

# interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

January 1985

Volume 13 Number 1

- 1 David Bolotin Socrates' Critique of Hedonism: a Reading of the *Philebus*
- 15 Arlene W. Saxonhouse The Net of Hephaestus: Aristophanes' Speech in Plato's *Symposium*
- 33 Marlo Lewis, Jr. An Interpretation of Plato's *Euthyphro* (Part I, Section 4, to end)
- 67 Donald J. Maletz An Introduction to Hegel's "Introduction" to the *Philosophy of Right*
- 91 Joseph J. Carpino On Laughter
- Discussion*
- 103 Angelo M. Codevilla De Gaulle as a Political Thinker: on Morrissey's *Reflections on De Gaulle*
- 113 Will Morrissey Reply to Codevilla
- Book Review*
- 119 Nino Langiulli *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* by Richard Rorty

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Volume 13 number 1

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Annual  
subscription rates individual \$13; institutional \$16; student (3-year limit) \$7. INTERPRETATION appears three times a year.

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for correspondence INTERPRETATION, Queens College, Flushing, N.Y. 11367, U.S.A.

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# Reflections on De Gaulle: Reply to Codevilla

WILL MORRISEY

The initial criticisms concern style. The account of de Gaulle's founding is called incoherent because the insights of various writers are too thoroughly mixed, yielding "an amorphous flow of quotes from a variety of sources, followed by what appears to be hermeneutics for its own sake."

In fact the book's structure and argument consist of juxtaposition, not mixture. The tenth chapter, for example, begins with a brief survey of five kinds of political foundings as described by several writers, most of them philosophers. The next section contains an account of one kind of founding, what is called the "ancient" founding; the account given presents a number of Plutarch's insights. The bulk of the chapter contains accounts of a "modern" founding (that of the United States) and a "late modern" founding (that of the Soviet Union). The fifth and final section of the chapter briefly summarizes de Gaulle's first attempt to found a regime, an attempt thoroughly discussed in the previous chapter. Because the book's subtitle is *Political Founding in Modernity* there should be no question as to the relevance of each section to the chapter as a whole (titled "Political Foundings: Reflections on *Mémoires de guerre*") and to the rest of the book. It is true that the reader will not find the "overarching connections between the reflections" explicitly stated. But there is nothing "hidden" about those connections. Readers accustomed to studying writers who really do "hide" things will find *Reflections on De Gaulle* quite simple and direct.

There are two other stylistic criticisms. First, "The book is marred by gratuitous, inconsequential remarks," of which four examples are given.

(1) "Montesquieu is said to be a 'much greater French writer.'" The offending passage may be found on page 3, in the third paragraph of the first chapter, "*La Discorde chez l'ennemi* (1924)":

. . . discretion causes the young French officer to analyze failures of German leadership; two centuries before, a much greater French writer commented on France by imagining Persian society. Fiction gave Montesquieu flexibility, the chance to elaborate many parallels. De Gaulle, using history, recent history, allows himself no more than a few hints. Nonetheless, because he whets them on history, those hints have sharp points for those who pride themselves on realism. The military, for example.

Montesquieu's superiority to de Gaulle is not announced as if it were a discovery. The intent should be clear; the author introduces a comparison between de Gaulle and Montesquieu while insisting on a contrast. If the sentence read, "two centuries before, Montesquieu commented on France by imagining Persian society," the reader could believe that the author intends to put de Gaulle's book on the same level with *The Persian Letters*. This is a kind of belief well prevented at

the outset of any book. It is not gratuitous to do so. At the same time, the reader's attention is drawn to the Frenchness de Gaulle and Montesquieu share. 'France'—particularly as compared and contrasted to 'Germany'—will be a major theme of the chapter and the book. The passage is therefore highly consequential.

(2) "Stanley Hoffman is the best writer on de Gaulle." The offending passage may be found on page 113, in the ninth chapter, "*Mémoires de guerre* (1954, 1956, 1959)": "The best de Gaulle scholar, Stanley Hoffmann, writes that 'ultimately, the great political leader is an educator,' and that *Mémoires de guerre* is 'essentially a treatise on rulership.'"

