is no particular reason why our pursuit of an ideal state of affairs should align with the traditional moral values that guide our individual actions. Quite the contrary.

Paul Hurley discusses this in his book *Beyond Consequentialism*. “Consequentialist moral theories are not theories of the relationship between reasons to act and right action. They are instead theories of the relationship between right actions and good overall states of affairs, upon which an action is morally right just in case its performance leads to the best state of affairs.” Yet asking people to make decisions based on what leads to a desired state of affairs inevitably compromises their own moral values to do what’s right on an individual basis. Hurley observes that this puts one in the untenable situation of making moral decisions based on two different moral criteria, each likely to be in conflict with the other.

Finally, such social planning, assuming some common vision, undermines our notions of free will and ultimately our sense of morality itself. When we focus on how society should ideally look, making a particular state of affairs the primary consideration, we are assuming that everyone in our society, under the right social conditions, will somehow act rightly—as though the human person is no more than a material object, reflecting solely his or her social and economic conditions, without free will. As Bradley Birzer, reflecting on the history of social scientific thought in *The Imaginative Conservative*, recently noted:

For a while, the West thought that economics or biology or psychology determined our existence. Then around 1967, it became race, class, or gender. And this

is the extremely dangerous situation in which we find ourselves. ... Few believe in free will, and those who do have no real ability to shape intellectual or cultural trends. Yet, without free will and a belief in it, there is no dignity and certainly no freedom of the human person. And without moral responsibility, there is no certain morality.

As the story of the Tower of Babel implies, we seem to naturally yearn for a common purpose, a common vision—all presumably with noble intentions. This sentiment was evidently prevalent thousands of years ago, and it continues to be a motivating force for many today. It not only sounds appealing; it also seems virtuous.

Yet the Tower of Babel story appears to be telling us that we need to consider such grand social visions with great caution. Even more, perhaps it’s telling us that, in light of our propensity for such utopian common visions, we need to commit ourselves to a completely different approach. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks reminds us, “after Babel, God comes to the conclusion that there must be another and different way for humans to live.”

The biblical story resumes, several generations after the Tower of Babel, with God saying to Abraham, “*Lech lecha*”—“Go for yourself ... And I will make of you a great nation; I will bless you, and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing.” And with these words, we see the beginning of ethical monotheism—not entailing global government but rather distinct communities with distinct traditions; not focused on one common vision under the dictates of the state but rather on communal responsibilities within civil society; not with a consequentialist vision of an ideal state of affairs but with individual moral obligations to be righteous, charitable, and just, all under a covenant with God.

Bruegel’s depiction of the Tower of Babel may have included many embellishments beyond the literal biblical text, but Bruegel, in the 16th century, appears to have discerned, perhaps more than he realized, the profound truth of its underlying message.

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STEVEN HORWITZ

ERIC KOHN

The classical liberal movement lost one of its strongest voices when economist Steven Horwitz passed away after a long fight with cancer on June 27, 2021.

"I still believe the world is getting better and better and more awesome. I'm just not going to see as much of it as I thought I would."

When Horwitz spoke those words on the *Free Thoughts* podcast in 2019, he was about two years into his battle with multiple myeloma—a disease that ultimately took his life. He was on that podcast to talk about gratitude and the importance of remaining grateful. As an economist, Horwitz knew we have reason to be grateful. For millennia, the average person survived on the equivalent of roughly \$3 per day—until around 1800, when that amount skyrocketed. But Steve's gratitude was not so much for material things but for his own life. This gratitude was exemplified in the happy-warrior spirit that he brought not only to debates about public affairs and economics but also to his battle with cancer.

Horwitz passed away at the age of 57. Yet he lived a full and meaningful life, sharing his exuberance and intelligence with his family, friends, students, and readers across the country.

Born Feb. 7, 1964, Steve Horwitz was raised in the suburbs of Detroit, Mich. He earned his B.A. in economics and philosophy from his beloved University of Michigan before going on to earn an M.A. and a Ph.D. in economics from George Mason University.

He taught economics at St. Lawrence University in Canton, N.Y., from 1989 through 2016, during which time he wrote his seminal economics text



Microfoundations of Macroeconomics: An Austrian Perspective, published in 2000. In 2017 he was named to the faculty of Ball State University as its Distinguished Professor of Free Enterprise in the Department of Economics and as director of the Institute for the Study of Political Economy in the Miller College of Business.

His 2015 book, *Hayek's Modern Family: Classical Liberalism and the Evolution of Social Institutions*, employed a Hayekian framework to explore the family as a social institution "that perform[s] certain irreplaceable functions in society" and offered a pointed "defense of the family as a social institution against the view that either the state or 'the village' is able or required to take over its irreplaceable functions." As Acton's Joseph Sunde noted in a 2015 review of *Hayek's Modern Family*, Horwitz argues "that economic prosperity has not only changed the way many view the family (no longer as survival assets), but created more room for love, sacrifice, and investment along the way."

This is, as Sunde notes, an explication of the economics of love. The economics of love was exemplified in Steve's life—his love for his family and his love of using the study of economics to instill a sense of wonder and awe in those whose lives he touched.

When asked to describe himself in an interview commemorating his 2020 Julian L. Simon Memorial Award win from the Competitive Enterprise Institute, Horwitz remarked that, "at the end of the day, I think I am a teacher." Steve as teacher shone through what could be the easily dismissed space of social media. As Tarnell Brown wrote at The Library of Economics and Liberty, Steve "believed in people, even when, no—especially when, we gave him every reason not to. That is, of course, exactly what faith is."

Family and teaching are perhaps the only two things in life Steve loved more than the pioneering Canadian progressive rock band Rush and the Detroit Red Wings. The joy induced by the former and the of-late anguish of the latter he detailed often on his Facebook page, a place that, without Steve's observations of the world around us, seems far less interesting.

And yet, were we ever tempted to think the world was getting less interesting, Steve Horwitz would be there to remind us that it's "getting better and better and more awesome." And we should enjoy what we get to see of it.

"If love remains/though everything is lost/we will pay the price/but we will not count the cost." —Rush, "Bravado"

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Justice, and Only Justice: The Beauty of Impartiality and the Ugliness of Her Rivals

James Bruce

Today's cries for justice come highly stylized. People don't want "justice, and only justice," the justice of Deuteronomy 16:20. No, they want justice *plus*. They want social justice, racial justice, or intergenerational justice. Justice by itself, unadorned with adjectives, seems boring by comparison to these glamorous cousins. But justice is good and should be pursued for its own sake and not for a predetermined ideological outcome or preferred social goal, the way adjectival forms of justice tend to do. In what follows I'll argue that basic justice offers us practical tools we need to resolve seemingly intractable legal and political disagreements.

But first: What is justice? The standard definition is giving to each his due. To offer this definition is to invite criticism. To whom is what given, and on what grounds? And who does the giving? We should resist the temptation to determine the answers to these questions in advance, and we can understand the addition of a word to *just* or *justice* as an attempt to decide the outcome of our deliberations before they have commenced. Someone wanting to modify justice must make a case for why we can use the new phrase in a way that is somehow literal and sensible, rather than metaphorical or just untrue.

This essay proposes that we stick with justice, only justice. We start by considering the theoretical and practical appeal of impartiality; we then turn to the confusion surrounding its rivals, a cluster of alternatives we shall call *equalizing justice*; we offer reasons for the continued attractiveness of equalizing justice, in spite of

our complaints; and we conclude with an exhortation to speak and to act outside the constraints of justice-only language.

The Theoretical and Practical Appeal of Impartial Injustice

Giving someone his due requires a sober-minded assessment of a situation. Impartiality is essential. It asks us to ignore some of what we see in order to focus on the salient features of a situation. We can fail to be impartial by insisting on irrelevance, or we can fail to be impartial by ignoring the important. Impartiality delivers two criteria for justice. First, justice must ignore what should be ignored; second, justice should focus on what is relevant. As we shall see, socioeconomic status can regularly be ignored, but *who did what to whom* should always be considered.

Impartiality may seem comparatively weak, inadequate for the task of helping us live together, but I argue that, on the contrary, impartiality offers strong theoretical and practical advantages.

First, the requirement to be impartial has theoretical appeal. In an age of increasing tribalism, impartiality turns our thoughts away from noticing mere differences to considering what counts instead. In an age of socioeconomic disparity, impartiality requires us to think about specific cases and not about our broader allegiances. In an age of political strife, we need political opponents to model impartial respect for the law.

Impartial justice has an ancient pedigree. Deuteronomy 16:19 commands judges not to pervert justice by showing partiality or accepting a bribe. The King James Version follows the Hebrew more

closely than many modern translations: "Thou shalt not respect persons." Not respecting persons may sound to modern ears like an exhortation to disrespect or to demean people, hence the change in newer translations, but *not respecting persons* serves as shorthand for disregarding features of cases that are extraneous to the question at hand. Judges should not twist the law against the poor (Exodus 23:6), but judges should not show a poor man favoritism either (Exodus 23:3). Judgment of wrongdoing should not rely on noticing, much less appealing to, someone's socioeconomic status. True, one can imagine outlying cases in which being poor or rich supplies the motive or the means to commit a particular crime, but even here the motives or the means, and not the poverty or the wealth, should be the object of concern, if such appeals are to be legitimate.

