

## AIN'T I A WOMAN?

### Multiculturalism's Contribution to Political Science

by

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#### Preface:

Sojourner Truth confronted progressive reformers for women's rights in the nineteenth century who thought her own radical efforts to be directed toward the abolition of slavery with the pointed query: Ain't I a woman? In doing so, she conveyed that she could not conceive that freedom for the slaves could be treated as a partible principle in discussions of freedom for any human beings. Much like Abraham Lincoln's insistence on the Declaration of Independence as "maxim for society," Truth stood on grounds of common humanity rather than cultural distinction. While political science must observe and explain the distinct variations through which common humanity presents itself, it would be impossible to conceive of a political science which could account for the woman, Sojourner Truth, and in doing so not also account for every man.

Writing in late 1979 in the newsletter, *Teaching Political Science*, Mary Shanley suggested that "anyone interested in teaching what political philosophers have said about women in the polity is confronted by great invisibilities and silences, which themselves need to be explained." Shanley conceived that the task of introducing women in such study required specific efforts to confront the challenges of political philosophy in general with further "interesting philosophical questions about the proper position of women in the polity." One might conceive that the question of what multiculturalism has to contribute to political science to be not very far removed from, and therefore likely to be handled similarly to, the question of women in political science. Shanley went on to confess, however, that "I am not terribly enthusiastic about the study of a philosopher's ideas about women removed from the context of his or her other thought. This is not to say that I do not think that classics' ideas about women should not be scrutinized. But I think this is better done in a course about the Western tradition *per se*." My reaction to the question regarding multiculturalism may conceivably be considered still less generous.

I have said and published much on the subject of multiculturalism. As a public servant I rejected the tacit notion of a majority culture's possessory rights in minority cultures, a notion underlying far more discussion of racial balancing and school busing than is perhaps evident to the lay understanding. Writing in *Reason* magazine in 1982 I declared that "the age of multiculturalism is an age of deceit, seeking to raise to the level of fundamental social bases principles inherently destructive of a free social order." I further characterized the advent of ethnic consciousness in American society as "mere aesthetic baubles, interesting to be sure, but providing nothing more than relaxing diversions from life's serious pursuits." In a 1991 essay in *Social Philosophy and Policy* I derided

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\* Paper prepared for delivery at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, September, 1993.

the notion of “group rights” and so-called “protected groups.” There I urged that “a principled discussion of civil rights would emphasize common terms of identity rather than difference among rights-holders.” In a 1992 essay in *Etnie, culture e unità dell'europa* (a cura di Vincenzo Buonomo) I observed that “il pluralismo contemporaneo, al contrario [dell'unità], valorizza le differenze sociali e produce forze avverse allo sviluppo dell'unità ultimà.” I concluded, further, that “Il pluralismo, dunque, non è una specie di politica ma uno stadio della società. In ogni Stato indipendente e dinamico e anche caratterizzato dall'unità politica (che è l'unione delle volontà costituzionali) e dalla libertà il pluralismo non durerà.” In 1991 I spoke directly on the question of multiculturalism at Emory University, where I identified an “original, humane notion of multiculturalism, the notion that there is an underlying humanity on the strength of which peoples of differing backgrounds can nevertheless establish some degree of fellowship” but then observed that this very notion had been superseded by a newer version which I described as follows:

The original, multicultural impulse was designed to say that we could, on the strength of protecting individual liberty, bring to the fore a flourishing of various cultures in the United States. Nathan Glazer recently wrote in *The New Republic* an essay on multiculturalism—a defense of multiculturalism harkening back to this older view—in which he points out, ‘Surely there is no objection to broadening the horizon of our academic curricula. That, in addition to all things else, would include material representative of African and, indeed, of the experience of American blacks; that would add material indicative of the experience of women; that would add material indicative of the experience of hispanics; that would add material indicative of the experiences even of homosexuals—if one wants to insist upon segregating homosexuals as a group.

This is regarded as wholly compatible with the idea of a university education. But, of course, Nathan Glazer himself, responding to an attack on a recent curricular reform in the State of New York, goes somewhat beyond that critical verb we have used repeatedly, “add.” For now the prevailing wisdom is: substitute, not add. The thought is that there has been previously a predominant white, European, male-oriented view of the world which is, in its principles, an act of oppression on people whose backgrounds and origins are not white, European, and male. And how does it improve the white, European male’s point of view by adding to it? One can only improve it by replacing it. The reason one can only improve it by replacing it is rather straightforwardly to be articulated; namely, cultural views are mutually exclusive. Cultural backgrounds are mutually exclusive. Ethnic heritages are mutually exclusive. There is not, the leading thinkers in the movement of deconstruction argue, a notion of common humanity. In fact, the very notion of humanity itself is an instrument of oppression which has been used to marginalize those who are not defined or described as fitting the stereotypical characteristics of what is called humanity. The only way to overcome the marginalizing impact of reason, the reason in accord with which this notion came to prevail in the western world, is to displace it altogether. So, now we talk of various centric curricula—Euro-centric, Afro-centric, hispano-centric, etc.—all mutually exclusive.

