

Interpretation

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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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Review Essay

Gregory Bruce Smith, *Political Philosophy and the Republican Future: Rediscovering Cicero*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018, 432 pp., \$55.00 (cloth).

Cicero's Republicanism Reconsidered

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As Gregory Bruce Smith points out at the outset of this erudite and important, if sometimes problematic, study, in contrast to the neglect he has suffered in recent times among students of philosophy and politics, the Roman statesman-philosopher Marcus Tullius Cicero was “considered one of the philosophical greats throughout the Christian era and well into the modern era” and was studied by many or most American schoolchildren from early in our history until well into the twentieth century (4, 66). The recent neglect of Cicero’s writings is due, Smith observes, to the fact that “the Cicero who is offered up for present audiences is but a vague, and boring, facsimile of the original” (7). But a proper study of Cicero is particularly apropos for our time, given the parallels between the situation to which he was responding—the decay of the Roman republic, coupled with the decline of philosophy into competing abstract, apolitical sects (Stoics, Epicureans, Cynics, Academics, and so on)—and our own: the loss of thoughtful civic concern, alongside philosophy’s decay into unworldly abstraction and jargon or barely disguised partisanship (“feminist, Marxist, ... deconstructionist, libertarian, ... multiculturalist,” 289). While recognizing, as he undertook his philosophic corpus late in life, that “his Roman republic was already doomed,” Smith maintains, Cicero hoped by means of his writings to

“bequeath a republican possibility for untold future generations” (4–5). And Smith argues that since the republican tradition, from its origins in classical Greece, “has been intertwined with the tradition of political philosophy... the future of republicanism” remains “inextricably connected” with that of political philosophy (2).

Smith contends that certain alterations Cicero made to the teachings of his philosophic predecessors make them more directly applicable to modern republicanism, which despite its present crisis constitutes “the highest form” of that type of government to have yet arisen. First, he “tried to soften the moral stance” bequeathed by “Plato, Aristotle, and Stoicism” by moderating “its remaining pagan stress on pugnacious, self-centered, self-assertive ‘magnanimity.’”¹ In so doing, he became in a sense “the first Christian philosopher,” despite having died before Christ’s birth—hence the status he attained as “the preeminent philosopher of Christianity until Aquinas.”² Additionally, however, Cicero “open[ed] spaces for a greater respect for commerce and labor than we see in the Greeks and for the creation of a distinctive republican soul better suited to philosophical statesmanship and public deliberation than war and imperial conquest” (9–10).

Smith’s opening chapter provides background by distinguishing between the two great historical models of republicanism: the classical (Greek and Roman) version, which aimed at “political freedom as an end in itself” (15) and (in the Greek case) was characterized by homogeneity and public contempt for the pursuit of wealth (which generates competing interests), and the modern commercial republic, ultimately devoted to the pursuit of “tranquility and comfort” at the expense of “martial and religious severity and austerity” (26). Despite the Greeks’ sometime persecution of philosophy as threatening to piety and civic virtue, Smith maintains, the basis of their civilization in “public speech” as a concomitant of direct self-government made it “the prerequisite for the birth of philosophy” (17). By contrast, the tranquility promised by modern liberal philosophers might be “achieved despotically, technologically, and even pharmaceutically” rather than through

¹ Smith will later acknowledge that Aristotle had already “substantially softened the pugnacious, heroic conception of virtue depicted...in Homer,” but contends that Cicero extended this softening through his reconceptualization of magnanimity (189).

² The manner in which Cicero seems to anticipate, or prepare “Roman soil” for the acceptance of, the teachings of Christianity has long been noted, as observed by Walter Miller in the introduction to his translation of *De officiis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1913), xiv. (However, Miller also expresses the conventional scholarly view of Cicero as an unphilosophical “follower” and paraphraser of Greek thought, “superficial” and unclear [xiii–xiv].)

self-government (26). Whereas the American variant of modern republicanism originally retained elements of “Christian virtue” as well as “ancient public-spiritedness” and honor that tempered that danger, Smith warns against the threat of an “ironic republicanism” implicit in the writings of the Cambridge historians J. G. A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner, carried to a further extreme by political theorist Philip Pettit, that endeavors to deprive self-government of *both* commercial and religious supports, in favor of a “modern, self-legislating, theoretical self,” antagonistic towards all tradition as well as “populism,” that aims to stifle political debate—and hence philosophy itself—for the sake of rule by an “enlightened” bureaucratic elite (28–38).

In his second chapter, “Initial Reflections on Political Philosophy,” Smith distinguishes political philosophy proper, which is grounded “on the phenomena that show themselves publicly to all who share a public space,” from the “constructivist,” academic “political theory” of our time, which seeks to “construc[t] its own foundations *ex nihilo*,” or “pick[s] and choose[s]” among elements of the philosophic tradition in a manner designed to advance the exponent’s “will to power” rather than engage in genuine dialogue with opposing views—thereby “destroy[ing] the distinction between citizen and subject” (40, 63). Constructivism, an offshoot of historicism, attempts to ignore or suppress the fundamental human “longing to grasp being or nature” (44). By contrast, Smith represents political philosophy, “follow[ing] Cicero and Plato,” as an “architectonic first philosophy that starts from a ‘cave’ or a ‘public space’” from which it can never “completely emancipat[e] itself,” so that it remains connected to “its own tradition or the phenomena of life,” even as it aspires to transcend that tradition (47). Smith claims to follow Plato and Cicero in viewing philosophy thus understood as an enterprise of “caring,” rooted in our human and political situation, as distinguished from what he maintains is the Aristotelian conception of philosophy as merely “staring” (48).³

³ This account of Aristotle’s understanding of philosophy (reiterated at 132 as the notion “that the detached ‘contemplative’ life is superior to the public life, even for the philosopher”; also at 149) is open to question, inasmuch as it seems to take its bearings from a particular, arguably exoteric, presentation Aristotle offers (e.g., in *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.7, 10.7–8), as distinguished from consideration of what he actually *does* in his writings, particularly the *Ethics* and *Politics*. See Ronna Burger, *Aristotle’s Dialogue with Socrates* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), chap. 4; Mary P. Nichols, *Citizens and Statesmen: A Study of Aristotle’s “Politics”* (Savage, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1992), 132–35. In fact, Aristotle’s remark in *Politics* 7.3 1325b15ff. identifying thinking as the highest sort of activity, including the thoughts of “master craftsmen” in the city (trans. Carnes Lord [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984]), closely approximates the account of thinking as activity that Smith will cite from Cicero’s *De officiis*.

Smith's third chapter provides a brief sketch of the political environment Cicero inhabited—the decaying Republic—and of the purpose of his philosophic writing. Following the failure of Cicero's endeavors to end Rome's civil wars and then to moderate Caesar's dictatorship, after the latter's assassination the now-unpopular lawyer-statesman spent the last two years of his life moving among his country homes out of self-protection, while composing most of his philosophic corpus. In Smith's account, in his writings "Cicero tried to recover what was best in the past, especially...Platonic thought correctly understood, but also the Roman past that he represented as more rational" than it really had been. Cicero often imitated Plato's practice of writing dialogues in which he avoided "speak[ing] in his own name," "hid[ing] his deepest understandings" behind his various characters' arguments. Cicero's guiding concern was to overcome the "clash of multiple sectarian school philosophies...that threatened to bring down public contempt on philosophy itself," instead offering "a unified vision" that preserved philosophy's architectonic status (68–69). Whereas his Greek predecessors had to employ rhetoric chiefly in order to persuade the multitude to tolerate the practice of philosophy, Cicero—writing in an environment in which philosophy (or pursuits going by that name) was more widely, though not quite securely, accepted—endeavored to transform political life to make it "amenable to philosophic statesmanship" (86).

