The Politics of Decline: The Political Philosophy of Swift's Gulliver's Travels

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Abstract

In this study, I analyse the dynamic between the idea of decline and the political prescriptions found in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. After mapping out the ways in which the idea of decline influences Swift's politial framework, I compare and contrast him with the more studied poltical theorist of decline Rousseau and the contemporary phenomenon of technocracy.

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1. Progress and Politics: The Problem Introduced

Much has been written about the so-called 'belief in progress' that characterises European thought since the Enlightenment. Very broadly, it is a faith[1] in the possibility of continuous individual and collective advancement in many spheres of human life, such as knowledge, morality, economics, and science (see e.g. Bury, 2010; Nisbet, 1980; Mokyr, 2018). Politics, of course, was not excluded from this belief in progress, and the dynamic between politics and progress ran in two major, interdependent ways. First, it was argued that the improvements and new discoveries in knowledge, morality, and even economics asked for, and ought to be used for, the restructuring of political institutions. Although later authors, such as Turgot and Condorcet, would develop the idea of political progress much further, the political philosophies of Hobbes and Locke were already rudimentary examples of it. They replaced the theological justifications of political order with one grounded in natural equality and the rational pursuit of natural laws, already accessible to all individuals in the pre-political state. Economic progress, too, was linked to politics: in Locke's description of the advent of a money-based economy, for example, we find the implicit idea that "[t]he development of a more sophisticated economy [requires] social, and eventually political organisation" (Hampsher-Monk, 1992, p. 103). Second, it was argued that the state's crucial function was to create a political framework that would safely allow its citizens to pursue their self-interest and thereby make advancements in all the aforementioned aspects of human life. Again, although it is true that we see, in later thinkers, a stronger insistence on the importance of progress and more attention being given to the possibility of the state not only safeguarding but also actively stimulating progress (see e.g. Mokyr, 2018, p. 259), it is clear that Locke and Hobbes already subscribed to a basic version of this idea. In Locke (1989, p. 53), we find the claim that "[t]he great and chief end . . . of men uniting into commonwealths . . . is the preservation of their property", and in Hobbes (1989, p. 85) we find the assertion that in the state of nature "there is no place for industry" or any other characteristic of developed human life, such as commerce, navigation and scientific knowledge. Another well-known example of this idea is Adam Smith's notion of the "invisible hand"

[1] The use of the word faith here is meant to capture the definition of many authors, such as Nisbet (1980), Bury (1920) and Mokyr (2018), who emphasise, all in their own way, the dogmatic, cultural, and non-verifiable nature of this belief. Importantly, Nisbet defends his characterisation of the belief in progress as non-empirical by highlighting its multidimensional nature: even if we can empirically prove that something, such as medicine, has advanced in the way it achieves the desired effect, "[m]atters become more complicated . . . when we ask what the overall effects are – environmental, social, moral, demographic, spiritual, and so forth – of even the kind of progress we see in the art of medicine" (Nisbet, 1980, p. 6).

through which an individual, by "pursuing his own interest . . . frequently promotes that of the society" (Smith, 1989, p. 194).

During the second half of the 18th century, writes Nisbet (1980, p. 171), belief in progress truly became "the dominant idea" that would provide the context in which other ideas were embedded. In Hume, for example, we find the claim that "industry, knowledge, and humanity, are linked together by an indissoluble chain, and are found . . . to be peculiar to the more polished . . . ages" (Hume, 1985, p. 271). In other words: these many elements of human life are linked and advance with one another and make things like good manners, economic growth and responsible government go hand in hand. However, it is in Kant that we arguably find the most powerful expression of the same two relationships between politics and progress we saw earlier in Hobbes and Locke: politics as created by progress in other realms and politics guaranteeing progress. In his *Idea for a Universal History*, Kant argues that humankind as a collective is slowly but surely, through the development of its natural faculties, on its way to creating a "perfectly just civil constitution" (Kant, 1991b, p. 46). At the same time, Kant writes in *What is Enlightenment?* that a people's advancement in its knowledge and morality as a result of the use of its reason is "almost inevitable, if only the public concerned is left in freedom", because "[m]en will of their own accord gradually work their way out of barbarism so long as artificial measures are not deliberately adopted to keep them in it" (Kant, 1991a, p. 55, 59).

The past decades, however, have seen developments that strongly run counter to this narrative. The two links between progress and politics have both been put into question by significant forces. First, the idea of modern political institutions guaranteeing progress has been undermined by a purported loss of faith in progress as a normative ideal in the West on the one hand (e.g. Nisbet, 1980; Pinker, 2018) and growing overall pessimism about future progress as an attainable ideal on the other (e.g. Schmeets and Tummers, 2022) – perhaps most strikingly, the financial future, with majorities in a large number of developed countries believing that the next generation will be worse off than previous ones (Clancy et al., 2022). Second, the idea of politics as created by and maintained by progress has been put into question by several contemporary developments which instead seem to imply that the reverse of this relationship is true. That is, the very developments through which "the highest purpose of nature, a universal cosmopolitan existence", which Kant (1991b, p. 51) posited as history's final stage, is purportedly approached – that is, through economic and political globalisation – are now explicitly linked with politically corrosive tendencies such as the anti-democratic, nostalgic,

