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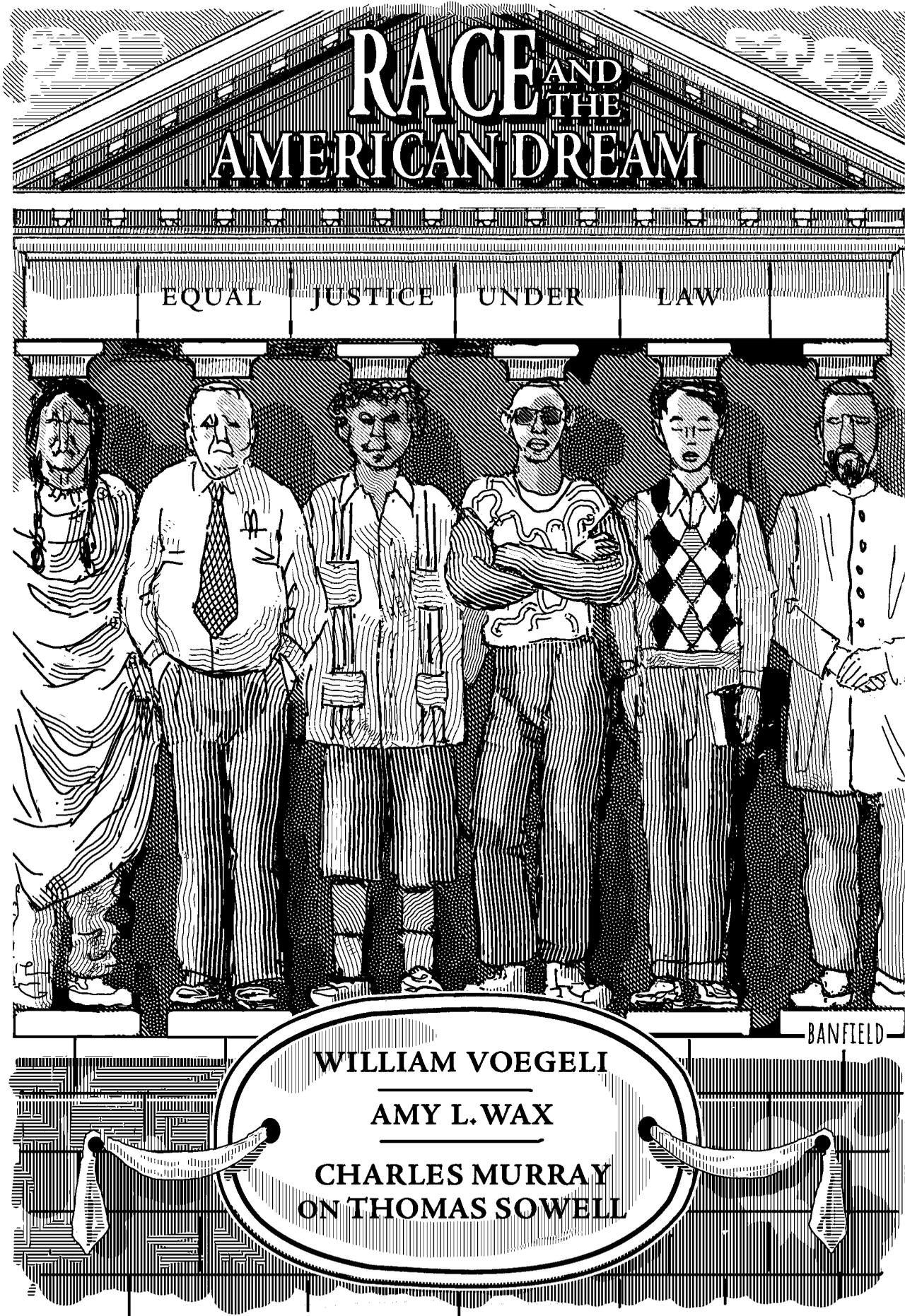
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Transcribed from the Original Palimpsest by Michael Anton

BETO'S REPUBLIC, BOOK I

What is woke justice?



Editor's Note: The following manuscript was recently discovered on a palimpsest in the Goucher College library as its collection was being sold off owing to disuse. Scholars have been unable to determine the manuscript's authenticity, the identity of its author, or even what pronouns he/she/they/xi/etc. use(d). Nor is anything concretely known about the purported narrator or the various characters.

