

# Classical Rationalism and the Politics of Europe



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Edited by

Ann Ward

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*For Lee and Mary*



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Regina, June 2017  
Ann Ward

## CHAPTER ONE

# CLASSICAL RATIONALISM AND THE POLITICS OF EUROPE

ANN WARD

Dramatic changes have occurred in Europe in the past quarter century. The fall of communism and the expansion of liberal democracy together with the desire to project a new “Europa” that is united, peaceful and prosperous into the future, illustrates that political philosophy is what grounds European political discourse and identity. Thus, an understanding of Europe’s political past and potential future directs us to the question: What is political philosophy?

An exploration of the question of political philosophy points us back to Socrates, widely regarded as the first political philosopher, or the first philosopher to make human beings central to philosophic inquiry. His political thought, which we know primarily through Plato’s Socratic dialogues, turns to the human soul as it reflects on and is drawn toward the good, and hence thinks about justice, virtue and the best regime in a universal way. But what is the justification for such an enterprise? Medieval Europeans looked to Scripture as authoritative on questions of justice or how one ought to live, leading to attempts by thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas to harmonize classical reason with revelation. Modern Enlightenment philosophers such as Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau discarded the classical quest for natural right in favour of individual natural rights secured by the social contract. The rise of historical consciousness in nineteenth-century Europe led to a reassessment and critique of Socratic rationalism by philosophers such as Hegel, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche in the name of history, faith and art.

Scholars such as Thomas Pangle suggest that a revival of the study of Socratic political philosophy will revive serious consideration of the questions of justice or how one ought to live, and demonstrate that classical rationalism is the essential dialectical partner and interrogator of

the political theology of Scripture/scripture(s). Classical rationalism in this context is understood as a necessary alternative to (1) modern liberalism, inadequate to the task of taking questions of justice seriously as it insists on regarding all religious claims and understandings of virtue (including the virtue aspired to by the ancients) as private preferences rather than definitive of the public sphere; and (2) contemporary postmodernism, which has abandoned rationalism altogether by rejecting any truth claims not understood as relative.

In response to the hypothetical question: Why do political philosophers need to study Scripture(s), Pangle, in *Political Philosophy and the God of Abraham*, argues that the study of the Bible, especially the books of Genesis up to Abraham, is necessary to revive serious reflection on the question of justice or righteousness, or how one ought to live. The revival of this question will in turn revive serious consideration of classical rationalism or Socratic political philosophy, the central concern of which is also justice and the right way to live, as *the* essential dialectical partner and interrogator of the political theology of the Bible. Classical rationalism in this context is understood as a necessary and refreshing alternative in *thought*, not deed, to the modern liberal philosophy of Hobbes and Locke, whose “cultural revolution” has been successful in, “reduc[ing] religious reflection and argument [along with reflection and argument about virtue, as it was aspired to in ancient republicanism] to the status of a birdlike cacophony of merely private and personal, shallow and shifting, opinions”.<sup>1</sup> It is also an alternative to the “postmodernism” which has abandoned rationalism altogether by rejecting any truth claims not understood as relative.

Pangle, however, is not entirely dismissive of modern political philosophy. Indeed, part of his project in studying the Bible is to recover the “radical” perspective of modern political philosophers as they sought to confront and discard the fundamental challenge posed by Scripture to their revolutionary natural rights philosophy. Still, modern political philosophy, or “classical liberalism,” is inadequate to the task of taking justice and how one ought to live seriously, as modern philosophers regard “faith” as merely “belief.” But, to fully appreciate the encounter with Scripture, Pangle argues that we must see that “faith” understands itself to be rooted in *knowledge*, not simply belief, a knowledge superior to that of unassisted reason.<sup>2</sup>

This volume is indebted to Pangle’s insight that classical rationalism or the type of philosophy practised by Socrates is the most serious challenge to political theology such as that found in the Bible. Yet, it is hard to avoid the impression that for Pangle, classical rationalism has a greater affinity

to Scripture(s) than to modern rationalism or postmodern philosophy. More to the point, Pangle seems to suggest that Socrates is closer to Abraham, the father of faith, than for instance to Hobbes or Marx. In contradistinction to Pangle's argument, chapters in this volume will argue that persons of faith such as Abraham or Antigone would more likely be among Socrates' accusers, and assumes that political philosophers such as Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu and Marx would be among his dialectical partners. This volume, therefore, views modern political philosophy, or classical liberalism and its critics, as indeed adequate to the task of taking justice and the right way to live seriously, even if there is room for debate and disagreement. In doing so, it enables the recovery of classical rationalism to be consistent with modern science. In other words, this volume does not close political philosophy off from a dialectical conversation with modern natural science as Pangle's book seems to do by pulling it into a dialectical conversation with Scripture.

