

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Fall 1995

Volume 23 Number 1

- 3 John C. Kohl, Jr. The Fabric of the Longer Repeated Passages in the *Odyssey*
- 41 John R. Pottenger The Sage and the Sophist: A Commentary on Plato's *Lesser Hippias*
- 61 Gary B. Herbert Immanuel Kant: Punishment and the Political Preconditions of Moral Existence
- Discussion*
- 77 Harry Neumann Political Theology? An Interpretation of Genesis (3:5, 22)
- Review Essays*
- 89 Will Morrisey Thirty-nine Reasons for Reading Benardete on the *Republic*, Review Essay on *Socrates' Second Sailing*, by Seth Benardete
- 101 Maureen Feder-Marcus Gendered Origins: Some Reflections, Review Essay on *Fear of Diversity*, by Arlene Saxonhouse
- 111 David Clinton Statesmanship for a New Era, Review Essay on *Traditions and Values in Politics and Diplomacy*, by Kenneth Thompson
- Book Reviews*
- 117 Ken Masugi *The Public and the Private in Aristotle's Political Philosophy*, by Judith A. Swanson
- 121 Alexander L. Harvey *Black Holes & Time Warps*, by Kip S. Thorne

Interpretation

- Editor-in-Chief Hilail Gildin, Dept. of Philosophy, Queens College
Executive Editor Leonard Grey
General Editors Seth G. Benardete • Charles E. Butterworth •
Hilail Gildin • Robert Horwitz (d. 1987) •
Howard B. White (d. 1974)
- Consulting Editors Christopher Bruell • Joseph Cropsey • Ernest L. Fortin
• John Hallowell (d. 1992) • Harry V. Jaffa •
David Lowenthal • Muhsin Mahdi • Harvey C. Mansfield
• Arnaldo Momigliano (d. 1987) • Michael Oakshott
(d. 1990) • Ellis Sandoz • Leo Strauss (d. 1973) •
Kenneth W. Thompson
- International Editors Terence E. Marshall • Heinrich Meier
Editors Wayne Ambler • Maurice Auerbach • Fred Baumann
• Michael Blaustein • Patrick Coby • Thomas S. Engeman
• Edward J. Erler • Maureen Feder-Marcus •
Joseph E. Goldberg • Steven Harvey •
Pamela K. Jensen • Ken Masugi • Grant B. Mindle
• Will Morrisey • Susan Orr • Charles T. Rubin •
Leslie G. Rubin • Susan Shell • Richard Velkley •
Bradford P. Wilson • Michael Zuckert •
Catherine Zuckert
- Manuscript Editor Lucia B. Prochnow
Subscriptions Subscription rates per volume (3 issues):
individuals \$25
libraries and all other institutions \$40
students (four-year limit) \$16
Single copies available.
Postage outside U.S.: Canada \$4.50 extra;
elsewhere \$5.40 extra by surface mail (8 weeks
or longer) or \$11.00 by air.
Payments: in U.S. dollars AND payable by
a financial institution located within the U.S.A.
(or the U.S. Postal Service).

THE JOURNAL WELCOMES MANUSCRIPTS IN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY AS WELL AS THOSE
IN THEOLOGY, LITERATURE, AND JURISPRUDENCE.

CONTRIBUTORS should follow *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 13th ed. or manuals
based on it; double-space their manuscripts, including notes; place references in the
text, in endnotes or follow current journal style in printing references. Words from
languages not rooted in Latin should be transliterated to English. To ensure
impartial judgment of their manuscripts, contributors should omit mention of their
other work; put, on the title page only, their name, any affiliation desired, address
with postal/zip code in full, and telephone. Contributors using computers should, if
possible, provide a character count of the entire manuscript. Please send THREE
clear copies, which will not be returned.

Composition by Eastern Composition, Inc.,
Binghamton, N.Y. 13905 U.S.A.
Printed and bound by Wickersham Printing Co.,
Lancaster, PA 17603 U.S.A.

Inquiries: (Mrs.) Guadalupe S. Angeles, Assistant to the Editor,
INTERPRETATION, Queens College, Flushing, N.Y.
11367-1597, U.S.A. (718)997-5542

Statesmanship for a New Age

DAVID CLINTON

Tulane University

Kenneth Thompson, *Traditions and Values in Politics and Diplomacy: Theory and Practice* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), xii + 353 pp., \$24.00.

