

Illuminating Richard Weaver's *Ideas*

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Steps Toward Restoration: The Consequences of Richard Weaver's *Ideas*, edited by Ted J. Smith III, *Wilmington, Del.: ISI BOOKS, 1998. xi + 302 pp.*

IN MARCH 1998 over 100 scholars, writers, and admirers of Richard Weaver gathered at Belmont Abbey College, a Catholic liberal arts college and Benedictine monastery in Belmont, North Carolina, for a symposium commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *Ideas Have Consequences* (hereafter, *Ideas*), his penetrating critique of modernity. Edited by Virginia Commonwealth University professor Ted J. Smith III, America's leading Weaver scholar, this volume of revised versions of the nine papers presented there, is an outstanding contribution to our understanding of both *Ideas* and Weaver himself. The essays yield a panoptic, harmonious treatment of *Ideas*, thoughtfully examining its origins, arguments, impact, nature, legacy, strengths—and weaknesses.

Weaver, his former colleague Wilma Ebbitt relates, was a disciplined, reflective, and quiet but congenial professor of English composition at the University of

Chicago when he wrote *Ideas*—an unlikely source of a profound and disturbing book. Meant to challenge “forces that threaten the foundations of civilization,”¹ *Ideas* offers a diagnosis of modernity grounded in metaphysics. Belief and action, Weaver maintained, flow from one’s “metaphysical dream of the world....an intuitive feeling about the immanent nature of reality.”² The West’s disintegration is the consequence of a centuries-old “evil decision” whereby “man could realize himself more fully if he would only abandon his belief in the existence of transcendentals,”³ and believe instead that only reality perceived by the senses is real. This led, Weaver argued, to philosophical materialism; minds fastening on fragments of reality; displacement of man as embodied soul by man as a purely material, utilitarian machine; accelerating abandonment of ideals, standards, and self-restraint in all of life, in favor of the gratification of appetites.

Ideas was the fruit of a remarkable intellectual odyssey, which Smith traces in a superbly researched essay. At one time a socialist, Weaver embraced Southern Agrarianism, which, greatly augmented and enriched by his own deeper delvings into history and metaphysics, was a major strain in his thinking. Smith (like historian Mark Malvasi and other contributors) rightly gives prominence

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to Weaver's doctoral dissertation at Louisiana State University, his first book, posthumously published as *The Southern Tradition at Bay*, which prefigures many arguments of *Ideas*. Weaver lauded the South as the West's "last non-materialist civilization," and argued that recreating such a society is our only hope of avoiding being driven by technology and "moral defeatism" into a nihilistic future.⁴ Drawing on Weaver's World War II letters, Smith persuasively argues that a second main strand in Weaver's thought was his "sickened rejection of contemporary culture." Pierre Albert Duhamel, Cleanth Brooks, and other individuals also influenced *Ideas*. Historian George Nash claims that aside from its original tracing of the West's decline to William of Occam, *Ideas* was derivative, drawing on not only the Agrarians but also Irving Babbitt and José Ortega y Gasset. While the full story of the intellectual roots of *Ideas* awaits publication of a scholarly compendium of materials from Weaver's notebooks, letters, and unpublished works—which, happily, Smith is undertaking⁵—the authors have given some promising leads.

Because *Ideas* compresses so much philosophy and intellectual history into a brief space, philosopher Robert Preston's lucid exposition of Weaver's core arguments is welcome. Like Weaver himself, Dr. Preston, Belmont Abbey College's president, deals in fundamentals. Weaver, he maintains, was a "philosophical realist" who held that reality has two aspects: universal (defining characteristics or essences) and individual (particular existents sharing those characteristics). This implies an unchanging metaphysical truth which is the source of absolute, universally applicable morals and ideals. Nominalism, by contrast, has it that only individual existents are real; universals are merely the mind's inventions for organizing this reality. Implying that there is no truth, only facts,

that morals are relative, and that life has no intrinsic purpose and no hierarchy of meaning, nominalism has the ghastly consequences Weaver enumerated.

Ideas inspired either splenetic or enthusiastic reviews, the latter mostly from conservatives. In a model piece of scholarship and exposition, Nash enumerates Weaver's appeals and contributions to conservatism. By tracing Western civilization's crisis to modernity's fundamental ideas, Weaver "dramatically extended the mental horizon of the post-war Right" beyond economics, foreign affairs and politics. Weaver's "unalloyed moral and metaphysical absolutism," insisting on the knowability of timeless truth, "exerted an upward pull on American conservatives," away from mere pragmatism. Weaver's sympathy with the Middle Ages and its worldview encouraged "a Roman Catholic interpretation of modern history," giving early postwar traditionalist conservatism a Catholic flavor. His stress on ideas as determinants of history, implying as it did that dissemination of better ideas affords a means of renewal, gave conservatives grounds for hope. And he led conservatives to see themselves as aristocrats defending a humane civilization against mass man. However, they were less persuaded by his attacks on the comfort-loving bourgeoisie, and on finance, industry, and commercialism, partly because conservatism's libertarian wing rejected these views, and partly because Weaver himself upheld private property on metaphysical grounds—another great service to conservatism.

