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The great & the good

by Daniel Mahoney

On *The Case for Greatness: Honorable Ambition and Its Critics* by Robert Faulkner.

Robert Faulkner
The Case for Greatness: Honorable
Ambition and Its Critics.
Yale University Press, 264 pages, $30

Rarely today does one come across a book of political philosophy that freshly illuminates the nature of reality as well as the great questions informing the western tradition of political reflection. In the face of too much theorizing, the phenomena of moral and political life in all their complexity and amplitude are obscured. The Boston College political theorist Robert Faulkner has written that rare book that helps one see the world better and more deeply. His book is a summa of learning, reflection, and wisdom, the product of a truly mature effort to overcome "those obscuring theories" that get in the way of an appreciation of "honorable or statesmanlike ambition."

Faulkner's starting point is the "big divide" between, on the one hand, "thoughtful citizens" and "appreciative historians" who still acknowledge those great statesmen whose qualities of soul are indispensable for "defending, reforming, and founding a free country," and, on the other hand, the various theorists who have succumbed to skepticism, cynicism, and doctrinaire egalitarianism regarding the great and the good. In the tradition of Leo Strauss, Faulkner establishes that the common-sense distinctions between honorable ambition, time-serving mediocrity, and the truly rapacious kind of ambition shorn of "justice, love, nobility, and friendship" are essential to any reasonable comprehension of human affairs. Drawing on Plato's, Xenophon's, and Aristotle's insights into ambition and its limits, Faulkner recovers the fundamental and enduring difference between the ambition of a noble statesman such as Lincoln who aimed to be *worthy* of the esteem of his fellow citizens, and the imperial ambition of a Cyrus the Great or Napoleon which gradually became indistinguishable from "cold despotism."

The heart and soul of Faulkner's defense of "honorable ambition" is an explication of the Aristotelian notion of *megalopsychia*, magnanimity or "greatness of soul." Faulkner rightly insists that Aristotle's portrait of magnanimity is the locus classicus of all efforts to do justice to the mixture of "greatness and goodness" that defines true statesmanship. Aristotle is the "philosophical portraitist" par excellence of the gentleman-statesman, the first and still unsurpassed "philosopher of the inside of a gentlemen." His is both description *and* defense of magnanimity, but one that brings to light the tensions and complications inherent in the soul of that rare human being who "thinks himself worthy of great things—and is indeed worthy of them."

The second chapter of Faulkner's book consists of a fascinating forty-page explication of the single

chapter in *The Nicomachean Ethics* (book IV, chapter 3) that attempts to come to terms with magnanimity, "the crown of the virtues." Faulkner supplements his careful and suggestive reading of this foundational chapter with discussions of other parts of the *Ethics* and *Politics* of Aristotle that round out the political philosopher's account of the public-spirited gentleman-statesman. The "great-souled" man that Aristotle was the first to theorize comes to sight not as a charismatic leader or fame seeker in the modern style, wooing the masses with vivid displays and spectacles. Rather he is a man of "noble and good character." As Aristotle's (and Faulkner's) chapter unfolds, the complications build and the virtue of magnanimity is revealed to be riddled with tensions. But Aristotle never withdraws his initial claim that the magnanimous man is both great and good.

In Aristotle's account, the great-souled man legitimately claims great honors for himself. His pride is neither sin nor arrogant usurpation. At the same time, he "holds himself moderately" toward "good and bad fortune." He desires recognition for his superiority but only from those who are morally serious, whose opinion really counts. Faulkner ably captures the great-souled man's reticence regarding honor itself: "His is superiority from the heights of inner independence. He has bigger fish to fry than his own glory." Yet as Faulkner shows, the rich Aristotelian portrait of "greatness of soul" contains its share of shadows. The magnanimous man is "unable to live in dependence on another" and only remembers the good he has done for others and not "the benefits that have been conferred" upon him. More troublingly, he is not inclined toward admiration since "in his eyes nothing is great." He does not even pursue a life of public service in any recognizable sense: "he is hesitant and slow to act except where there is great honor or significant result at stake." Aristotle underscores that he "puts no great weight on anything." He aspires to godlike self-sufficiency, and at the end of the chapter is said to move slowly and to speak with a deep voice. At one point, he is compared to the capricious Zeus, which in this context is surely more a criticism than a compliment.

