

**WORDS THAT STIR THOUGHT:  
RECOVERING THE LOST VOCABULARY OF A MIND ALIVE**

- 1. actionable – an event is actionable when the circumstances present a legal cause of action, an avenue into court to seek legal redress. When people speak jocularly of the moral neutering of lawyers, one of the traits being referred to is the tendency to see things not as right or wrong, but rather in terms of whether or not there is a cause of action. In other words, is there money in it? A related trait is that lawyers learn to think more procedurally than substantively. Where you might see vile injustice, the lawyer is thinking about where he can get it into court and under what cause of action. This cast of mind – let’s call it pragmatism, or perhaps proceduralism – makes its way into the world of public policy, which lawyers dominate in the U.S. Principled stands on the merits are easily dispensed with as the delusions of naïve schoolboys, when lawyers gather.**
  
- 2. agrarianism – a form of social and economic organization that emphasizes the well being of the farmer. Thomas Jefferson would be among the notables who have thought that U.S. democracy could flourish only amidst the habits of self-sufficiency and good sense cultivated in a nation of small farmers. Instead, we have allowed corporate agriculture to render these hardy perennials of American life an all-but-extinct species.**
  
- 3. almshouse – debtor’s prison. The debate 100 years ago about these institutions, and the “deserving” versus “undeserving” poor has been completely forgotten, along with the settled judgment that criminalizing debtors serves no social purpose. Also forgotten is the way that the banking system functions under the fractional reserve system, and that most loans are essentially “money” created out of thin air. For further information on this widely forgotten subject, see *Web of Debt* by Ellen Hodgson Brown.**
  
- 4. anomie – personal unease that comes about because of a breakdown of societal values and subsequent loss of purpose. In**

**an era of “retail therapy” and brain suppressing anti-depressants, we run the risk of losing contact with anomie, which can be a useful spur for social reform. If, however, we define every difficulty as merely a personal problem, it becomes quite difficult to locate the feelings of anomie in its societal roots.**

- 5. antinomian – in the more general definition, one who rejects a socially established morality. Difficult to be an antinomian in these days of, as Daniel Patrick Moynihan put it, “defining deviancy down.” Where is the bedrock morality to revolt against?**
- 6. Arminian – doctrine opposing the predestination of Calvinism and postulating salvation for all. Reformatted in secular form during the 19<sup>th</sup> century by, among others, philosopher William James, who made himself profoundly depressed worrying that everything in his life might be predetermined (by impersonal forces). James lifted himself out of depression by choosing to believe that he had free will and thus the possibility of, if not necessarily Christian salvation, a life fashioned according to his own choices.**
- 7. atomism – two distinct but related definitions worth recovering. One, tracing back at least to ancient Greek philosopher Democritus, defines all of life as reducing to individual physical particles. The belief is at the root of materialistic philosophies that postulate matter preceding mind. The other definition refers to individualism, or the belief that an individual can be entirely self-sufficient within society. The old community-versus-individualism discussion of American life, tracing back at least to Tocqueville, often enlists the term atomism.**
- 8. atonal – organized without regard for traditional musical ideals of tonality, harmony, melody, etc. A musical correlative to absurdist philosophical viewpoints in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, nowadays it seems to be the product of an impoverished talent pool. For the untutored it is often difficult to distinguish much modern music (circa 2009) from simply speaking while one or two instruments are continuously banged on in the background.**

Maybe all the melodies have already been written, all available notes deployed in all possible combinations.

9. **autarky** – a self-sufficient and independent national economy. Anathematized in the era of “globalization,” the economic crisis beginning (officially) in 2008 and the worldwide collapse of demand suggested to many that the virtues of autarkies be revisited. Much of the discussion these days is about how to “decouple” national economies from dependence on exports and imports.
10. **Babbity** – from George Babbit, a character in a Sinclair Lewis novel who represented sterile conformity and mindless boosterism, and the psychological perils that ensued from these traits. Arguably – and many social critics did argue it, circa the 1950s – Babbity is the default state of mind in the United States.
11. **bathos** – indulgence – to the point of wallowing – in trivial sentimentality. Many in Britain thought that the spectacle of mourning for Princess Diana, and forcing the Queen to participate, signaled that bathos had gained the upper hand, and could no longer be stigmatized and condemned.
12. **Bauhaus** – a type of modern architecture that produced boxy, severe, unornamented – in a word, ugly – buildings, considered suitable – as the theory had it – for the revolution of the workers and overthrow of the bourgeois regime. Dominant in architectural circles during the first 30 years after WWII, the movement has left its blight all over the world, ruining some of the choicest landscapes to be found, and leaving a most unloved built environment. For an account of how sterile theory can overcome popular taste in a field such as architecture, see Tom Wolfe’s *From Bauhaus to Our House* and *The Painted Word*. For a discussion of how the post-WWII built environment enthroned ugliness, see works of James Howard Kunstler, such as *The Geography of Nowhere* and *Home From Nowhere*.
13. **behaviorism** – a school of thought in psychology, associated with John Watson and B.F. Skinner, that regards objective behavior as

