



Resident Skeptic – CURRENT EVENTS

by

James R. Cowles

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Events / Recent History

Chapter 1 – False Equivalences and Moral Equivalence

I am learning – the hard way – to get knee-jerkingly suspicious every time someone mentions the phrase “moral equivalency” – and certainly when anyone attempts to employ moral equivalency in arguments. I suppose there are occasions when that term, and that rhetorical tactic, are justified, but I have not encountered any examples lately, least of all examples in real life. In fact, I would even make bold to say that at least 90% of the time – and I mean for that number to be interpreted quite literally – entities and acts that are said to be “morally equivalent” are anything but. Most of the time “morally equivalency” could be more accurately rephrased as “moral imbecility”. Two examples leap to mine immediately.

President Trump – two words that make about as much sense when used together as “two-sided triangle” – recently took some richly justified heat when he condemned the violence at the University of Virginia-Charlottesville ... you know ... the school whose campus was designed by Thomas Jefferson ... as being perpetrated by “many sides”: We condemn in the strongest possible terms this egregious display of hatred, bigotry and violence, **on many sides. On many sides.** (boldface added). One is left wondering if his repetition of the phrase “on many sides” is intended to insinuate that some **non-white-supremacist** terrorist drove his car into a gaggle of innocent American skinheads, fascists, and neo-Nazis. If so, such an event escaped the attention of the omnipresent news media. We can all be thankful that Trump, who is a moral philosopher only in the same sense that a prison chain gang of rock-breakers is a community of Bernini- and DaVinci-caliber sculptors, was not a journalist reporting on the Warsaw Ghetto uprising against the Nazis during the Polish Occupation: We condemn in the strongest possible terms this egregious display of hatred, bigotry and violence, **by Jews as well as Nazis. By Jews as well as Nazis.** But one must constantly bear in mind that this is just Trump being Trump, the President who perhaps wants to carpet-bomb Venezuela with food while cutting food-stamp money for military families at home. Like the peace of God, it “passes all understanding”.

Somewhat more subtle – comparison with Trump sets the “subtlety bar” pretty low! – is the kind of rhetoric one encounters from time to time, presumably among people who have no business not knowing better, but who pride themselves on bending over backward to be disinterestedly fair-minded, alleging that the Republican and Democratic Parties are both equally corrupt because “Aw, gee-gawrsh” – here the speaker removes his index finger from his nostril and examines the results of such prospecting – “they both do it!” Not exactly a “booger” of an argument, even when illustrated with slick imagery like that immediately below on the left. I will certainly not break a lance arguing that the Democratic Party is the repository of all political wisdom and propriety. But – as a matter of historical fact, assuming anyone studies history anymore, which assumption is far from limpidly clear – they both don’t do it to anything like the same extent, and least of all do “they both do it” with the kind of stiff-middle-finger brazenness so evident during the Obama years. Herewith some questions:

o Which Party adamantly and with cyborg-like reliability continues to oppose even modest efforts to regulate firearms commerce – like true universal background checks – advocated by roughly 90% of Americans, even in the face of “slaughters of the Innocents” like the Newtown, CT, shootings? If the

First Amendment were interpreted this anarchically, falsely yelling “Fire!” in a crowded theater would be protected speech.

o Which Party nominated a candidate who – ignoring precedents like NY Times v. Sullivan, about which one may be assured he knows less than nothing – advocates “opening up” libel laws, the better to enable aggrieved neo-fascists to sue dissident news media into financial submission. And by the way, does that candidate even know that there are no national- / Federal-level libel laws?

o Which Party nominated a candidate who, running roughshod over the “establishment” and “free exercise” clauses of the First Amendment – to say nothing of the “due process” clause of the Fifth and Fourteenth, and the “equal protection” clause of the latter – would institute registration of Muslims, even native-American-born Muslims, and the warrantless surveillance of their mosques?

o Which Party’s candidate advocated oil-drilling and mining on national-monument land, and signed an executive order to that effect once in office? At considerable risk of giving him ideas, I will say that I am getting more than a little hinky about the security of the Gettysburg Battlefield, Arlington Cemetery, and the Tomb of the Unknowns.

o Which Party’s candidate taps into an evidently inexhaustible reservoir of braggadocio about how the American military is always “locked and loaded” while cutting food-stamp support for their families? I have worked closely in the past with members of the Services, and, to their eternal credit, they are indeed “locked and loaded”. Now we can add a third adjective: “hungry”.

o Which Party confirmed as Secretary of Education a woman, Betsy DeVos, whose avowed intent is to privatize education with the ostensible goal of improving it, but whose real agenda is to enable schools thus privatized to thereby circumvent the “establishment” clause of the First Amendment so as to re-introduce prayer and Bible-reading into schools, and to substitute creationism and intelligent design for legitimate biology in school science curricula?

o Which Party’s candidate views with such alarm the decline of coal-mining jobs in the US, but who is evidently apathetic about the combined number of dancer / choreographer and podiatrists’ jobs, which equal roughly 50% of coal mining employment? Why is there no proportional hysteria about the job crises in professional dancers / choreographers and (the closely related field of) podiatry? Are dancers and podiatrists not equally deserving of gainful employment? Are they, unlike coal miners, to be relegated to public assistance, and thereby summarily consigned to Speaker Ryan’s Hammock of Laziness? Which leaves us with a burning question: without podiatrists, who will save those dancers’ soles. Finally, I was wrong in my initial assessment. In the process of writing this column, I have reappraised my cynicism about the strategy of “moral equivalence” in ethical discourse. In fact, I have discovered one context in which the attitudes and rhetoric of “moral equivalence” are fully justified. Compare the current Republican Congress and Republican Executive Branch ... oops! ... sorry! ... I’m being redundant! ... with a similar combination of the National Socialist Party of the 1940s and National Lampoon’s Animal House. Or think of it as “Horst Wessel Meets The Three Stooges”.

The universal all-purpose answer to all the above "Which Party ... " questions: **It damn well ain't the Democrats.**

Now that's what I call true "moral equivalence", for which I read "moral imbecility": the resemblance is positively uncanny!

Chapter 2 – Overcome Lipophobia? Fat Chance!

Does anyone besides me remember the kerfuffle about all the Donald Trump statues cropping up all over the place a few weeks ago? I don't think the matter has yet quite outlived Andy Warhol's 15 minutes of fame. But Donald Trump is like one of his eponymous wines (*Chateau Tres Belle Mar-A-Lago Drumpf*): it turns to vinegar in about 15 minutes, so I can't afford to wait **too** long to discuss it. So let the games begin!

Anyone who has read even one of my columns knows that I revile Donald Trump, the Trump brand, and everything both he and it stand for. Regardless of whatever god may exist, Donald Trump is one of that god's more egregious mistakes. So what follows is not a defense of Donald Trump. Rather, it is a defense of decency even in the face of extreme provocation, because trying to out-Trump Trump will only bring out, to some extent has already brought out, from the woodwork the chthonic demons that can make us ourselves into mini-Trumps.

In the case of the Trump statues, the hatred evoked by the statue assumes the form of *lipophobia*. Like its better-known cousins homophobia, Islamophobia, gynophobia, etc., lipophobia is a form of hatred and bigotry. Homophobia is hatred and bigotry against sexual-orientation minorities; Islamophobia, against Muslims; gynophobia, against women; etc. Similarly, lipophobia is hatred of and prejudice against fat people (from the Greek *lipos* for "fat" and *phobos* for "fear"). (You will notice that I refuse to use euphemisms like "large people," "heavy-set people," "people of size," etc., because the resort to euphemism is itself a telltale symptom of lipophobia.) I know about lipophobia. I dealt with it all through junior-high school, especially in gym class, and only survived because I learned how to fight, strictly in self-defense, but notwithstanding to fight real dirty, and fight so well that, e.g., I crushed one assailant's testicle ... after which the local Junior Brownshirt Wanna-Be Brigade sedulously left me alone. (Of course, once in a while I did get my arse kicked, but even then, with me as the kick-*ee*, the kick-*er*'s victory was so as to be not worth the cost.) After two weeks in high school, I quizzed out -- long story here -- and was fast-tracked to college despite being, chronologically, a high-school freshman. So there was no high-school repetition of junior-high boys' gym class. But I spent enough time as a young adolescent up close and personal with lipophobia to know the symptoms and, even more so, the stereotypes and the rationalizations for them.

That the Donald Trump statue is a work of art intended to leverage popular lipophobia in the public mind is evident if you ask yourself the following question: granted, Donald Trump is pathologically self-centered, narcissistic, and undisciplined, the question begged is: *why were those psychopathologies expressed in the form of someone who is **morbidly obese***? Like most older men, Trump is overweight, but it is not apparent that he is as overweight as the statue depicts. So what is the connection, and even more to the point **why** is there a connection? How would the statue have been different, and how would its *meaning* have been different, if Trump's undisputed self-absorption and lack of discipline had been expressed in a statue of another middle-aged man, **a fit and height-weight proportional middle-aged man**, say, George Clooney or Jean Claude "Muscles from Brussels" Van Damme? Finally, **what is there about physical fatness that lends itself so seamlessly to portrayals of Trump's "id-centric" psychology?** My answer: a **fit** Donald Trump statue like Clooney or Van Damme would not tap into the popular stereotypical cultural prejudice against fat people as narcissistic and lacking self-control. Hence the fat; hence the flab: *the physique incarnates the psyche*.

But perhaps even more fascinating to me is that, in discussing this topic in person and on social media with others, I have heard people defend the Trump statue using many cognate forms of the same rationalizations that, e.g., were prevalent when black people, in the early days of the civil-rights movement, objected to similar appeals to stereotypes of African-Americans. (This should not be interpreted as insinuating that the struggles of black people and fat people for dignity are in any way commensurate in degree, but rather *as a comment on people's stereotype- and bigotry-driven reactions* to those struggles.) Herewith those rationalizations and my responses:

o “Don’t take it so personally”

I don’t know how to take it any other way when people appeal to an arrant and irrational prejudice about fat people to impugn my mental health, emotional stability, and moral integrity by equating fatness with lack of self-discipline. Yes, there are fat people who lack self-discipline, but that physical paragon Jean Claude Van Damme has been arrested for domestic violence and the mere possession of musculature does not entail control of same. ... but – damn! – at least he ain’t fat! So when issues of such intimacy are involved, personally is the only way I **can** take it.

o "It’s all about the Emperor’s new clothes"

This one really frosts me in unmentionable areas, and that for three reasons: (1) saying that the obesity of the Trump statue is “about the Emperor’s new clothes” only proves that the speaker has never actually read or heard the parable, and so is (2) desperately searching for even a threadbare rationalization as a fig leaf – as it were – to conceal their own lipophobia. As long as it is about clothes instead of bodies, the speaker can attempt to divert the conversation toward the former and away from the latter. Finally, (3), the “Emperor’s new clothes” response only compounds the offense by insulting my intelligence: a rather dull third grader could instantly penetrate the rhetorical smokescreen. But – no need to thank me here – I’ll make it even more explicit: if the Emperor in the parable had the physique of the god Apollo, that would change nothing, because the story is not about the Emperor’s body, but about his flagrant obliviousness to the reality around him. The Emperor is absurd, not because he isn’t wearing a robe, but because he is dumb.

o "Trump himself set the precedent when he alluded to his own physical endowments"

A precedent entails no obligation to follow it. *Dred Scott v. Sandford* set a precedent that said black folks could never be citizens; *Plessy v. Ferguson*, that said the principle of “separate but equal” was permissible. We followed those precedents until we didn’t – in 1868 and 1954, respectively. Precedents don’t program us, least of all do they program us to respond in kind with “an eye for an eye” (which Gandhi wisely said would “leave the whole world blind”). We can be better than our precedents.

o "Where is your sense of humor about being fat?"

Oh golly-gee-gawrsh ... I dunno ... probably in the same general place African-Americans left their sense of humor about, e.g., Little Black Sambo, “the [‘n-word’ expurgated] beat[ing] their feet on the Mississippi mud,” and white guys in blackface mouthing supposed black locutions about “Massah” and “Feets do yo’ duty”. Or 1950s movies portraying Native Americans as “Injun Joe” or being killed by US Cavalry troops whose guns apparently had an infinite supply of ammunition that could kill a

half-dozen or so Native Americans with a single shot. You know ... someplace like that ... that's where my "sense of humor" about fat bigotry is.

That the Donald Trump statue is a statue depicting Donald Trump in particular is ultimately irrelevant. Trump is one of those people like Louie Gohmert, Sarah Palin, Rick Santorum, and Michele Bachmann who are almost impossible to satirize, because they are **walking, breathing satires of themselves**. Reality leaves art gasping in the dust: Andy Borowitz and I are flagrantly superfluous. Rather, the statue is, in reality, a statue referencing anyone who, for whatever reason, deviates from the standard societal / cultural definition of physical fitness and beauty in ways that the society considers especially egregious, e.g., body size and type. So when people ridicule and revile the Trump statue, they are, in reality, giving both themselves and others permission to ridicule and to revile those who are different, those they consider deformed. (Who knows? In future, there might be similar statues depicting such hilarious images as people with hare lip and cleft palates – or *NY Times* reporters with neural impairments. Hey! Wudd'n-**at** be a mega-hoot? I mean, it's important to have *something* to look forward to!) It's a rather crude form of sympathetic magic: stick the pin in the little doll, and you hurt the real person. That so many people are willing to participate in such behavior and to condone it in others suggests that there is really not all that much difference between Trump and his neo-brownshirts and the rest of us. Laughing at the Trump statues is a relatively mild and benign manifestation of mob psychology.

But mild though it is, it does teach us a lesson: The Mob can be us.

PS -- I wrote this column from my in-laws' house in Hilo, Hawaii, on the Big Island. Diane and I are now, as this is written, spending overnight in a hotel in Kona, and will drive to the airport for the flight back to Seattle tomorrow. So it is odd that it took this long for the following to occur to me: there is one place on the planet that, in my experience, is free of lipophobic body bigotry: the culture of Hawaii. Yes, of course, there are **individual** lipophobes and body bigots in Hawaii, but not very many, if my experience is typical. Hawaiian **culture** says the idea of swimming, snorkeling, surfing, paddleboarding, or just lolling on the beach is to have fun,, not to impress anyone with your physique. So in Hawaii I never hesitate to take my shirt off and go to the beach in just swim trunks -- something I would categorically never do in more body-bigoted venues like, e.g., southern California. In Hawaii, it doesn't matter how you look -- again, in terms of the culture as a whole -- but that you just have a good time. Whatever concern there is about body size / type centers on physical health, not one's worth as a person. In more body-bigoted places, I point to Hawaii, and say "Go and do thou likewise".

Chapter 3 – Victimizing First Responders, Some Ethical Reflections

Amanda Eller was indeed irresponsible in taking actions that resulted in other people risking serious injury, death, turning their spouses into widow(er)s, their kids into orphans, etc., in order to rescue her. That said, I do admire her for taking ownership of her actions – which is more than most people do who are similarly reckless. The arrogance of such people is nothing short of breathtaking: they presume upon the moral character of those more mature by simply taking for granted that, if and when they place themselves in a life-threatening situation, that others – police, fire fighters, EMTs, etc., and first-responders generally – will place themselves in harm’s way to rescue such amateur stunt people from the consequences of their own poor judgment. That Ms. Eller came to this realization is to her great credit. But the fact that she did so poses a problem for the greater society, in particular that part of the society that puts itself at risk for the sake of rescuing people from the results of such juvenile behavior.

The following is my very simple question: *could someone please explain to me why it is admirable and praiseworthy for someone to, e.g., “summit” Mt. Rainier or Everest or ski down a damn glacier or undertake any such challenge that puts their life at risk **and puts at risk the lives of innocent third parties** who will be called on to rescue the supposedly brave adventurers from the consequences of their (the adventurers’) recklessness? Why should the latter clean up the messes of the former and be expected to take a palette knife and scrape the foolhardy climber’s viscera off the mountainside? What is praiseworthy about requiring a Park Ranger or a helicopter pilot to risk bereaving her family to rescue a hiker, experienced or not, who was hell-bent on “summitting” Rainier?*

Is there not a fundamental moral issue here? I very much think so.

No compensating advantage is to be gained as would be the case if the climber were “summitting” a mountain on **Mars**. Scientific knowledge is almost universally recognized as a legitimate reason for one to risk one’s life, provided that no innocent third party becomes an involuntary victim. Ask Madame Curie, who died of radiation poisoning from exposure to radium. So it would have been entirely appropriate if the Apollo 11 astronauts ended up stranded on the moon, and NASA, *per impossibile*, had launched a rescue attempt. Nor is it a case of assisting in the preservation of an orderly, coherent society and preserving others’ rights, as when cops and paramedics come to rescue first responders at, e.g., armed robberies and fires. Nor is it inappropriate to admire helicopter pilots who ferry donated organs to hospitals for transplant into recipients. The same is true of epidemiologists, virologists, nurses, and other medical professionals who, e.g., travel to Third World areas to combat Ebola Zaire, Marburg, Rift Valley Fever, etc., etc. *But in the case of mountain climbers, stunt skiers, etc., etc. there is no higher principle at stake.* It is purely a hormone-fueled genital-measuring exercise that, in such cases, **always and without exception** holds the potential of being paid for in the coin of others’ blood and bereavement.

Of course, one can argue that, in some cases, the rescuers are not *compelled* to do any rescuing: they can always leave the foolhardy evolutionary dead-ends who end up clamoring for help to suffer the consequences of their own poor judgment. No vacation cruise guest is compelled to dive into the ocean to rescue someone who fell overboard from trying to do a *Titanic* by attempting to balance one-footed on the outermost point of the cruise ship’s prow. That rebuttal does carry *some* weight. But I would argue that it is far from decisive.

When Amanda Eller wandered into the Maui wilderness, *she knew, consciously or not, that she was leaving behind a group of caring people* who were possessed of enough compassion that, however annoyed some of them may have been with her for her lack of common sense, nevertheless would go to immense, even welfare- and life-threatening, lengths to search for her, to find her, and to care for her, should the worst happen. In other words, like all people who undertake unnecessary and altogether gratuitous risks, consciously or not, Amanda Eller leveraged their good will as her life-preserver. **She made her risks theirs**, and implicated them in her foolhardiness, knowing that their affection for her would impel her friends to take that risk along with her. This is a classic case of “Let’s you and him fight!” Or in Christian terms, it might be called “Presuming upon grace”, i.e. flirting with sin because you are convinced that God is too much of a soft touch to ever consign you to Hell.

