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### Review of Liberation and Authority. Plato's Gorgias, the First Book of the Republic, and Thucydides

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Thorne (N.) *Liberation and Authority. Plato's Gorgias, the First Book of the Republic, and Thucydides*. Pp. x +281. Lanham, Boulder, New York and London: Lexington Books, 2021. Cased, £85, US\$110. ISBN: 978-1-7036-3904-2.

“Authority,” Hannah Arendt declared in 1954, “has vanished from the modern world.” Political theorists have largely averred with Arendt’s diagnosis in the years since. Today’s crisis of authority stems in part from the chasm between the rational-legal authority on which political legitimacy rests and the conditions of bureaucratization and market-capitalism that have outrun this legitimacy. This provokes what Jürgen Habermas called a “legitimation crisis” where the governed have lost trust in the institutions of government even while these institutions continue to assert the authority to rule. As Hannah Arendt summed up, the proper question may no longer be what is authority, but was authority.

Nicholas Thorne’s *Liberation and Authority* offers a study of Plato’s *Gorgias*, *Republic I*, and Thucydides’ *History* oriented toward these questions of authority and its apparent contrast, liberation. On Thorne’s reading, Plato and Thucydides both give accounts of the decline and collapse of the authority of an older ethical order, one symbolized in Plato by the traditionalism of Gorgias and Cephalus and in Thucydides by the unity of the Athenian polis under Pericles. This collapse of authority goes by the name of “liberation” for Thorne, and he endeavors to show how Plato and Thucydides call such liberation into question. For Thucydides, the results are catastrophic, tantamount to the decline and collapse of Athens herself in the years after the death of Pericles. Plato offers a more ambiguous judgment, seeing both real evil embodied by the likes of Calicles but also profound good in the new questions about what is good and why. Both Thucydides and Plato depict the rise of what Thorne calls “the subjective spirit,” an abandonment of natural limits that presages personal as well as political tyranny.

Thorne’s inquiry joins a strong field of scholars who have examined similar questions in Thucydides and Plato. Thorne cites many of these scholars generously in his text, but they are some notable omissions. The work of Leo Strauss in particular, which Thorne acknowledges in a note but only once discusses, anticipates both Thorne’s specific concerns and his methodology of close reading. Other eminent scholars in the Straussian tradition, such as Clifford Orwin (on Thucydides) or Catherine Zuckert (on Plato) are omitted. Thorne does not engage more contextual work by political theorists such as J. Peter Euben or Arlene Saxonhouse, who have transformed the study of ancient political thought in the last thirty years. Thorne’s narrow set of scholarly interlocutors limits his ability to develop the implications of his textual insights, in particular the meaning and significance of the language of authority and liberation he adopts.

The study proceeds modestly, offering “close readings” of the texts and seeking “deeper connections” among Plato and Thucydides around the questions of authority and liberation (3). Thorne divides the book into three sections, beginning with Thucydides’ *History*, then examining Plato’s *Gorgias*, and ending with *Republic I*. In all of these sections, Thorne gives special attention to the structure of the arguments presented, treating the forms deployed to convey and express them. Thorne’s own case accumulates through small insights produced by careful, deliberate, and humble examination of the selected texts.

Thucydides, according to Thorne, is a “holist” (6). He views the whole as prior to its parts and greater than their sum. Pericles’s leadership illustrates such holism, exemplifying the unity of virtues, intellectual and moral, that can balance opposing goods. In one of Thorne’s many precious insights,

he shows how Thucydides' depiction of Athenian leaders subsequent to Pericles echoes him but only partly. For example, whereas Thucydides represents Pericles as capable of both activity or passivity, "leaning to one or the other according to the requirements of the situation at hand," Alcibiades is all action – "there is no passive moment" and Alcibiades lacks "intelligent restraint on that activity" (10). This one-sidedness shatters the "Periclean unity" that formed the basis of Athenian justice and stability.

