

February 2012

*The Idea of
“the West”
and the Revolt
Against It*

POLICY

STUDY

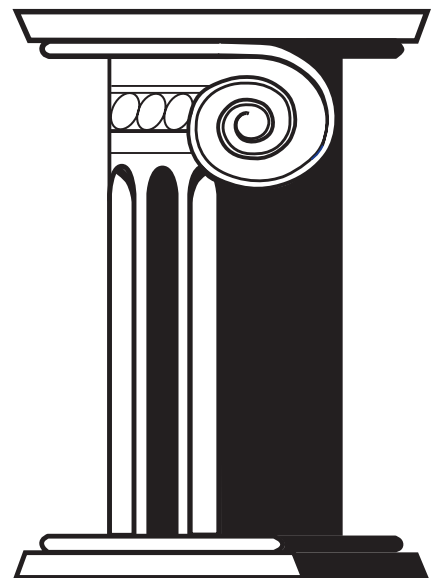
No. 12-3

by

Donald Paul Byron Racheter

**Public Interest Institute
Mount Pleasant, IA**

PUBLIC INTEREST



I N S T I T U T E

POLICY STUDY

February 2012

No. 12-3

Public Interest Institute

**Dr. Don Racheter,
President**

POLICY STUDIES are published as needed. They are longer, analytical articles on important public issues.

POLICY STUDIES are published by Public Interest Institute at Iowa Wesleyan College, a nonpartisan, nonprofit, research and educational institute whose activities are supported by contributions from private individuals, corporations, companies, and foundations. The Institute does **not** accept government grants.

Contributions are tax-deductible under sections 501(c)(3) and 170 of the Internal Revenue Code.

Permission to reprint or copy in whole or part is granted, provided a version of this credit line is used: "Reprinted by permission from POLICY STUDY, a publication of Public Interest Institute."

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and not necessarily those of Public Interest Institute.

If you have an article you believe is worth sharing, please send it to us. All or a portion of your article may be used. This publication is brought to you in the interest of a better-informed citizenry, because IDEAS DO MATTER.

We invite you to:
CALL us at 319-385-3462
FAX to 319-385-3799
E-MAIL to Public.Interest.Institute@LimitedGovernment.org
VISIT our Website at www.LimitedGovernment.org
WRITE us at our address on the back cover

Copyright 2012

The Idea of "the West" and the Revolt Against It¹

Contents

Executive Summary	3
Current American Intellectual Thought	5
The Idea of "the West"	5
Democracy and Liberalism	7
Modernity and Postmodernism	9
The Enlightenment and Rationalism	11
Nature and Natural Rights	14
Morality and the Categorical Imperative	16
Human Rights and the Ethical Life	19
Aesthetics Versus Paganism	20
Values and Justice	21
Reason and Art	23
Moral and Political Choices	25
Political Philosophy	27
Citizens Versus Subjects	28
Meritocracy Versus Democracy	29
Virtue Versus Consent	31
Endnotes	33

Executive Summary:

To understand what “the West” is—and is not—is of dire importance to the entire world. We must have answers to the thought that drives anti-Western sentiment. We must be able to evaluate if the West can learn from anti-Western sentiment. We must be able to evaluate what the West is now, what it should become, and how we are to get there. Since its founding, America has always looked to the Continent for intellectual guidance. In order that we might begin to understand what “the West” is and is not, we turn to Thomas Pangle’s book, *The Ennobling of Democracy*. Pangle evaluates how Western rationality or positivism developed in reaction to the questions of classical political rationalism, and how recent trends included under the category of Western thought known as postmodernism now react against both positivism and classical political rationalism.

Pangle says that what most vividly marks the present moment in history is the retreat of Marxism. According to Pangle, the anti-Marxist West is better defined in terms of liberal democracy and democratic republicanism, along with individual rights, especially individual civil and property rights. Pangle says that if we look back two centuries to when the West was trying to reform monarchism,

abundant answers to the questions of the moral and civic foundations of democracy existed. These philosophers of modernity spoke not only of human rights, but of “natural rights” resulting in moral “laws of nature and of nature’s God.”²² Ideas like the “state of nature,” “social compact,” and “categorical imperative” were taken seriously.

In a manner that had been unlike Classical Philosophy, modern scientific reasoning would lead to popular enlightenment—the enlightenment of the masses. Scientific morals, politics, aesthetics, philosophy, and religion were to replace the old prescientific or traditional morals, politics, aesthetics, philosophy, and religion. Pangle says that although the Enlightenment delivered on its promises in the areas of mathematics, economics, and technology, it failed to deliver on its promises in the areas of culture, morality, religion, and politics. The educated citizen now rarely endorses “natural rights” or “rights of man.” Today’s constitutionalists hold great skepticism towards even property rights, the core of the Enlightenment conception of the rights of man. But above all else, reason itself and the concept of universalism implied in reason is not trusted.

Modern rationalism has been scathingly criticized by succeeding generations of philosophical critics, starting

Executive Summary

“To understand what ‘the West’ is—and is not—is of dire importance to the entire world.”

The Idea of “the West”

“Did not theorists like Hamilton and Montesquieu depend upon, and yet inadequately account or provide for, certain absolutely crucial moral and educational foundations of civic republican culture: moral and educational foundations, the exploration of whose problematic nature was the central theme of Socratic republican theory?”

with Rousseau and reaching a climax in Nietzsche and Heidegger—critics who stress powerful arguments that modern rationalism, and therefore rationalism itself, is incapable of providing an acceptably profound, diverse, “creative,” and “historical” account of what is truly human.

Pangle says that Socratic political rationalism has little to do with the “Platonism” and “Aristotelian teleology” that respectable scholarship has produced for the last two hundred years, which views classical philosophy through the categories of modern rationalism—notably formed through such figures as the Kantian Edmund Zeller—and points us instead in the direction of a more accurate representation of the Socratic tradition. This is available due to Leo Strauss’ rediscovery of a careful reading of Plato, as found in the Islamic and Judaic Middle Ages in such works as Alfarabi’s *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle* and Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*.

Did not theorists like Hamilton and Montesquieu depend upon, and yet inadequately account or provide for, certain absolutely crucial moral and educational foundations of civic republican culture: moral and educational foundations, the exploration of whose problematic nature was the central theme of Socratic republican theory? Pangle suggests that if we are to

ennoble our understanding of our democratic political regime, we will need to cross-examine dialectally our opinions of the just, as did Plato and his greatest students. That political philosophy is missing from the postmodern account of rationalism; that the educational goals of postmodernism result in vacuous students; and that the political goals of postmodernism, at best, remain vague, all have dire implication to our understanding of civic responsibility and our political order.

To be free is not to be an independent individual, but to be a citizen of a polity in which one has access to the deliberations that authoritatively shape communal life. Since not all can rule at once, rule is rotated. Pangle says to know how to rule as a republican, one must know how to submit to being ruled. Voluntary obedience drives the republican citizen. Pangle says a sound republic will then be one in which the ruling offices are distributed as much as possible according to virtuous merit, or as Jefferson put it, the best form of government will most effectually select the best men of the natural aristocracy to rule and will make provision against the artificial aristocracy’s ascendancy.

Current American Intellectual Thought

Since its founding, America has always looked to the Continent for intellectual guidance.³ Although America defeated Germany at the battle of Normandy, it may be said that she lost a different war with Germany, the war of ideas. The American Academy proved all too willing to endorse German philosophy after the war. Oddly enough, America's intellectual imitation of the old major world powers of Britain, France, and especially Germany, did not cease even when America fought against results of some of these ideas on the battlefield. Even after World War II, German philosophy has served as the American standard of higher learning and civilization, evinced in American universities with the popularity of Max Weber, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Martin Heidegger and the epigones of Heideggerian existentialism in the French postmodernists, Foucault, and Lyotard. America's current position as a prominent world power places due importance on the thought she encourages both at home and abroad.

Not all recent scholarship uncritically espouses positivism, Heideggerian existentialism, or Lyotard's postmodernism. A formidable critique of Enlightenment philosophy is found in the thought of the German Jew Leo

Strauss. Through his studies of the great medieval minds of Alfarabi and Maimonides, Strauss rediscovered a reading of Plato that varied greatly from the more widespread Kantian interpretation in German philosophy, most notably in the work of Edmund Zeller. If a more accurate understanding of Plato different from current interpretation exists, this may have enormous implication within American education. Since Enlightenment philosophy emerged in conscious opposition to the Classical Greek philosophy of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, it is necessary to evaluate whether Greek philosophy has been adequately understood. One of the monumental discoveries of this more accurate reading of Plato is that Plato and his most illustrative students, Aristotle, Alfarabi, and Maimonides, conducted philosophy in a political mode; that is, they were advocates of political philosophy.