Chiara Bottici's *A Philosophy of Political Myth* provides a new and persuasive theory of political myth that gives a philosophical framework for understanding what political myths are, that they still exist and indeed why we still need them. Political myth, Bottici argues, addresses the human need for a feeling of significance arising out of the historical circumstances of the time. Significance, the provision of which is the most important aspect of political myth, is understood as "substantiating" or "grounding the world in which human beings live," by answering the question of "why" by narrating "whence."<sup>3</sup> Myth explains where we came from and thus where we are going, yet is distinct from religion. Whereas religion tries to give meaning to human life as such and for all time, myth seeks to give significance to particular peoples in changing historical circumstances. The second aspect of political myth is that, in providing significance, they prompt people to action. The political mythmaker, according to Bottici, has "the immediate intent of inciting people to action," and therefore relies for his or her efficacy on strong emotional appeals.<sup>4</sup> Although appealing to collective emotions, Bottici argues that political myth, such as that of the general strike, is an essential ingredient for modern progress even if it can also be a force for regress, such as the myth of the Aryan race.<sup>5</sup>

Bottici's book is similar to this volume in that it analyzes the ancient Greek, medieval, early modern, Enlightenment, nineteenth century and contemporary political epochs in European history. Yet, it does so through the lens of the political mythmaker, whereas this volume will do so through the lens of the political philosopher. The political mythmaker, according to Bottici, uses their imagination to appeal to the emotions of

their audience by providing them a sense of the political significance of their particular people in history. The political philosopher, on the other hand, this volume assumes, understands him or herself as using their reason to connect with the reason of their audience to provide a rational account of political justice based in the universal characteristics of human beings at all times. Political philosophy in this sense is like religion, except that it typically grounds its arguments in a concept of “nature” rather than an emotional appeal to the supernatural. The contributors to this collection, therefore, maintain the distinction between the *mythos* of poetry and the *logos* of philosophy that Bottici denies, even while acknowledging that the two genres can provide each other mutual aid. Moreover, whereas Bottici considers the importance of political myth to all forms of modern politics including fascism, communism and theocracy, this volume will focus on the impact that classical rationalism and its reconsideration can have on liberal democracy.

My previous volume with Cambridge Scholars Publishing, *Socrates: Reason or Unreason as the Foundation of European Identity*, sought to recover and revise our understanding of Socratic philosophy as an appropriate paradigm for European identity in the past and for constructing a new European identity in the future. In contrast to scholars such as Nussbaum (1986, 1990) and Damasio (1994), but in agreement with scholars such as Sokolon (2010), contributors in this volume sought to re-establish the place of the emotional and the physical in classical political philosophy. They also often viewed the Platonic dialogue as bridging the divide between philosophy and art rather than solidifying it. Moreover, Socrates is the undisputed hero of this volume. In the first half Socrates emerges as an exceptional human being whose soul, in partnership with the body, harmonizes reason and emotion in the quest for knowledge of the good in dialogue with others in such a way that is open to the divine. The second half reveals that Socrates and the way of life he represents is not simply a phenomenon of antiquity but can and should be contemporary. Socratic philosophy is either defended from the critiques of postmodern thinkers, or shown to actually be the inspiration and object of these thinkers themselves.

There are many similarities between my previous volume and the present one. For instance, excepting the medieval period included in the present volume, they both analyze the ancient Greek, early modern, Enlightenment, nineteenth century and contemporary political epochs in European history. Both also include chapters that analyze the mutually beneficial connection between classical rationalism and poetry, although chapters in the present volume also highlight their distinction. This present

volume differs from the previous one in other significant ways as well. The previous volume explores how Socratic philosophy or classical rationalism grounds European “identity.” Included in the concept of identity is the European understanding of historical self-consciousness, art and creativity, and faith and transcendence. The present volume, on the other hand, explores how classical rationalism grounds European “politics,” more particularly liberal, democratic politics and what is commonly understood as the “neoliberal” economic model that supports this politics. Moreover, whereas in the previous volume Socrates emerges as the undisputed hero of the book, in the present volume there is more debate. Although some contributors view Socrates and classical rationalism as a worthy model that can inform and uplift our understanding of democracy, other contributors view key alternatives such as liberalism, Marxism and postmodernism as superior philosophic prescriptions for Europe’s political present and future.

The organizing principle of David McGrane and Neil Hibbert’s *Applied Political Theory and Canadian Politics*, is the belief that the conceptual tools of political theory can be used to make political practices more comprehensible, salient and meaningful. As such, this book represents the first explicit attempt to connect political theory and Canadian politics. The overall argument of the collection is that, through the application of political theory, Canadian politics can be understood much better. The political subjects tackled in the book through the lens of political theory are ideology, equality, social justice, democracy, citizenship, ethnic diversity and minority rights, nationalism, and Canada’s place in the world. The edited collection proposed here also has as its core organizing principle the belief that political philosophy and theory can be applied to political practice to make the latter more comprehensible. Yet, this collection takes European rather than Canadian politics as its object, and analyzes canonical thinkers in the history of political philosophy. Moreover, the political practices and institutions illuminated include the role of poetry in lawmaking, the freedom of speech, monarchy, liberal nationalism and state sovereignty, commerce, class warfare, environmentalism and global capitalism and the distribution of wealth.

