

## Humility and Truth

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*The virtue of humility asks that we listen to the witness of God in every person. Nowadays humility is often confused with the sin of self-abnegation, the abuse of God's gift of life. And it is contrasted unfavorably with the sin of pride, taken in Romantic theory to be a virtue. In science and scholarship—for example in the science of economics—humility is necessary for excellence. But it is rarely practiced, and stands out when it is. Oddly, a “conservative” species of economics, so-called “Austrian” economics, recommends that we see successful businesspeople as simultaneously humble and great-souled, in balance. Romantic Pride, as in Milton's *Lucifer*, persists in the idol-worshiping of modern atheists. As the self-flagellating nun is proud she is not proud, the modern secularist is proud that he is not humble before God. Both are mistaken.*

I cannot conceive the necessity for God to love me. . . . But I can easily imagine that he loves that perspective of creation which can only be seen from the point where I am. . . . I must withdraw so that he may see it.

Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*<sup>1</sup>

According to one standard English translation of Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*, the humble person “in respect of that which is his own ought to subject himself to every neighbor, in respect of that which the latter has of God's.”<sup>2</sup> The sentence is not any clearer in the Latin, but seems in context to mean merely this: we should respect in

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<sup>1</sup> Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace (La pesanteur et la grâce)*, 1947; trans. Emma Crawford and Marion von der Ruhr, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952; London: Routledge Classics 2002), 41, in a chapter entitled “Self-Effacement.”

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (ca. 1270, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 2d ed., 1920), IIa IIae, q. 161, a. 3. New Advent website: <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/315100.htm>.

other people what God, after all, has created. To scorn listening to others is to commit the chief theological sin against the Holy Spirit, pride. The sparks of perfection in people should be esteemed, "that we may know the things that are given to us by God," as Paul put it.<sup>3</sup> Or, as Augustine wrote, also quoted approvingly by Aquinas, "We must not esteem by pretending to esteem, but should really think it possible for another person to have something that is hidden to us and whereby he is better than we are." And so too the founding Quaker, George Fox, who urged us to listen quietly and "answer the witness of God in every man, whether they are the heathen . . . or . . . do profess Christ."<sup>4</sup> Or Father Peter Maurin, described by Dorothy Day after his death in 1949 as "truly humble of heart, and loving. . . . He . . . saw all others around him as God saw them. In other words, he saw Christ in them."<sup>5</sup> Or Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in 2002, since the point is not merely Christian: "Truth on the ground is multiple, partial. . . . Each person, culture and language has part of it. . . . The [Jewish] sages said, 'Who is wise? One who learns from all men.'<sup>6</sup>

Humility enjoins listening for the sake of God's message within others. Shut up and learn something. The Wisdom books of the Hebrew Bible are full of such advice, as in the proverbs of Solomon: "Wise men lay up knowledge, but the babbling of a fool brings ruin near" (Prov. 10:14, RSV); "He who belittles his neighbor lacks sense, but a man of understanding remains silent" (11:12); "If one gives answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame" (18:13). Or Jesus son of Sirach: "The tongue of man is his fall. . . . But if thou love to hear, thou shalt receive understanding" (Eccles. 5:13, 6:33, KJV). "Some people without brains do an awful lot of talking," says the Scarecrow in the movie of *The Wizard of Oz*. Harry Truman defined an expert as "someone who doesn't want to learn anything new, because then he wouldn't be an expert." Such pride is the opposite of humility, the humility to listen and learn. The philosopher Amélie Oksenberg Rorty

<sup>3</sup> 1 Cor. 2:12 (Vulgate), quoted by Aquinas, *Ila Ilae*, q. 161, a. 3, as is the Augustine following.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Howard H. Brinton, *Friends for 300 Years* (New York: Harper, 1952; reprint, *Friends for 350 Years*, revised by Margaret Hope Bacon, Wallingford, Pa.: Pendle Hill Publications, 2002), 36.

