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**Conservatism and Rationality: Reflections on David Rosner's *Conservatism and Crisis, The Anti-Modernist Perspective in Twentieth-Century German Philosophy*.
Lexington Books, 2012.**

Reviewed by J. Randall Groves

David Rosner has written a cogent account of the conservative response to modernity in the Weimar Period. In this paper I examine the conservative arguments discussed in the book and Rosner's ultimate embrace of the anti-modernist critique. I will defend modernism and its postmodern progeny and argue that conservatives' responses to modernity not only fail; they are dangerous. I will offer two responses to the problem of modernity, a Nietzschean response and an eliminativist response.

There is no way to avoid living in an anti-foundationalist world, so any attempt to conceptualize the world or to live according to some imagined foundation is bound to take us into irrationality as well as lead us into inauthenticity and a loss of autonomy. It also prevents us from embracing new truths that science and, yes, philosophy, discover. Nietzsche tells us to embrace life without foundations. Those that do not embrace their freedom or the new truths are Nietzsche's "last men." The antimodernist is therefore simply an apologist for the last men.

Eliminativism,ⁱ a view in the philosophy of mind and of science, tells us that we must embrace new ways of thinking about human behavior. As science undermines what the eliminativists call "folk psychology" we will have to reconceive how we think about all mental life, just as we have embraced scientific developments concerning non-mental phenomena. The eliminativist does not lament the end of the soul, God, the afterlife, foundationalism or enchantment; these are all illusions anyway. And we even know why we came to have just those particular illusions.

The eliminativist embraces a probabilistic universe in which wisdom consists in adherence to the best argument, which is whatever the most recent science says is true, even if this means an end to long-held traditions. The eliminativist is happy, even thrilled with this continuous updating because the world is always interesting. The world of science is one that should inspire as much awe and respect as the world presented by any religion or tradition. The eliminativist also knows that the failure to understand or to accept what science tells us not only decreases our knowledge, it decreases our autonomy. Without understanding the determinants of behavior, we are unlikely to be able to take control of our lives. The Nietzschean and the eliminativist both reject the anti-modernist critique. We not only can live without foundations, we should.

David Rosner's *Conservatism and Crisis*ⁱⁱ is a concise treatment of the problem of modernism, particularly as it is manifested in the German philosophy of the Weimar

Period. The treatment, however, is a bit too concise. Rosner could have done much more in the way of setting up the philosophical background. Kant's conceptualization of the modern as the trifurcation of reason and of its inherent limits began a dialogue that worked its way through Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger, and this discussion, which Rosner references, particularly the work of Robert Pippinⁱⁱⁱ, should have been filled out. The logic of the conversation from Descartes to Nietzsche seemed to lead from the assertion of certain foundations, a questioning of all foundations and, inevitably, to a sense that there is a disconcerting groundlessness to reason, to all things ultimate. It would have helped the argument if these moves would have been rehearsed in the book. This philosophical conversation is often linked to historical events that came to a head with the Weimar Period and its aftermath in horror, so it is important to get it on the table.

On the other hand, the Weimar period was afflicted by much more than a philosophical problem. It is to Rosner's credit that he notes that one might well give a rather more convincing economic argument for the events of that time, but Rosner, nevertheless, still holds to the tradition that there is a connection between the philosophical and political history of the time.

After Kant's transcendentalism made the grounding of reason a serious problematic, Hegel proposed a dialectical justification of reason that was only complete with the development of absolute spirit. The massive metaphysical commitments of Hegel led to a vigorous response from Nietzsche, who asked that we just admit to the groundlessness of reason, that there are no facts, only interpretations. Nietzsche, more than any other philosopher, made nihilism a philosophical problem. With Nietzsche, there is no truth or meaning to be discovered, it must always be created. Nietzsche was not so naïve to believe that the majority of the people could live such a groundless existence. Most people do not have it in them to be "heroes" of valuation, creating value out of nothing. Most people require an established tradition to help them make choices. After the death of God, anything is possible, and for many, that is too much possibility. There is a flight from such freedom.

