

Political Rationalism in Unlikely Places

by

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“Having devoted my energies to the question of social organization in any future society that will replace the present one, I’ve come to the conclusion that all creators of social systems, from ancient times down to our own in 187-, were dreamers, story-tellers and fools, who contradicted themselves and understood absolutely nothing about natural science or that strange animal called man...But since the future form of human society is needed right now, when we’re finally ready to take action, in order to forestall any further thought on the subject, I’m proposing my own system of world organization. Here it is!” he said, tapping his notebook. “I wanted to expiate on my book to this meeting as briefly as possible, but I see it’s necessary to provide a great deal of verbal clarification; therefore my entire explication will take at least ten evenings, corresponding to the number of chapters in my book.” (Laughter was heard.) “Moreover, I must declare in advance that my system is not yet complete.” (Laughter again.) “I became lost in my own data and my conclusion contradicts the original premiss from which I started. Beginning with the idea of unlimited freedom, I end with unlimited despotism. I must add, however, there can be no other solution to the social problem except mine.”

Shigalyov¹

¹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Devils*, trans. Michael R. Katz, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1992, 426.

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Chapter One
Introduction

“Bill Gates, Microsoft co-founder and prominent philanthropist, lambasted the federal government Wednesday evening for its current dysfunction. ‘You don’t run a business like this,’ he said during POLITICO’s Playbook Cocktails. “This is a non-optimal path ... a business that is maximizing its output would proceed along a different path ... ‘In business, the idea of measuring what you are doing, picking the measurements that count like customer satisfaction and performance ... you thrive on that,’ he said.”²

““It seems like common sense to use evidence about what works to get better results...How could anyone be against it?”
Michele Jolin, Results for America³

“But have I not heard you say often that to solve a case a man has only to lie back in his chair and think? Do that. Interview the passengers on the train, view the body, examine what clues there are and then – well, I have faith in you! I am assured that it is no idle boast of yours. Lie back and think – use (as I have heard you say so often) the little grey cells of the mind – and you will *know!*”
M. Bouc⁴

² Jessica Meyers, “Bill Gates on D.C.: ‘You don’t run a business like this,’” *Politico*, March 3, 2013, retrieved at <http://www.politico.com/story/2013/03/bill-gates-on-dc-you-dont-run-a-business-like-this-88830.html>.

³ David Bornstein, “Can Governments Play Moneyball?” *The New York Times*, April 16, 2014, retrieved at <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/04/16/can-government-play-moneyball/>.

⁴ Agatha Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011, 57-8.

Part One: Political Rationalism in Unlikely Places

This thesis aims to enrich our understanding of “political rationalism,” a concept I draw from Michael Oakeshott. I do this by exploring depictions of political rationalism in works of fiction: in a play, an imaginary travelogue, a novel, and a film. These are the “unlikely places” to which the title points. The purpose of exploring fictional depictions of political rationalism is to better equip us to analyze, understand, and raise questions about, real life examples. To that end, this thesis’ conclusion departs from the world of fiction and turns to *The Federalist Papers*, which addresses itself to, and argues about, a real political community.

I. What is Political Rationalism?

Steven Pinker, Harvard University’s Johnstone Family Professor of Psychology, writes in *The New Republic*: “the worldview that guides the moral and spiritual values of an educated person today is the worldview given to us by science. Though the scientific facts do not by themselves dictate values, they certainly hem in the possibilities.” “The facts of science,” he claims, “undercut any moral or political system based on mystical forces, quests, destinies, dialectics, struggles, or messianic ages.” Later, he focuses specifically on the questions and problems of political life:

Take our understanding of politics...The new sciences of the mind are reexamining the connections between politics and human nature...The application of science to politics not only enriches our stock of ideas, but also offers the means to ascertain which of them are likely to be correct. Political debates have traditionally been deliberated through case studies, rhetoric, and what software engineers call HiPPO (highest-paid person’s opinion). Not

surprisingly, the controversies have careened without resolution...With the advent of data science – the analysis of large, open-access data sets of numbers or text – signals can be extracted from the noise and debates in history and political science can be resolved more objectively.⁵

In other words, according to Pinker, the techniques and findings of the natural sciences, applied to the domains of morality and politics, allow us to reach increasingly objective solutions to moral and political disputes. This turn to science holds out hope, then, that we may reach correct answers – not simply workable, or satisfactory, but *correct* – to questions having to do with morality and politics. Indeed, were we to entrust our political problems to scientists, we might today see them resolved in a fashion far closer to objective correctness than is our current practice.

This is an example of what is meant by “political rationalism”: the notion that the application of the correct formula or technique – in this case the techniques of modern natural science – will result in correct solutions to the problems or questions of political life.⁶ For the rationalist, there exists “a ‘body of rational principles’ concerning political activity and the administration of public affairs,” by

⁵ Steven Pinker, “Science is not the Enemy of the Humanities,” *The New Republic*, August 6, 2013. Retrieved at <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/114127/science-not-enemy-humanities>. I’ve compressed these quotations – those who wish to view the uncompressed version are encouraged to examine the full article.

⁶ I want to make it clear, following Oakeshott, that I’m talking here about specifically *modern* political rationalism; while I draw examples from antiquity, the term “classical political rationalism” has come to mean something quite different from what I discuss here. Michael Oakeshott, “Rationalism in Politics,” in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1991, 5; cf. Leo Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, ed. Thomas Pangle, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

reference to which principles we may “solve the political and governmental problems which confront mankind.”⁷ More succinctly, political rationalism is the “attempt to govern political society in the light of reason alone,” or the idea that politics is best and most fruitfully approached “on the basis of abstract, calculating reason alone...”⁸

One need not seek to apply the findings of natural science to politics in order to be a political rationalist. One need only believe, says Oakeshott, that the correct “technique of analysis” – whatever it may be – is the one thing needful in order to reach solutions to political questions; indeed, that politics ought to be understood as a set of technical problems amenable to technical solutions.⁹ “The conduct of affairs, for the rationalist,” says Oakeshott, “is a matter of solving problems...In this activity the character which the Rationalist claims for himself is the character of the engineer, whose mind (it is supposed) is controlled throughout by the appropriate technique and whose first step is to dismiss from his attention everything not directly related to his specific intentions.”¹⁰

We might think here of former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who “imagined that his brand of good governance would transcend ideological divisions. He attracted talented civil servants, applied rigorous metrics to every

⁷ Michael Oakeshott, “The Study of ‘Politics’ in a University,” in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 204. For the quotations, Oakeshott cites W.A. Robson, *The University Teaching of the Social Sciences – Political Science*, UNESCO, 1954, and H.J. Blackham, *Political Discipline in a Free Society*.

⁸ Peter J. Ahrens Dorf, “The Limits of Political Rationalism: Enlightenment and Religion in Oedipus the Tyrant,” *The Journal of Politics*, 66:3 (Aug., 2004), 773; Arlene W. Saxonhouse, “The Tyranny of Reason in the World of the Polis,” *The American Political Science Review*, 82:4 (Dec., 1988), 1272.

⁹ Oakeshott, “Rationalism in Politics,” 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

facet of their performance, and made government work”; in this, Bloomberg harkened back to the Progressive “vision of a government managed by disinterested experts who follow the dictates of empiricism...”¹¹ We might also recall the words of Bill Gates, quoted above, who laments the “non-optimal path” from which government might redirect itself by identifying and analyzing “the measurements that count” and thereby “maximizing its output.”¹² What we find here is a conceptualization of politics as a series of discrete problems amenable to technical solution and requiring the attention of those in possession of technical skills. People “need the Bloomborgs of the world to scrutinize the data on their behalf and figure out what is in their interest”; of one particularly unpopular policy, Bloomberg suggested: “Let’s try for a period of two years. We’ll measure the results and see if it works.”¹³ Politics here is resolved into data, measurements, results, and the ever-present question: does it work?

With this in mind, we return to Oakeshott’s characterization of the political rationalist as essentially blinkered: the practitioner of political rationalism ignores – indeed, thinks it a virtue to ignore – anything that might impede the resolution (or reduction) of political life into a set of technical problems about which we might reasonably ask whether a given solution “works.” The rationalist dismisses “from his attention everything not directly related to his specific intention”; the rationalist

¹¹ Jonathan Chait, “The Dashed Dreams of President Bloomberg,” *New York Magazine*, Sept. 8, 2013, retrieved at <http://nymag.com/news/politics/bloomberg/presidency-2013-9/>.

¹² Meyers, 2013.

¹³ Chait, 2013.

simplifies, reduces, abstracts, extracts principles and formulae from “the tangle and variety of experience.”¹⁴

II. The Turn to Analogy

In order to perform this abstraction, political rationalism often relies upon analogy. We turn here to Aristotle’s treatment in the *Politics* of Hippodamus of Miletus, who relies upon analogies between politics and mathematics, and between politics and medicine and gymnastic training, to suggest that measures be taken to encourage the proposing of new and better laws

Aristotle addresses Hippodamus’ analogical method by exploring his proposal that “those who discover something advantageous to the city...receive some honor,” and by posing the question that follows from this proposal: “whether it is harmful or advantageous for cities to change traditional laws, if some other one should be better.”¹⁵ Aristotle begins by following Hippodamus’ analogical thinking, and first considers whether “change might seem to be better.”

This has been advantageous, at any rate, in the other sciences – medicine, for example, has changed from its traditional ways, and gymnastic, and the arts and capacities generally, so that as political expertise too is to be regarded as one of these, it is clear that the same must necessarily hold concerning this as well.¹⁶

¹⁴ Oakeshott, “Rationalism in Politics,” 7, 6.

¹⁵ Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, Book 2, Chap. 8, Section 16, 1268b123-8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2, 8, 18, 1268b132-7.

But then he raises concerns specific to political life, concerns that obtain in politics but not in other arenas. Far from being simple, says Aristotle, the matter “would seem to require much caution.”

For when the improvement is small, and since it is a bad thing to habituate people to the reckless dissolution of laws, it is evident that some errors both of the legislators and of the rulers should be let go; for [the city] will not be benefited as much from changing them as it will be harmed through being habituated to disobey the rulers. And the argument from the example of the arts is false. Change in an art is not like change in law; for law has no strength with respect to obedience apart from habit, and this is not created except over a period of time. Hence the easy alteration of existing laws in favor of new and different ones weakens the power of law itself.¹⁷

The problem with Hippodamus’ analogies, says Aristotle, is that they have blinded him to considerations that are peripheral to his “specific intention” and yet extremely significant for the political community. In dealing analogically with politics, Hippodamus is able to isolate a well-defined problem and pose a perfectly calibrated solution, about which we are well equipped to ask: “Does it work?” But here resides the difficulty: Hippodamus’ solution may well “work,” in the sense that it addresses the specific problem he has identified; and yet, as Aristotle points out, it may still be a terrible idea.

In abstracting a discrete problem from the whole of political life, Hippodamus performs a procedure that might be acceptable in mathematics, or

¹⁷ Ibid., 2, 8, 22-24, 1269a14-24.

medicine, or the other arts. But this same procedure, for reasons Aristotle indicates, is inappropriate for politics. According to Leo Strauss, Hippodamus, while attempting to advance a “scheme...distinguished by its apparent simplicity and clarity,” in fact “arrives at utter confusion since he has not paid attention to the specific character of political things. He did not see that political things are in a class by themselves.”¹⁸

III. Technical vs. Practical Understandings of Politics

We can explain the turn to analogy characteristic of political rationalism by focusing on the kind of knowledge that political rationalism relies upon – along with the kind of knowledge, or prudence, that it obscures.

“Rationalism,” says Oakeshott, “is the assertion that...properly speaking, there is no knowledge which is not technical knowledge.”¹⁹ Technical knowledge, for Oakeshott, is the kind of knowledge that may be “formulated into rules which are, or may be, deliberately learned, remembered, and, as we say, put into practice; but whether or not it is, or has been, precisely formulated, its chief characteristic is that it is susceptible of precise formulation...”

The technique (or part of it) of driving a motor car on English roads is to be found in the Highway Code, the technique of cookery is contained in the cookery book, and the technique of discovery in natural science or in history is in their rules of research, of observation and verification²⁰

¹⁸ Leo Strauss, “The Origins of Political Science and the Problem of Socrates: Six Public Lectures by Leo Strauss,” lecture delivered October 27, 1958, in *Interpretation*, 23:2 (Winter 1996), 129-130

¹⁹ Oakeshott, “Rationalism in Politics,” 15.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

In contrast to technical knowledge, for Oakeshott, stands practical knowledge, which according to rationalism “is not knowledge at all.”²¹ Practical knowledge “exists only in use, is not reflective and (unlike technique) cannot be formulated into rules. This does not mean, however, that it is an esoteric sort of knowledge. It means only that the method by which it may be shared and becomes common knowledge is not the method of formulated doctrine.”²² This kind of knowledge has “the appearance of imprecision and consequently of uncertainty, of being a matter of opinion, of probability rather than truth”; technical knowledge, on the other hand, is “susceptible of precise formulation” and therefore has “at least the appearance of certainty: it appears to be possible to be certain about a technique.”²³

Hippodamus’ analogy between politics and mathematics, like Pinker’s between political life and the natural world, is drawn for the purpose of applying the techniques of one to the other: they are analogies that enable the application of mathematical or scientific techniques to politics. An often (but not always) unstated premise of such analogies is that the accumulation of technical knowledge in science or mathematics has outpaced (left at the starting gate, even) the accumulation of technical knowledge about political life. While mathematics and science become ever more technically precise, politics wallows in the mire of so-called practical knowledge. But, following the analogy, if we can say that politics is sufficiently similar to mathematics, or that political life is sufficiently similar to the natural world, we can then apply the same techniques that have resulted in such technical

²¹ Ibid., 15.

²² Ibid., 12.

²³ Ibid., 15.

precision in their native fields to the as yet untilled ground of politics. This has the potential to turn opinion, or hunch, or probability, into truth; for the rationalist, this is the path to “the only kind of knowledge which satisfies the standard of certainty which [he] has chosen.”²⁴

Returning to Aristotle yields a similar point: In addition to rejecting what Oakeshott calls practical knowledge, political rationalism rejects what Aristotle calls “prudence.”²⁵ The two are similar but not identical: Oakeshott’s practical knowledge is the portion of knowledge (about anything) that comes with practice, experience, and use; Aristotle distinguishes prudence from scientific knowledge by virtue of the fact that “what we know scientifically does not admit of being otherwise” or “exists of necessity,” while prudence is “concerned with things that admit of being otherwise.”²⁶ As distinct from science, which deals with matters of necessary truth, prudence is “a virtue of...the part [of the soul] involved in the formation of opinions.”²⁷

It is precisely this imprecision – this basis in opinion rather than necessary and indisputable truth – that suits prudence to political life:

The noble things and the just things, which the political art examines, admit of much dispute and variability...And even the good things admit of some

²⁴ Ibid., 16.

²⁵ The term is *phronēsis*. The Bartlett and Collins translation that I use here renders this as “prudence,” while Ross and Urmson use “practical wisdom.” *Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W.D. Ross and J.O. Urmson, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984.

²⁶ *Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 6, Chap. 4, 1139b21-5; 6, 6, 1140b35-1141a1.

²⁷ Ibid., 6, 5, 1140b25-7.

such variability on account of the harm that befalls many people as a result of them...It would certainly be desirable enough, then, if one who speaks about and on the basis of such things demonstrate the truth roughly and in outline, and if, in speaking about and on the basis of things that are for the most part so, one draw conclusions of that sort as well.²⁸

Prudence is what we ascribe to “Pericles and those of that sort,” since “they are able to observe the good things for themselves and those for human beings”; they can “deliberate nobly...about the sorts of things conducive to living well in general.”²⁹ Evaluating options and deciding what is to be done in a particular situation is prudence’s stock-in-trade:

[P]rudence is concerned with the human things and with those about which it is possible to deliberate. For we assert this to be the work of the prudent person especially – deliberating well – and nobody deliberates about things that cannot be otherwise, or about so many things as are without some end, an end, moreover, that is a good attainable through action...And prudence is not concerned with the universals alone but must also be acquainted with the particulars: it is bound up with action, and actions concerns the particulars.³⁰

²⁸ Ibid., 1, 3, 1094b15-23. “According to Aristotle’s view of politics as practiced in the world that we experience and about which he writes, there is no precise knowledge available to political rulers. Practical knowledge admits of no precise answers.” Arlene W. Saxonhouse, *Fear of Diversity: The Birth of Political Science in Ancient Greek Thought*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992, 207.

²⁹ Ibid., 6, 5, 1140b8-9; 1140a26-9.

³⁰ Ibid., 6, 7, 1141b10-17.

But because of prudence's imprecision – because it deals with opinions and particulars, rather than universal truths – the person of prudence may not be the person with scientific knowledge, and vice versa.

Hence even some who are without knowledge – those who have experience, among others – are more skilled in acting than are others who do have knowledge. For if someone should know that light meats are easily digestible and healthful, but is ignorant of what sorts are light, he will not produce health; rather, he who does know that poultry is light and healthful will to a greater degree produce health.³¹

In other words, sometimes a universally true insight – light meats are healthy – is no match for the simple conclusions of experience – chicken is healthy – when the goal is to produce a particular outcome in a particular situation. The point is to emphasize that prudence, since it is “bound up with action,” cannot do without particulars: the person of prudence is attuned to context, specifics, and circumstances. Contrast this with Oakeshott's rationalist, who believes that “the function of reason is precisely to surmount circumstances” – in other words, that true knowledge of politics consists not in sensitivity to particulars but rather in a grasp of universals such that any given set of particulars may be overcome.³²

The manner in which one attains prudence – an excellence of opinion about human things – is therefore starkly different from the manner in which one attains knowledge of matters about which universal truths are available:

³¹ Ibid., 6, 7, 1141b15-21.

³² Oakeshott, “Rationalism in Politics,” 10.

One sign of what has been said is the fact that the young become skilled in geometry and mathematics, and are wise in such things, but a young person does not seem to be prudent. The cause is that prudence is also of particulars, which come to be known as a result of experience, but a young person is inexperienced: a long period of time creates experience. And then someone might examine this as well: on account of what indeed might a boy become skilled in mathematics, but not wise or well versed in nature? Or is it because the former subjects exist through abstraction, whereas the principles of the latter come from experience?³³

The acquisition and employment of prudence stands in contrast to the abstraction employed by the mathematician seeking to demonstrate his theorems. But it is this very mode of abstraction that allows political rationalism to extract from the fullness of politics discrete problems susceptible to objectively correct solutions. It is this abstraction that allows the rationalist to ask, “does it work,” and to expect a coherent, demonstrable, and conclusive answer. Pinker urges this sort of abstraction upon us when he promises that by isolating discrete questions and answering them by analyzing data – by, in Oakeshott’s words, dismissing “from [our] attention everything not directly related to [our] specific intention” – “signals can be extracted from the noise and debates in history and political science can be resolved more objectively.”³⁴

³³ *Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, 6, 8, 1142a12-20. “Hence of the political art, a young person is not an appropriate student, for he is inexperienced in the actions pertaining to life, and the arguments are based on these actions and concern them” (1, 3, 1095a2-4).

³⁴ Oakeshott, “Rationalism in Politics,” 7; Pinker, 2013.

IV. Perfection, Uniformity, and Control

In urging us to embrace this sort of abstraction, political rationalism promises greater control over the vicissitudes of political life. In order to make this connection, we must first turn to Oakeshott's characterization of political rationalism as a politics of perfection and uniformity.

The rationalist tendency to abstraction in the name of objectivity, simplification in the name of precision, is why, for Oakeshott, "rationalist politics...are the politics of perfection, and they are the politics of uniformity..."³⁵ The rationalist "cannot imagine...politics which do not consist in solving problems, or a political problem of which there is no 'rational' solution at all...And the 'rational' solution of any problem is, in its nature, the perfect solution."³⁶ Once political life has been resolved into a finite set of problems, and once one of these problems has been isolated and a precise solution formulated – again, once we have asked and answered, "does it work" – we have naught to do but put our conclusions into practice.

This solution, further, will be applicable in any context in which "this" problem occurs: since rationalism abstracts from particulars in order to isolate its problem, it sees not a multiplicity of similar-but-importantly-different problems by virtue of different sets of particulars, but rather many iterations of this same problem, amenable to abstraction from their particular circumstances and the application of a perfect solution. "[T]here may not be one universal remedy for political ills, but the remedy for any particular ill is as universal in its application as

³⁵ Oakeshott, "Rationalism in Politics," 9.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

it is rational in its conception.”³⁷ “And from this politics of perfection springs the politics of uniformity: a scheme which does not recognize circumstance can have no place for variety.”³⁸ If the problems of politics can be perfectly solved – that is, can be transported from the realm of opinion, in which Aristotle locates political questions, to the realm of truth – then each solution, once reached, ought to put its problem to rest, not just here and now but everywhere and always.

If we can reach perfect solutions to the problems of politics, and if these solutions are applicable regardless of particular circumstances, then we will be increasingly resistant to the force of particulars, increasingly able to overcome the limits of circumstance.³⁹ Rather than making allowances for the half of our affairs that Machiavelli yields to fortune, we might hope to govern the entirety of human endeavors.⁴⁰ If we can discover the technical rules according to which political life proceeds – and political rationalism holds that this is simply a matter of applying the appropriate techniques of inquiry – what remains, as expressed above, is merely to

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ In this desire to distill unity out of variety in the name of control or mastery, the political rationalist has something in common with “the so-called nature philosophers or the pre-Socratics,” who, according to Saxonhouse, “saw in the vast diversity of the world the danger that the human mind could never comprehend such vastness. The task before them was to overcome that multiplicity and subdue the world to human understanding by simplifying and organizing the world we experience...The search for that one element, that from which all things emerge and into which all perish, could be understood as the drive for epistemological power over nature” (*Fear of Diversity*, 23-4).

⁴⁰ “Nonetheless, so that our free will not be eliminated, I judge that it might be true that fortune is arbiter of half of our actions, but also that she leaves the other half, or close to it, for us to govern.” Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, 98 (Chap. XXV).

isolate problems, apply the rules, reach a perfect and universally correct solution, and impose it in a uniform fashion.

An especially explicit example of this focus on universality and control can be found in Friedrich Engels' essay "Socialism: Utopian and Scientific," in which it is famously promised that "political rule over men" can, by the consistent application of the appropriate techniques, be resolved into a mere "administration of things."⁴¹ According to Engels, we have learned that "the economic structure of society always furnishes the real basis, starting from which we can alone work out the ultimate explanation of the whole superstructure of juridical and political institutions, as well as of the religious, philosophical, and other ideas of a given historical period."⁴² It is with reference to this universal principle – which "alone" is "always" true – that we can begin to discover the "inexorable natural laws" "inseparable" from each form of production.⁴³ Employing a now-familiar analogy, Engels explains that doubting these laws is as foolish and as futile as "expecting the electrodes of a battery not to decompose acidulated water..."⁴⁴ Both kinds of knowledge are part of "the positive science of Nature and history."⁴⁵

The immutable and eternal principles Engels identifies, like the laws discovered by natural science, are beyond our control. But just as understanding the workings of nature allows us to build batteries, the identification of these

⁴¹ Friedrich Engels, "Socialism: Utopian and Scientific," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1978, 689.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 699.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 705.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 708.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 699. These laws are also comparable to electricity (712).

principles allows us to exert control over political life. “Active social forces work exactly like natural forces,” Engels says:

[B]lindly, forcibly, destructively, so long as we do not understand, and reckon with, them. But when once we understand them, when once we grasp their action, their direction, their effects, it depends only upon ourselves to subject them more and more to our own will, and by means of them to reach our own ends.⁴⁶

For Engels, then, increasing our store of technical knowledge about politics – building upon the universal insight that has already been reached – is the route to greater control over, and indeed the uniform perfection of, political life: “Man’s own social organization, hitherto confronting him as a necessity imposed by Nature and history, now becomes the result of his own free action. The extraneous objective forces that have hitherto governed history pass under the control of man himself.”⁴⁷ This central promise of political rationalism – that as our technical knowledge of politics increases, so too will increase our ability to direct and control political life – will be a focal point of this thesis.

V. Context, Choice, and the Turn to Fiction

Works of fiction provide a particularly fruitful arena for exploring political rationalism. To explain why, we should begin with what Plato’s Socrates, in the *Republic*, calls the “old quarrel between philosophy and poetry.”⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Ibid., 712.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 715.

⁴⁸ *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom, New York: Basic Books, 1991, Book 10, 607b.

The central charge against poetry on behalf of philosophy, according to Socrates, is that poetry is imitative rather than educative, descriptive rather than explanatory. The “poetic man,” claims Socrates, is nothing more than an imitator. “He himself doesn’t understand; but he imitates in such a way as to seem, to men whose condition is like his own and who observe only speeches, to speak very well.”⁴⁹ Lacking understanding of that which he depicts, the poet “will imitate, although he doesn’t know in what way each thing is bad or good. But as it seems, whatever looks to be fair to the many who don’t know anything – that he will imitate.”⁵⁰ In his *Letter to D’Alembert*, Rousseau claims in similar fashion that the arts must pander to their audiences by imitating rather than attempting to educate: “To please them, there must be entertainments which promote their penchants, whereas what is needed are entertainments which would moderate them.”⁵¹ “Let no one then attribute to the theatre the power to change sentiments or morals [manners],” he continues, “which it can only follow and embellish.”⁵²

But it is this very capacity for imitation – for creating or recreating a particular context rather than distilling particulars into universal knowledge – that makes depictions of political rationalism in fiction the best ground on which to explore the rationalist tendency to abstraction, isolation, and simplification – and to evaluate rationalism’s promise of control. Such depictions situate political rationalism in particular contexts, in this or that particular community at this or that

⁴⁹ Ibid., 601a.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 602b.

⁵¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Letter to M. D’Alembert on the Theatre,” in *Politics and the Arts*, trans. Allan Bloom, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1960, 18.

⁵² Ibid., 19.

particular time: they locate political rationalism in a place, and bound it within a timeframe. As the action or narrative unfolds, we are faced with the kinds of idiosyncratic complications that show up, not everywhere and always, but at particular places and particular times, and we are asked – sometimes explicitly, sometimes not – to place political rationalism alongside our own practical intuitions.

In this sense, situating political rationalism in a particular context emphasizes human choices: those of the characters in the works we encounter, as well as our own imagined alternatives to these choices. This also returns us to Aristotle's prudence – an excellence in deliberating or choosing – and to a way of understanding political life that political rationalism attempts to delegitimize and obscure. Confronted with particular situations, and often in possession of imperfect or incomplete knowledge, we are forced to evaluate (and reevaluate, as the plot progresses) drawing upon our own experiences as human beings and citizens. We are asked to employ what prudence we have in order to judge a particular character's choices, to form expectations of a particular situation, to ask what we ourselves would say or do in this character's place at this particular time.

Denying the centrality of human choice to political life, political rationalism promises that if the appropriate techniques are adopted and formulae followed, success will be achieved not because of the virtue of "the many who don't know anything," but *regardless* of it (or of its absence). It is through technique, and not through education or enlightenment – in other words, not through the cultivation of an excellence in choosing – that political rationalism claims to "guarantee the

actualization of wisdom.”⁵³ In depicting particular contexts in which particular characters make particular choices, and in inviting us to evaluate these choices and imagine our own, fiction provokes us to examine this claim as it plays out in (imaginary) practice.

VI. Political Rationalism and Political Education

To get a sense of what’s at stake in our examination of political rationalism, we can follow Hilary Putnam (by way of Stephen Salkever), who brings to our attention “the idea that it is built into the very idea of rationality that what is rationally verifiable is verifiable to the satisfaction of the overwhelming majority.” For Salkever, this idea manifests in a dichotomy between “logical empiricism (the notion that explanation is ‘simply the deduction of predictions and retrodictions from laws’) and relativism or contextualism...(the notion that to explain is to point out the coherence of a particular cultural system)...”⁵⁴ It is not difficult to find this dichotomy in Pinker’s opposition between science – which is alone in its ability to offer valid prescriptions, as it allows us to deduce predictions from laws (or law-like generalizations) established through the proper techniques of analysis – and “case studies, rhetoric, and what software engineers call HiPPO (highest-paid person’s opinion,” all of which may bring to light or serve as explanations for particular circumstances, but none of which can offer evaluative tools, as they do not consist in deductions from previously established laws.

⁵³ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953, 171.

⁵⁴ Stephen G. Salkever, *Finding the Mean*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990, 28. Both quotations are from Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History*.

Embracing this dichotomy obviates any consideration of prudence, since prudence is an excellence in deliberating or choosing among matters of opinion, or “a virtue of...the part [of the soul] involved in the formation of opinions.” But for Pinker, and for those who subscribe to the neat opposition Salkever delineates, there is no such thing as better or worse opinions: our choices are merely (and entirely) between truth, understood along the lines of technical knowledge, and the endless multiplicity of unverifiable opinions, which are all equally good and equally bad, since our explanations of them (“the coherence of a particular cultural system,” “rhetoric,” “highest-paid-person’s opinion”) offer us no conceivable criteria by which we might evaluate them – and indeed, no sense that such evaluation might be possible or necessary.

Accepting these premises directs our attention entirely to the content of any given choice, and away – unless we wish to abandon the evaluative enterprise – from the identity or characteristics of the chooser. This is of a piece with the notion that “what is rationally verifiable is verifiable to the satisfaction of the overwhelming majority.” In a world in which we recognize only technical knowledge and undifferentiated opinions, any person provided with the appropriate formulae or techniques should be able to make objectively correct choices, all of the time. One might, without much difficulty, imagine a gigantic chart (or a somewhat smaller computer) that contains all of our technical knowledge about political life: in this situation, it doesn’t matter who governs, since all they have to do is identify a problem, connect it with the governing law, and apply the solution.

A consideration of prudence, in contrast, directs our attention to distinctions between people at least as much as to the content of particular choices. It is quite possible that the conclusions of prudence might not be “verifiable to the satisfaction of the overwhelming majority,” since, as Socrates reminds us, it may be that “the many...don’t know anything.” Prudence is a virtue: it is an attribute or capacity cultivated over time, and therefore some people have more and other people have less.⁵⁵ Turning to Oakeshott’s “practical knowledge” yields a similar point: anyone, in principle, can acquire technical knowledge, since it can be easily and perfectly communicated in a book (or chart, or computer); practical knowledge, on the other hand, “exists only in use” and “cannot be formulated into rules,” and is therefore sharply limited both in its means of acquisition and in its methods of communication. This does not mean, as Oakeshott notes, that practical knowledge cannot be taught, but rather that “the method by which it may be shared and becomes common knowledge is not the method of formulated doctrine.” Practical knowledge is acquired by practicing, just as prudence emerges from the practical activity of making choices.

⁵⁵ The implications of this are not necessarily undemocratic. Discussing Aristotle’s response to Plato’s *Republic*, Saxonhouse writes: “Since...rulers have no special or unique...access to universal knowledge, they can exchange places with the ruled, not because there will be no difference between Tweedledee and Tweedledum, but rather because there will be those differences. The knowledge that one has will not be identical to that of the other. In Socrates’ city, exchange of rule does not matter since the object is uniform and whoever ‘sees’ that object knows the same things as all others. Denying the uniformity of an unchanging object of political science, Aristotle again denies the uniformity of the participants in the activity of politics. The regular change in rulers will have beneficial consequences for the city precisely because different rulers will have different responses to the practical problems that confront all political actors” (*Fear of Diversity*, 207).

The two understandings sketched above point to two very different notions of political education – indeed, two very different notions of the kind of education most beneficial for the political community. If we find the first understanding more persuasive, political education should consist entirely in increasing our stock of technical knowledge about politics and disseminating this knowledge as widely as possible; if we find the second understanding more persuasive, political education should consist in cultivating, as widely as possible, an excellence in choosing. In the first case, the citizens of our polity may be left alone: we need urgently to study them, to observe their behavior and learn its laws, but we need not attempt in any way to interfere with this behavior, other than to share our conclusions. In the second case, we must seek both to involve our citizens in politics and to elevate this involvement through reflection, as what is needed, most of all, is practice in reflective deliberation and thoughtful choosing.

This is not all that is at stake in a consideration of political rationalism. The implications of political rationalism for political education are merely one part of its implications for the political community. To begin to explore these implications, we turn here to our first work of fiction, which is a comic depiction of the clash between rationalism and citizenship.

Part Two: Political Rationalism in Aristophanes' *The Clouds*

According to Leo Strauss, "Aristophanes [in *The Clouds*] presents Socrates in about the same light in which Aristotle presents Hippodamus from Miletus, as a

student of nature as a whole who fails to understand the political things.”⁵⁶ *The Clouds* also foreshadows Nietzsche’s presentation of Socrates, in which Socrates appears as “the prototype of the rationalist,” who believes that “thinking can not only fully understand being, but can even correct it; life can be guided by science...”⁵⁷ *The Clouds* dramatizes the effects and consequences of a particular brand of political rationalism within the Athenian political community; or rather, it shows us the collision between political rationalism and the political community. If Oakeshott’s rationalist urges us to abstract from any given set of circumstances, Aristophanes’ play shows us political rationalism embedded in the particular circumstances of 5th century Athens; and indeed, overcome by these circumstances.