**the only proper subject for psychological study. Implied is that the behavior of human beings can be objectively studied, predicted and controlled by controlling their environment. A product of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early-to-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century era of grand theories, in which the omniscient theorist explains everything, its influence continues, notably in pharma-psychology, which purports to control the chemical environment of the brain.**

- 14. boosterism – shilling for something, be it a theory, a politician, a city or whatever, rather than objectively analyzing. Indeed, preempting analysis seems to be the point. Often finds its way into profit-oriented journalism, making the concept of the “watchdog press” problematic. Arguably, the presidency of Ronald Reagan made boosterism the only acceptable posture in American public life.**
- 15. boulevardier – a man-about-town. Has public life diminished to such a point that this is a lost category, at least in the U.S.? Today’s would-be boulevardiers are in their private spaces hooked up to some machine or another, and pursue women through online dating. Not the same experience, and the loss of that public experience puts at risk the existence of such qualities as élan and sophistication.**
- 16. Calvinism – a branch of Protestantism rooted in the thinking of John Calvin, known particularly for a belief in predestination and the concept of an elect who would be saved and the non-elect who would not be. The Puritans who settled Massachusetts Bay Colony were Calvinists. Their focus on being able to display the outward “signs of election” gave rise, in the famous thesis of Max Weber, to the “Protestant work ethic,” and perhaps in their heirs to a fixation on those outward signs of election – the large house or car, etc. – rather than the state of grace and election they supposedly revealed. When the “American mind” is discussed by scholars inclined to such discussions, this way of thinking has been considered a key component.**
- 17. careerism – emphasis on advancing ones career at the expense of personal integrity, intellectual honesty and concern for the public**

welfare. Odd that the early baby-boomers, touted in the '60s as becoming the most idealistic generation in American history, having been liberated from the shackles of economic necessity and freed up to pursue loftier goals, became arguably the most careerist and venal generation. Seems the shackles stayed in place, as the concept of economic necessity ratcheted upward.

18. Cassandra – from Greek mythology, a person who prophesies catastrophe, generally in the form of social breakdown. There is a surprisingly solid market in the U.S. for the information products of Cassandras, though they must crawl back under their rocks after receiving their royalty checks. Since the days of Reagan, no public figure has been permitted to say of the U.S. anything other than that it is the best of all possible worlds, God's very own chosen country, a light unto the nations.
19. chiliasm – millenarianism, or the belief that Christ will return after (or before) a particular thousand-year period of justice. It's not widely understood just how influential this belief, in its two different forms, has been in American history. Prior to the Civil War, most American evangelicals were post-millenarians, meaning that they believed Christ would return after the thousand-year reign of truth and justice. Hence, they felt obliged to help bring about in the world such a realm, and were at the forefront of many reform movements, such as anti-slavery. But later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the majority became pre-millenarians who believed that Christ would come before the thousand-year period. As a consequence, they became disengaged with society, writing it off as hopeless, and withdrew into the private realms of personal salvation. This disengagement of evangelical Christians with the society at large is referred to by historians as "the great reversal."
20. clerisy – an intelligentsia, or cleric-like class that claims dominion over a particular area due to their expertise. For several decades we have lived in the era of "experts," and have forfeited our own decision-making to these technocrats in a host of areas, such as health care. To our detriment?

- 21. collectivism -- a system that emphasizes collective (communal) rather than individual action. It would be ever so helpful to the American public discourse if the minions of Limbaugh, Beck, Hannity, etc. would keep in mind that there are varying degrees of collectivism. Simply to pose a governmental rather than personal solution to some problem is not necessarily “socialism” or “communism,” but those are the only terms in play on the rabble-roused right. These folks are perfectly at liberty to have at collectivism, for the same sorts of reasons they think they don’t like socialism or communism. But collectivism is the proper term to use in the philosophical argument they think they’re engaged in. Or “statism” (see below).**
- 22. constitutionalism – a constitutional system of government; one in which a supervening constitution trumps laws passed through other processes, no matter how much more recent such laws may be compared to the constitution. It is very difficult for Americans to get their minds around the concept that constitutionalism is simply one form of government, not necessarily handed down from on high along with the holy writ of the document itself. The U.S. is the only nation where judicial interpretation of the constitution is allowed to prevail over the laws produced (in theory) from democratic deliberation. Political philosophy in America tends to be an exegesis of the U.S. Constitution to try to discern what the sainted Founding Fathers thought. Perhaps because he had no part in the drafting of the document, Thomas Jefferson warned against the potential intellectual tyranny of such a system. Said he – a certifiable member of the “Founding Fathers,” to be sure – of rigid adherence to the Constitution: “We might as well require a man to wear still the coat which fitted him when a boy as civilized society to remain forever under the regimen of their barbarous ancestors.”**
- 23. credentialism – an over-emphasis on academic credentials as prerequisites to employment. Nowadays we accept without challenge the notion that degrees make better employees. Anyone who reads the written work produced by American college students would be quickly disabused of that notion.**