<sup>5</sup> Dorothy Day, *Selected Writings*, Robert Ellsberg, ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983), 24.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (London: Continuum, 2002), 64-67.

once described this habit of intellectual humility, rare among academics and politicians eager to speak and reluctant to listen. What is crucial is:

our ability to engage in continuous conversation, testing one another, discovering our hidden presumptions, changing our minds because we have listened to the voices of our fellows. Lunatics also change their minds, but their minds change with the tides of the moon and not because they have listened, really listened, to their friends' questions and objections.<sup>7</sup>

Humility is part of the cardinal virtue of temperance, which in turn is the internal balance essential for a good life. Humility, said Aquinas, answers among the Christian virtues to the pagan virtue of great-souledness, which Aristotle the pagan teacher of aristocrats admired so much. To be humble is to temper one's passions in pursuing (as Aquinas put it) *boni ardui*, goods difficult of achievement. To be great-souled, which in turn is part of the cardinal virtue of courage, is to keep working towards such goods nonetheless.<sup>8</sup>

We evidently need both humility and great-souledness. Think of the balance of hope and temperance, and in particular the balance of great-souledness and humility, necessary to sustain good work in science and scholarship; in the church or in the marketplace; in sports or crafts; or in any difficult good. On the one side we need to follow the motto I learned from my high school driving instructor: *intendete altē in gubernatione*, "aim high in steering." That's the great-souledness, resisting the sin of despair, *acedia*. But on the other side we need too the skepticism of humility, reading the traffic signs, listening to the hints of the highway, resisting the sin of presumption, *superbia*. We need to listen, really listen, if we are not to end in foolishness or in the ditch. We need both, I said. Of course.

The goods difficult of achievement must be "goods" in the non-economic sense in order for humility and great-souledness in pursuing them to be ethical. Scholarly excellence in understanding actual economies, for example, or the use of one's wealth in proper stewardship are good goods, and proper objects therefore of a paired humility

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<sup>7</sup> Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, "Experiments in Philosophic Genre: Descartes' *Meditations*," *Critical Inquiry* 9 (March 1983): 562.

<sup>8</sup> Aquinas, *Summa*, IIa IIae, q. 161, a. 1.

and great-souledness in their pursuit. Scholarly excellence in understanding imaginary economies, or wealth used in projects of gluttony, are not such goods. It is, therefore, unsurprising to find people bound up in such sinful goods exhibiting an idiotic pride and lack of temperance. They sin boldly, but do not believe in or rejoice in Christ, or any other virtuous good. Humility would resist such presumption, as Aquinas's Christian version of great-souledness resists despair.<sup>9</sup> The French mystic Simone Weil declares in her notebooks that "Humility is the refusal to exist outside God," as she did so refuse. "It is the queen of virtues."<sup>10</sup>

To be prideful in the bad, un-Abrahamic, boyish sense is to will to defy the one God, which is to say to make *oneself* the object of striving, a very god, violating the first through fourth commandments. God is God, said the commandments, not little *moi*: *Sh'ma Yisrael adonai elohaynu adonai echad*, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord. Arthur Green characterizes the Hasidic movement in eighteenth-century Judaism as "a calculated creative *misreading* or reinterpretation of the entire received and accepted body of previous Jewish tradition."<sup>11</sup> But the *zaddik*, or Hasidic rabbi, Green notes, faced therefore the danger of spiritual pride, the last and worst temptation. An old *New Yorker* cartoon portrays two monks strolling in a cloister, one saying to the other, "But I *am* holier than thou!" "Only humility," writes Green, "can protect the *zaddik* from degenerating into a magician, one who worships his own powers rather than those of God."<sup>12</sup>

The Anglican divine of the late sixteenth century, Richard Hooker, put the joke this way: "the fall of angels doth make it almost a question whether we might not need a preservative still, lest we should haply wax proud that we are not proud."<sup>13</sup> The Anglicans of Hooker's day were complaining of two prideful doctrines. The Puritan said proudly

<sup>9</sup> Eileen Sweeney, "Vice and Sin," in Stephen J. Pope, ed., *The Ethics of Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 163.

<sup>10</sup> Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 40.

<sup>11</sup> Arthur Green, "Teachings of the Hasidic Masters," in Barry W. Holtz, ed., *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts* (New York: Summit Books, 1984), 361-401, at 371.