Yet there are those who embrace the Nietzschean "overman" as a model for living, who do try to live their lives according to values that they choose autonomously. Such people are highly experimental and artistic. Indeed, art becomes the foundation of all things as all reasons become aesthetic preferences. The decadence of the modern is to be found in this experimentation. The experimentation of the modern is rather unnerving to those who still cling to the old ways. Weimar decadence produced a violent conservative reaction, ultimately issuing in the assertion of assertiveness characteristic of the Nazis.

It is in this context that Heidegger's philosophy and behavior come to the fore. Heidegger was well aware of the Nietzschean challenge. As Rosner points out, it was

Heidegger who interpreted modernity as a narrative of loss, and who seemingly glossed over the possibility of living a Nietzschean life without falling into the trap of a return to origins, foundations or paradise. Heidegger's philosophy of being or Dasein acknowledges the thrownness of human being. It also makes us aware that human existence is highly temporal, and haunted by finitude, or being toward death. Authenticity is difficult under such circumstances, particularly because modern life is so determined by technology. And it is Heidegger who shows us why conservatism is so problematic, for it seems too easy to fall into a totalitarianism from an overly empowered conservatism. Heidegger's quest for authenticity, for the truth of being, led him into a false authenticity, the bald assertiveness of will.

Heidegger's three mistakes were (1) to be completely tone-deaf to the modernist critique of premodernism and (2) to ignore the Nietzschean possibility, or at least the early Nietzsche's possibility--that one could create one's own values. Heidegger does indicate that art reveals being in a primordial way, but he seems unable to get out from under his sense of loss and embrace an aesthetic existence as a return to authentic existence.

But the third mistake, and the most serious, is that the whole edifice of Dasein as a central concept rests on a mistake. Heidegger believes that the first person perspective reveals something more primordial than the third person perspective. The point of view of intentional beings is to Heidegger more basic than the third person point of view of subjects toward objects in the world (the world as presence). While phenomenal experience is one source among many for understanding the human mind, there is little reason to suppose that introspection will avail us more fruits than a system with epistemological safeguards. This is the eliminativist view. In fact, the eliminativist suspects that there is nothing special about introspection, seeing it as a source of information about the mind that has all the faults that afflict ordinary perception without the safeguards. Heideggerians will object that Dasein is distinct from introspection, but attention without an object is almost definitionally introspection. On the other hand, several of Heidegger's points are worth considering, particularly his notion of temporality. But even that can only be provisional. We need to test any claims about the human experience of time with empirical research.

Rosner follows tradition in arguing that Heidegger's philosophy is uniquely applicable to the problems of modernity. But this author finds such a tradition problematic. One wonders what role Dasein could possibly have as a sort of thing or intention that could be undermined by an historical phenomenon even if the historical phenomenon was profound. Heidegger's status as a critic of modernity is problematic since the problem begins with Plato and because Heidegger does not think the development of technological existence could have been avoided.

Heidegger's first mistake is his failure to understand the benefits of modernism as an advance over pre-modernism. Robert Pippin writes, "Nowhere does Heidegger seem sympathetic to the modern experience of an intense and well-motivated disappointment with the pre-modern tradition, the experience of long-entrenched and spectacular error, or with the consequences of 'methodologically unsecured' belief." For Pippin, science "marks not a radicalization of metaphysical self-assertion, a final forgetting of being, but a way of avoiding a disastrous, centuries-long self-forgetting" (1991, 141). It is incumbent upon critics of modernism to show how their answers to modernism do not fail to address the motivations for modernism in the first place. One could argue, for example, that the Greeks' development of a metaphysics of presence was essential to the eventual development of modern science and thought. Modernism may have its problems, but it was an advance on pre-modern traditionalism.

