

VOLUME XXIII, NUMBER 4, FALL 2023

# CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*

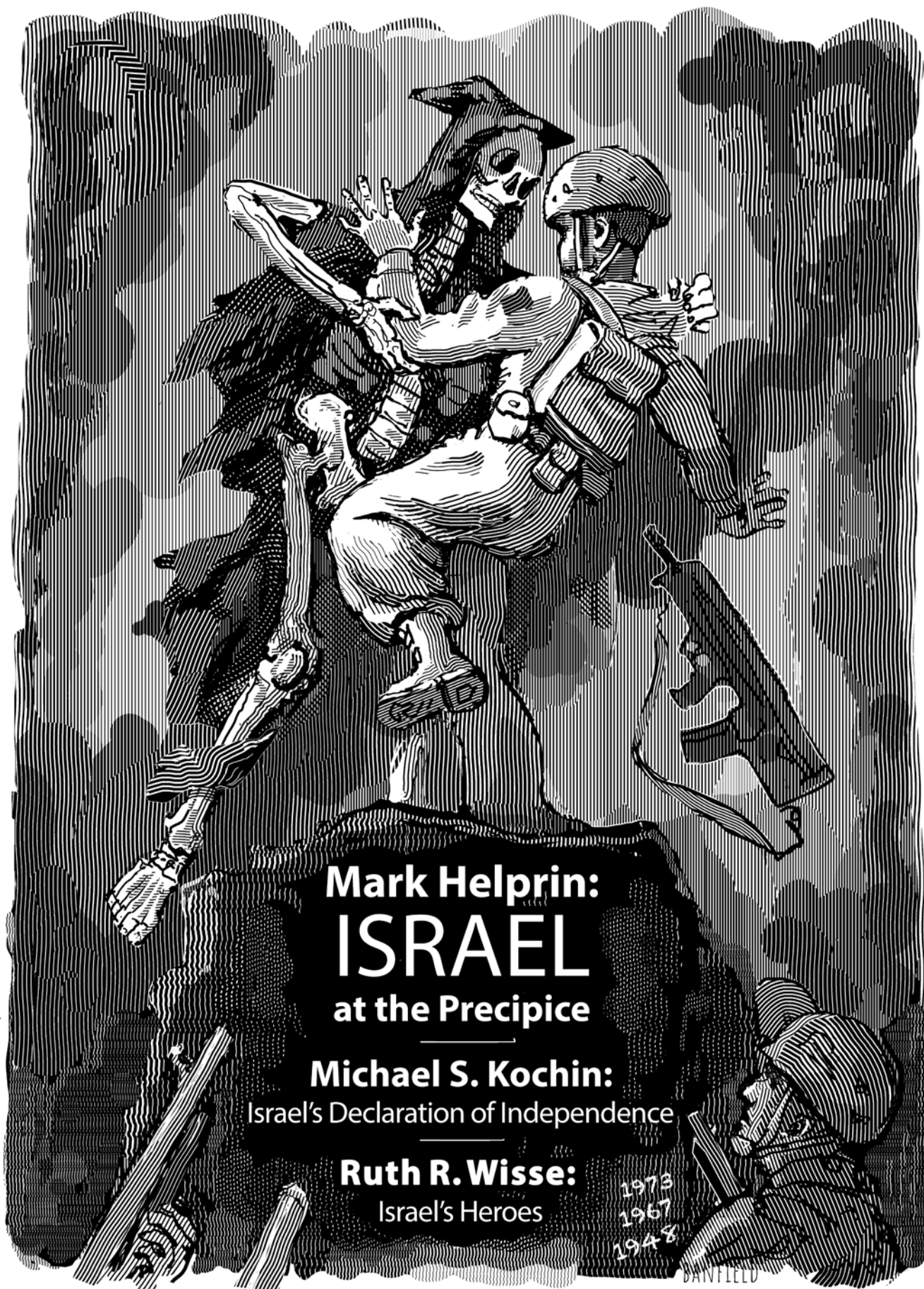
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Bessette:  
**COVID,  
a Constitutional  
Crisis**

