

As conservatism seeks a fresh self-understanding, the role of tradition—myth and religion—must be emphasized, lest state coercion be all we are left with

René Girard's Challenge to Fusionism

Donald J. Devine

Modern American conservatism rose in the 1950s under the leadership of William F. Buckley Jr. and Frank S. Meyer at the old *National Review* magazine, culminated in 1980 with the election of an admirer named Ronald Reagan, and is now widely seen as moribund—deservedly so, in some eyes.

One cannot blame Donald Trump. Back in 2005, during the George W. Bush years, Buckley himself called attention to the movement's "attenuations" that "haven't been resolved very persuasively." My own 2013 book, *America's Way Back*, documented the sad story of conservative decline and argued the need for a philosophical restatement if conservatism was to survive. Not surprisingly, most conservative efforts have focused on a political revival. Given today's continuing attenuation of principle, this could result only in Babel-like

confusion or a forced consensus clarifying nothing.

The first priority is an intellectual rather than a political reconsideration. Any such attempt must begin with Meyer, who was widely recognized as the leading systematic thinker of mainstream conservatism, or what came to be called "fusionism."

Meyer's "fusion"—he preferred the term "tension"—emphasized the moral primacy of a tradition of virtue but the necessity of not forcing it, an act that itself was not virtuous. Moral ends were the goals, but

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coercive means represented the pinnacle of immorality. His fusionism thus required achieving traditional virtuous ends using free, voluntary, market-based, decentralist means, with balanced political institutions to limit coercion. This appealed to socially conservative traditionalists for its emphasis on tradition and virtue, and it appealed to libertarians for its emphasis on free means. Practically, this synthesis provided political success for both ideologies.

With that political project now impaired, it is necessary to go beyond Meyer's original synthesis. Unlike a Marxist dialectic, Meyer's fusion does not have thesis and antithesis dissolve into a new synthesis: tradition's thesis and freedom's antithesis continue in a tension, where changes in circumstances can shake the integrity of the whole. Meyer's tradition of virtue rested on Aristotle's *Politics* in assuming "that the state is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal," with those without a state or family being "either above humanity, or below it." Yet today neither the state nor the traditional family can be assumed to be natural.

The purpose of this essay is first to review Meyer's "civilizational history of mankind" and its roots in one of America's most important émigré thinkers, and then to look deeply into another underappreciated analyst's fresh views on prehistorical humanity. At a minimum, a restoration of conservative thought requires paying attention to primitive history and to what it might tell us about the things that fusionism has long assumed are most important about tradition—as well as what this new knowledge reveals about the viability of freedom.

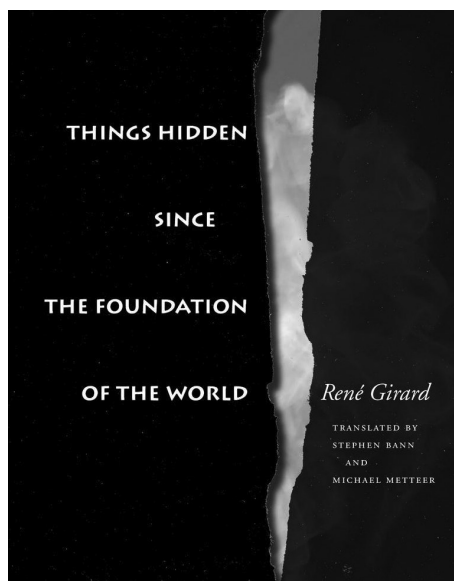
Meyer's thought begins with the great historian and philosopher Eric Voegelin, whose influence ran through Meyer to a wider intellectual audience, including the future fortieth president. In both his major theoretical pieces—the book *In Defense of Freedom* and the 1968 essay "Western Civilization:

The Problem of Political Freedom"—Meyer explicitly acknowledged his dependence on Voegelin for his history and philosophy (as opposed to his politics).

Following Voegelin, Meyer's story of Western civilization begins with "the first twenty-five hundred years of recorded history," encompassing the "cosmological" cultures of early agricultural civilization. These "conceived of existence so tightly unified and compactly fashioned that there was no room for distinction and contrast between the individual person and social order, between the cosmos and human order, between heaven and earth, between what is and what ought to be." This uniform, closely knitted nexus of social order and state existed everywhere agricultural civilization did, in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia, India, China, and even far away Mesoamerica.