The reason for Heidegger's second mistake is that he did not fully understand Nietzsche. Although the Darwinism of Nietzsche's philosophy is sometimes overplayed, one cannot neglect Nietzsche's understanding of Darwin in interpreting Nietzsche's philosophy. Nietzsche saw in a flash, as the brilliant often do, the deeper meaning and the long term implications of a new way of seeing the world. Nietzsche's Darwinism would always keep his overman humble. Consider the passage in the *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense* (1883), "In some remote corner of the universe, poured out and glittering in innumerable solar systems, there once was a star on which clever animals invented knowledge. That was the highest and most mendacious minute of 'world history'—yet only a minute.

After nature had drawn a few breaths the star grew cold, and the clever animals had to die....But if we could communicate with the mosquito, then we would learn that he floats through the air with the same self-importance, feeling within itself the flying center of the world. There is nothing in nature so despicable or insignificant that it cannot immediately be blown up like a bag by a slight breath of this power of knowledge; and just as every porter wants an admirer, the proudest human being, the philosopher, thinks that he sees on the eyes of the universe telescopically focused from all sides on his actions and thoughts.^{iv}

Heidegger never understood Nietzsche's Darwinistic humility. If in creating value we must really be "little gods," as he suggests in the Madman passage from the *Gay Science*, then nihilism will be the result, for none of us is capable of creating such grand meaning out of the events of our lives. And that is how Heidegger understands Nietzsche. But if Nietzsche, instead of saying we are little gods, is instead saying that we are mere mosquitoes who temporarily discovered reason and need to create some rough guidelines in order to get through 70 or so years, then life does not become nihilistic. But living this way can be messy, especially with previous value systems hanging over our heads, constricting the lines of possibility. And it can breed a very conservative backlash as the old values are trampled upon in the course of modernist

experimentation. And we must remember that the “smallness” of the humble Nietzschean response is a problem.

People want their lives to have meaning in the grand scheme of things, not just a meaning that will satisfy a reasonable person trying to make the most of a short time as a living human being. But this is the modernist mistake. The postmodernist makes it very plain that grand narratives are no longer viable. But Heidegger never understood this, never understood how it was possible to be both small and meaningful. And so Heidegger fell in with Nazi “bigness,” the *Volk*. That was the philosophical mistake that led to Heidegger becoming a Nazi. And it was ultimately a conservative mistake: it failed to understand the need to embrace the radical truth, that there is no grand narrative waiting to replace the failure of foundationalist modernism. Instead, Heidegger and Germany embraced a fake substitute and the rest is history.

And this is the deeper problem with conservatism: the philosophy of the fake substitute. Conservatism, somewhere deep in its subconsciousness, understands that the foundations are no longer tenable, but it can’t imagine living without those foundations, so it casts around for replacements. But there are no replacements, so any replacement is a lie, possibly a noble lie, but a lie nonetheless. Conservatism senses that it is lying to itself, and it replaces rational deferment with blind assertion. Most of the time this is relatively harmless, but in times of economic distress, it can become dangerous. Is the murderousness of some small modern religions, particularly some micro-sects of Islam at this point in history, a matter of a hysterical rejection of the obvious failure of religion to hold up to rational criticism?

Adorno, another critic of modernist Enlightenment, shows us another mistake in the critique of modernism. Adorno is well-known for his criticism of jazz as irredeemable mass culture^v. Adorno and Heidegger, like many critics of modernism, fail to see the gains and the possibilities that come with modernist standardization. For Adorno, the tendency of jazz to utilize organizational formulas completely undermined the possibility of real creativity. But Adorno was simply wrong. Jazz went on to become one of the most creative activities one can engage in. Standardization of harmonic forms enabled the development of great improvisational sophistication, a sophistication impossible without modernist premises.

Conservatism thrives in spite of the fact that it is almost definitionally opposed to beneficial mutation. In biology that is simply a death sentence. In the realm of culture, however, Conservatism always has adherents resisting the future at all costs and so manages to avoid the fate of extinction. How is this possible? Conservatism must always lose in the end—as all evolutionary dead ends must, but the potential for another temporary resurgence resides in every economic downturn, natural disaster or personal crisis.

