

Conservative Postmodernism, Postmodern Conservatism

Astute thinkers from Hegel onward have claimed that we live at the end of the modern world. That does not mean the modern world is about to disappear: the world, in truth, is more modern than ever. So we must contest Hegel's assertion that the modern world is the end, the fulfillment, of history. The longings of human beings have neither been satisfied nor have they disappeared. Modern strivings continue to be fueled by a progressively more restless and anxious human discontent. But if the modern world were to be succeeded by another—as it eventually will be—human beings would continue to be human, beings with souls or capabilities and longings not shared by, and higher, than those of other animals.

What has distinguished the modern world, above all, is a particular definition of what a human being is. That definition does not describe a real or complete human being. It was not even meant to be completely true, but mainly to be useful as a fiction in the pursuit of unprecedented freedom, justice, and prosperity. Modern thought has held that a human being is an *individual*, and the modern individual is an abstraction, an invention of the human mind. That individual is made more free from social and political constraints, and less directed toward duty and goodness by God and nature, than a real human being

ever could be. The modern individual is distinguished from the political animals—the citizens, statesmen, and philosophers—described by the Greek and Roman philosophers, and from the social, familial creatures described by Christian theologians. The modern individual is liberated from the philosopher's duty to know the truth about nature, from the citizen's selfless devotion to his country, from the creature's love and fear of God, and even from the loving responsibilities that are inseparable from family life. Conservatives today oppose liberal individualism both because its understanding of the human being is untrue and because that definition erodes all that is good about distinctively human existence.

The modern world has now ended only in the sense that we have now seen enough of it to judge it. Although we have reason to be grateful for the wealth, health, freedom, and power that modern achievements have given us, we *know* that the individual's pursuits of security and happiness will remain always pursuits—and not possessions. So even as the modern world continues to develop, we can be free of its characteristic delusion, its utopianism. We can speak of

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its strengths and its limitations from a perspective “outside” modernity, and that perspective is the foundation of conservatism today. Conservatives can be (perhaps the only) *genuinely* postmodern thinkers. The reason we can see beyond the modern world is that its intention to transform human nature has failed. Its project of transforming the human person into the autonomous individual was and remains unrealistic; we can now see the limits of being an individual because we remain more than individuals. The world created by modern individuals to make themselves fully at home turns out to have made human beings less at home than ever.

Conservative thought today is authentic postmodernism, but it is, obviously, not postmodernism as it is usually understood. Most allegedly postmodern thought emphasizes the arbitrary character of all human authority, the freedom of each human being from all standards but his own will or creativity, and the death not only of God but of nature. These allegedly postmodern characteristics are really hypermodern; they aim to “deconstruct” as incoherent and so incredible any residual modern faith in reason or nature. They shout that everything modern—in fact, everything human—is nothing but a construction.

Postmodernists in the usual sense often do well in exposing liberal hypocrisy, but they can only do so in the name of completing the modern project of liberating the individual’s subjective or willful and whimsical perspective from all external constraints. Conservative postmodernism, by acknowledging and affirming as good what we can really know about our natural possibilities and limitations, is radically opposed to liberated postmodernism—and to the modern premises it radicalizes.

The driving intention of modern thought is not to understand nature or human na-

ture, but to guide action to transform nature freely in accordance with human desire. According to the modern philosophers, we have very little reason to be grateful for what we have been given by God and nature. Nature, according to modern scientists, chooses for life, not death—but not for *my* life in particular. For life’s sake, nature intends each of us to be born, reproduce, raise our young, and quickly die. Both God and nature seem callously and cruelly indifferent to the lives of particular human individuals. So we individuals need to move as far as we can from the miserable life of poverty, contingency, and early death that nature intends for us.

Our lives, objectively speaking, are not really more contingent and doomed to death than those of the other animals. We have it better by nature, for example, than the bees and the ants, not to mention the fruit flies that live for only a few days. But the other animals are not conscious of, and so not animated by, awareness of their own deaths. We are human because we are the self-conscious animal. We are animals that restlessly and anxiously rebel against death. We are technological animals. We alone have the capability to resist with considerable success our natural fate: we will not go blindly to our deaths as so many bees and ants have done. We experience ourselves as free individuals, as (to some extent) ungoverned by instinct or the requirements of our social existence. We are, quite mysteriously, not only intelligent but free.

