

The Western Illusion of Human Nature

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(Preface: Over the past decade or two, courses on “Western Civilization” have been taking a smaller and smaller role in the curricula of American colleges. Here I attempt to accelerate the trend by reducing “Western Civ” to approximately one hour. My justification is the Nietzschean principle that big issues are like cold baths: one should get into and out of them as quickly as possible.)

For more than two millennia, the peoples we call “Western” have been haunted by the specter of their own inner being: an apparition of human nature so avaricious and contentious that, unless it is somehow governed, it will reduce society to anarchy. The political science of the unruly animal has come for the most part in two contrasting and alternating forms: either hierarchy or equality, monarchical authority or republican equilibrium: either a system of domination that (ideally) restrains people’s natural self-interest by an external power; or a self-organizing system of free and equal powers whose opposition (ideally) reconciles their particular interests in the common interest. Beyond politics, this is a totalized metaphysics of order, for the same generic structure of an elemental anarchy resolved by hierarchy or equality is found in the organization of the universe as well as the city, and again in therapeutic concepts of the human body. I claim it is a specifically Western metaphysics, for it supposes an opposition between nature and culture that is distinctive to the West and contrastive with the many other peoples who think beasts are basically human rather than humans are basically beasts — for them there is no “nature,” let alone one that has to be overcome.

Time permitting, I would offer so many qualifications of these essentialisms that I could be taken for an adept of “the post modern cult of self-inflicted failure” (Zurburgg). As it is, I am rather in the position of J. S. Mill’s one-eyed philosopher, thinking to derive some universal truths from an obsession with a

particular point of view. To call this “intellectual history” or even “archaeology” would be as disingenuous as it would be pretentious. All I am doing is selectively singling out a few examples of our long-standing tradition of human nature, and suggesting it is delusional. While I offer no sustained narrative of this lugubrious sense of what we are, I put in as evidence of its duration the fact that intellectual ancestors from Thucydides through Saint Augustine, Machiavelli, and the authors of the Federalist Papers, not to forget contemporaries such as the social scientists of “economic man” and the sociobiologists of “the selfish gene,” have all been accorded the scholarly label of “Hobbesian.” Some of these were monarchists, others partisans of democratic republics, yet all nevertheless shared that same sinister view of human nature.

I begin, however, with the much more robust connection between the political philosophies of Hobbes, Thucydides, and John Adams. The curious interrelations of this triad of authors will allow us to sketch the main coordinates of the Metaphysical Triangle of anarchy, hierarchy, and equality. For as different as were their solutions to the fundamental problem of human evil, both Hobbes and Adams found in Thucydides’ text on the Peloponnesian War, notably his gory account of the revolution at Corcyra, the model of their own ideas of the horrors society would suffer if mankind’s natural desires for power and gain were not checked—by sovereign imposition said Hobbes, by democratic balance said Adams.

Adams and Hobbes as Thucydideans

In 1763, young John Adams wrote a brief essay titled “All men would be tyrants if they could.” The essay was never published, but Adams revisited it in 1807 to endorse its conclusion that all “simple” (unmixed) forms of government, including pure democracy, as well as all moral virtues, all intellectual abilities, and all powers of wealth, beauty, art, and science are no proof against the selfish desires that rage in the hearts of men and issue in cruel and tyrannical government. As he explained the essay’s title:

“It means, in my opinion, no more than this plain simple observation upon human nature which every Man, who has ever read a treatise upon Morality, or conversed with the World... must have often made, vis., that the selfish Passions are stronger than the Social, and that the former would always prevail over the latter in any Man, left to the natural Emotions of his own Mind, unrestrained and unchecked by other Power extrinsic to himself.”¹

Adams knew the dim views of Hobbes and others on human nature, but

for historical evidence he gave special credence to Thucydides. In the context of the partisan conflicts attending the birth of the American republic, including class conflicts something like those of fifth-century Greece, Thucydides was for Adams the star witness of the havoc that can be caused by out-of-control desires and factional interests. Thus the ancient historian's place front and center in the Preface to Adams' *Defence of the Constitutions of the United States . . .*, where he writes: "It is impossible to read in Thucydides, lib. iii, his account of the factions and confusions throughout all Greece, which were introduced by this want of equilibrium, without horror." He then proceeds to give close paraphrase of Thucydides' narrative (3.70–3.85) of the civil strife (stasis) at Corcyra.

I radically abbreviate Thucydides' account. It concerns an uprising of the few against the many in Corcyra: a rebellion of the privileged class against the democratic rule of the people, with the aim of severing the city's allegiance to Athens by establishing an oligarchic regime allied instead with Sparta. In a series of violent clashes, involving also sacrilege against law and religion, each party was victorious in turn, inflicting casualties that mounted progressively when the Spartans intervened on behalf of the oligarchs and the Athenians on the side of the people. In the end, an Athenian fleet cordoned off the city, whereupon the oligarchic faction suffered bloody massacre at the hands of an out-of-control democratic mob:

Death raged in every shape; and, as usually happens at such times, there was no length to which violence did not go; some were killed by their fathers, and suppliants dragged from the altar or slain upon it; while some were even walled up in the temple of Dionysus, and died there (Thuc. 3.81.4–5).

Apparently more violent than any previous stasis, the civil war at Corcyra was only the first of the draconian kind that developed during the Peloponnesian War, as the Spartans and the Athenians became engaged in local conflicts on the side of the oligarchs and the people respectively. Thucydides conveys the sense of an epidemic diffusion of these political "convulsions," becoming ever more malignant as they spread from city to city. For the plague here unleashed was human nature: "human nature, always rebelling against the law and now its master, gladly showed itself ungoverned in passion, above respect for justice, and the enemy of all superiority" (3.84.2). "The cause of all these evils," he said, "was the lust for power arising from greed and ambition, and from these passions proceeded the violence of the parties engaged in contention" (3.82.8). But when Thucydides asserted that such suffering would ever be repeated "so long as human nature remained the same" (3.82.8), John Adams broke off his own exposition of the text to say, "if this nervous historian had known a balance of three powers, he would not have pronounced the distemper so incurable, but

would have added—so long as parties in the cities remained unbalanced.”

