

Interpretation

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Volume 46 Issue 3

- 443 Lisa Leibowitz Poetic Justice: An In-Depth Examination of Aristophanes's Portrait of Socrates
- 471 Alessandro Mulieri A Modern in Disguise? Leo Strauss on Marsilius of Padua
- 495 Devin Stauffer Locke on the Limits of Human Understanding
- 513 Charles R. Sullivan Churchill's Marlborough: The Character of a Trimmer
- 533 Ying Zhang The Guide to *The Guide*: Some Observations on "How To Begin To Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*"
- Book Reviews:**
- 565 Marco Andreacchio *Dante's Philosophical Life: Politics and Human Wisdom in "Purgatorio"* by Paul Stern
- 573 Elizabeth Corey *Michael Oakeshott and Leo Strauss: The Politics of Renaissance and Enlightenment* by David McIlwain
- 579 Emily A. Davis *The Life of Alcibiades: Dangerous Ambition and the Betrayal of Athens* by Jacqueline de Romilly; translated by Elizabeth Trapnell Rawlings
- 585 Jerome C. Foss *The Catholic Writings of Orestes Brownson* by Michael P. Federici
- 589 Steven H. Frankel *Debunking Howard Zinn: Exposing the Fake History That Turned a Generation against America* by Mary Grabar
- 595 Raymond Hain *The Soul of Statesmanship: Shakespeare on Nature, Virtue, and Political Wisdom*, edited by Khalil M. Habib and L. Joseph Hebert Jr.
- 601 Richard Jordan *Democracy and Imperialism: Irving Babbitt and Warlike Democracies* by William S. Smith
- 607 Spencer Krauss *Homer's Hero: Human Excellence in the "Iliad" and the "Odyssey"* by Michelle M. Kundmueller
- 613 Lucien Oulahbib *Lacan contra Foucault: Subjectivity, Sex and Politics*, edited by Nadia Bou Ali and Rohit Goel
- 627 Jan P. Schenkenberger *Briefwechsel 1919–1973* by Martin Heidegger and Karl Löwith, and *Fiala: Die Geschichte einer Versuchung* by Karl Löwith
- 639 Mark A. Scully *Bureaucracy in America: The Administrative State's Challenge to Constitutional Government* by Joseph Postell
- 645 Benjamin Slomski *The Rediscovery of America: Essays by Harry V. Jaffa on the New Birth of Politics* by Harry V. Jaffa, and *Unmasking the Administrative State: The Crisis of American Politics in the Twenty-First Century* by John Marini
- 655 Scott Yenor *Sparta's First Attic War: The Grand Strategy of Classical Sparta, 478–446 B.C.* by Paul A. Rahe

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Paul Stern, *Dante's Philosophical Life: Politics and Human Wisdom in "Purgatorio."* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018, 304 pp., \$65.00 (hardcover).

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Paul Stern's Dante is a teacher of life, a moral teacher, for whom morality is not, however, grounded in intelligible truth, but in ignorance and deception: the ignorance of nonphilosophers and the deception carried out by philosophers for the alleged benefit of all. In exposing Dante's supposed message, however, Stern de facto sustains nothing short of the public abrogation of *philosophy as an unjust way of life*; by the same token, Stern's argument disengaging politics and morality from any metaphysical or theological ground feeds *volens nolens* into the inglorious flourishing of "entertainment" as our present libertine age's most revered idol. To be sure, Stern's Dante is a "lover of knowledge," as opposed to petty entertainment. Yet the love cherished goes hand in hand with perplexity, is one with perplexity, and its object is a broken Self anticipating late or post-modernity's "subjectivity." As a result, it is not clear how, if at all, Stern's Dante's love of knowledge counters the drive—so rampant in our "entertainment industry"—of narcissistic compulsions.