So what are the practical and policy implications of forbidding people to implicate others in their own recklessness? How far can the government go in insisting that the results of irresponsible decision-making rest **only** on the shoulders of the reckless person? Answering that question is almost impossible at the level of generality I ask it. But, in general, there should be limits -- and for all I know, there already are limits ... in fact, I hope there *are* limits -- on how far even first responders are required to go in rescuing people from the consequences of their own stupidity and foolhardiness. To take a specific example, I believe it would be altogether morally defensible to post signs at various points on the hiking trails of, e.g., Mt. Rainier informing climbers that, beyond the location of the sign, hikers / climbers assume the entirety of their own risk, and that whatever assistance Park Service people may render beyond that point is entirely voluntary on the part of Park Service rangers. In fact, I would argue that what is **not** morally defensible is requiring Park rangers, as part of their professional responsibilities, to rescue and assist people whose plight is altogether the result of the distressed person's own lack of judgment. After all, Park rangers have families, too. Similar signs could be posted on beaches rendered infamous by rip-tides: if you venture into the water beyond a certain point, any assistance from a life-guard is rendered on a purely voluntary basis. Perhaps if such signs had been posted -- as they may well have been -- at strategic points on the fringe of the jungles of Maui, Amanda Eller might have thought twice about the wisdom of implicating people in the consequences of her self-admitted irresponsibility.

Granted, you cannot fix Stupid. But that does not mean you have to aid, abet, and subsidize it.

Chapter 4 – Mystery, Mozart, and Meat

DISCLAIMER: I freely admit that the following description / discussion about debates I, as a pro-choice advocate, have engaged in with pro-life people is purely anecdotal. I do not claim to have exercised any kind of scientific rigor in compiling and writing the following, nor should such be inferred. Still ... that being said ... *sheer consistency should count for something*. In writing this column, I could recall no exceptions to the following pattern. Anyway, make of the following what you will ...

I am personally pro-choice, and several years ago, I began to engage in at-times-rather-heated though -usually-civil conversations and debates with pro-life people, almost always conservative evangelical Christians, regarding pro-life vs. pro-choice positions on abortion. Many of these debates / discussions took place in the pages of *Christianity Today* in the "Comments" section of articles devoted to the morality and religious aspects of abortion. (I no longer read *Christianity Today*, and so have had no discussions of this nature recently, but I have engaged in similar debates with other pro-life people in other fora, e.g., Facebook, and have found the following pattern repeated faithfully.) The pattern goes something like this ...

At the beginning of the debate, I would ask my pro-life interlocutor why they are convinced that the fetus is human from – to use their phrase – “the moment of conception”. (At the time these earlier debates occurred, I had not worked out my critique of “the moment of conception” locution in any detail, as I have since. So I just accepted uncritically the ontological implications of the phrase “the moment of conception”. If I could push the “Rewind” button on those earlier debates, however, the idea of “the moment of conception” is one of the most salient critiques of the pro-life abortion ethos I would deploy.) My debate partner would always – I can recall no exceptions – respond as to the humanness of the fetus in a tone of voice an elementary-school teacher might employ when talking to an exceptionally dull third-grader. “Of *course* the fetus is human,” the response would go (I am paraphrasing), “because the fetus has two arms, two legs, a head, a full suite of DNA, in other words, the fetus has all the attributes that make a human being ... well ... *human*.”

I would then usually point out that all those attributes could, with equal justification, be ascribed to a cadaver. “So,” I would ask, “do cadavers in, e.g., hospital morgues and in mortuaries being prepared for final rites qualify as human?” The response at that point would be something along the line of “Well ... but the dead body is still a **human** dead body!” Pressing the point, I would say “OK ... yes, it is a human **body**. But it is a **dead** human body. Does a dead human body have constitutional rights? Can it run for office? Can it vote? Can it marry? Can it serve on a jury?” Without using the exact words, I was pressing the issue of phenotype and genotype, and arguing that, while a cadaver is – yes, to be sure – fully human as to both phenotype and genotype, even that does not suffice to make the cadaver a human person that must be accorded full civil and political rights. Why should a fetus be any different, if the only defining characteristics of the human-ness of the fetus are purely physical (phenotypic and genotypic)?

At that point in the debate, I would tell my antagonist two things, both of which tended to seriously ruffle some feathers, the former of which was a statement and the latter of which was a question: (1) by referring only to phenotypic and genotypic issues, *all they have achieved is to conclusively demonstrate that which was never in dispute, i.e., that the fetus is a piece of highly sophisticated meat*; (2) given that you are a believing and observant Christian, why have you left out the most critical and

sine qua non element that defines a human person – fetus or otherwise – **as** a human person. To be specific, *why have you left out spirit / soul / sentience* – choose your own favorite word – out of your catalogue of human-person-defining characteristics? Is that omission not, at the very least, paradoxical? “Basically,” I would continue, “you are arguing, as long as the fetus has the phenotypic and genotypic traits you have enumerated, that *spirit / soul is strictly optional.*”

I would then continue to explain that the reason I describe this omission as “paradoxical” is because ... think about this for a moment ... here I am, an ex-Christian, a half-assed Buddhist, a reprobate by Calvinistic criteria, and an advocate of Christian heterodoxy (in some cases outright heresy), *but nevertheless a believer in the human spirit* as manifest in, e.g., Buddha, Jesus, Sri Ramakrishna, the great artists, philosophers, religious mystics, and scientists of world civilization ... *here I am, of all people, trying to convince **an observant, believing Christian**, of all people, of the importance and cruciality of soul / spirit in defining what it means to be a human person, and that human beings are more than just piles of glorified brisket!* When and why and how did I, of all people, suddenly become the implacably remorseless critic of reductionistic ontologies of human-ness? In my previous experience, and outside of the context of the abortion debate, that was usually an office to which Christians were ideally suited.

I would conclude by asking my debate partner – by this point, “debate” would usually be too tame a word – when the **hay-yull** we went down the Rabbit Hole with Alice. When did Good and Evil switch sides and become mirror images, like in that old *Star Trek* episode *Mirror, Mirror*? At that point, the debate / discussion / rhetorical pro-wrestling match would almost always be terminated with prejudice.

Anyway, if the conservative evangelical position should be determinative, then we are left stuck with the question of how, if human beings are just “meat-dolls,” chunks of glorified ground round, how do we end up with, e.g., Mozart? Or pick your own luminary: Bach, Haydn, Mendelssohn, Picasso, Einstein ... *how do we get from meat-doll to Monet?* This is not to deny, Gnostic-like, that the meat is unimportant: Mozart needed hands to write his musical scores; Picasso, to hold his brush; Einstein, to write his equations; etc., etc., etc. *The meat is a necessary condition. **But is meat a sufficient condition?***

According to the conservative evangelical account of the human-ness of the fetus, the answer to that latter question is “Yes”. All Mozart needed was just ... **meat**. According to this “meat-centric” account, it was just **meat** that created that gloriously galloping first movement of Mozart’s *Violin Concerto No. 3 in C*. (Listen to it. Even if you are sitting down, if you can avoid dancing, I feel very sorry for you!) No spirit needed. No soul. Just meat. Ditto Haydn’s sublime *String Quartet in C-maj. Op. 3, No. 5*. (Same admonition: listen to it! Imagine **meat** writing something like that.) Again, no spirit needed. No soul. Just meat. At least, those are the conclusions we are left with if we accept the conservative evangelical “meat-doll ontology” of the fetus.

Actually, I am predisposed to be more charitable to the advocates of meat-doll ontology than this. I believe that, at least in their heart of hearts and judging by their rhetoric on other issues, evangelical pro-life people know better. *They are better than their own avowed meat-doll ontology vis a vis abortion.* I believe that conservative evangelical Christians are so passionate about rescinding *Roe* and *Casey*, and thus outlawing abortion, that they -- perhaps unconsciously, perhaps inadvertently -- skate over the “soul / spirit issue,” *not because they believe that issue to be unimportant*, but rather they know that, if they were to include spirit / soul in the attributes of the human person, that the resulting

anti-abortion law would crash and split apart upon the rocks of the "establishment" clause of the First Amendment: ***Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.*** Note, first, that there is no legal definition of the term "person." Note, secondly, that *the only available definitions of such are in essence religious.* So any law that seeks to make abortion illegal on the basis of the humanness of the fetus -- i.e., as a spirit- / soul-possessing entity -- **would be immediately unconstitutional.** Consequently, the only laws forbidding abortion that could possibly pass constitutional muster are laws that avoid the issue of spirit / soul -- and are therefore predicated on the meat-doll ontology. But such laws get you no farther toward forbidding abortion than laws forbidding animal cruelty.

So what is my answer? you ask. What is it that makes a human person a *human* person? What is it that makes Mozart Mozart? That makes Haydn Haydn? That makes Bach Bach? That makes Picasso Picasso? That makes Dante Dante? That makes Einstein Einstein? Fair enough. Yes, of course, no doubt there are differences in the way the brains of Mozart, Dante, Einstein, et al., are neurologically "wired". But, while such differences in neurophysiology would be a *necessary* condition, that assertion is still on the level of **meat**. So we are back to the issue of spirit / soul / sentience as a *sufficient* condition: *is being Mozart just a matter of meat*, as the meat-doll ontology implies? All versions of historical Christian anthropology staunchly deny that such is the case. All such teachings insist that human persons are not just meat. So then what is the *je ne sais quoi* that gets us beyond mere meat and to, say, *The Divine Comedy* or the general theory of relativity? If the fetus is just glorified meat, then what is the basis for the pro-life assertion that destroying a fetus is destroying a **person**? My answer is this: **I have no idea. Not the foggiest.** All I am certain of is that *if that "extra" is in essence in any sense religious, it is inconsistent with the US Constitution, and therefore not enactable into law.*

In other words, it beats-a hell outta me. As I said before in one of the two columns above, that is one of Donald Rumsfeld's "known unknowns": something I **know** I do not know. Questions like that confront us with Mystery -- note the capital "M" -- and that Mystery cannot be comprehended by the categories pertinent to mere meat. We should assume an attitude of epistemological humility in the face of such, and avoid the pretense that we know more than we do -- and most of all refuse to pontificate.

So when it comes to distinguishing Mystery from meat, we all have a "steak" in such an attitude ... yeah ... I know ... sorry!

Chapter 5 – The Inevitable Disappointments of Messiah-ship

Progressives need to grow the hell up.

What they need to outgrow is a certain prominent feature I have noticed in the political psychology of progressivism, especially – though certainly not exclusively – religiously grounded / motivated progressivism. Progressives, both religious and secular, entertain a certain, usually more or less implicit, nostalgia for *perfection* ... the perfect political candidate in particular. Sometimes they think they **actually find** such a candidate ... Barack Obama, Bernie Sanders, etc. ... and become over-the-top enthusiastic for the candidacy of that person. Sometimes that candidate ends up being elected. But then -- as is bound to happen -- the progressive favorite, once in office, fails in addressing some issue especially close to the hearts of progressives (closing Gitmo) or compromises about something equally critical (single-payer health insurance) or – this is a real killer in terms of progressives' view of the paragon's ideological virginity – talk to and hobnob with the opposition ... etc. ... or the progressive icon may even fail at some point in his or her election campaign, e.g., Barack Obama's distancing himself from the remarks of Rev. Jeremiah Wright. At that point, the progressive paragon's erstwhile supporters discover that their icon has, sometimes through political necessity, sometimes through blind circumstance, sometimes -- yes, let's acknowledge it -- the cupidity normal for mortal human beings, (what progressives at least see as) feet of clay. Quick! Somebody interrupt *Game of Thrones* with this apocalyptic newsflash: ***They are not perfect, after all.***

Furthermore, this lack of perfection need not result from any kind of venality or moral turpitude or deficit of principle. That may or may not be the case. Rather, the imperfection, the ostensible failure, may often be marred by the routine rough-and-tumble of compromise, the mutual back-scratching that is always a part of often-*sub-rosa* negotiations, and the usual rubber-chicken-and-bad-jokes dialectic of the DC cocktail circuit. There is even a technical term for this process. It is called **politics**. The attitude seems to be straight out of II Cor. 6:17: "Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate ... and touch not the unclean thing" (KJV). Hence both the fatal flaw and the sustaining paradox of progressivism, as well as the reason the Tea Party, never hesitant to sully its hands by actually getting candidates elected, was so much more politically effective than the Occupy movement, which always seemed much more concerned with overturning police cars and having sex in Zucotti Park: **progressives have a tendency to expect their politicians to be above politics.**

So, once polluted by the realities of retail politics, the erstwhile angel becomes, in many progressives' eyes, a **fallen** angel. Hence yet another instance of the New Testament in action in even secular progressivism, in this case, an instance of James 2:10: "Whoever violates [the Mosaic law] in one point is guilty of [violating] all" or Jesus' remark to the effect that merely *contemplating* adultery is morally tantamount to actually committing the act. (Question: in that latter case, what does one have to lose by physical consummation? But never mind ...) That scorched-earth ethic is one reason true, consistent progressives are so ineffectual: *they demand -- even as they deny doing so -- a level of moral and ideological perfection mere humans are simply incapable of.* And religiously grounded and motivated progressives sometimes take that propensity one step farther and apparently deny forgiveness to the person who has disappointed them, e.g. Prof. Cornel West's October, 2014, critique of President Obama. God may be relied upon to forgive. Religiously motivated progressives ... well ... not so much.

The latest manifestation of this tendency is the determination among some progressives -- how many is not certain -- to either simply sit out the election or even (we may hope) in a few cases, if you can feature this, **to vote for Donald Trump** rather than to support Hillary Clinton. I agree with a recent Robert Reich post that Hillary Clinton is the best candidate for the political system we *have*, and that Bernie Sanders is the best candidate for the political system we *need*. (I'm pretty sure that is a fair paraphrase of Sec. Reich's position.) Now, to be sure, I support Bernie Sanders myself. Also, to be sure, I am as wary of Sec. Clinton as everyone else, and have the same reservations about her essential honesty. That latter caution became even more pronounced recently when the Office of the Inspector General issued its *de facto* reprimand of Mrs. Clinton in the matter of her use of, personal e-mail server for the processing and storing of classified State Department e-mails.

But where I fundamentally part company with my progressive siblings -- for such I still consider them, their callowness and naivete notwithstanding -- concerns the even more fundamental issue of the nature and criticality of this particular presidential election. If this election turned on differences in particular, discrete policies -- immigration, climate change, income inequality, TPP, etc., etc. -- Sec. Clinton's fast-and-loose shenanigans with classified State Department e-mails would, in my mind no less than the minds of others, be immediately and categorically disqualifying, quite arguably even indictment-worthy -- as may well turn out yet to be the case. There was a time in my professional life when, as a civilian consultant to the Defense Department, the group that I managed and I depended critically upon the integrity and confidentiality of State Department communications with host governments and security agencies for our security, electronic and even physical, when traveling to foreign countries, especially NATO members, and working with their defense ministries on classified projects. That was at the height of the Cold War. The stakes were high. (Hence, also, my lack of empathy for Bradley -- now Chelsea -- Manning, though I regard the Snowden case as qualitatively different, since my understanding is that the latter did not involve the divulging of the actual *contents* of diplomatic / security communications.) So if this were a normal election, implicating "normal" issues of policy, I would see Sec. Clinton as, yes, presidential timber -- but rotten timber. But ...

... this is not -- I say again, **not** -- a normal election. And that for two reasons: (1) the Republican candidate, Donald J. Trump, is -- let's call things by their correct names, shall we? -- a rather explicitly avowed fascist, who (2) either does not understand the US Constitution or who understands it and does not care. What is at stake in this election is not a difference as to policy regarding the most effective way to address climate change, or even whether climate change exists as a human-made phenomenon. What is at stake in this election is not the best way to address income inequality. What is at stake in this election is not how extensively the US should involve itself in confronting the threat of ISIS / ISIL in the Middle East. All those are important issues that, in a normal presidential election cycle, would deservedly dominate public debate and discourse. What is at stake in this election is not even Sec. Clinton's integrity as a public official, a consideration that would be decisive under virtually any other circumstances. But -- to repeat -- this is **not** a normal election. *What is at stake in this election, rather, is nothing less than the future, arguably even the continued existence, of liberal (in the classical sense), latitudinarian, constitutional government.* For the first time since the first presidential Inauguration of George Washington in 1788, the Nation faces a non-negligible possibility that the next person sworn in as President and Commander-in-Chief will be someone who does not believe in, and in many critical ways, is hostile to, the very Constitution he would be sworn to uphold. In public statements, Trump has vowed to shut down mosques in violation of the "free exercise" clause of the First Amendment; deny citizenship to children born "feet dry" on American soil in direct violation of Section 1 of the 14th Amendment; violate that same Amendment by deporting 11 million (Trump's

own number) undocumented immigrants by denying them due process, which that Amendment guarantees to all "persons," i.e., not just "citizens"; and to take the Nation back to the late 1790s -- the Sedition Act of 1798, in particular -- by reinstating the crime of "seditious libel," according to which media and individuals can be criminally prosecuted for criticizing the government, verbally or in writing.

Given what is at stake, a protest vote consisting of either *de facto* voting for Trump by default, or of voting for Trump explicitly in order to protest the candidacy of Sec. Clinton over Sen Sanders -- a protest vote that, in a normal election, would be quite defensible -- would constitute nothing less than **an irresponsible betrayal of the American constitutional tradition** at least as egregious as the proposed policies of Donald Trump. As such, a protest vote would be -- as most progressives apparently have never stopped to realize -- an equally egregious and irresponsible betrayal of Sen. Sanders' own principles, policies, and proposals. I have never met Sen. Sanders, but based on his public statements and his Senate career, I gravely doubt that he would support a protest vote that lent *de facto* support to the candidacy of a fascist demagogue who stands for everything inimical to Sen. Sanders' values.

The usual rejoinder to Donald Trump's rhetoric, of course, is some form of "Aw, he's just foolin' wit-cha! He doesn't really mean it. It's just rhetoric." Two responses: (a) one of the classical mistakes most often made by people of good will who are accustomed to living in a classical liberal, constitutionally governed polity is to react, upon meeting a megalomaniacal demagogue, by saying "He's just a buffoon, a court jester ... and he doesn't really mean it". And he may not mean it -- until he does; (b) if it is "only rhetoric," "only talk," then so is, e.g., President Washington's farewell speech, the Gettysburg Address, Mr. Lincoln's Second Inaugural, etc. Rhetoric means something. Words count. It's "just rhetoric"? Well, by that standard, so was Barack Obama's repudiation of Rev. Jeremiah Wright -- and so was Wright's "damn America" sermon in the first place. I wonder how many people -- how many progressives -- would be as blasé if Donald Trump talked, not about building a fence, but invading Mexico to stop illegal immigration. Would that be "just rhetoric"?

I would certainly agree that things have come to a sorry pass, politically, when a presidential election degenerates into a choice between which of two about-equally-distasteful candidates is **least** repugnant, and one is confronted with the prospect of voting for the lesser of two evils ... or perhaps the least evil of two lessers. My choice will be determined by which candidate poses the **lesser** threat to the US Constitution. Everything else -- and I do mean *everything* else -- is negotiable. And therein, I think, lies the greatest challenge to progressives in terms of "grow[ing] the hell up": this is not the best of all possible worlds; sometimes it isn't even a good world; sometimes it's just the world, and you have to grit your teeth, square your jaw, and hope to do better next time. Under such circumstances, committing *seppuku* by simply opting out is just a juvenile Byronic temper tantrum. To not choose **is** to choose.

As Tom Paine said on the eve of the American Revolution "These are the times that try [our] souls". I make the much more modest claim that this is a time that tries our maturity. Or -- a more contemporary example -- there are the immortal words of that great 20th-century philosopher Mick Jagger: "You can't always get what you want, / But if you try, sometimes / You might just find / You get what you need".

