

Esotericism and Liberalism 1.0

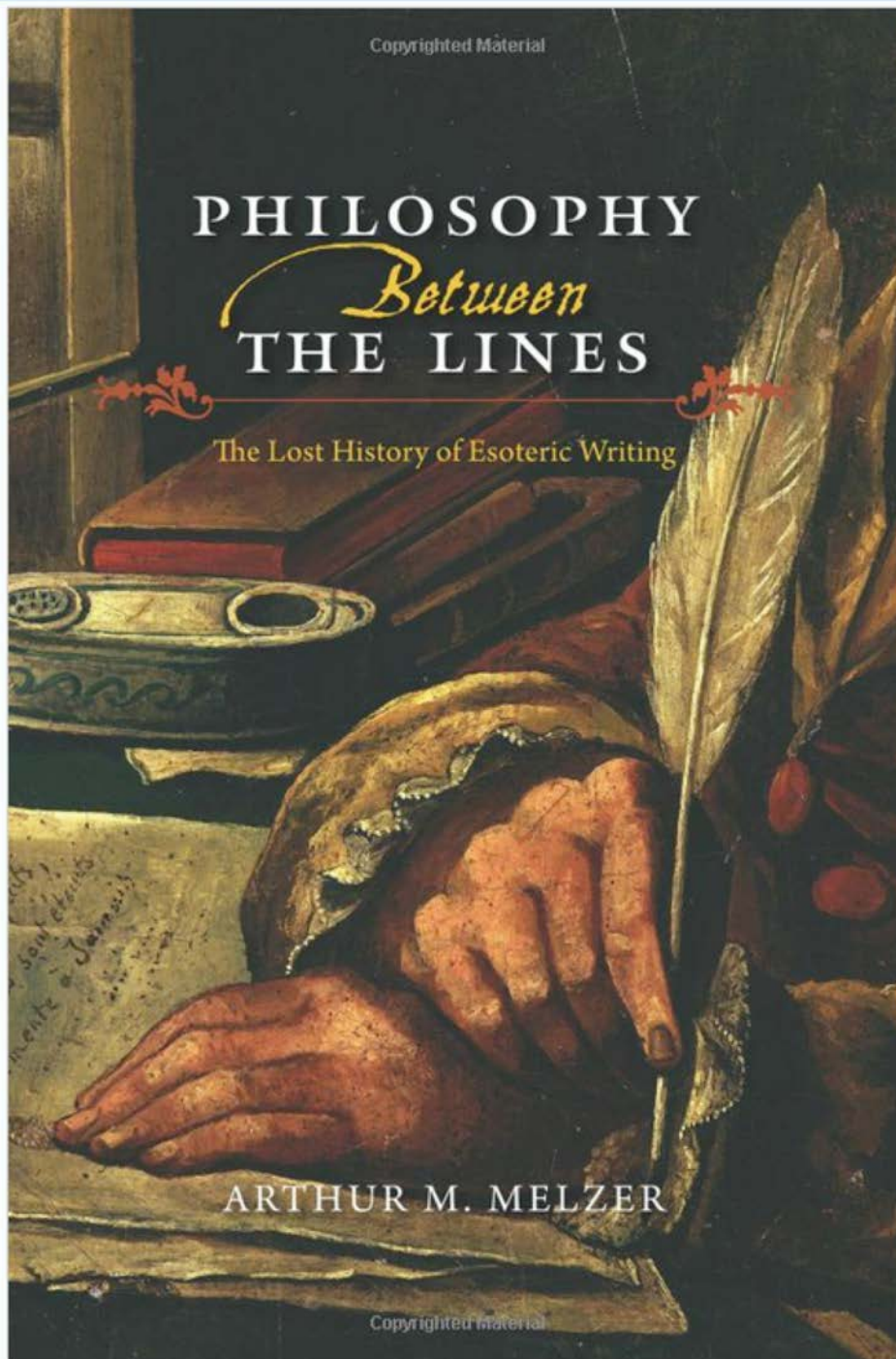
By Daniel B. Klein

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Invisible Hand seminar April 7, 2018

Youtube link for this lecture:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10Byu2nFbgc&feature=youtu.be>



Arthur Melzer

Between the lines

- Exoteric
- Esoteric

Obviousness, interpretive insightfulness is like propriety

Aesthetics

Praiseworthy-j

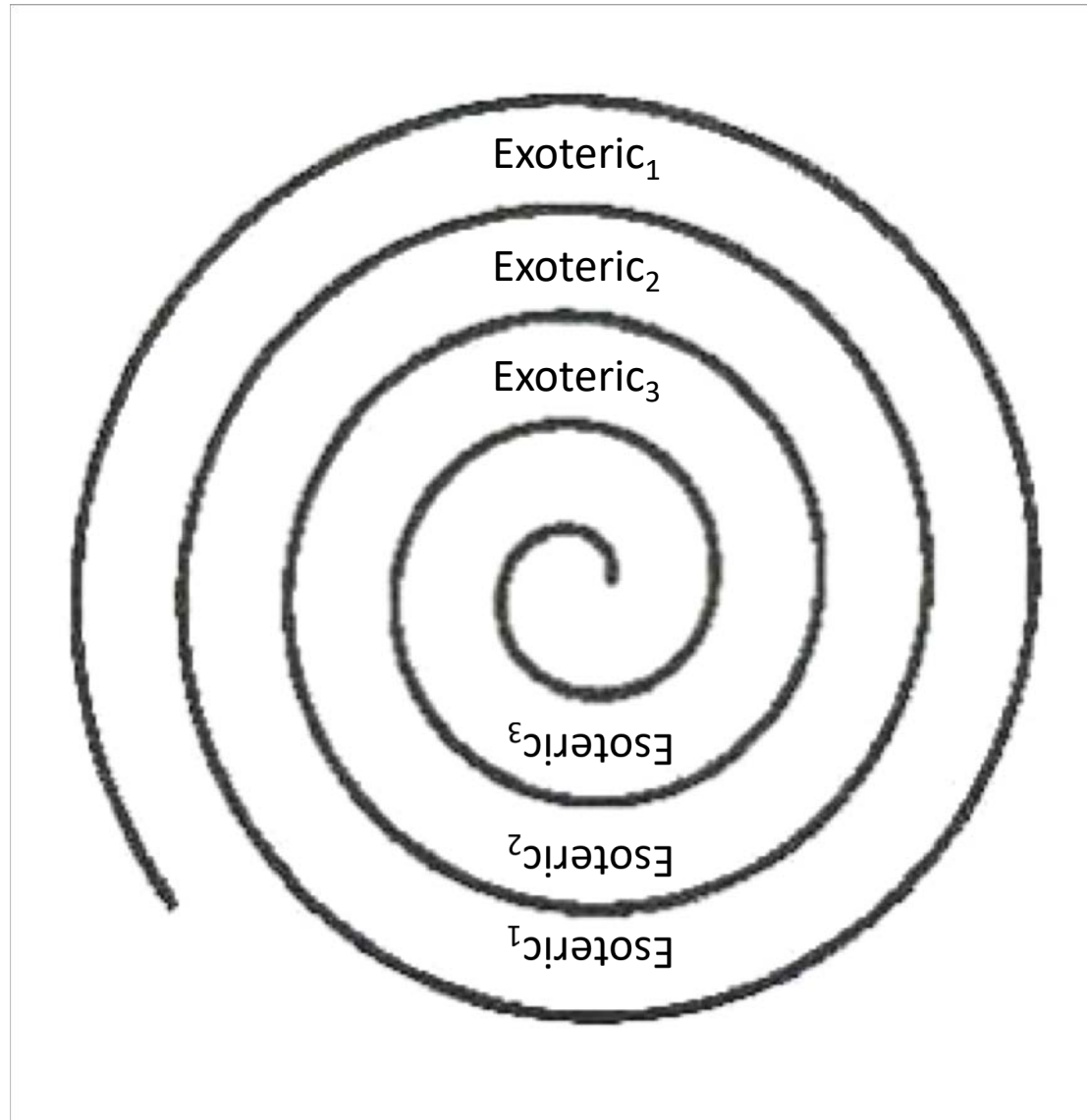
Propriety-j

Blameworthy-j

Grammar

Commutative
Justice

The exo-/eso- distinction



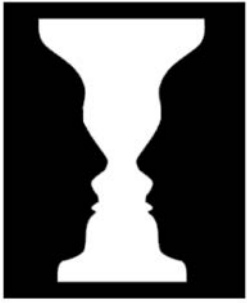
Asymmetric Interpretation

Knowledge

- information
- interpretation
- judgment

Symmetric interpretation

- knowledge flat-talk: Flattening knowledge down to information
- “common knowledge”
- univocality (as opposed to multivocality)



