

Nostalgia, Memory and Decline at the Dawn of Modern Political Thought

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the relationship between our understanding of the past and the idea of decline in modern political thought. I contend that the manner in which we recall our history frames our horizon of political possibilities. Biblical and pagan thought present two different but overlapping interpretations of the cosmos and time. In their original form, each provides its adherents with definite limits to human existence and erects boundaries to our ability to alter the foundations of political and social life. In modernity each of these undergoes a profound transformation that alters man's perceptions of life and its meaning. Specifically, they foster two distinct but overlapping modes of interpretation in memory and nostalgia. Using the writings of Rousseau, Burke, Tocqueville, and Nietzsche, I seek to defend the importance of historical memory because of the way it fosters political constraint—particularly amidst political and social decline. Understanding the possibilities and dangers implicit within these ideas, we may better realize the potential for maintaining free societies.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1

Decline and the Modes of Historical Thought in Modernity 1

Chapter 2

Reclaiming Nature's Voice: Rousseau's Nostalgic Politics and the Idea of Decline 41

Chapter 3

Breaking Truth and Nature: Burke on Memory and Decline in Revolutionary Times 86

Chapter 4

Recognizing Providence: Tocqueville on Equality, Memory, and Decline 135

Chapter 5

Estranged from the Present: Nietzsche and the Dream of Reenchantment 185

Conclusion: The Politics of Memory, Nostalgia, and Decline 233

Bibliography 245

Chapter 1

Decline and the Modes of Historical Thought in Modernity

We are, all, prophets about the past.

—John Lukacs¹

Everyone needs his memories. They keep the wolf of insignificance from the door.

—Saul Bellow²

I. Introduction

This dissertation examines the relationship between our understanding of the past and the idea of decline in the formation of modern political thought.³ Throughout the work, I contend that the manner in which we recall or efface our history frames our horizon of political possibilities. Biblical and pagan thought present two very different interpretations of the cosmos and time. In their original forms, each mode of thinking about time provides its adherents with a series of definite limits to human existence and erects boundaries around man's ability to alter the foundations of his political and social life. In modernity each of these undergoes a profound transformation. This change often leads people to either rely upon their historical memory to guide politics, or leads them into remake their social life in light of their nostalgic longings.

While it would be too simple to starkly oppose either historical memory and nostalgia, or the linear time of biblical teaching against the cyclical consciousness of the

¹ John Lukacs, *Historical Consciousness or the Remembered Past* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 263

² Saul Bellow, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (New York: Viking, 1970), p. 190

³ By decline, I simply mean the idea and perception that the vital core of society faces the danger of destruction. Of course, many of the authors I cite over the course of this work understand their society's most important elements differently, and I note this in regards to each thinker.

pagan world, I argue that because of biblical teaching's emphasis on the importance of linear time and restraining sense of historical memory, its inheritors can produce a more limited sense of man's natural capabilities. On the other hand, because the pagan vision interprets the cosmos nostalgically, it opens the possibility of horrific abuses in pursuit of an image of unrealizable perfection in politics. This image of past perfection leads nostalgic men to think nothing in principle constrains us from radically altering the nature of their communities.

In this work, I seek to defend the importance of a constrained sense of both history and anthropology for maintaining a free political order, particularly amidst the backdrop of political and social decline.⁴ I accomplish this by examining the lingering echoes of ancient biblical and pagan time consciousness in the responses of Rousseau, Burke, Tocqueville, and Nietzsche to the moral and political crises they perceived in their societies. In their political teachings, each of these thinkers draws on concepts of nostalgia or historical memory. I argue that we can only fully understand their political philosophies in light of their particular visions of historical anthropology. In doing this, I hope to clarify our understanding of the relationship between history, memory and politics, particularly in moments of civilizational crisis. These relationships form the grounding conditions that determine options a society might find possible, or even thinkable at any given time.⁵

⁴ Here, I borrow the terminology of "constrained" and "unconstrained," and change it somewhat from Thomas Sowell, *A Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggles* (New York: Basic Books, 2007). Where Sowell simply refers to how notions of human nature affects politics, I expand this meaning to include how we understand our broadest sense of historical possibility.

⁵ Here, I foreshadow Tocqueville's sociology of knowledge. For him, social conditions dictate the ideas

This chapter proceeds in five main parts. In the first, I briefly discuss my reasons for studying decline and how this theme affects political thought and practice. Specifically, I point to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the critical period to consider when reflecting upon the nature of modern thought about decline, and outline my reasons for choosing the four thinkers who drive this dissertation. Next, I sketch the two major but overlapping modes of time consciousness in biblical and pagan thought and elaborate upon the link each bears to memory and nostalgia. In the fourth and fifth sections, I turn to the psychological and social functions nostalgia and memory tend to serve. There I begin to develop my argument that the constraint offered by historical memory provides a better anthropological grounding for political life than that which modern nostalgia presupposes. However, for now I turn to a simple question: why study ideas of decline at all?

II. Responding to Decline

I would begin by observing that contemporary political theorists often obsess over notions of progress or utopia and seldom discuss their counterparts in decline, nostalgia, and cultural pessimism. I find this strange in light of the fact alongside their positive teachings, many of the canonical thinkers in the history of political philosophy tell the reader a story about their societies' actual or impending failure. These visions of failure frequently serve as a crucial backdrop to their conceptions of how we should understand

any society will easily accept. For one example, see Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J.P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (New York: Harper, 1963), pp. 15-16. On the implications of this sociology of knowledge, see Joshua Mitchell, *The Fragility of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 11-18.

political life.⁶ More importantly, I would also note that when societies marshal their intellectual resources to face profound crisis, they indicate far more clearly than they would in moments of apparent repose those things which they truly value.

I do not wish to weigh in on whether or not our society currently faces the specter of decline. If anything, this enquiry may show the ways in which every polity's choices determine on a daily basis whether it embraces or staves off political and social ruin. Instead, I hope to shed light on some of our society's reasons for thinking about the subject in the ways it does. While perhaps all peoples live with confusion about their current course, I would argue that our civilization seems particularly afflicted with self-contradiction and doubt about its present course. Where intellectuals regularly bemoan the failings of one aspect or another of our society and despite the failure of utopian thought, America's popular language remains that of progress, optimism, and quite often a more permanent sort of hope.⁷ However, beneath the assumption of progress and despite the optimistic tenor of most public speech, wide swaths of our popular media exhibit a marked gloominess about the present moment. A cynic might claim they speak this way merely because bad news sells, but this explanation seems rather simple.⁸

While some intellectuals seem to question whether or not our society really even deserves saving, most of our prophets of dire economic crisis or the effects of

⁶ Indeed, one might add that many of the major thinkers of the 20th century attempted to tell a grand story about the calamities that befell the world and provide a genealogy of their origin. At a minimum, think here of Strauss, Arendt, Oakeshott, and Voegelin, among others.

⁷ Joshua Dienstag, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. ix-x

⁸ For an interesting recent analysis of many such media, see Eduardo Velasquez, *A Consumer's Guide to the Apocalypse: Why There is No Cultural War in America and Why We Will Perish Nonetheless* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2007).

environmental degradation usually presuppose not the inevitability of decline, but rather the hope we might arrest it. Other still betray a secret longing for a kind of cathartic ruin that might portend social renewal.⁹ In later chapters, I will show the sense in which both Rousseau and Nietzsche prove themselves exponents of such thoughts. For now, I merely wish to identify that in recent years, many intellectuals seem to do their best to assert our impending downfall and constantly deride the popular optimism of American culture.¹⁰

Within contemporary trends in the history of political thought, I would argue that the idea of decline suffers from a relative neglect because many of the major grand narratives in modern political theory fail to robustly engage the dilemmas within the philosophy of history which decline suggests. Most political philosophy in the liberal or progressive tradition actively eschews the very idea of unavoidable social decline and decadence. The future-orientation of these theories rules out the possibility of irreversible decline. While more classically liberal thinkers posit a fundamentally restrained vision of nature and historical possibility, philosophies of open-ended progress actively aim at unmooring humanity from most or all of its constraints – think here of the contrasts between the ideals advanced by Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill, and the difference

⁹ Dienstag, *Pessimism*, p. x; Arthur Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History* (New York and London: The Free Press, 1997), pp. 7-9

In the meantime, nearly all declinists live day to day as David Hume did: as if the very opposite of what they argue holds true. Sane existence never meshes well with perpetual crisis.

¹⁰ Here, just to cite a handful of examples of what I mean in the last decade alone, see the following: Samuel Huntington, *Who Are We?: The Challenges to America's National Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004); Niall Ferguson, *The War of the World: Twentieth-Century Conflict and the Descent of the West* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006); Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005); Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001); and Kenneth S. Deffeyes, *Hubbert's Peak: The Impending World Oil Shortage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). On broader trends of recent apocalyptic thinking, see also Paul Corcoran, *Awaiting Apocalypse* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

between these ideals should be obvious.

Other visions of the history of political thought such as that proposed by Leo Strauss and others places emphasis upon the wisdom of ancient thinkers, and the understanding we have lost in our transition toward modernity.¹¹ None of these fully captures the deeper theological roots of the philosophy of history, nor the role of theology's secularized legacy in contemporary man's self-understanding. Modern political thought betrays a strong tendency toward rethinking life around one sphere of existence rather than a plurality of ends: for the liberals, this amounts to some model of autonomy or genuine fairness; with Marxists and social democratic progressives, economic well-being; in the case of Strauss, the possibility of philosophy for the few. Each of these visions seeks a peculiar version of ultimate meaning and well-being in these goals. In each case, they tell only partial stories without a fuller development of their ideas' origins.¹² Because these narratives fail on various levels, I suggest we might look elsewhere in the history of ideas for insight into why moderns seem peculiarly troubled about their place in the cosmos.

I argue that in a number of important ways, contemporary narratives of decline in political philosophy make a serious mistake by embracing some variant of Max Weber's discussion of the disenchantment of the world. In his famous lecture on "Science as a Vocation," Weber argued that as we progressively acquire control over our environment, we simultaneously lose our sense of meaning in the world:

¹¹ On the covert longing for the past, see Arthur P. Dudden, "Nostalgia and the American," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Oct.-Dec. 1961), esp. pp. 516-17.

¹² For a brief genealogy of modern progressive and declinist historical thinking, see chapter 1 in Herman, *The Idea of Decline*, esp. pp. 20-45.

the growing process of intellectualization and rationalization does *not* imply a growing understanding of the conditions under which we live. It means something quite different. It is the knowledge or conviction that *if only we wished* to understand them we *could* do so at any time. It means that in principle, then, we are not ruled by mysterious, unpredictable forces, but that, on the contrary, we can in principle *control everything by means of calculation*. That in turn means the disenchantment of the world. Unlike the savage for whom such forces existed, we need no longer have recourse to magic in order to control the spirits or pray to them. Instead, technology and calculation achieve our ends.¹³

Our sense of temporal control comes at the price of continued belief in the supernatural and the miraculous. By this understanding, science directly challenges religion's place in human life as a source for meaning and stability, to say nothing of its importance for comprehending time itself.

Weber's analysis of how disenchantment spreads focuses on modern Europe. He presupposes the spread of scientific reasoning necessarily implies the failure of religion. With the loss of our old hopes *beyond* merely human life, all the burdens of our world confront us with terrifying immediacy. Where Western society's sense of eternity once chastened our expectations for the world and provided us hope for life after death or participation in some divine presence, those among us who deny this must place their faith in the present. For the first time, "the meaning of life" becomes an issue that must be discussed. Left to find our own understanding of the universe, we often turn to history or science as replacements for the traditional promises of faith. Weber confronts the ever-

¹³ Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *The Vocation Lectures*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, eds. David Owen and Tracy B. Strong (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), pp. 12-3

growing tension between the previously easy understanding of the universe afforded to men through faith and the growing knowledge science provides us of the natural order.¹⁴ Once we could unite the two to form our understanding of the universe's ultimate purpose, because for those on what he calls the "threshold of modernity," the intellectual endeavor of science and the arts by which they pursued it represents "the path to true *nature*."¹⁵ Through both science and art, we could approach an understanding of God.

Whereas in earlier periods, humanistic natural science could work to understand creation as the outworking of providence, modern science highlights the "experience of the irrationality of the universe." Weber immediately understood this gap between science and ultimate reality could hold dangerous implications for man's temporal existence. In modernity, at best "God is hidden, his ways are not our ways, his thoughts are not our thoughts."¹⁶ This fragments human understanding. Disenchantment means the decline of a unitary religious understanding of the world, rending what once seemed a seamless whole. People so affected tend to replace their old beliefs with a patchwork "system" of scientific explanations of the world that they accept alongside the lingering wreckage of orthodox religion. This struggle opens the door to what we might call "re-enchantment."

To return to the implications this holds for political philosophy, authors such as Strauss and Arendt grappling with modernity on Weber's terms come to endorse a variant

¹⁴ Weber, "Science as a Vocation," pp. 28-9

¹⁵ Weber, "Science as a Vocation," p. 15

¹⁶ Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *The Vocation Lectures*, p. 86; "Science as a Vocation," p. 16

of ancient thought over the fragmented understanding of the moderns.¹⁷ Both endorse Weber's assertion that religion cannot pose a serious challenge or undergird any serious politics in modernity. Men must now *make* their own meaning, and turn to a variety of philosophic and historical modes to accomplish this. Strauss abhorred this turn to history, for it meant the negation of true philosophy. Both he and Arendt deny the stark opposition Weber draws between a liberal politics of responsibility where social life will take on the character of incremental action – the “slow, powerful drilling through hard boards, with a mixture of passion and a sense of a proportion” – and an ethic of conviction that might continually seek to reunite the human experience into an organic whole.¹⁸

Instead, Strauss and Arendt invoke categories of ancient thought to accomplish their defense of an ideal politics. Yet neither establishes a ground upon which men might actually accept their philosophical vision. Their politics focus on what philosophers might endorse, and utterly rejects the grounds upon which the majority of humanity embraces or rejects political order. In truth, neither the distinction between the ancients versus the moderns (which comprehends history in entirely philosophical terms), nor Weber's sociological analysis of secularization (which presupposes the failure of theological categories) can explain a number of important facets of modern political thought, particularly the ways various authors respond to decline.

Throughout this dissertation, I aim to show the ways in which we always recur to

¹⁷ See, for example, Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953) and Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

¹⁸ Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” p. 93

our past, and moreover, the ways that the past remains tacitly conditioned by various interpretations of reality itself. I begin this effort with the simple observation that we can identify two intuitive modes societies often use while dealing with the specter of decline. In the first, thinkers and leaders work to defend an ideal of their society that stems from its history, and more specifically, its gradually accumulated institutions, practices, and memories. Mobilizing an image of this past's role in the present, they suggest a political agenda in light of and constrained by this ideal. Throughout the dissertation, I will term this response that of *historical memory*. Alternatively, one might argue on behalf of radical recovery and a full restoration of lost glory. Any radical vision of the future, however, relies on an idea of what we have lost from the past—often the very distant past.¹⁹ This act of what I will later call *restorative nostalgia* forms the other major response to decline. These alternatives bear on Weber's notion of disenchantment, but go quite a bit beyond it; they suggest that Weber, Strauss, Arendt, and others pose a series of false dichotomies for modern political life. The real dilemmas come not from *whether* we embrace a political consciousness conditioned by history, but rather *which form* these take.

This dilemma leads us back to the central figures I study in this dissertation. Debates about the relative importance of ancient virtue and modern innovation, regarding the status and persistence of religion, and about the ultimate destiny of the Western world all come to their fullest fruition in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The fact that the responses generated to these issues as well as many others linger with us today makes

¹⁹ Lukacs, *Historical Consciousness*, p. 245

for a set of compelling reasons to call this the dawn of modern political thought. I examine this period's four most representative political thinkers with regard to the theme of decline – Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Edmund Burke, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Friedrich Nietzsche – and I use them to understand how we respond to political decline in modernity. Furthermore, I hope to show the ways certain aspects of their historical vision make these theories compelling to a wide audience.

By recognizing the possibilities and perils implicit in how we might mobilize the past for use in the present, we can better grasp the ground upon which liberal societies such as ours stand. I also hope to generate insights into the ways liberalism's most dangerous intellectual opponents seek to undermine the pluralistic ethos liberalism fosters to supplant it with their vision of a "reenchanted" society. In the following two sections, I introduce some of the arguments I develop in successive chapters, emphasizing the anthropological and theological background to the various authors' arguments.

III. Time Consciousness and the Past's Role in the Present

This section deals with how our sense of time relates to the social and political dispositions we hold dear. Specifically, it concerns the way biblical and pagan notions of time affect our understanding of the past and the role that these ideas play in shaping the present. Implicitly or explicitly, Rousseau, Burke, Tocqueville, and Nietzsche appropriate and think in terms of history's hold on the present. We usually conceptualize time in one of two broad ways, either as a linear development of discrete events or through the cyclical recurrence of cosmological patterns. I wish to emphasize the way these forms of thinking frame our understanding of reality. Throughout, I emphasize the overlap

between the two modes and the way this fact necessitates looking at how biblical and pagan time result in attitudes of respect for historical memory, or in the nostalgic yearning for a time and place that never actually existed.

We cannot live well without having a sense of purpose in life. As language-driven and symbol-mongering creatures unlike any other, men hope their lives might stand against creeping oblivion.²⁰ As I argue above, in modern times we often look to our sense of where we stand in time to provide this certainty. Human experience readily suggests the presence of cycles, and perhaps this explains why in most places and for most of human history, societies understood themselves as existing within a recurring circle of birth, maturity, decay, death, and renewal.²¹ At the other extreme, the widespread breakthrough of a linear understanding of history only came about through the advent of Judeo-Christian revelation, a change which often fits uneasily with the earlier notion of cycles. Yet neither of these forms a complete portrait of human existence, and even the most biblically-oriented society cannot fully understand itself in terms of linear development alone.²²

In most ages, men understand their world and their lives in tension between both the biblical and pagan conceptions of time. A moment's reflection shows both of these modes hold sway over the human mind. The universe we inhabit reveals its cycles of

²⁰ On this, see Walker Percy, "The Mystery of Language," in *The Message in the Bottle* (New York: Picador, 2000).

²¹ Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Or, Cosmos and History* trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), pp. xiii-xiv

²² Dienstag rightly notes that "no society has ever possessed a time-consciousness that is purely linear or purely cyclical," but this does not prevent us from broadly recognizing the distinction between the two of them (*Pessimism*, p. 10).

decay and renewal; our everyday life confirms their presence.²³ Most philosophies of history presuppose the existence of some linear structure of time. Even exceptions such as Giambattista Vico's *New Science* place time's cycles within a larger historical development.²⁴ While each affects our consciousness of events in distinctive ways, their indirect effects bear profound importance for society. However, before I discuss these, certain aspects of biblical and pagan time merit further discussion. I will then turn to the way men in modern times experience each mode of time through a sense of historical memory or in nostalgic desires.

The ancient pagan conception of time orders the world around an idea of primordial origins. Peoples who live within cultures driven by this understanding view and measure their present experience in light of this mythical beginning.²⁵ All of life becomes a conscious effort to recapture and recreate this moment in time; as such, the settlement of new places and the founding of new political communities take on symbolic meaning as acts of primordial creation, acts that establish the *cosmological community*: the society that attempts to live in light of its understanding of primordial creation and hopes to recapture it eternally. This phenomenon betrays literalness strange to modern eyes: in taking possession of new territory, these people conceptually transform that space from its status as nothing more than chaos into one of harmony with their greater

²³ Frank E. Manuel, *Shapes of Philosophical History* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1965), pp. 5-6; Eliade, *Myth*, p. 126

²⁴ On Vico's sense of time, see chapter 6 in Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1949), pp. 115-36

²⁵ Eliade, *Myth*, p. ix

cosmological order.²⁶

Indeed, pagan societies orient their entire existence around creation myths: they constantly seek physical and concrete orientation toward the “center of the world” – the preeminent “zone of the sacred, the zone of absolute reality” – *within* profane existence.²⁷ For these peoples, their moments of political founding constitute symbolic repetitions of creation itself, and this makes them crucial to a people’s self-understanding and sense of reality.²⁸ Pagan time begins with a mythical moment of paradigmatic creation. While *unrecoverable*, it also provides the society an image of perfection which it forever imitates. Mircea Eliade terms the other period the “Great Time,” and it becomes the goal toward which all men strive because “this age of gold is recoverable; in other words, it is repeatable, an infinite number of times.”²⁹ Because of this fact, stasis becomes the measure by which society judges all things. This stems from

the desire felt by the man of traditional societies to refuse history, and to confine himself to an indefinite repetition of archetypes, testifies to his thirst for the real and his terror of “losing” himself by letting himself be overwhelmed by the meaninglessness of profane existence.³⁰

For example, in Ancient Greek thought, the “recurrence of events under similar conditions was never bemoaned as an evil,” and instead “only that which was able or

²⁶ Eliade, *Myth*, pp. 10-11

²⁷ Eliade, *Myth*, pp. 17-18

²⁸ Eliade, *Myth*, pp. 20-22

²⁹ Eliade, *Myth*, p. 112

Particularly important for Rousseau’s thought, Eliade notes that in modern times, this understanding of time becomes debased, and the Golden Age itself stands in place of the Great Time as that unrecoverable moment. Yet it replaces the Great Time as the standard around which life in time must be judged (*Myth*, pp. 112-3).

³⁰ Eliade, *Myth*, pp. 91-2

likely to repeat itself was real.”³¹ Under the unreflective discipline of ancient pagan cosmology, men lived in a sort of restrained order.

Because of the anti-historical manner in which cosmological society works to abolish linear time, men cannot deal well with novelty; one might say they simply desire to live in concrete immediacy and communion with the inherited patterns of the fathers.³² On this point, David Lowenthal observes that endangered “states zealously guard the physical legacy felt to embody enduring communal identity. Rather than see their city destroyed, the Carthaginians beseeched their Roman conquerors to kill them all.”³³ Such a self-understanding makes ancient pagan communities inherently conservative and stable. However, their restrained sense of political and social possibility comes at a cost. Truly pagan thought cannot regard individuals as important; only their community deserves the sort of protections we commonly ascribe to individuals. This fact bears enormous political consequences: when modern philosophers like Rousseau and Nietzsche appropriate the pagan ethos for modern use, they unmoor it from its foundations in a literal cosmological community.

Judaism and Christianity profoundly reshape our sense of historical consciousness. Indeed, we might more accurately term a strictly Judeo-Christian notion of time a *theology* of history. Instead of events flowing in cycles around a pagan cosmological community, one that essentially roots itself in the temporal world but that claims orientation around an eternal pattern expressed in the sacred forms of life in

³¹ Manuel, *Shapes of Philosophical History*, p. 8

³² Eliade, *Myth*, pp. 85-6

³³ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 46

common, with the Hebrew covenant with God, we see a significant move away from simply recurring cosmological order. While the site of divine propitiation remains with a specific people and their ritual forms in time, the structure of time changes radically. Instead of recurrence, we see the linear story of the chosen people's unfolding providential relationship with God.³⁴

Christianity moves further still from the inheritance of cyclical time, transcending the bonds of a fixed people and place. As Christian consciousness of time centers neither on a society, nor on activities one must perform in a *particular* place, but rather on Christ's dramatic sacrifice and its implications, biblical history reduces the meaning of simple, every-day events to insignificance and simultaneously gives them divine purpose. With biblical time, we see little more than intimations of the future and can only comprehend nature through a glass darkly.³⁵ The ideal of knowable eternal recurrence marks pagan society. In monotheism time acquires a sense of permanence, irreversibility, and inscrutability; to ordinary men, the path providence will take forever remains mysterious and hidden.³⁶

Taken in their starkest forms, each mode of time demands a response around

³⁴ Eliade, *Myth*, p. 127

On this point, see John 4:19-24: "The woman said to him [Christ], 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.' Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth'" (NRSV).

³⁵ See 1 Corinthians 13:8-13: "For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.... For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face" (NRSV). Also see Manuel, *Shapes of Philosophical History*, pp. 25-25; Eliade, *Myth*, p. 143; Dienstag, *Pessimism*, pp. 15-16

³⁶ Eliade, *Myth*, pp. 104-6

which all order flows and from which various social and political consequences follow. Pagan time-consciousness leads us to understand life only insofar as it participates in the eternally recurring cosmological community. Aristotle wrote that by nature, a person living apart from the polis becomes either a beast or a god; yet in any case, an ordinary man without a community to call home exists in mere chaos.³⁷ Again, individuals matter little in this way of life. The belief in eternal recurrence demands no faith in things unseen; it merely requires public action that comports with the community's way of life, undertaken in light of their cosmology of primordial creation. The polis must show forth in action or perish.³⁸ Reckoning time from its origin and feeling the overpowering need to return there to revive the polity, precisely because of the eternal recurrence that pagan communities obsess about their decline and fall and rebel against the way linear time habitually breaks into cosmological order of the community.³⁹ Again, this fosters within ancient polities a deeply imitative, and thus, conservative ethic. But the danger Rousseau inaugurates and Nietzsche reinforces comes in how moderns appropriate this ancient vision for contemporary political ends. Once broken, any effort to reestablish the mimetic unity we see in ancient communities can only result in moral barbarism.

Many authors note the manner in which later thinkers transform a robust theology embracing Providence into a secular theory of progress. In this dissertation, I argue Burke and Tocqueville show us a way that the sense of memory we inherit from the biblical tradition can remind us of the limits to our ability to remake the world. In contrast to the

³⁷ Aristotle, *Politics* 1253a1-20. Compare to Eliade, *Myth*, pp. 6-11.

³⁸ Here, I would merely note the sense in which the desires of pagan society comport with Arendt's hopes for the *vita activa* in her *Human Condition*.

³⁹ Eliade, *Myth*, pp. 90-2

pagan conception of time, which roots its very understanding of the universe in the life of a particular community, Judaism and Christianity suggest a certain degree of indifference to the world. However distressed the Christian may become at events in life and struggle against them, living rightly in time requires belief in Christ. In the temporal world, life and even civilization itself can fall to pieces without ultimately affecting the fabric of hope. This belief provides a powerful source for political and social restraint because it opens the possibility of a distinction between temporal and theological goods. The biblical teaching regarding man's creation in God's image and the inherent limitations imposed by the Fall also helps counteract any temptations toward radically improving or changing the human condition. Combined together, the constrained anthropology of the Fall and the strong distinction biblical history imposes between this world and the next suggest that although they always remain partial, the memories around which we order profane existence bear separate importance. Having ruled out the image of communal unity and order to which ancient paganism aspires, biblical time opens a door to accepting the discontinuity of human life while also allowing us to think of life in pluralistic terms.

In most periods of human history, neither form of time consciousness totally dominates society. For moderns this becomes particularly true and makes it difficult for us to delineate the precise role each mode of time plays. Having lost the certainty – indeed, the fatalism – which pagan consciousness derives from the ordered nature of its cosmos, yet also finding it increasingly difficult to maintain belief in biblical history,

Karl Löwith observes that modern societies uneasily blend *both* modes.⁴⁰ However, we can trace their outgrowths in memory-acceptance and nostalgia. Where Burke and Tocqueville explicitly hope to embrace a politics rooted in biblical time and turn to historical memory as a way of reinforcing its hold on modern men, Rousseau and Nietzsche look back to paganism for a way of dealing with their rejection of biblical time. Unable to remove the effects history imposes on us, they seek to sidestep its burden in willing a sort of nostalgia. I will say more about why these responses acquire power over us in the in the next two sections. However, for the moment I wish to note the ways history's weight remains with us in modernity.

Precisely because existence constantly brings suffering and threatens us with oblivion, people restlessly seek purpose in their lives.⁴¹ Having changed our relations to nature, the finite world that science discloses erodes the habits of thought and action that marked medieval man's intellectual life. Science replaces the old patterns of living with techniques of increasing rationalization and control.⁴² Insofar as Weber's arguments about secularization hold true, the enchanted past departs, but a sense of loss and feeling of dislocation replace it in most of the world; in light of this feeling, he suggests we must find the moral courage to live responsibly despite such confusion. He implies that the *memory* of history's terrors might chasten us into moving forward with integrity rather than in hope of reenchantment.⁴³

In modern times, Weber's suggestion grows increasingly difficult for exactly the

⁴⁰ On the modern synthesis, see Löwith, *Meaning in History*, pp. 191-203.

⁴¹ Löwith, *Meaning in History*, pp. 3-4.

⁴² Romano Guardini, *The End of the Modern World* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2001), pp. 53-5

⁴³ Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," pp. 92-4

reasons he outlines. As religious faith loses common acceptance, the constrained anthropology biblical time leaves us as its inheritance fails. At the same time, this change makes images of the bygone past seem like an appealing alternative to the boredom of the present, suggesting an unconstrained vision in both politics and history. Paradoxically, even those who long for the past flee from its reality and efface it in favor of something more palatable.⁴⁴ This desire for recapturing one's imagined origins leads even those who embrace science into a nostalgic dream, albeit one quite often uneasily combined with remnants of biblical teaching in our historical memory. To cite one example, we know that early modern philosophers and natural scientists constantly returned to the idea of a "state of nature." While not conclusive, their obsessive pursuit of the "true" state of nature provides an intriguing intimation of pagan thought's legacy. This mode of thinking led some of them into radical prescriptions for the future. The psychological weight of the distant past often makes us feel like pawns within it, further tempting us to efface it and relieve ourselves of its burdens through an act of political will.⁴⁵

We cannot escape the past, but we always choose how we might interpret it. Our shared history makes the present world familiar and intelligible. It seems that if the historical memory our parents and grandparents pass on to us does not suffice as a source of meaning, we imaginatively turn further back – to prehistory, if necessary – and nostalgically make ties with a "Great Time," Golden Age, or state of nature as the early

⁴⁴ Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, p. 49

⁴⁵ Donald P. Spence, *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth: Meaning and Interpretation in Psychoanalysis* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982), pp. 86-7

modern political theorists did.⁴⁶ In later chapters, I aim at demonstrating the full dangers this presents in Rousseau and Nietzsche's political teaching. For now, I would argue that those who look for a path forward in man's ancient origins quite often follow them in looking to remake the organic unity of human existence they presuppose the pagans once embraced. Eliade argues that men can only bear existence well when their concept of time puts a destiny upon them; without a clear time consciousness, the politics of "slow, powerful drilling through hard boards" that Weber suggests must dominate us might lose all appeal.⁴⁷

In the twentieth century numerous radical ideologies worked to reenchanted the world. I would argue we still face a real temptation in nostalgia: to look back for an ideal time and use that vision to regenerate the world, nature, and restore the fading sense of community. Among certain intellectuals who live in disgust with the present, it becomes a parlor game to ask what century each of the guests would find most agreeable to live in and why. In such circles, the only presumptively wrong answer to this question is the present day.

As we will see, while modern men cannot accept the full sense of pagan cosmology, the nostalgic impulse paganism suggests in modern politics fosters an unrestrained anthropology. It impels thinkers to imagine we might rebuild the cosmological community (Rousseau's political teaching), or drives us to create something new in its image (Nietzsche's doctrines of the Overman and eternal

⁴⁶ Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, pp. 38-40

⁴⁷ Eliade, *Myth*, pp. 130-7; Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," p. 93

recurrence). Defending modernity and disenchantment requires the constant mobilization of memory within a conception of linear time (Burke and Tocqueville). This grows more difficult outside an explicitly biblical sense of time, yet I argue Tocqueville and Burke show us ways we can still defend a constrained historical anthropology. The next two sections develop these twin concepts of memory and nostalgia and their relationship to time, but I now turn to the role memory plays in maintaining this constraint in modernity.

IV. Social Memory, Personal Narrative, and Liberal Order

This section deals with memory's relationship to the linear order of biblical time, the social practices that sustain it, and the way contemporary society understands its own history. I argue that because of the way it makes every individual's life a part of providence, biblical time fosters a temporal horizon rich with personal and social memory. By virtue of their participation in a larger story, each person acquires a sense of importance in this life. In modernity, the specifically *theological* framework biblical history provides loses much of its appeal for and influence over society as a whole. Yet even after specifically religious faith fades, biblical time leaves its stamp on both our collective and individual sense of self. Memory understood as a social force assumes a vital importance in its place, and its constant presence forms the thread that holds life's tapestry together with integrity.⁴⁸ This section develops an understanding of memory's place in society, the role it plays in fostering a sense of political restraint, and preview how both Burke and Tocqueville deploy these notions in service of defending against

⁴⁸ On the variety of ways we might define memory, see James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. ix-xii

decline.

“Memory” can encompass a wide range of concepts, but here I mean to discuss it in two specific senses; first, the personal narratives of individual life, and second, the social memory that binds us together. Each brings dangers in modern times, yet we can dispense with neither and remain sane. Because biblical time distinguishes between the temporal and spiritual realms, ordinary matters of life become open to negotiation and modification. The private and public narratives we tell help define our existence and the memory of them forms precisely the resource modern peoples require for dealing with the rapid changes in their lives, one that links the obvious discontinuities of everyday life into a bearable whole. Memory also may establish an authoritative benchmark for judgment in precisely the place modern men feel weak, providing them an historical standard upon which they might evaluate their own and other people’s conduct in the world.

To begin, the most general function memory serves is to condition our perceptions. Burke and Tocqueville understood this well. Our minds interpret the world by creating a complex set of schematizing filters; these constitute an organized body of expectations we form on the basis of our recollections, and those unfortunate enough to lose this body of experience can hardly function in the world.⁴⁹ Because we form our memories and the ideas we draw from them in a dialectical encounter with the world, it cannot remain a solely individual phenomenon. The widespread habits of everyday life

⁴⁹ Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 6-7; for one excellent account of how the mind processes data, see F.A. Hayek, *The Sensory Order: An Inquiry into the Foundations of Theoretical Psychology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952).

we find in any society form a kind of implicit memory, and as I will show, both Burke and Tocqueville place great emphasis on the importance of manners and mores of their society. Both also know that precisely because these practices remain non-reflective and habitual, their meaning often slips away from people until it becomes a kind of rote.⁵⁰

Memory carries within it the problematic possibility for society of subsuming reality into the repetition of unchanging – and more importantly, ultimately forgettable – traditions:

Tradition is, at best, a kindly myth whose substance is eroded with time. The only enduring society is that which recreates in each generation the experience of the founders, which begins with man at the beginning and leaves its final secrets for the new generation to discover. Then, perhaps, all generations can be “genuine contemporaries” in following the same aspirations, the goal which is man’s by nature. If emotions are first in time, the quest for identity is first in the order of nature. All men seek knowledge of the whole and of themselves; without that, “self-preservation” is problematic and uncertain.⁵¹

When decline sets in and tradition begins to fail, reproducing the founders’ experience becomes impossible; mere imitation without understanding or adaptation replaces the act of discovery that memory implores us to undertake. In order to *retain* importance and relevance, memory requires reflection.⁵² This poses a fundamental difficulty with which both Burke and Tocqueville wrestled. For memory, stasis results in decay and loss. In that sense, it directly opposes the ancient pagan notion of recapitulating experience. Yet

⁵⁰ On habits and their tie to memory, see Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 40, 52-3; Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, pp. 22-23; and more generally, Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, pp. 41-46.

⁵¹ Wilson Carey McWilliams, *The Idea of Fraternity in America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), p. 61

⁵² Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 24-5

at the same time excessive critical reflection can lead us into rejecting our social memory as oppressive or corrupt: an excess of cynicism works to delegitimize all politics.⁵³ Any constrained historical anthropology requires men find a mean between these two extremes. While Burke and Tocqueville succeed in this, many others fail.

Memory often stands in tension with the factual content of experience. Any experience comparing witness statements or court testimony confirms this fact. The difficulty lay in that the mind does not merely *transcribe* everyday experiences into our consciousness. Instead, our brains record events selectively, quietly altering and ordering them in such a way that we make and retain a meaningful narrative out of them; because the mind only makes meaning through context, when we lack details, our minds work to fill in the gaps on the basis of past experiences. Invariably our constantly receding present moments blend together with our memory.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, when we invoke memory, we strive for faithfulness to the past.⁵⁵ As I will show, Burke argues healthy memory requires striking a balance here as well, for if we dwell too accurately on our past, it can undercut our sense of present legitimacy: our forebears' crimes might haunt us.⁵⁶

The interplay between the narratives we construct in our minds and the patterns we inherit from society create and maintain our sense of self. These provide us with the

⁵³ Contemporary popular culture provides us two major examples: Comedy Central's extraordinarily popular *Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* demonstrate the prevalence and excess this might reach.

⁵⁴ Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory*, pp. 14-5, 23-4, 35.

⁵⁵ Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, p. 21

⁵⁶ On this, see Edmund Burke, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, ed. Paul Langford (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), VI: 316-7; and his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J.G.A. Pocock (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), pp. 124-5.

basis to attribute some meaning to the events in our lives.⁵⁷ Such memory also allows communities to pass on their experience in a non-coercive manner; tradition may only serve as a source of information about how we might live. Even lacking the authority of aristocracy, tradition remains crucial for life with integrity.⁵⁸ Beyond this sense of personal identity, I will show the ways memory serves as a powerful constraint on the hope for reenchantment and the unconstrained anthropological sense it demands.

For many in modern society, secular affairs replace the providential import of biblical history as the anchor of time's meaning. This places additional importance upon the meaning personal and collective memory provides us. The fallibility of personal memory requires some remedy, and this causes our minds to constantly construct narratives about workaday life. We rely on the collective habits, myths, stories, and memories that abound in our culture to check our tendency toward isolated solipsism; as participants in this society, we ourselves add some small part to its story.⁵⁹ From the very beginning of our conscious lives, we always need others to complete the stories we ourselves play a part in and remind us what came before our time. To provide one concrete example of this, when we cannot remember events from our childhood and the crucial formative stories that come with this, we need our parents and others to fill in the gap. Literal physical mementos such as photos and keepsakes also tie us to memory in this way. Those individuals and peoples who lack this source of personal identity usually

⁵⁷ Spence, *Narrative Truth*, pp. 279-83

⁵⁸ On the way modern peoples transform tradition from something owed reverence to a mere source of information, see Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p 429.

⁵⁹ Spence, *Narrative Truth*, pp. 90-2

find themselves in a very real crisis precisely because their origins remain shrouded.⁶⁰ Indeed, all the authors I examine except for Nietzsche place enormous weight upon what families transmit through the generations and conceive of the family as a powerful source for stability. Even with the breaking of traditional modes of authority, the importance of origins does not recede for societies as a whole; with all the authors this dissertation examines, how we begin as peoples plays an enormous role in who we become.

When people try to remember, they cannot place events in isolation; memories always suggest one another in a constant, discontinuous stream that parallels, but does not fit the actual occurrences in the world they purport to represent.⁶¹ This parallels the brokenness presupposed by biblical history. Psychiatrist Donald Spence argues that in order to serve meaningfully, memory always requires a sort of “narrative truth,” that applies to the situation at hand, and it is “what we have in mind when we say that such and such is a good story, that a given explanation carries conviction, that *one* solution to a mystery must be true.”⁶² In much the same way personal memories lose some of their factual details, social memory tends to efface some of the specific facts of an event in favor of narrative fit and emotive resonance. These memories change over time to fit various social needs. The specifics of any situation get transformed into images, ideas, and stories. Done well, this does not slip into nostalgic oblivion. Rather, memory works to maintain whatever fragile continuity we can retain in a world of constant motion. Yet

⁶⁰ On the link between memory and identity, see Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, pp. 197-8.

⁶¹ On this, see Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, p. 26; Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory*, p. 4; and Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), p. 11.

⁶² Spence, *Narrative Truth*, p. 31

this only works in a society that allows for allegiance to multiple images of self—and only the idea of a separate temporal sphere presupposed by biblical time provides an adequate grounding for this.⁶³ By contrast, the unitary pagan cosmos cannot bear such dissent. Think here of why the jury sentenced Socrates to death: in the eyes of an Athenian society in decline, Socrates actively undermined the fading cosmological community. As we will see, it is no accident, then, that one very consistent Rousseauan scholar argued Athens *acted rightly* in defense of their community.⁶⁴

We often think that memory works in human life as something “back then” and that our imagination and reason instead direct us toward the future. Yet the difficulty with this dichotomy stems from the fact that “imagination as well as memory *come* from the past, no matter where they may be going.”⁶⁵ Personal memory participates in a dialectic with society. This helps create the symbolic meanings our languages, concepts, and culture as a whole share in common. Precisely because these symbols bear the shared ideas about what society values and individuals should see as meaningful within their lives, social memory functions as “a very special kind of communal tool kit whose tools, once used, made the user a reflection of the community.” They tell individuals a story about the nature of the world and how life within it should be lived. Such narratives help individuals overcome their sense of isolation.⁶⁶

As we will see, Burke, Tocqueville, and even Rousseau all recognize that what

⁶³ Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory*, pp. 73-4

⁶⁴ See Willmoore Kendall, “The People *versus* Socrates Revisited,” in his *Contra Mundum*, ed. Nellie Kendall (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994), pp. 149-67.

⁶⁵ Lukacs, *Historical Consciousness*, p. 245

⁶⁶ Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 11, 39-40

every society literally teaches its young may bear less importance than the images and ideas expressed in the stories people tell one another. Stories serve as the natural vehicle for social memory and the folk psychology that accompanies it because they work to mediate the world of culture for those that inhabit it. At the same time, the fragments of history found in storytelling and myth provide a space for comprehending how all the ideas, hopes, and intentions of those that comprise the community should fit together. Stories make both everyday and extraordinary events comprehensible for people in life, and they inculcate a wide variety of messages about a society's identity and what it stands for without necessarily being pedantic, didactic, or oppressive.⁶⁷

Societies thread the consequential meanings of their personal narratives and communal stories into every aspect of their existence, recalling them in commemorative ceremonies, habits, and in bodily practices—think here of the military salute, the handshake, and other signs of formal respect that have a nearly immemorial history. More generally, societies unintentionally embed these symbols in the activities of daily life. People speak and act out these narratives; they lose something as expressions of the written word.⁶⁸ Burke and Tocqueville develop their political teachings under the assumption that these practices, expressed as a society's manners and mores bear real importance, more than the legal codes they codify or the academic history their scholars pass on. Given the way their arguments rest on this, the disjuncture between what historians record and what their societies actually believe bears further exploration.

⁶⁷ Bruner, *Acts of Meaning*, p. 52

⁶⁸ Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, p. 6

Modern historians trace out principally inferential arguments on the basis of documentary evidence. The manner in which we habitually warp our memory distorts reality, but when we attempt to express our notions of the past – whether they be expressions of narrative or historical truth – we face an additional problem: language and the symbols we utilize in it *intimate* the reality of memory but can never fully capture it, often concealing things in the very effort to expose them to the light of understanding.⁶⁹ Think here of Plato, for whom reality “is not something that can be put into words like other sciences,” and we may begin to see the limits of expression.⁷⁰ History often cuts against the work of social memory; by analyzing and rendering lived human experience into argument, historians usually look for causal rather than emotional meaning in time. The modern historian attempts to *rethink* rather than remember or even simply record the past. In so doing, they freeze a theoretical fragment of that moment into the present day.⁷¹

Our experience of the recorded past always takes a conceptual form. That is, because the individual enjoys no embodied memory of events before my lifespan, all our knowledge of history comes from social memory or the written record.⁷² As I note above, our sense of continuity in linear time requires the constant mobilization of memory, and many or most of the memories to which we must refer to make sense out of time come down to us from our society; our culture’s ability to maintain and transmit a stable social

⁶⁹ Spence, *Narrative Truth*, p. 54

⁷⁰ Plato, Letter VII, trans. Glenn R. Morrow, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), p. 1659, 341c

⁷¹ Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, p. 14; Lukacs, *Historical Consciousness*, p. 34; Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, p. 60

⁷² Michael Oakeshott, “Present, Future, and Past” in *On History* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), pp. 19-20

memory holds considerable importance. Earlier societies worked to maintain the social stability within which the transmission of memory functions best, fostering a constrained sense of human possibility.⁷³ Their historians worked on behalf of culture; they wrote to *preserve* and weave together enchantment for their societies.⁷⁴ Once this changes, history itself becomes just another Weberian value sphere subject to professional imperatives. Consequently, its power as a source of order dies and often becomes little more than a tool of those who would seek to unravel the power of social memory.⁷⁵

In modernity, the memory of linear time undergoes a profound rationalization, distorting linear consciousness and removing its specifically biblical elements. When historians study grand social forces and seek to ascertain their causes and effects, they create a gap between the distant memories which people need to constitute their sense of place in the world and the deeply unstable social memory our culture inculcates into each of us. The action of memory tends to happen best when individuals retain a stable link to the physical spaces where important events in their lives occurred; we physically return to emotionally charged touchstones, to our childhood homes and the lands we traveled. Those physical ties to specific places over a long period of time make life's memories richer, yet the mobility of commercial society militates strongly against permanent ties of any kind.⁷⁶ Yet the need for an ordering principle remains; when the linear memory of the

⁷³ Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, pp. 123-4

⁷⁴ I will say more of this in Chapter 4 on Tocqueville, but see Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. II, Part I, Chapter 20.

⁷⁵ For an analysis of the professionalization of history, see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), especially chapters 2 and 3.

⁷⁶ Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, pp. 46, 65-7

past fails to provide one, nostalgia and the unconstrained hope for reenchancement move in to replace it.⁷⁷

Many continue to find solace in faith, but our culture at large – to say nothing of the intellectuals, artists, and opinion-makers who dominate it – rarely countenance that option. Nostalgia provides us with one natural intellectual respite in times of decline. However, the division between what historians write and the psychological need for narrative coherence in individual life creates an opening for us to turn from the recent remembered past – which for us often lacks all charm – to imagining some vision of the *distant* past. In a world prone to periodic reenchancement movements, this presents a dangerous intellectual problem, one which I discuss in the next section.

