Thomas L. Pangle and J. Harvey Lomax, eds.
Political Philosophy Cross-Examined: Perennial Challenges to the Philosophic Life

In Political Philosophy Cross-Examined: Perennial Challenges to the Philosophic Life, editors Thomas Pangle and J. Harvey Lomax, along with a host of distinguished professors of political philosophy, claim that political philosophy is in need of a trial. Pangle and Lomax invite the worthiest ancient and modern political philosophers to play both prosecutor and defence attorney under the premise that ‘[t]he most persistent, penetrating doubters of philosophy must of necessity be at the same time its strongest bulwarks, namely the philosophers themselves’ (p.3).

The book’s twelve essays survey the state of political and philosophic affairs – from Socrates bringing philosophy down from the clouds (and up from mere flux), to Heidegger’s critique of Nietzsche as to whether philosophy should matter anymore, and back to Socrates again, for good measure.

That teachers of political philosophy would want to retry the case against philosophy is curious given that, as the editors note, such trials have historically produced judgments against the philosophic way of life, and thus prompted the death, banishment or mistreatment of many a philosopher. (Christiano Banti’s portrait Gailileo before the Inquisition Court as the book’s cover illustration serves as a haunting reminder of those who have had to suffer for their dissenting opinions.) Given that most men in ancient and contemporary times believe there are no evils worse than death, it would seem that the editors and the contributors to this volume exhibit a great deal of courage, and perhaps even place philosophy in harm’s way, by drawing our attention to the complaints made against it.

The contributors’ effort suggest that the danger to philosophy that arises from its ‘mode of existence’ publicly being called into question is less than any danger that might come to philosophy by ignoring its rightful lineage. Here the editors’ rendering of the two types of charges made against philosophy is helpful in identifying the defendants of the philosophic regime. The moral indictment against philosophy is that the search to answer the question ‘what is?’ draws the philosopher away from answers rendered by political and moral authorities. The theoretical critique of philosophy is more manifold. Post-metaphysical, supernatural, and natural partisans doubt that there is any work to be done, that philosophy lacks the tools to the job, and that the job is worth doing, respectively. The editors conclude that ‘one must fully appreciate the panoply of charges in order to establish in our time a plausible justification of philosophy’. Throughout the volume, this theme – that the philosophic life is
brought into better focus in contradistinction to other ways of life— is presented consistently and effectively.

The authors in the volume emphatically agree that ‘what the philosophers have in common is the philosophic life’ (p. 3). All argue convincingly that political philosophy is about proper nouns. But does their presentation of political philosophy help, harm, or hinder the philosophic life in question in our day?

*Political Philosophy Cross-Examined* is written in honour of Heinrich Meyer ‘for his seminal contributions to political philosophy’, which includes his prolific scholarship on Leo Strauss. Given the book’s themes, and its emphasis on the personal nature of political philosophy, a consideration of the volume of essays in light of Strauss’s similar autobiographical presentation of political philosophy in his essay ‘What is Political Philosophy’¹ is helpful.

Unlike the authors and series editors of *Political Philosophy*, who proactively cross-examine political philosophy as an answer to ‘the greatest challenge . . . the prophet’s claims to divinely revealed knowledge’ (p. vii), Strauss testifies in ‘What is Political Philosophy’ that he was placed in a position of ‘particular difficulty’ in being ‘asked to speak about political philosophy in Jerusalem’. While the theme of political philosophy — ‘the city of righteousness, the faithful city’ as produced by ‘the prophet’s vision’ — is of the utmost importance in Jerusalem, Strauss pleads innocently that he was compelled by the subject matter to ‘lead’ his audience ‘into a region where the dimmest recollection of that vision is on the point of vanishing altogether — where the Kingdom of God is derisively called an imagined principality — to say here nothing of the region which was never illumined by it’ (Strauss, pp. 9-10).

Strauss’s compelled cross-examination of political philosophy centres on his characterization of ‘the problem of political philosophy’. He begins by hinting that the problem of political philosophy is that one is ‘compelled’ by it (or more authentically, that the political philosopher compels himself) ‘to wander away from our sacred heritage, or to be silent about it’. Strauss contends that ‘the meaning of political philosophy and its meaningful character is as evident today as it always has been since the time when political philosophy came to light in Athens’ (p. 33). For Strauss, political philosophy draws our attention to the better and the worse in politics, and in doing so it acts, at least initially, as a partisan of change in suggesting that we actively consider whether change or preservation is desirable.

Strauss argues that political philosophy, a branch of philosophy, is not political thought, political theory, political theology, or political science. Here he

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