The impact was not necessarily one-sided. *Ideas* brought Weaver prominence in conservatism, exposing him to other conservative positions which perhaps affected his thinking. Shedding new light on the development of Weaver's thought, Nash offers fascinating evidence that, beginning in 1959, Weaver was softening some of his rigorously anti-modern, anti-

capitalist positions. In what Nash rightly deems a "remarkable reversal," Weaver asserted in a 1959 speech that it was the intellectuals who had been poisoned with leftism, while ordinary Americans remained sensible and freedom-loving. "Even more surprising," Weaver now offered "a rousing defense of the American economic system," for producing an abundance for which Americans need not apologize. "Perhaps at the height of the Cold War against an atheistic and collectivist enemy," Nash speculates, "the United States of America looked better to him than it had in the late 1940s."

That same year, Chicago reissued *Ideas*, acknowledging its continued appeal, which Weaver in a new foreword attributed to its being "an intuition of a situation...of a world which has lost its center, which desires to believe again in value and obligation," which expressed many readers' own thoughts.⁶ In complementing the usual focus on the arguments of *Ideas*, University of New Hampshire professor Lawrence Prelli addresses its hitherto neglected rhetorical nature. One major reason for the perennial appeal of *Ideas*, he maintains, is that it is "a masterwork of rhetoric," which Duhamel defined as "effective expression." While *The Southern Tradition* presented "a positive cultural vision rooted in nonmaterialist metaphysics," *Ideas* is its "refutative counterpart," tracing modernity's woes to "a flawed materialistic metaphysics." Weaver addresses "readers' most fundamental sentiments," and his intuition appeals to his readers' own sense of a world gone awry and a desire for something better. Prelli observes that *Ideas* starkly contrasts a properly oriented, nonmaterialist, ideal-inspired society like the South of *The Southern Tradition* and materialist modernity, and invites readers to choose between them, and, in effect, to choose either to sink into fragmentation and nihilism or to recover spiritual and moral meaning.

Having "articulated and made rational the grounds for their felt uneasiness at the modern world," Weaver asks his readers if they will "redirect and rightly dispose their own deepest sentiments," and "choose a life of piety" amidst modernity's "spiritual and moral wreckage." In this rhetorical device, Prelli argues, "lies the rhetorical effectiveness and enduring appeal of *Ideas Have Consequences*."

The book's appeal rests, too, on its uncanny prescience. Focusing on politics and economics, writer and lawyer Ben Toledano finds Weaver's critique of modernity thoroughly vindicated by the subsequent relentless onslaught of materialism, self-indulgence, and egalitarianism. However, one wishes Toledano had undertaken a penetrating assessment of the arts, which abundantly justify Weaver's observations about fragmentation, obsession, and egotism.

Otherwise, *Steps Toward Restoration* rarely disappoints. Its essays give religion's role in Weaver's life and thought welcome, albeit glancing, attention. While in college preparatory school, Smith discloses, Weaver "participated enthusiastically in Christian youth activities on campus" and was an officer of the Christian Endeavor Society. Moreover, his close friendship with Duhamel exposed him to a rich Roman Catholic intellectual tradition, which Smith plausibly sees as "almost certainly the source of the undertone of Roman Catholicism that many readers have noted in *Ideas Have Consequences*." Nash characterizes Weaver as "an inactive Protestant" whose outlook was "basically Christian." A bedrock premise of *Ideas* is that "the world is intelligible."⁷ Preston argues that Weaver did not discuss where this intelligibility comes from "because his strategy is to make his argument as non-religious as possible." He adds that Weaver clearly finds its source in a "supreme mind"—a deity who created the universe. Weaver's admitted reliance on secular language in

Ideas puzzles Toledano, who characterizes him as a “deeply spiritual” person, whose belief in God, in the soul, and in original sin did not depend on membership in a religious denomination. Toledano laments that Weaver’s appeals to religion were “most often vague and indefinite,” and finds his proposed means of restoration inadequate, asserting that explicit appeal to organized, orthodox Christianity is our only hope of restoration. Prelli’s masterful handling of *Ideas* as rhetoric gives grounds for speculating that perhaps Weaver calculated that explicit Christian argument might repel readers in an impious age, that the rhetorical devices of rational, eloquent articulation of intuitions and of confronting readers with sharply polarized opposites would be more effective for being subtler, and might yield conversions later. Here, again, while this crucial aspect of Weaver’s thought cannot receive the treatment it merits without full access to Weaver’s papers, the authors do blaze trails into this central *terra incognita*.

No thinker, however brilliant, is infallible, and Weaver receives respectful but sharp and largely legitimate criticism from a Thomistic perspective by poet and critic Marion Montgomery, in the book’s longest and most challenging essay. Montgomery faults Weaver for misrepresenting Aristotle as prescribing a worldly career for the middle class, and argues, correctly,⁸ that Aristotle’s highest good for man was, rather, “the exercise of the intellect in pursuit and contemplation of the truth.” He is also equally uncomfortable with Weaver’s assertion that with Thomism the Catholic Church forsook asceticism and rigorous morality, and pragmatically accommodated the world.

