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ARTICLES

Democracy as Secular Theodicy

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Scholars across political philosophy, theology, economics, sociology, sociobiology, and history presently acknowledge that theistic and secular religions are *similar* in form and function. This essay goes further by establishing that all religions are *congruent* and otherwise complementary rather than being merely similar. All religions, regardless of their basis, are institutionalized behavioral responses to the "evil" represented by the scarcity of economic resources. All religions serve to unify populations for defense, cooperation, and production and proffer apologias for evil's persistence in the presence of presumptively omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent sovereigns (gods, kings, elected officials, etc.). All religions comprise a mix of metaphysical constructs and all religious "truths" are pragmatic in the sense of reflecting "what works," to what end it works, and for whom it works. Leibnizian theodicy, an aspect of theology and precursor of radical utilitarianism and welfare economics, argues that creating "the best of all possible worlds" entails divine trade-offs that purportedly minimize evil. Today's political economics and philosophy similarly entail faith-based approaches to creating "the greatest good for the greatest number," often implying the backing of divine wisdom. The upshot is the panoply of man-made evils, often intentional, that are characteristic of illiberal democratic majorities and theocratic states.

> The universal problem of scarcity and its consequences for human behavior and social organization is a form of theological inquiry: in a world where there is no God, scarcity replaces moral evil as the central problem of theodicy, and the process of assigning value becomes the central problem of morality.
>
> —Ross Emmett (2009, 169–70)

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> Perhaps what many people mean in speaking of God is just a personification of that tradition of morals or values that keeps their community alive. The source of order that religion ascribes to a human-like divinity.
>
> —Hayek (1991, 140)
>
> The terms "society" and "state" as they are used by the contemporary advocates of socialism, planning, and social control of all the activities of individuals signify a deity. The priests of this new creed ascribe to their idol all those attributes which the theologians ascribe to God—omnipotence, omniscience, infinite goodness, and so on.
>
> —Ludwig von Mises (1998, 151)
>
> For why should my liberty be determined by another man's scruples?
>
> —St. Paul (1 Cor. 10:29)

Among G. W. Leibniz's (1646–1716) late writings is an essay entitled "Principles of Nature and Grace." In it, the polymath mathematician, philosopher, and theologian echoes Plato and Aristotle by invoking the familiar principle that "nothing happens without a sufficient reason" (1908, 303). The principle holds that reasons underlie all facts, truths, and causes and so provide discoverable and unique answers to all legitimate questions concerning, among other things, his god's nature and benevolence. Leibniz's inquiry pursuant to this principle asks why there is something rather than nothing. He concludes that the "final reason of things is called God":

> It follows from the supreme perfection of God, that in creating the universe he has chosen the best possible plan, in which there is the greatest variety together with the greatest order; the best arranged ground, place, time; the most results produced in the most simple ways; the most of power, knowledge, happiness and goodness in the creatures that the universe could permit. For since all the possibles [*sic*] in the understanding of God laid claim to existence in proportion to their perfections, the result of all these claims must be the most perfect actual world that is possible. And without this it would not be possible to give a reason why things have turned out so rather than otherwise. (303–4)

Only through pure and perfect omniscience—a consequence of intelligent design—could Leibniz's god have engineered an optimal, aggregate welfare equilibrium across the entirety of mankind. As a mathematician and codiscoverer of the calculus (discovered independently by Isaac Newton),

Leibniz was well acquainted with the concepts of maxima and minima. He appears, however, to have been blissfully ignorant of "scarcity" as an economic concept and as the "first-cause uncaused" of evil. He also was unaware of the process by which complex equilibria emerge spontaneously out of apparent chaos, and he simply ignored the diversity of individual tastes, preferences, foibles, and scruples that flow from his god's ostensible gift of free will.

Leibniz explains his god's remarkable equilibrating feat by means of a theological device that he labels "theodicy" (*théodicée*), meaning a "god's judgement." Theodicy nowadays is taken more narrowly to denote an approach for understanding and assigning responsibility for the existence of evil in the presence of a supposedly benevolent sovereign (Heydt 2018, 89). Leibniz's creator god is not only a benevolent dictator but also both the ultimate owner of temporal human bodies and the residual claimant to immortal and fulfilled human souls (presumptions that are quintessential credence goods among true believers). As such, Leibniz's god knows ex ante not only what the utility function of every earthly individual ought to be but also the consequences of every individual's actions and reactions until the end of time itself.

Omniscience remains essential for a sovereign that conspicuously lacks the omnipotence with which to engineer directly the greatest possible earthly good through the creation of superabundance. Omnipotence obviates not only the dystopian problem of evil but also the need for omniscience. It obviates as well the need for a theodicy to explain why trade-offs among competing evils are necessary despite their causing bad things to happen to good people. Leibniz's "supremely perfect" god clearly was less perfect than St. Anselm's "absolutely" perfect god, "a being than which nothing greater can be conceived. . . . And it assuredly exists so truly, that it cannot be conceived not to exist" (1939, 8). Leibniz's god resembles instead the diminutive gods of Greek mythology, which, like Plato's demiurge (etymologically, "craftsman"), stood meekly in front of the natural law, rather than forcefully behind it, and so were reduced to creating merely "the best of all possible worlds." This limited capacity resembles the work of all-too-human secular deities, whose priests the economist Ludwig von Mises describes as presuming falsely to have "all those attributes which the theologians ascribe to God—omnipotence, omniscience, infinite goodness, and so on" (1998, 151).

Omnipotence not only removes the evil of scarcity but also obviates the theology of evil. As the philosopher David Hume notes, when a sovereign can effect change "by one fiat" and yet seemingly fails to do so, then, "though he appears unjust and barbarous, yet we must believe the contrary, because what

is injustice, crime, cruelty, and the blackest malice in us, is in him justice, mercy, and sovereign goodness" (2009, 62). Evil and theodicy, by this light, are empty concepts.

Omniscience is a poor substitute for omnipotence; however, it is essential for establishing the rules that undergird optimal utilitarian trade-offs in the face of scarcity, whose enduring prevalence negates the claim that "there would be no need for rules if people [like Leibniz's god] knew everything" (Hayek 1976, 20–22).

Scarcity lies tacitly at the center of both Leibnizian and secular theodicies. "If scarcity can be eliminated," noted the economist Robert Nelson, who wrote extensively at the intersection of economics, religion, and the state, then "the true cause of sin in the world will be eliminated as well, thereby opening the way to a whole new earthly circumstance" (2010, 4). As the economics historian (and biographer of the economist Frank Knight) Ross Emmett notes, "the universal problem of scarcity and its consequences for human behavior and social organization is a form of theological inquiry: in a world where there is no God, scarcity replaces moral evil as the central problem of theodicy, and the process of assigning value becomes the central problem of morality" (2009, 169–70). The upshot, notes the economist A. B. Cramp, is that "the laws of economics are the laws of life and life is religion, the search for the kingdom of God on earth" (1994, 181). Nelson adds that "the bitter conflicts between capitalism and communism have obscured a common theological core. . . . For [Herbert] Spencer as well as for [Karl] Marx, economics provides the central meaning and direction to human existence. For both, in short, economic forces assume the very role of the divine" (1991, 144).