V. Nostalgia, Reenchancement, and the Flight from Memory

While it seems obvious that pagan myths hold little appeal for contemporary society, the temptation moderns encounter regarding pagan time consciousness requires more detailed explanation. In ancient times, many societies embraced monotheism as a replacement that more adequately disclosed the truth of human existence. But amidst the ruins of faith and spreading unbelief, history itself becomes a measure. This opens the possibility that we might embrace the notion of the pagan world as a replacement for our present failings. This section focuses upon that danger of nostalgia, its tenuous relationship to historical memory, and the social consequences that follow from these facts.

Some men find it difficult to bear history's burden. Enduring the weight of their

⁷⁷ Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, pp. 49-50

society's deeds and perceiving their relative insignificance causes them too much anguish. Instead, they embrace the nostalgic impulse, and look to the permanent example of a distant or even hypothetical past to mollify their torment. The disjunction between the imagined perfection of the past and man's disgust with the present often leads such dissidents to embrace deeply unconstrained political agendas. These beliefs make them think it possible to remake human existence in society, or even to utterly alter human nature itself. Nietzsche and Rousseau provide two excellent cases of how this mindset operates.

The word nostalgia originally came into use as a medical term created by doctors serving with European militaries to describe the symptoms that often afflicted soldiers serving away from home for the first time.⁷⁸ Above and beyond the sense of homesickness that the word first evoked, it has come to mean far more in contemporary life. Generally, we might observe that nostalgia evokes a bittersweet emotion. It leads us to find comfort in an idealization of certain memories, ones which need not necessarily come from our own personal experiences.⁷⁹

Often nostalgia brings with it the sense that we have left the best part of ourselves somewhere else or in another time; this intuition comes at least in a part from the way the feeling quietly erases the painful components of old memories.⁸⁰ While both memory and nostalgia exist on a continuum between eidetic remembrance and total oblivion, nostalgia in all its forms involves a kind of forgetting, or at least more selection and editing of

⁷⁸ Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, pp. 3-4; Janelle L. Wilson, *Nostalgia: Sanctuary of Meaning* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2005), pp. 21-4

⁷⁹ Wilson, *Nostalgia*, p. 23; Lukacs, *Historical Consciousness*, p. 3

⁸⁰ Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, pp. 48-51

memory than what the construction of narrative truth entails. As we will see with Rousseau and Nietzsche, by looking away from conventional history and the present moment, nostalgia replicates a portion of the pagan sense of time while losing all the cultural constraint true paganism implied.

Nostalgia serves as a sort of “existential exercise” because it provides an emotional space and refuge where people return in times of crisis, as well as “a positive emotional and experiential reservoir that people delve into to deal with existential threat.”⁸¹ Working to scrub the past clean and idealizing it for social or personal consumption, nostalgia fulfills our need for a pleasant past in which we can believe. Because we want the past to be better, it becomes so.⁸² This brings with it social and political consequences. Here, Nietzsche bears on this point, because to accomplish the radical revival of the best in man, he argues that peoples must develop a “plastic power” to *forget* the constraints of the near past and radically remake the future around an ancient Greek ideal.⁸³

All periods face the need and temptation toward nostalgia. However, the constant transition and discontinuity we face in modernity make it a particularly dangerous desire. When social memory fails to provide a stable narrative, we must look elsewhere to create

⁸¹ Constantine Sedikides, Tim Wildschut, and Denise Baden, “Nostalgia: Conceptual Issues and Existential Functions,” in *Handbook of Experimental Existential Psychology*, ed. Jeff Greenberg, Sander L. Koole, and Tom Pyszczynski (New York and London: The Guilford Press, 2004), pp. 202-8. For two other empirical psychological studies of nostalgia, see Wildschut, Sedikides, Jamie Arndt, and Clay Routledge, “Nostalgia: Content, Triggers, Functions,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 91, No. 5 (2006); and Jason P. Leboe and Tamara L. Ansons, “On Misattributing Good Remembering to a Happy Past: An Investigation into the Cognitive Roots of Nostalgia,” *Emotion*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (2006).

⁸² Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, pp. 14-5, 32-5

⁸³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, ed. Daniel Breazeale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 61-2

meaning.⁸⁴ Where the eternally recurring or replicable past of pagan time served as a source of restraint, nostalgia demands something different: Because of the widespread failure of purely progressive theory to capture our attention, discontented moderns quite often look as Nietzsche and Rousseau did to the past for a vision of how we might remake the future.

While we know that the basic material of nostalgic experience rests in the real or imagined past, the phenomenon as a whole has little or nothing to do with the past itself. Rather, its origins lay in *present* emotional needs.⁸⁵ Because of its “editing” function and smoothing out of unpleasant memories, nostalgia provides one basis for sentimental attachment to others. This cannot constitute the Christian forgiveness that underpins redemption in linear time because much of the emphasis here lay with “forgetting” guilt. Nevertheless, by effacing the past’s burdens, nostalgia may simply make it easier for individuals to live in modern society.⁸⁶ We might observe that even faithful Christians are prone to draw on nostalgia in order to make the present more bearable. For the secular modern, nostalgia serves even more as a refuge precisely because without a conception of sin and redemption, there can be no forgiveness. The march of time alone cannot process or absolve guilt; the past’s responsibilities either accumulate or we must forget them. With Rousseau and to some extent Nietzsche, following our nostalgic yearning for a kind of pagan order can help accomplish this sort of cathartic absolution.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, p. 17; Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, pp. 49-50; Wilson, *Nostalgia*, pp. 54-8

⁸⁵ Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, p. 8-11; Wilson, *Nostalgia*, pp. 34-6

⁸⁶ Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, pp. 37-9, 43-4

⁸⁷ Stephen J. Tonsor, “Decadence Past and Present,” in *Equality, Decadence, and Modernity*, ed. Gregory

However, nostalgia comes in different varieties. Janelle Wilson makes an important distinction between what she calls “restorative” and “reflective” nostalgia. Reflective nostalgia occurs largely as a private phenomenon, one focused on the bittersweet feelings of our *personal* past and the world of our near forebears. Because of this, it can serve as a restraining force, reminding us of the best in our recent generations without forcing us to dwell upon their sins. Restorative nostalgia on the other hand emphasizes the sense of having a “lost home,” and turns to the past in order to repair something that our societies have lost in the present day.⁸⁸ Because of this, the desire for nostalgic restoration automatically unhinges men from a sense of intellectual and moral restraint fostered by present concerns; consequently, this move particularly appeals to those who desire to reenchant the world.

Thus, *which* time period we look back to makes a rather important difference: our parents’ experience usually stands too close to our own for it to afford us many charms. However, that of our grandparents or before makes for a very different story – think here of the contemporary German yearnings for the artifacts of East German rule, or our own fascination with the experience of the World War II generation and its sense of mission.⁸⁹ Both Rousseau and Nietzsche decisively turn away from the near past and instead toward restorative nostalgia. Reflective nostalgia makes for an interesting contrast to their

L. Schneider (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2005), p. 12-14. On escaping the past via nostalgia, forgetting, or amnesia, also see Oakeshott, “Present, Future, and Past,” p. 21.

⁸⁸ Wilson, *Nostalgia*, pp. 30-2

⁸⁹ Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, p. 51. One interesting example Davis draws upon is that of the initial intent and design of most amusement parks: Disneyland was designed as a romanticized secondhand version of the recent past, interesting and popular precisely because it took advantage of nostalgia’s generational gap (*Yearning for Yesterday*, p. 121).

radically anti-historical thinking because we might understand it as the place where memory and nostalgia blend together. In some ways, Burke and Tocqueville both indulge in nostalgic reflection, and I argue they do so because it fosters embracing a more constrained vision of human life and suggests that what came before bears importance for how we live today.

At a minimum, nostalgic reflection provides a source for refreshment and pleasure. It usually references a past we need not take particularly seriously, and which bears little on political life.⁹⁰ Restorative or political nostalgia, however, poses a specific set of dangers precisely because it requires *erasing* our narrative memory in light of an “older” ideal rooted entirely in present concerns.⁹¹ As Christopher Lasch puts it, this sort of restorative political nostalgia “evokes the past only to bury it alive.”⁹² Such nostalgia cannot help but disparage the present in light of that imaginary past; it requires no genuine exercise of memory and instead uses the power of imagination to find a place and space out of time to rest one’s hopes on. Sharing a conceptual link to pagan time consciousness but lacking an *actual* community out of which the cosmos would grow, this mode of thinking demands we reenchant the present to make men whole again.⁹³ Turning to the pagan world for inspiration creates little more than a moral monstrosity.

I readily concede that nostalgia comes in radically different varieties. Some instances merely seem peculiar. Eliade observes that throughout Medieval Europe, various heroes became the subject of legends only a generation after their death. In such

⁹⁰ Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, pp. 7-8

⁹¹ On a few examples of this, see Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, pp. 63-4.

⁹² Lasch, *True and Only Heaven*, p. 118

⁹³ Lasch, *True and Only Heaven*, pp. 82-4

cases, their actual deeds could not suffice; because legendary warriors *must* slay dragons, the “facts” of their stories changed to accommodate this detail.⁹⁴ Yet nostalgia does not simply start with the dead. It makes claims on the present as well. Eliade recounts a second incident: early in the twentieth century, a Romanian folklorist recorded a ballad of tragic love in which a mountain fairy flung a man about to be wed off a cliff; she did this out of jealousy, for the man had chosen his mortal love over her. When his fiancée attended his burial, she “poured out a funeral lament, full of mythological allusions, a liturgical text of rustic beauty,” and this became the content of the ballad. Pressing to discover the details, the folklorist found out that the event had only transpired forty years earlier and that the man’s fiancée still lived. She claimed that he had simply fallen off a cliff and that while his neighbors found and brought him back home that day, he died from his injuries soon after. The younger generation in the village insisted “that the old woman had forgotten; that her great grief had almost destroyed her mind. It was the myth that told the truth: the real story was only a falsification.”⁹⁵ While the benign myths of small Romanian communities do little harm, the nostalgic impulse that they betray poses political dangers because society cannot promote pristine notions of the past for long without it devolving into the hope to *imitate* or revive them. An imagined ideal of previous glory demands political action in the present.⁹⁶

The fact that the events Eliade describes occurred in the early twentieth century shows the hold nostalgia, and by extension, the pagan yearnings that tend to foster it

⁹⁴ Eliade, *Myth*, pp. 38-40

⁹⁵ Eliade, *Myth*, pp. 44-6

⁹⁶ Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, p. 162

maintain over us in modernity. Here we might observe that despite the historical development of biblical time spread by Christianity, it does not always completely suffuse the cultures to which the faith spreads. Rather, it fits uneasily *within* the older pagan time consciousness, blending together in unexpected ways. Thus, Lukacs notes that neither the medieval nor the renaissance period betrayed a particularly historical memory: while to some degree, both cultures developed a self-understanding within the Christian framework, their dominant mode of self-understanding rested not with linear continuity but constant *recurrence*.⁹⁷ We might explain at least part of this in the way that we can find the medieval world's enchanted fulcrum in the authority and power of the Church, and not so much in the message of Christianity. One of the great sources of stability in that world lay in that *all* intellectual life rested in authority, and it was this authority that mediated all knowledge and provided unity. It attenuated the anxieties that cause us to look to the past alone for purpose, and particularly those that suggest the recurrence of nostalgia in the face of constant change.⁹⁸

In this dissertation, I argue that political nostalgia becomes a sort of intellectual hallucination. Nietzsche and Rousseau exemplify the way pagan time consciousness continually opens the door to violence and tyranny. Their unconstrained anthropology can lead to no other conclusion. The concept of social memory and constrained vision of human nature we find in Burke and Tocqueville form one possible but perhaps fading check on the hope for reenchantment that leads us to nostalgia in the first place.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Lukacs, *Historical Consciousness*, pp. 11-12

⁹⁸ Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*, pp. 13-16, 23-4, 34-5

⁹⁹ Lukacs, *Historical Consciousness*, p. 243

Through an examination of four figures in modern political thought that respond to decline, we may better understand the political stakes of the twin phenomena of memory and restorative nostalgia.

VI. Concluding Thoughts

Biblical and pagan time consciousness plays a profound role in the way various people comprehend human life, particularly in periods of social distress or political decline. The loss of faith divorces many people from the theological roots of time consciousness, yet they often still think about their relationship to history and society in ways that resonate with the biblical and pagan understandings of time. In supposedly secular times, biblical time opens the possibility of a constrained historical anthropology conditioned by memory, a sense of the limits both of human moral capacity, and our capacity to alter ourselves or our environment. Pagan time tends to result in the opposite, inclining its adherents toward a radically unconstrained sense of human nature and political possibility oriented around a nostalgic dream of the distant, imagined past.

By way of an exploration of Rousseau, Burke, Tocqueville, and Nietzsche, I hope to show that if we wish to live in freedom, we must develop a particular sort of historical memory—one that comports to biblical time consciousness and recognizes the changes in consciousness modernity brings. Ultimately, I argue that we must stand with Tocqueville and accept the limitations of bounded freedom. While providence has ordained we live with democracy, and thus a sort of decline, the world still remains open to change and restraint. For now, I turn to Rousseau.

Chapter 2

Reclaiming Nature's Voice: Rousseau's Nostalgic Politics and the Idea of Decline

The body politic, like the human body, begins to die from the very moment of its birth, and carries within itself the very cause of its destruction. Both can have a constitution that is more or less robust and suited to preserve them for a longer or shorter time. The constitution of man is the work of nature; the constitution of the state is the work of art. It is not within men's power to prolong their lives; it is within their power to prolong the life of the state as far as possible, by giving it the best constitution it can have. The best constituted state will come to an end, but later rather than sooner, if no unforeseen accident brings about its premature fall.

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau¹

I. Nature and Reenchantment

In the previous chapter, I sketched some of the most important theoretical issues related to the idea of decline and argued that the focal point of an inquiry into ideas regarding decline comes at the period I term the dawn of modern political thought. Specifically, I begin with Rousseau, who exemplifies the impulse I identified as restorative nostalgia. Given the Genevan's concerns about the status and future of human community, his restlessness and alienation, and his gloominess about humanity's future, he serves as a "perfect foil for our own anxieties" about the nature of politics and the best life.² Rousseau's contrariness and complexity make him an endlessly interesting – if also maddening – object of study. Decline provides us a clear starting point in analyzing his work.

¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, in *The Basic Political Writings* trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), p. 194

² Asher Horowitz, *Rousseau: Nature and History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), p. 4

This chapter deals with Rousseau's relationship to the imagined past and seeks to understand the way his peculiar historical vision provided him the tools to criticize what he saw as modernity's darker side. I argue that this vision rests on a nostalgic transposition of the Fall that blends notions of both biblical and pagan time consciousness. Because of this, he develops an unconstrained vision of human nature and of the possibility that political community might heal our alienation. Unsurprisingly, he bases his critique of modern life not based so much on a straightforward analysis of modernity's flaws in light of a vision of the perfected future, but rather, in an idea of our *past*. It could be no other way – our very ideas of the future rest on conditions suggested by historical memory.³ While I do not mean to assert that Rousseau thinks in an entirely consistent fashion, I argue his entire critical project rests on certain remarkably stable anthropological and historical claims developed over the course of many works. At many points Rousseau seems entirely unconcerned about whether or not events transpired in the manner he describes. For him, acquiring literally true knowledge about the inherited past will always remain unlikely because our history's events irrevocably changed our consciousness. Neither historians nor philosophers conceive of going back far enough to see the truth about man's nature; Rousseau's approach seeks to remedy this blindness.⁴

Rousseau concerns himself with mythic representations of the past and hypotheses about it, and this holds especially true regarding what Rousseau took to be the

³ John Lukacs, *Historical Consciousness or the Remembered Past* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 245

⁴ "The philosophers who have examined the foundations of society have all felt the necessity of returning to the state of nature, but none of them has reached it.... They spoke about savage man, and it was civil man they depicted." See Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, in *The Basic Political Writings*, p. 38

inevitable decline in various forms of order. These notions convey a *sentimental* truth and a corresponding set of insights into human nature. I argue that in this respect, Rousseau's teaching fully embraces a dangerous form of politically restorative nostalgia. Recall Christopher Lasch's characterization of this nostalgia as a kind of dream state:

Nostalgia appeals to the feeling that the past offered delights no longer obtainable. Nostalgic representations of the past evoke a time irretrievably lost and for that reason timeless and unchanging. Strictly speaking, nostalgia does not entail the exercise of memory at all, since the past it idealizes stands outside time, frozen in unchanging perfection.⁵

Lest I be misunderstood to be dismissing Rousseau as a "mere nostalgist," as I argue in chapter one, nostalgic sentiments respond to a fundamental human need. The idea modernity takes a sense of organic unity from us bears some foundation in anthropological fact.⁶ While people in every society inevitably tend to blend a more realistic memory of the past with visions of nostalgia, few put their notions of the past to such extraordinary use as Rousseau in the service of criticizing the present.⁷

⁵ Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1991), p. 83

⁶ In his *The Pure Theory of Politics* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1963), Jouvenel writes, "it is relevant to note that primitivist nostalgia, widespread in classical literature and strikingly displayed by Rousseau, must be granted some factual foundation. Very early societies comprising a few dozen members did have the character of 'large families'.... The man born into such a society, in fact, never 'left home'.... Whatever the merits of the large, open, heterogeneous society, it bears the psychological handicap that average bilateral affinity is weak" (pp. 69-70). For a similar observation in contemporary political thought, also see F.A. Hayek, *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, Vol. III (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp. 153-76.

⁷ For a representative sample of ways people read Rousseau's instincts in viewing the past, see Bertrand de Jouvenel, "Rousseau the Pessimistic Evolutionist," *Yale French Studies*, Vol. 28 (1961), pp. 83-5; Jouvenel, *On Power: The Natural History of Its Growth* trans. J.F. Huntington (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1993), pp. 294-6; and Judith N. Shklar, *Men and Citizens: A Study of Rousseau's Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 140-1. More generally, see chapter 3 in Horowitz, *Rousseau*, pp. 50-85, esp. pp. 59-61 on Rousseau's evolutionary dialectic.

I claim that by evoking the bankruptcy of modern social life, Rousseau hoped to help carve out a new understanding of the world: one so that if conditions changed at some future point, might allow men to live at home in the world for the first time.⁸ Future society might attenuate this homelessness by allowing man to finally express his authentic sentiments without reservation, replacing the unpleasant masks we put on in front of strangers with a transparent sort of society.⁹ Rousseau knew the modern disposition doomed his brand of politics unless he could effect a change in consciousness itself. To that end, Rousseau deliberately effaces and reworks Christian notions of sin and redemption, hoping men might eventually escape back into the restorative horizon of pagan thought.

Rousseau grounds his diagnosis of man's social pathologies in a nostalgic image of an irretrievably lost nature and thereafter, in a succession of imagined histories of what he saw as decent historical societies.¹⁰ As I will show, Rousseau never clarified whether these stories bore any literal truth. However, they did contain a moral meaning he uses to striking effect. These subjects form my first two sections. In the third section, I detail what Bertrand de Jouvenel calls Rousseau's "clinical analysis of political deterioration" through an exploration of how order falls into chaos.¹¹ I argue that despite his hope for a better world, Rousseau did not believe the political aspect of his works could be

⁸ Tracy B. Strong, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Politics of the Ordinary* (Thousand Oaks and London: Sage Publications, 1994), pp. 152-5

⁹ Horowitz sees this as the goal of the *Social Contract* (Rousseau, p. 25). I would go further and claim that this sort of authentic simplicity stands at the heart of Rousseau's entire project.

¹⁰ Here, recall Hegel, for whom the Fall is the "eternal Mythos of Man." For all his efforts, Rousseau could not escape the boundaries of Christian thinking. See *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), p. 320-2.

¹¹ Jouvenel, "Rousseau the Pessimistic Evolutionist," p. 85

implemented as straightforward blueprints for a new form of communitarian democracy in his time, but rather that they might show the way toward unified political cultures unburdened by alienation.¹² I conclude with the observation that for those reasons and others, he eventually turned to the cultivation of the authentically individual human heart, and sketch the political consequences this holds. First, however, I begin where Rousseau does: with humanity's broken nature.

II. On the Hypothesis of Disrupted Nature

Rousseau begins his analysis of human life by observing that what we know and feel about the world should give us clues regarding the sort of life nature herself meant for us to lead. Without embracing an understanding of the Fall, he wishes to identify the moment when human life became miserable, and to “explain the sequence of wonders by which the strong could resolve to serve the weak, and the people to buy imaginary repose at the price of real felicity.”¹³ Because no human contrivance gives us anything but a reflection of our *present* nature, Rousseau insists that we should begin any inquiry into these matters

by putting aside the all the facts, for they have no bearing on the question. The investigations that may be undertaken concerning this subject should not be taken for historical truths, but only for hypothetical and conditional reasonings, better suited for

¹² This is not a novel claim: Shklar argues that none of Rousseau's works really claim to posit or are practical solutions to modern man's problems (*Men and Citizens*, pp. 183-4). Even authors who largely take Rousseau at face value such as Roger Masters observe that many of Rousseau's concepts are useful only as explanations of reality, not as prescriptions for concrete action. See his *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), esp. pp. 285-93.

¹³ Rousseau, *Inequality*, p. 38. Also, see Marc F. Plattner, *Rousseau's State of Nature: An Interpretation of the Discourse on Inequality* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1979), esp. pp. 17-25.

shedding light on the nature of things than on pointing out their true origin....¹⁴

Thus for Rousseau, the fact we retain nostalgic impulses in the first place tells us something about our primary nature and whence we have come. Their intensity gives us a real clue about our deepest origins. He disdains factual knowledge and works to deploy *suggestive* rather than *definitive* notions convenient for his own ideal ends. We know the pure state of nature never existed, but Rousseau finds the myth of origins useful precisely because we gain true knowledge through the sentiments that notion evokes.¹⁵ Modern consciousness meant we could not embrace ancient myths as historical truth, but Rousseau's story of the origins and rejection of history gives us a way of unburdening man from his past and appropriating certain aspects of pagan cosmology.

Rousseau plays on the Platonic category of "true myth." But where Plato only allowed the use of pseudos in light of philosophic knowledge of the Good, Rousseau replicates millennia of pagan thought. He roots the *pattern* around which society must orient itself into stable social practices, making that ideal an eventual imperative for action. The important move here rests in the fact that Rousseau hopes to recapture a sort of sentimental simplicity like that of pagan time consciousness. Rousseau's dream lay in that *if* men can recapture even an idea of nature, perhaps one day they may use this admittedly hypothetical knowledge of nature to reenchanted the world.¹⁶

Rousseau derives a number of general conclusions from these intuitions, but

¹⁴ Rousseau, *Inequality*, pp. 38-9.

¹⁵ Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, pp. 6-7

¹⁶ Think here for a moment of Weber's category of "the ethic of conviction," and its possible dangers when combined with the hope for reenchanted. See "Politics as a Vocation," in *The Vocation Lectures*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, eds. David Owen and Tracy B. Strong (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), p. 83. Eliade presents an interesting analysis of Plato in this regard. See his *Myth of the Eternal Return: Or, Cosmos and History* trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), pp. 6-9.

before discussing how he develops his vision of lost nature, I must note some of the tensions and flaws in his historical thinking.¹⁷ Likely because of the intuitive and hypothetical origin of his natural world, Rousseau casts doubt on the role actual historical knowledge plays in his understanding. In the *Discourse on Inequality*, he argues that “it belongs to history, when it exists, to provide the facts,” and further observes that, “it belongs to philosophy, when history is unavailable, to determine similar facts that connect them.”¹⁸ But even true history always requires philosophical interpretation and synthesis; for the very distant past, where no real facts are available, speculation alone remains. In making claims like this, he evinces a belief that natural man provides moderns a “hypothetically real starting point” whose downfall was caused by the same instability that makes modern life so difficult.¹⁹ Again, Rousseau discards Biblical history but cannot outrun the ideas it portends; his theory retains the structure of Genesis, but places it inside of a pagan myth that comports well with Mircea Eliade’s understanding of how cosmological societies orient themselves.²⁰

The usual methods other thinkers of his day suggested, such as relying on the guidance of natural law, inevitably fail. As long as man’s distant origins lay shrouded in

¹⁷ The status of history in Rousseau’s thought is a point of some controversy. Shklar claims he is the last great political thinker totally uninterested in history (*Men and Citizens*, pp. 1-2); Masters takes the opposite view, claiming he *introduces* the use of history in political theorizing (*Political Philosophy*, p. 5). In a sense, both are correct, but fail to specify what *sort* of history they mean—even though it refuses a notion of making the past live in the present as historical memory does, nostalgia *is* an historical impulse. On Rousseau’s history more generally, also see Horowitz, *Rousseau*, pp. 80-5.

¹⁸ Rousseau, *Inequality*, p. 59. More damningly, in the *Emile* (trans. Allan Bloom, New York: Basic Books, 1979), Rousseau claims history is an essentially useless form of education because it not convey significant moral knowledge to its students. For two examples, see pp. 110, 215.

¹⁹ Horowitz, *Rousseau*, p. 67 and Jouvenel, *Pure Theory*, p. 37

²⁰ Joshua Mitchell, *Not By Reason Alone: Religion, History, and Identity in Early Modern Political Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 111-2. See also, Eliade, *Eternal Return*, pp. 112-3.

mystery, “it is futile for us to determine the law he has received or which is best suited to his constitution.” In order to recapture this moment, we must examine all our existing institutions, for “only after having cleared away the dust and sand that surround the edifice” of human life can we see the “unshakeable base” beneath.²¹ We imagine too much of ourselves in the foundations of nature, unknowingly adding ideas civil society alone suggests to us. While we think we reach nature’s deepest foundations, we really only describe ourselves: philosophers cast in the Hobbesian mould “know extremely well what a Bourgeois of London or Paris is; but they will never know what a man is.”²² At the same time, they fail to observe the sense in which our “Frenchmen, our Englishmen, our Russians” have almost nothing in common with the ancients “except the shape of their bodies.”²³ Because we never acquire certain knowledge, Rousseau sets out to uncover the past hypothetically and conditionally, and he does so with the understanding that a simple, straightforward answer such as that the philosophers provide makes for a clean theory, but not an adequate one for explaining our fall from nature.²⁴

Once we abstract man out of civil society, Rousseau argues we find “an animal less strong than some, less agile than others, but all in all, the most advantageously organized of all.”²⁵ What sets natural man apart from the rest of the beasts rests not in his reasoning power—for at the beginning that barely exists. Rather, while man “feels the same impetus” as the other animals to obey his impulses, his unique ability rests with

²¹ Rousseau, *Inequality*, pp. 35-6

²² Rousseau, “The State of War,” in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau* trans. Christopher Kelly and Judith Bush, ed. Christopher Kelly, Vol. 11 (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2005), p. 64.

²³ Rousseau, *The Government of Poland* trans. Willmoore Kendall (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), p. 5

²⁴ Horowitz calls this Rousseau’s “polyvalence.” See *Rousseau*, p. 10.

²⁵ Rousseau, *Inequality*, p. 40

disobeying nature's commands. Initially, this potential will never come to fruition. Without some compelling external need, our minds remain static and completely undeveloped.²⁶ And Rousseau wonders: why should we change? Natural humanity lives in fundamentally unsociable conditions, coming together only for momentary coupling in fulfillment of desire. In such a condition, man's language remains a simple cry of nature. His ideas lack generality and abstraction; all concepts in such a time rest in a state of totally uncategorized particularity, with each object occupying its own unique place in the savage mind.²⁷ This intellectual stability ensures that barring outside intervention, his mindset and needs remain straightforward. Food, sex, and shelter remain the only requirements in this world of concrete immediacy.²⁸

In this animal stage of living, no properly moral relation exists between these isolated individuals. Their inclination toward compassion for one another leads them to render momentary assistance in moments when they hear another's cry, but this leaves no binding obligation between them. In some sense, natural man remains essentially good.²⁹ But this decency flows from the still-uncomplicated state man lives in:

Hence we could say that savages are not evil precisely because they do not know what it is to be good; for it is neither the development of enlightenment nor the restraint imposed by the law, but the calm of the passions and the ignorance of vice which prevents them from doing evil. *So much more profitable to these is the ignorance of vice than the*

²⁶ Rousseau, *Inequality*, p. 45-6

²⁷ Rousseau, *Inequality*, pp. 48-51

²⁸ Rousseau, *Inequality*, p. 56

²⁹ This is the central premise of Arthur Melzer's *The Natural Goodness of Man: On the System of Rousseau's Thought* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990). On this, see chapters 1 and 2, pp. 15-48.

*knowledge of virtue is to those.*³⁰

Interested in self-preservation and the avoidance of pain, savage men do not fall into conflict with one another. Man's passions remain neutral and uncomplicated by social habits: "His imagination depicts nothing to him; his heart asks nothing of him."³¹ They lead wild, but not yet wicked lives.

If man's nature remains so stable, how did he change? Rousseau asks the reader to ponder just what would drive such a creature to leave the state of nature: "does anyone fail to see that everything seems to remove savage man from the temptation and the means of ceasing to be savage?"³² This implies that some disaster forces men out of this state, and we *know* this must be true precisely because "it is impossible to conceive how a man could have crossed such a wide gap" between his initial stable nature and social life "without the provocation of necessity."³³ In the Second Discourse, Rousseau attempts to solve this puzzle by recreating a secularized idea of the Fall without positing exactly what prompted it.³⁴ At times, he implies the actual cause bears little relevance; eventually he settles on property as the principal reason behind this, a fact not lost later on Marx.³⁵

Life together utterly transforms humanity. From the initial practice of coming

³⁰ Rousseau, *Inequality*, p. 53

³¹ Rousseau, *Inequality*, pp. 55, 46. Rousseau develops this claim later in other works, but the passions themselves remain neutral; his is a world without sin. See Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, pp. 59-62.

³² Rousseau, *Inequality*, p. 46

³³ Rousseau, *Inequality*, p. 47

³⁴ On this general concept, see Patrick Riley, *The General Will Before Rousseau: The Transformation of the Divine into the Civic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), esp. pp. 181-250. More specifically, Joshua Mitchell argues Rousseau believes that despite its complete account of *why* man is what he is, Christianity's Fall does not tell the full story: "In dismissing Christianity, along with any politics that might be derivable from it, Rousseau radicalizes the search for origins and, in effect, accuses Christianity of *not going back far enough*. The *real* beginning is the state of nature." See *Not By Reason Alone*, p. 100.

³⁵ Yoav Peled, "Rousseau's Inhibited Radicalism: An Analysis of His Political Thought in Light of His Economic Ideas," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 74, No. 4 (Dec. 1980), pp. 1038-9.

together for mutual aid, man “found himself in a position to distinguish the rare occasions when common interest should make him count on the assistance of his fellow man, and those even rarer occasions when competition ought to make him distrust them.”³⁶ From there, the settled stability of living in particular places with a family emerged, and rudimentary property developed out of the places where these small groups lived. The growth of common life meant the simultaneous creation of shared language and feelings, so soon the “habit of living together gave rise to the sweetest sentiments known to man: conjugal love and paternal love.”³⁷ For the first time, groups of people could pass on their accumulated wisdom from one generation to the next, finally allowing further complications in men’s language, ideas, and feelings.

The capacity for speech which begins so crudely gives us concepts that in turn allow us to begin effecting control over our environment. What Rousseau calls man’s growing capacity for *perfectibility* makes us the most malleable creature of all, this

distinctive and almost unlimited faculty is the source of all man’s misfortunes... this is what, by dint of time, draws him out of that original condition... this is what, through centuries of giving rise to his enlightenment and his errors, his vices and his virtues, eventually makes him a tyrant over himself and nature.³⁸

It also allows him to appreciate his existence as something more than the simple avoidance of pain: For the first time, we can acquire hopes and fears, especially the fear of death.³⁹ With this comes the desire for more material goods. Even here, this settled

³⁶ Rousseau, *Inequality*, p. 61

³⁷ Rousseau, *Inequality*, pp. 62-3

³⁸ Rousseau, *Inequality*, p. 45

³⁹ Rousseau, *Inequality*, p. 42-3

solidarity of early community brings discord: we start to confuse our needs and wants, which is “the first sign of the destructive discord of vain passions and predatory egotism.”⁴⁰

This implies that while Rousseau’s notion of humanity as isolated and unsociable makes for a kind of individualism, his remains “the individualism of the weak” precisely because at the moment we acquire a common life and the speech that develops from it, man’s life becomes irretrievably interdependent.⁴¹ Our burgeoning mutual needs make possible both property and, if we manage our interdependence badly, slavery.⁴² For Rousseau, the creative mental power that establishes the relationship between man and his environment becomes a curse, forever leading him to improve:

Far from glorifying the ‘creative imagination’, Rousseau saw in this vehicle of ‘perfectibility’ the deepest source of human misery. What men need most is that sense of reality which forces them to resign themselves to necessity. Fantasy is precisely what destroys them.⁴³

This process of “social labor” allows for what Asher Horowitz terms the “dialectical unfolding of human nature.”⁴⁴ Rousseau argues this turn also causes man’s greatest misery. The fact we yearn for uncomplicated mores and take “delight in recalling the image of simplicity of the earliest times” tells us something has gone terribly wrong.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Stephen Ellenburg, *Rousseau’s Political Philosophy: An Interpretation from Within* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1976), pp. 73-4

⁴¹ Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, p. 41.

⁴² Rousseau, *Inequality*, pp. 58-9

⁴³ Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, p. 54. As is often the case, Masters takes a somewhat softer view of this, noting the necessity of this evolution; he implies Rousseau thinks it a positive good. See *Political Philosophy*, pp. 150-1.

⁴⁴ Horowitz, *Rousseau*, pp. 83-5

⁴⁵ Rousseau, *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* in *The Basic Political Writings*, p. 14

Here again, the burden history places upon us proves too great for Rousseau to bear without a retreat into nostalgia: this “image of simplicity” serves his need to obliterate the complexities of our actual history.

While our miseries increase as the complexity of our life in common grows, Rousseau places particular emphasis on role the emergence of settled property plays in this. Indeed, he observes that the “first person who, having enclosed a plot of land, took it into his head to say *this is mine* and found people simple enough to believe him was the true founder of civil society,” and that *this* moment occasions the start of true oppression.⁴⁶ While he acknowledges the physical aspect of tyranny that inevitably arose from that claim, he places more psychological weight on the *social* oppression that emerges from a social system of property. Having finally developed a sufficiently conceptual language to classify ideas, under such circumstances people tend “to consider different objects and make comparisons,” with dire consequences:

Imperceptibly they acquire the ideas of merit and beauty which produce feelings of preference.... A sweet and tender feeling insinuates itself into the soul and at the least opposition becomes an impetuous fury. Jealousy awakens with love; discord triumphs, and the sweetest passion receives sacrifices of human blood.⁴⁷

In society, men continually do spiritual violence to one another. In looking to society, they lose themselves in the eyes of others. While complex thoughts require a source for judgment which quickly turns men toward one another, Rousseau instead thinks that men should seek a standard in the nostalgic image provided by the state of nature.

⁴⁶ Rousseau, *Inequality*, p. 60

⁴⁷ Rousseau, *Inequality*, pp. 63-4

Operating dialectically with his environment, man develops ever more sophisticated ways of exploiting it. This demands an increasingly sophisticated division of labor in society, which allows for humanity to feed itself and spread over the land. But again, this “development” carries a steep price: “Vast forests were transformed into smiling fields which had to be watered with men’s sweat, and in which slavery and misery were soon seen to germinate and grow with the crops.”⁴⁸ Soon, advances in each new form of exploitation grant men the capacity to break the old balance; men were no longer tied to what they themselves could grow. Desires began to continually outstrip man’s ability to fulfill them, which in turn meant he would press every advantage at his disposal in competition with his fellows for ever more and better quality goods. This occasions the birth of the greatest social evil, that of deceit.

In order to attract attention from others, men continually modulate the face they present to the world to become something they think others wish them to be. The desire for recognition from one’s fellow man demands it:

It was necessary, for his advantage, to show himself to be something other than what he in fact was. Being something and appearing to be something became two completely different things; and from this distinction there arose grand ostentation, deceptive cunning, and all the vices that follow in their wake.⁴⁹

Since some will succeed more than others, inequality emerges and further fuels the conflict. These forces work together to reinforce the seeds of disorder that property-

⁴⁸ Rousseau, *Inequality*, p. 65

⁴⁹ Rousseau, *Inequality*, p. 67. Here again we may note an implicit clash with Plato. Rousseau hopes to unite the worlds of seeming and reality; rooting his “images” of perfection in community, he sees a path to reenchantment.

holding plants in men's souls; as a consequence, there "arose between the right of the strongest and the right of the first occupant a perpetual conflict that ended only in fights and murders."⁵⁰

What is most singular is that the less natural and pressing the needs, the more the passions increase and, what is worse, the power to satisfy them; so that after long periods of prosperity, after having swallowed up many treasures and ruined many men, my hero will end by butchering everything until he is the sole master of the universe. Such in brief is the moral portrait, if not of human life, than at least of the secret pretensions of the heart of every civilized man.⁵¹

Civil society becomes a state of oppression and war that constantly undermines the affections of ordinary people. The pathology of desire replaces man's natural self-love with ruthless selfishness.⁵²

For Rousseau, the emergence of true consciousness precludes returning to simple life in the state of nature. Despite that fact, in reading Rousseau and in life generally, we tend to overestimate our original nature and underestimate the degree to which time shapes us.⁵³ History shapes our nature dialectically through our interactions with the environment, with each other, and in rebellion against the lingering sentiments we derive from our original nature.⁵⁴ Because we cannot and should not return to this uncomplicated original nature, Rousseau turns to certain moments in our history to show

⁵⁰ Rousseau, *Inequality*, p. 68

⁵¹ Rousseau, Notes to Part I of *Inequality*, p. 91

⁵² Rousseau, *Inequality*, p. 106

⁵³ John T. Scott, "The Theodicy of the Second Discourse: The 'Pure State of Nature' and Rousseau's Political Thought," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 86, No. 3 (Sep. 1992), pp. 697-8

⁵⁴ On man's historical nature, see Horowitz, *Rousseau*, pp. 50-3; Masters, *Political Philosophy*, pp. 198-202; Ellenburg, *Rousseau's Political Philosophy*, pp. 62-3.

us how the ancients and a few decent moderns coped with the disastrous breach of nature, and does so with the understanding that these moments form an ideal around which we can nostalgically recapture decent life.⁵⁵ In the next section, I turn to an analysis of these moments and how they rely on the image of Rousseau's natural state and function as perfect examples of restorative nostalgia designed for a political end.

III. The Decent Life in Common: Rousseau's Idealized Historical Cases

Man is not naturally sociable, but society transforms his original condition. In his political writings, Rousseau does not want to and thinks it impossible to retreat into the wilderness precisely because modernity's unnatural "passions have forever destroyed their original simplicity."⁵⁶ We cannot live without others in spite of the fact they tend to make us miserable. Having acknowledged the fact that primitive harmony necessarily fails because of social evolution, Rousseau instead seeks the animation of true virtue in society.⁵⁷ Society brings with it certain useful marvels, but it exacts a terrible price in the loss of self-awareness, for "the more we accumulate knowledge, the more we deprive ourselves of the means of acquiring the most important knowledge of all," that of the sentiments.⁵⁸ Once the fall from nature came to pass, men could no longer heal themselves. However, this disruption does not leave men without patterns around which they might find cosmic order, ones that come as close to reproducing nature and salving

⁵⁵ Here, Eliade's analysis of Golden Age thinking bears on this point. As I have stated throughout, the hope here rests with making time bearable and overcoming what Eliade calls the "terror of history." See *Myth*, pp. 112-3, 141-62.

⁵⁶ Rousseau, Notes to Part I of *Inequality*, p. 94

⁵⁷ Jouvenel, *Sovereignty: An Inquiry Into the Political Good* trans. J.F. Huntington (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1997), pp. 326-7

⁵⁸ Rousseau, *Sciences and the Arts*, p. 3 and Rousseau, *Inequality*, p. 33

the wound of this fall as still remains possible.

For that reason, Rousseau directs our attention to a number of historical exemplars, each of which provides isolated pockets of what he saw as decent social order. All of them function as exercises in restorative nostalgia. Among these examples are Sparta, Rome, the early Israelites, and Geneva. These groups provide their members with a sort of stable yet intense form of social life that keeps the social war at bay. If Rousseau's individualism is that of the weak, these societies remedy this infirmity by adding to the resources of their members' souls.⁵⁹ In looking to these orders, Judith Shklar claims Rousseau sought an ideal vision of what modern social life lacks. They stand as protests against modernity and serve as

not merely private daydreams for Rousseau. They had social functions. Negatively they served as swords with which to smite his contemporaries. Positively he drew from them an image of the perfectly socialized man, the citizen whose entire life is absorbed by his social role. In its turn, this picture of an integrated existence could not but illuminate the distress of actual men, who had never known the patriotic life.⁶⁰

“Perfect socialization” necessitates submission to the patterns of Rousseau's decent society and the concomitant repetition of the same within history. While he acknowledges all societies falter from the moment of their founding, he believes they must strive to maintain a sort of stable imitation for as long as possible. These societies accomplish this bolstering of their members' souls' by making them individually insignificant, for as we will see in successive chapters, the dignity of human persons only

⁵⁹ Strong, *Politics of the Ordinary*, p. 55

⁶⁰ Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, pp. 13

makes sense within a framework of linear time. But to return to Rousseau's argument, in order to understand these images, we must turn where he did—to their origins.⁶¹

For Rousseau, every society has a founding: a moment when great men shape and determine the public's mores for good or ill.⁶² While they face all sorts of practical constraints, he writes that when these legislators of human order dare "to undertake the establishment of a people," they should feel as if they stand "in a position to change human nature... to alter man's constitution in order to strengthen it."⁶³ This function stands before politics and in some sense makes political life possible because for Rousseau, no firm basis in nature exists for nations before a legislator forms them.⁶⁴ However limited these characters remain in their ability to shape mores, framing his philosophy around them invites the idea that under the right conditions, human nature remains open to change. In the *Government of Poland*, he remarks upon three legislators "so outstanding as to deserve special mention" – Moses, Lycurgus, and Numa Pompilius – each of whom "achieved a kind of success which, were it not so thoroughly supported by evidence, we should regard as impossible."⁶⁵ Each deserves further comment.

Rousseau argues that Moses made the Jews culturally strong by devising "for them customs and practices that could not be blended into those of other nations and

⁶¹ To be fair, Shklar does write that "[n]ot even Sparta is a perfect abode for men," a fact that portends much for Rousseau's project of reenchancement and all those who follow him. See *Men and Citizens*, p. 18

⁶² This concept of a single *moment* of founding comports well with Eliade's claim about cosmological communities. Eliade writes that "[s]ettlement in a new, unknown, uncultivated country is equivalent to an act of Creation," and that for peoples who live within cyclical time, "every territory occupied... is first of all transformed from chaos into cosmos; that is, through the effect of ritual it is given a 'form' which makes it become real." See *Myth*, pp. 10-11

⁶³ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, p. 163

⁶⁴ Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, pp. 160-1

⁶⁵ Rousseau, *Poland*, pp. 5-6

weighted them down with rites and peculiar ceremonies,” so that as a result, the Jews could scatter over the whole of civilization but nevertheless manage to preserve their cultural integrity despite all challenges.⁶⁶ Lycurgus made the once weak, servile Spartan people powerful by binding them to their duties: “He fixed upon them a yoke of iron, the like of which no other people has ever borne; but he tied them to that yoke, made them, so to speak, one with it, by filling up every moment of their lives.”⁶⁷ In Rome, Numa Pompilius gave his people a common identity by forging “mildly restrictive institutions that bound each of them to the rest and all of them to the soil; and finally, by making their city sacred in their eyes by means of those rites.”⁶⁸ Indeed, he contrasts Numa with Rome’s mythical founder Romulus and claims that simply bringing a people together never suffices because one must shape a people profoundly enough so that the legislator’s alterations withstand history’s challenges.⁶⁹

Thus, Moses merely set the Jews apart, Lycurgus directed Spartan energy inward into civic institutions, and Numa gave the Romans a vision for which to strive through the sacredness of the ancestors and laws. But here, the role he assigns to Moses bears some additional scrutiny. In reducing Moses’ role to that of legislator rather than prophet, Rousseau hopes to escape the real import of biblical history; he provides an entirely

⁶⁶ Rousseau, *Poland*, p. 6. Willmoore Kendall observes that in some sense Moses is the “supreme Legislator, or Lawgiver: Moses’ act of founding, by contrast with that of lesser Founders, formed a people able to maintain its identity, and thus its ‘freedom,’ even when scattered to the four winds and without a ‘State’ or government of its own.” See his “Introduction: How to read Rousseau’s *Government of Poland*,” in *Poland*, p. xiii.

⁶⁷ Rousseau, *Poland*, p. 6-7

⁶⁸ Rousseau, *Poland*, p. 7

⁶⁹ On the differences between Romulus and Numa in Rousseau’s thought as the distinction between creative leadership on the one hand, and the regularizing of order on the other, see Jouvenel, *Sovereignty*, pp. 25, 58-9

profane reading of a central moment in the sacred scheme of biblical time. His movement away from biblical teaching demands the obliteration of God's trace in the world. By rendering all of Moses' acts in a temporal key, Rousseau converts the prophet into just one more political founder and myth-maker, or in Eliade's terms, just another creator of cosmological order. By denying the divine covenant, Rousseau could remove its extraordinary characteristics and reconceive the event as the establishment of rules and practices among just another ordinary, enslaved people, further distancing his ideas from biblical history and paving the way for a return to pagan understanding of the relationship between politics, religion, and culture.