Asymmetric Interpretation



Topics

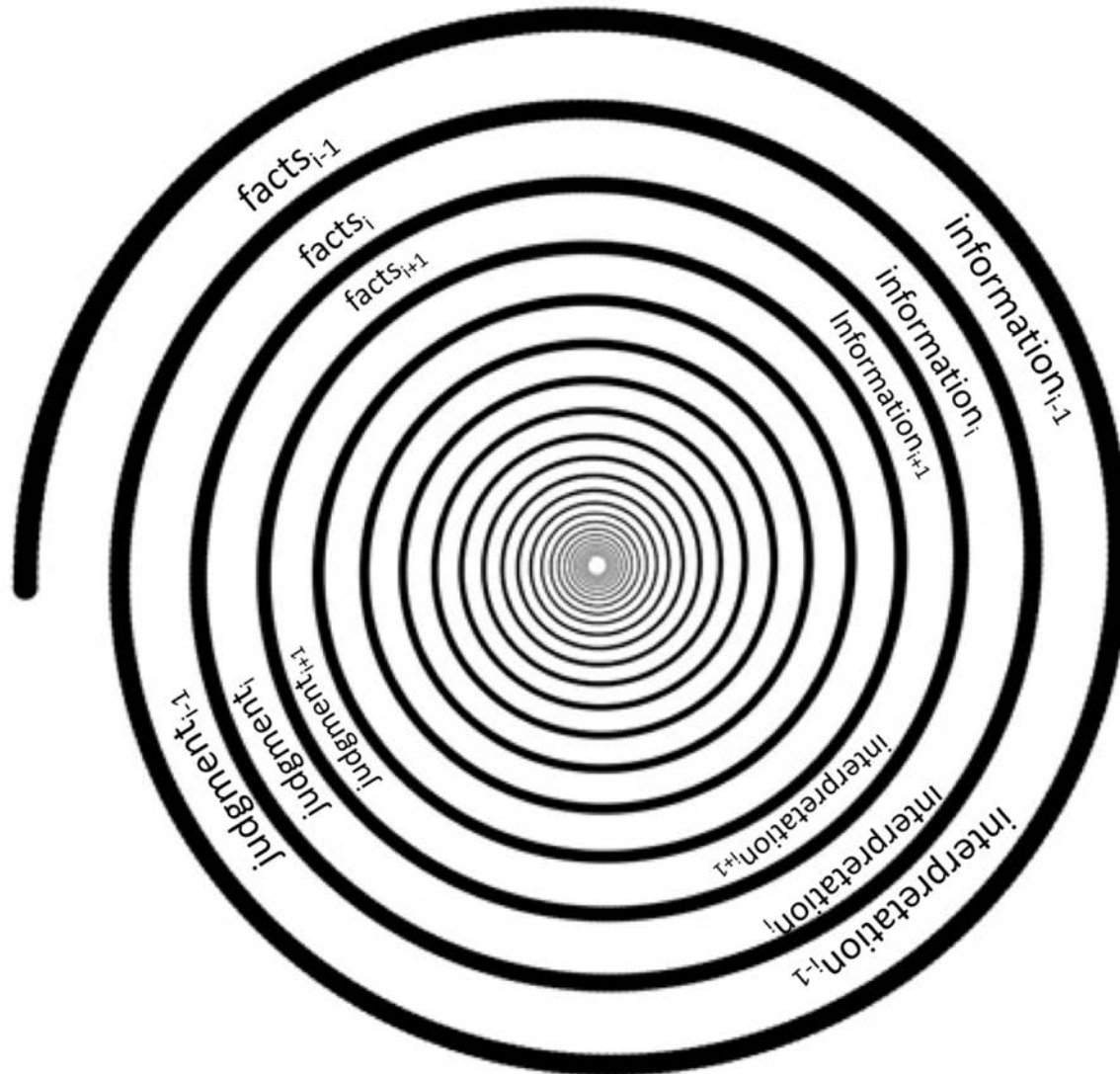
- entrepreneurial discovery
- regret
- humor (irony, satire, parody, raillery, etc.)
- giving and taking a hint
- going *meshuggeh*
- writing esoterically



“Computers are stupid: They do what you say, not what you mean.”



Knowledge spiral



The simple lie

Teenager: “Wasn’t me.”



Exoteric
Esoteric?

- The teenager himself as the esoteric auditor.

Outline

- Three types of exo-/eso- dyads
- Four motives or purposes
- Devices, techniques
- Melzer's historical claims
- Liberalism 1.0
 - motives, purposes

Three types of exo-/eso- dyads

Do you mean for the superior reader to embrace your *exoteric* message?

		Yes	No
Do you aim to communicate a more-than-winking esoteric message to the superior reader?	No	Plain Talk (univocality)	<u>Winking esotericism</u> (Type 0)
	Yes	<u>Type 1</u>	<u>Type 2</u>

Four motives or purposes

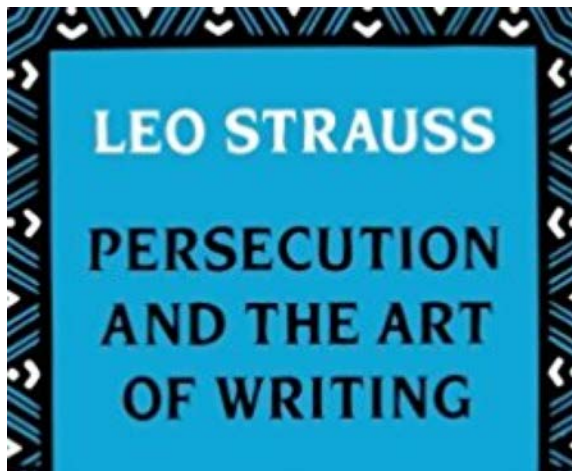
1. Defensive
2. Protective
3. Pedagogical
4. Political



Defensive



- Most intuitive: Defend oneself
- Censorship, persecution
- Being dismissed, ignored
- Not getting advancement, rewards.



Protective



Dangerous beliefs:

- No divine justice, no afterlife
- No providence, no God \Rightarrow no love of God
- You can't much affect the world
- You can't much improve yourself or your situation
- You can't much affect your own happiness
- Your hopes are unrealistic, maybe foolish

- The validation regress: Do your validators have validation?
- So-called foundations: Of morality, moral opinions, personal meaning, selfhood

- So-called foundations: Of political authority, of political opinion
- Government authority is institutionalized initiation of coercion

Protective



Who protected?

- the inferior reader
- non-reader others
- the would-be superior reader?

- Ignorance is bliss.

