

interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

September 1981

Volume 9 Numbers 2 & 3

- 141 Larry Arnhart The Rationality of Political Speech:
An Interpretation of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*
- 155 Jan H. Blits Manliness and Friendship
in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*
- 169 Mary Nichols *The Winter's Tale*:
The Triumph of Comedy over Tragedy
- 191 Jerry Weinberger On Bacon's *Advertisement Touching A Holy War*
- 207 John Parsons, Jr. On Sir William Temple's
Political and Philosophical Teaching
- 229 Susan Power John Locke:
Revolution, Resistance, or Opposition?
- 245 Barry Cooper The Politics of Performance: An Interpretation
of Bolingbroke's Political Theory
- 263 Philip J. Kain Labor, the State, and Aesthetic Theory in the
Writings of Schiller
- 279 Michael H. Mitias Law as the Basis of the State: Hegel
- 301 Stanley Corngold Dilthey's Essay *The Poetic Imagination*:
A Poetics of Force
- 339 Kent A. Kirwan Historicism and Statesmanship
in the Reform Argument of Woodrow Wilson
- 353 Richard Velkley Gadamer and Kant: The Critique of Modern
Aesthetic Consciousness in *Truth and Method*
- 365 Robert C. Grady Bertrand de Jouvenel:
Order, Legitimacy, and the Model of Rousseau
- 385 William R. Marty Rawls and the Harried Mother
- 397 Jürgen Gebhardt Ideology and Reality:
The Ideologue's Persuasion in Modern Politics
- 415 Kenneth W. Thompson Science, Morality, and Transnationalism
- Discussion*
- 427 Peter T. Manicas The Crisis of Contemporary Political Theory:
on Jacobson's *Pride and Solace*
- Book Reviews*
- 437 Patrick Coby *The Spirit of Liberalism*,
by Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr.
- 439 Will Morrisey *Political Parties in the Eighties*,
edited by Robert A. Goldwin

interpretation

Volume 9 numbers 2 & 3

Editor-in-Chief Hilail Gildin

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

Consulting Editors John Hallowell • Wilhelm Hennis • Erich Hula •
Arnaldo Momigliano • Michael Oakeshott • Ellis
Sandoz • Leo Strauss (d.1973) • Kenneth W.
Thompson

Associate Editors Larry Arnhart • Patrick Coby • Christopher A. Colmo
• Maureen Feder • Joseph E. Goldberg • Pamela
Jensen • Will Morrisey

Assistant Editor Marianne C. Grey

Production Manager Martyn Hitchcock

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. All manuscripts and editorial correspondence should be addressed to INTERPRETATION, Building G Room 101, Queens College, Flushing, N.Y. 11367, U.S.A.

Copyright 1982 • Interpretation

Discussion

THE CRISIS OF CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL THEORY

PETER T. MANICAS
Queens College

A Review of *Pride and Solace*, by Norman Jacobson (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978)

By now we are tired of crises. We have been told of too many and perhaps we have experienced too many. Perhaps we are, in consequence, just tired.

Political theory is especially vulnerable. In a well-known essay written in 1951, David Easton noted that political theory had become "impoverished," that the sort of activity practiced by Aristotle or Montesquieu—traditional political theory—had ended, that the contemporary political theorist had become a kind of historian, concerned exclusively with a "form of historical analysis." On the other hand, he noted, the sort of theorizing requisite to a genuinely empirical (i.e., behavioral) political science was not being generated either.¹ And there were some suspicions that it could not be generated—at least in accordance with the self-imposed prescriptions of the new "science" of politics.

In 1956 came the pronouncement from England that "for the moment, anyway, political philosophy [is] dead." Peter Laslett, the coroner on this occasion, is an informed historian. He suggested that political philosophy was dead "because politics [had] become too serious to be left to philosophers."² Laslett's judgment that political philosophy was dead *but* "for the moment" seemed to be correct, as we were literally made dizzy by resuscitations wrought at Harvard. *A Theory of Justice*³ was surely serious political philosophy and, like a new *Second Treatise of Civil Government*, it offered considerable solace to a nation badly needing it.

