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The Theological Origins of Modernity, by Michael Allen Gillespie

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protected enclaves for citizen interaction, overlapping authoritative institutions that can be appealed to and be mobilized, and citizen empowerment to effect real political change. These arrangements are themselves provisional, she claims, as she presents them as “likely candidates” for increasing political agency rather than abstract panaceas to be promoted in all contexts.

Provisional Politics, then, occupies a difficult position, rejecting both the ideal pursuit of abstract principles and the potentially paternalistic drive to come up with specific solutions to actual dilemmas. The project rejects the overwhelming ambitions of so much political theory in which the social contract, class consciousness, or a cosmopolitan ethics offer the solution to the world’s problems. As a result, the book offers some concrete proposals that are, in a word, underwhelming: “[P]roperty rights have no conclusive authority” but they are “often provisionally useful” (p. 54); voting rights should be allocated differently across different contexts depending on what allocation will “promote the conditions of political agency and plurality” in any particular time or place (p. 112). But indeed, the point is precisely that the overwhelming alternatives operate at a level of abstraction that cannot but prove antidemocratic.

In this sense, her argument for Kantian provisionality is of a piece with George Klosko’s work on Plato (which she discusses) and Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s work on Marx (which she does not). More generally, it is consistent with the turn toward “contingency” or “irony” in political thought of the past few decades. Indeed, her basic argument for provisionality in democratic theory (Chapter 2) will be unsurprising to those familiar with Sheldon Wolin’s claim that democratic decision making is always “partial and provisional.” But in the closing pages of the book, Ellis even invokes Thomas Jefferson’s warning about letting a constitution bind future generations as an example of provisional politics. This reflects her belief, stated much earlier in the book, that though provisionality has animated various strains of political thought, it has been largely absent from the history of social contract theory (pp. 15, 20).

The book comprises a series of exercises in provisional theorizing, beginning from the pathological position of entrenched political controversies and considering what policies might promote greater political agency and plurality. Ellis notes that some of these exercises are more encouraging than others; provisional theory offers clear benefits to the understandings of public reason (Chapter 2) and voting (Chapter 4), but is more ambivalent in the case of property rights among Kenyan widows (Chapter 3), and positively discouraging to a campaign for species preservation in Southern California (Chapter 5). The cases prove more difficult as they get more specific. But Ellis sticks to her provisional guns, demonstrating the difficulty of maintaining a commitment to democratic poli-

tics above any particular outcome. Ellis admits that she is far less optimistic than Kant himself, describing a series of provisionally useful interventions instead of, as she sees in Kant, an “asymptotic” progression toward peace. Notably, of course, her “muted pessimism” is anything but fatalism; in rejecting teleology, she envisions persistent, rather than episodic, opportunities for political engagement.

Provisional theory makes its strongest case in the chapter on deliberative democracy, where Ellis posits a virtuous cycle of democratic participation in which each opportunity for meaningful political engagement ends provisionally and thus serves as an invitation to more engagement. This cycle, however, meets its polar opposite in the final substantive chapter focusing on environmental politics, where Ellis describes a “ratchet effect” (p. 116) resulting from the specific dynamics of species extinction. Because any decision to protect a species is always subject to reversal, whereas every decision to let a species go extinct is necessarily irreversible, Ellis admits that endorsing provisional rather than conclusive policies in the environmental realm “amounts to a preemptive, substantive decision against species preservation” (p. 144), and that “species extinction on a large scale is the overwhelmingly likely outcome” (p. 146). Even in the face of this bleak realization, however, Ellis proves reluctant to abandon provisionality for a “paternalistic” embrace of substantive outcomes, surely because such paternalism carries its own frightening ratchet effect.

Provisional politics is not merely inconclusive; it endeavors to reconcile morality and politics by offering judgments that are declarative, open about their groundings, and admittedly fallible. Provisionalism is not a refusal to take a stand (or a denial of the ultimately contentious grounds of one’s stand), but a willingness to take a stand that invites, rather than seeks to forestall, disagreement. By the end of the book, Ellis has replaced Kant’s edict “Let justice reign, even if the world should perish” with her own: “Let there be provisional right, so that the possibility of politics in the world remains” (p. 158). Ellis makes no guarantees, and no promise of redemption. But then, what democrat would?

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— John M. Parrish, *Loyola Marymount University*

Michael Allen Gillespie tackles a perennial topic in the history of ideas—the emergence of the “modern” worldview and its relation to the theology of the premodern past—with originality and insight. The sweep of his book is particularly ambitious and impressive. Gillespie manages the difficult task of balancing more than a dozen sharply drawn intellectual portraits of major Western thinkers, while at the same time fitting each of these individual

puzzle pieces together into a complex and persuasive meta-narrative about the origins of our modern values.

