

III

Tradition and Intellect

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FIRST OF ALL, my argument depends on my acceptance by faith of a principle decisive to the argument, a principle I believe formulating a central truth: man is in his primary nature an intellectual creature, whatever the range of intellectual gifts we may distinguish from person to person. This being true, it must follow that the intellectual actions of the discrete person, within the limits of that person's unique and discrete gift of intellect, will be cumulatively decisive to that person's well-being as intellectual creature. That is why we must always carefully value by intellectual reflection our inheritance from our intellectual fathers. It will mean concomitantly as well that the person's intellectual actions in a present moment affect in some manner the general well-being of the community of mankind in that moment. And that makes a double imperative to our address to the mixed gifts of our fathers. What we are addressing is the responsibility of the particular intellect to tradition. That responsibility is to preserve the viable out of the totality of its inheritance and strengthen it through those peculiar gifts whereby the individual is a person.

Depending as my argument does from faith in this principle, I ought to clarify my own understanding of the nature of faith which moves me to an acceptance of the principle. And especially I should

do so, since it is my contention that all intellectual actions proceed out of faith. What, then, is faith? Here a preliminary characterization, to which we shall return. Faith is an intellectual consent in some degree to the *possible*. As the possible emerges as more and more probable to the rational intellect (which is not of course infallible in its supposing the possible as probable), faith thereupon becomes strengthened in its focus of assent to the probable. That action of intellect is the necessary pursuit of the actual, of what is. Intellectual action, precipitated as it were by some degree of faith, is both supported by faith and supports faith, whatever perception of reality that faith holds.

But because finite intellect is fallible in consequence of its finitudes, it is possible that an intense and growing faith as justified by rational intellect may give inordinate consent to an illusion misunderstood as a reality. If this were not a possibility to the intellectual life, and indeed a probability in any active moment, the unfolding of the soul in its potentialities would be a determined process, an inevitability in a mechanistic sense. In brief, then, I hold that even the intellectual action of radical nihilism is itself dependent on faith. It is out of faith that we now move to a concern for central questions always engaging intellect

in its actions, and they are questions necessarily implicit in our concerns for nature or history or community. This is true, whether our position is that of Thomist, or Idealist, or Positivist, or whatever.

There are two mysteries always confronting intellect in its attempts to understand its own existence, mysteries suggested by the two concepts nature and history. These are mysteries teasing to the intellect, whether it be committed to action under the rubrics of—and the accompanying sciences of—economics, or politics, or physics, or biology, or philosophy, or theology. Nature in relation to history we discover to be the abiding and fundamental theme of intellectual action, and of course it is a very conspicuous theme in the writings of the Fugitive-Agrarians.

Let us begin by observing that the Medieval world had its own “big bang” theory about the relation of nature and history. It saw a fulfilling of caused creation, initiated by an explosive creative grace, whereby God said at the beginning, “Let there be light.” That vision was subsequently appropriated, restricted, and refined in Renaissance thought and in subsequent thought, put to intellectual ends whereby gradually human intellect itself emerges as the principal father of history. There is a considerable literature to which my metaphor speaks, and especially a literature that has recently concentrated on the Hegelian synthesis of this Renaissance inclination to establish intellectual autonomy in relation to nature. That development leads at last into a popular ideology—a popular negative theology—at the level of historical spectacle as established and popularized by Marx, elaborated and executed by Lenin and their followers. But that we have come to “the end of history” as thus misrepresented, in the controversial metaphor of Francis Fukuyama, seems to leave us little the wiser for our long cen-

turies spent wrestling with the causes of and consequences of our ideas.¹ That wrestling, in sum, has been with the question of history as the principle of order to the body of mankind, and we have come at the close of our own century to the alarming recognition of its inadequacy.

