

Without natural law, man-made laws are emptied of meaning, subjecting us to the vagaries of legislated human feeling

Natural Law and Human Motives

Pierre Manent

MODERN AGE IS DELIGHTED TO PUBLISH the sixth and final Gilson lecture delivered by Pierre Manent at the *Institut Catholique de Paris* in March 2017. The subject of Manent's lectures was natural law, understood not from a metaphysical perspective but from the point of view of moral and political philosophy. Manent aims to recover a robust understanding of "liberty under law," both in the form of political command (or what one might call legitimate moral and political authority) and of those principles of the good that are inherent in the full manifestation of human nature and human motives. "Natural law is the law or the practical principles that human beings do not make because they belong to their nature, but that motivate, illuminate, and guide man-made laws." Against the dogmatism of ever more explicit "human rights" that close off democratic deliberation and hence the need for the great and crowning virtue of prudence in moral and political life, Manent restores practical reason to its rightful place.

His starting point is acting man, who is always confronted with the question, "What is one to do?" Human action is key to his analysis. He insists that we human beings are not bereft of guidance, since practical reason can draw on the motives that together constitute a flourishing life: the pleasant, the useful, and the just or noble. We are not playthings of those motives but political and moral *agents* who pursue the good in the situations in which we find ourselves. Our motives are not up to us; they belong to our nature as human beings, "but the way these human motives become" our action is up to us.

Pierre Manent was director of studies at *L'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*, Paris, until his retirement in 2014. This lecture was translated from the French by Ralph C. Hancock.

The indeterminacy of moral-political life allows one to choose between virtue and vice, better and worse. The good is never “determinate” but needs to be completed by virtuous human action. Nor are we prisoners of some unbridgeable gap between the “is” and the “ought,” as Machiavelli and many modern philosophers insist. As Manent says in a lovely formulation, “in reality there is neither a leap or chasm nor an abyss between ‘is’ and ‘ought,’ but only a gentle slope along which we can confidently walk.” At the end of an earlier lecture, Manent discusses how conscience—not understood as pure subjectivity but rather as a portal to and sign of truth and virtue—allows us to respect the indeterminacy of action while avoiding relativism or arbitrary choice. Machiavelli radicalizes the tension between the “is” and the “ought” in the direction of nihilism, and Luther places all his hopes in faith alone. Human beings—and Christians—cease to be acting men and are forced to choose arbitrarily. Manent’s Christian Aristotelianism points in another more truthful and salutary direction.

The lecture we are reproducing never remains at the level of abstraction. Manent discusses concretely (and provocatively) how Islamic terrorism mutilates the noble and just, how communism entails a systematic violation of the natural law, and how the natural law can provide guidance for thinking about marriage between a man and a woman as something much more than “an association of mere consent or enjoyment.” In the Gilson lectures as a whole, there are provocative discussions about how the state of nature, theorized by the early modern philosophers, literally undoes God’s creation, and how the modern state envisions a freedom that incoherently abolishes all command and obedience from human and political relations. We are left with the chimera of “autonomy,” without real substance or any recognition of ruling principles that provide humanizing guidance for acting man.

Manent by no means leaves us bereft of hope. There is an unchanging structure to human action that endures despite all the contemporary theoretical and practical obstacles to practical reason doing its work today. Elsewhere, he shows that in every time and place, acting man calibrates his means to the fixed ends of courage, prudence, justice, and temperance. We are no more prisoners of culture than we are playthings of our unchanging human motives. And in close-knit communities—ancient republics and Christian religious communities in particular—one witnesses vigorous alternatives to the regnant “an-archic” (without rule or principle) individualism. Pierre Manent’s is a thoughtful and compelling restatement of natural law and practical reason for a world that confronts all the perils of a liberty without law. His is a theoretical perspective that takes its bearings from the acting man who must choose between good and evil, right and wrong, virtue and vice. Manent places a reasonable bet on the fact that the good is not unsupported—that the ends and purposes of human freedom are available to practical reason and a well-formed conscience. His is a signal contribution to practical philosophy.

