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Freedom Requires Restraint: Where Movement Conservatism Went Wrong—And How to Fix It

By Joseph Baldacchino

In the wake of the 2008 elections the Republican Party looked to be on its last legs. Not only had Barack Obama triumphed in the presidential race, picking up the electoral votes of such previously "red" states as Virginia, North Carolina, and Florida, but the Democrats had widened the majorities they had gained while taking over both houses of Congress two years earlier. Flush with victory, the Democrats, perhaps understandably, interpreted the 2008 election returns as a mandate for their "progressive" policy agenda, which they proceeded to enact into law with gusto, helping in the process to increase the total public debt outstanding from $10.6 trillion on Inauguration Day 2009 to $13.6 trillion a scant 22 months later .[1]

Then came the mid-term elections of 2010, and the liberal ideological consensus that had seemed so palpable turned out to have been a mirage. Not only did the GOP garner the biggest mid-term gain in House seats achieved by either party since 1938, winning 56 percent of the 435 seats in contention, but the GOP also won an even larger 65 percent of this year's thirty-seven Senate races.[2] Perhaps even more impressive were Republican gains in the state houses, where they are poised to dominate the congressional redistricting process for the coming decade by controlling 29 of the 50 state governorships[3] and at least 57 of the 99 state legislative chambers.[4]

Will the apparent mandate for a pronounced rightward turn in matters of public policy prove any more lasting or substantial than the one in favor of progressivism that went a-glimmering in the 2010 election? If recent American history is any guide, the answer to this question is: Not very likely. Consider the elections of the past 30 years.

Certainly, 1980 seemed at the time to signal a sea-change in the nation's ideological allegiances. Not only did Ronald Reagan, the undisputed leader of the conservative movement, sweep to victory over the liberal Democratic White House incumbent, Jimmy Carter, but he also brought in on his coattails Republican control of the Senate, marking the first time the GOP had won a majority of either congressional chamber since 1952. The Democrats, who had controlled the House

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Joseph Baldacchino is president of the National Humanities Institute and editor of *Humanitas*.

D. J. T. Sullivan, Editor
ds@nhinet.org

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consistently since 1954, resumed control of the Senate in 1986.

The next significant change occurred in 1992 when the Democrats, led by Arkansas Gov. Bill Clinton, regained the White House after a twelve-year absence. A seemingly more seismic shift in the opposite direction came just two years later when Republicans, spearheaded by Rep. Newt Gingrich (Ga.), gained simultaneous control of both the House and Senate for the first time since the election of 1952.

Though Clinton was reelected in 1996, the Republican congressional ascendancy that began in 1994 continued with only a minor interruption until the 2006 off-year election. In that year, as mentioned, the Democrats regained control of the House: a victory that presaged the Democrats' sweep of the White House and both houses of Congress in 2008.

Based on the foregoing thumbnail history, the political contests that were most worthy of the label "redefining" or "wave" elections during the past three decades occurred, except for that of 2010, at fourteen-year intervals in 1980, 1994, and 2008. It should be noted that in each of these contests the party that triumphed was the beneficiary of disgust in the electorate with the record of the party in power. Reagan's 1980 election was in large part a reaction to the economic and foreign policy failures of Jimmy Carter, most notably inflation and interest rates in double digits and the Iranian hostage crisis.

In 1994 the Republicans benefited from the Clintons' overreaching on national health care and from years of entrenched corruption in the Democrat-controlled Congress, exemplified by scandals involving House Speaker Jim Wright (Tex.), who resigned in 1989, and House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Dan Rostenkowski (Ill.), who was forced to relinquish all leadership posts in 1994 before going down to electoral defeat in that same year. By 2008, amidst the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression, even many Republicans were worn down by the George W. Bush Administration's many domestic and foreign policy lapses, which provided a ready audience for Obama and the Democrats' siren song of "change."

On this evidence, neither major party can lay claim to the support of a stable majority either for its espoused policy prescriptions or for demonstrated political competence. Rather, the nation has become polarized between ardent devotees of Fox News on the right and MSNBC on the left. Elections are determined by a group in the middle that oscillates between the two sides to register dissatisfaction whenever the status quo becomes sufficiently difficult to tolerate. If the most recent "wave" election suggests anything new at all, it may be that the oscillations are becoming more frequent and more pronounced.