populist backlash against the liberal tradition from the populace on the one hand, and a technocratic desire of the political establishment to circumvent popular control and directly apply its specialised knowledge to political problems on the other (see e.g. Mair, 2013; Caramani, 2017). In conclusion: politics no longer broadly guarantees progress in other spheres of life, and this progress has purportedly led to developments which instead stimulate political decline. If it is true, then, that the interdependence of progress and politics cannot account for many of these contemporary developments, it becomes relevant to study instead that tradition in political thought which the early modern idea of progress came to replace. This tradition, which loosely connects the Ancients, Medievals and Renaissance thinkers, revolves around the idea of history as degenerative or even cyclical (Nisbet, 1980) and emphasises the importance of the state playing an active role in cultivating the virtue and civicmindedness of its citizens to halt the forces of decline (Herman, 2010), rather than merely playing an passive role in setting a political framework in which all aspects of human life can flourish and progress.

Which writer, then, deserves such a study? The earlier writers within this tradition – i.e. Polybius or Machiavelli – will, because of their general lack of familiarity with those elements in life we would now qualify as 'modern' (such as the importance of science and international commerce), have less to tell us than those theorists who manage to straddle both traditions of thought by virtue of their place in time: crudely stated, such thinkers that are recent enough to have known Newton's *Principia* but are simultaneously distant enough to have missed the publication of Kant's *Idea for a Universal History*. One such figure is Rousseau, and much attention in the past two decades has already been spent on studying him as a political theorist who presupposed the near inevitability of human decline in social life (e.g. Garrard, 2003; Neidleman, 2016; Warner, 2018). A writer whose contributions, in contrast to Rousseau's, have remained underappreciated, is English satirist and clergyman Jonathan Swift (1667-1745). Only recently has his well-known novel *Gulliver's Travels* attracted a study into its political philosophy of significant size and breadth (Robertson, 2022), but for the most part, the existing literature on Swift's politics, although voluminous, is either too narrowly focused on Swift in isolation from other thinkers or, alternatively, too eager to emphasise Swift's indebtedness to previous thinkers, which ignores his potential applicability to future – that is, contemporary – issues. My study, then, will perform the three functions that logically flow from this diagnosis. First, it will synthesise and further develop the existing literature on Swift and politics. Second, it will seek to encourage Swift's conversation with other historical political theorists, which has hitherto been neglected, by contrasting and comparing the respective notions of politics and

decline from him and the more studied Rousseau. Third and last, it will demonstrate the relevance of Swift's writing for contemporary issues by applying his work to the modern phenomenon of technocracy. The remaining structure of this thesis will follow these three points. In the next chapter, I will answer the research question that follows from the introduction above, which is: *What is the relationship between the idea of decline and the conceptualisation of politics in Swift's work?* In the subsequent chapter, I will discuss the applicability of Swift's framework to a comparison with Rousseau and to the contemporary phenomenon of technocracy. As the title of this thesis indicates, the main work of Swift that I shall be concerned with is his *Gulliver's Travels*. Although I firmly believe that this novel does, without having to rely on additional texts, already offer a fairly coherent political philosophy, it is sometimes necessary to draw on a number of Swift's additional writings in order to clarify ambiguities, and I have, it goes without saying, done so.

Before I start, a brief word on matters of methodology is necessary. Because the application of my findings to present-day phenomena is one of this study's objectives, it falls broadly within the methodological tradition loosely defined (or disparaged) as 'presentism', as opposed to the contextualism of the Cambridge School (see e.g. Spoerhase, 2008; Green, 2012). I adopt what Green (2012, p. 107) calls, following Bevir, the attitude of a 'pupil' rather than a historian of ideas, based on the belief that ideas as an object of historical study are characterised by "a conscious intention by its author to leap beyond the present and speak to the future". Rather than limiting myself to analysing texts in the light of what must have been the context-specific intention of the author while writing a work, I will take serious this role as not just an analyser but also a *reader* of the texts who, despite being "consciously aware of past intellectual traditions", also "seeks to extend, modify, and update such traditions in light of the distinctive concerns and developments of the pupil's own time" (Green, 2012, p. 109).

2. Swift's Political Philosophy: Decline and the Quest for a Perfect Society

In this section, I will outline the political philosophy of *Gulliver's Travels* in three steps. First, I will describe the declinist philosophy of history that Swift subscribes to. Second, I will argue that Swift rejects a number of political projects, all based on the idea of the possibility and desirability of progress, which claim to possess a capacity to circumvent the political ills which Swift has identified. Third, I will argue that Swift offers a number of political prescriptions as best possible solutions to the omnipresent likeliness of decline.

