

HOW JOSEPH DE MAISTRE READ PLATO'S LAWS

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Abstract: Maistre's *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg* is modeled on Plato's *Laws*. Plato and Maistre both demand the political control of natural inquiry, and implement these controls through theodictic conversation. Maistre, following the lead of Plato's legislator, publishes an exemplary conversation about providence between a young man tempted by an atheistic Enlightenment and two older, wiser, and more learned men of affairs. Maistre defends providentialism from materialist interpretations of natural science even as Plato defended it from ancient materialism.

I

Form and Argument in Theodictic Politics

Joseph Marie Comte de Maistre (1753–1821), a Savoyard diplomat and magistrate, was an influential critic of the French Revolution and its claims to realize a new, naturalistic, 'science of man'. When, in *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg, ou, entretiens sur le gouvernement temporel de la Providence* (1821), Maistre set out to give his final statement on divine justice in the temporal order, and thus of the place of theodicy in human reflection and action, he looked not to any Christian author, but to the literary and philosophical model of Plato's *Laws*.²

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² Maistre's Platonic readings have not gone unnoticed in the literature. At the end of his long essay, 'Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism', the late Isaiah Berlin wrote that the social structure which Maistre advocated 'derived from Plato's Guardians in the *Republic* and the Nocturnal Council in the *Laws* at least as much as from Christian tradition; it has affinities with the sermon of the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's famous parable'; Berlin, 'Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism', in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, 1997; originally published London, 1990), p. 174. The connection to the Grand Inquisitor is one of the last calumnies against Maistre in Berlin's essay: the Grand Inquisitor defends religion as the preservative of the received social order, while Maistre is as much a defender of received disorder as received order, and quotes with approval not just Bishops and Cardinals but also Seventeenth Century charismatics and mystics such as Madame Guyon. The connection to Plato is, as I shall show, an entirely different matter, and if one follows it up one discovers a very different Maistre from the proto-totalitarian of Berlin.

Robert Triomphe describes Plato's influence on Maistre in these words: 'Platon inspire la politique, la métaphysique, et la religion maistriennes'; see Triomphe, *Joseph de Maistre: Étude sur la vie et sur la doctrine d'un matérialiste mystique* (Geneva, 1968), p. 415. Triomphe discusses Maistre's Platonic citations (pp. 415–27), but without focusing on the formal and doctrinal analogies between the *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg* and the *Laws* that will be my concern here. Owen Bradley has argued for Maistre's debt to the

Maistre learned from Plato that the effort to explain and defend God's governance over the human and natural world is itself a political act: Maistre and Plato speak of divine providence in order to inspire and motivate men. In talking to a young sceptic, Plato's Athenian Stranger (the legislator for a new state) is explicit that questions of the gods' existence, their providence, and their relation to human entreaties are political concerns of the first order: 'It is necessary for the one laying down these laws to try to teach you in these [divine] matters, as they stand.'³ The sin of the Eighteenth Century, according to Maistre, is precisely the failure to theodiceize, the failure to ascribe the blessings of civil order to God's concern and love for His creatures. To speak of God's providence in chastising human beings for forgetting Him is not merely to explain events but to repair the very failure that brought down His wrath upon them.⁴

The *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg* is a work written for three voices, who are brought on stage in the sunlit after-dinner hours of a St. Petersburg summer: the Count, spokesman for Maistre himself (or Maistre's views as of 1809), aged, experienced, extraordinarily well educated in science, philosophy, literature, and theology, an outspoken enemy of empiricism in philosophy and of atheism in religion, and a foreigner stationed to perform diplomatic duties in St. Petersburg; the Senator, also aged, is Russian Orthodox by religion, illuminist by conviction, less familiar with and more prejudiced against science and philosophy, a native of St. Petersburg and an official in its government. Finally, the Chevalier, a military officer, is a French émigré aristocrat, better read in Voltaire than in Latin or Greek authors or even the great preachers Bossuet or Fénelon, the son of a pious mother whom the Count knew and greatly admired.

Plato's *Laws* also consists of a conversation among three participants of different origins and characters. The *Laws* is set on Crete, on the edge of the Greek world even as St. Petersburg is portrayed as the edge of the European world. The three interlocutors are all old men ascending on the longest day of the year to the shrine of Zeus. They are first, the Athenian Stranger, philosophically sophisticated and apparently Plato's own spokesman in that dialogue, corresponding to that extent to the Count of the *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*; Kleinias, the only native Cretan of the three, a local politician of some importance in Knossos, corresponding to the Senator; and *Laws* as a work of 'political anthropology' rather than political theodicy; see *A Modern Maistre: The Social and Political Thought of Joseph de Maistre* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1999). Bradley correctly perceives that Maistre learned from Plato to emphasize the ritual elements in political life. Yet for Maistre, as for Plato, the theological claims about divine governance that those religio-political rituals represent are of fundamental political importance.

³ *Laws* 888d.

⁴ Maistre, *Considerations on France* [*Considérations sur la France* (1797)], ed. and trans. Richard A. Lebrun (Cambridge, 1994), p. 48.