Charles  
Moore:  
**The Tories  
After  
Thatcher**

Harvey C.  
Mansfield:  
**Leo Strauss's  
Legacy**

Randy E.  
Barnett:  
**Cass  
Sunstein**

Christopher  
Flannery:  
**Shakespeare's  
First Folio**



Jeffrey H.  
Anderson:  
**Election 2024**

Christopher  
Caldwell:  
**Desperate  
Germany**

Allen C.  
Guelzo:  
**Woodrow  
Wilson's  
Red Scare**

David P.  
Goldman:  
**Why Sparta  
Won**

Michael  
Anton

Harvey C.  
Mansfield

William  
Voegeli:

**The Roots  
of Woke**



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PRICE: \$9.95

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Book Review by Michael Anton

## WOKE DILEMMAS

*The Narrow Passage: Plato, Foucault, and the Possibility of Political Philosophy*, by Glenn Ellmers.  
Encounter Books, 96 pages, \$24.99



GLENN ELLMERS'S *THE NARROW PASSAGE* is a strange little book that is hard to summarize. What makes the task even harder is, paradoxically, its brevity. Rarely is so short a book so densely argued—so packed with ideas and information that what begins as a precis veers into what feels like a full recounting. Still, one must do one's best—especially in the case of a book that answers two of the most burning practical and theoretical questions of our time: what is going on and how did we get here?

Not that explanations are scarce; everyone with an opinion feels entitled to give his own authoritative account of our present discontent and its origin, whether on Twitter (now X) or other free online soapboxes such as Substack. The explanation offered in *The Narrow Passage* may or may not turn out to be the definitive take, but of all the elucidations

of the origin and nature of “wokeness” it is the best available by far. It may not be, on the surface, the clearest, but that apparent lack of clarity is owing to the inherent complexity of the subject. It is relatively easy to write a facile bestseller purporting to explain the present unpleasantness (Amazon is full of them). Going to the roots is a lot harder.

Still, part of the one-upmanship game of the various competing accounts is to see which begins earliest—the '60s! the New Deal! the Progressive era! Hegel! Rousseau! the Enlightenment! modernity! the Reformation! The idea seems to be: whoever looks back the farthest, wins.

In this respect, Ellmers's account “loses,” though not by much. Drawing on a variety of sources—from the Bible to Plato to...well, it would take forever to list all the thinkers, scholars, and scribblers who inform this book.

But the overarching link is Leo Strauss and a handful of his most accomplished (not to say in all cases most prominent) and, in Ellmers's own qualifier, “unorthodox” students, such as Harry V. Jaffa, Harry Neumann, Seth Benardete, and Stanley Rosen. Ellmers also makes a brief but important stop to examine Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges's 1864 masterpiece, *The Ancient City*, which was half forgotten until rediscovered by Strauss in the 20th century. From there, he turns to Strauss's great philosophic antagonists, Alexandre Kojève and especially Martin Heidegger, and the later postmodernists they taught or inspired, above all Michel Foucault.

ONE EASY-TO-ANTICIPATE CRITICISM of *The Narrow Passage* is that Ellmers's reliance on Strauss and his students will be said to be merely sectar-



ian. After all, Ellmers, now a fellow at the Claremont Institute, was a student of both Jaffa and Neumann and wrote his first book, *The Soul of Politics*, about the former. Furthermore, he ignores academic convention by omitting irrelevant references to the vast secondary literature, which is perhaps one reason why his book clocks in at under a hundred pages. As someone who finds most of that literature boring and worthless, I'm grateful Ellmers didn't waste my time.

How does Ellmers get from Plato to Foucault? He shows how first Strauss and then a few of his students were virtually alone in the 20th century in understanding the natural exclusivity, or closedness, of human association and how that closedness was radically questioned, and later transformed, first by philosophy's original form, then by historical circumstances, then by a new understanding of religion, and finally by a new understanding of philosophy and science. The disorientation and anger now roiling not just America or the West but all modern or "advanced" societies are, Ellmers argues, the result of "[m]any contradictions and tensions that have been building for a long time—over decades, or even centuries" that now "may be reaching a breaking point."

