

Contra Ideology

by MARK KALTHOFF

When the philosopher Eric Voegelin (1901-1985) published his book *The New Science of Politics* in 1952 he offered an analysis of ideology and described as its chief error “the fallacious immanentization of the Christian eschaton.” (1) Ever since Voegelin’s writing, conservative thinkers have agreed that the errors of ideology consistently stem from doomed attempts by ideologues to create heaven upon earth. Because ideologues simply cannot tolerate the uncertainties of life, argued Voegelin, they create theoretical systems that promise certainty—but a certainty founded solely upon the power of imperfect human knowledge and purchased only through willful denial of unavoidable realities. Failure always results. As intellectual historian Ted McAllister put it in his study of Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, totalitarian ideologues believe that they have “obtained the knowledge necessary to transform this earthly world of woe into a paradise.” (2) But Russell Kirk never tired of reminding that despite promises of earthly splendor, the “cruel fact” is that “ideology has created . . . a series of terrestrial hells.” (3) Those who dream that a form of supreme human knowledge can enable man to control nature and shape the course of history are the ideologues. They want desperately to immanentize the eschaton, to make heaven on earth. They must be confronted, for their aim is to create a modern utopia. We know, however, that the word utopia is but a grim pun. The Greek *ou* (not) combines with the noun *topos* (place) meaning literally “no place.” But the *ou* (not) could just as easily be replaced with the Greek *eu* (good or happy), giving “good place.” Taken together, then, we learn from this little bit of etymology what the ideologues have always denied, that the *good place* is *no place*, that our efforts to make heaven on earth will always miscarry and bring horrific suffering instead.

Despite the failure of so many ideologies to make good on their promises—from fascism, communism, and Hitler’s national socialism, to radical feminism, romantic environmentalism, and so on—the attraction to ideological perspectives persists. Professor Bruce Thornton has recently documented this phenomenon, calling it a “new epidemic of false knowledge” that continues to plague the minds of many. (4) Why the ongoing attraction to ideological perspectives? And what might serve to mitigate this persistent attraction to ideology?

This essay suggests a plausible way to answer these questions. Briefly stated, it is this: There persists an ongoing attraction to ideological perspectives because there remains a culturally systemic misconception of four subjects: human nature, virtue, education, and tradition. The best way to prevent the ideologues’ attempts to immanentize the eschaton is to foster sound understanding of human nature, virtue, education, and tradition. A serious difficulty hampers such an effort, however, because the very ideology-enabling distortion of these four subjects has been caused by an on-going embrace of one particular ideology. It is perhaps the one ideology still widely perceived to be the best human path to earthly salvation. That ideology is metaphysical naturalism or scientism. It touches nearly every aspect of contemporary thought. Hence to undercut the perceived viability of ideological perspectives, our day requires an assault upon scientism in order to free from its influence our understanding of human nature, virtue, education, and tradition.

I. Prologue: On Teaching Fish to Discuss Water

What ideas, beliefs, and popular notions are commonly accepted as given, believed without critical examination, or upheld as self-evidently the way things are or ought to be? More

significantly, what ideas, beliefs, or notions are passively taken in as good, blindly assumed to be true, and treated as self-evidently foundational to the business of life without even knowing that one does so? If the first question poses difficulties, the second may seem almost impossible to answer. It is like asking a fish to discuss water. How does one make explicit those implicit cultural commitments, those beliefs that are so widely accepted that they go unnamed because they function beneath the level of conscious deliberation?

C.S. Lewis suggested that one means to identify such notions is to study history. In his little essay, “Learning in War Time,” he wrote:

We need intimate knowledge of the past. Not that the past has any magic about it, but because we cannot study the future, and yet need something to set against the present, to remind us that the basic assumptions have been quite different in different periods and that much which seems certain to the uneducated is merely temporary fashion. A man who has lived in many places is not likely to be deceived by the local errors of his native village: the scholar has lived in many times and is therefore in some degree immune from the great cataract of nonsense that pours from the press and the microphone of his own age. (5)

Every year I give this Lewis quotation to my students, not simply to justify history class as a worthy tool for making clear the basic assumptions of our day, but more fundamentally, to remind them that like the fish who cannot discuss water, it is possible to swallow uncritically the reigning ideologies without even knowing one is doing so. Of course, history is not the only tool for making clear the assumptions of our day. Any humble thinker capable of abstraction—or more literally of standing at a distance (*abstoare*)—be he the philosopher, political theorist, ethicist, biologist, or theologian, can learn to identify the intellectual water in which he and his contemporaries swim.

