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THE NEMESIS OF FAITH AND SCEPTICISM

I

The distinctive nature of modern European political activity and understanding (I have contended) is the potentiality of internal movement which they derive from their heterogeneous and complex character. And I have maintained that the historic poles of this movement are the two extremes which I have called the politics of faith and the politics of scepticism. Further, in so far as our political activity has on occasion come near to being immobilized at either of these extremes, or in so far as it has been turned decisively in the direction of either of them, two opposed styles of governing and understanding the office of government have been intimated or have even appeared. And since our political activity has always been turned in one or other of these directions and has never for long taken one direction without being recalled by the pull exercised by the other pole, it may be described, from different points of view, either as a fluctuation between two historic poles, or as a *concordia discors* of two opposed styles of government. Finally, I have suggested that the notorious ambiguity of our political language springs not from any temporary or disingenuous corruption of a once unequivocal vocabulary, but from the fact that, at whatever point we find ourselves in the range of internal movement potential in our politics, we have at our disposal one and the same set of words in which to express these diverse understandings of the activity of governing. In short, this ambiguity is specific and not merely general. And since its specific character derives from the specific character of the extremes between which we move, we must consider the precise polarity of our politics in order to

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understand it. And the more thoroughly we consider the character of these extremes, the clearer will be our view of the predicament of modern politics.

Each of these opposed styles of politics, when taken by itself, may be said to provoke a characteristic nemesis. But in neither case is the nemesis an external condemnation of the style, nor is it merely a fate which may be expected to overtake it if it persists in its ways. No doubt it is some dim perception of what lies in wait for our politics at each of its horizons that has kept us from a final surrender to either; but that is not what I am considering. The nemesis I speak of is, in each of these styles of politics, a confession or revelation of its own character. And consequently to investigate it is not merely to feed our apprehension of what might happen if our political activity were to become immobilized at either of these extremes; it is to reach a clearer understanding of the extremes themselves.

Each of these styles in its concrete appearances in political activity, and even in its appearances in the writings of its adherents, is qualified by the occasion of its appearance. Neither has ever filled our world of politics to the exclusion of the other; each has always been disguised with ornaments borrowed from its opponent, diluted by reminiscences of a character it assumed in order to defend itself on a particular occasion, or qualified by the contingent characteristics of some temporary version of itself. Nevertheless, each of these styles may be said to have an uninhibited character – a character which would reveal itself if the style stood alone, but which is never fully revealed so long as it appears in company with its opponent. And I speak of this uninhibited character as the nemesis of the style, because in each case it turns out to be a self-destructive character. When our political vocabulary becomes a vocabulary exclusive either to faith or to scepticism, the words at once lose their ambiguity, but at the same time they represent and suggest directions of political activity which if pursued defeat themselves. This, indeed, is what we should expect; it both repeats and confirms the reading of the extremes of our politics as the poles of a single activity and not as mere alternative opposites each capable of providing a concrete manner of governing and a coherent understanding of government. And it confirms also the reading of the ambiguity, not as a regrettable corruption of language, but as a characteristic of our politics without which they would be wholly different from what they are. In short, when either of these styles of politics claims for itself independence and

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completeness, it reveals a self-defeating character. Each is not less the partner than the opponent of the other; each stands in need of the other to rescue it from self-destruction, and if either succeeded in destroying the other, it would discover that, in the same act, it had destroyed itself.

The uninhibited character of each of these two styles of politics has, then, to be extricated. And to do this is not a purely logical exercise. It is true that each is a system, and from this point of view the nemesis is the incoherence of the system. Nevertheless, what we have to observe is not merely logical inconsistencies, nor is it merely a discrepancy between the ends and the means proposed; it is the manner in which each style, when relieved of the modifying partnership of its opponent, defeats its own purposes. And to elicit this is an imaginative rather than a logical exercise. Whenever the politics of modern Europe have moved decisively in the direction of either of these extremes, the shadow of the nemesis has appeared: our task is to reconstruct from these shadowy intimations the hidden character, or at least the hidden characteristics, which they signify.

II

The situation we have to consider in relation to each of these styles of politics is this. A society is a complex of activities. And the societies of modern Europe are distinguished by the great variety of the activities which compose them. Even if we may discern a few main directions of activity, each of these itself exhibits great internal variety of pursuit, and none is so far dominant as to put the others out of business. No societies have been less monolithic in their activities than those of modern Europe. Government, on the other hand, is a small body of men, usually occupying recognized offices, authorized in some recognized manner and empowered to control the activities of its subjects. The manner in which this control is exercised distinguishes one style of government from another.

In the politics of faith, governing is the minute and comprehensive control of all activities. The office of government is recognized as the imposition and maintenance of a condition of human circumstance in which all the activities afoot are made to conform to a single pattern or are set in one direction: those incapable of conforming are properly eliminated. The direction

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imposed may reveal itself in a rational consideration of the current directions of activity and may be selected because it appears to be already dominant. It may, on the other hand, be the product of a visionary experience of what is proper to mankind. Again, the chosen direction may impose itself gradually, or it may be imposed in a revolutionary manner. But whatever the manner of its appearance and imposition, it is unavoidably one of the directions of activity already intimated in the society upon which it is to be imposed: government, in this style, is never imposition of an entirely fresh direction of activity. Even the 'righteousness', which it was the office of the rule of the 'saints' to impose, was already recognized among the current directions of activity in seventeenth-century England. Further, the direction is chosen because it is believed to be preeminently proper to mankind and consequently to attract to itself the epithet 'perfect'. And until this direction is determined, the work of government (which is to impose and maintain it) cannot, properly speaking, begin.

Governing, then, in this understanding of it, is a 'total' activity. And this means that every permitted activity is itself an activity of governing (and is recognized as such), and that every subject legitimately employed is *eo ipso* an agent of government. The situation here is not that the appointed agents of government are expected to be everywhere in control of every activity; this may indeed be so, but it is not the significant point. The situation is that to be legitimately active is itself to be doing the work which, in this understanding of it, is the work of government. For every manner of activity must be understood either to be participation in the establishment and maintenance of the chosen condition of human circumstance (which is participation in the task assigned to government), or to be illegitimate. There is, then, in such a community only one work being carried on; and the various manners in which it may be pursued (sleeping, agriculture, painting pictures, nurturing children, etc.) are not distinct and independent activities, they are the indistinct components of a single pattern. What exists (for example) is not 'football', but 'football-in-so-far-as-it-promotes-perfection'. And the threefold division of activities possible elsewhere – governing, going about one's lawful business, and behaving unlawfully – is reduced to two by the coalescence of the first and second.

