Conversations with Bill Kristol

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I: What Was Jonathan Swift Up To? (0:15 – 43:09)

KRISTOL: Welcome to CONVERSATIONS, I'm Bill Kristol. And I'm joined today by Harvey Mansfield. Welcome and thank you for being here. This conversation was prompted – we're going to discuss Jonathan Swift and, especially, *Gulliver's Travels*. Not something I think you've ever written on, perhaps, but we were just talking about it a couple of months ago and you had these interesting insights, I thought.

MANSFIELD: I'm working up something to write on it, but it hasn't happened yet.

KRISTOL: This is an advance glimpse into Swift. But it was so interesting, I thought. So, why Jonathan Swift? How did you come to be reading him? He's not your normal, the normal fair of political philosophers.

MANSFIELD: No, it isn't. I'm in political philosophy, which is the true type of political science, and it's very easy to see *Gulliver's Travels* as a work in political science in comparative government. Gulliver travels to four different regimes, or four different regimes that are discussed. Each one is very different politically. They make beautiful comparisons all the way through. He himself refers to modern political science and discusses at a very considerable depth. He's within, I would say, my field of study, even though I'm certainly not an expert on 18th century literature.

KRISTOL: Give us a minute on Swift, just so people have an orientation. So, it's early 18th century?

MANSFIELD: Early 18th century is when he lived. His first major work was *A Tale of a Tub*, which I'll mention in a moment, and came out in 1704. *Gulliver's Travels*, which his is masterpiece, in 1726. Yes, it's political science but comically. There never was a funnier man than Jonathan Swift, I don't think.

KRISTOL: In general? Not just among political scientists?

MANSFIELD: In general.

KRISTOL: Among political scientists, that would be a very low bar.

MANSFIELD: A very low bar, yes. So, he gives us political science with wit. And wit both high and low, especially low. But the two, mixed. As I'll try to explain.

So, well, let's begin with *A Tale of a Tub*. The first couple of pages of *A Tale of a Tub*, which explain, I think, what he's doing with his life and his writings as a whole. There he tells the meaning of the phrase *a tale of a tub*. Which is that when whalers in a ship come upon a whale, they're fearful for the ship so they throw a tub over the side of their ship to distract the whale and to keep him from attacking the ship. And then he gives you the interpretation of this phrase, *a tale of a tub*, which he invents – this whole story he invents.

KRISTOL: Though he claims it's story of a well-known phrase.

MANSFIELD: A well-known phrase with this well-known interpretation, which is that the whale stands for Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, his major work of modern political science, and the ship stands for the commonwealth. So he's going to defend the commonwealth against the whale, against Thomas Hobbes, by throwing a tub as a kind of distraction to occupy the whale while the ship remains safe.

And the ship consists of, he says two things that he's going to defend: the church and the state. The commonwealth and the state. The commonwealth consists of the church and the state. He says that there's a "committee of grandees" that got together and decided they needed to appoint someone to defend this commonwealth, and either Swift volunteers for the job, or is appointed to the job. In any case, he takes up the job.

So there you have, I think, a picture of his entire work, which is really, essentially, political. Which is occupied, mainly, with the threat of Hobbesian, materialist, atheistic science to the religion of Christianity, which supports the present condition.

He was a Tory in politics, and here he takes up, throughout *Gulliver's Travels*, what you might call "the religious question." And yet, when you look at this book, you see hardly anything about religion. Very little about religion. And in fact, there is a lot of anti-Christian things you'll come across. Blasphemies more or less hidden. I'll mention one of them in a moment.

KRISTOL: But he himself had some affiliation with the church?

MANSFIELD: Yes, that's right. He was a dean of a church and he competed to become a bishop, which he was never able to capture for himself. He had a certain ambition. Yes, he was a church man. He defends the church, and very quietly does so in this book, *Gulliver's Travels*. So how does he do that? I'm consulting my notes discreetly.

KRISTOL: Just one thing on the challenge to Hobbes. I mean, was that – even at the time he [Swift] was understood to be a kind of a partisan of the ancients against the moderns, or a critic of modern political science? I mean, Swift was understood to be a –

MANSFIELD: That's right, a defender of the ancients. There was something in his time called "the quarrel of the ancients and the moderns," which was a literary quarrel. Who has the better literature? The ancients with Homer? Or the moderns with Racine, various modern playwrights, or maybe could have been Shakespeare?

Hobbes, of course, was a partisan of the moderns; he thought that he was one who *began* political science. Political science begins in 1640, he said – the year of the publication of his first book. The rest was trash.

So Swift comes up as a kind of defender of the ancients. He shows this right at the end of *Gulliver's Travels*, when he has Gulliver affirming his absolute devotion to the truth in a quotation. And the

quotation is from Virgil's *Aeneid*, and it's a quotation from Sinon, who was a Greek who came to introduce the Trojan Horse into Troy, which was going to destroy Troy. And he said to the Trojans, "You must believe my words, which are absolutely genuine and sincere."

So this is an example of speaking by indirection: If you look at the words of what – that Swift quotes, they support Gulliver's affirmation of the truth, but if you look up the context, you see that his affirmation is a lie. And it's perhaps a lie which will serve the cause of the Greeks.

Generalizing from this one, I suppose that Swift is a kind of Greek who's coming among the moderns, who are barbarians. And he's going to defend the Greeks. This is a point which is mentioned by my friend, late friend, Seth Bernadete in a very short writing he composed as an exam answer to his M.A. degree in about 1953, 54. Ten pages of –

KRISTOL: He was a grad student at Chicago, I suppose? Studying with Strauss.

MANSFIELD: Studying with Leo Strauss. So this was a golden treasury of insight, these 10 pages. And this is one of them.

Another one is that, of the seven places which Gulliver visits in *Gulliver's Travels*, only one of them is real. And that's the seventh, and that's Japan. And what does Gulliver do in Japan? He stands up for Christianity. Because the Japanese emperor has a ceremony at his court, which everyone who enters his court must trample on the cross – as, in other words, try to perform an action which is a blasphemy against Christianity. Gulliver excuses himself from this ceremony and defends himself against the others. The others, who are perfectly willing to do this, are Dutch. This is an example of how the modern state, or modern political science is hostile to religion and friendly to commerce. The Dutch were notorious for being willing to forswear their Christianity in order to have good commercial relations with foreign countries like Japan, which were not Christian. This is a comment of Swift on that way of going.

