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Pierre Manent: A World Beyond Politics?

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AT THE BEGINNING of his *Poetics*, Paul Claudel writes: “I am not considering the future, for it is the present the gods urge us to understand. Now and then, a man raises his brow, sniffs, listens, considers, and finds his position: he thinks, sighs, and taking his watch out his pocket, reads the time. *Where am I? What time is it?* These are the inexhaustible questions we ceaselessly ask the world.”¹ As we begin our political inquiry, these same questions motivate us; this same inexhaustible question urges us. To begin means to find one’s bearings.

How shall we orient ourselves in the social and political world? In what way can we best begin our inquiry? I believe that, in relation to politics, the first question to ask is: *What is it that holds authority for us?* “For us” does not mean here for Peter or Paul, or for political science students, or for this or that social class or age group, but for all of us as citizens of a contemporary democracy.

Now, I believe that if we make the effort to answer in the simplest and at the same time broadest way, we will say roughly that *we*, the citizens of a democracy in a new millennium, recognize the authority of *science* in the theoretical domain and of *liberty* in the practical domain. These are the two most widely recognized authorities in our societies. Of course, some among us also recognize other authorities, such as, for example, the authority of a Church or a religious Law, and this recognition can lead to conflicts of authority. But the most compelling authority, the one that inspires our laws and, beyond the laws, sets the tone of our society, is indeed the twofold authority of science and liberty.

When I say that science and liberty are our two great authorities, I obviously set aside the question of their truth or goodness. One can well think, as some ecologists do, that science is leading us to a catastrophe or, as do religious Fundamentalists, that liberty is drawing us further and further away from the divine law. It remains that these two authorities, these two “values” if you wish, effectively dominate our life. *Our societies are organized for and by science and liberty.* This is a *fact* and is, I believe, the main tenet of our present world.

But what do these great words “science” and “liberty” mean here? Are these notions not both hackneyed and vague? As for science, can we speak of science, when there are several sciences, very different from one another, and distinctions, and even oppositions, for example, between the natural

sciences for which mathematics is an indispensable and essential tool, and the human sciences that seem to resist mathematization? Do quantum physics and sociology, for example, equally partake of science? The ambiguities surrounding the notion of liberty appear even greater. Which liberty are we speaking of? Did some of the greatest conflicts of the past century not arise from the fact that men conceived different ideas of liberty? What common ground is there, for instance, between the liberty of the liberals and that of the Marxists, except for the fact that each party declares that what the other party offers is nothing but slavery topped by imposture?

These difficulties are quite real and we must keep them in mind if we wish to remain alert to the complexity of the phenomena. I believe nonetheless that it is legitimate to speak of science and liberty, at least inasmuch as they orient decisively the life and movement of our society. Beyond the complexity and ambiguity of these two notions, there is in each a very simple *active principle* that needs to be brought out in all its force.

Let us start with science. The modern meaning of the term is not only exact knowledge; it is not simply exact knowledge methodologically, that is to say, one whose exactitude is obtained and guaranteed by the application of the scientific method. These aspects are very important; they belong to the very definition of science. But beyond these aspects there is something more fundamental, a truly unprecedented *project*. Its aim is to see the world as it is, not as it ought to be, that is, to make the world entirely *visible* to the mind's eye. Thus this project has a twofold aspect, moral and epistemological.

From the moral point of view, the scientific project brings forth the *will* to banish from our perspective on the world all that has to do with our desires and our wishes—to banish all “illusions.” The first and most striking expression of this will is to be found in Machiavelli's *The Prince*, thus in a political context that goes back to the early sixteenth century. In chapter 15 of *The Prince* we read:

But since my intent is to write something useful to whomever understands it, it has appeared to me more fitting to go to the effectual truth of the thing than to the imagination of it. And many have dreamt of republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist in truth; for it is so far from how one lives to how one should live that he who lets go of what is done for what should be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation.²

Such is, formulated for the first time by Machiavelli, the *realistic* project of modern science. And such is the moral character of this science.

