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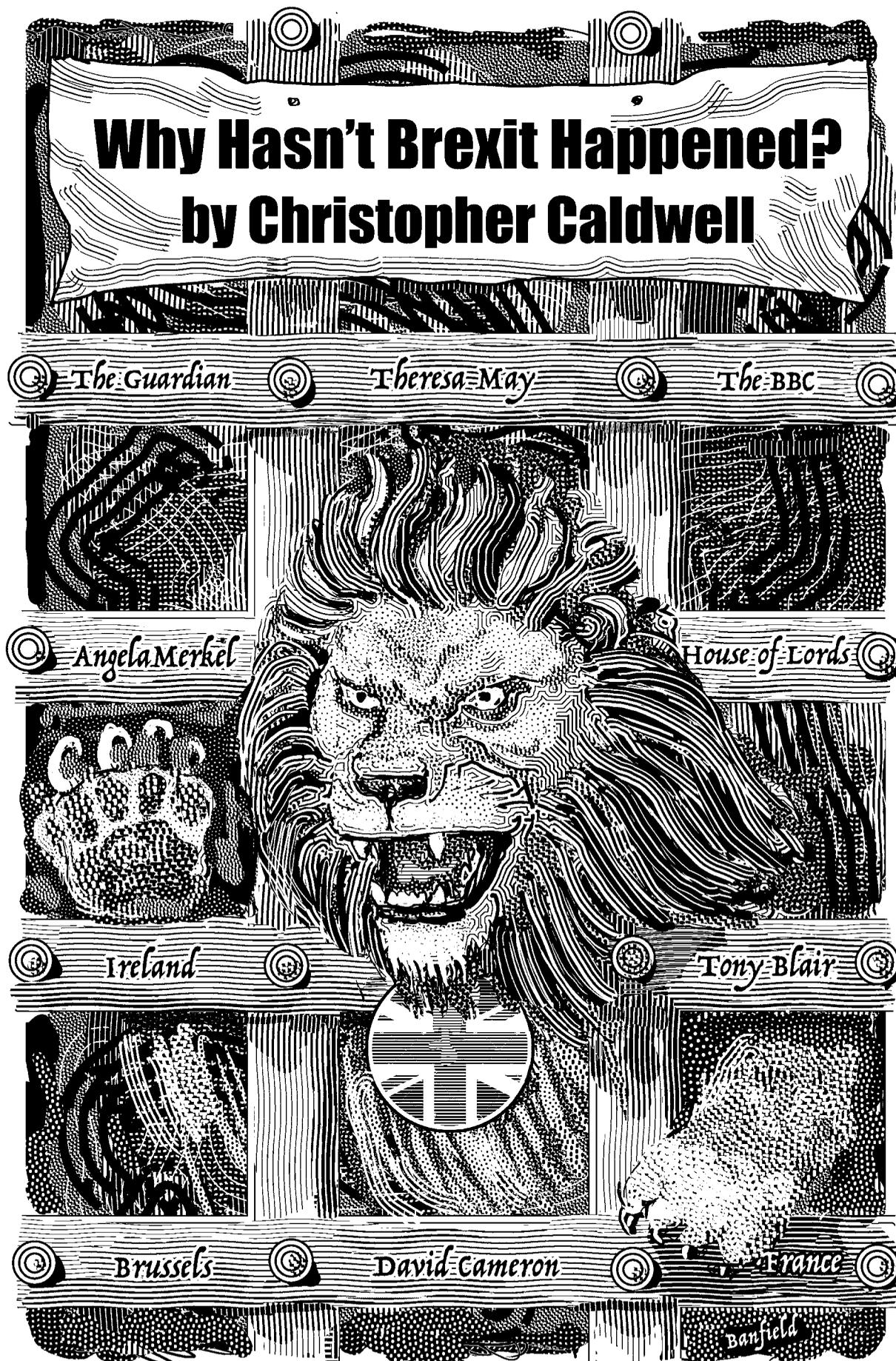
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Book Review by Mark Blitz

SOCRATES' FAILURES

Glaucon's Fate: History, Myth, and Character in Plato's Republic, by Jacob Howland.
Paul Dry Books, 295 pages, \$29.95



THE ISSUES THAT CONCERN JACOB Howland in *Glaucon's Fate* are these: "Is [Plato's] *Republic* primarily a work of philosophical inquiry or ideological dogmatism? Are its political proposals serious or ironic?" "How has the *Republic* managed to inspire tyrannical hubris as well as reflective openness?" Howland argues that "a confusion of philosophical aspiration and political ideology runs throughout the *Republic*."