Given this summary context to our immediate concern, it seems to me one of the considerable ironies in contemporary “conservative” or “traditionalist” thought that this thought has recognized the errors leading to the modernist elevation of intellect as autonomous, whereby intellect would become the god of history, but too often attacks those errors from the limited ground of history itself as established by its opposition. That is to make the opposition to modernism vulnerable. If engaged from such a limited ground, the critique, given the recent urgency of necessity in such attempts (a fighting of fire with fire as it were), is often accompanied by a plaintive longing for rain in this dry season of our community’s dissolution. Meanwhile the drought of “modernism” settles upon us. What I descry here are *ad hoc* defenses by traditionalists of intuited virtues of intellect, virtues which must be recovered to our health, and that is cause for rejoicing. But the longer there is the reliance on the *ad hoc* the more those defenses tend to become merely habitual and so ineffectual in the end. There is after all, as we might say, a condition of knee-jerk “conservatism” no less that knee-jerk “liberalism” that occasions such *ad hoc* response. Such a response to the Platonic “negative theology” of modernism, then, must prove in the end insufficient. For it proves in the end an imitation of that negative theology.

The term “negative theology” seems both appropriate and useful to us in our concern to deepen our response to modernism. Eric Voegelin points out that Plato contributes the term theology to Western philosophical vocabulary. What is of

interest to our present concern is that Plato, in the *Laws* and the *Republic*, is first of all concerned with negative propositions as types of theology. (Compare my remarks on faith in relation to nihilism). There is an ignorance within the soul whose consequence is just such propositions, but the propositions in their effects influence both public discourse and public actions. That is why the fool who says in his heart there is no god must not be confused with the natural idiot. For when the fool as plausible intellect makes such declarations, careless intellects become intoxicated by the illusional freedom. They embrace such propositions as declarations of absolute independence.

We put the condition as follows: the soul possesses illusions of truth accepted by faith as visions of truth. And as Voegelin recognizes, whether intellectual action proceeds from illusion or vision, those actions proceed out of faith.² It is for this reason that faith itself needs to be carefully considered at the outset, since the concern is with the conflicting engagements of differing faiths as the well-spring of intellectual action and conflict in community, whether held through negative theology (as does modernism) or positive theology (as does Thomistic realism).

Let us then make rather more clear what we mean by saying that faith is the ground of intellectual action. We shall define the term in what I understand as its proper aspect when governing intellectual deportment toward the abiding questions, here specifically the relation of history to nature. Faith is an openness of intellect, in some degree, to the unknown or to the only partially known: to that which includes but which is also inclusive of the faith-moved intellect. In brief, faith is a deportment of intellect to existential reality—to the whole of creation signified as consequent to the “big bang” in whatever sense that initiating

cause of being and of discrete beings is understood as effecting what is. Thus faith is the deportment necessary to any intellectual action, whether that positive deportment just described or a negative deportment out of negative theology.

Thus intellect is moved by faith, whether or not the *unknown* or *partially known* existential context to our intellectual response *is* in actuality: whether in actuality it is an other than, but inclusive of the inclining intellect, on the one hand; or whether, on the other hand, it is an illusion spawned by our intellectual desire—a desire which by our given nature is intrinsic to intellect and gives rise to an inclination to some sort of rest in knowing the other than. In this respect, then, we say positively, if we are a Thomist, that faith is an initiating grace to which intellect consents because of its desire. Only thus is any intellectual action possible. We must add that faith is not determinate in its ends. For one may (and many do) rest faith in self-generated illusion, out of what is a false love of the self in the final reckoning. Faith is a response to grace’s seeding of, the in-fertaling of, soul whereby the soul is granted its possible discovery of its teleological dimension. But it responds to the possible through its own intellectual actions which must be made proportionate to its own given and particular nature. Through this initiating grace, the journey toward Beatitude is made possible to intellect, while a contingent possibility is a journey to that false beatitude, the elevation of the soul as autonomous and independent of even its own existential being through its willfulness, the alienated condition of self-love.

It is in the context of this thought that I see practical necessities to intellectual action if our intellectual community is to move toward its own viability in recovering the community of mankind. Thus the necessity of setting the problem of history in relation to nature, toward under-

standing the affairs of persons taken separately and in community. "There's a divinity that shapes our ends," Hamlet says in a distraught moment, "Rough-hew them how we will." In Shakespeare's day that "divinity" was understood to signify the God of creation, though with the growing effects of empiricism—that is, as the rough-hewing begins to appear more and more a fine tuning of nature (human and other)—that sense of "divinity" undergoes radical change.