But a disquiet nonetheless remained. In other places, both in this country and abroad, writers from an earlier generation (especially Orwell, Camus, and Arendt), writers with a deeper understanding of nineteenth-century philosophy and letters, and more important, writers who were more profoundly influenced by the political events of this century, were defining what Norman Jacobson in

This essay was first presented at a colloquium at the Department of Philosophy, Texas A & M University. The author wishes to thank Professor John J. McDermott and his associates for their many kindnesses.

¹David Easton, "The Decline of Political Theory," *Journal of Politics*, 13 (February 1951).

²Peter Laslett, ed., *Philosophy, Politics and Society*. 1st ser. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1956),

p. vii.

³John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belnap Press of Harvard Univ., 1971).

*Pride and Solace*⁴ calls “political theory without solace.” For these writers and the many who have been influenced by them—or who have come to similar conclusions via different routes—this sort of theory, if “theory” is still the right word, is an expression of courage and of desperation, of shipwreck and catastrophe without prospect of a safe shore or even a stable mooring. It is a counsel of caution and compassion in the face of self-doubt. And, for better or for worse, it is an expression of increasing pervasiveness. Thus, Jacobson’s book is important.

Pride and Solace is a longish essay, even a meditation. At times moving and passionate (and often unclear), Jacobson evokes rather than evinces. The middle three chapters on Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Rousseau are not memorable, though they are not “wrong” or unhelpful, but we sense that they are not the business of the book; they are counters for other things, things said at the beginning of the book and at the end. The problems raised are not all new, nor have they gone entirely unattended. But they are serious problems and they are earnestly addressed.

Jacobson suggests that we read the history of Western political theory as the history of “various structures of solace.” His interest is not methodological or historical in the sense that he offers but another “form of historical analysis.” With Strauss and Voegelin, Arendt and Wolin, Jacobson uses “the tradition” to make a contemporary political point, specifically that there can be no prideful offer of salvation by political means.⁵

His idea is that

throughout the history of Western political thought has been the belief that private desperation must somehow be susceptible of public solution; that it is the office of the political theorist to be doctor of the soul, to join in helping relieve the conflict raging within by projecting it outward upon the city, there to be resolved once and for all (p. 1).

The articulation of the solution, the discovery of the truth is an act of pride on the part of the theorist; by showing that the fears of his readers stem “not from anything within themselves, but from the particular political condition” (p. 5), he can show also that there is public cure. He thus gives assurance, he consoles and comforts.

There are three central features that characterize the traditional effort at political theory: (1) the idea that the author is prideful; (2) the idea that he identifies a private desperation as amenable to public resolution; and (3) the idea that he discovers truth.

At first blush the idea that the great political theorists write from the pride

⁴Norman Jacobson, *Pride and Solace* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1978).

⁵For criticism of the idea of the tradition and of the uses to which it is put by Strauss, Voegelin, Arendt, and Wolin, see John G. Gunnell, *Political Theory: Tradition and Interpretation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop, 1979). This little book is highly informative, helpful, and provocative.

of discovery seems either dubious or unimportant. Obviously, the claim is not intended to be based on psychological evidence, nor presumably is it to deny that the great writers wrote from different and generally mixed motives. What then is its point?

It seems that it is essentially related to points (2) and (3), that one *must* be prideful if one supposes that one's private desperations are really political problems, or that one's diagnoses of the particular malaise and its solution should be accepted as true. The force of the "must" in "must be prideful" is that the following suppositions (either one or both) are mistaken: There is no authority or truth in such matters and/or it is a mistake to think that one can resolve private desperations with public resolutions. Jacobson seems to have something like this in mind, and that is what makes his book provocative and important.

Let us consider each of these ideas, beginning with the idea that private desperations are resolvable politically. There are two questions here. First, did the great theorists, Plato and Aristotle, Hobbes and Rousseau, believe this? Second, if they did, were they correct in their belief?

