

VOLUME XXI, NUMBER 2, SPRING 2021

# CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*

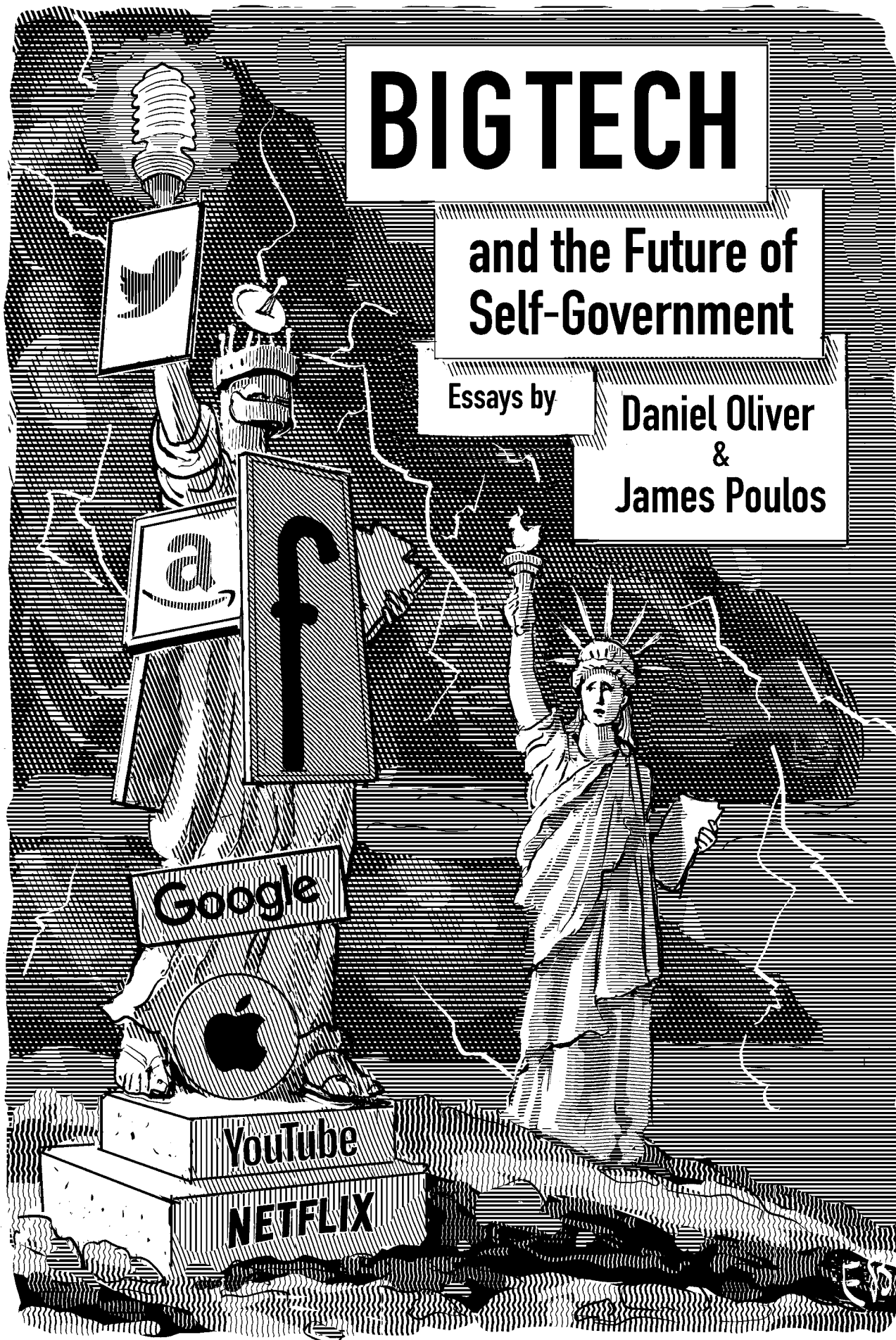
Joseph M.  
Bessette:  
**Obama's  
Promised  
Land**