—Daniel J. Mahoney, *Assumption College*

Since the human world is a world of action, a practical world, it is naturally or essentially “arch-ic.” Divided into commanding and obeying—a person either obeys or commands—it is also held together, and put in motion, by an act that begins and commands. By a reversal that is indeed supremely audacious and ambitious, the initiators of the modern movement posited that there was nothing natural in this archic character, and that, on the contrary, what was natural was the “an-archy” of a condition without either command or obedience, and that it was only by starting from such a condition that it would be possible to construct a just form of commanding and of obeying. Nevertheless, whatever the authority of our fathers or of those who inspired our constitutions, it would be hard seriously to maintain that equality is humanity’s natural condition, or that the command-obey polarity is artificial.

As a matter of fact, the modern political order, *our* political order, has never ceased to be archic. Even today it continues to depend on the acts of those who command. If it were otherwise, we would not be so worried about the passions, reasons, and dispositions of President Donald Trump. Still—and here lies the transformation—the modern political project has introduced into the archic order what one might call certain “an-archic planes”—horizontal planes in a vertical order—which are ever more extensive, and which attract all public light to themselves and thus monopolize acceptable public reasons.

Thus, even while we act and, as agents—as acting beings—enter necessarily into the countless modalities of the command-obey polarity, and necessarily engage in acts as commanded and illuminated by its rule, we seek to give more and more place to the plane of life that denies commanding or obeying by multiplying new rights, the declaration and recognition of which replaces the human life that we experience with a kind of

“dream-life of the angels,” in which we are supposed to put our faith.

What concerns me today are the consequences of these developments for our understanding, consequences that are inseparable from our forgetting of law. In the conditions that are ours, human association is more and more opaque to itself; it understands itself less and less since, as the practical and archic operation is more and more obscured by an-archic conventions and frameworks, the bases of actions and of institutions and the sources of citizens’ own actions and institutions are less and less accessible to them. How can we close the chasm, which grows larger every day, between our social and moral experience, on the one hand, and, on the other, the language of unlimited rights, which has become the sole authorized discourse? That is, how can we escape the demoralizing division between actual experience and legitimate speech and again give voice to our social and moral experience?

In the face of an-archic individualism, with its rights that no have meaning except openness to an unlimited authorization of actions or behaviors with no rule or purpose, it is tempting to posit somewhat defensively a communitarian and archic order based on a natural law that derives its authority from a certain idea of nature, an idea understood as the objective synthesis of all norms desirable for the good regulation of the human world. This approach is a response to a very legitimate need, in the face of the virulence of the principle of subjectivity, to formulate anew the principles of an objective order. But this defensive and reactive approach, by advancing theoretical and synthetic propositions concerning human nature or the nature of the human world, repeats or imitates what it is fighting against while proposing an opposite content. By countering the individualist principle of human rights with the necessary and salutary character of a “holistic” order, we remain in an essentially

theoretical perspective and fail to enter into the workings of practice itself. In order to enter into actual practice, it is necessary to consider the question of human motives.

The question of human motives

I will start from the following proposition: every action properly so called requires a balancing of the three main human motives, that is, the pleasant, the useful, and the fair or honest. The active presence in us of these three great motives is not up to us, even though the strength of each, their relative weight, and the way in which they affect our actions vary according to our nature, our education and, precisely, the way we are in the habit of acting. As objective components of human nature, we have them in common as human beings, and it is because we share these motives that we understand each other and that we are capable of judging one another, and moreover that we cannot avoid judging one another.

One might argue that these three categories of motives are not equally natural or objective, or not so in the same way. The pleasant and the useful are notable for their stability and objectivity. According to a famous remark of Aristotle's, we cannot cause sexual intercourse to be unpleasant, nor a knife's cut to be pleasant. As for the useful, we cannot make it the case that forgetting to declare our tax liabilities would not be quite useful, or that others' failure to honor their debts to us would not be very disadvantageous. It is conceptions of what is fair or just or noble that we consider to possess a certain plasticity, to the point of refusing them a natural or objective status. It cannot be denied that these conceptions in fact vary considerably according to places and times. It is just these variations that have led to the elaboration of the human sciences, the sciences whose task it is to make intelligible the "infinite diversity of laws and

customs" that humanity presents, and which the idea of an essentially constant "human nature" seems not to be able to account for.

