

THE MASTER IDEA OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION*

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A review of Graham James McAleer & Alexander S. Rosenthal-Pubul, *THE WISDOM OF OUR ANCESTORS: CONSERVATIVE HUMANISM AND THE WESTERN TRADITION* (University of Notre Dame Press 2023)

In *The Wisdom of Our Ancestors: Conservative Humanism and the Western Tradition*, authors McAleer and Rosenthal-Pubul pose three massive questions: What is conservatism? What is humanism? And what do they have to do with each other in the 21st century?

Throughout, their consideration of those questions is at once traditional and eclectic. Their central contention is that “Western conservatism is an allegiance to the humanist tradition rightly conceived.”¹ Indeed, they contend that humanism, rightly conceived, is the “master idea of Western civilization.”² As such, “humanism is the arching value that conservatism seeks to preserve”³ and the “best lens by which to understand Western civilizational identity.”⁴ Correlatively, they contend that “conservatism in the twenty-first century must be a defense of humanism,” and specifically a humanism that affirms the “transcendent dignity of the human person.”⁵

* Note from the Editor: The Federalist Society takes no positions on particular legal and public policy matters. Any expressions of opinion are those of the author. To join the debate, please email us at info@fedsoc.org.

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¹ GRAHAM JAMES MCALEER & ALEXANDER S. ROSENTHAL-PUBUL, *THE WISDOM OF OUR ANCESTORS: CONSERVATIVE HUMANISM AND THE WESTERN TRADITION* 23 (2023).

² *Id.* at xxix.

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.* at xxiv.

⁵ *Id.*

The authors consider those three questions in light of the present historical moment. They first affirm the now-common contention that the West is undergoing a “crisis of confidence” stemming from serious and sustained attacks from within and looming threats from abroad.⁶ That crisis of confidence, they contend, is existential.⁷ As they see it, the crisis has left the West unmoored from a sense of self. As they say in their preface, “The modern West is no longer conscious of its identity: it no longer knows what it stands for and what it stands against.”⁸ In response, they contend that the West does, truly, have tremendous wisdom to offer. Consequently, they contend that “the contemporary role of conservatism is to act as the guardian of Western civilization’s confidence.”⁹

They also orient their thinking around today’s challenges to liberalism resulting from the rise of a new nationalism.¹⁰ Given that increasingly clear conflict, they, by their own account, seek to steer between “two extreme poles”: namely, Francis Fukuyama’s “liberal universalism” (or “liberal cosmopolitanism”) and Aleksandr Dugin’s “antiliberal particularism” (or “tribalistic nationalism”).¹¹ Fukuyama and Dugin—neither of whom they reject *tout court*—function as framing figures throughout the book.¹²

Fukuyama is an American political scientist who has twice served as a member of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff.¹³ Today, he holds several prestigious positions at Stanford University, including a senior fellowship at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies.¹⁴ Famously, in 1989, shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall, Fukuyama proclaimed the “end of history.”¹⁵ As he posited it, history had culminated in liberalism’s triumph over all other possible political ideologies. Three years later, he published *The End of History and the Last Man*, which developed the thinking of

⁶ *Id.* at xviii. In the United States, of course, this crisis has dramatic constitutional dimensions. See JOHNATHAN O’NEILL, CONSERVATIVE THOUGHT AND AMERICAN CONSTITUTIONALISM SINCE THE NEW DEAL 284 (2022) (pointing out that “notable liberal and Progressive theorists increasingly pronounce the Constitution a failure that should be changed wholesale, or disobeyed, or radically democratized”).

⁷ MCALEER & ROSENTHAL-PUBUL, *supra* note 1, at xv, 190.

⁸ *Id.* at xvii.

⁹ *Id.* at xxiv.

¹⁰ *Id.* at xix.

¹¹ *Id.* at xxi, 125.

¹² *Id.* at xxiv (“There are elements of the Fukuyama and Dugin positions that need to be retained.”).

¹³ STANFORD UNIVERSITY, <https://fukuyama.stanford.edu/> (last visited May 3, 2024).

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History*, NAT’L INTEREST 16, Summer 1989, at 3–18.

his 1989 article and received international acclaim and attention. He has since published prolifically on political theory, development, and international politics. His most recent book, *Liberalism and Its Discontents*, which came out in 2022, defends classical liberalism against both the progressive left and the nationalist right.

By contrast, Dugin is a Russian political philosopher and mystic with apparent ties to Vladimir Putin. The authors present Dugin as the face of today's nationalism. The authors rightly expect readers to question their decision to feature Dugin due to his highly controversial (even infamous) reputation.¹⁶ As they note, Dugin has been called “the most dangerous philosopher in the world” and “Putin’s brain,” and the United States government has sanctioned Dugin for acts against Ukraine.¹⁷ Additionally, according to conservative media pundit Tucker Carlson’s recent interview of Dugin, Dugin’s books have been “banned by the Biden Administration in the United States.”¹⁸ (Whatever the truth of that claim, it is true that Dugin’s books are not available on Amazon, at least in English, as of this writing.) And yet, because the authors see Dugin as the “preeminent political philosopher in Russia,”¹⁹ and because they believe that he will be lesser known to many readers,²⁰ they spend substantial time on him over the course of the book, effectively making the book an introduction to his thought and wider influence.

In addition to Fukuyama and Dugin, the iconic English conservative Sir Roger Scruton functions as a third framing figure. As the authors say, “Each chapter can be seen as a commentary on themes addressed in Scruton’s *The Meaning of Conservatism*.”²¹ As the book unfolds, their intellectual debt to Scruton becomes obvious.

Importantly, another central contention of the book is that conservatism, as a political philosophy, has its “own identity” that can be distinguished from both liberalism and nationalism.²² According to the authors, conservatism offers a “*via media*”—a political middle—that “reconciles universal moral values and particularist loyalties.”²³ Hence, the authors concurrently affirm the

¹⁶ MCALEER & ROSENTHAL-PUBUL, *supra* note 1, at xx.

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ Tucker Carlson (@TuckerCarlson), X (formerly Twitter) (Apr. 29, 2024, 5:00 PM), <https://twitter.com/TuckerCarlson/status/1785066534995714067>.

