

Introduction

Fénelon Forgotten, and Found

Imagine a group of scholars gathered for a meal. They dine, they talk, and after the dishes are cleared, they play a game. The challenge is to name the thinker with the biggest gap between how he or she was regarded in their day and how he or she is regarded in our day. Some name thinkers well known to us today, but who were relatively unknown in their own age. (“Vico?”) Others go back to antiquity to pull forth names of thinkers once thought canonical but who today largely go unread. (“Xenophon?”) But in the end, the game’s judges would be hard-pressed not to give the win to the player who named Fénelon.

François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon was the author of the most-read book in eighteenth-century France after the Bible.¹ And his fame hardly stopped at the borders of France; from America to Russia, this work, *Telemachus*, was a de facto required text for all who wished to be thought enlightened.² But even more significantly, Fénelon’s reach was not just wide, but high. Even a partial list of the eighteenth-century thinkers who counted themselves among his admirers makes for a quite impressive roll call. Montesquieu called *Telemachus* “the divine work of this century.”³ Rousseau is said to have proclaimed that if Fénelon were still alive he would wish to have been his lackey to merit becoming his valet.⁴ Hume prominently cited Fénelon as a representative of modern morality.⁵ Bentham called *Telemachus* “the delight, not only of my waking, but my sleeping moments.”⁶ Godwin’s famous test-case for utilitarianism took Fénelon as representative of the pinnacle of human worth.⁷ Leibniz, even in disagreeing with him, called Fénelon “incomparable.”⁸ Herder placed Fénelon among the “representatives and guardian angels of humanity.”⁹ Goethe celebrated the “sweet and beneficial effect” *Telemachus* had on him.¹⁰ And all this is to say nothing of eighteenth-century political figures from James Stuart to Frederick the Great to Thomas Jefferson to Robespierre who likewise professed their admiration for Fénelon.¹¹

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Fénelon's influence on the Enlightenment is thus beyond doubt. But that was then. Things are different today, and especially in the English-speaking world. A cursory glance at what is available today in English on and by Fénelon makes this immediately clear. The most complete French edition of Fénelon's collected works runs to ten volumes quarto (and even so cannot be said to be fully complete), and has been supplemented by an outstanding edition of his correspondence in eighteen further volumes.¹² Yet only the smallest fraction of this is available today in English translation; when Cambridge republished *Telemachus* in 1994 it was announced as “the first English version of *Télémaque* since the 1770s.”¹³ As for the remainder of Fénelon's corpus, what remains available in print in English is limited for the most part to compilations of excerpts from his spiritual writings that have been collected in volumes intended for nonscholarly audiences.¹⁴ Perhaps as a result, Fénelon scholarship has not flourished in the English-speaking world—even though, happily, it remains robust elsewhere. Several years ago, I joked to a Dutch scholar that the entirety of the literature on Fénelon in English could be read in a week, while a year's reading wouldn't come close to exhausting the French literature. If that was an exaggeration, several years of reading later I can say that it wasn't much of one. Even now the English-language scholarship on Fénelon is limited to a few intellectual biographies and a handful of articles and chapters, and lacks a single monograph dedicated to providing an interpretation of his thought.¹⁵ This is remarkable given Fénelon's influence on European intellectual history, and given the fact that we live at a time when historians of political philosophy like myself sometimes seem already to have turned over (and indeed often more than once) every stone worth turning.

Yet glimmers of hope have begun to appear. Most notably, scholars of the history of economic thought have recently come to recognize Fénelon's crucial role in launching one of the central debates of eighteenth-century political economy, the luxury debate. In this vein several excellent recent works have called welcome attention the degree to which Mandeville's defense of the luxury economy emerged as a direct response to the influential and thoroughgoing critique of luxury that Fénelon developed in *Telemachus*.¹⁶ Further, we are also now very fortunate to have an excellent new intellectual biography of Fénelon that offers a nuanced account of his life and illuminatingly situates his thought in the context of the central episodes of his career.¹⁷ These developments suggest that now, in the wake of the tercentenary of his

death, the time may be ripe for a recovery. It is partly in this hope, at any rate, that this study of his thought is offered.

