

11-1-2017

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Recommended Citation

Miller, Patrick L. (2017) "Platonism of the Future," *Sophia and Philosophia*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 3 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://repository.belmont.edu/sph/vol1/iss3/6>

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Platonism of the Future

Patrick Lee Miller

Buying textbooks, writing syllabi, and putting on armor. This is how many students and teachers prepared to return to campus this past fall. The last few years have witnessed an intensifying war for the soul of the university, with many minor skirmishes, and several pitched battles. The most dramatic was last spring at Evergreen State, shortly before the end of the spring semester.¹ Perhaps the most dramatic since then has been at Reed College.² There is no shortage of examples, filling periodicals left and right. Wherever it next explodes, this war promises more ferocity, causing more casualties—careers, programs, ideals.

What's at stake? According to Michael Aaron, writing after the battle at Evergreen, the campus war is symptomatic of a broader clash of three worldviews contesting the future of our culture: traditionalism, modernism, and postmodernism.³ The traditionalists, he writes, “do not like the direction in which modernity is headed, and so are looking to go back to an earlier time when they believe society was better.” Whether they oppose changes to sexual mores or American demographics, Aaron adds, “these folks include typical status-quo conservatives, Evangelical Christians as well as more nefarious types such as white nationalists and the ‘alt right’.” In his estimation, they are done.

He concedes that the election of Trump has empowered them, but he believes “they have largely been pushed to the fringes in terms of their social influence.” A few hours in front of FoxNews, or browsing the massive comment threads of some PragerU videos, would disabuse him of this illusion. Traditionalists are *very* influential in the national culture of the U.S.A, if not other countries, and

¹ <http://www.chronicle.com/article/A-Radical-College-s-Public/241577>
<https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-campus-mob-came-for-meand-you-professor-could-be-next-1496187482>

² <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/11/the-surprising-revolt-at-reed/544682/>
<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/09/11/reed-college-course-lectures-canceled-after-student-protesters-interrupt-class>

³ <http://quillette.com/2017/06/08/evergreen-state-battle-modernity/>

hopeful predictions of their retreat have all proven false. But Aaron is correct, in a way. When these traditionalists talk about the future, they suspend their intellects, projecting onto it the past—and more often than not, an imaginary version of the past.⁴ Make America Great ... again?

Aaron is right, then, if by “social influence” he means the society of the academy, where many of the intelligent, informed, and innovative conversations about the future occur. With a few notable exceptions—Robert George of Princeton, for instance—traditionalists of that sort are marginal to these conversations. Nationally, most of them are speaking to each other, preferring the training camp to the front lines. Rod Dreher’s *Benedict Option* (2017) openly summons them to this withdrawal. “It is between the modernists and postmodernists,” Aaron rightly claims, “where the future of society is being fought,” and the battlefield is indeed the university. How, then, does he characterize these two opponents?

“Postmodernists,” he says, “eschew any notion of objectivity, perceiving knowledge as a construct of power differentials.” That’s as good a short summary as any, and Aaron adduces plenty of examples to show how this philosophical attitude ripples through the beliefs and behavior of people who may never have read Foucault, Derrida, or Lyotard. Focusing on “the Weinstein/Evergreen State affair,” he argues that it “poses a significant crossroads to modern society, extending well beyond the conflict occurring on campus.” Weinstein’s well-reasoned letter against the Day of Presence could have been debated rationally, on its objective merits, in the manner of modernism. Instead, it was treated as a racist incident, an exertion of white power, a move in the postmodern game of knowledge construction.

Just because postmodernism corrupts a university in this way, however, the vindication of modernism does not follow. That would follow only if two conditions were satisfied: if the three options Aaron states are really the only ones, and the other two (traditionalism and postmodernism) have been soundly eliminated. Let us assume that traditionalism of the sort Aaron describes has indeed been soundly eliminated. Let us also assume that postmodernism as a viable ideology for a functioning university has also been soundly eliminated.

⁴ <https://hyperallergic.com/383776/why-we-need-to-start-seeing-the-classical-world-in-color/>

Isn't that enough to satisfy those two conditions and render Aaron's argument sound? In a word, no.

To see why, let us begin with the elimination of postmodernism. Evergreen is indeed the *reductio ad absurdum* of postmodernism as a viable ideology for a functioning university. Students wandering campus with baseball bats in search of a professor, administrators not permitting campus police to protect him, more than fifty faculty members demanding his punishment for taking his argument to the media ... this is madness, and it will inevitably self-destruct, if it hasn't already.⁵ But that does not invalidate postmodern critiques of modernism and its aspiration to seek objective truth.

1. Postmodern Critiques

The best of them stem from Nietzsche. Postmodernists particularly cherish an essay he wrote early in his career, *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*.⁶ "In some out of the way corner of the universe," he began it, "there was a star on which clever beasts invented knowing." The star is quickly extinguished, the beasts and their knowledge disappear, and nothing is lost. Nietzsche compares the philosophers' traditional glorification of knowledge—as something oriented toward reality, as something good for its own sake—to the gnat's pride in flying. We humans value it not because it helps us live more truly, but because it makes us proud. Knowledge and its truths do not show us the world as it is. They operate in another direction, helping us create a flattering "reality" for ourselves. Deception, in sum, is the purpose of our vaunted cognition.

"Truths are illusions," Nietzsche wrote in the same essay, "which we have forgotten are illusions." Societies no less than individuals deceive themselves in order to believe a flattering 'truth'; the same holds for our whole species. Whenever human intellect comes to the brink of some real truth that might disillusion us, humiliate us, we turn away in shame or fear, followed immediately by anger at whoever dared try to educate us. Hasn't that been an effect of much modern science, which keeps displacing us from the center of the cosmos? The Galileo case is iconic, but more illustrative is that of Darwin. He suffered no

⁵ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/inside-the-madness-at-evergreen-state-1506034740>

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On_Truth_and_Lies_in_a_Nonmoral_Sense

inquisition, thanks to the freedom of speech enjoyed by the British of his era, but his account of human nature has nearly always been met with scorn from religious believers, whether in Kansas or Turkey.⁷

With this scorn, such traditionalists have retreated from the battle for our intellectual future, however, so the greater scandal is that Darwinism is still largely ignored—still!—by thinkers in the humanities and social sciences whose work it most of all concerns. These thinkers generally respond to evolutionary arguments about gender, for example, the way Republicans respond to the arguments of climate science—not usually by reading them and offering objective assessments of their content, but more often by contemptuously neglecting them as irrelevant or excoriating their proponents with vague *ad hominem* attacks. Witness the controversy over James Damore’s Google memo. The contempt and indignation of most of his critics was inversely proportional to their understanding of the relevant science.⁸

Was Nietzsche therefore right that truths are illusions? Hardly, a champion of the modern Enlightenment will retort: widespread stubbornness to assimilate complex and politically incorrect scientific truths does not vindicate postmodernism. Professors, journalists, and the people whose opinions they shape may adhere to illusory articles of “knowledge” and “truth,” but it does not follow—as the postmodernists would have it—that empirical science is pointless. Far from it. What about the Darwinian truths that exposed these specific illusions as such? What about scientific truths more generally? We may be swimming in a sea of prejudice, propaganda, and popular myths, but empirical science is a saving buoy. Only by knowing the truth can we see the illusions for what they are. Postmodernism does not subvert knowledge and truth, it covertly presumes them.