Megillus, a Spartan, and therefore a warrior, who is in those respects similar to the Chevalier, a foreigner, and a warrior. The *Laws* has twelve books, just as the *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg* has twelve dialogues, counting the fragmentary one.⁵ The conversation in Plato's *Laws* discusses the founding of and legislation for a new colony, but it turns out that such political establishments must comprehend religious life, and their goodness must be defended not only by appeal to the truths of human nature but to those of divine providence as well. The *Laws* is cited repeatedly by the Count and once, indirectly, by the Chevalier. Maistre made about one-hundred pages of notes on the *Laws* in 1809, the approximate dramatic date of the *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*.⁶

The *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg* is a work of great formal complexity, and is at the same time incomplete. In its major part the *Soirées* purports to be eleven discussions among three speakers: the Count, the Senator, and the Chevalier, with a concluding discussion that is a monologue by the Count, and a written elucidation on sacrifices ('Eclaircissement sur les sacrifices'), which the Count acknowledges as his writing.⁷ In other monological works of Maistre (for example in the preface to the 1814 edition of the *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques*) certain expressions of the Count, both from the text of the *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg* and from its companion piece the 'Eclaircissement sur les sacrifices', are cited as the author's own. Yet in these as in all writings whose primary purpose is practical rather than expository one must always hold open the distinction between the author's intentions and the author's expressions. In Maistre's case this is especially important because the works he published in his lifetime were supposed to be published anonymously, which gave the historical Maistre the opportunity to construct an authorial persona that he did not have to live in all respects.

For the appropriately prepared reader, parallels to the *Laws* come at once from the very beginning of the *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*. Early in the first *entretien*, the Count invokes his parents as minor gods: 'Sometimes, like an innocent magician, I evoke the venerable shades that once were for me terrestrial divinities and that today I evoke as tutelary geniuses.'⁸ As Lebrun notes,

⁵ Though for Maistre the *Laws* has thirteen books, since he counts the *Epinomis* as *Laws* XIII. See, e.g., Joseph de Maistre, *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg, ou, entretiens sur le gouvernement temporel de la Providence*, edited under the direction of Jean-Louis Darcel, 2 vols. with continuous pagination (Geneva, 1993), p. 298 n. 11; *St. Petersburg Dialogues, or Conversations on the Temporal Government of Providence*, ed. and trans. Richard A. Lebrun (Kingston and Montreal, 1993), p. 153 n. v. Enumerating the 'Eclaircissement sur les sacrifices' with the 'entretiens' will bring the number of divisions in the *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg* back up to thirteen, matching Maistre's enumeration of the books of the *Laws*.

⁶ Bradley, *A Modern Maistre*, p. 92; Triomphe, *Joseph de Maistre*, p. 415 n. 102.

⁷ See *Soirées*, pp. 467–8, 487 n. 22; *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, p. 270 and n. 18. The 'Eclaircissement' is printed in the first edition (Paris, 1821) at the end of the second volume.

⁸ *Soirées*, p. 89; *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, p. 7.

these shades are Maistre's deceased parents. The Athenian Stranger of the *Laws*, for his part, legislates the reverence of parents as the most important form of reverence to household deities (*Laws* 930e–931a). Like Archbishop Fénelon writing *Télémaque*, Maistre does not hesitate to present a Christian teaching under the aegis of pagan divinities.

No doubt, Maistre's departures from Plato's *Laws* are as important as his imitations. Plato's Kleinias is if anything the most materialistic or 'sophisticated' of the three speakers of the *Laws*, whereas the Senator is voluble in expounding his mysticism and mythology — both, however, see war as the fundamental condition of man.⁹ Megillus is an old and somewhat chauvinistic defender of his country's customs, whereas the Chevalier is young, and more than half-tempted by his country's enthusiasm for the overthrow of custom in favour, supposedly, of reason. Insofar as the *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg* continues the project of Plato — 'the human preface to the gospels', Maistre calls Plato's writings — it does so only in part, if in very important part. Most of the *Laws* is political in a way that very little of the *Soirées* is political. The *Laws* is devoted largely to the discussion of particular institutions and especially laws, indeed, the discussion of the gods and their providence occurs in the context of a discussion of penal law.

The *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg* is a defence of the dogmas and rituals of Catholicism against materialist atheism and against illuminism, even as the theological speech of the Athenian Stranger in book X of the *Laws* defends the religion of his 'new-model city' against the materialist inquirers into nature and against the superstitious invocations of magicians and mystery-cults. The addressee of the Athenian Stranger's defence of divine providence over human affairs is an imaginary young man who is attracted by the supposed sophistication of the materialists. This young man is taken with their claim that the laws of his and every city are founded only in human art, not in nature, for this claim supports his tyrannical aspirations to wield power in his city without the restraints of law.¹⁰ In the *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg* that addressee is present in the person of the Chevalier, who admires what he knows of Voltaire. The Chevalier comes dangerously close to endorsing the Enlightenment project to replace faith in divine providence, and prayerful entreaty for its solicitude, with the complete and unbounded rule of human reason over nature and custom.

The young French Chevalier is bedevilled by the conflict between two received opinions on matters theodictic, first, that individual virtue is rewarded, and second, that crime profits in this life.¹¹ Yet his longings are not wholly spiritual, and Maistre, like Plato, sees a continuity between religious and sexual passions. In the *Laws* the sexual code, which alone must be hal-

⁹ *Laws* 625d–626b.

¹⁰ See *Laws* 888a, 900c, 905c.