BOOK I

WOKRATES: I WENT DOWN TO JUSTIN Herman Plaza yesterday with Billy, son of Gordon, to express my spirituality by watching the Wiccan dances; and, at the same time, I wanted to see how they would put on the Pride Parade. Now the procession of trans men from the Castro was fine; but in my opinion the one by the womyn from Arcata was no less fine.

I was about to call an Uber on my iPhone 6 Plus when Paul Gerechtigkeitskrieger, an executive at Twitbook who often hires me as a consultant, saw me and had his personal assistant run to make us wait. The kid had to dodge a few needles, panhandlers, and piles of human feces. But he reached us in due course.

"Paul wants you to wait," he said.

I don't like taking orders from kids, but I also didn't want to lose Paul as a client, so we waited. Soon Paul and several of his brogrammers caught up with us. Paul said, "Hey, Rob-

in, we're all going up to my place. I'm getting some friends together for a post-parade party. Slanted Door is catering."

"Paul," I shot back, "if you deadname me one more time, I'm reporting you to The City's Human Rights Commission."

"Oh, sorry, uh...Wōkrates. Anyway, it looks like you're outnumbered."

"Meaning what?" I asked warily, for the way he said it had a rapey vibe.

"You have to come!"

Now, Paul lived in a full-floor spread at One Rincon Hill and always threw great parties. You never knew who you might meet there. A lot of bigwigs from the tech, corporate, and V.C. worlds would often show. I had picked up at least four clients there. Also, Paul was prone to popping really top-shelf Napa cab: Harlan, Bryant, Scarecrow. I even had Screaming Eagle there once. So I decided to follow him.

When we got there, the party was already rolling. There were many more brogrammers,

plus some of the City's more creative types, and some activists. One man really stood out, though. He was older and dressed funny, in a checked shirt and jeans, a belt with this huge brass buckle, and some kind of boots—but the rustic kind, not the kind they sell at Wilkes.

"Oh, that's my dad," Paul explained, "in from Fresno."

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Geoff," the old man said, extending his hand. He reeked of toxic masculinity, but I shook it so as not to offend Paul. It almost gave me hives to think of Paul growing up in the Valley, but I had to suppress that.

"I can't get over how much this city's changed," Geoff said, kind of sadly. "It's nothing like it was when my grandparents lived here."

"I can imagine," I said, with my best ironic smirk, which was meant to say without saying that Geoff was really old. I'm clever that way. But when a man who looks like *that* says something like *that*, I always know what's be-



hind it. I'm clever that way, too. And if you let those sorts of things pass, you're complicit. Silence is violence. So I mustered my ample courage and said: "I agree that it's changed, though in my opinion entirely for the better."

"I guess in some ways yes, in some no," he replied.

"In what way would you concede that it's better?" I asked.

"The baseball stadium is certainly a lot better!"

"And what do you think is worse?" I followed up, even though I already knew the answer.

"Well, little lady," he said condescendingly, "I don't know about worse, but...different. Like, for one thing, in my day, there were blondes, brunettes, and redheads. And that pretty much exhausted things. These days you see every color of the rainbow atop a gal's head."

"Are you criticizing my hair?"

"Oh, of course not," he said sheepishly.

"Does seeing color make you feel threatened?"

"Threatened? No, not exactly. Just...like a fish out of water, I guess."

"Would you be happier if everything, and everyone, were...white?" He clearly didn't get my meaning because he just stared and didn't answer. He didn't seem very bright. Which was odd, because Paul is very smart—smart

enough to hire me, for instance.

"I don't care about color," the old man said. "Hell, I don't even notice it."

"You mean you're colorblind?"

"Yes," he said proudly.

"Good thing for you, then, that stop signs are octagonal."

"I don't follow you."

"Are you hard of hearing?"

"Pardon?"

"You have my pardon. Whether or not you've earned it is another question. I only ask because, as people age, their hearing tends to go."

"I can hear you just fine. As for age, the main effects on me so far are, I love my family even more, I'm more proud of my son than ever, and I take my obligations to the Almighty more seriously. I just got back from Mass up at Saint Peter & Paul. Always good to stay on the right side of my Maker!"

"Oh, and do you think you are?"

"I sure hope so. Lord knows, He's been good to me so far."

"So you attribute your personal good fortune to god?"