The starting place is to admit that such intellectual water exists. We will not challenge the assumptions of our day until we are prepared to acknowledge that we live in a stream of received wisdom which is subject to critical scrutiny. The great historian Christopher Dawson put it this way:

Every period of civilization possesses certain characteristic ideas that are peculiarly its own. They express the mind of the society that has given them birth. . . . Yet so long as they are dominant, their unique and original character is never fully recognized, since they are accepted as principles of absolute truth and universal validity. They are looked on not as the popular ideas of the moment, but as eternal truths implanted in the very nature of things, and as self-evident in any kind of rational thinking. (6)

Contemporary opinion regards its own notions of virtue, of education, of tradition, and of human nature in this way. They are regarded as such not only because of widespread cultural amnesia—that ignorance of history which weakens our ability to know ourselves—but because the cultural water we live in is colored by peculiar attitudes regarding science, its power, its potential, and presumed authority as the final voice of truth. While distinct from one another, these subjects (virtue, education, tradition, and human nature) are not entirely separable from one another. Our understanding of each informs and conditions our understanding of all the others.

There is, however, something intuitively right, perhaps logically necessary, about starting with human nature.

II. *What is Man?*

This is the key question. If we get it right, we have a chance against the utopian ideologues. If we get it wrong, we are as likely to join their number as to hold them at bay. The metaphysical naturalist believes “that purely physical causes undirected by any guiding intelligence at base govern the world.” (7) He affirms “the doctrine that nature is ‘all there is.’” (8) By his lights, there exists nothing but the material stuff of which our flesh and other physical entities are made. (9) There is no Creator, no Divine ground of being, no ontological category beyond matter itself. Each person is but a hunk of meat; no more. When it comes time, therefore, to say what a human being is, the metaphysical naturalist answers just as did the journalist H.L. Mencken who declared with a straight face that human beings are no more than “an endless series of miserable and ridiculous bags of rapidly disintegrating amino acids.” (10) And on this point Mencken could claim that scientists backed him up. Consider briefly the following conclusions of biologists, conclusions which each believed followed directly from his biological science:

Ernst Haeckel (1877): “The cell consists of matter called protoplasm, composed chiefly of carbon, with an admixture of hydrogen, nitrogen and sulphur. These component parts, properly united, produce the soul and body of the animated world, and suitably nursed become man. With this single argument the mystery of the universe is explained, the Deity annulled and a new era of infinite knowledge ushered in.” (11)

Douglas Futuyma (1983): “Some shrink from the conclusion that the human species was not designed, has no purpose, and is the product of mere material mechanisms—but this seems to be the message of evolution.” (12)

George Gaylord Simpson (1949): “Man is the result of a purposeless and natural process that did not have him in mind. He was not planned. He is a state of matter, a form of life, a sort of animal, and a species of the Order Primates, akin nearly or remotely to all of life and indeed to all that is material.” (13)

If such pronouncements are correct, then the foundation for ideological scientism is firm. Consider Russell Kirk’s definition of scientism: It is “the popular notion that revelations of natural science, over the past two centuries and longer, somehow have demonstrated the obsolescence of the church’s claims; have informed us how men and women are naked apes merely; have pointed out that the ends of existence are production and consumption merely; that happiness is the gratification of sensual impulses; that notions of the resurrection of the flesh and the life everlasting are superstitions of the childhood of the race.” (14) This ideology insists that Man has made God, not the other way around. Man bears no *imago Dei*. Instead, man is in charge as god.