This mental maneuvering may seem difficult, but the ability to reason this way should be a necessary product of any liberal arts education; indeed, the ability to judge impartially should be something school age children do in the classroom and on the playing field. Though we sometimes fail spectacularly at placing in mental parentheses the unnecessary features of the people involved, we successfully do so all the time. Our ability to judge impartially explains the widespread moral outrage when people fail to do so. We can ignore some features of people that do not relate directly to the cases at hand, and we should defend our practice of doing it. Judging justly requires ignoring some of what we see.

But justice also demands that we emphasize some of what we do see.

Deuteronomy 16:19 also offers a strict command against bribery. Though bribery may make a judge insist on certain irrelevant features of a situation, bribery most likely causes the judge to ignore what's important, as the verse makes clear: "a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous" (ESV). Illicit gifts to judges encourage them to ignore the very things they should be observing. They are blind to what they should see, and they refuse to listen to the words offered on behalf of the innocent. An airtight alibi or the physical impossibility of a certain person committing a particular crime? These things are ignored by the unjust judge who prefers private gain to the true administration of justice.

Again, this mental maneuvering may seem difficult, but good decisions require such discretionary judgments all the time. Any parent knows the temptation to ignore the crucial features of a situation from a desire for personal advantage, most especially the personal advantage of rest and quiet after a long day. But justice requires attending to the right features necessary for judgment. If junior does the chores to receive the promised reward, but the promised reward is inconvenient to the parent, then ignoring the child's legitimate claim doesn't simply cause hurt feelings. Most crucially, it's unjust. The desire for private gain blinds the eyes of the parent. Sometimes parents try to outmaneuver the requirements of justice by appealing to a forced interpretation of the promise to junior that removes any parental obligation to him. But impartiality speaks against changing the ground rules for the reward after the chores have been done. Doing so subverts the cause, or twists the words, of the child, which is precisely what Deuteronomy 16:19 forbids.

Impartiality in Practice

That's the theory. Impartiality also has practical appeal. To see how, let's consider two examples.

Impartiality requires that we ignore irrelevant differences but also that we focus intently on important facts. So, in each instance, we can ask two questions: First, what should we ignore? Second, what should we remember? Let's ask these two questions about two hotly contested topics, immigration and policing.



First, immigration. Impartiality requires blindness to irrelevancies and focus on important details. If a country freely decides to let people immigrate, what is due to any given applicant? Impartiality answers this question by asking two follow-up questions. First, what should we ignore? An immigrant's origin, either nationally or ethnically, should not matter. Neither should the immigrant's gender or age. We should ignore religious differences, too, and political preferences, so long as these beliefs are consistent with our system of government. Second, what should we not forget? Not everyone who wants to immigrate supports that government's way of life. Terrorist groups will gladly exploit weaknesses in national borders. Such thinking is neither xenophobic nor apocalyptic but a sober-minded assessment of the world we inhabit. We need not ignore competing skills between immigrants either. Someone may be the world's best computer programmer or a Nobel laureate, or a talented plumber or skilled electrician, and so be ready to contribute immediately to the national life. In all, we should recognize the intricacies of this debate. Although pithy slogans promote political causes, they rarely solve genuine problems of justice—if they ever solve them at all.

Now let's look at policing. Consider just how much impartiality can bring to

this national concern. Again, let's apply our two questions for impartiality to this complex case. First, what should we ignore? When determining whether or not a particular police action is justified, we should ignore ethnic and physical differences to whatever degree they do not pertain to the case. Second, what should we remember? We should not forget the dangers of policing or how a routine traffic stop can turn into a lethal situation. We should not forget the real presence of racism in our country, nor should we forget the lawlessness that makes policing vital to thriving communities.

Take a concrete case of bad policing: Ferguson, Missouri. From the perspective of impartial justice, one truly damning feature of the Department of Justice investigation into the police department was the focus on policing for city revenue at the expense of public good.¹ The police officers are paid by the city, so emphasizing the need for policing with a view to revenue creates a serious financial incentive to blanket the city with tickets. The people need to pay at least some of those tickets so the city can overcome its projected revenue shortfall; without aggressive ticketing, the city could have failed to pay its police officers—hardly a desirable outcome from the perspective of the people doing the policing. The need for impartiality can describe the potential

for injustice here: Just as professors do not receive a salary based on the grades they give, police should not be pressured to fine citizens in the hopes of receiving their salaries.

So impartiality has practical appeal, but two features of impartiality make it potentially unpalatable. First, impartiality requires knowledge of particulars, something many of us have neither the time nor the inclination to acquire. But this requirement should not be seen as a weakness, however annoying or inconvenient it may be. We seek the truth in justice, and we should be willing to work for it.

Second, people may prefer choosing an approach to justice precisely because it guarantees our preferred outcome, but we cannot know in advance what impartiality requires. Far from being a defect, this inability to game the system is a benefit of impartial justice. We want our deliberations about justice to get us to the truth, even if the truth makes us uncomfortable—and even when we realize that our preferred outcome is an unjust one.

So even though impartially assessing what is due to someone is both difficult and unlikely to guarantee a preferred outcome, we should do the hard work and take the risk to pursue justice, only justice.

The Tortured Confusion of Equalizing Justice

Skeptics of impartial justice want to turn our gaze away from impartiality to focus on equality. They may even say that impartiality, far from being distinct from equality, is just equality applied in a different way. Equality for them is the inevitable way we understand questions of justice. But this argument ignores equalizing justice's arbitrary ideological commitments that make justice more confusing and rob it of its ability to give clear direction.

In what follows, we'll explore the conflicts and troubles in the equalizing camp with a view to showing how their appeals differ from impartiality in significant ways. We'll also consider how departures from impartial justice give us less confidence in our judgments, diminishing claims about equalizing justice's practical value. Impartial justice asks us to be attentive to the details of a situation and not to a broader trend or philosophical agenda, as is the case with equalizing

justice, but equalizing justice asks us to consider or to ignore new things without telling us how we should respond to this information. To see why, we'll consider three rivals to impartiality: justice as fairness, luck egalitarianism, and socialism.

Justice as fairness asks us to overcome arbitrariness. Its most prominent advocate, John Rawls, asks us to consider whether people have equal life prospects, that is, whether or not people with the same talents and ambition have the same likelihood for success.²

Luck egalitarianism—a position articulated by Ronald Dworkin, among others—asks us to fight brute luck on behalf of those who face real challenges through no fault of their own.³ Luck egalitarians think justice as fairness does not do enough to help level the playing field for those who have natural disabilities or impairments.

Socialism asks us to fight inequality. Socialism—defended in recent years by G.A. Cohen—criticizes luck egalitarianism for failure of nerve; luck egalitarians are heading in the right direction by wanting to compensate for bad luck, but they fail to recognize the artificial divide between our choices and our circumstances. We make bad choices, but sometimes we make those bad choices because of who we have become through no fault of our own.

To act against arbitrariness, justice as fairness asks us to focus on people's private affairs, including their childhoods. To act against brute luck, luck egalitarians want us to delve into people's private affairs, including their disabilities. To act against inequality, socialists want us to peer into people's lives, even their tastes and sensibilities. In contrast to impartiality's focus on not being a respecter of persons, other theories of justice demand an investigation into the private lives of other people. And rather than achieving greater clarity, we get more confusion when we attempt to weigh on the scales of justice things that have nothing to do with the particular circumstances.

To see why, let's return to immigration and policing. Opposition to any restrictions on immigration becomes problematic under impartiality's rivals. Life prospects, a level playing field, and equality all speak for open borders, without articulating any limiting rule. Being born on one side of the Rio Grande rather than the other seems arbitrary

but determinative of prospects for success, contra justice as fairness. Having requirements for entry does an injustice against those who fail to meet those requirements through no fault of their own, contra luck egalitarianism. And if we are a family as a nation, per socialism, then surely we are a global family, too. My point here is not that we should restrict immigration; I want to emphasize, instead, that departures from impartiality generate confusion and not clarity. Rivals to impartial justice do not give the clear advice that impartial justice offers.

Developing a coherent position on policing faces similar troubles. Having negative interactions with the police minimizes one's life prospects, suggesting the need for less policing, but living in a dangerous neighborhood minimizes one's life prospects, too, arguing for more. So justice as fairness offers no guidance here. People may suffer many things from brute luck—some mental illnesses, perhaps—but that does not give them license to harm others with the bad choices they make. Luck egalitarianism has nothing unique to offer here. Neither does socialism. Even if we are a family, people fight within families. So socialism may not be able to articulate the success criteria for policing, much less evaluate the justice or injustice of specific police policies. Again, the point isn't to question policing—we should have police—but to question whether or not impartiality's rivals actually offer action-guiding directives. Other theories of justice either quietly imitate impartiality, dressed up in new verbiage, or they advance zany or faddish approaches to policing that will do more harm than good.