There is also a second reason why now may be a good time to recover Fénelon, and especially his political thought. We are clearly living in a moment of political change on a number of fronts. But what is striking about these changes, for readers of Fénelon, is that they seem to be bringing us back ever closer to Fénelon's world rather than distancing us further from it.¹⁸ Also, many of these changes not only suggest Fénelon's relevance to our century and its politics, but also help to explain his relative neglect in the last century. For instance, it is hardly surprising that a century committed to secularization and *laïcité*, as was the twentieth century, might hesitate to embrace the political philosophy of a Catholic archbishop. But a century like ours, whose politics is being shaped by a resurgence in the political authority of revealed religion, is likely to find much of interest in a thinker who lived through an age of religious revival and religious persecution, and who sought to think through the proper place of revealed religion in politics. So too a century like the last one, largely defined by liberal optimism about the promise of ever-increasing economic growth, might naturally look askance at a defense of an economic system dedicated to the small and simple. But in a century such as ours, in which unlimited growth can no longer be assumed and in which stagnation and contraction suggest some may have to learn to do with less, an economic thinker who offers a robust defense of the economy of sufficiency may prove to be of great interest. To go even further: a century in which technology promised increased comfort and increased social connection could perhaps reasonably spare itself engagement with a thinker who wrote at length on such seemingly esoteric subjects as “pure love” and the “passive state” and transcendent unity. Yet if ours is in fact an age in which hopes of social connectivity are giving way to realities of social anomie, and rates of technological progress continue to increase even as subjective reports of happiness have flat-lined if not decreased, Fénelon's spirituality may have something to offer not just to religious believers but to all—believers and nonbelievers alike—personally exercised by a concern to know how to live a meaningful life amid the challenges and complexities of our world. Finally, and most importantly: a century driven by commitments to globalization and liberalization and democratization may have had little use for a political thinker who wrote in and for an age dominated by a king driven by penchants for absolutist power, ostentatious splendor, military glory, and imperial conquest. But in a century like ours, which seems destined to be

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In any case, Fénelon began his career as a young priest in Paris preaching at parishes associated with Saint-Sulpice, and in 1679 he received his first full-time post as the director of the *Institution des Nouvelles Catholiques*, a school for Protestant girls converting to Catholicism. The talents Fénelon displayed in this delicate job earned him his next post. In late 1685, in the immediate wake of Louis XIV's notorious revocation of the Edict of Nantes, Fénelon was appointed head of the mission to Saintonge, charged with conversion of the Huguenots there. Saintonge was one of the most concentrated Protestant centers in France, and it is a testament to the faith the authorities had in Fénelon's abilities that he was assigned this post. It is also a testament to Fénelon's talents on several fronts that he was able to fulfill his difficult duties there in a reasonably gentle manner.²¹ And his work did not go unnoticed. The governor of the region to which he was assigned was a son of the great Colbert, finance minister of Louis XIV, and Fénelon's services in his district led him to welcome Fénelon into his circle—a circle that included, among other noteworthy figures, the Duke of Beauvillier and the Duke of Chevreuse, each of whom married daughters of Colbert and would also prove lifelong friends and key allies in Fénelon's later efforts at resistance and reform.

By the time Fénelon returned to Paris in 1687 he was well on his way to becoming an established figure across several spheres. In the Church, Bossuet had taken him as his protégé. Testifying to his rise in the wider intellectual world, within a few years he would be elected to the *Académie française*. And in 1689, he made his political debut when, on the strength of Beauvillier's recommendation, he was named preceptor (or tutor) to the Duke of Burgundy, grandson of Louis XIV and *Petit Dauphin*. It was a decisive event in Fénelon's professional career to that point, and made possible his development as a political thinker and political reformer. As tutor, Fénelon enjoyed access to the court and its machinations; observing them with care provided him a great deal of material on which his later political inquiries would draw. And as tutor to a potential heir to the throne, Fénelon was conscious that his efforts to shape the mind and soul of his young charge might potentially shape the nation. It was also a post in which he was clearly invested and which allowed him to draw on his many diverse talents as an educator, author, spiritual advisor, and political observer. In time, Fénelon's duties would expand to include serving as preceptor to Burgundy's two brothers, the other *Enfants de France*: the Duke of Anjou (who would become Philip V, King of Spain) and the Duke of Berry.²² Yet these moments at the center of French politics were

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not to last, owing largely to what would become the defining episode of the next stage of Fénelon's career: his encounter with Madame Guyon.

Jeanne-Marie Bouvier de la Motte-Guyon was a self-taught spiritualist. A pioneer of the new form of mysticism that had been recently gaining ground in France, Guyon arrived in Paris in the mid-1680s and began to correspond with Fénelon. Many studies have been devoted to their relationship, but for our purposes what matters is their shared interest in the idea of "pure love" that would prove to be the downfall of each. Pure love was itself a controversial concept; only a year before the first meeting of Guyon and Fénelon, Rome had condemned the teachings of the Spanish priest and author Miguel de Molinos on the nature of the inner life and the role of love in it. Guyon however shared Molinos's intense interest in the inner life, and her explications of it—perhaps owing to what is generally agreed to be a lack of theological sophistication—soon brought her own writings under suspicion. This ultimately led to a comprehensive examination of her doctrines by the Church authorities at the request of Madame Maintenon, which Fénelon himself initially supported. But the investigation soon turned unfavorable for Guyon; by 1694 her doctrines were condemned by the Archbishop of Paris, and by the end of 1695 she had been imprisoned at Vincennes, later to be transferred to the Bastille. Throughout the initial stages of this process, and for whatever reason (but likely for the ways in which Guyon helped to awaken him from the spiritual "dryness" that had been evidently weighing on him for some time), Fénelon stayed loyal to Guyon.²³ By August 1698 matters were different; by then he had concluded that Guyon had "deceived" him and that she was a "hypocrite."²⁴ But by that point matters had moved well beyond the question of Guyon and her fate, and the controversy had come to focus on the defense of the doctrine of pure love that Fénelon had taken it upon himself to advance, much to Bossuet's consternation. The result was a protracted and bitter and increasingly public battle between Fénelon and his mentor. In its course, Fénelon wrote a host of works meant to demonstrate the orthodoxy of true love and its essential commensurability with the doctrines of the Church fathers and Councils; by far the most important of these was the *Explication of the Maxims of the Saints* of 1697. But for all his efforts Fénelon was ultimately outmaneuvered by Bossuet and came out on the losing side. At Bossuet's request, Louis XIV wrote directly to Pope Innocent XII to ask for his judgment on the *Maxims*. The result was the papal brief *Cum alias* released on March 12, 1699, formally condemning twenty-three propositions of the *Maxims*.