Taken generally, the answer to the first question is yes, even if there are problems regarding the formulation of the question. Its formulation suggests a psychological orientation that is generally foreign to the tradition. That is, we who live in the Age of the Therapeutic tend to construct our models in individual and psychological terms. We begin with an encapsulated self and take as a datum a contrast between self and society. This move, already an important shift away from the classical tradition, is then further personalized with the elusive categories of psychological science, the lonely ego, the narcissistic self, self-concern, compulsion, obsession, fantasy, desperation, pride, and solace. To be sure, the psychological motif is anticipated in Rousseau and perhaps behind him, in Plato (two of Jacobson's favorites), but it seems hardly characteristic. Even so, Jacobson's formulation of the question is perhaps less important than his correct observation that the tradition did articulate political solutions to problems that were *articulated* in political terms.

The second question may now be asked: Was the tradition correct in doing this? Jacobson thinks not. Here we see the full force of the psychologizing of politics. In the first formulation of his main theme, as cited above, the metaphor of "doctor of the soul" is used in explicitly post-Freudian terms: the theorist "joins in helping to relieve the conflict raging within by *projecting* it outward upon the city."

The conflict is within and is only projected outward. We are solaced because we are deluded. The "schemes designed to defend us against either the wantonness of our passions or the frailty of our reason" (p. 4), are doomed to failure because the conflict contains an irresolvable "contradiction." The "terrifying powers at work in the human heart" may be assuaged, or sublimated, or repressed, but they cannot be eliminated. The political theorist, yielding to the temptation "to blind himself to certain 'facts of life'" (p. 2), is a deceiver, and

the history of political theory is a history of deceptions—not ideologies—being like civilization itself a continuous effort to “civilize.” The original city, the *polis*, the Church, the State, are each asylums constructed by self-deceivers in a continuous, but ultimately unsuccessful effort to control and console its discontents.

The “unmasking” of political theory, the discovery that the Emperor has no clothes, was initiated by Rousseau, “one of the last of the solacers and the first of the unmaskers of the machinery of solace employed by the modern State,” and was impelled by Marx, Nietzsche, and a host of others writing in this century. The Age of Disenchantment forced the choices for the “responsible” writers of our time:

Abhor the prideful act of granting solace and accept ineffectuality; or embrace the dispensation of solace, without which “the masses” cannot conceivably be moved, and become a monument to pride, but effectual “in the world” (p. 18).

As Phillip Rieff has so perceptively noted, “the psychological man has withdrawn into a world always at war, where the ego is an armed force capable of achieving armistices, but not peace.” Thus, “turning away from the Occidental ideal of action leading toward salvation of others besides ourselves, the psychological man has espoused the Oriental ideal of salvation through self-contemplative manipulation.”⁶

To be sure, Jacobson does not put matters just as I have here, nor would he go as far as the text from Rieff suggests. But the reading I have offered, if not exact, seems nonetheless to underlie much of what Jacobson says. Moreover, as we shall also see, Jacobson genuinely struggles for some role for “responsible” theory. But as “fear of error” or “fatal involvement” rightly makes us wary and if, as with Arendt, we can no longer have confidence in “glittering triumph,” or indeed, of “even improvement,” can responsible theory say anything that can rightly be called political?

What then of the second feature of the tradition of political theory—the quest for and question of truth?

Jacobson begins by noting that the quest for truth was not taken as being identical with the quest for meaning (p. 1). He may be right in this, although it is arguable. He is surely correct, however, in contending that “there is no question that there has existed a preference in political theory for the true over the meaningful” (p. ix). And no doubt, this is a preference Jacobson disdains. “The concern of this book,” he says, “is primarily with the struggle to achieve meaning rather than to establish truth” (*ibid.*).

The distinction between “meaning” and “truth” is important for him—even if it is not all that clear. Moreover, it is more important to see why, and in what sense, he disdains the quest for truth. Is it because he thinks that truth is not possible? Is it because truth belongs to science and not to political theory?