On all sides the lament is heard that in the aftermath of the Cold War the foreign policy of the great powers lacks direction and focus. The spark of creativity that is remembered to have been “present at the creation” and the steadfastness of purpose that is retrospectively seen to have characterized the decades that followed are alike absent from a confused and short-sighted contemporary world. Of course, it is always tempting to contrast a heroic past with a diminished present, and to attribute more of a design to our predecessors than they possessed at the time. Nevertheless, the feeling spreads at home and abroad that Washington and other capitals are at sea.

Into this confused and anxious setting comes Kenneth Thompson with a book of reflections on the principles that ought to guide us in uncertain times. Few scholars can be better placed to provide such commentary, for Thompson has seen the whole of the Cold War unfold from a series of unrivalled vantage points. An active participant in the scholarly and philanthropic worlds for most of the past half-century, he has been a student of Hans Morgenthau, a colleague of Dean Rusk, and a prominent collaborator, along with figures such as Reinhold Niebuhr and George Kennan, in the effort to advance the insights of classical realism. For more than a decade, he has headed the Miller Center at the University of Virginia, a public affairs research institute where academicians and former policy-makers have come, the former to analyze the world they observe and the latter to set down their recollections of the events in which they were involved. For him, the raw materials of history, political science, and international relations are all at hand.

Out of all this knowledge, Thompson has distilled wisdom, in the latest in his long line of publications, *Traditions and Values in Politics and Diplomacy: Theory and Practice* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992). One of his broadest-ranging works, it is a plea—and a prescription—for statesmanship in uncertain and often unheroic times. Written for an educated general audience and unencumbered by an excessive pedantic apparatus of footnotes,

the book rests on the assumption that an informed statesmanship is not beyond our political leaders. It does not rely on jargon, but instead is phrased in a learned yet accessible style; unlike most academic books, this is a work of scholarship that one can actually imagine decision-makers reading and profiting from. But there is a price to be paid: In return for taking seriously the intelligence of men and women from the world of practical affairs, Thompson expects them to take seriously their responsibilities to the world temporarily entrusted to their care—or in other words to exhibit statesmanship.

He does not leave them without guidance in the effort to attain the ability to exercise leadership in the public good. Indeed, the book is in large measure an educative endeavor, beginning with a survey of the broad sweep of Western political thought and continuing through a series of cautionary tales drawn from the careers of modern political leaders. Although it is not organized as a political catechism or explicitly directed to an analysis of the concept of statesmanship, if read thoroughly and digested carefully, it supplies lessons to a prudent and upright prince. It does so by implicitly recognizing the all-too-rare but still necessary and attainable qualities of the public-spirited statesman.

What are the attributes of statesmanship? For Thompson, the first is the willingness to learn from history. As another senior scholar in the field, Stanley Hoffmann, has said in decrying the present-mindedness of the discipline of international relations, “Because we have an inadequate basis for comparison, we are tempted to exaggerate either continuity with a past that we know badly, or the radical originality of the present” (*Janus and Minerva: Essays in the Theory and Practice of International Politics* [Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987], p. 21). As his predecessor, Hans Morgenthau, did even in his works intended for undergraduate classroom use, Thompson strives against this tendency by drawing on a wealth of historical examples in illustrating his conception of the way international society works. He does not baby the reader by citing only cases from our own country and era: William Penn and Marshal Pilsudski both put in appearances, and there are allusions to events from the Congress of Vienna to the Kentucky Resolutions. The statesman must be a man or woman who is familiar with both the patterns and the variety in the past of our civilization and others. Without such a background, the leader lacks an essential basis for judgment, and policy has a tendency to shift with every piece of arriving news, or to remain frozen in unproductive courses long past the time when experience would have counseled cutting one’s losses. To be more than an accomplished calculator of the public mood—to attain the renown of a statesman—a leader cannot forgo the guidance available from the past. History, for Thompson, does have lessons to teach, and the polity is cheating itself if it settles for having its affairs guided by those who have not done their homework in this field. Citing Churchill as a prime example of the heights that can be scaled by someone who follows the path blazed by the historical record, he urges upon the reader a recognition that there is more to international politics than current events.