Leibniz's conception of a constrained sovereign foreshadowed the thinking by later secular "radical utilitarians"—most notably Jeremy Bentham, James Mill, and John Stuart Mill—whose radicalism coincidentally compromised their otherwise full-throated support for individual liberty (see Welch 1989). It foreshadowed as well the host of radical welfare economists that followed—A. C. Pigou and J. M. Keynes, for example (see Bohm 1973; Adler and Posner 2000; and Kumekawa 2017). These well-intentioned social thinkers lacked both omnipotence and omniscience, and so they were condemned to political hubris and illiberal democratic forms masquerading as "scientific government"—a throwback to the discredited yet pervasively influential "positive polity" of the nineteenth-century French philosopher and pioneering social "scientist" Auguste Comte (1875–77).

Like Leibniz's sovereign, utilitarians and welfare economists essentially are unconcerned about the incidence of costs that accompany well-intentioned efforts to improve, in the aggregate, upon "the best of all possible worlds." Bentham, for example, claims that individuals' rights are alienable whenever their abrogation is "advantageous to society" (Heydt 2018, 189); he also

believes that majoritarian democracy per se produces the greatest good for the greatest number. Public choice theory in economics demonstrates that society typically gains less in pecuniary value than the "losers" lose through radical utilitarian efforts, a consequence that necessitates policy justifications drawn from outside of positive economics. Proponents of social equality argue, for example, that "equality" is the telos of human existence and therefore necessarily counts toward increased aggregate utility.

The philosopher Colin Heydt demonstrates that classical Anglican utilitarianism, radical utilitarianism's precursor and "scientific" altruism's intellectual foundation, "developed out of the natural law tradition, running through Locke back to Pufendorf. Its utilitarian standard for right action was taken to be a law commanded by God so that the fundamental natural law is to 'promote happiness'" (2018, 9). The "radical" J. S. Mill follows the classical tradition when asserting that "the utilitarian doctrine is, that happiness is desirable, and the only thing desirable, as an end; all other things being only desirable as means to that end. . . . What is there to decide whether a particular pleasure is worth purchasing at the cost of a particular pain, except the feelings and judgment of the experience?" And yet, Mill continues, "the happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not the agent's own happiness, but that of all concerned" (1887, 79, 24, 38). Random occurrences of evil that might befall individual agents are acceptable burdens of social life by this standard.

Pace Mill and Bentham, the historian Charles Taylor notes that classical utilitarians focus (through the lens of "practical ethics" as informed by divine law) on morality as a private rather than public virtue, utility as a measure of personal happiness, pleasure and pain, and generally, metaphysical notions of the "good": "The present day welfare state can be understood as the long-term heir to the early Christian church" (2007, 737). Radical utilitarians, by contrast, cleave to the idea of morality dictating public duty through political ideals regarding justice and rights. Bentham, who often is labeled as the first (or at least the most prominent) radical utilitarian, "broke with many of the conventional views on the priority of natural law duties, the interdependence of religion and morality, the moral status of the self, and, most fundamentally, the idea that morality is *relational*, organized by moral duties directed to God, self, and other. Bentham's principle of utility—an undirected duty—contends that the main object of morality is not an individual, but aggregate happiness" (Heydt 2018, 253).

Welfare economics (a form of compulsory altruism) extends radical utilitarian thinking by embarking upon normative searches for the optimal relationship between the welfare of individuals, on one hand, and the welfare of society as a whole, on the other hand. It seeks to achieve this end by increasing one group's objective and subjective measures of utility at other parties' expense. The economist A. C. Pigou, a social egalitarian, although not a

Marxist, pioneered welfare economics theory. The socialist economist Joan Robinson lauds him as being "the first serious optimist" (also the title of Kumekawa's 2017 biography of Pigou); the economist and Nobelist George Stigler, by contrast, dismissed Pigou's work years later as being "eccentric" (1980, 20). Pigou was strongly influenced by the prominent nineteenth-century philosopher and practical ethicist Henry Sidgwick (Sidgwick 1874; see also Kumekawa 2017, 20, 70–74), who often is regarded as being the last classical utilitarian of significance.

The quasi-scientific distributions of costs and benefits entailed by welfare economics are part and parcel of the secular religion—what Rousseau terms "civil religion" (1923b, bk. 4, chap. 8)—that this essay labels "illiberal democracy." The economist, Nobelist, and staunchly classical liberal (he disliked the term "libertarian") F. A. Hayek instead labels the result "demarchy," a neologism for characterizing departures from the classical liberal desiderata of individual liberty, free markets entailing freedom of exchange ("catallaxy"), and equality before the law. Hayek deplores the fact that

> like most terms in our field [including "liberal"], the word "democracy" is also used in a wider and vaguer sense. But if it is used strictly to describe a method of government—namely, majority rule—it clearly refers to a problem different from that of [classical] liberalism. Liberalism is a doctrine about what the law ought to be, democracy a doctrine about the manner of determining what will be the law. . . . To the doctrinaire democrat the fact that the majority wants something is sufficient ground for regarding it as good; for him, the will of the majority determines not only what is law but what is good law. (2011, 167)

Demarchy occurs when self-interested majorities, acting in an environment that is constrained by scarcity, produce bad law—as when two wolves and one lamb vote on what to have for dinner. The result is a form of secular theodicy. "Secular," in this context, "means that political authority proceeds not from divine sanction but from the consent of the governed, and that such authority may not be used to prescribe or even to privilege any one religious tradition" (Dean and Waterman 1999, 5).

Illiberal democracy, like Leibniz's theodicy, is consequentialist in the sense of being normatively act utilitarian rather than impartially rule utilitarian. Illiberal act utilitarianism in a resource-constrained world produces "the greatest good for the greatest number" only when—by grand coincidence in the absence of perfect omniscience—the collective interest of a society is congruent with the private interests of every individual living within it. Rule utilitarianism, by contrast, as favored by classical liberal thinkers, provides a spontaneous and impartial foundation—individual liberty and

free markets—for mediating spontaneously among conflicting interests. The economist Julian Simon argues that government's proper role, by classical liberal lights, is "to set [utilitarian] market rules that are as impersonal and as general as possible, allowing individuals to decide for themselves how and what to produce and what to consume, in a manner that infringes as little as possible on the rights of others to do the same, and where each pays the full price of the costs to others of one's own activities" (1996, 584). To this end, the political scientist John East notes that "libertarianism is strongly [rule rather than act] utilitarian relativistic in its theoretical commitment. It despairs of our even knowing the ultimate moral and ethical first principles; that is, of ever knowing the truth, and hence it is indifferent, if not on occasion hostile, to the Platonic and biblical theoretical contributions to the Western heritage" (1998, 83–84).

