

NATURE AND JUSTICE

Ralph Hancock: *The Responsibility of Reason: Theory and Practice in a Liberal-Democratic Age*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011. Pp. xv, 329. \$90.00.)

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Ralph Hancock's *Responsibility of Reason* is a formidably ambitious book. The author tells us his hope in writing it has been "to contribute to a kind of healing of the rift between academic philosophy and social science on the one hand and the concerns of thoughtful citizens, statesmen, believers and lovers on the other" (xii). Without wanting to be disrespectful to Professor Hancock's aims, I must state at the outset that this book will be of little service to thoughtful citizens, statesmen, believers, and lovers. The book ranges masterfully over classical understandings of philosophy and prudence and interpretations and rejections of those understandings by Christian thinkers, Leo Strauss and his followers, and Husserl and Heidegger. The book culminates in a cautious defense of Tocqueville's synthesis of democratic sentiments, reason, and faith rightly understood, and a critical review of major works by John Rawls, Charles Taylor, and Michael Gillespie. No one who is not already immersed in the concerns about interpretation of texts pertaining to the modern problem of reason would be able to wade through this dense and difficult book. However, the book should be of enormous interest to people steeped in the debates in political philosophy about the place of reason in the human psyche, and in the political firmament of our time. There is too much to consider comprehensively in a brief space, so this review will focus on what I take to be the most interesting and provocative core of this book: the intersection between nature and justice.

As the author announces at the beginning of his inquiry, "the existential-ethical questions as to *who I am* and *what I am to do* are inseparable at once from the political question *who we are* and from [the] inexhaustible theoretical or ontological question of *the way things are*" (3). Is this not the oldest and still the most important question for those of us who study political philosophy? Can we know anything definitive about the way things are, and even if we can, does this knowledge instruct us or impede us as a guide to how we ought to live? Jumping to the concluding statements of the book, Hancock praises Delba Winthrop for her insight that a "theory of justice is impossible" because justice in the final analysis is a political creation, and because justice must demand allegiance from us that cannot be substantiated philosophically (*American Political Science Review* 72 [1978]: 1201–16). The philosophic question of the way things are cannot be settled definitively, but we moral and political creatures need guidelines about who we are and what we are to do, and so we must find a way to live conscientious, just, and moral

lives in a way that does not open us to constant anxiety but that still leaves room for the open-endedness of the philosophic inquiry.

A common failing among those who think seriously about these questions, in Hancock's account, is to break out of this tension between the political and the philosophical and weigh in heavily on one side. And so we have the derailing of Martin Heidegger, who "understood better than anyone the necessity of reflexive responsibility at the philosophical level" but "refused, disastrously, to connect this responsibility with reason's practical responsibility" (65). Heidegger's call to "being," his embrace of technological imperatives, and his plea for authentic thinking leave us with no guidelines whatsoever on the question of how we ought to live, and as we well know, Heidegger's one foray into the realm of politics was in fact disastrous and irresponsible. Hancock charges Heidegger's thought with an "ethical barrenness" (152). On the opposite side of the tension, we have John Rawls's famous union of justice and fairness, a combination that one finds as far back as Aristotle, but a combination that Aristotle knew well belongs only to "particular justice," specific to regime, and not to "general justice," which includes consideration of what is owed to individual souls, in accordance with an understanding of virtue. (I am indebted here to an excellent discussion of Aristotelian justice by Susan Collins, "Justice and the Dilemma of Moral Virtue in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*," in *Aristotle and Modern Politics*, ed. Aristide Tessitore [University of Notre Dame Press, 2002], 105–29). In his effort to build a society that is fair and just, Rawls eclipses the important question of the way things are by nature, and the role of those (philosophic types) who inquire into these matters. Fairness in the distribution of things is an important matter for everyone, in every political community, but it is not the only, or even the highest, consideration for a human life. Friendship in the pursuit of virtue is a calling separate from this kind of "justice as fairness," and may in fact collide with it, but Rawls simply silences the claim to friendship. Hancock refers to these lacunae in Rawls as the eclipse of the noble for the sake of the just, but I prefer to stick with the important difference between the political (emphasis on fairness and particular justice) and the philosophic (emphasis on virtue and general justice).

I gainsay the term "noble" because I believe it does not, and cannot, fit usefully into any contemporary discussion of reason and liberal democracy. Who are the "noble"? In the Straussian framework, they can be of two types: the "gentleman" who is the peak of moral virtue (including particular justice) and who stands as a bridge between the political and the philosophic, defensive of the kind of justice that is required for political solidarity and surety but open to the challenge posed to this world by philosophy; and the philosopher, who lives in perpetual openness to the question of what is natural. I believe Hancock shares my point of view on this. He writes of Strauss's threefold characterization of the philosopher, the gentleman, and everyone else: "The philosopher's transcendence is a prolongation of the gentleman's lofty contempt for that which he considers beneath him: the philosopher is to the

gentleman what the gentleman is to the vulgar. Philosophic elevation is parasitic on the rule of the gentleman—a rule the nobility of which Strauss praises, but the justice of which he subtly questions” (192). We do not live in a time or place where the rule of “gentlemen” is a practical solution to the problem of how we can reconcile what we know with how we ought to live, and that is because we are all democrats. This ought not to be a devastating loss, even for Strauss and his followers, because the justice of the “gentleman” is a political remedy, not a philosophic necessity.