In our day we largely understand the raw matter with which we ourselves shape our ends to lie imminently in material existence, requiring as the only acceptable divine power our finite intellect to process the possible ends we want effected. Thus process, emblematically celebrated as Progress (one of the Fugitive-Agrarian devil terms), becomes a symbolic naming of that new divinity, a shibboleth in the manipulation of *hoi polloi* by gnostic intellect. And in our century, especially, the new scholasticism of Progress in support of that divinity of autonomous intellect seems largely encompassed by that most recent among the sciences, economics. Such were the confused intellectual circumstances when the Fugitive-Agrarians began to respond. That is why it was inevitable that the Fugitive-Agrarian and the Distributists would attempt an alliance, their joint attempt represented by *Who Owns America?* (1935)—their less than satisfactory engagement of economic issues.

Modernist history, then, has its scholasticism. It is not concerned with the number of angels on a pinhead as the popular deprecatory view of medieval scholasticism puts it. It is concerned rather with the variety of data speculatively abstracted from material existence in relation to the present stage of technology. Data is then speculatively related to history—to event—in the interest of a smooth-hewing of our material ends as

our ultimate ends. The sacrifice made in the interest of this new scholasticism, practiced gnostically upon the material world, is the loss of a vision of the spiritual dimension of the speculator himself. By extension of effect it becomes the loss of that vision to the community of man which has more and more surrendered its intellectual consent to these new scholastics. One need consider only the elaborate industry in the American academy, rivaling the scholastic industry at the University of Paris in the thirteenth century, to appreciate the concern. It has become an industry focused toward execution of scholastic programs through the power centered in political institutions along the Potomac as rationalized by academic scholastics.³

In this resolution through gnostic process which elevates Progress as the reigning divinity, there follows a loss of vision—and "Where there is no vision, the people perish." They perish as a people through embracing illusion out of a desire for vision, a condition suited to the machinations of gnostic intent to power over the ends to be shaped through intellect asserted as autonomous, as independent of causes other than itself. Against this destruction of the community of intellect, *ad hoc* resistance proves insufficient again and again. Therefore, we must, as intellectual creatures, come to terms with both nature and history to recover our intellectual heritage from these manipulations of it. We can do so only insofar as we may effectively hold nature and history in a proper relation to each other. And that is possible only through metaphysics. Otherwise we shall continue doomed to *ad hoc*, desperate attempts at recovery through inadequate appeals to either nature or history. More than history or more than nature as the ground of argument must be brought to bear upon our difficulties in this historical moment.

More than, which is not to say that the

complexities of history in its popular sense, which have fruited our scholarship, are to be sprayed by and sterilized by metaphysics, anymore than that we should approach nature with the false understanding of the uses of metaphysics as popularly understood. It is rather to say that we must depend less and less upon our continuing *ad hoc* "historical" response to historical modernism's abuse of community. We must enlarge the arena of our engagement with these enemies of a proper history and nature and science and philosophy and theology. These enemies to our intended recovery have realized, as if by an instinctive response to their own machination, a terrible secret about mankind as temporally embattled in the ground of history and nature: in the limits of that ground, the present moment of history is always triumphant, so long as the engagement can be limited to a concept of history to which is denied any perspective upon it larger than its temporal dimensions.

If granted that limited ground as the limits of argument, the modernist is destined to triumph overlong, though not eternally, since by the authority of history so taken the present is self-evidently triumphant. Still, this moment's modernist is replaced by next moment's. One might demonstrate that the triumph is not eternal, of course, by recourse to history, by the evidence again and again present in the sequences of moments past in which a presumption of triumph in that past moment now lies in decay. Not too long ago every school child was exposed to Shelley's ironic drama on this point in his sonnet "Ozymandias." It is a present view of past triumph. The two "vast and trunkless legs" of the monument stand in a desert, the anciently "modernist" inscription still legible: "My name is Ozymanidias, king of kings: / Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" The chilling hush of the desert settles on many a reader in the conclud-

ing words of the poet: "nothing beside remains. Round the decay / Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare / The lone and level sands stretch far away."

Under the pressures of a "politically correct" curriculum, our young may soon be denied the chilling arrest of that moment. But they will not miss, eventually, its present manifestations. For they will encounter in most personal and specific ways that abiding metaphor—a fare of philosophy and literature that is ageless: the tensive fissures in their present moment as an awakening generation, between themselves and their immediate fathers, whether actual fathers are present or not. And they will encounter in another perspective those eruptions between themselves and their own daughters and sons. Against that error ancient wisdom speaks: generations pass but the truth abideth.