2.1 The Idea of Decline

The notion of decline in Swift's work has elicited substantial analysis, and there is little doubt that it is a more or less consistent, fundamental theme in his works. In the existing literature, there are interpretations that takes Swift's broader work as its subject material and there are interpretations that limit themselves to *Gulliver's Travels*. In the former category, we find Johnson (1965), for example, who sketches a loose account of what he deems to be Swift's implicit historical framework. The notion of decline, argues Johnson, is one of four constitutive parts of Swift's philosophy of history. Johnson describes how Swift's idea of decline differs from the Classical belief in the inevitability of degeneration: the idea, found in poets like Hesiod, that every new generation will always be worse off than those that preceded it. Swift's alternative view is largely the same in its implications but built on a somewhat different theoretical foundation. In Swift, the idea of the free will of every generation, combined with the Christian idea of original sin, result in a worldview in which humans, fatally flawed as they are, nevertheless have an overall tendency to decline: morally, intellectually, and perhaps even physically (see also Walsh, 2003). Therefore, every age is characterised by a perpetual tension between vice and virtue, and "the balance or imbalance of collective vice and virtue causes the revolutions of politics" (Johnson, 1965, p. 63). According to Swift, the prime cause for vice in his time was the preoccupation of people with their self-interest to the detriment of the common good: in his sermon *Doing Good,* for example, Swift argued that whereas citizens in ancient time were willing to sacrifice their lives for the common good, in his days "very few make the least scruple of sacrificing a whole nation, as well as their own souls, for a little present gain" (Swift, 1801b, p. 150). Whence this preoccupation for personal gain? According to Swift, a major catalyst for this is the pervasiveness of affluence or 'luxury'. This is a well-known idea in ancient and early modern thought (see Berry, 1994) which links economic abundance to two disastrous consequences: first, the reduction of men to "a feminised, even an effeminate being"

(Pocock, 1985, p. 114) who are excessively occupied with their constantly multiplying, uncontrolled bodily desires; and second, the distraction of men from the common good because of it. In other words: the uncontrolled pursuit of gain will make men too weak and too dependent on the satisfaction of their personal desires to exhibit the civicmindedness required for a state's survival. Another major reason for people's distraction from the common good, argues Swift in his pamphlet *The Sentiments of a Church of England Man*, is a major character flaw in human beings which "plainly shows" that "either our heads or our hearts are not as they should be" (Swift, 1801c, p. 337-348). This flaw is our desire to choose sides – break apart in factions – in conflicts, rather than using our impartial judgement. This is shown well, Swift points out, by our strange inclination to even pick a side in books that we read, or theatre plays that we see.

We find both these causes for decline mentioned extensively in the *Travels*. Before I turn to this analysis, it is useful to give a short overview of the book. In the *Travels*, Swift presents the travel account of seaman Lemuel Gulliver, who shipwrecks in multiple fictitious lands during four separate journeys. In the first part, Gulliver travels to the island kingdom of Lilliput, inhabited by little human beings "not six inches high" (Swift, 1989, p. 5), where he gets embroiled in tribalistic political conflicts. In the second part, the roles are reversed, as Gulliver strands on the isolated kingdom of Brobdingnag which is populated by gigantic human beings who live in peace under a balance of powers of the nobility and the monarch. In the third, more disjointed part, Gulliver travels to a variety of places. First, there is the flying island of Laputa, populated by scholars whose only concern is mathematics, astronomy and music; there is the island of Balnibarbi over which it hovers, in which local scholars, inspired by the Laputians, have unleashed their disastrous passion for technical improvement on the local populace with devastating results, leaving the farms barren and the houses dilapidated; and there are the island nations of Luggnagg and Glubbdubdrib, on which necromancers and immortal beings live. Fourthly and lastly, he shipwrecks at the island of the Houyhnhnms and Yahoos: the former being hyperrational horses devoid of human passions that live in a strict, rigidly stratified community (clearly modelled on Plato's *Republic*) whose ostensible perfectness Gulliver becomes enraptured with; the latter being a degenerate, savage species of humans of which some are enslaved by the Houyhnhnm, and others live in the wilds.

It is primarily in the first travel, to Lilliput, that the destructive effects of the human tendency towards forming factions are dealt with. First, the emperor's secretary informs Gulliver that the island suffers from a split into two rival camps: those that wear high heels under their shoes and those who instead were low heels. Although people claim that "the high heels are most

agreeable to [their] ancient constitution", (Swift, 1989, p. 21), the emperor has instead decided that only those who wear low heels qualify for posts in the government. The mutual hatred between these two parties over this dispute has escalated to point where "they will neither eat nor drink, nor talk with each other" (Swift, 1989, p. 22). Moreover, there is an additional domestic conflict about the correct way to crack open an egg: does one crack its small or big end? This internal discord was further encouraged by the neighbouring island of Blefuscu, something that ultimately lead to an open war between the two nations in which "eleven thousand persons have, at several times, suffered death, rather than submit to break their eggs at the smaller end" (Swift, 1989, p. 22). Even though Gulliver's relative size and strength make him a formidable weapon to the Lilliputians, his overall reluctance to commit himself to a side in these factional conflicts eventually leads to a political intrigue for which he flees the island. The negative effects of the human tendency for faction on politics are therefore numerous: not only does it lead to domestic turmoil, but it also breeds political favouritism at the expense of real talent and renders the state vulnerable vis-à-vis foreign nations.