<sup>12</sup> Green, "Teachings," 377. A similar point about how religion and magic differ, with an economist's twist to it, is the theme of my "Voodoo Economics," *Poetics Today* 12 (Summer 1991): 287-300.

<sup>13</sup> From his sermons, quoted in C. FitzSimmons Allison, *The Rise of Moralism: The Proclamation of the Gospel from Hooker to Baxter* (New York: Seabury Press, 1966), 4 (punctuation modernized).

that he was among the saints elected by God at the beginning. Whence proud Cromwell guilty of his country's blood—and proud reborn Christians now, waiting for the rapture. The Papists, on the other side, held a doctrine of perfect justification by the soul's infusion with righteousness, and therefore salvation not from the continuing grace of God but salvation earned and merited. Whence proud priests, as meritorious purveyors of merit, from which simony and child abuse.<sup>14</sup>

Lucifer, who even when he was light-bearer among the angels was not given to humble listening, is thus described in *Paradise Lost*:

he of the first,  
 If not the first archangel, great in power,  
 In favor and pre-eminence, yet fraught  
 With envy against the Son of God, that day  
 Honored by his great Father, and proclaimed  
 Messiah King anointed, could not bear  
 Through pride that sight, and thought himself impaired.  
 Deep malice thence conceiving and disdain.<sup>15</sup>

“Impaired” turns on the usual sort of Miltonic ambiguity. Lucifer thinks—that is, falsely imagines—himself to be a “pair” with Christ, thus “impaired”; but immediately the reader is surprised to see that Lucifer thinks himself impaired, that is, damaged. And Lucifer *thinks* himself into *actual* damage, indeed “conceives,” that is, generates, himself, by way of the double meaning of “conceive” = “think up” and “conceive” = “create a child.” He could not “bear,” that is, give birth to, the sight of Christ; he was fraught with, that is, bearing, envy that comes “through” the master sin, pride. Such word games seem impossibly cute. But that was how Milton worked.<sup>16</sup> For example the number of the last line, 666, known in numerology as the devil's number, is where Lucifer becomes indeed Satan (Hebrew “enemy”). The year of Our Lord containing 666, that is, 1666, was a culmination of disasters for Restoration England, a plague year (1665) followed by

<sup>14</sup> Allison, *The Rise of Moralism*, 7, 24. Allison, the former Episcopal bishop of South Carolina, shows the slide in late sixteenth-century Anglicanism towards the Catholic view of works, thence to deism and thence to atheism, the view that Christ was a Good Man only. “The imputation of *our* righteousness, not the imputation of Christ's righteousness, became that by which we are justified” (204).

<sup>15</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, V 659-666.

<sup>16</sup> Stanley Fish, *How Milton Works* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).

the Great Fire (1666). But it was a year of triumph for Milton the Puritan and embittered Cromwellite, who in it appeared to have finished the first editions of *Paradise Lost* (published 1667) and *Paradise Regained*, though blind.<sup>17</sup>

Satan in Milton is a great speaker, and no listener, which has led Romantics such as Blake and Goethe to imagine that Milton was of Satan's party. But Satan is, as Milton shows most clearly in the Satan-Christ colloquies in *Paradise Regained*, utterly incapable of shutting up and learning anything. His pride is the opposite of a proper humility balancing his undoubted great-souledness.

Stephen Pope explains that "humility should not be confused with humiliating self-abnegation before others."<sup>18</sup> "Some strands of Christian piety and theology," wrote Ellen Charry recently in these pages, "suspect that enjoying life is somehow impious." She notes that humility as practiced by medieval monasticism, "because of poor theological education of monastics . . . was interpreted as requiring self-abnegation."<sup>19</sup> Catherine of Siena could not write—she would dictate as many as three texts simultaneously to three scribes, in the style of Aquinas—but became a diplomat in the chaotic Italy of the Schism and was proclaimed at last a doctor of the church. In 1380, at the age that Jesus died, she starved herself to death by eating nothing but the eucharist. Dorothy Day said that reading a hagiography of Catherine inspired her to her own life of radical abstention in the name of Christ. Such behavior, Charry notes, "looks to many of us like defiant pride rather than obedient humility. Humility, perhaps now the most despised of Christian virtues, is, nevertheless, essential to happiness." But in Catherine "we see how easily it slips over into pride."<sup>20</sup> Simone Weil too in her proud self-abnegation—she too neglected herself to