Fénelon's response has often been taken as evidence of his grace. Immediately on news of the condemnation he made a full public recantation of his offending propositions; the Pope was so taken with Fénelon's docility that he considered appointing him cardinal. But the greatest blow to Fénelon's career was still yet to come. As part of his education of Burgundy, Fénelon had drawn up a series of didactic texts, including fables and dialogues and histories. The longest of these was a book-length manuscript that told the story of the son of Odysseus in search of his lost father. But this text, written for a specific and single addressee, would prove to have a very different destiny. Stolen by an unknown someone, the manuscript was published without the author's approval and appeared in April 1699—a short six weeks after *Cum alias*—under the title *Les aventures de Télémaque*. The event determined the remainder of its author's career. The king, reading the lessons it sought to teach his grandson, immediately (and rightly) saw in it a repudiation of the sort of glory and grandeur to which he had dedicated his reign. The result was Fénelon's banishment from court—and thus the same text that would bring Fénelon fame in the Enlightenment was, in the short run, the cause of the end of his formal political career.

Thus begins the third and final stage of Fénelon's life. Banished from Versailles and stripped of his position as tutor to Burgundy, Fénelon retreated to his diocese of Cambrai, of which he had been appointed bishop in 1695. It was, in one sense, political exile. But it was, in another sense, the beginning of a new stage in his career as both a political and a spiritual thinker. In Cambrai, Fénelon was chiefly concerned with managing his parish and ministering to the needs of his largely Flemish parishioners. These were tasks that suited him well, and allowing him to make the most of his gifts as a spiritual counselor and his experience teaching. They also afforded him a new perspective on politics. Cambrai lay in the heart of the northern borderlands that had long been contested in a series of bloody battles as a part of the War of Spanish Succession, and during his time there in the first decades of the eighteenth century, Fénelon saw firsthand the personal costs and devastation of both war and famine. He also maintained his correspondence with his former student, himself called to fight in these wars. And for a brief time, it seemed that Fénelon's political influence may reemerge. April 1711 saw the death of Burgundy's father, the *Grand Dauphin*, which left his pupil the Duke next in line to the throne. Later that year, in conjunction with his allies, Fénelon completed a draft proposal for reform of the French state, and it seemed possible and even likely that he would be appointed prime minister

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of France on Burgundy's accession to the throne, and thus in a position to enact his envisioned reforms. But it was not to be. In early 1712, while ministering to his wife who had fallen ill with measles, the Duke contracted the disease himself and followed his wife in death. Burgundy's death brought Fénelon's time in politics to an end for good, and he devoted the remainder of his career mostly to theological debates, actively and extensively participating in the critique of Jansenism that reached its peak with the papal bull *Unigenitus* of 1713. Illness and death came for Fénelon himself in early 1715, only months before the death of Louis XIV.

Condemned by both throne and altar but beloved by admirers from the *philosophes* to the faithful, Fénelon's life and legacy were momentous. But it is his thought that concerns us here. And Fénelon's career as a thinker was as momentous as his career at court and in the Church. Fénelon's writings spanned a remarkably wide range—rhetoric, education, literature, art, politics, philosophy, theology, and spirituality—and his contributions left a mark on each of these fields. A very brief introductory survey of these writings, focusing especially on those on which this study will draw, may thus also be helpful.²⁵

Fénelon's earliest writings lie in the intertwined fields of rhetoric and education. This was largely the result of his employments in the first stages of his career; as a young priest preaching his first sermons, the mechanisms of pulpit eloquence would have been much on his mind, just as the methods and aims of education would have been much on his mind during his labors at both *Nouvelles Catholiques* and the mission to Saintonge. In any case, it was at the time of these employments that Fénelon began work on his *Dialogues on Eloquence*. Though not published until 1718, the *Dialogues* would have lasting influence on eighteenth-century conceptions of oratory and rhetoric, and provides a crucial window into his understanding of eloquence and its place in both pulpit oratory and education. Fénelon would return to questions of rhetoric and eloquence in one of his last literary productions, his *Letter to the Academy*.²⁶ Written in 1714 in response to a solicitation for suggestions on projects the *Académie française* should pursue in the wake of completing its landmark dictionary, Fénelon's *Letter* elaborates on the themes of his *Dialogues*. But the two are also joined by a shared focus on education. As such, they provide key insight into Fénelon's intentions and methods as an educator, and introduce themes central to his two texts focusing principally on education. In the mid-1680s, the Duke and Duchess of Beauvillier, seeking advice on the education of their eight daughters,

commissioned from Fénelon a study that would come to be published as *On the Education of Girls*—a work that did much for both his career and his later literary legacy.²⁷ The *Education* together with his later and shorter *Advice à une dame de qualité* (likewise written in response to a solicitation for advice on educating a daughter) present his theories on the methods and ends of education, and together with the writings on eloquence do much to illuminate the educational aims and methods of *Telemachus* when read alongside it.