The Idea of "the West"

Today when the world tends to point the finger towards "the West" in response to its problems, it is not always clear to what the finger points. "The West" is increasingly the subject of attack by the wanting, the hungry, the poor, the East, the Mideast, South America, Latin America, the middle-class, the rich, the intellectual elite, as well as by Europe, America, the

and the Revolt Against It

"One of the monumental discoveries of this more accurate reading of Plato is that Plato and his most illustrative students, Aristotle, Alfarabi, and Maimonides, conducted philosophy in a political mode; that is, they were advocates of political philosophy."

The Idea of “the West”

“Some groups of individuals in Iraq and elsewhere in the Mideast are not playing by the ‘rules,’ do not have a similar regard for human life as does ‘the West,’ and are extremely determined to keep Western democracy from their region.”

geographic West, and the modern world. If seemingly anyone, anywhere in the world, including in Europe and North America, might blame “the West” for his problems, what exactly is meant by “the West”?

For example, during the war in Iraq *The New York Times* related how a group of Iraqi insurgents lured members of the newly formed Iraqi police force to raid a house riddled with explosives.⁴ The incident began when a Sudanese man on an adjacent roof top started randomly killing people on the street. When the police responded to reports of shootings, two bearded men approached the police vehicle and told the police that they suspected the owners of the house were terrorists. When the police demanded the occupants of the house abandon the property and no one left, the police raided the house. The terrorists then detonated the house-bomb, killing seven Iraqi police and at least twenty-five others.

The purpose of this attack and others like it was simply to scare the Iraqi people; to strike fear into their very beings. The aim was to convince them that their lives would never be peaceful, specifically if the Iraqi people voted in democratic elections to start a new government. Some groups of individuals in Iraq and elsewhere in the Mideast are not playing by the “rules,” do not have a similar regard for

human life as does “the West,” and are extremely determined to keep Western democracy from their region. Does the democratic form of government then answer our question of what is “the West”?

An evaluation of what Abu-Rabi⁵, for example, considers the intellectual element of Islamic resurgence reveals that there is a significant element in the Mideast that regards the cultural and scientific decline of the Islamic nation as due to the influence and thought of this “West.” Is this true? How do I as a citizen of the West and of the most powerful nation, militarily and financially, answer this accusation?

Abu-Rabi reveals that Hasan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb, the founders of the Muslim Brotherhood, believed that the appropriate way to revitalize the Islamic nation was to purge all “Western” influence from Islam, and return to the “roots” of Islam. That there is need for an intelligent critique to the thought that shapes the Muslim Brotherhood and other such Islamic resurgent elements, and subsequently Islamic terrorism, therefore becomes of utmost importance and applies to many, including: Marwan Yousif, neighbor to that house-bomb in Baghdad, Iraq; the Iraqi nation; the stability of the Mideast in general and Israel in particular; Spain, Japan and all other free nations of the world who have been victims of terrorist

attacks; and those nations who might be considered supporters of “the West” and therefore marked for future attack. It is important to each person who died on the airplanes that served as airborne bombs which struck America in 2001, to the owners of the airlines and to any airplane traveler in the world, to the family of each New York City firefighter who died following the 9/11 attacks, and to the American and other nations’ troops who continue to fight for a free Mideast and world, as well as global market stability, etc. Extensive examples serve to show just how hard it is to overestimate the importance of this question. To understand what “the West” is—and is not—is of dire importance to the entire world. We must have answers to the thought that drives anti-Western sentiment. We must be able to evaluate if the West can learn from anti-Western sentiment. We must be able to evaluate what the West is now, what it should become, and how we are to get there.

Democracy and Liberalism

In order that we might begin to understand what “the West” is and is not, we turn to Thomas Pangle’s book, *The Ennobling of Democracy*. Pangle evaluates how Western rationality or positivism developed in reaction to the questions of classical political rationalism, and how recent trends included under the

category of Western thought known as postmodernism now react against both positivism and classical political rationalism. If we are to understand the Mideastern resurgent elements and the world’s tendency to blame its problems on “the West,” we will need to investigate the intellectual roots of “Western” thought. Is “the West” Plato, Maimonides, Marx, or Lyotard?

We read Pangle to sort out which aspects of Western thought are most true to the Western tradition and which are contrary to the Western tradition. There may be good reason for an Islamic nation based on prophecy to reject certain aspects of Western thought. But it also may be that a true account of Western thought will reveal that the framers of this thought were sympathetic to or believed in the claims of prophetic religion. If we take seriously the questions that the framers of the West took seriously, those questions posed to us through classical political rationalism, we may be able to raise the standards—or ennoble—Western democracy.

Pangle says that what most vividly marks the present moment in history is the retreat of Marxism. He then asks what Marxism is in retreat from and what former Marxist nations are being delivered into. We are forced to examine what has come to fill this philosophical and political

and the Revolt Against It

“In order that we might begin to understand what ‘the West’ is and is not, we turn to Thomas Pangle’s book, The Ennobling of Democracy.”

The Idea of “the West”

“According to Pangle, the anti-Marxist West is better defined in terms of liberal democracy and democratic republicanism, along with individual rights, especially individual civil and property rights.”

void. The obvious answer is “the West,” but this does not really clarify the questions. What ideas are promoted by the West? If we respond by adding “democracy” and “human rights,” we must distinguish between these and the “people’s democracy,” which had been the heart of Marxism, and the “social, economic, and cultural rights” Marxism brought about.⁶ Indeed, is not Marxism one of the great products of “the West”?

According to Pangle, the anti-Marxist West is better defined in terms of liberal democracy and democratic republicanism, along with individual rights, especially individual civil and property rights. Even the term “liberal” needs clarification, as liberal parties in Western Europe are marginal, and in America the definition of liberal has come to mean many things. In using the term liberal, we must answer difficult questions. Pangle writes:

What is a liberal? What is the compelling moral justification for “liberalism”? What is “republicanism,” in contrast to democracy or democratism? How do republicanism and liberalism fit together? What justifies these qualifications on democracy, on popular sovereignty? What justifies the stress, in liberalism, on the

individual as such? Is “individualism” a sign of human dignity—or of fragmentation and atomization? How do liberal individualism and the free-market system with which it is intertwined harmonize with the citizenship, the civic solidarity, called for by our liberal democratic republicanism? Do liberalism and republicanism harmonize, or do they stand at some considerable tension with each other? Are individual rights and the competitive free market adequate to sustain the multiparty electoral, federal, and representative politics that so sharply distinguish the “Free World’s” interpretation of democracy? Or is the vitality of our citizenship withering—and not by accident, but in accordance with the deepest tendencies of our “liberal democratic” way of life?⁷

In response to such questions, we see large-scale philosophical naiveté among Western democratic intellectuals. Most disturbing is their doubt concerning the very existence of firm foundations for inquiry into and judgment of our political commitments. Pangle

says that for a long time the West defined itself against communist and fascist regimes. This often meant that the West had no positive definition of its own. As the threat of Marxist-inspired tyranny diminishes, Pangle says we in the West must confront our own problematic moral foundations.

Modernity and Postmodernism

Pangle says that if we look back two centuries to when the West was trying to reform monarchism, abundant answers to the questions of the moral and civic foundations of democracy existed. The authors of such views believed their purpose was to enlighten all citizens. These philosophers of modernity spoke not only of human rights, but of “natural rights” resulting in moral “laws of nature and of nature’s God.”⁸ Ideas like the “state of nature,” “social compact,” and “categorical imperative” were taken seriously. What has changed since the time of Spinoza, Locke, Kant, and Hegel?

Pangle says what has changed is a widespread disbelief in the pillars that founded modernity. In particular, we do not believe in “natural” rights any more, even if the word “nature” is used in the American Constitution. We do not believe in natural rights because we do not believe in “nature.” If there is no nature,

there can be no foundation in nature. We become skeptical about the possibility of any such foundation. This skepticism of all foundations Pangle calls “postmodernism.” Since postmodernism claims not to question one foundation on the basis of another foundation, its criticism tends only to be deconstructive and negative rather than positing an independent view.

What is of interest, however, in the use of the word “postmodern” is that it is still part of modernity. In using the word “postmodern,” one is recognizing that postmodernism requires modernism and a definition of modernism. “The ‘postmodern’ is not ‘what exists after modernity’; it is rather the state of being entangled in modernity, as something from which we cannot escape but in which we can no longer put, or find, faith.”⁹ If all we have is doubt of a past “something,” what is this something from which we cannot escape but no longer believe in?