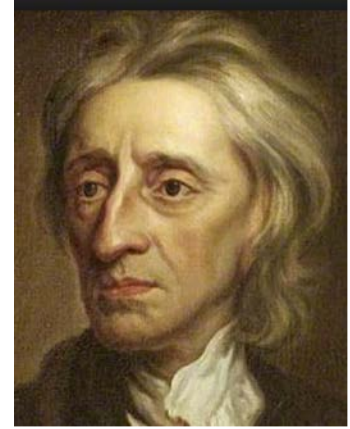
- Respecting pieties, traditions, established institutions, taboos.

Pedagogical



Socrates

- Socratic method
- Not two different people (Peter and Paul)
- Rather: Improving Paul: Conversion, cultivation, education, edification
- As opposed to spoon-feeding
- Make them puzzle, make them work for it
 - Much more pertinent for great thinkers



Political

- To advance (propagate) political goals, policy reforms.
- To advance *any* kind of institutional reform.
- Political, therefore, specifies a motive wider than reforming the reader's thinking.
- The salient type: **Winking**.
- Example?: Social contract
 - Stable polity versus not
- Everyday BS you see on TV.
 - Dissembling rationales, motivations
 - The insidious and crafty art of politics
- Relation to protective

Types and motives

Do you mean for the superior reader to embrace your *exoteric* message?

		Yes	No
Do you aim to communicate a more-than-winking esoteric message to the superior reader?	No	<p>Plain Talk (univocality)</p>	<p><u>Winking esotericism</u> (Type 0)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Defensive 2. Protective 3. Political
	Yes	<p><u>Type 1</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Defensive 2. Protective 3. Political 4. Pedagogical 	<p><u>Type 2</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Defensive 2. Protective 3. Political 4. Pedagogical

Devices, techniques



- That is, for Types 1 and 2 (more-than-winking esotericism)
- A natural dilemma: Nonobvious...
.... but not too!
- No simple code (not cryptography)

Devices, techniques

“J says X about Y”

Esoteric:

Reinterpret:

J,

Y,

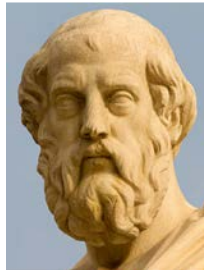
or X.

From the mouth of J

“J says X about Y”

- J is the author – who is anonymous!

- J is a disputant.



Plato

- J is a beggar, buffoon, fool, drunkard, or idiot.
- Or is it the author?
 - “beard,” “mask”



Devices, techniques

“J says X about Y”

Reinterpret Y:

Disassembling the true target, which is Z

Fables, allegories, histories $Y \Leftrightarrow Z$





Devices, techniques

“J says X about Y”

Disassembling the true target

$Y \Leftrightarrow Z$

in Smith's TMS

Y	Z (true target)
1. Infanticide	Slave trade
2. Honoring promise to highwayman	Complying with government rules
3. Casuistry	Interventionist state (10k Commandments)

Devices, techniques

“J says X about Y”

Reconsidering X – as opposed to S:

- Argue against S, provoking thought about S.
- Develop a compelling case for S and then take it back.
- Defend X lamely – Smith on usury

Devices, techniques

“J says X about Y”

Reconsidering X – as opposed to S:

- Dispersal (dispersing argumentation for a tacit viewpoint S throughout the text).
 - TMS against the governmentalization of social affairs

Devices, techniques

Other techniques:

- Textual incongruity (for example, departing from a declared plan).
- Conspicuous inconsistency or self-contradiction.
- The commission of errors that the author's demonstrated competence and mastery would not allow (for example, altering a quotation in a significant way). (Machiavelli on David's knife.)
- Intentional unclarity: Expressing the esoteric message in language that is obscure, vague, or terse. (Montesquieu)
- Expressing very striking or intense thoughts in an oblique or ancillary fashion, such as in a meandering digression or in the notes. (Smith on slave trade.)

Devices, techniques

Other techniques:

- Meaningful silence or conspicuous omission (as when the text creates expectations of coming to something that then remains unaddressed or unstated). (Smith's omission of poor law.)
- Alluding subtly to the writings or opinions of a significant figure.
- Using stories, allegories, fables, etc.
- The author tells of how he reads other writers to tell his readers how they are to read him.
- Saying something, using familiar terms, that sounds like a conventional thought but then quietly twisting the semantic content of the terms used.

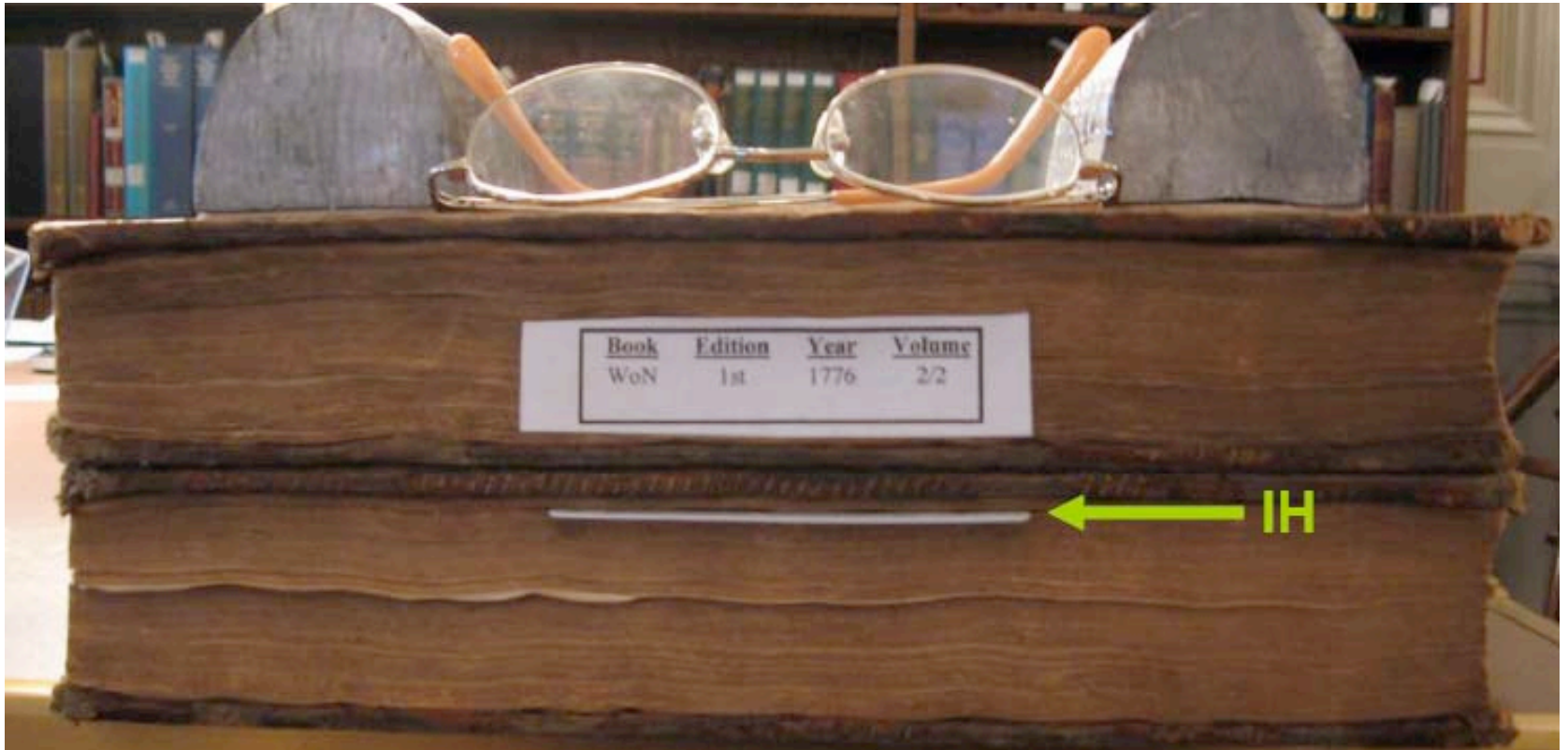
“in a word or two, placed in the middle”

