

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

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Delba P. Winthrop, *Aristotle: Democracy and Political Science*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018, xi + 288 pp., \$57.04 (hardcover).

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Delba Winthrop's commentary on Book 3 of Aristotle's *Politics* is an original reading that has momentous implications for his work as a whole. The topics of Book 3 will be familiar to readers of Aristotle: what is the city, who is the citizen, how many regimes exist and what are their ends, and who ought to rule, the many or the few, the best man or the laws? Book 3 for this reason appears fundamentally political. Not for a moment does Winthrop deny this, but she also shows that Aristotle's discussion of these questions is at the same time a discussion of the most theoretical, indeed metaphysical, of topics—what is being, is there a whole or cosmos, what are its first principles or causes? Not only *can* the metaphysician learn from politics about his own search for being; he *must* learn from politics to advance his search for being. In Winthrop's words, "the philosopher learn[s] about wholes and being only from taking the political seriously" (7). Aristotle's political inquiry, his *Politics*, is *the way* he does metaphysics. Indeed, the theme of Book 3 of the *Politics*, in Winthrop's words, is that "in politics or in speaking about political things the first cause and substance of all things becomes manifest" (18). While Aristotle's *Politics* is as theoretical as any work of metaphysics could be, Winthrop argues, his metaphysical reflections that emerge from it make a case for political reform, specifically, for composing mixed regimes that allow nobility and freedom to reflect humanity's contribution to the whole. Her claim challenges previous readings not only of Aristotle's *Politics*, but also the very distinction between his theoretical and practical works.

Readers of Plato will be reminded of Socrates's account, in the *Phaedo*, of his own philosophic development— of his attempt to study nature and its failure to reveal any direction toward the good, his turn to an examination of speeches, and eventually his positing of the ideas as the necessary condition for speech and intelligibility (111, 117; *Phaedo* 96a–101e). Imitating what Socrates called his “second sailing,” Aristotle turns to politics and its speeches about the advantageous and the just, in order to understand nature itself, and follows Socrates's lead in correcting their philosophic predecessors. Winthrop's presentation of Aristotle's project in terms of an imitation of Socrates (see 155) should be kept in mind when she dwells on Aristotle's taking Platonism as one of the primary philosophic positions of the past in need of correction, in both its introduction of the ideas and its political recommendations.

Central to Book 3 of the *Politics* is the debate between the democrats and the oligarchs about who should rule in the city. The democratic appeal to equality, Winthrop argues, is supported by a philosophic argument—an identification of nature with bodies and a mathematical understanding that reduces objects to numbers in abstraction from “what” they are (e.g., 4, 82–83, 98–99, 178). Such an argument has democratic appeal, for it flatters the many by teaching that no one is more qualified to rule than another. The oligarchs, in contrast, appeal to inequality, to difference rather than sameness. The oligarchic argument for inequality also has a philosophic counterpart, the Platonic ideas or forms, which differentiate the beings in the world by classifying qualities rather than by counting and thus serve as a philosophic ground for the distinctions that justify the rule of the few over the many (e.g., 20–22, 109, 146).

The city cannot be constituted as a whole on the basis of either democratic or oligarchic principle alone. If the whole were composed of identical units, there would be “a multitude of things.” We could count them all, but “all” would not constitute a whole. If, on the other hand, the forms are separate from matter, as the Platonic forms are presented as being, there remains the need to explain their connection not only to one another but to the rest of nature. “Doing justice to the better and the many means not only finding a political order suitable for mixing those who are capable of nobility and those who are not, but also explaining the relation of forms like the Platonic forms, ‘the few good,’ to the rest of nature, which seems to be bodies” (146). The political problem is the cosmological problem. Aristotle's attempt to correct the political partisans is at the same time an attempt to correct the

philosophic ones, who must “refine [their] understanding of what nature is by taking man’s wholes as models of what nature might be” (143).

