Interpretation
A Journal of Political Philosophy

Summer 2025 *Volume 51* Issue 3

ISSN 0020-9635

Interpretation

A Journal of Political Philosophy

Inquiries ***Interpretation, A Journal of Political Philosophy***
Department of Political Science
Baylor University
1 Bear Place, 97276
Waco, TX 76798

email interpretation@baylor.edu

Waller R. Newell, *Tyranny and Revolution: Rousseau to Heidegger*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022, 372 pp., $39.00.

Edmund Stewart
University of Nottingham
edmund.stewart@nottingham.ac.uk

"How much you Englishmen might learn from Germany; only you are all too proud. . . . In Germany the professors do teach; at Oxford, I believe, they only profess to do so." So says the comically tactless Ethelbert Stanhope of Anthony Trollope's *Barchester Towers*. At the time of the novel's publication in 1857, such a view was not in fact unreasonable. The modern professionalized university, it is little exaggeration to say, is a German creation, as are the disciplines of philosophy and classical philology in their modern forms. And yet only a century later, in the aftermath of World War II, one might well have wondered what went wrong. How could Martin Heidegger, one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century, not only advocate for the cause of National Socialism as rector of Freiburg University but, perhaps worse, barely find the means after 1945 to express regret for his actions? What responsibility do philosophers and university leaders bear, not only for failing to resist perverse and corrupting ideologies, but for the very creation and promulgation of those ideas in the first place? And can it happen again?

This important book by Waller Newell is one of the best places to find answers to these questions. Newell's study is part of a wider and ambitious research project into the concept of tyranny in the long tradition of political philosophy and history, from the ancient Greeks to the present day. It should be read in context with Newell's 2013 philosophical study *Tyranny: A New*

Interpretation, which examined the evolution of ideas on tyranny from antiquity to the Renaissance, and his sweeping 2016 historical survey *Tyrants: A History of Power, Injustice, and Terror*. The present volume continues the story of the development of philosophical thought related to tyranny from the Enlightenment to the twentieth century. Together these three volumes form something of a trilogy, impressive in their scope, ambition, and learning.

Newell has done much to revive interest in tyranny, both in political theory and practice, over the wide expanse of human history and Western political thought. Yet some explanation is needed as to what Newell understands tyranny to be. Given the wide variety of his interests, it is not always easy to trace a common thread between the diverse theories and political pathologies under consideration. A possible objection might be that highly divergent ideas and entities have been lumped together under one title. Ultimately, though, what typifies all these diverse political constitutions is, if anything, a spirit of excessive manliness, or rather a passionate will—to dominate others and, ultimately, nature itself. This is the ruthless and fascinatingly reckless appetite for greatness typified by Plato's Callicles in the *Gorgias*, a character whom Nietzsche could not but admire over two millennia later. This may be why Newell's first paradigm of the ancient tyrant is not a historical ruler such as Periander or Dionysius, but rather the Homeric hero Achilles.

Newell's conception of tyranny is thus broad and encompasses rulers and movements that are by no means universally regarded as tyrants. He nonetheless adopts three distinct classifications, the "garden variety" classical tyrants of ancient Greece, the Napoleonic-style "reformers," and the modern ideological "millenarian" tyrants, ranging from the Jacobins of the French Revolution to contemporary Islamic terrorists. Ancient and modern tyranny are in fact, Newell acknowledges, different entities. A potential weakness in Newell's schema is therefore that it neglects the existence of modern tyrants, such as Vladimir Putin, who are nonetheless of the "garden variety" in being highly personalist, entirely venal but with relatively few ideological commitments. Rather, in Newell's thesis, new ideas give birth to new tyrannies, and vice versa, hence the combination of theory and history. For ancient tyranny to be transformed into its modern equivalent, according to Newell, the tyrannical Will metastasizes from an engorged Desire for personal fulfillment into the desire for impersonal and idealistic domination. Hitler, we might almost suppose, would not have been anything more than a "garden variety" thug were it not for the totalitarian ideology of National Socialism. But what then

were the many winding turns in thought that led to that singular perversity? This is the central question of this book.

