

interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

May & Sept. 1986 Volume 14 Numbers 2 & 3

- 155 Joseph Cropsey The Dramatic End of Plato's Socrates
- 177 Charles Griswold, Jr. Philosophy, Education, and Courage in Plato's *Laches*
- 195 Thomas J. Lewis Refutative Rhetoric as True Rhetoric in the *Gorgias*
- 211 Thomas F. Curley III How to Read the *Consolation of Philosophy*
- 265 Joseph Masciulli The Armed Founder versus the Catonic Hero: Machiavelli and Rousseau on Popular Leadership
- 281 William Mathie Reason and Rhetoric in Hobbes's *Leviathan*
- 299 Peter Emberley Rousseau versus the Savoyard Vicar: the Profession of Faith Considered
- 331 Mackubin Thomas Owens, Jr. Alexander Hamilton on Natural Rights and Prudence
- 353 Peter Simpson Autonomous Morality and the Idea of the Noble

Review Essays

- 371 Ernest L. Fortin Faith and Reason in Contemporary Perspective Apropos of a Recent Book
- 389 Joseph J. Carpino On Eco's *The Name of the Rose*
- 415 Nino Langiulli Affirmative Action, Liberalism, and Teleology: on Nicholas Capaldi's *Out of Order*
- 431 Robert R. Sullivan The Most Recent Thinking of Jürgen Habermas

Book Reviews

- 441 Will Morrissey *Jerusalem versus Athens* by Paul Eidelberg
- 448 *How Does the Constitution Secure Rights?* edited by Robert A. Goldwin & William A. Schambra

Short Notices

- 455 Will Morrissey *Freedom of Expression* by Francis Canavan
- 456 Joan Stambaugh *Philosophical Apprenticeships* by Hans-Georg Gadamer

interpretation

Volume 14 numbers 2 & 3

Editor-in-Chief Hilail Gildin

Editors Seth G. Benardete • Charles E. Butterworth • Hilail Gildin • Robert Horwitz • Howard B. White (d. 1974)

Consulting Editors Joseph Cropsey • John Hallowell • Wilhelm Hennis • Erich Hula • Harry V. Jaffa • David Lowenthal • Arnaldo Momigliano • Michael Oakeshott • Ellis Sandoz • Leo Strauss (d. 1973) • Kenneth W. Thompson

Associate Editors Fred Baumann • Patrick Coby • Christopher A. Colmo • Derek Cross • Edward J. Erler • Maureen Feder-Marcus • Joseph E. Goldberg • Pamela K. Jensen • Will Morrisey • Charles Rubin • Leslie Rubin • John A. Wettergreen • Bradford Wilson • Catherine Zuckert • Michael Zuckert

Manuscript Editor Laurette G. Hupman

Design & Production Martyn Hitchcock

Annual subscription rates individual \$15; institutional \$18; student (3-year limit) \$7.50. There are three issues of INTERPRETATION a year.

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

Authors submitting manuscripts for publication in INTERPRETATION are requested to follow the *MLA Style Sheet* and to send clear and readable copies of their work.

Copyright 1986 • Interpretation

Review Essays

Faith and Reason in Contemporary Perspective Apropos of a Recent Book

ERNEST L. FORTIN

Boston College

After centuries of heated and often futile debate, any attempt to reopen the question of faith and reason is bound to strike the modern reader as a quaint anachronism or at best a daring challenge. For these ancient terms, once used as convenient labels to designate the two types of knowledge whose problematic relationship, it has been said, constitutes the highest theme of western thought, our contemporaries have substituted "religion" and "experience," both of which are supposedly less controversial and more readily accessible to us. No one is likely to quarrel with the word "experience," which has a certain *prima facie* evidence that "reason" can no longer claim, and we have all learned from William James and others that there are "varieties" of religious experience, with which it is possible to become acquainted even if we have no firsthand knowledge of them ourselves. Indeed, a remarkable degree of openness has come to prevail regarding these matters. Experiences can be described but require no justification. It suffices that they be "authentic." Everyone is entitled to his own without having to account for them or answer any questions about them. Since their objects are presumed to lie beyond the pale of rational discourse, all such questions are to be judged irrelevant or at the very least unanswerable.

The trouble is that it is not always easy to tell an authentic experience from one that is not. There is no mistaking the pain that I feel when I have a toothache, and, having had a number of them in the past, I know roughly what others go through when they are similarly afflicted. If, however, the content of the experience is not an object of sense perception, if it has to do with issues as subtle and elusive as those associated with religious belief, a greater measure of caution may be in order. Seemingly profound experiences often prove to be nothing more than fits of enthusiasm, passing fancies, delusions, or momentary infatuations. Others obviously have deeper roots, but even they are not wholly unambiguous in so far as they are apt to be mediated if not actually induced by the larger context of opinion to which they belong. For all practical purposes the world is what we see in it, and what we see in it is, with rare exceptions, what we have been taught to see in it. Our thoughts and feelings are rarely ours alone. They tend to be those of our time or of our society and are generally shared by other members of that society. They thus assume a public character to which they

owe both their plausibility and their authority. The Hindu who is persuaded that cows are sacred is not indulging in a private fantasy or expressing a purely personal view. His “knowledge” is noticeably different from that of the party-goer who has had too much to drink and swears that the cow in his backyard has wings. Still, it is not the kind of knowledge that someone brought up in different tradition would take for granted. This simple observation is enough to remind us that we are confronted with a multiplicity of such traditions, religious or otherwise, and that they often differ widely from one another. Hence the modern habit of speaking of “religions” in the plural rather than of “religion” in the singular, as was the custom prior to the sixteenth century. It follows that, once the normative character of these religions has been called into question, any effort to evaluate them will have to include some reference to criteria that are not indigenous to any one of them.