The second catalyst for vice mentioned earlier was luxury. Swift's discussion of it as a source of decline in the *Travels* is not restricted to one specific journey, instead, there are multiple attacks on the idea of luxury spread throughout the book, sometimes as a part of Gulliver's reflection on his home country of England. In part three, for example, Gulliver first describes the ghosts of the senators from the Roman Republic (which the necromancers have summoned for him to speak to) as "an assembly of heroes and demi-gods" (Swift, 1989, p. 117), before concluding shortly afterwards from his conversation with ghosts from Caesar's civil war (the culmination of the atrophy of civic virtue) that he was "surprized to find corruption grown so high and so quickly in that empire, by the force of luxury so lately introduced" (Swift, 1989, p. 121). Furthermore, in part four the idea of luxury is attacked thrice: one, for unnecessarily inflating human desires; two, for leading to the trading away of essential domestic wares for the sake of the import of foreign luxuries that are merely "materials of disease, folly, and vice"; three, for effeminising the English nobility to the point that "a weak diseased body, a meager countenance, and sallow complexion, are the true marks of noble blood (Swift, 1989, p. 155, 158). Luxury, then, leads to the collapse of civic virtue, unnecessarily enlarges human desires, increased the independence of a state on international commerce and saps the vitality of the very class which is expected to rule.

In this analysis of decline, Swift heavily relies on concepts from political thought that were already well-established in his time. As I briefly mentioned in the introduction, it is precisely

his indebtedness to previous traditions of thought has been incessantly emphasised in the existing literature. Swift has been compared and contrasted with, for example, Plato and Aristotle (e.g. Bloom, 1990; Nichols, 1981); utopianism (e.g. Houston, 2007); Christian theology and early Renaissance thought (e.g. Wedel, 1926); 17th century English Republicanism (e.g. Fink, 1947); and Locke (e.g. Dircks, 1960). Swift's framework, however, is not limited merely to positing the strong likeliness of societal decline. At points, writers like Johnson (1965) have noted, Swift's tone is simply one of bleak pessimism. According to him, Swift's historical outlook got progressively pessimistic as he aged, until by the time that he wrote Gulliver's Travels he had acquired an "increasingly jaundiced outlook on contemporary events" (Johnson, 1965, p. 74). Because of this, Gulliver's Travels "increases in gloomy misanthropy from book to book, citing the history of religious and political schism in England with thinly concealed allegory . . . for generalized lamentations" (Johnson, 1965, p. 75). The studies that are focused exclusively on Gulliver's Travels, such as Canfield (1973) and Hitt (1962), partially confirm this line of thought by identifying 'degeneration' and 'antiperfectionism', respectively, as unifying themes in the book. As Hitt writes: "In Gulliver's Travels the deterioration process or evolution-in-reverse theory in each book contradicts [the] modernist view of advance on physical, mental, and moral grounds" (Hitt, 1962, p. 162). Canfield, too, describes how Swift formulates in Gulliver's Travels a direct argument, with strong roots in Christian theology, against the emerging belief in the possibility of progress: "Against man's pride, his pretense to reason, his hopes of progress and perfectibility, Swift holds up the glass of satire to show us the traditional image of man's fallen nature" (Canfield, 1973, p. 15). It is because Swift makes this crucial step that he manages to bridge the gap between earlier political thought and modernity: he expands the notion of decline to cover, and refute, distinctly modern arguments for the possibility of progress. It is to this step that I shall now turn.

2.2 Overcoming Decline: Perfection or Absolutism?

As we will soon see, the modern prospect of progress that Swift addresses in book three of *Gulliver's Travels* revolve around the application of technology and knowledge to human problems. As Mokyr (2018) points out, faith in an eventually fruitful dynamic between knowledge and technology characterised much of Western thought long before it delivered any truly remarkable results – that is, during the Industrial Revolution. If Swift is ultimately unconvinced of the promise of technology and knowledge, it could be simply because he did not share this premature faith. This is a claim that some authors have indeed put forward: they

simply argue that decline is an inexorable reality for Swift and that these modern phenomena proved no exception to this belief and therefore elicited no substantially different response from him than any other versions of progress did. Mazlish (1963) and Hunter (2003), for example, argue that Swift's rejection of the idea of progress leads him to completely reject the feasibility of scientific progress – for example in the form of useful discoveries. As other authors, such as James (1979), Stanlis (2010) and Gill (2021) have pointed out, however, it seems much more plausible that Swift's rejection is not necessarily a rejection of science overall, but merely a rejection of scientism – the disregard of all other values and ends, such as morality, politics and theology, in favour of science and belief in scientific progress. In the Travels, we indeed find numerous passages in which the practical use of advances in science, knowledge and technology is in fact highly praised. The king of Brobdingnag, for example, says that "few things delighted him so much as new discoveries in art or in nature", and argues that they who create advancements in agriculture "do more essential service to [their] country, than the whole race of politicians put together" (Swift, 1989, p. 78). Whence then the increasingly misanthropic tone of the book that Johnson (1965) draws attention to, and how does Swift reconcile it with these sporadic encouragements of progress? As I will argue, to reconcile these two elements leads to a key insight into Swift's idea of politics and decline.