So, coming back to *A Tale of a Tub*, in which he describes what he's doing. Let's look at *Gulliver's Travels* from that point of view. To do that, we have to look at it as an esoteric writing.

This notion of esoteric writing comes from Leo Strauss in an early writing of his called *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, and has also been explained for most people, more easy to understand and to read and to appreciate, by Arthur Melzer in a very recent book called *Philosophy Between the Lines*. The esoteric writing means that a writer can write with two audiences in mind. One audience is other philosophers, who are willing to take up questions without any reserve as to the answers, which challenge contemporary views or social prejudices or even social opinions, which are useful to be understood and practiced. For example, especially, religion. And, in Swift's time, Christianity.

At the same time that they address philosophers, these writers addressed ordinary people, including statesmen, or people who read, and just ordinary people who absorb the opinions of great writers. That's exoteric. So, an esoteric writing is always exoteric at the same time, and when you're reading it, you have to be able to distinguish between the two and to see also how they interact.

So speaking roughly, the exoteric importance of *Gulliver's Travels* is, as you see at the beginning of *A Tale of a Tub*, a defense of church and state. But the esoteric meaning is a defense of the ancient philosophers and poets, Homer and Aristotle – who Swift says are his two heroes – against modern natural science and modern political science, which is derivative from modern natural science.

Swift in this shows himself a philosopher – a political philosopher, I would say, of the first rank. He's much underestimated by the scholars on Swift, who don't appreciate, or don't understand, or who maybe understand but reject the notion that he's an esoteric writer. They underestimate him; they think he's commenting on the politics of his own time, or on the literary quarrels of his own time, to which he makes

reference and which he has a certain involvement – like his friendship with Sir William Temple, who was a partisan of the ancients in this quarrel of the ancients and moderns.

But Swift is much deeper, and therefore, he's much more concerned with the sources of ancient and modern thought. Namely, the great writers, Plato and Aristotle, versus Hobbes and Spinoza, Descartes, and with contemporaries of his own who are interpreters of these people.

KRISTOL: Strauss himself, as I recall in that article, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, which is 1941, I think, and just two or three years after he really discovers, you might say, esotericism and exotericism, mentions Swift, right? In passing, without making any big deal of it, but indicating, I believe, that he, Strauss, saw very quickly that Swift was –

MANSFIELD: You're right. Now let me give you an example. And this gets into the comedy of Swift. I'm going to talk about something you might call "the comic equivalent." Right at the beginning – and this is going to be very indecent. We're going to discuss three major indecencies.

KRISTOL: This is a warning for people if they need to skip over the next few minutes of the discussion.

MANSFIELD: Right. Yeah turn this off for the children.

Right on the first couple of pages, Gulliver, who's the narrator of his own travels, talks about his education. Which he got, among other places, in Leiden, in Holland. In England, he was taught surgery by Robert Bates, a Mr. Robert Bates. Mr. Robert Bates is discussed and mentioned in the space of one or two paragraphs. Robert Bates was his master. So, his master was Mr. Robert Bates. And finally, he comes out with it: It was "Master Bates" whom he got to know and who became his mentor. So, now there you have an incredible indecency right at the beginning to this book. And this is noticed by the scholars – it is obvious – but they don't do anything with it; they just think it's a dirty joke which is in there and we pass over it because *ha ha ha*. As comparing himself to a masturbator. Now, what is masturbating? We have to go into this a little bit, explain the joke. It's what used to be called in the English public schools "solitary pleasure," taking solitary pleasure. Solitary pleasure of the body. Now, wouldn't that make you think there's such a thing as a solitary pleasure of the *mind*? The mind, something very high; the body, in this case especially, something very low. In talking about something low, you're also, if you have imagination, talking about something high. And this is what I mean by comic equivalent, that masturbation, as in the sexual activity, is the comic equivalent of philosophizing or contemplating the activity of the mind at the high level.

And you can take it a step further. If you look in the Bible, the Bible says no masturbation. That's spilling your seed. In other words, you're using your seed, your semen, not for the purpose for which it's intended, which is to generate, but just for your own pleasure on the side. Now again, apply that to the mind. You've got, in this case, a difference between knowing and generating. Generating, the level of the body; knowing, the level of the soul or of the mind. So, you're thinking. But in this case, it's not just wasteful, or going to no good end, but it enables you to understand. You could say masturbation, on the level of the soul, is a productive or a useful and even necessary activity as opposed to what –

And so, this also suggests that the Bible doesn't have the full truth on this activity. And that the Bible is as much directed against autonomous thinking or philosophical thinking as it is against masturbation and spilling your seed. For the Bible, philosophy is a kind of masturbation. It's a waste of your mind, which ought to be directed toward God.

So that's what I mean by – and I've pushed that a little bit – but that's what I mean by saying something exoterically, and also esoterically, in the special way that Swift does this in order to tell us something about what he's doing and the way he lives his life. So this dirty joke at the beginning tells you what *Gulliver's Travels* is all about. It's all about the education of Gulliver, going to four different regimes in

which he thinks and learns new things, has new experiences, and becomes a better and more rational person.

That's first indecency. Now, second is bowel movements. When Gulliver comes to the first place that he visits, which is called Lilliput, and that's where all the people are six-inches high. So you can hold them in your hand. He holds the Emperor of Lilliput in his hand. The Emperor calls himself "the delight and terror of the universe."

How could you take seriously any boastfulness from out of the mouth of someone who's six-inches tall? This shows you something about human pride, and the way in which we think we're much more interesting and more powerful and important than perhaps we are. That's one thing that it shows.

Now, Gulliver's so much bigger than these six-inch types that when he arrives he is famously tied-down by them. They want to make use of him. They call him a "man mountain," and so on. One thing this man mountain needs to do soon after he arrives is take a bowel movement. And in doing this, he says he's obeying "the natural necessities of nature." Nature is bringing upon this. Of course, when his bowel movement comes out it's absolutely huge, and it takes a carriage and many horses to take it away from the site, and you can imagine the stink for them. So, all together this is called by Gulliver "offensive matter."