It is neither gratuitous nor inconsequential to refer the reader to a good scholar who writes on the subject at hand, and to say that he is the best scholar who writes on that subject. The paragraphs that follow contain a description and assessment of Hoffmann's interpretation of de Gaulle's book. In this connection, one should note that the reviewer fails to distinguish between "the best de Gaulle scholar" and "the best writer on de Gaulle." Malraux, for one, is far superior to Hoffmann, but Malraux cannot be described as a de Gaulle scholar.

(3) "'Enough. It is only an aside.'" The reviewer quotes—again, out of context—a remark made on page 29, in the third chapter, "*Le fil de l'épée* (1932)." De Gaulle refers 'in passing' to the story of Socrates telling Nichomachides that the popular assembly's choice of a leader was unimportant because a dishonest and incapable citizen would be no different than a skillful and conscientious leader (Xenophon: *Memorabilia*, III.iv). Three paragraphs in *Reflections on De Gaulle* are devoted to the consideration of de Gaulle's evidently deliberate distortion of Xenophon's story. The paragraph following those paragraphs begins, "Enough. It is only an aside, if a fascinating one." This lets the reader adjust to the continuation of the chapter's main line of argument, resumed immediately. Neither de Gaulle's aside, nor the interpretation of it, nor even the offending transitional passage, can be seriously regarded as gratuitous or inconsequential by a thoughtful reader.

(4) "Quoting de Gaulle that political leadership draws from the people what they have of 'faith, and hope, and latent devotion' the author inserts in brackets, 'What, no charity?'" Some reviewers have no sense of humor. De Gaulle did. Moreover, a statesman's relationship to certain Christian virtues can be quite consequential.

The third criticism of style concerns "the annoying habit of dividing texts into chapters, sections, or pages so as to locate a particular point at the *center* of something or other." The reviewer contends that "depending on the criteria, almost any place is the middle of something"; to "divide" a text this way in an attempt to "establish [a point's] importance" "smacks of medieval numerology." One should note, however, that the author of the commentaries has not divided the texts into any parts that de Gaulle himself did not establish. The central passage of each chapter and section was determined, intentionally or not, by de

Gaulle. That “almost any place is the middle of something” is as true as it is trivial because the reviewer overlooks the fact that de Gaulle himself determines the *relevant* “things” by dividing his own book into parts as he judges best. Medieval numerology? Writers before and after the Middle Ages have written books with care. To know that is not to succumb to a mere “habit.” As for de Gaulle, I should remind the reviewer that I recognize Montesquieu as a much greater French writer. This does not mean that de Gaulle is an artless one. On the degree to which de Gaulle is artful, the reader of his books can judge for himself, comparing notes with my commentaries if he wishes.

The reviewer next turns to the substance of the book, criticizing the interpretations of *La Discorde chez l'ennemi*, *Le Fil de l'épée*, *La France et son armée*, *Mémoires de guerre* and, very briefly, *Mémoires d'espoir*. In each case the criticism reflects impatient, superficial reading.

On *La Discorde chez l'ennemi*, the reviewer questions the description of the book as (quoting it in full) “a history of the war [World War I] meant not so much as a history as a manual of leadership” (p.3). He observes that “leadership was not lacking on either side.” Quite so, but moderate, prudent leadership was; de Gaulle clarifies this, and his intention, by writing that

This study will attain its purpose, if it contributes, in its modest measure, to bringing our military leaders of tomorrow, according to the examples of their victorious models in the recent war, to molding their *esprit* and their character after the rules of classical order. It is in them that they will imbibe that sense of equilibrium, of what is possible, of measure [*la mesure*], which, alone, render durable and fruitful the works of energy.

The rules of classical order contrast with the vulgarized Nietzscheism of the Germans and the vulgarized Bergsonism of the French. For the commentary makes it clear that de Gaulle’s account of the German discord has implications for French leadership—present, past, and future. The commentary begins to make this clear in the paragraph quoted above concerning Montesquieu.