- 24. deindustrialization – reduction or destruction of a nation’s industrial capacity. Let’s rescue the term from oblivion before the process it describes is a fait accompli. The rationales for offshoring industrial capacities have largely broken down.**
- 25. determinism – theory that acts of the “will” are always the (ultimately predictable) result of prior actions or natural forces; hence there is no such thing as free will. It is at the heart of approaches to well being such as pharma-psychology, the belief that ones mind set is simply a function of brain chemistry.**
- 26. dualism – the belief that mind and body are separate substances; or, more broadly, that reality consists of two irreducible elements. Associated with Descartes in the world of academic philosophy. Rejected by materialists who believe mind to be merely an outgrowth of molecular activity, and by idealists, who believe that all matter first has an existence in mind.**
- 27. dystopia – account of social degeneration, of an anti-utopia. Dystopias written with broad strokes were more common in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, e.g., *Brave New World* and *1984*. Lately, perhaps reflecting the preemption of intellectual activity by academia, their focus has tended to be much more narrow, such as the anomie of suburbia or the degradation of the food supply.**
- 28. egalitarianism – a social, economic and political system that values human equality. Has always been a bugbear of the political right, going back to the reaction against the French Revolution, which enthroned equality along with liberty and fraternity as the cardinal virtues of the new polity. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup>, it got a bad name from foolish attempts to achieve equalities of outcome in education and other assaults on human nature, thus providing cover for a radically anti-egalitarian economic regime that allowed the income gap between haves and have-nots to grow dramatically.**
- 29. élan – vigorous spirit or enthusiasm, lust for life. As noted above, it is a social virtue, developed in association with other people,**

and may well not survive the withdrawal of all life into completely private spaces. Can élan develop from a relationship with ones phone, ipod or computer? What other qualities are put at risk by the privatization of behavior?

30. **empiricism** – defined broadly, the notion that the best approach to knowledge and truth is to gather data painstakingly and allow theses to emerge from the gathered data; as opposed to developing the thesis beforehand and allowing it to shape the research. Empiricism has been generally discredited as an explanation of how the advancement of human knowledge actually takes place in the real world, but the message hasn't necessarily become widely accepted in academia.
31. **epiphenomenon** – a secondary phenomenon necessarily caused by something else. In more philosophically literate times, the debate over the origins of human consciousness often found “epiphenomenon” offered as the materialist explanation. Consciousness was nothing but an epiphenomenon of molecular actions, it was said (though this hypothesis has never found any evidential support, despite decades of effort).
32. **eschatology** – a branch of theology dealing with speculation about the end of human history. Often mistakenly seen as the essence of religious belief, though most religions postulate as the fundamental tenet an alternative transcendent order of existence (a state of grace) available instantly to the believer.
33. **eudaemonism** – a theory that human happiness is the highest attainable good, and is to be sought diligently. Sophisticated eudaemonists will perhaps recognize that happiness is an epiphenomenon of other business, and will prove elusive if sought directly.
34. **exceptionalism** – a theory that a particular nation or region is exceptional and outside the normal boundaries of human experience. In social criticism circles, the term “American exceptionalism” is often heard, referring to the belief that the

**United States is a chosen nation, blessed above all others and having a special role to play in human history.**

- 35. existentialism – a school of thought holding that the universe is irrational and beyond human understanding, but the individual must nevertheless exercise her free will to the fullest and make choices, despite existing in a moral vacuum without any clear indicators of right and wrong. Each individual defines her own existence according to her own choices and standards.**
  
- 36. fractional reserve system – the banking system in effect in the U.S., in which banks are allowed to loan 90 percent of any deposits on hand. Then that 90 percent is deposited, and 90 percent of the new deposit is available for loans. And so on and so forth. Thus new money is essentially created out of whole cloth by the lending banks whenever a loan is made. A huge preponderance of money in circulation is created this way. In the years prior to WWII there was quite a bit more focus on our system of money creation. In recent decades the issue seems to have disappeared, and even the financial crash of 2008 did little to revive it. When you think about it, it's kind of strange. Many millions of people are looking for work to do. Many thousands of projects, involving infrastructure and such, are on the drawing boards waiting to commence. But the workers and the jobs can't be united because of the lack of something we call money. And most of that “money” is nothing but accounting entries in banks. Something is wrong with this picture.**
  
- 37. gemeinschaft – a term coined by the German thinker Toennies, referring to a naturally arising living arrangement among ones kin and close friends. For purposes of social analysis, a small-town environment where everyone knows most everyone else. A famous term in sociology, contrasted to (see below) gesellschaft.**
  
- 38. gemutlichkeit – staying with the German words: cordiality of a particularly gratifying sort. Achieving it is seen as a bit of an art, and worth some effort. To be fostered by social planners and merchants in cultures that value cordial face-to-face interaction. Long since MIA in post-WWII U.S.**

