

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Summer 2021

Volume 47 Issue 3

- 439 *Ann Charney Colmo* The Virtues and the Audience in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*
- 457 *Dustin Gish* Reasonable Foundations for Happiness: The Pursuit of Self-Knowledge in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*
- 483 *Dana Jalbert Stauffer* Richard III, Moralism: Shakespeare's Critique of the Politics of Christian Piety
- 503 *Jeffrey A. Bernstein* **Review Essays**
The Philosophy of Emil Fackenheim: From Revelation to the Holocaust by Kenneth Hart Green
- 519 *Borys M. Kowalsky* *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Artists of the New Weimar* by Sebastian Schütze
- 555 *Robert A. Ballingall* **Book Reviews**
The Spartan Drama of Plato's "Laws" by Eli Friedland
- 563 *Adam M. Carrington* Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*: two editions by Jeffrey Kahan and Jan Blits
- 569 *David Fott* *The Philosophy of Isaiah Berlin* by Johnny Lyons
- 575 *Will Morrisey* *Memoirs on Pauperism and Other Writings: Poverty, Public Welfare, and Inequality* by Alexis de Tocqueville
- 587 *Antoine Pageau-St-Hilaire* *Leo Strauss and the Theopolitics of Culture* by Philipp von Wussow
- 593 *Benjamin Schvarcz* *Justice Is Steady Work: A Conversation on Political Theory* by Michael Walzer and Astrid von Busekist
- 599 *Daniel Tanguay* *Montaigne: Life without Law* by Pierre Manent
- 605 *Jonathan Yudelman* *Natural Law and Human Rights: Toward a Recovery of Practical Reason* by Pierre Manent

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 • Lorraine Pangle • 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

Philipp von Wussow, *Leo Strauss and the Theopolitics of Culture*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020, xxvi + 376 pp., \$95 (cloth), \$33.95 (paper).

ANTOINE PAGEAU-ST-HILAIRE

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

apsthilaire@uchicago.edu

The title of von Wussow's book will surprise and puzzle many a reader, and this for at least two reasons. First, the meaning of the word "theopolitics" is not self-evident, and it is even less obvious that it could be associated with Leo Strauss's philosophical work. To be sure, religion and politics both occupy a crucial place in Strauss's thought and while he did think of the "theological-political problem" as *the* problem, he never coined the term "theopolitics," never attempted to bring religion and politics *together*, and even criticized political theology for doing so.¹ Second, the title suggests that Strauss thought of "culture" as a central notion for philosophy. Strauss did reflect on the problem that the notion of culture has posed for philosophy, but given his critique of the notion, we could hardly say that he proposed a renewed philosophy of culture. Fortunately, this is not what von Wussow claims. The misleading title could be clarified thus: Strauss's thought is best understood as a philosophical attempt to oppose "culture" and philosophies of culture with *political* philosophy, and political philosophy must necessarily reflect on the problem posed by revealed religion. "Strauss's conception of political philosophy was formed in the polemics against the notion of 'culture'" (x).

The book is structured around *Philosophy and Law*, "German Nihilism," the problem of relativism, and "Jerusalem and Athens," texts and themes

¹ On the theological-political problem as *the* theme of Strauss's work, see Leo Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, ed. H. and W. Meier (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2008), 8.

the discussion of which is prepared by a contextual section that presents the young Strauss's departure from Marburg neo-Kantianism and his critique of Carl Schmitt. The text alternates between close textual analyses and broader contextual and philosophical considerations about the debates that were contemporary to Strauss's work. These contextual explorations are important for the author's project, for one of the main claims that his book puts to the fore is that we should understand Strauss's writings according not only to their arguments but also to their action. Von Wussow insists that Strauss's texts should not be read as straightforward treatises; while they are not as explicitly dramatic as Platonic dialogues, he maintains that their arguments have an action insofar as "concepts and problems act out their conflict" in participating in the "unfolding drama of philosophy" (293).

It is not immediately clear how this way of understanding the *logos-ergon* dynamic does not conflate the due attention to the dramatic features of a philosophical text and the necessity of some contextual work in interpreting philosophical writings. To be sure, philosophers disagreed with and responded to each other through the history of philosophy, and understanding this is important for any successful hermeneutic endeavor. But it is equally important to avoid two pitfalls of such contextual work. The first one is to reduce the work to a mere expression of its intellectual context. Fortunately, our author does not fall prey to such reductionism: von Wussow never disputes either the genuine originality or the enduring philosophical import of Strauss's thought. The second is to contextualize beyond what is required and thus to overemphasize the significance of some intertextual dynamics that the contextual work attempts to reveal. The reader may find von Wussow's book guilty of this charge. While some of his contextualizing of Strauss's work is relevant and helpful, other attempts seem exaggerated. On one hand, one could hardly deny that an examination of Strauss's relation to Hermann Cohen and Carl Schmitt is important for understanding his dissatisfaction with the rising philosophy of culture and the forgetting of political philosophy. Likewise, von Wussow's thorough explanation of Strauss's *Auseinandersetzung* with Julius Guttman around *Philosophie und Gesetz* allows a better understanding of this convoluted work. On the other hand, the lengthy discussions of the genre of genealogies of National Socialism preparing an interpretation of "German Nihilism" (163–91), the detailed account of the rise of cultural anthropology and of Ruth Benedict's positions on cannibalism as the background of Strauss's concern about the problem of relativism (219–25, 230–32, 234–37), as well as the contrast between Strauss's emphatic and "festive" notion of the "West" (Strauss is on this account compared to

Levinas) and the discourse of postcolonialism as the main dramatic feature of the “Jerusalem and Athens” lecture delivered in 1967 (266–69, 271) will most likely appear to the reader as superfluous, and sometimes even distracting detours. The author’s learning is vast and impressive and many of his remarks are interesting and stimulating, but contextual elaborations should be wholly subservient to the task of understanding the subject matter under scrutiny. Unfortunately, this principle is not diligently respected.² And one sometimes wonders whether these digressions do not serve the purpose of overemphasizing the importance of the problem of culture in Strauss’s thought.

