

The Dangers of Sentimentality

An Essay

David Borodin

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Edition 8.31.20

(August 31, 2020; See the colophon, p. 170, for a note on the essay’s evolution.)

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The Dangers of Sentimentality

I. Introduction: Preliminary Definition, Etymology, and Thesis

“Sentiment” is an English noun that has been used for centuries to signify at least three closely related cognitive dispositions: a view of, or attitude toward, a situation or event; a feeling or emotion with regard to something; and, more generally, an opinion. Deriving from the Latin *sentire in mente* (“feeling an idea”), this English word “sentiment” still bears the bulk of its traditional associations with an endearing quality of human behavior—perhaps even one of the central attributes of what it is to be human.

Yet the morphological derivations of this lexeme, such as “sentimental,” *sentimentalist*,” and “sentimentality,” have gradually come to denote in the minds of more sophisticated speakers an incompatibly different sense from that still prevalent in our root word, “sentiment”—this despite an increasing *popular* confusion that treats these derivations as if still synonymous with it.

Indeed, the informed distinction made today between “sentiment” and “sentimentality” is anything but a superficial one and has its close parallel in the difference even *popularly* recognized between the meanings of “grandeur” and “grandiosity.” This latter term is widely understood to represent an unrealistic, excessive, and pretentious delusion of the former. For example, an astute critic might praise the “grandeur” found in a particular painting, poem, or musical composition under her scrutiny, but certainly *not* by referring to it as “grandiosity” which, to the contrary, would be

I. *Introduction: Preliminary Definition, Etymology, and Thesis—continued*

understood by her appropriate readership as a *disparagement*, cuing them in on what she perceives to be the artist's indulgence in mere cheap effects in place of rigorous control over the materials at hand.

Now, this disparity in usage seems to me roughly analogous to the one observed by Mark Twain as existing between "the right word" and "the *almost* right word," which Twain likened to "the difference between lightning and a lightning *bug*." Nevertheless, we often find "sentimentality" and its two sibling derivations still used (or, rather, *abused*) by many in an *approving* way, as though to recommend the sentimentalist as a person on whom we can count for a reassuringly human sensitivity to the personal experience of feelings and emotions that we refer to collectively as "sentiment."

And while all these words may indeed have conveyed this related sense to English speakers back in the mid-18th century, when the word "sentimentality" was first introduced, it appears to have taken little more than a generation or two before these honorifics began to ring in the ears of more attentive practitioners of our language as pejoratives—and I believe with ample justification.

For, unlike the original root word "sentiment," which has rightly retained much of its respectable sense, "sentimentality" had rather quickly come to serve the more sensitized users of our language as a kind of red flag: one warning of a type of *emotional dishonesty* or *disingenuousness* in operation, wherein fears of engagement with the confusing complexities of real life are assuaged by exhibitions of emotions inappropriate to the occasion, all indulged toward the

I. *Introduction: Preliminary Definition, Etymology, and Thesis—continued*

conventionalizing delusion of a safer, simpler reality.

But before moving on to an expanded definition of sentimentality, along with an exploration of what I believe to be the predictable psychic underpinnings of this mindset (surveyed in Section IV, below), I would like first to invite my readers to easily recognize the syndrome when they see it. And I believe there to be no more obvious place to start than where we are right now: *in words*. By this I mean in the aesthetic perspective afforded by the literary experience. I offer two well-known examples below to start: one in verse, the other in prose.

II. Aesthetics, Part 1: *Knowing it When We See it: Sentimentality in Poetry*

When Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, in their influential textbook *Understanding Poetry* (1938), vigorously chopped down “Trees,” the infamously famous poem by Joyce Kilmer (1913), it was because Kilmer's arboreal keepsake lent itself so easily for dissection as the quintessential example of sentimentality at work in (bad) poetry. I transcribe this exquisite specimen here to remind us of the aptness of their selection of “Trees” in this regard:

I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.
A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
Against the earth's sweet flowing breast;
A tree that looks at God all day,
And lifts her leafy arms to pray;

II.: Aesthetics, Part 1—*continued*

A tree that may in summer wear
A nest of robins in her hair;
Upon whose bosom snow has lain;
Who intimately lives with rain.
Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.

Now, let us put aside the *technical* reasons Brooks and Warren have put forth in demonstration of how "Trees" fails to work persuasively *as a poem* (i.e., *as a work of art*, to be judged on formal grounds, rather than *as a piece of devotional rhetoric*, to be judged solely on the emotional appeal of its "message"). Kilmer's poetic skill is not my real concern here so much as the ability necessary toward exciting an honest emotional commitment in his reader. So, where does this ability so abysmally fail? What *is* it exactly about these dozen lines of wholesome leafy goodness that, on purely human terms, makes us reach reflexively for our chain saw? I maintain the answer here is simple: *emotional insincerity*, which we can feel dripping from these lines like sap.

This is because instead of expressing what it feels like to live mindfully, or even *reverently*, in the presence of a sublime example of the natural world around him, Kilmer simply offers us up a cute dashboard ornament in the vague outline of a tree. For example, no fewer than nine of these twelve lines comprise simplistic anthropomorphisms, allowing Kilmer to pretend his subject is *not* a tree but rather a human being—sort of. Yes, even as a human, his

II.: Aesthetics, Part 1—*continued*

subject may be discerned only dimly, having been reduced to a mere posturing of pious faith. In other words, in place of an artistic intensification of experience, Kilmer proffers us a mere *souvenir*.

Yes, Kilmer has managed to reduce our rich associations of a vast and august family of living beings with which our species has enjoyed a long, complex, and vital relationship into a simplistic devotional image suitable for enclosure in a snow globe. Indeed, the pious adulation with which his icon is revealed to us could easily be borrowed for the worship of Jesus, Mary, or Kim Il Sung. And if we still harbor any doubt about the real intent of the poem, its hypocritically foolish couplet makes it abundantly clear: "Trees" is but a *devotional relic*, one to be memorized by impressionable young minds toward their proper worship of God, whom Kilmer congratulates for the most intelligent design of this all-purpose perennial that he has just rendered unrecognizable. In other words, Kilmer has bequeathed to us a *pious fake*. For, it seems he is simply too mawkishly teary-eyed to be in a condition to actually see the tree standing before him. What he observes (or at least *relates to us* has having observed) is unrecognizably distorted in the emotional blur of his simplistic idealizing. I read these lines and wonder whether our poetaster would even know a *real* tree if he walked into one. (For my own rather irreverent parody of this superlative specimen of the sentimental, see my sonnet "In Praise of Plain Pornography: A Meditation on Smut," which may be found listed under Section F., "Assorted Musings," in the table of contents of my *Collected Poems [& Essays]*.)

II.: Aesthetics, Part 1—*continued*

But let's be clear: the danger I warn about in this essay is not just the *aesthetically* unpleasant reality of yet another bad poem. No, lovers of poetry—or of any other form of art, for that matter—learn naturally to navigate around unsatisfactory examples in their pursuit of artistic satisfaction, and most succeed in doing so without succumbing to the narcissism of actually feeling injured by each bad poem they find. I believe the real danger of the sentimental mindset that made "Trees" possible is less its bric-a-brac aesthetic than the ethical implications of its inherent *insincerity*: the elaborate posturing after deep feeling that ultimately cripples one's ability to communicate genuine sentiment.

III. Aesthetics, Part 2: *Knowing it When We See it: Sentimentality in Prose*

Here, as promised, is another famous example of sentimentality in literature, this one from a novel rather than a poem. It is a passage cherished both by the sentimental readers for whom it was dished up and, ironically, by those shrewd and assiduous critics rightly offended by its unabashed expression of sentimentality. Commonly referred to as "The Death of Little Nell," it is a passage from Dickens's novel, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, in which the omniscient narrator describes to us the impact of the death of young Nell Trent, the beautiful, egregiously virtuous, and hopelessly selfless 13-year-old orphaned heroine who had been found dead at the end of an impressive trajectory of uncomplaining, selfless deeds of valor:

III.: Aesthetics, Part 2—*continued*

For she was dead. There, upon her little bed, she lay at rest. The solemn stillness was no marvel now.

She was dead. No sleep so beautiful and calm, so free from trace of pain, so fair to look upon. She seemed a creature fresh from the hand of God, and waiting for the breath of life; not one who had lived and suffered death.

Her couch was dressed here and there with some winter berries and green leaves, gathered in a spot she had been used to favour. "When I die, put near me something that has loved the light, and had the sky above it always." Those were her words.

She was dead. Dear, gentle, patient, noble Nell, was dead. Her little bird—a poor slight thing the pressure of a finger would have crushed—was stirring nimbly in its cage; and the strong heart of its child-mistress was mute and motionless for ever.

Where were the traces of her early cares, her sufferings, and fatigues? All gone. Sorrow was dead indeed in her, but peace and perfect happiness were born; imaged in her tranquil beauty and profound repose....

Well, given the right circumstances—perhaps a tumbler of Scotch and a comfortable chair by the fire after a satisfying meal—and this passage can be experienced as nothing short of *delicious*. Indeed, Oscar Wilde famously appraised the syrupy sentimentality of this passage as follows: **"One must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without dissolving into tears...of laughter."**

Why? Why would anyone erupt in tears of laughter rather than of heartbreak and compassion after reading these words? Well, because

III.: Aesthetics, Part 2—*continued*

they are words chosen precisely with the intent to *extort our sentiment*: to coerce from us via deceptive means some *gratuitous* emotional reactions the author had predatorily fixed in his crosshairs. Yes, this passage represents little more than a sanitized idealization, both of a child *and* of death—one consciously designed to jump-start our pity and taste for tragedy. We are the attempted victims of an emotional hoodwinking, wherein an author has misrepresented the world his readers know in order to obtain from them a desired emotional response. For, this was not the death of a *child* but rather of a *poster image of child-like perfection*, one in which the unrealistic attributes of perfect goodness that are the dream of all unrealistic parents are shamelessly exaggerated in a cheap effort to make our little heroine's demise seem all the more tragic. Indeed, it would be disingenuous of us to shed tears of anything *but* ironic laughter at the ludicrous incongruousness of the emotional deception offered us.

We *all* agree—those of us who cry here out of despair as well as those who do so out of ironic hilarity—that there is nothing at all laughable about the death of a child. And Wilde was quite obviously *not* suggesting that there was. Rather, he was criticizing the author's lamentable lapse of taste demonstrated in stooping to try and *cheat us of our tears*. Dickens yearns to have us *try on* the feeling of great loss, not so much the loss of a fictional character intended to represent a child with whom we can actually associate, but that of an unrealistic stereotype of thankful, uncomplaining, inhuman

III.: Aesthetics, Part 2—*continued*

goodness *posing* as a little girl. In other words, he wants us to shed tears for the tragic injustice of the death of *especially good* children.

But we needn't take the word of literary critics toward such an appraisal; the author's ever-so-reliable narrator apprises us of this quite unequivocally. Take, for example, the second paragraph, which would have us see our heroine as one who "seemed a creature fresh from the hand of God, and waiting for the breath of life; **not one who had lived and suffered death.**" Yes, we are informed outright, with a directness precluding the need for well-honed interpretive skills, that our Nell is but an *effigy*, not a character suggesting a flesh-and-blood child afflicted with the quirks and ambivalences of a real human being.

"The death of Little Nell" is not an isolated example of sentimentality among Dickens's novels, only a particularly famous one. The melodramatic death of poor little Jo the crossing sweeper in *Bleakhouse* (possibly too poor to afford even the final letter of his name) as well as the pitiable life of poor little crippled Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol* and a small schoolhouse of other tragic poor little poster-boy caricatures of downtrodden innocent childhood goodness testify to the effective following for sentimentality in Victorian reading material.

Now, despite his penchant for such tear-jerkers, Dickens happened also to be an accomplished literary artist, and numerous of his admirers have come forth in defense of the author for these lapses in taste, declaring them to be examples rather of the great

III.: Aesthetics, Part 2—*continued*

writer's compassion for the infamous plight of children in Victorian England. And indeed, Dickens *was* genuinely moved by this plight and *was* genuinely successful in awakening a consciousness of it among his vast readership. These are surely good things. But one need not be a cynic to be made uncomfortable with the way our author attempts to elicit our pity *dishonestly*—yes, by means of conspicuously simplified, prettified idealizing. In other words, that he wants his reader to feel compassion for the downtrodden is commendable; that he stoops to insure his success in this by exaggerating his victims' virtues (beyond the recognizably human) until our compassion is less elicited than *coerced*—now, *this* is contemptible, artistically as well as morally.

IV. Ethical Consequences, Part 1: Dogmatic Dynamics: Ideal v. Real and the Practice of Validation by Authority

After these two literary examples, let us move on from what had been basically an *aesthetic* argument to one more centered in the *ethical* ramifications of the subject mindset—one in which we can explore the detrimental effect sentimentality can have on the day-to-day living of our lives as social creatures. But in preparation for this I offer an attempt to closely define our subject and explore its roots.

Sentimentality is a form of emotional dishonesty characterized by the flaunting of emotions inappropriate to the occasion. It is a mode of thinking about one's world that allows its practitioner the avoidance of direct engagement in the unpleasant realities of life by

IV: Ethical Consequences, Part 1—*continued*

proffering a surrogate currency of superficial, *conventionalized* coinage. From within the safety of this choreographed response to an uncomfortable situation, the sentimentalist can pretend to an investment in a difficult question while actually ignoring it. In other words, sentimentality's seductive call to the emotionally fearful is but the opportunity to purchase at bargain price an anaesthetizing distance from the honest work and responsibility of rational thinking and honest communication. And like any cheap gratification, the sentimentalist's indulgence tends toward generalized, yet exaggerated, expression. Its conventionalized theatrical display provides a necessary distraction to the emotional sleight of hand being staged.

At bottom, therefore, sentimentality is an appeal to a shallow, uncomplicated response to circumstances that reasonably call for something more involved. It is a smoke-and-mirrors attempt to manipulate both practitioner and audience into believing there to be easy, unambiguous answers to inherently complex questions, inviting the latter to share in the former's delusion of an idealized world, cleansed of ambiguity, that feels safer and more reliable than the one that might otherwise be explored rationally, honestly, and bravely. It is the relishing of *souvenirs* in place of experiences.

Sentimentality, usually a symptom of narcissism and nearly always the result of inhibition, allows its self-indulgent user to play-act in counterfeit emotions. The sentimentalist's need to circumvent experience of negative emotions from behind masquerades of

IV: Ethical Consequences, Part 1—*continued*

meretricious exhibition is accomplished easiest through the obfuscation of one's true feelings, thereby sabotaging any honest communication with others and resulting in an inevitable social dissonance of thwarted expectations and mounting resentments.

The language of dissimulation necessary toward effecting this state of avoidance tends toward the disingenuous, generic, and pre-packaged rather than the honest, specific, and qualified. And, therefore, sentimentalists tend to find their hunger for validation unsatisfied by the social engagements of negotiation and dialogue, preferring the more dependable prerogative of Validation by AUTHORITY. This authority, an amorphous abstraction of an all-purpose, nonspecific nature, is typically recognized by its worshippers *not* upon careful consideration of persuasive evidence but simply on the strength of reputation. It is a ghostly notion that may be conjured from nothing, appealed to, and upheld on high amid the empyrean of an uncritical imagination, all effected through any number of mind-clenching adherences to the dictates of dogma—that form of obedient power worship in which a belief is validated as *necessarily and incontrovertibly true* only because *it is said to be so*.

The convention of dogma admits various expressions, such as tradition, received opinion, God, or some other entity outside of reason. Whatever the source, however, our practitioner's longing for the safety of reductive, one-dimensional answers to life's most subtly complicated questions, reinforced with this gratuitous,

IV: Ethical Consequences, Part 1—*continued*

unquestioning reverence for authority, conspires to provide the best possible conditions for the flourishing of ideology, especially in that most virulent strain of brain-sanitization known as religious fundamentalism.

And so, it should not be surprising how often we find religion, particularly in its fundamentalist strains, closely linked with attitudes of a sentimental nature. For, the ceremony of magical thinking known as religion continues not only to survive, *but to thrive*, in the scientific age, where the language of evidentiary-based belief is widely spoken, principally because of religion's savvy adaptive talent for *ignoring what is being said*—yes, by hearing only what it wants to hear (namely, that which does not threaten to invalidate its reason for being). And this may be effected most comfortably through the aforementioned phenomenon of dogma, the irrational privileging of something authoritatively expressed (typically *written*) over that which is *demonstrably* true. Indeed, dogmatists congratulate themselves as being *especially virtuous* in believing whatever flapdoodle they wish to believe true not only in spite of, but *because of*, its flagrantly inconsistent relationship with evidentiary testing. It's as if the heroic obstinacy necessary toward sustaining unprovable fantasies in the face of contrary evidence were, *in and of itself*, proof of high moral virtue.

Now, take this proud resistance to the discipline of reason, and add to it that most welcome protection against skepticism lent by the taboo of blasphemy, and it becomes obvious how religion offers the

IV: Ethical Consequences, Part 1—*continued*

ideal mental climate in which fearful, irrational minds may live vicariously in the safe, unlikely, make-believe world of eternal justice, goodness, and ultimate perfection—far from the less-than-perfect realities of life on earth.

“A sentimentalist,” Oscar Wilde succinctly observed (in *De Profundis*), “is simply one who wants to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it.” “The sentimentalist is always a cynic at heart. Indeed, sentimentality is merely the bank holiday of cynicism.”

William Butler Yeats, emphasizing the self-deceptive, disingenuous nature of this mode of mental existence, distinguished it from rhetoric as follows: “Rhetoric is fooling others; sentimentality is fooling yourself.” Arthur Koestler described the sentimentalist’s psychic world as a “metaphysical brothel for emotions.” And pushing our exploration into more threatening territory yet, James Baldwin (in “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” a critique of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*) warned that sentimentality “is always, therefore, the signal of secret and violent inhumanity, the mask of cruelty.”

Yes, *cruelty*. For, counterintuitive as such a formulation might ring in many an ear still today, the sentimentalist, in his teary-eyed worship of sanitized symbols of love, childhood, freedom, homeland, and authority, effectively distances himself from the seemingly imperfect *living* entities for which these serve as comforting simplistic *surrogates*. His theatrical cheer-leading, flag-waving salutes to the mere bromides of life concerning women,

IV: Ethical Consequences, Part 1—*continued*

babies, God, and homeland are only so many gooseteps removed from the cruel fascistic menaces of misogyny, homophobia, nationalism, xenophobia, racism, and totalitarianism. His world is a place not of commitment but of *amusement*, preferring as he does the *sights and sounds* of engagement in the world to the actual experience of living it.

In other words, rather than love someone the sentimentalist loves *the idea of loving someone*. Therefore, as a stranger to the world of genuine feelings, he is most susceptible to the cynical distrust of these most human qualities he finds so threatening, as well as the living beings that harbor them, making it that much easier for him to discount the value of *actual* human beings in relation to the *ideals* against which he measures them. And historically, the sense of social disenfranchisement that becomes the last refuge of the sentimentalist leaves brutality as his most desperate solution.

V. Ethical Consequences, Part 2: From Chocolate-Box Art to Teary-Eyed Despots

Thus, we should not find it surprising to read accounts of blatant sentimentality exhibited by history's preeminent virtuosos of brutality, such as Adolf Hitler, whose utopian idealism of racial purity provides us a virtual GPS map of the sentimentalist's world. Worthy of our critical consideration in this regard is a painting in oil and idealism executed by the budding young despot, age 23, that shows a rosy-cheeked, golden-haired Aryan Christ child safe in the

V: Ethical Consequences, Part 2—*continued*

rustic paws of a *Völkisch* Virgin emblazoned to the foreground of a stage-set landscape of sun-beamed purity and promise. These are pigments that have been deliberately coaxed into a visual cliché *easily* the pictorial equivalent of Kilmer's "Trees." Indeed, it is an expression of vapid sentimentality surpassed only by that more recent master of chocolate-box art and mail-order living, the late "Thomas Kinkade, Painter of Light™." (More on the fabulous Kinkade later. In the meanwhile, I reproduce a thumbnail image of this masterpiece of *kitsch*, Hitler's *Madonna and Child* of 1913, on my website, found both on the *Poems [& Prose Works]* and *Images* pages.)

What we apprehend in this painting needs no requisite training to see: an icon of philistinism revealing the emotionally bankrupt worldview of a man capable of crying at the thought of some *idealized* blond cherub while perfunctorily consigning *real* human beings to their grisly death in the gas chambers. You may examine the tear ducts of the sadistic tyrant of your choice; chances are you'll find them similarly set to leak sentimentally at the sanctified images of impersonal perfection rather than to the inhumanly cruel treatment of actual people.

Vladimir Nabokov, as so often, said it best of all (this time in a Cornell lecture on Fyodor Dostoyevsky later published in *Lectures in Russian Literature*):

We must distinguish between "sentimental" and "sensitive." A sentimentalist may be a perfect brute in his free time. A sensitive person is never a cruel person. Sentimental Rousseau, who could weep over a progressive idea, distributed his many natural children

V: Ethical Consequences, Part 2—*continued*

through various poorhouses and workhouses and never gave a hoot for them. A sentimental old maid may pamper her parrot and poison her niece. The sentimental politician may remember Mother's Day and ruthlessly destroy a rival. Stalin loved babies. Lenin sobbed at the opera, especially at the *Traviata* [literally "woman gone astray," Giuseppe Verdi's 1853 melodrama after Dumas, *fils*, showcasing a pitiable prostitute dying from tuberculosis in the throes of love]. A whole century of authors praised the simple life of the poor, and so on. Remember that when we speak of sentimentalists, among them Richardson, Rousseau, Dostoevski, we mean the non-artistic exaggeration of familiar emotions meant to provoke automatically traditional compassion in the reader. Dostoevski never really got over the influence which the European mystery novel and the sentimental novel made upon him. The sentimental influence implied that kind of conflict he liked—placing virtuous people in pathetic situations and then extracting from these situations the last ounce of pathos.

VI. Ethical Consequences, Part 3: Women's Rights v. God, History's Worst Abortioneer

Yet, examples of dangerous sentimentalists are hardly confined to the ranks of baby-kissing genocidal despots; they may also be seen to include the rallied masses of ostensibly moral-minded folk who, under the influence of religious "thinking," perversely argue for a deeper obligation to the mere *conception* of a human life, such as represented by an *insentient* embryo, than to the *complete and fully conscious* life suffering unmistakably before their eyes in the form of a pregnant woman. Astonishingly, this is to say they feel a stronger

VI: Ethical Consequences, Part 3—*continued*

commitment to a nascent *prospective* organism—one not yet possessed of a fully working nervous system and still bearing a one-in-four chance of being spontaneously aborted *naturally*, with or without the mother's knowledge—than to a fully developed human being in whom there can be *no question* of anything but a *profound* capacity for conscious suffering. It should be clear to all *rational* people at this sad point that sentimentality has here proudly volunteered as *midwife to misogyny*. For, let's face it: were the males of our species the ones who gave birth, the question of an adult parent's rights over his own body would *never* have been on the table to begin with. No, it takes the basic sentimental preference for ideas over real beings, reinforced by the tribe-loyalty tests of patriarchal religious authority, as well as a dollop of plain old misogyny on top for good measure, to put such a question there (and keep it there).

VI(a). Ethical Consequences, Part 3(a): A Belated Caveat Regarding the Importance of Context and Moderation: This Essay Does Not Endorse the Either-For-'em-or-Against-'em Approach

But before proceeding with our inquiry, it is important to affirm a crucial caveat: namely, that we be vigilant against succumbing to the same reductive dichotomizing distinguishing the very mindset we have targeted in this critique. If, in our attempt to identify the offending behavior, we fail to moderate in the light of appropriate *context*, we risk assuming that seductive *either-for-'em-or-against-'em*

VI(a): Ethical Consequences, Part 3(a)—*continued*

approach we know to be more congenial to the complaint than to the cure. Indeed, it's *critical* to the overriding sense of this essay to observe that upon close enough inspection, the boundaries separating "sentiment" from its "sentimental" posturings (or, as Nabokov succinctly put it, distinguishing the "sentimental" from the "sensitive") reveal themselves to be quite as porous as those boundaries minutely observed between anything else in this world of ours and *cannot* be appropriately appreciated outside of *context*.

A remark, gesture, or attitude that smacks of sentimentality in one particular scenario may seem innocent of such indulgences in quite another, this dynamic being no different than the proportioning nuances observed in operation everywhere else in human psychology and sociology, as illustrated time and again by the work of great playwrights and novelists. What counts more than the mere *event* of a specific behavior is the way that behavior interacts with others in the chemical flux that is the economy of human social intercourse.

A person observed to be performing an example of sentimentality is not necessarily, therefore, a genocidal despot in the making. No, in the spirit of the celebrated, *though likely apocryphal*, remark long attributed to Sigmund Freud regarding the occasionally inconsistent meaning of a cigar, it is possible to cry at the sight of a baby without wanting to then go off and annihilate a large group of people.

This study aspires only to recognize and come to terms with observable *tendencies* and *patterns* that seem to be predictive, to some

VI(a): Ethical Consequences, Part 3(a)—*continued*

extent, of certain likely outcomes in our social interactions. It is *not* intended to provide yet one more precision tool toward the simplistic profiling, judgmental labeling, and divisive treatment, of our fellow humans. For example, I continue to enjoy satisfying relationships with people who have demonstrated behaviors similar to those I have identified in these pages as sentimental—people whom I love and trust and feel enriched by having known—all despite any uncomfortable feelings aroused in me at such performances. Likewise, I realize their feelings for *me* must be the end result of having to cut an equally wide berth around *my* most irritating behaviors, none of which, hopefully, relegating me, *ipso facto*, to the politically convenient pigeonhole of “bleeding-heart liberal,” “amoral atheist,” or some other timely way of distinguishing *them* from *us*. Rather, if we’re *really* paying attention, it should be difficult to avoid the sobering observation that we’re *all* mixed accumulations of often contradictory attributes.

