Why the Center Can't Hold: A Diagnosis of Puritanized America

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Published by Punctum Books

O'Neill, Tom.
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“You didn’t land on Plymouth Rock; Plymouth Rock landed on you,” Malcolm X used to say in his sermons to black males. It was a way of guiding them toward a revision of The American Story—a story they must always have found incredible. An admirable thing about Malcolm’s statement is that it doesn’t take the Fourth of July, 1776, as the birth date of America. To run with his metaphor a bit, let’s note the rock’s first target wasn’t the black Americans who came eventually to feel its crushing weight; the first target was the Native Americans of New England. Let’s note too, the rock’s first truly asteroid-like impact wasn’t on those Indians who helped the Pilgrims through their first winter at the start of the 1620s; rather it was on Pequot Indians to the west of them in 1637.

We often speak of Washington as the Father of Our Country. He was in a number of ways our homegrown exemplar of the Enlightenment, and in a number of ways he acted with disinterested wisdom in our behalf. Still, America wasn’t conceived in the closing years of the Enlightenment; it was conceived a hundred and fifty years earlier in the time of our Puritan ancestors. If one looks back for a Father of Our Country in the days of our conception, it wasn’t Captain John Smith or John Rolfe; the most plausible candidate is the John Winthrop spoken of in the first chapter, for it’s his DNA we find flowing in our veins today—and, as already suggested, if we take freedom of thought and tolerance as earmarks of the Enlightenment, Winthrop was neither the Enlightenment’s forerunner nor its child.
By reason of our highly principled separation of church and state, while we may know something of Winthrop as Governor of Massachusetts, most of us have successfully evaded any inquiry into his religion. His religion was, as his label as a Puritan suggests, a subset of Protestantism—one which found most Protestantism insufficiently pure. Perhaps a secondary reason why our teachers have had so little to tell us about his motivations is that Puritanism is a notoriously difficult mentality to objectify—not the least because we have all inherited it.

When we arrived at Massachusetts Bay in 1630, we may have wished to establish a new Eden. We quickly found ourselves scrambling however for a place in the sun. There were impediments. They presented themselves as “wilderness.” More existentially, they came to be personified as “Indians” or “savages.” In order to tame the wilderness, we had to tame, subdue, or exterminate the savages.

Beyond that, we brought with us special sources of internal tension. It wasn’t just that some of us who affirmed we were God’s people found amongst us others—Roger Williams, Anne Hutchinson, Quakers—who, though thinking differently from us, claimed inconveniently to be God’s people as well. For beyond that, each of us was confronted by a highly personal problem of such a nature it couldn’t be resolved this side of the grave. No problem could be more urgent and no problem more impossible to solve. It presented itself in the question: Am I who count myself among God’s people truly one of them? Am I actually among the Elect?

No decision of mine, no baptismal ritual, no imitation of Jesus nor approval of me by the Christian community could put the question to rest. As Luther had protested, indulgences in the form of contributions to the church were the shabbiest of scams—as if some fellow mortals could sell us the grace of God. Likewise, for that matter, it was blasphemous to say any other work I might perform could merit that grace of redemption which was altogether in God’s hands to bestow or withhold. What human has a right to think he or she can force the hand of God? How incredibly lacking we must be in a true awareness of our state if we think we can oblige God to let us share in the eternal bliss that is God’s life.
In this matter, Calvin was particularly clear. If as said we knew the decision about our salvation did not reside with us, he said we knew precisely where it did reside. It resided in the eternal and inscrutable decree of God. From all eternity, as Paul’s Epistle to the Romans teaches, God has elected a few of us to the life of grace and salvation; the remaining majority, by an equally irrevocable decree, He has destined to burn in hell forever. Nor should we ask why. To ask “why?” is to presume. It’s to respond to God with blasphemy. For in asking, we presume we can call God to account. We’d have missed the infinite qualitative difference between our mere selves and God. We’d have assumed God must abide by our trivial human contrivances for justice. Rather the truth is, in this most important matter of life, we have resources neither on earth nor in heaven. Such had Calvin made clear.

Awesome! Breathtaking! Where does it leave us?

It leaves us hoping we are among the Elect, but with no way of finding out. In this Puritan predicament, if we are willing, we can glimpse the remarkably intense motivational context for the whole founding and development of Massachusetts Bay Colony—the colony that laid down the paradigm for the Puritan nation that continues into the present. If the economic and political development has proved spectacular—unparalleled in human history—a part of the explanation is in the drivenness of us who have carried it out.

Max Weber writes, “The Father in heaven of the New Testament, so human and understanding, who rejoices over the repentance of a sinner as a woman over the lost piece of silver she has found, is gone.”

It’s noteworthy that Weber cites a passage where Jesus compares God to a woman who has found a lost treasure. This passage, and the passages like it, has disappeared from the consciousness of the devout Puritan. One way to speak of Calvin’s accomplishment is that he has quite de-feminized the tender God of Jesus. Recognizing what Calvin has done, Weber speaks

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of “the extreme inhumanity” of the predestined state our ancestors felt they and everyone else had been born into.²

That a majority of us found it unbearable brings us to the paradox at the center of Puritan development. Terrible as was the prospect of damnation, and helpless as one was to change the decree of damnation if one was part of the human majority doomed to it, it occurred to countless of us Puritans that one could perhaps shelter oneself against the paralyzing fear of such doom if one could find signs one lived, here and now, in God’s friendship. This thought inspires the unending search for “the signs of election.”

In the book of Deuteronomy, there is a long list of the blessings Israel will enjoy if it is obedient to God. “The Lord thy God will set thee on high above all the nations of the earth. Blessed shalt thou be in the city, and blessed shalt thou be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of thy body, and the fruit of thy ground, and the fruit of thy cattle, the increase of thy kine, and the flocks of thy sheep.” The list continues for another ten verses. Then there is an even longer list of curses that will fall on Israel if it is not obedient. “Cursed shalt thou be in the city, and cursed in the field. Cursed shall be thy basket and thy store. Cursed shall be the fruit of thy body, and the fruit of thy land, the increase of thy kine, and the flocks of thy sheep. Cursed shalt thou be when thou comest in, and cursed shalt thou be when thou goest out.” The list continues for another forty-eight verses.³

Among us Puritans, if one was to take these verses to heart, one must put them through the purifying filter of predestination. In truth, man’s obedience or disobedience could not be the determining factor in one’s eternal lot. God was in charge of everything, and certainly this meant God and God alone made the decision as to our salvation as vessels of election, or our damnation as vessels of wrath. But could not one use these blessings and curses as so many indications of which way God had decided in one’s individual case? Could not purity of conduct, and the harmony and prosperity flowing from such, be a sign that God had eternally befriended one? In general, could not the success of an enterprise in which one immersed oneself be a sign here and now

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² Weber, Protestant Ethic, 104.
³ Deut. 28:1–68.
of God’s commitment to one’s wellbeing? And so commenced our great game of using prosperity as a scoreboard on which were registered eternal victory for the few and eternal failure for all the others.

Living for a mission could provide a kind of reassurance twice over. Let’s suppose one had as the governing goal of all one’s enterprise the establishment of God’s kingdom in the new world. Was not such a human already clearly in alignment with God? Further, if that mission was successful, was it not clear that God was both approving toward the mission and accepting of the person engaged in it?

From the beginning, the Puritans conceive their activity as a mission; and this category “mission” provides a powerful theme for explaining and integrating the moments of our subsequent history. It was our mission to become a city on a hill. As we turned the savage wilderness into God’s country, it was our mission to set up a form of government that would constitute the last best hope of humankind. Accomplishing that by our Constitution, we took on in the Monroe Doctrine the mission of being the exemplar and protector and arbiter of good order throughout the entire Western hemisphere. At home it was our manifest destiny to achieve the winning of the West by extending our borders to the Pacific Ocean. After that, it was our God-given duty to bring the Philippines under our Christian control, and then, by holding open the doors of China, to take our rightful place on the planet as the first among equals in the politics and commerce of the world.

Looking back to our Puritan forefathers for the beginnings of all this, notice how “mission” is taken as the implicit principle governing Puritan relations with Indians in the following description by Segal and Stinebeck:

The Puritan struggle against sin was, in part, a struggle against Satan as personified by the Indian. It was a life-and-death struggle and the Lord directed the Puritan forces in New England. Therefore, what the Puritan did, he did because God urged him to do it. Since the Puritan’s relations with the Indians were dominated by his importance as a messenger of God, his gain in a transaction with an Indian was a commensurate victory for God over
Satan. While New Plymouth authorities declared “there was no dealing with Indians above board,” these [under-the-board] dealings were justified because they were carried out according to the dictates of God. In the very same manner, the Jews had fought the Canaanites for possession of the Promised Land.