I will first explain, then, why *Gulliver's Travels* comes across as increasingly pessimistic about the possibility for human happiness. Although they are fairly accurate in their factual description of the Travels, some of the decline-focused analyses mentioned above miss an important element that Nichols (1981) has drawn attention to: the degree to which, as Gulliver travels in search for the perfect society, he gets increasingly disillusioned and, as a result, radicalised as narrator by the never-ending failure to find one, which skews his perspective significantly. First, it is important to realise that the assumption made here – which is also argued for persuasively by other authors such as Bloom (1990) – is that Gulliver is an unreliable narrator, and that where he speaks, Swift might very well be laughing at him. Based on this assumption, Nichols (1981) argues that Gulliver's search for the perfect society is the main theme that links all individual travels together. She claims that every society encountered by him, though each possessing its unique virtues, is ultimately deemed to be imperfect. Lilliput is technologically advanced but too much engrossed in political trivialities and spectacle; Brobdingnag is governed by common sense and reason, with a benevolent king and a strong civic spirit, yet is also shown to be narrow-minded due to the absolute lack of interest in foreign affairs made possible by its completely isolated location. Furthermore, Gulliver, by virtue of

his small size compared to the Brobdingnagian citizens, is hyperaware of (and ultimately disgusted by) the physical imperfections of the human body, which remain an unsurmountable impediment towards perfection regardless of how communal life is organised. The final two travels present societies which try to escape the physical constraints of nature in various ways. First, the Laputian scholars and Balnibarbian scientists and the societies they have created are found to have prioritised technological advancement and scientific abstraction over human reality, needs and happiness. Second, the Struldbruggs on Luggnagg, immortal human beings, rob Gulliver of his desire for immortality by showing that, since the physical aging process continues undisturbed, immortality simply means never-ending, agonising mental and physical frailty past the age of eighty. Third and last, the society of the Houyhnhnm, though ostensibly attractive due to their reliance on reason over their passions, ultimately casts out Gulliver for not being one of their kind (Nichols, 1981).

As Gulliver thus continuously fails to find a model society, we find his idea of human degeneration becoming more radical in tone. In the first half of the book, Gulliver is not yet consistently persuaded of the truthfulness of human degeneration. Although he seems to affirm the "degenerate nature of man" in part one, we also find a scene in part two where Gulliver reads through a Brobdingnagian treatise in disbelief, ultimately rejecting its premises, that "treats of the weakness of human kind", describing how "diminutive, contemptible, and helpless an animal was man in his own nature," and how "[human] nature was degenerated in these latter declining ages of the world" (Swift, 1989, p. 29, 79). In part three, however, a while after Gulliver has spoken with a number of Greek and Roman historical figures and become convinced of the moral inferiority of his generation compared to them, Gulliver describes his hypothetical conduct if he were to be an immortal Struldbrugg by writing that he would "probably prevent that continual degeneracy of human nature, so justly complained of in all ages" (Swift, 1989, p. 126). At the end of the book, with the Houyhnhnm council having banished him from the island and denounced him for being a savage Yahoo rather than the Houyhnhnm which he aspired to be so much, Gulliver's belief in human decline transforms into full misanthropy, and he declares his fellow Englishmen to be "Yahoos in shape and disposition, perhaps a little more civilized . . . but making of no other use of reason, than to improve and multiply [their] vices" (Swift, 1989, p. 172), and, ultimately, refuses to live in the company of his family, cursing them for their imperfections and choosing to reside with the horses – which he in his delusion deems to be English Houyhnhnm – in his stable instead.

What this means is that to recklessly pursue the idea of perfectness, both as it applies to one as an individual and to its political institutions, is to drive oneself mad. Swift's objection to in the pursuit of perfectness is, I believe, twofold. First, he argues that it is hopelessly unrealistic: it is a form of wishful thinking that takes humans not as they are but as one would like them to be. This argument has been given persuasively already in a debate which has traditionally divided scholars of Swift into broadly two camps: the 'hard' school that "read the Houyhnhnms as human paradigms" and the 'soft' school that "saw them as false ideals" (Hunter, 2003, p. 233). It seems clear to me that the second interpretation is true. Crane (2010), for example, has shown in an influential paper that the origin of Swift's use of horses must lie in a book on logical theorising, which Swift must have read as an undergraduate, that used the proportion between 'rational' and 'irrational' as being equivalent to that of 'man' and 'horse'. The Houyhnhnm, then, are a satire on the idea that man's uniquely defining characteristic is his rationality. As Swift put it in an oft-quoted letter to Alexander Pope: "I do not hate Mankind, it is [you others] who hate them because you would have them reasonable Animals, and are Angry for being disappointed" (Swift, 2010b, p. 677-678). In other words: if your philosophy relies on the concept of humans as (largely) rational beings, you cannot but be disappointed with, and even feel revolted by, the actual human material that you must work with.

The full implications of Swift's second argument against the pursuit of perfectness, however, have received considerably less attention in the literature. This argument, albeit never stated explicitly, is that human life is simply characterised by a plurality of values, areas of knowledge and interests which, although their state of equilibrium is always fragile, cannot possibly be replaced by any form of value monism. However (and this is where the analysis of Swift's response to scientific progress comes in), it is intrinsic to doctrines of progress, such as that of science, to insist on them being "inevitable, necessary, and inherently good" (Gill, 2020, p. 82). On the island of Balnibarbi, these absolutist pretensions – as Fitzgerald (1988, p. 2014) puts it, the desire "not to be restrained by law [and] to be accepted without question" – manifest themselves in several ways. For example, the lord that accompanies Gulliver on this travel has been alone on the island in refusing to destroy and rebuild the houses he owns according to the prescriptions of the scientific projectors, and fears that his continued refusal will "incur the censure of pride, singularity, affectation, ignorance [and] caprice" (Swift, 1989, p. 105) – in a word, he fears that he will become a social and political outcast for refusing to conform to what is new, modern, and scientific. Furthermore, the absolutist pretensions of science are shown in one of the professor's projects to build an artificial intelligence that can envelop all areas of

human knowledge and thereby make human learning, such as on philosophy and poetry, superfluous. Swift's description of such a device, which randomly arranges sentences after which the students write down anything of value they see, is prescient and deserves to be quoted as some length:

> The superficies was composed of several bits of wood, about the bigness of a die, but some larger than others. They were all linked together by slender wires. These bits of wood were covered, on every square, with paper pasted on them; and on these papers were written all the words of their language, in their several moods, tenses, and declensions; but without any order. The professor then desired me 'to observe; for he was going to set his engine at work.' The pupils, at his command, took each of them hold of an iron handle, whereof there were forty fixed round the edges of the frame; and giving them a sudden turn, the whole disposition of the words was entirely changed. He then commanded six-and-thirty of the lads, to read the several lines softly, as they appeared upon the frame; and where they found three or four words together that might make part of a sentence, they dictated to the four remaining boys, who were scribes. This work was repeated three or four times, and at every turn, the engine was so contrived, that the words shifted into new places, as the square bits of wood moved upside down (Swift, 1989, p. 109).

As Swift already noted in his earlier description of Laputa, the interest in its population for scientific pursuits had also engendered in them an unjustified confidence in asserting their opinion on political matters. The projectors take this a step further and conduct experiments and devise hypotheses with the aim to make politics an actual science. They have reduced politics to a biological problem – that is, one within the realm of natural science – and wonder whether the disagreement amongst politicians could not simply be cured by administering to each of them the right medicine for their purported ailment. In all these things, we see the assumption that there is an absolutist tendency in the idea of scientific progress that fails to respect the inherent plurality of things in life. The maker of the artificial intelligence, for example, fails to acknowledge the idea that studying something, for example poetry, is about more than creating and studying phrases that are randomly strung together; and those that reduce politics to a medical problem fail to acknowledge that politics might be more about the morality than about the expertise of politicians – something that Swift strongly endorses in book one of the Travels – or that there could be such a thing to begin with as the legitimate existence of different political interests.

This, then, is how the increasingly pessimistic tone of *Gulliver's Travels* is reconciled with the fact that Swift does not dismiss the idea of technological or scientific advancements. Rather than disputing the possibility of improvements in such areas, he merely warns for the absolutist tendencies which accompany the embracing of a belief in such progress. It is the same rejection of absolutism that, we shall see, is present in his political prescriptions. To this, we now turn.

2.3 Settling for Imperfection: The Republican Constitution

In the previous two subsections, I have identified the two ways in which we can expect Swift's political prescriptions to relate to his theory of decline. On the one hand, there will be a focus on limiting the damage that can be inflicted to the social fabric by the two natural sources of decline – that is, faction and luxury. It is this first relation that biographer Damrosch has in mind when he writes that "[j]ust as we have degenerated from Adam and Eve, so [the Yahoos] have degenerated even further, showing what our worst tendencies would be *if nothing held them in check*" (Damrosch, 2013, p. 375, emphasis added). On the other hand, there will be an emphasis on preventing forms of absolute power from arising. How does Swift propose our worst tendencies and the threat of absolutism are best held in check? To answer that question, the existing literature is useful, since as I said in the introduction, much has been written about Swift's political thought. There is, as Higgins (2010, p.803) puts it, "a considerable corpus of commentary" on that subject. From this literature, three main propositions come forward, each of which are responses to both decline and absolutism. These prescriptions are, first, a balance of political powers through a mixed constitution; second, the morality-promoting institution of a national church; and third, the battling of faction through both coercive institutional restraint and individual self-restraint. I shall discuss these three ideas one by one.

For the idea of a mixed government, the self-explanatory starting point is a short, early political essay by Swift (1801a) called the *Discourse of the Contests and Dissensions between the Nobles and the Commons in Athens and Rome* in which he defends the idea of a mixed constitution with a balance of powers between the monarch, nobles and commoners as the best way to balance the natural division into classes or types of people that exists in human nature. Natural here means that Swift does not invoke any specific normative principle by which this division of powers is justified: left to themselves, Swift argues, people will, by virtue of their different talents, simply sort themselves in that way. By drawing on historical examples from Athens and Rome, Swift deduces that only a right balance of power, in which the power of each class – the one, the few and the many, respectively – is circumscribed in ways known to all, can prevent the gradual encroachment of one class on the power of the other. Swift emphasise that this a

process which, once it has started, inevitably leads to more further encroachments and ultimately in the seizure of absolute power. Many authors, most notably Fink (1947), have seen in Gulliver's Travels, and especially its treatment of the Brobdingnagian government, a defence of these same principles as bulwark against tyranny and guarantee of societal stability, accompanied too by the introduction of a standing citizen army as an additional balancing force. In part two, we find Gulliver characterising the origin of the stable, prudent Brobdingnagian government that he encounters as follows:

> In the course of many ages, they have been troubled with the same disease, to which the whole race of mankind is subject; the nobility often contending for power, the people for liberty, and the king for absolute dominion. All which, however happily tempered by the laws of that kingdom, have been sometimes violated by each of the three parties; and have more than once occasioned civil wars, the last whereof was happily put an end to by this prince's grandfather in a general composition; and the militia then settled with common consent, hath been ever since kept in the strictest duty (Swift, 1989, p. 80).