Yet as Thucydides’ description of the “distemper” proceeds, not only did the main institutions of society succumb to human nature, but language itself suffered a similar corruption. Moral iniquity was coupled to self-serving hypocrisy to the extent that “words had to change their meaning and take that which was now given to them” (3.82.4). Thomas Gustafson speaks of an archetypal “Thucydidean Moment” when the corruptions of people and language became one.² (For a contemporary example, think of the so-called “compassionate conservatism” of the current American administration, which gives tax cuts to the rich at the expense of society in the name of “fairness,” or to the same effect dubs the inheritance tax the “death tax.”) Just so in Corcyra, as words and oaths were traduced in the all-out struggle for power, foul became fair, and fair, foul. Cautious plotting masqueraded as “self-defense”; prudent hesitation was castigated as “spurious cowardice”; frantic violence was “manliness” and moderation was the lack of it. Oaths were no proof against the advantages of breaking them. The only principle left standing, observes the classicist W. Robert Connor, was “the calculation of self interest. Now all the conventions of Greek life—promises, oaths, supplications, obligations to kin and benefactors and even the ultimate convention, language itself—give way. It is Hobbes’s *bellum omnium contra omnes*.”³

It is indeed—inasmuch as Hobbes was the first to translate Thucydides directly into English. If Thucydides seems Hobbesian, it is because Hobbes was a Thucydidean. As Hobbes put it in his verse autobiography,

Plautus, Euripides, Aristophanes,
I understood, nay more; but of all these,
There’s none that pleas’d me like Thucydides.
He says Democracy’s a Foolish Thing,
Than a Republick Wiser is one King.

Classical and Hobbesian scholars alike have seen in Thucydides’ narrative of the stasis at Corcyra a fundamental source of Hobbes’s conception of the state of nature. “Point for point,” writes Terence Bell, “feature for feature, Hobbes’s state of nature parallels Thucydides’ account of the Corcyrean revolution.”⁴ But where John Adams held that the escape from the natural anarchy described by Thucydides consisted in a self-organizing system of balanced powers, Hobbes’s solution was the imposition of a sovereign power that would “keep them all in awe.” As sometimes remarked, Hobbes’s narrative of the development from the

natural to the political state in *Leviathan* is just as much a myth of capitalist mentality. From a common starting point in each man's endless desire to secure his own good there inevitably follows a general scarcity of means, hence mutual incursions in which "the power of one man resisteth and hindereth the effects of the power of another"—precisely what Adams considered a good thing and Hobbes the source of worse to come. Worse was the ensuing evolution of the natural state from petty bourgeois competition to full capitalist exploitation, as each man finds he can only assure his own good by subduing others and harnessing their powers to his ends. Driven by this fierce competition and fears of a violent death, men finally agree to surrender their private right to use force in favor of a sovereign power who will bear their person and exercise their strength in the interest of collective peace and defense. Thus from the same basis of inherent human savagery, Hobbes and Adams devised radically different prescriptions for governing it: by domination or self-organization, hierarchy or equality, authority or reciprocity, monarchy or republic.

Contraries are sources of their contraries (Aristotle). This opposition of monarchy and republic is itself dialectical, each being defined against the other in practical politics as well as ideological debate. Even beyond their own contemporary controversies, Hobbes and Adams take their place in a centuries-long dispute between monarchical and popular sovereignty, engaging the arguments of distant philosophical adversaries and bygone political constitutions. Adams took Hobbes, his absolutism notwithstanding, as a respected interlocutor: "Hobbes, a man however unhappy in his temper or detestable for his principles, equal in genius and learning to any of his contemporaries." Whereas for his part, Hobbes's absolutism responded intertextually to republican doctrines of seemingly ancient memory: to Roman and Renaissance theories of civic life, with their emphasis on the citizens' equal voice in government. "One of Hobbes' aspirations in *Leviathan*," writes Quentin Skinner, "is to demolish this entire structure of [republican] thought, and with it the theory of equality and citizenship on which humanist civil science had been raised."⁵ Moreover, it only stands to (Hegelian) reason that each of the contraries preserves and encompasses the other in its negation, equality in hierarchy and vice versa. The way that Hobbes initiates the state of nature with each man's equal right to everything—which, as leading to continual war, is the trouble with it; even as Adams foresees an end to the war of nature in tyranny—which is the trouble with it. This "entire structure of thought" includes Hobbes's absolutism as the historic complement of the republicanism he wanted to demolish. It is a diachronic and dynamic structure of interdependent opposites: two contrasting modes of cultural order alternating with each other over a long time.

But again, as regimes for restraining the unruly human animal, sovereign

domination and egalitarian balance stand together on the cultural side of a basic nature-culture dualism that grounds the “entire structure.” Human nature is the necessity: that with which culture must cope—or to which it must succumb, as at Corcyra. And this antagonistic dualism of nature and culture is older than Thucydides. Hesiod’s description of the oncoming human condition of his own time (the eighth century B.C.) could well have been the model for Thucydides’ text on Corcyra. In the Age of Iron of Works and Days:

Neither will guest with host, nor friend with friend;
The brother-love of past days will be gone.
Men will dishonour parents...
Men will destroy the towns of other men.
... Men will do injury
To better men by speaking crooked words
And adding lying oaths...

Comments the classicist Gerald Naddaff: “Without justice, Hesiod believes that people will devour themselves like animals, that there will be a sort of Hobbesian state of nature—not unlike what preceded the reign of Zeus.”⁶

Ancient Greece

“Not unlike what preceded the reign of Zeus” — we are into ancient cosmology. In their dazzling commentary on Hesiod’s *Theogony*, Detienne and Vernant indeed make a succinct Hobbesian (or more precisely Nietzschean) summary of it: “There is no cosmic order without differentiation, hierarchy and supremacy. But by the same token, there is no supremacy without conflict, injustice towards others and constraint imposed by treachery and violence.”⁷ Here is a paradigm of the metaphysics of hierarchy, beginning in universal violence and ending in a stable, differentiated cosmos under the sovereignty of Zeus. The primordial violence was the relentless battle of the younger generation of gods led by Zeus against his father, Cronus, and the Titans of the older generation. Victorious, Zeus then apportions the “honors and privileges” of the gods, their statuses and functions. This divine order is now and forever stable; for henceforth quarrels among the immortals are settled by compelling oaths. By contrast, if humans notoriously break their oaths—in this lamentable Age of Iron, as at Corcyra—it

is precisely because strife and misery have been banished to the earthly plane. Some myths tell that humans are descendants of the unruly Titans.

Indeed everything suggests the sovereignty of Zeus was once the model of and for earthly kingship. By the time of Hesiod, however, anything like it had disappeared from Greece with the destruction of the Mycenaean kingdoms four centuries earlier. The kings of Hesiod's poetry were much reduced in power in comparison with their long-gone but not forgotten Mycenaean predecessors. Their authority was now contested and divided by a rivalrous elite. Indeed an agonistic spirit was largely abroad in society. Quoting Hesiod, And beggar strives with beggar, bard with bard. . . .