Moreover, the same conclusion appears when the situation is considered from the other end. For example, in that version of

the politics of faith for which the maximum exploitation of the resources of the world is the 'perfection' pursued, a community is appropriately recognized as a 'factory'. A subject is recognized as an 'employee' in the enterprise of 'perfection'; all legitimate activity is understood as 'factory work'. And since the activity of governing cannot be made an exception to this without being made illegitimate, what distinguishes a community of this sort is a single comprehensive manner of activity. In short, government in the service of 'perfection' appears not as a style of politics, but as a manner of abolishing politics. This, indeed, is the nemesis we should expect. In the politics of faith, each word in our political vocabulary (the word 'government' included) acquires a maximum meaning appropriate to the 'perfection' pursued, and enjoying that maximum meaning it comes to stand for all forms of legitimate activity and so none in particular.¹

Politics, then, as the pursuit of perfection, when they are out of reach of any modifying agency, are unable to protect themselves from dissolution. When government is understood as an activity of limitless control, it finds itself with nothing to control: a *factotum* has no subjects who are not opponents. This self-destruction is inherent in the uninhibited character of the politics of faith. But it is illustrated, and perhaps reinforced, in a number of contingent defects, some of which rank as self-defeats.

¹ 'Government . . . has no special character.' Leon Duguit, *Law and the Modern State* (tr. Laski), p. 49. This nemesis is intimated in many features of the manner of life enjoyed whenever and wherever our politics has touched the horizon of faith. On these occasions what has appropriately appeared is not merely the minute control of all activities which we associate with 'bureaucracy' or a *Beamtenstaat*, nor is it merely a multiplicity of informers, but the destruction of politics by the conversion of every activity into a 'political' activity and of every subject into an agent of government. And there is no end to the reverberations of this *motif* - unless the request of a wife for her husband to be executed for illegitimate activity may be said to be an 'end'. But it begins in far less spectacular appearances. It is present, for example, in the confusion of mind which overtakes those who speak the language of this style. For example, Lindsay (*Essentials of Democracy*, p. 7) and others who speak of the 'democratization of industry' can evidently observe no distinction between 'government' and the management of industry. And the view that the pursuit of 'perfection' is a *techné* which is all-inclusive and consequently that a farmer, a scientist, a composer or a mother, if they are proficient in this one *techné* are qualified to carry on their business, is an unfortunate (though legitimate) child of the politics of faith.

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In a community whose members, engaged in few activities and those of the simplest character, are not drawn in a variety of directions, the politics of faith will have some appropriateness. Indeed, a monolithic society may be expected to have a monolithic politics. And where there is only a single direction available, it will be followed, not because it is perceived to be the road to 'perfection', but because no alternative presents itself. But the characteristic of the communities of modern Europe is the multiplicity of their activities and directions of activity. And in this historic situation, the politics of faith, in which a single direction is selected for pursuit, all others being proscribed, has an incongruous appearance. It is a style of government at variance with the structure of the community it governs: it demands an exclusive direction of activity from subjects who do not readily recognize the relevance of the demand. Consequently, in the conditions of modern Europe, government in this style is engaged on a double task: first, of subduing the society, and secondly, of maintaining its submission to a single direction of activity. And to perform these tasks it will have need of immense power and will be incited to a continuous search for greater and greater quantities of power. But the more power it acquires, and indeed the more successful it appears in subduing the diverse activities to one activity, the more closely it will come to resemble an alien authority, until in the end it reveals itself (in respect of its power and its hostility) as comparable to a 'force of nature'. And a people whose activity is being directed, and being ever more thoroughly directed, to the conquest of nature and the exploitation of its resources, will recognize such a force as something it has been taught to oppose, or at least outwit. Thus the operation of one of the versions of the politics of faith, in the circumstances of modern Europe, may be seen to defeat itself by adding one more direction of activity to the already multiple directions, namely, the search for imprecisions in the pattern, the profitless activity of circumventing the minute control it is endeavouring to impose. Nor is this kind of self-destruction merely speculative; it has its parallels in the other versions of the politics of faith, and wherever this style of government has in any degree begun to impose itself upon the diverse activities of a modern European community, its shadow has appeared. It is the *impasse* which awakens the politics of Terror which sleeps in every version of government as the pursuit of 'perfection' when it is imposed upon an already diverse community.

The condition of human circumstance selected for exclusive

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pursuit in the politics of faith is, we have seen, collected in some manner from the community upon which it is to be imposed by government. The pattern of 'perfection' is one of the current directions of activity: it is an historic direction. The Baconian 'exploitation of the resources of the world', the 'righteousness' of the seventeenth-century 'saints' and the more recent direction of 'security', each belong to a particular historic context, and it is this context which gives them their specific character and plausibility. But in the politics of faith the exclusive conditions of human circumstance must be pursued as if its validity were permanent, not merely historical. Everything in this style of government is appropriately built to last; where the design of 'perfection' has been discovered, change need neither be feared nor anticipated, and what is unshakable is preferred to what is recognized as ephemeral. Where the proper direction of activity has been determined, there is no wisdom (only folly) in providing against mistakes by making tentative engagements and gradual explorations.² In this sense the politics of faith is the politics of immortality; the point of no-return cannot be reached too quickly and is recognized not with misgiving but with enthusiasm. In the conduct of affairs this style of government always backs the favourite, never the field. And buoyed up with certainty (the self-righteousness of the 'saint' and the self-confidence of the Baconian are in this respect twins) the politician of faith is appropriately prepared to risk everything for the fabulous prize of 'perfection'. But in fact the condition of human circumstance he pursues has no such permanent significance. It is composed of nothing more substantial than the perceptions of fallible intelligences dramatized by the passions of a few generations: in contemporary politics alone there are at least two versions of 'perfection' which compete with one another. Consequently, the imperishable monuments of the politics of faith are imperishable ruins, 'follies' remarkable often for the strength of their materials and always for the eccentricity of their design. That jealousy of time which faith proclaims, not only in its pretence of finality, but also in its characteristic urgency, is, in fact, a proclamation of self-defeat.