Knowledge and truth, mind you, not empirical science. For empirical science is nothing more than a method, a discipline, a way of seeking knowledge and truth. It cannot succeed unless its strictures be obeyed. There are always individuals who fail to follow these strictures—usually accidentally, sometimes deliberately—and this is why it is best done in a community. Rituals such as blind peer-review, for example, minimize the risk of sloppy or deceitful

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/23/world/europe/turkey-evolution-high-school-curriculum.html>

⁸ <http://quillette.com/2017/08/31/google-memo-economist-nothing/>

conclusions gaining credence. But the errors of individuals can become the errors of communities.⁹ This is why every era has had its spurious sciences. The 19th century had phrenology, which we now dismiss as quackery, while forgetting the prestige it enjoyed for a few decades as well as the principal scientists who promoted it. More troubling are the spurious sciences whose main figures we still remember and celebrate.

The greatest figure of the modern Enlightenment, Kant, is still studied reverently for, among other achievements, developing an ethics for which persons were obliged by moral duties and protected by moral rights thanks to their rationality. Act only on those maxims, he instructed, which could reasonably function as universal laws. His ethics appears to have been rationalist and universalist: it applied to every rational being. But who counted as rational? Critical race theorists have drawn attention to Kant's racism, which was never hidden, but propounded by the philosopher himself in series of lectures and texts that proved to be seminal for "scientific" racism.

Kant divided humanity into four races, as follows: first, "humanity exists in its greatest perfection in the white race"; second, "the yellow Indians have a smaller amount of Talent"; third and fourth, "The Negroes are lower and the lowest are a part of the American peoples."¹⁰ Kant's ethics were not universalist, argues Charles Mills, because they were conjoined to a theory of the races that deemed only whites fully rational.¹¹ Twenty years later, Kant himself denounced slavery and colonialism, but he never renounced the racism that could still rationalize both by denying non-whites moral rights (to freedom and property, for example).

He was not alone. Other major Enlightenment philosophers—e.g., Locke, Voltaire, Hume—were also racist, so today's political thinkers who wish to draw from their tradition hope to purify its central insights of the inegalitarian elements inherited from its foundation. The most prominent such effort has been John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971), which bases its political prescriptions on an imaginary scenario, "the original position," in which pure rational agents contract a political order. They will decide according to their

⁹ <https://heterodoxacademy.org/2017/01/27/why-viewpoint-diversity-also-matters-in-the-hard-sciences/>

¹⁰ From Kant's *Physical Geography*, translated and quoted by Eze (1997: 118).

¹¹ Mills 2017.

individual interests, he proposes, but because they are behind a “veil of ignorance,” pure of particular identities (Rawls mentions social status, class, intelligence, and strength, but remarkably neither race nor sex), none will promote the interests of one group above the others. The result will therefore be just.

This strategy of purification came under attack from many quarters for this very conceit. Feminists such as Carole Pateman, for instance, have argued that the ostensibly sexless rational agents are in fact men because the original position occludes the distinctly female contribution to their existence: childbirth and mothering. Just as Kant’s ethics were a rationalization for slavery and colonialism, then, Rawls used his theory of justice to “confirm ‘our’ intuitions, which include patriarchal relations of subordination.”¹² Ironically, Pateman’s general critique finds support from evolutionary psychology, which teaches that the intuitions of men and women—as populations, mind you, and only on some matters—are significantly different.¹³

Again, then, Darwinism confirms an important postmodern insight. Has empirical science therefore shown itself again as a sure route to knowledge and truth? Well, an empirical science is only as reliable as the community that sustains it. How reliable, then, is the scientific community? In its own self-conception, needless to say, it is quite reliable. Phrenology and “scientific” racism are sad chapters in its history; yet it was empirical science in the end that discredited them. With merit, scientists thus take pride in their rationality. However irrational they may be at times, especially when they speak outside their specialties, when they speak within them nowadays, they put aside their feelings, identities, and private ambitions to be objective, dispassionate, rational. Or so they feel.

But unless they were to rely on their feelings here, and oddly here alone, they should subject this self-conception to scientific investigation. Fortunately, some of them already have.

¹² Pateman 1988: 42.

¹³ <https://heterodoxacademy.org/2017/08/10/the-google-memo-what-does-the-research-say-about-gender-differences/>

2. The Science of Reason

The phenomenon of *confirmation bias* is by now widely recognized.¹⁴ When people hold beliefs, they actively seek evidence to confirm those beliefs, while ignoring contrary evidence. Correlatively, they ignore evidence that supports rival beliefs, while actively seeking evidence against them. The mechanism is thus better known as *myside bias*, and the best scientific account of rationality—the Darwinian account of Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber—explains why it was advantageous for humans to develop it.¹⁵

On the face of it, myside bias in human reasoning presents a challenge to Darwinism. Wouldn't it have been more advantageous for our species to have developed reasoning that was oriented toward the truth rather than toward myside's belief? Wouldn't a species doomed to always to trust its own beliefs, no matter how wrong, eventually lose the struggle for survival? No. An orientation of reasoning toward truth would appear to be more advantageous only when we imagine an individual reasoning and trying to find the truth on his own. An early man inquires whether he should move to higher ground. Believing that he need not do so, yet hesitating to reason about it, his inquiry would be compromised by his myside bias—he would focus on the weather's similarity to regular patterns, for example, and ignore its similarities to dangerous ones. If he's wrong, the error could cost him his life.

Our distant ancestors, however, were rarely left to their own devices. Instead, they reasoned in groups. Rather than everyone in a group considering the problem—a collective, if you will, of individual reasoners—it was more efficient for camps within the group to argue for rival positions before an audience. One side, believing it imperative to move to higher ground before an impending flood, could articulate the best arguments for doing so and the best objections to not doing so. By contrast, the other side, believing this would be a waste of resources because the flood would not come, could marshal the best arguments to counter its opponent. Each camp's inquiry would be compromised by myside bias, but the whole group would benefit from highly motivated advocates on both sides of the question.

¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confirmation_bias

¹⁵ Mercier and Sperber 2017: 218–19.

