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Part I: What is it like to be modern?

This part of the study expands on the introductory remarks by: locating, in Chapter 1, the axiological analysis that follows in the life of modern persons; offering, in chapter 2, initial definitions of the core modern values as well as their relation to universal values, and, in Chapter 3, explaining that 'values' implies much more than the common use of the term suggests.

Chapter 1: Taking the 'internal point of view'

Not so long ago, part of humanity woke up having become 'modern' sometime during the long dark night. Now, in the clear and certain light of day, they found themselves living in 'modern' ways, with distinctly 'modern' attitudes, habits, and institutions, in properly 'modern' cities. They were *being* modern and *becoming* more modern by the minute. It was wonderful. Earlier generations, who also used cognates for 'modern' and 'modernity', tended to associate the term with decadence, a fall, and an inferior place from that which came before. The new usage saw good both now and in that which is to come. The further away we got from the past the better.

Something had changed, perhaps irrevocably. When 'modern' became a way of life for individuals and institutions, it also became a habit of mind for individuals and institutions. 'Modern' could now be a compliment, carrying values and evaluations: 'What a modern idea!', one man now says to another. Another warns: 'We can't do that, we're moderns!'. 'Those nations and men (or races) are not yet *modern* like us', one says, about the yet-to-be civilized, the colonies and the enslaved pagans overseas, or even slaves at home. (This division helped ease the modern conscience which routinely betrayed its own values by continuing even to tolerate slavery). When reform is needed at home one says: 'Our law is not modern enough! It must keep up with the times.'

It was certainly not everyone or even most of the inhabitants of North Atlantic lands who had become modern. And reactions—including violent reactionary movements—kept many from taking up the modern mantle. There were periodic Luddite protests resenting 'modern machines'. There were discontents reacting to the 'modern pace of life'. There were reactionary cranks lamenting a lost age of knights bringing their ribbons to ladies-in-waiting. But enough of the population did embrace the changes that the age became named after their way of life.

What happened? Did the time just change? That is a common enough way to speak about it. And it is also vacuous of meaning. Even our best writers have been guilty of ascribing such power to time. In *The Winter's Tale* Shakespeare tells us that it is in Time's power to overthrow law, 'and in one self-born hour / To plant and o'erwhelm custom.'[1] Time itself, of course, has power to change nothing. Things do change 'in' time, or better, 'with' or 'over' time and, culturally (and in another sense altogether), 'with the times'.

Although a measure of change, time is not very adept at measuring the sorts of changes that matter most to persons. These include changes in ways and modes of life, culture, custom, mores, law, governance, constitution and regime, self-understanding, obligations, the source of obligation itself, the identity of God or gods, goods, the good, right or rights, and nature. Even though they cannot but occur 'within time', these changes are caused by means independent of time's strictures. This is so, even as they are intractably bounded by time. For, they are *caused* by human action and activity, rather than by the movement of time.

These causes consist in countless activities, compiled and averaged by the seemingly spontaneous ordering that emerges within any exchange amongst rational creatures, acting on their understanding of their own self-interest rightly or wrongly understood. These are creatures who act for *reasons*, rather than being merely 'caused' in a deterministic sense. Unless otherwise indicated, throughout this book, I will use 'dialectic' and 'dialogue' loosely to mean just this sort of relation between and among rational beings, rather than, respectively, the more limited sense of a Platonic or Hegelian dialectic, or the general sense of a mere exchange of words on a given 'stage'. And I shall assume that changes happen because of activity in the world, much of which is caused by persons. 'Person' will mean an individual being with powers of will and reason, as well as a centre of responsible moral agency. The position that persons are metaphysically central to any account of history or philosophy is here uncontested.

Returning to the emergence of 'modern', and the role of 'time', already in the twelfth century '*modernitas*' was being used by historians to refer to one's own time as part of a succession of ages.[2] So, there was precedent for marking 'now' as 'modern'. But this new 'modern' was wholly different. It involved more than just the juxtaposition of the ancients and us, the

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[1] Shakespeare, *Winter's Tale,* 4.1.7-9.

[2] 'The distinction between "ancient" and "modern" times...became common in the literature of the papal party.' H. J. Berman, *Law and Revolution.* vol 2 112.

moderns. It laid certain particular claims. 'Modern' now became more than a description of 'our time as opposed to all others before'. It was an assessment: for, now '[i]t was the best of times'. Even so, more than half a century before Charles Dickens popularized that phrase in the opening lines of *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), modernity had shown the lesser angels of its nature in building 'dark Satanic Mills' and engaging in international chattel slavery.[3] It was also 'the worst of times'. I am concerned here with interrogating the sense of 'modern' as 'the best of times', the optimistic vision of the changes and hope for the future—the proud position of being a person who is free, and self-directing, amongst other beings who are also free and self-directing.