<sup>17</sup> My colleague in English at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Michael Lieb, points out to me that 999 is important, too, the line in Book 9 of Adam's Fall in *Paradise Lost*. It is the result of turning upside down that 666, the number of the beast (Rev. 13:18). From Milton's viewpoint one might also say that 666 plus 999 equals 1665, the beginning of apostate England's well-deserved troubles.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen J. Pope, "Overview of the Ethics of St. Thomas Aquinas," in Pope, ed., *Ethics of Aquinas*, 45. André Comte-Sponville does not get this or any other Christian virtue right in *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues; The Uses of Philosophy in Everyday Life* (in French 1996; trans. Catherine Temerson, New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001), 140-148.

<sup>19</sup> Ellen T. Charry, "On Happiness," *Anglican Theological Review* 86 (Winter 2004): 24.

<sup>20</sup> Charry, "Happiness," 25.

death—seems like a highly literate and modern version of Catherine. As Thomas Merton put it, “Humility is a virtue, not a neurosis. . . . A humility that freezes our being and frustrates all healthy activity is not humility at all, but a disguised form of pride.”<sup>21</sup>

That is Satan’s repeated error. He thinks humility before God is self-abnegation, and a prideful self after all is his little god. Better to rule in hell than serve in heaven, says he. No, my dear Satan, wrong again. Humility is seen by him as the opposite of a world-enjoying spirit. It is not so, though it is a sacrifice of pride—a sacrifice which when genuine is literally a making sacred. Satan thinks of humility as merely an inconvenience to the questing will. Such confusion about humility is widespread. If you are a candidate for the priesthood in the Episcopal Church, you will fear that your discernment committee will turn out to be itself a site of envy and pride, engaging in fraternity/sorority hazing under a demand that you be “humble.”

What may be bothering Satan is the feminine quality of humility. Feminist theologians such as Valerie Saiving, Judith Plaskow, and Rosemary Ruether have been observing for decades that humility has a womanly cast, and that the corresponding sin of excess against the spirit is precisely self-abnegation—as Saiving put it in 1960, “triviality, distractability, and diffuseness; lack of an organizing center or focus; dependence on others for one’s own self definition; . . . in short, underdevelopment or negation of the self.”<sup>22</sup> Excess in self-abnegation is to humility as excess in pride is to great-souledness. Together the two virtues balance and complete each other. On their own, without the other, they are not virtues at all, but rather the characteristic female sin against the spirit and the characteristic male one.

True humility is not undignified. Uriah Heep is most “umble,” but of course has merely the semblance of the virtue. He esteems, or more accurately feigns to esteem, only rank. *That* is undignified.

But how little you think of the rightful umbleness of a person in my station, Master Copperfield! Father and me was both brought up at a foundation school for boys. . . . They taught us all a deal of umbleness. . . . We was to be umble to this person, and

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1956), 55.

<sup>22</sup> Valerie Saiving, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” *Journal of Religion* 40 (April 1960): 100-112.

umble to that; and to pull off our caps here, and to make bows there; and always to know our place, and abase ourselves before our betters. And we had such a lot of betters!<sup>23</sup>

True humility on the contrary is democratic, looking for the witness of God not merely in the great and good, but in any other person, whether heathen or professing Christ. Uriah Heep does *not* honor God's truth in the least high-ranking of us, which is to say that he embodies—Dickens's minor characters, like Jane Austen's, are always embodying some sin or error—the error that rank and truth are identical. He defers unreflectively to rank. In similar fashion, to give examples from the theory of prudence, called latterly “economics,” misled “Austrian” economists will defer unreflectively to, say, Ludwig von Mises, or misled M.I.T. neoclassical economists to Paul Anthony Samuelson. I speak of the *misled* among them, and *excessive* deference, not, I assure you, of my many good friends of both schools. Like a bad scientist of the schools, Uriah Heep does not listen, really listen to anybody or anything.

