

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Spring 2018

Volume 44 Issue 3

- 359 *Rodrigo Chacón* Philosophy as Awareness of Fundamental Problems, or Leo Strauss's Debt to Heidegger's Aristotle
- 379 *W. Julian Korab-Karpowicz* Why a World State Is Unnecessary: The Continuing Debate on World Government
- 403 *Laurence Lampert* Reading Benardete: A New *Parmenides*
- 425 *Ronald Beiner*
431 *Charles U. Zug* **An Exchange:**
Nietzsche's Final Teaching
by Michael Allen Gillespie
- 439 *Michael Allen Gillespie* On *Nietzsche's Final Teaching*: A Response to My Critics
- 447 *Charles U. Zug* Developing a Nietzschean Account of Musical Form: A Rejoinder to Michael Gillespie's Response
- 451 *José A. Colen* **Review Essay:**
What Is Wrong with Human Rights?
- 471 *Marco Andreacchio* **Book Reviews:**
For Humanism, edited by David Alderson and Robert Spencer
- 475 *Bernard J. Dobski* *Tyrants: A History of Power, Injustice, and Terror*
by Waller R. Newell
- 483 *Jerome C. Foss* *James Madison and Constitutional Imperfection*
by Jeremy D. Bailey
- 487 *Raymond Hain* *The Virtue Ethics of Levi Gersonides*
by Alexander Green
- 493 *Richard Jordan* *Public Intellectuals in the Global Arena: Professors or Pundits?*, edited by Michael C. Desch
- 501 *Mary Mathie* *Fate and Freedom in the Novels of David Adams Richards* by Sara MacDonald and Barry Craig
- 507 *Tyler Tritten* "Philosophie und Religion": Schellings *Politische Philosophie* by Ryan Scheerlinck

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

- Editor-in-Chief* Timothy W. Burns, Baylor University
- General Editors* Charles E. Butterworth • Timothy W. Burns
- General Editors (Late)* Howard B. White (d. 1974) • Robert Horwitz (d. 1987)
Seth G. Benardete (d. 2001) • Leonard Grey (d. 2009) •
Hilail Gildin (d. 2015)
- Consulting Editors* Christopher Bruell • David Lowenthal • Harvey C.
Mansfield • Thomas L. Pangle • Ellis Sandoz • Kenneth
W. Thompson
- Consulting Editors (Late)* Leo Strauss (d. 1973) • Arnaldo Momigliano (d. 1987) •
Michael Oakeshott (d. 1990) • John Hallowell (d. 1992)
• Ernest L. Fortin (d. 2002) • Muhsin Mahdi (d. 2007) •
Joseph Cropsey (d. 2012) • Harry V. Jaffa (d. 2015)
- International Editors* Terence E. Marshall • Heinrich Meier
- Editors* Peter Ahrens Dorf • Wayne Ambler • Marco Andreacchio •
Maurice Auerbach • Robert Bartlett • Fred Baumann • Eric
Buzzetti • Susan Collins • Patrick Coby • Erik Dempsey •
Elizabeth C'de Baca Eastman • Edward J. Erler • Maureen
Feder-Marcus • Robert Goldberg • L. Joseph Hebert •
Pamela K. Jensen • Hannes Kerber • Mark J. Lutz • Daniel
Ian Mark • Ken Masugi • Carol L. McNamara • Will
Morrisey • Amy Nendza • Charles T. Rubin • Leslie G.
Rubin • Thomas Schneider • Susan Meld Shell • Geoffrey
T. Sigalet • Nicholas Starr • Devin Stauffer • Bradford P.
Wilson • Cameron Wybrow • Martin D. Yaffe • Catherine
H. Zuckert • Michael P. Zuckert
- Copy Editor* Les Harris
- Designer* Sarah Teutschel
- Inquiries* ***Interpretation, A Journal of Political Philosophy***
Department of Political Science
Baylor University
1 Bear Place, 97276
Waco, TX 76798
- email* interpretation@baylor.edu

Sara MacDonald and Barry Craig, *Fate and Freedom in the Novels of David Adams Richards*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017, 174 pp., \$95 (cloth).

