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Editors' Note

THE *Virginia Journal for Political and Social Thought* is pleased to publish our inaugural issue, presenting four papers that demonstrate the diversity and depth of thought relating to politics, political philosophy, and sociology. This Journal is published twice annually and run by the Political and Social Thought Club at the University of Virginia.

In “Pleasure, Power, and the Internal Discourse of Cyclical Violence at the University”, Marianna Sherry examines Foucault’s step by step *scientia sexualis* in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* to trace the rationalization and consolidation of the discourse of student misconduct at universities.

In “When the People Win: The Birth of Freedom and the Burden of Self”, Reeya Verma examines how the introduction of self-determination and social mobility—of thought and class following the French Revolution has been both liberating and destabilizing, and how Marx has criticized this new modern world.

In “Mormonism in Modernity: How Religion Changes the Shape of Mill’s Harm Principle”, Isabella Gattuso reexamines a case study for Mill’s Harm Principle that he originally pondered in *On Liberty*, arguing that a new era of technological progress problematizes some of Mill’s original conclusions.

In “Frederich Nietzsche’s Ascetic Ideal and the Divinity of Truth”, Sterling Peterson examines how the rationalization of suffering originally enshrined in Judeo-Christian morality has evolved into the worship of truth in the modern sciences, creating a “will-to-truth” bent on its own destruction.

We appreciate all the submissions we received in anticipation of this issue and the work of our editorial board. We also appreciate the ongoing guidance and support of Professor Isaac Reed, Director of the Political and Social Thought program at UVA, who has been immensely helpful in realizing this vision. On behalf of our entire team, we sincerely hope you enjoy reading the Spring 2025 issue of the *Virginia Journal for Political and Social Thought*.

Pleasure, Power, and the Internal Discourse of Cyclical Violence at the University

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On February 27th, in a parking garage outside of Baton Rouge, 20-year-old Caleb Wilson was repeatedly punched in the chest until his heart stopped. The hazing ritual that was intended to initiate Wilson as a member of Omega Psi Phi took his life instead. In hearing about this tragedy, I couldn't help but think about the countless incidents which have plagued universities across the U.S., coming to light every so often when someone's life has been taken before seemingly fading into obscurity. Here at UVA, prominent members of the Intervarsity Fraternal Council have been accused and convicted of sexual violence, all for their originating chapters to continue to reproduce new members and new violations. Are collegiate networks suffering from collective amnesia or simply repressing the evidence of these violations? Interpreting this from a Foucauldian perspective (via *The History of Sexuality Volume I*), the collegiate institution's metabolization of recurrent abuse is indicative of its will to knowledge pertaining to the fraternal erotic.¹

Operatively, how does the discourse surrounding intimate activity and its misconduct play out within the institution? We only have to follow Foucault's step by step *scientia sexualis* to trace the rationalization and consolidation of the discourse of student misconduct.²

1. Through a clinical codification of the inducement to speak, the UVA honor system stands in as the secular Vatican which is commissioned to "judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile" all violations, through the form of confessional disclosures or extraction thereof.³ Hotlines for various divulgements are plastered everywhere. Call this number if the cleanliness of a bathroom stall is not to your satisfaction or you witness a peer utilize an authorized aid on an exam and remember, *Just Report It!* at this accessible link. Tell us everything.

¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: The will to knowledge*. Vintage. 1990, pg. 12.

² Id., pg. 65-67.

³ Id., pg. 61-62.

2. Through the postulate of a general and diffuse causality, these seemingly unbecoming deviances are attributed to a host of maladies to the social body of the University. Violence is caught up in the causal web of substance abuse, social isolation, suggestive dress, and other prescriptive theories seeking to diagnose and remedy the effects of assault.
3. Through the principle of a latency intrinsic to sexuality, the naturality of these occurrences are enshrined in the discourse. *Boys will be boys. They didn't know what they were capable of. She really wanted it.*
4. Through the method of interpretation, production and verification of the truth of the identities in question are generated. In the investigatory process, committees ascertain whether the complainant is a true victim or a false imitator. Endurance of the hazing process determines if you are paper or made - a true brother or an internal outsider. Only validation of the authority can create legitimate relations.
5. Through the medicalization of the effects of confessions; hazing, rape, and the like are given meaning and necessity as part and parcel of the experience of college students. Student Health and Wellness commissions Stall Street Journal, "a social norms program which corrects misperceptions by providing accurate data highlighting healthy behaviors." The President's office has ranked its hazing task force high on its own priority list. All is well.