The fundamental contradiction Ellmers discerns is between our present elites' insistence that everything they assert and do rests on irrefutable scientific proof, and their parallel claim—no less insistent—that all claims to truth, including that of science itself, "are now dismissed as hegemonic, white, male constructs. Thus, the same ruling class that defends its authority on the basis of scientific expertise also insists on identity-based truth, such as Afrocentric calculus and feminist chemistry." This contradiction, and others, are "irresolvable" and "can't be papered over forever." A bill is finally coming due.

One form that bill takes is "the disproportionate anger, the arbitrarily shifting pronouncements and priorities, the readiness to pounce on ever-changing 'enemies of the day'" that characterize the contemporary "activist Left." This arises from, in Ellmers's telling, the psychological pain and political confusion arising from forcing oneself to think X and Not-X at the same time.

**B**UT ELLMERS ACTUALLY GOES DEEPER and finds an even greater contradiction at the root of the human condition. Man's natural or default state, he asserts, following Strauss et al., is membership in a closed community in which all law, moral authority, and legitimacy are seen by members to come ultimately from a god or gods—gods who, moreover, are particular to their society;

or, to speak more precisely, to their *polis* or city, "society" being not just a modern word but a modern concept.

To call this community "closed" is true but also a laughable understatement. About the only concession such a city makes to its neighbors is acknowledging that they exist. Otherwise, in every respect, all outsiders are regarded as enemies or potential enemies. Certainly, there are rare exceptions, such as the Greeks (temporarily) uniting against the Persians. But the human norm is permanent, inherent enmity. Ellmers begins with an epigraph from Deuteronomy 7, in which the Lord commands the Israelites to "smite" their enemies and show no "mercy unto them" but "destroy their altars, cut down their groves, and burn their graven images with fire."

Beyond the literal meaning of the one true God speaking to His chosen people, one way to interpret this is as myth or metaphor. Another way is as the specific command of a specific god, given in a specific circumstance that was so different and long ago that it no longer applies. Without denying (or even investigating) the possibility of its literal truth, Ellmers takes it to express a permanent truth about the nature of man—i.e., of all human beings—and the longings of men's souls.

I am reminded of a Platonic dialogue which, though discussed only in this book's footnotes (Ellmers focuses much more on the *Statesman*), is most relevant to its thesis. If what Socrates argues to Polus and Callicles in the *Gorgias* is correct, then nearly all human beings are not living as they ought to live. To restate the thesis slightly to fit Ellmers's argument, if what *The Narrow Passage* argues is true, then most people are living unnaturally, i.e., not as their nature or constitution directs or inclines them. That is indeed a large claim. Before we affirm or reject it, let's try to understand it as best we can.

**M**AN AS MAN—THE NATURE OF HIS being—longs for both authoritative guidance and particularity, or a "closed" society. Already we see a tension. The most authoritative guidance is a universal law, but how can something universal also be particular at the same time? But before we even explore *that* conundrum, we must ask: what makes guidance authoritative? The ancient answer is a clear, and genuinely believed, connection to the divine. Ellmers quotes, though unobtrusively in a footnote, a line of the medieval Islamic philosopher Avicenna, which Strauss would make famous a thousand years later, that "the treatment of prophecy and the Divine Law is contained in [Plato's] *Laws*." Allan Bloom, in his 1974 eulogy of his teacher,

cited this puzzling remark as the prompt that turned the young Strauss back to serious study of the ancients.

Ellmers interprets it to mean (if I may make transparent what he leaves slightly obscure) that the great prophets are legislators in the most comprehensive sense. They command not merely what to do and what not to do, but what to believe—with "believe" here meant most literally. The pre-philosophical state of mankind is to believe in a god or gods who lay down not only fundamental moral and political laws but a whole cosmology and history, in which the citizens of a city actually believe, not as metaphor or spiritual inspiration, but as factual truth.