To the philosophers, Aristotle offers a more complete view of the whole by turning them toward political inquiry, where human assertiveness and freedom require a revision of their theories about nature, whether they appeal to bodies or to forms. It is in this sense that Aristotle attempts to turn potential philosophers to philosophy: teaching philosophers—at least those who make a plausible claim to being so—that they must turn to politics for progress in understanding the whole. To the political partisans, in turn, he offers a more complete view of the political whole in which they are vying for ascendance, one that can incorporate both equality and inequality in political life, one that flatters their claims only by elevating them toward virtue and nobility. Winthrop speaks of Aristotle’s “two educations,” one for philosophers and one for political men. Their parallel errors can be corrected by Aristotle’s “teaching about the human soul and about what one might surmise about politics and all things in light of that knowledge” (8).

In Aristotle’s analysis, as Winthrop points out, democrats want freedom more than equality, and freedom means not merely living as one sees fit but living a life befitting a free man rather than a slave (1–2, 157). Democrats might therefore be open to Aristotle’s teaching about virtue, for virtue is an overcoming of natural necessity, or a “striving to live according to human perfection,” a life of freedom rather than slavery (122–25). They must be taught, in Winthrop’s words, that the free man is the “virtuous man, or the noble man” (84). Oligarchs, for their part, want to justify their preeminence, their superiority. They believe, for example, that they deserve their wealth, which seems to have freed them from natural necessity. They confuse themselves with aristocrats, for they want to be recognized not simply for their wealth but for their achievement. But in Aristotle’s showing, virtue, not wealth, frees from necessity. They must be taught “what kind of wealth is worthy of being desired.” And when they are “taught about noble friendships that are possible for virtuous men,” they will also learn “how to live among democrats while maintaining [their] distinctiveness” (84). Aristotle’s appeal both to the democrats and the oligarchs culminates in his teaching about virtue, his teaching about soul.

Philosophic partisans, for their part, must understand that it is human virtue that can make the whole a whole, rather than “an all” with undifferentiated parts or a diversity with nothing in common. Human beings have souls, which cannot exist separate from body but which cannot be reduced to body. Without soul and the choices that proceed from it, we are simply bodies

to whose needs we cater, and/or minds that understand only necessary and unchanging things such as the forms (48). From body and mind come two sorts of slavery to nature, Winthrop explains, and neither, nor both together, can make a whole of human being (57; see also 63). Politics reveals the human soul at work in the world, the link between body and mind that neither materialists nor Platonists can provide.

Those who reduce being to body, as well as those who reduce being to form, by implication, lack knowledge of themselves, for neither offer views of nature that can account for themselves. Neither bodies nor forms speak. The “democratic” philosophers—and Winthrop counts Hobbes among them, not just Aristotle’s atomist predecessors—cannot explain how if nature were as they describe they could give their accounts of it (e.g., 5). The advocates of the forms, intelligible objects that can be known by mind, similarly, cannot explain their own desire to know them or to speak of them to others (see 99). Aristotle’s lesson for them is that of the words on the temple of Delphi, know yourself. Politics is his means. By showing them freedom, politics teaches them about a whole, which their own theories fail to do, for it is by asserting their freedom that human beings can rise above bodies to make claims for themselves and thereby learn from experience their own difference from the rest of nature, not only from body but also from intelligible and necessary forms. The human being is “unique among beings in combining physical and intelligent being in one being” (37), and therefore the only being that reflects this heterogeneity (i.e., matter or body and form) of the whole, but also the only being we know who can make his own being: “man’s capacities are given, but his being is the actuality of which he is the cause” (125, 65). Only through his freedom, his assertiveness, does the human being connect body to mind. In Winthrop’s words, “the twofold nature of man is connected in spiritedness, which is the *raison d’être* of politics” (158). Only by considering the human being who makes the city a whole can “we know what a whole might be like, and therefore whether nature can be understood as a whole, not an ‘all’” (125–26, 143).