Now, back to my rant.

VII. Ethical Consequences, Part 4: *Gay Rights (and God’s Ignorance of Science)*

And what about homophobia and our nation's current war over the basic rights of same-sex partners in love? This embarrassing chapter in our nation's struggle to free itself from the tyranny of ignorance provides yet one more demonstration of the ultimate dangers of sentimentality. For, at bottom, what *is* this political

VII: Ethical Consequences, Part 4—*continued*

nightmare of self-righteous discrimination *really* about if not the sentimental preference for a simplified *idealization* of human affairs over its *complex reality*? In this case, an explainable instinctive revulsion we might feel toward the different, *and therefore confusing*, sexual orientation of some other person—a disgust reflex bequeathed to us naturally through evolution, though one many of us learn to contravene through the civilizing influence of knowledge—remains in the minds of the fearfully superstitious something symbolically menacing and adversarially threatening.

And as a justification of this fear of the confusing real world—a place where behavior patterns evolve outside of any teleological "purpose"—the superstitious cling to their idealized, unreal, and therefore *dehumanized*, image of inherent sanctity they understand to be the "Godly" institution of marriage. Of course, there are many of us who are happily married enough to consider wedlock to be "sacred" as well, though more typically in the secular connotation of special or important rather than the devotional sense of meeting a judgmental creator's cumbersome expectations. But to us marriage is sacred *not* because *it just is* but rather because we happened to *make it so*.

Yes, those brought up on a strict diet of religious scripture tend to find it difficult to avoid the conceptual indigestion involved in seeing marriage for what it is: a purely human institution. Like morality itself, we know marriage to be a man-made social contract that evolved, variously by region and epoch, as a means of setting

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helpful boundaries against the potential social chaos unleashed by dangerous proprietary transgressions. Yet, superstitious believers in a hypocritically judgmental (albeit *invisible*) celestial parent figure will vigorously maintain (as sanctioned by their stalwart ignorance of anthropology, of course) that marriage is defined for all people, times, and circumstances strictly as a union "between a man and a woman."

Let us ignore for the moment the inconvenient fact that this definition is attributed to the inerrant authorship of the same creator who gave them homosexuality in the first place (along with all those other behaviors He hypocritically finds repugnant and punishable). Now, what is the one piece of conceptual apparatus essential in this mindless maintenance of justification toward a cruel discrimination of their fellow human beings? Of course, I argue it is the sentimentalist's predilection for unrealistic models of the world wherever they offer the seductive lazy comforts of denying life's unpleasant realities. For, it's simply cozier for the fearful deniers of science to trust the moral authority of received opinion than one of their own assessment, especially as the latter involves education and the unassuming spirit of open-minded inquiry on the basis of persuasive evidence.

VIII. Ethical Consequences, Part 5: Received Opinion: Black Boxes, "The Good Book," and Obscenity

The source of this received opinion in the gay rights argument remains the very same one that is relied on to confuse the debate over a woman's rights to her own body: namely, the authority of scripture—in this case, of course, specifically that book called "Good" by folks who don't read books. Remember that this same Holy Bible, recognized as the "infallible word of God" (by those who obviously know *nothing* about textual scholarship, let alone physics and biology) is in reality a politically contrived miscellany of incompatibly divergent writings by various authors spanning many centuries—all well before the advent of antipsychotic medications and their efficient treatment of such physiologically predictable inspirations—eventually to be canonized as we know it today only after hundreds of years of political sausage-making that would make our Congress look like kindergarten.

Yet, this anthology of iron-age slave-society morality, whose numerous authors collectively understood *zilch* of the actual reasons why things happened the way they did, is still worshiped by millions as a veritable "black box" of authority—an authority superstitiously guarded from questioning by the taboo of blasphemy. And true to the nature of any "black box," the user of this book is satisfied to rely on it without understanding anything of its contents. (Indeed, that *is* the point; the *mystery* of its operation is, *ipso facto*, sufficient confirmation of its unquestionable truth.) So, in place of the unambiguous directives one might expect from a judgmental creator of the world impatient with his recalcitrant creations, one finds in "black box" texts the fecund opportunity for

VIII: Ethical Consequences, Part 5—*continued*

divining such directives through the all-too-human art of *interpretation*.

Thus, as if this bigoted discriminatory position of religious zealots against women and homosexuals were not reprehensible enough in its own right, it is relatively rarely founded upon *concrete* pronouncements in their sacred texts but more often upon ingeniously elaborate *interpretations* of those certain passages—cryptic extracts conveniently offering themselves up for use as such in the way that tea leaves or animal droppings might have served the shamans of other cultures and eras.

Now, we know that homosexuality is found at a relatively consistent rate throughout the world, and not at all limited to our own species. Science can help us understand the evolutionary physiological mechanisms underlying this predictably natural tendency in so many types of creatures. Homosexual goats, for example, typically escape the derisive labels of "immoral," "ungodly," or "depraved"—even by your more judgmental zoologists—largely because their sexual behavior is easily recognized as being inescapably tied to their specific neural wiring. And few among even the God-intoxicated would find argument with this, particularly since the historically recognized lack of a damnable soul in a goat makes the point irrelevant anyway.

Yet the same legal loophole is not afforded members of our own species. No, due to the daunting complexity of the science of sexuality, the ranks of the intellectually lazy continue to cling

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jealously to their ignorance of scientific facts surrounding sexual behavior and its preferences and will salute to whatever indestructible truths they have endeavored to hear confided to them by their invisible, *mysterious* authority. Therefore, this "black box" of scripture can become for the faithful a kind of Enigma Machine in which irrational fears and confusing ambivalences can be routinely translated into a guiltless code of conventionality and acceptability. And with the help of such a magical mechanism, the pious are emboldened to gather forces and punitively legislate the fate of a minority of people who quite naturally derive one of life's deepest satisfactions somewhat differently than do their persecutors... perhaps.

That's right, *perhaps*. For, lurking behind the uniform trench coat of "family-value" morality is often found the lechery born out of repressed desire. This tendency exposes itself as a most exquisite example of the agile acrobatics of hypocrisy, wherein the salacious impulse to judgmentally censor sexual desire is engorged by the self-loathing acquired in the guilty desiring of it. Yes, sexual appetite is a perfectly natural, healthy, and necessary phenomenon. Due to its high-priority role in securing a future for our genes in the next generation, this instinctive hunger for a particularly delicious reward-system payload has become intrinsic to our brain architecture—not far behind that for glucose and oxygen.

And along the way, this powerful appetite for intimacy has become deeply rooted in our capacity for sustaining loving human

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relationships on various levels (such as the erotic, spousal, parental, filial, friendly, etc.), all of which based upon the cultivation of feelings and capacities for trust, loyalty, protectiveness, concern for another's wellbeing and, not least of all, that state of one's own satisfied wellbeing that serves as the very foundation upon which healthy social relationships of a less intimate nature can be built as well.

But because the *uninhibited* promiscuous indulgence of erotic appetite would wreak political havoc upon our human social system, the sex act itself has come to be treated by most religious guardians of morality as a contraband commodity—one to be weighed, tested, approved, and taxed under the strict control of its own usurped authority. Consequently, a culture of priggish prudery has developed around this most wholesome of hankerings in an attempt to cloak the tantalizing attractiveness of its erogenous zones. Therefore, certain body parts—those that have become associated in our brains with sexual excitement—have been condemned by the anthropologically ignorant as unhealthy to our social wellbeing and censured accordingly. The reasons include: first, because impertinent acceptance of these body parts risks revealing our true nature as flesh-and-blood animals rather than reflections of the divine; and second, because the consequences of *blindly acting upon* the erotic impulses with which they are associated proves socially complicated and ultimately dangerous.

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And so, by designing a moral standard wholly indifferent to the physical and psychological realities of this most natural, indeed *fundamental*, need—by which I mean sex, of course—religious officialdom can threaten its congregants with the punishment of inflicted remorse to anyone deemed to be in violation of it, hence extorting an undeserved obedience from them that is difficult, when not impossible, to maintain. And in the strict enforcement of that maintenance, religious authorities ultimately create a black market for forgiveness, one on which this natural emotion of erotic desire is considered contraband unless repurchased by its original owner at a usurious rate (once it's been made official by a blessing procured from the church).

This particular market event, in which the congregant is resold his own emotion, is transacted in the counterfeit currency of unnecessary guilt-ridden self-condemnation. So, just as if the church had itself invented or developed the intrinsic human emotion of erotic love, it now usurps the authority to offer the promise of love's enjoyment to its congregants at the costs incurred in obtaining the church's much-desired stamp of approval toward social, or at an even higher premium, *celestial*, redemption.

Yes, as insightfully observed by Sam Harris (in his *Letter to a Christian Nation*), this emotional extortion orchestrated by religious "moralists" over their adherents is achieved with little more than the congregant's own appetites and natural proclivities toward guilt. Successfully employed, it ingeniously protects the exorbitantly high

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price set on this otherwise free commodity of eroticism, thereby transforming a natural gratification into a contraband commodity that now may be relished only guiltily and surreptitiously.

Why then are we surprised to learn of the existence of a pervasive juvenile sex slave market operated by that most rigorous of sex deniers and guilt enforcers, the Catholic Church? Where else but underground is this powerful pressure of erotic desire expected to go when suppressed from its natural expression (through sexual gratification) by means of the *unnatural* rigors of fear-extorted abstinence? After all, forcing a man to repeat to himself that sex is shameful doesn't diminish his visceral desire for sex but only the esteem in which he holds both himself and the target of his desire.

Now, of the various cult sects that have mustered a flock size entitling them to the privileged (though meaningless) euphemism of "religion," Catholicism has been one particularly disapproving of the complete human experience of erotic love—that is *beyond* the justifying idealization of the sexual act as a vehicle for "procreation," which has become a devotional buzzword for the guilt-free farming of additional souls necessary toward the Church's own survival. And having created this black market in absolution and redemption, the Church has everything to gain by sustaining in its adherents the delusion of the possibility of a comfortable abstinence, an aspiration as futile as attempting to placate a starving man with news that there is virtue in hunger.

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In the meanwhile, the culture observed to have accrued around this nefarious secondary market cannot help but foster an atmosphere of inhibition and excessive modesty with which to cover the flesh of voyeuristic lasciviousness. In other words, we have learned to feel ashamed of our bodies and, even worse, to consider them obscene.

This sentimentally-induced preference for unreasonable ideals demands of us a state of denial as to the true nature of our existence as a species of animal sharing a planet with unknowable numbers of cousin species tracing back to common ancestors. Now, given that *we* are our bodies and that our bodies constitute *us*, any mindset that trains us to be ashamed of our bodies and see them as sources of obscenity should seem, to any rational mind, to be nothing short of *obscene* itself.

The very notion of obscenity is, of course, just another manmade convention, a conception that differs in its threshold parameters and consequences from culture to culture, epoch to epoch, like any other. Although the term describes a state of repugnance, stemming usually from the display of behavior offensive to moral principles established by an official cultural tradition at a particular time, it has come to be used as a gag reflex alerting us to the presence of any behavior that threatens to tarnish our species' conception of itself as being (somehow) above nature. It has long been, therefore, a convenient rallying cry for the sexually repressed and easily

VIII: Ethical Consequences, Part 5—*continued*

scandalized in their God-backed war against the reality of human sexuality and its cravings.

I refer, of course, to the predictable, tedious, and interminable campaign by religious sentimentalists against the satisfactions of erotica—or, if you prefer its pejorative synonym, *pornography*. As in all wars, this one being fought against the pornography industry and its adult customers in this country is cheer-led by rallying slogans that have little actual relevance to the purported offense itself and more to do rather with its most unsavory manifestation: in this case, *child* pornography.

Lest I am misunderstood pertaining to something of dire seriousness: child pornography should be, *ipso facto*, repugnant to us all and should be swiftly and mercilessly eradicated and prosecuted to the full extent of the law wherever it is found. Most pornographers would agree with this. The fact that *all* do not is a situation no different or more surprising than that touching any other discussion of human rights. My point is that like any true sentimentalist, the pornography crusader uses our appropriate concern for the plight of innocent children *inappropriately* to the proportion of its appearance in the larger genre in which it may be found. (Let's not lose sight of the point that the plight of victimized innocent children remains universal currency for use by sentimentalists, worldwide. Remember the effective exploitation of them toward the extortion of cheap tears by Dickens, discussed and alluded to above.)

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It becomes for religiously motivated moralists an easy ace-in-the-sleeve in their attempt to win over converts to the cause, all by appealing to a healthy reflex of repugnance toward child abuse found instinctively in (most) rational adults. Armed with this card, they are therefore better able to deflect the thrust of the argument to concentrate on that portion of the genre that few can find fault with. Thus, knowing that even most pornographers among us would agree that only the clinically depraved could want to subject our sexually innocent young to the trauma of sexual abuse and the other ramifications of the business of child pornography, they go on to use this ready-made rallying cry toward mustering troops for the bigger, unrelated, campaign: that to persuade us of the evident evils of pornography as a whole. The problem with this highly effective call to arms is that it is largely misplaced and irrelevant to the issue at hand.

The pornography industry is not *about* child pornography, though its darker periphery clearly encompasses it. The *vast* majority of the pornography available out there in any mode or conduit portrays consenting adults in action, all without the slightest reference to children. Few enthusiasts of pornography and its right to exist would wish this any other way (with the obvious exception, of course, of child pornographers, who should not be given a vote). But to stamp out *all* pornography only to be certain of taking with it whatever *child* pornography can be swept with the same shove of the broom is tantamount to the idea of our medical community aspiring

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to rid our bodies of *all* bacteria—those necessary to our wellbeing along with the harmful strains, so as to preclude any opportunity for the latter type. Forget that it's not cost effective; *it doesn't work*.

And as to the oft-voiced feminist argument that (all) pornography is explicitly degrading to (all) women, a closer, more objective, look at the question might just reveal a more tempered response here too. For, while there is certainly *some* truth to this concern, as evidenced by *some* purveyors of pornography, it can't possibly characterize *all* types made available. An obvious exception might be, for example, pornography intended for the eyes of women or gay men: two genres of erotica in which the male is typically staged to be viewed as the sex object of desire.

Remember the lesson we learned from the fiasco of the Eighteenth Amendment to our Constitution, when we attempted to protect women and children from abusively drunken husbands and fathers by attempting to enforce a prohibition against *anyone* imbibing *any* alcohol at *any* time. Now, it is this *precise* dynamic we face in the pornography question. For example, should pornographic material be removed from fertility clinics, where it openly continues to play a constructive role in stimulating contributions from sperm donors and patients? And how about consenting adult lovers engaged in lovemaking? Should the many of them who naturally derive pleasurable success employing erotica as a normal component of foreplay be denied *their* pleasure? And what about the well-documented clinical use of hardcore pornography in

VIII: Ethical Consequences, Part 5—*continued*

the treatment of voyeurism? The answers to these questions should be obvious, unless we let the judgmental moralizing prejudices of religion cast its inevitable dark shadow over the process. Surely part of the political tension surrounding this debate can be assigned (once again) to ignorance of anthropology, sociology, and in particular, *human sexuality*.

For example, even the most concise course in world art history should dispel, early on, the conservative notion of the pornographer as an evil force operating out along the fringe of society and/or mental health. Our most respectable museums continue to enthusiastically acquire and display examples of art that easily qualify unambiguously as pornography—items created and enjoyed toward salacious satisfaction—including artworks and utilitarian objects made by gifted artists and artisans from various cultures and epochs over many millennia. Should these cultural institutions be closed down, or at least forfeited of their funding, in retribution for the one-size-fits-all allegation of degradation to women or of setting an inappropriate example to our young?

For that matter, the practice of the big three Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam *necessarily* involve the humiliating act of penitent groveling to an imaginary angry sky parent in fear of the retribution earned from displeasing him. This is behavior that *unequivocally* demeans and degrades all of us—men, women, and children. Indeed, to my ear the priggish euphemism "oh my gosh" in place of the conventional "oh my God" sounds *far*

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more obscene than the word “fuck” could *ever* seem—this because its use is wholly predicated on a servile respect for the superstitious blasphemy taboo that punitively prohibits the use of “the lord’s name in vain,” thereby making it an expression of obsequiousness that I find absolutely *disrespectful* of our own human dignity. Yet, few among even the most stalwart humanistic atheist critics would argue that the practice of these admittedly harmful religions should be made *illegal*—this despite the insurmountable fact that religion has cost *abundantly* more bloodshed, anguish, and destructive emotional disturbance than could *ever* be attributed to pornography (...that is, by anyone other than a religious zealot).

It is well known that our cousin primates share this pleasure we humans enjoy from pornography. For example, male chimps offered photographs of females of their species in estrus at the expense of their typical allocations of juice will tend to sacrifice the juice reward to pay for the pornographic one. And recent statistics among human users of pornography show that the vast majority of males between the ages of 18 and 34—as much as 70 percent of the test population—visit a pornographic website in a typical month.

Clearly, we are not talking about the fringes of either society or mental health here but rather a common (and therefore *normal*, in the true sense of the word) appetite that has more to do with our inherited brain wiring, with its powerfully inspiring dopamine reward system, than to the traditional religious-inspired argument that sees it as certain proof of moral depravity.

IX. Ethical Consequences, Part 6: Reckless Pretenders to the Fourth Estate

But, all this fear-inspired injustice toward our fellow humans, be they women, homosexuals, or honest *sexuals* of *any* predilection, would be more difficult to accomplish without official sanctioning by *professional* purveyors of sentimentality. I refer now to such popular and profitable institutions of the fourth estate as conservative talk radio and television. See for yourself how, for example, a Rush Limbaugh, a Bill O'Reilly, or any random selection of Fox News reporter or commentator will predictably stoop to the seductively safe authority of received opinion in place of any fresh attempt at contextually *understanding* a particular event. Rather than invite their audience into a dialogue with evidence, they will stoop to appeal to their "fight or flight" emotions of fear and disgust toward selling their sponsors' perspective.

The language artfully employed by these purveyors of conventional morality, even while posing as objective reporters of fact, reveals (to those not buying it) little more than a manipulative rhetoric of buzzwords laced with coercive subliminal promptings that reinforce, in each of the tightly clenched minds imbibing them, the rewarding feeling of righteousness.

Take, for example, the ubiquitous political phrase, "what the American people want," a laughably hopeless cliché heard, ad nauseam, every election season. Of course, this is a locution that cannot possibly mean *anything* if intended sincerely, as it concretely aspires to the miraculous prospect of a consensus achieved among a few hundred million individuals of widely disparate cultural, philosophical, religious, and socio-economic background (let alone

IX: Ethical Consequences, Part 6—*continued*

educational and cognitive competence!), all motivated by widely divergent competing interests! But while it does not require graduate work in logic to intuit the inherent factual *impossibility* of such a ludicrous proposition, you will nevertheless hear this egregiously meaningless catchphrase bandied about by even our nation's more respectable politicians, journalists, and editorialists.

X. Ethical Consequences, Part 7: Received Opinion Shielded in Blasphemy
Taboo

And there is no safer source for the bulletproof authority of Received Opinion than the concept of DOGMA, religion's great contribution to world ignorance: a stunt of mental acrobatics in which an absurd proposition increasingly gains the outward appearance of incontrovertible truthfulness purely on the authority of its incessant repetition. Armed with this trusty tool of cognitive stealth, numerous religions around the world have managed to survive even the most rudimentary assaults from the world of reason by means of supplying their troops with that most effective model of cognitive flak jacket: TABOO AGAINST BLAPHEMY.

All three of the Abrahamic religions indulge in the benefits of this ingenious protective shield against critical inquiry. One has only to read a few gruesome pages of the history of post-reformation Britain to obtain a glimpse of the brutal effectiveness of this threat afforded by the practice of Christianity, both Catholic *and* Protestant. Yet the most egregious examples are found less often in Christianity and

X: Ethical Consequences, Part 7—*continued*

Judaism than in Islam, where even mainstream (non-extremist) believers presume to expect obedience to their own barbaric blasphemy laws by people *outside* their religion as well.

Why, even many *non*-Muslims defend this ludicrous presumption that a person's right to believe and practice patently preposterous ideas should extend to their immunity from any criticism for doing so. Forget for the moment (if you can) that the punishment for offenders in *this* case, at least in the hands of a *conspicuous* minority of today's Muslims, is nothing short of DEATH—no, not some equivalent of financial reparation for the provable injuries of slander, but *decapitation*—and just try to imagine some truly *rational* endeavor that would be protected from criticism in this way. Clearly, blasphemy taboo proves an indispensable implement in the proper washing of brains—so much so that minds developed with this magical property, even amid distinctly different cultures, will still tend to yield instinctive vicarious deference to even its most repugnant examples.

Examples abound. On the morning of January 7, 2015, two Islamic terrorists broke into the offices of the French weekly satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, killed eleven people, and injured as many, all on the grounds of blasphemy committed by the newspaper for the portrayal of their prophet Mohammed in cartoons. To a religion as protective of its patent absurdities as is Islam, perhaps it should not be surprising to find the handy

X: Ethical Consequences, Part 7—*continued*

mechanism of blasphemy taboo enforced with such especial vigor—a zealousness that sees a prophet's visual depiction *itself* (i.e., even *before* the level of its well-deserved satire) as disrespectful and, therefore, an insult to the entire faith and all its adherents.

In answer to the news of this unjustifiable savagery, Bill Donohue, president of the Catholic League, told CNN news that while "killing in response to insult, no matter how gross, must be unequivocally condemned...*neither should we tolerate the kind of intolerance that provoked this violent reaction.*" He explained that *Charlie Hebdo* had a "long and disgusting record" of mocking religious figures, including unflattering depictions of the Prophet Mohammed as well as Catholic popes, and that Stephane Charbonnier, the paper's publisher (himself one of the victims of the shootings) "didn't understand the role he played in his tragic death."

Well, neither do I, nor should *anyone* who considers him or herself to be a *rational* human being. Death for insulting someone, *or* that someone's religion, is BARBARIC, *period*. Now, Donohue *was* good enough to condemn the murder of the newspaper employees, but note that he still *did* think it appropriate to express his opinion of what he believed to be the *culpability of the victims in their own slaughter*—culpability for *the drawing of cartoons*, for Christ's sake!

And perhaps that's precisely our key: for *Christ's* sake. Yes, as a religious sentimentalist himself—thereby one for whom the privileging of invisible mythic entities over real live human beings is central to the dynamics of his faith—it appears that retribution for an

X: Ethical Consequences, Part 7—*continued*

insult to a belief *can* be ultimately rationalized and justified. (Yes, an insult to a *belief!*) Imagine, if you *possibly* can, Niels Bohr *murdering* Albert Einstein for the latter's perceived disparagement of the former's quantum mechanics. Of course, Einstein's great respect for his friend would have precluded taking his admittedly serious criticism of the latter's theory quite to the level of insult, but that's not our point; only that *if he had* worded his misgivings with the other's ideas less felicitously, this theoretical murder would still need to *remain* an unthinkable reaction. Why? Our knowledge of the man himself aside, this is largely because our imagined murder suspect was a scientist in search of truth rather than a sentimentalist in search of defending the honor of his commitment to dogma.

And how does Islam succeed in bullying so much of the rest of the world into slavishly honoring its presumed right to a despotic, medieval blaspheme taboo? Fear mongering. For, instilling fear is the easiest way to coerce the appearance of respect where said respect has not been earned. But Islam, though an *impressively* adept exponent of this practice, is hardly alone among the world's religions in utilizing fear toward such an end. Christ's threats of the punishments of hell awaiting those who didn't follow him are born of precisely this same instinct.

XI. Ethical Consequences, Part 8: *Cheerleading (in Opinions as Well as Sports)*

So, we should not be surprised to find conservative talk radio and television gurus exploiting the endorsement power of such talismans of unquestioned authority as Fear of God or Love of Country, Guns, and Sports Team, all toward the profitable trafficking of their received opinion (which tends, not coincidentally, to be almost indistinguishable from that of their sponsor's as well). Nor, in this regard, should we be caught unprepared to realize how sentimentality, with its inherent predilection for neat, simplified idealizations over threateningly complex and unattractive realities, serves its practitioners with the most efficient rhetoric for use toward this end.

For, all in all, a sentimental mindset provides the ideal environment for the successful breeding of that most irksomely manipulative form of discourse in which our species indulges: namely, CHEERLEADING: the practice of coercive persuasion, whether overt or subliminally covert, toward that state of gratuitous, manufactured conformity in which to easiest enjoy the warm and fuzzy feel of ingroup solidarity. This term "cheerleading" was originally associated with the specific promotional task of eliciting cheers, applause, and related expressions of enthusiasm from crowds at sporting events. But due to the striking functional similarities between this blatant type of crowd persuasion and the more insidious variety we can observe at work in the smaller circles of our social discourse, it should not be surprising to find the term used at times to refer to this day-to-day variety as well, particularly as pertains to politics. And I believe that when we examine the

XI: Ethical Consequences, Part 8—*continued*

language of this form of discourse more closely, we'll discover in its underlying syntax none other than our roving malefactor, *sentimentality*, particularly in light of its prominent penchant for the coerced response over the more expensive reasoned one, and for the gratuitous over the genuine. The vocabulary of this language of cheerleading requires no lexicon, as its semantic payload comprises little more than its essential mantra of "rah-rah," regardless of one's specific wording.

