

Some notes on conservatism, by Dr. Andreas Kinnegin

Being a conservative in Europe these days means having to explain yourself to other people on a daily basis. Indeed, it means having to justify, having to defend yourself on a daily basis. Very often, that is no fun at all. That is the case, for instance, when one is accused in the press of wanting to overthrow the government by force of arms, as happened to us about a year ago. Such accusations are so silly and out of touch with reality that I sometimes really don't know what to say in reply. But there is also a positive side to having to defend, to justify and to explain yourself all the time. It forces you to think through your beliefs and convictions, and thus constitutes a vigorous impulse to educate yourself. Being questioned all the time, one is bound to come up with some good answers, if only so as not to make a fool of one self.

In view of the fact that most people have little interest in and even less knowledge of fundamental principles and general ideas, it will come as no surprise that the questions usually asked are about more or less specific political issues. I am sure that you all have the same experience. To give a few examples: in the past year I have been asked what I, as a conservative, thought of the war in Iraq, of gay marriage, of the European Constitution, of the inclusion of Turkey into the European Union, of the role of Islam in the west and in the world, of sending Dutch troops to Afghanistan, of the Kyoto-treaty, of introducing lay justice in the Dutch legal system, of the causes of unemployment and poverty, etc. etc.

How to go about answering these questions? First of all, I believe that one should beware of thinking that one can and ought to provide the right answer to all the specific issues people ask one's opinion about. It is very flattering of course, when other people seem to take an interest in one's opinions, but we should try not to let our vanity get the upper hand and as a consequence say things we might regret later. Let us keep in mind that a wise man once said that the difference between him and other men was primarily that he knew when he did not know. Of course, admitting one's ignorance should not become a license to stall certain questions, and forget about them. That is not what the wise man just quoted did and would have wanted us to do. All he meant to say was that we ought to carefully think things through, before we express an opinion. Otherwise we not only make ourselves look ridiculous, but we also damage the cause we are standing for.

Secondly, when after due consideration we decide that we have pondered over the question sufficiently to be able to answer it with some gravity and authority,

we must always provide the caveat first that the answer is merely *a*, not *the* conservative answer. For, as we all know, *the* conservative answer to many questions we simply do not have.

Take for instance the war in Iraq. What is the conservative position on that issue? Should we be in favor of it or against it? And what about the way it is being waged? What is the conservative view on the number of troops in Iraq? What is the conservative view on Guantanamo Bay? It is obvious that conservatives differ amongst themselves, so no one should think that he can provide *the* conservative view. Let us resist the temptation to pronounce everyone who disagrees with us on a topic a heretic and thus not a real conservative. None of us is infallible. The heretic might just have a point. And even if he doesn't, his presence helps us to sharpen our minds in responding to his errors.

That is all very well, you might by now be thinking, but doesn't what you say entail the skeptical and nominalist conclusion that there is and can be no such thing as conservatism? My reply to that is: not necessarily. Every horse is unique and different from every other horse, but all horses, whatever their *differentia specifica*, belong to the same genus: each and everyone of them is a horse. Might that not be the case with conservatives as well? What we should try to do then is to determine and define, or at least describe, not wherein conservatives differ from each other, their *differentia specifica*, but wherein they are all conservatives, what makes them all conservatives. We need to go after the characteristics of the genus.

Is that possible? Is there such a thing as a conservative genus? Can we determine what a man must definitely think and believe, so as to be legitimately called conservative? Can we ascertain some invariable core convictions of conservatism, which must be shared by anyone aspiring to the title of conservative? A true skeptic and nominalist would of course argue that that is impossible. But I think he is wrong. There are indeed a few core convictions that every conservative is bound to share. Not on the level of specific political issues, to be sure, but on the level of fundamental principles and general ideas. It is there that one will find the persistent core of the conservative persuasion.