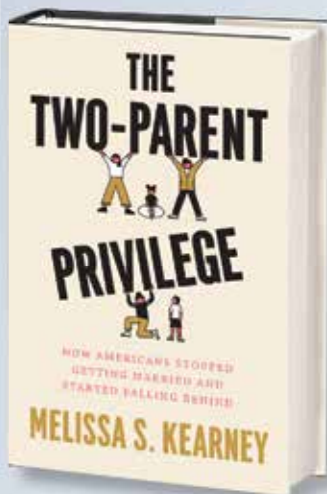
Ellmers never explains the meaning of his title, but one may surmise that the "narrow passage" in question is really two: Jesus's "narrow gate" to salvation, which He contrasts with the "broad road" to damnation, and the perilous ascent from Plato's cave to the surface and sunlight of truth. Whatever these two paths' profound differences, both are united in appealing to the universal and away from the particular.

A universal *faith* or philosophy might be tenable. But a universal *law*—at least one universally observed—is not; man is by nature particularist. A central insight of ancient political philosophy (or of any political philosophy worthy of the name) is the recognition that there *is* a universal human nature, but that one of its core elements is anti-universalism: man is the universal being whose being is opposed to—cannot live with or amid—universalism. Indeed, the very nature of man *demand*s particularism.

**F**ROM THE PHILOSOPHERS' POINT OF view, this is the fundamental paradox of the human situation. Philosophy is not necessarily or inevitably atheistic. To remain genuinely philosophic, it must remain eternally open to the possibility of the divine. But neither can philosophy accept any claim, much less a theological claim, on the basis of authority alone. When it examines actual theological claims from the standpoint of reason, it finds them, at best, unsupported by visible, tangible, confirmable evidence, and, at worst, somewhat fantastic. Furthermore, philosophy surveys the multitude of allegedly divine claims—differing cosmologies, contradicting accounts of creation and the past, and above all incompatible binding laws—and concludes that they cannot all simultaneously be true.

Among many other factors, this leads philosophy to seek the truth about man's origin, history, nature, situation, and place in the

# CHICAGO



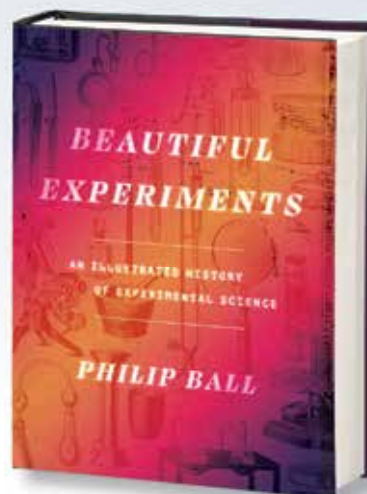
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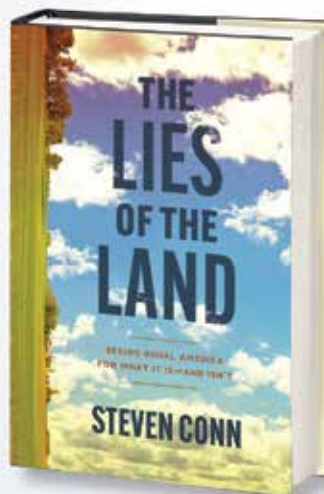
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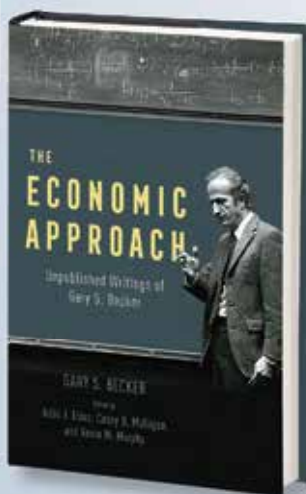
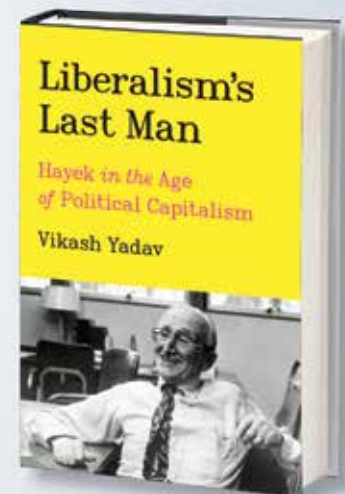
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universe. This truth is, after investigation, concluded to be unidentical with any of the extant authoritative accounts—that is, to the extent that genuine philosophy, which we may say is dogmatically anti-dogmatic, ever “concludes” anything. But philosophy does, let us say, assess, on the ground of plausibility and probability, that all such authoritative accounts are likely untrue.

