Worldly Souls

William E. Johnston, Jr.

A war is ended ingloriously, the promised honor is missing; a President, overwhelmingly elected, resigns, and the law seems both vindicated and confused; our economy of life appears out of control; and democracy is increasingly out of favor in the world. We are troubled with good reason. We sense our difficulties and doubt we can relieve them safely. Perhaps the beginning of wisdom in dark times is to search for the foundations of propriety and purpose; the alternative is to grasp at straws.

The following experiment by George Orwell offers a useful perspective from which to review our nervous condition:

I thought of a rather cruel trick I once played on a wasp. He was sucking jam on my plate, and I cut him in half. He paid no attention, merely went on with his meal, while a tiny stream of jam trickled out of his severed oesophagus. Only when he tried to fly away did he grasp the dreadful thing that had happened to him. It is the same with modern man. The thing that has been cut away is his soul, and there was a period—twenty years, perhaps—during which he did not notice it [Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters, 1969].

We cannot help but wonder whether Orwell was too optimistic.... Twenty years? If after twenty years man noticed his soul was cut away, did he recover it? If the cutting away is a constant danger, is the recovery a permanent problem? And what of this "modern man"? Should the jam still trickle from him? What does modernity have to do with whether, when next compelled to fly, he will accurately perceive his condition, the presence or absence of his soul?

Man is his own best and worst surgeon. Alone among the creatures he experiments on himself; he may cut away his own soul and not know what he has done, or know it too late. This is so for a paradoxical reason: Alone among the creatures, man is a political animal. Conscious that he has a soul, he knows that he may know himself by seeing in his mind's eye his reflection in the world. But this awareness of a power of reflection also means that the creature aware may choose to ignore the fruits of this enlightening conscientiousness, this soul, forgetting it altogether. The powers of the soul are ones of choice: to distinguish or not the expedient from the inexpedient, the just from the unjust, the good from the bad. Knowing that choice is necessary does not make the choosing easier; but only in this problematic consciousness exists the freedom to commit oneself to dreadful things, thus losing one's soul, or by better lights, to commit oneself to wonders, thus gaining it.

While modern men are not Christian, they have been Christianized in that, like Christians, they are supposed to know the condition and location of their souls. With their peculiar, if not scandalous, ancient faith Christians were instrumental in making the world modern by despairing of it. Though they may claim to be anything but modern men, Christians today are—like other wasps, the assiduously nonbelieving or disbelieving—modern precisely to the extent that they also do not give evidence, in the larger political sense to which Orwell draws our attention, of knowing the condition and location of their souls in the world. And perhaps like other moderns, believers have a political duty stemming from this psychological ignorance.

The modern conviction that we must revalue all values is one of the luxuries of the current despair; it is a luxury because despair is not usually so ambitious. The prevailing ideology is religious in its vehemence. We are in a crisis, and therefore our values must be inadequate; we need to determine new values, or at least revalue the decrepit ones left to us from a discredited time. The time past is discredited by merely being past, the present by merely being present. Only the future offers hope. The ideology-of-crisis believes that the future is foreseeable, and that it is foreseeably better than the past or present.

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Our crisis is that not enough are yet concert ed in this vision to will it into place. We desire a sufficient future in place of a deficient past and an even more deficient present, but our practice is insufficient.

The desire for revaluation of all values is a uniquely modern trait. One is tempted to say that it constitutes modernity. To do so would be a hopeful exaggeration, for there is no constitution to modernity. There is only a process, a constantly abiding, exhausting reconstituting that makes all life critical, that makes life a matter of crisis. If all values are to be revalued under the urging of critical despair, how do we determine what is good or bad? How may the soul make its choices and know itself? Such questions are almost implausible in the modern setting. They are implausible because good and bad as objects of thought have been reduced to matters of relevance and irrelevance.

We are reduced to assertions of feeling. The ambitious despair surrounding the present in favor of the future infects us, reconstituting our opinions with remarkable confidence-shattering alacrity. The healthy soul with its tempered mind has been displaced as a subject of consideration by the healthy body. We cannot know what is good or bad even though our condition is critical; and we would like to know this if only it could be deduced from our accepted categories. We are moderns by ideology, by sober conviction—with all the hopes modernity inspires of material luxuries ad infinitum. This infinite progress of hopes fills an age that has no belief in infinity or things eternal and permanent.

