

# Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Fall 2020

Volume 47 Issue 1

- 1 *Kojima Hidenobu* The Value of the Feudalistic Relationship in Edmund Burke's Political Economy
- 21 *Aaron Zubia* The Centrality of Convention in Hume's Moral and Political Philosophy
- 43 *Anthony Vecchio & J. A. Colen* **Leo Strauss's Walgreen Lectures on Machiavelli**  
The "Modern Principle": The Second Walgreen Lectures by Leo Strauss (1954)
- 119 *Borys M. Kowalsky & Patrick Malcolmson* **Review Essays**  
*Unmasking the Administrative State: The Crisis of American Politics in the Twenty-First Century* by John Marini
- 137 *David Lewis Schaefer* *The Habermas-Rawls Debate* by James Gordon Finlayson
- 153 *David Lewis Schaefer* *The Rediscovery of America: Essays by Harry V. Jaffa on the New Birth of Politics*, edited by Edward J. Erler and Ken Masugi
- 169 *Christine J. Basil* **Book Reviews**  
*Aristotle's Art of Rhetoric: Translated and with an Interpretive Essay* by Robert Bartlett
- 179 *Matthew Berry* *Augustine's Political Thought*, edited by Richard J. Dougherty
- 185 *Erin A. Dolgoy* *Francis Bacon* by David C. Innes
- 193 *Steven H. Frankel* *Curing Mad Truths: Medieval Wisdom for the Modern Age* by Rémi Brague
- 199 *Raymond Hain* *The Postsecular Political Philosophy of Jürgen Habermas: Translating the Sacred* by Dafydd Huw Rees
- 205 *Samuel Mead* *Plato's Tough Guys and Their Attachment to Justice* by Peter J. Hansen
- 211 *Charles U. Zug* *The Lost Soul of the American Presidency* by Stephen F. Knott

# Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

- Editor-in-Chief* Timothy W. Burns, Baylor University
- General Editors* Charles E. Butterworth • Timothy W. Burns
- General Editors (Late)* Howard B. White (d. 1974) • Robert Horwitz (d. 1987)  
Seth G. Benardete (d. 2001) • Leonard Grey (d. 2009) •  
Hilail Gildin (d. 2015)
- Consulting Editors* David Lowenthal • Harvey C. Mansfield • Thomas L.  
Pangle • Ellis Sandoz • Kenneth W. Thompson
- Consulting Editors (Late)* Leo Strauss (d. 1973) • Arnaldo Momigliano (d. 1987) •  
Michael Oakeshott (d. 1990) • John Hallowell (d. 1992)  
• Ernest L. Fortin (d. 2002) • Muhsin Mahdi (d. 2007) •  
Joseph Cropsey (d. 2012) • Harry V. Jaffa (d. 2015)
- International Editors* Terence E. Marshall • Heinrich Meier
- Editors* Peter Ahrens Dorf • Wayne Ambler • Marco Andreacchio •  
Maurice Auerbach • Robert Bartlett • Fred Baumann • Eric  
Buzzetti • Susan Collins • Patrick Coby • Erik Dempsey •  
Elizabeth C'de Baca Eastman • Edward J. Erler • Maureen  
Feder-Marcus • Robert Goldberg • L. Joseph Hebert •  
Pamela K. Jensen • Hannes Kerber • Mark J. Lutz • Daniel  
Ian Mark • Ken Masugi • Carol L. McNamara • Will  
Morrisey • Amy Nendza • Charles T. Rubin • Leslie G.  
Rubin • Thomas Schneider • Susan Meld Shell • Geoffrey  
T. Sigalet • Nicholas Starr • Devin Stauffer • Bradford P.  
Wilson • Cameron Wybrow • Martin D. Yaffe • Catherine  
H. Zuckert • Michael P. Zuckert
- Copy Editor* Les Harris
- Designer* Sarah Teutschel
- Inquiries* ***Interpretation, A Journal of Political Philosophy***  
Department of Political Science  
Baylor University  
1 Bear Place, 97276  
Waco, TX 76798
- email* [interpretation@baylor.edu](mailto:interpretation@baylor.edu)

---

Rémi Brague, *Curing Mad Truths: Medieval Wisdom for the Modern Age*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019, vii + 142 pp., \$29.99 (paper).