Chapter 6 – Donald Trump, Kellyanne Conway, and Microwaves

It doesn't happen very often that a mere chance utterance ends up subverting the secrecy surrounding what one would have thought were the most clandestine matters pertaining to the security of the Nation. For example, there was the dropped cigar case, containing Gen. Robert E. Lee's detailed plans for the approaching Battle of Antietam, the sheerly accidental finding of which by a lowly Union Army private fundamentally altered the outcome of the battle, contributing to the Federal victory and thereby convincing President Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation. Now we have Kellyanne Conway's ill-advised oh-by-the-way reference to "microwaves" as the medium former President Barack Obama used to spy on the goings-on in Trump Tower during the run-up to the 2016 Election. Since the secret is out, I can follow in the steps of Snowden and Manning and divulge what I managed to piece together from multiple sources, both classified and public, in the Government and from science. I cannot vouch for the truth of what follows, but Ms. Conway's "microwave" allusion is a telltale clue to what senior advisers in the Trump Administration, including President Trump himself, evidently *thought* was going on. (However, since actual *evidence* is strictly optional in our Post-Modernist / Post-Factual Age, this limitation is a minor impediment, at worst.) Anyway, bear with me. This takes a bit of telling.

In 1964, two engineers for Bell Telephone, Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson, were inspecting and performing maintenance on the large, building-sized microwave antenna at Holmdel, NJ, that is used to relay and transmit phone calls from multiple points on the planet. Penzias and Wilson were puzzled, however. No matter how diligent they were in cleaning, adjusting, and maintaining the antenna, there always remained a background of static, a kind of gentle, whispering sigh of extraneous noise, rather like the supposed ocean noise one hears when one puts a seashell up to one's ear -- the sonic equivalent of "snow" on the television screens of that era. They even went so far at one point as to go over the big antenna inch by inch, cleaning out the pigeon droppings that had accumulated over the years since the last maintenance cycle. (Your gratitude for my skipping over the tempting array of pigeon-excrement-related puns is duly noted and acknowledged ... you're welcome!) The source of the static -- for want of a better term -- was as enigmatic as its existence: no matter how Penzias and Wilson steered and oriented the antenna, they could discover no source, no directional bias, for the noise, which therefore seemed evenly distributed **over the entire sky**. The source was seemingly ... well ... **everywhere!**

I will skip the technical details and cut to the chase: it finally turned out, after exhaustive research by Penzias, Wilson, and others, that that persistent soft hiss of static was the radio-frequency noise generated by the stupendous heat of the Big Bang that occurred (we know now) about 13.7 billion years ago. The Big Bang itself generated temperatures so high that writing out the temperature at the moment of Creation without using exponential notation would require a number of zeros as long as this paragraph. But in the succeeding 13.7 billion years, the expansion of spacetime itself, discovered by Edwin P. Hubble in the 1930s, had "stretched" the wavelength, so that the leftover thermal energy corresponded to a temperature not much above absolute zero: approximately 3 degrees Kelvin, to be precise. (In 13.7 billion years, the cosmic expansion had "stretched" the heat radiation from needing a whole "Skeptics"-column-paragraph-full of zeros to needing only a single character: 3.) No wonder there was no point-source for the noise: the "source" was the entire Universe itself! Penzias and Wilson were jointly awarded the Nobel Prize in 1978 for their discovery.

(This ancient heat was spread over the entire Universe with remarkable uniformity. Cosmologists refer to the "isotropy" of the 3K background. But there are miniscule variations across the sky that escaped

detection until the last couple of decades -- referred to as the "3K-background **anisotropy**" -- and that probably correspond to quantum-level fluctuations in the initial Big Bang, micro-**micro**-anomalies that eventually formed galaxies and galactic clusters. But let's not get lost in the weeds.)

What does all this have to do with President Trump's allegations about former President Obama's surveillance activities directed toward Trump Tower? Good question! And thanks to Kellyanne Conway's politically inauspicious Freudian slip -- equivalent to the Union soldier serendipitously finding the errant cigar case in that fateful September of 1862 -- we now have a high-level answer: literally **everything**! That is, the archaic 3K background thermal radiation has **everything** to do with the allegations of surveillance on Trump Tower. Despite fine-tooth-comb searches into former President Obama's alleged activities directed toward the surveillance of Trump Tower, the FBI and the formidable staffs of congressional committees have uncovered *no evidence whatsoever of any such surveillance*. No tapped wires. No taps ... excuse me ... no **taps** at all. Only a superabundance of double quotes enclosing ... precisely *nothing*. The absence of evidence is unprecedented ... dammit! ... excuse me again ... **unprecedented**.

But instead of dispositively refuting President Trump's claims of Mr. Obama's nefarious spying, *this absence of evidence is alleged to be actually confirmatory*. Why? Because -- so go the reasoning and conclusions of Mr. Trump and his senior advisers -- Mr. Obama has apparently discovered a way, the technical details of which are still unknown, *to use the 3K microwave background radiation emitted by the entire Universe to spy on Mr. Trump* and his Administration. There are no microphones, no wires, no high-tech cameras, etc., nor are any such needed. The *entire Universe* is one Great Cosmic Wire Tapp ... aw **hay-yull!** ... one Great Cosmic Wire **Tap!** *Of course*, there are no mics, no wires, no transmitters, no receivers, etc., etc. *anywhere* ... because they are *everywhere!*

And one more highly suggestive clue as to how Mr. Trump & Co. may have cabbaged onto the 3K-background possibility. The technical term for the 3K background radiation left over from the Big Bang is "blackbody radiation". What could be more enticing for a group of conservative Republicans who did not deign to repudiate the support of the KKK and various other racially motivated alt-right organizations -- the kinds of folks in Congress who suggested that Mr. Obama, while in office, might do well to serve fried chicken and watermelon at White House soirees -- what could be more tantalizing than to suggest that the former President had hit upon a way to use **blackbody** radiation to spy on Messrs. Trump, Bannon, Sessions, & Co? The poetic justice alone of the idea would render such a possibility positively *elegant* to the point of erotic rapture, were not such conservative folks thus inclined so terrified of matters sexual! At least publicly.

That's all for now. I have not yet decided what to do with this Watergate-scale story. Certainly I am going to turn it over to a news organization that commands resources and professional credibility far beyond my own modest powers and attainments. Maybe George Stephanopoulos? Cokie Roberts? George F. Will? Martha Raddatz? Paul Krugman? Chris Matthews? Rachel Maddow?

Hey ! I got it! Jake **Tapper!**

PS -- In case it needs saying for the record ... the foregoing material on the Big Bang, the Antietam cigar case, the Penzias / Wilson collaboration, and the 3K background radiation is all true, but the rest is a farrago of sheer satire.

Chapter 7 – The Problematical Progressive Distaste for Things Military

Here's a sterling opportunity for someone to educate me. Why do so many – I won't say "all," but I feel pretty safe saying "most" – progressives / liberals / left-wingers almost reflexively and uncritically take such a dim, jaundiced, and suspicious view of the military and of members thereof? I am prompted to ask this question by a recent post on *Patheos*; that begs a multitude of questions the author rather blithely skates over. But in particular, at the very beginning, the writer simply asserts with no apparent justification that (boldface added)

*... from an American mindset, original Christianity and the first Christians appear nuts: they were universally nonviolent (against capital punishment, abortion, **military service** and killing in self-defense), rejected individual ownership of property in order to redistribute their wealth (Acts 2:44-45, Acts 4:35), and rejected any involvement with the government.*

Now, just for the record, I am sure that there are indeed many ways in which American Christians' attitudes and values depart from those of the first-century-CE, "primitive," primarily Jewish Church. That is beyond dispute. But the question I am asking is whether, assuming the above characterization is accurate, even that early Church's articulation of (what it no doubt saw as) "Christian values," in this case concerning military service, represented biblical norms any more faithfully than their 21st-century counterparts. Maybe both characterizations, that of the *first* century CE no less than that of the *twenty-first*, are *equally* wrong. It seems to me two questions are begged:

o Did Jesus consider military service as *intrinsically* tainted?

I mean military service *as such*, military service *per se*, military service *tout court*. There are obviously ethical issues attaching to military service – just as there are ethical issues attaching to **any** occupation or profession. Zacchaeus was a tax collector, and admitted to cheating in the practice of that profession (Lk. 19:1-10). But Jesus did not admonish Zacchaeus to renounce the profession of tax collection *per se*. In fact, Jesus never mentioned Zacchaeus' profession during the encounter, and Zacchaeus himself only alluded to it by way of promising to recompense those he had defrauded. The conclusion would seem to be that tax collection *tout court* was permissible, provided it was practiced within ethical bounds.

Similarly, in His encounter with the Roman centurion, Jesus did not admonish the centurion to take up another line of work. The only remark Jesus made to and about the centurion was to praise the centurion's faith (at least in the Lukan account -- Luke 7:1-10 – the Matthean version -- Matthew 8:5-13 – omits Jesus' praise). Now, this is interesting ... and it becomes even more interesting if we use this story to determine how consistently people on the left are willing to follow their own interpretive logic. It is often asserted, to the point of becoming a cliché, that Jesus saw nothing wrong with homosexuality or homosexual conduct *per se*, because Jesus never mentioned either. **I agree with that argument:** there is no textual record that Jesus ever admonished anyone as to the propriety of homosexual behavior. In fact, the Gospels record no encounters between Jesus and any LGBTQIA individual. (Some have argued that the Greek *pais*, which is translated "servant," is a euphemism for the centurion's homosexual lover, but this seems to me to be a maximal conclusion drawn from minimal lexical evidence. And even if true, such an interpretation would only support the argument about Jesus' indifference to sexual orientation, not Jesus' attitude toward military service.) So it is only to be expected that Jesus would be silent re homosexuality and homoerotic love.

However, just as Jesus is silent on the matter of homosexuality, Jesus is likewise silent on the propriety of military service during his encounter with the Roman centurion. May we conclude by the “silence criterion” that, within the bounds of the usual and obvious moral *caveats* that apply to all professions and occupations, Jesus is accepting of both types of behavior: homoeroticism and military service? **If not ... why?** I.e., how would one justify a double standard in light of what I am calling the “silence criterion”? Jesus did not hesitate to proactively broach moral issues when those issues had a direct bearing on His encounter with others. E.g., He broached the subject of wealth with the rich young man who wanted to be a disciple – but the man’s willingness to share his wealth had a bearing on the man’s competence as a potential disciple (Mk. 10:17-27). Did Jesus *refrain* from alluding to the centurion’s profession because He considered that profession irrelevant to the man’s faith? (In the Lukan account, those who intercede with Jesus on the centurion’s behalf cite the centurion’s material assistance in building a synagogue, but that is the only allusion to the centurion’s generosity in that regard.) If so, that is just restating what I am already arguing. At least in the case of the Roman centurion, *the presumptive taint progressives often associate with military service seems to be an instance of a dog that did not bark.*

o Did the (putative) pacifism of Jesus reflect the character of a pacifist God?

Perhaps it is on this issue that biblical theology – in both Testaments – parts company with progressive Christian theology and Christology most decisively. Regardless of whether you regard the Bible as a book of history – which I do *not* – or as an anthology of theological / Christological reflection and parable – which I *do* – **it is simply impossible to point to the biblical text and infer anything remotely like a pacifistic God therefrom.** Quite frankly, the Bible is one of the most sanguineous books in the entire human – never mind just Judaeo-Christian – literary canon. And I repeat: that is true in *both* Testaments, the New no less than the Old. Prof. Richard Dawkins’ characterization of the biblical God in *The God Delusion* is neither exaggeration nor libel. It is simply and literally true:

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser, a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.

Not to cavil, but I would only substitute “Bible” for “Old Testament”. Think “Donald J. Trump writ large”.

In order to avoid repeating myself, I will simply refer you to instances where, over the years, I have discussed exactly this issue previously, beginning most recently with Easter of 2016. I am careful to specify “both Testaments” because of New Testament texts like the image of the avenging Jesus in Revelation (Rev. 19:13) and Gospel quotations of Jesus as predicting destruction for villages that reject the Gospel (e.g., Matt. 10:14-15). If the early Church believed in a pacifistic Jesus and a pacifistic God, they did not – because they *could* not – justify it with reference to either Testament of the Bible – Mr. Corey’s *Patheos* column notwithstanding.

Granted, there are the sayings of Jesus about turning the other cheek, returning evil for good, etc. But it is significant that these texts, in context, refer without exception to **one’s personal, individual conduct**, not to military service on behalf of a social collective. Jesus’ admonitions on the former modes of conduct, and His silence about the latter, would imply that one cannot simply and naively

employ the same standards of morality in the latter as in the former, an attitude too often encountered among progressives. I conclude from this difference that, whereas one is free – arguably even obligated – to adopt a Gandhi-like stance of pacifism toward **one's personal, individual safety**, the morally acceptable use of military force consists exclusively in the protection of **others**. (This is how I interpret the Matt. 26:52 saying about living by the sword and dying by the sword: not as an advocacy of pacifism, but as *a counsel of self protection*. If Peter's impetuous use of the sword had eventuated armed conflict between the disciples and the Temple authorities, the disciples would surely have gotten their arses handed to them. So Jesus' admonition to not "live by the sword" is a comment on tactics, not morality: "Hey guys ... never go bear-hunting with a buggy whip!". By the way, the verse immediately following about God placing "twelve legions" [KJV] of warrior-angels at Jesus' disposal, is difficult to reconcile with allegations regarding the putative pacifism of God, regardless of how one interprets the celestial metaphysics.) That said, however, the propensity for many progressives to react adversely to military action remains largely unaccounted for. (I say "many," not "all," because there are exceptions like the late Christopher Hitchens, who, despite his strong credentials as a progressive, nevertheless advocated the American invasion of Iraq.) The following is my account, in brief.

More than people to the right of them, ideologically, leftists / liberals / progressives tend to be sons and daughters of the European Enlightenment who share a common faith, by no means unjustified, in the ability of human beings to "reason together" as Isaiah 1:18 says, but who tend to believe in humans' ability to *reason autonomously* about politics and ethics without the intervention or validation of any Deity. Hence the recurrence of the word "dialogue" in progressive rhetoric. What they often lack -- again, Christopher Hitchens is a counterexample -- is a sense of the incorrigibly tragic, i.e., an appreciation of **the practical and tragic limits of reason** in certain situations with certain people, an issue Martin Buber addressed in his long and eloquent letter to Gandhi regarding Gandhi's advocacy of non-violent resistance to the Nazis by European Jewry. (This consciousness of the tragic also accounts for the resurgence of the concept of sin in, e.g., Karl Barth's post-World-War-I biblical theology.) Rabbi Buber was a *tzaddik* and no one's idea of a hidebound conservative. But -- it may well be *precisely because he was a Jew* -- Buber was haunted by a sense of the tragic, like Banquo's ghost at MacBeth's feast, that Gandhi, for all his undisputed greatness otherwise, lacked. I even suspect this is why, at least among many progressives, so little is heard of Buber's respectful but incisive critique of Gandhi's pacifism with regard to the Nazis' Final Solution, and why progressives usually concentrate instead on Gandhi's emphasis on non-violence: most progressives' implicit faith in the efficacy of rationality and dialogue cause them to suffer at least as much as Mahatma Gandhi from an underdeveloped sense of the tragic. Therefore, they emphasize an Enlightenment-based exclusively "reason-centric" view of both history and politics, a corollary of which is a rather unreflective and uncritical suspicion of the occasional necessity for the judicious application of **justified** violence, and why so many progressives view the very phrase "justified violence" as an oxymoron.

More about this in a future rant ...

This is certainly a subject fraught with ambiguity, and therefore not to be subjected to moralistic bombast. So I wish for my progressive siblings what Don Miguel de Unamuno wished for his readers at the end of his great meditation *The Tragic Sense of Life*: "May God deny you peace but give you glory".

Chapter 8 – Dallas: When the NRA was Not Locked and Loaded

The orthodox argument advanced by the National Rifle Association (NRA) senior leadership for the individual ownership of firearms unconnected with military service is that firearms in the hands of private citizens acts as a deterrent to some future tyranny by the Federal government. One would think, then, that Michael Xavier Johnson would by now have been recruited by the NRA as both poster child and martyr. After all, in the wake of the LA and MN shootings of helpless black men by the police – to say nothing of Ferguson and New York City and Baltimore and ... -- Johnson's actions were pristinely and irreproachably consistent with the NRA's avowed advocacy of armed resistance to a tyrannical government bent on the subjugation of its citizens. Yet – at least, as far as I have been able to determine as of this writing (12 July) – the NRA, for all its rhetorical bluster about defending liberty by force of arms, has been curiously silent.

So one can only ask ... “Why only the sound of crickets chirping?” ...

Well ... on second thought ... that's not quite true. In fact, it isn't even in the same ballpark as true. In the wake of the recent shootings, especially the Dallas atrocity, the NRA has indeed been, as is customary with the NRA, stridently vocal. **Just stridently vocal for (what one would have thought the NRA would have considered) the wrong side.** And to continue down the rabbit-hole of mirror-reversal, in the case of the fatal shooting of Philando Castile, the NRA's defense of Mr. Castile's right to own a gun has amounted to much more of a whimper than a bang – again, the antipodal opposite of what one would have expected from the NRA -- a circumstance which has allegedly turned out to be a source of division within the ranks of the NRA itself. *So mea maxima culpa: I stand corrected.*

Instead of coming down on the side of those who use their Second Amendment rights to resist the excessive use of lethal force by the police, as NRA rhetoric has led us to expect, **the NRA has praised the use of such force by the police against the insurgents.**

Given the NRA's habitual bombast in defense of the Second Amendment and individual gun ownership as the trenches from which liberty would be defended against government tyranny, this is surprising ... in fact, jaw-droppingly, drool-inducingly astonishing. Think of it this way: how surprised would you be if you got into your time machine, punched up “Concord, MA, April 19, 1775”, emerged, sat down by “rude bridge that arched the flood,” watched the unfolding battle – **and saw hundreds of colonists on the sidelines cheering for the British army** – and afterwards convening at a local pub to drink a toast to the gallantry of King George III's boys in red? Similarly, **the NRA praised the gallantry of the Dallas police** in cornering and killing Micah Johnson, who was – at least one would have thought – employing his “right to ... bear arms” in opposition to the government's extermination of his brothers, an action concerning which the NRA still carries bruises from all its public chest-beating. Isn't resisting lethal coercion on the part of the government exactly what Micah Johnson was *supposed* to do, according to NRA orthodoxy? Observing these rhetorical twistings and turnings and contortions on the part of the NRA, the most appropriate exclamation that leaps to mind is “Whiskey Tango Foxtrot?!”