In this comment by Segal and Stinebeck, there’s opportunity to reflect on the tensions in our ancestors’ project. The Puritan mission was a war against sin. Yet Calvin had insisted it was by God’s eternal decree that sin existed. Before the creation of the world, Calvin reasoned, God had willed that there be sin. The logic of his position ran like this: since nothing on earth had an existence in spite of God, if something did exist, it was because God willed it. (Many Muslim theologians say the same today.) The inconvenience however of this splendidly logical doctrine was that it seemed to drain sin of its essential character, its character of being contrary to God. Rather when one sinned, one was performing God’s will. Further, if it is by God’s irresistible will that His creature sins, it was difficult to find a meaningful way to hold the creature responsible. One is responsible for what one chooses; regarding sin, according to Calvin, the creature had no choice—as indeed (in a way anticipating Skinner), he had no freedom.

This rather stark theological paradox invites us to reflect on another anomaly. Bear with me while I try to elaborate it. Here were we Christians in New England seeking to found a new Eden in which Christ would reign as the restorer of harmony, as the atonement [at-one-ment] with the Father, as the Messiah who would reign as Prince of Peace. To establish this was our Puritan mission. And the open land was our opportunity. Yet, as said, there was an impediment. The land wasn’t quite open after

4. Charles M. Segal and David C. Stinebeck, eds., *Puritans, Indians & Manifest Destiny* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1977), 49. That this work edited by Segal and Stinebeck has been marketed by its publisher as “juvenile non-fiction” baffles explanation. While I’ve known bright juveniles, I doubt I’ve ever known one who would, without abundant tutelage, be able to comprehend the message of this book.
all. Once again Satan had intruded himself in what was sup-
pposed to be God’s garden. And the minions of Satan were the
Indians. Quickly therefore the mission we took upon ourselves
in 1630 in service to the Prince of Peace became in 1637 a matter
of killing Indians. The mission, so brought down to earth and
fleshed out, could not easily discover in the four gospels a tex-
tual endorsement for the murder of Indian women and children,
and—since the provoking of adult Indian males was a conscious
strategy of the Puritans—the deaths even of adult Indian males
were a problem. But while the gospels provided little help here,
fortunately the Bible provided Puritans a whole book of Joshua
exemplifying a single-minded readiness on God’s part to annihi-
late Canaanites; and from here we drew biblical justification and
warrant. For we were the chosen people of the new order Jesus
had come into the world to establish.\(^5\)

There still remained, to be sure, a problem in seeking a war-
rant in the book of Joshua. Supposing the Israelites had had a
divine warrant to kill Canaanites, who was to say that meant
we Puritans—freshly chosen people though we be—had such a
warrant regarding Indians?

As we try to step outside our Puritan heritage and look to prob-
lematic aspects of the Puritan viewpoint, one can wonder how
well our ancestral non-Jewish, Anglo-Saxon American forefa-
thers understood the book of Joshua. Having taken Joshua liter-
ally, the Roman Catholic Church had quite confused itself by
condemning Galileo for saying that night and day are caused by
the earth’s rotation rather than a daily journey of the sun; the
Vatican decreed that if the sun miraculously stood still at the bat-
tle of Jericho, that proved the sun at ordinary times was revolving
around the earth. Ordinary speech however—including biblical
speech—is routinely indifferent to matters of science. We con-
tinue to say, without a second thought: “The sun rises in the east
and sets in the west.” As for accounts of genocidal annihilations
that make up most of the book of Joshua, modern archeology

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5. Characterization of sword as instrument of peace wasn’t, of course, an
invention peculiar to Puritans and ancient Israelites. Catholics had repeat-
edly invoked it as they promoted the Crusades. “God wills it!” Catholic
jihadists had cried as they scurried eastward pillaging across Europe and
hurled themselves into the Holy Land to slay Infidels.
has been unable to find physical evidence of such destruction. To cite the *Jewish Study Bible*: “intense archeological investigation of virtually all the places mentioned in Joshua that can be identified with current sites reveals no pattern of destruction that can be correlated, in either chronology or location, with the period of early Israel.”\(^6\) The scholarly consensus today seems to be that what actually took place in Joshua’s time—although it may well have involved friction and conflict—was not annihilation but settlement in unoccupied places in the central highlands, leading to gradual accommodation to and merging with native Canaanites. If so, the book of Joshua was far less an historical narrative (in the sense we currently conceive “history”) than poetic celebration of God’s power (He can make the sun stand still) and of God’s generosity to the Israelites—a celebration constructed from numerous folk traditions and set down long after the time of the putative events, having as its motivating purpose the maintenance and promotion of Jewish morale (including, if one reads it carefully, a kind of “commercial” for observing the rite of male circumcision).

When Protestants split decisively from the authority of Pope and Rome, they reached out for something to provide the sturdiness and unity which previously a centralized Catholic teaching authority had provided. Quite in line with the evolving Reformation as it emerged from Renaissance humanism, they sought this in a return to sources, specifically a return to the Bible. A hurdle of understanding of which they seemed only peripherally aware was that they were not Jews. It is undeniably true that Jews yield nothing to Protestants in their reverence for that part of the Bible Christians call the Old Testament. Contrary however to the practice of many Protestants—including, certainly, the practice of Puritans—Jews in general have maintained a sense of their Bible as a compilation from many sources, a compilation including a variety of genres: of histories it is true, but also of poems, fables and other fictional stories, anthologies of sayings, prophetic warnings, and the book of Job. After all, it was Jews who had put it together. They’ve maintained a sense that the theological convictions and perspectives flowing through this

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great array of writings were diverse. The book of Job with its non-stop debate between Job and his friends is a microcosm of Jewish intellectual life. This kind of pitting of biblical verse against verse and theme against theme is what has kept the rabbis in business for the last two thousand years. They see the Bible as an inspired invitation for a great argument about God and His creatures. Short of a messianic culmination of human history, these rabbinic scholars do not anticipate an end to this argument. (The statistically improbable prominence of so many Jewish intellectuals and professional men and women—many of them declared secularists—in so many fields of human endeavor can, I think, plausibly be traced in part to the Jewish tradition of originality and creativity in biblical argument; to be raised in such a tradition is to live one’s life amid questions regarding the context of everything.)

Protestants, looking to the Bible as the secure and sole anchor of their faith, seem to have required a less complicated, less open-ended, approach. For some, not only is each word in the Bible directly chosen by God, but each word is to be taken literally. This helps explain how Protestants (along with, to be fair, literal-minded Catholics and literal-minded Jews) can find marching orders in the Bible where others may find symbolic statements, allegories, and matter for reflection on the human predicament.

By reason of their strong tendency toward literalism, the notion of being among the Elect easily becomes associated among our Puritan forefathers with the notion of achieving possession of a Promised Land. A doctrine of Divine Real Estate seems altogether plausible to them. “Pure Christians like ourselves,” they reasoned, enjoy land by reason of divine promise. John Cotton, an eloquent Puritan preacher, exhorts Winthrop and company before they leave for America to have no scruple about encroaching on the lands of others. For in the case of people like them, God’s chosen, the appointment of land is by specific divine decree—as it was for the Israelites. God apportions land to them by “some more special appointment, because God tells them it by His own mouth; He does not so with other people.” Cotton concludes his argument saying “others take the land by His providence, but God’s people take the land by promise.”

It’s easy to see what a powerful idea this idea of a special dispensation can be. If we’re looking for it, we need no other source for American exceptionalism. This specific exceptionalism is not one that speaks simply of us Americans being exceptionally blessed. That may be part of it; but centrally, it is a belief and claim that we are exempt from law. We do not need to abide by the laws with which we would encumber others. We who place laws on others are, ourselves, outside those laws. As noted, a pilgrim leader had said “There is no dealing with Indians above board.” In the immediate situation of the Puritan settlers this meant Christians could hold the Indians to the letter of the treaties forged with them while the Christians themselves remained unbound. Indians could be punished, stripped of their lands, exterminated even, for violations. On the other hand, Indians could not hold “God’s people” to any standard at all. Puritans anticipated the statement of a recent American president: “I will never apologize for the American people.” The tradition endures. International law is less something that we are bound by than it is something of which we are in charge.

Some have found it strange that we who sometimes say we came to the new world to establish a rule of “laws, not men,” should have so routinely set to one side nearly all our treaties with Indians. The basis for this behavior lies here. It lies in our sense that when we aggrandize ourselves, we win a victory for God. To borrow from the wordplay in Hamlet’s graveyard scene, it is a sense that both lies deep and deeply lies. It constitutes a pre-emptive triumph by us over Enlightenment thinking about human equality by establishing for us a Puritan division of humankind into the Elect and the Damned. (Our great spokesman for the Enlightenment, after he accepted “all men are created equal” into his declaration against the British, preferred for daily use a Puritan practice; to actually treat all humans as equal was quite alien to Jefferson’s lifestyle and mindset.)

What though has all this to do with the growing ascendency of wealth in America? The template of thinking which we inherit from Puritan forefathers includes a kind of moral somersault. Getting ahead, acquiring wealth, “winning”: this kind of thing demonstrates that one is beloved by God. From this it follows that one should devote oneself without restraint to acquisition—but from an altogether
otherworldly motivation. (Beyond all wink of sarcasm, there really is a genuine ideological core to the American pursuit of wealth. The most virtuous among us, we think, are those most utterly in thrall to this pursuit. This is an important chunk of what Weber was teaching, and explains why Benjamin Franklin’s aphorisms figure importantly in Weber’s analysis. It helps explain why, so long as government is seen as facilitating the unrestricted pursuit of wealth, we tend to have no objection to it; it’s only when government attempts to place restraints on that pursuit that we seem to remember to complain of it as Big Government.)

