

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Fall 2019

Volume 46 Issue 1

3	<i>Hannes Kerber</i>	Leo Strauss on Exoteric Writing
27	<i>Marco Menon</i>	An Interpretation of Machiavelli's <i>Favola</i>
45	<i>Lloyd Robertson</i>	Review Essays <i>Ezekiel 38–48: A New Translation, with Introduction and Commentary</i> by Stephen L. Cook
61	<i>David Lewis Schaefer</i>	<i>Political Philosophy and the Republican Future: Rediscovering Cicero</i> by Gregory Bruce Smith
87	<i>Matthew Berry</i>	Book Reviews <i>The Alt-Right: What Everyone Needs to Know</i> by George Hawley
93	<i>Marco Menon</i>	<i>All'alba di un mondo nuovo</i> by Angelo Panebianco and Sergio Belardinelli
99	<i>Will Morrisey</i>	<i>The Kingdom of Man: Genesis and Failure of the Modern Project</i> by Rémi Brague
107	<i>Mary P. Nichols</i>	<i>Aristotle: Democracy and Political Science</i> by Delba P. Winthrop
119	<i>David A. Nordquest</i>	<i>Educating Liberty: Democracy and Aristocracy in J. S. Mill's Political Thought</i> by Christopher Barker
125	<i>Wendell O'Brien</i>	<i>Tractatus Politico-Philosophicus</i> by W. Julian Korab-Karpowicz
131	<i>Alexander Orwin</i>	<i>Glaucon's Fate: History, Myth, and Character in Plato's "Republic"</i> by Jacob Howland
137	<i>Joshua Parens</i>	<i>Leo Strauss and His Catholic Readers</i> by Geoffrey M. Vaughn
141	<i>John Ray</i>	<i>Nourishment: A Philosophy of the Political Body</i> by Corine Pelluchon
145	<i>David Lewis Schaefer</i>	<i>Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad</i> by Michael Walzer
155	<i>Georg Simmerl</i>	<i>Von Carl Schmitt zu Hannah Arendt?</i> by Sebastian Huhnholz

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

Rémi Brague, *The Kingdom of Man: Genesis and Failure of the Modern Project*. Translated by Paul Seaton. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018, xv + 330 pp., \$40.00 (cloth).

WILL MORRISEY

HILLSDALE COLLEGE

wmorrisey@outlook.com

With what may have been a touch of irony, Leo Strauss called for scholars to work on “the history of ideas.” Rémi Brague has taken him up on that. And he does so in a ‘Straussian’ way, to the extent of carefully avoiding the mistake of conflating history with historicism. For example, instead of attributing what is perhaps the characteristic modern ambition to historical circumstances, he writes, “the intention to dominate nature preceded the birth of the technology that allowed its realization” (59).

With *The Kingdom of Man*, Brague completes a trilogy in which he presents a panoramic view of theological and philosophic thought, ‘ancient and modern,’ primarily but not exclusively ‘Western.’ Most such efforts are cringeworthy exercises, superficial and canting, but Brague has read not only widely but with care, profiting from work done by Strauss and his students while maintaining an independent view. He follows Strauss in distinguishing between classical and modern philosophy, but he is less Socratic than Strauss. That is, he does not write as if philosophy needs to begin with a consideration of politics, precisely for philosophic and indeed ‘epistemological’ reasons. As a result, he presents Bacon rather than Machiavelli as the principal philosophic founder of modernity—thinking of modernity primarily in terms of science, not ‘the state.’ He gives a nod to Machiavelli, and indeed to Ficino, but in passing; it is a matter of emphasis. Brague also differs from Eric Voegelin: he does not attempt to ‘do philosophy,’ to join the ranks of *the greats*;

partly for that reason, he invents no new words or phrases, keeping to the humbler path of scholarship.

Brague identifies the “project” as characteristic of modernity; modernity itself not only spawns “projects” but is one—an “essay” (as per Montaigne), an “attempt,” an “experiment.” “The rise to prominence of ‘project’ is connected with a displacement of emphasis from reason to imagination in the definition of man, henceforth understood as the living thing capable of conceiving possibilities” (2). The phrase “If you can dream it, you can do it” marks a fatuous turn, but it is illustrative in the way caricatures often are. To conceive of a project implies, first, “the idea of a new beginning which causes the forgetting of everything that preceded”; second, “the idea of the autonomy of the acting subject”; and, finally, “the idea of a supportive milieu that prolongs the action and ensures its successful completion” (3). (Readers of Machiavelli will recall his ideas of the founding, the prince, and the state.) The master-project consists of the conquest of nature (what is ‘below’ man) and emancipation from “everything that presents itself as above man” (4). Humanism in this sense “must then tend to become an atheism,” despite the frequent use of biblical images and phrases by its publicists.