What is it, this persistent core? What principles and general ideas are we talking about? The shortest way to sum them up is to refer, like Leo Strauss, to two cities: Athens and Jerusalem. Or to refer, like Edmund Burke, to two spirits: the spirit of the gentleman and the spirit of religion. The two men, though using a different idiom, have exactly the same thing in mind. Burke's spirit of the gentleman

is precisely what Straus meant when he referred to Athens. And Burke's spirit of religion is the exact equivalent to Strauss' Jerusalem.

Athens and Jerusalem, the spirit of the gentleman and the spirit of religion. What do these short, all too short expressions stand for, what do they portend? They stand for two intellectual and moral traditions. On the one hand, the poetry, drama, oratory, historiography, and philosophy of the ancient Greeks and Romans. And on the other hand the Christian view of man and the world, anchored in the Bible, particularly in the Gospels and the letters of Paul, and expounded upon in later centuries by theological luminaries. It is these two intellectual and moral traditions that have, in combination, by and large shaped Western civilization. Conservatism, it seems to me, is in essence nothing but the defense and vindication of these traditions against other, conflicting intellectual and moral traditions. A defense and vindication that is driven by the conviction that the ideas and ideals these two traditions stand for are the most excellent mankind has as yet discovered and will probably ever discover. Why are these ideas and ideals the most excellent? Because they fathom most deeply the human condition, and provide man with the most accurate conception of his true needs, and thus of what must be striven for and what must be shunned, so as to lead a good life.

Ecce conservatism. Of course, this description is still rather abstract and vague, and needs to be fleshed out. Most importantly, I must say a bit more about what ideas and ideals the two traditions stand for. But before we do that, let us first turn our attention to the conflicting intellectual and moral traditions I mentioned, against which conservatives defend Athens and Jerusalem, the spirit of the gentleman and the spirit of religion.

The principal conflicting traditions, or so it seems when we consult the handbooks, are liberalism and socialism. And undeniably, there is much truth to that opinion. The words conservative and conservatism go back to the early nineteenth century, and were coined to mark off a position in opposition to both liberalism and socialism. Conservatives have vigorously fought the tenets of both of these ideologies in the past two centuries. Happily, one of these traditions, socialism, all but disappeared from the face of the earth some years ago, except in a few out of the way places like North-Korea, and the jungle of South-America. Let us hope and pray that it will never become fashionable again. Liberalism on the other hand is still alive and kicking. In fact, after the demise of socialism it has become the predominant worldview in the West. It is clear that conservatives will be very busy

fighting the tenets of liberalism in the years to come, both in its social-democratic and in its libertarian variation.

Instead of going into the topic of liberalism any further, however, I'll cut it short here, because I believe that liberalism or socialism are not conservatism's real antagonists. The real antagonists are other, profounder philosophies, of which liberalism and socialism are mere practical, political offshoots. I have in mind the Enlightenment and Romanticism. I will say a few words about both now, beginning with the Enlightenment.

There seems to me to be a lot of confusion among conservatives about how to judge the Enlightenment. Everyone knows of course that Burke's *Reflections* were directed not only against the French Revolution, but also and especially against the thought of the French Enlightenment thinkers, which had caused the Revolution in his eyes. As a consequence, conservatives from the days of Burke until today commonly have a negative view of the French Enlightenment. When it comes to an evaluation of the Enlightenment in general, however, very few conservatives would regard themselves as its opponent. On the contrary, they tend to see themselves as against the French, but in favor of the Scottish and American Enlightenment. The Scottish Enlightenment, that is to say the thought of men like David Hume, Adam Smith, and Adam Ferguson. And the American Enlightenment, meaning the thought of the Founding Fathers, of men like James Madison, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson.

It seems to me that this way of looking upon the Enlightenment is not very enlightening, to say the least. To begin with, the differences between the various so-called Enlightenment thinkers are frequently huge. David Hume and Adam Ferguson have very little in common. Neither did John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. The differences become even greater when we compare thinkers from different countries with each other. There is very little Adam Smith shares with Thomas Jefferson, let alone with Voltaire or Diderot. This raises the question why we should call all these men Enlightenment thinkers in the first place. Merely because they lived and wrote in the second half of the eighteenth century? That does not seem a good criterion to me. A hundred years from now the present age will perhaps be called the Liberal Age. But I don't suppose that you would be content to be categorized as a liberal by posterity, just because you happened to have lived in the Liberal Age. To get a more accurate picture of the Enlightenment we should begin by freeing ourselves from the

idea that everyone writing in the second half of the eighteenth century was therefore an Enlightenment thinker.