What would motivate them? Reason itself, whose purpose is social. “Giving reasons to justify oneself and reacting to the reasons given by others are, first and foremost,” write Mercier and Sperber, “a way to establish reputations and coordinate expectations.”¹⁶ Before the tribal council, where you propose that everyone move to higher ground, or whatever, if you cannot supply reasons for your belief, you begin to lose credibility. When you can supply reasons, not to mention objections to rival views, if your arguments prove persuasive, people begin to trust you, you gain status within the group, and thus power. Your power will erode, by contrast, if the beliefs for which you have argued turn out to be false. If this happens often, your power will be gone. So reason must heed reality to work its purpose. But its purpose is not to heed reality. Its purpose is to acquire status and power.

Foucault was thus onto something when he said that “‘truth’ is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it.”¹⁷ Following Nietzsche’s little essay, though, he went too far. For even if our claims to knowledge and truth are all justified within social institutions, even if they are all proposed by humans guilty of myside bias and greedy for honor, they are not all thereby illusions. Some of them are wrong, to be sure, but some of them are right. Such exaggeration has cost postmodern philosophy much credibility among circumspect thinkers. Nevertheless, good science has again confirmed its central tenet, at least when it is soberly qualified: science itself functions to some extent like any other human practice; its practitioners reason in order to secure status and power.

Foucault wrote histories that exposed practices, institutions, and ideologies of truth and justice as in fact regimes of power. In other words, he showed them to be pretentious and hypocritical, and he was very often right. The modern American prison system, for example, pretends to rehabilitate criminals in its so-called correctional facilities, rather than subject them to the cruel and unusual punishments prohibited by the framers of the American constitution (e.g., drawing and quartering). In fact, however, it throws them into an environment designed to torture them in soul as well as body.¹⁸ Foucault

¹⁶ Mercier and Sperber 2017: 143.

¹⁷ Gordon 1980: 133.

¹⁸ Foucault 1977.

exposed such hypocrisy in courts and prisons, medicine and psychiatry, churches and schools, among other modern regimes of truth-power.

Accordingly, to call for a return to modernism, as if postmodernism has simply been a temporary fit of cultural madness, is itself an illusion. Those who make this call, such as Aaron, are showing myside bias on a grand scale. They are not alone. A mirror image of this bias can be found among advocates of postmodernism. Both sides are focusing on what is good about their own camp and bad about its rival, while ignoring what is good about its rival and bad about their own camp.

3. Modernism vs. Postmodernism

Advocates of modernism, on one hand, would have us focus on the wonders of empirical science, along with the rights and freedoms of constitutional democracy. These are the two proudest legacies—the first theoretical, the second political—of Enlightenment philosophies. They should be praised, defended, and preserved. But these advocates would also have us ignore modern philosophy’s shortcomings. And yet only now, and still not widely enough, are proponents of this tradition coming to terms with the racism and sexism integral to it. The Enlightenment philosophers were racist and sexist, granted, but can’t their practical philosophies be purified of their personal failings and marginal writings?

Maybe, maybe not, but let’s imagine that they could. You can still make a decent living trying to solve the theoretical puzzles introduced by the philosophies of the 17th and 18th centuries. If the world is composed ultimately of inanimate matter, as many of them proposed, it is still hard to see how it is possible to have animate minds capable of knowledge, let alone choosing freely to act rightly in such a world.¹⁹ Only now, and still not widely enough, are proponents of these philosophies coming to terms with the Nietzschean critiques that undermine them. For decades in Anglo-American philosophy it was acceptable to ignore these critiques, dismissing Nietzsche as a madman or a proto-Nazi, but those dismissals now appear defensive.

¹⁹ <http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/the-illusionist>

The revival of Nietzsche's popularity is to a large extent due to his postmodern epigones. Surveying the failures of modern philosophies, advocates of postmodernism have shown a myside bias of their own, focusing on its sound critiques of modern theories and practices, while ignoring its own theoretical and political weaknesses. After all, any philosophy that rejects the notions of truth, knowledge, and goodness, while presenting itself as true, known, or at least better than its predecessors, soon appears as hypocritical as it showed them to be. Yet if advocates of postmodernism are not saying that its philosophies and politics are at least *better* than their modernist rivals, what *are* they saying?

Even when this theoretical problem is ignored, the egalitarian pretenses of its advocates are belied by the politics of both its founders and its recent permutations. Nietzsche was a proto-fascist, celebrating war as healthy for a state, slavery a requirement for its greatness.²⁰ Foucault, for his part, supported Ayatollah Khomeini's revolutionary movement, writing that it "impressed me in its attempt to open a spiritual dimension in politics."²¹ Seen against this background, the illiberal and sometimes violent protests of left-wing students at Evergreen, Middlebury, and Berkeley should come as no surprise.

Nor should it come as a surprise that postmodern rhetoric—which rejects moral judgments—has been adopted by violent right-wing counterparts. Consider, for example, Richard Spencer, who coined the term "alt-right" and has achieved national notoriety for two videos: in one, shortly after the presidential election, he is seen leading fellow white-supremacists with chants of "Hail, Trump!" to which some in his audience reply with Hitler salutes; in the other, he is giving an interview on the street after the Trump inauguration and is sucker-punched by an antifa protestor.

Apparently new to street-brawling, Spencer is more accustomed to quarreling with left-wing intellectuals. He was, after all, a doctoral candidate in the humanities at Duke University, a center for postmodern philosophy. There he absorbed the identity-politics that characterize the humanities in such places. "Trump's victory was, at its root," Spencer has said, "a victory for identity

²⁰ See, for example, *The Greek State*, and essay contemporaneous with *On Truth and Lies in the Nonmoral Sense*. Both are available in Pearson and Large 2006.

²¹ "What are the Iranians Dreaming About," *Le Nouvel Observateur*, October 16–22, 1978. Also excerpted on pp. 203–9 Afary and Anderson 2005. The original article is available here: <http://press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/007863.html>

politics.” Indeed, anyone familiar with the politics of the progressive professoriate will notice how he has adapted it for the regressive purpose of promoting white identity. Of the influence of social-justice warriors on his movement, he said tersely: “They made us.”²²

There are thus assets and liabilities to both philosophical approaches—the modernist, on one hand, and the postmodernist, on the other. Recognizing this is not to call a draw, nor to propose an incoherent compromise. Remembering the purpose of reasoning from Mercier and Sperber, what we need to adjudicate this dispute is something like a massive cultural council, a forum in which the advocates of these two alternatives may present their cases, a forum where their evidence would be evaluated and their arguments would be assessed for their soundness. Simply to call for reasoned assessment is to prejudice the contest against postmodernism. So be it. Does modernism thus win by default? Only if there are no other alternatives.

