



Lessons New and Old

Confronting Tyranny: Ancient Lessons for Global Politics by Toivo Koivukoski; David Tabachnick; Plato's Fable: On the Mortal Condition in Shadowy Times by Joshua Mitchell; Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens by Arlene W. Saxonhouse

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Confronting Tyranny: Ancient Lessons for Global Politics, edited by Toivo Koivukoski and David Tabachnick. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006. 260 pp. \$80.00 (cloth); \$27.95 (paper).

Plato's Fable: On the Mortal Condition in Shadowy Times, by Joshua Mitchell. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006. 205 pp. \$35.00 (cloth).

Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens, by Arlene W. Saxonhouse. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 235 pp. \$70.00 (cloth).

In 1816, Thomas Jefferson wrote that the discovery of “representative democracy has rendered useless almost everything written before on the structure of government; and in great measure, relieves our regret, if the political writing of Aristotle, or of any other ancient, have been lost, or are unfaithfully rendered or explained to us.”¹ No doubt, there are historical reasons to study classical Greece, but between us and them lies not only the discovery of representative democracy, but also the discoveries of Christianity, economics, national and transnational political institutions, universal human rights, and modern science. What can modern political theory learn from the lessons of old books? Three recent volumes wrestle with this question. In *Confronting Tyranny: Ancient Lessons for Global Politics*, the essays collected by Toivo Koivukoski and David Tabachnick ask what we can learn about modern oppressive institutions from their ancient ancestors. In *Plato's Fable: On the Mortal Condition in Shadowy Times*, Joshua Mitchell claims that Plato's *Republic* offers an account of ethical “imitation” superior to those offered by modern liberalism. In *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens*, Arlene Saxonhouse argues that free speech in antiquity differs from our rights-based understanding of the practice, and yet it sheds light on the presuppositions of modern freedoms.

I

Confronting Tyranny presents essays from fifteen authors and an introductory essay by Catherine Zuckert. Several analyze tyranny from modern and postmodern perspectives, but given the richness of the volume, I limit

my comments to authors who focus on the relationship between ancient and modern tyranny. Deriving lessons from ancient thought about modern institutions presupposes that ancient and modern forms of tyranny are sufficiently similar to admit of univocal analyses, and thus the first question of this volume is whether there is any fundamental difference between them. Echoing Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Roger Boesche's "An Omission from Ancient and Early Modern Theories of Tyranny: Genocidal Tyrannies" makes the case most persuasively that modern technology, national and ethnic ideologies, and more efficient institutional administrations resulted in genocidal violence that would have "astonish[ed] Aristotle, Tacitus, and Machiavelli" (p. 48).

Although the degree to which some modern tyrannies use violence distinguishes them from ancient tyrannies, Mark Blitz, in "Tyranny, Ancient and Modern," argues that "many tyrants—Idi Amin, for example—apparently display nothing that Aristotle has not uncovered already" (p. 16). Although Blitz concedes that the cases of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia require more careful analysis, he seems to claim that their only novelty was the extent to which they were intellectually justified by scientific ideologies (p. 19). For Blitz, the "totality of totalitarianism" was presaged by regimes familiar to the ancients, such as that of Periander; and Chirot's "Postcolonial African and Middle Eastern Tyrannies" suggests that many modern tyrannies do not differ in kind from ancient tyrannies.

Another way to compare ancient and modern notions of tyranny is to focus on how ancient authors characterized tyranny. Ronald Beiner reminds us that the analysis of tyranny in Plato's *Republic* is concerned primarily with the nature of the tyrannical soul, rather than the notion of tyranny as a regime type. Indeed, if political science is fundamentally concerned with the structural analyses of political regimes and institutions, then I think Beiner is quite correct to claim that the regime analysis of the *Republic* "wasn't really intended as political science at all" (p. 191); rather, the account of regimes in books VIII–IX primarily serves to illustrate the problem of evil in the interiority of the private soul (p. 192). Nathan Tarcov shows that Aristotle's comprehensive analysis of the regime of tyranny in antiquity distinguishes right and deviant regimes according to whether the regime is governed in the interest of the rulers or the ruled, which is radically different from modern accounts that "emphasize the source of government, in practice the presence or absence of accountability to the people" (p. 131). Indeed, Aristotle at times endorses the claim that the best government is royal rule (*basileia*)—or rule of one (*monarchia*) in the interest of the governed—regardless of the fact that in such a society, there may be an absence of rule of law and the democratically expressed consent of the governed. Tarcov finds ways to locate notions of

legality, legitimacy, and consent in Aristotle's account of regimes (p. 132), but Aristotle's primary notion is that of the common good.