From the epistemological point of view, the scientific project is defined by the methodical effort to bring the world before the mind's eye in such a way that the world, inasmuch as it is to be known, is henceforth *entirely* before the mind's eye, in other words, is henceforth *without mystery*. The

great German sociologist Max Weber, in a lecture given in the immediate aftermath of World War I and to which I shall return shortly, formulated this idea in a particularly forceful way. Speaking of the growing intellectualization and rationalization of life due to modern science, he states that they mean “the knowledge or belief that if one but wishes one *could* learn anything at any time. Hence it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation.”³

These two aspects of the modern project of knowledge converge in the mathematization that characterizes modern science, by contrast with Greek science, for example. Regarding the first aspect—the rejection of “illusions” and “imagination”—, it is clear that mathematical theorems do not reflect our desires and are indifferent to our wishes. And whereas men are divided by the different ideas they entertain about the Good, they are all necessarily in agreement on the validity of mathematical demonstrations. In this sense, modern science reconciles people. As for the second aspect, it is no less clear that mathematics is entirely intelligible, since it is precisely mathematical demonstration that provides the model of perfectly conclusive reasoning. Here we have, if not modern science in all its aspects, at least the project of modern science as it was defined at its inception and has worked to this day.

I now come to the second great authority, liberty. It seems more difficult to give a synthetic definition of liberty than of science. Are we speaking of religious, or political, or again economic liberty? Are we speaking of the “external” liberty to “do what I want” without anyone stopping me, as Hobbes and Spinoza conceived of it in the seventeenth century, or are we speaking of my “interior” liberty, by which I determine myself, give myself the law, as Rousseau and Kant conceived of it in the eighteenth century? However interesting and important these differences within the modern notion of liberty may be, they do not impinge on the effectual and dynamic truth of modern liberty, namely, that *man is the sovereign author, in fact and by right, of the human world*. He is and ought to be its author. The world, in any case the human world, “society,” does not have as its author God, or the gods, nor nature, but humans themselves. This fundamental truth of our condition, which in earlier societies was hidden and repressed, becomes visible in democratic societies. Democracy *enacts and develops* this human sovereignty. Every great election by universal suffrage, for example, gives life to the idea that the members of society, the citizens, are the authors of their own conditions of existence since they freely choose as their representatives those who will determine these conditions through legislation. Therein also lies the strongest and at the same time the noblest motive of the adversaries of modern democracy, of those who were once called “reactionaries.” They hold that there is something supremely dan-

gerous for man, in truth something impious, in the democratic ambition to organize the world “as we wish” instead of obeying the divine law or following the proven customs handed down from past generations.

The sketch I have just drawn is a summary for sure, but I believe that it gives a largely accurate idea of the two great “spiritual masses,” to use Hegel’s expression, that make up the world in which we are attempting to find our bearings. And all would be for the best in the best of worlds if strange phenomena did not arise as soon as we place these two masses side by side, science and liberty *together*.

Let us take a question that is much debated today, the question of genetic manipulation. Society, “democracy,” is thought by many entitled to if not prohibit these manipulations purely and simply, at least to regulate them. In this way we would be affirming our collective liberty. At the same time, there is the no less widespread feeling, possibly among the same people, that this legislation would be pointless, that “science cannot be stopped,” and that moreover one has no right to stop science! In fact, if the juridical situation, in different countries, is rather confused, it seems indeed that in practice genetic research is just about completely free. In short, our science seems to be stronger than our liberty, irresistibly stronger. But then what becomes of our liberty? Can one still speak of our liberty, our sovereignty, when science is our true and lawful sovereign? Besides, for a fairly long time now certain philosophers, such as Heidegger, have maintained that we live under the rule of science, that science is our fate, and that our much-vaunted liberty is illusory.

On the other hand, it seems that the contrary is also true, that liberty is stronger than science. No democratic government would dream of founding its legitimacy on science, for example, on the knowledge that science gives us of human nature or of human history. This was what totalitarian regimes claimed to do. Communism claimed to put into practice the scientific knowledge, elaborated by Marx, of the laws of history, under the name of “historical materialism.” Nazism for its part claimed to put into practice the scientific knowledge of the laws of human nature, in particular those governing the “inequality of the races.” The crimes committed in the twentieth century in the name of the laws of history or nature would without doubt be enough to turn any democratic government away from the temptation to found its action on science. But there is a further, more fundamental motive in addition to this one. For us, citizens of the democracies—and those who govern us are on this score citizens like us—*there is no science of what is good for us*, of what is good for man. What is good for us, individually or collectively, we discover or invent by ourselves and for ourselves, at every instant and in full liberty. What is good for us does not belong in the domain of science but of “values,” and these values we

choose, some even say we “create,” freely. In this sense, for us, liberty is stronger than science.

On the basis of these two examples, we see that, now science intimidates liberty, reduces it to silence, now liberty in return bids science to be silent. Thus, we are tempted to say, just as the men of the Middle Ages had to orient themselves in a world that was at once organized and disorganized by the confrontation of the two great authorities of the pope and the emperor, so we, citizens of the modern democracies, have to orient ourselves in a world that is at once organized and disorganized by the confrontation of the two great authorities of science and liberty.

