

Paradoxes of the Modern
Moral Imagination:
Reflections on
Contemplation and Action

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By “moral imagination” I mean, following Charles Taylor, “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations . . . shared by large groups of people . . . that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy.”¹

More specifically, I focus here on the modern moral imagination which informs modern thinking on human relations, and I want to start by considering Thomas Hobbes’s observations in his Introduction to the *Leviathan*:

But there is another saying not of late understood, by which [human beings] might learn truly to read one another, if they would take the pains; and that is *nosce teipsum, read thy self* . . . to teach us that for the similitude of the thoughts and passions of one man to the thoughts and passions of another, whosoever looketh into himself and considereth what he doth, when he does *think, opine, reason, hope*, &c, and upon what grounds, he shall thereby read and know, what are the thoughts and passions of all other men upon the like occasions . . . He that is to govern a whole nation must read in himself, not this or that particular man, but mankind, which though it be hard to do, harder than to learn any language or science, yet when I shall have set down my own reading orderly and perspicuously, the pains left another will be only to consider if he also find not the same in himself.²

This sets a direction for the modern moral imagination down to the present day. Let us notice all that Hobbes is saying to us: 1) The thoughts and passions are basically similar from one person to the next; 2) By introspection into one’s own inner being one can imagine the basic pattern of reasoning and passion which is common to human beings and thus infer how others are likely to respond in similar circumstances; 3) At the level of governing a nation this knowledge is essential because the task of governing extends far beyond our close personal relations—indeed governing requires a certain kind of impersonal or depersonalized relationship to all subjects of the commonwealth;

1 Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Duke University Press, 2003, p. 23

2 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, edited by Michael Oakeshott, Blackwell’s Political Texts, 1946, Intro

4) At the same time, since there is no fundamental difference in these patterns between the rulers and the subjects, there is 5) basic similarity of insight among all human beings; 6) what distinguishes one human being from another is the relative ability accurately to grasp the basic structure of human conduct by bracketing one's idiosyncrasies, foibles and particular goals; the office one holds does not distinguish one's basic humanity; 7) Hobbes, in the *Leviathan*, claims to have worked out in detail what this basic similitude is and the test of his argument is for the reader to consider whether Hobbes has expounded the fundamental character of human relations "scientifically," that is, in detachment from merely personal preferences and goals.

At the heart of Hobbes's thinking thus is the prototype of the modern moral imagination which emphasizes not mere self-interestedness—the aspect of Hobbes's thought we most commonly discuss—but also the capacity to enter into the views of others by inference from the universal basic structure of thought and emotion. We thus arrive at the thought of enlightened or rational self-interest, the conscious and disciplined pursuit of one's interests by which we take account of our inevitable implication in the unavoidable presence of others who are similarly self-interested and capable of disciplining their pursuits in the same way. Reflection on our experience leads us to conclude that our desire to set ourselves apart from, or above, others will be frustrated if we do not learn to behave in a "moral way." The moral way is the disciplined way of enlightened self-interest, which the individual learns through reflection on experience. What we acquire is the practice of self-regulation. We imagine the inner life of others according to the basic similarity of one to another in the common human condition. It is in learning how to discipline our self-interestedness that we demonstrate moral imagination. As Michael Oakeshott says, following Hobbes, "moral activity may be said to be the observation of a balance of accommodation between the demands of desiring selves each recognized by the others to be an end and not a mere slave of somebody else's desires."³

Hobbes sets the stage for the further development of the modern moral imagination. Subsequently, Adam Smith and David Hume, for instance, will emphasize the instinct of sympathy, the capacity for pity at the sight of others' pain. The moral imagination allows us to identify ourselves with others even though we must be individuals who are always for ourselves. The combination of self-interestedness with sympathy defines the modern moral imagination. Out of it we imagine and systematically describe a spontaneous civil association of innumerable voluntary transactions governed by a rule of law which permits the growth of wealth and the projection of an ideal of infinitely expanding prosperity. Consider also Immanuel Kant's project to achieve perpetual peace through the expansion of the republican and commercial order to all the world. The movement from Hobbes to Kant and beyond brings to sight the two great aspirations of modernity: perpetual peace and ever-expanding prosperity.