More importantly, Montgomery rejects Weaver’s Platonism. Weaver, he argues, apparently did not realize that William of Occam’s real enemy was not

Plato but Thomas Aquinas. The Nominalist position first arose, he points out, in the eleventh-century debate over the Eucharist and transubstantiation, in which Aquinas argued for realism. Modernism, driven by “desire for gnostic power over being itself,” is “an inverted Platonism,” with its presumption that the human intellect is autonomous and can create its own truth.

A line of descent runs from Occam through Descartes and Kant to modernism, Montgomery warns, and Weaver’s argument is inadvertently contaminated by it; witness his Kantian terminology. Weaver appears to be uncomfortable with “that world adjacent to his consciousness with which he seems...to confuse the sheer materialistic ideology he opposes.” His insistence on “driving afresh the wedge between the material and the transcendental,”⁹ Montgomery argues, requires “a dualism which at its most fundamental level denies the good of creation itself.” Sharing Weaver’s call for piety, he maintains that Weaver’s dualist approach for restoring it is self-defeating. The “gnostic intellect,” seeking “power over being itself” and now dominating the world, “has driven the very wedge Weaver calls for as the ‘rock’ upon which he would build his own metaphysical denial of this gnostic enemy of the transcendent.” Rather, “we should remove that old wounding wedge,” which sprang from gnosticism’s presumption that material existence is “neither good nor evil but only indifferent by its being accidental,” whereas in fact it is “necessarily good, in being created *ex nihilo* by a Supreme Good.”

This is the sort of foundational scrutiny and criticism in which Weaver himself engaged, an appropriate way simultaneously to honor and refine his arguments. And Montgomery is clearly right. Existence, the sum of creator and creation, is an organic whole, making dualism insupportable—as does the Incarna-

tion, one would think. Rather, the immanent and transcendent are distinct, yet connected: the transcendent God manifests Himself in creation, epitomized by the Eucharist's transubstantiation, in which the transcendent Deity *infuses* the immanent with His grace. Creation's goodness *qua* God's creation constrains our treatment of it, hence implies codes of morals (constraining treatment of others) and stewardship (constraining treatment of nature)—the very piety for which Weaver pleaded.

Dualism, it seems, ultimately implies two disastrous phenomena: disembodied, presumptuous mind, isolated from external reality and its corrective, chastening limitations (and did not Babbitt insist that the imagination be "disciplined to the facts"?¹⁰); and mere matter, including other people, shorn of transcendent significations, and hence of any grounds for a constraining piety. That the two nations whose philosophical life was most captivated by radical dualism, Kantian Germany and Cartesian France, spawned the radically impious horrors of, respectively, Nazism and the French Revolution, and that the latter inspired a third horror, the Soviet regime, must stand as a cautionary tale of the consequences of this bad idea.

Montgomery's critique in no way diminishes Weaver's greatness. Rather, as Nietzsche wrote of Schopenhauer, "The errors of great men are venerable because they are more fruitful than the truths of little men."¹¹ Here, they have occasioned Montgomery's critical sifting, sorting, correcting, and refining that advance the cause of truth which Weaver himself so nobly served.

Drawing on fresh scrutiny of Weaver's published and unpublished writings, as well as offering illuminating exposition and searching critical engagement, *Steps Toward Restoration* is the finest work of Weaver scholarship to date. With its learning, discernment, and seriousness,

it points the way to and sets a high standard for future efforts at explicating and assessing the man to whom conservatism—and Western civilization—owe so much.

1. Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago, 1948; 1959 ed.), vi. 2. *Ibid.*, 18. 3. *Ibid.*, 2-3. 4. Richard M. Weaver, *The Southern Tradition at Bay* (Washington, 1989), 375. 5. Telephone call of Professor Smith to this reviewer, March 15, 1999. Per a March 22, 1999, letter to this reviewer from David Bovenizer at Liberty Fund, this volume will probably appear in September 2000. 6. *Ideas*, vi. 7. *Ibid.*, 1. 8. See the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 10, chs. 7-8. 9. *Ideas*, 130. 10. Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (Indianapolis, 1979), 258. 11. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1954), 30.

The True Meaning of the Bible

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The Bible and Science, by Stanley L. Jaki, *Front Royal, VA: Christendom Press, 1996. 211 pp.*

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN the Bible and science is one of the most sensitive and important questions of modern times. Millions of people revere the Bible as God's Revelation, and science enjoys immense prestige as the foundation of our modern civilization. Many people, especially among the young, think that, for example, the account of creation in the first chapter of Genesis is inconsistent with recent scientific discoveries of the evolution of the universe. Faced with this decision, they opt for science and abandon their faith.

It is therefore necessary to ask if in-

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