

MAPPING THE MALAISE OF MODERNITY

The Geography of Good and Evil by Andreas Kinneging,
translated by Ineke Hardy (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2009)

Aristotle teaches that a primary source of our knowledge of the moral virtues is their presence in other human beings. In this respect, Andreas Kinneging's book, as well as the deed of its composition and publication, shows with utmost clarity the virtue of intellectual courage. It is exceedingly rare for any academic to rethink what he has been taught and credentialed with from the ground up. Yet as Kinneging tells us in his preface, it was while writing a book on classical civilization, intending to show the primitiveness of the classics and the Christians when compared with the moderns, that he was persuaded of precisely the opposite view. The unified collection of essays that constitutes this book is the first fruit of the extended inquiry that followed his conversion.

While Kinneging, a professor of jurisprudence at the University of Leiden, brought a well-trained mind to his self-guided study of classical and Christian texts, it is the authenticity and freshness of his essays that are the most compelling feature of this book. As he remarks in the preface, part of his Damascus moment was his recognition of the existential significance of what he was discovering. What he was reading had urgent meaning for life: for life lived *today*. Thus, there is no professorial vanity or vapid staleness in these

essays. We read him here wholly engaged in the act of teaching what he has learned while it is new in his mind and spirit. This, in addition to the fact that he retains some familiar terminology from contemporary academic discourse, may in part account for the astounding fact that his book was awarded the Socrates Prize for the best Dutch work in philosophy in 2006.

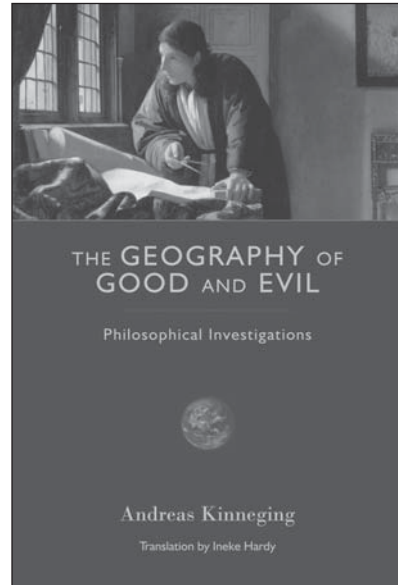
Kinneging's conservatism is not that of a classical liberal. In his first essay, "Leisure and Civilization," he calls into question the *Bildung* or the entire education of the intellectual classes of the present age. Superficiality is the mark of all public discourse. Universities are no longer temples of the spirit. But our true downfall is that only those with a genuine *Bildung* would be able to recognize our plight. The core of such an education is submersion in the classic texts of Greek and Roman thought, alongside the Bible and classical Christian theology. The loss of this learning is dangerous to us because it leaves us not knowing that we are lost and that we muddle, not knowing how to diagnose ourselves and how to treat our malady. But there is something far worse than the loss of the classics, says Kinneging, something

ROBERT C. JEFFREY teaches political philosophy at Wofford College in South Carolina.

worse than mere forgetting. The modern learning that demolished classical *Bildung* and replaced it, the Enlightenment, is a serious *positive* threat to civilization. Enlightenment thinking is not simply the fog of ignorance: it is a solid darkness. But conservatives must not be resigned to this darkness. They are the bringers of light. They are discoverers of secrets from the past.

In his second essay, “The Solid Darkness of the Enlightenment,” Kinneging acknowledges conservative critiques of modernity that focus on the limitations of modern rationalism. But the Enlightenment covers up not only the truth about human reason but the truth about the rest of the human soul as well. In a most edifying and thought-provoking line of approach, Kinneging argues that conservatives are characterized more than anything else by what they hold to be true about human *desiring* and *willing*, more so than by what they hold to be true about human reason.

Human beings are quirky. They do not automatically do what is in their interest. Their actions are tainted by demons from within, and they require something like purification. In this, they stand apart from the rest of creation. So, for Kinneging, the most fundamental truth about the human soul is that it is “inclined to evil.” Not doomed to evil, just inclined. That the fight against the tendency to disorder in the soul is always a David and Goliath affair is what makes the acquisition of virtue such an urgent matter for each individual human being and for society. Despite the Christian gloss on Aristotle, in the end Kinneging agrees with Aquinas that the classics and Christians can agree on much. They agree that self-restraint (let’s call it virtue) is possible and is necessary for political order. They also agree that individual virtue or self-rule is



Navigating through Enlightenment Fog

prior to political self-rule. Liberalism hates the idea of “inner control,” but for conservatives it is the key to true freedom.

The first act of Enlightenment thinkers is to cover up or deny the problematic truth about the human passions. Think only of the beginning of Machiavelli’s *Prince* (not cited by Kinneging): “It is a thing truly natural and ordinary to desire to acquire. . . .” Through the mastery of efficient causality, the moderns in various ways seek to put the effectual truths of calculating reason to the service of the passions, thus reversing the proper order of the soul. Further, in order to neuter the problem of the passions, they are driven either to deny the presence of innate evil affects or to recognize the affects but deny that they are evil. Kinneging is very good at classifying these approaches.