Illiberal democracy, whether conservative or progressive in its orientation, presumes, as does Leibniz's theodicy, to create an optimal social equilibrium by balancing scarcity-related evils prescriptively. Classical liberal principles, by contrast, presume that the greatest good is achieved when scarce resources flow spontaneously and unencumbered toward their highest-valued uses. By all appearances, the residual evil that could exist in a classically liberal world would be less great than that which occurs under both Leibnizian theodicy and illiberal secular democracy. Proof of this proposition necessarily is indirect; it must be inferred for the reasons noted by Mill: "Questions of ultimate ends are not amenable to direct proof. Whatever can be proved to be good, must be so by being shown to be a means to something admitted to be good without proof. . . . Considerations may be presented capable of determining the intellect either to give or withhold its assent to the doctrine; and this is equivalent to proof" (1887, 9–10). Nelson, echoing J. M. Keynes's view that "the theory of economics does not furnish a body of settled conclusions immediately applicable to policy," expands upon Mill's pragmatic assessment:

> In truth, the market mechanism has never been analytically demonstrated to be the most efficient means of producing and distributing the resources of society, when all costs—including information costs, search costs, costs of wasted resources due to failures, and other trial-and-error costs—are taken into account. Neither, however, has any other economic system ever been shown to be superior to the market. At the level of economic theory, the issue remains almost entirely unresolved. Indeed, it is more obscured than illuminated by most existing economic theory. It is only at the level of practical economic experience that a verdict in favor of the market system seems to stand on firm ground. . . . Contemporary economists can observe this fact and can give many commonsense explanations. But the

> most highly developed theoretical apparatus thus far produced by the economics profession is almost powerless to explain it. (1991, 235)

Theodicy and illiberal political philosophies also are powerless to explain it, no less to replicate it prescriptively.

Social choices made within theistic and secular religions ideally turn more or less spontaneously upon a collective sense regarding that mix of forms that maximizes the utility flowing from pecuniary prosperity and subjective flourishing combined. Subjective values, unlike pecuniary measures, remain incommensurable despite many clever proposals for drawing interpersonal comparisons. Hence, subjective values tend to be ignored in law, "which attaches total dominance to market values and tends to ignore more subjective ones" (Epstein 1993, 88–89), and in contemporary economics, which often assumes away inconvenient subjective truths on grounds that "positive economics is in principle independent of any particular ethical position or normative judgments" (Friedman 1953, 4). By contrast, old-school economists like Frank Knight, who also thought and wrote a good deal about religion, were comfortable believing that "the science of economics must be supplemented with an ethical [i.e., subjective] theory of value" (Emmett 2009, 143). The economist Lawrence Iannaccone, who pioneered the "religion and economics" program, argues along this line that "studies of religion promise to enhance economics at several levels: generating information about a neglected area of 'nonmarket' behavior; showing how economic models can be modified to address questions about belief, norms, and values; and exploring how religion (and, by extension, morals and culture) affect economic attitudes and activities of individuals, groups, and societies. At the same time, the studies promise to influence sociology, particularly the sociology of religion, which has developed a serious interest in the economic approach" (1998, 1465).

The scope of human behaviors that are characterized as "religious" has broadened considerably over the years. This broadening is appropriate given that both theistic and secular religions comprise rational behavioral responses to scarcity. Scarcity, in this context, represents a "first-cause uncaused" with respect to morality, ethics, human consciousness, and the evolved human capacity for rational thought and action. Scholars now acknowledge theistic and secular religions as being closely substitutable institutions whose ebbs and flows reflect changes in relative costs, benefits, and economic payoffs. Humanists, atheists, and others who claim to reject all religion unconditionally fail to appreciate the extent to which faith-based secular religions govern and otherwise influence their lives.

The remainder of this essay establishes the congruity between the principles and objectives of secular democracy and those of theistic religion. It also distinguishes between illiberal democracy and the tenets of classical liberal

thinking. The first two sections below survey, respectively, the changing scholarly perspective on religion's nature and scope and the nature of perceived evil. The next section establishes the congruity between democracy and theodicy. The following section identifies the varieties of religious purposes. The penultimate section compares conservative and progressive secular theodicies with libertarian philosophy. The essay ends with a concluding section.

Evolution of the Religion Concept

The prominent sociologist of religion Robert Bellah notes that "religion is a complex phenomenon, not easily defined" (2011, xiv). A thick literature confirms this observation. This essay cuts the Gordian knot by regarding "religion" as *any bundle of metaphysical beliefs, values, social structures, and related actions either directed by a lord or sovereign or else arising spontaneously for the purpose of alleviating economic scarcity's adverse effects upon mankind* (see Montanye 2012, 2017). This parsimonious definition encompasses both theistic and secular religions.

All religions are lexically identical, the term "religion" being a cognate of the Latin verb *ligo, ligare*, meaning literally "to bind together" and figuratively "to unify." The sociologist Émile Durkheim appears to predicate his enduring characterization of religion as a binding social force upon this foundation. Virtually any belief and activity can serve—indeed has served—as a unifying catalyst. The historian Michael Burleigh cites several "objects of devotion and refocused religiosity," including "'science,' 'progress,' 'morality,' money,' 'culture,' humanity,' and even 'sport'" (2007, xii), and also the arts "in the sense of giving higher meaning to a world that was increasingly disenchanted" (2005, 273). To this litany of devotional objects can be added the panoply of metaphysical gods, semidivine "charismatic" personalities, scriptural writings (including constitutions and statutes, as interpreted by priestly, enigmatic, and semidivine robed figures), written and oral traditions (e.g., creation myths), group hatreds within and between societies, and sundry memes (i.e., units of cultural transmission and imitation).

The literature is thick with descriptive albeit partial definitions of religion, with much of the recent literature being geared toward specifying optimal boundaries between church and state. This literature is pertinent to the present task of identifying the congruities between theodicy and democracy, especially illiberal democracy. A brief survey suffices for this purpose.

Socrates adduces, from a conversation between himself and Plato's eponymous character Euthyphro, that if religious piety reduces to "knowledge of how to give to, and to beg from the gods . . . piety then would be a sort of trading skill between gods and men" (Plato 1997, 14). The devoutly Christian philosopher Immanuel Kant crisply argues that "true" religion's defining characteristic entails belief in an afterlife (1960, 117).

Sociologists Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge argue that "religion is concerned with the supernatural; everything else is secondary" (1985, 25). Existentialist philosopher Søren Kierkegaard observes (with regard to the wave of nationalism that swept through Europe during his lifetime) that "in these times everything is politics. . . . The religious is eternity's transfigured rendition of the most beautiful dream of politics" (1998, 103). Social scientists H. Geoffrey Brennan and A. M. C. Waterman "identify three different aspects of religion as realized in individual consciousness: the *spiritual*, the *ethical*, and the *intellectual*" (1994, 9). Comte views theological religion as the first of three successive stages of social evolution, the later stages being "metaphysical" and the "positive or scientific" (1875–77, 3:23).