Faulkner is fully aware of these complications. He lays them out with a rare and admirable dialectical subtlety. He shows how the desire of the great-souled man for self-sufficiency needs to be corrected by the later emphasis on justice and the common good in the *Ethics*, as well as, in the *Politics*, an ample defense of rule of law, patriotism, and public spiritedness, and a "mixed regime" that takes into account the good of the popular elements in any political community. More fundamentally, Aristotle reveals the limits of all moral virtue shorn of philosophical reflection. But Faulkner rightly insists that Aristotle's ultimate subordination of magnanimity to philosophy entails a "clarifying and purifying of practical virtue, not an obliteration or replacement of it."

Still, Faulkner goes too far in simply identifying the great-souled man with the public-spirited gentleman-statesman. The philanthropy of the "great-souled man" is qualified by his refusal to acknowledge his debts to others, and his quest for self-sufficiency is ultimately in deep tension with a generous appreciation of moral limits and what one owes one's country. Instead of resting content with this ambiguity, Faulkner finally reads the great-souled man (in light of Aristotle's subsequent "correction") as a public-spirited statesman, one who combines greatness, goodness, and patriotism in ways that are genuinely admirable.

Faulkner can do so only by conflating later exemplars of "honorable ambition" such as Washington, Lincoln, and Churchill with Aristotle's canonical account of "greatness of soul." Throughout the text, Faulkner gives examples from the life and writings of such modern exemplars of magnanimity to illustrate Aristotle's understanding of greatness of soul. He is not wrong to attribute self-conscious magnanimity to some of the greatest democratic statesmen of modern times. Despite our official claims to the contrary, free communities depend upon the art of statesmanship to found, reform, and defend regimes of liberty.

Whether it is a matter of Lincoln's defense of his fellow democratic citizens against those tyrannical souls who belong to the "tribe of the lion and the eagle" (to cite his 1838 "Lyceum Address"), or Churchill's eloquent appeals to personal and political honor in the struggle against modern

totalitarianism, or Washington's embodiment of statesmanlike honor and dignity in a way that reminded his contemporaries of Roman *gravitas* and *dignitas*, the modern world has indeed witnessed rare, admirable, and noble displays of human and political excellence. But these distinctively modern manifestations of "greatness of soul" bring together aristocratic and democratic virtues in ways that depart from the letter and spirit of Aristotelian magnanimity (even as they build on Aristotle's wise and humane philosophical correction of the "autarky" inherent in the deepest longings of the magnanimous man). An instructive example provided by Faulkner helps illustrate the need to differentiate magnanimity proper (and its rare and admirable modern manifestations) from the "complicated" Aristotelian description.

In an excellent chapter, "Obscuring the Truly Great: Washington and Modern Theories of Fame," Faulkner discusses various interpretations of the "iconic American gentleman-statesman," George Washington. He contrasts the historian Douglas Adair's account of the American Founder's motives with that provided by John Marshall, among Washington's earliest as well as best biographers. Adair drew on a complicated "republican tradition"—largely of scholarly construction—that was said to incorporate Plutarch, Machiavelli, and the enlightenment philosopher-statesman Francis Bacon. In Adair's presentation, this tradition helps us understand that "fame," the quest for this worldly glory, lay behind the public spiritedness of a man such as Washington. In contrast, in his *Life o* *Life of Washington*, Marshall, a statesman of great distinction himself, drew on Cicero's account of the priority of duty in *De Officiis (On Duties)* to account for Washington's mixture of gravitas, high character, public spirit, and dedication to the cause of liberty. Marshall, like his friend and inspiration Washington, was unquestionably dedicated to the *modern* cause of constitutionalism, representative government, and the rights of man. But when describing Washington's virtues Marshall did not hesitate to turn to a classical account of public duty and virtue. I am speaking not of Aristotle's original description of magnanimity but rather of Cicero's modified and, dare I say, improved account of that virtue. As Faulkner himself shows, Cicero's version of magnanimity "dwells on the honorable duties involved in free public life." Its twin focus is on "stoic dutifulness and free politics." Cicero deprecates the apolitical hedonism of the epicurean philosophical tradition and defends the virtues that flourish in free political communities. Duty, a concern for justice and for one's fellow men and citizens, and a preference for free and dignified political life become the defining traits of the public-spirited gentleman-statesman.

This much has become clear: Washington embodied magnanimity as it had been modified by several post-Aristotelian sources. These included Cicero's republican appropriation of Stoicism, a Christian emphasis on common humanity, and the modern doctrine of the rights of man. Lincoln, too, was unarguably a modern exemplar of magnanimity but his abhorrence of slavery and his defense of human equality owed much to biblical religion. Churchill was largely "pagan" in his moral and philosophical bearing. But he knew that "the moral philosophy and the spiritual conceptions of men and nations" that were critical for the defense of the dignity of man in an age beset by "new ideological tyrannies and new scientific and industrial powers of destruction" owed a great deal to Christian ethics. Whatever his personal religious convictions, Churchill's capacious soul itself was unthinkable outside the context of the Christian West, of a civilization shaped by the humanizing tension between Athens and Jerusalem, magnanimity and humility.