William  
Voegeli:  
**Californicating  
America**

James  
Bowman:  
**Eminent  
Boomers**

Christopher  
Caldwell:  
**Robert E.  
Lee**

Robert  
Royal:  
**Rod Dreher's  
Survival  
Guide**



James  
Hankins:  
**Our Age of  
Conformity**

Harvey C.  
Mansfield:  
**Feminism vs.  
Womanism**

Mary  
Eberstadt:  
**Trans Kid  
Craze**

Daniel J.  
Mahoney  
♦  
Andrew  
Roberts:  
**Winston  
Churchill**

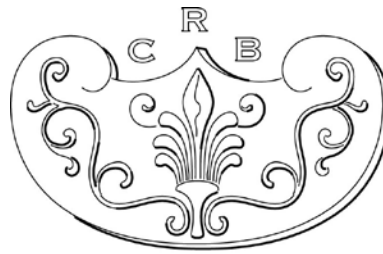
Christopher  
Flannery:  
**American  
Westerns**

A Publication of the Claremont Institute

PRICE: \$6.95

IN CANADA: \$9.50





Essay by James Hankins

## POLITICAL THOUGHT IN AN AGE OF CONFORMITY

*The consolations of philosophy.*

OURS IS AN AGE OF INTELLECTUAL conformity. Perhaps this is true to some extent of all ages, as humans are herding animals, but in our age there are unusual pressures on us to conform to an ideology and to prevent us from having a philosophy.

A philosophy is a way of thinking about the world; it is adopted in freedom, with foundations that transcend our time and place. An ideology is the creation of some class of persons, or their intellectual servants, that aims to restrict expression and to direct our thoughts toward particular ends and conclusions. The goal of philosophy is open-ended: to find truth and make coherent sense of the world around us. The goal of an ideology is to permit some group of persons to acquire or preserve power. Philosophers, who love wisdom because they lack it, assume that we do not have all the answers yet, and the way to find answers is to clarify our thinking. We try to do this by reflecting critically on experience and comparing our ideas to see whether they are mutually consistent. Ideologues already know all the answers. They may pretend their answers are systematically proven or based on science but in practice they accept many mutually con-

tradictory propositions and ignore many empirical realities, because not to do so would undermine their power. They may, for example, believe their power is benevolent, or will someday be benevolent, while in practice it causes immense suffering to those they rule and chiefly benefits themselves.

### Modernity and Globalism

OUR AGE IS PARTICULARLY SUSCEPTIBLE to ideology and particularly hostile to philosophy. For a long time those of us living in Western countries believed that ideology imposed its iron grip only under particular political systems, which we described as totalitarian. A totalitarian system was one in which the state imposed a dogmatic or correct way of thinking about every aspect of life. We in the West believed we were different because our liberal democracies formally protected free speech along with other liberties.

From the perspective of the 21st century, that belief now appears naïve. It is less clear that countries enjoying formal rights to free speech have more of it, in practice, than authoritarian countries with clear rules about what can and cannot be said. Doubts first arose, I think, in

Eastern Europe. Ryszard Legutko described in *The Demon in Democracy* (2016) the shock of discovering that Poland's escape from Communist control in 1989 was not an escape into a realm of freedom:

Incredible as it may seem, the final year of the decline of communism had more of the spirit of freedom than the period after the establishment of the new order, which immediately put a stop to something that many felt strongly at the time, and that, despite its elusiveness, is known to everybody who has an experience of freedom—a sense of having many doors open and many possibilities to pursue. Soon this sense evaporated, subdued by the new rhetoric of necessity that the liberal-democratic system brought with itself.

It is true that punishments for incorrect speech and belief are far more severe—even cruel and abominable—in totalitarian countries. But as historians understand, the severity of punishments is inversely proportional to the power of the state to control the behaviors punished. Severe punishment is not needed when the authorities are not really wor-

---

ried about controlling behaviors that might threaten the present order. In liberal democracies freedom of thought was easily tolerated so long as there was general, willing agreement about society's goals. But something has happened over the past several decades to cause many ordinary citizens to experience elite values in liberal democracies as stifling orthodoxies. Only members of the elite who cooperate with our liberal democracies' illiberal tendencies today are likely to believe they still have freedom of thought and do not need more of it.