Philosophy may not itself ever fully arrive at the full truth about man. But it assesses, too, that man is a being who needs—requires—an authoritative cosmology, history or “origin story,” and code of laws by which to live. Philosophy itself can affirm none of those accounts as true. To be blunter, it disbelieves all of them, even future or potential ones. Yet, to the extent that it *knows* anything about man, it knows that the need for such an account is part of his universal nature.

This is one half of the equation to which particularity is the other. There is in human nature a strong, inborn abhorrence of political universalism; there is no chance of a “brotherhood of man.” We know, at the very least from history and experience, that religions which make universal claims are possible. But translating those otherworldly claims to this world has proved...difficult. If Ellmers is right, doing so successfully is simply impossible.

Hence, in this understanding, when Aristotle famously describes man as the “political animal,” he means that man at once defines himself *as man* as distinct from other species,

but also as *this or that* group of men—against those others over there. Philosophy subjects the various distinctions between this tribe and that city or this nation and that empire to ruthless logical scrutiny and finds them all wanting or not grounded in nature in the way that species are natural. But the fact that such distinctions must and will always exist is also part of nature, of the nature of man. Man is the natural being whose universal nature requires dedication to what is, in the final analysis, an arbitrary or at least not fully natural distinction between citizen and noncitizen.

**B**UT CAN SOMETHING REQUIRED BY NATURE be declared, without contradiction, unnatural? One of the argument’s central paradoxes is that the paradox at its center is not, in the final analysis, paradoxical. Needing something that may not be true—that is, at the very least, unproven and unprovable—and requiring particularity despite sharing the same nature with those men against whom man wills himself into implacable opposition is just the way man *is*.

Ellmers shows that, despite this understanding’s apparent naturalness, the arrangement was already unraveling two and a half millennia ago in Periclean Athens. The “devastating effects of the Peloponnesian War” and “the corrosive influence of materialistic philosophy *prior* to Socrates” (among other factors) combined to fuel Athens’s “loss of faith.” The Olympian gods were no longer a

believable ground for morality among the elite, especially the aristocratic youth who flocked to Sophists such as Protagoras, teachers of rhetoric like Gorgias, and to philosophers, above all Socrates himself. Ordinary citizens still believed—as Aristophanes’ *Clouds* makes clear—but the tension between popular belief and elite unbelief, even disdain, was not sustainable. A city takes its bearings from the opinions of its rulers. When the beliefs of leaders and led radically diverge, either the latter come to adapt to the views of the former, or crack-up ensues. Considering that, in the period under consideration, elite opinion was veering toward nihilism, convergence was perhaps an even more worrisome possibility than crack-up.

Socrates, or at least Plato’s rendition of him, understood this and sought to find a new ground, not so much for elite belief in the ancestral gods as for elite belief in something that would supply a firm foundation for morality and justice. This is one purpose, if not necessarily the full meaning, of Plato’s famous doctrine of the “ideas” or “forms” (*eidos*). Ellmers quotes his (and my) teacher Harry Jaffa explaining the point: “For Socrates and for his followers, however, the ideas—the intelligible necessities underlying the being or goodness of things—replaced the gods as the ultimate authority.” In other words, in place of decaying faith in fantastical, particularist gods—Zeus, Athena, Apollo, and so forth—philosophy tries to substitute (if only for the few) a rational, universal standard grounded in nature. This is the famous philosophic doctrine of “natural right.”

**H**ERE IS WHERE *THE NARROW PASSAGE* gets really bold. Most of us who read the Great Books and study philosophy approach Plato with an air of reverence that never subsides with age or familiarity. It’s taken as axiomatic that whoever is hubristic enough to take on Plato must *ipso facto* be a fool. Ellmers had better hope that axiom is wrong, because he seemingly dares to go where few interpreters of Plato have gone before. (Although, to be fair, he does explicitly deny any attempt to do “anything so preposterous.”)