For Rousseau, these three legislators performed essentially the same function for their societies: "All these legislators of ancient times based their legislation on the same ideas. All three sought ties that would bind the citizens to the fatherland and to one another."⁷⁰ He argues every people needs such an authoritative leader to guide them, "someone so extraordinary in intelligence and moral strength that he can restructure the environment in which men live and thus indirectly compel them to turn away from their present course."⁷¹ Genuine society demands a common set of understandings, and a great founder (mythical or otherwise) provides this crucial mode of life.⁷² Founders do not rationalize the ideals implicit in a people's culture, for Rousseau argues that any people needs a more solid basis than mere reasonableness.⁷³ Nor does he claim society can rest *only* with the idea of returning to its perfect and eternal origin. He argues that a purely

⁷⁰ Rousseau, *Poland*, p. 8

⁷¹ Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, p. 127

⁷² Jouvenel, *On Power*, pp. 54-7

⁷³ Rousseau, *Inequality*, pp. 75-6

inherited understanding of what foundings and governments do only aids in the construction of tyranny.⁷⁴ Even adapted for present consumption, these founding ideas pose a real danger to liberal order.

All of Rousseau's ideal societies have several common aspects: simplicity, authentic sentiments of organic unity, and a sense of self-understanding that allows them to avoid self-reflexive discussion of matters best left to silence. All retain very rustic qualities. Rousseau sees these societies' relative poverty and ignorance as virtues that they should not discard lightly.⁷⁵ Their decent mores and good, simple laws work to denature men well instead of badly, replicating as best as possible the emotional balance of the state of nature. In doing so, they work to heal the breach of nature, weaning man away from amour-propre, and transporting the "I into the common unity."⁷⁶ These facets allow Rousseau's ideal to take shape, one in which ordinary men can live unreflectively in light of the founding myths as represented in the practices and patterns of the good political community. Having created this stable relationship between people that can persist over time, Rousseau's decent historical orders lead men to the crucial unity between politics, economy, and society that men must retain to persist and renew their society in time. Only in this manner can they evade the terror of history and specter of decline.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ When historical fact is "proof of right," this is a dangerous scenario: "A more logical method could be used, but not one more favorable to tyrants." Rousseau, *Social Contract*, p. 142. On the relationship between reason, sentiment, and judgment see also Ellenburg, *Rousseau's Political Philosophy*, pp. 175-7.

⁷⁵ Rousseau, *Sciences and the Arts*, pp. 7-8

⁷⁶ Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 40. On this idea, see also Masters, *Political Philosophy*, pp. 252-4 and Jouvenel, "Rousseau the Pessimistic Evolutinist," pp. 95-6.

⁷⁷ Rousseau, *Discourse on Political Economy in The Basic Political Writings*, pp. 114-5

In discussing them, Rousseau constantly reminds us that Sparta, Rome, and his other examples shared several other important characteristics. These included small size, cultural austerity, and the presence of exemplary men. I discuss each briefly. Rousseau associates limited scale with decent living and a certain sort of prosperity.⁷⁸ Truly decent order requires a reduction in scale and complexity from that which modernity imposes upon us. He claims that

Almost all small states, republics and monarchies alike, prosper, simply because they are small, because all their citizens know each other and keep an eye on each other, and because their rulers can see for themselves the harm that is being done and the good that is theirs to do and can look on as their orders are being executed.⁷⁹

Rousseau judges a good government not by how much money it lets its citizens accumulate, but rather by how happily its population lives. Citizens in small societies like this necessarily live in rough equality and manage to grow slowly while stably replicating their manners and mores over time.⁸⁰

The cultural austerity of such peoples leads them to accept only *necessary* amusements. They recognize and exclude useless delights as “evil for a being whose life is so short and whose time is so precious,” and such men find that their “habit of work renders inactivity intolerable and that a good conscience extinguishes the taste for frivolous pleasures.”⁸¹ The theater, which Rousseau envisions as *the* symbol of refined

⁷⁸ Even the most radical and abstract statement of Rousseau’s political teaching in the *Social Contract* works under the assumption decent order *requires* small scale. On the dangers of large size, see *Social Contract* pp. 168-70.

⁷⁹ Rousseau, *Poland*, p. 25

⁸⁰ Rousseau, *Political Economy*, p. 124 and *Social Contract*, pp. 190-1. Of course, this injunction about growth cuts against Rousseau’s other claim about small size.

⁸¹ Rousseau, *Politics and the Arts: Letter to M. D’Alembert on the Theater* (hereafter *D’Alembert*) trans.

and polite society, always plays a limited role in such places.⁸² Waxing particularly nostalgic, he observes that the ancients had actual heroes and saw little use for mere imitations on the stage.⁸³ In theater's place, public opinion in a good society governs mores and consciences, and as a result, wise peoples minimize the idle chatter of philosophers and priests.⁸⁴ Austerity helps all of these forces persist because it removes the primary, material incentives for men to engage in inauthentic behavior. No longer lusting after more than the most basic material goods, men find it easier to live and treat one another well; Arcadian simplicity and enchantment suffuses these cosmological communities which unreflectively embrace the recurrence of time's eternal cycles. As I noted in chapter one, pagan societies all face a difficulty in their horror of transition and change.

The seemingly permanent and recurring presence of good patterns and exemplars keeps these societies decent. In this, various types of people interest Rousseau more than others. He contrasts an idealized vision of Cato and Socrates against one another:

The virtue of Socrates is that of the wisest of men. But compared with Caesar and Pompey, Cato seems like a god among mortals.... A worthy student of Socrates would be the most virtuous of his contemporaries. A worthy imitator of Cato would be the greatest.

The virtue of the first would constitute his happiness; the second would seek his

Allan Bloom (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1960), p. 16

⁸² Peter France, "Primitivism and Enlightenment: Rousseau and the Scots," *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 15 (1985), p. 68

⁸³ Rousseau, *D'Alembert*, p. 32

⁸⁴ On public opinion, see Rousseau, *Social Contract*, pp. 215-9. Elsewhere, he writes that if "ever peace could be established where interest, pride, and opinionation now reign, thereby the dissensions of the priests and the philosophers would finally end." See *D'Alembert*, p. 11n.

happiness in that of others.⁸⁵

Rousseau sees the ancient aristocracy of Rome and societies like it as a vision of how leaders could once transform selfish individual men into genuine citizens of a body politic, who, despite their individual weakness, could retain health. The metaphor of a body politic holds importance because it allows Rousseau “to strengthen the impression that the republic thus artificially recreated the state of nature.”⁸⁶ To press this further, Rousseau saw the Spartan ideal of social friendship as the necessary historical force that made his ideal orders great. In those orders, legislation went so deep that society shaped all citizens in the same direction. Our longing for true companionship and belonging in the present day reminds us how important this sort of relationship remains. But I would argue that we cannot forget that in Rousseau’s enchanted polis – and in any society emulating it – true felicity comes at the price of anything resembling individual personhood. With any such political order, difference becomes dangerous—even criminal.⁸⁷

These historic polities arrested the dangerous division of labor that our breach from nature encourages. Rousseau claims his ideal polities employed no professional priests, soldiers, or judges; each citizen served in these roles as his duty and conscience dictated. In such a society, Rousseau claims man’s obligations and sentiments rarely came into conflict.⁸⁸ A good civil society like this did not simply make men remain in their stations; it habituated them to enjoy their lot in life “in order that they fulfill their

⁸⁵ Rousseau, *Political Economy*, pp. 121-2

⁸⁶ Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, p. 202

⁸⁷ Jouvenel, *Sovereignty*, pp. 156, 162

⁸⁸ Rousseau, *Poland*, p. 62

duties better, that they torment themselves less over changing their stations, that public order be better established.”⁸⁹ They teach men the simple and useful arts of self-sufficiency, so that living well, they gain strength.⁹⁰ As for women, by remaining in traditional roles, they indirectly command men indirectly through their “chaste power, exercised only within the conjugal union,” and exert enormous influence over the mores of the family.⁹¹

Of course, Rousseau knows well that this rules out all technical and commercial innovation. He understands that his reimagination of pagan community and the nature it claims to represent only remains a viable option so long as the society remains able to imitate their forefathers without innovation or much change of any kind. Markets unleash restless social energy utterly incompatible with this repetition and force individuals to specialize in one form of employment. Adam Smith observes that in such an order,

[e]very workman has a great quantity of his own work to dispose of beyond what he himself has occasion for; and every other workman being in exactly in the same situation, he is enabled to exchange.... He supplies them abundantly with what they have occasion for, and they accommodate him as amply with what he has occasion for, and a general plenty diffuses itself through all the different ranks of society.⁹²

Such social movement undoes everything Rousseau’s decent “historic” orders work so

⁸⁹ Rousseau, *D’Alembert*, p. 126n

⁹⁰ For one description of advantages to this sort of living, see Rousseau, *Sciences and the Arts*, pp. 3-5. See also Masters, *Political Philosophy*, pp. 243-54.

⁹¹ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, pp. 31-2. Rousseau often returns to the importance of women’s mores as a barometer of civic health. Recall his story in the *Emile* of the Spartan woman who “had five sons in the army and was awaiting news of the battle. A Helot arrives; trembling, she asks him for news. ‘Your five sons were killed.’ ‘Base slave, did I ask you that?’ ‘We won the victory.’ The mother runs to the temple and gives thanks to the gods. This is the female citizen” (p. 40).

⁹² Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1981), p. 22

hard to establish. The very idea of open markets undoes that stability, and as we will see in coming chapters, commercial society may in turn require the sort of stable meaning that only biblical history and its expression in historical memory can provide.

Rousseau commends one near-contemporary and certainly fictive example of a decent society in that of the Swiss. Yet even this political order does not lack complications. Isolated and beset with a cold, dangerous climate, the Swiss worked hard. Their continual labor “deprived them of the time to become acquainted with the passions,” and because snowstorms buried them six months out of the year, they enjoyed little contact with the outside world.⁹³ Their independence allowed them

relations of benevolence and friendship; harmony and peace reigned effortlessly in their large families, they had almost nothing else to deal with among themselves except marriages in which inclination alone was consulted.... It did not have any virtues because, not having any vices at all to conquer, doing good cost it nothing, and it was good and just without even knowing what justice and virtue were... when one sees the unbreakable firmness, the constancy, even the ferocity that these terrible men brought to combat... one no longer has any difficulty in conceiving the prodigies they performed for the defense of their country.⁹⁴

So constituted, Switzerland’s isolated autonomy allowed it a sort of reprieve from threatening cultural forces. Yet Geneva enjoyed even further advantages. Rousseau observes that a “body of philosophic and pacific theologians, or rather a body of officers of morality and ministers of virtue” blessed the city as guides.⁹⁵ I will say more about the

⁹³ Rousseau, *Plan for a Constitution for Corsica*, in *Collected Writings*, Vol. 11, p. 134

⁹⁴ Rousseau, *Corsica*, pp. 134-5

⁹⁵ Rousseau, *D’Alembert*, p. 14

Swiss in the next section, but for now it suffices to observe that *this* vision has little or nothing to do with the actual past, for Rousseau employs it as one more image around which we might eventually reenchant the world.

Rousseau creates a potent vision of ancient foundings and their subsequent history. He evokes an idea of who Moses and Numa were, and of what his homeland of recent memory might be as images that allow us to deeply criticize the origins of social disorder and psychological distress in the modern world. Throughout his discussions of what Shklar calls broadly “Spartan” societies, Rousseau continually evokes nostalgic images of places that might have been, which demonstrate goodness precisely because they address themselves toward and hope to completely fulfill the real longings we feel for the lost state of nature. This study provides the only source of reliable insight that might allow us to cut through the contradictions of modern life and give us the eventual potential for reenchantment.⁹⁶ Rousseau’s narratives of modern decline form the subject of my next section.

IV. The Derangement of Modern Life Amidst Social Decline

In many of his major works, Rousseau occupies himself in part with describing what so often condemns human society to relentless decline away from his perfect founding moments of cosmological community. But having effaced the Fall, he cannot accept man’s *natural* corruption by sin. Indeed, at least *in principle* Rousseau’s unconstrained anthropology cannot admit the fact of human limitation. His nostalgia

⁹⁶ On our tragically confused nature, Rousseau writes that the “first thing I notice upon considering the position of the human race is a manifest contradiction in its constitution, which makes it always vacillate.” See “The State of War,” in *Collected Works*, Vol. 11, p. 62.

gives him a way out of this difficulty, allowing him to simultaneously view modern society as the source of all evil while critiquing all extant social order in light of the past he imagines will restore us. In this vein, Rousseau often asks what keeps modern man from placing decent conventions over himself.⁹⁷ He observes that “everything degenerates in the hands of man,” and that we are simply unable to efface the “folly and contradiction” found within our institutions.⁹⁸ Simple realism dictates that all human contrivances must eventually fall apart. Events and actions beyond the control of those who initially found political and social order cause its degeneration.⁹⁹ But he notes qualitative differences between our world and healthy ones, and demands we apply his speculative or intuitive wisdom about the imagined past so that we can tell a history of the human heart—“a genealogy of sentiments”—which might someday lead us back to a healthy, authentic existence.¹⁰⁰

First and foremost, Rousseau claims his decent historical orders allow men the space to act as citizens rather than subjects or slaves. As noted above, they do this by restraining the excesses of inequality and limiting the extent to which society divides labor and specializes in particular fields. All of this aims at taming desires because decent political life begins to unravel when large numbers of people begin to confuse their wants with needs. In growing larger, our needs become powerful weaknesses, and soon men

⁹⁷ Masters, *Political Philosophy*, p. 299

⁹⁸ Rousseau, *Emile*, pp. 37, 82

⁹⁹ On this see Masters, *Political Philosophy*, pp. 403-5 and Horowitz, *Rousseau*, pp. 123-4.

¹⁰⁰ See Ellenburg, *Rousseau's Political Philosophy*, pp. 70-1, Jouvenel, “Rousseau the Pessimistic Evolutionist,” pp. 93-4, and Strong, *The Politics of the Ordinary*, p. 42. Rousseau begins Book I, Chapter I of the *Social Contract* with the claim that man “is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.... How did this change take place? I do not know.” He cheerfully applies his own speculation to help address the question in terms of cosmological order. See *Social Contract*, p. 141.

marshal all the powers of society toward the achievement of wealth, not the maintenance of virtue. Of course, we might view this as yet another outworking of the quarrel of the Ancients versus the Moderns. Where Rousseau aligns himself with the former, we will see that Burke, Tocqueville, and of course, Smith all endorse to some degree the liberal move of unleashing commercial desires within a constitutional order and deal with society's growing scale through the mobilization of local *interests* conditioned and restrained by our social memory.

While a portion of Rousseau's initial analysis of nature rests on changes in the economic order and the psychological effects they portend, in his discussions of how commerce affects actual societies, he mentions a good deal more about the political consequences this holds for modern man. Modes of living that spring from man's expanding desires depend in vital ways on an extensive division and specialization of labor, and Rousseau takes care to trace out the effect he believes these developments have on society. The advance of "civilized" life depends in several interesting ways on a confluence Rousseau observes between our vain curiosity and our deep aversion to hard work. Constant preoccupation with difficult tasks leaves men little time for distractions; this fact helps foster virtue and stability. Necessity compels men to complete difficult work, which keeps them out of trouble. Spare time leads men into discovering new vices. However, Rousseau agrees with Smith that all of our inclinations lead us in precisely the opposite direction, toward finding ways to simplify our labor and give us more free time.

Again, Rousseau equates novelty with death.¹⁰¹ This confluence of laziness and curiosity leads us to develop ever more specialized labor and ways of utilizing it to further our comfort, avarice, and vanity. Rousseau fears that this combination leads inexorably to a world of sophisticated weaklings incapable of sustaining real political action.¹⁰²

This “reemergence” of desire in societies once habituated against vice (and here Rousseau emphasizes Rome especially) increasingly leads men to turn toward self-interested commerce – rather than politics and the common good – as their principal orientation in life. Rousseau asserts that the politicians are a good indicator of this: “Ancient politicians spoke incessantly about mores and virtue; ours speak only of commerce and money.... According to them, a man is worth no more to the state than what he consumes.”¹⁰³ The danger implicit in this move toward consumption and luxury results from the fact “it is not possible for minds degraded by a multitude of futile needs to rise to anything great; and even if they had the strength, they would lack the courage.”¹⁰⁴ Any society that indulges in commercial life or that seeks to “change personal services into money” dooms itself for the slavery of exploitative dependence because public-spiritedness and calculations of self-interest stand eternally opposed to one another. In Rousseau’s universe, only slaves study finance.¹⁰⁵

Once one creates a civil society organized around commerce, virtuous politics die and men replace it with attitudes of thoroughgoing servility. This poses a particular

¹⁰¹ Rousseau, *Sciences and the Arts*, pp. 5-8

¹⁰² Rousseau, *Sciences and the Arts*, p. 16

¹⁰³ Rousseau, *Sciences and the Arts*, pp. 12-3

¹⁰⁴ Rousseau, *Sciences and the Arts*, p. 13

¹⁰⁵ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, pp. 197-8

danger for modern man because once he loses his virtue and freedom, he can do nothing to escape some form of servitude because all the desires of the age skew him against revolt: “Every man born in slavery is born for slavery; nothing is more certain. In their chains slaves lose everything, even the desire to escape.”¹⁰⁶ Even if society does not literally enslave men, their lack of autonomy and thoroughly degrading dependence on one another’s monetary favors gives them many servile characteristics. Whatever the physical violence such oppression engenders, competitive social dependency creates a deeper sort rooted in the insincerity society forces us to develop for survival.¹⁰⁷

Once men turn their attention to luxury and can afford to buy themselves leisure (or at least “free time”), their thoughts grow more complex and problematic, undermining any hope of transmitting the social order the way it came to them. The explosion of desire does not limit itself to material goods. People turn their minds toward increasingly complicated and novel forms of thought and action. Where simple people in stable society fix their attention on the necessities of life, luxurious moderns find themselves possessing the time to develop abstract social forms, complicated beliefs, and false manners.¹⁰⁸ The aesthetic austerity that decent people once maintained gives way to something else in “good taste,” which Rousseau sees as nothing more than a form of petty, foolish knowledge of trivialities.¹⁰⁹ Private opinions become deceitful conspiracy; public forms of dress force men to literally appear as the person they wish to be. Once

¹⁰⁶ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, pp. 142-3

¹⁰⁷ Alessandro Ferrara, *Modernity and Authenticity: A Study of the Social and Ethical Thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), p. 42

¹⁰⁸ Ellenburg, *Rousseau’s Political Philosophy*, pp. 181-3

¹⁰⁹ Rousseau, *D’Alembert*, p. 119

again, Rousseau wishes to merge appearance and reality, hoping to efface Plato's divided line between the worlds of being and becoming.¹¹⁰ This portends severe consequences: recall that for Rousseau, social life remains tenuous at best. Barring a strong countervailing force in feelings of love and affection, even the most natural society found in the family breaks apart as soon as firm ties of need begin to dissolve. Since modern life works relentlessly to rob men of decent feelings, the effectiveness of the family to restrain the worst aspects of modern life must also begin to fail.¹¹¹

Commerce and specialization allow for the creation of new amusements like the theater. For Rousseau, the theater symbolizes the worst tendencies of modern society toward inauthenticity and deceit. Rousseau observes that the "ancients had heroes and put men on their stages; we, on the contrary, put only heroes on the stage and hardly have any men."¹¹² We idolize those who *affect* valor because genuinely admirable citizens no longer remain among us. Even at its best, theater flatters all of men's worst intellectual tendencies:

People think they come together in the theatre, and it is there that they are isolated. It is there that they go to forget their friends, neighbors, and relations in order to concern themselves with fables, in order to cry for the misfortunes of the dead, or to laugh at the expense of the living.¹¹³

But particular forms of it such as comedy do even more damage to the sociable

¹¹⁰ Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, p. 76. On the importance of modes of dress, see Charles E. Ellison, "Rousseau and the Modern City: The Politics of Speech and Dress," *Political Theory*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Nov. 1985), esp. pp. 513-6.

¹¹¹ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, p. 142

¹¹² Rousseau, *D'Alembert*, p. 32

¹¹³ Rousseau, *D'Alembert*, pp. 16-7

sentiments, because theater as a whole works solely on the vices of the human heart. Specifically, it causes us to identify ourselves with the plight of those who do not deserve our sympathy: if we can see scoundrels playing the role of decent folk, what does it do to society to have decent men taking on the character of villains? Lacking any trust in human judgment, Rousseau presumes theater's audiences blend the images placed before them and reality itself.¹¹⁴

The explosion of a society's needs and its concomitant expansion of the division and specialization of labor encourage more and more people to turn away from the simple, stable life of the country and congregate in cities. In modern city life, carefully constructed appearances become all that matters to the self and to others.¹¹⁵ Cities themselves become the centers of an essentially staged existence, places which do nothing but aid in the destruction of our better natures.¹¹⁶ They further the randomness and divisions within the human person, forcing him to be several people at once, utterly dependent on the approval of others for his subsistence. Worse still, this form of living leads him to pander to others for mere recognition of his existence.¹¹⁷

Rousseau caustically observes that in modern times, "it is true, Socrates would not have drunk the hemlock; but he would have drunk from a cup far more bitter still: the

¹¹⁴ Rousseau, *D'Alembert*, pp. 34, 81

¹¹⁵ Rousseau, *Sciences and the Arts*, p. 4. These issues have particularly deleterious effects on women and they also abet the rise of disputatious philosophers. Together, both these phenomena work to undermine civic virtue. On women, see *D'Alembert*, pp. 87-90, 109; *Emile*, p. 372; and Ellison, "Rousseau and the Modern City," pp. 518-9. Regarding the role of intellectuals, particularly the sorts of ideas they spread, see *Poland*, p. 96; *Emile*, pp. 39, 274, and 321; Kendall, "Introduction" in *Poland*, pp. xxiv-v; and Strong, *The Politics of Ordinary Life*, p. 38.

¹¹⁶ Ellison, "Rousseau and the Modern City," pp. 499-505; Strong, *The Politics of the Ordinary*, p. 33

¹¹⁷ On randomness, see Kendall, "Introduction," in *Poland*, p. xxxii. For a discussion of the "divided self," see Ellenburg, *Rousseau's Political Philosophy*, pp. 196-8.

insulting ridicule and scorn that are a hundred times worse than death.”¹¹⁸ In times like these, a man like Socrates who aims at greatness and tries to bring a new hope to his people cannot find an audience. Instead of recognizing true magnanimity, modern men constantly seek satisfaction in the limited goals of commerce: we must not forget that the “soul imperceptibly proportions itself to the objects that occupy it, and it is great events that make great men.”¹¹⁹ Today, men exhaust themselves fighting a social war of all against all through commerce. All the while, they constantly compete for public esteem, losing their authentic selves in the process.¹²⁰

For Rousseau, this social war contradicts every inclination of our original nature. Nevertheless, the pathology of desire that in commercial society leads to the rapid growth of populations, of major cities, and of territory must inevitably lead men in society into conflict with their neighbors.¹²¹ The radical unchaining of desire within and without any given polity means the social comparison that occurs between individual also spreads between nations. Wealthy, populous states become a convenient target for the envious aspirations of others and must fight defensive wars. On the other hand, Rousseau observes that any

people whose position provides it an alternative merely between commerce and war is inherently weak. It depends on its neighbors; it depends on events. It never has anything but an uncertain and brief existence. Either it conquers and changes the situation, or it is

¹¹⁸ Rousseau, *Sciences and the Arts*, p. 10

¹¹⁹ Rousseau, *Sciences and the Arts*, p. 20. Compare to his statement in *Corsica* that “in order to awaken a nation’s activity it is necessary to give it great desires, great hopes, great positive motives for acting” (*Collected Works*, Vol. 11, p. 153).

¹²⁰ On the idea of a social war, see Ellenburg, *Rousseau’s Political Philosophy*, pp. 81-2

¹²¹ For a discussion of “the law of political rivalry,” see Jouvenel, *On Power*, pp. 154-6.

conquered and obliterated.¹²²

Both victory and failure in war pose dangers. The victor's increase of territory results in faction and corruption. Impending defeat forces men to act desperately to secure their survival. In any case, war *inevitably* destroys freedom. This always remains the case, but Rousseau argues that in modern times the dangers grow more acute.

Rousseau posits several reasons for this. He notes at several points that precisely because of our tendencies toward luxury and the satisfaction of desire, men become more afraid of suffering and death. They occupy themselves with concerns for their health and turn to doctors constantly.¹²³ Possessed by these fears, this sort of man cannot be taught how to live properly or to have a public spirit, let alone why he should risk death and injury for his countrymen.¹²⁴ When such people fight wars often enough, they always tend to appoint a portion of the population to specialize in its practice. He recounts the example of Rome, where the growing necessity of constant mobilization required creating professional soldiers.¹²⁵ For Rousseau, regular armies only serve two purposes, "attacking and conquering neighbors, and fettering and enslaving citizens," and he adds that if the state does not occupy them with wars abroad, they will turn their restless eyes homeward.¹²⁶

Social decline leads peoples in the same direction, rather than down distinct and different paths. Ironically, while Europe fights and trades in succession, its peoples grow

¹²² Rousseau, *Social Contract*, p. 168

¹²³ Rousseau, *Inequality*, pp. 42-3

¹²⁴ Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 53

¹²⁵ Rousseau, *Poland*, p. 84

¹²⁶ Rousseau, *Poland*, p. 80

more and more alike in taste and sentiment, something which Rousseau claims results from their never having been formed by a distinctively national legislator or set of customs:

there is no such thing nowadays as Frenchmen, Germans, Spaniards, or even Englishmen—only Europeans..., and for good reason.... Put them in the same circumstances and, man for man, they will do exactly the same things. They will all tell you how unselfish they are, and act like scoundrels. They will all go on and on about the public good, and think only of themselves.... Their fatherland is any country where there is money for them to steal and women for them to seduce.¹²⁷

Rousseau held up his native Swiss as a worthy people—but this changed when they became mercenaries. Tainted by the wealth of foreign princes who hired them,

[i]nsensibly they debased themselves.... The taste for money made them feel that they were poor; disdain for their station insensibly destroyed the virtues that were its work and the Swiss became five-penny men, as the French are four-penny ones.

Soon after, they fell prey to the irreversible temptations of commerce, industry, and luxury. Without a new founding and return to a stable, imitative order, people can never recapture lost virtue. Using a nostalgic vision of the past to recreate the future becomes the only way forward.¹²⁸

Rousseau identifies another devastating side effect from the division of labor in increasing professionalization in politics. He insists that any time politics ceases as an animating interest for ordinary men, this dooms the political order. For this reason, he

¹²⁷ Rousseau, *Poland*, p. 11-2

¹²⁸ Rousseau, *Corsica*, Vol. 11, p. 135-6

could never abide the idea of what Weber called the disenchanting world.¹²⁹ Just like every other part of life in common, the political sphere becomes another battleground in the social war, where various interests struggle for recognition and a small portion of the public's attention. Given the relentless desire for expansion of the market and the aforementioned tendencies that lead commercial peoples into war, Rousseau knows that the pressures of the age lead states to take control of ever larger territories. This becomes the "radical vice" of modern politics: "Large populations, vast territories! There you have the first and foremost reason for the misfortunes of mankind, above all the countless calamities that weaken and destroy polite peoples."¹³⁰ Large territory requires delegation of power or representative government; both undermine active civic life.¹³¹ As decent politics fail, rulers change their titles. Now rulers serve as the masters of a geographical space: "In holding the land thus, they are quite sure of holding the inhabitants."¹³² Kings no longer represent united peoples—after all, how could they?

Together, all this means that the cornerstone of decent politics in the General Will can never find expression. Every will in a world of social warfare remains narrowly private, and leaders must use raw power to dominate any people who do not form a General Will.¹³³ This means that if politics can secure any order at all outside of Rousseau's just society, the state's repressive power needs to work very hard.¹³⁴ Without

¹²⁹ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, p. 197

¹³⁰ Rousseau, *Poland*, p. 25

¹³¹ Rousseau, *Poland*, pp. 32-5

¹³² Rousseau, *Social Contract*, p. 152

¹³³ Jouvenel, *On Power*, p. 126

¹³⁴ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, p. 175. For a brief discussion of the differences between the General Will, the will of all, and individual wills, see Masters, *Political Philosophy*, pp. 325-7. Also see Jouvenel, *On*

the presence of a General Will that exercises sovereignty over political life, the government consciously works to make people miserable so that they can be governed more easily.¹³⁵ Rousseau notes that a healthy society votes publicly and simply. As soon as honesty and authenticity fail, a people must multiply the laws dealing with political power. For Rousseau, any society that increases its laws demonstrates its lack of control over its people. Alternatively, when the scope of law expands, the ground for the General Will evaporates.¹³⁶

The corruption of commercial society runs so deep that any politicians who do try to suggest stemming the tide against declining mores – anyone who actually attempts to follow the voice of nature – will face overwhelming opposition. Indeed, Rousseau argues their community will see them as traitors.¹³⁷ However prosaic and simple they may be, ordinary men love their religion and those little social habits that embody memory. Rousseau’s “voice of nature” seeks to destroy this in favor of a political that strips individual distinctive away from men in favor of a mythic communal identity. None of this implies that he thought radical change constituted a viable answer for societies in his day. In the *Social Contract*, he argues that any established government must remain in place unless it directly oppresses its people; yet while he does not endorse a truly cultural revolution in the short term, his entire theory presupposes that we must eventually recapture and apply these ancient sensibilities.¹³⁸ For the time being, he suggests that

Power, p. 281.

¹³⁵ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, p. 188

¹³⁶ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, p. 215

¹³⁷ Rousseau, *Political Economy*, p. 113

¹³⁸ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, p. 202

only indirect efforts will succeed in restraining the worst behavior. After condemning it as a trap for virtuous people, Rousseau even adds that in vicious nations the theater might keep people out of trouble and possibly even remind them of a few decent moral traits.¹³⁹ He concludes that in modern times, one must choose between making independent, strong men and making citizens.¹⁴⁰ This thought leads us to an assessment of Rousseau's positive teachings for the present and future.

V. The Sentimental Simplicity of a Reenchanted Future

I agree with one commentator that in the *Social Contract*, and indeed, in many of his writings, Rousseau rarely clarifies whether he refers “to the past, the present, the possible future, or to some utopian ‘ought-to-be’ that never was, will be, or can be.”¹⁴¹ However, in this section, I suggest some of the reasons why it seems more probable that Rousseau knew that no existing society – and particularly not the two he claimed to advise in constitutional matters – could actually alter their culture enough to fit his vision of a decent political order.

Even if Rousseau admits that no man can implement his theories, he still thinks his notions are useful: “My great regret for mankind is that so many ideas that I find to be good and useful, and highly practical on top of that, are still so far from being put into practice.”¹⁴² Whether or not Rousseau thought such action possible, this contradictory gap between his aspirations and reality invites attempts at radical political action. Rousseau admits rather early on in the *First Discourse* that he does not write for his own

¹³⁹ Rousseau, *D'Alembert*, p. 65; Masters, *Political Philosophy*, p. 234

¹⁴⁰ Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 39

¹⁴¹ John B. Noone, Jr. *Rousseau's Social Contract* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980), p. 3

¹⁴² Rousseau, *Poland*, p. 23

time.¹⁴³ Were he a prince or statesman, he claims that he would act or be silent, but in deranged times, a philosopher must write and speak the truth as he understands it.¹⁴⁴ But given the radical implications of any desire to reenchant the world, we must evaluate Rousseau's statements with caution.

In the *Social Contract*, Rousseau sets out a series of conditions a people must meet in order to be suited to receive authentic legislation:

One that, finding itself bound by some union of origin, interest or convention, has not yet felt the true yoke of laws. One that has no custom or superstitions that are deeply rooted.... One that can, without entering into the squabbles of its neighbors, resist each of them single-handed... One where each member can be known to all, and where there is no need to impose a great burden on a man than a man can bear.¹⁴⁵

Rousseau layers the difficulties of "true" legislation atop one another. He tells us a legislator must have a deep knowledge of any nation for which he writes, and that an outsider cannot truly perform this role.¹⁴⁶ Rousseau concludes that "[w]hat makes the work of legislation trying is not so much what must be established as what must be destroyed."¹⁴⁷

I take this to mean that Rousseau wrote these words for some future society, a people disillusioned enough with modernity and young and malleable enough to accept the deep changes true legislation would require. Here perhaps one might understand "young" to mean a people totally despairing from disenchantment and ready to move

¹⁴³ Rousseau, *Sciences and the Arts*, p. 2. On this, see Kendall, "Introduction," pp. xxviii and Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, pp. 102, 208-9, 211.

¹⁴⁴ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, p. 141.

¹⁴⁵ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, pp. 169-70

¹⁴⁶ Rousseau, *Poland*, p. 1

¹⁴⁷ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, p. 170

back into enchanted oblivion. So formed, a people might love their laws and wholeheartedly give themselves to their community.¹⁴⁸ The highest talent of government would then consist in forming people willing to live virtuous, unchanging lives.¹⁴⁹ Rousseau argues that we cannot introduce new forces or entirely new ideas into existing society. The reformer's only hope rests with redirecting or modifying forces already present in society. Legislators act through influence, not coercion.¹⁵⁰

This limitation rather strongly implies that not all peoples can become or will ever be suited to genuine freedom. On this point, he writes that liberty itself "is a food that is good to taste but hard to digest: it sets well only on a good strong stomach," and adds that one cannot safely free a man's body before one has first freed his soul.¹⁵¹ Put simply, real legislation demands a nearly blank slate: a willing band of people without any of the prejudices of extant society.¹⁵² This relates to Rousseau's image of history in that to accomplish their mission, would-be reformers must "raise souls to the pitch of the souls of the ancients."¹⁵³ This suggests that Rousseau intends not so much legislative or constitutional reform as a complete reorientation of men's hearts. Again, he uneasily pairs man's plastic nature with intractable conventions in a way that invites radical change. I will discuss a few examples of this before concluding.

¹⁴⁸ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, pp. 148, 172-3

¹⁴⁹ Rousseau, *Political Economy*, pp. 118-9

¹⁵⁰ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, p. 147

¹⁵¹ Rousseau, *Poland*, pp. 29-30. On the intractability of culture and difficulty of reform, see Masters, *Political Philosophy*, pp. 369-73.

¹⁵² Contrast this with *Social Contract* (p. 180), *Poland* (pp. 2-3, 92-94), and *Corsica* (*Collected Works*, Vol. 11, pp. 123-4). For different interpretations of how to approach Rousseau's seriousness about these proposals also see Kendall, "Introduction," pp. xvi-xviii; Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, pp. 14-15, 157; Masters, *Political Philosophy*, pp. 90-1, 357-9; Ellenburg, *Rousseau's Political Philosophy*, pp. 14-15, 205; Ferrara, *Modernity and Authenticity*, p. 1-2; and Jouvenel, *Sovereignty*, pp. 111-2.

¹⁵³ Rousseau, *Poland*, p. 12

For Rousseau, a culture that allows for authentic sentiment and uncomplicated living might produce conditions that allow for decent political life. Children comport best with his understanding of what purely natural man looked like. Until we pass society's prejudices on to them, our offspring exist for a moment as instances of pure potentiality.¹⁵⁴ In the *Poland*, Rousseau suggests that habituation should begin early, with the very games children play, and continue through life by structuring public ceremonies and celebrations.¹⁵⁵ Because sentiment matters more than reason, and intellectual achievement inevitably results in faction and envy, the public culture needs to emphasize physical over mental accomplishments.¹⁵⁶ Without undue development of intellectual life, Rousseau suggests one source of faction would dissipate. He insists the polity must subordinate another – that of theology – to political life. In place of any orthodox Christianity, true civic religion in the pagan mold would bind people together like Numa's laws.¹⁵⁷ United by civic understanding and common culture, the main causes of “idle chatter” in civic assemblies would cease, wisdom would reign, and the polity would recur in time.¹⁵⁸ All of Rousseau's positive agenda consciously attempts to recapture lost time, and in so doing, heal the breach of nature by subsuming man into political life—though he seemingly projects this into the distant future.¹⁵⁹

If creating a healthy republic forms Rousseau's best practical option, perhaps we

¹⁵⁴ Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, p. 36

¹⁵⁵ Rousseau, *Poland*, pp. 3-4, 13

¹⁵⁶ Rousseau, *Poland*, p. 15

¹⁵⁷ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, pp. 225-6. Also, in the *Poland*, Rousseau's educational reforms not-so-subtly excise the Catholic Church from Polish life. See *Poland*, pp. 19-24.

¹⁵⁸ Rousseau, *Poland*, pp. 39-41

¹⁵⁹ Mitchell, *Not By Reason Alone*, pp. 100-1

might identify another alternative in the *Emile*. Taking into account his realism regarding how achievable any of these projects were in the present day, one can better understand the meaning of Rousseau's other works. Because parents transmit all their harmful traditions to children, in corrupt times we need a teaching like that of the *Emile* to spiritually arm one child against the deranged nature of society.¹⁶⁰ Despairing of reenchantment in the present day and in place of a republic all citizens love – a republic strong enough to resist the temptations of a commercial world – Rousseau suggests we might instead build a republic in the soul of a single child who can resist vice and find happiness in his own abode.¹⁶¹

Emile ostensibly provides a way we can teach a child how to cope with the insanity of the modern world by drawing up our existence into itself, restraining our desires to match the limits our intuitions and sentiments about nature suggest.¹⁶² Much of the teaching in *Emile* directly contradicts that of his political works. Instead of perfectly disciplined, denatured men, Rousseau argues that independent, wild children will become the most decent, strongest types if they have to face the world alone.¹⁶³ If no compassion or genuine love exists in the social realm, you must teach children to generalize their sentimental experience of life outward to the rest of humanity.¹⁶⁴ In short, *Emile* develops a strong, independent will which itself represents an analogue to the General Will of decent political life. Here, perhaps one might observe a foreshadowing of Nietzsche.

¹⁶⁰ Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, pp. 145-6

¹⁶¹ Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 480

¹⁶² Rousseau, *Emile*, pp. 40-1, 83; Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, pp. 2-5

¹⁶³ Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 119

¹⁶⁴ Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 253

Born into a recalcitrant world that cannot render *men* authentic, he creates an ideal that might unshackle an individual from noxious social bonds in modernity. Nietzsche looks upon this move as nothing more than a sickly half-measure tied to Christian ethics, but as we will see, Rousseau merely opens the door for what comes later.

In both teachings, Rousseau continually emphasizes the way external discipline needs to become less important for the pupil or citizen. In its place, self-discipline and mastery of the inner life forms the crucial center of their sentimental existence.¹⁶⁵ Rousseau thinks this might be accomplished through a rather unlikely end: Because neither the good polis nor the enlightened tutor allows transgression to slip past its watchful censorship, this freedom inexplicably becomes solely interior.¹⁶⁶ Rousseau continually observes that vicious social forces always break down the barriers that either the state or the teacher attempts to erect between the citizen or child and the outside world. Creating and maintaining that safe space requires perpetual, quixotic vigilance. Even if their efforts were to succeed, it remains unclear that the sort of sentimental simplicity either of these two teachings would require remains available for human beings as they actually – or even possibly – live.¹⁶⁷

Hence, at the end of Rousseau's life he produces perhaps the symbol of his nostalgic teaching's ultimate failure in the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. In this work, Rousseau painfully resigns himself to the fact that all things on earth stand in flux, and accepts that a state of living in the moment and striving after simple peace and quiet may

¹⁶⁵ Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, pp. 16, 34

¹⁶⁶ Ellison, "Rousseau and the Modern City," p. 526; Mitchell, *Not By Reason Alone*, p. 107

¹⁶⁷ Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, pp. 23, 159

be our only source of contentment.¹⁶⁸ If anything, this ideal *negates* politics:

I no longer have neighbors, fellow creatures, or brothers in this world.... So let me remove from my mind all the troublesome objects I would bother myself with as painfully as I would uselessly. Alone for the rest of my life—since I find consolation, hope, and peace only in myself—I no longer ought nor want to concern myself with anything but me.¹⁶⁹

Here we see Rousseau's final refusal of history. By returning as much as possible to the simplicity of natural man, he rejects the painful memories of the past and the burden society and its inheritances place on him.¹⁷⁰ Ultimately Rousseau seeks relief through oblivion, a retreat from memories that he could not bear.

Rousseau's political teachings provide us the ground for a radical critique of modernity. Grounded in nostalgia and sentimental introspection, his vision seeks to capture the best in previous forms of life and restore what man has lost since the breach of nature. It does not suggest the capacity or will to create anew.¹⁷¹ He hoped that society might someday find renewal despite the burden of its contemporary vices, and though it may be nostalgic, his brooding insights resonate with us still. The fact his notions of reenchantment carry such appeal in modernity should haunt us precisely because the desire to efface history's burden remains. In the next chapter I discuss one of his staunchest opponents in Edmund Burke, whose defense of memory and the decency of ordinary life creates an important contrast to Rousseau's destructive nostalgic dream.

¹⁶⁸ Masters, *Political Philosophy*, p. 254; Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, p. 63

¹⁶⁹ Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, trans. Charles E. Butterworth (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1992), p. 5

¹⁷⁰ Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, pp. 140-1

¹⁷¹ Strong, *The Politics of the Ordinary*, p. 149

Chapter 3

Breaking Truth and Nature: Burke on Memory and Decline in Revolutionary Times

To complain of the age we live in, to murmur at the present possessors of power, to lament the past, to conceive extravagant hopes of the future, are the common dispositions of the greatest part of mankind; indeed the necessary effects of ignorance and levity of the vulgar. Such complaints and humours have existed in all times; yet as all times have *not* been alike, true political sagacity manifests itself, in distinguishing that complaint which only characterizes the general infirmity of human nature, from those which are symptoms of the particular distemperature of our own air and season.

—Edmund Burke¹

I. The Danger of Radicalism

In the previous chapter, I argued that Rousseau advanced the ideals of pagan thought as a means of restoring the sentimental simplicity lost in our fall from the state of nature. By contrast, Edmund Burke concerns himself with deeply practical matters that bear philosophical importance – ideas that continue to command a wide audience.² Burke still tends to provoke strong feelings in his readers. I suspect this stems at least in part because of the uncompromising way his work attacks political radicalism of any sort, as well as the peculiar way modern American conservatives appropriated Burke beginning

¹ Edmund Burke, *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* in *Select Works of Edmund Burke*, ed. Francis Canavan (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), I: 71

² Some of the more novel recent efforts attempting to understand Burke's place in modern thought include James Conniff, *The Useful Cobbler: Edmund Burke and the Politics of Progress* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), Stephen K. White, *Edmund Burke: Modernity, Politics, and Aesthetics* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1994), Seamus Deane, *Foreign Affections: Essays on Edmund Burke* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), Christopher Reid, *Edmund Burke and the Practice of Political Writing* (New York: St. Martin's, 1985), Paul Hindson and Tim Gray, *Burke's Dramatic Theory of Politics* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1988), and Stephen H. Browne, *Edmund Burke and the Discourse of Virtue* (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1993).

in the 1950's to construct their own intellectual movement.³

In this chapter, I focus on Burke's defense of historical memory amidst the transition to modernity. As a matter of course, most students of Burke mention something about how he thought various social and intellectual forces threatened the political order. Despite the many studies on Burke that touch on this in some way, the issue bears reexamination because Burke enjoys such a consistent place as the inspiration or backdrop for so many modern conservatives and communitarians who see modernity as a period of unremitting decline. Their fundamental misunderstanding rests in their approaching Burke as a source of inspiration for a traditional revival. This chapter helps explain how a memory-accepting disposition constrains political action, while at the same time it examines Burke's assault on what I have previously termed the "unconstrained vision" to illuminate the dangers such an assault poses. As I will show, Burke's sense of historical memory demands accepting the intractability of modernity and hopes to mobilize our past to maintain a sense of identity in the present.⁴

I argue that Burke's notion of decline stems from his understanding of how modern thinking and politics steadily erode man's cultural and intellectual inheritance. While the politically democratizing aspects of modernity abet the unraveling of the

³ In a 1967 article, Jeffrey Hart suggests this, and at least on that point there seems to be little change since. See his "Burke and Radical Freedom," *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Apr. 1967), p. 221. For a more recent argument along these lines, see Christopher Hitchens' review of a new edition of Burke's *Reflections*: "Reactionary Prophet," *The Atlantic Monthly* (Apr. 2004), pp. 130-8. The touchstone of American conservative uses and abuses of Burke can be found in Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind From Burke to Eliot* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2001).

⁴ On the relationship between various political movements and sorts of declinism, see Arthur Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History* (New York: Free Press, 1997), especially chapters 1 and 4. See also Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: WW Norton & Co, 1991), chapters 1-3.

traditional social order, he argues that a far greater danger consists in the intellectual attitudes fostered by radicalism and the political abuses of empire.⁵ These forces undermine the crucial framework through which society transmits its collective inheritance through the ages, upending the received social order, breaking down authority, and unbinding the will from its necessary and healthy boundaries. In this sense, an appreciation of man's finitude and incapacity in the face of history animates Burke's reaction to events in his day; unlike Rousseau, Burke saw no potential for healing man's brokenness through political action. Through a discussion of these issues in Burke's writings, I hope to show how near the end of his life, Burke himself began to doubt that the fragile inheritance of social memory and the wisdom he thought implicit in it would survive. However, I begin with an account of Burke's idea of human nature and its relation to history and memory.