What then is 'modern'? First, that which is apparently a simple temporal demarcation for most speakers of modern languages, masks an anthropological claim about the world we inhabit and come to shape, as it always already shapes us. More poetically: 'We fill pre-existing forms, and when we fill them we change them, and are changed [by them].'[4] Plato and Aristotle spoke—sometimes approvingly, sometimes not—of the ways of the 'men of old' as opposed to 'those of today'. 'Modern', when interrogated, now denotes less a fixed historical period than a set of conditions that are constitutive of the way of life of the present generations, and the type of person well-suited to that way of life.[5] Since it has been dominant for so long, all other ages dominated by different ideologies are 'time out of mind'. In our minds, our own cultural ancestors are as culturally far away from us as Maori tribesmen. And so 'modern' also becomes synonymous with being an ordinary person.

Self-consciously modern persons are everywhere but they are known not to be ubiquitous. One needs to be self-aware enough as a modern person to know that one's cultural identity is not synonymous with 'the way humans have always been'. Most moderns know that at least some people are not like us. They inhabit the dark past or far-flung tribal places of the world with unpronounceable and unpronounced names. This general sense of 'modern' as 'us' becomes a particular idea(l) in context. At *any* given time in our age we look at our collective achievements and failures and works of culture, or those

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[3] William Blake, 'And did those feet in ancient time' (1808).

[4] Frank Bidart, 'Borges and I'.

[5] Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I, 5, 986b8, and *Generation & Corruption* I, I, 314a6, commenting on the pre-Socratics; Plato often criticizes the forgetfulness of the present generation, as, e.g., through the mouth of the Egyptian priest teasing Solon in *Timaeus* 22b-25d.

of recent generations, and we establish a relation between them and us by calling one or both of them 'modern'. Sometimes this is a relation of approbation, and at others of censure.[6]

In establishing such relations, we also draw a distinction (that I shall take advantage of in my analysis): everything 'modern' has a counterpart, and probably an opposing part, in that which came before, in 'ancient' times, or in 'middle' or 'dark' ages. Those are either contributors to that which finally came to fruition as 'modern' (precursors, allusions, foreshadowings, e.g. 'the first human right', 'the earliest democracy'), or they were hindrances to modernity's development. 'Modern', then, is a shorthand way of communicating 'the way we have been lately'. This is both yet another demarcation of our age and a deeply anthropological sense of 'modern'. The latter is my ultimate concern, the anthropological sense. However, it is usual in discussion of the former to come to identify the latter.

Whence 'modernity'?

There is a popular enough debate in intellectual circles about when modernity began. The way the question is answered usually indicates that which the author assumes modernity is, and whether he judges it a good or bad thing. Two schools of interpretation on the identity of modernity should be mentioned here, for each commits an error I try to avoid. My understanding stands directly against the first but only obliquely against the second; often I move in the same direction as the latter. Both seem to confuse the age in which modernity dominates, and the accidents of that age, with the definition of 'modern'.

The first school includes Alexis de Tocqueville, Max Weber, and Karl Marx. It sees the roots of modernity stretching back much further into the past than is commonly assumed. Ideas of democracy, capital, ownership, right, are found to have prior provenance, as did practices like bourgeois city life and free trade. Thus, modernity began where those first emerged, at various points identified as sources. This 'long view' of modernity finally culminates in the 'modern age', perhaps coming into its own sometime in the seventeenth-century reformations, the French Revolution, or with America's advent, or perhaps with industrial capitalism. That was when 'we all' became

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[6] Leszek Kołakowski, 'Modernity on Endless Trial' in book of the same name (1991) discusses the difficulty of defining the term especially within the age that fits the definition, 3-13.

modern—or at least 'most of us'. Whether the thinker assesses its advent positively or negatively is, as of yet, beside the point.

The second school understands modernity—in the cultural sense and *broadly received*—to have begun much later, as late as the First World War. It sees modernity as a great break from the Classical inheritance, especially in education and statecraft.[7] There were inklings of modernity before that, but one cannot really speak of modernity until it becomes a great cultural habit and overtakes the older customs and habits that would come to be called 'pre-modern'. The change was sudden but not total. It affected the elites first and most, but eventually trickled down to affect everyone else. This watershed did not finally inundate traditional culture until the generation of 1968 grew up and began its long march through the institutions, beginning with their *almae matres*. They were the first generation raised without a non-revolutionary generation parenting them. Their grandparents had seen or were raised in the great disruption of World War I. Their parents were products of World War II. Their goal was to escape a culture, nay, a civilization, that could produce such destruction as trench warfare and death camps at its highest levels of sophistication and development.

I neither deny any such break nor its civilizational significance. And I am inclined to throw my hat in with the latter school on most accounts. But I am less concerned with *when* the modern age came about, than with that which makes up modern identity, or 'how we are now' or 'how we have been lately', no matter where it emerges or will emerge. Focusing on the content of that which we consider modern allows us to treat it on the level of principles, ideas, and the like. We are then prepared to find it active in nascent and partial forms in times and places where it might otherwise be unexpected or impossible, that is, if it were deemed to be the possession of just one age. We might find it in remarkable persons in Periclean Athens, Cicero's Rome, Celtic Britain, Ming Dynasty China, or yesterday's Mumbai. One might be taken for a madman rather than a 'modern' in such contexts.