¹⁹ MCALEER & ROSENTHAL-PUBUL, *supra* note 1, at xx.

²⁰ *Id.* at xxi.

²¹ *Id.* at xxvii.

²² *Id.* at 2.

²³ *Id.* at xxi, 56.

“universal validity of natural law” and the “value of particularity and attachment to localities of place, custom, and culture.”²⁴

Their long preface, introduction, and first chapter lay out their conceptions of “conservatism” and “humanism.” The following eight chapters elaborate on and defend conservative humanism’s metaphysical, institutional, moral, legal, economic, and other aspects. The final chapter culminates with what they call the “Benedict synthesis.” Named for Pope Benedict XVI (Joseph Ratzinger), who ultimately emerges as the book’s star, the Benedict synthesis, as the authors articulate it, is a blending of the best of classical, Christian, and modern insights about human nature and human flourishing.

Along the way, the authors discuss thinkers through the ages who have made important contributions to conservative humanism: Edmund Burke (whom they acknowledge as the “preeminent conservative figure of the English-speaking world”²⁵), Adam Smith, Aristotle, Cicero, Thomas Aquinas, Aurel Kolnai, and Eric Voegelin all appear prominently.²⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, on the contrary, serve as conservative humanism’s most formidable intellectual foes, with Dugin representing a continuation of certain lines of their thinking today.

To be sure, the book is an important contribution to the discussion about the relationship between conservatism and humanism.²⁷ Though the book is principally a work of political philosophy, the authors also offer a *cri de coeur* for the renewal of Western civilization—for the West to recall, in Burke’s words, the “wisdom of our ancestors” and so regain its confidence in its rich civilizational inheritance.

²⁴ *Id.* at xxiii.

²⁵ *Id.* at 156.

²⁶ Some readers, especially those in the United States, will find the authors’ omission of Russell Kirk from the book to be a deficiency. See BRADLEY J. BIRZER, BEYOND TENEBRAE: CHRISTIAN HUMANISM IN THE TWILIGHT OF THE WEST 13 (2019) (“Most Conservatives over the past seven decades have accepted Russell Kirk’s 1953 book, *The Conservative Mind*, as the touchstone of the modern movement.”); ANDRÉ GUSHURST-MOORE, THE COMMON MIND: POLITICS, SOCIETY, AND CHRISTIAN HUMANISM FROM THOMAS MORE TO RUSSELL KIRK 217 (2013) (“What is uniquely vivid in the life and work of Russell Kirk is the thoroughly considered identification of Christian humanism with a conservative political philosophy.”).

²⁷ See BIRZER *supra* note 26, at 3–6, 11, 21–26 (offering five “canons of humanism” and five “principles of conservatism,” and declaring that “[h]umanism is the thing that conservatives must conserve”).

I. CONSERVATISM

Given the many meanings in circulation today as to the principal terms of our political discourse, McAleer and Rosenthal-Pubul, quite helpfully, begin with some definitions.

By “liberalism,” they do not mean modern progressivism but rather the classical liberalism associated with John Locke, Adam Smith, Thomas Jefferson, Immanuel Kant, and John Stuart Mill, which generally champions capitalism, individualism, cosmopolitanism, universal rights, the rule of law, limited government, and the idea of progress.²⁸ As they say, “This is the liberal doctrine that Fukuyama presents as the final and universal ideology.”²⁹

By “conservatism,” they say, they do not mean commercial liberalism or nationalism.³⁰ So what are the salient features of conservatism? First, “The conservative’s default attitude is one of reverence for the past on the assumption that there is a collective and accumulated wisdom in history.”³¹ But they immediately concede, as they must, that “not any practice is legitimate simply because it is an inherited tradition.”³² For them, Christian convictions about human dignity provide a powerful corrective. Accordingly, “Actions that offend human dignity can be rejected on substantive grounds even where they are time-honored customs.”³³

Further, because conservatives generally see the past as a reliable fund from which to draw, the authors denounce “the pride and folly of rejecting the resources of tradition on the premise that one’s own generation is better and wiser than all that came before.”³⁴ That view, of course, has enormous educational implications. It implies that the insights of age-old writers remain relevant to the issues that confront society today and thus deserve continued study and consideration (more on education anon).

Regarding inherited traditions, the authors stress three as critical for preserving the West’s cultural inheritance—predictably enough, they are religion, the family, and education (in that order of importance).³⁵ Political

²⁸ *Id.* at xv, 1.

²⁹ *Id.* at 2.

³⁰ MCALEER & ROSENTHAL-PUBUL, *supra* note 1, at xv, 190.

³¹ *Id.* at 3.

³² *Id.* at 2.

³³ *Id.* at 2–3.

³⁴ *Id.* at 3. Their point recalls what C.S. Lewis famously called “chronological snobbery”: “the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate of our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that count discredited.” C.S. LEWIS, *SURPRISED BY JOY* 254 (1955).

³⁵ MCALEER & ROSENTHAL-PUBUL, *supra* note 1, at 5–15, 21.

conservatism, they contend, is a response to the breakdown of the “normal processes of cultural transmission” effected by those “three organs of tradition.”³⁶

Quoting Scruton, they first affirm that “the core of common culture is religion.”³⁷ Quoting George Washington’s Farewell Address and relying on Burke generally, moreover, they see traditional religion as necessary for a sure moral order.³⁸ As they see it, “no secular ideology has yet proved equal to the task of constraining the wayward impulses of human nature . . . nor is there any reason to expect it will in the future.”³⁹

Second, they stress the importance of safeguarding the family and the institution of marriage as a means to social stability. Again quoting Scruton, they affirm that “conservatives believe, with Burke, that the family is the core institution whereby societies reproduce themselves and pass moral knowledge to the young.”⁴⁰

Third, they claim that the essential end of education is to ensure cultural continuity through the transmission of the values and stories that form the culture’s particular identity.⁴¹ As to that end, they contend that modern universities are failing miserably.⁴² Yet again quoting Scruton, they decry that universities today generally promote a “culture of repudiation” regarding the West’s traditional texts, heroes, and symbols.⁴³

One notable subtext that emerges over the course of the book is that the West’s current crisis of confidence can be traced, in no small part, to 20th-century changes to the traditional university curriculum that stretched back to the Middle Ages.⁴⁴ To summarize: Deleterious changes began after World War I, when universities first relegated the classics to a specialized field for scholars and, in their place, created the Western Civilization survey course or Great Books program (à la Robert Maynard Hutchins and Mortimer Adler).⁴⁵ That change resulted in the general loss of the study of Greek and

³⁶ *Id.* at 21.