Fénelon's professional career also shaped the development of another side of his literary corpus: his contributions to philosophy, theology, and spirituality. On the first of these fronts, Fénelon's time under Bossuet in the 1680s witnessed his composition of his two contributions to post-Cartesian philosophy. These included his *Demonstration of the Existence of God* (first published in 1712), which used arguments drawn both from natural religion and from reason independent of experience to argue for God's existence, and his *Refutation of Malebranche* (first published in 1732), composed at Bossuet's direct request, which offers insight into Fénelon's understanding of providence via its several objections to Malebranche's positions on the nature and limits of God's freedom. These two works, in conjunction with his metaphysical treatise on the nature of being entitled the *Nature of Man* (composed c. 1688 though not published until 1904) and numerous occasional works—including an important letter that has been excerpted and separately published under the title *Refutation of Spinoza*—constitute his principal contributions to what we would today consider philosophy. In the 1690s, with the Guyon affair in full bloom, Fénelon's energies refocused on theology. Many of the most important of his writings in this vein sought to provide defenses of the orthodoxy of his positions via a demonstration of their consistency with the Church's positions. For us they are especially valuable as sources of explication of his concepts of love and hope and self-interest and as such demand attention for how they comport with and illuminate the tenets of his political philosophy. Previously we mentioned the most important and best-known of these writings, the *Explication of the Maxims of the Saints* (1697). But the *Maxims*, though the centerpiece of the controversy, was only one of many published and unpublished writings generated by Fénelon and Bossuet in the course of the quietism affair. Several of these writings will demand our attention, including both the polemical writings that Fénelon directed at Bossuet, as well as the conceptual writings in which he developed several of his key concepts at greater length. In this latter category are the *Gnostic of St. Clement of Alexandria* (written in 1694 but only

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have hypothesized that it was in fact meant for Maintenon or Beauvillier, perhaps to assist in sharpening criticisms they might deliver to the king directly in their own name.³¹ However this may be, the *Letter* is important for its forceful presentations of political positions Fénelon would develop in detail elsewhere. A second political work meant for a specific addressee is the oration Fénelon delivered in May 1707 at the consecration of Joseph-Clément of Bavaria, Elector and Archbishop of Cologne. The significance of this event was that Joseph-Clément, in addition to enjoying a long friendship with Fénelon, was born Elector though he pursued a career in the Church.³² Fénelon used the *Discourse* to set forth several of his key statements on the relationship of Church and state. The relationship of politics to religion is also central to another essay written for a specific addressee: the *Examination of Conscience Concerning the Duties of Kingship*. The addressee of the *Examination* was again Burgundy—but not the young boy that Fénelon had first taught. Thought to date to early 1711, the *Examination* was written when the Duke was nearly thirty, by which time he had seen war firsthand. Offering a series of queries for its addressee’s internal reflection, it challenged the Duke to understand and to embrace the duties of the king should he ascend to the throne. In so doing it draws at once on Fénelon’s understanding of moral psychology, his political teachings on order and good governance, his experiences as a spiritual director, and his skills at literary persuasion.

One last group of Fénelon’s political writings aside from *Telemachus* also deserves mention at the outset. As noted earlier, Fénelon’s time in Cambrai was one of tremendous military and political upheaval. Much of this owed to the War of Spanish Succession waged to establish the Bourbon claim to the Spanish throne. But it was also a period of domestic turmoil owing in part to famines France suffered during the final decade of the seventeenth century and the first decade of the eighteenth. Fénelon chronicled his reflections on these events in a series of unpublished writings that his modern editors have grouped together for the sake of convenience under the heading of “Political Memoranda.” Several of them deserve particular mention and attention. Fénelon addresses the legitimacy and feasibility of Louis’s claims to the Spanish throne in several pieces, including his “Memorandum on the Means of Preventing the War of Spanish Succession” (1701). He reflects on the devastation consequent to Louis’s wars in the “Memorandum on the Deplorable State of France” (1710). Perhaps most notably, in two memoranda written after the death of the *Grand Dauphin*, he offers practical schemes for reform in France. The first dates to November 1711. Known as the “Plans of