Another technique:

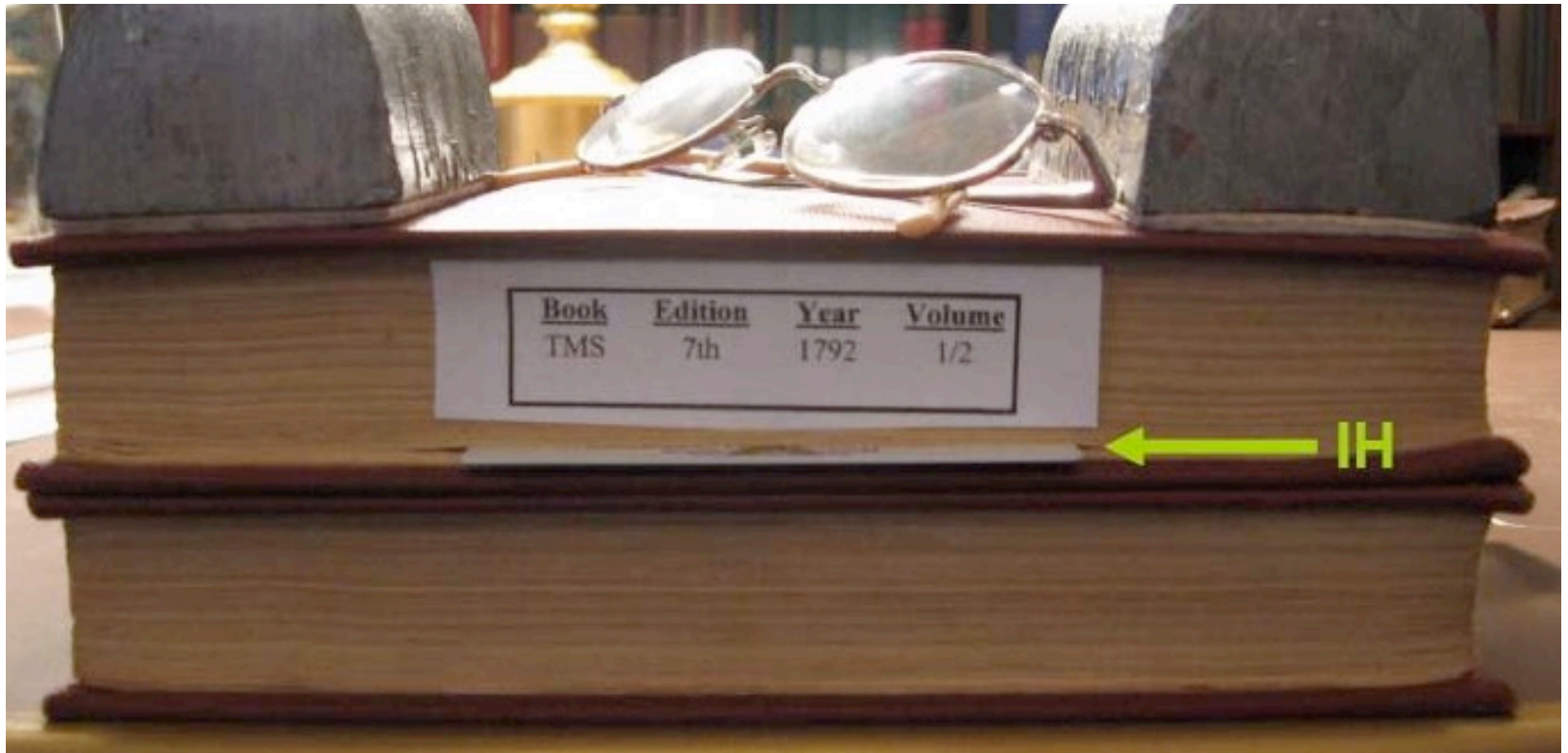
Placing thoughts of particular significance in middle of the text or in the exact center of a list or sequence.

- Machiavelli, David’s knife in *The Prince*.
- Smith on Thucydides: “Thucydides on the other hand *often expresses all that he labours so much in a word or two, sometimes placed in the middle of the narration* but in such a manner as not in the least to confound it.” (LRBL, 95; italics added)

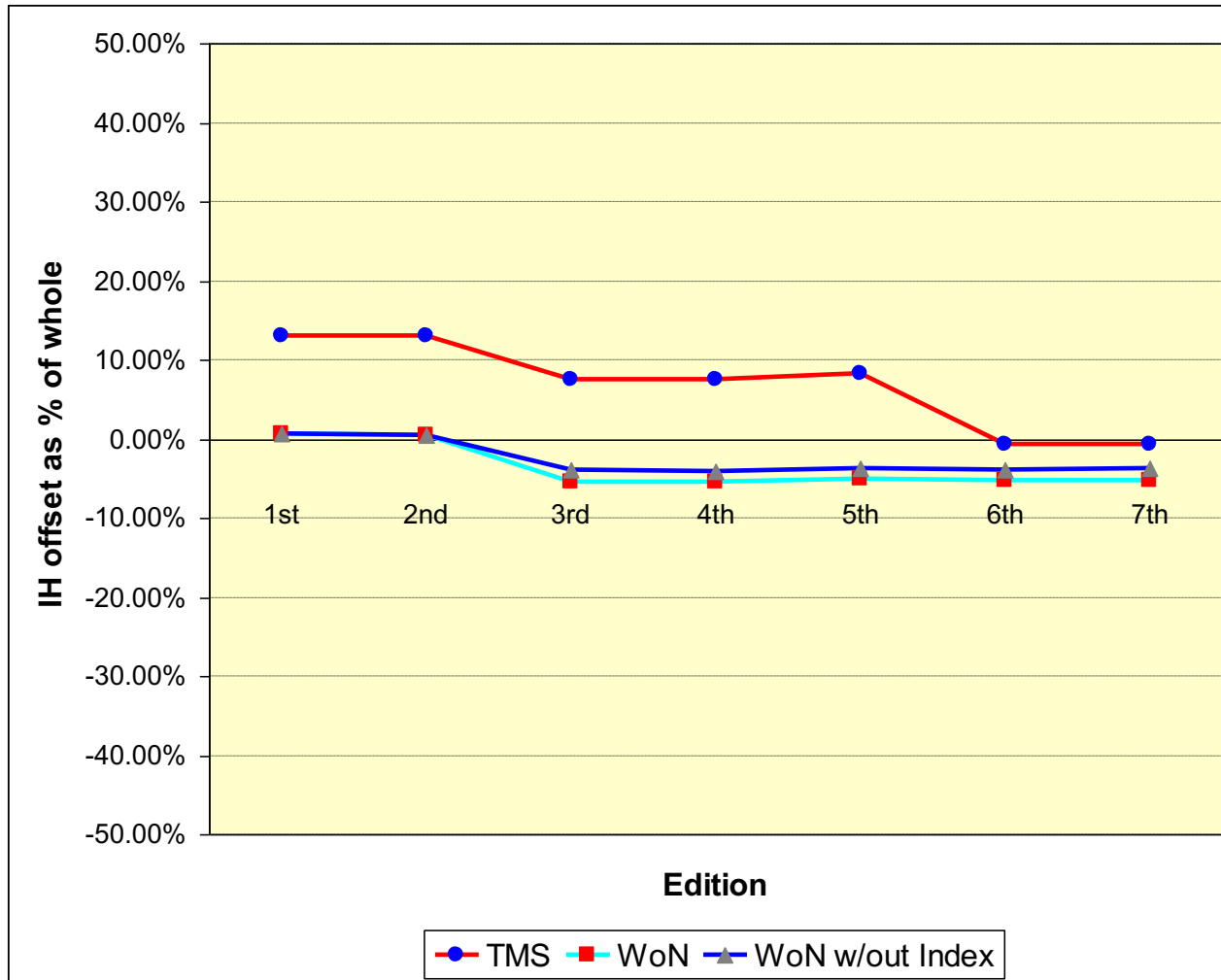
Wealth of Nations, 1st edition
1776



Theory of Moral Sentiments, 6th ed., 1790 (actually
the 7th of 1792)



“led by an invisible hand to”: Smith’s central idea





Smith, *Edinburgh Review*

1755: Review of Johnson's *Dictionary*

- *but; humour*

1756: Letter on literature

- praises Rousseau's dedication to Geneva – satirical

Melzer's historical claims



Let's turn to those...