A moment ago I alluded to the distinction and even the separation that is familiar to us between the world of science and the world of values. We take this separation as if it were a given. At the same time, as we have just seen, this separation is not really a separation, since now science rules liberty and now liberty rules science. This separation is thus less a given than a wish. We would like to resolve real or potential conflicts between the two authorities by separating the combatants. This wish was first formed when the two authorities asserted themselves in their fullest force, that is, near the end of the nineteenth century. Philosophers and sociologists at the time elaborated a doctrine aimed at resolving, or rather preventing these conflicts. This doctrine is still ours. It is the doctrine that wants to distinguish rigorously facts from values. The scientist is concerned with facts; the man chooses or creates freely the values by which he wants to live. There is no science of values, no objective knowledge of the good. You are familiar with this doctrine: it is the one that holds sway today.

It is not for us to study this doctrine in a thorough way. But we ought to take stock of it and make at least a broad evaluation, for several reasons of unequal urgency. The most urgent is the following: Does this book have to do with science or with values, which in this case could not be any other than *my* values? If it has to do with science, you ought not to miss a single statement, and indeed you ought to give your consent to all that is said. If it has to do with values, that is to say my values, why would you pay attention, why would my choice of values interest you? This alternative is not satisfactory, of course, but it seems to be implied in the current understanding of the separation between facts and values. This calls for closer examination.

It is remarkable that the most famous and most influential text on this question should consist of two lectures given by a university professor. The first, which I have already quoted, is devoted precisely to the vocation of a university professor as a scholar. I refer of course to the lectures of Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation” and “Politics as a Vocation,” delivered at

the University of Munich in December of 1918, at a time of great political, social, and moral confusion. As I have already indicated, these brief texts are among the most impressive and influential writings of the twentieth century. I will offer a brief analysis of the first lecture, by far the more important for our purposes, the one that concerns the work and vocation of the scholar.

Speaking before students and colleagues, Weber asks himself what his duty is as a professor, what his audience can demand of him. He replies:

One can only demand of the teacher that he have the intellectual integrity to see that it is one thing to state facts, to determine mathematical or logical relations or the internal structure of cultural values, while it is another thing to answer questions of the value of culture and its individual contents and the question of how one should act in the cultural community and in political associations. These are quite heterogeneous problems.⁴

Weber makes a rigorous distinction between science, which establishes facts and relations among facts, and life, political or otherwise, which necessarily involves evaluation and action. I have already underscored that not only is this idea familiar to us and so to speak a given, but it constitutes in some way our official doctrine. Yet, it is not easy to grasp because it seems that we cannot adequately understand human phenomena if we are incapable of evaluating them or if we refuse to do so. To cite an example, How can one begin to describe what goes on in a concentration camp without disclosing its inhumanity, that is, without evaluating it, without making a “value judgment”? Besides, as some commentators have observed, Weber himself, in his historical and sociological writings, does not tire of evaluating even as he establishes facts, or rather, *in order to* establish facts. Otherwise, how could he make a distinction, a very important distinction in his religious sociology, between a “prophet” and a “charlatan”?

But before criticizing Weber, it is incumbent on us to listen to him. How does he prove this thesis that seems quite difficult to accept provided we give it some thought? He refers approvingly to John Stuart Mill, who affirmed that if one proceeds from pure experience, one arrives at polytheism. In other words, the diverse aspects of the experience of life are so disparate—they draw us in such different directions—that it is impossible to reduce them to any unity (if such unity were possible, one would arrive at “monotheism”). In Weber’s terms, this means that human life is characterized by an irreconcilable conflict among “values.” Thus Weber discovers, or asserts, two kinds of heterogeneities that commentators often confuse: a heterogeneity between science and life on the one hand and a heterogeneity or even a struggle among values in life on the other hand.

In any case it is clear that for Weber intellectual honesty forbids us to teach, and before that to believe, that science could teach us how to live

or how to institute the political order; and this same intellectual honesty forbids us to believe for example that a thing is good because it is beautiful or vice versa. But why is Weber so preoccupied with intellectual honesty? Might this virtue, which is both intellectual and moral, be especially endangered today? Or, on the contrary, has it made decisive advances in modern times that would warrant safeguarding? Perhaps one could say that in his eyes both are true: in a world dominated by modern science, intellectual honesty is singularly valued and sharpened, and at the same time it runs particular risks.