³⁷ *Id.* at 5.

³⁸ *Id.* at 6, 159.

³⁹ *Id.* at 8.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 159.

⁴¹ *Id.* at 12–13.

⁴² *Id.* at xviii, 12–13.

⁴³ *Id.* at xviii, 42, 183.

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 30 (“A canon of exemplary Greek and Latin authors remained foundational for Western higher education until well into the twentieth century.”).

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 189. To be sure, Hutchins and Adler would be horrified by the authors’ implicating them in the events leading up to the West’s current crisis of confidence. Together, in 1949, Hutchins and

Roman authors in their original languages. Then, beginning in the 1960s, Western Civilization survey courses and Great Books programs came under increasingly fierce attacks from progressives, causing virtually all universities eventually to drop them from the curriculum.⁴⁶

It is obvious that the authors lament those educational developments, given what they see as the historical importance of the classics in shaping the Western mind generally and their central role in the thinking of conservatism's greatest thinkers specifically, especially Burke.⁴⁷ In response, they advocate that the revival of classical education is essential to any effort to renew Western culture.⁴⁸

II. HUMANISM

"Humanism," like "conservatism," has many meanings in circulation today.⁴⁹ It is also a word from which most conservatives reflexively recoil.⁵⁰ Once again, quite helpfully, McAleer and Rosenthal-Pubul clarify their conception upfront.

They proceed historically. Following the traditional telling, they present "three historical iterations" (or "forms") of humanism: (1) classical humanism; (2) Christian humanism; and (3) modern humanism (sometimes appropriately, sometimes inappropriately, called "secular humanism").⁵¹ Between the three forms, they say, "there are both tensions and possibilities of synthesis."⁵² Because humanism has existed in classical, Christian, and modern forms, moreover, the authors argue that it offers the "narrative of continuity that can best make sense of the West as an integral whole."⁵³

Adler founded the "Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies" (now the Aspen Institute) to help the West *regain* its confidence in its civilizational inheritance in the wake of the horrors of World War II and the early years of the Cold War. See generally SIDNEY HYMAN, *THE ASPEN IDEA* (1975).

⁴⁶ MCALEER & ROSENTHAL-PUBUL, *supra* note 1, at 189–90.

⁴⁷ *Id.* at 14–15, 159.

⁴⁸ *Id.* at 14–15.

⁴⁹ See ALAN JACOBS, *THE YEAR OF OUR LORD 1943: CHRISTIAN HUMANISM IN AN AGE OF CRISIS* 37 (2018) ("'Humanism' is a much-vexed, highly contested word whose meaning has zigged and zagged in strange ways over the centuries, and has equally often been used to praise and damn.").

⁵⁰ See BIRZER, *supra* note 26, at 3 ("[W]hen I mention the term 'humanism' among conservatives, I am almost always greeted with silence, headshaking, or actual and visible disgust. Almost all conservatives, it seems, associate humanism with secularism, atheism and radicalism.").

⁵¹ MCALEER & ROSENTHAL-PUBUL, *supra* note 1, at xxiv–xxv, 30–40.

⁵² *Id.* at 25.

⁵³ *Id.* at xxiv.

First, classical humanism comes from the ancient Greek ideal of human excellence. It accepts Aristotle's conception of man as a rational and political animal.⁵⁴ For the Greeks, human excellence was acquired through education. That education sought the full development of human potential—moral, intellectual, and aesthetic—through the study of philosophy, poetry, rhetoric, and other topics.⁵⁵ It also sought to prepare the free, male citizen of the Greek city-state for participation in political life.⁵⁶ To the Greek ideal, the Romans added training in the seven liberal arts. For the Romans, the liberal arts had a civilizing and refining effect on human nature, the end of which they called *humanitas*.⁵⁷ And it is, of course, from the Latin word *humanitas* that the English word “humanism” derives.

Second, Christian humanism comes from Judeo-Christian teachings about the nature of human beings. Christianity, which the authors twice call “the most anthropological of all faiths,”⁵⁸ retained the classical humanist ideal of excellence acquired through education, but it added the belief that all human beings have intrinsic and transcendent dignity.⁵⁹ That intrinsic and transcendent dignity is based first on the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, the belief that all human beings are created in the “image of God,” and second, on the doctrine of the Incarnation, the belief that God became man in the person of Jesus Christ.⁶⁰ Consequently, according to the authors, “Christianity, the religion of the God-man, supplied an egalitarian note affirming the singularity and unrepeatable value of each and every human being.”⁶¹ On that basis, the authors argue that Christianity serves as an “essential correction of the ancients.”⁶² Substantially complicating the elevated Christian conception of the human being, however, is the fact of human sinfulness, which can only be overcome by divine grace.⁶³

Third, modern humanism, which the authors call “a very complex phenomenon,” comes from the Enlightenment.⁶⁴ The authors immediately repudiate “atheistic liberal humanism,” which includes the reduction of nature

⁵⁴ *Id.* at 26.

⁵⁵ *Id.* at xxiv.

⁵⁶ *Id.* at xxv, 31.

⁵⁷ *Id.* at 29.

⁵⁸ *Id.* at xxv, 31.

⁵⁹ *Id.* at xxv, 31–32.

⁶⁰ *Id.* at xxv, 32.

⁶¹ *Id.* at xxix.

⁶² *Id.* at xxv.

⁶³ *Id.* at 32.