No doubt, we've all witnessed this form of motivational conditioning at work, even amid otherwise polite group conversations and public speeches, though we've probably often failed to recognize it as anything more specific than an aggressively manipulative form of behavior. An obvious example would be the cheers shouted by audience members at a speech, be it a political rally or just a donor-appreciation party for a nonprofit fundraiser.

These shouts of encouragement, often resembling war-cry whoops, are characteristically issued in response to comments felt (by the practicing cheerleader) to benefit from an amplifying emphasis—sort of the auditory equivalent of italics, bold print, and/or full caps used in journalistic print. In the political speech, such comments would typically be those felt to touch emotionally charged divisiveness, thereby helping to demarcate the enemy territory of contradictory opinion; in the philanthropic reception, they would more likely fall under the more benign category of the

XI: Ethical Consequences, Part 8—*continued*

aforesaid candidature for amplification. In either case, however, the end result tends to be quite similar in one important way: namely, the transmutation of that comment into a commodity of higher significance status than it might have contextually deserved.

For example, when the speaker expresses the typically exaggerated but nevertheless stirring statement that “we can’t possibly thank Mrs. X enough for her selfless generosity,” the whoop-like cheer by a loyal congregant might indicate little more than the latter’s vicarious pleasure in having been invited into such a group that *could not possibly thank one of its members enough*. So, just like those motivational hurrahs utilized by cheerleaders of the traditional sports field variety, these social-discourse cheerleaders aspire at length to put into play a motivational reinforcement of ingroup solidarity.

Now, this might appear on its surface to be little more than a rather friendly brand of social adhesive—one useful in unifying energies toward the accomplishment of a desired goal. And it is often largely that. But like anything else, it may also be seen, quite legitimately, as something more as well, and in this case something with an insidious potential to it. For, even the seemingly benign nonprofit variety of cheerleading still tends to act as a subtle reinforcement of a subliminal world where we are no longer free to choose for ourselves, case by case, what seems good, better, or best.

The same may be witnessed operating amid certain television talk shows, particularly those indulging its viewers with sensational,

XI: Ethical Consequences, Part 8—*continued*

suggestive, or otherwise divisive subjects. Nearly every sentence uttered by some celebrity or other during such a show is characteristically punctuated with predictable and annoyingly distracting whoops, cheers, whistles, and applause from the crowd, subtly indicating the pleasure of its individual members as to their invitation to be temporary compatriots of such a speaker.

Yes, cheerleading one's home team, whether at the stadium, the party caucus, or the dinner table, tends to condition our target audience to acquiesce uncritically in the embracement of whatever idea is being marketed. But the insidious art of cheerleading adopts *many* forms in its various manifestations throughout the gamut of human interaction across its various media. And to my mind, the most obnoxious *non-verbal* technique in modern popular culture is the phenomenon of "canned laughter," that electronically prepackaged likeness of laughter (reproduced from a synthesis of 100% organic human hysterics) judiciously sprinkled onto recordings of actual acting by those producers of television situation comedies who consider their audiences to be too stupid to know where to laugh, or just how hard.

Of course, were the product *itself*, by virtue of its writing, directing, and acting, humorous to the necessary degree, such audio cues of egregiously blatant propagandizing would be unnecessary from the get-go. It's just quicker and cheaper to slap on a happy face where the requisite smile proved inconveniently difficult to coax.

XII. Ethical Consequences, Part 9: *The Religion of Competitive Team Sports*

Now, where is cheerleading found in its most conspicuous, concretely recognizable form? Well, of course, before the bleachers of its above-mentioned birthplace, that of competitive team sports events. For, even were we to succeed in throwing off the degrading shackles of religious dogma (as exemplified in those blood-thirsty, penitent superstitions of abusive sky parents with which we torture our vulnerable young minds), most of us would still find ourselves chained to religion's modern *secularized* byproduct, *competitive team sports fandom*.

Yes, competitive team sports fans tend to accumulate in congregations no less dogmatically divisive in their tribe loyalty than those gathered by your local church. Indeed, team sports fandom is historically based on even less *individualized* motivation than that of religious devotion, especially since sports fan loyalty tends to be grounded on little more than *identification through location*. For, where even the least engaged of church congregants might still consider the content and tone of the homily they're expected to swallow at their chosen church as a couple of the flavor components that makes attendance there worthwhile, sports fans, on the other hand, tend to be seduced toward *their* adoption of the team they're to back via a much simpler drop-down menu.

In order to qualify for zealous support of one's competitive sports team, a candidate fan need not even go so far as actually embrace what is publicly perceived to be that teams' particular rank of

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sportsmanship, ethics, morals, technical guidance, or even *competence*, so long as this prospective fan meets the following rigorous test: a.) that he or she resides, or at least *has* resided, in some sort of close physical proximity to where a team is registered; or b.) that he or she attends, or at least *has* attended (or maybe even *wished* they had attended) college in some sort of physical proximity to where this team is registered. Those candidates who do indeed pass this demanding test and qualify as team groupies are then free to crack open a beer, sit back, and allow the team's promoters to construct for them new meaning in their lives. And this is achieved via the cheer-led marketing phenomenon of "branding," wherein the fan's personal identity becomes but a reflection of the name-brand *collective* one being promoted.

The devotion paid a team by its devotees represents a sacrifice of individuality to the comfort of communal solidarity, all toward validation of the individual by the congregation of fellow devotees—and this through little more than, well, *cheerleading*. Indeed, team sports fans typically report the feeling of having *inherited* rather than acquired their devotion to their team, as if it had been passed to them through their genetic material rather than their observational and interpretive experience.

In his 1957 book, *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries*, the distinguished scholar of mythology, Mircea Eliade, argued that the "cultural text" represented by athletic contests may be one of the modern modes in which the profane is made sacred, this by means of offering a

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residuum of, or substitute for, what he terms the "magico-religious time" of earlier societies. Now, let us put our reading glasses on a moment and take a closer look at such "texts" toward a clearer sense of their actual semantic content.

Competitive athletic team sports appear to have at least three major characteristics in common: namely, those of being: a.) goal-oriented; b.) non-utilitarian; and c.) essentially *inconsequential* (despite their *symbolic* significance). And the targeted goal of these combined attributes would appear to comprise at least two more requisite characteristics: d.) the proud defeat of rivals; and e.) the breaking of records (or, in other words, the defeat of even *one's own team*). Yes, in a ritual grammar comparable to that found in most religious systems, as well as in the rival tribe warfare waged by our early ancestors, team sports fandom offers its participants an opportunity to experience a sense of *ultimacy*, that sense of transcendence, typically group-validated, toward an identification with an *ideal* self.

An example of this identification has been observed in recent tests showing that testosterone levels in male sports fans rise markedly after their team's victories and drop as dramatically after their defeats. And the "beneficial stress" associated with the euphoria felt by celebrants of such victories is thought by many researchers to lead to a dangerous form of addiction. But this addictive quality exists whether this stress is of the consequential type (i.e., relevant to the *actual* obliteration of an enemy) or of the subject *inconsequential*

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strain (as in the *symbolic* obliteration of our foe in the shape of a rival sports team). The end result remains the same *to the psyche*, however, for this ideal *collective* self of team sports fandom easily fits the brain architecture inherited from real warriors and may be easily sustained *symbolically* through a mythologizing process artfully cheer-led to reinforce the beliefs, values, and traditions requisite to that much-sought state of manufactured conformity that proves the most comfortable recliner for the intellectually lazy.

Having already discussed the art of cheerleading, it is time now to observe how that sacred space of its practice—the sports stadium—further serves its users as a safe arena for nothing short of the guilt-free practice of overt sexism. For, ever since at least the mid-20th century, the sports team cheerleader has come to occupy the job slot filled almost exclusively by attractive young females who rigorously prepare to find themselves subordinately relegated to the objectified role of dancing on the fringes of a male world, where they've been trained to excite a largely male target congregation toward the appropriate worship of male achievement. But unlike the role women would have played as booty in our ancestors' tribal conflicts, here in this modern symbolic practice they become little more than life-size fantasy trophies lending further branding power to an already over-valued event.

And as to the aptness of our continuing religious analogy, a superlative example comes to mind in the form of the Super Bowl, an annual testosterone tournament seemingly (when not *literally*) on

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steroids—indeed a prime-time gladiator spectacle that has awkwardly bulged into one of the two or three of our country's most sacred *national holidays*. For, what is this event, when viewed from an anthropological perspective, if not a major religious rally demonstrating nationalistic fervor? Consider, for example, its distinctive ceremonial trappings: the protracted feasting on high-caloric, low-nutrition foodstuffs (largely packaged specifically for the occasion via predatory marketing strategies); the highly ritualized performance of the nation's anthem; the artfully preserved vestige of pre-game prayer (such as to emphasize the role of supernatural intervention and/or backing); and the proud display of fetishistic attachment to symbolic objects in the form of ceremonial costume.

Now, this last-mentioned ritual relates specifically to the wearing by devotees of football jerseys imitating those official garments worn by actual members of their team, a practice perhaps analogous to the ceremonial donning of animal headdresses by participants of religious rites in numerous pre-industrial cultures, wherein the particular spirit being worshipped is thought to temporarily reside in the officiant dancing in it.

But even at a more basic level, this sense of ultimacy we defined above as an individual's pursuit of a group-validated transcendent identification with an *ideal* self—a satisfaction long enjoyed by religious celebrants among their congregation—is one similarly available to our modern team sports fan as well. And as if this

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intuitively obvious correlation required corroboration, it could be found even in the etymology of this term "fan," which is, after all, a mere abbreviation of the word "fanatic" (in turn deriving from the Latin for "inspired by a god," or "of a temple").

XIII. Ethical Consequences, Part 10: Nationalism: God, Guns, "Freedom," and Eagles

But it should inspire little wonder in us that this appetite for hero worship we find greedily indulged in the world of competitive sports is so readily available in the minds of its spectators. For, this innate predilection is quite easily cultivated into high ritual through even the most rudimentary religious indoctrination, wherein the worship of mythic heroes and their implausible exploits reinforces the congregant's hunger for still other larger-than-life protagonists. And the subservient attitude necessary to this practiced obeisance is easily nourished later on in life with those instant gratifications obtained through witnessing mere *symbols* of these mythic preoccupations.

These restorative emblems, sanitized of their original context like nutrients from over-refined breakfast cereals, act upon the glycemic index of the adult attention span like insulin. They include such unambiguous visual cues as team uniforms, fluttering "stars and stripes," and, not least, those unavoidable bald eagles. But none of these representations need convey any appreciable *meaning* in order to achieve the desired Pavlovian conditioning effect; the empty

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image or sound is sufficient to raise, reflexively, the hand to the heart. For example, the salubrious ring of that one hallowed word in the English language that has lately come to bring a tear to every sentimental eye in our nation: FREEDOM.

Those who've been trained to salute the sound of this long-emptied locution do not feel the need to inquire as to its relevance in any particular proposition. When sung as part of the chord encompassing the G-major triad of God, Game, and Guns, it represents a pitch that needs no semantic context in which to be properly appreciated. Never mind that the concept of freedom itself, whether in politics or physics, once divorced from context and consequence, becomes as potentially dangerous as it is superficially alluring *and ultimately meaningless*. In much the same way, the word "obedience" tends to lose a good bit of the warm and fuzzy association it's long enjoyed in the minds of exasperated parents once it has been re-applied to characterize the servile behavior of adult citizens toward some despotic ruler (real or not). As usual, *context is everything*.

The "FREEDOM!" you read of on the pick-up bumper ahead of you has precious little to do with what might make our country a better (or worse) place in which to live, and even less regarding certain hook-billed birds of prey. Yes, despite the best authorities found at your local sports bar, the American bald eagle is *not* free and *cannot* symbolize with any meaning you could take to the bank the virtue in some childish fantasy of living unhampered by

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governmental laws. Though a bird of prey (and of *ruthless* kleptoparasitism when theft promises the lesser effort), these creatures struggle against their evolutionary environmental pressures as desperately as do the lowliest of rodents. (Indeed, given how recently this exemplar of freedom was removed from the Endangered Species list, a reasonable argument could be made for the significantly greater liberty of rats and mice.) It's only that the bald eagle's size, speed, and fierceness of feeding skills makes it the more *ostensible* symbol of independence.

But the reality remains that unlike many of those folks who have the time to indulge in the political fetishizing of these creatures, none of the actual flesh-and-blood examples of the species can afford to retire from their profession and adopt a hobby. I have witnessed American citizens struggle against tears at the mere thought of one of these birds and all that they purportedly represent of the "uniquely American" spirit of entrepreneurial courage and God-fearing respect for "family values"—this despite the fact these same folks might thoughtlessly waste the lives of countless of their equally noble cousins in sport. And were it not for the inconvenient fact of illegality, even these live symbols of "American independence" would not be quite so sacred—except, perhaps, to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife authorities whose job it is to keep its free and proud citizens from hunting these poor creatures into extinction.

Thus, religion, with its ubiquitous deference to blind authority over individualized reasoning, as well as its obsessive preference for

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ideals over flesh-and-blood particulars, serves as a requisite primer for yet another of our deleterious adult cravings: namely the yearnings of *nationalism*.

This term, ironically viewed as an honorific by its proud adherents (though clearly pejorative to any open mind before it), refers to a brand of chauvinism in which excessive patriotic feeling becomes glorified into pernicious imperialist fervor, seductively justifying the alienating adulation of certain chosen peoples over their necessary adversaries. No, nationalism is *not* the benign and wholesome practice of loyal citizenship we've been assiduously trained to see it as since childhood. Rather, it is a *divisive* mindset, one predicated on the positing of a rival group, nation, or culture seen by the home-team group to be an inevitable threat to its safety and presumptions.

Given the fundamentally irrational nature of any such fear-induced worldview, nationalism's proponents characteristically succeed in their campaign to promulgate flock loyalty not through a dialectic of evidentiary reasoning but rather through the simpler and more trustworthy mechanism of *conditioning*. Yes, instead of attempting to teach our youth the benefits of loyalty by demonstrating its intrinsic and indispensable role in healthy relationships—those ranging from the intimate expression among family and friends to its expanded social version among communities and nations—it proves quicker to just *inculcate* it in them via *blind allegiance*, especially during the formative years.

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Hence, it is clearly not for educational reasons that we require our children to place their hands over their hearts when gazing at our nation's flag while reciting their Pledge of Allegiance or perfunctorily chanting our national anthem to it.

Now, just think about this. If we were to train a child accordingly to respond with mere *blind allegiance* to a particular work of visual art, music, literature, philosophy, or science, would we then be preparing him or her to actually *appreciate* it? If by “appreciate” we mean to recognize the worth of or to understand (especially on the basis of discernment, taste, and knowledge), then obviously our answer must be an unequivocal *no*. If, on the other hand, we merely wish to indicate the act of *responding reflexively* (i.e., without the benefits of these skills and goals), then, sadly, we have indeed succeeded in wangling our desired affirmation.

When we tell our children “our nation is the greatest on earth,” we provide them the huge disservice of teaching them to pretend that misinformation can be true and of importance to their wellbeing, *which it cannot*. For, such a statement as “our nation is the greatest on earth” is necessarily both erroneous and unhelpful on several counts, including, most obviously, the fact that it *cannot possibly* be true, *but* just as importantly because even *were* it true, its statement endorses an unhealthy perspective of chauvinism that privileges judgmental attitudes in a child's mind, encouraging him or her to grow up to be a sentimental bigot.

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Of course, the fact that *it cannot possibly be true* has nothing to do with the identity of the specific nation you happen to be boasting about at the moment but only the more obvious fact that such a proposition depends entirely for its meaning upon some subjective preference and, hence, cannot be objectively measured for accuracy (such as, for example, the proposition that Russia is, *in landmass*, the world's *largest* nation, or that China is, *in population*, the same, etc.).

Now, the most effective tool toward the clean implantation into fresh young minds of such simplistic memes as nationalism, racism, or sexual chauvinism remains the above-mentioned apparatus of blasphemy taboo. Though more traditionally associated with use by religion as a protection of its central memes against unwanted and inconvenient critical inquiry, blasphemy taboo can be seen operating effectively in ostensibly secular spheres of human endeavor as well.

Start, for example, with the above-mentioned sharp-toothed Muslim prohibition against desecrating respect for Muhammad in any way, shape or form (including the mere visual representation of him). How much substantive difference is there between this taboo and the one still being proposed by American lawmakers in the form of prohibition against the desecration of our nation's flag? For, although the U.S. Supreme Court has most recently (via *United States v. Eichman*, 1990) reasserted the refreshingly sober view that utterances of "symbolic speech" nonetheless deserve Free Speech protection by our country's First Amendment (i.e., not differently than if such statements had been expressed in signs of speech we

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recognize as *words*), there have been no fewer than 40 proposals to date since then by U.S. lawmakers to reverse this perspective and enact stringent laws prohibiting the desecration in any way, shape, or form, of our nation's flag. In the weeks following the Court's 1990 decision, *Time Magazine's* Walter Isaacson offered a eulogy for the long-venerated tradition of mandatory flag worship:

“Reverence for the flag is ingrained in every schoolchild who has quailed at the thought of letting it touch the ground, in every citizen moved by pictures of it being raised at Iwo Jima or planted on the moon, in every veteran who has ever heard taps played at the end of a Memorial Day parade, in every gold-star mother who treasures a neatly folded emblem of her family's supreme sacrifice.”

Remarkably, Isaacson has managed within this one sentence to pull out every stop on the sentimentalist's keyboard console. While holding down the sacrilege nerve as his pedal point he artfully works the upper manuals with arpeggiated chords around the keynotes of the sacrosanct until coercing our consent as to the inherent reasonableness of equating our emotional investment in a *mere symbol* of our country with that of the actual flesh-and-blood citizens who have been sacrificed for it. But what he has more importantly revealed here is the full register of rhetorical flourishes available to the accomplished sentimentalist toward this technique for ideological recruitment.

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By orchestrating his observation with the reverent sound effects of ceremony, children, and bereft mothers, a deft emotions artist is then free to employ an incremental repetition of the diminished sacrosanct interval that inevitably urges us back to the tonic of righteousness—this by inferring the ubiquity of this feeling throughout a whole population and thereby reinforcing that sense of the sacred through mere repetition.

Now, a sociologist or anthropologist might have approached the same phenomenon to quite different effect by commenting on the successfulness of social conditioning in humans during their formative years, such that it is possible to predictably coerce from them certain reflexive emotional responses simply by touching on certain triggers in our conditioned sense of what is sacred. Indeed, it is really the symbolic damage associated with *the violation of the sacred* that generates the heat in the above passage by Isaacson, *not* the particular griefs of mothers and veterans.

This is how the sentimentalist practices his scales. For, at bottom, how different in terms of *appreciable damage realized* is the desecration of a *symbol* of a country to that incurred by the doodled *representation* of some dark-age warlord? While we Americans remain rightfully proud of our inherent collective right to speak up in public against injustice through the medium of words (i.e., desecrating cherished ideas by means of a megaphone or printed editorial), many of us are nevertheless *scandalized* at the thought of expressing this same moral

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outrage more symbolically through the desecration of *representations* of these ideas.

The blatant hypocrisy in this distinction should be easily apparent to anyone not sentimentally inclined. Burning a flag is *not*, after all, tantamount to bombing a building or injuring a person. Much like words, flags are bereft of a nervous system and cannot suffer or serve as a means of physical protection or accommodation of business, and typically represent only negligible property value. They are manifestations of *signs*. Declaring a sign—whether manifest as a string of words or a piece of cloth—to be *sacred* and therefore *legally inviolate* is no less ridiculous than declaring Mohammed, Christ, or Zeus to be the unlawful object of criticism or unflattering images. Just as it should be simply beneath our dignity as human beings to live in fear of disrespecting an imagined authority, such as a god, it should be considered equally reprehensible as aspirants to democracy to wish for a society in which the mere symbols of that democracy are protected by so medieval a practice of mindless superstition and group coercion as is the malignant meme of blasphemy taboo.

This notion was echoed by Justice William Brennan, Jr. in his wording of the majority opinion to the above-mentioned 1990 Supreme Court case, where he observes, “The mere destruction or disfigurement of a symbol’s physical manifestation does not diminish or otherwise affect the symbol itself.” He then concludes this opinion with an eloquent succinctness of reasoning as follows,

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“Punishing desecration of the flag dilutes the very freedom that makes the emblem so revered, and worth revering.” Yes, as has been observed before (though not often enough), it is only reasonable to expect that in a true democracy, one wherein each citizen wields the right to voice his or her opinion without fear of retaliation by the group, that same inherent right must be *sacrificed to some degree* in the individual practice of it in order to still accommodate the competing needs, interests, and opinions of the whole society. Therefore, any symbol of such a democracy will need to bear the dignity allowing it to suffer the consequences of the protected rights it represents. To the contrary, any “respect” extorted through enforced obedience to some taboo protecting a fetish of its faith is no respect at all but merely a pitiful surrendering to coercion. It is contemptible.

But this ideological tension between the individual practice of rights on the one hand and the enjoyment of the benefits of those rights *by all* on the other is the pivot on which so many political wars are poised. For example, the continued campaign by the National Rifle Association to make dangerous weaponry available to all. Since its inception in 1871, this gun-advocacy forum has eventually garnered a membership of over 5 million gun lovers and become one of the three most influential lobbying groups in Washington, D.C. And with every schoolyard massacre that proved the unnecessary tragic outcome of the need for gun control the NRA’s printing presses and website managers are thrown into overdrive toward a

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blitzkrieg of “alternative facts” about the correlation between gun ownership and needless gun fatalities.

Another quote from Justice Brennan, again in regard to the above-mentioned 1990 flag-burning case, may prove helpful toward focusing on the most salient source of the problem, namely runaway idealism:

The idea that there is no right in American society that is pure and unlimited is an established concept in American jurisprudence. The rights of the individual are always being weighed against the interests of the society as a whole as represented by the Government.

What could be more reasonable? It doesn't take a graduate degree in law, philosophy, sociology, or history to find this observation comfortably consistent with what we've learned in life from our attempts to get along with others. Yet, any public discussion of this dilemma regarding guns has long since become politicized into a zero-sum game, wherein advocates of government restraints on individual ownership are craftily identified with treasonous saboteurs of “all that we stand for as Americans.” Through the cheerleading techniques of the NRA and numerous other conservative propaganda institutions, the popular consumerist appetite for the satisfactions of righteousness is cleverly thrown the bloodiest of red meat available: that special cut called *sacrilege*—here in the form of an alleged disrespect by gun control advocates to “our founding fathers,” here identified as those sacred ancestors who had

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courageously endeavored to leave us in their unblemished wisdom one of the central tenets of faith in our country's greatness, The Second Amendment to our Constitution. I use here a terminology conspicuously laden with overtones of religious worship only because *it is appropriate to the subject*. Indeed, the language in which these feeding frenzies are typically staged is as carefully nuanced in the grammar of sentimentality as is Isaacson's organ-loft eulogy for the flag.

This is the language of Nationalism, another of the many regional dialects of Standard Bigotry (along with such colorful local manifestations as racism, xenophobia, misogyny, homophobia, etc.) that share as their underlying grammar the conjugation and declension of simple verbs and nouns into charged emotional states of ingroup / outgroup affiliation and rivalry. By translating the aridly philosophic and cumbersomely complex discussion of shared rights that remains the heart of this legal debate into the easier and more colorful public spectacle of Christians and lions, these gladiators for the ideal of unbounded gun ownership are careful to appeal to that reliable hand-over-heart reflex of loyalty to the symbols of citizenship that had been so methodically instilled in so many of us while young. But in the true spirit of sentimentality, this is a loyalty to *symbols* rather than to the more complicated system of attributes for which those symbols stand.

And this propensity toward proud, unquestioning loyalty to mere symbols in place of real people or issues easily becomes, in the

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hands of the politically savvy, an efficient implement in the consolidation of political power. For, a mind conditioned to swoon at the sight of a flag, uniform, or slogan is one especially vulnerable to coercion toward the wholesale purchase of toxic (when not merely irrelevant) ideas under its inferred endorsement. Of the many embarrassingly blatant examples of this tendency revealed to us during the occupation of the White House by that archetypical sentimental bully, Donald Trump, one of the most salient of these concerned his sanctimonious condemnation of National Football League team members who elected to kneel rather than stand during that now-inescapable national liturgy we know as the national-anthem-at-American-competitive-team-sporting-events.

Although the impetus to kneel had begun as a peaceable protest against racial inequality in our country, it was immediately read by sentimentalists as a demonstration of unpatriotic feeling, some of whom further reading into this simple physical gesture as overtly dishonoring not just the flag as symbol of what it is to be American but more specifically the fallen military and police officers *who died in service to us all*. (Please try to keep in mind, if it's not too late, that we're just talking about a *fucking ball game* here, not an inauguration, a funeral, or a national catastrophe!)

It is interesting to note, by the way, that Colin Kaepernick, the player responsible for initiating the practice, as well as his San Francisco 49ers teammate Eric Reid, describe their action as having been carefully considered in an attempt to retain an attitude of

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respect, despite their wish to protest. Said Reid, “We chose to kneel because it’s a respectful gesture. I remember thinking our posture was like a flag flown at half-mast to mark a tragedy.”

Kaepernick explained the initial impetus in an interview as follows: “I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color. To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way...,” adding that he intended to continue his protest in this manner until he felt the American flag came to represent finally “what it’s supposed to represent.”

What seems to me most obvious from these comments, as well as the controversy aroused by them, is that the commodity perceived to be at stake here is little more than a proper understanding of just what the U.S. flag *actually represents*. To the protestor it has become primarily symbolic of that basic democratic value of citizenship equality from which it is perceived our country has strayed; to the enraged responders it is rather that sense of obligation the living ought to feel for the memory of those who have died in service to their country.