He's looking at, he's considering Thomas Hobbes and Thomas Hobbes' materialism, and he comes across an instance of "offensive matter." Now, there's non-offensive or even agreeable matter – that's food, once you put it in your mouth. And that's necessary for you to live, for your self-preservation, to eat, to fill yourself. But, everything that goes in has to come out, and when it comes out it stinks. It's no longer food, to put it mildly. And it's offensive, even to us. So, there is, you might say, *congenial matter*, which is food, and *offensive matter*, which is S-H-I-T.

So there isn't just one type of matter. Materialism says that everything is matter. And that means that nothing is shameful or smelly or offensive, and nothing is agreeable, or useful.

I say, the philosophical lesson is that nature is friendly to us, and gives us a sense of what is good for us and what is bad for us. There is within nature, or within just our sense of smell, a source of both shame and pride. That certain things make us proud and make us happy, and other things we reject. So, necessity is partly having to acquire what's good for you, but it's also having to evacuate what's no longer good for you.

So this is an argument against the philosophers who believe that everything is matter, and that human life is ruled by necessities. All of which would be on the same level, and you can never afford to be proud because it may be necessary to do something of which you're not proud.

And that's Machiavelli. Machiavelli comes up several times in *Gulliver's Travels*, though he's never mentioned. Yes, he's never mentioned. He comes up in the fact that there are 39 chapters in *Gulliver's Travels*. I'll leave that. The number 13 is always connected to Machiavelli.

Necessity, it's not enough simply to understand our lives by necessities, which are sort of on the level of natural or non-human necessities. We have to make a distinction between our pride and our shame. This is a constant theme throughout *Gulliver's Travels*, which to refer to what I spoke of before, the six-inch people call into question our sense of pride, but you might say, that the reference to bowel movement reminds us of it.

Then, when Gulliver goes to Brobdingnag, which is the second regime, he also has to have a bowel movement at the beginning, when he arrives, and this is when *he* is very small and everyone else is hugely tall. And everyone else doesn't care about his sense of shame, where he goes. He wants to go

privately and not everybody watching. But a woman intervenes and understands his sense of shame and shows him a place where he can go off in private and do what he needs.

So this didn't happen in the Lilliput. So, one difference between Lilliput and Brobdingnag is, Brobdingnag understands or respects our shame, or a sense of wanting privacy. There are certain things you don't want to do while everybody is watching. So, there's a kind of level of understanding which is above – and this woman, see, shows a certain appreciation of what is shameful and what is not.

That's indecency number two. It has to do with materialism. And in general, you might say Swift appears to have a kind of obsession with excrement, human excrement, because he's constantly referring to it. And I think this is, there's a reason. There's a deep, philosophical reason for it. He's trying to understand the notion of philosophical necessity and how it relates to human beings and to nature.

KRISTOL: I suppose the, contra, maybe, the certain overly edifying view of human life, or where the body is unimportant or something. The agreeable and the disagreeable are connected, right? You can't do without natural necessity.

MANSFIELD: That's right; that's right. You can't have the high without the low. Yeah. Therefore, you can't have life without comedy, without making fun. Comedy is making fun of human pretensions, human pride. You slip on a banana peel and fall. That means – you're a creature who knows how to stand on his own hind legs. Stand up, that's part of human pride. We stand up; other animals don't. They bend over. And yet, we can fall in a ridiculous way. And that's what, in general you would say, comedy tries to teach us.

KRISTOL: We fall, especially, when we're not looking down. Not paying attention to the ground.

MANSFIELD: Yes, that's right. Thales, the famous philosopher, who's looking up at the stars and thinking high thoughts, and he doesn't see that there's a hole in the ground right in front of him, so he falls in. You have to pay attention.

Yes, so the philosopher has to consider the human, which means, in a sense, the low. And that means that he has to consider the sort of non-philosophical aspects of life. And that means that he has to think about politics. Because politics has to do with the relationship between reason and unreason – the thinking types and the people who don't think so well, or who don't do it except now and again. And the unthinking types are passions.

So, our sense of shame is, on the one hand, what makes us human – because other animals are not ashamed of anything – but at the same time, it's also what keeps us from thinking that we're perfect or like gods. That we're always doing something we wish we hadn't done and regretting. Too bad. I'm sorry I did that. Could have done that better. So, we're self-critical.

So, we use our reason to criticize our lack of reason, our inability. And that you see especially in politics, because a lot of people resist what is obvious, or what seems obvious. They resist what's good for them because it didn't come from me; I don't care about it. And you have to – a politician then has to persuade people that this will be good for them. And you can't do that simply by listing the advantages; you have to get them on your side, get them passionate, or get them agreeable. You have to heat them up sometimes and cool them down other times. So that's how Swift gets into politics.

Now a third indecency is the famous urination episode. Where Gulliver preforms a great service for the public, but is not praised for it by the queen. He's visiting the capital of a kingdom –

KRISTOL: This is still in Lilliput.

MANSFIELD: He's still in Lilliput, yes. This is still in Book One. And a fire breaks out in the king's palace, owing to the carelessness of a certain maid of honor. You have to look at all the references throughout the book to "maids of honor." That's something to do.

And a fire breaks out in the queen's portion of the palace. And Gulliver, who is there – they start to, they try to put out the fire with these little thimble-fulls of water, because that's how big a pale is for a six-inch person. They're not getting far with that. And so, he says, he was standing there and, [it reads] "through great presence of mind, it was luckiest chance in the world," he says, "that the night before he drunk a lot of wine," which within his body, naturally, was transformed into urine. And so, when they called upon him to put out the fire, he was able to spray it with his male member and apply it to all the proper places. So, you can see this couldn't have been done by a woman. It would had to be someone who could direct his hose, you could say.

And [he] was able to put out the fire and save the palace and perform this great service for the public. However, the queen didn't like it because she was very angry that someone had urinated on her chambers. That was the way that it had been saved from the fire.

And so that was – and then, actually, he says that the palace had a rule that anyone who urinated in the palace, that was a capital offense. There was capital punishment for that action. So that was a rule which denies human necessities. Here's a human necessity which Gulliver takes advantage of, an indecency which he gets in trouble for. This turns people against him and is one of the articles of impeachment that come to be later.

