MINDING the MODERN

Human Agency, Intellectual Traditions, and Responsible Knowledge

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ABBREVIATIONS

ADT  St. Augustine of Hippo, *The Trinity* [*De Trinitate*]
AR   Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*
AV   Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*
BL   Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*
BT   Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*
BTr  Boethius, *Tractates, De Consolatione Philosophiae*
CCS  Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *On the Constitution of Church and State*
CD   St. Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God against the Pagans* [*De Civitate Dei*]
CF   Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Friend*
CL   Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*
CLS  Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lay Sermons*
CM   Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Marginalia*
CN   Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Notebooks, 5*
### Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Author(s) and Title</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TMS</td>
<td>Adam Smith, <em>The Theory of Moral Sentiments</em></td>
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<td>TT</td>
<td>Samuel Taylor Coleridge, <em>Table Talk</em></td>
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<td>WMA</td>
<td>Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, <em>Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship</em></td>
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<td>WWR</td>
<td>Arthur Schopenhauer, <em>The World as Will and Representation</em></td>
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Portrait of a Gentleman in his Study, 1528–30, Lorenzo Lotto (c.1480–1556) / Galleria dell’Accademia, Venice, Italy / The Bridgeman Art Library

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EXORDIUM

Modernity’s Gaze

The young man's forlorn, abstracted, and blank gaze suggests disorientation and incipient melancholy: we cannot meet his eyes, and they will not meet ours. Indeed, the beholder of Lorenzo Lotto’s canvas may feel somewhat flustered, as though he or she had accidentally intruded on a scene of intensely personal, albeit ineffable anguish. For Lotto’s young man, whose identity remains unknown, seems utterly alone in the world—the quintessentially modern, solitary individual confined to his study in ways familiar from the candle-lit interior of Descartes’s Meditations all the way to the cork-lined refuge where Proust would labor on his magnum opus. Yet Lotto’s youth also appears bereft of the dynamism, confidence, and sense of purpose usually claimed for the modern, autonomous self—be it Descartes’s cogito, John Locke’s “consciousness,” or Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s “founding act” (Tathandlung). The cold-blooded lizard and discarded ring on the table hint at the loss of ἔρως as a source of motivation, an impression compounded by the fact that lute and hunting horn, emblems of conviviality and worldly pleasure, are now hung up on the wall in the background.¹ Instead, the glimpse of the outside world that the painting affords us shows dusk encroaching. The pendulum swings; time moves on. We have

¹. Dating of Lotto’s canvas varies, with some (Berenson) dating it as early as 1524, and others suggesting dates of 1526 (Brown et al.) or even 1530 (Humfrey). For discussions, see Humfrey, Lorenzo Lotto, D. A. Brown, Lorenzo Lotto, and Berenson, Lorenzo Lotto.
happened upon a scene of palpable melancholy. Thus, even as a massive folio dominates the picture, the young man’s irresolute posture intimates that books no longer hold answers, perhaps because the right questions elude him. On one widely accepted interpretation, the tome is a business ledger. Other, earlier accounts view the massive folio as emblematic of a life of study to which the man now means to dedicate himself. Either way, the relation of the young man’s body to the book suggests a state of incapacitation and inertia, rather than gathering resolve. Moreover, the enigmatic knowledge contained in the folio may well account for the young man’s distracted and withdrawn expression. Hence it is that the book’s ponderous mass supports the young man only physically. For his body, leaning on it, strikes a twisted, faintly artificial pose, and his left hand betrays his distracted and indifferent attitude toward the book. Moreover, the absence of a chair, of paper and quill in this study, as well as the miscellaneous array of a half-opened letter and a ruffled blue silk cloth casually bunched up beneath the folio all suggest a psychological state of abstractive loitering rather than focused and purposive study.