Surely modern thinkers should allow us to be grateful, at least, for our singular freedom. But grateful, they say, to whom? Human freedom is too mysterious to be regarded as natural, and even if it came from God, we cannot help but wish he had given us much more. How can we be grateful to a God who left us alone and shivering to provide for ourselves? We employ our freedom not to live according to nature,

but to escape from our natural constraints, to conquer nature. Our freedom is not simply our self-conscious individuality but our technology—our ability to use our brains to give orders to nature. We might say—to avoid speciesism—that we are unsure whether the chimps and the dolphins are self-conscious. But we do know they are un-technological; they do not freely impose their will on nature. There would be no “ecological crisis” if it were not for human beings, and nature would cheer if human beings were to disappear. Human freedom is what disorders nature. Or, to be properly modern, human freedom is what imposes human order on a nature that is hostile to individual human existence.

When we reflect on our freedom, we are inclined even to confuse ourselves with God. We easily lord it over the chimps and the dolphins, using them however we will. The technological success of modern thought is in a way super-natural. The very conception of ourselves as free or super-natural is what connects the modern individual to the Christian religion. The individual really did try to replace the God of the Bible in the modern world—with the individual himself.

When the modern individual speaks truthfully about his self-consciousness, his freedom, and his mortality, he expresses his distorted debt to Christianity—a debt that he is very anxious, in his freedom, to deny. According to Saint Augustine, human beings are pilgrims or aliens in this world; they know that their true home is somewhere else. Saint Augustine observes that Christians are critics of pagan “natural theology.” Christians know they are not merely part of nature, that they are free beings with longings that cannot be satisfied by nature. Christians are also critics of “civil theology.” They know they are not merely citizens, reducible to parts of a political com-

munity. Only Christian theology recognizes and can account for human freedom, for why we personally and truthfully experience ourselves as more than natural or political beings. We were made in the image and likeness of the supernatural and supra-political God.

Extreme or Augustinian Christianity was criticized by Saint Thomas Aquinas for dwelling far too much on the human experience of alienation or homelessness. God, after all, created nature, and our natural enjoyments and fulfillments—although not completely satisfying—are still good. Human life would not really be nothing but restless misery without faith in God. Even if Aristotle was wrong, finally, to call us political animals, the pride human beings take in political accomplishments is a legitimate or partially truthful human pleasure. Even Christians cannot really claim that they merely use their political communities to achieve their true, non-political goal. Being a Christian is compatible with experiencing oneself to some extent, if only to some extent, as a devoted citizen. Otherwise, good citizens would have every right to deny Christians any share in political rule. Saint Augustine’s account of the human creature is surely too abstract, in Saint Thomas’s view. A Christian at home with his homelessness because of his faith is actually more free than others to enjoy the good things of this world for what they are.

The modern individual, from one view, is an Augustinian who does not believe in the personal and providential God of the Bible. Saint Augustine used his considerable rhetorical eloquence to describe the human misery that undermines every human good. He makes us aware, very aware, of human misery and contingency to show us that we can only be happy in hope for the eternal life graciously offered to us by God. We have the best reasons to be grateful for grace. But we seem to have little reason to

be grateful for nature without grace. The philosophers who argued otherwise, according to Saint Augustine, were blinded by pride. The same pride that kept the philosophers from acknowledging their longing for God and the eternal life that only God can give caused them to construct fraudulent visions for human happiness on earth, such as the ways of life of the statesman and the philosopher.

The modern individual—or the philosophers who constructed him—might be understood to be animated by the most insane form of pride ever. The modern individual aims to create in this world—not through grace but through human work—what God promised in the next. But viewed in another way, the modern individual seems less proud than desperate. The Christians are right about human misery and contingency; the modern individual is totally taken in by Augustine’s “negative” rhetoric about human alienation. But he does not believe in the Christian God; Augustine’s “positive” rhetoric about grace, providence, and salvation does not move him at all. And so he has no choice but to try to do for himself what the Christians believed God would do. The individual finds himself with a heavy—really, a horrible—burden. The modern individual is an alien—an absolutely contingent being who belongs nowhere in particular—who must build for himself his own place in the world.