Yet Republican leaders in Washington, D.C., have assured us in the wake of their 2010 congressional gains that their victory will not lull them into a false sense of security. The GOP, they insist, recognizes that it is on probation. The Democrats won in 2008 because the Bush Administration failed to live up to conservative principles, and the public will turn against the Republicans again if they don't mend their ways. But this time will be different, they assure us, because Republicans have understood the public's message, and this time, under the watchful eye of "Tea Party" activists, Republicans will do the public's bidding.

"Across the country right now," explained incoming Speaker John Boehner on election night, "we are witnessing a repudiation of Washington, a repudiation of big government, and a repudiation of politicians who refuse to listen to the people, because, for far too long, Washington's been doing what's best for Washington, not what's best for the American people. Tonight, that begins to change."

How credible is such rhetoric? At first blush it may seem marginally more plausible than the Democrats' explanation that the voters would have approved their programs if only they had understood them. But, in fact, not only American government but American society in general have grown increasingly dysfunctional over the past half century. Deep down, many serious observers know this, but few, regardless of political persuasion or walk of life, want to face the depressing reality. To do so would require difficult changes in the way we live. Instead of accepting the necessary pain, we are tempted to look away from the actual situation. We create imaginative visions that paint our dominant desires and inclinations in the best light and excuse us from

mending our self-indulgent ways.

Barring difficult efforts of will, the human tendency is to pick and choose parts of reality that would justify sticking to our favored mode of existence. We come up with ideas and slogans—even entire ideologies—that present as actual historical reality not the world as it is but the world as we would like it to be, this in order for us to be able to live as we please. So, when politicians wax eloquent about "conservative principles" no less than when they speak glowingly of "progressive ideals," the question must be asked: Are they addressing the real world in all its complexity or are they presenting an imaginative dream that advances hidden motives?

All humans are more or less prone to hiding inconvenient truths—from others, certainly, but perhaps most significantly from themselves. The reason is ultimately moral laziness. We know only too well our own weaknesses, but we shrink from the hard inner work that morality and happiness require. As Irving Babbitt observed, all humans want to attain happiness on the cheap—to reap the fruits of the spirit without exerting spiritual effort. This tendency toward escapism has become increasingly common in modern Western society. The pre-modern West—heavily influenced by classical and especially Christian culture—taught that man is born with obligations not only to self but to his fellow members of society: in Jesus' words, to "love thy neighbor as thyself."

For Aristotle, as for Thomas Aquinas, the purpose of politics and law was to further the common good of society which was shared by all in the sense that it was good for its own sake. Differently put, there is a self in man that is more than individual and higher than mere enlightened self-interest whose nature is to foster genuine community among people. But in the sixteenth century a philosophical and moral revolution began. Encouraged by thinkers such as Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, and Descartes, promotion of the common good was displaced as society's ultimate purpose by the lesser goal of trying to maximize the satisfaction of conflicting individual and group interests.

Are the Republicans right? Will adhering to "conservative principles" begin to correct the serious problems now besetting American society and thereby provide what is "best for the American people"? Clearly, that depends on what is meant by "conservative principles." The think tank intellectuals and hired guns are ready with glib answers. Conservatism means "liberty" or "freedom." It means "limited government." It means "constitutionalism," "free markets," "private property." But these are general terms, which can each have very different—even opposite—meanings. Whether the mentioned ideas are good or bad depends upon what is meant and the purposes served in each instance.

Traditional conservatives—from Edmund Burke and John Adams in the eighteenth century to Irving Babbitt and Russell Kirk in the twentieth—supported liberty, property, and restraints on government but not as ultimate ends in themselves. They saw them as conducive to efficient production and other commodious arrangements, but most importantly as means to the higher ends of society, which can be summarized in the term "community."