But that is not enough. We should also free ourselves from the idea that the Enlightenment is something that occurred in the second half of the eighteenth century. For what occurred in the second half of the eighteenth century under the name of Enlightenment was in essence not more than a popularization of the revolution in intellectual and moral thought brought about more than a century before by two Britons, a Frenchman and a Dutchman. I am talking of Francis Bacon (1561-1626), Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), René Descartes (1596-1650) and Baruch de Spinoza (1632-1677). These are the real fathers of the Enlightenment. To understand the basic convictions of the Enlightenment one must turn to them.

What Bacon, Hobbes, Descartes and Spinoza share is above all the belief that most of what had been thought before them about man and the world was pure nonsense. And they make no bones about it too. They spit it out without reserve. With the exception of Euclidean geometry, almost everything the ancients and the Christian Middle Ages had brought forward by way of explaining man and the world, in their view, might as well be binned right away. Bacon, Hobbes, Descartes and Spinoza are all convinced that a completely new intellectual start must be made in order to make sense of things. And that is precisely what they do in their works: make a new start.

Before I say something about this new start, let us first go back over what I just said. I said that Bacon, Hobbes, Descartes and Spinoza believed that almost everything the ancients and the Christian Middle Ages had brought forward by way of explaining man and the world should be disposed of, because it is nonsensical. What exactly does that mean? It means that the intellectual and moral traditions earlier described, harking back to Athens and Jerusalem, expressing the spirit of the gentleman and the spirit the religion, should be disposed of, because they are nonsensical. So what we encounter in the philosophy of Bacon, Hobbes, Descartes, and Spinoza is an unprecedented, out-and-out break with these traditions.

Not surprisingly, there was an immediate reaction from thinkers within these traditions, which were quick in recognizing the danger posed by the new and revolutionary ideas of the four men. Think of writers like Blaise Pascal in France and the Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth in England. This, it seems to me, is the real hour of birth of conservatism. We should not date it back to somewhere around the end of the eighteenth century or the beginning of the nineteenth century, when

Burke wrote his *Philippicae*, and when the words conservative and conservatism were devised. We should date it back to the period between 1650 and 1670, when the first books appeared, which self-consciously defended the tradition of Athens and Jerusalem against the new Enlightenment thinking.

Let me add to this, by way of an interjection, that alternatively, one might also say, of course, that conservatism, being the vindication of the traditions of Athens and Jerusalem, has existed ever since these traditions came into being. That is at least since the fifth century before Christ and the first century after Christ respectively. On that view, all that changed around 1650 is that conservatism acquired a formidable new enemy. However that may be, it seems to me to be definitively wrong to let conservatism begin with Burke.

Let us go back to the Enlightenment now and ask ourselves what conservatives have from its beginning found so objectionable in it. For the sake of brevity and clarity, I will limit myself to a short discussion of one important point: the idea, already mentioned, that almost everything that has been thought and said in the past is silly and false. Conservatism has always rejected that idea. That is not to say that everything that has been thought and said was marvelous and true. Far from it. Particularly pre-Enlightenment natural science, based largely on Aristotle and Ptolemy, was obviously in many ways wrong. Due to the techniques provided by the Enlightenment thinkers, such as the calculus, the resolute-composite method, and the doing of controlled experiments, in combination with their basic ontological idea that the world merely consists of matter in motion, our knowledge of physical nature has increased substantially, even mind bogglingly so. Thus, with regard to the natural sciences, the idea that, starting with the Enlightenment, we have made a lot of progress in our knowledge and we will probably make more progress in the future is surely justified.