Nothing better illustrates the complexity and depth of Winthrop’s work than the way in which she folds Aristotle’s treatment of men and women into her discussion. When she observes that for Aristotle human being “is comprised of both male and female being,” “two forms that human being in a body can assume” (49, 53), she again captures the difference between Aristotle and his philosophic predecessors, whether ancient materialists or Platonists, who reduce the differences between men and women either to their bodies

or to a form that applies to both alike. Although Winthrop does not stray to discuss the *Republic*, its “female drama” (451c) illustrates her point, when Socrates finds no practice that “belongs to a woman because she is a woman or to a man because he is a man” (455d–e). For Aristotle, although men and women share a common humanity, their tasks and their virtues differ (94), and by complementing each other suggest the possibility of a whole with dissimilar parts (53). Curiously, Winthrop entitles one of her chapter sections “From a Man’s Point of View,” while not providing a parallel section “From a Woman’s Point of View.” That she is by no means silencing women, however, is indicated by her observation that “women always have the last word,” which she makes in the course of writing “From a Man’s Point of View” (79).

It is not simply from a man’s point of view that Winthrop comments on Aristotle’s account of the tyrant Thrasyboulos, who sent his herald to another tyrant Periander, whose name she points out is literally “All-Around Man” (49), to ask him for advice about how to rule. Periander said nothing, but took the herald to a field, where he stripped away the tallest stalks of grain. Winthrop finds in Periander’s advice the virtues of “a good hermaphrodite,” for “he is as courageous as a man and as silent as a woman.” The silence to which Aristotle refers, however, is not one that fails to speak, for it speaks through deeds. As Aristotle recounts the story, when Thrasyboulos hears from his herald what Periander did, he proceeds “to make away with” or “destroy” the manly preeminent men in the city. Winthrop notices a difference, as “of course we must,” between Aristotle’s description of Periander’s “stripping away” or “abstracting” (*aphaireō*) the tallest grains and Thrasyboulos’s “making away with” (*anaireō*) the manly. The former uses “his marvelous virtue to philosophize”: he “abstracted” the tallest stalks like the philosopher who “stud[ies] the workings of nature by using the average case as a form.” The latter, however, “had asked about politics, not nature,” and understood Periander’s advice to be applicable to political beings. To notice the difference between Periander’s “philosophic” deed and Thrasyboulos’s destructive political one, however, is to notice the connection: Periander’s philosophizing teaches the political Thrasyboulos “to obliterate the manliness that incorrectly manifests itself in noble political deeds, or to teach the manly that the only noble deed is to philosophize” (151–52). It requires a woman, paradoxically, to speak up for manliness. The tyrants in the end are not “good hermaphrodites,” but “hermaphrodite tyrants” (cf. 152 with 151); their communication is wholly manly. They are both “all-around men.”

While the democrats and oligarchs approach each other in succumbing to the natural necessities of body, whether by finding strength in numbers or in an abundance of material goods, “the ‘tyranny’ of philosophy” has a similar effect on political nobility. By using the average case as a form, as Pericles did, and by accepting “the rule of natural philosophy,” as Thrasyboulos seems to have done, they do away with the preeminent, whether with regard to form or to political life, and “make nobility immanent” (152). Aristotle’s “natural science,” in contrast, by “posit[ing] forms that are the best, not the average case” (155), preserves political nobility. In this way, Aristotle is like the women, who are benefited by “manly men of moral virtue,” who not only protect them but also give them “something to talk about” (73). Winthrop thus finds in Aristotle’s calling women “babblers” a reason for listening to them rather than silencing them. After all, Aristotle himself does not claim that a woman’s virtue is silence but rather “discretion” (49). It is a virtue that Winthrop attributes to the philosopher, who must be “cautious” as well as courageous “with respect to the public teaching of philosophy to political men” (116), although he, at least Aristotle, leaves nothing so obscure that we cannot find it (68).

Winthrop’s reflections on men and women, woven into her commentary when appropriate, therefore gather the core questions—equality and difference, the possibility of a heterogeneous whole, the necessity and limits of assertiveness for that whole, and even the manner of speaking and writing for conveying truth about that whole. The understanding of the whole that emerges from Winthrop’s commentary on Aristotle’s metaphysical politics is therefore a political metaphysics, an understanding of the cosmos as a sort of mixed regime, modeled on Aristotle’s political mixed regime (116). Both cosmological and political wholes mix nature or necessity and freedom, the homogeneity of body or the homogeneity imposed by the forms, with the heterogeneity that comes from human action that aims at the noble and the good. Winthrop’s statement about the mixed regime applies to the cosmos: “the mix is ultimately a mix of different first principles” (131).