The unavoidable direction of my remarks at Emory University was to point anew toward science—that is, philosophy—as the only suitable ground on which to answer the

questions raised in our time concerning multiculturalism. In an essay shortly to be published in the *Educational Researcher* I insist that we need to transcend the discourse on race, to “remove race and ethnicity as points of moral reference.” I did so, all the time observing that

many believe that race/ethnicity constitutes the unique point of moral reference. This has occurred, I believe, on account of profound and gradual reorientation in our understanding of education. The theme of this response, accordingly, that every effort to root education in the confirmation or elaboration of fundamental racial or ethnic beginnings directly contradicts the true purpose and character of education. In a word, we have lost touch with the true etymological bearing of our usage, ‘education,’ and substituted tacitly the etymological meaning of the French usage, ‘formation.’ Where the former seeks a ‘leading forth’ toward thoughts unthought, the latter treats the soul as filled with blank place holders waiting to receive constructivist projects (the model of which remains Rousseau’s *Emile*).

In light of this long and well established discourse, accordingly, I conceive no other response to the question of this panel (“What do race and gender contribute to political science?”) as more appropriate than a frank return to the forms of philosophy, and the practical dilemmas they create, which originated the peculiar form of this discourse so common in the late twentieth century. In the paper that follows, therefore, I will discuss, first, an instructive eighteenth century discussion of cultural relativism and, second, the moral and political quandary that emerged in the United States the first time that particular version of science threatened significantly to inform the common understanding.

### There Was More Than One Enlightenment

It is our custom to treat the philosophy of the eighteenth century as the true and lineal ancestor of philosophy in our own time. We are perhaps mistaken, however, in imagining the terms and practices of contemporary philosophy to have been set in the principles of eighteenth, as opposed let us say to nineteenth, century philosophy. If we have been mistaken in identifying the sources of our practices, we at least have not been scandalously mistaken. It were natural enough for a modern thinker to conceive that his principles were derived from ancient thinkers and principles. In spite of eighteenth century thought’s obsession with the war between the ancients and the moderns, I would suggest a reconsideration of its foundations, in which reconsideration we would quite consciously if obtusely treat the distinction between ancients and moderns as an open question.

While this reconsideration might surely constitute a general project, I am interested in it via the medium of a quite specific work, within a very narrow genre. This is a clue to guide us. For surely the ready recourse to moral fable in the eighteenth century contrasts sharply with any approach any contemporary philosopher is likely to adopt. Further, the claim that such fables might be a vehicle for the development of philosophical principles is in our time contrary to our intuitions. It is no accident, doubtless, that apart from Rousseau’s *Emile* the fictions and other romantic creations of serious writers from the eighteenth century and after receive short shrift from biographers, philosophers, and historians. The *Temple de Gnide* by Montesquieu is famous for being thought frivo-

lous. Like many of his other fables, this one generally attracts patronizing praise of its workmanship and neglect of its content. I wish to establish the context within which this analysis takes place by reconstituting the language and the problem as they were viewed in the eighteenth century by David Hume.

### I. DAVID HUME'S "A DIALOGUE"

The principal version of the modern predicament which characterized eighteenth century reflection was the fact that the recourse to general reason and enlightenment had undermined the traditional association of ideas of the human good with particular regimes. The regime or constitution had become merely instrumental, itself a product of rational purpose but not rational in itself. Thus, morals and social principles came to be seen to depend on "sentiments," as opposed to rational principles.<sup>1</sup> While this eventuality created for some the dilemma that morals ceased to be assimilable to reason insofar as the objects of rational inquiry were still regarded as beyond convention, for Hume it led only to a natural emphasis on utility:

But to all appearance the sentiments of Stockholm, Geneva, Rome ancient and modern, Athens and Memphis, have the same characters; and no sensible man can implicitly assent to any of them, but from the general principle, that as the truth in these subjects is beyond human capacity, and that as for one's own ease he must adopt some tenets, there is most satisfaction and convenience in holding [that we first were taught].<sup>2</sup>

Where men once held it to be the case that their moral obligations required to be comprehended as necessary, then, Hume maintained that they were adequately accounted for on grounds of utility. In that he eliminated the need for rational justification of moral principles [the term rational justification as used here applies to ends, not to the means selected to secure ends].

Whether it were so or not, eighteenth century thinkers generally considered that the ancients thought differently about these matters. Hume was no exception. In particular, although he was not much of a poet (which Montesquieu certainly was), Hume went so far as to write a fable, "A Dialogue," in which he sought to portray this difference between ancients and moderns and its consequences. We might add that he seemed especially proud of this effort. The point to note here is that the difference which is emphasized is not a difference in perspective on science, per se, but rather a difference in perspective on the status of morality—or whether morality could be a proper object [as end] of philosophical or scientific inquiry at all (for which sake it must be general or universal as opposed to particular). Hume's fable maintains that the relativity of morals expresses a fundamental opposition between morality (or law) and reason and thus argues against Montesquieu.

I choose Hume's "A Dialogue" as basis for this explication partly on account of its relation to Montesquieu's *Temple de Gnide*. Montesquieu published his fable shortly after his *Les Lettres Persanes* had appeared to welcome reviews. A few of the themes of

<sup>1</sup> David Hume to Gilbert Elliott, *Essays Moral and Political*, vol. I, p. 54 (Greene and Grose).