But does that mean that everything that has been thought and said in the past is asinine, because it is not the result of following the techniques and basic ontological ideas of the natural sciences? It is the *proton pseudos* of the Enlightenment to believe that that is indeed the case. Its consequences are manifold and terrible. It has conjured up what Burckhardt has called *le terrible esprit de nouveauté*, that regards everything that has been achieved in the past as backward, retarded, childish, wrongheaded, narrow-minded, prejudiced, discriminatory, oppressive, and irrational. An *esprit* that believes that change –in jargon: innovation– is by definition an improvement and therefore good. There is no need to dwell at

great length on the destruction this belief has wrought. It is undoubtedly one of the principle reasons why you and I have become conservatives.

Among the principle victims of this belief are the great traditions of moral and political thought, deriving from Athens and Jerusalem. The Enlightenment thinkers, after having shoved them aside with a slight of hand, set out to develop new and better views of morals and politics. After several centuries of trying we cannot escape the conclusion, however, that these new and better views have turned out to be a failure. They are at best utilitarian, but tend to drift towards nihilism. Which is hardly surprising, given the fact that from an Enlightenment perspective, taking the natural sciences as the standard of knowledge, morality cannot be grounded on anything else than subjective preference.

From the beginning, conservatives have opposed this *terrible esprit de nouveauté*. "We know", says Burke, "that we have made no discoveries, and we think that no discoveries are to be made, in morality; nor many in the great principles of government, nor in the ideas of liberty, which were understood long before we were born." If you want to understand morality and politics, Burke is saying, study Plato and Aristotle, Cicero and Seneca, Augustine and Aquinas. That is to say: return to Athens and Jerusalem. What you will find there is a much richer, truer and wiser picture of the human condition than the picture provided by the various Enlightenment thinkers.

Now, keeping this in mind, let us take another look at the Scotsmen and Americans we discussed earlier, often judged to be Enlightenment thinkers. It is evident to all who know their works that they are indebted most of all to the writings of the ancient Greeks, and particularly the ancient Romans. They stand in the classical tradition. They are Athenians, so to speak, and are hence part of the conservative tradition. So why call them Enlightenment thinkers? That merely causes confusion.

Although I could go on for hours discussing the sins of the Enlightenment with you, I will stop here and will now turn to that other great enemy of conservatism: Romanticism. Some of you might be surprised that I place it alongside the Enlightenment as conservatism's great enemy. It is an opinion one doesn't encounter often. In fact, outside of the fields of art history, literary history, and music history one hears very little of Romanticism. That is remarkable, because many of the moral and political scourges of the modern world go back to and originate in the Romantics, at least as many as originate in the Enlightenment.

The origins of Romanticism are often said to lie in Germany in the first decades of the nineteenth century. But, again, I have to say that this is not entirely correct. In the first decades of the nineteenth century Romanticism was popularized by a great number of - particularly German- writers, but its origins go back to the second half of the eighteenth century, to the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), and Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803). Before them of course the Italian Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) had already articulated many of the ideas central to Romanticism.

It seems to me that what Rousseau says, in one of the first sentences of his *Confessions* (1765), sums up marvelously what Romanticism is all about. What he says there is this: "I am made unlike anyone I have ever met. I will even venture to say that I am like no one in the whole world. I may be no better, but at least I am different." This difference principle is at the heart of Romanticism.

Romanticism was at bottom a radical reinterpretation of reality. The romantic notion of reality is the exact antipode of the one prevalent in the Enlightenment. Now, peculiarity, singularity, uniqueness, incomparability, are the defining marks of being, and uniformity, invariability, universality, timelessness, its opposite, its denial. Truth can still be found, but it is no longer the one and only everlasting truth, valid irrespective of time and place. The truth is historicized, individualized, subjectivized.

