



Humanum

Issues in Family, Culture & Science

BOOK REVIEW

Issue Two / 2021

Will the Thread Be Unbroken?

MICHAEL HANBY

Sohrab Ahmari, *The Unbroken Thread: Discovering the Wisdom of Tradition in an Age of Chaos* (Convergent Books, 2021).

These are worrisome times for all thinking people. The nihilism of these days is now too obvious to ignore, as all the once-solid realities seem to be melting away before our eyes. The digital conquest of time and space has dissolved past and future into a bland presentism. Actual places where people once met face to face have been obliterated in favor of virtual “spaces” experienced in isolation, a phenomenon well underway before the onset of Covid-19. The “creative destruction” of our techno-capitalist order is increasingly creating whole classes of obsolete people and desolate places, leaving many homeless as well as rootless. With the “death of God,” the modern world exchanged hope for optimism, but now the objects of this false hope seem to be failing us. Liberal democracy seems to be rapidly transforming into a totalitarianism less obviously violent, but more total than any that has preceded it. Our technology no longer seems to be our servant and is rapidly becoming our master, in ways too numerous to count. The relentless dynamism of technological change creates a yawning chasm between each new generation and those that preceded it, who can hardly be said to inhabit the same world. Radical new political ideologies negate human nature, human reason, even the very language by which we recognize a world in common, revealing the nihilistic essence of modern freedom and confirming that the “death of God” leads ineluctably to the destruction of his image within ourselves.

This bleak picture is even more worrisome, or should be, for parents of this generation: perhaps the *last* generation to have lived some portion of its life without a permanent connection to the internet from birth or parents of the first generation not to. What kind of people will our children become? What will they see, and how will they think? Will they *be able* to think? How will they live humanely in a *posthuman* world?

Concern for the fate of a civilization rapidly consuming itself forms the backdrop to *The*

Unbroken Thread: Discovering the Wisdom of Tradition in the Age of Chaos by Sohrab Ahmari, an Iranian émigré, Catholic convert, and editor of *The New York Post*. But the book is most profitably and appreciably read through the paternal concern for the fate of Ahmari's young son.

Through the foggy nihilism of our present age and in very different figures across the ages, there remains imprinted on the human heart the traces of a wisdom not our own, calling out to us through the fog of our ennui, meaninglessness, and confusion and binding the human race together by an unbroken thread.

This paternal concern brackets the interior substance of the book that otherwise defies genre, which is another way of saying that Ahmari aspires to perform several tasks simultaneously—not all, it must be admitted, with equal success. Readers familiar with his online *persona* will recognize between the lines a manifesto of sorts for traditionalist Catholicism and the “common good conservatism” he is helping to create. On the lines the book aspires to offer something of an intellectual history while also posing and answering questions such as “Is God Reasonable?” or “What is freedom for?” that are irreducibly philosophical or theological: And each of the questions that form the theme of the various chapters—twelve in all—are addressed through biographical vignettes drawn from an eclectic collection of historical figures from Seneca, Confucius, Augustine and Aquinas, to C.S. Lewis, Andrea Dworkin and Hans Jonas.

Ahmari is neither a philosopher nor a historian by trade, however. He is a journalist. He is also quite obviously an intelligent, thoughtful, and well-read man. It is no insult to him to point out that journalism as a thought form is not really adequate to adjudicating some of these questions. Journalism is a form of empiricism requiring no special competence from its practitioners beyond the application of its method. Its animating conceit is that the world lies transparent before the method, which transforms the world into a collection of self-evident facts requiring no further intellectual penetration. Consequently, journalistic reason as such cannot really enter into philosophical or theological questions from the inside to reason out whether they are true or false according to their own principles without becoming something other than journalism, namely, philosophy, theology, or history. We are human before we are journalists, and humans are philosophical animals, so it is quite natural that we should pose these sorts of questions. Nevertheless, as a thought form journalism carries with it the inevitable temptation to treat difficult questions of truth as simplistic questions of fact and to pronounce with a kind of empirical authority where one should instead be thinking.

Ahmari, at times seems to succumb to this temptation. The answers to the questions that provide the themes for the various chapters are true, wise, and largely unsurprising. Yes, God is reasonable. No, sex is not (just) a private matter. Freedom is not simply for doing what one pleases but for following the moral law. Of course one should not simply disregard all authority and think for oneself, especially since this is hardly possible. But the conclusions are sometimes better than the arguments used to advance them. And not all the organizing questions are equally well formulated or get to the heart of the issue Ahmari wishes to explore. “Is sex a private matter?” hardly goes to the core of modern confusion about sexuality; nor does sexuality's susceptibility to the *libido dominandi* exhaust relevant Christian teaching on this question. The whole chapter feels like something of a missed opportunity, driven by the goal of bringing Andrea Dworkin into alignment with St. Augustine. Much could have been

said about the objectivity of human love, how its reality affirms a world of objective truth and goodness in defiance of our nihilism, or about the profound meaning of procreation and childhood, a surprising omission considering the paternal tenderness that animates so much of the book.

Readers who possess detailed knowledge or professional competence in philosophy, theology, or history are likely to be left wanting when they encounter their own areas of expertise. I caught myself momentarily rooting for Ockham while reading Ahmari's all-too-easy treatment of medieval and modern nominalism. Readers who are not already inclined toward Ahmari's traditionalism may not find the question "Is God reasonable?" convincingly answered by the fact that a thirteenth-century Dominican friar thought so. And Ahmari's journalistic method (and contemporary political concerns) occasionally produce cringe-worthy anachronisms, like when he writes of *The City of God*, "The overarching problem had to do with God and politics. To wit, did government have a role in promoting faith?"

On the other hand, readers may discover that they enjoy the most Ahmari's treatment of the figures they know the least. I found his sympathetic treatment of Dworkin to be particularly poignant, along with his portrayal of Rabbi Heschel in his chapter on the Sabbath and Howard Thurman in his chapter on human dignity. If *The Unbroken Thread* shows the limits of the journalistic craft, it also amply displays its highest virtues. Ahmari is a gifted writer. His prose is unfailingly clear and occasionally beautiful. Each of his biographical vignettes is compelling in itself and in its own way, and yet they are still more compelling in their ensemble effect. Whatever the philosophical, theological, or historical limitations of his journalistic method, Ahmari's humane, sensitive and sympathetic depiction of this subject is a success in powerfully illustrating his central point. Through the foggy nihilism of our present age and in very different figures across the ages, there remains imprinted on the human heart the traces of a wisdom not our own, calling out to us through the fog of our ennui, meaninglessness, and confusion and binding the human race together by an unbroken thread. This wisdom is the source of life lived abundantly even now, and therefore a great gift to Ahmari's children and ours. May it forever remain unbroken.

