A review by Carroll Quigley in The Washington Sunday Star, 24 December 1967, of two books:

1) **WESTERN POLITICAL THOUGHT.**

Volume I: Plato to Augustine,

by Christopher Morris.

Xxxx: Basic Books, 19xx

2) **THE ECONOMIC LIFE OF THE ANCIENT WORLD,**

by Jean-Philippe Levy.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 19xx

"The Classicists' Approach to Western Thought"

WESTERN POLITICAL THOUGHT

Volume I: Plato to Augustine.

By Christopher Morris. 282 pages, with index and notes.

Basic Books. $6.95.

THE ECONOMIC LIFE OF THE ANCIENT WORLD.

By Jean-Philippe Levy. 147 pages, with index and bibliography.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press. $5.

A hundred or even eighty years ago, the classicists sat at the top of the academic world. They dominated higher education and access to it. Even at that time they were narrow, pedantic, and inflexible, smug in their cultural superiority despite their ignorance of science, philosophy, or general history, which hampered their understanding of the real meanings of the ancient writings to which they professed devotion. As a result, the benefits which education could have gained from their knowledge of the ancient languages was
largely lost. Their insistence that this knowledge be an end in itself, rather than a tool to better understanding of the past, made it necessary for education to free itself from their smothering embrace.

Such thoughts are brought to mind by these two volumes, which are sad examples of this old, and clearly not yet extinct, classical outlook. The chief assumptions of that outlook were:

1. The myth of "the Greek miracle," which pretended that Greek culture rose suddenly and dramatically from the innate genius of the Greek people without much contribution from their historic predecessors (an error based on the classicists' ignorance of these predecessors).
2. The belief that the experience of one Greek people, the Athenians, over a very brief period (roughly from 480 to 340 B.C.) was typical, if not identical, with that of all Greeks in all periods (except Sparta).
3. The belief that the Greek writings which survived revealed the outlook of the Greeks as a whole, without any recognition that the reason some of them, such as Xenophon and Plato, survived was just because they DID NOT represent the outlook of the ordinary Greek of their day, but were, in fact, the rebellion against that outlook.
4. The classicists' attribution of ideas were to these reactionary writers (like Plato and Cicero) rather than to the real originators, such as the Sophists, whom classicists despised, maligned, or ignored.

Deals with Plato

The Morris book, written by a fellow of King's College and lecturer in history of Cambridge University, England, is an example of this point of view in its more virulent form. It is the first of three promised volumes on the subject down to Marx and J. S. Mill. After an opening chapter on "The Miraculous Birth of Political Thought," an event which the author attributes to the Greek polis "and with it 'the Greek miracle,' the first jerking of western humanity out of its intellectual rut," the author gets down to his subject with Plato. This is followed by seven more chapters on Aristotle, "From Polis to Cosmopolis," the Stoics and Epicureans, then Rome, two chapters on the church, and a final one on Augustine. There is total ignoring of the Asiatic, Egyptian, Persian, Hebrew, and early Greek contributions to the subject.

If Morris' sins were only those of omission, his book might be used for information on the political thought of classical antiquity, but even on this, presumably the author's special field, his inability even to see the correct questions, let alone the significant relationships, is beyond belief. He makes no effort to tell the reader what were the political ideas of the men and movements he mentions, but is content merely to write down, in no sensible sequence, his random and often mistaken thoughts and reactions to these. The fact that his prejudices on these matters are those of the average triumphant classicist of vintage 1880 does not make these meanderings any more acceptable to any reader today. He misses completely the great stages in the growth of ancient political ideas by which a community based on blood kinship was replaced by one based on religion, and the latter, in turn, by one based on public authority of a relatively secular character, a process which occurred in western Asia centuries before it happened in the Mediterranean Basin in a less elaborate and less instructive form.

