

## Excerpt

### PRELUDE TO PART III AND CHAPTER ELEVEN

From *America's Identity Crisis* by Michael Gellert

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## PART III

### THE UNDERSIDE OF INNOCENCE

*Then the Lord God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever"—therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.*

—Genesis 3:22-24

*If there is any major addiction that the United States of America has, it is the addiction of innocence, to keep ourselves unknowing, just new, putting it all behind us, and to have the wide open eyes and mouths of the child.*

—James Hillman

*It may well be that a society's greatest madness seems normal to itself.*

—Allan Bloom

### Prelude: The Style of Innocence

If the addiction to height poses a growing threat to democracy in America, then the addiction to innocence already has a formidable grasp not only on the nation's understanding and practice of democracy, but its soul. Freedom itself has acquired a special meaning from having been filtered through the lens of innocence, so that it has become difficult to distinguish which social beliefs and practices genuinely express freedom, and which innocence. Innocence is a kind of freedom too, but it does not

understand the importance of the recognition of necessity. Given this, even the addiction to height is hinged upon the addiction to innocence, since the culture exhibits a complete innocence about the former and does not recognize the need to set limits and come down from the heights.

Innocence, in the sense I am referring to it here, is an epistemic style, a way of knowing. It operates according to the principle or assumption that the world is what it appears to be, that is, that the nature of things is as the things themselves suggest by their appearance. Appearance is the criterion that determines what is meaningful and real. The philosopher Bertrand Russell called this principle “naive realism,” and saw it as the root condition of man: “We all start from ‘naive realism,’ i.e., the doctrine that things are what they seem.” In other words, human beings, like animals, are born naturally believing that things are what they seem. Innocence is the original condition of all living creatures.

As an account of the beginnings of humanity, the Book of Genesis clearly highlights the primacy of innocence and the latter’s significance in the drama of human existence and suffering. It is tempting and comforting to see the serpent, who was later associated with the devil, as the culprit responsible for man’s expulsion from the garden of Eden. But this temptation is just an avoidance of responsibility, exactly the sort that got Adam and Eve into trouble in the first place. Eve blamed the serpent, and Adam blamed Eve. The truth behind this allegory of the beginning of humanity is that Adam and Eve were tempted because they were *able* to be tempted. Original sin occurred as a corollary to the condition of original innocence, indeed, as a consequence of it. It is even possible that innocence *was* the original sin, and not pride, as most biblical authorities contend.

God said to Adam, “Do not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” Things being what they seem, and with this rule seeming fairly straightforward, Adam did not think to eat from the tree. But then the serpent said to Eve, “God does not want you to eat from the tree only because you will become like him. Eat from it and you too will have special knowledge.” Things again being what they seem, now the situation was different. Now it seemed like a good idea to eat from the tree. So they ate. But the special knowledge that the tree gave was precisely derived from the shattering of innocence. Now man knew good and evil, sacred and sacrilegious, and all the other pairs of opposites that riddle human nature. And he knew guilt and shame. He was ashamed of his innocent nakedness, and felt compelled to cover himself. There’s a price for this knowledge. One cannot stay in paradise without innocence or purity. As the Talmud points out, God did not banish man from the garden of Eden in anger or vengeance; he did it matter-of-factly and for man’s own good. Having the freedom and power this knowledge brings without really knowing how to live with it would be far more injurious to man than to be sent out from the garden. A particular injury and danger, the Bible tells us, would be that man, after having eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, would then eat from the tree of (eternal) life and live forever. (There were, according to the oral tradition of the Talmud, many trees in the garden.) With no suffering and finality to his condition, he would then never be motivated to learn how to live with good and evil and manage his condition. In fact, it was in exiling man that God assured that man could eventually find his way to eternal life, but with the knowledge that he now had of good and evil.

Genesis is the story of man's emergence from his original condition of youth. Adam and Eve before the Fall lived as children: carefree, cared for, spontaneously living in the moment, uninhibited, and innocent. Psychologically, they *were* children, and the part they played in the Bible is analogous in human history to man's childhood. After Adam and Eve's exile from the garden, man had to work in order to live, childbirth and life thereafter became difficult, and suffering and death became part of the human condition. These are undoubtedly the realities that a discerning, maturing consciousness must face.

Of course, *Homo sapiens* always had to struggle to survive and eke out an existence in the world. Allegories such as Genesis use parables to speak about psychological and social differentiation or complexity. The exile from the garden of Eden represents the fact that man cannot live in a paradisaic condition of eternal youth and innocence, though he may want to. He must leave this condition in order to become not only more fully human, but more fully aware of his divine nature. One might take note that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is a tree of *knowledge* and *awareness* that would, Genesis tells us, make man become like God; and one might then ask: why did God plant this tree in the garden in the first place if he really didn't want man to eat from it? Did not God, who according to the Talmud has foreknowledge of all events in the future, know that man would eat from it?

A more explicit occasion in which the Bible uses childhood as a paradigm of consciousness is Christ's admonition that unless one becomes like a little child one cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. But even here, the reference is to being *childlike* and not literally, psychologically, a child. The innocence alluded to in the Christian paradigm is the innocence of a wise man or woman who has the simplicity of a child but the discerning consciousness of a mature person. Thus did Christ admonish his followers to be as gentle as the dove but as cunning as the serpent. Innocence here reflects a conscious attitude, a purity of heart, and not a static condition, either psychologically or socially.

