

Book Review

Thomas L. Pangle. *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism: The Moral Vision of the American Founders and the Philosophy of Locke* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1988), 334 pp., £17.96, ISBN 0 226 64540 1 (boards).

Reviewed by William B. Allen*

To reflect on the question of America, and how we should understand America, we might well begin by just admitting that Professor Pangle is correct: it is indeed true that the key chord of modernity is America. He may, however, be incorrect in his understanding of what America means as the key chord of modernity. By key chord I mean that modernity opens and ends on that chord. We need to place in context what it is about America that has presented the problem that Professor Pangle struggles with, unsuccessfully, in his work.

Starting with the title itself, assuming the title to mean that the *Spirit of Modern Republicanism* is America, then it is sufficient. If, on the other hand, it means that America is assimilated to a broader standard, then it is insufficient. I believe that Professor Pangle takes it in the latter sense, and there resides the difficulty.

Instead of the correct identification of America as central to modernity, Pangle imagines that a certain tension exists, whether between perfect gentlemanliness and the so-called parts of virtue or between virtue and happiness. This tension derives broadly from the rejection of classical republicanism by modern political philosophy. This book purports to demonstrate that one is entitled to make just such a leap from classical to modern political philosophy.

Pangle claims that America stands on the shoulders of John Locke, and not merely John Locke as one in a series of thinkers or legislators but in the particulars of his theory as regards its relationship to classical republicanism. Now that theory, of course, stands on the shoulders of Machiavelli. I, on the other hand, have tried at length (elsewhere) to introduce the notion that the American presentation of the cause of nature (which is how I prefer to think of it) is a presentation which is indeed conversant with modern principles but not imprisoned by them.

I've made that argument on two grounds. First, the Americans usually read more widely than is attributed to them – even by this book, which seeks to give them credit for wide reading. Secondly, the Americans were human. The latter argument is more difficult to sustain in the presence of discussions which imagine that it is the same thing to engage in philosophy as it is to hold conversations about other people's conversations. To remind us that the Americans were humans is otherwise not extraordinary, since we are nothing more ourselves, and the task which they measured up to, but which we have far less frequently measured up to since that time, was precisely to remember themselves as human and therefore to confront the teachings of philosophy always with at least one healthy dose of skepticism – namely, whatever the principles seemed to call for, must it not always be the case that human nature will prevail?

* Published in the *History of Political Thought* v. 11, no. 3 (Autumn 1990):551-555.

The American founders use principles that go beyond mere habituation and that challenge their fellows as well as those who come afterwards to articulate their accomplishment not as a step in the history of philosophy but as a self-conscious interpretation of nature and human nature in particular.

Something that puts this in a stronger perspective may be derived from a sideways glance at a related phenomenon. Arguments about the founding – particularly the argument that the founding is base – commonly begin by regarding the founders as wise and virtuous, while concluding that their descendents are mean and miserable. Professor Pangle’s account is no different in that respect.

This particular presentation of the founding – the notion of a democracy low but solid – is a criticism however veiled, for it denies to America and its founders any claim of nobility or of excellence. In the attempt to build a tension between nobility and excellence, on the one hand (I think that is what Pangle means by “pride”), and justice, on the other, we see why we are forced into making that choice. It is a view which maintains not only that the founders expected little from men in general but that they so contrived matters as never to allow for anything. They never allowed for, let alone demanded, virtue.

Now I suggest that this flies in the face of the evidence, but the evidence is a very long story. Nevertheless, the story has been told. The materials are available; there are enough people now writing and speaking about these things who make them accessible, if not patently clear. So much is this so that I must, parenthetically, remark that it begins to be rather vexing that there would be anyone left who would bother, on the basis of shabby scholarship, to impose upon our good nature and our patience rather than submit to this long story.

The story is too long to tell in this review. But an apostrophe will at least afford opportunity to judge how far virtue was excluded from the founding. When we speak of virtue in the American founding, it is not sufficient to speak of instances or quotations that cite attitudes towards virtue as instrumental in preserving the stability of the regime. That is part of the discussion; equally important, however, is to recognize the founding itself as an accomplishment in virtue.

True, the framers read Locke, Hobbes, Smith, Hume, Hutcheson, among others. But they had no less available Aristotle’s *Politics*. We find in 1792, for example, in Madison’s “Notes on the Foundations of Government,” a recourse to Aristotle that calls into question any simple-minded view of the texts upon which Madison relied.