I can only venture the theory that the NRA has thus far been reticent about endorsing the actions of Micah Xavier Johnson because the late Mr. Johnson took matters *into his own hands* and, bypassing the usual means of seeking and forging democratic consensus by soliciting others' opinions and support, *acted purely on his own*, apparently without even the knowledge of his parents. So perhaps

the nuance missing from the NRA's advocacy of DIY armed insurrection is that the matter was not first referred to committee and debated there. (What committee? Aw c'mon ... don't be]so picky!) In other words, the principle would seem to be that it's quite OK to take up arms, Galahad-like, in chivalrous defense of Miss Liberty's virginity, **as long as we all vote on it first**. So, since we as a Nation inherited the Second Amendment and its attendant "privileges and immunities" from the Framers who created the Constitution in the first place, and since those Framers formed an especially illustrious subset of the Founders, it would seem reasonable to ask how democratic and consensus-sensitive the original decision was to oppose that archetypal tyrannical government, the Crown of Great Britain and the agents of King George III. In other words, how democratic was that prototypical armed Insurrection against the archetypal Tyranny?

Answer: Even by the standards of the late 1700s ... *not very*.

Oh, sure, there were the "committees of correspondence," basically the shadow governments of the Colonies that were on the brink of revolution, anyway, and therefore determined to resist Royal power and chart their own course. (Thomas Jefferson's autobiography gives some fascinating insight into the working of colonial Virginia's own committee of correspondence.) And, yes, these committees, as the embryonic "governments in domestic exile" of the obstreperous colonies, did report to the Continental Congress. But membership on such committees was not determined democratically by any reasonable definition of that term, and, in any case, the Articles of Confederation had no power to bind any State to the decisions of all the other States, even by unanimous vote of Congress. Even at the level of the Continental Congress, consensus was hard to come by, never mind at the State level, as witness the tumultuous debates attending the various "olive branch" resolutions and beseechings approved by that Congress and dutifully transmitted to London for summary rejection by King and Parliament. Only **after** the Revolution had been won and the Constitution was placed before the States for ratification in 1787-89 did actual democracy break out as a positive contagion. *So if an alleged lack of democratic consensus lies at the root of the NRA's reluctance to endorse Micah Johnson's act of insurrection, then such a lack should also render the original Revolution illegitimate.* But based on the NRA's Pavlovian tendency to dislocate its shoulder waving the Flag, one is entitled to a certain skepticism about such a conclusion.

But don't give up hope! For the real issue is actually hidden in plain sight. The explanation of the ... shall we say ... ambivalence of the NRA toward Johnson's one-man rebellion and the consequent source of the NRA's enthusiasm for the police lies neither in any incipient affection for American democracy, or even for the police protecting the tenets of an ordered society. Instead, I think the answer lies, not in anything having to do with the Founding and the Framing, but in a subsequent historical event roughly 80 years later, in the run-up to the Civil War: John Brown's abortive but prophetic slave rebellion at the Federal armory of Harper's Ferry in 1859. This was not the first slave rebellion in American history, far from it: Nat Turner's uprising preceded it by 28 years, and there were others before that. The persistent nightmare of white society -- both North and South, but most especially in the South, for obvious reasons -- was that slaves would acquire arms and that, at some point, some latter-day Nat Turner or John Brown would arise, under whose leadership slaves would succeed in doing what they had previously failed to do.

Hence the widespread horror when black men, many former slaves, formed the 54th Massachusetts under the command of Col. Robert Gould Shaw in 1863 -- under the terms of President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation which went into effect on 1 January 1863. (Remember: by the time the

Proclamation was published, the infamous *Dred Scott* decision of the Taney Court had been in effect for 6 years. Black slaves who managed to escape the Confederacy and enlist in the Union army would no longer be slaves, but neither would they be American citizens. Actual citizenship for black folks, both slave and free, would have to wait until the ratification of the 14th Amendment in 1868.) Even after the Civil War was over and Reconstruction was under way, even after the 15th Amendment was ratified, even into the brief "golden age" when black candidates -- many of whom were ex-slaves -- were elected to Congress ... *even then* the very thought of a black man with a gun would be to many people, both in the North and in the South, the very essence of Hell-on-earth made flesh. Hence the resurgence of violence against blacks following the Compromise of 1877, the Presidency of Rutherford B. Hayes, the withdrawal of Federal troops from the former Confederacy, and the failure to enforce the "Reconstruction Amendments" ... and the dying of the "golden age". Black men with the vote was bad enough. Black men with guns was Apocalypse.

So let's go ahead and take our tongue out of our cheek and pass gas during dinner at Downton Abbey by speaking plainly, shall we? The reason the NRA abandoned its advocacy of gun rights in the case of Micah Xavier Johnson in Dallas was because **the issue was never about gun rights in the first place**. Or rather, it was about gun rights, but only *gun rights for white people*, and even that was strictly secondary. **For the real issue was about, and still is about, race.**

Hence my diagnosis: at the bottom of the NRA's new-found modesty about gun rights lies, not any concern for the Second Amendment, but a latter-day version of the Reconstruction determination to reinforce white privilege and white power -- and *de facto* black slavery, 13th Amendment notwithstanding -- at any and all cost. The thought of gun rights for black people scares the hell out of the NRA no less than it would have scared John C. Calhoun. If Philandro Castile or Alton Sterling or Micah Johnson had been white, the Twitter feed from the NRA leadership would by now be white-hot with allegations about a "new Ruby Ridge," a "New Waco," etc. But Messrs. Castile, Sterling, and Johnson were not white men. They were black men.

My advice: don't flinch when the NRA thunders about gun rights. It's just noise. The NRA is firing blanks.

Chapter 9 – Progressivism’s Clandestine Romance with Authoritarianism

“Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.” – Matthew 5:48 (KJV)

Anyone who has read any of my “Skeptic’s” columns, especially those published after the last disastrous presidential election, will know that one of my favorite targets is a group I refer to variously as “boutique progressives” or “liberal purists”, the latter term borrowed from Bill Maher, who has the same grievance against progressives. What (Bill and) I mean by that are liberals, left-wingers, progressives who insist that a political candidate, in order to be worthy of our support, absolutely must conform to every principle, every jot and tittle, of progressive ideology, without exception. They must, in other words, be ideologically perfect, i.e., the kind of perfection demanded of Christians by the author of Matthew’s Gospel. The self-appointed Dostoyevskian Grand Inquisitors may be Cornel West or our own home-grown Wes Howard-Brook. But regardless, they all insist on a purity of ideology with a zeal that can only be matched by a *zampolit* (“political officer”) that the old Soviet Union assigned to every military unit in the Warsaw Pact to ensure soldiers’ political orthodoxy in word and deed. Any deviation from strict progressive orthodoxy – or its Marxist equivalent – could never be forgiven, and resulted in the ostracism of the offender from any political support, the orthodox-progressive equivalent of a stretch in Lefortovo Prison or a firing squad in the USSR.

Hence Cornel West’s distaste for President Obama, who committed the mortal sin of talking to corporate CEOs. Hence Howard-Brooks’ consigning of Mrs. Clinton and Barack Obama to the outer darkness, the former for the mortal sin of having given a couple speeches to Goldman-Sachs; the latter for declining to reject his (Obama’s) former Chicago pastor with sufficient vehemence. Moral vanity apparently never goes out of style among boutique progressives, who have evidently never read Romans 3:23, their Christian pretensions notwithstanding. (Herewith a rule of thumb: God forgives, progressives do not.) Problem is, such demands for ideological virginity inevitably backfire, in this case by the election of Donald Trump. Nor should this be a surprise, for this is hardly a new phenomenon. On the contrary, history is littered with the remains of boutique progressivism’s victims. We find this surprising only because so many of our colleges and universities no longer require the study of history. Please allow me to compensate slightly ...

Boutique progressivism is almost always – I can think of no exceptions – associated with a romantic sensibility that believes in the perfectibility of human beings and that recoils from any suggestion that perhaps, just perhaps, the human condition is at base incorrigibly tragic, incorrigibly fraught with ambiguity. (For the less romantically inclined and less regimented among us, this ambiguity is one of the things that makes the human condition and culture interesting, and enables the existence of, e.g., Dostoyevsky, Sophocles, Ibsen, et al.) In the hubristic pursuit of this vision, boutique progressives inevitably end up facilitating the rise of political, ethical, and social structures that are often less truly progressive than the structures against which boutique progressives previously rebelled. They end up becoming object lessons in the truth of MacBeth’s speech in Shakespeare’s play: “I dare do all that may become a man, who dares do more is none,” i.e., try to be more than a human being, and you will inevitably only end up being less. (For footnotes, see Milton’s Lucifer.) English romanticism between the late 18th and early 19th centuries could serve as the paradigmatic example of this tendency.

Name any poet in that tradition -- Blake, Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Coleridge, et al. -- and you will find underneath their undisputed literary talents the unshakable belief that the experience of the Holy was available without suffering -- one wag once defined romanticism as the Resurrection without the

Crucifixion -- and was perhaps most readily attainable through art and poetry. In fact, Shelley even wrote a rather long *Defence of Poetry* arguing for just that position, whereby poets were held to be "the unacknowledged legislators" of the human race, if only the masses would follow the enlightened leadership of the literary and aesthetic elite. (As I said above, boutique progressivism in any form and during any age is never at a loss for moral vanity.) Blake seriously believed that, through the passionate pursuit of art, that the Kingdom of God could be historically realized and the New Jerusalem established "in England's green and pleasant land". Wordsworth believed that the contemplation of Nature in a state of equanimity could lead one to spiritual enlightenment with no admixture of suffering or repentance. (See his "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" and his great poetic autobiography *The Prelude*.) As art, this is indisputably beautiful. As politics, however, it is arrant bullshit "of the purest ray serene". Why?

The short answer is that the English-romantic penchant for flights of value-free emotion and raptures about the attainability of Paradise on earth, and the passion to achieve both under the tutelage of a literary and artistic elite inevitably led to a tendency to hero-worship. In the case of the English romantics, the hero *du jour* turned out to be Napoleon Bonaparte, who wreaked havoc on Europe from France to the very gates of Moscow, and, but for the intervention of winter, might have achieved what Hitler could not: the unification of Europe under one empire. Too late it dawned on the Wordsworths, Coleridges, and Shelleys that unexamined passion in the service of political and social change is merely tyranny by another name.

Even as staunch a romantic as Beethoven seems to have realized this when, having once dedicated his great *Eroica* symphony to Napoleon, he removed the dedication in subsequent editions of the work. (One wonders if Wordsworth's initial enthusiasm for the French Revolution, culminating in the Terror, precipitated the same insight in him. But, as I am fond of saying, that is another rant for another time.) This point was indelibly written in blood at Waterloo during the Battle of the Nations in 1815, commemorated by a great monument just outside the city of Leipzig, Germany, when a coalition of armies, led by the Duke of Wellington, defeated Napoleon and discredited the political "airy nothings" of the English romantics, the boutique progressives of the 19th century. Unfortunately, the experiment with boutique progressivism of the English romantics left quite a number of bodies unburied on the fields of Russia and Belgium.

Now to ruffle a few more feathers: the next great romantic experiment in boutique progressivism, one even more sanguinary, was the German experiment with Naziism in the 1930s and 1940s. Very few people would think to use the words "romanticism" and "Naziism" in the same sentence. I do not hesitate to do so, because the hallmarks are there: uncritical emotion unleashed in the service of an ostensibly salvific cause (in this case, Teutonic jingoism and racial purity) and the instantiation of such in a single man, what I called elsewhere "One Big Guy". Adolf Hitler is to fascist romantics of the 1940s -- not all of whom were in Germany (think "Oswald Moseley" and King George VIII here) -- what Napoleon was to English romantics only a century-plus before. Which would make Gen. Dwight Eisenhower Adolf Hitler's Duke of Wellington. Like the English romanticism of the previous century, Naziism was built upon a foundation of pure nostalgia, amplified by a sense of irredentist entitlement engendered by the brutal reprisals written into the Treaty of Versailles that ended World War I, and completely taken off the leash of rational criticism. Wordsworth looked back to the lost glories of childhood (*The Prelude*) and Hitler & Co. yearned to make real the archaic and mythological German past valorized in the music of Richard Wagner, in other words, felonious nostalgia. The latter wanted to, as it were, "Make Germany Great Again". Both English romanticism and Naziism, rebelling

against the intrinsic limitations of the human condition, also rebelled against those boundaries, and, in an attempt to actualize their ideals, handed over power to their respective "One Big Guys": Robespierre and Napoleon, in the case of the English romantics; Hitler in the case of the National Socialists. In both cases, the West spent generations of time cleaning up the bodies.

Same was true of Communism, perhaps the last hurrah of global romanticism. Like English romanticism and National Socialism, Communism, dissatisfied with human limitations, looked to the supposedly scientifically founded dialectic of history, the eventual victory of the proletariat, the withering of the state, and its replacement by the classless society to realize its dream of justice and human equality. Like the previous two romantically founded movements, it handed over power to "One Big Guy": Lenin, at first; then Stalin; followed by a succession of faceless grey bureaucrats, the poster children of mediocrity, who replaced scientific socialism with scientific slaughter in an effort to enhance human life. The result was a warren of grey apartment blocks, slipshod design of nuclear reactors, famine due to state-planned agriculture orchestrated by Stalin's minister of agriculture Trofim Lysenko, the Gulag Archipelago, and, in the late 1980s, final collapse. Once again, the relentless pursuit of perfection resulted in tyranny and suffering under the hegemony of One Big Guy.

By now, you should be able to write my critique of boutique progressivism as well as I: it is one more instance of human beings who, ignoring the tragic limitations of the human condition, especially the most tragic principle of all that sometimes the Perfect is the mortal enemy of the Just Good and even of the Just Good Enough, attempt to transcend that condition in order to achieve perfection. I see this tendency in people who wrote in the name of Bernie Sanders instead of voting for Hillary. I see this symptom in people who voted for Stein or Johnson. I see this tendency in people who want to terminate the political careers of people like, e.g., Gov. Ralph Northam of Virginia, for dallying with blackface almost 40 years ago as a medical student. Repugnant? Yes. Dumb? Yes. Racist? Yes. Criminal? No. Impeachable? Arguably -- but *impeachment of a sitting governor is allowed for in the Virginia State constitution*, unlike a kangaroo trial in the social media and in the streets. (If Northam were in a jail and if the people busily spittle-spraying against Northam on their keyboards using Twitter and Facebook were instead carrying pitchforks and torches and looking for a short rope and a tall tree to hang it from, we would call the situation what it really is: an attempted lynching.) But how many readers of this column have lives pristine enough to stand up to the kind of withering critiques leveled at Northam about things done 40 years ago, *pristine enough to decline referring the matter to a vote of the people*, preferring instead Northam's preemptive resignation? How many of us have not done things 40 years ago we would be ashamed of now? Full disclosure: 40 years ago, I relished the telling of homophobic jokes. Therefore, I suppose now, at age almost-70, I am preemptively disqualified from holding elective office.

One can only be thankful that no boutique progressives were around when Jesus confronted the accusers of the woman taken in adultery: when Jesus invited her accusers to cast the first stone, they probably would all have eagerly volunteered to do so. Almost certainly would have done so if they had been the ancestors of today's boutique progressives. One more time we see that romantically derived ideologies are, without exception, founded on a degree of moral arrogance I can only describe as breathtaking. As those calling for Northam's resignation without benefit of a vote, amply demonstrate, boutique progressivism is merely authoritarianism in democracy's clothing. (The same boutique progressives who are calling for Northam's resignation without benefit of plebescite are in many cases the same people who complain about *voter suppression*! One can only speculate as to how the 47% of black voters who want Northam to remain in office can justify progressives' ignoring of

black voters' wishes -- *while ostensibly advocating for black people's voting rights*. How is it possible to oppose voter suppression while at the same time demanding that Gov. Northam resign, and thereby *avoid a vote*? Ditto avoiding a vote in the Virginia Assembly on any potential bill of impeachment.) And, as was the case with English romanticism, Naziism, and Communism, the result was the same. English romantics' uncritical enthusiasm gave the world Robespierres and Napoleon; Naziism, Hitler; and Communism, Lenin and Stalin. (Oh and we should not forget Mao Zedong and the excesses of the Cultural Revolution. And the Kim family of North Korea. And, just conceivably, a Republican governor of Virginia. All courtesy of fanatical political romanticism run rampant in its lust for perfection.) In the American case, the backfire of boutique progressivism gave us Donald Trump, who is the leader of the United States only in the same sense in which Moe is the leader of Larry and Curly. So ... congratulations to boutique progressives: your intolerance of the incorrigibly tragic nature of the human condition, your hypocritical attempts to suppress the voices of dissident progressives, and your intolerant demand for perfection at any price, has given us yet another ... One Big Guy.

My conclusion: Yes, I do fear Evil. But Perfection scares the bloody hell out of me.

Chapter 10 – The Silly Controversy about the Value of Philosophy

I am old enough to remember when Bill Cosby was actually *funny*. I mean back in the pre-Dr.-Cliff-Huxtable days when he was a rising young stand-up comic just beginning to appear on, e.g., the *Tonight* show. One of my favorite Cosby one-man / stand-up skits, in fact, was his impression of being an undergraduate in college, and guessing other students' major fields by their personal idiosyncrasies and mannerisms. Says Cosby, you could always distinguish philosophy majors as the people who went around campus gazing dreamily up into the sky, oblivious to their surroundings, and muttering "Why is there **air**?" (Legend has it that one of the founders of Western philosophy, Thales of Miletus in the 6th century BCE, fell into a well because he did something much like that.) This story is funny when (the old, "pre-roofie") Bill Cosby told it as a joke. It is much less funny when highly educated people like Dr. Neil Degrasse Tyson and Bill Nye are reputed to seriously entertain the same stereotype. But I suspect that the controversy their remarks about philosophy have recently evoked results much more from poor *reading* on others' part than from poor *thinking* on theirs, because the rebuttals of their arguments are just too obvious for people of such attainments to have overlooked.

Tyson's part of the latest kerfuffle originates from the *Huffington Post* publicizing some remarks about philosophy – in particular, the philosophy of science – Tyson made in a recent Nerdist podcast, quoted in the *HuffPo*, wherein Tyson demurred from remarks by one of the interviewers in support of the study of philosophy, which Tyson asserts, justifiably enough, does not discover any new knowledge about the world. This description is what touched off the controversy.

The reason I say the controversy about Tyson's comments about philosophy has been blown grossly out of proportion is for two reasons. First of all, Tyson's remarks about philosophy concern the value of philosophical speculation *as part of the pursuit of science* – in this case, physics and presumably astrophysics (Tyson's own field) – by professional scientists. Tyson is warning practicing *scientists*, and, for that matter, practicing *philosophers*, endeavoring to make substantive contributions to **science**, to not get lost in their own underwear by obsessing about questions like "What is the meaning of *meaning*?" -- Tyson's equivalent of "Why is there **air**?" The second reason the controversy has assumed such unjustifiably exaggerated proportions is because, in other contexts, *in contexts outside of empirical "hard" science*, Tyson cheerfully asserts that, yes, philosophy obviously has substantive contributions to make. In a conversation with Richard Dawkins, also cited in the *HuffPo* story, Tyson said (boldface added):

It's not that there can't be other philosophical subjects, there is religious philosophy, and ethical philosophy, and political philosophy, plenty of stuff for the philosophers to do, but the frontier of the physical sciences does not appear to be among them.