I. Strepsiades’ Socratic Turn

The Clouds opens late at night, in the home of Strepsiades, an Athenian citizen. Though the hour is late, Strepsiades is unable to sleep, consumed by worry over the debts accrued by Pheidippides, his spendthrift son. Strepsiades, it becomes clear, is none-too-sharp and more than a touch uncouth, a more or less average sort with the misfortune to have married a well-born woman and spawned an offspring

⁵⁶ Leo Strauss, “The Problem of Socrates: Five Lectures” (second lecture), in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, 126. “The Aristophanean Socrates is characterized by an amazing lack of *phronesis*, of practical wisdom or prudence” (121); see also 124-5, and Leo Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966, 49. This Socrates is the “pre-Socratic Socrates,” “before he ever raised the question of what a perfect gentleman is, i.e., a question comprising all the inquiries of the kind to which he dedicated himself entirely after his break with natural philosophy (*Socrates and Aristophanes*, 4).

⁵⁷ Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, 7. “Yet, whereas Aristophanes presents the young Socrates, Nietzsche’s attack is directed against the Platonic Socrates: Nietzsche, whose *The Birth of Tragedy* is almost silent about comedy, uses Aristophanes’ critique of the young Socrates as if it had been meant as a critique of the Platonic Socrates” (8).

obsessed with horses, chariots, and pursuits more suited to those whose parents' means exceed the average. Our first impression of Strepsiades is of overwhelming conventionality: his way of speaking, his oaths to the gods, even his problems – a wife whose tastes run to the extravagant, a son, favored and spoiled by his mother, who spends money on the foolish impulses of youth – are conventional.

Also conventional are the concerns that lead him to seek out Socrates, that infamous flouter of convention. Strepsiades has discovered “one straight path, daimonically preternatural,” he tells his son, by which he won't have to “give anyone back even an obol / of those debts that I owe because of you” (76, 117-8).⁵⁸ Indicating Socrates' “thinkery,” a sort of compound in which he instructs his students, Strepsiades explains to Pheidippides: “In there dwell men who by speaking / persuade one that the heaven is a stove / and that it is around us, and we are charcoals. / If someone gives them money, they teach him / how to win both just and unjust causes by speaking” (94-9). What Strepsiades knows of Socrates and his students is indicative both of Strepsiades' conventionality, his commonness, and of the common and conventional understanding of Socrates' activities: he circulates novel, naturalistic, and mildly blasphemous accounts of the cosmos, and he teaches (for pay) how to use rhetoric in the service of deceit.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Aristophanes, “The Clouds,” in *Four Texts on Socrates*, trans. Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998. All subsequent references to *The Clouds* refer to this translation, with line numbers noted in parentheses.

⁵⁹ Or, if we prefer: “Socrates does injustice and is meddlesome, by investigating the things under the earth and the heavenly things, and by making the weaker speech the stronger, and by teaching others these same things,” just as was seen “in the comedy of Aristophanes...” Plato, “Apology of Socrates,” in *Four Texts on Socrates*, 19b-c.

Strepsiades' original plan is to send his son to receive a Socratic education. Pheidippides refuses, recoiling in the distaste the athletic sons of decent Athenians must all feel for Socrates and his pupils: "Ugh! Villains, I know. They're boasters, / pale, shoeless men that you're speaking of, / and among them that miserably unhappy Socrates and Chaere- / phon" (102-5). So Strepsiades, after praying to the gods for success – recall again his unceasing conventionality – sets out himself for the thinkery.

When Strepsiades' knock on the thinkery door is answered, and he finds himself in conversation with one of Socrates' students, we immediately learn a great deal about the character of the activities that take place within. In the first place, a great many of them are secret: some things are "not sanctioned to say, except to the students"; others are "Mysteries" (140, 144). As the student relates the experiment Strepsiades is interrupting, we also learn that Socrates and his pupils are preoccupied with animals, and with animal – that is, biological – processes. "Just now," says the student, "Socrates was asking Chaerephon / how many of its own feet a flea could leap"; Chaerephon himself had inquired whether "gnats / hum through their mouth or through their behind" (144-5, 157-8). Socrates answers these questions through experiment and measurement, and also through deduction from biological and anatomical principles. The denizens of the thinkery are also greatly concerned with the heavens – recall Strepsiades' earlier claim about the stove and the charcoals. Sometimes the concern for the heavens overlaps with both the concern for animals and the concern for animal processes: As Socrates "was investigating the courses / and revolutions of the moon and was gaping upwards, /

a lizard (it was night) crapped on him from the roof" (171-3). Strepsiades, naturally, is terribly "pleased by a lizard crapping on Socrates" (174).

With all this talk of animals and animal imperatives, it is understandable that Strepsiades, upon entering the thinkery and getting a good look at the rest of the students, forgets the difference between men and animals: "Heracles," he exclaims, "Where do these beasts come from?" (184) He finds the students obtuse; he cannot square their esoteric pursuits with his concern for the conventional and quotidian. Told that students are "investigating the things beneath the earth," he responds: "Then it's vegetable bulbs. / Don't give it any more thought now, / for I know where there are big and beautiful ones" (188-190). This is something the students aren't interested in, but it's also something they wouldn't know, as (unlike the healthy Pheidippides) "its not possible for them to spend / very much time outside in the air" (198-9).

The following exchange between Strepsiades and one of Socrates' students is worth quoting at length:

STREP. Before the gods, what are these things? Tell me.

STUDENT. This is astronomy.

STREP. And what is this?

STUDENT. Geometry.

STREP. So what's the use of it?

STUDENT. To measure the earth.

STREP. For the land-allotment?

STUDENT. No, all of it.

STREP. That's a pretty trick

you speak of: for it's populist and useful.

STUDENT. Here's a map of the whole earth. See?

Here's Athens.

STREP. What are you saying? I'm not persuaded,
since I don't see any judges sitting.

STUDENT. Truly, this *is* the area of Attica.

STREP. And where are my fellow demesmen of Cicyнна?

STUDENT. They're in here. And Euboea here, as you see,
is long and laid out quite far.

STREP. I know, for it was laid out by us and Pericles.

But Lacedaemon – where is it?

STUDENT. Where is it? Here.

STREP. So near us! Give thought to how
to take it quite far away from us.

STUDENT. But that's impossible.

STREP. By Zeus, you'll lament, then! (200-18)

This exchange brings to the fore many of the central themes of Strepsiades' encounter with the thinkery. Invoking the gods – again – Strepsiades inquires about the interests of Socrates and his students. When abstract areas of study are named – astronomy, which concerns itself with the heavens; geometry, which focuses on forms and figures – Strepsiades wants to know their uses, how they can be applied to the practical concerns that characterize and bound his existence. Strepsiades

wants to localize, to connect things to his city and its customs and ends; he cannot conceive of a skill outside of its usefulness to him or to his community. Thus measuring the earth connects immediately to the Athenian land-allotment, and the location of Lacedaemon connects immediately to the Athenian concern for security.⁶⁰ Euboea, for Strepsiades, is significant not by virtue of its geographical position in an indifferent rendering, but rather because Pericles led an Athenian campaign to secure it.⁶¹ It simply makes no sense to Strepsiades to think about Athens in the abstract, as one area out of many on a map, without thinking of the particular institution of law courts, nor does it make sense to think of an abstract Attica without inquiring immediately about *his* deme and *his* fellows. Strepsiades cannot grasp the cosmopolitan presentation of the student, in which Athens is a place on a map like any other, distinct from Lacedaemon only by geographical happenstance. He exhibits an overriding concern for what is his own: his family, his deme and his demesmen, his city and its imperatives – and his fiscal obligations, which drew him to the thinkery in the first place. He seems the embodiment of Aristotle’s observation that we care most for the things that are our own.⁶²

Another way of approaching this is to note that Socrates and his students are relentlessly impersonal and depersonalizing, insofar as they concern themselves, so far as is possible, with the disembodied, the detached, the universal rather than the

⁶⁰ “[Strepsiades] becomes at once keenly interested in the arts of measuring and mapping the earth or the land, which affect him in his capacity as patriotic citizen: Socrates and his pupils lack that motive in their studies...For Socrates, Strepsiades and the Spartan danger are equally contemptible because they are both ephemeral” (Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, 15).

⁶¹ I’m indebted to West and West’s notes for this bit of information – see footnote 44 on p. 124.

⁶² See *The Politics*, Book 2, Chap. 5, Sections 1-10; see also Saxonhouse, 201.

particular. Socrates is concerned with animals – and more, he is concerned with the animal processes of physical motion, the generation of sound, and digestion. These processes are common to beasts and men, and focusing on these processes allows Socrates to consider universal questions about living beings rather than particular questions about *this* kind of living being (human) in *this* particular city (Athens), with these particular gods, demes, families, etc.⁶³ Strepsiades unwittingly demonstrates this tendency toward the universal, and thus toward the obscuring of distinctions, when he erases the boundary between men and beasts in his exclamation upon entering the thinkery. The concerns of the thinkery's denizens with the heavens, and with the things beneath the earth, are yet another indication of their focus on the universal and the impersonal – the heavens are above all of us, the earth below all of us – rather than the particular characteristics of the city in which they live, and the human beings by which they are surrounded. Strepsiades tries vainly to connect their inquiries to the needs of the city and the citizens – recall his insistence that they join him in gathering vegetables – but his horizons and theirs are irreconcilable. Socrates and his students are absorbed by the biological processes of fleas and lizards, but they are oblivious to the physical needs and desires (for vegetables, for instance) of their fellow Athenians. Strepsiades cannot understand the desire for knowledge beyond such knowledge as has immediate bearing on – and can be an immediate help to – himself, his family, or his city.

⁶³ It is worth noting that Strepsiades, too, evinces a profound interest in biological functions, but they are always his own functions: Strepsiades is deeply concerned with his own excretory needs and habits.

The juxtaposition here is stark: Strepsiades is entirely of his community and its conventions and particularities, a satiric representation of the average and utterly unexceptional Athenian, while the denizens of the thinkery are entirely outside of the Athenian community and concerned neither with its conventions nor its particulars. The thinkery is a city unto itself, in Athens but not of Athens.⁶⁴ And now we meet Socrates himself, who appears suspended in a basket above the scene, and explains that he has been “tread[ing] on air and contemplat[ing] the sun” (225). Strepsiades, interpreting these comments in light of conventional piety and therefore as blasphemous, responds: “Then you look down on the gods from a perch / and not from the earth? – if that’s what you’re doing” (226-7).

And here is where the trouble starts, in one line, when Strepsiades bids Socrates: “Come now, Socratesie, come down to me” (237).

Thus begins the collision between two irreconcilable worlds, pictured here as the interaction between two comically exaggerated representatives. Socrates begins immediately to attack Strepsiades’ conventional understandings of the gods – an attack to which, by virtue of his thoughtlessness, Strepsiades is at least partly immune. “[W]e don’t credit gods,” Socrates explains, and asks: “Do you wish to know divine matters plainly, / to know correctly what they are?” (248, 250-1) “Yes, by Zeus,” Strepsiades obliviously responds, though he wonders: “What do you swear

⁶⁴ “Socrates...is wholly unconcerned with the city or the family...He is concerned above all with knowledge of things aloft and, secondarily, with the art of speaking. His concern calls for an association radically different from the family, the association with his fellow students or pupils. They live by themselves...despising all ephemeral things, practicing continence and endurance to the highest degree...They know of no obligation to outsiders; they recognize only the rights of those who know” (Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, 48).

with?" (252, 249) Socrates explains that he and his students take their bearings from "measureless Air, who holds the / earth aloft, and bright Aether, and august goddesses Clouds," these "much-honored Clouds," who appear on stage and serve as the play's chorus (263-5, 269). The Clouds "alone are goddesses," says Socrates: "everything else is drivel," and "Zeus doesn't even exist" (365-7).⁶⁵ Strepsiades wonders whether "Olympian Zeus" isn't, as he has always believed, "a god for us," and confesses that he'd always understood rain as "Zeus...pissing through a / sieve" (366, 373). This, too, shows his preoccupations: Zeus is (or was) a god "for us," a god attached to the particular community that worships him – and is (or was) understood by Strepsiades as a sort of bigger version of himself, with the same urges and imperatives. The same point comes up when Socrates explains that "ethereal vortex" compels the movements of the Clouds, which are "borne along by necessity" – and then Strepsiades exclaims: "Vortex? I hadn't noticed that / Zeus doesn't exist, and that instead of him Vortex is now king" (377-380). Socrates takes his bearings from impersonal, universal (and, as West and West point out, deterministic) nature, while Strepsiades takes his bearings from himself, and from the relationships visible in the human communities with which he is familiar.⁶⁶

When Socrates *does* turn his attention to the human, it is in the service of establishing a correspondence between human beings and the natural world, such

⁶⁵ Later, Socrates identifies his gods as "this Chaos, and the Clouds, and the Tongue, these three" (424). According to West and West's helpful notes, "Chaos: the word means 'space' or 'sky.' In Hesiod Chaos is that which first comes into being, before all gods (*Theogony* 116)." This is note 77 on p. 133.

⁶⁶ West and West, note 70 on p. 131.

that both can be comprehended by the same universal logic. Trying to explain thunder and lightning to Strepsiades, Socrates says:

I will teach you from yourself. / Have you ever been filled up with stew at the Panathenaea, and / then your belly was stirred up, / and suddenly an agitation rumbled through it...Then consider, since you have farted so much from such a / little belly, / isn't it likely that this air, being boundless, / should thunder greatly...Whenever a dry wind is raised aloft and gets shut up into / these clouds, / it puffs them up inside like a bladder; then by necessity / it bursts them and goes rapidly outside because of its density, / and by its rushing and impetus it itself kindles itself. (385-407)

It is not only between human beings and the natural world that Socrates attempts to impose a commonality and therefore a common logic. His goal, with Strepsiades, is to render him indistinguishable from his other students: "Your nature," he explains, "won't be any different from Chaerephon's" (503). Thus Strepsiades, who wants only to "give my creditors the slip," will be brought to abandon his practical, quotidian concerns and immerse himself in questions of universal import (434). Oakeshott's mention of perfection and uniformity should come to mind: In educating Strepsiades toward the unitary logic that drives all aspects of the universe – in teaching him the correct technique for understanding everything – Socrates intends to render him identical to, interchangeable with, his other students. In relating the uniform knowledge of the universe, Socrates will perfect Strepsiades, and in perfecting him, he will cast him in the uniform mold of a Socratic student.

But Strepsiades isn't interested in being perfected. He wants only to learn the sort of rhetoric that will allow him to escape his debts. In bidding Socrates to "come down to me," he rejects the ascent that Socrates offers: up from the particulars of *his* desires, *his* family and community, and toward the disinterested study of the universal. Instead, he wants Socrates to "come down" – to apply the techniques at his disposal to understanding politics in the way that he has understood nature, and therefore to provide Strepsiades with the knowledge to manipulate other members of the political community. And this Socrates is willing to do: "You will become a smooth, rattling, fine-as-flour speaker," he promises (260). But Socrates is serious about the unitary nature of the knowledge he possesses, and he refuses to teach Strepsiades about rhetoric – indeed, seems to think such a thing is impossible – without first teaching him about the whole of which rhetoric is a part. In other words, Socrates will not – cannot – teach Strepsiades anything about politics without first teaching him the knowledge of nature from which knowledge of politics is analogically derived. When Strepsiades demands to learn "The most unjust speech," Socrates insists: "you must learn other things before that..." (658-9)

As it turns out, Strepsiades is unable to learn these other things – or indeed, to learn much of anything at all. He is too old, too rustic, too set in his ways to absorb new ideas, especially ideas as radical as those entertained in the thinkery. He is therefore expelled from the establishment, and advised to send his son in his place – for the concerns of the thinkery are "matters / fit for those younger than

he..." (515-6)⁶⁷ Strepsiades leaves the thinkery and returns home, intent on convincing Pheidippides to seek a Socratic education in his stead.

II. The Education of Pheidippides

When Strepsiades goes home to collect his son, he is a changed man, and he enthusiastically shares the parodic version of a Socratic education that he has absorbed. "What foolishness," he exclaims to his son, "believing in Zeus at your age"; "you're like a little child and think ancient things" (818-820). To prove further the value of his newfound knowledge, Strepsiades shows Pheidippides a rooster and a hen, and asks:

STREP. Come, let me see. What do you believe this is? Tell me.

[Points to the rooster.]

PHEID. A chicken.

STREP. Beautiful! And what is this? *[Pointing to the hen.]*

PHEID. A chicken.

STREP. Both the same? You're ridiculous.

Not so, from now on. Call this one

"chickeness" and that one "rooster" (847-851).

This exchange is significant because Strepsiades is correctly pointing out a conceptual inconsistency: roosters and hens are both called chickens, except sometimes a rooster is called a rooster and in this fashion distinguished from a chicken. In other words, roosters are sometimes chickens and sometimes not, and hens are always chickens, but sometimes calling them chickens instead of hens

⁶⁷ Contrast Aristotle's prudence, of which a "young person" is seldom in possession, with the knowledge taught in the thinkery, which is suited only to the young.

confuses the issue. To clarify things on a linguistic level – to make this particular example fit the universal rule of perfect conceptual and linguistic clarity – it makes sense to adopt Strepsiades' scheme. But since the scheme departs so sharply from practice, its actual effect would be only to confuse, which is made clear by Pheidippides' incredulity. In practice, the context in which a given conversation occurs tends to obviate any confusion over whether or not a rooster is a chicken or a chicken is a hen. Whatever else he may have picked up at the thinkery, Strepsiades has clearly not learned how to apply rules to practice in a useful fashion, or how to thoughtfully link universals to particulars. The rationalist cast of mind he has absorbed from Socrates – the attention to universal formulae, technical rules and principles – has made him less, not more, able to engage coherently with the world around him.

But he's still very much focused on avoiding his debts, and so he marches his son over to the thinkery and explains to Socrates: "He's to learn the two speeches: / the stronger, whatever it may be, and the weaker, / which argues the unjust things and overturns the stronger. / If not both, he's to learn at least the unjust one by every art" (881-5).

Promising to teach Pheidippides as his father desires, Socrates departs, and is replaced by Just Speech and Unjust Speech, come in person to make their respective cases. Unjust Speech here is in his element, claiming that he will "destroy" Just Speech "by speaking among the many," who he says are "wise," against Just Speech's contention that the many are "mindless" (891, 896-7). While Just Speech holds that Unjust Speech is "too bold," Unjust Speech responds that Just

Speech is “ancient,” and denies that “Justice even exists” (914-5, 901). Just Speech promises to deliver an “ancient education,” carrying forward the things that “fathers” have “handed down”; Unjust Speech promises the “pleasures” that Just Speech eschews, and also claims to provide for “the necessities of nature”:

You’ve done wrong, fallen in love, committed some adultery, and / then
you’ve been caught. / You’re ruined, for you’re unable to speak. But if you
consort with / me, / then use your nature, leap, laugh, believe that nothing is
shameful! / For if you happen to be caught as an adulterer, you’ll reply to /
him / that you’ve done him no injustice. Then you’ll refer him to Zeus, / how
“even he was worsted by love and women; / yet how could you, a mortal, be
greater than a god?” (961, 967, 1072, 1075-1081)

Naturally, Strepsiades is convinced, as his concern has always been for his son to argue his way out of difficulty. But as Socrates returns to the stage, it becomes clear that Unjust Speech promises yet more than this: In addition to success in lawsuits, Pheidippides will also learn how to excel in politics. Thus Strepsiades instructs Socrates to “sharpen him up well for me: on the one side, / sharpen his jaw for petty lawsuits, / and on the other, for the greater matters” (1108-1110). Socrates, for his part, promises, as he leads away the still reluctant Pheidippides, to return the boy “as a shrewd sophist” (1111).

Time passes – perhaps days or even weeks – and then Pheidippides is returned to his father, Socrates pronouncing his education complete. Though he is eager to make use of his son’s skills, Strepsiades first encounters his creditors alone, when they arrive unannounced at his home, one after the other. Trying to fend the

men off on the basis of Socratic principles, Strepsiades reminds us why he was an unsuccessful student. He is aware of having learned universal knowledge – truths about nature and the cosmos that apply at all times and in all places – but he’s comically unclear about how to connect these truths to the particular situation in front of him. Thus he informs his first creditor – while continuing to swear by Zeus himself – that “swearing by Zeus is laughable to those who know,” and then, having driven the first away, demands of the second creditor: “How then is it just for you to get your money back / if you know nothing of the matters aloft?” (1241, 1283-4) Strepsiades is sure that he’s learned something universally significant – there are no gods, the cosmos is animated by the deterministic and amoral forces of physical nature – and he senses, correctly, that this has bearing on justice and injustice in the city, but he can’t make the link in a coherent way. Unfortunately for Strepsiades, his son has no such difficulty.

Strepsiades eventually drives his second creditor away with an animal prod, and goes back inside his house, only to emerge a moment later in shock and outrage. Pheidippides, it seems, has beaten his father! And now, following his father outside of the house, he promises to make it clear to Strepsiades that “I was beating you with justice” (1333). “How pleasant it is,” Pheidippides says, “to consort with novel and shrewd / matters / and to be able to look down on the established laws” (1399-1400). He explains his departure from the established laws – which forbid father-beating – as follows:

PHEID. ...first I will ask you this: did you beat me when I was a boy?

STREP. Yes, I did; I was well-intentioned and concerned for you.

PHEID. Then tell me,
isn't it also just for me likewise to be well-intentioned toward you
and to beat you, since in fact to be well-intentioned is to beat?
For why should *your* body be unchastised by blows,
but not mine? And in fact I too was born free.
Children weep: does it seem fit to you that a father not weep?
You will say that it is the law that this is a boy's work,
but *I* would say in return, "Old men are children twice."
And it's more appropriate for the old to weep than the young,
inasmuch as it's less just for them to do wrong.
STREP. But nowhere is it the law that the father suffer this.
PHEID. Wasn't he who first set down this law a man
like you and me, and didn't he persuade those of long ago by
speaking?
Is it any less allowable for me too, then, to set down in turn
for the future a novel law for sons to beat their fathers in return?
...
Consider the chickens and the other beasts:
they defend themselves against their fathers. Yet how do they
differ
from us, except that they do not write decrees? (1408-1429)

Pheidippides here is setting nature against convention: in this sense, his argument is as notable for what it leaves out as for what it includes.⁶⁸ In emphasizing the commonality between fathers and children – both have bodies that feel pain, both weep, neither are slaves – he obscures the essential difference between fathers and children, which is that fathers are fathers and children are children. In taking his bearings from a combination of impersonal physical facts and abstract legal statuses, Pheidippides downplays the quite personal and particular relationship between child and parent.

The abstraction Pheidippides performs here is of a piece with the abstraction practiced by the political rationalist. In seeking to isolate the particular problem he has articulated – should sons beat their fathers? – he “dismiss[es] from his attention everything not directly related to his specific intentions.”⁶⁹ The elements of the issue that appear relevant to him – fathers and sons both have bodies, both feel pain, both weep, neither are slaves – are those that consist in easily and accurately verifiable facts. Precise information of this nature promises a precise answer to the question at hand. The relation between fathers and children, meanwhile, is not nearly as precise. It emerges from nature, but its content is not defined or dictated by nature in a manner that is “verifiable to the satisfaction of the overwhelming majority.”⁷⁰ While the fact of feeling pain follows necessarily from the universal and deterministic laws of physical nature, the nature of the father-son relationship cannot be straightforwardly deduced from any universal truth about the world.

⁶⁸ In setting nature against convention, Pheidippides imitates Unjust Speech, who “appeals from law to nature” (Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, 32).

⁶⁹ Oakeshott, “Rationalism in Politics,” 9.

⁷⁰ Salkever, 28.

Describing the father-son relationship, and developing a sense of what it should be and what its imperatives are, depends upon experience – and more, upon experience within a particular community and with particular relationships, since the nature of the father-son relation varies between communities and even between families. This experience, these particulars in all their variations and idiosyncrasies, are precisely what Pheidippides needs to abstract from in order to formulate his technical response to what he frames as a technical problem.

That this abstraction rests on analogy is made clear by Pheidippides' final point. We are reminded here of Strauss' remark that Socrates in *The Clouds* resembles Hippodamus of Miletus: both men set up analogies between political life and something about which technical knowledge is more readily available, such that politics is dealt with on terms other than its own. Pheidippides, taught by Socrates, draws an analogy between human beings and animals, and therefore between animal organization and human life in the familial and political communities. The difference, he claims, is conventional and insignificant: human beings legislate their actions while animals simply act. This difference works to obscure rather than reveal the bottom truth, which is that human beings are basically pretentious chickens. The analogy between human beings and animals reduces these pretensions – which, by implication, include the abundance of roles, feelings, experiences, and expectations in which consists the parent-child relationship – to what Engels might call “superstructure,” except the objective truth underneath is physical-biological-natural rather than economic.

The effect of this analogy, and the abstraction it enables, is to make father-son relationships – indeed, all conventions both familial and political – a matter best addressed by technical knowledge rather than prudence. To navigate the traditional version of the parent-child relationship – the version from which emerges Strepsiades’ outrage at being struck – one needs a measure of prudence, which will be connected with a particular time and place because customs and conventions vary at different times and in different places. One needs to be able to make good choices in situations in which no necessary or objective answer is apparent, and thus one needs the education in making good parental choices that emerges from experience and community. But to navigate the version of the parent-child relationship that Pheidippides proposes, one grounded in the facts of physical nature rather than imprecise and changeable convention, one needs the sort of knowledge that comes by study rather than by experience. Rather than an education in making good choices, one needs training in deducing conclusions from universally true premises; rather than learning to navigate imprecision and uncertainty, one needs the training to derive precise guidance from certain knowledge.

It is easy to draw the connection between Pheidippides’ claim to technically precise solutions to political/familial questions and what Oakeshott calls a “politics of uniformity.” In making salient the physical or biological characteristics of human beings, which features humans share with animals, Pheidippides abstracts from custom, from convention, from “the tangle and variety of experience.”⁷¹ Convention

⁷¹ Oakeshott, “Rationalism in Politics,” 6.

varies with circumstance, whereas the techniques Pheidippides learned in the thinkery attempt to ascend from the contingencies of convention to the necessities of nature: think of the abstract geometry, the map on which Athens appears interchangeable with other cities, the “measureless Air” in place of the particular and personified Zeus. The abstraction from convention, for Socrates and Pheidippides, is an attempt to transcend the limits of circumstance, and “a scheme which does not recognize circumstance can have no place for variety.”⁷² In his unjust speech in defense of father-beating, Pheidippides makes a claim not simply to truth, but to *the* truth, to the truth that emerges from a universally true account of nature and thus resolves all questions, at all times and all places.

III. Athens and the Thinkery

Socrates had promised Strepsiades an opportunity to control his fate, to reverse the misfortune that had afflicted him. Pheidippides would be taken into the thinkery and taught the truth about the cosmos, which also includes the truth about human beings – and then Pheidippides would be equipped to manipulate other men using unjust speech. This promise proves both true and false. Pheidippides does indeed learn to argue using unjust speech, but this speech turns out to consist simply in extending Socrates’ teachings about nature to the affairs of men in the city. And while Pheidippides is doubtless able to deceive his father’s creditors, he also proves able to abuse his father, and to justify this abuse using the very same techniques Strepsiades had hoped would redound to his own benefit. It appears that the undermining of convention is corrosive: the reasons one ought to pay one’s

⁷² Ibid., 10.

debts turn out to be strikingly similar to the reasons one ought not to beat one's father. The rationalist approach that is taught in the thinkery – rationalist insofar as it seeks, and takes its bearings from, universally valid technical knowledge – is, when applied to the affairs of the city, nothing short of disastrous. Indeed, when confronted with the full implications of what Pheidippides has learned – and with the possibility that Pheidippides may beat his mother as well as his father – Strepsiades burns the thinkery to the ground, and *The Clouds* concludes with Socrates and his students fleeing from the outraged Athenian.

In this sense, the image most significant for us is that of the thinkery both within and apart from Athens. Though physically located in the city, the denizens of the thinkery take their bearings from study and knowledge that transcends the city; ensconced within the particular, they seek the universal. In so doing, they reject the particular conventions of Athens, both in their manners of behavior and dress, and in more weighty matters of piety and moral education. This rejection is, at bottom, a rejection of opinion – which, as embodied by Strepsiades, is often ridiculous – in favor of knowledge, obtained by the consistent application of the correct technique of analysis. But when Strepsiades calls Socrates down to him, when the thinkery and the city collide, the knowledge of the one proves radically unsuited to the affairs of the other. It is almost fitting that the play concludes with the thinkery's removal – by fire – from Athens, the physical reification of what, at the level of understanding or orientation, had already taken place.

Aristophanes' *The Clouds* deepens our understanding of political rationalism in several interesting ways. In the first instance, it brings to the fore the connection between political rationalism and political education. With Pheidippides' example in mind, we are asked to consider the implications of a rationalist education for existing institutions, and for the stability of the polity in general. Leaving aside the question of whether a rationalist education brings us closer to truth, we must consider the degree to which the relationships central to our polity rest upon custom or convention – and the degree to which a rationalist education might be disruptive, even corrosive, for these relationships.⁷³

The Clouds also provokes us to consider the degree to which a rationalism of the sort employed and taught by Socrates can, once it abstracts from the needs and concerns of ordinary citizens, be helpfully applied to these same concerns. In other words, the play asks: given that Socrates' technique of analysis, as well as the knowledge it produces, is predicated on indifference to the quotidian concerns that typify men like Strepsiades, can this technique and its fruits then be coherently applied to these concerns? Can we move back and forth – are we better or worse for trying to move back and forth – between the thinkery and the city?

If the comic action of the play answers these questions in the negative – a rationalist education is bad for the city, rationalist techniques and knowledge cannot be applied to the city's concerns – we are then driven to consider what kind of addition or supplement to rationalism might alleviate these difficulties. Surely

⁷³ Along similar lines: "In the case of rain and thunder, Zeus has been replaced by the Clouds and Air; in the case of the punishment of perjury, Zeus has not been replaced by anybody or anything" (Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, 19).

knowledge of astronomy, geometry, anatomy, and rhetoric is not in itself bad; we may cheer as Strepsiades runs Socrates out of town, but would we endorse the indiscriminate expulsion of doctors, architects, physical trainers, legislators? We can acknowledge that Socrates' indifference to Athens and the Athenians is destructive, but the answer cannot be for Socrates to become Strepsiades – that is, to become entirely unreflective and entirely obtuse. Is there a way of pursuing Socrates' sort of inquiry while avoiding his destructive detachment from the city?

Most broadly, if Oakeshott brings to our attention the epistemic character of political rationalism – the kind of knowledge it elevates, and the kind it obscures – *The Clouds* redirects our attention to the effects and consequences of political rationalism for the political community. Oakeshott asks us to consider political rationalism in theory, as an idea, while *The Clouds* shows it to us in practice, employed as a guide for acting in the world. If Engels outlines the promise of political rationalism, *The Clouds* puts this promise to the test. We will revisit this theme, in importantly different ways, in the next several works we examine.

Chapter Two
Political Rationalism and Matters of Perspective in *Gulliver's Travels*

"Very soon all men will be alike all over the world."

Marindelle⁷⁴

"But you'll not want to hear my moralizing, Mr. Lockwood: you'll judge as well as I can, all these things; at least, you'll think you will and that's the same."

Ellen Dean⁷⁵

This chapter is an exploration of political rationalism as it appears in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. *Gulliver's Travels* provides us with two quite different depictions of a rationalist approach to politics, which depictions appear in the third and fourth parts of the four-part work. For our purposes, the first two parts of the work prepare the ground for our examination of the last two parts, in the sense that the thematic lenses through which we will examine the latter first appear and are developed in the former.

⁷⁴ Jean Lartéguy, *The Centurions*, trans. Xan Fielding, New York: E.P Dutton & Co., 1961, 445

⁷⁵ Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, London: Penguin Books, 2003, 185.

The first two parts of *Gulliver's Travels* invite us to join our narrator, Lemuel Gulliver, on journeys to Lilliput, where everyone is very small, and Brobdingnag, where everyone is very big. The central theme introduced here is that of perspective: the perspective of Gulliver and the perspectives of his several hosts, with physical perspective often bound up with moral and political perspective. These vast differences in perspective – physical, moral, political – draw our attention to the importance of particulars – again: physical, moral, political – in political life; we learn, by accompanying the hapless Gulliver, the folly of the assuming that “one size fits all.” The last two parts might then be said to dramatize two very different attempts to adopt a rationalist perspective on political life – that is, to take one's bearings from reason alone, and therefore to transcend the wild variability in perspectives found in the first two parts. But from these attempts emerge models of rule that are troubling, to say the least, and we are again asked to consider why it is that political rationalism in these contexts does such violence to the political communities it means to perfect.