Smith's next six chapters explore Cicero's teachings regarding, successively, the nature of philosophy, "cosmology and natural philosophy," "natural theology," ethics, rhetoric, and politics. Through a fresh examination of the *Tusculan Disputations*, Smith challenges the scholarly dismissal of Cicero as a merely derivative thinker, arguing that the Roman's "recovery" of Socratic/Platonic philosophy in that work was also intended as a "transformation" of the philosophic enterprise (94). Given the Romans' love of oratory—a byproduct of their system of self-government—Cicero undertook to "merge" philosophy with oratory so as to "publicly exal[t]" the former. He aimed to enable philosophy to appeal to "a larger republican citizenry rather than the smaller circle of the aristocratic few." If this project succeeded, Cicero might make politics itself "more philosophical" and less dominated by "warriors, the wealthy," or blind tradition. It entailed setting forth a positive teaching, as distinguished from the "negative dialectics" in which he held the Platonic Socrates to have engaged. Whereas Cicero, even while praising Socrates for having "brought philosophy down from the heavens" to address human and political questions, held his form of dialectics ultimately responsible for its subsequent decay into a variety of warring sects, his own teaching was

intended to generate “a philosophically informed republican statesmanship and statesmanlike philosophy”—even as it “open[ed] the door,” in Smith’s account, for “pre-Thomistic *philosophic* Christianity” (96–99, Smith’s emphasis).

In contrast not only to the apolitical “school philosophies” of his time but also to the doctrines of Martin Heidegger, Smith notes, Cicero devotes each of the five books of the *Disputations* chiefly to moral concerns, aiming “to demonstrate that it is necessary to enter philosophy primarily from ethical rather than...cosmological/ontological concerns.” While agreeing with Heidegger’s argument that reflection on death “forces us to be philosophic,” Cicero contends that the resultant “phenomenological” reflection leads us “not to ongoing anxiety but to an erotic desire to know the truth,” especially (as with Plato) to “wonder about the place of soul understood as mind in the larger whole” (102–5). In turn, this concern “leads philosophy unavoidably toward natural theology,” including the discovery of “a God who is pure soul/mind yet nonetheless...also cause and will,” confronting “the same mystery as scripture does.” In representing God as “mind, will, and first cause,” Smith observes, Cicero “side[s]” with the Platonic view that the cosmos “had a beginning,” contrary to Aristotle’s apparent judgment that it was eternal (109).⁴ Here, however, we are compelled to wonder on what ground Smith attributes to either Plato or Cicero theological views expressed by characters in their dialogues, particularly in view of his having cited Cicero’s practice (like that of Plato) of “hiding” his deepest beliefs from all but the most careful readers. Given the acknowledged primacy for Cicero of the political/moral over the “metaphysical,” is Cicero really asserting a theological truth here, rather than a morally salutary teaching? (This is not of course to assert the greater phenomenological validity of Heideggerian anxiety. But neither does Smith’s Cicero offer any refutation of the apparent Aristotelian cosmological view.)⁵

⁴ See, however, David Bolotin, *An Approach to Aristotle’s “Physics” with Particular Attention to His Mode of Writing* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 5, 19–24, 93, 101, 150 on the grounds for doubting that Aristotle seriously maintained the eternity of the visible world as a scientific truth, as opposed to a salutary or protective teaching.

⁵ At *Tusculan Disputations* 1.28.69 the chief speaker, “M.”—presumably representing (Marcus Tullius) Cicero, but not necessarily a direct spokesman for Cicero’s own beliefs—while arguing that the observation of the visible universe and the earth’s bounty compels the conclusion that “some being is over them,” leaves it open whether that being is an “author, if these things have had beginning, as Plato holds, or if they have always existed, as Aristotle thinks, some governor” (trans. J. E. King [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927]). (At the conclusion of Book 1, Marcus makes explicit the primarily moral rather than theoretical aim of his reflections, which are designed “to alleviate distresses, terrors, [and] lusts.”)

The same difficulty characterizes Smith's account of what he calls Cicero's "criticism of Plato" regarding the nature of the soul: whereas the Platonic soul encompassed such "irrational elements" as *thumos*, *eros*, and *epithumia*, Cicero in Smith's account "is more Christian" in denying the "dignity" of such "prerational states" while portraying "pure soul qua mind and will." Is the difference here more than a rhetorical one? How plausible is the Ciceronian representation of the soul as "striving to be more of a pure cause comparable...to the first cause" rather than (as in the Socratic metaphor of reason as "charioteer") aiming to guide or control our nonrational elements? Does denying *thumos* (spiritedness) "dignity" refute Socrates's portrayal of it (in Plato's *Republic*) as an empirical component of the soul? And if *eros* is the foundation of philosophy (although Smith will subsequently cite Cicero as "tak[ing] Plato to task" for holding this position [120]), how can it be dismissed as lacking dignity? In these regards, Smith appears to strain excessively to interpret Cicero as a "proto-Christian," even though Christian writers would indeed claim him as a precursor (110–11).

Smith does show a closer linkage between Cicero and Christianity in the second book of the *Tusculan Disputations* through his enunciation of a doctrine of "conscience," a concept essentially absent from Greek thought, as a reflection of his "internal approach to ethics," in contrast to Aristotle's emphasis on praise and blame as the means by which we acquire moral virtue. At the same time Smith emphasizes that while "reject[ing] the pagan pursuit of glory," Cicero tries to combine conscience with "the notion of pride and honor," which is not strictly harmonious with Christian doctrine (113). One wishes that Smith had endeavored to explain how Cicero reconciles his encouragement of pride with his praise of "that most unpagan of virtues, humility," in *De officiis* (205).⁶ Beyond this, as Smith attributes to the Roman a belief that "the basis of even honor and nobility must be *internal*" rather than based on others' praise—to the point of rejecting not only "the pagan pursuit of glory" but, "before the fact...the Lockean reliance on bourgeois reputation" (113, Smith's emphasis), we again wonder whether the *Tusculans* are not setting forth a certain "inspirational" moral ideal (just as the *Republic* offers an idealized account of Roman history), rather than an actual corrective to Aristotle's, let alone Locke's, teaching. (Of course neither Aristotle nor Locke would deny that an excellent human being will be guided by love of the good or noble rather than merely following popular opinion; but they would

⁶ Moreover, in *De officiis* 1.12.38, Cicero does not reject as impermissible the pursuit of wars "which have glory for their end," but holds only that they must be pursued "with less bitterness" than struggles for survival.

hold that such rational self-guidance must be generated at least initially by appeals to the young person's sense of shame. Can reason, as distinguished from revelation, demonstrate the presence in human nature of an inherent inclination to act morally?⁷

Repeatedly, in his summary of the moral teaching in the remainder of the *Tusculans*, Smith refers to what the “surface” of the book teaches (116–25), without clearly explaining whether that surface conceals a deeper teaching (as we might expect) that qualifies it. Certainly, the “surface” denial in Book 3 “that the wise man is susceptible to distress” and hence unhappiness (116) sounds like just the sort of conventional Stoic doctrine from which Smith previously noted Cicero distanced himself, and which he subsequently denies the Roman seriously maintained (120, 123). (Smith contends that Cicero's “seeming adoption of Stoic principles” was simply a means to gain “traction for a quiet critique of [an unnamed] Plato” for supposedly “seeing both virtue and philosophy as forms of ‘fiery longing’” [120].) And indeed, Smith disclaims “recommending” “at the moment” Cicero's “transformed notion of virtue,” which dictates that we “jettison” even “emotions like pity,” aiming only “to argue that some version of this noble basis of individual restraint... is now a republican necessity”—in contrast to the modern belief that chance can be overcome “through natural science and technology, or through a political science that eschews virtue” by instead “enthroning” such passions as “fear, ambition, and greed” (122–23). But Cicero was neither the first nor last philosophic thinker to teach the necessity of moral restraint. And—especially in view of Smith's own previous praise of modern commercial republicanism, despite its deficiencies—how is it beneficial to teach that, contrary to Aristotle and his followers, external goods (wealth, friends, family, reputation), let alone pity, lack all goodness (125)? (In contrast, Smith will cite “Cicero the character” in *De finibus* as taking the Stoics to task precisely for failing