This volume explores Socratic rationalism, its relation to poetry and history, the major alternatives to Socratic rationalism in the history of political philosophy, the potential impact of returning to it in contemporary times, and related themes. It takes an interdisciplinary approach with fifteen chapters from scholars in the fields of Philosophy and Political Science. The contributors research and teach in Canada and the United States.

Part One explores how classical rationalism is grounded in historic, poetic, and philosophic sources in the ancient world. In chapter two, Lindsay Mahon Rathnam argues that in his *Histories* Herodotus indicates that Hellenic piety is a derivation from the Egyptian. Yet, in bringing the Egyptian gods to Greece the Hellenic poets transformed them. Herodotus is explicit about the relative recentness of this introduction, and the key role played by the poets in shaping the Greek pantheon. According to Rathnam the character of this transmission becomes clearer through Herodotus' exegesis of the story of Helen in Egypt, which reveals both the creative and destructive power of beauty and the great poets' complex relation with Egyptian sources. This takes place through an extended treatment of the events of the Trojan war, told from the Egyptian perspective. In his treatment of Helen's excursion in Egypt, Herodotus, Rathnam argues, allows us to see the scaffolding at work in Homer's renovation of the Egyptian pantheon. By clarifying how—and why—Homer reshaped the Egyptian gods, Herodotus brings out what is distinctive about the Hellenes. Homer transformed gods that circumscribe human action into those that support it. Herodotus thus reveals the power of narrative, including Socratic narratives that illustrate the justice of supporting justice, to sustain flourishing communities and uphold human agency.

Bernard J. Dobski, in chapter three, considering Thucydides' explicit linking of natural disasters to the suffering endured during the Peloponnesian war and thus to his claim for the war's surpassing greatness, argues that there is a complex triangulation between Thucydides' treatment of politics, nature, and historiography at work in his *History*. Dobski's chapter aims to clarify the nature of this triangulation, concluding that for Thucydides the sharp distinction between a nature governed by fixed, immutable and objectively knowable laws, on the one hand, and a cosmos governed by gods interested in upholding justice among men, on the other hand, represents a false dichotomy. The contrast between the perspectives of Demosthenes, the supremely talented human being in the *History*, and Thucydides himself are particularly instructive here. According to Dobski, for Demosthenes the material world is something that can be manipulated to serve his own political and military goals. While this view excludes the belief in divine beings who intervene in human affairs by moving natural elements according to their own wishes, it nevertheless views the material world as something that can be known and manipulated by man, as an ordered home that is not completely indifferent to human hopes and aspirations. Thucydides, on the other hand, views the material world as having what Dobski calls "ways" or "manners" which can be discerned or



grasped, but not fixed natures whose material causes can be known objectively by the unaided human mind.

In chapter four, I explore freedom of speech as it is exemplified by Plato's Socrates and Sophocles' *Antigone*, often seen as models of free inquiry and expression in the face of unjust political power. In the *Apology of Socrates*, Socrates argues that he spent his life questioning the authoritative opinions that supported the laws of Athens. Socrates' philosophic life resulted in his trial for not believing in the city's gods and corrupting the young. He is found guilty and condemned to death, a death which Socrates' accepts rather than cease his unique way of speaking. In Sophocles' *Antigone*, Antigone defies Creon's decree to leave her brother Polynices unburied, accepting the penalty of death for her actions. Before being buried alive she speaks against Creon's tyrannical rule of Thebes, claiming that she gives voice to a citizenry too afraid to critique their ruler. Framing the discussion with an analysis of John Stuart Mill's advocacy of free speech in *On Liberty*, I argue that although both Socrates and Antigone can be viewed as ancient precursors to the democratic defence of freedom of speech, there are important ways in which they differ. Whereas Antigone puts loyalty to family and divine law above human law, Socrates acknowledges that he has not cared for the things of his family and, despite characterizing himself as a gift of the god to the city, gains a rational self-knowledge that can put military necessity ahead of the desire to give the dead a proper burial, coming to light in his defense of the generals of the Battle of Arginusae. I thus conclude that Antigone would be one of Socrates' accusers rather than defenders, but surprisingly more at home in a modern, liberal democracy than one guided by Socratic reason.