I call this Puritan mindset a “somersault” because it’s a kind of leap of faith over a familiar objection presented by so many time-honored sages—by Aristotle, the Buddha, and Jesus, among others. The objection states that one condemns oneself to slavery if one pursues wealth as life’s organizing goal. Aristotle had argued that to undertake such pursuit is a strategic error, since it takes something whose essential nature is to be instrumental (wealth) and attempts to make it the goal. Such a pursuit, he says, never “arrives;” you can never get enough of what isn’t what you really want and need. The Buddha and Jesus posed similar objections. Jesus asks, “What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and suffers the loss of his soul?” The Buddha tells us it is open-ended desire that makes human life miserable. The Puritan somersault over such traditional objections consists in regarding achieved wealth as a sign of divine favor. This perspective lifts all restraints, since for the Puritan, there’s no such thing as being too confident that God is on one’s side. Since one lives always under the shadow of doubt, further acquisitions are always welcome. Indeed they are necessary with an urgency like that with which the addict regards cocaine. (Today, one can note a neurosis of this sort at work in our Puritan selves as we seek “absolute national security.” Security of that degree is an ever-retreating horizon; it’s unreachable. Each time that we find new means to intimidate our enemies, we find we have both new reasons to fear them and have more enemies to intimidate; daily we intensify the enmity of others toward us and recruit newcomers to their ranks.)

What saves the Puritan orientation from descending immediately into pure economic narcissism, greed, and chaos is partly that the first generation of our Puritan ancestors was, as noted, preoccupied by a sense of being called to a mission. A century
and a half before we were “a nation,” the seeds of American nationalism were germinating.

A kind of closed loop in the dynamics of faith was operational in this Puritan nationalism: “Our godly mission shows we are God’s people; and the fact we are God’s people shows our mission is godly.” With this as the operating conviction, commitment can be unqualified and, in fact, selfless. The begging of a question here doesn’t necessarily indicate invalidity. An elderly couple, for instance, may explain the longevity of their marriage: “Our mutual love has been sustained by the goodness each finds in the other; and the goodness each finds in the other has been fostered by our mutual love.” It’s quite possible this is true even if it doesn’t much help an outsider to grasp the inner dynamic. When Heidegger lapsed into a worship of German destiny and embraced Nazism, it wasn’t exactly a surrender to selfishness or some mere lapse of logic he was involved in, but a lapse into uncritical sentimentality and nationalism. Because this lapse was not a lapse into selfishness, Heidegger could never quite find a way to repent of it after the war, or to apologize. Nationalism can anesthetize one to humane ethics, as it does today. We Americans resist socialism—or at least the label of it—as big-government tyranny; but look at all the holidays every year on which we celebrate and ratify our national militancy.

The Puritans’ commitment to mission can be regarded as a kind of closed loop, and while some closed loops may be virtuous, there is in these neat and rigid systems the possibility of things going wildly awry. Chesterton remarked: “A madman is someone who has lost everything but his reason.” The true-believing that goes on in the Puritan loop may have a simplicity and internal consistency so compelling that it pays no attention to counter-evidence. It was this hunch that led Max Weber to posit something obsessive at the center of the Protestant work ethic. Even Lutherans sometimes charged that the unending search for “signs of election” by Calvinist Puritans had led to a betrayal of the Reformation’s great insight into the nature of grace. Were not the Puritans busily scurrying about, some Lutherans asked, in a frenzy to earn grace after all? These Lutherans charged that the Puritans had bootlegged the heresy of salvation-by-works into the Reformation by a back door. They charged that in the
actual psychology of Calvinist Puritans, works had become everything.

This gospel of justification-certified-by-acquisition had, as noted, trouble with the Jesus of the gospels. There we find Jesus speaking dramatically of the difficulties of the Rich Man. For all their belief in literal interpretation, the pastors of the first generation of Puritan settlers had in hand a mechanism by which to somersault over this text. Jesus, they said, was speaking of the dangers of wealth sought in a spirit of self-indulgence. Wealth resulting from single-minded efforts to establish God’s kingdom here on earth was quite a different matter. Such wealth needed no justification; such wealth was in fact here and now the principal sign granted to us that we are justified.

A negative implication for one who holds this view is that the poor are not justified. This too was believed. The immense epidemics that drastically reduced the numbers of Indians in the early years of Puritan migration were a confirmation to Puritans that Indians were not justified—had never been intended by God for heaven. The miraculous success of us Puritans in a pre-dawn attack on the Pequots as we burnt them alive in their tents demonstrated that we were God’s friends and they were not. Clearly these burnt offerings were pleasing to God. Regarding widows and orphans, in the face of everything Jesus and earlier Jewish prophets had to say on their behalf, the sufferings and misfortunes of Pequot widows and orphans provided a thoughtful Puritan with opportunity to question the virtue of these victims of our power. Did not Deuteronomy offer us a reason to question the godliness of those who suffer? Were not then these civilian misfortunes signs? And if God manifested by their sufferings that He had no part with them, why then ought we to befriend them in any way? We hunted and slew nearly all the surviving Pequots we could find. (Later the miserable conditions in which God allowed Jefferson to keep his kidnapped blacks were a reassuring sign to Jefferson that Providence intended them for exploitation.)

So, to sum up yet again: a paradoxical ethos was established. The trademark of godliness was to be sought and captured in an open-ended pursuit of worldly success. That is to say, certified godliness (a deep sense of reliable and comforting personal
justification) was a confirmation and guarantee of election to grace that only a successful acquisition of wealth could deliver.

If one says, “Well, sure; that’s the way people have always thought,” Weber would direct one back to the phrase “open-ended pursuit” and call attention to the weight a relentless theological context added. Weber speaks of the systematic rationalization of work dictated by the Protestant ethic. The humane context had dropped out. One can argue—as contemporary critics of capitalism do—that an unrestricted and unwholesome simplification had taken place. One can argue that things had gotten unwholesomely schematized, and that a great many important human concerns had been abandoned in the process. One can argue also that the true sign of the times was in the murder of Indians, and that we had disastrously misinterpreted it.

America’s story, whether good or bad, can be told as one about acquisition. In its romanticized version, we tell this story as a story about our hunger for land and the preciousness we felt for the land we hungered for. We do this in our rich literature of the West. We have our cowboy stories and our little houses on the prairie. Not only in our novels but in our movies this theme has been nearly inexhaustible. One of our all-time favorite stage shows is a musical dramatization of how Oklahoma was opened to homesteading. The first performances of this musical boosted our morale during the Second World War. In all seasons since, there have been multiple performances across America. A few years before that musical play, in the depths of the Depression, we found ourselves gripped by a novel about how troubles in that same Oklahoma had led some to migrate to California in relentless determination to find new opportunity. In the course of the novel, the Joad family comes to personify the indomitable spirit of the American people. To this day, the story resonates with us and its ending can bring tears.

One can say then, our theme has been land, and the plot of our story has been the winning of the West.

But there’s a way to de-romanticize the story and say it was about the acquisition of property—and to say that property mattered because it has been a way of keeping score. Considering how we’ve actually treated the property we’ve acquired, this version of the story is the more plausible version. People who love the land do not treat it as we have. They do not do to the land the things we are doing as I write.
Also this version can better accommodate the way individual groups have been treated as the story’s unfolded. The Oklahoma that was opened to homesteading had been designated earlier as a last refuge for Indians whom our federal government had driven westward from east of the Mississippi. Now, with the “opening” of Oklahoma, the children of those Indians were put under fresh constraints and suffered new losses of land that we’d guaranteed was theirs in “perpetuity.” Later, when in the wake of rapacious farming techniques, Oklahoma ceased to nurture the children of these homesteaders, and many were forced to migrate, the California to which numbers of them came had been wrested at gunpoint from Mexico less than a century before. Beyond, then, the wide-eyed wonder at the beauty of nature, and beyond the adventure of turning the wilderness into God’s country, was something else. Across the map of what had become the United States a kind of banner had been carried westward which read: “Claims of the sons of Puritans prevail over all counter-claims.” The dictum required no legal theory to back it up. It was manifest.