In his *Autobiography*, Benjamin Franklin makes a characteristic joke about the matter, noting of humility that “I cannot boast of much success in acquiring the reality of this virtue; but I had a good deal with regard to the appearance of it.”<sup>24</sup> Yet in fact—a point which applies to most of his self-descriptions, part of his craftiness in appearing “umble”—he understates his ethical achievement here. The mature Franklin was well known as never giving an answer before he had heard out the other person. He acted as though he had read and taken careful note of the medieval motto *audite et alteram partem*, “listen even to the other side.” Shocking idea. In an age of orators Franklin was a listener. In the Constitutional Convention he hardly spoke, not out of pusillanimous fear of failure—after all, this diligent printer had stood before kings, and had all the great-souledness a man could require—but out of a proper and habitual humility towards his fellows. To be humble in this sense, from Christian and doubtless other perspectives, is merely to have a decent respect for the opinions of humankind, because other men and women sometimes reveal God's

<sup>23</sup> Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, chap. 39.

<sup>24</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. L. W. Larabee, R. L. Ketcham, H. C. Boatfield, and H. M. Fineman (1771-1774; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 159.

Own Truth. As Iris Murdoch expressed it in 1967, "Humility is not a peculiar habit of self-effacement, rather like having an inaudible voice. It is selfless respect for reality and one of the most difficult and central of all virtues."<sup>25</sup>

A striking example in my own experience—I myself cannot boast of much success in acquiring the reality of this virtue—is Don Lavoie (1951-2001), a professor of economics at George Mason University. His very name reflects it: officially "Don," in French-Canadian style, not the full Hibernian "Donald," which means in Old Irish "world ruler." He was humble, a startling quality in a profession not known for showing it. When a physicist some time ago attended a conference about economics and chaos theory, he remarked that he had once thought that *physicists* were the most arrogant academics around.<sup>26</sup> Lavoie was not "umble." His respect for the opinions of humankind was not deference to mere rank. He was a democrat, lower case *d*. He did not by any means lack the great-souledness that Aquinas viewed as paired with humility. He ventured on great, hopeful projects, such as bringing the humanities to economics, seriously, or bringing the computer to economics and to its teaching, seriously. He satisfied the Thomist definitions of a humble and great-souled venturer, even being a Christian with a purpose of approach to God.

"The good man," writes Murdoch, "is humble; he is very unlike the neo-Kantian Lucifer. . . . Only rarely does one meet somebody in whom [humility] positively shines, in whom one apprehends with amazement the absence of the anxious avaricious tentacles of the self."<sup>27</sup> Murdoch points out that humility is one of the chief virtues in a good artist and in a good scientist. She would have known, as a good novelist and a good academic philosopher. Among the contending schools of economic science there is one which does at least *theoretically* recommend such humility, listening, really listening, scientifically speaking—not certainly the Marxism I started with; nor the Harvard neoclassical economics I was trained in; nor the Chicago-School

<sup>25</sup> Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts," Leslie Stephen Lecture, 1967, in Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970; reprint, London and Boston: Ark Paperbacks, 1985), 95.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Robert Pool, "Strange Bedfellows," *Science* 245 (August 18, 1989): 700-703. Compare Cicero, *De divinatione*, II.xiii. 30, "*physicus, quo genere nihil adrogantius*" (the physicist of which kind none is more arrogant). The physicist in the *Science* interview, or Cicero, did not perhaps know any professor of surgery.

<sup>27</sup> Murdoch, "Sovereignty of Good," 103.

economics I then practiced, and still do Monday to Friday; but the NYU-Auburn-George-Mason-University Austrian economics that Lavoie discovered young as a student of computer science and improved in his work.