Vernant draws the compelling inference that the competition necessarily engages equals even as it aims at superiority—thus hierarchy and equality are mutually grounded in anarchy.⁸ Or in another reading, the emergent antithesis, hierarchy, encompasses its surpassed negation, equality. Something like that happened in subsequent Greek history. Well before it was achieved in the Athenian democracy of the fifth century, the demand for political equality was raised by the aristocrats of certain late archaic city-states—who were losing out in their chronic competition for superiority. Classicists tell that *isonomia*, “equality,” was the reclamation of certain oligarchs protesting their disenfranchisement by tyrants.

Isonomia—“the fairest of names” as Herodotus called it. In principle the equality of which Athens was the model entailed equal participation of the citizens in a government they held in common—and from which women, slaves, and resident foreigners were excluded. For the citizens it meant: equality before the law; equality of voice and vote in the Assembly, the sovereign body of the state; and a rotational equality of selection by lot for the Council of Five Hundred that set the agenda for the Assembly. In contrast to the ancient monarchies ruled privately, coercively, and mystically from the palace above, here the powers of government devolved publicly, collectively, and equally on the citizens assembled in the center of the city to determine the common policies that would also, hopefully, accommodate their several private and factional interests. Or as Pericles put the corollary civic virtue, the citizens should love the city as they make love themselves. By this time, *isonomia* was everywhere; the sense of a self-constituting system of equal and opposite forces was taking over cosmologies as well as polities, and working its way down into physiologies and ontologies.

In the sixth-century cosmology of the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaximander, monarchy was replaced by the rule of equality in nature, in a way analogous to the historical transformation of the city. Anaximander's alternative to the stratified universe of Hesiod and Homer, ordered and dominated by the

sovereign god, was a self-organized world that achieved stability through the mutual opposition of the equal elements of which it was composed.⁹ Invading one another and making “reparations” for such “injustice,” the opposed qualities of heat and cold, moist and dry, create the substance of things. At the level of the cosmos they make a kind of celestial city-state. Just as the order of the polis is negotiated in the Assembly of equal citizens met in the center (agora), so in Anaximander’s universe the earth is held stable at the center by its equidistance from the fiery bodies of the heavenly sphere. A commentary by Aristotle implies that the equipoise is a result of counteracting forces as well as equal distances. The celestial geopolitics is not only analogous to the earthly city, with its many households surrounding the agora where their particularities are integrated, it more specifically corresponds to the multiple domestic hearths surrounding the common ritual hearth of the agora—the fires of all adding a sacrificial and metonymic link to the metaphorical parallels of the terrestrial and celestial regimes.

Within the healthy bodies of the denizens of these houses, isonomia also reigns. According to the sixth-century physician Alcmaeon, health consists of a balance among the equal and opposed elements of which the body is composed, such as moist and dry, heat and cold, bitter and sweet. Sickness is caused by the domination or “monarchy” of any one element. Repeated in texts of the Hippocratic doctors, this theory of a balanced “cosmos of health” was destined to last into the Middle Ages. Indeed, more than two thousand years after Alcmaeon, John Adams reproduced it, complete with political allusions. “Some physicians,” Adams wrote, “have thought that if it were practicable to keep the several humors of the body in exact balance, it might be immortal; and so perhaps would a political body, if the balance of power could always be exactly even.”¹⁰ As for the play of elementary humors or forces in Adams, Alcmaeon, or Anaximander, the lasting formulation of this isonomic ontology was Empedocles’ doctrine of the four roots: the equal and opposite pairs of fire and water, earth and air, moved together and apart by the equal forces of love and strife.

Of course, isonomia did not reign alone, completely displacing the hierarchical order, no more in the body than in the universe. The Platonic scheme of the body ruled by the soul, and within the soul the part of reason ruling the appetitive part, continued to do service, along with other forms of “monarchy,” through the Middle Ages. And even after Zeus and Jupiter were usurped by the Christian God, Aristotle’s hierarchical cosmos—with its *Primum Mobile* likewise transferred to God—was still being reproduced by the likes of Dante and Aquinas. Indeed as E. M. W. Tillyard relates in *The Elizabethan World Picture*, “It was a serious matter not a mere fancy if an Elizabethan writer compared Elizabeth to the *primum mobile*, the master-sphere of the physical universe, and

every activity within the realm to the varied motions of the other spheres governed to the last fraction by the influence of their container.” But to return to fifth-century B.C. Athens, here was isonomia not only in the superstructures but in all the structures; it was in the cultural basis.

All the same, classicists have been wont to see the cosmology, physiology, and ontology of isonomia as ideological reflections of the polity. Working from Durkheimian or Marxist principles of theory arising out of social practice, they hold that the concepts of natural order are modeled on the egalitarian city-state. All sorts of objections might be raised to this view, beginning with the observation that isonomia is itself an ideological value, and as such it was as much a precondition of the polis as it was a reflection. But the critical point—as argued by Charles Kahn—is that for the ancient Greeks the boundaries between society and nature were not as rigidly determined or analytically policed as they are in the modern scholarly imagination. The assimilation of society and nature was normal; what certain fifth-century philosophers were moved to establish was their separation. More precisely, society and nature were defined “by mutual contrast,” writes Kahn, “as a result of fifth-century controversies regarding physis [nature] and nomos [convention, custom]”—in other words, what we now know as fateful binary opposition of nature and culture. Here was the dualism that established the natural ground of our Metaphysical Triangle: the antisocial human nature that equality and hierarchy themselves contend to control.

The sophists are the usual suspects. Although they could generally agree that nature and culture were antithetical, they were all over the map on which was a good thing and which bad, which of the two dominated the other and in what way. Of the several variants, two had the longest legs, motivating one another as logical contraries through a history that reaches into the present. On the one hand, the idea of nature as pure and beneficent, but held in thrall by the tyranny of custom: think Rousseau, natural human rights, natural equality of mankind, universal morality—on to perverse commodity forms such as bottled water from pure springs in “primitive” Fiji that in its plastic containers indeed makes a certain culture (for bacteria). On the other hand, there is the human nature I am tracing here in critical periods of its dominance: the idea of an innate, antisocial human animal with which culture must contend—often unsuccessfully.

For what chance could culture have if it were just local and changeable matters of belief in comparison with behavioral dispositions that are hard-wired in the species and imperatives of each individual? “Fire burns here and in Persia,” said Aristotle, “human institutions change under our eyes.” Man-made and variable from one group to another, human customs would have all the character of

secondary qualities of perception, like hot and cold or sweet and bitter. Culture was artificial, superficial, and subjective compared with the reality of natural things. From this, as Boas and Lovejoy remark, it was easy to conclude it was wrong.¹¹ What was worst of all for the subsequent career of the culture concept in our native Western anthropology was that *nomos* acquired the sense of something false in comparison with the truth of nature.