Introducing Adam Smith

Before we try to calculate Adam Smith’s influence on our developing Puritan nation, let’s look at Smith himself in the latter part of the eighteenth century. The temper of Adam Smith’s writing is sweet. His professional career opened with lectures on rhetoric which he delivered in Edinburgh in his mid-twenties. They must have been very good. For what one finds later in The Wealth of Nations is a wonderfully considerate pedagogy. While the goal of his writing was theory and prescription, his technique was gently to share with his reader the sources of his convictions. Conscientious about these convictions, he wishes to make available to the reader the experiences and considerations by which he’s come to them. Aristotle’s advice in his own work on rhetoric can perhaps be summed up: Do not get in the way of the truth you want to disclose. Whether it was from Aristotle, or Francis Bacon, or by his own intuitive sense, this seems to have been Smith’s rule. One can open almost any page of The Wealth of Nations and understand details there of an argument in progress—even if one is quite unversed in the grand theoretic generalization toward which Smith is working.
The temper of Smith’s writing is also benign. While still in his twenties, he passed from being a lecturer on rhetoric to being a lecturer on morality. As such, he was particularly interested to discover the sources and nature of moral sentiments. One can imagine his students were fortunate in the instruction they received. For time and again later in his pages on *The Wealth of Nations*, the reader can find a compassionate, gently Chaucer-like, regard for human affairs. His teacher Francis Hutcheson had taught him to think habitually in terms of what would provide the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Smith argues for generous wages for workers—on grounds similar to those W. Edwards Deming uses in the twentieth century (i.e., good morale of the worker tends to promote high quality in goods and services being provided). Smith celebrates the division of labor not only for its efficiency, but because he sees it as permitting an individual (or a country) to discover what his or her (or their) natural proclivities are and to concentrate on developing those to a point of expertise. The individual and society would benefit mutually—or at least that is what he intended. (Even today, the real work being done in America—I mean the work that sustains us still as a society, not the pseudo-work of financial manipulation—is being done by ordinary people who have achieved precisely the kinds of technical expertise Smith envisioned. So while Smith discourses famously on pin-making, perhaps he’d had insufficient occasion to observe the extreme inhumanity to which the division of labor—as eventually materialized in the assembly-line—could be pushed. I’m willing to grant him that he couldn’t foresee the degree to which a worker could be reduced to a cog in the industrial process.)

Smith opposed slavery. Two concerns listed above—maintenance of morale and development of expertise—indicate why. He says the savings one envisions from the work of a captive laborer are illusory; the quantity produced by such a worker will be meager, and the quality poor. (This was not because the captive was incompetent, but because the captive was smart—something an exploiter of captive labor like Jefferson found it inconvenient to admit.)

Smith’s argument against the exploitation of colonies—a routine occurrence in the reigning mercantilism—was similar. If colonists are exploited, they will know they are being
exploited. They will resent this and will not be willing to pay even those taxes necessary for their upkeep and defense. Smith thought England should let the American colonies go; but he thought also England was not wise enough to know this. Out of pride—not from good economics—England, he thought, would hold on till there was war. His great work, published in 1776, was prophetic—confirmed on this point in the year it appeared.

Not only, in Smith’s opinion, was England over-regulating the American colonies; he thought it was over-regulating the people of England. The center then of Smith’s program was laissez-faire—but in a far more humanely contextualized sense than the term is defended today. Let the people, acting freely in exchanges with one another, decide the prices of things. Let the workers, freely negotiating with the managers, arrive at wages they’re willing to work for. (Unions, Smith says, are a natural exercise of freedom, and laws prohibiting them are instances of governmental excess.) Let the marketplace determine what goods and services will be provided, and in what quantity, and of what quality, and at what price. Let there be no tariffs, protective or otherwise, on goods crossing borders (except perhaps in the infancy of a newly founded industry). If there must be colonies, let them be treated as equals in matters of trade; and let them participate in their own governance.

All this seemed a wonderful prescription for freeing up the energies of the human race at the time of writing. The emphasis was not on the benefits of capitalism but on the democratization of economics. Parties privileged in the traditional mercantilist system had, of course, reason to resist it. A majority of government officials could be expected to resent it. The tendency of Smith’s program was to reduce their influence, their numbers, and their compensations. One finds here anticipations of Thoreau’s preference for a government that governs least. It was this tendency that made Smith’s message popular. (Tellingly, in his effort to divide labor into “productive labor” and “unproductive labor,” Smith was inclined to cite court officials, ecclesiastics, and military personnel as instances of the latter. One can assume these parties were not amused.)

Given this brief summary, let’s see what affinities there might be between Smith’s prescriptions and the earlier, pre-Enlightenment,
thinking of our Puritan forefathers. We may have to meander a bit as we go.

Our Puritan forefathers were nurtured, as we’ve seen, in a Calvinism that led each believer into a state of stark loneliness. One could not, as perhaps in medieval Europe, belong to the “one true Church” and thereby think oneself saved. Rather our Puritan ancestors situated each person alone before God. One’s eternal destiny remained inscrutable. The only thing to reach out to—the telling, comforting sign—was success here and now.

Smith, though clearly an agent and citizen of the Enlightenment, was raised in a place with a history steeped in Calvinism. In attempts to gauge the effect of this on Smith, it can be helpful to note his lifelong friendship with David Hume, a fellow Scot. Hume, raised in the same dour environs, toyed all his life with what’s sometimes called the Egocentric Predicament. The controlling question for the Egocentric Predicament is: how do I know I’m not the only being there is? Hume’s answer: I don’t. Noteworthy about that question is how it lands Hume—and any disciple of his—in an isolation that parallels the isolation and quandary arising from the Puritan question: how can I assure myself I’m among the Elect?

While their writings make clear that both Hume and Smith managed to slough off most constraints of the Calvinist mindset, one can wonder whether either was ever entirely free of the heightened individualism that Calvinism stimulated. In Hume’s case, I’d say this individualism surfaces in the unrelieved subjectivism for which he makes claims in his most deliberate passages. As indicated, a fair phrasing of the predicament he argues for is that so far as any individual can know, the entire universe is simply a projection of his or her personal subjectivity.

Hume’s friend Smith is much more grounded in the extrametrical world, and his case is more complicated. Historians tell us that, in his and Hume’s time, “old light” Calvinism was on the wane in Scotland. Also, we’re told by Smith’s biographers that his mother was a very devout Christian, and that she—a widow almost from the time of Smith’s birth—was the mainstay of her bachelor son’s life. It’s interesting then to ask what religious content Smith may have drawn from his relationship to her and to the times.
The question isn’t easy to answer. “Old Light” Calvinism is often associated with “covenanters.” Among its major aspects, the theological emphasis of covenanters can alleviate the horror of predestination by channeling it into activity on behalf of God. This indeed is what Perry Miller believes happened early in American Puritanism. While God is utterly free, God has freely bound Himself to work within covenantal relations with His Elect; belief in this becomes in turn a strong motivation for His Elect to work hard. A waning of that theological emphasis as the Enlightenment gained ground among the professors and other writers and intellectuals of Scotland could plausibly mean that the doctrine of predestination retreated yet further—moving toward a vanishing point. If this was happening in the Scottish Christianity of Smith’s day, that was a substantial alteration. Smith’s Calvinism, supposing some traces of Calvinism remained with him, would then have been quite different from that of our first Puritan forefathers. I take this to have been the case.

It is not a stretch to hypothesize that both Smith’s mother and Smith himself maintained some confidence in a divine providence, but without any accompanying thought that God had predetermined all outcomes in the world God created. Such seems in fact the informal theological backdrop that provides context for Smith’s reflections on moral sentiments and for the consequences of these reflections in his economic theory. There are routine references to “nature,” to “the plan of nature,” to the “divine plan,” and to “providence” in Smith’s writing on moral sentiments. Providence, he says, has installed in us the capacity to empathize; yet the use we make of that capacity occurs in the arena of our freedom.

What makes it difficult to be definitive here is that Smith seems not, at least when writing as an economist, to insist on some precise theological context. This lets some interpreters say his references in his moral writings to a divine plan are just window dressing, a mere concession Smith makes to the residual religious thinking of his time. Since however Smith was neither a sloppy writer nor a timid one, the simpler interpretation is that he believed in some version of divine providence but felt he had enough on his plate not to argue about it. He felt no impulse to reignite religious wars of the previous century. When the
Scottish Enlightenment arrived, its spirit was to allow its participants a fresh start. One neither had to square oneself with all the old traditions, nor identify oneself in terms of the old labels. What I take to be implied in the way Smith phrases things is:

1) there is a divine plan written into nature—which would mean the atheists were wrong; but
2) there is no predestination—which would mean the original Calvinists were wrong.

This would leave Smith somewhere along the line stretching from a deist to a person of devout temper (like perhaps Darwin’s wife in the next century) who believes there is an ongoing and daily divine providence.

Allowing the murkiness here, it seems one can find still a holdover from attitudes of original Calvinist individualism at the center of Smith’s thinking. Smith’s is, to be sure, a transformed individualism. Unlike the individualism of original Calvinism, it celebrates freedom; but it’s still an individualism, and this individualism supplies the motivational theory basic to *The Wealth of Nations*. Just as Hume couldn’t see any way out of his ego-centric predicament, so Smith couldn’t see any other scaffolding on which to construct a desirable economics than upon an inescapable and indispensable self-interest of the human individual.

Make no mistake. He intended to construct; and he didn’t see the limit of his labors to be merely in constructing a theory. He intended a revolutionary document. While many an economist has claimed to do nothing more than describe how things are, Smith (like Marx in later days) knew that—beyond providing a diagnosis—he was prescribing. As noted earlier, he intended a prescription to counter mercantilism. No mere spectator, he’d chosen sides and wanted to recruit the reader to the side he’d chosen; for he thought mercantilism attempted, counterproductively, to promote national success at the expense of individual freedom and happiness.