Other scholars are more circumspect with respect to definitions. Sociologist of religion José Casanova expresses pessimism that any comprehensive definition of religion can be fashioned: "There is no consensus, perhaps there will never be, as to what counts as religion. Furthermore, even when there is agreement on the object of study, there is likely to be disagreement on what it is that one ought to be counting, that is to say, on which of the dimensions of religiosity . . . one should measure, and how various dimensions should be ranked and compared" (1994, 26). Concerns of this sort reflect in part theistic religion's changing perspectives. Nelson observes that "our leading contemporary theologians . . . speak publicly in languages of economics, natural resources management, conservation, biology, ecology, sociology, administrative science, and other forms of policy discourse" (2010, x). Stark, in collaboration with fellow sociologist Roger Finke, notes that "most of the world's religious scriptures abound in the language of exchange" (2000, 40), an observation with which the social ethicist Paul Heyne (2008) agrees. The language and rituals of theistic religions also idealize the process of mutually beneficial exchange, with gods epitomizing exchange perfection (Montanye 2012). The distinguished biologist E. O. Wilson views religion less cheerfully as being "like other human institutions in that they evolve in directions that enhance the welfare of their practitioners" (1978, 174).

Knight, by contrast, considers theistic religion and economics as being wholly unrelated because, as Knight's biographer Ross Emmett notes, "economics is an integral part of the intellectual culture of a liberal society, and . . . [theistic] religion is not. . . . [It] contains no resource for the evaluation of social change, which is the one thing most needed in a modern society" (2009, 168). More recently, however, the "liberation theology" movement "tries to relate God's reign to people through their own culture and social situation, especially to the poor and marginal members of society. It maintains that God's reign, proclaimed authoritatively and efficaciously by Jesus, brings about a new human being in a new society marked by justice, freedom, solidarity, and peace. This reign, then, serves as the ultimate truth [i.e., a theodicy] for liberation theology's social theory" (Schubeck 1999, 70). Knight's views appear to be outdated by this light.

Theologian Max Stackhouse boldly defines religion as "a comprehensive worldview or 'metaphysical moral vision' that is accepted as binding because it is held to be, in itself, basically true and just, even if all dimensions of it cannot be either finally confirmed or refuted. . . . [It thereby] provides a framework for interpreting the realities of life in the world, it guides the basic beliefs and behaviors of persons and it empowers believers to seek to transform the world in accordance with a normative ethic of what should be" (2007, 7–8). Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from a German detention camp during World War II, laments that "we are moving towards a completely religionless time; people as they are now simply cannot be religious any more. Even those who honestly describe themselves as 'religious' do not in the least act up to it, and so they presumably mean something quite different by 'religious'" (1997, 278). Bonhoeffer finds solace in the idea of Christianity without religion. Another theologian, Paul Tillich, observes the conflation of theistic and secular religions when observing that "everything secular can enter the realm of the holy and that the holy can be secularized. On one hand, this means that secular things, events, and realms can become matters of ultimate concern, [i.e., they] become divine powers; and, on the other hand, this means that divine powers can be reduced to secular objects, [and so] lose their religious character. Both types of movement can be observed throughout the entire history of religion and culture, which indicates that there is an essential unity of the holy and the secular, in spite of their existential separation" (1973, 1:221). Casanova labels this conflation of theistic and secular concepts "deprivatization," by which he means that

> religious traditions throughout the world are refusing to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularization had reserved for them. . . . Religions . . . are entering the public sphere and the arena of political contestation not only to defend their traditional turf, as they have done in the past, but also to participate in the very struggles to define and to set the modern boundaries between the private and public spheres, between system and life-world, between legality and morality, between individual and society, between family, civil society, and state, between nations, states, civilizations, and the world system. (1994, 5–6)

Nelson concludes that "in retrospect, it now appears that the dismissive attitude of the social sciences toward religion was actually the disdain of one faith as expressed toward a religions competitor" (2010, xii). Wilson attributes this competition to a lack of "consilience" (i.e., "a jumping together of knowledge") that overcomes "the ongoing fragmentation of knowledge and resulting chaos in philosophy [which] are not reflections of the real world but artifacts of scholarship" (1998, 8). The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein would attribute the "resulting chaos" instead to the ambiguities of language games played by professional obscurants.

Burleigh provides vivid examples of changing religious perspectives and definitions, documenting in particular how nationalism became "the most potent church to emerge [in Europe] during the nineteenth century" (2005, 199). The same can be said for later secular religions, including Marxism, communism, fascism, National Socialism, Zionism, and American democratic fundamentalism, all in the twentieth century, and "radical Islam" in the twenty-first century (Montanye 2006, 2017). Nelson notes that "modern economic theologies helped to spur the twentieth-century wars of religion. The modern wars were in fact consistent with, and often justified by, the Darwinist [also Hobbesian and Spencerian] vision of unremitting competitive struggle, battle to the finish, and survival of the fittest. In bestowing a religious sanction on the law of the jungle, the new economic theologies of the age of Darwin bear much of the responsibility for the calamitous results" (1991, 141).

Battles to the finish are waged by religious fundamentalists, whose fighting-faith ideologies represent "a system of thought that disguises, distorts, or even makes sacrosanct a certain institution for the sake of special interests" (Schubeck 1999, 75). The academic psychiatrist Mortimer Ostrow notes that psychologists "consider a religious community fundamentalist if it displays several of the following qualities: unusual zeal, separatism, authoritarianism, religious stringency, intolerance of the deviations of others, aggressiveness or defensiveness or both, an apocalyptic frame of mind, a belief in the inerrancy of the scripture that they value, intolerance of alternative translations and of modern commentaries, intolerance of all sexual language and activity except for marital sex" (2007, 174). This description applies equally well to secular and theistic religions alike. Economist Dennis Mueller aptly argues that fundamentalist "religion, in its extremist form, poses a threat to [classical] liberal democracy" (2009, 24).

Economist Joseph Schumpeter foreshadows Nelson and Burleigh when explaining that "Marxism is a religion. To the believer, it presents, first, a system of ultimate ends that embody the meaning of life and are absolute standards by which to judge events and actions; and secondly, a guide to those ends which implies a plan of salvation and the indication of the evil from which mankind, or a chosen section of mankind, is to be saved. . . . [It] belongs to that subgroup [of 'isms'] which promotes paradise this side of the grave" (1950, 5). Mises (as already noted) characterizes secular officials and bureaucrats as acting out of a desire to emulate, if not to be, gods. As secular religions became self-defining, theistic covenants that once were symbolized by the rainbow, cross, and crescent became symbolized instead by secular flags, slogans, all-too-human quasi-deities, and reimagined enemies.

Scholars often question whether "deified" civil power constitutes a "substitute religion" or a "substitute for religion" (Burleigh 2007, 197). Either way, the debate correctly characterizes theistic and secular religions as

substitutable institutions whose ebbs and flows reflect relative costs, benefits, and ultimate economic payoffs. The economic nature of substitutability between theistic and secular religions is evinced by the evolution of Massachusetts's 1780 colonial constitution, article 3 of which provided that

> as the happiness of a people, and the good order and preservation of civil government, essentially depend upon piety, religion, and morality; and as these cannot be generally diffused through a Community, but by the institution of the public worship of God, and of public instructions in piety, religion, and morality: Therefore to promote their happiness and to secure the good order and preservation of their government, the people of this Commonwealth have a right to invest the Legislature [with authority to provide for mandatory church attendance and support of churches from public funds]. (S. Smith 1995, 19–20)

The people of colonial Massachusetts intrinsically viewed religion as a public good that was instrumental to the production of many desirable ends that were both publicly (collective order) and privately (individual happiness) beneficial. The lack of significant religious diversity within Massachusetts's Congregationalist society justified public support for religion on efficiency grounds. The positive case for public support had evaporated by 1833, whereupon Massachusetts dropped the public-funding provision from its constitution, thereby returning theistic religion to the private sphere.