The great theologians of the past were not wholly unaware of the problem and that is why they preferred a more objective approach to it than the one to which we have lately become accustomed. They knew that what went under the name of “faith” was ultimately grounded in an experience of some sort, whether it be that of the prophet to whom God had spoken or of the recipient of his message, but they denied that it was a simple matter of subjective experience and insisted that the formulation of its content be submitted to the external control of reason. The assumption was that, although the divinely revealed truth exceeded the mind’s natural capacity, it did not run counter to it and was not totally impervious to it. Since the God who reveals himself in the Scriptures was also the author of nature, and since he cannot contradict himself, no real antagonism between the dogmas of the faith and the independent findings of reason could be anticipated.¹ Christianity was in principle and could become in fact a universal religion.² It was not the preserve of any particular nation or group of people and its teachings contained nothing incongruent or demonstrably false. The assent that they commanded was a reasonable one—*rationabile obsequium* (cf. Romans, 12:1). It was an assent of which all human beings were theoretically capable. There was nothing to fear from a philosophic investigation of its roots and no danger of its being damaged by it as long as the investigator was competent. If anything, the opposite was true. Philosophy could be employed, not indeed as a principle allowing one to pass judgment on the truth or falsity of Revelation, but as a tool with which to probe its meaning and counter any attack that might be leveled against it in the name of reason.

It is quite possible, however, that in its eagerness to emphasize the reasonableness of the Christian faith, medieval theology downplayed its experiential or existential component, just as, in its eagerness to react against this tendency, modern theology is prone to overlook its rational component. The singular merit of Robert Sokolowski’s book, *The God of Faith and Reason: The Foundations of*

1. See, for example, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, 1, ch. 7.

2. Cf. Augustine, *City of God*, x.32.

Christian Theology,³ is that it looks for a happy balance between these two approaches and that it does so, not merely by restating the problem as it posed itself in the Middle Ages, but by using the contributions of modern phenomenology to arrive at a more adequate articulation of it. As its subtitle suggests, Sokolowski's essay is an exercise in what is now called "fundamental theology." Its immediate aim is not so much to defend the compatibility of the life of faith with that of reason as to lay bare the theoretical presuppositions that enable one to make sense of the dogmas and practices of Christianity. Such a theology is said to proceed by way of clarification rather than by way of inference from premises to conclusions. It seeks above all to elaborate the horizon or "open up the logical space" within which the "meaning" of these teachings can be unfolded for the benefit of believers and interested nonbelievers alike (cf. pp. xiv and 37). Accordingly, it is most aptly described as a "theology of disclosure" or a "theology of manifestation," as distinguished from, though not necessarily in opposition to, a "theology of things," Sokolowski's term for the theology of the Middle Ages. Its thesis is that there is imbedded in the structures of the Christian faith a coherent pattern of thought that becomes fully manifest only when we reflect thematically on the peculiar understanding of God that underlies it and contrast it with the one that pervades the whole of pagan philosophic and religious thought.

According to Sokolowski, this novel understanding is best formulated in terms of the fundamental distinction between God and the world, a distinction that has no exact equivalent outside of Christian theology. Neither in Greek philosophic thought nor in any religious tradition other than Christianity is God conceived as a being that is not in any way affected by the existence or nonexistence of the world. God is not himself a part of the world, and, even though he is responsible both for its coming into being and its continued existence, he gains nothing from its presence, just as he would lose nothing from its absence. Take God away and nothing is left of the world, but the converse does not obtain, for even if there were no world, God would still be "all that he is in undiminished goodness and greatness" (p. 107). In him and in him alone, essence and existence coincide. When he creates, "there may be 'more' but there is no 'greater' or 'better'" (p. 19). This insight, as we learn from the first chapter of the book, is already implicit in Anselm's celebrated formula according to which God is the being than whom none greater can be conceived. The distinction that it presumes is unlike any of the ones with which we are familiar from common experience. In all of these the two terms of the distinction imply each other and have no meaning one without the other (cf. pp. 32–33). Without a son or a daughter, there is no father or mother and vice versa. The present case is different in that the relationship of dependence between God and the world works in one direction only.⁴

3. Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982. Pp. xiv + 172.

4. For a similar argument, cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theol.*, I, q.45, a.3, ad lum, where Aquinas explains that the relation of the creature to God is a real "relation" (*relatio realis*), whereas the relation of God to the creature is no more than a "relation of reason" (*relatio secundum rationem*).

God is no more perfect for having created the world and would not be any less perfect for not having created it. Such a view constitutes a radical departure from all of pagan or pre-Christian thought, for which God is merely the most perfect being in the universe. "In Greek and Roman religion, and in Greek and Roman philosophies, god or the gods are appreciated as the most powerful, most independent and self-sufficient, most unchanging beings in the world, but they are accepted within the context of being." Hence "the possibility that they could be even though everything that is not divine were not, is not a possibility that occurs to anyone" (p. 12). This is true of the Olympian gods, but it is also true of the god of Aristotelian metaphysics, for "no matter how Aristotle's god is to be described, as the prime mover or the self-thinking thought, he is part of the world, and it is obviously necessary that there be other beings besides him, whether he is aware of them or not" (pp. 15–16). Within this framework, the whole of nature is looked upon as a rational necessity and is treated as such. The thought that the world might never have existed simply does not arise. The same view is equally characteristic of the later Platonic tradition, despite its emphasis on the transcendence of the divine principle of all things, for even here the transsubstantial One or the Good is still "taken as 'part' of what is: it is the One by being one over, for, and in many, never by being One only alone by itself" (p. 18).