Why Equalizing Justice Is Still Attractive

If appealing to impartiality seems desirable and indeed preferable to appeals to equality—given the latter's confusion—why do people still want to add ideology to impartiality in their appeals for justice?

I have three theories about the attractiveness of contemporary equalizing justice. I list them in order of declining sympathy; that is, I offer the most morally attractive reason to appeal to equalizing justice at the start, and I end with the most nefarious reason to do so.

First, people genuinely desire better prospects but may lack the wherewithal

to articulate what they want. Speaking about “social justice” for kids in schools may really be a claim about justice, and only justice. If schools claim to be teaching children how to read but fail to do so, we don’t have a failure of some modified form of justice. We have an instance of fraud—of injustice, strictly speaking. But an appeal to “social justice” in this case actually blurs the issue. We have here a case of injustice, plain and simple. Alternatively, the situation may not be about justice, and only justice. For example, if one school has more resources than another school because invested parents can donate more to one school than to another, we don’t have a case of injustice but of parental love matched with resources. Someone can make the case that richer parents should pay more in taxes to benefit the children of poor parents, but this public policy argument needs to offer reasons for the policy and not just a slogan about “social justice.” We should reflect more as a society about how to help people articulate their concerns, whether they follow from justice or not.

Second, equalizing justice is attractive because it solves a problem about the awkwardness of accusations. Asking for justice without modification requires an account of the situation, a naming of the harm that was done as well as the wrongdoer. But if you lack opportunities you think you deserve, locating the harm that is done and the wrongdoer or wrongdoers can be a difficult task. It may also be discomfiting. However, if you cry, “I want social justice,” people may listen to your complaint without requiring the details of an accusation, namely, a description of who did what. So we can place this second reason under the heading of a failure of nerve. Precisely because cries for “social justice” allow us to sidestep questions of responsibility, those wanting to accuse someone without confronting the social costs of doing so find such calls genuinely appealing. Cries for particular changes under the social justice banner allow us to agitate for change without having to articulate our positions in a way that may embarrass us. Society should do better to encourage forthrightness about our collective concerns with a view to identifying actual wrongdoers.

Third, appeals to a modified form of *justice* can appeal to wrongdoers them-

selves because such appeals offer the possibility of a fossilization or furtherance of injustice. If people harmed by wrongdoers do not have the nerve to accuse *them*, but nevertheless identify the *wrongdoing*, then even the wrongdoers may revel in the language of social justice as a shield with which to cover themselves. It’s a recognition of the wrong, but, happily from their point of view, the wrong does not seem to have a culprit. For example, advocates for so-called reproductive justice may want minors to procure abortion without parental consent because they fear pregnant girls may face shame or even physical violence from family members. But sexual predators also have an interest in guaranteeing this access to abortion. Abortion offers perpetrators of crimes against children an opportunity to end pregnancies that result from their wicked activity. Doing so without drawing attention to the girl’s parents—and the law—helps and does not hurt those who sexually exploit girls. So the language of social justice can permit wrongdoers to sound like champions of public virtue when, put simply, they are not.

Conclusion: The Importance of Moral Terms Other than Justice

The task of justice requires humility, not slogans, and a sober-minded assessment of facts, not glib remarks. Sadly, we have become so overrun with debates about justice that we have forgotten the single word *justice* does not exhaust our commitments and responsibilities to each other.

So, by way of conclusion, let’s consider other words and moral language we can and should use to describe our life together.

I’ll start with a hypothetical example. If I see someone stranded on the side of a lightly trafficked road to nowhere, late at night, in the middle of a historic snowstorm, does *justice* require that I stop? The language of *justice* seems surprisingly inadequate in my deliberations. In fact, we may think less of me if I did rigorous calculations about what justice requires. Nor does *injustice* quite capture our sensibilities if I don’t help the stranded traveler. I doubt *injustice* would spring to your lips. *What a jerk*, perhaps. Or *what a wicked and horrible thing to do*—he left him to die.

Appeals to language beyond justice may strike some as troubling. Immanuel

Kant, for example, thought that receiving charity dehumanizes or debases the recipient. But here Kant both misunderstands the benefits of being a focus of someone else’s concern and underestimates the possibilities for grinding humiliation by the bureaucratic machinery of modern nation-states. I, for example, would much prefer to be the recipient of a stranger’s kindness than passionless state-sponsored assistance.

The world attempts to make every transaction happen according to the language of justice. But we know that, especially in times of great need, while we do not want less than justice, we certainly need more than justice. When a man seeking to justify himself asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus offers the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Three men walk by someone injured by robbers, but only the last man has mercy on him. That third man, a Samaritan, proved to be the injured man’s neighbor. Appeals to justice actually seem out of place in the face of the man’s desperate need. He needs someone to love him.

So love your neighbor. Be kind to him. You must always give him justice, but sometimes you have the privilege of offering him so much more.

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NOTES

1 United States Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, *Investigation of the Ferguson Department*, March 4, 2015: https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/opa/press-releases/attachments/2015/03/04/ferguson_police_department_report.pdf. See especially section III, Ferguson Law Enforcement Efforts Are Focused on Generating Revenue.

2 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

3 Ronald Dworkin, “What is Equality? Part 2: Equality of Resources.” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 10:4 (1981): 283–345.

Does the First Amendment Fulfill Its Promise of Religious Liberty?

Joseph G. Scoville

Religion forms culture, and culture dictates laws. A core element of culture is its understanding of the human person and of marriage, sexuality, and the family. In the post-Christian era, as Jewish and Christian morality loses its hold on the culture, we are witnessing new attitudes about these foundational issues. The laws of this country—whether enacted by legislation or executive orders or imposed by judicial fiat—have followed suit, recognizing novel individual rights. The most prominent include the right to same-sex marriage, to abortion on demand, and to change one's biological sex.

Some religious believers, now seemingly in the minority, find themselves subject to government coercion requiring them not only to recognize these rights but also to participate in conduct that their religion declares objectively immoral. The protagonists include bakers fined for refusing to bake a wedding cake for a same-sex union; nuns forced to provide their employees with health insurance covering abortifacient drugs; and doctors and pharmacists disciplined for refusing to provide medical procedures or drugs they consider immoral.

So the question is, Does the First Amendment's guarantee of the right to the "free exercise" of religion provide any protection to those who resist laws requiring them to act contrary to their

religiously informed consciences? Unless the Supreme Court reverses its case law, the answer is "not much."

The Constitution of 1787 established a republic in which the interests of the majority of citizens, subject to enumerated procedural checks and balances, would ultimately prevail. The Bill of Rights, adopted two years later, provided a needed counterbalance to the majoritarianism of the original document. Although the majority generally has the power to make the rules, it must nevertheless respect certain rights of the minority. The First Amendment—presumably "first" because of its importance in a free society—protects important rights in absolute terms:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

When faced with state restrictions on freedom of speech or the press, the Supreme Court has honored the language of the First Amendment by subjecting restrictions to strict scrutiny. Most types of restriction are presumed invalid, with the burden on the government to identify a "compelling" state interest and to demonstrate that the law is the least restrictive means available to attain that compelling interest. Although the freedoms of speech and press are not absolute and must occasionally yield to other important interests, the strict-scrutiny standard weighs the balance heavily in favor of individual freedom.

A History of Religious Liberty in America

Given the centrality of religious liberty to the history of the Founding, one might assume a similarly rigorous approach to the religious liberty guaranteed in the Free Exercise Clause of the same amendment. Not so. In those cases where the Court has applied the Free Exercise Clause, except for a brief period in the mid-20th century, it has refused to find that religiously motivated conduct enjoys any special protection from majoritarian laws.

The first, and still influential, case decided by the Supreme Court under the Free Exercise Clause was *Reynolds v. United*

States (1879). *Reynolds* upheld a federal law declaring polygamy illegal in the Utah territory, against the claims of a Mormon whose religious duty was to practice plural marriage. The Court articulated a distinction between belief and conduct that holds true today:

Congress was deprived of all legislative power over mere opinion, but was left free to reach actions which were in violation of social duties or subversive of good order.

Having recognized the dichotomy between highly protected belief and less protected conduct, the Court could have articulated some sort of test by which the demands of conscience might be balanced against the competing demands of "social duty" and "good order," but it did not. The holding of *Reynolds* may be summarized as "believe what you want but do as the law commands." In subsequent cases, the Court relied on this principle to reject claims by religious conscientious objectors that the Free Exercise Clause relieved them of the duty to comply with military conscription laws or state laws requiring military education.