II. History, Memory, and Nature

Above all, Burke's thought aims at exploring notions of history and nature. He works to understand the preconditions of effective judgment and action in the world. With Burke, knowing right from wrong in the abstract never suffices; we need ideas that orient us toward action.⁶ Even in his one work of systematic philosophy, Burke never quite provides a complete statement about the relationship between the various claims he makes on the subject, opting instead for a looser discussion of "the natural economy of

⁵ For a different argument regarding the role of democracy as Burke's principal enemy, see Daniel O'Neill, "Burke on Democracy as the Death of Western Civilization," *Polity*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Jan. 2004). Alternatively, Stephen White argues that it is the explosion of will in modernity Burke sought to attack, see *Edmund Burke: Modernity, Politics, and Aesthetics*, pp. 4-5. While I differ significantly with both, their arguments shape this effort in a variety of ways.

⁶ Conniff, *The Useful Cobbler*, p. 10

the passions.”⁷ He admits that his “natural style of writing is somewhat careless,” and a cursory glance at Burke’s rhetoric tells us he had little interest in the philosopher’s clear and distinct ideas. Moreover, he saw real danger in placing too much faith in abstraction.⁸ To some degree, his intellectual style follows from his presuppositions about man’s ability to represent the world through thought and language.

Throughout his writings, Burke emphasizes the limits to human knowledge. While he believes strongly in man’s fallibility and original sin, he observes that our inherent moral capacities exist in a sort of middle ground:

we must soften into a credulity below the milkiness of infancy, to think all men virtuous.

We must be tainted by a malignity truly diabolical, to believe all the world equally wicked and corrupt. Men are in public life as in private, some good, some evil.⁹

Here Burke denies Rousseau’s assertions regarding the natural malleability and goodness of humanity; without saying so directly, he embraces a strikingly biblical anthropology. Those who attempt to conceptualize the cosmos in easy or precise terms embark on a fool’s errand.

While we can gain an understanding of certain natural phenomena, much of the complexity of human affairs simply stands beyond our full comprehension. In studying individual men’s passions, Burke admits that the

⁷ White, *Edmund Burke*, p. 25

⁸ Burke, *Further Reflections on the French Revolution*, ed. Daniel E. Ritchie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1992), p. 22; and Francis Canavan, *The Political Reason of Edmund Burke* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1960), p. 80

⁹ Burke, *Present Discontents, Select Works I*: 100. On the ideas of fallibility and original sin, see also Joseph Pappin, *The Metaphysics of Edmund Burke* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1993), p. 119; Peter Stanlis, *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1958), pp. 182-4; and especially William C. Dowling, “Burke and the Age of Chivalry,” *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 12 (1982), pp. 119-20.

characters of nature are legible it is true; but they are not plain enough to enable those who run, to read them. We must make use of a cautious... a timorous method of proceeding.... since the condition of our nature binds us to a strict law and very narrow limits.¹⁰

Similarly with political affairs, we must recognize that most events do not admit of easy explanation, for it

is often impossible...to find any proportion between the apparent force of any moral causes we assign, and their known operation. We are therefore obliged to deliver up that operation to mere chance; or, more piously (perhaps more rationally), to the occasional interposition and the irresistible hand of the Great Disposer.¹¹

But in recognizing the limitations of our minds, Burke does not make the additional Humean leap into pure empiricism. Even if we may not unravel the “great chain of causes, leading back to God,” and fall out of our depth whenever “we go but one step beyond the immediately sensible qualities of things,” our historical memory saves us from pure doubt. Certainty never quite avails; reason leads into accepting Providence.¹²

While nature’s light “rarely shines with clarity,” Burke claims we nevertheless retain some meaningful path to an understanding of our place in the universe through the

¹⁰ Burke, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke* (hereafter *Writings and Speeches*), ed. Paul Langford (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), I: 190

¹¹ Burke, *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, in *Select Works*, III: 63. On Burke’s idea of Providence, see John C. Weston, “Edmund Burke’s View of History,” *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Apr. 1961), pp. 208-9 and Canavan, *Edmund Burke: Prescription and Providence* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 1987), p. 155.

¹² Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, I: 283. Conniff argues that Burke’s ideas are essentially Humean, but this seems to miss the way Burke hedges his argument; Canavan, Strauss, Stanlis, and Pappin tack a bit too far in the opposite direction, overextending Burke’s vision of human rationality to fit a Thomist cast. See Conniff, *The Useful Cobbler*, pp. 21-5; Canavan, *Political Reason*, pp. 40-5; Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950), pp. 311-3; Stanlis, *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law*, pp. 14-15, 44; and Pappin, *The Metaphysics of Edmund Burke*, p. 103.

inherited social memory that binds us together in time.¹³ He observes certain fixed principles that inhere in human reasoning and in our aesthetic taste that we might imagine exist even in the most stripped-down understanding of human life, for “if there were not some principles of judgment as well as of sentiment common to all mankind, no hold could possibly be taken either on their reason or their passions, sufficient to maintain the ordinary correspondence of life.”¹⁴ Where the individual mental weakness of our bare nature would seem to leave us unable to engage in any sort of meaningful reasoning or judgment, Burke suggests that human beings recur to a different sort of understanding that we generate whenever we gather in common.

This means that for Burke, the very idea of some abstract situation where individuals break themselves off from society can never be more than fantasy. He contends that the very pain we suffer from isolation proves our natural sociability.¹⁵ We find nature wherever men gather:

The state of civil society... is a state of nature; and much more truly so than a savage and incoherent mode of life. For man is by nature reasonable; and he is never perfectly in his rational state, but when he is placed where his reason may be best cultivated, and most predominates. *Art is man's nature*. We are as much, at least, in a state of nature in formed manhood, as in immature and helpless infancy.¹⁶

Man may grow into reasonableness, but his intellect requires the aid of a social medium – what elsewhere I termed memory – that simplifies and categorizes experience.¹⁷ This

¹³ White, *Edmund Burke*, p. 27

¹⁴ Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, I: 196

¹⁵ Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, I: 220

¹⁶ Burke, *Further Reflections*, pp. 168-9, emphasis mine.

¹⁷ Pappin, *Metaphysics of Edmund Burke*, p. 114

allows us to recognize certain forms of stability that inhere in our second, social nature. Because he claims Rousseau's fictive state of nature consisting of man in isolation never existed, Burke eschews the rest of Rousseau's nostalgic historical narrative entirely. Instead he turns to man's historical inheritance in its various written, oral, and practiced forms.

If individuals can and must turn to society as a necessary cognitive support, the habits and traditional understandings society holds dear conditions its ability to evaluate events and objects in the world. Memory plays a crucial role in conditioning social forms. These habits modify our tastes, but they do not do so arbitrarily:

It is confessed, that custom, and some other causes, have made many deviations from the natural pleasures or pains which belong to these several Tastes; but then the power of distinguishing between the natural and acquired relish remains to the very last. A man frequently comes to prefer the Taste of tobacco to that of sugar, and the flavour of vinegar to that of milk; but this makes no confusion in Tastes, whilst he is sensible that the tobacco and vinegar are not sweet, and whilst he knows that habit alone has reconciled his palate to these alien pleasures.¹⁸

Yet while Burke recognizes that on this understanding aesthetics and morals bleed into one another, he argues that making too clear an analogy or an overly strong link between these two spheres of life “has a strong tendency to confound our ideas of things; and it has given rise to an infinite deal of whimsical theory.”¹⁹ While this move betrays a sort of philosophical incoherence, Burke argues it retains a practical wisdom. In his understanding, an excess of logical consistency and intellectual coherence poses dangers

¹⁸ Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, I: 199

¹⁹ Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, I: 272

of its own.

Decent judgment in both morals and aesthetics requires the harmonious action of our reason and sentiment, a delicate balance occurring only in society, which in turn conditions man's thought and feeling.²⁰ Because no human judgment rests in an uncomplicated space of pure reason or emotion, Burke argues that one "cannot stand forward and give praise or blame to anything which relates to human actions... on a simple view of the object, as it stands stripped of every relation, in all the nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstraction."²¹ Passions affect people equally in their immediate properties and effects, but like any information or sensation, our habits and customs condition us to interpret stimuli in a number of ways.

For instance, society may and often does develop a complex and rigorous set of abstract beliefs about aesthetic taste; though founded in imagination, these rules can be quite coherent.²² Moral relations carry a different weight, for

nothing universal can be rationally affirmed on any moral, or any political subject. Pure metaphysical abstraction does not belong to these matters. The lines of morality are not like the ideal lines of mathematics. They are broad and deep as well as long. They admit of exceptions; they demand modifications.... not made by the process of logic, but by the rules of prudence.... Metaphysics cannot live without definition; but prudence is cautious how she defines.²³

Though society conditions moral thinking, the fact that we must always make prudential

²⁰ On the relation of thought and feeling in judgment, see Canavan, *Political Reason*, pp. 59-61 and Conniff, *The Useful Cobbler*, pp. 25-31.

²¹ Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* ed. J.G.A. Pocock (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), p. 7

²² Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, I: 205

²³ Burke, *Further Reflections*, p. 91

exceptions to our general rules does not imply any sort of true relativism. Burke posits an indirect but very real link between society's conventions and the moral rules ordained by Providence. Any natural rights a people might hold dear only gain their concrete specification through social mores, laws, and institutions that force their protection.

Our understanding and experience of the world always remains skewed and incomplete. Burke never denied the *existence* of the natural law. His principal difficulty with the concept seems to rest with the problems he found in applying it to all but the most obvious moral wrongs.²⁴ In speaking of a natural moral order, Burke observed that these

metaphysic rights entering into common life, like rays of light which pierce into a dense medium, are by the laws of nature refracted from their straight line. Indeed... it becomes absurd to talk of them as if they continued in the simplicity of their original direction. The nature of man is intricate; the objects of society are of the greatest possible complexity; and, therefore, no simple disposition or direction of power can be suitable either to man's nature or to the quality of his affairs.... The rights of men are in a sort of *middle*, incapable of definition, but not impossible to be discerned.²⁵

Because of the weakness of private reason, we cannot precisely identify our truly natural rights, and when we do, we face the temptation to turn our abstract notions into reality, effacing the very real exceptions human life creates. Society's historical judgment of

²⁴ Burke's status as an orthodox representative of the natural law tradition is one of the central premises of Strauss, Canavan, Stanlis, and Pappin's work, among others, who claim that the natural law in his teaching is only apprehensible through concrete social institutions. The instability of such a standard and the fallibility of human reasoning in Burke's thought calls this into question. For some responses along these lines, see Conniff, *The Useful Cobbler*, pp. 13, 38-46; James F. Davidson, "Natural Law and International Law in Edmund Burke," *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (July 1959), pp. 485-6; and Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), pp. 216-9, 227-32.

²⁵ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 54

these matters becomes a substitute for individual ignorance and incapacity. As a result, rights emerge as the beneficent byproducts of lasting social prejudices, providing a sort of stability to moral judgment that neither aesthetics nor abstract philosophy can claim.

These prejudices bear society's collective wisdom regarding moral and political affairs, constituting a ready guide to understanding a complicated world and man's place in it. Burke argues that the path of prejudice, "engages the mind in a steady course of wisdom and virtue and does not leave the man hesitating in a moment of decision skeptical, puzzled, and unresolved."²⁶ By following a policy of living within these bounds, a society gains the "happy effect of following nature, which is wisdom without reflection, and above it."²⁷ A wise people use this collective memory as compensation for the basic infirmity of human nature. Those societies which make this choice retain an understanding that dictates good taste and decent moral judgment.²⁸

Yet any such understanding takes time to develop, and not just any sort of institution can perform this function. Burke observes that "by the essential fundamental constitution of things," we always find "a radical infirmity in all human contrivances," especially in those that men create intentionally.²⁹ This means that only with the passage of time can societies correct the initial errors of their institutions:

The means taught by experience may be better suited to political ends than those contrived in the original project. They again react upon the primitive constitution, and sometimes improve the design itself.... At worst, the errors and deviations of every kind

²⁶ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 76

²⁷ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 29

²⁸ Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, I: 207

²⁹ Burke, *Further Reflections*, p. 15

in reckoning are found and computed, and the ship proceeds in her course.³⁰

Human beings always judge matters based on limited knowledge and constrained moral capacities; inherited memory provides a workable means of coping with these limitations.

For Burke, chivalry presents one example of a wise cultural institution that transmits vital ideas. Like any other good intellectual institution, chivalry creates a set of attitudes that people can bring to bear at any place and in any time, providing a moral and aesthetic standard precisely where the infirmities of bare nature leave us wanting.³¹ In contrast to the easy conflation of morals and abstract philosophy, Burke observes that the British and others living within the confines of nature

know that *we* have made no discoveries, and we think that no discoveries are to be made in morality, nor many in the great principles of government, nor in the ideas of liberty, which were understood long before we were born, altogether as well as they will be after the grace has heaped its mold upon our presumption and the silent tomb shall have imposed its law on our pert loquacity.³²

Security lay in making judgments based on our previous experience and the intuitions that flow from it: “There is no safety for honest men, but by believing all possible evil of evil men, and acting with promptitude, decision, and steadiness on that belief,”³³ and such an understanding provides the confidence necessary for peoples to continue even in uncertain times without failing to make either prudent moral decisions or correct intellectual judgments regarding their situations.

Burke identifies a difficulty underlying this turn to civil society in the fact that

³⁰ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 151

³¹ On this, see Dowling, “Burke and the Age of Chivalry,” p. 114

³² Burke, *Reflections*, p. 75

³³ Burke, *Further Reflections*, p. 33

actual living people must interpret the ideals that society passes on through its institutions. Citizens and subjects constantly debate which ideals hold real importance for society and which should be protected or let fall. Therefore, prudence, folk psychology, and common sense bear real political importance for society. None of these solves the dilemma because the human condition remains broken; there exists no true escape from this reality. In legal matters, Burke observes that people in all times find it “hard to distinguish with the last degree of accuracy, what laws are fundamental, and what not” to the constitution.³⁴ In theological matters, we find a similar problem in that before one teaches Scripture, one must come to terms with the fact while the Bible “to be sure, contains the words of eternal life, and certainly furnish every thing necessary for salvation,” we must also recognize “the bible is one of the most miscellaneous books in the world, and exhibits by no means a regular series of dogmas, or a summary of religion proper.” Burke implores us not to forget that the “schemes of God are inscrutable; his ways are not our ways, nor his thoughts our thoughts,” yet also observes that despite these problems, we “are not, however, on this account to discard reason altogether, and to forget the use of that guide which God has given us for our direction.”³⁵ These examples show that for Burke, navigating the moral universe requires a reference to venerable social institutions as well as a good deal of wisdom, patience, and humility.

Burke argues that man inhabits a moral universe where all people – and particularly those in power – must answer for their actions.³⁶ Men *should* follow the

³⁴ Burke, *Miscellaneous Writings*, ed. Francis Canavan (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), p. 215

³⁵ Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, II: 362. See also Conniff, *The Useful Cobbler*, pp. 42-6.

³⁶ For a sense of the moral responsibilities that inhere in power, see Burke’s “Speech to the Electors of

dictates of nature and law *ought* to govern as Heaven intends, but Burke recognizes that notwithstanding God's commandments, men often find themselves in a struggling to interpret and come to an accord on what exactly the law requires. Nature's law may be immutable, but in Burke's thought it becomes politically problematic because of the way nature stands hopelessly entangled with social convention. God's absence from the world and our inability to see more than reflections and shadows of the divine will enjoins humility in the face of our world's limited political goods. As a fallen creature, man's moral and intellectual limitations prevent him from seeing nature directly.³⁷ However, our historical memory allows us an approximation of the truth. We never acquire more than indirect wisdom – certainly never enough to heal the world in the way that Rousseau desired.

The shades of gray found in most ordinary moral dilemmas multiply considerably when one turns to social and political questions. All the difficulties human nature presents for knowing and acting demand a prudent flexibility in light of our best moral judgment. In many cases, Burke argues “inconstancy is a sort of natural corrective of folly and ignorance” on the part of the powerful.³⁸ Any decision one undertakes outside of some formal matter of law or philosophy usually tends toward expression in terms of “the more or less, the earlier or the later, and on a balance of advantage and

Bristol” in *Miscellaneous Writings*, pp. 5-13. Also see chapter 6 on “The Politics of Trusteeship,” in Conniff, *The Useful Cobbler*, pp. 137-60.

³⁷ Even Stanlis and Canavan seem to recognize this problem in their discussions of Burke and the natural law, but fail to take that thought seriously enough: If my interpretation bears out, Burke calls into question the entire project of using the Thomistic notion of natural law as a unified ordering principle in society, and instead argued for a far more liberal, pluralistic order. See for example, Stanlis, *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law*, pp. 40-66 and Canavan, *Edmund Burke*, pp. 151-60.

³⁸ Burke, *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents*, *Select Works*, I: 74

inconvenience, of good and evil.”³⁹ Given such a state of affairs, Burke argues that it

is no inconsiderable part of wisdom, to know how much of an evil ought to be tolerated; lest, by attempting a degree of purity impracticable in degenerate times and manners, instead of cutting off the subsisting ill practices, new corruptions might be produced for the concealment and security of the old.⁴⁰

Even if we derive our moral ideas from some proper understanding of nature, the difficulties everyday life presents us tend to complicate how we apply such precepts to actual situations. We cannot know with certainty that we will choose well.

Yet while one might claim that this uncertainty means we should completely surrender our freedom to act outside of cultural norms, Burke instead argues that living a full life requires ordered liberty. We should make laws “in which the liberty of no one man, and no body of men, and no number of men, can find means to trespass on the liberty of any person,” so that the individual will always respect those near him.⁴¹ Without a stable method of securing this liberty in a constitution that maintains itself over time, the culture, the ideas, and consequently, politics within a society might become deranged and subject to the false hope of nostalgic reenchantment. For Burke, historical memory formed the principal means through which any people could continue to transmit its ancient constitution as an intergenerational inheritance. This process forms the subject of my next section.

III. The Phenomenology of Inheritance

Just after his discussion of Richard Price’s sermon about revolutionary rights in

³⁹ Burke, *Miscellaneous Writings*, p. 202

⁴⁰ Burke, *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents*, *Select Works*, I: 141

⁴¹ Burke, *Further Reflections*, pp. 7-8

the *Reflections*, Burke remarks that with the British people

from Magna Charta to the Declaration of Right it has been the uniform policy of our constitution to claim and assert our liberties as an entailed inheritance derived to us from our forefathers, and to be transmitted to our posterity—as an estate specifically belonging to the people of this kingdom, without any reference whatever to any other more general or prior right. By this means our constitution preserves a unity in so great a diversity of its parts. We have an inheritable crown, an inheritable peerage, and a House of Commons and a people inheriting privileges, franchises, and liberties from a long line of ancestors.⁴²

The idea of an ancient constitution held real meaning for the educated populace of Burke's time, but the deeper idea he presents in this passage regarding the ubiquity of inheritance and its importance for the maintenance of a decent life deserves an extended comment.⁴³

In many respects, Burke's notion of inheritance undergirds his entire conception of decline. It also underscores his commitment to embracing the constraints our history places upon us. As noted above, a rightly-ordered civil society works to redress man's intellectual deficiencies and provides him with a stable way of navigating the world without authoritatively dictating his ends. A society passes on its cultural and historical memory by establishing a system of inheritance that operates at every level (legal, moral, cultural, institutional), and I argue Burke understood that all successful peoples renew their sense of self through what I term the "phenomenology of inheritance." This sense of

⁴² Burke, *Reflections*, p. 29

⁴³ On this idea, see J.G.A. Pocock, "Burke and the Ancient Constitution: A Problem in the History of Ideas," in *Politics, Language, & Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), especially pp. 205-10. Here, I am explicitly arguing against Bruce James Smith's claim that Burke's theory is one of historical oblivion, or that he attempted to erase the past. See chapter 3 of his *Politics and Remembrance: Republican Themes in Machiavelli, Burke, and Tocqueville* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), esp. pp. 111-22.

cultural inheritance begins most literally and concretely with the physical, landed property families pass on through the generations, for it is this “power of perpetuating our property in our families” that is “one of the most valuable and interesting circumstances belonging to it, and that which tends the most to the perpetuation of society itself.”⁴⁴ Any society that wishes to endure must view the security of property as – after the protection of life itself – the most important function of state. As I later discuss in chapter four on Tocqueville, primogeniture plays a crucial role in this process because without it, passing on any society’s cultural inheritance grows much more complicated; the turn to a more egalitarian concept of property places an increasing burden not merely on social memory but also its capacities for faith to provide meaning for society at large.

These literally physical inheritances matter because we develop our ties to concrete people and places through them; we learn how to establish moral affections and bonds through these relations that we then generalize outward through the whole of our society. In this reasoning, Burke partially follows Adam Smith, who argues that our ability to empathize with other people depends in large part on our awareness of their situation because “our sympathy with the grief or joy or another, before we are informed of the cause of either, is always extremely imperfect.”⁴⁵ The difference between the two lay in that while Smith describes the functions of sympathetic fellow-feeling, Burke

⁴⁴ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 45

⁴⁵ Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, eds. D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1984), p. 10 (I.i.1.9). See also Burke’s letter to Smith congratulating him on the *Theory*: “I am not only pleased with the ingenuity of your Theory; I am convinced of its solidity and Truth.... A theory like yours founded on the Nature of man, which is always the same, will last, when those that are founded on his opinions, which are always changing, will and must be forgotten.” 10 September 1759, in *Selected Letters of Edmund Burke* ed. Harvey Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 92-3.

explicitly ties the development of these sentiments to his teaching on inheritance.

We come into a world of relationships that Providence ordains and inherit a set of concrete obligations from that simple fact. These duties inhere

not in consequence of any special voluntary pact. They arise from the relation of man to man, and the relation of man to God, which relations are not matters of choice. On the contrary, the force of all the pacts which we enter into with any particular person... depends on those prior obligations.

Family stands as the natural home of all inheritance, and it obliges us to undertake certain acts:

When we marry, the choice is voluntary, but the duties are not matter of choice.... Parents may not be consenting to their moral relation; but consenting or not, they are bound to a long train of burthensome duties towards those with whom they have never made a convention of any sort.⁴⁶

For Burke, the foundation of our entire moral order rests not on consent but on Providence: “there we are; there we are placed by the Sovereign Disposer: and we must do the best we can in our situation. The situation of man is the preceptor of his duty.”⁴⁷ Our only choice in the matter may be one of willful rejection, which as we will see becomes the basis for the unmaking of inheritance and the attempt to negate man’s historical nature.⁴⁸

Our inherited web of moral relations binds us to one another in a way that choice cannot. On Burke’s understanding *neither* choice nor law effectively links peoples

⁴⁶ Burke, *Further Reflections*, pp. 160-1

⁴⁷ Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, V: 404

⁴⁸ On this, Canavan notes that “In Burke’s moral universe... obligation is antecedent to consent and compels consent. We *must* consent, rationally and freely, to the morally obligatory relationships that are knit into ‘the predisposed order of things.’” See *Edmund Burke*, p. 119.

together. Rather, sympathy and long history – beginning with concrete relationships between individuals and then generalized outward – bind men together:

Men are not tied to one another by papers and seals. They are led to associate by resemblances, by conformities, by sympathies. It is with nations as with individuals. Nothing is so strong a tie of amity between nation and nation as correspondence in laws, customs, manners, and habits of life. They have more than the force of treaties in themselves. They are obligations written in the heart.⁴⁹

Conversely, Burke observes that while “[d]istance of place does not extinguish the duties or the rights of men,” it tends strongly to erode both the natural sympathies we feel toward one another, and diminishes our ability to act rightly. In the same vein, difference also renders the plight of others less vivid. For Burke, unless concrete inherited relations exist between people, only moral shock, the rendering of the other’s plight, or some shared experience or institution consistently allows us to extend sympathetic recognition to those outside our community or family.⁵⁰ Obviously, as I note elsewhere, this understanding encounters severe problems in commercial society and places severe burdens on individuals to find a way to root themselves in time.

The physical inheritance of property and obligation that binds people together in society resonates throughout the political order. It undergirds Burke’s understanding of society as a moral essence where there “ought to be a system of manners... which a well-

⁴⁹ Burke, *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, in *Select Works*, III: 132

⁵⁰ Burke, *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, in *Select Works*, III: 135; see also *Writings and Speeches*, V: 404-5. On this same point, Smith also observes that we are all too prone to value ourselves and those close to us than the distant and unfamiliar—the prospect of losing a finger would keep us awake while the death of a hundred million Chinese would occasion some humanitarian musing and sleep with “the most profound security.” See *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, pp. 135-7 (III.3.3-5).

informed mind would be disposed to relish.”⁵¹ Here, inheritance culturally disposes people to accept the system of morals, attitudes, and tastes that orients them to feel a deep loyalty to their society. This culminates in a vision of society underwritten by inheritance that sees itself as an imitative, but also linear, temporal order passed down from generation to generation. Burke expresses this idea in two crucial passages.

In the first, Burke affirms that “society is indeed a contract,” yet not one that may be dissolved at leisure. We should look on this order with no small reverence, for it “is a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue and in all perfection”; since such a partnership cannot fulfill its ends in any man’s lifetime, “it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.”⁵² Yet elsewhere, he expresses this sentiment even more forcefully. Observing the involuntary nature of our inherited duties, he remarks that “though civil society might be at first a voluntary act (which in many cases it undoubtedly was) its continuance is under a permanent standing covenant,” one that “attaches upon every individual of that society, without any formal act of his own.”⁵³ The rapid motion and restless individualism of modern life cuts against all Burke’s conception of civil society.

Civil society stands as “a tissue of conventions,” one that our ancestors pass down to us with preordained – indeed, often long-forgotten purposes – largely outside of any

⁵¹ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 68. On this phenomenon of national sympathy, see Conniff, *The Useful Cobbler*, p. 67.

⁵² Burke, *Reflections*, pp. 84-5

⁵³ Burke, *Further Reflections*, p. 159

one person's intentions or control.⁵⁴ Civil life forms a moral order that contains all the ends of individuals living within it, one that works toward the larger goal of human betterment—such as men can achieve in this life. As the product of a great chain of innumerable human activities, we cannot think of civil society as a unified organic growth, for that understanding comports not with Burke's sense of memory but with the pagan world.⁵⁵ The crucial fact about this pattern is that it stabilizes men's lives, making them merely "life-renters" in an eternal but ever-changing order.⁵⁶ It reminds men of *specific* forebears, tying them to the memory of *actual* men rather than Rousseau's mythic founders and their ideally-constituted "Spartan" societies. The physical and cultural reminders of inheritance work throughout men's lives, attaching them to specific places and actual people:

A man's sense of his place in a succession of generations gives him an awareness of being located in a coherent chronology which is not just a sequence of mechanical clock-minutes or calendar days. The past is not anonymous, and so neither will the future be.⁵⁷

In addition to providing cultural stability, moral instruction, and an idea of vocation to those who live within its structures, Burke's idea of inheritance also contains a symbolic component as well.

If the physical inheritance we acquire from our parents and the social inheritance of duties that attach to us from birth lead us to accept a set of cultural and intellectual

⁵⁴ Canavan, *Edmund Burke*, p. 64

⁵⁵ Burke, *Further Reflections*, p. 169. See also Conniff, *The Useful Cobbler*, pp. 69-70 and Canavan, *Political Reason*, p. 88-90

⁵⁶ Burke, *Reflections*, pp. 82-3. See also Frans DeBruyn, *The Literary Genres of Edmund Burke: The Political Uses of Literary Form* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 60.

⁵⁷ Hart, "Burke and Radical Freedom," p. 231-2

dispositions, for Burke these forces can work together to remind us of our prescribed place in the natural order. Our multiple inheritances confirm our finitude and humble status before greatness and eternity. The Church establishment, the maintenance of nobility and monarchy, and all the visual grandeur attached to these institutions stand as symbolic reminders of order. This means that state support of the Church and nobility works as a useful and good employment of public wealth: “It is the public ornament. It is the public consolation. It nourishes the public hope.”⁵⁸ In general, public grandeur works to simultaneously elevate our minds and remind us of our relative weakness before power.⁵⁹ More importantly, the chivalric, refined manners that the aristocratic order suggests, and theologically, the physical reminders of our submission to the divine order finds in the sacraments lead us back in to recognizing our finitude.⁶⁰ Both Christian and aristocratic beliefs require a “visible form of introduction” that links us to the whole of society.⁶¹ When society respects such institutions,

referring all to the point of reference to which all should be directed, they think themselves bound, not only as individuals in the sanctuary of the heart or as congregated in that personal capacity, to renew the memory of their high origin and cast, but also in their corporate character to perform their national homage to the institutor and author and

⁵⁸ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 86.

⁵⁹ O’Neill uses the notion of Church and aristocracy in conjunction with Burke’s ideal of the sublime and the beautiful to create a stark picture of nobility’s ornament smoothing over the sting of subordination, while the sublimity of religion and political power works to keep us humbly in our places. Dowling evokes a somewhat softer vision of this, but both rightly observe the central role voluntary submission to authority plays in this order. See O’Neill, “Burke on Democracy,” esp. pp. 208-9 and Dowling, “Burke and the Age of Chivalry,” esp. p. 115. More generally, see chapter 2 of White, *Edmund Burke*, pp. 22-36.

⁶⁰ On what Burke calls “the spirit of a gentleman and the spirit of religion,” see *Reflections*, pp. 68-9. On the need for true religious belief and its place, see Canavan, *Edmund Burke*, pp. 67-9.

⁶¹ Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, II: 363

protector of civil society.⁶²

Thus we can only appreciate our inheritance in light of our place in the created order. The inheritances of memory and the assurances of faith save us from a sense of historic oblivion. As we will see with Tocqueville, when Burke's aristocratic sense of social memory fades, people living in democratic times imagine it possible to remake the world based on a vision of nostalgic restoration.

Any society that respects its inheritance will act in reference to its deep historical memory and with an intention of benefiting posterity; it makes decisions in light of the "identity they have achieved through deep ancestral linkage with the generations and wisdom of the past."⁶³ Indeed, those who live in a society conditioned by this sort of memory accommodate "all their ideas and all their habits to it."⁶⁴ Because this tradition provides the stable moral center of their reality, it serves to condition their judgments. Indeed, even when for reasons of conscience some dissent from the prevailing opinions of the day (as Burke often did), they must still make reference to the common stock of inherited wisdom.⁶⁵ Because mores run deeper than laws, politicians merely work to preserve the existing order. While from time to time they may renew fading wisdom by reinterpreting and imaginatively recasting social memory, they cannot really hope to transform society without undoing the logic of inheritance.⁶⁶ The political practitioner in such a society – what Strauss calls the "acting man" – focuses for this reason on "what is

⁶² Burke, *Reflections*, p. 86

⁶³ Pappin, *The Metaphysics of Edmund Burke*, p. 148

⁶⁴ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 137

⁶⁵ Stanlis, *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law*, p. 161 and Canavan, *Political Reason*, pp. 61-3

⁶⁶ See Conniff, *The Useful Cobbler*, pp. 86-9 and Weston, "Edmund Burke's View of History," p. 217.

nearest and dearest to him, however deficient in excellence it may be,” a fact which necessarily narrows such men’s concerns. They must operate within their inheritance and, if they act rightly, remain its principal guardians.⁶⁷

Any society that maintains the generational links will live under the discipline of an historical standard and in reference to a particular social memory. Such a society preserves a political system “in a just correspondence and symmetry with the order of the world and with the mode of existence decreed to a permanent body composed of transitory parts,” where the society as a whole “is never old or middle-aged or young, but, in a condition of unchangeable constancy, moves on through the varied tenor of perpetual decay, fall, renovation and progression.” By alternating acts of commemorative preservation and novelty, such an order becomes neither “wholly new” nor “wholly obsolete.”⁶⁸ Throughout, social memory provides a standard useful for many situations and conditions.

Given this, men operating under the aegis of memory presume tradition’s rationality until events prove otherwise. They understand that it is only “with infinite caution that any man ought to venture upon pulling down an edifice which has answered in any tolerable degree for ages the common purposes of society,” or think to alter existing ones without the lessons of his culture’s history fully before him.⁶⁹ Institutions and liberties accrue over time, and inheritance makes “the state not only a family, but a trust; not so much a biological unity, or the image of one, as an undying *persona ficta*,

⁶⁷ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 309

⁶⁸ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 30

⁶⁹ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 53-4

which secures our liberties by vesting the possession of them in an immortal continuity.”⁷⁰ As one would expect, the institutions of inheritance extend to politics as well, where the notion of prescription stands at the center of Burke’s ideal.

Burke unambiguously links the voting rights granted by property-holding to the position of public trust in which suffrage places those citizens. Those who hold property share a stake in ensuring politicians act with prudence in shaping legislation.⁷¹ Yet while Burke seemingly endorses the tight link between power and property-holding, he nevertheless claims that there “is no qualification for government but virtue and wisdom, actual or presumptive.”⁷² Prescription and the right of inheritance place the most legitimate title to rule with the landed aristocracy, but at times it seems – to paraphrase Tocqueville – Burke appreciates aristocracy more for what it *represents* than for those who actually comprise it. He admits that at their worst, aristocrats bear many flaws, and that he is “no friend to aristocracy, in the sense at least in which that word is usually understood.”⁷³ Mere holders of title have a legitimate, but not necessarily just claim to authority, and such trustees must answer for any abuse of the public interest.⁷⁴ Burke’s dictum that to “make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely,” should remind us that even though they inherit their title, he believes aristocrats must nonetheless foster

⁷⁰ Pocock, “Burke and the Ancient Constitution,” p. 212

⁷¹ Burke, *Miscellaneous Writings*, pp. 246-7

⁷² Burke, *Reflections*, p. 44

⁷³ Burke, *Thoughts on the Present Discontents*, *Select Works*, I: 89

⁷⁴ Burke, *Miscellaneous Writings*, p. 11. See also Burke’s extended discussion of the qualities of natural aristocracy in his *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* in *Further Reflections*, pp. 168-9, and Conniff’s discussion of aristocracy’s relationship to other powers in *The Useful Cobbler*, pp. 94-100.

a kind of political friendship with those beneath them.⁷⁵

Inheritance stands at the center of many of Burke's arguments about the nature of a decent society; the fragility of human morality haunts him because not all inheritances bear civilization's goods. For example, just as it debases the overseer, slavery also cripples the man in bondage—each holds within himself an incurable evil that cannot be eliminated. Both will pass on a moral stain to those that follow them.⁷⁶ Our origins matter, no doubt. But whatever the character of our beginnings, Burke maintains – with Rousseau – that what we preserve and pass on to our progeny bears far more importance than the narrative of the ancient past. They differ on the question of how the distant past relates to the present. By Burke's understanding, a society's vices propagate themselves far more easily than its do virtues. While Burke knows that civil society rarely begins life without bloodshed, he nevertheless argues that once we fail to transmit the best of that inheritance through a stable political order, decline inevitably results.

IV. The Pathology of Decline

I think one might fairly characterize much of Burke's prolific career as a series of responses to what he perceived as escalating civilizational crises. He casts many of these issues in terms of a present decline in light of the ancient constitution and how the beneficent historical inheritance had begun to fail. He battled the spread of malignancies in the body politic precisely because he knew once present, they would grow increasingly difficult to eradicate. This perception appears most forcefully in Burke's analysis and

⁷⁵ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 68. Compare to Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VIII, esp. chs. 11-14.

⁷⁶ Burke, *Miscellaneous Writings*, pp. 255-9

reaction to the twin dangers of Indianism and Jacobinism. In each, he represents the development and spread of their effects as a thoroughgoing pathology requiring a serious response.⁷⁷ This section explores some of the specific ways Burke identifies these forces and it details the manner in which he ties decline to a series of revolutionary attitudes that erode a people's capacity to transmit a fixed inheritance.

For Burke, the idea of isolated individuals taking it upon themselves to understand the world through critical reason or willful sentiment alone, the notion of men divorcing themselves from their inherited culture, or that of a philosopher thinking it possible to unravel fully the deepest causes of human passions were all examples of an illusory, fantastic hubris.⁷⁸ In this both Burke and Rousseau stand in agreement. Yet Burke never gives in to Rousseau's nostalgic temptation to negate memory and quest after sentimental political unity. While men always remain prone to such acts, Burke observes the ways in which the peculiar marriage between his time's radical thinking and political misdeeds paved the way for willfulness to take new hold over humanity. This begins with Richard Price, who on Burke's account advised his audience to all rationally determine for themselves the nature of their beliefs independent of others and "to set up, each of them, a separate meeting house upon his own particular principles." As we have seen, this contradicts Burke's essential belief in man's deep incapacity to act and know without the assistance historical memory supplies. For him, Price's curious zeal for

⁷⁷ Conniff applies the term "pathology" to France only, but I think it describes Burke's handling of Indian affairs aptly as well because he describes the progress of corruption from the East India Company to the homeland in similar terms of sickness and disease. See *The Useful Cobbler*, p. 219-20.

⁷⁸ As I will note below, we know what Burke thought of Rousseau; one wonders what he might have said about Kant's project.

intellectual independence really begs not “the propagation of his own opinions, but of any opinions... not for the diffusion of truth, but for the spreading of contradiction.”⁷⁹

For Burke, this lassitude toward truth and vague spreading of doubt open a long train of intellectual abuses that culminate in a breakdown of society’s necessary authority, especially as it resides in the Church, aristocracy, and more generally, in civil society’s manners as a whole. In the preface to his satire of Lord Bolingbroke’s writings, *A Vindication of Natural Society*, Burke writes that he “cannot conceive” how those authors possessed by these ideas

propose to compass the Designs they pretend to have in view, by the Instruments which they employ. Do they pretend to exalt the Mind of Man, by proving him no better than a Beast? Do they think to enforce the Practice of Virtue, by denying that Vice and Virtue are distinguished by good or ill Fortune here, or by Happiness or Misery here after? Do they imagine they shall increase our Piety, and our Reliance on God, by exploding his Providence, and insisting that he is neither just nor good?⁸⁰

Engaging in a *reductio ad absurdum* of Bolingbroke’s ideas, Burke shows a way that the abstractions of the rationalist mind all too easily tend to the destruction of inheritance society.⁸¹ Early in his literary career, Burke noted the dangers of universalizing theory and speculative reason, and this notion only deepened over time.⁸²

Radical attitudes spread an understanding of man’s role in society as one of relentless critical thought toward the past; as either progressivism or nostalgic declinism,

⁷⁹ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 11

⁸⁰ Burke, *A Vindication of Natural Society* ed. Frank N. Pagano, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), p. 5

⁸¹ For a comparison of Burke and Bolingbroke’s ideas see Harvey C. Mansfield, *Statesmanship and Party Government: A Study of Burke and Bolingbroke* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965).

⁸² For three accounts of Burke’s critique of metaphysics, abstraction, and “theory,” see Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 303-7, Canavan, *Political Reason*, p. 28-53, and White, *Edmund Burke*, pp. 44-56.

all radicalism seeks to efface history's stamp from our memory. Such ideas jumpstart a process of social unraveling; they herald social decline. Satirically, Burke observes that radicals believe that well-constituted human institutions will survive this ordeal: "the more closely the Origin of Religion and Government are examined, the more clearly their Excellencies must appear. They come purified from the Fire."⁸³ Burke argues that usually the opposite holds true. His enemies' attitude fails to differentiate between the "radical infirmity in all human contrivances" and a positive and thorough viciousness in any institution's current affairs.⁸⁴ We should not dwell too closely upon the foundations of states: "There is a secret veil to be drawn over the beginnings of all governments," for they have "their origin, as the beginning of all such things have had, in some matters that had as good be covered by obscurity."⁸⁵ Radicals like Bolingbroke tend to look nostalgically to the past to undermine the legitimacy of the present regime in preparation for a perfect, healing future oriented around an idea of natural origins. Overall, Burke fears an overly prejudicial reading of history might lead students to doubt any regime's decency, much less its moral standing.⁸⁶

In a satirical mode, Burke's *Vindication* traces out an anti-historical ideal that later he would find replicated in radical thought. Operating under a fictive notion of original nature, Burke inverts all his ordinary principles of thought. His anonymous "author" relentlessly exposes the vicious past and dark underbelly of society's inherited memories. He frames this society's original purpose as not peace and order, but

⁸³ Burke, *Vindication*, p. 18

⁸⁴ Burke, *Further Reflections*, p. 15

⁸⁵ Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, VI: 316-7. See also White, *Edmund Burke*, pp. 87-8.

⁸⁶ Burke, *Reflections*, pp. 124-5. See also Conniff, *The Useful Cobbler*, p. 7.

conquest.⁸⁷ Lawgivers and founders – our “civilizers” – are its worst criminals and their progeny in today’s statesmen merely disguise their tyranny well.⁸⁸ Government itself can only be tyrannical, and the presence of party and faction in supposedly just republican and democratic government merely exacerbates this flaw.⁸⁹ Consequently, law merely conceals force, the ends of artificial society fail to satisfy our real needs, leisure leads to weakness, and only the simple life in rude nature makes us happy.⁹⁰ However actual revolutionists depart from Burke’s satirical depiction, many share a confidence that reason, some sense of natural religion, and an attendant sense of natural rights will best guide men through life— notions they derive from an image of a pristine past.⁹¹

For Burke, Price’s sermon provides concrete demonstration of how a critical attitude toward society’s historical inheritances naturally undermines the moral and political authority of the institutions that spring from them. The “rights” Price affirms to choose governors, replace them for misconduct, and reframe government on rational grounds take but the first step toward the deranged politics of revolution.⁹² This mindset works relentlessly, effacing our belief in human limitations. It deadens the orderly,

⁸⁷ Burke, *Vindication*, p. 24

⁸⁸ Burke, *Vindication*, pp. 39, 41

⁸⁹ Burke, *Vindication*, pp. 61, 69. This is worth comparing to Burke’s later attack on what he called the “court cabal,” and their efforts to eliminate the impulse toward party in British politics. He argued that what such an idea ignores that parties naturally arise in republics as a form of civic friendship within them, and that they are the political outgrowth of natural, inherited attachment to particular men and groups: “Commonwealths are made of families, free commonwealths of parties also; and we may well affirm, that our natural regards and ties of blood tend inevitably to make men bad citizens, as that the bonds of our party weaken those by which we are held to our country.” See *Thoughts on the Present Discontents, Select Works I*: 146-8.

⁹⁰ Burke, *Vindication*, pp. 75, 77-8, and 84-5

⁹¹ Burke, *Vindication*, pp. 88-91

⁹² Burke, *Reflections*, p. 14

natural sympathies our inheritance usually leads us to respect.⁹³ By jaundicing our affections toward our common history and shared institutions, the theories radicals propound

temper and harden the breast in order to prepare it for the desperate strokes which are sometimes used in extreme occasions.... the mind receives a gratuitous taint; and the moral sentiments suffer not a little when no political purposes is served by the depravation. This sort of people are so taken up with their theories about the rights of man that they have totally forgotten his nature. Without opening up one new avenue to the understanding, they have succeeded in stopping up those that lead to the heart. They have perverted in themselves, and in those that attend to them, all the well-placed sympathies of the human breast.⁹⁴

By fostering attitudes that derange human sentiments, the radicals unleash new habits of approaching human affairs and new modes of judging them on the world.

Burke places the blame for radicalism's fervor squarely on the leading lights of the Enlightenment: on Rousseau, Voltaire, Helvetius, and others.⁹⁵ The "great problem" of the day for such thinkers "is to find a substitute for all the principles which hitherto have been employed to regulate the human will and action"; in arguing that the will needs no boundaries but the expression of its own authenticity, Burke argues that radicals instead "merge all natural and all social sentiment in inordinate vanity," and that their teacher in this effort is Rousseau.⁹⁶ After all, Rousseau's authentic sentiments only emerge in the language of pure and unadulterated nature; as we saw in chapter two,

⁹³ For White, this attitude unfolds "itself in the medium of a 'false sublime': one that annihilates the confrontation with finitude" (*Edmund Burke*, p. 32).

⁹⁴ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 56

⁹⁵ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 75

⁹⁶ Burke, *Further Reflections*, p. 48

recapturing authentic existence demands the rejection of social memory's stamp on the mind in favor of nostalgic restoration through a revival of pagan virtues.

By placing the locus of moral obligation on free choice aimed at the development of *individual* virtue, Burke argues that the masters of the radical style reject the very basis of moral development—the duties that inhere because of relationships between specific men. Rejecting the duties of family as a “vulgar relation...because the relation is not, of course, the result of *free election*,” such theories efface the sense in which, for Burke, to “be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections.”⁹⁷

Thus, radical thought begins its inversion of the moral universe and breaks the old understandings that hold decent society together. In advocating universal benevolence while undermining both personal and political humility, in truth the radicals allow for neither. Not recognizing human finitude, radicals fail to appreciate the way ordinary, local sentiments of good will and decency toward particular and necessarily flawed people prepares us to extend moral recognition to the whole of humanity.⁹⁸ Having failed there, radicals cannot see the “consanguinity between benevolence and humility” that makes them “virtues of the same stock,” inextricably linking them to the daily habits of ordinary life and not the abstract reasoning of metaphysical speculation.⁹⁹ Recall that for Burke, man cannot healthily eschew the relationship his reason bears with his historical inheritances; social memory conditions thought. Unbound from society, radical

⁹⁷ Burke, *Further Reflections*, pp. 50-1 and *Reflections*, p. 41

⁹⁸ Burke, *Further Reflections*, p. 49

⁹⁹ Burke, *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, *Select Works* III: 79

individual freedom – a “selfish liberty, as if every man was to regulate the whole of his conduct by his own will” – necessarily leads us to “the abuse, or oblivion, of our rational faculties.”¹⁰⁰

What makes this move toward unchained individualism so dangerous stems from the fact will always develops both objects and ends. At the “moment *will* is set above reason and justice” – and he understands both only in their proper relation to civil society – as the ultimate standard, we must wonder “in what part or portion of the community that dangerous domination of *will* may the least mischievously be placed.” He further questions whether we can restrain politics at all when those who will radical ends search for the means that will bring their goals to fruition.¹⁰¹ Regarding both France and India, Burke observes that the standard of the will cannot respect any external order: when laws or norms exist as impediments to the will, those who reason solely by the will have little reason not to abolish them, and in due course one finds that “there was never a man who thought he had no law but his own will, who did not soon find he had no end but his own profit.”¹⁰² The arbitrary will leads to an equally arbitrary understanding of practical and moral affairs. Merely generalizing it to the whole community as Rousseau demands does not evade this objection.

