

## ON THE MODERN MORAL IMAGINATION

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By “moral imagination” I mean, following Charles Taylor, “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations....shared by large groups of people...that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy.” (*Modern Social Imaginaries*, p23)

More specifically, I focus here on the modern moral imagination which informs modern thinking on human relations. Consider Thomas Hobbes’s observation in his Introduction to the *Leviathan*:

But there is another saying not of late understood, by which [human beings] might learn truly to read one another, if they would take the pains; and that is *nosce teipsum, read thy self*....to teach us that for the similitude of the thoughts and passions of one man to the thoughts and passions of another, whosoever looketh into himself and considereth what he doth, when he does *think, opine, reason, hope, &c*, and upon what grounds, he shall thereby read and know, what are the thoughts and passions of all other men upon the like occasions....He that is to govern a whole nation must read in himself, not this or that particular man, but mankind, which though it be hard to do, harder than to learn any language or science, yet when I shall have set down my own reading orderly and perspicuously, the pains left another will be only to consider if he also find not the same in himself. (Intro. to *Leviathan*)

This sets a direction for the modern moral imagination down to the present day. Let us notice all that Hobbes is saying to us: 1) The thoughts and passions are basically similar from one person to the next; 2) By introspection into one’s own inner being one can imagine the basic pattern of reasoning and passion which is common to human beings and thus infer how others are likely to respond in similar circumstances; 3) At the level of governing a nation this knowledge is essential because the task of governing extends far beyond our close personal relations – indeed governing requires a certain kind of impersonal or de-personalized relationship to all subjects of the commonwealth; 4) At the same time, since there is no fundamental difference in these patterns between the rulers and the subjects, there is 5) basic similarity of insight among all human beings; 6) what distinguishes one human being from another is the relative ability accurately to grasp the basic structure of human conduct by bracketing one’s idiosyncrasies, foibles and particular goals; the office one holds does not distinguish one’s basic humanity; 7) Hobbes, in the *Leviathan*, claims to have worked out in detail what this basic

similitude is and the test of his argument is for the reader to consider whether Hobbes has expounded the fundamental character of human relations “scientifically,” that is, in detachment from merely personal preferences and goals.

At the heart of Hobbes’s thinking thus is the prototype of the modern moral imagination which emphasizes not mere self-interestedness – the aspect of Hobbes’s thought we most commonly discuss – but also the capacity to enter into the views of others by inference from the universal basic structure of thought and emotion. We thus arrive at the thought of enlightened or rational self-interest, the conscious and disciplined pursuit of one’s interests by which we take account of our inevitable implication in the unavoidable presence of others who are similarly self-interested and capable of disciplining their pursuits in the same way. Reflection on our experience leads us to conclude that our desire to set ourselves apart from, or above, others will be frustrated if we do not learn to behave in a “moral way.” The moral way is the disciplined way of enlightened self-interest, which the individual learns through reflection on experience. What we acquire is the practice of self-regulation. We imagine the inner life of others according to the basic similarity of one to another in the common human condition. It is in learning how to discipline our self-interestedness that we demonstrate moral imagination. As Michael Oakeshott says, following Hobbes, “moral activity may be said to be the observation of a balance of accommodation between the demands of desiring selves each recognized by the others to be an end and not a mere slave of somebody else’s desires.” (“Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind, in *Rationalism in Politics*, 502)

Hobbes sets the stage for the further development of the modern moral imagination. Subsequently, Adam Smith and David Hume, for instance, will emphasize the instinct of sympathy, the capacity for pity at the sight of others’ pain. The moral imagination allows us to identify ourselves with others even though we must be individuals who are always for ourselves. The combination of self-interestedness with sympathy defines the modern moral imagination. Out of it we imagine and systematically describe a spontaneous civil association of innumerable voluntary transactions governed by a rule of law which permits the growth of wealth and the projection of an ideal of infinitely expanding prosperity. Consider also Immanuel Kant’s project to achieve perpetual peace through the expansion of the republican and commercial order to all the world. The movement from Hobbes to Kant and beyond brings to sight the two great aspirations of modernity: perpetual peace and ever-expanding prosperity.

What appears to be Hobbes’s pessimism about the human condition is nearly the opposite of the truth. Hobbes thought he had outlined the basic science of human conduct which, to the extent we learn it, makes it possible for us to transform human relations along the lines further developed in the movement from Locke to Smith and Hume, to Kant and beyond. These later writers work out the basis for confidence that the spontaneous order enabled by enlightened self-interest is not reliant for its stability on massive coercive power in central governments. Rather, it promises a more enduring stability than that maintained by coercion.