⁶⁴ *Id.* at xxv.

to biology, science conceived as conquest, a critique of tradition, and a denunciation of religion as intolerance and superstition.⁶⁵ Their critique draws heavily on the early 20th-century Russian philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev.⁶⁶ According to Berdyaev, though modern humanism affirms man's self-confidence and exalts him, it ultimately debases him "by ceasing to regard him as a being of higher and divine origin."⁶⁷ That leads, Berdyaev ominously concludes, to man's "own perdition."⁶⁸

At least through the end of chapter 1, what the authors seek to retain from modern humanism as part of their synthesis is much more difficult to discern than what they reject. What is clear, however, is that they see modern humanism as "in crisis because its commitment to human dignity is not self-sufficient but depends on an older and richer inheritance."⁶⁹

III. CONSERVATIVE HUMANISM

Over the next eight chapters, McAleer and Rosenthal-Pubul elaborate on and defend multiple aspects of conservative humanism: chapter 2 takes up metaphysics; chapter 3, establishment; chapter 4, law; chapter 5, humanistic enterprise; chapter 6, the conservative *via media*; chapter 7, liberty and history; chapter 8, conservatism without re primitivism; and the final chapter, the Benedict synthesis.

At this point, a word to the wise is in order: The chapters—sometimes quite frustratingly—overlap substantially, and they often look ahead and circle back, so the following treatment, though it tracks the book's trajectory, necessarily draws on the book *in toto*.

A. Metaphysics

Chapter 2 addresses the "metaphysical foundations of conservatism."⁷⁰ The authors admit upfront that some readers will find the subject "needless," but they insist that it is fundamental.⁷¹ For them, "The basic vocabulary of

⁶⁵ *Id.*

⁶⁶ *Id.* at 23.

⁶⁷ *Id.* at 40.

⁶⁸ *Id.*

⁶⁹ *Id.* at 42.

⁷⁰ *Id.* at 45.

⁷¹ Other readers—those inclined to follow Karl Popper in spirit if not in particulars—will find the authors' linking of politics and metaphysics to be not only needless but deeply dangerous. See generally KARL POPPER, *THE OPEN SOCIETY AND ITS ENEMIES* (1994).

politics is inescapably metaphysical,⁷² and conservative humanism is a response to the current (anti)metaphysical situation, which plays into the West's crisis of confidence.⁷³

As they conceive it, conservative humanism is not only a political middle but also an "ontological middle."⁷⁴ What that ultimately means is that conservative humanism is a "defense of rational order."⁷⁵ Their argument responds to those on the left (the Frankfurt School and Jacques Derrida) and those on the right (Heidegger and Dugin) who think that rationality is a ruse created and perpetuated by the West as a tool of oppression.⁷⁶

Conservative humanism, they contend, must also "thread its way between angelism and vitalism."⁷⁷ Their basic point is that angelism and vitalism both get human nature dangerously wrong.⁷⁸ Angelism—which they hint at from several directions but never define outright—seemingly sees human beings as having no nature. They are clearer about vitalism: "Vitalist accounts of human beings emphasize scarcity, nakedness, materialism, positivism, and disenchantment."⁷⁹ They see elements of angelism in Fukuyama's liberalism, and they discuss Heidegger's devotion to vitalism and his influence on Dugin.⁸⁰ In chapter 6, to show that metaphysics matters, they connect vitalism to practical politics, including its presence within the French New Right (*Nouvelle Droite*).⁸¹

Additionally, because politics is about the relationship of the individual to the group, they lay out their conception of the individual. "In its metaphysics, Western humanism has strongly affirmed personal individuality," they say.⁸² Consequently, "Conservative humanism must affirm the individual as much as liberalism."⁸³ And yet, conservative humanism must also "take pains to account for coordination among individuals."⁸⁴

⁷² MCALEER & ROSENTHAL-PUBUL, *supra* note 1, at 45.

⁷³ *Id.* at xxix.

⁷⁴ *Id.* at 56.

⁷⁵ *Id.* at 45.

⁷⁶ *Id.* at 45–47.

⁷⁷ *Id.* at xxvii.

⁷⁸ *Id.* at 47–56.

⁷⁹ *Id.* at xxv.

⁸⁰ *Id.* at 56.

⁸¹ *Id.* at 133–34.

⁸² *Id.* at 56.

⁸³ *Id.*

⁸⁴ *Id.*

Their account of the individual closely follows that of Aquinas. According to Aquinas, there are only individuals, but they have a nature, conform to a “pattern,” and display “like attributes.”⁸⁵ Thus, all over the world, people want a home, a healthy family, a sense of belonging that comes from various forms of membership, and a relationship with the divine.⁸⁶ In short, individuals want to express their singularity in the context of solidarity.

B. Establishment

Quoting Scruton, the authors affirm at the outset of chapter 3 that conservatism is a “defense of ‘establishment.’”⁸⁷ Crucially, by “establishment,” they do not mean the status quo or anything else with a possible negative connotation. As they use it, establishment means “institutions bearing values and offices.”⁸⁸ Establishment is essential, they say, because it “transmits the character and inheritance of a civilization to future generations.”⁸⁹

Establishment includes the state and private property.⁹⁰ They approvingly note Scruton’s rejection of Lady Margaret Thatcher’s economic policy—she famously followed F.A. Hayek—“because it wrongly stated the scope of establishment” through its hostility toward the state.⁹¹ They also approvingly note that Scruton, as a conservative, defended the necessity of the welfare state and even some forms of state ownership, though less radically than socialists and nationalists.⁹² Establishment also notably includes “autonomous communities.”⁹³ Autonomous communities are the family, the church, and myriad voluntary organizations, including guilds, clubs, corporations, and trusts.⁹⁴

The authors next argue that establishment has a moral basis. To that end, they offer value theory, which they call a “critical plank in conservative humanism.”⁹⁵ “Conservatives,” unlike Kantian and utilitarian liberals, “do not think the world and its objects are morally neutral,” they say.⁹⁶ Rather, for

⁸⁵ *Id.* at 57.

⁸⁶ *Id.*

⁸⁷ *Id.* at 59.

⁸⁸ *Id.* at xxviii.

⁸⁹ *Id.*

⁹⁰ *Id.* at xxviii, 17.

⁹¹ *Id.* at xxviii.

⁹² *Id.*

⁹³ *Id.* at 16–17, 184.

⁹⁴ *Id.*

⁹⁵ *Id.* at 69.