Nevertheless, as interesting as may be the epistemological or more generally philosophical questions posed by the scope of variations in the human phenomenon, these do not directly affect the practical human being, the human being in action, as agent. The question whether the idea of the just or the noble varies with one's particular culture is without pertinence for the acting human being: as an agent, a determinate idea of the just or the noble—most often in effect the idea held and nourished by his or her "culture" or city—and not at all the "infinite diversity" catalogued by the anthropologist—is necessarily among the principal motives of his actions. The variability of ideas of the just or of the noble, but also to a lesser degree of the useful, and even of the pleasant (since human beings can have very different ideas concerning what is "good to eat")—this variability in no way changes the invariable fact that every human being, whatever the "culture" or city to which he belongs, is necessarily moved by these three categories of motives.

Of course, this does not mean that the agent is the inert site of the activity of motives, of their play or concurrence, or that the chosen action is determined mechanically by the strongest motive, or by the strongest combination of motives, however such strength might be evaluated. As I have just noted, the agent is an agent; he bears an active relation to his motives. Neither the pleasant, nor the useful, nor the noble (just, fair) are in his power, but the weight accorded to each, and the way they are combined, depends in the first instance on him, that is, on his disposition, on his nature as it is either perfected or degraded by his education and by the habits produced by his past actions. In brief, the agent's motives are not up to him, as to either their presence or their nature; they belong to

the human being as such, to human nature; but the way these human motives become *his* action is up to him. His dispositions with respect to the action, his virtues and his vices, are up to him.

This description of the relationship between the action and the motives of action is admittedly just an overview, but it has the merit of emphasizing—rightly, I think—the objective and shareable character of human motives. But does it make sense to oppose the agent’s certainty with the uncertainty of the theoretical man, as I have done? Let us take a closer look at the problem.

Let us start with the case, which is not so rare and which is always interesting, of a person who effectively or sincerely sacrifices the pleasant, or the useful, or both, to his or her idea of the just or of the noble. If we share his idea of the just or of the noble, or if we at least include it in the category of what is authentically just or noble, then all is well, I might say, and we admire such an agent. This is a just man, or a noble woman, and perhaps even a hero! But what happens when his or her idea of the just seems to us unjust, or if his idea of the noble seems ignoble? Can we still say that he has in practice obeyed, as an agent, the motive of the just or of the noble such as he understands it, adding only that for our part we disapprove, reject, or condemn his idea of the just or of the noble? Might we look at the crimes of Islamist terrorists in this way? How can we judiciously confront the chasm that suddenly opens up between the point of view of the agent and that of the spectator?

We can begin to bridge this chasm by suggesting that the crimes justified by high ideas of the just or of the noble result from the corruption of a legitimate or authentic idea of the just or of the noble. In such cases, the agent vividly experiences the passion awakened by a certain idea of the noble or of the just; he is in a way exalted, but he lacks the adequate dispositions to lead his enthusi-

asm in the right direction and thus to purge it; he is looking, as it were, for a short cut and offers to satisfy his passion immediately, in a way that is crude and cruel, and that has little to do with the idea of the just or of the noble that originally motivated him or that was present more or less seriously at the beginning of the process. In the simplest case, which is not necessarily the rarest, this idea simply provided the pretext for satiating a criminal tendency.

An analysis of this kind might help us to clarify the conduct of terrorists by discerning how in their case the religious motivation relates to the criminal action. We cannot say that their action is a crime without any connection to the idea of the noble or of the just that they draw from their religion or from a certain interpretation of their religion. Nor can we say that they simply obey an idea of the noble that we do not share. Shall we say that they obey a “false idea” of the noble? It is less the idea that is false than their relation to the idea. Terrorists do not concern themselves with the idea, they do not attach themselves to it, except insofar as it seems to justify their passion and their criminal drives, but they lose interest in it as soon as it might oblige them to consider more seriously the direction they are about to take. In any case, it seems hardly pertinent to view their conduct as a “radicalization” to be treated by a “deradicalization,” as if terrorist criminality were a sickness separable from the general dynamic of human motives, motives therefore that we all share.