I. Thinking With, Against, and Around, Our Narrator

Jonathan Swift's imaginary travelogue *Gulliver's Travels* opens in a manner that immediately arouses our suspicions. Mention is made, in a brief “*Advertisement*” before the main narrative begins, of many “Alterations and Insertions” made to the original text by a “Person since deceased, on whose Judgment the Publisher relied (4).”⁷⁶ These changes quite displeased “Captain

⁷⁶ Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, New York: Penguin Books, 2003. All subsequent references to *Gulliver's Travels* will be in-text, page numbers only. Many of the quotations used here are portions of longer sentences, cut off either before or after

Gulliver,” and we will learn more about this in Gulliver’s exchange with Mr. Sympson, which follows this advertisement and directly precedes the narrative. But the narrative as it comes to us has not been corrected by the author; rather, we must rely on the corrections provided by a “a very worthy Gentleman in London, and a most intimate Friend of the Author’s,” who is said to have compared the unsatisfactorily edited copy with Gulliver’s original text. Of course, this brief note, like much else in *Gulliver’s Travels*, is funny. We may not laugh out loud, but we’re amused by the petty squabbles that the narrative we’re about to read has occasioned, more extensive description of which is surely to follow. The second and more subtle effect, though, is to put us on guard, to call forth in us immediately some sense that what we’re about to read might be less than perfectly reliable.

This sense that we’ll find our narrator somewhat unreliable is compounded by Gulliver’s own expression of frustration in the “LETTER FROM Capt. *GULLIVER* TO HIS Cousin *SYMPSON*” that follows the “Advertisement” but precedes the main text. Here, Gulliver complains that his countrymen – which he calls “Yahoos,” for reasons to be explained much later – are “a Species of Animals utterly incapable of Amendment by Precepts or Examples...Behold, after above six Months Warning, I cannot learn that my Book hath produced one single Effect according to mine Intentions”; this despite the fact that many useful “Reformations...were plainly deducible from the Precepts delivered in my Book” (6). We notice the silliness of Gulliver’s expectations, the foolishly high opinion he has of his own work and its powers of instruction. At the close of the “LETTER,” Gulliver mentions that

the quoted portion. At times, I’ve removed part of a quotation – these removals are indicated by ellipses.

“unavoidable Necessity” has forced him into “conversing with a few of your Species, and particularly those of mine own Family” – that is, his contempt for his countrymen, and for human beings generally, extends even to his own relations. If the earlier portion of the “LETTER” prompted us to question Gulliver’s judgment, this remark makes us question the integrity of his affections, even his moral sense. Before the narrative even begins – before we’ve traveled anywhere at all – we’re shown the strangeness, the perhaps not entirely trustworthy nature, of our narrator. This cannot help but color our expectations of the narrative that is to follow; already, we are being asked to think *around*, as well as *with*, what we’re reading.

And in truth, “thinking around” is what *Gulliver’s Travels* most trains its reader to do. We’re prompted, throughout the work, to think around Lemuel Gulliver. We’re given hints – often more than hints – that things aren’t precisely as he says they are, and this makes us look for ways to see things other than through his eyes; that is, to see things in ways other than the way he sees them. Our attention is drawn to the partiality, to the narrowness, of Gulliver’s perspective, and we are prompted to cultivate our own perspective apart from our narrator’s.

At the same time, we are given reason to believe that Gulliver is not an entirely incompetent observer of others, and also that he’s possessed of a natural curiosity that will aid his – and our – observations. “My Hours of Leisure I spent in reading the best Authors, ancient and modern,” he says of his past time at sea, “and when I was ashore, in observing the Manners and Dispositions of the People, as well as learning their Language, wherein I had a great Facility by the strength of my

Memory” (22). Gulliver, it seems, won’t be all bad: he’s reasonably well-read, has an ear for languages, and his memory can be relied on. Our narrator, in other words, can’t simply be dismissed – he won’t be all wrong, all the time. This is what makes it interesting to think about the way his perspective works in the narrative. Looking through his eyes, we won’t often get flatly wrong information, nor will his judgment always be in error; at the same time, it might be advantageous to try and think for ourselves, to consider what *we* would do in addition to observing what Gulliver does, since both his intellectual and moral judgments – if the “LETTER” is any guide – seem questionable. This is what it means to “think around” Gulliver, to think both with him and against him, and to maintain the distance between his view of things and our own. This is also a wonderful way of focusing our attention on perspective and its effects without allowing us access to a narrative reality that pretends to transcend perspective. We’ve no choice but to see through Gulliver’s eyes, and we can’t entirely rely on nor entirely dismiss his impressions of things. We’ll just have to muddle through as best we can.

II. Lilliput, Brobdingnag, and the Play of Perspectives

Gulliver’s voyages to Lilliput and Brobdingnag draw our attention to the significance of perspective; indeed, our attention is directed here before the narrative even begins. We begin by confronting the possibility that our narrator may be unreliable, or that his judgment may be imperfect, and we are therefore prompted to “think around” our narrator, to cultivate our own sense of things without dismissing what we’re told. In other words, we’re asked to cultivate our own perspective just as we’re primed to take notice of how Gulliver’s colors what he

tells us. We're also prompted to consider the ways in which different perspectives lead us to reason differently, or the way in which perspective provides a starting point – a ground – for reason. Lilliput and Brobdingnag confront us – and Gulliver – with stark differences in physical size, and therefore in physical perspective. Our attention is drawn in both places to the connections between physical perspective and evaluative reasoning, and the dependence of our evaluations of physical appearance – big, small, beautiful, ugly, etc. – on this perspective.

This connection also extends into the political realm, as the differences in physical perspective that appear here are mirrored by differences in intellectual, moral, and political perspective – which differences provide different starting points for the kind of reasoning that issues in judgments about politics. Though our narrator will often be a step behind, we readers will be prompted to consider the differences between the Lilliputian and Brobdingnagian perspectives on political life – and how these perspectives differ from Gulliver's. The multiplicity of different perspectives, and the intimate connection between perspective, reasoning, and political judgment or evaluation, is our theme here. What emerges is a sense of the degree to which the reason we employ – and Gulliver, and the Lilliputians, and the Brobdingnagians employ – in making choices about politics emerges from, is grounded in, a particular perspective, bound to a particular time and place, and even to a particular range of physical stature. What we learn from following Gulliver is that reasoning well about the politics of any given community cannot be separated from an intimate familiarity with the particulars, the idiosyncrasies, of that community.

Our first destination is the island of Lilliput, on which Gulliver is shipwrecked, having been separated from the rest of his crew at sea. Falling asleep, he awakens to discover that he's been tied to the ground. The "slender Ligatures" that bind him are the work of the Lilliputians, a society of "human Creature[s] not six Inches high" (23). When Gulliver easily breaks the Lilliputians' restraints, we see that what appears solid and strong to these "diminutive Mortals" is not necessarily so to Gulliver. But when they discharge "above an hundred Arrows" (26) into our escaping narrator, he quickly reconsiders his plan, driving home the point that even small things can have big consequences. The physical difference between our narrator and his tiny captors is significant, but it does not mean that he can dismiss them. Instead, he must try, as far as is possible, to understand them, to see things from their point of view – and to accommodate their concerns by treating them "in the most submissive manner" (25). He is at once intensely conscious of his bigness *and* intensely aware of the need to accommodate their smallness.

Gulliver is eventually set free, and employs his natural curiosity in observing Lilliputian society. He notes with admiration their "Intrepidity" (26) and ingenuity – he notes in particular that they "are most excellent Mathematicians, and arrived to a great Perfection in Mechanics" (28) – but he also draws a connection between the precision of their vision and its limits. "...Nature hath adapted the Eyes of the *Lilliputians* to all Objects proper for their view," he observes: "They see with great exactness, but at no great distance" (55).⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Allan Bloom notes that the Lilliputians "suffer from a loss of perspective. It is not their fault; that is the way they are built." This section owes a great deal to Bloom's discussion of *Gulliver's Travels*, in which he points out that "Swift's device in Lilliput

This theme – the correspondence between precision and myopia – permeates the entirety of Gulliver’s time among the Lilliputians. It is worth noting, too, that the Lilliputian skill in matters of detail and precision – mechanics, mathematics – is matched by an apparent lack of ability when it comes to managing larger questions of public affairs. Though their institutions are competently designed, the Lilliputians seem to have fallen into political degeneracy due to an inability to provide for broader (and less precise) concerns like virtue and character. The Lilliputians are well equipped for the small and exact but poorly suited to the large and murky.

It is here on Lilliput that Gulliver begins “to conceive some imperfect Idea of Courts and Ministers,” (53) and his impressions are largely negative. The royal court is full of intrigue and betrayal, and though the Emperor’s stature is minute, his “Ambition” is “unmeasurable” (51).⁷⁸ This latter observation emerges in the context of the conflict between Lilliput and Blefuscu, “an Island situated to the North North-East side of *Lilliput*,” (49) which, according to the Lilliputians, is “the other great Empire of the Universe” (47). This constricted, confined understanding of the universe is characteristic of their limited vision. “For as to what we have heard you affirm,” one of them tells Gulliver, “that there are other Kingdoms and States in the World, inhabited by human Creatures as large as yourself, our Philosophers are in

and Brobdingnag is to take moral and intellectual differences and project them in physical dimensions.” Allan Bloom, “Giants and Dwarfs: An Outline of *Gulliver’s Travels*,” in *Giants and Dwarfs*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990, pp. 39-40.

⁷⁸ “I had been hitherto all my Life a Stranger to Courts, for which I was unqualified by the Meanness of my Condition. I had indeed heard and read enough of the Dispositions of great Princes and Ministers; but never expected to have found such terrible Effects of them in so remote a Country, governed, as I thought, by very different Maxims from those in *Europe*” (64).

much doubt, and would rather conjecture that you dropped from the Moon, or one of the Stars” (47). The Lilliputians cannot conceive beyond what they can see – and they cannot see very far.

Gulliver may be initially impressed with his hosts, but we are led to acknowledge the Lilliputians’ ridiculousness well before our narrator. Gulliver reports that the Lilliputians dance upon ropes in order to gain public office, a practice “often attended with fatal Accidents” (39). This seems absurd to us but appears merely curious to Gulliver, indicating again the need to “think around” our narrator, to cultivate our own perspective even broader than his (and therefore much broader than that of the Lilliputians). By the same token, Gulliver’s straight-faced observations about the nature of the war between Lilliput and Blefescu do not reflect the absurdity of the situation. An internal religious quarrel over whether eggs ought to be broken at the big or little end has, over time, led to “six Rebellions” and the deaths of “eleven thousand Persons”; “[T]he Monarchs of *Blefescu*,” it is alleged, have “constantly fomented” this strife, and “the Exiles always fled for Refuge to that Empire” (48). The political judgment of the Lilliputians seems to reflect the narrowness of their vision – their reasoning about politics proceeds from their myopia – a fact that escapes our narrator.

But before we sell Gulliver short, we should note that he refuses to use his size to destroy Blefescu on behalf of the Lilliputian Emperor. We can see further than Gulliver, but Gulliver can see further than the Lilliputians – the difference in physical perspective between our narrator and his diminutive hosts is matched by a corresponding difference, however undeveloped, in intellectual or moral

perspective. Setting a pattern that will continue through his next adventure, Gulliver displays a keen sense of the relationship between perspective, reasoning, and evaluation – but only on the level of the physical. We, on the other hand, are prompted to extend these considerations into the intellectual, moral, and political realms.

This difference is most entertainingly illustrated when a fire breaks out at the Empress' apartment. Gulliver is immediately summoned to the scene, but efforts to squelch the flames, undertaken with "Buckets...about the size of a large Thimble," are hopeless (54). "The case seemed wholly desperate and deplorable," he says, "and this magnificent Palace would have infallibly been burnt down to the ground, if, by a Presence of Mind, unusual to me, I had not suddenly thought of an Expedient" (54). Having had a great deal to drink earlier in the evening, he now finds it within his power to relieve himself. The wine he'd earlier consumed begins "to operate by Urine; which I now voided in such a Quantity, and applied so well to the proper Places, that in three Minutes the Fire was wholly extinguished" (54). Here the divergence in physical perspective matches almost perfectly the difference in reasoning and judgment. Gulliver is overjoyed to have put out the fire, but his hosts – and the Empress in particular – are less than pleased by his show of disrespect. Indeed, her majesty refuses to occupy the buildings Gulliver saved, "and, in the presence of her chief Confidants, could not forbear vowing Revenge" (54). Gulliver triumphantly believes that he has saved the palace, but the Lilliputians see only the disrespect that he has shown.

It is this perceived disrespect that provides the grounds for one of the “*Articles of Impeachment*” (65) eventually filed against Gulliver. As the first *Article* sets out, according to Lilliputian law, “whoever shall make water within the Precincts of the Royal Palace, shall be liable to the Pains and Penalties of High Treason” (65). Gulliver, therefore, “under colour of extinguishing the Fire kindled in the Apartment of his Majesty’s dear Imperial Consort, did maliciously, traitorously, and devilishly, by discharge of his Urine, put out the said Fire kindled in the said Apartment...against the Statute in that Case provided” (65). The phrasing of the *Article* indicates the Lilliputian perspective: Gulliver’s having extinguished the fire – and averted certain catastrophe – is incidental to the far more important (and damning) fact that he relieved himself all over the Palace. Gulliver’s emphasis, in his own recounting of the story, is quite different, and the reader cannot help but marvel at the Lilliputians’ inability to focus on the big picture. This shortsightedness – the focus on the near and the immediate to the exclusion of all else – draws attention to the difference in perspective between Gulliver and his hosts, and between the reader and all involved.⁷⁹

It is revealing that the major element of Gulliver’s proposed punishment at the hands of the Lilliputians is to be the loss of his eyes.⁸⁰ His eyes – his ability to see for himself – are understood to be the source of discord between Gulliver and his hosts; without his eyes, it is expected that he will cease objections and docilely use his size at the behest of the Emperor. Gulliver’s powers of sight are intimately

⁷⁹ According to Bloom, “Gulliver is condemned because the Lilliputians discovered in the palace fire that his moral taste was not the same as theirs” (46).

⁸⁰ The Lilliputian Emperor and his Court also plan to slowly starve Gulliver to death.

bound up with – stand in for – his perspective, his point of view, and for the divergent reasoning and judgment that follows from this point of view. If (sighted) Gulliver and the Lilliputians cannot live together, this stark difference in perspective is the root cause.

Fortunately for our narrative, Gulliver retains both his eyes and his point of view, and finds his way off of Lilliput and back home. But by this point he's discovered an "insatiable Desire of seeing foreign Countries," (75) and he returns to sea, this time in the ship *Adventure*. He's again separated from his crew in an unfamiliar land – this time, the country is called Brobdingnag.

And this time, the inhabitants are gigantic – and Gulliver, therefore, is tiny. He is also distraught, and in his distress, he begins to consider the perspective of his oversized hosts. "In this terrible Agitation of Mind," he says, "I could not forbear thinking of *Lilliput*, whose Inhabitants looked upon me as the greatest Prodigy that ever appeared in the World...I reflected what a Mortification it must prove to me to appear as inconsiderable in this Nation as one single *Lilliputian* would be among us" (82). These thoughts, in turn, prompt Gulliver to consider the relationship between perspective, comparison, and evaluation. "Undoubtedly Philosophers are in the right when they tell us, that nothing is great or little otherwise than by Comparison," he reflects.

It might have pleased Fortune to let the *Lilliputians* find some Nation, where the People were as diminutive with respect to them, as they were to me. And who knows but that even this prodigious Race of Mortals might be equally

overmatched in some distant part of the World, whereof we have yet no
Discovery? (83)

Following the pattern set during his time on Lilliput, Gulliver will elaborate on this relationship throughout his time in Brobdingnag – but his comments will remain, for the most part, on the level of the physical. The reader, on the other hand, will be prompted to consider the connection between perspective, reasoning, and judgment on matters intellectual, moral, and political. We will be expected to take Gulliver’s observations and extend them.

One of Gulliver’s most pertinent physical observations appears shortly after his arrival in Brobdingnag, following his discovery and adoption by a farming family. As the family’s nurse begins to breastfeed their youngest child, Gulliver confesses that “no Object ever disgusted me so much as the sight of her monstrous Breast,” the nipple of which is “so verified with Spots, Pimples and Freckles, that nothing could appear more nauseous” (87). This prompts Gulliver to ruminate further on the connections between perspective and evaluation, using his experiences in Lilliput to inform his reflections.

I remember when I was at *Lilliput*, the Complexions of those diminutive People appeared to me the fairest in the World, and talking upon this subject with a Person of Learning there...He said he could discover great Holes in my Skin, that the Stumps of my Beard were ten times stronger than the Bristles of a Boar, and my Complexion made up of several Colours altogether disagreeable...On the other side, discoursing of the Ladies in that Emperor’s

Court, he used to tell me, one had Freckles, another too wide a Mouth, a third too large a Nose, nothing of which I was able to distinguish (87).

Gulliver here begins to consider not simply the connection between perspective and evaluation, but the *dependence* of evaluation upon perspective: we reason differently, and judge differently, depending upon our point of view. It is his own (physical) perspective that colors his view of that which he observes, and he judges – beautiful, ugly, flawless, imperfect – according to this perspective.

This made me reflect upon the fair Skins of our *English* Ladies, who appear so beautiful to us, only because they are of our own size, and their Defects not to be seen but through a Magnifying Glass, where we find by Experiment that the smoothest and whitest Skins look rough and coarse, and ill coloured (87).

One's perspective may shift, as evidenced by the example of the magnifying glass, and Gulliver does his best to adapt his perspective so as to ensure commensurability between his evaluations and the object being evaluated. Here, Gulliver adopts a foreign perspective in order to reason in a manner that accommodates the object he has in view, and does his best to evaluate the Brobdingnagians on their own terms rather than through the distorted lens that emerges from own size:

I confess this Reflection was obvious enough... lest the Reader might think that those vast Creatures were actually deformed: For I must do them Justice to say they are a comely Race of People; and particularly the Features of my Master's Countenance...when I beheld him from the Height of sixty Foot, appeared very well proportioned (87-88).

Just as differences in physical perspective shape one's evaluations of physical beauty, these same differences – bound up with differences in physical ability – shape evaluations of honor, worth and rank. After he is nearly abducted by an outsized monkey, Gulliver attempts to impress his hosts – by this point, the royal Court of Brobdingnag – with threats and fiery words. “However, my speech produced nothing else beside a loud Laughter...This made me reflect how vain an Attempt it is for a Man to endeavour doing Himself Honour among those who are out of all Degree of Equality or Comparison with him” (115). From the perspective of the Brobdingnagians, Gulliver's attempts at bravery are so insignificant as to appear laughable; a people so much larger than he cannot see the significance of the difference between a brave Gulliver and a cowardly Gulliver. It is well here to remember Gulliver's own difficulty at distinguishing the beautiful from the ugly Lilliputians: differences that appeared significant to other Lilliputians did not appear at all to him. Here, a difference that appears immensely important to Gulliver does not appear at all to his hosts – and Gulliver's assertion of this difference prompts laughter at the ridiculousness of his proposition. Our narrator makes what amounts to the same observation from the opposing point of view, when he says of the indignity of his situation that “the King of *Great Britain* himself, in my Condition, must have undergone the same Distress” (92). The difference between Englishmen and Brobdingnagians is overwhelming enough to obviate any differences between Englishmen who might find themselves in Brobdingnag. This, too, is pregnant with significance: an Englishman would reason and judge quite

differently confronted with an English king or an English commoner; a Brobdingnagian would draw the same conclusions when confronted with either.

The difference in perspective between Gulliver and his hosts, and the corresponding difference in reasoning and evaluation, extends to the political realm as well. After Gulliver has given an account of his native land and continent, and the King of Brobdingnag has expressed his low opinion of European politics as presented by Gulliver, our narrator eventually becomes indignant.⁸¹ “I one Day took the freedom to tell his Majesty,” he says, “that the Contempt he discovered towards *Europe*...did not seem answerable to those excellent Qualities of the Mind he was Master of. That, Reason did not extend itself with the bulk of the Body: On the contrary, we observed in our Country that the tallest Persons were usually least provided with it” (118). Gulliver here explicitly disjoins physical perspective from political reasoning and judgment. He had elaborated for us the connections between physical perspective and evaluation of beauty, and between physical perspective and evaluations of worth, rank, and honor, but here he draws the line: he will not allow that his hosts’ physical perspective connects also with a broader view of politics.

⁸¹ “...I confess, that after I had been a little too copious in talking of my own beloved Country, of our Trade, and Wars by Sea and Land, of our Schisms in Religion, and Parties in the State, the Prejudices of his Education prevailed so far, that he could not forbear taking me up in his right Hand, and stroking me gently with the other, after a hearty Fit of laughing, asked me whether I were a *Whig* or a *Tory*. Then turning to his first Minister...he observed how contemptible a Thing was human Grandeur, which could be mimicked by such diminutive Insects as I: And yet, said he...these Creatures have their Titles and Distinctions of Honour...And thus he continued on, while my Colour came and went several times, with Indignation to hear our noble Country...the Pride and Envy of the World, so contemptuously treated (100).” I’ve omitted quite a bit.

But of course, Gulliver is wrong. We can tell, even if he can't, that difference between Gulliver and his hosts in terms of physical perspective is mirrored, paralleled, by a difference in perspective on politics – much the same as on Lilliput. The King's evaluations of European politics are informed by his broader perspective rather than Gulliver's relative myopia – this is why these observations mystify and disappoint our narrator.

When Gulliver, stung by the King's apparent contempt for European politics, gives his host a far more detailed account of British affairs, he elicits precisely this kind of disappointing response. Intending to present his homeland in the best possible light, Gulliver has given "to every Point a more favourable turn by many Degrees than the strictness of Truth would allow" (124). But the questions the King offers indicate his lack of satisfaction. To Gulliver's lengthy presentation of the institutions of his home country, the King responds with rather broader concerns than Gulliver addressed – concerns not about the particulars of British institutions but rather about the kinds of people who will fill these institutions. Of the British nobles, the King desires to know "What Share of Knowledge these Lords had in the Laws of their Country, and how they came by it, so as to enable them to decide the Properties of their Fellow-Subjects in the last Resort," and "Whether they were always so free from Avarice, Partialities, or Want, that a Bribe, or some other sinister View, could have no place among them" (120). Of courts and lawyers, the King asks "Whether those pleading Orators were Persons educated in the general Knowledge of Equity, or only in provincial, national, and other local Customs," and "Whether they or their Judges had any Part in penning those Laws which they

assumed the Liberty of interpreting and glossing upon at their Pleasure” (121). When told of Britain’s “extensive Wars,” the King wonders whether the English are an especially “quarrelsome People, or live among very bad Neighbours” (121). The King wants to know, not that the nobility have power, but whether they *deserve* their power; not that lawyers can argue the law, but whether they understand the *justice* that the law is supposed to embody; not the scale of European wars, but the *causes* and the *rightness* of them. The King’s vision is wider than Gulliver’s. He has taken a step back to ask bigger questions: questions of character rather than rank, of causes rather than conduct, of justice rather than law. Here, Gulliver appears as the Lilliputians had appeared before: confident in matters of institutional design and formal distinctions between persons, about which a great measure of precision is possible, but adrift in the deeper and murkier waters of character, virtue, and justice. We notice, even if Gulliver does not, that the King’s questions expose the narrowness of Gulliver’s presentation and the limits of his perspective.

Gulliver, on the other hand, draws quite the opposite conclusion. For him, the King’s distaste for European politics demonstrates his “many *Prejudices*, and a certain *Narrowness of Thinking*” (124).⁸² This emerges quite clearly, for Gulliver, in the King’s rejection of Gulliver’s offer to help him produce gunpowder. That the King would let slip this “Opportunity” (125) indicates his limited vision – the narrowness rather than the breadth of his political judgment. “He confined the

⁸² The irony of Gulliver’s use of the language of physical difference to describe the King’s views appears even more explicitly just after, when Gulliver comments on the King’s “*narrow Principles and short Views!*” (125) It is also interesting how quickly this judgment follows Gulliver’s own assertion of his rather narrow or provincial patriotism.

Knowledge of governing within very *narrow Bounds*,” explains Gulliver, noting the same focus on “common Sense and Reason” and “Justice and Lenity” that had characterized the King’s disappointing response to his earlier discourse on European politics (126). The King’s focus on (to Gulliver’s mind) insufficiently precise notions like “common Sense” and “Justice” indicate an “Ignorance” that comes from the Brobdingnagians’ “not having hitherto reduced *Politics* into a *Science*” (126). What seems to the King admirably plain seems to Gulliver unbearably vague; what seems to the King a dismissal of the unnecessary and pernicious seems to Gulliver a rejection of knowledge. To the reader, it is clear that the King’s evaluation of European politics is similar to our own evaluation of Lilliputian politics.⁸³

Gulliver’s use of the language of science, his invocation of a “*Science*” of “*Politics*,” points to a body of knowledge about politics that ostensibly transcends the “*Narrowness*” of the King’s thinking. Indeed, this body of knowledge can be expected to transcend the limits and “*Prejudices*” of any particular perspective, taking its bearings instead from a reason anchored in that which is resistant to the multiplicity of perspectives. The political reasoning and judgments of the Lilliputian Emperor or the Brobdingnagian King may depend on their unique perspectives on politics (which parallels their unique physical perspectives), but a scientific

⁸³ We can also imagine that, were Gulliver able to alter his perspective, he might be able to see more clearly the King’s understandings of “common Sense” and “Justice” – just as when he endeavored to adopt the physical perspective of the Brobdingnagians, he was able to see the physical beauty that had previously appeared to him as ugliness. When Gulliver returns home from Brobdingnag, he at first sees houses, people, and even his family members as particularly tiny – in this sense, he has absorbed or adopted some of the Brobdingnagians’ perspective simply by living among them.

approach to political life can be expected to replace the imprecision and variability of perspective with the unitary truth that follows from reason alone. To “[reduce] *Politics* into a *Science*” is to evaluate and judge informed not by one among many perspectives but rather by perspective-less (and perspective-transcending) reason: in other words, to take a rationalist approach to political life. Gulliver’s final two voyages show us two examples of precisely this project.

III. Laputa, Balnibarbi, and the Universal Rule of Science

Gulliver soon sets out to sea again, and again his ship meets an unfortunate fate. This time, he finds himself set adrift by pirates, and alone and disconsolate on an unfamiliar island. Suddenly, he notices “a vast Opaque Body between me and the Sun, moving forward towards the Island,” which after closer inspection appears to be “an Island in the Air, inhabited by Men, who were able...to raise, or sink, or put it into a Progressive Motion, as they pleased” (146). This is the floating island of Laputa, which rules over Balnibarbi, the country below.

Gulliver’s first view of Laputa’s inhabitants is revealing in the extreme. “Their Heads were all reclined either to the Right, or the Left,” he says, “one of their Eyes turned inward, and the other directly up to the Zenith” (148). The Laputans are perennially engaged in “intense Speculations,” so that a Laputan gentleman of “better Quality” is “always so wrapped up in Cogitation, that he is in manifest danger of falling down every Precipice” (148-9).⁸⁴ As a consequence, his hosts “forgot several times what they were about, and left me to myself...For they appeared altogether unmoved by the Sight of my Foreign Habit and Countenance” (149). The

⁸⁴ Socrates in *The Clouds* is the obvious comparison here.

point could not be sharper: attentive only to their inner thoughts and to the highest principles, the Laputans miss what's right in front of them. They focus on the "Zenith" – singular, unitary, universal – but they miss the heterogeneity right under their noses, apparent in Gulliver's "Foreign Habit and Countenance." Consumed by speculations about the highest truth, they are comically unable to understand and negotiate variability or difference – of terrain, most laughably, but also of habits and countenances. The pattern set here will characterize the rest of Gulliver's visit to Laputa and Balnibarbi: The Laputans, and the leading lights of Balnibarbi, are unable to negotiate particulars; they are attentive to universals at the expense of particulars. If the Lilliputians and Brobdingnagians display perspectives commensurate with their size, the Laputans (and the best Balnibarbians) focus on the "Zenith," and do their best to see from the perspective of the unitary and universal (and perspective-transcending) truth that the "Zenith" represents.

The effects of this focus on universals at the expense of particulars become clear almost immediately. The Laputan King is "distinguished above all his Predecessors for his Hospitality to Strangers," but is far less interested in Gulliver than were the rulers of Lilliput and Brobdingnag, preferring to focus instead on the "Globes and Spheres, and Mathematical Instruments of all kinds" that fill his throne room (149). When Gulliver is fitted for a suit of Laputan clothes, the tailor "first took my Altitude by a Quadrant, and then with Rule and Compasses, described the Dimensions and Outlines of my whole Body," which results in clothes "very ill made, and quite out of shape, by happening to mistake a Figure in the Calculation, an occurrence our narrator learns is "very frequent and little regarded" (151). The

Laputan language is the first that Gulliver learns through the formal and standardized practice of writing rather than through the informal, day-to-day, and often diverse practice of speech. In approaching any particular task or subject, the Laputans take their bearings from technical knowledge rather than practical experience, from the universal and detached rather than the particular and engaged. The effects of this are comically catastrophic in fields – tailoring, for instance, or politics – in which the practical and the particular is indispensable.

In order to grapple with particulars – to interpret and act on their surroundings – the Laputans turn to the language and concepts of universals. Thus “If they would, for Example, praise the Beauty of a Woman...they describe it by Rhombs, Circles, Parallelograms, Ellipses, and other Geometrical Terms, or by words of Art drawn from Music” (152). And like Gulliver’s tailor, the Laputan disinterest in particulars results in perpetual comic disappointment. “And although they are dextrous enough upon a Piece of Paper in the management of the Rule, the Pencil, and the Divider,” Gulliver says, “yet in the common Actions and behavior of Life, I have not seen a more clumsy, awkward, and unhandy People, nor so slow and perplexed in their Conceptions upon all other Subjects, except those of Mathematics and Music” (152). The Laputan turn to universal concepts as a means of understanding seems to distort, rather than to clarify, the world around them; their reliance on technical knowledge obscures things rather than bringing them into focus.

The Laputans are also keenly interested in politics, though in a peculiar way. Gulliver observes in them a “strong Disposition...towards News and Politics,

perpetually inquiring into Public Affairs, giving their Judgments in matters of State, and passionately disputing every Inch of a Party Opinion” (152). At the same time they pursue this fevered disputation of their own politics, the Laputans are profoundly incurious about the multiplicity of political practices and institutions beyond the borders of their floating island. When Gulliver learns enough of the language to speak with the King, “His Majesty discovered not the least Curiosity to inquire into the Laws, Government, History, Religion, or Manners of the Countries where I had been” (155). The Laputans are disputatious, but their disputes lack breadth.

This odd combination of vociferous interest and disengagement or detachment appears also in the way in which Laputa maintains its rule over the cities below, characterized both by intense determination and by casual, detached brutality.⁸⁵ “If any Town should engage in Rebellion...or refuse to pay the usual Tribute,” Gulliver explains, the King’s “mildest Course is by keeping the Island hovering over such a Town...whereby he can deprive them of the Benefit of the Sun and the Rain, and consequently afflict the Inhabitants with Death and Diseases” (159). The Laputans exercise a power over the land below near to the force of nature itself – but they seem strikingly unconcerned about the “Death and Diseases” that bend Balnibarbi to their will. The King’s final remedy for disobedience – lowering the island onto a rebellious town, “which makes a universal Destruction both of Houses and Men” (160) – is rarely put into practice, not because it is morally repellant but rather because it would incur the disproportionate wrath of the

⁸⁵ See Bloom 48-9.

people, and would damage the estates of his ministers on the land below. This latter remedy might also damage the island itself, and perhaps even impair its ability to remain afloat.⁸⁶

When one of these rebellions break out, in Lindalino, “the second City in the Kingdom,” (160), it takes the distracted King eight months to notice. Demanding “the Choice of their own Governor, and other the like Exorbitances,” (161) the Lindalinians refuse to yield before the Laputans, even as the floating island deprives them of sun and rain. The Lindalinians have also hit upon a weak point in Laputa’s power. The island is kept afloat and steered by means of a “Loadstone” embedded in the “Body of Adamant that constitutes the bottom of the Island” (156). The Lindalinians have “fixed a great Loadstone” (161) of their own on top of four towers at the corners of the city, hoping by which measure to create an irresistible attraction between these stones and the bottom of Laputa – if the floating island should get close enough. Their design, Gulliver tells us, is “to fix [Laputa] for ever, to kill the King and all his Servants, and entirely change the Government” (162). The Lindalinians’ visceral hate for their floating rulers is apparent here, but also notable is their desire to bind Laputa to the earth forever, to fix an unbreakable connection between the land below and the island above. In addition to losing their fearsome power over nature, the Laputans would no longer have the ability to detach or disengage from the land below – an image that, like other expressions of the

⁸⁶ “And the King, when he is highest provoked, and most determined to press a City to Rubbish, orders the Island to descend with great gentleness, out of a Pretence of Tenderness to his People, but indeed for fear of breaking the Adamantine Bottom; in which Case it is the Opinion of all their Philosophers, that the Loadstone could no longer hold it up, and the whole Mass would fall to the Ground” (160).

physical and spatial in Gulliver's narrative, prompts us to think also of the intellectual, moral, and political disengagement that accompanies the physical. The Lindalinians may want to be rid of the King, but they also seem to want the Laputans to tear their gaze from the "Zenith" and focus on *them*, on their own particular concerns and their desire to make their own particular choices.