- 39. gerrymander – rearranging election districts so as to give more representation to the party that has the power to do the rearranging. If not precisely a lost word, the practice has become so flagrant in recent years, along with the entrenchment of incumbents, that the term needs to be resuscitated and suitably anathematized.**
- 40. gesellschaft – the opposite of gemeinschaft; basically the big city environment into which modernity has forced many people. What is it like to live among strangers and not know the great majority of people with whom you come in contact? How do the ensuing states of mind and institutions differ from gemeinschaft? What is lost and what is gained? These questions have guided much sociological research.**
- 41. gnosticism – defined broadly, belief in an esoteric body of truth that has great explanatory power about the mysteries of life, and is not widely accessible. Back in the days when there was a bit of intellect in the American conservative intellectual movement, gnosticism was identified as the fundamental error in collectivist endeavors (such as communism) to improve mankind. The early church had categorized a more narrowly defined gnosticism as heretical in its postulation that matter is evil.**
- 42. greenback – the legal tender issued by the U.S. government during the Civil War. Most people mistakenly believe that bills are still created and issued by the government, but they are Federal Reserve notes, issued by the Federal Reserve, a consortium of private banks. For 100 years after the Civil War there was considerable sentiment for returning to a system of greenback money issued by the federal government (which now mints only coins). It was a boilerplate issue in progressive political agendas. But the PR arm of the banking industry seems to have finally made the movement disappear. Raising questions about the money system is a sure way to nonentity status in the economic profession.**

- 43. Hegelianism – defined broadly, a belief that human history is essentially the playing out of ideas in society. Hegel, the renowned 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher, believed that humankind continually progressed as concepts such as freedom made their way through history. Marx and other students of Hegel famously branched off from his idealist thinking and saw history as guided by a materialist dialectic. Moving matter around, and the economic arrangements that followed therefrom, became for them the engine of history. It is interesting that most Americans subscribe to one or another idealist philosophy – they believe that mind precedes and influences matter – but never a hint of Hegelianism has crept into the American mind. If you accept that belief determines outcomes on the physical and social plane, wouldn't you naturally develop a curiosity about the social effects of widely held beliefs?**
- 44. immanentism – belief that God, or an abstract mind, exists in time and pervades the world. Going back to the conservative thinkers, they saw this immanentism as part and parcel of the gnosticism that was fueling futile modern attempts at utopia. On their bulletin boards was pinned the Eric Voegelin aphorism, “you can't immanentize the eschaton.” Meaning, God (or the ideal polity that God represents) exists outside time and can't be brought into it. Man must accept his fallen nature, and the inevitable futility of highly ambitious social reform efforts.**
- 45. idealism – in philosophical terms, the belief that mind precedes matter, and indeed creates it. Nature was created in the mind of God, and continues to exist only because He observes it, according to 18<sup>th</sup> century idealist philosopher George Berkeley (yes, the namesake of Berkeley, CA, though his name is pronounced Barkley). America's most famous idealist philosopher, Josiah Royce, grew up in Berkeley. Quantum mechanics has been interpreted by many as supporting idealism.**
- 46. imperialism – a policy of extending to other lands the influence or dominion of ones own country. Well, this certainly isn't a lost word, as the political left bandies it about rather promiscuously.**

**But the concept is lost to mainstream America, even though, while history was still taught in American schools, it was presented as one cause of the disastrous 20<sup>th</sup> century wars. There seems to be little room for the coexistence of the concepts of imperialism and American exceptionalism. If we – the United States – are always fulfilling our divinely ordained mission in the world, always acting as a force for freedom, peace and prosperity, then how can our policies be characterized as imperialist?**

- 47. jingoism – extreme nationalism calling for a belligerent foreign policy. Like imperialism, the concept has a hard time coexisting with American exceptionalism. It is certainly evident to foreign observers of the U.S., who see what Americans regard as the most innocuous demonstrations of patriotism – such as playing the national anthem before sporting events – as dangerous nationalism tending toward jingoism. This word is a bit more in the lost category than imperialism, though it is perhaps more useful, referring to specific and easily identifiable behavior of individuals. The ad hominem argument always flies further in the U.S. than broad, systemic critiques.**
- 48. Keynesianism – a system of economic thought holding, in most general terms, that government has an essential role to play in the economy by regulating both demand and the excesses of capitalism. It was prevailing economic orthodoxy during the years of post-WWII western social democracy, roughly 1945-1973, considered by economic geographers to have been a golden era of sorts that saw an enormous expansion of the middle class and a narrowing of the income gap. Keynesianism was supplanted as economic orthodoxy by the anti-government rhetoric and a-historical, theoretical models of neoliberalism, a regime that is in crisis as I write in 2009.**
- 49. Kulturkampf – a war between two competing cultures or value systems. More apt when it was coined in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to describe the clash between religious and civil forces in Germany. Today the so-called “culture wars” in the U.S. serve largely to distract the attention of the public from the war that is being**

waged on it by a ravenously greedy oligarchy (see below) and the courtier press and political system that support it.