There may be a "new" lesson lingering in the modern experience of tyranny that was insufficiently appreciated in antiquity. A glance at Plato's *Laws* or Aristotle's *Politics* finds institutions that might even astonish modern tyrants. All education (*paideia*) in a regime must inculcate the worldview and beliefs of that regime in a fashion that today looks like unapologetic propaganda. Everything from the regulation of prices in the marketplace to the age and even seasons for permissible human breeding falls within the purview of the city. Although Aristotle points out that tyrannies suppress "intermediate" institutions, strictly speaking, there is no such thing as civil society distinct from the polis in Aristotle's political science, nor is there any economy independent of the polity. A danger, sometimes overlooked by the authors of *Confronting Tyranny*—who, in general, wish to advocate that ancient authors have important lessons for modern political theorists—is the difference between what Benjamin Constant called ancient and modern ideas of liberty.

II

If Plato's *Republic* is primarily concerned with the nature of the soul, rather than with political institutions, then one suspects that it speaks in a timeless way because whereas many details of human institutions are historically variable, the human soul is less so. Such a timeless understanding of the soul does not entail that human nature is ahistorical or invariable, but it suggests that human nature offers an outline, as it were, that human narratives at different times and places have fleshed out differently. *Plato's Fable*, by Joshua Mitchell, claims that the "story" that Plato's *Republic* tells about the nature of the soul and "the significance of imitation in mortal life" is superior to the story supplied by modern liberalism (p. 1).

Unpacking what Mitchell means by *imitation* elucidates the central claim of his book. At the close of book IX of the *Republic*, Socrates tells Glaucon that the city in speech that they have established most likely exists nowhere in the world, but rather, it is a "model, perhaps, laid up in heaven for one who wishes to see and found a city within himself based on what he has seen."² According to Mitchell, it is "divine reason's" access to such a pattern or model—through philosophy's transcendence of human mortality (which he calls "practicing death")—that offers the only hope. Modern liberalism, by contrast, possesses, at best, impoverished accounts of imitation—or how humans become good. Mitchell faults the pluralistic stories one finds in

Rawls or Habermas for figuring reason as only an instrument of preference. Liberalism's other alternatives consist in what Mitchell calls "socialization" (namely, the notion that only improper upbringing makes people bad) or "identity politics" (namely, the notion that one's patterns are determined by identification with a certain ethnic or national group). The former is too optimistic in that it assumes that reason responds to simple incentives, and the latter too pessimistic in that it subsumes reason in identity (p. 11). Mitchell considers Alexis DeToqueville's account of mediating institutions in *Democracy in America* a serious alternative, but such a form of liberalism ultimately only espouses a notion of "mimetic good fortune." The inculcation of good mores in modern America is simply the result of our legacy of "gathering together in mediational fora," something "bequeathed to [us] by [our] Puritan ancestors and precariously nurtured by the governmental apparatus of federalism" (p. 187).

Superior to all this, according to Mitchell, is Plato's account of the Good in the *Republic*. "Only by the light of the Good—a divine gift, as it were—can humans be freed from the defective 'mortal patterns' that are otherwise their lot. This is the meaning of the saying, 'only philosophy can save us'" (p. 17). To prove such a claim, Mitchell provides a short introductory chapter (twenty pages) that characterizes the alternatives that liberalism offers; a short concluding chapter that compares Plato's account to that of DeToqueville and argues for the superiority of the former (twenty-six pages); and a *very* long second chapter (146 pages) that walks the reader through all ten books of the *Republic*, highlighting those sections that speak to or support Mitchell's thesis. *Plato's Fable* is ultimately a 150-page reflection on the claim that the "shadowy condition" of mortality (as it is depicted in the allegory of the Cave) is one in which humans dwell in bondage and from which only philosophy can lead us into a divine light.