The use of their "Loadstones" wins the day for the Lindalinians, and the Laputan King is forced to yield entirely to their demands. The opposition on display here is instructive: the Laputans think only in terms of total rule – enforced by the threat of total destruction – or the complete absence of rule. This is of a piece with their focus on universal rather than particulars, their preference for the clarity and precision of technical knowledge rather than the messiness of hands-on experience – even when, as in tailoring, looking exclusively to technical knowledge yields undesirable results. But the Lindalinian desire to fix Laputa to the land below – to bring the floating island so close that hands-on experience is unavoidable – points us in another direction: not to the opposition between the universal categories of total victory (death, disease, crushed city) or total defeat (granting all demands and retreating in disgrace), but rather to a governance that would be attentive to particulars, to specifics and variations; a governance that would be bound – figuratively, and here, literally – to its object, and to the uniqueness thereof. The Lindalinians want the Laputans to tear their gaze from the "Zenith," and to focus instead on Lindalino.

When Gulliver descends from Laputa to Balnibarbi, he at first expresses “some little Satisfaction in finding myself on firm Ground” – in both the literal and figurative senses (163). This relief, however, is short-lived; the Laputan preoccupation with the “Zenith” has had tremendous effects in Balnibarbi as well. As Gulliver tours the capital city of Lagado, he finds “the Houses very strangely Built, and most of them out of repair,” the people “generally in Rags,” and in the fields no “expectation either of Corn or Grass, although the Soil appeared to be excellent” (164). This barrenness and poverty is due, we discover, to the efforts of the “PROJECTORS,” a group of Balnibarbians who, after a brief but influential visit to Laputa, returned home with “Schemes of putting all Arts, Sciences, Languages, and Mechanics upon a new Foot” (166). In Balnibarbi, reorienting one’s affairs according to the “new Rules and Methods” advanced by the Projectors is considered a matter of patriotism and good citizenship: those who are “content to go on in the old Forms” are “looked on with an Eye of Contempt and Ill Will, as Enemies to Art, ignorant, and ill Commonwealths-men, preferring their own Ease and Sloth before the general Improvement of their Country” (166). Here, unlike in Laputa, the attempt to take one’s bearings from higher (unitary, universal, technical) truths has the flavor of imposition, of compulsion; the rationalism which is a fashion in Laputa has in Balnibarbi the characteristic of rule. The comic ineptness on display in Laputa emerges here as well, but the effects in Balnibarbi are significantly more unsettling.

At the Academy of Projectors, however, the tone is quite different: hopeful, persistently optimistic, and convinced of the rightness of their collective enterprise.

Gulliver himself, having “been a sort of Projector in my younger Days,” (167) is not entirely unsympathetic to their endeavors, and he relates the details of his visit to the Academy with polite interest and a straight face. But we readers are prompted, as before, to see both with and beyond Gulliver, and several of the earliest experiments Gulliver relates capture the spirit of the Academy quite well. One Projector, “His Hands and Clothes daubed over with Filth,” is engaged in “an Operation to reduce human Excrement to its original Food”; another has “contrived a new Method for building Houses, by beginning at the Roof and working downwards to the Foundation”; a third Projector is “a Man born blind, who had several Apprentices in his own Condition: Their Employment was to mix Colours for Painters” (168). The practices of the Projectors, in other words, are backwards, upside down, indifferent to difference and therefore radically inattentive to suitability or fit. These several experiments, as well, seem to capture the patterns of thought on display in Laputa and Balnibarbi. By focusing on the “Zenith” instead of the particulars of their surroundings, the Laputans and the Projectors try to work backwards from the end instead of starting at the beginning, or try to begin at the top instead of the bottom. They take their bearings from a technical understanding of the whole of things: thus excrement might just as well be transformed into food as the other way around, and houses might just as well proceed from the roof rather than the foundation. This utter disregard for the conclusions of practical experience is emphasized by the comic notion of blind men mixing colors: here, all endeavors should proceed according to technical rules rather than by experience and practical know-how, the conclusions of which cannot be translated into precise formulas or

precepts. This leads to a radical absence of fit, a dissonance between object and mode of understanding, and – as seen in Laputa – the kind of absurdity that follows from disregarding (or, here, being literally blind to) that which cannot be reduced to technical rules and yet is right in front of one’s face.

Connected to this is the prevalence, among the Projectors, of comically untenable analogies. Proceeding from the principle that “there is a strict universal Resemblance between the Natural and the Political Body,” (175) one Projector proposes to improve the functioning of deliberative bodies by the judicious administration of “Lenitives, Aperitives, Abstersives, Corrosives, Restringtons, Palliatives, Laxatives, Cephalalgicks, Ictericks, Aprophlegmaticks, Acousticks, as their several cases required” (176). That the mode of engagement (medical treatment) is so unsuited to the object (deliberative bodies) points to the inaptness of the original analogy between the “Natural and the Political Body” – and therefore to the decisive importance of the very particulars, the *difference*, that the Projectors turn their attention away from. Recall Hippodamus of Miletus, admonished by Aristotle for abstracting away the differences between politics and other kinds of things, for not dealing with politics on its own terms and therefore drawing conclusions that did not fit his object.

Another experiment at the Academy involves “a Scheme for entirely abolishing all Words whatsoever” – “since Words are only Names for *Things*, it would be more convenient for all Men to carry about them, such *Things* as were necessary to express the particular Business they are to discourse on” (172). The project here is to transcend language in favor of objects; that is, to transcend the

variability, multiplicity, and necessary partiality of words in favor of the universal, unitary truth of things. A “great Advantage proposed by this Invention, was that it would serve as an Universal Language to be understood in all civilized Nations, whose Goods and Utensils are generally of the same kind, or nearly resembling, so that their Uses might easily be comprehended” (174).⁸⁷ Linguistic difference, in its exasperating multiplicity and idiosyncrasy, would here be overcome in favor of universal and perfect understanding; the problem of linguistic representation, with its attendant vagueness and imprecision, would give way to a mode of communication entirely susceptible to technical precision and rational ordering.

The attempt to escape or transcend language here parallels the attempt to escape or transcend perspective; the goal in both cases is to move from the particular to the universal, from the diverse to the unitary. Here, as before, the specter of compulsion lurks just in the background. “And this Invention would surely have taken Place,” says Gulliver, “if the Women in conjunction with the Vulgar and Illiterate had not threatened to raise a Rebellion, unless they might be allowed the Liberty to speak with their Tongues...Such constant irreconcilable Enemies to Science are the Common People” (172). The “Common People” of Balnibarbi are attached to their own unique language, and resist the imposition of linguistic homogeneity and the abolition of linguistic distinctions. Like the Lindalinians, they seem to demand attention to difference and to specificity – to particulars rather than universals, and to the experiential rather than the technical. Perhaps this is the

⁸⁷ This is not the only good that will come of this invention. The most immediate benefit of this project will be a lessening of the “Diminution of our Lungs by Corrosion” that results from speech, which corrosion “contributes to the shortening of our Lives” (172).

reason for the ever-present undercurrent of threat, of compulsion, that accompanies the ascendancy of Laputan science in Balnibarbi.

Gulliver's voyages to Lilliput and Brobdingnag had drawn our attention to the significance of perspective for evaluation and judgment, and to the great divergence that exists between perspectives – and thus the tremendous variability of evaluation and judgment. This dynamic was at work most immediately in the realms of the physical and the spatial, but it soon became apparent that the differences in physical perspective between Gulliver and his hosts were mirrored or paralleled by differences in intellectual, moral, and political perspective. We were then prompted to transfer our observations about the relationship between perspective and evaluation or judgment to the political realm, where we were confronted with the great divergence in perspectives on political life, and therefore the tremendous variability of political judgment.

The Laputans, meanwhile, cast their eyes toward “the Zenith.” They attempt to orient themselves according to the universal and immutable principles of mathematics and musical notation, principles immune to the distorting mediation of point of view or perspective. If Lilliput and Brobdingnag brought to our attention the multiple possible ways of seeing and judging the (physical and political) world, Laputa shows us one attempt to escape this multiplicity, to engage with and judge the world according to universal and unitary truths rather than particular and variable perspectives. But this turn to universals makes the Laputans unable to manage particulars; this turn to the unitary “Zenith” makes them unable to

negotiate difference. They fall into holes when the terrain isn't uniform, they can't make clothes that fit the unique form of each person, and they are devoted to the discovery of universal truths but profoundly incurious about the world around them.

The turn to "the Zenith" also characterizes Gulliver's visit to Balnibarbi, in which the ascendance of science comes with an undercurrent of compulsion. The efforts of the Projectors may be comic in their ineptness, but they are nothing short of devastating to the land and people who bear the burden of their experiments. As the experiments in the Academy of the Projectors illustrate, the Balnibarbian scientific project shares an intellectual core with the Laputan enterprise: both are animated by the same goals and characterized by the same shortcomings and difficulties. The inability to negotiate difference, to deal with particulars on their own terms, is apparent here as well. Also apparent is a profound lack of suitability, of fit, of concordance between mode of engagement and object with which they would engage – think of the attempt to treat deliberative bodies using medical remedies. The Projectors' inattentiveness to particulars and difference makes them unable to match method to object.

This dissonance between object and mode of understanding and engagement also characterizes the manner in which the Laputans rule the country below. They are strikingly disinterested in Balnibarbi: when Gulliver descends, he finds that the Laputans are "too much taken up in their own Speculations, to have regard to what passed here below" (165). At the same time, they are determined to maintain their rule, and to do so they casually employ strikingly brutal means. But these inhuman

methods substitute for actual engagement with the particulars of the cities below. The Laputan understanding of political rule allows for either total rule or total freedom, and when they cannot impose one, their only recourse is to grant the other. The Lindalinian desire to bind Laputa to the earth seems to indicate a desire for Laputan engagement with the particulars of Lindalino, for a kind of rule that is suited to these particulars rather than one that proceeds from unitary and universal understandings of rule and freedom. The Laputan inability to negotiate difference, to grapple with particulars, seems at the heart of both the brutality and the dysfunction of their rule.⁸⁸

IV. The Land of the Houyhnhnms, and Gulliver's Education in Rationalism

At the end of his visit to the Academy, Gulliver seems distinctly unimpressed, or at least unconvinced that Laputa and Balnibarbi offer anything worthy of further exploration: "I saw nothing in this Country that could invite me to a longer Continuance, and began to think of returning home to *England*" (179). But our narrator's journey home is circuitous, and some of what he encounters is significant for our purposes.

I suggest that the following portion of *Gulliver's Travels* – the conclusion of the third part and the whole of the fourth – can be helpfully understood as Gulliver's education. The ground for this education had been prepared in Laputa and Brobdingnag, where our narrator discovered the importance of perspective, and became conscious of the multiplicity of available perspectives and therefore the

⁸⁸ This paragraph owes much to "Aeschylus and the Binding of the Tyrant," co-authored with Arlene Saxonhouse, in which we juxtapose unitary understandings of total rule and total freedom against the heterogeneous combination of rule and freedom that characterizes true political rule.

multitude of ways of evaluating and judging – reasoning about – the world.

Gulliver's third voyage – to Laputa and Balnibarbi – presented him with one possible way of resolving this unsettling multiplicity of perspectives, that is, one possible way of transcending the partiality of perspective. But the universal truths on offer on Laputa and at the Academy prove comically unsuited to practical application, and the turn to “the Zenith” leaves the Laputans and the best Balnibarbians unable to negotiate the world right in front of them. Gulliver quickly becomes aware that he has nothing more to learn here. But the curiosity that Gulliver exhibits, even as he makes his way home, shows his hunger for the kind of education that Laputa could not provide.

Gulliver intends to return home first by proceeding to the “great Island of *Luggnagg*,” the King of which Island has formed a “strict Alliance” with the Emperor of Japan (180). From Japan, our narrator believes that he can return to Europe. Waylaid at the very outset of his several-legged journey, Gulliver decides to divert himself by visiting the “little Island of *Glubbudrib*,” which name, “as nearly as I can interpret the Word, signifies the Island of *Sorcerers* or *Magicians*” (180). Here, Gulliver has the chance to indulge his curiosity in an entirely new way, as the Governor of the Island “hath a Power of calling whom he pleaseth from the Dead,” and commanding and questioning them as he likes (180).

Gulliver visits with great personages ancient and modern, and is impressed far more with the ancients than with the moderns; indeed, he is “chiefly disgusted

with modern History” in comparison with that of the ancients.⁸⁹ And although he explicitly exempts the history of own country from his comments, his observations here stand in sharp contrast to his defenses of English politics and government in Brobdingnag. For the first time, Gulliver takes a sustained and fully self-conscious look at his home continent from a critical distance, that is, from a perspective shaped by his travels. Here, Gulliver begins to contemplate the series of disjunctions that the Brobdingnagian King had suggested earlier: between rank and deservingness of rank, between the legal and the just, and between the good and the efficacious. Here Gulliver also begins to add to his curiosity a kind of misanthropy, or at least to temper his inclination to think the best of people. “How low an Opinion I had of human Wisdom and Integrity,” he says, “when I was truly informed of the Springs and Motives of great Enterprises and Revolutions in the World, and of the contemptible Accidents to which they owed their Success” (185). As much as he desires to return home, Gulliver’s immersion in history – his conversations with the dead – have begun to undermine his confidence in his country, his continent, and his species. The first effect of Gulliver’s incipient education is to distance him from what is his own.

Gulliver now continues to Luggnagg, and continues also to deepen his newfound distaste for humankind. Here, he encounters the Struldbruggs, Luggnaggians possessed of eternal life. Gulliver, naturally, is eager to make their acquaintance, and occupies himself with thoughts and talk about how he might

⁸⁹ Bloom describes *Gulliver’s Travels* as “one of the last explicit statements in the famous Quarrel between the Ancients and Moderns and perhaps the greatest intervention in that notorious argument” (36).

spend his own imagined eternity. But the truth about the Struldbruggs does not match Gulliver's imagining: in fact, the Struldbruggs have "not only all the Follies and Infirmities of other old Men, but many more which arose from the dreadful Prospect of never dying" (196). They have "no Distinction of Taste, but eat and drink whatever they can get, without Relish or Appetite"; they "forget the common Appellations of things, and the Names of Persons, even of those who are their nearest Friends and Relations" (197). The Struldbruggs are friendless, pleasureless, poor, and hated, and Gulliver goes from envying their deathlessness to calling them "the most mortifying Sight I ever beheld" (198).

From Luggnagg, Gulliver continues as planned to Japan, and then makes his way home to England. Here, he says, he "continued at home with my Wife and Children about Five Months in a very happy Condition, if I could have learned the Lesson of knowing when I was well" (205). Gulliver's inability to remain contentedly at home – the lack of self-knowledge that prevents him from learning his own contentment – is no surprise; after all, he has become disillusioned with, estranged from, some of the things that are his own. The disjunction at work here is fascinating: Gulliver is both too educated and not educated enough to be content at home, with his own family and his own people. His conversations with the dead on Glubbudrib have opened his eyes to the distance between how things are and how things ought to be, and his encounters with the Struldbruggs – the living dead – have dimmed his sense of human possibilities. He had even hoped to transport "a Couple of *StruldBruggs* to my own Country, to arm our People against the Fear of Death"; Gulliver's newfound distrust at this most human of fears, his desire to

dissuade his fellows from something that seems intrinsic to their humanity, indicates his ambivalence in his own country and among his own kind (198).

Gulliver now sets back out to sea, but is removed as Captain of his ship and imprisoned by a mutinous crew – which again draws our attention to the growing distance between Gulliver and other human beings. The crew sets our narrator ashore in the Land of the Houyhnhnms, but Gulliver’s first encounter here is with a Yahoo rather than a Houyhnhnm, and this, too, is instructive for thinking about Gulliver’s relation to humankind and to his own humanity.

Gulliver first describes a Yahoo without knowing it is a Yahoo – that is, he comes across the animal, soon after being cast ashore, without knowing the name of the species. He encounters three sets of tracks – those of humans, cows, and horses – and then finds himself “a little discomposed” when he catches sight of an animal the shape of which is “very singular, and deformed” (207).

Their Heads and Breasts were covered with a thick Hair, some frizzled and others lank; they had Beards like Goats, and a long ridge of Hair down their Backs, and the fore-parts of their Legs and Feet, but the rest of their Bodies were bare, so that I might see their Skins, which were of a brown buff Colour. They had no Tails, nor any Hair at all on their Buttocks, except about the *Anus*; which, I presume, Nature had placed there to defend them as they sat on the Ground; for this Posture they used, as well as lying down, and often stood on their hind Feet (207).

It is clear – to us, even if Gulliver hasn't seen it yet – which sets of tracks these animals left: these are human beings! Our narrator will be brought to acknowledge this in the near future, but not before he remarks on the "Contempt and Aversion" he feels for these animals, never before having "naturally conceived so strong an Antipathy" (207). These Yahoos, it is true, are human beings at their least civilized, human beings entirely animalistic in their behavior – but they are human beings still, and Gulliver's ungenerous reaction highlights the misanthropy that has been developing within him.

Gulliver's visceral distaste for the Yahoos stands in contrast with his immediate admiration for the Houyhnhnms, the next race he encounters. The Houyhnhnms are horses rather than men, and the first one Gulliver comes across receives his "Civilities with Disdain," treating him aloofly but without hostility (208). The intelligence of the Houyhnhnms soon becomes manifest, as Gulliver observes their "Gestures, not unlike those of a Philosopher," and characterizes their "Behavior" as "so orderly and rational, so acute and judicious" (209). Gulliver initially desires to find the Houyhnhnms' keepers, believing that "a People who could so far civilize brute Animals, must needs excel in Wisdom all the Nations of the World" (211). But soon he realizes that the Houyhnhnms *are* the keepers, and that the polite but "contemptuous" manner in which the Houyhnhnms treat him follows from his resemblance to the Yahoos, those "detestable Creatures" he had earlier encountered (212). When the Houyhnhnms put Gulliver and a Yahoo face to face, our narrator finally observes "in this abominable animal, a perfect human figure," which only increases his disgust (213).

For as to those filthy *Yahoos*, although there were few greater Lovers of Mankind, at that time, than myself; yet I confess I never saw any sensitive Being so detestable on all accounts; and the more I came near them, the more hateful they grew, while I stayed in that Country (213).

In time, Gulliver comes to learn the Houyhnhnms' language, and gives a predictably unflattering account of his home continent to his hosts. The exchange here is not unlike Gulliver's conversations with the King of Brobdingnag, but the animating discrepancy between Gulliver and his hosts is different: While in Brobdingnag the difference was perspective – Gulliver's narrow and the Brobdingnagians' great and broad – here the difference is the Houyhnhnms' devotion to reason, and their inability to countenance, or even to understand, that which appears irrational. The Houyhnhnms, Gulliver tells us, seek first and foremost “to cultivate *Reason*, and to be wholly governed by it”; this is why they simply cannot grasp the notion that a rational creature might act irrationally (246). And there is more: Reason, for the Houyhnhnms, always issues in certain and precise conclusions.

Neither is *Reason* among them a Point Problematical as with us, where Men can argue with Plausibility on both sides of a Question; but strikes you with immediate Conviction; as it must needs to where it is not mingled, obscured or discoloured by Passion and Interest (246).

The Houyhnhnms know neither disagreement nor confusion; as Gulliver informs us, they have great difficulty understanding “the meaning of the Word *Opinion*, or how a Point could be disputable” (246). They also know no lying, and

therefore no fiction, nor “the least Idea of Books or Literature” (217). This follows from their aversion to speaking “*the Thing which was not*”: “the Use of Speech was to make us understand one another, and to receive Information of Facts...if anyone *said the Thing which was not*, these Ends were defeated” (221). Their politics, such as it is, consists in “a Representative Council of the whole Nation” held “every fourth Year,” which always issues in “unanimous Consent and Contribution” in the distribution of resources (248). Their language has no terms equivalent to “Power, Government, War, Law,” or “Punishment,” as among them “*Reason* alone is sufficient to govern a *Rational* creature” (225, 238). There are divisions among the Houyhnhnms, but these are subject to unanimous assent rather than dispute:

[A]mong the *Houyhnhnms*, the *White*, the *Sorrel*, and the *Iron-grey*, were not...born with equal Talents of the Mind, or a Capacity to improve them, and therefore contributed always in the Condition of Servants, without ever aspiring to match out of their own Race, which in this Country would be reckoned monstrous and unnatural (236).⁹⁰

Other divisions and differences are simply overlooked. Thus, “They have no Fondness for their Colts or Foals...And I observed my Master to show the same Affection to his Neighbour’s Issue that he had for his own”; “And my Master thought it monstrous in us to give the Females a different kind of Education from the Males...But the Houyhnhnms train up their Youth to Strength, Speed, and Hardiness” (246-8).⁹¹

⁹⁰ This brings to mind the myth of the metals in Plato, *Republic*, Book III, 414c-415c.

⁹¹ Plato, *Republic*, Book V, 451c-458d.

The universal rule of detached and sober reason characterizes the Houyhnhnm's way of life to the very core, which detachment ensures that the Houyhnhnms do not prefer their own above that which belongs to another. Indeed, the very distinction between that which is one's own and that which is another's is tentative at best, and can easily be rendered meaningless: When they attend to "the Regulation of Children," the Houyhnhnms frequently "changeth" a child of one that "hath two Males" with that of one that "hath two Females" in order to better distribute offspring (248). "And when a Child hath been lost by any Casualty, where the Mother is past Breeding, it is determined what Family...shall breed another to supply the Loss" (248). Distinctions, when they are drawn – as in the case of the Houyhnhnm's caste system – proceed entirely from the conclusions of abstract reason rather than from attachment (family, friendship) or desire (love, sex, advantage). "They will have it that *Nature* teaches them to love the whole Species, and it is *Reason* only that maketh a Distinction of Persons, where there is a superior Degree of Virtue" (246).

This detachment makes the Houyhnhnms strikingly unerotic. They talk much of love but not at all of desire, much of friendship but never of preferring one friend to another. Love and friendship for the Houyhnhnms are universal, and therefore sharply different from the kinds of love and friendship that follow from preference and from distinction. "Courtship, Love," and "Presents...have no place" in their pairings and marriages, which are deliberately arranged in order "to preserve the Race from degenerating" (247). The ease with which they exchange children emphasizes both the expansiveness and the detachment, the abstractedness, of this

sort of love. Their poetry abounds in “exalted Notions of Friendship and Benevolence,” but both of these aspects of Houyhnhnm life are universal rather than particular (251). The “Etymology” of the term “Houyhnhnm” signifies “*The Perfection of Nature*” – and yet the Houyhnhnms’ way of life seems strikingly, viscerally unnatural (217).

Gulliver, however, is struck not by the divergence between the natures of Houyhnhnms and humans, but rather by the superiority of Houyhnhnm to human life. In observing and living among the Houyhnhnms and Yahoos, he comes to see the Houyhnhnm way of life as entirely in accordance with nature; that is, he comes to see nature as supplying the same guidance, in the same form, to both Houyhnhnms and humans. Confronted with the lack of variety and spice in the Houyhnhnm diet, he remarks on “how easily Nature is satisfied,” and characterizes “the frequent use of Salt among us” as “an Effect of Luxury” (215). Trying to explain the human propensity for illness to his Houyhnhnm host, Gulliver says: “[W]e eat when we were not hungry, and drank without the Provocation of Thirst,” contrasting the voraciousness of human appetites with the rather bloodless moderation of the Houyhnhnms (233).⁹² He notes that the Houyhnhnm “Language doth not abound in Variety of Words,” but rather than connecting this to the sterility of their poetry, their lack of literature, or their inability to lie and therefore to tell stories, he instead explains this by saying that “their Wants and Passions are fewer than among us” (223).

⁹² This brings to mind Glaucon’s complaint about the “city of sows,” in which the citizens “have their feast without relishes.” Plato, *Republic*, Book II, 372c-d.

The Houyhnhnms' asceticism stands in contrast to the rudeness of the Yahoos, who are appetitive in the extreme. Gulliver's host – he almost immediately begins to refer to him as his "Master" – observes that "Five *Yahoos*," provided with "as much Food as would be sufficient for Fifty...will, instead of eating peacefully, fall together by the Ears, each single one impatient to *have all to itself*" (239). Our narrator himself becomes the focus of the aggressive sexual advances of a female Yahoo – which advances he rejects in a repulsed panic – who is "not...above eleven Years old" (245). If we might say of the Houyhnhnms that their reason seems to overcome or eliminate rather than moderating their appetites, the Yahoos are notable for "their undistinguishing Appetite to devour everything that came in their way"; that is, the Houyhnhnms are all reason and no appetite, and the Yahoos are all appetite and no reason (240).

Gulliver himself, of course, occupies a middle position – but he does not see it this way. Rather, he enthusiastically adopts the contrast drawn by his hosts between perfectly rational, and therefore perfectly virtuous, Houyhnhnms, on the one hand, and perfectly appetitive, and therefore perfectly "odious," Yahoos, on the other (240). He asserts his own knowledge of human nature as opposed to Houyhnhnm nature, but then exhibits the low regard in which he holds this knowledge by simply adopting the Houyhnhnm scheme: "As I ought to have understood Human Nature much better than I supposed it possible for my Master to do, so it was easy to apply the Character he gave of the *Yahoos* to myself and my Countrymen" (243). In one significant sense, Gulliver has put the lie to the notion that the Yahoos are "the most unteachable of all Animals" (244). And yet he has

learned only to despise himself and his fellows, and to take his bearings from the natures of talking horses rather than human beings.

Gulliver also remains oblivious to the dark side of Houyhnhnm rationalism, which is evidenced by “the only Debate which ever happened in that Country”: “whether the *Yahoos* should be exterminated from the Face of the Earth” (249). The simplicity and matter-of-factness with which this debated is presented contrasts sharply with its ominous implications and – at least possibly – genocidal consequences. Attention is drawn here to what the Houyhnhnms’ reliance upon reason and (their understanding of) nature elides: sentiment, attachment, empathy, and the moral considerations that emerge from such things. Their entirely – perhaps coldly – rationalist approach to everything from family, to governance, to death (Houyhnhnms neither fear death, nor grieve, nor mourn the dead) leads them to consider the “Yahoo question” in a manner that seems morally oblivious. The Houyhnhnms are not human; Gulliver fails to notice that they are also capable of inhumanity.

It is at one of the Houyhnhnm assemblies – and perhaps as part of this unsettling debate – that Gulliver’s hosts decide that he must be expelled. Heartbroken – he had planned to spend the rest of his life happily among the Houyhnhnms – Gulliver nonetheless prepares a boat (using Yahoo skins, which he has also been wearing) and departs. He is eventually discovered and brought aboard a ship, though this takes place quite against his wishes. Finding his way home, he is disgusted by the family he had only recently embraced so fondly, which disgust is also disgust at himself: “I must freely confess the sight of them filled me

only with Hatred, Disgust and Contempt, and the more by reflecting on the near Alliance I had to them” (265). Gulliver’s time among the Houyhnhnms has changed him; his education that began at the close of the third book has imposed a most inconvenient distance between Gulliver and those closest to him. Rather than learning his own contentment, he has learned discontent with himself.

When Gulliver arrives in the Land of the Houyhnhnms, he is at something of a crossroads. In Lilliput and Brobdingnag, the ground had, in a fashion, been cut out from under him. The starting point from which he had always reasoned about the world – his own perspective as an Englishman, relatively learned, and of normal physical stature – had been unsettled, exposed as only one particular perspective on a continuum of available perspectives, all of which offer unique grounds from which to reason about, evaluate, and judge the world. This shakes Gulliver up, but it also opens up space for learning, for exploration beyond his previous horizons. He leaves Brobdingnag with his “Thirst...of seeing the World...as violent as ever”; his newfound questions about the world cry out for the kinds of experiences that might lead to satisfying answers (143).

Laputa and Balnibarbi offer one set of answers to these questions, but their approach to reasoning about, judging, and engaging with the world proves incoherent, and their politics appear thoughtlessly cruel and needlessly destructive. This is also the first place with which Gulliver simply loses interest, and from which he is neither expelled, nor escapes, nor is removed against his will. This dissatisfaction, we may speculate, is the germ of his misanthropy, which is brought

into increasing focus along his next several stops. Gulliver first finds modern history – that is, his own history, and his own people – wanting in comparison with that of the ancients, and then learns to adopt a new perspective on death, and therefore begins to question the fear of death, the experience perhaps most common to human beings. It is in such a state that Gulliver finds himself in the Land of the Houyhnhnms, and is confronted with the most compelling settlement to the nagging question of how best to reason about, judge, and engage with the world. Gulliver’s rationalist education at the hands of the Houyhnhnms fills the void created by his previous experiences.

Figured in this fashion, it is not difficult to connect this section of *Gulliver’s Travels* with *The Clouds*. The Houyhnhnms exhibit a Socratic detachment from the conventional, believing that “Nature and Reason [are] sufficient Guides for a reasonable Animal” (229). Unlike Pheidippides, Gulliver arrives at his lessons already dissatisfied with human customs and conventions, but from Socrates’ attempted education of Strepsiades we can glean an example of a similar kind of “ground clearing”: Strepsiades is continually urged to abstract from his own particular concerns, from the concerns of his family and his city, and to take his bearings only from the kind of naturalistic reasoning that this abstraction enables. Gulliver has already distanced himself from the concerns and conventions that permeate the particular context from which he set sail – those that characterize his family, his country, his continent, even his species – and so is ready to begin his education at the beginning, without the baggage of particular attachments and interests.

At their core, Gulliver's questions are questions about how best to negotiate difference. His experiences of radical difference in Lilliput and Balnibarbi had called into question his ability to reason appropriately about things, and therefore to act appropriately in the world. The Laputan turn toward technical and unitary knowledge about the world – toward “the Zenith” – proves unable also to negotiate difference, to grapple with the kinds of particular and idiosyncratic variations that characterize human life and political life. The Houyhnhnm reliance upon, and beginning from, “Nature and Reason” seems an attractive answer to this conundrum, since “Nature and Reason” ought to provide reliable guidance regardless of particulars; that is, taking one's bearings from “Nature and Reason” ought to overcome the force of particulars in any particular context. But the Houyhnhnms prove profoundly unable to negotiate a single extremely significant instance of difference: in a land populated by perfectly rational Houyhnhnms and perfectly appetitive Yahoos, Gulliver is neither Houyhnhnm nor Yahoo, but rather a being somewhat in between. He is different, singular, unique; his hosts cannot adequately grapple with this, nor can they bring him to an appropriate understanding about himself. In the Land of the Houyhnhnms, and under the tutelage of Houyhnhnm rationalism, Gulliver comes to detest himself as a Yahoo rather than attaining knowledge of himself as a human being.

This brings to mind the consequences, in *The Clouds*, of Socratic rationalism, as well as the Socratic inability to negotiate difference, to adequately address particular attachments and divergent human contexts. After his naturalistic and rationalist education, Pheidippides returns home and confronts his father with an

argument about parent-beating that is both perfectly rational and perfectly destructive, in the sense that he is unable to see – and, perhaps, indifferent to – the implications of his argument for his family and his city. He has learned abstract reasoning but unlearned attachment and sentiment; he has forgotten the role that particular connections and their implications play in human affairs. In so doing, he has become profoundly imprudent: he has become adept at drawing technical and naturalistic distinctions but awful at making appropriate and effectual human choices. Gulliver's situation leaving the Land of the Houyhnhnms is similar: the gulf between the way the Houyhnhnms have taught him to evaluate and engage with the world, on the one hand, and the particular human world in which he lives and to which he is suited, on the other, is wide enough to make him unable to live as a human being should. This accounts for his somewhat imprudent expectation, expressed at the end of *Gulliver's Travels*, that his book will “inform and instruct Mankind,” and his exceedingly imprudent disappointment, expressed at the start of the work, that his fellow human beings have failed to reform themselves in accordance with his exhortations (268).

In this sense, Gulliver's education at the hands of the Houyhnhnms, admirable as their society initially appears, has made him something like the Laputan tailor: He has honed his ability to reason abstractly, much as the Laputan tailor is versed in the abstract science of geometry. But he cannot adapt his abstract reasoning to particular differences: between Houyhnhnms, Yahoos, and Englishmen; between Houyhnhnm nature and human nature; and between the Houyhnhnm community and human (and, more particularly, his own) community – much like the

Laputan tailor cannot use his skill at geometry to produce clothes that appropriately fit the divergent forms of particular human beings. And, evidenced by the Houyhnhnms' never-ending debate on the extermination of the Yahoos, the Houyhnhnm approach to at least one of the questions of political life resembles the Laputan response to the rebellion of Lindalino: Both proposals – extermination of the Yahoos, the crushing of rebellious cities beneath the floating island – are inhumanly violent, total rather than partial or nuanced in scope, and represent an intolerance of and an inability to negotiate difference rather than a willingness to adapt to, and engage with, particular and divergent grievances, situations, and species.