¹¹ *Soirées*, pp. 201–3; *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, pp. 85–6.

lowed and attributed to a divine origin, are defied by a 'young man full of sperm'.¹² Maistre's Chevalier enjoys society, that is to say, mixed company, and its pleasures, but he is tempted from them by theological conversation.¹³ As the conversations move on, the Chevalier's passions are sublimated to the extent that, as he himself tells us, he will for the first time in his life go to sleep thinking of David and his Psalms.¹⁴ Yet he is still prone to sum up a theological contention by envisioning a choice between the superstitious sister and the logical one.¹⁵ Not for nothing does the Count intone in the eleventh *entretien* that 'The young man who masters his eyes and his desires in the presence of a beautiful woman is a greater thaumaturge than Moses.'¹⁶

The problem Plato faces in the *Laws* is to explain how man's government can imitate, manifest, and, an atheist would say, replace divine providence. His Athenian Stranger finds the answer in legislation founded in a science of the human soul that comprehends an account of the gods, their knowledge of human affairs, and the proper way to worship them. In the *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, the revealed religion and its inherited tradition substitute for the impossible science of the human soul. For the Count we have sufficient knowledge of the soul's nature to know only that it is divided between good and obedient, and evil and wilful longings, and that our knowledge of the world and our understanding of language cannot possibly be explained by the empiricism of Locke and Condillac. Yet insofar as our need for irrationally grounded authority is itself rationally comprehensible, Maistre does not depart decisively from the old rationalism of the Platonic and Aristotelian traditions.

II

Theodicy and Science

Plato and Maistre share a common recognition that atheism becomes a political problem as an effect of the scientific or philosophic inquiry into nature. In particular, the natural philosophers of Plato's time and the materialists of the Eighteenth Century both sought to reduce all sensible and imperceptible motions to the mechanical motions of self-moving matter. Divine and human actions are alike denied explanatory force beyond what is empirically observed: only materialistic causality is to be admitted, according to the 'wise modern scholars' of both the Greek and the French Enlightenment.¹⁷ Referring no action to the divine First Cause, both sophists and *philosophes*

¹² *Laws* 838d, 835c, 839b; see Michael S. Kochin, 'The Unity of the Virtues and the Limitations of Magnesia', *History of Political Thought*, 19 (1998), pp. 125–41; *Gender and Rhetoric in Plato's Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 112–30.

¹³ *Soirées*, p. 204; *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, p. 87.

¹⁴ *Soirées*, p. 418; *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, p. 238.

¹⁵ *Soirées*, p. 522; *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, p. 305.

¹⁶ *Soirées*, p. 564; *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, p. 333.

¹⁷ *Laws* 886d, 'Τ ν ν ων κα σοφ ν', cf. *Apology* 19c.

substitute secondary, wholly material causes. The modern Enlightenment, unlike its ancient predecessor, fought to popularise its materialist doctrines. Faith in divine providence and fear of divine wrath are thus attenuated even among those brought up on the proper pious dogmas, and finally eliminated from the population at large.¹⁸

Both Maistre and Plato demand the political control of natural inquiry to mitigate its subversive political effects.¹⁹ One should not confuse this demand for control with a devaluation of natural inquiry in its proper place, however. The regimes of Plato's *Republic* and *Laws* are unprecedented in their incorporation and maintenance of philosophic inquiry within the regimes themselves. Maistre, too, sees natural science well used as a support for true religious ideas: he claims that Catholicism alone among the Christian churches can survive the acid bath of science.²⁰ Theodictic conversation is itself a device for implementing these controls on the political élite's understanding of science. Maistre, like the legislator in the *Laws*, publishes an exemplary conversation about divine providence between a young man tempted by the atheistic (or 'practically atheistic') Enlightenment and two older, wiser, and more learned men of affairs.²¹

The Count begins his answer to the Chevalier by distinguishing between the general law and the accidents that befall particular individuals. This enables Maistre to defend injustice to the individual as an aspect of general providence over the whole. Yet the Count, unlike the men of the Enlightenment, will not deny particular Providence. He will maintain the dignity of the individual within the whole.²²

To maintain that the world is governed by laws which generally speaking are good in the light of the whole and only accidentally bad for individuals, the Count must contend against deterministic accounts of causality, which would render free will meaningless and impute responsibility for all evils to the Creator. The Count must also contend against possibilism, against the view that God could will anything that we can imagine, for such a doctrine

¹⁸ On the disappearance of fear of God even among ultra-orthodox Jews see Haym Soloveitchik, 'Migration, Acculturation, and the New Role of Texts in the Haredi World', in *Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, ed. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago, 1994), pp. 212–6.

¹⁹ See Joseph de Maistre, *An Examination of the Philosophy of Bacon: Wherein Different Questions of Rational Philosophy are Treated*, ed. and trans. Richard A. Lebrun (Kingston and Montreal, 1999), pp. 272–3.

²⁰ Joseph de Maistre, *Du Pape*, ed. Jacques Lovie and Joannès Chetail (Geneva, 1966), book IV, chapter ii, pp. 305–6; *The Pope: Considered in his Relations with the Church, Temporal Sovereignities, Separated Churches, and the Cause of Civilization*, trans. Aeneas McD. Dawson (London, 1850), p. 305.