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Modernity might end if we were to ask ourselves too many questions about its objectives. If we knew good or bad—or even if we were preoccupied by our ignorance of this—would we risk further social and individual pathologies by giving free rein to this ambition to remake the world so that no one will ever despair again? The risks do not loom so large when the possibilities are so inspiring. According to our ideology we ought to run the risks; we are certain of this almost to a vengeance. Yet from the corner of our eyes we see the knife approaching with its matter-of-fact definitiveness. Our self-inflicted cutting (not at all as casual or as abstractly begun as Orwell's) turns our ambition against us. We would transcend distinctions of bad and good because we seek to remake the world. To radically transform our situation we must remake good and bad. This process unfolds before our despairing eyes as a nihilistic program of revaluing all values while the material transformations we see around us, in whose name the modern project began, seem almost perversely inadequate.

We are aware of difficulties inherent to this process. Despair must seek relief either in sanity or in madness. We do not know of any objective other than to press on in our ambition to improve on creation. The constant criticism of the present in favor of the better future is incurable, a kind of hysteria of expectations. In our blindness we do not recognize it as a disease. We assume that only in the remaking can we relieve ourselves of the ambition to remake. We desire to be like gods in order that we may finally rest as men—and then wonder why we fail.

Consider a problem that is small in comparison to the larger sickness of the modern project. It is summed up in the question: Must the world be left to suffer the ills of wicked men? Viewed historically, the answer can only be yes. Yes, because it is impossible to imagine a world of only good men or one ruled insistently by them. A world without evil men is beyond human experience. Such a world may exist only beyond this human existence, in a world of gods and not of men. But is this not the world we wish to make?

While suffering may not be avoided, much of it may be mitigated, and some of it eliminated entirely. We know this is not a world given only to death and destruction. From our finite experiences we see it is also given to life and to creation. Moreover, the faithful among us are confident because we are told that God remembered Noah (Genesis 8:11). We are of the same flesh as Noah, and reside upon the same earth.

This confidence is old, and it is shaken by the seeming power of men to act as gods, at least in their being able to destroy what was once created and in denying natural and divine benevolences. So many have been slaughtered in our century that even the flesh seems transformed by history. If the twentieth century has proven anything, then it has demonstrated that almost nothing is beyond the power of human wickedness (even the denial that men are ever given to wickedness). In the words of Hans Jonas: "Now we shiver in the nakedness of a nihilism in which near-omnipotence is paired with near emptiness, greatest capacity with knowing least what for" (Philosophical Essays, 1974).

Contrast this sane and sober view of the modern dilemma with the pessimistic words recorded long ago by Herodotus: "Of all man's miseries the bitterest is this, to know so much and to have control over so little" (Inquiries, IX, 16). This ancient wisdom seems the more archaic because the passionate faith of modern intelligence claims that man's power is commensurate with his knowledge, and that the increase of both is necessarily freeing. But we are fearful before the presumption of this modern ambition, even if inescapably attached to it, for even though our power seems very great, we find, as Professor Jonas tells us, that we run short of knowledge how to use it prudently. Indeed, we are no longer even
certain of the meaning of prudence or of its place in the modern scheme of things. Of all ancient virtues it stands as the most archaic, least relevant.

Our knowledge exceeds our power to command fate. Our power—potentially greater because of our increasing knowledge—is still less than the power we want. This has led to the modern presupposition, a faith (not calling itself a faith) founded on the replacement of knowledge with the mechanized energy of wanting. Under the siege of this ideology we suppress the notion that we cannot do everything our desires might inspire. We find, alas, that what we do is not what we would do for our own good: Our efforts are too frequently productive of anger, danger, side effects. The aspirations of human power for relief of burdens and illnessest seem gravely defective when compared to the exorbitant power to increase burdens and to devise deaths more efficient than natural illnesses. By their very nature ambiguities attach to the given, seldom to the imagined. We yearn for what is beyond ambiguity and are angered when the possible is discovered to be impossible; or what is worse, that the presumably possible is impossible due to the indiscretions of our power. We are distressed to find that such power as we have is morally neutral, subject to use and abuse. We conveniently overlook this in the elevation of our powerful expectations.