Meanwhile, the unwieldy folio appears more as dead mass than as a repository of learning. We suspect that the unspecified past wisdom contained in it has but the most tenuous hold on the young man whose consciousness, to judge by his withdrawn gaze, appears altogether adrift. If the book seems incapable of answering questions, it is so because for Lotto’s youth to articulate those questions would require contact with an outside world of experience from which he has quite obviously withdrawn. Sequestered into gathering darkness, the young man appears wholly bereft of sense experience, interpersonal relations, and commitments such as define the world outside his study. That world has been reduced to a narrow slice of landscape faintly illumined from the horizon and soon to be expunged from sight by the nocturnal clouds gathering overhead. Yet, to return to the heart of the painting, the book: does the massive tome with its worn leather binding constitute a bona fide repository of learning, or is it but an emblem of the futility or sheer elusiveness of knowledge? Do the fading rose petals, conventional emblems of transience and of time lost, stand in metonymic relationship to the book’s vellum leaves so distractedly fingered by the man? Is it truly a book, or are we to take it as an emblem of a lost plenitude, an allegory of the premodern cosmos that has been displaced by numberless theoretical perplexities liable to induce the terror of Blaise Pascal’s silent, “infinite spaces”? Indeed, if the book no longer stands for the plenitude of (past and future) meanings but, instead, allegorizes the terminal loss of certainty in matters of both speculative and practical reason, can art (including the art of this painting) be said to fare any better? Aside from confronting us with modernity’s pervasive loss of intellectual orientation and practical purpose, might Lotto’s canvas also suggest that art itself can only tabulate, yet never remedy that very predicament?
To be sure, Lotto’s painting, part of an oeuvre sometimes credited with having inaugurated the modern psychological portrait, should not be freighted with excessive significance for the arguments to follow. Still, its eloquent tonal composition furnishes a poignant and compact illustration of this book’s principal concerns. First, there is the increasingly embattled, seemingly untenable status of action, practical reason, and a coherent model of human agency as both self-aware and responsible. Irresolute and metaphysically perplexed, Lotto’s young man suggests that the nexus between human flourishing and action, and indeed the very legitimacy of these basic concepts, has become acutely problematic. Does melancholy (acedia) still belong to the realm of choice and will? Does it still name a condition of “sin”? Or has it been reconstituted as an irreversible existential “condition,” thereby destabilizing the very underpinnings of what it means to be human—viz., notions of judgment, will, choice, intentionality, action, responsibility, and relationality? While some connection between action and ultimate ends may yet exist at the periphery of Lotto’s portrait, the notion of the human appears more than ever an enigma. It appears to elude the theoretical (syllogistic) type of explanation that in the modern era (certainly by the beginning of the seventeenth century) has largely established itself as the only model of reason. As a result, the premodern, Aristotelian view that had posited action as the consummation of practical reason and its commitment to a communal and normative set of ends now appears strangely illegitimate and almost incomprehensible. Indeed, Lotto’s portrait gives little hope that whatever thought process may be unfolding behind those mournful eyes could ever be translated back into the realm of action that proceeds on the strength of habits, judgments, and traditions whose meaning is inseparable from our acknowledgment of their authority and their dialectically reasoned transmission to the future.

The physiognomy of Lotto’s modern melancholic individual vividly captures one of my principal claims: viz., that beginning with the advent of nominalism and voluntarism in the fourteenth century, theoretical inquiry and practical reason have terminally parted ways. In Part I, I explore how that parting of ways came about, the premise being that any coherent and meaningful understanding of action—in contrast to strictly naturalist conceptions of “process” or sociological accounts of the “behavior” of individuals and groups—presupposes a profound alignment of will and intellect. Central to that narrative is the story of how that integral relation between cognition and commitment, intellect and will, gradually unravels in the aftermath of Aquinas’s synthesis of Aristotelian realism with the Augustinian conception of the human will—at once incontrovertibly self-aware, eminently fallible, and yet responsible for its elections. Both the theological origins of modernity’s disaggregation of practical and theoretical reason and the innumerable speculative problems and perplexities to which this development gives rise are vividly captured in the withdrawn countenance and hesitant posture of Lotto’s melancholic young man. He
seems above all *irresolute*, that is, bereft of the capacity to be, or even imagine himself as, a creative, committed, and responsible agent in the world.

A second objective of this book is to clarify the increasingly confused understanding of what role concepts play in humanistic inquiry, and what constitutes the ground or source of their authority. As we shall find, the principal issue here concerns the wholesale and often unreflected migration of modern scientific methods into a domain of thought that is essentially interpretive, and where acts of inquiry aim at clarifying and realizing a notion of the good, rather than at sifting quantifiable and ostensibly value-neutral “information.” If we accept the older view of that massive folio in Lotto’s painting as an emblem of humanistic learning, then the young man’s distracted and perplexed countenance truly embodies a distinctly modern type of individuality, at once bewildered by the seeming illegibility of inherited traditions of moral inquiry and, thus, unable to grasp the very nature and significance of tradition per se. Instead of a dialogic principle that allows a given generation to orient itself by engaging, extending, and transforming the reach of inherited conceptions, tradition now appears but dead weight. Even if it were to be shuffled off, what could possibly take its place? The young man’s conspicuous loitering over the folio in utter isolation suggests a profound bewilderment as to just how knowledge is to be achieved now that the Scholastic model of *disputatio* has collapsed, a model premised on the productive dialectical encounter with past attempts at grasping questions of the good, human flourishing, responsibility, and ultimate ends. No longer understood as an “open transcendental” (C. Gunton), specific intellectual traditions (as indeed the very notion of *traditio* itself) appear to concern modernity only as an object of perplexity and indignation, or impending oblivion. At once distraught and distracted by the chimera of the *new* and riveted onto a future with a mix of manic anticipation and growing dread, the modern subject only knows that it has forgotten something but appears unable to recall just what it was. This book is an attempt to retrieve this twofold enigma: the unique nature of humanistic, interpretive concepts and frameworks enabling our quest for articulate and responsible knowledge in the realm of practical reason, and the distinctive dialectical process whereby such concepts (e.g., will, person, judgment, action, and the Platonic triad of the good, the true, and the beautiful) are received, rethought, and transmitted to future generations.