Chapter Three
Moral Rationalism and Murder in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*

“It is the work of a thirteenth-century sculptor called Radovan, or the Joyous One, and it instantly recalls the novels of Dostoevsky. There is the same sense of rich, contending disorder changing oozily from form to form, each one of which the mind strives to grasp...These scenes are depicted with a primitive curiosity, but also make a highly cultured admission that that curiosity cannot be wholly gratified. It is as if the child in the artist asked, ‘What are those funny men doing?’ and the subtle man in him answered, ‘I do not know, but I think...”

Rebecca West⁹³

“This is a murky, fantastic case, a contemporary one, an incident that belongs to our own age, an age in which the heart of man has grown dark and muddied; in which one hears the saying quoted that ‘blood reinvigorates’; in which material comfort is preached as life’s only aim. It’s a case that involves dreams derived from books, sir, a heart that has been overstimulated by theories; in it we see a determination to take the first step, but it’s a determination of a particular kind – the man’s taken his resolve, but it’s as if he’d fallen off a cliff or jumped from a steeple, as if he’d blundered into the crime like some clockwork automaton. He forgot to close the door behind him, and he killed, killed two people, because of a theory.”

Porfiry Petrovich⁹⁴

ROSSITER: It’s too late, man. To build from the bottom up, you start with a new foundation, right?

PACO: What do you mean, dynamite everything?

ROSSITER: Mm...like the good builders do.

PACO: Yeah, but they don’t blow up the people inside.

⁹³ Rebecca West, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, New York: Penguin Books, 1969, 174.

⁹⁴ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. David McDuff, London, UK: Penguin Books: 1991, 527-8.

ROSSITER: I don't see any people.
PACO: Rossiter, that's precisely your problem. You don't see people.⁹⁵

Like *Gulliver's Travels*, Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* offers us a window into political rationalism that is intensely personal, centering on the experiences and impressions of a particular character. Unlike *Gulliver's Travels*, *Crime and Punishment* deals not primarily – indeed, hardly at all – with political arrangements and sets of institutions; rather, Dostoevsky's novel brings us into close contact with several different moral perspectives, and for the most part merely intimates the more overtly political perspectives that follow from these moral frameworks.

In this sense, *Crime and Punishment* allows us to explore the moral rationalism that both goes hand in hand with political rationalism, and provides the grounds upon which a rationalist approach to politics rests. Examining the several different examples of rationalist moral calculus found in the novel allows us to further develop our picture of the nature, as well as the limitations, of a rationalist approach to moral and political life. Further, against these several especially articulate and well-articulated examples of moral rationalism, the novel offers another approach to moral life, one far less articulate and precise and yet arguably more compelling. This prompts us to connect the insufficiency of moral rationalism with the limits of an approach to morality that prizes precision, and indeed with the possibility that reducing morality to reasoned speech – assuming that everything

⁹⁵ *R.P.M.*, DVD, Directed by Stanley Kramer, 1970, United States: SPHE, 2011.

important about moral life can be captured, expressed, and calculated in rational discourse – is itself insufficient.

The several examples of moral rationalism found in *Crime and Punishment* have several attributes in common. Firstly, they follow, to a greater or lesser degree, a mathematical mode of reasoning. In this sense, referring to these modes of moral reasoning as “moral calculus” is not accidental: They appear as processes of calculation, and they determine right and wrong along quantitative and mathematical lines. Secondly, the several examples of moral rationalism found in the novel have in common the neglect – or even the deliberate avoidance – of attachment or sentiment. The novel’s moral rationalists do not allow attachments to other human beings to interfere with their calculations, nor do such attachments figure into their calculus. Human attachment, and the affection and sentiment with which such attachments are connected, appear as an impediment to moral reasoning rather than a ground upon which moral life might rest. These two elements – a mathematical mode of reasoning and a dismissal of human attachments – are of a piece, in the sense that both point us to morality as a product of reason alone, unencumbered by sentiment, affection, or partiality. Thirdly, *Crime and Punishment*’s several examples of moral rationalism all frame themselves as, and insist on the importance of, a break from the past, and from what is often referred to as the “prejudice” with which the past saddles us. This, too, is of a piece with the first two attributes: The moral rationalism of the novel, in its several iterations, must unshackle itself from the moral inheritance of the past and begin anew, precisely because it must begin from reason alone. The moral prejudices of

the past, like the moral impulses that emerge from human attachment, can only muddle the clarity and precision that a rationalist approach to morality promises to achieve.

In this sense, the moral rationalism on display in *Crime and Punishment*, like the political rationalism on display in the other works examined in this thesis, offers the possibility of precise answers to difficult questions. In adopting a mathematical mode of calculation, and in rejecting or eliding that which might complicate this mode of moral reasoning, the moral rationalism depicted in the novel allows its practitioners to make moral choices that they understand as perfectly correct. The action of the novel shows us the unraveling of this moral certainty, and offers – if only in outline – an alternative approach to moral life, one that takes its bearings from exactly those aspects of human existence that moral rationalism overlooks or dismisses.

I. Raskolnikov's Ruminations

Dostoevsky's novel centers on Raskolnikov, a young ex-student in dire financial circumstances. The crime that he commits – the murder of an elderly pawnbroker and her sister – sets the novel's action in motion, and the remainder of the work follows his mental and emotional tribulations until his eventual confession and imprisonment. The connection between Raskolnikov's crime and his ideas – between his actions and the rationalist moral calculus with which he justifies these actions – is central to our discussion of the novel.

When we first encounter Raskolnikov, he's just emerged from "a whole month of concentrated depression and gloomy excitement," cooped up in his tiny,

tomb-like room in St. Petersburg and ruminating on a particular idea (41).⁹⁶ The extent of his detachment from the world around him, and from fellow human beings, is clear: He has “withdrawn from everyone, like a tortoise into its shell”; “So absorbed in himself [has] he grown, so isolated from everyone else,” that encountering other people brings forth in him an “unpleasant sense of revulsion” (60, 33, 43). Even as he walks the lively and colorful streets of St. Petersburg, he “[ceases] to be aware of his surroundings, nor [has] he any desire to be aware of them”; “all that mediocre rubbish” that is the stuff of quotidian existence “[has] nothing whatsoever to do with him” (34, 33). Raskolnikov sets himself apart from, and above, the human beings with which he lives in such close proximity. He has deliberately severed connections: He has not seen his mother and sister for years, and it has been months since he’s seen his closest friend, Razumikhin.

Throughout his self-imposed month of isolation, Raskolnikov has done nothing but think. He’s been “tormented” by “a terrible, monstrous and fantastic question that had begun to torture his heart and mind and inexorably demanded resolution” (79). When he receives a letter from his mother informing him of his sister’s impending marriage, he decides immediately to resolve this question, to “do something, and at once...Or else turn my back on life altogether” (79).

The idea with which Raskolnikov has been absorbed – the question that he now feels he must answer – has to do with an old pawnbroker, Alyona Ivanovna, with whom he has had dealings due to his poverty. This idea, which “popped up in his head” one day “like a chicken broken from an egg,” is that he ought to kill the

⁹⁶ Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*. All subsequent references to *Crime and Punishment* will be in-text, page numbers only.

pawnbroker, take her goods and money, and put them to use in his own life (99). But Raskolnikov understands this crime not mainly as an act of theft; rather, he understands himself to be acting upon – actualizing in the world – a particular theory of social life.

In this sense, Raskolnikov's crime is self-consciously political. The way he thinks about and justifies his act is by situating it within his understanding of the workings of social life and the processes of history. Raskolnikov has a theory of politics and a theory of history – he has a theory of political history, really – according to which his crime is not only acceptable but perhaps even admirable, and this theory provides the framework within which Raskolnikov thinks about his crime.

This is important because it allows us to understand the place of Raskolnikov's other motive for his crime: the financial motive. The financial motive, in fact, has a central place in his understanding of his crime, but if we take his word for it – and we should take his word for it – the question of whether or not his act is permissible hinges not on the direness of his financial circumstances but rather on whether or not he is justified in committing the crime that will ease these circumstances. Killing Alyona Ivanovna for financial reasons would be unremarkable – plenty of people kill for money. Raskolnikov's crime is remarkable because he articulates a theory according to which it is permissible for him to kill for money, and he makes it clear that it is this theory, and not his desire for gain, that guides his actions. His crime is remarkable because it is ultimately a crime of the

mind. It is a crime that originates in, justifies itself according to, and takes its bearings from ideas.

II. Moral Mathematics

Raskolnikov's idea – the theory about the world from which his crime emerges – calculates the morality of an act by determining the aggregate good or evil that will likely emerge from the act. In this sense, Raskolnikov takes a rationalist approach to morality: He determines what is permitted, or not, according to a calculus of good and bad. In this way of thinking, moral action is a matter of right reasoning. Morality follows from – indeed, is nothing more than the conclusions of – reason.⁹⁷ In this sense, Raskolnikov's isolation, his detachment from friends and family, and his obsessive rumination have sharpened his moral sense, since they have removed any obstacles – sentiment, attachment, distraction – to concentrated moral reasoning.

There are two places to turn in order to sketch the contours of Raskolnikov's thinking. The first is a conversation he overhears at a “rather inferior little eating-house”; the second is an article that he wrote some time ago and that has been published without his knowledge (99). Both of these events – the overhearing of the conversation and the penning of the article – take place before the novel's narrative begins, but the details of both come to light as the novel progresses.

Having just left the pawnbroker Alyona Ivanovna, Raskolnikov stops into an eating-house and sits alone, as is his custom. He is surprised to overhear two others

⁹⁷ In his discussion of utilitarian approaches to the problem of “dirty hands,” Michael Walzer illuminates both the contours and the difficulties of a similarly calculative approach to morality. Michael Walzer, “Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 2:2 (Winter, 1973), 168-172.

– a student and a “young officer” – discussing Alyona and her sister, Lizaveta (99).

The crime he will eventually commit seems already to have occurred to him, at least in outline, and so it is doubly coincidental that he overhears this particular conversation, which centers on the value of the pawnbroker’s life, and the permissibility of taking it.

“I’ll tell you this,” says the student to the officer, “I’d murder that old woman and rob her of all her money, and I swear to you, I’d do it without the slightest twinge of conscience” (101). Raskolnikov is “in a state of extreme excitement”; after all, “inside his own head there had just been engendered...*precisely those very same thoughts*” (101). But the coincidence is greater still: as the student goes on to explain his moral calculus, Raskolnikov acknowledges that has himself reasoned in precisely the same fashion. In fact, this approach to morality is “commonplace” among “young people,” though perhaps it is only Raskolnikov who is ready to translate words and thoughts into action (102). The student’s moral logic is as follows:

[O]n the one hand you have a nasty, stupid, worthless, meaningless, sick old woman who’s no use to anyone and is, indeed, actually harmful to people, who doesn’t even know herself why she’s alive, and who’s going to kick the bucket of her own accord tomorrow...on the other hand you have young, fresh energies that are going to waste for want of backing – thousands of people are involved, and it’s happening everywhere. A hundred, a thousand good deeds and undertakings that could be arranged and expedited with that old woman’s money...what do you think – wouldn’t one petty little crime like

that be atoned for by all those thousands of good deeds? Instead of one life – thousands of lives rescued from corruption and decay. One death to a hundred lives – I mean, there’s arithmetic for you! (101-2)

The emphasis on arithmetic here is telling: Moral reasoning, in the student’s presentation, appears identical to mathematical reasoning. To reason rightly about moral matters, one simply leaves sentiment to the side and tallies up the goods and evils, noting on which side the balance lies and acting accordingly. But the student Raskolnikov overhears is not prepared to act on his reasoning, and his officer companion notes the contradiction: When the student claims that the pawnbroker’s death, following his logic, would merely be her “just deserts,” the officer replies that “there are no just deserts in it at all unless you’re prepared to do it yourself” (102). In other words, the fact that the student is unwilling to act upon his moral reasoning shows that he doesn’t really believe it. If the murder is just, as he claims, the student should not hesitate to carry it out; the fact that he doesn’t carry it out – despite the overwhelming arithmetic in its favor – exposes his moral reasoning as faulty.

III. The Ordinary and the Extraordinary

Raskolnikov shares the student’s ideas, but he also goes further. It is the element he adds to this sort of mathematical moral reasoning that allows him, unlike the student, to act on his ideas. For this, we must jump ahead in the narrative, to a scene in which Raskolnikov is engaged in conversation with Porfiry Petrovich, a police inspector who suspects him of the murders. Porfiry has mentioned to Raskolnikov an article that the latter had written and was subsequently published without his knowledge. Porfiry has read the article and was

impressed by its content, and particularly struck by an especially provocative little idea. This idea is Raskolnikov's theory of political history, which theory supplements the mathematical moral reasoning that he holds in common with the overheard student. It is this theory that allows Raskolnikov to act on his moral reasoning, to translate his moral rationalism into murder.

Raskolnikov's theory appears in his article, but the article isn't about his theory. It seems rather – at least from Porfiry's summary – that the theory appears almost as an afterthought, a footnote. In discussing the article, Porfiry draws our attention to “a certain idea that you introduced at the end of the piece, but which you unfortunately alluded to only in passing, obscurely” (311). The arresting power of this allusion, this obscure intimation, is made clear by the fact that Porfiry's attention was captured not by the ostensible subject of the article but rather by this brief sketch of an idea.

Raskolnikov's idea is that there are two different kinds of people in the world: ordinary people, who live in thrall to the prejudices and customs of the day – it is not difficult here to hear echoes of the “mediocre rubbish” by which Raskolnikov feels he is surrounded – and extraordinary people, unbound by prejudice, who act on their own convictions and thereby effect change in the world (33).

Porfiry, the detective, frames Raskolnikov's idea in legal terms. As Porfiry understands it, “the ordinary must live in obedience and do not have the right to break the law,” while “The extraordinary, on the other hand, have the right to commit all sorts of crimes and break the law in all sorts of ways...” Raskolnikov's

idea, in other words, is a theory about law – a theory that has bearing on the duties of citizens, police, and judges. It is a theory according to which certain people owe the law no obedience and should not be held by law to account for their actions. These extraordinary people, in Porfiry's restating of Raskolnikov's idea, "have a perfect right to commit all sorts of crimes and atrocities" – they have the legal right to do what others do not. These extraordinary people must be understood and dealt with "as if the law did not apply to them" (311).

Raskolnikov corrects Porfiry by taking the discussion out of the realm of law – or at least, out of the realm of the kind of law that has bearing on the duties of citizens, police, and judges – and places it in the realm of individual conscience. The idea that he alluded to, he says, was simply that "an 'extraordinary' person has a right...not an official right, of course, but a private one, to allow his conscience to step across certain...obstacles" (312). Raskolnikov clarifies his point using the example of Newton: If Newton, he says, had found it necessary to kill in order to make his discoveries known – whether the victims numbered one or one hundred – then he would have had the right, even the duty, to do so, since the evil involved in such killing would be outweighed by the good involved in publicizing Newton's discoveries.

Raskolnikov then speaks directly to what appears to be his main area of concern: political history, or the history of political change and progress. If Newton had been a political figure, Raskolnikov continues, he'd have surely encountered obstacles over which he and his conscience would have had to step. Those who have been among "the law-makers and guiding spirits of mankind" – Muhammad,

Napoleon, Lycurgus – have always had to shed blood. “It is in fact worth noting, says Raskolnikov, “that the majority of those benefactors and guiding spirits of mankind were particularly fearsome blood-letters.” The men that benefit humankind the most have to be criminals – not in the narrow legal sense, but in the sense of transgressors, people who step outside of the bounds of what is permitted. These men must transgress, must cross boundaries, simply because of the nature of their ideas and actions: These men transgress because they effect change in the world, because they “move the world and lead it towards a goal” (313). On a fundamental level, says Raskolnikov, the world is divided into people to whom this transgression is permitted and people to whom it is not.

Raskolnikov finds nothing particularly new or original in these ideas: In his words, “[T]hat’s just the way things are, I’m afraid...It’s not my fault they’re like that. That’s the way things are and that’s how they’ll always be” (317). “Of course you’re right when you say that this is nothing new and resembles all the things we’ve read and heard a thousand times,” says his friend Razumikhin. But perhaps, as Razumikhin suggests, Raskolnikov’s originality consists in his focus on what he calls a “private” right, what we ought to think of as a right of conscience. “[W]hat is really original about all this,” says Razumikhin, “is that you condone the shedding of blood *on grounds of conscience*” (316). According to Raskolnikov, it isn’t simply that the transgressions of the extraordinary are forgotten, forgiven, or judged necessary in light of the fact that they “move the world,” but rather that the extraordinary should not and do not experience the pangs of conscience in carrying out their work. His

theory of political history is also a psychological theory, a theory of the psychology of the extraordinary man.

This, then, is the connection between the moral rationalism to which Raskolnikov subscribes and the murderous act that he commits: Raskolnikov, unlike the overheard student, may act on his moral reasoning without fear of the pangs of conscience, because he has also reasoned that he *should* not feel the pangs of conscience. This is because he, having acted, can identify himself as an extraordinary person, since none but the extraordinary have the courage to act upon such moral reasoning in the face of prejudice and custom. The very fact that he translates his rationalist approach to morality into action – that he is the sort of person who acts on his moral reasoning uninhibited by convention or sentiment – means that he has a right of conscience to his crime.

Here, the three main attributes of Raskolnikov's moral rationalism come into sharp relief: His mode of moral reasoning is mathematical, he downgrades the importance of human attachment in favor of abstract moral calculus, and he insists on the right of – indeed, the necessity for – the extraordinary to break with the prejudices of the ordinary in order to “move the world and lead it towards a goal.” His moral reasoning is detached both from other human beings and from the past, and it is precise insofar as it begins and ends with reason alone, as expressed in mathematical terms. For Raskolnikov, the proof of this process is his own ability to enact it: his “right of conscience” to enact his moral rationalism follows from his ability to break the chains of attachment and inheritance and take his bearings from reason alone.

Of course, Raskolnikov is wrong: As the novel progresses, it becomes clear – both to the reader and to Raskolnikov himself – that his conscience has not permitted him to “step across” the murder he has committed. Explaining why this is so – exposing the blind spots of Raskolnikov’s moral rationalism – will be the work of this chapter’s sixth and seventh sections. But Raskolnikov’s moral rationalism is not the only sort of moral rationalism that *Crime and Punishment* presents. If we can call Raskolnikov’s moral reasoning elitist, we might refer to the other two examples as economic, in the first case, and hedonistic, in the second. Attending to these two other examples of a rationalist approach to moral reasoning will bring Raskolnikov’s own blind spots into sharper relief, and will shed light on the novel’s ultimate challenge to moral rationalism.

IV. Luzhin’s Economic Rationalism

The letter Raskolnikov receives from his mother, which letter prompts him immediately to act on his murderous moral calculus, announces his sister’s impending marriage to Pyotr Petrovich Luzhin, a “man of business” described by Raskolnikov’s mother as “a very decent and respectable man, just a bit arrogant and on the gloomy side” (68). In the same letter, she notes “a certain lack of harmony with regard to ideas” between Luzhin and Dunya, Raskolnikov’s sister and Luzhin’s intended (69). She continues:

I also found him a bit hard-mannered at first; but I mean it could just be that he’s a straightforward sort of man...For example, on his second visit...he said during the course of the conversation that even in the days before he had met Dunya he had decided to marry an honest girl, but one without a dowry, and

she must be the kind of girl who already knew what poverty was like; because, as he explained...it's always far better if the wife views the husband as her benefactor (69).

What is "hard-mannered" about Luzhin, in other words, is that he approaches marriage like a business proposition. If his wife views him as her benefactor, her deliverance from poverty, he'll hold the position of advantage in the marriage: Luzhin, the "man of business," brings the logic of a business negotiation into the arena of the heart. The crassness of his calculations here seems appropriate for the world of business but not for the intimate sphere.

When Raskolnikov and Luzhin meet face-to-face some time later, it becomes clear that their ideas have a great deal in common, despite Raskolnikov's contempt for his future brother-in-law. Luzhin, like Raskolnikov, is interested in "what is new," in casting aside received way of thinking in favor of "a clearer view – more, as it were, criticism; more efficiency" (192). When Raskolnikov expresses pessimism about the degree to which such efficiency might take hold in contemporary Russia, Luzhin elaborates on his point.

[Q]uite a great deal has already been achieved: new, wholesome ideas have been disseminated, several new, wholesome literary works have received circulation in place of the old, dreamy, romantic ones; literature is assuming a more mature inflection; many harmful prejudices have been uprooted and put to scorn...In a word, he have irrevocably cut our ties with the past, and that, in my opinion, sir, amounts to effective action (193).

Here we hear not only reflections of Raskolnikov's scorn for the customs and prejudices of the "ordinary," but also echoes of the overheard student, who had enthusiastically assured his conversational companion that "it's possible to correct and channel nature...otherwise we would all just drown in a sea of prejudice. If it weren't for that, there would never have been a single great man" (102). Luzhin, Raskolnikov, and the student with which the latter shares a certain quantitative moral sense, all hold in common the notion that prejudice, the moral and intellectual legacy of the past, is the chief obstacle to be overcome. But whereas both the overheard student and Raskolnikov – as evidenced by his article – are concerned with greatness and extraordinary men, Luzhin is concerned with efficiency: his ideas tend toward the economic rather than the historical-political.

This economic orientation, and the central role it plays in Luzhin's particular kind of moral rationalism, is captured nicely by his understanding of the recent conclusions of "Science":

"Love yourself before all others, for everything in the world is founded upon self-interest." If you love only yourself, you will conduct your enterprises in a proper manner...Economic justice adds, moreover, that the more privately organized enterprise there is in society...the more firmly it is founded and the better the public cause is organized, too. From this it follows that in acquiring wealth solely and exclusively for myself, I am by virtue of that very same fact acquiring it for all...and this is not because of any private, individual acts of generosity, but as a consequence of the resulting universal prosperity. A simple thought, but one that has unfortunately taken a long

time to arrive, overshadowed as it has been by enthusiasm and proneness to dreaming (194).

Raskolnikov is repelled by Luzhin's ideas – and the smugness and self-satisfaction with which he relates them – and yet he recognizes, with great discomfort, the common ground between this moral calculus and his own. “[I]f you take these ideas you were advocating just now to their ultimate conclusion,” he exclaims, “the end result would be that it's all right to go around killing people” (197). Of course, Raskolnikov's own moral calculus has issued in precisely this conclusion, and Raskolnikov has acted on it more directly than Luzhin can possibly know. But Raskolnikov recognizes a common core between his and Luzhin's thinking – a moral orientation that takes its bearings from a neutral set of facts, and calculates without regard for sentiment, prejudice, received wisdom, or human attachment – and he recognizes the ultimate indifference to human life implicit in both approaches to morality.

Luzhin comes away from his initial encounter with Raskolnikov thoroughly offended, and Dunya – against his wishes – arranges for he and Raskolnikov to meet again, in order to mend the relationship between the two. At this meeting, the engagement between Dunya and Luzhin unravels, as Dunya becomes aware of – and disgusted by – the implications of Luzhin's approach to moral life. Luzhin disdains the dreamy prejudices of the past and embraces the clarity and efficiency of economics; it is therefore unsurprising that he is “a man who could not abide uncertainty” (353). In his view, Dunya's attachment to her brother is an unnecessary complication: the conflict between fiancé and brother must be resolved

according to a rational calculus of advantage, unencumbered by sentiment or affection. The hard dollars-and-cents truth that Dunya needs Luzhin more than she needs Raskolnikov makes Luzhin certain that the conflict will be resolved in his favor, and the uncertainty and imprecision that attachment and sentiment introduce into this calculus deeply unsettles him.

Dunya articulates another approach to moral life, in which her attachment to her brother carries at least as much weight as the advantage she will derive from her marriage to Luzhin. When Luzhin expresses offense at the notion that Dunya considers her brother's feelings equally with his, she responds: "I put your interests on the same level as all that has hitherto been precious to me in life, that has constituted the *integrity* of my life, and you suddenly take offence because you think I value you *too little*?" (359) Unlike Luzhin's certain calculus of advantage, Dunya's approach to moral action involves an imprecise navigation between people to whom she is attached, and whose sentiments she must take into account. Luzhin's outrage at this makes Dunya realize the ugliness of his calculus: "[Y]ou've been calculating on our helplessness," she accuses, even as he asserts that his involvement in "certain expenses" on Dunya's behalf ought to decide the matter (362-3).

Later, after the engagement has disintegrated, we are provided with a view of the connection between Luzhin's economic orientation, on the one hand, and his embrace of a rationalist moral calculus, on the other. "What he cherished and valued more highly than anything else in the world," we are told, "was his money...it put him on an equal footing with all that was above him" (364). Focusing on economic calculations, for Luzhin, enables the precision – the certainty – that non-

economic modes of reasoning seem to lack. In order to resolve the imprecise into the certain, and in order to calculate his own place in the world, Luzhin recognizes “no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous ‘cash payment’”; he dissolves both considerations of attachment and sentiment and the inherited prejudices of the past “in the icy water of egotistical calculation.”⁹⁸ Like Raskolnikov, Luzhin’s moral rationalism allows him to resolve infinitely murky and complicated moral problems into clear calculations in the mathematical mode; it reduces infinite complexity into numerical simplicity. It also allows him to pursue his own advantage with a clear conscience, since his path is illuminated by certain and unencumbered reason. Both men, in somewhat different ways, distill human and moral complexity into the kind of simplicity than can be negotiated – and resolved – by rational calculation.

V. Svidrigailov’s Hedonistic Rationalism

Svidrigailov, like Luzhin, is connected to Raskolnikov through Dunya. Before her engagement to Luzhin, Dunya had been employed in a domestic capacity at the home of Svidrigailov and his now-deceased wife. Svidrigailov pursued Dunya, and a scandal ensued; now that his wife has passed – leaving him a rich man – Svidrigailov has come to Petersburg for reasons both uncertain and suspicious, and has sought out Raskolnikov.

At first glance, the dissolute Svidrigailov and the persnickety Luzhin have little in common other than this connection to Dunya. But in fact, the two men – together with Raskolnikov – have in common an approach to moral life, though this

⁹⁸ Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1988, 57.

approach often seems to lead them to divergent conclusions. Svidrigailov, like Luzhin, navigates moral life by reason alone. But the animating principle of Svidrigailov's moral rationalism is hedonistic rather than economic: if Luzhin's reason follows from economic calculations, Svidrigailov's chases after what feels good. The two men thus both resolve moral complexity into moral simplicity, Luzhin by economic calculations, and Svidrigailov by a calculus of pleasure.

Over the course of two meetings with Raskolnikov – both characterized by the latter's suspicions about Svidrigailov's intentions toward Dunya – Svidrigailov's particular brand of hedonistic moral rationalism emerges. It also comes to light that the two men have a great deal in common. The two are "birds of a feather," Svidrigailov says: "there's something about you that resembles myself" (346, 350). Part of the commonality between Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov comes from the detachment both men share, their sense of apartness from ordinary people and quotidian affairs. "[T]here's practically nothing that interests me," says Svidrigailov, and "I'm not really interested in what anyone thinks of me" (340). Though his wife has just died, and he admits that he misses her, he seems also to have played a role in her death, about which he says matter-of-factly that "my own conscience is perfectly clear on the matter" (338). He even subscribes, at least to some degree, to Raskolnikov's distinction between the docile ordinary and the bold extraordinary, noting that "human beings in general are fond, even inordinately fond, of being trampled on" (339).

Demonstrating his disdain for the conventions of the ordinary, Svidrigailov is brutally honest about taking his moral bearings from reason in the service of desire.

“I seldom lie,” he says, and he admits frankly that “I’m a lecherous and idle man” (345, 347). When it emerges that he wants to present Dunya with a sum of money, and Raskolnikov comments on the unseemliness of this proposition, Svidrigailov shows that he shares with Raskolnikov not merely a detachment from ordinary people and quotidian affairs, but also (and this he shares with Luzhin as well) a disdain for the moral prejudices inherited from the past, and a sense that such prejudices inhibit human accomplishment. If we took our bearings from inherited moral conventions, says Svidrigailov, we’d “not even possess the right to do a single crumb of good, merely because of some empty accepted convention. That’s absurd” (349). Svidrigailov, like both Raskolnikov and Luzhin, is eager to throw off the shackles of the past and the bonds of convention.

When Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov meet again, the latter elaborates on his approach to moral life. He takes his moral bearings from his own desires, he says, because “In lechery there is at least something permanent, something that is truly founded upon nature and is not subject to the imagination” (543). Svidrigailov’s hedonism here appears as a perverse cousin to *The Clouds*’ Socratic rationalism – and that of the Houyhnhnms in *Gulliver’s Travels* – in which nature is understood as the only valid guide to appropriate behavior. Coupled with his naturalism is his disdain, as mentioned above, for the limitations of custom and convention, a disdain also shared with *The Clouds*’ Socrates. “Why should I give up women,” asks Svidrigailov, “since at least they’re something I care about? It’s a pastime, at any rate” (543). Having discerned human nature, Svidrigailov – like Raskolnikov and

Luzhin – can safely rely upon reason alone to take him from nature to moral certainty, even in the absence of conventional supports.

Svidrigailov's particular brand of hedonistic rationalism is also on display when he discusses relationship with his late wife, explaining that despite accepted convention, "it was quite out of the question for me to be faithful to her" (546). He then elaborates on his moral reasoning about his late wife and his marriage: "Actually, if one is to form a dispassionate judgment about certain people, one must first of all jettison certain prejudices one may have, and also one's customary manner of dealing with the persons and objects that surround us" (546). "Everyone must look out for himself," he says, echoing Luzhin's assertions about self-interest, though in a hedonistic rather than economic vein (555).

In his disinterest in the broader concerns of social and political life, Svidrigailov departs from Raskolnikov, whose elitist moral rationalism takes its bearings from a consideration of human beings in the aggregate. He urges Raskolnikov to "put...to one side" the "Problems to do with man as citizen" that have occupied his attention" (559). But in the decisive case, he is willing to embrace Raskolnikov's way of thinking: if the commonalities between Luzhin's and Raskolnikov's rationalism come to light at the level of implications, Svidrigailov much more directly endorses Raskolnikov's moral calculus – and its brutal consequences. Having overheard Raskolnikov describing his ideas, he characterizes them as "a reasonable sort of theory," "a perfectly reasonable theory" (566). He also offers to assist Raskolnikov in escaping justice, both because he recognizes a kinship between he and Raskolnikov and in order to curry favor with Dunya. "We'll save

him, get him out of this," Svidrigailov promises, "And as for the fact of the murder, he'll accomplish a lot of good works yet, and all this will be wiped from the slate; please put your mind at rest. He may yet be a great man" (567). Here, Svidrigailov shows himself willing to endorse not only the reasonableness of Raskolnikov's theory but also the latter's quantitative moral calculus, tallying up goods and evils in order to make moral determinations.

VI. Raskolnikov's Confessions, and Sonya's Alternative

The undesirable consequences of Luzhin's and Svidrigailov's moral rationalisms seem self-evident: Both men are selfish and self-seeking, both form toxic relationships with other human beings, and both reach moral conclusions that seem repellant. All of these things are true of Raskolnikov's moral rationalism as well, but his thinking – in contrast to that of Luzhin or Svidrigailov – seems not nearly as facile. Luzhin's economic calculus and Svidrigailov's matter-of-fact hedonism are both broadly drawn and articulated by detestable characters; Raskolnikov's elitist rationalism is more artful, and is articulated by a character with whom we have great sympathy. Nevertheless, Raskolnikov's moral rationalism – and its ultimate and profound inadequacy – is perhaps the primary theme of the novel. Why is Raskolnikov's rationalism inadequate? And is there an alternative to his way of approaching moral life?

The first glimmer of an answer to these questions comes from the scene in which occurs Raskolnikov's most meaningful confession, the scene in which he confesses his crime not to the police but to Sonya, a young prostitute whose appearance in his life has been recent but significant.

Raskolnikov begins with a simple explanation for his crime: "I wanted to become a Napoleon," he says to Sonya, "and that's why I killed" (483). But this simplicity is quickly left behind. He follows and complicates this brief explanation with an elaboration of his moral calculus:

I once asked myself the question: what if Napoleon, for example, had been in my position...what if...he had quite simply had nothing but an absurd old woman, a petty bureaucrat's widow, whom he was also going to have to murder, so he could steal all the money out of her chest (to help his career, do you see?) (483).