According to Pangle, “at the heart of modernity is the trust or faith in scientific reason, understood as the source not only of vast powers but of authoritative guidance as to how to use those powers.”¹⁰ This new scientific reason was born in opposition to the reason of Classical Philosophy. The struggle to be free from the bonds of Classical Philosophy was at the same time a struggle

and the Revolt Against It

“These philosophers of modernity spoke not only of human rights, but of ‘natural rights’ resulting in moral ‘laws of nature and of nature’s God.’”

The Idea of “the West”

“Pangle says that although the Enlightenment delivered its promises in the areas of mathematics, economics, and technology, it failed to deliver its promises in the areas of culture, morality, religion, and politics.”

for a new universal culture to unite humanity. In a manner that had been unlike Classical Philosophy, modern scientific reasoning would lead to popular enlightenment, the enlightenment of the masses. Scientific morals, politics, aesthetics, philosophy, and religion were to replace the old prescientific or traditional morals, politics, aesthetics, philosophy, and religion. Modernity did believe in a foundation based on this scientific reason.¹¹

Pangle says that although the Enlightenment delivered its promises in the areas of mathematics, economics, and technology, it failed to deliver its promises in the areas of culture, morality, religion, and politics. In particular, religion ceased trying to be scientific and political science made no claim to authoritative guidance to the nature of the common good.¹² Due to these failures, *reason itself*, instead of Enlightenment rationalism, was more and more viewed with distrust.

The great Enlightenment attempt to provide systematic, rational, and acceptable foundations for life both public and private has proven inadequate. We need not conclude that this search itself is therefore void. Pangle says the Enlightenment succeeded in providing lasting moral and civic notions: universal humanity and equality, government by consent, free-

market economy, and toleration of the private remain the bulwark of the liberal public ethos.¹³ But the original philosophic and scientific foundations for this ethos have long since been abandoned, leaving the public ethos itself crippled. The educated citizen now rarely endorses “natural rights” or “rights of man.” Today’s constitutionalists hold great skepticism towards even property rights, the core of the Enlightenment conception of the rights of man. But above all else, reason itself and the concept of universalism implied in reason is not trusted.¹⁴ At the popular level, this sense of distrust is fueled by suspicion of rationalism as the source of “sexist,” “Eurocentric,” inhumanely utilitarian, and technologically-driven exploitation. Behind popular suspicion lurks greater difficulty. Modern rationalism has been scathingly criticized by succeeding generations of philosophical critics, starting with Rousseau and reaching a climax in Nietzsche and Heidegger—critics who stress powerful arguments that modern rationalism, and therefore rationalism itself, is incapable of providing an acceptably profound, diverse, “creative,” and “historical” account of what is truly human.¹⁵

Pangle summarizes our situation:

Here, then, is our situation in a nutshell:

we in the West find ourselves in possession of fantastically powerful technological and economic resources; these resources fuel a society that is deeply unsure of its moral purpose and foundations; as an accompaniment or consequence, this society has come to be increasingly penetrated and shaped by a new, highly problematic and skeptical (not to say nihilistic) cultural dispensation known as “postmodernism”.¹⁶

Pangle begins his book with selections of the most influential thinkers¹⁷ who stand at the source of this new “ism” to direct our attention to the strengths and decisive weaknesses of this unfolding worldview. Pangle calls attention to the civic irresponsibility, spiritual deadliness, and philosophic dogmatism of this increasingly dominant trend of thinking.¹⁸ His objective is to rescue the genuine spiritual, moral, and civic challenges of our time from the belittling effects of the new philosophic elite. Pangle urges us to reopen the case for reason as the only firm foundation for our conception of man.

The Enlightenment and Rationalism

Pangle argues that this case should be reopened as common criticisms and patronizing endorsements leveled against the great moral and political philosophies of the Enlightenment do not adequately account for the fuller meditations of Spinoza, Locke, Montesquieu, Hume, or the authors of the *Federalist Papers*. In reopening this debate, Pangle also draws our attention to the necessary recognition of the limits of this debate, “the reacquisition of intimate familiarity with the grounding treatises of modern republicanism only makes the shortcomings of the Enlightenment’s conception of human freedom and excellence more apparent.”¹⁹ This realization helps us to see the strength of modernity’s critics. Pangle says it is on these great opponents, specifically Heidegger, that “postmodernists” rely for whatever impact their deconstruction of rationalism may have.²⁰

Pangle’s goal is not simply to return to the authority of eighteenth-century philosophy but instead to provide an authentic critique of modernity. This critique requires and culminates with the “other” political rationalism, that of Socrates and the Socratic tradition.²¹

and the Revolt Against It

“Pangle urges us to reopen the case for reason as the only firm foundation for our conception of man.”

The Idea of “the West”

“Pangle reminds us that previous attempts at attempted synthesis, such as the best known and most thoughtful by Benjamin Franklin, have subordinated classical republicanism to the republicanism of the Enlightenment, Socratic to modern.”

Pangle says that Socratic political rationalism has little to do with the “Platonism” and “Aristotelian teleology” that respectable scholarship has produced for the last two hundred years, which views classical philosophy through the categories of modern rationalism—notably formed through such figures as the Kantian Edmund Zeller—and points us instead in the direction of a more accurate representation of the Socratic tradition. This is available due to Leo Strauss’ rediscovery of a careful reading of Plato, as found in the Islamic and Judaic Middle Ages in such works as Alfarabi’s *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle* and Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*.²²

If our account of reason is crucial to the political regime, and as Pangle says a more careful reading of Plato, a foundational thinker to the West, is available through Alfarabi, then the Mideast has recourse within its own philosophical tradition to evaluate the best possible version of a modern Western political regime that is yet sympathetic to the claims of the prophetic religion of Islam. Similarly, the West can raise its understanding of reason through investigating Alfarabi.

The Socratic political rationalism presented through Alfarabi and Maimonides is at significant odds with modern rationalism and the republicanism modern

rationalism supports.²³

Pangle says this gap is not unbridgeable as both use rational argument as the basis for discovery of truth regarding the human condition. A practical compromise between the two is possible but only if the debate is taken seriously, the strengths and weaknesses of both sides considered, and one position is brought to its conclusion in its subordination to the other.

Pangle reminds us that previous attempts at attempted synthesis, such as the best known and most thoughtful by Benjamin Franklin, have subordinated classical republicanism to the republicanism of the Enlightenment, Socratic to modern. Pangle suggests we might consider the opposite:

By reappropriating classical civic rationalism, we may be afforded a framework that integrates the politically most significant discoveries of modern rationalism into a conception of humanity that does justice to the whole range of the human problem and the human potential, in a way and to a degree never achieved by modern rationalism.²⁴

Pangle writes his book to provoke the reader to serious consideration of this end. This investigation is

significant to not only the West or the Mideast but to anyone interested in virtuous governing.

Pangle presents as both undesirable and impossible an unqualified return to classical political rationalism. Impossible because our mass-society is fundamentally different than mass-society as the subject of classical political theory, especially as depicted in the treatises of Xenophon; undesirable because of advances modern republican theory has effected over ancient republican theory.²⁵ Pangle says the unprecedented political horrors of the twentieth century, i.e., Marxist gulags, fascist death camps, or the shadow of nuclear holocaust, need not eclipse modern advancement. Pangle states:

I have in mind, not only the defeat of Marxism and fascism and the abolition of slavery, but more positively, the achievement of dignity and political organization for free labor; the enormous improvement in basic provisions and healthcare for the mass of humanity; the growth of recognition of universal human dignity in the doctrine of human rights; and, perhaps most important of all, the protection of human rights and of self-government

in constitutional mechanisms and civic practices unknown to classical republican theory.²⁶

Pangle quotes Publius, Alexander Hamilton, in the *Federalist Papers*, no. 9:

The science of politics, however, like most other sciences, has received great improvement. The efficacy of various principles is now well understood, which were either not known at all, or imperfectly known to the ancients. The regular distribution of power into distinct departments; the introduction of legislative balances and checks; the institution of courts composed of judges holding their offices during good behavior; the representation of the people in the legislature by deputies of their own elections: these are wholly new discoveries, or have made their principal progress toward perfection in modern times. They are means, and powerful means, by which the excellencies of republican government may be retained and its imperfections lessened or avoided. To this catalogue of

and the Revolt Against It

“Pangle says the unprecedented political horrors of the twentieth century, i.e., Marxist gulags, fascist death camps, or the shadow of nuclear holocaust, need not eclipse modern advancement.”