Thus, even where the noble or the just is concerned, the point of view of the observer and the point of view of the agent cannot be entirely separated. The observer, whether a professional scholar or an ordinary citizen, cannot say simply: this agent judges a conduct to be intrinsically noble or just that I judge to be intrinsically ignoble or unjust. However strange may be the “culture” of the “other,” and his idea of the noble or the

just, I cannot judge an action without judging an agent, and I cannot judge the agent without judging myself. This requires effort. Thus Montesquieu, while emphasizing the “*bizarrieries*” of the nobility’s “point of honor,” shows that the passion of the point of honor effectively sustains a vigorous disposition to liberty, since it introduces certain “necessary modifications in the obedience” due to a prince. Even if these “*bizarrieries*” first strike us as incomprehensible and even seem to us absurd, the motive that informs them and that they in turn maintain then becomes quite comprehensible for us.

The reference of human beings, whoever they may be, to an idea of the noble or of the just is always in principle comprehensible and shareable by all human beings, at least as a possible and meaningful perspective. If there are some forms of conduct towards which we cannot make this movement of understanding, whether these be crimes of honor or of terrorism, then we must conclude that these are forms of conduct that are just as criminal for their agents as they would be if we had adopted them ourselves.

Moreover, as I have said, the acting human being is not a prisoner of his or her motives. He is not the plaything of his idea of the just. He is so much less its plaything as this idea is never completely determinate. It is surrounded by a halo of the uncertain and the problematic. The agent moved by a high idea of the just is able to correct and to rectify, or at least to inflect, the idea that he has received from his “culture” or his city. Thus those men who are declared the most just have often been the “reformers” of their cities. In this sense the motive of the just or of the noble is “stronger” than the idea of the just or of the noble that specifies it here and now.

These remarks are intended only to suggest that the bases of practical life are much more stable and constant than we are inclined to admit, carried away as we are by the theoretical point of view of the social

sciences, and more generally by the point of view of the observer or spectator. As spectators—and human beings *love* spectacles—we are naturally attracted and charmed by the spectacle of the diversity of human conduct that attracts our attention all the more when it is different from what is familiar to us, and that attracts it most especially if the particularity is spectacular, preferably spectacularly atrocious. This is not the best disposition for penetrating the springs of the acting animal. We must go against this tendency if we want to do justice to the point of view of action. All this matters for our approach to the question of natural law.

The question of natural law

The very notion of natural law presupposes or implies that we have the ability to judge human conduct according to criteria that are clear, stable, and largely if not universally shared. It demands that the motley diversity of the human phenomenon, which is apparent to anyone, be reduced to a single set of characteristics common to all humanity, and thus suitable to provide the foundation for rules of justice that are comprehensible and acceptable by all. We have suggested that the principal motives of human action—the pleasant, the useful, and the noble—constitute such characteristics. There is the question, however, how we can accord a decisive role to the motives of action, that is, to the factual bases of human acting, in an investigation into natural law, that is, into action’s norm.

Sometimes the emperor of our philosophical scruples isn’t wearing much. A case in point are the modern philosophers who are eager to reproach their predecessors or some of their colleagues for confusing “is” with “ought,” or succumbing to the “naturalistic fallacy.” But in reality there is neither a leap nor a chasm nor an abyss between “is” and “ought,” but only a gentle slope along which

we can confidently walk. This, I say without vanity, is what I am now doing. To consider attentively the way in which human beings act, to grasp the reasons of their actions, and from this to discern the best way to judge and guide such actions—this not only involves no paralogism; it in fact constitutes the only way to proceed if we want to escape the alternative of deciding arbitrarily what rule, norm, or law we will declare valid, or on the other hand renouncing to seek it. This in any case is what I propose, and it is a modest proposition in all respects.