Aristotle’s democracy is “the fundamentally democratic mixed regime” that he outlines (178) and that is elevated by freedom and moral and intellectual virtue. “The mixed regime is a mix of bodies with the boasts men make that they are more than bodies.” That is, the democratic mixed regime is “more than a democratic mix” precisely because it mixes *human beings* (131). This applies to the oligarchic mixed regime as well. Winthrop understands the different functions of governing—legislating and judging—as experiences

that preserve the mix. Legislating, which requires one “to reason in terms of general principles and to make wholes,” must mix “a bit of philosophic *eros*, a yearning to be one with the whole,” with spiritedness, recognition of distinction, and assertiveness (170). Judging, in contrast to legislating, requires examining particular cases that test the law by constituting exceptions or revealing omissions (180). Judging educates in drawing distinctions, just as legislating educates in forming wholes for oneself and for others. Winthrop’s formulation indicates that for Aristotle the human consists of both *eros* and spiritedness, something he could have learned from Plato, and perhaps indicates as well that the “Platonists” whom Aristotle treats as philosophic partisans do not include Plato himself. For Plato, the forms are not as primary as the soul that seeks to know the whole and yet resists any assimilation to the whole that makes knowing impossible. Winthrop’s Aristotle, insofar as his responses to advocates of forms and to democratic materialists both culminate in a teaching about the human soul (8), turns out to be a Platonist.

Winthrop also helps us to understand the difference between Aristotle’s democracy and a modern democracy: the former is necessarily a mixed regime, whereas modern democracy tries not to be one, at least in theory. From this perspective, modern democracy is open to Aristotle’s criticism of the democratic partisans, as is the science that supports it—the principle of body underlies its appeal to equality, and it thereby encourages slavishness. Just as modern natural science seeks to understand bodies in motion in order to control them “for the relief of man’s estate,” modern political science understands human passions and how to control them for the sake of peace and commodious living. Modern democracy may boast of being a “liberal democracy” when it understands itself to exist by the consent of the people in order to protect their individual rights, but we might say in light of Winthrop’s analysis that the democracy that it boasts of being is only a slavish one that uses the language of rights in the service of the passions, but that its boast to be “liberal” elevates it in the direction of freedom. Slaves do not boast of their freedom. Like the boasts of the political partisans Aristotle addresses, the claims of modern democracy call into question its own theoretical presuppositions. Whereas modern political science seeks to imitate natural science, Aristotle’s political science, Winthrop writes, is “the model for natural science” (178, 184). By looking to the mixture of necessity and freedom in the mixed regime, Aristotle might “refine [our] understanding of what nature is by taking man’s wholes as models of what nature might be” (143).

If Aristotle's political science is the model for natural science, however, what is the status of his more theoretical works? For example, if for Aristotle the only way to do metaphysics is through the sort of political inquiry Winthrop finds in the *Politics*, how are we supposed to understand Aristotle's *Metaphysics*? Winthrop argues that "the closest one can come to articulating being is to speak of man's virtues," through which we might "come to know what a whole that includes human being is" (53–54). Would not speeches like the *Ethics* and the *Politics*, then, be *the* way to learn about being? Moreover, if political science is the model for natural science, how are we supposed to understand Aristotle's *Physics*? Does not the very existence of the *Metaphysics* and the *Physics* refute Winthrop's thesis? For example, if the philosopher learns about wholes and being "only" from politics, why does he write a physics and metaphysics? Winthrop herself does not raise these questions, unless implicitly, for her thesis about Book 3 of the *Politics* begs us to do so. Perhaps her thesis is not refuted by the very existence of Aristotle's theoretical works, but rather gives us a new way of understanding those works. Far from being of higher philosophical stature than his so-called practical works, they would be informed by his political insights.