In the final volume of C.S. Lewis’s space trilogy, *That Hideous Strength*, we read a story about the institutionalization of scientism in an organization called the National Institute of Co-ordinated Experiments (the N.I.C.E.). Among the leaders of this organization who have embraced naturalism’s materialist anthropology is one member of the N.I.C.E. who clearly spells out its

wider ideological implications. “If Science is really given a free hand it can now take over the human race and re-condition it: make man a really efficient animal. . . . Man has got to take charge of Man,” he explains. “That means, remember, that some men have got to take charge of the rest.” When asked by a new initiate what sort of thing this disciple of scientism has in mind, the reply comes: “Quite simple and obvious things, at first—sterilization of the unfit, liquidation of backward races (we don’t want any dead weights), selective breeding. Then the real education, meaning pre-natal education . . . [and] we’ll get on to biochemical conditioning in the end and direct manipulation of the brain. . . .” (15) In a later conversation the defender of the N.I.C.E.’s programs explains that science will in fact usher in the kingdom of God, as Jesus meant it: “For, mark my words,” he promises, “this thing is going to happen. The Kingdom is going to arrive: in this world: in this country. The powers of science are an instrument, an irresistible instrument. . . . An instrument of judgment as well as of healing.” (16)

According to scientism, then, even if man is a bag of rapidly disintegrating acids, because nature is all there is, man is god. Children and babies may then be discarded, designed, or destroyed, according to the dictates of man’s presumed divine status. If scientism is wrong, however, then those who embrace its naturalistic ideology are apostates who have sinned against the first commandment by denying man’s creaturely status. What if man is not just a sack of acids? Then he is something more and, significantly, something else altogether. Here the great G.K. Chesterton pointed the way in his masterpiece, *The Everlasting Man*:

The simplest truth about man is that he is a very strange being; almost in the sense of being a stranger on the earth. . . . It is not natural to see man as a natural product. It is not common sense to call man a common object of the country or the seashore. It is not seeing straight to see him as an animal. It is not sane. It sins against the light; against that broad daylight of proportion which is the principle of all reality. . . . If he was an ordinary product of biological growth, like any other beast or bird, then it is all the more extraordinary that he was not in the least like any other beast or bird. He seems rather more supernatural as a natural product than as a supernatural one. . . . [Between the man and the monkey] is a difference of kind and not a difference of degree. A monkey does not draw clumsily and a man cleverly; a monkey does not begin the art of representation and a man carry it to perfection. A monkey does not do it at all; he does not begin to do it at all; he does not begin to begin to do it at all. A line of some kind is crossed before the first faint line can begin. (17)

If man is more than a sack of acids and qualitatively distinct from the monkey, he is also less than God. He is a creature capable of goodness and rational behavior, open to the contingencies of life and desirous of knowledge, but who regularly misses the mark because he is scarred by original sin. Political philosopher J. Budziszewski rightly remarks that most “ideologies just deny [original sin].” He explains what he calls the “three great troubles of public life”:

One of our troubles is plain and practical: we do wrong. The second is intellectual: we not only misbehave but misthink, not only do wrong but call it right. The third, of course, is strategic, for the second affects our efforts to cope with the first. Our toils to rectify sin are themselves twisted by sin, our labors to shed light on iniquity themselves darkened by iniquity. No mind is unstained, no motive unmixed. We

cannot fix ourselves. We might as well expect a surgeon to sew his severed hands back on. (18)

The ideologue's failure to acknowledge man's fallen condition stems from scientism's inability to say correctly what man is. For the materialist, man is not fallen. He is simply ignorant. This opinion concludes that our woes are not traceable to our sin but to bad education. Growing as it does from the enlightenment project, scientism's defenders believe that the virtuous society will be the well-informed society and that the best culture will be the nation of scientifically trained specialists ready to demonstrate the utility of their every thought and action. And because they ignore the voices of their fathers as the voices of out-dated ignorance, they have abandoned tradition for the cult of the new, for the idea of Progress. In short, metaphysical naturalism fosters a mistaken view of human nature. That mistaken view of human nature leads us to misdiagnose our condition and to prescribe solutions grounded in mistaken understandings of education, virtue, and tradition. These are among the greatest errors of ideology. How can they be confronted and corrected?

III. Confronting the Errors of Ideology with Virtue

Is the person who knows more information more virtuous? Certainly not simply because he knows more. But the Enlightenment idea, Bruce Thornton reminds us, is that knowledge is virtue "(or *should* be, if it isn't) . . . [and] that if one knows what is good for him, he will pursue it." (19) That people again and again *do not do* what is good for them may just be the plainest observable verity. The "fact of sin" Chesterton called "a fact as practical as potatoes. . . . Original sin," he insisted, "is the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved." (20) But in our day of scientism, the proof is rejected. Those committed to scientism deny original sin; for to insist that people *will do what is good for themselves* if they only know what is good for themselves is to deny original sin. Clearly knowledge alone is not virtue.