The principle of this proposition can be summed up roughly as follows: a society, a regime, or an institution that does not give sufficient place to the three great motives that we have enumerated, that does not open up sufficient space for them, cannot be considered in conformity with natural law, that is, with this order of practical life that is not made by human beings but within which they not only live better and more happily, in a way that is more in conformity with human nature and its vocation, but in which they also find more complete and exact self-knowledge. I would like to show by a few examples that this proposition, though it may not provide for the elaboration of what the Greek philosophers called the “best regime,” gives us the means to arrive at appropriate judgments on the great practical and political questions. As I have said, this is a modest proposition; strictly understood it leaves much to be desired and thus calls for complements and refinements. But it does help us arrive at practical truths on questions that it is very important for us to evaluate judiciously.

Let us take first the case of a political regime concerning whose nature and merits much has been said over the last three quarters of a century, that is, the communist regime. Some are especially focused on communist “ideals,” on the idea of justice that the regime claimed to put into practice, either in

order to praise its radicality and completeness or to denounce its “utopian” character. Those who had granted the validity and the nobility of the ideal were then obliged to ask themselves whether this ideal was at least approximately realized by the regime. There was thus an argument over about seventy years concerning ideal communism and “real socialism”—for how is it possible to judge whether the real corresponds to the ideal when one regards the real in the light of an idea of the ideal that is necessarily very uncertain, and when there is no way to know what a society effectively “in conformity with the ideal” of communism would really look like?

Among the lessons to be learned from the terrible communist experience, let us retain this one: the surest way not to see what is right before one’s eyes and to commit the most serious errors of political and moral judgment is to look at the human world according to the polarity between the real and the ideal, “is” and “ought.” Once a person has subjected himself to the obligation to bring about the *convergence* of what he began by *separating* in the most rigorous manner, he is under a contradictory injunction that gravely prevents or falsifies any spontaneous or sincere perception of the human association under consideration, in this case, the communist regime. How can the sinister phenomenon—what we see as sinister and is sinister—be regarded as showing reality when it is supposed simultaneously to indicate the sunny ideal? How then can the sinister phenomenon even be *seen*?

Even so, it was a simple thing not to be duped, even without being seriously informed concerning the magnitude of the repression and cruelty of the regime. The most casual and least observant traveler, in seeing the sadness of housing and clothing, the stiffness and brutality of physiognomies, the difficulty of obtaining the most elementary services from one’s neighbor—even the

most naïve and favorably disposed traveler, I say, was forced to notice that the communist regime granted only the most meager share to the useful and the pleasant, and that it frustrated cruelly and incomprehensibly these two fundamental sources of human life. This defect was so obvious and so massive that, whatever one's sympathies for the ideal proclaimed by the regime, and even if one were ignorant of the fact of its crimes, this defect was enough to declare it without hesitation contrary to natural law. A judgment based exclusively on the role of the useful and the pleasant in communist life would have been incomplete but also rigorously exact. This would distinguish it from many other judgments, which were caught between the opposing tongs of the real and the ideal, the "is" and the "ought."

In order to establish the pertinence of the criteria of the three motives, we might also have taken the example, not of a political regime, but of a fundamental social institution such as marriage. If man and woman are to find in marriage a framework and a rule of life that gives appropriate place to the three motives, then a lot of imagination is not needed to unfold the practical consequences of a natural law so conceived. Marriage will not be an association of mere consent or enjoyment, one that might be chosen, put aside, and resumed according to changing feelings, as it is regarded more and more today; nor will it be a mere arrangement of the utility of families, as it was traditionally; nor, finally, will it be a paradoxical exercise in chastity, as proposed in a certain Catholic interpretation of the natural law that is still quite widespread.

It may seem that the result of applying our criteria is, if not trivial, at least disappointing, since it leaves us with a concrete but minimal characterization of the institution, without providing any explicit criterion of perfection or at least of improvement. This objection seems to me groundless. The notion of

natural law neither includes nor demands an exhaustive definition of all the institutions in which human beings seek human goods. It is supposed to help us apply a simple and concrete criterion for determining whether it is possible for human nature to find satisfactory fulfillment in a given institution, political regime, or framework of action in general.