Reasons not to write it down



- When you speak: The discourse context.
- Writing relinquishes much control over your words
- Said of Smith: “he hated scribblers” (Ross 123)
- People who wrote nothing:
 - Socrates
 - Jesus
- Except for the Letters, Plato put into his own mouth only the titles of his works
- Anonymity the norm until mid-18C

Historical claims



- Philosophy before the printing press.
- Elites.
- Up through early modern, **virtually all great writers.**

- Printing press, Reformation, wars of religion
- Falling costs of printing, mass printing, mass readership.
- Literacy, Protestantism
- Liberalization of the press, religious toleration.
- Freedom of thought, conscience, religion, speech
- The emergence of “public opinion”
- Science, enlightenment

- Rise of the nation state
- Republicanism in an extended territory
- Liberalism: Shifting government to lower things

Historical claims



- 18C: Lively discussion about esotericism

Melzer's online appendix:

110 pages (and growing):

A Chronological Compilation of Testimonial Evidence for Esotericism

http://press.uchicago.edu/sites/melzer/melzer_appendix.pdf

“Almost every major thinker from Homer to Nietzsche is included, as either the source or the subject ...”

Melzer welcomes more: melzer@msu.edu

Historical claims



- A year marker: 1800
- Then, esotericism **recedes**, and *rapidly*.
- Also, rapidly, *forgetting*.

Historical claims



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Preface

A LOST METHOD OF WRITING — AND READING

In a letter to a friend, dated October 20, 1811, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe speaks of an act of forgetting taking place before his eyes: “I have always considered it an evil, indeed a disaster which, in the second half of the previous century, gained more and more ground that one no longer drew a distinction between the exoteric and the esoteric.”

Historical claims



- After 1800, a forgetting and blindness.
- Impoverished interpretations of older texts – acceptance of the exoteric.
- Faulty interpretations.

Historical claims



- Leo Strauss (1899-1973) rediscovers and explores and expounds on past esotericism.
- (Straussian baggage.)
- (Straussians themselves divided.)
- Great hostility to Strauss. Neglect.
- A network of pupils, colleagues.

Other great achievements



- Exploring the blindness to esotericism.
- Exploring the hostility to those who maintain its existence and importance.
- Cautioning against the abuse of esoteric reading.
- Introduction to larger Straussian worldview.

Esotericism and Liberalism 1.0



- Hume and Smith.
- I've purported some esoteric moments in Smith.
 - I think esotericism is frequent and important in TMS.
 - Less so in WN.
 - Dugald Stewart and Dupont de Nemours indicate Smith soft-peddled/fudged.
 - L. Stephen: "Smith dealt over-delicately with some existing restrictions" (322-3)
- Hume, too; quite important.



Both remark on esotericism



- Hume (EPM): “...a man has but a bad grace, who delivers a theory, however true, which, he must confess, leads to a practice dangerous and pernicious. Why rake into those corners of nature which spread a nuisance all around? ... Truths which are *pernicious* to society, if any such there be, will yield to errors which are salutary and *advantageous*.”



Both remark on esotericism



Smith on esotericism:

- LRBL discusses strategic writing (145-7, 152-3, 179, 197-9).
- *Astronomy* suggests the practice of esotericism by scientists and astronomers.
- TMS: Some discussion of political political esotericism (factions) and wise moderation (Solon), also stuff about frankness, concealment, reserve.
- Dupont de Nemours letter to Smith 1788.
- *Ancient Logics* has long strange footnote fulminating against neo-Platonist esoteric interpretation of Plato.



Contrarities



Donald Livingston (1984, 36) :



"philosophical insight is gained by working through the **contrarities** of thought which structure a drama of inquiry."

Contrarieties

reason -- Hume

nature, natural – both

justice – both, esp. Smith

liberty, freedom – both, esp. Hume

impartial spectator – Smith



Why be esoteric?



About religion, that is obvious and not controversial.

What about:

- philosophy/epistemology
 - its certainty,
 - its generality,
 - its supposed foundations?



Why be esoteric?



What about:

- morality
 - its flavor (e.g., suicide)
 - its certainty,
 - its generality,
 - its supposed foundations?



Why be esoteric?

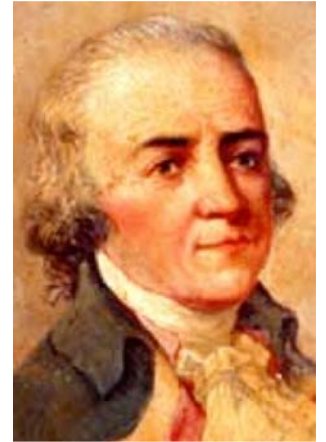


What about:

- politics

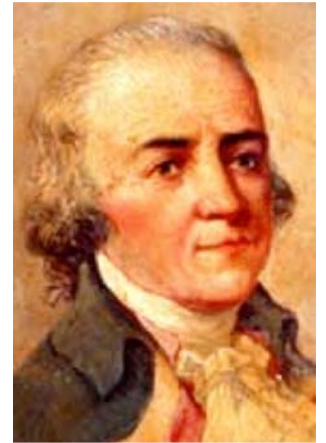
- its flavor (e.g., presumption of liberty)
- its certainty,
- its generality,
- its supposed foundations?

Dupont de Nemours to Smith 1788:



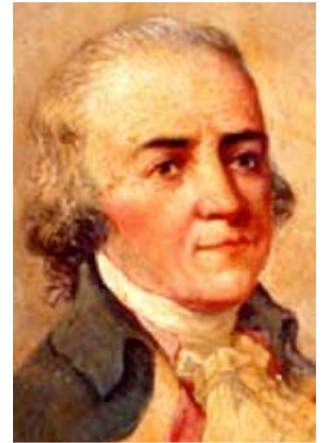
“I hope you will forgive the deficiencies of my work that are not unknown to me and some of which were voluntarily committed.”

Dupont de Nemours to Smith 1788:



“It is more important to do well than to say well. If, speaking as a government official we announce to our traders, to our producers and to the cream of our civil administrators that it is useless and dangerous to give specific encouragement to firms and the export of their products, we would neither”

Dupont de Nemours to Smith 1788:



“be read nor heard, but in addition we would risk having sound Principles denounced and estranged from the government itself, and we would prolong by a decade ignorance and its deadly effects. By assaulting their eyes with bright light, we would reconstitute their blindness.”

