

# The City of Tears

*By Christopher Litwin*

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**Ancient philosophy offered consolation for loss, separation, and death. Modern philosophy no longer does so, considering that it should limit its role to the quest for truth. This renunciation has, according to Michaël Föessel, deep consequences for our current politics and their lack of any broader perspective.**

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Reviewed: Michaël Föessel, *Le Temps de la consolation* (The Time of Consolation), Seuil, 2015, 378 p.

So easily could ancient philosophy present itself as offering consolation that this word even referred to a philosophical genre in its own right<sup>1</sup> Opening his book with an acknowledgement that this genre has disappeared, Michaël Föessel argues that modern philosophy has renounced its power to console. But this does not mean that philosophy no longer relates essentially to consolation; rather, it now does so in a very different way. The causes of this renunciation and their consequences for modern understandings of consolation are the questions addressed by *Le Temps de la consolation* (The Time of Consolation).

## **“The Grief Which Expresses Itself in the Hard Saying that ‘God is Dead’”<sup>2</sup>**

If consolation still interests modern philosophy, it is because philosophy regards it with suspicion. If misused, consolation is like an anesthetic that, by displacing our sorrow onto imaginary compensatory objects, turns us away from the pain of loss or separation, making our

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<sup>1</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. V. E. Watts, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1969.

<sup>2</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1977, 455.

lives dishonestly bearable. Such “diversion” places us in a duplicitous condition that neutralizes the potentially subversive effects of social suffering and sorrow, depoliticizing us to boot. If this suspicion has, at least since Marx, been directed at religion (the “opium of the people”), it also applies to contemporary rhetoric about therapy, whether it be the injunctions of psychological discourses encouraging us to be “resilient” in the face of sorrow (“to seek closure”) or the commercialization of philosophy in stores specializing in spiritual wisdom, aimed at consumers desperate for meaning. These pseudo-therapies articulate, in fact, logics of subjectification (*assujétissement*) which, rather than recognizing the experience of desolation for its ability to touch us in the depths of our being and to appeal, in this way, to our freedom, interpret it as a passing disturbance of our normal condition, to which patients, once their grief has subsided, will hurriedly return.

Thus the book does justice to the modern suspicion of consolation by considering Pascal, Marx, Heidegger, and Foucault, but it is careful in each case to examine whether such critiques condemn consolation in all its forms. For if modern philosophy cannot critically accommodate an idea of consolation that escapes the logic of duplicity and false consciousness, then, faced with the experience of separation in its various forms, we would, according to Föessel, be locked into a choice between two even more problematic alternatives. The first is the melancholy of the inconsolable. It interprets all consolation as dispossession of the sorrow that still clings to the lost object and thus to the being it once was. But by so doing, it closes itself to the future. The contrary alternative is reconciliation. It consists of two forms: *restoration*, in which knowledge of the original identity is assumed and the irreversibility of loss denied, and *overcoming*, in which a new identity is acquired that can deny the negation of loss yet while eroding consciousness of our finitude. Faced with the alternative between a melancholia of the inconsolable and the doubtful promise of reconciliation, we must, according to Föessel, situate our political horizon in what he calls the “time of consolation.” Such are the stakes of a “politics of consolation.”

## **An Anthropology of Consolation**

According to Föessel, the modern rupture that initiates the abandonment of consolation as a philosophical genre does not preclude philosophy from considering consolation as a universal anthropological phenomenon. It is possible, from this perspective, to discover its “grammar.” Consolation is always, he suggests, characterized by an *object* and a *method*.

This *object*, as Föessel demonstrates in his beautiful reflections on Saint Augustine’s tears, does not consist so much in dispelling the sorrow of those we console as in alleviating (*suppléer à*) their sense of separation and loss by opening them, through gestures, words, and consideration, to a sense of community. The point is to bring about a shift, a transition. To use Rousseau’s language, we feel comforted when that contraction of existence that occurs in desolation—the inexpressible violence and solitude that initially characterize the experience of

loss—is replaced by the expansive sweetness of a sentiment of communal existence (*sentiment de l'existence*). The suffering of loss is, in this way, neither abolished nor relativized, nor is separation itself forgotten. Rather, it is replaced (*suppléé*): its interpretation is displaced through the time in which this community of existence opens up.

