Modernity abounds in contradictions. How is it that human beings may be seen as appetite-satisfying machines on the basis of materialistic metaphysics and yet also be esteemed as subjects possessing inestimable moral worth? On what basis is pain judged bad, and its infliction even worse—generating obligations to minimize it—when pain is but a phantasmal epiphenomenon produced by the indifferent operations of material cause and effect? Why is the pursuit of power—whether political, personal, or scientific—of such incomparable importance that we see all things and actions in terms of it, even though we acknowledge no non-arbitrary basis upon which to decide what it means to use that power well? In The Responsibility of Reason, Ralph Hancock endeavors to point the way toward a more philosophically coherent account of man and society in light of the confusions into which modern theorists fall.

Hancock, a professor of political science at Brigham Young University, argues that behind modernity’s incoherence and confusion are misapprehensions regarding the nature of, and relationship between, theory and practice. The resulting situation is one in which reason dodges its responsibility to rule as best it can, leaving us at the mercy of willful impulses both petty and prodigious, and massive impersonal forces. At the same time a truncated, instrumentalist understanding of reason is asserted to be the presumptive sovereign of the cosmos, wielded to gain control over the whole of what is and could be, while lacking the capacity to distinguish between possible purposes or to question its own pretensions.

Early modern thought caricatured pre-modern thought as claiming to possess wisdom regarding the eternal essences of things. Pre-modern thinkers were charged with vainly asserting the possibility and superiority of a purely contemplative, self-sufficient life, and finding on that basis an absolute right to rule. To be fair, certain systems derived from classical philosophy and ancient religions opened themselves up to this criticism. But as Hancock demonstrates, an attentive and unprejudiced reading of Aristotle—a principal target of the early modern critique—shows his awareness that the relationship between the best way of life and claims to rule are complicated, and that the political ambitions of philosophical types require moderation. Modern thinkers replaced what they perceived as an empty and misery-generating conception of theory with a determined focus on practice, replacing philosophy with ideological doctrines grounded on flattering premises, such as the positing of rights, confident that these premises would work to produce benefits that everyone would see and feel—or at least enough people to pretend that they represented everyone.

The founders of the modern project, such as Thomas Hobbes, understood their practical project to be an extension of their theoretical insights into the nature of things, in particular the human good. And yet their theory required them to deny altogether the existence of anything like final conceptions of the human good, or the possibility of beholding higher truths and moving from them to the proper ordering of the city and man. The belief, so prevalent today, that we can have practical theories without bothering with philosophy properly so-called, and that only overtly practical theories have value, is a direct descendent of this modern theorizing. Most political science today is more accurately described as political engineering or political tactics, not only in the “empirical” or “quantita-
Hancock's argument works toward an appreciation and embrace of the fact that there is no way to separate theory from practice, or practice from theory, for they are always interdependent. Theory never attains omniscience and practice never acquires omnicompetence, and each is in need of the other in order to recognize its shortcomings and make advances. All of our philosophical ideas emerge out of our experiences and observations; however much our ideas ascend from sense and opinion toward truth they will always remain tethered to pre-philosophical views and attachments. There is no escaping the circularity of this situation, but there is also no escaping the responsibility that comes with the effort to learn more and become better.

We are stuck in this circle because human beings seek transcendence. We do so, Hancock argues, in two ways: vertically, in pursuit of the noble, beautiful, virtuous, divine, and true (an originally pagan preoccupation, he concedes); and horizontally, in community with others, yearning for universal justice (a mission indebted to the Biblical tradition). Early modern theorists recognized only horizontal transcendence as attainable, according to Hancock. They denied the goodness or possibility of vertical transcendence, retaining appreciation for its components only insofar as they could be redefined and circumscribed in horizontal directions. In Hobbes's teaching, for example, courage, honor, morality, intelligence, and piety are all subsumed under and reduced to obedience to the law, and any reminder of their earlier meanings or higher aspirations are declared vainglorious. As modernity progressed, the Biblical sources of horizontal transcendence were downplayed or disowned, and replaced (as Alexis de Tocqueville observed) by the democratic desire to collapse all distinctions within a single, immense, and impersonal pantheistic force.

As modernity has advanced it has become clear that conceptions of horizontal transcendence lack coherent meaning or significance except in light of what vertical conceptions of transcendence illuminate. So long as human beings were recognized as creatures of a loving God, it made sense, in theory, to be concerned for the welfare of all, however imperfectly believers translated their creeds into practice. But without divine sanction, the love of mankind becomes groundless at the same time that it is rendered abstract and extreme—again, following Tocqueville, by focusing on the undistinguished “mass” of men instead of concrete individuals, or “neighbors.” Mobilized by a technological imperative that knows no boundaries and heeds no prohibitions, there is nothing that modern man will not do in order to perfect mankind, even though on his own terms he has no intelligible basis on which to discern the nature of perfection or conceive the possibility of it.

Any genuinely philosophical (i.e., scientific) account of human nature must reckon with the multifarious ways in which people are equal and unequal to each other. The goodness of democratic justice only makes sense with reference to standards that measure better and worse. Hancock is no unreconstructed aristocrat who would like to abolish concern for horizontal transcendence. He does not exhibit the indifference toward human well-being in general associated with those who regard themselves as superior simply in thought or deed. Following Tocqueville, Hancock accepts the justness of our liberal democratic societies, societies that he reasonably regards as pretty good relatively speaking, worthy of our gratitude, and worth taking responsibility for preserving and improving, all the while combating the momentum toward despotism that accurses along the technological-democratic road.

The complexity of Hancock's dense and intense analyses of Aristotle, Martin Heidegger, Leo Strauss, and Tocqueville is difficult to convey in a brief review. I can say that he recommends a Tocquevillian orientation toward the relationship between philosophy and politics informed by his interpretation of Aristotle. Tocqueville's style is illustrative of the mutual entanglement of theory and practice, the recognition of which works to moderate each side responsibly, given an awareness of philosophy's inability to wholly detach itself from political circumstances in its origins and ongoing activity, as well as the dependence of civilized political practice on theory for its better articulation, inspiration, and protection. Hancock fruitfully contrasts this approach with Heidegger's extraordinarily irresponsible ultra-theoretical anti-theory.

Along the way, Hancock discusses Augustine, Martin Luther, and John Calvin in explaining how Christianity altered the pagan worldview before undergoing transformations of its own. Modernity arose indebted to Christianity but also in rebellion against it. As befits his own conclusions, Hancock's book ends not with a definitive solution but rather a moment of wonder as to whether or not the only thing that can reconcile our pursuit of the good and our admiration of the excellent with our concern for fairness and our longing for belonging is a reintegration of love into the mix. Reason needs to rule—preferably indirectly—because actions are based on ideas, however inchoate, and because actions point toward ideas, however inarticulately. But reason's rule must be tempered because it is always compromised by context, and so cannot be too sure of itself. One might propose that it is reasonable for love to inform reason's rule. The reader may suspect that Hancock's recourse to love arises from a pre-philosophical commitment or allegiance, but nobody, however enlightened, is exempt from having those. The accusation doesn't end the conversation, as moderns seek to do—though their own premises are hardly freestanding, incontestable, and unadulterated by subjective affect. It is instead the basis on which another conversation, now both old and new, may begin again, again.

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