During the early 20th century, when the Supreme Court was generally expanding its recognition of individual rights, it assiduously avoided taking up free exercise claims. For example, *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* (1925) involved a challenge to the constitutionality of the Oregon Compulsory Education Act, which required most children to attend public schools through age 16, in effect abolishing private and parochial schools. Plaintiffs (the Society of Sisters and a group of Catholic parents) argued that the law abridged their rights under several provisions of the Constitution, including the Free Exercise Clause. The Court struck down the law, but not on First Amendment grounds, which it ignored. Instead, the Court found a violation of the sisters' property right to run a legitimate business, as well as the parents' due process right to direct their children's upbringing. The Court avoided an obvious opportunity to establish circumstances in which the First Amendment allows a believer to act in accordance with conscience contrary to the requirements of law.

Claims of religious exemption from the requirements of law were, how-

ever, unavoidable in the celebrated “flag salute cases” of the 1940s. *Minersville School District v. Gobitis* (1940) arose from the expulsion of two elementary school children from a public school in Pennsylvania because of their refusal to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, as required by state law. The children’s parents, members of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, challenged the state law on free exercise grounds, as their religion considered the pledge to pay homage to a graven image. Although the lower courts upheld the parents’ free exercise claim, the Supreme Court rejected it. Relying on *Reynolds*, Justice Felix Frankfurter reaffirmed the principle that religious liberty had never included “exemption from doing what society thinks necessary for the promotion of some great common end, or from a penalty for conduct which appears dangerous to the general good.” With all but one Justice agreeing, the Court refused to recognize a First Amendment protection for conduct that violates generally applicable laws: “The mere possession of religious convictions which contradict the relevant concerns of a political society does not relieve the citizen from the discharge of political responsibilities.” The state had a legitimate interest in promoting national unity, even at the cost of coercing schoolchildren to act against their religious consciences. A spate of discrimination and even violence against the Jehovah’s Witnesses ensued.

Three years later, in *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette* (1943), the Court reversed the *Gobitis* case. This, too, involved a challenge by Jehovah’s Witnesses to a law compelling public schoolchildren to salute the flag. The majority of the Court held that the law was unconstitutional, but rather than relying on the Free Exercise Clause, the Court found that the state lacked authority to impose upon any individual the duty to participate in “a ceremony so touching matters of opinion and political attitude.” Therefore, it was “not necessary to inquire whether non-conformist beliefs will exempt from the duty to salute.” The grounds for this decision are important for our analysis. The *Barnette* decision is now understood to have established the First Amendment right against “compelled speech” rather than any principle of religious liberty.

Until 1963, the Supreme Court had never held that the Free Exercise Clause grants believers any religious exemp-

tion from complying with laws of general applicability. Familiar religious exemptions were all a matter of legislative grace. The Selective Services Act, for example, provided express accommodations for Quakers and others who held pacifist religious beliefs. The Volstead Act, passed to implement the prohibition of alcoholic beverages under the Eighteenth Amendment, allowed but regulated the possession and use of wine for “sacramental purposes, or like religious rites.” In these and other areas of life, the demands of conscience were at the mercy of majoritarian legislatures, which were free to recognize religious exemptions but not constitutionally required to do so. As long as the law was neutral (that is, not aimed specifically at religious practice), and of general applicability (that is, not subject to discretionary exceptions), it must be obeyed, regardless of religious objections.

In 1963, however, the Court’s treatment of free exercise claims changed. The landmark case, *Sherbert v. Verner* (1963), involved another small American denomination, the Seventh Day Adventists. Plaintiff was denied unemployment compensation benefits under state law because she refused to work on Saturday, which she, as an Adventist, honored as the Sabbath. The Warren Court held that the state’s denial of unemployment benefits placed a burden on the exercise of Sherbert’s right of free exercise of her religion. For the first time in its history, the Court applied a strict-scrutiny analysis, requiring that the state prove that a compelling state interest was served by the law and that its means were the least restrictive necessary to accomplish this interest. The strict-scrutiny test, which is extremely hard to satisfy, was predictably not met in this case. The Court found that the state’s identified interest—administrative difficulty in distinguishing feigned religious objections from sincere ones—was insufficient. In several subsequent cases, the Court vindicated the free exercise claims of employees denied unemployment compensation arising from their refusal to work on their Sabbath or to perform work that violated their religious beliefs.

In *Wisconsin v. Yoder* (1972), the Supreme Court applied the strict-scrutiny test to a free exercise claim outside the workers’ compensation context. *Yoder* was a challenge by members of the Old Order Amish

to the requirements of the Wisconsin Compulsory Education Law, which required attendance at school until age 16. Applying the strict-scrutiny test, the Court found that the state’s interest in education, although important, was not so “compelling” that it justified forcing Amish families to expose their children to secondary schooling, where the children would be taught principles contrary to their faith.

The *Sherbert-Yoder* line of cases worked a tectonic change in the analysis of religious liberty claims. For the preceding century, the Supreme Court had drawn a clear distinction between religious belief, which was entitled to the highest level of protection against state encroachment, and religiously motivated conduct, which was entitled to no protection when it conflicted with generally applicable law. The Court worried out loud about a lawless society in which everyone was entitled to act as he pleased in accordance with his religious tenets, regardless of the law. The Court made no real effort to articulate standards by which the claims of individual conscience were to be balanced against the demands of the civil law. *Sherbert* and the cases that followed it took a radically different approach: When the state seeks to coerce compliance with a law that violates sincerely held religious morality, the state must justify its action by identifying a very good reason to do so (a “compelling state interest”) as well as show that it has no other reasonable way to accomplish its goal (“least restrictive means”). Religiously motivated conduct went from unprotected to highly protected.

This regime came to a halt in 1993 with *Employment Division v. Smith*. The plaintiffs in *Smith*, Native Americans, were fired because of their use of sacramental peyote in a religious ceremony. The state of Oregon denied their claims for unemployment compensation, on the ground that drug use was “misconduct” under the statute and because peyote use violated Oregon criminal law. Plaintiffs contended that disqualifying them for religious use of peyote burdened their free exercise of religion. Under the *Sherbert-Yoder* line of decisions, the plaintiffs had a slam-dunk case; even the Oregon Supreme Court held in their favor. But Justice Antonin Scalia, writing for a majority of the Court, rejected the free exercise claim. Without overruling the *Sherbert-Yoder* line of cases, Justice Scalia

distinguished them on the ground that those cases “involved not the Free Exercise Clause alone, but the Free Exercise Clause in conjunction with other constitutional protections, such as freedom of speech and of the press.” In analyzing *Smith*’s claim grounded only in the Free Exercise Clause, the Court returned to *Reynolds* and *Gobitis*, remarking that “We have never held that an individual’s religious beliefs excuse him from compliance with an otherwise valid law prohibiting conduct that the State is free to regulate.” The Court explicitly rejected the strict-scrutiny test. As long as the enactment is a “neutral law of general applicability,” the Free Exercise Clause provides no exemption from obedience. The Court said that any other system would allow each citizen to become a “law unto himself.”

Smith returned the country to the *status quo* before 1963, under which the only way to gain exemption for religious scruples must be through legislation. Recognizing this, Congress quickly passed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), signed into law by President Bill Clinton in 1993. RFRA purported to reinstate the *Sherbert-Yoder* test: Laws substantially burdening religious practice, even if they are neutral and generally applicable, must be justified as the least restrictive means of achieving a compelling state interest. The Supreme Court held in 1997 that Congress did not have the authority to impose this standard on the states. Consequently, RFRA now applies only to federal laws and regulations that substantially burden the exercise of religion. Despite what many casual observers may imagine, much of the famous litigation in recent years involving free exercise—notably *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* (2014) and *Little Sisters of the Poor Saints Peter and Paul Home v. Pennsylvania* (2020)—involved RFRA, not the Free Exercise Clause.

After *Smith*, the Court has occasionally invalidated laws on free exercise grounds on a finding that the laws were not neutral or of general applicability and were therefore subject to strict scrutiny. In the most recent case, *Fulton v. Philadelphia* (2021), Catholic Social Services (CSS) challenged the decision of Philadelphia’s child welfare department to stop referring children to CSS upon discovering that the CSS would not certify same-sex couples to be foster parents on account of its religious beliefs about marriage. The Court found that the city’s policy was not generally applicable, because it contained numerous discretionary exemptions. Applying strict scrutiny, the Court concluded that Philadelphia did not have a compelling reason to deny a religious exemption to CSS, even though the city had never granted exemptions to other agencies on nonreligious grounds. The concurring justices, as well as many commentators, complained that the Court’s determination that the city’s policy was not “generally applicable” was contrived and reflected the majority’s reluctance to face the real issue in the case—whether *Smith* should be overruled. The same critics pointed out that a simple amendment to Philadelphia’s ordinance would satisfy *Fulton* and allow the city once again to eliminate CSS from the adoption program. Thus, while *Fulton* seems to be a victory for religious freedom, it is a narrow and superficial one, as the decision articulated no principle useful in any other case.