In retrospect it is easier to see that intellectual conformity was never in the first place a problem confined to particular political regimes. It was never a problem that was going to be solved by regime change. It is rather a problem of modernity and globalism. Both Communists and liberal democrats were committed to their forms of modernity and hostile to tradition, or to any thinking deemed insufficiently modern. Communists believed that the political system needed to extirpate traditional ways of thought, while liberal democrats of the secular sort thought they could be tolerated—for now—because, with the march of history, non-liberal ways of thought would inevitably be trodden underfoot. U.S. Senator Patrick Moynihan used to call this attitude “the liberal expectancy,” and until recently this was also the attitude of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) toward traditional religions in China. But in recent decades, progressives have become impatient. The politics that claims to be liberal has become far more dominant in the realm of culture and has therefore become narrower, more dogmatic, more determined to impose a vision of the good on those who do not share it.

Globalization, too, has narrowed the circle of approved ideas—an apparent paradox. But in fact the type of intolerance displayed by global corporations, international institutions, and many NGOs has its own internal logic. It is a rule of logic that the more things are *denoted* the fewer are *connoted*: we are able to make generalizations only by bracketing particulars. Thus, in the realm of ideology, the more universal power becomes, the less it can tolerate the particular—deviations from accepted ideas. Worldwide commercial brands monopolize glamour and degrade the appeal of local producers. Many human rights crusaders are similarly bent on destroying local ways of life. Advocacy of human rights sounds irreproachably high-minded until one starts inquiring about *which* human rights are in question, imposed on whom, by whom, and using what sanctions. If we are

advocating, say, gay rights in Russia or Iran, digital rights in China, transgender rights in Pakistan, animal rights in sub-Saharan Africa, feminism among the Zulu, or reproductive rights in Catholic hospitals, one may properly ask whether advocates are really according respect to the diverse opinions and beliefs of others. A global regime empowered to enforce human rights inevitably must suppress deviant local beliefs. Strict modernists will argue that global values are the right ones and local ones primitive or backward, but even if one grants that premise, the conclusion still stands: the imposition of values on a global scale requires a certain conformity of thought. Global concentrations of economic and political power have an inherent tendency to reify, harden, and instrumentalize ideas as elements of ideological systems.

### Freedom to Philosophize

THE FREE PLAY OF THOUGHT BELOVED of philosophers thus becomes deviant behavior, subversive of reigning ideologies. (Just ask Socrates.) The advantage of fixed ideologies for a national or global elite is that they can be monitored for orthodoxy. As codified in the wondrous words of the Miranda warning, anything you say may be used against you. Anything you say may be used to pigeon-hole you, to incarcerate your views, against your will, somewhere in a row of cells arranged from left to right. You, as a free thinker in search of truth, would prefer to locate your current, provisional positions somewhere in a multi-dimensional and trans-temporal system. But doing so openly today is becoming more difficult. In China, you could damage your social credit score, even if you love your country and want to use your mind to help it. In the West, there will be powerful persons eager to label you as insensitive or racist or sexist, which, by the lights of our present cultural censors, are the very gravest of crimes. Or so we are told by the powerful, many of them very ignorant and stupid people.

We seem to be entering a period in which men and women around the world can no longer speak freely without prejudice to their lives, careers, and families. We in the West have been here before, in the early modern age of religious warfare, with its catechisms, loyalty oaths, penal laws, inquisitions, and *autos-da-fé*. The Chinese people have had more recent experience of such times: the Cultural Revolution is still a living memory. In the aftermath of ideological tyrannies many in the West, as in contemporary China, worked to make their societies and political systems more humane

and moderate, less sure of themselves, less dogmatic and intolerant, more ready to admit that there might be valid moral and political beliefs apart from those generated by political elites in the interest of self-preservation and self-aggrandizement.

In the West the voices for ideological moderation—for liberalism—in universities have become more subdued in recent decades. Those voices are also increasingly tainted by the patent failures of liberalism in our time—above all, by its inability to distinguish liberty from license—as well as by forms of toleration that abandon common moral standards and by the growing venality of elites and the absence of devotion to the common good. On the surface the situation seems paradoxical. How can societies formally devoted to freedom turn into bastions of conformism? But as Alexis de Tocqueville noted almost two centuries ago, the forces for intellectual homogenization can be stronger in societies with more explicit political freedoms, and societies devoted to freedom and equality naturally tend to have less respect for the past. Yet if we want to improve our societies, we need to be free to think; our minds need the ability to range with reflective detachment over the experience of our civilization and of other civilizations. We need a trans-temporal space of contemplation from which to consider alternatives. We need a temporal space, too, to talk to each other, to seek truth in each other's company, the way Socrates did with his disciples.

