

**REPUBLICS ANCIENT & MODERN, VOL. 2:
NEW MODES & ORDERS IN EARLY
MODERN POLITICAL THOUGHT**

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To my surprise, I found this to be an extremely topical book, even though it discusses only people long dead. It bridges, or at least brings more clarity to the framework of, recent bestselling books such as Patrick Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed* and Steven Pinker's *Enlightenment Now*. The former claims that the Enlightenment was a mistake and is now playing out its bitter end. The latter, conversely, claims that the Enlightenment continues to make everything better, and will do so forever. This book, twenty-five years old, makes no such claims about the future. Rather, it tells us how we got here—how and why the West abandoned the Ancient Greek focus on virtue and political participation as the prime goals of a good life. And the book addresses, without really meaning to, a current obsession of mine—to what degree is our current material prosperity, such that we not only have giant flat screen televisions, but, much more importantly, that we do not spend our days removing live Guinea worms slowly from our flesh, necessarily tied to the Enlightenment? That is, in an alternate reality where the Enlightenment never happened, and we all lived in a West with the values, political and otherwise, of the High Middle Ages, what would our material lives look like?

This is the second volume of Paul Rahe's trilogy (originally a single book) that traces the development of Western political thought. The first volume focused on Ancient Greece. This volume focuses on "early modern" political thought, by which is meant Enlightenment thought. The third volume discusses the political thought of America's founding. Rahe is a Straussian, which in this context means essentially someone who thinks the pinnacle of political thought was reached with that founding. Thus, Rahe's project is to show why we had to abandon earlier political thought to reach the superiority of the Enlightenment, then how American structures perfected and polished that first draft. Therefore Rahe comes down on the side of Steven Pinker; you will not find him criticizing the Enlightenment in any way. His putative focus is political organization, but he more generally believes, like Pinker,

that the Enlightenment improved society on every measure, although he offers fewer statistics than Pinker. Of course, the Enlightenment very much needs rescuing nowadays; it is under attack from a range of enemies, some stupid, such as social justice warriors, Derrida-loving deconstructionists, and the like, who think the Enlightenment a tool of the patriarchy and other oppressors, and some brilliant, like Deneen, who think that the Enlightenment was, for the most part, a mistake, and one whose chickens are coming home to roost.

It took me a while to realize where this book was heading. Somewhat disconcerting was the immediate jump from Classical Greece to Francis Bacon; political thought in between those two isn't rejected by Rahe, it is simply mostly ignored. Once you realize, though, that Rahe's project is to exalt the Enlightenment at the expense of Greek thought, and therefore also at the expense of Roman as well as medieval Christian thought, the reason for the jump becomes clearer—it avoids hard questions by posing a simplistic dichotomy. This book endorses a wholesale rejection of the Greek ideas that man is a political animal, and that his capacity for *logos* allows him to seek the just and the good, in favor of strongly endorsing the opposite ideas, that man is not a political animal, and that virtue is the last thing at which a political system should aim. Quite a turnabout, though it's to the author's credit that his own sympathies did not appear to interfere with his analysis in the first volume.

The biggest problem with this book is not its scholarship, which appears impeccable and unbelievably deep. It is that the author claims a Gnostic vision into what all the famous men of early modern political thought really thought, despite what they said. The analysis strikes me as plausible in many cases, but it tends to make the book appear ends-focused and propagandistic, for an academic work. In any case, propaganda or not, Rahe pushes a few basic themes, over and over, through a deep examination of several different thinkers. One theme, following Niccolò Machiavelli as the progenitor, is that all men are wicked, and always will be wicked, and political systems must not only recognize this, but must be organized around this. A second theme is that the end of government should be material increase for the populace as a whole. A third theme is the consequence of the first two; it is that for political organization, virtue as an end is counterproductive to real

human flourishing, which is made possible by labor and commerce, and hampered by piety and religion.

