function of what we have been taught (L 43.934–36). Thus, while the forces of sovereign law and punishment cannot compel belief, they can and must compel the teachers of the people, both in churches and in the universities, to teach only true, that is, Hobbesian, doctrine. (One feels that Leviathan may not be the text Smith needs to explore Hobbes’s modern mentality—his characteristic cussedness is on much clearer display in his turn to the dialogue form against John Wallis, who famously accused him of writing conversations between “Thomas” and “Hobbes.”)

Smith makes passing reference in several chapters to the effect that new sites of philosophizing may have had in developing the modern mentality. For instance, secret societies like the Freemasons were often vehicles of an egalitarian-universalist but emphatically elitist creed—not unlike the modern gospel of human rights. Elsewhere, he writes that “like all great haters of the bourgeoisie, Nietzsche [and Marx] were recipients of the ultimate passport to bourgeois respectability—the Ph.D.” (17–18). One wishes he would devote more time to these (non-Skinnerian) questions of institutional context, and of that medieval institution flourishing in the bosom of modern democracies, the university, in particular. (Hobbes, for example, hated Oxford, while Locke lived and worked there quite happily for over a decade.)

Significantly, in early modernity it was the BA that served, quite literally, as a gentleman’s degree, which automatically elevated its recipient to the rank of gentry. This explains why expanding access to it has become a signal aspiration of modern democracies—and why the mark of elite distinction that is a PhD remains a source of discomfort to many egalitarians who hold it. Smith argues that hostility to hierarchical authority unites modernity and its doubles. This explains one aspect of our current crisis of higher education. Universities rest fundamentally on a relationship of natural authority between those who know (in this case the teacher or magister, who is master both of her subject and her students) and those who do not. Smith is too much of a modern to flaunt his mastery. But it is there on the page for all to see.

The Humanity of Philosophy

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I start every year by reading the Nicomachean Ethics with freshmen. It is a revealing experience because the Ethics is quite different from anything most new college students have ever read before.
Many of them associate ethics with reasoning about the right action in particular situations—often hypotheticals of the “trolley problem” variety. They are surprised to discover that for Aristotle, ethics is about what kind of person you want to be. The discovery is exciting because they already spend a lot of time thinking about that very question.

Yet students find the answers Aristotle proposes to be unsatisfactory. He argues that there are three basic options: the life of pleasure, the life of honor, and the life of intellect. That catalog strikes students as radically incomplete. Must we choose between being party animals, politicians, or philosophers?

The puzzlement with which students confront Aristotle's ethics tells us something about the modern age. Modernity involves a multiplication of the kinds of lives available to us. In addition to the three options suggested by Aristotle, we might consider the following: the life of religious faith, the life of bourgeois industry, the life of artistic creation, or the life of ideological commitment.

Steven Smith’s book can be read as a meditation on this extended menu. Each of the writers he discusses reflects on the right life under modern conditions. This ethical concern overrides the differences of genre and method between Rousseau, Hegel, and Bellow. Fundamentally, all raise the same question as Aristotle: what kind of person should I be?

Flaubert makes the case against the bourgeois life. In Madame Bovary and other works, he mounts a blistering attack on the conformity, materialism, and hypocrisy associated with the bourgeoisie. A famous letter to Georges Sand includes a succinct statement of his argument: “Axiom: hatred of the Bourgeois is the beginning of virtue. As for me, I include in the word ‘bourgeois,’ the bourgeois in overalls as well as the bourgeois in frock coat. It’s we, we alone—that is, the educated—who are the People, or, to put it better, the tradition of Humanity.”

Flaubert is usually remembered as the champion of the artistic existence. This was, famously, the choice he made for himself. The great merit of Smith’s reading is to remind us that the case for art does not appear in Flaubert’s most famous novel. The contrast to the loathsome Homais is the physician Larivière rather than any ideal of creativity.

What distinguishes Larivière from Homais is not the nature of his activity. As we would say today, both work in the “healthcare industry.” Instead, it is the attitude each brings to that work. Homais is an ineffectual tinkerer whose passion for being useful belies his actual accomplishments. Larivière would “almost have passed for a saint if the keenness of his intellect had not caused him to be feared as a demon.”

Smith argues that “If Homais is a prefiguration of Nietzsche’s last man, Larivière is a likely anticipation of his Overman” (238). I am not sure that is right. What Larivière more clearly anticipates is the ascetic priest. He has cast off religious faith but retains the spirit of devotion to a higher calling.

