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The Age of the Individual: 500 Years Ago Today  
Session 2: The Impact of Individualism**

**Aspects of Modern Individualism and their Relevance  
for Capitalism**

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## **A. Introduction: Gallery of modern individualism**

This essay takes as its point of departure for review of the impact of individualism some comments on Max Weber's study, which is titled, "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" which was published in 1905. Beyond Weber's ascription of features of modern individualist capitalism to the rise of Protestantism, this essay suggests another source for individualism in the rise of modern science with special attention to the *Meditations* of Descartes. Whether with Luther, Descartes or later thinkers, attention is also focused upon the appropriate correlative opposite of individualism, which may be catholic, community, group, corporation, Geist, culture or other. This contrast is illustrated in several ways including the conflict between a rational ego of Kant and the collective ego or Geist of Hegel. Our last illustration in this series is the American and Columbia Professor of philosophy, John Dewey, in his book, *Individualism Old and New* of 1930. Dewey's effort to sustain traditional individualism while interpreting it for the new conditions for American society of 1930 suggests the need to sustain traditional individualism while seeking to extend it toward meeting the challenges of our own times.

An epilogue looks back to the significance of Luther's translation of the Bible into German for individualism and examines new themes in Biblical translation and the degree of their relevance for economics.

### **1. The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism**

At the outset of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber drew the important distinction between the traditional quest for gold and profit which has existed from time immemorial and economic spirit of persons who were committed to an "inner asceticism" which was combined with "this worldly" rather than an "other worldly" emphasis. The result of this "inner asceticism" for the individual person in its economic dimensions is two-fold. For those who possess property or capital, their moral virtue required a modest way of life with careful saving and prudent investment. For those who worked the land and for those who labored at crafts, their moral virtue required integrity

and responsibility in carrying out their work as well as probity in their private lives. In the Calvinist version of the Protestant Ethic, according to Weber, the wealth of an individual or his thrift and responsibility in his economic calling or vocation is a sign of divine grace. Weber argues that concomitant with the Calvinist doctrine that salvation for the individual was pre-determined, there exists the thesis that the economic success of the individual in this world provides a sign of whether he has been saved or not.

Luther's bold translation of the Bible into German provided the new possibility that the individual could read the Bible in his own language and interpret it according to his own individual way rather than depend upon or share in the communal interpretation of the Biblical text provided by the Priest, who read the authorized Latin translation.

An interesting speculation regarding the history of economics emerges from Weber's thesis as to the role of the new individualism in the transformation of the understanding of prices. The earlier theory of a just price proposed the possibility that a moral group or corporate body, like the Papacy, could set just prices for the goods of the society. The new ethic of individualism would suggest that the optimal price is set by the intersection between the offer supplied by the seller who seeks to maximize his return and the bid by the buyer who seeks to minimize his costs. Such an optimal price provides incentives for productivity, an increase of supply as well as incentives for reduction of costs and increase in demand. It may not represent a just price but it meets the criteria of rational choice for individuals and increases the potentialities for economic growth.

There is an apparent recognition of the dynamic growth of American capitalism by the turn of the century in Weber's reference to American "bigness" in his essay of 1905. Weber writes, "When the imagination of a whole people has once been turned toward purely quantitative bigness, as in the United States, this romanticism of numbers exercises an irresistible appeal to the poets among business men." This striking sentence of Max Weber indicates his creative approach toward casting the typology of business groups while it also demonstrates that his analysis is not buttressed by the data of economic history or the data of personal biography.

This identification of the quantitative growth of the American economy and the rugged or heroic individuals who were its leaders in the first decade of the century, was also indicated by another European observer of the American mind and spirit, George Santayana, who combined both the external insight of a European scholar with the internal knowledge of a resident of New England argued in his essay titled, “The Genteel tradition in American Philosophy” for the duality within American culture. Santayana describes the genteel tradition as an approach which recognizes “that sin exists, that sin exists to be punished, and that it is beautiful that sin exists to be punished.” Santayana considers the American mind as possessing an “agonized conscience.” This American mind metaphorically inhabits the colonial mansion, according to Santayana, while the American will, which realizes its expression in business metaphorically inhabits the American skyscraper and possesses the energy of Niagara Falls. Speculatively, this dualism between this mind and this will may be considered to be the key to the rise of American individualist philanthropy expressed in the several major private foundations and the several major endowed universities established shortly before and shortly after the turn of the century.