Moreover, if there is one nemesis reserved for the pretence of finality in politics, there is another which follows upon the pre-

² The Education Act of 1944 is deeply veined with the politics of faith, and some of its provisions are being riveted upon us by school buildings which are exclusively appropriate to them.

occupation with the future which is characteristic of the politics of faith. Government as the minute direction of every activity in pursuit of a condition of human circumstance called (and perhaps universally agreed to be) 'perfection' shoulders a tremendous responsibility. The appropriate attitude of the subject cannot be one of indifference, or tolerance, or even mere approval; it must be an attitude of devotion, of gratitude and of love. The zeal for 'perfection' which belongs to this style of government (and was early observed to do so by Halifax and Hume) has its counterpart in the enthusiasm of the subject for his government. The enemies of a regime will be identified not as mere dissidents to be inhibited, but as unbelievers to be converted. Mere obedience is not enough; it must be accompanied by fervour.³ Indeed, if the subject is not enthusiastic about government there is no legitimate object for his devotion; if he is devoted to 'perfection' he *must* be devoted to government. And whenever our politics has turned decisively in the direction of the horizon of faith, government has always demanded not acquiescence but love and devotion. But in these circumstances, where what is promised is 'salvation', the achievement of government must always be either too great or too small, and in both cases gratitude is turned into hatred, and the self-defeating character of the style reveals itself.

Suppose (what has never yet happened) that this style of government were to establish a condition of human circumstances recognized as 'perfection'. Many disconcerting consequences would follow, and not least among them this: the subject would owe (and would be aware of owing) everything he could value to a single benefactor. But finding himself without the means of requiting this debt (which he sees to comprise all his indebtedness), his joy will make itself known as misery and his gratitude as animosity. For, as Tacitus observes: 'benefits received are a delight to us as long as we think we can requite them; when that possibility is far exceeded, they are repaid with hatred instead of gratitude.'⁴

On the other hand, let us suppose (a more likely occurrence)

³ The Greek muleteer who, when asked why he beat his animal, which was going very well, replied, 'Yes, but he doesn't *want* to go,' was an exponent of the politics of faith. This is Pascal's definition of tyranny. *Pensées* (Brunschvicg), p. 332.

⁴ *Ann.* iv. 18. cf. Montaigne, *Essais*, ii. 12; Pascal, *Pensées*, 72; La Rochefoucauld, *Maximes*, 226.

that, promising 'perfection', this style of government finds it difficult to fulfil its undertaking, or manifestly falls far short. It has aroused desires which it is unable to satisfy, or to satisfy immediately. In these circumstances, the attention of the subject will be directed to the future, and at the same time government will bend itself with fresh energy to the task. But on both accounts it will forfeit the love and devotion it demands.

In respect of the first, government will address itself thus to the subject: 'You are to know that perfection is a great prize, difficult to win. We are on the way to it; but it is unreasonable to expect the mess of ages suddenly to be transformed into paradise.⁵ And you are to know also that although you may not live to enter the promised land, your children and your children's children will inhabit it. What you lack, they will enjoy. To you will belong the undying glory that attaches to pioneers.' And to these comforting words the subject will respond with due gratitude. He will be capable (it may be supposed) of making do with less than 'perfection' so long as his confidence that it is on the way is not shaken. For a period he may be satisfied with the dim comfort of distant utopias.

But in respect of the second, government in this style will speak as follows: 'The pursuit of "perfection" is an arduous undertaking. You must not only expect to forego delights which those who come after will enjoy, you must also expect to suffer the pains and deprivations inseparable from the enterprise. We are responsible for leading you towards the promised land, and we cannot discharge this duty without plenary powers. We require, not a "doctor's mandate", but a "saviour's mandate". But do not allow the sufferings of this present time, or even some of the rather odd demands we must make of you, to disturb your confidence. Be assured that we recognize only one duty, the duty to "perfect" mankind; and we will allow nothing to stand in the way of its performance.'

And with this proclamation will appear on the surface all that lies hidden in the recesses of this style of politics: a character scarcely calculated to inspire devotion. Every protective formality in the conduct of affairs will be recognized as an impediment to the pursuit of 'perfection', the antinomian character which belongs to all activity tied to a single overmastering principle will appear; engagements, loyalties, undertakings will be

⁵ 'Heaven can be established on earth.' Lenin, *The Threatened Catastrophe*.

swept aside; actual miseries (in this crow's flight to 'perfection') will be overlooked or discounted; prayers will be offered for 'industrial peace' (so that we can get on with the job), while the poor, the oppressed, the terrorized and the tortured are forgotten; no price will be considered too high to pay for 'perfection'. Indeed, an *interimsethik* will be announced: a temporary transvaluation of values in which the 'perfection' of mankind will be seen to spring from the degradation of living men. The present, represented as an interlude between night and day, will become an uncertain twilight.⁶ Compassion will be treason, love heresy. And in these circumstances, where *il n'y a que de cadavres ou de demi-dieux*, where it will be difficult to hide the slaughter and impossible to conceal the corruption, and where the ship is so conspicuously preferred to the crew, it is not unlikely that gratitude and devotion will be reserved. In success, then, and in failure, and always when it is in process, government as the pursuit of 'perfection', when it stands alone, is a self-defeating style of politics. It requires what it cannot command, and needs what its character prohibits.

The nemesis of faith, then, is the manner in which government, when harnessed to the pursuit of 'perfection', unavoidably collapses: the engagement to impose a single pattern of activity upon a community is a self-defeating engagement. And this is further illustrated in what may be called the logic of 'security' in the politics of faith.

There is a critical point in the scale of meanings which belong to the word 'security' in a political vocabulary. On one side of this point, protection against some of the vicissitudes of fortune is recognized to be among the activities of government. Here the inspiration is the observation of actual miseries suffered; and 'security' is understood as the assurance of relief. Nevertheless, the range of this assurance is not determined by the magnitude of the misery, but by a perception of the displacements consequent upon its removal. Any 'protection' involves government taking charge of some of the activities of the subject; but the limit here is the 'protection' which can be supplied without imposing a comprehensive pattern of activity upon the commu-

⁶ In this twilight, doctors will dream of the rapid advances that might be made in medicine if they were supplied with expendable human subjects for experiment. And philanthropists, like Robert Owen, will recognize in the poor admirable material for social experiment, because they are unable to defend themselves.

