

essential readings
FOR THE MODERN CONSERVATIVE

A Condensation of Richard Weaver's
Ideas Have Consequences

Reprinted 2012 by
Alabama Policy Institute
Birmingham, Alabama

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ABOUT THIS SERIES

The Alabama Policy Institute commissioned “Essential Readings for the Modern Conservative” to provide busy, conservative-minded individuals with a way to acquaint themselves with at least the rudiments of conservatism. A work like Richard Weaver’s *Ideas Have Consequences* might seem too large to be worked into the corners of our schedule, but a condensed version could be read in a weekend or on a long flight. With such an abridged version, conservatives of all educational levels will be able to read swiftly and concisely what the best minds in American conservative thought have had to say. This series is an attempt to capture the central message of the various authors and to express it in fewer, simpler words. We believe there are still men and women in sufficient numbers today who take their values seriously and who consider themselves to be of conservative principle but might be hard pressed to explain their political philosophy. This series is for them.

It is certainly true that these condensations were written in hopes of providing a rough familiarity with the ideas of leading conservative thinkers, but they were also written to whet the appetite enough to motivate the reader to tackle the main text as well. It is the nature of a summary to touch upon the main points of a text and omit the full beauty of the original prose; all of the illustrations and the humor — the personality of the author must be left behind in the primary source. These smaller versions of great works are far better reading than nothing at all, but who is satisfied with the appetizer when he can have the main course?

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction		1
Chapter One	The Unsentimental Sentiment	5
Chapter Two	Distinction and Hierarchy	7
Chapter Three	Fragmentation and Obsession	11
Chapter Four	Egotism in Work and Art	15
Chapter Five	The Great Stereopticon	19
Chapter Six	The Spoiled-Child Psychology	23
Chapter Seven	The Last Metaphysical Right	25
Chapter Eight	The Power of the Word	29
Chapter Nine	Piety and Justice	33

INTRODUCTION

In his introduction, Richard Weaver wastes no time declaring the purpose of *Ideas Have Consequences*: examining the dissolution of Western civilization by a deduction from first principles rather than by analogy. He also promises to provide the beginnings of a solution to the crisis, believing it improper to analyze a problem correctly then plead “moral impotence” to do anything about it. In making these claims, Weaver assumes the world is intelligible and man is a free agent, which Weaver believes to be true. Further, since the problems facing modern society are products of careless choice and not irresistible forces, man can be held responsible for his action or inaction regarding those problems. With these presuppositions laid out, Weaver continues.

In any effort to address the decay of civilization, Weaver writes, the major problem is first getting men to distinguish between better and worse. Man’s system of values has all but faded away. In Weaver’s words, “There is ground for declaring that modern man has become a moral idiot.”¹ It is helpful to remember that Weaver published this book in 1948, when the world was still recovering from World War II. He did not believe it necessary to provide any further proof than to appeal to the testimony of a few years past for his assertion that the basis of value judgments was lost to most men. The Holocaust and the devastation of Europe were the results of a process Weaver traced all the way back to the 14th century, the Waterloo of moral universals, when William of Occam began to teach nominalism, which denies that moral universals have real existence. The triumph of nominalism in the medieval debate proved to be “the crucial event in the history

of Western culture; from this flowed those acts which issue now in modern decadence.”² Occam left man with no higher authority for moral judgment than himself; universal terms became mere names arbitrarily created to serve our convenience. As a result, Weaver tells us, reality as it was perceived by the intellect was rejected in favor of reality as perceived by the senses. With this event, Western society changed course.

From the denial of universals eventually came the denial of truth beyond anything transcending experience itself. Once truth was out of the way, nature became regarded as containing the principles of its own constitution and behavior, and so a careful study of nature came to be called science. The Aristotelian doctrine of forms and abstract universal concepts of perfection was discarded. With forms out of the picture, the doctrine of original sin perished next. After all, if physical nature is the sum total of existence and if man is natural, we cannot think of him as suffering from some innate evil—indeed, evil is a word now lacking meaning. Thus, if man is naturally good, his defects must spring from either ignorance or environmental deprivation.

This rationale continues: since man is no longer to waste time speculating about things beyond this present world as perceived by the body, the highest intellectual calling is interpreting the data of the senses. The 18th-century rationalists, Hobbes and Locke chimed this tune; man need only to reason properly upon evidence from nature to arrive at fact. Such a philosophy fit well with the development of modern science. How the world worked was the question, not why it existed. Religion was on shaky ground by this point, at best, and materialism was on the way.

1 Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, p. 1.

2 *Ibid.* p. 3.

Charles Darwin's arrival in the 19th century made it possible to explain man's origin without reference to anything beyond nature (at least, it was now possible for those incapable of abstract thought). Man was now firmly entrenched within nature, and his motivations for action followed suit; man did what he did because of biological necessity, which was only a simpler way of saying that men acted because of economic incentive. Individual men, under Marxism, made little difference in the grand scheme of history; it was the interplay of classes and economic interests, both great material forces that mattered, not freedom of the will. Man had come a long way—from the image of his Creator to a “wealth-seeking and consuming animal.”³ His life was now “practice without theory,” a whirlwind of activity, working, eating, sleeping, procreating, getting and spending, all without any unifying, transcendent purpose. Wars have to be fought, Weaver notes, and so man reintroduces those ideals in which he no longer believes so that men will be willing to die; the paradox is bothersome.⁴

After tracing the same process through the history of education and statesmanship, Weaver concludes his narrative by repeating the great task he has before him: establishing the fact of decadence. Man must be convinced that he is, in fact, in big trouble, and that all the glowing renditions of man's history in the last seven centuries is so much bilge water.

Weaver has another great point to make, which is that the obstacle confronting him in the completion of his task is that the more insensibility people develop the further down the primrose path they travel. Today it might be said that people become desensitized to their own degradation as it becomes

progressively worse. Men become complacent about the logical contradictions in their worldview—if they ever do recognize them—and calloused to the suffering of their fellow men: “We approach a condition in which we shall be amoral without the capacity to perceive it and degraded without the means to measure our descent.”⁵ Weaver concludes that the time to act is now, while there is still hope of restoring to men the moral vision needed to see their own depravity, before the time comes when men will prefer perdition.

Thus Weaver prepares the groundwork for the second great part of his Introduction, the Inquiry. He begins the task by putting modern man on the witness stand and interrogating him on two points: knowledge and happiness. It can hardly be the case that culture has declined for hundreds of years if the average man today is more knowledgeable than his ancestors. Of course, it depends on what is meant by knowledge. Weaver is clear: “I shall adhere to the classic proposition that there is no knowledge at the level of sensation, that therefore knowledge is of universals, and that whatever we know as a truth enables us to predict.”⁶ With this standard, Weaver measures the wisdom of contemporary humanity, and by it man is found wanting. The individual today is kept scurrying about in an endless accumulation of unrelated facts, the data of experience, and the results of the latest scientific research. For him, knowledge consists of many small things; speculative contemplation is replaced by the investigation of physical reality, and man can no longer see the forest for the trees. The defenders of modern civilization might point to the increase in literacy as proof of their claim that modern man is better educated than his

3 *Ibid.* p. 6.

4 *Ibid.* p. 7.

5 *Ibid.* p. 10.

6 *Ibid.* p. 12.

predecessors, but there is small comfort to be had from the prospect of the masses reading, if all they read are newspapers and tabloids.

Another defense of modern civilization is the abundance of material possessions available to man, abundance unknown to earlier times. Weaver replies that while individual man may have more possessions today than the peasant of yesteryear, no definition of an “adequate” living can be found in currency as the basis to satisfy a man with so much and no more. The abundance of having necessities met has been replaced by the scarcity of not having all that one can desire in a complex market economy. What’s worse, the more man has to indulge in, the less he retains the hardiness necessary to labor and acquire goods and services. Luxury breeds indolence, and so man’s laziness renders him unfit even to maintain his material establishment.

Weaver is more interested in whether man is happier today than whether he is more educated or better provisioned, however. Happiness, our author is careful to explain, means a feeling of conscious vitality, of being able to meet the demands of life with strength. And what is man’s condition on this count? Misery: a “deep psychic anxiety” prevails in our age. Men have the look of the hunted, full of insecurities about the future of their lives, their families, and their legacy. In the Cold War era of Weaver’s time such a fear would have been readily apparent, though in our time communism has been replaced by terrorism, and we are no more secure than were they. Man’s condition is made worse, continues Weaver, by a feeling of powerlessness. He is securely trapped in the bowels of a great metropolis, at someone else’s beck and call, toiling for a wage over which he has little

control. “Not only is this man likely to be a slavey [sic] at his place of daily toil, but he is cribbed, cabined, and confined in countless ways, many of which are merely devices to make possible physically the living together of masses.”⁷ This author can attest to the truth of such a statement. The faces one encounters on a mass-transit system provide multiple proofs of Weaver’s argument.