⁷ Again, the passage Smith quotes from the *Tusculans* (2.26.64) to the effect that “there is no audience for virtue of higher authority than the approval of conscience” (Smith's emphasis) forms part of an extended moral exhortation by “M.” It does not actually demonstrate the discovery of a new faculty unknown to “the Greeks,” and specifically in contrast to “the Aristotle who lowered morality to a habitual status below knowledge and contemplation” (114). Is it even likely that Cicero, as a philosopher—as distinguished from his rhetorical spokesman—would have reversed this ranking? (See *De officiis*, 1.16.71, suggesting that “men of extraordinary genius who have devoted themselves to learning must be excused for not taking part in public affairs” [a passage to which Smith alludes at 191]. Admittedly, at 1.43.155 the writer judges “that the duties prescribed by justice must be given precedence over the pursuit of knowledge”; but as Smith acknowledges, Cicero also indicates that we may “satisfy our public duty with publicly disseminated books” [203]; and though Smith judges that Socrates, who didn't write, was therefore “not fully just” by Cicero's standard, Cicero elsewhere speaks of the Athenian's “great and superhuman virtues” [1.41.148].)

to acknowledge the goodness of external and bodily goods [148, 152]. One wishes that the author had provided clarification on this score. Assuming that the position seemingly taken in the *Tusculans* was merely rhetorical, what was its justification?)

In treating Cicero's account of natural philosophy or cosmology in the subsequent chapter, Smith reiterates that in contrast to his contemporaries, Cicero denied that it constituted "first philosophy," a status that he reserved for political philosophy, broadly understood. Indeed, Cicero wished to maintain the subordination of theology as well as cosmology to "architectonic political philosophy," which means understanding the whole of things in light of the human good. In this regard, Smith notes that while Cicero made "Epicurean cosmological materialism his chief opponent" because of its conduciveness to hedonism instead of the *honestum*, he "also stresses" the extent to which the Epicureans' Stoic opponents "are ultimately materialists" as well in sharing the belief "that the senses are the only source of knowledge" (128–29, 132, 140). Interestingly in this context, however, Smith also notes that Cicero's disparagement of poetry, in contrast with Plato, leaves him unable to explain how to craft "an architectonic, holistic whole of knowledge," which would seem (in the absence of perfect understanding of the whole) to require poetic, rather than merely oratorical, presentation (141–42).

Smith's sixth chapter takes up Cicero's "natural theology." Noting that Cicero "lived at the time of the breakdown of pagan polytheism," Smith argues that the Roman took advantage of that opportunity to "ope[n] a theological space that could be occupied after his death." Although he could not have known that the space would be filled by "philosophical Christianity," Smith remarks, "this is how one opens spaces without constructing them in an authoritarian fashion." Thanks to his opposition to superstition, polytheism, pantheism, and anthropomorphism as well as atheism, Cicero "became the most influential Christian philosopher until Aquinas," surpassing even Augustine (154–55).

In Cicero's theology, Smith remarks, "awe and wonder take priority over brooding about death and the afterlife." While he "no more intended any autonomy for natural theology than the moderns who attempted to emancipate both philosophy and secular government from theological domination," Cicero—in contrast to Greek and Roman practice—wished to subject both government and theology to the "supervision" of philosophy. However, Smith observes, "the Catholic Church...moved throughout the period from the collapse of the Roman Empire to the dawn of modernity to give theology

autonomy from philosophy, with an increasing desire for hegemony over the state” as well (156–57). (Smith does not explain how Cicero expected to maintain the sovereignty of philosophy over government and religion.)

“The modern republican tradition,” Smith observes, includes “two competing approaches to the relationship between religion and the state”: the American one, embodying “a secular state consciously built upon a religious society” and intended to secure religious liberty, and the French or Continental model of “an openly atheist state and society,” an approach that easily harmonizes with the intentions of such antirepublican thinkers as Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. Cicero, he contends, can guide us in enabling reason to “supervene over both politics and theology” while “abolish[ing] neither” (157–58).

Smith portrays Cicero as seeking to replace “absurd traditional articles of faith” with a “rational faith,” which requires a divinity possessed of “an individual mind as active will (monotheism) that creates the cosmos and beneficially supports human existence,” something “very close to the scriptural account” (169). Since this conception is no less true of the Jewish than the Christian God, we are driven to wonder: Is the similarity purely coincidental? Smith does not speculate on that issue, but proceeds to maintain that because “the doctrine of the Trinity presents the divine as a *complex* one, both in the world and outside and prior to the world,” it “solves philosophical conundrums that no simple conception of the One can confront,” and thus “can claim to be a rational religion.” Given what many, including its own advocates, would regard as the incomprehensibility of this doctrine (*Credo quia absurdum*), the ground of that claim is not obvious. And when Smith adds, “and it is also the traditional religion of the republican West,” we suspect that the claim is simply part of his own project of using available materials to fortify self-government in the modern or postmodern world—in contrast to Hegel’s endeavor to obliterate transcendence, generating an “ultimate unity in a universal homogeneous state” that would be tyrannical rather than republican (172). Smith surely goes too far in trying to make Christianity alone serve that project, however, when he reads a passage in *De natura deorum* questioning the basis of divine love for human beings as “a foretelling of the Christian God of love...who replaces the angry God of the Old Testament who relies on fear” as did the pagan gods (175–76)—as if the God of the Hebrew Bible did not act out of love for humanity, or as if

Christian theology did not rely extensively on the fear of divine punishments on this earth as well as the hereafter.⁸

Smith concludes his chapter on Cicero's theology by observing that while Cicero refrains from propounding a specific monotheistic doctrine, given his "ticklish situation" in a society characterized by "irrational faith...he gives the signposts to a rational faith." He adds that in Cicero's view, "reason must supervene over faith without eliminating it," particularly in a republic, since atheism and republicanism are incompatible (185), for reasons Smith never fully elaborates (but see 322n15 and 397n51).