Instead of dwelling further upon original sin, then, let us consider the other end of the spectrum. What is virtue? If virtue is not knowledge, then what is it? We should note that any culture that has to ask such a question is probably in trouble. In our case the question has to be asked because the language of virtue has been replaced in public discourse by talk of "values." Values, however, are relative to their holders. Virtues are fixed. Today we hear much about "family" values, "women's" values, "gay" values, and so on. But are these not just the values held by families or by women or by gays or by whatever-the-special-group? What if you belong to a different group? Then you have different values. Who can say whether one set of values transcends any of the others? Because values are different than facts, the modern ideologue will argue, values are subjective preferences merely; therefore, the only universal ethical norm is *tolerance* of the values of others, whether you uphold those values or not. In this way, then, values language fails to get hold of what we are after, viz. *a fixed idea of moral excellence* that withstands the moral relativism imposed by the tolerance fanatics. To such a fixed ideal of being "set right" we give the name virtue. (21)

The confusion of values and virtues is partly due to the way the acid of scientism has caused widespread misunderstanding of human nature. Everyone from the biologist to the theologian acknowledges our identity as *homo sapiens*. The Latin *homo* means "mankind or man." The word *sapiens* comes from the Latin *sapientia* which means "wisdom" and "discernment." To be truly human thus requires the cultivation of wisdom and discernment, that is, the cultivation of what the

ancients called the *cardinal* virtues. There are four—Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance. (22) Here the word “cardinal” comes from the Latin *cardo*, which means “hinge.” In short, the realization of all other goods and, indeed, of our full humanity hinges or turns upon the acquisition of these virtues. The Christian vision adds to the four cardinal virtues the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love, thereby completing the seven classical virtues.

These are fixed. Nobody ever says, “Well you value wisdom, but we value foolishness.” Or “You may be into courage, but our group upholds cowardice as a value.” Virtue transcends the mishmash of value relativism and points toward the moral excellence that can confront scientism. How? Let us consider just one example, the virtue of hope.

Again, who hears anyone say, “Well, for you hope is okay, but these folks over here are founded upon despair. And they’re making a pretty fine run at it, despite their hopelessness, so let us not be intolerant of them.” Of course, we never hear this. Hope is universally regarded as a virtue. But that does not mean that it is universally understood. Scientism has twisted the meaning of hope to support the ideological agenda of making heaven on earth.

In contrast to the etymological understanding of *homo sapiens* that we just reviewed, there is another view of mankind. We might call it *homo sciens*, from the Latin *scientia* from which we get the word science. *Homo sciens* knows lots of stuff. The stuff he knows begins with the assumption that man is, like everything else he sees, a material thing. To be fully human, on this view, is to stockpile material things, to amass knowledge of material things, and to acquire expertise in the techniques (*techne*) of manipulating material things. *Homo sciens* can do things. He knows stuff. He is the master of means. *Homo sapiens* knows what to do and why to do it. He understands ends. The story of the modern era has been the story of the waning of *homo sapiens* and the waxing of *homo sciens*, of the glorification of *means* while losing sight of the *meaning*. (23)

Man has become so good at scientific technique that every day he has come to expect new gadgets and labor-saving devices, all received as hallmarks of the inevitability of Progress. The ideal of man’s perfectibility follows as a corollary. The goal for the materialist is to increase material creature comforts by establishing an earthly paradise of hot tubs, remote controlled home entertainment centers, and a flawless healthcare system that guarantees physical fitness and longevity to every pleasure-sated hedonist of our materialist world. Here is the wrong answer to the question, “what is man?” conjoined with a worship of science grounded in metaphysical naturalism. (24) Christopher Dawson has noted that the idea of Progress has been “the working faith of our civilization, and so completely has it become a part of the modern mind that any attempt to criticize it has seemed almost an act of impiety.” (25) When Alexis De Tocqueville visited the United States, he met an American sailor with whom he had a brief exchange: “I ask him why his country’s vessels are built to last a short time,” wrote Tocqueville, “and he replies to me without hesitation that the art of navigation makes such rapid progress daily that the most beautiful ship would soon become almost useless if its existence were prolonged beyond a few years.” In this brief exchange Tocqueville perceived “the general and systematic idea according to which” Americans conducted their affairs, *viz.* a belief in the perfectibility of man. (26)