Likewise, with Christ, whom Paul describes as the second or "last Adam," there is a redemption of the exiled condition and a restoration of Adam's connection with God in that the kingdom of God can now be attained through a life of faith, love, and righteousness. This, however, points to an evolution of consciousness and not a regression to an original condition of puerile innocence. In Judaism, too, this evolution is evident in the idea of the *tzaddik* or "righteous one" who has lost his sense of individuality in attaining union with God. The *tzaddik*, as the tales of the Hasidim illustrate, is a wise person who may be childlike yet is anything but a child.

The paradigm on which America is founded does not make clear this distinction between the first Adam and the second Adam. Consequently, there is to this day a profound and profoundly unconscious confusion about the meaning of innocence. In fact, America was very much founded on the paradigm of the first Adam. The literary critic R. W. B. Lewis has traced the development of the theme of an American paradise from the inception of the nation through the nineteenth century, demonstrating how this theme has shaped the outlook of such influential writers as Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Henry James. Lewis writes that the new American Adam was

an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant

and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources. It was not surprising, in a Bible-reading generation, that the new hero (in praise or disapproval) was most easily identified with Adam before the Fall. Adam was the first, the archetypal, man. His moral position was prior to experience, and in his very newness he was fundamentally innocent.

Adam is a favorite American archetypal hero. As Lewis adds, he appears as Hawkeye in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Deerslayer*, Huck Finn in Mark Twain's classic *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Donatello in Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun*, and Billy Budd in Melville's *Billy Budd*. In twentieth-century literature he surfaces as Fitzgerald's *Gatsby*, Faulkner's Isaac McCaslin in *The Bear*, the "invisible man" in Ellison's novel with that title, Salinger's "Catcher in the Rye," and Saul Bellow's Augie March. He also continues to be an appealing figure in American films. One may think of Gary Cooper's character in "Meet John Doe," Robert De Niro's character in "Taxidriver," Chauncey Gardner in "Being There," Dustin Hoffman's character in "Rain Man," and, of course, Forrest Gump. The fact that some of these characters are developmentally delayed is merely a creative device, but is apt: even the term "developmentally delayed" speaks to the condition of Adam before the Fall.

A nation's heroic ideal and its national character are formed from the same mold. Thus, in having found a "fundamentally innocent" hero, America had also founded itself upon his psychology. As Emerson said, "Here's for the plain old Adam, the simple genuine self against the whole world." This position, of course, inevitably sets in motion some drama or tragedy that brings about the necessary departure from innocence. The Genesis story, as is the case with all mythic allegory, didn't happen once-upon-a-time a long time ago; it happens again and again as a regular occurrence in human experience. The Civil War was just such a tragic departure or fall from innocence, as the psychologist Guilford Dudley argues. An innocence that believed that slavery was justified by virtue of the needs it fulfilled—this was naive realism operating in an economic and racial framework—was bound to result in cataclysm. A similar innocence or belief in the virtue of appearances was preponderant in the Vietnam War and Watergate. On the other side of innocence is its lesson, that, as Henry James, Sr. wrote, "nothing can indeed be more remote. . . from distinctively *human* attributes. . . than this sleek and comely Adamic condition." Emerson, too, in the final analysis recognized the two sides of the equation, calling the side of Adam before the Fall the "party of Hope" (or the "party of the Future"), and the side after the Fall, the "party of Memory" (or the "party of the Past"). Do these not also correspond, respectively, to the spirit of youth and the spirit of authority?

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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### THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF AMERICAN INNOCENCE

*Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house.*

—Matthew 5:14-15

*O America! Because you build for mankind I build for you.*

—Walt Whitman

## **The American Vision**

American innocence takes many forms, some of which we shall be discussing in some detail. If there exists a single historical source for them, it is probably the vision upon which America was founded. This vision consists of the nation's understanding of its mission on earth, its *raison d'être* or purpose in history. Not all nations have a vision or heroic mission as part of their constitution or national endowment. England, France, Russia, and China are among the modern nations that can claim such a heritage, and of course, the visions of each are different from the other. The American vision is especially distinct, not only in its aims, but in how explicitly it was conceived and promoted. Indeed, in spite of the innocent assumptions and consequential shortcomings of this vision, it continues to be explicitly promoted by politicians, as if simply touting a belief in the vision has superseded any need to revise and revive it in a matured, sobered form.

If money talks, the American dollar bill boldly proclaims the American vision. The seal of the United States, first put on the backside of the dollar by FDR to express his view that the New Deal was a step toward creating a new order in the world, is the equivalent of what a personal signature is to the individual; it is a symbol of identity. As such, the Great Seal is the alpha and omega of American symbols: it extols the basic premises and goals with which the nation was conceived. Its imagery, the design of which in the initial stages involved the efforts of Franklin, Jefferson, and Adams, speaks to the heart of the American enterprise. It tells how both the Founding Fathers and the Puritans before them viewed America and what they had in mind for it.

The American bald eagle, of course, is universally associated with liberty and democracy. It represents not only the idea of natural rights, that all men are equal, but the norms of political organization that keep this idea alive and strong. With its escutcheon or shield, the eagle signifies the American scheme for the practice and preservation of democracy. This scheme or system checks the tendency toward inordinate power by a few on the one hand and the confusion of the multitude on the other by making every center of power responsible to the people. It prevents injustice by balancing subordinate centers of power with other centers. And it assures freedom by denying to any source of prestige or authority immunity from criticism. In its mouth the eagle holds a scroll upon which is inscribed *E Pluribus Unum*, or "Out of many, one." Although this motto largely alludes to the union of the thirteen colonies into one nation, it also points to the idea of the brotherhood of man that was conveyed in the biblical phrase, "Ye are brethren," and that was central to both the Puritan and Jeffersonian plans for America. Jefferson saw the

democratic principle of equality as the primary means that would advance the brotherhood of man.