Greens and Tribal Origins

Morris does not see how close the Greeks were to tribal origins and to a tribal outlook, in which there could be no distinction of state and society and in which the individual must be totally absorbed in the group, and he seems to be quite unaware that Plato and Aristotle, as political reactionaries, wished to preserve that condition and the polis itself, a century after Pericles saw that the polis was obsolete as a
political organization. The Sophist and Stoic efforts to free the individual from the all-embracing grasp of
the polis and later the imperium are totally misconstrued by Morris. He talks with naïve enthusiasm of the
Greek efforts to bring morality into political rule as if the numerous Egyptian and Hebrew thoughts on this
matter, some of them a thousand years before the Greeks, had never taken place. He neglects the most
basic contribution of the Greeks to politics and to all thinking, their establishment of the rules for thinking in
two-valued logic, and he does not see the dire consequences of this triumph of exaggerated philosophic
realism (in the belief that intellectual categories have real existence). As a result, he misses the whole
meaning of the Sophist discovery of philosophic nominalism, which brought that group into alliance with the
Ionian scientists and the Hippocratic doctors. This alliance, which was destroyed by the subsequent
alliance of Platonism and oligarchy, gave the first great impetus in Greek thought toward individualism and
reliance on observation as the chief source of human knowledge and, by distinguishing nature from
convention, established the idea of natural law and right as superior to the older idea that all power, even
that of the gods, or the state, rested on force or whim (as it still does in Moslem thought).

This volume is full of errors. Morris tells us (p. 42), "All Greek philosophers believed in change, for theirs
was a dynamic rather than a static universe"; this is, of course, the exact contrary of the truth, for the
combination of two-valued logic and philosophic realism made it impossible for the Greeks to deal with
motion, with the consequence that many Greek thinkers from Zeno of Elea, through Plato and the early
Aristotle, denied either the reality or the significance of change, a misconception which dominated Western
cosmology thereafter until Galileo insisted, "But it does move!" Similarly, Morris writes (p. 46), "Socrates
was at least a liberal in the sense the individual before the state," when the "Crito" shows Socrates
prepared to sacrifice an individual life (his own) rather than to oppose the state in what he regards as an
erroneous action.

Defining "Just Man"

Morris tells us (p. 41) that talented children of worker parents in Plato's Republic "should nonetheless
receive a philosophic training," a point which Warner Fite refuted 35 years ago. He also believes that Plato,
in "The Republic," regarded a just man as a "balanced, harmonious, non-lopsided man," when Plato's
whole argument shows the "just" man as a narrow specialist who "minded his own business." Morris' bias
and ignorance is shown in hundreds of slips, such as his calling Democritus "the great Athenian scientist"
(p. 61), when, in fact, Democritus, a widely-travelled resident of Thrace, made but one doubtful visit to
Athens.

Morris' slovenly Scholarship is most evident in what he himself calls (p. 64) "the central argument of 'The
Republic', the parallel which Plato draws between the individual and the state." In that argument, the
individual and the state (the latter, to Plato, identical with society) are both organisms that are real living
entities with dissimilar parts which are not interchangeable. This last characteristic was the vital one for
Plato, since his whole argument was intended to lead to the conclusion that individuals, like organs of a
body, would continue to function in society in the places to which they were born. Naturally Plato could
never have persuaded Thrasymachus of this, because the latter was a nominalist to whom only individuals
were real entities, but Morris says (p. 68) that Thrasymachus "has been made to accept the analogy
between the state and the individual;" and gives a footnote reference to "The Republic" to prove
it. Unfortunately the reference is to Book; II, where Thrasymachus does not appear, and the speaker in
question is Glaucon, a different person. On the preceding page (67) another speech attributed by Morris to
Thrasymachus turns out to be by Adeimantus. Such methods of argument are not cricket, but they show
clearly that Morris' familiarity with his materials is deficient. In fact, a casual check of his footnotes, of which
there are hundreds, shows that they are very unreliable.
Much of this volume is written in this slovenly way, a great pity, for no period in history, since the late 16th century, is in greater need of clarification of political ideas than today, and certainly one of the best ways to clear up such confusions is to go over the paths along which political thought has traveled in the past, especially in antiquity. But in that we would need a more reliable guide than Mr. Morris, despite his high academic position in England.

Levy's "Economic Life of the Ancient World" is in every way much less of a book. Less than half as long; for a larger subject, it is little more than a sketch. Its four chapters deal with the period before Alexander, the Hellenistic era; the Early Empire, and the empire in decay. The first chapter is almost valueless, with no recognition of the basic chronology nor the fundamental geographic facts and economic issues. The other chapters are better, but still mediocre and too brief to explain anything important.

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Please email the editors (editors@carrollquigley.net) with corrections, questions, or if you have other works by Professor Quigley you would like to see posted.