I contend that is possible to have been 'the way we are now' before the modern age, on a personal level or in small groups, such as the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment salons. So long as we define our age in terms of the values it prizes and the virtues it practises, there were moderns before modernity. In fact, there had to be moderns before modernity. Otherwise, how did it begin?

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[7] A. A. M. Kinneging, *Aristocracy, Antiquity, and History: Classicism in Political Thought*, 'Classicism, Romanticism, and Modernity', 303ff.

One would have then been modern in terms of valuing consent, equality, or autonomy as core moral values, and attempting to live according to them.

However, one could not have had the egalitarian constitution. For, to be a constitution requires an entire form of government and governance, both political and moral, social and personal/psychological. Said differently, the modern age begins when the constitution becomes 'egalitarian'. What that means I describe in terms of a specific 'mind' becoming dominant. This mind has a conscience that is committed to realizing equality of persons, coupled with a sense of its own unicity (autonomy), and the unicity of all other persons. So that these unique persons can realize themselves in the world, and so that they do not destroy one another in the process, this mind demands consensual obligations from other similar minds rather than command. Thus, contract becomes the preferred manner of organization of social and political life. The connections go on, and I explain their outworking in the final section of the book.

Open questions

The 'modern age' has been our own age for several hundreds of years. We are not wholly ignorant of it. In no small part that is because the ink, spilled in trying to tell us what and who we are, is immense.[8] Yet we still lack definitive answers to definitional questions: What is modernity? What is modern man? What divides the ancients from the moderns? What divides the moderns from everything else? These are all questions homing in on the 'nature' of modernity.

But they also include normative questions about modern life as that which moderns call a lifestyle. Their predecessors might have called it a culture or constitution. Is this lifestyle defensible as a good way of life? Is it synonymous, even, with the good life? Is it justifiable on its own terms? These questions bridge the epochal and anthropological senses of 'modern'. For, they ask not only about the modern age, but thereby about the values that dominate and define that age—questions which could presumably have quite a different life if they were instantiated in another age, with its own historical contingencies. Said differently: modern values do not constitute all that has made modernity.

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[8] There is a literature in all the human sciences as well as literary criticism. For a short sociology list, see: Introduction, notes 15-17.

For that reason, interesting as answers would be to those questions, they might not be answers to the most germane questions about modern values. For, those questions preclude the most existentially relevant area of inquiry for modern persons. This area also forms the problematics of modernity, opened up in the question: What is it *like* to be modern? The answer in the experience of being modern is the least often generalized sense of 'modern', even as evidence for that sense is closest at hand. Exceptions exist in the fine and popular arts. The modern novel and theatre are two places where the fine arts routinely depict what it is like to be modern existentially. Think of Albert Camus's *La Peste* (1947) or Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949). In popular culture, (confessional) folk music has also gone a long way in this direction (e.g., Leonard Cohen). But on the whole, moderns learn about themselves from a third-party perspective, by way of answers to academic, scholarly, or popular forms of the questions above. Third-party answers necessarily miss the most striking change that modern values have brought about, namely, the revolution in what it *means* to be a person.[9]

To answer the third-party questions, one does not actually have to be modern. If Aristotle were dropped into our midst, he could begin to draw up answers by empirical methods and careful taxonomies and definitions. Since he, too, believes that ethics is anthropologically anchored (rather than cosmologically or theologically anchored), he could find easy inroads into understanding modern individualism as social, psychological, and political phenomena. And we might imagine that a subtle mind like his would present a clear *definition* of 'modern', in its many senses, that was both precise and accurate.

The experiential question, 'What is it *like* to be modern?', however, turns on the verb 'to be', and on beings who exist in just that manner, or 'like that'. In a certain sense, it could fit within the 'how' of the Aristotelians. Yet, it also demands an answer from a *subjective* point of view. It is almost to ask how it *feels* to be modern, where 'feel' would include the whole affectual repertoire, and the normative understanding of that which one *should* feel in given situations.

Modern life has individual persons—and their lived experience—at its metaphysical centre. In a very modern way, the question as to what it is like is

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[9] I appreciate the shared space occupied by existential phenomenology and Wittgensteinian philosophy, exemplified in sociology by Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, on the meaning of modern personal identity. *Cf.* 'The Self: Ontological Security and Existential Anxiety', esp., 36-42.

addressed to and answerable by an individual modern person himself—and, indeed, *herself!*—namely, by you and me. It is also a question which Aristotle would *in principle* initially have no way to answer, not in the chief sense that it asks to be answered. Aristotle would most assuredly be both non-modern and un-modern. Perhaps soon enough he would become anti-modern. His entire disposition, his constitution, is otherwise.