Let us now turn from methodology to philosophy proper. Throughout his book, von Wussow rightly indicates that Strauss attempts to move beyond culture and cultures by recovering a universal horizon or standard. Early on, he points out that *nature* “is at the core of the quest for a ‘horizon beyond liberalism’ qua culturalism” (52). Several times, the quest for a standard or for nature is associated with Strauss’s recovery of Plato or his Platonism (xxii, 37–38, 61, 65, 196, 204, 264, 288–89, 293–94)—and I think rightly so. At the same time, however, von Wussow’s examination of the problem of relativism suggests that the logical self-contradiction of relativism was *not* a sound argument in Strauss’s eyes (247). Our author argues that Strauss’s strategy to attack relativism with its own weapons was hazardous and unsuccessful, except for its capacity to “awaken a prejudice’ in favor of the Bible and Plato, or Jerusalem and Athens” (252). I think this is a misleading understanding of Strauss’s attempt. The formal refutation of relativism is not meant to prove the validity of any given “absolutism,” but only to prove the impossibility of most relativistic positions: if one is dogmatic about one’s relativism, one is incoherent. And because the relativist is supposed to treat all positions equally, he must treat relativistic and absolutist positions as equal stances, which is also incoherent. Strauss’s point is not that “‘absolutism’ may indeed be ‘as true as relativism,’ but hence it is also as untrue as any relativistic position” (252). The point is rather that relativism cannot refute any absolutist position while most relativistic stances are self-contradictory, and thus refuted as far as they accept to submit to the rules of logic. Now there remains for the relativist one coherent possibility, which is to fully embrace the relativity and contingency of one’s own relativistic stance. Strauss was fully aware of that possibility, and he ascribed it to the radical historicism of Martin Heidegger. Strauss could certainly not submit Heidegger’s position to the formal self-contradiction of cultural

² To name but one more example, the discussion of the Mayer-Landauer debate on German philosophy and politics, which took place at the New School *after* Strauss’s “German Nihilism,” seems really out of place (188–91).

relativism, and the question whether he succeeded in answering the challenge of Heideggerian historicity is far beyond the scope of the present comments.³ But his argument against relativism was not meant to raise a nonrelativistic prejudice for Plato and the Bible on relativistic grounds. Once philosophy has removed the obstacle of relativism, it need not commit to any dogmatic position, but it must remain open to the *possibility* that some universal standard beyond the multiplicity of cultures is available to the human mind. *This* kind of openness, I believe, is how Strauss conceived of his recovery of Plato.⁴

Von Wussow thinks slightly differently. He correctly characterizes Strauss's Platonism when he asserts that "he sought to restate for twentieth-century thought the view that philosophy is knowledge of one's own ignorance" (289). But Socratic *docta ignorantia* is then quickly assimilated to a critique of human reason from the standpoint of divine revelation, as if Strauss's interpretation of Plato's *Apology* was not different from Yehuda Halevi's (cf. 282). Yet, as our author notes, Strauss thought that Halevi's interpretation went "somewhat too far."⁵ Von Wussow suggests that the difference between Halevi and Strauss is that Halevi saw in Socrates's *human* wisdom the possibility of divine wisdom and their harmonious compatibility, whereas Strauss saw in his paradoxical vindication of the Delphic oracle through an attempt to refute it the "genuine model of the relationship between reason and revelation" (282). I think that the difference is greater. As his reading of the *Euthyphro* suggests, Strauss thinks that Socrates does not believe in the gods of Greek religion, so he may very well have thought that Socrates doubts the divine origin of Chaerephon's testimony.⁶ At any rate, the Delphic oracle is *not*, on Strauss's interpretation, the genuine origin of Socrates's "mission."⁷ The real tension between reason and revelation will be found not in the tension between Socrates and Apollo, but in the tension between Plato and the Bible.

³ For Strauss's awareness that Heidegger's position escapes the formal refutation, see Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 25–28. On Heidegger's own critique of this formal argument and his full embrace of the radical uncertainty of the philosophical enterprise, see esp. Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995 [1929–30]), 18–19 [GA 29/30, 26–28].

⁴ Cf. Leo Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 38–39.

⁵ Leo Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 170.

⁶ See Leo Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, ed. T. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 201–2. Cf. *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, 41.

⁷ See *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, 46–47.

On this question of “Athens and Jerusalem,” von Wussow argues that the tension is ultimately irresolvable and remains for philosophy a *problem* (e.g., 264–65). While I agree with this interpretation, he does not seem to see how difficult this state of affairs is for philosophy *especially*:

How could the mutual nonrefutation of philosophy and revelation amount to a refutation of philosophy only? For if the mutual nonrefutability of philosophy and revelation refutes philosophy, it would also seem to refute revelation. If revelation cannot refute philosophy—the life of free investigation—then revelation is perhaps not the one thing needful, and the life of obedient love is not evidently the right life. (277)

The problem, as it has been frequently articulated, is that revelation does not need to *refute* philosophy because it can rest on *belief*, whereas philosophy, the basis of which is supposed to be unassisted *reason*, cannot accept to be grounded on an act of will: “being based on belief is fatal to philosophy.”⁸ Von Wussow’s interesting claim that Strauss’s emphatic vindication of the “West” appears less “old-fashioned” and dogmatic once the “West” is seen in the light of a fundamental tension (283) would only be strengthened if the force of that tension would be fully appreciated.

⁸ Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968), 256.