Austrian economists are the free-market followers of the literal, ethnic Austrians Carl Menger (1840-1921), Ludwig von Mises (1881-1973), and Friedrich Hayek (1899-1992). They have now for about a century been explaining to us other economists that the economic scientist cannot expect to outguess the businessperson. We should *listen* to the mystery of entrepreneurship, the Austrians say, not airily assume (as my fellow neoclassicals tend to do) that nothing whatever is to be gained by actually talking to economic “agents”: after all, such “agents” are completely determined by such-and-such a mathematical model. As a non-economist professor at the business school of the University of Chicago put it to me once, the neoclassicals, especially at Chicago, believe a contradiction: everyone is rational; and everyone who doesn’t believe so is an idiot.

I said Lavoie improved Austrian economics, and this is one way he did it, by advocating a hermeneutics of economics as an academic discipline, and by listening for the hermeneutics inside the actual economy itself. Hermeneutics is the listening side of a speaking rhetoric, as Lavoie said.<sup>28</sup> Austrian economics, despite its conservative political credentials, is the natural home for a humanistic approach to the economy which acknowledges, as economics after and contrary to the blessed Adam Smith mainly has not, that humans are speaking and listening and interpreting animals. Smith believed that the propensity to truck and barter, as he called it, was based on the faculty of reason. So much for the Reason half of the Enlightenment project. But, he added and believed, it is also based on “the faculty of speech”—the other, Freedom half of the Enlightenment project, ignored in technical economics after his death.<sup>29</sup>

The habit of listening, really listening, in Lavoie’s life was strictly paralleled, that is, by his belief in it as a characterization of the economy. Adam Smith was again better than his followers. He said

<sup>28</sup> Don Lavoie, ed., *Economics and Hermeneutics* (London: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>29</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. R. H. Campbell, A. S. Skinner, and W. B. Todd, Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith (1776; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), vol. 1, part 1, chap. 2.

famously in *The Wealth of Nations* that “it is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.”<sup>30</sup> Modern economists have invariably interpreted this to mean that greed is good and that the economic man should treat other people as vending machines. This is mistaken, as one can see in the context of the passage itself and in all of Smith’s work, which he conceived as ethical philosophy. Smith’s butcher and baker are not merely prudence-loving folk who treat the rest of the world as a lamentable constraint on their own willfulness. A market depends, does it not, on an imaginative engagement with the customers and suppliers, to feel what they are thinking, to see the witness in them?<sup>31</sup> No wonder the Quakers and the Hasidim have been such good businesspeople. No wonder the rigorously humble Amish are well known as brilliant farmers, within their self-imposed constraints of no tractors and no electricity. An alert businesswoman “subjects herself to every neighbor.” She listens and learns from other people and from the world, through that selfless respect for reality. The businesswoman’s goods are difficult of achievement, requiring great-souledness, but depend also on listening, really listening, to what people want and the world will allow.

The business section of the *Chicago Tribune* has a feature on Mondays called “My Biggest Mistake,” in which managers of small businesses confess to this or that expensive failure to answer the witness of reality: not listening to customers here; not listening to employees there. It is hard to imagine a similar column in a publication directed at the learned clerisy: “my biggest scientific mistake,” running an experiment on oxidative phosphorylation; or “my biggest artistic mistake,” wrapping a building in cellophane; or “my biggest theological mistake,” interpreting the doctrine of transubstantiation. The clerisy is too proud for such stooping. Considering the allegedly modern temptations to pride in capitalist enterprise, it will seem odd to say so, but Lavoie believed, as I do, that the capitalist at her pretty-good best, as the Christian Fathers and the Angelic Doctor said of the best of humans, is *humble*.

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<sup>30</sup> Smith (Campbell et al., eds.), *Wealth of Nations*, vol. 1, part 1, chap. 2, para. 2, p. 25.

<sup>31</sup> Samuel Fleischacker has argued this in his astonishing rehabilitations of Smith as a major ethical philosopher and as an egalitarian of the first wave; see, for example, *On Adam Smith’s “Wealth of Nations”: A Philosophical Companion* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 90-94.