4. The Limits of Science

Science exerts a strong pull on the conscience of everyone who values reasoned assessment. How could it not, when it has yielded so many marvels in so short a time? In the global tribal council, so to speak, empirical science has established its credibility more often than not. The history of science reminds scholars of phrenology or cold fusion, but these failures are eclipsed by its successes. And prominent among these successes are those which have discredited elements of traditional worldviews, from Galileo to Franklin to Darwin, right up to the present. Does esteem for science thus decide the epochal question finally for all but reactionary traditionalists and intransigent postmodernists? No: not because it is a participant in the contest, but because it is incapable of rendering such a judgment.

First of all, empirical science *describes* the world, it does not *prescribe* any way to live in it. Empirical scientists can build a nuclear bomb, for example, but their expertise cannot tell you whether you should drop it, let alone where or when.

²² <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/10/richard-spencer-trump-alt-right-white-nationalist>

Clashes of values cannot be resolved by the scientific community; clashes of worldview are way beyond their pale. Scientists can subvert or confirm any empirical claims made within a worldview (geocentrism, divine lightning, a decisive fall from innocent paradise, and so on), but the worldview and its basic injunctions will always be immune to scientific critique or corroboration. Physical science cannot disprove the existence of an immaterial spirit or an omnipotent God. Nor can it legitimately conclude that humans have a right to life, or property, or happiness.

So, postmodernists zealous to achieve gender equality by presuming that gender is entirely a social construction can be tamed by evolutionary psychology's findings about natural sex differences. Judith Butler is wrong that "what gender 'is,' is always relative to the constructed relations in which it is determined."²³ But whether she is also wrong that sex and gender are essential to who we really are—our personal identity, or subjectivity, in the jargon of philosophers—is not a question empirical scientists can answer. How could a scientist operationalize the notion of who we *really* are? This not a hypothesis at all; it's a first principle of a worldview.

In Butler's case, it is the Nietzschean worldview according to which there is no person, no subject, no agent doing one's deeds; one simply is the deeds themselves.²⁴ Butler adds the twist that some of these deeds are gendered—performances such as wearing make-up or wrestling in the schoolyard—so that becoming a person requires simultaneously becoming a gender.²⁵ For Kant, and most other philosophers, ancient or modern, there is a person doing one's deeds, a free agent responsible for them, and in many accounts a soul that will be judged by them. No scientist could decide this question, or for that matter stake a claim anywhere in such a debate. On such questions, empirical science is *silent*.

Similarly, whether truth is power and all knowledge claims but pretentious power-grabs—these are not hypotheses that scientists could test empirically. Like many postmodern theses, these are first principles of a worldview as old as the Greek Sophists.²⁶ The best refutation of it can still be found in the works of Plato, beginning with his *Theaetetus*, where Socrates engages with the best of the

²³ Butler 1999, 15

²⁴ *On the Genealogy of Morality* 1.13.

²⁵ Butler 1993: 232.

²⁶ <http://www.3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/2016/11/truth-in-the-age-of-trump.html>

original truth-relativists, Protagoras, and exposes his hypocrisy.²⁷ He traveled the Greek world selling his expertise, mastery of persuading crowds. Pushed to account for it, he denies that it is knowledge of anything really true; it is merely an ability to substitute better appearances for worse. Better, though, by which measure? By appearances, to be consistent. Protagoras is not really an expert, then, he only appears to be one. But in his worldview there is no difference.

Modernists believe there is a difference between appearance and reality, that something which seems true can be discredited by showing that it is not really so. Thus, if they still believe a universal morality can be derived from humans' empathy for one another, they should investigate social psychology's findings about it (and tribalism) to revise their belief.²⁸ But whether humans nonetheless have universal rights—upon some other basis, perhaps personhood, however that be understood—is not a hypothesis empirical scientists can test. The notion of rights cannot be operationalized any more than person could be. Social psychologists may of course study cultures' beliefs about rights. But what about *real* rights, the kind governments are morally bound to respect, whatever a culture's beliefs?

Locke argued that European settlers had earned a right to their American properties by mixing their agricultural labor with the land in a way the native hunter-gatherers of that continent had not done. Marx saw such arguments as fixtures of capitalist ideology, the sort of fictions that bewitch the mind of the proletariat and keep them from simply taking what they need to achieve equality. Who was right: Locke or Marx? No scientist could decide such a question, let alone stake a claim anywhere in the debate. For it's not question of empirical science. If you desire to maximize wealth, empirical science can help you achieve your desire. So likewise for the desire to achieve equality (between races, sexes, classes, etc.). But whether you *should* desire such things, and whether you *should* make them the goals of your political efforts—these are not scientific questions.

Empirical science cannot even fully underwrite its own claims to knowledge and truth. Do scientific experiments yield knowledge? Do they show us the

²⁷ *Theaetetus* 161–67.

²⁸ <http://bostonreview.net/forum/paul-bloom-against-empathy>
<https://theconversation.com/does-empathy-have-limits-72637>
<http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/09/can-democracy-survive-tribalism.html>

truth? These are not scientific questions, properly speaking, because they cannot be answered by empirical means. Any experiment designed to underwrite the validity of experimentation would of course beg the question. More fundamentally, though, empirical science relies on the senses, but are the senses reliable? This cannot be shown scientifically without begging the question. The science of optics may very well teach us when and where our eyes function well. But even when they are functioning well, do they present us with the *real* world, or only an appearance of it?

So how can these questions be answered? How can the claims of empirical science be underwritten? Postmodernist philosophers, on one hand, won't bother to try, preoccupied as they are with the criticism of these very claims. Modernist philosophers, on the other hand, have been trying since the scientific revolution to underwrite them ... and failing. Postmodern critiques, rooted in skeptical puzzles that worried some of the best Enlightenment thinkers (e.g., Hume), are evidence of this failure. Empirical science has nevertheless proceeded undeterred, with most empirical scientists remaining indifferent to philosophic doubts, while achieving marvelous insights.

But the practice of science cannot be long sustained without the co-operation of our wider culture (legally, economically, pedagogically). This is the theoretical half of our present crisis. As the culture becomes more doubtful of scientific legitimacy—whether through postmodern philosophy, the rise of fundamentalism and superstition, or some other means—proponents of empirical science cannot remain indifferent to these doubts if the practice is to flourish. The best of them, the ones entertained by thoughtful people, must be addressed. But how can the skeptical critiques of modern science and philosophy be met? How can such puzzles be solved? The answers to these questions lie in an unexpected place.

Assuming that reality is consistently ordered, a *cosmos*, Plato argues that the senses do not give us reality as it is because the appearances they present to us are inconsistent. Later skeptics would elaborate this argument, highlighting all the many ways that our sense-data are contradictory. The mountains look blue from a distance, but green close-up. Why assume that proximity gives us their accurate appearance? Maybe it is distance that reveals their real color instead. The pool-water feels cold after you've been lying in the sun, but warm as

compared with the windy air. Which is it, warm or cold? The examples are endless, and Sextus Empiricus is the place to go if you ever want more of them.