But the individual does see some good news in the Christian teaching about human freedom or alienation. We are not merely parts of nature or parts of a city. We are, in a sense, mysteriously made in the image of God. The effectual truth of grace—the real evidence for it—must be what we achieve through applied reason or technology. The modern individual, of course, is not the same person as the Christian creature. He comes into being through the denial of certain real aspects of his humanity

that Christians affirm. The individual claims not to have a real longing to love God or other human beings; he merely wants the security and comfort, or freedom from death and pain, that the Christian God promised. The result of accepting the negative but not the positive teaching of Saint Augustine is the construction of a being who wants “freedom from” nature but not “freedom for” anything in particular. He has no particular view of what a free and comfortable human being should do with his comfort and freedom.

The Christian vision of heaven—the constant, unimpeded love of God—was replaced by Marx’s vision of communism, a world-to-come where we can do whatever we want, whenever we want, without any constraint by or guidance from nature, other human beings, or God. A future full of love was replaced by one without any love at all. Before we allow our very reasonable prejudice against Marx to lessen the force of this conclusion, we should remember that the most consistent liberals or libertarians also hope that religion and the state will wither away, leaving each human individual with an “autonomous” future. The modern utopias of liberalism and socialism are not really very different. It is hard, in fact, to know why Marx called his utopia “communism”; the world he imagined is filled with unencumbered individuals, not beings devoted to the service of others. The biggest misconception that we can have about Marxism—the one he himself emphasized—is that he provided any real antidote to the miserable excesses of liberal individualism.

The individual was invented by early-modern thinkers who were anti-Christian but still Augustinian. Prominent among these was John Locke. In Locke’s famous alternative to the Biblical creation story, human beings must be imagined to exist in

a state of nature to reveal what they would be like without the human construction of government. There they are free and equal individuals. They have no natural inclination to be citizens or even social beings, and they think for themselves alone. The foundation of government must therefore be consent: I must see how government serves my self-interest as an individual, how government makes me more secure and comfortable than I am without it. Because human beings invent government to serve their bodily needs, government should be understood as a particularly successful example of human freedom or technology. In consenting to be ruled, the individual

never surrenders his self-conscious judgment about the ability of government to protect his rights. In his own mind, the individual never gives way to political devotion or genuine communal loyalty. He refuses to be a sucker, like a bee or an ant—or even like a human being blinded by love.

The individual is clearly an invention—an abstract, distorted, only partial human being—because Locke's state of nature is clearly somewhat of a lie. As Rousseau famously observed, if we were really self-sufficient individuals by nature we would be so stupid as to be unconscious. Self-consciousness is necessarily consciousness with others; it depends upon a language that could only develop among social or even political animals. The human being is clearly a gregarious animal by nature—like the chimps, but with a distinctive capability for far more complex and intensely social language. The natural individual

Locke describes is, when we think about it, rather obviously impossible.

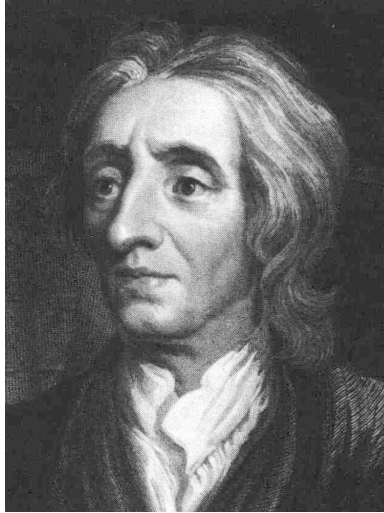
But it is a sign of human freedom that the individual could be invented as a human *goal* to free civilized people from their traditional, political, religious, and even familial dependence. Locke intended, as far as he could, to transform social, political, religious, and familial beings into individuals. Because nature was not really on his side, we can now say that Locke was to some extent engaged in mission impossible. But it is also undeniable that he achieved some real success.

The American Constitution of 1789 is largely a Lockean construction.

There, human beings are

not defined in terms of race, class, gender, or religious belief. The Constitution does not acknowledge our people's dependence on God or their past. Americans are understood to consent to government as individuals. So blacks and whites, men and women, and Jews, Christians, and Moslems can all be free and equal citizens of our country. All human beings, in fact, can be free and equal citizens of the United States. But they do not consent as Christians or Jews or as members of any other group: their religion, gender, race, communal and class-based identities are all private or inessential matters.