## **2. The *Meditations* of Descartes and the Origins of Individualism**

Modern individualism can trace its origins to the expression of religious individualism 500 years ago in accord with the insight of this conference but can also trace its roots back to the origins of modern science a century later. A heroic demonstration of individualism is available in the works and trials of Galileo while a striking illustration of individualism is found in the *Meditations* of Rene Descartes.

Like Luther, Descartes begins his meditation by questioning the doctrines of his Catholic education at what he refers to as the “excellent” La Fleche Jesuit College. Alone in his single chamber heated by a stove; Descartes begins his skeptical analysis of all his prior beliefs. He moves rapidly from doubting his own sensory experience to doubting mathematics and God. Yet, he cannot doubt that as a first person individual he is

doubting or thinking. It is this Cartesian first person self which is indubitable. Even if the world is completely illusory, his Cogito, or I think, like his Dubito, or I doubt, or his Epochi, I suspend judgment is undeniable. Neither sense, experience nor mathematics or God himself can force or coerce him to say something to be true which is false or declare something false to be true. As an individual self or thinking being, Descartes can suspend judgment even against an omnipotent demon deceiver. Descartes recognizes the power of his own individual mind but considers himself to be placed at that point in his meditation in an extremely isolated position.

Significantly, at the turn of the twentieth century, Edmund Husserl in his Cartesian meditations, considered this position to be the starting point for the phenomenology of consciousness and to lead to the analysis of the stream of consciousness, which became so important for the expression of the individualism in modernist literature.

Back in the room with Descartes he moved out of his isolation. Beginning with the idea of God in his mind he proved the existence of God and from this to confidence in mathematics and thus to a world of geometrical extension, which was the world according to Cartesian physics. From the individual consciousness of self, Descartes had realized a mathematical system of the universe.

There is a relevant footnote in the career of Descartes. As the founder of modern physics, Descartes was a celebrity who was invited to the court of Queen Christine of Sweden. At the conclusion of the thirty years of religious warfare in Europe, Descartes was requested by Queen Christine to compose the verses for the ballet in honor of the treaty of Westphalia in 1648. It is an interesting speculation as to the degree to which the rationalism of Descartes is reflected in the system of Westphalia. According to the Westphalia system, the doctrine of Just War as determined by religious authority, whether Holy Roman Emperor or Pope, analogous to the abandonment of Just Price Theory economics. Instead, wars are to be justified only if and when rational individual sovereigns or rational sovereign states are defending their security interests against aggression from other rational individual sovereigns or individual sovereign states. The

contemplated result was to be a peaceful balance of power among individual states without a global body for supervision.

### **3. The correlative opposites of Descartes and *Hamlet***

There is a measure of insight regarding the nature of individualism to be gained by considering the correlative opposites that have been proposed against Descartes' concept of *res cogitans* or mind. With intentional abusiveness, Gilbert Ryle referred to it as the concept of a ghost in a machine thereby omitting the ways in which mind is connected to brain and bodily behavior. In an alternative focus, Charles Peirce explicitly criticizes Descartes for the argument that science is based upon the intuition of individual minds. Peirce takes issue with a familiar theory according to which scientific progress is ascribed to the genius of individuals, although some individuals may stand on the shoulder of others. In this version Galileo's genius and tenacity build upon the thesis of Copernicus and are extended in the geometric physics of Descartes. Newton transforms the Cartesian physics so greatly that his epitaph reflects his individual monumental discovery. The epitaph reads "Nature and nature's laws lay hid in night\God said 'Let Newton be' and all was light." On this account of the progress of science, the individual genius of Albert Einstein moves physics forward beyond Newton.

For Peirce, in contrast to this version of the great individuals, science requires a community of inquiry in which different hypotheses are generated with the result that there are rejections of those hypotheses whose predictions are refuted by experiment and convergence by the community of inquiry upon beliefs in those hypotheses whose predictions are confirmed by experiment so as to realize progressively truer knowledge.