A proud, secular, modern member of the clerisy, on the contrary, declares stoutly that he can get along without such airy stuff, and scorns religion and its talk of humility. But in his pride he turns out to be in thrall to a faithful or hopeful idol of, say, art or science or progress or hap or even merely to his proud self-image as the village atheist: "I thank whatever gods may be / For my unconquerable soul."<sup>32</sup> "The man who has made his choice in favor of a profane life," noted Mircea Eliade in 1957, "never succeeds in completely doing away with religious behavior. . . . Even the most desacralized existence still preserves traces of a religious valorization of the world."<sup>33</sup> The atheist treats the scenes of his youth, the graves of his ancestors, the loves of his life as sacred. It is what the Dutch philosopher and poet Maarten Doorman called recently the Romantic Order.<sup>34</sup> "The issue between secularists and believers," writes the political philosopher J. Budziszewski, "is not whether to have faith in a god, or faith in something other than a god; it is whether to have faith in this or that kind of god."<sup>35</sup> The Romantic or his partner the Realist has faith, all right, but in something other than God.

H. L. Mencken admired in himself, and in Joseph Conrad and in Theodore Dreiser (at least in Dreiser's more aristocratic moods) the "ability to look into the blackness steadily." He detected softening on this matter even in his hero Nietzsche, who "shrinking from the horror of that abyss of negation, revived the Pythagorean concept of *der ewigen Wiederkunft* [the eternal return]—a vain and blood-curdling sort of comfort. To it, after a while, he added explanations almost Christian—a whole repertoire of whys and wherefores, aims and goals, aspirations and significances."<sup>36</sup> Theodore Dreiser, too, labored sometimes under "the burden of a believing mind," lapsing into "imbecile sentimentalities." He was, after all, "the Indiana peasant."<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup> W. E. Henley, "Invictus."

<sup>33</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (in French 1957; trans. W. R. Trask; New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959), 23.

<sup>34</sup> Maarten Doorman, *De Romantisch Orde* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2004).

<sup>35</sup> J. Budziszewski, "Religion and Civic Culture," in John W. Chapman and William A. Galston, eds., *Virtue, Nomos*, 34 (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 52.

<sup>36</sup> H. L. Mencken, "Theodore Dreiser," from *A Book of Prefaces* (1917; in Alistair Cooke, ed., *The Vintage Mencken* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 49.

<sup>37</sup> Mencken, "Theodore Dreiser," 51.

A pose like Mencken's is sharply analyzed by Murdoch: "The atmosphere is invigorating and tends to produce self-satisfaction in the reader, who feels himself to be a member of an elite, addressed by another one. Contempt for the ordinary human condition, together with a conviction of personal salvation, saves the writer from real pessimism. His gloom is superficial and conceals real elation."<sup>38</sup> Mencken admitted as much. In 1922 he declared himself the happiest of men, elated to live in a nation so filled with boobs, clowns, morons, and Methodists—"the Ku Klux Klan was, to all intents and purposes, simply the secular arm of the Methodist Church"—that he could earn a comfortable living making fun of them.<sup>39</sup>

Being unaware of the god he believes in, the agnostic and especially the atheist will often be as uncritical in his faith in his god/idol and his hope for salvation from it as a Sicilian widow lighting a candle before a statue of the Virgin. The judge Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., had been annealed in the fires of the Civil War. He was seriously wounded three times, and saw his best friend die. Before the war he had been a devout and peaceable Emersonian, an abolitionist who joined up on principle. In the war he lost his principles, adopting instead a hard faith of mere blind duty—no God for him, except his own little idol, the Romantic Himself of the stoic materialist. "The faith is true and adorable," he wrote in "A Soldier's Faith," delivered on Memorial Day in 1895—small comfort it must have been to widows or orphans, but Holmes was hard indeed—"which leads a soldier to throw away his life in obedience to a blindly accepted duty, in a cause which he little understands, in a plan of campaign of which he has no notion, under tactics of which he does not see the use."<sup>40</sup> Ah yes, true and adorable.

The mere, eloquent assertion of his faith was about as far as Holmes could get in defending it. Holmes never considered ethics to

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<sup>38</sup> Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" in Marjorie Grene, ed., *The Anatomy of Knowledge: Papers Presented to the Study Group on Foundations of Cultural Unity, Bowdoin College, 1965 and 1966* ([Amherst]: University of Massachusetts Press, [1969]); in Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 50.