In his chapter on Cicero's ethical teaching as set forth in *De officiis*, Smith represents the Roman as offering a superior "response" to Machiavelli, and to the modern republican project derived from him, regarding the crucial question of "the best means to the conquest of chance" (188). In his initial treatment of the relation of Cicero's ethics to that of his philosophic predecessors Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics, Smith blurs the issue by discussing the degree to which he is a "consequentialist" rather than a "deontologist"—terms (and a dichotomy) alien to their writings. And in reiterating the supposedly greater proximity of Cicero's teaching to that of Plato rather than Aristotle, Smith confusingly remarks that "Cicero stresses that real moral virtue is, following Socrates, a form of knowledge, not, as Aristotle would have it, based on habits that are a mean between two vices" (190): it is Aristotle, not Plato, who *invented* the term "moral virtue," which definitionally refers to characteristics born of habit; never, when propounding his paradoxical equation of virtue with knowledge, does Plato's Socrates add the qualifier "moral." However Cicero himself may have represented his relation to his two great predecessors, it is actually Aristotle rather than Plato who paved the way for Cicero's elevation of morality as a quasi-independent sphere of excellence—despite relegating it to "second-best" status in comparison with intellectual virtue.⁹ And Smith again exaggerates the gap between Cicero and Aristotle by emphasizing the Roman's determination "to disassociate wisdom from contemplative *theoria*, which implies a retreat from the *res publica*," a retreat

⁸ Contrast also Smith's claim at 356n11 that Christianity's basis in "articles of faith that need philosophic explanation...rather than on laws that need interpretation, as with Judaism and Islam," makes it "perfectly suited" to the American republic's "diversity of opinion," with Leo Strauss's observation that "the precarious status of philosophy in Judaism as well as in Islam," unlike its attempted incorporation into Christian theology, "guaranteed its private character and therewith its inner freedom from supervision" (*Persecution and the Art of Writing* [Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1952], 21).

⁹ See note 7 above regarding Cicero's own hedging on the relative rank of moral and intellectual virtue.

he wrongly attributes to the Stagirite (191).¹⁰ (And can wisdom truly be severed from *theoria*, in the view of Aristotle any more than of Plato?)

Smith's endeavor to elevate Cicero over Aristotle continues in the sequel, where he asserts the existence of a "tension" between the Stagirite's "pantheon of virtues in the *Nicomachean Ethics*" and his preferred, or "best generally practicable," regime, polity, which "explicitly required only middling virtues." It is not obvious that there is any contradiction between endeavoring to portray the best possible human life and describing the qualities that it is reasonable to hope for in the general populace. Yet Cicero, in Smith's account, was "unwilling to accept" the "lowering of the sights" that Aristotle called for, instead "demand[ing] a republic with higher ethical aspirations than Aristotle's polity, to say nothing of the moderns and their own even more severe version of the 'lowering of the sights,' for which we are increasingly paying a no longer maintainable price in the loss of honorable behavior and civil discourse." What began as a criticism of Aristotle on questionably "idealistic" grounds thus passes through a blanket condemnation of modern political philosophy (despite Smith's previously having called modern republicanism, built on that philosophy, the highest form of such government yet attained), then culminates in a sweeping condemnation of "modern man" as absorbed by "the ravenous self-absorbed pursuit of unlimited wealth and power divorced from honor and duty as ends in themselves," which Smith attributes to our reliance on external restraints on conduct, in contrast to the "internal restraints" that Cicero espoused. However, Smith will contend that Cicero "opens the door to an ethics of duty and honor without being inimical to rights rationally conceived, or liberty and equality as they must exist in a republican context" (191–93).

As Smith notes, in the introduction to *De officiis (On Duties)*, written in the form of a letter to his wastrel son (then studying philosophy with a Peripatetic in Athens), Cicero stresses the need to combine philosophy with oratory, as the Greek philosophers and rhetoricians failed to do. Even while professing to resemble the Peripatetics in being a follower of Plato and Socrates, Smith

¹⁰ See note 3 above. In this connection, however, it is also curious to see Smith finding fault with Aristotle's "creation of individual areas of study that are removed from the public arena," including "physics and biology" (318n2, Smith's emphasis). Must philosophy, to be compatible with republicanism, focus *solely* on studies that relate to the public arena? And contrariwise, how can it possibly be maintained that Aristotle's studies of "ethics and politics" are removed from that arena (ibid.)? In addition, one wonders whether the Dream of Scipio with which *De republica* concludes, especially the disparagement of earthly as compared with heavenly things at 6.19ff., does not signify that Cicero too ultimately ranked *theoria* above prudence, even if he avoided elsewhere asserting this ranking.

observes, Cicero implicitly claims to be more comprehensive than they were in undertaking the necessary combination.¹¹ His aspiration, as Smith puts it, is “to force philosophy out into the *res publica*” (193–95).

De officiis is divided into three parts, Smith observes, respectively devoted to the themes of moral excellence (*honestum*), utility, and the relation between the two, culminating in the “surface” teaching that only those things conducive to moral excellence “are ultimately expedient...from the broadest perspective” (193). Again, *honestum* in Cicero’s view “can only be found in activity, albeit that includes the working of a mind that is never at rest,” as opposed to the “tranquility” pursued by both Stoics and Epicureans and also (Smith believes) “exemplified by Socrates’s repeated dramatic motionlessness while thinking” (197).¹²

One broad issue on which Smith distinguishes Cicero’s moral teaching from Aristotle’s is the question whether (moral) virtue is to be identified chiefly with the good of the individual who possesses or practices it (as with Aristotle’s liberality) or that of others who benefit from it (Cicero’s charity and kindness) (199). Smith particularly stresses the contrast between Cicero’s unambiguous praise of justice as the “crowning glory” of the virtues and Aristotle’s assignment of that status to magnanimity or “great-souledness” (197).¹³ Yet while Smith observes that greatness of soul “has come down in status” from Aristotle’s teaching to Cicero’s, he is compelled to admit that republics sometimes need individuals who belong, in Lincoln’s phrase, to the “tribe of the eagle and family of the lion,” if only to protect them against other such individuals. Somewhat obscurely, Smith explains that while for Cicero, true “fortitude must be linked to the public interest rather than immortal

¹¹ Although Smith makes a point of Cicero’s omitting the name of the founder of the Peripatetic school, Aristotle, from his reference to them (194), it should be noted that Cicero does name the Stagirite only two paragraphs later, expressing no less regret that Aristotle and the orator Isocrates “undervalued” one another’s occupations than that Plato and Demosthenes failed to combine forces (*De officiis* 1.1.4).

¹² Here again, Smith unfortunately caricatures a Greek philosopher—this time, Socrates—by drawing selectively on Plato’s dialogues to depict him as almost always being at rest (363n), so as to create a contrast with Cicero, despite just having observed that activity, for Cicero, *includes* the working of one’s mind. Can any reader of the dialogues conceive of Socrates’s mind as ever being inactive? (Smith stood on better ground in contrasting Cicero with the Stoics, Epicureans, and other sectarians like the Pyrrhonian skeptics.)

¹³ Aristotle’s account is actually more ambiguous than Smith acknowledges here, since he also represents justice (in its broader sense) as encompassing all other virtues (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1129b27–32), as Smith acknowledges elsewhere (364)— though he ultimately does come down on the side of magnanimity, in the sense that implicitly culminates in philosophy (Burger, *Aristotle’s Dialogue with Socrates*, 84, 87, 95–96).

glory...one can substitute the longing for an immortally good reputation,” as in the case of Washington and Lincoln (198, 205). But since, as Smith later acknowledges, “spiritedness and magnanimity...are hardly in oversupply” at present, we may need “to err back in the direction of fostering them again,” reflecting the fact that “Cicero’s balance” is not fully “appropriate for our time” (394). This, at its core, was Machiavelli’s objection to the teaching of Christianity in his time, as well as that of “the writers” who fostered it. (Recall Machiavelli’s implied “correction” of Cicero’s teaching about the lion and the fox from *De officiis* in chapter 18 of *The Prince*—not that Italy suffered from any shortage of spirited men like Pope Julius in his era, but that the effect of the Christian teaching of humility and self-abnegation was to make the many the dupes of the few, such as that consummate fraudster Alexander VI or even worse, that practitioner of “holy cruelty,” Ferdinand of Spain. At what point in history did Cicero’s well-intentioned effort to tame Roman imperialism or tyrannical ambition ultimately come to generate more harm than good?)

