

Book Reviews

Robin J. Varma: *Ruling Bodies: A Study of Coercion and Punishment in Plato's "Republic," "Laws," and "Gorgias."* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2022. Pp. vii, 163.)

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This short, lively book is a clearly written introduction to statecraft in three Platonic dialogues, and an analysis of the subordinate theme of how well-organized regimes use coercion and/or punishment.

The introduction offers very brief interpretations of the mid-1970s Foucault, Arendt circa *The Human Condition*, and Habermas in *Theory and Practice*. Readers will want a longer and more thorough engagement with these thinkers across a greater variety of their texts to avoid some confusions about theories and methods (e.g., Foucault's theory of discipline and his a priori commitments at 3–4, 147–48) and to cash out the “paradigm shift” in coercion that Varma uncovers (11).

Unlike the unifying theme of Arthur Shuster's 2016 book *Punishment and the History of Political Philosophy* (University of Toronto Press), which concerns the place of retribution in the theory and practice of civic republican and modern social contract theory, Varma offers a view of coercion and punishment from the point of view of the philosopher-legislator, with greater emphasis on coercion than on punishment. This figure is ultimately attracted to tyranny, and the desire to tyrannize over others becomes the main justification of coercion employed as preventative medicine (53). This unifying theme brings together disparate Platonic interlocutors such as Glaucon, Kleinias, Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles, as either aspirants to tyranny or flatterers of Dionysius (34, 83, 114–19, 133, 137n27).

The important virtue of Varma's approach, as noted by others working in this line of inquiry, is that the limits of civic reform become clear or clearer as one thinks about the entrance of classical rationality into the city. The deficit of this approach is that it considers coercion and punishment from the perspective of a figure who seeks to limit their use, or use them gently or not at all. Varma seeks to illuminate the massive disconnect between modern cities seeking to reform their criminal justice systems and to clarify the roots of legitimate use of force on citizens, and philosophical dialogues written and read from the perspective of the philosopher as legislator. As a result, he is less interested in everyday criminal psychology (versus the political ambitions of the founder-legislator) and familiar scholarly topics such as proportionality.

The book's substantive chapters are arranged in the manner of the regime-declension in *Republic* 8 and 9. Varma starts with an account of coercion as preventative medicine in the "ideal" aristocratic city; then moves on to punishment in actual existing and potential oligarchic cities; and closes by discussing popular discourse as a domain of punitiveness and self-punishment in the democratic city (11). This structure suggests that it is possible to distinguish between retrospective punishment and the type of prospective (medicinal) coercion that will "prevent injustice from ever appearing in the city" (53).

In chapter 1, Varma offers interesting reflections on the tale of Leontius, litigating the spectacle of punishment as a tool of control in the city, and reflecting on tyrannical father-killing desires (22–26). Unlike those who read Homer's *Iliad* as a story of reconciling anger or as an archaic assertion of classical natural right, Varma interprets Achilles as a protodemocratic man caught up with his private desires (27). Largely bypassing the institutionalization of punishment in Kallipolis, Varma moves directly to the "causes of political injustice" (49). In a series of provocative and fruitful interpretations of the *Republic*, we are shown just how terrifyingly coercive a statesman like Asclepius (*Republic* 407e) can be. The program of rational coercion requires interpreting the bodily desires as poisons (45–46), interpreting the fear of death as an intellectual error punishable by death (49), and eugenics and mass extermination as the ultimate prophylactic measure (43–44). Varma briefly litigates the question whether the ideal city is in fact possible (17, 42, 59n80, 60nn87–89), and ultimately offers two parallel readings: in one, the gentle philosopher persuades citizens; in the other, the "impatient" statesman coerces citizens into acting virtuously (53).

Chapter 2 is more clearly signposted and more directly about coercion and punishment than the other chapters. Varma interprets Plato's *Laws* as a criticism of Kleinias's will to punish, based on Kleinias's belief in a Hobbes-adjacent "psychological war of all against all" (72, 96–97). Varma's interpretation follows other commentators but offers two original, Jungian contributions: an interesting reflection on the statesman's will to punish shadow images of themselves, and an analysis of the argument of the action in the *Laws* (99n6; see also 66–67, 71–72, 86–88, 100nn8–9, 102n32). In this chapter, we find lively descriptions of the inner *agon* of Kleinias; interesting reflections on the undesirability of the low labors of punishment (89, 92); and other statements (in tension with the foregoing) concerning the giving and receiving of just and noble punishment (94).

Chapter 3 deals with coercion and punishment as tools that a philosopher might use to control orators whose rhetorical shadow-arts sicken the erring democratic city. Institutions, here and in other chapters, are only touched upon, and one should look elsewhere (e.g., Danielle Allen's *The World of Prometheus* [Princeton University Press, 2000]) for elaborations on formal and informal democratic institutions, and the cultural assumptions underpinning them. The analysis of Socrates's transformation of rhetoric into "church confessional" helpfully brings the themes of punishment into view (129).

A longer discussion of Callicles's democratic psychology, begun in the section on Polus, would have been welcome.

The brief concluding chapter on Hobbes presents him as a materialist with a "mechanized picture of the world" (10), bracketing his political science *more geometrico* (143). Hobbes's new political science installs power as the basic unit of analysis, which, in Varma's view, displaces the erotic foundations of political philosophy. The Hobbesian turn in modern political philosophy is risky because eros (unlike the will to power) can be redirected towards philosophical knowledge.

The book is strong on exegesis, and especially eloquent when presenting analogical and metaphorical accounts of ascents and descents. Some of the characterizations of psychagogy are memorable and deliver a real punch. The book's metaphorical or actual dualism is sometimes at odds with its interest in coercion in different regime types (aristocracy, oligarchy, and democracy). More generally, whether coercion and punishment have a "fundamental nature" (1) or "essence" (148) is not fully argued. The sustained focus on tyranny provides helpful guidance concerning the psychology of an Alcibiades or a Raskolnikov, half Napoleon and half louse, but pushes aside other justifications of coercion and punishment and other motivations of criminal conduct.

The correctness of Hobbes's state-of-nature psychologizing haunts Varma's book and establishes Hobbes as perhaps the key interlocutor of Plato and his dramatic persons. As an implication of Varma's dialogue with Hobbesian materialism, modern theories of punishment such as deterrence and retribution are placed in a somewhat Procrustean bed. Variations within modern theories of punishment are homogenized: very different thinkers such as Beccaria and Kant become part of a single modern moment. One antidote is to read ancient materialists such as Epicurus and Lucretius for evidence of their rejection of the will to punish. Whether and how they succeed in doing so is an interesting question, given this book's premises.

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Christopher Holman: *Hobbes and the Democratic Imaginary*. (New York: State University of New York Press, 2022. Pp. 328.)

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Recently, scholars have turned to Thomas Hobbes as an unlikely source of inspiration for engaging the challenges of democratic theory. In one of the first book-length treatments of the subject, Christopher Holman illuminates both sides of this complicated story. A cogent and insightful review of