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Rather than drawing value from within himself, Larivière is a servant to a disenchanted but still rigorous code of morality.

The question Nietzsche raises is whether the discipline of secular monks like Larivière can survive the death of God. Some of Nietzsche’s successors sought a replacement in ideological commitment. The difference between religion and ideology is that while God calls the man of faith, the ideologist chooses his own deity. For the thinkers of the Counter-Enlightenment, as Smith calls it, the existential decision belongs to man himself.

In opposition to the decisionism defended by the likes of Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss proposed to revive philosophy as way of life. In his chapter on Strauss, Smith demonstrates how thoroughly this effort was misunderstood by some of Strauss’s critics. For Strauss, the technical analysis of arguments was not the essence of philosophy. Instead this essence was just the ethical question raised by Aristotle.

Like Aristotle, Strauss made the case for philosophy as the best kind of life. Strauss must therefore confront an objection that also arises when I teach freshmen. Philosophy is inherently “elitist,” not only in the sense that it is associated with dead white European males but because only a minority of human beings are interested in wisdom. Strauss’s critique of modernity rests on his rejection of the Kantian assumption that philosophy can be made “public,” subjecting all lives to the scrutiny of reason. For Strauss, universal enlightenment is a contradiction in terms.

Bellow also doubts that the human predicament can be rationalized. Consider what Artur Sammler sees on the crosstown bus: “All human types reproduced, the barbarian, redskin, or Fiji, the dandy, the buffalo hunter, the desperado, the queer, the sexual fantasist, the squaw; bluestocking, princess, poet, painter, prospector, troubadour, guerrilla, Che Guevara, the new Thomas à Becket.” The choices have multiplied beyond those available in the nineteenth century and the old models no longer sell. “Not imitated are the businessman, the soldier, the priest, and the square,” Sammler notes.6

What Bellow offers is not exactly a rehabilitation of the bourgeois, whose flaws he knows well. Rather, it is a rejection of the pursuit of a consistent choice. Bellow recognizes that there is something inhuman about the demand that we become just one sort of person. Real life is always a bit of a muddle.

So Smith contends that the ethical center of Bellow’s novel is not Sammler but rather Elya. He is a physician—but not a scientific saint. He is a proud Jew—but not exactly a religious man. He is also a successful businessman—but generous with his wealth.

What Elya lacks in consistency, he makes up in feeling. He really seems to care about other people—as people, not fellow citizens, coreligionists, business partners, lovers of art, comrades in arms, or philosophical

6Saul Bellow, Mr. Sammler’s Planet (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 120.
interlocutors. Elya is also and perhaps most importantly a family man who rescued Sammler and other relatives from the ruins of Europe. His familial love reflects an aspect of life that seems to be missing from the other archetypes I have mentioned.

There is a word for the kind of person Elya Gruner is, but you will not find it in Greek, French, or English. It is not even really a part of German. Instead, you have to turn to Yiddish. The word, of course, is mensch. By taking ethics as a problem of life rather than intellect, Smith shows that modernity might be a bit less discontented if we worried less about choosing the right life and more about just being human.

Rousseau, Optimism, and Critique

Susan Meld Shell

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Steven Smith’s illuminating and instructive book is above all a “liberal” work—liberal in the sense of being intellectually “generous” as well as broadly committed to understanding and sustaining the modern liberal project.

Steven Smith is less concerned with defining modernity precisely—if such a thing is even possible—than with writing its biography, with emphasis on the curious self-critique that, on his account, has alternately plagued and enriched it, almost from the start. However and whenever modernity begins (be it with Machiavelli, or the discovery of new lands, or with Galilean and Newtonian science, or the invention of the printing press), by the late 1600s a serious debate was already underway as to the relative merits of the modern and ancient authors, a debate repeated, in an arguably deeper and philosophically more radical way, by Rousseau and the twin movements of late- and counter-Enlightenment that he willy-nilly set in motion. Smith’s book is less a history of modernity than of a certain modern human type: less a treatise than a Bildungsroman, in the manner of Goethe’s Apprenticeship of Wilhelm Meister, or more pertinently, Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit. And it is thus especially fitting that the book not only ends with an analysis of two late modern novels—themselves exemplary explorations of the bourgeois mind—but takes its primary bearings (as I read Smith) from the political and moral problematic that lies embedded in the philosophic triumvirate of late modernity: Kant, Hegel, and Rousseau.