As a consequence of a century of Supreme Court cases, culminating in the *Smith* decision, religious believers have no constitutional protection against laws that force them to cooperate in, or even implement, conduct that is abhorrent to their religiously formed moral beliefs. Although the Court was able to avoid the question in *Fulton*, the social problem created by the *Smith* rule is not likely to disappear any time soon.

Until the Supreme Court establishes a workable constitutional principle for the evaluation of free exercise claims, it will face unrelenting pressure to resolve the societal clash between regnant social values and religious belief. Natural law and biblical morality no longer have currency among the media, academics, or many of those who make or enforce the laws. Conduct that was deemed immoral, unnatural, or criminal a few years ago has gained legal and even constitutional protection. Citizens adhering to traditional morality find themselves subjected to the coercive power of the state for refusing to cooperate in acts that their faith tells them are immoral. Although the First Amendment guarantees them the right to the free exercise of their religion, the Supreme Court has told them that “exercise” is limited to belief: They are free to believe but not to live their lives in accordance with their faith. Simply put, in America, the Land of the Free, believers now have no constitutional right to act in accordance with conscience.

The clash between those who adhere to traditional morality and those who claim the right not only to ignore traditional morality but also to compel believers to actively support them has predictably led to social strife. In America, social strife inevitably leads to recourse to the courts. Father John Courtney Murray described the First Amendment as “Articles of Peace,” a civic framework by which individuals in a pluralistic society can live together. By emptying the Free Exercise Clause of any protection for believers who refuse to cooperate in conduct they consider immoral, the *Smith* decision deprives the Clause of its intended purpose of keeping the peace. The strict-scrutiny test of *Sherbert* and *Yoder*, by contrast, forces the state to justify whether the vindication of newly found sexual rights really requires coercing the cooperation of unwilling religious believers. Adoption of this test would by no means guarantee that believers will prevail in every case, but it would at least require a balancing of their rights against the newly found rights of others. If the Bill of Rights is to serve its function of allowing the majority to make the rules while preserving minority rights, it is now incumbent upon the Court to overrule *Smith* and to articulate standards under which the dictates of conscience can coexist with sexual freedom in this brave new world.

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ESSAY

Distinguishing Sound Economics from Ideology

Stephen Barrows

It's difficult to know who to trust these days. We are bombarded with competing claims, perspectives, and information, and at such a rapid pace, it almost induces vertigo. MIT professor Sinan Aral characterizes social media and its societal impact as *The Hype Machine*—the title of his 2020 book on the topic. Aral points out that “This Hype Machine connects us in a worldwide communication network, exchanging trillions of messages a day, guided by algorithms, designed to inform, persuade, entertain, and manipulate us.”

How do we sift through what is true and what is simply ideological manipulation? Is it even possible to just “follow the science”?

First, it would be a mistake to dismiss expertise. Not long ago, Tom Nichols lamented the death of expertise, which he described as a “Google-fueled, Wikipedia-based, blog-sodden collapse of any division between professionals and laymen, students and teachers, knowers and wonderers—in other words, between those of any achievement in an area and those with none at all.”² The world thrives on the division of labor and the division of knowledge. We all depend on experts to help us know what is true on certain matters. Nevertheless, there are rules of thumb to help laypeople discern bias behind claims or proposals made by experts. Let's take a look specifically at a discipline prone to inaccurate predictions or controversial policy advice: economics.

Conceptual Tools

There are several conceptual tools non-experts can use when assessing economic claims. To use these tools effectively, one must first understand the essence of eco-

nomics. Economics is the study of *human action under conditions of scarcity*. This entails three important points.

First, economists are concerned with the observable choices that people make, not the psychological rationale underlying those choices. Second, economic expertise entails describing what is the case—not what ought to be. In short, economics is distinct from the fields of psychology and ethics. Third, economics concerns itself with scarcity. Scarcity exists when the demand for something exceeds supply when the price is zero. Economists study the different methods of rationing these scarce resources; the most common is the price system, such as how to ration Ferraris. There are also nonpricing mechanisms, such as how to ration limited admissions to Stanford (where they don't sell to the highest bidder). With this basic background, let's turn to some useful tools noneconomists can use to assess economic claims and policy recommendations. Such tools will help to distinguish sound economic ideas from those that are infused with bias or dominated by ideology.

The first tool is this: Does the economic claim or policy analysis acknowledge

tradeoffs, and in particular, recognize that each choice entails foregone alternatives? Consider labor policy and the minimum wage as an example. Economists debate whether imposing a particular minimum wage reduces employment in a specific situation, but what is indisputable is that the employer must forgo spending these funds on alternative uses (e.g., hiring another worker or increasing the advertising budget to increase sales, etc.). *There is always an opportunity cost involved*—and any economist who suggests otherwise is not acknowledging reality. The same concept can be applied to industrial policy. A growing number of conservatives advocate propping up U.S. manufacturing through various subsidies or, like economist and former Trump appointee Peter Navarro, advocate various forms of protectionism. On the other side of the political spectrum, liberal economist Mariana Mazzucato advocates government-intensive “moonshot” economics to achieve various UN Sustainable Development Goals.³ While both sides make valid points about how to potentially improve current policy, they ultimately fail to adequately address the opportunity costs involved in their respective economic policy proposals.

A second tool pertains to externalities. An externality is a cost or benefit borne by individuals who are not participants in an exchange. An economic idea or policy proposal can be assessed for soundness by asking whether or not it recognizes the existence of relevant externalities. Pollution is an example of a negative externality; herd immunity from vaccination is an example of a positive one. Establishing clear property rights and enforcing the rule of law can often internalize these externalities. Nevertheless, externalities arise from numerous economic activities, and ignoring or dismissing them is a potential indicator that the economic claim or policy proposal is infused with bias.

Two more evaluative tools are particularly helpful when assessing economic claims or policy recommendations—and they are closely linked to one another. The first flows logically from economics as the study of *human action* under conditions of scarcity. Humans are distinct from the rest of the created order. Human beings are created in the image and likeness of God and are endowed with reason and free will. Because humans

choose and act, economic science cannot be conducted in the same fashion as the natural sciences. Consider this: Combine sodium with water and you will invariably get an explosive reaction; the atoms and molecules *don’t choose* how to react—they simply react in accordance with their nature. But unlike molecules, human beings *do choose* how to react—and because each person is unique, policy makers can’t necessarily predict how certain policies will alter people’s choices. While empirical analysis of economic matters can identify patterns and yield genuine insights, such empirical studies ultimately constitute a commentary on economic history but are of limited value as a predictive tool. Economic optimization and equilibration (the core of neo-classical economics) are contingent—that is, based on particular historical circumstances. In contrast, ballistics can use the laws of physics to hit a target under controlled conditions *every time*. Policymakers cannot do the same. Human beings aren’t static, nor do they respond like molecules in a controlled experiment. Thus, one should always assess economic ideas in light of the uniqueness of the human person—each of whom chooses uniquely.

A similar evaluative tool is what is called the “knowledge problem.” Nobel laureate Friedrich Hayek highlighted this problem in his seminal essay “The Use of Knowledge in Society.” Hayek states:

The peculiar character of the problem of a rational economic order is determined precisely by the fact that the knowledge of the circumstances of which we must make use never exists in concentrated or integrated form, but solely as the dispersed bits of incomplete and frequently contradictory knowledge which all the separate individuals possess. The economic problem of society is thus ... a problem of how to secure the best use of resources known to any of the members of society, for ends whose relative importance only these individuals know. Or, to put it briefly, it is a problem of the utilization of knowledge not given to anyone in its totality.⁴

The implication of Hayek’s insight is straightforward: economic analysis, insofar as it is wedded to policy proposals, should be conducted with a certain

kind of humility and reservation. Just as human nature precludes economists from engaging in policy the way a chemist engages in a science experiment, so too should the use of knowledge in the marketplace constrain economists from a kind of policymaking hubris. Economists and policymakers cannot possibly know—or even make use of—the kind of distributed knowledge that permeates the marketplace. Attempts to control economic production and economic outcomes from the commanding heights fare poorly, largely because of the knowledge problem.

While economists agree on most fundamental economic concepts and principles, they often come to different conclusions on the effects of various policies. It’s not easy to discern truth from propaganda or insights from ideology. Most economists seek to educate and explain, but they can also become partisan ideologues for specific policies that go beyond the purview of economics. Paul Krugman, who won the Nobel Prize in economics, is unquestionably a highly insightful economist. But unfortunately, as a *New York Times* opinion columnist, he often ventures into areas well beyond his expertise. Inasmuch as he pushes ideology over dispassionate economic analysis, he harms the credibility of his otherwise astute economic contributions. We can be tempted to write off economists, but rather than dismiss or devalue their particular expertise (when they are indeed operating within the realm of their expertise), the noneconomist would do well to assess economic ideas and policy proposals in light of tradeoffs (opportunity cost), externalities, the distinctiveness of human action, and the use of knowledge in society.