The *object* of consolation is inseparable from a *method* that can also be characterized by a rhetorical trope: *metaphor* (on this point, Foessel owes much to Ricœur and Derrida): “By displacing the literal meaning, it creates a figurative sense that, by renaming the object, makes it possible to experience it in new ways” (74). The rhetoric of consolation is metaphorical because literal meanings have failed, in the face of separation and desolation, to produce the effect of a “supplement” (*supplément*), that is, to displace the sufferer’s perception from the incommunicable violence of their loss to the recognition of a new community present in separation. Confronted with the desolation of the loss of a loved one, consoling words will, for example, displace a literal meaning (death as absolute separation) onto a metaphorical one, which reinscribes the life of the departed into the community of the living and admits them into communion of the human race: the deceased “rests in peace” even when this metaphor is based on no actual knowledge. Thus Jean Genet, “devastated by the death of his lover, who was killed by the Germans during the Liberation of Paris, ... explains how, to his great surprise, the solemnity of the burial comforted him a little.” The priest’s words, which was also the voice of society, may have been “the most complete contradiction of the vagrant, thieving, and pederast writer... Genet felt an irrepressible ‘friendship’ for this priest ‘who allowed Jean to leave [him] with the regrets of the entire world’ (113).

But Jean’s entry into the metaphorical community to which the priest’s words opened the door depended on a lie about his own life that Genet, at war with society, would see as a betrayal. Thus if the “displacement” of consolation implied the substitution of a literal meaning for a figurative one, consolation functions and lasts only to the extent that knowledge does not reveal the illusion to be a lie.

## The Modern Rupture

Ancient philosophy could present itself as a form of consolation without fear that some knowledge would unveil the lie of its figurative discourse because the “displacement” that it sought to effectuate was itself a movement towards knowledge, in which Platonism, Stoicism, and Aristotelianism recognized “what is most pleasant and best”<sup>3</sup> in intellectual, divine, and immortal life. Philosophy could thus represent the soul that experiences separation as a remembering of the unique space from which the soul, in its union with the body, has exiled itself, namely pure intellectual life. The power of this idea spontaneously generates in the soul of the philosopher a consoling opinion<sup>4</sup> that displaces the sense of death as separation in order to

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<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W. B. Ross, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1924, 12.7.1072b 23-30.

<sup>4</sup> See Plato, *Phaedo*, 66b.

represent it as the place from which truth fully manifests itself that remains inaccessible as long as the soul remains alienated in the body. Philosophical life thus consists in preparing this return of the soul to the immortality of pure thought—that is, in “learning how to die.” This consists, needless to say, of nothing more than an opinion, a consoling hope; not of philosophical knowledge,<sup>5</sup> but of an opinion immanent to philosophical practice. Of course, not all ancient philosophy, by any stretch of the imagination, made reminiscence (like Platonism and Stoicism) a metaphor for knowledge. Yet this objection is a minor one, for Fœssel’s argument is not to claim that the consolation genre was found in all ancient philosophy, but only to show why a genre that was possible in Antiquity no longer is in modern times.

Modern philosophy’s renunciation of its consoling power is thus primarily the result of a crisis in the paradigm of knowledge. As the objectivity of modern science is no longer conceived on the model of intellective knowledge, the reason of the moderns is no longer the power to dispose the soul to the good, and, consequently, in keeping with the analogy between the government of the soul and the city, to the political community’s power to govern. The revelation of truth by the objective knowledge of the moderns no longer produces a naturally consoling opinion for the soul, and the metaphorical register of *reminiscence*, which was also that of ancient philosophical consolation, can no longer adequately represent the way in which the experience of knowledge affects the soul. The modern model of the objective knowledge of phenomena does little, if anything, to console man of his unhappy condition: “the transcendental subject from which modern philosophy begins has become too critical to be consoled” (167).