One may wonder where the students stand on interpersonal violence. If the institution is more concerned with measuring and administering violence rather than suppressing it, why don't students themselves take a stand against it? Speaking anecdotally, the allure of the frat house is indisputable. Despite knowing the likelihood of being harmed, raped or otherwise unwillingly touched dramatically increases simply by virtue of the association, weekend after weekend, hoards of students flock to the grimy basements of the various chapters on grounds. It feels good to earn and enact your status amongst your peers. It feels good to confirm your desirability. It feels good to elevate yourself above similar others and envy "unreachables". It feels good to be in the know and invited where others are clueless and excluded. It feels good to be a body jostled amongst other bodies. Here lies the double impetus of pleasure and power.⁴ The University of Virginia loves its fraternities. It shields their properties, redeems them through trial, exalts their alumni, and relentlessly attends their functions. The fruitless findings of the countless taskforces, response teams, and commissions allow the University to insert itself into the private lives of students in perpetuity; all on the basis of a secret yet and never to be uncovered.⁵ The constant presence of this unconsummated enforcement is made into a sort of joke or game. The circular incitement of minor wrist slaps and evasions gives both the University and the IFC the pleasurable project of

⁴ Id., pg. 45.

⁵ Id., pg. 41.

slight gains.⁶ This sentiment cannot singularly originate from above, but through obligatory speech acts which individual students profess their enrapture with the very entities which unabashedly punish us.⁷

When a first-year student died of meningitis just weeks ago at the University of Virginia, intoxicated, fatigued, and immunocompromised, his new brothers serenaded his old family with the Good Ole Song. All is Well.

Works Cited:

Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: The will to knowledge*. Vintage. 1990.

⁶ Id., pg. 45.

⁷ Id., pg. 62.

When the People Win: The Birth of Freedom and the Burden of Self

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The *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* mark another inflection point in how the world was conceptualized, emerging about half a century after the French Revolution. The philosophical paradox of the social and the political—much like the chicken and the egg—is one that defines modernity. However, the conception of the “social” had not yet been fully formed. In the previously feudal society, the overwhelming majority—the Third Estate—neither participated in politics nor had the capacity for social mobility. Essentially, there can be no class struggle without the prior existence of distinct classes and their dynamics. What is this inflection point? The emergence of self-determination.

Following the French Revolution, the people of France assume political power, and complex classes informally emerge. As the authority of the monarchy and the First Estate dissolves, a shift of power occurs, not only redistributing political influence but also redefining the social landscape. Just as “politics as influence” arises as a brand-new concept for the rulers, depicted by Danton and Robespierre, politics as self-determination also arises as a new concept for the ruled. Its implications are what Marx seeks to rationalize.

This shift is analogous to the social landscape of the University of Virginia, which relies almost entirely on student self-governance. Rather than focusing solely on the transition of power structures, it is striking how, in both cases, there is no centralized ruling power—whether by establishment or by virtue of the unstable and lack of centralization in government at the time. Granting power to the students, who are bound only by select guidelines, leaves self-determination at the forefront of the school’s social hierarchy—a horizontal power structure. Decision-making in autonomy is directly tied to self-interest, and their fluid positions within the social structure are intuitively linked to their engagement and relevance within the community. This environment of self-governance mirrors how new factors emerge and give rise to tensions amongst the People in

France. Both forms of rule emphasize the collective will just as much as they can reintroduce inequalities, such as the power shift from aristocrats to bourgeois dominance in France or informal power structures among students at UVA.

Young Marx identifies that philosophy has still not caught up with a new, emergent reality, arguing that “the theological critic does not get beyond feeling to consciousness”⁸. The definition of “social” changes, as workers are now contextualized in a state of both material conditions and social relations that influence thinking. Marx acknowledges this inflection point and warns that re-establishing society as an “abstraction vis-à-vis the individual” should be avoided, since the social experience and consciousness inherently define the individual⁹. Marx’s contemporaries like t Bauer, who Marx references, are focused on the intellectual responsibilities in shaping the revolution and history, such as the role of critical and individual consciousness.