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

*Les Lettres Persanes* were the focus in *Temple de Gnide*, albeit in a different setting. Nevertheless, *Les Lettres Persanes* was regarded as a serious if charmingly diverting work, while *Temple de Gnide* was regarded as merely a charming diversion.

*Temple de Gnide* was never regarded seriously, until the publication of "A Dialogue" in 1751 and Rousseau's stinging criticism in *Les Reveries du Promeneur Solitaire* in 1782. The *Temple de Gnide* goes unmentioned in Hume's fable. I would argue, however, that it and *Les Lettres Persanes* are the probable sources of inspiration for "A Dialogue." The reason for this is as follows: several odd resemblances and parallels among these works, in light of already established evidence of Hume's close reading of Montesquieu (*Les Lettres Persanes* especially) and his frequent, extensive responses to Montesquieu, offer the kind of factual certainty to which Hume, above all others, would yield as probable evidence of a correspondence.<sup>3</sup>

Like *Temple de Gnide*, Hume's fable is narrated by an unnamed character who is also the principal character of the tale. Unlike *Temple de Gnide*, most of the character and place names in Hume's fable are patent inventions, with the exception only of two which play roles of some importance. Most important is the narrator's interlocutor, Palamedes, whose name invokes the mythology of the Trojan War in the manner that most of the important names in *Temple de Gnide* often do. Next is the character Usbek, the single name in a series of artificial names which itself is not artificial and which is the name of the principal character in *Les Lettres Persanes*. Usbek's chief problem in that work (the woman question) is also the chief question of *Temple de Gnide* and consequently a major theme of "A Dialogue," indeed, the main question of the narrator's presentation. Further, Usbek in *Les Lettres Persanes* is the source of the argument in defense of fable as an alternative and perhaps superior mode to convey philosophic truth (also a question in "A Dialogue").

The key to understand "A Dialogue" seems to be the character of Palamedes, called "a rambler in his principles." The fable begins with a parody of Athenian morals and manners related by Palamedes and in which the typical Athenian, the "Athenian man of merit," is Socrates. In relating his tale, however, Palamedes abstracts completely from the cause of Socrates's death and presents a caricature of Socrates's morality as the general portrait of Athenian morality. While the Socrates character, Alcheic, was compounded of events in the lives of Themistocles, Brutus, and Socrates, Palamedes applied all the judgments of this compound character to the "Athenian man of merit."

I think I have fairly made it appear, that an Athenian man of merit might be such as would pass with us for incestuous, a parricide, an assassin, an ungrateful, perjured traitor, and something else too abominable to be named; not to mention his rusticity and ill-manners.

Next, he argued, Alcheic took his own life, having fallen "into a state of bad health," "universally regretted and applauded in that country." Hume's narrator considered Socrates's end desperate but suitable, although Alcheic died "with the most absurd blasphem-

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<sup>3</sup> Roger B. Oake, "Montesquieu and Hume," *Modern Language Quarterly*, vol. 2, March & June, 1941.

mies in his mouth”—he boasted that a wise man is scarcely inferior to the great god.” So much was this approved and applauded at Athens, that

he shall have statues, if not altars, erected to his memory; poems and orations shall be composed in his praise; great sects shall be proud of calling themselves by his name; and the most distant posterity shall blindly continue their admiration: Though were such a one to arise among themselves, they would justly regard him with horror and execration.

The indictment concluded thus, and it was an indictment in spite of Palamedes’s apparent purpose to portray a relativity of morals and manners—their detachment from reason. Perhaps the reason this turned into an indictment lies in the fact that, in forming the portrait of Socrates’s character, Palamedes made no use of the single veridical event from Socrates’s life otherwise included in the tale. That was the story from Xenophon’s *Memorabilia*, in which Socrates influenced his boys to moderation by establishing the principle of sharing their meals in common when they dined together. In that story shame was the principle which operated to inspire moderation. Palamedes made it a point to say that he copied the story literally from Xenophon.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, he called Socrates’s device an artifice, as if to suggest that the generosity, the eye for the common good, which he inspired, had no deeper foundation than transient artifice. It was regarded as “extraordinary” for the very reason that it stood out in stark contrast to the ordinary manners of Athenians and, as he portrayed it, the selfish end of Socrates’s life. Thus, it was not a character trait but a momentary self-indulgence.

Now we can see how Palamedes himself serves to unravel the secret of this fable. In his own person, or at least his own name, this character whom Socrates so regularly invoked as the symbol of Socrates’s own character and circumstances, denies Socrates’s most important claims. He treats Socrates as the very opposite of himself and thereby tacitly rejects the union of knowledge and virtue. Palamedes had signified for the historical Socrates the unacceptable opposition of law and reason. In Xenophon’s *Apology* Socrates deflected the ignominy of his being “executed unjustly” to his executioners, just as he found “far more noble themes for song” in Palamedes’s circumstances than in those of Odysseus, who conspired to execute Palamedes unjustly. Socrates said that he took “comfort” in the example of Palamedes.<sup>5</sup> Again, in the *Memorabilia*, Socrates made Palamedes the prototype of his refutation of Euthydemus’s argument that the good is the beneficial (useful) and the evil harmful (inexpedient), “for all the poets sing of him, how that he was envied for his wisdom and done to death by Odysseus.”<sup>6</sup> Palamedes was reputed to be the discoverer of number and the inventor of the alphabet, lighthouses, weights and measures, dice, backgammon, and the discus, as well as the discoverer of Odysseus’s ruse for avoiding service at Troy. Socrates accordingly took his bearings as much from Palamedes’s superior reason as the injustice

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<sup>4</sup> *Memorabilia*, XIII, iv, 1. He did not, however, concede that he got the idea of Socrates’s ill health from Xenophon, whom he called one of “the greatest geniuses.”

