Review

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The title might give readers the wrong impression that the book concerns how Abraham Lincoln developed new concepts in political philosophy in the manner of Thomas Hobbes or Karl Marx. But the book in fact illuminates Lincoln’s thinking and acts by referring to concepts from Aristotle, Plato, and Thomas Aquinas. Lincoln is, as it were, what Plato would have called a philosopher king, not a modern philosopher who happens also to be a ruler.

Joseph R. Fornieri uses the classical and the medieval philosophers in two ways. First, he uses concepts from them to distinguish Lincoln’s values and policies from those of his political rivals and to illuminate how Lincoln understood the moral and political challenges he faced. For example, Lincoln’s policies are characterized by magnanimity as Aquinas defined it, but Salmon P. Chase’s and Stephen A. Douglas’s policies, in opposite ways, are not. Fornieri also uses concepts from Aristotle, Plato, and Aquinas to develop fair-minded and interesting distinctions among views of Lincoln that prevail in contemporary scholarship and to weigh their plausibility as interpretations of his presidency and character. For example, some scholars, such as William Lee Miller and Allen Guelzo, see Lincoln’s policies as embodying the special sense Aristotle gave to the word “prudence,” by which he meant a mature judgment about when it is possible to take risks to advance one’s ideals and when discretion is the better part of valor, but other scholars, such as Garry Wills and Richard Hofstadter, do not see Lincoln that way; the Aristotelian term binds together elements of a family of related perspectives, bringing out relationships of kinship among them that might not otherwise have been obvious.

To make his case for this way of reading Lincoln, Fornieri need not argue that Lincoln studied these philosophers (although Lincoln clearly did master Plutarch and Euclid, and for that matter knew his Bible thoroughly as well); all he needs to show is that concepts from those philosophers illuminate Lincoln’s practices for us in telling
ways. Although the philosophical ideas in this book are traditional ones, Lincoln is also seen as someone who, in working out the practical details of policy in the crosscurrents of political exigencies, displayed a philosophical clarity of mind and a principled command not only of his key values but also of the living tensions between means and ends, and to that extent Fornieri’s Lincoln is not merely a ruler whose ideals those philosophers described but also a thinker who brings philosophical insight to bear on the practical political problems he faced.

Fornieri’s analysis turns on six key themes from the classical and medieval philosophical traditions: Wisdom, Prudence, Duty, Magnanimity, Rhetoric, and Patriotism. That Lincoln’s career showed these attributes might seem to go without saying. But Fornieri’s development of these terms is not platitudinous, because he understands them in carefully developed and discriminating ways and uses them to sharpen insights about Lincoln’s political values and acts.

By “wisdom,” Fornieri means to pick out how Lincoln approached the normative aspects of politics, seeing himself neither as an apostle of realpolitik nor exactly as a prophetic moral reformer. Unlike the former, Lincoln saw himself as bound to transcendental principles that he must seek, in however qualified a way, to translate into law and policy; he could not ignore power, but he was not obsessed by it. Unlike the moral reformer, on the other hand, Lincoln felt himself to be responsible for the continuity of a political society whose fallenness he could not transform with a wave of the hand, and thus Lincoln would not choose merely to “do God’s will though the world perish.”

Fornieri defines “wisdom” in such a way as to distinguish Lincoln from the mere progressive, that is, someone who sought chiefly to do the public’s bidding or to do the newest and most urgent thing, and from the revolutionary, who remakes political institutions in such a way as to break their relationships with their past. Lincoln’s transcendent normative commitments are of two kinds, both of which seem at first to be traditional, even backward-looking, but have transformative implications. First of all, Lincoln is foundationally committed to the moral equality of all persons, from which a call for universal freedom derives. Second, Lincoln is committed to treating labor (not exchange) as the origin of economic value, from which follows what James McPherson called the “free labor ideology” as a vision of human flourishing. Equality and freedom follow from the sense that the human identity opens out to the infinite. From the free labor ideology follows a vision of the harmony of labor and capital, in which neither must be allowed to have the upper hand.
Fornieri makes two arguments about the sources of these transcendent commitments, both of them disputable. First, he sees Lincoln as tied back to the political traditions of the founders, as seeking to fulfill rather than to destroy the law, as it were. That is certainly how Lincoln saw himself, and it is more than arguably true about him. But one has to remember that Fornieri sees Lincoln as chiefly loyal to values that the founders were themselves unable to make good on, which somewhat changes the nature of what it is to be loyal to the founders. Furthermore, Lincoln himself saw the founders in a somewhat idealized way, a way that is open to telling criticism. The Jefferson to whom Lincoln professes loyalty is not exactly the Jefferson known to historians. Because of those two things, whether Lincoln ultimately stands with continuity or with change, with the founders or in place of them as the shaper of a second founding, is still an open question.

Second, Fornieri also calls Lincoln’s transcendent commitment to equal freedom “biblical” and notes that Lincoln championed that commitment against the biblical arguments made by defenders of slavery. In doing this, Fornieri seems to conflate a strategic use of the Bible with a foundational one. The Bible was an essentially contested text in the antebellum era, and everybody had to claim its authority. Even as a freethinker, before the religious turn of his final years, Lincoln was steeped in the language of the Bible and respected its power as a moral archive. But he was not a biblical believer in the traditional sense of that term or in the sense of it that is brandished today. Lincoln’s founders are more attractive than his opponents’ founders, but his development of their themes is not the only and inevitable one. In the same way, Lincoln’s Bible is more attractive, and for that matter deeper, than his opponents’ Bible, but it is not more biblical.

