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PIETAS

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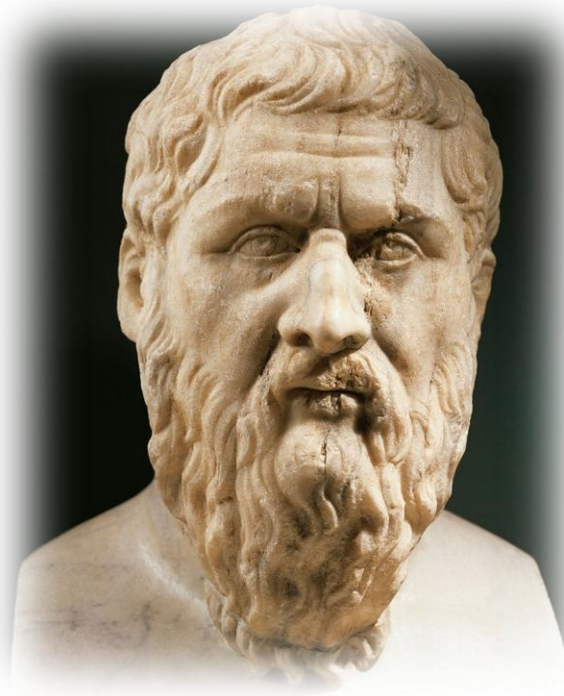
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Marble bust of Plato, from a 4th Century Original, Capitoline Museums, Rome

If Leo Strauss is correct that Plato is the author of the *Minos*, then it is Plato's Socrates who begins that dialogue with the *what-is* question, "Law for us—what is it?" Strauss's great work was to reinvigorate not a dogma of Plato, but what he saw to be the Platonic doctrine of ideas (ιδέα, from *idein*, to see), literally meaning the form or shape of something (εἶδος), and thus the Aristotelian formulation of "to ti ên einai" (τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι)—the "the what it was to be" or "the thing—what was it?" Still, writes Strauss, "no one has ever succeeded in giving a satisfactory or clear account of this doctrine of ideas."¹ Thomas Pangle observes, "Strauss's unorthodox interpretation of the ideas begins from the observation that when Socrates speaks of an idea or form, he is referring to that to which the question 'What is ...?' points (e.g., What is Man? What is Number? What is Justice."² Strauss distinguished between the idea of justice, which was part of a theological teaching necessary for the education of the

¹ Leo Strauss, *City and Man* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 119.

² Thomas Pangle, "Introduction," in Leo Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 7.

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young, and the ideas as they accounted for our experience of nature. Laurence Lampert writes of Socrates's teachings on the idea of justice, "it is *exoteric*; it is *philosophic poetry*; it is not the part of Plato nearest to Strauss's heart."³ But this was not the case for "Socrates' genuine insight into human perception and cognition, or sensing and understanding"—issues of little interest to young Greeks like Glaucon.

This issue of *Pietas* features articles that follow and affirm or challenge the above characterizations, asking questions about beauty, law, technology, and morals. Daniel O'Toole, in "The Nobility of Gods and Men," treats the question of *what is* the beautiful or noble in the largely neglected dialogue *Greater Hippias*. It is the only work of Plato's—"indeed, it's the only classical work"—to provide an extensive investigation into the subject, even though such an investigation is crucial to understanding Plato's philosophy as a whole. O'Toole focuses on the dialogue's middle section (291b-293c), in which Hippias can neither provide a coherent definition of beauty nor come to terms with his own confusions about it. After showing how beauty draws out man's longing for the transcendent and the divine, Socrates points out the convictions and confusions that underlie its traditional or conventional view. Socrates concludes that the elusive notion of beauty is an inadequate standard for human life, tests the extent to which it is compatible with a rationalist understanding of nature, and redirects the reader back to the imperfect world of man.

Asking the question *what is technology?*, Matthew Wells contends that classical political philosophers were not only aware of the dangers of technology but advanced powerful arguments against innovation. In "On Classical Political Philosophy's Critique of Innovation," Wells draws from the works of Plato, Aristotle, Xenophon, and others to argue that the ancients' shared concern about technology stemmed from their ideas about human psychology and their awareness of the importance of habit in education. Although innovation might appear beneficial, human beings are fundamentally irrational and require a sub-rational education that includes music and gymnastics. And unlike modern thinkers, ancient philosophers knew that politics, which concerns the human things, does not admit of complete rationality. It is hard enough, says Wells, to educate humans, but technological innovations often accompany a decline in virtue. Thus, "One must judge innovations,

³ Laurence Lampert, *The Beijing Lectures. Strauss, Plato, Nietzsche: Philosophy and its Poetry* (Philadelphia, PA: Paul Dry Books, 2024), 89.