Weaver moves to the end of this mighty Introduction. The problem faced today is how to restore to man the intellectual integrity that enables him to determine right from wrong and better from worse. Weaver’s first chapter sets forth the ultimate source of our thinking and feeling about the world, the guide we take for our judgments.

7 *Ibid.* p. 16.

CHAPTER ONE

The Unsentimental Sentiment

Everyone has a way of looking at the world. What Weaver calls the “metaphysical dream” is simply an individual’s lens for viewing life. It is an “intuitive feeling” all ideas and beliefs are referred to for verification. If a man thinks that life is good and has some idea of what sort of life he ought to live, he is impelled to live, and in so doing, Weaver would have us believe, he exercises his own free will. Once one has a clear vision of one’s metaphysical dream, the rational faculty can be brought to serve that vision and preserve it from sentimentality. Consistency of character can be maintained if we relate our ideas to our metaphysical dream, else contradiction is accepted with indifference. What Weaver is doing is building his way to a definition of culture and refinement. A man whose sentiment or attitude toward the world is rational, who chooses to order his life around this abstract pattern, is a man of self-control. Weaver calls this the “feat of abstraction.” Man chooses his metaphysical dream, his first principles, over the sensate world, and has thus conquered himself. His knowledge passes from particulars to universals, and his emotions pass from chaotic feelings to a concept of what he ought to feel. Such a man believes in eternity and in eternal forms; he believes that universal, absolute standards of perfection exist for things in this world, standards beyond the material world but real nonetheless. He believes there is structure to the universe, an “oughtness” for man and thing. He is a man of culture, which Weaver defines as “sentiment refined and measured by intellect.” It is this sort of understanding that Weaver presents as opposition to the great threat he examines in this chapter.⁸

8 *Ibid.* p. 23.

The desire for immediacy seeks to dissolve the formal aspects of everything to get at the supposed reality behind them. Weaver calls this desire barbarism, an impatience of the lower orders of man with the imaginative or spiritual aspects of things. The barbarian is unconcerned with how a thing might be or ought to be; he cares only for what it is in its stark material reality, unshaped by abstract notions. Culture is under attack today because men are hacking away at the formal requirements on expression and art that stand in the way of a raw, natural man’s egotistic outpouring. But why is heartfelt expression not good enough? Weaver notes that “unformed expression is ever tending toward ignorance.”⁹ The cultured man desires forms and conventions, knowing that good intentions are not enough to make his work the best it can be and to make of life more than the story of two-legged animals. Debauched man loses his taste and his discrimination in his quest for immediacy, not realizing that it is the idea, the veiling, and the form that excites us. “It is our various supposals about a matter which give it meaning, and not some intrinsic property which can be seized in the barehanded fashion of the barbarian.”¹⁰ Crude men pursue the source of physical sensation; Weaver believes the modern treatment of obscenity to be a sufficient example of this ravaging by immediacy.

Men today have lost the ability to determine what is and is not appropriate for public display. The Greeks and the Elizabethans had some idea of what ought to stay offstage, but modern man lost his concept of the obscene with the rise of the publicity machine. In the 19th century, journalism expanded its coverage to areas that once were taboo. The process has continued to the point that today there is an entire industry

9 *Ibid.* p. 25.

10 *Ibid.* p. 27.

of media specializing in peddling the obscene and prurient material that the cultivated find repugnant. Men seek titillation in the extremes of passion and suffering because they have lost the reference points that would have told them what belonged to the privacy of the individual rather than to public consumption, and Weaver affirms that behind this offense is a rejection of proper sentiment in favor of immediacy.

The decay of forms has had more than one undesirable consequence, however; Weaver finds reason for concern in the current state of human relationships, both those of the family and of friendly acquaintance. What is there, after all, to bind us to the very old or very young but sentiment? The desire for immediacy admits only the present advantage in relationships, so children and the aged, who can do little for us, fall by the wayside. Parents are neglected; children are a liability. As man sinks deeper and deeper into material gratification, the link between the generations vanishes, and, as Weaver puts it, not all the tinkering of sociologists can put the home together again.

Yet another result of the weakening of the sentiments of the people is the loss of the idea of the hero. This is significant, writes Weaver, because the hero cannot be a relativist. He offers his life up in the service of ideals; he is absolutely devoted above his property and himself. The hero has to believe in something beyond his own skin, or he would have no reason to risk it. In today's self-obsessed climate, the hero is in short supply. Weaver mourns the loss of the "historical soldier," whose sacrifice was made in the last defense of reason, of order, in an attempt to shore up civilization from its enemies. The modern automaton is a poor substitute for this traditional soldier, and mechanized warfare removes ethical considerations from the realm of soldiery.

Weaver briefly mentions a fourth offspring of the loss of trained sentiment: the growth of commercialism. The man of commerce is by nature, in contrast to the soldier, a relativist, and is therefore constantly attuned to the fluctuating values of the market. Business and sentiment do not mix, and our author thinks this might explain why in some societies traders were excluded from positions of influence and prestige (he mentions Plato's *Laws* as another example). As transcendence disappears from social life, some men—many, it would seem—choose to worship the dollar sign in its place.

Only the restoration of proper sentiment can save us from the dual dangers of sentimentality, with its emotion lavished on the trivial, and brutality, which is no respecter of persons in its violence. Weaver had seen enough of brutality, having just witnessed the horrors of the Second World War, and he feared that Western society, what had survived of it, was still on the path that led to destruction. "Our only redemption lies in restraint imposed by idea," Weaver writes; the task for conservatives is to rediscover the right relationship in society of faith and reason for an age that has forgotten the meaning of faith.¹¹

11 *Ibid.* p. 34.

CHAPTER TWO

Distinction and Hierarchy

In chapter two, Weaver explains his conviction that social order involves hierarchy by definition and that the undermining of such inequality has been destructive to the fabric of our civilization. Once man develops his metaphysical dream and places his sentiments under the control of his reason, he will recognize there are two justifications for distinction or elevation in society: knowledge and virtue. Men of high moral character or deep learning are naturally preferred historically for positions of leadership, and at every level there is the same order, so that everyone feels he occupies the place suited for him, with points of reference above and below. As men are unequal, so are the stations offered them in society. Weaver identifies the beginning of the decline of hierarchy with the “unfixing of relationships” in the fourteenth century, though the deterioration only reached its full strength in the nineteenth, appearing then as the culmination of the current nature philosophy.¹² Ideas like knowledge and virtue require belief in the transcendent, and with that belief gone, the impulse was to look to the lower levels of society for guidance. Gone, too, are the distinctions once attached to vocations—it no longer matters what you do, really, only how much you are paid. The capacity to consume has replaced transcendent ideals as the rule by which the professions and social stations of people are judged. Even institutions of higher learning have abandoned the field to the egalitarians and their leveling doctrines (one wonders how much further advanced is the retreat in our time). Traditional values in learning, as elsewhere, are rejected, and knowledge becomes power in service of appetite. Government, no longer a place for the best men of society, is transfigured into a bloated

bureaucracy promoting economic development, a “partnership in things subservient only to gross animal existence.”¹³

The most deceitful blow to the ordering of degrees in society is being stricken by equalitarianism, or egalitarianism, as it insists that all men are equal. Weaver believes this doctrine the most insidious to hierarchy because it presents itself as a redress of injustice when it is in fact the opposite. Justice would see each man receive his due; the egalitarians would see each man get the same to spare those who might otherwise get less the affront to their pride. Weaver also suspects that “equality” is often found in the mouths of those who would use it to make their advancement in society easier. He does not begrudge them their rise, only their method.

If human relationships mean order, an order of the standing of one person to another, then equality is destructive, seeking to tumble all the building blocks of society and rearrange them according to an abstract pattern. Fraternity, however, is an ordering concept. Social and familial relationships are by necessity hierarchical: parent and child cannot be equal, nor can young and old, rich and poor, strong and weak. One is reminded of the old saying that where a horse bears two, one must ride behind. Society cannot offer less than equality before the law, but it cannot survive an attempt to ignore the differences between people. Each must act where he is strong, as Weaver says, or else chaos will increase. Fraternity, the right ordering of people with each other, has been neglected in favor of leveling ideology, to the detriment of all. Fraternity can offer harmony among the classes, providing a sense of duty to those in higher levels and a sense

12 *Ibid.* p. 36.

13 *Ibid.* p. 38.

of contentment and protection to those in the lower classes. So far from being complementary, as the Jacobins thought, the two concepts are really mutually exclusive: “It will be found as a general rule that those parts of the world which have talked least of equality have in the solid fact of their social life exhibited the greatest fraternity.”¹⁴ In this present world, people are mismatched with their stations by society and become more and more suspicious of authority. Leaders, Weaver regrets, will not lead, and servants will not serve. The basis of an organic social order, fraternity uniting distinct parts, is coming apart at the seams.