<sup>5</sup> Plato, *Apology*, translated by Thomas G. West and Grace S. West (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1984), 26.

<sup>6</sup> *Memorabilia*, IV, ii, 33.

which he suffered.<sup>7</sup> Nor was he alone in his appreciation of that unjust fate.<sup>8</sup> Thus he magnified his own fate and end:

I am willing to die many times if these things [about Hades] are true, since especially for myself spending time there would be wondrous: whenever I happened to meet Palamedes and Telemonian Ajax, or anyone else of the ancients who died because of an unjust judgment, I would compare my own experiences with theirs.<sup>9</sup>

How shocked, then would Socrates-Alcheic be, to meet with Palamedes-Hume and discover that the standards of comparison had changed—to learn indeed that his having lived seventy years unmolested and died only at a time when life becomes insupportable<sup>10</sup> had become evidence for the fact not only that he was not treated unjustly but had in fact set the standard for a despicable and unworthy Athenian morality. Might Hume have considered Socrates's end a form of unworthy crying, his insistence that knowledge is virtue an unjustified attempt to defend the life he led beyond the utility which he derived from it?

It would be premature to conclude so, for we have reviewed only the half of “A Dialogue.” And while it is true that Palamedes concludes the second half of the fable with a statement which echoes this provisional conclusion and relates strongly to remarks Hume makes elsewhere, the fable takes a turn which qualifies the force of this reflection. Palamedes's point is this:

religion had in ancient times, very little influence on common life... In those ages it was the business of philosophy alone to regulate men's ordinary behavior and deportment; and accordingly, we may observe, that this being the sole principle, by which a man could elevate himself above his fellows, it acquired a mighty ascendant over many, and produced great singularities of maxims and conduct.

On this reading the ancient gods had little or no regard for the “virtues or vices which only affected the peace and happiness of human society.” In that situation the identification of wisdom and virtue conduced to satisfy the philosopher's utility—he had free scope to seek his elevation. The fact that Palamedes offers this portrait of “natural manners” after a lengthy refutation from the unnamed narrator inclines us to see in Palamedes the mind of Hume, in whom we find an echo of the portrait of “artificial manners” with which Palamedes contrasted the ancient ways. In the essay, “Of some Verbal Disputes,” Hume explained why modern philosophers reason differently than their ancient counterparts in matters of morals.

In later times, philosophies of all kinds, especially ethics, have been more closely united with theology than ever they were observed to be among the Heathens; and as this latter science admits of no terms of composition, but bends every branch of knowledge to its own purpose, without much regard to the phenomena of nature,

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<sup>7</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 522d.

<sup>8</sup> Cf., the Complaints of Ajax, in Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, XIII, 56.

<sup>9</sup> Plato, *Apology*.

<sup>10</sup> Cf., Hume's expectations for himself in his “Autobiography.”

or to the unbiased sentiments of the mind, hence reasoning, and even language, have been warped from their natural course, and distinctions have been endeavored to be established, where the difference of the object was, in a manner imperceptible.<sup>11</sup>

In this light, the purpose of “A Dialogue” seems to be to offer in mimetic form a test of the proposition whether the marriage of reason and law or morality in Christianity can be comprehended in an adequate general account of the “behavior and deportment” of humankind.

Since this question, apart from direct consideration of the element of Christianity, is at the heart of *Temple de Gnide*, here, too, we discern the intersection between the two fables. The question might be restated, taking Socrates and Athens as they appear rather than in the form of Humean revisionism, to inquire whether the marriage of reason and law is the correct foundation of human ethics. That is at least how Hume’s unnamed narrator conceives it, despite agreeing with Palamedes in the end, that

When men depart from the maxims of common reason, and affect these artificial lives, as you call them, no one can answer for what will please or displease them. They are in a different element from the rest of humankind; and the natural principles of their minds play not with the same regularity, as if left to themselves, free from the illusions of religious superstition or philosophical enthusiasm.

The “philosophical enthusiasm” which the narrator appends was called “extravagant philosophy” by Palamedes, exemplified by Diogenes and Pascal, the latter of whom Palamedes considered as the perfection of Christian example and the former of whom Palamedes used as the perfection of the example of Socrates. From the contrast between Diogenes and Pascal, Palamedes concluded that there seemed no “universal standard of morals.” The narrator, on the other hand, considers these both examples of “artificial lives” beyond the reach of common human experience and therefore yielding no general rule.