One sometimes detects in contemporary scholarship on Plato—for instance, in Sara Monoson's *Plato's Democratic Entanglements* (2000) or Chris Bobonich's *Plato's Utopia Recast* (2002)—a desire to find a "kinder and gentler" Plato, namely, one less aristocratic, more egalitarian, and certainly less metaphysical. Although Mitchell does not engage contemporary scholarship, his take on Plato is "untraditional" in the sense that it embraces, rather than criticizes, all those elements in the *Republic* that offend modern antimetaphysical sentiments. But in another sense, Mitchell's reading of the *Republic* is profoundly traditional, viz. in the tradition of Christian Platonism from Augustine to Emerson, which viewed Plato as a proto-Christian. Indeed, although Mitchell's notes engage such philosophers as Hobbes, Rousseau, Marx, and Nietzsche, there are as many (if not more) notes that point out

parallels to Augustine, Luther, and Calvin. I cannot recall a modern work on ancient philosophy that sought to illuminate the *Republic* by citing St. Paul (p. 29).

Although I sympathize with Mitchell's emphasis on the *Republic's* inescapable need for transcendence as a solution to our mortal condition, at times I found his characterization of that transcendence foreign to Plato. Consider, for instance, Mitchell's construal of the problem of justice in the *Republic*. In the *Republic*, Polemarchus claims that it is "just to give to each what is owed."³ According to Mitchell, "when we behold the city set up in heaven at the end of Book IX, however, justice no longer pertains to debt. . . . The appearance of debt at the outset of the discussion of justice, and its disappearance at the conclusion, warrants some attention. . . . If mortal gold is the currency by which debt can be measured, then must the currency of ethics be beyond debt? Is what is disclosed through ethics, in other words, beyond the possibility of payment?" (p. 139). In the sequel, Mitchell goes on to claim that although one must keep the Christian account of debt—in which "the irruption of God into time" can never be earned or merited—separate from that in Plato, nonetheless, he believes that the *Republic* shows that one must leave aside the "mortal" notion of justice as a kind of debt. Rather, he takes Plato's fable to indicate that the "payment of debt by mortal means leaves the predicament of man essentially unaltered; a divine resolution of the predicament is made necessarily by man's inability to move beyond lingering death; and finally, the disclosure of the divine resolution occurs on the occasion of death, rightly understood—which moves the soul beyond the contradictions of hypothetical thinking, to unpremiered knowledge" (p. 143). For Plato, "philosophical death" consists in "dislodging the hypotheses about the nature of the Good that adhere to the life he lives" (p. 144).

Although imaginative, it strikes me as unhelpful to attribute such an account of debt to Plato (or some of Mitchell's other characterizations such as that the model of *Republic* IX is a "city up in heaven" [p. 139], that the philosopher is one who receives "divine illumination" [p. 48], or that the Good is a "divine gift, of sorts, that irrupts into the world of shadows but that cannot be rendered in terms of that world" [p. 165]). Indeed, Mitchell's characterization of the Good as one's "true Home" (pp. 29–30, 108–9, 147) sounds more like the neo-Platonism of Proclus or Boethius than anything from the *Republic*. Mitchell's volume left me wondering the extent to which he has neglected lessons "new" rather than old. "Getting history right" allows a political theorist to bestow credit where credit is due in the history of political thought and to identify those sources which provide the most fruitful ground for accurate reflection. Contemporary liberal political theory may be

in need of the redemptive possibilities that an appeal to the divine provides, but it was unclear to me why Mitchell sought to present a quasi-Christian account of political philosophy under the guise of Plato. Mitchell claims that the defective versions of imitation—socialization and identity politics—both emerge out of the Reformation tradition (p. 8), but I wondered why he chose not to pursue the traditions of Christian political thought that antedate the Reformation, either in Thomastic or Augustinian thought. The notion of being separated from one's "true Home" is primarily a Christian one, and if Mitchell feels that that is at the heart of the problem of imitation in liberalism, it would seem to follow that it requires a solution explicitly cognizant of its Christian origins.