Weaver goes on to discuss the arguments for social equality and why they are inadequate, beginning with the contention that the erasure of all social distinctions will usher in the golden calf of pure democracy. But such a term really is meaningless, because it is caught on the horns of a dilemma. If it means equality before the law, it offers nothing more than any monarchy has offered and can offer; if it means equality of condition, it means injustice “because one law for the ox and the lion is tyranny.”¹⁵ Furthermore, the only way any ideal of economic equality could be realized would be the enforcing power of a totalitarian despotism, a far cry from pure democracy. After Weaver is through with it, the idea is an empty shell.

Another defense of “democratic equality” offered by its more sophisticated proponents is that it would allow each person the chance to develop his potentialities. Weaver’s rebuttal is subtle: the argument implies that man is like a seed with great possibility for growth if only it is placed in the soil of liberty, of freedom from distinction and hierarchy. This theory

assumes that a man’s destiny is a product of nature and therefore outside the power of will and discipline to constrain what nature intended. Such an idea is romantic fallacy, Weaver asserts, because it provides no purpose for man, no freedom to do something, only freedom from social inequality, imagining that nature will provide the necessary direction as it does for a field of wild flowers. In other words, if equality could only allow men to do more of what they could do, what they might do, no good has been proved. Of course, if by potentiality one means the opportunity for advancement, then such an idea presupposes hierarchy and is thus logically inconsistent. Equality cannot be a means for climbing the social ladder—there would be none. Democracy in this case is not the end but the means, and so it is not equality that is sought, but a more fair chance for the deserving to get ahead. Also, it does not escape Weaver that democracies seldom love the superior among them; rather, they tend to demand conformity, as Tocqueville saw, to prevent their peers from rising above them.

Weaver continues to decimate the egalitarian position by calling them to task for one of the processes inherent to democracy—election. If the radicals were really after equality, they ought to choose governors by lot, like the ancient Greeks. An election is, after all, a choosing out of someone reported to be better qualified for the position than his competitors. If there is no best man, society ought to be allowed to “flourish wild,” without any procedures for winnowing out the dross in line for public benefits and political power. “Let youth and age, wisdom and folly, courage and cowardice, self-control and dissoluteness, sit together on the bench. This will be representative; this is a cross-

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 43.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 44.

section. . . .”¹⁶ Modern egalitarians contradict their own principles if they agree to elections in place of random selection, though for that matter, even the Greeks had the sense to reserve the positions of military command to those best qualified—they were chosen by election.

Weaver moves on to his most daring challenge yet to the egalitarians when he discusses the need of democracy for aristocracy. People cannot govern themselves, he contends, if they cannot recruit and prepare leaders from among themselves, those best qualified men called aristocrats. Education, it is agreed, is critical to the survival of democracy. But in Weaver’s eyes, this statement is only another way of expressing the need of democracy for men who understand “the hierarchy of values,” men whose sentiments are under rational control, men with moral fiber, and men with the liberal education necessary to enlarge the scope of their understanding. Such an aristocracy must be drawn from the people, and so cannot exist without democracy, but the system has been corrupted by the lure of materialism. Education has become a method of preparing men to make widgets and count dollars; it has ceased to beautify men’s souls, train the mind, and order the passions. “Those who maintain that education should prepare one for living successfully in this world have won a practically complete victory The prevailing conception is that education must be such as will enable one to acquire enough wealth to live on the plane of the bourgeoisie. That kind of education does not develop the aristocratic virtues.”¹⁷ Democracy certainly cannot be faulted for failing to invest the material resources necessary to build countless schools and colleges, but it has forgotten the

ends of learning, the hierarchy of knowledge, and so the last road to salvation leads instead to the rule of another god: Mammon.

16 *Ibid.* p. 46.

17 *Ibid.* p. 49.

CHAPTER THREE

Fragmentation and Obsession

To grasp Weaver's arguments in this chapter, it is helpful to envision a large disk that is solid at the center but increasingly fragmented and disordered as distance from the center increases. Weaver uses this metaphor to describe the shift in what sort of knowledge the educated perceive as desirable from the Middle Ages to modern times. At the core of knowledge is metaphysics or theology, first principles about the ultimate nature of reality that answer the "why" questions. Away from this center, knowledge is more particular, concerned with specific principles or even isolated facts, and raw data drawn from the sensate world but not made to relate to first principles. This flight toward the periphery sees men avoiding the questions about the meaning of life and the moral implications of what they do in favor of increasing expertise in some tiny corner of the world of study. Truth has been replaced by fact.

Weaver runs through a historical review of the decline of the pursuit of knowledge from his beloved Middle Ages to the present day. Once upon a time, he assures us, the man of greatest learning was the philosophic doctor. He had a mastery of ultimate principles and a grasp of eternal truth. But the years passed, and he came to be replaced by modernity with the gentleman, his secular cousin. Weaver does not entirely disapprove of the gentleman; he is the replacement for the philosophic doctor, minus the religious foundation. Great interest in the liberal arts in the time of Sir Thomas More, Rabelais, and Thomas Elyot appeared and was relied on to provide the broad understanding and moral character the gentleman needed but would not receive from the bosom of the church. The gentleman was

an idealist, brought up to live by a code of ethics and proper sentiment, though, lacking the grounding in religion he needed, he was only a partial replacement for the doctor of philosophy. Still, as long as the West could hold on to a gentleman class, there was some protection for the transmission of tradition and culture. If their ideal was imperfect and not always realized, the very existence of such a class as an ideal out-weighed any disadvantages. By far, Weaver says, the most significant aspect of the idea of a gentleman is his distrust of specialization. From the times of classical antiquity, a healthy suspicion of too much knowledge or skill in any one area of learning, except perhaps the very highest areas like philosophy and theology, persisted; the freeman ought to pursue liberal learning, disciplines that beautify the soul, ultimate questions whose answers suit a man to lead other men. A man's education ought to comprehend all the fields of learning while being a slave to none. The gentleman sought a broad view of humanity that could not be had from a minute examination of the particulars, and so he was satisfied to remain in the center, contemplating philosophic questions of the highest order, seeking to synthesize all his knowledge into a whole vision that could make him worthy to lead.

The idea of a gentleman was not long for this world, unfortunately, when science began to dominate the people's imagination. Weaver finds that the public's veneration of the man of knowledge came to be built on new ground—power. "It was soon a banality that the scholar contributes to civilization by adding to its dominion over nature."¹⁸ Following Bacon, the task of the new learned elite was the relief of man's estate, the increase

18 *Ibid.* p. 57.

of his technological prowess, to the end of a more prosperous and comfortable existence. The modern scholar, in Weaver's mind, is like a drunkard who, with the world heaving around him, fixes tenaciously on some few particulars, having lost his hold on metaphysics and even philosophy entirely. "From this comes a most important symptom of our condition, the astonishing vogue of factual information."¹⁹ Truth was replaced by an inert accumulation of facts; the greater one's stock of unrelated material data, the wiser one was perceived to be. Direct observation of material reality, endless investigation of the secrets of science, was felt to be more sure and safe ground for knowledge than the exercise of the intellect upon abstract principles. The gentleman's distrust of specialization was supplanted by the scientist's distrust of generalization. Men no longer feel safe in making moral statements or judgments—they must stick to things, to scientific research, to facts. They dare not venture out into philosophical speculation or moral deliberation.

From here Weaver takes us to the key word for this chapter: obsession. "It should be plain from the foregoing that modern man is suffering from a severe fragmentation of his world picture. This fragmentation leads directly to an obsession with isolated parts."²⁰ As Weaver uses the word, obsession is a replacement of something painful with something innocuous. The "modern egotist" escapes the metaphysical center of knowledge and reality by filling his mind with the jumble of facts and figures lying about the periphery. He no longer has to decide right from wrong; he no longer has to make value judgments that might lead to division and controversy. He can make safe, scientific

statements about radiation or microchips or the genetic code without ever worrying over the meaning of life; "[t]he pedantic empiricist, buried in his little province of phenomena, imagines that fidelity to it exempts him from concern with larger aspects of reality—in the case of science, from consideration of whether there is reality other than matter."²¹ Obsession with fragments, Weaver continues, has grave consequence, among them fanaticism, by which he means the absorption of all activity into means at the cost of ends. If a thing can be done, it must be done. Science and technology have left us in a perilous position, for without a standard for sanity, we have no idea what we ought to do even as we desperately seek after the means to do it.

Another aspect of this "psychopathology" is the high degree of instability exhibited by men fixated on very small portions of the world. Weaver believes he sees such a volatility of emotion in large cities and assembly lines; workers devoted to a mind-numbing task and overcrowded urbanites are known for their fickle admiration, their excitability, suggestibility, and proneness to panic. There is little chance for that sober reflection the man of philosophic habits requires, little room for the quiet contemplation of the first principles of life. Arguments may be brilliantly executed but fall apart for lack of relevance to first principles; movements of great sophistication and clever propaganda techniques collapse because of their foolish presuppositions about human nature.