A project differs from a task. Tasks begin when “I receive a mission to do something from an origin I cannot control, but must discover” (5), a mission that causes me to question my ability to perform it, requiring sacrifices of me, and which puts the responsibility for undertaking and completing the task squarely ‘on my shoulders.’ A biblical prophet, a ‘pagan’ hero: Moses and Hercules perform tasks, not projects. Man’s uniqueness is understood as his capacity for “commerce with the highest of the beings” (10), not as his capacity to invent new things for himself to do, then figure out ways to do them. The ‘tasked’ man or woman might be a messiah, might be divinized, might be a great ascetic. But the task will always be given, never self-assigned or spun out of one’s own imagination and desires. “It does not seem that the ancient civilizations conceived of a control of nature by human activity” (17). “For a Christian like Augustine, man is not lord of creation except to the extent that he is son of God” (22). And even the Bible regards this lordship as questionable, after Eden: the book of Ecclesiastes humbles its readers by telling them, “The advantage of man over the animal is nothing” (23), since men die as surely as animals do. Messianism is an assignment from God. Divinization, when it occurs, derives from God’s grace, not human ‘projection,’ a fact that leaves plenty of room for humility; and asceticism aims not at self-mastery so much as the “gift of the self in charity” (33)—that

is, partaking of the agapic love exhibited by God in assigning tasks. Among nonbiblical ‘ancients,’ self-mastery “does not imply domination over external nature” (34), constituting rather an attempt to make reason, the distinctive human characteristic *by nature*, rule the passions. For nonmodern thinkers, even *poesis* or making “has nothing to do with an idiosyncratic design” (34), having rather to do with *mimesis* or imitation. Artists do not create: “The idea of creative construction appeared with the modern age,” as seen even in such decidedly un-‘Romantic’ sorts as Hobbes, Kant, and Marx.

Here Brague does connect modernity with politics. “The modern project of a domination of nature presupposes a certain representation of nature and the place that one occupies in it, but also a specific model of what it is to dominate in general” (37), namely, the model of ‘the prince,’ the ‘one alone’ who not only rules but acts as ‘principal’ and as an embodied ‘principle,’ the authoritative source of that rule. “In other words, the rule of man over nature presupposes a theory of monarchy,” indeed, of “absolute monarchy,” of *sovereignty* (37). Brague identifies the thinker who took the step between the classical idea of art as making and the modern concept of art as creation as the Renaissance writer Cristoforo Landino, “inspired by his friend Marsilio Ficino” (40). For them, “the *poiein* of the poet is intermediary” between creation and making (40); art, for these neo-Platonists, takes a God-given form and forms matter in accordance with it. With that move, Renaissance thinkers moved closer to the ambition “to transform nature by work” (46); for Ficino, the artist becomes “the lord and teacher of matter,” although in so ruling and teaching it he is “awakening” and “serving” it (48). Following Strauss, Brague next identifies Machiavelli as the source of the claim that human action is “a mode of mastery, of ‘subjecting’ *fortuna*,” understood as everything that up to now has escaped “from the control of man.” “The idea of *fortuna* is perhaps the first representation of the *object* of mastery, even before it was called ‘nature.’” “*Fortuna* is the way things appear once they are seen in the optic of mastery” (49). Unlike Strauss, Brague does not associate this new ambition with Machiavelli’s conception of *lo stato*, the modern state.

Brague helpfully distinguishes the modern ambition from magic, which of course had been around for a long time. “The goal of theurgy...was not to act horizontally to change nature, but rather to establish a vertical link, by causing a superior being to descend into a statue or by elevating man” (54). Either way, the magus invokes a higher power, whether divine or natural, ‘calling upon’ it. He does not claim to possess this power, although he or others may suppose him to be possessed by it. “Francis Bacon rehabilitated

magic” (55) not as a method (quite sensibly judging it ineffective) but as a symbol of a worthy human ambition to control the nonhuman. Similarly, in the eyes of the moderns the alchemists had the right ambition but the wrong way to achieve it, whereas such Aristotelians as Avicenna and Averroes denied that art could or should rival nature. With modernity, “the idea of a rivalry with God...comes to light” (57), a rivalry properly criticized as Satanic by those who kept the Bible in mind.