In this passage, we find the three elements of a balanced constitution most important for Swift. First, the balance of power between the three classes; second, the notion of laws tempering the violating of this equilibrium by circumscribing the limits of the power of each class; third, the idea of a standing civilian army. Moreover, we find in this passage the idea that political constitutions will inevitably be violated at some point, no matter the quality of its laws. Nevertheless, this renders the original constitution of particular importance, because though unable to prevent the encroachments on the power of the others so natural to the human classes, it might very well be able to extend the duration of its relative stability. This notion of a relatively good original constitution which is slowly eroded by natural infighting is stated explicitly in both part one and two of the Travels: in part one, Gulliver qualifies his praise for the Lilliputian constitution by desiring to "only be understood to mean the original institutions, and not the most scandalous corruptions into which these people are fallen by the degenerate nature of man"; and in part two, the Brobdingnagian king argues that the English constitution as described to him by Gulliver "in its original might have been tolerable; but these [are] half erased, and the rest wholly blurred and blotted by corruptions" (Swift, 1989, p. 29, 76). As a caveat, it is important to note that these specific political prescriptions are not original in nature: most notably Fink (1947), but also others (e.g. Wedel, 1926) have persuasively shown that Swift is heavily indebted to the tradition of English Republicanism, a loose line of thought with its origins in the aftermath of the English Civil war, "written to justify the ad hoc establishment

of a kingless commonwealth" (Collins, 2011, p. 269; see also Worden, 1991 for a more comprehensive overview). All three aspects of a balanced constitution are indeed found in this tradition of thought.

The second element in Swift's politics of decline is the installation of a national church. Christianity is conspicuously absent from the Travels, and it is only here that we are fully compelled to consult Swift's other writings. In his analysis, Connery (2009) finds that the justification for the church's authority given by the clergyman Swift is predominantly pragmatic in nature. The main role of the church is to be a stabilising force in society by solidifying its unity, preventing schisms and factional disputes, and upholding morality through the reminder of divine punishment – and not necessarily, as one would expect from a clergyman, to be right when it comes to its theological doctrines. In his biography of Swift, Nokes (1985, p. 278) makes the same argument: Swift dismisses or mocks "theological disputes while enjoining practical conformity within the Anglican Church, and [stresses] the heavenly reward for such conformity". A heavy emphasis on intricate theological disputes, which both engenders unnecessary debate and lacks the psychological force or even comprehensibility to buttress public morality, is therefore detrimental to the church's task. In his essay *Thoughts on Religion,* Swift makes this point explicitly:

> I believe that thousands of men would be orthodox enough in certain points, if divines had not been too curious, or too narrow, in reducing orthodoxy within the compass of subtleties, niceties, and distinctions, with little warrant from Scripture, and less from reason or good policy (Swift, 2010c, p. 710).

This rejection of divisive, obscure doctrines is something we saw too in his equation of factional conflicts to petty squabbles over where to open an egg which we saw in book one of *Gulliver's Travels*. It is this belief that finds expression in the extant sermons of Swift, written in plain language, which "seek to encourage dutiful behaviour and orthodox opinions by eschewing theological problems" (Nokes, 1985, p. 273). In his *Sentiments of a Church of England Man,* Swift (1801c) explicitly accepts the implications of his embrace of political stability over theological correctness by arguing that minor alterations to official church doctrine are permissible given that they will achieve a uniting effect on the Christian community.

The third and last element in Swift's politics of decline is the battling of faction through both coercive governmental measures and the encouragement of self-restraint in expressing one's heteredox opinions. Rather than making the point that, since men quarrel and form factions

about issues that are trivial, people ought to be given the liberty to put forward whatever opinions they want – that it, that they are free to believe that an egg ought to be cracked open on the small or big end, and free to believe in the trinity or not – Swift argues that these issues, trivial as they might be, are nevertheless potent enough to rip apart a society. Therefore, he draws a strict distinction between freedom of thought and freedom of consequences. Whereas each person has the right to "keep their thoughts within their own breast", they simultaneously "ought to be answerable for the effects their thoughts produce upon others" (Swift, 2010a, p. 707). In other words: Swift evaluates these matters not on the basis of rights but simply on the basis of their consequences, and given the disastrous consequences of the human tendency to form faction, no person has a right to utter thoughts that undermine the public consensus. The king in Brobdingnag echoes this conviction in book two of the Travels, arguing that, although it would be tyrannical of a government to forcibly convert its citizens to hold other beliefs, it would be weakness not do force them to conceal their thoughts (Swift, 1989). Besides advocating regulation of public speech from the government, Swift also encourages people to practice a form of self-censorship in the utterance of their thoughts. In this, Swift argues that it is no great thing to ask for self-restraint since, he claims, it is already the habit of everyone to think before speaking rather than invariably giving voice to their naturally fragmented, sometimes incoherent thoughts. Whereas it is only madmen that feel the need to immediately express whatever their imagination has produced, someone "by his wits" will have "only expressed such thoughts, as his judgement directed him to chuse, leaving the rest to die away in his memory" (Swift, 2010a, p. 707).