There were only two partial exceptions to this cosmological history, the Greeks of classical civilization and the Jews of Syriac civilization. While these were different from one another in many respects, the philosophers of Athens and the prophets of Jerusalem both drove a distinction between what is and what ought to be, sundering the unity of cosmological civilization. Yet neither long survived the power of Macedon and Rome. It was not until Western Christendom, derived from Greek and Jewish traditions, eventually "placed the person at the center of being" that the individual could choose his own moral path, freed from an ancient uniformity of culture that had suffocated all diversity.

Western man lived in two worlds: that of nature, as cosmological man did, but also a transcendent one, the tension between the two leaving the individual to choose between them. This constant tension increased creativity but also undermined the traditional norms supporting order. Once this Pandora's Box of individualism was opened, anything became possible. Western institutions emerged from



René Girard argued that the sacrifice of a scapegoat—an outcast—and its later divinization was the foundation of order, culture, and even the state

this differentiation through the tension between the temporal power of Caesar and the spiritual authority of God—between state and society. By the time of Magna Carta, power in Europe was diffused throughout fiefs, manors, parishes, monasteries, cities, and innumerable nonstate institutions.

The great critics of this transformation, such as Machiavelli, Rousseau, and Nietzsche, agreed that Christianity had introduced a radical change but argued that it had destroyed an ancient good and unleashed disorder. In this view, Christianity eroded the love of honor and devotion to the *polis* under the gods that had characterized Greek and the other cosmological civilizations. Even supporters of the Christian order conceded that the tension between nature and transcendence often failed to attain the right balance—especially for limiting coercion, a goal frustrated by “the natural lust of men for power.” Europe never fully overcame its cosmological heritage, Meyer contended.

It was not until the rise of the United States—the first new nation, Seymour

Martin Lipset called it—that the remaining cosmological fetters were broken, and a society was allowed the opportunity to balance power and facilitate virtue at the same time. The tension in individual lives produced an economic, social, and political success in America that over time outperformed the rest of the world. Yet, Meyer concluded, Americans too “brought with them the human condition” with its hope for a worldly utopia that would remove forever the negative effects of the tension, “a struggle which continues to this day and which is not yet decided.”

This has been the story around which modern conservatism built its success: limit government and allow free institutions, including the family and church, to inculcate both liberty and virtue to minimize coercion. Up to President Reagan the idea seemed to work, providing economic prosperity into the following quarter-century and prompting a revival of traditional values concerning such things as family and abortion, and even eliciting a recognition from the other side of politics that the “era of big

government is over.” But then it all seemed to sour into the present discontent.

An empirical study titled *The Political Culture of the United States* that I published forty years ago could argue with extensive polling data that the Western tradition and its characteristic freedom were still vital, and the book was accepted even by its academic critics as an accurate expression of empirical reality. Today, on the other hand, Meyer’s story is mostly received in the academy as ethnocentric misanthropy, and the principles Meyer championed have declined in popular support. Where once there was agreement that tradition could limit freedom’s excesses with minimal coercion, there is now the prospect of a future without social restraints, leaving only state coercion—and a widespread sense that modern times may be coming to an end.

Beginning at the beginning

Perhaps answers are to be found in premodern times. Beginning with “recorded history,” as Meyer did, already assumes the existence of social order, when today’s problem is precisely that of restoring the sources of social order. Just how long did human life go on before the social order emerged? The most recent starting point of the human race, from some biblical estimates, is 4,000 BC, which means “records” would be missing for almost half of human history. Other biblical estimates go back further by expanding the length of a “day” in Genesis. The modern scientific estimate by anthropologists and ethnologists has humans existing 30,000–50,000 years ago, with the Lascaux caves showing human behavior dated to 10,000–15,000 BC. In that case, our records miss roughly 10,000 years of history. There are traces of agriculture (and its competitor, pastoralism) dated as early as 8,000 BC but only as adjuncts to the gathering of wild barley, without evidence of plows.

Cities of a thousand or more people did not appear until about 4,000 BC, with the arrival of state civilization and the ability to support a sufficient number of noncultivators to record traditions.