The narrator initially sought to defend Athenians (he did not mention Socrates) and in doing so educed “four sources of moral sentiments” which subsist everywhere, subject only to accidental variations. These four were the propensities to “useful” and “agreeable” qualities respecting oneself and society. As such they were opposed to Palamedes’s fourfold “foundation of all moral determinations:” fashion, vogue, custom, and law. Now, inasmuch as fashion, vogue, and custom are in reality only one thing, common prejudice, Palamedes offers at most two foundations of morality. And insofar as law has no foundation other than common prejudice—his original argument—he offers only one foundation. Prior to deducing his “four sources of moral sentiments” the narrator responded to Palamedes’s single foundation in common prejudice by suggesting that that foundation were in fact the universal propensity to praise and blame human qualities as conducing or not to what is useful or agreeable, for “where would be the sense of extolling a good character or action, which at the same time, is allowed to be good for nothing.” Thus, he insisted on a general, objective foundation for “all the differences, therefore, in morals.” The difference seems to be that mere prejudice is insufficient to

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<sup>11</sup> Op. cit.

guide men insofar as they act on the basis of the useful or agreeable. Hence, prejudice gains its power from its ability to seem to answer the need to identify the useful or agreeable. Palamedes and the narrator do not seem very far apart.

There is a difference, however. The narrator drew out this difference by concentrating above all on the relations between the sexes and describing moral sentiments as naturally founded in the necessity to follow principles of utility and agreeableness determined by the circumstances. In that light, the variations among men in these matters express an underlying uniformity.

The narrator portrayed a modern people whose manners could be as easily parodied to their disadvantage as those of the Athenians had been. In doing so he drew from Palamedes the disclaimer that he had not designed to exalt “the moderns at the expense of the ancients.” The modern people were the French, and their extreme deference to women was the central feature of the narrator’s story. Palamedes did not retract his insistence that the Athenian man of merit (who certainly did not defer to women either in the original form or in the caricature) would be to them a horror, despite the French affectation that no people other than they were ever so like the Athenians.<sup>12</sup> He was, however, willing to concede that the French man of merit might “be an object of the highest contempt and ridicule” at Athens.

Rousseau conceived that the teaching of *Temple de Gnide* was just such a “superiority of the females” as was also described in *Les Lettres Persanes* and which constitutes the central teaching of the French man of merit. The French man of merit was Montesquieu (which the central book of *L’Esprit des Lois* makes abundantly clear). He sought principles of ethics beyond mere convention, even while conceding the modern principle of utility.<sup>13</sup> Our narrator turned to the discussion of praise and blame to indicate how far Montesquieu might succeed: “the principles upon which men reason in morals are always the same, though the conclusions which they draw are often very different.” Everywhere the spirit of law-abidingness is “a capital virtue.” Our notions of beauty of person persist in ancient and modern eras, expressed in the Apollo and the Venus, while it is the character of a Scipio and the honor of Cornelia which universally fulfill expectations of heroes and matrons. That is, the *Temple de Gnide*’s celebration of the body is just, while its standards of heroism and feminine virtue may miss the point.

The absence of war in Montesquieu’s fable may testify to the insufficiency of his celebration of the soul. For it is the “difference between war and peace” which diversifies the most “our ideas of moral virtue and personal merit.” In this sense, the closest we approach toward universality is in recognizing “the merit of riper years”: “integrity, humanity, ability, knowledge, and the other more solid and useful qualities of the human mind.” But *Temple de Gnide* celebrates the “manner, the ornaments, and the graces” of the young, which “are more arbitrary and casual.” Given our narrator’s concurrence with

<sup>12</sup> One might compare Pericles’ “funeral oration” in Thucydides with Montesquieu’s portrait of French manners in *Esprit des Lois*, XIX to see how complete the comparison may be between Athens and France. Then see *Temple de Gnide*, where Montesquieu does not name but describes Athens in terms borrowed from Pericles, Third Chant, para. 13.

<sup>13</sup> Cf., “Essai touchant les loix naturelles et la distinction du juste et de l’injuste.”

Palamedes that modern religion has displaced philosophy, with the result that the latter like ancient religion exists but does not care about “those virtues or vices which only affect the peace and happiness of human society,” there must seem little or no occasion for reason to guide the morals of the young.

The conclusion of Hume’s fable, or something like it, may account for Rousseau’s attack on the lasciviousness of *Temple de Gnide*. Even if the fable had a nobler purpose, Rousseau held, it only appealed to those passions which, when encouraged, could only lead to harm and were not susceptible to the restraints of reason. It is not that Rousseau despaired of universal principle. He argued that

La verité générale et abstraite est le plus précieux de tous les biens. Sans elle l’homme est aveugle; elle est l’oeil de la raison.<sup>14</sup>

One concludes, therefore, that he understood universal and abstract truth to be inapplicable to this subject, to which strong convictions alone apply. One may deduce as much from the form of his description of the precise evil of the fable, which, he held, offered under the false mantle of antiquity a modern poison, at least for the unwary.