What does this have to do with hope? Quite a bit. The virtue of hope is fully conditioned by that for which one hopes. The ideologue who implicitly trusts in the “idea of Progress,” who longs and labors for heaven on earth because he believes with the materialist that there is nothing more and that such a goal is attainable, has abandoned the virtue of hope in favor of false presumption. On this point, the Thomist philosopher Josef Pieper had much to say as he elaborated upon the meaning of the word *viator*:

To be a “viator” means to be “one on the way.” The *status viatoris* is, then, the “condition of being on the way.” Its proper antonym is *status comprehensoris*. One who has comprehended, encompassed, arrived, is no longer a *viator*, but *comprehensor*. . . . The virtue of hope is preeminently the virtue of the *status viatoris*; it is the proper virtue of the “not yet”. . . . *Praesumptio* is a perverse anticipation of the fulfillment of hope. . . . Presumption has its source in a self-esteem that, while false, is somehow affirmed by the individual’s own will; it consists in the will to achieve a certainty that is necessarily invalid because there is no valid ground for it. Even more specifically, this false esteem of oneself is a lack of humility, a denial of one’s actual creatureliness and an unnatural claim to being like God. (27)

The institutionalized scientism of the N.I.C.E. in Lewis’s novel had forsaken the virtue of hope for the false presumption of being like God. It had denied human creaturely status and sinfulness. Accordingly, it trusted the ideological dream of achieving *status comprehensoris* by human effort, of immanentizing a this-worldly eschaton. The virtue of hope works to counter such belief in the inevitability of progress and the perfectibility of man, because it requires the humility of a pilgrim, the humility which flows from a sound assessment of human nature as scarred by original sin and incapable of achieving beatitude this side of eternity.

IV. Confronting the Errors of Ideology with Tradition and Liberal Education

Is a full-fledged resuscitation of the classical virtues the only available weapon against ideology? Certainly not. Another can be found in the revival and appreciation of the ideal of liberal education and of tradition. Tradition defies what Richard Weaver called “presentism” or what C.S. Lewis called “chronological snobbery,” that attitude of progressive ideologues who worship the cult of the new and trust in the latest technology to solve all human problems. Liberal education works to form the intellect in wholesome ways and thereby avoid the distortions of narrow specialization and mere technical training. Such distortions routinely undermine what John Henry Newman called a “philosophical habit of mind.” Liberal education cultivates it. Scientism praises narrow specialization and dismisses tradition. As Frank Meyer has pointed out, the heritage of Western education “was based on the assumption that the function of the school and the college is to train the mind and transmit to the young the culture and tradition of the civilization, thus forming a firm foundation for virtue.” (28) Leo Strauss rightly insisted, repeatedly, that “liberal education reminds . . . of human greatness”; that it “consists in listening to the conversation among the greatest minds.” (29) A renewed emphasis upon tradition and liberal education, then, can counter ideological tendencies. Let us consider these briefly before concluding.

As with the other subjects of this essay, a proper understanding of education begins with a proper understanding of human nature. Years ago Richard Weaver explained that

no theory of education makes sense unless it is based on some consistent view of the kind of creature who is to be educated and of the kind of life he ought to be educated for. If one believes that man is and can be only an animal, he should be trained as an animal—not really “educated” at all . . . If one believes that he is a spiritual being with a soul and an eternal destiny at stake, these must be guiding

concepts in the design of his education. If one believes that he is by nature wholly good, a certain kind of educational regimen is indicated. If one believes that he has aspirations toward the good but serious liability to error and wrongdoing, a proper education must take this into account. (30)

The ideological view of man that we have been considering stems from scientism's assessment of man as mere material animal whose chief end is material comfort. Such a view emphasizes utilitarian efficiency, technical training, and narrow specialization as the best education for securing the good life. But such "instrumental" education, which Albert Jay Nock distinguished from "formative" education, fails because it begins with a flawed reductionist view of man—that he is nothing but a sack of amino acids. (31) He certainly is a sack of amino acids; but he is not *just* a sack of amino acids. The problem with naturalism here is its seizing upon one aspect of humanity and treating it as the whole.