Contrary to much influential modern thought—Jean-Jacques Rousseau being the most conspicuous example—goodness does not flow spontaneously from human impulses but requires sustained moral effort and supporting cultural and political institutions. Burke recognized the extent to which in England and Europe the latter had been painstakingly developed over centuries. Government, together with other social structures, is necessary to put restraints on actions and desires inimical to man's higher potential. How much government is needed and what kind cannot be determined in the abstract, but depends on the character of the people of a specific time and place.

For Burke and other traditional conservatives, liberty understood as equally appropriate to all conceivable circumstances is not only irrational but dangerous. Concerning the abstract liberty promoted by the French Jacobins and their supporters, Burke wrote: "I flatter myself that I love a manly, moral, regulated liberty as well as any gentleman . . . . But I cannot . . . give praise or blame to anything which relates to human actions . . . on a simple view of the object, as it stands stripped of every relation, in . . . metaphysical abstraction. . . . Is it because liberty in the abstract may be classed amongst the bless-

ings of mankind, that I am seriously to felicitate a madman, who has escaped from the protecting restraint and wholesome darkness of his cell, on his restoration to the enjoyment of light and liberty? . . .

"I should, therefore," Burke continued, "suspend my congratulations on the new liberty of France until I was informed how it had been combined with government, with public force, with the discipline and obedience of armies, with the collection of an effective and well-distributed revenue, with morality and religion, with the solidity of property, with peace and order, with civil and social manners. All these (in their way) are good things, too, and without them liberty is not a benefit whilst it lasts, and is not likely to continue long."[5]

Similarly, John Adams, in an October 18, 1790, letter to his cousin Samuel Adams, wrote: "'The love of liberty,' you say, 'is interwoven in the soul of man.' So it is, according to La Fontaine, in that of a wolf; and I doubt whether it be much more rational, generous, or social, in one than in the other, until in man it is enlightened by experience, reflection, education, and civil and political institutions." [6]

In other words, when it becomes common for economic actors, be they janitors or heads of hedge funds, to set aside normal moral and cultural restraints when at work, it will undermine not only the quality of their everyday existence but also the honesty and integrity on which a well-functioning market and indeed all civilized life depend. It needs to be understood that in a time of precipitous moral decline freedom may actually become positively destructive of the higher purposes of society. Imagine historical circumstances in which captains of finance have, because of a general moral decline, become unscrupulous, caring little about the welfare of their customers, employees, or society at large. In such a situation, a mentality of unmitigated greed might become pervasive. On the other hand, freedom may become something altogether different where economic and cultural elites embody and expect high standards.

Yet, when the conservative movement so powerful in American politics over the past half century was getting its intellectual start in the 1950s, it became apparent very soon that its participants were profoundly at odds concerning the meaning of freedom, which hinges on the fundamental nature of man and society. Along with Burke and most framers of the American constitution—and in keeping with the pre-modern classical and Christian heritage—conservative academics such as Russell Kirk, Robert Nisbet, and the economist Wilhelm Röpke denounced as reductionism the notion that human beings, who are almost wholly dependent on society for the very attributes that make them human, are ultimately obligated to nothing beyond individual self-interest.

They agreed with Babbitt that freedom, property, constitutional government, and similar rights derive their immense value not primarily from their usefulness to the self-indulgent selves that divide men and women one from another but from their usefulness to the higher or universal self that wills what is good for its own sake and is the basis of community. Indeed, Babbitt held that American liberties owed their very existence to the classical and Christian moral and religious heritage.

But other influential movement founders held the opposite view. Taking sharp issue with the "New Conservatism" of Kirk, Nisbet, Peter Viereck, and others, Frank S. Meyer, who would become a prime architect of the movement, declared sweepingly in a 1955 article that "*all* value resides in the individual; *all* social institutions derive their value and, in fact, their very being from individuals and are justified only to the extent that they serve the needs of individuals."[7] Meyer's radical individualism, which he attributed in large part to John Stuart Mill, was shared to various degrees by numerous others whose ideas helped shape the early conservative movement, including the economists Ludwig von Mises, Friederich Hayek, and Milton Friedman.

