

Brian Welter

Des vérités devenues folles
by Rémi Brague*

Philosopher Rémi Brague, a traditional and Catholic voice in France, covers virtue and values, anthropology, nature and creation, and the family and culture in this collection of English lectures translated back into French. His call for a return to the Middle Ages is in fact an apology of the Catholic and Thomistic perspective. *Des vérités devenues folles* is written for Catholics who are engaged in building an alternative to modernity. The book succeeds through its nuanced yet clear argument: It is to a *certain* medieval culture that Brague skillfully and persuasively calls us. Unfortunately, this nuance will be lost on careless readers.

Building—and rebuilding—culture does not demand the reinvention of the wheel. Underpinning the argument is the not very original notion of a civilization founded on *logos*, “on the discourse that allows for rationalism and that has defined human beings since the Greek philosophers. *Logos* provides us with the principle that sense and intelligibility are present in the world in some manner, and that we are in some way home here.”¹ *Logos* already founded and underpinned medieval

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¹ Brague, *Des vérités devenues folles*, 18.

European civilization, and Brague optimistically asserts that such a civilization is still possible through tradition. He echoes Jose Ortega y Gasset and Charles Dupont de Nemours in arguing, "Among the fundamental rights of humanity, there is one that needs to occupy first place. . . . It's the right to continuity."² Such thoughts pit Brague sharply against the mainstream and alongside Alasdair MacIntyre and Roger Scruton. Like Scruton, Brague envisions a rich, nuanced, and forward-thinking tradition that can inform the present and the future based on a conversation between the present and the past, making history "a form of conversation."³ Brague contrasts this conversation with the barbarity of forgetting the past and thereby dropping our identity, something that he sees happening in contemporary France.

Such conversations with both the past and tradition are vital because of modernity's wide-ranging failures. Any attempt at reforming modernity, such as with a fundamentalist interpretation of biblical creation stories, is doomed to failure. We need something subtler, *both-and* rather than *either-or*. Brague seems to relish the creative tension between Scripture and Greek thought. The ancient Greeks' cosmological view of creation, which envisions an end or purpose to every created good or being, far surpasses the modern downgrading of nature to lifeless material available for exploitation. The much humbler yet richer medieval view, according to the author, looked on nature as a book of wisdom and even occasionally as our master. Enigmatically connected to this, the medieval mind was much more poetic than ours, Brague contends. Medieval poets envisioned birds singing in their Latin, a dignified and holy liturgical language, rather than in a rustic vernacular. Such asides enrich the argument and convey aspects of the medieval personality that the author has in mind for us today.

² *Ibid.*, 160–161.

³ *Ibid.*, 162.

Anthropology and nature form the core of *Des vérités devenues folles*. Brague contrasts modernity's project-based thinking with the medieval *task*. While a project is defined by a human or human society, a task is given us by something or someone higher. This part lacks in detail and coherence. Perhaps the word *vocation* better expresses Brague's thinking in both English and French. The author could have expanded his argument to include the Benedictine *ora et labora* ("pray and work"), which gave dignity and a spiritual quality to the most menial jobs. Today's aspirational capitalist cultures could do with more dishwashing and floor sweeping, something that the author fails to emphasize.

As with many Catholic thinkers, such as Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, one of Brague's strengths lies in both his definition of man and his insight into how modernity compromises the integrity of the human being. A market-first socio-economic viewpoint reduces the person to a mere consumer, which also harms the family: "The market introduces its own patterns of thought into the sacred fortification of the family."⁴ This leads to a clarification of personhood: "The dimension according to which there is something in us that possesses an intrinsic value is the personal dimension. A person is a being whom we should and must respect as such, independently of performance."⁵ Modernity's atomization of humans contrasts with the medieval view of the person as part of an organic society that thought long-term and prioritized family and religion.

So what would this "medieval" society look like today? It would be civilized. Brague memorably contrasts barbarity with civilization. Barbarians fail to communicate. Conversely,

⁴ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 142.

civilization establishes an ideal of communication. It is not just any type of communication, but that which is based on or needs to be based on the city, among people who enjoy the attribute *civis*, and who therefore deserve to be called *civilis*. The city [is] a space that defines itself by the possibility of linguistic communication, a space in which the objective is to make communication among people possible, even easy and spontaneous. The city's ideal is the flourishing of communication among men.⁶

Such a city allows for the political nature of humans to develop. This nature “stems from our capacity to use the *logos*,”⁷ though Brague makes the fascinating point that too much reason leads to excess and a return to barbarity. He notes how overly-civilized societies attempt to rejuvenate themselves by inviting in the apparently more barbaric. Such observations parallel those made by the controversial French novelist Michel Houellebecq. In fact, Houellebecq's notorious cynicism regarding modernity is not so far off from that of Brague, though the latter offers an appealing solution in contrast to Houellebecq's apparent hopelessness. As with other parts of *Des vérités devenues folles*, the easily-offended will be provoked into all sorts of pearl-clutching and swooning.

Brague's discussion of liberty will undoubtedly fall on deaf modernist ears while chiming with traditionalist Catholics. In a sense, then, Brague fails with these lectures because few modernists will question their viewpoint if they read the book. But Catholics, on the defensive for decades, need buttressing. *Des vérités devenues folles* provides this. Brague challenges, for instance, the mainstream yet childish view of liberty based on endless consumer choice and the satisfaction of our natural impulses. He doesn't rely exclusively on Catholic and medieval

⁶ *Ibid.*, 154–155.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 155.

thought, and cites, for instance, Kant's concern that by following our instincts we allow ourselves to become enslaved to them.

Identifying science and the scientific mindset as underpinning much of modernity, Brague contends that Galileo's revolution, which superseded the Thomistic-Aristotelian scheme whereby each thing in creation is ordered to an end, separated man from the universe. It shrank humanity's vision of itself and of the cosmos. Creation became mere matter, something to manipulate. Mathematics became the ultimate explanation for everything. Nature lost its meaning to us, and we in turn lost something of our personhood. As with other Catholics interested in science, such as the physicist Father Stanley Jaki, Brague sheds light on the deficiency of the scientific mindset. This does not entail a rejection of science, but only, and again paralleling other Catholic writers, the observation that science needs to take a humbler position. Science cannot provide the foundation to humanity's relationship with nature or satisfy our metaphysical concerns.

Consistency, nuance, and detail contribute to making *Des vérités devenues folles* convincing, even though the book is not so accessible to those without theology and philosophy backgrounds. Brague calls us back to the profound insights of the medieval mind. Traditionalists, anyone inspired by the New Evangelization, and those dismayed by society's current direction will surely take heart in Brague's series of lectures. He helps us see that our noble and urgent task consists in handing on a living tradition to the next generation and beyond. It is a vocation worth taking up because the spirit of modernity pales in comparison to this *logos*-inspired medieval vision.



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SUMMARY

This paper is a review of the book: Rémi Brague, *Des vérités devenues folles* (Paris: Salvator, 2019). The book is a collection of Brague's lectures that cover virtue and values, anthropology, nature and creation, and the family and culture. The author highlights that Brague (1) calls his readers back to the profound insights of the medieval mind, and (2) helps them see that their noble and urgent task consists in handing on a living tradition to the next generation and beyond.

KEYWORDS

Rémi Brague, virtue, value, anthropology, nature, creation, family, culture, modernity.

REFERENCES

Brague, Rémi. *Des vérités devenues folles*. Paris: Salvator, 2019.