However, if he were to 'convert' to modern cultural identity (and presuming such conversion is possible), he could then eventually describe it from within, explain its contours, and interpret the world from its purview. What would it mean to *become* modern? That is another tack towards the same answer, namely, to the leading question of this part of my book. This question is answerable by all kinds of persons.

It is also answerable on behalf of corporate modern persons, be they groups or nations, tribes or (academic) communities, but only from *within* such collectives, or *as* them, meaning, on their behalf—speaking *in persona…* 'What is it like to be a modern polity?' is one such variation on the question at hand. And again, it would not be possible to have enough inside knowledge properly to answer that question without the experience of being a (part of a) corporate modern person.

Not a genealogy of values

There are many books that describe 'how we got here' anthropologically.[10] Although a fascinating topic in itself, it is not the topic of this study. I begin 'here' and attempt to describe and explain what it is like. I have tried as much as possible to address the provenance of values with which this study is concerned, namely, those attaching to personhood in its historical development in the West, and consent, equality, and autonomy as broadly received. But I have paid attention only to those historical and genealogical elements minimally necessary to alert the reader to relevant phenomena. Meaning, I want to provide the philosophical tools with which one can distinguish 'being modern', at the level of persons, from being anything else.

Such differences are revealed to be 'modern' habits of mind and valuation, and action in kind, personally, socially, and institutionally, rather than the fact that modern persons tend to drink pasteurised milk and use pencil sharpeners; and that they are organized and regulated in their milk-drinking and pencil consumption by a corporate and governmental

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[10] *E.g.*, Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*; *A Secular Age.*

management class, so much that 'in modern society there is no other leadership group but managers.' The knock-on effect is that '[i]f the managers of our major institutions, and especially of business, do not take responsibility for the common good, no one else can or will.'[11] Again, 'modern' is understood as a culture more than it is as an epoch, age, ideology, or set of ideas – even as it is the dominant culture of our modern age.

Like classic social theorists, my effort is to present a comprehensive view of man and society which is ultimately inseparable from my 'interest in understanding the condition and the prospects of [my own] age'. The old lesson that 'all deep thought begins and ends in the attempt to grasp whatever touches one most immediately' is my touchstone, as it similarly was of those whose names I cite as authorities along the way.[12]

What of the 'post-modern'?

Some have called our more recent decennia 'post-modern', to the point where the words have fused into the neologism 'postmodern'. Personhood, values, literature, and art are all now analysed in terms that are supposedly consonant with this epoch.[13] I reject the claim that 'post-modern' is a discrete identity, either of persons or of this (or any) age. It is undeniable that there is a discernible and shared phenomenon in literature and cultural criticism, literary theory and even popular culture that is referred to as 'postmodern'. Nevertheless, 'late' or 'mature' or 'crisis' modernity would be better names for it.

In the 'postmodern age', modern realities, values, evaluations, habits, and practices, still obtain, albeit sometimes in accentuated or extreme forms: a 'radicalising of modernity', which is 'unsettling'.[14] In any case, 'modern' is still the point of reference for its own reflexive analysis; and its purported cultural content is still the point of departure. Insofar as consent, equality, and autonomy are essential to anything calling itself 'postmodern', they are extensions of modern values. I shall make this clear in the chapters that follow.

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[11] The main proponent of understanding management culture as modern culture, Peter F. Drucker, in *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices* (1973), 28.

[12] Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *Law in Modern Society: Toward a Criticism of Social Theory*, 38.

[13] For a careful analysis of the basic meanings of 'post-modern', which I follow, see Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, 'Modernity or Post-Modernity?', 45-54.

[14] Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, 52.

From the point of view of the self-consciously modern, it appears that we have arrived at 'the end of history', 'the last men'. For them, there is indeed nowhere else to progress to. We are told as much with similarly-titled books in the Hegelian or Nietzschean traditions.[15] Even the postmodern itself does not posit anything *necessarily*—i.e., logically—'after' the modern. That which is 'post' either a*rrives* after or extends 'beyond' the 'various institutional clusters of modernity'.[16] And it could be many things or indeed *anything* that fulfils that criterion. Postmodernity, too, is light refracted through the lens of the modern.

Aren't these just Enlightenment values?

What we *actually* are is not 'post-modern' but 'post-Enlightenment'. Although the two are often conflated, 'modern' is not reducible to 'Enlightenment' in any straightforward way (nor is the reverse derivation possible). Yet, the ordering of the concepts would seem still to need to be the other way around. Their relation is not one of derivation but extension. Enlightenment is an extension of some of what is modern. The most commonly understood forms of Enlightenment rationality, for instance, involve intense adherence to modern values of personal autonomy of enquiry, even to the exclusion of other values such as universal equality and consensualism. Think of Galileo as the secular martyr for the cause of autonomy of enquiry that Descartes and Bacon were later to champion (each in their own philosophical idiom). While equality is present in the doctrines of many children of the Enlightenment, the elite cadre of thinkers who outlined that which Enlightenment was to become found it hard to include humans who were blind to reason in their own class. Thus, slavery was routinely permitted even in the homes of leading Enlightenment figures. Slavery is almost the epitome of a non-consensual relation. But Enlightenment thinkers were also not always friends of consensual government, for instance, as democratic self-governance. For, the common man is unwise and unlearned, and needs to be guarded against. Universal values reify and promote the common man. It is he rather than the *philosophe* who is able to answer the question: 'What is it like to be modern?'