Next, nothing prevents us from pursuing the reflection on the engagement of each motive according to the institution under consideration, with the understanding that—in every human institution, but in different ways according to the nature of the institution—the motive of the noble or of the just opens up a field of possibilities to the desire for improvement that is incomparably more vast than does the motive of the pleasant or that of the useful. Natural law as I propose to view it here offers precisely this advantage: while providing explicit and concrete criteria that make it possible to appreciate the conformity of an institution or of a mode of conduct to the natural law, it leaves the agent as well as the evaluator great latitude for exploring paths of improvement, or rather encourages him to explore such paths of improvement. If we wish for the appeal to natural law to be able usefully to illuminate the complexities and refinements of practical life, it is important that far from taking the form of a discourse that is theoretical and assertoric—and that confuses the ordinary regime of action with the perfect regime, each one spoiling the other—the discourse of natural law maintains in a sense the potentiality and, I dare say, the reserve of practical principles that remain implicit insofar as they have not yet commanded a concrete action.

The explicit and the implicit

Such an approach would make it possible to avoid what is the hazardous and occasionally ridiculous in *lists* of human rights. It makes

little sense, we can agree, to include “paid vacations” in a catalog of rights to be translated into all the languages of the world, including those that have no word for “vacation” or for “salary.” On the other hand, paid vacations make perfect sense among the very welcome and useful measures that one might reasonably claim and establish in a productive society characterized by salaried work. It might be said that paid vacations, or other such policies, fit no better in an account of the content of the natural law than in a catalog of human rights.

This is true, but precisely a right understanding of natural law, a right understanding of its *practical* character, saves us from the tyranny of the explicit and the exhaustive that is the fate and the scourge of the philosophy of human rights. This philosophy, having abandoned the perspective of the agent, can guide actions only by absolute propositions that can in no way enter into practical deliberation since, once a human right has been declared, there is nothing left to deliberate, but only strictly to apply. But the very character of natural law excludes anything so dogmatically explicit, since it involves the “play” proper to practical life, since it always leaves room to deliberate and then to choose. That effectively makes it less explicit, and moreover less pretentious, but not less rigorous: it alone is in fact rigorous *in practice* because, unlike declared rights, it is meant to be part of an actual deliberation and not to replace one.

So conceived, natural law is not like Kantian moral law, in relation to which the agent must always necessarily fall short. Natural law guides action but does not determine it, and thus does not command it. Only the agent, enlightened by the natural law and alert to particular circumstances, is fit to make the reflective choice that leads to effective action and commands it. Where the *natural* law is concerned, humanity in its ordinary or current condition is not this mass of perdition

that the law condemns, but so many actors who undertake much and often fall short, who are ceaselessly straying further from and coming closer to this law of nature that does not define an idea, but rather helps us to find the point of equilibrium and the optimal rule for a happy life—that is to say a reasonably pleasant, useful, and noble life.

I have already mentioned the common and as it were official objection that is addressed to the very notion of natural law: nature cannot make laws; only man, only human reason and will, is capable of producing law, since law has meaning only in relation to a human being who produces and obeys it. What is curious is that the force of this objection has been felt and even become axiomatic at the same time as and to the degree that we were losing any sense of the seriousness of human law. At the same time—and to the degree that these human rights were gaining all the authority that had until then been accorded to political law, the law that commands in the human world—the human law, thus emptied of its meaning, obtained the monopoly of the idea of law at the expense of natural law. This double movement suggests that natural law and human and political law, far from being incompatible notions, are on the contrary in solidarity and mutually implicated. Natural law is the law or the practical principles that human beings do not make because they belong to their nature, but that motivate, illuminate, and guide man-made laws. If there were not an authority or a resource like natural law, there could not be a human law in the proper sense, since human beings would not have a way to evaluate what they choose to call law, or, in the first place, no way to know whether what they are talking about is in fact the practical measure called law. Thus, as we see today, as the law becomes more and more exclusively a guarantor of rights, an authorizing law, it is losing entirely what constituted its nature as law, that is to say its character as a rule of action.

We might add that this natural law contains nothing that might offend human pride since it simply invites the agent to combine the three great human motives in the best way. What could be more satisfying to the acting human being than to have produced, in the given circumstances, the action that imparts what is due to the pleasant, the useful, and the noble? What could be more honorable than to have discerned and produced the just proportion?