However religion ultimately is conceived and defined, Nelson's overarching observation must be considered: "It is time to take secular religion seriously. It is real religion. In the twentieth century it showed greater energy, won more converts, and had more impact on the Western world than the traditional institutional forms of Christianity" (2010, 349).

Theodicy, Democracy, and the Nature of Evil

The distinguished biologist and evolutionist Richard Dawkins notes that nature's god—"a miserly economist"—is neither evil nor cruel, "only indifferent. This is one of the hardest lessons for humans to learn. We cannot admit that things might be neither good nor evil, but simply callous—lacking all purpose" (1995, 96). This insight highlights the problem of scarcity, which is the fundamental driver of Darwinian evolution and the first-cause uncaused of both theodicy and secular democracy.

Leibniz's theodicy reconciles the presumed existence of a dictatorial, albeit presumptively benevolent, creator god, on one hand, with the world's evident stock and flow of evil and suffering, on the other hand. Evil occurs both naturally (e.g., as the result of scarcity and of natural disasters like floods

and earthquakes) and also as the result of man-made harms that result from illiberal democratic policies that affect individuals adversely, often including the policies' intended beneficiaries.

Leibniz's theodicy conceives of evil arising from three sources: "Evil may be taken metaphysically, physically and morally. [There being] an infinitude of possible worlds, that evil enter into divers of them, and that even the best of all contain a measure thereof. Thus has God been induced to permit evil" (1908, ¶ 21). Evil, by Leibniz's lights, not only was intrinsic to the world's natural order, but also (and somewhat surprisingly) served a positive purpose as well: "It is true that one may imagine possible worlds without sin and without unhappiness, and one could make some like Utopian or Sevarambian romances: but these same worlds again would be very inferior to ours in goodness. . . . We know, moreover, that often an evil brings forth a good whereto one would not have attained without that evil. Often indeed two evils have made one great good" (1985, ¶ 10). In modern context, if (as often happens) market rivalry between two participants is viewed as an evil (e.g., as a "race to the bottom"), then the classical liberal would concede that two evils can indeed "make one great good" for society as a whole.

Knight's position on sin and unhappiness is not entirely dissimilar to Leibniz's. Nelson notes that "Knight saw a 'positive moral value of pain and suffering. . . . The need for this emphasis is indubitable; human nature proverbially appears finer in adversity than in prosperity'" (2010, 293). Nelson accordingly characterizes Knight's position as a secular form of "Calvinism without God." The sainted Mother Teresa saw suffering as a gift from God that allows ordinary individuals to experience the passion of Christ, a divine gift that she delivered personally to the needlessly dying patients that suffered under her sect's seemingly inhumane brand of healthcare (Hitchens 1995). Tyrants and illiberal democrats similarly (and regrettably) justify their despotic rule on the premise that adversity and suffering benefit the political soul.

Mill perceives evil—which he describes as "the vicissitudes of fortune, and other disappointments"—as being "principally the effect either of gross imprudence, of ill-regulated desires, or of bad or imperfect social institutions. All the grand sources, in short, of human suffering are in a great degree, many of them almost entirely, conquerable by human care and effort; and though their removal is grievously slow, though a long succession of generations will perish in the breach before the conquest is completed, and this world becomes all that, if will and knowledge were not wanting, it might easily be made" (1887, 34). Bentham, a radical utilitarian like Mill (and a notable prison reformer), notices that the "seeds of good and evil are inseparably mixed" within the framework of individuals' motivations, although presumably not within the motivations of other Whiggish reformers, including Mill and Edmund Burke among others.

Hayek, a staunch classical liberal and avowed enemy of "demarchy," claims that "conservatives deceive themselves when they blame the evils of our time on democracy. The chief evil is unlimited government, and nobody is qualified to wield unlimited power. The powers which modern democracy possesses would be even more intolerable in the hands of some small elite. . . . It is not who governs but what government is entitled to do that seems to me the essential problem" (2011, 525). Consider, in this regard, that Lord Acton's memorable aphorism about "absolute power corrupting absolutely" targeted the papacy rather than secular government. For today's classical liberals, the source of evil lies in the loss of individual liberty and the freedom of voluntary exchange along with the rising level of coercion that benefits powerful factions via the creation of economic rents and social entitlements. These evils are characteristic of illiberal democracy.

Philosophers in turn have characterized evil in many ways. Plato finds moral evil in the disregard for truth. Hobbes (1998) locates evil in violence, war, and the untamed savagery of nature. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1923a) imagines the source of evil being private property and individual selfishness, a view often shared nowadays by modern Christian theologians, communitarians, egalitarians, and progressives. Darwin sees evil emerging from within "Cooperative Societies, which many look at as the main hope for the future, likewise exclude competition. This seems to me a great evil for the future progress of mankind" (Weikart 1995, 611). Critical-studies scholars locate evil in unequal power relationships. Economists and evolutionists, as already noted, equate evil with scarcity. Adam Smith sees evil flowing from arbitrary and ultimately feckless attempts by the forerunners of radical utilitarianism and welfare economics to remedy perceived evils by means of positive (i.e., prescriptive) law: "To hurt in any degree the interest of any one order of citizens for no other purpose but to promote that of some other, is evidently contrary to . . . justice and equality of treatment, which the sovereign owes to all the different orders of his subjects" (1976, 2:171). Schumpeter envisions the seeds of evil lying within capitalism itself, whose great benefits ineluctably would fund the rise of intellectual and political elites who could not help but "nibble at the foundations of capitalist society" (1950, 151). The physicist Steven Weinberg imagines that the greatest source of evil flows from religion itself (theistic or secular—take your pick), characterizing it as "an insult to human dignity. With or without it you'd have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, it takes religion" (Dawkins 2006, 249). Emmett (reflecting upon Knight's classical liberal thinking) claims that "the greatest enemy of the secular society is not religion *per se*, but rather it is those who, with the best of intentions, seek to restrict the operation of the market and liberal democracy in the interest of promoting values that they believe all humans should adopt" (2009, 189). East lists "totalitarianism, authoritarianism, hedonism, fanaticism, atheism, utilitarianism, positivism, statism, relativism, egalitarianism, and nihilism" as evils spawned by contemporary Western

philosophers (1998, 81). The philosopher Michael Sandel finds evil in "the tyranny of merit": "Those who celebrate the meritocratic ideal and make it the center of their political project overlook the moral question" (2020, 25). The economist Joseph Stiglitz (2012) sees evil in the inequality spawned by meritocratic ideals. The prominent economist Lawrence Summers offers backhanded agreement, noting that "one of the reasons that inequality has probably gone up in our society is that people are being treated closer to the way that they're supposed to be treated" (Sandel 2020, 79).