In other words, Raskolnikov saw the obstacle in front of him, and considered whether or not Napoleon would step across. Concluding that he would – that he would not be dissuaded by the tawdriness of the deed – Raskolnikov simply followed Napoleon's example and did away with the obstacle in his path. But Sonya rejects the distinction upon which Raskolnikov's example is based: the distinction he draws between "Napoleon" and "an absurd old woman," which distinction implies that the former is worth more than the latter. For Raskolnikov, these distinctions between human beings can be determined rationally – quantitatively, in fact – by reckoning the goods and evils that each human being will produce. Extraordinary human beings, "those benefactors and guiding spirits of mankind" who "move the world and lead it towards a goal," are bound to produce far more good for the species than any one ordinary person, to say nothing of an absurd old woman (313). For Sonya, on the other hand, these distinctions are unclear: Thus when Raskolnikov argues that "all I killed was a louse – a loathsome,

useless, harmful louse,” Sonya simply and emphatically responds: “But that louse was a human being!” (485) Sonya challenges the quantitative evaluation of human worth upon which Raskolnikov’s rationalism is based – she questions whether such an evaluation is possible – and in its place she offers the claim of common humanity, which contains precious little grounds for precise distinctions between human beings. When Raskolnikov asks her to determine the worth of particular human beings based on the good or evil they will produce, and to decide based on such calculations who should live and who should die, Sonya says that he’s posing “a question that it’s wrong to ask” (476). The kinds of calculations upon which Raskolnikov’s moral rationalism is based are both impossible and reprehensible.

Raskolnikov elaborates further on his ideas: “I went on thinking and thinking,” he says, “And what dreams I had, such strange and diverse dreams” (486). The focus of his thinking, he continues, was first his own stupidity, and later the stupidity of others, the stupidity of human beings in general, the human lack of cleverness. Eventually he realized that “people aren’t going to change, and that no one can make them any different from what they are, and that it’s not worth the effort to try.” This, he says, is “the law they operate by...It’s a law, Sonya! It really is true!” “And now I know, Sonya,” he continues, “that whoever is strong and powerful in mind and spirit is their lord and master! Whoever takes a lot of liberties is right in their eyes. Whoever is able to spit on most things, they consider their law-giver...That’s how it’s been in the past, and that’s how it always will be! Only a blind person could fail to perceive it!” (486)

But if Raskolnikov claims knowledge of the abstract and impersonal laws of human behavior, Sonya points us – and Raskolnikov – back to primary human attachments, which, in their particularity and contingency, contrast sharply with Raskolnikov’s universal and necessary law. “[H]ow will you live,” Sonya asks:

What will keep you alive...How will life be possible for you now? I mean, what will you tell your mother? (Oh, what will happen to them now?) But what am I saying? Why, you’ve already deserted your mother and sister. Yes, you’ve deserted them, deserted them...But how can you live without anyone, without anyone at all? (489)

For Sonya, Raskolnikov’s understanding of the laws of human existence – leaving aside the question of whether this understanding is accurate – is of little significance. In Sonya’s understanding, human beings are sustained – are kept alive – by their attachments, which attachments are contingent rather than necessary, particular rather than universal, and have little to do with rational calculation or abstract laws. Sonya’s appeal to common humanity muddled Raskolnikov’s precise distinctions between human beings; here her appeal to familial relationships introduces particularity into his universal abstraction. By focusing on these attachments, Sonya both reinforces the common humanity that Raskolnikov had tried to deny, and undermines his attempt to abstract from the irreducibly particular and personal aspects of human existence in favor of universal laws.

At this point in the novel, Sonya’s appeals fall on deaf ears. Instead, Raskolnikov casts his crime as wrong simply because he overestimated himself: He is ordinary rather than extraordinary, and he therefore cannot claim the right of

conscience due an extraordinary man. In fact, he says, his own ordinariness should have been obvious to him much earlier: "Do you really think I didn't know," he says, "that the very fact that I'd started to search my conscience and ask myself whether I had any right to assume power over someone else like that meant that I didn't have any such right" (487). An extraordinary man, in conformity with the picture Raskolnikov had drawn, would be "someone to whom the question would never occur and who would go straight into action at once" (487). The question did occur to Raskolnikov – before he committed his crime, in fact – and he therefore ought to have been aware of his own ordinariness. He suppressed this knowledge, he says, in order to make a vain attempt at assuming extraordinary status, at becoming an extraordinary man. Only after his crime does he realize and accept that "I had no right to do it, because I'm just a louse like everyone else" (488).

VII. "Life" and "Dialectics"

Turning to the novel's epilogue, we find the most profound expression of the moral perspective represented by Sonya. Raskolnikov has confessed his crime to the authorities and been sent to prison in Siberia, but he stills feels no remorse whatsoever for his actions. What he feels is what he felt before, what he revealed in his confession to Sonya: disappointment at being unable to live up to his convictions, at finding himself an ordinary instead of an extraordinary sort of person. "Of course," he says to himself, "from a legal point of view a crime was committed; of course, the letter of the law was violated and blood was spilt...

Though of course in that case a great many of mankind's benefactors who did not inherit power but took it for themselves ought to have been executed at

their very first steps. But those people had the courage of their convictions, and so *they were right*, while I didn't, and consequently had no right to take the step I did (623).

The reference to the "letter of the law" is important: What has been violated, for Raskolnikov, is law as it appears in statute books, law as discussed by citizens and policemen and judges. This is the kind of law in reference to which Porfiry had initially introduced Raskolnikov's theory. Raskolnikov had made it clear at the time that his theory had little – nothing, in fact – to do with this kind of law, and he makes it clear now that it is only this kind of law that has been violated. Against this kind of law, the "letter of the law," Raskolnikov holds the kind of law that he identified in his confession to Sonya, a law of human nature and human history. He was wrong only in having believed himself able to assume the position of an extraordinary man and claim the right of conscience due the extraordinary. His moral reasoning is still valid; it is only in his self-understanding that he has erred.

At the same time, we are told that Raskolnikov "had quite possibly sensed in himself and in his convictions a profound lie" (624). Perhaps Raskolnikov has begun to connect his misunderstanding of himself with a broader misunderstanding about human beings generally, and hence about his approach to human morality. If Raskolnikov cannot accurately evaluate himself, perhaps Sonya was right about the impossibility of evaluating human beings, and therefore of a moral calculus that takes its bearings from a mathematical figuring of distinctions between human beings. Perhaps Raskolnikov's moral rationalism is as groundless as it is brutal.

The closest we come to an answer to these questions comes in and just after the scene in which he realizes his love for Sonya. This scene, importantly, is a scene without speech, a scene in which perhaps the truest communication that takes place in the novel passes between characters entirely without dialogue. “They tried to speak,” we are told, “but were unable to” (629). Later in the same day, we are given an extended description of Raskolnikov’s condition:

He was, however, unable to give much prolonged or continuous thought to anything that evening, or to concentrate on any one idea; and anyway, even if he had been able to, he would not have found his way to a solution of these questions in a conscious manner; now he could only feel. In place of dialectics life had arrived, and in his consciousness something of a wholly different nature must now work towards fruition (630).

The oppositions are striking: feeling instead of conscious thought, life instead of dialectics. The profound lie in Raskolnikov’s convictions had not been his self-misunderstanding, nor was it the particular nature of the divisions he drew between human beings, but rather his embrace of dialectics to the exclusion of life. Raskolnikov sought his moral compass in conscious thought, in rational calculation, rather than in the experience of human attachment.

The attachment that forms between Raskolnikov and Sonya provides a particularly illustrative contrast to Raskolnikov’s rationalism because its nature is resistant to reasoned speech: As the pair’s inability to speak their love to one another demonstrates, the nature of their attachment cannot be captured in words. Life, Raskolnikov begins to realize, cannot be captured by dialectics; rather, life

stands in opposition to dialectics. Raskolnikov had duped himself into believing that he could fully understand the world around him and the human beings within it, and that he could capture this world and these beings in thought and sum them up in speech: He therefore thought himself able to chart a moral course using reason and calculation alone. He had neglected those aspects of human and moral life that are resistant to reasoned speech, and therefore cannot be calculated upon.

Sonya's alternative to Raskolnikov's moral rationalism is both a broadening of horizons and a narrowing of ambitions. It is a broadening of horizons in the sense that it takes into account aspects of human life that Raskolnikov's rationalism – as well as that of Luzhin and Svidrigailov – elides or explicitly rejects. Raskolnikov's moral rationalism is a product of isolation, and the moral calculus in which he engages explicitly rejects the significance of human attachments. He does not consider familial relationships, whether his own or those of others, nor does he take into account the common humanity to which Sonya directs his attention. The question that to Sonya is of the utmost importance – “what will you tell your mother?” – cannot figure into Raskolnikov's neat calculations of human worth, since it indicates the weight, the significance, of an aspect of human life that makes the mathematical calculation of human worth impossible (489). If familial relationships have moral significance, then we cannot calculate the worth of individual human beings, abstracted from the relationships in which they are embedded. Further, in pointing Raskolnikov to the significance of his mother's judgments, Sonya is urging Raskolnikov to submit – or at least to take into account – the inherited moral

prejudices that his moral rationalism, as well as that of Luzhin and Svidrigailov, had so conspicuously rejected. If it matters what Raskolnikov's mother thinks, then we cannot so easily dismiss the moral inheritance of the past. Finally, if human relationships are both morally significant and common to most, if not all, human beings, then at least some weight must be given to Sonya's assertion of a common humanity. The "louse" that Raskolnikov killed had a sister, a deceased husband, presumably a mother and father as well: In determining her worth abstracted from these relationships, Raskolnikov had both overlooked something important and neglected that which is common to humanity (485).

Connected to this broadening of horizons – this insistence that Raskolnikov take into account aspects of human life that his moral rationalism had overlooked or dismissed – is a narrowing of ambitions. This is so because the very aspects of human life to which Sonya points our attention cannot be expressed in terms of numerical value, nor can they be captured by Luzhin's crass economic figuring, nor by Svidrigailov's hedonistic weighing of sensual pleasure. If common humanity is important, if inherited moral prejudices cannot be dismissed – if "what will you tell your mother" is indeed a significant question – then moral questions cannot be resolved with perfect precision (489). It is fitting, then, that Raskolnikov's most powerful moral experience – his life-changing realization of his love for Sonya – resists expression in words. If the "something" that now dominates and guides his "consciousness" cannot be adequately expressed in words, it certainly cannot figure into rational moral calculus (630). The opposition between capacious, imprecise, particular and contingent "life" and reductive, precise, abstract and universal

“dialectics” indicates the ultimate insufficiency of Raskolnikov’s moral rationalism, and points the way to a fuller and richer engagement with human existence, one that denies moral precision and yet does justice to the fullness of human affairs (630).

Chapter Four
Mortals, Machines, and Political Rationalism in Fritz Lang's
Metropolis

“In the past the man has been first; in the future the system must be first.”
Frederick W. Taylor⁹⁹

“The despot is not a man. It is the *Plan*.”
Le Corbusier¹⁰⁰

“Michael Bloomberg has made New York City sing over the past 12 years – not because of his ear for music, but his eye for numbers. The city today is more vibrant and on sounder managerial footing in large part because of his data-driven approach. He has often said, “You can’t change it if you can’t measure it.”
Steve Koonin
Director of NYU’s Center for Urban Science and Progress¹⁰¹

At the time of its release, Fritz Lang’s 1927 silent film *Metropolis* met with what are politely called mixed reviews. Writing for *The New York Times*, the science fiction writer H.G. Wells pronounced it “the silliest film.” “I do not believe,” he

⁹⁹ Frederick Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management*, Easton, PA: Hive Publishing Company, 1985, 7; see also Robert Kanigel, *The One Best Way: Frederick Winslow Taylor and the Enigma of Efficiency*, New York: Viking, 1997, 19.

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in James Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998, 112.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in “Talking Bloomberg: Notable New Yorkers Weigh in on Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg’s Legacy,” in *The New York Times*, August 16, 2013. Retrieved at <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2013/08/18/nyregion/bloomberg-voices.html>.

continued, "it would be possible to make one sillier." "It gives in one eddying concentration almost every possible foolishness, cliché, platitude and muddlement about mechanical progress and progress in general, served up with a sauce of sentimentality that is all its own."¹⁰² Fritz Lang himself would later say that he thought *Metropolis* "silly and stupid," and that he "detested it after it was finished."¹⁰³

The charge of sentimentality, at least, is accurate. But it is this same "sauce of sentimentality" that makes the film a profoundly interesting place to explore the theme of political rationalism, that is, the "attempt to govern political society in the light of reason alone," or "on the basis of abstract, calculating reason alone..."¹⁰⁴ In its depiction of life in the scientifically managed city of the future, *Metropolis* asks us to examine the notion that the application of pure reason, as embodied in the correct formula or technique, is the best way to approach – and to settle and resolve – the questions and problems of political life.

Wells himself, in the very same review, points us squarely in this direction. In the film's future city, Wells observes, "the workers are spiritless, hopeless

¹⁰² H.G. Wells, "Mr. Wells Reviews a Current Film," *The New York Times Magazine*, April 17, 1927, pages 4 and 22. Reprinted in Michael Minden and Holger Bachmann, eds., *Fritz Lang's Metropolis: Cinematic Visions of Technology and Fear*, New York: Camden House, 2000, 94.

¹⁰³ Holger Bachmann, "Introduction," in Minden and Bachmann, 3. Though Lang had said much earlier: "[E]verything I have to say and will never be able to express in words is written down in the black and white film writing of 'Metropolis,' and if I did not succeed in expressing myself there, I will certainly not find the expression here [in words]" (45).

¹⁰⁴ Peter J. Ahrensdorf, "The Limits of Political Rationalism: Enlightenment and Religion in Oedipus the Tyrant," *The Journal of Politics*, 66:3 (Aug., 2004), 773; Arlene W. Saxonhouse, "The Tyranny of Reason in the World of the Polis," *The American Political Science Review*, 82:4 (Dec., 1988), 1272.

drudges, working reluctantly and mechanically. But a mechanical civilization has no use for mere drudges; the more efficient its machinery the less need there is for the quasi-mechanical minder.” Referring to one of his own works, he continues:

It may indeed create temporary masses of unemployed, and in “The Sleeper Awakes” there was a mass of unemployed people under the hatches. That was written in 1897, when the possibility of restraining the growth of large masses of population had scarcely dawned on the world. It was reasonable then to anticipate an embarrassing underworld of underproductive people. We did not know what to do with the abyss. But there is no excuse for that today.¹⁰⁵

Wells’ implied solution to the difficulties created by automation is precise, perfectly responsive to the problem he has articulated, and capable, we may speculate, of being precisely calibrated using easily obtainable and accurate information. And yet it is also deeply unsettling. That this latter consideration would not occur to Wells – and, more, that he would overlook the myriad other considerations having to do with family, faith, feeling, dignity, love, etc., that might make his readers recoil from such a suggestion – makes one think that *Metropolis* may be on to something after all. The film’s focal phrase – ““THE MEDIATOR BETWEEN HEAD AND HANDS MUST BE THE HEART!” – is certainly sentimental. And yet there may be something in this sentimentality that cuts to the core of the approach to human and political questions exemplified by Wells’ proposal. As its

¹⁰⁵ Wells, in Minden and Bachmann, 96.

action progresses, *Metropolis* suggests that political rule is a matter – to borrow the language of the film – just as much of the “heart” as of the “head.”

I. The “Scientific Management” of the City

The film *Metropolis* opens with the title illuminated on the screen as if projected by lights. Just behind the text, and highlighted by spotlights and glowing rings as the text fades away, is the skyline of the great city for which the film is named, a twisting, turning, awe-inspiring and architecturally astounding festival of structure and shadow.



Image 1¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ This image is taken from *Metropolis*, DVD, directed by Fritz Lang, 1927, Germany: Kino International, 2010. All images that follow are taken from the same source.

The light by which the skyline is illuminated, and because of which the city seems to physically radiate majesty and beauty, now seems to harden into form, to recoil in on itself and assume a definite shape. As the skyline darkens into an outline, we see in front of us the image of a steel piston, pumping rapidly up and down and flanked by two others. The black outline of the skyline remains for a moment, as if to remind us of its presence and importance, and then fades as the action of the machines assumes center stage. As lights move across the screen – this time in rapid and orderly lines – the pistons are replaced by spinning wheels, by rotating cranks and whirling disks, by the turning of monstrous gears and the never-ending back-and-

forth motion of metal pumps.

The machines are endless, and their motion is unceasing; their kinetic force is both entrancing



Image 2

and disturbing. The implications of this fatigueless and steel-strong motion are emphasized by the transition onscreen from the sequence of machines to the movement of a giant clock, the twitching hands of which seem to underscore the machines' unrelenting demands. The inner ring of the clock is open, exposing its

gear-driven core and reinforcing the affinity between the regular motion of the machines and the relentless advance of measured time.

In 1927, the year *Metropolis* was released, Dexter Kimball, dean of Cornell University's engineering school, declared: "At no time has the influence of Fred Taylor been so great or his memory so secure as at this moment."¹⁰⁷ If "Fordism" and the mass production of automobiles on the assembly line are often said to characterize that era, we might counter that Fordism was "simply 'an application of the Taylor system to mass production': Fordism was the special case, Taylorism the universal." As one engineer put it, "All that the rest of us have done...is simply to take [Taylor's] basic ideas, refine them, and adapt them to big-scale modern production."¹⁰⁸ At the heart of things are Frederick Taylor's ideas about the relation between human beings, materials of production, and time – as well as his sense of what is, and what is not, important to take into account when organizing and directing groups of human beings.

These ideas, in Taylor's words, constitute a "true science" of management, "resting upon clearly defined laws, rules, and principles, as a foundation."¹⁰⁹ These laws, rules, and principles are discoverable by systematic investigation into human

¹⁰⁷ Kanigel, 494. The quotation in the quotation is attributed to Robert Linhart. In Weimar Germany, according to Kanigel, the embrace of Taylorist principles was known as *Rationalisierung* – rationalization. As Kanigel also notes, "By 1927, a scholarly bibliography on scientific management in Germany was forty pages long" (527). Others have commented on the link between *Metropolis* and Taylorism, including Ludmilla Jordanova, "Science, Machines, and Gender," Minden and Bachmann, 2000.

¹⁰⁸ Kanigel, 498.

¹⁰⁹ Taylor, 7.

capacities – which investigation, throughout Taylor’s lifetime, often involved the repeated execution of timed tasks.¹¹⁰ These tasks could then be broken down into sub-tasks – even into individual motions – and the optimal time for executing each component of each task could be determined, as well as the optimal motion at each stage of each task’s execution. Each task could then be resolved into a single most efficient series of timed movements, which movements could be made standard for – and required of – all workers. This emphasis on measurement and standardization also indicates what Taylorism excludes: the initiative and intuition of individual workers, the kind of “craft knowledge” that is acquired through practice, the judgment or prudence that often comes with hands-on experience and is resistant to – indeed, compensates for the shortcomings of – standardization, and the innumerable variations between human beings that makes what is appropriate for one inappropriate for another.¹¹¹ The purpose of Taylor’s approach, to borrow from a book title, is to discover and implement “the one best way,” to resolve complexity into perfect simplicity (and efficiency) in the organization of human beings.

Metropolis introduces us to a city organized according to the Taylorist conception of human beings, based on principles derived from the Taylorist sense of what is and isn’t important to know. It is a city in which those who labor are

¹¹⁰ The following description of Taylor’s process is drawn from Kanigel. See also Taylor, 117-118.

¹¹¹ Kanigel says of Taylor’s early efforts at standardization: “Traditional craft know-how was being reduced to scientific data and passing from workman to manager, from shop floor to front office” (179). Taylor himself refers to this same process as “the gradual substitution of science for rule of thumb throughout the mechanic arts” (25).

reduced to their function in, and their utility to, the city; it is a city in which those who rule need not ever actually see their workers, since all necessary information can be gleaned from a finite set of measurements and metrics. It is a city in which “the plan” is first, and the purpose of governance is to ensure that the plan is kept. The film also dramatizes the undermining of these principles. It shows us the awful consequences that follow from reducing human beings to pieces in a plan, and the incoherence of a regime that shuns human complication in favor of mechanical simplicity. If the famous industrial scene in Chaplin’s *Modern Times* can be said to depict the merging or melding of man and machine, much of *Metropolis* can be understood as an exploration of – and, ultimately, a warning against – the Taylorist analogy between machine and man, or of the Taylorist reduction of man to machine. The film shows us a political community in which the city and the factory are one, and in which both are arranged according to the same total and totalizing principles; a community in which complexity is excluded and perfect simplicity (and specialization) is enforced. It also shows us this community undermined by the aspects of human existence – love, friendship, family, curiosity, sex – that help to differentiate men from machines, and that are resistant to, and destructive of, standardization and planning. In its depiction of such a city, *Metropolis* does nothing more than bring to life Taylor’s own remarks, which end the “Introduction” to *The Principles of Scientific Management*:

“The illustrations chosen [here] are such as, it is believed, will especially appeal to engineers and to managers of industrial and manufacturing establishments, and also quite as much to all of the men who are working in

these establishments. It is hoped, however, that it will be clear to other readers that the same principles can be applied with equal force to all social activities: to the management of our homes; the management of our farms; the management of the business of our tradesmen, large and small; of our churches, our philanthropic institutions, our universities, and our governmental departments.”¹¹²

II. Human Beings and Machines

We return to the neverending motion of the machines, and then to unceasing advance of the clock, and as the hands converge we are shown a giant steam whistle, which erupts all at once in sight and sound framed against the backdrop of the city. The words “Shift Change” appear on the screen as the frantically paced score reaches its crescendo.

¹¹² Taylor, 8.

Two identical columns of workers stand stock-still as a giant gate slowly opens at the mouth of a tunnel; one column faces toward us, the other away from us.



Image 3

As the camera pulls back, we begin to realize just how many men are involved in this operation, all dressed identically in dirty coveralls and dark bill-less caps. The score assumes a somber and even sorrowful tone, and the two groups of men move in opposite directions: one group advancing in determined lock-step, the other still synchronized but slower, jerkier, giving the impression of great fatigue. It soon becomes clear that the group entering the tunnel is taking two steps for every one woeful lunge of the group exiting. As the scene persists, we cannot but marvel both at the number of workers and at the synchronization of movement within each

group. The whistle blows again, and the spent workers file into a giant elevator and descend, motionless, as the intertitles explain:

“Deep below
the earth’s surface
lay the workers’ city”

Our first view of the city below the earth centers on the endless rectangular light fixtures by which it is illuminated, affixed to a ceiling that meets the tops of

numberless
blocky buildings.

This is the
workers’ skyline
and the workers’
sky. As the men
file out, we
realize that the
elevator with

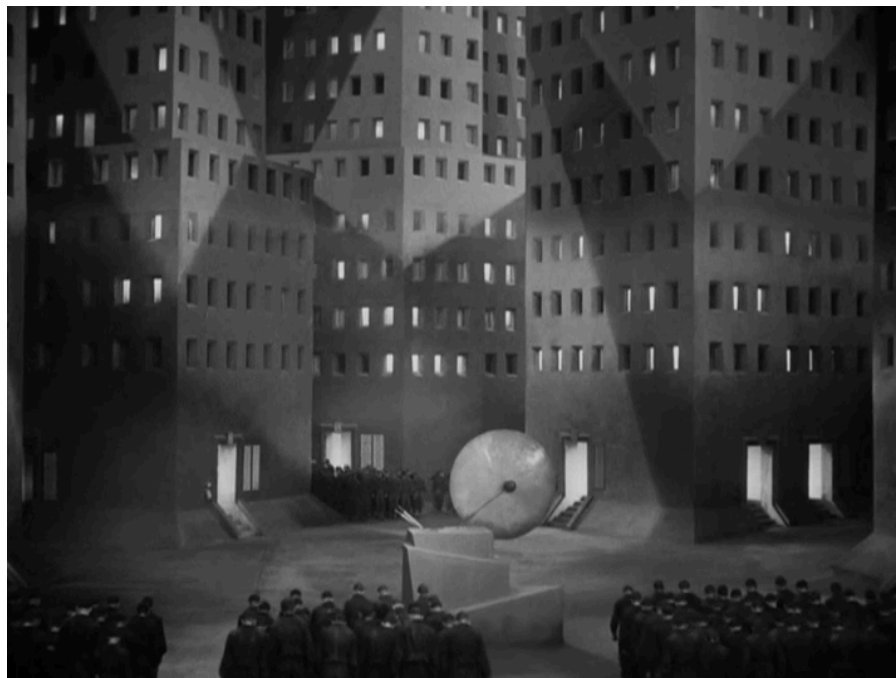


Image 4

which we travelled is flanked by two others, and that the three elevator loads of workers have been preceded by three more – and, presumably, will be followed by more still. The mournful resonance of the score continues as the camera lingers on the workers, still moving in unison and in formation toward drab, identical buildings.

The scene fades slowly into darkness.

Support for and reaction against Taylorism were both adamant and vigorous. Scientific management, for Taylor and his supporters, would end the antagonism between workers and owners by removing disputes from the realm of opinion – in which each side is an ardently partial judge in its own case – and delivering them up to the cool and impartial judgment of science. Disputes over rates of pay would become irrelevant, since such rates were not “a subject to be theorized over,” but rather to be settled according to the conclusions of scientific experiment.¹¹³ Under this system, “collective bargaining...becomes of trifling importance.’ Should some injustice arise, workers had only to protest and receive ‘a careful scientific investigation’ into the case.”¹¹⁴ In Taylor’s own words, “What constitutes a fair day’s work will be a question for scientific investigation, instead of a subject to be bargained and haggled over.”¹¹⁵ The greatest good for employers, employees, and “the whole people,” will be brought about through “scientific management, which has for its sole aim the attainment of justice for all...parties through impartial scientific investigation of all the elements of the problem.”¹¹⁶ In this rendering, scientific management holds out the prospect, not of settling disputes between classes of men, but of *solving* them, of determining – impartially, scientifically – the correct hours, rates of pay, methods and conditions, etc., of any given field of human activity. Political disputes between men are to be resolved into the scientific

¹¹³ Kanigel, 213. The quoted words are Taylor’s.

¹¹⁴ Kanigel, 476. The quoted words, again, are Taylor’s.

¹¹⁵ Taylor, 143.

¹¹⁶ Taylor, 138-9.

administration of things.¹¹⁷ This perspective also reveals the universal implications of scientific management, in the sense that Taylor's emphasis on measurement and standardization can (and should) be extended beyond the factory floor and into other arenas; the systematic application of "the one best way" is suited for all realms in which human beings must be organized and decisions must be made for (and about) a collective.

For critics of Taylorism, precisely this propensity to resolve all questions into matters of scientific investigation and administration – to relentlessly observe, measure, time, set, and standardize, and to exclude anything that is resistant to measurement and standardization – was its most destructive quality. For Taylor, this was scientific management's philosophical core and greatest promise; for his opponents, the effects of Taylorism on human beings were ominous in the extreme. They complained that it would reduce the worker to an "automaton," a "*factotum* or machine," and that "workers [were] now 'nothing more nor less than human machines to carry out...instructions.'"¹¹⁸

At bottom, this was a complaint about the way scientific management conceived of human beings, the way it understood the men and women it sought to arrange. Testifying in front of Congress, one proponent of Taylorism was asked "whether he would 'class a man in the same category that you would an ordinary machine.'" He understood a man, he responded, "as a little portable power plant...a mighty delicate and complicated machine...The physical body of the man is

¹¹⁷ Friedrich Engels, "Socialism: Utopian and Scientific," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1978, 689.

¹¹⁸ Kanigel, 444-445; 462.

constructed on the same mechanical principles as the machine is, except that it is a very much higher development.” Asked how he knew how hard to drive the human machines under his control, he replied: “Specialists...We employ the specialist who knows what the machine can stand, and we should use the specialist who knows what the human frame can stand.”¹¹⁹ Like the Taylorist conception of useful knowledge, this understanding of human beings is conspicuous for what it excludes: the attachments and relationships – familial, romantic, friendly – that bind men to one another above and beyond the demands of utility or function; the multiplicity of roles that human beings take on, which includes but is not limited to – and, crucially, has unavoidable bearing on – a given function in an organizational scheme; and the curiosity that drives human beings to seek out personal experience, face-to-face understanding, and familiarity with that which resists measurement and standardization.

III. Love at First Sight

Leaving the workers’ city, we move upward and outward. Our ascent brings us to the Club of the Sons and the Eternal Gardens, the liveliness and variety of which force an immediate and sharp contrast. Here we meet Freder Fredersen, son of the city’s master, who thrives and frolics among the “lecture halls and libraries...theaters and stadiums.” Our first sight of Freder is of his victory in a footrace within a majestic stadium; we are next shown him chasing – and being chased by – the beautiful women who are his companions at the Eternal Gardens, an almost unnaturally lush gathering place for the sons of the city’s rulers. We are

¹¹⁹ Kanigel, 460.

struck by the richness, the vigorousness, and the enthusiasm of Freder's existence – and then Freder is struck by Maria.

The giant double doors to the Eternal Gardens open slowly, and framed in the middle of the shot is Maria, a young woman of about Freder's age, and then the threadbare children by which she is surrounded. They advance slowly, and then the camera moves closer, but Maria is never anywhere other than the center of the screen, the focus of Freder's – and our – attention.



Image 5

We move back and forth between Freder and Maria, as if to emphasize the intensity of the connection that all of a sudden exists between the two, and then Maria speaks to the children. "Look," she says to them, "These are your brothers!" She gestures as if to display the immaculately dressed Freder and his comely companions to her dirty and barefoot young charges, but it seems as though she more clearly intends the children as display. She looks directly at Freder and repeats: "These are your brothers!" We again alternate between Freder and Maria gazing at one another before Maria and the children are hustled out the door. Freder runs after her, and

the music quickens – and becomes both tense and ominous – as we next see him amidst the whirling, pulsing machines at the heart of the city.

This encounter between Freder and Maria provides the starting point for – and the driving force behind – the action of *Metropolis*. In this encounter are also found several of the themes that bring the film into contact with the principles of scientific management. Firstly, the encounter between Freder and Maria is a powerfully visual and personal encounter, as indicated by the degree to which the camera lingers on their mutual gaze. Maria’s intent in bringing the children to the Eternal Gardens is to display them, to show them to the sons of the city’s masters; for Freder, this display is immensely affecting, and prompts the desire for more “face-to-face” encounters, more experience as seen from close up, with his own two eyes. This contrasts sharply with the visual schema according to which Joh Fredersen, Freder’s father and the city’s “brain,” operates: the panorama, the skyline, the undifferentiated block of workers performing the impersonal task.¹²⁰ If Freder desires to see for himself, Joh prefers to receive information – to see – via the sequence of signs and figures on a monitor, or through lighted boards indicating function or non-function. It is striking when we learn later in the film that Joh Fredersen – whose plan governs the movements of every worker on every machine – has never actually seen much of what is below the surface of *Metropolis*.¹²¹

¹²⁰ In the version of the film released in the United States, Joh Fredersen was known as “John Masterman”; see the American film reviews found in Minden and Bachmann, 2000.

¹²¹ This way of understanding vision and perspective owes much to Scott, *Seeing Like a State*.

The encounter between Freder and Maria also brings to our attention different kinds of human roles and relationships, some of which are unaccounted for in Joh Fredersen's governing scheme. In displaying her young charges in the Eternal Gardens, Maria employs familial language – “these are your brothers” – language that complicates the relationship between the sons of the rulers and the children of the workers. For Joh, the relation between the workers and the rulers is based entirely on function: both parties are defined by their function in the city, and relate to one another in terms of this category. The language of family complicates this relationship, in the sense that a familial relation involves bonds of affection and obligation that Joh's emphasis on function elides. Freder's interest in Maria is also – indeed, is primarily – romantic: the relationship he envisions between he and Maria is based on spontaneous feeling, on desire, rather than on the performance of tasks toward a planned end. Freder will also experience strong feelings of kinship and friendship, both with one of the workers he encounters and with Josaphat, his father's soon-to-be-dismissed functionary. The relationships Freder explores in the film – familial, romantic, friendship – all challenge Joh's function-centric understanding of human beings, just as the roles with which Freder experiments – brother, lover, friend – transcend the bounds of function and are spontaneous rather than planned.

The dichotomy that undergirds these thematic examples is that between simplicity and complexity: a complexity that takes full account of the “tangle and variety” of human experience, and a simplicity that seeks to abstract from this

fullness.¹²² This dichotomy points back to Taylorism, in the sense that the most powerful charge against scientific management is that it abstracts from the full human being in order to conceive of the “little portable power plant” perfectly defined by its function. The Taylorist analogy between man and machine is based upon this abstraction, as is the particular brand of political rationalism according to which *Metropolis*' city is governed. Joh Fredersen's rationalist approach to political rule, like Frederick Taylor's approach to management, eschews or elides a great portion of human life: it deals with people as though they were less than what they are.

IV. The Head and the Heart

The whites and tans in which Freder is dressed contrast immediately with the dark, dull coveralls worn by the workers – the parents of those Maria had called his brothers. Wandering about in confusion, Freder is struck by the relation between the movements of the machines and the movements of their minders, who jerk from left to right in sharp, unsettling unison. Facing toward their work and away from Freder – their faces as if glued to the metal and glass in front of them – each appears bound or joined to his great machine, or perhaps part of it. Everything that characterizes Freder's existence – variety, beauty, individual distinction and recognition, the rhythm and motion of the human body rather than the iron machine – seems absent here; the contrast is jarring to Freder and to us.

