[Review] Ryan Patrick Hanley (2020) The political philosophy of Fénelon, and, Ryan Patrick Hanley (2020) Fénelon. Moral and political writings

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Ryan Patrick Hanley, The Political Philosophy of Fénelon (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2020). Pp. 324; \$39.95 cloth.

Ryan Patrick Hanley, ed. and trans., Fénelon. Moral and Political Writings (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2020). Pp. 286; \$99.00 cloth.

Interest in the political philosophy of Archbishop Fénelon has been rightly rejuvenated in the last decade or so in the English-speaking world. The author of Telemachus, the second best-selling book of the eighteenth century in France after the Bible, Fénelon has long enjoyed a reputation in France as a pivotal pre- or early Enlightenment thinker. It is only relatively recently, however, that Anglophone scholarship of this celebrated figure has begun to explicate the far-reaching influence in and beyond France of his political philosophy, both within his lifetime and after.¹ Both Ryan Patrick Hanley's outstanding monograph on Fénelon's political thought and his accompanying translations of key political writings by the Archbishop are welcome and important interventions, not only within the field of political philosophy but also those beyond it.

After study at the seminary at Saint-Sulpice and ordination as a priest in 1676, François de Salignac de la Motte-Fénelon, Archbishop of Cambrai (1651-1715), the product of a second marriage in an ancient noble family, became director of the Nouvelles Catholiques, a college for women who had converted from Protestantism. In this position, Fénelon both came to be seen rising star within the Gallican Church, in part for his authorship of Treatise on the Education of Girls (1687) and developed three transformative relationships. The first was with Bishop Bossuet, the Bishop of Meaux and a prominent figure within the court of King Louis XIV. Bossuet had been impressed by Fénelon's work and employed him

to convert Huguenot women to Catholicism, which Fénelon did, while eschewing the frequently robust techniques often applied during such conversions. His second relationship was with both the duc de Beauvilliers and his brother-in-law, the duc de Chevreuse. Both men were high-ranking members of the court who were married to daughters of the king's former finance minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert, and both were impressed by Fénelon's educational work and by the Treatise. When the two dukes were appointed as governors to Louis XIV's grandsons in 1689, they turned, with the support and blessing of Bossuet, to Fénelon to take charge of the education of the three princes (the ducs de Bourgogne, Anjou, and Berry).² Fénelon then served as a member of the French court for ten years, until 1699, when a theological dispute with Bossuet over the doctrine of pure love known as the Quietist Affair and the leaking of Telemachus, perceived as a condemnation of the nature of Louis XIV's "absolute" kingship and the decadence of his court, led to his banishment from the court. Fénelon was then moved to the archdiocese of Cambrai as Archbishop. From Cambrai, he continued to advise his former pupil the duc de Bourgogne while actively engaging in the upheavals and events of the war-torn Cambrai, ravaged by the pan-European War of the Spanish Succession (1702-14). During this period, he also continued making political plans for a France after Louis XIV.³

In Hanley's opinion, withstanding the incredible success and impact of Telemachus, Fénelon "may be the most neglected of the major moral and political thinkers of early modernity."⁴ This neglect has led to the "biggest gap between how he" was considered in his own time and how he "is regarded in our day" (4). Despite his writings in rhetoric, education, literature, art, politics, philosophy, theology and spirituality, there has been comparatively little work on Fénelon in English, and his main renown in the Anglophone world is from some translations of his views on spirituality and occasional discussion of Telemachus. Hanley's purpose is to reconstruct Fénelon's political philosophy and, in so doing, to provide

an overview and introduction that will demonstrate his influence and offer modern political theorists resources for the consideration of pressing issues in our own time (15).