But hasn't empirical science silenced these doubts? Doesn't our science of optics tell us the real color of the mountains by measuring the objective wavelength of the light they reflect? Doesn't our science of kinetics tell us the real temperature of the water by measuring the objective motion of its molecules? Not, one last time, without begging the question. Upon what evidence, after all, have we become so sure of the sciences of optics and kinetics? The evidence of our senses: from the colors, sounds, and textures of innumerable screens, sensors, and instruments. What underwrites our confidence in these sense-data, which are susceptible to the same doubts?

Not even neuroscience can close this gap, despite all the fascinating lessons it has been teaching us in recent decades about our brains, including how they process sense-data. For neuroscience is like any other empirical science: its evidence comes from the senses, the same range of colors, sounds, and textures that constitute all our other observations.

5. Platonism and the Pursuit of Truth

Recognizing the severity of this problem, skeptics of every era would have us suspend judgment about the sciences, giving philosophy a reputation for being anti-scientific. This is one error of the postmodernists. But Plato did not commit it. He was one of the first empirical scientists (see his *Timaeus*), and his best student (Aristotle) became one of history's best empirical scientists. For Plato, and thus for Platonists, the world as it appears to us through the senses—the material world—may be no more than an image of reality, rather than reality itself, which is immaterial; but that does not mean it should be ignored. On the contrary, it merits rational study for that very reason. You can learn a lot about something by studying its images.

Moreover, it is from a study of reality's images that one must begin, even if the goal of inquiry is ultimately to transcend them. According to Plato, reality is comprised of immaterial and eternal Forms, consistent objects accessible to our immaterial intellect. Only so can there be knowledge, because the knower and the known become one, foreclosing skeptical doubts. Only so is the truth good

for its own sake, because the supreme Form is the Good, the original reality of which all other goodness is an image. A search for truth is thus a search for Forms, and above all the Good. The reward for success in this search is becoming the best of all things, the source of all goodness.²⁹ These doctrines are of course foreign to modern sensibilities, not to mention postmodern critique. Platonism is accordingly ridiculed by empirically minded thinkers—until it is recognized that most objections against it would also undermine mathematics, the study of immaterial and eternal numbers.

Take two stones. What makes them two, rather than one or three? Is it merely the fact that we call them “two,” or some equivalent in another language? Is it merely the fact that we consider them so, whoever we are, whichever culture we inhabit? If so, the truth of “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ”—to borrow an example from Orwell’s *1984*—would be relative to our ways of speaking and thinking.³⁰ Were we to speak and think otherwise, the truth would change too. But if the two stones are two on account of something about *them*, regardless of what we think or say, there must be something they share that makes them so. It cannot be in either one, for then that one would be two. Nor can it be in both exclusively, for other things elsewhere and at other times can be two as well. If truths can be non-relative, or absolute, there must be some realities that are in no specific place, at no specific time, which can account for them. These are Plato’s Forms.

On one understanding of them, they are themselves mathematical structures, the hidden geometry of our world. It is no coincidence that Galileo’s father was a student of this tradition, or that Platonism flourished during the Renaissance. Returning to the present, the new theory of “digital physics,” that the universe is ultimately information rather than matter—“its from bits”—continues this tradition.³¹ In truth, though, it’s not a theory in physics, but instead in metaphysics; it’s an account of reality beyond matter. Far from being anti-scientific, then, Platonism gives science its best foundation. It solves the riddle of skepticism, saving science from futility, and it rescues truth from relativism, underwriting the broader pursuit of wisdom of which empirical science is only one part.

²⁹ For a fuller account, see Miller 2011, Ch. 4.

³⁰ Part 1, Ch. 7.

³¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_physics

A human being is born into a world of overpowering sensations and must make her way through sights and sounds to the truth that explains them. For the Platonist, though, the ultimate goal is not to know all the scientific truths, if ever that were possible, but rather to live the best possible life. To do so, she must know what is best. How else to distinguish what is good from what is bad, let alone make difficult decisions between competing goods? The value of everything, after all, depends on such wisdom. Being rich, for example, can do you more harm than good unless you know how to spend your money. So likewise for being famous or honored, if you don't have a healthy contempt for flattery. Imagine someone whose narcissism has never been challenged by the demands of honest work or the sobering lesson of doing what's best to general disapproval. These days, it's not hard.

Intellectuals who have devoted their lives to the pursuit of truth—again, the scientific community are exemplary—tend to believe that knowledge, unlike wealth and honor, is good for its own sake. But is it? It certainly isn't good in the wrong hands. Knowing how to build a nuclear bomb may be good, for the right people in the right circumstances, but it is certainly bad for the wrong people in any circumstance. Yet that fact, if it be granted, argues only that the *use* of knowledge can be bad. What about the truth itself? Imagine it is never used, but merely known. Why, if at all, would this be good?

What kind of account of the world could allow that truth is good for its own sake? The question cannot even be posed within postmodern worldviews, which do not accord any value to truth, which is only a fictional name for power. What about modern ones? They esteem the pursuit of objective truth—exemplified by empirical science, wherein the scientist sets aside her particular desires in order to explain the world dispassionately—but only as a means to other ends. “’Tis not contrary to reason,” wrote Hume, “to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger.”³² It goes without saying, therefore, that ‘tis neither contrary to reason to prefer anything else—honor, wealth, power—to objective truth.

Reason's practical function according to Hume is not to find the truth, but to satisfy our preferences or desires. In part, then, he anticipates Mercier and Sperber, who, as we have seen, have agreed that reason's function is not to find the truth. But their account was not merely negative; they conclude that reason

³² *Treatise of Human Nature* 2.3.3.6.

has a positive function. On this part, Hume is close. Reason is not for satisfying all preferences and desires, but only one in particular: the desire for social status. Have the empirical scientific findings of Darwinism on reasoning thus vindicated the empiricist philosophy of Hume and his modernist successors? Or have they bolstered the postmodernists, by elaborating Nietzsche's early thinking about the vanity of reason?

Both, in a way; in a way, neither. By granting truth only instrumental value, as a means rather than an end in itself, modernism hides a danger that postmodernism has made explicit. The postmodernist is contemptuous of truth as such, whereas the modernist pretends to care about it. But really, the modernist should care about truth only when it serves his purposes. Whenever it ceases to do so—witness the response of many intellectuals to Darwinism, forecast by Nietzsche's seminal essay on truth—he should no longer care. He could still pursue it, but his motives would have to be external: money, if his job requires it; fame and honor, if prestige is won by discovering it. In the last resort, when neither wealth nor status can be won through inquiry, habit may be his only motive.