One can imagine, then, the exhilaration Smith felt when he was first visited by the “invisible hand”—by which I mean when this marvelously convenient metaphorical conception dawned on him. (The metaphor makes its first appearance in his writing on morals when he is discussing empathy.) To appreciate what this
meant to him, it’s necessary to see him as more complicated than either his friends or foes of later times have often allowed him to be. Anticipating utilitarians to come and echoing Aquinas and the scholastics’ concept of “the common good” from the medieval past, Smith passionately sought to promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Just as we’d lose sight of the Puritans and be substituting some fabrication of our own devising were we to deny the genuineness of their obsession to get right with God, so we’d lose sight of Smith were we to deny the passion of his humanism—the sincere humanitarianism out of which he acted. He was anything but a cold-hearted and disinterested party.

As noted, like the American revolutionaries who were his contemporaries, Smith saw British mercantilism as exploitation and *The Wealth of Nations* of 1776 was written to provide an alternative. An argument can be made that his book has been as influential on American life as the Declaration of Independence of that same year. While Smith’s phrases haven’t been memorized in the rote manner some of Jefferson and company’s phrases have, one can argue that Smith’s program, albeit in a garbled version, has been more deeply internalized than our July 4th document has.

The key statement of the Declaration is that all men are created equal. The canonical statement in *The Wealth of Nations*, occurring in book 4, chapter 2, paragraph 9 is as follows:

> He [every individual], indeed, neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good.

Some exegesis of this central statement is required. Some have claimed that the passage should never have been conceded the
key position it’s usually accorded as a source for understanding what Smith is about. They point out that the passage is part of a case for demonstrating how a nation’s wealth is built from the labor of individuals within its national confines, and that the passage’s field of reference should be restricted to making that point. But this will not do. Smith clearly intends a wide reference; he inserts “as in many other cases” to underscore his intention. He reinforces that in the next sentence: “Nor is it always the worse for the society…”—suggesting what he says at this point is offered as enunciation of an underlying principle of wide application.

The last sentence I included here (“I have never known…”) is as close to sarcasm as one is likely to find in Smith. It may not be as gratuitous as it seems. Even though Smith speaks of merchants in the sentence that immediately follows (which I have not included above), it could be Smith intends a carom-shot with his sarcasm—a way to take a passing swipe at the bureaucratic mercantilists of the government. In Smith’s view, while they pretended to be governing trade for the public good, what they were really doing was getting in the way of honest exchange (and probably getting rich in the process). Still I regard this sentence as unfortunate. It’s arguable that his witty dismissal of “those who affected to trade for the public good” was a mistake on Smith’s part—opening a door to much misinterpretation in times to come. He can too easily be interpreted as saying “anyone who engages in business from humane and idealistic motives is simply getting in the way.” A conscientious disciple of Francis Hutcheson would not say this. Smith did not say this. He had good reason not to.

Most noteworthy, but mostly unnoted, is that the whole argument is an argument on behalf of the public good. Smith is making a case for a better way than mercantilism to promote the public good—the common good, if one will allow an affinity in Smith for Aristotle and Aquinas. He’s saying if each participant will merely be conscientious about his or her particular task so as to provide goods or services that will command the approval of buyers, everything will be fine; the marketplace is self-organizing, and “the public good” will be secured without the interference of government officials. But note the regularly unnoted underlying implication of making this argument. The underlying implication is that, whatever the personal economic enterprise of the
reader, the reader-as-citizen is interested in promoting the public good. As a shoemaker, one should concentrate on making good shoes; but the same person as a citizen is regarded as able to stand back and concern himself or herself with seeing to it that the way shoes are provided is conducive to the wellbeing of society. The shoemaker as citizen, Smith assumes, is quite concerned about the public good after all. Otherwise, Smith’s argument would have no traction—would not be addressing the shoemaker and other potential readers on anything they cared about. If people did not care about the public good, there were no potential readers for *The Wealth of Nations*. The book was intended as a manual for those who cared about the public good.

Grasped in the fullness of this context, Smith’s argument is astoundingly paradoxical: the public good will be most effectively achieved if people forget about it!

As one can infer, though, from the foregoing considerations, the argument cannot really be that stark. The famous passage on the “invisible hand” is hyperbolic. Joseph Schumpeter faults Smith for this. He says that had Smith schematized things less sharply, and had he qualified his statements more, Smith would not have become so famous, but his writing would have had a more salutary effect. There may be something to this.

A way to put the matter more sympathetically than Schumpeter does is to say that we, Smith’s fellow mortals, have proved too much for him; we have outmaneuvered his good intentions. In his moral discourses Smith discusses at length the role he thinks our capacity for empathy plays in our behavior. He says we learn to think of what is best for others by exercising a wonderful gift, which a benevolent providence has provided to us, of putting ourselves in another’s place. Then—quite legitimately I’d say—he doubles back, and says we spontaneously arrive at a correct sense of what our own behavior should be by trying to see ourselves through others’ eyes—by imagining, that is, how different activities open to us would look to others. (Is there a shrewd anticipation of Kant’s Categorical Imperative here? So it would seem, and of Sartre’s reflections on the shame principle, too.)

This review of the nuances in Smith is needed, I believe, for an accurate assessment of what Smith intends in the canonical passage when he employs the word “interest.” Smith does not speak of “selfishness,” but he does speak of the “interest” of the
individual human being. In Francis Ford Coppola's *Wall Street*, Gordon Gecko says, “Greed is good.” Smith does not say, “Greed is good.” He does however say the self-interest of the individual promotes the public good.

Our mistake has been to define this “interest” of his too narrowly. For Smith, a shoemaker’s interest extends to having the customer walk out of the shop with a satisfying pair of shoes. If that does not happen, what pride can he or she take in being a shoemaker? If there are employees, a shoemaker’s interest extends to having employees of high morale. A shoemaker’s interest extends to maintaining a culture in which debts are paid on time and without fraud. Honesty is the best policy, not just because it will yield returning customers and promote word-of-mouth advertising and establish good credit against which the shoemaker can borrow, but because it provides the conditions under which the shoemaker can work with a sense of responsibility and predictability. Again, it’s the shoemaker’s interest to have a good walkway leading to the shoe shop, to have a good fire department to protect his place of business from burning down, to have a police force adequate for the security of the shop and the merchandise and the customers and the person of the shoemaker and for any employees of the shoemaker. A well-to-do society in which the people generally are decently educated and reasonably prosperous, and care about good-looking and reliable shoes, is also in the shoemaker’s interest.

Unfortunately, when Puritan descendants of the late eighteenth century were ginning up the spirit of capitalism as a way of systematizing and maintaining momentum for their acquisitive activity, they were blind to much of the generous humanitarian concern that was taken for granted as context in Smith’s presentation of an individual’s “self-interest.”

One of Weber’s theoretical hurdles was to explain why he thought it proper that Benjamin Franklin should land smack in the middle of his—Weber’s—exposition of the Protestant Ethic. Franklin was hardly a Protestant, much less a Puritan Protestant, in any conventional sense of the terms. He had a well earned reputation as a *bon vivant* during his days in Paris from 1776 to 1785 (where, incidentally, he met and conversed with Smith). When, however, Franklin was still in his proverb-writing days, he wrote
eloquently and with a quasi-religious fervor of the virtues of living to generate income, and of living frugally and re-investing one’s savings as one went along. These writings were immensely popular and much quoted here in the American colonies. Weber cites Franklin to make the point that, once the capitalist spirit was brought to a boiling point by Puritan anxiety, it acquired a self-sustaining character. Eventually a capitalist approach had restructured the human context sufficiently that capitalism was taken as a feature of the landscape. In the first fervor of American Puritanism, clerics writing on Puritan ascetic practice had often warned that the pursuit of worldly goods might become an end in itself. In successive generations from 1650 to the second half of the 1700s (a period, say, of more than a hundred years), this seems in many cases to have been accomplished. By the end of that process an ethos of virtue-by-acquisition was rooted in the South as well as in the North. Yet even amid that secularizing of Puritanism, humans needed a sustaining story. They required some sense that the lifestyle they led had a meaning that stretched beyond themselves and ministered to some larger good. They needed to believe that in some way they were acting in harmony with the universe and conformed to its destiny. For this, Adam Smith could prove useful.

To utilize him in our evolving American society would require tinkering. As has been argued—for anything some words of Smith may suggest to the contrary—Smith is presupposing a contextualizing decency and good will in the individual upon whom his prescriptive economics is based. He is innocent of any Puritan fear of “fellow feeling” as a potential distraction from God’s work; rather he calls such feeling “empathy,” sees it as coming from God, and he views our human gregariousness with Enlightenment optimism. Empathy of one human for another is a victory for the divine plan. Perhaps a too-optimistic agent of the Enlightenment, Smith is presupposing in his “individual” an internalized context in which law is respected, adulteration of content in a good or service is a disgrace, contracts are honored, and honesty is more the rule than the exception. (Until recently, and maybe still, Japanese society in its intra-national relations has exemplified something of the manners Smith ascribes to Englishmen—who believe in doing what’s “cricket”—and to
people in general.) An ethos in which *caveat emptor*—let the buyer beware—is a ruling maxim (cited as it is today as an excuse for anything and everything) is unimaginable to Smith. Certainly, he never envisions a scenario in which individuals will routinely and unapologetically seek personal aggrandizement at the cost of the whole order they share with others; in his thinking, it’s only within a context of honored routine decency that a focus on individual acquisition can ensure the emergence of “the greatest happiness for the greatest number.”