²¹ See *Laws* 811c–812a, 817bc, 885b, 888a, 907c–d.

²² *Soirées*, pp. 96–8; *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, pp. 12–13. Cf. *Laws* 903bc, 905b; Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, part III chapter 13.

would once again imply that every innocent who suffers could have been exempted.²³

The Count's alternative to determinism is a phenomenalist reinterpretation of modern science. In Maistre's view natural science is not a causal account of material phenomena, but merely correlates secondary phenomena like the motion of the moon with primary phenomena like gravitation. Our age, says the Count, is an age in which men 'rise painfully from effects to causes, in which they even concern themselves only with effects, in which they say it is useless to concern oneself with causes, and in which they do not even know what a cause is . . . If man could understand the cause of a single physical phenomenon, he could probably understand all the others'.²⁴ Physical theories do not give us physical causes, Maistre argues, for the appeal to a law of nature to explain a generally observed effect is not a causal explanation but the restatement of the fact in a more general and abstract form.²⁵ The general version of the fact puts the fact in its proper general perspective, which is often of great use, but it gets us no further toward understanding why the general event occurs.

The paradigm of causal explanation is moral causation: Why is Pierre bleeding, we ask? Because Jacques punched him in the nose. Why did Jacques hit Pierre? Because Pierre insulted him. Nothing in our stories about opium or the motion of the moon answers to 'Why?' in the same way that we can answer the relevant questions about Jacques and Pierre. To claim, therefore, that natural science can provide causal explanations of the motion of matter in the same way that ordinary experience can provide causal explanations of the motions of Jacques' fist is to use the word 'cause' in two very different ways, as has been noted since Aristotle. Maistre's move is to deny that we can make sense of the use of the word 'cause' in 'the motions of the moon are caused by the universal law of Gravitation'. The universal law of Gravitation describes the motions, Maistre argues, it does not cause them, just as an increase in the census count registers but does not cause an increase in the counted population.

Science, says the Count, strives to describe and classify the phenomena, relating secondary effects to 'known primary effects that we take for causes'.²⁶ As Maistre writes in the *Examen de la philosophie de Bacon*, 'If human science had only the knowledge of causes as its goal, it would be irreparably worthless, since we know not one . . . To reduce science to the knowledge of causes is to discourage man, it is to lead him astray, it is to stuff out science instead of making it grow'.²⁷

²³ Cf. Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, part III, chapter 17.

²⁴ *Soirées*, p. 137; *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, p. 39.

²⁵ *Soirées*, pp. 272–3; *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, p. 134; see also *Examination*, pp. 243–9.

²⁶ *Soirées*, p. 274; *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, p. 135.

²⁷ *Examination*, pp. 54–5.

While this view is not very familiar today, it does have a distinguished lineage: from Maimonides, Copernicus and Newton to Duhem in the last century and the contemporary philosopher of science Bas van Fraassen.²⁸ As Maistre himself notes, the hypotheses of Copernicus aspired to describe the phenomena, not to offer a physical explanation of them.²⁹ Newton's Gravitational Hypothesis, similarly, was understood by Newton — if not by all of his followers — to provide no physical cause for gravitational attraction, but simply to describe it. In Maistre's view it is 'theophobia' or *théomisie* — denial of God's existence and providence — that prompts the causal interpretation of modern natural science, since this interpretation purports to replace the appeal to the divine will as First Cause with a detailed account of natural causation that renders God and his Providence superfluous for the maintenance of the observed natural order.³⁰

Maistre does not aim at giving an original interpretation of Newtonian science — precisely the opposite, he wishes to unravel the *Lumières*' claim to Newton's mantle by appealing to the authentic views of Newton himself.³¹ Having demonstrated the distance between Newton and his self-proclaimed Enlightenment followers, Maistre argues that the Enlightenment adoption of the causal interpretation of Newtonian science was motivated not by deference to science but by dogmatic atheism.

III

Platonic and Maistrian Theodicy Contrasted

Until now I have stressed the way in which the form of Maistre's theodictic discourses imitates Plato, and the way his phenomenism is deployed for the Platonic purpose of defending Providentialism from atheistic materialism. There are, however, crucial differences between the Maistrian and Platonic defences of divine providence.

First, Platonic theodicy is directed strictly to the individual.³² The legislator composes persuasive preludes or 'preambles' to his laws in order to convince individual dissenters or deviants that submission to the laws is submission to

²⁸ Pierre Duhem, *The Aim and Structure of Physical Theory*, trans. Philip P. Wiener (Princeton, 1991); Bas van Fraassen, *Laws and Symmetry* (Oxford, 1989); and especially van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image* (Oxford, 1980).

²⁹ *Examination*, p. 79 n. 32.

³⁰ *Soirées*, pp. 279–83; *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, pp. 139–42; *Examination*, p. 163.

³¹ *Soirées*, pp. 297–8 n. 11, 580 n. 15; *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, p. 152 n. v, pp. 342–3 n. vi; *Examination*, pp. 191–2; for Newtonian pronouncements that support Maistre's reading see, e.g., Sir Isaac Newton, *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, Definition VIII, in *Sir Isaac Newton's Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy and His System of the World*, ed. Florian Cajori, trans. Andrew Motte (Berkeley, 1971), vol. I, pp. 5–6; cited in van Fraassen, *Laws and Symmetry*, p. 350 n. 14.