As the rest of the book so well shows, the basic distinction to which attention has just been drawn undergirds the entire structure of Christian life and thought. It is indispensable to a proper understanding of the Trinity, the Incarnation, divine grace, and the role of the sacraments in human life, and it governs the manner in which Christians read the Scriptures, experience the world around them, and relate to one another and to the divinity. This is not to say that once the importance of that distinction is fully appreciated, the Christian "mysteries" cease to be mysteries but only that one then begins to see more clearly wherein their mysterious character lies (cf. pp. 37–39). Such an approach has the great advantage of preserving the integrity of the faith as well as that of the natural order (pp. 21–23). Contrary to what one so often finds among contemporary religious thinkers, there is no question of reducing Christian theology to a complex system of symbols designed to convey a purely human meaning. On this score, Sokolowski can also claim to be on more solid ground than either Rahner or Lonergan, whose "transcendental Thomism" arrives at God through an analysis of human thought and its alleged demand for complete or unrestricted knowledge. Unlike Sokolowski, Rahner and Lonergan take the createdness of the world for granted, for only on that assumption can it be regarded as transparent to God and hence "completely intelligible." As a consequence, neither of them sees the need to contrast the Christian and pagan senses of the whole. Their transcendental method thus fails to give "due recognition" to the pagan state of mind. It refuses to accept it as a real possibility and works entirely within a perspective that is biblical or Christian from the outset (cf. pp. 108–109). Without explicitly saying so, Sokolowski seems to detect in their approach a latent tendency to blur

or deemphasize the distinction between the natural and the supernatural orders.⁵ His own method of dealing with this issue likewise differs markedly from that of Karl Barth, who goes to the opposite extreme and repudiates metaphysics altogether but makes us pay for the “religious clarity” that this repudiation generates by leaving us in “philosophical darkness” (p. 112).

One further point to be stressed is that the distinction between God and the world occupies a unique position within Christian theology itself. Since that distinction is not entirely beyond the scope of reason, it does not strictly speaking belong to the realm of faith, but since it has not in fact been discovered without the aid of divine revelation, one hesitates to describe it as purely philosophical. Therein lies its advantage. Because it stands at the intersection of the two domains, it can serve as a bridge between them (cf. p. 39). Nonbelievers will have fewer difficulties with it than they do with the dogmas of the faith, and, having accepted it or at least been made to see that it is not manifestly contrary to reason, they will be less reluctant to concede that the Christian mysteries, though not accessible to human reason alone, do not require that one turn one’s back on it (cf. pp. xii, 39, and 113).

Sokolowski’s essay has few parallels in the theologically lean and impoverished literature of our time. As was mentioned earlier, its topic and the level on which it is taken up are more typical of former ages than of ours and the thesis that it lays before us is argued with a cogency that one admires all the more as it is so rarely found elsewhere today. One can only hope that, by raising once again the thorny issue of the rapport between faith and reason, and by raising it in a manner that is both respectful of the past and sympathetic to recent developments, the book will set a new trend in religious philosophy as well as in philosophical theology. There does not appear to be much doubt that it accomplishes what it sets out to do, namely, to show that the Christian faith can command the respect of thoughtful persons regardless of what their religious convictions may be and even if they profess no religious convictions at all. As such, it stands in the best tradition of Catholic theology, which has always prized reason and looked upon it as an ally rather than an enemy of the Faith. Anyone who starts from the same premises, and they are the ones that the medieval tradition took as its point of departure, is bound to arrive at similar conclusions and will agree that the Christian faith cannot be dismissed as meaningless, that its main tenets are neither patent absurdities nor logical inconsistencies, and hence that one can subscribe to them without lapsing into obvious contradictions.

This said, one wonders whether, apart from its more modern (and sometimes more obscure) terminology, Sokolowski’s “theology of disclosure” is really as new as it claims to be. In view of the extreme care that the medieval theologians brought to the distinction between the sciences and their various formalities, they

5. See esp. pp. 89–90 and 100–101, where the problem is taken up in much the same terms but without any mention of either Rahner or Lonergan.

can scarcely be thought to have been less concerned than we are with the manner in which things come to light, are “presenced,” or manifest themselves to us. To be sure, Sokolowski has no intention of separating the two theologies, which, he says, must be kept “in tandem” (p. 93); but he nevertheless sees them as different. Whereas the “theology of things” takes the Christian distinction between God and the world for granted and concentrates on its two terms, the “theology of disclosure” zeroes in on the distinction itself (cf. pp. 90–92). To speak of such a distinction, however, is to imply that one has already analyzed its terms and determined as accurately as possible wherein they differ. The medievals may possibly have taken the distinction between God and the world for granted, but there is reason to think that Sokolowski, who highlights that distinction, tends to take its terms for granted.

A case in point is his insistence on the intramundane character of the Aristotelian God, which may or may not do full justice to the complexity of Aristotle’s thought on this matter. Unfortunately, the texts in which the problem is taken up in the *Metaphysics* and elsewhere are relatively few in number and, as the long history of Aristotelian scholarship demonstrates, notoriously difficult to interpret. Ascertaining what exactly Aristotle may have meant by “God” is no small task, especially since the word is applied not only to the “first unmoved mover” and the other separate substances but, in accordance with earlier Greek tradition, to the outermost heaven, all of the heavenly bodies, and on occasion reason itself. The ambiguity is noted by Cicero, who observes apropos of Aristotle’s lost dialogue *On Philosophy*: “At one moment he assigns divinity exclusively to the mind; at another he calls the world itself a god; elsewhere he puts some other god over the world, assigning to this god the task of regulating and sustaining the movement of the world by means of a revolution of some sort; then he calls the celestial heat (or ether) a god, not realizing that the heaven is a part of that world which he himself had previously designated by the name of god” (*De Nat. Deor.*, I.xiii.33). Clearly, some of Aristotle’s “divine” beings belong to the whole with which the metaphysician is concerned, but it is not at all clear that the prime mover is himself a “part” of that whole. The *Metaphysics* describes him variously as “self-subsisting actuality” (ἐνέργεια ἢ καθ’ αὐτήν, 1072^b27; cf. 1071^b20), an “eternal and immovable being” (αἰδίων οὐσίαν ἀκίνητον, 1071^b5), the good at which everything in the universe aims (1072^b3), or the principle on which the heaven and all of nature depend” (1272^b14), even though he himself does not depend on them or receive anything from them. God is the subject of sacred theology, which appropriately begins with him and studies everything else in relation to him.⁶ He is not as such the subject of metaphysics or first philosophy, which takes as its theme being qua being,⁷ knows nothing of God as he is in himself, and would not speak of him at all were it not for the fact that the world as we know it becomes unintelligible without him. Significantly,

6. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theol.*, I, q.1, a.7.