Faulkner's admirable defense of a tradition of thought and action that "took seriously what is good and true as well as what is strong and great" would be even more persuasive if he had reflected more systematically on the Roman, Christian, and broadly democratic contributions to and modifications of what I am tempted to call a tradition of magnanimity. As I have suggested, that tradition incorporated and developed Aristotle's restrained but fundamental critique of magnanimity by weaving together pride and self-restraint, the desire for prominence with public duty.

One of the strengths of Robert Faulkner's eloquent book (it contains no shortage of quotable

aphorisms) is the way it turns genealogy against those who see in it the preferred instrument for debunking what is seemingly worthy of respect and admiration. In this reductive modern tradition, to turn to the origin of things is by definition to expose the groundlessness of that which is presupposed to have feet of clay. Faulkner stands this tradition on its head. By returning to the profound philosophical origins of the contemporary prejudice against “honorable ambition” he shows that moral and political greatness remain unscathed if only we have the courage to trust what we see and experience rather than the dogmas put forward in the name of “enlightenment.”

Faulkner convincingly argues that the “brutal eviction” of noble greatness of soul by Thomas Hobbes was built on one dogmatic assumption after another. Honorable ambition was reduced to mere vanity or vainglory. Hobbes’s famous “laws of reason” in *Leviathan* are no more than prescriptions for niceness or inoffensiveness; moral judgments are nothing more than rival tastes or appetites. Hobbes assaults traditional morals in a sweeping critique that is more polemic than argument. In light of Hobbes’s lowering of the human horizon, Kant admirably attempted to restore the dignity of the moral life, to inform the modern “philosophy of equal rights with a new idea of righteousness” tied to an affirmation of the universal moral law and the moral equality of men. But there is a large dose of dogmatism in Kant’s insistence on “autonomy” and his reliance on historical progress, the movement of history, to substitute for the political virtue of men and citizens. At the end of the modern movement with Nietzsche, a concern for noble greatness of soul “comes storming back” in a manner that went a long way toward discrediting the idea of a “politics of greatness.” This poet-philosopher-legislator expresses a “bitter contempt” for the “virtue of humanity.” He “eulogizes both Shakespeare and the ‘blond beast’” even as his thought gives way to limitless relativism.

Against the abstractions that dominate modern philosophical thought, Faulkner calls on us to trust our own judgment and experience. As the classical historians and philosophers appreciated so well, “decent people have an eye in particular for the fitting or correct thing to do. For Aristotle, that discernment, admittedly shaped by correct dispositions, is near the core of moral judgment.” Alas, Faulkner demonstrates that common sense will get little support from what passes for “political theory” in elite academic circles today. A contemporary political philosopher such as John Rawls succumbed to dogmatic egalitarianism and gave next to no consideration to the qualities of soul necessary to preserve a free country. In *The Human Condition* (1958), Hannah Arendt spoke more promisingly about the need to overcome the “loss of common sense” promoted by skeptical modern philosophy. She called for the recovery of “public space,” the realm of freedom that still had a place for “the glory of great deeds.” But Faulkner shows that Arendt tended to aestheticize politics, identifying “action” with the act of distinguishing oneself by “breaking with the everyday.” Too often she spoke about “public space” as if it provided a stage for theatrical display more than a humanizing arena for moderating conflict and pursuing the civic common good. Surprisingly, she gave little or no thought to the “old absolutes” such as “prudence, wisdom, and decent character.”

Modern “theorizing” has contributed in its own way to the extremes of tyranny and total war. One way it has done so is by providing arguments to the “dictatorial transformer of civilization” such as Robespierre, Lenin, Hitler, or Che Guevara. But great democratic statesmen such as FDR, Churchill, Truman, and Reagan “led the democracies to confront and then defeat the tyrannical dictators and their empires.” In *The Case for Greatness*, Robert Faulkner provides a model of political philosophizing that does justice to the palpable distinction between the statesman and the tyrant. He wisely suggests that we should not be on guard against “the evil of greatness,” in the manner recommended by egalitarian dogmatists and debunkers, but rather against the dangers of “evil greatness.” By reminding us of the indispensability of men “both good and great,” Faulkner renews the tradition of classical philosophy. He puts us in touch with the world of common sense, of virtue and vice, that lies before us if we but open ourselves to it. That is no mean achievement, indeed.

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