

# Interpretation

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- 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

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## Book Reviews

Judith A. Swanson, *The Public and the Private in Aristotle's Political Philosophy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), xiv + 244 pp; \$32.95.

KEN MASUGI

*Ashland University*

Judith A. Swanson regards her audience as modern individuals (*idiōtai*) who insist on the sanctity of their private lives. Thus, she puts forth the seemingly audacious argument that “Aristotle’s political works present a vivid and substantive conception of the private [*to idion*]” (p. 1). She contends that contemporary liberal societies “might be willing and able to assimilate Aristotle’s proposals . . . because the proposals maintain the sanctity of privacy” (p. 210). She elaborates on this claim in thoughtful chapters on the household, slavery, women, the economy, “preservative law,” political education, justice, friendship, and philosophy. Her elegant study of Aristotle’s political philosophy (one of some noteworthy recent books on Aristotle) proves indispensable for the scholar. Appropriately for a book on Aristotle, hers is simultaneously a political and a philosophic endeavor.

The great question Swanson suggests is the extent to which we who live in modernity can benefit from the classical notions of the best regime. “By assimilating Aristotle’s teaching about the centrality of excellence to private activity, a liberal society can transform itself into a form of polity that promotes true freedom and approaches true aristocracy” (p. 8). The book’s final sentence artfully maintains that “Insofar as Aristotle’s political objective is to bring about polities that border on aristocracies, and not aristocracies, his political advice is apt for contemporary liberal societies” (p. 211). How much true aristocracy can “contemporary liberal societies”—or any society—bear? Aristotle’s practical advice about aristocracies is not apt for modernity, she seems to be saying. Let us see how great a guide her Aristotle can be for us today.

By the private, Swanson means more than what is beneath the public, that is, the household. Aristotle “conceives the private as activities, not as sites, and as activities not restricted to the household. An activity qualifies as private, if it cultivates virtue without accommodating or conforming to common opinion” (p. 10). Denying Hannah Arendt’s influential but wrong-headed notion of the distinction between public and private, Swanson argues that “ideally, human beings serve the public by exercising the uncompromised virtue acquired in the

household both inside and outside the household" (p. 11). For example, the friendships within the household prompt "the thought that the private has more power to elicit excellence than the public" (p. 29). If legislators need to produce friendship, and thus virtue, then "Legislators everywhere are . . . obliged to facilitate privacy" (p. 30). She elaborates on these themes throughout the book.

One wonders why Swanson doesn't also argue that Aristotle stands for individualism. Then ancient political philosophy would be individualistic, just as modern theorizing is (cf. Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* [New York: Basic Books, 1968]). Indeed, she contends that "education must make persons at once excellent citizens, excellent human beings, and excellent individuals" (145). But how is an "individual" different from a human being simply? What modern individual is willing to be satisfied with privacy, when it exists for the sake of such a demanding end as virtue? Does Swanson think the honey of modern language can sweeten such bitter medicine? One wonders who her penultimate audience is (political philosophy's ultimate audience being of course Socrates).

Moreover, some of her arguments about the private life strike one as fanciful or even ultimately contradictory of a major strength, namely her insistence on the political relevance of Aristotle. In expounding on the elements of the household, for example, Swanson makes some astounding claims: "By assigning citizenship only to men, then, Aristotle reduces their opportunity, and increases women's, to contemplate" (p. 61). (Would a resident foreigner thus be in a better position to philosophize than a native?) This is to say that women could have the same scope of objects to contemplate and the same experiences to foster their prudence as men, unless Swanson takes the contemplative life to focus primarily on the apolitical world, and assumes that the apolitical world could be understood apart from the political one. "The inclination to privacy, quietude, or a 'passive' way of life is both a female and a philosophical one. . . . [F]emaleness is positive because it prefers privacy" (p. 63). Now Swanson's footnote to this sentence does observe: "That Aristotle thinks also that women be suited for political life does not undermine this contention; it underscores his view that men and women manifest combinations of maleness and femaleness, are drawn variously to publicity and privacy" (p. 63). But do women typically have a natural inclination to philosophy not typically present in men? The history of philosophy (among other evidence) would seem to indicate otherwise, unless this is another example of the frustration (or impotence) of nature. (Cf. Ken Masugi, "Another Peek at Aristotle and Phyllis: The Place of Women in Aristotle's Argument for Human Equality," in Thomas Silver and Peter Schramm, eds., *Natural Right and Political Right: Essays in Honor of Harry V. Jaffa* [Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 1984], pp. 267–88.)