If the eagle represents the heart of the American vision, it is the reverse side of the seal, the pyramid, that represents its significance in the greater scheme of things. The pyramid of course is an Egyptian motif. It here implies strength and duration, as the Egyptian pyramids are among the most ancient manmade structures still intact. There was, during the eighteenth century when the seal was designed, a general fascination with Egypt and things Egyptian. Like the Great Pyramid of Giza, the oldest and largest in the world and probably the one upon which the seal is modeled, the new American republic was seen as a monumental achievement in human innovation. At the base of the pyramid is the scroll that expresses the importance of this achievement; upon it is inscribed, *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, or “New Order of the Ages.” This was intended to announce the beginning of a new era in history, an era in which democracy and the republican form of government were to establish the brotherhood of man. This was to be the American era. Naturally, the Puritan ideal of a new order was the precursor to the ideal held by the Founding Fathers; the former was predominantly religious in character and predemocratic, while the latter was conceived in political terms and was to be achieved through the principles and practice of democracy. Yet both had this in common as their most important defining quality: the new order was to reinstate a morally mindful direction for humanity.

The Puritans and Founding Fathers alike believed America to be the stage for the next scene in the drama of God’s plan for humanity. Both felt the inspiration of the Prophets to be their own: “Prepare ye in the wilderness the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (Isaiah 40:3). The Puritans, as everyone knows, overtly expressed the view and hope that America would be a godly nation. In particular, it would reestablish and continue the theocratic tradition of ancient Israel, a nation believed to have been founded by the will of God and meant to live according to the will of God. The Puritans saw themselves as a latter-day “Chosen People,” led out of the House of Bondage into the wilderness and the Promised Land with the mission to create a righteous nation. They wished to establish America as the “new Jerusalem” or heavenly city on earth; it would be, as Yale University’s president Ezra Stiles said a century later, “God’s American Israel.” Americans for generations would continue to feel this special calling. “We Americans,” Melville remarked in 1850, “are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time.” To the Puritans, the implications of this were of course seen in the context of their particular odyssey: there would be a new and purer church, and the order of the land would be defined by a clean break from the sin, injustice, aristocratic exploitation, and religious persecution of Europe. America would be a new beginning for humanity, a place concerned with moral as well as material improvement. This work of transforming or redeeming the human condition, Cotton Mather insisted, was not merely part of America’s identity, but essential to its unfolding. As Richard Hofstadter put it, America began with a “belief in perfection,” the signpost of innocence.

The ideal of the Founding Fathers was, of course, the one that has prevailed upon the nation. Their vision of a new order was partial in what it borrowed from Israel. It disregarded the idea of a theocracy and focused on the idea of establishing a moral nation whose citizens would conduct their affairs with virtue, virtue here understood not as

devout purity or holiness but as the integrity that constitutes a life of well-being. There are some scholars who believe that Israel had a political influence on the Founding Fathers other than suggesting the model of a theocracy: within the framework of its theocracy, Israel had a chief judge who served in the capacity of a commander-in-chief and chief executive, a kind of senate (eventually known as the Sanhedrin), and a popular assembly whose functions corresponded, respectively, to the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives. But it is not likely that the Founding Fathers drew much inspiration in their political thinking from this, in spite of their familiarity with the Bible. They didn't need to draw on this source. The main political sources that informed their vision of a new order were the democracy of Greece, Roman republicanism, and the political philosophy of the Enlightenment. Jefferson was additionally inspired by what he learned about idealistic, egalitarian societies in the forests of prefeudal Saxony, in England before the Norman Conquest, and in the American colonies before the French and Indian Wars. (The societies in the colonies consisted of the Indian tribes and the independent yeoman farmers on the edge of the frontier.) Even though much of what he gleaned from the history of these prepolitical orders appears to have been glorified by his imagination, one cannot dismiss their influence upon him.

A word about the moral nature of the new order as conceived by the Founding Fathers may be of interest here. This morality was seen as grounded in what the Enlightenment philosopher Francis Hutcheson described as the moral sense or faculty that is inherent in all human beings. For the people to effectively rule themselves, there needed to be an enlightened citizenry that could engage itself in benevolent, mild-mannered government. For Jefferson, this would be attainable because the evils of the old European order, the evils of monarchy and aristocracy, would no longer interfere with the people's ability to access their natural, God-given moral sense. The slate had been wiped clean with the new beginning in America. Again we encounter the innocent belief in perfection. In fact, Jefferson believed that a large measure of moral enlightenment had already been attained at the outset of the American enterprise: "If all the sovereigns of Europe were to set themselves to work to emancipate the minds of their subjects from their present ignorance and prejudice and that as zealously as they now attempt the contrary, a thousand years would not place them on that high ground from which our common people are now setting out." Needless to say, history would soon prove Jefferson wrong not only by spilling the blood from the Civil War on this "high ground," but by transforming Western Europe's absolute monarchies into constitutional monarchies and parliamentary democracies.