Not only are we all democrats, but we are living in the legacy of Christianity, and this is where Hancock’s analysis of reason becomes really interesting. Hancock concedes that Christianity changes much in how we think of reason, because the elevation of the divine to a kingdom separate from the kingdom of the political world radically separates general justice (and virtue) from particular justice (deciding what’s fair). Already in Augustine, Hancock remarks, “we begin to see how a certain ‘secularization’ of the political order, a reduction of politics to purely ‘mundane’ or ‘naturalistic’ concerns, may emerge from a distinctly other-worldly or dualistic orientation” (89). Christianity breaks the fragile tension between nature and justice held together by the classical tradition. By the time we get to Calvin and the nascent Protestantism that marries itself to the modern project of progress, divine transcendence, whether experienced in philosophy or faith, has become little more than a “spiritual sanction” for the universally pursued goals of the material world. “The paradoxical worldliness of Calvinism thus provides a surprising mirror image to the implicit standpoint of masterful transcendence presupposed in modern secular rationalism” (104). Not unexpectedly, Hancock’s discussion of Christianity is followed in this book by considerations on Machiavelli and Hobbes, rightful heirs to the legacy of the Christian project.

From Hancock’s perspective, we cannot live genuinely in the modern, rights-based political context while taking our bearings from the classical Greek orientation toward nature. The mediation of “gentlemen” is unworkable. Curiously, Hancock keeps coming back to Heidegger, who he claims is “always nearest and farthest from the truth” (164). Heidegger was right to draw out the implications of the gap between the natural (the divine) and the political, but his unsatisfying passive response was to set up camp with the poets and the philosophers, the “listeners” to being (164). Hancock cannot accept this as a viable response to the question of how we ought to live. The Christian legacy, for Hancock, is not ultimately a disaster for politics, even though it fostered the disruptions that have led us to Heidegger on the one hand, John Rawls on the other. Hancock is willing to abandon the classical distinction between the noble and the base for the Christian clarification of the right and the wrong (212). He has a genuine empathy for “ordinary human beings,” for whom there are real goods that are worth pursuing and that presumably still can be connected in some meaningful way to the highest goods of virtue and general justice.

The modern political philosopher who can save us, for Hancock, is Alexis de Tocqueville, a man who understood, with Heidegger and Strauss, the gravity of “the threat to the ‘laws of moral analogy’ contained in the modern emancipation of individual freedom from politically and socially authorized virtue,” but whose strategy was to “strengthen democratic souls, or preserve their strength, by sustaining practices that the Americans themselves understand to be devoted to material well-being, ‘well-understood’” (272). Tocqueville accepts that it is not possible to give a complete theoretical account of what is “highest” in human beings, but he admired America for its propensity to combine a democratic aesthetic with attention to Christian faith. In the New World, uncorrupted by the aristocratic residue of France, a “practical harmony” of politics and religion contributed to the “elevation of soul and political liberty,” not as a dyad, but as two separate but compelling callings: a combination, as Hancock terms it, of “absolute submission and absolute liberty” (266).

The question at the end of Hancock’s book is: Does Tocqueville rescue us from the travails of reason that the author has so meticulously catalogued? Perhaps I am not the best person to be answering this question since in addition to being a student of political philosophy, I am a Canadian and a woman. Tocqueville holds little ground in Canada, a nation founded by English Loyalists and French Canadians (not Puritans), and now bearing a constitution that entrenches multiculturalism. The twin towers of absolute liberty and absolute submission endorsed by Hancock in the name of Tocqueville cannot hold as a model for Western liberal democracy in general. In addition, as Hancock notes, part of Tocqueville’s project entails the retention of women in the home as guarantors of a “moral regularity essential to the perpetuation of an orderly society” (267). Nowhere in Western liberal democracies have the majority of women stayed loyal to this aim.

Ralph Hancock does a brilliant job of mapping out the conundrum of nature and justice in some of the most compelling accounts, historical and contemporary, of that difficult combination. For me, Tocqueville is not a convincing response, politically, to this conundrum. It is better to suffer an injustice than to commit one: this is something we can know is at the heart of all politics, all law. It is better for us, in how we live and what we do, if we understand the political truth of this. I am still left with the question posed by Callicles in the *Gorgias* and left maddeningly unanswered by Socrates. Is this truth also at the heart of nature? Is it the responsibility of reason to make it so?

—Leah Bradshaw