Surprisingly Shakespeare has provided in his portrait of the paradigmatically individual character of *Hamlet* an illustration of this criticism of knowledge, which is learned, from ghosts. Hamlet does possess an "agonized conscience" which seeks atonement with his dead father. He meets and speaks to the ghost of his father and has what James Joyce

referred to as a moment of atonement as “at-one-ment.” He agrees to carry out his father’s revenge by killing the murderer of his father.

Despite this spiritual “at-one-ment” which in contractual terms could be identified as a “meeting of the minds” Hamlet does not carry out the plan. In explaining his delay, Hamlet refers to specific parts of his body and their function rather than to his mind as determining his individual behavior. Thus he says, “...But I am pigeon-liver’d and lack gall, To make oppression bitter, or ere this, I should have fatted all the region kites, With this slave’s offal.”

Hamlet proceeds from this to the statement of his own doubts regarding ghostly apparitions even connecting these with weakness in mental states such as melancholy. Thus he says,

The spirit that I have seen,  
May be the devil: and the devil hath power  
To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps  
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,  
As he is very potent with such spirits,  
Abuses me to damn me....

Hamlet continues to suggest a kind of experimental predictive test by the actors in a play as immunity of inquiry which will confirm the guilt of Claudius: “...I’ll have grounds, More relative than this: the play’s the thing, Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king.” This reference to *Hamlet* admits the entry of the significant point that modern individualism which had religious origins and scientific origins was also developed in dramatic works like Shakespeare’s, and in Renaissance portraits like those of Rembrandt, as well as in the *Bildungs-Roman* and in the modernist impressionist novels like those of Henry James.

#### **4. The ego of Kant and the Geist of Hegel**

In the post-Lutheran development of German philosophy the correlative opposition of concepts that emerges most sharply is that between the rational ego of Kantianism and the collective ego or Geist of Hegelian thought. For Kant, the rational ego can assert a categorical imperative despite social culture or psychological inclination that is universalizable as a norm for all societies and all historical ages. For Hegel, the morals and institutions of every historical society are internally related to its Geist, that is its spirit, culture or ethos, and can be understood and evaluated only within its particular conceptual and linguistic framework.

When considering the newly discovered South Sea Islands of the Pacific and their way of life, Kant concedes the attraction of a life of pleasure and the activity of what he terms “propagation of the species.” Kant even accepts that this way of life does not violate the laws of nature and could be universalized for other societies. Yet Kant insists that no rational person could enter into this way of life since it would represent a contradiction of his rationality in that it would negate his future ability to exercise rational choice in the future by aborting the development of his own rationality. The argument represents an enlightenment theme that human beings cannot reject the practice of science without a destructive impact on their ability to make rational decisions about the future of their environment. For Hegel, in theory there would seem to be no reason why he ought not to recognize the Geist that is the ethos or culture in the anthropological sense of the South Sea Islanders even though his own historic examples are relativity among the Egyptian Geist, the Greek Geist and the European Geist. Yet, despite this cultural relativism, the Hegelian concept of dialectic proposes a historical progressivism in which there has been progress from the Egyptian Geist in which only one is free through the Greek Geist in which some are free to the European-Christian Geist in which all are free in the sense that all person would participate as citizens of the Nation-State.

With reference to economic individualism, Kant argues against the universalizability of private egoism in the marketplace while asserting that the setting of prices as rents or

wages is the subject of what he terms “private law” that is negotiation of contract between individual employers or employees or individual landlords and tenants. There is to be no intervention of public law or government other than the responsibility to enforce contracts or to guarantee that the currency of payment is not watered or debased. Hegel’s emphasis is upon the ways in which the economics, like the politics, of a society is relative to its Geist. This Hegelian insight was interpreted to broad appeal and an alternative outcome in Marxist economic historicism.

Despite their conceptual contrast both Kantian thought and Hegelian thought represented, each in its own way, the recognition of the achievement of European Individualism. In the Age of the Enlightenment, Kant contributed to the formation of the idea of the Enlightened rational self or individual including his thesis of “respect for persons” as a condition for the phenomena of moral behavior. Hegel contributed to the formation of the idea of the romantic self as a developing individual who is shaped by and participates in the historically fulfilling ZeitGeist, that is, the culture or spirit of his age.