7. Cf. *Metaphysics*, 1003^a21, 1004^b15, 1025^b2, etc.

God is discussed only toward the end of the *Physics* and the *Metaphysics*, where he is introduced as the extrinsic final cause of the world, as distinct for its intrinsic final cause or the order of its parts.

As for the contention that Aristotle could not conceive of a divine being whose existence was not so linked to the world as to be unthinkable without it (cf. pp. 16–18), it too may have to be re-examined in the light of other statements that bear on this subject. The problem comes up at least once in the *Metaphysics*, in connection with the discussion of the number of the separate substances. True enough, Aristotle thought it “reasonable” (*εὐλογον*) to suppose that this number is identical to that of the spheres, which is tentatively set at either fifty-five or forty-seven. Yet he was not prepared to rule out the possibility that there might be other separate substances whose existence is not in any way related to the realm of celestial or sublunar phenomena (cf. *Met.*, 1074^a14–31).

Even if these remarks should prove accurate, however, they are by no means fatal to Sokolowski’s general thesis; for regardless of whether one regards Aristotle’s prime mover as part of the world or not, a vast difference still separates him from the God of Christian theology. That difference comes most clearly to sight in Sokolowski’s discussion of the radical contingency of all beings other than God. The pages devoted to this topic bring us back to the more familiar view according to which the opposition between the religious and the philosophic traditions turns in the final analysis on the issue of creation or divine omnipotence.⁸ Between a God who is defined exclusively as the thought that thinks itself, is ignorant of what goes on in this world, and has nothing to do with its coming into being or its governance on the one hand, and the all-powerful creator of the biblical tradition on the other, there is obviously no middle term. From this point of view at least it is certainly possible to argue for the greater transcendence of the Christian God, who not only surpasses all other beings in perfection but, as the *ipsum esse subsistens* or uniquely self-subsistent being, already contains within himself the totality of being.

Sokolowski would appear to have reason on his side when he insists that, once the case for creation has been presented, the philosopher owes it to himself to take it seriously (cf. p. 115). That it was taken with the utmost seriousness by the great thinkers of the past is amply attested to by the numerous disquisitions to which it gave rise in all three of the great religious communities of the West, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. It does not follow necessarily that, having examined that case thoroughly, the philosopher will be more inclined to accept it. For one thing, it is hard to see how God could produce beings other than himself and still be said to be infinite or to exhaust the totality of being. As far as human reason knows, nothing can be added to infinity. To say that that creation gives us something “more” but nothing “greater” or “better” provides us with a good shorthand statement of the problem but does little to elucidate it. It is equally

8. See *inter multa alia* Averroes, *Decisive Treatise*, in Lerner and Mahdi, *Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook* (N.Y., 1963), 173–75; Maimonides, *Guide*, II.13.

hard to see how a God who is defined as pure and changeless actuality could create without passing from potency to act and hence without undergoing some kind of change. Finally, if God can create, he also has the power to intervene in the processes of nature and alter them as he sees fit. Anything that is not inherently contradictory becomes possible. In that case, science loses something of its necessary character and must live with the realization that its results could be overturned at any time by divine decree. Divine omnipotence may not render the world order vain, but it does inject an unknown factor or an element of unpredictability into the philosopher's quest for unchanging causes.

Much as one can admire the zeal with which the medieval theologians wrestled with these issues, it is fair to say that the problems themselves have always been clearer than the proposed solutions to them. Sokolowski seems to grant as much when he goes on to explain that the Christian distinction between God and the world is not on a par with other philosophical doctrines in so far as it "engages our affections" and demands the collaboration of both the intellect and the will. To that extent, it is inseparable from action and must be "lived" before it can even be stated (pp. 123, 142). While not itself a properly supernatural truth, it at least has that much in common with the truths that belong exclusively to the order of grace. It should be noted that Aristotle, for his part, did not claim to be able to prove apodictically that the world was eternal. In *Topics* 104^b6–17, he admits that the magnitude of the problem is such as to defy any completely satisfactory solution, and he also makes it clear in the *Metaphysics* that he preferred his own alternative to the others only because it was the one that offered the "fewest difficulties" (cf. *Met.*, 1075^a27) and shed the greatest amount of light on the famous issue of the one and the many or of being and becoming that had dominated the whole of pre-Socratic philosophy.⁹ Since so little in the way of rational certitude awaits us on either side of this vexed question, it may be to our advantage to leave the study of nature aside for the time being and, taking our cue from Socrates,¹⁰ turn to Sokolowski's account of human or moral things.

The discussion in this particular instance begins with an analysis of natural virtue (pp. 53–68) that takes its bearings from the *Nicomachean Ethics* and focuses on the nature of moral agency as well as on Aristotle's division of human types into four basic categories or formal possibilities: the virtuous, the continent, the incontinent, and the vicious. The stage for much of the argument is set by Kant, who is used as a foil to illustrate the importance attributed to moral character in classical thought. For Kant, the ethical life is conceived solely in terms of the struggle between inclination and duty or between passion and rational obligation. The virtues and habits have practically no role to play in it and the notion of human wholeness all but disappears. Kant had the right idea when he

9. See Aristotle's summary discussion of this frequently debated topic in *Metaphysics*, 1075^a25–1076^a5.

10. Cf. Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, 1.1.10–15.

“related moral responsibility to the issue of the divine” (p. 56), but that is about as much as Sokolowski is willing to say in his behalf. For an adequate assessment of natural moral phenomena “we must get out from under Kant,” and this is where Aristotle can be most helpful to us (p. 55).