To be sure, fidelity to history means far more than a slavish adherence to whatever contemporary policy one has inherited from one's predecessors. Thompson is eloquent in lamenting possibilities for peace and stability that have been lost when leaders lacked the understanding or the courage to seize fleeting opportunities for a creative diplomacy; he reveals his early study of Toynbee when he dismisses stereotyped and routinized responses and "vague and amorphous reactions spawned by mimesis, or the mere imitation of past actions"; he agrees with Paul Kennedy that attempts to relive past glories will not solve the problem of imperial overstretch. For Thompson, learning from the past is entirely different from losing one's imagination. Rather, it means understanding both the limits and the possibilities of change, based on a sense of what works in what circumstances and why, which in turn comes from the comparative perspective available through great historical interpreters from Thucydides to Meinecke or Burckhardt. This feeling for history is as necessary in the State Department as in the college lecture hall, and we should beware of making too many excuses for "practical" politicians if they plead ignorance of what has gone before. The dedication of the book is itself significant: It is to the author's parents and children, demonstrating in the clearest way his belief that the linkage of causation across the generations creates a high responsibility both for appreciating the realities of the legacy one has received and for always bearing in mind when taking decisions their effect on the legacy one is to leave behind.

If this responsibility includes the obligation to make a sustained effort to think clearly about the occasions on which continuity should be observed and those on which change is necessary, how are the two to be distinguished? Here we find the second attribute of the praiseworthy statesman. As the title of the book implies, mastery of international relations demands an acquaintance not just with traditions but also with values, and a familiarity not just with practice but also with theory. Pragmatism in foreign policy is not enough and must be enriched by a sense of history (pp. 333–34), but Thompson wants a yet more ultimate standard by which to judge the contemporary and the historical record. This counterbalance to historicism comes into being through an appreciation of political philosophy.

It is therefore no accident that a book on international politics begins with a section on traditions in philosophy, religion, and ethics. Here Thompson displays his own broad learning in the ease with which he treats all three. Despite his facility in conveying to the reader the essence of many writers and schools of thought, it seems that he reserves his greatest appreciation for Augustine, whose warnings on original sin, the potency of self-interest, and the ineradicability of conflict from human affairs did so much to lay the foundations for modern realism.

It is a perspective that lends itself to an emphasis on "the tragic element of life," in which competition can only be managed, not transcended by selfless love, and peace is maintained more often by a balance of power than by recon-

ciliation and mutual appreciation. The existence of conflict is not due to ignorance (though as we have seen a knowledge of the past is essential to good policy), nor to unjust social structures (though Augustine does not countenance passivity in the face of injustices if they can be corrected), nor to the influence of certain abnormal and wicked individuals (though there is plenty of wickedness about). All of these explanations promise that with the proper remedy—the advance of education and understanding, or the right measure of social reform, or the defeat of the villain—the burden of conflict can be lifted from humanity, and politics, understood as the management of conflict, can be abolished. It is that confidence, which Thompson regards as facile optimism from whatever political camp it emanates, that he dismisses.

Such faith in a happy ending, he believes, is not only foolish but positively dangerous. It encourages an attitude of self-righteousness on the part of those who are sure they have discovered the key to lasting peace and who are therefore likely to be intolerant of those who stand in their way. The naivety and excessive optimism of the adherents of communism about the ease of eradicating self-interest and struggle from human affairs led them to their excessive casualness, even cynicism, about the means they employed. Thompson shares with the other leaders of the realist camp the concern that leaders will be too sure of their own good intentions and too unwilling to grant legitimacy to any objectives of other states. Such uncompromising attitudes are fatal to the ability of diplomacy to ameliorate, or at least to allow opponents to learn to live with, the disagreements and rivalries that are inevitable in a system of contending sovereigns, or indeed in any social relationship.

The alternative to this hazardous innocence that Thompson draws from his study of political philosophy is based on a constant effort never to forget the centrality of self-interest—and of sin. No one's motives are entirely pure, including one's own; even the most generous political act mixes altruism with some degree of self-assertion. If statesmen will accept this painful truth about themselves and their countries, they will have a chance of attaining the humility and skepticism that can allow coexistence to work. If national interest motivates every state's actions, then all meet on common ground on which bargains and accommodations are possible. If the membership roll of the United Nations is not divided into unquestioned saints and unredeemable sinners, then international politics descends to a lower but safer plane on which national objectives of equal legitimacy may be tested on their workability and their compatibility with the safety and objectives of others. Instead of an other-worldly pure morality, a system of practical morality is necessary to the safety of this world.

Practical morality is practical in that it does not neglect the factor of power. As leaders try to find their way through a maze of conflicting obligations, they discover that the finiteness of their power requires them to make choices among their different moral duties, all of which have a legitimate claim on them; that the omnipresence of power relationships in social settings requires them to hus-

band their own power resources and consider how any action will affect their self-interest defined in terms of power; that the temptations of power require them to guard against their own inflated ambitions as well as those of their rivals. Perhaps the finest section in the book, the chapters on power and realism demonstrate Thompson's lifelong concern with the problems that each raises, and they express his conviction that realism as he understands it is not a way of divorcing morality from politics but rather the only sure way to introduce true morality, as opposed to hypocritical moralism, into politics. His plea is for a return to "an ancient discourse that considers the interrelatedness of power and morality" (p. 149).