⁶Phillip Rieff, *Freud: The Mind of the Moralizer* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1961), p. 392.

Or is it because truth, as we come to know it, undermines, or overwhelms, or makes impossible the quest for meaning, and of the two, we need meaning more than truth?

There are some moments in the book when one is tempted to suppose that for Jacobson, truth is not possible (period). In this, he catches another feature of our times—at least among the sophisticated. Weary and rightly wary of claims to truth by politicians and intellectuals whose self-serving uses of “truth” are increasingly and painfully obvious; alive to the collapse or decay of deeply held values and beliefs about community, religion, and family; and sensitive to the genuinely fragile foundations of even modern science, those who hold out for truth risk naiveté or, worse, accusations of dogmatism or even of fanaticism. If taken seriously, however, the denial of truth becomes a self-defeating nihilism. Generally, as Plato demonstrated against Callicles, it is not taken seriously, and when held, is held inconsistently. Jacobson is not so foolish.

He is surely repelled by rationalist, absolutist, and holistic ideas of truth, by both “scientific conceit” and “ideological certitude.” Truths come in small packages and we always stand at low tide on shifting sand. The lesson for Jacobson is Camus’s: “He who does not know everything cannot kill everything.”⁷ Surely this is a lesson that must be learned. But in rightly rejecting political absolutisms and the underlying rationalist or positivist metaphysics on which they stand, Jacobson, like Camus, leaves us precious little. We are, he says, “naked in the Garden.” “The only possibility for the political theorist is to give himself wholeheartedly to the project of inventing a set of limits to political action” (p. 160). Again, as with Arendt, we are to be content with the modest, if indispensable, effort to prevent “catastrophes” (p. 139).

It would be a mistake to suppose that Camus’s lesson has been learned. Nihilistic and historical crime has not been erased. Camus is correct in his analysis that such acts presuppose limitlessness—that “unlimited display of human pride” that confuses Creator and Created. Yet, what follows from this? Are we to blame the theorists?

More important, perhaps, what are the limits of the posture of “calculated ignorance”? Like Camus, Jacobson rejects complacency and recognizes that “by our silence we also enter the fray.” But what does “inventing limits to political action” mean concretely? And is inventing limits enough?

Consider, finally, the idea that limits are to be invented. Why “invention” here? Jacobson says that “the mystiques of solace resorted to by those political theorists who were responsible for the creation and maintenance of the tradition are no longer available to us” (p. 160).

I think Jacobson is surely right in this, both in replacing “discovery” by “invention” and in contending that the inherited mystiques are no longer available to us. But again, the crucial question is, Why?

⁷Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (New York: Vintage, 1956), p. 289.

For Jacobson it is not, we may judge, because their problems are not ours and therefore their solutions cannot be ours, because it seems precisely in the effort to *give* solutions that traditional theory goes wrong. Is it because, then, for the tradition, theory could be built on solid foundations: Human Nature, God, History? And now this is not possible? A wonderful text from Arendt is approvingly quoted. We are compelled, she said,

not only to find and devise new laws, but to find and devise their very measure, the yardstick of good and evil, the principle of their source. Politically, this means that before drawing up the constitution of a new body politic, we shall have to create—not merely discover—a new foundation for human community as such (p. 129).

This takes us to the central issue. It is the question of foundations that seems exactly to distinguish our world from worlds past; moreover, our difficulty is the question of *whether* we can create new foundations and, if it is possible, how they are to be created.