Most of the rest of the essays in the book are “investigations” of individual virtues or of connections between virtues. Because of his phenomenological orientation, Kinneging is less interested in the “foundations” of moral philosophy (what is under the earth) than he is in the vis-

ible edifice built above ground—thus, the “*geography* of good and evil.” What is important is that good and evil are “out there” in the world, a world common to us all. It is a world that can be mapped by distinguishing and connecting the virtues and vices, as the case may be. Kinneking directs his most potent intellectual assaults against the “Romantics,” the most radical of moderns, who locate the source of morality within every separate and unique, and thus morally autonomous, human being. The Romantics are the new sophists who think of themselves as beyond good and evil when in fact they are lost in the darkness of the self. Kinneking, on the contrary, admires the parts of Aristotle’s *Ethics* that concretely describe the key virtues of character. They are the next step beyond observing qualities of character found in great literature and in histories, and in a world not of our own making or choosing. These parts of the *Ethics*, as well as the concise analyses of virtues found in Aquinas, become his models. Thus, the central essays of the book are inventive attempts at rectifying the names of the virtues and vices, in a slightly new key, so that the contemporary eye can see the terrain of virtue through the enveloping darkness.

Perhaps the two most compelling chapters are Kinneking’s treatments of tolerance and loyalty, easily recognizable as the favorite “virtue” and “vice” of our enlightened cognoscenti. Tolerance today is proof against judgmentalism, but as Kinneking shows, true tolerance *presupposes* disapproval or objection. The conditions for the stance of enduring or abiding proper to tolerance are actually quite narrow. One motive for tolerantly enduring the otherwise intolerable might be love or affection; another motive might be respect, as for a political office. What goes by the name of tolerance today is actually pseudo-tolerance. And what most characterizes

pseudo-tolerance is indifference, a denial that something of value is at stake, a denial that something makes any difference at all. Not just lack of concern but also lack of respect and lack of love are implicit in indifference. Thus, pseudo-tolerance is actually a *vice* characteristic of a society without care, respect, or love—a society with no convictions. True tolerance, on the other hand, is a “virtue for people with strong convictions and great willpower that keeps them from browbeating others.” It is not resignation but a condition for prudent persuasion.

What about loyalty? Loyalty is a vice in a world in which “I” takes precedence over “we,” in which the individual is higher than any community. Kinneking notes that loyalty is spoken of in one positive sense today, as “consumer loyalty.” But this is a perversion of its true and original meaning. The true vice corresponding to the true virtue of loyalty is betrayal. But one betrays only when one forsakes what is holy or sacred. Loyalty applies to the fidelity proper between human beings, or between God and human beings, in which the bond is greater than the choices of individuals, in which the bond is not conditional upon mere preference. Thus, loyalty is anathema to any form of liberalism.

One reason loyalty is forsaken in modern times is that it is a demanding virtue. It is inconvenient to consider that virtue may require that a man lay down his life for his friends. It is the ultimate encumbrance to be compelled to die. But the cost of a society built on systematic betrayal in pursuit of the chimera of individual fulfillment is loss of trust and confidence between members of communities. More and more people withdraw into themselves. Kinneking concludes by stating that there are limits to loyalty. The objection to loyalty on grounds that the Nazi SS were bound by honor to loyalty *per se* is not decisive. Loy-

alty is always good insofar as community is impossible without it. But it does not and cannot define the nature of the community. Apparently, then, loyalty is not a complete virtue in itself but must always be informed by something higher.

I must remark briefly on some limitations of the book. No doubt because of the autodidacticism of Professor Kinneging's classical learning, there are some noticeable imprecisions and errors of interpretation. The more important of these concern Aristotle's *Ethics*. In his treatment of justice, for example, Kinneging confuses legal justice with the complete virtue of justice. The discussion of the latter is found at the very beginning of Book V of the *Ethics* and is restricted to the art of the founder or lawgiver. Jurisprudence is not the complete virtue of justice, but in a sense Aristotle does want

us to mistake it for justice. Kinneging is also wrong to state that friendship is not a virtue of character. In fact, it is the last of the four "peaks" of moral virtue (great-souledness, justice, prudence, and friendship), each one of which Aristotle says represents in some way complete virtue. It should also be remembered that in the Platonic dialogues Plato never says anything in his own name.

In justice to Professor Kinneging, however, such errors do not detract from the overall merit of his work. Indeed, my last thought is that this is the sort of book more of us professors should write. It is a brilliant model for sallies against our dark age aimed at a more general but thoughtful audience. In this respect Professor Kinneging's success in the Netherlands should give us all courage.

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