Another of Hanley's critical interventions in The Political Philosophy of Fénelon is his examination of the consistency of Fénelon's moral and political thought across all of his texts. One of the major flaws of Anglophone scholarship on Fénelon is its myopic concentration on Telemachus, to the exclusion of the rich corpus he produced. This myopia is especially regrettable in the case of the Political Memoranda, in which Fénelon planned for a future France with Bourgoigne on the throne.⁵ Inattention to the breadth and interdisciplinarity of Fénelon's writing has led to both a limited understanding of the significance and nature of his thought as a political philosopher and to the oft-cited view that he was an idealist or utopian, rather than a pragmatic and far-sighted thinker on politics. Hanley's evaluation of all the political works—and his edited Moral and Political Writings provides the first translations into English of several—as well as Fénelon's works on rhetoric, education, spirituality, religion, and theology enables him to offer a dynamic and rich view of Fénelon's thought. Hanley's immersion in the totality of Fénelon's writing also enables him to advance three claims in Fénelon scholarship: that all parts of his system can “be understood through the lens of pure love”; that his view on “luxury and grandeur” make him a “radical reactionary” who longed to return to a Biblical Golden Age; and that his political philosophy asserts and reinforces “separate spheres” between political action and spiritual contemplation (16-22).

The picture that Hanley paints of Fénelon is one of a thinker both “moderate and modern” who was a realist rather than an idealist and who was optimistic about humanity's capacity to improve. Extending Saint Augustine's concept of the “two cities,” Fénelon argued that the world could be made less vicious if one was willing to be selfless and make sacrifices rather than simply focusing on self-love (230, 239). The doctrine of “pure love” was, for Fénelon, “incompatible with politics” in that “pure love” centered on “external goods” and a

human glory that was distinct from the divine glory that is “the sole and exclusive object of pure love.” In order to achieve “pure love,” the individual must transcend the material and political world—a world anchored by self-love—in pursuit of true and lasting happiness. Where Fénelon’s employment of pure love within his system might seem to make his writing legible more as theology than as political philosophy, it should be recognized as political philosophy because of Fénelon’s practical acceptance that the ideal of “pure love” is for saints and not rulers. Fénelon understood the world “in its entirety,” of which the political world was only a part. The “best life” would not be found in politics as it required a coercive power to restrain self-love, a need that only encouraged it further, whereas “pure love” forfeited self-love and awakened love through disinterest (198-200, 220). While Fénelon accepted that this view made politics and the “best life” antithetical, both his political system and his education of Bourgonie as a future king emphasized the importance of moral development, drawing deeply from religious imperatives to temper the hubristic tendencies of political leaders. His Platonic belief that “justice in the city is inseparable from justice in the soul of its ruler” required the moderation of the passions (including pleasure) and led him to describe the ideal real-world ruler as possessed of an understanding of the passions that could employ reason to manage his government for the benefit of all his people (117-18).

Even as Hanley presents Catholicism as an integral part of Fénelon’s political philosophy, he emphasizes that Fénelon’s aim was not the advocacy of an idealistic vision of spirituality or the production of saintly rulers. Rather, religion acted as a “transcendent sphere” that both humbled the behavior of political actors and placed leaders below the law (as it and authority were from God) and restrained the destructive and blasphemous self-deification that led to tyranny (“summum malum”). Kings must subordinate their own interests and material glory to the love of their people, as “true glory” and happiness were to be found in a comprehension that their interests were entwined with the people’s through the

promotion of the people's well-being. Fénelon thus sought not to recreate an imagined Golden Age but to apply religion and faith pragmatically, so that Christians (both kings and individuals) could moderate and improve their behavior on earth (135, 142, 148-49, 150, 169-71).

Fénelon's pragmatism is also evident in Hanley's critique of his political economy, another area that is frequently misunderstood, according to Hanley, as is evident in Istvan Hont's "totalitarian" depiction of Bétique and Salente in Telemachus.⁶ By engaging with a wider range of Fénelon's works, including the Examination of Conscience, the Tables de Chaulnes and Spiritual Fragments, Hanley is able to propound a deeper estimation of his economic thought. Hanley identifies three key themes: a desire to monitor opulence and employ moderation, a rejection of "the obsession with growth and expansion central to modern economic thought," and a refutation in the belief that "stable and flourishing economic order could be built on a single dominant mode of production." Tracking these themes, Hanley finds in Fénelon's political economy "[m]oderate commitments to self-sufficiency in wealth, stability in growth, and mixed modes of production" (50-51, 80-81). The interpretation of Fénelon's economic thought thus shifts in Hanley's hands from the perception, held by some modern commentators, of a monomaniacal restriction of luxury and desire intended to undermine Colbert's mercantilism with austere (proto-) socialism, to a perception of Fénelon's system as one built upon temporary state involvement to correct ills that would then give way to the free pursuit of economic self-interest. Hanley's tracking of, and emphasis on, the "moderation" of Fénelon's political economy is a valuable intervention that advances our reading of Fénelon's political and economic thought. It is part of his equally significant description of Fénelon's adherence to "moderation" in general, which is also to be found in his attitude toward kingship, the waging of war, the application of reason, education, law and the public good (27, 96, 106).