⁹⁶ *Id.* at 61.

conservatives, “Values are part of the furniture of the world, and the qualities of objects and persons are constellations of values.”⁹⁷

Their argument relies heavily on the thinking of Max Scheler, an early 20th-century German philosopher who made considerable contributions to phenomenology (a method of philosophical inquiry that focuses acutely on experience), and Aurel Kolnai, an Austro-Hungarian-born antitotalitarian philosopher whom they consider to be Scheler’s “greatest conservative commentator.”⁹⁸

According to the authors, Scheler’s value theory, with its hierarchy of values, provides sure moral insights. As a moral theory—contrary to modern parlance about “personal values”—Scheler’s is “realist, objective, and universal.”⁹⁹ As such, the authors argue that it is “well suited to conservatism.”¹⁰⁰

According to Kolnai, values are an “autonomous, impersonal code of objective norms.”¹⁰¹ Those norms are “universals discerned as qualities inherent in persons, objects, and actions” through human beings’ natural sympathy.¹⁰² Values, says Kolnai, provide “a tone of warning, urging, vetoing, and commanding.”¹⁰³ Some value tones function as prohibitions—e.g., “Do not kill, Do not steal, and so on.” Conversely, other value tones come in the form of positive precepts—e.g., “Defend the widow and protect the lowly.”¹⁰⁴ As their examples suggest, value theory basically arrives by intuition at Judeo-Christian moral precepts, albeit by a different route.

Again quoting Kolnai, they add that the “recognition of, and support for, values requires privilege.”¹⁰⁵ Privilege, they say, both “populate[s] our world with values”¹⁰⁶ and “embodies a hierarchy of values.”¹⁰⁷ Significantly, by “privilege,” they do not mean advantage but rather “value-bearing social formations.”¹⁰⁸ They also describe privilege as a “manifold of memberships and belonging.”¹⁰⁹ Examples include the officer corps, the professoriate, the

⁹⁷ *Id.* at 65.

⁹⁸ *Id.* at 60.

⁹⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰⁰ *Id.* at 79.

¹⁰¹ *Id.* at 69.

¹⁰² *Id.*

¹⁰³ *Id.* at 66.

¹⁰⁴ *Id.*

¹⁰⁵ *Id.* at 69.

¹⁰⁶ *Id.* at 58.

¹⁰⁷ *Id.* at xxx.

¹⁰⁸ *Id.* at 70.

¹⁰⁹ *Id.*

professions, the bench, fashion houses, and heralded sports clubs.¹¹⁰ Value perception, beyond simple intuition, is aided through participation in those groups.¹¹¹ But beyond merely aiding in value perception, those groups have a political purpose. That is, privilege, as a part of establishment, “breaks up power.”¹¹² Thus, “establishment is one necessary feature of a society with a healthy politics.”¹¹³

C. Law

Chapter 4 takes up law—more specifically, natural law. One of the authors’ aims is “to show the importance of natural law for any viable humanism.”¹¹⁴ Their understanding of natural law derives largely from Aquinas, and readers familiar with the Thomistic account of natural law will find their treatment of it uncontroversial.

First and foremost, they present natural law as a “realist moral theory.”¹¹⁵ It is unchanging: “It claims that right and wrong do not change because what it means to be a human does not change.”¹¹⁶ It is also universal.¹¹⁷ Thus, contrary to certain forms of nationalism, “natural law is opposed to relativism and to any idea of justice reducible to national will and its history.”¹¹⁸ Most fundamentally, the natural moral order is one in which reason properly orders and directs the appetites.¹¹⁹

Regarding the relationship between natural law and positive law, moreover, they hold that “natural law is the measure of the rationality of the law.”¹²⁰ As such, it is the law above the law. Accordingly, “If positive law clashes with the few, but socially foundational, obligations and liberties stemming from our fixed appetitive core, the law is unjust.”¹²¹ And so: “Natural law trumps human law when push comes to shove.”¹²²

¹¹⁰ *Id.* at xxx.

¹¹¹ *Id.* at 70.

¹¹² *Id.*

¹¹³ *Id.* at 72.

¹¹⁴ *Id.* at 53.

¹¹⁵ *Id.* at 79.

¹¹⁶ *Id.*

¹¹⁷ *Id.* at 140.

¹¹⁸ *Id.* at 85.

¹¹⁹ *Id.* at 79.

¹²⁰ *Id.*

¹²¹ *Id.*

¹²² *Id.* at 80.

They next address five criticisms of natural law from the right. (They do not address any criticisms from the left.) They associate those five criticisms with five particular thinkers—specifically, that natural law is unnecessary (Scruton), that it is abstract (Carl Schmitt), that it is theological (Leo Strauss), that it is unnatural (Heidegger), and that it is indeterminate (Thomas Hibbs).¹²³

Though the details of their responses to those five criticisms are too much to recount here, a few points are salient: Against Scruton, they argue that the common law and rights granted through history and tradition are insufficient, and they argue for liberty and property as natural rights.¹²⁴ Against Schmitt, they argue that “persons have a juridical completeness in their own right.”¹²⁵ Against Strauss, they argue that natural law does not collapse into theology.¹²⁶ Against Heidegger, they argue that the rule of law is unsustainable when “persons are reduced to an existentialism of risk.”¹²⁷ And against Hibbs, they argue that natural law is determinate (enough) that it can “deliver policy.”¹²⁸

Ultimately, those familiar with the natural law tradition will find the authors’ presentation of it capable but unbalanced. Natural law, at least as the authors present it in chapter 4, is associated exclusively with medieval and early modern Catholic Christianity (Aquinas and Francisco de Vitoria).¹²⁹ That undersells the natural law tradition considerably. Like humanism, the natural law tradition spans the centuries.¹³⁰ It, too, has significant pre-Christian antecedents: Sophocles, Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero remain seminal figures. There are also early modern Protestant natural law thinkers such as Hugo Grotius and Samuel von Pufendorf, as well as modern Catholic, Protestant, and secular thinkers such as Jacques Maritain, C.S. Lewis, and Lon L. Fuller, respectively. To this list, of course, one can add several Jewish thinkers from the Middle Ages to the present, including Maimonides, Moses Mendelssohn, and David Novak. Indeed, for that reason, there is even a compelling case for natural law being the master idea of Western civilization

¹²³ *Id.* at 84–97.

¹²⁴ *Id.* at xxxi, 84–87.

¹²⁵ *Id.* at 87–90, 97.