### **5. Dewey on *Individualism Old and New***

John Dewey represented an extension of Hegelianism in that the focus of his concern was the interpretation, criticism and development of American culture while he also was the inheritor of the Universalism of Kantianism in that he believed that there existed a scientific method that was the sole method of gaining reliable human knowledge for all societies.

In his essay of 1930, titled *Individualism Old and New* Dewey argued that the traditional American Individualism, which he so greatly appreciated, had been partially eroded. The independent American farmer and the independent American craftsmen had become, by 1930, parts of a new corporate culture. The great traditions of American Christian society, which he appreciated, were cast in a partial conflict with the discoveries and methods of Darwinism and modern Science. Dewey called for a reconstruction of elements of the Old Individualism toward the emergence of a New Individualism.

The New Individualism would develop through the replacement of the authoritarian aspects of traditional education by the more democratic and individual-centered aspects of Progressive education. The New Individualism would be enhanced in the context of overcoming the negative impact of the Depression upon individual development through economic planning based upon an increase of social scientific knowledge including the science of economics. Similarly, the New Individualism would follow upon the improved social scientific knowledge of criminology and psychological knowledge of rehabilitation that would replace the punitive aspects of the judicial system. Thus the New Individualism could be considered as a reconstruction within a more democratic and scientific culture of the values of the older Individualism.

From the retrospective perspective of the eighty-seven years since *Individualism Old and New* was published, there seemed to have been several weaknesses in the Deweyan program.

Dewey's formulation of the record did not adequately take into account the resiliency and strength of the American religious spirit. Whether it was because of its rootedness within the structure of the American family or because of its connection to the American nationalist ethos or because of its function in the rights of passage including birth, marriage and death or for other reasons, America's religious institutions and traditions achieved a *modus vivendi* with scientific beliefs including Darwinism and with democratic institutions such that they have not eroded. Further, Dewey's optimistic belief in the progress of the social sciences so that they would replace either the operations of free markets through a planned economy or the practices of the judicial system through social psychological knowledge of human nature, proved excessive. Again, Dewey unlike the Protestant theologian of his own time, Reinhold Niebuhr, did not ascribe sufficient weight to the forces of regression and evil in history that surfaced so strongly in the twentieth century including the doubled edged application of scientific knowledge that had led Winston Churchill to declare during the U2 rocket barrage on England, that "the Dark Ages returned on the winged tips of science."

Yet, in conclusion the effort of the Deweyan vision merits recognition. It is the idea of maintaining and sustaining the major values of the Individualism that were realized in American culture in its earlier period as these were set against the Deweyan interpretation of the Aristotelian dictum of the “actualization of the potentialities of *man qua man*” so as to meet the challenges within American society posed by science and greater democracy which would include, for our time, the challenges of greater demographic diversity and a wider range of religious pluralism for the continuity and emergence of the New American Individualism.

## **6. Epilogue: Biblical translations, Biblical platitudes and All Souls Day**

In this commemoration of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation with its significance for Individualism and for the development of capitalism, it may be useful to note that the Lutheran and other Protestant translations of the Bible into vernacular languages so as to make possible the individual reading of the Biblical text have been augmented by increased knowledge of the historical background and the relevant languages providing a greater understanding of the cultural context of the Biblical texts and suggesting alternative readings. Three minor illustrations of these divergent textual interpretations are cited that also serve to provide a contrast with examples of three major Biblical platitudes that can be related to a constant understanding of economic behavior.

One such illustration is the emphasis on the Sinaitic covenant as representing a covenantal formula as in the Hebrew term “*B’rith*,” which is a word that is derived from the Akkadian word, “*B’rith*” as a term for “covenant” or “treaty.” An Akkadian “*b’rith*” like a Hittite Treaty is characteristically divided into three divisions. The first division identifies the party of the first part and the second division identifies the party of the second part. These are followed by the third part, which is a series of commandments or obligations that bind the two parties and represent the terms of this covenant as a permanent contract.

In the case of the Sinaitic Covenant, the first proposition is the declaration of the party of the first part as, “I am the Lord thy God who took thee out of the Land of Egypt, the house of bondage.” On this understanding, the party of the second part is identified in the context of the delivery of the Commandments but in accordance with the recognized covenantal form, the party of the second part could be identified as the vassal group which is referred to in the proposition that follows upon the first affirmation: “Thou shalt have no other Gods before me.”