In chapter five, Robert Ballingall argues that although Plato is usually considered a critic of poetry and of tragedy in particular, in the *Laws* we read of a city-in-speech whose "whole regime is constructed as the imitation of the most beautiful and best way of life, which we at least assert to be really the truest tragedy" (817b3-5). Ballingall's chapter takes up the apparent rehabilitation of tragedy in the *Laws* and argues that it is in fact consistent with the critique of tragedy in the *Republic*. Although the Athenian stranger appears to praise the regime that he conceives of in calling it a tragedy, Ballingall shows that he quietly means to insult it. The regime is a tragedy, he implies, because it merely—and hence regrettably—imitates the way of life that is best and truly serious. Attending to key passages that Plato dramatically connects with 817a-d, Ballingall argues that the reasons adduced for this shortcoming are the very ones responsible for tragedy's enduring appeal. Like Socrates in the

*Republic*, the Athenian counsels the censorship of tragic lamentations. But his arguments suggest that the allure of tragedy is ineradicable and the cause of the unfortunate necessities to which politics must resort, even or precisely at its best.

Leah Bradshaw, in chapter six, argues that in Aristotelian ethics there is an inseparable connection among character, reason and virtue. For Aristotle, according to Bradshaw, it is not possible to make a claim about what is a reasonable choice without at the same time making a claim about what is good. The “good person,” for Aristotle, is the one who chooses in accordance with the beautiful, the advantageous and the pleasant, but these goals are framed by an understanding of justice and temperance. Justice and temperance are virtues, and they are artful consequences of reasonable deliberation. Yet, deliberation and judgments about courses of action that follow are always taken in particular contexts, and thus to the triad of character, virtue and reason, Bradshaw argues that Aristotle adds politics. Famously, Aristotle claims that man is by nature a political animal and that anyone who lives outside of a *polis* is either a beast or a god. But, through her analysis of the distinction between the good citizen and the good man, Bradshaw discovers that for Aristotle it is in fact possible for a singular human being, through reason or more particularly *thinking* as the transcendent aspect of reason that grasps something about justice and the good independent of one’s immediate context, to put themselves outside of the contours of their particular regime and stand alone as a self-governing individual. Bradshaw concludes by examining Thomas Hobbes’s instrumental understanding of reason as representative of modernity and which is anathema to Aristotle’s entanglement of reason with politics, character, virtue and vice.

Medieval political thought and the classical liberalism of Hugo Grotius and Thomas Hobbes is the subject of Part Two. Patrick N. Cain, in chapter seven, analyzes St. Thomas Aquinas’s argument for kingship, without any reference to natural law, in *De Regno*. Unlike Aquinas’s other works in which he endorses a mixed regime, *De Regno* takes politics as its primary subject matter, apparently addressing itself to an actual ruler—the king of Cyprus. Cain sheds light on the enormity of the task Aquinas sets for himself in *De Regno*, incorporating not only scripture’s, philosophy’s, and statesmanship’s understanding of the best regime, it also addresses the practical realities of political life, including the possibility of securing kingly government against tyranny. Yet, as Cain progresses through the text, he discovers that just as Aquinas’s philosophic discussion suggests that only God can fulfill the definition of true kingship, his use of the scriptures suggests that the only true king is Christ—that complete

kingship is not possible for any human being who is not also divine. Since for Aquinas Christ's rule is not direct but entrusted to the Church, Cain argues that *De Regno* concerns the rule of the Church as much as it concerns the king of Cyprus. However, Cain concludes that although the Church, in Aquinas's view, may by right rule over earthly kings in spiritual matters, in so doing it must leave a near absolute space for prudence—which may require human limits on earthly kings—to rule in the affairs of politics, just as the king must refrain from attempting to rule over spiritual matters.

In chapter eight, Jeremy Seth Geddert observes that scholars credit Hugo Grotius with inventing modern natural rights and making modern Europe possible by relegating virtue to the private sphere and thus liberating politics from questions of the soul. Yet, Geddert argues that although Grotius does provide a foundation for a basic set of secular natural rights, in addition to these he frequently speaks of a “wider” virtue. Indeed, Grotius, according to Geddert, subtly insinuates that the maintenance of natural rights actually depends on this wider virtue. This reveals a recognition on Grotius' part that virtue is not so much a modern doctrine as it is a classical vision or intuition of the Good. Moreover, the highest realm of human virtue is now free from imposition by a political realm whose rules are typically formulated by the many, as Socrates knew all too well. In sum, Geddert argues that Grotius develops individual rights in order to cultivate a minimum level of virtue in the mass populace now invited to participate in modern politics, while simultaneously preserving the possibility of a nondogmatic wider virtue. This ethical distinction taken from the Stoics, Geddert argues, separates the rules of the many and the virtue of the few. Through this distinction, Grotius employs his classical European heritage to shape a modern Europe true to its roots.