The Idea of “the West”

“By nature is the human being a political animal.”

circumstances that tend to the amelioration of popular systems of civil government, I shall venture, however novel it may appear to some, to add one more, on a principle that has been made the foundation of an objection to the new Constitution; I mean the ENLARGEMENT of the ORBIT within which such systems are to revolve, either in respect to the dimensions of a single State, or to the consolidation of several smaller States into one great Confederacy.... The opponents of the PLAN proposed have, with assiduity, cited and circulated the observations of Montesquieu on the necessity of a contracted territory for a republican government. But they seem not to have been apprised of the sentiments of that great man expressed in another part of his work.... So far are the suggestions of Montesquieu from standing in opposition to a general Union of the States that he explicitly treats of a CONFEDERATE REPUBLIC as the expedient for extending the sphere of popular government and reconciling

the advantages of monarchy with those of republicanism.²⁷

Pangle says the great question that looms over even the high-water marks of modern republican theory is this: Did not theorists like Hamilton and Montesquieu depend upon, and yet inadequately account or provide for, certain absolutely crucial moral and educational foundations of civic republican culture, the exploration of whose problematic nature was the central theme of Socratic republican theory?²⁸

Nature and Natural Rights

Pangle says it is not difficult to show that classical political philosophy is well aware of the foundation in nature or natural right of the universal human claim to share in dignity, “nobility,” or inner “beauty.” Pangle says it suffices to recall Aristotle’s most famous characterization of human nature:

By nature is the human being a political animal. That is why even when they have no need of assistance from one another they are no less directed toward living together. Not but that also the common advantage brings them together, to the extent that a share in living nobly falls to each: for it is this especially that is

the goal, for all humans, both in common and individually. But they also come together for the sake of life itself, and for this hold together the political community, because perhaps there is some portion of nobility even just in living as such, if life is not too full of hardships. (*Politics* 1278b 12-27.)²⁹

Pangle says Aristotle insists that the universal concern for a share in nobility points toward human excellence or virtue. This concern includes the aspiration to share in the rare and elevated through participation in a republican community.

Pangle says that classical political philosophy is aware that natural right dictates that the virtue of political justice must rest on an egalitarian pillar. Justice is equality, as both Aristotle (*Politics* 1282b14 ff., 1301b28 ff.) and Plato's Athenian Stranger (*Laws* 757) declare.³⁰ But this equality is not simple; it is twofold. Every society must provide corrective justice, according to which every person is to be regarded as arithmetically equal for such loci as the marketplace and courtroom:

In communal exchange, it is justice in this sense that is the bond.... The city is maintained by

reciprocity according to analogy; for [citizens] seek to repay evil with evil, or they consider themselves slaves; and good with good; and if they can't, mutual exchange ceases: but they are maintained by mutual exchange. That is why they set up a public temple to the goddesses of gratitude, so that there will be reciprocity. (Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1132b32-1133a4).³¹

But this is not the only sense of justice as equality. There is another and higher sense: "distributive justice," or "justice as fairness."³² The principle here is merit. Rather than arithmetic equality between individuals and their rewards, there is equality proportional to ability. Pangle says that in Aristotle burden and opportunity, office and risk, and honor and disgrace ought to be distributed in proportions equal to the different contributions, efforts, proven potentials, and attainments of citizens. Modern political philosophy addresses only half the conception of justice as equality.

The great doubt classical republican theory poses for modern republican theory is this: has modern theory, in its successful attempt to clarify and satisfy the most basic

and the Revolt Against It

"Modern political philosophy addresses only half the conception of justice as equality."

The Idea of “the West”

“For it is indeed the exploration of the problem of justice, or the common good, and not so much the preaching of justice, in which classical political philosophy culminates.”

legitimate demands of political life, obscured the clear view of human excellence that is required in order to shape a public life that reflects the whole of the common good? In devoting itself to the most basic human needs, has modern republican political philosophy not eclipsed the higher dimensions of civic aspiration—and the deeply problematic reflections on our human condition to which we are led by focusing on those higher aspirations? For it is indeed the exploration of the problem of justice, or the common good, and not so much the preaching of justice, in which classical political philosophy culminates. The classics are moral philosophers, not moralists.³³

Pangle says the questionableness of modern philosophies of natural rights and therewith the foundations of modern and especially American constitutionalism is today widely acknowledged. This doubt is so widespread it has degenerated into a formulaic dogmatism. Pangle reemphasizes he is not endorsing conventional criticisms of Lockean and Montesquieuan political philosophy. Pangle argues

in two previous publications³⁴ that conventional criticisms of Enlightenment political philosophy rest on historically and philosophically naïve and only partial readings of Locke and Montesquieu. Pangle says the political philosophies of the Enlightenment do come into view when these arguments are placed in their own context, as once again in dialogue with what the Enlightenment political philosophies acknowledge to be their great rivals—the Bible and classical political philosophy.³⁵

Morality and the Categorical Imperative

Pangle says that when this dialogue is reenacted, the problematic nature of fashionable attempts to supplant early-modern republicanism with recourse to German idealism become apparent. Pangle says in the midst of the postmodernist onslaught, Kant’s moral and political philosophy becomes very attractive. In comparison with what is perceived to be the weak foundations of liberal democratic political theory, temptation to summon the richness and analytical rigor of Kant’s philosophy is understandable.

Pangle says what is not understandable is how little these transfusions resemble the morally severe, metaphysically grounded, and authentic thought of Kant. According

to Kant, examination of human experience reveals the categorical imperative: a single eternal universal principle of morality. “Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become universal law.”³⁶ Pangle says in Kant the categorical imperative is the one and only bedrock for any conception of human rights that expresses human dignity as opposed to collective Hobbesian shrewdness. In order to vindicate this single fundamental law, a thorough critique of pure reason showing the radical limitations of all scientific and metaphysical thinking is required. Pangle says once vindicated and analyzed, this categorical imperative emerges as much more than a regulative principle into which anyone can fit whatever seems morally “uplifting,” “sweet,” or “appealing.”³⁷ When properly conceived in terms of the will or freedom seen as end in itself, the categorical imperative demands a precise set of *immutably true* moral virtues and a system of *immutably true* principles of constitutionalism. Postmodernists who appeal to “Kant” choose to ignore this precise set of immutable moral virtues and true principles of constitutionalism in favor of the postmodernists’ emotions or desires; that is, postmodernists disregard what Kant considers as imperative. We next explore what Pangle means by this.

Pangle says Kant elaborates the moral virtues in Kant’s *Metaphysical Principles of the Doctrine of Virtue*, part two of Kant’s *Metaphysics and Morals*. Kant elaborates the constitutional principles in the first part of the same work: *The Metaphysical Principles of the Doctrine of Right*. Pangle goes on:

One sometimes gets the impression that contemporary borrowers from Kant have not heard of this treatise, in which Kant presents the substantial heart of his moral, legal, and political philosophy. Yet one cannot altogether blame our contemporary “Kantians” for trying to creep silently by this core of authentic Kantianism. *The Metaphysics of Morals* is not a treatise calculated to win Kant popularity contests, since it is here that he makes clearest his view of the extraordinary demands of a conception of human dignity and human rights that cannot possibly be reduced to the utilitarian quest for physical safety, material comfort, and the vanity of “universal recognition.”³⁸

Pangle says the Kantian conception of justice is

and the Revolt Against It

“When properly conceived in terms of the will or freedom seen as end in itself, the categorical imperative demands a precise set of immutably true moral virtues and a system of immutably true principles of constitutionalism.”

The Idea of “the West”

“A straightforward deduction from the categorical imperative which dictates that rational humanity must always be treated not merely as a means but as an end in itself.”

grounded in the state of nature and includes the principles of natural rights, especially property rights, natural laws, the social contract, and a strict doctrine of sovereignty. Pangle notes three distinctive features of the legal philosophy Kant builds on these foundations. The first is a penal system that demonstrates punishment can only be just if it is retributive, which includes a ringing endorsement of retributive capital punishment. The second is a denial of the right of revolution and a denial of the moral legitimacy of civil disobedience. The third is a moral critique of what would today be called the welfare state.

Pangle says Kant begins his doctrine of virtues with proper moral stature towards oneself and therefore towards one's preservation and sexuality. The first two virtues are the absolute avoidance of suicide and the absolute avoidance of purely sexual gratification, which Kant calls “wanton self-desecration.”³⁹ Pangle says the argument is a straightforward deduction from the categorical imperative which dictates that rational humanity must always be treated not merely as a means but as an end in itself. Pangle quotes Kant, “The ground of proof of the moral evil lies obviously in the fact that one gives up one's very personality (casts it aside) when one uses oneself merely as the means for the gratification of an animal drive.”⁴⁰ Pangle makes

obvious the difference in Kant and the postmodern version of Kant:

Kant adds that on the basis of the categorical imperative, this sexual vice must be judged worse than suicide, for “the obstinate throwing away of one's life as a burden is at least not a weak surrender to animal pleasure, but demands courage, in which there is always found respect for the humanity in one's own person” (*The Metaphysics of Morals*, pt. 1, sec. 7). Kant begins his teaching on the moral virtues in this stunning fashion because he wishes to announce from the outset the intimately demanding character of the entailments of human rights. He wishes to make unmistakably clear how far anything properly derivable from authentic human rights stands from self-indulgence, or from what we today call “sexual liberation.”⁴¹

Pangle says when one turns from the texts of Kant to the use made of Kant in contemporary discussions, one cannot but gape in amazement at the disparity in tone, substance, morals, and politics. Pangle says it is not Kant to which appeal is

made, but simply the august name and authority of a past great reasoner and moralist. This version of Kant is then used to defend principles and policies whose laxity would set Kant's hairs on end. If the postmodern appeal to Kant can be said to be authentic, it is not clear how.