...il faut détacher du public instruit des multitudes de lecteurs simples et crédules à qui l’histoire du manuscrit, narrée par un auteur grave avec un air de bonne foi, en a réellement imposé, et qui ont bu sans crainte, dans une coupe de forme antique, le poison dont ils se seraient au moins défies s’il leur eut été présenté dans une vase moderne.<sup>15</sup>

Rousseau, of course, argued consistently against the use of fables for youths. La Fontaine he saw as dangerous and regarded his fables as useful only for adults. Thus, his criticism of Montesquieu is akin to that against La Fontaine, with the addition that he sees Montesquieu as offering a frankly modern teaching and, presumably, a teaching consistent with Palamedes-Hume.

We disagree with Rousseau and believe that the problem can be illustrated by a closer look at his understanding of La Fontaine rather than determining the modernism of Montesquieu. Whatever the degree of modernism in the fables of Fontaine, at least Fontaine defended himself against Rousseau in advance. He insisted, of course, that his “apparent puerilities” were in fact “some important truths.”<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, he held these truths to be important for children as well as adults—perhaps more so. He argued, for example, that it would mean little to tell a child that Crassus in his attack on the Parthians paid too little heed to how he would exit the country after entering it, and this caused him and his army to perish in spite of attempting to withdraw. To the same child, he wrote, say that the fox and the goat went into the bottom of a well to get a drink; that the fox

<sup>14</sup> Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Les reveries dun promeneur solitaire* (Paris: Gamier-Flammarion, 1964), p. 77.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 81: “...it’s necessary to subtract from the educated public the multitudes of vulgar and credulous readers upon whom the manuscript’s history, recounted by a serious author with an air of good faith, has really imposed itself, and who have drunk fearlessly from an ancient chalice the very poison they would at least have suspected had it been presented to them in a modern carafe.”

<sup>16</sup> De la Fontaine, *Fables* (Paris: Bordas, 1964), “Dedicace,” p. 35.

climbed out upon the shoulders and horns of his comrade; and the goat was stuck there on account of lacking such foresight. The child then would grasp the principle of the error of Crassus and not, as Rousseau maintained, learn how to exploit friendships.

The apparent impasse between Rousseau and La Fontaine may be resolvable only by recourse to their intentions. Fontaine traced the inspiration of his art to Socrates in Plato's *Phaedo*. When he paraphrased the discussion of Socrates's dream, which led to Socrates setting Aesop to meter, he added a note: "car, comme la musique ne rend pas l'homme meilleur, à quoi bon s'y attacher?" [for, music not making man the better, what good is there for him to apply himself to it?] Socrates, of course, held that he was unsure whether the gods meant for him to make philosophy or to make poetry, when they commanded that he make music. He undertook to turn Aesop into poetry in order to be on the safe side. Yet, he did not doubt that the end of his effort was the quest for the good. La Fontaine's denial that music makes men good both qualifies the degree of his inspiration from Socrates and seems to vindicate Rousseau. Note, however, what La Fontaine said of fables in his own name:

deux points; inventions utiles et agréables: ce sont eux qui ont introduit les sciences parmi les hommes. Ésope a trouvé un art singulier de les joindre l'un avec l'autre.

La Fontaine finds an ancient source for the modern focus on the useful and agreeable or pleasant. In his version, however, those are the sources, not of moral sentiments but, of sciences! Hume's view seems therefore an inversion, insofar as it has any roots in this tradition. La Fontaine was still more explicit:

Et comme, par definition du point, de la ligne, de la surface, et par d'autres principes tres familiers, nous parvenons a des connaissances qui mesurent enfin le ciel et la terre, de meme aussi, par les raisonnements et consequences que l'on peut tirer de ces fables, on se forme le jugement et les moeurs, on se rend capable de grandes choses.<sup>17</sup>

Presumably, fables which do not "make man better" but which nevertheless "make one capable of great things" in the same way that science enables one to measure great things leave the choice of what one is to do in one's own hands. They "shape" without forming judgment. That would mean that judgment is formed by views of the useful and the pleasant. Thus, fables as a method of instruction—in Hume's view, no more powerful than philosophy itself on moral questions in the modern era—may convey rational guidance for moral choice only to the extent that rational guidance for moral choice remains possible on the basis of the useful and the pleasant. La Fontaine, in other words, did not go so far as Rousseau thought he had to go, but nevertheless left it as questionable whether there remained any guidance for human beings as to ends.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, "Preface," p. 39. "two points; useful and pleasant inventions: those are the things that have introduced sciences among men. Aesop discovered a singular art for connecting the one with the other." "And since by defining the point, the line, the surface, and by other very familiar principles, we arrive at certain understanding that ultimately measure the heavens and earth, so, too, by the reasoning and consequences that folk can deduce from these fables, they shape their judgment and their morals, they make themselves capable of great things."

## II: THOMAS JEFFERSON'S SCIENCE

It is doubtful that any Enlightenment thinker (save perhaps Montesquieu) could have left a legacy of response to the question of ends. In 1754 Montesquieu completed the definitive version of his classical work and then died. In that same year, Jean Jacques Rousseau published his *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality Among Men*, which opened the modern assault on nature as a moral standard and natural rights as a source of political principles.

True, for Rousseau man was good in nature—if to be good it suffices to be peaceful and stupid. But that is the point: man in nature is not the man we know. The men we know, Rousseau held, are wicked. What changed him? “only the changes occurring in his structure, the progresses he has made and the knowledge which he has acquired.” Thus, in the “Second Discourse,” in footnote “I,” Rousseau repeats the critique he had offered in the “First Discourse on Science and the Arts.”