The Aristotelian view of morality is subsequently contrasted with the Christian view, which modifies it to some extent and, by adding to it the infused moral virtues and the theological virtues, provides a new setting for human existence. None of these properly Christian virtues destroys the natural virtues, which continue to serve as a kind of “ballast” for Christian action (p. 83). This must not be taken to mean that, when the two contexts, i.e. the natural and the theological, are introduced, the individual moral agent is “split into two performers”; it means rather that “in the concrete situation, . . . what the Christian is primarily supposed to do is what the good man would be expected to do” (p. 82). To be more specific,

The Christian perspective does not bring in obligations that are at odds with what we ought to do according to the nature of things; the Christian illumination of what is to be done consists first of all in confirming what is good by nature, and in appreciating that what is good according to nature is not simply good in itself but also good because created and therefore willed by God. What is good by nature is not set over what is good by grace but is integrated into it. And what is good by grace is not simply a matter of convention and arbitrary decision; rather it builds on nature and shares in the reasonableness associated with nature (p. 83).

While there is much to applaud in all of this, one cannot help thinking that Sokolowski’s determination to absolve Christian ethics from even the faintest suspicion of irrationality has again caused him to weight the evidence in his favor. Among other things, his interpretation of the *Ethics* stresses only such elements as may be thought to be neutral in regard to the distinction that was later made between pagan and Christian virtue. Little if anything is said about the spirit that informs Aristotle’s treatment of these matters, his method of procedure, the kind of reader to whom his book is typically addressed, his resolve to present moral phenomena on their own level or as they appear not so much to the philosopher as to morally good or decent human beings, and, most important, the cognitive status that attaches to moral virtue in the Aristotelian scheme. The way is thus paved for the assertion that Christian morality does not contradict pagan morality but merely redirects or refines it by privileging “certain aspects of natural moral goods” (p. 83).¹¹ Generally speaking, it exhibits a livelier concern

11. Sokolowski’s remarks concerning the difference between natural and Christian morality are set within the context of a comparison between the Augustinian and Thomistic views of natural virtue (cf. pp. 78–79 and 88). In simple terms, for Augustine natural virtue without faith is “false” virtue; for Aquinas, it is “true” virtue, albeit only relative virtue. This apparent discrepancy is rightly said to find its explanation in the fact that Aquinas distinguishes more sharply between the order of nature and the order of grace. It is not unimportant to note, however, that Augustine, who generally works within a Platonic framework, tends to study all things in the light of their highest principles. Just as Plato denies that virtue without true knowledge is genuine virtue, so Augustine denies that virtue without faith is true virtue.

with what human beings have in common “as created and loved and redeemed by God”; it pays greater attention to the needs and dignity of the weak, the unborn, and the poor; and it is more emphatic in its proclamation of “the natural equality of all men,” later to be reasserted by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau (pp. 83, 96). None of this, not even the addition of humility to Aristotle’s list of virtues, constitutes an obstacle to the pursuit of natural goodness. Humility may affect one’s appraisal of one’s own worth, but it does not enter into competition with noble pride or make the believer any less secure in his actions as a human being. The example of those who manage to combine in their own persons “natural pride and supernatural humility” is proof enough that the two virtues can live comfortably together (p. 85).

All well and good, save for the fact that we are still confronted with two vastly different types of human beings between which one is sooner or later compelled to choose. Luther may have exaggerated but he was not entirely wide of the mark when he pronounced Aristotle’s *Ethics* “the worst of all books,” one that “flatly opposes divine grace and all Christian virtues.”¹² Even if the Christian and the pagan should happen to agree on many of the same things, the spirit that animates them and dictates their actions is not the same, and that is surely something to be considered in any analysis of moral character. Sokolowski’s argument proves only that Christian belief promotes one type of morality and, depending on one’s perspective, perhaps not the highest one at that. The passing remark to the effect that in Aquinas “the noble seems almost to be changed into the obligatory” (p. 81) says a good deal about Christianity’s inherent propensity to elevate justice above nobility, thereby stripping the moral life of some of its splendor.¹³ Magnanimity, once it is required of everyone, inevitably ceases to be the rare achievement described in Book IV of the *Ethics*. It becomes, as Aquinas would have it, a part of courage, arguably the lowest albeit the most necessary of the moral virtues (*Summa Theol.*, II-II, qu. 129, a. 5). This alone does not make Christian morality any less “reasonable,” but to anyone who is not inclined to measure human perfection by what is said about it in the New Testament, it could make it look somewhat less lofty. For better or for worse, there are not many “ladies” and “gentlemen” anywhere in the Bible, and the few people who tried to behave as if they were—Saul and Michal immediately come to

12. Luther, *An Open Letter to the German Nobility*, in *Three Treatises* (Philadelphia, 1960), pp. 93–94.

13. On p. 77, Sokolowski notes by way of comparison that, whereas “natural temperance, for example, moderates our use of food and drink in view of health and the exercise of reason, . . . infused virtue will urge us toward asceticism.” No one denies, of course, that Christian virtue is more ascetical than purely natural virtue, but the interesting point in Sokolowski’s statement is that it reflects a purely instrumental conception of natural virtue, which is regarded as a means to a further end, whether it be bodily health or the healthy condition of the mind. No mention is made of the Aristotelian notion of moderation and moral virtue generally as something “noble” (*καλόν*) or desirable for its own sake; cf. *Nic. Ethics*, 1115^b13 and 24; 1116^a12 and ^b20; 1117^a17; 1119^a18 and ^b17; 1120^a23, et *passim*.

mind—soon learned to rue their mistake.¹⁴ Along similar lines, it is significant that the Christian tradition has often seen a parallel of sorts between Christ and Socrates (who was not a gentleman) but never, as far as I know, between Christ and Achilles, “the best of the Achaeans.” Simply put, by valuing some moral “goods” so much more highly than others, Christianity risks inhibiting the development of certain parts of the soul the cultivation of which may not be any less essential to the attainment of human excellence.