Of course, both readings may be seen as just one of many, each of which partly valid and abundantly incomplete. For, a flag, like *any* symbol employed by a working mind toward sharing with others, can never be neatly circumscribed into one definitively determined and unchanging meaning, especially given the fact that the various

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minds that take it up (in order to keep it alive) are each the product of different lives and their remembered association trains.

Yet, in the exquisitely poor taste we've come to expect from this impresario of received opinion, Trump grabbed his cellphone and weighed in publicly on the issue with a seat-of-the-pants ethical judgment on what remains at bottom, really, a *non-issue* (by which I mean the kneeling-versus-standing business, *not* the inequality that prompted the protest in the first place). Using his preferred conduit of Presidential editorializing, the Twitter tweet, Trump issued the following directive: "Very important that NFL players STAND tomorrow, and always, for the playing of our National Anthem. Respect our Flag and our Country!" And soon after this, among a flurry of schoolyard-style bullying, he bolstered this sentiment with the following fatwa: "If NFL fans refuse to go to games until players stop disrespecting our Flag & Country, you will see change take place fast. Fire or suspend!"

Let us try to put aside for the moment, if we possibly can, the egregiously undignified inappropriateness of such directives *issuing from a President*. (One would hope the President of a major nation would have more pressing responsibilities to attend to than policing patriotism etiquette at sporting events.) It seems possible to cobble together from the incoherence of Trump's various rants on this subject a unified declamation of sorts. I offer here a possibility:

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I, Donald Trump, President of this country, hereby proclaim it factual that any sports professional not standing during the performance of our national anthem is, ipso facto, disrespecting our flag and, therefore, our country; moreover, that any such disrespect needs to be swiftly eradicated by means of punishment, namely by the elimination of any such player from the profession.

Now, of the many mindset loops conducive to this kind of “thinking,” the most salient seem to me to be the four following beliefs: **one**, that a person’s decision not to stand during a performance of our national anthem is necessarily indicative of disrespect to our flag; **two**, that any perceived disrespect of our flag is necessarily synonymous with overt disrespect of one’s country and those who have died in its service; **three**, that anyone showing such lack of patriotism as associated with this perceived disrespect deserves swift and severe punishment in order that this insufficiency may be eradicated and the country restored as quickly as possible to that desired state of totalitarian respect for authority befitting the privilege of living in the greatest nation on earth; and last, but hardly least, **four**, that a sporting event is an appropriate arena in which to test all this.

Yes, it is actually this last belief that remains for my money the most curious and remarkable. As explored above in Section XII, the religion-like worship of competitive team sports may be seen, time and again, to offer the ideal arena in which to consolidate ingroup loyalties, especially through establishing the rivalry boundaries of a perceived outgroup. This may explain why it doesn’t seem strange

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to most American citizens that an inconsequential, goal-oriented entertainment symbolizing the vanquishing of enemies, such as a football game, should have come to be such a trusty testing ground for religious and patriotic feelings. But this tradition is hardly *inherent* in this, or any, sport; it has merely accrued in time through the aegis of a culture hungry for the worship of authority.

It is interesting that Kaepernick's protest, along with the predictable storm of hatred showered on him and his sympathizers, was not anything novel in American history; a very similar event happened, with a very similar public response, a couple of decades earlier. This was back in 1996 when Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, then a guard for the Denver Nuggets, was suspended by the National Basketball Association for his refusal to stand for the same compulsory performance of our anthem. Not surprisingly, Abdul-Rauf's reasoning was quite similar to Kaepernick's: our flag represented something different to him than it did to those who went on to burn down his home, repeatedly threaten his life, and conspire to steal from him his prime years of deserved NBA stardom.

Initially, by the way, the crisis had been resolved only when Abdul-Rauf agreed to stand during the anthem, though pray instead of sing. Such is the deep convictions of sentimentalists that they can be appeased by a mere gesture of *ostensible* conformance to tradition rather than an actual change in behavior. Yes, as long as he could be seen *posing* as he should for the required ritual, despite the

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continued transparency of his refusal to mouth the words he believed hypocritical to his belief system, the world of professional basketball would deign to allow him to continue operating as its cash cow. Interestingly, all these years later, Abudul-Rauf *still* refuses to stand for the anthem, despite this severe, abusive retribution he has endured from scandalized sentimentalists.

But a look at the history of the musical anthem at the center of this ridiculous controversy might help reveal the arbitrary nature of such highly emotional commitments of belief.

“The Star-Spangled Banner,” is a patriotic song with lyrics derived from “Defence of Fort M’Henry,” a poem of 1814 by Francis Scott Key (as well as from his earlier song, “When the Warriors Return”) about an incident in the Battle of Baltimore during the War of 1812, particularly as set to the tune of a popular British club song (“To Anacreon in Heaven,” the official song of an 18th-century London gentlemen’s club of amateur musicians).

Although recognized for official use as early as 1889 by the United States Navy and played soon after across the country at Army posts (at evening retreat), it was not until 1931 that it had been *officially* adopted as the nation’s anthem. Until then, it was merely one of a number of patriotic songs serving this purpose at appropriate public events (e.g., July 4th celebrations), including “Hail Columbia,” “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee,” and “America the Beautiful.”

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In 1916, President Woodrow Wilson issued an executive order recognizing “The Star-Spangled Banner” as *the* national anthem to be played at military (and other appropriate) occasions. The following year, he asked the U.S. Bureau of Education to prepare an official version of this anthem out of the many existing ones, and on December 5, 1917 the version we know today was first performed at Carnegie Hall. But although this anthem was indeed performed at a baseball game as early as the 1918 World Series, it was not until a quarter-century later (during World War II) that the tradition became a ubiquitous feature of baseball games and, still later yet, of various other public sports events.

Until 1942 there had been no prescription authorized as to appropriate behavior during the playing of this anthem in the United States. During that year, a couple of revisions to section 301 of title 36 of the U.S. Code regarding its performance were made: the first on June 22nd, which indicated that those in uniform should salute while others should simply stand at attention, with men removing their hats and women placing their hand over their heart, *though only if the flag was present*; the second on December 23rd of the same year, further prescribing those at attention to face in the direction of the music and specifying that women *and* men place their hand over their heart, though, again, only in the presence of the flag.

As recently as 1976, this part of the code was again revised (ironically, in an effort to simplify it!), wherein both men and women

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were instructed to place hand over heart, though now whether or not the flag was present. In 1998, it was tweaked further to stipulate that members of the Armed Forces and veterans should salute during performance of it, whether or not the flag was displayed.

However, *all of these* changes refer to what are known as “statutory suggestions” or “behavioral requirements,” *not to enforceable, binding law*. According to legal scholars, this distinction between binding and non-binding law relevant to 36 U.S.C., §301 is easily recognized in the context of the subject discussion in at least two clear ways: first, the conspicuous lack of criminal penalties included in the code toward dealing punitively with violations of its provisions; and second, the pointed use of the auxiliary modal verb “should” rather than that of “shall” in each instance of usage—a distinction of consistent significance to American legal history.

Yet, despite this rather lucid legal distinction, sentimental zealots for patriotic display continue to treat violations of these statutory suggestions as if they were criminal violations of binding law. Example: the Trump-friendly tirade by Roy Moore, an ultra-conservative former judge then running to fill a U.S. Senate seat. (Yes, founder and president of the Foundation for Moral Law, an Alabama 501[c][3] dedicated to promoting the privileging of Christian values in American politics, this is the same former judge who was forced out of the Alabama Supreme Court for refusing to obey a court order to remove a monument of the Ten Commandments and then forced out yet again for directing judges

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to enforce a ban on same-sex marriages that was ruled unconstitutional.)

Moore claimed that NFL protesters who kneel rather than stand during the national anthem are not only unpatriotic *but lawbreakers too*. “It’s against the law...It was an act of Congress that every man stand and put their hand over their heart. That’s the law,” he told *Time* magazine in October of 2017. Now, it would seem to me a *judge*, of all people, might possess the legal background alerting him to the elementary distinctions between binding and non-binding laws, but in the heat of the sentimental reflex to judge others, subtleties such as this might easily be forgotten or overlooked.

Regardless, a consensus among legal scholars is that even if 36 U.S.C., §301 *had* been intended to be legally binding (i.e., despite its deliberate wording and conspicuous lack of punitive remedies), the First Amendment itself would prevent the prescriptions for behavior found here from being enforced anyhow. For example, the Supreme Court held in *West Va. Bd. Of Ed. v. Barnette* (1943) that public school students can’t be required to salute the flag, nor adults be required to stand at attention with hand over heart and hats removed during the national anthem. (The opinion declared that “no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein.”)

So, why do men like Donald Trump and Roy Moore react to peaceful protests expressed through non-criminal refusals to

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embrace statutory suggestions as if these protesters were engaging in a behavior that proved a dangerous threat to a stable society? I believe the answer to be found in a type of social conditioning most of us undergo during our formative years, but one that adheres more indelibly or inflexibly in some than in others in adulthood. This conditioning involves the sensitizing of our youth to the symbols of patriotic feeling, much as religious parents strive to sensitize their children to the requisite symbolism of their own religious practice.

While a Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist parent might typically show little concern over their child's lack of overt, or *worshipful*, respect to the sight of a Christian cross, a practicing Catholic would typically find this same lack of *overt* respect to that cross by their school-age child to be commensurate with active *disrespect*. Something of this same difference in defining "disrespect" can be found at the intersections of numerous other cultural traditions, religious or otherwise. Likewise, children of any of these households might ignore to the point of insensitivity the cultural importance of certain native-American religious relics, and this with impunity simply because these objects or ideas fail to show up on the parents' "radar" as worthy of this type of respect. With something less than cultural smugness, these parents would be unlikely to consider such of their children to lack this respect to be overtly *disrespectful* in our usual sense of the word.

But the social obligations we lay down as nations in the best interest of the integrity and safety of the state tend to require of us

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more *active* respect by its citizens than do any overlapping or competing cultural priorities. Chief among these is the citizen's loyalty to their nation, a feeling of support for, allegiance with, and commitment to, the state. But loyalty is an associational attachment involving a potentially costly commitment to secure, or at least *not jeopardize*, the well-being of the practitioner's object of loyalty. Therefore, it should not be surprising that loyalty, particularly at this level, tends to be easiest gauged by the *lack of harm rather than extent of benefit* extended to their object by said practitioner. And for this reason, a citizen failing to show adequate overt or active respect to a symbol of the state tends to be viewed more warily than the one showing that same want of this respect toward a religious relic (particularly one *outside* one's parents' religious tradition).

Since actual "mindreading" (as opposed to subtle clue-reading) is not *really* a human faculty (at least not at the implied level of extra-sensory perception), it tends to be difficult to know whether an underperformer of overt respect is therefore capable of active *disrespect*, the end result of which, of course, being the potential for *disloyal* subversive actions that are dangerous to the continued well-being of the state.

This may explain why the practice of conditioning in young children these feelings for flag worship has enjoyed such a long tradition in our country, even among parents otherwise sensible to the dangers of brainwashing, which this practice remains at its most basic level. For, the only reason, *really*, to teach a malleable young

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mind the virtue of “trying on” the emotions involved in worshipful reverence of a flag is an inherent distrust in that child’s later ability to be seen as faithful to their country. It is an attempt to permanently wire that child to a desired reflexive response, freeing them of the dangers of behavior that might be judged subversive. The problem with this practice should be obvious, though. A citizen who *reflexively* stands, salutes, kowtows, or cries at the sight or thought of a mere symbol is that much less likely to *actively* engage in mindful commitment to the actual entity or endeavor for which that symbol is thought to stand. When Pavlov’s dogs salivated at the sound of a bell, it was no longer reflective of the animal’s feeling of, or attention to, the valuable survival instinct of hunger and only a blind reflex.

Of course, it is also true, as the Italians say, that “the appetite comes with the eating” and that ringing the bell can also *awaken* feelings of hunger (through a reverse-engineered association train of the emotional connections in the brain). But surely this is no recommendation of the practice, as the only benefit of this type of control over a subject is dissociating its natural inherited inclinations toward energy maintenance in an unnatural effort to fatten it up. Hopefully, we wish our children to grow into considerate, thinking individuals and citizens rather than sure-fire solid-state circuitries of approved knee-jerk reactions.

This problem in perceiving the attributes of loyalty in ones other than ourselves can be further complicated by the existence of *varying types* of loyalty, as formally recognized by psychologists,

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sociologists, and philosophers. For example, Stephen Nathanson, a philosopher at Northeastern University, distinguishes between *exclusionary* and *non-exclusionary* forms of loyalty. The act of sustaining a loyalty of the former type would necessarily involve excluding loyalty to other people, groups, or ideas, thereby creating *disloyalty* to one or more in order to *sustain* it toward another. Patriotism, at least as it is characteristically inculcated in our young people, tends to be best described by this type, especially as a deep commitment to the values of a nation other than one's own can be perceived by overcautious citizens as necessary proof that such commitments were made *at the expense* of those toward one's *own* country.

Of course, this notion is predicated on the erroneous assumption that there is only a finite quantity of this feeling of commitment to be spent and that being wholly committed to one's country should leave zero percentage available for employment elsewhere. I say *erroneous* because we can easily reject this notion through the analogy of love. Most parents are not afraid of losing their feeling of love for one of their children by feeling and bestowing it upon another. (This is not to say that the *recipients* of this love, the children, might not *interpret* the parent's love shown to a sibling as being bestowed at his or her own expense; however, such a reading rarely reflects the true feelings, or even *actions*, of the parent.)

Yes, when we look around us, we see it is not only possible, but quite common (*and therefore normal*), to observe individual loyalties

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sustained among friends and family without endangering those loyalties the individual might sustain toward other entities, causes, or belief systems. These, therefore, may be considered *non-exclusionary* loyalties. By remaining indifferent to such distinctions, it is far easier to pose in such a way as to fill in the outline of the poster image of patriotism to which a nationalist typically aspires. Hence, this unremitting instinct to want to instill in our young these reflexive reactions to symbols we associate with respect, loyalty, and responsibility.

But once again, a brief look at the history of this inculcation can easily dispel any romantic notions we're likely to savor of it. Let us turn to The Pledge of Allegiance, that oath-centered conditioning ritual that remains the mainstay of American patriotism indoctrination. Although there are many other countries that sustain a tradition of oaths of allegiance for specific purposes, the United States remains in a conspicuous minority of those using such an oath *as a component of childhood education*.

Interestingly, this statistic is in direct inverse proportion to the predominant role of religion in American politics as compared with most other industrialized nations. It should not be surprising, therefore, to learn that the inspiration and driving force behind this tradition of teaching The Pledge of Allegiance to our children was of both a religious and a business nature.

Although other oaths of allegiance to our nation existed before it (such as one devised by Rear Admiral George Balch, auditor of the

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New York Board of Education), The Pledge of Allegiance as we know it today was, with only a couple of minor changes, the creation of a Baptist minister (Francis Bellamy, 1855-1931) at the recruitment of a zealous magazine marketer (James B. Upham) for a popular children's monthly (*The Youth's Companion*). In preparation for the national public school celebration of Columbus Day in 1892 (commemorating the 400th anniversary of the arrival of Christopher Columbus in the Americas), Upham devised a promotional scheme for this magazine that would effortlessly take out two fowl with one projectile: first, to realize his decidedly sentimental dream of instilling devout nationalism in impressionable young minds; and second, to make an *unprecedented killing* in the sale of American flags. Yes, this marketing scheme Upham devised toward enriching the magazine's coffers aspired to nothing short of profiting on the sale of at least one flag *to every school in the country!* Once again, anyone wishing to better understand the role of religion in American politics need only *follow the money*.

After Upham and Bellamy had then conspired to lobby Congress and President Benjamin Harrison sufficiently, the latter (not coincidentally) made a public proclamation (Presidential Proclamation 335) that the public-school flag ceremony, including said pledge, would be the center of the nationwide Columbus Day celebrations. Consequently, The Pledge of Allegiance was first used in public schools on October 12, 1892, during the Columbus Day observances. After this, various minor adjustments were made to the

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wording, most notoriously the addition of the phrase “under God,” which was made under President Eisenhower in 1954 as part of his campaign to infuse Capitalism with Christianity as a bulwark against the threat of communism. (And in 1956, “In God We Trust,” which had been used on some coinage since 1864, would be adopted as the official U.S. motto, replacing the unofficial *E pluribus unum*, and mandated to appear on all currency.)

The audacious unconstitutionality of this addition is, of course, not hard to see; indeed, it’s nearly blinding to those who recognize in it an insidious example of government-sanctioned endorsement of religion, one that clearly violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment and constitutes yet another erosion of the all-important notion of a separation between church and state, a defining feature of our constitution.

But equally telling of the perceived benefits of indelibly imprinting nationalism into our vulnerable young minds was the specific physical performance aspects surrounding the recitation of this pledge. Placing the hand over the heart, as has been prescribed by the U.S.C. since 1942, symbolically offers up one’s heart (i.e., life) as forfeiture in the event of failure to fulfill the pledge. Photographs abound from the early 20th century showing children reciting their pledge to the flag while performing a precise set of gestures eerily discomfiting to modern viewers. These constitute something known as “the Bellamy Salute,” named after the same author of our pledge, who, in 1892, modified the then-current “Balch Salute” of some five years earlier.

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The instructions for the “Bellamy Salute” were published specifically for the above-mentioned National School Celebration of Columbus Day, for which The Pledge of Allegiance itself had been created, packaged, and marketed. These instructions read as follows:

At a signal from the Principal the pupils, in ordered ranks, hands to the side, face the Flag. Another signal is given; every pupil gives the flag the military salute—right hand lifted, palm downward, to align with the forehead and close to it. Standing thus, all repeat together, slowly, “I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands; one Nation Indivisible, with Liberty and Justice for All.” At the words, “to my Flag,” the right hand is extended gracefully, palm upward, toward the Flag, and remains in this gesture till the end of the affirmation; whereupon all hands immediately drop to the side.

This kiddie performance is closely reminiscent of the so-called Roman Salute, a militaristic group conformance gesture in which the arm is held out forward, straight, with palm down and fingers touching. But although scholars are now dubious about the likelihood of this precise salute having actually been employed in classical Rome, it did manage to become the subject of romanticization by Italian fascists of the 1920s who were propagandistically bent upon drawing parallels between their august classical heritage and their own tawdry vision of a totalitarian martial society. Similar forms of this salute were adopted by nationalist movements in various countries throughout the 1920s and 30s, including France, Spain, Greece, Estonia, Yugoslavia, and

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Brazil. But it was to become most recognizable to modern memory in its Nazi German adoption as the *Hitlergruss* (“Hitler Salute”). Indeed, because of the close identification of this type of salute with militaristic nationalist movements worldwide, it has been banned in most countries since World War II, though its presence survives unofficially among diverse hate groups wishing to preserve something of the militaristic totalitarian spirit of fascism. And back in 1942, it should not be surprising that Congress, wishing to distance American culture from the fascist world, amended title 36 of the U.S. Code to replace this goose-stepping militaristic one with the more oath-oriented hand-over-heart version still in use here now.

But no matter how we try to dress it up, and *even without* the insidious atheist-baiting verbiage of that flagrantly unconstitutional insertion of the words “under God” in 1954, this ritual of coerced flag worship easily coalesces into the following morally unsettling image: that of children of an impressionable age standing in rigid, mindless conformity, engaged in the reflexive religious worship of a symbol of their country by means of an on-demand protestation of proud, blind faith in their home team of governmental ideology, all this by means of a precise, choreographed, verbal mind-conditioning formula. This sad scenario, with its unavoidable reminders of militaristic, authoritarian nationalism and salivating laboratory canines, should rightly strike any rational believer in democracy as ignominious. (Indeed, this should seem so to no less a degree than to

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the sordid business of school prayer, which represents a brazenly unconstitutional agenda of eroding the carefully conceived and protected right of each citizen of the state to remain free from the yoke of the church and all the medieval absurdities its various cults wish to sell him or her from the comfort of its unconstitutional enjoyment of government subsidization through tax exemption.)

Nor did more recent rulings making this performance “voluntary” provide *realistic* relief to our children from this obligation; the importance of peer approval to children of this age, coupled with their fear of being targeted for outgroup bullying, manages to keep this practice *effectively* mandatory for a huge cross-section of kids in our country.

Yet, it is this very state of mindless worship of authority for the mere sake of authority that remains most dear to sentimental politicians made uncomfortable by the prospect of free thinking. And I believe such displays of reflexive, righteous zeal for unexamined received morality so proudly brandished by sanctimonious bullies like Messrs. Trump and Moore are traceable in large measure to this venerated tradition of childhood conditioning in flag worship.

Let us give up this medieval practice of indoctrination by conditioning and raise our children to actually *think* about their country and not just wait for the cue, assume the position, and worship its symbols. Remember Justice Brennan’s judicious remark about flag desecration which, with only the necessary switch of

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relevant abstract noun, can be made wholly appropriate to flag observance as well: *punishing those who [observe] the flag [differently than do you] dilutes the very freedom that makes the emblem so revered, and worth revering.*

XIV. Ethical Consequences, Part 11: Worship & Prayer as Submission and Subordination

And this brings us back to a theme touched on above but now deserving closer examination, being as it remains one of the crucial tenets of this essay. I speak specifically here of my argument that the panoply of attitudes associated worldwide with religious practice—these including prayer, worship, dogma, and the superstitious fear of profanation—contribute significantly toward the shaping of the sentimental mindset and the myriad indignities it is heir to. After all, how different really is the disgust reflex triggered in a pious nationalist at the thought of a desecrated symbol of their nation than that sparked in a pious religionist confronting blasphemy or heresy against their god? I contend, little...if any.

As observed above, one of the societal protections afforded religious memes from the potential embarrassments of critical inquiry is *blasphemy taboo*, an evolutionarily ingenious means of keeping vacuously incoherent ideas safe from the light of reason by, in effect, drawing the blinds. This taboo achieves its consummate state of censorship with remarkable efficiency, as it merely

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capitalizes on our own inherent capacity to be scandalized by the violation or debasement of that which is held to be sacred.

The state of being “sacred”—meaning special, hallowed, holy, consecrated, venerated, or protected by religious doctrine—is a status enjoyed by certain entities or ideas on the basis of cultural convention. After all, there is nothing in this world that can be *inherently* “sacred”—not any more than something can be *inherently* beautiful, dangerous, or costly—as these are all *values*, which are merely relative standards with which we humans evaluate things, actions, and ideas. In other words, they are merely constructs of the human mind developed under the aegis of culture, just like virtue, morality, pornography, justice, etc. Even the most universal-seeming concept, such as “holding life sacred” will, upon close enough examination, reveal *a spectrum* of commitment, in both degree *and* type, according to a wide variety of considerations and circumstances, such as religious doctrines, secular laws, traditions, or plain old context. Sure, they are *built upon* inherited behavioral tendencies and instinctive reactions, but in that same sense in which the acquisition of any *specific* human language is built upon the foundation of an inherited universal *instinct for language*.

So, when we demote the status of a concept we had formerly held to be “sacred” to the more general, popular, and available category of the profane (non-sacred), we engender a type of ambiguity, fleeting as it might be, wherein one thing is seen to have two values, even if only while in transition. This confusion of status seems to me

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to be a type of cognitive dissonance—an inconsistency of attitude or view that threatens our desired sense of certainty and stability. It is as if two mutually exclusive realities have been assigned for the moment to the same entity. And our nervous systems seem to have evolved a natural mechanism with which to recognize and react to this state of dissonance: our own hardwired repugnance reflex.

This feeling of repugnance is one that most of us have inherited in varying degrees through a seamless blend of genes and cultural environment. It is an emotion of disdain, usually accompanied with disgust, in response to something sensed as potentially dangerous. Although the earliest manifestations of this reflex were likely limited to *literally* toxic entities found in our *physical* environment—an example would be the gag reflex to the sight and smell of, say, excrement—this reaction seems eventually to have evolved into a psychological one pertaining, by association, to potentially dangerous *ideas* as well. And in particular, such ideas might be those that subversively threaten the seeming “rightness” of a recognized source of authority.

In his 2007 book, *god is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, the late Christopher Hitchens maintained, and I believe quite persuasively, that there is an essentially human proclivity toward confusing what is at any time sanctioned to be sacred from its opposite, the profane. (He writes, “this mad confusion between the sacred and the profane is found in all faiths and at all times.”) And it is this tendency, he further suggests, that lays the best foundation for

explaining such cultural phenomena as the prohibition against eating pork in both Jewish and Muslim societies. (Specifically, he sees the roots of such a prohibition to be the rather human-like qualities that make pigs particularly easy for us to anthropomorphize and, thereby, associate their consumption by us with the instinctively repulsive act of cannibalism.) This emphasis on the ease with which our species can confuse the sacred and profane, along with the ensuing ramifications of this confusion, seems to me to map rather neatly onto the concept I introduced a few paragraphs ago about the cognitive dissonance we often suffer in attempting to navigate between the sacred and profane.

Since the politics of loyalties is one of the central features of human society, the *testing* of loyalty remains a key arena in which divisiveness among us thrives. Put more than two people in a room and you have the foundational requirements for ingroup/outgroup perceptions, identifications, practices, and conflicts. And exacerbating this tendency for divisive allegiance-making is the authority baggage we all bring along with us from our formative years, when we were subjected to parental authority that operated outside our own rational understanding. For, it is reasonable, and often necessary, for a parent to exercise less-than-democratic authority over their young child, who is not yet capable of making sound decisions regarding its own survival. After all, appealing to the reasonableness and good judgment of a two-year-old as to the danger of automobiles is considerably less conducive to that child's longevity than unequivocally maintaining a prohibition against playing in traffic, no matter how seemingly arbitrary and unfair it remains in the young mind being prohibited.