Movement conservatism was thus divided from its beginning on the central issue of man's moral nature and its relation to politics and liberty. Yet, by the mid-1960s, serious theoretical argument had given way to an ostensible consensus, dubbed "fusionism." This ideological position, whose leading exponent was Frank Meyer himself, has been summarized as holding that "virtue is the ultimate end of man as man," but that individual freedom is the "ultimate *political* end."[8] Indeed, according to Meyer's relatively

mature, "fusionist" position, the "achievement of virtue" was none of the state's business, hence not a *political* question at all.[9]

Despite its label, Meyer's "fusionism" never achieved a genuine philosophical synthesis of Burkean conservatism and the ideology of classical liberalism or libertarianism. A genuine synthesis would have been impossible, for the two opposing positions are based on contradictory assumptions. For traditional conservatives, the notion that freedom can exist in the absence of moral restraint flies in the face of all historical experience.

Adam Smith, who is widely regarded as the father of economics, noted in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, for example, that "upon the tolerable observance" of such duties as politeness, justice, trust, chastity, and fidelity "depends the very existence of human society, which would crumble into nothing if mankind were not generally impressed with a reverence for these important rules of conduct." Smith added that social order is not spontaneous or automatic, but is founded on institutions that promote self control, prudence, gratification deferral, respect for the lives and property of others, and some concern for the common good.[10]

Burke, who was an admirer of Smith, similarly wrote: "Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites; in proportion as their love of justice is above their rapacity . . . . Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without."[11] Hence, for traditional conservatism as represented by Burke, by Smith in important respects, and by the American constitutional framers, the advancement of political liberty in any meaningful sense necessarily entails the simultaneous advancement of an ethic of individual restraint and responsibility in support of the common good. Success in the first is impossible without success in the second. To suggest otherwise, according to traditional conservatism, would be absurd.[12]

Yet Meyer's fusionism does precisely that. He elevates the pursuit of liberty to the highest goal of politics while ignoring freedom's dependence on moral restraint and its corresponding institutional and cultural supports. True enough, in his overtures for the traditionalists' support, Meyer pays homage to man's higher ends, even to religion, yet it is clear from his writings that he remains at a loss concerning what those ends entail. As late as 1962 he was still asserting, for example, the reality of the "rational, volitional, autonomous individual" versus the "myth of society."[13]

Remove the effects of society on human life for but an hour, a Burke or a Smith would respond to Meyer, and he would recognize soon enough the part of reality he had missed.

A telling measure of morality's lack of significance in Meyer's fusionism is that it paralleled the place accorded to religion by many avid secularists: religion is all right as a private matter, but it has no legitimate place in public life. According to Meyer, the constitutional framers shared his preference for separating morality and politics, but this would have come as startling news to George Washington, among others, who said in his Farewell Address: "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. . . . [R]eason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle."[14]

In the end, all that separated Meyer's fusionist position from libertarianism was the superimposition of a few traditionalist-sounding rhetorical flourishes. In respect to their practical import for how Americans participate in private and public life, the two positions were identical. Such was the considered opinion of the late libertarian scholar and activist Murray N. Rothbard, as expressed in the Fall 1981 issue of *Modern Age*.[15] Yet, beginning in the mid-1960s, large numbers of Americans who would have been reluctant to embrace libertarianism that was labeled as such found themselves able to do so when it was newly packaged, with the assistance of Meyer and his fusionist allies, as "conservatism."

As George Nash observed in his 1976 history of American intellectual conservatism, "rather surprisingly, by the mid-1960s the tumult began to subside. Perhaps, as Meyer remarked, the disputants had run out of fresh things to say. Certainly, they had other topics on their mind—the rise of Senator Goldwater, for instance. And, as the dust

settled, many conservatives made a common discovery: that Meyer's fusionism had won. Quietly, with little fanfare, by a process [Meyer] later called, 'osmosis,' fusionism became, for most *National Review* conservatives, a fait accompli."[16]

What Nash here reports as a victory for fusionism may have been such in practice but certainly not in theory. A major and festering moral and philosophical problem had been swept under the rug. This could happen because those most directly involved had much less interest in philosophical stringency than in issues of practical politics.