Turning to economic matters, Smith cites Cicero’s view that although private property is not itself natural, it arises “from a natural necessity.” But precisely because of its unnaturalness, it must be “linked with penumbral virtues,” such as charity, to be legitimate. Cicero also opposes redistributive measures undertaken by government, since they are the root of the sort of despotic impulses that helped destroy the Roman republic. Additionally, Cicero enunciates a doctrine of just war according to which, even though most of Rome’s wealth had derived from previous acts of conquest, its defense is legitimate, although further “wars for conquest and aggrandizement” are unjust (201–2). (Machiavelli might of course insert a word here about victors’ justice.) But throughout Cicero’s works, Smith observes, “there is a turn from a focus on war” to one on commerce as “central to a republic.” However, in contrast to “most modern defenses of commerce,” Cicero maintains a distinction between “vulgar” and “liberal” modes of acquisition—the former including lending at interest (the very foundation of the modern economy) as well as such “illiberal” occupations as manual labor and “small shop keeping,” disparaged as lacking any “element of intelligence” and lacking the “leisure” that is “necessary for civic engagement and the exercise of the virtues.” While Smith grants that Cicero’s liberal/vulgar distinction would need to be “rethought” in our more egalitarian era—when we see in many more occupations “a significant element of intelligence and art,” while even “mechanical operations” often generate sufficient wealth to afford their practitioners with leisure—he argues that where Cicero “parts from the modern view, he should give us reason to rethink,” by considering how to use our

wealth to create “genuine liberality” for many—especially in “the coming postmodern world” (211–13, 366).

De officiis culminates (in Book 3) in what Smith terms “a genuine utilitarianism,” in which Cicero subtly qualifies the Stoic doctrine that the honorable and the useful can never conflict with “quiet doses” of the “realism” that Machiavelli would subsequently “buil[d] upon as his only foundation.” That is, while “there are almost no cases in which one must engage in vice to foster utility”—e.g., Romulus ostensibly “did not really have to kill his brother” to achieve his desired end, and one’s interests “can almost always be secured without harming others,” especially through “sharp’ business practices”—still there are exceptions, and one is not bound to keep promises made to “pirates” and other barbarians. But while Cicero avoids asserting a “pedantic, deontological universalism,” unlike Machiavelli “he will not undermine his main premise” by elaborating the “rare circumstances” that might justify deviating from the *honestum*. The conclusion with which Cicero leaves his readers (perhaps exemplifying his attempted unification of philosophy with rhetoric) is that “we primarily conquer chance through *honestum*” (220–22).

Smith resumes the theme of Cicero’s linkage between philosophy and oratory in the subsequent chapter, “Cicero on Oratory and the Language Arts,” which focuses on the dialogue *De oratore*. As Smith recounts, Cicero (or his character) blames the Greek philosophers, specifically Socrates, for “reduc[ing] oratory to sophistry in an attempt to define and defend philosophy as a primarily theoretical activity” (think of dialogues like the *Protagoras* and *Gorgias* in which Socrates challenges leading teachers of rhetoric for lacking true knowledge).¹⁴ By contrast, for Cicero, “oratory—like philosophy and politics—is an arena of truth and of bringing truth ‘into the open’ in a public arena.” Even though Cicero recognizes that Plato, unlike his Socrates, added an element of *poiesis* to philosophy, he nonetheless “diminishes the importance of poetry” by comparison with oratory, since the former depends on a “genius” possessed by few, while the latter, being a “science,” can be “employed by more individuals,” making it “both more scientific and more

¹⁴ Of course any attempted distinction between Socrates and Plato is artificial, since our only direct sources for knowing “Socrates,” aside from Aristophanes’s *Clouds*, are the dialogues composed by Plato and Xenophon. Arguably, what the Platonic Socrates is seeking to achieve in his dialogues with the rhetoricians is precisely to win them over as allies of philosophy (see *Republic* 450a, 498d), a combination ultimately accomplished by Plato himself through his philosophic poetry (Devin Stauffer, *The Unity of Plato’s “Gorgias”* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006], 177–82). But consider as well Aristotle’s criticism of the Sophists, at the conclusion of his *Ethics* (1181a13–19), for having reduced political science to rhetoric.

democratic than genius.” In *De oratore* “Cicero tried to show that real oratory is a high form of statesmanship and that it needs the support of philosophy,” or that it *is* “philosophy as it turns to its public duties” (225–27). Smith adds that among the American Founders, the linkage between “truth and eloquence” was still appreciated, in contrast to the subsequent decline in appreciation of the inherent value of political life, as well as (for reasons he leaves obscure) in “our understanding of the nature of truth” (228).

De oratore, as Smith recounts, aims “to give back to rhetoric/oratory the status” it supposedly had “before Socrates ‘vanquished’ it in the name of dialectic, reducing it to sophistry.” With obvious allusions to several of Plato’s dialogues, *De oratore* offers “a transformed notion of Plato’s *politikos*” or statesman. This entails overcoming the “customary” Roman “prejudice against philosophy,” to which the past political heroes Antony and Crassus are depicted as having to accommodate themselves. Curiously, Cicero (or rather, his character) in Smith’s account attributes Socrates’s death to his having failed to learn “the lessons of ideal oratory”—despite the fact that he refused to read the defense speech prepared for him by the orator Lysias.¹⁵ At the same time, “we are led to the issue of whether Rome could have saved its republic with a high-level oratory that appealed to the mind” rather than “the passions” (232–34). (But how far was the rhetorical decay a cause rather than a result of the civic decay? Smith cites Crassus’s acknowledgment that his view of philosophy as an “architectonic” activity capable of being linked with oratory embodies “an ideal that...has never yet existed,” and suggests the kinship of that ideal with Socrates’s proposal of philosopher-kings in Plato’s *Republic* as the sole remedy for civic evils [238]. To what extent have Cicero’s expectations of a solution to the political problem moved beyond Plato’s?)

Smith concludes his chapter on *De oratore* with the interesting suggestion that Cicero’s view of philosophy’s need to go public, “eschew[ing] the ‘holy secrets’ of the nonpublic Epicureans,” anticipates Heidegger’s teaching “that truth must come into ‘unconcealment’” and “lie in open view.” Contrary to Heidegger, Cicero maintained that the revelation of truth “requires a republic and a philosophy that speaks in everyday speech.” Curiously, however, Smith’s Cicero blames Socrates, through his invention of dialectic,

¹⁵ As the preceding lines of this section of *De oratore* make clear, however (1.53.231–33), Cicero or his character understands that Socrates’s refusal to deliver Lysias’s speech, and indeed, his provocation of the Athenians to vote to execute him, were not the product of ignorance of the rhetorical art. Here, as elsewhere, one wishes that Smith had been more precise in distinguishing the views that Cicero places in the mouth of his characters from his deeper thoughts.

for having “sent philosophy off in a direction that eventually undermined everyday speech” (243).¹⁶

Smith begins his ninth chapter, “Cicero on Politics,” by remarking that Cicero imitated the “curriculum” of his time in treating political science as “a subset of ethics”—the opposite, I note, of the ranking that Aristotle gives them.¹⁷ In consequence, Smith notes, Cicero holds “that no amount of constitutional or legal tinkering” can replace “education and character formation in addressing the problems intrinsic to political life,” in contrast to “modern republican thinkers.”¹⁸ This belief “leads Cicero to conclude that a healthy republican regime requires an aristocracy,” albeit one “defined by virtue, not simply by birth, wealth, or military prowess” (245). Drawing chiefly on Scipio’s speech in *De republica*, Smith immediately alludes to “the textbook idea” for which Cicero (along with his predecessor Polybius) “is best known,” that of “balanced government”—one in which, “ideally,” the balancer “will be a philosopher/orator/statesman,” who will work his will above all through education (246–50). Smith distinguishes Cicero’s balanced regime from Aristotle’s “mixed” one, polity, on the ground that since the latter combines two defective regimes, oligarchy and democracy, it will always be “on the verge of civil war,” whereas “Cicero mixes principles like virtue and popular liberty along with executive energy, the latter of which Aristotle substantially ignores” (252).¹⁹ In contrast to Aristotle’s polity, Cicero’s best regime balances

¹⁶ Although Socrates is indeed identified as the ultimate source of the sects into which philosophy became divided by Cicero’s time, it is difficult to reconcile the negative opinion of him that Smith attributes to Cicero with remarks like the following (3.1.15): “there is not any of us, when he reads the admirably written dialogues of Plato, in almost all of which the character of Socrates is represented, who does not, though what is written of him is written in a divine spirit, conceive something still greater of him about whom it is written.”