<sup>39</sup> H. L. Mencken, "On Being an American," in *Prejudices: Third Series* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1922); in Mencken, *The American Scene: A Reader*, ed. Huntington Cairns (New York: Knopf, 1965), 19.

<sup>40</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., "A Soldier's Faith: An Address Delivered on Memorial Day, May 30, 1895," in Joseph T. Cox, ed., *The Written Wars: American War Prose through the Civil War* (North Haven, Conn.: Archon Books, 1996), 263-270.

be a matter to be defended. He adhered to the “emotivism” of late Romantic ethicists, the “hurrah-boo” theory. Ethical and aesthetic preferences, he wrote in 1902, are “more or less arbitrary. . . . Do you like sugar in your coffee or don’t you?”<sup>41</sup> Hurrah. In the same year: “Our tastes are finalities.”<sup>42</sup> Boo. In the fourth year of the Great War he wrote to Harold Laski, “When men differ in taste as to the kind of world they want the only thing to do is to go to work killing.”<sup>43</sup> The problem here is the word “taste,” with its invocation of considerations more or less arbitrary, sugar in your coffee, hurrah-boo. And here he is again in 1918: “Deep-seated preferences cannot be argued about—you cannot argue a man into liking a glass of beer—and therefore, when differences are sufficiently far reaching, we try to kill the other man.”<sup>44</sup> To settle the matter of south Slav nationalism or German naval ambitions or the Eastern Question we need to get to work killing.

Holmes never brought a theology to bear, no repertoire of whys and wherefores, aims and goals, aspirations and significances, since theologies are denied to atheists by their faiths. Yet note the title of his Memorial Day talk, “A Soldier’s Faith,” thirty years after the Civil War, and listen to the religious words pouring out. The man who with Captain Holmes has known “the blue line of fire at the dead angle of Spotsylvania . . . [knows] that man has in him that *unspeakable something* which makes him capable of *miracle*, able to lift himself by the might of his own *soul*, unaided, able to face annihilation for a blind *belief*.”<sup>45</sup> While sick with dysentery behind the lines at Fredericksburg, a younger Holmes wrote to his mother with what was already a mix of an aristocratic and a shadowy Christian view: “[I]t’s odd how indifferent one gets to the sight of death—perhaps because one gets aristocratic and don’t value much a common life—Then they are apt to be so dirty it seems natural—‘Dust to dust.’”<sup>46</sup> Holmes planned that his

<sup>41</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., and Sir Frederick Pollock, *Holmes-Pollock Letters*, M. D. Howe, ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1941), letter to Lady Pollock, Sept. 6, 1902, 105.

<sup>42</sup> Holmes, *Address . . . at the Dedication of the Northwestern University Law School Building*, quoted in Albert W. Alschuler, *Law without Values: The Life, Work, and Legacy of Justice Holmes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 24.

<sup>43</sup> Holmes, *Holmes-Laski Letters*, Dec. 3, 1917, quoted in David Luban, “Justice Holmes and Judicial Virtue,” in Chapman and Galston, eds., *Virtue*, 244.

<sup>44</sup> Holmes, “Natural Law” (1918), quoted in Alschuler, *Law without Values*, 192.

<sup>45</sup> Holmes, “Address on Memorial Day,” 266.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Alschuler, *Law without Values*, 43.

last words would be "Have faith and pursue the unknown end." Faith and hope. But to what *boni ardui*?

So likewise the Nobel laureate in physics and learned theologian Stephen Weinberg accepts invitations to appear on television to attack the very notion of God. He defends his own god, a fervently worshiped physics, against the heresies of relativism and postmodernism professed over in the departments of English and theology, about which, thank God, he is entirely ignorant. Weinberg has no need for the hypothesis of a YHWH. Not for him, this proud physicist, humility before what Kant called the two most astonishing facts, astonishing after thinking about them for a lifetime: "the starry skies above and the moral universe within."

No religion. No transcendent, no love or faith or hope. Pride as a Romantic virtue, not a Christian vice. Humility as self-abnegation, no sort of virtue. The abyss of negation. Ah yes.

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