---

STEVEN H. FRANKEL

XAVIER UNIVERSITY

*Frankel@xavier.edu*

Shortly after the referendum in Great Britain to withdraw from the European Union in 2016, a small group of scholars on the Continent issued “The Paris Statement—A Europe We Can Believe In.”<sup>1</sup> The document lays out in thirty-six concise statements a diagnosis of the declining EU and a prescription to improve its condition. The authors suggest that the EU has reached an impasse because it has abandoned its traditions and institutions, which have been cherished for generations and have contributed to a uniquely tolerant and public-minded set of nations. In its place, they argue, the EU has adopted a new ersatz religion, devoted to globalism and the belief in progress. The document concludes by calling for statesmen to articulate the value of nation states and particular traditions.

One of the twelve signatories, Rémi Brague, has been making these arguments for much of his impressive career. Brague, the emeritus professor of medieval and Arabic philosophy at Paris I and the Romano Guardini chair of philosophy at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität (Munich), is well known to readers of *Interpretation* thanks to his continuing engagement with the work of Leo Strauss. Brague’s particular interest in Strauss’s diagnosis of the theological-political problem has had a profound influence on his scholarship. In fact, several of Brague’s major works present a sort of response to Strauss. In *The Law of God*, for instance, he challenges Strauss’s account of the idea of divine law, and in *Eccentric Culture: A Theory of Western Civilization*, he offers an alternative to Strauss’s account of the West by including a

<sup>1</sup> <https://thetrueeurope.eu/a-europe-we-can-believe-in/>.

more prominent role for Rome or Christianity as an alternative to Athens and Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup>

Brague's most recent work, *Curing Mad Truths*, offers a useful point of entry into his thought as a whole, and also allows readers to grasp the relation between his theoretical work and its contemporary political import. The book concludes with an imagined dialogue between Brague and a political opponent who has just listened to his argument. His interlocutor observes: "You claim to defend law and order, or anything whatsoever that you advertise as being valuable; in fact, you simply get cold feet when confronted with reforms...that could endanger your position as a privileged member of a ruling elite." Brague does not deny that he is a member of a ruling elite, even though his views are clearly at odds with the leading contemporary moral and political views in the West. Instead, he responds on theoretical grounds: "what has to be salvaged is not a particular political system any longer, not even a definite civilization. It is mankind as a whole, the speaking animal... that doubts of its own legitimacy and that needs grounds for wishing to push further the human adventure" (114–15). In short, Brague's political project relies on a broad theoretical framework. *Curing Mad Truths* intends to explain this framework.

The book argues that modernity as a whole has failed to ground its project for the conquest of nature in terms of the human good. The term "mad truths" comes from G. K. Chesterton, who described the modern world as "full of the old Christian virtues gone mad." The phrase is commonly misquoted as "mad truths" (rather than mad virtues) because Chesterton himself explains that their madness comes from a "man who has lost everything except his reason" (1). The modern project liberates reason from the context of human experience, which gives it meaning, and as a result leads us into folly. Chesterton subsequently revised his thesis: there are no Christian virtues per se, only human virtues that are universal and eternal. This correction brings the defects of the modern project into sharper focus. That project borrows its notion of virtue from the medieval and ancient traditions, even as it distorts and ultimately destroys it. This is Brague's thesis: the modern project relies heavily on medieval and ancient notions that it can no longer explain

---

<sup>2</sup> Rémi Brague, *The Law of God: The Philosophical History of an Idea*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Brague, *Eccentric Culture: A Theory of Western Civilization*, trans. Samuel Lester (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's, 2002). Two works devoted to Strauss specifically are Brague, "Athens, Jerusalem, Mecca: Leo Strauss's 'Muslim' Understanding of Greek Philosophy," *Poetics Today* 19, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 235–59; Brague, "Leo Strauss and Maimonides," trans. C. J. Sheldon, in *Leo Strauss's Thought*, ed. Alan Udoff (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1991), 93–114.

or justify.<sup>3</sup> Inevitably these notions are perverted to the point of madness or pathology. The idea, for example, of repentance persists in the modern world. We still feel guilt over our wrongdoings and seek forgiveness for them. But we are apt to blame them on the sins of our ancestors rather than on ourselves, and to make matters worse, we no longer acknowledge an authority capable of absolving us. Rather than achieving forgiveness, the idea of repentance becomes a “mad truth” of infinite, unforgivable guilt.