In these conditions, not only does modern philosophy offer no consolation as such, but it also constantly critically interrogates the metaphorical expedient of a form of consolation that no longer emanates from knowledge. Thus suspicion is directed at any consolation in which comfort is acquired only at the price of being “diverted” from an objective truth that we cannot face. Described this way, Pascal would seem to be the epitome of modern suspicion (115-122). Yet on original though highly debatable<sup>6</sup> grounds, Fœssel rejects this view, as Pascal does not so much suspect all consolation (faith excepted) of being a “diversion” (*divertissement*) as he asserts it. If Pascal can make this assertion, it is because he assumes that “the state from which man fell” is already known (121), since humans, in their misery, have a way of recognizing the signs of their past greatness. In this way, Pascal “places Socrates’ teaching about reminiscence in Christianity’s service: the truth and happiness that I believe I lack has, in fact, been merely forgotten” (129). Thus the flaw in Pascal’s critique of all human consolation (faith excepted) as

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<sup>5</sup> While Socrates seemed to have demonstrated the “immortality” of the soul in *Phaedo*, the possibility remained that it was “destructible” (88b).

<sup>6</sup> Contrary to what Fœssel claims, Pascal does not need knowledge of our past grandeur to formulate his critique of the logic of diversion that human consolation (with the exception of the Christian faith) obeys. It is enough for him to show that consolation belongs to a logic of avoidance and excuse-making from which pathological normativity arises. In reality, it is in fact the analysis of distraction that should open the unbelieving reader of the *Pensées* to a hermeneutic (rather than knowledge) that reveals the signs of man’s greatness in his very misery, a hermeneutic that for Pascal is Christian consolation itself. There is, moreover, something very surprising about Fœssel’s refusal to acknowledge Pascal’s Christian hermeneutic (129), which gives such an important role to the *figuration* of truth and the believer’s *stultitia* (and thus to illusion)—his own “grammar” of consolation.

“diversion” is not that it is too modern, but that it is not modern enough, as it is based on knowledge of what we lack (God, from whom we are separated) but which eludes objective knowledge.

Thus we can see the emergence in Pascal of what Föessel sees as the main theme of the modern critique of consolation. This critique assumes the perspective, in a sense, that Pascal adopts in the *Pensées*, but refuses to interpret the sense of separation and absence that makes us seek consolation as the knowledge or memory of some unity or the presence of what we have lost. In fact, Föessel insists, the modern paradigm of knowledge is characterized by a kind of suspicion of memory: for when we seek to explain our present situation, we seek the causes in our past, we naturally tend to reread the past in the light of our present, as if the latter announced itself in it: “Antiquity’s idea of consolation through memory rested on the conviction that the past was sheltered from the curses of the present. Adorno maintains, to the contrary, that memories are inevitably contaminated by current distress” (161). If this is so, how can we console ourselves through the reminiscence of what we have lost, if this memory is itself suspected of falsifying our knowledge of that from which we feel separated?

To clarify the idea of a “consolation of the moderns” that breaks with the framework of reminiscence, Föessel offers two examples: Kantian philosophy (186-196) and Hobbes’ artificialist theory of political representation. We can only consider the latter, which strikes us as less expected but also more problematic.

Consolation means the shift, through figurative rhetoric, from a state characterized by solitude, violence, and non-communication to one in which a sense of community compensates for, without abolishing, the misery of the initial separation. It is not difficult to recognize the separating violence of the Hobbesian state of nature in Föessel’s description of this initial condition. Yet the distinctive trait of modern consolation is to compensate for the state of separation with a figurative substitute without relying on the recollection of a past community. Furthermore, there is in fact no trace of a past or latent community in Hobbes’ state of nature, and the use of a figurative substitute to compensate for a state of nature in which the traces of a lost community cannot be discerned is precisely the function of the sovereign *representation*, which, through the social contract, puts an end to the separating violence of the state of nature: “Politics responds to the desolation of the state of nature because it identifies the authority through which the human world becomes possible” (203). It reactivates no lost original community, but produces artificially, on an underlying bedrock of human solitude, non-communication, and violence, a figurative substitute for the community that compensates for the modern loss of belief in the political body’s substantive unity.<sup>7</sup> Thus Hobbes assigns a “consolatory role to the state which, in a vein that is hardly alien to his thought, one could without paradox call ‘the providential state’ [i.e., the welfare state, *l’État-providence*]” (203).