Burke’s specific critiques of Bolingbroke, Rousseau, and Price find a more general expression against the approach men of letters and philosophers take when they analyze practical matters. For these individuals, “fond of distinguishing themselves, are

¹⁰⁰ Burke, *Further Reflections*, p. 7

¹⁰¹ Burke, *Further Reflections*, pp. 7-8

¹⁰² Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, VI: 375

rarely averse to innovation”—even when they find the basis of such novelty in the distant past.¹⁰³ Indeed, they make their living suggesting novel ways of interpreting the world. Possessed by will, they carry a sort of dogmatic madness into every sphere of life which they touch, all the while mistaking their theoretical aims for practical wisdom.¹⁰⁴ Here again, Burke echoes Smith, who discusses a “man of system,” who

is apt to be very wise in his own conceit; and is often so enamoured with the supposed beauty of his own ideal plan of government, that he cannot suffer the smallest deviation from any part of it.... 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.... Some general, and even systematical, idea of the perfection of policy and law, may no doubt be necessary.... But to insist on establishing... every thing which that idea may seem to require, must often be the highest degree of arrogance. It is to erect his own judgment into the supreme standard of right and wrong.¹⁰⁵

This produces real danger, because in “states there are often some obscure and latent causes, things which appear at first view of little moment, on which a very great part of its prosperity or adversity may most essentially depend,” for all acts of state require “experience, and even more experience than any person can gain in his whole life, no matter how sagacious and observing he may be.”¹⁰⁶

In failing to appreciate the limits of rationality for human action or any standard but the false products of pure individualism, radical thinking enables what Burke calls

¹⁰³ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 97

¹⁰⁴ For some brief examples of Burke’s idea of this temperament at work, see *Reflections*, pp. 26-7, 31-2, 40-1, and 59-60.

¹⁰⁵ Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, pp. 233-4 (VI.ii.2.17-18)

¹⁰⁶ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 53

“the delusive plausibilities of moral politicians.”¹⁰⁷ Whether it stems from the pure hope for progress or a dream of nostalgic restoration, the contempt for inherited institutions and government by prudence leads to the idea men can modify human conventions whenever and wherever they prove even slightly deficient. Only those who disdain memory can think in these terms. For Burke, when we combine Price’s establishment of a right to cashier princes for misconduct with the radical intellectual attitude toward legitimizing history of institutions, they result in an obvious conclusion:

If all the absurd theories of lawyers and divines were to vitiate the objects in which they are conversant, we should have no law and no religion left in the world.... No government could stand a moment if it could be blown down with anything so loose and indefinite as an opinion of “misconduct.”¹⁰⁸

For Burke, the idea one should replace an entire regime for “misconduct” merely represents one more consequence of the radical derangement from the authority of prescription and stability of a society’s historical inheritance. This holds devastating consequences for any society that allows such notions to take root.¹⁰⁹

Having accepted the principle that a government may be replaced for misconduct, reordering other, even deeper elements of society on supposedly moral or practical grounds also becomes an option. In France, Burke observes the revolutionaries “have at length ventured completely to subvert all property of all descriptions.” In doing so, they compel

all men, in all transactions of commerce, in the disposal of lands, in civic dealing, and

¹⁰⁷ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 33

¹⁰⁸ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 23-4

¹⁰⁹ On how authority sustains order, see Canavan, *Political Reason*, pp. 95-102

through the whole communion of life, to accept as perfect payment and good and lawful tender the symbols of their speculation on a projected sale of their plunder.¹¹⁰

The sudden introduction of paper money in conjunction with confiscations of land further wrecks the stable relationship of a decent society's physical inheritance:

By this means the spirit of money-jobbing and speculation goes into the mass of land itself and incorporates with it. By this kind of operation that species of property becomes (as it were) volatilized; it assumes an unnatural and monstrous activity, and thereby throws into the hands of the several managers... all the representative of money and perhaps a full tenth part of all the land in France, which has now acquired the worst and most pernicious part of the evil of a paper circulation, the greatest possible uncertainty of its value.¹¹¹

By undermining the stability of commerce and property, the revolutionaries destabilized the first tangible link between generations. This move parallels their rejection of inherited moral duties that come from being born into a specific society in time. While this begins with the aristocracy, who are "the possessors of family wealth, and of the distinction which attends hereditary possession," such a move undermines the whole chain of inheritance that stands as the "natural *securities* for this transmission" for society's historical memory.¹¹²

The unraveling of society's physical inheritance through property and the accompanying rapid upheaval of all material value in the state find yet another parallel in the conduct of revolutionary politics. Having staked their claim on the justice of replacing

¹¹⁰ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 134

¹¹¹ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 168. See also Pocock, "The Political Economy of Burke's Analysis of the French Revolution," in *Virtue, Commerce, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), esp. pp. 199-200

¹¹² Burke, *Reflections*, p. 45

government and starting fresh, revolutionaries begin to “act as if they were the entire masters” of that society. For Burke, “this unprincipled facility of changing the state as often, and as much, and as in as many ways as there are floating fancies or fashions,” leads to a situation where “the whole chain and continuity of the commonwealth would be broken,” and in which the link between generations disintegrates, men “would become little better than the flies of a summer.”¹¹³ For Burke, life without embracing the restraints of memory results in little more than political monstrosity.

In a revolutionary order, no one holds office long enough to learn the value of prudence or develop a sense of institutional memory. Revolutionaries despise these forms of wisdom; among revolutionaries, one finds the healthy time horizon of “temporary possessors and life-renters” completely inverted and replaced with the fickle gods of unmediated public opinion, which Burke sees as the aggregate unchained will of a people gone mad. Being “nearer to their objects,” revolutionists find that the

share of infamy that is likely to fall to the lot of each individual in public acts is small indeed, the operation of opinion being in the inverse ratio to the number of those who abuse power.... A perfect democracy is, therefore, the most shameless thing in the world. As it is the most shameless, it is also the most fearless.¹¹⁴

Burke’s concern here rests with a notion that any ethic of moral and intellectual restraint in human affairs only comes through the proper transmission of historic institutions and habitual discipline that can teach it. A society that fails in this task embraces its own demise.

¹¹³ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 83

¹¹⁴ Burke, *Reflections*, pp. 82-3

Such a set of institutions stands as the work of generations, yet forms an all-too-fragile inheritance. At the opening of the impeachment of Warren Hastings in February 1788, Burke describes the danger of unleashing untried youth into politics without restraint in terms similar to that he uses regarding the revolutionaries. Proper, prudential leadership requires age and experience. One fact that

distinguishes the East India Company is the youth of the person who are employed in the system of the Service. They have almost universally been sent out at that period of life to begin their progress and career... which in all other places has been employed in the course of a rigid education. They have been sent there in fact... with a perilous independence, with too inordinate expectations, and with boundless power. They are schoolboys without Tutors. They are minors without Guardians. The world is let loose upon them with all its temptations; and they are let loose on the world, with all the powers that despotism can give.

Burke concludes that this dangerous link between unfettered power and inexperienced youth “is the situation of the Company’s Servants,” but one also faced by the revolutionaries in France—and that he feared might grow to be an issue in England.¹¹⁵ If it did, Burke fears this might lead England into a freefall of unrest and political decline.

When the unconstrained will acts in political life, instead of realizing the benefits of freedom, it degenerates into the pursuit of calculated self-interest that wrecks the foundation of civil society. Indeed, Burke only recognizes the presence of a real, disciplined civil society in the context of a stable chain of inherited social memory.

¹¹⁵ Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, VI: 288

For a more extended development of this argument, see my “Edmund Burke, the Warren Hastings Trial, and the Moral Dimension of Corruption,” *Polity*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (January 2008), esp. pp. 82-89. Later references to the Hastings trial and India follow this account.

Without that “habitual social discipline,”

when you disturb this harmony; when you break up this beautiful order, this array of truth and nature as well as of habit and prejudice; when you separate the common sort of men from their proper chieftains so as to form them into an adverse army, I no longer know that venerable object called the people in such a disbanded race of deserters and vagabonds.¹¹⁶

For Burke, nothing “can secure a steady and moderate conduct in such assemblies but that the body of them should be respectably composed, in point of condition of life or permanent property, of education, and of such habits as enlarge and liberalize the understanding.”¹¹⁷ Having broken down an old order, the French sought to replace it with a new one driven by an abstract, untried ideal.

The revolutionary will thinks in terms of uniformity and theoretical perfection. This too requires a further assault on another kind of inheritance, that of attachment to locality: “the people should no longer be Gascons, Picards, Bretons, Normans, but Frenchmen, with one country, one heart, and one Assembly.” For Burke, the very idea loses touch with unreality: “instead of being all Frenchmen, the greater likelihood is that the inhabitants of that region will shortly have no country.” Beginning with “our public affections in our families,” we learn our affections close to home or not at all. Only from there do we extend moral recognition “to our neighborhoods and our habitual provincial connections.”¹¹⁸ Dissolving ties to place and people, “this new conquering empire of light and reason” must as a result demolish the pleasing manners and possibly irrational

¹¹⁶ Burke, *Further Reflections*, pp. 167, 169

¹¹⁷ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 36

¹¹⁸ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 173

morals, the chivalric ideals that “cover the defects of our naked, shivering nature.” All irrationality becomes merely “ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion.”¹¹⁹ Even marriage and the family fall under radical scrutiny. Extending their understanding of free choice to these institutions, the revolutionaries proclaim marriage to be “no better than a common civil contract,” freely entered and easily broken through divorce.¹²⁰ If a lack of property does not undermine the phenomenology of inheritance thoroughly enough, without the stability of locality, manners, or family itself, inheritance loses the rest of its social supports.

For Burke, the aggregate consequences of unrestrained action in civil society and its cultural and intellectual life result in a political freefall of decline. Where any prudent government tends toward discovering and punishing vice, one overrun by the political abuses of willful politics tends to erode its people’s capacity to make moral distinctions. Such politics tend toward terror.¹²¹ Whether the agents of decline accomplish their efforts through the acts of empire or through revolution at home, when men subvert the inherited paths to power and remake the law to fit their will, their subordinates will no longer

look to acts of parliament, to regulations, to declarations, to votes, and resolutions. No, they are not such fools. They will ask, what is the road to power, credit, wealth, and honours...? what conduct ends in neglect, disgrace, poverty, exile, prison, and gibbet? These will teach them the course which they are to follow. It is your distribution of these that will give the character and tone to your government. All the rest is miserable

¹¹⁹ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 67. On the death of these ideas, see Dowling, “Burke and the Age of Chivalry,” esp. pp. 109-14.

¹²⁰ Burke, *Letters on a Regicide Peace, Select Works III*: 128. For a discussion of Burke’s horror at the effects of divorce, see O’Neill, “Burke on Democracy,” pp. 218-9.

¹²¹ Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, VI: 396-7

grimace.¹²²

Having broken the chain of obedience and authority in society, one can no longer even rely on soldiers to obey their leaders.¹²³ The specific paths revolutionary will and imperial abuse take diverge somewhat, but for Burke they share similarly vicious qualities.

With the French Revolution, the high-minded principles of rights degenerate into a shameful use of force to constrain the people's escalating desires for greater and greater freedom. Because they have so thoroughly erased the normal process of political self-restraint provided by civil society's inheritances, "the moment any difference arises between" the National Assembly and the people, they turn to the army to put down recurring rebellion. When colonists, slaves, and anyone else with still-unrealized aspirations toward liberty rises up, "massacre, torture, hanging" result, all of which form the natural "fruits of metaphysic declarations wantonly made, and shamefully retracted!"¹²⁴ In India, Burke outlines a vicious dialectic of escalating abuse fostered by the arbitrary, avaricious will governing the East India Company:

Tyrannous exaction brings on servile concealment; and that again calls for tyrannous coercion. They move in a circle, mutually producing and produced; till at length nothing of humanity is left in the government, no trace of integrity, spirit, or manliness in the people, who drag out a precarious and degraded existence under this system of outrage upon human nature.¹²⁵

Both groups engage in rhetorical evasion: Hastings admitted his exercise of absolute and

¹²² Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, V: 436

¹²³ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 193

¹²⁴ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 195

¹²⁵ Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, V: 533

arbitrary authority, the revolutionaries mask it in the rhetoric of popular sovereignty.¹²⁶ By its very nature, the willfulness behind these movements spreads through every level of society and “arbitrary will (the last corruption of ruling power) step by step, poisons the heart of every citizen.”¹²⁷

Even if some lingering, virtuous policy can contain these eruptions of will, Burke raises an additional concern. The politics found in both France and India unleashes certain ambitions and longings that a regularly inherited order manages and attenuates. Having tasted power well beyond their age and normal station in life, neither the members of the National Assembly nor the youth employed by the East India Company will be satisfied by the old ways, these “men will never quietly settle in ordinary occupations, nor submit to any scheme which must reduce them to an entirely private condition, or to the exercise of a steady, peaceful, but obscure and unimportant industry.”¹²⁸ As these men come home, they pass on both the attitudes they learned in their previous employment and their examples implicitly disrespect whatever lingering notion of inherited order might still be present in civil society.

It should be little surprise that Burke conceptualized both Hastings’ conduct and that of the French Revolutionaries in a similar light. In his thinking, the Revolution becomes a sort of pagan theology, and an “armed doctrine” launching an assault on the

¹²⁶ See on this Steven Blakemore, “Rereading the French Revolution: Burke and the Paradoxes of History,” in *The Enduring Edmund Burke* ed. Ian Crowe (Wilmington: ISI Books, 1997), p. 50-2

¹²⁷ Burke, *Further Reflections*, p. 176; compare to Burke’s assault on Hastings’ scheme of “geographical morality,” in *Writings and Speeches*, VI: 346-9. Hastings argued that because India had never been ruled by anything other than tyrants, this authorized the East India Company’s behavior—a tactic Burke found repugnant.

¹²⁸ Burke, *Further Reflections*, p. 233

entirety of the civilized world, against which no tradition or inheritance could long subsist.¹²⁹ He also understands that revolutions take on a life of their own wherein the moderating factions within any such organization fall away, devoured by their increasingly radical progeny.¹³⁰ With India, Burke fears that a newly-wealthy, willful body of youth weaned to manhood on the exercise of absolute power will marry into the nobility, buy influence, and carry their attitudes toward power into British politics.¹³¹ In both systems, these men “have found their resources in crimes,” a dreadful discovery because they replace Burke’s earlier, beneficent notion of inheritance with one where men have “nothing to lose” and society provides “no medium for them, betwixt the highest elevation, and death with infamy.”¹³² In erasing the past, they merely repeat its worst mistakes; their false inheritance of malevolent hope results in “old tyranny writ new.”¹³³

V. Burke’s Response to Decline

Over the course of his long political career, Burke marshaled all his energies to combat the decline he saw in the political world. Even as he believed in the march of Providence, he also recognized that prudence demands we act with all our power instead of engaging in the “mad and impious presumption” that things will simply take care of themselves.¹³⁴ As such, Burke fights his enemies and the forces of decline with every tool

¹²⁹ Burke, *Further Reflections*, p. 208 and *Letters on a Regicide Peace Select Works III*: 76. On the threat to civilization, see Conniff, *The Useful Cobbler*, pp. 227-30.

¹³⁰ See Burke, *Reflections*, pp. 59, 123, 216-7, and *Further Reflections*, p. 46-7.

¹³¹ Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, V: 403

¹³² Burke, *Letters on a Regicide Peace, Select Works III*: 183-4

¹³³ Blakemore, “Rereading the French Revolution,” p. 51

¹³⁴ Burke, *Letters on a Regicide Peace, Select Works III*: 160

and idea at his disposal, and deploys them with considerable rhetorical flourish. In all of these efforts, historical memory becomes one of his principal weapons. He deploys the understanding it generates for a number of moralizing ends.

Given the emphasis Burke places on inheritance, we can immediately identify how memory serves its purpose as a useful storehouse of knowledge. This especially holds true for him when the object of study lay in the distant past, for he (rather cannily) argues that there, less partisan fervor emerges there and as such, distance provides us much more room to identify a coherent and believable vision from the story of history.¹³⁵ Ironically, Burke's uses of history usually appear in his efforts in partisan political persuasion. In them, he attempts to persuade his opponents and neutral parties that his depiction of the ancient constitution fits English character best. Even when we cannot use history as an unambiguously unifying narrative, history's use runs deeper as the repository of examples from which we can learn: "And is then example nothing? It is every thing. Example is the school of mankind, and they will learn at no other."¹³⁶ In every case, he draws moral meaning out of the past.

Specifically, Burke deploys historical examples to use the past to help us understand what we inherit from our forefathers. These examples help secure certain political ideas and counteract deviations from the wisdom implicit in British traditions.¹³⁷ Broadly speaking, he deploys a sense of historical memory to achieve a few overlapping

¹³⁵ For an example of how Burke does this, see *Thoughts on the Present Discontents, Select Works I*: 76.

¹³⁶ Burke, *Letters on a Regicide Peace, Select Works III*: 143

¹³⁷ On Burke's use of history, see Weston, "Edmund Burke's View of History" and Conniff, *The Useful Cobbler*, pp. 4, 54-63, 70-1. Strauss wrongly claims that for Burke, history is only of limited use for political life. On this, see *Natural Right and History*, pp. 304-7.

goals: as an orientation to future action, to establish some historical precedent as a moral standard, and to remind the British of who they really are. Throughout, Burke deploys an idea of British history and institutions –a reminiscence of their ancient inheritances – to remind his audience of their true selves and all the obligations that self-understanding brings with it.

Burke consistently draws certain boundaries and sorts of propriety out of the past examples. These boundaries naturally occur to the mind well-formed by historical memory. His opponents rejected the very idea the past should constrain the present. Radical thought respects no boundaries of time or place, promulgating a theory of universal blame where no institutional flaw or past crime should remain unexposed.¹³⁸ Here, I recall my argument in chapter one that in secular time, guilt accumulates in ways that only the Christian sense of linear time – and the space it leaves us for forgiveness – may absolve. He observes that generally we

do not draw the moral lessons we might from history. On the contrary, without care it may be used to vitiate our minds and to destroy our happiness. In history a great volume is unrolled for our experience, drawing the materials of future wisdom from the past errors and infirmities of mankind.¹³⁹

Careless historical thought causes us to confuse the proper objects of moral and political opprobrium, as there “is a difference between a moral or political exposure of a publick

¹³⁸ In one of his more memorable phrases, Burke argues that the revolutionaries in both France and England pursue their opponents, past and present, “into the obscurest retreats, and haul them before their revolutionary tribunals. Neither sex, nor age—nor the sanctuary of the tomb is sacred to them.... Their turpitude purveys to their malice; and they unplumb the dead for bullets to assassinate the living.” See *Further Reflections*, p. 281.

¹³⁹ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 124

evil, relative to the administration of government, whether in men or systems, and a declaration of defects, real or supposed, in the fundamental Constitution” of a nation.¹⁴⁰

An active effort to corrode our understanding of history poses even more dangers.

Burke responds to the dangers of reading the history of a nation’s institutions wrongly by imbuing that past with a sense of the sublime through invocations of civic religion. Having observed the simple notion that “with or without right, a revolution will be the last resource of the thinking and good,” Burke recounts a number of ways the British people understand their state as a whole consecrated by both a religious establishment and long-standing inherited tradition.¹⁴¹ The proper attitude toward the past consists in this:

Always acting as if in the presence of canonized forefathers, the spirit of freedom, leading in itself to misrule and excess, is tempered with an awful gravity. This idea of a liberal descent inspires us with a sense of habitual native dignity.... We procure reverence to our civil institutions on the principle upon which nature teaches us to revere individual men: on account of their age and on account of those from whom they are descended.¹⁴²

Burke observes that in order to avoid certain evils, those of “inconstancy and versatility,” the British people “consecrated the state” in their memories in such a way

that no man should approach to look into its defects but with due caution, that he should never dream of beginning its reformation by its subversion, that he should approach to the faults of the state as to the wound of a father, with pious awe and trembling solicitude.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Burke, *Miscellaneous Writings*, pp. 28-9

¹⁴¹ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 27

¹⁴² Burke, *Reflections*, p. 30

¹⁴³ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 84

This self-understanding reinforces both the rightness of the inherited order and the stability of its ancient constitution.

By exhorting his countrymen to remember their consecration of the state through a combination of religious establishment and a deep belief in their own historical inheritance, Burke hopes to accomplish a revival of belief and mobilize a defense against radical willfulness. Through his acts of public recollection and commemoration, he worked to revive England's waning sense of self. His defense of what he saw as legitimate human freedom rested on man's multiple inheritances, and with the spread of democratic thinking, it faced insurmountable challenges:

Traditional thought – and this is the real reason why religion is necessary to any viable conservative politics – envisioned man as achieving essential being (that is, being as an essence) only outside of time: in eternity.... But what Revolutionary theory sought, and this was the source – is the source – of its deep appeal in the West, was the experience of *essential freedom*, the freedom of man as an essence, *within* time. And that is why it proved, and has proved, to be so powerful a weapon. Any concrete circumstance standing in the way of *that* freedom – and any concrete circumstance would have to stand in the way of that freedom – would at best be regarded as bothersome... and at worse as contemptible and intolerable.¹⁴⁴

Given the enormous opposition he faced during his life, one wonders whether he genuinely believed it would have any effect.

Despite this, he could not keep silent, for he believed that there “are times and circumstances, in which not to speak out is at least to connive,” if not to countenance

¹⁴⁴ Hart, “Burke and Radical Freedom,” p. 225

evil.¹⁴⁵ Burke seems to have hoped that by speaking out he could help maintain some sense of political humility and moral realism in British politics. But his deep belief in human fallibility meant that he was unwilling to suggest radical action even in the face of his era's worst evils, such as slavery. His sense of memory ruled out the hope of reactionary restoration, for this too represents just one more species of lost unity. Statesmen cannot undo deeply contrived evils without long-term, equally thoughtful plans to counter them—if they can ameliorate such conditions at all.¹⁴⁶

Near the end of his life, this realization led Burke to make some rather stark admissions regarding how men might maintain prudential politics. Reestablishing his society's historical inheritance seemed less and less likely. Because of the instability radical ideas inject into the world, the once-reliable understanding provided by historical memory and traditional inheritances no longer availed:

Louis the XVIth. was a diligent reader of history. But the very lamp of prudence blinded him. The guide of human life led him astray. A silent revolution in the moral world preceded the political, and prepared it. It became of more importance than ever what examples were given, and what measures were adopted.... The chain of subordination, even in cabal and sedition, was broken in it's most important links.... *There was no longer any means of arresting a principle in it's course.*¹⁴⁷

If this were not enough to call into question his faith that prudential politics would prevail, at the end of his *Thoughts on French Affairs*, Burke admits that if indeed a

great change is to be made in human affairs, the minds of men will be fitted to it; the

¹⁴⁵ Burke, *Further Reflections*, p. 179

¹⁴⁶ For one articulation of this, see Burke's "Sketch of the Negro Code" in *Miscellaneous Writings*.

¹⁴⁷ Burke, *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, *Select Works III*: 185-6, emphasis mine.

general opinions and feelings will draw that way. Every fear, every hope, will forward it; and then they who persist in opposing this might current in human affairs, will appear rather to resist the decrees of Providence itself, than the mere designs of men. They will not be resolute and firm, but perverse and obstinate.¹⁴⁸

Burke knew that the radical rejection of history doomed the entire project of politics by inheritance and prescription.¹⁴⁹ He also knew that the one alternative to social memory via its negation in nostalgic reenchantment heralded political death. Thus, he led a noble struggle in which he hoped to defend England's dying inheritance.

This admission bears certain lessons for any contemporary attempt to instantiate a Burkean politics, or for anyone hoping to acquire much more than a set of intellectual predilections from his writings. Burke himself tells us that a politics governed by an authoritative historical memory only remains possible when society stably replicates order. One can find ground for this thoroughly prudential politics *only* through a coherent and interconnected web of social and cultural inheritances which no contemporary society can claim. Self-proclaimed traditionalists remind us of our failure to maintain the old ways, but they should ponder what little that proclamation might actually accomplish.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Burke, *Further Reflections*, pp. 254-5. See also Weston, "Edmund Burke's View of History," pp. 227-8. Compare to the Author's Introduction of *Democracy in America*, where Alexis de Tocqueville writes, "Running through the pages of our history, there is hardly an important event in the last seven hundred years which has not turned out to be advantageous for equality.... Wherever one looks one finds the same revolution taking place throughout the Christian world. Everywhere the diverse happenings in the lives of people have turned to democracy's profit; all men's efforts have aided it... and all have worked together, some against their will and some unconsciously, blind instruments in the hands of God. Therefore the gradual progress of equality is something fated." See *Democracy in America* ed. J.P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (New York: HarperCollins, 1969), pp. 11-12.

¹⁴⁹ See Pocock, "Burke and the Ancient Constitution," p. 231 and White, *Edmund Burke*, p. 55

¹⁵⁰ For two examples of this sort of argument, see Kirk, *The Conservative Mind* and Bruce Frohnen, *Virtue*

Burke knows we cannot rewind the clock. In democratic times, this means that while historical memory and inherited traditions may not be dead, they do not provide viable sources of wisdom for political life. Burke lived in a world where politically authoritative memory faded before his eyes and saw no viable replacement. In many ways, Tocqueville brings a similar historical disposition to bear on this dilemma. In the next chapter, I demonstrate the ways Tocqueville claims society might retain a sense of memory through its mores and its continuing faith—a path that provides the one remaining possibility for stable meaning in democratic times.

Chapter 4

Recognizing Providence: Tocqueville on Disenchantment, Memory, and Decline

I am aware that many of my contemporaries think that nations on earth are never their own masters and that they are bound to obey some insuperable and unthinking power, the product of preexisting facts of race, or soil, or climate. These are false and cowardly doctrines which can only produce feeble men and pusillanimous nations.... Providence has, in truth, drawn a predestined circle around each man beyond which he cannot pass; but within those vast limits man is strong and free, and so are peoples.

– Alexis de Tocqueville¹

I. A New Political Science

As I note in previous chapters, the recollection of events that the persistent consciousness of biblical time allows society, as well as the wisdom it embodies in social memory provide peoples that embrace it one major bulwark against the radical hope to reenchant the world. In this chapter, I explore the ways in which Tocqueville relates memory and liberty in a disenchanted world. I argue that while he saw the march of equality as the preeminent destroyer of every people's history and the cultural embodiments of its social memory, he nevertheless maintained a hope that various familial, civic, political, and religious institutions might serve as reminders, anchoring democracy against its tendency to oscillate between extremes of thought and action.

Alexis de Tocqueville rightly deserves his place as one of the nineteenth century's most important defenders of liberalism. In an era beset both by those implacably opposed to the changes wrought by modern social life such as Marx and Nietzsche, as well as its

¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J.P. Mayer (New York: Harper, 1963), p. 705

titular champions – such as Hegel and Mill – Tocqueville worked through a richer understanding of events. Through his defense of unreflective habits and social memory, he stood with much of the modern British and Anglophile political tradition, but he also transcended it by incorporating a profound understanding of our moral psychology and knowledge of the ways changing social conditions would undermine the stable conventions so crucial for the persistence of institutions like the common law. Unlike many conservatives, he understood that tradition would not save liberal politics, for in modernity tradition loses its authority; only a “new political science” that recognized our peculiar condition might keep us from servitude.²

Beginning with a series of empirical and historical observations, Tocqueville develops an interpretation of the modern world quite different from his contemporaries, one strikingly anti-philosophical in its implications. His method presupposes that once it comes into being, a nation’s “social state” – that is, the basic conditions of its daily life – “may itself be considered as the prime cause of most of its laws, customs, and ideas which control the nation’s behavior,” modifying “even those things which it does not cause.”³ In a slightly different idiom than Tocqueville uses, one might say that “[b]eing precedes consciousness.” While at their founding, a people’s ideals and deepest beliefs may guide them, thereafter the social conditions take precedence over a people’s ability to shape events to their preference.⁴

² Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 12

³ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 50

⁴ On this, see Joshua Mitchell, *The Fragility of Freedom: Tocqueville on Religion, Democracy, and the American Future* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 11-17; and Roger Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 30-

Because of this claim that social conditions shape and precede most thought, Tocqueville joins Burke in moving beyond the speculative anthropology of the social contractarians by dealing from the very beginning with his subjects' origins and culture.⁵ In looking for the essential causes of social change, Tocqueville overturns any simple attempt to delineate causation. Instead he presupposes that causes and effects always bear a circular relationship with one another.⁶ For Tocqueville, the history and social memory of any people form the vital core necessary for any effort at understanding – to say nothing of defending – the achievements of our forbears. He highlights the essential fragility of civilization, which only results from a “prolonged social endeavor taking place on the same spot, an endeavor which each generation bequeaths to the next.”⁷ As a collection of practices held in common by society more than as a merely tangible inheritance, we can see the importance of social memory for Tocqueville's thinking. Particularly in America, he looked to the past “to know what we have to fear or hope therefrom,” and like Burke before him, sought to keep that past in dialogue with the present.⁸ In so doing, he hoped to “educate democracy” and “gradually to substitute

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⁵ Indeed, Tocqueville found himself somewhat disappointed by the ways America shattered the illusions his reading and common opinion in Europe cultivated; hoping to find “the history of the whole of humanity framed within a few degrees of longitude,” instead he found a continent of essentially similar peoples. See Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J.P. Mayer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), pp. 332-4. On Tocqueville's relationship to practice, see Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. and Delba Winthrop, “Tocqueville's New Political Science,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, ed. Cheryl B. Welch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 81-103. On the contrast between Tocqueville and social contract theory, see Sheldon Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 171-2.

⁶ Mitchell, *The Fragility of Freedom*, p. 18

⁷ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 327

⁸ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 19. On Tocqueville's understanding of the past's relationship to the present, see Ralph Lerner, *Revolutions Revisited: Two Faces of the Politics of Enlightenment* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), pp. 60-2 and 112-28.

understanding of statecraft for present inexperience,” an effort which above all required prudence and adaptation “to the needs of time and place.”⁹ This formed the goal of his new political science.

In this effort, Tocqueville determined that the idea of equality stood above all others factors as the most salient force of history in the West since the emergence of Christianity. Tocqueville knew equality does not merely serve as a principle governing social life; unless men find a way to restrain it through a variety of mediating institutions, the idea takes on a life of its own. This “logic of equality” haunted him because equality’s gradual extension, first in social conditions and then in other guises, fosters nothing short of a revolution in thinking and action.¹⁰ In surveying the west’s history, he could come to no other conclusion that even from the perspective of the 1830’s, “there is hardly an important event in the last seven hundred years which has not turned out to be favorable to equality” in France, much less in the world, because no matter where “one looks one finds the same revolution taking place throughout the Christian world.” This served as sufficient proof for Tocqueville that Providence stands behind democracy – “God does not Himself need to speak for us to find sure signs of His will” – and means that sooner or later, “the gradual progress of equality is something fated” in every corner of the globe. This unprecedented fact of “a world itself quite new” necessitated the foundation of his new mode of social inquiry.¹¹

Yet where Rousseau saw the emergence of liberalism and modernity as the death

⁹ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 12

¹⁰ For a discussion of the “logic of equality,” and its relationship to envy and other facets of democracy, see Mitchell, *The Fragility of Freedom*, pp. 78-87.

¹¹ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp. 9-12

of true virtue and Burke could largely only react in horror at the outworking of radically egalitarian thinking in France and England, Tocqueville becomes a reluctant but heroic defender not only of the various inheritances Burke sought to preserve, but also of the political and social order a full-bodied commercial and democratic society requires to live in freedom. He and Burke stand as one in their opposition to any attempt to reenchanted the world; yet in acknowledging the true implications of equality in social life, Tocqueville realized the mere affirmation of custom and tradition would not suffice to protect the fragile liberal inheritance.¹² Tocqueville realized tradition and custom form only one part of social memory, and that while the aristocratic inheritance and ancient constitution Burke thought so important do indeed comprise one part of that memory, these institutions cannot suffice as its sole source in democratic times. Men must embrace the democratic family, civic and political associations, and sincere faith if they desire to keep their freedom in the perilous times that we face.¹³

I proceed in five main parts. First, I discuss Tocqueville's theory of how the logic of equality drives society from an aristocratic to a democratic social state, and how his fundamentally Augustinian understanding of psychology plays a part in this. In the second and third sections, I flesh out the manner in which aristocracy and democracy affect social memory. While aristocracy builds its entire self-understanding around an

¹² For various accounts of Tocqueville's opposition to rechantment, see Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, p. 81; Boesche, *Strange Liberalism*, pp. 34-35; Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy*, trans. John Waggoner (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), pp. xv-xvi; and Peter Augustine Lawler, *The Restless Mind: Alexis de Tocqueville on the Origin and Perpetuation of Human Liberty* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1993), pp. 3-4.

¹³ Tocqueville noted that Americans – the preeminently democratic people – “treat tradition as valuable for information only.” See *Democracy in America*, p. 429.

idea of imitation and inheritance, I argue Tocqueville understood democracy as a thoroughgoing rejection of this mode of self-understanding. In the succeeding two sections, I present an interpretation of how Tocqueville thought Americans succeeded at coping with the logic of equality. Here, I demonstrate the specific ways in which he argued the colonists supported institutions of social memory, and thus political restraint. Finally, I conclude by presenting some of Tocqueville's ultimate fears about how democracy may fall into political decline and servitude. I begin with Tocqueville's understanding of history as the story of equality's progress in the West.

II. Aristocracy, Democracy, and the March of Equality

This section explores the categories within which Tocqueville understands the scope of Western history. One must note at the outset that his account defies modern modes of thinking and scholarship; his work proceeds in neither a solely historical nor an entirely sociological method. Instead, it presents a sort of philosophical history rendered in ideal types.¹⁴ As I note above, Tocqueville's account rests on the idea that equality forms the principal motive force behind history's march. It serves as the grounding condition for his account of how the social state of Western societies gradually shifted from essentially aristocratic forms toward increasingly democratic ones. While dangerous to freedom, Tocqueville insists that this movement must be Providential, for if we cannot attribute this march to divine will and see some hopeful purpose in it, its effects could

¹⁴ On the role of ideal types in Tocqueville in contrast to a few other nineteenth century figures, see Robert Nisbet, "Tocqueville's Ideal Types," in *Reconsidering Tocqueville's Democracy in America*, ed. Abraham S. Eisenstadt (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1988), pp. 186-88.

only be described as demonic.¹⁵ He sees this movement with “religious dread” precisely because so few people in his time comprehend the enormity of this process; too many of his contemporaries kept their eyes “fixed on the ruins still in sight on the bank,” obsessing over the fading aristocratic past “while the stream whirls us backward—facing toward the abyss.”¹⁶

In the Author’s Introduction to *Democracy in America* and elsewhere in his writings, Tocqueville sets out variants of what Joshua Mitchell terms the “Fable of Liberalism.”¹⁷ This philosophical history provides a powerful genealogy of the deep and distinctive changes modernity wrought in our consciousness between the aristocratic and democratic ages. Tocqueville thinks of these social states as pairs and constantly uses them to sharpen and refine his observations about the modern world. Where aristocracy prized honor, obedience, stability, greatness, and virtue; in democracy, we find a world driven by sympathy and self-interested action, gentle manners, great movement, and little concern with political greatness. Those living in an aristocratic social order see authority as essentially legitimate; having no conception of equality, peasants could love nobles “when they were just and merciful and felt neither repugnance nor degradation in submitting to their severities, which seemed inevitable ills sent by God.”¹⁸ Without any deep notion of equality or a social state that suggested its presence, the peasant (and

¹⁵ Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, pp. 109-10

¹⁶ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp. 12-13

¹⁷ While I elaborate the salient parts of this story, for a brief discussion of the Fable of Liberalism, see Mitchell, “Tocqueville on Democratic Religious Experience,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville*, esp. pp. 277-81. For other observations similar to his, see Lerner, *Revolutions Revisited*, pp. 33-36; and Manent, *Tocqueville*, p. 73-75.

¹⁸ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp. 13-15

Tocqueville thinks, his near-contemporary Frenchmen) lived an essentially fatalistic life. Such men bear hardship with seeming equanimity. However, Tocqueville writes that if you show such a person

a way of escape from the afflictions which seem to worry him so little and he will rush so passionately, so blindly to it that if you happen to be in his path, he will trample you underfoot, hardly noticing your presence!¹⁹

Prior to changes in society that erode memory, however, revolution remained outside of man's normal hopes. Yet we might also observe the way the people bore a similar relationship to material goods.

Life for some in aristocracy "was brilliant, ostentatious, but not comfortable," while in democracy, the love of material well being and growth of commerce allows far more people to enjoy comfort and "a more prosperous lot," while in contrast to warlike aristocracy, "the people would be pacific not from despair of anything better but from knowing itself to be well-off."²⁰ Tocqueville's presumption here, which he would later elaborate in Volume II of *Democracy*, rests on the idea that commerce, tamer passions, and democracy undermine not only the causes of war, but also the very desires that allow wars to be fought in the first place.²¹ In the end, he fears these trends could reduce humanity to those with "[s]pirit coldly burning," men possessed by "serious, tenacious, selfish, cold, frozen imagination, having respect for money, industrious, proud and

¹⁹ Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Anchor Books, 1955), p. 134

²⁰ Tocqueville, *Memoir on Pauperism*, trans. Seymour Drescher (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997), p. 44; Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 15

²¹ Kant's *Idea of a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent* develops a similar notion; on this account, he too participates in the fable of liberalism. On peace in the democratic age, see *Democracy in America*, Vol. II, Part III, Chapters 1, 21-26.

rationalist” tendencies. Mankind’s future might rest in this very narrow social type.²² Tocqueville believes that in fostering a materialist sensibility and concept of self-interested private life over the noble’s vision of political greatness and virtuous action, commerce and the love of well-being might undermine the very real gains they allow in societies that embrace them.²³

While I will elaborate about each of the social states in the next two sections, the taming of man’s more extreme passions in favor of harnessing his ability to produce physical goods forms the constant motif surrounding equality’s movement through human institutions. Throughout his account of the movement from aristocracy to democracy, Tocqueville identifies “religious dread” with a process rapidly spinning out of control with too few men recognizing the novelty of this development. Tocqueville’s dramatic metaphor of men being forced downstream toward the abyss illustrates the stakes he saw in this endeavor. Against almost the whole of the history of political thought, he argued that the dangers of this shifting social state went far deeper than most aristocratic thinkers could admit. Precisely because of his theory of social state, Tocqueville – with Plato – held that one dominant principle and type of soul controlled every political order. He wrote:

I have always considered what is called mixed government to be a chimera. There is in truth no such thing as a mixed government (in the sense usually given to the words), since in any society one finds in the end some principle of action that dominates all the others.... When a society really does have a mixed government, that is to say, one equally

²² Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, p. 177

²³ On this alternative, see Manent, *Tocqueville*, pp. 19-20.

shared between contrary principles, either a revolution breaks out or that society breaks up.²⁴

This means that there would be no simple, stable mean or compromise between the forces of aristocracy and democracy.

Institutional remedies such as those suggested by Montesquieu or those expounded in *The Federalist* may provide some additional stability for the societies that adopt them, but neither addresses the fundamental issue presented by Tocqueville's understanding of how changing social state affects the world. If equality forms the ruling principle of the age, *political* forms alone cannot moderate its influence; only social and religious institutions that rein in the excesses of the democratic spirit might help establish a healthier balance in society. The difficulty equality presents democracy forces a different sort of resolution precisely because "mixed" regimes so often seek to limit political participation:

It is not that peoples with a democratic social state naturally scorn freedom; on the contrary, they have an instinctive taste for it. But freedom is not the chief and continual object of their desires; it is equality for which they feel an eternal love; they rush on freedom with quick and sudden impulses, but if they miss their mark they resign themselves to their disappointment; but nothing will satisfy them without equality, and they would rather die than lose it.²⁵

The historic opposition between the few or one who should rule and the many that must be kept from power no longer holds; the alternative equality presents men is either freedom or servitude, and unfortunately the former places significant burdens on those

²⁴ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 251

²⁵ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 57

who would embrace it. This stark choice represents the central dilemma of the democratic age. Tocqueville held that only social memory and faith might partially resolve it.

Despite this ominous fact, Tocqueville recognizes at least two constants to the human condition. Both notions intimate the idea that differences in social state do not quite reach to the depths of the soul. First, throughout *Democracy*, Tocqueville emphasizes the curious tendency of men to oscillate between extremes of thought and action: Man, “unable to hold firmly to what is true and just, is generally reduced to choosing between two excesses.”²⁶ Tocqueville constantly identifies pairings of excess and deficiency in relation to thought and action, but the most important of these relates to man’s general disposition toward engagement in the world. I will discuss this at greater length in later sections, but this particular aspect of what Mitchell terms the “Augustinian Self” poses particular dangers for democracy precisely because absent some attenuation from society or personal belief, in the face of the world’s pressures men tend toward one of two socially destabilizing poles: those of “self-enclosed solipsism and restive overreaching.”²⁷

Secondly, Tocqueville also claims one other permanent aspect for our nature in our propensity toward faith. He begins here with a psychological observation that the goods found in this world can never fully satisfy our longings because “[a]lone among all created beings, man shows a natural disgust for existence and an immense longing to exist; he scorns life and fears annihilation.” That instinctive Augustinian pairing drives

²⁶ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 43. Peter Lawler notes that “all that is distinctively human begins with the disorder or ‘dis-ease’ of the restless mind.” See *The Restless Mind*, p. 4.

²⁷ Mitchell, *Fragility of Freedom*, p. 40

all of us into contemplation of eternity, which in turn leads us to religion. For these reasons – and his own doubts aside – Tocqueville concludes that

[i]t is by a sort of intellectual aberration, and in a way, by doing moral violence to their own nature, that men detach themselves from religious beliefs; an invincible inclination draws them back. Incredulity is an accident; faith is the only permanent state of mankind.²⁸

The inclination toward faith and the need for certainty it portends hold startling implications for how we understand politics in an ostensibly secular, but certainly disenchanted world. Being unable to endure doubt, Tocqueville suggests that men look to power when faith fails to provide them certainty. But even more importantly, Tocqueville argues that in light of this tendency, religion or its absence forms the deepest ground for any people's self understanding, and all mores, manners, and laws bear its stamp.²⁹

In summary, Tocqueville presents a philosophical history of modernity driven by the logic of equality. Faced with this unprecedented force, the original social state of aristocracy finds itself under siege, eroded and replaced with practices that favor self-interest over virtue, and commerce over honor and war. Yet as we will see, Tocqueville presents a somewhat more complicated picture than do many of his liberal colleagues. Barring some institutional corrective and decisive break from the past, the various dangers presented by the oscillations of the human soul, memory of the aristocratic past, and the excesses of the democratic future may lead men into quiet servitude. In light of this fable of liberalism and with these two permanent traits in mind, I now turn to

²⁸ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp. 296-7

²⁹ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 47

aristocracy.

III. Aristocracy and the Harsh Tutelage of Social Memory

While Sheldon Wolin correctly identifies aristocracy as something of a metaphor for loss in Tocqueville's thinking, in truth it forms far more.³⁰ Tocqueville's understanding of equality and democracy rests in fundamental ways on the constant contrasts he draws between lost aristocracy and the modern world.³¹ To reiterate a portion of the fable of liberalism, when discussing the advantages of democratic government, Tocqueville rhetorically asks the reader what we should expect from society and government in modern times. There, he identifies aristocracy with a number of traits: elevation, generosity, the scorn of material goods, deep conviction, profound devotion, elevated manners, great poetry, glory, power, political greatness, and above all, the desire to leave a mark on history.³² At the very least, aristocracy provides the possibility of all these things; in short order, democracy precludes many of them, orienting men instead towards more moderate pursuits. For the purposes of this argument, however, I wish to focus on how the social state of aristocracy preserved social memory, and what transmitting it across the generations demanded.

Surprised at "ancient and modern writers" for not having paid greater attention to the laws and traditions surrounding inheritance, Tocqueville argues that by this means societies "lay hand on each generation before it is born," and that this grants men "almost

³⁰ Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, p. 88

³¹ As Edward Gargan puts it, "[o]nly through the most precise and extensive consideration of every feature of the aristocratic culture of the past is he able to suggest the outline of the emerging society." See Gargan, "Tocqueville and the Problem of Historical Prognosis," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 68, No. 2 (Jan. 1963), p. 336.

³² Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 245

supernatural power over the future of his fellows.” Founded on the stable ideal of primogeniture, aristocracy “assembles, concentrates, and piles up property, and soon power, too” in the hands of the same families over long periods of time. In such places,

Hence family feeling finds a sort of physical expression in the land. The family represents the land, and the land the family, perpetuating its name, origin, glory, power, and virtue. It is an imperishable witness to the past and a precious earnest of the future.³³

Living on the same land over generations allows aristocrats and their subjects to develop a panoply of habits and practices that accompany the landed inheritance in the form of social memories.