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Government” or “Tables of Chaulnes” (Chaulnes being the place of the estate of the Duke of Chevreuse at which Fénelon and his circle of aristocratic reformers met to develop these plans), the “Tables” lay out a comprehensive scheme for reforming social and political institutions in France upon the Duke of Burgundy’s accession to the throne. As has been rightly noted by Jacques Le Brun in his notes on the text, the “Tables” are a collection of “*phrases incomplètes*” and indeed their sometimes-awkward syntax can give them the appearance of the “*caractère hâtif de notes*” (Pl. 2:1078n). Yet their careful organization—evident on the folio pages of the manuscript in Fénelon’s hand (A.S.-S. Ms. 2027) and which includes a systematic division into headings and bracketed subheadings—attests to the degree to which these seemingly hastily jotted notes in fact represent an organized and comprehensive approach to political reform. Divided into such subheadings as “Church” and “Nobility” and “Justice” and “Commerce,” the “Tables” is our most direct window into Fénelon’s practical vision for France.³³ Yet Fénelon’s hopes for an opportunity to enact these reforms were dashed upon the Duke’s death, only months after the drafting of the “Tables”—an event that gave occasion to another key memorandum, the “Memorandum on the Measures to Take after the Death of the Duke of Burgundy,” dated March 15, 1712. As we shall see, these political writings all examine themes also addressed in *Telemachus*, and reading them alongside each other helps to clarify their didactic lessons and sensitize us to certain aspects of the text of *Telemachus* and its teachings that may be less evident at first glance.

In the end, it is to *Telemachus* that Fénelon largely owed his legacy and influence—the work in which his talents as political thinker, spiritual counselor, and literary stylist are most on display. As noted earlier, for all its later renown and popularity, *Telemachus* was originally conceived and composed for an audience of one.³⁴ Fénelon laid out his intentions for the text in a frequently cited memoir.³⁵ Defending his work from the charge that it was meant as an attack on or satire of specific public figures, Fénelon insists that he sought “only to entertain the Duke of Burgundy with these adventures, and to instruct him while entertaining him, without ever wishing to give this work to the public.” And the instruction he meant to convey is clear: *Telemachus*, he explains, “is a fictional narration in the form of a heroic poem, like those of Homer and Virgil, in which I put the key teachings appropriate for a prince destined by birth to reign,” including “all the truths necessary for government, and all the faults that sovereign power can have.”³⁶ The political significance of *Telemachus* is thus beyond question, even as assessments of its

didacticism and its style have varied over the ages. In what follows, little effort will be made to defend its style (after teaching the text for several years it seems fair to say that one either finds its style charming, or one doesn't) in order to focus on what Fénelon himself considered its main aim: namely, and in keeping with the intentions of the mirror-for-princes genre to which it is a contribution, to illustrate the “truths” necessary for good governance and the “faults” that inhibit its realization.

That said, *Telemachus* is not a treatise, but a work of fiction—a literary effort that presents its teachings in a text that self-consciously sought to bring together the virtues of the ancient epic and the modern novel. As such, even if an analysis of its style lies beyond our scope, a very brief overview of the trajectory of its plot may prove helpful, especially given its sometimes dizzying array of names and places.³⁷ The book itself tells the story of Telemachus, following him around the Mediterranean in search of his father, yet to return to Ithaca from the Trojan Wars. Its subtitle specifically presents it as a continuation of the fourth book of Homer's *Odyssey*. In Homer's epic, Telemachus is only present for the first four books, disappearing entirely from the story until his father's homecoming in the final book. Fénelon exploits this narrative silence, taking the essentially blank slate of Homer's treatment to develop a portrait of a young prince destined to rule, and guided in his search by his wise tutor, Mentor—in fact the disguised goddess Minerva. Together Mentor and Telemachus track across the Mediterranean in search of Odysseus for eighteen books of the text, with the tutor taking every chance to convey the essential lessons of good government and virtuous living to his young charge.

The opening four books of Homer's *Odyssey* introduce Telemachus, first visited by Minerva in the form of Mentor, who encourages him to seek out news of his father in Pylos and Sparta, where Menelaus speaks of Ulysses's arrival on Calypso's island. Fénelon's story begins with Mentor and Telemachus arriving on Calypso's shores, washing up there after a shipwreck. Telemachus remains on the island for the whole of the first five books, in which he recounts to Calypso the story of his travels since leaving Pylos. He begins with the story of setting sail to Sicily in search of further news of Ulysses, and how they were shipwrecked and taken prisoner there by Acestes, king of a band of displaced Trojans. Acestes, learning his visitor was the son of their enemy Ulysses, sentenced him to a death that he was spared only by Mentor's gifts of divine prophecy (Book 1). In gratitude for Mentor's services, Acestes then arranged to convey them back to Ithaca via a Phoenician ship. But this ship was soon taken by rival Egyptians, and Mentor and Telemachus were brought to

(Book 12), and the quarrel in the camp between Telemachus and Hippias (Book 13). After this, Telemachus makes a revealing journey to the underworld in search of his father, traveling through both Tartarus and the Elysian Fields, meeting the shades of numerous kings both bad and good (Book 14). Leaving the underworld, Telemachus returns to fight in and ultimately win the battle of the Salentines, vanquishing Adrastus (Book 15) and arranging for the establishment of postwar order between Salente and its former enemy (Book 16). With peace established, Telemachus returns to Salente to see the fruits of Mentor's and Idomeneus's successful efforts at reform, and to begin his life with his bride Antiope, daughter of Idomeneus (Book 17). Together they then leave for Ithaca, en route to which Mentor delivers his final lessons on kingship. Arriving in Ithaca at last, the text concludes with Minerva revealing herself to Telemachus before ascending to heaven, and Telemachus reunited with his father at the house of the swineherd Eumeus (Book 18).