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<sup>7</sup> Hobbesian science does in fact destroy substantialist interpretations of the political body of Christian political theology (the kingdom as “mystical body”) and replaces it with an artificialist and mechanistic political body. On this point, Föessel refers to Philippe Crignon, *De l’incarnation à la représentation. L’ontologie de Thomas Hobbes*, Paris, Garnier, 2012.

## Objections

In a style that is always lively as well as rigorous, which blends clarity of expression with penetrating intuition, *Le Temps de la consolation* is a rich and fascinating philosophical work that makes the attentive reader want to mark up each page. It is in this spirit that we raise the following objections.

The first concerns the brilliant reading of Hobbes' politics that we have just summarized. It runs into a difficulty that Föessel recognizes without dwelling upon it: "Hobbes is not a theorist of consolation *stricto sensu* ..., the word does not appear in his work" (200). Clearly, Hobbes' political philosophy, by showing "that a community must not be conceived as a [mystical] body, but the outcome of human convention with no theological basis" (205) replies in a way to the "retreat of the God of history" (207), and it is for this reason that Föessel sees it as a "a system of representation that can be interpreted as consolation for the loss of the communal body" (207). Yet it must be acknowledged that in the Hobbesian system, men, by producing a community through a pact of association that puts an end to the violence and solitude of the state of nature, in fact lose nothing for which they must be consoled. Unless one reads the Hobbesian state of nature or state of war as the misery of the human condition in God's absence—in other words, in a theological manner that would perhaps be better suited for Pascal's politics—there is in fact *nothing* in Hobbes of which we must console ourselves for having lost, either in the state of war or the civil state.

Föessel's analysis would have benefited from drawing on Rousseau's Second Discourse, in which, without evoking theology or the assumption of an original community, the transition to the civil state through its successive modifications of man's original nature is a much better example of "modern consolation." The solitude and lack of communication found in Rousseau's state of nature are paradoxical in that they both represent the happiest possible condition for man, prior to the awakening of the social passions, and the most terrifying state of deprivation and separation that civilized man can imagine. Thus there is indeed an original loss of which the civil state must console, but it is something that we cannot aspire to find again, and it is in no way an original community. Föessel's choice of Hobbes over Rousseau as the epitome of political thought that exemplifies "modern consolation" is all the more surprising in that Föessel's idea of a "grammar" of consolation owes so much to Derrida's *Of Grammatology* and thus to Rousseau's concept of the "supplement" (*supplément*).

Our second objection concerns Föessel's rather terse assertion that the ancient idea of intellectual knowledge and what he calls the "subjectification of (and through) truth" becomes "secondary in modern philosophy." By equating the subject in modern philosophy with the transcendental subject, is Föessel not brought to read the history of modern philosophy through Kant's distorting lens? Readers of Spinoza and Hegel will have a hard time accepting this claim—as they should. Surely the third kind of knowledge discussed in Book 5 of the *Ethics* and Hegel's idea of absolute knowledge recall to some extent the ancient ideal of intellectual life. And how can one say, in Hegel's case, that the "subjectification of (and through) truth"

becomes secondary when the latter is precisely what, in his eyes, defines philosophical knowledge as such? Thus Hegel writes:

In my view, which can be justified only by exposition of the system itself, everything turns on grasping and expressing the True not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*.<sup>8</sup>

One can, in this context, criticize Föessel for not bringing to bear with sufficient clarity problems that Spinoza and Hegel pose for his tersely stated thesis. Yet is this objection decisive? The book's final chapter would seem to offer an initial response as regards Hegel (Spinoza, however, is almost completely absent from the book, which is problematic). Föessel emphasizes the fact that the Hegelian dialectic, by presenting itself as absolute knowledge, abandons the ancient idea of philosophical consolation and replaces it with that of reconciliation. Yet absolute knowledge's "speculative Good Friday" only transcends the unhappy consciousness and thus the idea of consolation by abolishing the subject's finite condition—by degrading "the Self to the level of a predicate" and elevating "Substance to Subject."<sup>9</sup> The speculative subject that reconciles with itself in absolute knowledge may prove to be as abstract and alien to the human *self* that seeks love and consolation (which Pascal spoke of) as Kant's transcendental subject. Because it is "better" than ancient philosophy at reconciling the Subject with itself and making the Self no more than its predicate, Hegel's system, Föessel suggests, does as little for *me* (i.e., the Pascalian *moi*)—it will have no greater subjective effect on me and will console me no more—than transcendental philosophy.