The problem has larger ramifications, however, for it is far from evident that from a purely philosophical standpoint moral virtue is fully supported by nature and that its normal requirements are always consonant with the good of society as a whole. To cite only one of the examples adduced by Sokolowski, Christianity’s traditional stand against abortion and infanticide can be defended on rational as well as on Christian grounds, but the reasons that purport to justify it may have to be pondered in the light of other reasons that militate against it in certain circumstances. Aristotle, Sokolowski’s spokesman for natural morality, did after all propose that the number of children be limited and that deformed offspring not be allowed to live (cf. *Pol.*, 1135^b20–26). One can likewise think of numerous other cases where in strict observance of the rules of justice as ordinarily understood would be detrimental to the preservation and welfare of the city. A society that has no regard for the observance of these rules could easily jeopardize its chances of survival, but neither Aristotle nor any of his classical followers ever went so far as to maintain that an unswerving commitment to them is always and everywhere possible.

Confronted with that problem, some Christian Aristotelians of the Middle Ages questioned the universal applicability of all universally recognized principles of justice and right. As one of them expressed it in equivalent terms, what is universally admitted is not rational and what is rational is not universally admitted.¹⁵ The question with which we ultimately come face to face is whether, in the absence of a legislating God, the moral order is internally consistent at every point and enjoys the cosmic support that most decent human beings demand for it. Sokolowski puts us on the right track when he observes that “the divine is inseparable from a sense of the good and the obligatory” (p. 55). The moral man as such, one is tempted to say, is the natural candidate for belief in divine revelation.

This brings us straightaway to the comparatively brief but incisive appendix that is devoted an examination of the relationship between Christian belief and the political life (pp. 157–64). Sokolowski notes perceptively that the privatization of religion necessitated or brought about by the triumph of modern liberalism has led to the neglect of religion on the part of political thinkers and of poli-

14. Cf. I Samuel, 15:1–9; II Samuel, 6:16–23.

15. Cf. Marsilius of Padua, *The Defender of the Peace*, II.12.7–8.

tics on the part of theologians, to the detriment of both political theory and theology. Such was not the situation in premodern times, when most philosophers and theologians were wont to take a lively interest in all questions pertaining to the place of religion in society. One notable exception to the present-day rule is to be found in the works of Leo Strauss and his disciples, to whom Sokolowski gives full credit for having refocused our attention on this problem but with whom he nevertheless feels compelled to take issue on a number of crucial points. Specifically, he sees no warrant for the allegation that revealed religion renders “the political life, or at least the preservation of natural right impossible” in so far as it singles out some members of the body politic “as superior to others, not because of wealth or strength or virtue or intelligence or natural ability,” but because they are the repositories of certain higher truths to which no one else is privy. His answer to that charge is that Christianity leaves the realm of nature intact and hence does not advance any political teachings that are not equally available to non-Christian or nonbelievers or establish “a group of people who are supposed to govern others by virtue of the unusual opinions they possess.” None of its central doctrines, least of all the belief in creation, interferes with the normal operations of human reason or contravenes the “natural necessities” of the political order (p. 158).

Although Sokolowski readily acknowledges that Strauss’ position on these and related matters remains somewhat elusive, he questions what appears to be his understanding of revealed religion as the “communication of commandments whose necessity is not obvious to reason” and that, as the story of Abraham and Isaac suggests, “may even appear to be irrational.” Such an understanding is foreign to Christianity, which, we are again told, accentuates certain parts of natural morality more than others and expresses some of its requirements with greater clarity, but whose teachings never “work against the natural law” (p. 159).

Equally objectionable in Sokolowski’s eyes is the Straussian tendency to interpret the distinction between the natural and the supernatural as a simple variant of the distinction between nature and convention, the pivot of Strauss’ political theory. On this telling, the mysteries of the faith, along with the Christian virtues and the obligations they entail, become another form of conventionalism, at the risk of losing much of their credibility. Yet Strauss himself acknowledges the threat that the weakening of the sense of the sacred poses to civil society. For the same reason, Sokolowski cannot accept the view that Athens is permanently at odds with Jerusalem or that philosophic reason and religious belief can coexist only in an uneasy and finally unresolvable tension with each other. According to Strauss, this tension is what prompted many of the philosophers of the past to conceal their innermost thoughts lest by disclosing them openly they should undermine the salutary opinions by which most people live and on which society depends for its well being. This peculiar mode of writing may have been prevalent among philosophers in the past, but Sokolowski denies its relevance to Christianity on the ground that the Christian faith “does not enter into competi-

tion with reason” and that “its scope is other than the whole within which reason finds its home.” The Christian writer can dispense with this form of concealment or deliberate dissimulation, not because he is more honest or forthright than others, but because the things he believes in “do not necessitate a conflict between what is believed and what is known” (p. 162). Christianity is not a convention, formulating for the uneducated in a way that is persuasive to them certain thoughts about the ultimate, the sacred, the necessary, the obligatory, or the whole that philosophy then scrutinizes and reveals as mere opinion. Unlike the God of whom Strauss speaks, the Christian God is not “unfathomable will,” and unlike the God of the philosophers, he is not intellect alone. As the *ipsum esse subsistens*, he is both Will and Intellect and neither more one than the other. Moreover, the fact that he creates and redeems does not deprive nature of its intelligibility or prevent human beings from discerning that intelligibility by the exercise of their unimpeded reason. Hence the Christian need not prescind from the notion of creation when he speculates about the world. What he does as a philosopher is no different from what he would do if he were convinced that the world is eternal and uncreated.