The cure for such mad truths is the recovery of their older, fuller meaning. In *The Legitimacy of the Human*, Brague had argued that the best place to begin searching for this meaning is the medieval Catholic Church, particularly the work of Thomas Aquinas, who Brague suggests provides the most coherent and profound synthesis of philosophy and Christianity. The notion of recovering this synthesis is fraught with risk. Many medieval and ancient ideas are obsolete or wrong. On the other hand, the modern prejudice is to see the past as the dark ages of superstition in order to promote the modern project of science and enlightenment. Here Brague proves himself a sober guide: “Medieval people were exactly as smart and as stupid, as benighted and as enlightened, as generous and as wicked, and so on, as we are now. But they were not so in the same way. When modern times set on, they brought about ‘new learning and new ignorance’ in a perfect balance. Some new things were learned while other ones were forgotten, either not paid attention or even given good riddance to” (5). This is not a question of “progress or return.” Both options, Brague insists, are untenable. Instead, he proposes that a “rescue mission” is in order to recover the full meaning of our most cherished ideas before they undermine and destroy us. Otherwise, as Brague suggests in one of his many evocative references, we are like the sea captain in Joseph Conrad’s *End of the Tether*, who must continue sailing despite his failing eyesight in order to satisfy his daughter’s need for money. “He keeps leading his ship till she finally suffers shipwreck” (34).

Brague’s strategy is to compare contemporary concepts of nature, freedom, virtue, and so forth with their older counterparts and to show how the newer versions are incoherent and unstable. Some concepts, such as atheism, are wholesale abandonments of older notions, but they take their meaning in opposition to the older notion. In the case of contemporary atheism, Brague admits that the situation looks bleak, and that evidence of religious revivals

---

<sup>3</sup> This is the theme of Brague’s *The Kingdom of Man: Genesis and Failure of the Modern Project*, trans. Paul Seaton (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018). It is reprised in chap. 1 of *Curing Mad Truths*.

in some places could simply be “rear-guard battles” (24). Furthermore, at least at the beginning of the Enlightenment, there was no pressing need for science to give an account of the ultimate nature of reality. It seemed sufficient to pursue security and comfort and thereby relieve man’s estate. But doubts about the Enlightenment began to emerge as men sought to conquer and exploit the earth to achieve these goals. These concerns were soon followed by broader doubts concerning man’s superiority to animals (cf. 28–29, 39). Our experience of the brutality and violence of atheistic regimes appears to confirm these worries. At this stage, reason turns against the project of the Enlightenment and against human life itself.

Writing about contemporary Europe, Brague notes the plummeting birth rates among educated people and remarks: “we absolutely must be able to tell why the existence of human beings on this earth is a good thing” (31). Brague thus turns from his account of the failure of atheism to his argument for the “necessity of goodness.” Significantly, Brague chooses to begin with Aristotle rather than revelation. Aristotle argues in the *Politics* that “the political community comes into being for the sake of life, but it goes on existing for the sake of the good life” (cf. 36). The good is secondary to our self-preservation and thus we may, as prudence dictates, have to forgo it temporarily for a more pressing need. In a sense, then, we can survive without a notion of the good, but we cannot live well nor can we sustain life. Brague presses further, arguing that access to the good is necessary. He suggests that freedom is a necessary precondition of moral action, and that we gain that freedom despite the determination of our bodies and birth, by access to the good. Brague finds this notion of the good in both Athens and Jerusalem; it is “the good news implied by both Plato and the Bible” (45).