It was not without difficulty that we succeeded in making ourselves so unhappy. When one considers, on the one hand, all the prodigious labors of men, so many profound sciences, so many invented arts, so much strength applied, abysses filled in, mountains levelled, rocks crushed, rivers made navigable, land cleared, lakes dug out, swamps dried up, enormous buildings erected on land, the sea covered with vessels and sailors, and when, on the other hand, one investigates with but little meditation the true advantages which have resulted from all this for the happiness of humankind, one can only be struck by the astonishing disproportion which exists between these things and deplore man's blindness... Admire human society as much as one may, it will be no less true that it necessarily inclines men to despise one another in proportion as their interests intersect...

This art alone, this capacity for progress, for self-perfection, is the sole distinguishing characteristic of man for Rousseau. And it is a sufficiently ambiguous distinction that there is room to wonder where man begins and orangutan ends—or whether African cannot mate with orangutan. It is on this ground that Rousseau entertained the idea of a progressive development of humanity. The very uncertainty of humanity's identity renders a reliance on nature as a guide impossible. There could not be a more complete contrast with that version of the Enlightenment which assumed not only that men could recognize men, but that their doing so was the basis of moral judgment. The contrast was produced by the Enlightenments' inclination to follow in the paths of Galileo and Descartes, in the paths of natural science.

We can discern a threat to science and to liberty in this approach by considering its effect on Thomas Jefferson's thought in the context of America, where Jefferson tried to mate natural science and freedom. He, more than any other founder, was profoundly influenced by the European Enlightenment, and the result was some confusion in his own mind as to the force of American principles in the context of natural history. The confusion was sufficiently great that he almost repudiated the truths of the Declaration of Independence.

Jefferson's position, stated most forcefully in the *Notes on the State of Virginia*, has long been misunderstood and abused by scholars, who have accused him of being

simply a racist. The controversy centers in an exchange Jefferson had with Benjamin Banneker. Banneker's impassioned appeal of August 19, 1791 was that Jefferson (as Secretary of State as well as author of the Declaration) exert himself to remove the baseless prejudice of an inherent inferiority of black people. For the purpose Banneker condescended to make himself an exhibit. While he did not appeal to the instance of his producing an almanac, the formal occasion of his letter was to transmit that philosophical effort to a kindred soul. Thus, the implication was unavoidable that Banneker considered this a case made; his mathematical and astronomical abilities were the acquisitions of his race. He appealed to Jefferson, therefore, to join in procuring for black people "their promotion from any state of degradation to which the unjustifiable cruelty and barbarism of men may have reduced them." Banneker attributed the entire prejudice concerning the blacks lack of "mental endowment" to the enforced brutishness of slavery.

Jefferson responded by immediately recognizing the almanac as the "proofs you exhibit, that nature has given to our black brethren, talents equal to the other colors of men," despite Banneker's having in fact apologized for including the two messages in the one letter. Moreover, Jefferson saw the exhibit as aimed at the prejudice of color, with the distinction that Jefferson derived it not only from slavery but from the "degraded condition of their existence, both in Africa and America." Jefferson, therefore, rejected Banneker's claim that the whole cause of black imbecility was American despotism. Much like Rousseau, he had public, if speculative, doubts about the place of the black man in the chain of being.

This story actually begins with Jefferson's *Notes*, in which he pondered whether the black man were not inferior to whites. Scholars have assailed first the passages in the *Notes* and then Jefferson's response to Banneker (as well as later correspondence) as evidence of his indelible prejudice. They overlook in the *Notes* Jefferson's prayer that matters stand other than they seemed. The later charges center on the fact that Jefferson allegedly wrote in a private letter to Joel Barlow (some say Benjamin Rush, mistakenly) and questioned whether "Banneker had done the almanac or that any black man could have." The implication has been that Jefferson spoke differently to his "white equal" than to Banneker, as well as differently in public and private. Obviously, the *Notes* are every bit as public as the Declaration was, and at the least Jefferson is exculpated from the charge of hypocrisy. We are concerned to know whether he is equally exculpated from the charge of confusion.

Jefferson returned to these questions in a letter to Joel Barlow on October 8, 1809. He wrote concerning a Frenchman who had assumed the mission to prove black capacities, having taken up Rousseau's challenge. I quote at length:

He wrote to me also on the doubts I had expressed five or six and twenty years ago in the Notes on Virginia, as to the grade of understanding of the negroes, and he sent me his book on the literature of the negroes. His credulity has made him gather up every story he could find of men of color, (without distinguishing whether black, or of what degree of mixture,) however slight the mention, or light the authority on which they quoted. The whole do not amount, in point of evidence, to what we know ourselves of Banneker. We know he had trigonometry enough to make almanacs, but not without the suspicion of aid from Ellicot, who

was his neighbor and friend [and employer, in laying out Washington, D.C.], and never missed an opportunity of puffing him. I have a long letter from Banneker, which shows him to have had a mind of very common stature indeed.