I would differ from Tyson somewhat on even this narrower point: the real "action" in the philosophy of science these days is, and has been for some time, the so-called "measurement problem" in quantum theory, and related issues pertaining to quantum entanglement, Bell's Theorem, and the EPR paradox. Be that as it may, the scope of Tyson's comments on philosophy do not amount, as many commentators and critics have inferred, in a wholesale repudiation of philosophy *tout court* as a discipline, but only in questioning the extent to which philosophy has anything of substance to say in terms of empirical results, now that philosophy and the empirical sciences have gone their separate ways since Newton. (The last citadel of "natural philosophy" was Darwin, which "officially" fell in 1859, when the first

edition of Darwin's *Origin of Species* was published.) The reaction of the philosophy community *contra* Tyson is greatly exaggerated.

(In "The Philosophy of Neil DeGrasse Tyson," Julian Drury has written a very temperate, clear-eyed argument supporting this conclusion in a May, 2014, story in *Progressive Spring*.)

Similar remarks apply to Bill Nye's contribution to the controversy. Judging by the similarly exaggerated vehemence of the reaction, one imagines Bill Cosby's "Why is there **air**?" joke being nailed to a cathedral door and precipitating a second Protestant Reformation. Speaking of the Reformation, an April, 2017, *Quartz* story contains an account of an apparent Damascene conversion of Bill Nye *vis a vis* the discipline of philosophy.

Shortly after reading my article, Nye began discussing philosophy with his friend David Kyle Johnson, a professor of philosophy at King's College in Pennsylvania. Nye listened to Johnson's lectures on The Big Questions of Philosophy and read his works. "I read his book so many times, it fell apart," Nye said. "I had to get another copy." The science guy said he learned the importance of major philosophical figures. "People allude to Socrates and Plato and Aristotle all the time, and I think many of us who make those references don't have a solid grounding," he said. "It's good to know the history of philosophy."

In fact -- and to continue the analogy -- while he still has no patience with certain philosophical speculations, like the conjecture that the entire Universe might be contained in some great cosmic Video Game, Nye has apparently become, not just a convert to philosophy as a discipline, but also something of an evangelist.

Ultimately, Nye is now convinced that philosophy is a pure form of critical thinking and would like "everybody in the world" to have a philosophical outlook. His Netflix show, Bill Nye Saves the World, will focus on issues such as climate change and alternative medicine. Nye believes a philosophical approach to studying the facts should convince everyone of the scientific validity of climate change and the falsity of alternative medicine.

In any case, for purely logical reasons, if no other, it should be evident from a moment's thought that, not only is philosophy a legitimate learned discipline -- in fact, a *Wissenschaft* in the German sense, not of "science" as the word is often translated, but in the authentic German sense of "a body of disciplined knowledge and inquiry" (e.g. art history is also a *Wissenschaft*) -- but even the attempt to debunk philosophy is logically incoherent. To debunk philosophy, you first have to settle on certain criteria of meaning and coherence. You then have to sift through various texts and statements made by philosophers over the centuries and validate them against those discursive criteria. (Oh ... I am getting ahead of myself: before you do that, you have to first test the criteria "internally" for logical and conceptual coherence.) Finally, you have to formulate your judgment -- debunked or not debunked -- depending on whether philosophy passed or failed all those debunking tests. But in formulating the criteria, validating them, and comparing philosophical discourse, you are -- though it be in spite of yourself -- doing philosophy. Bottom line: **attempts to debunk philosophy end up debunking themselves**. Schemes to debunk philosophy are just examples of Stanley Fish's "self-consuming artifacts".

Nor is the "progress" criterion any more meaningful. Philosophers who wrong-headedly misinterpret Tyson's critique as applicable to **all** philosophy take Tyson to task for assessing the value of philosophy by how much "progress" philosophy has made over the last 2500 years, i.e., since arising on the Ionian coast around 600 BCE. In several places, Tyson does use the "p-word". But what Tyson really means, if you read his statements with due care, is that philosophers have made no progress in ascertaining empirical data since, say, the days of Isaac Newton in the late 17th century. But this just amounts to saying that philosophers have not become scientists ... which at least flirts with tautology. Besides, if "progress" is your criterion, then how much "progress" has been made in music from, say, the time of Palestrina and Josquin DePres to, say, Haydn? Has there been any "progress" from Botticelli to Boudin? If the answer is "No," then ... well ... music and painting bite the dust along with philosophy, if "progress" is the yardstick. But then, how much "progress" has there been in defining "progress"? Which is much like asking "Why *is* there **air**?"

Finally, there is the "death and disaster" criterion. There was a recent AirAsia flight from Perth, Australia, to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, where engine damage caused the plane to vibrate in mid-air, as one passenger said, like a badly loaded washing machine on "spin" cycle -- so badly that the pilot asked passengers to "pray". During times of such stress -- when you think your plane could crash, when you think your child might have leukemia, etc. -- everyone becomes an armchair-avocational theologian / philosopher, philosopher debunkers and debunking be damned. Scant point in asking if a given activity is "valid" or "legitimate" or not if the activity is inevitable, anyway. The amygdala takes over and the prefrontal cortex can just shut the hell up!

Oh by the way ... one possible way to address Cosby's "Why is there **air**?" question is to cite the anthropic principle: if air did not exist, we would not be around to ask "Why is there **air**?". Intelligent anaerobic bacteria, maybe, but not us.

Chapter 11 – Pro-Life God vs. Facts and Statistics

Back in February of 2014, I published a “Skeptic’s Collection” in which I cited biblical texts in both Testaments calling into serious question whether the Judaeo-Christian God may be fairly characterized as pro-life. As you will see if you follow the above URL, that column was Part 1 of what I originally envisioned as a two-part series. But for reasons I can no longer remember, I never wrote and published Part 2. Until now. Part 2 approaches the subject of the pro-life credentials of God from a somewhat different perspective: comparing the texts allegedly asserting God’s pro-life stance, not with other biblical texts as in Part 1, but with actual, empirical data, worldwide, on infant mortality. *My purpose, now as in 2014, is not to ridicule Christianity or Christians.* Though I am pro-choice myself, and though I approach the subject of abortion from an explicitly secular, constitutional, “rights-centric” perspective, I believe that a quite respectable case can be made for a pro-life ethic. But I question the tendency among religiously motivated pro-life people to “cherry pick” by concentrating too exclusively on biblical texts without running those texts up against the “phenomenal” world outside the Bible and checking whether the two – world and text – are mutually consistent. In the following, **I argue that they are not.** Consequently, while *a case can be made for a pro-life ethic, that case cannot be founded on the theology of the Bible.* In fact, the God of the Bible is **anything but** pro-life, not because one’s textual exegesis is wrong, but because the texts do not jibe with the empirical “facts on the ground”.

It is worth noting that it is possible to build an argument for a pro-life ethic on a purely secular, non-religious (not to say *anti-religious*) basis. But since I am discussing theology, I will deal only with *religiously grounded* pro-life arguments, specifically Christian arguments, since that is the religious tradition with which I am most familiar. I will not reprise Psalm 139 here, beyond calling attention to the sweeping claims made in that text for God’s excruciatingly detailed and utterly comprehensive custodianship of the developing fetus. I would theorize in passing that the language of Psalm 139, even in English translation, is so overwhelmingly majestic that the sheer cadence of the language can tend to anaesthetize one’s critical faculty: when one is contemplating the overwhelming sovereignty of God’s love (Hebrew: *hesed*, “covenant-love”) for the developing fetus in the mother’s womb, it can seem in bad taste, arguably sacrilegious, to bandy about statistics – rather like debating whether this specific blob of green paint should go **here** rather than **there** in Renoir’s *Luncheon of the Boating Party*. It just seems exasperatingly beside the point. Again, my purpose is not to ridicule Christianity or Christians, but, with all due respect, **such “caviling” is precisely what is called for.** It is anything but beside the point.

To see why, consider ... The percentage of pregnancies ending in miscarriage / spontaneous abortion – for the purposes of this column, I consider the two synonymous – varies widely, depending on how one defines “spontaneous”. (“Spontaneous” in the sense that the pregnancy terminates with no human intervention.) Also, as even a hour or two of cursory research will show, the incidence of such terminations of pregnancy varies widely from country to country: as one might expect, the rate is significantly higher in “Third World” countries, relative to their “First World” counterparts. But, in order to bias my conclusions toward the optimistic, I am going to assume that spontaneous-abortion statistics for the latter are **typical worldwide**. So in the interest of maintaining an “optimistic” bias, I will adopt the 15%-to-20% number for the miscarriage / spontaneous-abortion incidence for pregnancies worldwide. (Again, the actual number would probably go up significantly if actual miscarriage statistics for the developing world were factored in.) In fact, I will “low-ball” even that

number and peg the worldwide incidence of miscarried / spontaneously aborted pregnancies at 15%: the low end of that range.

Now, the Guttmacher Institute estimates that in 2012 – the latest year for which I could find statistics – there were 213 million pregnancies **worldwide**. If, by hypothesis, we estimate that 15% of these pregnancies terminate prematurely by miscarriage / spontaneous abortion, this means that, of the 213 million pregnancies in 2012, in round-as-possible numbers, about 32 million pregnancies miscarried / spontaneously aborted in 2012. (Not to belabor the point, but this 32-million number is almost certainly significantly on the low side.) This means that, in 2012, about 2.6 million pregnancies miscarried worldwide per **month**. For a 4-week month, this translates to 666,000 pregnancies (again, worldwide) per **week**. So **every day**, worldwide, 95,000 pregnancies spontaneously aborted. That is 4,000 pregnancies per **hour**, 66 pregnancies per **minute**, almost exactly 1 miscarried pregnancy per **second** ... again, worldwide, and under what are almost certainly unrealistically optimistic assumptions. (Of course, I am also assuming, no less unrealistically, that these pregnancies all miscarry **in the same calendar year in which they were conceived**. Timing makes a difference, and if pregnancies conceived in 2012 miscarry in 2013, the foregoing numbers for 2012 would decrease accordingly. But I would expect that this would be more than offset by factoring in the *actual incidence* of miscarriages in the “Third World”.) The bottom line: even under the most optimistic assumption that the 15-percent miscarriage rate holds worldwide, one fetus is spontaneously aborted every **second** of every **minute** of every **hour** of every **day** of every **week** of every **month** of every **year**.

Of course, one can argue that it is fallacious – to say nothing of bad hermeneutics – to take Psalm 139 and like texts at face value and literally. Even from a purely secular standpoint, I concur. It does as much interpretive violence to the text of Psalm 139 (and others) to see it as a treatise on reproductive biology as it does to the text of *MacBeth* to believe Shakespeare is instructing us in factual Scottish history. The important point, this response would argue, is that God is intimately involved in the conception, gestation, and birth of each human being, not that God “jimmies” the odd chromosome here, “tweaks” the odd gene there, and patches up the odd faulty nucleotide over yonder, least of all that God fine-tunes the laws of chemistry and genetics in pursuit of some ideal of genetic perfection, like the people led by Khan (Ricardo Montalban) in the old *Star Trek* episode. But this begs a disarmingly simple question: **Why Not?** That is, given all the “omnis,” why does God **not** intervene? According to orthodox – lower-case “o” – Christian theology, God is possessed of all the “omnis”: *omniscience*, *omnipresence*, *omnipotence*, *omnibenevolence*. So when we run the theology of Psalm 139 up against the foregoing statistics, even as rough and approximate (though remember: most likely artificially optimistic) as the latter are, we discover that we are confronted by a kind of molecular-genetic version of the Problem of Evil.

As the stinging little doggerel in Archibald MacLeish’s play *JB* says “If God is God, He is not good; / If God is good, He is not God. / Take the even, take the odd”. Both alternatives – the “even” and the “odd” -- have consequences that are about equally distasteful to people who seek to found a principled pro-life stance on the theology of the Bible. “If God is God, He is not good”, because, though possessed of all the requisite “omnis,” God nevertheless allows fetuses – i.e., *children* – to die, and to die *in utero*, in numbers too hideous to long contemplate. Such a God is *ex facie* **non-pro-life**. “If God is good, He is not God” because, while God’s *intentions* may be pro-life, we are now confronted with the biblical texts I cited in Part 1 back in 2014. Even if we interpret those texts, as I do, as theological parables and not as “straight” history, we have to consider the possibility that (a) the God as conceived in those texts is not “good” in any humanly significant sense, unless we are willing to consider

xenophobia and genocide as in some sense good, or (b) God is indeed “good” notwithstanding, but lacks the power (the “omni”) to instantiate in the real world God’s reverence and *hesed* for life in the womb. In case (b), if you are pro-life, you are on your own. God’s bioethics vis a vis abortion is, at best, a kind of *coda* to purely human reflection on rights and ethics regarding abortion and life issues generally, i.e., God is a “bit player”. What makes the game worth it is, as MacLeish’s poem concludes, “the little green leaves in the wood, and the wind on the water”.

My counsel, which I fully and respectfully realize not everyone can in good conscience follow, is to (1) cut the Gordian knot by (2) refusing to get lost in one’s underwear by trying to square the circle of the abortion issue, and life issues generally, by recourse to religious doctrine – all the more so because considerations of constitutionality end up “filtering out” such considerations, anyway, as matters of public policy, which the “establishment” clause of the First Amendment mandates to be religion neutral. Maybe if the dominant religious idiom of the Nation were something other than theocentric monotheism, if that idiom were, say, Buddhist or Taoist, the Gordian knot would not be so entangling. But that is not reality.

A good start would be to renounce "cherry picking". Facts count. So does intellectual integrity. The dialogue on such a fraught issue as abortion is not aided by ignoring the implications of either.

Chapter 12 – “Planet B” and the Deficiency of Imagination

I hate to nit-pick people and movements with which I am otherwise in total agreement. For example, I hate to nit-pick the late Christopher Hitchens and Bill Maher, with whom I otherwise agree almost completely, on the matter of religion by pointing out that it is not **religion** *per se* that poisons everything, as “Hitch” argued, but **monotheistic** religion, and that most Christians do not believe in “talking snakes,” as Bill is so fond of asserting, only radical-fringe fundamentalists. Well ... here is another example: the recent March for Science. The marchers’ recognition of the criticality of evidence and empirical investigation, and their advocacy of following both wherever they lead, is refreshing in an age when the great massifs of evidence on climate change have been suppressed by the government as a matter of public policy. Their advocacy of clarity and rationality of thought is equally welcome. But I must demur from their lack of nuance and qualification in addressing the issue of planetary colonization, especially given the cartoonish “There Is No Planet B” rhetoric. Someone needs to tell them, as gently and diplomatically as possible, “**Of course**, there is no Planet B! We haven’t found it yet -- though the Kepler Telescope, even in its wounded condition, has found several possible Planet-B candidates -- and even if we did find it, we do not – **yet** – have the technology to even get to it, let alone colonize it!” And it looks like the diplomat charged with communicating this message is going to have to be me, your Curmudgeonly Skeptic-In-Residence. The reasons for my disagreement are two-fold, having to do with biological evolution and with the nature of science.

Biologically / evolutionarily, renouncing planetary colonization amounts to choosing slow-motion species-suicide. One of the ways species preserve themselves – as species, not as individuals – is through **diversification of habitat**. (The following paragraph makes extensive use of the “pathetic fallacy”. Such usage is purely metaphorical: *I am **not** arguing, even implicitly, for intelligent design, least of all for creationism.* It is just a convenient way of talking.) When a bee hive attains a certain size – or when a second queen bee is hatched within the hive ... I dunno ... the closest I come to being an apiarist is listening to the theme music from *The Sting* – the hive splits in two, one “sub-swarm” of bees leaves the original hive and flies away, as a community, to found a second bee colony elsewhere. My understanding is that something analogous occurs in ant communities: a new community forms and leaves the “mother house,” by migrating to a different patch of real estate. With plants, dandelions release their seed “parachutes” to ride the wind and give rise to other dandelions in other fields elsewhere. Flowers entice bees to take their (the plants’) pollen and so perpetuate plants elsewhere. To be sure, there are many other strategies species have evolved to ensure their perpetuation. But **diversification of habitat** is one of the more important.

Diversification of habitat has been so critical in the history of life on earth that the **absence** of this ability -- that is, the **absence** of a Planet B -- has very nearly resulted in a dead, lifeless world on several occasions in life's history. The tethering of life to this particular planet has very nearly spelled life's doom. Two examples ... I suppose the most obvious – because so well-publicized – bullet that life on earth has so far dodged was the cometary or asteroid impact 65 million years ago that occurred at, and defined, the boundary between the Cretaceous and Tertiary periods, that wiped out the dinosaurs, ended up facilitating the rise of mammals, and that altered the climate on earth for millions of years. The so-called “Chixulub event” – after the small village on the Yucatan Peninsula adjacent to the crater now hidden by the Gulf of Mexico -- killed off something like 2/3 of all life on earth. Much more destructive, though less well publicized, was the great End-Permian Extinction of 250 million years ago, resulting from stupendous volcanic eruptions along the “Siberian traps”, that eradicated about 90-plus percent of life on earth. (The mortality was much greater than the Chixulub

event because a far greater proportion of life called the ocean home than than would be the case 180 million years later, and the late-Permian oceans became solution of acid.) Even a relatively localized event like the eruption of the Yellowstone magma chamber would be, not an extinction event, at least for humans, but enough to alter life for centuries to come. **The earth is a rough place to live** – even if you discount cosmic catastrophes of the scale of Chixulub – because the earth itself is quite capable of doing itself in. And us along with it. **If this planet is the only game in town, if there is no Planet B, then, from an evolutionary standpoint, the game is, essentially, already over.** If for no other reason than the laws of chance, earth will – *not may, but will* – eventually become unlivable. Science March rhetoric notwithstanding, there **must** be a Planet B. Much of the human race **must** be elsewhere when the bloom finally goes off the cosmic Rose. Otherwise, in the words of the late and beloved Bill Paxton in *Aliens*: “Game over, man! We’re all gonna die!”

But aside from biological / evolutionary considerations, the “No Planet B” rhetoric is actually, though perhaps covertly, **anti-science** – the purpose of the March notwithstanding. I start out assuming that, at the present stage of human development, planetary colonization is a multiple-centuries-long project that will require the development of technologies, many of which we cannot even name or dream of now. Given present technology, it would require *a single crew* of astronauts eight months to travel to Mars one way. Spend, say, six months on the Martian surface, then another eight-month trip home, and we are talking two years for *a single mission comprising a single crew of astronauts*. (I am also glossing over the time spent waiting for another Earth-Mars conjunction to bring the two planets close enough to make the homeward trip short enough to be practical. The real round-trip time could be more like three years.) One-off missions are one thing. Actual colonization, involving hundreds of colonists and dozens of spacecraft, together with their associated support infrastructure, would consume resources on a planet-wide scale. So for today and into the immediate future ... quite correct ... there is no Planet B. An alternative would be terra-forming: alter the Martian climate so that, over several centuries, by the time human arrived on Mars, Mars would have become a reasonable facsimile of earth. Melt the ice caps, release CO-2 into the Martian atmosphere so as to induce – ah! the irony! – global warming / climate change on Mars, change the soil chemistry by seeding the Martian surface with the right chemicals, etc., etc., etc. But – again – this would take centuries, and with present technology, it would not be possible at all.