The world has lost its appetite for a liberally educated class of men prepared to deal with questions of grave moral significance, but before it can be determined whether the world can be made to see the need for essentials,

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 58.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 59.

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 60.

for metaphysics, the question must be asked if everyone can participate in the “aristocratic virtues.” Simply put, can people today recover the wisdom and self-control that once served them as a counterweight to these psychopathic tendencies? Weaver gives the example of a Vermont farmer of the 1850s, independent, diligent, civic-minded, temperate, and respectful of history. He was a man who could say “No.” Modern industrialism exploits such an individual and condemns him. Dignity becomes an old fashion, and social hierarchy is abolished. The mass of workers stand on a dismal but level plane beneath the small managerial elite. Such men likely do not know what they are making, and if they do, they probably do not pause to consider the ethical consequences. When this industrial organization is subordinated to modern political bureaucracy, Weaver cautions, a monster is born. (It is again helpful to remember how soon after the Second World War Weaver was writing.) He gives an extreme example: the atomic bomb. The workers at Oak Ridge, Tenn., 70,000 strong, labored to complete a task of which they knew little or nothing. Weaver holds in contempt the propaganda that was so effective that the workers took pride in their ignorance, considering it a badge of honor for co-operation, though for what, they did not know. He speculates that, had they known, a few, perhaps only a very few, might have had second thoughts about helping to construct the technology for a weapon whose power would far exceed what was necessary to kill enemy soldiers. Perhaps they would have refused to participate in an effort to give modern man the ability to wipe out huge numbers of non-combatants in a single stroke.

Oak Ridge is an extreme example, but a good reminder that the issue of who shall have the reins of power must still be resolved. As

means become more and more numerous and powerful, the ends to which they ought to be put still must be decided. “The conclusion, so vexatious to democracy, that wisdom and not popularity qualifies us for rule may be forced upon us by the peril in atomic energy. Wisdom does not lie on the periphery.”²² Having at last discovered the ability to destroy ourselves completely, we cannot afford to delay any longer our search for moral clarity.

Another sort of obsession results from so much attention to fragmentary facts and from the specialization of labor, an obsession Weaver terms presentism. Many modern people are provincial, though they scorn the word provincial in terms of time, for they refuse to look beyond the present moment in memory of the past or planning for the future. The tender-minded find facing the past an unpleasant task; they would rather forget the painful lesson history has to teach us and so submerge themselves in the pleasures of the moment; “[t]he very possibility that there may exist timeless truths is a reproach to the life of laxness and indifference which modern egotism encourages. It is entirely likely, therefore, that concentration upon the moment is another outlet through obsession.”²³ Modern people, Weaver knows, would rather not pay the price to regenerate their awareness of timeless truth and historical wisdom; they would rather call those who believe such obstructionist, or obscurantist, or backwards, but they fail to consider that a move toward center is neither forward nor backward. It is, however, a move away from the abyss.

²² *Ibid.* p. 65.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 68.

CHAPTER FOUR

Egotism in Work and Art

Weaver, in his observations of man's irresponsibility and defiance, discerns a tremendous egotism that he believes to be another manifestation of the fragmentation of knowledge, specifically the making of the separate self the measure of value. Man thinks now only of his rights, never his duties, and does not bother to refer his actions to an external frame of obligation. Weaver begins his analysis of how egotism has infected man's labor and the arts by contending that the malady always takes the form of withdrawal from the community. Man retreats into himself; he is satisfied with himself, equal to everyone, needing no one. As egotism progresses, the "I" begins to dominate in man's view of reality, and selfishness cuts man off from the real world as he loses the ability to perceive a world not centered on him. Weaver proposes to examine the causes of what Nathaniel Hawthorne called the unpardonable sin.

It should come as no surprise that Weaver looks back to the Renaissance in his search for the beginning of this destructive pride. He places the blame on a "split in the theory of knowledge" that pitted the medieval scholars' view of learning as an exercise in humble study and meditation, and a way to learn just how little one truly knew against that of the disciples of Bacon, with his dictum that knowledge is power. The possessors of knowledge begin to swell with the new-found importance of fresh triumphs in the material world even as knowledge is degraded into skill at producing technological wonders. One of the greatest consequences of this erosion of the old understanding of knowledge is the

disappearance of necessity: "[h]aving become incapable of knowing, [the modern egotist] becomes incapable of working."²⁴ The self-centered man no longer realizes that he is a rational creature, obligated to labor to bring an ideal into reality. Work becomes merely a means to gain the sustenance for living; the pursuit of a perfect ideal, the attempt at excellence and craftsmanship, fades away; "[h]ere begins modern labor's history. . . ."²⁵ The degradation of work, caused by egotism, is the first of two great fields of human endeavor Weaver attends to in this chapter.

The egotist, Weaver explains, thinks of himself first and his task second. The product of his labors, the reality of them, is merely the outcome of whim or calculation. He feels no burden to realize a perfect form in his craft; he subordinates the end to self and has his own estimate of the worth of his work. Labor, at length, becomes a commodity that must jockey for favor among other forces, and unilateral settlement is institutionalized. Workers feel at perfect liberty to go on strike until their own arbitrary demands are met. They are no longer rewarded for how their performance measures up against an ideal; their payment is whatever they can extort from their employers. Weaver calls this mindset the greatest disservice done to our age. Men cease to believe that labor is a divine ordinance and begin to view it as they do the secularized state. Wholly man's contrivance, work leaves people discontented with what has been apportioned to them by men no better than themselves. The myth of "service" fails because it turns out to be service to other selfish selves just like them. Each becomes his own master and only grudgingly sells his labor for wages necessary for subsistence. Weaver

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 73.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 74.

recognizes the resultant danger: government will be invited to tyranny of force to provide the discipline that will hold men to production, now that they no longer discipline themselves.

Such are the perils when egotism influences daily labor. But an even more sensitive index of egotism's power over human affairs is to be found in examining the "ravages of egotism in aesthetic expression."²⁶ Weaver spends much more time surveying the doleful state of art in the wake of modern man's magnified arrogance than he did on labor. Egotism, he believes, separates art from nature, so that man leaves the truth of reality and expresses himself in isolation. Art becomes an exhibit of the passions and fancies of the self; form, as in labor, is rejected as confining.

The first field to be surveyed for the effects of this aspect of this descent into the self is literature. The romantic revolt of the 18th century, to which Weaver points as the beginning of literature's decline, first manifested itself in the doctrine of ethical optimism, courtesy of the Earl of Shaftesbury. The earl taught, contrary to the orthodox view of human depravity, that man has a natural moral sense that can not only recognize virtue but can be counted on to cherish it. What this meant for literature was that man's impulses were now sanctioned, and so they were subjected to exploitation. The first proof of this was in the fiction and poetry of sensibility, with men such as Oliver Goldsmith and Edward Young professing contempt for the strictures and forms of city life and literary fashion and turning their attention to the beauties of nature and the experiences of the senses. Novelists like Laurence Sterne followed. They put their heroes through a

"sentimental vagabondage" and exhibited them as men of feeling. In such a world as this, the career of an individual man is considered worth following in minute detail. "When Rousseau wrote at the beginning of *The Confessions*: 'I am different from all men I have seen. If I am not better, at least I am different,' he expressed directly the note of egotistic sensibility."²⁷

At the beginning of the 19th century the work of the early Romantics was hotly debated by the expressionists. They sounded with greater volume the ideas of their forebears, chiefly rebellion against conventions and institutions; whether it was Wordsworth and the speech of common men or Byron and the ruins of Rome, emancipation from sentiments and forms was the theme of the day. As the century progressed, the movement continued apace. Some of the Romantics, though, came to believe that experience and sensibility were a dead end for their art, and they turned for salvation to a painstaking attention to form. Weaver gives them little credit for this, however, since it was just another attempt to escape awareness of man's destiny. Form became obsessive, and so, too, did the turn to imagination, another Romantic effort to escape moral bankruptcy. The Symbolists reacted against the deification of the material world by representing things beyond this world; they were reaching for "the outer reality," but they retained a Romantic's interest in the intimate and individual, and their symbols became so private and their metaphors so fleeting that they widened the gulf between poetry and the public.

Weaver turns to the field of music to catalogue further the damage that egotism has had on the fine arts. Essentially, Weaver does not forgive

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 79.