For Smith and his classical liberal descendants, the alleged "evil" of competing self-interests that is unleashed by capitalism, individual liberty, and free markets provides precisely the sort of mediating force that Leibniz speculates "brings forth a good whereto one would not have attained without that evil" (Leibniz 1985, ¶ 10).

Natural evils (e.g., earthquakes, epidemics, chance personal misfortune, and scarcity itself) are consequences of physical laws and random events over which neither Leibniz's god nor secular democracies have control. As if anticipating Albert Einstein's later question, "Did God have a choice?," Leibniz's proleptic answer is, in effect, "Not entirely." Leibniz's god, remember, was omniscient but not omnipotent.

Voltaire trivializes Leibniz's sunny theodicy in a poem that questions whether any benevolent god could countenance the catastrophic Lisbon earthquake of 1755, for which no divine, evil-reducing trade-off was readily imaginable. He goes on to ridicule Leibniz's "Panglossian" theodicy in the comic novel *Candide* (1759). The distinguished philosopher Bertrand Russell dismisses Leibniz's philosophical and theological writings on grounds that they were "optimistic, orthodox, fantastic, and shallow" (1945, 581).

Leibniz's theodicy nevertheless foreshadows the approaches taken by nineteenth-century radical utilitarians and by twentieth-century welfare economists. And yet his writings had little if any direct influence on modern political economy.

Democracy as Theodicy

The theologian Richard Amesbury observes (reflecting the sociologist Max Weber) that "at the heart of the democratic enterprise lies a paradox: on one hand democracy is possible when there is a *demos*, and constituting a *demos* inevitably produces exclusions. Citizenship requires that we distinguish insiders from outsiders, and the democratic struggle among citizens to be treated *equally* to one another is almost always, in effect, a quest to be treated *differently* from those outside the polity. On the other hand, there is no democratic way of determining who belongs and who does not" (2010, abstract). This paradox creates a bind for illiberal democratic politicians.

The conservative classicist Allan Bloom notes that "to succeed, [the legislator] must charm men with at least the appearance of divine authority to make up for the human authority he lacks and to give men the motives for submission to the law that nature does not provide. He not only needs authority from the gods; he must establish a civil religion that can support and reward men's willing the common good. . . . As one looks at what the legislator must do, it is hard to resist the temptation to say it is impossible" (1990, 227–28). Consequently, notes Nelson, "'[a] candidate running for the presidency of the United States does well to recognize that he is running for a religious office. The national religion is, to be sure, quite pragmatic and secular. His concerns will be power, vested interests, money, jobs, and other utterly mundane affairs. Still, America conducts itself like a religion.' . . . In the public life of our day and age, real heresy can now take only secular forms" (Robert Nelson 2001, 264, 296, quoting the American theologian Michael Novak in part).

Mankind's welfare was and remains the object of both Leibnizian theodicy (especially as manifested in conservative political thinking) and contemporary democracy (whether classically liberal or, as it is now, increasingly illiberal). It is pursued both through radical utilitarian policies (achieving, presumably, through political and legal means, the greatest aggregate good for the greatest number) and also through efforts to achieve social efficiency through the principles of welfare economics. The economist Peter Bohm constructively defines welfare economics as a theodicy, "the part of economics that attempts to explain how to identify and arrive at *socially efficient* solutions to the resource allocation problems of the national (or local) economy. Expressed another way, welfare economics tries to reduce the set of alternatives containing the 'best' solution for the economy by eliminating such solutions as can be shown to be inferior to other feasible solutions. The next step—choosing the 'best' or 'optimum' among the alternatives in this reduced set—is a question of subjective values and hence, not within the province of scientific analysis" (1973, preface). Welfare economics, like radical utilitarian and cost-benefit analysis, seeks only to maximize *aggregate* social welfare, without particular regard for the resulting distributions of gains and losses. The economist E. J. Mishan notes that "what counts as a benefit or loss to one part of the economy—to one or more persons or groups—does not necessarily count as a benefit or loss to the economy as a whole. And in cost-benefit analysis we are concerned with the economy as a whole, with the welfare of a defined society, and not any smaller part of it" (1982, xix). The task of political economics, in other words, is to maximize social surplus, leaving distribution to the market process (i.e., "trickle-down economics"), as constrained by laws and social norms.

The economist Allan Feldman echoes Nelson (as quoted earlier) when noting that welfare economics

> is organized around three main propositions. The first theorem answers the question: In an economy with competitive buyers and sellers, will the outcome be for the common good? The second theorem addresses the issue of distributional equity, and answers this question: In an economy where distributional decisions are made by an enlightened sovereign, can the common good be achieved by a slightly modified market mechanism, or must the market be abolished altogether. The third theorem focuses on the general issue of defining social welfare, or the common good, whether via the market, via a centralized political process, or via a voting process. It answers this question: Does there exist a reliable way to derive from the interests of individuals, the true interests of society, regarding, for example, alternative distributions of wealth. . . . Where does welfare economics stand today? The First and Second Theorems are encouraging results that suggest the market mechanism has great virtue: competitive equilibrium and Pareto optimality are firmly bound. But measuring the size of the economic pie, or judging among divisions of it, leads to the paradoxes and impossibilities summarized by the Third Theorem. And this is a tragedy. We feel we know, like Adam Smith knew, which policies would increase the wealth of nations. But because of all our theoretic goblins, we can no longer prove it. (1991, 714, 725; see Arrow 1963 regarding "paradoxes and impossibilities")

Welfare economics can (but need not) recognize incommensurable individual utilities within conceptual schemes for compensating individuals who are made worse off by policies that fail the restrictive test of Pareto optimality (which requires that no individuals be made worse off). The failure to compensate constitutes a man-made evil, an instance of illiberal democracy imitating Leibnizian theodicy.

The Varieties of Religious Purpose

The rich variety of religious purposes already has been glimpsed. A few more examples further illuminate the bridge between theodicy and illiberal democracy.

Stark, who attributes the progress of Western civilization to the "victory of rational theology" (2005, xiii), argues that

> stripped to basics, social science addresses two questions about groups: What holds them together? What divides them? What is it that causes some set of people to constitute a group toward which they feel a strong sense of solidarity—mutual feelings of common identity, purpose, and concerns? Conversely, what

> is it that causes groups to see themselves as pitted against one another—as strangers and enemies? Group solidarity is sustained primarily by a common culture—language, traditions, religion, history. The same factors serve as boundaries that set groups apart. The extent to which religion enters into either solidarity or conflict appears to be in direct proportion to the *scope* of the Gods involved. (2001, 33)

More specifically, Stark (a Iannaccone protégé) addresses the "evil" of scarcity when asking "what do people want from God? To answer, we must acknowledge the most fundamental aspect of the human predicament, namely that rewards are always *limited in supply, and some are entirely unavailable*—at least they are not available here and now through conventional means. . . . In response, humans tend to seek alternative means to overcome limited supplies or complete unavailability. The most common of these involve explanations about how the rewards may be obtained by *recourse to the supernatural*. These involve three general forms: *magic, miracles*, and *otherworldly rewards*" (2001, 17). To Stark's litany must be added the rewards obtained by rent and entitlement seekers, within illiberal democracies, who rely on recourse to "our father which art in Washington" and in other decision-making centers, where predators find secular prayers more reliably productive.