These two statements are followed by a series of familiar commandments or obligations such as the commandment not to kill, nor to steal, to bear false witness, commit adultery, to covet thy neighbor’s house and so on.

The use of the term “*B’rith*” or “covenant” which Luther translates as “bund” raises difficulties in the translation of the Hebrew phrase “Ten Propositions” as “Ten Commandments” as well as in the Christian use of the term “Old Testament” rather than “Old Covenant.”

The translation of the Sinaitic Covenant as Ten Commandments appears to blur the covenantal nature of the Sinaitic Covenant in that the first proposition inscribed on the two tablets is not a commandment but the identification of God as the party of the first part.

The use of the word testament rather than covenant departs from the Akkadian word “*B’rith*.” It represents an application to the Sinaitic Covenant derived from the covenant with Jesus which was the Last Will and Testament of Jesus marked by the shedding of His blood. The parallel to the testament of Jesus was drawn through the shedding of the blood of the animals that were sacrificed after the Sinaitic Covenant. This provided a basis for comparison between the Old Testament of Law in obedience to the commandments and the New Testament of Faith through the crucifixion and redemption of Jesus.

A second illustration made use of the knowledge of the Egyptian language that was achieved centuries after Luther's translation. The Biblical text states that Adam was made in the image of God. Through the centuries the phrase that states that man is made in the image of God, had been used as a proof text for the equality of all human beings on the ground that each human being shared in the human heritage of having been "made in the image of God." Yet the students of Egyptian archaeology and language have pointed out that the phrase "made in the image of God" is a standard courtier expression of praise reserved for the Pharaoh who, alone, has been "made in the image of God."

On this linguistic comparison, the Hebrew phrase "Be Tselem Elohim Nivrah HeAdam" that is that the Adam was created in the image of God justifies the monarchist, rather than an egalitarian, interpretation in which Adam has been created by God in his own image to be the sovereign, "who rules over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air...over all the creatures that move along the ground."

A third illustration, nearer home, refers to the Biblical exegesis by the chairman of the Board of the Columbia Presbyterian Hospital at the turn of the century regarding the Biblical Commandment in Genesis: "with pain thou shalt bear children must be understood and carried out to the letter." The Chairman was a Fundamentalist, who believed in the literal interpretation of Biblical language with its commandments applicable to all believers in the Bible as the word of God. Thus the Biblical Commandment to women "with pain thou shalt bear children must be understood and carried out to the letter." Consequently, when chloroform was discovered and proposed as an anesthetic for the relief of pain during childbirth, he acted to hold up the use of its application at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital as a potential violation of divine command.

A scholar in Hebrew and Semitics languages was hired in the hope of resolving this problem by showing that the translation of the Biblical Hebrew term, "*Tsa'ar*" could be rendered, not as physical pain but as the anguish, worry and sorrow that is inevitable in the course of the having and rearing of children. Unfortunately, for this resolution, the

scholar who was selected carried out his assignment by comparing every use of the term throughout the diverse text of the Bible. The result was that the reference of the term was to physical pain so that the stay on the use of chloroform remained. Surprisingly, the issue was resolved when Queen Victoria permitted the use of chloroform for the birth of her granddaughter. After this precedent by the Queen, whose sovereignty included the title of “defender of the faith,” the chairman of the Board of Columbia Presbyterian, withdrew all opposition.

The significant point for Lutheran and early translations of the Bible is the consideration of the Bible as a unitary work representing a timeless and sacred word. Considering the developmental elements among Biblical texts as well as a literary or semiotic interpretation of the relationship among diverse texts of the Bible, it would be evident that there is a sharp demarcation between the Edenic context of the Bible and the Noahide, Abrahamic, Mosaic or later contexts of Biblical texts. Within the conditions of Eden, humans could eat the fruit of the garden without labor and the birth of Adam as well as that of Eve took place without pain. In the Post-Edenic periods this is no longer true. The fact that a sufficiently large trust fund could guarantee that a person could eat his daily bread from “cradle to grave” without labor by the sweat of his brow does not falsify but by its necessity actually proves the Post-Edenic condition that labor is required for human beings to eat. Similarly, the discovery and use of anesthesia would not refute but prove that the Post-Edenic condition involved a relationship between pain and childbirth.