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 80.

music for progressing beyond Mozart. Bach and the Baroque era ended in 1750, and the Classic era ended with Beethoven, who was himself a proto-Romantic. Weaver approves of the music of Mozart for the graceful beauty he achieved while adhering to traditional forms. He furnished “an example of freedom and restraint, of balance and resiliency. “Here is one of the happiest illustrations, occurring just prior to the Romantic deluge, of what is possible with freedom and law.”²⁸ It would not last long; Beethoven sympathized with the French Revolution, and though he was certainly a musical genius, his music began to evince the dynamism and individualism that foreshadowed the next century’s degradation. Great expressions of feeling, the striving for climaxes, and new forms and subject matter came to characterize the Romantic period of music. Music had become fully secular and more public; indeed, the 19th century saw the advent of the “journalist of music.” Weaver believed that the decay of the symphonic form was directly analogous to the dissolution of the class system. Order was crumbling in society as it was in music.

Music had its Impressionist movement in Liszt and Debussy, who turned to the exploitation of color and atmosphere and the conjuring of visual images. This was the flowering of program music, written to evoke or complement something visual. Absolute music, such as Bach’s or Mozart’s was written for its own sake, with no reference to environment. Weaver notes that the Impressionist phase was a dramatic departure from classical form, with its focus on the “emotive fragments” the painters had been pursuing. Weaver sums up the decline of

Western music into three broad stages: first was architectural music, the highest form; next was thematic music, like the Romantics; and last was textural. “It hardly needs pointing out that this is a movement away from the autonomous and integrated ideal toward a collection of fragments which afford maximum opportunity for subjective and egotistic expression.”²⁹

Weaver reserves special denigration for jazz, which he calls the “clearest of all signs of our age’s deep-seated predilection for barbarism.”³⁰ From its primitive and disreputable origins in the dives of New Orleans it grew like a cancer, gaining legitimacy and power from the attention of professional musicians, leaving in the wake of its noxious ascendancy the wreckage of intellectual restraint and the harmony between reason and sentiment. “That destruction is a triumph of grotesque, even hysterical, emotion over propriety and reasonableness.”³¹ Jazz’s driving impulse is best comprehended in its syncopation, which for Weaver is a symbol of spiritual impatience to get to the realization without paying the dues in aesthetic ritual that leads to less quality and more effect. Form is nearly out of the picture entirely. The jazz artist is far more concerned with pouring out his own feelings at the moment, making the music individualized, and held only to the standard of the self. Jazz is the embodiment of the domination of the passions, the more base animal urges, over the rational and spiritual parts of the soul; “[a]nd it is admitted that what man expresses in music dear to him he will most certainly express in his social practices.”³²

28 *Ibid.* p. 83.

29 *Ibid.* p. 84 f.

30 *Ibid.* p. 85.

31 *Ibid.*

32 *Ibid.* p. 87.

Painting has its story to tell as well, Weaver notes, and one no less dismal than the others. What had once been a unifying force representative of the common social metaphysical dream, as in the art of ancient Greece, started down the path to egotism and fragmentation with the rise of portrait-painting in the 15th century (one is tempted to believe that Weaver never really forgave society for moving beyond medieval Europe). Portraiture was followed by interest in landscapes and, as artists continued to show interest in the physical world, scenes and still life took the place of story on the canvas. The trend culminated in Impressionism, “the revolutionary event of modern painting.”³³ Weaver’s own interpretation of Impressionism is that it brought nominalism into painting. A cardinal tenet of the doctrine is that outline does not exist in nature, so the painting was divorced from convention or form and turned to material things as they appeared to the artist. The repudiation of form was but the first sign of disintegration, however; the acceptance of transience or impermanence was the other. The Impressionists attempted to capture the fugitive effects of light striking an object. Monet, for example, painted the same haystack at three different times of the day. Something fundamental had changed in what artists tried to depict with their palettes: “The symbolizing of perception through representation was being dropped in favor of an immediate contact with the flux of reality.”³⁴

The general character of the movements Weaver diagnosed is an urge to destroy order; it is one more exhibition of the passion for immediacy, the impatience with the medium, with rational restraint and convention. Egotism as a whole,

as it manifests itself in work and art, is a fruit of the heresy that man’s destiny in the world is to lean back and enjoy himself. Weaver asks whether political damnation can be far off if egotism reigns so easily in the hearts of men. Can a people whose internal discipline has atrophied safe-guard their liberty against encroaching government? Will a spoiled people rouse themselves to maintain order, that they might avoid the tyranny that alone is capable of ruling a dissolute populace? Conversely, will an indolent nation stand by as the state swells with greater and greater power, mollifying their fears with promises of peace and prosperity? Weaver has misgivings about the answers.

33 *Ibid.* p. 88.

34 *Ibid.* p. 90.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Great Stereopticon

In chapter five, Weaver introduces one of the signature concepts of the book by examining the response of practical men to the problems presented by the fragmentation of knowledge and the disappearance of a healthy metaphysical dream. Being “below the level of philosophy,” these men—statesmen, businessmen, heads of institutions, and the like—cannot penetrate to the real cause of the decline, so they attempt to restore the social order in a way they can understand. That is, they try to solve the problem by physical means. They perceive their problem to be finding ways to motivate to communal activity a people who no longer share a common system of beliefs. As soon as the individual asserts his autonomy from the community, the shared basis for value judgments and the respect for authority begin to crumble. Therefore, leaders must act to preserve their livelihoods.

That solution is to let religion go quietly into the night and supplant piety with erudition. And the best means to that end, the best way to get the whole citizenry drinking from the same fountain, is the network of information and entertainment so many rely on to tell them what to think. We might call it the media. Richard Weaver calls it the Great Stereopticon.

That wicked but puissant force was understood by our author to be composed of three parts: the press, the motion picture, and radio and television. He goes in that order, first subjecting journalism to his tender ministrations. It must be appreciated, he contends, that the newspaper is a spawn of the machine. It has historically been closely linked with the financial and political exploitation that accompanies

industrialism. The victory of the mechanical press has been complete; we no longer notice the ubiquity of its influence. Weaver dares to consider whether the spread of the art of writing has been the good thing we assume it was. Plato was not so sure. He had Socrates suspicious at best that writing could communicate ideas as well as live discourse; the written word could not change its presentation to the reader, could not adapt the tone or message for the audience. Of course, Weaver is aware he cannot press this point too hard in a book, so he settles for recognition that ideas in print are under a limitation. Newspapers and books will never capture the full flame of abstract thinking as it can develop in person, and therefore media ever gives “one unvarying answer.” This fact causes Weaver to suspect that modern publications wish to minimize discussion—something he takes very seriously.

Except on academic matters, Weaver believes the press is none too keen on an honest, open exchange of views. Phrases are stereotyped and carefully chosen to produce the desired unconscious response, and more of a man's thinking is done for him than he realizes. He is untrained in the skill of recognizing implicit assumptions, uneducated in rhetoric, and does not apprehend the tactics being employed against his private judgment. Moreover, newspapers are under pressure to distort the facts in hopes of holding attention. Excluding advertising, Weaver finds that there is a subtle urge to exaggerate or color the stories beyond necessity in order to sell copy. The press thrives on sensation, scandal, and tragedy, and the worse the news is, the better news it makes. So, if the news isn't compelling enough, then add an accentuation of the unimportant here, some creative quotation there, and you have conflict planted and watered. “Journalism, on the whole, is glad to see a quarrel start and sorry to see it

end.”³⁵ Newspapers love heroes, but they appear to love villains even more.

The second cog in the great machine is the motion picture, whose influence on the young and whose resources for dramatic representation are enormous. But Weaver’s interest lies primarily in the harmful effects of movie-going on the adult minds that find satisfaction in front of the big screen. What we think of as censorship misses the point entirely, he thinks. What needs to be removed or altered is not the passionate kiss or the indecent clothing so much as the smug glorification of materialist values. The selfish hero or heroine stands in need of being censored for representing all the beliefs that are “hurrying us on to perdition.” To be worthy of the name, censorship would have to completely reinterpret most movie themes—the story, not the immodesty, does the most damage to society.

Lastly, there is radio and television, unique (at least in Weaver’s time) for their abilities to transmit the human voice. Weaver’s criticism of radio is essentially that it diminishes our opportunity to select what information we consume. Radio, at least to him, is everywhere (television having not taken over as a dominant media in 1948), and so we grow callous to the juxtaposition of the serious with the ridiculous. Weaver remembers war announcements of the destruction of great cities that were interspersed with advertisements for laxatives or comedy-variety shows. The commentator or announcer, too, bears some of the guilt for the evil their medium has done. By his formula of regular, indifferent inflection, the announcer undermined the poignancy or gravity of his message. Therefore, the radio, more than screen

or paper, was “the cheerful liar.”³⁶ Weaver also indicts the radio for discouraging people to participate in the national conversation. Radio can reach everywhere with its authoritative voice, much like a public address system in a factory; “[i]f we grant the assumptions of the materialists that society must conform to the developments of science, we may as well prepare ourselves for the monolithic state.”³⁷

Weaver moves from specific iniquity to general: having examined particular distortions by the Stereopticon, he turns to the fundamental source of the harm it does. That harm is fourfold, and the first is the fact that the machine is used to pervert the information that flows through it. The data “takes its significance from a sickly metaphysical dream.”³⁸ Weaver notes that those in control of the beast select their subject matter based on horrible assumptions about reality, and so disasters, intrigues, scandals, and the darker side of humanity becomes the norm. Fundamental to the dream also is the doctrine of progress, which will ensure that popularity and freshness and magnitude determine what is approved by the media. Shallow evaluation of today in light of yesterday, if it is remembered at all, replaces judgment by a standard of perfection (a form). Even worse, the “metaphysicians of publicity” have chosen to preach that the meaning of life is happiness through comfort. The physical appetites must be satisfied; when they are, life is complete, and everyone can get along. Man does not need to be good, and he does not need to reflect on what is the best life. He just needs to have his bodily desires sated, live like normal folks, and die before he is a drain on the economy. Complacency

35 *Ibid.* p. 97.