Whatever the specifics, human history certainly starts well before agricultural civilization and the hierarchical cosmological state with which the Meyer-Voegelin story begins. Most social science calls this period hunter-gatherer (though the hunters may have come later), and it starts with families, or maybe bands of males impregnating unprotected females, with tribes and clans only much later evolving into states—though states probably obtained their cosmological form from these earlier patterns. An analysis of tradition must therefore start with these distant times, and maybe the story of freedom should too.

The great philosophers begin with beginnings: Hobbes with a brutish one, Rousseau with a noble one, and Locke with an insecure one. They all were more interested in the original condition’s consequences for civilization and government than they were in the historicity of the state of nature, and they possessed little reliable empirical information for the period between the origin of man and recorded history. Rousseau’s *Second Discourse* does attempt to construct an anthropological trajectory of sorts. It presents primitive examples of mankind eventually corrupted by socialization, “not to be taken as historical truth,” but rather as the most likely result given Rousseau’s assumptions. His two principle axioms were that men are naturally first interested in their own “self-preservation and welfare” and that we have a “natural aversion to seeing any other being but especially any being like ourselves suffer or perish.”

Rousseau contradicts both Hobbes and Locke. According to him, far from being aggressive, early man is satisfied with his fate and simply perseveres through the obstacles in his way with independence and equanimity.

ity. Rousseau's first human was virtually alone, meeting few others on his lonely excursions, and forming no lasting attachments even to mates, with children pretty much on their own. If injured by another's hostility, the natural man would never dream of revenge but would move stoically on his way. This free but challenging idyllic state continues, in Rousseau's telling, until a growing population forces the noble savage into contact with others.

Socialization went well initially, given man's natural aversion to violence. While some social "conformities" developed, "all behaved as he himself would have done" on his own. This gave individuals the confidence to agree to common rules of a very general form. Over time, however, industry and a more "enlightened mind" allowed the stronger and wiser members of society to create families and property, conditions to which the weak could only consent, feeling it was "safer to imitate [the powerful] than to dislodge them." The sexes developed specialized functions, thus increasing artificial needs that weakened man's naturally independent spirit. Metallurgy and agriculture were the ruin of humanity, allowing the "sly and artful" to manipulate the rest into giving their consent to their own domination.

The great empirical investigations into real prehistory, as opposed to Rousseau's mythical kind, do not take place until the ethnological studies of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. These analyses of fast-disappearing preagricultural social forms provide most of what we know, or think we know, about primitive life. The late Stanford University and *Académie française* philosopher René Girard has placed the observations gleaned from these and other scientific investigations into a series of books that explore the deep origins of humanity as reflected in anthropology, ethnology, psychology, literature, and religion.

Girard starts with what is empirically

different about human beings, rather than with assumptions about man's nature. The obvious comparison is with primates. Girard finds three distinctive human characteristics: the largest brain and longest period of infant immaturity of any mammal, along with opposable thumbs and firm-grasping fingers. The hand is immediately socially significant, in that it allows for holding and throwing rocks—where at best other primates might clumsily hurl branches—thus making man the most fearsome predator in nature, a status only enhanced by that big brain.

The human male's potential for violence is exacerbated by vast reserves of adrenaline useful in hunting and war. Unfulfilled desires for females (other primates, in contrast, often keep females in common) or for goods can produce rage for dominance, which invariably first turns inward among the family, rather than spinning outward, where it meets greater resistance. The idea of "father" does not exist among other primates, which have only dominant and subordinate males, the latter of whom typically will not challenge the former even for food.

Further, humans seem to have a more aggressive desire than apes for many more things, not just for sex and food but also for clothing, tools, and even frivolities. Girard concludes that imitation, emotion, and desire are the primal drives. Humans learn social mimicking right from the beginning by looking at their mothers and others around them. He calls this social function "acquisitive desire" based on imitating others and wanting what they seem to be desiring, a faculty exaggerated beyond simple animal desires by the greater brain function of man, leading to a passion exclusively human.

Human desire seems to overcome the normal "animal equilibrium," with one person passionately coveting what another possesses and the other naturally resisting. Even the prospect of dying does not seem much to deter human combatants, unlike

other mammals, which rarely fight to the death. While desire comes from observing others and is thus social, it also frustrates sociability, with envy leading to increasingly large divisions in and between families until the tribe can be divided into equal numbers, thus threatening mass murder and even the clan's survival.