³² See e.g., *Laws* 903b–905d, and compare *Gorgias* 523a–527e, likewise addressed to the individual.

the gods.³³ The laws invoke the gods to guard the city against the danger that the tyranny of men might replace submission to the laws.³⁴ Plato's Athenian Stranger uses religion not to keep the masses in line but to dissuade the young of wealthy and well-born families from being corrupted by Sophistic materialism. The danger is that these few, promising young men will be tempted to put aside all political or legal obligation to pursue power and pleasure, as their social position frees them from fear of men and their atheism from fear of the gods. For this reason, the Athenian Stranger introduces a law about the dissolution of the regime directly after those that deal with the gods: 'Whoever leads the city toward human rule enslaving the laws . . .' In the city of the *Laws*, to attempt tyranny is to commit sacrilege, and hence the judges of tyrannical sedition are those who judge temple robbery; treason, too, is a kind of sacrilege.³⁵ In the *Laws*, the gods are invoked by the preludes to protect those who lack human protectors: strangers, orphans, and the elderly.³⁶ The Nocturnal Council communicates with the single religious dissenter, applying theodicy as a remedy amidst the more ordinary punishments of the criminal law.³⁷ One can say of Plato's theology and its public teachers what Maistre quotes as true of the Protestant minister of his day: 'The state no longer views them in any other light than as officers of police.'³⁸ In the *Laws* there are some slight acknowledgments of divine election or punishment of cities and their peoples, as in the divine good fortune that moderated the Spartan regime by bringing about the dual kingship.³⁹ Yet there is no extended effort to put such election into a framework of justification, as the Athenian Stranger does in *Laws X* with regard to divine providence toward individuals. To use the language of Maimonidean theodicy, the election of peoples in Plato's view is a matter of divine will, not of divine wisdom. Maistrian theodicy, by contrast, justifies divine providence over not only the individual but whole nations and civilizations.⁴⁰

Plato encounters a world of élite materialist enlightenment and at the same time popular superstition. The Nocturnal Council must tame the aristocratic

³³ *Laws* 716a–718a, 762e; and see especially the religious appeals that accompany the sexual regulations (838b–839d).

³⁴ See *Laws* 856b.

³⁵ *Laws* 856.

³⁶ *Laws* 729e–730a, 926d–928a, 930–32.

³⁷ *Laws* 885, 907d; on this point see Leo Strauss, *The Argument and The Action of Plato's Laws* (Chicago, 1975).

³⁸ *Du Pape*, book III, chapter iii, p. 265; *The Pope*, p. 267.

³⁹ *Laws* 691d.

⁴⁰ See *Soirées*, pp. 129–132, 169–71 (*St. Petersburg Dialogues*, pp. 34–5, 68–9). In the *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, divine providence over the nation receives much less attention that it does in the *Considérations sur la France* or in the *Essai sur le principe générateur des constitutions politiques* (1814), and divine providence over the individual receives much more attention.

young and keep out the foreign sophists who would flatter these young men's abilities and liberate them from the constraints of their pious education. The laws and the magistrates will have to keep the religious practices of the populace from ostentation or mad excess. Magicians, necromancers, and soothsayers must be expelled.⁴¹ The cult of the dead must be chaste and austere: funerals and tombs should not be too elaborate, and public and private devotion to the gods of the underworld must be restrained.⁴² In the city of the *Laws* there are to be no private shrines or cults, except for the homage that sons and daughters owe to their aged parents.⁴³ If one prays, one must have the wisdom to pray for the right things, the Athenian Stranger pronounces — it is unclear what harm comes from not praying at all.⁴⁴

For the Count, the spirit of the Eighteenth Century is the spirit of practical atheism, whose first corollary is the denial of the effectiveness of prayer.⁴⁵ Prayer, he says, is valuable in itself, as submission to the kingship of God.⁴⁶ Popular superstition is no threat in Maistre's eyes. Plato's Athenian Stranger legislates for a regime or *politeia* in which public participation is still crucial, even if that participation is attenuated compared to democratic regimes.⁴⁷ Maistre, for his part, is a partisan of monarchies and so neither expects nor demands much from the people. Even the guardians of the *Republic* make greater efforts to instil salutary opinions in the populace they rule than Maistre would think necessary or desirable.⁴⁸ For Maistre, it is no great matter if those who are distanced from affairs fail to maintain a merely reasonable degree of religiosity, and one suspects that one whose admiration for the cult of the Saints borders on syncretism would not hesitate to defend any element of popular Catholic ritual.⁴⁹ The Chevalier refers in passing to one of the *Laws*' key passages on religious restraint, but the 'Editor' of the *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg* finds this passage simply unintelligible!⁵⁰

Yet the Count confronts elite superstition in the form of Illuminism, represented in the *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg* by the Senator.⁵¹ Against the

⁴¹ *Laws* 908.

⁴² *Laws* 958e–960b; see 717a6 with the commentary of E.B. England, *The Laws of Plato* (Manchester, 1921).

⁴³ *Laws* 909e, 930e–931e.

⁴⁴ *Laws* 687c–88c ff.

⁴⁵ *Soirées*, pp. 239–40, 247; *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, pp. 111–2, 117.

⁴⁶ *Soirées*, p. 312; *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, p. 162.

