

THE CITY OF MAN.

By Pierre Manent. Translated by Marc A. LePain. Princeton Univ. Press. 248 pp. \$24.95

What does it mean to be modern? As French political philosopher Manent shows in this important book, just asking the question reveals one to be in the grip of the modern, to be aware that we are both human (implying a universal human nature) and modern (implying a sharp awareness of historical contingency and the malleability of human nature). Manent pursues the historical source of this self-consciousness and muses on its meaning and destination.

To be modern is to be free from the constraints of nature and grace, to flee from the Western tradition's two exemplary models for ordering the soul: the magnanimous man of Athens, proud with his civic responsibilities, and the humble monk, dedicated to God. The profound tension between magnanimity and humility lies, in Manent's view, at the heart of the West's cultural and political dynamism. But because both models understood virtue substantively as real—implying a range of excellences and goods that humans discovered rather than created—and viewed human nature as oriented toward the good, the two traditions could speak to one another, most powerfully in St. Thomas Aquinas's great effort at synthesizing Greek philosophy and Christian revelation. Yet both magnanimity and humility were worn down over time through their reciprocal critique (each viewed the other's good as illusory) and their internal contradictions (the political strife of the Greek cities and the Christian wars of religion). And what eventually replaced them, starting in the 18th century, is the "city of man" of liberal democratic modernity, an artificial construct—a human project—based on the individual prior to any demand upon his allegiance.

In the first half of *The City of Man*,

Manent explores three of the principal dimensions of modern understanding: history, sociology, and economics. The authority of history relativizes the idea of permanent human ends; the sociological viewpoint replaces the perspective of the human actor situated within the common human world with that of the detached observer, a "scientist" of human affairs; the idea of the economic system reduces human motivation to the desire for acquisition, truncating the full range of human excellences. Manent carefully reconstructs the emergence of these new authorities in the writings of Montesquieu, Adam Smith, Rousseau, Nietzsche, and other great thinkers, noting that for all the attention devoted to us by the human sciences, we moderns remain a bit of a cipher.

As Manent underscores in the second half of his book, this fact has troubling consequences. From Montesquieu on, virtue, whether pagan or Christian, has been reinterpreted as repressive. Moderns view the citizen's obligations or the monk's hairshirt as constraining human nature rather than as advancing it toward its full potential. The law's neutrality toward conceptions of the good becomes an injunction: you must be free to choose your own "lifestyle," free to jettison the past as so much baggage. Yet what is freedom for? The modern individual, Manent tells us, runs and runs without a destination. The cost of our liberty has been a deep inarticulateness about the ends of life.

Manent proposes no solutions. *The City of Man*, beautifully translated from the French edition published in 1994, seeks to mirror the world, not to transform it. But it carries a lesson nonetheless: untethered from the past, we slide into nihilism, and may no longer be able even to sustain our modern liberties. Athens, Jerusalem, Rome—the roots of our civilization, rich with teachings on human nature and destiny—still call to us disenchanted moderns. But we find it more and more difficult to listen.

—Brian C. Anderson