But it could become possible ... with science! Not tomorrow. Not next week. Not within my lifetime. But someday. That’s fine. Science is “always already” future-oriented, especially science applied toward future problems and goals. So to simply say, as I have heard people connected with the March say, “There Is No Planet B” – *and simply stop there as if that were the last word* – is to say that science itself, including the sciences that would support planetary colonization, should ... just ... simply ... stop, because colonization itself, colonization *per se*, colonization *tout court*, is a dead end. But **the real dead end is to permanently renounce planetary colonization**. As I argued previously, that would be a permanent dead end, all right: for the entire human species. Lurking behind the “No Planet B” rhetoric is also the perception that science does not enable us to walk and chew gum at the same time, by *encouraging us to believe the false dichotomy that we can either care for the earth or work toward planetary colonization ... but not both*. *This is demonstrably not true, and actually works toward the discrediting of science*. The same science that allows us to both light up cities and to incinerate them can allow us to care for this earth and to locate and colonize some distant-future “Earth 2.0”. That is not a choice we need to make. Believing we have to make such a choice is just a 21st-century version of the old and long-discredited, early-60s argument that we have enough problems on earth, so why do we need to be concerned about our own moon or the moons of Saturn.

But to its credit -- and probably quite inadvertently -- the March for Science did raise what is arguably the most fundamental question of all. Given the multiple-century time-frames required for serious, large-scale planetary colonization ... is the human race, at its most basic biological level, evolved to be capable of planning for such vast periods. Here, I am not encouraged. And the "No Planet B" rhetoric gives me ample reason to believe the answer is "No, we humans are not evolved to be capable of such long-term planning". Humans' cognitive and perceptory apparatus were evolved to deal with short-term threats and short-term problems. If you are being frozen by the gales blowing off the great glaciers covering Europe, you learn to build a fire to keep you and your family warm **right-freakin'-now**. If everyone learns the trick and starts building fires, and especially when they discover new technologies for building new kinds of fires, yes, there probably will be destructive consequences from nuclear waste, greenhouse gases, etc., etc., etc. But you are concerned with keeping yourself and yours warm **right now**. What will happen after a couple millennia of greenhouse gases have warmed the ambient temperature enough to turn **all** of San Diego into Sea World ... well ... that is for future generations of that day to deal with. So we work -- and vote -- so as to minimize discomfort in a year, or 2 years, or 4 years. Maybe another intelligent species somewhere with mean lifetimes measured in say five digits' worth of years can plan in terms of centuries and millennia. But not us.

So, at the end of the day, "There Is No Planet B" may well be a comment, not on the availability of alternate habitats for the human race, but for the human race itself and its mortality as a species. "No Planet B" may be just shorthand for Hamlet's soliloquy about "the undiscovered country, from whose bourn no traveller returns, [that] puzzles the will, and makes us rather bear those ills we have, than fly to others that we know not of. Thus conscience doth make cowards of us all ... "

Y'all have a nice day, y'hear?!

Chapter 13 – Jumping the Brexit Shark

For the last several weeks, I have been following the news out of the UK about the Parliament's vote on PM Theresa May's foredoomed plan for Brexit, including one installment of "Prime Minister's questions," which, for obvious reasons, centered on the still-falling debris from the May government's unprecedented 230-vote blow-up of Mrs. May's Brexit deal. It had all the tragic dignity of, say, Sophocles' *Oedipus* trilogy: you know what is going to happen, but for that very reason, you simply cannot bring yourself to avert your gaze. I was all the more horrified because, knowing the Parliament vote was imminent and that it would be followed by the 29 March deadline imposed by Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty, I had begun some weeks before to read about the European Union (EU), Brexit, and the consequences of both for the UK. In other words, I jumped the shark and began to teach myself at least the rudiments of EU governance and the consequences of the impending exit -- which by now will probably be a no-deal "crash-out" of the UK therefrom. **At this point – full disclosure -- I probably know just enough to be dangerous.** But what I did learn, and what I found most fascinating, in a kind of watching-a-python-swallow-a-full-grown-goat-whole kind of way, are the similarities motivating both Brexit and the election of the US's first overtly fascist President in Donald Trump.

If you place as trivial a value on your peace of mind as I do, and if you are interested in following my meandering footsteps across the minefield of Brexit politics, you can do no better than to read two books, both of which could serve as textbooks for an entry-level course we might call "Brexit 101": *Brexit: What the Hell Happens Now* by Ian Dunt (hereafter *Brexit*) and *Well, You Did Ask – Why the UK Voted to Leave the EU* by Michael Ashcroft and Kevin Culwick (hereafter *Ask*). Mr. Dunt does an immense service, especially for us non-Europeans, by setting the proper context for Brexit by means of an illuminating discussion of the true purpose of the by-now-infamous Article 50. The relevant section of that terse 300-or-so-word paragraph is as follows:

*The treaties [governing membership in the EU, together with all other ancillary agreements relating thereto] shall cease to apply to the State in question [, i.e., to the State seceding from the EU] from the date of entry into force of the withdrawal agreement or, failing that, two years after the notification referred to in paragraph 2, unless the European Council, in agreement with the Member States concerned, **unanimously** decides to extend this period. [boldface added]*

The clock has been ticking off the two years ever since 29 March 2017, when the British government gave official notice of the results of the Brexit referendum and its intent to withdraw from the EU. Hence the "magic date" of 29 March 2019. Dunt goes on to comment *The important fact is that Article 50 is brutal. ... [T]he former Italian prime minister Giuliano Amato [the author of Article 50] said shortly after the Brexit vote "My intention was that it should be a classic safety valve that was there, but never used."*

But Article 50 turned out to be a "safety valve" only in the same sense that the nuclear self-destruct device installed in the starship *Nostramo* in the movie *Alien* was a similar "safety valve". So the British public, *via* the Brexit referendum, led first by PM Cameron and subsequently by PM May, acted the part of Ellen Ripley and **actually used the "safety valve"**. Article 50's purpose is punitive: as Dunt says *Article 50 will make any country that leaves the EU suffer*. Given the events of the past two years, combined with the ineptitude of PM May's Brexit ministers (e.g., Boris Johnson, Liam Fox, and David Davis ... keep reading), Article 50 promises to fulfill this punitive purpose spectacularly well. One can think of Article 50 in much the same terms with which one thinks of a nuclear deterrent: both are

intended never to be used, but if they ever *are actually* used, deterrence has failed and catastrophe is the result.

Like the election of Donald Trump, much of the support for Brexit in the referendum was purely emotional. Says Dunt, quoting Aaron Banks, millionaire supporter of Brexit, *As Aaron Banks said ... "Facts don't work. You have got to connect with people emotionally. It's the Trump success"*. The following lines from Dunt should strike a responsive chord among Americans: *Those in favor of Brexit closed their ears to discussions about complexity*. [Despite being a short book, Dunt's *Brexit* is full to bursting with witheringly comprehensive and dauntingly technical discussions of just these complexities. -- JRC] *A political culture took hold where baseless optimism was prized over sobriety*. With the US stock market going up and down more erratically than Stormy Daniels' knickers, is anyone "tired of winning" yet?

Again, as with Trump, one of the most salient issues driving the Brexit controversy and referendum was the issue of immigration. If anything, immigration is an even more volatile issue in the UK than in the US. I say that because under the EU constitution, one of the explicit goals is to *encourage* and to *facilitate* immigration among member states. That is the purpose of the visa-less travel facilitated by the Schengen zone, for which the US has no equivalent. As Ashworth and Culwick say in *Ask*, *People associated the EU with excessive immigration, pointless rules and regulations, and having to pay for other countries' economic problems*. Does anyone hear distinctly Trumpian echoes of skepticism, often outright hostility, to immigration (both legal and illegal), the proliferation of rules and regulations (e.g., coal mines' dumping of waste into streams), and paying for other countries' economic problems (e.g., irritation about NATO nations not paying "their fair share," as though NATO were a group dinner where people split the check)?

But the immigration issue is, in both the EU and the UK, by far the most volatile issue. It is volatile for two reasons: one emotional, the other economic. In some cases, Ashworth and Culwick note in *Ask*, there are persistent ethnic divisions that separate British citizens from immigrants: *Immigrants are a specific caste*, asserted one *Ask* interviewee. *No Brit will invite an immigrant home for dinner. Maybe by the second or third generation you will be allowed to be a real friend to a Brit. (Please note that I make no judgment as to whether this assessment is objectively true or not.* But it is indisputably a feeling that, right or wrong, is shared by a number of immigrants to Britain about the desirability on the part of Britons of immigrants and immigration.) Economically and in terms of trade, there is the intimate interlinking of free movement within the EU and access to the single market, a point Dunt recurs to again and again in *Brexit*. This is where the rubber really meets the road *vis a vis* Trump's trade policy.

[T]he influential Brussels-based Bruegel think tank released a report arguing that the EU should concede on [the issue of visa-free movement] a la the Schengen zone. Unlike freedom of goods, services, and capital, the free movement of people was political, not economic [argued Bruegel].

Donald Trump could teach a master class on the Bruegel conclusion, though Trump's version of such a class would conjure the demons of MS-13 and organized crime, while simultaneously deferring to European cultural fears of immigrants from the Levant. One spark of optimism in Brexit is Dunt's speculation that an "emergency brake" on immigration into the UK, limiting immigration to perhaps 50,000 immigrants per year or a temporary 5- to 7-year suspension of free movement thereto might be agreeable to both the EU and the UK. But Dunt pulls back on the reins after a flash of tentative

optimism: *But would Brexiters accept it? The answer to that is probably no.* Given Trump's free-floating xenophobia, the answer would most likely be the same for him. Once again, Trump as an individual and the EU as a community, or at least the "Leave" faction, are in agreement.

Trump and PM May's Brexit ministers also share, not only a lack of elementary professional competence, but, also like Trump, a common predisposition to incoherence. In order to make the reading of this column as pain-free as possible, I restrict myself to citing only one example from Boris Johnson, with the strict understanding that analogous examples populate the portfolios of Liam Fox and David Davis. Johnson, Fox, and Davis are often referred to in the British press as "The Three Musketeers". I would prefer the sobriquet "The Gang That Couldn't Shoot Straight".

In a Telegraph column days after the [Brexit referendum] vote, Johnson wrote "British people will still be able to go and work in the EU. To live, to travel, to study; to buy homes and settle down." He was describing freedom of movement. This would imply Britain was staying in the single market. In his next Telegraph column, Johnson promised the exact opposite: Britain would end freedom of movement and strike a free trade deal with the EU, both of which would only be possible if we left the single market.

Makes one positively nostalgic for "covfefe," dunnit?

Rather than rehearse in detail the arguments of *Brexit* and *Ask*, for which I have neither the time nor the space, it might be best to take a step or two back and contemplate the horror scenario that begins Dunt's book: the vision of the UK simply crashing out of the EU with no agreement to mitigate the Article 50 apocalypse, e.g., traffic jams on both sides of the Channel Tunnel, diabetics running out of insulin, cancer patients running out of chemotherapy drugs, divorces (and marriages and child-custody rulings) recognized on one side of the English Channel but not the other, planes unable to leave from Heathrow or Gatwick, etc. (Remember: planes are allowed in and out because of treaties between, e.g., the US and EU -- not the US and the UK -- but by Article 50, landing rights between the US and the UK have been abrogated. The only sovereignty on which American planes may land is the EU, no longer the UK. These treaties would have to be renegotiated.) If anything, Dunt's horror story is excessively optimistic. Leaving the EU, like Trump's purely discretionary tariff war with China, Canada, etc., is a grand instance of the cutting off of one's nose despite the consequences to one's face.

In the days leading up to 29 March, we would do well to remember: sometimes the worst *can* happen, "baseless optimism" notwithstanding. There is such a thing as "toxic optimism". Even if you think you would never get tired of winning.

Chapter 14 – “Trans” Restrooms or What to Do in Lieu of a Loo

I have a scandalously radical idea about how to resolve the transgender restroom crisis. Let’s use two rusty, neglected, but potentially still-useful tools: (a) reason / rationality, and (b) mathematics. Regarding both, despite a diligent internet search, I have been able to find no – as in “identically zero” – documented, or even **und**ocumented / anecdotal, instances of a trans person committing any sexual assault, or even non-sexual assault, in any restroom. (By contrast, Binging or Googling for sexual assaults *against* transgender people, i.e., where the transgendered person is the **victim** rather than the perpetrator, easily and instantly returns multiple digits' worth of "hits".) So, despite that, for the purposes of this column, I will assume that, *contra* the facts as I have been able to determine them, the propensity for trans people committing sexual assault is the same as the same propensity for sexual predation in the general population. In addition to being a practical necessity – after all, I *do* have to start somewhere – this has the additional advantage of establishing a statistical “does-not-exceed ceiling” on the prevalence of sexual predation on the part of trans people. I.e., under these assumptions, it will be possible to derive a number quantifying the **maximum** probability of being a victim of sexual predation committed by a transgender person – always bearing in mind that, as far as I have been able to determine, actual, empirical evidence for such sexual assault seems to be zero. With all the above in mind ...

o Given that the bills currently being considered by State legislatures pertain to public bathrooms, a relevant question is *How many public bathrooms are there in the United States?*

According to Quora.com, there are – I’m using numbers as round as possible – about 200 million public restrooms in the United States. Let’s assume they are evenly divided between men’s and women’s restrooms: 100 million for men; 100 million for women. Granted some restrooms are epicene / unisex, but I will assume the numbers for these will not materially affect the following, because the unisex numbers are assumed to be small, and besides, if a restroom is unisex, then the “where to go” problem for trans people is moot.

o Another relevant issue would be *How many trans people are there in the United States?*

According to InfoPlease, there are approximately, in round-as-possible numbers, about 700,000 transgender people in the United States.

o Given that I am assuming – **again, *contra* the evidence I have been able to ascertain** -- that the prevalence of sexual predation in the trans community is essentially the same as for the general population, the number of sexual predators (of all types) in the US is also relevant. According to StatisticBrain, there are about – again, round numbers – 750,000 sexual predators in the US. (I am assuming that being a convicted sex offender is synonymous with “sexual predator,” an assumption that seems reasonable to me – *modulo* the distinction between “convicted” and “latent but inactive and undiscovered”).)

Since the US has a total population of about 330 million, this means that the proportion of sexual predators relative to the general US population is approximately $750,000 / 330,000,000$, or .00227, i.e., about one-tenth of two percent.

Now, if the same proportion of sexual predators prevails in the transgender community, that means that the number of transgender sexual predators – of all types – is $.00227 \times 700,000$, or, in round numbers, about 1600 trans sexual predators in the US as a whole.

Now ... given all the above ... and assuming the propensity for sexual predation in the trans community is approximately the same as that same propensity in the general US population ... given all that

What is the probability that I will encounter an experience of sexual predation perpetrated by a transgender person in any given men's restroom?

Well, obviously this requires that the trans person and I happen to use the same restroom at essentially the same time. If the two of us are “ships that pass in the night” ... no harm, no foul.

All other things being equal – which they aren't, of course, but keep reading – the probability that I will enter **any** of the given public restrooms in the US – from Unalakleet, AK, to Key West, FL – is obviously 1 chance in 100,000,000, i.e., a probability of 10^{-8} .

In order to suffer sexual assault, it would be necessary for one – I am assuming *only* one -- of the purely hypothetical 1600 sexually predatory trans people enter the same restroom. The probability of this is $1600 / 100,000,000$, i.e., $1.6 \times 10^3 / 10^8 = 1.6 \times 10^{-5}$.

So the probability of us both – myself **and** the sexually predatory trans person – entering the same restroom at the same time, assuming both uses of the restroom were independent events, i.e., not causally related, would then be:

The probability that I will enter the men's room x the probability that one of the 1600 trans people will enter = $10^{-8} \times (1.6 \times 10^{-5}) = 1.6 \times 10^{-13}$, in round numbers, **about 1 chance in ten trillion.**

Furthermore, if we take into account gender differences -- a trans male would presumably no longer use the women's restroom -- then the probability is even smaller.

In that case, we have 800 sexually predatory trans males -- the "male half" the original 1600 -- entering the same men's restroom as I. The probability that one of the 800 will enter **any** given men's room is $800 / 100,000,000$, i.e., $8 \times 10^2 / 10^8$, i.e., 8×10^{-6} . So the probability that our hypothetical trans predator would enter **the same men's restroom as I** would be similar to the previous case: $10^{-8} \times (8 \times 10^{-6}) = 8 \times 10^{-14}$, in round numbers, *about 8 chances in 100 trillion.*

(I would wager that it would be fascinating to calculate the corresponding probability of suffering a sexual assault if we replace our hypothetical trans sex predator by a hypothetical sexually repressed, conservative member of Congress or the clergy. The difference, of course, is that the latter is decidedly *not* merely hypothetical.)

Of course, as I said earlier, all things are not equal. It is exceedingly unlikely that I will use any public men's restroom in Unalakleet, AK, or in Key West, FL, in any realistically conceivable future. I may well **never** use such a facility in **either** place. It is much more likely that I will use public facilities in my immediate vicinity, probably the Greater Seattle area, or where I have family and in-laws -- in my

case, Wichita, KS, or somewhere on the Big Island of HI, respectively. So, as a matter of practical fact, I will not have all 100 million men's restrooms at my disposal, so the "hunting ground" for a hypothetical trans sexual predator would be dramatically smaller. But so would the hypothetical trans sexual predator **population**: the smaller "hunting ground" is, I would argue, compensated for by a correspondingly **smaller "hunter" population**. So, in light of those mutually compensating circumstances, the conclusion seems to me warranted that the foregoing probabilities would likely change, but not dramatically so when we concentrate on the real world.

So what's the overall bottom line vis a vis State trans bathroom legislation, both enacted and proposed?

Very simply, even under the most wildly *pessimistic* assumption -- not borne out by any actual data I am aware of and have been able to discover -- that the incidence of sexual predation within the transgender community is comparable to the same incidence within the general US population ... even under such pessimistic assumptions ... the probability of anyone of either sex experiencing sexual assault in a public restroom perpetrated by a transgendered individual is literally a few chances in ten or a hundred trillion -- i.e., approaching identically zero. Moreover, the foregoing implicitly assumes that a hypothetical trans sexual predator would be irresistibly driven to assault me the moment he encountered me in a men's room. But even the most vicious depraved serial predators like the Green River killer and Ted Bundy do not assault literally every woman they encounter. So even my order-of-magnitude estimates above are unrealistically pessimistic. Rather, as I said in the beginning, the foregoing estimates are in the nature of "not-to-exceed ceilings", i.e., the probability of being assaulted by a trans sexual predator in a public restroom are **no more than** about 1 in 10 trillion or 1 in 100 trillion, depending on the size of the population of predators. And even those order-of-magnitude estimates implicitly assume that **every** trans sexual predator would respond to **every** restroom encounter, Terminator-cyborg-like, by automatically attacking **every** potential victim.