Morality, however, is not the sole or even the primary feature of the new order envisioned by the Founding Fathers. Above all, the new order would be what Jefferson called an "empire for liberty" (this is implied by the obverse side of the seal, the eagle). Again, it was liberty that made the moral sense accessible. Liberty was seen as the first and last principle that circumscribed all the other attributes of the new order. In the words of Daniel Boorstin, "America was where the equal destiny of the human species might be realized and attested, where the adaptability and pioneering talents of man might be given superlative expression, where morality would have the reward of health and prosperity, and prosperity would prove the rightness of morality, where the political self-governing possibilities of the species would be demonstrated." All this would be possible for the first time in modern history because of liberty.

The empire of liberty that would establish the egalitarian brotherhood of man was to be realized first in America, but being a New Order of the Ages, it was not to be confined there. All humanity was to benefit from this. As Washington declared in his first inaugural speech, “the preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are justly considered, perhaps as deeply, as finally staked on the experiment intrusted to the hands of the American people.” America’s purpose in the scheme of things was to exemplify and spearhead the empire of liberty. This was believed to be decreed by destiny, by the will of God. The doctrine of Manifest Destiny and the justification of American expansionism were in no small measure derived from this belief.

This brings us to the top of the pyramid, to the eye in the triangle. This is the all-seeing, omnipresent eye of God, an image that goes back to the seven eyes of Yahweh that “range through the whole earth” (Zechariah 4:10) and the single but all-observing eye of the god Horus in ancient Egyptian religion. In the American context, the eye of God signifies not only God’s watchfulness but his will, otherwise known as Providence. God watches over America with a specific aim or plan, and bestows his care, provision, and guidance in order to realize this plan. The notion of Providence was so intimately related to the idea of a new beginning and order, that one of the first settlements in America was named after it. The Puritans’ idea that America was the place for a new beginning in the history of mankind was, to them, not merely a hope, but a conviction borne out by the evidence of their survival. Escape from religious oppression in England, a false start at a new life in Holland, perilous journeys across a vast ocean, harsh winters in the wilderness of an unknown continent, all reinforced their impression that their exodus was second in history only to that of the Israelites, and that God must be willing it, too. Similarly, the Founding Fathers, although religiously a different breed than the Puritans, were compelled to recognize a less-than-vague sense of destiny at work in events. Remember, history tells us that they did not set out to be revolutionaries but were, as Edmund Burke put it, conservatives fighting for the traditional rights of Englishmen. To have been cornered into the risky undertaking of a revolution, and to have undertaken it successfully, was living proof to them that a divine authority was mysteriously involved and had blessed their actions.

The Latin motto *Annuit Coeptis*—“He favors our undertakings”—puts into words the sense of Providence with which the Puritans and Founding Fathers were imbued. Arched like an umbrella over the pyramid, this motto reflects the view that the entire building process of the American enterprise occurs and must occur under the auspices of Providence and divine grace. Everything is before God’s eye. In the final analysis, the American venture was seen not only as a material project, but a moral and spiritual one. The apex of the pyramid, the high point of the American experiment, is not a material but a spiritual pinnacle. The fact that the capstone is not firmly placed on the rest of the pyramid is intended to suggest that the pyramid is not finished; the American experiment is a work in progress.

## **The American Vision as a Paradigm of Innocence**



With its idea that the founding of America was a new beginning for humanity, the American vision was predicated on the notion that some original condition of innocence or purity, some virginal way of being that man had deviated from, could be recaptured. This notion was quite explicit and by no means merely implied. The Puritan Edward Johnson spoke of New England as the place “where the Lord would create a new heaven and a new earth, new churches and a new commonwealth together.” Jefferson’s view on the high ground upon which America launched humanity’s new beginning has already been cited. Thomas Paine captured the sentiment of the Founding Fathers and their entire generation more succinctly: “We have it in our power to begin the world over again.” Even the seal boasted a conviction in America’s purity and innocence. One of the Department of State’s official publications on the history of the seal states that the colors of the pales or bands in the shield of the eagle are those used in the flag, and that the white signifies purity and innocence.

Of course, it would not be fair to claim that the founders of America were altogether innocent in their assumptions. In spite of their ideal of a new social order, the Puritans were not blinded by naive innocence. Theirs was not a naive realism that believed things are how they appear; or at least, given how things appeared *to them*, they did not perceive the world in a naive fashion. The pessimistic Calvinist view of human nature as fundamentally sinful and flawed grounded the Puritans in a sober realism. The cosmic forces of good and evil were seen to meet in the world as if upon a battlefield, and the human struggle, a struggle against human nature itself, was to beat a virtuous path through this battlefield. Righteousness was not given as a natural gift or blessing, but earned. Likewise, Jefferson was not unaware of the human propensity toward corruption, and he knew that a vigilant eye must be kept on the tendency of government to deteriorate and itself become corrupt: “In every government on earth is some trace of human weakness, some germ of corruption and degeneracy, which cunning will discover, and wickedness insensibly open, cultivate and improve.” In any event, Jefferson had John Adams standing over his shoulder, balancing his optimism with a sober realism equal to that of any Puritan.