There are many ways of supporting this implication of Winthrop's work. Aristotle's *Physics*, for example, does not reduce nature to body, for natural beings have forms that differentiate them from other natural beings. And their forms, while they give structure and ends to the development of natural beings, do not exist outside of them but rule from within. Natural beings, in Aristotle's physics, have the principles of motion within themselves. As Winthrop says of the "self-conscious natural scientist," whom I assume we must distinguish from the modern one, he "consider[s] the natures, the 'whats' of the beings in order to judge the whole of being" (78; see also 155), for which "form is as much being and as necessary as substance" (159). He is like what Winthrop dubs an "ethical mathematician" (140), the philosopher who has been educated by Aristotle in the human things.

Aristotle's *Metaphysics* too might be understood to be written by a political scientist, whose philosophizing about human beings has given him the principles for an investigation of being. The *Metaphysics* begins, for example, with the observation that "all human beings desire to know." That is, it begins with the human being as subject, not object, and with the human as distinct from the rest of nature. Not even the unmoved mover *desires* to know. It is not given to wonder (cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1125a3–4), which Aristotle soon explains is the origin of philosophy (*Metaphysics* 982b12–13). For Aristotle

to begin with the human desire to know is to declare that his inquiry in his *Metaphysics* will not forget about its author, that any understanding of the whole that comes from his inquiry will never lose sight of the one who makes the inquiry, the one who gives the account. His *Metaphysics*, in other words, will not be vulnerable to his criticism of the partisans in the *Politics*, philosophic as well as political, that they forget about themselves (178).

The debate Aristotle sets up in Book A of the *Metaphysics*, between those who reduce the whole to bodies and those who introduce the forms, resembles the political debate between the democrats and the oligarchs. So too the *Metaphysics* itself moves from the question of being to the question of the cosmos, from ontology to cosmology, as if it were asking not only “what” things are, but how they are ordered into a whole. This move from ontology to cosmology mirrors the move in Book 3 of the *Politics* from the question of who is the citizen to the question of regimes, which order a city and thus determine citizenship: what they are, how many there are, how we should rank them, and whether one or more than one aims at a common good that is more than just the sum of its parts (see 27). And when Aristotle asks in the *Metaphysics* whether the whole contains the good within itself as the order that structures it or as something separate that in some way imparts order to the whole (1075a12–15), his question is analogous to one that he brings up in *Politics*, Book 3—whether the laws or the best man should rule in the city (167–78; also cf. 51 with 58). As in the *Politics*, so in the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle indicates that the answer must involve both. Indeed, when Aristotle speaks of the god in the *Metaphysics* as an unmoved mover, which moves all things by being loved, he has recourse to an understanding of the human soul, for it is the human soul that, unlike the god, loves and thereby moves not only to its own perfection but also longs for a perfection outside or beyond itself. Human beings for Aristotle, unlike other natural beings, cannot be understood only by “what” they are in abstraction from what they can become, or from their moving themselves by loving another.

Readers of Winthrop must judge for themselves how far she would go in attributing to Aristotle an understanding of the goodness of the whole derived from his inquiry into the human or political things. She argues that Aristotle fails to find one ruler or one principle (*monarchia*, in Greek), either in the political or in the metaphysical sense, to be “a first cause and ruler of the whole” (148). As she writes, “if there were a king in nature, a form of forms, he would have a substance other than body, but Aristotle does not demonstrate the existence of this kind of being in nature” (176). The unmoved mover,

presumably, remains for her an open question or a statement of the problem rather than answer (see 188–89). Nature at its best allows us only a mixed regime of necessity and freedom. A mixed regime, however, Winthrop points out, is “a mixed blessing,” almost “as if the legislator of nature has made man and the whole imperfect for the sake of leaving man free to do the work of man, differentiating him from a beast.” In this way, Winthrop is able to see in “nature’s indifference” “nature’s goodness, which consists in leaving human beings free to be noble,” and even “requiring” that they assert their freedom (116–17). This is “the theodicy that makes the whole of being intelligible as a whole intended to make manifest man’s humanity” (116–17). As Winthrop says, “nature makes man’s freedom possible by permitting him the arts she was not generous enough to make unnecessary” (117).

