

Interpretation

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Inquiries ***Interpretation, A Journal of Political Philosophy***
Department of Political Science
Baylor University
1 Bear Place, 97276
Waco, TX 76798

email interpretation@baylor.edu

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MICHAEL P. FOLEY

BAYLOR UNIVERSITY

Michael_Foley@baylor.edu

Frederick Lawrence is not a household name in Catholic theology or political philosophy, and yet he is something of a Mr. Belvedere or a (brilliant) Forrest Gump, having lived in Rome while the sessions of the Second Vatican Council were taking place and having studied under or worked with such luminaries as Bernard Lonergan, Karl Barth, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Eric Voegelin, Johann Baptist Metz, René Girard, and Ernest Fortin (who subsequently introduced Lawrence to the writings of Leo Strauss). Lawrence's limited visibility is partly owed to his devotion to his students at Boston College, where he has been teaching since 1971, and partly to his direction of the annual and weekend "Lonergan workshops" (which he founded in 1973) and his editing of the proceedings for *The Lonergan Workshop Journal*.

Lawrence has also chosen as his sole means of wider communication the scholarly essay and the academic presentation—until now. *The Fragility of Consciousness* marks Lawrence's first monograph. The fruit of decades of theological reflection on contemporary topics and challenges, the twelve essays that comprise this volume range from some of Lawrence's better-known published pieces to previously rare unpublished works. Within these pages one will find sophisticated engagements of major figures, including Heidegger, Voegelin, Gadamer, Habermas, Benedict XVI, and of course, Lonergan. Yet as editors Randall S. Rosenberg and Kevin Vander Schel note, emerging from this array of interlocutions are three broad thematic lines: the practice of conversation, the interplay of faith and reason, and the crisis of culture (xx).

Readers of *Interpretation* are most likely to be drawn to two essays in particular: “A Jewish and Christian Approach to the Problematic of Jerusalem and Athens: Leo Strauss and Bernard Lonergan” and “The Recovery of Theology in a Political Mode: The Example of Ernest L. Fortin, AA.”

“A Jewish and Christian Approach” (72–159) first appeared in *Divyadaan: Journal of Philosophy and Education* in 2008. Despite its hefty weigh-in at eighty-seven pages, the essay is a tour de force that never loses a rather breathless momentum. Lawrence’s central thesis is that Strauss’s “three waves of modernity” and Lonergan’s “longer cycle of decline” have much in common and can even be seen as complementary (117; see 118). Yet despite their similar analyses of modernity, Strauss and Lonergan have significantly different views of philosophy and theology.

Lawrence is especially lucid when surveying the development of Strauss’s political philosophy through Strauss’s work on Heidegger, Lessing, Spinoza, Hobbes, Maimonides, and Alfarabi. Lawrence’s summaries of Strauss on faith and reason, premodern and modern rationalism, and the political drawbacks of Christianity are, it seems to me, well grounded and balanced. He detects a voluntarist strain in Strauss’s views on God and religion, and he suspects a “conceptualist” understanding of knowledge operative in Strauss’s philosophy. But Lawrence, who is respectful of Strauss to the point of being deferential, is careful not to draw any hard conclusions, partly out of charity and partly out of a genuine uncertainty about the evidence of Strauss’s writings as well as the conflicting accounts of his disciples. Strauss himself, for example, provides two very different translations of *noēsis noēseōs*—an Aristotelian phrase in the *Metaphysics* crucial to Lawrence’s argument. The translation “thought thinking thought” moves in a conceptualist direction, while the translation “understanding of understanding” points to a (healthier) “intellectualist” direction.

It is when Lawrence explains Lonergan’s cognitional theory and theology that the article grows dense. This is not entirely Lawrence’s fault, for Lonergan’s vocabulary, carefully crafted to designate specific realities, is a curriculum unto itself. Further, Lonergan’s thought is an interlinking barrel of monkeys, and it is difficult to describe one monkey without describing another and still another. But Lawrence is able to land eventually in an interesting place. The most significant difference between Strauss and Lonergan, Lawrence argues, is their respective conceptions of divine transcendence and natural theology, with Strauss denying and Lonergan affirming the existence of both. The roots of this difference, in turn, can be traced to how each author