(In a recent work commenting on the popular romance of a universal natural reason underlying superficial cultural differences—*War of the Worlds: What about Peace?*—Bruno Latour proves again that we are not really modern. For the American imperialist project of neoliberal democratization has the same ancient premise. It assumes that the innate practical rationality common to mankind, if it can be relieved of local culture idiosyncrasies, as by employing the kind of force anyone would naturally understand, will make other peoples happy and good, just like us.)

From the supposition that nature is truth came various sophistic arguments about its necessary realization in and against culture. In the simplest version, culture is just nature in another form: as, for example, Thrasymachus' eruption in *The Republic*—"the just is nothing else than the advantage of the strongest." Glaucon, however, reserves a certain oppositional power for culture, asserting that everyone naturally pursues his own good "until forcibly turned away by law and custom to respect the principle of equality." More up to date sociobiologically speaking is Callicles' complex argument in the *Gorgias* that such good order and noble sentiments are merely mystifications of an irrepressible self-interest: merely public right-thinking by which the weak vainly attempt to suppress the gainful inclinations of the strong. But as an auditor and admirer of sophists, Thucydides offers some of the most powerful permutations of the sinister nature-versus-fragile culture dualism by having it that nature is both the maker and breaker of culture. The lust for power is responsible both for the creation of the Athenian empire and for the destruction of the Corcyrean state. The Athenians told the hapless Melians they were besieging that ruling wherever one can is a "necessary law of nature," yet the human nature that broke out in Corcyra, according to Thucydides, was "the enemy to all superiority." This is the best of all possible worlds of historical theorizing, where it is only human nature to act contrary to human nature, in which case human nature becomes the unbeatable world champion of historiography.

Alternative Orders

Beyond the ancient arguments about whether human nature was good or bad and the cultural constructions that could be made of it, the Western tradition has long harbored an alternative conception of order, of the kind anthropologists traditionally studied: kinship community. True that in the West this is the unmarked human condition, despite that—or perhaps because—family and kindred relations are sources of our deepest sentiments and attachments. Ignoring these, our philosophies of human nature generally come from the larger society, organized on radically different principles. In the occurrence, “human nature” consists of the imagined dispositions of active adult males, to the exclusion of women, children, and old folks, and the neglect of the one universal principle of human sociality, kinship. The lurking contradiction may help account for some remarkable recommendations of kinship subjectivity and community on the part of the ancients. Plato and Augustine both formulated what amounted to a broad system of Hawaiian kinship as a mode of sociability appropriate to mankind: Augustine seeing it as the original human condition, Plato as the ideal civil society among the enlightened classes of his utopian Republic. Here everyone is related to everyone in the community by the primary familial ties of brother and sister, mother and father, son and daughter. (It was not for nothing, Augustine opined, that God made us the descendants of one ancestor, thus all humanity but one kindred.) In effect, the Bishop of Hippo went on to forestall E. B. Tylor’s famous theory of the incest taboo—“marry out or die out”—by fifteen hundred years, noting likewise that the prohibition of marriage within the family would usefully multiply its kindred relationships. Citing Plato on pre-state society, Cicero developed an idea of the species-being that resonates strongly with kinship community and reciprocity. “As men are born for the sake of men,” he wrote, “that they may be able to mutually help one another, in this we ought to follow Nature as our guide, to constitute the general good by an interchange of acts of kindness, by giving and receiving and thus . . . cement human society more closely together, man to man.”¹² Pauline doctrine Christianized the idea: since we are all members of the body of Christ, “we are members of one another.” So again in the twelfth century, John of Salisbury enjoins the general practice of mutual aid on grounds that in society, as in the universe, “each individual part is a member of the other individual parts.”¹³

People are members of one another; they exist not in or for themselves, but in relationships of mutual being—one could be reading Marilyn Strathern on the New Guinea Highlands. Here one realizes oneself in and through these mutualities of being, the way “mother” and “child” or “father” and “child” become such through the reciprocal enactment of the bond which thus identifies them. And

as the mother and father work on the child's behalf, or as wife and husband in consideration of one another, the kinship other is internally present as a cause of one's own intentionality. In this condition of mutuality of being—which seems a good definition of kinship tout court—interests are no more confined to the satisfactions of the individual body than selves are to its boundaries. Anthropologists of Pacific societies speak rather of “the transpersonal self,” the self as a “composite site of relationships” or the self as “a locus of shared social relationships or shared biographies.” Many are the societies worldwide where relatives must be compensated for one's death, the injuries one receives, or even for having one's hair cut. Many then are the societies in which self-interest as we know it is witchcraft, madness, or some similar defect that is grounds for ostracism, execution, or at least therapy.

And what if human subjectivity, even including kinship, extended widely into what we call “nature,” encompassing all kinds of animals, plants, and inanimate things? New Zealand Maori are related genealogically to everything in the universe. “When the Maori walked abroad, he was among his own kindred. The trees around him were, like himself, the offspring of [the god] Tane.”¹⁴ And what shall we make of man's “animal nature” if, as is reported the length and breadth of North and South America, animals have a human nature. Like many plants—not to mention stars, mountains, or thunder—many animals have consciousness, will, intentionality, soul; in short, they are persons like ourselves. As Viveiros de Castro and others report of Amazonia, animals have culture: chiefs, clans, ceremonial houses, same as people. They are persons under their fur and feathers, same as different groups of people under their dress and adornment. As is true also in parts of New Guinea, animals were originally human rather than the other way round.

It is not that these peoples draw the line between nature and culture farther out into the world than we do. What is not significant to them is not a matter of “nature” but of indifference. The rest is peopled. There is no “nature” and a fortiori no dualism of nature and culture. I repeat: no concept of nature, no opposition of nature and culture. “A meaningful concept of nature appears not to be constructed,” says Signe Howell of the Malaysian Chewong people.¹⁵ “There is no reason to suggest,” Strathern writes of New Guinea, “that any more than in Hagen, Eastern Highlands people imagine a ‘nature’ upon which society and culture impose their rules and classifications.”¹⁶ Of course these peoples do not have the benefit of knowing Darwinian evolution. But neither did the Western ancients know Darwin when they drew the conclusion that men were beasts, which on the evidence of resemblance seems no more necessary than the opposite. Indeed as I hope to show in the end, if one seriously considers the cultural organization of biological evolution over the past three million years, one might

have a decent respect for the more common opinion of mankind that we are not the social creatures of animal dispositions.