I quoted that phrase, "luckiest chance in the world." Now, what is the luckiest chance in the world? A miracle. By nature, see, wine turns into urine when your body gets hold of it. But by miracle – and now he's attacking the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation – by miracle, wine is turned into the blood of Christ. That's the parallel which he sets up in your mind. That miracle is against the natural necessity or explanation of it. That, I think, is –

KRISTOL: And this queen tries to ban these natural necessities? That's sort of the church or something? Not recognizing –

MANSFIELD: Yes, yeah. The church, or modern philosophers. Because you might say the king's palace is the modern state, because Lilliput represents modern politics, modern principles. The king's palace is the modern state, and then the queen's quarters within that would be where the philosophers had their place in modern political science. So Gulliver saves it for them.

So then, what is his activity? He does this through, like *A Tale of a Tub*, through diversion, which is irony and satire. What Swift is most famous for, or most noted for, irony and satire. Defend the fires that modern political science and modern philosophy create by putting them out with his irony and satire. He doesn't directly try to refute them, state the principles of Hobbes or Descartes and so on and then say why they're wrong, but he shows you.

An example which you have to use your imagination to understand and to develop. This urination episode I think is the most famous thing in *Gulliver's Travels*. It's the one thing that everybody remembers who's ever read that book. I think it's a picture of, one of the pictures that he gives of what he does.

Then in the rest of – I mean there's a wealth of detail which we have to pass over. Just one more thing in the first book, it turns out that Gulliver, he wants to be used. The King of Lilliput – sometimes called "King," sometimes called "Emperor" – wants to use him as a kind of force, military force, against their enemy, Blefuscu, which is an enemy that they created because it came out of party division within Lilliput. And the people that were exiled, having lost the party battle, became their enemies. So, these two regimes are sort of together, but they fight each other.

Gulliver goes at the command of the King of Lilliput and takes all the ships of the Blefuscutians – "the men of war," he calls them – by a cable and pulls them back to the enemy, back to Lilliput. This is a kind of great military measure that he takes on behalf of Lilliput. But on the other hand, he doesn't want the Blefuscutians to be totally annihilated, so he stands up for them. And this leads to his negotiations with the King of Blefuscu, which in turn leads to a kind of conspiracy in which Gulliver leaves Lilliput and goes to Blefuscu.

Gulliver has a kind of neutrality between – you can say he represents here the sort of neutrality of modern political science: He gives advice to both sides and tries to keep kind of a balance of power, which will also be a force of moderation over the divide.

So he becomes obnoxious to the King of Lilliput, and one of the courtiers and some of Gulliver's enemies get together articles of impeachment against Gulliver. He had originally made a kind of contract with the king – he was so powerful, so they wanted to keep him under control.

You would say that they wanted to use him, sort of like an atomic bomb. He would be a decisive weapon on their side. But then this decisive weapon has ideas of his own, of neutrality and moderation, which he tries to enforce. So, in this way, I think Gulliver, when he's in Lilliput, sort of stands for modern science. Modern science is an instrument of modern politics. And modern science enables us to be much stronger, but the difficulty is that modern science has ideas of its own, just as Gulliver did. It doesn't want to be the slave of a political power.

We see this today, of course, in many ways in our politics, like the argument over stem-cell research. What people's political inclinations and moral inclinations go towards is often very different from what science wants to do. Science has this kind of energy and development and demand to develop on its own.

And this is shown, too, in the punishment that Lilliput conceives for Gulliver because of his treachery. They want to blind him because they are afraid if they just kill him, his carcass will be there and get smelly and cause great inconvenience to them. So, they think they can blind him and that way he would have to obey them and become their instrument.

But the trouble is that when he's blind, he's not useful to them because he can't go where he wants to go, and when he's not blind, then he has ideas of his own because he sees and has his own directions that he sees. That's a kind of picture, I think, of the troubles of harnessing modern science to modern politics, which is altogether current today.

KRISTOL: That's Book One.

MANSFIELD: That's Book One. Now we go to Brobdingnag.

II. On *Gulliver's Travels* (43:09 – 1:33:54)

KRISTOL: So, Gulliver, the narrator of this tale, goes first to Lilliput and then comes back home, I guess, in between each of these voyages?

MANSFIELD: That's right, yes.

KRISTOL: Very amazing that he has such interesting voyages, isn't it?

MANSFIELD: Right, right. But it's also just seeing that he returns to home each time, but doesn't hesitate to leave the company of his wife and children each time as well.

KRISTOL: Has an inquisitive spirit or something.

MANSFIELD: Yes, he's an inquisitive spirit without much sense of family responsibility, you might say. Sometimes he has that and sometimes he denies that.

Let's look at Brobdingnag. Brobdingnag is the place where *Gulliver* is six-inches tall and the others are six-feet tall, so it's a kind of proportion of 1 to 12 in both Brobdingnag and Lilliput. Gulliver's 12-times bigger in Lilliput and 12-times smaller in Brobdingnag. He has a very different reception then the one he had in Lilliput.

Lilliput remember, they see him immediately as a threat, and so while he's asleep they tie him down, and he wakes up a prisoner. In Brobdingnag, he's greeted, and they can't believe, at first, that somebody who speaks and seems to have human features could be so small. Just like us if we encountered somebody who was a human being who was six-inches tall. You would be amazed.

But they hold him up – same as he held up the King of Lilliput in his hand – and they determined, by questioning and listening, that he's a rational creature. So I think that's important, that here's a way of mutual recognition.

And since he's a rational creature, he must be treated in a certain way – and it turns out, as I mentioned, with a bowel movement, his sense of shame is respected in Brobdingnag as it was not in Lilliput. So this is, I think you might say, Swift's presentation of the origin of natural right. That there is a recognition of the humanity of a fellow human being, which is connected to two things: To the reason of – the fact that he could talk and express himself understandably; even if it was in a different language, still you know he's trying to say something – and the form, that he has the look of a human being. So those two things together.

