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Hume's 'False Philosophy' and the Reflections of Common Life

By Jonathan Allen Green

There are more things in heaven and earth,
Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.
—Hamlet, I.V

Theologians often distinguish between two ways of describing God: apophatic description, and cataphatic description. The former posits negative statements about what God is *not*; the latter, affirmative statements about what God *is*. When St. Paul writes to St. Timothy that God “dwell[s] in light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, or can see,” he indicates that God must be understood apophatically, in the *via negativa*.¹ In contrast, when a Rabbi calls the Jewish people to prayer, he begins with an elegant cataphaticism: “Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.”²

In the ongoing battle for the soul of conservatism, Professor Donald Livingston’s recent article in *The Intercollegiate Review*, “David Hume and

the Conservative Tradition,” presents a primarily apophatic reading of the Anglo-American conservative political tradition.³ Echoing Russell Kirk’s classic formulation, Livingston defines conservatism as “a critique of ideology in politics.”⁴

The ensuing discussion of David Hume confirms that, for Livingston, conservatism can only be properly understood in terms of its philosophic antithesis—ideology—or what Hume calls “false philosophy.” Hume’s methodology of enlightenment is dialectical in form. According to Hume (via Livingston), the typically modern philosopher pretends to reason from “abstract speculative principle[s]” unmoored from vulgar, pre-philosophical assumptions.⁵ But as Hume shows, these pre-philosophical assumptions are logically necessary for practical moral and political debate; *argumentum in vacuo* cannot generate its own starting premises.

Descartes’ critical project, Kant’s *reine Vernunft*, Bentham’s utilitarianism—these are nothing but false temptresses, nihilisms shielded under a guise of objectivity. Only those few courageous souls willing to doubt the purported self-sufficiency and supremacy of their own petrified, ideological schemata can hope to attain the prize of Hume’s “true philosophy”: authentic, philo-

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sophic conservatism.

Realizing that abstruse rationalism effectually “leads to total skepticism,” the true philosopher humbles himself and consents to “the autonomy of custom”; that is, he presumes “the pre-reflective . . . to be true unless shown otherwise.”⁶ This new disposition brings modesty and *sapientia*, the “metaphysical wisdom” that differentiates humans from animals and automata.⁷ Rather than pompously assuming ultimate authority *over* nature, the newly enlightened philosopher contents himself to play an important, but limited role *in* nature.

Although, as C. S. Lewis noted, the presumptions of modernity often place “God in the dock,” Hume’s true philosopher will submit happily to the authority of God and the constraints inherent in his humanness.⁸ He learns, in Russell Kirk’s phrase, “that consciousness and rationality did not commence with [himself] or [his] contemporaries.”⁹ No longer crushed under the weight of false philosophy, his “moral imagination” is brought back to life.¹⁰

Livingston ultimately concludes that our present political discontents are rooted in philosophical confusion. Since Descartes, false philosophy not only has infected our way of thinking but has bled over into the realm of practical politics as well. In the current political climate, ideologies of the left—socialism, communism, and neo-liberalism—battle ideologies of the right—fascism, libertarianism, and neo-conservatism—like grotesque, Hesiodic Titans on the hillsides of Thessaly. Because these hostile ideologies rest on opposing (and unexamined) “abstract principles,” contemporary political discourse is usually shrill and fruitless.¹¹

But true conservatism, as understood by Burke and Hume, offers a way through this quagmire. Put simply, we must renounce the ideological urge in both philosophy and politics. The former must be attended to first; only by confronting political ideology through “a critical philosophical engagement,” Livingston argues, can we restore a responsible political order and combat the pernicious effects of ideology in the public square.¹² Although this task is novel (and therefore daunting), it is necessary if we are to salvage that which is good and true in the American political tradition.