Humans have functioned as workers of some product throughout history, so what is unique about post-revolutionary France’s work environment that leads to Marx’s hypotheses? Forms of capital for the People have now expanded to include private property, and the conditions of work shift from open lands to factories, making wage labor more accessible, thereby increasing the division of labor and leading workers to lose control over the pace and nature of their work—hence explaining why “wages and private property are identical”¹⁰. Factory work becomes the dominant form of labor, forcing new conditions of involvement in production as well as broader constraints on humanity in urban areas. While Marx argues that the “conscious life-activity directly distinguishes man from animal life-activity,” it is also that capitalism and its development grant the worker a form of freedom from the rigid bounds of the feudal order¹¹. Instead, this illusory freedom removes the traditional obligations to the landowners and displaces it onto selling labor, forcing the laborer into an unwilling dependency on work in order to maintain the laborer and the laborer’s family. Tension arises between the interests of the individual, family, community, and state, and so does a form of wage slavery where “labour does not appear as an end in itself but as the servant of the wage,” imposing the four forms of alienation upon the worker.¹²

Marx, in the end, proposes that this freedom and seeming self-determination can be best mitigated by reinstituting a form of order, Communism. But the introduction of self-determination and social mobility—of thought and class—in France is as liberating as it is destabilizing.

⁸ Tucker, Robert C., ed. 1978. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. 2nd ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, pg. 69

⁹ Id., pg. 86.

¹⁰ Id., pg. 79, 154.

¹¹ Id., pg. 76.

¹² Id., pg. 79.

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Mormonism in Modernity: How Religion Changes the Shape of Mill's Harm Principle

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In *On Liberty*, Mill's beliefs culminate in what has come to be known as the harm principle: the idea that man should be free to pursue his desires so long as he doesn't harm any number of other parties¹³. From this principal follows that man should be free to individually think and discuss in order to develop his own individuality. In this piece, I illuminate Mill's greater arguments by pursuing the question: *would Mill still consider modern Mormonism consistent with his arguments?*

Mormonism is central in my analysis because it serves as a case study that highlights the culmination of Mill's argument: that even a religion perceived as morally objectionable, by living separately, should be protected from external attempts to civilize it¹⁴. However, modernity has reshaped Mormonism. To answer whether he would still consider Mormonism consistent with the harm principle, we must first define harm, which seems to be a limit on man's ability to be a progressive being¹⁵. Therefore, both physical and social limitations on individual development are considered harm.

In this sense, Mill might object to modern Mormonism for similar reasons he objects to bureaucracy. He argues that a bureaucracy is dangerous because its primary goal has become self-preservation, and few individuals have power to reform or change the bureaucracy¹⁶. While an educational establishment differs to some respect, a religious school, particularly one closely tied to a broader religious institution retains many of the same elements of a social tyranny. In Mormon culture, high objects of attainment within the culture rest within the Church or in settling with family, and because the Church is supposedly backed with an idea of a higher power, there is little

¹³ J.S. Mill, "On Liberty," in *Mill: The Spirit of the Age, On Liberty, The Subjection of Women*, selected and edited by Alan Ryan. Norton Critical Edition. W.W. Norton, 1996, pg. 13.

¹⁴ Id., pg. 104.

¹⁵ Id., pg. 19.

¹⁶ Id., pg. 126.

opportunity to introduce reforms or have an upper leader change the culture without losing the people who follow Mormonite doctrine. In this way, the church has limited the individuality of those within the group and therefore violates the harm principle.

However, this was true for the Mormons within the 1859 text. Although there is something to be said about Mill's exclusion of those within Mormonism in his original argument, his broader defense of their right to separation suggests that the role of technology complicates carrying out the harm principle. For example, Mormons are no longer isolated in a remote corner of the earth engaging in "morally objectionable" activities: instead, high ranking religious officials can use social media, and BYU's mascot videos and student interviews drive engagement. In this environment, Mill's vision for free speech is almost impossible. "Wrong opinions yield to fact and opinion, but fact and opinion must be brought before it"¹⁷, but in an era of virtual echo chambers and dead internet it seems that discussion is not the only necessity in building individual judgment. In fact, he agrees this quiet suppression that exaggerates truth into falsehood is a formidable evil¹⁸. However, by the harm principle social media cannot be limited because it poses no tangible threat by itself. Therefore, modernity has both freed and condemned us. Mill cannot maintain his original views about Mormonism without also conceding social media has made liberty, preventing harm and man's sovereign and personal development three opposing goals.