A philosophy professor at Tulsa University, Howland thinks Socrates failed to convince his central interlocutor in the *Republic*, Plato's brother Glaucon, "of the superiority of the life of philosophy and justice." Evidence for this is Howland's surmise (following Michael Munn) that Glaucon died fighting for the notorious Thirty Tyrants who ruled Athens in 404 B.C., after Sparta defeated it. Plato's relatives Charmides and Critias are known to have been members of the Thirty—Critias led the group, which killed 1,500 people. This connection leads Howland to make much of

what he takes to be Critias' views in three of the dialogues in which he appears (*Critias*, *Timaeus*, and *Charmides*).

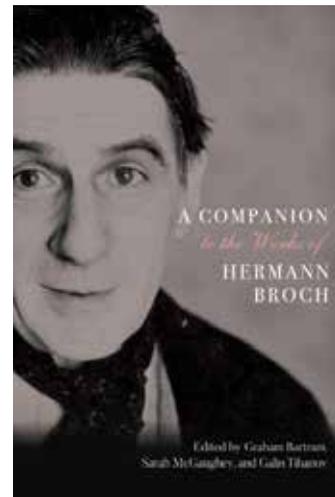
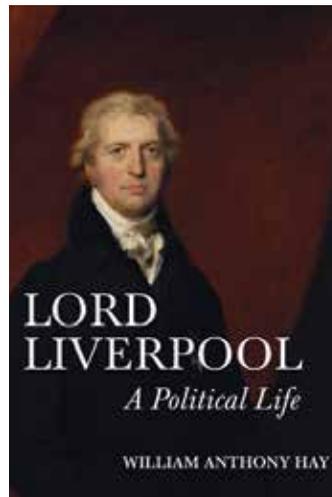
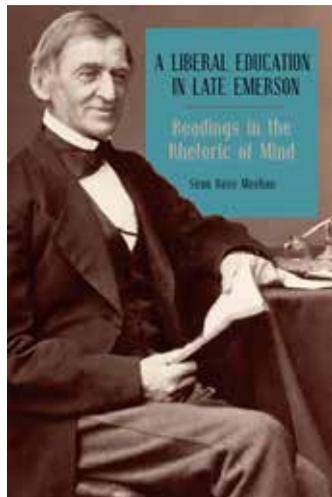
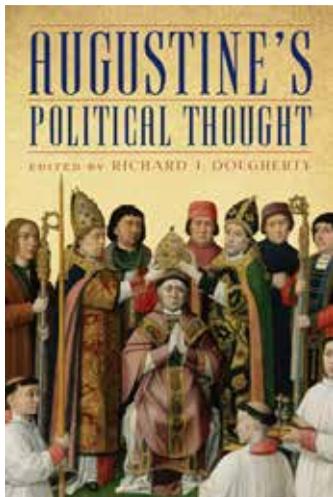
Few who study Plato claim Socrates succeeded in turning his most politically ambitious interlocutors toward a philosophical life. This is visible with Alcibiades, whom Howland discusses, and clear enough to the reader of the *Charmides* even if one did not know that Critias led the Thirty. Speculation about whether Glaucon supported this tyranny does not add much to the already striking evidence of Socrates' failures: Glaucon's political ambition and shortcomings, as well as his gifts, are evident in the *Republic*. But such speculation is historically and poetically interesting: in general, Howland makes good use of the *Republic's* literary references. He suggests that Glaucon died in the battle of Munchia—the decisive battle between the Thirty and democratic forces. This battle was fought on the road along which Socrates and Glaucon walk at the *Republic's* beginning; they are stopped by

Polemarchus' slave near or at the place on the road on which the battle was joined. Several of the *Republic's* characters, moreover, were killed by the Thirty. From this perspective, the *Republic* is Plato's memorial to his brother.

THE NOVELTY OF HOWLAND'S APPROACH is to consider Critias to be a tyrant informed by philosophy, an ideologue who is a precursor to later ideological views. The "*Timaeus* begins to reveal the ideological shape and scope of Critias' ambitions"; Critias has a "top-down, technical conception of politics." More importantly, Socrates' most just regime in the *Republic*, Callipolis (the Beautiful City), exemplifies a Critian regime. In it, "political repression co-exists...with individual license." "In constructing Callipolis," Howland asserts, "Socrates disgraces philosophy as well as virtue—and he knows it, as the fears and regrets that frame the *Republic's* central books make clear." Callipolis is characterized by "philosophical totalitarianism"

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and “infected with immoderation and ruled by technicians supported by a rhetoric of expertise, the practical but philosophically spurious side of the formal ontology in which the city’s kings are trained.”