The biologist and evolutionist Richard Alexander expands upon these insights by adding that

> as with the concept of morality, the concept of God must be viewed as originally generated and maintained for the purpose—now seen by many as immoral—of furthering the interest of one group of humans [i.e., factions] at the expense of one or more other groups. Somehow, as the concept became that of a *universal, impartial* god for *all people*, it converged on the notion of modern moral philosophers that morality means indiscriminate and self-sacrificing altruism by individuals so as to bring about the greatest good to the greatest number. . . . Gods are inventions originally developed to extend the notion that some [individuals and groups] have greater rights than others to design and enforce rules, and that some are more destined to be leaders, others to be followers. (1987, 207)

The gods of illiberal democracy, by Alexander's lights, are inventions developed to justify the acquisition of perverse rights and entitlements.

By conspicuous contrast, the anthropologist Scott Atran argues (as do some contemporary economists and many neoatheists) that "from an evolutionary standpoint, the reasons why religion shouldn't exist are patent: religion is materially expensive and unrelentingly counterfactual and even

counterintuitive. Religious practice is costly in terms of material sacrifice (at least one's prayer time), emotional expenditure (including fears and hopes), and cognitive effort (maintaining both factual and counterintuitive networks of beliefs)" (2002, 4). And yet the prevalence of theistic and secular religions is undeniable, making Atran's interpretation of religion interesting primarily because it misses the forest for the trees by focusing upon costs instead of net benefits.

The apotheosis of secular religion can be appreciated more fully as an artifact of Enlightenment thinking, which preferred science and reason over blind faith and metaphysical ideals. Whereas theologians and moral philosophers have characterized the nature of human reason as being "concerned with nothing but itself, nor can it have any other occupation" (Kant 1922, 680), Mises argues instead that "the primary task of reason is to cope consciously with the limitations imposed on man by nature" (1998, 237). The problem with reason, as Hayek (1955) describes it (somewhat ironically given his evolutionary theory of classical liberalism), lies in wishful attempts to apply the methods of natural science in order to derive metaphysical certitudes within the social sciences. The economist Julian Simon disparages illiberal applications of reason when noting that "many unselfish well-off persons think they know better than do poor people what is good for the poor and for the world. Most of us secretly believe that we know how some others should live their lives better than they themselves know. But this belief matters only when it is hitched up with arrogance and the willingness to compel others to do what we think they ought to do" (1996, 542). Hayek explains the roots of this hubris, which permeate both commercialized theodicy and illiberal democracy:

> The intellectual, by his whole disposition, is uninterested in technical details or practical difficulties. What appeals to him are the broad visions, the specious comprehension of the social order as a whole which a planned system promises. . . . There can be few more thankless tasks at present than the essential one of developing the philosophical foundation on which the further development of a free society must be based. Since the man who undertakes it must accept much of the framework of the existing order, he will appear to many of the more speculatively minded intellectuals merely as a timid apologist for things as they are; at the same time he will be dismissed by men of affairs as an impractical theorist. . . . If he takes advantage of such support as he can get from men of affairs, he will almost certainly discredit himself with those on whom he depends for the spreading of his ideas. (1990, 20, 22)

Fatuous intellectual visions for creating heaven on earth persist, by Hayek's lights, because they provide an efficient platform for signaling individuals' professional, intellectual, and social virtues of conformity, cooperation, and trustworthiness. This platform often is referred to as "social capital," which the World Bank defines as "the norms and social relations embedded in social structures that enable people to coordinate action to achieve desired goals" (1985, 29). Generic examples of social capital include the spontaneous and uniquely American "associations" that fascinated Tocqueville (2012) and the economist and Nobelist James Buchanan's "theory of clubs" (1965). The focus nowadays falls upon voluntary associations called "factions," which coalesce for the purpose of extracting social rights and entitlements via compulsive law.

Secular Democracy

In the absence of gods, all-too-human political individuals step forward to fill the lacuna. Here is where theocentric and secular religions conflate, with illiberal politicians professing not only to emulate the intelligent design of gods but also presuming to know their mind and will. In this regard, conservatives take individuals as they presume their god intended them to be, while progressives take individuals (à la Locke and the behaviorist B. F. Skinner) as tabulae rasae that presumably can be molded to suit prevailing flights of fantasy. Classical liberals, by comparison, take individuals more or less as they are.

Without recognizing or at least acknowledging the fact, conservatives and progressives—unlike classical liberals—face the same inherent limitations as the Leibnizian god that ultimately could not overcome the fundamental problems of scarcity and sundry evils. Accordingly, Hayek believes that "the [classical] liberal today must positively oppose some of the basic conceptions which most conservatives share with the socialists" (2011, 520). Paraphrasing Hayek in spirit, it is better to be a classical liberal dissatisfied than a conservative or progressive satisfied.

The sociologist Robert Nisbet highlights essential points where conservative and classical liberals agree and disagree. The two groups share (i) "a common dislike for the intervention of government, especially national, centralized government, in the economic, social, political, and intellectual lives of citizens"; (ii) "a great deal of consensus . . . as to what legitimate equality in society should consist of"; (iii) "belief in the necessity of *freedom*, most notably *economic* freedom"; and (iv) "a common dislike for war and, more especially, of the war society this country knew in 1917 and 1918 under Woodrow Wilson and again under FDR in World War II" (1998, 43).

One principal difference between conservatives and classical liberals, as observed by Nisbet, entails "the contrasting way in which the two groups perceive the population . . . as composed not of individuals directly, but of

the natural groups within which individuals invariably live—family, locality, church, region, social class, nation, and so on" (1998, 46). In short, libertarians resemble classical utilitarians, leaving spiritual beliefs to individual choice. Conservatives instead emulate radical utilitarians while also infusing the public sphere with theological virtues and values. Progressives, by comparison, are radical utilitarians who infuse the public sphere with normative post-postmodern, à la Foucault, spiritual values.

Another principal difference between conservatives and classical liberals—a more relevant difference for this essay's purposes—is in the regard for personal morality, metaphysics, and theistic religion. The philosopher Tibor Machan states that "conservatives tend, on the whole, to be anti-rationalistic in their methodology" (1998, 103). A variety of other scholars agree. Hayek doubts "whether there can be such a thing as a conservative political philosophy. Conservatism may often be a useful political maxim, but it does not give us any guiding principles which can influence long-range developments" (2011, 533). The conservative journalist M. Stanton Evans argues that "it is necessary to reverse the usual tenets of economic and technological determinism. What I am suggesting instead is a theological determinism; which is to say that theology determines metaphysics, which determines political philosophy and institutions, which in turn determines the economic and technological organization of society" (1998, 91–92). The political scientist M. Morton Auerbach claims that "the conservative believes ours is a God-centered, and therefore an ordered, universe; that man's purpose is to shape his life to the patterns of order proceeding from the Divine center of life; and that, in seeking this objective, man is hampered by a fallible intellect and vagrant will" (1998, 7). The conservative apologist Russell Kirk offers a similar metaphysical perspective, which he contrasts with the classical liberal view:

> The great lie of division on modern politics . . . is not between totalitarians on the one hand and liberals (or libertarians) on the other; instead, it lies between all those who believe in a transcendent moral authority, on the one side, and on the other side all those who mistake our ephemeral existence as individuals for the be-all and end-all. . . . conservatives disagree with libertarians on the question of what holds civil society together. Libertarians contend—so far as they endure any binding at all—that the nexus of society is self interest, closely joined to cash payment. But conservatives declare that society is a community of souls, joining the dead, the living, and those yet unborn; and that it coheres through what Aristotle called friendship and Christians call it love. (1998, 182–83)

Notice that the god of conservative "practical ethics" is not uniquely a Christian god despite the tight relationship between conservative politics and Christian evangelism. Instead, the conservatives' god resembles Thomas Jefferson's notion of nature's god, an empty vessel in which normative virtues and values are stored for later retrieval and interpretation as needed.