**Kant's essay – “An Old Question Raised Again: Is the Human Race Constantly Progressing?” -- advocates a “predictive history,” a philosophy of the future not of the past which is to be achieved by “widening” one’s view of future time; it is a kind of prophetic history. How is this possible? Only, Kant says, if we commit ourselves in advance to goals which certify the dignity and enlightenment of humanity. That is, we must adopt ideals for the future which are worthy in themselves and then act towards the future under their inspiration. Given the sorry record of human history how can we believe in, or summon the energy to work for, these ideals? Kant’s answer is that nothing less is worthy of a being that wishes to achieve true dignity and happiness. Here the moral imagination projects a moral transformation in the human condition. We must imagine our perfection and then gather the resources to pursue that perfection. We need, Kant says, “moralized politics” rather than “political morality.”**

**Kant means by political morality the expedient calculation of self-interest we associate with Machiavelli. By moralized politics Kant means transforming enlightened self-interest to include the goal of a perfected human condition. This goal builds into enlightened self-interest the motive of transforming self-interest, no matter how rationally pursued, into that higher virtue to which enlightened self-interest in the past seemed to be a barrier. This is to say that human beings have the capacity to construct their own vision of perfection and then find ways to make the vision a material reality in human relations. We incorporate the ideal end-state into our self-interest. The science of conduct in Hobbes is to be perfected in the moral idealism of Kant.**

**Kant fully understands that the plausibility of the path to perfection is hindered by the record of past history. But if human beings are genuinely free in the sense that they can make their ideals for themselves, they can thereby inspire themselves to strive unceasingly to make the ideals reality. We must become the cause of our own advance to completed enlightenment. In order to do this we must achieve a cosmopolitan point of view in which we regard humanity as a whole and not only in local identity. This is to extend Hobbes’s original insight for the possibility of a commonwealth – the internal cosmopolitanism of the state -- to the possibility of a universal commonwealth composed of states who see the similitude of the thoughts and passions in each other.**

**The emergence of this ideal in Kant’s time, which he thought the great revolutions of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries incarnated, is for him the sign of progress because the new ideals of peace and prosperity are coming to be the only legitimate ideals human beings can entertain. Their validity does not lie initially in their plausibility but in their intrinsic appeal to a being who seeks dignity and affirmation in his own terms. There is a latent moral disposition in the human race which at this moment in history is coming to sight. Perpetual peace will replace perpetual conflict. Living in hope for the heavenly kingdom will be transposed into a project to use self-interest to transform ourselves into an existence beyond self-interest. This is the**

apex of the modern moral imagination. Kant sees himself at a revelatory moment in which the moral disposition of the human race begins to reveal itself fully, to be formulated as a project for the future which, he thinks, cannot disappear. Contingent events cannot derail the moral direction. Kant says: “The human race has always been in progress toward the better and will continue to be so henceforth. To him who does not consider what happens in just some one nation but who has regard to the whole scope of all the peoples on earth who will gradually come to participate in progress, this reveals the prospect of an immeasurable time – provided at least that there does not, by some chance, occur a second epoch of natural evolution which will push aside the human race for other creatures....”

As the sense of duty to what ought to happen expands, it “will also extend to nations in their external relations toward one another up to the realization of the cosmopolitan society,” increasingly resistant to “the mockery of the politician who would willingly take the hope of man as the dreaming of a distraught mind.” And offensive war “which constantly retards this advancement” will be renounced altogether.

If the modern moral imagination is preoccupied with the ideals of peace and prosperity, bolstered by the confidence science and technology impart to it, it is, nevertheless, attended by a haunting question: Is it possible that we can advance materially and decline spiritually? From the first appearance of the modern moral imagination there has been an accompanying, dissenting theme. “Modernity” constitutes itself in the dialectic of what Michael Oakeshott calls the “politics of faith” with the “politics of skepticism.” One could call this the internal dialectic of the modern moral imagination.

The skeptical theme is the residual legacy of the Classic/Christian heritage of western civilization which, in refusing to subscribe to Kant’s predictive history of the future, remembers and contemplates the past record of the corruption induced by the acquisition of power. As Oakeshott puts it:

In the politics of faith, the activity of governing is understood to be in the service of the perfection of mankind....human perfection is sought precisely because it is not present....[and] is to be achieved by human effort, and confidence in the evanescence of imperfection springs here from faith in human power and not from trust in divine providence....man is redeemable in history....[and] the chief agent of the improvement, which is to culminate in perfection, is government.(*The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scpeticism*, 23-4)

Moreover,

One of the characteristic assumptions, then, of the politics of faith is that human power is sufficient, or may become sufficient, to procure salvation. A second assumption is that the word ‘perfection’ (and its synonyms) denotes a

single, comprehensive condition of human circumstances....Consequently, this style of politics requires a double confidence: the conviction that the necessary power is available or can be generated, and the conviction that, even if we do not know exactly what constitutes perfection, at least we know the road that leads to it. (PFPS, 26)

By contrast, the politics of skepticism expresses “prudent diffidence” in recognizing politics as a necessary evil. The politics of skepticism “expects human conflict....seeing no way of abolishing it without abolishing much else at the same time...[and thus] to be sparing of the quantity of power invested in government.”(PFPS,33)

“Modernity” constitutes itself both in rejecting its Classic/Christian heritage, acknowledging that heritage only insofar as it is made the preamble to our present, and yet also in its failure to rid itself of that heritage which irritatingly reminds us that the ideal picture of our future opposes the actual structure of reality as we have always experienced it. Kant is perfectly aware of this opposition and, in fact, endorses this departure from dwelling on the reality of the historical record. For him the construction of ideals for the future is the sign of human freedom, freedom understood as liberation from reality justified by a claim to knowledge of the only imaginable future for man. This is an eschatological interpretation of history.