Contributions of This Study

A primary aim of this study is to provide a reconstruction of Fénelon's political philosophy. By so doing, it seeks to offer an overview of and introduction to Fénelon's thought that will be of use both to historians of ideas seeking to better understand a thinker who had such demonstrable influence on the development of early modern political thought, and to political theorists who may find in it useful resources that can help us think through several pressing political issues that we face today. But reconstruction is only one of its aims. In addition, what follows also presents an interpretation of Fénelon's thought and specifically an interpretation that self-consciously aims to carve out distinctive positions within the extant scholarship on three particular fronts.

Earlier it was noted that the scholarship on Fénelon's political thought, especially in English, is not as robust as might be wished. But this is hardly to say that it is nonexistent. A generation ago, several prominent anglophone scholars, in the context of broader studies of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century French thought, began to call attention to Fénelon's place in this context.³⁸ European scholars have been interested in his political thought for much longer, even though there was often little consensus on how this thought is best characterized. Charles Urbain, one of the most important contributors to these early studies, opened his introductory essay to his 1920 collection of Fénelon's political writings by observing that "the political

But what exactly should we make of this claim, and particularly the understanding of the relationship of Fénelon's politics to his spirituality on which it is founded? My sense is that taken in one way it captures something very crucial to his project. Both his political thought and his religious thought share a common focus on overcoming a common enemy. That enemy is self-love.⁴⁵ As Fénelon's writings everywhere attest, and as we will see more than once in what follows, self-love is consistently taken by Fénelon to represent the single greatest threat to the political order and its efforts to achieve stability and flourish, as well as the single greatest threat to the individual's soul in its efforts to achieve full communion with God. Yet as much as Fénelon's political thought and religious thought share a common understanding of the chief obstacle to be overcome, their visions of the good achieved once this enemy is vanquished are very different. Put as briefly and as bluntly as possible: pure love—the disinterested love of God that is free from any hint of self-love—is indeed the aim of the spiritual life and the mark of Christian perfection, according to Fénelon. Yet this pure love, by its very nature, lies beyond politics, owing to its nature. The political world, as it is understood by Fénelon, is inescapably a world of self-love—a world driven by concerns for wealth, for power, and ultimately for glory. To think that the rulers or citizens of this world could ever be completely disabused of such concerns Fénelon thinks naïve. Yet at the same time, Fénelon deeply and sincerely despised the abuses that he everywhere saw men of the political world commit in the name of self-love, and as a political reformer he was centrally concerned to mitigate these abuses. But his political reforms aimed at a goal very different from the goal of the transcendence of self-love at which spiritual reform of the individual aims. Troubled by the politics of selfishness, yet convinced that self-love can never be fully eradicated from politics, Fénelon set himself a specific task: not to eliminate self-love, but to elevate it and educate it. Put differently, the aim of Fénelon's political teachings was never to transform self-loving kings into pure-loving saints, but to encourage rulers to embrace a higher self-love—and particularly a love of a specific sort of glory that he called “true glory”—that would render them both happier and better for their peoples, even if it failed to raise them to the highest levels of individual perfection achieved by the most devout. Seen thusly, Fénelon's political philosophy and his efforts at political reform operate in the space between politics as it is and the spirit as it longs to be. It is a vision of an improved politics that is defined between and against the two poles of the earthly city and the heavenly city, and requires that we

political critique: that is, the identification and diagnosis of extant political pathologies and corruptions. Yet at other places, he is engaged in the separate (though hardly unrelated) project of setting forth constructive solutions to these pathologies, in an effort to restore health to the body politic through practical reform. The crucial point to be emphasized—and which can too easily be lost—is that Fénelon was radical in his critiques, but moderate in his constructive solutions. Fénelon, that is, recognized that however useful radical critique might be as a way to shock and awaken audiences out of complacency, it is not necessary—and indeed it is often fatal—to attempt to translate radical critique into radical action; calling for a radical break with a problematic past is not in any way tantamount to calling for the embrace of a politics built on a radical ideology in its own right. Thus while Fénelon was committed to the belief that the conditions of French politics had devolved under the absolutist government of Louis XIV to a point at which radical break from the past was required, the system he sought to substitute in its place cannot be understood through the categories of political radicalism so familiar to us from either the eighteenth-century revolutionaries or twentieth-century experiences of political radicalism.