⁴⁷ See e.g. *Laws* 751a–758a, 814c, 942.

⁴⁸ See e.g. *Republic* 401bc, 414d.

⁴⁹ See the peroration on the Pantheon in Rome at the end of *Du Pape*, book IV, chapter XI, section XVIII, pp. 360–3; *The Pope*, pp. 365–9.

⁵⁰ See *Laws* 955e–956b; *Soirées*, p. 543 n. 50; *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, p. 307 n. 32.

⁵¹ On the hold that Illuminist views had over the court of Czar Alexander I at which Maistre served as Sardinian ambassador, see Paul Johnson, *The Birth of the Modern: World Society 1815–1830* (London, 1991), pp. 110–4.

Senator, the Count maintains that 'we know nothing of spiritual things', and distinguishes between the vain speculations of contemporary illuminists and the useful inquiries of metaphysics and theology.⁵² 'I thank God for my ignorance even more than for my knowledge', the Count exclaims regarding the tenets of illuminism, 'for my knowledge is my own, at least in part, and in consequence I cannot be sure it is good, while my ignorance, on the contrary, at least that of which I am speaking, is from Him, and so I have all possible confidence in it'.⁵³ The Count speaks repeatedly of the division of the self familiar to us from Plato, Paul and Augustine, but the Senator envisions the dissolution of the self in some higher unity.⁵⁴ In the end, both Plato and Maistre want a *via media* between superstition and atheism. As the Count puts it: we want 'to walk firmly at an equal distance between illuminism and scepticism'.⁵⁵

Theodicy, Platonic and Maistrian, is not the task of justifying the ways of God to human beings so much as the task of justifying the ways of God to different types of people. Theodicy is therefore inherently dialogic — in Maistre, as in Plato, form and content are one. The Chevalier, though a young man with atheistical tendencies, seems to have been persuaded to return to orthodoxy by the Count's defence of divine providence. As I argue in the Appendix below, there is substantial reason to identify the Chevalier with the fictional 'Editor' whose notes frequently appear. If this hypothesis is correct, not only was the Chevalier persuaded, but also he devoted a substantial part of his maturity to compiling a learned commentary upon the conversations he heard and transcribed in St. Petersburg.

IV

Conclusion: Scholarship and Politics in a Post-Theodictic Age

Maistre's defence of divine providence was not intended for a remnant of believers in an atheistic world, but for a counterrevolutionary élite that would save the states of Europe, from Russia to Ireland, for Catholic Christianity. His writings were to suffer a perverse fate in the secularised public world that overwhelmed his efforts: Maistre's rhetorically florid portrayals of society as an economy of violence and sacrifice, when separated by men like Donoso Cortes and Charles Maurras from his providentialism, helped to undermine or prevent the consolidation of democratic regimes in France, Spain, and Argentina.⁵⁶

Maistre's heirs failed to turn his defence of inherited dogmas into a defence of inherited democratic dogmas. One can say that they wrought havoc not

⁵² *Soirées*, p. 508; *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, p. 295.

⁵³ *Soirées*, p. 518; *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, p. 303. See also the Count's attack on modern Cabala; *Soirées*, p. 491 n. 45; *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, p. 284 n. vii.

⁵⁴ *Soirées*, pp. 498–9, 505; *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, pp. 287–8, 293.

⁵⁵ *Soirées*, p. 528; *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, p. 309.

⁵⁶ See Alberto Spektorowski, 'Joseph de Maistre, Donoso Cortes and Argentina's Catholic Right' (Tel Aviv University, Department of Political Science, typescript).

because they were too Maistrian but because they were not Maistrian enough: they did not dilute Maistre's attack on the Enlightenment with his acknowledgements of 'legitimate usurpation', and they failed to apply to modern democracy his dictum that any form of government 'is good wherever it is established'.⁵⁷ Maistre himself was ever cautious about actually existing consolidated republics.⁵⁸

This partial, godless, revival of Maistrian thought and the old prejudices that it defended has served in the past to undermine the necessary prejudices of democracy. One can say of Maistre's heirs what Maistre himself said of the men of the Enlightenment:

A man indulging his individual reason is dangerous in the moral and political order precisely in proportion to his talents. The more wit, activity, and perseverance he has, the more deadly his existence. He only multiplies a negative power and sinks into nothingness.⁵⁹

One therefore wonders if the appropriation of Maistre to undermine functioning modern republics ought to be blamed on the Devil. It is true that Maistre's ideas, when secularised by his heirs, proved pernicious. As John Courtney Murray writes, 'Maistre was unable to repudiate the scoundrels who were one day to claim him as their master'.⁶⁰ Is that Maistre's fault, or does the degeneration of Maistrian political theodicy into Maurrasian Fascism merely illustrate his claim that human reason undisciplined by submission to God is bound to be poisonous?