"No, not all of it. Frankly, I attribute a lot of it to hard work and doing the right thing. But the blessings of the Lord sure never hurt!"

"Couldn't part of it, even most of it, simply be your privilege?"

"Pardon?"

"Never mind." I could tell that a mediocre white man like him would never see where I was going with that, and that explaining it in a way he would understand was impossible. So instead I said: "You mentioned 'doing the right thing.'"

"Yes."

"Are you so sure you know what the right thing is?" I asked, for I could sense unearned confidence oozing from his every pore.

"Well, I always pay my debts, tell the truth, and try to treat everyone fairly."

"And you think that's 'doing the right thing'? Or, if we could be a bit more precise in our language, that's justice?"

"I think so, yes."

"What do you mean by 'treating everyone fairly'?"

"I mean treating everyone equally."

"You mean treating everyone the same no matter what their specific circumstances?"

"I suppose so, yes."

"So you'd treat the white tech bro the same as the Black homeless person?"

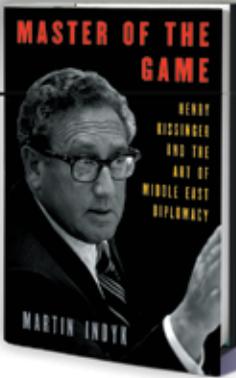
"I don't see why not, as long as they both had the same chances. Race and class should have nothing to do with it."

"But what if race and class contribute to—are drivers of—inequality? Doesn't fairness require that those who've been treated badly in the past should get more while those

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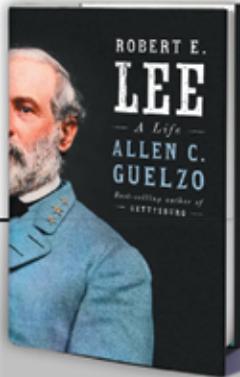
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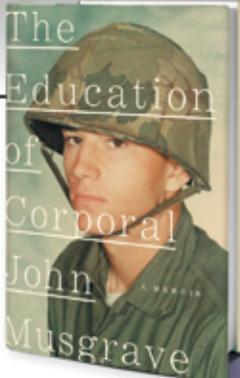




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who've benefited from past unfairness get less?"

"I don't know about that. I think fairness is treating everyone according to their merits."

"So the person who has more merit should get more, and the person who has less should get less?"

"Exactly."

"So you're not for equality after all?"

"Pardon?"

"First you said justice is treating everyone equally. But now you say it means treating them unequally, because awarding by merit means distributing good things unequally. Justice clearly can't be equality and inequality at the same time."

"Of course, it can," Paul chimed in, "at least if Rawls, Coates, and Kendi can be believed."

"Well, son, I leave it to you to hash this out. Great party, and you know how proud I am of you, but I've got to get back to Fresno for a VFW meeting." With that, the old man went down to the garage, climbed into his F-150, and drove away.

"Looks like that makes you the heir to this argument," I said to Paul—though in general I oppose the concept of inheritance, because it perpetuates generational privilege. "Tell me: those authorities you cite. What is it they say to reconcile equality and inequality?"

"It's very simple," Paul said, "and I know you know the argument, since I've heard you make it in those seminars you teach at my company. So I suspect this is just you with your famous irony. In any case, I'll humor you by stating the argument. Justice is using inequality to create equality. It's helping people by redistributing advantages to equalize what is unequal."

"Paul, you amazing spirit," I replied (even though Paul identifies as a cisgender male, I try to avoid gender-normative terminology as much as possible). "Let me see if I understand you. You are saying two things, it seems to me. One is that justice is helping people."

"Yes."

"And never harming them?"

"Not that I can see."

"So justice is helping some—the deserving—and harming no one?"

"Yes, that's exactly it."

"You also say that inequality creates equality. But how can a thing be used to create its opposite?"

"It's very simple, as I'm sure you know. Inequality builds up in society and the economy as a result of privilege and other forms of unfairness. The way to rectify that is to spread the good things around. If you simply treat everyone equally, then the privileged will always end up having more. So you have to treat

people unequally: doing more for those who have less, and less for those who have more. And that's how you achieve equality."

"I think I begin to see," I said, playfully—for of course I saw right through his entire argument, but I resolved to show him the inadequacy of what he was proposing. "So equality is good and inequality is bad, correct?"

"Yes," he said, "except when inequality is used to create equality. Then it's good."