36 *Ibid.* p. 103.

37 *Ibid.* p. 104.

38 *Ibid.*

is the result, and it acts as a soothing blanket shielding the common man from thinking too deeply about the meaning underlying his daily routine. Philosophers make poor consumers, and employers need men firmly attached to this present world. The operators of the Stereopticon have decided on what level they want people to think; “[t]hey are protecting a materialist civilization growing more insecure and panicky as awareness filters through that it is over an abyss.”³⁹

If Weaver’s criticisms of the media machine could be summed up, it would be done by saying that the Stereopticon insulates people from serious reflection on the permanent things of life. Plato’s cave has been perfected in the modern world. Men are more firmly chained than ever, watching the images dance by on the wall ahead of them, still unaware that those images are shadows of lies, if more skillfully done today than ever before. But Weaver sees some reason for hope in the enduring suspicion of men of propaganda (particularly in the early Cold War years) and, indeed, of the media as a whole and in the rejection by some modern poets of the middle-class world picture and its unoriginal language.

Weaver dismisses the plea that modern media keeps the people well informed. It may stuff a man full of facts, but it discourages meditation and philosophic reflection, keeping him instead flitting from one event to another, submerged in the fragmentation of knowledge. “The constant stream of sensation, eulogized as lively propagation of what the public wants to hear, discourages the pulling together of events from past time into a whole for contemplation.”⁴⁰ Such a man as would retain

some of his humanity would do well to turn his eyes to things of natural beauty, things of permanence, if he would avoid falling to the mental malady Weaver discusses next.

39 *Ibid.* p. 106.

40 *Ibid.* p. 111.

CHAPTER SIX

The Spoiled-Child Psychology

Man, having been taught by the Great Stereopticon that his destiny is earthly and his paradise temporal, expects the solution to his labors and discomforts to be easily attainable. He has taken on what Weaver calls the “spoiled-child psychology” of the urban masses; he thinks himself entitled to gratification of his desires. We can hardly wonder at his condition, though, for he has been told time and again that he has a right to happiness, to ease, and to political power and material prosperity. When those promises fail to come true, modern man becomes first disillusioned, and then angry. The world, he learns, is no simple machine to be manipulated by the experts for his benefit. He still has to get up in the morning and go to his daily toil to earn his bread. Weaver notes that his bitterness comes from having forgotten that man is the product, in his maturity, of discipline and struggle and effort; his ego has been inflated to the point of unfitting himself for the trial of life.

What happens next is not difficult to anticipate. For a sense of transcendent purpose or mission, the pampered modern urbanite would substitute comfort. He no longer recognizes an end greater than himself; he no longer subordinates the self to the community at need. He has severed himself from all ties, all reminders of human frailty and contingency, trusting in technology to free him more and more from the dictates of nature. And why should he not? Science has promised him all the desires of his heart without his having to work for them. Work is not prayer or an approach to an ideal. It is a hated necessity—but only for the time being. “When men must no longer win bread by the sweat of their brow, the primal curse will have ceased; and we are assured daily

by advertisements that the goal is not too far off.”⁴¹ Such a worship of comfort, Weaver finds, is another aspect of modern man’s decision to live wholly in this world. What he wishes to ask is whether the cult of comfort, which unfits a man for a full life, follows necessarily from a loss of belief in ideas. When men reject the supernatural, intangible goals for life in favor of material gain, will men not seek more and more pleasure and gratification while working less and less for them?

Not surprisingly, Weaver places the first step of this path into puerile psychology in the Middle Ages, when the ethic of Plato was abandoned and the ethic of Aristotle adopted. The latter’s doctrine of a mean between two extremes, a life accommodated to the world and avoiding unpleasant extremes of virtue or vice, commended itself to the Renaissance gentleman and later to the bourgeoisie in its turn. The Platonic pursuit of virtue until worldly circumstances lost importance was left in the dust. Christianity makes clear that there are virtues that do not lose efficacy through increase but that is a harder road than the prudent acquiescence that even the Roman Catholic Church, with Thomism, chose to adopt. Eventually, even the idea of the hero would begin to rust, for the hero is made by exertion, by sacrifice and endurance of hardship, all the things that are anathema to the spoiled child modernity has produced. Weaver fears that this new psychology may leave the Western world unfit for the political struggle against communism that loomed ahead. (Again, we must remember that Weaver wrote in 1948.) He finds it ironic that the free world, supposedly occupying the high moral ground, cannot defend itself in the world of ideas, as a result of having grown soft and flabby in pursuit of

41 *Ibid.* p. 116.

ease. The Bolsheviks, however, who have never forgotten that life is a struggle, are making great strides in the spread of their ideas to new adherents. We have relaxed ourselves right out of the ability to think. The question now is whether we will continue to atrophy until our defeat is certain or find a source of discipline and accept the hard realities of life on a planet shared with men who wish us ill. The double danger here is that the Western state may decide to arrogate power to itself to enforce that discipline, a move that would undermine, to say the least, the ideals we supposedly hold dear. The Cold War for Weaver is just one reminder that science has not exempted us from life's struggle.

Weaver believes that the failure of discipline is traceable to “warfare between the productive and consumptive faculties,”⁴² by which he refers to the conflict of modern man's desires and what is necessary to satisfy those desires. Man has been allowed to believe that his consumptive faculty can order society; but consuming does not produce, and productivity requires labor and subordination and the deferment of gratification. This inconsistency between belief and practicality is a dilemma for the child-man, because the more he is spoiled, the less he can provide for his own consumption. Muscles wasting away from disuse will soon fail to provide the effort of procuring means for further consumption of goods and services. In a democracy, there is a great temptation to use the power of the state to raise living standards and by authoritarian control dictate the balance of production and consumption. Men rise to power promising the masses something for nothing, and men will eventually eat the seed corn from their hands. Their love of eating grows as their willingness to farm and cook withers.

Of course, history has proven the failure of fascist and socialist systems to come through on their guarantees, but what cannot be disputed, according to Weaver, is that they did succeed in putting an end—temporarily—to disorder and frustration by having a scapegoat. The spoiled child is frustrated, and his new government provides him something to hate. Minorities, aristocrats, intellectuals, millionaires, all who could be considered privileged, have fallen under the axe at one time or another. Any perception of superiority is damning; even thrift is regarded as evidence of superiority, so that capital is under attack. Diligence and prosperity require looking behind and ahead, things the spoiled man has forgotten. When he sees those better off than himself, he sees an inequality of condition but not of merit—his principles do not allow it—and moves to eliminate it. “The mass simply decides that it can get something without submitting to the discipline of work and proceeds to dispossess.”⁴³

One last thing: the spoiled child that is modern society has lost the ability to think. Like a pampered child of the rich, man today is spoiled by soft conditions and government programs, knowing he does not have to think to survive. He has a sort of contempt for reality. Weaver finds that this story of weakness stems from a false world picture, an unhealthy metaphysical dream. Economic advantage has produced a softening of conditions and of men, and as ever-easier ways are sought for attaining the same advantage, the decline continues apace. If industrial democracy, bent on “social justice” and the redistribution of wealth, batters away faithfully at private property and enterprise, production will diminish. Society must ask itself: Where is a source of discipline?

42 *Ibid.* p. 124.

43 *Ibid.* p. 127.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Last Metaphysical Right

Weaver has brought us a long way in his survey of the sad decadence and decay of modern Western civilization. He now changes course and begins to propose a plan for reform and restoration, beginning with man's last abstract right.

Any reform must begin by convincing man that he is in trouble. If he cannot be convinced he is headed for disaster, he will not change his path. But we cannot teach virtue directly; instead, we must drive a fresh wedge between the material and the spiritual—we must revive dualism. Without this separation, we would not be able to pull ourselves upward; we would have no point of reference higher than where we are. Man must admit the existence of ideals before he can admit he has failed to meet them. If he will deny that whatever is, is right, he has made a start. “Upon this rock of metaphysical right we shall build our house.”⁴⁴ If ultimates are admitted again, value, significance, and definition itself can breathe free air once more, relativism and skepticism can be defeated, and we can live in a world of certitude once more. Weaver looks around for a rallying point to begin his charge against modernity and fastens upon the right of private property, the last metaphysical right remaining to us. The prerogatives of religion, of sex, and of vocation, have all been swept aside by materialism, but private property (an absolute right according to the French Revolution) remained secure in the constitutions of the 19th century.