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nity. When a man is defended against misfortune in such a way as to deprive him of the authority to defend himself, the limit is passed.

On the other side of this point, however, 'security' is understood to mean the assurance of a certain level of 'well-being', and government is understood to be the activity of providing this assurance. In general, the politics of faith may be said to begin at this point, where the minimum meanings of 'security' begin to turn into the maximum. But only in one of its versions is 'security' recognized as itself the comprehensive direction of activity to be imposed upon the community, and consequently it is there that the nemesis of 'security' is to be perceived. And since what is sought is not merely 'protection' against some of the vicissitudes of fortune, but a community organized expressly for the exclusion of vicissitude, the most minute and relentless control of all activities will be called for. The first need of government is, consequently, immense power; and it will be supposed that the assurance the subject has of enjoying this condition of 'security' will be proportionate to the power at the disposal of government. The unsought (but nevertheless unavoidable) accompaniments of this style of government have often been pointed out. Where 'perfection' is identified with 'security' the common condition of the subject will be one of slavery qualified by whatever privilege he can secure for himself by an even more prostrate submission; and the condition of the community will be the enjoyment of an ever decreasing level of well-being as the motive for exertion slackens. But these consequences are costs within his power to pay; to some they may seem intolerable, but they do not amount to the self-defeat of the style of government. Nevertheless this is a self-destructive style of government; and the shadow of this self-destruction has hung over Europe for some generations. For, while it is true that complete insulation from vicissitude is impossible without government endowed with immense power, it is also true that where government possesses this immense power, 'security' at once diminishes: the condition of absolute 'security' is a condition also of absolute precariousness.

The mechanism of self-defeat may be elucidated in this manner. A man in Anglo-Norman England, harassed by insecurity, might commend himself to a powerful magnate and thus win protection from some of the vicissitudes of fortune. Obligations would be entailed, and these would appear on the balance-

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sheet as small additions to the power of the magnate. But the practical conditions on which commendation could increase the security of the client were that the power of the magnate was great, but not boundless, and that the contribution to this power made by each client was small, but not insignificant. For if to commend himself were to tie himself to the mighty ambitions which accompany immense power, the client might find himself secured against many of the minor vicissitudes of life but at the same time a partner in larger struggles and a prey to larger vicissitudes in which he had hitherto no share, and indeed which would not exist (or would exist only on a smaller scale) if he and his like did not make their contributions to the power of the magnate.

In principle, then, the price of 'security' is submission. And while a certain level of 'security' may be enjoyed by an appropriate submission to a moderately powerful protector, it would seem that a comprehensive 'security' might be achieved by a total submission to an immensely powerful protector. This, indeed, is the inference involved in this version of the politics of faith. For here, all subjects are commended to one protector, the government, and the immense power thus generated is available to be brought to bear whenever any item in this comprehensive 'security' is threatened. But the result is different from what was anticipated. Where every activity is an activity of government, the opportunities of conflict between communities organized for this kind of 'security' are enormously increased in number and the occasions in severity. Indeed, a world of communities each organized for comprehensive 'security' is a world organized for dispute, and (since the whole power of the community is behind every dispute) for major dispute. No community can, in fact, enjoy comprehensive security without so great a command over the affairs of so many other communities that, where submission is not immediately forthcoming, conflict is unavoidable. Unless what is to be secured is a level of 'well-being' below that which is currently enjoyed, to defend 'security' in one place must be to attack it elsewhere. In short, the version of the politics of faith in which 'perfection' is identified with 'security' is a style of politics which calls for government with a greater endowment of power than any other, and it is one in which power is more easily and more plausibly collected than in any other. But whatever minor protections and securities it may provide, the unavoidable

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product of this immense and ever active concentration of power, directed to the achievement of this purpose, is a diminished security and an enlarged precariousness.

There is, it is true, a passage in the myth of this version of the politics of faith designed to provide against this contingency. It was believed that if 'the people' (that is, 'the masses' from whose submissiveness government derives its power to dispense a comprehensive 'security') were to remain in control of the power generated by their submissiveness, then the nemesis of 'security' would be avoided. War was represented as the sport of kings; and a people submissive only to its own government would never be tricked out of the enjoyment of what it had provided the means to establish. But this escape from the nemesis of 'security' has proved itself an illusion. No community can enjoy comprehensive 'security' without a comprehensive mastery of the world, and no subject can enjoy comprehensive security without complete submissiveness to a power great enough to win that mastery. Moreover, government is not only a set of arrangements for the discharge of public business, in this case the provision of comprehensive 'security'; it is also what J. S. Mill called 'a great influence acting upon the human mind'. Where to govern is to wield immense power, the activity of governing attracts to its service not men of moderation and self-control concerned to avoid the defects of the enterprise upon which they are engaged, but either the neurotic and the frustrated who know no bounds or the parvenu who is easily intoxicated by the chance of doing big and clever things. And where this power is generated from the submissiveness of 'the masses' in search of comprehensive 'security', it falls into the hands of protectors who promise more than they can perform and, pretending to lead, impose the responsibility for their actions upon their followers.⁷ Indeed, it is only the reminiscence of the moderation which belongs to the minimum meaning of 'security' which makes the politics of the maximum meaning seem even plausible. Or, alternatively, it is only when the pull of scepticism is exerted upon this version of faith that self-defeat is avoided.

⁷ 'The choice was put to them, whether they would like to be kings or kings' couriers. Like children, they all wanted to be couriers. So now there are a great many couriers, they post through the world, and, as there are no kings left, shout to each other their meaningless and obsolete messages. They would gladly put an end to their wretched lives, but they dare not because of their oaths of service.' Kafka, *Aphorisms*.

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There is one other aspect of the nemesis of the politics of faith to be considered, namely, what may be called its moral infirmity. For although this infirmity does not itself involve self-defeat, it must nevertheless be counted a quality on account of which the style is incapable of standing by itself.