Again, Gulliver turns out to have a master, like Master Bates, only not like Master Bates who taught him things. In this case, he's really, almost you might say, the slave of this very big farmer who takes him in and gives him to his daughter to take care of. She takes care of him and helps him, keeps him in a cage and carries him around. So in a way, he's still a prisoner. He was a prisoner in Lilliput and he was a prisoner in Brobdingnag, as well.

This is another thing that people remember from *Gulliver's Travels*. One of the things that happens is he comes upon women, young women, who are naked and don't have a sense of shame in front him because he's so insignificantly small. But he looks at them and their breasts, their bare breasts, and is disgusted at how pockmarked and uneven and irregular they appear to be to him.

Now, if you think about it, this is the view that a scientist has through a microscope, say, of human skin, or of a human breast. It looks much less regular, doesn't look like smooth and beautiful. Beauty, see, can't survive that kind of close inspection. So, it's as if an ordinary person were looking through a microscope. That's comparable to what Gulliver is doing looking at a very large human being. Magnification.

This is something about the scientific outlook, because that's what he gets to start off with. The scientific outlook can't include a sense of beauty, or what's wonderful, or what's magnificent. It cuts beauty down to size. And this it does through magnification – which says that nature, to the view of common sense and of common perception, the unaided eye, is capable of beauty. But when you look at it through telescope or microscope, it loses its sense of form; it loses its proportion.

See this is what we get in the first two parts of *Gulliver's Travels*: the importance of proportion. Nature is proportional. In Brobdingnag, he has these troubles. He meets a wasp whom he has to kill with his sword. It's ridiculous that a fly or a wasp would be so fearful to a human being. And this suggests how friendly to us nature is in creating the proportion – if flies and wasps are a danger, you swat them but you

don't have to fight them as an enemy. So, the natural terrors of human life are moderated. They exist, but not in such a way as to preoccupy us and to frighten us into a sense of submission and terror. Nature is not a source of terror.

And the realization of this enables you to live an unfearful life and have a calm soul. A calm soul is a kind of, is a way of – a calm soul is a way of looking at nature in its proportion. So when the modern philosophers speak of self-preservation – John Locke, "the right of self-preservation," or Thomas Hobbes, the same thing – they forget that nature makes it possible for us to preserve ourselves with some sense of calm. Locke denied that. He said that the essential feature of the human soul is disquiet and unease. Unease. Uneasiness.

But Swift says you couldn't live that way, if the human soul was naturally uneasy. There has to be some source of calm, and that's nature's natural proportion.

KRISTOL: So we're neither six-inches tall nor – it wouldn't work, somehow, if we were tiny or huge.

MANSFIELD: Yeah, if we were much bigger or much huger. So, things are set for us.

I don't know whether this figures in what the physicists of today call "the standard model," but I don't think it does. The proportion – I don't know if you can put this in an equation, but the proportionality of nature which makes possible, and which is –

So, modern science is interested in what is very tiny and what is very huge. Modern science is essentially the work of the microscope and the telescope. Whereas, for the ancients and for Swift, he wants to remind us that the nature that's visible to the *unaided* eye is our nature. Remind of us the importance of common sense and of the human point of view.

Now, there is – So, Gulliver has all these troubles in Brobdingnag because he's so small. And there's a chapter, the fifth chapter, in which 14 different accidents occur, which emphasize his vulnerability in this place.

The 13th accident is the case of a monkey, who Gulliver says "presented the greatest danger to me in that country." So this monkey treats Gulliver as if Gulliver were an offspring of the monkey. He sees the similarity between himself and Gulliver, the monkey. He tries to mother, help out, Gulliver as if Gulliver were one of his species. He crams him full of monkey food, which is disgusting to Gulliver. And he has to do his best to try to avoid this and get rid of what the monkey stuffs him with, and the monkey cavorts and so on.

And I think that monkey – this is my suggestion and is a little bit far out, but let's go with it. I think that monkey stands for Machiavelli. Machiavelli, and his books, who misunderstand or misreads humanity and thinks that they're all like him. Who want to become prince of everything. And he stuffs them with their food – that is, his doctrines. And so he represents the greatest danger to Gulliver, and that means to modern man.

I think that shows Swift as understanding the importance of – as most scholars do not – of Machiavelli as the founder of modernity and as antecedent of Hobbes and Locke and the other 17th century philosophers. It was Machiavelli who began the notion of "unfriendly nature" and a nature which is characterized by the rule of necessity. That's Machiavelli's main message in *The Prince*. In the 15th chapter of *The Prince*, the first paragraph of the 15th chapter of *The Prince* is, "live according to necessity." Swift is showing the difficulties, and of course, he wants to make fun of him.

And Gulliver, in Brobdingnag, has conversations with the King, in which they talk about regimes. He talks about England. He presents England as an instance of the best regime, as if it couldn't be improved in any way. Later on, this is abandoned in his later discussions when he comes to Laputa. The King listens

to him and says the English, as far as he can see, are "the nastiest race of little vermin" that he's ever heard of. So, the – Brobdingnag seems to represent the moral point of view. The point of view of morality, which finds certain things disgraceful, loathsome. Gulliver adopts this when he talks about the wasps and the monkey and so on. These animals, rats, loathsome. They're a kind of moral condemnation of animals that aren't human beings. This is the opposite of the materialistic point of view, and he perhaps goes too far –

KRISTOL: Moralistic about animals.

MANSFIELD: Weasels, and so on, are weasley. All this comes out in Brobdingnag. So Brobdingnag seems to be a kind of moral version of Lilliput. I would say, in Aristotle's terms, in the *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle makes a distinction between moral virtue and intellectual virtue. And I'd say Brobdingnag is moral virtue without any intellectual virtue. Without any virtue of the intellect which could moderate the need for moral principle or respect for moral virtues. And the King shows himself curious about philosophy, but in an unphilosophical way. He's not –

So this Aristotelian distinction, I think, is very characteristic of Swift. The moral virtue, you might say, is the exoteric human virtue, and intellectual virtue sees the defects of moral virtue but keeps quiet about them. That's characteristic – the silence or the discretion, the deference of intellectual virtue. That's very much characteristic of the ancient, Socratic philosophers – Xenophon, Plato, and Aristotle.