Jacobson surprises us. One might have supposed that he would accept the idea, for some, as he notes, the very *definition* of modernity, that in times past, theories “have always built upon settled views of the ‘nature’ of man in distinction to the excruciating modern business of trying to create something out of the void of the human ‘condition’” (p. 6). But he rejects this way of drawing the distinction on the ground that “for all great theorists there has always been a sense in which the civic God is dead” (p. 6). Moreover, political theory “has sprung less often from the urge to reflect ‘fixed principles’ than from the impulse to meet the challenge actually to fix principles in the midst of what is seen by the aristocrat of the mind as chaos, or decline, stagnation, or suicidal destructiveness” (pp. 8f.). On his “ideal” (“formal”) definition of politics, politics operates “in the absence of a knowable, definable, objective, immutable, transmittable common good” (p. 9). “Political theory begins precisely at the moment when things become, so to speak, unglued” (p. 10).

There is a great deal to commend in these remarks. Plato and Aristotle surely gave us reflective responses to the revolutionary changes of fifth-century Athens. But they were not the revolutionaries. Indeed, anachronistically, they sought to “fix principles” that history was undermining. Hobbes, of course, wrote to the crises of the seventeenth century. Hobbes was the revolutionary, articulating principles that made more sense in the century following than they did in his own day. Indeed, it would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that those figures we identify as crucial in the tradition—Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau—are so identified because they so brilliantly articulated politics in what later was seen to be politics at the transition. As reactionaries or revolutionaries, they gave us insight into the past or the future. They lamented the civic God who had died, or they found bases for the creation of a new civic God.⁸ But if so, why the problem so urgently

⁸This way of identifying the tradition seems consistent with Gunnell’s criticism of that idea. It also makes political theory ideological (in one of its many senses).

Gunnell has something in common with Jacobson as regards the relation of the theorist to

displayed in *Pride and Solace*? What is there about our crisis that so alters the functions and limits of political theory?

One answer is easy to give and it goes like this: Things are different now because we know too much. We cannot be deceived by some new magician, some new Sunlight Man. There can be no new foundations for human community. The conflicts and contradictions are not amenable to political solutions. As I noted, this answer is characteristic of our age, and without doubt it is felt, if ambivalently, by Jacobson, as by many others. But it is not the only answer. Indeed, I do not think it is the one that Jacobson does give.

There are two texts that suggest an alternative. At one place, he remarks that “modernity is no synonym for an absence of fixed principles, but is a term which combines the idea of democratic ‘disenchantment’ with a determination not to emulate the absolutist systems of the past” (pp. 11f.). And in his prologue (p. x), he describes *Pride and Solace* in conventional terms by saying that “it examines the ascendancy in political theory of the nation-state, its subsequent decline in legitimacy, and the vulnerability of Western humanity bereft of authoritative ideas, principles, and institutions.”

Our politics is thus one of transition. Neither *polis*, nor Church, nor State can any longer provide solutions to our problems. The ideas that sustained authority and legitimated the political order no longer have authority. They are frayed, wearing thin, tattered. But our time nevertheless is different from similar periods in the past.

If it is true now that there is a “democratic ‘disenchantment,’” does this mean democracy has been tried and rejected, or that, as Jacobson puts it in another place, “men must compose their own scripts”? And if it is true that

his times. Gunnell notes, for example, that “his response is often a response to personal denial, yet it is not simply a matter of personal deprivation” (p. 142). Similarly, the figure of the Hebrew prophet that recurs in Jacobson’s treatment is found also in Gunnell’s.

Finally, as regards the contemporary situation in political theory, despite his criticism of the idea of the tradition, Gunnell still asks if it is still possible for “this kind of literature”—traditional political theory—to be produced. He discovers that features identified by Strauss, Arendt, and Wolin (e.g., the diffusion of the idea of the political, abandonment of the idea of a human nature, positivism, and historicism) are all relevant to the “disengagement of creative thought from the problem of political order” (p. 160). He adds another: It may be that the conditions of “the open society” are incompatible with political theory. But this is not because the open society is necessarily the good society or because it does not stand in need of criticism or of alternative visions, but because in effect, political theory is buried by being ignored: “The political theorist is not unlike Sophocles’s Ajax, a hero without a field of action or anyone to notice him if he does act” (p. 161).