Doing good requires moral purpose, whereas indifference to such purpose is contributive to being bad. The modern morality of tolerance—besides dismissing as silly such talk of good and bad—encourages indifference and inattention, though by this it means nothing malicious. These encouragements, part of that ambition whose major object is to avoid disappointment by the completion of human power, lead to a material contradiction: an indifferent morality attached to a differential power. Moral distinctions tend to arise from the leverages obtained by power; the frustration of power produces the desire for greater power with the desire for less exacting standards for its display. Among other things this results in a confidence in the future and a despair of the present.

Reservations about our projects linger of course, particularly of late, political reservations about our power as a nation. The real and concrete predicament of our otherwise optimizing morality—a morality based on the optimization of power—has become depressing, even shameful (although shame, like prudence, is ridiculed as...shameful). America and Americans began the sixties with inspiring hopes. A mere half generation later the nation and the people find themselves confused by murder, military defeat, assassinations, civil strife, and political corruption. The absence of clear and present purposes, whether personal or national, is uncomfortably underscored with the celebration of our national anniversaries. We are reminded of the formidable purposes of previous generations of Americans.

The question in many minds is no longer whether we can make the world safe for democracy, but whether this democracy is safe for us and the world. That is a frightening transformation, even if it is a transformation of perceptions rather than of facts. We view the world much differently than we did fifteen years ago. The misapplications of our powers, in Vietnam for instance, have degraded our resolution as a free people, and many of us are now ashamed—embarrassed would be more in keeping with the modern ethos—of our liberties, because they seem to be bought at the cost of the contractions of liberty elsewhere. We are captives of our immediate past and believe ourselves to be hostages to a decidedly uncertain and unpleasant present. Our modern ideology of reconstitutions is confounded by its recent and annoying dependencies on old constitutions and newly discovered ecological limitations.

To feel shame, however, is a sign that there is knowledge of shortcomings, mistakes, and boundaries. More important, it is a felt sign—and more convincing for its being felt—that we retain a sense of what ought to be done, even as it has not been done. We may still have a sense of purpose. In feeling shame we can be somewhat confident that what we do, but have done badly, may still require doing. To feel no shame would be to be ignorant of inescapable limitations, of the ethical necessity of propriety in movement and of positive purpose.

Because we sometimes react violently to the lures and failures of our powers as technological beings we have become reactionary, the impolite term for being conservative. We have reacted so long to threats of facism and communism that we have forgotten what it is we would protect from threat, what we value. To become reactionary is to enter the threshold of the theological—which is not the joke it may seem. Thus, in the words of Karl Barth:

In following the road of thought, this it is which has caused us to enter dark recesses. The need of making decisions of will, the need of action, the world as it is—this it is which has compelled us to consider what the world is, how we are to live in it, and what we are to do in it [Epistle to the Romans, 1933].

Conservatism is not always blind to its radical roots. Whatever conservatism we Americans develop in reaction to an age of expanding darkness—of the demise of dreams—cannot be truly conservative if it is not dedicated to preserving what represents a great radicalism in the rest of the world: political freedom and liberal democracy. To the extent that prudence is drawn forth by the desire to conserve, it may turn out that the more conservative we become in embarrassment at our liberal excesses, the more dedicated we will be to preserving liberty and healthy democratic life. Such prudence might be easily mistaken for radical commitment.

Aristotle tells us that the soul is the cause or source of the living body (De Anima, 415b). Earlier we posed the question of whether the world is given only to death and destruction. Aristotle dismisses one form of death and destruction—fire—as the cause of growth and nutrition. This dismissal seems appropriate to us today, but its logical basis does not. While fire may destroy to infinity so long as there is anything combustible, "there are limitations to all things that subsist naturally, and some definite principle governs their dimensions and growth."
And this belongs to the soul, not to fire." Aquinas, in his commentary, adds: "And this is reasonable enough, for the quantitative limits of material things are fixed by form—the specific principle—rather than matter. Now the soul of a living being is to the elements it contains as form is to matter; the soul, then, rather than fire, sets the term and natural limit to size and growth." And this is quite reasonable—except for the most important of qualifications: Only men have the power to be unreasonable. Man may choose to unsettle the natural limits implicit in his form, his soul. That our choice as men and women may be unnatural by nature is the logical consequence of our natural freedom. The modern ambition to mold matter to whatever form is expedient is continually offended by this unreasonableness of reason.