Middle Ages and Renaissance: Monarchy and Republic

Here is a corollary distinction in Western concepts of human nature. In *The Symbolism of Evil*, Paul Ricoeur makes a point of the singularity of the Western cosmogony in which evil was neither a primordial condition nor a divinely orchestrated tragedy but uniquely the responsibility of man—the fault of Adam, who disobeyed God to please himself. Since, as Saint Augustine put it, “we are all in that one man,” whatever the differences among the older philosophers about man’s innate character, Original Sin pretty much sealed the deal for Christendom through the Middle Ages. Endless desires of the flesh led to endless war: within men, between men, and with Nature. “How they mutually oppress,” said Augustine, “and how they that are able do devour, and when one fish hath devoured, the greater the less, itself also is devoured by another.”¹⁷ Iranaeus’s version of the fish story was already derived from an older rabbinical tradition: “Earthly rule has been appointed by God for the benefit of nations, so that under the fear of human rule, men may not devour each other like fishes.”¹⁸ As a totemic model of human nature, *les grands poissons mangent les plus petits* remained proverbial through the Middle Ages, and it is still alive as a trenchant description of neoliberal capitalism. It is a stricture of the *longue durée*. The companion idea that men are even worse to each other than beasts—in Augustine’s words, “not even lions or tigers have ever waged war with their kind as men have waged war with one another” (12.22)—has also done service as the moral to fables about the necessity of hierarchy. As by John Chrysostom: “If you deprive the city of its rulers, we would have to live a life less rational than animals, biting and devouring each other.”¹⁹ Yes, the city: “Abel lived a simple life,” Thomas Gilby remarked, “Cain built the first city.”²⁰

Given this viciousness of fallen humanity, coercive government in general and monarchy in particular had redeeming political value. The powers of kings, judges, executioners, even the severity of the father had their good reasons, said Augustine, for while they are feared, the wicked are kept within bounds and the good live peacefully among the wicked. “Political Augustinism,” it has been called. Rule from above and beyond, over and against the sinfully inclined underlying population was the general principle, applicable to the feudal lord as well as the emperor or king, to bishop as well as pope. Made necessary by human

cupidity and contentiousness, monarchy on earth was the image of God's rule of the cosmos in the view of Dante, Aquinas, Giles of Rome, John of Salisbury, and many other worthies. Adapting the Aristotelian cosmology of the Unmoved Mover to Christianity, they commonly argued that just as the universe had one Divine Source and Law of Motion, so should the human realm. Accordingly the king or emperor had a special affinity with divinity—endlessly debated, of course, with the pope. Commonly characterized as the vice regent, the vicar, or the earthly successor of God, the medieval monarch was also, as Kantorowicz famously documented, Christlike, a god-man—*christomimeuteus*, the “actor” or “impersonator” of Christ. But then, monarchy was a whole metaphysics of order, extending from all-inclusive heaven to all things on earth, even material things.

This monarchical cosmology was probably more totalizing than any doctrine of sovereign domination since the Mycenaean. As a principle of rule, the dependence of the Many on the One ran from the whole animated by God through the earthly lordships to the smallest things, in a series of increasing particularity and decreasing virtue, each part being in its own organization a replication of the hierarchical entity that included it. There was a prince in everything. Otto Gierke remarks that just as the body ruled by the Heart is subordinate to the Soul ruled by Reason, so it is “in the whole of inanimate nature, for there we shall find no compound substance in which there is not one element which determines the nature of the whole.”²¹ This monarchical chain of being comprised a matrix of reciprocal analogies, as in the routine descriptions of the kingdom as a human body and the body as a kingdom. Wycliff added an Aristotelian formulation: “In polity, the people are the matter and the king is the form.”²²

But should old Aquinas be forgot? His insistence, following Aristotle, that mankind is social by nature could compromise the stigma of original sin, together with its antidote in coercive rule, and even offer some hope of felicity in an earthly life that for Augustine was only a vale of tears. But then, in arguing that men are naturally inclined to society because of their inability, alone or in families, to fend for themselves, Aquinas thus founded the community on human needs, desires, and self-interest—which is to say, on original sin, more or less naturalized. (One is reminded of Carl Becker's thesis in *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers*, that the philosophes' project of enlightenment consisted largely in secularizing Christian theology. They likewise envisioned the origin of society in self-interest: as epitomized by Helvetius's cynical formula, *Amitié, c'est avoir besoin.*) It follows that, like Aristotle, who believed that any and every form of government was subject to corruption by people's insatiable desires, for Aquinas too if men were naturally social, they were not naturally sociable. “The desire to seek their own good is present in the souls of all men,” he wrote, and no earthly thing will pacify it.²³ Hence the need

of a ruler whose virtue would transcend the self-concern of his subjects, and reconcile their conflicts in the interest of the common good. “For if many men were to live together with each providing only what is convenient for himself, the community would break up into its various parts unless one of them had the responsibility for the good of the community as a whole.”²⁴

Saint Thomas was known to meliorate his support of kingship by advocating some distribution of its powers among the *grandees* and the people, as in Aristotelian mixed government. But the monarchical order had its own ongoing contradictions. Liberty, contract, representation, and consent of the governed were known in some form in feudalism itself. Increasingly subject to law, kingship became an instrument of society rather than a power above it. There was also the growing autonomy of cities, guilds, and peasant communes. All such resistance, moreover, might have found inspiration in the critical negation encompassed in medieval Christendom from the beginning—from the Garden of Eden and the Gospels. For it was only after the Fall that mankind was forced to submit to kingship and law, private property, and inequality: all devised to control human evil. This was not what God originally intended for humanity. Originally, in the state of innocence, men were free and equal in His sight. Which suggests that all along, inside the medieval regime of hierarchy, there was a free, egalitarian republic waiting to come out.

Beginning late in the eleventh century it got out in Pisa, Milan, Genoa, Florence, and other cities of Lombardy and Tuscany. Whether persuaded that they were naturally good as the Bible said, or capable of civic virtue as Cicero said, they no longer needed to think that God had sanctioned their subjection to princes in order to repress their wickedness. Men (only men) became active citizens prescribing laws for themselves rather than passive subjects suffering the authority imposed upon them. Many of the “prehumanists” who philosophized their states “treat it as a distinctive virtue of elective systems that they guarantee the equality of all citizens before the law. No one’s interests are excluded, no one is unfairly subordinated to anyone else.”²⁵ When Aristotle’s *Politics* became available, the cities might boast of following his ideal of a government where men rule and are ruled in turn, insofar as their magistrates were salaried officials elected only for short terms. By a Florentine law of 1328, they were selected from the citizen body by lot—literally out of a bag. However, in the early republics the Aristotelian formula of mixed government—the combined rule of the one, the few, and the many—was not regarded as a set of checks and balances, but merely as creating class harmony on the Milo Minderbinder principle of “everyone has a share.” Civic peace was an obsession, if only because it was constantly threatened. As against partisan interests, the interests of the city were largely confined to preaching professors of the civic virtues of the old

Roman Republic. Yet as Cicero had lamented of his own time, "some belong to a democratic party, others to an aristocratic party, but few to a national party." Quentin Skinner repeatedly asks how, in this situation, public welfare could be reconciled with self-aggrandizement. If the answer be, by the mythical gifts of Orpheus taming the savage beasts by the sound of his voice and his lyre, the question remains, how indeed? Fallen into factional discord, most of the cities that had become republics by the mid-twelfth century lapsed and again put their trust in princes by the end of the thirteenth.