This is quite perceptive, but may be shortsighted. The theorist today cannot be a hero—even Marcuse who taught us of co-optation was first co-opted and then brushed aside—but he may still choose to write—if only from the sort of pride Jacobson spoke about. Moreover, if we are now in a period of transition, we cannot now say which documents and theories will come to be identified as crucial to understanding our present. That will depend upon what happens and how subsequent scholarship (if such there still is?) views this period. My own suspicion regarding *A Theory of Justice* is that it will be viewed as the divine-right-of-kings literature of the seventeenth century is now viewed. No one reads James I or Filmer, although we all know what they argued for. Perhaps Alvin Toffler or Buckminster Fuller will be the John Locke of subsequent centuries?

there is “a determination not to emulate the absolutist systems of the past,” does this mean we must seek a solution that is not absolutist, or that no political solution is possible?

Our problem is not created by the impossibility of truth (as such), nor by the question of whether it is discovered, deduced, or invented. These are dilemmas that result from epistemological misformulation within the Western tradition between conventionalizing Sophists and Platonizing realists, between positivist scientisms and historicist absolutisms. But if I am correct, Jacobson’s plague on both houses is not a rejection of truth, but a rejection of certitude and of the idea that those who claim it can speak and act for humanity.

Nor is our problem the impossibility of creating new foundations for human community. This is so even if it is true that we can now more clearly see that these foundations cannot be discovered or deduced from Human Nature, God, or History, and that they must be invented, created, realized by human activity.

Nor is the failure of the tradition to help us now a failure rightly diagnosed in terms of our discovery that the conflicts are within, and therefore not responsive to political solutions. Rather, as Jacobson sees, the unmaskers, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, showed us that our

aristocratic fathers are dead and we the children cannot, or will not, take that awful responsibility on ourselves, the care of the whole community. Instead we see it as our job to fashion the theory and practice of our own discrete existence (p. 12).

This is exactly right. Our choice is not between a new politics of authority or no politics. There is a third alternative: genuine democratic politics.

That is, past political theorists, as “aristocrats of the spirit,” tried to do for all only what each could do for himself. They gave us solutions that defined and legitimated the civic God; they justified the authority of *polis*, Church, and State. The unmaskers, from Rousseau to Marx to Freud, unseated authority by explaining our craving for it.

Sadly enough, all that we learned was that if one could not speak, let alone act, for humanity, one must speak and act only for himself. Hence the trepidation, the desperation, the abandonment of politics. Hence also the attitude, characteristic of Orwell, Camus, and Arendt, that we must abandon “glittering triumph,” even improvement, and concern ourselves with the more modest task of inventing limits. But this assumes that the problem is to move “the masses,” for it is on this assumption that limits are demanded. By contrast, if the democratic man “must think himself out of his predicament by himself,” if “the rules do not permit him to call for the intervention of a foreign power” (p. 13)—not even his therapist—then theory might have a more positive task.

If there is to be a new foundation for human community, it must be the product of individuals acting creatively and conjointly. In turn, this depends upon our willingness to take the responsibility of caring for, of, and about the

whole community. In Jacobson, as in Orwell, Camus, and Arendt, there is a deep streak of communitarian anarchism, a hope though not a prediction, that the undermining of authority and the discovery of autonomy need not be the end of politics.⁹

In this regard, responsible political theory can do nothing less than articulate the obstacles and conditions of a democratic politics. My impotence, like my desperation is personal; but I cannot wash my hands of it and retire. But neither is it sufficient to share my loneliness and desperation, especially if what we are to share is the idea that "there is no meaning, all is lost." As humans, we need solace; but it must be insisted that we need a critical vision more. For as seems clear to me, where critique or vision is absent, there is no politics.

⁹In his foreword to the American edition of *The Rebel*, Herbert Read remarks that Camus's ideas often come close to anarchism. The best statement in Arendt is perhaps the concluding chapter of her *On Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1963). Orwell's activities during the Spanish Civil War are well-known, and his *1984* is the classic attack on the unthinking conformity that stands at the opposite pole of the anarchist attitude.