Qualia of dissatisfaction can attach to any belief, no matter how rational, if it is possible to just associate it with pain. This may require obfuscation of the true causality, but no matter, humans do not operate rationally anyway. Or rather, there is no guarantee of rationality and a whole lot working against rationality. Human thought is not conducted by a syntactic machine with an empirically defensible perception of the world. The human mind is a connectionist network that works by association of broad patterns. These patterns are not necessarily scientifically defensible. They are the result of our earliest associations, and have been selected merely because they useful to adherents in some way—but not necessarily in the way it is imagined.

Daniel Dennett argues that there is a fallacy of misguided semantic precision that undermines our ability to understand thinking^{vi}. Our thoughts are a mess. We can see this most clearly in all early examples of categorization. Think of yin and yang in which femininity, yin, is associated with slow, soft, yielding, diffuse, cold, wet, passivity, water, earth, the moon, and nighttime. This makes no sense to us now, but we grant the ancients slack because they had no real science available to them. But notice that it reveals a connectionist sort of associationism. Primitive people make all kinds of crazy associations. In the experience of early peoples these associations probably made sense. They were even selected for in a perverse fashion. We are victims of this primitive associationism. It can rear its head at any time as we witness on all sides of the political spectrum, but more on the conservative side recently.

More sophisticated conservatives utilize education to carry on a complex but ultimately fallacious scholasticism of apologetics for tradition, at least according to my view. From their point of view, they understand both the limits of society and human nature more clearly than the liberal. But conservatism, even intelligent conservatism, always stays too long at the party. It is in the nature of conservatism to not change a position once a position has been taken. Any quick changes violate the virtue ethic of steady character.

It is the case that a certain percentage of the population is going to be genetically disposed to latch onto traditional and particularly religious doctrines. We know that a certain percentage of people's brains have a greater amount of certain chemicals which cause them to see the world with an aura of sorts. It is the same effect people otherwise constituted so that they do not have an overactive amygdala are able to duplicate with drugs like alcohol, marijuana and LSD. In any case, thanks to mirror neurons, such people with this condition appear to have charisma, which seems to be able to create a good feeling that comes with the aura even in those not so easily disposed toward religious consciousness.

This is a prettier world than the rest of us live in. Ideas which affirm this prettier world get strong purchase in such people. It also affects others—conservative ideas are

powerful even without the genetic assist, but this visceral appeal of conservatism would probably be enough even without the genetic component of the explanation.

What would have to be true for the conservative tendency to be a rational response? The world would have to only intermittently lend itself to human control. If we really cannot control nature or society without disastrous consequences, or at least without suboptimal consequences, we should therefore keep our organized interactions with the order of things to a minimum. If the world is like that, resistant to our best efforts, with losses outweighing the gains from change, then conservatism follows. But if the world is malleable, if we can change people's circumstances to improve their lives without generally making them worse off, then we ought to do so. I will not try to decide that fundamental and difficult question here.

Although conservatism is conceptually defensible depending on the factual dispute about the nature of the world and of people, conservatism is still resistance to the best argument when the best argument is critical of the status quo. At its most defensible, conservatism is resistance to the quick implementation of actions based on the best argument if that best argument is too recent. How can that be a good thing? In the past, we have had some hare-brained ideas, so it is likely that a fair percentage ended spectacularly mistaken when quickly implemented. Conservatism is good at preventing worst case scenarios of this particular type. But this scenario only obtains part of the time, and it cannot be regarded as a permanent condition because after a certain amount of consideration we can no longer be said to be rushing things.