III

Carefully attuned to the differences and interrelations between new and old lessons is Saxonhouse's *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens*, which examines how *parrhêsia* ("free speech" or more literally "saying everything") and *aidôs* ("shame" or sensitivity to the opinions of others) operated in the democracy of fifth- and fourth-century Athens. Saxonhouse asks, "Does democracy (like philosophy) . . . require shame, the contextual individual, or is democracy built on a transcendence of shame, on uncovering practices that resist shame and the history that defines what is shameful? Or to put it another way: is democracy grounded on the communitarian individual who experiences shame in an historical context or the liberal individual who is free from both history and shame?" (p. 77). Although such contemporary debates animate her book, Saxonhouse is also attuned to the difficulties of using ancient Athenian institutions as models for modern political theory. The result is an extraordinarily rich and thoughtful book that is both theoretically sophisticated and historically nuanced; it is a model of how historical scholarship can illuminate contemporary political theory.

Free Speech and Democracy proceeds in four parts. The first part of the book clears away anachronistic concepts that hinder the understanding of *parrhêsia* in ancient Athens. Whereas modern theorists conceive of "freedom of speech" as a right held by individuals against the government or the social coercion of others, prior to the notion of representative government, there was no separation of "government" and the people, and according to Saxonhouse, there were no notions of "rights" as checks against government intrusion (pp. 23, 29). The second and third parts of her book then proceed to explain what the ancient practice of *parrhêsia* was and how it is related to *aidôs*. *Aidôs* (which Saxonhouse illuminates from the story of Gyges in Herodotus

and Plato) is a “social emotion connecting us to those around us. It requires the ability to know and understand what are to be the limits of human behavior as defined by the social community in which we live, limits that are set not by natural capacities but by how we appear in the eyes of others” (p. 63). Opposed to *aidôs* is *parrhêsia*, or the “frank talk” that any citizen—regardless of family lineage or societal class—was invited (and indeed expected) to present in the assembly. By examining evidence from fourth-century orators and Socrates’s trial, Saxonhouse shows that the concept was closely related to that of *isêgoria*—the Athenian practice of allowing equal opportunity for all to speak in the assembly—but it also implies a willingness to criticize, or what she calls “democratic amnesia,” which allows individuals to “defy the stranglehold of earlier forms of rule and earlier beliefs in order to look toward a future” (p. 38). Rather than view such a practice as a protection of individuals against the state, Saxonhouse argues that it should be understood as one of the most highly lauded aspects of a system of self-rule in which public deliberation and unveiling of truth was done for the benefit of the city.

The trial of Socrates—that frank talker extraordinaire—underscores an idiosyncratic aspect of Athenian *parrhêsia*. Some have wondered how the freedom-loving city of Athens could have put to death its most freely speaking individual. Saxonhouse persuasively argues that the problem was not a failure of Athenian ideals, but rather that Socrates sought to exercise *parrhêsia* outside the sphere in which Athenians located frank talk, namely, the assembly. Just like Aristophanic comedy could use the most crude, insulting, and even blasphemous language, as long as it took place only in the theater (pp. 130–31), Athenian *parrhêsia* permitted the criticism and questioning of everything in a shameless fashion, just as long as it took place in the assembly. Socrates’s crime, as it were, consisted in exercising a shameless free speech everywhere, rather than in the realm in which it was accepted (p. 110).

As one might guess, a healthy democratic polity—indeed, as Saxonhouse notes, any polity (p. 89)—requires both *parrhêsia* and *aidôs*, and the fourth part of Saxonhouse’s book probes the limits of *parrhêsia* by looking at its depiction in Greek plays, Thucydides’s accounts of deliberative assemblies, and Plato’s *Protagoras*. In Euripides and Aristophanes, Saxonhouse finds sensitivities to the dangers of unfettered frank talk, especially when it intrudes on life outside the Assembly; in Thucydides’s depictions of assemblies deliberating on the question of the wholesale destruction of Mytilene, she finds a debate about the very virtue of free debate, in which one speaker argues (in a speech) against further speeches in favor of action and the other speaker tries to persuade his Athenian audience, all the while pessimistic about the possibility of rational persuasion. Finally, Saxonhouse finds in *Protagoras*’s long speech claims that *aidôs* is presented (along with *dikê*, or

“justice”) as the gifts by means of which Zeus establishes in human society a dialectical exchange between Socrates—who exercises *parrhêsia* without *aidôs*—and Protagoras—who, in addition to stressing the fundamental nature of *aidôs*, also chooses rhetoric over “frank talk.” She sums up the Socratic position by suggesting that Socrates replaces *aidôs* with *eidôs*; brief, frank, unlimited dialectical questioning seeks to escape the problems inherent in *parrhêsia* itself.