Practical morality in international relations attempts to put power to work to achieve proximate solutions to perennial problems, in the Niebuhrian formulation. It works with the realities of international life rather than ignoring them, as Morgenthau asserted. It manages conflicts, in the hope of preventing their explosion into violence. It places its trust in devices like a balance of power that may preserve a measure of stability and of justice in that it creates a situation in which each party receives something and none can wholly exclude the others from the distribution of benefits. It hopes that spheres of influence and buffer zones may buy time for diplomacy to work, thereby averting war. In short, practical morality comes to seem very similar to traditional diplomatic relations among a group of states that accept one another's legitimacy even as they compete with and try to restrain their enemy-partners.

This sort of moderate contest depends crucially on the absence in the important capitals of any crusading spirit or messianic sense of mission. Such a willingness to live and let live in turn demands a self-conscious standing back from one's own history, so as to judge one's own goals with the same skeptical eye one applies to others. Passion and excessive self-partiality can be avoided through this distancing of oneself from the slogans and catch-phrases that propagate a sense of unique virtue. Thompson's great model for this quality of statesmanship is America's Civil War president. Churchill, the biographer of his ancestor Marlborough and prolific contemporary historian, stands as the exemplar of the statesman grounded in the lessons of history. Lincoln, the melancholy student of Shakespeare and the Bible, stands as the supreme example of the statesman whose philosophical depth allows him to transcend his nation's historical traditions and reach a certain objectivity in assessing the claims even of its wartime enemy. This profundity of understanding is as important a component of statesmanship as historical wisdom.

Thompson discusses his third element of statesmanship in a less sustained way than the other two, but it is also necessary, particularly in an era of flux. This is the contribution made by political skill, which encompasses both the ability to *decide* policy and the ability to *enact* policy. The combination of these qualities separates the successful statesman from the knowledgeable outside observer, such as the academician, who is free from the pressures imposed

by the necessity for action under conditions of incomplete information and immediate deadlines. With the former, the statesman can make choices in the face of the dilemmas that politics presents. In any serious political decision, all the alternatives will probably have good arguments, and in all likelihood principled arguments, to support them. If foreign policy were a matter of choosing between right and wrong in each case that presented itself, the task of leadership would be easier. But the demand of office is often that one choose between two dimensions of justice or two values that are incompatible, even though each of them is justifiable in the abstract. This balancing process can be carried on successfully only with a combination of insight and intestinal fortitude that few possess. Once a decision has been made, there remains the use of persuasion and the other political arts, including the exercise of power, to gain its acceptance by the necessary group, whether that is a half-dozen men in the age of cabinet diplomacy or a mass electorate in the late twentieth century.

In the section of his book entitled "Presidents and Conflicts of Values," Thompson develops this third component of statesmanship by assessing several post-World War II chief executives in their performance of these tasks. In general, they fell short because they failed the intellectual challenge. Dwight Eisenhower's "conceptual framework . . . [in] international politics was . . . a vague, if inspiring, internationalism." John Kennedy "was blind to the irreconcilable conflict between activism and pragmatism in all its dimensions." Lyndon Johnson never overcame and perhaps never recognized "the unresolved conflict between collective security and the national interest" in Southeast Asia. In the case of Richard Nixon, "Machiavellian statecraft devoid of virtue led to the repudiation of his policies." Thompson mixes these critical conclusions with statements of praise for the real strengths of each man, and he acknowledges the relative ease with which policy may be condemned by those who do not bear the responsibility for making it. Nevertheless, in the end he argues that each of them in his conduct of office failed to bring to bear at least one of the three elements of successful statecraft: an awareness of the limits that history places on the opportunities for diplomatic progress; a philosophical appreciation for the necessity of advancing moral goals not by the easy route of high-flown words or a single-minded attachment to one value alone, but by the arduous path of balancing and compromising among irreconcilable moral goods; and an adeptness at using power in a restrained and yet politically effective way to arrive at decisions and have them carried out.

Thus, the challenge remains the daunting one of surpassing the historical, philosophical, and political achievements of even these leaders—and in an unfamiliar international environment. To his credit, Thompson would not have us despair of finding true statesmanship, and we should not. For as long as the country can produce citizens with the learning, the wisdom, and the articulateness that this book displays, identifying the statesmen in our midst remains both an achievable goal and a duty.