Now this choosing is not only a personal problem; it is a political one as well. Do we have a civic soul that ought to cause or ground our political existences, our choices? Americans (and our allies who share elements of a similar political fabric) have much more to conserve than the means to feed the body, the quantitative material things (though no one may reasonably doubt the importance of these). If we are to be properly conservative, we have to preserve our lawful democratic political fabric, our form, to be certain that our healthy blood and treasure do not trickle from us unused.

We speak of loyalty to our radical tradition; but can there be such a thing as a radical tradition? The juxtaposition of radical with tradition suggests a contradiction. Living with this contradiction and working through it may be the key to our success or failure. The preservation of tradition is the fond object of conservatives; in our instance this fond object is still radical in its essence, if not consistently so in its historical elaborations. What we find difficult to admit is that this radicalism is best appreciated in the American accomplishment: the creation of an empire of freedom in a new land by revolutionary political action consolidated in law. Is it possible that "empire" may go with "freedom," "revolution" with "law"? There are those who would doubt this; yet the very crises we have just passed through should have taught us the importance of our foundations and the continued force of their political and economic imperatives. The very difficulty we have in joining freedom to empire theoretically makes all the more remarkable the extent to which it has in fact been practiced historically. Such instruction may seem uninspiring, but at least it recommends its own foreign policy: to aim at assuring as spacious an environment as possible in which free and democratic states may exist and flourish (cf. Dean Acheson's Present at the Creation, 1969). And it may advise us on how to judge revolutions—by their attachment to the rule of law.

What is more difficult for us to admit is that the ground of our being as a people—as individuals, Christian or otherwise—is a political ground. In the Aristotelian or classical sense our soul is a political one whose formal nature must be appreciated in order that the propriety and purpose of its actions may be understood for what they are—efforts to moderate the passions of unreason by reflecting on the limits of reason. To perceive the limits of nature is to be forewarned of dangers that are all too likely to occur in our unclassical devotion to eliminating irksome political contradictions such as those we have been discussing—soul and body, freedom and empire, revolution and law.

These considerations may seem idle ones to Christians. The Christian ethos transcends the world and all its powers. It is proper and necessary to recall this. But it is equally important to understand that the Christian urgency about the world's inadequacies flourishes in contemporary ideologies as a secular condemnation of the world with will-to-power ambitions. The desire for salvation from the world's ways, for eternal life, has been absorbed into the modern universal ethos, which despairs of the world as it seeks to change it. The Christian would transform the world indirectly by leaving it for a life under grace—a desire thwarted by the continuing exigencies of ungraceful daily life. With the secularization of this dynamic rejection, the transcendent element has been replaced by the historical; the modern sensibility, no less burdened by the necessary course of things than earlier ones, would transform this course so that existence is subject to exclusively human discretion, a wholly man-made grace. No longer capable of believing in divine creation, modernity believes in the creative power of human self-transformation and the efficacy of material changes in this transformation. The merely promised divine transformation was seen to be a superstition; the scientifically argued human transformation was accepted enthusiastically as hypothetically realizable. The hypothesis then became the historical test of past and present social arrangements. Belief was thus removed from transcendent inspiration (ahistorical) to immanent (historical) possibility.

This was the reigning danger in the Christian ambition as a religious movement from the start; it could not help but have political and historical dimension because it found itself tied to the affairs of men and women as a church, an institution of the world. With the discoveries of modern science in moving and shaping the world the limitations of form recognized and respected by the classical sensibility were replaced by the unlimited possibilities of re-formed material magnitude. This process of re-formation is energized by a secularized Christian desire for historical salvation independent of the laws and Law of this world. The Christian movement remained in the world on such terms that could only

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disqualify the world—its nature, its various forms and wonders—from any moral legitimacy.

The world remains disqualified for Christians even now. They share the material expectations of their secularized brethren, and they, in any case, retain the rejection of the world inherent in their tradition. How are they to find their souls in the world? The tradition teaches that they are not. But if not in the world, where? And if not now, when?

Paul said in warning the early Christians: “So do not become proud, but stand in awe....Lest you be wise in your own conceits...” (Romans 11:20, 25). Wise in your own conceits—like Orwell’s wasp? Can the Christian cut away the world, including its Judaism (for this was the immediate issue in Paul’s mind), without losing his soul?