It follows that being true to the truth means being different, thinking, feeling and perceiving differently. In other words, being original, an artist, a creator. Romantic man is potentially a creator, *ein Schöpfer*. He can think of new things, unthought of before. In this he is divine, much more than a mere creature, *ein Geschöpf*. In this he is not only part of creation, but he takes part in creating. In being a creator he shapes the world according to his image. Ontologically, this entails that the self has a transcendental status. It is something active, primal, determining rather than being determined by the outside world, molding man's experience, rather than being molded by it. Kant was of course one of the first to draw this conclusion, but his conclusions did not even nearly exhaust all the new vista's made possible by the notion of man as a creator.

If we now apply these ideas to the realms of morals and politics some interesting implications become visible. To act morally right means being true to one's uniqueness and originality. That is: to be authentic. Only the impulses of the authentic will are to be taken into account, not what others will, and not what 'the other inside of' us wills. That is what constitutes truthfulness.

The concept of truthfulness is obviously much older, but its meaning shifted fundamentally with the Romantics. Whereas truthfulness used to denote accordance with the facts of the world, it now began to signify accordance with the self. Truthfulness no longer depends on whether a statement fits the facts, but whether the person who utters it 'really means' what he says. The question whether it is really his view thus replaces the question whether his view is a correct view. What counts most is that man is really 'committed' to his expressed views. More generally, what counts is 'to be oneself', i.e. to let only the self determine one's acts. To be yourself in this sense, is what constitutes autonomy, independence, true freedom. A man whose acts are not means of self-expression, but ways to please others - 'inside the breast or outside' - is a hypocrite, a philistine, a slave.

The writer who popularized these ideas in the English speaking world, and hence, because of its global predominance, in the whole world, was J.S. Mill. There is no time to go into this at length. Let me just remind you of the plea in chapter three of *On Liberty* (1859), aptly entitled "Of Individuality", against traditions and customs as something unsuitable to the uncustomary individual, to the person of genius. And I call to mind his plea for "experiments in living" by the individual, as a principal ingredient of human happiness and individual and social progress.

What does all this lead up to? That is no mystery. Its principal effect is a complete relativism, not only with regard to good and evil, but also with regard to truth and untruth. The results of which we see everyday around us. First, it does away with the idea that we can and should learn from parents, teachers, elders, and forefathers. After all, everything thought and said is but a subjective point of view? As a result a new primitivism rules, that portends disaster for human civilization. And second, it destroys one's spiritual defenses in the face of evil. After all, what is evil but a subjective point of view? What is evil for you may be good for me, and what is evil for me may be good for you.

Let us now return to conservatism. Again, just like in the seventeenth century, conservatives were quick in recognizing the danger posed by the new ideas. In fact, the first to recognize the danger were the Romantics themselves, many of whom became conservative later in life. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel provides us with the foremost example of this u-turn. Although he never managed to free himself entirely from the Romantic mindset, he became one of the first and best critics of the Romantic cult of the self.

Hence, conservatives since Hegel's days have aimed their arrows not only at the

Enlightenment, but also and to the same degree at Romanticism. It seems to me that today, in the early twenty-first century, the Enlightenment and Romanticism are still conservatism's main antagonists. The various kinds of socialism conservatives have fought for so long were an offspring either of Romanticism or of the Enlightenment, and often had a little of both, as is usual with offspring. The various kinds of liberalism conservatives still fight today are also the product of the Enlightenment and Romanticism. We'd better keep that in mind. One can fight one's enemies effectively only if one knows what really moves them, deep down.

Now, let me round off by making a few remarks about what conservatism sets against the Enlightenment and Romanticism, what it wants to defend, what its *parti-pris* is: Athens and Jerusalem, the spirit of the gentleman and the spirit of religion. I will keep it short, since you all know what I am talking about at least as well, and probably better than I do. The richness of the subject, moreover, prohibits setting out all its treasures. All that can be done in a lecture like this one is to provide one or two clues and suggestions. I will limit myself to saying something about the relationship between Athens and Jerusalem first, and then conclude with a few remarks about what Athens and Jerusalem had to say about the nature of man, a topic crucial to any serious worldview.