The fate of Maistre's writings may therefore indicate the most serious difficulty for contemporary readers of Plato who hope that their scholarly labours will clarify our political situation. In nearly all modern democratic states, built on secular or atheistic foundations, religion has lost its former utility as a support for public order. From the example of the modern Maistrisians, such as

⁵⁷ See 'On the Sovereignty of the People', p. 140; Joseph de Maistre, *Essay on the Generative Principle of Political Constitutions and Other Human Institutions* in *On God and Society*, ed. Elisha Greifer, and trans. with the assistance of Lawrence M. Porter (Chicago, 1959), p. xxx; Richard A. Lebrun, *Throne and Altar: The Political and Religious Thought of Joseph de Maistre* (Ottawa, 1965), p. 66. Helpful on this point is Carl Schmitt's discussion of Donoso Cortes in *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Theory of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, MA, 1985), pp. 51–2. Bradley rightly stresses Maistre's efforts to moderate the counter-revolutionaries' hopes from a Bourbon restoration and his refusal to join the Ultras in denouncing the Charter; see *A Modern Maistre*, pp. 216–30.

⁵⁸ Contrast Maistre's doubts about the stability of the new American Federal government, 'this babe-in-arms', with his slightly earlier defence of the established republics of Berne and Venice; *Considerations on France*, pp. 35, 60–61; 'On the Sovereignty of the People', pp. 138–41.

⁵⁹ 'On the Sovereignty of the People', p. 104.

⁶⁰ John Courtney Murray, 'The Political Thought of Joseph de Maistre', *The Review of Politics*, 11 (1949), pp. 63–86, p. 86.

Maurras and Donoso, we could learn to make Plato 'modern' by glossing over the numerous and lengthy theodictic passages in the dialogues from the *Apolo-gy* and *Gorgias* to the *Republic*, the *Timaeus*, and the *Laws*. We may indeed succeed in making Platonic texts resonate with our students and readers.

Yet, as we are reminded by Maistre's theocentric reading of Plato *Laws*, such 'godless' Platonic readings are problematic scholarship. At the end of the Athenian Stranger's exposition of the regime of Magnesia — 'or whatever name the God makes up for it' — Kleinias says that in actually founding the regime 'it is in every way necessary to follow the path along which the God has guided us, as it were [*schedon*]'.⁶¹ Impressed, perhaps, by the distinction between divine guidance offered by the Bible and the divine guidance 'as it were' that Plato illuminates, our scholarship has left Plato's religious teaching largely unexpounded. As the maleficent impact of the modern, secularised, Maistrisians shows, there is no guarantee that the bowdlerization of a theocentric writer — his theodicy excised to conform to our atheistic prejudices — will yield a salutary political teaching.⁶²

Appendix: On the Composition of the *Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*

To understand how Maistre read Plato's *Laws* it is necessary to grasp both the drama and the form of the *Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*. In this drama the notes have a place that is more than merely subservient to the text they supplement. In addition to the speeches assigned to each of the three characters of the *Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*, there are at least three classes of notes in the first edition.⁶³ These are:

1. The footnotes (and a few endnotes)⁶⁴ to each dialogue ascribed to the 'Editor' of the *Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*.
2. The footnotes to each dialogue that are not so ascribed.
3. The endnotes printed at the end of each dialogue without ascription.

⁶¹ *Laws* 968b, 969a.

⁶² The abyss between the humanism of classical scholarship (in which humanism I would include nearly all Plato scholarship) and the theocentrism of Christianity is pointed out by Sister Blanche in a deliberately provocative commencement address in J.M. Coetzee's recent work of fiction *The Humanities in Africa* (Munich, 2001). As Coetzee shows, a glimpse of this abyss does not disturb post-Christian academics, so much as make them squirm in their seats from discomfort at the *faux pas* of the speaker who reminds them of it.

⁶³ The distinction between the footnotes and the endnotes as printed in the first edition is preserved more carefully in Lebrun's translation than in the recent critical edition by Darcel, wherein all the notes are run together at the end of each *entretien*. All notes in the first edition that are not marked therein as '*Note de l'Editeur*' are marked with '(*J. de M.*)' in Darcel's edition, thus conflating the question of these notes' supposed authorship within the text with their 'real' authorship by Maistre; for a striking example of the artificial difficulties this conflation raises see Darcel's note c. to *Soirées*, p. 228 n. 31.

⁶⁴ E.g. *Soirées*, pp. 371–2 n. 142, 427 n. 108, 489–90 n. 42, 492 n. 47, 492–3 n. 50 (*St. Petersburg Dialogues*, pp. 203–4 n. xxxii, 242 n. xiv, 283 n. v, 284 n. viii, 285 n. x).

To my knowledge there is only one cross-reference between the sets of notes: there is one note of type 1, an ‘Editor’s note’ that refers to a note of type 3.⁶⁵ There is a note of class 2, an unascrbed footnote that dates itself to ‘more than ten years’ after the conversation among the Count, the Senator, and the Chevalier took place.⁶⁶ Moreover, there are numerous cross-references to other places in the text in the footnotes, but none in the endnotes.⁶⁷

Assuming that the Editor enters the stage last, these considerations suggest that the notes to the *Entretiens* can be ordered into three layers, 3 2 1. But who is the ‘Editor’? And who is speaking in the notes of types 2 and 3?

When a work of formal complexity draws attention to its own composition, one must always pay the closest attention. At the beginning of the eighth dialogue the Chevalier admits that he has been writing down the conversations, leaving wide margins in anticipation of corrections and supplements from the Senator and the Count.⁶⁸ I propose that the notes of class 3 represent such supplements. The vast bulk of these notes are added to the statements of the Count and the Senator, and I would argue that just as the views of these two can be distinguished in the text, the Senator’s illuminism from the Count’s more orthodox Catholicism, so too can they be distinguished in the endnotes. As Lebrun states, some of the footnotes ascribed to ‘the Editor’ were certainly written by Maistre himself.⁶⁹ I, for my part, see Maistre’s inimitable style in all of the ‘Editor’s notes’ that are more than a word or two, even when, according to Darcel, the hand in the manuscript is that of another.