Though much of this book took shape in a solitary study not unlike the one depicted by Lotto, it is also a palimpsest of many intellectual debts and was made possible by countless acts of personal friendship and collegial support. Of the many voices that enriched this book and contributed greatly to whatever merits it may have, some belong to people whom I have never met, yet whose intellectual personae and integrity have spoken powerfully to me through their published work. Thus what follows was often inspired and is gratefully indebted to the work of Hans-Georg
Gadamer, Alasdair MacIntyre, Louis Dupré, Charles Taylor, and Robert Sokolowski, to name some of the most compelling writers to have traversed similar ground. I hope to have emulated not just the scope of their ambition but, however imperfectly, the exemplary sense of intellectual purpose and responsibility that speaks from their published work. Now in my twenty-first year of teaching and writing at Duke University, I am acutely aware of the enormous debt that this book, and indeed my overall intellectual flourishing at this most mercurial institution, have owed to the generosity, wisdom, and unflagging support of some of my closest and most trusted colleagues and friends. David Aers read the entire manuscript and commented on it with the degree of care and detail that only someone possessed of his unfathomable learning and intellectual passion could have summoned; his late-night emails, alerting me to invariably crucial primary and secondary readings, have done much to deepen and consolidate the arguments I sought to develop, and they greatly helped sharpen my sense of responsibility and humility as I strayed farther and farther out of my main area of expertise (European Romanticism) and into the refreshingly coherent traditions of inquiry of which philosophical theology and moral philosophy are composed. Stanley Hauerwas and Paul Griffiths at the Duke Divinity School both read the book in its later stages and commented on it with characteristic generosity and a sharp eye for the nuances and complex etiology of theological and philosophical argument. I was also a deeply grateful auditor of Reinhard Hütter’s seminars on Aquinas, which led to some inspiring and enriching conversations about the challenging and topographically complex borderlands connecting theology, philosophy, and aesthetics. A unique debt of gratitude I owe to Vivasvan Soni, who has followed this book’s evolution with truly unparalleled care and attentiveness. Viv’s preternatural ability to grasp an argument’s basic intent, while sympathetically and constructively drawing out its larger potential and significance, never ceases to astonish. His detailed and trenchant written responses to individual sections have left a lasting imprint on whatever is of merit in this book.

A book of such immodest (though, I hope, not altogether irresponsible) scope and ambition obviously takes time to gestate, and much of that fermentation takes place in discussions and conversations such as follow the presentation of some selection from it. Truly invaluable in this regard was my stay at the National Humanities Center—generously funded by the NHC (via the Duke Endowment) and by an ACLS fellowship—during the 2010–2011 academic year. By “genial coincidence,” as Coleridge might have called it, James Engell was also a fellow there that year, and I am ever so grateful for the keen interest that he took in the book project as a whole and in the sections on Coleridge in particular. My conversations with James Engell, Miguel Tamen, Bernie Levinson, and Geoff Harpham on the serene, sun-dappled terraces and meeting spaces of the National Humanities Center are among my fondest memories of a year spent in what, surely, has to be every academic’s “para-
dise.” While the book was taking shape, I also was fortunate enough to be invited to present portions of it at Johns Hopkins, Stanford, Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Yale, Brown, Rice, Michigan, SUNY Buffalo, Indiana, the Catholic University of Louvain, and the University of Oregon, occasions when treasured friendships were forged and countless intellectual debts were accumulated. Though no doubt I now fail to recall all of them, many colleagues and graduate students at these and other institutions provided me with often invaluable suggestions and probed the book’s arguments with a degree of attentiveness and dialectical rigor that reassures me that the Scholastic ethos of disputatio has not (at least not yet) been completely vanquished by a self-regarding and superficial professionalism. In this regard, I wish to acknowledge my particular gratitude to David Collings, David Clark, Richard Macksey, Noel Jackson, Denise Gigante, Nicholas Halmi, David Wellbery, Paul Fry, Jacques Khalip, Fritz Breithaupt, Joshua Kates, Bill Rasch, Eyal Peretz, Tres Pyle, Nancy Yousef and, here at Duke, Rob Mitchell, Jakob Norberg, Frank Lentricchia, Tom Ferraro, Natalya Chuchinsky, Rachel Stern, and William Revere.

Finally, throughout the writing of this book I have enjoyed the collegial and personal support of some great colleagues and friends here at Duke: Len Tennenhouse and Bill Donahue have been most generous colleagues and, in working heroically to reestablish sound standards for constructive and responsible chairmanship in the two departments to which I belong, they also did much to create the supportive work environment that has allowed this project to flourish. Finally, my wife and partner in life, Sandra—gifted artist and pedagogue in her own right and a font of common sense in all matters artistic and pedagogical—was at once shrewd and gentle in helping me maintain the right balance between genuine intellectual passion and outright self-absorption. In this she had the unflagging support of our young daughter, Naomi, who along with my fully grown daughters, Natalie and Elisa, has given my life more meaning and love than I could have ever imagined. Together, they have been a steady prompt for me to balance life and work, and to be alert to the myriad and often unpredictable ways in which those two spheres show themselves to be entwined.

Durham, July 2012