A moral activity is one in which a principle of self-limitation is detectable; merely to respond to the push of circumstance may on occasion be unavoidable, but it is something less than being morally active. The components whose relationship we have to consider here are the power available to government and the enterprise of imposing a single pattern of activity, and with it a monolithic character, upon a community. And our question is whether the politics of faith should be understood as a speculative idea supplying itself (or being providentially supplied) with the necessary power, and therefore enjoying a principle of self-limitation; or whether they should be understood as merely an excess of power inciting government to engage in the limitless activity of pursuing 'perfection'. For merely to respond to the incitement of power, to follow wherever it leads and to exploit every enlargement, is not a moral activity; it is only a display of energy. If this were a question of precedence, there is no doubt about what our answer must be. To impose a single pattern of activity upon a community (and moreover upon a community distinguished by a new-found multiplicity of directions of activity) requires a minute and relentless control which only a government endowed with great power could even contemplate. And not until governments were long practiced in the enterprise of minute control, undertaken gradually and often for the immediate purpose of victory in war,⁸ did the notion of minute control in pursuit of 'perfection' emerge. But it is not a question of precedence; our problem is whether the idea of 'perfection' is capable of supplying a principle of self-limitation and thus transforming a display of energy into a moral activity. And the answer appears to be that the idea of 'perfection' in virtue of its own limitlessness is incapable of self-limitation. To impose and maintain a single pattern of activity (not for some limited purpose, such as victory in war, but because this pattern of activity is

⁸ cf. *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, vol. II, ch. vii, p. 9. [The reference to the *Cambridge Economic History of Europe* is a mistake. The reference is actually to Lionel Robbins, *The Theory of Economic Policy, in English Classical Political Economy* (London: Macmillan, 1952). See Editor's Introduction above, p. ix.]

recognized to be the 'perfect' condition of human circumstance) is in itself indistinguishable from bringing to bear upon the community all the power available to government and engaging in a perpetual search for more and more extensive power. It does not call for a quantum of power appropriate to the achievement of a specific purpose: the purpose is in the custody of the power and extends with every extension of power.⁹

It seems, then, that the politics of faith is the pursuit of 'perfection' harnessed to power: the character of 'perfection' being merely that condition of human circumstance which emerges when minute and relentless control is exercised over the activities of the subject. Nor is it remarkable that this should be so. Many of our activities are of this kind, the work being inspired by the tools which are themselves gradually improved as the project goes forward and merely as a means of forwarding the project. The production of wealth, for example, which, while it may be limited by considerations of enjoyment, may also become a habit which far outruns this limit and acquires a momentum of its own directed towards a maximum which coincides with a diminished rather than an enhanced happiness. And both the extension of 'education' in the last hundred and fifty years, and the enlargement of the activities of the BBC from its small beginnings, are examples of the same process at work. But what is remarkable is the manner in which such enterprises are endowed with a spurious moral character on account, it would seem, of the energy and persistence with which they are pursued, and even on account of the appearance they have of inevitability when they are properly under way. So far, then, the politics of faith are comparable to the exploitation of a technique; impelled by an inner momentum, they are as little hindered as may be by considerations even of utility and are devoid of any principle of self-limitation.

But this is not the end of the matter. The politics of faith appear not in general, but in a variety of versions; and it belongs to a version to supply a principle of self-limitation. 'Perfection' is not merely what appears when minute and relentless control is taken of all the activities of the subject: it is a mundane condition of human circumstances which has suffered definition. What is

⁹ 'It is the duty of government to do whatever is conducive to the welfare of the governed. The only limit to this duty is power . . .' Nassau Senior, quoted in Robbins, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

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sought is 'righteousness', or 'the maximum exploitation of the resources of the world', or 'security'. Here 'perfection' is not harnessed to power; power is harnessed to particularized 'perfection'. And in so far as these notions of 'perfection' are exclusive of one another, there would appear to be in each a principle of self-limitation. Nevertheless, the appearance is illusory. If 'righteousness', or 'the maximum exploitation of the resources of the world', or 'security' were understood as limited objectives, each calling for an appropriate (and therefore limited) supply of power for its achievement, then each would certainly enjoy a principle of self-limitation. But in the politics of faith this is not so. They are exclusive notions of 'perfection', not alternative forms of 'perfection', because *ex hypothesi* 'perfection' cannot have alternative forms. And appearing as notions of 'perfection', they do not each call for a different and appropriate supply of power; they each call for as much as there is and for the endless search for more, and in doing so share a common limitless character. In short, the distinctions which the various versions of the politics of faith appear to represent are distinctions without differences. Each is defined, not by itself, but by the power available or in prospect; each is an activity to be 'moralized' only on the principle 'I ought because I can.' And, paradoxically, as it will seem to some, it is their character as 'perfection' which turns their pursuit from a moral activity into a mere response to the incitement of power.

III

The nemesis of sceptical politics, when they are freed from any modifying agency, is less spectacular than that of the politics of faith in similar circumstances: the self-defeat of scepticism is both less devastating and more subtle. And this difference of standing between the two styles (which has already suggested itself at other points in our investigation) is not insignificant; it represents a principle which must be considered later in more detail. Nevertheless, self-defeat is not absent from the politics of scepticism: to say the least, it is unsteady when it stands by itself.

The sceptical style of government is not anarchical: the extreme here is not 'no-government', or even government reduced to the smallest dimensions. Faith reveals itself as maximum government, the total ordering of the activities of the

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subject, and, from this point of view, scepticism may be said to represent minimum government: it is concerned to impose the least possible uniformity upon the direction of activity. But the character of the sceptical style is not merely what it is when reflected in the mirror of faith. It has a positive office, the maintenance of a relevant public order in a community; and it can rise above minimum government, and be imperial in its own province, without approximating itself to rule in the manner of faith. Consequently the nemesis here is not the absence of government, nor is it an inclination towards weak government. Indeed, in its characteristic sphere of activity, and on account of the narrowness of that sphere, government in the sceptical style is able to be strong just where the government of faith is liable to be weak. The power it needs, since it is not great, is (in modern times) readily available; the manner in which this power is used does not provoke massive opposition which calls for great and possibly insufficient exertions; and because in normal circumstances this style of government is never at the end of its tether, there remains always something in hand for occasions of emergency. In short, this style of government can be strong because it does not need to be overwhelming in order to be strong: it is paramount because its activities are limited.