Rosner correctly points out that the 19th century conservative thinkers were responding to the collapse of traditional values and subsequent problem of nihilism. These thinkers made the wrong choice, and Rosner follows them in making the mistake. Rosner writes, "Rorty's neo-pragmatist solution is, again, an epistemological version of Musil's modernism—that is to say, piecemeal, tentative answers are all we've really got, and all we can hope for and all we really need....Perhaps it would be easier and preferable with tentativeness and uncertainty, with piecemeal answers, with spiritual aporia, with a void of ethics. But unfortunately I am not. I believe the human mind requires a fixed point of belief, a coherent grounding of its assumptions and world-view." (96) Rosner and the conservative are mistaken. They could have seen modernity as a liberating renaissance, but instead let their disappointment with reality cloud their analysis of modernity. From the conservative point of view, the radical liberty of the Weimar libertine was too much. Weimar had the conservatives' "hare-brained idea" detector flashing red. It was too radical for them. It seemed to confirm their conception of human nature and to indicate that tradition was not a world well lost.

The narrative of loss is a deep culprit in the conservative critique of modernity. With Heidegger, it is a perversion of being itself, the West having taken a wrong turn at some point and yielded to what the Frankfurt School calls technological or instrumental

reason. The loss is the loss of an unmediated relation to Dasein or being. But how likely is it that we had a special relationship with Dasein and then lost it to a dominating technology? What is this Dasein and what does it have to do with one's attitude to modernity? Heidegger seems to indicate that modernity undermines the possibility of authentic Dasein. This would be a deep loss indeed if Heidegger is correct in his assessment of the importance of Dasein. But it is unlikely that Heidegger is correct. Human perceptions and orientations to the world come from senses that evolved from systems for something else. They are askew to the world. There is nothing like a perfect fit between organism and world. Evolution can work wonders, but design is not one of them.

The evolution of consciousness has yielded a phenomenal aspect to human life that is quite rich, but we would be wrong to think that other creatures don't also have a rich phenomenal life. It is true that they do not have a consciousness for which Dasein is a question, but that is a much higher level consideration anyway. This creates a dilemma for Heideggerians: If Dasein is basic, it is something that cannot be in danger from modernity. If it is a higher level consideration of a being living a middle class German life in Weimar Germany, then it is not so basic after all.

It should be noted that Weimar conservatives are responding to modernity at a very bad time. Weimar Germany was wracked by the Versailles Treaty and subject to overwhelming inflation and unemployment. I believe that part of the negative reaction of Heidegger and others to modernity is because in their view it was ill serving them and because economic and political woes tended to reinforce the groundlessness. Rosner, to be fair, notes this economic and political dimension, but I think much more needs to be made of it. One thinker conspicuously missing from many discussions of modernity, including this one, is Marx. Marx too addresses modernity and provides an answer: unalienated labor. Marx would argue that the meaning of human existence is to be found in unalienated labor, labor that fulfills Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic in which the slave (laborer) wins the ultimate recognition through the embodiment of the laborer's ideas in material (or ideal) reality.

The problem with the Marxian answer is similar to the problem with Heidegger's, namely historical refutation. Stalinism and Maoism discredited Marxism as a real option for modernists just as Nazism did much to discredit Heidegger. But we can separate Marx's account of alienated labor from his theory of history and the theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat. We need a "small" Marxist answer to modernity, a Marxist answer shorn of its grand narrative clothing. A "small Marxist answer" to modernity is to find a way of making a living that is not only adequate to one's needs, but personally fulfilling.

Marx also gives us a better and less confused understanding of the relationship of consciousness to technology than Heidegger. Heidegger imagines modern technology

to mark a major break with previous forms, but he also imagines that technological reason to be a necessary result of the metaphysics of presence, which Heidegger traces back to Plato. What Heidegger misses is the extent to which the evolution of technology and of humanity have been complimentary. We started becoming human when we began making stone tools, and the tools made us smarter, made us more than we were. We became more human yet when we acquired the tool of language. We have been in the process of becoming fully human ever since, and our relationship to technology has been incredibly important at each stage. Marx is right that the history of the social forms can be understood partly as a result of changing technology. Marx's understanding of technology is therefore more consistent with contemporary archaeological and anthropological understandings which link cognitive development with tool use.