50. **lebensraum** – literally in German, room to live. Used by the Nazis to describe the imperative of expansion to the east required for German economic self-sufficiency. Could be seen as an element of the concept of “manifest destiny” that impelled 19<sup>th</sup> century American expansion westward and abroad. Hitler took many of his ideas from the U.S., such as government propaganda (made into a fine art by the Creel Committee during WWI) and eugenics. It’s not obvious that lebensraum will be used in the future as a justification for imperialist expansion, but it’s wise to remember the concept and keep an eye on it.
51. **leviathan** – using here the definition put forward by philosopher Thomas Hobbes in his well known book of the same name: the all-powerful state that can command the allegiance of the governed and force them to do its bidding. Certainly, the concept of leviathan has not been lost in the U.S. – visions of demonic big government form the radio bloviator-fomented nightmares of millions of American citizens. What should be recalled is that Hobbes, writing in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, was the beginning of the discussion, not the last word on the subject. We have, in the Anglo-Saxon political tradition, over 300 years of elaboration on the tension between governmental power and individual liberty, characterized by some pretty profound thought. What point in tossing out those three centuries and returning to the paranoia of the eccentric royalist Hobbes?
52. **libertinism** – living unrestrained by convention or morality; dedicated to pleasure, often to the point of being dissolute. In an age of moral relativism, the category of libertine tends to get merged into regular, everyday life and indistinguishable from the normal pursuit of self-interest. It’s hard to think about defying conventions when the conventions have broken down. But self-destruction remains a quite likely outcome of libertinism, so it is perhaps helpful to keep the category in mind and understand it as a venture outside of tried and true strategies for living.

- 53. logocentrism** – a way of thinking postulating the existence of **THE WORD**, existing out there ripe for the plucking and promulgated by an authoritative source, such as God. Characteristic of much of ancient Greek philosophy, as well as of the religious traditions rooted in the Bible – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The Book of John begins, “In the beginning was the word....” Apprehending the truth of the word and living according to it are seen as the main business of life. Undercut by Darwinism and post-modern relativism, logocentrism is perhaps due a revival in an era where, increasingly, idealist philosophies bring thought (cast in words) front and center.
- 54. monism** – a belief that reality is composed of a single substance; contra dualism, which postulates mind and matter as two distinct substances. In philosophical discussions there are two types – monistic materialism, which holds that matter is the single substance and mind is an epiphenomenon of matter; and monistic idealism, which holds that mind is the fundamental substance of everything.
- 55. muckrake** – to investigate and expose the misdeeds and corruption of individuals, business and government. The muckrakers were journalists in the Progressive Era at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who exposed enormities in such industries as meat-packing. We are rapidly losing the concept, as journalism escalates into a cost cutting mode. Muckraking requires money to finance investigative reporting, and increasingly the corporate media, often in symbiotic relationships with the would-be objects of investigation, are not undertaking such ventures. One indicator: In the 30 years following Watergate – the presumed triumph and ultimate justification of investigative reporting – the number of persons working full-time as investigator reporters (for various news organizations) in Washington D.C. declined from 30 to three.
- 56. nationalism** – a zealous sense of national consciousness and the exaltation of that nation’s culture and institutions above all others. Long identified by historians as one cause of 20<sup>th</sup> century

world war, nationalism is held suspect by European nations that suffered so much from those wars. A lost concept, however, in the U.S., where no expression of nationalism or jingoism is so fervent and bellicose as to place it outside of the accepted definition of patriotism.

57. **naturalism** – a way of thinking that denies the existence of the supernatural. While the future of thought undoubtedly will be a combination of such approaches as scientific investigation rooted in naturalism and acceptance of the possibility of the supernatural, it is somewhat important to understand the categories that did exist in the grand era of theorizing – the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For reasons of social status and self definition, many people still fit themselves rigidly into one such category or another. Academics, for example, find it difficult to challenge the naturalist creed due to social pressure in their peer group. To continue to categorize them as they would have been 100 years ago is to emphasize the narrowness of their thinking, and to short-circuit the “All thinking people acknowledge.....” approach to discourse they often take.
58. **noblesse oblige** – the obligation of those who enjoy a high station in life to benefit the general welfare. Difficult to say if the concept is surviving. Certainly, many who have great wealth, such as Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, rather conspicuously undertake philanthropy, but whether the impulse is widespread among those for whom it is less affordable is not clear. It has long been a justification of capitalism that permitting the accumulation of great individual wealth promotes the formation of large pools of capital that are then put to socially useful purposes through philanthropy, e.g., Carnegie libraries. It might be worth a bit of study to determine the degree to which that is actually taking place.
59. **nominalism** – a point of view, attributed first to William of Occam in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, rejecting Platonic ideas and holding that one cannot speak of, say, a chair, in its essence, but can only with profit think of a particular chair and all its particularities.