Ironically, in the same 1981 issue of *Modern Age* in which the libertarian Rothbard explained that Meyer's fusionism was actually libertarianism, Russell Kirk posed the question of what conservatism (of the traditionalist or pre-fusionist variety) and libertarianism have in common. His answer was that, except for sharing "a detestation of collectivism"—an opposition to "the totalist state and the heavy hand of bureaucracy"—conservatives and libertarians have "nothing" in common. "Nor will they ever have," he added. "To talk of forming a league or coalition between these two is like advocating a union of fire and ice."[17]

Leveling against libertarianism criticism that could have applied equally to Meyer's fusionism, Kirk wrote: "The ruinous failing of the ideologues who call themselves libertarians is their fanatic attachment to a simple solitary principle—that is, to the notion of personal freedom as the whole end of the civil social order, and indeed of human existence." The libertarians, Kirk reported, borrowed whole from John Stuart Mill's 1859 book *On Liberty* the principle that "the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection."[18]

As noted previously, fusionism, too, made Mill's principle sacrosanct, denying any legitimate place in politics for promoting moral restraint. The ability of every individual to act without regard for the common good was elevated to the highest end of conservative politics. All of conservatism's subsidiary political goals—limited government, free enterprise, private property, minimal taxation—became similarly associated with the unrestrained pursuit of self-interest.

If society is considered less than real, the highest goal for which the individual can strive is to be able to do as he or she pleases to the greatest extent possible. And since doing as he or she pleases is synonymous with freedom by the fusionists' definition, it follows that, for them in their heart of hearts, there never can be too much liberty or (which is to say the same thing) too little government. To view the world in the light of such broad generalizations discourages subtlety of mind and attention to the needs of actual historical situations. "If you believe in the capitalist system," Rush Limbaugh explained in a September 2009 television interview, "then you have to erase from your whole worldview what does somebody need. It's not about need. . . . it is about doing whatever you want to do."[19]

In contrast with the one-sided emphasis on freedom characteristic of movement conservatism since the 1960s, traditional conservatism views both government and limits on government as necessary responses to man's flawed moral nature. Because men are not angels, as Madison observed, government is needed to help restrain their passions. But since governments are made of fallible men and not angels, governments also must be limited: "In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself."[20]

Similarly, Burke instructed: "To make a government requires no great prudence. Settle the seat of power; teach obedience: and the work is done. To give freedom is still more easy. It is not necessary to guide; and only requires to let go the rein. But to form a *free government*; that is, to temper together these opposite elements of liberty and restraints in one consistent work, requires much thought, deep reflection, a sagacious, powerful, and combining mind."[21]

Unfortunately, what America has lacked during much of its history and increasingly so is "free government" such as advocated by the framers, Burke, Babbitt, Kirk, and other traditional conservatives. Instead, the tendency has been for political power and the control of government to lurch back and forth between Big Government

"progressives" who are prone always and everywhere to "teach obedience" and Small Government "conservatives" (or libertarians) who are prone always and everywhere to "let go the rein."

Because guided by abstract generalizations rather than historical reality, ideologues of both types are blind to the changing proportions of liberty *and* restraint appropriate to actual circumstances. The assumption of power by either group, therefore, inevitably heralds trouble. The response of the electorate almost invariably has been to displace one set of rascals with its opposite number only to have the process repeat itself 'ere long.

What about the most recent election? Does the latest shift in favor of "conservative principles" signal a departure from the long-established dysfunctional pattern? To reiterate what was stated tentatively above: The answer depends on what is meant by conservative principles. Almost certainly more dysfunction is on the way. Is there a way to get out of this cycle? One necessary step is to face complex reality and to break the morally and philosophically lazy habits that stand in the way of understanding the prerequisites of liberty.

Some who think of themselves as libertarians may object to the argument here offered that they do recognize that liberty needs moral, cultural, and institutional supports and that liberty is not an end in itself. Such libertarians may be closer to the traditional conservatives than they realize. Their "libertarianism" does in fact suggest the kind of philosophically tenable rapprochement between liberals and conservatives that Meyer's "fusionism" clearly failed to achieve.