For some perspective on what these numbers mean, consider ... Let's say that, **once each minute**, a given transsexual sexual predator enters a bathroom with a potential victim. Let's also assume that our hypothetical trans sexual predator is indeed a transsexual Terminator-cyborg whose programming instills in him an irresistible imperative to attack **every single potential victim every single time he encounters such**. Those order-of-magnitude estimates imply that -- **worst case** -- the trans predator would carry out an **actual** attack once in 20 million years, in the 1-in-10-trillion case, and once in 200 million years in the 1-in-100-trillion case (round-as-possible numbers in both cases). Finally, consider that 200 million years is a little less than the length of time since the end-Permian Great Extinction event that killed off 90% of the species on the planet.

(Granted, the foregoing numbers only yield the probability that **one** trans predator will attack **one** victim, whereas there are -- by assumption -- 1600 trans predators in the hypothetical "hunter" population. But relative to the population of the US, the number of public restrooms, and the vanishingly small probability of one-on-one encounters -- the magnitude of the relevant numbers, both large and small -- the exponent of 3 on the 10 in the 1600 -- 1.6×10^3 -- makes only a negligible difference.)

In view of this, it is utterly unconscionable that State legislatures are even contemplating, much less passing, legislation that would force transgendered individuals to agonize about what they will do in lieu of a loo.

Chapter 15 – Concerning Uncounted Chickens and the Enlightenment

As anyone knows who has read more than a half-dozen or so of these “Skeptic’s” columns over the years, especially those emphasizing some aspect of history, one of my all-time favorite quotes is by the German historian and philosopher of history G. W. F. Hegel: “The only thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history,” an assertion no less true for being facially self-contradictory. A simpler, more colloquial, and less high-falutin’, way of saying the same thing is “Don’t count your chickens before they’re hatched”. Many of the comments, predictions, and prognostications being bandied about by the liberal / progressive community in advance of the 2018 mid-term elections sorely tempts me to conclude that, having lost the last presidential election, progressives have apparently renounced the vocation of politics and taken up that of running a poultry farm: the election of 2016 taught them nothing. By insisting with square-jawed determination that eggs simply *are* chickens, my progressive siblings seemed determined to provide one more practical demonstration of Hegel’s wisdom.

At bottom, this determination is founded on a base combining intellectual arrogance and ideological myopia. By and large, progressives and people on the left generally, while not being doctoral-level students of world history, nevertheless more or less unconsciously think, contemplate, decide, and act within the classically liberal tradition of the European Enlightenment of the 18th century. Even if they are religiously devout, their devotion to their faith is severely tempered by being subject to the tutelage of Reason. They are cognates of the metaphor Plato uses in the *Phaedrus*: the spirit and the physical passions are like horses drawing a chariot being steered by Reason. Does Plato’s chariot-metaphor apply perfectly and invariably? Of course not. Even liberals, progressives, and leftists have an amygdala. But, by and large and perhaps above all, without even thinking about it, the default thought-form of progressives and of people religiously and politically left-or-center incorporates several aspects that make it difficult to encounter Trump supporters ... and that usually leave progressives dazedly shaking their heads. Without going into detail, some of these attitudes and world-views are:

o Evidence is important

Except for *a priori* analytic statements, i.e., more or less, statements that are true by definition (e.g., “All bachelors are unmarried”), no assertions are self-validating and therefore require evidence (e.g., “A significant component of global warming / climate change is attributable to human activity”).

o Science has credibility

Why? Because science is evidence-based. *Science is not a particular discipline. It is a methodology.* Never mind the technical details of the scientific method. Suffice to say that science is important because evidence is important, evidence that is publicly examinable, repeatable, and empirically derived.

o Logic is important

“Logic” simply refers to the necessary connections between statements and beliefs, both those of subjective taste and those of objective knowledge. I am most emphatically **not** free to believe “just any damn thing I want”. If I am disgusted by a movie in which a man treats a woman as a “sex toilet,” then logic demands that I require that men not sexually maltreat or harass or assault women. If I am appalled

by slavery, then I cannot logically oppose the removal of public statues celebrating and honoring it. It is most likely that very few, if any, people live in a manner consistent with their own beliefs and principles. But such inconsistencies are usually regarded as pathological conditions to be corrected, not as virtues to be cultivated.

Does it seem that I am belaboring the obvious by spending so much time and text discussing self-evident principles? If so, that is because you are probably a progressive. These principles, and others I did not mention, like those enumerated in Steven Pinker's much more comprehensive list in *Enlightenment Now*, are not shared universally. At one point in his formidable book, Pinker asks

Who could be against reason, science, humanism, and progress? ... Do these ideals really need a defense? They absolutely do. Since the 1960s, trust in the institutions of modernity has sunk, and the second decade of the 21st century saw the rise of populist movements that blatantly repudiate the ideals of the Enlightenment. They are tribalist rather than cosmopolitan, authoritarian rather than democratic, contemptuous of experts rather than respectful of knowledge ...

Sound like anyone we know?

In particular, these Enlightenment principles are **not** shared by most supporters of Donald Trump and the contemporary Republican Party, e.g., Freedom Caucus Republicans and the Tea Party. The very fact that these principles seem self-evident to so many people -- many of whom, I would argue, know next to nothing about the European Enlightenment, its roots in European history, its architects and luminaries, and its tenets, and who would never think of claiming the label of "progressive" -- the very transparency of these principles is the result of *misconceiving of the Trump movement as a political movement* instead of what it really is: a religious movement, and specifically an atavistic hyper-fundamentalist religious movement, at that. *That very disjunction between those who subscribe to Enlightenment principles and those who do not is fair warning against confusing chickens with eggs, and counting the former before they have hatched from the latter.*

Not all Christians are fundamentalists, or even conservative. There is a quite substantive left wing among Christians. The Christian left and Christian progressives do accept the principles of the Enlightenment without qualm, and even see those principles as essential safeguards of their own, and their sect's, moral and religious conscience. By no means should all Christians be painted with the same brush.

But among Christians who are to the right of the spectrum, their understanding of the Enlightenment and their assent to its principles weakens as you move farther and farther to the right. (If you want to observe one of the more militant forms of the anti-Enlightenment Christian bias in action, you can do no better than to read two books by the late Francis Schaeffer: *How Should We Then Live?* and *A Christian Manifesto*.) This is why it is so notoriously difficult to discuss science, politics, and religion in conversations between progressives and conservatives: the two parties are, not only playing the game according to different rules, they are, in fact, playing *altogether different games*. The rules may sound superficially similar, but they could hardly be more different. This difference is decisive in predicting how each group will react to different inputs and stimuli, and, perhaps most significantly for progressives, in predicting how conservatives and Trump supporters will vote.

Take one principle in particular: **logic is important**. If you believe logic is important and that words and actions should be mutually consistent, then, if you are a Christian, Trump's sexual escapades, and the dissimulation and outright lies he has told to conceal or to mitigate them, will considerably weaken him as a candidate and will weaken the candidacies of those who support him. In fact, this probably will be the result if you are a devout Christian *progressive*. (Granted, if you really are a "devout Christian progressive," it would be most unlikely you would vote for anyone supporting Trump's agenda, anyway, but Trump's florid sexual history probably would not make you *more* likely to do so.) But if you are a devout Christian *conservative*, especially fundamentalist, such inconsistencies may well make you **more** likely to vote for Trump supporters, not less. Why? As articles in *The Guardian* and *The Intellectualist* argue -- correctly, I think -- at this point on this issue, conservative Christians point to prophecies in the Hebrew Bible predicting that a Persian king, Cyrus, would be God's instrument for Israel's reclamation of the land lost in the Babylonian and Assyrian conquests. In other words, Cyrus would "**Make [Israel] Great Again**". Cyrus was no one's idea of a good Jew, any more than Trump is anyone's idea of a good Christian. But, argue conservative Christians, God's sovereign supervenience of history overrules any merely political calculus. (The ideological DNA of such a stance extends all the way back to Tertullian's *De Carne Christi* : *Prorsus credibile est, quia ineptum est*, arguably the most misunderstood patristic principle, but let's not go rabbit-hunting, shall we?) Of course, conservative Christians are deafeningly silent on St. Paul's repudiation of one possible inference from this principle: "Shall we continue in sin that Grace may abound? God forbid." But the point is that, in the face of God's sovereignty over history, even logic sometimes must yield in the conservative Christian mind.

As for the veracity of science ... the validity of that has been in doubt among conservative Christians since at least 1859, when the first edition of Darwin's *Origin of Species* was published, and completely collapsed when *The Descent of Man*, originally a separate work, was published shortly thereafter. This explains why conservative Christians are not impressed when progressives cite the high-nineties percent of climatologists who affirm the existence of human-caused climate change, and the basically unanimous support for Big Bang cosmology. It also explains why there is such a bull market for creationism and intelligent design among conservative Christians: both run diametrically counter to science, which renders them more credible to conservatives, not less.

The point of all the foregoing is that, when it comes to predicting the downfall of Trumpists and of Trumpism in the off-year elections, *progressives often naively assess the issue exactly 180 degrees backward*. They critique Trump, Trumpists, and Trumpism according to the norms and canons of the 18th-century European Enlightenment: cogency of logic, corroborating evidence, scientific rigor, etc., etc., etc., the usual criteria of Enlightenment-centric liberal society, i.e. the very values and criteria Trump, Trumpists, and Trumpism do not share, that they consider alien to the point of hostility. **Such evaluative methods are -- in the strictly etymological sense -- preposterous: front-to-back wrong, literally "ass-backwards", in terms of how Trump supporters, and the Trump ideology, view the matter.** That climate change is exhaustively corroborated *renders it less credible*, not more. That Trump is a sexual predator invests him with *more* authority as a leader -- remember Cyrus! -- *not less*. Debating Trump supporters, and predicting the likelihood of their downfall in the 2018 elections, on the basis of Enlightenment standards / criteria is diametrically wrong-headed. You may as well be a Johns Hopkins evolutionary geneticist arguing gene therapy with a witch doctor from New Guinea.

So forget being a chicken farmer: do not allow rosy scenarios based on the ideology of liberal democracy to egg you on.

Chapter 16 – Re-Fighting the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest

I hated saying it the first time, and I hate even more saying it again. The only reason I said it the first time, and the only reason I'm saying it again, is because I think that, for reasons of mental hygiene if nothing else, we progressives / leftists / liberals, i.e., those of us still possessed of a functioning prefrontal cortex, must remain firmly tethered to reality. Besides, in addition to personal hygiene, for the sake of the Nation we dare not follow the fascist-adjacent right, lemming-like, over the cliff of "alternative facts."

So I will swallow the bitter pill and say it yet again:

(1) *There will be no "blue wave" in November*

We will more than likely see the usual scenario repeated whereby ... yes, to be sure ... the party holding the White House loses some seats in an off-year election. (Only twice since World War 2 has the party holding the White House *gained* seats in an off-year election.) But it will be nothing like the Republican equivalent of what 2010 was to Democrats under President Obama, i.e., a decisive defeat, verging on a blow-out. The Congress-in-waiting we wake up to on the morning of 7 November will be substantially the Congress of the evening of 5 November. Not identically, of course, but substantially. But even if November should be the Republicans' equivalent of 2010 for the Democrats ... that is ...

(2) *... even if the House should change hands, **the Senate will not***

Why is (2) important?

If you really need to ask that question, you have not been paying attention. But never mind that. I'll tell you anyway: *(2) is important because, absent a 2/3 Senate majority to depose Trump, any impeachment or even an invocation of the Twenty-Fifth Amendment (hereafter TFA) will accomplish nothing.* (Given the gravity of the issue, even a Democrat-controlled *House* might not muster the 2/3 majority requisite under TFA. After all, even after two years of Trump and his craven lickspittles, Democrats have not distinguished themselves with conspicuous displays of rigid spines. The last member of either House to display such just died. In fact, we watched his funeral at the National Cathedral. And be it noted: he was a Republican. I must say, however, in the interest of fairness, Attorney-General Jeff Sessions has so far displayed remarkable integrity in recusing himself and in refusing to back down in the face of Trump's neolithic slobberings.) Absent the 2/3 majority in the Senate requisite to actually -- goddamit all -- **doing** something, any "blue wave" that gave control of the House to Democrats would merely dash itself against the impregnable sea-wall of Republican opposition in the Senate, and therefore only afford the Democratic Party in the House a stellar opportunity to practice public legislative masturbation: a harmless enough activity as long as you refuse to believe it actually ... you know ... **accomplishes** anything like ... oh ... say ... deposing an illegitimate President and thereby preserving constitutional government in the American Republic.

Moreover, I think an **un**successful impeachment attempt or an abortive invocation of TFA might well only result in a *wounded* Trump, like merely wounding a mother bear with a .22-caliber round. We might then discover that what we have seen so far is only "Trump Lite," and that a wounded Trump would, like that mother bear, be even more vicious. I think it would even be unwise to rule out the

possibility of a 21st-century version of the 1933 burning of the Reichstag, i.e., a manufactured crisis (e.g., an alleged attack across the DMZ by North Korea, a container ship allegedly holding a nuclear weapon docked in an American port, etc. ... especially in the evidence-free Trumpian universe of "alternative facts," the possibilities are endless) that would give Trump an excuse to grab more power, up to and including the suspension of civil liberties and the declaration of martial law, both of which well-housebroken Republicans would obediently come to heel and support. Wounded bears aside, I think Andrew Sullivan hit on the best analogy to the present situation in his 7 Sep 2018 *Daily Intelligencer* column:

We have a president holding liberal democracy hostage, empowered by a cult following. The goal is to get through this without killing any hostages, i.e., without irreparable breaches in our democratic system. Come at him too directly and you might provoke the very thing you are trying to avoid. Somehow, we have to get the nut job to put the gun down and let the hostages go, without giving in to any of his demands.

A task that would probably intimidate even *NCIS: Los Angeles*. For the old rule of regicide -- which, for the record, I intend strictly as metaphor -- still holds: if you strike the King, strike to kill, not merely to wound.

One is reminded of Neville Chamberlain's quasi-erotic fantasies about playing nice with Hitler concerning the Sudetenland at Munich in 1938. (Umm ... you **do** know about that, right? ... or have you, like too many on the left, written off the history of the West as merely a *kabuki* drama played out by dead, white, patriarchal European males?) The tragic difference, of course, is that Great Britain and her Empire had Winston Churchill waiting in the wings to administer a slap to the face to the pacifist and Oswald Mosley / British-fascist wing of Britons, bring them back to reality, and rescue them from Chamberlain's dangerous folly. I say the difference is "tragic" -- for us -- because I see no analogous Churchillian figure on the left side of the American horizon to render the same service for us. Ideology and party be damned, Sen. McCain might well have played that role, but what Rudyard Kipling once called "the lords of Life and Death" are evidently in a foul mood these days.

Democrats, and the left generally, make the same mistake with today's right -- please note: I said "**today's** right", i.e., not the right of William F. Buckley, William Rusher, Mary Ann Glendon, and James Burnham, all of sainted memory -- that Chamberlain made with Hitler: Chamberlain argued his case from the standpoint of presuppositions and values *firmly rooted in the European Enlightenment of the 18th century*: rationality, fairness, the give-and-take of negotiation, the criticality of empirical evidence, free speech, etc., etc. Hitler shared none of those presuppositions and values. Hitler was not a habitue of the salons and seminars frequented by, e.g., Condorcet, Rousseau, Voltaire, Locke, Hume, the Encyclopedists, et. al. He was a straight-up denizen of the Teutoburg Forest of the early first century CE who was, above all else, concerned to commemorate the Teutoburgers' victory over the Roman legions by continuing to expand Teutonic hegemony. (Umm ... you **do** know about that, too ... right? ...) There was nothing genteel about Hitler. He was all about brute power, the closest approach to Nietzsche's "blonde beast" ever to appear in physical form -- Nietzsche's Anti-Christ instantiated. He was notoriously flatulent. He loved Wagner, not Haydn. Neville Chamberlain did not understand this. **Chamberlain did not understand that Hitler and the National Socialists had missed the European Enlightenment.** To his immortal credit, Winston Churchill did. But then, Winston Churchill believed unapologetically in the objective superiority of Enlightenment-centric classical liberalism over the grunting, spittle-spraying crudities of authoritarianism.

Similarly, today's progressives need a Churchill – preferably several such – on the left that, casting aside their endemic tendency to assume the best about their adversaries, understand about today's American right what Churchill understood about the Nazis: McConnell, Graham, etc. – in general, the Republican members of the Senate Judiciary Committee – do not give a flying shit about anything even remotely connected with liberal democracy, gender equality, constitutional government, due process, or, indeed, any of the Enlightenment principles enshrined in the Constitution they profess to revere even as they use that Document for toilet paper. Like the Germanic tribes fighting Varus's Romans 2000 years ago, they care about *power, period* – theirs and their party's. Someone said the Kavanaugh hearings were a job interview for the position of Associate Justice. They were right. But it is equally true that, e.g., to Lindsay Graham, they were a job interview, also: to be Jeff Sessions' replacement.

That is why there will be no blue wave: **like Neville Chamberlain, we on the left insist on taking the knife of Enlightenment-era principled rationality to the gun fight of raw-power confrontation.** Seduced by the Siren song of postmodernist nihilism, too many on the left see the former, not as a means for the liberation of the human spirit, but as a vehicle for aggressions, both micro- and mega-, and as an excuse to perpetuate some form of slavery. So they insist on invading the Teutoburg Forest with the collected works of Rousseau instead of RPGs. That does not mean advocating for a lack of principle. On the contrary, **principle is just the point.** We do not have to channel McConnell on Merrick Garland. But we do have to learn to be just as coldly Machiavellian as they. We have been "harmless as doves" long enough. We need to learn to be "wise as serpents". And to bite and to sting like same. We can no longer play nice. It took Churchill to teach that lesson to Great Britain and her Empire.

Which leads me back to my original question: who will be *our* Churchill?

PS -- If events should prove me wrong in my predictions, if there is a "blue wave" -- i.e., if the Romans win the latter-day Battle of the Teutoburg Forest -- please feel free to remind me of this endlessly. I assure you, I will be as ecstatic as everyone else!

PPS -- Those of you who are waiting for me to repeat Scott Kelly's apology for his admiration of Winston Churchill should by all means feel free to wait for my apology until Kanye West votes straight-Democrat and until Madonna is again a virgin. The left needs to learn that its demands for pristine perfection betray a juvenile shallowness of intellect, since they have evidently never learned the tragic truth about politics: sometimes the Perfect is the mortal enemy of the Good -- and even of the Just Good Enough. Yet another reason there will be no "blue wave".

Chapter 17 – “Useful Idiots” and the Challenges of White House Humor

From time to time this past week, I have been watching commentary on Michelle Wolf's raucous 28 April White House Correspondents Dinner (WHCD) monologue about Trump and his *gauleiters* in the Republican party and elements of the American fascist community. As good as I am with the English language, even I am at a loss to find appropriate adjectives that would do justice to the arrant, bare-faced hypocrisy of Republicans in particular and conservatives in general, especially conservative Reformed / evangelical Christians. Far from surprisingly, members of both communities -- American para-fascists and conservative Reformed / evangelical Christians -- expressed the usual outrage that is *de rigueur* whenever they are criticized about their inconsistencies. (Yes, yes, I know: there are Reformed Protestant Christians who reject Trump, but they are the exceptions that prove the rule.) I say that for several good reasons, among which are:

I have never heard anyone express a similar level of outrage about ...