Some traditional explanations like the Bible do start with benign humans. But once expelled from Eden with knowledge of good and evil, the first dramatic act of biblical humanity is the killing of Abel by Cain, who is so worried about violent reprisal from his extended family that he asks for and is given by God a sign protecting him from them to allow his very survival. Whether one begins with Darwin or the Bible or Girard, it is a good guess that the first humans were extremely violent.

Rousseau would seem to be the holdout from this picture of primal man. But in fact he agrees with this violent nature, after a stage of population increase and socialization in the tribe has been passed. Even in "nature," when solitary man supposedly meets others with pity, Rousseau is clear that self-preservation comes first. Moreover, the noble savage is easily corrupted to violence once in a social group, as Rousseau concedes. The *Second Discourse's* unsocial man disappears very quickly. Rousseau is least convincing about nature in the context of children, who if not strong enough just expire—but then how does population increase? Social order requires protecting children, and they require some very early social order.

Creating order

Order must have developed or we would not be here. So how did these emerged apes or Eden-banished men control that violent animal in their hearts? There was no state. Humans do not seem to have natural domi-

nance patterns like apes to maintain order, so human fights for supremacy lead easily to death. Simple coercion produces even more disorder, as opposed to a peace enforced by a dominant male, as for other primates.

Girard is intrigued that today "no one speaks about" the obvious human pattern of passionate envy and desire resulting in mass violence. The author of the Decalogue did, as did a nonbeliever like Hobbes, who feared a war of all against all that could only be restrained by a powerful state. Even now all one has to do to understand the need to control community violence is to watch children quarrel over some trifle. What could stop a rivalry that might cumulate in reciprocal escalation endangering the very survival of any social arrangement, in conditions where no one's power is much greater than anyone else's?

With direct coercion by equally weak individuals limited, some kind of social restriction must substitute for spontaneous defense. In his classic *Totem and Taboo*, Sigmund Freud labeled these restrictions "taboos." In the long period without the state, only beliefs, myth, and religion are available to keep the peace. In Girard's account, societies first repress "mimetic conflict" by prohibiting everything that might provoke violence. But that needs reinforcement by the second "great pillar of religion"—ritual—which must hide the prohibitions "beneath the major symbols of the sacred."

Rather than erasing the mimetic crisis of violence, rituals reproduce it in less threatening symbolic terms that might even allow taboos to be violated, if only in strictly fixed forms for the term of the ritual itself.

But what taboo is powerful enough to promote a fear sufficient to overcome a passionate desire that could divide the whole community into warring groups? The answer is a taboo that involves taking a life through sacrifice. Animal predators choose the weakest prospective victim as their prey, and

archaic human leaders appear to have chosen scapegoats—many crippled—for their sacrifices. A wise archaic leader with little power is limited to finding some outcast against whom all factions can unite.

Girard emphasizes that Caiaphas, the high priest at the time of Jesus, had admonished his fellow leaders that “it is better that one man should die for the people, than for the whole nation to be destroyed,” even rebuking the others—“You know nothing at all” if you as leaders do not understand this basic social reality.

Girard cites myths from nations across the world that involve hidden sacrifice and in which scapegoats emerge as gods, including Claude Levi-Strauss's Ojibwa and Tikopia tales in his *Totemism*, Euripides's *The Bacchae*, and Philostratus's *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, as well as Inca and Hindu practices, Romulus and Oedipus, and many others. Girard's interpretation is that once the scapegoat has appeased the contending factions and is safely dead, he can be recognized as a sacrifice for the good of the community, which then appreciates the reconciliation and peace brought about through his death. The return to calmer times after the sacrifice first appears to confirm the guilt of the innocent victim. But ancient fear and the honor of the dead then lead to reverencing the victim for the better times that follow.

After agreeing to further restrictions to avoid recurrence of conflict and adopting rituals to reinforce them, the united society considers the sacrifice sacred, and over time it makes him or her a god, so as to enforce the myth. As myths—or religions, as we should say—hardened into traditions and then cultures, they established an order that prepared the way for the agricultural societies that have been the focus of almost all modern systematic investigation. Girard suggests that kingship and the state itself ultimately emerged from sacrificial ceremonies.