The first great use of private property can be to defenders of order and tradition as an incontestable truth. Private property is dogma; it is a self-justifying right, but Weaver relishes this one right which does not rise and fall with current opinion or answer “the sophistries of the world.” He is clear about what he means by property: not the intangible kind brought into being by finance capitalism, such as stocks and bonds, but land. The link between the property and the owner is crucial for Weaver. Corporations make ownership anonymous—there is no tie between the man and his property, nothing on which to stake his name and honor. The sort of property Weaver lauds takes the form of “independent farms, of local businesses, of homes owned by the occupants, where individual responsibility gives significance to prerogative over property.”⁴⁵ Through property, men can exercise their will and be full men, deriving purpose and provision for his children from his labors and building a reputation of integrity and skill. Man becomes attached to his property, and he now has an entrenchment against the “swirling forces of social collapse” that lead to statism. He has protection against the ire of the state should he decide to dissent and criticize. Against an otherwise omnipotent state, a man may fall back upon the right of private property to support him. Weaver notes that, in the West, this reliance upon one's land is a custom of long standing. If they fail, they can go back to their own piece of the world and do as they will. Private property is a bulwark of political freedom; if the state can take your land, it is harder to play the role of the loyal opposition.⁴⁶

44 *Ibid.* p. 130.

45 *Ibid.* p. 133.

46 Sadly, recent developments have made it easier for cities to seize land, even for private use. Weaver would have known the depth of our loss.

Property also serves as an aid to the survival of liberal education in this country. “Virtually without exception, liberal education, that is to say, education centered on ideas and ideals, has fared best in those institutions which draw their income from private sources.”⁴⁷ Unlike public institutions, private schools are not forced to justify the usefulness of their curricula to the job market. Private schools can preserve pure knowledge and the training of the mind, such as John Henry Newman advocated; they afford a haven for dying aristocratic studies like Greek and Latin. Private schools, in short, can do as they see fit, but, “it seems fair to say that the opposite of the private is the prostitute.”⁴⁸ In addition to educational dissent, property also provides an opportunity for training in virtue. Freedom can prove the man. With property he can exercise his virtue, making it an active principle in his labors, shouldering his own burdens and flourishing in defiance of those who would make the state the great provider.

Weaver moves from examining the benefits of property in our time of crisis to its strengths in ordinary times, among which is its encouragement of providence, which, as he views it, requires an awareness of past and future atypical of our provincial age. Providence calls for reason and imagination, because it recognizes that past diligence is responsible for present reward and that present toil will produce future prosperity. Those who labor can store up for themselves a compensation the indigent cannot have. Property, in short, encourages industry and foresight. One is reminded of the old fable of the ant and the grasshopper. Moral virtue is also abetted by property’s resistance to what Weaver calls adulteration and we would call inflation.

Popular government is prone to forsake honor and integrity and steal from their creditors by printing money, thereby devaluing the national debt and driving prices up on real goods. Productive private property can be a kind of sanctuary against robbery of this sort, providing a more stable value and keeping in place the balance between effort and reward.

Moreover, as mentioned above, there is a natural connection between the sense of honor and the personal relationship to property. Real property can still maintain a tie between the owner or maker and his product. The rise of finance capital saw names change to “General” this and “Standard” that, allowing men to anonymously embezzle or adulterate the quality of the product. Modern corporations too often use the assembly line and the advertiser to promise more and deliver less. Nearness to perfection as an ideal is cast aside in the lust for greater profit, and the world is starved for value. “A genuine article of fine material, put together by that craftsmanship which is oblivious of time, is almost certain today to be in the super-luxury class, if indeed it is not already a museum exhibit.”⁴⁹ Housing furnishes a fine example, for Weaver. Once built to last for generations, and built by the owner, homes today are made by anonymous builders for anonymous buyers with an eye on the bottom line, and “after 20 years they are falling apart.” As craftsmanship retreats before efficiency; the cheap drives out the dear.

Weaver has a final point to make about property. Distributive ownership of private property (widespread ownership) might correct a subversion of values called economic determinism. Industrialism and corporations

47 *Ibid.* p. 136.

48 *Ibid.* p. 137.

49 *Ibid.* p. 142. The author finds this passage particularly poignant.

brought the enthronement of economic man. Property aggregated into large estates in few hands, and it seemed to many that society was a playing field for irresistible economic forces. Man was viewed as an animal after food and shelter before he was anything else, and politics, art, and all else was subordinated to the struggle for material accommodation. Such a worldview was shattered by the Great Depression. In that catastrophe, economic activity was firmly subordinated to political control, and economic man was no more. “The principle re-emerged that what is done with economic goods must be somehow related to man’s destiny.”⁵⁰ Of course, Weaver knows that the prospect of the state as arbiter of the economy has its own terrors, but they serve to put before us again the question of how the spirit of obedience, of piety, can be preserved in a secular society. The bureaucrat will be no better than the robber barons, so if we wish to restore society, we must “demass” the masses. Property will be crucial. A society of responsible persons, free in their labor and enjoyment of private property would be one amenable to the building of character. Property to Weaver is an essential part of any scheme that assumes man has a free will between better and worse, and in that sense it may be said to be sacred. Such a metaphysical right, if defended, will not only limit the power of the state but also serve as a springboard for an offensive against modernity and the recovery of other inviolable rights from the encroachment of the night.

50 *Ibid.* p. 144.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Power of the Word

In chapter eight, Weaver counterattacks the forces of dissolution on the field of language, namely semantics, a modern phenomenon with roots in the Middle Ages and the nominalism of Occam that followed. Traditionally, mankind regarded the word as having a divine element—by words did the Lord God establish the heavens and fashion the earth, and by the Word was salvation brought to men. Speech is a principle of intelligibility and order, or used to be; semantics regards words as so many convenient signs, without any necessary reference to physical reality or ideas. Such a philosophy is inspired by a conviction that language fails to comprehend the infinite variety of life and by a fear of the independent power of words. In their effort to remove any barriers to immediate apprehension of the physical world, semanticists are bent on stripping words of all meaning that might connect them to a metaphysical dream, to ideational reality. Noting that people today disagree quite frequently over basic issues of life, semanticists propose to put an end to any predication of truth. Words will not really mean anything; they will just serve as useful signs for mental pictures we have agreed on beforehand. “The aim of semantics is to dissolve form and thereby destroy inclination in the belief that the result will enable a scientific manipulation. Our argument is that the removal of inclination destroys the essence of language.”⁵¹ If the ability of words is to tend toward something beyond themselves with independent existence, language will become meaningless.

Weaver argues that if the semanticists have their way, if all debatable meanings and references to

abstract ideas are removed from language in the pursuit of scientific precision, teleology itself will collapse. We would have no way to speak of ends, or purposes, of values or morality. Our language would have lost its ability to reach above ourselves, and we would have no way to order our priorities, except at random. Weaver grants that men disagree over meaning and seem never to reconcile, but he believes that by referring to first principles we can discover who is right and who is not. If there are transcendent purposes and attainable truth, we ought not to expect unison from those whose degrees of apprehension of truth vary. The proponents of semantics would do away with all associations of words with fixed ideas; in fact, they would very much like to get beyond words altogether and “seize the object barehanded.”⁵² Weaver illustrates this classic philosophical problem when he asks whether we know what the word “horse” means more clearly when we can point to the animal that we associate with that word or when we use the word in the abstract, in its generic significance. Which came first, the word “horse” or the horse? If the semanticists are right, the word just happened to be associated with that particular animal—there is no form or idea of horse to which real animals must adhere to deserve the name. Weaver is ready to assert that they ask for the impossible, which is that we can never break out of the circle of language and grasp the objects behind. Definition, he admits, is ultimately circular. If one defines a word with other words, and then attempts to define those words, eventually one runs out of explanations and arrives back where the process began. Sooner or later, as Aristotle knew, ultimate definition is a matter of intuition. We just know certain things somehow, without being able to explain them in speech. Some knowledge comes to the mind as sight comes

51 *Ibid.* p. 153.

52 *Ibid.* p. 156.

to the eyes. "If we can never succeed in getting out of the circle of definition, is it not true that all conventional definitions are but reminders of what we already, in a way, possess?"⁵³

Weaver has gone to all this trouble because words are "our reminders of knowledge." Language is a storehouse for common memory; words embody others' experiences and allow us to express meaning beyond ourselves, meaning in currency with other human beings. How else could we communicate? How else could we even think? Weaver challenges the doubtful to try the experiment of thinking without words. He insists words have meaning in themselves, though a word may not exhaust the meaning; it may be shared with other words. Semantics is another flight from the center, another effort at fragmenting knowledge, and at finding reality in a mass of peripheral meanings. The semanticists are working to substitute things for words and regard the "synthesizing power" of language with horror. They are atomists.