Human Rights and the Ethical Life

Pangle makes clear what questions must be considered to appeal to Kant. Pangle says Kant's philosophy is the purest attempt to make human rights and the will as end in itself the foundations of an elevated conception of humanity,

...thus radically subordinating love, the good, and happiness, and virtue or excellence conceived of as ultimately determined by these latter rather than by human rights. Kant holds that to make the good, rather than rights, the supreme principle of humanity is to condemn humanity to a conditioned, or unfree, and even animalistic existence and status. For the good, or happiness, is ultimately indefinable by reason except in negative terms (avoidance of death, etc.); worldly happiness is therefore determined by forces that are

historical, economic, psychological, and so forth. To make happiness our standard is therefore to surrender our humanity, our freedom and rationality, to these deterministic and historical or merely subjective forces. Now is this true? That is the most important question for anyone who seriously seeks to return to Kant.⁴²

If we seek refuge in Hegel, Pangle says that Hegel's purported improvements on Kant's moral and political philosophy do not put to rest, but further obscures this question. Hegel is famous for his criticism of the barren formalism of Kant's categorical imperative.⁴³ Hegel claims to have given content to the formalism by showing how the categorical imperative, or the concept of the will as end in itself, is embodied in the institutions of a rational constitutional state administering a modern liberal society. The ethical life then consists of the fulfillment of these institutions' rational prescriptions. At the same time, citizens would recognize their dutiful and emancipated rational dignity. Pangle says Hegel's emphasis on the need of institutional recognition of virtue in the modern state reveals Hegel's neglect to address virtue, or the aspects of human existence which matter so much they cannot

and the Revolt Against It

“Kant holds that to make the good, rather than rights, the supreme principle of humanity is to condemn humanity to a conditioned, or unfree, and even animalistic existence and status.”

The Idea of “the West”

be institutionalized, in his ethical and political philosophy. Pangle supports this statement asking for consideration of what Hegel does and does not say in Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* about happiness, love, God, sainthood, heroism, philosophy, and friendship, and what Hegel admits is “virtue in the strict sense of the word,” while keeping in mind the status of these subjects in the political works of Plato and Aristotle.⁴⁴

Pangle says the philosophically most profound work in the last century that adequately accounts for the depths of what it would mean to recur to Kant for enrichment of the moral and political principles of modern constitutionalism ends with the following words:

The old foundations of law and of the state are more problematic than they were before.... Thus Kant’s problem is absolutely our problem. It is certainly not simply “the same” but it repeats itself... the conditionality of humanity and above all of history, which is the starting point for all transcendence, must be subjected to an *interrogation* that is philosophic, i.e., *unconditioned*. But the question will never really be unconditioned except if, *in the knowledge applied*

to historical passion, the question uncovers the question of the good. It is not our task here to examine more closely the *answer* to this question—and also the Christian answer of Augustine. That the decisive question remains *true*, even if it does *not* find an answer, the example of *Socrates* can teach to whomever asks as he did.⁴⁵

Pangle says any serious recourse to Kant and Hegel requires reconsideration of the Socratic alternative and of the great debates between Socratism and revealed religion.⁴⁶ In order to understand modern political rationalism, we need to take seriously the questions of classical political rationalism against which modern rationalism reacted.

Aesthetics Versus Paganism

Pangle begins our investigation of modern rationalism by tracing in chapter one the roots of thought found in one of the most influential postmodernists, the Frenchman Jean-François Lyotard. We learn that Lyotard reacts against Hegelian rationalism. Hegel portrayed the evolution of human rationalism as history and this process as complete in his day. Lyotard instead appeals to Kant’s aesthetics through the Frenchman Diderot. Under

“In order to understand modern political rationalism, we need to take seriously the questions of classical political rationalism against which modern rationalism reacted.”

examination, however, we find that Lyotard has appealed to little more than Kant's august name, for Lyotard truncates the essential groundwork of Kant's aesthetics, the categorical imperative. Lyotard posits instead his "paganism," which is a radical feminism. Lyotard rejects all rationalism: classical and modern, theist or atheist. Lyotard appeals to the female child as the antithesis of rationalism because he says reason does not suit women.⁴⁷

Lyotard's conception of justice in his anti-rational paganism is therefore the particular situation in which severe judgment is passed *without criteria*.⁴⁸ In order that we are able to judge if Lyotard is accurate, we need to examine the authors Lyotard appeals to for justification of his claims. The thought of Nietzsche and Heidegger are prominent in Lyotard, so in chapter two Pangle turns our attention to an investigation of the Heideggerian roots of postmodernism.

Pangle recounts to us what Nietzsche and Heidegger deem the essential nihilistic outcome stemming from the commitment to the Western science and rationalism which came to be during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Science conceives of itself and all of human existence through certain fundamental categories. Truth is held to be what is intelligible in these categories. All other aspects of existence that cannot fit into

these categories are false. The experience of history teaches us that the most precious aspects of human existence cannot be adequately comprehended through such categories. Our search for knowledge of life through science cannot inform these aspects of human existence. To try to do so would compromise truth and inadequately account for human experience.

Values and Justice

What can be known about human experience is that its diversity is dependent upon an historical and not eternal Being. This Being is identical with the unfolding of a wholly unpredictable history. Since it is historical, Being depends on humanity and will cease as humanity ceases. This Being, as it unfolds as that which is important to a people, is essentially limited within a cultural horizon which is defined against another people's cultural horizon. Each horizon is constantly changing in relationship to the other cultural horizons. Any attempt to understand the human situation is limited by its own cultural commitment. What Nietzsche calls "values" stem from judgments made within and based on these cultural limitations. Any attempt to make a universal judgment concerning the human condition becomes inauthentic. We are no longer able to make such judgments,

and the Revolt Against It

"Science conceives of itself and all of human existence through certain fundamental categories. Truth is held to be what is intelligible in these categories. All other aspects of existence that cannot fit into these categories are false."

The Idea of “the West”

“Heidegger viewed the contemporary rationalist movement toward equalization of values, or equalization of the objects of value, the stress on tolerance, the easygoing ‘agreement to disagree,’ and the liberal ‘open society’ as all symptomatic of the dissolution of standards and the loss of dedication in life.”

hence the nihilistic outcome of Western rationalism.

If this is a true account of the human situation, the claim of reason or science to universalism seems to contrast with these limitations of man’s self-knowledge. Pangle explains in Heidegger that the attempt to claim by reason, once it assumes sovereign authority, to look upon life with transhistorical detachment, neutrality, and objectivity results inevitably in either dishonesty or easygoing shallowness.⁴⁹ Heidegger saw that rationalism as defined to him through the Enlightenment thinkers could not do justice to the human situation, because this rationalism viewed the question of justice itself and all such “value” judgments as subjective, subconscious, or else wise outside the categories of scientific or true knowledge. Significantly, rather than conclude that “values” are things that can be easily exchanged as postmodernism would later conclude, Heidegger took seriously the human condition of “value” judgment, even as he saw it limited through cultural commitment. Heidegger says in his work, *Nietzsche*, that:

Those who establish the highest values, the creators, the new philosophers, must according to Nietzsche be experimenters; they must make their way and break a trail in the

knowledge that they do not have *the* Truth. From such knowledge it in no way follows that they may view their concepts as betting chips in some game, where they can just exchange their concepts for some others; what follows is precisely the opposite: the sever rigor and the binding of their thinking must experience in the things themselves a grounding such as philosophy hitherto has not known. For only thus is there created the possibility of a grounded position erecting itself against the others and the strife becoming an actual strife and thus the actual source of truth.⁵⁰

Heidegger viewed the contemporary rationalist movement toward equalization of values, or equalization of the objects of value, the stress on tolerance, the easygoing “agreement to disagree,” and the liberal “open society” as all symptomatic of the dissolution of standards and the loss of dedication in life.⁵¹ Although Nietzsche and Heidegger could see the limitations of the rationalism they were tracing the limits to in that it could not sincerely equate for the human condition, Nietzsche and Heidegger yet believed that something like the human condition existed and was important enough to require

sincere philosophical rigor and candor.