What if, Ellmers asks, Plato did his work *too well*? What if a doctrine intended only for an educated aristocracy—formulated to bridge the gap between the rulers and the common people, to foster unity in place of elite atheism that drives division—“slipped its leash”? Against the intention of its creator (or discoverer), Plato’s “theory of the forms” and natural right not only became widely popular; in the course of solving one problem, they

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created another, greater one. Plato's rhetoric very likely did bolster elite confidence in transcendent morality. But it also undermined popular belief in ancestral gods and hence attacked the foundation of human sociability: particularity.

Plato was emphatically not an Enlightenment thinker: he did not believe, and even argued forcefully against, the notion that the broad mass of mankind could ever become fully rational, much less philosophic. Yet, in Ellmers's recounting, the attempt to enlighten a few led, eventually, to a kind of faux "enlightenment" of the many.

I SHALL NOT ATTEMPT TO SUMMARIZE Ellmers's account of how this happened but will instead encourage those interested (and you should be) to buy the book. I will, however, note that here Ellmers is just as "unorthodox" in his Straussianism as the scholars he cites. The familiar story holds that the Enlightenment was a late innovation—a heresy, if you will—introduced by renegade philosophers 2,000 years after their way of life was first pioneered. Ellmers doesn't so much dismiss this story as modify it, showing that the seeds of more than a few elements that the orthodox account holds to be fully modern were in fact germinating in the ancient original.

For our purposes, the most important are: a rationality that is inevitably corrosive on authoritative opinion; implicit or at least easily misconstruable utopianism; and an impulse, even enticement, toward tyranny. (It would be too much to take on in this review, but on the connection between philosophy and tyranny, *The Narrow Passage* shares a point of contact with the self-published dissertation now making the rounds, Costin Alamiariu's *Selective Breeding and the Birth of Philosophy*.) Summed up in this way, it is not hard to see our contemporary rule by "experts" in the name of "science," and simultaneous revolutionary zeal to remake everything anew, as echoes and reflections of the Platonic original. "Plato is," Ellmers concludes, "in crucial respects, the original instigator of our cold civil war; and elements of both Left and Right are enacting and rebelling against Plato's legacy."

Ellmers (indirectly) accuses Plato of playing with fire—of promulgating a universal cosmology that he knows would, and could, never be fit for universal consumption. It's not merely that there's no possibility that a rational cosmology will ever be accepted by the multitude, or serve as the basis for the kind of authoritative code that the many need no less than food and air—although all that is true. Nor is it even the inherent tension be-

tween philosophic cosmopolitanism and local or particular laws and customs (*nomoi*)—although that, too, is true enough.

THE DEEPER PROBLEM IS THAT, EVEN ON its own terms, philosophic rationalism is, and must remain, forever uncertain and unsettled. There are at least two reasons for this. The first is that for philosophy to remain philosophic, it must reject dogmatism; that is to say, it must refuse to accept any conclusion as final. All apparent "knowledge" must be perpetually open to revision and even refutation and obsolescence. For obvious reasons, this kind of permanent, non-dogmatic but rather "zetetic" or searching (longing) skepticism cannot be the basis of any public authority. Politics requires certainty or at least firm resolve, while philosophy, even political philosophy, provides only eternally open questions with, at best, probabilistic and plausible "answers" that may be discarded or superseded at any time.

Strange and horrifying as it sounds, wokeness can be interpreted as a sign that humanity is returning to its roots—that things, far from veering off track, are in fact "getting back to normal."

The other reason is that, even at its highest and most confident, philosophy admits it cannot provide a coherent and complete account of the whole—that is, of the universe and man's place in it—and not even of that part of the whole that is man's alone, i.e., politics. Ellmers shows this in a brilliant capsule interpretation of Plato's *Statesman*, in the process explaining Strauss's enigmatic phrase "noetic heterogeneity" better than any attempt I've yet seen. The irony—if one may use that word in this context—is that Plato, the thinker who best understood the elusiveness of the whole, and *a fortiori* of knowledge of the whole, did more than anyone to instill in untold billions the precise opposite conclusions: that man's situation is knowable, his nature perfectible, and complete justice may be achieved on this earth. One legacy of this misunderstanding is the rage of today's utopians at never seeing their utopian expectations met. Rather than abandon utopianism, as close study of Plato

would encourage, they instead double and triple their zeal.