Brague next turns to a step-by-step account of the “deployment” of modernity (61), the successive attempt to formulate and advance the project, culminating in the thought of Auguste Comte. Several elements went into this deployment, including nautical astronomy, the rediscovery of Gnosticism in the fifteenth century (with its claim that Creation was botched and in need of repair) and of Epicureanism (with its atomistic materialism), also in that century, and the Reformation’s emphasis on the ‘fallenness’ of nature. None of these events ‘caused’ the modern project, but together they “posed anew” the “question of man’s place among the creatures” (67). In Brague’s judgment, Francis Bacon was “the first, it seems, to have put forth the idea of a domination of man over nature” (68), reorienting philosophy away from contemplation, toward power—power understood not primarily as political rule guided by prudential reasoning but as “a hybrid union of production and action.” That is how, in Bacon’s words, men can “enlarg[e] the bounds of human empire, to the effecting of all things possible,” with the final goal being (Brague writes) to achieve “the maximal satisfaction of the unlimited desires of man” (70). To this a reader of Strauss would add that it was Machiavelli who wrote, “And truly it is a very natural and ordinary thing to desire to acquire” (*The Prince* 3).

Descartes soon follows with the moral concept of “generosity,” by which he means “the mastery of the passions” *in the service of* such “empire” (72). The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw a line of thinkers who followed in the Machiavellian-Baconian-Cartesian line, including such familiar names as Spinoza, Locke, and Voltaire. Locke’s labor theory of value, for example, rests on an epistemology wherein “the mind transforms the givens of sensation,” making them *useful*; “most deeply, Locke conceives of work as the self-creation of man” (97).

Brague identifies several “particularly spectacular scientific triumphs” that accelerated the modern project: the discovery of electricity and the means of controlling it; Lavoisier’s decomposition of air and water, which “gave the coup de grâce to the traditional notion of the four elements”; the invention

of hot-air balloons, giving men “a new perspective on the earth” (77). The combination of these demonstrations of the manipulability of nature with a quasi-divine view of earth accelerated the production of the “scientific utopias” of “modern times,” a genre inaugurated at the outset by Bacon himself (78). The idea of sustainable *progress* did not trail far behind; indeed, Hobbes already redefines happiness as a “dynamic” process, a “movement toward what is desired” rather than the achievement of a *telos* natural to man (80). The ‘historicist turn’ transformed this notion of progress into *progressivism* (a word “attested in English as early as 1848”), whereby progress “becomes the object of a belief,” a secular version of Providence (81). This led to a paradox, however. Providence, whether divine or human-historical, takes control of things out of human control: “the results can no longer be credited to man, dragged along as he is by a current that surpasses him and of which he is not the master” (81).

Anthropology replaces theology, as seen in Hume, who writes, “The science of man is the only solid foundation for the other sciences” (85). Added to progressivism, this results in the claim that “the human no longer designates what man is, but what he ought to be” (87). “Human dignity” (89)—a term now much bruted-about—comes to mean advancement toward that *historically* promised end. With goodness redefined, evil also needed reconception. Without original sin, and without Satan, thinkers look around for a “substitute devil” (90), finding him in Freemasons, Jews, Jesuits, eventually ‘reactionaries,’ ‘the bourgeoisie,’ and so on (and on). “The Cult of Humanity” arises, first in German Idealism, a new idealism of *realizable* ideas, but then in Comte’s Positivism (91). Although Nietzsche despised the likes of Comte, he too concurs in the fundamentals: the human subject confers ‘value,’ and is therefore “worth more than all the values that it will please him to pose” (100). “The very nature of virtue changed” (102). As early as Kant, “culture” replaced “nature” (103). “The classical idea of human dignity is transformed: it was located in the clarity of [man’s] intellect; now it is rethought on the basis of the idea of mastery” (105). In terms of practice, “action” now means “production as the transformation of nature,” seen in industrial technology (107). Reason becomes instrumental to instantiating the envisioned *realizable* ideal or scientific utopia. “In a phrase that would have seemed crazy to Aristotle,” Claude Bernard wrote, “*true science acts* and explains its action and its power” (109). True science gets results. It does not know the nature of things; it suffices for it to manipulate things effectively to achieve the desired purpose, namely, whatever is desired.