Notes

1. The Daily History of the Debt Results, http://www.treasurydirect.gov/NP/NPGateway.

2. *Politics et Cetera*, Novemer 8, 2010, 6.

3. State and Legislative Partisan Composition Following the 2010 Election, National Conference of State Legislatures November 23, 2010, http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&cd=1&sqi=2&ved=0CBMQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ncsl.org%2Fdocuments%2Fstatevote %2F2010_Legis_and_State _post.pdf&rct=j&q=State%20and%20Legislative%20Partisan%20Composition&ei=80XxTPqBLsWblgfUxo2YDQ&usg=AFQjCNEHaaxOHedqis NbN7JaGNP5es-9mg&cad=rja

4. Map of Post-Election Partisan Composition of State Legislatures, National Conference of State Legislatures, http://www.ncsl.org/tabid/21253/default.aspx.

5. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968 [1790]), 90-91.

6. John Adams to Samuel Adams 18 October 1790, http://www.scribd.com/doc/12305/T-Jefferson-S-Adams-letters.

7. Frank S. Meyer, "Collectivism Rebaptized," *The Freeman* (July 1955), 560 (emphases in the original).

8. George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 174 (emphasis in the original).

9. Ibid., 173.

10. See Mark L. Melcher and Stephen R. Soukup, "Capitalism: RIP," *Politics et Cetera*, February 2, 2009, 1-5.

11. Edmund Burke, *A Letter from Mr. Burke to a Member of the French Assembly* (Paris and London, 1791), 68-69.

12. It should be emphasized that, for Burke and for traditional Anglo-Saxon conservatism in general, the ethic of restraint perceived as essential to the free society does not consist of uniform adherence to an a priori blueprint, to be followed regardless of circumstances. Rather, it results from a special quality of will—toward goodness—that exists at least potentially within every individual, albeit in continuing tension with desires of a lower quality.

The higher or ethical will seeks in ever-changing conditions to restrain contrary impulses toward narrow self-indulgence or arbitrariness in order to create from the situation at hand new historical reality that advances our highest human potential. Compared with a social order that views morality as conforming mechanically to ideologies or dogmas that are always and everywhere applicable, one that recognizes individual creativity as necessary for moral action will tend to place greater value on decentralization and on the accommodation of diverse competing interests.

Still, a society influenced by traditional Anglo-Saxon conservatism will see the need to place

restrictions on certain types of behavior through law. Owing to the inner tension between good and evil within every person, it would be unrealistic to expect people always to live up to the commands of moral conscience for the sake of morality alone. By having government enforce penalties for kinds of activity that have proved especially harmful to human dignity, society can enlist men's desire to avoid punishment—though itself not a moral purpose—in the service of the higher good.

To allow broad scope for individual moral creativity, however, a society guided by traditional conservatism will limit the number of laws and regulations to the fewest practicable. And, to reduce the element of uncertainty that makes moral and other actions always difficult, such a society will avoid changing the law except when absolutely necessary. See Joseph Baldacchino, "Ethics and the Common Good: Abstract vs. Experiential," *Humanitas*, 15:2 (2002), esp. 39-59.

13. Frank S. Meyer, *In Defense of Freedom: A Conservative Credo* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1962), 22-23 and 28, cited in Nash, *Conservative Intellectual Movement*, 172 and 173.

14. Washington's Farewell Address, 1796, www.nhinet.org/ccs/docs/farewell1796.htm.

15. Murray N. Rothbard, "Frank S. Meyer: The Fusionist as Libertarian Manqué," *Modern Age*, 25:4 (Fall 1981), 352-63.

16. George H. Nash, *Conservative Intellectual Movement*, 178, 391n118, 391n119.

17. Russell Kirk, "Libertarians: The Chirping Sectaries," *Modern Age*, 25:4 (Fall 1981), 345-51.

18. Ibid.

19. Rush on The Jay Leno Show September 24, 2009, http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/home/daily/site_092509/content/01125106.guest.html

20. Madison, *Federalist* No. 51.

21. Burke, *Reflections*, 373-74 (emphasis in the original).