The educational implication of this view of man is to embrace vocational specialization and make it the measure of the whole pedagogical enterprise. The resulting view of education urges development of only one part of man. For such a program Richard Weaver had a ready response. "Specialization develops only a part of man," he wrote in *Ideas have Consequences*, and "a man partially developed is deformed." He continued:

But all hinges on the interpretation of needs; if the primary need of man is to perfect his spiritual being and prepare for immortality, then education of the mind and the passions will take precedence over all else. The growth of materialism, however, has made this a consideration remote and even incomprehensible to the majority. Those who maintain that education should prepare one for living successfully in this world have won a practically complete victory . . . the prevailing conception is that education must be such as will enable one to acquire enough wealth to live on the plane of the bourgeoisie. (32)

Such education does not develop virtue, however. It does not guard against the narrow perspective of the ideologue. It is more likely, moreover, to foster that invalid self-esteem that Josef Pieper called presumption. For expertise in one narrow field (technical proficiency in the medical laboratory for example) may lead one to see all reality as an extension of this narrow training. On this matter the acerbic historian Hilaire Belloc spoke up clearly: "Since the most famous scientist need not have any intellectual claim to fame, the chances are that he will be an Ass like you and me. But, being famous, his opinion will be reverently sought on a host of matters where it is worthless and especially on the nature of the universe, of morals, of society, where he has no sort of standing; and here he will challenge, in his innocence, such giants as Suarez and Aquinas, whom he has never read." (33)

What can guard against this ideology-breeding narrowness of vision? We need a view of education that takes into account not just man's animal nature, but one that seeks to cultivate the heart and soul, to discipline and furnish the mind, and to inculcate virtue and wisdom. It is a view of education that refuses to equate learning with the stockpiling of factoids. It is a view that also rejects what Tracy Simmons calls "that free-for-all of open curricula where the dazed and confused spend irreplaceable years browsing among survey courses, taking ant bites out of whatever nuggets randomly lie among the crumbs, learning little or nothing in particular." (34) Simply put, it is a

view of education that seeks to develop what John Henry Newman called a philosophical habit of mind. Hear Newman describe this educational ideal:

An assemblage of learned men, zealous for their own sciences, and rivals of each other, are brought, by familiar intercourse and for the sake of intellectual peace, to adjust together the claims and relations of their respective subjects of investigation. They learn to respect, to consult, to aid each other. Thus is created a pure and clear atmosphere of thought, which the student also breathes. . . . He apprehends the great outlines of knowledge, the principles on which it rests, the scale of its parts, its lights and its shades, its great points and its little, as he otherwise cannot apprehend them. Hence it is that his education is called “Liberal.” A habit of mind is formed which lasts through life, of which the attributes are, freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom; or what . . . I ventured to call a philosophical habit. (35)

This ideal can only be achieved when science does not presume to be the only legitimate knowledge, when we admit that one can have genuine knowledge of such things as duty and virtue. Newman understood that this philosophical habit of mind is the product of genuine liberal arts education. What are the liberal arts, the *artes liberales*? Thomas Aquinas offered this clarification in his *Commentary* on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*: “Every art is called *liberal* which is ordered to knowing; those which are ordered to some utility to be attained through action are called *servile* arts.” (36) In short, a liberal art is any organized body of knowledge worth knowing for its own sake, in and of itself, without any regard whatsoever for the application or utility that such knowledge may possess. Liberal learning is thus free of necessity or servility and is pursued as its own end.