Accordingly, this essay aims at a brief critique of ideology as it is currently manifested in American society and politics, using Hume’s dialectic of enlightenment as a theoretical framework. In the following pages I argue that conservatism, if it is to avoid the pitfalls of ideology, must reject both the totalizing impulse of modernity—particularly liberal modernity—and the general “incredulity toward meta-narrative” characteristic of post-modern thought.¹³ Instead, a robust, traditional conservatism must root itself in a theological and historical understanding of the human being. As Aristotle knew, the true “student of politics . . . must study the nature of the soul.”¹⁴

Shortly after Descartes ushered in the early-modern era, the masses began to trust philosophers over priests. This led to a new faith in autonomous reason, which, practically speaking, exalted Science as humanity’s best chance for material improvement, and crowned Philosophy as the final word on metaphysical, moral, and political questions. This faith in reason rose conspicuously alongside the Hegelian notion of inevitable historical progress, the idea that gradual human advancement is written into the very structure of the cosmos.

This newfound historicism suggested that our ancestors—who had generally deferred to religious authority over secular authority—had been on the wrong side of history, and therefore deserved our censure. Thus, above all, modern thought must be understood as a rejection of the pre-enlightenment West. “Unlike any preceding culture,” notes sociologist Anthony Giddens, the modern human “lives in the future, rather than the past.”¹⁵

Although the modern period has ushered in countless material improvements for which conservatives should be deeply grateful, the predilections of the modern mind are also ripe soil for ideological speculation. Indeed, ideological reasoning (“which,” you will recall, “presume[s] the domain of the pre-reflective to be false unless shown otherwise”) is the natural outgrowth of the modern mentality;¹⁶ it relies entirely on the assumption that abstract thought—liberated from the constraints of place and history—can discern the total truth of reality, a presupposition that would have seemed absurd before Descartes’ *cogito, ergo sum*.

This position of epistemic authority is the throne from which Marx announced that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle.”¹⁷ It is the throne that Hitler climbed to propound his own racial and nationalist ideology, the myth of the imminent *Drittes Reich*. And it is, in many important ways, the same throne from which Locke theorized the natural rights of man to life, liberty, and property, and from which the General Assembly of the United Nations subsequently amended his list. Thus modern notions of history and reason are closely bound up with the great instances of ideology in the twentieth century: Soviet communism, German fascism, and Western liberalism.

While conservatives should of course condemn fascism and communism as thoroughly false philosophies, the present essay aims, in part, at a more introspective—and therefore, more controversial—critique of ideology: namely, a critique of liberalism. In many purportedly conservative circles, pointing out the ideological nature of liberalism (and its economic counterpart, modern industrial capitalism) is close to political heresy.

“But piety requires us to honor the truth above our friends,” and the truth of the matter is that liberalism, in both its classical (i.e., libertarian) and more recent (i.e., Rawlsian) aberrations, is a deeply ideological *Weltanschauung*, and therefore is susceptible to the errors of false philosophy outlined above.¹⁸ As Madame Roland’s infamous last words before the French guillotine attest, liberty is a malleable construction that can be used to justify both good and evil: “Oh Liberty, what crimes are committed in thy name!”¹⁹

That liberalism is an ideology can be seen through an examination of its methods. Locke began the liberal political tradition when he rejected the historical reality of the Garden of Eden, and instead posited isolated, individual experience—apart from any social, political or religious relations—as the original position of man. Borrowing a phrase from Thomas Hobbes, he called this arrangement the “State of Nature”

Although Locke’s pre-political humans were not always anarchic like Hobbes’s, they were certainly discontent. They had legitimate claims to their lives, their liberty, and their cultivated land, but these “natural rights” were often violated by other men. So, in a moment of rational coopera-

tion, Locke’s pre-political individuals formed governments which, in Thomas Jefferson’s well-known phrase, are intended “to secure [their natural] rights, . . . deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”²⁰ For as long as these rights remained unmolested, human beings were “free.” Similarly, the liberal individual was economically “free” for as long as his right to the uncoerced, consensual exchange of material goods between individuals and corporations remained intact.²¹ For modern human beings, Locke went on to claim, living and working in the domain of a sovereign government constitutes our implicit consent to the government’s existence, and therefore binds us to submit to its authority.²²

