

Interpretation

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Volume 22 Number 1

- 3 David C. Innes Bacon's *New Atlantis*: The Christian Hope and the Modern Hope
- 39 Peter C. Myers Equality, Property, and the Problem of Partisanship: The Lockean Constitution as Mixed Regime
- 65 Jeffrey J. Poelvoorde Women in the Novels of Nathaniel Hawthorne
- 91 Colin D. Pearce The Wisdom of Exile: Edward Everett Hale's "The Man Without a Country"
- 111 Joseph Gonda On Jacob Klein's *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra*
- 129 David Bolotin Leo Strauss and Classical Political Philosophy
- Book Review*
- 143 Paul A. Basinski *Liberalism*, by Harry Neumann
- 151 Harry Neumann Politics or Terror of Reason: Comments on Paul Basinski's Review of *Liberalism*

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Politics or Terror of Reason: Comments on Paul Basinski's Review of *Liberalism*

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If we wish to grasp the heart (*Wesen*) of science, then we must first come to grips with the decisive question: Should science continue to exist for us or should we drive it to a swift end? That science should exist at all is never unconditionally necessary . . . If what that passionate, god-seeking, last German philosopher, Friederich Nietzsche, said: "God is dead" is true . . . how do things then stand with science?¹

Reason (*Geist*) is the life that itself cuts into life: through its own agony, it increases its own knowledge . . . You are no eagles: therefore you do not experience the joy in the terror of reason. And whoever is not a bird should not perch on abysses.²

Liberalism will not receive a more sympathetic interpretation than Basinski's, perhaps because we both value works such as Mahler's Sixth, in which *Liberalism's* atheism (nihilism) is set to music. Like Wagner, especially in *Tristan*, Mahler reveals life's essential emptiness, its indistinguishableness from death (*Liberalism*, pp. 202–7). He is alive to the horror experienced by desire—any desire—faced with science, knowledge of reality. Although Basinski notes this horror, he does not stress, as does *Liberalism*, that it is *the* problem *always* confronting thoughtful men. Put differently, Basinski emphasized *Liberalism's* irrational or romantic (moral-political), not its rational or scientific (atheist, nihilist), side.

The reason for Basinski's choice of emphasis is obvious: Not much, if anything, can, or need be, said about reality's essential nihilism. Speech and communication, community and politics, is the voice of desire, and desire is implacably opposed to reason and science. Indeed the war of desire against reason is—and always was—the central fact of the human condition. Compared to this war, everything else is trivial, human-all-too-human. Desire's horror of reason sparks its war against intellect and intellectuals, men determined to see life for what it eternally is. For thought, that horror is not serious, but then nothing is serious (or playful) for intellect and for men insofar as their passions permit them to be intellectuals. It is serious for desire, however, the ground of

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all seriousness, of all community and communication (politics, morality, religion, philosophy—there is no essential difference between them: *Liberalism*, pp. 170–78, 213–15).

Strauss and Schmitt oppose political liberalism's ideal of a world of "fun," a world without the life-and-death seriousness of moral-political decisions and the wars caused by them (*Liberalism*, pp. xiii–xiv, 92–95, 261–66). This opposition is fueled by passion's hatred of science, that is, by life's hatred of death. The main emotion, informing all others, is the desire to secure what is good for oneself, happiness. This drive is responsible for politics and therefore for morality and piety. Basinski rightly notes Schmitt's observation: without theology, no morality and without morality, no politics. But Basinski makes it seem as if I believe that any desire can exist without god, without faith in some eternal, nonarbitrary standard of good and bad, of true happiness. This is impossible, since desire and therefore politics and its moralities always imply gods, absolute standards. All political conflicts imply opposing gods, opposing notions of what constitutes human happiness. The enemy's god, his version of the good life, always is perceived as a wretched snare from which humanity must be liberated!

Science, liberal education, liberates from politics and therefore from morality and religion. Science's atheism (nihilism) is anathema to politics because it is hated by desire. Passion's creativity is what Nietzsche meant by the will to power which is desire's determination to rescue moral-political life by overpowering (obfuscating) reality's atheism. The will to power, the will to overpower reality, springs from what Nietzsche calls the "tarantula," the spirit of revenge, moral indignation, hatred of intellect and intellectuals (*Liberalism*, pp. 177, 213–15). "Hatred is the beginning and end of politics" (Basinski). Basinski does not sufficiently stress this hatred's centrality for *Liberalism's* view of the human condition which, as Aristotle noted, is by nature political, that is (contrary to Aristotle) dominated by emotion, not by reason and science. Indeed the basic human passion is not love of truth, since truth (nihilism) is not lovable; it is hatred of truth or the determination to be deceived, that is, to be political, moral, religious or philosophic.

