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Politics, Innocence and the Limits of Goodness by Peter
Johnson

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dence and bewilderment among the intellectuals—has been overtaken by a tempest that the critical theorist may well find both invigorating and troubling.

In Germany, furthermore, the struggle over the public sphere has taken a decisive turn. No doubt the most impassioned and significant essays of *The New Conservatism* are those written as contributions to the continuing discussion of the role of the intellectuals and the university, the work of Heidegger and Carl Schmitt, and especially the “historians’ debate” that broke out shortly after Reagan’s juggling act of Bitburg and Bergen-Belsen. Now at issue, as Habermas insists, is the public use of history and the integrity of the public sphere, the only sphere where crimes and damages from the past can ever be settled. For Habermas postwar history must never retreat to apologetics while hiding behind the protective shield of science. If collective memory is used to create a constructive national idea, it must be a “constitutional patriotism” firmly anchored in the political experience of a Federal Republic of Germany that “opened itself without reservation to the political culture of the West” (p. 227). That accomplishment, for Habermas, is his generation’s greatest legacy.

But is critical history in jeopardy? Can the public sphere be renewed? Since October 1989 such questions have become even more insistent than before. The answers of the present are equivocal and divided. In their matter-of-factness Habermas’ efforts may exemplify the kind of critical discourse the public sphere must now hope to sustain.

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Politics, Innocence, and the Limits of Goodness.

By Peter Johnson. London: Routledge, 1988. 283p. \$35.00.

This engaging study serves to illuminate political morality by exploring, in literature as well as in philosophical texts, the nature of moral innocence. The exploration is finely tuned and well informed. An introductory chapter is followed by critical analyses of Greek and Kantian treatments of virtuous action and political morality. In the third chapter Machiavelli’s views are interpreted, as are con-

temporary analyses of the “dirty hands” problem by such theorists as Walzer, Thomas Nagel, and Bernard Williams; and the vice of pride is thoughtfully dissected with the help of Shakespeare and Hume. In the next chapter the meaning and import of absolute morality—and absolute virtue—is presented. In chapter 5 we discover the author’s philosophical leanings as he goes about interpreting Hegel, Nietzsche, and Arendt on innocence, morality, and politics. Chapter 6 commends literature as an antidote to the abstractions and generalizations inflicted by moral and political philosophers. Chapters 7–9 explore three literary texts for their bearings on the issues at hand. A tenth chapter defends the proposition that moral character, action, and outcome are not just contingently related but are instead inherently, and so inevitably, connected.

The author has given the subject matter the kind of scrutiny it requires. I cannot do justice to the book’s plenitude here. Among the riches I count two central claims: that an adequate understanding of political morality requires paying attention to moral character or disposition and that certain kinds of moral character have no place in politics. Moral innocence exemplifies these claims. Inspection of this moral disposition renders more complete and concrete our understanding of morality and politics and the connections between the two; and it is a disposition that neither can nor should be sustained in the public realm.

The innocents to whom Johnson refers are not those who suffer politics or are corrupted by it; nor does he mean those merely ignorant of, or naive about politics. The innocent here are active agents who embody absolute virtue. Their virtue is absolute because unbounded (e.g., by duty), pure because valued for its own sake, and incorruptible. But their absolute adherence to absolute virtue is completely unreflective: they do not know why they value virtue; and they do not resist corruption through moral strength but, rather, are naturally immune to it. Their ignorance, then, is distinctive as well: it encompasses not merely lack of prudence and an inability to learn from experience but also, more centrally, ignorance of evil. Moral innocence does not, because it cannot, negotiate with evil.

Moral innocence also appears in different guises, a fact moral and political philosophers usually miss and almost never investigate. In-

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deed, that they generally fail to recognize the multiplicity of moral dispositions and the bearing of these on political morality is, as I have intimated, one of Johnson's central charges. Literature can, he argues, help here. Three texts are selected to help in the case of moral innocence: Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, Melville's *Billy Budd*, and Graham Greene's *Quiet American* (whose innocent is Pyle, a Harvard graduate committed to bringing democracy to Indochina). All three characters are active forces in the public realm, but Henry's moral innocence appears as weakness and vacillation, Billy's as mute, unschooled purity that can express itself publicly only through violence, and Pyle's as fanaticism, reflecting principles provided by the Harvard library and a determination rooted in the liberal conviction that goodwill and sound principle can determine the course of political life.

That each of these characters produce disaster in the political realm is not surprising: Henry ruins a kingdom, Billy kills a superior officer, and Pyle kills for "America." But why, precisely, are we unsurprised? Probably because we are not in this area Kantians; we are not surprised when good persons do bad things in politics because we do not believe that politics can be construed simply as a field of application for rules arrived at in morality. Probably, in other words, we believe in some sort of consequentialist realism instead. On this view morality and politics are in frequent conflict if not altogether divided because virtue—typically in the vague form of "conscience" or "principle"—often has to give way so that greater evils may be avoided or some good achieved. Politics is a tough business, a realm of tragedy and/or moral pragmatism. Good politicians know this and so compromise with evil on consequentialist grounds; but good men like Henry and Pyle do not and so produce bad results.

Drawing in part on Hegel and Arendt, Johnson argues that this is not right. The key is to recognize that "it is not an accident that the moral innocents in all three texts are murdered, executed, or assassinated" and that each is thereby justly rewarded (p. 245). Their morality is unfit for politics because in that essential and valuable realm their goodness becomes, necessarily and inevitably, evil. A mature morality recognizes this and so properly limits itself, as Captain Vere must recognize Billy's

guilt and take responsibility for his execution. Politics is indeed a tough business; but it is so less because virtue has so often to be compromised than because absolute virtue has to be sacrificed. And politics is indeed an autonomous realm; but "whether moral considerations protect or threaten [it] depends on the moral disposition involved" (p. 245). Generalizations are unwelcome here.

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Surviving Power: Exercising It and Giving It Up. By Xandra Kayden. New York: Free Press, 1990. 216p. \$22.95.

Fluctuating Fortunes: The Political Power of Business in America. By David Vogel. New York: Basic Books, 1989. 352p. \$20.95.

Three Faces of Power. By Kenneth E. Boulding. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1989. 259p. \$28.00.

Power is enormously complex. Rather than being a single phenomenon, it is a complicated set of phenomena—as these three books attest. Drawing on interviews, Xandra Kayden takes us "up close and personal" to consider what individuals experience both when they hold power and when they relinquish it, treating power as a matter of occupying positions of high responsibility. David Vogel examines the capacity of U.S. business to shape the terms of public debate and influence policy choice, viewing power in terms of group conflict. Kenneth Boulding provides the most wide-ranging treatment, sketching in broad strokes the interrelations of three forms of power, enlarging the usual notions of coercion, exchange, and persuasion into what he terms *threat power*, *economic power*, and *integrative power* and then applying them to interpersonal relations and organizations.

Political psychologists will find Kayden's book of special interest. Her concern is not what people do with power "but what it does to people: what it is like to get it and use it, and what happens when it is lost" (p. 3). Kayden's book concentrates on how the experience of power tests the character of people, but she points us toward other important lines of inquiry as well. In particular, Kayden suggests that holding power is a transforming experi-