But this is a quibble compared with deeper problems. At times, Swanson appears to soften Aristotle for modern audiences, beyond the demands of con-

sent. Such a depoliticized Aristotle would be worse than useless—it would flatter modern vices (as, for instance, communitarianism does). For example, she asserts that “Next to a virtuous populace, the noblest end a regime can achieve is peace. Peace is noble because it facilitates virtue, but it is also necessary for the preservation of a regime” (p. 117). This is far too low an understanding of nobility.

Moreover, on a more political level of understanding, the private and the modern political problem of centralized administration are perfectly compatible. Consider Tocqueville’s famous analysis of individualism in the beginning of part 2, volume II of *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville differentiated among individualism (a modern phenomenon wherein men withdraw to a private, apolitical sphere), ages-old egoism, and his proposed emphasis on self-interest properly understood, his attempted substitute for the full-strength Aristotelianism of man’s political nature. True self-interest would lead to the formation of voluntary associations to aid in the exercise of human liberty and self-government. Swanson’s attempt to import Aristotle into the modern world lacks the persuasiveness of Tocqueville’s devices. She has not sufficiently appreciated modern privacy’s dependence on the notion of natural rights.

Also problematic is her overly refined presentation of spiritedness (*thumos*), which

is rather a moral sensibility or posture, a loyalty to what is not simply one’s own but one’s own and dear or thought to be good. . . . Being a loyalty or commitment to what is good and one’s own, it is the disposition that someone may have about not only intimates and friends (*Pol* 1328a1–2, 10–11) but also the activity of philosophy.

Thus, spiritedness is not in Aristotle’s view blind or simple patriotism. . . . Spiritedness thus springs from or is attached to judgment. (Pp. 13–40. Footnotes omitted)

In a footnote to the last passage Swanson describes spiritedness as “a kind of moral virtue” (p. 140). She looks past the *phenomenon* of spiritedness that is the source of Aristotle’s inquiry. (Cf. Carnes Lord, “Aristotle’s Anthropology,” in Carnes Lord and David K. O’Connor, eds., *Essays on the Foundations of Aristotelian Political Science* [Berkeley: University of California, 1991], p. 52.)

In a similar way Swanson’s account of friendship is overly refined, focusing on this crucial subject in light of the highest of friendships: “Like education, friendship improves the quality of life by requiring virtue . . .” (p. 165). Friendships are of course both public and private—existing as political friendship (concord or community, which Carnes Lord has daringly translated as “solidarity”) and as private relationships. Thus, “political friendship between rulers and ruled requires acknowledging and fostering the private” (p. 192). In distinguishing concord from mere order, Swanson contends that “Insofar as

justice presupposes order, government should try to appease citizens, but to the extent that their demands contravene justice it should ignore them” (p. 185). But is it not obvious that a just government ought to do more than “ignore” the unjust demands of the populace? Moreover, Swanson may reveal a far too lax view of what is necessary for political life when she asserts, “Whereas true friendship is difficult to achieve, civic friendship is not” (p. 180). Yet Aristotle’s treatment of civic friendship makes it, in its refined sense, a characteristic of the best regime. Oddly, while Swanson makes the private depend on virtue, she removes the best regime from political friendship.

This is all part of Swanson’s reticence concerning the best regime. She eschews a systematic analysis of this theme of *Politics* VII, though she has much to say about book VIII. But her reader must consider the possibility that Swanson may have truncated any discussion of the best regime, for a political motive, that of keeping Aristotle relevant to the modern world. Perhaps the whole notion of the best regime is inapplicable in modern times, especially given the postclassical challenge to reason posed by revelation. (Swanson sees Aristotle as an early advocate of a form of church-state separation [p. 117].) Even a liberal society that assimilated Aristotle’s private-public analysis as she understands it could only approach, not be, a “true aristocracy” (p. 8, p. 211 cited above). (Cf. Mary P. Nichols, *Citizens and Statesmen: A Study of Aristotle’s “Politics”* [Savage, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1992]. See especially chapters 3 and 4.)

Finally, one wonders whether Swanson should have grounded herself on *to idion* in the sense of her own, her American regime. For example, was James Madison being Aristotelian or modern when in *The Federalist*, number 14, he praised American political innovations on behalf of “private rights and public happiness”? In using language such as “kindred blood,” “manly spirit,” and “mutual guardians of their mutual happiness,” Madison was being more political than Swanson’s Aristotle. Of course, Abraham Lincoln above all understood the applicability of the best regime to modernity, in articulating how individuals are tied to a greater whole through the notion of political duty.

It is thus no criticism of Swanson to conclude that she has produced a caricature of Aristotle. After all, she is writing, in large measure, for contemporary individuals who allegedly crave their autonomy. This initial limitation does not detract from the value of her endeavor and the obligation of students of political philosophy to ponder it.