Others have argued that Callipolis is not intended to be a concrete political model: the *Republic’s* political scheme is meant to show that no actual city is an adequate home for justice, or that it outlines a version of the republic of letters, or of the education of philosophers across generations. Howland does not make these arguments. Rather, he attempts to save Socrates from his accusation of political recklessness by arguing that Socrates (or is it Plato?) means to distinguish the individual philosophical life from a political order ruled by philosophers, or intended to produce them. The dialogue’s “dramatic failures teach that philosophical salvation cannot be worked out through political institutions.” Callipolis is “a profoundly immoderate regime that is only superficially governed by the measures of philosophy.”

HOWLAND ADVANCES THIS VIEW BY differentiating genuine philosophy from the technical philosophy taught and employed in Callipolis, and by arguing that Socrates and true philosophy are erotic while Critias and his thought-informed

tyranny are *thumotic*—dominated by spiritedness. “The path of natural erotic development,” he writes, “leads to the perfection of the genuine philosopher...that of thumotic political production, to Callipolis’s pure-bred but philosophically illegitimate rulers.” “Socrates offers prophetic intimations of the Good, the unifying origin of the Whole, that allow us to glimpse the truest and deepest mysteries of philosophy. For genuinely erotic souls, the light of the Good, more brilliant than any flame, points the way toward virtue and happiness.” The *Republic’s* concluding myth, moreover, “supports an erotic reading of the *Republic* as a quest for individual salvation through philosophy.” We should therefore distinguish Socrates’ genuine presentation of philosophy from one that makes it too precise or scientific. The latter kind of “philosophy” is the ground for ideological tyranny.

Howland’s Socrates nonetheless is blameworthy because he does not clearly differentiate true from scientific philosophy:

Socrates instructs his companions in the fundamental dogma, so to speak, of the church of the Good. This philosophical catechism plainly indicates that the Good, in its lofty uniqueness, cannot be adequately cognized by a purely formal

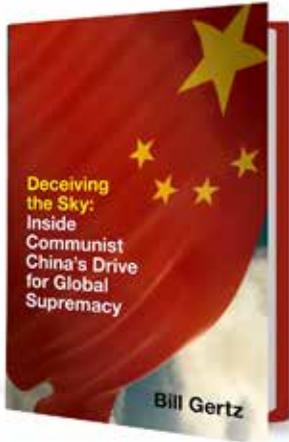
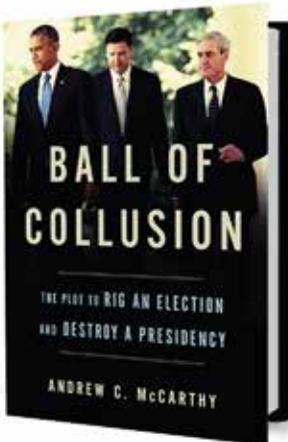
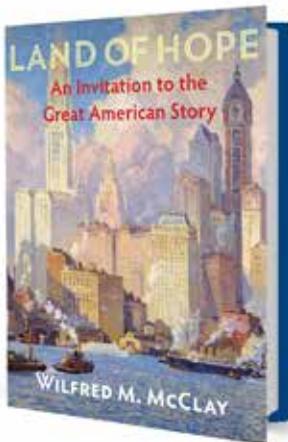
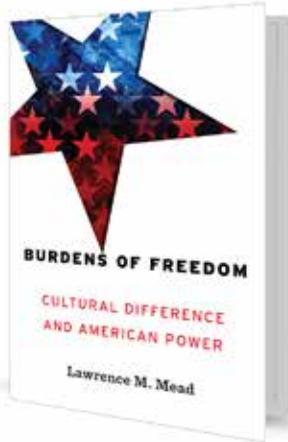
ontology or with scientific precision. Yet it makes no clear distinction between scientific and non-scientific forms of knowledge.... An insufficiently attentive auditor might nevertheless take Socrates to mean that intellectual vision is essentially, or in its highest instance, *identical* to *episteme* [science].... Yet, it is this very misunderstanding on which the education of the philosopher-kings is based.

TO DEVELOP HIS POSITION HOWLAND takes a number of arguable steps. First, he largely ignores the *Republic’s* search for justice: although he praises non-metaphysical philosophy, the actual search for justice in the dialogue is given short-shrift. Indeed, he says little about justice in the soul. But if the philosopher’s soul or way of life is most just, and if the soul is spirited as well as erotic, the place of spiritedness in thought must be greater than Howland suggests. He even downplays the philosopher’s use of reason in attempting to articulate matters subtly and with complexity: the work or activity of the philosopher is, in his account, somewhat unclear.