MARY MATHIE

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS, SAN ANTONIO

mary.mathie@gmail.com

The protagonists in David Adams Richards's novels experience hardship in almost every way: financially, physically, politically, and at the hands of those they ought to be able to trust. Their lives seem impossible. Thus critics and readers have often taken the world Richards creates to be bounded by an inexorable fate. Sara MacDonald and Barry Craig counter this notion in their book *Fate and Freedom in the Novels of David Adams Richards*. They write that "like the well-meaning social support workers who often appear in Richards's novels, many readers believe that, without proper intervention, his characters embody a futile servility to their circumstances" (xv). MacDonald and Craig reject this description, and in fact contend that the novels are all about freedom. They admit that to view the characters in the novels of Richards as free "might require a dramatic shift" in how most readers understand freedom. To accomplish this dramatic shift sounds like a hefty task, but the authors come closer to doing so than one might expect inasmuch as they rely on Richards's stories as they attempt it, thus providing one of the first serious accounts of this deserving modern novelist.

MacDonald and Craig contend specifically that the view of freedom presented by Richards is Christian and Augustinian. They preface the book with a reading of the *Confessions*, focusing on Augustine's attempt to find the cause of evil in the world. They emphasize Augustine's movement from an attachment to Manichean dualism (which "presents matter as the cause of evil and absolves human beings of individual moral responsibility") to his

final position that “evil is simply a disordering of the proper relation of the created order, having its source in the human will” (xiii). From this position, the authors suggest, both Augustine and Richards understand all human evil to be the result, not of physics or matter, but of free will. They go on to argue that this account of freedom is ultimately Platonic as well, because Socrates in the *Republic* and Augustine in the *Confessions* both make the same claim: that natural, physical, material, and sensual things, once properly understood, all indicate the existence of the Good since (unlike evil, which comes from the will) they are all participants in the Good, and thus all have some good in them. They conclude that the argument presented in the *Confessions* “demonstrates the compatibility” (xii) of Augustinian Christianity and Platonism.

The authors go on to deal with the later novels of Richards by proceeding in the order in which they were written, beginning with *Friends of Meager Fortune*. *Friends* invites obvious comparisons to Greek literature, in its story of the epic struggle of two strong brothers to establish a lumber empire. The prophecy of a Micmac card-reader, presaging initial success and then great failure for the ostensible protagonist Owen Jameson, stands in for an oracle. Fate seems to control the lives of the characters in that Owen’s boldness, assisted by the power with which rumor takes up and elaborates upon his mistake of kissing a married woman, brings about the fulfillment of the prophecy surrounding his life. The authors argue that Richards presents the comparison to Greek tragedy to show that the Greek world view is vainglorious and insufficient. Because these characters view the world as the pagan Greeks do, they cannot find what they seek, including a fulfilled and reciprocated human love. The most Christian character, Meager Fortune, on the other hand, is at peace in his own life despite its great hardships.

The second chapter goes on to deal with *Mercy among the Children*, a novel which has some of Richards’s most appealing characters endure some of his greatest tragedies. Their account of this novel is, in my view, the strongest part of their argument. The work is narrated by Lyle Henderson and is his account of the great sorrows that have come to his family and of his father Sydney’s vow of nonviolence, which has kept Sydney from attempting to avenge these injuries. Sydney’s vow is made to God; Lyle, on the other hand, mentally struggles against his father and against the idea of God. The authors bring together the complex events of this novel compellingly, and they argue that Richards presents Sydney’s strength as an ultimate freedom, although it keeps him from violent action, and Lyle’s attempt at independence as an

ultimate failure. They point out that only when Lyle lets go of his need to be in control of events does he seem to be able to acquire any comfort or peace.

In the subsequent chapter, MacDonald and Craig deal with *The Lost Highway*, which returns to a secular protagonist. They argue that Richards presents Alex Chapman as an “inverted image of Sydney Henderson” (73). Like Sydney, Alex seeks in books a world outside his own, but unlike Sydney he finds in them a source for extreme skepticism and becomes a stoic humanist. Alex seeks freedom through complete independence and reliance on his own rationality, but he gains it instead by loving someone and becoming, in this way, dependent. The authors suggest that this fact of Alex’s life points him, and others, to a need for infinite love as the means to human freedom. Thus “Richards suggests that the truth manifest in Christianity is eternally true” (101). The need of love points to a God who is love—to the Christian God.