Beyond the philosophical ideal

This brings the story of humanity up to Meyer and Voegelin's 2,500 years of recorded history, where Girard joins them in recognizing cosmological civilizations everywhere. Yet while Voegelin and Meyer give almost equal attention to Athens and Jerusalem, Girard stresses the latter's revelation as the only real challenge to the status quo, with the dominance of Greek gods frustrating Athens's break with its cosmological roots, leading that city to scapegoat even Socrates. Jews did emphasize animal sacrifice and promote taboos, but they also questioned them, with traditions such as God's preferring mercy over sacrifice, with prophets challenging sacred kingship, and finally with Deutero-Isaiah and the positive image of the suffering servant.

But the fundamental cosmological break—as conceded even by philosophers such as Rousseau, Machiavelli, Hegel, and Nietzsche—was with Jesus. Girard insists Jesus died not as dumb sacrifice but by directly contradicting and exposing the scapegoat myth underlying all other ancient religions. Jesus nowhere calls for sacrifice but rather for every individual to mimic the Father's command of love in the person of the Son, who did not seek death but refused to be intimidated by it. This God respected freedom so much that he could not force good even for his Son, and if he had, Girard says he would be no better than Satan. This appeal to individual rather than group obligation unleashed freedom into the world for both good and ill.

In the Old World, nothing was more powerful than violence, which is why archaic religion divinized it. Nietzsche directly contrasts primitive myth to Jesus's passion: his counterhero is Dionysus, the god of collective violence, of the frenzied mob. In Euripides's play *The Bacchae*, Dionysus is placed on trial as a false god but warns King Pentheus of

his power, comparing himself to the kingly ox not being able to kick the small pricks that bind it to the plow. The humble human pricks Dionysus, who then manipulates events to have his crowd of followers tear the king apart. St. Paul attributed a similar phrase to Jesus, whom he heard on the road to Damascus complaining that Saul/Paul was persecuting Him. Yet Jesus told Saul it was “hard for [him] to kick against the goads” steering him to Christianity. The comparison between Jesus and Dionysus was obvious to Nietzsche:

Dionysus versus the “Crucified”: there you have the antithesis. It is not a difference in regard to their martyrdom—it is a difference in the meaning of it. [To Dionysus] Life itself, its eternal fruitfulness and recurrence, creates torment, destruction, the will to annihilation. In the other case, suffering—the “Crucified as the innocent one”—counts as an objection to this life, as a formula to its condemnation. (*The Will to Power*, 1052)

Dionysus, like Rousseau’s noble savage, philosophically accepts life and death as it is, as a recurrence of honorable fruitfulness and torment, while Jesus rejects human life and its natural violence for a peaceful heavenly kingdom yet to come. Nietzsche opposed Christianity’s siding with the victim, seeing the faith as a slave morality of the weak that objected to rule by the morally superior supermen—as simple envy against the violent aristocratic leaders who sacrificed Jesus and persecuted him and his followers.

Interestingly, Girard argues that even Christian philosophy, surrounded as it was by Roman and Germanic myth, did not initially see the sacrificial problem or how the Resurrection overcame it. The Letter to the Hebrews’ emphasis on ancient sacrifice, rather than the uniqueness of Jesus’s free acceptance of his role, undermined the cen-

tral Christian message, but it did make that message more attractive to tribes following their ancient ways. This misplaced emphasis continued through the High Middle Ages up to Thomas Aquinas, with his reliance on Aristotelian philosophy, including its high regard for heroic sacrifice.

The Resurrection broke man’s subservience to power, creating a Western civilization that changed world culture. Yet the temptation to use coercion to fulfill one’s desires remains a seductive force, as the injunction to let the “weeds” grow with the good crops proves impossible for most people to accept. Still, no one today endorses (in speech, at least) what not so long ago was the norm: sacrificing innocent scapegoats for the common good. Indeed, the opposite view has spread to the “ends of the earth.” Not even the most vicious person will publicly repeat Caiaphas’s words justifying the killing of an innocent victim to help the community. Even Hitler falsely claimed he and his people were the victims of those he persecuted.

Girard closes with a warning that survival today requires taking the Christian message to its logical conclusion by definitively renouncing violence. He denies that this is naïve utopianism. The “improbable” source of any such renunciation, he says, can only be the Judeo-Christian tradition itself: the only one, he argues, to teach openly and authoritatively in support of victims.