In other words, we need what in the 17th century was called *libertas philosophandi*, freedom to philosophize. Some of us need this simply for our own sanity; drowning in a flood of lies and falsehoods we need to live in truth. Some of us, like the Renaissance humanist Francesco Petrarch, would like to make use of the resources within our traditions in order to reform the sad deficiencies of contemporary political deliberation and leadership. We would like our rulers to be well educated; to be infused with greater humanity, moderation, love of justice, and respect for the common good. We would like them to recognize the worth of the individual and affiliate themselves with sound traditions that nourish our common moral and spiritual lives. Like the new generation of Confucians in contemporary China, we believe recovery of a lost past can transform the present.

What studies can promote *libertas philosophandi*? In 17th-century Europe the disciplines freest from religious politics were what we now call, collectively, science—what the educated of the time called natural phi-

---

losophy. Natural philosophy was thought to be a politically neutral field of study, not the concern of governments and religious establishments. The case of Galileo shocked the Europe of his day in part because contemporaries (including Galileo himself) believed natural philosophy should dwell in an empyrean realm beyond the reach of politico-religious authority. In the 21st century, sadly, science has become almost as much a part of politics as regime theory or international relations. Scientific research no longer provides a refuge from politics; it plays too important a role in the legitimation of policy.

### A Refuge from Conformity

I WOULD MAINTAIN THAT, TODAY, THE field of study in which one is most likely to find the requisite intellectual freedom is in the history of philosophy, including the history of political thought. It is a realm of freedom not because what lies deep in history is beyond the power or interest of present-day ideologues. The past is a foreign country but, sadly, it has trouble remaining non-aligned. Machiavelli made the opposite argument: he believed we could subject the past to cool analysis because the outcomes of actions were already known and therefore did not arouse partisan hopes or fears. Our passions are involved when we observe the actions of our contemporaries because they affect us; not so with actions in the past. The news makes us angry and fearful by turns, while we view the past through a golden mist of memory. The great men of the past are safely dead and do not threaten us.

I am far from sure that Machiavelli's statement was true of his own time—witness the passionate disagreement aroused by attempts during the Renaissance to turn Julius Caesar or Cicero into paragons of virtue—but it is certainly not true today. The current ideological battles in the West over renaming institutes and buildings, the pulling down of statues of figures no longer admired, and the rewriting of textbooks—all these phenomena demonstrate that study of the past does not *per se* provide a refuge from the ideological passions of the present. We might try to escape the consequences of freely expressing our opinions through esoteric writing, like Maimonides, or through irony, like Edward Gibbon or Machiavelli himself. But the pastness of the past by itself cannot set us free.

The reason why intellectual history can provide a refuge from conformity in an age

of militant ideologies, I believe, is that it teaches a discipline of reading texts, and those texts, properly studied, have the power to shred the ideological cocoons that confine us in their silken pupal threads. Historians of political thought know how easy it is to read a text and believe you have understood it, how easy it is to file it in some dossier of received ideas or make its claims fit your own preconceptions. To avoid the historian's unforgivable sin, anachronism, to escape the magnetic field of the present that may distort our own moral compass, requires hard intellectual work. It requires unremitting, disciplined effort to grasp the meaning of a text in its time, both its surface and hidden meanings; to recover it as illocutionary and perlocutionary act—to use J.L. Austin's terms, made famous among intellectual his-

Through disciplined  
reading we come to enjoy  
the most exhilarating  
experience in the life  
of the mind: finding  
something we haven't  
thought of before,  
something that changes  
our way of understanding  
the world.

torians by Quentin Skinner—that is, to understand the intended and actual effects of a text on readers in its time. That is why we historians of political thought have over the past century vastly expanded our collection of hermeneutical tools. We have come to see that to understand the writings of the past requires a deep knowledge of the text in its original language, of the history of rhetorical theory and literary genres, of the modes of communication typical of past ages, of the text's reception history, and of the history of disciplines. We must learn how to grasp in imagination the life of an author in his time, including his sources and models, and the habits of thought and politics of his milieu.