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But this sort of “blind” respect for authority, once it is no longer necessary, can be difficult to shed, or at least to *reinterpret* for usage as a responsible adult. And those who have most trouble making this transition seem, in my experience, to struggle through their adulthood with how to effectively and gracefully meet authority in society. Typically, instead of exercising *reasoned respect*, such as when one follows traffic laws that may be *personally* inconvenient but are nonetheless beneficial to the common good, these strugglers tend to confront authority with their minds set for either *inculcated worship* or its converse, the rebellious resistance of *apostasy*. And it is in this all-or-nothing rigidity of response, which is inherently inflexible to the sensitive nuance of power relations operating among adult humans in the real world, that the compromising spirit of cooperation loses out to the more aggressive dictates of competition.

Conversely, we have also evolved a *positive* reinforcement mechanism—this by way of our neurochemical reward system, wherein an increased release of the neurotransmitter dopamine along our brain’s “mesolimbic pathway” (including such regions as the ventral tegmental area, the nucleus accumbens of the ventral striatum, the amygdala, the hippocampus, and prefrontal cortex). This release mediates an experience of pleasure that has a reinforcing effect on a performed behavior—typically one that had proved beneficial in and for some way to our ancestors over the millennia. Thus, behaviors associated with aspects of righteousness, such as empathetic concern, fairness, and reciprocity, can also

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trigger a reflex sensation that reward us with the pleasurable feeling we associate with righteousness, all by means of the stimulation of reinforcing neural chain reactions released by our own cerebral drugstore. And in this way “rightness” has the feel of rightness even before the consequences of our action in the world around us can be judged as to its actual candidature as a “right” or “proper” action.

These automatic mechanisms of our nervous system, insidiously tweaking our behavior in small increments in both directions, may be harnessed by any number of cascades of events to prompt more developed directions in behavior. For example, not only can this ancient disgust reflex toward the pollution of our *physical* environment be manipulated via psychological means to enhance our dislike of certain *ideas*, but this newly adopted stance can be reinforced *positively* by the converse system of dopamine reward-system payload. Through these inherently seductive behavioral modification systems of our brain we are left vulnerable to the pleasurable accommodation of useless, or even toxic, ideas. And this is where religious thinking comes in.

Religion as Evolutionary Byproduct

For, religion, or *any* psychological system of dependency on authority-inculcated “truth” (dogma), is given free reign by such reinforcing pleasures of routine, repetition, and social solidarity. An otherwise useless, if not downright dangerous, idea in the context of individual application can evoke positive reinforcement in our mesolimbic pathway when enough members of our fellow in-group

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perform it, despite the continued lack of evidence as to the idea's soundness or efficacy. This reinforcing feeling derives from the historically helpful feeling of solidarity *but hijacked now to reinforce something unrelated to its original use.*

Evolutionary biologists and psychologists refer to such a phenomenon as an "evolutionary byproduct," otherwise known as a "pre-adaptation," or this latter term's more recent replacement, "exaptation." (This was the term coined by Stephen Jay Gould and Elizabeth Vrba in 1982 to replace "pre-adaptation," a term they believed to have become bogged down with the baggage of *teleology*, the goal-oriented explanation of phenomena by way of the purpose they serve rather than by their causes).

These designations are used to describe the same proposed mechanism: namely that a trait might shift along its evolutionary trajectory. In other words, having evolved on the basis of a function it served that was beneficial to the passing on of genes, it then remained in use to serve another, *unrelated*, function. Of the many examples of exaptation, one of the most commonly offered relates to the evolution of feathers, which are believed to have initially evolved in certain dinosaurs that were incapable of flying but that were benefitted by the heat-regulating and/or mate-attracting display properties of these structures, only to become co-opted for use in flying much later on in birds.

It has been argued by some that religion is itself such an exaptation (evolutionary byproduct), in that neither religious beliefs

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nor behaviors really qualify as adaptive traits in an evolutionary sense and should be viewed rather as incidental byproducts of the cognitive architecture of the brain—features that served early humans well toward their survival but that remained in the behavioral repertoire for reasons of other, unrelated, benefits.

This argument as pertains to the genesis of religion concerns the evolutionary role of something referred to as “agent detection,” and even more specifically the exaggerated development of this form of awareness known as “hyperactive agent detection device” (or HADD, a term coined by the experimental psychologist Justin L. Barrett). Plain old “agent detection” is the general term used by evolutionary and social psychologists to describe a survival strategy in which predilections that evolved to become hardwired into the brains of many animals (including humans) cause it to presume the purposeful intervention into their awareness of an intelligent “agent” in a particular situation. This “agent,” in its simplest description might be any creature possessed of intentionality, though it is most specifically relates to those, such as a predator, rival, or other enemy, whose detected presence presents a likely threat.

Now, the later development of this tendency into the exaggerated variety mentioned above—that is, the hyperactive model—is actually the specific mechanism seen by those who embrace the byproduct theory of religion as the source for the religious sensibility. They see the very belief in creator gods as the

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evolutionary byproduct (exaptation) of this ancient reflexive predilection to detect agency with the sort of hair-trigger sensitivity that results in *lots* of false positive responses.

An excellent introduction to this theory is offered by Daniel C. Dennett in his 2006 *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. Dennett posits a very benign example of the HADD phenomenon in dogs relating to the common behavioral response of your house pet jumping up from out of a nap and barking at the sound of snow falling off an eave. He goes on to describe the use of this detection mechanism toward an animal's ability of adopting "an intentional stance," in which the animal treats some other thing in its world as a.) agents; b.) more specifically those agents with *limited beliefs* about the world; c.) those same with *specific desires*; and finally d.) "enough common sense to do the *rational* thing given those beliefs and desires."

Others who have written extensively on this subject have offered various thought experiments to illustrate the likely way this mechanism might have evolved. A common example of this is the following. Two early humans were walking together into a clearing where a large dark mass showed up in their peripheral vision. The one with a healthy (i.e., in this case *hyperactive*) agent response device reflexively reacts as if the mass were a large predator animal, even though in this case it just happened to be a boulder, while his companion, having a less hyperactively tuned version, presumes it is just a boulder or something else non-threatening and, accordingly,

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pays no attention. Though the unexcited human just happened to be right in this case, the false response he saved himself from wasting in this particular instance proves, in the final analysis, much less costly than the outcome of presuming each such instance to be likewise benign. Therefore, the one most likely to pass on his genes to us is the one with the extra-sensitive detection system, not the one likely to consider each possible threat benign. In other words, sooner or later, he might be eaten by the “boulder” whereas his more trigger-happy friend has merely wasted a little time and attention to his endeavor.

Now back to Dennett, who claims, regarding the above-mentioned “intentional stance,” that “so powerful is our innate urge to adopt the intentional stance that we have real difficulty in turning it off when it is no longer appropriate.” And it is in this way that belief in a creator god may be seen as an evolutionary byproduct of agent detection. Once our ancestors added *hyperactive agent detection device* to their repertoire, enabling them to adopt the *intentional stance* at the drop of a fruit from a tree behind one, it is not a reach from there to attributing any unexplained phenomenon to some invisible agent in possession of an unlimited number (because perceived) of intentions, beliefs, desires, rational motivations, as well as ample wherewithal, to intervene in our lives.

Our brain’s reward system, which developed as a means of reinforcing behaviors that, for one reason or other, worked in helping ancestors to live long enough to pass on their genes, offers

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this reinforcement potential blindly to *any* dynamics that come along, including even the unsavory or unhelpful. So, perhaps we don't so much experience the good feeling of having made a *specific* right decision so much as we enjoy the generalized feeling of being right or in the right. In other words, this evolved reward-system payload of dopamine accompanying any of our behaviors that we feel to be righteous makes us at the same time vulnerable to sign onto other, *potentially less propitious*, behaviors that similarly "feel" right.

And it is this same automatic response that helps preserve the various secular forms of manufactured conformity permeating societies around the globe, such as tradition, ritual, received opinion, or the inherent urge to consolidate and sacralize ingroups, be they sports teams, schools, political parties, or national institutions. But since these brain mechanisms of behavioral reward rarely distinguish with any precision between such societal concepts as what specifically, technically, or legally constitutes the sacred versus the profane, they tend to flourish on the basis of that more coarse-grained, *categorical* distinction between the two. And this may be how our inherited disgust reflex toward pollution and desecration may subvert what inclinations we might have toward any truly open-minded inquiry about an event or topic.

I believe this all boils down to a key truth about our cognitive life as social creatures: the cultural construct of religious worship tends

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to play a key role in shaping our accommodation with, and indulgence in, *uncritical thinking*.

Worship and Prayer Defined

But let's pause a moment in order to reign in our language by identifying terms. By "religious" I do not mean any *specific* religion, denomination or sect, nor even more broadly "organized" versus unorganized, disorganized, or what have you. Rather, I mean the whole set of culturally developed behaviors and practices, replete with their consequent morals, ethics, worldviews, and politics, that constitute the act of WORSHIP.

Now, our word "worship" originally derives from the Old English word "weorthscipe" (i.e., *worthship*), which meant both the state of *worthiness* itself as well as the practice of acknowledging said worthiness, as in the recognition of honor and renown. And it appears to have retained this sense, without necessary reference to superstition and its respect for the supernatural, well until the early 14th century, when we see it increasingly take on the specific use of describing the adoration *of the divine*. Indeed, in recent centuries, "worship" has come to be so closely focused on religious devotion that the occasional secular use of it tends, ironically, to be understood only by analogy to the religious one. So, when we hear someone today say he or she "worships" him or her, we understand it to mean that the target of this esteem is held as high *as if they were divine*. In other words, "worship" has, by and large, lost its general

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meaning of honoring a person, so loaded has it become with the baggage of god(s).

Similarly, the English word “prayer,” meaning an act of supplication or intercession towards a god, or else an invocation of praise or thanks to same (or a few other minor variations), derives from the Medieval Latin word “*precaria*,” meaning *petition*. In light of this, it should not surprise us to learn that anthropologists recognize a close relationship between prayer and the concepts of surrender and supplication. And indeed, the words for “prayer” and “supplication” are one and the same in several ancient languages, such as Greek, Latin and Hebrew.

Though religions may differ among each other in some manner as to the way “worship” (or at least its translation) is understood in a particular devotional context, it appears the most common usage among them all would be what is expressed by the Greek word “*proskuneo*,” as often found used in the texts that would come to comprise the New Testament. Central to the constellation of meanings associated with this word is that of performing obeisance toward a supernatural being, or at least a person of superior rank. By this is meant the obedient deferential show of respect offered by a subordinate to a superior, such as the act of kissing his or her hand or the deep bowing one’s head before them, or even the touching one’s forehead to the ground in servile supplication.

But whatever the subtle nuances of differences discerned in the context of a particular passage, the common thread in all this is the

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spirit of obsequious self-abnegation communicated by and with this exchange. It is impossible for me to grasp, hard as I try, how the denial or abasement of one's worth could *in any way* be seen to *ennoble* rather than *egregiously demean* the practitioner. After all, such a performance is intended only to emphatically memorialize the practitioner's subordinate status to some other being. Rather, it seems to me that any civilized human being would naturally aspire to eradicate this servile role for themselves as well as for others; **it should simply be beneath our dignity.**

Subordination and Submission as Practiced by Our Cousins

Of course, this demeaning act of deference to the mere status of a higher authority is a behavior pattern in no way confined to our own species; it can be observed in varying manifestations and degrees throughout the animal kingdom, though perhaps most recognizably as practiced in the societies of our primate cousins. Robert M. Sapolsky, in *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst* (2017), lucidly and insightfully discusses these features from a primatologist's (and neuroscientist's) perspective, especially in his chapter entitled "Hierarchy, Obedience, and Resistance" (chapter 12 on pp. 425-77). With admirable succinctness Sapolsky defines hierarchy as a "ranking system that formalizes unequal access to limited resources, ranging from meat to that nebulous thing called 'prestige,'" adding that these hierarchies ultimately "establish a status quo by ritualizing inequalities."

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Though Sapolsky's research career has focused on baboons in the wild (with a special interest in the effect of the stress derived from such politics on the animal's physiology), his observations on the practice of dominance hierarchy observable among our cousin primates in general reveal a highly nuanced vocabulary of body language, gestures, and vocal utterances that memorialize the inequality of subordinate and dominant roles.

Another important translator of, and commentator on, this language of "ritualized inequality" across its various dialects is the distinguished Dutch primatologist Frans de Waal. For example, see de Waal's *Chimpanzee Politics: Power and Sex Among Apes* (1982 and 2007), where he analyzes the "submissive greeting" and its reception by the dominant male in articulate detail (pp. 78-81). De Waal notes that this "greeting" by a subordinate male chimp offered to the dominant male—a sequence of short, panting grunts made while assuming a corresponding posture of bobbing bows from which the dominant male may be viewed upwards from below—is answered by the dominant male by his adoption of a "big" presence, standing tall with hair raised in an aggressive stance—this while the greeter adopts a protective stance, as if to avoid a punch. Therefore, the greeter and greeted each have their ritualized vocabulary of posture, movement, and even sound to memorialize the status of their differing rungs in the social hierarchy.

XIV: Ethical Consequences, Part 11— *continued***Not All That Different than When Practiced by Humans**

Now, as an example of just how far we humans have evolved from these rather rudimentary displays practiced by of our cousin primates, we have only to watch footage of Nazi rallies and their ubiquitous performance by attendees of the *Hitlergruss* (“Hitler Greeting”) salute. This non-verbal gesture of allegiance, described above in reference to the “Roman salute” (or “Bellamy salute,” as later adopted for children in U.S. schools) became named for its most notorious usage as a brainwashing tool by Adolph Hitler, though it had been copied from the Italian fascist salute instituted by Benito Mussolini years before.

In Hitler’s version, this reflexive gesture was accompanied by the verbal utterances that identified the appropriate target of worship: Adolf Hitler himself. These utterances included the militant grunts, “Heil Hitler,” “Heil, mein Führer,” or simply “Heil” as well as a special-use variant specific to public rallies—a catechism-like performance of antiphonal nature wherein the German word *sieg* (“victory”) was called by an initiator to be answered by *heil* (“salvation,” “safe,” “whole,” “intact,” etc.) by the respondents. Notably, however, this repeatedly reinforced demonstration of submissive loyalty to history’s most notorious dominant male was answered, or “accepted,” with a gesture by the receiver that differed dramatically with the greeting in its choreography and implicit message. I’ll call this gesture of acceptance by the “greeted” alpha “the receiver pose.” In this response, the recipient of the proffered

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submissiveness gesture (the *Hitlergrüß* itself) shows himself in the attitude of deigning to accept the submissiveness offering in a way that further memorializes his greater status. This pose may be described as the proffering of an open hand supported shoulder-height upon a bent right arm. In direct contrast to the physically strenuous gesture of the greeting, this “receiver pose” is conspicuously relaxed, as if to emphasize the lesser physical effort involved in taking than giving, thereby emphasizing the receiver’s comparatively luxurious dominance.

Tilman Allert, professor of sociology and social psychology at the University of Frankfurt, in his 2005 book, *The Hitler Salute: On the Meaning of a Gesture*, posits a significant connection between the *Hitlergrüß* and the German nation’s “regression into a state of moral disregard.” And that connection, he contends, pertains to the sacralization of the greeter’s publicly emphasized submission and inequality. Allert suggests that the swearing of an oath moves a commitment to action into a sacred sphere in which the pledge taker never has to reevaluate his intentions and reconsider his oath. The gesture invokes the addressed authority—in this case Adolf Hitler, leader of the Nazi party—as a transcendent protective presence, helping to “pave the way for the individual’s self-negation in the ostensible moment of his self-assertion.”

Surprisingly, Allert does not specifically address the above-mentioned “receiver pose” and therefore does not weigh in with an interpretation of any likely hierarchical meaning in it, such as I have

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ventured some two paragraphs ago relevant to its contrast with the “greeter pose.” Pertaining to this memorialization of submissiveness, however, he argues that with the help of this ritualized reflexive gesture, allegiance now meant “participation in what had become a sacralized reality, and moral scrutiny of one’s own actions became superfluous.” Ultimately, therefore, “the Hitler salute was tantamount to disassembling one’s own distinct identity.” Allert sums up the inherent danger of such a ritualized “greeting”:

These two phenomena—erosion of sense of self and moral disregard— together formed a vicious circle that impeded Germans’ interactions with one another and encouraged them to prefer a ritual to actual human contact. The story of the Hitler greeting is a tale of how Germans tried to evade the responsibility of normal social intercourse, rejected the gift of contact with others, allowed social mores to decay, and refused to acknowledge the inherent openness and ambivalence of human relationships and social exchange.

...We are still living with the history of the fatal gesture that was the Hitler salute, and one of the lessons of that history was that we need to be wary of obligatory rituals, especially when they are imposed from above.

It is ironic that much as we humans pride ourselves in our ability to transcend the “primitive” behaviors of our evolutionary cousins through our cultivated exercise of reason, the spirit of subordination remains a perversely cherished staple of *our* repertoire as well—and this, I believe, thanks largely to religion. For, most religious systems across the globe have cultivated into an art the language of fearful

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submission and supplication as part of daily worship ritual. (Islam goes at least one step further by virtue of its very name, which means no less than *submission* or *surrender* [to the will of God].)

Ritualized Protestations of Unworthiness Before a Parent Figure

In the numerous cultures and tongues in which superstitious submission, surrender, and self-abnegation are practiced, the formula is as simple as it is irresistible: the supplicant assumes the body language and verbal formulae developed by their particular tradition to be expressive of the “individual’s” unworthiness before an imagined figure of authority. This helps emphasize the greatness of the object of power being worshipped, thereby heightening (by contrast) the imagined power of the worshipped. For example, the practice of kneeling in the various traditions of Christianity—whether as a posture for proper prayer, for receiving the host, as an after-communion ritual, or during mass—along with the gesture of joining hands, palms touching, before one’s breast in an attitude of prayer; these ritualized gestures help sustain an attitude associated with the submissiveness necessary to approach a higher authority without the risk of offense. And that offense is imagined to be the supplicant’s disrespect of the inequality in status between him or her and their imagined (and then feared) authority.

I say “imagined” here for obvious reasons of course, as the supplicant enters this game as one would into *any* delusional conspiracy of belief, be it the love of their god, the existence of good and evil as forces of nature (as opposed to mere constructs of human

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brains), or the statistical likelihood of walking out of a casino with more money than one brought into it. He or she enters only after having checked one's critical faculties at the door in exchange for a conformance ticket redeemable everywhere *within the premises*. While inside, no proof of *anything* is required; the neurochemical satisfactions of ingroup conformance prove sufficient, excepting perhaps those recalcitrant cases for which the persuasive threat of punishment looms large.

It cannot be merely coincidental that this instruction manual for "black box" authority maps so closely onto the conditions naturally forming around the developing mind of a young child—a creature whose very survival in a dauntingly confusing and dangerous world is predicated on a form of this presumed and unconditional authority from its parent(s) or other caregiver(s). For, as stated above, due to the obvious danger of any *truly* democratic independence for a youngster of a tender age, even the most loving, supportive, non-abusive parent or other caregiver imposes, even if only implicitly, a sense of "black box" authority by the simple virtue of the child's inability to understand exactly why sufferance of that authority is actually necessary to its day-to-day protection from serious injury or death.

Parental Authority for Worship by Adults

But then we grow up...or at least *some* of us do, and to varying degrees. And as we thus mature and learn about the world around us, we also discover the edges of this provisional type of authority

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assumed by our parents and how *their* feet too are made of mere clay—clay that nonetheless supported the weight of authority that kept the two-year-old alive and out of traffic. Yes, we come to see that behind its impressive façade, authority is revealed to be contextual, malleable, ambiguous, or even arbitrary seeming, when not *truly* arbitrary. The fact that this authority was presented as *necessarily* right and, better yet, the *only* necessary right, has merely to do with the requisite simplicity of a child's menu at life's oh-so-complicated banquet.

How different then is this young child's role in an adult household from his or her later role, as an adult, in a religious community? Doesn't the latter take on something of the role of the former by ritualizing this power and judgmental consequences of authority? I believe the answers to these two questions are obvious: *not much* and *yes*, respectively. This is to say that religious practice seduces us as adults to stay in, or at least revisit, the comforting non-responsible world of our early formative years, where things happen because of rules and actions that need not be understandable to us because they emanate from above our sphere of intentionality. But typically, this delusion of innocent impotence the adherent buys into does not protect him or her from judgmental blame and abasement.

So, when I see a practicing Christian, Jew, or Muslim, for example, pray to the mercy and forgiveness of a stern, albeit *obviously* unprovable, father figure, I am filled with sadness that a fellow human being can be so easily indoctrinated into open-armed

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acceptance of impotence—yes, the willing though unnecessary renunciation of ultimate self-responsibility in their adult life. Sadder yet is the fact that this same father figure to whom the adherent has gladly, wholly, and proudly surrendered this most necessary sense of responsibility happens in most cases to be little more than a petty, petulant, impatient, jealous, narcissistic, vengeful, tyrannical, bigoted, misogynistic, patriarchal son-of-a-bitch with absolutely no social skills and a truly breathtaking incompetence. Why would *anyone* abandon their dignity to *even a real parent* who behaves like the god portrayed in any of the big three monotheistic religions, let alone to one that's no more at bottom than an inadvertent hiccup in our cognitive apparatus, a mere byproduct of the mental acrobatics we compulsively perform around our fear of the finality of death?

But while this is to me heart-wrenchingly sad, what makes it downright contemptible is the religious tradition that conspires to pervert such mindless acquiescence into nothing short of a sign of *virtue*. Yes, the victim of this brainwashing technique is rewarded for each coerced protestation of unworthiness by the lie that this state of degradation is evidence of the victim's—well, *worthiness*. Yes, I'll repeat this undiluted inanity in hopes of being able to unpack it: by attesting to one's unworthiness—be this due to sinfulness, pride, lust, avarice, etc., or all the above—one comes closer to actually attaining *virtue*. In other words, by saying "I am a sinner," I become *less sinful* than some good citizen who doesn't even believe in the ludicrous notion of sin.

XIV: Ethical Consequences, Part 11— *continued*Which Brings Us to “Sin”

For, this whole concept of “sin” rests upon a core belief that is inherently incompatible with the basic laws of nature—namely, that any creature of The Process of Evolution by Natural Selection can somehow be guilty of transgressing against such a thing as the “divine law” of a “supreme intelligence.” After all, intelligence itself is a property of *nervous systems*, and in particular a property found developing *quite late* in the evolution of nervous systems. What had been little more than a few on-or-off reflex responses to environmental conditions, like we still find in use in the simplest life forms, would in the course of millions upon millions of years develop into actual networks of nerve tissue, eventually integrated into vast swaths of these more primitive robotic mechanisms until the evolution of cortices allowed for the conduction and integration of the increasingly intricate and complex texture of these countless reciprocal interactions, all gradually giving way, through millions more years of tweaking, to such advanced abilities as self-consciousness, future planning, retrospective reverie, and creativity itself (including none less than the creation of gods).

So, the more complex and far-reaching an intelligence appears to be depends *directly* on the degree to which the nervous system that creates it has evolved over the last half a billion years of its biological development out of the veritable on-or-off switches of primitive organisms. “High” intelligence—say of the sort so many humans are said to enjoy—therefore, can only arrive *much* later in such a game

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rather than earlier, *but at any rate, certainly not prior to it!* And a “supreme intelligence,” such as we find attributed to a deity entity capable of creating the universe from nothing, would *necessarily* be one operating *that much further* upon this same trajectory of the genesis of nervous systems. Therefore, it is blatantly self-contradictory to say that any creation of this bottom-up accrual of events, such as a “supreme intelligence” would by definition need to be, should *precede* even the most rudimentary hints of nervous systems of a half-billion years earlier in the life of our earth and then, to make matters even more ridiculous, exercise exclusively top-down causality on its own source, thereby intelligently designing...itself.

“Divine Law” v. The Laws of Nature

Yes, even those who try to have it both ways by simplistically asserting that “divine law” *is* the law of nature (as created and maintained by God) are simply playing a philosophical shell game. This is easily revealed by contemplating the following: *were*, indeed, the *non-judgmental, non-teleological, part-random, mutation-driven* mechanisms of Natural Selection *just another way of describing* “divine law,” then this same “divine law” would necessarily have every one of the attributes of the process of Natural Selection and *not* the judgmental, teleological, punitive parent features most appreciated

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by believers. One does not need a degree in philosophy to see this “divine law” argument as a pathetic attempt at paying mere lip service to science while eating one’s theological cake in comfort. It is an argument that easily qualifies as that most unpardonable of “sins” of logic in philosophy: an *absurdity*—that which can be defined as a proposition of truth conjured into being via inconsistent reasoning.

This is an attempted shortcut to “truth” that is simply unworthy of our attention excepting, perhaps, in stand-up comedy. (Exempt from this critique, however, is the specific notion of “divine law” posited by Spinoza, for whose system the contradiction I have just outlined does not really apply, despite superficial appearances. This is because Spinoza’s radical and heretical concept of God is one that is *truly* synonymous with that of Nature, and so any “divine law” gleaned from his system can be no more than *a description of how nature works*. And this, of course, presents no contradiction to the mechanism of Evolution by Natural Selection, which, after all, merely describes how the biological reach of nature works.)