In the years since Locke formulated his theory of individualism, political philosophers have proceeded to embellish his list of natural rights. (Modernity, remember, is animated by the idea of progress.) Perhaps most famously, John Rawls demanded that, in order to guarantee a “fair worth” to our Lockean rights, human beings must possess the material means to *realize* our rights. As a result, the most basic rights of life, liberty, and property really imply second-level rights to more substantive goods: for example, social security, welfare benefits, sufficient health-care, and so on.²³

While very few conservatives will accept Rawls’s amendments as legitimate (and rightly so), many are eager to adopt Locke as a founding figure in the Anglo-American conservative tradition. This is a serious error. Locke’s isolated individual is a fabrication, a hypothetical conjecture used to solve an academic riddle. In reality, neither natural nor historical evidence supports Locke’s idea of the solitary individual.

Human beings are not born into a State of Nature. We are born into the arms of mothers, raised alongside siblings and relatives, and grow to maturity in a time and place not of our choosing. As a result, real freedom is a much deeper matter than simple consent; real meaning cannot be found in lonely seclusion. And yet, the obligations that we have to our families, our communities, and to God are coldly excluded from liberal political theory.²⁴

Liberalism, laments Wendell Berry, leads to fragmentation, setting “us ‘free’ from responsibility and therefore from the possibility of

meaning."²⁵ As Locke's theory has permeated the collective mentality of the modern West, this has led to societies of unprecedented moral diffidence. "Most modern freedom is at root fear," wrote Chesterton. "It is not so much that we are too bold to endure rules; it is rather that we are too timid to endure responsibilities."²⁶

The social atomization and moral timidity engendered by liberalism are especially problematic given the recent appearance of postmodernism. As its name implies, postmodernism is a general denunciation of the grand designs of the twentieth century. It rejects the universal—indeed, denies the existence of the universal—in favor of the particular. Postmodernism denounces all traditional sources of metaphysical authority as impotent, and thereby renders the construction of normativity an intimately personal task. The moral theory of emotivism, which holds that moral and ethical judgments are simply the expression of individual desires, is quintessentially postmodern in this respect. "I claim that there are all kinds of truth," shouts Flannery O'Connor's fictional postmodernist, "your truth and somebody else's, but behind all of them, there's only one truth and that is that there's no truth."²⁷

Nietzsche enthusiastically heralded the death of God; the postmodernists likewise hail the death of Nature.²⁸ In doing so, by denying human beings access to natural and supernatural moral reasons, postmodernism places the "whole burden of meaning" directly onto the individual's will.²⁹ Unhappily, this new burden comes at a time when our society's collective capacity for altruistic moral and political action has atrophied under liberalism. So rather than presenting an alternative to the excesses of liberal modernity, postmodernism only exacerbates its effects. Postmodernism, it turns out, is an (ironically) extreme form of modern liberalism.

Just as it eschews other ideologies, any authentic conservatism must also eschew liberalism (and its postmodern permutation) as a symptom of modernity, rather than its cure. In the final analysis, liberalism is inseparable from the caustic ideological speculation that pervades our time: the very same speculation that conservatism exists to combat.

If, as I have argued, Lockean liberalism is

a shoddy foundation on which to construct a twenty-first century conservatism, towards what alternative should conservatives look? Here Livingston's essay can help us once again. To this point, I have represented Hume's conservatism in negative terms—that is, apophatically: in opposition to ideology. But this approach has perhaps overshadowed the more cataphatic implications of his dialectic. True, the enlightened philosopher realizes that, to quote Livingston, modern "principles of philosophic reason are incompatible with human nature."³⁰ But it seems appropriate to ask as well: what positive "principles of philosophic reason" *do* comport with human nature?