And Gulliver is kept in a cage; I think, again, that's a sign of his captivity in Brobdingnag, and of the compulsiveness, the compulsion of moral virtue. Moral virtue sort of keeps you in a cage. You can't think too – you're not able to get out of moral virtue, to look on it and to consider its characteristics, which may need to be moderated or even departed from.

So, Swift is not a total enemy of Machiavelli. Machiavelli is kind of a total enemy of moral virtue, but Swift says, "No. But, you're right on some points." It might be necessary, say, not to keep a certain promise. So, Gulliver in Lilliput makes a promise to the King of Lilliput which he departs from or finds a reason to. Because the King of Lilliput was going to misuse his promise to obey by doing away with the Blefuscutians. That would be an example of how intellectual virtue can correct moral virtue.

KRISTOL: I suppose the regime of moral virtue, if that's what Brobdingnag is, makes men too big and makes human beings too grand, or too big. The opposite of scientific.

MANSFIELD: Yeah, the opposite of the scientific realm.

KRISTOL: Materialism makes them too small.

MANSFIELD: There are indications that this is really, these first two books are really about the same regime but looked at differently.

And Gulliver goes through this education. First, in necessity, and how that's not the right principle; and second, in morality, and how that *is* the right principle, but it needs to be properly understood, from a certain distance, by a free mind. It's characteristic of each of these regimes that Gulliver is unhappy or doesn't fit. He doesn't fit into any one of them. So in each one – in Lilliput, he escapes, and in Brobdingnag, he's expelled. And then we'll see in Laputa, in the Houyhnhnms, too.

Right, so now let's turn to Laputa. Laputa is the third voyage – or is it? The chapter title of the first chapter in Book Three refers to "the third voyage," but then, when you begin that chapter, you see he says, "Then, I made a trip the Levant." It's just that short sentence; that's not quite the quotation, but it's that short. And he doesn't ever say another word about that in the whole book.

So here's a trip that totally absent. No accounting of it at all. Levant, it's the east – later on we see that the east is associated with religion. So, I think this is another one of the inconspicuous indications that *Gulliver's Travels* is about religion much more fundamentally than appears on the surface. The third voyage, in others words, which one is it? Is it the one going to Laputa or the one going to Levant that he says nothing about? If it's the latter, then that would be the central voyage of five instead of the third of four.

KRISTOL: The central voyage of the five, but he says nothing about it. Somehow, it's too inappropriate to discuss.

MANSFIELD: It is, too inappropriate. The only discussion that he gives is of his experience in Japan, where he defends Christianity, but he doesn't explain why or why one would do that. You have to gather that and think it out for yourself. But, it also keeps him from being criticized or attacked for all the really strong criticisms that he makes or implies about Christianity.

There are two parts in the Third Book. The first six, which are on science, and then from seven to eleven are on religion. And one of the most striking things in Book Three – Book Three is about a regime of science. And so, it's run by scientists. And these people are always thinking. And they're always, while they're thinking, becoming abstract, diverted from the things around them and thinking of things abroad. So, they have one eye which looks upward, sort of to infinity, and another which looks inward. But there's nothing – they're no good at just looking at what's in front of their face or their hand. A hand in front of your face, that's not their specialty. And they're mathematicians. They're mathematical philosophers, whose philosophy takes them away from human life, abstracts them.

So in order to survive, these scientists of Laputa have to have someone always with them called "a Flapper." And he has a bellows with dried peas in it so it makes a rattling noise, and he sticks in the ear of the scientists and reminds him of what's going on around him, that something bad not happen to him, or something obvious happen to him.

You remember before, in the urination episode, Gulliver had spoken of "presence of mind," as if knowing that you need to go to the bathroom is characteristic of presence of mind, but that's just what these mathematicians wouldn't remember. So, they might go in their pants if they didn't have a Flapper to remind them what's going on. And their wives are very disgusted with husbands that pay no attention to women, and so their wives all have lovers. And the wives proceed with their lovers making out right in front of their husbands, who don't notice because they're abstracted and [have] Flappers.

Flappers remind you of, or stand for common sense. Common sense is something that science rejects, or stands above. Always wants to find a *scientific reason* why a common-sense proposition is usually wrong. But it also, without knowing it, stands in need of common sense of ordinary people who aren't scientists.

And so, one way in which this happens is money. Science takes a whole lot of money. America's universities now, there's no university that lives without, that can get on without federal money. Even the so-called "private" universities – Harvard, and so on – they get millions or hundreds of millions of dollars from the federal government. And that's because of science. Science is so very expensive. There's no way you can run a scientific laboratory without huge expenses.

And the scientist themselves have no way of saying, scientifically, "Here's the *scientific* proof why you should pay us to carry on science." And in fact, science has no scientific way of showing or proving that science is good for us. It just assumes that it is. It says, "Well, the results will be good. We'll fix you up and keep you alive for much longer than otherwise."

But that's not a scientific proof; that's just the fruits, what they call "the fruits" of science. So, science needs – and it also needs, besides money, it needs interpretation. It needs people who will persuade the

federal government to support science. They have TV ads and so on, which cost millions of dollars. The scientists aren't very good at making money; they're good at studying things. So they need people who can interpret science to non-scientists. A scientist works on mathematics, and non-scientists don't know much mathematics, people like me. We all need explanations of what science is, so you have, all the newspapers have scientific columns and so on. Books are written, which are popular treatments, people who are not scientists who are good at writing or good at persuading.

So science depends on common sense in this way. Science always exists in the company of non-science.

And science can't really understand non-science, can't really understand why people resist science. So like vaccinations: They say, "Well, that will give you autism." Which is wrong, you know, but it's a misinterpretation of science that concerns scientists because they have to maintain the reputation of science. So they get angry when they see charlatans or just misled people who make representations of this kind, and science needs this in order to survive.

So I think all of this is what is involved in the notion of *Flapper*. You could call Swift himself, he's an example of a Flapper. He's a prudent fellow. A Flapper is someone who's not necessarily smart intellectually, doesn't get A's in his courses, but he's prudent. He has good judgement, and he's able to look at things that are happening around him and able to take care of that. Swift combines the scientist and the Flapper, himself, in a way that ordinary science doesn't, because he understands science and is gifted in the highest regions of science, which is philosophy.