Stern's reading of Dante strikes a familiar chord in the ear of those accustomed to what has become in recent years a seemingly standard reading of Strauss as propounder of an instrumentalist, if not altogether Machiavellian approach to religion or theology. The "end," of course, is supposed to be good,

* The present critical review condenses arguments and insights articulated in depth and scholarly detail in the forthcoming article "Christianity and Philosophy in Dante" to appear in *Mediaevalia*, no. 42 (2021).

yet its means is conceived as frankly *beyond* good and evil. Ironically, morality itself is supposed to be *amoral* insofar as it stands as instrument of supermoral (read: morally indifferent) pursuits, rather than as pathway to a proper, at once immanent and transcendent, good—a Ciceronian *res publica*.¹ The common good is then replaced by the good of the philosopher, even as the philosopher *can be* beneficial to nonphilosophers. This is where Dante is supposed to be of help. His poetry is precisely what Stern sees as filling the gap between the good of philosophers and the good of nonphilosophers—between the truth of reason and that of, well, faith. How does Dante’s “philosophical poetry” fulfill its task? In a twofold, tongue-in-cheek manner, by using Christianity (medieval theology) and Neoplatonism (represented by Virgil) against each other in the interests of “a new revelation” (221) that relishes immanence (after Neoplatonism) in the very act, however, of discovering its brokenness (Christian insight). Dante’s new revelation incarnates a *political* synthesis of two supposedly antipolitical stances, inheriting Christianity’s sensitivity towards the worldly self’s dividedness and Christianity’s pagan nemesis’s rejection of divine transcendence.

Part and parcel of Dante’s synthesis is the denial of any fundamental unity of consciousness, of any absolute identity grounding contextual ones. The consummate hero expresses his heroism by feeling at home in his discordant self, renouncing any quest for a truth beyond perplexity, in favor of perplexity conceived as truth. Having renounced any quest for the eternal, the enlightened hero takes seriously (that is, takes as irreducible) our “political” dividedness; having turned to the human world (“history”?) as self-referential, the same hero resists any implosion of the political into the carnal (“elemental” selfishness)—even as the latter is seen as grounding the former.

Can the political be salvaged in Stern’s terms? Or does it need a firmer, “stronger” grounding—clearly not one provided by any Kantian or neo-Kantian “as if”? As the “ideals” of contemporary political discourse (not least of them, those of multiculturalism and environmentalism) are melting across the world like wax into the cauldron of despotism, more than “broken

¹ “Thus it is—said Scipio—that the Public Good (Republic) is the Good of the People, although the People is not any sort of herd of men gathered in any which way, but the gathering of a multitude associated by a shared sense of right and of common utility; and yet, the first cause of such a gathering is not so much weakness, as that natural disposition of men as if to join a herd” (Est igitur res publica, res poluli; populus autem non omnis hominum cœtus quoquo modo congregatus, sed cœtus multitudinis iuris consensu et utilitatis communione sociatus; eius autem prima causa coeundi est non tam inbecillitas quam naturalis quaedam hominum quasi congregatio) (Cicero, *De re publica* 1.25, in the footsteps of Aristotle, *Politics* bk. 1).

subjectivity” or an appeal thereto is needed to prevent politics from decaying into subpolitical barbarism. No academic emptying out of politics of any metaphysical pretense would seem fit to contrast the flooding of politics with progressive frenzy.

Stern’s Dante subverts the very idea of classical political philosophy, which had entailed a quest for the essential meaning of political life and order. By severing politics from any metaphysical unity, Stern’s reading invites a philosophy for which politics is “designed to produce an efflorescence of human powers” (178–79), disguising the deep “perplexities” that the philosopher sets out to expose, “to think anew,” by way of challenging their moral-political mask (179–80). In short, philosophy invites the production of political-moral masks of the “perplexities” that philosophy sets out to expose. Politics emerges as merely instrumental to the philosopher’s revelation of a broken being.

