

and psychologically enriched capacity for understanding men and societies.”⁴ In embracing this enriched capacity against Platonic nostalgia, Berlin may have evinced faith in progress—or at least youthful optimism—after all. It is not clear whether Smith does—or we can—share this remnant of hope.

Of Moderns and Masters

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Today, we academics often reassure ourselves—and others—that although research may seem like the only currency of academic success, our research *informs* our teaching, and vice versa. That these two aspects of the professor’s role should seem at odds is itself an indictment of the modern university, one of the premodern institutions occupying the uneasy terrain of discontented modernity identified in Steven Smith’s delightful new book. But to read *Modernity and Its Discontents* is to see a master pedagogue at work, for whom the two aspects of the role are in perfect harmony.

Like *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*, this book is based on Smith’s lectures to undergraduates at Yale. Yet each chapter speaks simultaneously to Smith’s characteristic interests and virtues as an exegete, offering sensitive and nuanced readings of some usual—and unusual—suspects in the canon of modern political philosophy. The former include Hobbes’s *Leviathan* and Spinoza’s *Theologico-Political Treatise*, the latter Machiavelli’s *Mandragola*, Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, and Lampedusa’s *The Leopard*. Moreover, Smith’s productive play with genre often recasts familiar works in unfamiliar roles, as with his reading of Descartes’s *Discourse on Method* as an autobiography.

Whether he is reading a treatise, a play, or a novel, Smith’s method is one of character-based, philosophical portraiture. As such, *Modernity and Its Discontents* is a work of unapologetic humanism in the history of political thought, an approach practiced by Isaiah Berlin, Judith Shklar, and Alan Ryan, among others, and which offers a welcome alternative to the extremes of textualism and contextualism between which the field is so often torn.

Philosophy, for Smith, is a way of life, and the great works of political philosophy are the *Bildungsromane* of modernity. One of the book’s key

⁴Isaiah Berlin, *The Sense of Reality*, ed. Henry Hardy (London: Chatto and Windus, 1996), 175, 193.

contributions is its presentation of modernity not as a product of secularism, the Enlightenment, the nation-state, or bureaucratic rationalization, but rather as a “mentality” (4) and the cultivation of a particular character “unknown to the ancient and medieval worlds,” that of the bourgeois (ix). For Smith, discontent is thus constitutive of the modern condition as one of freedom and doubt, of equality and anxiety, in which no one knows (or even has) his place.

With this definition in mind, Smith dates philosophical modernity from the elevation of autobiographical reflection to the level of philosophy, as in Descartes’s *Discourse on Method* or *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. He begins, however, with Machiavelli, who was not himself a modern, but a “prophet” of modernity (7). Refreshingly, it is *Mandragola*’s Lucrezia (in righting the wrongs done her ancient namesake) who wears the laurels of the first “modern.” Those who follow describe and respond to their condition in different ways—none more vividly than Flaubert, who complained of “waves of hatred for the stupidity of my age. ... Shit keeps coming into my mouth, as from a strangulated hernia. I want to make a paste of it and daub it over the nineteenth century, the way they coat Indian pagodas with cow dung” (quoted at 225).

Smith himself is more positive—an unabashed modern content with discontent. He celebrates the virtues of generosity and humanity (*humanitas*) elevated to the center of moral philosophy by Descartes and others. But he notes the tension characteristic of the modern mentality, in which one’s moral duties to humanity and a solipsistic unconcern for the ethics of everyday life often go hand-in-hand. Descartes’s celebration of life in Holland as a blessed condition of philosophic isolation in which he could contemplate humanity—but with all the modern conveniences—is suggestive (57). Then as now, it seems the price of a commitment to moral universalism is a lack of interest or care for those closest to us.

In shining a light on his authors’ contradictions—and illuminating our own—Smith is far too magnanimous a man to indulge in the conceit of “unmasking” or condemning them. Occasionally, however, he backs away from the definition of modernity set out in the introduction, with the effect of letting (or at least appearing to let) certain authors off the hook. In the chapters on Spinoza and Hobbes, Smith embraces a familiar narrative in which they are agents of a “secular” and “tolerant” modernity (cf. 9, 72, 87). In dividing man into two—a *forum internum* and *forum externum*—and arguing that “faith hath no dependence... upon compulsion or commandment, but only upon certainty or probability of arguments,” Smith’s version of the “more tolerant” Hobbes makes a case “eerily like Locke’s later arguments for toleration” (76, 83). This is true, but it does not then follow that Hobbes was a Lockean on toleration—or vice versa! The *forum internum* / *externum* distinction is in obvious tension with Hobbes’s materialist psychology and exists mainly to make the “License of Naaman” that follows plausible to skeptical Christians. Moreover, Hobbes makes clear in the passage Smith cites that the arguments from which faith arises are “drawn from Reason, or from something men beleeve already” (*Leviathan* 42.782, my emphasis), and that is a

function of what we have been taught (L 43.934–36). Thus, while the forces of sovereign law and punishment cannot compel belief, they can and must compel the teachers of the people, both in churches and in the universities, to teach only true, that is, Hobbesian, doctrine. (One feels that *Leviathan* may not be the text Smith needs to explore Hobbes's modern mentality—his characteristic cussedness is on much clearer display in his turn to the dialogue form against John Wallis, who famously accused him of writing conversations between “Thomas” and “Hobbes.”)

Smith makes passing reference in several chapters to the effect that new *sites* of philosophizing may have had in developing the modern mentality. For instance, secret societies like the Freemasons were often vehicles of an egalitarian-universalist but emphatically elitist creed—not unlike the modern gospel of human rights. Elsewhere, he writes that “like all great haters of the bourgeoisie, Nietzsche [and Marx] were recipients of the ultimate passport to bourgeois respectability—the Ph.D.” (17–18). One wishes he would devote more time to these (non-Skinnerian) questions of institutional context, and of that medieval institution flourishing in the bosom of modern democracies, the university, in particular. (Hobbes, for example, hated Oxford, while Locke lived and worked there quite happily for over a decade.)

Significantly, in early modernity it was the BA that served, quite literally, as a gentleman's degree, which automatically elevated its recipient to the rank of gentry. This explains why expanding access to it has become a signal aspiration of modern democracies—and why the mark of elite distinction that is a PhD remains a source of discomfort to many egalitarians who hold it. Smith argues that hostility to hierarchical authority unites modernity and its doubles. This explains one aspect of our current crisis of higher education. Universities rest fundamentally on a relationship of natural authority between those who know (in this case the teacher or *magister*, who is master both of her subject and her students) and those who do not. Smith is too much of a modern to flaunt his mastery. But it is there on the page for all to see.

The Humanity of Philosophy

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I start every year by reading the *Nicomachean Ethics* with freshmen. It is a revealing experience because the *Ethics* is quite different from anything most new college students have ever read before.