Such philosophers as Plato and Aristotle understood *autarkeia* or self-sufficiency as a life lived in terms of ‘unaided’ human reason, thought governed by the principle of self-contradiction which sought to discover the nature of things without the unquestioned acceptance of the ruling conventions of the city. To moderns, however, self-sufficiency means that “man must be the sole origin of man” (122). In the words of Ludwig Feuerbach, “The task of the modern period is the realization and humanization of God, the dissolution of theology into anthropology” (123). Whereas Aeschylus makes Prometheus the divine patron of blacksmiths and early Christian writers saw him as a figure of Christ, Diderot calls him the father of man himself, and Marx calls him the “first saint of the philosophical calendar” (131). In politics, this results in a push for understanding human beings as *autonomous*, as beings who give themselves all their laws—“an enterprise unthinkable except on the basis of a sensualist anthropology, Locke’s” (134). Brague incautiously associates this with both the American and the French Revolutions; while it is true that the great seal of the United States lauds a *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, that new order or regime still rules under the laws of nature and of nature’s God. As for the French revolutionaries, that depended on the one you asked and the moment you asked him.

In announcing the Religion of Humanity—its “new Supreme Being” being man as he creates himself—Comte “represents a sort of Catholicism without Christianity” (137). But really, on Brague’s own evidence, it is more than that, given that Catholicism (or at least Thomist Catholicism) without Christianity would be Aristotelianism, which moderns reject as firmly as they reject the God of the Bible.

But why stop at the conquest of nonhuman nature? Brague devotes his final chapters to the self-immolation of modern humanism, an immolation sparked by its own premises. It is not only that science severed from respect for the laws of nature and of nature’s God may ruin as much as, or more than, it builds—oppressing workers, whether under ‘capitalism’ or ‘socialism,’ polluting water and air, committing genocide, and at times seeming to threaten the survival of humanity itself—but that science so reconceived contradicts its own intention, undermining the dignity of man and often humiliating him in principle as well as in practice. It is enough to recall Sade, Darwin, and Freud, but Brague sees that Machiavelli has already replaced the man-god, Jesus, with the man-beast, Chiron the centaur. Man becomes the object of scientific domination, not only the agent. Jeremy Bentham memorably expressed this dimension of modernity in dismissing the Rights of

Man proclaimed by the French revolutionaries as nonsense upon stilts. As in Machiavelli, the princes of the new order take care (however inconsistently) to exempt themselves from such 'objectification.' As Brague understates the matter, "Man conceived as the result of the benevolence of a God who created him in his image and calls him into a free communion with him would ill suit the enterprise of a total remaking" (170). And if Hobbes's mighty Leviathan, the modern state, is an artificial man, why not remake each individual man? Such crude methods as eugenics, and such grand concepts as the Superman, have proved only preludes to proposals for "dissolving" man (as the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss put it), a notion currently seen in plans for the rule of human beings by supercomputers. 'Trans-humanism,' indeed.

Brague ends with a statement of what he calls "the paradox of the good": "The modern project is perfectly fine when it comes to producing *goods*." However, "it seems to be incapable of explaining why it is *good* that there are human beings to enjoy the goods that are thus put at their disposal" (214). He aptly quotes a character in André Malraux's first novel, *The Temptation of the West*, published in 1926: In the West, "the absolute reality was God, then man; but *man is dead*, after God, and you anxiously seek someone to whom you could confide your strange heritage. Your little efforts at creating structures for moderate nihilisms, however, do not seem to me destined for a long existence" (171). The speaker is a young Chinese who nonetheless feels the same temptation in himself, China having been divided and conquered by the West in more ways than one.

A summary of Brague's argument shows why his book provokes and stimulates. It cannot do justice to the details he brings forth, statements not only by philosophers and theologians but by painters, composers and musicologists, polemicists, historians, scientists, physicians, and not a few quacks and cranks (well chosen for illustrative value). He fastidiously avoids treating these fauna equally, except in the sense that most of them are equally ardent proponents of the modern project. Finally, it should be remarked that with this translation Paul Seaton augments his ever-increasing reputation as one of the finest contemporary translators of French prose into English.