What appears to many to be Hobbes's pessimism about the human condition is nearly the opposite of the truth. Hobbes thought he had outlined the basic science of human conduct which, to the extent we learn it, makes it possible for us to transform human relations along the lines further developed in the movement from Locke to Smith and Hume, to Kant and beyond. These later writers work out the basis for confidence that the spontaneous order enabled by enlightened self-interest is not reliant for its stability on massive coercive power in central governments. Rather, it promises a more enduring stability than that maintained by coercion. The hope of progress in human relations was fostered by the development of this new political science, gradually to expand beyond the commitment to establishing the right internal order for the modern state to the further commitment to realize that order on a universal scale through what Kant was to call the "cosmopolitan point of view."

Kant's essay—"An Old Question Raised Again: Is the Human Race Constantly Progressing?"—advocates a "predictive history," a philosophy of the future not of the past which is to be achieved by "widening" one's view of future time; it is a kind of prophetic history. How is this possible? Only, Kant says, if we commit ourselves in advance to goals which certify the dignity and enlightenment of humanity. That is, we must adopt ideals for the future which are worthy in themselves and then act towards the future under their inspiration. To the extent that already in his time Kant could see republics, what we now call liberal

3 Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics, New and Expanded Edition*, Liberty Fund, 1991, p. 502

democracies, coming into being, he could imagine a federation of republics to promote a world of perpetual peace, a world in which war would cease to exist.

Given the sorry record of human history how can we believe in, or summon the energy to work for, these ideals? Kant's answer is that nothing less is worthy of a being that wishes to achieve true dignity and happiness. Here the moral imagination projects a moral transformation in the human condition. We must imagine our perfection and then gather the resources to pursue that perfection. We need, Kant says, "moralized politics" rather than "political morality."

Kant means by political morality the expedient calculation of self-interest we associate with Machiavelli. By moralized politics Kant means transforming enlightened self-interest to include the goal of a perfected human condition. This goal builds into enlightened self-interest the motive of transforming self-interest, no matter how rationally pursued, into that higher virtue to which enlightened self-interest in the past seemed to be a barrier. Instead of being content with enlightened self-interest, we need to pursue the equation of our self-interest with the well-being of all humanity. This is to say that human beings have the capacity to construct their own vision of perfection and then find ways to make the vision a material reality in human relations. We incorporate the ideal end-state into our self-interest. The science of conduct in Hobbes is to be perfected in the moral idealism of Kant through which the solution of the internal ordering of states will be expanded to resolve the conflicts among the states of the world.

Kant fully recognizes and admits that the plausibility of the path to perfection is hindered by the record of past history. But if human beings are genuinely free in the sense that they can make their ideals for themselves, they can thereby inspire themselves to strive unceasingly to make the ideals reality. We must believe that a worthy goal will not remain abstract, but will be fully realized in practice. Properly devised moral theory will not remain abstract but will, over time, be put into practice. We must become the cause of our own advance to completing the enlightenment project. In order to do this we must achieve a cosmopolitan point of view in which we regard humanity as a whole and not only our local identity. This is to extend Hobbes's original insight for the possibility of a commonwealth—the internal cosmopolitanism of the subjects committed to the state through subscription to a system of laws—to the possibility of a universal commonwealth composed of states who see the similitude of the thoughts and passions in each other. It is as if the idea of the social contract which became the dominant orientation in the liberalization of domestic politics will be extended to the creation of an international social contract.

The emergence of this ideal in Kant's time, which he thought the great revolutions of the 17th and 18th centuries incarnated, is for him the sign of progress because the new ideals of individual freedom, peace and prosperity are coming to be the only legitimate ideals human beings can entertain. Their validity does not lie initially in their historical plausibility but in their intrinsic appeal to beings who seek dignity and affirmation in their own terms, and who believe that what their reason tells them is right determines the direction that their public activity will take.

There is a latent moral disposition in the human race which at this moment in history is coming to sight. Whatever the failures of the French Revolution might be, the expressed ideals, the project of social reformation, reveals the destiny of the human race to which we must commit ourselves. Perpetual peace will replace perpetual conflict. Living in hope for the heavenly kingdom will be transposed into a project to use self-interest to transform ourselves into an existence beyond self-interest. This is the apex of the modern moral imagination. Kant sees himself at a revelatory moment in which the moral disposition of the human race begins to reveal itself fully, to be formulated as a project for the future which, he thinks, cannot disappear. Contingent events cannot derail the moral direction. Kant says: "The human race has always been in progress toward the better and will continue to be so henceforth. To him who does not consider what happens in just some one nation but who has regard to the whole scope of all the peoples on earth who will gradually come to participate in progress, this reveals the prospect of an immeasurable time—provided at least that there does not, by some chance, occur a second epoch of natural evolution which will push aside the human race for other creatures . . ."