understands human understanding. For Strauss, who is “perhaps affected by conceptualism” (154), one cannot know that the whole is intelligible until one knows the whole, and since mortal man cannot know the whole, he must admit that the whole is unintelligible (112), thereby giving philosophy a tragic hue and making any reconciliation between Athens and Jerusalem impossible. Although Strauss has an impressive devotion to asking questions and affirming man’s “passionate desire to know everything about everything” (156–57), his possibly “truncated reduction of human knowing” (156) leads him to deny a human knowledge of divine transcendence or a supernatural solution that can complement and complete human knowing. Lonergan, on the other hand, would argue that it is impossible to affirm that parts of the whole are intelligible without implicitly affirming that the whole is intelligible; and if the whole is intelligible, so too is the intelligible principle of the whole, namely, God (see 154). Given that the human mind has the capacity to grasp this principle (albeit only through analogical knowledge), it behooves the philosopher precisely as a philosopher to remain open to a supernatural solution if he wishes to remain open to the truth. For Strauss, the turn to religious faith necessarily involves a “sacrifice of the intellect”; for Lonergan, it is when one *rejects* this turn that one sacrifices the full potential of the intellect.

“The Recovery of Theology” (278–95) is a previously unpublished piece written for a 2010 roundtable discussion at Boston College entitled “Immortal Longings: Reason, Faith, and Politics in the Work of Father Ernest Fortin.” Lawrence offers a fascinating reflection on Fortin based on over forty years of friendship. Regarding Fortin’s formation, Lawrence opines that although Fortin was a beneficiary of some of the best Catholic education offered prior to Vatican II, he never entirely accepted the neoscholastic manual tradition which, to paraphrase a memorable line from Saul Bellow, often turned the first fruits of genius into canned goods for the academy. But unlike many of his generation, neither did Fortin embrace the paradigms that were replacing neoscholasticism, namely, historical criticism and social-justice activism. Rather than espousing either a preconconciliar tradition that was atrophied and myopic or a postconciliar “tradition of polemics against tradition” (288), Fortin called for a “new way of reading old books” that required docility before past masters and a capacity for reading with great attention and fresh eyes, thereby allowing the author’s questions rather than one’s own to govern interpretation. By declining membership in both the old school and the new, Fortin “became a ‘sign of contradiction,’ a *vox clamans in deserto* in the world of contemporary Catholic philosophical and theological thought” (282).

Lawrence credits Fortin's singularity to two factors, one of which was to be expected. It was Allan Bloom, Fortin's lifelong friend, who introduced him to Leo Strauss, and it was Strauss who helped Fortin retain the best of what he had learned as a "teenage Thomist" while breaking new ground in other areas. But the second factor surprised me: Fortin's "capacity for admiration and for friendship" (283). Both personally and professionally, Fortin had a penchant for looking up to others, even would-be rivals, and never looking down on others, even ideological adversaries. It never occurred to me before, but his love of wonder was certainly tied to his generous heart; the combination gave him a boyish, unpretentious enthusiasm and open-mindedness that stayed with him throughout his life.

Fortin's "new way of reading old books" led him to do "theology in a political mode" (286), which includes a preference for discussing the polis over "culture," an exploration of how Christianity in some ways *heightens* the tension between Athens and Jerusalem, and a sensitivity to Christianity's apolitical and transpolitical dimensions. And like Strauss's and Bloom's understanding of political philosophy as "first philosophy," it also entails beginning "with a concrete analysis of the human soul in action" as a means of ascending to wisdom (285). Theology in a political mode, Lawrence opines, makes Fortin more similar to Alfarabi in his appropriation of philosophy than to the Aquinas of the neo-Thomists, but Fortin never sidelined his faith. "As a teacher, he did not parade, but neither did he hide, the fact that he was a priest," Lawrence writes. "He once explained to me that his aim was to teach the books in the curriculum with accuracy and integrity so that his students might just wonder and take time to think about why he was and remained a priest" (295).

All told, *The Fragility of Consciousness* is an outstanding collection of essays that highlight not only Fred Lawrence's genius and breadth but survey from a distinctive and promising point of view the great questions and doyens of our age. It is well worth a read, even if it will occasionally make your own consciousness feel more than fragile. My only regret is that the volume does not include Lawrence's "Leo Strauss and the Fourth Wave of Modernity," but interested readers can find that essay in *Leo Strauss and Judaism: Jerusalem and Athens Critically Revisited*, edited by David Novak (Rowman & Littlefield, 1996).