3. Swift, Rousseau, Technocracy: the Search for Certainty

In this final section, I will develop what I believe is Swift's relevance vis-à-vis Rousseau, a different political theorist of decline, on the one hand, and the contemporary phenomenon of technocracy on the other.

3.1 Rousseau

Rousseau has been recognised by many as a theorist of decline who posits that, since men are not naturally sociable creatures and since all social life is inherently unstable by virtue of it always being at risk of individuals, torn as they are between multiple causes that demand their loyalty, choosing their own self-interest over that of the state, the goal of political action ought to be to shape the human nature of its naturally unsociable citizens into something as conducive as possible for identification with the collective good and the pursuit of the general will (see e.g. Garrard, 2003; Neidleman, 2016; Warner, 2018). This is accomplished by "transforming each individual, who is by himself a complete and solitary whole, into parts of a greater whole from which he in a manner receives his life and being" (Rousseau, 1989b, p. 400). As Warner (2018) argues, for Rousseau it is not only the setting up of political institution, but also by steering a variety of private associations and domains, such as culture, family and friendship, towards a course conducive to a robust, all-encompassing civic identity, that the state's unity stability is best maintained. In the chapter on civic religion in the Social Contract, Rousseau summarises this overarching aim thusly: "All that destroys social unity is worthless; all institutions that set man in contradiction to himself are worthless" (Rousseau, 1989, p. 437).

There are many similarities between Swift's and Rousseau's politics of decline: both identify luxury and private interests as unavoidable forces of destruction that ought to be contained as best as possible by the state; both abhor abstract theorising and instead value institutions, like religion, primarily for pragmatic reasons; both identify the best form of life with a life lived in a virtuous body politic with a high degree of civicmindedness. Where Swift and Rousseau significantly differ, however, is in Swift's rejection of the longing for complete societal unity that underpins Rousseau's writings. Instead, Swift's political framework is based, albeit implicitly, on the idea that human interests, values and pursuits are pluralistic and cannot possibly be fully captured by a single, monist value or ideal. Perhaps the best statement of this idea comes in a passage from *Gulliver's Travels* which, it seems to be, has hitherto been largely neglected by commentators. In book three, the political projectors that I studied in the previous section describe another experiment to Gulliver: in order to root out political disagreement, one

could try to saw off the back of the head of two disagreeing individuals and subsequently attach these pieces to the head of the other party. In that way, "the two half brains being left do debate the matter between themselves within the space of one skull, would soon come to a good understanding" (Swift, 1989, p. 113). The fact that this is satirised as part of a broader scientific trend to seek to unify elements of human life where it does not exist shows, I believe, Swift's conviction that even if one were to glue two skulls together, complete unity of interests will simply not arise. The political system best suited to this reality of irreducible pluralism is, therefore, one that balances and tempers different powers and interests, not one that insists, like Rousseau does, on shaping absolute unity where there is none to be found.

3.2 Technocracy

A contemporary phenomenon in which this same absolutist, monist logic is recognisable is in the technocratic perspective on politics (e.g. Caramani, 2017). According to the technocratic logic, political problems are epistemic problem which are solvable as long as rational, expertise-driven solutions pursue the objective common interest for a given, non-pluralistic society. This is, albeit in a different form, what Swift refers to when he describes the projector's idea of 'politics as a science' in book three of *Gulliver's Travels*. What Swift's framework does is, first, enable us to perceive the absolutist tendencies of the technocratic logic in which political disagreement is, since politics is a matter of right and wrong, simply a sign of one's opponents being factually mistaken; and second, it gives us tools to criticise it by drawing attention, through the means of satire, to the inherent plurality it human values, interests and pursuits. This analysis, I believe, can be used to discern defects in a variety of political and societal assumptions which the technocratic logic struggles to address. The most recent example of this would be the widespread concern about the use if so-called chatbots – recall the artificial intelligence from Swift – which is used by (high school) students to cheat on their homework. What Swift's framework asks us here, then, is what exactly we believe the underlying goal of education to be: why would the use of artificial intelligence, if students indeed no longer have to rely on their own capabilities, be a problem? What are the underlying values that a technocratic perspective fails to capture?

In this, my overall analysis of Swift mirrors Isaiah Berlin's (2013) assessment of Machiavelli, although my analysis of Swift's notion of value pluralism does not, as does Berlin's of Machiavelli, correspond to the public-private distinction. Instead, it applies to all spheres of human life. Because of that all-encompassing scope, I believe there are equally strong parallels between Swift and the tradition of 16th century humanist modernists which Toulmin writes

about in his book *Cosmopolis*, in which he affirms the claim made by 20th century philosophers such as Rorty and MacIntyre that the modern project of finding epistemological and political stability in abstracted, timeless principles about which we can be absolutely certain has failed. Therefore, he argues, drawing on a tradition of early modern figures like Erasmus and Montaigne, the postmodern era needs a political return to the pluralism, tolerance and suspension of judgement which characterised this first wave of early modern thinkers. Toulmin extends this logic to the political domain to argue for the reduction of power of sovereign nation states in favour of a more dispersed, pluralistic conception of political power, in which transnational political institutions and non-governmental organisations play a much more important role. It is this desire for a balance of powers on which Swift's political framework was based, too. Perhaps, future studies could try to extend the Swiftian framework to contemporary political institutions too.

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