Rahe begins by making clear the core of his project—to inform the reader of the hidden meanings he has managed to scry within every thinker from Machiavelli to David Hume. He quotes John Stuart Mill that every community must have “something settled, something permanent, and not to be called into question; something which, by general agreement, has a right to be where it is, and to be secure against disturbance, whatever else may change.” It is not a coincidence that Hilaire Belloc’s definition of heresy is the converse: “the dislocation of some complete and self-supporting scheme by the introduction of a novel denial of some essential part therein.” In any society, a heresy is something that disturbs what is settled and permanent. For the West in the “early modern” time period that was orthodox Christianity; for many of us today it is the Enlightenment core value of ever-increasing autonomy and emancipation. But Rahe’s claim is that the writers he studies could not afford to be perceived as heretics; therefore, to a man, in order not to appear to disturb what was viewed by their society as “settled and permanent,” they hid their atheism, or at least extreme latitudinarianism or Socinianism, which was the one common bond they all had, and which was the key component of their new way of thinking. Until that is stripped away, Rahe tells us, you cannot understand the thought of these men.

Now, to me, this all seems far too Gnostic, and very overdone. For every man he studies, Rahe minutely parses his words, claiming in each case that any words endorsing virtue, or religion, were merely uttered to fool the gullible, and that each author should only be believed when he is contradicting common beliefs of the time. If he agrees with common beliefs, he must be lying. As Rahe says, typically, of a passage from Francis Bacon, “When read in isolation, this passage would appear to be a vigorous condemnation of atheism, but that aspect of its argument is pretense and nothing more.” To prove it and all similar passages are mere pretense, we are over and over led on winding paths of extensive quotations, interspersed with Rahe’s conclusions as to whether the man in question is lying or not at any given time. This makes it unclear, whenever Rahe summarizes a thinker’s positions, if it is an objective description of the position, or instead the position freshly discovered

by Rahe after several hundred years, that everyone else missed. Maybe they did miss it; I am not qualified to judge. But I doubt very much that Blaise Pascal was really an atheist, as Rahe claims, and men he uses as exemplars of his interpretive approach, such as the Venetian Paolo Sarpi, were not nearly as clearly proto-, or actual, atheists as Rahe claims. More likely the reason that previous claims Sarpi was an atheist “were, prior to the last decade, generally dismissed or resolutely ignored” is because they’re not convincing to other scholars. And so with each author Rahe analyzes. It is not clear to me why Rahe, a very smart man, feels like he needs to place such reliance on trying to prove the irreligious character of each thinker; their thoughts were, certainly, ultimately corrosive enough to the centrality of religion to society, and they accomplished their goal of denigrating virtue in favor of commerce, but I think it likely these men were more complex than Rahe gives them credit for.

In any case, Rahe begins by attempting to demonstrate that Enlightenment thinkers emphasized “humanity” over virtue, which had been the focus of Greek (and Christian) thought. (One of the flaws of this book is that Rahe as a matter of course lumps Greek and Christian thought together, as something between a foil and a straw man, always failing to distinguish the two though usually using Greek thought as the primary, and never substantially acknowledging the many differences between Greek and Christian thought, or the complexity and depth of Christian thought, which, following the propagandists of the time he studies, he glibly dismisses as “priestcraft.”) For Rahe, the goal of the Enlightenment was for political systems to “promote our ease and to procure an exemption from labour.” This implies hostility toward all the values of the Classical world, especially of its love of martial virtues and denigration of the commercial virtues (and means that, much as these men admired Machiavelli for his rejection of virtue, they rejected his veneration of martial ability and acts).

Rahe claims that “the attribution of rights to men as such . . . and the treatment of pity as a virtue deserving the respect normally reserved for courage, moderation, piety, justice, and wisdom—these are phenomena distinctly modern. . . .” This claim for modernity (which, again, fails to distinguish Classical from Christian pre-modern thought) Rahe then uses as the springboard for an exhaustive discussion tracing this inversion of Classical political thought from the cynicism of Machiavelli

through Francis Bacon (the very clear hero of this book, which can perhaps be boiled down entirely to endorsing Bacon's desire to accomplish "the conquest of nature for the relief of man's estate"), René Descartes, Montaigne, and others. According to Rahe, every single one of these writers rejects the possibility of virtue, that man has any teleology, and "the propriety of wonder, gratitude, and awe," instead substituting the need "for a revolt against the niggardliness of nature and nature's God"—that is, for material pursuits as the highest goal of humanity.