This, by the way, was Nietzsche's mature diagnosis of the scientific revolution.³³ Enlightenment thinkers and their successors were still behaving as if truth were good for its own sake, even though their philosophies made this impossible. They carry on, Nietzsche argued, because they are running on the fumes of "the ascetic ideal," especially Christianity, according to which God declares himself to be the Truth, the Way, and the Life. In Christianity, truth is good for its own sake—it's divine, offering eternal felicity, or at least salvation from the fires of Hell—so its pursuit is compelling. Pursuing it for its own sake, as a modernist, makes sense only if the modernist is secretly an ascetic. That was Nietzsche's conclusion.

Some modernist thinkers are Christians, or ascetics of another faith, but more and more are not. One of the principal features of the modern era, at least in the West, has been secularization.³⁴ Why would non-believers still devote their lives to the truth? For money? With some people, yes. It's still possible to earn a living this way, although there are many more fertile fields for the growth of

³³ *Genealogy of Morality*, Third Essay. (Available in Clark and Swensen 1988.)

³⁴ For a sophisticated account of the phenomenon, see Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007).

capital. For status? With other people, perhaps. Professors are still more respected than lawyers, although that is changing.³⁵ When money and status can be more easily achieved in less strenuous and lonely professions, then, why would any non-believer still choose this one?

Nietzsche forecast that this question would haunt a culture that had lost its faith in the divinity of Truth. He forecast, in other words, the advent of postmodernism, calling it nihilism. Many think he was a nihilist, or a postmodernist ahead of his time. In fact, he was neither. He predicted that a culture that had reached this precipice without finding a new purpose would be doomed. Writing in 1887, he prophesied an unprecedented world-historical drama, a struggle between the destructive forces of nihilism and the hollow shell of European hopes. “That great drama in a hundred acts reserved for Europe in the next two centuries,” he wrote, “the most dubious drama but perhaps also the one most rich in hope ...”³⁶

What was his hope? That from this drama would emerge new meanings, non-ascetic meanings, for living. To this end, he preached an eternal return of the same—that time was not a line from past to future, but a circle for which the past is future—which would free humanity from the resentment over loss and death that fostered asceticism.³⁷ If he was right about the crisis of modernity—and I believe he was—we are past the midpoint of that drama, whose climax should surpass the awful opening acts of the 20th century. Whether or not he was right about the eternal return, well, that is not for us here to decide.

Such questions are instead for the vanguard in this war, those who occupy neither trenches nor bunkers, but universities, or, if universities have become so enervated by internal critique and corporate corruption that they cannot any longer make the pursuit of grand truths and purposes their goal, then such questions must be debated openly wherever it is nowadays that thinkers can do so. Here we can say what must be true of any purpose—future or past—that could preserve the best facets of modernism (empirical science, universal rights and freedoms) while correcting the flaws that postmodernism has exposed in its philosophical foundation. Three requirements are salient.

³⁵ <http://www.chronicle.com/article/Most-Republicans-Think/240587>

³⁶ *On the Genealogy of Morality* 3.27. Available in Clark and Swensen 1988.

³⁷ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Part 2, “On Redemption.” (Available in Del Caro 2006.) For the best account of Nietzsche on the eternal return of the same, see Loeb 2010.

6.A Durable Purpose

First of all, this purpose must conceive truth as good, if not The Good of Plato. Only with such a notion of truth could scientists pursue truth for its own sake, choosing this pursuit even when the activity of research, arduous even when it is uncontroversial, becomes unpopular, as it must, given the perennial human attraction to flattering illusions. Not unless you believe truth to be its own reward—a pearl of great price—will you endure the penury and obscurity, never mind the persecution, that occasionally attend its pursuit. Martyrs to the pursuit of truth need no memorial here, as their honor always soars after their cultures reconcile themselves to the shock of their discoveries.

Secondly, this durable purpose must form a community so devoted to its pursuit that its members become capable of prosecuting this pursuit in the face of adversity and temptation. The solitary genius is a Romantic myth; difficult truths are found in concert with other reasoners, often in competition with one another. Reason is social, as Mercier and Sperber have demonstrated, so it goes quickly astray when it is exercised for too long in isolation.³⁸ A truth-pursuing community must be formed not only with this fact in mind, but also vigilant against the vices endemic to common and competitive pursuits. Because reason aims to secure social status, there must be safeguards against reasoners' satisfaction with the easy victories of conformity.

The scientific community may be our best present model of such a community, but the training of its members is still insufficient to withstand the adversity and temptations of the crisis heralded by Nietzsche. Scientific training is rigorous, to be sure, but it is almost entirely intellectual. You can become a scientist—or for that matter a professor in most any field—without any formal character training. Without such training, how can you be expected to resist the vices endemic to social reasoning? The temptation for profit and the longing for prestige too easily compromise the pursuit of truth in every field. As the drama reaches its climax, the community of truth-lovers must be trained in both courage and temperance as well as the disciplines of the intellect.

Thirdly, and finally, this durable purpose must legitimate a political order capable of granting citizens the stable freedom required for this complex training. A variety of purposes will satisfy the first two criteria, which is to say

³⁸ Mercier and Sperber 2017: 205–7.

that a variety of philosophies will rightfully claim to form communities of this sort. A certain plurality of such communities must therefore be permitted to flourish in one state. So too must other communities founded on other philosophical bases, communities who reject these criteria, or even this way of posing the problem—including the postmodernists, not to mention other philosophies not yet devised. For even if they would undermine the science and freedom protected by the constitution, were they to become dominant, they are beneficial to everyone so long as they do not.

J. S Mill enumerated four such benefits.³⁹ In the midst of so much philosophical acrimony, they are all worth remembering. Your philosophical opponents may prove to be right: always grant them the opportunity to develop and defend their doctrines so that you may be corrected when you are wrong. Even when they are not wholly right, they may be onto a partial truth, which you could incorporate into your own doctrine to make it richer. And when they're fully wrong, something that rarely ever happens, their challenge nonetheless forces you to go deeper into your own doctrine, understanding it better and formulating better arguments in its favor. Indeed, writes Mill, without engaging your opponents regularly in debate, “the meaning of the doctrine itself will be in danger of being lost or enfeebled, and deprived of its vital effect on the character and conduct.”

Postmodernists who wish to celebrate diversity nowadays are typically relativists. This is one reason they end up as hypocrites: preaching inclusion in theory, in practice they exclude anyone whose worldview threatens their group's notion of diversity. This is why, when they speak of it, they refer to race, sex, and a host of other bodily differences, but never intellectual viewpoint. Modernists also wish to tolerate diversity, as *On Liberty* makes abundantly clear, but their primary concern is viewpoint (especially religion). In Mill's account, the purpose of this toleration is the pursuit of truth. Everyone can pursue the truth better in the midst of vigorous debate. Notice, then, that the modernist case for toleration—and thus for liberalism—depends on the pursuit of truth. Only if that pursuit is coherent, only if truth is possible, can a liberal political order remain coherent.