The Aristotelian Gillies offered trenchant criticism of the modern views on the origins of politics. Writing in the aftermath of the American and French revolutions, in a new introduction to the *Politics*, Gillies defended Aristotle against what he called “the cunning,” cowardly principles of Hobbes and Manderville, as well as the “benevolent moral affections espoused by Hutcheson and Shaftesbury.” (The youthful Alexander Hamilton was no less harsh on Hobbes in the revolutionary tract, “The Farmer Refuted.”) Aristotle rather built on the foundation, according to Gillies, that “both society and government are as congenial to the nature of man as it is for a plant to fix its roots in the earth, to extend its branches, and to scatter its seeds.” Now, I trace the significance of this argument to the fact that, for the critics of the framing, Aristotle is the singular source

of the supposed antithesis to a base America. My argument is based on the notion that Plato, if he says anything at all, rather criticizes the ancient city. Aristotle, though, defended the city, the actual city whose end was supposedly virtue. Plato, on the other hand, never approaches an account of an actual city, save through the mouths of the Hobbeses of the ancient world. Gillies rejected both Locke's social contract and, while accepting in principle the inalienable right to be self-governed, the egalitarian freight of the new inalienable right to be fairly represented (as it had already come to be interpreted by the end of eighteenth century). Locke's mistake, according to Gillies, was to settle for the hypothetical argument of a state of nature, rather than to follow up this implication of Aristotle's teaching on a "system" of civil society. "In this system will be found not the arbitrary assertion of universal sovereignty but the articulation of the idea of a common good. The good of the community will more surely defend the expedient of giving to the people at large a control in the government." That is the key passage, the one in which Gillies joins the ideas of Madison (*Federalist* 63, for example). He seems to mean that one can justify the claims of self-government politically expressed without justifying a notion of egalitarian democracy. That seems to be, in large measure, what is accomplished in *The Federalist Papers*.

In making this argument, *The Federalist* asserts that something that Professor Pangle denies in this book – namely, that self-government is not one among the many ends of the modern polity. Rather, it is the end which comprehends all the particular ends that are described in the course of that politics. When one examines, for example, liberty, in Professor Pangle's view, one observes the end of liberty, the end of self-government, the end of prosperity, etc. But as one analyses *Federalist* essays One to Nine, one discovers a fairly radical theory about the connection between republicanism, peace and prosperity – a theory that is counter-intuitive, which is to say that it reversed the usual order in which we view those things.

We usually consider that we wish for peace in order to enjoy prosperity – to give a shorthand version. That process is reversed in the *Federalist Papers*. They offer an elaborate argument by which we discover that prosperity guarantees peace far more certainly than peace guarantees prosperity. If one designs one's way of life appropriately – one's constitutionalism, if you will – certain consequences flow from that constitutionalism. Thus it is possible to argue that the American regime is the best regime, in a context in which it is possible to reproduce claims of specific excellence both in terms of the design and of the consequences that are present at the founding itself. Those claims all turn on the question of whether this notion of self-government is indeed correct.

In Professor Pangle's account, finally, one of the keys to the difficulty of interpreting America is that we meet with tension in the categories of the virtues and also a supposed tension between the objective of knowledge on the one hand, and self-government on the other. What Professor Pangle seems not fully to have conceived is the sense in which self-government as a goal derives from the classical discovery of the end of virtue (even if you consider virtue to be knowledge, in that Platonic or Socratic formulation).

To the extent that self-government or self-control becomes almost a symbolic accomplishment – a condition, necessary if not sufficient, for the attainment of ultimate virtue – one can take it as a point to be aimed at wholly apart from dealing with the question

of one's readiness or capacity for the contemplative life. The *vita active* from that point of view is not a life in opposition to the life of contemplation, but is at least a life or stage of life on the way to the life of contemplation. The capacity to develop moderation, if that is to be identified as the *vita active* (which one may doubt), the capacity to attain that self-control, now expressed as the ideal of self-government, does exist in a tension with other claims of authority to rule. Without having to pursue claims beyond the immediate claim of self-government, one then finds that it is possible, as the American Founders did, to focus on the requirements of self-government itself.

The theory is that one can take no steps beyond the demonstration in the attempt to vindicate the claims of humanity. Now, if that is true, it will then further be the case that all of the particular claims of the American Constitution – claims in defense of self-government – are in fact not claims about political processes, not claims about a collective right to self determination or any other similar corruption of the meaning of self-government but in fact are specific claims about the capacity for virtue on the part of humanity at large. This means far greater numbers of people than Professor Pangle, at least, admits into the inner circle of either perfect gentlemanliness or readiness for the contemplative life.

Professor Pangle essentially believes that mankind only lives in tribes. Therefore, he sees the American and the modern experience as debasing, depreciating, because it makes the life of the tribe tenuous without opening any other vista. Well, it is true that modernity liberates men from the tribe; but it is not true that it does so without further vistas. The question of America remains precisely the question of whether the hopes, the ambitions of the founding can be vindicated. That is perhaps for us to say, though it is probably well to remind ourselves that none of us, nor any human beings, will ever speak finally in these matters.