The Great Chain of Being and its Modern Version: Hypo/Hyperdescent

The pride with which today’s superstitious practitioner of worship boasts their somehow-virtuous fear of this imagined parent figure I see as somewhat analogous to the comfort taken by most citizens of medieval Europe who could acquiesce to their particular rung of hardship on the social ladder via the concept of something called “Great Chain of Being.” This was an idealistically tidy

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hierarchy of the status of just about everything in the universe, from God down to dung, all following a kind of ladder model, its rungs dedicated to just about every possible role of subordination conceivable by the medieval mind. In this great encyclopedia of the descent of inferiority we can learn which animals rank higher than the next, from lions down to sheep, as well as which people, from nobility down through clergy into peasantry, until even the lowliest beggar had been explained. Even angelic beings—those creatures that get by, somehow, without their brains—may be found carefully ranked in descent from their chief executive officer down through the constabulary branch to the oh-so-nearly human.

This “Great Chain of Being” is the ultimate caste system, one that leaves no entity out, from primordial soup to nuts. And it looks ahead to more systematized attempts at codifying inequality, such as articulated by the rules of hypo/hyperdescent. Examples practiced in the U.S. include the state of Louisiana’s antebellum art of skin-tone stratification in which children were officially classified on the basis of the color blend of their family tree, and this to an unprecedented degree of precision. Beginning at the top, of course, with “white” (where no less august than God would be were this still just the “Great Chain of Being”) we find all those considered to be completely free of African “contamination” of European blood.

Of course, this scientifically nonsensical distinction was conjured up as a convenient retrofitting of pseudoscience in support of racist idealism, and it remains breathtakingly free of any the truths of what

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genetics reveals to us concerning the whole baseless notion of “race.” But anyway, the best thinking by racists at the time concluded that anyone in possession of a “traceable amount of African blood” of less than a one-thirty-second portion qualified as “white.” And it is from this lofty height of blood “purity” that we descend down through the more and more perceptible traces of the above-mentioned encroachment of African “contamination” of European blood, such as conceived of in the “hexadecaroon” (one-sixteenth black), the “octaroon” (one-eighth black) and the “quadroon” (one-quarter black) down through the “free mulatto” (designating any non-slave born of a black and white parent) and still on down to that almost unthinkable *yet oh-so-necessary* job description of “negro.” This last was the designation for someone of African descent who unfortunately lacked *any at all* European ancestry, leaving them necessarily lower than a mere “person of color” and hence completely unredeemable by society—except, of course, as a chattel to be used for money-saving forced labor.

God-Fearing as a Good Thing?

Now, all of this attention to finding one’s appropriate rung on the inequality ladder, from wanton privilege down to the lowliest slave or serf, addresses the astonishing amount of nuance found in the human pursuit of subdividing subordination, whether from God down to pig iron or from white aristocrat down through the various shades of “black” of which human pigmentation is capable. As we have discussed above, the instinct for subordination may found in

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vast numbers of life forms on our earth but has been raised to a level of sophistication in humans that is simply awe-inspiring. And being so key to the human psyche, let us take a closer look at the psychological ramifications of this obsession.

When, say, an evangelical protestant (or *any* pious believer, really) brags about being a “god-fearing” citizen, he or she certainly does *not* intend this to be read as a confession of naiveté or cowardliness but rather of evidence of this person’s highly *moral* character as the obedient “child” of an all-powerful parental authority. This is a pathetic reminder that an otherwise mature and educated adult can actually believe that good behavior is attainable and sustainable only through the fear of punishment, or hunger for reward, by an angry, judgmental parent figure from whom is voraciously hungered acceptance, validation, and even tangible reward.

Respect in Place of Worship

Of course, *without* that insatiable invisible parent figure we can maintain good behavior more consistently and honestly by simply harnessing the innate altruistic tendencies evolutionarily wired into our brains, tempered with the rational understanding of the emotional economics of a society that cannot operate harmoniously when more than one of its citizens enjoy unbridled freedom.

Therefore, while it is reasonable that we *respect* the laws we create to keep our society operating as smoothly as possible, it would prove *counterproductive* to go that step further and actually *worship*

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those same laws. For, where respect, appreciation, admiration, and critical-inspired emulation are natural and useful components of the level playing field aspired to in any secular democratic society, "worship," on the contrary, is a fear-inspired reflexive behavior that thrives best in a dynamic of exaggerated competitive contrast between power and powerlessness, high and low, right and wrong, pure and corrupt, light and dark... good and bad. Worship necessarily exalts one party onto the metaphoric pedestal of the ideal unobtainable by the unworthy congregants gathering fearfully around its base. When properly practiced, Worship's congregants cannot see *each other* beyond the peripheral blur obtained when one is looking up beyond this world to that more ideal one where, *sentimentally*, a symbol has more value than the real. This is why pedestals were created in the first place: to raise the object of apprehension to an elevation appropriate to (or at least necessary to) the reinforcement of a simplistic hierarchy in which bigger, higher, less obtainable is better than smaller, lower, and reachable.

Iconoclasm Unnecessary Were it Not for Hero Worship

And perhaps this explains the common practice of iconoclasm at times of transitions of social power. For, one of the first steps of a political revolution or coup is the ritualistic toppling of monuments of leaders from their pedestals—monuments that had been used to identify and reinforce the rightness of the particular ingroup wielding the authority. But we need not forage through historical film archives in search of these ceremonies of toppled symbols of

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authority; decade after decade, they remain all around us. Yes, these are the same types of pedestals from which so many public monument statues have toppled across our country even as recently as June of 2020.

Following the sadistic racist murder of George Floyd by white policemen in Minneapolis, crowds of protesters not only in that city but in cities around the world, became sensitized to the need to desacralize famous personages associated with the subjugation of underclasses. What began as protest against the accepted tradition of white authority subjecting those of a different skin color to the socio-economic class of the underprivileged quickly grew via obvious association to extend to a protest against *any* ingroup subjecting their chosen outgroup, such as in the case of the representative of a colonialist power that once did, or still continues to, subjugate the members of its colonized culture. Thus, statues not only of slave-owning American Confederates, but also of British, Belgian, and other former imperialist/colonialist authorities, became associated with the ingroup that now needed to be out.

Real History Versus Mere Monuments

Yet when these protesters of our nation's ongoing pandemic of black subjugation were moved by their anger and frustration to bring down monumental sculptural relics of Confederate leaders, huge numbers of conservative southern whites objected to having their "history" and "legacy" disrespected. In other words, though the moral ramifications of Confederate society have, by and large,

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become repugnant to our nation's sense of self, the culture that created, nourished, and sustained Confederate society came to be respected as if separable from this morality. This is comparable to rewarding the nostalgic impulses of a post-war German found confessing to the fond memories of some "good old days" of Nazi-era society. While it may be reasonable from a purely psychological perspective that the formative years spent in a corrupt social system can still summon up warm associations of family, friends, and affiliations that have become inextricably connected with one's identity, any attempt to justify or rationalize the *moral values* inherent in these feel-good moments is accomplished only with the help of blurring the border between one's personal and societal commitments.

Among other things worthy of consideration in regard to this is how much this sense of scandalization speaks about the role of public monuments in a nation's psyche. For one thing, the vast majority of these monuments depicting slave-owning Confederates were produced generations after the Civil War, not as attempts to record "history" but rather as monuments of white supremacist nostalgia for a "golden age" of genteel whites flourishing on the backs of black lives that didn't matter. Yes, these larger-than-life mementoes were mostly intended symbolically as religious glorifications of a lost lifestyle rather than appreciations of specific individuals who were beloved by their community for their moral virtues.

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Monuments as Advertising the Good Old Days of Racist Subordination

I emphasize “religious” here for good reason, as the installation ceremonies of these monuments were richly studded with references to that God who, not surprisingly, looked kindly on their racist endeavor, thereby reinforcing what was to white supremacist minds the authority that condoned the practice and entitlements of white supremacy. For, let us not forget that this was the era of Jim Crow, when it became necessary in the minds of most segregationists to emphasize in the minds of those blacks whom they were subjugating the concept of white domination that had been legal during the halcyon days of their grandparents.

It may be true that the real meaning of these monuments to proud southerners is not specifically their identification with bigotry and injustice but rather the valor and sacrifice of fellow citizens who gave their life to protect their beliefs and practices. If that is so, so much the more reprehensible. The mere fact that I’m willing to die for a cause bears little that should be deserving of respect and admiration *unless the cause itself is worthy of sacrifice*. And anyone who thinks that the cause of white supremacy is such an example is, I’m afraid, a white supremacist. Period. No, let’s not hide behind big words like valor and determination, as these attitudes can as easily be marshalled toward cruel exploitation as toward world peace and justice.

XIV: Ethical Consequences, Part 11— *continued*History?

Now, a common complaint among objectors to the removal of these monuments is that in doing so we are destroying our nation's history which, for better or worse, is not something that can just be rewritten to suit modern taste—at least not without indulging in the dark art of censorship. And until we take a closer, more sober, look at this argument, I confess it can *sound* quite persuasive, particularly to those sensitized to the consequences via real-life examples of brain-numbing state censorship from the cold war era. (For example, witness how, in 1953, subscribers to the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* received re-edited pages of the fifth volume of the second edition—pages that were to be dutifully pasted into their own copies, along with precise scissors-and-paste instructions for doing so, all for “decontamination” purposes. These offending passages in need of pasting over included *former truths* about their late Minister of Internal Affairs—i.e., secret police chief—Lavrentiy Beria, whose biographical details had become inconveniently obsolete after his arrest and execution.)

Now, I sincerely believe we *should* be vigilant against any temptation toward state censorship and should *stalwartly* resist the rewriting of history as a convenient means of burying the dead. But this principal is *irrelevant* pertaining to the Confederate memorial argument and is used merely as a red herring by most objectors. Indeed, the removal of the public monuments in question does *not* represent the act of destroying and rewriting history—not by a long

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shot. For, despite any such removal there remains a *rich* repository of the history of what actually happened in the lives of our citizens in these regions—this to be found in the usual repositories of libraries, historical societies, and online databases, all bursting with books, articles, peer-review scholarly papers, and podcasts, documentaries, and films, and all of which available to anyone able and willing to read, listen, or view.

The point is that public monuments have rarely ever been a reliable source of actual history. They tend rather to be the billboards on which history revisionists can advertise comfortably memorable take-aways from historical events and shape the way future generations (who age further and further from the real-life experience of the facts) will remember such events. And in the subject case, these larger-than-life advertisements celebrated the comfortable feel of brave righteousness that is the self-satisfied luxury of any oppressor class.

Stephen Marche, in an insightful op-ed for the *Los Angeles Times* (“Confederates, Columbus and everyone else: Let’s just tear down all the public memorials to ‘great’ men,” October 6, 2017) argued for tearing down ALL public memorials to “great men,” as they have “outlived their purpose.” He goes on to argue:

Statues to the Confederacy were consciously created to impose white supremacy as a dominant ideology. But the intention behind statues is often more muddying than clarifying of their function. Statues to Columbus were often raised to celebrate the contributions of Catholic

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and Italian Americans. The Ku Klux Klan explicitly resisted monuments to Columbus, seeing them as “part of a conspiracy to establish Roman Catholicism,” as one Klan lecturer put it.

Statues never represent the people on the monuments: They represent the interest of those who build them. [emphasis added]

It is interesting to note too, by the way, that President Donald Trump, who has never failed to provide us just the right jingo for any bigot to remember and repeat on any particular occasion, found it appropriate to placate his racist constituency by claiming these Confederate monuments to be worth preserving because of being “part of our heritage.” Remember please that this heritage he pretends to covet was not at all “ours” but *theirs*, meaning those disloyal traitors to our country who were willing to shed their blood and ours in order to protect the comforts of their slave-based economy, itself possible only on the basis of a pervasive immorality. Again, this would be little different than Germany deciding it best to keep all and any memorials to the Third Reich in place, despite the message this sends to its citizens and the world’s because it was, alas, their heritage. Some heritages are simply not worth preserving.

Beauty is in the Eye of the Oppressor

Then there is the occasional pathetic excuse of the “artistic loss” to be suffered from their removal. Even a breathlessly perfect philistine like Donald Trump, who wouldn’t know a Vermeer from plain veneer, objected that removing Confederate memorial sculptures meant removing “beauty,” a beauty that would, in his

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own inimitable syntax, “never able to be comparably replaced.” Let’s take a closer look then at this “beauty” lamented by our self-proclaimed aesthete.

The majority of Confederate memorials were made by the Monumental Bronze Company of Bridgeport, Connecticut, a business specializing in the mass-production of largescale copies of sculptures in what the firm called “white bronze,” a euphemism for zinc. (Unlike a high-temperature copper alloy such as bronze, which allows for sensitive articulation of complex and subtle design patterns, zinc and other softer, low-temperature, metals and alloys sacrifice this clarity potential for easier, quicker, and cheaper manufacture.) The artist and artistry behind the original sculpture reproduced by this veritable Walmart of monuments mattered as little to these crafty marketers as to the nostalgia-ridden white supremacist women who commissioned them. In fact, many of these cheaply cast oversized keepsakes were really just identical copies of sculptures by northern sculptors commissioned for Union memorials. (For example, the ubiquitous “Silent Sentinel,” the hundreds of examples of which distinguished from their northern counterparts by little more than the replacement of the initials U.S. with C.S. on the soldier’s belt buckle.)

Granted, occasionally a memorial made in this manner would be cast and assembled following as its model an original of a truly talented sculptor, but the mass-produced faux-bronze zinc souvenir that left the factory represented as much artistic integrity as might

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any photomechanical halftone print of an old master painting. So, when Trump decries the loss of beauty with the destruction of these memorials, he almost certainly has to have in mind a form of “beauty” less beholden to aesthetics than to concepts—like, for example, the good old concept of white supremacy.

And Now for Really Monumental Kitsch: A “Magnificent, Incredible, Majestic Mountain”...Ruined

With the desecration of monuments in mind, it should not at all have been surprising to learn of Donald Trump’s choice of location for his shamelessly divisive Nuremberg-style reelection rally posing as the country’s July 4th birthday celebration of 2020. It was, of course, that monument of monuments to American monumentalism: Mt. Rushmore National Memorial in Keystone, South Dakota. Yes, after watching monuments that *can* be toppled come tumbling down all around him, wouldn’t any impotent desperado intent on looking tough to “anarchist” monument topplers arrange his next photo op in front of the *one* monument that truly qualifies as, well, *topple proof*? Why settle for anything less, well, *untoppleable* than a granite mountain? Better yet, a mountain hewn with 60-foot high icon reliefs of American expansionist presidents dynamited out of the austere natural beauty of a particularly prized and ancient specimen of our nation’s geology? O.K., you leftist anarchists. Here’s a goddamned mountain. I dare you!

And not only that. Mount Rushmore, aside from its distinguished place in world art as a grotesque monument to American

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gargantuan kitsch, also has the dubious distinction of having achieved nothing short of a *monumental* irony: namely, that its *raison d'être* as a memorial to American democracy and freedom from oppression speaks largely to white nationalists and those others willing to ignore the injustice toward the indigenous people from whom this site was brazenly and mendaciously swindled.

Yes, to the Lakota Sioux, who were granted this territory *in perpetuity* by the Federal Government (as part of the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie), only to have it abruptly taken back, *without legal remedy*, some eight years later when the government found more profitable use for this land than some increasingly inconvenient appeasement gesture, this monument looks *a lot* less like a monument to American democracy and freedom than to the ruthless racist subordination of an American underclass.

You see, George Armstrong Custer had arrived here in the 1870s in order to map the Black Hills for the Federal Government, but as soon as gold was discovered there, the place was dynamited open for the inevitable rape-and-pillage invasion of the get-rich-quick gold rush horde, thereby leaving the valuable Fort Laramie Treaty but a worthless piece of paper in the hands of the land's true *and* legal owners. And this irony grows deeper yet, as it extends to the fact that this land that had been considered sacred to the indigenous people on it for countless centuries (on the basis of its ancestral and mythical associations) would within a couple of generations be monumentally defaced with the seventy-five-times-life-size

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likenesses of white expansionist leaders representative of the very government that stole it from them.

The idea for defacing this sacred granite mountain traces back *not* to an idea of promoting the concept of America as the land of democracy so much as an expedient gimmick to bring in desperately needed tourist industry dollars to a forgotten backwater state. Doane Robinson, the South Dakota historian credited with conjuring up with this publicity stunt, had commented that “tourists soon get fed up on scenery unless it has something of special interest connected with it to make it impressive” and had actually coveted for this project not presidents but oversized representations of the nation’s sacred mythology of the American West, including, for example, such selfless philanthropist patriots as “Buffalo Bill” Cody.

However, the sculptor chosen for this Brobdingnagian marvel, a publicity-hungry salesman-cum-showman named John Gutzon de la Mothe Borglum, had something somewhat more in the way of teary-eyed attention-catching in mind. Yes, fresh from an aborted sculpture commission for the massive bas-relief memorial to Confederate leaders on Stone Mountain Georgia (one originally sponsored by the above-mentioned United Daughters of the Confederacy in unofficial coordination with the Ku Klux Klan and other philanthropic groups), Borglum opted rather for the representation of U.S. presidents, this due to their understandably stronger recognition value and valuable patriotic appeal.

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In particular, Borglum thought that a couple of schoolhouse staples like Washington and Lincoln, complemented with a couple of great American expansionists, such as Louisiana Purchase purchaser Thomas Jefferson and rough-riding Spanish-American Warrior Teddy Roosevelt, would wring just the right amount of sentimental lacrimal-duct seepage from the American tourist industry. (By God, American-style patriotism is a hard act to follow!)

Federal funding for this patriotic mission after tourist dollars began not until 1927 and would not be abandoned until 1941, when the mere suggestions of costume covering the original waist-length images was deemed perfectly satisfactory, if not preferable, given the circumstances of loss of interest and financing. Unlike contemporary critics of the project, who had the traitorous temerity to respond to aesthetic considerations and consider the mountain's defacement tantamount to "keeping a cow in the rotunda of the Capital building," true patriots, untroubled by artistic sensibilities, continued to proudly defend this ruination of good granite, hiding behind the sentimental comfort of nationalist, xenophobic mantras.

Today, Mount Rushmore proudly joins the ranks of such famous American theme-parks as The Mall of America, Magic Kingdom, and other notable examples of America's traditional fetish with the grotesquely oversized, the dumbed down, and the profitably exaggerated. And it is hardly coincidental that it was nowhere else but here that Donald Trump—supreme sentimentalist, petty tyrant, would-be dictator, and consummate philistine—came on July 4th,

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2020, to bash the principles of democracy with his polarizing rant against the thinking people of his country. It fits like a fucking glove. As does the fact that this same colossus of self-admiration, in one of his countless twitter-platform self-promotions, communicated the self-obvious truth that his own self-sacrosanct image deserves to be added to the Rushmore lineup of greats. (The presidential tweet reads: “Never suggested it although, based on all of the many things accomplished during the first 3 ½ years, perhaps more than any other Presidency, sounds like a good idea to me.”) But although it would be hard to “ruin” the Mount Rushmore monument *aesthetically speaking*, the *logistical* challenge to such an undertaking would be in how to handle the inevitable stipulation that Trump’s smarmy likeness loom larger than those of his predecessors.

Public Monuments and Hero Worship

And it is this precise psychic dynamic at work in the veneration of historical personages, especially through the erection of public monuments, that may be seen, to derive from the religious reflex—a response in which the object of veneration is never seen as a complex organic whole composed of seemingly contradictory desires and ideas, as we might recognize an individual to be. Rather, it is always the simple, undiluted ideal of an unrealistic goodness that is easier to perceive as such from the upward-looking distance imposed by the pedestal of hero worship. Public monuments to national leaders tend toward the hagiographer’s art, sanitizing our memory of real people, for better or worse, into the unblemished stuff of saints.

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But one doesn't need to look far from the pulpit to see the bequest of religious obeisance in the practice of the primitive ritual of hero worship. For, the worship of, as opposed to *respect for*, significant players in the game of history is a psychological/sociological phenomenon that has flourished throughout the world for millennia, whether associated with actual personages or imaginary supernatural ones.

Relevant to the former category (historical figures), in the hands of such philosophical advocates as Thomas Carlyle and Friedrich Nietzsche, the concept became articulated beyond the mere description of a natural human response into something much closer to a *prescriptive* imperative. Carlyle's 1840 essay "On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History," would quickly inspire a generalized "Great Man" theory of history (in which the history of the world was seen to be little more than the collective biography of "Great Men").

Of course, the "Great Man" theory is an absurdly unrealistic and sophomoric worldview. It's lack of women, for one, as well as of behind-the-scenes motivators and collaborators of *both* sexes, easily reveals how foreign its romantic idealism is to the actual nuts-and-bolts workings of history, which unfolds in unpredictable cascades of reciprocal interaction, though all the while appearing to untrained eyes as monolithic, inevitable historic moments. Yet, realistic or not, this delusional, simplistic theory nevertheless prepared the ground for the *Übermensch* (variously translated into English as "overman,"

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“beyond-man,” “superior human,” and, alas, “superman”), a concept Nietzsche introduced a couple generations later in his 1883 book *Also sprach Zarathustra*. In Nietzsche’s concept, certain individuals (men, *of course*), through their superior intelligence and character, etc., may aspire to develop new values with which to transcend the common herd of conformist robots and become one with the “eternal recurrence.” Although philosophically much more sophisticated and nuanced than this concept might appear in a short paraphrase, it is easy to see how Nietzsche’s concept would become so seductive to Nazi ideologists, who would pervert it for their own pernicious use toward framing the characteristics of their own ingroup and outgroup of good guys and bad guys.

The Use of Pedestals in Reinforcing Worship and Subordination

But the one element that remains indispensable to this whole “Great Man” tradition is the *fixture* of transcendence, most typically the physical fixture of *the pedestal*. Throughout human history, symbolic representations of real and imagined personages were held aloft, quite literally, for their proper veneration. When placed on a raised support, such as a pillar, column, base, platform, or dais, the symbol becomes not only better visible by its *literal* transcendence above any competing optical information (i.e., framed against the sky as opposed to a miasma of terrestrial objects and hence retaining a more robust figure-ground distinction) but also by its *figurative* transcendence as something higher than the observer (worshipper).

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The psychological significance of this type of transcendence lent to public monuments by the use of physical pedestals correlates neatly with what happens when placing real people on metaphorical pedestals. When we speak proverbially of “putting someone on a pedestal,” we mean really that we worship them rather than respect them. The “Madonna-whore complex,” first identified by Freud (as “psychic impotence”) but gradually embraced in various ways and to differing degrees outside of the psychoanalytic literature, offers a recognizable example of this mapping. Men with this psychological complex are said to see women in a stultifying dichotomy of Madonna v. prostitute—thereby leaving the complex sufferer in a seemingly unsolvable dilemma of desiring a sexual partner whom he as degraded to the status of whore the while remaining unable to desire the respected partner identified as “the Madonna.”

Now, whether or not one accepts Freud’s characteristically elaborate, mythologized explanation, the dynamics seen operating behind the props are easy enough to see—namely, the difficulty in obtaining a mutually satisfying intimate relationship with a partner held aloft, metaphorically, on a pedestal. In simpler terms this means *truly respecting what we worship*.

While worship is a form of respect unsuitable for a target of status lower than a deity, respect is an acknowledgement, in communication *and* action, of the target’s capability and worth. When one worships a god, the worshipper has, by definition, no hope (or even desire!) of achieving the level playing field of intimacy

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and trust in a truly democratic nature, such as can be found in an all-human loving relationship (of any basis, sexual or otherwise). After all, subservience to something higher, better, more important and powerful, *is the point* in worship. This foundation of inequality cannot produce good results toward loving relationships, though it works exquisitely well in the creation of those between masters and slaves.

Bronze Horsemen

World literature may be seen brimming with examples of the psychological and sociological effect of implementing pedestals in our relationships with one another. A particularly brilliant and deftly insightful one is Alexander Pushkin's magnificent narrative poem, *Medny Vsadnik: Peterburgskaya Povest* ("The Bronze Horseman: A Petersburg Tale," 1833), considered by many experts to be the greatest poem of Russia's greatest poet (and even, by some, to be the best poem written *anywhere* in the 19th-century). Our poet has his protagonist, a pitiable poor young clerk named Evgenii, who contemplates spending the rest of his life with his love, Parasha, only to find himself stranded atop a marble lion in Peter's Square surrounded by water after a great flood of the River Neva, all alone were it not for the menacing monumental bronze statue of the horseback Tsar Peter the Great dominating the attention of that square. After discovering that he has lost his beloved to this disaster, Evgenii goes mad and curses the only authority he can see—the imposing horseback St. Peter that feigns in his gesture to protect the

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inhabitants of this city just destroyed. And in response to this disrespect of ultimate authority, the statue comes to life and relentlessly pursues our poor protagonist, hunting him down to his death.

The statue itself, now known as “The Bronze Horseman” (in honor of Pushkin’s poem) and completed by the celebrated French sculptor Étienne Maurice Falconet in 1782, as commissioned by Peter’s granddaughter-in-law Catherine the Great, is celebrated for its ambiguity: the Tsar’s outstretched arm reaching westward toward the Neva seems both to be a gesture of protection *and* of threat. This ambiguity of gesture dovetails neatly with a key theme in the poem: that inescapable and complicated conflict between the state and the individual, an unequal playing field wherein is left little room for a disinherited individual.

It may not be coincidental that monuments celebrating the authority of statehood tend, according to an old tradition, to depict a militant-looking man astride a brave steed and raised high on a tall base or pedestal to enhance the menacing impact of untouchable authority and reinforce a response in the viewer that is not merely respectful but worshipful. The bronze horseman of Pushkin’s poem fits this bill exquisitely and makes for the perfect icon of domination of the individual by the state.

Although shelves of books and articles have been written exploring Pushkin’s sensitively complex treatment of this theme, suffice it to say that the effect of such monuments on the citizen’s

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psyche is not accidental but intended; indeed, it is intended specifically to reinforce a feeling of the viewer's inferiority, if not downright subjugation, to the authority being depicted.