In the politics of faith, government has no special character. On this account it becomes, in the end, the only legitimate activity; and, in general, the nemesis of this style springs from its characteristic limitlessness, its concern with 'perfection'. In the politics of scepticism, on the other hand, government appears as one among the many forms of activity which compose a community; it is preeminent only in respect of being concerned with a universal aspect of activities, namely, their disposition to limit one another. And, in general, the nemesis of scepticism springs from the severe self-limitation which belongs to its character. Its office is to maintain a relevant public order, that is, an order appropriate to the manner and directions of the activities which compose the community. But the habit of being exact, and never excessive, in the performance of this duty is apt to make the performance itself less ready. And, in this respect, when it stands alone, the politics of scepticism reveal a certain inappropriateness to the conditions of modern European communities.

Government in the manner of faith must be and seems to be a hostile power in any community save one engaged in few and simple activities. Consequently it has the appearance of an

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intruder in the communities of modern Europe: its first duty is to impose simplicity, to reduce activities to those which can be controlled by the power available. But what is characteristic of these communities is not only a multiplicity of directions of activity, but also a disposition for rapid and perpetual change. And an appropriate manner of government will be one which not only recognizes multiplicity but one that is also alive to change. It is at this point that the characteristic failure of the politics of scepticism appears: it is a style of government preeminently suitable for a complex but relatively static condition of society. The government of faith is alive to change because its chief office is to suppress change where it involves divergence from the chosen direction of 'perfection', and there is nothing in its character which stands in the way of its carrying out this duty. The government of scepticism, on the other hand, having no authority to prevent it, is relatively indifferent to change of any kind, and consequently is apt to be insensitive even to those effects of change which come within its province, namely the appearance of conditions which require an adjustment in the system of rights and duties if a relevant order is to be maintained. Nor is this a contingent failing: it is a defect of the virtue of this style of government.

A community given to rapid and perpetual change in the directions of its activities stands in particular need of a manner of government not itself readily involved in change. And the insistence on formality, as an emblem of orderliness in the maintenance of order, which belongs to scepticism, is clearly appropriate. But the reluctance to jeopardize order by a ready resort to informality has its counterpart in a resistance to those modifications of formalities without which order rapidly becomes irrelevant and consequently self-destructive. And where (as here) virtue lies, not in imagining and anticipating change, but in devising the most economical and least revolutionary adjustments which must be made in the system of rights and duties in response to only the most manifest and well-established changes, a lack of vigilance is almost indistinguishable from minding one's own business. To be more apprehensive would entail being less firm; and a greater readiness in government to reform the system of rights and duties would be inseparable from taking a larger command over the activities of the community. In short, in the absence of a larger enterprise, the sceptical office of keeping the system of rights and duties relevant to the current activities which compose the community may be expected to be

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sluggishly performed. Without the pull exerted by faith, without the 'perfectionism' which we have seen to be both an illusion and a dangerous illusion, itself evoking a nemesis, government in the sceptical style is liable to be overtaken by a nemesis of political quietism.

The disposition of scepticism to underestimate the occasion is another facet of this defeat. Faith recognizes every occasion as an emergency, and in the name of the 'public interest' or the 'public advantage' maintains its antinomian rule by calling upon the vast power at its command, which (because it is always insufficient) is always in process of being enlarged. The doctrine of 'eminent domain', for example, is magnified into a doctrine of 'sovereignty' and is understood not as an aid to the interpretation of the law, but as a law to end all laws, as authority for minute *ad hoc* control, as (in brief) the short-cut to heaven.¹⁰

In the sceptical style, on the other hand, for government to allow itself to be conditioned by emergency is already to be half-way to one manner of self-defeat. Strictly speaking, in this style, there can be no emergency: where law is at the mercy of occasion there is an end to the rule of law; and where modifications in the system of rights and duties are in response to extraordinary circumstances, they may introduce a temporary and local appropriateness but only at the cost of damaging the whole fabric which it is the office of government to protect.

Scepticism, therefore, is disposed to understatement. Rejecting the call of emergency in its own province, and being reluctant

¹⁰ That in certain circumstances government may override private rights, including the rights of the subject against the government, is unavoidable; government, whatever its style, can consent to no absolute bar to its effectiveness. This doctrine is formulated in the concept of 'eminent domain', and it was understood to present no serious problems so long as government was turned in the direction of scepticism, that is so long as the 'circumstances' were narrowly rather than widely interpreted and the right exercised with diffidence. Indeed, that concept itself may be said to be sceptical because it distinguishes activity in an emergency from normal activity. But where the maximum begins to displace the minimum, where 'public necessity' is enlarged into 'well-being', 'prosperity' or 'salvation', or where any and every occasion may be designated an 'emergency' calling into operation the right of 'eminent domain', or where in some of its activities government always claims special privileges (e.g. the exclusion of specific performance from a contract) the right comes to swallow up all other rights, and from small beginnings a bastard and unmanageable doctrine of 'sovereignty' has appeared.

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to go beyond its own province, it is liable to confuse a genuine emergency with the counterfeit emergencies of faith, and to discount it. But in doing so it displays an insufficiency which puts it on the road to the other manner of self-defeat to which it is liable. The energy and enterprise characteristic of modern European communities call for formality in government which the sceptical style can supply; but they call also for readiness in genuine emergency, and here this style is handicapped by its own virtues. The paradox of sceptical politics is that, while it is the style of government with the largest reserve of power available for use in emergency, it is also the least disposed to call upon this [reserve. It responds slowly to inspired imagining of perils to come. Yet the sceptical style cannot sustain itself as a purely empirical activity; it requires something more to attain coherence which, when it appears with unaccustomed passion and urgency, or as ideology, elicits a defensive response. Self-conscious dissatisfaction with the lack of projects designed to yield improving accomplishments overwhelms the habit of 'not doing'. Departure from studied self-limitation comes to seem unavoidable. In the presence of a style which is full of] passion and achieves its limited results by representing itself as a boundless enterprise, this studied self-limitation, this *mésure* on the part of government, must seem out of place, at best an oddity and at worst an example of indolence. It is always difficult to be enthusiastic about moderation or passionate about self-control, but in these circumstances it is impossible. Demanding neither love nor gratitude but only respect, this style of government will receive indifference or even contempt. While faith suffers the nemesis of excess, scepticism is deprived of its authority by its moderation.