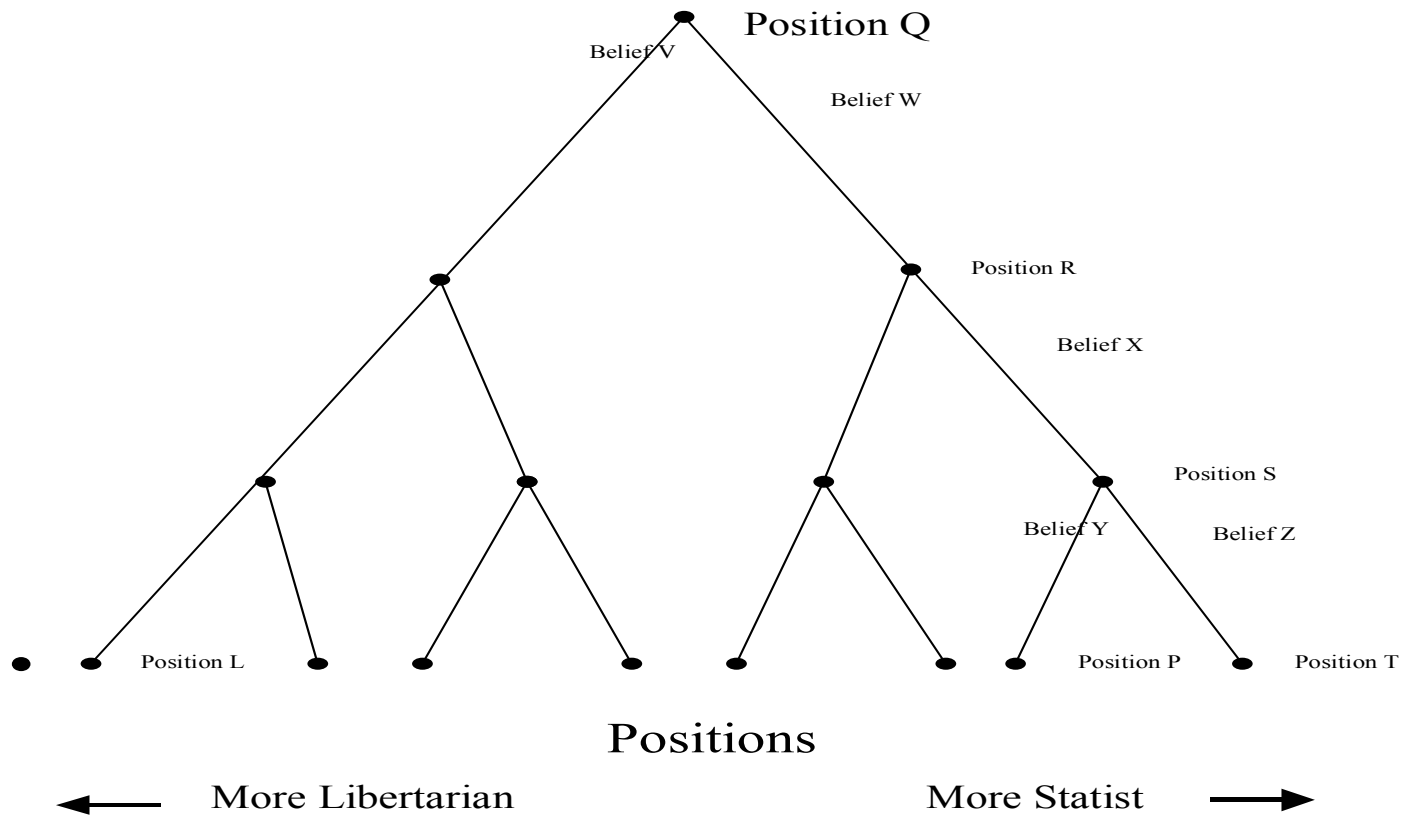
Condorcet



wrote of thinkers in England and France

“covering the truth with a veil to spare eyes too weak, and leaving others the pleasure of divining it; ...[and] seeming not to want more than a **semi-tolerance in religion** and a **semi-liberty in politics...**”

Bargaining vs. challenging



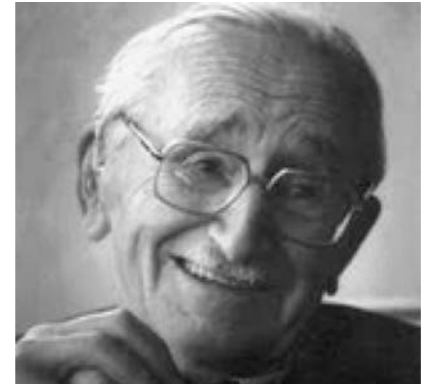
Bargainer begins by challenging Belief Z.
Challenger begins by challenging Belief W.

Ludwig von Mises



“It is impossible to understand the history of economic thought if one does not pay attention to the fact that **economics as such is a challenge to the conceit of those in power.**”

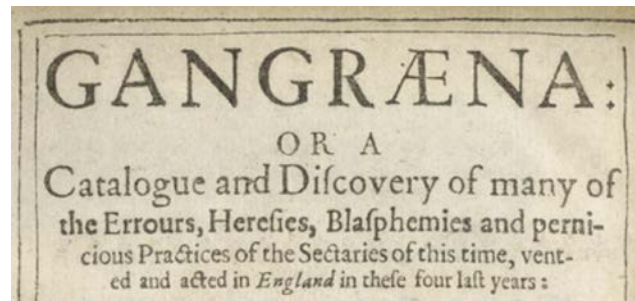
Hayek: *The Fatal Conceit:*
The pretense of knowledge,
expertise a sham



Frightening gateways

Liberalization throws things open to the unknown.

⇒ immorality, dissent, upheaval, turmoil.



Thomas Edwards
1646

The burden of decision making.
Where will the liberty principle end?

Social cohesion

Smith's four-stage theory:

hunter, shepherds, agriculture, commerce

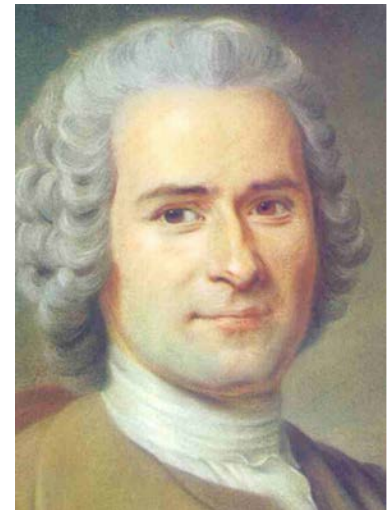
Rousseau: cohesionism

1750: Discourse on the Arts and Sciences

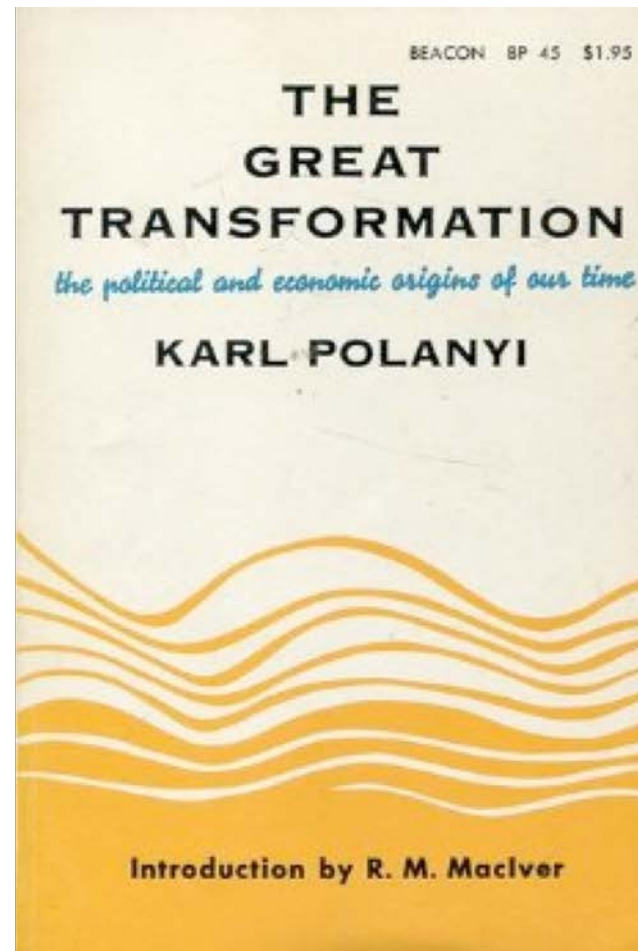
1754: Discourse on Inequality

1755: Discourse on Political Economy

1762: Social Contract



Liberalism → ← cohesionism



Polanyi: The first transformation

- “the dislocation caused by such devices must disjoint man’s relationships and threaten his natural habitat with annihilation.” (42)
- “[T]he cause of the degradation” is “the disintegration of the cultural environment of the victim...” (157)
- “[T]he immediate cause of his undoing...lies in the lethal injury to the institutions in which his social existence is embodied. The result is loss of self-respect and standards ...” (157)

Smith downplays concomitant turmoil

- Innovation, entrepreneurship, creative destruction in WN:
 - Surface: Not much
 - Below the surface: Concomitant, important

(748,260-1, 277.4, 19-22).