The conceit of faith as grace without law or Law lies in this: It may be true for one individual, by grace of God in Christ. It cannot, however, be true of a multitude of individuals, a city or a nation. A multitude is irrevocably of the world and therefore requires the law to govern its parts. In default of governing with legal rule, the parts and souls of individuals, if not their lives, will be cut off by the massive weight of the multitude. What may be true for one individual by grace cannot be true of a whole group simply according to membership; otherwise, as Paul says regarding works, “grace would no longer be grace.”

But what of the one individual who by grace would pass through this world (“This world is not my home, I’m just passin’ through...”) without adherence to law or Law? What of the government of the parts of one’s self? Have we not, as with cities and nations, found that the soul of a man or a woman may be cut off by its own massive passions and those of its physical exigencies? Though we no longer find this to our liking, the analogy offered by Plato’s Socrates is still suggestive: We look to the government of an individual’s being in the city and nation in order to gain an insight into the government of each reflective soul. To be aware of the movements of the limited human social whole may guide us to seeing the divine sense that resides and is reflected, however dimly, in each individual part.

The Christian conceit is that this government of the individual, in both public or historical and private or rational capacities, is transcended by the saving power of grace in Christ. The natural consequence of this Christian morality is to free the individual from the laws and Law of this world, from all merely natural limits. But historically, if not existentially by the common sense of our reflective psyches, we know that this freedom or freeing may be pernicious as well as creative. To the extent it is both, Christian morality reveals the unnatural extremes but does not reveal well the middle or human course, that course between animality and divinity. For only individuals may do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with their God. There can be no blame or honor apart from the deeds of distinct individuals. And there can be no blame or honor unless there is a self-consciously recognized propriety in government as such, by individuals of themselves, of their own several parts.

The mundane law is the necessary but undetermined limitation on the individual’s presumption of a grace founded simply upon being the only creature made in the image of God. Belief that believing in God’s saving grace in Christ will lift the world’s cares and overcome the gravity of one’s responsibility for the world is to forget the fact of having been made, of being only an image of divine power and wisdom. The need for law or Law remains the evidence of man’s and woman’s permanent shame, proof that they control little apart from the problematic and reflective controls the law or Law allows. When legality is suspended or renounced in the conviction that belief has transcended it, we steal from ourselves the means for being aware of our ignorance of our concrete human situations. At the same time, we lose awareness of the presence or absence of our separate and distinct souls. Placing ourselves apart from or above the legal restraints reasoned by us and revealed to us, we assume we are wise in the conceits of our power. Without the laws of this world, and without Law, there is no possibility of doing justly, loving mercy, or walking humbly. Lawless behavior is that by which men and women fail to do justice, do not love mercy, and do not walk humbly—before man or God. To be without law and Law is to be either a god or a beast.

We have emphasized the problematic aspects of our situation, aspects that demand reasoned limits and self-legislation. Our human burden is no mere abstraction. As existentialist philosopher Max Scheler has said: “This is the age when man has become fully and thoroughly problematic to himself.” Because the problems of decision in the world are coterminous with life, the recognition of the problematic may bring its own certainties. We may not easily or without cost avoid decision. Within the contexts of the two dependencies we have been discussing, the psychological and the political, the pressures and costs are usually considerable. The alienating associations of our lives are many, the supportive communities few. Nevertheless, we end up subject to ourselves in our freedom, whichever way we choose. The character of that subjection we determine largely for ourselves; it is seldom dictated to us. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn goes so far as to claim: “We can firmly assert our inner freedom even in external conditions of unfreedom.” But inner freedom cannot survive for long unless it finds compatible expression in the world. Solzhenitsyn is compelled to admit this when he confronts the Soviet system:

Our present system is unique in world history, because over and above its physical and economic constraints, it demands of us total surrender of our souls, continuous and active participation in the general, conscious lie. To this putrefaction of the soul, this spiritual enslavement, human beings who wish to be human cannot consent [“As Breathing and Consciousness Return,” in From Under the Rubble]. Consent has external dimensions: The soul is not allowed
the luxury of turning its back on its environment. Or it is
allowed that luxury under the threat of the experiment-
tially minded, such as Orwell with his wasp.