What is the relationship between Athens and Jerusalem, between the spirit of the gentleman and the spirit of religion, between ancient Greek and Roman thought on the one hand and Medieval-Christian thought on the other? There are those who say that the relationship is a relationship characterized by tension, a fruitful tension perhaps, but still tension. Thus seen, Athens and Jerusalem differ fundamentally from each other. They are basically antithetical.

This view has a long history. It goes back to the church father Tertullian and according to some to St. Paul before him, who says in 1 Corinthians 3: 19, "the wisdom of this world is folly with God". In the twentieth century it has famously been defended by writers as diverse as Leo Strauss and Karl Barth.

If this view were correct, it would of course become very difficult to think of conservatism in the singular, as one identifiable intellectual and moral tradition. The best we could do in that case, would be to speak of two different conservatisms, a philosophical one and a religious one. Two different conservatisms, that may unite and fight together against common enemies, but are essentially at odds with each other, and doomed to fly at each others throats as soon as the common enemy is gone.

That would follow, if this view were correct. However, I believe that it is wrong. Most of church fathers, who -let us not forget that- created Christian orthodoxy, were ancient philosophers as well. It is impossible to clearly separate Athens from Jerusalem in their work. Take Augustine for example. Evidently a very Christian author. But Augustine is just as evidently a Platonist. For those who know their Plato, he, or rather his disciple Plotinus, is all over the pages of Augustine. Or take Thomas Aquinas. Also a very Christian author. To him the Bible is *auctoritas* number one. But at the same time his indebtedness to Aristotle is huge. Or take the New Testament itself, the most sacred book of Christianity. To anyone versed in Greek philosophy, it is obvious that the ideas and ideals presented in the New Testament resemble those of the Greek philosophers in many ways, for instance in their emphasis on the inner goodness and virtue of the soul instead of the outer conformity of the human act to the law.

Some have refused Aquinas the title of Christian, because of the influence of Aristotle on his thought. That is silly. For by the same token one would have to refuse Augustine that title, given the influence of Platonic philosophy. Yes, one would even have to say that the Gospel itself is insufficiently Christian. Which is of course madness.

Hence, the only true view on the relation between ancient and Christian thought is that, particularly the tradition of Platonism, but also other strands of Greek philosophy, such as Aristotelianism and Stoicism, are in many ways very close to the spirit of the Gospel. Moreover, Christianity, as we know it, is a result of a coming together of these two sources of ancient philosophy and the Gospel in the mind of the church fathers. Therefore, Christianity cannot be separated from ancient philosophy. Athens cannot be separated from Jerusalem. Ever since they came together, they have become one tradition, at least in the West. And this is the conservative tradition, or, if you like, the point of departure for the conservative tradition.

I will now move on to my last subject: the nature of man, according to the conservative mind.

At the heart of every conservative anthropology we find the conviction that man is not by nature good. On the contrary, he is by nature in many ways wicked and deprived. He may not be a devil, but he is also far from being an angel. He is inclined more towards evil than towards good. But he is not doomed to be evil. He can change, although with difficulty, and he can never be entirely sure of his victory over

the evil within him. For man, it is easy to be evil, and hard to be good.

Some people would argue that this view is typically Christian, and that it has little in common with how the ancients conceived of man. I think these people are wrong. The ancients had a very similar vision. Around 700 B.C. the Greek poet Hesiod already wrote, in a verse often quoted by posterity, that "badness can be got easily and in shoals: the road to her is smooth, and she lives very near us. But between us and goodness the gods have placed the sweat of our brows: long and steep is the path that leads to her". And what to think of the story of Heracles at the crossroads, recounted three centuries later, by Xenophon in the *Memorabilia*, and frequently repeated by other writers of antiquity, such as Cicero. In case you forgot, let me refresh your memory. It is the story of Heracles who is sitting at a crossroads, perplexed what road to take. Two ladies come up to him from the two roads, one very fleshy and soft, prettied up, eyes wide open, and in sexy cloths, the other modest and pure. The fleshy one, significantly, reaches Heracles first and tries to convince him to take her road, because it is the most pleasant and the easiest. "You will not miss the taste of any delight", she promises him. And Heracles, after hearing these things, says: "Woman, what is your name?" To which the answer is: "My friends call me happiness, but those who hate me nickname me vice".