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NOTES

1 Sinan Aral, *The Hype Machine: How Social Media Disrupts Our Elections, Our Economy, and Our Health—and How We Must Adapt* (New York: Harper Collins, 2020).

2 Tom Nichols, “The Death of Expertise,” <https://thefederalist.com/2014/01/17/the-death-of-expertise/>. Accessed September 1, 2021.

3 See Mariana Mazzucato, *Mission Economy: A Moonshot Guide to Changing Capitalism* (New York: Harper Collins, 2021).

4 F.A. Hayek, “The Use of Knowledge in Society,” *The American Economic Review* 35, no. 4 (September 1945), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1809376>.

**ESSAY**

The Church's Overdue Reconciliation with Liberalism

By Gustavo Irrazábal

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Translated by Joshua Gregor,
Acton Institute

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In his social encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891), Leo XIII condemned socialism for rejecting private property and instigating class warfare. But the historical evolution of the concept made it necessary to nuance this view. Already by 1931, Pius XI distinguished between revolutionary socialism, which he continued to condemn outright, and reformist

socialism that accepted participation in democratic life—though even the latter remained, in his judgment, incompatible with the Christian faith. A new distinction was introduced by John XXIII and John Paul II, who distinguished between “ideologies” (closed views of reality) and “historical movements,” which, though inspired by ideologies, show greater flexibility and pragmatism through their familiarity with social reality. Thus, though it would not be licit for a Christian to adhere to Marxism as an ideology (in the first sense), it would be possible for him to participate in a “socialist” party to the extent that it was compatible with his faith.

It is telling that this gradual refinement in the evaluation of socialism has not happened with regard to liberalism, which has always been considered a relatively homogenous body of thought that can be critiqued en bloc. It is a remarkable paradox when we recall that the Church, especially after the Second World War, made great strides in the acceptance of republican democracy (political liberalism) and the market economy (economic liberalism), without this being reflected in a more nuanced view of the philosophy behind them. We could look for a historical explanation, interpreting this fact as a consequence of conflicts between the

Church and liberal states in the 19th century. We can also note a certain bias of Catholic sensibilities in favor of appeals to solidarity, as abundant in socialist rhetoric as they are lacking in liberal rhetoric.

It is true, however, that there is a profound difference between a liberal view of society and a Catholic view, and this difference cannot be set aside. Put schematically, in the liberal view the political community has no proper end except in a purely formal sense: that of preserving the autonomy of the individuals it comprises, allowing them to pursue their respective goals in life. In the Catholic view, on the other hand, the political community is not simply a group of individuals concerned with their own goals, but an organic unity joined together by a spiritual bond and endowed with a specific end—the common good—that includes, but at the same time transcends, the particular good of each member of the community.

The difference is less dramatic than it seems if we avoid falling into caricatures. Liberals and Catholics agree that democracy must be founded on respect for human rights, but liberals tend to insist more on civil and political rights (“freedoms”), while Catholics tend to emphasize social rights. Both can accept the idea that democracy must be inspired

by values, but liberals generally pay more attention to formal values (freedom and equality, understood as equality of opportunity, i.e., absence of privileges), while Catholics maintain that those formal values lack meaning if they are not rooted in a cultural “soil,” an ethical vision shared by the people at large.

These tendencies reveal an irreducible tension, but not necessarily an insuperable opposition, unless polemic instincts prevail over calm reflection. For public discourse, led by social dialogue, requires both dimensions: a focus on specifically political values (peace, equality, justice) but also the ability to communicate on the level of comprehensive worldviews (religious or otherwise). Without these, political concepts remain “formal”—that is, empty of tangible content. For example, one who seeks to defend same-sex “marriage” by claiming that any adult is free to contract marriage with whomever he pleases is implicitly adhering to a particular view of the nature and end of marriage: the institutionalization of a romantic bond. And one who promotes abortion by appealing to the freedom of the mother is assuming a particular idea of the embryo’s ontological status (in this case, by denying its condition as a human life).

These and many other questions cannot be resolved without appealing to fundamental religious or philosophical convictions. Why should they be left aside or confined to the private sphere if they are in fact unavoidable and, moreover, an indispensable contribution to public dialogue? True civic respect consists not in hiding them or denying their importance but in bringing them into the debate when they are relevant. Political “neutrality” is a myth, generally used to tacitly impose a particular ideology and shield it from criticism.

On the other hand, though, it is true that if we wish to base the unity of society on an “integral,” homogenous idea of culture, we run the risk of coercively imposing a certain conception on the members of society as a whole, either through the state or through some other ideological channel. In this sense, liberal suspicions are understandable, but they

can be allayed with two clarifications. In the first place, the spiritual bond to which we referred can be understood in a nonmaximalist way, thus leaving room for the pluralism characteristic of modern free societies. On the other hand, noting democracy’s need for this cultural support doesn’t mean subordinating it to the dangerous concept of a “national being” or relegating the Church to the role of a tutor. It simply implies recognition of her freedom to exercise her mission to evangelize culture, together with the analogous right of other religions and cultural groups to put forth their own messages.

Human rights, which are the heart of modern political ethics, are based on a minimum political and formal consensus. They can be made tangible and concrete only by a sufficient degree of agreement on certain fundamental social values—a certain view of human dignity that prevents the reduction of human rights to empty categories, ideological manipulation, or unreasonable multiplication. A liberalism that entrenches itself exclusively in the affirmation of individual freedoms leads to permanent conflict and social breakdown. A culturalist communitarianism that lives on (historically imaginary) nostalgia for homogeneity leads to explicit or latent forms of authoritarianism.

In this sense, John Paul II maintained that “a democracy without values easily becomes a visible or hidden totalitarianism.” We should add that a democracy that seeks a foundation on a mythical “being of the nation” or of the people runs a similar risk. Reconciliation with liberalism—in the sense of approaching it with both appreciation and critique—is an urgent task in order to give meaning to the evolution of the Church’s social teaching throughout the 20th century. To put off this challenge or, worse, to be ignorant of it would deepen today’s confusion and crisis of republican democracy, the only system that historically has proven effective in defending human dignity.

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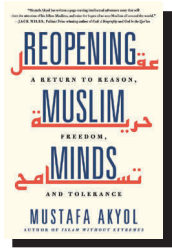
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Opening the Mind

Reopening Muslim Minds: A Return to Reason, Freedom, and Tolerance

By Mustafa Akyol

Reviewed by Karen Taliaferro



It is rare to find in a single work a carefully documented intellectual history of Islam as well as a *cri de coeur* for contemporary reforms—or at least it is rare to find both tasks done well. Mustafa Akyol's *Reopening Muslim Minds*, however, impressively achieves both feats with substance and elegance in a work that deserves to be acclaimed and widely read. Akyol, a Turkish journalist

and senior fellow at the Cato Institute, has devoted his career to this trio of freedom, reason, and tolerance within Islam, making the case that “we Muslims don’t have a shortage of good ideas and good values”—and that those ideals are ripe for reclaiming. In *Reopening Muslim Minds*, he takes the reader on a journey from the Constitution of Medina (622 CE) to COVID, traveling through 12th-century Ibn Tufayl’s novel of reason and enlightenment, *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*, through the rise and demise of medieval *kalām*, or dialectical theology, and on to science, rationalism, and tolerance.

Unlike some reformist works that blanket over the difficulties confronting 21st-century Islam, Akyol is clear-eyed about the dire losses to the Islamic world from these various turns away from reason, freedom, and tolerance. But unlike any number of works for Western audiences that begin and end with such tales of decline, Akyol continuously highlights what is hopeful, calling attention to the elements of Islamic tradition that are ripe for recovery and cultivation today. In his chapters recounting “How the Sharia Stagnated” and “How We Lost the Sciences,” he guides the reader through a “hall of fame ... [of] Muslim minds who championed reason, freedom, or tolerance—sometimes at the expense of their lives.” These range from 11th-century Mu’tazilite scholar Abd al-Jabbar, who reinterpreted the Qur’anic and biblical story of Abraham’s sacrifice of his son as a misunderstood dream, to 14th-century polymath and defender of scientific observation Ibn al-Khatib, to Tunisia’s famed scholar, reformer, and (now imperiled) parliament speaker Rached al-Ghannouchi.

The book is impeccably referenced and annotated, so the reader seeking a more strictly scholarly direction has ample resources to do so. Such scholars might especially appreciate Chapter 8, “The Last Man Standing: Ibn Rushd,” in which Akyol surveys the promise of the Andalusian philosopher’s rationalist *oeuvre* for the contemporary world. In addition to exploring Ibn Rushd’s (Averroes, in the West) famous “truth does not oppose truth” argument in *The Decisive Treatise*, which declares the compatibility of human wisdom and divine Law, Akyol also wades

into more controversial territories, such as jihad and women’s rights, using Ibn Rushd’s lesser-known commentaries on Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. Here, as throughout the book, Akyol takes pain to link modern ideals with the history of Islamic thought.