Nature’s goodness for Aristotle therefore does not indicate any simple teleological view of the universe, with a teleological view of humanity forming a part. Rather, to achieve our natural end, we must exercise our freedom, “[our] capacity to be the cause of [our] own being insofar as [we] can choose [our] own end” (178). Human activity mixes itself with natural necessity, whether material determinism or authoritative forms, to make a whole rather than an “all” of countable bodies or a diversity of beings with irreducible identities. Winthrop’s account, however much it revises the traditional understanding of Aristotle’s teleology, preserves the goodness of nature and accords humanity a home in the universe, precisely because our home is one that we ourselves must and can make manifest by our activity. This accomplishment of human freedom is a sign of “natural or divine beneficence” (see 165). Thus “Aristotle can consistently speak” of a god who sanctions the punishments that rulers devise for those who disobey sound laws “without depriving man of his freedom or his responsibility for his virtue.” Aristotle gives us no reason, Winthrop writes, “to suppose that man is not the chief executive” (200). If the legislative work is especially appropriate to oligarchs, and that of judging to democrats, it seems that the executive work belongs to human beings as such.

Winthrop suggests that Aristotle has replaced the poets of his time, who lead human beings to believe that “man is at the mercy of capricious fates.” From their perspective, human assertiveness would appear as “*hybris* against the fates” and indicate his “estrangement from the whole” (163, 165). Human virtues, and human assertion of freedom in acting virtuously, would by this view contradict nature’s intention. Aristotle’s argument that nature is eternal, and that God is neither creator nor legislator, in contrast, allows human virtue.

By implication, human rule in cities “is unhindered by any cause greater than man.” “It would be better,” she observes, “to know that the god does not care about man than to suspect his intentions” (181–84). Aristotle’s philosophy, inimical to poetry’s depiction of divine and often tyrannical interventions in human affairs, would open space for a new kind of poetry, one that “makes manifest” rather than simply “makes” and that portrays human responsibility, and therefore human virtue and the possibilities of political self-rule (e.g., 61, 160, 181, and esp. 168). Aristotle’s *Poetics*, presumably, serves as a guide to this new kind of poetry.

Winthrop’s reflections on how Aristotle’s philosophy assaults the poetry of his time leads her to end her book on a grim note, questioning whether Christianity negates the possibility of natural or divine beneficence that allows human freedom. Christianity’s belief in a God who creates the world and who even enters that world by becoming man for the sake of human redemption presents a God more active and ruling than any god Aristotle suggests, however we understand his “unmoved” mover. In the face of Christianity’s omnipotent divinity, Winthrop questions whether there could be a “nature according to which man’s makings, including his political makings, were free, and by which he was befriended” (200). Although Winthrop does not elaborate, it is possible that an Augustinian distinction between the city of man and the city of God or a Thomistic introduction of hierarchical law in the place of Aristotelian political science might fuel her concern. To her criticism of Christianity, in the name of Aristotle, I would propose an alternative. Aristotle’s theodicy, in the very way that Winthrop formulates it, allows us to see in Christianity the same arrangement for the best—God after all gives human beings free will, without depriving them of it even when they fail to do what he commands. Because Christianity understands divine omnipotence in light of divine beneficence and love, there appears a rule of the whole imperfect enough to allow human freedom and perfect enough to expect that it be used well. Like Aristotle’s philosophy, Christian revelation, which makes manifest God’s love, is hostile to a poetry of oppressive fates, and might even illustrate the new kind of poetry for which Aristotle calls.

Regardless of whether one is persuaded by Winthrop’s work, it offers us an intellectual feast, including an appendix with her own translation of Book 3 of the *Politics*. Whether my reflections on this wonderful book do more than scratch its surface, they are meant to invite readers into Winthrop’s text, not only to delight in its interpretive gems but to consider its profound implications for how we understand our world.