It is truth as possible to intellect which puts history and nature in their proper perspective, their ordinate relationship to each other. The necessity is for a metaphysical vision ordering community, lest persons perish for lack of a vision of truth. That the necessity of metaphysical vision presses upon us more heavily than at any time since the thirteenth century seems self-evident. We may cite the concern in rigorous intellectuals as they resist the decay of intellectual community of our century. Thinkers as diverse as the physicist Neils Bohr and the philosopher Eric Voegelin recognize the necessity that we recover metaphysical vision.

What we mean by such a vision is a climate of consent among intellects, a presumption of truth as possible to intellect but not created by intellect itself. There is, by such a view, an intellectual insight of reality itself, the existential complex of reality which is always adjacent and always engaging intellect. But the view sees as well that intellect is a part of that complex and not its cause.

Such vision allows intellect an anchor in some desirable but never perfect possibilities to its knowing reality: *never perfect*, since intellect is itself a part of that whole which it must engage through its natural actions.

With such a consent on faith to the possibility of truth there may emerge a sufficiently common consent that makes intellectual discourse possible once more among the diversity of intellects now so much at odds. That discourse, by embracing a common good, will not mean an absolute correspondence of vision between one intellect and another. But it does mean as possible to intellectual community first of all a common recognition of truth as vouchsafed to intellect by reality itself. That will allow a communal consent beyond the presumption of isolated intellectual autonomy, beyond the presumption that intellect is the measure of truth rather than truth the measure of intellect. That gnostic dislocation has evolved since the Renaissance, we suggested, with the effect of atomizing the intellectual community into increasingly desperate and disparate assumptions of isolated self-sufficiencies. This effected subjectivism is self-willed as the limit of any intellectual certainty. Its destructiveness to the community of humanity is lamented in our epitaph for our age: the Age of Alienation.

1. See *A Look at "The End of History?"* edited by Kenneth M. Jensen (Washington, D.C.), 1990. See also Fukuyama's extension of his argument in his *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, 1992). 2. It is over the question of *faith* that Voegelin and Leo Strauss reach a sort of parting of the ways in their relationship, in large part I suggest because

a sufficient meaning of the term is not established between them. The issue emerges in their correspondence. See their letters and see also the essay in the same volume by Ellis Sandoz, "Medieval Rationalism or Mystic Philosophy? Reflections on the Strauss-Voegelin Correspondence," in *Faith and Political Philosophy*, edited by Peter Emberly and Barry Cooper (University Park, Penn., 1992). As for their relation as philosophical historians: History elevated to a secular science called historiography very much troubles both. Strauss in his Walgreen Lectures, *Natural Right and History*, explores the rise of historiography out of 18th century rationalism. Voegelin takes a longer view, from Joachim of Flora in the 12th century through Hegel to Marx, in his *Science, Politics & Gnosticism*, and in his own Walgreen Lectures, *The New Science of Politics*, analyzing the destructive consequences in the interest of our recovering a viable political philosophy. This latter work has increasingly commanded the attention of our academic "political scientists," over the past two decades, and with a gradual salutary effect. 3. With a little time and wit, one could develop parallels between late medieval scholasticism and modern economic scholasticism. Indeed, there is suggestive analogy between, say, such minds as that of the Father of Nominalism, William of Occam, and certain nominalists committed to the "index of Leading Indicators," to the intricate involvement, by definition, among such categories as *unemployment claims, building permits, unfilled orders for durables, money supply, stock prices, consumer confidence*, and so on. The refining within the separate indicators is a challenge to scholastic ingenuity, as for instance the proposal regarding money supply of the importance of distinctions between "M-1," "M-2," and "M-3" — i.e., currency in circulation, savings accounts and mutual funds, and time deposits (Treasury bills, savings bonds, commercial paper and so on). One might, in such a playful mood, even find analogy between these dimensions of abstract accounting of material reality and the many species of grace in scholastic philosophy. Little wonder, given the indefinite intricacies of category, that a college of economic cardinals, roughly encompassing Washington, D.C. and supported by monastics in academic institutions, make daily assessments of the effects of these "graces" on the material well-being of the polity.