What is to be Held in Common: Pierre Manent’s Philosophy of Liberalism

Jordan Goldberg, 2014

This summer, I read broadly in the writings of Pierre Manent, a contemporary Parisian intellectual historian and political philosopher. With his retirement this past Spring, and the English translation of his final major work being published in just a few weeks, I’ve been afforded an immense opportunity to begin what will culminate in an honors project giving a comprehensive account of his philosophy and an evaluation of its significance. My interest in his work sprung initially from a class taken in the spring of my sophomore year, and has continued to grow as I’ve explored more and more political theory and found the questions he raises and the concerns he voices to be both extremely fruitful in considering the history of political thought, and exceptionally important in thinking about the ideas that undergird the modern political world. Moving chronologically through his corpus I’ve done my best to trace, and hopefully understand, the main currents of his intellectual journey, the subtleties of his thought, and the consequence of his conclusions.

Deeply concerned with what he terms “the modern difference,” Manent’s work focuses broadly on the staggering significance of the rise of liberalism (understood in the broad sense—the regime based on individual rights, free markets, representative democracy, etc.) and its manifold consequences for the forms and contents of modern life. For, alongside Alexis de Tocqueville (to whom Manent devotes much attention), he sees the rise of liberalism and democratic government—in short, the advent of modernity—to have produced a fundamental shift in the lives of human beings—one that Tocqueville considers so substantial as to have produced a schism between “two distinct humanities,” the ancient and the modern, or aristocratic and democratic. Through the thought of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Montesquieu, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Alexis de Tocqueville, Karl Marx, Immanuel Kant and countless other modern philosophers, then, he traces the implications, nature, and substance of modernity and what it means for the experience of those who live out the new truth of the modern world. His early works, such as Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy, The City of Man and An Intellectual History of Liberalism provide this penetrating analysis.

What especially captivates me is his nuanced attention to the tensions and difficulties in this modern project. What gives direction or meaning to human life defined as pure freedom? Alongside liberalism’s critics, such as Marx or Alexis de Tocqueville, he questions what the dominance of the radically atomizing theory of individual rights might mean for the common political life of a democracy, for the “common adventure” that constitutes true civic engagement and common action. With especially this question in mind, his most recent works have focused much more on the contemporary world, which I’ve come to believe provides the weightiest of Manent’s contributions to political philosophy. Looking particularly at Europe, in A World Beyond Politics and several essays, he contemplates the consequences of what he diagnoses to be the winnowing away of the public sphere, and a movement towards the unencumbered experience of purely individualized “humanity,” without the mediations of political forms. Neglecting the most important form of human association—the political—he argues, deprives us of a substantial component of human experience.

Having read the entirety of Manent’s published works, alongside the majority of his articles and essays that have been either translated into or written in English, my project has perhaps raised more questions than it has answered. But working closely alongside Professor Franco during weekly meetings, which were very helpful for clarifying and crystallizing my thoughts, taking lengthy notes on all readings, and finally synthesizing much of this into a written twenty page account and brief analysis of all the material that I’ve read, both Professor Franco and I feel very confident in beginning to structure and develop the actual substance of the honors project that I will complete this coming year.

Faculty Mentor: Professor Paul Franco

Funded by: The Surdna Foundation