Sokolowski’s acute comments are all the more welcome as they reveal with unusual clarity the uneasiness that Christian theologians frequently experience when confronted with Strauss’ analysis of the so-called theologicopolitical problem. Though critical of Strauss on the points that have just been mentioned, Sokolowski is not entirely unsympathetic to him and he fully appreciates the difficulty posed by the fact that one cannot always tell whether Strauss is speaking in his own name or merely paraphrasing the authors about whom he writes. Strauss certainly said or implied that many of these authors looked upon revealed religion as a politically useful myth, however cautious they may have been in stating that view. What is more, he never expressly disagrees with them. But neither does he profess to agree with them; for only a completed philosophy, as distinct from a philosophy that understands itself as an unfinished and unfinishable quest for wisdom, could demonstrate the falsity of revealed religion, let alone rule out its possibility. Strauss denied that he was in possession of such a philosophy. He knew that, within certain limits, the “teachings” of the classical philosophers could be harmonized with those of revealed religion, and he pointed to the achievements of Averroes, Maimonides, and Thomas Aquinas as examples of the various ways in which this harmonization could be effected. But this leaves untouched the question of whether the *βίος θεωρητικός* or philosophy as a way of life rather than as a set of teachings or a body of doctrines is compatible with the believer’s wholehearted assent to certain truths that either exceed the capacity of human reason or cannot be nailed down by it. One may wish to quarrel with that definition of philosophy, but to be convincing to everyone, the argument against it would have to be based on premises that bear no trace of the influence of divine revelation. Sokolowski has a good point when he reproaches Rahner and Lonergan with not accepting the pagan state of mind as a real possi-

bility, but he himself appears to be reluctant to go all the way in recognizing that possibility.

Using Strauss against himself, so to speak, Sokolowski quotes a statement to the effect that “By becoming aware of the dignity of the mind, we realize the true ground of the dignity of man and therewith of the goodness of the world, whether we understand it as created or uncreated, which is the home of man because it is the home of the human mind.”¹⁶ From that statement he infers that by Strauss’ own admission Christian belief need not be interpreted as just another convention and that the Christian thinker is not required to choose between nature on the one hand and creation and grace on the other (p. 161). The argument may be beside the point, however, inasmuch as Sokolowski has not proved but merely asserted that Strauss relegated religion in general and Christianity in particular to the realm of convention; but even if it is not, we should miss the full import of Strauss’ statement if we were to see in it a simple acknowledgment of the fact that there is a large area of agreement between the domains of philosophy and revealed religion. The total picture comes into view only when we look at a parallel passage in the essay entitled “How to Begin to Study the *Guide of the Perplexed*,” where Strauss explains that the same conclusion—in the instance under consideration, the existence, oneness, and immateriality of God—may occasionally be drawn from two different and opposed premises, to wit, the eternity of the world or its creation in time. But he is careful to add that the results in each case are not simply identical:

For instance, someone might have said prior to the Second World War that Germany would be prosperous regardless of whether she won or lost the war; if she won, her prosperity would follow immediately; if she lost, her prosperity would be assured by the United States of America who would need her as an ally against Soviet Russia; but the predictor would have abstracted from the difference between Germany as the greatest power which ruled tyrannically and was ruled tyrannically, and Germany as a second-rank power ruled democratically. The God whose being is proved on the assumption of creation is the biblical God who is characterized by Will and whose knowledge has only the name in common with our knowledge.¹⁷

Granted, in the vast majority of cases the human being who takes reason alone as his ultimate guide and the one who seeks to please God above all else are likely to come to the same conclusion regarding what is to be done in a particular set of circumstances. But there is also something of importance to be learned from the few remaining cases in which their actions could conceivably differ.

As a Christian theologian, Sokolowski can hardly be blamed for taking exception to the Maimonidean and Straussian view according to which God is essentially Will rather than Intellect and for countering it with the Thomistic view, for

16. L. Strauss, “What Is Liberal Education?” in *Liberalism, Ancient and Modern* (New York, 1968), p. 8.

17. L. Strauss, *ibid.*, p. 180.

which God is as much Intellect as he is Will. The fact is, however, that Thomas' position is a theological interpretation of the biblical datum that draws heavily on Aristotelian philosophy. If one sticks to what is said about God in the Hebrew Scriptures, which is what Strauss has in mind, a different vision emerges. As is obvious not only from the paradigmatic story of Abraham and Isaac but from innumerable other biblical passages as well, the biblical God does not give any reasons for what he does or what he demands of his followers. That outlook is only slightly modified in the New Testament, which replaces what is now called the Old Law with the new and in some fashion perhaps even more paradoxical "command" of love. It is no accident that within the Christian tradition itself the voluntaristic emphasis on the divine will again comes massively to the fore in the works of such well-known late-medieval theologians as Scotus and Ockham.

Closely related to this problem is the whole issue of esoteric writing, which figures prominently in Straussian hermeneutics but which is supposedly out of place in the Christian world. In his treatment of this matter, Sokolowski laments the fact that more is not known about the way Strauss interpreted Aquinas' works and alludes to a "Straussian oral tradition" according to which Strauss would have considered Aquinas to be "more truly a philosopher than a believer" (p. 161). Strauss did say more than once that there is no way of knowing in advance what a truly great mind is capable of, but to my knowledge he never questioned the sincerity of Aquinas' religious beliefs. It did not surprise him that, whenever possible, Aquinas consciously and deliberately interpreted Aristotle's text in the manner that best accords with the Christian faith. Strauss was also intrigued by Aquinas' habit of muting his disagreements with some of his Christian predecessors by exposing their thought "reverently" (*reverenter*), a practice reminiscent of the reserve that marks the works of the ancient philosophers and some of their Islamic and Jewish followers. This is not to suggest, however, that he regarded Aquinas as an esoteric writer. The truth of the matter is that genuine esotericism was less frowned upon than ignored in the Christian West, where for a long time it survived mainly in the form of a pedagogical device to which the learned could resort when called upon to address the simple faithful. Aquinas, who was vaguely acquainted with it through the works of the Pseudo-Dionysius, leaves it at saying that, while it may have had its legitimate uses at other moments in history, it was now largely abandoned—*apud modernos est inconsuetus*.¹⁸