Nevertheless, any wish for a new world order was bound to be colored by innocence, by the imagination’s longing for paradise. It was bound to be Edenlike, for there has *never* been a new order in the world that was peaceful and harmonious for very long. Even the Israelites didn’t have the kind of order that the early Americans aspired toward. Strife and disharmony plagued the Kingdom of Israel from its inception, until the nation was finally divided into two and then conquered by the Babylonians, resulting in the exile of the Jews and their eventual worldwide dispersion. Given this kind of historical experience, some modern-day Orthodox Jews do not place great stock in the idea of a new order or even a modern state of Israel; only an apocalyptic and messianic event can bring about a truly alternative order. Whether in the form of a Christian, communist, or utopian state, ideas of a new social or world order have always been illusory and thereby often the cause of even greater disorder and suffering in the world. As the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr observed, “One interesting aspect of these illusions of ‘new beginnings’ in history is that they are never quite as new as is assumed, and never remain quite as pure as when they are new.”

Even in their conception, their purity is questionable. The existential philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev had this to say about this subject (and it should be noted beforehand

that his use of the adjective “world” is intended to mean “worldly” rather than “international”):

World harmony is a false and an enslaving idea. One must get free from it for the sake of the dignity of personality. World harmony is also disharmony and disorder. The realm of world reason is also the world of the irrational and senseless. It is a false aestheticism which sees a world harmony. . . . Optimism about the world order is the servitude of man. Freedom from servitude is freedom from the crushing idea of world order which is the outcome of objectivization, that is to say, of the fall. The good news of the approach of the Kingdom of God is set in opposition to the world order. It means the end of the false harmony which is founded upon the realm of the common. The problem of theodicy is not solved by objectivizing thought in an objectivized world order. It is only solved on the existential plane where God reveals himself as freedom, love and sacrifice, where He suffers for man and strives together with man against the falsity and wrong of the world, against the intolerable suffering of the world.

Said otherwise, freedom cannot be confined to or defined by the idea of a worldly order, no matter how harmonious and peaceful the latter may aspire to be. Freedom that finds its ultimate expression in the social or collective order, in an object, rather than in the spiritual condition of the person, the subject, is not a complete freedom. Jesus and Buddha, for example, demonstrated their spiritual liberation by living among the poor and the suffering; the Buddha even died from food poisoning. The truly free person finds freedom amidst worldly conditions, and is not dependent upon them or upon their alteration or eradication.

If the idea of a new world order smacks of the innocence of the garden of Eden, then Providence—a most mysterious and mystical idea when it is not used to explain every whim of nature or history as divine intervention—also easily lends itself to innocent pretensions. This invariably occurs when it is allied with the desire for a new order. It becomes the grounds for justifying any and all deeds that are deemed necessary in order to establish the new order. As the psychologist Rollo May said, the hallmark of innocence is to “always identify your self-interest with the design of Providence.” We may add to the category of self-interest the interest of a cause one strongly believes in, regardless of the merit that that cause may have in and of itself. Using the idea of Providence to promote such interests has justified countless atrocities in history. The Crusades, the Inquisition, and the religious wars from 1550 to 1648 were just a few that preceded the American demonstrations of this tendency. In more recent times, Hitler proclaimed in a 1936 speech that “I go the way that Providence dictates for me with all the assurance of a sleepwalker.”

America’s examples of course begin with the genocide of the Indians, which the early generations of Americans believed was ordained by God in order to make way for the new inhabitants. Even Benjamin Franklin, who was known as a friend to the Indians,

could not help but innocently wonder if God's hand were behind man's deeds: ". . . if it be the design of Providence to extirpate these savages in order to make room for cultivators of the earth, it seems not improbable that rum may be the appointed means. It has already annihilated all the tribes who formerly inhabited the sea-coast." (Franklin wrote this in connection with a commission that he was part of and that had given rum to the Indians in exchange for signing a treaty.) Providence and its natural corollary, Manifest Destiny, were blatantly used to justify the Mexican War, a war clearly provoked by the Americans in order to annex Mexican territories. In his protest song, "With God on Our Side," Bob Dylan sings with pathos about how confidently Americans enlisted God not only in the campaign against the Indians but in other wars bridging from the Spanish-American War to the Cold War. Indeed, in the Civil War, *both* sides claimed to have had God on their side.

The recruitment of the idea of Providence in such episodes shows how evil can disguise itself in and operate through innocence. One wills or resigns to stay innocent or is simply engulfed—as Hitler insinuated, asleep—in the innocence of his viewpoint, so that he does not or cannot see that something evil is being propagated. Often this type of innocence is the naive realism of *desire*: things appear the way one *wants* them to appear. Given the deceptive and seductive nature of this naive realism, the second of Buddha's Four Noble Truths teaches that desire is the cause of suffering. Certainly, it can easily and dangerously inspire us to use great ideas in the service of great lies. At other times, however, such innocence simply defies explanation. "Perhaps innocence is a greater mystery than evil," Hillman concludes.

The misuse of the idea of Providence is a practice that psychologically and spiritually enslaves man. It enslaves him to false ideas of God and the world. Berdyaev again had this to say about this problem:

The world is not in such a state as justifies an optimistic doctrine of the action of divine providence in it. If everything is from God, and everything is directed by God towards happiness, if God acts in the plague and in cholera and in tortures, in wars and enslavements, alike, the consequence, when thought out, must be to lead to the denial of the existence of evil and injustice in the world. The providence of God in the world, which in any case we admit only as an inexplicable mystery, is rationalized by theological doctrines, and that is always an affront both to the honour of God and to the dignity of man. It makes God appear always as an autocratic monarch, making use of every part of the world, of every individuality, for the establishment of the common world order, for the administration of the whole to the glory of God. This is held to be a justification of every injustice, every evil, every sorrow, of the parts of the world.