From the modern individualistic view, blacks and women were degraded by American law for most of our history. But our Constitution surely created the framework by which all individuals would eventually be liberated from the inessential baggage of race, class, and gender. The core of the



John Locke

American form of justice—a real, if incomplete, form of justice—is the liberation of human beings from any qualities that make them more than individuals. Our national Constitution is a construction—we know it was invented by human beings—for a construction—the individual invented by Locke and other modern thinkers.

The American founding fathers surely knew that human beings are more than individuals. They also knew that government should be limited. The most intimate and sacred aspects of being human are left relatively untouched by the law. Human beings are free, in private, to consider themselves as creatures with duties to their Creator, and our founders assumed that they would do so. They could consent as liberated individuals in public, but love and be devoted to God, their families, and their friends in private. Unable or unwilling to become complete and perfect individuals, Americans would live double lives. As Alexis de Tocqueville explained, they would be restless and anxious pursuers of material prosperity during the week, acting as if God is dead and so they must work incessantly to achieve self-sufficiency—then on Sunday they would do nothing but restfully contemplate God’s goodness, certain that He provides.

By focusing on the Constitution of 1789, we may exaggerate how modern and secular America was intended to be. The first Americans were Puritans, and their view that American liberty is really for the duties of creatures has always remained with us. The American people have always been, by modern standards, very religious. The Puritan virtues and vices were emphatically not those of Lockean individuals, and neither were the Christian virtues and vices Tocqueville found in America. The First Amendment to the Constitution is actually a correction to the Constitution in a Christian or anti-individualistic direction. There,

for example, the free exercise of religion is recognized as a positive good. Above all, we must not forget that the original intention was to leave almost all legislation concerning religion and morality to the states. So in another way Americans led double lives: state laws were less individualistic (and from the individualist’s perspective, more tyrannical) than national law. Only in the 1940s, through the clever manipulation of the Bill of Rights and the Fourteenth Amendment by the Supreme Court, did the Madisonian or individualistic spirit of the unamended Constitution begin to be used to invalidate the moral and religious legislation of the states.

Despite our very modern Constitution, American lives have been only inconsistently modern. We might even say, as Tocqueville does, that it is that very inconsistency that has made modern liberty appear good to human beings. One American paradox is that our political protection of individual rights attracted all sorts of pre-modern ways of life to our shores. Jews, Catholics, various Protestant sects came to America not to be individuals but to practice their faiths in peace and freedom. They often wanted most of all to maintain their traditions free from political intrusion. Catholics, for example, cannot forget the extent to which their Church—its faith and its institutions—flourished in America with a certain purity, free from the temptations and corruptions of political power. And as we can read in the writing of John Courtney Murray, the Church as late as the 1950s stood ready to teach Americans the true meaning of human liberty. We have to add, of course, the telling fact that after World War II America had the largest and most vibrant Jewish community in the world. Reflection on what has happened to the Jews almost everywhere else allows us to see the humane nobility of the American commitment to individual rights.

But in the long run, the attempt to maintain pre-modern traditions (even the tradition of natural rights) in individualistic America usually fails. Children or grandchildren come to understand themselves primarily as individuals with rights, and so free not to be dominated by the authority of fathers, traditions, churches, or God. According to Tocqueville, the human mind hates inconsistency, and it is almost irresistibly inclined to harmonize heaven and earth. The view that we are individuals for some purposes but not others is not very credible. So it is almost inevitable that Americans come to understand themselves more consistently as individuals, attempting to apply the ideas of contract and consent to every part of their lives.

Marriage, for example, comes to be understood less as a sacrament and more as a contract between two individuals, to be dissolved at will. Sex is dissociated from the hard responsibilities connected with procreation given us by God and nature. Sex becomes “safe sex,” a contract between “consenting adults” who never lose their minds in passionate enjoyment or in love. From an individual point of view, Sex cannot be safe—or no real limit on our freedom—if we ever stop calculating about it. Social arrangements reflecting real or imagined differences between men and women are more consistently and insistently regarded as oppressive. Merely biological differences cannot be regarded as real limits to individual freedom. On balance, the history of America is a story of our thought and even our lives becoming progressively more individualistic—although, because real human nature never stops resisting, not completely individualistic.