In taking this position, I intervene in a long-standing debate in the francophone scholarship over whether Fénelon is best understood as an “idealist” or a “realist.”⁴⁸ As will soon become clear, my own sympathies are with the latter camp. But the issue here goes beyond this scholarly debate. At issue in the end is not just Fénelon’s temperament or demeanor as a political thinker and reformer, but also the question of the ultimate horizons of his political vision, and specifically his understanding of what in fact can and cannot be accomplished through political action. To give away the game at the outset: my own sense is that Fénelon was optimistic about our capacity to improve and elevate political life, but sober in his understanding of how far it could in fact be raised. This sobriety was itself the product of his understanding of the limits of both human nature and political action. With regard to the former, and as we have already had occasion to mention, Fénelon understood self-love, problematic as it may indeed be, to be too entrenched in our natures to admit of the sort of complete excision that would enable us to establish a golden age in the here and now. As a result, he sought less to effect the “denaturing” of the human being described by his admirer Rousseau in his notorious portrait of the legislator, than to educate and elevate the self-love that is at once an inescapable part of both our natures and the landscape of modern politics. Idylls of life before the fall, or before the flood, or before any of the

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many other moments that set us on the path to where we are today, must remain just that: idylls. These idylls may be helpful to us insofar as they can help us to clarify our vision of the political orders that are most deserving of our admiration. In so doing they can be very useful as polestars guiding our efforts at reform. But we err if we think that we can make these idylls reality. Armed with this conviction, Fénelon believed that the central task before political reformers is to work with what has been given to them: in his case to work with the self-love that lies at the heart of both the modern person and the modern polis. In the end then, Fénelon was hardly a champion of either the extreme ascetic self-renunciation or the extreme austere classical republicanism with which he has sometimes been associated. Far from extreme and ancient, Fénelon's fundamental orientations are in this way modern and moderate.⁴⁹

This in turn leads to a third point that this study will raise. As evident from its title, it aims to provide an explication of Fénelon's political philosophy. Yet to say that Fénelon has a "philosophy"—much less a "political philosophy"—is to take a position that is not uncontroversial. Some of the most careful students of Fénelon's philosophical writings have themselves wondered if it is indeed appropriate to speak of his having a "philosophy" at all, to say nothing of a "political philosophy."⁵⁰ Aware of this—as well as the debates that scholars today often have had over the possible differences between "political thought" and "political theory" and "political philosophy"—what follows argues that Fénelon ultimately is best regarded as a political philosopher. My reasons for doing so are twofold. First, an animating principle of Fénelon's inquiry is a fundamentally philosophical commitment to distinguishing the true from the false. This commitment is especially central to Fénelon's political inquiry, even though this is rarely noted—and when it is, it tends to be noted only in discrete instances without acknowledging the systemic role of this approach across his political inquiry. In this vein, chapter 1 examines how Fénelon's theory of education is founded on a distinction between "true glory" and "false glory." Chapter 2 shows how his political economy is founded on his distinction between "true riches" and "false riches." Chapter 3 argues that Fénelon's theory of war and is founded on a distinction between "true courage" and "false courage." Chapter 4 focuses on the ways in which his theory of statesmanship is grounded in a distinction between "true pleasures" and "false pleasures." As I hope to show, in each of these cases the shift from a love of the "false" form of these goods to a love of their "true" form is a shift from one sort of self-love to another—a shift from

a selfish and exclusive desire to acquire external goods at any cost, to a more elevated desire to earn and deserve certain goods as a result of certain types of moral behavior. On this front we again see the degree to which self-love and its elevation is central to Fénelon's politics. But insofar as determination of the distinction between the true and the false is itself a task of philosophy, the ubiquity and prominence of this distinction in his thought attests to one way in which Fénelon's political inquiry deserves to be seen as a political philosophy.

Fénelon also needs to be understood as a political philosopher for a second reason. To return to another point already noted: Fénelon understands the world of political action and the world of spiritual contemplation to occupy separate spheres. The political world, that is, cannot be understood as the whole of the world, on Fénelon's view. Instead it needs to be understood as part of a larger world within which it exists and by which it is bounded. And this larger world is itself constituted by the subjects that are ultimately most dear to Fénelon: the world of God's existence and the soul's perfection via a contemplation that leads it closer to God. A full treatment of the distinctive practices and activities of this world—practices that especially include prayer, meditation, and contemplation—of course lies well beyond this study of Fénelon's politics. At the same time, we cannot understand this politics without appreciating the way these activities, even as they lie well beyond the political world, shape the political world. It is for this reason that chapters 5, 6, and 7 focus on themes of faith and hope and love that may on their face seem to lie beyond politics. As I hope to show in these chapters, the standard provided by this world beyond politics enables us to judge the relative value of goods in the political world and specifically enables us to distinguish between true and false goods in the political world. And while for Fénelon the distinction between true and false is not simply equivalent to the distinction between celestial and terrestrial, or the distinction between the city of God and the city of man, it is yet the case that good and bad in the terrestrial world, Fénelon believes, cannot be understood without the frame of reference that only appreciation of the superiority of the celestial can afford. Most importantly on this front, appreciation of the superiority of the celestial to the terrestrial—or to use the terms that Fénelon himself uses, appreciation of the superiority of the *surnaturel* to the *naturel*—not only makes it possible to distinguish false glory from true glory but also makes possible our appreciation of another higher form of glory, namely celestial or divine glory: a glory that ultimately, and crucially, eclipses false glory and true glory alike. For

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now, the claim on which I want to insist is that the fact that politics cannot be understood at its deepest level without understanding the relationship of politics to the larger world of which it is a part is a second reason why we do well to speak of Fénelon not only as a political thinker or political theorist but as a political philosopher.