¹⁷ See *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.2, 10.9. For a critique of the contemporary subsumption of political science under ethics, which has generated the sort of abstract, dogmatic, and unpolitical theorizing exemplified by writers like John Rawls, Robert Nozick, and Philip Pettit, see my “On Restoring the Primacy of Politics to Ethics,” *Intercollegiate Review* 44, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 42–47.

¹⁸ This sweeping judgment of “modern republican thinkers” is problematic, since although they typically relied *more* on institutional arrangements to channel self-interest in a salutary direction than their classical predecessors did, I can think of none of them (Locke? Montesquieu? Harrington? Rousseau?) who denied the importance of “education and character formation” as a foundation of republicanism as well. Although the authors of our Constitution made no direct provision for their perpetuation, this was not out of a lack of concern for them (as the writings and speeches of founders like Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Franklin, Noah Webster, and various Antifederalists attest), but out of a belief that they were essentially a state and local function.

¹⁹ Note, however, that Aristotle stresses the need to generate a large middle class—admittedly a difficult enterprise in the circumstances of the Greek polis—to bind a polity together (*Politics* 4.11). Nor, of course, does he deny the importance of virtue or an element of popular liberty. On the reasons for the “absence” of the executive power in Aristotle’s mixed regime, see Harvey C. Mansfield, *Taming the*

“not economic classes” but the “executive energy” of monarchy and “the wisdom and virtue possible in a genuine, nonhereditary aristocracy”—along with, finally, “the republican liberty of all citizens to have access to the public space” (252). (However, in describing his favored mixed regime in *De republica* 1.30–35, Cicero’s spokesman Scipio more specifically seems to ordain that the people hold a share of political power, acknowledging the difficulty of perceiving true virtue, while in *De legibus* 3.6 the plebeians are specifically guaranteed the right to elect tribunes to defend their interests—thus incorporating an element of class balancing.)

Repeating an earlier contrast he had drawn between Cicero and Aristotle, Smith observes that Cicero’s model regime entails a “high” rather than merely “middling” understanding of republican virtue, in which respect, since “Aristotle is closer to the instincts of modern republicanism, . . . he is not the best antidote for its moral sicknesses,” in contrast to the elevation that Cicero offers to “our moral sights.” But how realistic is this remedy? How far did Cicero himself expect the model regime outlined by Scipio in *De republica* to be achieved in practice? And is political utopianism in any sense a cure for our current political and moral ills? (Along the same lines, how persuasive is Smith’s claim that Cicero’s supposed view that “love,” in such forms as “patriotism, friendship, and longing for personal admiration,” is “more powerful than the modern political psychology that descends from Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, and even the somewhat more expansive teachings of Montesquieu, Hume, and Smith based on ‘sympathy’” [253]? And why would Cicero, like Machiavelli, have sought “greater executive energy and authority than Aristotle” did [253], if his goal were to *reduce* the dependence on fear as a means of enforcing the laws and reducing the factional strife which Scipio’s interlocutor describes as threatening the republic’s survival [1.19]?) At the end of this chapter, Smith will acknowledge that Cicero lacked “enough experience to reach a properly balanced conclusion” regarding the constitution of the executive, and will seem to credit the American Founders for improving on the Roman’s prescriptions in this regard, only to complain, curiously, that their system so “focused on avoiding majority tyranny” that it “made it difficult to get anything done”—as if American history exhibits an insufficient degree of legislative enactments or independent executive actions. He also accuses the Founders of “underestim[ing] that the greatest check on tyranny was an active, virtuous, properly involved citizenry”—ignoring the writings of Jefferson and various Federalists and Antifederalists on this

subject, and never making clear *where* he thinks the current threat of tyranny arises from. If, as various analysts maintain, our liberty is endangered today by an unconstitutionally expanded scope of federal and state legislation, an insufficiently accountable federal bureaucracy, and/or a judiciary or president unmoored from constitutional restraints, how would making it easier to get things “done” have mitigated the threat? And just what can we “learn from Cicero” about how to “inspiri[t]” our citizenry so as to make them more resistant to intrusions on their civic rights, or less preoccupied with private enjoyments and the expansion of their “entitlements” (268, 270)? Smith does not elaborate.

The remaining element of Cicero’s politics that Smith discusses is his treatment of property and commerce. Here Smith endeavors to situate Cicero’s outlook between that of ancient thinkers who scorned labor and the pursuit of wealth (although, as previously noted, this account of their thought overlooks the extent to which the philosophers had to outwardly accommodate the prejudices of their aristocratic readers) and that of moderns like Locke who espouse the unlimited pursuit of wealth, reducing the goal of politics largely to the efficient “administration of things” (Engels) and ignoring the question of the good. Here, however, Smith’s initial contrast between Cicero and Locke seriously distorts the latter’s teaching, by claiming that he grounded the legitimacy of property on its mode of acquisition rather than on “the *end* for which it is needed” (Smith’s emphasis). In fact, a careful reading of the chapter on property in Locke’s *Two Treatises* (II 5) will demonstrate that Locke ultimately grounds the right to unlimited acquisition not on the labor that would first enable inhabitants of the “State of Nature” to make something “theirs,” but rather on the fact that the opportunity for unlimited acquisition through peaceful means (which could include investment, or the labor of one’s employees, as well) ultimately raises everyone’s standard of living, by increasing the general stock of goods available (at a lower price) for all—along the way increasing opportunities for remunerative employment.²⁰ Since it is not true, contrary to Smith, that Locke “legitimizes property on the basis of its origin alone”—in fact he indicates his awareness, no less than Cicero or Machiavelli (whom Smith cites on this point), that *all* current landholdings probably derive from historical acts of unjust conquest²¹—it is wrong to infer that his account “opens the door to inflammatory discussions”

²⁰ See Stanley C. Brubaker, “Coming into One’s Own: John Locke’s Theory of Property, God, and Politics,” *Review of Politics* 74 (2012): 207–32; Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, II 5, sec. 43.

²¹ *Two Treatises* II 16, secs. 175–76, 191–92, 196.

on “reparations for peoples historically oppressed to be paid by the descendants” of their past oppressors (264–66). (Instead, it opens the door to the exercise of the right of resistance or revolution against any government that violates its subjects’ rights, regardless of its origin.)