Precisely because Providence can be admitted "only as an inexplicable mystery," St. Augustine took great care in framing his thoughts on this subject. He wished to remove from history the element of irrational capriciousness, but at the same time he did

not wish to eliminate the mystery of history or turn the idea of Providence into a device that explained history with perfect human hindsight, justifying every evil in the world. That God is active in history as the redeemer does not mean that he is the executor of a bureaucratic master plan. As the theologian W. H. Vanstone wrote, “The activity of God in creation must be precarious. It must proceed by no assured programme. Its progress, like every progress of love, must be an angular progress—in which each step is a precarious step into the unknown; in which each triumph contains a new potential of tragedy.” The potential for tragedy, for wrong turns, for evil is part and parcel of the process of history, and a notion of Providence that removes this potential gives a false impression not only of history but of the mysterious ways God works in history. Vanstone adds that it is in the concrete and individual crises of human existence that we see the workings of God, that is, the “ever precarious creativity of the love of God.” Because man’s response to these crises and to that love must be one of freedom, there can be no predetermined goal of Providence, be it “the good society,” “the caring society,” “the fulfillment of humanity,” “personal development,” or “happiness.” There is thus nothing about Providence that manifests in a general, solid pattern or that one can predict, other than that it appears to be the expression of divine love.

In his first inaugural address, Jefferson famously described America as a nation dedicated to “acknowledging and adoring an overruling Providence, which by all its dispensations proves that it delights in the happiness of man here and his greater happiness hereafter. . . .” Clearly, this reflects the belief in a Providence that had solid proofs and that proceeded according to an assigned program or predetermined goal of human happiness. This belief had difficulty holding together the opposites of God and the evil in the world. The Calvinist sense of evil had been emptied from the Jeffersonian universe, and Providence in the latter indeed had an “overruling” quality in a way that didn’t quite have in the Puritan universe. To the Puritans, Providence stood over and against evil; to the Jeffersonians, there wasn’t even a need for it to take such a position. One could argue that in the end Jefferson used Providence much the way absolute monarchs did, that is, to bolster the authority of the political order. The fact that he used it in favor of democracy and not autocracy simply made it more palatable.

And certainly, the clever way he wove it together with natural philosophy made it especially palatable. The incentive for this piece of fine stitchery Jefferson owed largely to his mentor, John Locke. Locke saw natural rights as derived from the law of nature, which in turn he saw as the will or “voice of God.” Jefferson’s idea of this is basically identical. To Jefferson, God primarily was, although not other than the God of Judaism and Christianity, the “Author of Nature.” (In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson referred to him as “Nature’s God.”) He was the Creator who made the earth. In the Jeffersonian cosmology, divine order manifested in and as natural order. Every fact of natural history and the natural environment revealed the Creator; to Jefferson, nature itself was revelation. It was the context of his faith, providing ample testimony of Providence and the purpose of the Creator. Providence here revolved around the notion of God as Provider through the gifts of nature and the splendors of the earth. The laws of nature were themselves the guiding hand of Providence, and thus to live in accord with these laws was to live by the will of God. Among these laws was the one that all men are created equal. Nature deemed this so because equality and freedom enable men to find their optimal place in its economy.

A hundred years before Darwin, Jefferson believed that the forces motivating human beings are natural, and that the society that promotes the fittest adaptation to these forces will be the healthiest. The principles of nature are a society's surest guide to attaining the good life—good not just materially, but morally. Nature is consummately skillful and balanced. It is complex but aesthetically pleasing and harmoniously ordered. It is efficient in its economy, making room for all its creatures and benevolently promoting their sustenance and well-being. "All the great laws of society," Thomas Paine said in Jeffersonian fashion, "are laws of nature." It was in no small measure for this reason that Jefferson was opposed to America departing from an agrarian way of life. To live removed from nature would obscure the experience of nature's overruling Providence. As for the larger purpose or design of the Creator, it was for man to energetically develop the resources of nature for his advancement in "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." God's purpose for mankind was thus also naturally oriented. Needless to say, these ideas of divinity were well-suited to the continental task of the early American, and it has been said that Jefferson recast the image of God to suit this purpose.

Nevertheless, the Jeffersonian synthesis of natural philosophy and creationism can hardly be dismissed on the grounds of being merely utilitarian or even just the minority view of a few of the more philosophically-minded Founding Fathers. It may not have been a view unanimously held by all the Founding Fathers, but certainly it was the view that gave the Declaration of Independence its spiritual authority and set the tone of the American vision as the Founding Fathers saw it. It did so because it linked what was natural or "self-evident" to what was divinely willed. The Declaration of Independence states it to be self-evident that men are "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights." In an earlier draft of the Declaration, Jefferson asserts as "sacred & undeniable . . . that all men are created equal and independent." In other words, God's will for natural rights was as self-evident to the Founding Fathers as were the natural laws themselves. Democracy and Providence had been wed.