I agree with Basinski that thought begins and ends with "the nothing" but not, as he asserts, just in our "postmetaphysical age." Basinski rightly notes that for my atheism, god never died because he never existed. Atheism or nihilism (the two are identical) is not a modern historical or historicist event which may be succeeded by future ages of piety in which "Being" will send new gods. Desire's hatred of science creates these pious hopes. This hatred is responsible for all community and communication. Basinski does not sufficiently stress the fact that what usually passes for "reason" (common sense or political "reason") is, in reality, desire's will to overpower reason and science.

Understood scientifically, the moral-political world, the humanity created by passion's hatred of science, is a world of conflicting bigotries and prejudices

unable to realize their own emptiness: only the enemy is a bigot, a special interest, politically incorrect; one's own faction always represents truth, justice and political correctness. Politics is this war of factions deluded about their always arbitrary factionalism—"where ignorant armies clash by night." Since it refers to the heart of politics, the title of Plato's *Republic* should be translated as *Faction*. That would be the rational or scientific translation; the more emotional or political translation is *Republic*.³

Each faction demands imposition of its morality or religion, its notion of happiness, on its enemies and, if possible, on all men. And, as Bloom notes in his *Closing of the American Mind*, even the philosophers have their faction, just as, for example, the democrats and the nazis, have theirs—and, therefore, their enemies (*Liberalism*, pp. xiv–xv, 88–91).

Desire's will to power prevents political men from seeing that their real and only enemy is their own reason, the Serpent who reveals the stupidity of all political (factional) fights. Men are political insofar as they are irrational, for only the irrational can, or wants to, rule; reason (science) offers no guidance, no gods or moral standards. Thus the champions of mankind's political-moral factions, those Nietzsche called "the famous wise men," shrink from the knowledge that their real enemy is their own reason, not hostile factions. That realization, science or liberal education, is too horrible to contemplate.

What Heidegger says of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* holds for *Liberalism*:

Zarathustra must first of all *become* who he is. Zarathustra recoils in horror from this becoming. That horror pervades the entire work. . . . The horror determines the style, the hesitant and constantly arrested course, of the entire book. That horror stifles all Zarathustra's self-assurance and arrogance from the very outset. One who does not constantly perceive the horror in all the discourses—seemingly arrogant and often ecstatically conducted as they are—will never know who Zarathustra is.⁴

Zarathustra's animals, his passions, are terrified by the honest self-knowledge for which he strives. He wills to be the first honest man, the first true atheist, the superman who negates all desire, all moral-political life. When pseudo-intellectuals advocate their need "to get in touch with one's feelings" as a kind of moral imperative, they reveal their terror at the horror which Zarathustra must steel himself to confront.

A man's real enemies never are hostile factions. Wisdom (science) has no enemies except the dread inspired by it in all desire. The life of feeling or desire is subhuman, bestial. In *The Burrow*, Kafka incorporates desire's hegemony in an underground beast which spends all its time desperately fortifying its home against all possible enemy inroads. Its main feeling, terror, is misunderstood (or fearfully misinterpreted) as fear of external enemies. If that beast were to transcend its bestiality and become human, it would realize that what terrifies it is, in reality, its own reason. Nietzsche rightly insisted that the really

crucial errors, those arising from passion's moral indignation against reason, are triggered by cowardice, not blindness.⁵ Men dread to be the nothingness which, in fact, they are. No man, only a superman, could conquer this cowardice and be honest with himself about himself. Basinski correctly observes that *Liberalism* holds out no hope either for supermen (Nietzsche) or new gods (Heidegger).⁶

NOTES

1. Martin Heidegger, *Die Selbstbehauptung der deutschen Universität* (Breslau, 1933), pp. 7, 12.
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, II:8 ("The Famous Wise Men").
3. Plato, *Republic*, 338D–339A, 343C, 540E–541B.
4. Martin Heidegger, "Who is Nietzsche's Zarathustra?" in *The New Nietzsche*, edited by D. Allison (New York, 1977), p. 66.
5. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, Preface, section 3.
6. Harry Neumann, "Eternal and Temporal Enemies: Carl Schmitt's Political Theology," *Political Communication*, 9 (1992): 282–83. This article is an appendix to *Liberalism*, pp. 200–201, 260.