Under these conditions, the active life overtakes and supersedes the contemplative life as understood by the ancients and the medievals. It is no longer the life outside the cave that is primary, but rather the task to reorganize the life within the cave. The quest for the transcendent must be given material realization immanently in the world.

As the sense of duty to what ought to happen expands, it “will also extend to nations in their external relations toward one another up to the realization of the cosmopolitan society,” increasingly resistant to “the mockery of the politician who would willingly take the hope of man as the dreaming of a distraught mind.” And offensive war “which constantly retards this advancement” will be renounced altogether.

If the modern moral imagination is preoccupied with proving that we are free in the sense that we can determine our future for ourselves in service to the ideals of peace and prosperity, bolstered by the confidence science and technology impart to it, it is, nevertheless, attended by haunting questions: Is it possible that we can advance materially and decline spiritually? What is the foundation for our idealism, or is there any such thing? From the first appearance of the modern moral imagination there has been an accompanying, dissenting theme. Michael Oakeshott has described this modern dialectic: “Modernity” constitutes itself in the dialectic of what Michael Oakeshott calls the “politics of faith” with the “politics of skepticism.” One could call this the internal dialectic of the modern moral imagination.

The skeptical theme is the residual legacy of the Classic/Christian heritage of western civilization which, in refusing to subscribe to Kant’s predictive history of the future, remembers and contemplates the past record of the corruption induced by the acquisition of power. As Oakeshott puts it:

In the politics of faith, the activity of governing is understood to be in the service of the perfection of mankind . . . human perfection is sought precisely because it is not present . . . [and] is to be achieved by human effort, and confidence in the evanescence of imperfection springs here from faith in human power and not from trust in divine providence . . . man is redeemable in history . . . [and] the chief agent of the improvement, which is to culminate in perfection, is government.⁴

Moreover,

One of the characteristic assumptions, then, of the politics of faith is that human power is sufficient, or may become sufficient, to procure salvation. A second assumption is that the word ‘perfection’ (and its synonyms) denotes a single, comprehensive condition of human circumstances . . . Consequently, this style of politics requires a double confidence: the conviction that the necessary power is available or can be generated, and the conviction that, even if we do not know exactly what constitutes perfection, at least we know the road that leads to it.⁵

By contrast, the politics of skepticism expresses “prudent diffidence” in recognizing politics as a necessary evil. The politics of skepticism “expects human conflict . . . seeing no way of abolishing it without abolishing much else at the same time . . . [and thus] to be sparing of the quantity of power invested in government.”⁶

“Modernity” constitutes itself both in rejecting its Classic/Christian heritage, acknowledging that heritage only insofar as it is made the preamble to our present, and yet also in its failure to rid itself of that heritage which irritatingly reminds us that the ideal picture of our future opposes the actual structure of reality as we have always experienced it, and as we have experienced it most dramatically in the twentieth century of total war and holocaust. Kant is perfectly aware of the opposition and, in fact, endorses departure from dwelling on the reality of the historical record. For him the construction of ideals for the future

4 Michael Oakeshott, *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Skepticism*, Yale University Press, 1996, pp. 23-24

5 Oakeshott, op.cit. p. 26

6 Oakeshott, op. cit. p. 33

is the sign of human freedom, freedom understood as liberation from what traditionally was understood to be the natural reality, justified by a claim to knowledge of the only imaginable future for man. This is an eschatological interpretation of history, since Kant, having accepted the view that man is a historical being and thus constantly becoming, cannot accept that this becoming has no point or end state. In this, he anticipates, and tries to refute, what will be the Nietzschean critique that man as historical being has no goal, or only arbitrarily imposed goals stemming from the desire to disguise from themselves meaninglessness or nihilism.

The neo-classical political philosopher, Eric Voegelin says, responding to what has happened in history since Kant wrote, “The eschatological interpretation of history results in a false picture of reality; and errors with regard to the structure of reality have practical consequences when the false conception is made the basis of political action.”⁷

According to Voegelin, there are two inescapable facts: First, what comes into being will go out of being; second, the mystery of human historical existence cannot be solved. By contrast, what Voegelin calls the Gnostic claimant to final knowledge asserts that human beings can make something that will not end because they know what that goal must be. This assertion seeks to escape the ordeal of conscious existence by imagining the end of history. Modernity blends the vocabulary of utopian idealism into the language of everyday life, putting merely prudential action on the defensive. Kant’s critique of “political morality” depends on our accepting that we are in fact in the process of transcending the structure of reality as we have always known it. The implication of a “moralized politics” is that we can use politics to bring politics to an end, perhaps even, as we have seen in our time, justifying Machiavellian means in the name of pursuing Kantian goals. The danger, that abstract idealism will rationalize the most extreme Machiavellian means, is a well known feature of the past century.