All this, of course, underscores Jefferson's legacy as one of history's great innovators of democracy. If there is an innocence in his use (or misuse) of the idea of Providence and in his grafting it together with nature, there is at least something to be said for the way this gave democracy a spiritual value. At least in the eyes of God, all men are created equal. In fact, everybody knows that men are *not* created equal. Some are more intelligent, others more gifted in diverse ways, and still others stronger and healthier. But in the eyes of God and the economy of nature, these are differences of no real consequence and only serve God's purpose in making nature more diverse and bountiful. Jefferson's genius was in reconciling thorny contradictions and making them appear nonexistent. The visible world as it appears, the world of nature, is much more conducive to the egalitarian spirit of democracy than the artificial, hierarchical world man creates based on his desires and vices. Boorstin has identified the basic feature of Jeffersonian thought as "an attempt to capture naiveté; to divest individual minds of their peculiarities that each might sense the visible universe with childish innocence. The large purpose was to save men from ideas and systems: to take them out of the cave where they saw nothing but the puppets of their own brains, into the open air where they could see the sensible objects which alone were real." This is as good a description of naive realism as one gets.

Jefferson's vision of a morally directed, new order of democracy buttressed by Providence is perhaps the most idealistic national vision in history. Only Marxism-Leninism, which has since passed into history because of its untenable idealism and assessment of human nature, is comparable in the degree and quality, if not the content, of the idealism. This may partly explain why the United States and the Soviet Union were at such great odds with each other: both were driven by intensely idealistic, messianic visions that were ideologically opposed to each other. The Soviet vision had an extremely idealistic core or foundation which could not hold up the weight of the pragmatic needs of the nation and the people. This is why it ultimately failed. The communist credo misjudged the factor of human motivation, failing to recognize that personal ambition not only outweighs ideals to serve the collectivity, but, if organized in a more or less moral, life-enhancing manner, is the *best way* to serve the collectivity. On the other hand, the American vision has an essentially pragmatic foundation with an idealistic overlay; this is, in spite of any overly optimistic illusions in its idealism, eminently more manageable.

This pragmatic foundation, the idea of natural rights, had its beginnings with the Greeks, but the particular theory of natural rights that the American vision is built upon comes from John Locke. The idealistic overlay upon this, the actual visionary component of the American vision, comes largely from Thomas Jefferson. Joseph Ellis writes:

[Jefferson's] several arguments for American independence all were shaped around a central motif, in which the imperfect and inadequate present was contrasted with a perfect and pure future, achievable once the sources of corruption were eliminated. . . .

The vision he projected in the natural rights section of the Declaration, then, represented yet another formulation of the Jeffersonian imagination. The specific form of the vision undoubtedly drew upon language Locke had used to describe the putative conditions of society before governments were established. But the urge to embrace such an ideal society came from deep inside Jefferson himself. It was the vision of a young man projecting his personal cravings for a world in which all behavior was voluntary and therefore all coercion unnecessary, where independence and equality never collided, where the sources of all authority were invisible because they had already been internalized. . . .

Though indebted to Locke, Jefferson's political vision was more radical than liberal, driven as it was by a youthful romanticism unwilling to negotiate its high standards with an imperfect world. . . . The American dream, then, is just that, the Jeffersonian dream writ large.

It seems that any way we turn the discussion, we find ourselves on the doorsteps of the spirit of youth.

## The Innocence of Humanism

I have already defined humanism as that tradition that, originally taking form through the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, expressed a rational faith that man is capable of self-fulfillment and ethical conduct without recourse to supernatural forces. Here I'd like to focus on the ways humanism shaped the thinking and the values of the Founding Fathers, particularly Thomas Jefferson. As Ellis pointed out, American idealism is Jefferson's idealism writ large. While it is true that the development of America was influenced by the views and temperaments of the Founding Fathers acting *together* in a creative tension and balance, it was Jefferson who most made an impression on the nation's idealistic vision and character. The influences on *him* in turn were very much those of the tradition of humanism.

The rise of humanism was a crucial chapter in Western intellectual history. The inquiry into man, nature, God, and the relationships between them was freed from the dogma of religion and theology and from prescientific, superstitious thinking. Reason replaced faith as the primary way of knowing, and the Age of Reason (or the Enlightenment) was born. With this, the modern era began. In the words of Kant, the Enlightenment represented "man's exodus from his self-imposed tutelage," that is, from his reliance upon external authority. Or, as the sociologist C. Wright Mills more recently said, the "central goal of Western humanism [was] . . . the audacious control by reason of man's fate." Man as opposed to God or the church became the source of authority on questions of truth and meaning; from this did humanism derive its name. With Auguste Comte, humanism even became a new religion of humanity, and humanity an object of devotion.

Given this departure from religious tradition, one of the first things to be thrown out the window by humanism was the doctrine of original sin. Man is born as a *tabula rasa* or blank slate. Innocent at birth, it is society that corrupts him. Rousseau's "Noble Savage" embodied the new original condition, and Voltaire's "Candide," the modern prototype of all Forrest Gumps to come, exemplified the prelapsarian innocence which many people now wished to recapture. (It should be noted, however, that Voltaire was parodying this innocent's condition, not idealizing it.) The idea of the "natural man"—the ideal man who lives a balanced, harmonious existence—arose side by side with natural philosophy, itself an offshoot of the Enlightenment. This idea became alloyed in America with the notion of the rugged individualist, though individualism per se can also be traced to European humanism. Morality was removed from the fears of divine retribution and recast according to ethics such as those of Spinoza or to empirical principles such as Kant's categorical imperative. Man became the author of his moral code. This was not only liberating but, many now argue, too liberating, eventually resulting in complete moral relativism. This trend reached its critical point with Nietzsche, who insisted that man is ultimately free—"God is dead"—and that there is no absolute standard of truth outside human experience; truth is relative to the changing experience of man.