¹²⁶ *Id.* at 90–92, 97.

¹²⁷ *Id.* at 92–93, 97.

¹²⁸ *Id.* at 93–97.

¹²⁹ In chapter 6, the authors will weigh in on the long-running debate about Burke’s views on natural law and squarely locate him in the natural law camp.

¹³⁰ SAMUEL GREGG, *THE ESSENTIAL NATURAL LAW* 1–11 (2021).

instead of humanism.¹³¹ At any rate, their argument for natural law being a viable moral theory for conservative humanism would have been significantly stronger if they had given the natural law tradition a more fulsome telling.

D. Economics

Chapter 5, entitled “Humanistic Enterprise,” concerns economics. The chapter title comes from the company manifesto of the Italian fashion designer Bruno Cucinelli, which stresses the dignity of work according to the monastic ideals of Saint Benedict (the founder of the Benedictine order).¹³² The authors affirm the dignity of work against the classical conception, which saw work as most fitting for slaves and servants. In their words: “It took the humility of the cross to first suggest to monks to dirty their hands in the monastery garden, and it took Christian humanism to complement the *artes liberales* with the *artes mechanicae*.”¹³³ But Cucinelli’s company manifesto, they note, does not mention the division of labor, which leads them to a discussion of economic theory.

Noticeably, from the beginning of the book, the authors are generally congenial to the market economy and speak favorably of Adam Smith. They credit the market economy, as they must, with substantial gains as to both human material well-being and physical longevity.¹³⁴ More controversially, they contend that Smith’s signature contribution to economics—the division of labor—makes a significant contribution to humanism.¹³⁵ That argument, of course, puts them at odds with the postliberal right and the progressive left, both of which contend that the division of labor subverts human dignity.

Surprisingly, the authors’ interpretation of Smith turns on Eric Voegelin’s philosophy of history. They use Voegelin to interpret Smith because they similarly see Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* as a philosophy of history. Those unfamiliar with Voegelin’s thinking will find the discussion difficult to follow.¹³⁶ The authors’ discussion centers on “differentiation,” a recondite Voegelian term of art that they attempt to explain and apply to Smith’s

¹³¹ See *id.* at 1 (“Few ideas have been as influential in the development of moral, political, legal, and economic thought in the broad Western tradition as the idea of natural law.”).

¹³² MCALEER & ROSENTHAL-PUBUL, *supra* note 1, at 99.

¹³³ *Id.* at 101.

¹³⁴ *Id.* at 18.

¹³⁵ *Id.* at 102.

¹³⁶ See BIRZER *supra* note 26, at 137 (“Of all the major non-leftist thinkers of the twentieth century, Eric Voegelin remains perhaps the most difficult to understand Indeed, even the most dedicated conservative scholars find themselves slogging through much of Voegelin’s thought.”).

thinking over multiple pages.¹³⁷ The authors' principal point is that differentiation allows the division of labor to be ennobling rather than debasing. In simplest terms, the division of labor allows for refinements in the arts and sciences, which enhance human life, and encourages hobbies, collecting, fascinations, and personal flair.¹³⁸

Theirs is no laissez-faire economics, however. Following (their conception of) Catholic social thought, they hold that "politics trumps economics and thus the government administration of commerce is, sometimes, absolutely morally required."¹³⁹ They continue: "Direct [government] engagement with business, directed by the ideals of solidarity and distribution, is sometimes necessary."¹⁴⁰ And following Scruton, they add that "libertarians might be against regulation, but conservatives are not."¹⁴¹ Following Pope Francis, moreover, they argue for a moral obligation for government to support small business, which they find implicit in the doctrine of subsidiarity.¹⁴²

The chapter ends with an encomium to Cucinelli, whose business draws upon heritage and craft and has great solicitude for the land and its people. For them, "[Cucinelli] and his company are an enterprising embodiment of Christian humanism."¹⁴³ As the authors see it, Cucinelli's business is "evidence that profit and dignity can be drawn from the ancestral."¹⁴⁴

E. The Conservative Via Media

In chapter 6, the authors focus on the tension between liberal cosmopolitanism and nationalism. They begin with Kant as the *ne plus ultra* philosopher of liberal cosmopolitanism. They next offer Dugin as Kant's *bête noire*. In their preface, they provided a lengthy discussion of Dugin's highly controversial reputation, his alleged influence on Vladimir Putin, and his disdain for liberal cosmopolitanism.¹⁴⁵ In chapter 2, moreover, the authors discussed Heidegger's influence on Dugin, resulting in Dugin's "mangled metaphysics" (vitalism).

¹³⁷ MCALEER & ROSENTHAL-PUBUL, *supra* note 1, at 103–10.

¹³⁸ *Id.* at 107.

¹³⁹ *Id.* at 113.

¹⁴⁰ *Id.*

¹⁴¹ *Id.* at 114.

¹⁴² *Id.*

¹⁴³ *Id.* at 117.

¹⁴⁴ *Id.*

¹⁴⁵ *Id.* at xx–xxii.

Now, in chapter 6, they summarize that “Dugin is motivated by the most profound opposition to Western modernity, its claims to universality, and its narrative of historical progress.”¹⁴⁶ To explain, they provide an extended discussion of the influence of René Guénon—a highly eclectic French philosopher and mystic—on Dugin’s thinking, followed by a return to Heidegger’s influence on Dugin’s thinking.¹⁴⁷ The most important outcome of their combined influence on Dugin is that he argues for a return to a pre-Enlightenment world and the end of the West’s universalizing pretensions.