Well, these scientists are not very practical, and in fact, they are impractical in a very aggressive way. They try to do things that ordinary people do in a different way. So, most people build a house from the ground up to the roof – but in Laputa, they start with the roof and then build down. You think of that ridiculous way of doing things. And there's an academy in this place, The Academy of Projectors, which runs various experiments of this kind that are all wonderfully funny and gifted. Including one of them who works with human excrement, and he's trying to bring human excrement back to its original food, trying to reverse the operation of digestion.

So it's a kind of reductionism – that nature and common-sense nature has to be reduced to its originals and then reconstructed. So, you can take waste material, like human excrement, and make something good out of it. That's what science is very good at doing, that kind of reconstruction after first a reduction.

KRISTOL: What does it mean to build a house from the top down? What does that sort of suggest?

MANSFIELD: Yeah, you know, I've thought about that and – yea, utopia. That's right.

KRISTOL: No grounding.

MANSFIELD: That's right. Good, yeah. You start with the conclusion and then work your way back to the premise instead of reasonably.

KRISTOL: Which is sort of the modern way as opposed to Aristotle, I suppose, right? Which begins with opinions or something.

MANSFIELD: There's one way, which sounds more Aristotelian I think, that's these projectors had, and that is how to cure the polarization of parties. The people, partisanship that divides a country. He says, well, the cure for it is to take the Whigs and the Tories – those were the two parties then – and cut the brain in half of each Whig and each Tory and switch their heads, their brains, so each of them has half Whig and half Tory instead of all Whig and all Tory.

That's kind of a picture, you might say, a physiological picture of Aristotle's political science. Which has democracy and oligarchy are the two parties in every country, and he tries to work towards a mixed regime.

KRISTOL: A literally mixed regime.

MANSFIELD: Yeah, this is a literally mixed regime based on your own brain. Those are wonderful things.

So that's the first part of the voyage to Laputa. And then he goes to the second part – He gets weary of, he can't stand it; he gets bored of this scientific utopia.

So he goes to a place called Glubbdubdrib, which is an island that has access to the Underworld. So, he goes down to the Underworld – it's not Hell, and it's not Hades; it's a place where people die and the heroes of yesteryear are there.

So he calls up Alexander the Great, and Caesar and Pompey. He looks at the ancient heroes, finds them not what they're cracked up to be, and then talks to Aristotle and Homer, who he says are his two heroes.

Then he comes to the people called the *struldbrugs*. The *struldbrugs* are people who never die. These are people who live or just come by chance, selected by chance, by birth. They have a little red dot on their foreheads and that means that they'll never die. Gulliver's entranced by this. He says, isn't this wonderful? This is immorality; this is just what every human being wants, to be able to live forever. But it turns out that, although they never die, they always get old. Older and older. This shows that when people want to be immortal, what they mean is they want to be immortally young. They want to be as they are at their peak and not to degenerate any further. So, these people get older, and older, and older and they don't know what's going on; they lose their memories; their marriages collapse after 80 years or something. All these horrible things happen to them to the point where death seems, by contrast, a very happy result. He's showing us that our human desire for immortality is too strong and not as rational as we think.

So in a way, wisdom is impossible. There's always a limit to it. The limit to it is our mortality. There are certain very wise people, and Swift is among them: They're dead now, and we can't get access to them except through their books. So, in that way, they're still alive, but as human beings, no. As individual human beings, they're gone.

So the rule of the wise is, in practice, the rule of the old. And the *true* rule of the wise is through the reading of their books. So all of us live in a kind of Underworld where we can go and we can call up Aristotle and Homer and meet them as friends by reading their books.

That's sort of also a representation of Plato's cave in the *Republic*. I'll just leave that as a remark.

Nature limits our pride. Come back to the question of pride. We would like to be so proud as to be immortal, to be gods, but we can't.

KRISTOL: It wouldn't work out as well as we think, either. Because we get old.

MANSFIELD: It's terrible, in fact.

Now we come to the country of the Houyhnhnms, Book Four. I'm accelerating a little bit now. "The country of the Houyhnhnms" is so called and repeated like that. It's the only country that has no name, and that's because one zone is not respected among the Houyhnhnms. The Houyhnhnms are horses. So, they have the shape or form of a horse. Now, as we know horses, they're very spirited animals. They

could be resented as that part of the soul that Plato called *thumos*, or spiritedness, as opposed to appetite.

The horses have reason. These Houyhnhnms have reason, and they live according to reason. But the thing that they don't have is what usually, in our common experience, goes with being a horse – namely, spiritedness. Spiritedness is what attaches you to your own and makes you defend your own. So it's typical, or significant of the Houyhnhnms that they don't have a name of their own. They live off by themselves; they never see any other country, because if they did, they would start to make comparisons and comparisons would lead to pride. This is, in your own country, or shame in your own country if you don't think it's as good; that's what happens to Gulliver.

So Gulliver gets totally persuaded by these rational animals, if you want to call them. Rational animals in the guise of irrational. The irrational appears to be totally rational, or turns out to be. It's a kind of reason which is impossible to live by. Because it's a reason which is totally separated from what is your own, what is your own body. It's a reason which is therefore taken out of your shape, or your form, separated from it.

The Houyhnhnms have trouble recognizing Gulliver as a rational creature. Back in Brobdingnag, that was possible and that was the basis of natural right. But here now, that sort of question is revisited and a different answer is given. What is really essential is not your shape or form, because your shape is just what you're attached to, whereas what's real about you is your reason. But the thing is, your reason doesn't allow you to prefer your own. So, the Houyhnhnms don't have any of their own children. The children they gave birth to, they think no better of than other people's children. They just live by, in families by convenience. Nobody gets upset when a horse dies. He's gone. Because we carry on, and so on.

There's no opinions. There's nothing in between reason and total unreason. Those are totally separated and the separation is in the fact that they're Houyhnhnms and then these despicable animals, Yahoos. Yahoos, who have a form of human beings except they have claws instead of hands. And they stand for human appetite, associated with human reason.

So Gulliver can't stand this because he has the form of a Yahoo, or almost the form – and this is why the Houyhnhnms don't recognize him as a rational creature – and he's very ashamed that he's one of the Yahoos, a female Yahoo.