Inevitably for a book of such breadth, one wishes at times for greater depth. In recounting “why we lost reason,” for instance, Akyol stresses the undeniably important historical turn from rationalist Mu’tazilite thought, which predominated the first few centuries of Islamic civilization, to the more voluntarist Ash’ari strain, which emphasizes God’s will over His rationality and that still influences Islamic thought and society today. He might, though, have added to this discussion another historical tension, that between the *falāsifa*, or the philosophers in the Greek (especially Aristotelian) tradition, and the *mutakallimūn*, or practitioners of dialectical theology. Akyol writes that the two sorts of thinkers were “lumped together, and delegitimized forever, as the deviant branches of the true faith.” There is truth to this, but differentiating the two could add texture to his tableau: Ibn Rushd was a philosopher in the Peripatetic tradition; his sources were straightforwardly not divine. In fact, in *The Decisive Treatise*, he advocated (against his opponents, al-Ghazali chief among them) the study of non-Muslim philosophy by pointing out that Muslims use tools for religious sacrifice without taking into account whether the toolmaker was Muslim. Islam, in other words, needn’t rest on exclusively divine grounds but could, even should, make room for rationalist developments. This tradition of *falsafa*—the term itself showing its Greek, rather than Islamic, origins—could not often coexist easily with the theological *kalām* tradition, which began from revelation. Ibn Rushd himself, in his *Commentary on Plato’s Republic*, wrote that the views of the *mutakallimūn* on God’s will represented “an opinion close to sophistry, very far from the nature of man, and far from being the content of a Law.” Might such a dismissive attitude toward theology also help explain the turn away from rationalism?

This same rationalist-voluntarist fight, to Akyol, finds clear expression in what he terms the “Islamic Euthyphro Dilemma.” This dilemma, adapted from the eponymous Platonic dialogue, raises the question of whether, in the words of the 12th-century theologian and jurist al-Kiyā’ al-Harrāsī, good and bad are “grounded in any essential property [of the act],” thereby allowing rational investigation into the nature of the good, or whether, on the other hand, they are “grounded simply in God’s command and prohibition,” as voluntarism would have it. The answer had to be the latter to al-Kiyā’ and his intellectual successors in the Ash’ari school of theology, which took over from the earlier rationalist Mu’tazilī school. For Akyol, this is one of the great tragedies of the history of Islamic thought, as it effectively rendered rationalist theology heretical. Still, it is noteworthy that Akyol terms this rationalist-voluntarist quandary a dilemma, suggesting (rightly, in my view) that neither horn provides a suitable answer to the source of morality. The voluntarist horn of the dilemma presents its problem immediately—if indeed God’s command is sufficient not only to ascertain the good but in fact to *render* an act good, then God can command horrific things that we are obligated to do. It must nevertheless be acknowledged that the rationalist horn presents a problem as well: To “imagine that morality may have a source other than religion—such as human intuition and reason,”

as Akyol seems to favor doing, means that there is a standard, a source of morality, that is higher than God.

Does “reason” as a “source” of morality solve the problem, or does it simply solve some aspects of it only to raise other problems? The rationalist French Enlightenment was closely linked with violence, and secular totalitarian regimes of the 20th century have invoked reason and rationalist “progress” in their own immoralities. What, then, prevents reason from producing its own excesses—or is there any such thing? I do not mean to suggest that the dilemma necessarily poses an insurmountable problem; the Christian notion of humans having been created in the image of God and participating in divine reason, for instance, may well do the trick. But it does make matters more complicated than what a simple return to the rationalist Mu’tazilism—or even to Ibn Rushd’s Hellenizing philosophy—can resolve.

Still, here too Akyol leaves a trail of crumbs for those who are interested in going deeper. His treatment of Kevin Reinhart’s notion of what is *ma’arūf*, known, and how this form of knowledge—different from both scientific knowledge, *‘ilm*, and reason, *‘aql*—might do some of the epistemological work I am suggesting, and as he does throughout the book, Akyol points the reader in the direction of excellent scholarship on the matter.

Reopening Muslim Minds is not only about reason, of course; both freedom and tolerance are given their due attention. In one of the most provocative chapters, “Back to Mecca,” Akyol argues for a Qur’anic hermeneutic resembling that of Mahmoud Mohammed Taha, the 20th-century Sudanese mystic who saw in the Qur’an a two-part message: first, an essential, universal Islam, with messages of peace and tolerance, as contained in the Meccan verses, then the more contextually specific verses handed down in Medina. Akyol similarly argues that the Medinan verses that advocate, for example, “slay[ing] the pagans where you find them” (2:191), be “understood as temporary commandments given in a specific context of war—similar to the militant passages one can also read in the Hebrew Bible.” In the following chapter on apostasy, however, Akyol takes the additional step of advocating a more skeptical stance toward one of the primary sources of *shari’a*, the hadiths (sayings of the Prophet

Mohammad, as recounted by a number of more and less authoritative sources). Doing so, Akyol argues, would lead to a much less coercive Islam; in fact, he writes that “like almost all other coercive elements in Islamic law, the punishment for apostasy comes from not the Qur’an, but the hadiths”—and that “there are good reasons to be cautious of them [i.e., the hadiths].”

Akyol is right to point out that the Qur’an has no temporal punishment for apostasy; this is related to his later advocacy of the Irja’ tradition, which etymologically and doctrinally called for the “postponement” of punishment from this earth to God’s judgment in the hereafter. All these discussions are part and parcel of—or perhaps even culminate in—Akyol’s clarion call for political freedom through “giving up coercive power in the name of Islam.” Though he does not explicitly advocate a positively secular state, the removal of coercion in the name of Islam surely implies it, and Akyol does write that the experience of Muslim “minorities in the West, or as majorities in secular states ranging from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Indonesia,” presents “a much brighter story than those in coercive states such as Saudi Arabia or Iran.”

There are difficulties with this approach, however. First, if indeed the Medinan verses were revealed in and for a specific context, it is difficult to argue that Islam is not inherently political, for it requires one to hold that the verses were intended not to convey morality but rather tactics meant to direct the lives of a specific community in a specific time and place. But what is this if not political? Relatedly, as Akyol himself acknowledges, one of the reasons that apostasy had a temporal punishment among early generations of Muslims was that “the very concept of ‘religion’ was more comprehensive than what we think of today. It was not just a belief, but also communal belonging and political allegiance.” Again, this is true—and it was true for Mohammad and his band of followers—but it makes it difficult to argue that Islam was first a moral and religious message that only later became political.

But there is one other potential obstacle to Akyol’s admirable vision for Islam. Akyol writes of a “communitarian spirit” in Islam that, I would add, certainly has its benefits and beauties, but that has, to Akyol, hindered the advancement of the dignity

of the human person in Islamic societies. As Akyol writes, “Having no compulsion in religion will also require a new Muslimhood—not as collectively disciplined communities, but rather self-disciplined individuals.” Such individuals “will follow not the dictates of others, but the dictates of [their] own moral compass[es].” Here, as with the horns of the Euthyphro dilemma, it is not clear that the solution to the excesses of one horn is simply to choose the other horn. The individualist-communitarian pendulum can swing too far in either direction, and one should be cautious in advocating a full embrace of individualism, as we in the West see amply. Beyond this, if indeed Islam is more inherently political than Akyol professes—which I acknowledge remains an “if”—then to shift from a communitarian orientation to an individual one is to alter the very nature of the religion itself.

Conclusion

Robert “Musa” Cerantonio, an Australian-born Muslim convert who, until his 2019 imprisonment, was widely considered to be one of the most influential jihadi preachers in the world, is said to have adopted Islam as a teenager, after two years of reading about the tradition. In a 2015 interview with *The Atlantic*’s Graeme Wood, he acknowledged that although he felt a firm religious obligation to pledge allegiance to ISIS’s then-leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as the legitimate caliph of all Muslims, he also experienced a visceral reaction against the violence that Islamic State members are required to enact. Extremism has many tragic elements, but one of them is surely the false choice a figure like Cerantonio expressed—that between fulfilling his religious obligation and following his humane instincts, the very instincts toward reason, freedom and tolerance that *Reopening Muslim Minds* links with authentic Islamic sources. One wonders what might have happened had young Robert read Akyol’s book during those two formative years.