Seems like one of those how many angels can dance on the head of a pin discourses popular at the time, but many mid 20<sup>th</sup> century conservatives – see Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* – attribute to nominalism the beginning of the end for the concept of a transcendent order outside of material reality, and the commencement of a relentless and gruesome march toward secular modernity. When columnist George Will wrote: “A true conservative genuinely mourns the passing of the 13<sup>th</sup> century,” presumably he was lamenting (albeit tongue-in-cheek) the rise of nominalism. As an aside, it’s a matter of curiosity why intellectual history – the study of ideas, of widely held beliefs or at least beliefs held by an influential elite, and how they impact culture through history – has not become a popular enthusiasm among the more bookish classes. Particularly in a nation such as the U.S., where, as noted above, many people believe strongly in the power of belief to affect reality.

60. oligarchy – rule by a wealthy few. To be sharply contrasted with democracy, though the distinction seems lost in the U.S. today. It is difficult to find a piece of legislation since the 1970s that has failed to benefit primarily an identifiable oligarchy, which has found its lobbying dollars to be money well spent. If money dictates all public policy – and arguably it does in the U.S. today, at every level of government – then there is in effect an oligarchy consisting of those who have the money to buy public policy. “Plutocracy” is a synonym also ripe for recovery.
61. oligopoly – market situation in which each of a few producers influences but does not totally dominate the market for that particular product. A little better than a monopoly and thus usually able to escape the tentacles of antitrust law, but sometimes not much better, and far from the oft-invoked ideal of a highly competitive free market.
62. ontology – study of the true nature of being. Such questions tend to be dismissed these days as too broad to be successfully addressed, or a resolution of the questions is accepted strictly on faith without significant examination. Theology and philosophy,

and maybe even science, really have covered some significant ground on these matters, though not producing a definitive answer; but these inquiries have been largely lost to the current discourse.

63. Panglossian – seeing life through ridiculously optimistic, rose-colored lenses. Taken from Dr. Pangloss, a character in Voltaire’s novella *Candide*, who repeatedly states innocently and sincerely, “All is for the best in this the best of all possible worlds” – an attempt by Voltaire to satirize the notion of German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz that, from an Olympian perspective, the universe makes perfect sense. Leibniz’s views, in this instance dealing with the availability of infinite possibility in the universe, are quite sophisticated and worth the attention of serious people, despite Voltaire’s simplistic dismissal. But Voltaire is on to something – returning here to the realm of intellectual history – to the extent that he attacks the sanguinity of the Panglossian viewpoint as at cross purposes with social reform, much needed at the moment in history in which he wrote, and in all since then.
64. Pelagianism – rejection of the concept of original sin by the philosopher Pelagius; deemed a heresy by the early church. Original sin, as the Catholics define it, is not widely understood. It seems to have more to do with the infirmities that aging flesh is heir to than with blameworthiness for misbehavior. Or so it was defined to me by a Catholic priest who enjoyed the great esteem of basketball coach Bobby Knight. Pelagius, however, was arguing that individuals have perfect freedom to do right or wrong, so he, at least, understood original sin as referring to a compulsion often to do wrong simply as a component of human nature. Modern conservatism, at least deep in its intellectual roots, presumes the twistedness of human nature due to original sin and consequent futility of substantial social reform, so the subject is worth a bit of thought today.
65. phenomenology – the study of the development of human consciousness and self awareness as a part of philosophy. Are you perhaps under the mistaken impression that science has

**preempted this discussion and pinned down consciousness once and for all? Despite decades of Herculean effort, science has not been able to ground the origins of consciousness in materialism. It remains a great mystery.**

- 66. polymath – someone quite gifted and accomplished in many different fields. The aforementioned Leibniz was a polymath and a genius, whose accomplishments included development of the calculus, independent of Newton (they are both given credit), and of the binary system upon which all digital enterprise, including computing, is based. It certainly seems that polymaths have become an all but extinct species in the last century or so, as academia, with its narrow specialization, has preempted intellectual life. That’s unfortunate, since the broad perspective ranging across a host of disciplines is often the most valuable one.**
- 67. positivism – the theory that theological, metaphysical and rationalist thought are unavailing of truth, which can only be gleaned from natural phenomena studied empirically. An outgrowth of the materialist fallacy, positivism dominated academic thought through much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Legal positivism, associated with Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., holds that it is pointless to refer to any transcendent origins of the law, and the attention of courts and scholars must be fixed on the law as it has developed organically and been made by men in case law, common law and statutory law. The name of Holmes is regularly taken in vain by conservative Christian law students, who believe that positivism must be unseated in legal thinking, as it has been to some degree in other aspects of intellectual life.**
- 68. prelapsarian – before the (Biblical) fall; i.e., in a lost golden age of days gone by. The word is employed occasionally in academia to criticize accounts of history that assume the obvious superiority of a bygone era. They are dismissed as “prelapsarian narratives.” The fact that this book is published by the Prelapsarian Press perhaps will suggest that there is much of merit to be recaptured from the past, including lost words. Postlapsarian, of course, means after the fall.**