Surveying these three requirements—first, a notion of truth as good for its own sake; second, a community organized for the pursuit of truth and

³⁹ Mill 1978: 50.

empowered to train character as well as intellect; and third, a political order that permits a diversity of such communities—which of the many philosophies available to us should we choose as the new foundation for the modernists’ achievements (empirical science and universal rights), the foundation solid enough to support them without inviting the collapse presaged by Nietzsche? With regard to the first two requirements, many philosophies may stake a claim, but to my mind two stand out immediately: Platonism and Aristotelianism.

7. Premodernism of the Future

Both Plato and Aristotle put the divine at the summit of their cosmos, making union with it the supreme goal of life. Each did so in a different way—with epochal consequences for the rest of their philosophies—but neither left any room for doubt that pursuit of the truth was the best way to live, and achievement of it was the greatest happiness for us.⁴⁰ In order that this pursuit might happen most efficiently, with the least opportunity for corruption, each founded a community that was concerned with character virtues as well as intellectual excellence. For Aristotle, this was the Lyceum; for Plato, the Academy.⁴¹ Evidence about both is scarce, but Plato’s *Republic* is full of educational recommendations for philosophers, many of which address students’ characters.⁴² Some of these must have entered, in some way, into his training of real students.

Both flourished in democratic Athens, yet each was ambivalent about this sort of constitution. They were critical of it, to be sure, but both also praised it with qualification. Believing many heads were better than one, Aristotle was the most sympathetic.⁴³ Plato observed that a democracy, while ostensibly one constitution, “contains all kind of constitutions, as a result of its license.”⁴⁴ It is, in the popular meaning of the word, liberal. “Isn’t that a heavenly and pleasant

⁴⁰ For Plato, see *Republic* 6. For Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 10. This was nearly the consensus of Greek or Roman philosophers; see Miller 2012.

⁴¹ For what little we know about each, see Hadot 2004: 55–90.

⁴² See especially *Republic* 3 and 7.

⁴³ E.g., *Politics* 1295a–b.

⁴⁴ *Republic* 587d.

way to pass the time,” he adds, “while it lasts.”⁴⁵ Some choose to read this as sarcasm, but it cannot be entirely so: democratic Athens executed his teacher, but it has also permitted Plato to develop and found his Academy; it could not have seemed to him all bad. Furthermore, as most readers either do not notice or quickly forget, Plato’s “utopia” is only his second best city. The perfect one is a place where equals enjoy simple pleasures.⁴⁶

In any event, the most serious problem with democracy is that it is unstable. A state that grants freedom and equality without any limits is bound to become tyrannical.⁴⁷ Indeed, Plato recognizes that everything here (in the sensible, material, temporal world) is bound to perish, including his own utopia.⁴⁸ He is generally regarded as advocating totalitarianism. Karl Popper famously argued that his utopia inspired 20th century dictators, although of the most notorious only Ayatollah Khomeini is on record as an actual reader of *Republic*. Yet Plato is careful to say that this utopia is not for this world below, but instead for the heavens.⁴⁹ It remains open, therefore, for a Platonist to argue that the best regime for this fallen world is democracy, as Churchill said, because it is “the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”

The problem with democracy, highlighted by Plato, but never solved by his fellow Athenians, was how to make it last, how to keep it from degenerating into tyranny. We are still wrestling with this problem in our own times, most urgently in recent months, but we do so with more confidence, and more historical evidence, than either Plato or earlier Platonists could have had. For the decline of democracy into tyranny was also a problem that exercised the framers of the U.S. Constitution, who were sometimes aware of Plato particularly, but nearly always conversant in the ancient thinkers he influenced.

“Polybius,” said John Adams of the Constitutional Convention of the summer of 1787, “was on everyone’s mind.” Benjamin Franklin suspected there were flaws in the document they produced, but he was a man of the world, well aware how difficult it is to achieve ideals perfectly, and so he said at the end of their

⁴⁵ *Republic* 588a.

⁴⁶ *Republic* 372a–d.

⁴⁷ *Republic* 562a.

⁴⁸ *Republic* 546a.

⁴⁹ *Republic* 450c, 472c–473b.

deliberations: “It therefore astonishes me, Sir, to find this system approaching so near to perfection as it does.” Assume for a moment, then, that it is possible to agree with Franklin and argue as a Platonist that the U.S. Constitution, with the many liberal democracies modeled upon it, does the best to meet the third requirement articulated above, providing an account of the political order best suited to the pursuit of truth, not to mention a coherent account of truth that is worth seeking for its own sake.

Indulging that assumption, and granting everything claimed thus far, it still does not follow that we should choose Platonism, or for that matter Aristotelianism, as the way out of our present crisis simply because the minimal requirements of an escape have been met. How could we profess either philosophy as the way to secure the pursuit of truth without believing, and first arguing, that it is itself true? Someone such as Michael Aaron, who sees the present cultural conflict as a contest between modernists and postmodernists, while premodern philosophies (“traditionalism” in his terms) stand idly by, should not take seriously the claims of Platonists or Aristotelians to have resolved it unless they can be shown to be true. So: can they?

That is obviously too large a question to be answered here. One does not present the case for a whole philosophy, answering all the credible objections to it, in one essay. Here we can at most consider two hints. Quickly, let us recall that the first requirement was already about truth itself. According to it, a durable philosophy—if not also a true philosophy—must conceive truth as something good for its own sake. If there are other philosophies besides Platonism and Aristotelianism that do so, while also making sense of the very notion (truth), they too must be assessed for whether they achieve this good end.

That’s far harder than it might seem, and yet the premodern philosophies, whatever their other faults, did so naturally. If only for the purpose of brevity, then, let us focus on them, comparing their relative success or failure to assimilate the scientific advance most pertinent to their projects: Darwinism. This comparison will also involve, not coincidentally, a discussion of sexism. In this way, the kind of controversies that are presently drawing the lines between modernism and postmodernism (e.g., Googlegate) will coincide in an assessment of Plato and Aristotle.

8. Platonism of the Future

Aristotelian philosophies (whether Christian, Jewish, or Muslim) have always suffered from several serious problems, but until Darwin it was reasonable to assume that these problems could be solved. Since Darwin, however, this hope has become unsustainable for a crucial one of these problems. Aristotle's notion of the good is specific to each type of organism: the good for dogs is good for dogs but not for ferns, and *vice versa*.

Humans, most importantly, are supposed to have a good unique to our species, a purpose inherent to our kind of bodies. Aristotelian ethics and politics thus depend on our species having an essence and a goal inherent to this essence. His practical philosophy depends, in technical terms, on natural teleology. Yet in the wake of Darwin's revolution, it is clear to most thinkers that there is no such thing—at least not as Aristotle understands it.⁵⁰ Put another way, Aristotle's practical philosophy ties the human good too tightly to the human body, as something stable across generations, with an innate essence that supplies a natural goal.