On *Le Fil de l'épée*, the reviewer claims that it is wrong to think that the book contains a military “philosophy” and not a “philosophy of life.” “In fact the book is about the requirements for political life.” Obviously, a “philosophy of life” is not the same as a philosophy, or a “philosophy,” of political life. Further, writing on military “philosophy” does not preclude writing on the requirements for political life. *Le Fil de l'épée* is primarily a book on military leadership; de Gaulle distinguishes military leadership from political rulership in the final chapter. The author of the commentary explicitly discusses the ethical and political implications of de Gaulle’s account of military leadership—central concerns of any serious reader of de Gaulle’s book.

In regard to the Gaullist understanding of rulership, the reviewer claims that “Morrisey’s treatment of Bergson, outside of paraphrases of de Gaulle, is limited

to an obscure comparison to Heraclitus and to an identification with the preference for offensive military operations.” This is false. The book’s appendix consists of approximately one thousand words on Bergson, Bertrand Russell’s criticisms of Bergson, and de Gaulle’s Bergsonian aspect. No one claims that Bergson says anything directly concerning military operations, although one trusts that no one denies that Bergson’s writings were in vogue among French military leaders, and among the French generally, at the time of the “Great War.”

The reviewer claims that because of this alleged neglect of Bergson, “Morrisey misses what is surely the distinguishing feature of de Gaulle’s political thought: its concentration on the simple, primordial problem of keeping the polity alive for action in history.” In this, the reviewer’s de Gaulle reflects the reviewer’s version of Bergson, who believes that “perhaps the most interesting feature of any organism is how it manages to make a living.” Leaving aside the question of whether or not this formulation does justice to Bergson, one must observe that de Gaulle concerns himself not only with the “primordial” problem of survival but with the purpose for surviving: grandeur. If de Gaulle concerned himself mostly with the primordial, he would hardly deserve any thoroughgoing attention. De Gaulle insists that survival alone is not enough, even as he spurns utopianism. That simultaneous insistence and spurning distinguishes him from the various historicist “leaders” of this century.

On *La France et son armée*, the reviewer is disappointed by “Morrisey’s abstract, scarcely relevant commentary,” which contrasts with the “colorful” text. But a “reflection” almost necessarily emphasizes the outlines of the phenomenon reflected, not so much its colors; it abstracts from concrete particulars. As for the relevance of these reflections, the passage quoted by the reviewer refers to both survival and a purpose for survival—both quite relevant to an account of French military history.

The reviewer’s most extensive criticism concerns the interpretation of *Mémoires de guerre*.

In the fifth part Morrisey says that the *War Memoirs* “chronicle the Gaullist quest for the grandeur of France,” that France’s defeat “corrupted the French military leadership” and that, while fighting with his division, he “decided to continue the war until the enemy’s defeat.” But [Morrisey] is wrong.

The reviewer claims that “the corruption of France’s leadership” is “a constant theme” of de Gaulle’s pre-1940 writings. He is unable to provide a single example of the alleged corruption of France’s *military* leadership prior to 1940. He shows, as *Reflections on De Gaulle* shows, that de Gaulle regarded the French military leadership as mistaken, advocating a too-aggressive strategy during the “Great War” and a too-passive strategy thereafter. De Gaulle implies that the French military leadership envy men of character and lack the ability to (as the reviewer describes Weygand) step “outside the intellectual framework in which

[they] had operated so long.” But de Gaulle writes that Weygand would have made an excellent second-in-command, that political circumstances pushed Weygand beyond his true place—hardly a matter of corruption. In sum, de Gaulle shows that the French military leadership were mediocre, not corrupt.

As for the political leadership, de Gaulle regards them in much the same way. They are more weak than corrupt. But he does allude to “certain influences” on Prime Minister Paul Reynaud, a probable allusion to Reynaud’s mistress, a Nazi sympathizer. One may therefore say that de Gaulle hints at some corruption of the French political leadership. *Reflections on De Gaulle* makes this clear, too.

To write that de Gaulle “decided [at Laon] to continue the war until the enemy’s defeat, regardless of France’s defeat,” is simply to refer to de Gaulle’s own account:

I felt myself borne up by a fury without limits. Ah! It’s too stupid! The war is beginning infinitely badly. It is therefore [!] necessary that it must go on. There is, for that, much space in the world. If I live, I shall fight, wherever I must, as long as I must, until the enemy is defeated and the national stain washed clean. All that I have managed to do since then was resolved on that day. (*Mémoires de guerre*, Vol. I, *L’Appel*, Paris: Plon, 1954, p. 43.)