Previous scholarly explorations of this ground, Gillespie notes, have tended to gravitate between characterizing modernity either as a radical break with the Christian past and the rise of a fundamentally new mode of life and inquiry (G. F. W. Hegel, Jacob Burckhardt, Hans Blumenberg), or as a more gradual and continuous transformation that transposed Christian ideas to a secular context (Etienne Gilson, Karl Lowith, Johan Huizinga). However, as Gillespie argues, these approaches have all tended to assume the internal coherence of the theology of ancient and medieval Christendom itself, and to infer that modernity must therefore constitute a response to this theology, either by extending or secularizing it, on the one hand, or by breaking with and thoroughly transfiguring it, on the other.

Instead, Gillespie's book contends that the true origins of modernity are to be found within a tension (or perhaps incoherence) present within orthodox Christianity itself. Christianity's continuation of the radical monotheism of Judaism led it to adopt an ontological realism regarding universals, inspired by its broad universal claims regarding God's omnipotence and omnibenevolence. However, the particularist character of Christianity's account of revelation, especially in its biblical foundations and in the doctrine of the Incarnation, contrarily committed it to a more nominalist and individualist ontological foundation. This conflict recurs again and again within Christianity's history, emerging both in its philosophical troubles (theodicy) and its political conflicts (the Reformation). But Gillespie stresses that modernity as we know it also took shape within the constraints of this enduring metaphysical dilemma, and for this reason, even though the explicit theological reasoning has now largely dropped out of sight, a deep theoretical conflict still remains at its heart. These tensions within Christianity will be familiar to theologians and philosophers of religion, but Gillespie's ingenious contribution is to spot the many ways in which this tension reappears within modern culture itself.

The core of the author's argument can be found in his first chapter: that the origins of modernity can be traced back to the nominalist revolution in medieval philosophy and theology, and that, indeed, the germ of the idea of the modern is already implicit in the controversy to which nominalism gave rise. Ockham, the quintessential nominalist thinker, held that ontological realism about universals, though perhaps initially inspired by claims about God's monotheistic omnipotence, in fact constrained God's omnipotence by making God dependent on forces independent of God's own being and will. In place of this ontological realism, Ockham promoted a radical orientation toward particulars and individualism that led to an increased awareness of contingency and a sharper focus on the will as opposed to reason. It led as well to a more

thoroughly voluntaristic understanding of God's intervention in and judgment of the world.

In the centuries immediately following Ockham, Gillespie goes on to argue, the theological conflict exposed by nominalism began to work its way out into the broader culture, first through Renaissance humanism, from Petrarch to Machiavelli and Erasmus, and then through the Reformation thought of Martin Luther and his Protestant successors. Although the humanists rejected the logical squabbles of nominalism as much as those of scholasticism, they nevertheless derived from the nominalists their distinctive concern with particularity and individualism—but at the expense of a full affirmation of God's omnipotence. Luther and the Reformers, in turn, seeking to head off the perceived Pelagianism of humanist individualism, took the nominalist notion in a different direction: a voluntarist reaffirmation of God's omnipotence, bought at the price of undercutting free will and human dignity.

Modernity, on Gillespie's account, arose in response to this set of imperatives and tensions hidden within the nominalist mode of inquiry. By refocusing our attention on questions of becoming and motion, rather than being and universals, nominalism gave rise to an understanding of the relation of God and nature that made possible modern natural science. But its most lasting expressions emerged with Descartes and Hobbes, whom Gillespie pairs as rival fathers of competing versions of modernity: for Descartes, a rationalist modernity, for Hobbes a materialist one. Descartes's rationalism, the foundation of the continental philosophical tradition, solved the enduring conflict by elevating the subjective will of both the nominalist and humanist traditions above the particular limitations of the bodily and finite world. By contrast, Hobbes's materialism, which underwrites much of subsequent Anglo-American philosophy, employed a neonominalism that emphasized the contingency of nature and of humanity's place within nature, but also stressed humanity's potential to shape and constrain this contingency through instrumental reason and convention.

In the book's final chapter and epilogue, Gillespie begins to draw some more explicit connections between the story he has been telling and the enduring contemporary philosophical problems that he claims are rooted in the direction taken by modernity. The insights he begins to develop here are good ones (his brief reflections on the relation of contemporary Islam to these theological problems are particularly provocative), and less historically inclined readers might wish for some further and more explicit unpacking of these connections. But for readers willing to work out certain aspects of the story's connections to contemporary thought on their own, or for readers for whom a genealogy of Western moral and political concepts is an end in itself, Gillespie's impressive book will constitute an important contribution to the macrolevel interpretation of the history of moral and political ideas.

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