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J.S. Mill, "On Liberty," in *Mill: The Spirit of the Age, On Liberty, The Subjection of Women*, selected and edited by Alan Ryan. Norton Critical Edition. W.W. Norton, 1996

¹⁷ Id., pg. 37.

¹⁸ Id., pg. 97.

Frederich Nietzsche's Ascetic Ideal and the Divinity of Truth

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In his collection of polemics entitled *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Frederich Nietzsche examines the historical origins of “good” and “bad”, of “good” and “evil” and of the “ascetic ideal”¹⁹. At its root, Nietzsche conceptualizes the ascetic ideal as seeking an answer to the ultimate problem of human existence: what is the purpose of suffering? That to live is to suffer is self-evident for Nietzsche, but the problem of human existence lies not simply with the experience of pain itself, which is perhaps manageable, but “Suffering for *what?*”²⁰ For animal human, “[w]hat actually arouses indignation over suffering is not the suffering itself, but the senselessness of suffering”²¹, the inability to derive meaning from it.

In the course of human history, various religious traditions have sought to posit a formulation of the ascetic ideal as an answer to the question of meaning, from the Greek and Buddhist religions of antiquity to the Judeo-Christian religions and their “slave morality”²². In fact, religion’s central impetus lies in this perilous quest, in prescribing a coherent framework of meaning onto the experience of suffering.

Of course, us moderns may no longer find ourselves entranced by these same religious metaphysics. But that hardly means we’re not worshippers.

¹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, edited by Keith Ansell-Pearson, translated by Carol Diethe. (Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought). Cambridge University Press, pg. 161 §28.

²⁰ Id., pg. 161 §28.

²¹ Id., pg. 85 §7.

²² Id., pg. 61 §10.

Nietzsche argues that science is itself modernity's greatest iteration of the ascetic ideal. Science is not free from value judgements or presuppositions about the nature and value of truth itself, and as a result, is not the opposition to the ascetic ideal originally enshrined in Judeo-Christian religion but rather its evolution – a manifestation of will to truth. The sciences presuppose divinity of truth because “[o]ur faith in science is still based on a metaphysical faith, – even we knowers of today, we godless anti-metaphysicians, still take our fire from the blaze set alight by a faith thousands of years old, that faith of the Christians, which was also Plato's faith, that God is truth, that truth is divine”²³

The problem lies in humanity's ever-advancing apprehension of this so-called divine truth, the steady advancement of scientific knowledge that seeks to demystify the nature of existence, which may begin as the destruction of religious divinity, but ends with the destruction of science's ultimate deity, with the destruction of truth itself. As we progress in seeking to apprehend the truth, we eventually begin to realize that the notion of an objective and divine true itself “becomes more and more unbelievable”, and “nothing any longer turns out to be divine except for error, blindness and lies”²⁴. In short, we are left with a rejection of life, with “a will to nothingness”²⁵.

The question then ultimately arises: what is the solution to the original problem the “ascetic ideal” set out to solve? Nietzsche argues that we must allow the truth “to be a problem”, that “the value of truth is tentatively to be called into question”²⁶. However, this project seems inevitably difficult and paradoxical. To arrive at a criticism of the value of truth seems in itself a will to truth; it is a task that seems necessarily against itself. Would a world truly emancipated from truth, where life is made of perspective and interpretation, free us from our “will to nothingness”? To refuse all axioms of science and morality, to so entirely shirk the ascetic ideal and reject a telos, seems almost as much an embrace of a nihilistic will to nothingness as Nietzsche's maligned modern historiographer, who finds no interest in morality or teleology, who thinks himself objective. Is Nietzsche's project not a will to truth in another attenuated, cloaked form, another move from the “suicidal nihilism”²⁷ from which we all crave salvation?

Works Cited:

Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, edited by Keith Ansell-Pearson, translated by Carol Diethe. (Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought). Cambridge University Press

²³ Id., pg. 153 §24.

²⁴ Id., pg. 154 §24.

²⁵ Id., pg. 161 §28.

²⁶ Id., pg. 154 §24.

²⁷ Id., pg. 161 §28.