Not to be readily understood by its subjects is, for a style of government, to be convicted of inappropriateness, even though the lack of understanding is a commentary on the subjects rather than on the style. And in this activist climate (in which the government of faith seems so preeminently relevant), the sceptical style must appear as an unintelligible piece of sophistication. Government in this style is, we have seen, primarily a judicial activity; and where men are intent upon achievement, either individual or communal, judicial activity is easily mistaken for a hindrance. It abdicates exactly at the point where the activist expects an assertion of authority; it withdraws where he expects it to proceed; it insists upon technicalities; it is narrow, severe and unenthusiastic; it is without courage or conviction. Here is a style of government which recognizes a multiplicity of

directions of activity, and yet expresses approval of none; which assumes 'imperfection' and yet ventures upon no moral judgement. It sets a high value on precedent, but does not believe that the path of precedent leads to any specific destination.¹¹ It pretends to be determined by 'expediency' but in so refined a manner that it will not surrender itself to the pursuit of 'perfection'. In what seems a wanton self-limitation, it refuses to defend a man in such a manner as to deprive him of all authority to defend himself. If the activist is concerned with 'truth', a law of evidence which precludes a court from hearing what, if heard, would establish guilt, appears an obstructive technicality. If he is concerned with 'good husbandry', to allow proprietary rights to stand in the way is absurd. If he is concerned with 'righteousness', to make peace with the 'heathen' is vile. In short, the intellectual distinctions which constitute this style of government are foreign to the activist climate of opinion; in a world where all other activities are serious, where diligence is virtue and energy excellence, they fix upon government the character of frivolity.

No doubt this judgement of the politics of scepticism suffers from both ignorance and misconception. Nevertheless, it reveals a certain inappropriateness in the style, and, what is more important, it leads us, if we will allow it to do so, to the final nemesis of scepticism: the disposition to reduce politics to play.

By 'play',¹² I mean activity pursued on certain specified occasions, at fixed times and in a place set apart and according to exact rules, the significance of the activity lying not in a terminal result aimed at, but in the disposition which is enjoyed and fostered in the cause of the activity. This manner of activity is contrasted, in general, with 'serious' activity or with what may be called 'ordinary life'. Without 'earnest' there can be no 'play'; without 'play' there can be no 'earnest'. Consequently, 'play' is not merely or directly opposed to 'serious' activity; its relationship to 'ordinary life' is that of an ironical companion. It exhibits

¹¹ 'Precisely because I believe that the world would be just as well off if it lived under laws different from ours in many ways, and because I believe that the claim of our special code to respect is simply that it exists, that it is the one to which we have become accustomed and not that it represents an eternal principle, I am slow to consent to overruling a precedent, and think that our important duty is to see that the judicial duel shall be fought out in its accustomed way.' Holmes, *Collected Legal Papers*, p. 239.

¹² See J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*.

in itself the tensions, the violence and the 'seriousness' of 'ordinary life', but they are a mockery of their originals and when reflected back upon 'ordinary life' they have the effect of deflating its 'seriousness' by reducing the significance of the ends pursued.

There is, of course, a 'playful' component in most of our activities: in business and in religion. And whenever we insist upon the manner rather than the result we are, in this sense, 'at play'. But nowhere is this component more clearly present than in the various levels of political activity, in the conduct of affairs at home, in the administration of justice, in diplomacy and in war. How large and how significant a place 'play' is recognized to have will, of course, depend upon our interpretation of the detail of these activities, but on any interpretation this component is conspicuous both in the administration of justice and in the conduct of parliamentary government. For both these activities there is a place and time set apart, marking them off from the world outside. The persons engaged in these activities play a part which distinguishes their behaviour, there and then, from what it is elsewhere: their movements conform to a ritual and their manner of speech is guarded by special privileges and determined by exact rules. Friends appear as opponents; there is dispute without hatred, conflict without violence; victory is subordinated to accepted rules and conventions; to win a point by the ingenious exploitation of procedure is recognized to be legitimate, but failure to observe the ritual (even though it is inadvertent failure) disqualifies the contestant; and the whole is enveloped in a convention which allows victory by words and in no other manner.

In all this there is much that is foreign to the politics of faith. This style of government is preeminently 'serious'. Political activity is approximated to 'ordinary life', and the terminal result is held to be more important than the manner in which it is achieved. Debate is argument, not conversation; and when the direction of activity has been determined, 'opposition' has no place. Indeed, all the features of modern European government which we have already observed to be regrettable from the standpoint of faith are those which belong to the component of 'playfulness'; and whenever our politics has turned decisively in the direction of faith, it is this component which has been reduced or suppressed. On the other hand, it is the component of 'play' which preeminently represents scepticism: indeed, it may be identified with the sceptical style. Political activity is

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recognized as a limited activity, distinguished from 'ordinary life'. The insistence upon formality in the conduct of affairs; the terminal result subordinated to the manner of its achievement; the understanding of debate as conversation and as a perpetual partner in the activity of governing; the recognition of devices (such as majority decisions) as nothing more than convenient conventions; the understanding of the limited significance of victory – all these are at once characteristic of the politics of scepticism and of politics as 'play'. And the sceptic would go on to observe that the relationship between government in this style and the activities of its subjects is, in many respects, the relationship between 'play' and 'ordinary life'. To govern is not the 'serious' business of setting activity in a certain direction and supplying it with energy and an object; it is providing current activities with a ready and continuously appropriate means of resolving the difficulties generated by their passionate and exclusive concentration upon themselves, and in this manner lessening the violence of the impact of one activity upon another. That this cannot be done without an endowment of power is obvious. But the sceptic will remark that the necessary power is small and that the manner in which it is exercised, its formality and moderation, is itself an ironical criticism of the excess and self-centredness of the activities it controls.