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including technological innovations (e.g., shipbuilding), in light of their merits, that is, their liability to upend or support virtuous habits.” Indeed, the Stranger in Plato’s *Laws* advises that a people suffer before adopting innovations that lead to a debased way of life.

If classical philosophy highlights the limits of rational control in political life, later thinkers would seek new ways to reconcile freedom, transcendence, and human action within that same imperfect sphere. But Marco A. Andreacchio argues that the great Platonist Pico della Mirandola is not to be placed among them. Modern critics, argues Andreacchio, have largely misunderstood Florence’s “new Orpheus” by seriously underestimating two crucial features of his works: his philosophical treatment of politics and his deliberate use of irony. Rather than a proto-modern, Pico is an “ancient spirit” offering his readers a classical alternative to the modern critique of Christianity, or more generally of revealed religion. Yet he must neutralize the roots of the modern view in Christianity’s own conversion of the ancients’ “mathematical science” into a dogmatic metaphysics. Pico defends a conception of freedom rooted in absolute transcendence, which secures liberty against any reductionist, deterministic, or chaotic account of the will. This fundamentally philosophical character of liberty supports Pico’s “heroic” or “aristocratic” conception of the human being, as well as his claim that the philosopher, as poet, has a legitimate role in public life. The Christian faith is the “firm or fixed guise of a poetry working within nature without imposing itself upon nature, precisely insofar as nature is understood not in terms of ‘flesh,’ but as the horizon of poetic activity.” Thus, Pico’s “poetic theology” is the “new philosophy” that both works with Christian teachings and preserves an ancient or pre-Christian philosophy.

The question of how philosophical or transcendent truths enter public life is not limited to politics and freedom but also arises in the realm of religious experience and practice. The poet, artist, and architect, suggests David D. Corey in his article “Beauty in Worship,” are properly aides to both faith and the pursuit of truth. Corey addresses whether the beauty that onlookers see in Christian churches, architecture, and ritual is a distraction from faith or something preparatory for it. Beauty, he argues, if pursued for its own sake, is a “*propaedeutic to the faith.*” While it may not lead its beholders to communion with God, “Attention to beauty encourages a disposition of soul that is so like divine worship as to constitute a kind of preparation for it.” This human delight in beauty, argues Corey, is not just part of a universal nature but a means to reconcile our contemporary fractious politics.

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We opened with Strauss's work of reinvigorating the teaching of Platonic ideas. Strauss wanted to conserve the ancient understanding of philosophy from what he called nihilism, a loss of meaning that he traced to the collapse of both reason and revelation in the modern world. Advocates for liberalism had assaulted and undermined both as a guide for living, and Strauss warned that this constituted a crisis of the West. In "The Tattered Banner of Moral Realism," Albert Norton, Jr. seeks to clarify the plight of postmodern thought in its "repudiation of truth- and moral-realism." Upon rejecting sacred order, secular postmodern thought attempts to locate truth and moral significance in process philosophies. Such efforts reject transcendence *ab initio* and instead seek to find human purpose and meaning in ideological social movements. History replaces God. Narrative replaces objectivity of truth and of right and wrong, distorting man's sense of place in the world. The tragic sense that humans possess from their awareness of death and justice is no longer mediated by religion. Rather than confront this sense of the tragic, humans give themselves over to social processes that redefine their conception of truth and morality. But in doing so, they cheapen the individual moral dignity of the person and open themselves to ideological totalitarianism. Still, Norton argues that hope is not entirely lost; humans can reclaim what is true precisely because the new moral vision is false.

In this issue, Paul Jordan Diduch provides a thoughtful review essay on Ryan K. Balot's *Tragedy, Philosophy, and Political Education in Plato's Laws*. Veronica Brooks and L. Joseph Hebert review Travis Curtright's *The Controversial Thomas More*. Luigi Bradizza reviews Richard Avramenko and Ethan Alexander Davey's *Aristocratic Voices*, and Casey J. Wheatland reviews Aurelian Craiutu's *Why Not Moderation? Letters to Young Radicals*. William Batchelder's review of Musa al Gharbi's *We Were Never Woke* (Princeton, 2024), which we promised in our last issue, will appear in our upcoming spring issue. Many thanks to both our authors and peer-reviewers, without whom this journal would not be possible.

The Ciceronian Society