Lee Ward, in chapter nine, suggests that Thomas Hobbes's theory of sovereign authorization can illuminate important aspects of both the relation of liberalism and nationalism, and the “legitimate border” issue that troubles critics of democratic theory such as Abizadeh. Ward argues that while Hobbes obviously did not speak about the version of nationalism familiar historically from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, his treatment of sovereign authorization, according to which every individual subject authorizes the sovereign to represent and act on his or her behalf, supplies an alternative to the standard nationalist recourse to myth about political founding and identity. The concept of representation is the pivotal link between liberalism and nationalism, and Hobbes practically invented the modern idea of representation in his theory of sovereign authorization. The central feature of Hobbes's idea of political founding is the doctrine of

the legal personality of the state, which stipulates that authorization is both a constitutive act through which the sovereign is produced, and simultaneously the moral referent by which individuals understand their political obligation. Ward argues that Hobbes's account of political founding supplies an alternative, or corrective, to nationalist myths that require recurring reexamination and affirmation of the legitimacy of the state. Hobbes's theory of sovereign authorization, according to Ward, also speaks to the legitimate border problem. Hobbes's account of sovereign authorization lays out a process by which outsiders can become insiders, but one that justifies borders in a manner not dependent on pre-political grounds of legitimacy or the consent of outsiders.

Part Three reconsiders classical rationalism in the works of Montesquieu and other Enlightenment republicans in Europe and America. In chapter ten, Andrew Bibby explores the major alternatives to Socratic rationalism by way of an examination of Montesquieu's philosophy of liberalism. While few scholars would deny the significance of Montesquieu's contribution to modern liberal political thought, according to Bibby the question of Montesquieu's commitment to modern rationalism—as the only alternative to classical rationalism—is still very much open to debate. Most scholars view Montesquieu's great work, *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748) as—in some form—a repudiation of classical natural right. Beyond this agreement, however, scholars still very much disagree on what exactly Montesquieu has offered as a substitute. Many have drawn close comparisons to Machiavelli and Hobbes's version of modern natural right. Others have linked Montesquieu to Rousseau, and the historicist tradition—an interpretation, which if true, would stand as an indictment against Montesquieu, that is, as himself contributing to the corrosion or "crisis" of modern natural right philosophy and the abandonment of rationalism, which followed. Bibby argues that Montesquieu's liberalism is best understood as a critique of early modern liberalism from within. Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* is profitably viewed as the last major attempt to revise Lockean liberalism without collapsing into relativism. In this sense, Bibby claims that Montesquieu offers a serious and defensible alternative to classical rationalism. For Bibby, Montesquieu's liberal political philosophy has these two added virtues: it lends itself to humor and friendship; and it not only encourages a comparison to classical rationalism, but requires a serious study of it.

Timothy W. Burns, in chapter eleven, analyzes the debate between John Adams and the French political economist Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, Baron de Laune (1727-1781). According to Burns Turgot was a champion of what we today call classical liberal economics and classical

liberalism. In 1781 he wrote a letter to the English champion of American independence, Dr. Price, responding to Price's *Additional Observations on Civil Liberty* (London: 1777). The letter criticized the 13 American states for slavishly following the British in having different branches of government, with checks and balances on these class-based branches. The letter, Burns claims, was fateful, in that it provoked an extended response from John Adams, published as *Defense of the Constitutions of the United States* in 1786-87, a response that became an important source of understanding the branches of government in what was soon to be proposed as the new United States Constitution. Adams sought to demonstrate that, contrary to Turgot's claim, three natural classes, manifested throughout human history and not only in England, are reflected in the constitutions of the American states. But the dispute between Adams and Turgot turns on an understanding of the new science of government and the new understanding of human beings on which it rests. Burns argues that Adams' response to Turgot missed the radical nature of the enlightened, commercial republic Turgot sketches—its attempt to wipe out deep longings that give rise both to political ambition and religious devotion—and that the result was Adams' misleading of the Anti-Federalists in the debate over ratification of the U.S. constitution, against Federalists and others (like Jefferson) who understood the enlightenment and the new, tri-partite representative government much more along the lines of Turgot. Burns concludes with brief reflections on the subsequent state of this political-intellectual drama, in the works of Rousseau, Constant, and postmodernism.

Part Four explores contemporary reflections on the relation of classical rationalism to modern democracy, economics, and education. In chapter twelve, Kevin M. Cherry limns the works of Jacques Maritain and Yves Simon for a "politically rational" way of thinking about political polarization and the resultant divisions within contemporary Christian contexts, focusing on each author's Walgreen lectures at the University of Chicago. Maritain's lectures, given in December 1949, became *Man and the State* (originally published in 1951); Simon's, given in the spring of 1948, became *Philosophy of Democratic Government* (also 1951). In both works, Cherry argues, the authors draw on "classically rational" sources, primarily Thomas Aquinas, for their thinking about pluralism, and acknowledge especially an Aristotelian influence. Through their adaptation of these sources to democracy understood as dependent on the pluralism that arises out of particular interests and differing religious and philosophic beliefs, their work, according to Cherry, is still helpful in thinking about contemporary political life.