The poles of our politics may, then, be reformulated as 'earnest' and 'play'. And 'earnest' and 'play' are both opponents and partners, so faith and scepticism are both enemies and friends. Scepticism represents the extreme of 'play', and its nemesis (when it stands alone, deprived of the modifying pull of 'earnest') will be that which belongs to the character of 'play'.

There is a certain extemporizing exuberance which is apt to appear within the exactness which belongs to 'play': a disposition to overdo things. But this is not the forerunner of collapse; it is merely a manifestation of the latitude which an exact outline permits; it is the *play* within 'play'. When, however, the passion to win supervenes, the spell is broken and 'play' is at an end. Nevertheless, though this is defeat, it is not self-defeat. The self-defeat of 'play' is the lethargy which overtake the game when one of the players is wholly indifferent about winning. We give away points because we see it pleases our opponent to win; but all to no purpose. The apathy communicates itself, the 'play' goes to pieces and the game collapses. In 'play', properly speaking, victory and defeat are irrelevant; but without the illusion that winning matters, 'play' is impossible. This is the nemesis of

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'play': the belief that there is *nothing* serious in mortality. But, just as the irony of scepticism can recall faith from the self-defeat that belongs to its uninhibited character, so the pull of faith, the illusion that there is a victory to be won (and not a resort to the extreme of faith), rescues from self-destruction a style of politics disposed to reduce the activity of governing to mere 'play'.¹³

IV

To say that each of these styles of government, when it stands by itself, is self-destructive, and to say that what can rescue each from self-destruction is something that the other is able to supply, is perhaps only a picturesque way of saying that faith and scepticism in modern European politics are not merely opponents, but also partners. Our enquiry into the nemesis of each of these styles no more than reinforces the view that they are not, properly speaking, alternative manners of governing and understandings of the office of government but the poles of the internal movement of our politics.

But it has brought to light a characteristic of faith and scepticism which has hitherto been noticeable but not properly noticed, namely, the fact that these two styles do not exactly match one another. They oppose one another, but the opposition is oblique; they are partners, but they do not enjoy exactly the same standing. It is only when we consider the respective inabilities of faith and scepticism to stand alone that this inequality declares itself unmistakably.

Self-defeat is a necessary characteristic of the politics of faith. I do not mean that, in the long run, the pursuit of this style of government is bound to land a community, especially a community of the kind that exists in modern Europe, in destruction; this may be so, but it is not the point. I mean that this style of government is inherently self-contradictory. On the other hand, the politics of scepticism suffers only from a strong contingent liability to self-defeat: when it stands alone it stands unsteadily. Consequently, while the pull of scepticism may rescue faith from certain self-destruction, the pull of faith saves scepticism from only probable self-destruction.

¹³ cf. Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks* (2nd edn), vol. I, p. 74.

If the politics of scepticism represented mere anarchy, then this style of government would be inherently self-contradictory, and would be as fully dependent upon faith as in fact faith is upon it: anarchy and faith, when they stand alone, are each, in different manners, the abolition of 'government'. But scepticism is not anarchy; it is not even disposed to anarchy. And in virtue of its escape from anarchy, it escapes inherent self-destruction as a manner of government. The defects of its virtues are serious, and if they were fully operative it would certainly be no better than a limping style of politics, but it is not necessary that they should be fully operative. For the most part, the inappropriateness of the sceptical style to the communities of modern Europe (which is its greatest defeat) is an inappropriateness to a condition which it does not itself promote, namely, a condition of 'emergency' and 'war'. It is true that 'war' is to be considered a normal rather than an abnormal condition of modern European communities, but this is not (so far as major conflict is concerned) a consequence of the character of the communities themselves, but of their political activity having been turned frequently and for long periods in the aggressive direction of faith. The major conflicts of modern times have either been religious, or a product of the pursuit of 'perfection' understood as the maximum exploitation of the resources of the world, or in defence of 'perfection' as 'security'. A manner of government unready to recognize and unsuited to meet this condition may be said to be likely to suffer defeat when it appears, and may be said to be inappropriate if the chances are that it will appear, but it does nothing to encourage the appearance.

And further, the excess, the absence of self-limitation, which belongs to the style of faith when it stands alone is both characteristic and always complete in the sense that it is always as great as the power available permits it to be; but, since scepticism in politics is not anarchy, the severe self-limitation that is characteristic of it (and in virtue of which it is both a 'moral' activity and a vulnerable activity) is not an extreme; it does not limit itself out of existence. The style of faith, when it stands alone, is not susceptible of degrees, there is no more or less, it is always at the end of its tether and is incapable of the kind of self-criticism which would enable it to defend itself against its own excesses. It is, as we have seen, the politics of immortality, building for eternity. But the sceptical style, even when it stands alone, is capable of some self-criticism; there is a recognized limit to which it can compare its achievements, and it enjoys some

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reserve and scope for internal movement and self-correction. It is the politics of mortality, which does not mean that the range of its vision is confined to a present instant, but that it is neither short nor long. Everything in this style of government is provisional and is constructed so that it may be enlarged or diminished as unfolding circumstances demand; but there are degrees of evanescence, and what is transitory is, on that account, not merely momentary. Government in the style of faith is a godlike activity; in the style of scepticism it is a human activity, not the activity of a day-fly. In short, if we regard these poles of our political activity as positive and negative, it is necessary to recognize that while the style of faith stands for 'everything', the complete control of the activities which compose a community, the style of scepticism stands, not for 'nothing', but for 'little'.

Moreover, this inequality between the characters of faith and scepticism may be formulated in a general practical principle: excess and defect are not equidistant from the mean. As Isocrates observed, and Confucius before him, 'moderation lies in deficiency rather than in excess':¹⁴ indeed, deficiency itself enjoys a mean because it is never absolute. The spendthrift may dispose of all and rather more than all that he possesses, but even the miser must spend something; the marksman whose first bullet falls short may see where it falls and may dispose himself accordingly to hit the mark next time, but he whose first bullet wings its way into a distance where the eye cannot follow it is no nearer to hitting the mark than if he had never fired. And whatever may be the limitations of this principle, I think we may find it useful when we come to consider what conclusions it is permissible to draw from this understanding of our politics.

¹⁴ Isocrates, *Ad Nicoclem*, p. 33; Confucius, *Analects*, iv. p. 23.