There is something particularly problematic in modern science, and that is its incomplete character. It is definitely and essentially incomplete—it cannot be completed. Weber asks why one engages in doing something that in reality never comes, and can never come, to an end. Why are human beings forever striving to know what they know they will never know? The meaning of science is to have no meaning. Intellectual honesty consists in not arbitrarily giving it a meaning—by saying for example that science makes it possible to construct a more just world—in continuing the work of science despite this absence of meaning. But this honesty is almost superhuman or inhuman, since men desire nothing more than to find meaning in what they do. Accordingly the temptation to give meaning to scientific activity is almost irresistible. Thus, innumerable scholars and teachers arbitrarily ascribe meaning to their scientific activity or its tentative results and in doing so they transform themselves into little prophets, little demagogues.

These scholars and teachers let us know their personal convictions—but they have a right to do—but they present them as the result of pure science, and therein they lack honesty. This behavior is lamentable, but it flows almost necessarily from a major trait of our situation. In modern society only science can be the object of public affirmation or approval. It is the only publicly acceptable thought content. Other “values,” for example esthetic or religious values, no longer have any right to be accepted in the public forum, or no longer have sufficient strength to be accepted in the public forum. Near the end of his lecture, Weber states:

The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the “disenchantment of the world.” Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations. It is not accidental that our greatest art is intimate and not monumental, nor is it accidental that today only within the smallest and intimate circles, in personal human stations, in *pianissimo*, that something is pulsating that corresponds to the prophetic *pneuma*, which in former times swept through the great communities like a firebrand, welding them together. If we attempt to force and to “invent” a monumental style in art, the result is

the many miserable monstrosities that are produced as monuments in the last twenty years. If one tries intellectually to construe new religions without a new and genuine prophecy, then, in an inner sense, something similar will result, but with still worse effects. And academic prophecy, finally, will create only fanatical sects but never a genuine community.⁵

One can only be impressed by this eloquent description of a social world that is still our own, that is even, so to speak, more and more our own. The public forum more and more stripped of religious signs, the flight into the “private” sphere, the poverty of public architecture, and the multiplication of odd “new religions”—all these phenomena have only developed further, coupled with the increasing power of science to shape all aspects, including the most intimate, of our life. The loss of substance of public life is such that at times it seems that it is constituted now only by the publicization of private life, or private lives.

In the passage I have just cited, Max Weber deplores the practical consequences of the separation that he recommends as a matter of principle and requires that we respect out of intellectual honesty. In fact, why is life more and more private if not because the public domain is more and more dominated by a science that has nothing to say about our life? And this is the same science whose integrity Weber wants to respect. In any case, one of the great merits of Weber is precisely to have underscored with incomparable vigor a fundamental aspect of our society that I will address shortly, namely, that it is founded on separations, that it is a definite organization of separations. The major separation in his view is the separation of science and life: between science that has no meaning for man and does not tell him how to live, and life that has no unity, that is shot through with and so to speak defined by the conflicts of values, by the “war of the gods,” in which each man must *choose*, without any rational warrant, his god or his demon.

This separation between science and life is solidly linked to the constitutive separation of the political order between the public and the private: science rules the public domain, it is the only value effectively accepted in the public realm; life, authentic life, is to be sought in the private realm, authentic life is private life. Thus we are strangely divided: we have faith in science, we make it sovereign in the public forum, that is to say, we join together the two strongest ideas in the mind of man, the idea of truth and the idea of the Republic, and at the same time we decide to live so to speak apart and elsewhere: outside the public sphere, in the private; outside science, in values.

At the very moment when we bring to light the strange and almost absurd character of our undertaking, we suddenly understand its meaning. In the first moment, when we join together science and the public realm,

science and the State if you wish, we create the framework and the conditions of our life; in the second moment, we aim at exercising our liberty. The separations that Weber underscores, like those we will consider next, are rooted in this duality of moments. Modern man, democratic man, wants first to create the framework of his life, the most neutral and even the emptiest framework, in order then to live all the more freely. He affirms science in order to better affirm liberty. Of course, he can only affirm each by affirming their separation.

I have just said that democratic people want first to create the framework of their life in order then to live all the more freely. This is a proposition that appears rather inoffensive and that, in its very platitude, does not probably correspond to the idea you have of political philosophy! In reality, it sums up an extraordinary change in humanity's perspectives. To understand the enormity of this historic innovation that defines modern democracy, it is enough to think for a moment of the perspective on life that our premodern ancestors had. They had no idea at all of this division, this separation into two moments. For them to live was to obey the law. Of course, there were several kinds of law—religious law, political law, family law—and these different laws could come into conflict. But people knew that life consisted chiefly in obedience to law. We do not want to obey the law; we want to be free. To be free, we must create the conditions of liberty. Science and the state allow us to create these conditions. And the public forum is more and emptier so that we can be more and freer.