A last point bears mentioning before concluding this introduction and turning to the work of explication and interpretation. This concerns how to read Fénelon. Fénelon was an author who knew what it was like to be misread and misinterpreted; as we have already seen, his fall from grace and his condemnation by both throne and altar ~~was a~~ direct result of the ways his texts were read and interpreted by Bossuet and Innocent XII and Louis XIV among others. Conscious of this, in reading and interpreting Fénelon myself I have tried as best I can to follow his own counsels, as delivered in his public disputes with Bossuet and in his private correspondence. These counsels include, first, Fénelon's request that "the fair reader patiently make two readings" of his ~~works~~ (MSJ OF 3:249). I can attest that in the present case this bar has been cleared (and indeed by more than a little). Fénelon also asks that we read in what we today might call the spirit of hermeneutical charity: that is, that we read with a genuine desire to try to grasp the meaning of a text rather than reading with the aim of discovering the flaws of an author's argument (see, e.g., RRQ Pl. 1:1136–37; MSJ OF 3:249). Elsewhere Fénelon calls this meaning the "*sensus obvius et naturalis*" of a book (CF 4:171; CF 4:199; CF 6:140), which he says is "the true and sole meaning of a text well understood" (CF 8:114; cf. CF 12:59–60).⁵¹ At the same time, this meaning hardly reveals itself without any effort on the reader's part; as Fénelon explains, "the *sensus obvius* is not the sense that presents itself at first, when a work has not been thoroughly examined and has only been read in a superficial manner," but only once it has been "sufficiently examined" in its entirety (RTP OF 2:330; cf. RRQ Pl. 1:1130; CF 8:73). Conscious of these admonitions, I have tried to ensure that they have governed my efforts to reconstruct Fénelon's positions throughout. In addition, at several places Fénelon suggests that genuine understanding requires understanding systems as wholes. Thus, just as a historian seeking to master his material must strive "to see it in its entirety, as from a single view," which can only be done if he turns it around and regards it "from all sides" (LAF Pl. 2:1179), so too good readers must strive to understand how these detached propositions can be "reunited in a single body," as "nothing would be more unfair than to judge a book on its detached propositions alone" (MSJ OF 3:248); indeed elsewhere in his

correspondence Fénelon cautions against making judgments against a given author before having thoroughly studied their corpus (CF 2:16), and rejects the “very malicious art” of interpreters who detach discrete propositions from their contexts (CF 6:252). In my own efforts to understand Fénelon’s writings I have sought to be guided by these warnings and to understand his discrete claims both in the context of the individual works in which they appear and from the point of view of his system in its entirety.

In addition to the question of how best to understand Fénelon’s texts, readers of his work are also confronted with the question of how he should be understood relative to his context.⁵² This is an especially daunting question in Fénelon’s case. For not only was he an extremely prolific writer, but, as we have already seen, he contributed to a stunning array of fields, and in all of these cases he self-consciously sought to stake out his position against leading authorities on these questions to whom he makes frequent reference, both explicit and implicit. To mention only the most important of these: Fénelon’s interventions on the question of pure love led him to engage thinkers from Augustine and Aquinas and Clement to St. Francis de Sales and St. John of the Cross and St. Bonaventure alongside Molinos and Guyon. His writings on metaphysics apply a synthesis of Augustinianism and Cartesianism to critiques of Malebranche and Spinoza, among others. His writings on economics emerge from a long tradition of French economic thinking that extends from Bodin and Montchrétien to Boisguilbert and Vauban. His writings on education are never far removed from concerns he encountered in the work of associates and colleagues such as Fleury and Bossuet, as well as in the work of contemporaries such as Madame de Sévigné. His writings on morality are shaped not only by long reading in Homer and Plato and Virgil and Cicero, but also by sustained engagement with contemporary reflections on the *honnête homme* described by seventeenth-century French moralists from La Bruyère to La Fontaine to La Rochefoucauld. And most importantly for this study, his political writings contribute to and extend multiple discrete traditions within the history of political thought, including reason-of-state theory, just war theory, utopian theory, and, most notably, the mirror-for-princes genre made famous by Machiavelli and to which *Telemachus* is arguably the last major contribution. All of this bears mentioning insofar as it helps remind us of the striking array of genres and debates and thinkers with which and with whom Fénelon engaged, and which require direct and extended engagement if one hopes to grasp fully the entire extent of his context. This study makes no claim to be comprehensive in this sense. Rather, in the