The movements of one man lag behind those of the others, and it becomes clear that this worker is exhausted and cannot properly perform his task. The liquid

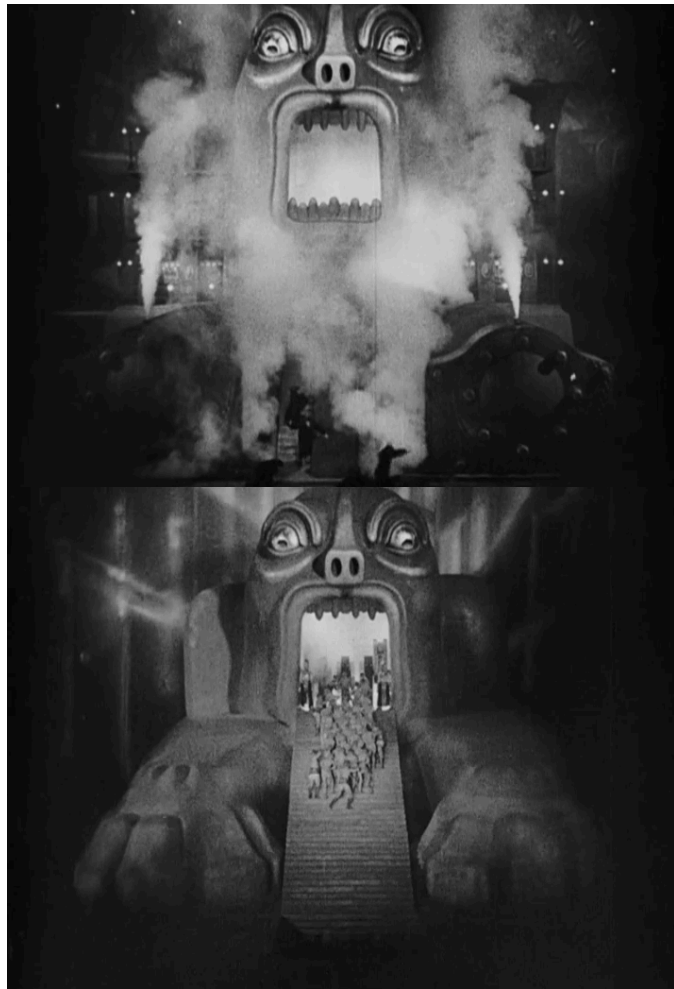
¹²² Oakeshott, “Rationalism in Politics,” 6.

inside a thermometer-like tube begins to rise, and we anticipate disaster. Struggling for a valve, the man falls, and the liquid continues to rise – and the other workers, seeing only the task in front of them and moving only in time with the machine, continue on obliviously. As the liquid reaches the top of the tube, smoke or steam bursts forth from several parts of the machine, searing the workers and knocking Freder back against a wall. As the smoke builds and spreads, the workers jump frantically from their stations,

Image 6

falling great distances, writhing on the ground or laying chillingly still. Freder looks back at the machine, and its center is transformed into a hideous face, dominated by a gaping, hungry mouth.

Freder now sees chained slaves, dragged up steps to the mouth and thrown in – sacrificed – as masked overseers make ritualistic movements. Then Freder’s vision changes, and we see the next shift of workers



marching up the same steps, in their square formations and listless lockstep, and through the mouth of the monster. The half-imagined scene is fantastical, but it also

captures a truth about the awful cruelty of the workers' existence, a truth that cannot be captured by the lifeless reports and readouts that will reach Freder's father.

Freder flees to his car and instructs his driver to take him "To the new Tower of Babel – to my father – !" As the car drives off, we see yet more shifts of workers in formation marching past; then we are away from the workers' city and near the Tower, imposing and grand, where the streets team with cars and the skies are filled with all manner of aircraft.

Image 7



Image 8

At the new Tower of Babel, we have our first encounter with Joh Fredersen, the master of Metropolis and the brain of the city – and also Freder's father. The music

turns imposing, as if to convey the weight of the activities taking place, as Joh paces a gigantic office issuing instructions. Behind him, an endless stream of information appears on a large, manned monitor; to the

side, a collection of well dressed clerks attend diligently and yet frantically to a tremendous stack of documents. His massive desk sits in front of a window that seems to take in the entire city.



Image 9

The office attendants here work as single-mindedly as the laborers below; their rhythm, like that of the machine-workers, emerges from the demands of their work – from the flow of information they attend – rather than from within themselves. But not all the men share Joh’s discipline, his absolute focus: Josaphat, employed in attending to the stream of information appearing on the monitor, is distracted by Freder’s distress, and approaches the young man. As Freder shares his tale with the concerned Josaphat, Joh refocuses his attention on his son – and then swiftly, angrily, on Josaphat, who had not informed him of the accident at the machine. Returning to Freder, he calms the young man, and then dismisses the others in his office. When Joh asks Freder why he entered the “machine halls,” Freder responds:

“I wanted to look into the faces of the people whose little children are my brothers, my sisters...”

Sensing Freder’s distress, but clearly not sharing his familial feelings, Joh steps over to his massive window and gazes out; Freder approaches and appeals to his father:

“Your magnificent city,
Father – and you the brain
of this city – and all of us
in the city’s light – – “

And the city is indeed magnificent: the music turns majestic, and we are presented with shot after shot of towering buildings, futuristic skyline, and architectural feats. But these views, like those from Joh’s window, are detached, imposing but not intimate, alive with majesty but devoid of humanity.¹²³ When Joh explains to Freder, with regard to the workers, that “the depths” are simply “Where they belong,” Freder recoils from his father’s coldness. He is affected more by the up-close experience of human misery – by his look “into the faces” of the workers – than by the commanding, distant view from the tower. For Joh, Freder’s focus on the personal, the intimate, blinds him to the big picture; for Freder, Joh’s big thinking obscures things that are smaller but more important.

The relentless movement of the wall clock catches Freder’s eye and sends a shiver down his spine, but Joh is unconcerned; he is more interested in the arrival of Grot, the foreman of the “Heart Machine,” who has discovered plans for a worker uprising. Appalled that Josaphat has again failed to discover information concerning the workers, he dismisses him from service. Freder is horrified at Josaphat’s dismissal, reminding his father that his now former clerk will be sent to “the depths” – will become, in other words, one of the workers. But for Joh, this is appropriate: Josaphat’s performance proved him unsuited to his function in the office, which

¹²³ Again, this way of understanding vision and perspective owes much to Scott, *Seeing Like a State*.

means that his abilities would be put to better use below. The bonds of friendship that are soon to form between Freder and Josaphat – sparked by Freder’s horror at Josaphat’s dismissal – are not so much alien to Joh as simply irrelevant. For Joh, the appropriate place for Josaphat is the place corresponding his talents. This is not, in itself, an offensive notion: if we take Freder to be requesting that Josaphat remain in a job he cannot do, it seems like the son, in his kindness, has overlooked something obvious. But in understanding Josaphat’s dismissal as simply an adjustment, an administrative correction – in not understanding what Freder sees immediately – Joh, too, has overlooked something significant.

V. The Machine-Man and the Tower of Babel

Now Freder goes below once again, and he is greeted – and frightened – by smoke, motorized carts, and teams of workers trudging along amidst the heat and iron. He finds himself mesmerized by the frantic movements of a worker operating – or being operated by – a machine that looks like nothing other than a giant clock.

Image 10



The symbolism is inescapable: this man is literally joined with the clock, bound to the rhythm of the machine and hostage to its movements. He embodies the relation between time, machines, and the human body upon which Joh Fredersen’s city is

based, and from which Taylorism takes its bearings: the human being is indistinguishable from the machine. Freder addresses the exhausted man as “Brother,” cradles him in his arms, and insists that he wants to “trade lives” with him, manning the machine while the other makes his way up to the surface. Georgy, the worker, makes his way to Yoshiwara, a nightclub of sorts where women and music are found, while Freder swiftly finds himself out of step with his mechanical dance partner, unable to operate the machine.

While Freder grapples with the consequences of his rashness, Joh goes to visit Rotwang, the mad inventor, who makes his home in an archaic house “overlooked by the centuries” and dwarfed by the city’s skyscrapers. Rotwang has created a robot that can take the form of a human being, a project that Joh wishes to employ for his own purposes.



Image 11

Rotwang's project seems to confirm his insanity – and yet it fits almost perfectly with the city that Joh Fredersen oversees. Rotwang has created “the man of the future,” he says, “The Machine-Man.” In his madness, the inventor has captured the city's ideal subject: a fusion of human being and machine, or a being that is human in form but machine – perfectly functional, and nothing other than functional – at its core. “Give me another 24 hours,” Rotwang promises,” and no one, Joh Fredersen, no one will be able to tell a Machine-Man from a mortal - - !”

Turning away from the subject of the Machine-Man for the moment, Joh offers the reason for his visit: “As usual, when my experts fail me, I come to you for advice...” Joh needs to learn the truth about the planned workers' rebellion, and he cannot learn it from his office in the tower, nor from his information stream, his lighted

indications, and his commanding view. Examining the plans Joh has intercepted, Rotwang identifies them as maps of the catacombs below the city, and the two descend into the depths in order to ascertain the workers' intentions. It becomes clear that Joh has never been to the catacombs before; we are forced to question whether he has ever even seen the workers' city with his own eyes, or observed their strenuous work in person. Both of the things Joh needed to know in order to learn what the workers intend to do – the meaning of the plans, and how to follow them to the destination indicated – are well beyond the means at his disposal: curiosity and firsthand experience would have served him better than endless streams of data. The workers, by virtue of their station beneath the city, know something – something important – that Joh does not. And Rotwang, by virtue of his arcane interests, has information about the mysteries of the city that Joh lacks; indeed, Joh Fredersen's city should not *have* mysteries. This calls into question Joh's position as the "brain" of Metropolis: it seems here that the city has multiple "brains," and that one "brain" cannot hope to amass every bit of useful knowledge, every piece of necessary information. It appears that some knowledge depends upon the position or location of those that live and work in one place or another, upon firsthand experience, or upon the unfocused curiosity of an eccentric. The suggestion here is that the workers' ability to use their plans is inseparable from their experience beneath the city, just as Rotwang's ability to discern their meaning is inseparable from both the curiosity that led him to learn of the catacombs and his exploration of the depths. What Freder is doing – following his curiosity and

seeking out firsthand experience – may provide him with a better education than his father ever could.

Meanwhile, Freder finds himself increasingly unable to manage his machine, the hands of which, in his imagining, have turned into the hands of a giant clock, the motion of which he cannot control.



Image 12

He cries out for his father, and then, just as he collapses in exhaustion, the whistle blows and the new shift arrives, leaving him staggering away from his ill-conceived adventure in substitution. He had recoiled earlier at his father's impersonal attitude toward the workers – he had wanted to understand them as individuals, as unique

human beings, rather than as undifferentiated and perfectly replaceable (because perfectly identical) lumps of flesh and bone. But here the truth of his insight has been brought home to him in a powerfully physical way: he is not identical with his “brother,” and so cannot substitute himself in his place. Freder, like his father, had failed to differentiate properly: his father between workers, he between worker and surface-dweller. Joh Fredersen’s pretense, rejected by his son, is that he has solved the problem of Metropolis, or conceived of the perfect plan for the city’s operation, if only all the human pieces can be arranged and directed appropriately. Freder, coming from the opposite direction, has fallen into a similar difficulty: he had assumed that the brotherhood he embraced made the workers and the surface-dwellers perfectly equal and hence perfectly interchangeable, and that the problem of Metropolis could be solved by the changing – or perhaps the sharing – of lives, each subject living both on the surface and below. But this, too, is a great simplification; neither formula takes full account of difference and its implications.

Following the workers, Freder makes his way down into the catacombs, and arrives at the meeting place just as Joh and Rotwang begin their surveillance. Entering the hall, Freder is shocked and overjoyed to discover Maria standing at the center, flanked by giant wooden crosses. The score captures the sweetness of the encounter, and Freder marvels again at her beauty. Many of the workers have knelt now, and Maria begins to speak: “Today I will tell you the legend of THE TOWER OF BABEL...” We are then shown the legend, the brief film-within-the-film capturing the tale of “a tower whose top may reach unto the stars!”

Maria's telling emphasizes the tower as a plan, an image in the "minds" of those who "conceived" of it. She also draws our attention to the separation between the minds in which the tower was conceived and the "hands" who were assigned the task of building. Here Maria indicates the focus of her tale, with significance both for the old and the new Towers of Babel:

Image 13



"But the *hands* that built

the Tower of Babel

knew

nothing of the dream of

the

brain that had

conceived it."

The theme here is the

stark disjunction

between the beauty of the plan of the Tower and the harshness and cruelty involved in the actual building. This is powerfully captured by the appearance of the word "BABEL," which both drips blood and glimmers with light and promise. The point of the story, for Maria, is not that one tongue was scattered into different languages, but rather that the "mind" and the "hands" could not reach each other, even in their common tongue: "People spoke the same language, but could not understand each other..." The Tower is destroyed by the very hands that built it, and here we return to an angelic Maria, who shares the moral of her tale, which is also the focal phrase

of the film: “THE MEDIATOR BETWEEN HEAD AND HANDS MUST BE THE HEART!” When one of the workers asks the identity of the mediator, Freder is immediately thrust before our eyes.

The score now changes tone and becomes harsher: some of the workers are impatient, and it is this impatience that makes the greatest impression on Joh Fredersen. As Freder and Maria embrace, and he offers to act as mediator, Joh instructs Rotwang to “give the Machine-Man the likeness of that girl.” Joh intends to turn the workers against Maria, and therefore to render them leaderless and – presumably – unable to act. But here, too, Joh is missing something important: Rotwang alone has seen the embrace between Maria and Freder. The plan Joh formulates to perform his function as the city’s “brain” – to decapitate the workers’ group and therefore ensure that they continue to peacefully and dependably attend the machines – will do great violence to the happiness of his son; Joh’s role as “brain” is in direct conflict with his role as father.

VI. “Death Descends Upon the City”

Rotwang puts his Joh’s plan into action, and in one of the most visually arresting sequences in the film, the Machine-Man is given the likeness of Maria.

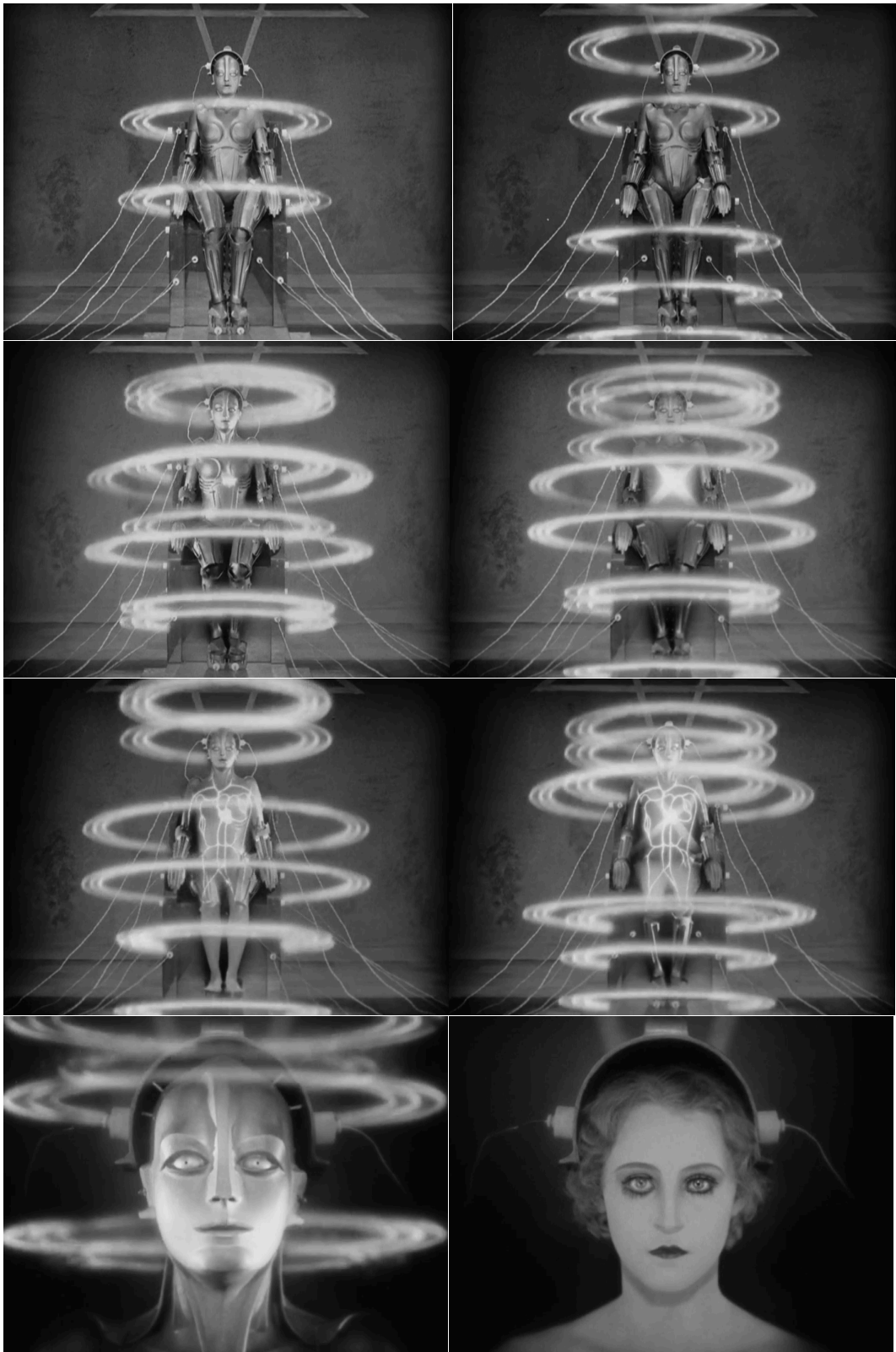


Image 14

This is in many ways the climactic moment of *Metropolis*. Perhaps the governing theme of the film – the distinction between men and machines, and the blurring of this distinction – is enacted before our eyes, as a machine and a human being are merged into what Rotwang has identified as “the man of the future.” This new being would seem the ideal subject of Joh Fredersen’s city, the perfectly functional entity that Joh imagines when he plans and directs. But it is Rotwang, not Joh, who has created the Machine-Man, and it is Rotwang who directs its destructive destiny. That the Machine-Man will dramatically undermine the city for which it is perfectly suited – that Joh’s ideal subject will prove his undoing – speaks to the impossibility of the man-machine fusion, the incommensurability or disharmony between human being and machine. Joh’s dream is unnatural; his ideal subject is the herald of his doom.

A gathering of well-dressed men – Rotwang refers to them as the “upper ten thousand” – is underway elsewhere in the city. In a sequence interspersed with Freder’s fevered sleep, the Machine-Maria emerges onstage at the gathering and begins to dance, filling the men’s faces with lust and violent desire.



Image 15



Image 16



Image 17

erotically charged, and the men become almost frightening in the intensity of their focus.

Freder's dreams turn to apocalyptic visions, the Machine-Maria's dance becomes more and more



Image 18

Gripped by a terrifying vision, Freder cries out: "Death descends upon the city," and the scene ends.

VII. "Kill Them – the Machines -!!"

The Machine-Maria has sown discord and despair amongst the city's upper classes, and continues to draw them away from the Eternal Gardens with her seductive floor show. This, too, is something Joh Fredersen had not counted on: sex does not figure into his function-centric ideal of human behavior. In fact, the Machine-Maria has thrown the city's upper classes into disorder precisely because of their inability to act as Machine-Men, because of the human desires that pull them

away from what Joh considers their proper place.¹²⁴ But this has not distracted Joh from his broader aim, and we are now shown Joh's plan in action, as the Machine-Maria incites rebellion amongst the workers. Her movements as she speaks are rapid and provocative, her expression both inviting and challenging, and she seems to all but pull the workers in to her with her outstretched hands. All of their eyes are on her, and her words and gestures hold her audience rapt.



Image 19

The image is strikingly similar to that of the “upper ten thousand” focused on the Machine-Maria’s seductive dance, and we cannot but marvel at the power wielded by this beautiful and persuasive machine-woman. This ability to move men – all

¹²⁴ For more, see Jordanova, 2000, and Andreas Huyssen, “The Vamp and the Machine,” in the same collection.

classes of men – above and beyond what Joh can accomplish, to bend men to her will and make them act for (or against) Joh and his plan, is powerfully out of place in Joh’s rationally ordered city. We also have a sense of the tenuousness of Joh’s hold on this new power, the swiftness with which it can move from furthering his plans to undermining them: had not the Machine-Maria, after all, thrown the upper classes into disarray at Rotwang’s behest? This cuts to the core of Joh’s control over the city, and exposes the limits, once again, of his sort of planning and his view of human beings. Curiosity, familial feeling, and the headiness of love have already interfered with – exposed the fragility of – his plans: now sex and the power of rhetoric do the same. The elements of human life that he has overlooked are pushing things beyond his control.

The Machine-Maria continues to speak to the workers, and we now find her using Joh’s own ideas – and one of the tropes of Taylorism – against him. In his governance of the city, Joh had conflated human beings with machines; he had arranged things as though a human being was no more than “a little portable power plant...a mighty delicate and complicated machine...”¹²⁵ Now Maria exposes the dysfunction at the heart of this analogy, the inadequacy of this conflation, by turning the mechanical into the organic in her rhetoric. “Who is the living food for the machines in Metropolis,” she asks.

“Who feeds the machines
with their own flesh - - ?!
Let the machines starve,

¹²⁵ Kanigel, 460.

you fools - ! Let them die - !!

Kill them – the machines - !!”¹²⁶

The workers mass around the Machine-Maria, rushing with their wives to heed her violent words – and the score hints unmistakably of *La Marseillaise*. The workers storm the elevators, and the chaos of their movements here contrasts sharply with their almost deathly progression earlier in the film. Now the workers come in wave after wave, pulling one another along, breaking down the gates to the machine halls and pulling their fellows away from their work. But here we have the first sign that something terrible has happened. As the cry goes up from the last departing worker’s wife – “Not one man – or woman remain behind - !” – two small children, clothed in rags, creep timidly down the stairs of one of the workers’ blocky apartment buildings.

Meanwhile, the Machine-Maria urges the workers on to the “Heart Machine,” the massive whirling disc, overseen by Grot himself, who protests: “If the Heart Machine is destroyed, the entire workers’ city will be flooded - !!” Grot is overpowered – in their frenzy, the workers have forgotten their children and believe their city to be empty – and the Machine-Maria sets in motion the Heart Machine’s destruction and slips out of the machine halls, just as the real Maria descends into the workers’ city. Floodwaters pour into the streets, and buildings begin to crumble as the children cry out in terror. “Where are your fathers, your mothers,” Maria asks. But the workers, dancing in front of the wreckage of the Heart Machine, are oblivious to their children’s distress.

¹²⁶ I’ve condensed multiple intertitles into a single quotation here.

VIII. The Mediator

Freder and Josaphat make their way to the workers' city, into which the floodwaters continue to pour. Pushing his way through the swarm of children, Freder at last makes his way to his beloved, the real Maria, and they dramatically embrace, surrounded by the children's outstretched arms. With Josaphat's help, they herd the children out of the city and make the arduous climb up the airshafts, the only available means of escape. The scene is chaotic: the children swarm upward and outward, larger carrying smaller, with Freder, Maria, and Josephat frantically directing their young charges. As the last child departs, Maria collapses, and Freder carries her up the staircase; below, the water pours ever faster into the workers' city, and the buildings rapidly collapse.

Meanwhile, the frenzied workers continue to dance around the destroyed Heart Machine, as if rejoicing at the death of a hated god. In his office, Joh Fredersen is consumed by worry, his once proud and erect bearing giving way to hunched and agitated concern. "I must know," he howls at his assistant, Slim, "Where is my son?!!!" Slim responds, and in his response is made clear the fullness of Joh's obtuseness and the magnitude of its consequences: "Tomorrow, thousands will ask in fury and desperation: Joh Fredersen, where is my son - !" Joh, helpless, can only close his eyes and cover his ears; it is too late for him to put right his mistakes. He had overlooked, or disregarded, the familial roles and relationships of others; now his own family is being taken from him.

We turn back to the workers, and Grot, the foreman of the Heart Machine, is desperately trying to call them to attention. When they finally turn their eyes to

him, he cries out: “Where are your children??!” The workers are stunned at the question, looking searchingly at one another as if both seeking the answer and attempting to account for the oversight. When Grot details the destruction of the city below, they are thrown into violent mourning; when he asks who incited them to such folly, their sadness turns to anger: “It’s the witch’s fault,” one cries out, by which she means the Machine-Maria.

But it isn’t the Machine-Maria’s fault, of course; as with the case of Joh Fredersen, the Machine-Maria was merely a spark, a catalyst, exposing the workers’ own destructive oversimplifications. The workers had narrowed their vision in the same fashion as had Joh Fredersen: they reduced themselves to their function in the city – they saw themselves as workers alone – and failed to account for their roles as husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, aunts and uncles, and so forth. In abandoning their children in order to destroy the machines – in forgetting that they were familial in addition to laboring beings – the workers have acted as though Joh’s reductive understanding of their lives were true. Maria – the real Maria – had spoken to the workers of family, of affection, of relationships animated and characterized by more than functional utility; she had spoken of the need for the “heart,” and in the language of brotherhood. She had taken the richness and variety of their lives as her starting point, even amidst the crushing monotony of their work and their city. The language of the Machine-Maria, on the other hand, had blurred the lines between machine and human – had imagined machines that carry out organic processes: eat, live, die – and had therefore undercut the crucial differences between human beings and machines, which differences consist precisely in the

richness, variety, and complexity of human, as distinct from mechanical, existence. Thus roused and tempted, the workers forgot their children – forgot the physical manifestations of their complex humanity – and went to destroy the machines as though setting after a living, breathing, human enemy rather than an artfully arranged pile of iron.

“The witch,” as it happens, is presiding over a raucous crowd at Yoshiwara, carried about on the shoulders of the city’s “upper ten thousand” and urging them into the streets. “Let’s all watch as the world goes to the devil,” she cries, proving again her ability to upset the neat functional divisions Joh had envisioned – after all, are the city’s upper classes not those who ought to be imposing order on chaos rather than acting as its eager spectators? Meanwhile, Grot continues to harangue the workers, encouraging them to find and kill the Machine-Maria. As both the workers and the “upper ten thousand” pour into the streets, the workers catch sight of Maria – the real Maria – and demand of her, “Where are our children, you witch - ??!” Despite her protestations, they chase her through the streets, eventually colliding with the crowd that had emerged from Yoshiwara. The real Maria slips away, and the Machine-Maria is captured; the workers, unaware that there are two Marias, drag the Machine-Maria off, intending to burn her at the stake. As Freder rushes to intervene – not realizing that the real Maria is safe – the workers, dancing once again, tie the Machine-Maria atop a pile of wood and set the base alight.

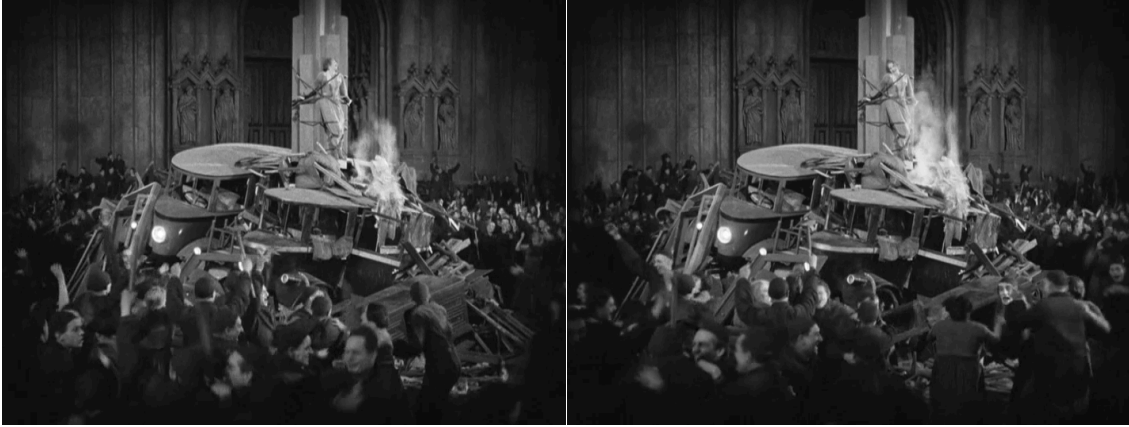


Image 20

The flames begin to engulf the Machine-Maria, still laughing maniacally, as Freder, restrained by the workers, looks on in despair. Just then Rotwang, consumed by anger and possessed by madness, catches sight of the real Maria and begins to chase her. Fleeing into a church, Maria inadvertently rings the enormous church bell, rousing the workers from their frenzy and focusing their attention. Having been entirely consumed by the fire, the Machine-Maria reveals her true form, exposing the iron underneath her human mask; the workers, horrified, release Freder, who notices Rotwang chasing Maria – the real Maria – along the church façade.

Freder sets off after the pair, and confronts Rotwang atop the church. Meanwhile, Josephat tells Joh and Slim what has happened, and they rush off to intervene. Freder and Rotwang struggle, and Joh joins the crowd of workers at the base of the church. He falls to his knees in sadness, guilt, and impotence, unable to help his son and knowing that his own actions have led to this place.



Image 21

The workers, realizing Joh's identity, creep closer, and Josephat informs Grot that the workers' children are alive. But Joh's child is still in danger, and while the workers kneel in relief, Joh mutters to himself – is he praying, perhaps? – and keeps his eyes fixed on the spectacle above. Rotwang gains the upper hand and knocks Freder unconscious for a moment, and when Freder awakens he sees the madman carrying Maria still further up the structure. He gives chase again, and confronts Rotwang at the very summit of the building, with Maria hanging precariously on a railing.

As Joh looks on in horror, Rotwang and Freder tumble down to a lower level, still locked in struggle. Rotwang falls off of the building and down to the ground,

and the workers rush in his direction; Joh runs into the church, and Freder and Maria embrace. The scene fades, and opens again on the church entrance, toward which the workers advance in a single triangular column. Joh, Freder, and Maria emerge, and Grot walks to greet them. Grot extends his hand to Joh, and Joh, at Maria and Freder's prompting, begins to extend his – then hesitates. Maria approaches Freder, and reminds him of his role: "Head and hands want to join together, but they don't have the heart to do it...Oh mediator, show them the way to each other..." Freder speaks encouragingly to his father, then takes both men's hands in his own and joins them together. As the score concludes triumphantly, the two men clasp hands, and the film's focal phrase appears again onscreen:

A black rectangular box containing white text that reads: "THE MEDIATOR BETWEEN HEAD AND HANDS MUST BE THE HEART!"

Image 22

IX. The Head, the Heart, and the City

Metropolis is nakedly, unashamedly sentimental: in its staging of the three-sided battle between the “head,” the “hands,” and the “heart,” it makes no secret of where its sympathies lie. It is a story of plans gone awry, order overtaken by chaos, human beings shattered, and human relationships torn asunder – all mended and redeemed by the power of fellow-feeling and love. It aligns us with Freder’s naïveté and guides us toward what is ostensibly the most naïve of approaches to the problems of social and political organization. Taken as a set of literal recommendations, or as a model for how we should make decisions about political life, the suggestions that emerge from the film – reason and its technical fruits are inherently odious, the wisest insights emerge from the unreflective emotional lives of childlike people, the impulses that follow from love are more reliable than the conclusions derived from calculation, one should at all costs avoid making robots that look like humans – seem to confirm Wells’ judgment that *Metropolis* is, in fact, “the silliest film.”¹²⁷

But taken less programmatically, as a set of provocations for thinking about the place of reason in social and political organization, the film helpfully illuminates some of the blind spots of a rationalist approach to politics. These blind spots are evidenced by Wells’ blithe suggestion that we explore “the possibility of restraining the growth of large masses of population,” or that we use reason and the tools provided by science to accommodate human reproduction to projected societal need.¹²⁸ These blind spots also appear in Joh Fredersen’s political rule in the city, in which the techniques of the scientifically managed workplace are applied to the

¹²⁷ H.G. Wells in Minden and Bachmann, 2000.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

whole of social and political organization. The city's destruction emerges from these blind spots, and the film is most interesting not as a spur to total reorientation away from the "head" and toward the "heart," but rather as the strongest possible case in favor of the "heart," which case points ultimately to the need for Joh's rationalism and Freder's sentimentalism – and, of course, Grot's powerful "hands" – to mediate with one another, or for the considerations that emerge from each to be taken into account. On this reading, the film prompts us not to exchange one sort of simplicity for another, but rather to embrace the kind of complexity that can only be negotiated by an entirely human – not mechanical, and never precise – prudence.

Chapter Five

Conclusion: Political Rationalism and Prudence

“Which kind of thoughts, is called *Foresight*, and *Prudence*, or *Providence*; and sometimes *Wisdom*; though such conjecture, through the difficulty of observing all circumstances, be very fallacious...And though it be called Prudence, when the Event answereth our Expectation; yet in its own nature, it is but Presumption. For the foresight of things to come, which is Providence, belongs onely to him by whose will they are to come.”