What exactly is vice, badness or evil? There are many different ways in which this question has been discussed and can be discussed. And there are many different aspects to the issue. For now, let me just point out one historically very influential way of talking about evil, which has helped mankind for ages to get into focus what it means. I am thinking of the theory of the seven root sins, also named the seven deadly sins, or the seven cardinal vices. You all know them of course: in Latin their names are *superbia*, *avaritia*, *luxuria*, *ira*, *gula*, *invidia*, and *acedia*. In modern English: pride in the sense of conceit, greed, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and lack of concern.

Much could be said about all of them, but don't worry. I won't. The basic idea is that each and every human being is ridden with these sinful impulses. And that from these seven spring many other sinful impulses, such as cruelty. If we let them go ahead, and let them dominate us, we will wreak havoc and make our life and those of other people solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short. In fact, as Burke said, "History consists for the greater part of the miseries brought upon the world by pride, ambition, avarice, revenge, lust, sedition, hypocrisy, ungoverned zeal, and all the train of disorderly appetites, which shake the public with the same troublous

storms that toss the private state and render life unsweet." Hence, the sinfulness or viciousness of human nature is not just some problem amongst many others, it is *the* problem of human existence, privately and publicly.

Again, there are people saying that this is a typically Christian way of seeing it. And that the ancients thought very differently. Again I disagree. It is true that the exact list of the seven deadly sins as we know it is a Christian creation. One finds it first in the book *Moralia in Job*, authored by Pope Gregory the Great around 600 A.D. But the ancients knew them all, discussed them all, and rejected them all, or almost all. Even the list as we have it is found almost in its entirety in an ancient writer: to wit in Horace's *Letters*. The only difference is that where Gregory has *superbia*, Horace has *amor laudis*, the love of being praised.

So if all conservatives agree that the sinfulness or viciousness of human nature is *the* problem of human existence, the question arises what can we do about it? As I said before, conservatives believe that man is not doomed to be evil. He can change, although with difficulty, and although he can never be sure of his victory over the evil within him. Man can turn around, discard his evil ways, and become good, at least to a certain extent. This is what the central Platonic notion of *periagogè* and the central Biblical notion of *metanoia* are about: both signify a turning around, a conversion from evil to good.

Much has been made about the supposed difference between the ancients and Christianity with regard to this turning around or conversion. According to some the Christian turning around is a consequence of God's grace, whereas the ancient turning around is a consequence of human virtue. Again, I disagree. Anyone who believes that the ancients put their whole trust in human virtue, should reread Plato's allegory of the cave. He will see that Plato speaks of the turning around towards the light in the passive tense. In fact, the person concerned is being dragged out of the cave by force, against his will. On the other hand, those who believe that Christians have put all their faith in grace, and reject all efforts by man of to be virtuous, should reread any Christian author they like, and they will find that all of them expect very strenuous moral efforts indeed of every Christian.

Since grace is God's business and prerogative, it suffices to say a few words about human virtue only. For the conservative tradition virtue is the answer of man to vice, to sin, to the evil within us. Again, I could say many things about virtue and the virtues now, but I will exert self-control. Which, by the way, is one of the virtues, and a very important one too. I have to finish my lecture. I have already demanded

too much of your patience. Which, by the way, is another important virtue.

Just this to close off. A good life, individually and collectively, privately and publicly, is a virtuous life. To lead a good life an individual needs to be virtuous. A good society is unthinkable without virtuous members. Even the most optimal combination of market and government institutions will not produce a good society, if virtue is lacking in its members. How is virtue acquired? To the extent that it lies in our hands: by a good education. It seems to me that these are the most central insights of the conservative tradition. If the West ever forgets them entirely, Western civilization, which has already deteriorated substantially under the influence of the doctrines of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, will surely come to an end. Let us work as hard as we can, to assure that that will not happen.