Nietzsche and Heidegger saw that Enlightenment rationalism would produce a Western society that worshiped a religion of technique. If we view rationality to be limited only to improving the length of life or the quality of computer processing speeds and not to include questions of justice or of the human condition, we are incapable of knowing about those things most important to man. If our science produces technology that is so powerful to make its misuse a great evil, this science points towards a question—How should this science be used?—that this science cannot account for. Science so defined will itself point to the question of justice. Seeing the technology producing Enlightenment rationalism as incapable of accounting for the human situation, Nietzsche and his student Heidegger both reject rationalism itself. Because technology is wrong, so then must be rationalism. Thus Heidegger concludes what is demanded of man is that he seriously investigate non-Western accounts of the human situation, that is, accounts of the human situation not based in reason, and a deconstruction of the Western authority found in reason.⁵² However, we need not throw out the baby with the bath water. Leo Strauss and Pangle both argue that Enlightenment rationalism has its limits, but that this account

of reason is not the only account of reason available to man.⁵³

Reason and Art

Pangle draws our attention to the civic implications of an account of reason that excludes the possibility of knowledge of the human condition. Pangle says in chapter three, “Weak Thinking,” that the postmodern movement tries to appropriate many of Heidegger’s basic conceptions of thought, language, and existence, which reject Western rationality, while transforming these conceptions so as to substitute for Heidegger’s anguish from his depth of recognition of the implications of Enlightenment rationality to the condition of man and for Heidegger’s belief in the sincerity of “value” conflict.⁵⁴ Pangle says what is aimed at is what Lyotard has christened “*la sveltesse*”: the exhilaration of a discordant diversity or “difference” metamorphic enough to prevent the rootedness that engenders serious conflict but simultaneously strong and purposeful enough to “contaminate” and subvert the hegemony of rationalist, technologically regimented existence as supported through Western rationalism.⁵⁵

Pangle says the postmodernists disagree upon the degree to which a just or nonexploitative authentic version of a postmodern culture stands

and the Revolt Against It

“Seeing the technology producing Enlightenment rationalism as incapable of accounting for the human situation, Nietzsche and his student Heidegger both reject rationalism itself.”

The Idea of “the West”

“Lyotard thus avoids the initially painful process of Socratic self-purgation and cuts himself off from the serene, consuming pleasure of Socratic self-knowledge and self-liberation.”

from liberal bourgeois society as we now know it. He recounts the thought of Lyotard and Vattimo. Pangle says Lyotard’s moral indignation towards contemporary “capitalist” existence blinds Lyotard to political philosophy. Pangle says:

[Lyotard’s] tirades against the hegemonic character of rationalism in general, and of Socratism in particular, as presented in Plato’s dialogues, provide him with the perfect excuse for indulging apparently redemptive moral or even religious feelings without having to expose those feelings, and the opinions they generate and are generated out of, to the sustained acid test of Socratic questioning. Lyotard thus avoids the initially painful process of Socratic self-purgation and cuts himself off from the serene, consuming pleasure of Socratic self-knowledge and self-liberation.⁵⁶

Pangle notes that Lyotard stands apart from all other postmodernists in the degree to which Lyotard expresses some strong moral passion for justice and liberation. Pangle says Lyotard furthermore stands on the brink of Socratic self-discovery, in that he seriously wrestles with the Socratic

challenge, above all, of Plato’s *Gorgias*. Pangle says Lyotard cannot leave behind uncertainty regarding the collapse of the fundamental distinction between rhetoric and dialectic.⁵⁷ Pangle says Lyotard is aware that the “Platonic discourse that inaugurates science is not scientific, precisely to the extent that it attempts to legitimate science.”⁵⁸ Without recourse to the sort of argumentation found in the dialogues, Plato’s scientific knowledge “would be in the position of presupposing its own validity and stooping to what it condemns: begging the question, proceeding on prejudice.”⁵⁹

Pangle says Lyotard cannot discern how Plato can be thought to have succeeded in his most fundamental enterprise, because Lyotard fails to distinguish clearly the truly dialectical aspects from what Lyotard calls the “narrative” or “poetic” aspects of the Platonic dialogues. This failure Pangle says is understandable due to Plato’s artful interplay of the “narrative” and “dialectic” which superficially obscures the latter. But Pangle says Lyotard’s reading of the dialogues remains a failure to follow meticulously the guidance Plato offers in the *Phaedrus* as well as the *Gorgias* to the interpretation of Plato’s written words.⁶⁰

Pangle says Lyotard above all has failed to see the extent

to which what he correctly calls the “legitimation of science,” in Plato, stands or falls with a relentless dialectical cross-examination of our opinions as to the just. Pangle says Lyotard has failed to see that *political* philosophy in the Socratic, not the Enlightenment, sense, is the first and fundamental philosophy. Pangle says Lyotard’s failure is finally traceable to the fact that Lyotard and his mentor Heidegger appear to have no experience of such Socratic political philosophizing. Pangle suggests a painstaking attention to the surface of the *Gorgias* might have helped Lyotard to begin to find his way to this Socratic heart of things.⁶¹ If what Pangle says is correct, and the proper understanding of Plato is fundamentally political in operation, revision may be required of the view made popular by Schleiermacher which defines Platonic studies through the *Timaeus*.

Pangle next evaluates the writings of Gianni Vattimo to illustrate more recent connections of Nietzsche and Heidegger to postmodern thought. Pangle emphasizes the placid nature of this version of Heidegger. Pangle says where Lyotard still looks to the “intensification of life” through art, Vattimo accepts the “death, or better put, the decline ... of art.”⁶² We should view art not as dying, but as in decline. Heidegger reveals

to us the Western tradition based on reason is rooted in a self-destructive falsehood. Decline then, is a merely relative notion that serves as a kind of orientation. Pangle says we discover in this decline a new, “weak” meaning of the aesthetic, and through the aesthetic, of Being itself. Vattimo promotes “*il pensiero debole*” translated “weak thinking.” We must give up all pretension to see more than we can to be more than we are. Pangle says we see negatively the vicious residue of rationalism, monotheism, and metaphysics. Positively we see very little. Our eyes are “weak” and do not see “beauty” or “nobility.”⁶³ In Vattimo, these notions are only historical relics, and to claim otherwise is inauthentic. This, for Vattimo, however, is the result of maturation. Whereas previous “strong” eyes looked for notions of justice which now are seen as nonexistent, our new “weak” eyes see what “strong” eyes could not. Weak eyes see the weakness of Being. Pangle says for our time, to be is to “oscillate” in fluid indeterminacy.⁶⁴

Moral and Political Choices

Pangle challenges this fluid interpretation of Heidegger by asking what precisely and concretely this means for civic life. He says the “weak thinkers” refuse Heidegger’s invitation to join in Heidegger’s longing for cultural

and the Revolt Against It

*“Pangle says
Lyotard’s failure
is finally traceable
to the fact that
Lyotard and his
mentor Heidegger
appear to have no
experience of such
Socratic political
philosophizing.”*

The Idea of “the West”

“Pangle says these warnings are particularly apt when applied to the totalitarian temptations rooted in left-wing Hegelianism and in Marx, in the scientism and neo-Darwinism that have marked and marred American philosophy, and when applied to Jurgen Habermas’s so-called ‘emancipatory’ theory of ‘communicative action.’”

revolution, and yet they accept Heidegger’s overthrow of pre-Heideggerian philosophy, religion, and art. Pangle asks if Heidegger’s critique can be so easily accepted while rejecting the momentum of that critique. Pangle says the “weak thinkers” remain morally committed to a vaguely anarchistic democratism, while simultaneously warning us of the exclusive tendencies of moral dogmatism, of the danger that standards can lead to oppressive hierarchies, of the ease with which devotion to causes, even beautiful causes, can obfuscate the elemental fellowship of human beings qua human beings.⁶⁵

Pangle notes these warnings are necessary, especially when applied to late Enlightenment thinking. Pangle says these warnings are particularly apt when applied to the totalitarian temptations rooted in left-wing Hegelianism and in Marx, in the scientism and neo-Darwinism that have marked and marred American philosophy, and when applied to Jurgen Habermas’s so-called “emancipatory” theory of “communicative action.”⁶⁶ Pangle asks if the warnings of the “weak thinkers” are not more properly directed against modern antirationalism than against the older forms of rationalism, pointing to modern antirationalism’s results in Nazism.