Marx also provides us with a start towards a response to tradition. Marx, like Hegel, is a historical thinker. Understanding any form of life must first place that form of life in its historical context. This aspect of Marx's philosophy supplies an empty spot in Nietzsche. Nietzsche never came up with an adequate way of engaging with tradition and history when creating values anew. There is no view from nowhere. Both Hegel and Marx knew that we must start from somewhere. Unlike Marx, however, I would avoid economic reductionism and look for the lessons to be derived from key periods and episodes of intellectual history. Like Habermas,^{vii} I read history as a learning process. We can build meaning from a view of history.

The conservatives of German philosophy and Weimar turned recently discovered existential truths into starting points for the conservative critique of modernity. But those same existential truths are sometimes taken as liberating, as they were by Nietzsche. In fact, one could argue that the Nietzschean response is more appropriate to the premise of nihilism—the idea that there are no objective values. But the choice between the Nietzschean and Conservative responses in a given person might very well ride on how good or bad his or circumstances have been recently. The Conservative is the person who, when thrown in the water, senses nothing to hang on to and drowns, while the Nietzschean just starts swimming. Yes, it is true there is no firm spot on which to stand, but that does not mean we cannot get from point “a” to point “b.”

The critique of modernity consists in the fact that it does not supply a replacement for the loss of meaningful values that comes with the modernist victory over pre-modernism. But what counts as meaningful? If the only thing that will count as a meaningful value is one that has the status of the former eternal verities, then no, modernity cannot supply that. However, part of modernity's message is a call to a greater humility. We are not eternal souls on trial before God for our actions and thoughts over a lifetime. Human life is not so grand as that.

We are simply human beings with 70 or so years to come to terms with our finitude. And that's it. What does any single human life matter in the cosmic scale of things? Not very much at all. But it matters a bit, if only to ourselves. And it is that humble bit we must first accept if we are to come to any proper understanding of things. That is what Nietzsche learned from Darwin. But this is precisely what Conservatives cannot do. They want that loud, low bass note on the root of the chord signifying resolution that says they are important, of even cosmic significance. They want to be with God *forever* and they want to be at the center of God's perspective. And they want justice: they want the evil in the world to end in hell *forever*. And they want Truth: they want what is true in the past to be true *forever*. But our smartest, deepest thinkers have told us to settle for rather less than that. And many people are perfectly fine with a changing landscape, especially those directing the change or gaining by the changes, but also those who can ride the wave, so to speak.

Modernity can replace our former values with something much better anyway: a glimpse of some very powerful ways of looking at the universe, and boundless awe at what we see. Ask any scientist if their view of the universe does not inspire them to ecstatic heights of appreciation. The reason for their rejection is that they are asking modernity for something it refuses to supply. It will not supply the undifferentiated lifeworld and the magical feeling of tradition, the secure feeling of belonging that comes with the pre-modern, uncritical acceptance of one's social role. The problem is believing that an undifferentiated lifeworld and static social roles are good things. They are not.

Habermas characterizes modernity as the tripartite division of the lifeworld into three types of reason: scientific, aesthetic and moral. This has been the Enlightenment's self-understanding since Kant. The Enlightenment understood that it was a good thing to break Humpty Dumpty, as it were, into three pieces. Otherwise we will confuse our categories. But splitting the world this way took all the magic out of things. The German people wanted the magic, but they were unable to put Humpty Dumpty back together again. So were the German philosophers. But who needs Humpty Dumpty anyway?

David Rosner has written an excellent brief treatment of the critique of modernism in Weimar Germany, utilizing primarily the philosophical perspective, but also giving economic factors an important role in causing the groundlessness that the antimodernists reject. Working primarily with Heidegger, Rosner explains quite clearly why he believes modernism is deeply problematic. This work will be useful for students and researchers interested in the conservative critique of modernism. Although I have tried to show the mistakes of the conservative critique of modernism, Rosner is adept at presenting the conservative argument, and that makes the book a worthwhile read.

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