Classical liberalism, by contrast, downplays the notions that conservatives hold so dear. East argues that

> the skeptical bent of libertarianism makes it suspect and skeptical of [theistic] religion . . . [which] lacks the empirical and quantitative nature of reason and science; hence its intellectual nature is frequently less probing and demanding, and the quality of its findings less certain and reliable. At worst, the libertarian sees religion in its more fervent forms evolving into religiosity and ultimately taking on an anti-intellectual and potentially authoritarian [and fundamentalist] cast. Religion then becomes merely another collectivism with hostility to reason, individualism, the limited state, and free choice. . . . Sanguine about the creative and productive capacity of man, libertarians are powerful exponents of individualism, freedom, private property, the division of labor, and the capacity of the spontaneous forces of the free market to utilize and maximize human creative and productive potential. (1998, 81–83)

Rejection of conservatives' views regarding theistic religion's role in civil society constitutes a rare point of tangency between classical liberal and progressive thinking (Montanye 2020).

Machan explains that libertarianism is, "first of all, a political doctrine [confined to the use of force in society]. It should be distinguished from the 'metaphorical libertarianism' related to the problem of freedom of the will; from 'social libertarianism,' namely the [post-postmodern] view that concerning voluntary human activities and associations everything not involving coercion is equally proper, morally correct, immune from valid moral criticism, rebuke, ostracism, and other forms of opposition and condemnation; from 'moral libertarianism' or libertinism, namely the view that all freely chosen conduct has *equal* merit from the point of view of what is right and wrong in human behavior" (1998, 106).

At bottom, the essential difference between classical liberals, on one hand, and conservatives and progressives, on the other hand, turns, as economist Thomas Sowell explains, upon conflicts of visions regarding the implementation of secular theodicy, the classical liberal vision being constrained, while all other approaches essentially are unconstrained.

> In the unconstrained vision, there are no intractable reasons for social evils and therefore no reason why they cannot be solved, with sufficient moral commitment. But in the constrained vision, whatever artifices or strategies restrain or ameliorate inherent human evils will themselves have costs, some in the form of other social ills created by these civilizing institutions, so that all that is possible is a prudent trade-off [i.e., a secular theodicy]. . . . The political battles of the day are a potpourri of special interests, mass emotions, personality clashes, corruption, and numerous other factors. . . . In short, the two criteria for distinguishing constrained and unconstrained visions are (1) the locus of discretion, and (2) the mode of discretion." (2007, 25, 7, 106)

Unconstrained forms of democracy tend to be judged fancifully as idyllic albeit conspicuously imperfect schemes for establishing heaven on earth. In practice, however, these schemes reduce to secular dictatorships that closely reflect the utility function (the tastes and preferences, foibles and scruples) of one, or at most a few, powerful and self-interested factions and voting majorities.

Summary and Conclusion

Nelson writes that

> the religious purpose of the market is to ensure maximal efficiency in the use of the [scarce] material resources of society, and thus rapid movement of American society along a route of progress in this world. . . . It has . . . fallen to a new priesthood in the economics profession to provide a normative foundation for the market, now necessarily taking a religions form . . . in order to assist in fending off the widespread rent seeking and other multiple forms of opportunism that always threaten the bonds of social cohesion. . . . The mainstream 'economics religion' in the United States today . . . offers . . . a market sustaining set of norms. . . . the defense of a market economy cannot rest on any ordinary religion. It requires a religion with the particular characteristics that it advances the pursuit of self-interest in appropriate domains but tightly restrains it in others. (2001, 8–13)

Stigler's view of the economist as secular preacher was more circumspect:

> Economists have no special, professional knowledge of that which is virtuous or just, and the question naturally arises as to how they are able to deliver confident and distinctive advice to a society that is already supplied with that commodity. . . . Possibly the most surprising thing to say about the economist

> preachers is that they have done very little of it. . . . The economist-preacher has simply helped to straighten out the issues for a frequently muddled nation. . . . He lives in a world of mistakes, ancient and modern, subtle and simple, and since he is simply pointing out to the society that what it seeks, it is seeking inefficiently, he need not quarrel with what it seeks. (1980, 1–2, 9)

Stigler's positivist, model-thumping economist-preachers also might be described as living in a private world of indulgent self-importance. Influential advice regarding economic policies—both liberal and illiberal—is as likely nowadays to be given by lawyers and judges as by economists. This is to be expected given that public policies increasingly are designed to weaken social efficiency rather than improve upon it—for example, by hamstringing market operations with normative regulations, antitrust prosecutions, and equality, diversity, and inclusion policies.

Economists Richard Nelson and Sidney Winter conclude consideration of secular-economic preaching and policy in the absence of omnipotence and omniscience by noting that

> it is hard to discern *any* role for policy analysis. The presence of public goods and other reasons for collective action call for collective decision-making machinery, but there is no such thing as a "public interest" to be served, only a collection of individual interests. In arriving at collective decisions, conflicts of interest need to be resolved. But, from this perspective, no one interest is "better" than any other. And since everybody knows the structure of the economic (and political) problem as well as anyone else, there are no "experts" and there is no need for "analysis." The policy-making problem is simply one of arriving at a Pareto-optimal agreement. (1982, 379)

The upshot, in other words, is secular theodicy without omniscience. Paraphrasing Emmett (quoted earlier), in the absence of Pareto optimality (an ineluctable consequence of scarcity), illiberal democracy replaces utilitarianism as the central problem of secular religion.

Hayek preaches classical liberalism's virtues as a duty of practical ethics that individuals owe, by dint of nature, both to themselves and to others. He (like Knight) eschews, as do most Austrian-inspired economists, the limiting strictures of economic positivism, which preclude a holistic understanding and appreciation of life's "evil" characteristics. Illiberal democracy, by contrast, forcefully imposes a secular theodicy that is predicated upon intrinsically flawed presumptions of omnipotence and omniscience. The result is a plethora of man-made evils that complement the natural evil of

intrinsic scarcity and undercut the classical utilitarians' unique quest for the greatest good, yielding instead divisive and costly social chaos (Montanye 2021).

Increasing the extent of individual utility and human flourishing at this juncture requires that decision-makers and their "expert" advisers cease acting as secular high priests of "scientific government" and instead return to the classical liberal tenets of individual liberty and free markets.

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