"So when inequality is used to take from one and give to another, that's good?"

"Precisely."

"Presumably it's good for the one who receives?"

"Yes."

"And is it also good for the one from whom the good things are taken?"

Now I had him! "Well, in a sense, in that it makes the whole society better."

"Are the good of the individual and the good of society always the same?"

"In the long run, of course."

"But in the short run?"

"I suppose," he said after much hesitation.

"Do you think the one from whom things are taken—say, money, or a job, or honor—feels that the taking is good for him?"

"Well, Wōkrates, he may not feel that way, but his feeling may be mistaken."

"Of course, I agree that feelings, especially the feelings of the privileged, may be mistaken. But is that true in this case? For how is it not harm to lose something that one has?"

"If one does not deserve what one has, how can it be harm?"

"So, deserving is the key?"

"Yes."

"If one does not deserve what one has, and it is taken, that is not harm, but if one does deserve his good things, and any are taken, that is harm?"

"Fitly spoken, Wōkrates."

"Would you say that someone who has worked hard, designed many good apps, worked for many startups, launched several IPOs, and disrupted whole industries deserves what they have?"

"By Kara, yes, I would!"

"And what else makes one deserving?"

"Well," Paul said, thinking it over, "to be a supporter of justice and to work for equality."

"Yes," I replied, "that sounds well spoken. But what if one who crushes it in the Valley while working for justice was also born to privilege?"

"And how, Wōkrates, would that undercut his later achievements or his commitment to justice?"

"Not undercut, you amazing spirit, but undergird. For surely we would not say that one born to privilege achieved everything himself."

"I suppose not," he said with some uneasiness.

"And surely we would have to admit that his privilege contributes to inequality."

"It appears we must."

"Hence his goods must in some sense, to some degree, be undeserved?"

"I don't know how you have driven me to this point, Wōkrates, but it seems I have no choice but to agree to this, too."

"Then when we use inequality on him—treating him not equally but differently—to create more equality for others—are we not harming him?"

"I at least believe so, emphatically!"

"Then, my excellent friend, justice cannot be helping the deserving and harming no one. Justice, it seems, must involve some measure of harm."

"It would appear so," he said with a resigned sigh.

"But a measure of harm only against those who, owing either to their privilege or lack of commitment to justice, deserve to be harmed."

"I agree," he said.

"We shall do battle then, you following my lead, to further this justice."

Now, @jack, the CEO of Orange, or maybe Hooli—I can't remember—had shown up in the middle of this discussion, and after canvassing the room to size up the pretty girls, and pounding some wine (which was not, alas, Screaming Eagle), he started to listen in on our conversation. He sat very intently as we spoke, glowering in his hoodie like Darth Maul from that movie I didn't see, his eyes going back and forth on us, as if he were watching a tennis match (like from that other movie I didn't see). He was clearly getting worked up and many times seemed to want to interrupt, but some of the others—V.C. partners who didn't need anything from him—restrained him from doing so.

But when we reached a pause in the conversation, he burst forth like a Tesla in Ludicrous Mode and began to shout, "Oh, please, Wōkrates, save your ridiculous lectures for the starry-eyed Millennials who go to those training seminars we pay you so lavishly for. With them you can be as vague as you want because they're too dopey to notice when you cut corners. But everyone at this party is the real deal; we see right through you. So why don't you stop being all evasive and tell us what you really think justice is? And don't tell us that it's diversity, or inclusion, or equity, or tolerance, or fairness, or any other of your buzzwords, but state a definition clearly and concisely."

I was literally afraid for my life, but then Paul reminded me that @jack at least nominally answers to a board. That, and he really does care what's written about him in the



New York Times. So I reasoned that, despite appearances, he probably wasn't going to kill me in front of all these people.

"@jack, you amazing man," I said, for he really did seem very manly at that moment, "don't be hard on us if we're not as smart as you. After all, we didn't found a transformative multibillion-dollar company. If we don't know as much you, that's hardly surprising, and we should be called in, not called out."

"There's the famous 'Wokratic irony,'" he snarled, "but no answer."

"But how can I answer when you forbid me from giving the answer? It's clever how you police my speech in such a narrow way. It's as if you demand I tell you what privilege is but insist that I not say it's whiteness, or maleness, or cisgenderedness, or wealth, or Republicanism, or conservatism. What if justice really *is* one of the things you excluded above?"