- 69. primitivism – the belief – often merely an affectation, usually among the educated classes – that a simple life lived close to nature is superior to the larded-on, inauthentic experiences of more developed civilization. Primitivism was the most important cause of World War I, in the view of historian Modris Eksteins, with Europeans rather whimsically tossing out what in retrospect was a quite impressive civilization just because they were bored. We see it today perhaps in such forms of primal expression as tattoos and body piercings substituting as means of communication for that quintessential product of civilization – words.**
- 70. procrustean – from Greek mythology, means attempting to fit everything to preconceived notions. Procrustes was an innkeeper, who offered his guests a fine bed, and would sever their limbs as needed to ensure that they fit in the bed. Arguably, the procrustean habit of mind is widespread these days in the U.S., as opinions come to seem like personal property that must be defended to the death, and all incoming data made to fit them.**
- 71. profiteering – making an unconscionable amount of money by providing goods and services during an emergency. The term used to be rather commonly deployed for those who profited from war, such as weapons manufacturers. Nowadays, the arms industry virtually has Washington in its hip pocket, and contractors make fortunes in America’s elective wars, yet the word profiteering is seen or heard only occasionally on the odd leftist website.**
- 72. Pythagoreanism – belief of the ancient Greek thinker Pythagoras and his followers in the mystical significance of numbers and the harmony of the spheres. Known in America only in connection with a geometry theorem, Pythagoras was a thoroughgoing mystic who saw a transcendent order in mathematics. The concept has never been refuted; indeed if anything it has gained support from the uncanny reflection of mathematical principles often found in nature. The transcendent order of mathematical rationality, seeming to exist quite apart from human development in the natural world and hardly accountable for by the process of**

natural selection, is perhaps the biggest hurdle faced by a naturalist Darwinism.

73. **realpolitik** – politics based on practical considerations of national interest, rather than more theoretical or ethical objectives. Abandoned in the last couple of decades by both conservatives and liberals in the U.S., both movements are sometimes summoned back to realpolitik by the odd contrarian observer. Realpolitik has often been used in the past to justify a bellicose foreign policy; lately it is the principal rationale for disengaging in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Curiously, a theory supposedly rooted in amorality has assumed the moral high ground.
74. **religiosity** – making a great display of religious belief; to be contrasted with actually holding the belief. When mainline Protestantism was the dominant religious tradition in the U.S., such displays were looked down upon. One silently took pleasure in reflecting the signs of election, but did not make a show of them. As the evangelical movement, with its requirement of bearing personal witness and proselytizing, has gained prominence since the 1960s, religiosity has become more a part of American religious life.
75. **rentier** – someone who receives an income from property or securities. It was common in the Progressive Era of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which seems to have been a vastly more economically literate period than our own (Did you know that *The Wizard of Oz* was written as a populist parable about the gold standard, which many in the general reading public of the time picked up on?), to refer to the “rentier class.” It was not considered good for the economy to be making money simply from already having money, so laws were set up, or at least proposed, to prevent the rentier class from suppressing the working economy. Today the whole concept of a rentier class is gone. Rather, they now own Congress through campaign contributions, and the financial sector has been inflated to the point where it completely overwhelms both the Main Street economy and government.

- 76. revanchist – political policy aiming to recover lost land or status. Same root as the word revenge. Supposedly put to rest in the post-Soviet “new world order” of globalization, where the McDonalds golden arches are a sign of peaceful coexistence, revanchism may be rearing up again in places such as the Balkans. Ancient grievances – and new border disputes – are not slain by rhetoric.**
- 77. samizdat – the printing and distribution of government-suppressed literature in the USSR and its satellite countries. The concept could use a revival for deployment in the west to address the tight control that corporate money has over what goes into print. The internet might be thought of as samizdat.**
- 78. schadenfreude – taking pleasure in the pain of others. The word – and no doubt the experience – seem to be enjoying a revival without the assistance of this project, perhaps a reflection of an American culture that has eradicated more wholesome forms of pleasure involving the face-to-face interaction of human beings. Strangely, people who are pretty reliably dishonest with themselves about most things will freely confess to enjoying schadenfreude.**
- 79. scholasticism – an approach to knowledge dominant in middle ages Christendom, combining adherence to religious dogma with the systematic naturalism of Aristotle. It made of Christianity an intellectual force to be reckoned with, and left the Catholic Church with a fairly rigorous intellectual posture that has allowed it to tackle head-on challenges to the faith such as Darwinism. In the Catholic tradition deriving from scholasticism, there is seen to be no conflict between religious belief and the natural world as it is revealed by science, and the Church will work hard, and with intellectual honesty, to reconcile any apparent conflict.**
- 80. sophistry – an argument that is deceptively persuasive, but ultimately specious. Comes from the ancient Greek sophists, who hired themselves out as instructors of rhetoric and argumentation, claiming that they could teach one how to argue successfully both, or multiple, sides of any issue. Not unlike the training of lawyers today. Occasionally our political discourse will**

rise from the level of puerile nonsense up to sophistry, but usually it is not so subtle as to merit the term.