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BOOK

Profit and Responsibility

Woke, Inc.: Inside Corporate America's Social Justice Scam

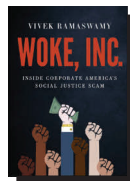
By Vivek Ramaswamy

Reviewed by Noah Gould

The standard critique of woke capitalism is that woke ideas are ruining business. Instead of engaging in political activism, companies should focus on turning a profit by creating superior goods and services. In his book, *Woke Inc.*, Vivek Ramaswamy takes a different approach to the argument. He argues that “woke capitalism” isn’t wrong because it’s ruining business, but because woke business is ruining the foundations of our democracy. When businesses engage in political and social activism, they undermine the way the democratic process was intended, through debate in the public square. *Woke Inc.* offers some important insights, but it unfortunately gets bogged down by an imagined debate with Milton Friedman about the purpose of business and anecdotes from Ramaswamy’s career, which combine to muddy the waters on the purpose of business.

The main weakness of the book is that it does not offer a clear and compelling alternative to work capitalism. At first, Ramaswamy seems to embrace the idea that the only responsibility of a firm is to turn a profit. This stance would align with the definition Friedman offers in *Capitalism and Freedom*: “There is one and only one social responsibility of a business—to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits as long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition without deception or fraud.” To Friedman, profit seeking is necessary and sufficient to the social responsibility of a firm.

But then Ramaswamy seems to depart from this idea. He argues that firms were given limited liability in return for. He argues that this is a break from Milton Friedman:



Advocates of classical capitalism like Milton Friedman wrongly assumed that both fundamental features of the corporation—limited shareholder liability and the mandate to maximize shareholder value—were strictly about incentivizing entrepreneurs and investors to unleash innovation. They ignored the way in which limited shareholder liability would create titanic corporate monsters with power heretofore unimagined, offering no coherent theory for how society should constrain the power of those monsters outside the marketplace.

Here Ramaswamy bases his critique on the popular perception of Friedman rather than his actual view, which is quite similar to Ramaswamy’s. Friedman did not merely argue against stakeholder capitalism because it decreases productivity. He was also concerned about the general effect on society when businesses stray outside the goal of seeking profits. In his essay “A Friedman Doctrine: The Social Responsibility of Business Is to Increase its Profits,” he argues that under stakeholder capitalism:

the businessman—self-selected or appointed directly or indirectly by stockholders—is to be simultaneously legislator, executive and jurist. He is to decide whom to tax by how much and for what purpose, and he is to spend the proceeds—all this guided only by general exhortation from on high to restrain inflation, improve the environment, fight poverty and so on and on.

In fact, the ideas of Ramaswamy and Friedman have a large overlap. They both emphasize aspects of cronyism, where state and business power combine to override democratic process. Ramaswamy emphasizes the corporate side of cronyism, arguing that businesses are overriding the democratic process. But Friedman was aware of the damage to both the market process and the democratic process. Friedman would say that corporate responsibility is to seek profits, while according to Ramaswamy, it is to refrain from non-profit-seeking activities. This does not amount to a true split from Friedman, merely a difference in emphasis. This is not to say that Friedman is the last word on the purpose

of a firm or that he can't be questioned. But Ramaswamy is not really critiquing Friedman's arguments. The debate with Milton Friedman ends up being more imagined than substantive.

Since the difference is negligible, why does Ramaswamy feel the need to break with Friedman? Perhaps he wants to distance himself from the popular view of Friedman. Ramaswamy's pharmaceutical company wasn't just seeking profits; it was "developing lifesaving medicines." But by trying to distance himself from "greedy" profiteers, he muddies the waters on what the necessary conditions are for a business to function and does not defend the appropriate role of profit. For instance, he explains how, as CEO, he changed recruiting practices to favor candidates with low-income backgrounds. He writes that "our new policy was just one small way to make Roivant a better company. As CEO, that was my own small way of making the world better too." This introduces the question of whether it is enough for Roivant to be seeking profit through developing medicines. Do they also have to "make the world a better place" by maintaining a diverse workforce? We are left wondering whether he intends his experience in Roivant to be prescriptive for other businesses. In other words, is profit within the rules of the game a necessary but not sufficient criterion for a legitimate business?

Another problem exists at a deeper level. How did we get to a place where political forces coopt business and engage with questions far beyond their scope? A thriving society must have vibrant business, governmental, religious, and civil spheres, each of which plays a specific role. Abraham Kuyper describes the importance of this idea in his lecture "Sphere Sovereignty":

Now in all of these spheres or circles the cogwheels engage one another, and it is precisely because of the mutual interaction of these spheres that there is an emergence of that rich, many-sided, multi-formed human life; but in that life there is also the danger that one sphere may encroach upon the neighboring sphere; thus causing a wheel to jerk and to break cog upon cog, and interfering with the progress of the whole.

In fact, asking whether society is ruining business or business is ruining society is the wrong approach. Instead we should ask, "What has caused the deeper societal problem?" The individual spheres of society are weakening and every problem becomes unitary. We have lost a sense that different types of institutions in society have authority over different facets of life. Civil society is terribly weakened, leaving space for other spheres to dominate. The political, economic, and religious spheres are rolled into one and every problem reduced to one dimension. Ramaswamy claims that woke capitalism is "literally a religion." Perhaps one of the reasons it became like a religion is because the religious sphere is hollowed out. The idea of sphere sovereignty gives a framework for a broader critique on how different spheres have abdicated their functions, leaving a vacuum for woke business to fill.

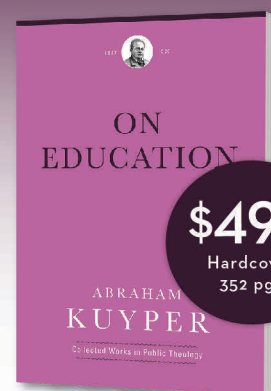
Woke Inc. gets bogged down by the debate with Friedman, then further muddies the waters with stories from Ramaswamy's career, which have ambiguous applications. This confusion masks what could have been a compelling argument. Ramaswamy shows through case studies how the foundations of a free society are harmed when businesses step outside their legitimate purpose. Ramaswamy could have used Friedman's ideas as a launching pad to explore the state of business almost 60 years after the Nobel laureate's original argument. We can now see some of the upheaval that has resulted from a broad understanding of corporate responsibility. But a lack of understanding of the purpose of business is not the only problem. Civil society has an important function alongside business and government in a flourishing society, a role that is increasingly diminished. Were the business sphere to return to a narrowed role tomorrow, it would not result in a properly ordered society. A compelling response to woke capitalism needs to place business within a greater understanding of a flourishing society.

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COLUMN

PLAYING TO ANGELS

Adapted from Sacred Heart Academy Commencement Address, June 13, 2021

Rev. Robert A. Sirico

The Honorable Henry Hyde, in a speech to the National Right to Life Committee, reminded the Committee of something I hope you will never forget. He said that we are not “playing to the gallery, but to the angels, and to Him who made the angels.”

Ponder that for a moment.

If there is one insidious idea that we have worked to inoculate you against during your time with us, it is this tendency, all too prevalent, to play to the gallery. Its lure and seduction are understandable enough: one likes to hear the cheers and affirmation; the benefits from networking opportunities are exciting, and the potential promotions and awards are palpable.

Besides, angels are all too often quiet, and when they do speak, they frequently remind us of uncomfortable truths about how we might have to relocate here, or undertake some inconvenient calling there. They rarely guarantee applause or success.

You will find in the gallery many of those counted among the NONES, that is the growing number of young people in your age demographic, who do not identify themselves with any religious affiliation. You will share dorms with them, play on sports teams with them, and you will share meals and classrooms with them. You may be even taught by them.

Your pastors and parents who have invested so much hope in your future may see this as cause for anxiety. But we have reason to trust.

The first thing to remember is that what many of the NONES are rejecting is not the understanding of Christianity you have come to know; what they are rejecting is not Christianity at all, and the reason they are rejecting it is not because they have found it false; what they have come upon is inadequate, desiccated, and weak. On this matter our friend Chesterton weighs in:

“The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.”

All this is sad, of course, but in another sense, it is hopeful, if for no other reason than that nature abhors a vacuum. In the face of such an ineffective and timid profession, you have a way to live out an effective and confident witness within the contexts to which you will be called. You have been equipped with the capacity to propose and to live the *real thing* in the coming years, and in doing this, you will help our world to come to its senses.

I have been intrigued by a simple passage from the document of the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, which clarifies what it is we are really doing. It tells us that “Christ ... fully reveals man to man himself ...” (22:1). Our task, then, is to simply help people better comprehend their own authenticity. It is to help them to answer that primordial and ubiquitous yearning found in every human heart, which is the admonition inscribed above the portico of the Oracle at Delphi: “Know Thyself.”

This task, this mission, will take humility, but if you understand that this humility is simply the love of truth above all else, you will also have the strength to be confident. You will not be seduced by the gallery. You will not be foolhardy or frivolous, but neither will you be risk-averse. Hold on to the idealism you now feel. As St. John Paul the Great used to encourage, “Never settle for mediocrity.”

Rev. Robert A. Sirico is co-founder and president of the Acton Institute. **R&L**

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