David Lewis Schaefer, in chapter thirteen, critiques Thomas Piketty's argument in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (*CITC*) that the perpetuation of democracy in developed Western nations is threatened by the restoration of a new oligarchy based on inherited wealth, to the point of rivaling the landed aristocracy he portrays as characteristic of nineteenth-century France. To address this threat, according to Schaefer, Piketty proposes a progressive global tax on capital to be collected and the proceeds of which to be administered by a European budgetary parliament whose reach would not only extend throughout Europe but also, ultimately, across the planet. While most critical discussion of Piketty's argument, both positive and negative, has focused on the economic evidence Piketty proffers to demonstrate the threat of a new oligarchy, Schaefer argues that the greater significance of *CITC* lies in its disparagement, in the name of a professed determination to "bet everything on democracy," of the actual practice of self-government; its depreciation of the qualities of citizen character that self-government presupposes; and its denial of the liberal understanding of the *purpose* of such government as the securing of individual rights or "negative" liberties such as life, liberty, and property.

In chapter fourteen, Emma Planinc returns to Thomas Pangle's *Ennobling of Democracy*, first published in 1992, and discovers a dual educational program at work. According to Planinc, Pangle advocates, on the one hand, what he believes is the politically necessary removal of postmodernism from the minds of loyal citizens, and on the other, the private but philosophically challenging task of making good students in fact more postmodern insofar as they ought to be compelled to question the given and principled foundations of their lives. Thus, for Planinc, the driving thesis of Pangle's book is that postmodern thought is not wrong, but dangerous, and that its spokespersons are inadequate in not being sufficiently Socratic, attempting to perform an enlightening mass education on those who would be better suited to a loyal, solid, and principled mode of civic existence. Pangle thus calls for the reinvigoration of the belief in natural rights or natural dignity as providing the fixed standard for human existence and political communities. Planinc argues, however, that we are forced to confront a turn that has developed since the publication of *Ennobling*: the reinvigoration of philosophical argumentation toward an embrace of a natural standard, but one that does not privilege the human or any conception of "rationalism"; indeed, for Planinc, the idea that nature should provide a standard may lead us further down the path of relativistic ambiguity prophesied by Pangle.

Naomi Couto, in chapter fifteen, like Planinc, addresses contemporary education. Couto claims that the market approach to education will threaten critical thinking skills that are essential to discussions of freedom and justice in a democratic society. Tensions between education as “functional” and education as “critical thinking” informs Couto’s discussion on what vision animates education, with both sides of the debate arguing that they produce a desirable kind of person and society. Critiquing the logic inherent in functional models, Couto argues that promoting the moral and ethical dimensions of education in the hopes of giving rise to political citizens rather than corporate employees is a responsibility we have to ourselves, our communities and our society. To aid in this project Couto develops what she calls an “ethos” of ancient and modern thought that concerns itself with the nature and purpose of public education as part of culture, and how it perceives itself in the realms of past and present narratives.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas L. Pangle, *Political Philosophy and the God of Abraham* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Pangle, *Political Philosophy*, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Chiara Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 125.

<sup>4</sup> Bottici, *Political Myth*, 185, 196.

<sup>5</sup> Bottici, *Political Myth*, 159.



**PART ONE:**

**HISTORIC, POETIC, AND PHILOSOPHIC  
GROUNDS OF CLASSICAL RATIONALISM  
IN ANCIENT THOUGHT**

## CHAPTER TWO

### A MORE SUITABLE STORY: HERODOTUS' HELEN AND THE POETIC ORIGINS OF THEHELLENES

LINDSAY MAHON RATHNAM

In his *Histories*, Herodotus claims that Hellenic piety is a derivation from the Egyptian (2.43, 44, 49, 50, 52).<sup>1</sup> Yet in bringing the Egyptian gods to Greece, the Hellenic poets - Melampus, Homer, and Hesiod-transformed them. Herodotus is explicit about the relative recentness of their introduction, and the key role played by the poets in shaping the Greek pantheon:

But whence each of these gods came into existence, or whether hey were for ever, and what kind of shape they had were not known until the day before yesterday... for I believe that Homer and Hesiod were four hundred years before my time- and no more than that. It is they who created for the Greeks their theogony... (2.53).

The character of this transmission becomes clearer through Herodotus' exegesis of the story of Helen in Egypt, which reveals the great poet's complex relationship with Egyptian sources.<sup>2</sup> This takes place through an extended treatment of the events of the Trojan war, told from the Egyptian perspective.<sup>3</sup> In his treatment of Helen's excursion in Egypt, Herodotus allows us to see the scaffolding at work in Homer's renovation of the Egyptian pantheon.<sup>4</sup> By clarifying how- and why- Homer reshaped the Egyptian gods, Herodotus brings out what is distinctive about the Hellenes. Homer transformed gods that circumscribe human action into those that support it. In his meditations on Homer, Herodotus thus reveals the power of narrative to sustain flourishing communities and uphold human agency.