I have focused here on Brague’s treatment of the good because it gets to the heart of his analysis. Without some transcendent point of reference, some notion of the good, humanity finds itself unable to justify and explain its life such that it is willing to continue its existence. The spirit of Brague’s book is surprisingly conciliatory, particularly on the question of Athens vs. Jerusalem. Moreover, though he does refer to Christianity’s advantages over both Athens and Jerusalem, his emphasis here is on dialogue rather than polemics (see 66–67, 113). Moreover, he insists that these traditions and their texts should be studied as knowledge that will nourish and enrich us, not as mere historical curiosities or in the spirit of historicism.

We can certainly admire and find comfort in Brague’s argument, but there remains a lingering difficulty: Does not Brague’s project, like the Paris

Statement, rest on faith? Would anything cause the West to turn back from its present course? To his credit, Brague is aware of this difficulty. For example, he ends his chapter on “values or virtues” with a kind of prayer: “In the present day, Western mankind is badly in need of this double rediscovery and recovery: on the one hand, of the virtues as being good for each and every human being, and on the other hand, of obedience to the commandment to be, and to be what one is. May it understand this necessity and this urgency” (89). In short, Brague’s important project rests on a prayer that humanity will come to its senses and, following either logos or revelation, recognize the goodness of its being. Though Brague may be the model of a sober-minded political philosopher, his project for the salvation of the West rests on a hope—for a miracle.

The difficulty that appears to thwart Brague’s argument and the Paris Statement was analyzed by Ernest Fortin nearly forty years ago, in a penetrating essay that appeared in *Interpretation*.<sup>4</sup> Fortin explains that the teachings of Christianity are eschatological or transpolitical, such that any attempt to derive a political program from them is futile. The New Testament does not distinguish between regimes, nor does it suggest a preference for one type of regime over another. Furthermore, “its dominant theme is not justice, but love, and love as a political principle is a pretty fuzzy thing” (350). For Christians, including Brague, this is a great virtue because it calls humanity to a higher destiny, and identifies a domain beyond civil society as a locus of virtue. As Christianity began to spread, however, it was forced to issue practical guidance to its adherents, and the only viable alternative was “to introduce political philosophy into the Christian scheme” (351). In this arrangement, political philosophy was given new life, but at the cost of constant ecclesiastical surveillance. However, since political philosophy had already developed an esoteric component, adherents to this new regime knew how to preserve their freedom by living outwardly as Christians.

The situation prevailed and benefited both sides until the Enlightenment launched an all-out attack on faith in the name of science. As we have seen, Brague too describes this attack; however, according to Fortin, the attack had several unanticipated consequences. For one thing, Christianity became unmoored from political philosophy even as its adherents made ever greater

---

<sup>4</sup> Ernest Fortin, “Rational Theologians and Irrational Philosophers: A Straussian Perspective,” *Interpretation* 12, nos. 2–3 (1984): 349–56. The essay was reprinted in *Collected Essays*, vol. 2, *Classical Christianity and the Political Order: Reflections on the Theologico-Political Problem*, ed. J. Brian Benestad (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), 287–96.

claims on its behalf. Fortin cites Chateaubriand as the basis for the modern rehabilitation of Christianity on the grounds that it is the source of everything good in modernity. As Lessing, who witnessed the transformation first hand, observed in a letter to his brother: "A curtain had been drawn between faith and philosophy, behind which each could go his own way without disturbing the other. But what is happening now? They are tearing down this curtain, and under the pretext of making us rational Christians, they are making us very irrational philosophers" (quoted by Brague at 354). Modern thought attempts to settle the quarrel between reason and revelation by separating them into discrete domains. This liberates theologians to embrace doctrines incompatible with the teachings of the Gospel. Philosophers too are liberated from the need to appear faithful and have used this freedom to attack theologians with unmitigated ire, indifferent to the political consequences. Remi Brague's project to recover medieval truths is surely a noble and worthy endeavor. Nonetheless, in an age of unbelief, where convictions are grounded in neither reason nor authoritative tradition, his prospects, both theologically and politically, remain slender.