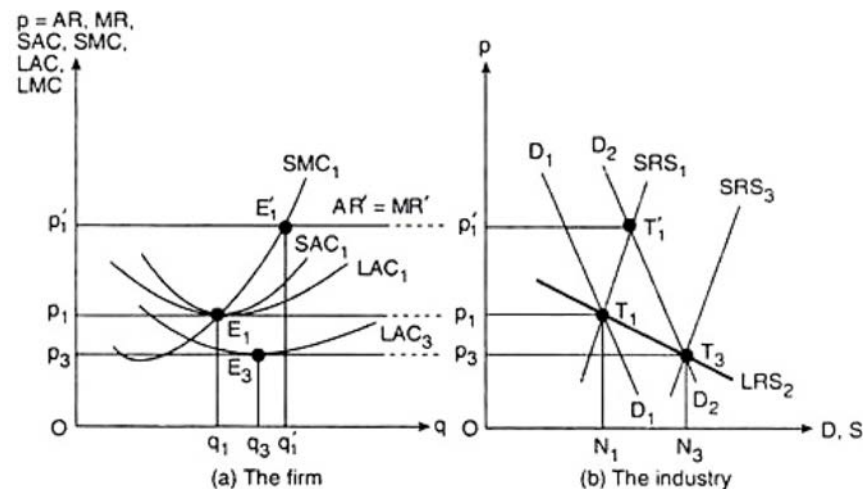


Fig. 10.12 Long-run supply curve of the decreasing cost industry

Innovation in morals

- TMS: little favoring challenging.
 - Even frowns on it.
 - Some say TMS teaches conformity.
 - Even: paints morality as conformity.
 - But, subtly, innovation in your man within your breast.
- ⇒ Smith advising independence of judgment but discreetness, reserve.

Smith naturalizes commerce

- “propensity to truck, barter, and exchange”
(25)
- Family affection: familiarity, *not blood* (TMS 222.11-223.14)
- “In commercial countries ...
descendants...**naturally** separate and
disperse, as interest or inclination may
direct.” (223.13)
- Sympathy: Not just copying another’s
sentiment, but entering into his *situation*.

“The child of jurisprudence is liberalism”

(Pocock 1983, 249)

Commutative justice: Not messing with other people's stuff

Jurisprudence ⇒ CJ

⇒ earnings

Calvinism etc.: sanctification of earnings

WN etc.: defense of earnings

- moral authorization of pursuit of honest income
- McCloskey: honoring commerce
- Unleashes innovation, Great Enrichment

Defense to offense

- Flipside of CJ:

⇒ Liberty: Govt not messing with your stuff

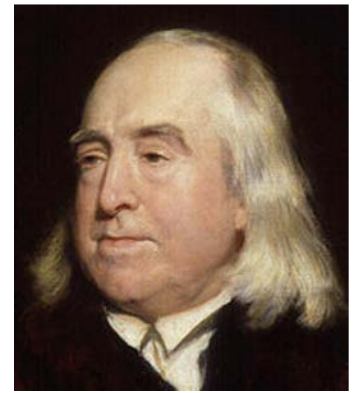
the liberty principle



Anarcho-capitalist exhibiting his humility

In Defence of Usury

(1787)



- “Should it be my fortune to gain any advantage over you, it must be **with weapons which you have taught me to wield**”



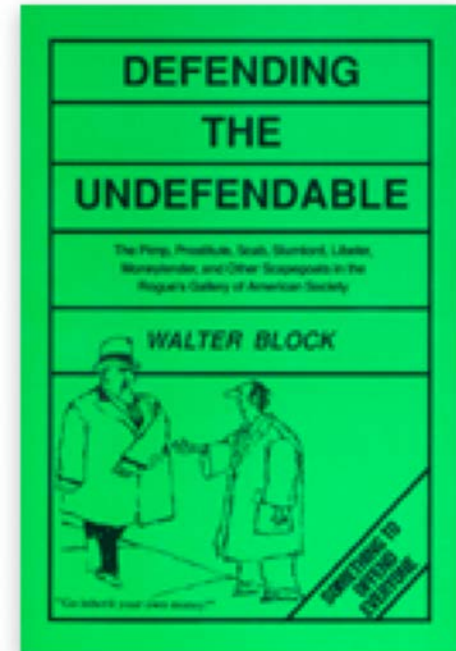
G.K. Chesterton (1933):

“The modern world began by Bentham writing the *Defence of Usury*, ...

and it has ended after a hundred years in even the vulgar newspaper opinion finding Finance indefensible.”

Enthusiasm, fanaticism, men of system

- People with an axiom to grind.
- Burke versus Paine.
- “Wilkes and Liberty”
- Rothbardians as men of system.
- Presumption of liberty
- Presumption of the status quo