After earlier detailing the land, culture, and conventions of Egypt, Herodotus turns to a chronicle of its history. In this, he alerts his audience

to a shift in his methods: “So far it is my eyes, my judgment, and my searching that speaks these words to you; from this on, it is the accounts of the Egyptians that I will tell to you as I heard them, though there will be, as a supplement to them, what I have seen myself” (2.99).<sup>5</sup> These Egyptian stories will be filtered through Herodotus’ active intervention, arranging, supplementing, and commenting upon the work of the Egyptian chroniclers.<sup>6</sup> This interplay should be kept in mind when we encounter ‘intersectional’ moments- figures or stories who originate in Egypt but also dwell within the landscape of Greek myth.<sup>7</sup> Egyptian stories allow Herodotus to ‘make strange’ the Greeks.

Midway through his chronicle of Egyptian history, one such figure appears: Proteus, but one far different from that familiar to the Greeks from the *Odyssey*. There, Proteus was a shape-shifting sea-god, a divine-being that could assume whatever form he willed. Here, Proteus is emphatically mortal, and of one (human) form; he is simply a ‘man of Memphis’ (2.112), one of a long line of Egyptian kings (2.4, 2.99-2.100, 2.143-144). In comparison with the multi-shaped splendour of the Homeric Proteus, the mere mortality of the Egyptian king seems dull and flat.<sup>8</sup> As he did with the Persian chroniclers in the opening of the work, Herodotus signals that he is operating in a different, prosaic register than that of the Greek poets. The stories of others afford the distance by which he can deflate the stuff of myth.

But although Proteus is merely mortal, the Egyptians seem to regard another Homeric figure as divine. In the precinct of Proteus Herodotus remarks on the shrine dedicated to the Foreign Aphrodite: “My guess is that this shrine is the shrine of Helen, daughter of Tyndareus.” (2.112). Herodotus notes the strangeness of this: “Of all the other temples of Aphrodite, not one is called after the goddess as ‘foreign’.” (2.112). In light of everything Herodotus has earlier related of the Egyptians, this appears deeply bizarre. Not only do they reject foreign ways and cleave to those of their ancestors (2.79), but they are particularly cold to the beauty of the body, preferring to be clean rather than fair-seeming (2.37). They are thus cold to humanity itself.<sup>9</sup> Of all peoples, then, they are the least likely to be moved to worship the beauty of a human woman, and it is nigh impossible that they should deem a beautiful human divine. It is possible that Herodotus’ judgment is questionable; perhaps he has reverted to a typically Hellenic chauvinism, the kind he lambasted earlier as “showing no manner of thought” (2.45) for its ignorance of the Egyptians and its over-evaluation of human heroes. The Greeks might have made a goddess out of a beautiful woman, but such behaviour seems entirely uncharacteristic of the Egyptians.

Herodotus is clear that he is ‘guessing’ here; he cannot ascertain the facts for certain. But yet by hazarding this guess- when he was not compelled by the facts, or by what the Egyptians have said- Herodotus has highlighted just how amazingly, divinely beautiful Helen is. Indeed, the fact of Helen’s beauty, and how it is read and experienced by the various peoples she encounters, will prove key to the unfolding of the narrative Herodotus is constructing. Since it is a beauty that cannot be experienced firsthand, for we cannot see Helen but rather hear about her, we face the problem that Herodotus dramatised earlier in the *Histories* through the story of Candaules: how to credit the report of beauty without seeing it ourselves (1.8). Candaules knew that the eyes are superior judges to the ears, and so forced the unwilling Gyges to witness the beauty of his queen. Herodotus cannot likewise force his audience, and so therefore must suggest her beauty by reporting its effects, by showing her beauty at work. The first example of this shows just how powerful and transformative it must have been: that the Egyptians, they for whom the human is so infinitely below and separate from the divine,<sup>10</sup> were so struck by Helen as to treat this mere human being as a goddess underscores the extremity of her beauty- and the profundity of its effect.

Moreover, that Helen’s human beauty could have such an effect on the Egyptians shows that convention’s rule is capable of being disrupted; an extraordinary experience can jostle forth unconventional reactions. The disruptive effects of Helen’s beauty on those Egyptians who behold her suggest the ways in which the body resists perfect and total acculturation. In this, Helen’s effects on the Egyptians echo the earlier experience of the Egyptian Deserters (2.30). These Deserters, having been left on duty without relief for far too long, abandoned their post. When the Egyptian king Psammetichus urged them to return to Egypt, citing their traditions and their families, their spokesman showed his genitals and claimed “wherever I have this, I will have wives and children.” The conventions of the Egyptians insist that sexuality belongs to the gods; their conventions alienate themselves from their bodies.<sup>11</sup> In denying this, the Deserters cease to be Egyptian. Their experience thus suggests that the body cannot be completely acculturated. Convention cannot entirely silence the body.