We forget ourselves and give ourselves over to lies
when we neglect the self-rule of due process under law
and Law. Such neglect leads to an inability to appreciate
that which makes us a creative force in the world. The
modern situation has offered to us the unique possibility
of forgetting our value for life. The final irony of
that which makes us a creative force in the world. The
on the world, respecting its own limits. Without respect
only when we are self-subject in a limiting world. For the
modem situation has offered to us the unique possibility
of freedom is that it is subject to powers greater than our
own, and yet may exist nevertheless. We can remain free
only when we are self-subject in a limiting world. For the
soul to avoid its material and spiritual enslavements it
must be governed by its own reflection in the world and
on the world, respecting its own limits. Without respect
for its provisional status, without shame, without the
wise ignorance of self-government, it will go despair-
ingly on to act apart from all law, treating itself and
others as objects of power with limit, wise and proud
in its terrifying conceits. That we will act there is no
doubt; that we will act according to the soul’s reflec-
tions, its limited being, its natural jeopardy against the
weight of material powers and spiritual excesses, there is
considerable doubt.

In facing this doubt may exist opportunities for
discerning within our soul the paths of its proper obliga-
tions. The history of the modern period records in dismal
iteration the attempts at total transformation of nature
under the hands of men and women, even as those hands
have become less able to control their own powers.
These ambitious efforts to reconstitute nature forget that
human beings, the soul and the flesh, are also parts of
nature. It is no accident that the history of such final
solutions to the predicaments of human nature reaches its
depths in Stalin and Hitler. Our century is rich in evil
because it is affluent in ambitions to solve once and for
all the human dilemma. In this our age is both aggres-
sively totalitarian (a total solution) and naively demo-
cratic (that all human beings might equally be uncon-
strained by circumstances). Unlawful powers devoted to
final ends can result only in the murderous and unnatural
acts of a bestial tyranny. Total transformations naturally
beget totalitarian excesses. The forgetting of the limits
inherent in the need for law and Law constitutes the
self-forgetting of the human soul, its entrapment in
self-inflicted lies.

But where does this leave Christians in their duty?
They would seem to have that inner freedom that Sol-
zenitsyn finds most praiseworthy and immune to an
overly “socialized” world. They would seem to be most
free of the world. But is this so? While the world is evil
for believers, it is only in the world that grace through
faith operates. The believer’s responsibility becomes
singular when it involves faith here and now. Where else
may faith be true and matter? Obedience to law and Law
is due precisely because without it the world—with all its
powers for good, the powers to act justly, to love mercy,
to walk humbly—would destroy itself under the crushing
movements of unbridled powers whose aim is to erase
from nature the humanly problematic. Anything short of
this pious concern by the Christian for what is good for
the world is nihilistic conceit. The believer’s soul is
circumscribed by the conditions of faith, and these
conditions present to the believer a desperate irony—a
conditioning of the supposedly unconditioned, a
making-worldly of the hoped-for-spiritual.

These are, to be sure, clumsy expressions for what is
in reality an inescapable ecological fact. Care for the
world is the only moderating imperative for life available
to the believer. All else is a lie. Without the world there
could have been no cross, there could be no Christianity.
“For God so loved the world....” Christians must
therefore endeavor to save the world in all its worldliness
in order to save for their souls the opportunity of faith.
That they, like other political animals, cannot save
themselves by their own power cannot be discovered,
much less acted upon, unless they suffer the cares of the
world, unless the Lord is waited upon, unless humility
and obedience to law are created, unless they stand in
freedom under that revealed Law, unless they love
mercy and seek to act justly—these, all these things, they
must do in order to run or to take flight with their souls
intact.

Can Christians be so mature, so non-Christian? Matu-
ernity is not defined as the final settling of the problems
of the world; it is the continuing realization that the prob-
lems of the world and the world’s problems will never be
settled once and for all by the human hand, but will
demand repeated settlements (cf. James A. Ogilvy’s “Re-
flections on the Absolute” in Review of Metaphysics,
March, 1975). The coming to awareness of the soul in its
refusal to appease itself or its enemies is not achieved in
final or utter abandonment of itself, either in the world or
from the world. The enlightenment of the soul rather lies
in the perpetual discoverings of its own duties to the
democratic governance of its energies and to the lawful
securing of the various lives of the polity of humankind.