Next, the author turns to an examination of "virtue and vice," in which his aim is to trace, primarily through the thought of John Locke, as an overarching principle of the Enlightenment, that virtue and vice do not exist, at least in the sense used in earlier ages, and thus the project of man, and the project of his political creations, should be the "pursuit of happiness" and the "enjoyments of this life." This basically tracks the earlier part of the book, but here Rahe turns his focus to government, and the idea that the critical function of government is to make the "enjoyments of life" more commodious. That's a simplification, of course—this book is very dense, so summaries tend to be far inferior to the real thing, but you get the idea. Naturally, anything in Locke suggesting the opposite, or undermining this position, is casually dismissed as mere evasion of the supposedly omnipresent threat of the (Anglican) Church, whose "priestcraft" lurked everywhere trying to trap the unwary. Sure, Locke may demonstrate "conventional piety," but don't you know, he "discreetly indicates to those prepared to follow his logic through to the bitter end," his "most diligent and persistent readers," (flattery will get you everywhere, apparently) that it's all horsepucky, and any piety is evil. Along the same lines, and eliding that their focus was the ancient world, not Christianity, Rahe adduces Adam Smith, Alexander Hamilton, and Benjamin Franklin (every so often, Rahe gives us a preview of coming attractions by sweeping in some of the American Founders in his discussion). All this is viewed through Rahe's scrying lens, where he tells us what each thinker really believed, despite what he actually said.

Rahe emphasizes commerce as the "happiness" goal of the Enlightenment; a more accurate characterization, and one that gets more focus today, is on ever-increasing liberty in general, in opposition to the burdens and oppression supposedly created by a search for virtue through ordered liberty. In that scheme, freedom of material pursuits

is just one facet of the pursuit of ever-more unbridled liberty. More broadly, that liberty is the ability of the individual to exercise choice in the pursuit of the satisfaction of self-interest, to “live as one likes.” As Patrick Deneen says, “[Enlightenment] liberalism is perhaps best defined as the effort to liberate individuals from all forms of arbitrary and non-chosen relationships.” The necessary consequence is that the State becomes viewed as existing to enhance the individual’s ability to choose for himself—therefore, an ever more powerful State is necessary to better secure the individual’s freedom to choose. The expansive necessary implications of Enlightenment thought beyond commerce seem to escape Rahe, however.

Of course, Rahe simplistically attributes the supposedly universal desire of his chosen philosophers to hide their real meaning to some combination of “Christianity’s persecuting impulse” and their recoiling from the wars of religion. As to this latter, although the religious motivation for many wars, such as the English Civil War, is exaggerated, and anti-Catholic propaganda appears to have conditioned the mind of many of these supposedly independent thinkers, there was at that time some reasonable basis for this position. Like one could for Communism in 1925, before the crimes of the entire twentieth century showed its reality (not to mention that those crimes can fairly be laid largely at the feet of the very thinkers in this book), one might spin a case that in 1750, before the French Revolution and its progeny, Christianity was excessively linked to violence. You couldn’t today, which would seem to undermine many of the premises Rahe finds critical as support for Enlightenment thought. We can see what they could not. But Rahe never seems to make this connection, instead treating this kneejerk aversion to religious piety and virtue as just as sensible today as it was in 1750. This is a substantial gap in his thinking. And, as with pretty much every modern opponent of Christianity, he seems unable to grasp that most of Western morality is predicated on Christianity. He approvingly cites Adam Smith, for example, attacking the ethos of Classical Greece, “Can there be greater barbarity, for example, than to hurt an infant?”, concluding that a society based on trade results in increased gentleness. Maybe it does, but that’s not why we think it’s wrong to hurt infants, or why Smith did—it’s because of Christianity, and only that.