There is a second divergence between Enlightenment and modern ideas that prevents us from talking about them as coterminous. Modernity

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[15] Most famously by Francis Fukuyama, in *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), which has as its premise that the fall of competitors to liberal modern values represents the triumph of liberalism, and the end of the dialectic of political development.

[16] Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, 49, 52.

overtook an older philosophy of freedom from Christianity. The Enlightenment was much more beholden to determinism. It was actually reaction to some Enlightenment materialism that reinjected spiritual freedom into the discourse. Not only had both Luther and Calvin purged natural spiritual freedom from parts of the theological and philosophical discourse, but the natural sciences had also removed it from discourses about the material world. Rousseau is a case in point of the reaction against both theological and scientific determinisms. Amongst some Enlightenment philosophers, the former was denied since the latter was thought to account for everything: only material determinism was needed. Compare Rousseau's essentializing of liberty in the definition of man, standing nearly *contra mundum*, to 'the human mechanism' of La Mettrie.[17]

It is difficult to see how one gets logically from a mechanistic and deterministic account of the world to 'free and equal citizens' of the modern constitution. Both freedom and equality are precluded by material determinism. The scientific discourse begun in a coarse form in the seventeenth century was eventually to result in an all-encompassing theory of evolution, published in 1859. Modern values, unlike their Enlightenment forbears, have always avoided affirming the psychological and social consequences of the natural sciences in their Newtonian and Darwinian idioms. In 1859, the work that would be a capstone on Rousseau's theory of autonomy, preserving it in a curbed form for liberal democratic men, was *On Liberty*. Enlightenment science was not denied in that work or others like it. The purported implications were just ignored by moderns.

Moreover, looking at the last two hundred years, political programmes with terms like 'evolutionary' or 'Darwinism' in their names were not the driving forces in freeing the slaves, emancipating women, extending the franchise, and replacing status with contract in the market and society. Changes that are distinctly modern, in the sense in which I am using the term and in its common moral sense, have not been in line with nature. For, consent, equality, and autonomy are not values that can be found in nature. The badger did not survive its less well-adapted near-ancestors because it was more autonomous. Modern values are set up in direct opposition to at least two pillars of the Enlightenment that descend from its materialism: determinism and a hierarchy of capacities that has resulted from material history. Radical feminism, a very modern movement, denies 'essentialism'. That chiefly means essentializing the incidental. Nature is incidental;

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[17] La Mettrie, *L'homme machine*, translated as *Man a Machine* (1748) and *Machine-Man* (2009).

autonomy is essential. Thus, 'biology is not destiny'. Women are free to forego genetic fitness and species-selves as their chief virtue and way of belonging. It is not only *contra mundum* but deliberately *contra naturam* on an Enlightenment understanding.

The third divergence between Enlightenment and modern ideas is in philosophical anthropology. This is related to the anti-determinism just discussed. Rousseau's ploy for a free community of equals was based in a general sense that our morals have not been improved by sophisticated, scientific accounts of our nature. Quite the opposite. These accounts have led us away from our more intimate knowledge of how to be self-sufficient in the world, both as individual animals and as a species. They have annihilated our autonomy through their false authority. We cannot exercise self-rule, because we no longer know ourselves—again both individually and as mankind. Casting man as a mechanism in a world devoid of divine intention, the Enlightenment had to deny the unicity of the individual. Said differently, each man is not a person but an example of a kind of sophisticated animal. There is no 'deep self' inside you, besides your illusion of that self. There is no 'personal' identity that cannot be explained (away) in terms of material causality. Modern values, and the constitution that rests on them, are set up in Romantic opposition to the de-personalization of the world that the Enlightenment brings on. It bases this opposition on the experience of the self as real, personal, unique, and dignified. Whereas the modern constitution is an instantiation of modern values, which have as their immediate predecessor Christian humanism, Enlightenment values are explicitly anti-humanist.

This theme and those that brought me to it recur below. But I do not argue the point further. I will proceed as if the status of modern values outside of the Enlightenment project is *arguendo*. I hope that in the process of explaining modern values I can imply a stronger case for that which I have adumbrated here.

Of bats and men

I have cannibalized my leading question from Thomas Nagel's classic article 'What is it like to be a bat?'.[18] Nagel's black box problem of the bat begins with the observation that no one involved in the discourse about bats is now or ever could have been a bat. There is no information available across that

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[18] Thomas Nagel, 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?'.

epistemic divide; no 'subjective character of the experience' is knowable. Even a full description of the bat in all other forms of knowledge would fail to contain the very thing that it is to be a bat.