The real, substantive issue that lies between Cicero and Locke, as Smith goes on to observe, is the question whether (as the Roman maintained) “limits are needed to the amount of private property one holds in order to avoid the luxury and decadence that destroys virtue” (266). In other words, does allowing the opportunity for, indeed encouraging, ordinary people to strive to maximize their wealth through labor, saving, and investment tend to divert them from the higher purposes of life—such as worshiping God, pursuing wisdom, or serving one’s country in both civil and military offices—in favor of the endless pursuit of baubles? There is much to be said on this question, both for and against. Any such discussion would need to take account, however, of the way that the free-enterprise economy originally shaped by thinkers like Locke, Montesquieu, and Adam Smith has vastly expanded the opportunities for learning, civic participation, and culture available to ordinary folk—along with improving everyone’s health, extending our lifespan, and diverting people from the factional strife over dividing a fixed economic “pie,” as well as from religious warfare, which characterized the system that preceded it.²² And Smith himself rejects the notion that “government should enforce limits” on wealth “and engage in redistribution schemes.” Instead, he proposes that such “limits should grow out of a proper understanding of choice-worthy ends and from the rationally informed preferences of individuals concerned with happiness and virtue in a society” that uses “such tools as shame” in order to support “virtue and liberty” (266).

In an effort to demonstrate Cicero’s contemporary relevance, Smith actually mixes two entirely different issues here. On one hand he reminds us of Cicero’s view (from *De officiis*) that one should avoid “wrongful gains,’ which are based on deceit and misrepresentation, and even what he calls ‘sharp practices,’” calling this a “foreign idea for us.” But what is “foreign” about it? Don’t the United States and other commercial republics possess and enforce all sorts of laws against fraud, designed to protect both consumers and honest businessmen from being cheated? (If anything, laws are too often enacted or

²² See the trilogy by economic historian Deirdre McCloskey, *The Bourgeois Virtues*, *Bourgeois Dignity*, and *Bourgeois Equality*, published by University of Chicago Press in 2007, 2010, and 2016, respectively. Contrast Gregory Smith’s mistaken claim that Adam Smith and David Hume advocated “the pursuit of mindless luxury” (316).

administered to favor particular interest groups—antitrust legislation, high tariffs, occupational licensing regulations, minimum-wage laws, rent control, racial and gender-based “set-asides,” zoning laws—in the specious name of protecting against “unfair” practices, i.e., free competition.) On the other hand, Smith suggests the need for social sanctions to remind us “of the limits to the wealth one needs for excellent action and thought.” But who will identify and apply those limits? When Smith observes that “for Cicero...the amount [of property] we need is primarily limited by a ranking of the ends of our actions,” who is to do the ranking? Doesn’t the amount of wealth one needs to pursue worthy ends vary among individuals, depending on their goals and capacities, so that for every hedge-fund manager obsessed with increasing his holdings (but “harming” nobody but himself in the process), or every wastrel expending his inheritance sailing yachts in the Caribbean, there may be many more members of the top 0.1 percent devoting themselves to philanthropy—like Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, and the Koch brothers?²³ (Consider the vast sums donated by the superrich to support medical research, museums, colleges, hospitals, orchestras, and tuition scholarships enabling underprivileged youth living to attend challenging private schools—freeing such activities from total dependence on allocations by government.) And at a less stratospheric economic level, isn’t the typical lawyer or executive, just like the typical salesman or blue-collar worker, driven above all by a not-ignoble desire to provide as well as he can for his family—while often taking time to serve his church and community? Although Smith disclaims wanting to encourage a “bureaucratic ethic of redistribution” which (as Cicero foresaw) would only unleash “new forms of despotism,” his caricature of the American economy can serve only to encourage it. Smith’s encouragement of public “shaming” of wealthy individuals for the sheer fact of being wealthy would promote the spread of envy and resentment that already poisons our politics.

This is not to defend the lamentable state of popular “culture” in America—countless hours wasted on social media or brainless television shows, for instance—but its crudity has little or no correlation with economic class, since rich and poor rarely show significant differences in artistic, musical, or literary taste. But much as a sober observer would wish, like Cicero, to

²³ See, on the impossibility of justifying fixed limits to wealth, given the varied uses (high and low) to which it may be put, Bertrand de Jouvenel’s *The Ethics of Redistribution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), 23–48. Curiously, Smith maintains “that the generation of wealth is more valuable” than its mere possession, since “the former supports useful virtues,” while “the latter supports luxury and undisciplined behavior” (395). He offers no empirical support for this generalization, and the first judgment is seemingly contradicted by his assertion that wealth is commonly generated by “sharp” practices.

set “limits” to mindless acquisition and stultifying entertainment through “philosophical and ethical education, and codes of honor” (267), it is hard to see where such limits are likely to come from, given the increasing failure of American schools to offer the most basic civic education, and the ruin that has beset the realm of higher education thanks to the politicization of the social sciences and humanities. And what would Cicero say of the breakdown of the American family, encouraged by morally debilitating popular entertainment, growing welfare dependency, and the unfortunate emulation by youth of the “lifestyles” of thoroughly corrupt entertainers?²⁴ Yet none of these problems will be addressed by blaspheming the American people as “awash” in “unlimited greed,” or as misled by “preposterous myths like the invisible hand” (a metaphor of Adam Smith’s, designed to forestall foolish governmental attempts to allocate economic resources more efficiently than the market would do that our Mr. Smith regrettably misrepresents). (A serious attack on greed in present-day America would go after government policies that undermine America’s traditional moral culture by legalizing casinos, lotteries, and “recreational” drugs, fostering and catering to vices that cause the greatest harm among those most in need of acquiring the “bourgeois” virtues, all to the benefit of unscrupulous entrepreneurs and legislators eager to enhance tax revenues. But—aside from suggesting a constitutional amendment to outlaw lotteries, and wisely urging lawmakers to exhibit the “courage” necessary “to confront tort reform” [395]—Smith fails to make the necessary distinctions between blameworthy greed and legitimate acquisitiveness. See also note 23 above.)

Ascending from his unfortunate foray into political economy, Smith devotes his penultimate chapter to an insightful comparison between Cicero and Nietzsche, in which he argues persuasively that despite the “comprehensive and architectonic” view of philosophy that they share, “Nietzsche remains a modern constructivist who thinks he can will outcomes *ex nihilo*,” whereas

²⁴ In this connection we cannot avoid being struck by the oddity of Smith’s subsequent mockery of the concern of contemporary social conservatives with the restoration of “‘family values,’ which would be more persuasive if it could be articulated in substantive terms other than mere gay bashing” (301–2)—when even sensible homosexuals agree that single parenthood, along with the culture of divorce, is not the ideal way to bring up children. Apparently, as with his denunciation of Americans’ “greed,” Smith felt obliged to cover his left flank to compensate for his condemnations of postmodernism. But see, for instance, on the endeavor of evangelical church members to provide (largely unpaid) foster care services that supplement and improve upon those provided by state government, with particular focus on combating “the fragmentation of families”—precisely the sort of active citizenship Smith elsewhere professes to favor (314)—Naomi Schaefer Riley’s articles “Drawing a Larger Circle around Families,” *Philanthropy Magazine*, Summer 2017, and “The Challenge of Finding Homes for Rural America’s Foster Children,” *The Atlantic*, August 3, 2018.

“Cicero’s noble and measured rhetoric represents the more likely means to a solid republican future” (274–75). Unlike Nietzsche’s philosophers, who aim to remake human nature but then withdraw to an “Epicurean garden” while they “rule indirectly through new priests and aristocrats,” despising the “dirt” of politics, Cicero exhibits a respect for republican liberty, seeing it as the root of philosophy (as it was for Plato’s Socrates), and “an idealism of modest expectations” that is the antithesis of Nietzschean nihilism and authoritarian “great politics” (277, 281–83). It is both ironic and deeply troubling that Nietzsche, despite his contempt for popular self-government, is considered within the postmodern academy “one of the age’s greatest defenders of democratic outcomes” (275), while Cicero is dismissed as a fuddy-duddy.