"You know damn well it's not. And since we're not your usual audience, who can't handle the real truth, why don't we cut the crap and state the truth plainly?"

"I, for one, would like nothing more than to hear the truth stated plainly." I really meant that, too; I just had no expectation of hearing it from @jack. Naturally, I only said the first part and not the second. I left the second to be

inferred. That's another example of how my delicious irony works.

"Fine, here it is," he replied. "Justice is the advantage of the stronger. You're welcome."

"And I do thank you for enlightening me, if indeed that's what you've done. But first I must know what you mean."

"Simply this: that in any grouping, from a little startup all the way up to a huge company, justice is simply what the CEO declares and commands."

"And what is the advantage or interest of a company? Presumably to make money?"

"Partly that. But also to smoke the competition, to take market share, to disrupt the industry, and even to invent a new industry."

"How does your company make money for its rulers and take market share from its competitors?"

"By writing good code, of course."

"But there are many companies and many industries, aren't there?"

"Of course, you smooth-brain."

I didn't like being called "smooth-brain," but I was pretty sure that my contract with @jack's company would soon be up for renewal so I decided to let it go. "You seem to be saying," I replied instead, "that there is no justice. For isn't that really the case if justice is different depending on who rules?"

"Now it's you who is being confusing."

"Well, do all companies have the same interests?"

"Of course not."

"But for a tech company, justice, or interest, or advantage—for according to you, they're all the same thing—is nothing but what the CEO says it is. That's your argument, correct?"

"Correct."

"Hence also for, say, an old media company, like a newspaper, justice is only what its CEO says it is?"

"Of course."

"Do tech companies and newspapers have the same interests?"

"By no means!"

"Then mustn't justice be at least these two different things? And really an infinite multiplicity of things? For as many interests as there are, there must be that many different kinds of justice?"

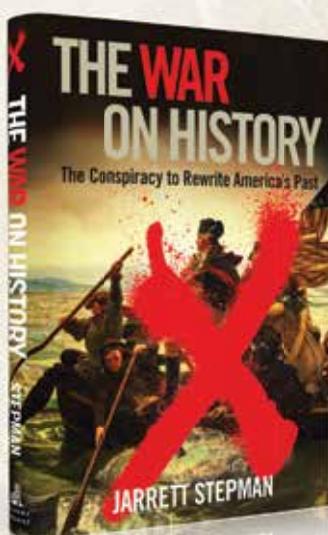
"I suppose so."

"But if justice is an infinite variety of things, how can it be anything—that is, any *one* thing?"

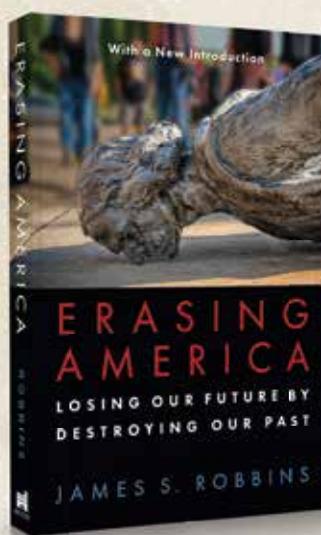
"This is tedious, but I said I'd play along. It's really very simple. There are rulers and ruled. Sheepdogs and sheeple. Or, if you want me to be blunt, masters and slaves. In every case, justice is determined by those at

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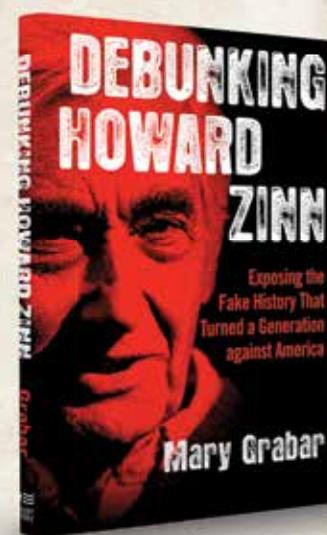
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the top. That's what all forms of justice have in common, even if they appear to differ in other ways. Really, Wōkrates, even one of your seminar dummies could understand this much."

"My goodness, you most excellent man, many of those so-called 'seminar dummies' are your own employees! But let's see if we can rescue the argument. Earlier you said that justice is the advantage of the stronger. Now you say it's what the CEOs—who are presumably also stronger—"

"Of course," he interrupted.