So Smith’s theory is not about getting away with things. That’s a preoccupation of contemporary corporate lawyers, but it is not his preoccupation. He is far from advocating the emergence of a new mercantilism, one not of nations but of corporations. (Can we stipulate that our current corporatocracy engages in a new mercantilism—one antipathetic to the democratic principles Smith championed—and that the resemblance of this corporatocracy to the theocracy envisioned by our Puritan forefathers is neither accidental nor unimportant?) According to Smith’s theory the market will act to reward self-interest only in those instances where the needs of consumers are being genuinely served. Consumers routinely deprived, he thought, will seek out other providers—or, in a monopolistic oligarchy, will eventually wither and die. Without consumers, there is no market. (Smith may still be right. If, today, we say the market no longer disciplines banks and corporations, we may be speaking too soon. Plausibly, the market may yet discipline banks and other corporations through responses and strategies of consumer disapproval, or by descending into catastrophic dysfunction and collapse. Something of the latter seems rumbling on the horizons of several national economies as I write.) To conclude: it’s highly unlikely Smith would ever have endorsed a neo-mercantilism of corporations which nurtures many of the impositions on individual liberty he wrote to protest against.

Yet one can see how Smith’s model could facilitate a gradually secularizing Puritan quest for justification by way of mission and success. One has only to strip away the civilizing context in which he wrote, and one can meld Smith’s acceptance of individualism with a Puritan sense of isolation. Smith can be made to chime with the latter-day Calvinist Jonathan Edwards. Just as
for Edwards, the “hands of an angry God” work toward a godly purpose, so too one can claim does the “invisible hand” of Smith. Being descendants of Puritan forefathers, many business people today seem to feel it makes no more sense to appeal against the workings of the stock market than it would make sense to their Puritan forefathers to appeal against God’s eternal decrees.

(Of course this doesn’t keep those same business people from doing all they can to manipulate our allegedly autonomous and self-governing market. A notion of fatalism about the stock market provides in fact a cover for all kinds of free-wheeling subterfuge. Virtually indestructible cockroaches are put to shame by the banksters and other financial manipulators who emerge from the gutters of America today bearing the flag of “too big to fail.” As for a sense of those who currently fall by the wayside, the new Puritan is just as ready to regard them as damned by an invisible hand as were earlier Puritans to find desperate and defeated Indians doomed by the hand of an angry God. No less than our forefathers, our contemporary Puritans are ready to regard those who suffer as having no just claims on the successful. That this was not Smith’s attitude—nor, for that matter, the attitude of Benjamin Franklin in his maturity—is of no interest in our latter-day capitalism. Smith’s readiness to decrease the role of government has been adopted and reformulated by a Puritan sense that this world’s governments belong more to Satan than to God—and we’ve now come to regard it as the task of the godly to restrict the power of government to the service of our self-aggrandizement.)

So the Enlightenment thinking of Adam Smith was co-opted by the narrower and less humane thinking of secularizing Puritans. Though Smith’s schematization and prescription was intended benignly and rooted in wholesome sensibility, when the model he offered was further schematized and reconfigured to merge with a Puritan mission to seek worldly success, it was felt that a license for selfishness had been granted—indeed that an obligation to aggrandize oneself had been decreed. A door opened widely to a world-wasting reduction that destroys not only forest and animal, but great swaths of the working poor both here and abroad, and which tends toward an incremental dissolution of social bonds in general. It’s a reduction that tends to leave the world a wrecking ground for the richly demented.
Introducing Milton Friedman

While a reduced and distorted version of Adam Smith had become a standard feature of American thinking well before Milton Friedman, it took Friedman to endow it with that character of the “one true faith” that’s a trademark of Puritanism. If the business schools of America today teach a bottom-line scorched-earth approach to economics, he more than anyone else can claim the credit.

The late Friedman, of the University of Chicago, and later of the Hoover Institute at Stanford University, is regarded by some as America’s foremost expositor of “the conservative philosophy.” His position is called “conservative” because its controlling concern is said to be to clarify and promote the laissez-faire principle set forth in Smith which says government should leave the marketplace free of its intrusion. Friedman himself then is called “a conservative” as one thought to be dedicated to conserving this principle—a principle he thinks modern-day liberals have a terrible habit of diluting or betraying.

One can catch the flavor of his conservatism in an article Friedman published in the *New York Times* in 1970. Chastising some business men, Friedman writes:

> The businessmen believe they are defending free enterprise when they declaim that business is not concerned “merely” with profit but also with promoting desirable “social” ends; that business has a “social conscience” and takes seriously its responsibilities for providing employment, eliminating discrimination, avoiding pollution and whatever else may be the catchwords of the contemporary crop of reformers. In fact they are—or would be if anyone else took them seriously—preaching pure and unadulterated socialism. Businessmen who talk this way are unwitting puppets of the intellectual forces that have been undermining the basis of a free society these past decades.⁸

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What Friedman objects to is the doubleness of vision that a concern for social goals introduces into the thinking and behavior of a businessman. Sitting in a classroom a couple hundred yards from the Hoover Institute during Friedman’s residence there, I remember hearing a very orthodox Friedmanite economist warn us that, in the event we become businessmen, we must not sentimentalize the workforce; rather we must remember always to regard “it” purely and simply as “a factor of production.” If, by laying off half our employees, we can increase the profits of our company, it is our duty to the stockholders to do so. Not to do so would be an act of theft—of stealing from the stockholders. (And if there are no stockholders? No doubt then, it would be a crime against ourselves to spend more money on the workforce than we had to.)

I remember thinking how sublimely surgical this was. Two thousand five hundred years of Hellenic and Judaic humanism out the window with a single toss! In its place: “Always treat a fellow human being as a mere means; never allow fellow feeling or a regard for the person to confuse your thinking; realize always that for all practical purposes the employee is a thing.”

Years later I was in a college workroom running off handouts for an ethics class I was teaching when an economics teacher came upon me. He asked what I was up to. When I said I was preparing for an ethics class, he replied that ethics was good for Sunday afternoons but that the rest of the week was controlled by the discipline he taught. I loved him for his unvarnished arrogance. I reflected how completely Friedman’s sense of what was central and what was peripheral had prevailed—with this instructor at least (but probably, in truth, with a majority of the students to whom I was attempting to teach ethics).

Friedman’s sense, to be sure, of “reformers” and their “catchwords” (catchwords about providing jobs, working to diminish gender and race discrimination, attempting to reduce pollution of the environment) is not—for all the ease with which he pretends to dismiss them—a sense that these constitute a harmless Sunday-afternoon diversion. Rather he’s afraid people are genuinely paying attention to these catchwords and these false prophets—else why the essay? At the end of the short excerpt above, he says that those businessmen who listen to the reformers
are “unwitting puppets of the intellectual forces that have been undermining the basis of a free society these past decades.” In Friedman’s view, we’re not talking about pleasant ways to spend Sunday afternoons. Anyone, he’s saying, who attempts to introduce into the workplace an ethics distinct from the discipline of the free market itself, as elaborated by Friedman, is undermining America. In fact, his free market is ethics. Those attempting reforms betray our free way of life (betray, presumably what we send our young overseas to die for). Images of executions of “traitors” Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were not a distant memory as Friedman was writing. They’re context here, and Friedman’s use of the phrase “intellectual forces” was meant to convey that some intellectuals (people like the Rosenbergs and other fellow-travelers) were the agents of forces out to ruin us all.

Friedman was serious toward his political opposition; for this reason Friedman—notwithstanding an inclination to smirk disarmingly—should be taken seriously. Today when we hear echoes of his rhetoric on Fox News and talk radio, we shouldn’t dismiss these voices as mere chatter; according to the argument I’m building, they express beliefs in which our tradition is rooted. In exposition of this tradition, a few paragraphs later comes Friedman’s effort to elucidate how the profit motive provides the one and only responsibility of a corporate executive in a typical business:

In a free-enterprise, private property system, a corporate executive is an employee of the owners of the business. He has direct responsibility to his employers. That responsibility is to conduct the business in accordance with their desires, which generally will be to make as much money as possible while conforming to the basic rules of society, both those embodied in law and those embodied in ethical custom. Of course in some cases his employers may have a different objective. A group of persons might establish a corporation for an eleemosynary purpose—for example, a hospital or a school. The manager of such a corporation will not have money profit as his objectives but the rendering of certain services.
The two passages here candidly place Friedman’s cards on the table. His candor shouldn’t disarm us but rather engage us to examine critically the game he is playing.\(^9\)

1. Doesn’t it seem a bit quaint, even if charming, to describe a CEO as an employee of the stockholders? It suggests that CEOs are like assembly-line workers, spending their days in carrying out the orders of their managers. Or again, it suggests CEOs relate to stockholders like a maid to the mistress of the house—a mistress who might say: “Today, Hilda, I want you to dust the windowsills.”