As Eric Voegelin says, “The eschatological interpretation of history results in a false picture of reality; and errors with regard to the structure of reality have practical consequences when the false conception is made the basis of political action.” (*The New Science of Politics*, 166) According to Voegelin, there are two inescapable facts: First, what comes into being will go out of being; second, the mystery of human historical existence cannot be solved. By contrast, what Voegelin calls the Gnostic claimant to final knowledge asserts that human beings can make something that will not end because they know what that goal must be. This assertion seeks to escape the ordeal of existence by imagining the end of history. Modernity blends the vocabulary of utopian idealism into the language of everyday life, putting prudential action on the defensive. Kant’s critique of “political morality” depends on our accepting that we are in fact in the process of transcending the structure of reality as we have always known it. The implication of a “moralized politics” is that we can use politics to bring politics to an end, perhaps even justifying Machiavellian means in the name of pursuing Kantian goals. The danger, that abstract idealism will rationalize the most extreme Machiavellian means, is well known.

As Voegelin further remarks: “In classic and Christian ethics the first of the moral virtues is *Sophia* or *prudentia*, because without adequate understanding of the structure of reality, including the *conditio humana*, moral action with rational coordination of means and ends is hardly possible. In the Gnostic dream world, on the other hand, nonrecognition of reality is the first principle. As a consequence, types of action which in the real world would be considered as morally insane because of the real effects which they will have will be considered moral in the dream world

because they intended an entirely different effect. The gap between intended and real effect will be imputed not to the Gnostic immorality of ignoring the structure of reality but to the immorality of some other person or society that does not behave as it should behave according to the dream conception of cause and effect.”(NSP, 169) One result is the obsessive search for the individual or group that has wickedly conspired against the project to attain the ideal condition. The liquidation of that individual or group, or at least the reform of their thinking, will be necessary in order that progress toward the ideal may continue.

The modern moral imagination exemplifies a profound dialectical tension between the philosophy of the future and the Classic/Christian inheritance. The defeat of Soviet Communism indicates the emergence of a new dialectical balance involving a resurgence of what Oakeshott called the “politics of skepticism” against the “politics of faith” or political utopianism. But although the most virulent form of this utopianism has been defeated, many of the milder, less extreme forms survive and pervade the vocabulary of contemporary politics.

This is the “post-modern” condition, a situation of declining confidence in the enlightenment claim for a philosophy of the future. This uncertainty is accompanied by aggressive bewilderment about alternative ways of imagining ourselves. The loss of confidence in political utopianism understandably issues in the feeling that we have lost meaning in life because we have put so much faith in politics as the locus of meaning. This modern departure from the Platonic, Aristotelian and Biblical understanding that politics is an instrument in the service of that which transcends the mundane makes us reluctant to return – or leaves us believing there is no path of return -- to that which we have spent several centuries dismantling. The critique has been both effective and yet unsuccessful. Hannah Arendt describes our location as “between past and future,” and, like Heidegger, argues for “thinking,” or the non-calculative use of our rational faculty to open ourselves to the fullness of Being. The insight here is that we cannot cure the loss of self-confidence by projecting yet a new and different imagined future, but we cannot, at least not yet, endure submitting to that which we thought we had overcome.

Michael Oakeshott urges openness to the “voice of poetry in the conversation of mankind.” The voice of poetry is an alternative to, but not a substitute or replacement for, the scientific/technological voice. The voice of poetry is also not a political voice. The poetic voice is a different way of imagining our world, disclosing possibilities which the voices of science, technology and politics obscure. For him, the poetic experience is to move about among images which evoke delight and encourage contemplation. Poetry is not about “fact” or “not-fact” nor about events of which we inquire when and where they took place. “Where imagining is ‘contemplating’, then, ‘fact and ‘not-fact’ do not appear.”(VPCM, in RIP, 509)  
Poetic images in contemplation

**provoke neither speculation nor inquiry about the occasion or conditions of their appearing but only delight in their having appeared. They have no antecedents or consequents; they are not recognized as causes or conditions or signs of some other image to follow, or as the products or effects of one that went before; they are not instances of a kind, nor are they means to an end; they are neither 'useful' nor 'useless'....Moreover, the image in contemplation is neither pleasurable nor painful; and it does not attract to itself either moral approval or disapproval. Pleasure and pain, approval and disapproval are characteristics of images of desire and aversion, but the partner of desire and aversion is incapable of being the partner of contemplation. (510)**

**In short, Oakeshott's poetic experience offers a release for a time from the interminable project to perfect ourselves in perpetual peace and ever-growing wealth. That project is in principle interminable because there is no guarantee against falling back into war, nor insulation from the failure of material wealth to assuage spiritual longing. Oakeshott allows for a glimpse of the transcendent in the momentary release in contemplation of the poetic voice. He is stoic, but he points to a more comprehensive moral imagination which, while it need not abandon modern accomplishments, would recognize their subordinate and incomplete character.**