There are a few points in The Political Philosophy of Freedom that perhaps could have been addressed in more detail. In his evaluation of Fénelon's view of aristocratic political power, Hanley notes that not only was there "evidence of a quite modern and egalitarian conception of political obligation" but also that the Archbishop was "a conspicuous champion of the aristocracy as an institutional counterweight to monarchy" (134). Consequently, Fénelon wanted to bolster the authority of the aristocracy and representative assemblies to offer "an independent bulwark of power capable of counterbalancing the authority of the king" (134). Hanley asserts that these plans were not a design to "reify" aristocratic power—a claim that would be deemed debatable by a number of scholars—but an attempt to contain executive power. Given the nature of Louis XIV's "absolutist" regime and the work on the relationship between its centralized organization and the exclusion of the ancient nobility of the sword in favour of the nobility of the robe, this assertion requires fuller explanation. Fuller explanation of this claim is also warranted by the fact that Fénelon's later Political Memoranda would contain plans for the future French government under Bourgonne's kingship and would consider the future role of the aristocracy within a reformed state. Such a state could have potentially shifted toward a government that did indeed offer augmented participation in government for the people, as was sought by some reformers around Bourgonne. The monograph could also have benefited from a more direct engagement at times with the wider intellectual context in which Fénelon lived and worked, not only in France but also in Europe.

These rather trifling points aside, The Political Philosophy of Fénelon is an important work that moves Anglophone scholarship on the Archbishop forward some distance. Hanley has provided an incredibly meticulous, thoughtful, adroit, and erudite discussion of Fénelon's political philosophy that draws on a much wider range of Fénelon's writings than previously and that contextualizes them in new and illuminating ways. For those who do not read French

(and for those who do), Hanley's translations in Fénelon. Moral and Political Writings are valuable both as an informative companion pieces to The Political Philosophy of Fénelon and as works to be enjoyed for their own sake. While Fénelon's political career resulted in his exile from the court, this worldly failure encouraged him to "live a life on his own principles," values that deeply informed the later memoranda included in Hanley's new collection of Fénelon's works. Together, Hanley's translations of Fénelon's works and his explanation of them will inspire a new generation of scholars to research the full extent of Fénelon's impact.

Notes

1. Albert Cherel, Fénelon au XVIIIe siècle en France (1715 – 1820): Son prestige – son influence (Paris: Hachette, 1917), and Patrick Riley, "Rousseau, Fénelon, and the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns," The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau, ed. Patrick Riley (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001), 81.
2. On Fénelon's life, see Cardinal Louis François de Bausset, Histoire de Fénelon, 4 vols (Paris: 1850); Jeanne-Lydie Goré, L'itinéraire de Fénelon: humanisme et spiritualité, 2 vols (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1957), and Jacques Le Brun, "Introduction" and notes, Oeuvres I et II (Paris: Gallimard, 1983 - 1997).
3. Hanley divides Fénelon's life into three parts: childhood, his role as a preceptor to the young princes, and his 'political exile' at Cambrai; Hanley, "Introduction," Fénelon. Moral and Political Writings, 1-5.
4. Hanley, The Political Philosophy of Fénelon, 1. All subsequent quotations are to this book and are cited parenthetically.
5. See Andrew Mansfield, "The Burgundy Circle's plans to undermine Louis XIV's 'absolute' state through polysynody and the high nobility," Intellectual History Review, 27: 2 (2017), 223-245.

6. Istvan Hont, Politics in Commercial Society: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2015), 105. Hanley also highlights this description found in Michael Sonenscher, Paul Schuurman and Jean-Michel Racault; see 256, n.2.