2. Doesn’t some of this quaintness reside in Friedman’s implication that the CEO spends his or her day consulting with stockholders in order to do their bidding? Friedman might counter: “The CEO doesn’t have to consult his employers; he already knows what they want. They want—as I said—as much money from their stocks as they can get.”

3. Again, though, one wonders about the accuracy of characterization. In the name of schematization, has Friedman perhaps reconfigured and oversimplified?

4. Corporations get started for purposes. There’s a rationale for the corporation before there is any rationale for stockholders. Unless one’s an out-and-out scam artist, one doesn’t just say: “I’d like to make a lot of money; I think I’ll get a lot of people to invest in a corporation.”

5. Isn’t what really happens more likely to be that, say, a Theodore Judah—living in the 1850s in a promising but remarkably isolated new state of California—comes along and says: “There ought to be a transcontinental railroad”?\(^9\)

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Only when that’s been said does Judah venture forth in search of investors.

6. One might counter: “Well, the motivations of the investors can be very different from the motivations of the visionary.” Suppose though Judah had lived to become—as he’d hoped—the CEO of the Central Pacific. Would his motivation have been simply to make money for his investors, or would it have been to construc and run an excellent railroad? Quite probably his original vision would have carried through into his career as CEO.

7. Would he then have been defrauding his investors as he attempted to find the best steel, lay the best track, and provide the finest service he could? His answer would probably have been: “How so?” He’d say they must have known the purpose of the man and project they’d invested in.

8. The cynics may reply this didn’t happen—not in Judah’s case. But Judah puts us in mind of how money—in the best cases—is facilitator and consequence of well considered projects.

9. So it’s partly Friedman’s reduction of everything to money that one finds uncritical. It is this which disqualifies him as a disciple of Adam Smith. Smith understood the function of money was to facilitate life. This understanding runs through his thousands of anecdotes and arguments. Friedman on the other hand seems to take it for granted that people invest simply to make money. He doesn’t take seriously the possibility they invest in things they believe in—that they invest to make particular things happen. When they do, he seems inclined to say, as in the second half of the second excerpt: “Well, this is no longer actually business we’re talking of; now we’re talking about hobbies.”

10. To structure things thus—to turn things around in the way he does—converts his model of what business is into a Procrustean bed. To protect this model, he’s willing to
lop off the areas of human endeavor and human interest the model cannot neatly accommodate, implying there’s something about them that’s un-businesslike.

To consider an example: surely Pope Julius II did not invest in Michelangelo in order to make money. Nor was Michelangelo’s aesthetic sense dictated to by some compulsion to see that his patron got a maximum return of profit. Friedman’s objection is predictable. He’d say: “I’m not talking about THAT!” He might add: “See, the word ‘profit’ doesn’t even come up in such transactions!” Exactly.

And that should alert one to be thoughtful about how long a list one could generate of other “THATs” about which Friedman isn’t talking.

Friedman speaks of the executive as making for his bosses as much money as possible “while conforming to the basic rules of society, both those embodied in the law and those embodied in ethical custom.” This seems like a good and necessary concession—surely a concession that was the very context for Adam Smith’s reflections on how free markets would operate to produce the greatest good. But one has to wonder what weight Friedman can actually allow this concession. After all, he’s arguing that business motivated by the profit-motive is sufficiently disciplined by the free market. The role of government and presumably of government law is to leave it alone. He tells us the executive should not worry, for instance, about pollution of our habitat. Either Friedman’s position is that there is no ethical custom of taking care of the environment, or—if he finds that unpalatable—that to attend to it and make it normative would be nonetheless to advocate “pure unadulterated socialism” and would be to enter among the ranks of “the unwitting puppets of the intellectual forces that have been undermining the basis a free society these past decades.” So much for ethical custom.

We arrive then at one of Friedman’s more troubled moments. The government issues a charter for a corporation. This
charter confers on a corporation a fictitious personhood, and the government endows this “person” with certain privileges so it can achieve goals which the government approves as conducive to the general welfare. Yet government should not, according to Friedman, intrude upon the operations of that which its law has created.

15. The reason for thinking Friedman’s intentions about conforming to law and ethical custom are so vague as to dwindle to a null set—to a category that contains no instances—is that, taken seriously, they work against the rest of Friedman’s argument.

16. The article is titled: “The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase its Profits.” But corporations are not chartered to increase their profits; governments charter them to build bridges, mine coal, feed the hungry, cure the sick.

17. Friedman then is in a bind. For in terms of contractual obligation and responsibility, the CEO has not simply to look over his or her shoulder to stockholder-bosses, but to look back before that to the particular purposes for which the corporation was chartered. Yet in Friedman’s presentation of his model, this dimension of corporate concern would seem to have dissolved with the issuing of the license; once it exists, the purpose of the corporation seems to have become totally internalized.

18. This is not good even for the corporation. For it moves thereby toward the world of the schizophrenic. Enron, on the eve of its implosion, was such a totally internalized corporation. So was the enterprise of Bernie Madoff.

19. One cannot claim the endorsement of Adam Smith for a doctrine of unfettered corporations. Unlike Friedman, Smith sees the chartering government as there at the creation, and as responsible therefore for outcomes. This incites in Smith a cautionary concern. He regards with apprehension the special privileges government confers in
chartering and licensing things and sees how these privileges act as a restraint on the freedoms of those outside the grant. It would not have occurred to him to claim as Friedman does that once such privileges are in place, government has no responsibility for the impact their exercise has on the freedoms of those who have no share in them. While Friedman is concerned for the freedom of fictitious persons called corporations, Smith is concerned for the freedom of actual persons.

20. Friedman’s corporation is a corporation born of Friedman’s capacity to abstract. It’s not connected to things outside itself by real-world relations. It’s not beholden to the fire department or the police department for its safety. It’s not beholden to a public water supply. It doesn’t use roads. It makes no demands for protection against foreign invasion. It owes nothing to ends for which it was instituted. The educational system that has provided it with qualified workers is not entitled to its support. Only on such assumptions is Friedman able to find that the corporation is without social responsibility other than to increase the profits of its stockholders.

21. In other words, Friedman’s corporation is a fantasy. He is serious in claiming benefits and opportunities for it, but when you ask him of its corresponding responsibilities, he wanders off into a denunciation of socialism. It’s especially noteworthy how, in the earlier of the two excerpts above, Friedman dismisses “avoiding pollution” as among “the catchwords of the contemporary crop of reformers.” Grown-up businessmen, he seems to say, don’t concern themselves with avoiding pollution; avoiding pollution is not their responsibility. In tribute to Friedman and the tradition for which he speaks, one can’t help but be impressed at how thoroughly this lesson has become imbedded. Whether Friedman is teaching this lesson because it’s simply the rule in play, or whether it’s the rule in play because he and like-minded economists have taught it is, I suppose, subject to debate.
22. My hunch is that the dispensation granted here by Friedman and “conservative” predecessors and current disciples contributes hugely to our current problems.

23. A couple years ago, uncalculated amounts of oil were pouring into northern waters of the Gulf of Mexico from a pipe in the water below a structure called Deep Horizon where British Petroleum drilled for oil. At that time a guest-expert on the *PBS NewsHour* cautioned watchers of the show against “hysterical reactions.” From the general tendency of his remarks, it was clear it would not be an “hysterical reaction” to be deeply concerned about the future of BP. All adult persons know BP is important and must, at all costs, be preserved. What would be “hysterical” would be to so worry about the Gulf as to put the future of BP in jeopardy.

24. To recast the expert’s sentiment in the vocabulary of Friedman: It had never been the function of BP to “protect the Gulf”—a “catchphrase” if ever there was one. The function of BP was—and is—to deliver oil. Yet even that is perhaps too romantic a description. The real function of BP has always been to deliver money to stockholders. That is why BP is right not only to drill for oil, but right to drill for it in as quick and cost-cutting a way as it can get away with. (The PBS-expert must feel happy; we’ve recovered from hysteria, and the future of off-shore drilling remains bright.)

25. One can hear Friedman muttering from his grave: “That’s just the way it is. If you’re looking for someone to blame, this looking about is itself a sign of your childishness—for this is the lifestyle you’ve been lucky enough to get born into. To think otherwise—to load BP with concerns about the environment and attempt to shame it for not living up to those concerns—is to be among the “unwitting puppets of the intellectual forces that have been undermining the basis of a free society.”
26. As we’ve seen, Friedman does acknowledge this isn’t the whole picture. He speaks of “eleemosynary” pursuits. That the adjective is rare enough to function as a stumper in a spelling bee is instructive. Friedman registers by its use that we pass at this point outside the purview of serious business. Earlier we looked at relations between Pope Julius and Michelangelo. Examples Friedman gives are hospitals and schools. He acknowledges that here the purpose may be other than to maximize profits. He makes a conscientious concession that not everything fits his model.