Broadening the fusionist perspective

Girard asks the impossible by calling for a complete elimination of violence, and Voegelin and Meyer warned most sternly against the temptation to political utopia. Fortunately, Girard is pragmatic enough to make this final concession: “A science of politics must try to defend order . . . through the most peaceful means possible, while recognizing that it can aspire to nonviolence

only at the price of unleashing the greatest possible violence." In the spirit of fusionism, it must be a fine balance. Using the least possible violence and allowing maximum freedom undoubtedly is the moral way, but insufficient order can be catastrophic.

It is important to recall that Meyer considered the state (and the family) to be the "natural" limits on freedom. He started with civilization and Aristotle's assumption about man as a social and political animal, but that means Meyer discounted perhaps 3,000 to 6,000 years of agricultural civilization's evolution and 7,000 years of hunter-gatherer socialization before that. Yes, by the end, man was social. But was he "naturally" so? The state clearly was not "natural."

Girard's analysis is important not so much for its specifics as for the change in perspective it brings toward human time. An awareness of that time's extraordinary length must affect how a serious person looks at everything.

Recognizing that humanity did not start with civilization and was not primarily social at the outset highlights the tenuous nature of freedom—the degree of violence in nature, the difficulty of containing it, and its possible reemergence absent suprarational moral restrictions. Whatever interior constraints may be inherent in us, human desire and the passion for others' goods and mates must have dominated the species for a very long period before the state arose. Social restraints were required to limit passionate, primal freedom's violence, which was not tamed until symbols of the sacred—sacrifices, prohibitions, taboos, and institutions of ritual utilizing coercion, much of it against the innocent—produced order and prepared the way for the state and civilization.

A serious fusionism today must face the fact that its ideal of freedom has not only relied on coercion to control coercion but also on religion or myth. Freedom must remain the "criterion principle, the guide"

for Western civilization, as Meyer emphasized. But, as he also argued, no principle can be absolute once applied, and one must give due weight to other traditional principles. Minimizing the importance of tradition, too many modern followers of Meyer and Voegelin simply rely on reason, philosophy, and science. As Girard once argued, however, these are simplifications of a much more complex reality.

Today philosophy and science themselves have become the problem. Reaching back to Plato, the "prohibitions of philosophy," as Girard calls them, have stressed abstraction and jettisoned emotion and personal desire, which ignores much of what humans do. Neither reason nor philosophy nor science can be separated absolutely from human emotion and its traditions. As the great philosopher of science Karl Popper explained, both science and philosophy need tradition as a base from which to begin explanation and to reach any practical end. First principles and axioms must be based on what we already know, or think we know. There is simply no escaping tradition, very much including revelation.

Today all ancient myths are exposed, all modern absolute thought and ideologies exhausted—Marxism, humanism, rationalism, progressivism, even a deterministic science. The last remaining absolute is an amorphous universal concern for victims, with no convincing myth to justify it. In his *Tales of a New America*, Robert Reich stresses the necessity of a "morality tale" to unite society but says it can consist simply of "cultural parables" rather than truths. A long look at history suggests that society actually needs to believe its myths for them to have social value.

What happens in a modern world without the constraints of either taboo or revealed religion? The only alternative is private or state coercion. Western freedom separated Caesar from church and society to create a principle that restrained state coercion,

fostering the eventual development in the New World of balanced institutions with the possibility of individual freedom under law. Girard directly confronts Voegelin’s philosophical rival, Leo Strauss, for ranking Athenian rationalism over Jerusalem’s revelation in the development of the Western tradition and civilization. The philosophers were important, but their writings had no bite until Christianity. As John Locke put it in *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, “the philosophers showed the beauty of virtue” but “left her unendowed” so that “few were willing to espouse her” until “the immortal weight of glory” that was the Incarnation made free virtue manifest and created a civilization.

Machiavelli, Rousseau, and Nietzsche were not reluctant to place the Incarnation

at the center of the Western tradition, so as to condemn how its new freedom had destroyed ancient order and a supposedly more realistic morality. Meyer and Voegelin, on the other hand, stressed the new order’s revolutionary “flash of eternity into time” as a dramatic improvement. Unless their followers today emphasize its continuing importance, however, they will not remain relevant in a world where elites now universally condemn the scapegoating of innocent victims. The heirs of Machiavelli, Rousseau, and Nietzsche invoke the language of the new persuasion but appropriate its innocent-victim status to themselves, even as they follow the old morality in manipulating power for their own interests—which certainly do not include the safeguarding of free means or free ends. †

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