That problem is absent from my question. My question is in principle answerable, and thus ultimately a different type of question from Nagel's. For, most readers of this paragraph (and perhaps even its author) are 'modern' in important ways. Or we have been modern at one time or another and have a living memory of it. Chief among our epistemic benefits is that we have (had) conscious experience of being modern, and we might even self-identify as 'modern'. Or—even if willy-nilly—we understand(-stood) the world by way of 'modern' values and categories of thought, especially about the person and his place in the world. This allows us to adopt the 'internal point of view' or 'adopt the hermeneutic' quite easily, to understand the 'intention, plan, purpose', and 'the reasons for acting, of acting persons'. We are able to have practical knowledge of the way it is to be that sort of person.[19]

Whether we like it or not, most of us interact constantly with many modern persons, natural and corporate, and are surrounded by many others. We self-understand as persons. Some of us have never met a person who is not (self-)descriptively modern. In all this we have the 'subjective character of the experience' of being modern, from which, and with which we (can) communicate something of being modern to one another. We could refine and perfect it, as iron sharpens iron. Or we might try to dull its sharpest parts so that they do not damage us.

This 'something of being modern' may even approach knowledge. Such knowledge would be in principle epistemologically inaccessible to non-modern humans. But in the hands of the philosopher it could prove invaluable to understanding the sustainability of modern personhood—and thus the modern constitution—on its own terms. That is a goal of this book, which I return to in the concluding section.

Constitution, regime, *politeia*

Below I answer, 'What is it like to be modern?', by way of three chief moral values of those who are self-consciously 'modern'. These form the *terra cognita* for moderns, their values, and their virtues. They are universal equality,

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[19] See 'Social Theory can Describe 'Internally'' in John Finnis, *Aquinas: Moral, Political, and Legal Theory*, where he claims Weber, Collingwood, and H. L. A. Hart all called this '*adopting the hermeneutic or internal point of view*', 38.

personal autonomy, and consensualism. The first two have obvious meanings that do not distract too much from their meaning for moderns. But the last, consensualism, should be explained. It is the position that moral obligations can only be acquired by means of consent, or as conditions that increase the likelihood of consensual obligations being the standard of moral obligations.

These three values and their lived realities arguably form a large part of that which motivates modern politics and everyday life. Our government and governance, personally and politically, socially and psychologically, are according to their strictures. Whatever they might be called in common language, these values form that which political philosophers would call the modern 'regime' or 'constitution' (to use both a Tocquevillian and Aristotelian descriptor for what amounts to the same thing).

As such, modern values, when transmuted into dispositions for human action, cannot easily be decoupled from their dealings in interpersonal life. That is, one cannot really be modern alone. They are thus enmeshed in expectations of personal moral behaviour, including law, both broadly construed. The latter includes not only positive law but our shared *nomoi*; whereas the former involves not only outward behaviour but one's inner moral life. Put simply, consent, equality, and autonomy do a lot of definitional and regulative work in modern life.

In that way, these values become dispositions for certain types of action (virtues), based in first principles (often also dogmas), resulting in law-like structures of relation (*nomoi*). It is all those, rather than merely a set of beliefs about the world. They also result in a regime of law and governance, set up and perpetuated for modern 'persons of law'. 'Being modern' as a cultural identity is embodied in a constitution, that is, a form of governance and government for moral persons.

Already, by using 'constitution' and 'regime' in this manner, I am appealing to a tradition that goes back to Plato's *Republic*. His soul-state analogy is appealed to throughout in this book, *mutatis mutandis*. The attendant truth is affirmed that public governance and private character type hardly ever diverge on a large scale, or hardly without great turmoil. Democratic ages have democratically-minded persons as their common and expected constituents; aristocratic ages have aristocratically-habituated persons as theirs; and so on... One *can* always be at odds with the constitution of one's age, but then one is also seen as at least a bit odd, perhaps as a pariah, or worse. The soul-state analogy will mostly be implied in other arguments, rather than argued for. I am taking it for granted. Thus, terms such as *politeia*,

constitution, and regime should be understood to refer both to a form of government and a way of governance, say, 'a democratic constitution'. That is shorthand for 'a democratic way of life'. Let that stand, unless the context clearly indicates a specific reading of, say, 'constitution', meaning a foundational law of a particular nation.

Modern culture

The argument in this book is that, if one can recognize the modern creature by his habits, to be modern is to be founded, formed, and informed *at least* by the three values of consent, autonomy, and equality. Each of these produces those habits of life, ethics, culture, belief, and politics that are necessary to self-understanding and the formations of our moral imperatives as 'modern' persons.