THE MOST TROUBLING IMPLICATION IN this book full of troubling implications is what this basic insight, if true, means for modern liberal regimes—all of which, needless to say, purport to be based on allegedly universal, rational truths. Experience hath shewn that the modern liberal regime can work, and thrive, in practice. But not—at least not yet—universally. Indeed, it is not unreasonable to suggest that those rationalist regimes that have worked best in practice are those that have retained a large measure of their particularity. The inherent tension between the universal and particular—the paradox at the heart of the whole project, of man's inherent situation—has however never been resolved. This may be one of those rare cases when an unworkable theory eventually, and inevitably, undermines something that seemed, for a while, to work well enough in practice.

A further paradox is that not only has natural right not been refuted, all the philosophic arguments in its favor are stronger than those against. Natural right is true, or as true as it is possible for human reason to establish. Yet it cannot, or can't forever, serve as the basis of public authority. The especial conundrum for modern man is that, so long as modernity survives—so long as "science" understood as the true account of nature is held to be the highest, or even only, form of knowledge—then *only* natural right is possible as a basis for public authority, above all in a "society" not unified by a god or gods. This further explains woke hysteria: "science," applied to the political, is a kind of claim to natural right, but science is inherently anti-particular, to say nothing of all the ways in which scientific findings undermine or even contradict woke dogma.

If Ellmers is right, then the true root of wokeness is the un- or subconscious rejection of the rational state in favor of an inchoate return to pre-philosophic particularity. Most wokesters, in their conscious minds, still believe or insist they can have it all: wokeness and science, rationality and belonging, universality and particularity. But somewhere in their souls they intuit, perhaps even "know," that this is not so. This disconnect is a source of bewilderment, even rage.

When push comes to shove, though, observation has also shown that woke always wins. Ellmers's explanation of why this is so boils down to two causes. First, the natural impulse to belong to a closed society that sharply distinguishes friend from enemy is simply more



powerful than any human inclination toward rationality. We all—especially we moderns—prefer to flatter ourselves that we think and act reasonably. We have a hard time admitting, even (especially) to ourselves, the vast extent to which our opinions and actions are driven by appetite, inclination, or prejudice, and that what we insist are rational motives are often mere rationalizations.

The second cause is no less simple, and here, finally, we reach Foucault. As the old saying goes, Ellmers has done the torturous work of (re)reading that literary atrocity and moral monster so that we don't have to. Foucault, Ellmers explains, sees all human phenomena, including truth and the nature of reality itself, through the lens of power. For Foucault, reality and truth are just constructs invented and imposed by the powerful. This is a kind of comic-book version of Friedrich Nietzsche's account of the "value-creating" prophet who invents the "horizons" within which human life is alone possible. The difference (or one difference) is that Nietzsche understood the tragic dimension of his teaching, and hence of man's situation, and hence the *necessity* that some great man must will an imagined whole out of nothingness.

Foucault, by contrast, blithely takes all this in stride, apparently untroubled by the universe's underlying randomness and utter lack of meaning. No problem, he seems to shrug; it's all just a construct anyway. This stance may seem simplistic and childish, but actually has amazing explanatory power for our time. When one stops and considers the arbitrariness, the counter-intuitive stupidity, the daily-shifting "accounts" of what we are commanded to accept as sacred, and wonders: how did 63 "genders" possibly become unquestionable dogma? On reflection, the only connecting thread is power. And that's the real reason woke always trumps science: the woke have the whip hand.

**W**HICH BRINGS US BACK TO THE BEGINNING. The deepest impulse for wokeism is, Ellmers observes, not any genuine belief in the alleged truth of its claims. One other contradiction he points out as endemic to our times is the simultaneous insistence that up-to-the-minute woke dogma is unassailably true, but also eternally liquid because of the permanent revolution's ever-shifting needs, and more importantly because nothing can ever *really* be true, for to admit

the possibility of external, eternal truth is to limit human power.