Some of the unascrbed footnotes, too, refer to the Count’s or the Senator’s speech as though the speaker were distinct from the author of the note — but no such reference is made to a speech by the Chevalier.⁷⁰ Others, like the unascrbed endnotes, seem to belong to the speech and the speaker who is anno-

⁶⁵ *Soirées*, p. 301 n. 34; *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, p. 148 n. 18.

⁶⁶ *Soirées*, p. 196 n. 104; *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, p. 67 n. 68.

⁶⁷ See e.g. *Soirées*, p. 454 n. 4; *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, p. 246 n. 4.

⁶⁸ *Soirées*, pp. 429–30; *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, pp. 243–4.

⁶⁹ As Lebrun states, ‘Discussing possible publication of his *Soirées* with De Place, Maistre mentions points that could be “cast into the notes of an imaginary editor”’; Richard A. Lebrun, *Joseph de Maistre: An Intellectual Militant* (Kingston and Montreal, 1988), p. 342 n. 7; and see also pp. 259–60. Though the *Soirées* was published posthumously, there is no reason to believe that any part of the text was authored by another. Even when the manuscript shows another hand, the style and thought reflect Maistre’s dictation; on the role of Maistre’s daughter Constance, whose hand is present in the manuscript, see Darcel, ‘Genèse et publication des *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*’ in *Soirées*, p. 18.

⁷⁰ See e.g. *Soirées*, p. 262 n. 23; *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, p. 114 n. 14, where the annotator comments on the anecdote the Count tells concerning Copernicus: ‘I know nothing of this fact’. See also *Soirées*, pp. 373 n. 156, 454 n. 6, 587 n. 27 (*St. Petersburg Dialogues*, pp. 197 n. 115, p. 249 n. 6, 332 n. 14); and, for such a note on a speech by the Senator, *Soirées*, p. 539 n. 28 (*St. Petersburg Dialogues*, p. 298 n. 19).

tated.⁷¹ We might therefore distinguish in class 2 those unascrbed notes that continue or supplement the words of the speaker and those that emend or reply to them. Call the former 2a, the latter 2b.

The simplest hypothesis is that the Editor who speaks in the notes of class 1 and the anonymous 'I' of class 2b, are both identical with the Chevalier, not the Count. The account of how the conversations came to be written down suggests that it is the Chevalier who edited these conversations. To my knowledge, the editor never refers to a statement made by the Chevalier in the third person, while he does do so to both the Count and the Senator.⁷² Of course, and to repeat, all of these voices, however many we finally number, including the Senator, the Chevalier, the Count, the Editor, and the 'I' of the unascrbed footnotes, are creations of the historical Joseph Marie Comte de Maistre.⁷³

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⁷¹ See e.g. *Soirées*, pp. 370 n. 137, 424 n. 87 (*St. Petersburg Dialogues* pp. 192 n. 100, 233 n. 77).

⁷² For such notes on speeches of the Senator, see *Soirées*, pp. 228 n. 31, 427 n. 103 (*St. Petersburg Dialogues*, pp. 94 n. 20, 237 n. 88); on speeches of the Count, *Soirées*, pp. 266 n. 36, 353–4 n. 21, 356 n. 41, 358 n. 52, 362 n. 75, 362 n. 81, 365 n. 98, 368 n. 123, 368–9 n. 128, 488 n. 28, 488 n. 32 (*St. Petersburg Dialogues*, pp. 120 n. 25, 165 n. 15, 168 n. 32, 171 n. 41, 177 n. 59, 178 n. 65, 182 n. 79, 185 n. 88, 189 n. 94, 274 n. 23, 275 n. 27). The apparent exceptions to this rule, where the 'Editor' refers to the speech of the Chevalier as though it were the speech of another man, occur at *Soirées*, p. 543 nn. 49–50 (*St. Petersburg Dialogues*, pp. 307–8 nn. 31–32). These, however, are notes to a speech made by 'Commander M.', which the Chevalier reports to the Count and the Senator in direct quotation. Thus, it is not the Chevalier himself whom the 'Editor' corrects as though another man were speaking, but 'Commander M.'

⁷³ This paper was presented at a panel on 'Joseph de Maistre's Critique of Enlightenment Political Science' at the 1999 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association. I would like to thank my fellow panelists Ronald Beiner (in whose Toronto seminar on Maistre the germ of the paper was first presented), Christopher Blum, and Alberto Spektorowski, as well as Kalev Pehme, Paul Gottfried, Andrew Patch, Irad Kimhi, Andrew Janiak, Anna Kochin, and the editors of *Polis*, for their comments and corrections. Research for this paper was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Postdoctoral Fellowship, a Metcalf Fellowship from Victoria College, and an Alon Fellowship. I would also like to acknowledge the help of the staff of the Interlibrary Loan Department of the University of Toronto's Robarts Library in sifting through the early printings of the *Soirées*, and the generosity of the State University of New York at Buffalo Library in lending their first edition.