We are today the direct heirs of the humanist tradition. Jung believed that modern man's exclusive reliance on his power of reason has split him off from his instinctual, irrational side, leading to a psychic dissociation and such catastrophes as our two World Wars. The instinctual, irrational side that was once let in through the front door under the auspices of faith has now been forced to sneak around and break in through the back door

with a vengeance. Pointing out our deviant use of rationalism and designating us today as “Voltaire’s bastards,” John Ralston Saul says much the same. The gift of reason that originally liberated us from the shackles of ignorance has now become a new form of tyranny. In becoming a closed system of methods and dictates that are devoid of values and common sense, reason has launched us into “headless abstraction” and “unending, meaningless battles.”

The extermination of the Jews by the Nazis, as the extreme example of this, was conducted *systematically*, with cold, rational precision. What the political scientist Hannah Arendt described in that situation as the “banality of evil” was an evil that was *made* banal because, aided by the technology of the death camps, it was mechanized and sanitized of human contact, contact between the perpetrators and their victims. The architects of the “final solution” did not have to see the consequences of their designs. Thus, by defining the human being as a rational creature and making his relationship to the universe one-sidedly rational and abstract, the humanist tradition has ironically led to the exact opposite of what it wished for. Instead of a humanism, the world has, in the twentieth century, demonstrated an inhumanity and cruelty unparalleled in scope and kind at any other time. The Austrian poet and playwright Franz Grillparzer said it well 150 years ago: “The ways of modern erudition: From humanism/ through nationalism/ to brutalism.” This progression—or rather, regression—goes *through* nationalism because the latter has, of course, been a vital source of identity and meaning since humankind first banded together in large groups. Although one might expect that with the rise of humanism, nationalism and the wars it fuels would have been assuaged, evidently the opposite is true. Nationalism now has the onus of supplying all by itself a meaning to existence that faith formerly supplied. However, in the final analysis, humanism makes catastrophes such as those of the twentieth century possible not because it breeds nationalism, or for that matter secularism or even moral relativity. Humanism makes possible every crime of humanity against humanity because it promotes the full development of the human being and his powers but with an innocence about his fullness, about his primitive, irrational side and his capacity for evil.

The soil from which the flower of modern civilization sprouted is the same soil in which the American nation has its foundational roots. Certainly, the liberal—or as Ellis points out, radical—vision of Jefferson was a humanistic vision. “The Enlightenment for Thomas Jefferson,” explains the historian Andrew Burstein, “was a spirit of intellectual optimism. The Enlightenment thinkers saw the good in the human spirit, and Jefferson was most intoxicated by the idea that human beings possessed the potential to do remarkable good and that a government could be created which would tap into this spirit, into this impulse to do good.” The vocabulary of Jefferson, like that of Voltaire and Locke before him, was inclined toward a simple, ungraded scale of good and evil. An evil leader was believed to be one who knowingly and intentionally used his power abusively. But this view did not take into account the way most evil acts would in fact occur in the humanist age, that is, innocently and with the naive realism that they *appeared* to be serving good causes. The road to hell that is paved with good intentions is by definition a humanist road.

Humanism’s ideal of man as a “natural man” had strong repercussions on Jefferson’s thinking, as did natural philosophy as a whole. It has been argued that Jefferson was seduced by natural philosophy. His apotheosis of the natural had two



notable effects. Firstly, it limited his view of society, a view which, like his idealism in general, became very much America's own. His sense of community was less concerned with traditions, institutions, and values than with instincts, needs, and physical health. Again, the continental task and the nation's spirit of youth were served well with this. Secondly, Jefferson's emphasis on the natural clearly responded to the question of natural rights, but it shed no light on the question of social duties. As Boorstin writes, "His 'natural rights' theory of government left all men naturally free from duties to their neighbors: no claims could be validated except by the Creator's plan, and the Creator seemed to have made no duties but only rights." Boorstin adds that slavery was an example of how Jefferson's political theory faltered when society had to affirm positive moral values. The theory made it explicit that slavery was a violation of God-given rights, but it could not articulate the appropriate, dutiful response "because it had left the moral ends of the human community vaguely implicit in nature." One sees the same shortcoming regarding the articulation of social responsibilities in Locke's thought as well. He asserted that natural law would enable man to develop "a body of ethics . . . teaching all the duties of life," yet he never made a serious effort to elaborate such a code.

Jefferson's idealism was permeated with the innocence of humanism. The principles of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" are at the core of the American creed. Every American believes in them. However, so much of what makes them believable is not only that they appeal to our human innocence but that they appeal in a charming, innocent way. Jefferson, in the Declaration of Independence, articulated these principles at a sufficiently abstract level and with a rhapsodic, inspirational quality so that no one would notice that they are unattainable and mutually exclusive or contradictory. "Perfect freedom," Ellis asserts, "doesn't lead to perfect equality; it usually leads to inequality." He adds that the truths of the Declaration of Independence are "in some sense nice representations of Jefferson's personality, wishing to be above it all and concealing the contradictions." This may be true but should not be allowed to detract from the fact that Jefferson's personality was informed by the times he lived in just as he himself informed those times. The principles he glorified and the way he glorified them were, in hindsight, typically humanistic. To be above it all and to conceal contradictions were also prevailing tendencies of the humanism blossoming in Jefferson's day.