In their final full chapter, the authors turn to *Crimes against My Brother*. Here they understand Richards to complete the argument he has developed through the series of novels, that “the love of self must be converted in the love of others and the love of God” (125). Three boys, aware of Sydney Henderson’s pact of nonviolence and faith, make an opposing pact to rely only on each other and neither to believe in nor to depend on God. Although they start out as firm friends, they become bitterly divided as they grow older. MacDonald and Craig argue that the betrayals that destroy their friendships and their lives are instances of overweening attempts at autonomy, and also that the love that is revived between at least two of these friends by the end of the novel, as well as the love felt by others around them, show where the real power of the human soul is found.

The authors make it clear that love is powerful and salutary in the novels, and this helps to establish one branch of their argument, namely, that Richards exposes a certain kind of human freedom—the freedom his characters have, not entirely to choose whom to love or whether to love, but rather to love no matter what others think of them or do to them. The less convincing branch of their argument is that which presents these characters as emblems of Christian, Augustinian, and Platonic doctrine.

One problem with this latter argument is that it relies so much on the doctrines of the characters that each one is often presented as fully governed by his ideas rather than by the various events that have formed and deformed him. Thus, for example, the authors portray Sydney Henderson as a successful proponent of his vow, whereas one might argue his vow has gravely

injured his family. His greatness may lie in his having made not the right choice, but rather the best choice available to a man injured by his father, his priest, and his circumstances. Similarly, the authors seem to me to understate Lyle's good qualities, even to the point of textual mistakes. For example, they discuss Percy's selfless thoughts about Lyle before his death without noting that these thoughts are not really Percy's (since his thoughts could not be known by anyone) but are attributed to Percy by Lyle, presumably out of his own guilt but also his own humility. Similarly, they depict Ian's development as a movement towards Christian humility, but there are suggestions in the text that his tragic fault has little to do with atheism.

Moreover, while MacDonald and Craig are at pains throughout to ground the controversial view of freedom they defend in a solid philosophical tradition, they occasionally oversimplify Richards's world by tying it all to this tradition as they see it. Their own brief account of Augustine and even briefer account of Plato leave more questions than they answer. Even if one accepts that the ends of human life sought by Christian and Platonic traditions may be compatible, one might still contend that the two traditions discover and resolve the complexities of human life in different or even opposing ways, and even that the means by which they discover those complexities, more than the ends discovered, are the subject of the novelist. To fully accept the argument of the book, one would have to evaluate Richards on his ability to convince readers to agree on the ends of human life, but readers may instead be looking for his insights into the means by which human beings reach out into the unsoundable world.

Nonetheless, in attending to the way love is treated by Richards the authors make a compelling case that his characters benefit when they let go—when they put themselves aside. This is not easy for these characters, and it is not easy for the reader, because Richards gives us stories in which a reasonable person might feel hopelessly unable to reconcile what is manifestly desirable with what is possible or with what one owes to someone else. The interpretation provided combats this feeling. Most notably, the book successfully pulls together the elements of Lyle's various thoughts at the end of *Mercy*. Lyle's grief and pain is the kind that very little can resolve, and it appears from his story as if faith might be the only thing that can assuage that pain. They make the subtle point, for instance, that Sydney is not necessarily better than Jay Beard because he is nonviolent. Rather, if Sydney is better, it is because he shows an outstanding strength in his ability to submit his will to something outside of himself, and moreover this strength seems to shine out

to people around him (including even his raging son) and to manifest itself in warmth, in love, and in integrity. A similar care and subtlety also appear in their accounts of Camellia's relationships with Reggie and with Owen in *Friends of Meager Fortune*, of Alex Chapman's sacrifice in *The Lost Highway*, and of Lonnie Sullivan's special kind of evil in *Crimes against My Brother*.

As MacDonald and Craig state, many critics find the stories of Richards to be "stories of violence, darkness, and despair" (xi). Their analysis of the books responds to these critics; but more importantly, they offer a plausible account that might give some comfort and motivation to the ordinary reader who finds himself staggering under the harsher blows experienced in Richards's formidable works.