Anyway, the deepest source of wokeism is the enduring human need for particularity. Ellmers doesn't quite say, but I believe a reasonable inference from his argument is that, crazy as wokeness seems (and is), its emergence should have been much less surprising than it was to those of us not in its thrall. The wonder is not that wokeness, or some renewed appeal to particularity, reemerged; the wonder is or should have been that semi- or quasi-universalist claims, contrary to man's natural inclination, held sway for as long as they did. Strange and horrifying as it sounds, wokeness can be interpreted as a sign that humanity is returning to its roots—that things, far from veering off track, are in fact "getting back to normal."

If this interpretation is correct, then something like two thirds of recorded Western history has been a long, strange, unsustainable interregnum that is only now finally unraveling. Above all, what we've become accustomed to in liberal democratic societies as "normal," to say nothing of the idea of "progress," are aberrations. Getting back to the *real* normal would then require reconnecting with the divine—or, if the genuine article is out of reach, with the "divine." Perhaps this is what Heidegger meant when he famously, ominously declaimed that "Only a god can save us now."

I'm on record denying the proposition that wokeism is a religion. Above all, it lacks a self-consciously spiritual and/or supernatural cosmology that I consider to be the *sine qua non* of true faith. But Ellmers makes a strong case that wokeism is a kind of religion-lite, a substitute for real faith that attempts to fill the same void and serve the same purpose. It is "lite," I hasten to add, only in the content of its thinking or "theology"—in its effects, it is anything but. Wokeism in practice is characterized by a ferocious zeal that would impress history's most intolerant persecutors and idol-smashers.

**A**S THIS REVIEW WAS BEING DRAFTED, and as if to prove Ellmers's point, several such inquisitors affiliated with the University of Virginia and its host city of Charlottesville oversaw the destruction of an equestrian statue of Robert E. Lee that had stood in a city park for nearly a century. Not content merely with literally melting down the bronze, Lee's exorcists went to the trouble to cut off his statue's face "in the pattern of a death mask" and snapped a photo as it glowed bright orange

just before dissolving into oblivion. "Burn their graven images with fire" indeed.

We will see more of this. And it won't stop with Confederates. Indeed, we're already well past that supposed limiting principle. Since the George Floyd riots of 2020, statues of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses Grant, Theodore Roosevelt, Lewis and Clark, Francis Scott Key, Kit Carson, Walt Whitman, Christopher Columbus, Francis Drake, and Junípero Serra, among many, many others, have been destroyed, defaced, or removed from places of public honor (some unlucky monuments have suffered all three). Just after Thanksgiving, a statue of the author of the Declaration of Independence and America's third president was removed from New York City Hall after 187 years. This is to say nothing of similar iconoclasm occurring throughout Europe and the Anglosphere.

When this orgy was at its peak, most conservatives reacted with uncomprehending anger, followed by the consoling expectation that the destructive passion would burn itself out soon enough. Glenn Ellmers shows why that hope is, as the kids say, "cope." Mankind's natural state is to sort into "us" and "them," i.e., friend and enemy. And the enemy of today's ruling power, needless to say, is us—anyone who cherishes our American and Western heritage, warts and all, but mostly its glories, which vastly outnumber and outweigh its warts. Our antagonists have decisively left behind yesterday's universal(ist) gods and reembraced particularism with a vengeance. We meanwhile remain in the thrall of the old—that is to say, new—deities who somehow, even if they satisfy our souls to a degree, are powerless against their angry rivals, at least in this world.

Somehow the non-woke, to survive and thrive, need to find a way to square this circle, to reconnect their doctrines to a divine spirit that is (ahem) more spirited than the modern easygoing softness they've become accustomed to. They will need a fighting faith that sees the necessity of a forceful defense, that (to borrow now from Robert Frost) is willing to take its own side in a fight. For, whether they like it or not, they (we) are in a fight, and just to survive we will need all the help we can get.

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