Be that as it may, Sokolowski traces Christianity's greater openness to philosophy to its "special understanding of God," which calls for a world in which "the mind and reason are at home" and does away with "many of the paradoxes and contradictions that Strauss so well describes between religion and philosophy" (p. 163). The same point could be made more simply by stating that, as a charismatic religion or a religion of love rather than of the Law, Christianity is not linked to any particular political community and does not lay down any particular

18. Thomas Aquinas, *In Librum B. Dionysii De Divinis Nominibus*, C. Pera, ed. (Turin, 1950), Prooemium, II, p. I.

code of laws by which such a community might be governed.¹⁹ On that level at any rate, it was immune to the kind of philosophic criticism that could be directed against the Jewish or the Islamic Law. This is still a far cry from saying that its moral imperatives are always in full accord with the needs of the political life. As we have had occasion to observe, there are times when, in the name of reason itself, wise and decent rulers may feel compelled to embark upon courses of action that Christian morality reproves. One does not solve that problem by arguing that none of the teachings of the Faith violates the “natural law”; for, the natural law properly so-called is itself a product of the Christian world and a reflection of its own understanding of natural morality.²⁰ What Christian theology calls “reason” is sometimes, though not always, what it has already chosen to define as reason.

It is easy, too easy perhaps, to say that “Christian Revelation leaves the natural necessities and natural truths intact, including all those that are at work in political life,” and that a commitment to its beliefs does not of itself qualify one for positions of leadership in civil society (p. 158). Everyone knows that throughout much of its history the Church did arrogate to itself the right to exercise political authority and to impose its ethical demands on society as a whole. Sokolowski, who does not dwell on the subject, would probably reply that this is a simple historical accident based on a misunderstanding of Christian principles on the part of Church leaders. Even so, the frequency with which that misunderstanding has been perpetrated across the centuries does little to allay the fears that it continues to inspire in the minds of others. Strauss’ criticisms are not proper to him and to

19. On that basis, Sokolowski argues for the greater transcendence of the New Testament conception of God over against that of the Old Testament (cf. pp. 124–29). The God of the Old Testament, we are told, is an “interventionist” God who does not allow things to be according to their own natures. His creative power and dominion over the world no doubt set him apart from everything else, but for all that, when the Jewish writers speak of him, “they speak of ‘the same thing’ that the gentiles speak of with their god and gods, except that the Jews consider themselves to be speaking truly while the others are in error” (p. 125). As Sokolowski himself eventually recognizes, however, this supereminently transcendent character of the Christian God is often obscured in ordinary Christian piety. The whole argument, which is as subtle as it is profound, would require a much more detailed examination than any that can be accorded to it here. One regrets only that more is not said about the Old Testament’s highly original notion of the “holiness” (in modern parlance, the “transcendence”) of God, which could cast the problem in a slightly different light.

20. As recent studies have shown, the origin of the natural law theory presents a riddle that no one has yet been able to crack. Cicero, the author of the oldest known works in which the expression is used in a clearly moral sense, identifies the natural law with right reason, thereby depriving it of its strictly legal status (cf. *Republ.*, III.22). The Church Fathers refer to it only sparingly and more as a commonplace than as a fully developed doctrine. The first theological treatises devoted expressly to it date only from the thirteenth century and are proper to the Christian West, where the natural law proved especially helpful as a means of bridging the gulf between the ecclesiastical and the temporal powers. Since the end of the nineteenth century, the claim has frequently been made that the Church itself is the authentic interpreter of the natural law, a fact that may seem somewhat strange if, as is likewise asserted, the natural law is accessible to the unassisted human reason. On this point, see the puzzling remarks by T. E. Wassmer, “Natural Law: Contemporary Theology and Philosophy,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 10, p. 262.

his “school.” They were first voiced by thoughtful and dedicated Christians as far back as the Middle Ages. One occasionally regrets that Sokolowski, who blames Christian theologians for their neglect of political theory, has not taken it more seriously himself. What he regards as the *primum quoad nos* or “first for us” is not the political life but the *Lebenswelt* of modern phenomenology, which is not particularly noted for its interest in politics and shows relatively little awareness of the extent to which our perception of the world around us is shaped by the realities of our political situation. This, more than anything else, is what lends to his analysis a slightly abstract quality and, despite its claim to be “closer to life” (p. 97), an air of remoteness from the vital concerns of everyday Christian living.

It is not necessary to add that the foregoing remarks barely touch the surface of Sokolowski’s essay and are in no way meant to detract from its outstanding merits. They will have achieved their purpose if they encourage others to read the book for themselves and to read it with all the attention it deserves. Sad to say, there are few recent books of its kind that can be recommended with the same degree of confidence and enthusiasm. We live in a peculiar age, one whose leading thinkers are frequently embarrassed by the continued presence of faith and reason in our midst and, not knowing what to do with them, would just as soon ignore them altogether. *Et le combat cessa, faute de combattants* . . . Sokolowski wants them both, but he knows that their harmonious relationship is no longer as evident to us as it was to our medieval forebears. His is a courageous book, which ignores the fads and fashions of the day and refuses to be intimidated by the pomp and ceremony of the contemporary theological establishment. It is also a serene and dispassionate book, as remarkable for its defense of the faith against the latent or vestigial rationalism of our time as for its defense of reason against the irrationalism of so much of present-day religious thought. Theologians will find in it a challenging alternative to the approaches favored by Rahner and Lonergan, the two currently most influential names in Catholic theology, and it will also teach political theorists to be more moderate in their criticisms of a tradition that for the most part they have never taken the pains to investigate. A sure sign of its success is that one need not agree with everything that is said in it in order to be enlightened and perhaps even profoundly edified by it.