The ideologue, seeking to make heaven on earth, is a zealot for utility and application. “How will such and such knowledge be useful for changing the world?” he asks. If it seems practical for his this-worldly aim, then he will pursue it. The notion that knowledge may be its own end is alien to him. The idea of learning as free—free from pragmatic justification, from ideological utility, from pecuniary benefit—is hard for him to grasp. But Marion Montgomery rightly reminds us that the original seven liberal arts, “the trivium and quadrivium were established *before* the pragmatic advantages of those disciplines appeared, [they were] developed out of the natural desire of man to know, not because they were immediately practical.” (37)

The point here is simple. There is a sane view of learning that recognizes the value of each discipline in its proper place. This view acknowledges that while disciplines may be distinct, none are fully separable from the others. This view understands the proper connections between disciplines while apprehending their limits and boundaries, thereby avoiding the disproportionate emphasis upon the fruits of one discipline. Most importantly, this view sees learning as a good in itself without the need for pragmatic justification. When this view of learning is embraced, the narrow specialization that leads to ideological deformity will be countered, as will be the ideologue’s humorless concern for the utility of his every cognitive effort.

A final word can be said about the role of tradition. Here Russell Kirk can guide us well. We have already noted the ideological penchant for the “chronological snobbery” that dismisses the past as out-dated, ignorant, and irrelevant to our presumed enlightened perspective. But this presentism is certainly naïve and ultimately harmful. It is the things that do not change that deserve the greatest share of our attention. What T.S. Eliot called “the permanent things” are most

important, because they are anchored deeply in the nature of reality and thereby outlast the fads and fashions that wither and fade. As Kirk pointed out, “unless men know the past, they are unable to understand distinctions between what is permanent and what is transient in their lives.” (38)

The voice of tradition is not opposed to change. Change is inevitable. Real progress is possible too. But, unlike the ideological notion that progress comes through shedding the past, “true progress, improvement, is unthinkable without tradition,” Kirk explained, “because progress rests upon addition, not subtraction.” (39) What is the content of tradition, of that which is handed down from our ancestors, and which we are obliged to pass on to our posterity? Kirk tells us: “At the core of the body of traditions of any society is to be found a number of customs and precepts, described by some as natural law formulated into traditions, which that society ignores at its peril . . . when they are doubted or denied by the doctrinaire skeptic [or ideologue], any society is in peril of losing these moral sanctions which make the civil social order possible,” and which make it possible to hold at bay the fanciful dreams of ideological progressives. (40) In short, the ideologues will be foiled by those who mind what Edmund Burke called the “eternal contract” between the dead, the living, and the yet unborn. The scientism of our day cannot stand when our culture is animated by what G.K. Chesterton called “the democracy of the dead.” On this Chesterton wrote: “Democracy tells us not to neglect a good man’s opinion, even if he is our groom; tradition asks us not to neglect a good man’s opinion, even if he is our father.” (41) Tradition is this democracy of the dead. By listening to the voice of our fathers, to the wisdom of the ages, we gain a further weapon against the error of the ideology of scientism. Again Kirk: “The limitations of science are not apprehended by the throng of the quarter-educated who think themselves emancipated from their spiritual heritage. When we confront these people, we are dealing not merely with persons ignorant of tradition, but actively hostile toward it.” (42) A renewed reverence for tradition counters this ideological hostility and reminds us that the architects of any earthly heaven are those who willfully violate the commandment to honor our father and mother.

Conclusion

The argument of this essay begins with the premise that despite the failure of so many modern ideologies to deliver on their promises, there remains in our world a strong proclivity to succumb to the ideologues’ temptations. Because giving in to their false promises has proven so dangerous, it is necessary to combat the errors of ideology. Among the chief weapons for this task, we do well to focus upon four subjects: human nature, virtue, liberal learning, and tradition. There is a fly in the ointment, however. The contemporary understanding of these four subjects has been diminished and distorted by the cultural hegemony exercised by scientism, perhaps the single most powerful ideology of our day. If we are to gain a proper understanding of human nature, lay hold of virtue as opposed to mere values, reanimate a high regard for liberal learning, and mind the voice of tradition, we must understand these subjects apart from the influence of scientism. By doing so, we can be well armed for joining the combat against scientism and any other ideologues who wrongly seek to immanentize the eschaton.

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1. Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 121. An earlier version of this paper was read to the Intercollegiate

- Studies Institute Honors Fellowship Colloquium, “Progress & Revolution: Utopian Ideology, Terror, and the Human Cost,” Washington, D.C., August 1, 2002.
2. Ted. V. McAllister, *Revolt against Modernity: Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, & and the Search for a Postliberal Order* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1996), 23.
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