The offensive against semantics will bring us to rescue symbolism from the clutches of the positivists. They have agreed that there is but one world, the one apparent to the senses, and so anything that purports to be a symbol or a bridge to an ideational world must be opposed. One example is the effort to remove adornment or elaborate design from dress. Crowns, cassocks, flags, medals, cords, ribbons, pins, and the like, whether sacred, profane, or military, are under attack. Any reminder of distinction or meaning beyond the immediate and sensate, any symbol of an idea, is in the crosshairs of the positivists. And the same tendency is to be found in the decay of honorifics. Modern men scorn the distinction of "doctor" and "professor" and so choose no longer to use them. The

military clings to its ranks, but in general, as honorifics refer to hierarchy and judgments of value, they are hated by those who would forget the past and ignore the transcendent.

Weaver knows what is at stake. He refers to evidence that students whose command of language is greatest tend to do best in the classroom, whatever their discipline. He refers to the ability of poets to comprehend truth more quickly and more clearly than most men. But he knows that skill in language must depend on the survival of language itself. Fresh in Weaver's mind was the use of language by propagandists during the Second World War. What was "bold" or "aggressive" by our forces would have been "treacherous" or "merciless" on the other. "Democracy" can mean universal suffrage for one and the redistribution of wealth by the coercive power of the state for another. Tradition has been defeated, and the generations are losing their ability to speak to one another. "Progress makes father and child live in different worlds, and speech fails to provide a means to bridge them. The word is almost in limbo, where the positivists have wished to consign it."⁵⁴

Finally we have arrived at Weaver's practical undertaking: a rehabilitation of the word through education. Man, he says, needs a twofold training: first, he requires literature and rhetoric, and second he needs logic and dialectic. The young are creatures of feeling and imagination who want to feel but do not know how. Good poetry and literature can educate their emotions and fashion in them a love of the beautiful. Plato believed music and literature could bring virtue into the soul, but it and its instruction must be of the first quality. Those poets and authors who have

53 *Ibid.* p. 157.

54 *Ibid.* p. 164.

best used language to express the sublime and the true are the best masters for the training of sentiment and the introduction of feeling and experience common to mankind. Weaver notes also that Latin and Greek ought be emphasized. There is nothing like translation to force clarity and exactness in the use of words and to insulate the mind from the looseness and exaggeration rampant today. Socratic dialectic is the next step in the rehabilitation; it will provide the precision of definition and order of thought necessary for a healthy metaphysic. Dialectic, the “science of naming,” will require the student to see limitation and distinction, and will train him to think properly, a training that will stand him in far better stead than today’s vague admonition to think for himself. A man thus educated will be equipped to apprehend and appreciate the power of words to provide and maintain order; he knows that “in the beginning was the Word.”⁵⁵

55 *Ibid.* p. 169.

CHAPTER NINE

Piety and Justice

Weaver concludes his book with a chapter written to bring us back near the beginning, to a crowning concept that governs man's attitude toward the world: piety. Modern man has rejected this virtue by destroying what generations of his forefather venerated. He has taken his crime as proof of virtue, and the worse he becomes, the harder it is to convince him of his error. The order of nature has fallen victim to the triumph of science and technology. Man will no longer admit the right to exist of anything not of his own contriving, and he seeks to impose his own plans on his environment and remold it in his image. He is impious. "Piety is a discipline of the will through respect. It admits the right to exist of things larger than the ego, of things different from the ego."⁵⁶ There are three things that must be regarded with a renewed spirit of piety: nature, our neighbors, and the past.

Nature must be admitted to reflect some kind of order, an order that predates us and will outlast us, an order beyond our complete understanding. Weaver believes that man's recent preoccupation with devising machines that manipulate some aspect of nature for our benefit has brought unintended consequences. The more we are connected by transportation and communication advances, the more delicate the world becomes, and people become less resilient and tolerant for lack of separation and privacy. Obsession with the reconstruction of nature is an adolescent malady; maturity brings a certain acceptance of the order of things, an acknowledgement that man's powers

are limited. The spoiled child wants to tear down what is to try building what he wants to be. He has lost his proper relationship to nature, which Weaver defines as a mean between the extremes of total, unreflecting immersion in nature and total abstraction, the denial of any goodness in nature, the extreme amenable to technology. What we ought to seek is a way of life that enjoys and respects nature for what it is. "Thus we may say of the great material world that we do not desire it chiefly but that we think it has a place in the order of things which is entitled to respect."⁵⁷

The second form of piety accepts the goodness in other beings and other ways of life.⁵⁸ Pious man will recognize that other people have just as much a right to live as he; Weaver, to no one's surprise, thinks back to medieval chivalry as a tradition that took formal cognizance of the basic fact that God made all people, even one's enemies. Their existence, too, is a part of God's creation; different does not necessarily mean inferior. Piety brings a respect for their existence and a precondition for the tolerance of our fellow man.

Lastly we must be pious with regard to the past. It is, after all, all we have, since the present is always moving and the future is as yet unknown. Memory makes us who we are. We lose our own identity if we attempt to cast off the past as an inhibition to our desires. Awareness of the past is an antidote, says Weaver, to both egotism and shallow optimism. Such knowledge can teach caution about ideas of man's perfectibility and schemes to renovate humanity. The fall of the Roman

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* p. 172.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* p. 175.

⁵⁸ This form is reminiscent of Kirk's belief that conservatism cherished the variety and mystery of life.

Empire, for instance, can make one doubt the theory of automatic progress. “The reader of history is chastened, and as he closes his book, he may say, with Dante, in *The Inferno*: ‘I had not thought death had undone so many.’”⁵⁹

Weaver mourns society’s loss of its sense of obligation and piety and turns to examine certain forms of impiety currently operating as disintegrating forces. The first of these is the specious ideal of “equality of the sexes.” Even so profound a distinction as that between male and female is but one challenge. Every effort has been made to obliterate the divergence in role, conduct, and dress of the sexes. But Weaver believes that women have lost the prestige they once had and have failed to gain real standing in the business world (Again, it is necessary to remember Weaver published in 1948). “After the gentleman went, the lady had to go too. No longer protected, the woman now has her career, in which she makes a drab pilgrimage from two-room apartment to job to divorce court.”⁶⁰

Next in line is the loss of respect for what is generally called individuality. Weaver, however, prefers the term personality, for to him that term better describes the nature of the self as something given, something originating beyond ourselves that allows us to be unique while taking part in the living community of others. Personality is held in contempt by those who would enforce uniformity and crush dissent and is disbelieved by those who doubt its transcendent origin. A proper piety here would grant everyone the right to order their own lives and believe as they will.

Lastly, and most importantly for Weaver, there is the modern impiety that scorns the heritage of the past. This modern impiety is seen as an unfortunate burden, to be cast off in favor of our abstract designs. Piety toward history acknowledges that past events happened for a reason, and according to a divine purpose. Modern man cannot admit this providence, for it would be to admit wisdom superior to his own. His pride is revealed in his impatience over the limitations the past has imposed on him. He determines to force nature to reveal all her secrets and compel the world to submit to his will in a way history reveals has never been possible. He will not endure the discipline of time; he casts aside quality in favor of immediate gratification. Form and style, which require time and restraint, are discarded. He expects all delights to be free, and, like the child, he expects all paradoxes to be resolved for him and all difficulties removed. But if he learns that he is a creature, dependent on creation and lacking full understanding of its ends, his picture of the world would change profoundly.

Weaver returns us to the beginning by asking how we can encourage men to see their own miserable condition. Men today cannot see the cure; they believe what they need is more of the disease. Once men are convinced of their state, then men have to decide whether they truly want to get well. The decline of religion is ominous for the answer to this question. For, when it becomes plain that the rewards of this world are not equal to its pain and the possibility of another world is denied, calculation demands ending it all. If there is no Hell, there is no justice. If man does decide he wants civilization to live, he must then be willing to pay the price. Will he finally admit that reward only comes with labor? Will he be

59 *Ibid.* p. 177.

60 *Ibid.* p. 179.

willing to see comfort as a seduction and set prosperity aside in favor of some sterner ideal? Will he accept duty as the cost of freedom? Such things call for deep reformation, and Weaver is not sure we are not too far gone to affect it. Still, those who can see the road ahead must make their counsel known, for we are all in this together. It may be, he thinks, that we await a great change, a great disaster that will bring home once more the reality of evil and the need for virtue. "If such is the most we can hope for, something toward that revival may be prepared by acts of thought and volition in this waning day of the West."⁶¹ Weaver's message, in the end, is to watch, and to pray.

61 *Ibid.* p. 187.

