

# Interpretation

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This is an unusually coherent and provocative Festschrift. Credit is due surely to its editor, Evanthia Speliotis, but also to Ronna Burger in whose honor these chapters have been written. Professor Burger is very focused in her inquiries, and this is evident in those who can be counted her students and friends. Speliotis's title, *Nature, Law, and the Sacred*, almost captures the central theme that emerges from the volume. Rather than "sacred," the third noun might have more aptly been "tragedy," though it might not have made for as plausible a tripartite theme. Among Seth Benardete's students, Ronna Burger has devoted less time to "tragedy" and more to the "sacred"—and for that reason the editor's title may also make more sense. Nevertheless, her students and friends in this volume return again and again to tragedy in one form or another: whether it is ancient Greek tragedy's grasp of what makes human life tragic in the essays by Speliotis and Michael Davis; the antitragic spirit of Plato's appropriation of Aristophanes's *Ecclesiazusae* in *Republic* 5 in Derek Duplessie's piece; Aristotle's supposed overcoming of tragedy in political life in *Nicomachean Ethics* 5, in Mary Nichols's essay; the highly tragic character of the founding of the Sanhedrin of the Yavneh Academy, in Jacob Howland's analysis of the Oven of Akhnai in *Bava Metzia*; the more loosely tragic relation of pure consciousness to lived thought, in Peter Vedder's exploration of Descartes's *Meditation* 1; which reappears in the promise of an overcoming of the tension between consciousness and what is other than it in Robert Berman's treatment of a portion of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*; only for that very overcoming to be challenged, according to Paul T. Wilford, by Kierkegaard with the firm assertion that

this tragic feature of existence most evident in the unhappy consciousness can be overcome only through “a loving relationship with the word made flesh,” that is, a miraculous incarnation (362–63). Behind all these senses of tragedy, one hears echoes of Strauss’s theologico-political problem and Benardete’s indeterminate dyad.

Given the high tragic pitch of Howland’s treatment of the Oven of Akhnai, it is striking that the chapter that vies for being the least tragic in tone in this volume is Rosslyn Weiss’s closely juxtaposed and well worth comparing piece on the Garden of Eden. She attempts to show that the knowledge of good and evil acquired by Adam and Eve in the Garden is quite simply knowledge, and altogether natural. In its spirit, her piece may be closest to that of Mary Nichols. Both seem to argue that morality and politics can be made either altogether or nearly fully nontragic. Weiss claims that her interpretation is the literal (*peshat*) meaning of Genesis. This literal interpretation has an ancient history, but it is highly theological rather than a naively straightforward or literal one (209). The view that the knowledge of good and evil and the commandments that flow from it are natural goes back to the Mu’tazilite *kalām* and appears in Judaism first in Saadya Gaon (892–942 CE). As Leo Strauss explains in “The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*” (in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* [Free Press, 1952], 95–98), this view is known in the Islamic and Jewish traditions as “rational law” and in the Christian tradition as “natural law.” Weiss claims that this view is captured in Socrates’s account of the forms as opposed to Euthyphro’s view in the dialogue of the same name (208). This equivalence of Socrates’s teaching with the biblical one might be tenable if the forms referred to things like commandments rather than to “abstractions” like the good, the beautiful, and the just. The challenge here is evident in the ready confusion scholars make of natural right and natural law. In its original, ancient conception natural right acknowledges the high standard either of the best regime (*kallipolis*) or the best life (the philosophic). It judges regimes and lives in accordance with these far-from-easily encapsulated standards. In contrast, rational or natural law assimilates biblical (or Qur’anic) notions of law (and more specifically the Second Table of the Decalogue) to philosophic notions of the natural—thereby obscuring the difference and relation between nature and law. Because the natural law tradition acknowledges the existence of a high standard, it is tempting to assimilate natural right and natural law to one another, but one must resist this temptation.