In this book, Newell outlines the "Philosophy of Freedom" that paradoxically contributed to tyranny in its specifically modern form, as Newell understands it. It is not a study of tyranny and revolution itself, but rather of the ideas which (to some extent unintentionally) justified and encouraged the pursuit of modern tyranny. Readers should thus expect many pages to pass without any reference to the book's professed subject. We are led through the works of Rousseau, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, with not inconsiderable detours along the way through their primary influences and successors, including Kant, Schiller, Marx, and Kojève. Yet these lengthy peregrinations will not prove wasted effort. The end result is a detailed and sophisticated account of the theoretical foundations of modern tyranny.

What then is the Philosophy of Freedom and how to explain its disastrous results? The roots of these intellectual developments are to be found, as Newell demonstrates, in ancient Greek philosophy. And yet it is possible that while the German philosophers of the nineteenth century never stopped reading and admiring the classics, they nonetheless lost any interest in *learning* from them. For Hegel, the Greeks were now merely part of a process of historical development. For Heidegger, the entire tradition of metaphysics from Plato onwards needed to be abandoned in favor of a system of ideas he associated with the original archaic, and pre-Socratic, Greek polis. Allusions to classical texts remain brief and allusive, while canonical authors such as Euripides are dismissed wholesale by Nietzsche as insufficiently true to the "real" Hellenic spirit.

Newell charts, above all, the progressive abandonment of any process of personal betterment, once a central goal of ancient philosophers. Platonic philosophers had posited the existence of the Idea of the Good, which was not to be found in man but which man might seek with the aid of philosophy. For Plato in the *Republic*, education was intended to turn the individual soul upwards, towards the unchanging Ideas. Nascent philosophers must be coaxed into leaving the metaphorical Cave. Hegel and his successors, by contrast, opted to remain below. Human salvation is not to be found above with what is eternal and constant but with a constant process of origination and change. Human nature does not need to be overcome by means of education; rather, in the state of nature human beings are good. It is society that has corrupted and constrained their healthy natural urges. Change in society

will be provided by a historical process. Through successive traumas, a heroic humanity may reach Hegel's final "end of history."

It is ironic that, almost like the guardians of Plato's Callipolis in *Republic* VIII, the great German philosophers gradually renounced in stages the wisdom of Platonic philosophy. Each change in thought invited a new change yet more radical, just as Plato's timocrats were replaced by the more extreme oligarchs and democrats. The liberal worldview of Hegel was steadily undermined and radicalized by Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. An initial insouciance regarding the theoretical "slaughter-bench of history" gradually allowed almost any means to be justified by its end. As in the *Republic*, the culmination of the Philosophy of Freedom is, paradoxically, tyranny.

Newell suggests that, from the perspective of post-Enlightenment thinkers, this process was in a sense inevitable and necessary:

> Nature, we now know, is random happenstance, a realm of sheer accident, chance and becoming. . . . Any talk of a higher realm of virtue and the longing for immortality was merely, as Hobbes scathingly put it, "absurd" and "insignificant" speech with no counterpart in measurable physical reality. (2)

Was this really known, though? Modern science has not in fact compelled us to abandon our consciousness of the natural or divine, which exists beyond the human and the material. At the most it has merely made easier a deliberate and free choice to remain in the Cave. Not much has changed really since the time of the Greeks. In essence, we may opt for Socrates or the Sophists; the divine Ideas or man as the "measure of all things." If we choose the latter, we will be inducted by Protagoras, but ultimately the final lesson will be taught by Thrasymachus: that might is right and that the happiest being alive is the tyrant. The history of the twentieth century should teach us that, in the end, there is nothing to be found in the Cave but misery and darkness. Perhaps it is time we returned to Plato.