IV

In her conclusion, Saxonhouse dwells on the paradox of extolling “historical amnesia” while turning “to the past, to the literature and history of a small city that flourished two and a half millennia ago” (p. 207). I would like to reflect briefly on the same problem, namely, the relationship between the new and old lessons that contemporary political theorists can learn from the study of classical Greek political thought. Any study of ancient thought is constrained by the “chains” of the past—insofar as it is bound by canons of historical and contextualized interpretation—and yet at the same time, if it is to be philosophical, it must also be forward looking and willing to seek new insights to current situations from old lessons.

It is no coincidence of scholarship that the most fertile ground for reflection on human affairs continues to be works like Plato’s *Republic*, the *Apology of Socrates*, and Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, rather than, say, Plato’s *Laws*, the orations of Isocrates, or even Aristotle’s *Politics*. Although the *Republic* claims that the city and soul are isomorphic, the construction of Plato’s city in speech offers an almost unlimited and timeless source for speculation about the human soul, one that will always eclipse his account of political institutions in the *Laws*. The same could be said with respect to the differences between scholarship on Aristotle’s *Ethics* and *Politics*, or between that most famous court case of Athens, depicted in the *Apology* and the plethora of orations we possess from Isocrates, Demosthenes, or Aeschines. The latter illustrate in far more detail and with greater clarity the legal institutions and concepts of Athens, but since they illuminate a juridical system thoroughly alien to our own, the orations themselves can only offer antiquarian insights.

It does not follow, of course, that the modern theorist who examines concepts of human nature in works of classical political theory naively presupposes that human nature is unchanging, nor would I claim that the evolution of human institutions makes the study of the polis or its government irrelevant. Events like Christianity’s proclamation that God entered human history as a man or the

discovery of representative government radically reorient human nature in a way that changes forever its study. And it requires a naïve view of history to think that progress has inoculated the institutions of “modernity” from the sickness of tyranny one finds throughout antiquity. Leo Strauss, writing in 1948, claimed that scholars of his generation “were relieved when they rediscovered the pages in which Plato and other classical thinkers seemed to have interpreted for us the horrors of the twentieth century.”⁴ Although those living at that dark time must have found comfort in any light, to learn that the Enlightenment could just as easily descend into the Dark Ages (from which it allegedly was heroically reborn in the Renaissance) was enough for some to signal the demise of modernity itself.

The lesson I draw from such an observation is that the study of ancient works and institutions illuminates best when they are far enough away to set in contrast contemporary concepts without being so distant as to offer little or illusory comparisons. Saxonhouse’s study of *parrhêsia* is most insightful when it shows us how something we are familiar with—freedom of speech—is practiced in a significantly different fashion such that we are brought to see what is most distinctive in our own practices by comparison. It is like looking at a picture of oneself from another time, which helps one see more clearly what one looks like now. By comparison, one could look at dozens of recent pictures of one’s self and not see something “new.” One could study freedom of speech jurisprudence in numerous state constitutions and never see the distinctive and idiosyncratic “rights-based” nature of our free speech practices, although a glance at fourth-century Athenian practices sets it in immediate contrast. On the other hand, I suspect that the notion of transcendence in Plato’s *Republic* is so different from Christian notions of salvation that it is misleading to illuminate the latter by the former. One can compare the two, of course, but it is like using Ptolemaic cosmology to help make sense of quantum physics. The ancient concept of tyranny sheds unexpected light on modern questions. In *Confronting Tyranny*, essays by David Tabachnick and Mark Lilla suggest that ancient analyses of tyranny undermine many of the premises of Bush’s 2002 “Axis of Evil” State of the Union address, including the claim that tyranny (as distinct from global terrorism) poses a danger to the general safety of the world. Whether further fruitful lessons will arise from antiquity’s experience with empire or be limited by the distinctively modern phenomenon of transpolitical terrorism is an exciting area for further research.

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Notes

1. Arlene W. Saxonhouse, *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 13.
2. Plato *Republic* 592b2–3.
3. Pl. *Rep.* 331e3–4.
4. Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny, Including the Strauss-Kojève Correspondence*, rev. and expanded ed., ed. Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (New York: Free Press, 1991), 23.

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