What is said of politics and morality applies *mutatis mutandis* to beauty and pleasure, as well. Stern’s volume instrumentalizes both aspects of life by disengaging them from the problem of eternity, or from eternity as essential dimension of mind. Just as beauty points to no transcendence, pleasure cannot be pure: pleasure and pain are inextricable by the very fact that pleasure does not signal the redeeming presence of what is always present, even though *we* are not present to it unless sporadically, in the medium of our own makings. In short, Stern’s Dante opens the door to modernity’s opposition of *aesthetics*, as science of beauty, to *ethics*, now reduced to a science of mere utility. The classical desire for which beauty is necessarily bound to a common good (*utilitas communis*) reflecting directly a supreme good (*summum bonum*) or Plato’s “the idea of the good,” yields irrevocably to desire pointing to our material shortcomings, which is to say, to our existence, or mortality and the concomitant need to mask it. Now, this *poetic* masking is said to be for the good *of all*, namely, of both philosophers and nonphilosophers, although, again, the good addressed is a broken one, insofar as the good of philosophers consists in the self-reflection of a broken subjectivity, whereas the good of nonphilosophers consists in being entertained by artifices sedating passions that would otherwise threaten the philosophical life, not least of them the passion of moral indignation (82, 114), to which our common sense of injustice seems to be reduced without remainder.

There is no appeal to justice in Stern’s work; no trace left of any classical teaching of natural right. And if “elemental” selfishness is countered, it is in the tacit name of enlightened selfishness, of a selfishness grounded in the marriage of “sexual desire” and “reason,” emerging, in turn, out of the primacy

of “becoming” and “possibility” over being and actuality (72–79 and 88). In conformity with such a premise, Stern’s Dante offers us no ethical model, no ethical incarnation of intellectual virtue. Concrete models of ethical integrity, models providing a reliable compass to political life, would seem to entail a natural hierarchy of ends, and thus a rootedness of ethics in *metaphysical questions as ends*. Instead of any concrete path of life that we may emulate qua political agents, Stern’s Dante offers us a discourse pointing from ethics to flesh-bound “finitude” as “source... of human good” (241). Stern’s “defense” of politics/ethics exposes itself, in this respect, to the objection that it bereaves its target of any anchorage allowing it to stay afloat in the face of the temptation to relapse into the intimate *source* of human good. Ultimately, Stern’s reading seems to undermine the “exoteric” dimension of political life, by upholding it as a mere means to an “esoteric” dimension in which “philosophers” alone are truly at home. What non-philosophers are left with, in effect, is not a *way of nobility* to follow, but ideals in the dark (“the obscure”), linguistic formulas directing us towards their unforeseeable realization. Such a realization requires, among other things, the rejection of any requirement to be good independently of the work demanded to progress towards the realization of a Kantian-like “Kingdom of Ends.” Once again, the shadow of modernity is projected upon Dante.

If an alternative reading of Dante is called for, it need not deny the *poetic* character of politics as mask of ignorance, and yes, of perplexity, too, particularly in the face of death. What is objectionable in Stern is not the stress he places upon the concealment at work in ordinary political life, but the scholar’s closure to any recognition of a sense, or unity of meaning to political life more fundamental than any perplexity and the thought thereof. To speak in biblical terms, what is objectionable in Stern is what is objectionable in much of modern political thought, namely, a conception of man that dispenses with any “original blessing,” to confine man’s genealogy to a “fallen” condition. The foremost implication of such a confinement is—as Giambattista Vico showed incisively in his critiques of modern anthropology (Hobbes, Descartes, Spinoza, Locke, etc.)—an outright rejection of any and all divine providence (as opposed, for instance, to what we might call a “historical providence”). Now, as much as Stern’s opposition to fideistic readings of Dante may be justified, Stern’s volume has not shown what it seems to take for granted, namely, that we can read Dante *as a whole* without taking seriously his teachings concerning divine providence, natural or otherwise.

The absence of divine providence points further back to the separation of the human from the divine, of the ethical from the metaphysical, of what appears “after nature” from what hides “before nature.” On Stern’s reading, Dante is then a thoroughly modern man, oriented towards the future since he conceives of origins *in themselves* as subhuman, and thus as constituting something we naturally tend to rise *above*. Even reflection upon the “broken” underpinnings of politics is supposed to be above or superior to these underpinnings.

In sum, Stern’s defense of politics amounts to the defense of a characteristically (late) modern conception of politics on account of which we are, in fact, *compelled* to live politically (239). The vindication of politics stands upon a description of man’s origins as subpolitical. Stern might object that for his Dante the encounter with the “other” is primordial. Yet any such encounter is a far cry from the nobility political life can reflect and indeed incarnate. What the politics addressed by Stern’s Dante points to is nothing noble, let alone sacred, but “the desires that shape [our] thinking,” the thinking of nonphilosophers and philosophers alike (157). Politics reflects desires the vision of which makes us “acutely aware of the partiality of knowing” (154). Brokenness, relativity, finitude: these are the inglorious conquests of a science of politics cut off from the suprapolitical.