If law could be fully naturalized, then perhaps politics would become thoroughly nontragic. One can see in Mary Nichols's piece a friendly dispute with Ronna Burger's contention, in her *Aristotle's Dialogue with Plato*, that Plato and Aristotle are closer to one another than they appear to be. Nichols replies that Aristotle's politics is (almost wholly) nontragic, while Plato's is tragic. Although justice as reciprocity, as natural justice, and as equity, that is, a corrective of law's universality, are all ways of making politics less tragic (129), I doubt they go very far in removing the stain of tragedy encapsulated in the dispute between law and the extraordinary human being (133). That is, I doubt that the case for the rule of law is as open and shut as Nichols suggests. After all, recourse to equity would not be necessary if law were as superior a solution to the rule of living wisdom as she suggests. That the ostracism of the extraordinary human being is an emblem of the disorder at the heart of things human is well captured by Howland's chapter.

Many of the chapters in *Nature, Law, and the Sacred* that do not touch so directly on the theme of tragedy are forays by senior scholars into authors or themes for which they have not become renowned, but which repay with the delight we feel when we see a steady hand at work in novel terrain: Clifford Orwin's foray into Xenophon, Nathan Tarcov's into Boccaccio, and Richard Velkey's into Lessing. In his exploration of Xenophon, Orwin is curious to see how and why Machiavelli and Franklin detected anticipations of the modern in Xenophon. For those of us especially interested in the hinge between pre-modern and modern, this is exciting territory. Tarcov's *Decameron* reminds one of the *Thousand and One Nights* for the manner in which a strictly speaking nonphilosophic work can reap such philosophic rewards. Velkey's analysis of *Laocoön* promises rewards to anyone with the patience to follow his analysis of this "immensely complex work" (183), particularly anyone interested in the theme of beauty and its strange fate in modernity.

Seth Appelbaum explores the "World-to-Come" in Maimonides's *Commentary on the Mishnah* and *Guide of the Perplexed*. This interesting exploration of these two texts leads to a convergence between the silence about restoration of the Temple in the *Commentary* and Maimonides's famous chapter in the *Guide* (3.32) on God's ruse with sacrifices. God educates the people Israel by leading them away from sacrificial worship toward intellectual worship. Appelbaum tempers this somewhat with his fascinating discussion of Maimonides's hints in the *Commentary* that the Messianic Age will not last forever but will be followed by a recurrence of an age of idolatry, followed by a renewed effort at enlightenment (264–66). One could ask,

though, whether by omitting reference to related discussions in the *Treatise on Resurrection* and especially in the *Mishneh Torah* Appelbaum has not overstated the equivalence of Maimonides's teaching with its most radical teaching for the elite (for example, 265). Although his elitism is unwashed in the *Guide*, even there he gives pointers to how his teaching in the *Mishneh Torah* seeks to educate all Jews, in accordance with their capacity.

In addition to the through line of tragedy, a number of the chapters form pairs or triplets well worth considering with care. In addition to comparisons already mentioned of Nichols, Weiss, and Howland and implied in my opening list with reference to Berman and Wilford, Speliotis's and Davis's chapters on Sophocles and Euripides respectively demand comparison. Tipton's chapter on Plato's *Theages* addresses Socrates's *daimonion* in a manner called for in Orwin's chapter on Xenophon (113).

The remaining chapters by Matthew Oberreider (Plato's *Protagoras*), Steven Berg (Dante), Peter Vedder (Descartes), and Stuart Warner (Montesquieu) all stand out for their close readings. Berg's Dante is explosive in the mold of Fr. Fortin's, though his suggestion that Matelda rather than Beatrice is Dante's true love is, to my knowledge, an unprecedented interpretation. For reasons partly personal, I was especially intrigued by the chapters by Vedder and Warner. Vedder's analysis of *Meditation 1* is comparable in quality to the inquiries into Descartes of the more or less incomparable Richard Kennington. I plan to reread this essay, more than once. Although Warner delivered a lecture on Montesquieu at my university at my invitation, it was quite a different lecture. What a delightful bonus to have in hand such a careful investigation of the all-too-easily neglected Preface to the *Spirit of the Laws*.