The dogmatism of rights, by according meaning and credit only to the living individual's feeling of suffering or of enjoyment, by granting exclusive and unquestioned authority to his feeling as a self—and thus to the passive part of his being—has ruined the whole architecture of practical life. What is there left to do for a person who no longer wants to do anything but to offer up his private suffering or his private enjoyment for public recognition and for protection by the state? By ruining the architecture of practical life, the dogmatism of rights has destroyed the intelligibility not only of natural law and of human-political law but also of political commandment, of which political law is a part, and which always provides the key to the practical order. However we might try to give new life and color to the now discredited notion of natural law, its destiny is inseparable from those of political law and political commandment. These three great constituents of the architecture of practical life either work together or perish together.

The primacy of command

If we escape for a moment the spell of modern freedom; if we close our ears for a moment to the ceaselessly whispered suggestion to let people do as they will, to let things be; if we strive to be attentive to practical life as we can observe it in ourselves and outside ourselves; then we will perceive that all action is

either commanding or commanded, at least implicitly or by tendency. This, moreover, is why human life, whether public, social, or private, is always essentially *in tension*. This is neither a defect that we should correct nor a disease that we should heal.

There is no need to attribute this tension to some particular feature of human nature: for example, as Hobbes does, to the desire ever to acquire power after power. Almost everything is contained in the fact of having to act, in the fact of the *agendum*. The urgency of what is to be done and the desire to do well easily cause us to mistake the command contained in the action itself; this command, which is at least implicit, of course does not escape those who take part in the action with us and who thus see a command, our command, where we see only the thing to be done. Thus the acting person, even the least eager to command, necessarily puts pressure (as we say today) on the person acting with him. It may be indeed that this tension is now more intense and more trying than it has ever been, insofar as we would like to think that we must live without either command or obedience.

As I just noted, command has less to do with the acting person's desire for power than with action itself; or let us say at least that the person assumes the commanding stance only because it is internal to action itself. Authentic or complete action is naturally commanding. Command is action itself, its core and essence. As to one who neither commands nor obeys—who can say what he really does? In the movements of his body or of his soul, how can we discern the part played by habit, by reflexes, by automatic responses, by just going along, “doing nothing”?

Command indicates immediately that one has broken with passivity, with the inertia of immanent life, that the present is not enough, that one cannot merely continue or prolong, that a future must be opened up, and that an action *begins*. Aristotle emphasizes that only

he who commands needs all the virtues of the acting person. (This is so at least of the person who means to command *well*, but then one who does not know how to command does not *truly* command.) He needs especially the virtue that orders and crowns practical life, the virtue of prudence, which is the virtue proper to him who commands, whereas he who obeys can be satisfied with what Aristotle calls right opinion, which tells him whom and how he should obey. In the good regime of the Greek city, that is, in the well-constituted democracy, every citizen commands and obeys in turn: either he commands, or he obeys—*tertium non datur*.

Among those who know what it means to command and to obey, no one would dream of claiming that he obeys himself or that he commands himself, a fetishistic formula and a paralogism dear to the adepts of “autonomy.” These reflexive and reversible propositions have no meaning in practical life, since they presuppose that it is possible to erase the qualitative difference between the commanding agent and the commanded agent, between the disposition of one who commands and the disposition of one who is commanded—in brief they presuppose that the same agent can contain simultaneously the two opposing dispositions of practical life. In the real city, which is inhabited and animated by actors and not reflective thinkers, the citizen can be said to accomplish no action that is not commanded by a magistrate of the city, unless he himself is a magistrate, in which case he commands other citizens for the time and within the scope of his office.

This perspective, which is oriented by the question of command, does not derive from some particular value attached to the superiority or inequality implied in commanding, or from some special taste for this inequality or superiority, nor from any overall conception of the world, from a “hierarchical conception” of the natural and human world, as

is often said lazily and repeated confidently in dealing, for example, with Aristotle. This perspective is tied directly to a way of understanding practical life and action. The practical good, which has no existence outside of the action that aims at it and produces it, is as it were at every moment on the verge of being lost, or degraded, or of being abandoned. And at every moment it is the proper and personal aim of whoever has received or who claims particular responsibility for this good, and who breaks with the inertia in which human life naturally sinks or gets bogged down, to command and to begin the action that preserves or improves, the “perfecting” action, with a view to this good.