This list may seem endless, and the items on it are by no means the only tools an intellectual historian may need to draw upon in his or her effort to understand a text. But the rewards of disciplined textual study are

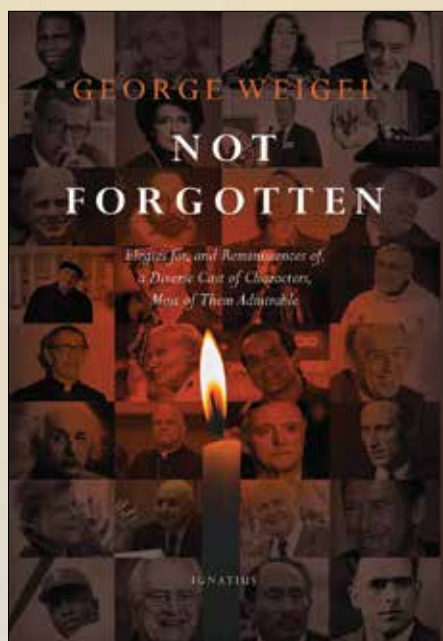
great. The greatest reward? That we can get closer to hearing an authentic voice from the past, a voice expressing a mind whose thinking may be utterly different from our own. Through the disciplined reading of texts we come to enjoy the most exhilarating experience in the life of the mind: finding something you haven't thought of before, something that changes your way of understanding the world. Unless we are the kind of thinker that Notre Dame's Brad Gregory calls "supersessionists"—persons who believe that nothing in the past can ever be useful to the present—the voices of the past will open up to us a far wider kingdom of possibility than the narrow provincialism our present moment permits. As in Cicero's *Dream of Scipio* we will see the world and its history "*de excelso et pleno stellarum, illustri et claro quodam loco*": from a clear and lustrous place on high and full of stars. If we believe in the possibility of renaissance, of a rebirth of fine things and powerful ideas that have been lost to our own time, the voices of the dead will bring them vividly before the mind's eye. We may hear with sudden discomfort words like those Oliver Cromwell wrote to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, "I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken!" We may start little by little to believe that some of our truths may be false, and some of our virtues may be vices.

The study of old political texts, in short, provides an antidote to the conformism of our age and the false ideologies our age tries to impose upon us. They provide an opportunity to reconstitute the limited modern self with the unlimited resources of the human tradition. Old texts can also help make us tolerant, and improve our ways of tolerating others. Our tolerance will not be expressed through clenched teeth or with dismissive superiority; we will not be tolerant merely because we lack the power to suppress. We will be tolerant, in the finest sense of that word, because we will have learned to think of other minds as capable of holding truths that we do not already possess, valuable truths that can change our world for the better.

*James Hankins is professor of history at Harvard University and the author, most recently, of Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy (Harvard University Press). An earlier version of this essay appears in Zhengzhi Sixiangshi Duihualu: Dialogues in the History of Political Thought, edited by Hansong Li (Commercial Press).*



# INSPIRING WORKS ON VIRTUE, LOVE & FRIENDSHIP



## ◆ NOT FORGOTTEN

George Weigel

Weigel has known many interesting personalities in politics, religion, journalism, the academy, entertainment, and sports. In these reminiscences and elegies of some 60 people, he helps us understand the deep truths of the human condition illuminated by these not-forgotten lives. Written with verve and insight on the consequential lives that have touched his own including **Albert Einstein, William F. Buckley, Flannery O'Connor, Franz Jägerstätter, John Paul II, Jackie Robinson, Charles Krauthammer, Sophie Scholl,** and many more.

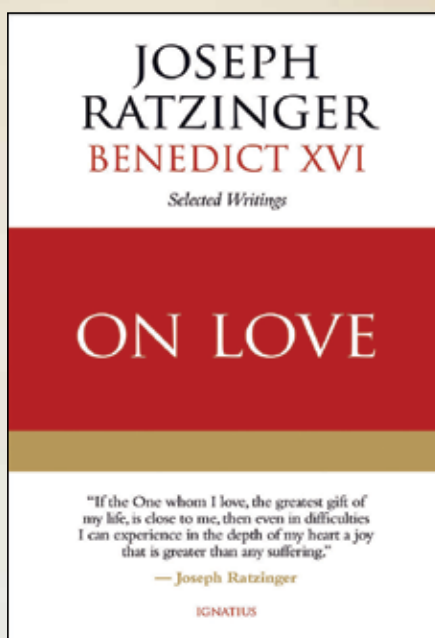
NFP . . . Sewn Softcover, \$17.95

"Moving and delightful, these reminiscences prove that Weigel has not only a mind of the very first order, but the heart to match.