Here, of course, Jefferson accepts Banneker's authorship, while retaining the suspicion that he was aided in the work. More importantly, he takes what little he finds in Banneker's mind as evidence sufficient as to "the grade of understanding of the negroes." What grade was that: "a mind of very common stature indeed." The term of reference for this "common stature," of course, has to be the intellectual attainments of white folk, since the questions grow out of the suspicion that the black mind was inferior to the common.

Some scholars have imagined this phrase to imply defect, inferiority. They read the word "common" to mean base or vulgar (certainly a possible meaning), and there differ from me, who recall the Euclidean term "common notion" as the critical linchpin in constructing the intellectual edifice of geometry. That is, what Jefferson sought in every black mind was not evidence of genius but of ordinary intelligence, intelligence sufficient to warrant confidence that the axioms of nature would command the souls of ordinary black folk as they do those of ordinary white folk. That must be the level of intelligence of the common intellect, else the "consent of the governed" will lose all intelligibility.

Here, then, is where confusion enters, for this is the light in which *Notes on the State of Virginia*, querying whether freed blacks could become citizens, developed Jefferson's doubts as forcefully and publicly as those doubts are ever developed anywhere. I give the relevant text:

In general, their existence appears to participate more of sensation than reflection... An Animal whose body is at rest, and who does not reflect, must be disposed to sleep of course. Comparing them by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me, that in memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid...

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...notwithstanding these and other discouraging circumstances among the Romans, their slaves were often their rarest artists. They excelled too in science, inasmuch as to be usually employed as tutors to their master's children... not their condition then, but nature, has produced the distinction.—Whether further observation will or will not verify the conjecture, that nature has been less bountiful to them in the endowments of the head...

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To justify a general conclusion, requires many observations, even where the subject may be submitted to the anatomical knife... How much more then where it is a faculty, not a substance, we are examining; where it eludes the research of all the senses;... let me add too, as a circumstance of great tenderness, where our conclusion would degrade a whole race of men from their rank in the scale of beings which the Creator may perhaps have given them... I advance it therefore as a

suspicion only, that the blacks ... are inferior to the whites in the endowment both of body and mind.

In light of these passages everything should become clear. Jefferson's disagreement with Banneker over the source of black degradation derived from Jefferson's own confidence in the sufficiency of natural history to answer that question. Only natural history could provide such an answer as would remove the truth beyond mere political taste or sentiment. It would have been foolish to embrace the equality of blacks and whites, if to do so were to entail the denial of the natural rights on which the laws of free men were based. Such a result would have had to follow, if the political union of blacks and whites had to be forced against the evidences of natural history. If the souls of black folk could not be commanded by the axioms of nature, their political union with whites could not be based on that mutual consent which derives from recognition that all men are created equal—that is, black men could not recognize the equality of all men or the superiority of life in accord with natural right. It was not Banneker's appeal to the Declaration which could persuade Jefferson. It was rather the demonstration that Banneker possessed "a mind of very common stature indeed." This was for Jefferson not merely a disposition of the heart, for he regarded the agreement of natural history with natural right as the necessary foundation of that elevation of mind and body to which he aspired on behalf of all men.

Jefferson's proclivity for natural science betrayed him in this case into seeking a proof for the axiom that all men are created equal, the which is not only impossible but oxymoronic. His problem emerges from his entertaining the question of humanity as a matter of natural science. As Euclid's common notions reveal, through the centrality of the term "equal" in the five axioms, the self-evidence and truth of axioms revolve around a principle of identity. That is, the native operation of the intellect is the distinction of same and other—the recognition of the principle of equality.

What that means in this case is that to recognize that all men are created equal, and to recognize all men as men, are one and the same. The one cannot be accomplished without the other. To push the question, Are blacks men? Are Indians men? Are Chinese men? Are Saxons men? Are Persians men? is already to deny the radical insight of the Declaration. Jefferson, speculating Rousseau-like on orangutans and near-men, threatened to overturn the liberating foundation of the American polity. Since in Rousseau human equality meant nothing, inasmuch as a changing and deviating nature constantly undermined the meaning of humanity itself, such speculation was vacuous. But for Jefferson, to whom humanity was founded in an immutable identity, such speculation was dangerous in the extreme, however natural in the context. To his credit, however, he protested to Barlow that "nothing was or is farther from my intentions, than to enlist myself as the champion of a fixed opinion, where I have only expressed doubt."

The path cleared by Rousseau led at century's end not only to Jefferson's confusion but to Kant and Hegel and ultimately to Nietzsche. In the course of time reason, revelation, and nature came to be supplanted by history as the principal moral cause to which most thinkers turned. Even in the French Revolution, where Montesquieu's work was remembered, the spirit of Rousseau ultimately prevailed. It realized itself in Hegel's identification of the Napoleonic consummation of that revolution as wisdom's dawning.

Thus, the eighteenth century, and its Enlightenments, closed on a dismal note of anticipated slavery, fully realized in the form of the modern totalitarianisms since. It did not bring liberty; it brought tyranny.

Thomas Jefferson ultimately did not take the road which led Europe to tyranny. In doing so he ultimately if silently conceded to Benjamin Banneker, and each of us, all that Banneker asked. The human in all of us makes each of us a man, makes each of us a woman.