This articulation of the command and obedience that constitute complete action has been relaxed or diluted, and thus lost to view, in the conditions of modern *society* and *freedom*, in which the irresistible power of the state and its sovereignty impose the framework and the habit of equal rights, and thus offer a life that ignores command as well as obedience, at least ostensibly or apparently, a life that we call “free,” in which each is busy pressing his rights and seeking his interests. Command has not entirely disappeared—far from it; it is even seen as legitimate within the limited framework of a function within a system of productive work. It is in the guise of necessities of production or of administration that command and obedience subsist among us. But this is by no means a residual subsistence, but rather a power that is all the more violent for being underhanded, given that “work relations” are all doubtless rendered more difficult by the fact that the inequality that there prevails is contrary to the principles of common existence and to the tenor of the rest of social life.

Let me observe in passing that to the degree that the command-obey polarity became, as it were, invisible in the socio-political landscape informed by the figure of the autonomous subject, something called

“domination” became the focus of attention; this was understood to be a social and moral phenomenon that is in a way detached from the action of members of society, since the command of he who commands is no longer concretely inscribed and visible in the public space, but instead a phenomenon that bears down on the mass of society in a way that is all the more oppressive and discouraging. This domination has taken many forms throughout the development of modernity, but from the beginning it has been at the root of the resistance and suspicion to which modern productive society has constantly given rise. Certainly one of the most serious weaknesses of “liberalism” is its incapacity to take the measure of this phenomenon, its readiness to see in this resistance and suspicion an “ideological” viewpoint fomented by those sectors of social or political opinion that refuse to see the “reality” or the “necessities” of “the modern economy.”

It is, on the other hand, in close-knit communities that are devoted to action in the full sense, and where there is special attention given to the exactness of action, to the effective presence and to the life of the good or of the proper end of these communities, that the articulation between command and obedience is the most explicitly clear and thematized, as well as carried out with the most care. This is in particular the case of ancient republics and of Christian religious communities.

As we have abandoned ourselves more and more completely, or more and more resolutely, to the inertia of *laissez-faire* or of letting be, we have lost sight of the central role of command in practical life, including especially the commanding role of the law as a rule of common action. We put our faith in the postulate that a certain inaction, or a certain abstention, is at the origin of the greatest goods. At the same time as the flux that carries away the products of our activities swells and accelerates, we take off the brakes and abstain from

actions that would tend to moderate and to direct the movement of people and of things. We believe, moreover, that nothing is more pointless or sterile in general than the tension proper to the acting person, whether he is concerned with this world or with the other. “Avoid stress,” “stay cool,” “take it easy”—these are a few versions of the only commandment whose validity we recognize.

The grammar of human life has been reduced for us to enjoyment or suffering. Between these two modes of passivity that claim all our attention and provide the matter of all our new rights, there is no longer any space for acting. At the beginning of the arc of the development of modernity, we deliberately abandoned that law that commands and gives the rule to action, in favor of the State that organizes the conditions of action, an action henceforth judged not by its rule but by its effects. Since this beginning, the rule of action has been continually eroded and action itself has been continually shrinking, while the effects of our actions, or rather of our abstentions, become ever more crushing.

The acting animal is now the prisoner of the very audacious and ingenious arrangement that he once built to escape the urgency and to avoid the difficulty of the practical question. Caught in the realm of inaction, he seeks, with a zeal he believes to be active, the last corners of social existence that still escape the *laissez-faire* idea and where the very idea of the law might suffer its final defeat. Western, or at least European, humanity seems to rally itself all together, not in order to do some great new thing, but in order to refuse irrevocably to hear the question, “What is to be done?”

Throughout these lectures, it has not been my ambition, like a prophet in Nineveh, to awaken the West from its arrogant passivity. I have tried to open, or rather to reopen, certain paths, once majestic roadways that we have long since abandoned, leading to the practical science or philosophy that we are cruelly lacking. †