The Florentine republic managed to survive into the sixteenth century, not by avoiding the clash of interests but by institutionalizing it, in the aim of preventing the domination of any one faction or class by the counterweight of others. A corollary was the brilliant and self-congratulatory political science celebrating the Florentine virtues of liberty and equality—as by Leonardi Bruno—and making a virtue of self-seeking strife as a constitutional means of transforming partisan factionalism into the freedom and prosperity of the city—as by Machiavelli.

It was up to Machiavelli to "get real" about civic virtue. I use the expression because so many describe Machiavelli's discourse as "realism," that is, in reference to his sophistic imaginary that, at least in crisis, man's darker physis should prevail over justice and morality. Not only in *The Prince* but in his republican persona in *The Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli radically subverted the earlier faith in civic peace as the necessary condition of civic greatness. The heading of Chapter 4, Book I, reads: "The Discord between the Plebs and the Senate of Rome made this Republic both Free and Powerful." People who cavil at these conflicts, he said, are paying too much attention to the tumults and not enough to the liberty they produced. Republics everywhere, he said, are beset with opposition between the popular and privileged classes, "and all legislation favorable to liberty is brought about by the clash between them." Although the "Machiavellian moment," as J. G. A. Pocock famously set forth, introduced a new temporality of contingency and change in human affairs, upsetting the eternal, divinely ordered universe of the received Christian wisdom, there remained an essential continuity: that eternal figure of self-pleasing man—whom Machiavelli regarded as an inevitable political condition.

Even in *The Prince*, the basic motivation of the shifty morality Machiavelli recommends for rulers is the yet more consistent immorality of their subjects. Only by their own duplicity can princes contend with men of whom one can make this generalization: that "they are ungrateful, fickle, liars and deceivers, they shun danger and are greedy for profit." Likewise in *The Discourses* Machiavelli says, "It must needs be taken for granted that all men are wicked, and that

they will always give vent to the malignity that is in their minds when the opportunity offers.” Indeed in this republican context such malignant self-concern can have positive functions. Machiavelli claimed that allowing the free play of factional interests could even answer the ancient question of how then to establish the common interest—though his answer rather begged the question. Good examples of civic virtue will come from good education, he said, good education from good laws, “and good laws from those very tumults which so many condemn.” Yes but how do good laws come from tumults of self-interest?—most of which, as Pocock points out, have merely the negative character of plebs putting down the patricians’ attempts at domination.²⁶

Still, the coherence of the whole that self-regulating contentiousness could not achieve in the Renaissance republic it managed to produce in the large scale of the cosmos. In a work entitled *The Nature of Things according to Their Own Proper Principles* (1565), Bernardino Telesio of Cosenza generalizes self-interest into a universal empirical principle of nature. “It is quite evident,” he wrote, “that nature is propelled by self-interest.” Telesio proves that if Anaximander hadn’t lived, the Renaissance would have had to invent him. As in Anaximander’s cosmos, in Telesio’s all things are produced through the opposition of heat and cold, emanating from the Sun and the Earth, and the bodies thus composed invade one another in their self-interested attempts to realize their own natures. For all entities, animate and inanimate, are endowed with sensory capacities that react to other things in terms of pleasure and pain in order to grow themselves. “It is not blind and senseless chance, then, that brings active natures into perpetual conflict. They all desire in the highest degree to preserve themselves; they strive, furthermore, to grow and reproduce their individual subjects.” Unlike Anaximander, Telesio sees no reconciliation of these conflicts by a sense of justice. Virtue comes down to the bedrock self-aggrandizement that makes a self-organized world. If the world is then organized, it is as if by an Invisible Hand—of which concept Telesio was one of the first to give a political, ethical, and natural expression, according to Amos Funkenstein.²⁷ But aside from the fact that Anaximander beat him to it by two thousand years (plus), it is perhaps evident by now that Invisible Hand doctrines are intrinsic to regimes of any kind—economic, political, cosmological, or physiological—that are founded on the oppositions of self-interested parts. Failing some civic concern for the common welfare, and it generally does fail, the only hope is that, in the appropriately cosmological trope of Alexander Pope:

Yet make at once their circle round the Sun:
So two consistent motions act the Soul;
And one regards Itself, and one the Whole.

Thus God and Nature link'd the gen'ral frame,
And bade Self-love and Social be the same.
(Essay on Man III, 313–318)

To close this particular circle: Bacon called Telesio “the first of the moderns.” Hobbes had read Telesio, and himself once said, “Nature does all things by conflict of bodies pressing each other mutually with their motions.”

American Founding Fathers

On March 6, 1775, at the fifth anniversary commemoration of the Boston Massacre in the city’s Old South Church, the orator of the day, Dr. Joseph Warren, took the podium wearing a Roman toga—a multivalent sign that his audience knew how to understand.²⁸ Indeed in their political writings the Founding Fathers often took on classical identities, the way that Alexander Hamilton (to mention one of countless examples), when urging an attack on the French at New Orleans, signed himself “Pericles” in an allusion to the Athenian statesman’s speech calling for war with Sparta. “The history of Greece,” wrote John Adams, “should be to our countrymen what is called by many families on the continent a boudoir; an octagonal apartment in a house with a full-length mirror on every side, and another in the ceiling.”²⁹ Standing there, Thomas Jefferson would have seen not only an all-round image of his American self but his vision of the ancient class struggle besetting the new American republic: “The same political parties which now agitate the U.S. have existed through all time,” he said. “Whether the power of the people or that of the aristoi should prevail kept Greece and Rome in eternal convulsions.”³⁰ “Convulsions” was Thucydides’ own term for it. “Faction” was Aristotle’s. When James Madison in Federalist No. 10 spoke of the “latent causes of faction” as “sown in the nature of man,” and of the unequal distribution of property as the principal overt cause, he was clearly emulating *The Politics*, Book V, on civil strife—which has its own allusions to the civil strife at Corcyra. In Federalist 51, Madison comes back to factions with an implicit nod to Hobbes: “In a society under the forms of which the stronger faction can readily unite and oppress the weaker, anarchy may as truly be said to reign as in a state of nature when the weaker individual is not secured against the stronger.” Madison’s resolution is also Hobbesian: “a government that will protect all parties.” But of course not an absolute sovereign. Rather, a balance of opposed powers. So Madison went on, in what became the most famous passage of the Federalist Papers:

Ambition must be made to counteract ambition. . . . It may be a reflection on human nature that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary.