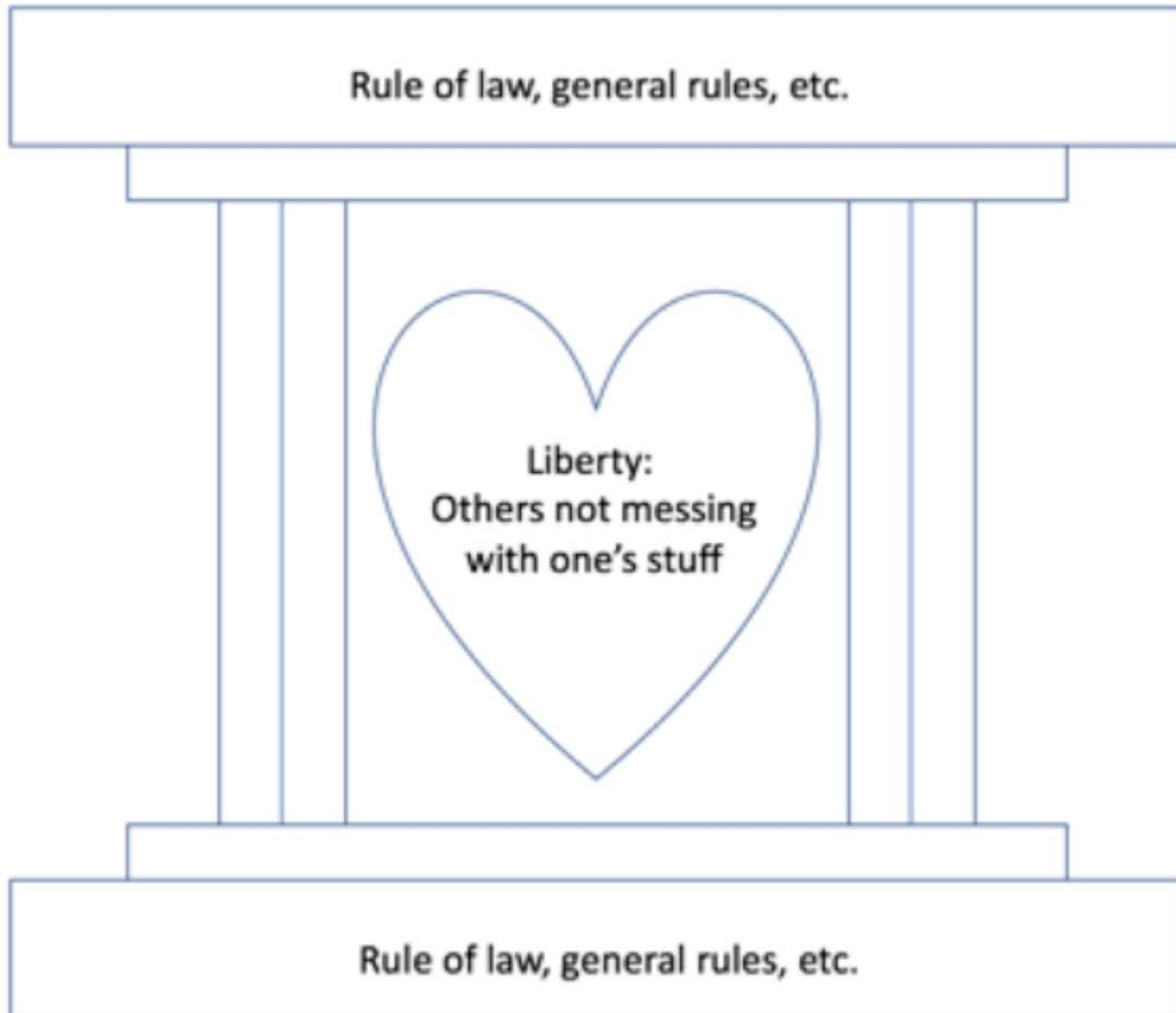


Authority, liberty



- “In all governments, there is a perpetual intestine struggle, open or secret, between AUTHORITY and LIBERTY; and neither of them can ever absolutely prevail in the contest. A great sacrifice of liberty must necessarily be made in every government...”
- “[L]iberty is the perfection of civil society; but still authority must be acknowledged essential to its very existence: and in those contests, which so often take place between the one and the other, the latter may, on that account, challenge the preference.”
- Stable polity a precondition.
- Integration of authority: Jural dualism.
- Direct and overall liberty sometimes disagree.

HUME'S CONSTITUTION OF LIBERTY



Pro-freedom, not pro-business

- Defending liberalization perceived as defending business interests, serving their interests.
- Defending pursuit of honest income perceived as defending acquisitiveness.
- A life of low things. Forsaking virtue.
- Smith paints merchants as conniving.
 - But between the lines...

Summary

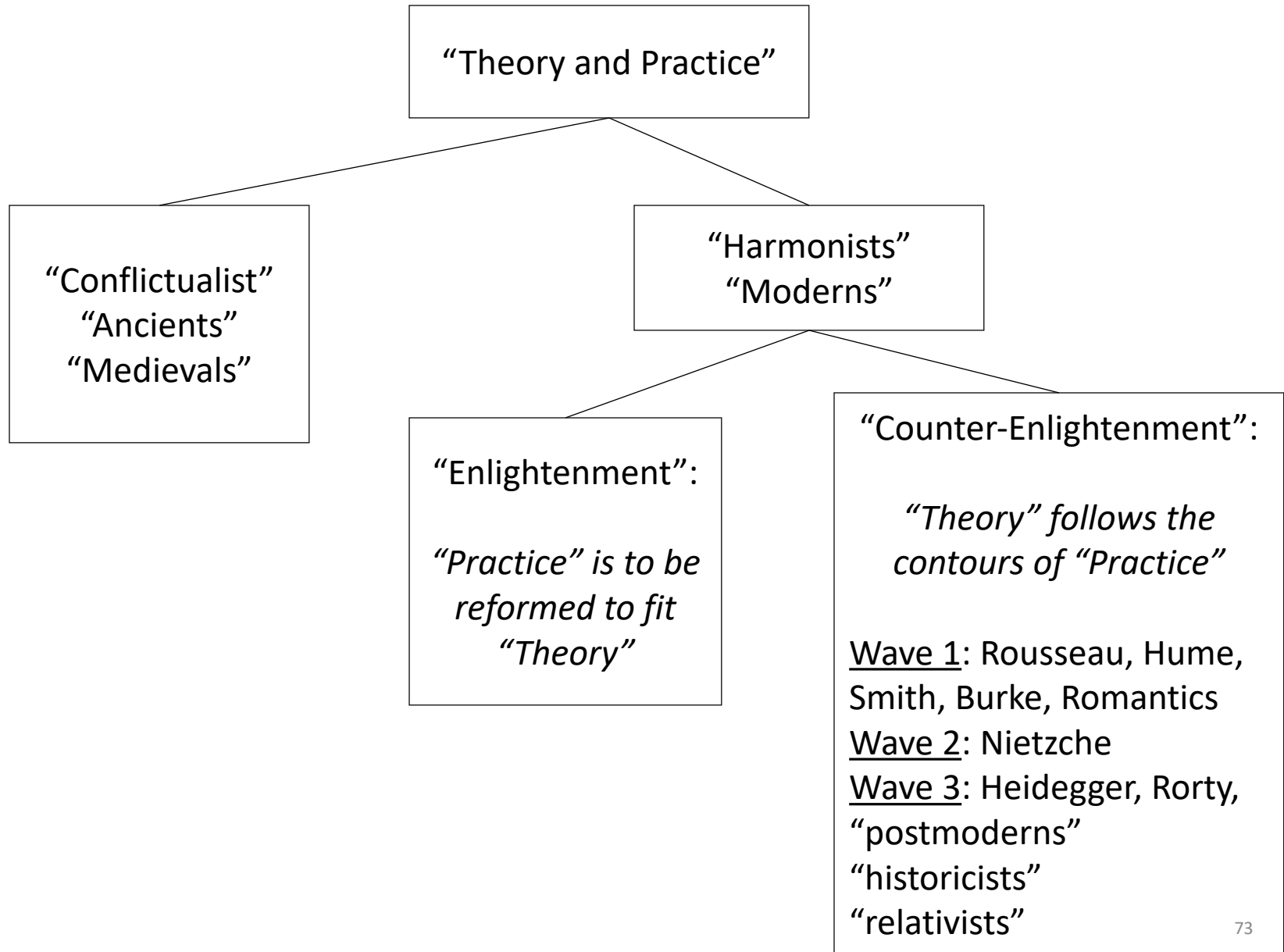
- Three types of exo-/eso- dyads
- Four motives or purposes
- Devices, techniques
- Melzer's historical claims
- Liberalism 1.0
 - motives, purposes

Thank you for
your attention!

Melzer's demarcations, strong separations

theory	practice	page
"for its own sake"	utility, for the some other sake	75
think	act	77
vita contemplativa	vita activa	72, 244
philosopher	city (polis)	76
reason	sociality	79
reason	faith/tradition/authority	79
reason	"cave"/illusion/prejuduce	81, 83
reason	social life	236
philosophy	politics	109
to understand	to change	243

Melzer's scheme/narrative



Straussian themes

Catherine and Michael Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss* (2006):

Broad tenets projected by Strauss:

- America is modern.
- Modernity is bad.
- America is good.

Three ways to resolve

- East coast:
- Reject or qualify or downplay “America is good.”
- Representative: Allan Bloom

- West coast:
- Reject or qualify or downplay “America is modern.”
- Representative: Harry Jaffa

- Midwest:
- Reject or qualify or downplay “Modernity is bad.”
- Representative: Martin Diamond