Even religion tends to become a choice we make for our convenience. We conclude that God would never command anything that would violate our rights. If He ever did, we would withdraw our consent from

even His rule. The traditional view is that God must judge the modern individual to be the product of willful self-deception; human beings can never be as self-sufficient as the individual claims to be. The modern view is that the undeceived and self-sufficient individual must judge God; theology cannot be a rationalization for oppression. The individual, not God, is that for which everything exists. God, the individual believes he knows, cannot really provide him any security—although the modern individual may still, on occasion, hypocritically take advantage of the comfort that religious community provides.

It is reasonable to believe that the individual Locke invented will never achieve the happiness he pursues. Such an alien can never be at home in this world. His life remains an incessant pursuit that ends only in death. The mistake of modern utopianism is its reasoning that because the individual obsessively pursues bodily satisfaction, the individual will be happier to the extent he achieves it. The truth is that modern liberalism is about the pursuit, and not about the enjoyment, of happiness. The individual does pursue bodily security and comfort, but the more of it he achieves, the more dissatisfied he is. The more secure or free from contingency he is objectively, the more he experiences his existence as contingent and the more he is haunted by death. The more death is pushed back by modern technology, the more accidental it seems. The more accidental or less necessary death seems, the more terrible it seems.

Surely it is possible for human beings to live well with invincible necessity. For example, thoughtful acceptance of the necessity of death is what makes sense of the practice of such risky virtues as courage. If you have to go sometime, you might as well go down virtuously. But if death ever came to seem entirely accidental because tech-

nology had enabled human lives to become indefinitely long, then the individual would become obsessively risk averse. Then, every moment of life would be given over to calculation about security. The current biotechnological promise of indefinite longevity would surely produce more perfectly modern individuals—beings with even less capacity to enjoy life than we have now. We can reasonably anticipate, therefore, that the limited but still quite real successes of the biotechnological project in fending off death and disease will be the cause of a religious revival. It will become more clear than ever that to the extent we understand ourselves as individuals we can never be happy. Contrary to the hopes of our new eugenic utopians—and to the fears of some conservative Nietzscheans—we do not have the capability to make for ourselves a “posthuman” future. The individual has neither the intention nor the means to surrender his freedom, his distorted but real self-consciousness.

Actual enjoyment or happiness is even contrary to the modern individual’s view of his freedom. He is free because he can oppose himself to nature; the moment he gives way to some natural enjoyment he surrenders his freedom. His freedom is freedom *from* nature *for* nothing in particular, except not suffering or death. We can even say, with Tocqueville, that the individual perversely takes pride in his inability really to enjoy. The individual is a *materialist* insofar as he rejects all non-materialistic human goals as illusions, but his disparagement of real human enjoyment makes him an equally extreme *anti-materialist*. We might say that his single-minded pursuit of material goals while being conscious of that pursuit’s futility is undeniable evidence that he has a soul. No other animal could be so perversely screwed up, and Tocqueville was subtle or Christian enough to see the greatness in such human misery.

Contemporary “therapeutic” thought invites the modern individual to surrender his soul or his obsessions in the name of immediate enjoyment. Experts advise him to give up his singular freedom and become just one of the animals again. All he has to do is not be moved by what he knows to be true, by what he really knows about his own death and the nature that is out to kill him. The goal of therapy is to engender what Allan Bloom calls flatness of soul, a disposition to be unmoved by love or death and so to be no longer open to the truth. The therapists have mainly won linguistic victories: Americans speak in their easygoing and amoral language more than ever before. Those victories are impressive enough that experts such as Bloom and the sociologist James Davison Hunter mistake what people say today for what they actually experience. It takes postmodern conservative outsiders like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (and Mother Teresa of Calcutta) to both notice and have the courage to say that Americans are more lonely and death-obsessed than ever before. Like Tocqueville, what Solzhenitsyn hears just beneath the surface in the lives of free, restless, enlightened, and prosperous Americans is the “howl” of existentialism.

People are more screwed up than ever, as the philosophical novelist Walker Percy said, because they have been deprived of the language to express the longings of a real human being. But they are also now screwed up because they have lost even the language of the individual. The modern individual, although abstracted from and so less than a real human being, is more than the being described by the therapeutic experts. Therapeutic language is particularly alienating because it is *two* steps removed from corresponding to the longings of a real human being. The modern individual is moved by death but not by love; the entirely imaginary therapeutic being is moved by neither.