They don't even eat the same things. The horses, of course, just eat oats and horse food. They're vegans. And the Yahoos eat the flesh of asses and dogs. That's dead-asses flesh. That's a cookbook for the Yahoos. The cuisine. There's no cuisine, so to speak, in the country of the Houyhnhnms.

Now, the Houyhnhnms are so rational that they don't understand anybody who's not rational. Because they have no connection to that; they don't have any way of seeing it in themselves. So they don't have opinions. What they say is either true or not true. And if they come across something or someone who says something which is not true, that's what they call "a lie." So, a lie is "saying the thing which is not." That's his beautiful description. See, he leaves out the real definition of a lie, which is saying the thing which is not and pretending that it is. That's what a lie is. You're substituting something for the thing which is not. But that's left out, because that's, when you think about it, that's the definition of a thing which is an opinion, which may be true or may not be true.

So, they have no opinions. They have no arguments. They have no philosophy, because they have no questioning. They're just affronted. When Gulliver comes, he presents this problem to them and it's such a problem that they have to have a debate in their assembly. They have a republican form of government. They have to have a debate – which, by the way, seems to be Swift's preferred form of government to monarchy. Republican [form of government] over monarchy. This is esoteric. It's an

esoteric preference he has. They have a debate over what to do with Gulliver, and so they finally decide to expel him.

Gulliver had developed a relationship with one of the horses, whom he called “My Master.” So here we have a master again, just as in Book One and Two. *My master*. He keeps calling him “My Master.”

So the different meanings of the word *master*. We had this business at Harvard recently that the word *master*, Master of the Harvard House, smacks of “slave master,” so we must get rid of that word.

That word is sort of used here, but in a benign sense because the master is a master of reason and not of force or doesn’t hold a whip. But he’s a master of reason, and he can sometimes laugh at you, but he won’t punish you. And if you show you’re unreasonable, or you bring some difficulty before him, then the rational thing is to expel, but not to *punish* for doing something wrong. The different meanings of master are whether it makes you a slave, or makes you just a relationship of education. Mentor. Is it master/slave or master/apprentice? Or a combination, that the master in reason is so strong that he makes you his slave? And you consent to this.

That’s what Gulliver does. He consents. He sees the need to run his life according to reason. He also introduces problems in the country of the Houyhnhnms that they meet in this in-between-creature. They have Yahoos and they have Houyhnhnms – now, here’s Gulliver, who has the look of a Yahoo and some of the ways of a Yahoo and the feelings of a Yahoo, but also has reason.

So, our reason is complicated by our association with unreason. And that’s perhaps a good enough point on which to end.

KRISTOL: Can I ask you one more thing, though, about that? So, the horses are, I guess, comedy, and the fact that the horses are taken to be the most spirited animals or the most – So, in this regime of the horses, there’s no spiritedness. Is that right? There’s reason and passion, so to speak, and no connectivity or no –

MANSFIELD: No. No.

KRISTOL: That’s what one takes from the necessity? So what happens at the very end? I’ve forgotten.

MANSFIELD: That’s right. There’s no friendship; there’s no loyalty. There’s just people that you happen to live nearby; there are neighbors. And those neighbors become that rather diminished meaning of friend. There’s no loyalty. No partisanship.

KRISTOL: So even though Gulliver likes it there, he leaves? I forget.

MANSFIELD: He’s made to leave. And on his way home he makes a stop in Japan.

KRISTOL: Then he ends up back in England?

MANSFIELD: Yes, it takes him a long time to get back to the spirit of family life, because he can’t stand his wife and children who seem now to be Yahoos.

Yahoos have certain diseases which are endemic to them. And one sovereign remedy for all of them, which is called “Yahoos’ Evil” Swift says, and that’s a mixture of their urine and excrement. Their own urine and excrement. And that’s what they use to fix all the diseases and troubles and difficulties that come their way.

And see, that’s what Swift does: Urine and excrement, that’s a combination of satire and irony. It’s a way of discussing these high questions by presenting them from a low and comic point of view.

KRISTOL: Thank you for explaining much, some, of *Gulliver's Travels*.

MANSFIELD: Speculating.

KRISTOL: You've worked out a lot of it.

MANSFIELD: I've worked out some it.

KRISTOL: I look forward –

MANSFIELD: For future inquiry, by minds better than mine.

KRISTOL: It's amazing, isn't it, though? That he saw this so early, so to speak, I mean you might say. Right after Hobbes and before modern science was so far along, in a way.

MANSFIELD: Yes, that he was so far seeing.

KRISTOL: Impressive. Well, we look forward to whatever you choose to publish on it, but if you don't, at least people have this conversation and they can read the rest of Swift and other authors. Is there anyone else who's like Swift at all that you know of?

MANSFIELD: Yes. I would say later on in the 18th century, Laurence Sterne. Yeah, read *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*.

KRISTOL: Okay.

MANSFIELD: That's based on the notion of diversion. So, diversion or digression. When you're –

It's a novel, which is always stopping to consider something going on. And it doesn't even begin with the birth of the hero, Tristram Shandy, but it begins with his being conceived by his father and mother. So that's a feature.

Swift, too, is very given to digressions and discussing the subject of digressions. He has a chapter called "A Digression on Digressions" in one of his books.

KRISTOL: And what are digressions?

MANSFIELD: Digressions are two things: They're what relax you, playful; but they're also what suddenly strike you as important. You have to stop to consider something, you know, before – So, say, going to the bathroom – that's a digression that takes you away from business or whatever you're doing. But, suddenly, when you consider it necessary. What does that mean? What is a necessity? What is humanly necessary? And stop to consider that as a theoretical question. So, it's both very unphilosophical and very philosophical, digression.

KRISTOL: So, when authors like this speak of digressions or indicate digressions, it's not the least important but maybe the most important part of the book?

MANSFIELD: Yes, so pay attention. And *Tristram Shandy* by Laurence Sterne, again, is nothing but digression, you could say. He hardly makes any headway in the plot of the story. The plot consists of digressions.

KRISTOL: Okay, well that's another book for us to discuss at some point. Anyway, thank you, Harvey Mansfield, so much for this conversation, and thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]