According to Hume, true philosophy ultimately consists in the "reflections of common life, methodized and corrected."³¹ A rejection of ideology, therefore, involves a corollary acceptance of Aristotle's *sensus communis*, those conspicuous truths that are often obscured by ideology. In a word, these are T. S. Eliot's "permanent things"³²—an abiding faith in God, solidarity with one's given place, an appreciation of productive order, Burke's "moral imagination."³³

These are the principles that should guide our political action, and this is why a "healthy political society reposes in the enjoyment of inherited traditions and practices"—because tradition is the vehicle through which the permanent things are transmitted from one generation to the next.³⁴ The tragedy of ideology is that it deprecates this permanence; the romance of conservatism is that it defends it.³⁵

It is no disparagement of Hume to concede that, despite the intellectual richness of his critique of false philosophy, a fuller explication of the *sensus communis* must extend beyond the parameters of his own writing and specifically his epistemology. Hume's dialectic makes clear that any search for universals must root itself in the tangibility of the pre-reflective, lived human experience; that is to say, his critique conceptually endorses the simultaneous unity and tension of universality and particularity that is an abiding aspect of direct experience. It follows that for Hume, "true philosophy" should be predicated not only on intuition or perception, but also on a form of reason uncorrupted by ideology: call it "metarationality."

Curiously, however, Hume's thought is often tepid to defend such restrained, properly constituted reason; as a result, in the centuries following Hume, many conservatives have falsely conflated reason and ideology, and dismissed both as dangerous.³⁶ Such distortion is damaging and moreover unnecessary. In locating the transcending "grace / that keeps this world" amidst the ever-changingness of life, the true philosopher must not clumsily distort the tangible and the concrete.³⁷ Nevertheless, his defense of the permanent things should not phyrically attempt to cast off reason, via intuition or some such device. As humans, we are inevitably rational; the choice afforded us is *what sort* of reason we will employ.³⁸

For the philosopher's task, a study of history is especially important. In the confusion and disarray of our own time, history can act as a surrogate form of common sense, illuminating the essentials of human moral, political, and religious experience. Our predecessors can remind us of what it means to be human. "We need intimate knowledge of the past," wrote C. S. Lewis,

because we cannot study the future, and yet need something to set against the present. . . . A man who has lived in many places is not likely to be deceived by the local errors of his native village: the scholar has lived in many times and is therefore in some degree immune from the great cataract of nonsense that pours from the press and microphone of his own age.³⁹

Cultivating historical consciousness does not, of course, mean dogmatically resurrecting the debates and the controversies of the past; this is neither desirable nor helpful. Eliot makes much the same point in the *Four Quartets*:

We cannot revive old factions
We cannot restore old policies
Or follow an antique drum.⁴⁰

An unthinking nostalgia for days-gone-by will not help our current situation, and neither will blissful optimism: progress is not inevitable, and our future will be exactly as humane or as base as we make it through our actions. Amidst the current throes of ideology, the challenge and the promise of conservatism rest in resuscitating our languishing political and cultural traditions, in restoring philosophy to its proper station, in extending the old truths into our own time, in making dry bones speak once more.

Notes

1. 1 Timothy 6:16.
2. Deuteronomy 6:4.
3. Donald Livingston, "David Hume and the Conservative Tradition," *The Intercollegiate Review* 44:2 (Fall 2009): 30-41.
4. Livingston, 30. See also Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind from Burke to Eliot* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2001; 1953), esp. Ch. 1.
5. David Hume, *Essays Moral, Literary, and Political*, ed. Eugene Miller (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Classics, 1985), 60; qtd. in Livingston, 34.
6. Livingston, 31-32.
7. See Michael D. Aeschliman, *The Restitution of Man: C. S. Lewis and the Case against Scientism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1983), esp. 20.
8. C. S. Lewis, "God in the Dock"; in *God in the Dock*, ed. Walter Hopper (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994; 1970), 240-244.
9. Russell Kirk, *Eliot and his Age: T. S. Eliot's Moral Imagination in the Twentieth Century* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2008; 1971), 39.
10. Ibid.
11. Livingston, 30.
12. Ibid., 40.
13. This is the best short definition of postmodernism I know of. See Jean- François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984; 1979), xxiv.
14. *Nicomachean Ethics* I.1102a19-20.
15. Anthony Giddens, *Conversations with Anthony Giddens: Making Sense of Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 94.
16. Livingston, 32.
17. Karl Marx, *Manifest der kommunistischen Partei* (1872), I.I, 83, translation mine; in *Philosophische und ökonomische Schriften* (Stuttgart, Germany: Reclam Verlag, 2008), 82-96.
18. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I.1096a16.
19. Quoted. in Jacques Maritain, *Truth and Human Fellowship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 4.
20. *Declaration of Independence* (1776), ¶ 2.
21. Corporations are, of course, individuals created by legal fiction.
22. Locke's theory of individualism, rights, and the social contract is enumerated in his *Two Trea-*