Thomas Hobbes¹²⁹

“As there is a degree of depravity in mankind which requires a certain degree of circumspection and distrust, so there are other qualities in human nature which justify a certain portion of esteem and confidence. Republican government presupposes the existence of these qualities in a higher degree than any other form. Were the pictures which have been drawn by the political jealousy of some among us faithful likenesses of the human character, the inference would be, that there is not sufficient virtue among men for self-government; and that nothing less than the chains of despotism can restrain them from destroying and devouring one another.”

Publius¹³⁰

Part One: The Excesses of Political Rationalism

Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* prompts us toward a particular kind of mediation in political life, a navigation of the competing demands of the heart, the hands, and the

¹²⁹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, C.B. Macpherson, ed., London, UK: Penguin Books, 1968, Chap. 3, 97.

¹³⁰ *The Federalist*, George W. Carey and James McClellan, eds, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001, paper 55.

head. This mediation, by its nature, is inexact. If Joh Fredersen's dramatic downfall confronts us with the dangers of organizing our politics by the light of reason alone, Freder Fredersen and Maria show us both the importance of the heart – of sentiment, affection, and human attachment – and the impossibility, or at least the silliness, of a politics that simply follows the heart. In truth, *Metropolis* offers not a guide to politics, but rather a warning against relying exclusively on any particular technique, scheme, or formula. In its spur to mediation, the film points us away from the illusory exactness promised by techniques and formulas, and toward the messy and inexact navigation of perpetual uncertainty, an approach to politics that rejects mechanical certainty and embraces human imprecision.

This rejection of certainty in politics is a rejection of political rationalism, in the sense that reason alone is cast as an insufficient guide to political life. Politics here appears not as a series of discrete problems susceptible to solution by the application of the correct “technique of analysis,” but rather as an arena of constant imprecision and perpetual negotiation.¹³¹ The technical understanding of politics, in which knowledge about political life can be “formulated into rules which are, or may be, deliberately learned, remembered, and, as we say, put into practice,” is rejected in favor of an approach to political life that takes its bearings as much from practical knowledge – which “exists only in use, is not reflective and (unlike technique) cannot be formulated into rules” – as from technique.¹³² This is neither a rejection of reason nor a rejection of technique; rather, it is a rejection of rationalism, in the

¹³¹ Oakeshott, “Rationalism in Politics,” 7.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 15, 12.

sense that neither reason nor technique alone can provide us with a satisfactory – let alone precise – guide to politics.

These same conclusions, in different forms, emerge as well from all of the works examined in this thesis. In *The Clouds*, Socrates' naturalistic rationalism provides him with insight into the cosmos, the nature of language, and the principles of rhetoric, but it also makes him into a stranger within his own polity.¹³³ His concerns are with the universal rather than the particular: with the universal principles of nature rather than the concerns and conventions of the particular city of Athens. The education that he provides to Pheidippides enables the latter to apply these principles to human affairs, and to reason in naturalistic terms about his family and his city. But this education is comically disastrous: far from relieving his father's financial stress, Pheidippides' Socratic education introduces violence between father and son (and, by implication, between mother and son), and threatens to undermine the familial arrangements upon which the city rests – which leads, in turn, to Socrates' unceremonious ejection from Athens. In *The Clouds*, the attempt to take a rationalist approach to politics appears both ridiculous and destructive; Pheidippides learns the universal principles of nature, but unlearns the practical knowledge of Athenian convention.

In *Gulliver's Travels*, perspective comes to the fore, and – like the conventions and customs of Athens – stands in opposition to the universal pretensions of rationalism. Gulliver's first two voyages emphasize the importance of perspective – physical, intellectual, and moral – for judgment and evaluation: perspective appears

¹³³ This last feature, at least, is common to both Aristophanes' and Plato's Socrates; see Plato, "Apology of Socrates," 17d-18a.

here as the particular ground from which reason takes its bearings. Gulliver's comically inept attempts to evaluate the affairs of the Lilliputians and Brobdingnagians emphasize the degree to which his different perspective colors his reasoning and his judgment. The second two parts of the work show us two different attempts to organize political affairs according to universal principles, ignoring the divergence in perspectives from which reason takes its bearings. The Laputans, on their floating island, cast "one of their Eyes...inward, and the other directly up to the Zenith"; in other words, they try to apply universal, technical rules directly to their own lives and affairs.¹³⁴ This both makes them unable to negotiate particular differences – they tailor geometrically perfect clothes that do not fit their wearers, for example – and prompts them to govern the cities below their island with a casually brutal, disinterested violence. This casual brutality also manifests in the politics of the Houyhnhnms, who contemplate the extermination of the Yahoos with a detached, hyper-rational calm. The Houyhnhnms live according to reason and take their bearings from a universal understanding of nature, but they, too, overlook particular differences: in this case, the difference between human nature and Houyhnhnm nature. This oversight makes Gulliver's rationalist education at the hands of the Houyhnhnms similar to Pheidippides' rationalist education at the hands of Socrates, in the sense that both pupils emerge from the experience severed from their own communities and attachments. The Houyhnhnms, in making Gulliver unable to live among his own kind, are exposed as imprudent educators, just as Gulliver imprudently rejects his fellow human beings.

¹³⁴ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 148.

Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* shows several examples of moral rationalism, in which reason is understood as the one thing needful in order to make perfectly correct moral choices. Here, morality appears as a calculative process, in which goods and evils need only be appropriately tallied and weighed against each other in order to determine moral action. The novel's three examples of moral rationalism – elitist, economic, and hedonistic – are similarly precise in their calculations and similarly brutal, or at least willing to countenance brutality, in their conclusions. The novel also offers us, if only in outline, a challenge to the notion that moral choices can be navigated with technical precision: In embracing common humanity and human attachments, Sonya's alternative to Raskolnikov's rationalism offers an approach to moral life that is both less certain and more human. In sacrificing pretensions to universality and precision in favor of a necessarily imprecise accommodation to the messiness of human affairs, Sonya's education of Raskolnikov does what the Houyhnhnm's education of Gulliver could not: It makes him better able to live among his fellow human beings.

The themes that unite these accounts of rationalism resonate with the discussion of political rationalism in the introduction to this thesis. All of these works prompt us to reconsider the notion that human affairs are best navigated according to technical knowledge exclusively. All of these works call into question rationalism's promise to provide technically precise answers to human questions, and therefore to allow us greater control over human affairs. All of these works raise questions about the appropriateness of rationalism's embrace of universality and its neglect of, and abstraction from, difference: in *The Clouds*, human affairs

seem importantly different from the natural world; in *Gulliver's Travels*, politics are importantly different from science, and Houyhnhnms are importantly different from humans; in *Crime and Punishment*, moral reasoning is importantly different from mathematical calculation; and in *Metropolis*, human beings are importantly different from machines. In each case, the inherent particularity of human affairs undermines the attempt to navigate human and political life by reason alone.

This opens up a space for prudence: for “deliberating well” about “the human things,” which do not proceed according to necessity but rather always “admit of being otherwise.”¹³⁵ Justice, nobility, and the human good – the subject matter of political life – “admit of much dispute and variability,” and therefore must be reasoned about in a provisional fashion, “roughly and in outline,” rather than in a manner that searches after certainty and precision.¹³⁶ A prudent approach to politics consist not in a rejection of rationalism but rather in a rejection of the rationalist claims to universality and precision: prudence is not an embrace of unreason, but rather a reasoned navigation of perpetual uncertainty, in which human complexity and particularity is negotiated rather than neglected or denied.

Having examined several examples of a rationalist approach to political and moral life, we turn now to *The Federalist Papers*, which will serve as an example of a prudent approach to the science of politics. The authors of *The Federalist Papers* both reason prudently about politics and emphasize the need for prudence in the

¹³⁵ *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 6, Chap. 7, 1141b10-17; 6, 6, 1140b35-1141a1.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1, 3, 1094b15-23.

political community they discuss, embracing reason while avoiding the excesses of rationalism.

Part Two: Publius' Prudent Political Science in *The Federalist Papers*

At the opening of *The Federalist Papers*, Publius makes the reader aware of the importance of his project: Americans, says Publius, are called upon to provide an answer to the question, “whether societies of men are really capable nor not, of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend, for their political constitutions, on accident and force.”¹³⁷ The Federalist project, for Publius, consists in a sharp break from all previous political history – thus the Americans, as distinct from other peoples at other times, can demonstrate that dependence on “accident and force” in political affairs is not perpetual. The possibility of “establishing good government from reflection and choice” exists for Publius and for the Americans in a way in which it did not exist for Publius’ and the Americans’ predecessors.

In advancing this claim, Publius asserts that “the science of politics...like most other sciences, has received great improvement” (FP 9). It is this improvement in the science of politics that explains, at least in part, the unique possibilities open to Publius and the Americans, and indeed makes it possible to establish “good government from reflection and choice.” The science of politics, for Publius, shows us how to construct a government that will provide both effective security and

¹³⁷ *The Federalist*, George W. Carey and James McClellan, eds, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001, paper 1. Future references to this edition will be in-text and will appear as FP and the number of the paper – in this case, FP 1. Since the authors of *The Federalist Papers* speak under the name “Publius,” this persona will be credited as the author of the *Papers*.

effective liberty: it provides the “means, and powerful means, by which the excellencies of republican government may be retained, and its imperfections lessened or avoided” (FP 9).

The project of *The Federalist Papers*, then, seems essentially rationalist. Publius has access to a “science of politics” – a set of universal precepts or principles about political life – by means of which the problems of republican government are to be resolved. Perfecting the republican form of government here seems simply a matter of technique: Control over political life can be attained through the rational application of the universal rules of politics. The science of politics here appears much like the art or science of war, which “teaches general principles...which apply universally” (FP 56).

But this reading radically simplifies Publius’ approach to political life, and captures only part of the *Federalist’s* project. In truth, Publius’ proposal consists not simply in the technical application of mechanically inflexible and universally applicable rules, but rather in the prudent adoption and adaptation of loose guidelines, which guidelines are open to great modification – or even rejection – depending upon circumstance. This emphasis on the accommodation of circumstance – on the importance of particulars – is further illustrated by Publius’ discussions of the particular character of the polity he treats, and by his insistence on the need for prudence in the governance of the polity and among the populace. Republican governance, for Publius, depends not upon technique alone, but rather upon an admixture of technique and prudence, in which each informs and modifies the other.

I. A Technical Approach to Politics

Publius' political science in *The Federalist Papers* appears at first glance to consist entirely of technique: of the technical application of the universal principles of political life. This comes to the fore most clearly in *The Federalist's* discussions of institutional design, and of the reasons for the institutional forms he recommends.

The principles of political science are those by which Publius constructs the form of his government. They consist primarily in "the regular distribution of power into distinct departments; the introduction of legislative balances and checks...the representation of the people in the legislature...the ENLARGEMENT of the ORBIT within which such [popular] systems are to revolve," and others (FP 9). We must remember, however, that we are constructing "a government which is to be administered by men over men" (FP 51). We are constructing, in other words, with human material. The science of politics must therefore be fundamentally a science of human beings. Animating the principles of political science, then, is an understanding of "the true springs by which human conduct is actuated," which understanding separates Publius from both his opponents and his predecessors (FP 15). This understanding allows Publius a window into human nature, into the probable actions of human beings in different situations and positions, and therefore provides him with the ability to structure his government in order to direct the actions of the governors.

Publius' understanding of human nature seems to center on the "defect of better motives" (FP 51). This defect means that interests, passions, and opinions are stronger drivers of human conduct than religion, morality, or justice; that

“momentary passions, and immediate interests” are stronger than “general or remote considerations”; that “benefits and terrors” are the strongest bonds of attachment; that self-love, love of power, avarice, and ambition animate most of human activity (FP 6; 17).¹³⁸ Even “a tolerable knowledge of human nature” allows one to see that political union itself is necessary because “men are ambitious, vindictive, and rapacious”: these are “solid conclusions, drawn from the natural and necessary progress of human affairs” (FP 6; 8).¹³⁹

The sort of political union that Publius recommends – a specifically energetic or vigorous union – is necessary because of “axioms, as simple as they are universal...the *means* ought to be proportioned to the *end*; the persons from whose agency the attainment of any *end* is expected, ought to possess the *means* by which it is to be attained” (FP 23).¹⁴⁰ These, says Publius, are “maxims in ethics and politics” comparable to the “primary truths, or first principles” of geometry (FP 31). The union, then, must be of such “energy and duration” as to be able to effectively protect the lives and livelihoods of Americans (FP 23).

It is precisely this energy and duration, however, that threatens republican liberty. To solve this problem, Publius turns to the principles mentioned above: “the regular distribution of power into distinct departments; the introduction of

¹³⁸ See also FP 10; 15; 1; 11; 7; also FP 70, in which “the great interests of society are sacrificed to the vanity, to the conceit, and to the obstinacy of individuals...” This is a “despicable frailty, or rather detestable vice in the human character.”

¹³⁹ “Why has government been instituted at all? Because the passions of men will not conform to the dictates of reason and justice, without constraint” (FP 15). This point is echoed in FP 51, in which government appears as “the greatest of all reflections on human nature.” See *The Federalist Papers*, Clinton Rossiter, ed., New York: Signet Classic, 2003, p. 48 for “ambitious” rather than “ambitions” in FP 6.

¹⁴⁰ In FP 44, “No axiom is more clearly established in law, or in reason, than that wherever the end is required, the means are authorized...”

legislative balances and checks...the representation of the people in the legislature,” and “the ENLARGEMENT of the ORBIT within which such [popular] systems are to revolve” (FP 9). Thus, when confronted with the problem of faction, Publius famously despairs of removing the causes of faction, which are “sown in the nature of man,” and concentrates his energies on the controlling of faction’s effects (FP 10). The means to this end suggested by the science of politics is the extension of the republic, such that a greater option of “fit characters” will be available to “refine and enlarge the public views” as representatives, and such that interests and opinions and therefore factions and parties will be multiplied and thus rendered less effectual (FP 10; 51). When attempting to effectively preserve the independence of the branches of government, Publius finds the means by which the “encroaching nature of power” is to be contained in the same impulse that drives human beings to seek to expand their power: “Ambition must be made to counteract ambition” (FP 48; 51).¹⁴¹ The “private interests” of each individual in maintaining the honors and benefits of office is to be connected with the independence of the office itself – in this way, the ambition of officials will secure the liberties of the people against an overbearing legislature (FP 51). Finally, in attempting to ensure “good behaviour” in the executive, Publius makes use of the “love of fame, the ruling passion of the noblest minds” in order to bind the ambitious man’s powerful desire for acclaim to the planning and undertaking of “extensive and arduous enterprises for the public benefit” (FP 72). In allowing the executive to indulge his “passion for power and pre-eminence” and at the same time attaching such indulgence to action on behalf of

¹⁴¹ See also FP 72, in which the president’s “avarice might be a guard upon his avarice.”

the public good, Publius makes use of human nature to solve difficulties created by human nature (FP 72).

The principles of Publius' science of politics seem therefore to govern both his assertion of the need for an energetic or vigorous union and his crafting of solutions to the difficulties such a union creates. These principles, based as they are in the nature of human beings, seem to provide universal and precise means by which government can be organized. But if this were so, we might expect the principles of political science – the separation of powers, for example – to be adopted without modification, imposed upon – rather than adapted to – divergent circumstances. We might expect little attention to the particulars of the nascent American polity, and little care for the character of its populace. In fact, as we will see below, none of these things are true.

II. "A Common Share of Prudence"

The notion that "the legislative, the executive, and judiciary departments, ought to be separate and distinct" is described by Publius as a "political truth" of "intrinsic value," an "invaluable precept" brought to our attention by none other than "the celebrated Montesquieu" (FP 47). In an effort to "ascertain [Montesquieu's] meaning on this point," however, we discover that he was enamored of the constitution of England to the degree that he "delivered, in the form of elementary truths, the several characteristic principles of that particular system" (FP 47). In order to properly grasp Montesquieu's maxim, we ought to examine his words in the context of his source material. The results of this examination, according to Publius, show that Montesquieu meant to incorporate a great deal of

latitude into his theory, which latitude is perhaps not captured by his words alone; in fact, the true meaning of the separation of powers contains much less in the way of precise instruction than originally seemed the case: “where the *whole* power of one department is exercised by the same hands, which possesses the *whole* power of another department, the fundamental principles of a free constitution are subverted” (FP 47). This does not point us toward a strict or formulaic separation of powers; rather, it warns us *away* from an extreme *concentration* of powers.

If we find his analysis of Montesquieu unconvincing, Publius proceeds to show us that of the several states which have incorporated wording into their constitutions calling for a separation of powers, “in no instance has a competent provision been made for maintaining in practice the separation delineated on paper” (FP 47). This means that this “sacred maxim of free government” has been taken by the Americans themselves, in practice, as a loose constraint, or a piece of imperfect and adaptable guidance, rather than a precise, technical rule (FP 47). And indeed, this newfound latitude allowed us by Montesquieu’s maxim means that we may turn from a strict separation of powers to the provision of “*some* practical security for each, against the invasion of the others” (FP 48).¹⁴² Montesquieu’s “sacred maxim” is now presented as “that separate and distinct exercise of the different powers of government, which, *to a certain extent*, is admitted on all hands to be essential to the preservation of liberty” (FP 47; 51).¹⁴³

The separation of powers had initially been presented as a “political truth,” one of the principles of Publius’ new political science, and as emerging and following

¹⁴² Emphasis is mine.

¹⁴³ Emphasis is mine.

from human nature itself. Now, it seems that the principle of the separation of powers should be considered only “to a certain extent,” and provides us not with a blueprint or formula but rather with the injunction that we take “some” measures to prevent “the *whole* power of one department” from being “exercised by the same hands, which possesses the *whole* power of another department” (FP 51; 48; 47). The reason we must treat the separation of powers as a loose guideline to be prudently adapted rather than a technical rule to be mechanically applied has to do with the divergent circumstances in which we must act. What Montesquieu presented as “elementary truths” were instead the “characteristic principles of *that particular system*” found in England, which principles cannot be abstracted from that system and applied in other contexts; rather, they must be adapted, adopted only in part, etc., in a fashion responsive to the particulars of other political communities (FP 47).¹⁴⁴ Those states that tried to apply these principles mechanically found that they could not turn paper into practice: they could not make divergent circumstances conform to universal and unitary principle. Thus Publius tells us that “theoretic reasoning...in most...cases, must be qualified by the lessons of practice” (FP 43).

In truth, it is not simply the transition from theory to practice that is fraught with imprecision; the formulation of theory – the abstraction from practice in order to formulate distinctions, principles, and rules – is similarly riddled with ambiguity. In order to direct us to this conclusion, Publius shows us the difficulty faced by the greatest scientists in identifying divisions in the “great kingdoms of nature,” and

¹⁴⁴ Emphasis is mine.

then shows us the far greater difficulty in drawing distinctions among and within the conceptual artifices of man, “in which the obscurity arises as well from the object itself, as from the organ by which it is contemplated” (FP 37).¹⁴⁵ This inability to draw precise distinctions has direct bearing on the principle of the separation of powers: “No skill in the science of government,” says Publius, is able to distinguish conclusively between the powers of government, and none of the “greatest adepts in political science” are able to eliminate “the obscurity which reigns in these subjects” (FP 37). In addition to the conceptual confusion which is part and parcel of all “institutions of man,” we are also bound by our language: “the medium through which the conceptions of men are conveyed to each other, adds a fresh embarrassment” (FP 37).¹⁴⁶ We have not the words to accurately express our inexact concepts and ideas: even “When the Almighty himself condescends to address mankind in their own language, his meaning, luminous as it must be, is rendered dim and doubtful, by the cloudy medium through which it is communicated” (FP 37). Publius finds uncertainty and inexactness not only in the practical application of principles, but also in the principles themselves, since neither our thinking nor our communication can be considered precise.

It should therefore come as no surprise that Publius recommends to us not the insights of “Theoretic politicians,” but rather “that best oracle of wisdom, experience” (FP 10; 15). Publius’ formal innovations, initial appearances to the

¹⁴⁵ Publius makes a similar point in FP 27 with regard to “the inaccuracy, or inexplicitness, of the distinction between internal and external...”

¹⁴⁶ This may account for the recurring problem of definitions, as in FP 9 (confederate republic); 14 (“confusion of names” as to republic vs. democracy); 39 (republic); and 42 (felonies).

contrary, are “inventions of prudence” – imprecise, irregular, and adjustable – rather than the “artificial structure and regular symmetry” which results from a theorist’s “abstract view of the subject” (FP 51; 37). It is “experience,” rather than technical knowledge, that Publius characterizes as “the parent of wisdom” in those who are to govern; he therefore warns against “those political doctors, whose sagacity disdains the admonitions of experimental instruction” (FP 72; 28). In both governing and devising the structures of government, practical knowledge – the kind of knowledge that Oakeshott says “exists only in use, is not reflective and (unlike technique) cannot be formulated into rules” – is just as valuable as, and must inform the implementation of, the universal principles of the new political science.¹⁴⁷

And indeed, if these principles are animated by knowledge of “the true springs by which human conduct is actuated” – that is, by knowledge of human nature and human behavior – then there is yet another reason to call into question the technical character of Publius’ approach to politics (FP 15). On closer examination, Publius’ account of human nature seems far more elastic than initial appearances suggest, and his account of the constitutional convention seems to undermine the universal claim that “men are ambitious, vindictive, and rapacious” (FP 6). Publius describes the men of the constitutional convention as not “having been...influenced by any passion, except love for their country”; many of these men “had become highly distinguished by their patriotism, virtue, and wisdom” (FP 2). This body, it seems, was immune to any tendency to faction or party, and its

¹⁴⁷ Oakeshott, “Rationalism in Politics,” 15.

members were possessed of “a deep conviction of the necessity of sacrificing private opinions and partial interests to the public good” (FP 37). One might say, of course, that this apparent counterexample to Publius’ pessimistic portrait of human nature was the product of an extraordinary situation: Absent the desperate circumstances of the time, such behavior will not likely be found. Indeed, Publius seems to say this himself when speaking of the circumstances in which the state constitutions were formed (FP 49).

If the triumph of immediate interests and momentary passions were the rule rather than the exception, however, it is doubtful that we could pursue the project of popular government as Publius understands it. In his discussion of the effective division of powers, Publius describes the consideration of forms and institutional design as “auxiliary precautions” (FP 51). The primary precaution, or in other words the primary means by which energy and liberty are to be reconciled, is not any particular institutional innovation but rather “a dependence on the people” (FP 51). Indeed, the fact that “the whole power of the proposed government is to be in the hands of the representatives of the people” is “the essential, and, after all, the only efficacious security for the rights and privileges of the people, which is attainable in civil society” (FP 28). This reliance on the people seems to undermine the notion that “momentary passions, and immediate interests” always outweigh “general or remote considerations of policy, utility or justice,” and also to call into question the universality of the “defect of better motives” among human beings; if human beings are always (or even usually) shortsighted and malign, then surely “a

dependence on the people” would be a poor ground upon which to base the ultimate security of a political community (FP 6; 51).

In fact, Publius’ picture of the American people here seems to undermine much of what was presented as universal knowledge of human nature. It turns out that we can indeed rely on the people to determine how their own interests may best be served, and even to act in a just and truthful fashion. While the people may sometimes be swayed by “temporary errors and delusions,” “the cool and deliberate sense of the community,” which emerges when “reason, justice, and truth, can regain their authority over the public mind,” is what is to be counted on in charting the course of government (FP 63). “[T]he people of any country (if like the Americans intelligent and well informed) seldom adopt, and steadily persevere for many years, in any erroneous opinion respecting their interests” (FP 3). This is why Publius can justly claim that the people are “the natural guardians of the constitution,” and are “enlightened enough to distinguish between a legal exercise and an illegal usurpation of authority” (FP 16). Far from painting a uniform and universally negative picture of human nature, Publius here places his faith in the “good sense” of the people, and in a “common share of prudence” in the administration of the government (FP 71; 27). Without expecting a “nation of philosophers,” we nonetheless “rest all our political experiments on the capacity of mankind for self-government,” he says, and find that we must trust the “prudence and firmness of the people” (FP 49; 39; 32).

III. A Prudent Political Science

Publius' account of human nature, on this reading, might be called both optimistic and pessimistic. Indeed, it seems, on this reading, that Publius does not articulate a unitary and universal understanding of human nature; rather, Publius articulates an understanding of the *possibilities* of human nature, and of the depths and summits contained therein. A depiction of human beings which does not account for the "defect of better motives" would lead to a government that placed its faith in "parchment barriers" at home and good intentions abroad – such a government can only appeal to those "far gone in Utopian speculations" and absorbed in "idle theories" (FP 51; 48; 6). At the same time, says Publius:

This supposition of universal venality in human nature is little less an error in political reasoning, than the supposition of universal rectitude. The institution of delegated power implies, that there is a portion of virtue and honour among mankind, which may be a reasonable foundation of confidence: and experience justifies the theory (FP 76).

If one side of human nature makes government necessary, the other side makes *republican* government possible. If the men of the convention cannot be accounted for without considering that they held, to the utmost possible degree, all of the admirable qualities in human nature, the future elected and electors of American must be understood to possess such qualities in at least a tolerable degree, at least most of the time. We are left with what Publius might call a "prudent mean" – both sides of human nature, as Publius sees it, are provided for (FP 65).¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ Publius uses the phrase in FP 65 in the context of a discussion of impeachment mechanisms.

After all, says Publius, “Where, in the name of common sense, are our fears to end, if we may not trust our sons, our brothers, our neighbors, our fellow citizens?” (FP 29)

Publius’ political science reflects this emphasis on the space between imprudent extremes and the provision for the possibilities, good and bad, contained in the nature of human beings. We are shown this in the discussion of representatives’ terms of office, in which “experience, the guide that ought always to be followed whenever it can be found,” teaches that “liberty...lies within extremes, which afford sufficient latitude for all the variations which may be required by the various situations and circumstances of civil society” (FP 52; 53). In other words, there is no precise solution to the question of how long terms of office should be, no universal principle that can govern – as opposed to loosely guide – our action here. Instead, we should rely on both principle and prudence to navigate between “pernicious” extremes (FP 35).¹⁴⁹ To pretend to greater exactitude is folly: “No man,” says Publius, “will subject himse[l]f to the ridicule of pretending that any natural connexion subsists between the sun or the seasons, and the period within which human virtue can bear the temptations of power” (FP 53). At the same time, we are to take our bearings from the “received and well founded maxim, that, where no other circumstances affect the case, the greater the power is, the shorter ought to be its duration” (FP 53). Publius here considers the guidance of maxims, the force of circumstances, and the conclusions of experience in order to delineate the space within which human possibilities may prudently be allowed to exhibit themselves.

¹⁴⁹ Another example: the amendment procedure discussed in FP 43 “guards equally against” an “extreme facility” and an “extreme difficulty,” both of which are equally problematic.

Publius' political science is therefore best considered a *prudent* political science, following Publius' usage of the term throughout *The Federalist Papers*, in which "prudence" appears akin to sound judgment informed by good sense, reason, experience, and moderation, as opposed to formal, technical knowledge.¹⁵⁰ A prudent political science is a science of politics informed by the variable and heterogeneous conclusions of reason, experience, principle, history, fellow-feeling (we are asked, after all, to "trust our sons, our brothers, our neighbors, our fellow citizens"), custom or convention (insofar as political stability depends, at least to some degree, on "that veneration which time bestows on every thing") and intuition, rather than by a set of technical rules or formulas in which no discrepancies or divergences exist (FP 29; 49). This does not mean, says Publius, that we must abandon the claim to a science of politics: "Though it cannot be pretended that the

¹⁵⁰ In FP 2 are paired "prudent and advisable"; in FP 3, "wisdom and prudence"; in FPs 4 and 36, prudently seems to stand for capably or ably; in FP 5, "sound policy, prudence, and foresight" are grouped together; in FP 17, "uprightness and prudence" are paired; in FP 23, "prudence and propriety"; in FP 24, "discretion and prudence" and the "maxims of prudence and policy"; in FP 32, questions of prudence are identified with question of expedience and inexpedience, and the same seems true in FP 22; an "imprudent extreme" is brought to our attention in FP 26, while we find a "prudent mediocrity" between extremes in FP 62 and a "prudent mean" in FP 65; the prudence of the people seems to stand for their good sense or good judgment in FPs 31, 33, and 41, and FP 33 also mentions an "imprudent zeal," while "prudence and good sense" are paired in FP 74; in FPs 15, 27, 38, 40, 41, 62, 64, 70, 75, and 85 prudence appears identical with good judgment, while in FPs 38 and 85 imprudence seems to stand for bad judgment; in FPs 7 and 43 prudence seems a combination of good judgment and moderation; in FP 44 is the pairing of "prudence and industry"; in FP 51, the mechanisms by which power is divided among the several departments are referred to as "inventions of prudence"; in FP 57, "human prudence" seems to stand for human ability or human intellect; in FP 62, prudence has us embracing the lesser evil, and also seems to stand for discretion; "prudence and efficacy" are paired in FP 79; "prudence and integrity" are paired, but seem not to be identified with one another, in FP 81, and the same might be said for "prudent and honest" in FP 8.

principles of moral and political knowledge have, in general, the same degree of certainty with those of the mathematics, yet they have much better claims in this respect than, to judge from the conduct of men in particular situations, we should be disposed to allow them” (FP 31). Insofar as Publius’ understanding of human nature accounts for man’s less admirable possibilities, the principles of his political science can suggest the formal and institutional mechanisms that account for, channel, and control these “defects of better motives” (FP 51). If we admit that the conceptual “institutions of man” are inexact in themselves, and that this imprecision is increased by the insufficiency of language, we may nonetheless apply the necessarily elastic principles of political science, as well as insights drawn from a multitude of other sources, in order to prudently eliminate extremes, to account for a diverse and variable human nature, and to provide a reasonable and adaptable framework for political organization. In articulating this imprecise science of politics, Publius is cognizant also of the degree to which the happiness of the American polity will depend on qualities among both rulers and ruled that cannot be precisely defined, nor cultivated with technical exactness. These qualities, like the prudence Publius both exhibits and calls forth from his countrymen, are imprecise, unquantifiable, and yet essential to republican government. After all, says Publius:

Duty, gratitude, interest, ambition itself, are the chords by which [representatives] will be bound to fidelity and sympathy with the great mass of the people. It is possible that these may all be insufficient to control the caprice and wickedness of men. But are they not all that government will

admit, and that human prudence can devise? Are they not the genuine, and the characteristic means by which republican government provides for the liberty and happiness of the people? (FP 57)

In articulating his prudent political science, Publius exemplifies an approach to political life that embraces reason while avoiding the excesses of rationalism. In so doing, Publius offers us one version of the kind of mediation or negotiation called forth explicitly by *Metropolis* and implicitly by our other materials: rather than constructing his proposed polity based on a unitary and necessarily reductive understanding of human beings, Publius accounts for – and navigates between – divergent facets of human existence, including self-interested reason, affection and fellow-feeling, various levels of human attachment and association, custom or convention, and ambition both admirable and pernicious. Publius’ proposals therefore appear not as technical or formulaic deductions from a universal and unchanging human nature, but rather as necessarily inexact responses to the diverse conclusions of principle, experience, and the broad possibilities of human behavior, to be adapted to, rather than imposed upon, divergent circumstances. If political rationalism, in our presentation, denied the importance of human choice to political life, Publius’ prudent political science takes account of human choice: Publius does not presume to predict or fully comprehend the course of human behavior, but rather seeks to embrace its possibilities while limiting its extremes. In this, Publius gives up the claim to full control over political life: the establishment of “good government from reflection and choice” is not the necessary conclusion of

technical processes, but rather a hope, a possibility, an ongoing project that can be pursued but never guaranteed (FP 1). But in ceding this claim to control, Publius avoids an approach to politics that abstracts from the fullness of human life, reduces or ignores difference and variety, and denies rather than embraces human choice and human possibility.

Publius' emphasis on the need for prudence in both governors and governed – on the dependence of republican government on the character of the republican polity – returns us to the question of political education discussed in the introductory chapter of this thesis. If, as Publius suggests, the health of a republican polity depends, at least to some degree, on the existence of a prudent populace, then the sort of political education most needful would consist in the cultivation of such prudence. If a republican polity recognizes the possibilities of human choice, then the sort of political education most needful would consist in the cultivation of an excellence in choosing. If the proper approach to politics consists not in taking one's bearings from technical rules, but rather in attending to – and prioritizing among – endlessly divergent facets of human nature and political life, then the sort of political education most needful would involve training in the navigation of perpetual uncertainty, in which perfectly correct choices are unavailable, but better and worse choices are perfectly possible. If, as our materials have suggested, a rationalist approach to politics does violence to the political community it intends to correct, then we must rely, not upon unaided reason to produce certain solutions to the problems of politics, but rather upon prudence – an excellence of opinion and

choice-making – to help us imperfectly negotiate the perpetual questions of political life.

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