On Tocqueville’s account, this fact shapes every social institution. Rooting their power in families and property, political authorities never enjoy direct ties with their subjects. Rather, they approach them through the layered mediation of the land-holding family, and specifically the head of household, the father, who embodies it. Aristocracy ties men one to another through links of obligation constituted by men’s relations to the land. The king of any given country serves not as the king of the people, but as ruler of the geographic space mediated *through* those who maintain authority over its inhabitants, and addresses his nobles as those who control their lands by inheritance, and so on—hence the constant aristocratic invocation of the “Great Chain of Being.” Tocqueville makes several observations about this worth quoting at length:

In countries organized on the basis of an aristocratic hierarchy, authority never addresses the whole of the governed directly. Men are linked one to the other and confine themselves to controlling those next on the chain. The rest follows. This applies to the

³³ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp. 51-52

family as well as to all associations with a leader. In aristocracies society is, in truth, only concerned with *the father*. It only controls the sons through the father; it rules him, and he rules them. Hence the father has not only his natural right. He is given a political right to command. He is the author and support of the family; he is also its magistrate.³⁴

As Burke knew well, land itself serves as the origin point of aristocratic habits and the distinctive types of social memory such societies convey to their inhabitants.³⁵ Marriage and family work to perpetuate the tie to the land; as I note below, aristocracy's greatest insurance rested in maintaining fixed social habits and ideals that cohered with this model.

Organized along the authority of the fathers, the aristocratic social state naturally imposes certain other institutions on those who live by it. Seeking to reproduce a stable, tightly interwoven society of like-minded families (not individuals), aristocracy quietly molds the entire social and economic order to fit this need. Regenerating the stable society rules out more than the tiniest incremental changes; it demands holistic *imitation*. Economically, this necessity results in the creation of guilds and the apprenticeship system, a world in which "every profession is a world apart into which all and sundry cannot enter.... composed of the same families who known one another and among whom a corporate public opinion and a sense of corporate pride soon develop." In terms of taste, aristocrats do not seek to consume goods. They use and pass them down. This demands craftsmanship of extremely high quality, and thus artisans "in aristocratic

³⁴ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 586, emphasis mine

³⁵ On the link between property, memory, and social stability, see Lawler, *Restless Mind*, pp. 20-1 and Mitchell, *Fragility of Freedom*, p. 119.

societies work for a strictly limited number of customers who are very hard to please.”³⁶ Such refined taste promotes habits of memory-transmission, as an apprentice can only learn a trade through patient observation, long practice, and constant evaluation in light of exacting standards. These form ideal conditions for the stable transmission of the peculiar conventions that comprise a given people’s identity in time.

This stable transmission of manners and mores allows aristocracy to develop complicated and highly coherent codes of behavior that rest on the idea of each person taking his proper place, “not too high and not too low.”³⁷ Tied to specific places, each particular group could develop its own mode of living, acting, and even communication that excluded others.³⁸ Thus, each small aristocratic clan or group “forms, as it were, a particular species of the human race, and though they differ in no essential form from the mass of men, they stand to some extent apart and have some needs peculiar to themselves.” Usually constituted around certain ideas of martial virtue, codes of honor serve as the standard by which all individuals earn praise or blame in society. Because of this set of differences, the society as a whole views actions undertaken by one class or one particular person in light of its status, not in light of some universal rule. This means that they will view some acts as irrelevant because a commoner perpetrated them, when a

³⁶ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp. 465-6

³⁷ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 606

³⁸ Tocqueville notes that linguistic dialects serve this function of creating distinctiveness among people, and that more than most peoples, aristocratic language “out to be as at rest as are all its other institutions.” He writes that “when men are no longer held to a fixed social position, when they continually see one another and talk together, when castes are destroyed and classes change and merge, all the words of a language get mixed up too.... Almost all the dialects dividing up the languages of Europe are visibly tending to disappear; in the New World there are no dialects, and in the Old they are vanishing” (*Democracy in America*, pp. 478, 480).

noble behaving in the same way would fall into dishonor.³⁹ Together, these rules of order constitute an important set of social memories that further reinforce their society's self-understanding.

One particularly important consequence of these codes and the innumerable distinctions they help maintain between men emerges in the way they allow entire societies to create social distance—that is, an existence so separate that members of different social classes seemingly “have not at all the same way of thinking or feeling,” and “cannot well understand what the others suffer, nor judge them by themselves.”⁴⁰ Nietzsche called this “the pathos of distance,” where one class enjoys a “continuing and predominant feeling of complete and fundamental superiority of a higher ruling kind in relation to a lower kind, to those ‘below,’” and it renders those who rule unable to “conceive clearly what it was like to suffer if one were not of noble birth.”⁴¹ Not only does this allow unsympathetic aristocrats to deal out enormous violence to those outside their social class, but it also establishes a firm and inescapable principle of mastery and servitude, one where generational bonds reinforce the society's sense of memory and harsh associational life, and even a sense of adoration between lords and vassals.⁴²

Yet the thing one must bear in mind about aristocracy relates to the nature of all these fixed relationships, for they inhere not in the bonds between individual persons but

³⁹ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 617

⁴⁰ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 561

⁴¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 12-13; Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 564.

Tocqueville cites the example of Mme. de Sévigné, whose letters joked about rebels being broken at the wheel, or hung, drawn, and quartered in paragraphs as she discussed her social engagements to her daughter (*Democracy in America*, pp. 563-4). On Tocqueville and Nietzsche's agreement, see Mitchell, *The Fragility of Freedom*, p. 179.

⁴² Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp. 574-5

rather, between men occupying *roles* in society. The close links fostered by habit and social memory and the “sense in which all the generations are contemporaneous” do not make for personal ties; indeed, precisely because of the manner in which aristocracy links men in chains of obligation more than relationships with affection, men in this state usually cannot conceive of such a thing.⁴³ As Tocqueville notes, most of his contemporaries “still regard association as a weapon of war to be hastily improvised and used at once on the field of battle.”⁴⁴ Society may unify itself for action through this great chain of association, but it makes use of it hierarchically—which is to say, slavishly and in deference to the authority of the fathers. On this point, the whole society may indeed retain tight familial bonds, but fathers maintain them through the force of habit and power of imitation, not by any sort of natural affection. Society defines the nature of social relationships before individuals find themselves born into them; until the march of equality sweeps away the entire order, their inheritors will have the same experience.⁴⁵

Unsurprisingly, aristocracy also fosters a strong sense of intellectual stability and authority rooted in the roles assigned to men in society. Aristocratic men “are naturally inclined to be guided in their views by a more thoughtful man or class, and they have little inclination to suppose the masses infallible.”⁴⁶ Because their social state classifies nearly all of them by virtue of their lineage, they do not imagine they can overcome the limits that society presents them and “no one attempts to fight against an inevitable fate.” Legislators and philosophers seek out “eternal laws” and believe in their capacity to

⁴³ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp. 507-8

⁴⁴ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 193

⁴⁵ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 588

⁴⁶ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 435

identify the correct place for each object in nature through “vast ideas... of the dignity, the power, and the greatness of man”; as Wolin puts it, the “stability or fixity of truth, which the ancient philosophers and the mediaeval theologians had revered as its most important attribute, was the complement to the ideal of a motionless society.”⁴⁷ While they occasionally burst out in fits of gaiety in public squares (think of the carnival), aristocrats recognize firm limits to their status.⁴⁸ More importantly still for the concept of memory, “the present generation undertakes to save generations to come the trouble of regulating their own destinies.”⁴⁹

One final consequence of aristocracy’s boundaries bears mentioning. In developing habits far above those of the crowd, they naturally “imagine glorious delights” and set very ambitious goals for themselves. We retain the physical stamp of this in the enormous castles and cathedrals that dot Europe. While Tocqueville readily admits aristocracy often commits “very tyrannical and inhuman acts,” at the same time, “they rarely entertain groveling thoughts, and they show a kind of haughty contempt for petty pleasures even when they indulge in them.”⁵⁰ An idea of their own greatness drives them. This social state remains so intellectually stable that even when aristocrats fall into a sort of dissolution, they do not do so for mere comfort. Instead, “they require... sumptuous depravity and startling corruption,” seemingly worshipping material things and excelling in the “art of besotting themselves”—here we might think of the Marquis

⁴⁷ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp. 453, 462; Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, p. 29

⁴⁸ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 609

⁴⁹ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp. 452-3

⁵⁰ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 462

de Sade.⁵¹

For Tocqueville, aristocracy maintains its social memory through a stable system of primogeniture and all the associated habits of imitation that follow directly from it. Yet regardless of its apparent stability, the mimetic patterns aristocrats follow prove remarkably weak in the face of equality precisely because they require stability of landed inheritance, manners, and perhaps most importantly, the continuing authority of the fathers to subsist. In his discussions of democracy's tendencies as a pure social state, Tocqueville demonstrates the wide variety of ways the logic of equality undermines traditional social memory. This forms the subject of my next section.

IV. Democracy, the Logic of Equality, and the Erosion of Traditional Social Memory

For Tocqueville, Providence ordained aristocracy's decline as the world's dominant social state. Yet while the transition toward conditions of equality unleashed tremendous social energy, in most places the persistence of aristocracy ensured that most of the benefits democratic life should confer would remain unfulfilled.⁵² No people can ever *totally* efface the habits and memories of its political founding, yet on Tocqueville's account democracy confronts or will soon assail every state touched by the idea of equality. This section of the chapter deals with what elsewhere I have called equality's pure logic –where Tocqueville sees it proceeding absent any institutional restraints – and the manner in which equality's effects erode a people's ability to retain and transmit its habits of thought and action that form its social memory. While Tocqueville insists God

⁵¹ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 533

⁵² Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 16

Himself decreed equality, he links its spread with the emergence of the Christian belief and even suggests that the very universality of the Roman Empire prepared the way for the universal church in Rome.⁵³

Yet Tocqueville begins his account of the unmaking of the aristocratic world with a discussion of the law of inheritance and the elimination of primogeniture. Once this happened, “the death of each owner causes a revolution in property; not only do possessions change hand, but their very nature is altered, as they are continually broken up in to smaller and smaller fractions.” In removing the principle of stable family ownership through the inheritance of the fathers, the egalitarian impulse “breaks that intimate connection between family feeling and preservation of the land.” The aristocratic family may still reside on the land; yet nobles find it increasingly difficult to call themselves truly “of” the land because they can no longer realistically expect to own and reside on the same land. This fact that soon deprives them of the “memories and pride” that give them any incentive to keep it.⁵⁴

Tocqueville implies that aristocracy merely concealed our deepest inclinations. He makes the startling claim that even the aristocratic family based its sense of community “on an illusion of personal selfishness; a man seeks to perpetuate himself and, in some sense, to make himself immortal thorough his great-grandchildren.” As soon as the tie to the land disappears, he argues that “personal selfishness turns to its real inclinations,” and very quickly, “each man concentrates on his immediate convenience”

⁵³ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp. 445-6. Also see Mitchell, *Fragility of Freedom*, pp. 162-4.

⁵⁴ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp. 52-3

and perhaps that of the next generation—but no further.⁵⁵ Once the emerging idea of equality breaks this link, no means of reconstituting it persists. The rapid emergence of self-interest proves what aristocracy so skillfully conceals in its rhetoric of natural law: that inequality's entire edifice holds no more weight than any other longstanding convention without a basis in nature.⁵⁶

Without the authority property that helps provide, the role of the fathers quickly diminishes to that of physical necessity alone. Tocqueville notes that in America, “the family, if one takes the word in its Roman and aristocratic sense, no long exists.” The father exercises discipline over his children as long as they remain young, but as they age “the reins of filial obedience are daily slackened.”⁵⁷ Without the authority of the father, perhaps the central link of mediation between the bewildering array of formal and informal aristocratic institutions begins to crumble; the most immediate (and unquestioned) check against those who would transgress its boundaries falters. This holds profound implications for the transmission of aristocracy's imitative social memory.

Where once aristocratic guilds and other social institutions presented an insuperable boundary to innovation, the movement away from inherited title and the concomitant rise of self-interest renders men for the first time capable of making choices regarding their employment. For the first time, *not* mastering a single trade becomes an option.⁵⁸ The innovation of free labor slowly but surely destroys the integrity of guilds and other corporate institutions for the simple reason that “craftsmen don't know or care

⁵⁵ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 53

⁵⁶ On this, see Manent, *Tocqueville*, pp. 70-2

⁵⁷ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 585

⁵⁸ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 403

about one another and indeed hardly ever meet.” No longer restrained by the demands of an aristocracy demanding perfect craftsmanship and assisted by an ever-increasing number of former landholders who “still have the tastes acquired in their time of prosperity without the means to indulge them,” craftsmen can finally exploit every small advantage to make a profit. This leads to constant innovation, quicker production, and the imposition of “standards of prudent and conscious mediocrity” without aspiring to the perfection for which the aristocratic artisan always strove.⁵⁹ As a direct result of this, men find it much more difficult to pass on the habits of a trade. More importantly for a society as a whole, the peculiar customs that came with all guilds began to collapse, and as a result another major locus of social memory collapses.

Alongside this freedom of choice in occupation, the desire for comfort and wealth begins to overtake any hope for honor, glory, or making a name for oneself in history. Because everyone desires consumer goods, and all find themselves in a position of increasing physical enjoyment, society acquires a novel anxiety:

when distinctions of rank are blurred and privileges abolished, when patrimonies are divided up and education and freedom spread, the poor conceive an eager desire to acquire comfort, and the rich think of the danger of losing it. A lot of middling fortunes are established. Their owners have enough physical enjoyments to get a taste for them, but not enough to content them. They never win them without effort or indulge in them without anxiety.

Tocqueville finds this particularly distinctive because this “passion for comfort is essentially a middle-class affair,” but one that those with the memory of the aristocratic

⁵⁹ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp. 465-6

past have a difficult time engaging in without a descent into class conflict—a fact which bears on the French Revolution.⁶⁰ Democratic man begins longing passionately for objects out of ordinary reach; he becomes calculating, self-interested creature, yet as Pierre Manent observes, “there is passion in this calculation, for it orders his life.”⁶¹

One distinctive fact about those who pursue wealth stems from the way they begin to view the past and its traditions as useful as “information” only.⁶² This erosion of the past’s value emerges in part because in an innovation-culture the past becomes a standard we must forever transcend in favor of the newer and better. After the breakdown of ancient authorities and paternal authority, this opens a space where “old conceptions vanish and new ones take their place, then the human mind imagines the possibility of an ideal but always fugitive perfection.”⁶³ Yearning after this constant improvement, Tocqueville notes that Americans habitually make changes for the sake of daily profit that the French only undertook for the sake of victory in war. In the eyes of the Americans – and one assumes, eventually, the world – “something which does not exist is just something that has not been tried yet.”⁶⁴ The socio-economic conditions presented by equality dispose men toward ignoring their cultural inheritance. At the same time, it abets an even more significant change in men’s intellectual dispositions.

Men in all ages betray a strong tendency to oscillate between various extremes. But barring some remedy, democratic times press this set of Augustinian dispositions

⁶⁰ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 531

⁶¹ Manent, *Tocqueville*, p. 60

⁶² Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 429

⁶³ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 453

⁶⁴ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 401-4

even further: in worldly affairs, this results in the pairing of quiet isolation or restless involvement; psychologically, between manic elation and depression; and in terms of belief, between overreaching skepticism and uncritical acceptance. Taken together, these tendencies push beyond the ordinary restiveness of the human soul to become what elsewhere I have termed the Cartesian self.⁶⁵ In addition to the wild oscillation between extremes found in all men, such souls develop several distinctive characteristics, among them tendencies of abstraction and skepticism; a propensity to interpret the world through relentlessly egalitarian (which is to say, envious) eyes; the creation of a sort of self-confirmation through imagined similarity of all individuals and events; and a desire to collapse all their experience and understanding into the material world. I will discuss each in turn.

Confronting a world of constant motion, the Cartesian man finds it difficult to interpret his environment through anything resembling a careful study of his situation. Having thrust himself into a world of restless commercial activity, he lacks the time for self-reflection. History and habit provide him few guides. Having lost the constituent elements of his aristocratic inheritance, “it is easy for a man to lose track of his ancestors’ conceptions or not to bother about them.” With the loss of paternal authority and the authority of great men in general, isolated individuals find it difficult to accept any individual’s word “as proof of anything.” Given the relentless sense of technical improvement such a society confronts him with, the Cartesian soul takes the easy path

⁶⁵ See Matthew Sitman and Brian Smith, “The Rift in the Modern Mind: Tocqueville and Percy on the Rise of the Cartesian Self,” *Perspectives on Political Science*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Winter 2007), esp. pp. 17-18. For other accounts of this change, see Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, pp. 22-26, 85-90; Manent, *Tocqueville*, pp. 42-45; and Lawler, *Restless Mind*, pp. 4-8, 24-27.

and withdraws from his fellow man, becoming “narrowly shut up in himself, and from that basis makes the pretension to judge the world.”⁶⁶ Given his lack of time to delve into the concrete facts or details of any case, such a man turns to general ideas that “permit human minds to pass judgment quickly on a great number of things.” As incomplete as they may be, such notions appeal to him because they flatter his instinct that everyone and everything in the world more or less comports with his own experience.⁶⁷ Solipsistic abstraction undercuts social memory because instead of deriving knowledge from concrete particulars and learned habits, generalization attempts to transcend the particulars entirely, placing the very ground of social memory in danger.

Whether it serves as a cause or effect of equality’s progress, the Cartesian self’s tendency to collapse distinctions between men, ideas, and objects into similitude causes them to greet any instances of genuine difference with varying levels of envy. Precisely because they face constant egalitarian competition against other equally unfettered men, those living in such times find themselves constantly reminded of their own inadequacy. Such men may not be “afraid of great talents but have little taste for them,” and will seldom recognize their superiority.⁶⁸ Yet the real difficulty results from the fact that when “everything is more or less level, the slightest variation is noticed.” Indeed, “the more equal men are, the more insatiable will be their longing for equality.”⁶⁹ This poses a severe danger because no matter how hard men try to think otherwise – and their envy does indeed suggest that all distinctiveness other than their own should perish – some

⁶⁶ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 430

⁶⁷ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp. 437-9

⁶⁸ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp. 198-9

⁶⁹ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 538

inequalities always remain.⁷⁰ Even more importantly, their notions of equality cause them to desire to transform the world in light of their aspirations for unity, simplicity, and similarity; their desire in this regard for an unmediated understanding and experience of the world strips the layers of mediation that aristocratic society and its remnants provide.⁷¹ As Tocqueville notes, the Cartesian self tends to react violently against all remnants of difference and distinctiveness—as we will see, this poses particular dangers when linked to political power.

Being unable to respect boundaries of thought or action and disrespecting all authority save that of their own minds, the Cartesian soul also tends to collapse all the dimensions of human experience into the material realm. Put alternatively, his skepticism and tendency toward abstract thought leads him into collapsing the distinctions between God and man (what Tocqueville terms pantheism), and more generally against any notion of the divine whatsoever. Recall that Tocqueville holds men to be naturally religious creatures. For such creatures, doubt becomes a sort of intellectual poison: at one point, Tocqueville wrote that man's three principal miseries were illnesses, death, and doubt.⁷² Because of this, he argues that when society presents them with “no authority in religion or in politics, men are frightened by the limitless independence with which they are

⁷⁰ Tocqueville argues that men fear being absorbed into the mass so much that they will create innumerable and often irrelevant distinctions between themselves simply to avoid the fate of being so ordinary; society in general may work to level society, but “the personal pride of each individual will always make him try to escape from the common level, and he will form some equality somewhere to his own profit” (*Democracy in America*, p. 605). On the issue of envy and inequality, see Lawler, *Restless Mind*, p. 44-48; and Mitchell, *Fragility of Freedom*, pp. 82-3, 85-6.

⁷¹ On this, in Appendix I, Y, Tocqueville observes: “To force all men to march in step toward the same goal—that is a human idea.... The human idea of unity is almost always sterile, but that of God is immensely fruitful. Men think they prove their greatness by simplifying the means. God's object is simple but His means infinitely various” (*Democracy in America*, pp. 734-5).

⁷² Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, p. 155

faced.... worried and worn out by the constant restlessness of everything,” they inevitably seek solace in political authority or a notion like pantheism that comports with their desire for an easy answer to life’s ultimate mysteries.⁷³ In the face of pure equality, social memory cannot long subsist.

Alongside all of the aforementioned effects of equality, the social distance of aristocracy collapses under equality’s pressure. This fact has at least two relevant dimensions regarding memory. First, society’s manners and mores grow gentler because men’s “sensibility embraces more objects” than those living in aristocratic times. While equality evinces its dangerous tendency toward greater abstraction in the Cartesian self, it also allows men to extend sympathetic recognition to one another in unprecedented ways. Their apparent (if not actual) similarity leads them to “think and feel in nearly the same manner,” so that “each instantaneously can judge the feelings of all the others.” This runs deep enough so that it “makes no difference if strangers or enemies are in question; his imagination at once puts him into their place.”⁷⁴ Having erased the social and emotional barriers between classes, equality also erodes the subtle differences in behavior that make aristocracy’s complicated codes of honor possible.⁷⁵ Turning all men to self-interested pursuit of wealth (rather than a situation where a few chase glory and the rest toil in

⁷³ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 444

⁷⁴ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 564; on this, also see Manent, *Tocqueville*, pp. 48-51.

⁷⁵ Roger Boesche raises an interesting example of this: “Consider the world of dance. With the passing of the aristocratic order, the waltz replaced both the *contre* and the minuet. The eclipse of the minuet reflected the slow extinction of the tightly knit aristocratic community. In learning the minuet, one simultaneously learned the manners and ideology of an aristocratic community; one dance manual, for example, consumed sixty pages in explaining the bow of the minuet in itself, because in mastering the bow, one mastered so much of the demeanor required in aristocratic society. The waltz, easier to learn and needing only two people in order to dance, reflected the fragmentation of society and more fully suited the energy and individualism of the rising bourgeoisie” (*Strange Liberalism*, pp. 44-45).

forgotten servitude to their master's ends) and broken them into innumerable little circles of ever-increasing likeness, motives of honor become more and more "fantastic." This becomes true because in its full sense, honor only "supports the peculiar requirements of a very few people" and therefore cannot long subsist in the face of equality's relentless march. Honor provides men the basis for assigning praise and blame; without it, they find themselves unable to make categorical judgments regarding the rightness of an act or quality of a thing.⁷⁶ The memory-reproducing habits of those who respect honor codes always remain detailed, demanding learning by imitation; against an egalitarian social condition, this sort of memory falls away as an option for democratic man. They must find it in another form.

Before moving on to the manner in which Tocqueville thought the Americans of the nineteenth century ameliorated this condition, at least one other major consequence of equality demands description. As noted above, the Cartesian self demands certitude and seeks to establish it on the basis of its own mental powers. Those possessed by it often fall into isolated solipsism. However, the world constantly confronts them with their ignorance, which they do their best to evade. Unwilling to trust the authority of any particular man or group, nevertheless democratic men "are readier to trust the mass, and public opinion becomes more and more mistress of the world." Because men understand their decisions in terms of self-interest and their ability to draw distinct boundaries between spheres of life or make firm judgments of morality, quality, or taste fades, democratic men put extraordinary faith in the majority opinion on a wide range of

⁷⁶ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp. 620-7

questions. In practice, this “leaves him isolated and defenseless” whenever he attempts to stand against the majority.⁷⁷ As we will see, following their deepest psychological tendencies, such men oscillate between thoughts of self-sufficiency and conformity to the mass, and barring some restraint, will fall into a new kind of slavery.

As Tocqueville presents it, the march of equality poses a severe threat to the persistence of memory in society. However, he does not argue that a people’s memory dies quickly or easily. On the contrary, the memory of a one’s origins leaves a persistent and often-dangerous stamp on life. The difficulty lay in that practices undergirded by memory often persist in seeming health long after the reasons for their existence pass away:

It would seem that in all human institutions, as in the human body, there is a hidden source of energy, the life principle itself, independent of the organs which perform the various functions needed for survival; once this vital flame burns low, the whole organism languishes and wastes away, and though the organs seem to function as before, they serve no useful purpose.⁷⁸

The memory of the aristocratic past persists even among peoples living quite far from a condition of aristocracy. This legacy often manifests itself in violent forms.

Two examples will demonstrate the peculiar ways this plays out in modern times. First, in his notebooks on America, Tocqueville observes that in America, the duel had mostly fallen away, and those “laws which *oblige* a man to fight in some parts of Europe... do not exist at all.” Yet when duels did occur in America, they nearly always

⁷⁷ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 435

⁷⁸ Tocqueville, *Old Regime*, p. 79

ended in death. Here we see the democratic tendency to live in extremes of thought and behavior: while the *amount* of honor-based behavior recedes, what remains grows in intensity.⁷⁹ However, Tocqueville presents a second, more intriguing case that belies the pure logic of equality. He relates the story of a young Native American “who had been educated at a New England school, where he had greatly distinguished himself and acquired all the external aspect of a civilized man.” When war broke out between the United States and England, the young man led his tribe’s warriors into battle. Tocqueville’s interlocutor noted that the Americans “allowed the Indians into their ranks only on condition that they abstained from the horrible practice of scalping the defeated,” but that in the glee of battle, the young man could not resist taking the scalp of an Englishman.⁸⁰ The pure logic of equality gives men no way to comprehend these desires and having lost the conscious memory of why men act by codes of honor, it sees them as atavisms.

Yet these instances provide just two points of confirmation that Tocqueville’s intuition regarding equality’s limits may prove true. He thinks it possible to destroy the practices that convey memory, but their stamp remains for generations. Under conditions of equality, society strives to make men equal, but individuals always “try to escape from the common level.”⁸¹ Even against the imperatives of the Cartesian self, this impulse

⁷⁹ He writes that men fight in America “to kill; one fights because one sees no hope of getting one’s adversary condemned to death. There are very few duels, but they almost always end in death.” On the other hand, Europeans rarely fight duels “except in order to say that one has done so.” They pursue the appearance of honor-seeking but in actuality live in more moderate, almost-bourgeois ways. See Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, pp. 216-7. Also see *Democracy in America*, pp. 618-9.

⁸⁰ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 319n1; see also Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, pp. 37-8.

⁸¹ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 605

provides men some intuition that memory remains critical for their lives. With this in mind, I now turn to Tocqueville's discussion of America and how the colonists escaped the peril of pure equality.

V. The Maintenance of Social Memory in America

Tocqueville sees America as the best model for learning how the world might respond to the coming of equality, and sought "the shape of democracy itself" in the patterns of behavior Americans established.⁸² What makes the colonists so unique stems from the fact they managed to break from the aristocratic past *and* avoid falling into some form of absolute power: "Circumstances, origin, education, and above all mores allowed them to establish and maintain the sovereignty of the people."⁸³ This section deals with the crucial balance Tocqueville held the Americans to have established between the separation from old memories of aristocratic oppression while maintaining certain other, more beneficial practices conducive to freedom; in it I explore Tocqueville's understanding of America's origins, the effect these beginnings have on their social memory, and the ways in which he believed Americans maintained what Peter Lawler terms their "truthful incoherence."⁸⁴

Recall Tocqueville's theory of social states: Peoples bear the marks of their origins, and even if "nature has not given each people an indelible national character one must at least admit that physical or political causes have made a people's spirit adopt habits which are very difficult to eradicate, even though it is no longer subject to any of

⁸² Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 19

⁸³ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 57

⁸⁴ Lawler, *Restless Mind*, p. 138

those causes.”⁸⁵ On Tocqueville’s account, even though in some sense they escaped the shadow of their specifically aristocratic history, the founding colonists in America do not differ on this point. He traces *their* origins – or at least the part they maintained on arriving in America – to two fundamental sources: their Puritan faith and their English civic and political habits. Both reinforced one another to help create a series of distinctively democratic sources for social memory, and thus, for the maintenance of liberty under difficult conditions. To be clear, Tocqueville’s theory undercuts any purely political understanding of the American Founding; on his account Americans talk a great deal about the Founding Fathers and the constitutional understandings this origin ostensibly sets in motion, but this is not what maintains their government in *practice*.⁸⁶

Regarding the Puritans, Tocqueville insists that they understood the New World as their own Promised Land. They emigrated to America for predominately theological, not political or economic reasons:

No necessity forced them to leave their country; they gave up a desirable social position and assured means of livelihood; nor was their object in going to the New World to better their position or accumulate wealth; they tore themselves away from home comforts in obedience to a purely intellectual craving; in facing the inevitable sufferings of *exile* they hoped for the triumph of *an idea*.⁸⁷

The idea of exile and implied return here bears an important meaning: Tocqueville cites Nathaniel Morton, a historian of the early colonies who demonstrates in many ways that

⁸⁵ Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, p. 161. Also see Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp. 31-32; on the deep link between origins and later identity, also see Mitchell, *Fragility of Freedom*, pp. 33-39.

⁸⁶ Here, Tocqueville stands in direct tension with the predominately Straussian understanding of the Founding. For one example of his interpretation of Founding Fathers, see Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 373.

⁸⁷ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 36, emphasis on “exile” mine.

they understood themselves as an explicitly Old Testament people working out Biblical history itself.⁸⁸

Precisely because of their faith, the Puritans took the ideals of human equality, liberty, and political independence seriously, a fact which led them to organize their communities in a democratic fashion from the very beginning. Yet by their understanding, all of these goods came through their religiosity: “in America it is religion which leads to enlightenment and the observance of divine laws which leads men to liberty.”⁸⁹ Here Tocqueville understands this as preeminently an issue of boundaries and motion because our permanent psychological instability demands some salutary limits.⁹⁰ A people with fixed religious beliefs may act with a freedom and certitude that others cannot because in their

moral world everything is classified, coordinated, foreseen, and decided in advance. In the world of politics everything is in turmoil, contested, and uncertain. In the one case obedience is passive, though voluntary; in the other there is independence, contempt of experience, and jealousy of all authority.... Religion, being free and powerful within its own sphere and content with the position reserved for it, realizes that its sway is all the better established because it relies only on its own powers and rules men’s hearts without external support.⁹¹

Having firmly established moral and theological limits for their society above and beyond the “universal and permanent needs of mankind,” the Puritans remade a thin but very real

⁸⁸ On this point, see Mitchell, *Fragility of Freedom*, pp. 38-9. On the more general context of this Puritan moment, see Barbara Allen, *Tocqueville, Covenant, and the Democratic Revolution: Harmonizing Earth with Heaven* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005), especially chapters 1-3. More generally, see also Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

⁸⁹ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 45

⁹⁰ On this, see Mitchell, *Fragility of Freedom*, pp. 29-33.

⁹¹ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 47

version of what Tocqueville says may disappear under the pressures of equality: a code of honor, which as he defines it “is nothing but this particular rule, based on a particular state of society, by means of which a people distributes praise or blame.”⁹²

The Puritans not only reinforced their social memory through their community’s distinctive, stable habits of action and thought. Their beliefs also rooted their anthropology in various constraints and reminded them of the limits of human life; they forged a way of being that naturally disposes men to both accept hardship and reject attempts to reenchant the world. I will discuss faith’s beneficial psychological effects in more depth later in this section, but at the moment it suffices to note that the Puritan founding far outstrips the later political one in terms of importance for Tocqueville. While Tocqueville does not make this argument, perhaps the Puritan grounding in Biblical history forms one implicit reason they not only kept but expanded upon so many English social and political institutions, for these institutions rest in the first instance on the accumulated and embodied wisdom social memory provides, and their security demands society cultivate habits that reproduce them.

For Tocqueville, the most beneficial result of Americans embracing English civic and legal habits emerged in a seemingly innocuous fact: “the great privilege of the Americans is to be able to make retrievable mistakes.”⁹³ They maintained this unique ability precisely because the English style of both political and judicial order rely on precedent, not purely abstract principle. To some degree, the structure of the system and

⁹² Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp. 616-7

⁹³ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 232

the constant reminders of how past actions bear on the present work to mitigate even bad laws. American laws may “almost always” emerge in a “defective or untimely” fashion—but to some degree this does not matter because their visibility creates a false perception of their overall importance.⁹⁴ Such a system absolutely requires a strong sense of social memory that conveys the lessons and practices of a people’s linear history because memory rather than some image of nostalgic perfection forms the standard of practical judgment for citizens’ lives. Instead of an image generated from an imagined past, the English style relies on a judgment derived from the accumulated moments of linear time.

Tocqueville notes that while he knew men in both the United States and in England that attacked their political leaders, he never met “a single man who did not regard provincial freedom as a great blessing.”⁹⁵ Here again, the *beginnings* of the colonies matters. Political life emerged out of associational life, and because of this essential fact the “right of association is of English origin and always existed in America.”⁹⁶ The existence of local institutions through which men quietly pass on the knowledge of how to act in common and the precedents, manners, and moral intuitions that guide public action forms a guarantee against the worst tendencies of the Cartesian self in social life and politics. These English-style institutions establish habits that guard freedom by teaching “people to appreciate its peaceful enjoyment and accustom them to make use of it.”⁹⁷ In order to make use of the benefits this social and political life provides, men must immerse themselves in the particular details of the community rather

⁹⁴ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 232

⁹⁵ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 97

⁹⁶ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 192

⁹⁷ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 63

than find comfort in their hollow theories about how the world should or might work, and allow themselves to be drawn out of their small, isolated private life.⁹⁸

The institutions of local life and habits of thinking these instill reverberate through the entire legal and political structure of society. Indeed, the way these formed “a perfectly logical chain” struck Tocqueville as profoundly important.⁹⁹ I will note only a few of Tocqueville’s examples of this. Ordinary men turn to common law lawyers – decidedly not the uneasy mix of statutory, theoretical, and decreasingly precedent-based practitioners we encounter today – not as the authoritative interpreters of abstract doctrines, but rather as the bearers of wisdom about “what has been done.” This makes them akin to “the Egyptian priests, being, as they were, the only interpreter of an occult science.”¹⁰⁰ Precisely because citizens not only share a part in making the law – not only through their vote but through the practices of daily life – they see the man who offends against it as “an enemy of the human race.”¹⁰¹

Tocqueville highlights the continuity between the original English practice, the American legal system, and lived experience by noting the role of the justice of the peace. Found in every township, this official stood “halfway between a man of the world and a magistrate, an administrator and a judge,” and held sway as “society’s policeman, a

⁹⁸ The English heritage works to save democratic souls from themselves in a number of ways: In addition to guarding against isolation, Tocqueville writes that if “there is a subject concerning which a democracy is particularly liable to commit itself blindly and extravagantly to general ideas, the best possible corrective is to make the citizens pay daily, practical attention to it. This will force them to go into details, and the details will show them the weak points in the theory. This remedy is often painful but always effective” (*Democracy in America*, p. 442).

⁹⁹ Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, p. 176

¹⁰⁰ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 267

¹⁰¹ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 97

matter requiring good sense and integrity more than knowledge.”¹⁰² All of these institutions remind men of memory’s importance and provide a means of transmitting it through the generations in ways that require neither the extraordinary stability of aristocratic inheritance nor the authority of the fathers. For Tocqueville, America’s English origins provide the society a means of allowing the past to break unobtrusively into the present by using the latent wisdom of precedent to moderate and guide – but not aristocratically preordain – action in the present.¹⁰³

Tocqueville knows well that the fragility of republican government lay in the difficulty of maintaining both a collective sense of self *and* the ideals of provincial freedom, yet in Boston and in other places in America, he encountered men and women convinced that in order to persist, “a people must be *balanced, religious, and very enlightened*.”¹⁰⁴ As we have seen, any sense of self or persistent social institution rests on a firm foundation of social memory. On Tocqueville’s account of American institutions, the colonists adapted the ancient memory-conveying institutions of lost aristocracy for use in conditions of social equality. They put their innovation to good effect in moderating the excesses of the Cartesian self. In place of the authoritative traditions of the fathers, Americans understand tradition as a stock of information.¹⁰⁵ Yet surprisingly,

¹⁰² Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp. 75-6

¹⁰³ Here it is important to remember that one cannot teach these things in a classroom; one must learn them through habits and practice, a fact which we will see becomes crucial for Tocqueville’s dissection of the French Revolution—and his prediction of what may come to pass in America. On this, see Boesche, *Strange Liberalism*, pp. 181-5. On the mediating bond of past and present, see Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds*, pp. 111-2.

¹⁰⁴ Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, p. 48. Citing “the able résumé made by Mr. Madison” in *Federalist* No. 18, Tocqueville observes that the loss of identity leading to violent faction is the principle defect of such governments (*Journey to America*, pp. 248-9).

¹⁰⁵ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 429

far from ruling out the transmission of ancient social practices, this fact gave them new life, for Americans have both the freedom of innovation and failure—while it always takes time, they can learn from their mistakes. Aristocrats associate failure with shame and death.¹⁰⁶ They accomplished this principally through the loosened but deeper bonds within the democratic family, by means of the moderating influence of sincere faith, and on the basis of a life of association. I discuss each in turn.

With the collapse of social distance occasioned by equality, the democratic family undergoes two simultaneous changes: the breakdown of paternal authority loosens bonds of obligation, yet family members see a remarkable increase in their sense of uncomplicated natural affection for one another. As with everything related to the death of aristocracy, Tocqueville ties this change to the abolition of primogeniture.

When the father of a family has little property his son and he live constantly in the same place and carry on the same work together. Habit and necessity bring them together and force them all the time to communicate with each other. There is bound, then, to be a sort of intimate familiarity between them which makes power less absolute and goes ill with respectful formalities.¹⁰⁷

While “nothing forcibly brings them together,” the democratic family faces nothing apart from the imperatives of self-interest that might drive a wedge between them. The lack of permanent obligation in family life requires that men turn to faith and wider associations

¹⁰⁶ The very structure of townships shows this fact. The ability to endure failure and persist also bears importance: Democracy can sustain bankruptcy and other disasters to which honor-loving aristocratic societies could only respond with shame and self-negation. See Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp. 62-3, 224-5.

¹⁰⁷ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 587

to help bolster their bonds of mutual affection.¹⁰⁸

Simultaneously tighter emotional bonds and relaxed paternal authority carry many consequences, not the least of which for Tocqueville bears on the relationship between the sexes. Having applied a notion of the division of labor to the family, Americans “have carefully separated the functions of man and of woman so that the great work of society may be better performed.”¹⁰⁹ Tocqueville sees life as “a serious duty imposed on us, to be seen through to the end to our credit,” one whose greatest purpose rests in continued generation.¹¹⁰ This makes strong families vital for perpetuating civilization as a whole. Recognizing the importance of this natural tie, the Americans took care to preserve it by shaming those who would violate the marriage bond.¹¹¹ At risk of stating the obvious, families form the first and most important location for imitation and transmission of the practices and beliefs that make up social memory; precisely because the habits of life acquired in one sphere spill over into all the others, for Tocqueville the family forms society’s most important bulwark against the erosion of memory, and hence, of freedom.¹¹²

As I noted earlier in mentioning the importance of America’s Puritan origins, faith grounds men’s minds in ways particularly important for the democratic soul. When faced with an unbound horizon, men seek solace and comfort wherever they can; though

¹⁰⁸ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 588

¹⁰⁹ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 601

¹¹⁰ Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, p. 155

¹¹¹ Tocqueville notes that among the Americans, “the seducer is as much dishonored as the victim” (*Democracy in America*, p. 602).

¹¹² Regarding the spillover effects between different spheres of life, see Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 215; see also Mitchell, *Fragility of Freedom*, pp. 22-28.

society does not require *agreement* about the one true religious faith, all that matters is that the citizens “should profess religion” that provides some insuperable, ineffable boundaries to human action.¹¹³ Religion draws men away from their material concerns and workaday affairs—an aspect of life where the Cartesian self finds itself particularly likely to fall into danger. As self-interested men, democratic peoples betray a striking propensity to become not merely selfish and egoistic, but perfectly individualistic and filled with “a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends” leaving “the greater society to look after itself.”¹¹⁴

The family alone cannot prevent this lapse into isolation, but with combined with faith, men find themselves more capable of a moderated self-interest, *properly understood*. This curious species of self-interest for which Tocqueville claims Americans give themselves too little credit, “continually leads them to help one another and disposes them to freely give part of their time and wealth for the good of the state.”¹¹⁵ Allowing men to constitute their self-interest in and through their relations with their fellows, this doctrine

does not inspire great sacrifices, but every day it prompts some small ones; by itself it cannot make a man virtues, but its discipline shapes a lot of orderly, temperate, moderate, careful, and self-controlled citizens. If it does not lead the will directly to virtue, it

¹¹³ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 290. See also Manent, *Tocqueville*, pp. 85-88. On the importance of the ineffable command, see Mitchell, *Fragility of Freedom*, pp. 27-28.

¹¹⁴ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 506

¹¹⁵ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 526

establishes habits which unconsciously turn it that way.¹¹⁶

Americans refuse to admit publicly that they assimilate and moderate their self-interest into their faith and its associated virtues of hope and charity. However, their stated theory of human nature belies their deeper, practice-based mode of living.

Religion also provides one additional support to social memory in that it maintains a space within the soul for considering a longer time-horizon. Here the link to biblical time appears quite profoundly. While the solitary Cartesian self naturally collapses all experience into the material realm and this relegates time to a bodily experience: thus, all considerations of memory and history beyond the limited view of the isolated self and its restless, expansive desires become difficult to fathom. Precisely because of these tendencies toward immoderate self interest, he who follows the Cartesian path constantly engage in a “futile pursuit of that complete felicity which always escapes him,” and for him, time itself collapses into the present moment alone.¹¹⁷ However, faith alone can partially and temporarily reorient such men away from the short-term and allow them to consider a wider frame of vision while conveying a hope of resolving the fundamental contradictions of human existence. Without a mode of living that renders successive events relevant to one another, memory cannot persist. Absent a sense of resolution which grants us an acceptance of our finite place in the universe, man’s restlessness causes him to evade his past and future in favor of the present moment alone.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 527

¹¹⁷ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp. 536, 547-9

¹¹⁸ On Tocqueville’s sense of faith as a resolution, see Lawler, *Restless Mind*, pp. 145-8.

Yet *neither* family nor faith alone allows a complete removal of the tensions in human life. Here the English habits of association work to reinforce belief and natural affection, and these in turn fortify our ability to come together. Understood as the habit of combining for specific ends in civil, political, and commercial life, Tocqueville discusses a bewildering array of consequences that associations portend for various aspects of political life. But for whatever ends men constitute them, at the heart of these associations stands the idea that only through a sincere coming together among citizens in public can we preserve freedom: “*Feelings and ideas are renewed, the heart enlarged, and the understanding developed only by the reciprocal action of men one upon the other.*”¹¹⁹ Only association in society at large can manage the renewal of men’s hearts. As intrinsically meaningful organizations, associations foster the exercise and development of social memory. Family alone cannot do these things because, having carefully chosen their family and dear friends, democratic man can avoid risk, confrontation, and self-exposure before a potentially hostile but at the very least unfamiliar audience. Nor can sincere faith by itself suffice, because without a physical place that draws believers together, social practices that transmit the memory of the faith, and a liturgy that embodies this shared memory, faith becomes little more than an exercise in abstract thought.¹²⁰

Thus, truly *generative* association depends on resources very difficult to constitute – and as I have already intimated and will further explore in the next section –

¹¹⁹ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 515, emphasis mine.

¹²⁰ On this, see Mitchell, *Fragility of Freedom*, pp. 109-10.

that become increasingly tenuous under equality's motion. Faith, family, and association all depend on one another for reinforcement and can easily falter if circumstances or the actions of men break the memory that sustains these foundations of life in society. While Tocqueville realizes that men generally only realize these three institutions imperfectly, all of them perform vital roles in maintaining memory's constraints and the freedom that follows from them. How Tocqueville thought the descent into one form of despotism transpired in France and the manner in which it might occur everywhere else forms the subject of my final section, and it to this prophetic history I now turn.

VI. On Ideology, Quietude, and the Despotism of the Soul

Democracy in America culminates in a chilling prophecy that depicts a world of lethargic, isolated, and childlike men incapable of acting together without the direction and approval of an overwhelming, protective administrative state. In his *Old Regime and the Revolution*, Tocqueville dissects the process by which a succession of malevolent social forces, errors, and short-sighted political decisions gave rise to the fanatical violence of the French Revolution. Both works provide startling images of how societies that seek to efface memory could end, and each alternative ends in despotism. By way of conclusion, I argue briefly that between their accounts of how national origins shape identity, we might identify the two most likely paths to tyranny, one which bears more loosely on America, and the other in the post-aristocratic world still trapped in memories of glory, greatness, and lost virtue.

Tyranny requires the disruption of social memory for a number of reasons. In short, the little habits, distinctive customs, linguistic differences, and cultural sensibilities

that differentiate men from one another, provide them a stable sense of self and a mental space to which they may return for guidance. These embodiments of memory solidify the ground upon which all institutions that mediate human relations stand. Because the logic of equality strips away these entities that stand against the centralization of the state's administrative powers, which by their very nature take authority and judgment out of the hands of citizens and subject decisions to the uniform rule of bureaucracy, "[e]very central power which follows its natural instincts loves equality and favors it. For equality singularly facilitates, extends, and secures its influence."¹²¹

Tocqueville draws an important distinction between administrative and governmental centralization. In times of equality, he sees the latter as inevitable in the face of a commercial society's needs. The power to adjudicate legal decisions, impose regulatory standards, and keep order in the nation must prevail under such conditions. However, administrative centralization looks to *control* a wide variety of "interests of special concern" to various localities, and while it can work wonders "in assembling, at a given time and place, all the available resources of the nation," it does so at the cost of the citizens' continued independence.¹²² In France, the monarchy took every opportunity to foster the growth of unaccountable administrative bureaucracies totally unaccountable to the local provinces they controlled; indeed, the French government saw the civic and political associations which hoped to influence the path of the provinces as a dangerous menace to their authority and consistently worked to undermine the stability, power, and

¹²¹ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 673

¹²² Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp. 87-88

influence of these local associations.¹²³

While in America, the federal apparatus began as a barely centralized government with hardly any administrative powers whatsoever, Tocqueville fears the Americans and all democratic peoples might eventually cede local authority to the state, doing so without any active efforts like those French localities faced from the monarchy.¹²⁴ Once he begins his descent into a narrow self-interest and lapse into the mentality of the Cartesian self, democratic man “naturally turns his eyes toward that huge entity which alone stands out above the universal level of abasement.”¹²⁵ He seeks the benevolent security of a power that exists to manage and ensure the people against any risk to their material well-being. Tocqueville argues this became one significant motivation behind the actions of the French Revolutionaries.¹²⁶ Isolated, materially obsessed men do not associate with each other. Those who fail to come together become further enclosed in their individualism. Under such conditions no habits or memory of freedom can persist.