Monumental Records of Sentimentality

Now, turning back to our main theme—the common correlation of the act of worship and the mindset of sentimentality—let us turn to the style of inscriptions that are commonly found on these Confederate monuments we speak of. For example, on the Pine Bluff Confederate Monument (aka David Owen Dodd Statue) in front of the Jefferson County Courthouse in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, erected by the United Daughters of the Confederacy in 1898, we find the following inscriptions:

1861-1865 / CONSECRATED TO THE MEMORY OF THE
CONFEDERATE SOLDIERS AND SEAMEN // FAME'S TEMPLE
BOASTS NO HIGHER NAME, / NO KING IS GRANDER ON HIS
THRONE; / NO GLORY SHINES WITH BRIGHTER GLEAM, / THE
NAME OF 'PATRIOT' STANDS ALONE. // WHEN THIS HISTORIC
SHAFT SHALL CRUMBLING LIE / IN AGES HENCE, IN WOMAN'S
HEART WILL BE, / A FOLDED FLAG, A THRILLING PAGE
UNROLLED, / A DEATHLESS SONG OF SOUTHERN CHIVALRY. //
THESE SEAMEN OF CONFEDERATE FAME / STARTED THE
WONDERING WORLD; / FOR BRAVER FIGHT WAS NEVER
FOUGHT, / AND FAIRER FLAG WAS NEVER FURLED. // THE
KNIGHTLIEST OF THE KNIGHTLY RACE / WHO SINCE THE DAYS
OF OLD, / HAVE KEPT THE LAMP OF CHIVALRY / ALIGHT IN

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HEARTS OF GOLD. // THIS CORNER STONE WAS LAID BY /
JEFFERSON DAVIS. / PRESIDENT OF C.S.A. / APRIL 29, 1886.

Wow! For connoisseurs of sentimentality, this may just well be the motherlode. It's hard to know what to admire first, the tinsel cheapness of its purple prose or the cloying redolence of medieval romance wafting throughout with its flagrant anachronisms of "southern chivalry" and "knightliest of the knightly race." The art of "golden-age" nostalgia, a staple of the sentimentalist's repertoire, is performed here on a 24-karat harp with the stunning completion of that golden line: "...who since the days of old have kept the lamp of chivalry alight in hearts of gold." One can easily imagine the tear that welled in the eyes of the good old racist society ladies of the UDC who paid for this memorial to the good old days of their daddy's and granddaddy's age of chivalry, when both ships and men were made of the forced labor of owned and abused human beings of dark skin color.

Sir Walter Scott, "Chivalry," and the Medieval Romance of Reconstructionist Racists

Yes, in these inspired words one finds the cheap appeal of proverbial good old days to anesthetize the reader from discovering a paucity of actual message. What exactly are the great deeds being memorialized here? Chivalry? And what in the hell does chivalry, a long-extinct social code of medieval Europe, have to do with mid-19th-century new-world owners and exploiters of human chattels? Well-dressed wealthy white men opening doors for well-dressed wealthy white women and ordering their black servants to serve

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them like the queens they want their daughters to be? This coating of empty gestures with a plating of nostalgic posturing is the essence of sentimentality.

Of course, I am not the first to remark about this curious fascination that medieval social customs had for American Southern aristocracy. Numerous scholars have written about the curious cult in the South for the novels of the early 19th-century Scottish historical novelist and poet Sir Walter Scott, whose works were redolent of a romanticized nostalgia for the medieval. In the minds of 19th-century Southerners, Scott's romantic interpretations of feudal life offered a parallel with the ideal life of manners and aristocracy the South so craved as a way of feeling comfortable with their much-criticized caste system. They named their steamboats after characters from *Ivanhoe* and adopted numerous other fixtures from Scott's writings to help them keep alive the mythic life they desired to have. Indeed, one of the most popular anthems of the Confederacy was "Chivalrous U.S.A."

Mark Twain went so far as to coin the term the "Sir Walter Scott disease" referring to the effect that the author's embarrassingly romanticized visions had on the American South, such as observed in *Life on the Mississippi* (p. 376 of the 1893 edition):

It was Sir Walter Scott that made every gentleman in the South a major or colonel, or a general or a judge before the war; and it was also he that made these gentlemen value these bogus decorations. For it was he that created rank and caste and pride and pleasure in them.

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Twain went on to declare, quite obviously with his tongue firmly planted in his cheek, that Scott “had so large a hand in making Southern character, as it existed before the [Civil] war,” that he is “in great measure responsible for the war.”

All this romanticizing of the medieval should be seen as highly ironic, of course, given the fact that medieval life was, excepting what was being enjoyed by a tiny fraction of the populace, *wretched* to say the least—even by mid-19th century American standards! This was not a case of historicism but of plain old-fashioned mind-numbing mythologizing. Southern society was conjuring up a lifestyle that never actually existed in medieval Europe but had been, rather, simply patched together from idealized imaginings, more from contemplation of the dress and furnishings of the period, as well as quotes from romance literature and novelists like Scott, than from studies of actual history.

Sir Walter Scott’s influence in the antebellum and Civil-War South was huge; mid-century authors such as Joseph Holt Ingraham had learned to channel this romance of medieval Europe introduced by Scott to the local appetite for mythic palliatives. Ingraham’s Colonel Peyton, for example, is a classic example of feudal lord dressed up for antebellum plantation taste as an aristocratic Cavalier. The feminine ideal of the “Southern Maiden,” for another, was taken right out of the romance culture of medieval times, being an imagined vessel of unapproachably pure, chaste, servility that needed to be protected from the black brutes working around her.

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This vessel of purity was given away by her father as a major piece of social currency, one that would be easily devalued by any lack of submissiveness in her—this because subordination to father and husband was essential to preserving the patriarchal family structure necessary to the South's antiquated version of a feudal land-owning agricultural economy. Any truly strong woman, meaning one that could wield authority beyond that which touched the maintenance of her slaves, threatened to undermine the entire power structure of plantation patriarchy.

"Chivalry" Continued

What is most interesting is that the loss of the Civil War by the South did not end this mythologizing element of Southern life. Although it grew increasingly more difficult to sustain this delusion during reconstruction, that didn't keep anyone from trying. And the notion of "chivalry" became more meaningful to this culture than ever before in its desperate attempt to retain the look of aristocracy that this nostalgic culture so craved. Between the early 1880s and late 1960s some 5,000 black men are known to have lynched. Add to this the uncounted deaths of blacks in numerous white-supremacist riots. And behind all of this brutality was lingering the myth of chivalry, wherein one could find some sort of analogy with the notion of delicately submissive white maidens in need of protection from rape by brutish, uncivilized black men. This imagery was kept alive by the Ku Klux Klan, who saw the endeavors of the white knight saving the pure maiden from the dangerous black beast as

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the central trope of their own narrative that allowed them to perpetrate and rationalize their unconscionable deeds. Thomas Dixon, one of the most popular authors of the turn of the century South, produced novel after novel that romanticized the brutality of racism and the over-sweetened nostalgia for the good old days of slave society, always emphasizing that most precious commodity of such a culture: the pure white maiden.

Sentimentality's Serious Threat to Educating Our Young: Why America is Behind

It should not come as a surprise, therefore, that with this exaggerated appetite for sentimentality in the South, replete with its mythologized life style (intended to provide the proper atmosphere of delusion in which perpetrators of conscienceless social practices could sleep at night), religion gained a foothold here much more tenaciously and dangerously than elsewhere in the country, giving rise to the virulent far-right wing of the Republican party in the second half of the 20th century that would hijack American politics with a stranglehold against reason and science—one that would gradually leave our country lagging way behind so many other countries, particularly in education.

For example, ever since the 1960s our nation's school textbooks have suffered an insidious process of degradation by being dumbed down to evangelical standards in order to represent a parochially prudish, puritanical, nationalistic, xenophobic, Christ-centered, anti-science culture attractive to conservative Southern states. Due to the boycott by the Texas School Board of any textbooks that attempted

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to teach real science (such as Evolution by Natural Selection) instead of pseudo-science (such as “Intelligent Design” [Creationism]), as well as refusing to soften criticism of the history of slavery and black oppression, textbook publishers in this country decided they could not afford to lose such a big customer as the Texas State Board of Education and therefore prostituted themselves to the almighty dollar by accepting the Board’s rewrites of their history books. It has been estimated that one out of every 10 public school students in the U.S. currently is a Texan. It didn’t take very long for the bean counters at major publishing houses to figure out that printing books that can’t be used in Texas means bringing in far too few beans.

See the excellent 2012 documentary by Scott Thurman, entitled *The Revisionaries*, for a frightening look at this evangelical crusade to dumb down our nation’s youth and, therefore, our future. For example, you can hear with your own ears a board member shamelessly proclaiming the apparently self-evident truth that “education is inherently religious.” I say “shamelessly” not just because this statement is flagrantly untrue, let alone vacuous, but because its presumptuous implementation directly contradicts and threatens the intensions of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment of our Constitution. Not that so blatant a contradiction as this would occur to such a group which, after all, launches each working session with a prayer to that same almighty that they see as the ultimate author of this “history” narrative they’re intent on re-writing to suit their defiantly uneducated needs.

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But while it may be true that the influence of Texas on the school textbook industry has become *somewhat* less powerful than it was at the time of the making of this documentary, these basic dynamics may still be seen at work not only in Texas or elsewhere in the darkly evangelical South but in many other regions of our country as well. Take sex education, for example. When the state of Washington passed a bill in 2020 requiring public school districts to teach comprehensive sexual health education (including, most contentiously, the age-appropriate teaching of “affirmative consent,” defined as “conscious and voluntary agreement to engage in sexual activity”) it met with vehement push-back from religious conservatives who saw this educational requirement as “removing the innocence from our youth.” In other words, argue these consummate sentimentalists, it is preferable to leave children in blissful ignorance of one of the central realities of life rather than to prepare them with the real-life information they will need in order to safely navigate its often-dangerous waters. This is yet one more illustration of the power of sentimentality as a corrosive force in society.

XV: Economic Consequences, Part 1

**XV. Economic Consequences, Part 1: Sentimentality in the Marketplace:
*Dashboard Ornaments and the World of Manufactured Collectibles***

One of the categories of tangible personal property that invites the *most* amount of misunderstanding among the clients of art professionals these days is that of "manufactured collectibles," an increasingly prevalent term for a now-ubiquitous category of commodities in various media that share as their most recognizable unifying characteristic the dubious distinction of having been manufactured *specifically for collecting*. Indeed, it is a genre of objects that came into being solely to feed the collecting instincts of a new sector of the public hungry to acquire material culture though lacking exposure to the sophisticated tradition of collecting it.

The prolifically varied manifestations of this genre amid a wide array of media (including ceramics, glass, metal alloys, printed paper and canvas, and even fully appointed homes) all share a common denominator: the pretense of being something worthy of a collector's savor while remaining but a mass-produced reproduction of a symbol of such a thing. This is, quintessentially, *sentimentality on wheels*, let loose, downhill, on the economy.

Until relatively recently, the term "collectible" (without the modifier "manufactured") was understood without much ambiguity to designate an item of tangible personal property that was *of interest to a collector*. And since the noun "collector" traditionally conjured up a constellation of associations surrounding the concepts of connoisseurship, aesthetic taste, historic importance, etc., it was

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intuited that collectors endeavored to build collections of those kinds of things worthy of connoisseurship.

For example, "fine arts" and "decorative arts" objects (i.e., "art and antiques"), particularly those examples by established makers of the past whose work could be sought out for study toward a deeper understanding of what one was collecting—these were the kinds of things that came to mind when one heard the term "collectible object." And wherever there is connoisseurship at work, discerning bad from mediocre from superlative examples of any chosen genre of collecting, the qualitative ranking process utilized towards this end creates a complicated network of supply and demand easiest navigated with *money*. Not surprisingly, *huge* economies have sprung into being to protect stakes in this continuum of the acquisition, and later sale, of ranked objects of material culture.

Now, historically, there had been a relative parity between the acumen necessary to play this game and the disposable income necessary to finance it. But gradually, particularly since World War II, and especially in the U.S., a dramatic increase in disposable income quickly surpassed the rate of growth of collecting acumen, leaving a conspicuous vacuum to be filled by entrepreneurs savvy enough to discover an important principle—namely, that it's way easier to collect *without* acumen than with it.

Yes, it is simpler and less painful to just skip the connoisseurship training on which qualitative ranking turns and invite buyers to jump in with nothing but their enthusiasm, naiveté, and, last but not

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least, CASH. And since this new genre would still need the requisite obstacle course of a ranking hierarchy (in order to keep all its players from remaining undistinguished among themselves), such could be quickly satisfied *artificially*—yes, with the establishment of *arbitrary* rankings that would invite the same supply/demand dynamics hitherto inspired by connoisseurship. Now, what was the easiest method of *artificially* stimulating the collector instincts in this emerging class of "collector," you ask? Answer: the *limited edition*.

Of course, editions of artwork multiples across the various media had already been *limited* for centuries. Since a woodblock, engraving plate, lithographic stone, or casting mold would erode through use, the makers, purveyors, and buyers of these published multiples were sensitive to the qualitative ranking potential of the various pulls taken from a particular matrix before it had lost its viability to produce competitively "collectible" commodities. But the new proletarian entrepreneurs found they could salvage the glamour associated with this particular relic of art connoisseurship and use it as a means toward a simpler end: *creating* rarity and then treating that rarity *as if it were something to be coveted in and of itself*.

In other words, they found they could create the necessary supply/demand ratio on which their desired market would need to balance without having to inconvenience their impatient target audience with the prerequisite acquisition of taste. What built-in obsolescence became for the American auto industry, "limited

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edition" objects would be for its bauble-collecting market: a mechanism for *predicting* future sales.

Yes, it was a prophesy-come-true stratagem involving the promotion of a thing as worthy of collecting until it became...well, *worthy of collecting*. So, in place of the subtle differences distinguishing specimens of serious art creations would now be the low-hanging fruit of an edition fraction indicating only that a certain mass-produced object belonged to a *finite* supply of identical mass-produced objects—as if rarity in and of itself was, somehow, a virtue and not just an adjustment to a complex combination of other, more meaningful, components of value. Hence, the promoter of a "manufactured collectible" became one who could train his target audience to hunger for the consumption of what he contemplated selling—whatever that might be—by seducing them with their own ignorance of the role of rarity in value. (Remember that rarity by itself—that is, without *desirability*—is almost *never* a feature of marketability. To the contrary, a genre represented by very few examples is unlikely to garner the necessary exposure to develop the demand that rarity can magnify.)

This target audience has been trained for the instant gratification of procuring objects for which no criteria of selection are necessary beyond simple brand recognition. *In other words, "manufactured collectibles" are the fast food of the tangible personal property market. And those who been properly trained toward a taste for this food tend to overeat in compensation for the short-lived satisfaction obtainable*

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from it. The collector of important paintings can be satisfied with a mere handful where the collector of "collector plates" is rarely satisfied with an entire closet full.

And as if this were not sad enough, the horrible irony in all of this is that when all has been said and bought, the promised (or at least implied) benefits of ownership of "manufactured collectibles," which tend to center chiefly on those of a monetary investment-return nature, *nearly always disappoint*, especially in comparison with the same type of return enjoyed on the traditional "collectibles" on which these artificial markets are carefully modeled.

One of the most well-known brands of earlier years to have engaged in this type of misleading promotion is the so-called Hummel (actually Hümmel) figurine. This refers to the ceramic creations of the W. Goebel Porzellanfabrik GmbH of Rödentel, Germany following designs by Berta Hümmel (German, 1909-46), known as Sister Maria Innocentia, a Franciscan nun at the convent of Siessen in upper Swabia. Berta Hümmel's syrupy drawings, and the unctuous baked clay clichés created in their image, represent idealized images, not of *actual* children, but of the unrealistic, wishful *profiling* of children—yes, puritanically posed lumps of rosy-cheeked innocence and goodness. This egregiously incomplete assessment of the formative years of development in hominids of our particular species seems particularly congenial to the sentimental mindset of Christian teaching (which tends to idealize children as "gifts from God"), though it remains typically

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unrecognizable to less pious parents experienced in the raising of *real* children.

All in all, therefore, it should not be surprising to find such pretenses to the sensibilities of collectors and investors so consistently interchangeable with the feel-good world of religious sentimentality, particularly as associated with Christianity. A host of Christian-targeted manufactured collectibles makes its way down predominantly Chinese assembly lines as we speak, including the mountains of mawkish, fundamentalist-inspired, mail-order tchotchkes churned out for sale by predatory Christian entertainment promoters, such as Precious Moments, Inc. But it would be hard to imagine a more perfect embodiment of the high hypocrisy essential to the proper practice of both sentimentality *and* Christianity than the above-mentioned "Thomas Kinkade, Painter of Light™."

Shortly before his debauched downfall and death, evangelical America's favorite "painter" (read: *hack*) was considered to be among a handful of our country's most financially successful "artists" (read: *living lifestyle brands*). Kinkade made his fabulous financial fortune cranking out saccharine icons of idyllic creature comfort, images in which cute Cotswold cottages glow over-warm with family values and the unblemished happiness of relentlessly misremembered childhoods. These canvases and their exponentially proliferated paper progeny serve as dashboard ornaments for the wall; they beckon, like a Hallmark card or a trip to Disneyland, to the

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disenchanted hearts of those good souls discomfited by more recognizable representations of human life.

Our self-styled "painter of light," whose trademark invites only fleeting confusion with the epithet of a *real* painter named Joseph Mallord William Turner, RA of Britain over a century and a half earlier, typically signed his chocolate-box affirmations of idealized social values with a stylized fish (the Christian symbol of Jesus) and the biblical citation: "John 3:16." This citation alerts us to that particular verse of morally incomprehensible gibberish that has been translated for us by King James' scholars as follows: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

Now, *whatever* you want this nonsense to mean, Kinkade has appropriated it, like so many other biblical validation seekers before him, as a veritable bumper sticker of use in alerting anyone behind him at the moment as to his moral navigational abilities. And this should be seen as no mere coincidence: Kinkade's images are trite visual bromides, as easy to swallow in one glance as are large-print bumper stickers. They are optically perceptible platitudes that prove particularly congenial to the evangelical pipedream of the perfect life (be it one lived here on earth or, *somehow*, later on).

This close identification with Christian values has contributed to an intrinsic misunderstanding concerning the consensual disparagement of Kinkade's paintings by professional art critics. As with his spiritual brother of an earlier era, Joyce Kilmer, the

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poetaster of "Trees," this lack of esteem in which Kinkade is unanimously held by serious painting critics (or anyone at all with an eye for what paintings are actually about) has really *nothing at all* to do with the biographical reality of his hypocritical religiosity and *everything* to do with the incompetence of his visual constructs to accomplish what it is that memorably satisfying works of art do: create an arena, through the demonstrated mastery of a specific chosen medium, in which to engage us in an exploration of the meanings and values of life experience.

In other words, like Kilmer's *Trees* and Hitler's *Madonna*, Kinkade's platitudinous oily indulgences fail as *artworks* even before they do as sincere expressions of a worldview. Like the predictable output of a mere poetaster in comparison with that of a poet, they stoop to *tell* because they are unable to *show*. Rather than representing well-met challenges in the handling of line and color toward the creating of intensified worlds of expression, they remain little more than visual souvenirs of shallow, unattainable lifestyles. The fact that they also happen to represent a disingenuous trying-on of emotion and a posturing after artistic depth, only further exacerbates the critical response to his flock's continued delusional insistence that his work is indeed worthy of be taken seriously.

But even on the level of the spirit in which these visual pastiches were actually conceived—that of the marketplace—they prove *hugely* disappointing. Given the artificially high prices obtained by this master businessman for his cheesy images on the *primary market*

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(i.e., sold to ultimate consumers of his factory's fresh output), it may seem surprising to bystanders how attempts by those devotees of his who eventually attempt to get rid of these same commodities of the commonplace upon the *secondary market* (i.e., as previously-owned items) prove, *alas*, disappointing, to say the least. (Truth is, you can't *give 'em away*.)

However, Thomas Kinkade was hardly a unique phenomenon, only an *embarrassingly* successful one. (Kinkade's contribution to world kitsch went *way* beyond the two-dimensional confines of pretentious mats and frames, metastasizing as it did into entire neighborhoods of mail-order homes, each approximating those seen in his hokey images, and replete with appropriately kitsch household contents ready to ignite the instant living of the good life.) No, the manufacture and trafficking of visual hokum has been, and remains a *powerful* industry.

And with this appetite our country displays on such grandiose scale for the souvenirs of disposable manufactured conformity we will leave an even bigger, uglier, more long-lasting footprint on the natural order of our planet: one made of discarded non-biodegradable expressions of sappy sentimentality, such as snow globes, dashboard ornaments, "collector plates," and the acres upon acres of pretentiously framed canvas and paper indelibly stained with visual gestures of grandiosity posing as great art.

Of course, it makes no difference to our mother earth, at least in terms of her continued ability to sustain *us*, weather we choke her

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fragile, breathing surface with pretentious baubles or with genuine artistic expressions of the deepest humanity. For, even were we to conspire in finding all this crap of the former variety highly satisfying as cultural relics—say, perhaps, in a witty, *ironic* way—*litter is litter* where the rubber meets *our* road. The absorptive skin of our planet is all-too-quickly vanishing beneath the proliferation of acres-large storage facility campuses. Appropriately, these life-long holding tanks for our manufactured refuse are typically found springing up throughout the reaches of our inescapable urban sprawl *directly* across the street from the acres-large retail markets that have been built to sell the very shit that will then need to be so expensively abandoned there. But this hardening of the earth's crust into asphalted parking lots cordoned by corrugated metal doors would not be the less sad, *environmentally speaking*, were these omnipresent lockers to be found crammed with *real* treasure rather than fake.

No, the most tragic impact of sentimentality in the marketplace is neither its contribution to the cultivation of bad taste over good, nor to lost investment capital, but rather to the fact that these losses are sustained so widely *by those who can least afford them*. For, were it only the upwardly mobile professionals who were taken for fools by the predatory practices of “manufactured collectibles” marketers we might at least take some solace in their loss as an opportunity for further education. But, sadly, the most prevalent victims of these crooked vulgarians remain widows, pensioners, and other

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vulnerable innocents (of *both* sexes) who cannot afford the costs incurred by such an education and who nevertheless end up hoodwinked into investing their precious nest eggs on costly junk that not even these same market vultures could ever retranslate back into cash for them.

And although markets are inherently risky places, even for seasoned professionals, it is the added lure of sentimentality that helps seal the fate of the next innocent in offering up his or her meagre hard-earned sacrifice to the kitsch promoter's feasting table. Sentimentality has never been a *necessary* component of the art of bait-and-switch; one only needs the dishonesty associated with willful misrepresentation to keep *that* fishing boat afloat and operating. What sentimentality *does* lend to the endeavor, however, is that wider net with which to haul in fresh victims.

XVI. Economic Consequences, Part 2: Lackluster Marriages Launched by Extravagant Weddings

One of the ways in which sentimentality remains an attractive refuge for a mind in fearful denial of certain basic facts of life is the allure it most readily provides minds toward the confusing of dreams for realities. Instead of exploring the frightening, albeit *natural*, ambivalences felt in regard to a major event in one's life—like prospective matrimony, for example—it is far easier to just throw more money at its *symbol* (the wedding *ceremony*) than to attempt to build or strengthen the actual *material* (the marital

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relationship). At least that's how it has appeared in practice increasingly in recent decades, especially in the U.S., where, according to a recent survey of 13,000 brides and grooms by the "Real Weddings Study" (on the TheKnot.com wedding website), the average amount of hard-earned (or, more typically, *borrowed*) financial resources spent on a single wedding during the year 2014 was just over \$30,000.

Yes, thirty thousand dollars! This is the equivalent of a complete down payment on what in most neighborhoods in this country would be a most satisfactory *home* for the starting couple, an asset of particular value to newlyweds, who typically struggle with financial challenges as significant components of their introduction to a shared life. Granted, other surveys, based on different sampling methods, have yielded a wide range of averages—those from as low as \$18,000 to as high as \$75,000 or more (especially in certain high-cost regions, like New York City)—but even \$18,000, *as an average*, is ridiculous.

Of course, those to whom tens of thousands of dollars for a party is an insignificant expenditure should be free to spend their money as they like. The problem is only that so many less affluent families feel the need to sell themselves into serious debt and stress in order to meet the precedents perceived by them to have been set by these bigger spenders. Taking their cues from our aggressively consumerist culture, such folk feel obliged to spend money they don't have, all in superstitious investment in the fortune of the

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marriage. The sad truth is, however, contrary to their superstition. Indeed, a study recently conducted at Emory University found that women whose wedding cost over \$20,000 divorced at a rate more than one-and-a-half times *higher* than those who spent only between \$5,000 and \$10,000. It would be interesting to learn the statistics for the \$100,000 weddings as compared with those kept within the budget of \$3,000-5,000. I, for one, would have no trouble believing a divorce rate of much higher separating these two groups.