27. What he’s not about to consider is that these business enterprises may actually be excellent models for reconfiguring our thinking on business in general. Notice the attributes of what we consider here. Both for hospitals and for schools there’s a fairly undeniable need. In both there is organization to meet the need. Both require funds to operate. But the purpose of neither is reducible to the making of a profit. What if one were to take hospitals and schools as a paradigm for businesses in general? Let us say legitimate institutions in general are founded to fulfill some wholesome function. Well and good. Yet income in excess of daily expenses is necessary if these institutions are to survive. Again, well and good. The “profit” if you want to call it that goes toward maintenance and renovation. It is “instrumental,” not goal setting. (For just this reason, Friedmanites are presently doing all they can to convert schools, hospitals, prisons, and all health care into for-profit enterprises.)

28. Recently I complimented a doctor working in the emergency room of a public hospital for bringing my son back from a coma that could have ended in death. I added to my remark—thinking perhaps like Friedman—“but you don’t get paid adequately for the work you do!” She replied: “Oh, I get paid enough.” I persisted, “How so?” She said: “What I get paid permits me do the job I live for.”
29. The doctor declared a truth. The contented doctor (who may today be an endangered species) does not go into medicine to make a lot of money; she/he goes into it to cure people. The happy lawyer (if there is such today) goes into law to protect rights, curb wrongdoing, secure justice. The happy teacher is sustained by the experience of seeing people learn.

30. Aristotle, who perhaps would have gotten an F in any economics course taught by Friedman, endorses what my son’s doctor said. As mentioned earlier, Aristotle insists “money is means” and adds: “One who lives for money lives the life of a slave.” Finally he says: “Happiness is in doing—is achieved in action performed in accord with virtue.” The doctor exemplified this. (Many an ethics student, feeling things have gotten a bit mystical with Aristotle, wants at this point to return to “money,” but having declared it “pure instrumentality,” Aristotle’s not about to back down.)

31. As a consequence of simplifying and schematizing, the world with which Friedman ends is schizoid. He’d have the father of children feel affection for those children and concern that they live well in times to come; yet Friedman would have that same father go off to work and labor each day simply to increase the return to stockholders without exercising any regard for the impact his corporation might have on the society his son is to live in. True, Friedman might respond: “Well, that’s just the way people behave.” But he complains rather that they don’t behave this way enough. He wants this schizoid behavior—has done his best to dictate it to the business schools of the land, and thinks people are behaving unethically when they don’t practice it. More insistently than Adam Smith, he’s a missionary. It turns out after all that Friedman is not just about money; he’s about his doctrine about money. And this is what makes him a Puritan. Not only is the world that’s generated by his thinking an alienated one, but he insists we enter that world as a destiny—as our ticket into adulthood. To our misfortune we often do.
There is nothing in nature that requires a businessman to shed his responsibilities as citizen when becoming a CEO. Somehow though, Friedman feels a businessman can and should do this—should suspend his humanity on the ground that he is owned by stockholders.

Further, while Friedman speaks of the restraints of law, there’s nothing in his system to keep corporations from using their money to buy law-makers and insist they provide a maximum of privileges for corporations and a minimum of responsibilities. (Some were surprised when Friedman offered himself as a tutor to General Pinochet, the dictator in Chile, after President Salvador Allende was, with assistance from our CIA, ousted and then assassinated in 1973. No one should have been surprised that Friedman pitched in. Fully provided for in Friedman’s conception of freedom is the freedom of a dictator to control all the laws and to be accountable to none of them. He had already done what he could to secure that kind of freedom for American corporations. In this way have we extended the reach of our Puritanism to Latin America.)

To be fair though, in asking us to join his world, Friedman is—as I’ve tried to show earlier—playing to some of the most deeply entrenched tendencies of our history and culture. (This is why “liberal” Democrats are such lame critics of “hard-line” Republicans. The Democrats emerge from the same history and culture, and have the same values.) Routinely, when it’s been a matter of actual practice, our Puritan heritage has trumped our Enlightenment heritage. When we want to feel noble about ourselves, we put on the rhetoric of the Enlightenment; but when it’s time to act, we regress to the behavior of forefathers earlier than Washington and Hamilton. Before moving on to discuss what these tendencies mean for our attitude toward the use of force, and for our attitude toward habitat (both already touched on), let’s try to draw our observations on the ascendency of the rich to a close.

When bankers, stockbrokers, and laissez-faire economists find themselves confronted by ethicists or by people whom these financiers’ policies have impoverished, the financiers tend to lapse into “don’t blame me; I’m just telling you how it’s done” mode. They’ll claim their economics is merely descriptive. They’ll say in defense of some action they’re taking: “The stock market
requires this of me.” Or they may say of a past action: “Had I not acted as I did, I’d have been fired—and someone else would have been brought in to do exactly the thing I wouldn’t do. I had to do what I did. It was inevitable.”

Such talk is instructive. With a good ear, one can hear echoes of Calvinist predestination. In place of an inscrutable God-Who is often angry, we have here a stock market whose decrees are absolute and predictably unpredictable—its decrees are beyond appeal. It’s a fool’s business to complain about this stock market; one can only attend to it closely and do what one can to accommodate to it. Any suggestion the “free market” is actually a market that humans freely manipulate is heresy. This somehow remains true in the face of contrary evidence coming in from all corners. A charge that the free market is a game rigged to serve the interests of its major players, the privileged rich, is not only blasphemous, it’s subversive blasphemy, bordering on treason. For it fosters “class warfare” and unpatriotically is “undermining the basis of a free society.” One who makes charges disrespectful to the market can be assumed to be an infantile person, isolated, aberrational—one who rejects reality. (Such a one is by no means entitled to chat with Charlie Rose, or be interviewed on the PBS NewsHour.)

This is instructive. The angry God in whose hands we found ourselves at the beginning of America’s story was a God who had at once agents who could be depended on to dispense His wrath (the Puritans, for instance) and had also objects of His wrath (the “savages,” for instance). Agents of His wrath could be presumed to be destined for heaven; objects of His wrath were all destined for hell. One of the best ways to reassure oneself one wasn’t destined for hell was to enlist definitively as one of God’s avenging agents against the objects of His wrath.

Something similar has happened in the twenty-first-century update to our story. The path to security and prosperity is to accept the ultimacy of the free market and its oracular decrees as the stock market reveals them—and then to respond in obedience—by engaging in the market, serving it, preserving it. This is true, whether one is by ethnicity “majority born” or “minority born,” and whether one is born a U.S. citizen or is an immigrant. Regardless of which category you are in, the inclination is to sell out. This is so whether you are president, or secretary of state, or
law professor, or justice on the Supreme Court, or journalist, or
pundit, or portfolio analyst. If you wish to avoid being a target
of the agents of wrath, your best course of action is to join their
ranks.

Short of this maneuver, one remains among the market’s more
vulnerable. People living in other countries run special risks. If
for instance in Central America, people don’t show respect for
the market in the manner and form in which we’ve shaped it,
their country can be invaded, their leaders can be executed, and
their land can be destroyed.

Yet even here at home, in ways that irritate those who insist
on the profit motive, we find that the doctor, the lawyer, and
the teacher are likely to perform at their best when outside our
paradigm of orthodox bottom-line market economics. So also
do other providers of public service—our police officers and
fire fighters, our paramedics and nurses. It shouldn’t surprise us
therefore that some politicians win popularity by waging cam-
aigns against such people. The strategy for a true-believer and
wannabe-victor in today’s economic world is, it seems, to move
as far from these fuzzy-statused do-gooder types as one can—
and to tame such do-gooders in the process by constricting their
funding and belittling their dedication. (Sure, there’s room for
legitimate criticism of people in the fields of public service; but
there are popular recent political campaigns against them as a
class that can hardly be explained except by envy and resentment
for the example they give.)

The newest discovery of the economic realist is in fact that
in seeking a profit, no genuine good or service need be pro-
vided. One can make money off of money. Manufacturing can
be shipped overseas. Service industries can go too. Sustained
for years by influxes of loans from China and from our appar-
tently inexhaustible federal reserve, financiers can play among
themselves ruinous games with other people’s savings—and be
rescued with funds and rewarded by bonuses paid out against
future taxes when it seems their failures might otherwise bring
the entire money system crashing down.

The world we enter thereby is not altogether as alien and
unprecedented as we sometimes protest. Puritans and Friedman –
no mere icons of the past, but living mentors—have labored hard
to bring this world to birth. The bleak model they’ve perfected for
us tends toward a self-reinforcing and enduring efficacy. Today the elites among us see no real boundaries to profit-taking; nor do they see any real alternatives to it. They see it as the one landscape into which we all are born. Righteously, and with Jesus well domesticated, they march us forward. It’s God’s plan: to the extent we can make it happen, and though the heavens may fall, our acquisitions and opportunities must be maximized.

Hermann Gossen (a German economist of the nineteenth century deeply impressed by what he saw as a connection between God and laissez-faire economics), wondering that anyone should be seeking an alternative to this principle of self-aggrandizement, asked: “How can a creature be so arrogant as to want to frustrate totally or partially the purpose of his Creator?” Gossen meant God had sentenced us to pursue riches, and our duty was to do so. A majority of us in America today subscribe to this; and as we do, our rich grow richer, our poor grow poorer, our debts grow bigger, our use of habitat becomes more unrestricted, our infrastructure crumbles, and our society tumbles in the direction of terminal incoherence.