According to a distinguished and popular historiographic tradition, the American Republic was founded on the dark concept of human nature that is variously described as “pessimistic,” “realistic,” “jaundiced,” or “Hobbesian.” There were numerous disagreements among the framers of the Constitution, but almost a consensus on the necessity to control human avarice and viciousness—which, moreover, many could specifically locate in the human breast. In *The Federalist* Hamilton took it as a constitutional premise, “that the fiery and destructive passions of war reign in the human breast.” Said William Lenoir in the North Carolina debates: “We ought to consider the depravity of human nature, the predominant thirst for power which is in the breast of everyone.”³¹ (Hey dude, what happened to the milk of human kindness?) A lot of this so-called pessimism was directed against the unruly masses by members of the possessing classes, who could agree with Madison (and John Locke) that the preservation of property was the first object of government. They had a healthy fear of what one called “the fury of democracy,” meaning agitations such as the Shays Rebellion and the demands for the cancellation of debts and the redistribution of property that the poor were making in the name of liberty and equality. Hence the sense of Jefferson and others that they were afflicted by the perennial struggle of the aristoi and the people from which Hamilton among others drew the conclusion that they needed a strong government to “resist the popular current.”

In Hamilton’s idea of a mixed Aristotelian constitution, much like that of John Adams, the “many” represented in a lower house would be counterposed by a “natural aristocracy” of the few in the Senate, the legislature in turn balancing off the one executive. But since the proposed constitution had all three powers elected directly or indirectly by the people, many participants in the ratification debates already saw that the correspondence between class and governing bodies wasn’t happening. Hence Patrick Henry’s outburst in the Virginia convention against a document that lacked the restraint that even the British government relied upon—self-love:

Tell me not of checks on paper; but tell me of checks founded on self-love. This powerful irresistible stimulus of self-love has saved that government. It has interposed that hereditary nobility between the king and commons. . . . Where is the rock of your salvation? The real rock of political salvation is self-love, perpetuated from age to age in every human breast and manifested in every

action.³²

Still, the belief of the founders in the efficacy of the balance of powers—of letting ambition fight ambition and interest, interest—was well-nigh unconditional. Which is perhaps why its actual inscription in government was ever in contention, often indeterminate, and sometimes illusory. In 1814, John Adams thought he found eight such checks in the constitution, including the states against the national government, the people against their representatives and the classic balance of Montesquieu among legislative, executive, and judicial branches. Madison advocated an extensive representative government that could counter “the spirit of faction” by a combination of size and diversity, hoping thus to neutralize regional and economic differences. Here was one good reason for imperialism. Another was that the agrarian frontier could create a large cadre of middling farmers to offset the power of the commercial rich and the resentments of the urban poor. The idea was already abroad that Americans were by and large equally fixed, just as today everyone is “middle class”—except the nineteen percent who think they are in the upper one percent of income. Besides, imperialism and war are conditions of fortune that can compensate for the civic virtue lacking in the constitution, being circumstances in which the common good of victory is in everyone’s private interest.

In respect of civic virtue, the new American republic was in a better position than its historic predecessors, since by the eighteenth century self-interest had largely emerged from the shadow of sin. So far as the welfare of the nation was concerned, America was on its way to transforming the Ciceronian doctrine that we all have self-interest in the common interest into the neoliberal converse that the common interest is self-interest. And more than civic virtue, the values called up from the beginning of the Republic to resolve the contradictions of a collectivity based on self-interest were nationalism and patriotism—which, again, thrive in war and imperial expansion.

When Alexander Hamilton repeatedly insisted in the Federalist Papers that there should be no intermediate bodies between the federal government and individual persons, he was not merely putting down arguments for states’ rights. There was something radically new, nationalism, in his demand that the federal government “must carry its agency to the persons of the citizens,” that it “must be able to address itself immediately to the hopes and fears of the individual; and to attract to its support those passions which have the strongest influence on the human heart.” In other words the nation must insinuate itself into people’s everyday lives as an object of their fondest sentiments, so that having thus incorporated the nation in themselves they find themselves incorporated in the nation. The more the citizens are accustomed to meet with the national author-

ity in the common occurrences of the political life, said Hamilton,

the more it is familiarized to their sight and to their feelings, the further it enters those objects which touch the most sensible chords and put in motion the most active springs of the human heart, the greater will be the probability that it will conciliate the respect and attachment of the community.

No longer is passion fighting passion. The nation is the passion. Now there's nationalism for you. Also naturalism: a renewed body politics of the body politic.

Hence also modernism, or the world re-encharmed by a certain materialism. The founders were disposed to justify every possible constitutional arrangement by appeals to natural order. Richard Hofstadter observed that the science boom of the eighteenth century, riding on the rational cosmos of Newton, provided them with a heavenly model of balanced and stable forces in support of the idea that government could be established on the same basis.³³ Underlying that, of course, were the drumbeats of war and self-love pounding naturally in every human breast. This sort of naturalism (cum "realism") came to be celebrated as the "disenchantment of the world," although what it really meant was the enchantment of society by the world—by body and matter instead of spirit. (I have said it elsewhere: materialism must be a form of idealism, because it's wrong—too.) Not only was society understood as the collective outcome of individual wants and dispositions—as in sciences such as evolutionary psychology and economics or the average common American folklore—but the world was enchanted by culturally relative utilities, as of gold, oil, pinot noir grapes, and pure Fiji waters. Here is a construction of nature by particular cultural values, whose symbolic qualities are understood however as purely material qualities, whose social sources are attributed rather to bodily desires, and whose arbitrary satisfactions are mystified as universally rational choices.