Inflected in the modern idiom as universal equality, personal autonomy, and a prejudice for consensual moral obligations, these values are constitutive of what it is to be modern. Moreover, to be modern is to expect others to value these likewise. It is to feel oneself to be good—morally righteous— when one heeds their call in daily life, or when one *fights* for their extension in(to) political life. It is to want to announce them as the Good News to the dark and evil places where they are not the norms.[20] It is to make them and their children the judges of reasonableness of action. It is all this and much, much more. But I argue that they serve *at least* as a convincing description of a way of being a good modern person, natural or corporate.

The best word I have for that which they ultimately are is 'values'—and thus the constitutional axiology before you. They are the core values for modern persons, which determine the cardinal virtues, and so on. A name for this type of valuing and evaluation, with social forms following on, on a large scale, is a 'culture'. I will employ the term 'modern culture' to mean just that, often as a byword for the modern constitution, but more under the aspect of a lived reality. Those persons who participate in modern culture as members are acculturated, meaning they are constituted, to its egalitarian ways. They

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[20] Cf. Michael Walzer, 'Just War and Holy War: Again'. In this (to my knowledge) unpublished paper, presented in Warsaw, Walzer lays out the thought of the medieval Polish anti-crusader and just war theorist Paul Wladmiri. He draws parallels between Christian 'crucifiers' (Wladmiri's term) who displaced the peaceful pagans of the Baltic states (to this day, I am told, Latvians resent those oft-forgotten 'Northern crusades'), ostensibly for the sake of their souls, to modern Islamists *and* to those who are willing to dispose of relatively peaceful regimes today that do not meet the evolving standard found in democracy and human rights discourses.

share in the egalitarian constitution as their 'man-world', which they were '[b]iologically deprived of', and so had to make for themselves. Man 'constructs a human world. This world, of course, is culture.'—in the broadest sense where it can be opposed to 'nature'.[21] I name modern culture, in its formal aspects, the 'egalitarian constitution', including what some have meant by 'world' or 'age', such as in the Christian prayers that end or 'world without end'[22] or 'unto ages of ages'[23] when translating '*in saecula saeculorum*'.

Bounds of the egalitarian constitution

As values, evaluations, and virtues, consent, equality, and autonomy set the bounds of modern cultural identity and negotiate the relations of the persons so bounded. Equality provides the universal status of persons; consent provides the ideal procedures of relation between those equal persons; and autonomy, self-direction of said consenting egalitarians, provides the content of said relations—and thus the moral limits of that which is ultimately permissible.

At the level of natural persons, these values help both to discern and to set the boundaries of being modern, which becomes synonymous with being a decent, good, upright human being. The same obtains at the level of groups and even nations. Demonstrating that a nation is modern involves at least that it: treats other nations consensually, say, by doing foreign policy by means of treaties rather than threats of invasion; negotiates as equal parties to said treaties, in other words understanding that both parties are 'sovereign' over their own public person; and respects the integrity—autonomy—of the cultural or national life of the state with which it interacts, i.e., 'self-determination' as it is called in modern politics. When a corporate or natural person is said 'not to be modern', the claim is that it fails to meet at least one of the standards set by those values.

As values, each of these is prized more in some places and times than in others. But both wherever and by whomever they are greatly prized could properly be called 'modern'. Those who prize these values are 'being modern',

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[21] Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, says that culture is participated in as a society, made up of individual humans. For Berger, world 'is here understood in a phenomenological sense, that is, with the question of its ultimate ontological status remaining in brackets', 187. For anthropological application of the term: cf. Max Scheler, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos*. For application to the sociology of knowledge, cf. Max Scheler, *Die Wissensformen und die Gesellschaft*; Alfred Schutz, *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt*, and *Collected Papers*, vols. I–II.

[22] Since Thomas Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer*, 1549.

[23] A common way to render it in the Anglosphere.

or thinking, reasoning, and feeling like moderns, where moral reasoning is understood as an admixture of thought and of affect. Wherever they are, one is seeing modern culture and practice—the *habitus* of the modern. This is not meant to exclude the various and sundry other things that are also modern. As values, they serve in the evaluation of where the good is to be found. As virtues, they become part of the identity—habitual activity that forms 'ruts'—the common go-to actions and responses of modern persons. These are often ethical ruts, where 'ethics' is understood as norms that distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

As *nomoi* they characterize our way of being in the world in law and law-like relations, customs, and practices. Taken together with other modern persons, both natural and corporate, they form a way of being in the world. This forms a 'we', including an in-group of 'our sort of people' and the institutions that facilitate association between us; and an out-group of 'them', the others who are not (yet) like us. The nation-state has been the political model for moderns of just that sort of 'we'.[24]

Constitution as culture

Implicit in all of this is that I am arguing against the notion of modernity as merely a set of ideas. 'Modernity', 'the modern', and their cognates are being used in this book as stand-ins for a cultural phenomenon that has historical precedence. But it is not merely an historical occurrence or an historical age. It could be called the 'culture of modernity', as Charles Taylor sketches in his article 'Two theories of modernity'.[25] Modern identity as 'culture' is distinguished from modern identity as 'natural', as that which one gets when all the cultural accretions are removed: the individual, naked ape, ready to socially-contract his way into more utility, and eminently procedurally rational.