Though in Stern politics is “the realm of action and reflection on action that most reveals the soul” (156), what is meant by “soul,” here, is hardly anything noble or worthy of high esteem; far from being a mirror of the superhuman, the political life envisioned by Stern mirrors nothing but the subhuman, if only as fuel for a society of *homines fabri*, men compelled, virtually destined, to spin dreams convincing them of their fragility and of the concomitant necessity of their dream making.

Stern’s Dante’s hero is then a man intimately, even happily aware of his limits, not because he has seen past them (as ancient Socratics had?), but because the “poetic” medium of his awareness points him systematically away from the unlimited, to revel in the limited, the finite, the partial in its openness to further, inescapable partiality. Such is the content of Dante’s supposed “new revelation,” the lesson Dante is supposed to have reckoned himself to be responsible to prophesy so that a new, “healthier” “world-historical” society may emerge (240).

The vision at hand is tantalizing, especially inasmuch as it invites the thought that the triumph of finitude presupposes the transcendence of the

ancestral intuition of a necessary bond between the limited and the unlimited, between politics and metaphysics: Stern's own thesis stands on the shoulders of his critique of medieval Christianity in the persons of Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas. Their *premodern* intuition is now belittled as unduly limited, blind, as it were, to the real nature of our limits. It would then be unfair to conclude that Stern dispenses altogether with the category of the unlimited. If only tacitly, he evokes it by ascending (or perhaps descending) onto the horizon of finitude radically unbound to infinity. Just as, for Stern, "Dante's moderation culminates in... immoderate love," so does his finitude culminate in a kind of infinity characterized most tellingly by "human time" (249).

The secular, "healthier" society Stern's book evokes as incarnating the mutual separation of ethics and metaphysics carries within its bosom the unresolved problem of knowledge without virtue and of virtue without knowledge. If ethics were as shut to metaphysics as Leibnizian monads are to causal influences, then no knowledge (as such) could alter our moral life. Such a lesson would seem to be confirmed by the Socratic hypothesis that virtue cannot be taught: virtue needs to be cultivated, lived. Yet for Socrates the life of virtue is inseparable from the question of truth. Truth alone, as revealed through the practice of scratching beneath the façade of human certainty, can prove to Socrates that the divine speaks truthfully, which is to say, that human speech presupposes and thus somehow depends upon divine speech. Holding that virtue cannot be taught is fine as long as we do not thereupon infer that truth does not transcend the realm of ethics, or that the ethical life demands the banishment of metaphysics. Accordingly, the Socratic hypothesis spelled out most notably in Plato's *Protagoras* is open to the possibility that knowledge has a positive influence on our moral life. To return to Dante, the human requires exposure to the divine: a purgatory shut to heavenly gardens would be less than human. Conversely, far from abrogating ethics, metaphysics illuminates ethics, both from without (religiously) and from within (philosophically). And if vice proves to be "an emancipator of the mind," as W. E. H. Lecky would poignantly remark,² that is not under the *modern* assumption that truth is a pragmatic synthesis of virtues and vices (Machiavelli), but under an older assumption that virtue alone does not resolve the problem of truth for us: ethics or politics cannot resolve metaphysical questions any more than meta

² Leo Strauss cites W. E. H. Lecky's *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe*, vol. 2 (1883) in a heading for "Persecution and the Art of Writing," in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 22.

physics can resolve political problems.³ Neither does Dante's Paradise silence Purgatory, rendering human providence expendable, even as Stern's de facto silencing of Paradise, and thereby of divine providence, remains unjustifiable.

³ The constitutional openness of ethics to metaphysics signals an ineffaceable categorical distinction between *doing* good and *being* good. Goodness as such requires *both* deed and knowledge in their mutual irreducibility (we do not *know* simply for the sake of *doing*, and we do not *do* simply so that we may *know*: the primacy of truth does not render our work superfluous, even as it prevents it from being self-sufficient).