The interpretations of Biblical texts by much greater reference to their historical contexts as well as to the literary context of each separate work marks a significant difference between the culture of contemporary Biblical translation and the culture of the New Individualism that marked the emergence of the Biblical translations of Luther and other Protestant’s five hundred years ago.

Despite the changes in the ways in which the Biblical texts are read, including the heightened individualism that Luther’s translation brought to the reading of the Bible,

there are three constant platitudes that have economic significance that can be identified on virtually every reading of the Biblical texts. These three concerns of economics comprehend in the first instance, the multiple references that can be used to justify private property and in the second instance, the significant references in justification of public taxation as well as in the third instance, diverse commandments for the practice of philanthropy.

The first of these concerns is the requirement that received new emphasis within the Protestant ethic that individuals are responsible for carrying out their labor effectively and for acting prudently with their persons and their property. Along these lines, one interesting quotation, from the *Song of Songs* is the following: “they have made me keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept.”

The contextual reference of this sentence may be to the failure of the beloved woman to guard or keep her own chastity or virginity. Further in the strong Anti-Judaic spirit that characterized some of Luther’s message, the phrase could be understood as the failure of the first bride, which was Israel, to keep its covenant with the divine groom.

Yet, the literal interpretation of the text calls upon the primary responsibility of a person who is responsible for guarding vineyards that he keep his own vineyard.

The aspect of private property is stressed in the original language with a double use of the possessive: “My vineyard (*karmi*) of mine (*sheli*) have I not kept.”

This emphasis on the keeping of private vineyards recalls the refusal of Naboth to transfer his private vineyard to the king. Naboth does not assert a natural right of property against a doctrine of eminent domain but declares that it would be a profanation of God for him to transfer to any other the landed inheritance of his forefathers.

Second, there is the recurrent theme in Biblical text of the legitimacy of taxation for State or public purpose. The prophet, Samuel, warns the people of the abuses that the king may exercise against the property and practices of persons in his ostensible effort to carry out his sovereign functions. Yet Samuel and the people agree on the necessity and

desirability of a sovereign including his ability to institute public taxation for the benefit of declared purposes of State.

Similarly, a relevant quotation of Jesus is often cited in justification of taxation even though its originating context is a situation of duress and it involves a direct reference to the image of Caesar on the coinage. That quotation which defends the collection of taxes is “render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.”

Third, there are numerous Biblical commandments for charitable action both of a general nature and of particular specificity that, in contemporaneous terms, would justify the philanthropic sector of an economy. One example refers to “gleaning” as the portion of the private property crop that is required to be reserved for the needy of the society. The practice of “gleaning” is expressed in several passages of the Bible and reverberates in Keats’ reference to the book of *Ruth* of which he writes, “... the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home, she stood in tears amid the alien corn.”

Although the poetry of philanthropy with its good intentions may stand in contrast with the more prosaic aspects of private property and of public taxation, from the Biblical text to our own times, each of these three sectors has some place in an economy. The Lutheran Reformation that was carried out just before All Saints Day brought with it a new emphasis on the significance of capitalism or the private sector. The philanthropic sector of that century cannot be considered completely virtuous with, a moral warning for other periods, when one recalls that the legal precedent in the English Common Law for the perpetuity of philanthropic foundations is the gift for a perpetual supply of green wood for the burning of witches.

A symbolic significance can be read into Luther’s choice of his posting on the day before All Saints Day, on which all Saints are assured of heaven to the following day’s title as All Souls Day, on which only some are assured of Heaven and some are not. In the 1950’s the challenge for those who aspire to membership in All Souls College by taking

the examination allegedly included answering the following question in the allotted six hours: “Is there a line? If so, how do you draw it?”

The drawing of the appropriate lines within the private sector, the public sector and the philanthropic sector as well as the appropriate divisions within each of these sectors marks a challenge that goes beyond the institutional boundaries of religion and philosophy to such new domains as the workings of markets, perhaps the guidance of economics and the decisions of rugged as well as eroded or fallible individuals.