Taylor proposes a 'cultural' and an 'acultural' understanding of modernity. The argument toward a cultural understanding of modernity says that modernity is not that which one gets when the human is stripped of local culture, history, particularity, and loyalties. It is rather a unified vision, or a 'constellation of understandings of the person, nature, society and the good.'[26] This vision is not some final destination of mankind, but rather one among

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[24] Nigel Biggar offers a theological approach to understanding the importance of this modern home(land). *Between Kin and Cosmopolis: An Ethic of the Nation*, 'Loyalty and Limits', 1ff.

[25] Charles Taylor. 'Two theories of Modernity', 24-33.

[26] *Ibid.*, 27.

many 'metaphysical dreams of the world'.[27] Perhaps because it is by and large also our own dream, it is at times hard to tell that it is a dream—even a very good one—but not the only one possible.

Speaking of modernity as a 'culture' takes us out of the anodyne historicist framework. It also removes us far away from the sterile world of ideas, where 'modernity' is a sort of artefact in the lab, chemically tested to see of what it is composed. Rather, we enter into the cantankerous life of faction, parties, the half-apprehended social cues of who is with us and who is against us: namely, the world of belief and belonging. To be modern is to associate with moderns. Man is always tribal, sometimes he gets to choose his tribe but usually his tribe claims him. It claims him in his whole person. Both his body and his soul are meant to come into line with the tribe's way of life. His loves and his hates are meant to be aligned to the tribe's ends. Daniel Defoe, who lived in England astride the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, is said to have said 'that there were a hundred thousand stout country-fellows … ready to fight to the death against popery, without knowing whether popery was a man or a horse.'[28] 'Popery' was a stand-in for those in the know for a well-defined set of beliefs and practices (another tribe), namely, the Roman Catholics. But for the man on the street it was either the image of the devil, an excuse to let off some steam, or a way of dispossessing those whom he envied of their livelihoods.

'Modernity' can be that for some—and it brings about the best and worst in critics. It certainly has the insider-outsider feel about it. Countries that are not yet modern like us are called 'third world', with at least one world safely separating them from us. And it is much easier to justify the moral segregation between beings who are modern and beings who are anything else, if modern values are posited to be acultural, natural human values—the real people. We get equality, and they get left with their own culture.

Cultures are not merely a set of accidental values and practices, thrown into a pot and stirred. There is an inner relation and logic to much of that which comes to be integrated and to that which is left out. This is especially true of any culture's cardinal values. Those are culture-specific, and sometimes culture-bound. They are neither universal nor universalizable. But there are implications that tend in the other direction in ordinary thought and consideration. By that I mean how adult human beings tend to reason about morals and ethics, irrespective of cultural formation or background. Some of

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[27] Richard Weaver, *Ideas have consequences*, 18, 21, 33-36.

[28] As quoted in William Hazlitt, 'On Prejudice'.

the examples below appeal to this 'universal moral grammar'. It, like actual grammar, functions in any and all acquisition of moral language.

For example, if you tell humans that they are equal in a given context, such as with fifty of them stranded on a desert island, we imagine that a similar set of thoughts, feelings, and actions would tend to follow; whereas others would be precluded or excluded. Try then to divide some good unequally; what might happen? Some of what that which follows would be derived from the analytical analysis, based on what 'equal' means as a value and measure of goods in social life. If, again, you communicate that the denizens of the desert island are personally autonomous, and then begin requiring them to obey the commands of others at every turn, you will likely be met with resistance. And, once more, if you tell them that their consent is required before they are morally obligated, then handing out moral censure for breach of non-consensual social rules would seem to be an injustice. So, some of this is basic to humans; whereas some is basic to the concepts.

There is an in-baked ethical reasoning that is based on what the terms mean *in any context where human language is the means of communication*. That cannot be taken for granted, or relativized away as 'merely cultural', especially if such values are definitional of a meta-cultural reality. Modernity is both cultural and stable in its practices, and the values that define it precede it historically. In arguing that modernity is a culture, Taylor particularizes modernity too much; he locates it too narrowly in the recent past of 'North Atlantic civilization'.[29] In arguing that modernity is human nature rightly understood, his enemies, the 'aculturalists', essentialize it unnecessarily and without warrant. That which modern persons themselves call 'modern'—with consent, equality and autonomy as its cardinal moral values—is fundamentally the same wherever it is found and whenever it is found. But neither is it synonymous with human nature, as the aculturalists want it, nor is it merely the over-hyped province of a small, proud part of the human race who just happens to have been wildly successful lately, as Taylorian culturalists imagine it.

In the chapter that follows, I begin to describe the constituent parts of the egalitarian constitution, beginning with modern values of consent, equality, and autonomy.

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[29] This is Taylor's coinage. It stands in variously for Christendom, the West, Europe, and many other concepts with overlapping meaning, within the (cultural) geography about which he writes.