"—command. Do the CEOs always command what is to their advantage?"

"If they're not fools!"

"And do they command what is advantageous to those they rule?"

"Well, the advantage of those they rule is not their object. But if and to the extent that the CEOs are good at what they do, their rule is naturally advantageous to those whom they rule."

"So the interests of the CEOs and employees are identical?"

"No, you hack. As I said, when CEOs benefit their employees, it's only incidental. And even then, it's true only to a degree—insofar as the CEOs are really and truly good at their jobs; that is, superior by nature. Which not all of them are. Everyone knows that the weak and stupid often luck their way into the corner office. But in those cases, their rule benefits neither themselves nor their employees."

"So good CEOs, as opposed to bad ones, benefit not just themselves but those they manage?"

"Exactly."

"What about those they do not manage?"

"What about them?"

"In your case, you rule your employees, but not those you don't hire."

"Obviously."

"Is your rule over those whom you rule also good for those you do not rule?"

"Surely it's not bad! But mostly it's irrelevant; I don't concern myself with those who don't concern me."

"If your rule were bad for them, would that be unjust?"

"I don't see how anything I do could be bad for them, when I have nothing to do with them!"

"Don't you have something to do with them when you decide not to hire them?"

@jack was momentarily puzzled by this, but then said, "Maybe, assuming they apply."

"Is it to your advantage to hire, say, those who are best at coding?"

"Indeed."

"And to not hire those who are not good at coding?"

"Of course."

"And you know who is good at coding and who is not?"

"I wouldn't be much of a CEO if I didn't!"

"So everyone you've not hired is bad?"

"Not necessarily. It's just that we found others who are better."

"So those not hired are, at the very least, worse."

"Yes."

"But if you misjudged this, wouldn't you, by your own argument, be unjust to yourself—since justice is your advantage—and unjust to those not hired, since according to you justice also benefits the ruled?"

"I suppose so."

"How many of your coders are male?"

"I don't have the exact number off the top of my head," he said warily.

"Just roughly, then. Half?"

"No, it's more than that."

"Sixty percent?"

"No, more than that."

"Seventy-five percent?"

"Where are you going with this?"

"How many are white?"

"Again, where are you going with this?" He was clearly starting to get nervous.

"And how many are Black?"

"I told you, I don't have the exact figures in my head."

"But you're confident that everyone you've not hired is worse than those you have hired?"

"Look, we do our best to find the best people, and that includes an aggressive push for diversity."

"If you focused on coding alone, would you, in your opinion, get as much diversity?"

He hesitated before replying, "No, I don't think we would. Because of longstanding structural imbalances in society, the economy, and in the educational system, the ideal workforce just isn't available yet. But we in-

vest in many programs to help create it for the future."

"And if you focused on diversity alone, would you get the same quality of coding?"

"I very much would like to believe so. But in practice, things haven't worked out that way yet, for the reasons I just mentioned."

"But you said before that your interest as a CEO, or rather as a ruler, is to make money and take market share from your competitors. But now you seem to be saying that diversity detracts from those interests. Is that what you're saying?"

Now I really had him squirming! "Well," he said, after much thought, "the purpose of a tech company is not only, or even primarily, to make money. It's to make the world a better place."

"Do you make the world a better place by making money?"

"I would say, rather, that by making the world a better place, we make money."

"Then your interests, as ruler, would seem to be broader and higher than simply making money and adding market share."

"It would appear so, yes," he said, somewhat bewildered by how I had skillfully maneuvered him to this admission.

"And is diversity in your interest?" I asked, twisting the knife.

"By Kamala, it is!"

"Then we must conclude, best of CEOs, that justice is not simply the interest of the stronger, but something much larger—unless, indeed, the interests of the stronger and the weaker always coincide."

"I suppose we must," he conceded

"I owe you one, then, @jack, for helping these others to see more clearly what justice is not, and thereby what it might be. For some of them must now realize that they had been defending the proposition that justice is good, without quite knowing what justice is. Which must be their next topic of conversation. But since I already know what justice is, I don't need to hear any more and will leave you to it."

Michael Anton is a lecturer and research fellow at Hillsdale College, a former national security official in the Trump Administration, and a senior fellow at the Claremont Institute. The complete manuscript of Beto's Republic—all ten books—will be published later this year.

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