The Illusion of Human Nature

The problem is not whether human nature is good or bad. The many "anti-Hobbits" of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who attacked innate egoism on grounds of natural goodness or natural sociability remained with the same sclerotic framework of a corporeal determination of cultural forms. But beginning in the Enlightenment, the idea of the human condition as a culturalized nature appeared within the Western tradition. Thus Adam Ferguson's observation that individuals do not exist before or apart from society but are constituted therein. In society they are born, and there they remain—capable

of all the sentiments on which diverse peoples construct their existence, amity prominent among them but not excluding enmity either. For Marx similarly, the “human essence” exists in and as social relationships, not in some poor bugger squatting outside the universe. Born neither good nor bad, human beings form themselves for better or worse in social activity (praxis) as it unfolds in given historical circumstances. Marx was all against reading from social formations to innate dispositions—although one could certainly read from bourgeois society to the mythical Hobbesian war of each against all. One might suppose that some knowledge of colonized others contributed to this anthropology. In any case, with the important proviso that “given cultural orders” replace “given historical circumstances” in the Marxist formulation, in other words that the praxis by which people make themselves is itself culturally informed, this notion of the human condition is an ethnographic commonplace.

No ape can tell the difference between holy water and distilled water, Leslie White used to say, because there is no difference chemically—although the meaningful difference makes all the difference to how people value it; even as, unlike apes, whether or not they are thirsty makes no difference in this regard. That was my brief lesson on what means “symbol” and what means “culture.” Regarding the implications for human nature, leading a life according to culture means having the ability and knowing the necessity of achieving our natural inclinations symbolically, according to meaningful determinations of ourselves and the objects of our existence. Human culture, it needs be considered, is much older than human nature: culture has been around for three million years, ten or fifteen times longer than the modern human species, *Homo sapiens*. We have evolved biologically under cultural selection. Not that we are “blank slates,” lacking any animal imperatives, only that what was uniquely selected for in the genus *Homo* was the ability to realize these imperatives in the innumerable different ways that archaeology, history, and anthropology have demonstrated. Biology became a determined determinant, inasmuch as its necessities were mediated and organized symbolically. We have the equipment to live a thousand different lives, as Clifford Geertz says, although we end up living only one.³⁴ But this is only possible on the condition that biological imperatives do not specify the objects or modes of their satisfaction.

So who are the realists? Fijians say that young children have “watery souls,” meaning they are indeterminate until they demonstrate their social being by the practice of Fijian relationships. As in many kinship-dominated communities, humanity is defined by reciprocity. “The mind (will, awareness),” Strathern was told in Hagen, “first becomes visible when a child shows feeling for those related to it, and comes to appreciate the interdependence or reciprocity that characterizes social relationships.”³⁵ Although from Augustine to Freud the needs and

dependencies of infants have been taken as evidence of their egoism—consider how we gratuitously speak of the child’s needs as “demands”—the prevalent interpretation among the anthropological others is simply that the child is incomplete, not yet defined as human by engagement in the cultural praxis of relationships. Human nature then becomes a specific cultural kind. So when in Java, “the people quite frankly say, “To be human is to be Javanese,” Geertz, who reports it, says they are right—in the sense that, “there is no such thing as human nature independent of culture.”³⁶ Again not that there is no such nature, but that its mode of existence and social efficacy depends on the culture concerned—a mediated and thus determined determinant.

What is most pertinent to the relations between physis and nomos is not (for example) that all cultures have sex, but that all sex has culture. Sexual drives are variously expressed and repressed according to local determinations of appropriate partners, occasions, times, places, and bodily practices. We sublimate our generic sexuality in all kinds of ways— including its transcendence in favor of the higher values of celibacy, which also proves that in symbolic regimes there are more compelling ways of achieving immortality than the inarticulate mystique of the “selfish gene.” Immortality, like everything else for human beings, is a symbolic phenomenon—what else could it be? (In *The Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith observes that men have been known to voluntarily throw away lives to acquire after death a renown which they could no longer enjoy, being content to anticipate in the imagination the fame it would bring them.) Likewise, sexuality is realized in various meaningfully ordered forms. Some even do it by telephone. Or for another example of conceptual manipulation (pun intended), there is Bill Clinton’s “I did not have sex with that woman.”

As it is for sex, so for other inherent needs, drives, or dispositions: nutritional, aggressive, egoistic, sociable, compassionate—whatever they are they come under symbolic definition and thus cultural order. In the occurrence, aggression or domination may take the behavioral form of, say, the New Yorker’s response to, “Have a nice day”—“DON’T TELL ME WHAT TO DO!” We war on the playing fields of Eton, give battle with swear words and insults, dominate with gifts that cannot be reciprocated, or write scathing book reviews of academic adversaries. Eskimo say gifts make slaves, like whips make dogs. But to think that, or to think our proverbial opposite, that gifts make friends—a saying that like the Eskimos’ goes against the grain of the prevailing economy—requires that we are born with “watery souls,” waiting to manifest our humanity for better or worse in the meaningful experiences of a particular way of life. Not, however, as in our ancient philosophies and modern sciences, that we are condemned by an irresistible human nature to look to our own advantage at the cost of whomever it may concern and thus become menaces to our own social

existence.

It's all been a huge mistake. My modest conclusion is that Western civilization has been largely constructed on a mistaken idea of "human nature." (Sorry, beg your pardon; it was all a mistake.) It is probably true, however, that this mistaken idea of human nature endangers our existence.

Notes

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³W. Robert Connor, *Thucydides* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 89.

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⁵Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*. Vol. 3: Hobbes and Civil Science (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 15.

⁶Gerald Naddaf, "Anthropogony and Politogony in Anaximander of Miletus," in Dirk L. Coupric, Robert Hahn, and Gerald Naddaf, *Anaximander in Context: New Studies in the Origins of Greek Philosophy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2003), 19.

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¹¹Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (1935; Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 106.

¹²Cicero, *De Officiis*, I, vii.

¹³In Cary J. Nederman and Kate Forhan, eds., *Medieval Political Theory—A Reader: The Quest for the Body Politic, 1100–1400* (London: Routledge, 1993), 28.

¹⁴Elsdon Best, *The Maori*, Vol.1 (Wellington, NZ: Harry H. Tombs, 1924), 128.

¹⁵Signe Howell, "Nature in Culture or Culture in Nature? Chewong Ideas of 'humans' and other Species," in Phillippe Descola and Gisli Palsson, eds., *Nature and Society: Anthropological Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 1996), 130.

- ¹⁶Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 92.
- ¹⁷In Herbert A. Deane, *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 47.
- ¹⁸In Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve and the Serpent* (New York: Random House, 1988), 47.
- ¹⁹Deane, 101.
- ²⁰Thomas Gilby, *The Political Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 8.
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- ²³Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Political Writings*, R. Dyson, ed. and trans. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 23, 26.
- ²⁴Aquinas, 7.
- ²⁵Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics, Vol. II: Renaissance Virtues* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 28–29.
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- ³⁵Strathern, 90.
- ³⁶Geertz, 52–53, 49.