One has only to visit the local bookstore, drugstore, or supermarket magazine aisle to follow the money back to the culprit: our nation's out-of-control wedding industry. The top 10 wedding magazines (yes *top ten!*) represent a combined circulation of over 2.3 million copies! And showcased like centerfold pinups across these slick, perfumed pages are the come-hither overtures of countless caterers, wedding gown retailers, formal wear rentals, "beauty suppliers," photographers, stationers, florists, musicians, honeymoon travel agencies, and gift purveyors of all types, let alone those now-indispensable spin-doctor gurus of the industry: the *wedding consultants!* If it's not already too late to remember at this sad point, these big-tent displays are, theoretically at least, mounted for one essential reason: to publicly memorialize the marital union of two people *who are about to learn how to budget a domestic economy of reciprocal sacrifice.* Is there any better demonstration discoverable in all this hypocritical world of the centuries-old idiom of throwing the baby out with the bathwater? Why, the only item missing in action

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from the above insolvency inventory is *marital commitment*: that promise of loyalty to one another's happiness through all imaginable tests of sacrifice, a promise that in the best of all worlds should be sustained *at least* past the point at which the party had been paid for. Sadly however, the *ultimate* benefactors of this feeding frenzy of consumerism remain, more often than not, well-fed divorce lawyers.

A wedding is *not* the measure of a marriage; it is a handful of rice and a heartfelt wish for continued happiness bestowed upon a loving couple. In fact, it is quite possible, and not at all uncommon, to commence a powerful, enduring marriage from off the inexpensive ceremony of a trip to the justice of the peace and a night at the local motel—given, of course, the inclusion of those two basic ingredients of love and respect.

Conversely, it is nearly *impossible* to do so *without* these fundamentals, *even launched from a party the size of the Super Bowl*. And this rather obvious point turns something that might have otherwise been merely pathetic into something downright *unconscionable*. For, what the wedding industry in our country *really* reinforces in the minds of our young couples is not just the emotionally shallow, capricious, and ultimately destructive notion that healthy marriages can be built upon gorged and distended weddings but, worse yet, that to *not* indulge in such aggressively consumerist competition with one's friends, neighbors, and even *family*, for the most opulent, voguish, and expensive party obtainable is to undervalue the solemnity of the occasion and the significance of

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the couple in the ranks of the tradition. Consequently, families go willingly into significant debt, stress, and even anguish over the staging of a pageant of competitive manufactured conformity that remains little more than a heavily photo-archived *symbol of something real*—something that now, once it's been encumbered with the unwelcome weight of all this gratuitous financial burden, political tension, and raised expectations, tends to stand *less* of a chance of healthy, long-term survival than it might have stood before. Now, once and for all, let us forget pornography; *this* is obscene!

XVII. Economic Consequences, Part 3: *Our National Debt to Santa*

And mention again of obscenity brings to mind yet another sad example of the *economic* consequences of sentimentality—that of our nation's budget-busting spending compulsion on Santa. For, what has been observed in the preceding section regarding the increasingly prevalent and pitiful confusion of meaningful marriages with memorable weddings may be seen to operate *full bore* in shopping malls, virtual malls, ATMs, and pawn shops across our country in response to the benefaction burdens of the "Holiday Season."

Don't be fooled by the politically correct euphemism though; this consumerist cult, whose swarm-like flock descends on retail stores and dot-com websites like a desperately welcome plague during the last couple of months of each year, has little at all to do with the traditions of Hannukah, Kwanzaa, Mödraniht, Yalda, Saturnalia,

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Dongzhi, or Pancha Ganapati and *lots* to do, perversely, with the unmistakably Christian tradition of *Christmas*. I say “perversely” because the long-popular and increasingly global sport of going broke in the pursuit of perfunctory gift giving on this hallowed day bears scant relation, *theologically speaking*, with celebrating the birth of a specific Roman-era preacher from Judea who labored under delusions of divine pedigree.

First of all, a consensus exists among even pious experts on the history of Christianity that December 25th had been selected back in 336 A.D. as the date on which the birth of Jesus Christ would be commemorated *not* because of its likelihood—indeed, all but a few agree that it is quite *unlikely*—but rather because of the shrewd business acumen of early church fathers in contriving to employ a celebration date that had been long infused already with pagan significance (the winter solstice), thereby ensuring the survival of this tradition amid its competition.

Second, despite the claims of purists that the big-tent blow-out into which this observance had grotesquely grown over the course of the last two centuries actually represents a secularized consumerism that is *inverse* to the “original” spirit of this holiday, *it really doesn't*. Or, at least, it does only if indeed there *is* such a thing as a precisely identifiable “original” spirit to *any* tradition, let alone one so continuously and diversely cobbled, repackaged, and remarketed as is Christian theology. As Stephen Nissenbaum so eloquently argues (in his fascinating history of the Christmas

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tradition[s], *The Battle for Christmas* [1996]), although this holiday may indeed be correctly identified today as an “invented tradition,” such a label, in and of itself, does not render the tradition *inauthentic*, since, as he observes, “it is difficult...to imagine such a thing as a tradition that was *not* invented—and reinvented, and invented yet again” [emphasis added].

Nissenbaum traces the sundry social needs this observance ritual has satisfied among Christians and non-Christians alike during its ongoing development and dissemination, from old world into new, including its early Saturnalia-like rowdy revelries (such that seduced the New England Puritans to strictly suppress Christmas observance altogether), its later guise as civic pageant, and still later, its divergence into the twin prongs of private (indoor) celebration and grandiose public (outdoor) spectacle in the later 19th century. And he suggests that those of us made uncomfortable with the conspicuously consumerist mood of this holiday as practiced today would do well to consider how effective certain early 19th-century entrepreneurs (of both capitalism *and* sentimentality) were in making it that way. Included among the key players in this new teary-eyed business venture were such prominent early New York impresarios of commerce and golden-age nostalgia as John Pintard, Washington Irving, and Clement Clarke Moore.

By the 1820s, with the widespread publication of Moore’s Christmas poem “A Visit from St. Nicholas” (beginning “’Twas the night before Christmas” and placing Santa Claus front and center in

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the observance of what had once been Christ's mass), the stage was already set for the large-scale merchandizing of this feast day of sentimental indulgence. Of course, the publication a mere generation later of Charles Dickens's sentimental novella, *A Christmas Carol*, would only fan the flames of this particular indulgence in the sentimental idealization of indigent children, but already the best minds in the burgeoning mercantile industry were fast conspiring to capitalize on producing the costly fuel for this exquisitely inefficient fire. Producers of toys, novelties, greeting cards, decorations, and confections vied with one another for access to the wallets of the average (and better yet, *above-average*) American household in what would eventually become, by far, the holiest day in all commerce.

And it was with the help of sentimentality, in this case specifically the lure of antiquarian nostalgia for a golden-age past of child-like purity and innocence, that kept the menacing wheels of this merciless machinery so well oiled. Those who could not afford to partake in these displays of Christian benevolence were helped to feel a wee bit less Christian-like than their more affluent (or, at least, *overextended*) neighbor. Conspicuous shows of premeditated charity soon became a way of wielding a competitive edge in the raging war to build one's own church upon the rock of this newly redefined Christian holiday. And by the final decade of the century, Nissenbaum observes, "well-to-do New Yorkers had begun to arrange new and larger kinds of Christmas visitations to the poor, and these gala events reeked—strongly—of exploitation." For, he

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explains, New Yorkers “began to treat charity, almost literally, as a kind of spectator sport, performed on a large scale in arena-like spaces before a paying audience.” He goes so far as to describe these spectacles, wherein children were scheduled to put on such performances at different holiday venues, “as if there were something erotically charged about watching hungry children eat.”

And it is here that we are given a particularly rich insight into the darker moral and ethical ramifications of the practice of sentimentality. For, destructive enough as emotional dishonesty proves in a relationship of two or three people, when practiced *en masse*, as a public spectacle, its manipulative features tend to magnify into dangerously coercive “bandwagon” thinking that challenges the group’s members to decide as to which side of the *either-for-‘em-or-against-‘em* stance they belong. Peer pressure tends to obscure the obvious fact that there’s plenty of room to flourish comfortably in between and take what one likes from each. The sound of “cheerleading” all around you in a situation like this can act as a coercive reinforcement of the rightness of an act, despite one’s private critical responses to the contrary. The adrenaline pumping through the bleachers of competitive team sports events and political rallies has this same bonding effect in subordinating one’s critical astuteness to the sacrifice of flock thinking. And this is sentimentality’s most cozy lair.

The Czech novelist Milan Kundera articulated this notion quite succinctly in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1982; 1984), though

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using in place of our word “sentimentality” the nearly synonymous German term *kitsch*:

The feeling induced by kitsch must be a kind the multitudes can share. Kitsch may not, therefore, depend on an unusual situation; it must derive from the basic images people have engraved in their memories: the ungrateful daughter, the neglected father, children running on the grass, the motherland betrayed, first love. Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: how nice to see children running in the grass! **The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass! It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch.** The brotherhood of man on earth will be possible only on a base of kitsch. And no one knows this better than politicians. Whenever a camera is in the offing, they immediately run to the nearest child, lift it in the air, kiss it on the cheek. Kitsch is the aesthetic ideal of all politicians and political movements. [Emphasis added]

Yes, it is the second tear, the one that says: “How nice to be moved, together with all my fellow philanthropists, by watching starving children eat!” that makes sentimentality truly Sentimentality. Now, whether we choose to call it “kitsch” or “sentimentality,” this is the same emotionally insincere mindset that makes possible the moral world described by Nissenbaum above regarding certain large-scale charity affairs in late 19th-century New York society. Poor children, who might otherwise have elicited feelings of compassion from those without worries about their next meal, are merely idealized simplistically into pitiful poster images of innocent vulnerability, then exploited for the entertainment value of

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the guilt-ridden wealthy, turning what might have led to actual altruism into an erotically charged spectator sport, where the audience pays to engage in a self-congratulatory group hug of guilt-ameliorating “good deeds.” And Nissenbaum is not slow to point out the terrible irony that makes this spectacle even more immoral: enticing a starving child, whose body is unused to regular quantities of food, to suddenly gorge himself (to the appreciative oohs and aahs of the sponsoring crowd) represents not only condescendingly cruel exploitation of a child but a serious danger to his health, *often with fatal consequences*.

But while the unrealistic idealizing of children that made all this predatory charity attractive and possible could hardly be attributed to the mindset of one person, such a cultural tendency surely had among its sources key intellectuals of the day. And one of these, either by direct quotation or by a kind of cultural osmosis, almost certainly had been the Swiss clergyman and educational reformer Johann Pestalozzi (1746-1827), a man who (somehow) managed to see children as vessels of purity, innocence, and innate unselfishness that adults would be well to emulate if they were to achieve a peaceful, productive society. (As you might have guessed by now, Pestalozzi did not have children of his own; otherwise it might have proved more challenging to cling to such visions of purity and innocence.) In Pestalozzi’s mindset, which through numerous of his followers in Europe and America became integral to the “festival of feelings” that was to be Christmas, the giving of gifts by parents to

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children during this holiday became conflated, symbolically, with nothing less than the presentation of gifts to the Holy Child. This is what idealizing offers: substituting the real thing for a souvenir of an unobtainable simplification of it. (Oh, were kids only allowed to be kids, *real* human beings, possessed of real human instincts and learned responses, in the process of learning to be older, more responsible real human beings!)

But I digress. My focus in this section was supposed to be specifically another of the *economic* consequences of sentimentality and not more of the moral and ethical ones explored variously above. The problem is in the erroneous notion that economics can be cleanly excised from the surrounding tissue of human behavior and examined, full flourishing, by itself. It can't because *everything is economics*: ethics, morality, politics, law, the arts, and the rest of human endeavor; all operate as economies wherein assets are weighed and negotiated against liabilities in a sacrifice of individual, for overall, well-being. And the disproportion we witness concerning the moral and ethical consequences of sentimentality's disingenuous behavior finds its direct parallel in the world of household finance as well, as observed above concerning the confusing of weddings for marriages—and often with miserable if not disastrous results effecting significant challenges to human happiness and well-being.

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It has been estimated recently that the average American household spends just under a thousand dollars on Christmas every year. It has also been estimated that this same average American household has an annual income of less than sixty thousand dollars. So, out of 365 days, this one day costs, on average, six times the amount earned for it. It would not be irrelevant to question whether this average six-fold expenditure may be said to have purchased all the benefits expected of it.

What *do* we expect to get out of such an expensive day, especially as compared with the other 364 days of the year? I believe the commodity most likely to be answered here would *not* be *things people buy for us that we would not have bought for ourselves but are now feeling obliged to pretend we don't want to get rid of* (such that we might return ourselves to a pre-Christmas state of somewhat less clutter in our lives while spending that same amount of money we don't really have toward effecting the same dishonest and uncomfortable state of affairs in other people's lives). Rather, it would more likely be something along the lines of *a feeling of love, fellowship, family ties, and reconnection of meaningful relationships*.

Now, what are the essential ingredients of this latter state of feeling? Love, fellowship, family ties, and reconnection of meaningful relationships, of course. And of the former? Just under a thousand dollars, on average. The latter may be had without much in the way of financial outlay: be there, listen, trust, and share. And in theory, the emotional benefits of these relationship pursuits can be

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enjoyed on the former—our \$1,000 day— just as well as it can on the other, less cost-driven days of the year. In practice, it's *depressingly rare*. With expectation and responsibility ratcheted up beyond reach of reason and proportion all around us, failure to get the value of our money, time, creativity, and stress out of this noisy contest of expectations becomes too often a disastrous prophesy-come-true. Children impatiently tearing good paper into trash to unveil the evidence as to whether their parents love them more or less than they do their siblings. Parents, who have just overspent on igniting their children's ugly rivalry instincts, preparing to compete against themselves over what they spent on their spouse the previous year. And down the line. Political intrigues surrounding which family member hosts the big dinner and who's been invited to stay over. This, that, and the other, all compared against last year's performance. And all for just under a thousand dollars (*if you're lucky enough to be "average"*).

The most lasting legacy of all this, sadly, may be measured in the mountains of chattels manufactured for our ever-proliferating storage facilities to hold in their cold confines; entire industries calibrated for the production of perfunctory purchasing, each widget of which spending as little as a day or two in the limelight of the recipient's attention deficit before predictably fading into the oblivion of something used, soon to be forgotten, returned, abandoned to storage, or disposed of.

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Now, for those poor folks who find themselves outside this picture of normality and, for whatever reason, *not* excited about the approach, yet again, of Christmas there is reserved a special punishment: that of *Christmas music*. The stuff is inescapable! Unlike the visual input of garishly glittering tinsel, to which one still retains the power to ignore, when desperate enough, by covering one's eyes, sound is viscerally invasive, stealing into your ears like an invisible torrent of liquid distraction that seeps deep into your skull, demanding to be reckoned with.

Now, in the right mood and under the right conditions, few experiences prove more satisfying to me than the that of hunkering down to lose myself in an artistically stimulating, satisfying and rewarding cultural artifact formed out of the sophisticated, emotionally sensitive, highly nuanced language of music. But “White Christmas”? Sentimentality of this potency should be sampled, *if it must*, only in small doses, unless one is properly medicated. But to be subjected to such saccharine auditory input, over-amplified, indoors and out, 24/7, for as much as seven hundred hours per “Holiday Season” is little short of cruelty.

Christopher Deacy, in his *Christmas as Religion: Rethinking Santa, the Secular, and the Sacred* (2016), writes that “to observe or not observe religious holidays—these are counted among our most basic political freedoms” but that “when it comes to Christmas it is difficult if not impossible to escape the festival.” To those who find these vapid ditties as sickening as do I it is little different than

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encountering along every street you choose to walk a sudden proliferation of giant billboards displaying in foot-tall letters the text of Kilmer's *Trees* or "the death of Little Nell."

Why is it so hard to escape? Easy. Think *the emperor's new clothes*. Yes, just as in Hans Christian Andersen's presciently timeless tale about pluralistic ignorance (and more), it's quite easy to find oneself conditioned to think something good or true on the mere strength of our society's acquiescent pretense to the same.

Example given. When I'm asked by a bank teller or shop cashier the inevitable "Holiday Season" question as to whether I'm "ready for the holidays" (a query I read as a touchingly cautious probe to discover if I'm surviving the mayhem, though couched in the expected language of conformance), I typically answer honestly "no, I'm not" (and sometimes even more boldly that, in fact, my favorite day of the year just happens to be December 26th!). Remarkably, my subversive response is typically greeted *not* with the scandalized disbelief of a Catholic learning of the pope's closet atheism but rather with a look of knowing *relief*, as if of someone winked at from outside an oppressive conspiracy maintained all around them.

Yes, typically *they agree with me*, though usually with the circumspection of one venturing out into the uncertain safety promised by my preemptive confession. And some have even taken the opportunity of this welcome moment of trust to spill their guts about it and share their frustrations and anxieties over the whole nightmare. Included in this unburdening I have inventoried the

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predictable culprits of tarnished expectations, familial political tensions, and mounting debt—but *mostly mounting debt*. And since everything is economics, and since, therefore, this particular anxiety around the high cost of the holiday cannot be successfully excised from the surrounding tissue of well-being, *it tends to taint everything*.

Of course, to those whose response conforms to the conditioned mindset of the question posed, this same questioner is not necessarily committing an act of hypocrisy, since the question was really only ever meant as a social icebreaker anyway rather than a genuine attempt to procure valuable information. (He or she would have little reason to give a good goddamn whether or not I'm ready for Christmas, at least any more than they would be interested in the details of my health when they ask "how are you?") It is simply a piece of discourse prompted by the comforts of manufactured conformity. In other words, I had performed the role of Andersen's innocent child who asked the logical question about the emperor's *obvious* nakedness because he didn't know that his majesty's lack of clothing was *to be seen* (through the quiet conspiracy of unquestioned group conformance) rather as being most elegantly attired. (Moral: Most folks will do *anything* to sustain the comfort of conformance.)

Following this same phenomenon of social behavior, there is a widely embraced presumption, invented by sentimentalists, reinforced by retailers, and willingly suffered by the emperor's citizenry, that Christmas Music is Good for You: that its feel-good nostalgia for simpler, better days can relieve the stress associated

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with living in the brutal real world (thereby promoting purchase of more Christmas product, coincidentally). Therefore, it's played everywhere, all the time. (What's good for some *must* be good for all.) But this is nothing more than a particularly shameless specimen of cultural smugness. Now, I happen to believe the chamber music of Brahms to be good for you—largely because it proves conducive to *my* wellbeing. But it would never occur to me that loudly broadcasting recordings of it through my neighborhood would be understood as a public service.

Whether or not there is, after all, any truth to the long-attested statistic of especially high rates of depression and suicide during the “Holiday Season,” I would wager that a good-size portion of what *can* be confirmed as factual is due, at least in some significant measure, to Christmas music. And as to my characterization of this music as sentimental in the first place, if this surprises any of my readers by this point in the essay, they haven't been paying attention. (After all, how many more sacred cows are there to slaughter?) For the sake of (sentimental) skeptics of this particular strand of my thesis, I offer authoritative corroboration by yet another well-respected scholar of the American Christmas tradition(s), Penne L. Restad, who writes (in *Christmas in America* [1995]) so approvingly of the Irving Berlin song (made *outrageously* famous by Bing Crosby), “White Christmas,” as follows:

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Appealingly sentimental, “White Christmas” endures as the holiday’s quintessential expression. It has no dark side. War is forgotten. It bears no hint of commerce, not even a gift, but only describes perfection.

Not Wilde, nor Nabokov, nor Kundera could have summed up the verdict with more memorable succinctness—and this from an unapologetic champion of the modern holiday as we know it!

“White Christmas,” that quintessential musical expression of the modern Christmas holiday spirit, is in Restad’s quintessentially oxymoronic description, an “appealingly sentimental” place to which one can retire to the safety of misinformed, unrealistic, golden-age nostalgia, where life is not as we know it (from life) *and therefore much more appealing*. In other words, it is the musical equivalent of a snow globe souvenir available for purchase on a tour-group visit, *not to life itself* but to its fabulously successful theme-park-size gift store nestled safely outside its city walls.

Thank you anyway, but I choose *life*.

XVIII. Posthumous Consequences: *And then We Die...(aka, The Burial Business)*

And then we die...which, for many folks, *is just the beginning*. Yes, after all the above-described costs of sentimentality have been suffered and paid for, there is *yet another* world of mindless manufactured conformity awaiting the sentimentally inclined once their brains have shut down *officially*. The industry to which I now refer is none other than the interment business, the last (though not

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least by a long shot) in a seemingly endless lineup of products and services a body can be subjected to before it ceases to qualify as a viable consumer. This is a trade specializing in the transmutation of base superstition into the profitable long-term waste of precious real estate.

The *magnum opus* of this ancient profession is the proper harnessing of that powerful yet incoherent human desire for eternal life without our brain and then investing this urge into a seemingly eternal lease of living accommodations for the dead, complete with every comfort the non-existent clearly will no longer need.

But let us back up a bit to begin right at the announcement of a loved one's death. Apparently, the laws of sentimentality do not permit use of the word "death" or its morphological derivations, such as die, died, or dead—this out of deference to its religion's central oath, which promises to avoid unpleasant realities at all costs. Therefore, hiding behind the ostensible gesture of protecting the feelings and dignity of the bereaved (though really only safekeeping those of the *speaker*, as the bereaved typically *do not want their tragedy ignored*), the sentimentalist will immediately translate this very useful word into a more palatable euphemistic denial of what can only be called *reality*: in this case the obvious, inescapable, fully provable, *fact* that this living organism that was once animated will not ever again be so.

The euphemism arsenal at the sentimentalist's disposal toward this obfuscation is broad, though its superstitious etiquette suggests

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the following current favorite dissimulation: "passed." No, not even the old fashioned "passed away," a safely meaningless-enough term that still manages to allude to a scientifically *unimaginable* process, but one apparently now considered too long (by a syllable) and cumbersome on the tongue to avoid *total* avoidance of peripheral reference to the subject at hand. Let's compare this particular red herring, the euphemism "passed," with our good old realist's term "died." While the former vaguely suggests a mere transition from one sphere of endeavor to another, *leaving it quite open as to the actual availability of the deceased*, the latter makes no mistake about what has just happened to the departed and then goes on to prevent all possible misunderstandings about what he or she might do next, which is, of course, *nothing*.

Once the announcement has been made and the emotional impact of the news carefully avoided, those individuals who would prefer to cremate the remains of their beloved deceased are often met with a shudder of scandalized disbelief that the dead could be subjected to such indignity. (Never mind that the loved one in question is currently nothing more than a memory in the minds of his or her survivors and no longer has anything at all to do with the corpse laid before us.) No, we are bullied into cordoning off yet more of our increasingly unavailable earth's surface—whatever has not yet been compacted to receive new vending potential and the inevitable indefinite storage of purchased commodities—in the fool's errand of

XVIII: Posthumous Consequences—*continued*

attempting to preserve the dead in our conspired state of denial of the physical reality of death.

This conspiracy manages to win for each new corpse the one particular advantage it most certainly does not any more have need of: a cordoned plot of ground all to itself in which to molder. And it is at this inappropriate point that the undertaker steps in with his heart-felt recommendations to the bereaved (and otherwise emotionally vulnerable) of the timeless virtues of the super-deluxe extra-reinforced, lead-lined, button-tufted silk-cushioned, mahogany casket, a veritable strongbox for the rotting loved one sufficient to keep the decaying remains of the deceased from returning to the ashes of the earth until the rapture, *and beyond!* This curious cult of standing watch over the inevitable decomposition of once-living flesh is obviously yet another ancient bequest of religion, a cult that centers on the belief of a life after this one, thereby confusing the living as to where his or her energies are best invested.

XIX. Conclusion

Throughout this essay, I have attempted to examine human social customs operating in various arenas of endeavor, including: a.) religion and our sacrifice of precious livelihood to insatiable, invisible, and otherwise unprovable entities; b.) competitive team sports and our surprisingly similar investment; c.) nationalistic political propaganda, especially by way of the sacralization of the commonplace through the practice of blasphemy taboo; d.) the

XIX: Conclusion—*continued*

comfortable reliance on received opinion over fresh observation and reflection, especially as achieved via the employment of the same taboo against sacrilege; e.) the flagrant waste of large amounts of revenue on worthless symbols; f.) the epic spending on ceremonies without regard to the relationships they merely symbolize; and, finally, g.) the delusional, idealistic denial of the oh-so-obvious reality of death.

Now, I have argued in this essay that the mindset that lends itself most readily toward the continued practice of these modern vestiges of ancient "magico-religious" rites is that very one that so seductively promises refuge to the emotionally fearful and intellectually lazy from the uncomfortable complexities of life. I refer, of course, to Sentimentality. In other words, these social habits are all rooted, I argue, in that type of pusillanimous preference for sanitized symbols over real people and their institutions that we have observed to be central to our working definition of "sentimentality."

I believe the reason that epithet "sentimental fool" tends to ring as a pejorative to *all* ears (i.e., ironically, even to those sentimental types who lovingly deprecate *themselves* with this appellation) is not because it is thought to denote a person considered foolish by virtue of indulging in sentiment but rather because that person's customary indulgence in a disingenuous *posturing after* sentiment identifies them as perpetrator of a special brand of foolishness fraught with significantly deleterious social consequences.

XIX: Conclusion—*continued*

No, “sentimentality” must cease to be understood as some benign synonym for “sentiment.” On the contrary, this word actually represents the potentially dangerous idealizing that aspires to the *extortion* of sentiment. I believe we do ourselves an injustice by indulging the continued use of this term as a mere decorative honorific when, in fact, it represents a serious psychological dysfunction that hampers our ability to be emotionally honest and engaged, caring, empathetic, rational, and just.

XIX. Publisher's Colophon

The Dangers of Sentimentality

An Essay

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Published by the Author:

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Edition 8.31.20
(August 31, 2020)

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(*This essay was composed largely between 2015 and late 2019 and then revised somewhat in March of 2020 before a 53-page addition (specifically what is now Section XIV) was composed in July and August. This essay, as it appeared *before* the 2020 revisions and additions, may also be found available in hardcopy in the author's *Collected Poems (& Essays)* [Edition 5.1.20]

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