—**Mary Eberstadt**, Author, *Adam & Eve after the Pill*

"Weigel displays his distinctive blend of philosophic sophistication and humane sympathy. An intellectual feast."

—**George F. Will**  
Author, *The Conservative Sensibility*



**"If the One whom I love, the greatest gift of my life, is close to me, then even in difficulties I can experience in the depth of my heart a joy that is greater than any suffering."**

—**Joseph Ratzinger**

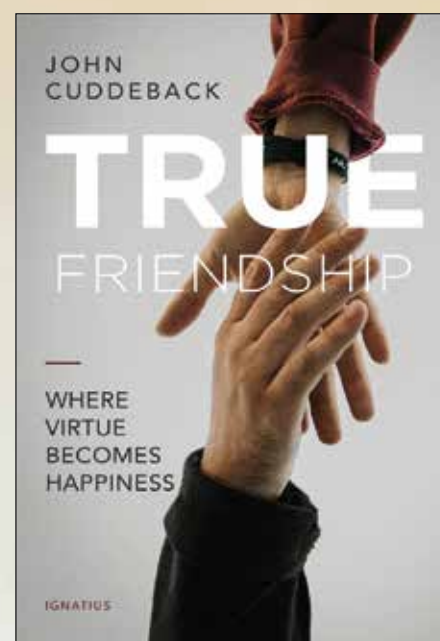
## ◆ ON LOVE

Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI

Benedict XVI addresses the theme he has celebrated, pondered, and witnessed by his life more than any other: love. For him, love is the vital nucleus of the Church and to serve Christ is above all a question of love: "Peter, do you love me? Feed my sheep." Love is also the quest of every human being on the journey toward eternity.

Arranged by the liturgical seasons of the Church year, these writings trace how Joseph Ratzinger has been enamored of the love of God throughout his years of serving the Church.

JRSW3P . . . Sewn Softcover, \$16.95



## ◆ TRUE FRIENDSHIP

John Cuddeback

We all want true friends. But how do we know what friendship is, or where to find it? Philosopher Cuddeback weaves together the timeless wisdom of Scripture, saints and the ancient Greeks to map out the beautiful path to man's greatest joy—true friendship.

Using Aristotle's teachings on the deep connection between happiness and virtuous living, Cuddeback shows that true friendship can only be achieved through a life of virtue, and this is where the human person comes most fully alive. He offers rich advice on how to tap into this reality in our own lives.

TFP . . . Sewn Softcover, \$15.95

"Wonderfully clear and concise. This book is very wise, very practical, and very much needed."

—**Peter Kreeft, Ph.D.**  
Author, *Wisdom from the Psalms*

"Cuddeback demonstrates that true friendship based on virtue benefits the individual, family life, and social life. Highly recommended."

—**Alice von Hildebrand, Ph.D.**



ignatius press

P.O. Box 1339, Ft. Collins, CO 80522

[www.ignatius.com](http://www.ignatius.com)

**(800) 651-1531**



The CLAREMONT REVIEW OF BOOKS is a publication of the CLAREMONT INSTITUTE  
FOR THE STUDY OF STATESMANSHIP AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY.

Subscribe to  
the *Claremont Review of Books*

*"I read the Claremont Review of Books regularly because it is by far the best review of books around, both in its choice of books and topics and in its treating them in depth, in style, and—most unusual of all—with real thought, instead of politically correct rhetoric."*

—Thomas Sowell

Subscribe to the CRB today and save 25%  
off the newstand price. A one-year  
subscription is only \$19.95.

To begin receiving America's premier  
conservative book review, visit  
[claremontreviewofbooks.com](http://claremontreviewofbooks.com)  
or call (909) 981 2200.

CLAREMONT  
REVIEW OF BOOKS  
1317 W. FOOTHILL  
BLVD, SUITE 120,  
UPLAND, CA  
91786

NON PROFIT ORG.  
U.S. POSTAGE PAID  
PERMIT NO. 504  
UPLAND, CA