But the truth is that, whatever they say, human beings remain moved by both. The alleged therapeutic solution to the misery of individuality actually exaggerates the problem—and we should notice that most, though not all, contemporary “communitarianism” is therapeutic in intention. Our therapists actually produce pathetic human beings who can neither *be* good nor *feel* good. People today know they need help because, as the lapidary Canadian thinker George Grant observed, they know they have been deprived of something—but they usually get no help in figuring out what.

We live at the end of the modern world because we now see the consequences of the modern reduction of the real human being to an individual. What began as a fiction to limit government has redefined more and more of human life. If human beings really believe they are merely individuals, they perversely work to empty human life of the contents that make it worth living. A life defined only by avoiding death and misery is, in fact, supremely miserable. So, today, our sophisticated individuals sometimes spend their time envying the other animals—at least they’re content. But the individual really knows that the dog’s life is not for him. The individual wrongly believes that his choice is between subhuman contentment and human unhappiness, and in his freedom he sometimes talks nostalgically about the former—the “simple life”—but still consistently chooses the latter.

Not only are Americans more individualistic than ever, the biotechnological revolution promises to give them new weapons of unprecedented power in their war against nature. The victories they win—like most

of the victories won on behalf of the modern individual—will probably be at the expense of the distinctively human goods: love, family, friends, country, virtue, art, spiritual life, and, most generally, living responsibly in light of what we really know about what we have been given. The bio-

technological revolution will be driven by individualistic obsession, and we can limit and direct it only if we can recover the truth that we are more than individuals.

Postmodernism rightly understood begins with the realization that we should, in fact, be grateful for what we have been given. We have been given not only self-conscious mortality and a mysterious freedom to negate nature, but all sorts of natural compensations for our dis-

tinctively human misery. Love is not an illusion, and we have been fitted by nature to know the truth. Both love of each other and love of the truth depend, as far as we can tell, on the inevitability of death. As far as we can tell, self-consciousness—with all the virtues and distinctively human enjoyments it makes possible—depends on our having corruptible bodies. The fact that despite all that nature has given us we remain somewhat alienated might reasonably be seen as evidence that our true home lies elsewhere, and that it is in our nature to long for a personal God. As Saint Thomas Aquinas said, what we know through revelation completes—but does not contradict—what we know through reason. Even if we are, for now, not ready to be grateful for the gift of faith, we can still reasonably believe that our homelessness is a price worth paying for all that we can know, love, and do in our lives. Because we can be ambiguously at home, or at home with our homelessness, we can abandon the modern obsession with



Saint Thomas Aquinas

making ourselves fully at home in this world.

It is no longer enough for Americans to be abstracted modern individuals most of the time and full human creatures only in fleeting private moments. All of our institutions must be consistently understood in light of what we really know about human nature. We have religious liberty because human beings, by nature, really are open to God, and because what we really know about nature points to the real possibility that we are created. We have political liberty because we are more than citizens, but that liberty is compatible with political responsibility because we are, among other things, citizens. Because human freedom and human responsibilities make possible and necessary both virtue and spiritual life, we can live well with death. The beginning of the postmodern world is the replacement of the individual by the whole human being, and the using of our natural capabilities for thought and action to make the world worthy of him. This is not to say that any particular changes to our form of government are now necessary. Our constitutionalism might actually be better defended from the perspective of the created human

being than that of the abstract individual—as Orestes Brownson in the nineteenth century and Robert Kraynak and Carey McWilliams very recently have explained. Postmodern conservatism is quite compatible with liberal or limited and democratic government, and it certainly has a higher view than does liberal individualism of the capacity of the ordinary person to choose truth and virtue over security and comfort.

Conservatives today rightly attack so-called postmodernists for their attacks on truth, science, virtue, and God. But those attacks on our ability to perceive the truth and goodness of nature and human nature are actually *modern* in origin. The promiscuously ironic professor of philosophy Richard Rorty once described himself as a postmodernist bourgeois liberal. That particular self-description turns out to be neither irony nor an oxymoron. Postmodernism as it is usually understood, Rorty appreciates, does not really offer any challenge at all to modern or liberal individualism. Because we conservatives aim to conserve the full truth about human and natural reality, we have no interest in conserving the modern error of mistaking the abstract individual for the real human being.