This movement creates conditions ripe for the utter destruction of the fragile liberal inheritance; the French Revolutionaries and all peoples fully possessed by the logic of equality fail to understand that no idea of rights can suffice to preserve both equality and freedom without long-established habits that support them. Their disrespect for history and memory led them to deny the sanctity of wills, and it “never seemed to cross anyone’s mind that the surest way of training people to violate the rights of the

¹²³ Tocqueville, *Old Regime*, pp. 34-39, 64, 95-96

¹²⁴ One account of how this has largely changed since Tocqueville’s time can be found in Robert Higgs, *Crisis and Leviathan: Critical Episodes in the Growth of American Government* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

¹²⁵ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 672

¹²⁶ For one example see Tocqueville, *Old Regime*, pp. 70-1

living is to set at nought the wishes of the dead.”¹²⁷ Once they accede to that measure, the basic habits and property rights of the living soon follow. Men who live in a world of concrete immediacy retain little reason to respect any moment beyond their own. In this vein, Tocqueville writes:

For contractual engagements they had no respect, and no concern for private rights. Indeed, private rights were, in their eyes, negligible; only the public interest mattered. Though most of them [the revolutionaries] were amiable, well-meaning persons, men of substance, conscientious public servants or able administrators, such was their enthusiasm for the cause they sponsored that they carried their theories to fanatical lengths.¹²⁸

Tocqueville implies that those with British political habits or sincere faith escape this extreme because of the practices these forces instilled. Others enjoyed different luck, and face not only the eventual mildness of administrative bureaucracy, but also the horrors of violent tyranny.

In France, the intransigent memory of aristocracy created an ever-increasing pressure for reform that finally exploded in revolutionary violence. Given the democratic soul’s propensity for simple, unitary, and direct “solutions” to the world’s “problems” the ideology that led to the terror was a natural outgrowth. The memory of aristocracy left the French “more prone to heroism than to humdrum virtue, apter for genius than good sense, more inclined to think up grandiose schemes than to carry through great enterprises.”¹²⁹ As thoroughly as the revolution attempted to efface memory, it could not erase France’s

¹²⁷ Tocqueville, *Old Regime*, p. 190

¹²⁸ Tocqueville, *Old Regime*, p. 159

¹²⁹ Tocqueville, *Old Regime*, p. 211

political origins; in America, those who desire various forms of religious reenchantment as well as secular, egalitarian leftists find themselves thwarted by the remnant of old political habits of restraint. Our common sense and social memory keep us from genuine revolution.

Yet we cannot so easily dismiss the other, darker shadow Tocqueville casts at the end of *Democracy*. There he fears that the full force of memory-effacing equality would prove victorious in its aspiration to level all the genuine differences upon which one can build vibrant faith and associational life. Unfettered by the salutary boundaries those forces create, men would find themselves under

an immense, protective power which is alone responsible for securing their enjoyment and watching over their fate. That power is absolute, thoughtful of detail, orderly, provident, and gentle. It would resemble parental authority if, father-like, it tried to prepare its charges for a man's life, but on the contrary, it only tries to keep them in perpetual childhood. It likes to see the citizens enjoy themselves, provided they think of nothing but enjoyment.... Why should it not entirely relieve them from the trouble of thinking and all the cares of living?¹³⁰

The Cartesian self's tendency to love abstraction, seek satisfaction in material goods, deny faith, and strip away all layers of mediation from human experience in pursuit of these goods leads one directly into the arms of the tutelary despotism.

As I have argued, to actually accomplish the destruction of liberty, both soft and hard tyranny must efface the ground of social memory and foster indifference by isolating men from one another. Our commercial life does a good deal to break men

¹³⁰ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 692

apart; only conscious efforts on the part of those who value freedom can save social memory and institutions that draw them back together.¹³¹ Tocqueville's liberal sense of political limits and his realism lead him to conclude that the enchanted hope of purifying the world or making men virtuous will only end in creating slaves. As his experience studying prisons taught him, power cannot easily mold men—it may, however, check their worst habits.¹³² However perilous their situation, in democratic times men still retain the capacity to choose the path between a life struggling for equality in freedom, and acquiescence in mere existence under the tutelary despotism. No political program will save us from this choice and from the difficult task of continually rebuilding community in the face of relentless change. Civic action undertaken in light of social memory might suffice.

Yet fortunately, and dangerously, liberal politics requires we neither seek to erase social memory, nor attempt to freeze it into some form of nostalgic, repetitive tradition. While we often underestimate ourselves in light of our ancestors, we can never return to their social state. Those who seek the nostalgic restoration of some lost tradition or hope to revive the virtues of the aristocratic life must reckon with Tocqueville's powerful notion of their provenance: as artifacts of a world where social distance reigned, we

¹³¹ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp. 237-40, 509-10

¹³² Tocqueville and his friend Gustave de Beaumont wrote: "If it be possible to obtain moral reformation for any human being, it seems that we ought to expect it... for youths, whose misfortune was cause less by crime, than by inexperience, and in whom all the generous passions of youth may be excited. With a criminal, whose corruption is inveterate, and deeply rooted, the feeling of honesty is not awakened, because the sentiment is extinct. With a youth, this feeling exists, though it has not yet been called into action." See their *On the Penitentiary System in the United States and Its Application in France*, trans. Francis Lieber (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), p. 150.

cannot restore them.¹³³ The manner in which democracy must proceed in a constant, almost Sisyphean task of re-knitting democratic social bonds will not appeal to those with the remnant of aristocratic tastes. But only through this effort might we retain any hope of protecting our fragile social memory and defending liberal order.¹³⁴

Most scholars categorize Tocqueville's aspirations and assessments at varying points under the modern notions of "optimism" or "pessimism," but ultimately that misses the point: Tocqueville's rhetoric follows the Christian understanding of life lived with either hope or despair, and given the extent of his sense of loss, one can only marvel at his heroic defense of a disenchanted world in which he knew he could not live, but which he earnestly hoped could persist in liberty.

¹³³ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 695

¹³⁴ Manent, *Tocqueville*, p. 27; Lerner, *Revolutions Revisited*, pp. 128-30

Chapter 5

Estranged from the Present: Nietzsche and the Dream of Reenchantment

There is great advantage to be gained in distantly estranging ourselves from our age and for once being driven as it were away from its shores back on to the ocean of the world-outlooks of the past. Looking back at the coast from this distance we command a view, no doubt for the first time, of its total configuration, and when we approach it again we have the advantage of understanding it better as a whole than those who have never left it.

—Friedrich Nietzsche¹

I. Rejecting History's Burden

As I note in the previous chapters, memory and nostalgia each place peculiar burdens on those who embrace them. At this point, I hope to have shown that the history of political thought provides evidence that both modes of recollection lead their adherents into viewing social and political decline in specific and distinct ways. Nietzsche forms no exception to this, and in this chapter, I argue that his central doctrines rest on a nostalgic and, in his mind, explicitly pagan understanding of time. Unlike Rousseau, he explicitly embraces the idea of eternal recurrence—although, as I will explain, he deploys it in a significantly different, future-oriented, and more explicitly *reflective* manner than did his ancient predecessors.

Nietzsche sought to diagnose the source of Western society's manifest exhaustion and decline. In place of this sickness, he hoped that his teaching might foster a doctrine of life-affirmation, independence, and vitality. In order to accomplish this, Nietzsche

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 195

emphasizes the need to reject the burden of history—and thus cannot admit the benefits social memory offers those who accept its restraints. Like Rousseau, he endorses an extremely creative theoretical edifice aimed at resolving the dilemma effacing memory presents. While Rousseau’s doctrines aim at the establishment of entire polities where free and equal men might live authentically, Nietzsche denies the very ground upon which such an existence might take place. No longer perceived as a problem, social and moral inequality among people becomes the most important basis of a healthy society; instead of imagining that we might create a social order better suited to manage human discontent, Nietzsche locates his eventual hopes of resolving the failure of human life he witnessed in modernity within the individual human will.²

Not unexpectedly, Nietzsche also differs from both Burke and Tocqueville in rather profound ways as well. For Nietzsche, those who understand the world in terms of disenchanted biblical time while hoping to respect their historical inheritance cannot live well. As I will show, Nietzsche sees any life lived without the freedom to transcend petty faith and moral scruples as contemptible, for he thought “life itself to be an instinct for growth, for endurance, for the accumulation of force: for *power*: when there is no will to power, there is decline.”³ Nietzsche’s peculiar affirmation of life requires men negate biblical time’s influence upon them. He demands that men deny the burden that

² On the contrast between Rousseau and Nietzsche on this point, see Karl Löwith, *Nietzsche’s Philosophy of the Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, trans. J. Harvey Lomax (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 186-7. More generally, see Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Nietzsche contra Rousseau: A Study of Nietzsche’s Moral and Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

³ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ in The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, trans. Judith Norman, eds. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 6. On Nietzsche’s understanding of just what this “power” means, see George de Huszar, “Nietzsche’s Theory of Decadence and the Transvaluation of Values,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (June 1945), pp. 259-60.

respecting historical memory imposes on those who wish to obey its imperatives through restrained communities grounded to some degree on custom and precedent. Precisely because of this point, in this chapter I further note the ways in which Nietzsche's philosophy cannot support political life in liberal order. Indeed, he explicitly and diametrically opposes maintaining the present social order by calling for the total destruction of Western culture and the subsequent affirmation of a new system of values. However, this novel vision of the future always remains conditioned by his understanding of the past.⁴ Like Rousseau, Nietzsche looks backward nostalgically while simultaneously aiming forward at a better future.

At first glance, Nietzsche seems to reject claims of nostalgia upon the modern mind. He cannot bear the idea of "thinking backward," and insists we direct our gaze to the future:

'Ah, if only I had lived in those days!' – that is the speech of foolish and trifling men.

Every piece of history one has studied *seriously*, though it be that of the most lauded land of the past, will rather lead one to exclaim at last: 'Anything rather than back to that....'

Posterity can be relied upon to pass the same judgment on our own age: it will have been intolerable, life in it unliveable. – And yet does not everyone endure it in his own age?⁵

Even if he does not *actually* wish to recapture the past, Nietzsche posits a semi-historical ideal in a highly-stylized image of the Presocratic Greek world. While he rejects the

⁴ Since at least the end of World War II, many authors worked tirelessly to rehabilitate Nietzsche's thinking—and in doing so interpret some of his more extreme statements as poetic excess or applicable only to the interior struggles of the free spirit's heart. For reasons that I will make clear later in this chapter, I disagree firmly with this interpretation. For the source of many of these existentialist interpretations see Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974). For a more recent introduction to the "kinder, gentler" Nietzsche, see Robert Solomon and Kathleen Higgins, *What Nietzsche Really Said* (New York: Schochen Books, 2001).

⁵ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p. 295

personal reflective nostalgia for the recent past, all of his theorizing aims at reviving an understanding based on that of the long lost Greek world. He sought refuge and nostalgic restoration through the ancients, or at least in their mode of living *before* the Jewish and Christian “slave morality” corrupted society.⁶ More specifically, he argued that the pagan idea of *eternal recurrence* represented the highest possible alternative to the prison of biblical time. This alternative provided him both a way of redeeming the ephemeral chaos of the world as well as a metaphysics that alleviated the burden of the past in favor of a better future.⁷

This chapter will proceed in five main parts. First, I outline the standard Nietzsche uses to comprehend the ongoing failure of vitality in Western culture. Here, I show how he depicts the life-affirming ancients, emphasizing their historical unreflectiveness and relations to suffering, death, and tragedy. Second, I turn to Nietzsche’s various accounts of how moderns fell into disorder. Throughout his various efforts, he presents two different but complementary stories about this descent. One account is intellectual and cultural, consisting in the death of Dionysian thinking in Greece; the other plays itself out on ethical grounds in what he terms the slave revolt against the ethic of nobility. Because for Nietzsche these two movements introduce the problem of living historically, my third section will consist of an interlude on his understanding of this phenomenon and the

⁶ Löwith, *Eternal Recurrence*, pp. 95, 119. On Nietzsche’s relationship to the Greeks more generally, see Dale Wilkerson, *Nietzsche and the Greeks* (London and New York: Continuum, 2006).

⁷ Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 216 and Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), p. 219. For three in-depth philosophical treatments of Nietzsche, time, and his eternal return, see Joan Stambaugh, *The Problem of Time in Nietzsche*, trans. John F. Humphrey (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1987); Stambaugh, *Nietzsche’s Thought of Eternal Return* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972); and Alastair Moles, *Nietzsche’s Philosophy of Nature and Cosmology* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), esp. chapters 1, 7, and 9.

particular difficulties it presents for the affirmation of authentic human living. In my fourth section, I pick up Nietzsche's tale of civilizational crisis by detailing the outworkings of slave morality in Protestantism, modern philosophy, and what he terms the "Last Man." Fifthly, I sketch Nietzsche's attempt to solve the dilemma presented by decline and show how the higher man's transvaluation of all value and embrace of reflective eternal recurrence mandate explosions of violence in society to prepare for the coming of the overman. Finally, I conclude with some thoughts on the political consequences of Nietzsche's assault on memory and biblical time. For the moment, however, I begin with the ancients.

II. Nietzsche's Life-Affirming Ancients

In this section, I discuss several characteristics Nietzsche emphasizes about ancient, noble peoples in general and the Greeks in particular. These include their relationship to time and history, the "pathos of distance" that marks their social order, the moral and religious beliefs that flow from this, and finally, the sorts of actions Nietzsche ascribes to his ancient peoples. Nietzsche's admiration for the ancient world rests on his peculiarly nostalgic understanding of how the ancients lived. He saw them as the great hope for rejuvenating European civilization because avoiding the burden of historical reflection, they could act without guilt and understand their place within an eternally recurring order. Though later peoples disavow many details of this mode of reasoning as purely mythical, Nietzsche thought the ancients recognized certain essential truths about time and nature. While he does not argue we can undo the work of two millennia and revert back to an existence such as theirs, Nietzsche nevertheless uses his idea of ancient

man in ways strikingly similar to those of Rousseau.

Nietzsche's ancients enjoyed a life that embraces contradictions—something he grew convinced that post-Socratic Greeks and moderns alike lost completely. The core assumptions of the Greeks all centered on an egotism rooted in the nature of noble souls: “that unshakeable faith that to a being such as ‘we are’ other beings must be subordinate by nature and have to sacrifice themselves.”⁸ Such peoples see themselves as the source of all value; as “the noble, the mighty, the high-placed and the high-minded,” they judge all the things that flowed from their lives and activity as good and all those occupations held by the lower classes as bad:

It was from this *pathos of distance* that they first claimed the right to create values and give these values names.... The pathos of nobility and distance, as I have said, the continuing and predominate feeling of complete and fundamental superiority of a higher ruling kind in relation to a lower kind, to those ‘below’ – that is the origin of the antithesis ‘good’ and ‘bad’.⁹

Indeed, Nietzsche goes further than claiming that the relationship between nobility and servitude creates our seemingly natural moral distinctions. He insists the Greeks understood a fact we have lost: namely, that all high culture demands a separation between those who serve and those who rule.¹⁰ Having built their world on what Nietzsche considers entirely natural and proper distinctions among men, the Greeks could live in ways that modern men hardly comprehend. A glance at what he saw as their

⁸ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. 215

⁹ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 12-13

¹⁰ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p. 162

central beliefs explains why.

For Nietzsche, a close examination of Greek writings and thought leads one to the realization that in the future, we might strive “boldly to seek our models in the original ancient Greek world of greatness, naturalness and humanity,” for “*there we also discover the reality of an essentially unhistorical culture and one which is nonetheless, or rather on that account, an inexpressibly richer and more vital culture.*”¹¹ The vitality of “estrangement” from the present day comes from the fact that these ancients could escape the confining memory of the past, transcending their history’s awful burden.¹² While other creatures can simply live in the present, man is the *remembering* animal, who “braces himself against the great and even greater pressure of what is past: it pushes him down or bends him sideways, it encumbers his steps as a dark, invisible burden,” and leaves him weary. Indeed, Nietzsche further claims that all happiness comes as a direct result of being able to live unhistorically for fleeting moments, and that the act of “[f]orgetting is essential to action of any kind.” Healthy societies develop what he calls “plastic power,” by which he means “the capacity to develop out of oneself in one’s own way, to transform and incorporate into oneself what is past and foreign, to heal wounds, to replace what has been lost, to recreate broken moulds.”¹³

Yet living as they did in memory of myth and inherited patterns, the honor-loving ancients were well aware of their debt to the past. In light of this observation, Nietzsche

¹¹ Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, ed. Daniel Breazeale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 103, italics in original

¹² Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p. 295. On the link between forgetting and release in Nietzsche, also see Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, p. 219.

¹³ Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, pp. 61-2

invites his readers to meditate upon a proposition—that “*the unhistorical and the historical are necessary in equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people and of a culture.*”¹⁴ Mediating between the two required a set of assumptions that modern men lack completely, but which Nietzsche hoped to evoke through his works. Pagans know that peoples only exist “because of the sacrifices and deeds of the forefathers, – and that these have to be *paid back* with sacrifices and deeds” that recognize the manner in which the ancestors ordered the cosmos.¹⁵ Man cannot totally forget his history, but he can *choose* how to conceive of it, and the Greeks along with other pagan peoples did so within an understanding of the cosmos as a continual, unending cycle.

Because of this constant repetition of action and deeds recollecting the primordial image of the ancestors who themselves imitate the gods, and the periodic celebrations and festivals that principally consist in the sensual *release* from all obligations, Nietzsche claimed that ancient man transcended the accumulating burden of biblical time. The ancients managed a balance between these cycles of memory and forgetfulness through repetitive moments of pious observation and ecstatic release; Nietzsche termed these the “Dionysian,” a set of stirrings that “as they grow in intensity, cause subjectivity to vanish to the point of complete self-forgetting.” He opposed this instinct to the rational, balanced, passion-taming mentality of the Apollonian.¹⁶ Each alone remained incomplete,

¹⁴ Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, p. 63, italics in original. Late in life and suffering from various maladies, Nietzsche observed the following: “the illness gave me the right to change all my habits completely; it permitted, it *required* me to forget...” See Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, p. 118.

¹⁵ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, p. 65

¹⁶ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, trans. Ronald Speirs, eds. Raymond Guess and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 17. On the relationship between the

and the balancing between Apollonian and Dionysian entailed celebration and festival combined with the terrible recognition of man's individual finitude in light of the eternal time in which the gods lived. As Nietzsche observes, "[h]ow else could that people have borne existence, given their extreme sensitivity, their stormy desires, their unique gift for *suffering*, if that same existence had not been shown to them in their gods, suffused with a higher glory?"¹⁷ While his arguments about how modern men might replicate this resolution did evolve, Nietzsche consistently believed the festival imagery of tragedy allowed the ancients to accept "that that which truly exists, the eternally suffering and contradictory, primordial unity, simultaneously needs, for its constant release and redemption, the ecstatic vision, intensely pleasurable semblance."¹⁸

Nietzsche argued that the highest cultural form that reconciled both suffering and ecstasy was Greek tragedy. The logic behind this argument bears some further examination before turning to his explanation of the society that lived within this tragic self-understanding. According to Nietzsche, the Greek tragedians expressed the highest understanding of Greek religion; as such, they knew how to deal with suffering, and knew it bore an inextricable relationship to pleasure and happiness. In seeing this link, they understood that the capacity for the one could not exist without the other, and that trying to do away with suffering would inevitably diminish the joy of life.¹⁹ For Nietzsche, the most impressive thing about ancient Greek beliefs rested in their

Apollonian and Dionysian drives, see Peter Berkowitz, *Nietzsche: The Ethics of an Immoralist* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 52-5.

¹⁷ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, pp. 23-4

¹⁸ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, p. 26

¹⁹ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), p. 86

fearlessness, their ability to confront reality – both pleasant and painful – with gratitude. This virtue persisted until “the rabble gained the upper hand in Greece,” when “*fear* became rampant in religion, too.”²⁰ Prior to this, the noble position Greeks held allowed them to *make* value, and thus a set of beliefs that reflected their position. Indeed, Nietzsche believed this a literal truth, as evinced by the fact that the Greeks made the gods far less godly than we imagine:

Greeks did not see the Homeric gods as set above them as masters, or themselves set beneath the gods as servants, as the Jews did. They saw as it were only the reflection of the most successful exemplars of their own caste, that is to say an ideal, not an antithesis of their own nature. They felt inter-related with them, their existed a mutual interest, a kind of symmetry.²¹

The relatively lowly status of the gods merely reflected the experience of the noble in everyday life. As a consequence of this, while necessity led the Greeks to create gods,

theodicy was never a Hellenic problem; they took care never to attribute the existence of the world, and hence responsibility for the way it is, to the gods. The gods, too, are subject to *ananke* [necessity]; this is a confession of the rarest wisdom.²²

Although the ancients thought their gods far less than omnipotent, they nevertheless held them responsible for their failures to act. Nietzsche notes that the Chinese, among others, would act to “force from their god the goodwill he is denying them,” by humiliating his icons and defiling the temples erected in his name.²³ Their gods reflected the

²⁰ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 64

²¹ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p. 66

²² Nietzsche, “The Dionysiac World View,” in *Birth of Tragedy*, p. 125

²³ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p. 65. Historians of Medieval Europe note that forms of humiliation of saints and relics could include placing the sacred objects on the ground or covering them with thorns. On this, see Patrick Geary, “Humiliation of Saints,” *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell

simultaneous freedom and necessity of everyday noble existence.

The very similarity of gods and man meant that in violating moral prohibitions, one might find nobility; even sacrilege (which really meant violating the actions of the ancestors) might fall into this category. Without a monotheistic, transcendent God to consider, whence “every deed is to be considered *solely with respect to its supernatural consequences*, without regard for its natural consequences,” sin itself cannot make sense.²⁴ Thus, Greeks avoided another burden of memory in that for them, guilt “hardly exists, only a lack of insight into the worth of man and his limits.”²⁵ Nietzsche thought one thing these men understood was the realization that we can neither expunge our desires nor repress them forever. The greatness of the Greeks’ particular form of pagan belief consisted in the way they periodically allowed a partial release of the darker side of human nature. For them manic violence formed a constituent element in the cycle of life and thus of the cosmos. Taking this “all-too-human” set of desires as given, the Greeks regulated wickedness “within the usages of society and religion,” allowing violent desire periodic free reign as part of the rites of religion.²⁶

Nietzsche presents the Greeks’ relationship with violence and cruelty as an important facet of their souls, one we would do well to remember. They knew how to embrace the festivity of cruelty and enjoyed few events that did not partake of some

University Press, 1994).

²⁴ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, pp. 187-8

Note here that the word in the New Testament Greek we translate as sin (*hamartia*) literally means “missing the mark.” Once we remove the divine standard of measurement it presupposes, the concept falls into meaninglessness.

²⁵ Nietzsche, “The Dionysiac World View,” in *Birth of Tragedy*, p. 132

²⁶ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, pp. 265-6

violence; the spilling of blood served a vital role in reinforcing habits of thinking, feeling, and action that Nietzsche thought necessary for healthy society. The ancients knew the value of “disinterested malice” toward their inferiors, and thought it a normal state of events: “To see someone suffer is nice, to make somebody suffer even nicer – that is a hard proposition, but an ancient, powerful human-all-too-human proposition....”²⁷ The important element for Nietzsche in this rests on the *disinterestedness* of ancient cruelty. As an unhistorical and *forgetting* people, the Greeks harbored few grudges and nursed no long-term resentments.

Nietzsche makes much of the Greek way of dealing with any strong emotions. For them, such feelings come in ephemeral frenzy, a result of unconscious instinct far more than of deliberate reflection. Anger in particular rarely degenerates into lengthy resentment; rather,

it is consumed and exhausted in an immediate reaction, and therefore it does not *poison*.... To be unable to take his enemies, his misfortunes and even his *misdeeds* seriously for long – that is the sign of strong, rounded natures with a superabundance of a power which is flexible, formative, healing and can make one forget....²⁸

He cites one example of this in the form of duels; these preserve the character of greatness and allow for a situation in which “the heart is lightened” after the expulsion of anger, dishonor, or shame. Thus, men as a whole learn to act with caution when in society.²⁹

²⁷ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, pp. 45-6. On the idea of violence and cruelty as “the spice of life,” see also Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, pp. 211-2.

²⁸ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, pp. 23-4

²⁹ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, pp. 144-5

Our revulsion at the idea that any kernel of human greatness requires a nobility rooted in periodic violence only shows the completeness of modernity's fall from Nietzsche's ideal. Overall, Nietzsche looked to the noble Greeks because they, like any "good and healthy aristocracy," understood their role not merely functionally as the rulers of society, "but as their *meaning* and highest justification—that it therefore accepts with a good conscience the sacrifice of untold human beings who, *for its sake*, must be reduced and lowered to incomplete human beings, to slaves, to instruments."³⁰ A good conscience in this respect requires one to accept without remorse that within every noble race rests "the blond beast of prey, the magnificent *blond beast* avidly prowling round for spoil and victory," and that as an essential part of every higher nature, "this hidden centre needs release from time to time."³¹ While unrecoverable, in some sense, Nietzsche holds up *this* form of human life for a reason, one which I explore in later sections. For now, I turn to the direct result of nobility's thoughtless ways.

III. The Revolt Against Noble Mastery

Throughout his writings, Nietzsche describes two forces that undermined and eventually overcame the nobility found among the ancients. Both philosophy and the slave morality of Judaism and Christianity play their parts in this. Each tames and ultimately vanquishes a portion of the healthy soul, in the end leaving men weak and unable to reassert themselves in the manner of the ancients. However, the assertion of the Judeo-Christian ethical sensibility could only emerge in a world where men asked for

³⁰ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 202

³¹ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, p. 25

rational reasons to believe their myths and historical grounding for their faith in them. I begin my discussion where Nietzsche did: with the consequences Socratic philosophy holds for the noble soul.

At best, ancient religion and myth provide a social pattern for men to imitate. Nietzsche implies – and as we saw in previous chapters, other authors concur – that ancient man performs the rites and duties associated with this more or less unreflectively, living within the eternally recurring way men “always” had. Such practices did not foster doctrinal belief. Tragedy allowed men to heroically represent their relatively meaningless place in this drama and yet still make it meaningful. Yet under the scrutiny of dialectical reasoning and the relative popularity of lesser and newer forms of art such as comedy, the old myths began to die:

The demise of tragedy was at the same time the demise of myth. Until that point the Greeks had been compelled to connect everything they experienced, immediately and involuntarily, to their myths, indeed they could only understand their experiences through this connection; thereby even the most immediate present was bound to appear to them straight away *sub specie aeterni* and, in a certain sense, as timeless.³²

Note here the way Nietzsche emphasizes the *unreflective* nature of the way ancients represented the world. Anchored in mythical ideas, these peoples could veil the terror of existence beneath their embrace of fate, and find meaning amidst the flux of everyday experience in the idea of eternity as represented *within* the myths.³³ Their very lack of

³² Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, p. 110

³³ In “The Dionysiac World View,” Nietzsche writes that “Greeks knew the terrors and horrors of existence, but they covered them with a veil in order to be able to live,” and as I note above, created the gods as mirrors of themselves to meet this necessity. This compares well with Eliade’s reasoning about the structure of ancient, recurring time. See *Birth of Tragedy*, pp. 124-5.

theoretical or scientific reflection constrained them.

Instead of simply willing and acting, Nietzsche claims that the Apollonian desire which overtook Greece endorsed two quite different demands: “know thyself” and “not too much.”³⁴ However, philosophy goes further and demands *reasons* for living as one does and principles that support these ideals:

Whenever truth is unveiled, the ecstatic eyes of the artist remain fixed on what still remains veiled, even after the unveiling; similarly, theoretical man enjoys and satisfies himself with the discarded veil, and his desire finds its highest goal in the process of unveiling which he achieves by his own efforts and which is always successful.³⁵

Though “successful,” the search for knowledge ultimately undermines one’s health. Nietzsche believes that a mere desire for self-knowledge does not suffice for an “active, successful nature.” The truly successful soul instead acts “as if there hovered before them the commandment: *will* a self and thou shalt *become* a self.”³⁶ Nor can the Apollonian forget the past; in attempting to *ground* his myth in historical fact, he abets “the fate of every myth to creep gradually into the narrow confines of an allegedly historical reality” that kills the vitality of both religions and peoples.³⁷ The desire for knowledge, rather than simple strength of will opens the door to the rejection of the truths behind man’s inherited beliefs. In rending the fabric of myth, philosophy prepares the way for men to embrace an unhealthy amount of memory and blends his time consciousness in ways that

³⁴ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, p. 27. On the relationship between the Dionysian love of myth and the Apollonian embrace of philosophy and history, see also Cristiano Grottanelli, “Nietzsche and Myth,” *History of Religions*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (August 1997), pp. 3-20.

³⁵ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, pp. 72-73

³⁶ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p. 294

³⁷ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, p. 53. Recall too, Nietzsche argument that “the capacity to feel to a certain degree unhistorically... constitutes the foundation upon which anything sound, healthy and great, anything truly human, can grow” (*Untimely Mediations*, p. 63).

eventually erode his ability to act with greatness.

For Nietzsche, these dangers proceeded apace as the Greeks grew increasingly Apollonian, tame, and reasonable. They denied the Dionysian roots of their great health.³⁸ Part of the way reason evacuates the ground for myth rests on the manner in which it denies men the multiplicity of thoughts necessary for a full life: “that *mature* freedom of spirit which is equally self-mastery and discipline of the heart and permits access to many and contradictory modes of thought.”³⁹ Polytheism entails the personification of various forces that control and drive human life: fertility, love, war, anger, hate, death. All of these become aspects of *particular* gods who might become objects of veneration and fear in turn as the suffering and joy of human life proceed and terminate within the eternal recurrence. In searching for reasons and mediating between extreme positions (and what is the mean but just such a mediation?), the philosophers “lack eyes for seeing what is unique.”⁴⁰ The Dionysian knows that each myth bears a partial and thus *contradictory* insight into human existence, and that “incomplete thoughts also have their value” over and against the pursuit of unmediated truth that characterizes the pure Apollonian type.⁴¹

Reason entails the breaking of myth, and thus heralds the death of unreflective eternal recurrence. By making men reasonable creatures

³⁸ As early as *Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche tied reasonableness, optimism, and democracy (even the Athenian one, built on slavery) as symptoms of “a decline of strength, of approaching old age, of physiological exhaustion,” and insisted that pessimism held the key to health (pp. 7-8).

³⁹ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p. 8

⁴⁰ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, p. 212

⁴¹ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p. 96. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche writes “I love him who does not want to have too many virtues. One virtue is more virtue than two, because it is more of a noose on which his catastrophe may hang” (New York: Penguin, 1988, p. 15). Partial, partisan virtue bears more fruit and power than a full-bodied prudence.

Human beings now make their actions subject to the rule of abstractions; they no longer tolerate being swept away by sudden impressions and sensuous perceptions; they now generalize all these impressions first, turning them into cooler, less colourful concepts in order to harness the vehicles of their lives and actions to them.⁴²

For Nietzsche, our philosophically-inspired *need* to reflect upon and provide reasons for our decisions after the fact tames men and weakens their strength of will. And he is quite clear that *taming* the passions, subordinating the “strongest and most evil spirits,” means embarking on a regress of humanity, for “all ordered society puts the passions to sleep,” and *order* expunges the deep reserves that allow for cycles of memory and forgetting, of piety and violence.⁴³

Whatever failings Nietzsche identifies within the Apollonian soul, it nevertheless maintained the pathos of distance. After all, both the Apollonian and Dionysian worked to maintain the constraints of the pagan ethos. But the need to create reasons for slavery, cruelty, and war weakened ancient man, preparing the way for the ultimate transformation of humanity into sick souls. Yet according to Nietzsche, their ultimate demise came not from their own intellectual decay so much as the indirect effect of their oppressive nature. Having divided humanity into lower and higher, good and bad, the nobles gave little thought to those beneath them, leaving slaves free to think and live so long as their actions never directly challenged the status quo.⁴⁴ Of course, the slaves possessed too little power and the wrong disposition to effect such a challenge in the first

⁴² Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense,” in *Birth of Tragedy*, p. 146

⁴³ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, p. 79

⁴⁴ For a lengthy discussion of Nietzsche’s idea of master and slave morality, see *Beyond Good and Evil*, pp. 204-8.

place.⁴⁵ Nietzsche argues that eventually, in a different place and time ruled by the same noble sort that acted with similar indifference, something unprecedented happened.

Jewish priests began a transformation. Powerless to actually change their situation,

their hate swells into something huge and uncanny to a most intellectual and poisonous level. The greatest haters in world history, and the most intelligent, have always been priests: — nobody else's intelligence stands a chance against the intelligence of priestly revenge.⁴⁶

Nietzsche sees nothing surprising about this turn of events or about the hatred borne by the weak for the strong.⁴⁷ The Jewish revenge in this case consisted in the inversion and revaluation of all values. The slaves start with a profound resentment for nobles that “turns creative and gives birth to values” of their own. In this transformation, all that the nobles term good becomes evil in the eyes of the Jewish slaves; their own weakness, mildness, and supposed humility into the highest virtues.⁴⁸

For Nietzsche, this single act of revaluation marks the Jews as the most disastrous people in human history. By being the first to discover the transformative power of resentment, they succeeded in making men introspective for the first time at the terrible price of their strength of spirit.⁴⁹ This fosters many errors; perhaps the most important

⁴⁵ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, pp. 36-7

⁴⁶ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, p. 18. On hatred and deferred revenge as poisons of the soul, Nietzsche writes that “to desire to revenge without possessing the strength and courage to carry out revenge means to carry about a chronic illness” (*Human, All Too Human*, pp. 42-3).

⁴⁷ In a characteristic moment, Nietzsche observes that “[t]here is nothing strange about the fact larks bear a grudge towards large birds of prey: but that is no reason to blame the large birds of prey for carrying off the little lambs.” While these lambs hate the birds, the “birds of prey will view it somewhat derisively, and will perhaps say, ‘We don’t bear any grudge at all toward these lambs, in fact we love them, nothing is tastier than a tender lamb’” (*Genealogy*, p. 28).

⁴⁸ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, p. 24; *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 108

⁴⁹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, pp. 20-1

comes with the invention of sin. As I have shown above, Nietzsche thought the ancients comprehended something profound about human needs in their manner of *accepting* that various desires require periodic release. For him, the archetypal ancient understanding of a great wrongdoing comes through a story like that of Prometheus; he opposes it to the Fall from Eden. Nietzsche describes the former as an original, willed, and necessary action in which man commits an offense, “and must in turn accept... the whole flood of suffering and tribulations which the offended heavenly powers *must* in turn visit upon the human race.” The central lesson of this act, “namely that wrongdoing is of necessity imposed on the titanically striving individual,” grants man’s actions a kind of dignity. Nietzsche contrasts the lesson of the Promethean myth to that of the Fall, “where the origin of evil was seen to lie in curiosity, mendacious pretence, openness to seduction, lasciviousness”—all attributes the ancient world aligned with femininity. No dignity inhered in this act, and all greatness therein rested with God, not mankind.⁵⁰

For Nietzsche, the transformation of ancient morals into sin implies far more than just the Jewish slave’s self-identification with femininity. It mandates the abasement of the body in favor of a set of unworldly commands. Having denied the need for periodic sensual release of *both* violence and sex, the Judeo-Christian ideal instead embraces a sort of asceticism.⁵¹ What they term self-control, Nietzsche insists inflicts men with “a peculiar disease; namely, a constant irritability in the face of all natural stirrings and inclinations—as it were, a kind of itching” with the end result that “[n]o longer may he

⁵⁰ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, pp. 49-50

⁵¹ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, pp. 72-3

entrust himself to any instinct.”⁵² Having lost this reserve, men no longer have the ability to undertake great, character-forming, and wicked action; as such they cannot work toward the “great epochs of our life” that “come when we gain the courage to rechristen our evil as what is best in us.”⁵³ As a result, ordinary instincts that even in slaves would find outward expression and periodic release turn inward, with disastrous consequences for all of civilization.

The revolt in slave morality did not simply change the beliefs of most men. This moral revolution tames the nobles by unleashing what he calls “bad conscience” upon them. Simply prohibiting violence and undermining a rigid caste system fail to suffice, for Nietzsche knows that the darker instincts cannot disappear. Those “instincts which are not discharged outwardly *turn inwards*,” creating what he terms the “*internalization of man*,” a change that punishes misbehavior but also reverses old desires against men themselves:

Lacking external enemies and obstacles, and forced into the oppressive narrowness and conformity of custom, man impatiently ripped himself apart, persecuted himself, gnawed at himself, gave himself no peace... – this fool, this prisoner consumed with longing and despair, became the inventor of ‘bad conscience.’⁵⁴

Thus, the nobles themselves began to sublimate their deepest desires, feel *guilt* over these longings. They either conform or descend into utmost barbarism and face the consequences of a vengeful society.⁵⁵

⁵² Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, p. 244

⁵³ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 86

⁵⁴ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, pp. 61-2

⁵⁵ Here may be a good moment to note in passing that at least one scholar argues that the persistence of

In repressing the periodic eruptions of cathartic violence and finally destroying the mythic piety of noble humanity, the rise of this slave morality did incalculable damage: “These bearers of oppressive, vindictive instincts, the descendents of all European and non-European slavery, in particular of all the pre-Aryan population – represent the *decline* of mankind!”⁵⁶ Nietzsche claims that this only happened as a result of the need of slaves to hold some deeper meaning for their lives, something beyond their everyday suffering. Religious founders identify a deep-seated psychological yearning common to “a certain average type of souls who have not yet *recognized* that they belong together.”⁵⁷ He claims this applies to all faiths, even Buddhism. The entire edifice upon which men build monotheistic religion, however, goes far deeper in its derangement from health.

Nietzsche claims the nobles themselves helped undo the ground for unreflective belief in myth and its cosmological order. But the Jewish and Christian revolt also sought to replace the old world’s seemingly failed understanding of time and history. He considers the invention of covenantal history as the ultimate act of resentful power undertaken by priests against the rest of society. Completing the demolition of noble value, Nietzsche notes that the Jewish priests “performed a miracle of falsification... in an unparalleled act of scorn for tradition and historical reality, they translated the history of their own people *into religion*.”⁵⁸ The very idea of the immortality of the soul, granted

instinct and very clear rank ordering Nietzsche creates according to “health” and “sickness” demonstrates that he believed in a real and stable concept of truth and nature. See Berkowitz, *Nietzsche*, pp. 25-8.

⁵⁶ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, p. 26

⁵⁷ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, p. 297

⁵⁸ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, p. 23

on condition of what Nietzsche saw as slavish faith, “has been the most enormous and most vicious attempt to assassinate *noble* humanity.”⁵⁹ After Christ, history becomes little more than “a disguised Christian theodicy” designed to make peoples and time itself conform to the notion that ordinary mortals play some notable part in the providential order.⁶⁰

For Nietzsche, this egalitarian ideal meant that above all, Judaism and Christianity worked as an ethic undermining authentic, noble life. The slavish priests submerged the heroic, destructive power of the blond beasts under the weight of bad conscience and remade the order of time itself to comport with their need for vengeance. Christian belief claims to bring *all* to equal account before a divine standard, a fact that makes it little more than “a hangman’s metaphysics.”⁶¹ Of course, if *everyone* potentially bears a perfect, eternal destiny rooted in a providential order unfolding in biblical time, then the burdens of historical memory, sin, and guilt must remain absolute until men find themselves forgiven or absolved. For Nietzsche, man’s movement away from the noble embrace of eternal recurrence and decline into *historical* self-understanding poses peculiar problems. Before picking up his account of decline in the West, it is to these issues I now turn.

IV. An Interlude on the Problem of Historical Man

By making men introspective (and as he terms it, “interesting”), philosophy and religion mandate the creation of a new mode of understanding time and history. As a

⁵⁹ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, p. 40

⁶⁰ Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, p. 207

⁶¹ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce, Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, p. 182

result, the “question of the degree to which life requires the service of history at all” becomes “one of the supreme questions and concerns in regard to the health of a man, a people or a culture.”⁶² Nietzsche knows that while this increases our psychological depth, it also means we can no longer casually embrace mythic explanations of our place in the cosmos. As I suggest above, one major difficulty he identifies rests in the peculiar way slavish ideas lead the mass of men to embrace a predominately historical consciousness. This new awareness demands that men assign meaning and direction to the march of time, and makes men “believe that the meaning of existence will come more and more to light in the course of its *process*, and they glance behind them only so that from the process so far, they can learn to understand the present.”⁶³ In many ways, Nietzsche’s assault on the idea of historical man stems from his observation that “[w]e still need a critique of the concept of ‘purpose’” in and for life.⁶⁴ This section discusses his sense of what history does for society, how it affects those who embrace it, and the consequences that follow from historical memory’s prevalence in modernity.

In his most extended and direct treatment of the subject, “The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” Nietzsche divides the subject into three categories – monumental, antiquarian, and critical – all of which “pertain to the living man in three respects: it pertains to him as a being who acts and strives, as a being who preserves and reveres, as a being who suffers and seeks deliverance.”⁶⁵ The monumental studies great

⁶² Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, p. 67

⁶³ Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, p. 65

⁶⁴ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, p. 316

⁶⁵ Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, p. 67. For an account of these types, see Berkowitz, *Nietzsche*, pp. 28-34.

acts and deeds; the antiquarian recalls the meaning of traditions, practices and objects; the critical undermines both, looking for the “real” story beneath. Each type of history bears certain dangers and possibilities, and each does its own appropriate work at very different times to serve various needs:

If the man who wants to do something great has need of the past at all, he appropriates it by means of monumental history; he, on the other hand, who likes to persist in the familiar... tends the past as an antiquarian historian; and only he who is oppressed by a present need, and who wants to throw off this burden at any cost, has need of critical history, that is to say a history that judges and condemns.⁶⁶

Nietzsche implies that older, noble peoples knew when and how to utilize each; they also understood when to simply avoid or extirpate history altogether. Because of their inheritance of slave morality, Nietzsche’s contemporaries knew no such balance.

According to Nietzsche, all great human beings exert what he calls a “retroactive force,” because in light of what these higher men accomplish, man’s understanding of the past changes entirely.⁶⁷ This forms part of the reason he so emphasizes *monumental* history. I would highlight another reason in the way Nietzsche claims monumental history fades in modern times. In its place, the “consuming fever of history” merely encourages the repetition of earlier patterns of thought endemic to slave morality.⁶⁸ Nietzsche cites history’s status as the long-term outworking of resentment and its role as an accumulating burden of cultural restraint. Both efface the “plastic power” of forgetting that he finds so necessary to right living. I will discuss each before moving on to some of

⁶⁶ Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, p. 72

⁶⁷ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, p. 104

⁶⁸ Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, p. 60

the consequences that he argued flowed from them.

First, just as the Christian history of redemption “settles” accounts in a metaphysical sense, history to modern men is yet another means of working out their resentment. Just as the priests did for all mankind, historians remake the moral value of their specific corner of the world. In this particular case, it means that they rewrite the tablets upon which their contemporaries evaluate past deeds, and through those deeds, see the present as well: “Historians look backwards; and they end up *believing* backwards too.”⁶⁹ Far from being a disinterested pursuit of the truth, their history *really* creates a stage where “man spins his web over the past and subdues it,” so that it becomes one more example of man “willing backwards” in the “*spirit of revenge*” against those with whom he disagrees rather than looking forward or reconciling himself to time’s ultimate lack of purpose and meaning.⁷⁰

Secondly, precisely because this sort of historical man wills and believes “backwards,” rooting his self-understanding in the layers of accumulated historical memory, he becomes “a thing dark and veiled,” whose true nature and deepest instincts become lost.⁷¹ This means that modern people weigh themselves down with “a huge quantity of indigestible stones of knowledge,” and live in an “incomprehensible” culture without recourse to that dead weight the long-past experience of previous times

⁶⁹ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, p. 159. In this vein, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche writes: “This is my pity for all that is past: I see how all of it is abandoned—abandoned to the pleasure, the spirit, the madness of every generation, which comes along and reinterprets all that has been as a bridge to itself” (p. 202). The fact Nietzsche deploys the concept of pity here is striking. Men cannot leave history alone, and this is part of the problem: we look backwards when we should be transcending the past in favor of a better future.

⁷⁰ Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, p. 91; *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pp. 140-1

⁷¹ Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, p. 129

represents.⁷² History serves the interests of the status quo in part, as well:

We know, indeed, what history can do when it gains a certain ascendancy, we know it only too well: it can cut off the strongest instincts of youth, its fire, defiance, unselfishness and love, at the roots, damp down the heat of its sense of justice, suppress or regress its desire to mature slowly... indeed, it can even deprive youth of its fairest privilege, of its power to implant in itself the belief in a great idea and then let it grow to an even greater one.⁷³

Nietzsche blames the Europeans of the nineteenth century for embracing totalizing visions of historical development (think here of Darwinian evolution). Though they seek to “perfect nature” through the accumulation of knowledge, they ultimately increase the depth of their “incapacity for action.”⁷⁴ For Nietzsche, this fact holds deeply destructive consequences.