It was this mistake that led Aristotle to argue, for example, that women were inferior to men. If the good of each type of organism is inherent to its type of body, the bodily differences between women and men should have some consequences for their fulfillment of the human goal. "Silence is a woman's glory," he wrote, quoting a traditional poet in his argument that women may have had reason, but that they were unable to use it, as mature men could, to counteract their unruly emotions.⁵¹ The roots of this political argument go down into his ethics and psychology, then deeper into his physics and embryology, which understood women as malformed men.⁵² Aristotle's "scientific" sexism thus stands with Kant's "scientific" racism as an infamous illustration of the postmodernists' critique of truth.

Even if they exaggerated that critique by claiming that *all* pursuits of truth are exertions of power, however, they were right that *some* philosophical and scientific theories are rationalizations for injustice. (Whatever the fate of

⁵⁰ See, e.g., Dupré 1995, part I, chapters 1–3.

⁵¹ *Politics* 1260a30. Available in Barnes 1984.

⁵² See, e.g., *Generation of Animals* 737a28 (also 775a15–16 and 784a5). Available in Barnes 1984.

postmodern philosophy, this insight will forever be its contribution to our intellectual culture.) Considering only the injustice of sexism, we should note in passing that Plato argued against the grain of Athenian misogyny to the conclusion that women should be given the same educational and political opportunities as men, right up to the office of Philosopher-Queen.⁵³

As for Aristotle's "scientific" sexism, Aristotelians have recently argued that it can be eliminated from his philosophy—rather as Kantians argue that his philosophy can be purified of its original racism. Whether or not those arguments succeed, Aristotelians cannot escape their problem with Darwin. Alasdair MacIntyre's *Dependent Rational Animals*, for example, is a sustained effort to present human biology in a way that maintains Aristotelian ethics without remaining committed to the outmoded aspects of Aristotelian biology. Yet the effort fails. It remains committed to the notions of species, natural teleology, and flourishing. At one point, MacIntyre even explicitly brackets evolutionary concerns, something he must do in order to preserve the coherence of the whole project.⁵⁴

MacIntyre's failure to reconcile Aristotle with Darwin is especially important for the argument of this essay. For it was MacIntyre who first saw that the soundness of certain postmodern critiques of modern philosophy would require returning to premodern philosophy in order to find philosophical foundations that modernism could not supply. Unlike this essay, though, he did not argue for preserving what is valuable in the modern, but instead for refashioning culture on a premodern basis. In his first and most famous effort, *After Virtue*, this basis was supposed to be Aristotle, exemplified by the choice posed by the subtitle of its final chapter: "Nietzsche *or* Aristotle?" Those were roughly the alternatives: a revived Aristotelian account of social life, or a Nietzschean dancing over the abyss of an exhausted modernism.

The title of that chapter was in fact longer: "After Virtue: Nietzsche *or* Aristotle, Trotsky *and* St. Benedict." However it was that Marxist revolution and Christian monasticism were supposed to be compatible, MacIntyre eventually focused exclusively on the less radical, Thomistic version of Aristotle. This made his revival of Aristotle more plausible, by giving it the concrete institution of the

⁵³ *Republic* 455d.

⁵⁴ *Species* (23, 78), natural teleology and flourishing (64–65), evolutionary concerns (56),

Catholic Church for social influence, but to many non-Catholics this move was obviously alienating.⁵⁵ Catholic Aristotelianism, whether in the person of MacIntyre or Robert George, is the intellectual component of the traditionalism Aaron rejects for its lack of “social influence.” Whatever its social influence, though, Darwin had already doomed its intellectual potential. Both MacIntyre and George try, in different ways, to underwrite their moral philosophy by appeals to biology, but each fails to account for the perpetual flux at the heart of Darwin’s account of nature.⁵⁶

To Platonism, by contrast, Darwin poses no threat. On the contrary, when you believe, as Platonists do, that the physical world is but “a moving image of eternity”—where nothing we perceive through our senses will have a permanent form, and everything tangible must be in perpetual flux—you should expect something like Darwinism to be true, long before it receives the imprimatur of empirical science.⁵⁷ This is not to say that you would credit natural evolutionary theories before they received confirmation through experiments and the other techniques of modern science. Instead, you might propose it as a hypothesis awaiting confirmation, with the equanimity of a thinker who fears no inquiry, wanting only to know the truth, whatever it is, because the truth is good for its own sake.

Disputes between Platonists and Aristotelians about the effect of modern biology on philosophy, not to mention the ancient debates about the correct conception of the relationship of matter and form, are not appropriate for this occasion.⁵⁸ So too must we bypass for now many interesting quarrels over the relationship between reason as it is understood by Darwinians, as a tool for achieving social status, and reason as it has been understood by Platonists and Aristotelians alike, as something inherently aimed towards the truth. As a hint, with a tip of the hat to Plotinus, we might say that embodied reason is an image of the pure intellect of our disembodied soul, just as social status is an image of the true good beyond powers and principalities.⁵⁹ But for now, that must remain

⁵⁵ See, e.g., MacIntyre 1988 and 1989.

⁵⁶ See, e.g., George et al. 2012.

⁵⁷ “Moving image” (*Timaeus* 28a). An anticipation of Darwin’s theory of natural selection was available to Plato in the poem of Empedocles (B57, B59, B60, B61).

⁵⁸ For a hint of such theoretical disputes, see Gerson 1990: chapter 3, especially 139–41.

⁵⁹ *Enneads* 1.1. Available in Armstrong 2000: 95–121.

only a hint. For the natural home of such quarrels, debates, and disputes is within the walls of a properly oriented university.

To summarize: such a university will be an institution that seeks truth as something good for its own sake, an institution that motivates this pursuit as integral to a life well-lived, and finally an institution that recognizes the corrupting influence of power upon this pursuit and strives to mitigate this corruption with disciplines of character as well as intellect. My suggestion here, which must therefore remain at most a suggestion, is that such an institution should look to those of Athens in the 4th century BC. Not those of London of the 18th century, nor Berlin of the 19th century, never mind Paris of the 20th century. We should look backwards not because we wish to backwards, in the manner of the traditionalists mentioned by Aaron, but because we long to move forward again. What we need, in short, is neither modernism nor postmodernism, but a peculiar sort of premodernism ... a premodernism of the future.

More precisely, we should not build our new institution on the plan of the Lyceum, as for too long the universities of Europe were. Instead we should look toward another place outside Athens' walls, a field named *Acadēmia*, owned by a certain Plato. On that ground we can begin to build the Platonism we need, a Platonism of the future.

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