81. **Spenglerian** – refers to the view of historian Oswald Spengler that all major cultures go through an inevitable process of decay. Cultural collapse is a useful concept to keep at hand these days, and Spenglerian is a handy adjective with which to broach the subject, once it's back in circulation.
82. **statism** – concentration of power in a central government. Like “collectivism,” this is a more suitably general term than “communism” or “socialism,” which the Limbaugh legions should be using instead.
83. **Taylorism** – a management system promoting greater efficiency, developed in the U.S. in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century; emphasis on breaking down production into individual repetitive tasks. Taylorism increased efficiency, but turned the manufacturing process into one of mind-numbing tedium for those on the assembly line. And yet, there are probably many millions of Americans who would welcome that tedium if the manufacturing jobs, which provided so many with a middle class income, would just return from overseas.
84. **technocrat** – a supposed expert in a supposedly technical discipline inaccessible to the layman, placed into a management position. The 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the rise of the technocrat and a culture of deference to experts in all fields. Confidence in the technocracy began to crumble perhaps in the early '70s, with the publication of David Halberstam's book, *The Best and the Brightest*, which showed what a fine hash the Kennedy and Johnson administrations – with all their brilliant, highly credentialed technocrats, flow charts and management systems – had made of Vietnam. Questions about the degree to which the “experts” should be trusted arise regularly, certainly in connection with health care.
85. **teleology** – study of the ends or aims toward which an organism or system is headed. The orientation of philosophy among the

ancient Greeks and their heirs in the western tradition was to try to understand something – a man, a monkey, a form of government, etc. -- in terms of what its ideal objective would be. What was its purpose, where was it aiming? The view presupposed rational design in the universe, and was presumed in the scientific community, and in most of the philosophical community, to have been dethroned by Darwinism and its notion that there is no essential distinction between species; they are all just part of an evolutionary continuum. But quantum mechanics, and its revelation of the importance of the intending observer whose attention collapses waves of potential into particulate reality, has brought renewed interest in the concept of teleology.

86. Thanatos – the death instinct. Freud postulated it years ago. Not much heard of it in the years since Freud fell from the pinnacle of authority in the mind business. Is there anything to it? Do some people on some level will their own demise? A related question: Is there any reason at all to believe the presumption of most economic models that all people are rational actors and seek to optimize their own circumstances?
87. theodicy – attempts to defend God’s goodness and justice, despite the existence of evil. For some reason, a perpetually lively question, though the word has been lost. Nowadays it goes by the expression “the problem of evil” in theological discussions. But if you accept free will, it certainly stands to reason that many will use their freedom malevolently and bring evil into the world. The problem of evil, however, does pose a considerable hurdle to religious faith for many people.
88. transcendentalism – an idealist (mind precedes matter) philosophy that emphasizes the transcendent, or spiritual, over materialism and empiricism. With roots from Plato through Kant and Hegel, the movement is best known in the U.S. for the incarnation in New England in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century led by Ralph Waldo Emerson. A substantial part of the current American self-help movement (e.,g., *The Secret*), a multi-billion dollar industry, traces back through the New Thought Metaphysics of the late 19<sup>th</sup>

- century to the transcendentalists (though Emerson was quite skeptical about using the philosophy for making money).
89. **triumphalism** – an attitude of victoriousness, or superiority. You will sometimes hear the term “American triumphalism” from scholars and social critics, especially referring to the post-WWII period, when Americans, largely unscathed by the war compared to Europe, and unmindful of the contribution of the Red Army in defeating the Nazis, assumed an air of victorious superiority. To our detriment, no doubt. While the Europeans rolled up their sleeves amidst the rubble and began to construct functional social democracies without regard to ideology (at least in western Europe), in the U.S. every ideological slogan that could somehow attach itself to the notion of American exceptionalism captured the public mind and brought progress of a social nature to a standstill.
90. **trustbuster** – a public servant, such as Theodore Roosevelt, who makes it his business to break up monopolies. Deployed usually as a compliment, though sometimes with ironic disdain, the word is part of that Progressive Era sensibility of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that died during World War I, and has returned only intermittently since.
91. **weltanschauung** – world view; philosophy of life. And with these last two words in particular we come to the interesting question of why the German language has lent itself so readily to describing experience in terms of ideas. Why is it so much more a language for thinkers than English? Is it because the Germans have always attached more importance to mind than is found in the naturalism of the Anglo-American tradition? Often, if we want a word to describe either a philosophical position or a social condition we must borrow it from the Germans.
92. **zeitgeist** – spirit of the times. Coined by Hegel, who saw certain ideas characterizing a particular time and place. If we misplace this word – as it mostly has been in recent decades – does the concept disappear also? Have we suffered a loss for not having

**some notion of the spirit of the times, or is it too much of an abstraction? What is the zeitgeist of the United States in 2010?**