tises of Government (1689).

23. See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (1971), Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005.

24. One of the most encouraging signs that our Founding Fathers were not wholly liberal thinkers is their reference to the divine nature of rights in the Declaration of Independence. *Contra* Locke, the Founding Fathers understood that whatever rights we have are granted to us by Providence; they are certainly not a construction, the consequence of one man's abstract theory. Even still, the rather clear Lockean antecedents of the Declaration's second paragraph suggest a liberal influence that should be challenging for conservatives. Although I am generally convinced by Russell Kirk's interpretation of the Founding ("a revolution to preserve what is"), for now, I propose to set all this aside.

25. From "Rugged Individualism," in Wendell Berry, *The Way of Ignorance: and other Essays* (Berkeley, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2006), 9-12.

26. G. K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994; 1912), 143.

27. From *Wiseblood*, in Flannery O'Connor, *Collected Works* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1988), 95.

28. This clever line of demarcation between modernity and postmodernity is taken from Peter Lawler, "Conservative Postmodernism, Postmodern Conservatism," *The Intercollegiate Review* 38:1 (Fall 2002): 16-25.

29. The "burden of meaning" is an idea taken from George Grant's *Time as History* lectures. George Grant, *Time as History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995; 1969), 24.

30. Livingston, 31.

31. David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 162; quoted in Livingston, 32.

32. "Conservatism is too often a conservation of the wrong things: liberalism a relaxation of discipline; revolution a denial of the permanent things." From T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture: The Idea of a Christian Society and Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1940), 102.

33. See Russell Kirk, "The Moral Imagination,"

Literature and Belief 1 (1981): 37-49.

34. Livingston, 30.

35. It bears noting that any real defense of permanence necessarily requires ingenuity, creativity, and thus liberty. As I have argued above, conservatives must insist, against Locke, that crude, abstract notions of 'freedom' are ultimately too thin to sustain political community; equally, however, they must defend the richer understanding of historical liberty described by Burke, who sought to reconcile the concept of freedom with its objective antecedent, and to understand Locke's individual as a desirable product of civilization, and not its efficient cause. That liberal ideology is false does not imply that liberty is unreal or nonessential.

36. At moments, Hume seems insufficiently aware that alongside the abstract reason he deconstructs is a purer form of reason—the very reason which capacitates his devastating critique of "false philosophy." As such, his corpus is often of little help in countering antirational conservatism. For an examination of Hume's empiricism from a conservative point of view, see Donald Livingston, *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium: Hume's Pathology of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), esp. Ch. 1.

37. Wendell Berry, "A Warning to My Readers," 5, 6; in *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 1998), 117.

38. For epistemological ideas that might supplement Hume's undeveloped notion of "true philosophy," see the work of Benedetto Croce, especially *Logic as the Science of the Pure Concept* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1917). For a more recent explication of genuinely philosophical and simultaneously historical reason, see Claes G. Ryn, *Will, Imagination and Reason: Babbitt, Croce and the Problem of Reality*, 2nd expanded edition (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1997). For a summary of the relevant ideas, see Joseph Baldacchino, "Ethics and the Common Good: Abstract vs. Experiential," *Humanitas* 15:2 (2002), esp. 38-59.

39. C. S. Lewis, "Learning in War Time," in *The Weight of Glory*, ed. Walter Hopper (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), 58-59.

40. T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1943, 37.