Regarding practical politics, moreover, they tie Dugin’s thinking to the nationalist vision of conservatism found in Viktor Orbán’s Hungary and the French New Right. Their principal objection to that nationalist vision is that it tends toward relativism, which subverts conservative humanism’s insistence on a universal morality.¹⁴⁸

They next turn to the subject of national conservatism.¹⁴⁹ They rightly feature Yoram Hazony as a leader of the national conservatism movement and as one of its “formidable intellectual defenders.”¹⁵⁰ Surprisingly, however, their discussion of national conservatism as a movement and Hazony’s thought leadership in support of it is sparse. They clearly situate Hazony close to Dugin in light of Hazony’s own rejection of liberal cosmopolitanism’s universalizing aspirations,¹⁵¹ but beyond that, it is difficult to discern whether they believe that Hazony’s thinking about nationalism differs from Dugin’s thinking about it. And though they are concerned that Dugin’s thinking about nationalism leads to relativism, they do not say whether they think Hazony’s thinking necessarily leads there, too.¹⁵²

Chapter 6 concludes with their clearest conception of the conservative *via media* between liberal cosmopolitanism and nationalistic tribalism. For support, they turn once again to Burke and Aquinas as their exemplars.¹⁵³ In their framing, Burke’s thought embodies the traditional Christian teaching about the order of charity exemplified in Aquinas’s teaching: that is, a legitimate

¹⁴⁶ *Id.* at 125.

¹⁴⁷ *Id.* at 125–30.

¹⁴⁸ *Id.* at 134.

¹⁴⁹ *Id.* at 134–36.

¹⁵⁰ *Id.* at xix.

¹⁵¹ *Id.* at 135.

¹⁵² Hazony has been widely criticized for promoting a brand of conservatism that leads to relativism. See, e.g., Will Jones, *Conservatives Are Not Relativists: Yoram Hazony and a Conservatism Built on Sand*, CHRISTIAN TODAY (Jan. 30, 2019, 8:01 AM), <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/conservatives-are-not-relativists-yoram-hazony-and-a-conservatism-built-on-sand/131596.htm>.

¹⁵³ MCALDER & ROSENTHAL-PUBUL, *supra* note 1, at 136–41.

preferential love for one's own kin and country, but with love moving outward to include ultimately all of humanity. That conception, they say, is consistent with the Christian concern for the dignity of the stranger found in the parable of Good Samaritan. To that, they add the guidance of natural law as providing a universally binding morality, which can trump the legitimate regard for national and cultural differences. It is here that they claim Burke for the natural law tradition and conclude: "It is no coincidence that the iconic conservative Burke, utterly steeped in Christian humanism, was also a tireless defender of human dignity whenever it was threatened."¹⁵⁴

F. Liberty and History

In chapter 7, the authors aim to articulate a conservative conception of liberty distinct from a liberal one. Correlatively, they aim to critique the liberal conception of liberty while concurrently crediting its achievements.¹⁵⁵

Chapter 7 begins with Fukuyama's philosophy of history. The authors show how he draws heavily on G.W.F. Hegel and Alexandre Kojève. Based on Fukuyama's reading of Hegel and Kojève, he concludes that the fundamental drive that moves history forward is the human desire for universal and equal recognition.¹⁵⁶ That desire for recognition finds its fulfillment in liberalism, which places a premium on individual liberty.

Against that backdrop, the authors observe that, for Fukuyama, modern liberty is the "negative liberty" that Sir Isaiah Berlin famously posited—that is, to be unencumbered by external constraint.¹⁵⁷ It is the familiar conception of liberty underlying the First Amendment's protection of speech, religion, assembly, and the press.

"Modern liberty," the authors notably say, is "salutary."¹⁵⁸ Though they accept negative liberty as an important modern achievement, they believe that it, standing alone, is deficient. For them, liberalism has failed to make a convincing case that negative liberty is an intrinsic good.¹⁵⁹ Negative liberty, moreover, can be used for harmful ends.

¹⁵⁴ *Id.* at 141. *Accord* BIRZER *supra* note 26, at 17 ("Burke's overriding concern was the upholding of the dignity of human nature, whether for the American colonials, the Irish, Asian Indians, or Roman Catholics.").

¹⁵⁵ MCALEER & ROSENTHAL-PUBUL, *supra* note 1, at 144.

¹⁵⁶ *Id.* at 144–46.

¹⁵⁷ *Id.* at xxxii, 150.

¹⁵⁸ *Id.* at xxvii.

¹⁵⁹ *Id.* at 150.

To arrive at their conservative conception of liberty, they synthesize classical and Christian conceptions of liberty while retaining certain facets of negative liberty. They again begin with the ancient Greeks and Romans. From them—Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics—the authors derive the idea that liberty involves “virtuous self-mastery” over “self-centered passions.”¹⁶⁰ Christianity similarly sees liberty as the release from the bondage of sin, with sin being a form of slavery. And both the classical and Christian conceptions of liberty hold that liberty is for something, and that that something is virtue.

Ultimately, Burke is the embodiment of their synthesis. As they say, “Burke’s conservative conception of freedom, connecting freedom to virtue, is an inheritance of Western humanism, both classical and Christian.”¹⁶¹ They, like Burke, take issue with the modern conception of liberty to the extent that it allows for liberty to degenerate into license (“license” meaning a use of liberty contrary to moral excellence). On this point, they supply one of Burke’s most famous statements: “What is liberty without virtue and wisdom? It is the greatest of all possible evils: for it is folly, vice, and madness, without tuition or restraint.”¹⁶² But they emphasize that Burke does not reject modern liberty entirely. He famously defended religious toleration and other modern civil liberties, they observe.¹⁶³

They end the chapter by contending that negative liberty is only sustainable when the organs of tradition—religion, the family, and education—are sound. In light of their overall assessment as to the state of those organs of tradition today, one is left wondering if they think that conservative humanism has any real chance of renewing Western culture.

G. Conservatism Without Reprimitivism

Chapter 8 concerns reprimitivism—the descent from civilization into barbarism. The authors contend that reprimitivism remains a “real possibility” facing the West today.¹⁶⁴

To frame the discussion, the authors return to vitalism and angelism, two pathologies regarding what it means to be a human being. Relying once again on Kolnai, they first show why vitalism is so destructive. They recall their earlier discussion of Dugin’s deep attachment to Heidegger and Dugin’s

¹⁶⁰ *Id.* at 151–55.

¹⁶¹ *Id.* at 151.

¹⁶² *Id.* at 157.

¹⁶³ *Id.* at 156–57.