Transcendent commitments, no matter how deep, do not apply themselves, and how they are to be cashed out in the hurly-burly of the political world is something only a mature intuition can judge, for applying such commitments cannot be reduced to rule. Aristotle calls this intuitive practical sense “prudence.” Fornieri describes prudence with subtlety and learning. Prudence distinguishes Lincoln’s pursuit of his moral aims, both when he compromised and when he held firm, both when he acted cautiously, as for instance when he revoked the emancipation orders of generals Fremont and Hunter, and when, having acted, as for instance once he had issued the Emancipation Proclamation, he made it clear that there could be no going back. It is prudence that distinguishes Lincoln from William Lloyd Garrison and the abolitionists. But it is also prudence that distinguishes Lincoln from unsteady leaders like William H. Seward. Even when
Lincoln made a strategic concession, as when he bowed to public feeling against racial equality in the Peoria speech or when he advanced colonization as a solution to racial conflict, Fornieri makes it clear that Lincoln hedged those concessions in such a way as to keep the door open for racial equality later. Lincoln’s concessions were matters of prudence—that is to say, not of moral surrender. Prudence is also different from cunning, as Lincoln’s behavior is different from Douglas’s. Cunning understands how to thrive in a world of crosscurrents, and such thriving often happens at the expenses of the values one professes to champion. But only prudence knows how to advance a moral agenda despite the crosscurrents.

By “duty” Fornieri means Lincoln’s loyalty to the constitution in the face of its tensions with his primary values. Fornieri details how Lincoln neither trampled the constitution as “a covenant with death and an agreement with hell” nor slavishly bound himself to the constitutional doctrines of the old republic. Lincoln transformed the republic that constitution ruled, while always making sure that whatever he chose to do could be defended within a plausible reading of that document. Fornieri’s analysis of the famous Hodges letter of 1864, explaining the constitutional constraints that shaped Lincoln’s approach to emancipation, is exemplary for its richness and nuance. Fornieri contrasts Lincoln’s prudent understanding of duty with James Buchanan’s rigid and dogmatic one, on the one hand, and with the unconstrained higher-law opposition to the Fugitive Slave Act of the antislavery radicals on the other. (In doing this he somewhat risks seeing all the radicals as being entirely of a piece.) Fornieri also provides a cogent account of Lincoln’s occasional extraconstitutional acts, such as the suspension of habeas corpus, which Lincoln defended without sliding down the slippery slope to a doctrine of emergency powers that might have justified just about anything.

In Aristotle’s view “magnanimity” means the ambition for greatness. Fornieri qualifies this term by attaching it to moral greatness, as Aquinas does, calling the result “biblical magnanimity.” He is not much seduced by the temptation to see the figures of “towering genius” who “disdain a beaten path” in Lincoln’s 1838 Lyceum Address as prefigurations of Lincoln himself; they are figures who represent temptations, perhaps, but not models. Lincoln’s magnanimity, in Fornieri’s view, is closer to George Washington’s, in that it embraces a greatness which nevertheless rejects charismatic power and sees itself always as under the restraining power of concern for the res publica. (Think, for instance, of the difference between Washington and Napoleon.) This technical sense of magnanimity, as greatness
combined with humility and restraint, is most evident in the religious turn in Lincoln’s last years, in which it concerns him to do what he can understand of God’s will without ever quite seeing himself as wielding God’s thunderbolt. In the Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln combines this Thomist sense of the meaning of magnanimity with our more traditional sense of that word.

We are accustomed to using the word “rhetoric” in a pejorative sense. Fornieri reminds us that to Aristotle rhetoric was a high art, one that involved using persuasion to bring others to act in the right way. In its realistic weighing of circumstances and possibilities, rhetoric is guided by practical intuitions in just the way prudence is; rhetoric is to words what prudence is to acts. Fornieri sees Lincoln as using rhetoric not to “remake America,” as Garry Wills did, but to engage the “public mind,” that background of shared assumptions about the world in whose terms persuasion always takes place.

Finally, Fornieri provides a nuanced account of Lincoln’s patriotism. It was not the irrational enthusiasm for one’s own country and people that we call nationalism, a passion that all too often descends into oppression of others and into repression at home, but rather a rational love of the guiding values of the public mind. Patriotism turns on values that may be rooted in American national experiences but are not confined to them, and indeed typically the values Lincoln has in mind to advance are those that America seems to test the possibilities of for the rest of the world, as it tests, for instance, whether any nation “conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal can long endure.”

Patriotism of Lincoln’s kind is a mature and critical patriotism, capable of strongly rebuking the citizens of a republic that has lost its way, as the United States clearly had on the subject of slavery. Lincoln’s patriotism similarly underlay his opposition to nativism, particularly where nativism draped itself in the flag. Lincoln’s was a patriotism different from and critical of that pugnacious jingoism that beats its chest in defense of “my country right or wrong” and even now chants “USA! USA!” to shout down self-doubt. Most of all, Lincoln’s patriotism was strongly different from the spread-eagle nationalism of Douglas’s “Young America,” which in its embrace of Manifest Destiny and its enthusiasm for proslavery filibustering expeditions to Cuba and Nicaragua made the antebellum United States a standing threat to the freedom of the rest of our hemisphere. Reflective patriotism, which Lincoln had thought of as a “political religion” in the Lyceum speech, calls for a self-aware and self-critical citizenship. It is this re-
flective patriotism that underlies the forbearing and un-self-righteous stance of Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address.

The strength of Fornieri’s book is its ability to use philosophical language to make fine discriminations between Lincoln and his political rivals, specifying just what it was that made Lincoln great, even relative to figures who had a great deal in common with him. He makes similarly fine discriminations between his views on most of the major themes of current scholarly discussion and those of others. *Abraham Lincoln, Philosopher Statesman* is a judicious and clear-thinking book that makes thoughtful sense of Lincoln’s greatness.