Pangle says the more immediate danger found in

postmodern thought, from Vattimo and Lyotard on the continent to Paul De Man and Richard Rorty in America, is the open boasting of “weakness” of thinking. Pangle asks of this weakness:

In celebrating their incapacity and inclination to seek grounds for life’s most necessary moral and political choices, do the postmodernists not license escape from those choices, or from responsibility for thinking them through? In stressing the “oscillation” of all thought, do they not inadvertently cultivate a climate of moral vacillation? Is the unintended consequence not a tendency to flatter whatever now exists, and to serve whatever academic, cultural, and political powers there be?⁶⁷

If this is true, it is hard to see how education continues in the postmodern conception. The postmodern account of education boldly promotes subversion of traditional Western authority found in reason. Pangle says this subversion begins from the dogmatic denial of the very possibility of cross-cultural or transhistorical dialogue, and culminates in the explicit rejection of any traditional conception of humanity.⁶⁸

Pangle says this posture towards education will hardly cultivate students of passionate concern for deciphering what can be learned from a text or work of art. Rather, Pangle says what will be cultivated is indeed a *pensiero debole*, or weak thinking, characterized by a superficial sense of satisfaction which masks a fundamental emptiness of the spirit.⁶⁹

Examination of Lyotard's political goal reveals more weakness. Lyotard promotes the view that life is "just gaming" with no rules, and that this view will somehow lead to emancipation. Lyotard says the solution is really, "in principle, quite simple."

give the public free access to the memory and data banks. Language games will then be games of perfect information at any given moment. But they will also be non-zero-sum games, and by virtue of that fact discussions will never risk fixating in a position of minimax equilibrium because they have exhausted their stakes. For the stakes will be in that case constituted by knowledge, which are language's reserves of possible utterances, are inexhaustible. This sketches the outline of a politics in which the desire for justice and the

desire for the unknown will be equally respected.⁷⁰

What little guidance Lyotard does provide for the political goal of postmodernism is ambiguous at best, and Pangle concludes it likely to be only another "game."

Political Philosophy

The conceptions of justice prescribed through Nietzsche's "values," Heidegger's new gods, Lyotard's "paganism," and Vattimo's "weak thinking," each seem to lack a true attention to and evaluation of the human condition. To examine our political order, we must consider the question of justice. If as Pangle suggests there is a more accurate reading of Plato which has escaped Lyotard and his teachers, the fundamental enterprise of which is based on dialectical cross-examination of our opinions of the just, we will need to at least consider what Pangle suggests as possible. This will require an investigation of what Plato and his brightest students indicate the nature of justice to be, especially in relationship to the political order. Pangle shows through his exposition of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Lyotard, and Vattimo that this school of thought which culminates in postmodernism has misunderstood the fundamental enterprise of Plato's philosophy as essentially *political* in nature.

and the Revolt Against It

"The conceptions of justice prescribed through Nietzsche's 'values,' Heidegger's new gods, Lyotard's 'paganism,' and Vattimo's 'weak thinking,' each seem to lack a true attention to and evaluation of the human condition."

The Idea of “the West”

“To be free is not to be an independent individual, but to be a citizen of a polity in which one has access to the deliberations that authoritatively shape communal life. Since not all can rule at once, rule is rotated.”

We recall from earlier that Pangle has indicated that authentic Socratic or classical political rationalism is a civic philosophy that flourished for the last time in the Islamic and Judaic Middle Ages in such works as Alfarabi’s *Philosophy of Plato* and Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*.⁷¹ Pangle suggests that if we are to ennoble our understanding of our democratic political regime, we will need to cross-examine dialectally our opinions of the just, as did Plato and his greatest students. That political philosophy is missing from the postmodern account of rationalism; that the educational goals of postmodernism result in vacuous students; and that the political goals of postmodernism, at best, remain vague, all have dire implication to our understanding of civic responsibility and our political order. If Lyotard’s “paganism” and other postmodern thought are to define our conception of the just regime, we Americans ought to investigate the civic implication of the moral and political thought that shapes our political existence. To ennoble democracy and better our postmodern notions of justice will require an authentic examination of and critique of classical political rationalism.

Having revealed telling questions as to the nature of the postmodern account of education and the political regime, Pangle turns in his following chapters to investigate what classical

political rationalism reveals about education and the political order. He then applies these insights to American education and liberalism. In chapter seven, “Reinvigorating the Legacy of Classical Republicanism,” Pangle examines classical republicanism primarily through Aristotle’s account of the just regime in his *Politics*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, and *Laws*.

Pangle says that freedom and rule together as inseparable concepts distinguish classical republican government. To be free is not to be an independent individual, but to be a citizen of a polity in which one has access to the deliberations that authoritatively shape communal life. Since not all can rule at once, rule is rotated. Pangle says to know how to rule as a republican, one must know how to submit to being ruled. Voluntary obedience drives the republican citizen. Freedom is not incompatible with being ruled, but rather presupposes being ruled and the character capacities that make one a truly obedient follower.

Citizens Versus Subjects

Aristotle says in the *Politics* that the excellence of a citizen is knowing the rule over free persons from both the perspective of the ruler and the ruled.⁷² Pangle says in Aristotle this excellence of citizenship is a standard by which all nominal citizens can and must be

judged. Citizens are and ought to be ranked, honored and dishonored, in accordance with their demonstrated capacity for free obedience. In the truly free and equal society, Pangle says, those who rule must deserve to rule.

Isocrates describes the nature of equality in his famous oration in praise of the democracy of Athens, the *Areopagiticus*:

What contributed most to the noble management of the city was that, of the two recognized sorts of equality—the sort that apportions the same to everyone, and the sort that apportions what is fitting to each—they did not misunderstand which was most useful, but rejected as unjust the sort that holds in equal esteem the virtuous and wicked, and chose the one that honors and punishes according to the merit of each. Through this they managed the city, not selecting the rulers by lot from everyone, but selecting the best and the most capable for each task. For they expected that the other citizens would also tend to resemble those who supervised affairs.⁷³

Pangle says that equality before the law in the reasonable or correct sense, or equal

republican access to or eligibility for office, turns out on analysis to mean equal opportunity to earn the trust of one's fellow citizens on the basis of proven merit and potential.

Having discussed the first notion in classical republicanism as standard of judgment for ranking the ruler and the ruled, Pangle next turns to an examination of virtue, or the qualities of character that ought to be taken into account in determining merit. Pangle lists those virtues which are common to the ruler and the ruled: a sense of shame or reverence, courage, moderation or self-control, truthfulness, justice, especially the obedience to law, and piety.⁷⁴ Those virtues which are rarer excellences and begin to distinguish those citizens who have earned the respect of others and set them apart as potential rulers include generosity, noble ambition, pride, justice in the sense of a quasi-paternal concern for the common good, and finally, reigning over all these more strictly moral qualities, a complementary intellectual insight, prudence, or practical judgment and wisdom.⁷⁵

Meritocracy Versus Democracy

Pangle says a sound republic will then be one in which the ruling offices are distributed as much as possible according

and the Revolt Against It

“In the truly free and equal society, Pangle says, those who rule must deserve to rule.”

The Idea of “the West”

“Jefferson distinguishes between a natural aristocracy among men, based on talents and virtue, and an artificial aristocracy founded on wealth and birthright.”

to virtuous merit, and in which those who possess such merit are given the freest and fullest opportunity possible to exercise their capacities.⁷⁶ Pangle says Thomas Jefferson restated this basic classical republican thesis in his letter to John Adams of October 28, 1813. Jefferson distinguishes between a natural aristocracy among men, based on talents and virtue, and an artificial aristocracy founded on wealth and birthright. Jefferson says the best form of government will most effectually select the best men of the natural aristocracy to rule and will make provision against the artificial aristocracy’s ascendancy.⁷⁷

Pangle says the best republic would then be ruled by the wisest and meritorious few, who would select their own successors. However, Plato’s *Laws* demonstrate the rule of the wise and virtuous must be qualified by popular consent. The majority demand is legitimated by their superiority in strength in numbers to the virtuous minority. Since the common good of man lies in the ability to share in political rule, Pangle says Aristotle brings to light a fundamental difficulty in the meaning of the “common good” and in the meaning of virtue understood as dedication to the common good in its highest manifestation. The common good is meant to be in some sense the good of all. It is meant to be a communal life in which all can and have to

share in order to participate. This communal life involves the security and prosperity of all. But Pangle says the good life for man is more than being taken care of as pets. He says the peak of this good life that is the common good is honorable activity in accordance with virtue, centered on justice or devotion to the common good.⁷⁸