Society could only accumulate knowledge and impose restraint through the creation of a memory-conditioned bad conscience. More specifically, men burn this feeling into social memory through pain, for whenever “man decided he had to make a memory for himself, it never happened without blood, torments and sacrifices.” Man pays this price for “reason, solemnity, mastering of emotions, this really dismal thing called reflection.”⁷⁵ Nietzsche took this sense of what we might call “blood-memory” very seriously. He writes that “[i]t is simply not possible that a human being should *not* have the qualities and preferences of his parents and ancestors in his body, whatever

⁷² Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, p. 78

⁷³ Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, p. 115

⁷⁴ Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, p. 108

⁷⁵ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, pp. 41-2

appearances may suggest to the contrary.”⁷⁶ Thus, the burden of history becomes apparent in the pain of bad conscience *through the generations*. Precisely because of this, men construct increasingly elaborate modes of imbuing the ever-accumulating record of time and its agonies with spiritual or transcendent meaning.⁷⁷ This historical culture fosters “a kind of inborn grey-hairedness,” a perpetual tendency to seek “consolation through remembering what has been,” something which happens despite all their supposed faith in redemption.⁷⁸

In place of historical consciousness, Nietzsche desires a world beyond looking backward, one without revenge, retribution, resentment, and one that imposes neither praise nor blame upon individuals and peoples through their history.⁷⁹ In Nietzsche’s understanding, “[t]ime itself does not heal; it only buries.”⁸⁰ Again, this bears a link to his hope that we might recapture some elements of the pagan alternative to social memory. He suggests that if instead of merely knowing the whole record of history, we were to collapse it into a searing moment of insight, we would create godlike happiness without pain or burden of memory. Rather than a moment of reflection, it would create a feeling of clarity.⁸¹

Nietzsche acknowledges that this form of revelatory insight probably stands beyond the realm of human attainment. Instead, he suggests we create a kind of

⁷⁶ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 214

⁷⁷ On this, see Carl Pletsch, “History and Friedrich Nietzsche’s Philosophy of Time,” *History and Theory*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Feb. 1977), pp. 33-35; and Löwith, *Eternal Recurrence*, pp. 131-3.

⁷⁸ Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, p. 101

⁷⁹ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pp. 93-94. On escaping this problematic past, also see Berkowitz, *Nietzsche*, pp. 29-31.

⁸⁰ Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, p. 219

⁸¹ For this odd formulation, see Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, pp. 267-9.

“genuine” history that blends both knowledge *and* appropriate sorts of forgetting, one that aims at justice rather than some sort of principled objectivity.⁸² For that reason, men must transcend the attempt to create the future by knowing the past; instead they must *will* the recurrence of their own existence, and somehow, the future. Obviously, much stands in the way of this. I discuss the modern obstacles to this change in the next section.

V. Exhausted Faith, Lifeless Philosophy, and the Last Man

Man’s turn to historical consciousness forms only one part of what Nietzsche sees as the failure of authentic life in modernity. Experience serves as but one part of the way his weakened contemporaries sought refuge against the anxieties of their existence:

The catastrophe slumbering in the womb of theoretical culture is gradually beginning to frighten modern man; in other words, he is beginning to suspect the consequences of his own existence; he therefore dips into his store of experiences for some means of warding off the danger, although he does not really believe in them.⁸³

This section explores some of the means Nietzsche thought his contemporaries used to evade their condition. The difficulty he identifies above means that man’s (presumptively irrational) ordinary faith falls prey to philosophical attempts to achieve a moral or metaphysical replacement. Nietzsche thought this quest a contemptible failure, but that it nevertheless caused real difficulties for any attempt to revive man’s fading vitality.

Nietzsche does little to systematically trace out the reasons Christian belief faltered. In many places, he asserts its exhaustion: “today every kind of dogmatism is left

⁸² On this, see Berkowitz, *Nietzsche*, pp. 37-39 and 70-75.

⁸³ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, p. 87

standing dispirited and discouraged. *If it is left standing at all!*⁸⁴ He thought the Reformation's great success (from the slavish Christian's perspective) came in that it brought the Renaissance to an end, turning it into "a meaningless event, a great *In Vain!*"⁸⁵ This bears importance because he saw the Renaissance as *the* hope for Western civilization to transcend the sickness of faith by reasserting pagan values. Instead, a German monk completed what elsewhere Nietzsche termed the "*peasant rebellion of the spirit.*" Luther undertook reforms that Nietzsche saw as the death knell of traditional, unreflective faith. For example,

[h]e gave back to the priest sexual intercourse with woman; but three quarters of the reverence of which the common people, especially the women among the common people, are capable, rests on the faith that a person who is an exception at this point will be an exception in other respects as well; it is here that the popular faith in something superhuman in man, in the miracle, in the redeeming god in man, finds its subtlest and most insidious advocate.⁸⁶

In the name of purifying the corrupt faith, Luther restored priesthood to a condition of mere mortality. In so doing, he undermined the last remaining shreds of old, *pagan* belief upon which Christianity uneasily grew; with this weakness, it could not long persist as a vigorous faith.

Taking these arguments as his point of departure, Nietzsche asserted the *hollowness* of European church life. For him, the end of the Inquisition and persecution of heresy signaled not as Voltaire and others would have it the march of *progress*, but

⁸⁴ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 1

⁸⁵ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, p. 65

⁸⁶ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, pp. 311-2

rather served as the herald of Christianity's end: "Not their love of men but the impotence of their love of men keeps the Christians of today from—burning us."⁸⁷ This peculiar situation where the mass of European bourgeois attended church, mouthed the platitudes of beliefs which they no longer genuinely *lived*, and went about their lives provoked one of Nietzsche's most potent dramatic formulations in *The Gay Science*'s aphorism "The Madman."⁸⁸

Living in indifference, the modern bourgeois men who "do what is required," attend church, and perform their duties "with a patient and modest seriousness and without too much curiosity and discomfort" inevitably *kill* religion through their tameness. Such people do not burn heretics. They fail to realize the import of their actions, for "[t]his deed is still more distant from them than the most distant starts—and yet they have done it themselves."⁸⁹ Nietzsche thinks the difficulty in dealing with such men rests in the fact that they *cannot see* the depth of the revolution they began by discarding their conventional faith or understand where the consequences of this rejection would lead them. The Madman wonders:

How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers?... What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? *Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?*⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 84. Kaufmann aptly summarizes Nietzsche's intent here: "If Christians were really passionately concerned for the salvation of their fellow men in the hereafter, they would still burn those whose heresies lead legions into eternal damnation" (p. 84n8).

⁸⁸ In the Madman, a man comes to a small German town, seeking God, then accuses the townsmen: "The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. 'Whither is god?' he cried; 'I will tell you. We have killed him—you and I. All of us are his murders'" (Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, p. 181). On this aphorism's importance, see Berkowitz, *Nietzsche*, pp. 15-17.

⁸⁹ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, pp. 69-70; *Gay Science*, p. 181-2

⁹⁰ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, p. 181, emphasis mine

I will explore how Nietzsche addresses this crucial question more fully in the next section, but note that he knows that man *must* eventually find a substitute for his departed faith in God, and that man's initial attempts to salve this – perhaps all his efforts in this direction – will fail.

The failure of orthodox Christian religion opens a door through which further confusion may enter modern man's soul. Modern bourgeois people “loathe the Church, *not its poison*”—the moral teaching and the subservient, slavish way of living faith demands of its adherents.⁹¹ While denying God, ordinary men still believe in sin and harbor lingering guilt over their bodies' needs, even though “[b]elief in the cure” the Church offers for guilt “has now been shaken to its deepest roots... *belief in the sickness* which it taught and propagated continues to exist.”⁹² Even those who agree with Nietzsche that religion serves little purpose other than as a form of control act this way—“*and yet everything goes on as before.*”⁹³ For Nietzsche, all this evasion of the truth of their belief represents nothing more than an egregious act of bad faith.⁹⁴

Even when religion died, it bled into philosophy. This held particularly true in German thought. He knows that man's peculiar curse inheres in having “to believe, to know, from time to time *why* he exists.” Nevertheless, Nietzsche insists that the desire for “*nothing but certainties*” in these questions “is a *religious after-shoot*, no more,” one that

⁹¹ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, p. 21

⁹² Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p. 329. In one other particularly striking aphorism, Nietzsche writes “Christianity gave Eros a poison to drink: he did not die of it but degenerated—into a vice” (*Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 92).

⁹³ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, p. 34

⁹⁴ On this, see Löwith, *Eternal Recurrence*, pp. 108-15; Berkowitz, *Nietzsche*, pp. 93-96; and Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, pp. 215-17.

paralyzes humanity by turning it even further upon itself.⁹⁵ Nietzsche suggests that as a result of the need for certainty, theology *colonized* philosophy; this is why the Germans responded so favorably to Kant, for they saw him as a “hidden path to the old ideal,” and that allowed for “the concept of morality as the *essence* of the world.”⁹⁶ Doubt never genuinely enters these philosophers minds; in their search for knowledge, they merely reduce the strangeness and chaos of the world to something familiar and *impose* their sense of what should be in both morals and metaphysics upon nature.⁹⁷

In this effort, Nietzsche argues philosophers and their outworn theological followers concoct little more than a “scholarly variation of the common *faith* in the prevalent morality.”⁹⁸ As he puts it in the *Gay Science*, “Kant’s joke” upon the world came in that he “wanted to prove, in a way that would dumfound the common man, that the common man was right” in his basic moral prejudices. Nowhere in any of their speculations did Nietzsche’s contemporaries suggest that if they discarded the faith of their fathers as childish, that their *moral* vision might also require scrutiny.⁹⁹ Indeed, whatever elevated language of philosophy or the new theology they used, modern thinkers set about reasoning through these moral questions in a profoundly egalitarian and democratic way. For Nietzsche, these efforts represent just one more example of the “*plebeianism* of the modern spirit.”¹⁰⁰

If anything, the philosophy and theology of modernity merely further encourages

⁹⁵ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, p. 75; *Human, All Too Human*, p. 308

⁹⁶ Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, p. 9

⁹⁷ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, pp. 167-8, 300; *Beyond Good and Evil*, pp. 15-16

⁹⁸ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 98

⁹⁹ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, pp. 205-6

¹⁰⁰ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, p. 15

unhealthy thinking, the embrace of historical consciousness, and negation of the noble spirit. In the preface to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche assaults the end state men raised in such an environment reach. These “last men,” the most contemptible sort that can live, speak a language of weakness which Nietzsche renders with vicious sarcasm:

‘We have invented happiness,’ say the last men, and they blink. They have left the regions where it was hard to live, for one needs warmth.... One still works, for work is a form of entertainment. But one is careful lest the entertainment be too harrowing.... Who still wants to rule? Who obey? Both require too much exertion.... Everybody wants the same, everybody is the same: whoever feels different goes voluntarily into a madhouse.¹⁰¹

Though his presentation of the last man’s characteristics here remains somewhat stylized and imprecise, this quotation does outline the end toward which Nietzsche sees us all marching.

But the central sense of a life bearing no goal other than “happiness” frustrates Nietzsche most of all, and represents the destiny of a people that bears its history and has no means of healthy forgetting. Instead, this culture weighs heavily on such a people; it creates a situation in which “the hypnotic feeling of nothingness, the tranquility of deepest sleep, in short, *absence of suffering* – this may be counted as the highest good... by the suffering and by those who are deeply depressed.”¹⁰² Such people lack a goal, and this diminishes their ability to live well.¹⁰³ They forget that man’s deepest end comes not through some vision of eternal life – Nietzsche tell us this provides a way to live as a

¹⁰¹ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pp. 17-18

¹⁰² Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, p. 105

¹⁰³ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 60

“pale shade” – but rather that a genuinely “living thing seeks above all to *discharge* its strength—life itself is *will to power*; self-preservation is only one of the indirect and most frequent results.”¹⁰⁴ In this critique of the last man, we begin to see the overarching reasons behind Nietzsche’s loathing of modern political and social life, which for him consists of life in the herd.

Their faith and substitutes for it having failed them, some of the last men look to the state to salve their anxieties. This makes for an easy transition for most of them, because the pale morality that remains “trains the individual to be a function of the herd and to ascribe value to himself only as a function.”¹⁰⁵ Nietzsche observes that modern politics contributes to this acquiescence: “Democratic institutions are quarantine arrangements to combat that ancient pestilence, lust for tyranny: as such they are very useful and very boring.”¹⁰⁶ Yet even if Nietzsche finds this sort of arrangement occasionally useful, he loathes democracy’s frequent partner: liberalism. In his mind, liberal institutions damage real freedom by working to “undermine the will to power, they set to work leveling mountains and valleys and call this morality, they make things small, cowardly, and enjoyable, – they represent the continual triumph of herd animals.”¹⁰⁷ Both liberalism and democracy encourage the stale, boring arrangements within which the last man can emerge and go to sleep. Liberals cannot help but deny that leadership and change require the self-initiation of constant strife and suffering both for

¹⁰⁴ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p. 299; *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 21

¹⁰⁵ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, p. 174

¹⁰⁶ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p. 383

¹⁰⁷ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, p. 213

oneself and for others.¹⁰⁸ Instead Nietzsche argues that real freedom consists in war, in violence, in self-sacrifice, and generally in a state “five paces away from tyranny, right on the threshold, where servitude is a danger.”¹⁰⁹ This sort of dangerous living invites a total absence of political restraint.

The modern state flattens souls through the reproduction of restraining historical memories, outworn moral codes, and dying faith, all the while cultivating the love of comfort. In short, it embraces the disenchantment of the world.¹¹⁰ Insofar as the last man thinks of freedom at all, he sees himself as free when he “*no longer perceives* the weight of the chains,” or at least feels no new ones being placed upon him.¹¹¹ The last man bears an enormous but unacknowledged historical sensibility, but he cannot bear the presence of real talent. In his love of “sterile tranquility,” the last man shunts “active men” away from grand politics and into the pursuit of wealth.¹¹² The display of greatness cannot proceed without risk among the last men. They make for a jealous lot: “Arrogance on the part of the meritorious is even more offensive to us than the arrogance of those without merit: for merit itself is offensive.”¹¹³ Nietzsche cynically observes that in the eyes of the last men “[h]aving a talent is not enough: one also requires your permission for it—right, my friends?”¹¹⁴ Envy rules the last man as much as the desire for tranquility.

The persistent resentment that drove the slave revolt in morality accounts well for

¹⁰⁸ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p. 61

¹⁰⁹ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, p. 214

¹¹⁰ Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, pp. 84-5, 112-3

¹¹¹ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p. 306

¹¹² Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, pp. 132-3; de Huszar, “Nietzsche’s Theory of Decadence,” pp. 264-5

¹¹³ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p. 139

¹¹⁴ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 90

the maintenance of envy among member of the herd. Whatever revenge the priests took on behalf of the powerless no longer suffices for the mass man; since *all* men now exhibit individual powerlessness, their *silent* envy grows all the stronger.¹¹⁵ The manifold failure of health in Europe results in the death of distinctive, life-affirming differences in culture, for “Europeans are becoming more similar to each other,” creating a “nomadic type of man” capable of adapting but “who will be poor in will, extremely employable, and as much in need of a master and commander as of their daily bread.” These last men create a situation in which “the democratization of Europe is at the same time an involuntary arrangement for the cultivation of *tyrants*.”¹¹⁶ Yet paradoxically, the last men work to destroy anyone who would rise above: “Anyone who does not *want* to see what is lofty in a man looks that much more keenly for what is low in him and mere foreground—and thus betrays himself.”¹¹⁷ That act of self-betrayal creates a situation in which all potentially free spirits cannot feel at home in the world and indeed, might go mad in the din of envious chatter.¹¹⁸

However, Nietzsche notes that cultural resurrection occurs only on a people’s sickbed. In some sense, he knows the specter of the last man can create the conditions under which a *higher man* might one day emerge.¹¹⁹ He does not make this claim without qualification, though; Nietzsche thought the poisonous legacy of the slave revolt in morality runs extremely deep and will require drastic, potentially lethal measures. He

¹¹⁵ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, pp. 226-7

¹¹⁶ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, pp. 176-7

¹¹⁷ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 223

¹¹⁸ On the “homelessness” of all free spirits in Europe, see Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, pp. 338-40.

¹¹⁹ On this, see *Human, All Too Human*, p. 169; *Gay Science*, pp. 96-7; and *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 73.

fears this asks too much of the age: “I no longer know whether you, my dear fellow man and neighbor, are at all *capable* of living in a way that would damage the species.”¹²⁰ To be clear, Nietzsche thinks that nothing the last man does can harm his merely biological life. He merely lives a long life beset with profound *spiritual sickness*. That disease of thought and feeling stems from the historically-imposed burden which man must overcome. In the next section, I discuss how he thought this might occur.

VI. Between the Failure of Aesthetic Reenchantment and the Rise of the Overman

Nietzsche seriously contemplated at least two distinct but interrelated options by which he hoped to revive Western civilization’s fading life. Slowly realizing it failed to affect men deeply enough, he eventually discarded his first notion of aesthetic reenchantment. He developed a more thorough alternative by combining several doctrines. Nietzsche hoped that the transvaluation of value and the embrace of a new, reflective eternal recurrence would one day produce an overman capable of leading us out of our sickness and into great health. Yet throughout Nietzsche’s writings, the intent to reenchanted the world remains the same, and we may learn something about his attitude toward man’s relationship to time by evaluating both in turn.

Seeing himself and, initially, Richard Wagner as the preeminent apostles of a lost Dionysian ethic, Nietzsche initially thought a full-bodied aesthetic experience such as that which Wagner hoped to create at Bayreuth might help carve out a space for cultural revival.¹²¹ Wagner’s aesthetic performances would accomplish something everyday life

¹²⁰ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, p. 73

¹²¹ While in this aesthetic phase, Nietzsche thought Wagner the most important possible contributor to the hope for reenchantment, he also wrote that poets like Schiller “*rejuvenated* the Germans” (*Human, All Too*

could not: if only for brief moments, the feelings and emotions they evoked might let people living in an increasingly disenchanted world partake in the delight of primordial essence of eternity, “and receive an intimation, in Dionysiac ecstasy, that this delight is indestructible and eternal.”¹²² Wagner’s great accomplishment came in way he revived mythical thinking, a mode “not founded on a thought, as the children of an artificial culture believe, it is itself a mode of thinking; it communicates an idea of the world, but as a succession of events, actions and sufferings.”¹²³ In short, Wagner recreated a spectacle of eternal recurrence for his audience.

Yet however important Wagner’s accomplishment, Nietzsche came to believe that a mythic, unreflective consciousness of time and the cosmos would not suffice as the basis for cultural revival. Art and poetry simply do not go *deep* enough into the soul of man to address the wounds of resentment and the burden of history. Zarathustra states: “I have grown weary of the poets, the old and the new: superficial they all seem to me, and shallow seas. Their thoughts have not penetrated deeply enough; therefore their feelings did not touch bottom.”¹²⁴ The difficulty Nietzsche outlines poetically in *Zarathustra* stems from the nature of aesthetic experience and action. Since his creation relies on preexisting threads of culture the artist, even the high-minded sort of Wagnerian proportions will always remain at least in part merely the “interpreter and transfigurer of

Human, p. 252).

¹²² Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, pp. 80-1. For a further discussion of how Nietzsche thought music might particularly accomplish this, see also pp. 93-7.

¹²³ Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, p. 236

¹²⁴ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 128

the past.”¹²⁵ According to Nietzsche, insofar as we merely *reconfigure* past understandings, we will never reach the root of the modern spiritual sickness.

Nietzsche argued that myth’s power dies in the face of reflection and critical history. This means that modern art, which sought to deify forms and ideal types rather than to merely represent a vision of the eternal, could not affect men the way it once did.¹²⁶ While the effects of Wagnerian art might signal that European culture still carried sufficient life to reawaken itself, could not provide more than a momentary “period of recuperation.” Nietzsche hoped Wagner might restore culture, but those efforts achieved little more than “a brief awakening of the dead... an agreeable recollection, a yearning desire for what has almost been lost, a hurried embracing of a happiness that lasts for but a few minutes.”¹²⁷ Instead of seeing these precious moments as an opening to the restoration of what their culture lost in the move toward historical consciousness, modern men merely use “works of art to lure aside from the great *via dolorosa* of humanity those who are wretched, exhausted, and sick, and to offer them a brief lustful moment—a little intoxication and madness.”¹²⁸ Wagner could momentarily evoke the nostalgia for eternal recurrence, but the spectators continued to live with all the burdens found in a world of disenchanting historical memory.

Nietzsche saw that he had to deliberately evoke a counter-theology to oppose the dying faith of sick European souls.¹²⁹ His first tentative suggestion involved the

¹²⁵ Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, pp. 253-4

¹²⁶ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 71

¹²⁷ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p. 256

¹²⁸ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, p. 144

¹²⁹ Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, pp. 219-20

emergence of a series of “counter-Alexanders” who might re-knit rather than continue to sever the loose threads of older culture and belief.¹³⁰ In some sense he never denied this idea, yet he eventually embraced the notion that all our inherited, extant mores and manners of thinking about the world would have to be swept aside before this could be accomplished. He tells us we moderns “have nothing whatever of our own,” and transitioning beyond such a impasse requires “the destruction of modern bogus cultivatedness for the sake of a true culture.”¹³¹ Nietzsche admits this bleak alternative might appear “*inhuman*” in the present moment, but this appearance does not invalidate its necessity.¹³²

The tiresome, slavish accretions of our history and the moral burden that the past imposes in the form of bad conscience hold us back from our lost instincts and our true nature. The transformation into Apollonian, reason-giving creatures made us forget the primacy of the unconscious, the emotional, and the *will* over the conscious intellect as the guiding faculties of life: “Thoughts are the shadows of our feelings—always darker, emptier, and simpler.”¹³³ Our reasons serve as nothing more than shameful covers for the fact we never *believe* out of reasonableness.¹³⁴ The fact that modern culture and belief bear no viable fruit does not provide sufficient reason for we who live within its confines to change it, precisely because intellectual *reasons* alone never suffice to persuade. Any means of radically altering the decaying social order must go deeper than intellectual

¹³⁰ Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, p. 209

¹³¹ Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, pp. 79-80

¹³² Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, p. 347

¹³³ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, p. 203

¹³⁴ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, p. 330

change or artistic expression.

Nietzsche repeatedly drew his audience to one immutable law of social life—that for every great change, we must also inflict suffering:

Who will attain anything great if he does not find in himself the strength and the will to *inflict* great suffering? Being able to suffer is the least thing; weak women and even slaves often achieve virtuosity in that. But not to perish of internal distress and uncertainty when one inflicts great suffering and hears the cry of this suffering—that is great, that belongs to greatness.¹³⁵

Elsewhere, he writes: “O my brothers, am I cruel? But I say: what is falling, we should still push. Everything today falls and decays: who would check it? But I—I even want to push it.... And he whom you cannot teach to fly, teach to fall faster!”¹³⁶ This insight, also presented poetically in “The Three Metamorphoses” is the key to effecting and to reviving health in the souls of men, and it forms but the first step in his eventual ideal of creating men who can embrace the idea and reality of eternal recurrence through will and reflection.¹³⁷ Only the liberation of the will might redeem men from themselves. But the will, the liberator and joy-bringer” for all mankind, “is itself still a prisoner” to the past:

‘It was’—that is the name of the will’s gnashing of teeth and most secret melancholy.

Powerless against what has been done, he is an angry spectator of all that is past. The will cannot will backwards; and that he cannot break time and time’s covetousness, that is the

¹³⁵ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, p. 255

¹³⁶ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 209

¹³⁷ In the “Three Metamorphoses,” Nietzsche outlines three stages of human existence. In the first, men live like camels and bear much (in the terms of this chapter, the burden of history and bad conscience). In the second, the camel transforms into a lion, which “would conquer his freedom and be master,” destroying the great dragon “Thou Shalt.” Finally, the beast of prey must become a child, because the “child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning... a sacred ‘Yes.’ For the game of creation, my brothers, a sacred ‘Yes’ is needed...” (*Zarathustra*, pp. 25-27).

will's loneliest melancholy.¹³⁸

The philosophers who discuss the will never understood the falsehood beneath the usual dichotomy of freedom and bondage. Rather, Nietzsche drew the distinction between the strong and the weak, and believed that independence would only come to the strong and pitiless.¹³⁹ However, the past and all the weight of historical memory burden the will, a fact that poses a severe difficulty to any who might challenge the spiritually weakened status quo.

Nietzsche believed his progress-oriented contemporaries could not see past their own idealism. They thought they could move beyond war, but failed to understand that “if their cause is to prosper at all, it requires precisely the same evil-smelling manure as all other human undertakings have need of,” that is, both spiritual and literal violence.¹⁴⁰ In order to truly change and revive culture, Nietzsche thought that those higher men who understand the stakes involved must return life to its natural state of inexorable cruelty toward the weak, for they know that humanity only grows stronger through strife.¹⁴¹ The idea of “well-being” places man in a place that “makes his destruction *desirable*” to those who actually still long for a better world.¹⁴² If for no other reason than that those who bring pain and inflict cruelty force those around them to give up comfortableness, Nietzsche thinks they “contribute immensely to the preservation and enhancement of the

¹³⁸ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 139

¹³⁹ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, pp. 29, 41-2. On the will, see de Husazar, who argues that the “strong man accepts the world of becoming and finds value in change, chance and variety, and does not yearn for changelessness, certainty and uniformity. He finds tragic delight in cosmic disorder without God and seductiveness in terror, uncertainty, and chance. He can live by probabilities and bids farewell to every fixed opinion and desire for certainty” (“Nietzsche’s Theory of Decadence,” p. 263).

¹⁴⁰ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, pp. 176, 179

¹⁴¹ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, p. 100; *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 210

¹⁴² Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 153

species.”¹⁴³ He finds it better that society and its great men find a way to destroy those who love bourgeois comforts rather than remain in the lowly state in which we live: “That the sick should *not* make the healthy sick... ought to be the chief concern,” and restore the healthy pathos of distance between weak and strong.¹⁴⁴

While the *idea* of cruelty forms one part of Nietzsche’s preparation to return society to health, we must understand that this serves as anything but a theoretical teaching. Nietzsche gives his readers every indication that change requires actual cruelty and violence before man might shake off the burden of his history and the moral weight of bad conscience; only a titanic struggle might make decadents like us remember our long-forgotten instincts leading to greatness. He defines civilization as a long series of struggles and searches for those who would lead us.¹⁴⁵ *Only* when struggle and strife persist do we see “those magical, incomprehensible, and unfathomable ones arise, those enigmatic men predestined for victory and seduction, whose most beautiful expression is found in Alcibiades and Caesar.”¹⁴⁶ Like Napoleon they synthesize monster and overman, but never truly achieve the fullest of human potential.¹⁴⁷ Nietzsche praises them as something *between*, a higher man that might lead us into a place of creativity. They open the way for potential revitalization through massive violence.

Nietzsche thought the last serious attempt at a revaluation of values in the Renaissance failed. He calls revaluation a “destiny of a task” in which “[a]ll means are

¹⁴³ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, p. 253

¹⁴⁴ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, p. 97

¹⁴⁵ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 212

¹⁴⁶ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 112

¹⁴⁷ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, p. 36

justified.... Especially *war*,” because it “has always been the most sensible measure for spirits who have become too inward-looking and profound.”¹⁴⁸ Because war has its liberatory, revitalizing uses, Nietzsche welcomed all the signs his time presented of becoming “a more virile, warlike age,” because “this age shall prepare the way for one yet higher, and it shall gather the strength that this higher age will require some day—the age that will carry heroism into the search for knowledge and that will *wage wars* for the sake of ideas and their consequences.”¹⁴⁹ He firmly believed that his ideas would bring about great, violent change: “Starting with me, the earth will know *great politics*.”¹⁵⁰ The beast of prey must come out once again to clear the rubble of the world slave morality built, but in order to create a better race of higher men, we must somehow become *more evil* and recognize all our instincts toward cruelty and violence as the source of our greatness.¹⁵¹

The link between creativity and violence bears analysis because of the way Nietzsche thought history’s burden obscured the truth of human existence. Having made the cosmological vision of eternal recurrence ridiculous and unthinkable, man turned to a historical mode of self-understanding, a transformation that could not be undone without an equally momentous effort at expunging its influence from the human psyche. Nietzsche hopes that higher men accomplish this incredible feat and destroy the remnants of the past, they might recognize the value of this life. Without the fictive burden of heaven and hell, men might “*want the earth*” for the first time since the ancients.

¹⁴⁸ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, p. 155

¹⁴⁹ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, p. 228

¹⁵⁰ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 144

¹⁵¹ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pp. 218-9

Furthermore, they might do so in a *reflective* way, fully aware of the defective alternative Christianity presents.¹⁵²

Somewhere Nietzsche hopes that an overman might emerge to lead us to recognize – help us *will* – a better mode of understanding in the eternal return, his “highest possible formula of affirmation.”¹⁵³ The idea seems deceptively simple; it would serve as the ideal for “the most high-spirited, alive, and world-affirming human being who has not only come to terms and learned to get along with whatever was and is, but who wants to have *what was and is* repeated into all eternity.”¹⁵⁴ But this idea does not simply serve as a myth for Nietzsche. He uses it both an anthropological and cosmological theory which on his account at least makes as much sense as the biblical concept of time—and more, even, if God truly is dead.¹⁵⁵ Nietzsche borrows this ancient concept and reconfigures for use in altering the future. With the new notion, man must will the life which he would willingly repeat eternally. Because of the many defects of the present, Nietzsche’s notion here mandates a future-orientation the ancients utterly lacked. At the same time, the social aspect of this vision rests on an understanding of the lost virtues of the ancient world, and demands we configure our lives around recovering that lost virtue and health through the understanding purchased by our apprehension of

¹⁵² Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 316

¹⁵³ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 123

¹⁵⁴ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 68. He also presents a variant of the same thought in *The Gay Science* as a hypothetical situation, where a demon asks the reader in a moment of loneliness whether, given the chance, he would embrace just such a recurrence of life, and concludes the aphorism with a pointed question: “how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?” (pp. 274-5).

¹⁵⁵ Löwith, *Eternal Recurrence*, p. 187

the ancient truth of eternal recurrence.¹⁵⁶

The contradiction at the center of this teaching comes in the simultaneity of both the liberated will and an inexorable sense of fate—indeed a *love* of that fate which comes through man’s reflective embrace of the eternal return.¹⁵⁷ Having destroyed all that restrains them, creators must then stamp the world with their own values. Zarathustra confronts his audience with frightening alternatives: “Can you give yourself your own evil and your own good and hang your won will over yourself as a law? Can you be your won judge and avenger of your law?”¹⁵⁸ This challenge justifies the level of cruelty and indifference Nietzsche demands we recreate, that is his invocation of the pathos of distance. Living in the present, past wrongs can be forgotten—but doing so with integrity requires establishing oneself as a law, and one’s will as a law over oneself. The hope we might accomplish all this leads Nietzsche to the conclusion that we must inevitably become godlike in our will to power.¹⁵⁹ So oriented, we might become the overman.

VII. Conclusion: Descending into the Abyss

Throughout his writings, Nietzsche insists that his overriding goal consists of affirming life. But his affirmation requires that we shed much of our inheritance: In the face of a general European decline, he utterly rejects linear historical memory as nothing more than a burden, albeit one that occasionally provides a useful set of materials for

¹⁵⁶ On this, see Löwith, *Eternal Recurrence*, pp. 87-91; idem. *Meaning in History*, p. 214; and Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 202-6.

¹⁵⁷ For *amor fati*, see Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, p. 223. Also see Reginster, *Affirmation of Life*, pp. 207-9, 229-30.

¹⁵⁸ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 63

¹⁵⁹ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, pp. 181-2. On the uninhibited will, see Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, pp. 124-5. For two comments on this idea of self-deification, see Berkowitz, *Nietzsche*, pp. 4, 15-19, and 207-10; and de Huaszar, “Nietzsche’s Theory of Decadence,” pp. 266-7.

those with strong enough personalities to bear its horrors.¹⁶⁰ Although on occasion, he assaults the idea of tyranny, he nevertheless insists we abandon most of the historic safeguards against it in liberal politics. Nietzsche exhibits nothing but contempt for the conventional political and social restraints memory provides. Only the self-imposed boundaries of the liberated will can satisfy him. Nietzsche prefers the constant enchantment of the eternal recurrence to the accumulating burdens of social memory.

For all the talk of affirming life, his philosophy works very hard to negate all but the “healthiest” specimens. It rests on a concept of the unhindered individual, a person so unbound that we can will the recreation of the world in his own image. Indeed, Nietzsche demonstrates striking consistency on this point:

The new faction in favour of life that takes on the greatest task of all, that of breeding humanity to higher levels (which includes the ruthless extermination of everything degenerate and parasitical), will make possible a *surplus of life* that will necessarily regenerate the Dionysian state. I promise a *tragic* age: tragedy, the highest art of saying yes to life, will be reborn when humanity has moved beyond consciousness of the harshest though most necessary wars *without suffering from it*.¹⁶¹

Higher men should cultivate an ethos according to which we deny life to the undeserving, “the parasites on society.”¹⁶² The path forward requires violence and death, of course. Nevertheless, he assures us that something greater will emerge from Western civilization’s ashes.

Far from embracing life for society, Nietzsche’s yes-saying dream only endorses

¹⁶⁰ Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, p. 86

¹⁶¹ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 110

¹⁶² Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, pp. 209-10

it for the few strong enough to survive the deadly struggle he portends. Ironically enough, even they might not find themselves ready to condescend to the *practical* affirmation of life, that is, its *literal creation*. Nietzsche tells us that for the same reasons all higher men reject constraint, “the philosopher abhors *marriage*, together with all that might persuade him to it.”¹⁶³ While he mentions this fact amidst a discussion of ascetic values, it raises a rather important point. His philosophy explicitly aims at embracing life and health, but that denies the true ground of it in the *generation of life*. The life of the liberated will cannot bear the ordinary duties of childbearing. Zarathustra loves “him who justifies future and redeems past generations: for he wants to perish of the present.”¹⁶⁴ This seems only too true. A world without children would soon perish.

Nietzsche’s despair of a disenchanted world led him into paradox, contradiction, and perhaps also madness. In doing this, I would argue he forgot one of his most important aphorisms: “Whoever fights monsters should see to it in the process he does not become a monster. And when you look long into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you.”¹⁶⁵ He looked to the heroic past to create an energetic future without the burden of historical or moral consequences. It led him to an extraordinary and cruel prescription for salving the wounds of history and time. Through this, his philosophy became not an affirmation of life, but rather the embrace of desolation and death.

¹⁶³ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, pp. 80-2

¹⁶⁴ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 16

¹⁶⁵ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 89

Conclusion: The Politics of Memory, Nostalgia, and Decline

In the last analysis, modern man, who accepts history or claims to accept it, can reproach archaic man, imprisoned within the mythical horizon of archetypes and repetition, with his creative impotence, or... his inability to take the risks entailed by every creative act. For the modern man can be creative only insofar as he is historical; in other words, all creation is forbidden him except that which has its source in his own freedom; and, consequently, everything is denied him except the freedom to make history by making himself.

—Mircea Eliade¹

While many thinkers did not deny the benefits the Scientific Revolution provided us in terms of increasing control over our own destinies, the advancing disenchantment of Western society which accompanied it sparked a number of compelling assaults against straightforward notions of progress or utopia. In this dissertation, I attempted to defend the importance of the constrained vision historical memory provides over and against the dangers of restorative nostalgia and the unconstrained political projects it all too often portends. I have done this against the backdrop of decline because in moments of crisis, our sense of life's meaning and its interrelations with politics, society, and history fall under scrutiny. The specter of failure on a civilizational scale places man's highest ideals in a crucible.

I examined four of the most important intellectual responses to modernity, all of which shared an anxiety that the forces acting in their times would soon unravel or already had effaced Europe's greatest achievements. While Rousseau, Burke,

¹ Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return or, Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), pp. 155-6

Tocqueville, and Nietzsche all observed the transience of human creations – and certainly that of human life as well – each of these men pinpointed very different fissures in society and its consciousness that triggered the onset of decline. Despite their disparate diagnoses of the crises facing humanity, they all recognize an oncoming and ongoing diminution within the core of Western society. Each of them define the central elements of our society differently: In Rousseau, authentic self-expression takes pride of place. For Burke and Tocqueville, the transmission of our vital inheritance and maintenance of social institutions bears great importance. Finally, with Nietzsche our capacity to will forms the center of his teaching.

All of them observed the possibility, and in many ways, the reality of a stifling conformity within Europe. They abhorred the coming of a world where cultural and even psychological distinctiveness would cease to have any meaning. For Rousseau, this emerged when men pursued only wealth and personal power, resulting in a condition where there “is no such thing nowadays as Frenchmen, Germans, Spaniards, or even Englishmen—only Europeans..., and for good reason.... Put them in the same circumstances and, man for man, they will do exactly the same things.”² Both Burke and Tocqueville echoed this fear that our attachments to cultural particularity would die in the face of rational, leveling equality.³ Nietzsche held nothing but contempt for the way this allows men to adapt to any situation – because all become alike in their pursuit of petty

² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Government of Poland* trans. Willmoore Kendall (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), pp. 11-12

³ See Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J.G.A. Pocock (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), p. 173 and Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J.P. Mayer (New York: Harper, 1963), pp. 702-5

pleasures – but requires they live “as much in need of a master and commander as of their daily bread.”⁴ Echoing centuries of republican thought, none of them thought society could long retain a sense of martial virtue against the imperatives of commercial life.

While they all attributed this to different sources, they detected weariness in the soul of civilization. That exhaustion represents the end of life as they knew it because it heralds the death of society’s ability to engender greatness. How each of these authors responded to this crisis of civilization bore a tight relationship to their understanding of man’s place in time itself. Whether or not they embraced the continuing hope for an enchanted world, or accepted and even looked for the good in the creeping reality of disenchantment followed directly from their assumptions about the past’s place in the present. The desire for nostalgic reenchantment led Rousseau and Nietzsche down a radically different path than the historically-bound one Burke and Tocqueville carved out.

Rousseau sought to make men whole again through an imaginative recapitulation of idealized “spartan” historical societies for which he hoped men might strive. These societies would allow men to live authentically and strip away the accumulated burdens and innovations historical memory demands we embrace. He thought participation in the reconfigured cycles of political life oriented around the Legislator’s founding myth would allow men to subsume themselves into a wholesome existence without restless desire. This would heal the psychological wound poorly-constituted society inflicts upon them. By binding “the citizens to the fatherland and to one another,” the resolution to the

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989), pp. 176-7

crisis would come through heroic, virtuous *political* action of a sort that would mold an entire society through its authority and power.⁵

While Nietzsche appropriated many aspects of Rousseau's social diagnosis, he nevertheless heaped scorn on the Genevan's approach to curing man of his sickness because it betrayed nothing more than "unrestrained vanity and unrestrained self-contempt."⁶ Nietzsche embraced a similar mode of time consciousness, he saw all merely social and political efforts at reenchantment as insufficient because the actions of a *community* cannot overcome the derangement of the soul: "Every philosophy which believes that the problem of existence is touched on, not to say solved, by a political event is a joke- and pseudo-philosophy."⁷ Instead, as I discussed in the previous chapter Nietzsche suggests the ultimate answer might be found in the willful, conscious embrace of eternal recurrence, shown to us by the overman yet to emerge. Of course, this could only come to pass after an enormously destructive transvaluation of all existing value. Casting off of all the accumulated burdens of history requires monstrous political action.

Nietzsche and Rousseau both embrace aspects of the pagan ethos. However, Nietzsche insists that culture cannot be simply and painlessly overwritten by reviving or founding a new political system; the habits of a sick culture weigh upon its inhabitants. Recall "the camel that, burdened, speeds into the desert" becomes Nietzsche's metaphor

⁵ Rousseau, *Government of Poland*, p. 8

⁶ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, trans. Judith Norman, eds. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 221-2

⁷ Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, ed. Daniel Breazeale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 147-8

for humanity living before the destructive transvaluation of value.⁸ Rousseau locates both man's derangement and his salvation in his relations to others in the common civic life. While to some degree Nietzsche agrees *society* eviscerates the best in noble mankind and seeks to tame it through imposing a bad conscience on those who would transcend petty concerns, in many respects this becomes a crisis of the *individual* conscience that must find its ultimate resolution within the soul, not the culture. Both, however, firmly reject the persistent constraints historical memory force upon us.

One might characterize Burke's career as one long twilight struggle to maintain the precedent-based memory of the "ancient constitution" against all those who sought to undermine its hold over his nation's consciousness. The idea that we could somehow transcend the limitations of our inheritance struck him as delusive and dangerous. Every nation's historical inheritance and practices of cultural memory constitute the glue that binds together civil life, and thus, if "civil society be the offspring of convention, that convention must be its law" precisely because all forms of "legislative, judicial, or executory power are its creatures."⁹ Any attempt to efface the restraints of history really means the destruction of civilization. Burke's politics always remain firmly bound within the limitations of historical precedent and he reluctantly embraces the creeping hold of disenchantment. Yet Burke had no answer to the desire for equality, a fact which makes his writings profoundly limited as guides to politics in modern life.

Tocqueville understood that one could not simply outrun the burden of historical

⁸ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1966), pp. 25-6

⁹ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 52

memory. Indeed, perhaps his best example of this insight came in his uncompleted account in *The Old Regime and the Revolution*. There he sought to show the way in which even the supposed innovations of the French Revolutionaries actually came directly out of the monarchy's foolish, custom-eroding policies, and in fact had been the work of centuries. These accumulated actions presented a historical burden that despite their best efforts, the revolutionaries themselves could not outrun: "they nursed the foolish hope that a sudden, radical transformation of a very ancient, highly intricate social system could be effected almost painlessly, under the auspices of reason and by its efficacy alone."¹⁰ Tocqueville acknowledged that the march of equality and all of its concomitant desires made such a revolution inevitable, but he nevertheless assumed that despite this wave of change, he could still defend a kind of freedom in equality by showing the world how the Americans continually renewed and passed on their social memory through habits of civic association.

Burke and Tocqueville also exhibit a similar divide on the question of *where* men might resolve the crisis of social decline. Burke assumes the unbroken authority of a social memory and embraces a concept of society as a sacred "partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born."¹¹ He could claim a sort of generational unity that only aristocracy allows, and he believed men could accept it *unreflectively* in much the same

¹⁰ Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Anchor, 1955), p. 144

¹¹ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 85

way Rousseau hoped properly habituated peoples might uncritically love the laws.¹² Where Burke failed to see the radical changes the logic of equality would unleash, Tocqueville knew no truly *authoritative* resolution to the erosive power of radical egalitarianism would avail itself. While he decried the naked individualism presupposed by this equality and would have abhorred the equally-individualistic alternative Nietzsche presents, he knew that these same isolated, ordinary men would either form a civil society capable of transmitting their society's memory, or their culture would perish. The language of conscious consent and will replaces aristocratic fatalism.

All four authors confront a loss of certainty. The decline of conventional religious faith forced each to remind his audience exactly where men find meaning in their lives. Rousseau thought a mythical civic religion could salve this wound; Burke attempted to remind his people who they really were and insisted that they could not just discard religious faith out of a desire for theoretical consistency. Both could count on the presence of certain authoritative ideas within their respective polities. By the nineteenth century, the loss of more or less uncritically accepted *social* authority meant that both Nietzsche and Tocqueville found themselves forced to rethink that authority and what its absence meant for human life. For Nietzsche, we have seen authority moves to the naked will. With Tocqueville, it finds expression in public opinion, a force that properly constituted civil society *might* have a chance of taming with the action of restraining habits.

¹² On the depth of the laws engraved on men's hearts, see Rousseau, *Social Contract* in *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), p. 172

Rousseau and Nietzsche both hope to restore society by effacing a goodly number of our inherited institutions and all the historical burdens they carry with them. Their restorative nostalgia and desire for an enchanted political world necessarily leads their adherents into tacitly or explicitly endorsing acts of violence against existing political life. In looking outside the immediate inheritance of memory for guidance, both Rousseau and Nietzsche deny the value of precedent based on historical practice. Indeed, they uproot and destroy any form of thinking based solely on what has been because of a delusive *image* of past glory and health. Their sense of the *possible* future conditioned by that enchanted, nostalgic past fosters disgust with the present and disdain for our role as guardians of the inherited memories, conventions, and habits that make up a civilization. Neither Rousseau nor Nietzsche sees much use for limiting political power. Indeed, both of them explicitly condemn all the trappings liberal or constitutional constraint. Given their presuppositions about the nature of human social life and its relationship to the burden of history, they could do nothing else.

Weber rightly noted the link between the burden of our historical memory, disenchantment, and the maintenance of limits to political power. He insisted that institutions of memory allowed us a way to tame the excess of political power, but only if we accepted the *boredom* of thinking about politics as “a slow, powerful drilling through hard boards, with a mixture of passion and a sense of proportion.”¹³ Instead of viewing politics as a source of drama and majesty, Burke and Tocqueville advocate a

¹³ Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation” in *The Vocation Lectures*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, ed. David Owen and Tracy B. Strong (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), p. 93

disenchanted politics restrained by the precedents, customs, and traditions of the past. They insist that true freedom always comes hand in hand with the constraints provided by historically conditioned social institutions, and that any attempt to remake the world in light of some other vision of time merely erodes this precious inheritance.

If Rousseau and Nietzsche highlight the perils of embracing nostalgia and the dream of reenchancement, ultimately, Burke and Tocqueville show us the link between memory and perhaps our society's most precious discovery in politics: free, liberal self-government. Because of the march of equality, we cannot proceed through some attempt to revitalize half-forgotten traditions. The transmission of our society's freedom can only take place in the institutions and in the *habits* of civil society. Their decline does not presuppose our demise as a people, but it should serve as a warning, for without these habits, our fragile political order will ultimately pass away.

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