¹⁶⁴ *Id.* at xxxiii.

rejection of Greek rationalism in favor of a more primordial Greek past that celebrated the chaotic and amoral. That places Dugin squarely in the vitalist camp. Dugin, moreover, embraces “tribal egoism,” a phrase they take from Kolnai. For Kolnai, it was tribal egoism that led to National Socialism.¹⁶⁵ Thus, Dugin’s vitalism risks the same abolition of humanism as under Nazism.¹⁶⁶

The authors next examine the threat of angelism that they find within conservative humanism. Against angelism, they argue that “conservatives should freely own that humans are a morally precarious animal.”¹⁶⁷ As support, they turn to an unexpected source: psychoanalysis. As they see it, “conservatism needs to take psychoanalysis more seriously.”¹⁶⁸ Their reason: “Psychoanalysis has identified all manner of ruses by which the mind camouflages its most elaborate, and dark, strategies.”¹⁶⁹

Their thinking concerning psychoanalysis flows from another unexpected source: the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan.¹⁷⁰ As they rightly note, Lacan understood himself to be the most accurate interpreter of Sigmund Freud’s views, and Lacan sought to develop and promote Freud’s legacy. Though Lacan has been widely celebrated by the progressive left, the authors claim that he is no progressive (just as Lacan claimed that Freud was no progressive).¹⁷¹ That claim seems like a significant stretch. So many of the premises of Freudian psychoanalysis are thoroughly anti-Christian, moreover. And famously, like Freud, Lacan was an avowed atheist. The authors make no effort to show how Lacan’s thinking coheres with their conception of humanism, which draws so heavily on the Judeo-Christian conception of human beings being made in the image of God, so their invocation of his ideas strikes a strange chord.

Finally, and also unexpectedly, their discussion regarding angelism looks at law-and-order politics through the lens of detective fiction. Devotees of detective fiction might find that discussion interesting, while those who do not will find it quite quixotic and difficult to follow.

¹⁶⁵ *Id.* at 164.

¹⁶⁶ *Id.* at 166.

¹⁶⁷ *Id.* at 167.

¹⁶⁸ *Id.* at xxxiii.

¹⁶⁹ *Id.*

¹⁷⁰ *Id.* at 172.

¹⁷¹ *Id.*

IV. THE BENEDICT SYNTHESIS

In the book's final chapter, the authors offer Pope Benedict XVI as the contemporary thinker who has most clearly and cogently synthesized the best of classical, Christian, and modern thought.

They first stress the role of Greek rationality in Benedict's synthesis.¹⁷² Benedict follows Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle in believing that "philosophical reason can apprehend moral truths grounded in nature."¹⁷³ Crucially, Benedict also sees harmony between Greek rationality and Christian theology. To quote him, the New Testament "bears the imprint of the Greek spirit."¹⁷⁴ It is of supreme significance that John's Gospel presents Christ as the *Logos*, the incarnation of reason itself.

The authors also stress, quoting Benedict, that the Enlightenment "contains important values that are essential for us, precisely as Christians, and we do not wish to do without them."¹⁷⁵ As they see it, "The real problem is the Enlightenment's 'modern self-limitation of reason,' evident in the positivist and materialist doctrine of the period." They continue: "Unlike Greek rationality, these doctrines exclude metaphysical speculation about persons and ethics, hoping to confine the rational to the scientific-empirical sphere alone."¹⁷⁶ That error—scientism—is part of what Benedict calls the "second Enlightenment."¹⁷⁷ The failure to accept that reason has a place in discerning moral and philosophical truth leads to "irrationalisms of religion and scientific fundamentalism."¹⁷⁸

Further, the authors embrace the Enlightenment's insistence on equal human dignity. The classical world accepted human inequality as an anthropological and sociological fact. Aristotle, of course, famously posited a natural hierarchy among human beings, with men superior to women, and masters superior to slaves. The authors, however, hold human equality in high regard.¹⁷⁹

But equality and dignity, like humanism, must be rightly conceived. Once again, Christianity serves as an essential correction of the classical world.

¹⁷² *Id.* at 176.

¹⁷³ *Id.* at 179.

¹⁷⁴ *Id.* at 180.

¹⁷⁵ *Id.* at 181.

¹⁷⁶ *Id.* at 178.

¹⁷⁷ *Id.* at 181.

¹⁷⁸ *Id.* at 178.

¹⁷⁹ *Id.* at 192–94.

Given the empirical fact of human differences in size, strength, skill, appearance, and intellect, equality has no basis in nature. Thus, as they see it, “Equality is ultimately a moral thesis that rests on the biblical Judeo-Christian faith that all human beings are created in God’s image.”¹⁸⁰ And: “It is therefore respect for equality of dignity among all human beings that conservatism defends, regardless of distinctions of sex, class, or race.”¹⁸¹

Based on the notion of equal human dignity, moreover, conservative humanism has “a very broad sympathy for the classical liberal aspiration of equality of opportunity against arbitrary discrimination,” though “it look[s] with great suspicion on efforts to secure a mandatory equality of outcomes.”¹⁸² They also reject equality of outcomes because of concerns regarding statism and human flourishing: “The demand for such a radical equality requires a vast bureaucracy of social control, is antimeritocratic, and is hostile to the aspirations of human excellence and freedom,” they say.¹⁸³

Though they credit Kant with contributing to human dignity based on the human capacity for high-minded rational action,¹⁸⁴ they are skeptical that modern notions of human dignity are sufficient: “The Enlightenment militated for equal human dignity . . . but where does the idea of dignity come from? It is only as a theological-moral proposition deriving historically from Christianity that the West’s idea of human dignity assumes coherence.”¹⁸⁵ Consequently, “Without God, man has no transcendent dignity and becomes merely a physical, natural creature.”¹⁸⁶ The likely result: re primitivism.

McAleer and Rosenthal-Pubul make a strong case for the tie between conservatism and humanism. They also make a strong case for the value of Western civilization at a time when it needs ardent defenders. And they also make a strong case that the recognition of the transcendent dignity of every person is necessary to preserve Western civilization from re primitivism. All told, however, because theirs is ultimately a conservative *Christian* humanism, while the book offers strong reasons for the convinced to become even more so, those who are unconvinced at the outset will likely remain so.

¹⁸⁰ *Id.* at 193.

¹⁸¹ *Id.* at 193–94.

¹⁸² *Id.* at 194.

¹⁸³ *Id.*

¹⁸⁴ *Id.* at 81.

¹⁸⁵ *Id.* at 183.

¹⁸⁶ *Id.* at xxix.