As I said at the beginning, I have been much fascinated lately by the question, rarely put precisely, whether the Enlightenment was necessary for the scientific progress in the West that created the modern world. Rahe in passing makes a reasonable case that it was—not because science itself has much to do with the political thought of any person Rahe discusses in this book (though Bacon in particular went in heavily for science himself, something Rahe does not mention), but because the Enlightenment undoubtedly changed the focus from virtue and transcendence to an obsessive focus on “improving man’s estate.” And thus, while scientific progress might have been considerable otherwise, the fact that political systems in the West re-prioritized their goals, and the goals of the individual therein, toward material improvement seems like it must have accelerated the process of material and scientific development.

Rahe sees the danger in this line of thought, however, so he attacks it head on. Or he says he does, and then doesn’t. He says, “Were it not for Bacon’s warning, it might be tempting to think of Christianity as having presided at the marriage between natural philosophy and commerce.” He adduces Max Weber, the “monastic endorsement of labor as a form of prayer,” and much more in support of Christianity being fully in harmony with increases in human material flourishing. What is Bacon’s warning that supposedly wipes all this from the ledger and shows the Enlightenment and its denial of transcendence is necessary for the modern world? Apparently, that Bacon told us that “in every age, natural philosophy has had a troublesome adversary hard to deal with; namely superstition, and the blind and immoderate zeal of religion.” That’s not real convincing if that’s his whole argument, which it is. Oh, Rahe drones on and on about Saint Augustine (miscasting his words), Richard Hooker, and Selim III’s grand vizier’s dislike of atheism (that latter interesting but wholly irrelevant). Then, many words later, he tells us that Bacon’s characterization of Christianity as “blind, immoderate, and incautious zeal” was merely an accurate summary of the “the wholehearted, pious devotion consistently advocated by the great leaders of the Christian church,” best shown by their habit of burning people alive. Rahe then lectures us, “any pious, premodern people . . . regard[s] innovation with distaste.” QED! Such low-end propaganda, devoid of any evidence or reasoning, makes me pretty sure that I was

right to begin with. No doubt some religious thinkers did think that “the project of conquering nature [was] a denial of God’s Providence,” but given that we are given no examples in a book with a huge number of footnotes, I suspect that was not a widespread view, or we’d be inundated with specifics. Rahe’s is a slippery approach, which if you view it using Rahe’s own form of textual analysis, suggests that, indeed, the Enlightenment is not necessary for our modern world, and that one can easily imagine rockets taking men to Mars in a political context not far removed from that of the High Middle Ages. That is, “the conquest of nature for the relief of man’s estate” does not require rejecting virtue and religion; that is a false dichotomy, fed to the gullible like Paul Rahe by men like Francis Bacon.

The rest of the book is taken up with a minute examination, inasmuch as it supports the author’s claims, of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, with long side discourses on Montesquieu and the relatively obscure James Harrington. Once again, most of Rahe’s discussion on Locke is focused on attacking anyone who would associate Locke’s thinking with, or find it compatible with, Christianity, whether in its orthodox form or as Deism, or even with some form of belief in natural law. We continue to be treated over and over to a phrase Rahe is in love with, that some text or another is “by no means fortuitous,” the tic that shows each time that Rahe is about to unveil the real meaning that everyone else missed. And we are yet again berated with Rahe’s very favorite quote, from one James Toland, to the effect that anything that agrees with common opinion is probably a lie, and anything that disagrees is the author’s real views. Maybe that’s true sometimes, but that is basically the No True Scotsman logical fallacy, not a useful form of interpretation, unless propaganda is your real goal.

The problem with this book isn’t just that the reader can’t tell if he’s getting a straight exposition of the thought of the thinkers profiled. Nor is it that Rahe is very clearly keeping his Straussian axe sharp, winding up to the third volume, where he will doubtless tell us that the pinnacle of human history was reached at America’s Founding. It is that only an extremely well-read reader can tell where Rahe is interpolating or misleading by omission, since the book covers so much, and Rahe is not an honest broker. This makes what could have been a useful summary of Enlightenment thought about as useful as a puddle of quicksand.