- o Trump openly talking about grabbing women by the genitals, including advocating similar actions on the part of other men.

- o Urging his followers to assault opponents

- o On several occasions, advocating the wholesale gutting of First Amendment of speech and press, up to and including prior restraint. *NY Times v. Sullivan* is to Trump and his supporters what the *Roe* and *Casey* decisions are to anti-abortion activists.

- o Trashing due process and "free exercise" liberties by the registration of American Muslims for the mere "crime" of being Muslims and engaging in warrantless surveillance of mosques.

But on each such occasion, I have observed members the Reformed Christian lobby competing to outdo one another in crawling up their own intimate bodily orifices backwards to excuse Trump's behavior, and to see who would be first to give him a pass for deceptions that would have earned Barack Obama, at the very least, a bill of impeachment from any Republican Congress.

Now, on 28 April, along comes Michelle Wolf at the WHCD and drops a few f-bombs and assorted other Anglo-Saxon expletives -- i.e., uses **words** instead of committing **acts** (Neil DeGrasse Tyson via Twitter: "When did it become okay to be more offended by what someone with no power says than by what someone with power does?") -- and the American fascist community reacts as if ISIS hordes were marching down Constitution Ave, pissing on crucifixes, and raping Christian women along the way. (Fox News, by contrast, displaying its customary virtuosity in practicing Nietzsche's "transvaluation of all values," called Wolf's monologue "incredibly disrespectful".) Nor did the news media escape Wolf's mordant critique: CNN ("Breaking news"), Fox, and MSNBC {"This is who we are").

Which brings me to my sole adverse criticism of Wolf's excoriation: she left out the quote-progressive-unquote, boutique-progressive, liberal-purist Christian media like *Sojourners* et al., and their representatives like Cornel West, Wes Howard-Brook, et al., to whom Barack Obama was insufficiently pure. (One wonders: have these worthies ever read and internalized Romans 3:23? Apparently not.) Their delicate sensibilities would not allow them to support and advocate for a

progressive but imperfect candidate, and in consequence they succumbed to the perennial, and quintessentially Reformed-Christian, desire for a degree of perfection that always proves to be the enemy of the good -- and most especially of the good-*enough*.

So speaking of Russian involvement in the last election, the term полезные идиоты (“useful idiot”) leaps immediately to mind.

Chapter 18 – Electoral Politics 2016 as “Rasslin”

When I was a kid, and even into my early teens, I was a rabid professional wrestling fan. So was my dad. We would watch pro “rasslin” on our local TV in Wichita, KS, and cheer when the good guy, e.g. Pat O’Connor or Dory Funk, Jr., or Tommy Martin or Chief Jay Strongbow, delivered a *coup de grace* to the likes of Mr. Moto or The Sheik or Bob Geigel ... anyway, any of a number of bad guys. We would also watch previews of upcoming matches as a “rassler,” almost always one of the bad guys, would amp up viewers with bombastic predictions of how he would crush his good-guy opponent the week or evening following. Dad and I scarfed it up, even as my fundamentalist-Baptist mother sat in an adjoining room reading her Bible and praying earnestly for the eternal well-being of our immortal souls. Seriously now ... no brag, just fact ... I think this time spent watching pro “rasslin” is why I can, with all due modesty, lay valid claim to having a deeper-than-average, untutored but instinctive, understanding of the psychology driving and sustaining the Trump campaign. It is also the reason why I can understand why all the critiques thus far levied against Trump have failed to touch him, if anything, often have even *bolstered* his popularity, and why I can also predict that future such attacks are all likewise doomed to fail. My analogy with pro “rasslin” also affords me a basis for asserting that there is really only one way to finally and fatally discredit Trump, and to describe such a strategy.

Let’s understand up front what that strategy is **not**. The anti-Trump strategy does **not** consist of attempting to duplicate Trump’s facility for guttersnipe rhetoric about biological functions and anatomical endowments. Sen. Marco Rubio’s attempts to do so only resulted in making my toenails ache from vicarious embarrassment. It was painfully obvious from the get-go that, when it comes to such language and such tropes, Rubio was a rank amateur, as much of an amateur as I would be if I tried to compete with Yitzhak Perlman as a violinist. I disagree with Sen. Rubio on just about everything. But Rubio strikes me as decorum personified, a gentleman in the most honorable sense of the term. Trump quite the contrary. They inhabit altogether different environments. Hogs wallow in mud and offal as a matter of nature. When people try to do it, it always comes across as artificial, forced, and histrionic. Unless you are Donald Trump. In which case, you are dealing with, not only a professional, but with a pig in human form and in its natural environment. (And my apologies for insulting pigs!) Scatology is to Donald Trump what the musical score of Mozart’s *Violin Concerto No. 3* is to Yitzhak Perlman. Just don’t ever go there. I don’t know, of course, but it would not surprise me in the least if Sen. Rubio, in his heart of hearts and while being too civilized to say as much publicly, agrees with all the above.

Problem is, even rationality and dispassionate critique do not work any better. An excellent, even classical, example of this strategy in action was provided by Hillary Clinton’s recent speech so scathingly critical of virtually all of Trump’s proposals, both as to domestic and foreign policy. Trump eats wonks the same way a diner in a Japanese restaurant eats *edamame* peas: as a light appetizer. And, perhaps more importantly, Trump’s acolytes and devotees enjoy the same appetizer *vicariously*, much as I enjoyed beating up on Bob Geigel by watching Pat O’Connor beat up on him for real. If this were a normal election, where the bombast and bluster are epiphenomena cast like a thin veil over substantive issues of law and policy, Sec. Clinton’s speech, and others like it to follow, would have nailed Trump to the wall. The speech would have marked her as a serious, substantive candidate with serious and substantive experience – and someone of presidential temperament, even if you disagree with her on matters of policy. But this is **not** a normal election. Trump’s **lack** of coherence and rationality are seen by his followers as **assets**, not liabilities. Anything smacking of a thoughtful, substantive critique is instantly labeled elitist and “PC”. So to attack his incoherence and irrationality

doesn't discredit him. It just gives frightened and angry people **more** reason to vote for him. For Trump is a walking id with a "yuge" ego ... but no trace of a *superego*. (Howzzat for an example of an elitist / "PC" allusion?) Trump reminds me of that extraterrestrial virus in *The Andromeda Strain*: the initial strategy was to destroy it by detonating the last-resort "doomsday" nuclear device underneath the secure laboratory, but it turned out that the virus *thrived on radiation*, so that a nuclear detonation would actually **feed** it, not kill it. More prosaically, trying to discredit Trump with any kind of rational critique, however trenchant, is like trying to put out a fire by pouring kerosene on it.

So what would be a truly decisive, dispositive strategy for once-and-for all discrediting Trump with stake-through-a-vampire's-heart finality? If (a) competing with him in the self-defeating game of mutual vilification and ridicule in a kind of *ad hominem* Olympics will not suffice -- as has already been amply and painfully demonstrated in the case of Sen. Rubio -- and if (b) refuting his candidacy by demonstrating his arrant incompetence, abysmal ignorance, and desperately dangerous disregard for the US Constitution, as Hillary Clinton recently attempted to do in her San Diego speech ... if neither (a) nor (b) will suffice ... then what? Is there a (c) strategy to defend the Nation against the walking embodiment of the very "domestic" enemies members of the Armed Forces are oath-bound to oppose? Well, I have good news and bad news. First the good news: yes, there is a strategy (c). Insofar as anything in life can be guaranteed, it is guaranteed to work. Now the bad news: you almost certainly will not like (c). Given that it is impossible for anyone to "out-scatologize" Trump by personal insult and invective, and given that Trump is a master of channeling his followers' slavering anti-intellectualism so as to warp serious critiques of his proposals and policies on grounds of rationality, facts, and logic. (Remember: we are citizens of a Nation where roughly half the people **accept** the belief that Jesus will return in their lifetime, and where roughly one-third also **reject** evolution.) Strategy (c) for decisively discrediting Donald Trump and his candidacy is both simple to state and horrifying to contemplate:

(c) Go ahead and elect Donald J. Trump President of the United States

Please understand: **I am not advocating. I am not campaigning.** Least of all for Donald Trump. If I could gaze into a crystal ball and see Trump defeated in November, and that by a humiliatingly decisive margin, both electorally and popularly, I would be the first to admit that I am over-reacting. I would not only open the champagne. I would *buy* the champagne. But given the utter failure, except for a couple of exceptions (Nicholas Kristof and, I think, Nate Silver) to predict the likelihood of Trump candidacy, I have adopted a policy of simply ignoring the commentariat's prognostications of Trump's political demise ... all of which have so far been premature. The one and only, sole, unique anti-Trump strategy I am willing to credit at this point is *the ignominious failure of an actual Trump Presidency*. So go ahead and elect him. Let him try to build his damn wall. Let him try to rewrite tort law -- and **State** tort law at that -- to re-inscribe in the statute books the 18th-century crime of "seditious libel" so he can use it to persecute his enemies at the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, who have had the audacity to actually believe that the "abridgement" clause of the First Amendment means what it says. Let him re-litigate *NY Times v. Sullivan*. Let him try to force Muslims -- including American Muslims -- to carry religious i.d. cards declaring their Muslim faith -- and thereby litigate what would surely be civil-rights cases based on the "free exercise" clause of the very First Amendment he gives every evidence of reviling. Let him try to deport 11 million undocumented immigrants without so much as a "by your leave" addressed to the Fifth Amendment's "due process" clause. Let him attempt to dissolve NATO in favor of returning Europe to a baroque system of interlocking local alliances ... you remember ... right? ... like the interlocking alliances that, in August

of 1914, functioned as a mutual suicide pact transforming the Continent and England into one vast abattoir. So let the loose cannon roll and hope that the aftermath will leave people willing to learn elementary lessons in ballistics and the use of artillery.

Assuming his ready-fire-aim approach to matters of global strategy and statesmanship did not eventuate in either a nuclear war, environmental apocalypse, or a trade war that would make the Great Depression look like a Sunday School ice-cream social, it would also be salutary for us, as a Nation, to suffer through the *Goetterdaemmerung* of an actual Trump presidency. Maybe we could regain, or begin nurturing in the first place, some minimal respect for facts, evidence, rationality, and civilized discourse that the Founders of the Nation and the Framers of its Constitution tried to teach the country they founded, and whose prospects for success seem now so much in doubt. An actual Trump Presidency might just serve us well as a form of national penance. Perhaps most especially for those fundamentalistic and Puritanical quote-progressives-unquote whose insistence on moral purity and ideological orthodoxy amounts to an arrogant refusal to learn that, in an imperfect world, *sometimes the best is the enemy of the just-good-enough*.

And when all that was over and we started digging out from under the rubble ... well ... see the title of this column, and remember: **y'always got me**.

Chapter 19 – The Primacy of Economics and the Rhetoric of “Manliness”

In an 1841 letter to the great Scottish essayist, satirist, and social critic Thomas Carlyle, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote “The Anglo-Saxon race [i.e., in the overall context of Emerson’s letter, the British] is proud and strong and selfish. *England maintains trade, not liberty.*” (italics added) The last five words could be taken as a summary of the state of the current discussion concerning trade and the economics of globalism. All parties to the discussion, regardless of their positions on particular issues, seem determined to “maintain[] trade, not liberty”. I recently ran across what might be considered a classical example of this attitude in an otherwise-excellent article in the Harvard Business Review by Prof. Joan C. Williams, Distinguished Professor of Law and Founding Director of the Center of WorkLife Law at the University of California, Hastings College of the Law. I have serious issues with her analysis of the results of the 2016 presidential election in terms of economics. But I will mostly skate over that, other than to recommend reflecting on Ta-Nehisi Coates’s assertion that the results of the election were determinatively influenced, much less by economics, than by “white fright” at the prospect of a two-term *black* President being succeeded by a *female* President.

I say I will “mostly skate over” Prof. Williams’s preparatory arguments – for so I regard them – but those preliminary theses are important to acknowledge as a preparation for dealing with (what I regard as) her most central – and, I would say, dangerous – position: “maintain[ing] trade over liberty”. But even with the ancillary arguments, it is difficult to know where to start. Throughout her article, she seems entangled between a concern to (a) acknowledge the validity of the white working class (WWC) and its concerns about the lack of wage growth while simultaneously (b) distancing herself from the concomitant prejudice and bigotry that so often accompany those valid economic issues. Even so, at times, she loses the battle for even-handedness. For example:

o Straight talk is seen as requiring manly courage, not being “a total wuss and a wimp,” an electronics technician told Lamont [one of the secondary sources Williams cites].

Not a word critiquing the prevalent WWC assumption that “straight talk” is a “manly” virtue – which would imply that a woman, not being a man, would be consigned to being “a total wuss and a wimp,” and therefore lacking a moral backbone. Also not a word even suggesting that “straight talk,” being by definition devoid of nuance, often oversimplifies issues, recalling H. L. Mencken’s trenchant observation that “for every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong”. Perhaps she would do the WWC a great service if she told them “Sorry, ladies and gentlemen, but matters are often not as simple as ‘straight talk’ usually makes them seem”.

o I wish manliness worked differently. But most men, like most women, seek to fulfill the ideals they’ve grown up with. For many blue-collar men, all they’re asking for is basic human dignity (male varietal).

No doubt, in the 1850s, apologists for slavery could as well say “I wish race worked differently. But most plantation owners seek to fulfill the ideals they’ve grown up with.” Williams is not an advocate for slavery, of course. But she seems to passively acquiesce to the WWC culture’s understanding of “manliness”. So her argument swerves away from a critique of WWC attitudes toward gender roles, and could serve as well as a vehicle to swerve away from issues of race and ethnicity. Also, the “basic human dignity” at issue is, as she herself says, the “male varietal” which, within the context of that quote, is defined purely in terms of money. This is, as I will argue below, a persistent problem with Williams’s analysis of the issue: *an exclusively one-dimensional conception of economics in isolation*

from all other values and considerations. Again, it's a case in point of Emerson: "trade" over "liberty." When forced to choose between them, the former is given preference over the latter.

o The Democrats' solution? Last week the New York Times published an article advising men with high-school educations to take pink-collar jobs. Talk about insensitivity.

Again, the issue, in Williams's view, is the failure of Democrats and progressives to uncritically underwrite the values of the Trump-prone WWC, in particular, that culture's understanding of masculinity. Does she understand that RNs, regardless of gender, earn more than a typical automotive mechanic? (So which of the two occupations is truly "masculine"? Which is pink-collar and which is blue-?) Also, would she be willing to critique Colin Kaepernick and his teammates for kneeling during the National Anthem, thus demonstrating "insensitivity" to Southern conservatives' sensibilities? If not, why?

But Williams's perspective is most problematical – I would even argue that "potentially dangerous" is not inappropriate – with her first major point and piece of advice to Democrats and progressives.

If You Want to Connect with White Working-Class Voters, Place Economics at the Center

Well.

This is an interesting perspective, given that *much of the law regulating the conduct of corporations in the marketplace and toward their employees is precisely geared to remove "economics [from] the center"* in deference to other values and priorities. If all -- repeat: **all** -- we are interested in is "plac[ing] economics at the center" in the pristinely unmodulated way Prof. Williams uses that locution, then we should -- *as Trump is very much in the process of doing* -- repeal all environmental, safe-workplace, child-labor, etc. -- regulations and allow the free market, to say nothing of the laws of physics and thermodynamics, to have the decisive vote as to the consequences. Alternative energy sources? Aw hell, coal will do just fine: good enough at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution for our great- and great-great-grandparents, good enough for us. If illegal immigrants are indeed found usurping American jobs, then adopt the "manly" approach: round them up, perhaps give them a sack lunch, and ship them whence they came, with no effeminate constitutional shilly-shallying about "due process" or "equal protection" or "feet-dry citizenship" for children born in the US. Remember: per Emerson, "maintain[] trade, not liberty".

And speaking of the Constitution, this brings us to the most insidious aspect of Prof. Williams's analysis: her utter neglect of so much as a hat-tip to considerations of the constitutional limits on governmental, in particular, presidential power. Unfortunately, she is not alone in this omission. *Observing the current debates about immigration, economics, income disparity, etc., etc., etc., a 7-tentacled extraterrestrial visitor just arrived from one of the ringed moons of Epsilon Eridani 7 would be justified in concluding that, when an American joins the Armed Forces, he or she takes a solemn oath to "support and defend the Balance of Payments and Income Growth Potential of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same" not to "support and defend the Constitution of the United States".* (Question: why do recruits -- and a President being inaugurated -- take an oath to preserve the *Constitution* of the United States and not the *United States itself*? Exercise for reader. When you discover the answer, you will see why

I beat this drum so loudly.) If we forget to remember this, we do so at our peril. And during the election of 2016, I believe we forgot to remember it.

In fairness to her, I believe Prof. Williams did not forget. She just forgot to remember. Like Esau, who sold his birthright to Jacob in the Genesis story, she succumbed to the illusion that the immediate exigencies of economics are everything, superseding all other considerations. Esau, realizing his mistake, was unable to recover the birthright he scorned, though he sought it with tears (Heb. 12:17). Thus endeth a cautionary tale for us.

Nor are we the first to forget. In 1919, Germany, emerging from the Great War and the humiliation of Versailles, drafted a wonderfully enlightened constitution in the beautiful old city of Weimar as a blueprint for its new parliamentary democracy. What ensued in short order were political instability, street violence among competing factions, depression, and hyper-inflation, eventuating catastrophic levels of poverty and unemployment. Facing multiple crises, Germans decided to follow Prof. Williams's advice: place "cultural" issues on hold so as to concentrate on practicalities and "place economics at the center". After all, it seemed at the time the "practical" thing to do. It probably would have seemed "practical" to us, too, had we been there. But forgetting cultural issues, issues of principle, and the latitudinarian, classical-liberal values of the European Enlightenment led to the shredding of the Weimar constitution, the rise of fascism, the suppression of what we would call First Amendment liberties (what we would term censorship of the press), the *Ermaechtigungsgesetz* ("Enabling Act") of 1933, the dissolution of the *Reichstag*, and ... but no point in continuing the list ... I think you see what I mean.

"Jim, you're over-reacting" ... On the contrary, I am driven by the logic of Prof. Williams' own argument. For if economics really is "at the center" -- Prof. Williams' terminology, not mine -- then the implications of such a policy include all the above. *By definition, there can only be one center to anything*, be it a circle or a suite of policies. Emerson was right: *if economics ("trade") is "at the center", then the Constitution and the values inherent in the American tradition of "ordered liberty" are and must be strictly secondary*. Problem is, judging by the current state of the debate on the economy and related issues -- immigration, the environment, you name it -- those are precisely the priorities that most seem, Esau-like, to prefer.

So ... enjoy your "mess of pottage" (Genesis 25:31–34) and welcome to Weimar!

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