Howland’s second questionable step is to partially distort Socrates’ presentation of the philosophers’ education in Callipolis. The rul-

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Encounter with Katyń

*The Wartime and Postwar Story of Poles
Who Saw the Katyń Site in 1943*

Tadeusz Wolsza, Institute for the History of Science

2019, 422 pp, ISBN 978-1-5310-1537-4, \$50.00

From the Foreword:

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ers there “alone are allowed to pursue, not philosophy as such, but only a part of it—a formal and systematic metaphysics.” What is the warrant for this view? Socrates indeed discusses the importance of mathematical education and speaks of various ways in which students are compelled—but he also discusses at length dialectical inquiry as the peak of their education, and indicates that they will love learning and that they may “see the good itself.”

This issue is connected to a third questionable step, a certain moralism: “the goodness of philosophical speech is dependent on the moral orientation of those who employ it.” But is not the philosophical life itself the ground of philosophers’ “moral orientation”? Howland acts as if moderation is the central virtue the genuine Socrates teaches. Yet it is the third virtue in the soul as well as in the city. In general, Howland comes close to contrasting a political side of Socrates that is totalitarian or leads to totalitarianism with a prophetic, contemplative side that is quasi-Christian.

Howland’s fourth arguable step is to overestimate Socrates’ estimation of the true city—the city of pigs. This city, Howland claims, “will...respect the intrinsic measures of *human being*...exemplifying the natural criteria of what it is to be a self-sufficient human community...” “In the true city all are perfected by nature.” There is but “one truly relevant standard for which Socrates has so far vouched in the Republic: the natural measures of human being and community that came to light in the True City.” Yet, one wonders how excellent a city can be that has no need for philosophy and no philosophers, that fails to credit or educate human spiritedness, that apparently lacks erotic longing and wonder, and that may engage in virtuous action but lacks virtuous character and choice? Philosophers’ “love of learning, perfected through intellectual inquiry produces an erotic and self-conscious attunement... to the things themselves—reduplicating, insofar as possible, the natural, instinctive and supremely musical soul-transformation of the True City.” But how can philosophy be aligned with a city in which there is no individual choice or pride? The true city is an image of natural justice, but it truncates human powers; as with all cities its justice is naturally incomplete.

AFIFTH QUESTIONABLE STEP IS HOWLAND’S failure to discuss sufficiently Socrates’ analysis in Books VIII and IX of various forms of government, or to explain why the tyrant is there portrayed as eros incarnate and not as excessively spirited. We would have expected a link between tyranny

and philosophy, given the relation between tyranny and spirited excess that Howland presents and his concern that the connection between eros and philosophy is ignored in Callipolis. More generally, he argues that “Socrates’ new beginning mixes two modes of knowing and speaking that sit uneasily together: philosophical prophecy and political science.” To argue this he must ignore what the *Statesman’s* discussion of political science, the regime of the *Laws*, and the description of democracy in the *Statesman* and *Republic* tell us about combining political science and philosophy’s other elements. Perhaps Howland has in mind a distinction between Socrates and the Eleatic and Athenian Strangers, Plato’s chief characters in the *Statesman* and *Laws*, but he does not explore this distinction. His general antipathy to philosophy’s political use, moreover, would have been more telling had he addressed not merely what he believes to be the totalitarianism to which it might lead, but also the teaching of individual liberty and limited government which, from at least John Locke forward, it has fostered.

WHY, IN HOWLAND’S VIEW, DOES Socrates convert philosophy to ideology? “If Socrates argues for a regime and a curriculum that he knows to be philosophically and politically deficient, he does so not simply to test Glaucon’s nature, but also in the hope of keeping him at his side. Callipolis is in this sense an individually tailored advertisement for Socratic philosophizing, designed to make Glaucon invest more deeply in their relationship.” Moreover, Howland argues, Socrates advances the “professionalization” of philosophy in Callipolis in order to exclude the “vicious [or fraudulent] philosophers” by establishing “labors of abstract studies” that would be too rigorous for them. In attempting to suppress counterfeit philosophers, “Socrates clouds the erotic purity of his soul with the unphilosophical spiritedness of an ideologue.”

Are these explanations sufficient to account for Howland’s claim that, by constructing Callipolis, Socrates “disgraces philosophy”? In any event, *Glaucon’s Fate* is thoughtful and illuminating, with many telling historical and literary references and a challenging thesis. It explores significant questions about Plato’s understanding of the connection between philosophy and politics and is well worth reading.

Mark Blitz is the Fletcher Jones Professor of Political Philosophy at Claremont McKenna College, and the author of Plato’s Political Philosophy (Johns Hopkins University Press).

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