Smith begins his concluding chapter “Political Philosophy and the Republican Future” by expressing concern that republican government, of which history offers relatively few examples until modern times (13), may not survive for another century, given the threatened status of our two “greatest legacies,...the intellectual openness of the tradition of political philosophy and the self-governing freedom of republican institutions.” The only alternative to “antirepublican” rule by “various technical and intellectual elites” will be “to foster fully functioning postmodern, republican citizens” whose characters have been shaped by “‘internal’ checks and philosophical bearings” partly Ciceronian in nature. Among the elements of the “rethinking” necessary to reopen the future are a “non-autonomous, non-ontological understanding of...modern science...consistent with” its original “self-understanding” (one wishes that Smith had provided some explanation here); appreciating the “unavoidability of religion and the potential possibilities of a rational religion”; a rethinking “of commercial republicanism and the virtues it requires so that we again see commerce as a means to republicanism, and not the other way around”; recognition of “the limits of reason and hence the unavoidable necessity for traditions”; and “understanding that true individualism” must be linked with virtue (285–87). As this list indicates, Smith maintains that a rethinking of our intellectual and moral “environment” is far more important than any institutional change (288). Reminding us of the contemporary fragmentation of “competing school philosophies” (Marxism, feminism, multiculturalism, conservatism, etc.) that characterizes our era as it did Cicero’s, and which has engendered a dismissal of philosophy as a serious undertaking (289), Smith makes the important point that a great impediment to the “integrative understanding” we require is the “prevalent dogma” emanating from Nietzsche and Heidegger regarding the supposed “uniformity of the Western tradition,” which is used as an

excuse for dismissing that tradition—since we already “kno[w] what all past authors share” (all being dead white males) and its wrongness. That dogma must be challenged by recognizing that the philosophic tradition’s origins were “phenomenological” rather than dogmatically “metaphysical,” and that “the Western tradition has been anything but unitary,” with the greatest authors being not only “‘untimely’ critics” rather than spokesmen for “their own time,” but participants “in a critical dialogue with other great authors” into which we can still enter (295–96) through thoughtful reading. In other words, the ultimate obstacle to our own intellectual liberation is the doctrine of historicism.

In the sequel Smith persuasively takes both the contemporary Left and Right to task for failing to develop a substantive understanding of republican freedom that is grounded in serious consideration of the nature of the human good, repudiating the “voluntarist” notion of the “self-legislating Ego” who creates his nature and his ends *ex nihilo*. Even the communitarians, who purport to overcome the limitations of traditionless individualism, treat one’s “identity” as a matter of arbitrary personal “choice” (296–306). (This form of identity politics has been pushed to an extreme by the transgender movement, which espouses a doctrine according to which the “self” is inherently separable from the body.) As Nietzsche foresaw, viewing life as rooted in groundless willing ultimately results not in the free pursuit of “meaning,” but rather in a battle to *impose* one’s “narrative” on others (306)—as is exhibited in the struggle among competing racial, ethnic, gender, and feminist groups currently tearing American political and academic life apart.

As a remedy for our current crisis, Smith prescribes a new republican “soulcraft,” inspired by Cicero, that would “weave together elements drawn from both ancient and modern republicanism and from past elements of the tradition” (308). Recognizing the weakening in our time of the “primary moral supports” on which the American Founders relied—“a decaying code of honor conjoined with Christian notions of humility and self-discipline, all embellished with a strong work ethic”—we cannot allow the inculcation of virtue to be relegated to a merely private concern.²⁵ However, Smith rightly warns that “turning moral pedagogy over to the modern state” would hardly do the trick, and instead asks only that government get “out of the business of

²⁵ Whether Americans or other modern democrats really stand in need of a greater dose of Christian humility, as opposed to a fortification of genuine pride, is doubtful, as Smith seemed to concede at 394; see Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 2.3.18, esp. 604.

negating the efforts of those who can inculcate virtue” in our youth (309–10). Here, one might have expected Smith to challenge the Supreme Court jurisprudence of the past seventy years that has struck down as unconstitutional practically all expressions of public support for religion in the public square (e.g., a display of the Ten Commandments in a courthouse!), along with all restrictions on the public display of pornography (instead, we have “drag queens” conducting “story hours” for preschoolers in public libraries nationwide); and to resist the political pressure to include radical sex-“education” programs in public school curricula (at shockingly early ages). Unfortunately, however, while dismissing (as previously noted) the efforts of the seriously religious to address the decline of stable heterosexual families, Smith offers another random denunciation of the “selfish[ness]” and “shameless[ness]” of our “brightest and best,” whom he blames for the “near meltdown of markets” (as if such meltdowns were unprecedented, and as if they exemplified our gravest moral problem) (393n37).²⁶

The remainder of Smith’s prescriptions for soulcraft include the plausible but obvious (“rethink the moral foundations for citizen liberty and the capacity for personal self-control and responsibility that are demanded by republicanism”; “consider how to maximize the number of individuals motivated by...internal checks on behavior” [309–10]); and the interesting but excessively general injunctions to foster “a conception of justice” whereby “individuals take it upon themselves...to protect the weak by defending their liberty and self-sufficiency, not by turning them into...bureaucratic pets” and to promote a “rational religion” (314–15; Smith offers little specificity on how to distinguish rational from irrational forms of religion). Others embody the same sort of unsupported policy generalizations—make “domestic” rather than “international engagement” “the primacy focus of our political life,” as if other nations and terrorist groups left this a matter of choice (314); “reward the slow, gradual, long-term accumulation of capital over the home run” (394; in an age of rapid technological innovation, is it wise to discourage entrepreneurs and investors—any more than we do baseball players—from swinging for the fences?)—that characterized Smith’s previous economic prescriptions.

Summing up: Gregory Smith has made an important contribution to our intellectual and (potentially) political life by demonstrating that Cicero

²⁶ Smith repeats his knock on the “brightest and best,” along with “our social, political, [and] educational elites,” at 312, remarking that we cannot “expect the most scrupulous attention to ethical behavior...for the public good” from them, but the ground of these populist, throwaway lines—which might have emanated from either Donald Trump or Bernie Sanders—remains obscure.

is a far more interesting thinker than academic pedants of the past century and more have made him out to be; by showing how Cicero constitutes a worthy role model for reconciling serious philosophic study with republican statesmanship; and by suggesting that the gap between classical and modern liberal political philosophy is less great than it is sometimes thought to be. He indicates how the study of Cicero can inspire a prudent moderation of the extremes to which Lockean individualism, taken alone, might lead us, as well as offering an attractive alternative to the exciting but dangerously antiliberal doctrines of Nietzsche, which have continued to infect our academic life in the guise of “liberation.”

The criticisms I have made of Smith’s book are secondary to the foregoing praise. I have questioned some of the distinctions he makes (on Cicero’s behalf) between the teachings of Plato and Aristotle, and have suggested that in his attempt to elevate Cicero’s support of republican statesmanship, he sometimes exaggerates the Roman’s differences from Aristotle regarding the relative merits of the contemplative and political lives, while downplaying the Stagirite’s respect for politics and morality. Finally, Smith would have done better to refrain from offering policy prescriptions and judgments that failed to embody genuine Ciceronian prudence.

Despite these reservations, I strongly commend *Political Philosophy and the Republican Future* to my academic colleagues, hoping that others will follow Smith’s lead in studying Cicero’s writings, and in reconsidering the link between substantive political philosophy, grounded in human nature, and the preservation of republican government—a link that, as Smith demonstrates, runs in both directions.