To remark this is, of course, not to imply, as the reviewer imagines that *Reflections on De Gaulle* implies, that de Gaulle’s “identification with France” was ever “in question.” The book’s argument clearly sustains the observation made by almost every commentator on de Gaulle, that de Gaulle “identified himself” with France all along.

On de Gaulle’s final book, *Mémoires d’espoir*, the reviewer claims that it is not of the same substantive or literary quality as the rest of de Gaulle’s books. Why [it is] not is an important question, about which we learn little in Morrisey’s book.

This is not surprising, inasmuch as Morrisey finds *Mémoires d’espoir* equal to much else de Gaulle wrote, allowing for its incompleteness. The style “excites us less than that of *Mémoires de guerre*,” Morrisey writes, but he does not suppose excitement a necessary effect of quality.

The reviewer suggests an explanation for the allegedly inferior quality of *Mémoires d’espoir*.<sup>1</sup> He claims that it is “not much of” an exaggeration to reduce de Gaulle’s patriotism

to a kind of worship of the State. He literally subordinated every political good to that one, and understood other political good in terms of it.

1. For a fuller discussion, see Angelo M. Codevilla: “De Gaulle,” in *Statesmanship: Essays in Honor of Sir Winston S. Churchill*, Harry V. Jaffa, ed. (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 1981), pp. 213–233. At the time this reply to Codevilla was written Codevilla’s book on de Gaulle, *The Limits of Grandeur: The Statesmanship of Charles de Gaulle*, had not appeared.

Once again, the reviewer overlooks or minimizes grandeur. Even in his most 'statist' speech, the 1946 Bayeux Manifesto, de Gaulle insists that "All our History is the alternation between the immense sufferings of a dispersed people and the fecund grandeurs of a free nation grouped under the guidance of a strong state." The state's purpose is French grandeur; the French state is not the purpose of grandeur, which is, in exclusively human terms, an end not a means.

The reviewer claims that this alleged state-worship led to de Gaulle's "commitment to giving each citizen a stake in France" by the means of "a laborious process that can best be described as 'interest group liberalism.'" "

Morrissey is quite correct to note that nothing is more foreign to de Gaulle's thinking than "interest-group liberalism." Yet observers of the Fifth Republic (including de Gaulle and Malraux in *Les Chênes qu'on abat* )<sup>2</sup> invariably admit that its day-to-day business consisted of nothing else.

Here the reviewer confuses two different things: de Gaulle's complaints that much of his time was spent on merely economic, 'standard-of-living' issues and de Gaulle's hope for what he called "participation" or, earlier, "the association of labor, capital, and technology." In economics, interest-group liberalism and "participation" resemble one another in that both involve profit-sharing and consultations among the major economic groups involved in a given enterprise. Economic "participation," contrary to the reviewer's claim, was not implemented to the extent de Gaulle intended. De Gaulle proposed it as a way to overcome the defects of interest-group liberalism, differing from the latter in its maintenance of a strong executive authority. In both economics and politics, de Gaulle rejected anything along the lines of the endless negotiation and *immobilisme* of the parliamentary regime.

*Reflections on De Gaulle* contains a number of pages on de Gaulle's partial failure to found the regime he wanted. The final chapter almost entirely concerns this theme. As acknowledged at the beginning, Montesquieu has important things to teach. But Plato's Socrates gets the last *substantive* word.

Like a messenger from God sent to bring a new legal code to a country household far removed from the city, a book reviewer can bear words describing new discoveries (if not revelations). Whatever disputes may arise, I can only be grateful to Angelo Codevilla for his closing benediction. One might wonder what de Gaulle would think of the characterization, "a bright man who wrote carefully." One prefers Malraux's: "his intelligence followed the *level* of his reflection (what Chateaubriand called the intelligence of greatness of soul). "

2. It is important to observe that Malraux's *Les Chênes qu'on abat* was revised and expanded, forming part of *La Corde et les souris* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), the second volume of his 'anti-memoir,' *Le Miroir des Limbes*. The revised version contains an important new section on de Gaulle. See also Will Morrissey: *Reflections on Malraux: Cultural Founding in Modernity*, Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1984.