Let us assume this reply is correct. If so, then it is understandable that even modern efforts to reactive the ideal of intellectual knowledge mark modern philosophy's renunciation of the ancient philosophical ideal of consolation. But does this necessarily mean that modern philosophy has given up presenting itself as consolatory and is only tangentially interested in "subjectification of (and through) truth" or in what Foucault called the "care for the self"?

It is unfortunate that Föessel does not give more consideration to Montaigne, who is mentioned in chapter 4 only briefly and anecdotally as emblematic of a skeptical attitude towards classical philosophy's consoling potential (141). Indeed, Montaigne's skepticism is largely formulated on the basis of this insight (ancient philosophy at best consoles through *diversion*,<sup>10</sup> a concept that, as is well known, greatly inspired Pascal) and fully embraces the abandonment of the model of self-knowledge as reminiscence. In a state of idleness, Montaigne no longer finds in the philosophical ideal that presided over his republican friendship with La Boétie any reassurance that would console him of the melancholy caused by the death of the only being who could have consoled him of such a loss—that is, the very friend he had lost—or of the dreadful "spectacle of our public death" (i.e., the Wars of Religion). But whereas

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<sup>8</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, *Op. Cit.*, 9-10.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 453.

<sup>10</sup> Michel de Montaigne, "On Diversion" (Book III, 4) in *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1993, 935-946.

Montaigne's situation leads him to declare that philosophy has abandoned the consolatory power it had in antiquity, in this situation which illustrates Fœssel's system better than any other (self-knowledge is not reminiscence, human reason has no access to intellectual knowledge, nor to a lost original community), the *Essays* do in fact invent a new and modern genre of philosophical consolation.<sup>11</sup>

Thus *Le Temps de la consolation* unfairly overlooks the modern philosophical genre of consolation, from the *Essays* on. The example of Rousseau once again seems crucial itself in this instance. For not only does he make consolation or compensation an essential theme of his political philosophy, but he also characterizes his *entire* philosophical enterprise, from the First Discourse to the *Rêveries*—which owe so much to the *Essays*—as “something highly consoling and useful”<sup>12</sup>:

I never adopted the philosophy of the happy people of the age; it does not suit me. I suit one more. I sought one more appropriate for my heart, more consoling in adversity, more encouraging to virtue. I found it in the books of J.J.<sup>13</sup>

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*Le Temps de la consolation* makes a forceful case for consolation as an essential philosophical and political question in grasping a modern community that seeks to compensate for, yet without abolishing, the sense of separation on which modernity is first founded. Yet we confess that the idea of a “politics of consolation” leaves us wanting more, as the author only traces its broadest contours. He shows us its foils: on the one hand, a politics reduced to governance, removed from history and with no future, in which there is no community to create; on the other, a politics haunted by the desire to restore a past but lost identity (the national community, the song of the land and the dead against the disenchantment of the world, the first presence of religious speech, and so on). Yet for now, it is less clear what a politics of consolation could actually be (its forms of action, its purposes, the national or post-national horizon that could be traced out, and what the practical and legal implications would be for liberal democracies).

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<sup>11</sup> Foucault rightly saw Montaigne as a modern reappropriation of philosophy as care for the self. “I think Montaigne should be reread in this perspective, as an attempt to reconstitute an aesthetics and an ethics of self.” Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France*, trans. Graham Burchell, New York, Picador, 2005, 251.

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Preface to *Narcissus*,” in *The Discourses and other Early Political Writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, 101.

<sup>13</sup> Rousseau, *Rousseau Judge of Jean-Jacques*, trans. Judith R. Bush, Roger D. Masters, and Christopher Kelly, Hanover, University Press of New England, 1990, 52.

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