As Voegelin further remarks: “In classic and Christian ethics the first of the moral virtues is *Sophia* or *prudentia*, because without adequate understanding of the structure of reality, including the *conditio humana*, moral action with rational co-ordination of means and ends is hardly possible. In the Gnostic dream world, on the other hand, nonrecognition of reality is the first principle. As a consequence, types of action which in the real world would be considered as morally insane because of the real effects which they will have will be considered moral in the dream world because they intended an entirely different effect. The gap between intended and real effect will be imputed not to the Gnostic immorality of ignoring the structure of reality but to the immorality of some other person or society that does not behave as it should behave according to the dream conception of cause and effect.”⁸ One result is the obsessive search for the individual or group that has wickedly conspired against the project to attain the ideal condition. The liquidation of that individual or group, or at least the reform of their thinking, will be necessary in order that progress toward the ideal may continue. Needless to say, there is no consensus on whom to name as the source of our failure so far to have purified the moral condition.

The modern moral imagination exemplifies a profound dialectical tension between the philosophy of the future and the Classic/Christian inheritance. The defeat of Soviet Communism indicates the emergence of a new dialectical balance involving a resurgence of what Oakeshott called the “politics of skepticism” against the “politics of faith” or political utopianism. But although the most virulent form of this utopianism may have been defeated, many of the milder, less extreme forms survive and pervade the vocabulary of contemporary politics, and other virulent threats seem to be forming.

This is the “post-modern” condition, a situation of declining confidence in the enlightenment claim for a philosophy of the future. This uncertainty is accompanied by aggressive bewilderment about alternative ways of imagining ourselves. The loss of confidence in political utopianism understandably issues in the feeling that we are losing meaning in life because we have put so much faith in politics as the practical locus of meaning. This modern departure from the Platonic, Aristotelian and Biblical understanding that politics is an instrument in the service of that which transcends the mundane makes us reluctant to return—

7 Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, University of Chicago Press, 1968, p. 166

8 Oakeshott, op. cit. p. 169

or leaves us believing there is no path of return—to that which we have spent several centuries dismantling. The modern critique has been both effective and yet unsuccessful. Hannah Arendt describes our situation as “between past and future,” and, like Heidegger, argues for “thinking,” or the non-calculative use of our rational faculty to open ourselves to the fullness of Being, to rescue ourselves from the modern version of the Sisyphian ordeal. The insight here is that we cannot cure the loss of self-confidence by projecting yet a new and different imagined future, but we cannot, at least not yet, endure resubmitting to that which we thought we had overcome.

Michael Oakeshott urges openness to the “voice of poetry in the conversation of mankind.” The voice of poetry is an alternative to, but not a substitute or replacement for, the scientific/technological voice. The voice of poetry is also not a political voice. The poetic voice is a different way of imagining our world, disclosing possibilities which the voices of science, technology and politics obscure. For him, the poetic experience is to move about among images which evoke delight and encourage contemplation. Poetry is not about “fact” or “not-fact” nor about events of which we inquire when and where they took place. “Where imagining is ‘contemplating’, then, ‘fact and ‘not-fact’ do not appear.”⁹ Poetic images in contemplation

provoke neither speculation nor inquiry about the occasion or conditions of their appearing but only delight in their having appeared. They have no antecedents or consequents; they are not recognized as causes or conditions or signs of some other image to follow, or as the products or effects of one that went before; they are not instances of a kind, nor are they means to an end; they are neither ‘useful’ nor ‘useless’ . . . Moreover, the image in contemplation is neither pleasurable nor painful; and it does not attract to itself either moral approval or disapproval. Pleasure and pain, approval and disapproval are characteristics of images of desire and aversion, but the partner of desire and aversion is incapable of being the partner of contemplation.¹⁰

In short, Oakeshott’s poetic experience offers a release for a time from the interminable project to perfect ourselves in perpetual peace and ever-growing wealth. He proposes a kind of residual element of contemplation in the form of temporary and momentary releases from our time-boundedness. The project is in principle interminable because there is no guarantee against falling back into war, nor insulation from the failure of material wealth to assuage spiritual longing. Oakeshott allows for a glimpse of the transcendent in the momentary release in contemplation of the poetic voice. He is stoic, but he at least hints at a more comprehensive moral imagination which, while it need not abandon modern accomplishments, would recognize their subordinate and incomplete character.