We can see the tension between the virtuous minority who deserve to rule and the majority demand to share in the rule. Pangle quotes Aristotle’s discussion of the solution. In the best sort of democracy, whose popular foundation is a hardworking and public-spirited yeomanry reluctant to spend its time participating in daily political affairs,

the offices will always be filled by the best, with the consent and without the envy of the people, and this arrangement will satisfy the decent and respectable. For they will not be ruled by those who are worse, and they will themselves rule in a just fashion because they will be subject to audit by others. For to be trammelled, and not to be able to do everything according to one’s own opinion, is advantageous. For the capacity to do whatever one wishes is incapable of guarding against

what is base in each of the human beings. The necessary result, then, is what is most advantageous in cities: the decent rule without lapses from decency, and the mass is not demeaned. That this is the best democracy is evidence, and its cause is equally evident: the character of the people.⁷⁹

Pangle says this view of the claim of the majority only underlies the degree to which consent is a distinctly secondary principle of legitimacy. The principle that is first in rank and sovereignty is virtue. Consent must justify itself in terms of aspiration to and qualification for virtue. Pangle says that strictly speaking, “popular sovereignty” is always an abridgment of civic justice—that is, of the sovereignty of the just, of those dedicated to and capable of serving the common good of the society.⁸⁰

Once having found a worthy source of critique in classical political rationalism, Pangle continues in later chapters to challenge democracy. What we immediately see as different in Plato and in his students is that they take seriously that differences exist in man. Plato takes what every child and adult in the West knows to be true and incorporated this teaching that all men are different into his account of the

just political regime in order to construct a better life for all. If we continue to ignore our political situation as *truly* “diverse,” we will never be able to come to ask the question of the good of man and to be able to challenge our political order to seek after the answer.

Following the recognition that all men are unequal in a certain regard, a standard of judgment is constructed such that all men are then ranked according to *merit* or *virtue*. Due to this ranking, the best citizens are capable of ruling. Rather than tyranny, this is the best possible situation, as the other citizens’ desire for their best possible political existence.

Virtue Versus Consent

This understanding of the political regime sharply contrasts with today’s politics. When is the last time we heard a politician say that virtue is more important than consent, that virtue is happiness, or that the wise in America will do what is right for themselves? Instead of our incessant pre-occupation with ill-conceived “rights,” the political force that ought to drive the American people and politicians is the desire to know why the greatest work of classical republicanism is called *Laws*, and not, perhaps, “Licentiousness.”

Without such a drive for understanding the essential elements of the political

and the Revolt Against It

“Instead of our incessant pre-occupation with ill-conceived ‘rights,’ the political force that ought to drive the American people and politicians is the desire to know why the greatest work of classical republicanism is called Laws, and not, perhaps, ‘Licentiousness.’”

The Idea of “the West”

*“In the West
postmodern thought,
which views reason
as inessential,
prevents real
examination of the
political order.”*

regime, American democracy has become and is the sail of what turns out to be only the hot-air of modern popular thought. The symptom is more widespread to include the world, however, and the cause of the problem is how we view rationalism. Returning to our introductory considerations, Abu-Rabi reveals that Sayyid Qutb and Hasan al-Banna use partial accounts of Western thought, as have the postmoderns we evaluated. Typically this thought originated in Marx and Kant, and is used to defend Islamic fundamentalism—without serious evaluation whether these accounts of rationality are sympathetic to Islamic prophecy or the cause at hand. As we have seen through wars on terrorism, this thought, while ill-informed, is yet a serious political impetus. Even though the proponents of terrorism may not be able to claim allegiance to an existing nation that supports their political goals, the actions caused by terrorists have reshaped the entire world political order. Widespread destruction is hard to ignore. If we are to find serious solutions to the new forms of war the modern world faces, the modern world must examine its own account of reason or the irrationality that some so willingly embrace and promote.

Pangle introduces us to the modern Western political milieu and urges serious investigation of our political

rationalism. Pangle reveals to us that our account of reason is crucial to our political or religious regime. If the Western account of political rationalism is to be just to the full human situation, our political rationalism must take seriously the question of justice. If the Mideastern account of political rationalism is to bring about modern prosperity and also respect Islamic prophecy, philosophic inquiry into the just political and religious regime will be necessary. As suggested by Pangle, Alfarabi’s *Political Writings*⁸¹ begin such an investigation. Alfarabi investigates what the just political and religious regime must look like. If we moderns truly desire the “justice” we so often hear about, we will need to think seriously about what justice is and is not.

Incidentally, Mideastern thinkers like Sayyid Qutb and Hasan al-Banna may be able to “reject the West” and still come to an account of the just political regime, as Pangle tells us we ought to investigate justice through the Islamic philosopher Alfarabi; although, if Alfarabi is indeed the second teacher, after Aristotle, ironically we find the greatest student of the Western tradition in Arabia. In the West postmodern thought, which views reason as inessential, prevents real examination of the political order. Similarly, in order that serious examination of the political

order and its relationship to prophetic religion occurs, thinkers like Qutb, al-Banna, and other influential writers in the Mideast will need to reexamine the role of philosophy in education.⁸² If we are to construct something resembling the just political order, influential writers in the West and Mideast and modern world alike must take seriously philosophical inquiry into the just political regime.

Endnotes:

¹ The author wishes to thank Central College Professors Rev. Dr. Terrence J. Kleven and Dr. A. Chadwick Ray who served as first and second readers for his Senior Honors Project from which this paper is an extract, and Dr. Don Racheter who assisted in this revision.

² See Thomas L. Pangle, *The Ennobling of Democracy: The Challenge of the Postmodern Age*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992, p. 3.

³ See Allan David Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*, Foreword by Saul Bellow, New York, New York, Simon and Schuster Inc, 1987, pp. 144-172.

⁴ See Richard A. Opiel, Jr., and Khalid al-Ansary, "25 Insurgents Are Killed Trying to Overrun U.S. Outpost in Mosul," *New York Times*, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/30/international/middleeast/30iraq.htm>>, December 30, 2004.

⁵ See Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi, *Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Arab World*, Foreword by Mahmoud Ayoub, Albany, New York, State University of New York Press, 1996, see especially pp. 62-91.

⁶ Pangle, op. cit., p. 2.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., p. 3.

⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid. p. 4.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ In chapter one, this includes: Lyotard, Rorty, Kojève's Hegelianism, Kant through Lyotard and Diderot, Heidegger, Burke, Marx, Longinus and Xenophon, Freud, Plato, Nietzsche, and Vattimo.

¹⁸ Pangle, op. cit., p. 5.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 5-6.

²¹ Ibid., p. 6.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 8. Emphasis in the original.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 8-9.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 9.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ *Montesquieu's Philosophy of Liberalism: A Commentary on the Spirit of the Laws*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1973; *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism: The Moral Vision of the American Founders and the Philosophy of Locke*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988.

³⁵ Pangle, op. cit., p. 10.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 11.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 11-12.

⁴² Ibid., p. 12. Thus we see even in Kant's noble and somewhat Christian attempt the elements of Machiavelli.

⁴³ Pangle references *Philosophy of Right*, sec. 135.

⁴⁴ Pangle references *Philosophy of Right*, secs. 19-20, 93, 123, 150, 158, 163, 242.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 13. Pangle's reference: Kruger 1931, 236; emphasis in the

original.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 31.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 32.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 37.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 36.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 37.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Dr. Terrence J. Kleven, Mideastern Civilization Class Notes, Fall 2004.

⁵⁴ Pangle, op. cit., p. 48.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 48-49.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 50.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., p. 51.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 53.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 54.

⁶⁸ Although postmodernism is popularly and uncritically assumed to justify moral and political licentiousness, this statement goes beyond current conceptions of so-called "tolerance." This takes the diminution of education one step further than the "feel-good" sentiments awash in popular liberal dialogue might support. This reveals the importance of the critical evaluation of popular thought.

⁶⁹ Pangle, op. cit., p. 55.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 6.

⁷² Ibid., p. 106.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 107.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., pp. 107-108.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 109.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 110.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ See Alfarabi, *The Political Writings: Selected Aphorisms and Other Texts*, Translated and Annotated by Charles E. Butterworth, Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 2001.

⁸² A blind turn to "democracy" may not be the answer the Mideast needs. For an evaluation of education in modern democracy, see: Allan Bloom, op. cit.

**Public Interest Institute
at Iowa Wesleyan College
600 North Jackson Street
Mount Pleasant, IA 52641-1328**

NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION
U.S. POSTAGE PAID
MAILED FROM ZIP CODE 52761
PERMIT NO. 338

This policy study is brought to you in the interest of a better-informed citizenry, because IDEAS DO MATTER. You can write Public Interest Institute at:

Public Interest Institute
600 North Jackson Street
Mount Pleasant, IA 52641-1328

Public.Interest.Institute@LimitedGovernment.org
www.LimitedGovernment.org