The Egyptians who beheld Helen are not as radically transformed as the Deserters; they remain Egyptian. Nevertheless, her beauty draws them out of their characteristic conventional categories; the inadequacy of their conventional lenses become, temporarily, imperfectly, apparent, for those conventions could not contain or explain a beauty such as Helen’s. The Egyptians, who regard culture as fate, were led outside of their conventional categories by the human beauty of Helen; those who denied the beauty of

the body and the humanity of the gods judged a beautiful woman to be a goddess. This shows the powerful ways that the body can motivate action, even ones we might otherwise resist. The Egyptians shun the foreign, but Helen's beauty leads them to worship a foreign Aphrodite. Her human beauty has led them to transgress the boundaries of their own conventions by attracting them to what is foreign. The human body can therefore show the very conventionality of cultural boundaries, precisely by drawing us to transgress them. Helen may be Greek, but her human beauty resonates with the Egyptians, reminds them that they are not just Egyptian but human, too.

Indeed, Helen's beauty sparks a host of transgressions and boundary-crossings. Most notably, it led Alexander to break the bonds of *xeinia* by kidnapping her in the first place. If Helen could have such an effect on the Egyptians, the kidnappings and war she inspired might seem less fabulous, more humanly plausible. If this does not make it just to kidnap, and then keep, the divinely beautiful Helen, it might, however, make it understandable. Helen's beauty leads those who behold her to break rules, behave irrationally, and transcend their cultural horizons. Her beauty destabilizes; for better or for worse, it motivates unexpected and unusual action from those who behold it. Helen's exceptional beauty, then, both initiates and symbolizes the human capacity for the extraordinary and unexpected. Helen's beauty is rare yet still humanly possible, and the responses it provokes leads her beholders out of the rote and everyday. Helen reminds us that human nature has within it the capacity for the surprising and unexpected, whether it be rare beauty or unconventional acts. To judge the events of the Trojan War, as Herodotus does in this micro-narrative, we have to attend both to the common and everyday, as the Persian chroniclers did in the version of the war that opened the *Histories*, and the unusual and unexpected.

Still, even if Herodotus' 'guess' about the effects of Helen's beauty has shed some light on Alexander's actions, his servants do not credit such excuses. After 'wrecking winds' carry Alexander off course to Egypt,<sup>12</sup> his servants desert their master and, sitting suppliant at the shrine of Heracles, accuse him of 'injustice' toward Menelaus (2.113). Benardete observes the striking fact that the Hellenic or Trojan servants speak of Alexander's injustice, whereas the Egyptians speak of his impiety.<sup>13</sup> This suggests that the Egyptians conceive of human behaviour solely (rather than partially) through the lens of the divine; to be virtuous is to be obedient to the divine, to be vicious is to transgress against it.<sup>14</sup> Virtue is only an aspect of piety for the Egyptians. It is what they owe to the gods, not what they owe to themselves or others: not, in other words, what is decent or becoming.

Even so, although the Hellenes speak of justice and the Egyptians speak of piety, their outrage is shared. Justice and piety here make the same demand. Relevant are Herodotus' comments earlier in the Egyptian narrative about the relativity of measures: "men who are pinched for land measure by fathoms; those who are less pinched by furlongs; those who have much by parasangs; those who have plenty, by schoeni." (2.6) Different situations prompt diverse means of measurement, of understanding one's world. The same actions are here measured by different yardsticks—piety and justice. Indeed, there seems to be a common ground for this shared outrage,<sup>15</sup> even though it is differently understood: the sacred importance of hospitality.<sup>16</sup>

The importance of this becomes clear if we delve into the premises underlying hospitality. Hospitality rests on the recognition that safety is not protected or guaranteed, that both hosts and guests are at risk in their interaction. It also insists that we can overcome this need. If we were powerless to overcome it, hospitality would not be a duty; for something to be a requirement means that it must be possible. Hospitality thus recognizes the vulnerability of others and the power that we have to redress that vulnerability, that— as desiring and greedy human beings, we could exploit others, but that we likewise have the capability to refrain from such exploitation. Such restraint rests on the recognition of both human weakness and of the human power to mitigate that weakness.<sup>17</sup> The violation of hospitality exploits the former and fails to uphold the latter. Here, the impious and unseemly collide.

Proteus is horrified by Alexander's crime against hospitality. It is precisely his deep sense of the criminality of Alexander's actions that makes him refrain from punishing him further: "If I did not think it of the first consequences not to kill any stranger who, under duress of the winds, has come to this land of mine, I would myself have taken vengeance on you on behalf of that Greek" (2.115).<sup>18</sup> His lack of anger is yet another manifestation of Egyptian alienation from the human.<sup>19</sup> A crime of impiety is, after all, a crime against the god— a god so far removed from the human that identification with the divine is simply impossible. Anger arises when we feel thwarted, even if it is not specifically we ourselves who are thwarted but rather someone or something we identify with, someone that we 'feel' with. The Egyptians do not primarily conceive of crime as against human beings, and are separated from their gods; because of this, they never really become enraged.<sup>20</sup> Proteus meticulously fulfills his duties as host while redressing a crime against hospitality; he takes Alexander's stolen goods, including Helen, and gives him three days to leave the