It is an irony not lost on modern thinkers from the 17th century forward that nature has produced out of herself a being whose identity is constituted in opposition to nature herself, as if nature purposely creates her own dialectical opposition. At least Bacon, Rousseau, Kant and Hegel saw this. In her well-known work, *The Human Condition*,¹¹ Hannah Arendt reflects on this at length. In the final section of that work, “The Vita Activa and the Modern Age,” she says

The increase in power of man over the things of this world springs . . . from the distance which man puts between himself and the world, that is, from world alienation.¹²

Whereas the *vita contemplativa* or contemplative life seeks reconciliation with the world even as, through the intellect, it looks beyond the world towards the divine source of all being, the *vita activa* or active life seeks to remake the world in order to be at home with a world of its own choosing. As she goes on to say,

9 Oakeshott, RIP, p. 509

10 Oakeshott, RIP, op. cit. p. 510

11 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd edition, University of Chicago Press, 2018

12 Arendt, op. cit. p. 252, fn 2

Under modern conditions, not destruction but conservation spells ruin because the very durability of conserved objects is the greatest impediment to the turnover process, whose constant gain in speed is the only constancy left wherever it has taken hold.¹³

Modern science has taught us that the world is not as it appears to be to common sense observation, that “man had been deceived so long as he trusted that reality and truth would reveal themselves to his senses and to his reason if only he remained true to what he saw with the eyes of body and mind.” The resolve, then, to doubt the validity of received wisdom penetrated every aspect of life in the form of suspicion of any claim to knowledge not grounded in the methods of modern science: “if neither the senses nor common sense nor reason can be trusted, then it may well be that all we take for reality is only a dream.”¹⁴ In religion, “If there was salvation, it had to lie in man himself.”¹⁵ Man “is confronted with nothing and nobody but himself.”¹⁶ What we have in common, as we have already seen in our consideration of Hobbes, is the structure of our minds which allows us to reckon together even when we start from very different initial experiences of the world. Whatever can bind us together, then, must be something to which we have agreed because it simultaneously permits us to interact with a certain confidence that we share what Taylor called a “social imaginary,” and yet also at the same time to retain our freedom to express our understanding in terms congenial to our sense of being selves, individuals among other individuals. But this also means that there will be, must be, adjustment and readjustment through time. We may posit comprehensive ends or goals—indeed we often do—but what we will actually experience is perpetual encounter with the distance between “what is” and what we imagine the world “ought to be.”

Arendt calls this the great reversal in which contemplation no longer rules action, but action rules contemplation:

The fundamental experience behind the reversal of contemplation and action was precisely that man’s thirst for knowledge could be assuaged only after he had put his trust into the ingenuity of his hands . . . truth was no longer supposed to appear, to reveal and disclose itself to the mental eye of a beholder, there arose a veritable necessity to hunt for truth behind deceptive appearances. Nothing could be less trustworthy for acquiring knowledge and approaching truth than passive observation or mere contemplation . . . knowledge concerned only what one had done himself . . . that it could be tested only through more doing.¹⁷

This meant the victory of *homo faber*, man the maker or fabricator. But as we have seen in our earlier reflections, the appeal of visions for the future—visions which we have made for ourselves because it appeals to us—runs up against what actually happens in historical experience which repeatedly disappoints the vision where the attraction of the image lacks the power to remake the material substance or to imprint upon it the order we have conceived for it.

We are reminded, therefore, of what radically time-bound creatures we are. Adopting the vocation to remake the world was, and is, the catalyst for remarkable and unprecedented achievements but also remarkable and unprecedented upheavals and destruction. One of the tasks of political philosophy in our time is to adopt a critical stance towards the great reversal, to engage in the Socratic task of not knowing what everyone claims to know, to think against the age while fully aware of its character. This is, in short, to comprehend the modern moral imagination without succumbing to its seductions.

13 Arendt, op. cit. p. 253

14 Arendt, op. cit. p. 277

15 Arendt, op. cit. p. 279

16 Arendt, op. cit. p. 280

17 Arendt, op. cit. p. 290