Not only is "holism essential to adequate statesmanship" (84); holism also constitutes the "Thucydidean view" about political judgment. Thucydides chronicles a decline in the adequacy of Athenian thinking, which becomes more and more "immediate." Thorne introduces this term as a translation of *ta paronta* (in Thucydides iii.82.2) to denote the "temporal narrowness" as well as "conceptual narrowness" that develop across the history, culminating in the Sicilian Expedition. There, according to Thorne, "the Athenian desire to focus on the present" creates "a circle of immediate reaction" (58). Alcibiades ignores the interests of the *polis*, replacing the whole with his own individual self. Pericles' last speech attempted to move Athenians away from their immediate reactions; Alcibiades sets these reactions aflame.

Plato, Thorne comments during his discussion of Thucydides, also concerns himself with how the "individual *as perceiving subject* becomes a focal point that determines the course of events" (80; emphasis in the original) and how this is true not just in the character of Alcibiades but in Athens in general. Thorne names this phenomenon the "subjective spirit," a spirit that receives its fullest philosophical expression, on Thorne's reading, in Plato's characters of Calicles and Thrasymachus. In effect, Thorne reads the *Gorgias* and Book I of the *Republic* as philosophical responses to the problem that Thucydides identifies in the *History*.

Through the succession of Gorgias, Polus, and Calicles, Plato's *Gorgias* illustrates the "subjective spirit" develop from its rather harmless, if unthoughtful articulation by Gorgias to its unbridled and ferocious expression in Calicles. In another fascinating insight, Thorne shows how Plato builds an argument with the reader in part by revealing the good in Calicles. Borrowing from Raphael Woolf, Thorne argues that Calicles' demands for integrity and friendship as well as his commitment to bringing certain ideas to the fore, especially the concern for ruling and the focus on the appetites, focus the reader on the fundamental question of how to distinguish good from bad ruling principles.

Thorne also identifies "an ordered movement through three standpoints" (177) analogous to the *Gorgias*' in the first book of Plato's *Republic*. Thrasymachus, like Calicles, "opens up the problem of liberation" (224). If convention no longer rules, what or who should rule and why? For Calicles and Thrasymachus, "the impulse is toward liberation . . . with the result that the appetites come into their own, in abstraction from any wider normative framework" (251). The *Republic* departs from the *Gorgias*, according to Thorne, by elucidating the move from a standpoint that accepts the authority of tradition (illustrated by Cephalus) to one that is defined by its liberation from that authority (Thrasymachus). The *Gorgias* may hint at this, but the *Republic* makes it "universal and essential" (255). Both point to the difference between "an objective order and the caprice of an individual will" (266), but the *Republic* elaborates such an objective order far beyond what the *Gorgias* indicates.

What is the content of this "objective order," the alternative to an anarchistic politics of subjectivism? Thorne never defines what he means by "objective" nor explains how an objective order might gain and maintain authority. "The freedom toward which Plato and Thucydides point us," Thorne concludes, "would free us from the likely consequences of the inadequate conception

of liberation . . . by integrating into the notion of liberation the need for authority.” This would allow, Thorne continues, the authority we do accept “to be of the proper kind, the authority of actual limits of the real world” (268). What makes authority “of the proper kind”? What are the “actual limits of the real world” and how would we know them?

Here Thorne’s narrow scholarly purview hampers his analysis. Strauss in his *Natural Right and History* sought to respond to the crisis of authority with close readings of Plato to return 20<sup>th</sup> century relativists to a natural order of justice. Euben, Saxonhouse, and others counter with accounts of the democratic authority institutionalized in Athens, an authority that Socrates both appropriates and transforms. Ignoring these arguments, Thorne ends without developing the implications of his own turn to Thucydides and Plato. Despite its promise to speak “to our own time,” *Liberation and Authority* leaves unanswered the fundamental questions Arendt articulated nearly seventy years ago. What is authority? Or: What was it?

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