

**W. G. Runciman**

*Great Books, Bad Arguments: Republic, Leviathan, and The Communist Manifesto.*

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This book belongs to an old genre: the broadside against canonical thinkers. Books in this genre—Popper’s *The Open Society and its Enemies* is a well-known example—catalogue the mistakes allegedly made by respected figures, depicting their work as naïve and perhaps dangerous. Runciman examines three classic texts: Plato’s *Republic*, Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, and Marx and Engels’s *Communist Manifesto*. He argues that each makes claims that are ‘at best implausible and at worst demonstrably false’ (2). In particular, each contains a flawed political sociology: ‘a set of related propositions about...how human beings do, or might, or would behave towards one another under specified historical and environmental conditions’ (2). Each book asks about the best way to maintain order and avoid conflict, but according to Runciman, each bases its answer on an erroneous account of what human beings are like. Despite its title, the book says little about the arguments Plato, Hobbes, and Marx and Engels use to support their positions. This is not a book about invalid inferences or logical fallacies. Its focus is on conclusions: particular claims that Runciman thinks are implausible or false. In discussing these claims, Runciman pulls no punches. He approvingly quotes Thrasymachus’s words from the *Republic*, ‘o most naïve’ (16, 110), and on one occasion (76), he refers to Plato’s views as ‘bullshit’.

This is a slim book—fewer than 140 small pages—and its size dictates its approach. The texts under discussion are complex and have been interpreted in many different ways, so it would be helpful to start with an overview of what Runciman takes them to be doing and how their arguments relate to their overall projects. Lacking the space for such overviews, Runciman immediately starts listing mistakes, and for the most part, lists them in piecemeal fashion. He devotes one chapter to each book, sandwiching these chapters between a brief introduction and conclusion. Chapter 2 attacks the political sociology of the *Republic*. The chapter sidesteps some big interpretive questions: it assumes that the *Republic* defends a doctrine, and that Socrates is its spokesman. Runciman also assumes that the *Republic*’s doctrine is political, thereby opposing those, such as Julia Annas, who read it as a primarily ethical work. Runciman finds several implausible claims in the *Republic*. One is Socrates’s insistence that the three parts of the soul correspond to the three parts of the *polis*. Another is the claim that the *polis* ‘must share the “forms and characters” of its citizens’, such that ‘the citizens of a “tyrannical” society are mostly, if not all, tyrannical’ (21). Runciman also attacks the taxonomy of constitutions in Book Eight. This taxonomy, he says, is not exhaustive, since it ignores constitutions (such as Sparta’s) of which Plato must have been aware. It also falsely presents the various constitutions ‘not only as descending in order from good to bad but as succeeding one another in an actual sequence of change’ (40). But history shows that aristocracies are not always followed by timocracies, or timocracies by oligarchies. In

any case, Runciman argues, the *Republic* never satisfactorily answers the challenge issued by Thrasymachus in Book One: why be just? All told, 'Plato's political sociology turns out to be confused in formulation, illogical in exposition, and implausible in application' (39-40).

Chapter 3 turns to *Leviathan*. The main target here is Hobbes's claim that only a commonwealth with an absolute sovereign can avoid social dissolution. Runciman points out that 'the historical record is full of counter-examples' (65) to the claim that divided sovereignty is a recipe for disaster. He also criticizes Hobbes for not considering the reasons divided sovereignty may be an effective route to social stability. People are more loyal to rulers they see as answerable to themselves, so 'the demand that rulers should be answerable to the ruled for how they rule them might actually improve the chances of harmony and order' (81). The sociological facts, Runciman argues, are just the opposite of what Hobbes claims. Cooperation is 'possible in a society without a Hobbesian Sovereign'; disorder 'is not only possible, but under some conditions more likely, in a society with one' (86).

Chapter 4 examines the *Communist Manifesto*, and what Runciman sees as its mistaken claims about the past and the future. Its claims about the past stem from Marx's theory of history, with its 'adherence to a Hegelian presupposition of teleology' and its 'oversimplification' of the historical process that 'preceded the emergence of capitalism' (96). Its claims about the future are its confident but 'falsified' (91) predictions of a proletarian revolution. Runciman argues that these predictions have not merely been disproved by 'unpredictable contingent events' (91); they are undermined by deep flaws in the book's analysis. Marx and Engels, he claims, simply did not imagine that workers would be 'much more concerned to resist their bourgeois employers within the capitalist system than to overturn the capitalist system by a proletarian revolution' (93-4).

It is hard not to admire this book's pluck. A great deal of work on canonical figures deals with technicalities of interest only to specialists. There is a place for lively readings that discuss the big picture in terms a general audience can understand. There is also a place for work that is not afraid to say that a great thinker is wrong. It can be instructive to be provoked, as Plato knew quite well. But I have two reservations about *Great Books, Bad Arguments*. The first concerns its audience. The book's jacket and introduction suggest that Runciman's goal is to explain something: namely, why these books are so admired if their arguments are so bad. He does touch on this issue in the conclusion, where he calls the three books examples of 'optative sociology' (123). They give voice to a powerful wish for social reform, and are 'masterpieces of anger transmuted into hope' (123). But the discussion of optative sociology is barely two pages long, which means that nearly the entire book is a list of supposed mistakes. And who wants to read a list of mistakes? Specialists in Plato, Hobbes, or Marx might, if they are deeply invested in the minutiae of these thinkers' arguments. But this book does not deal with minutiae and is clearly not aimed at specialists. Its audience seems to be much more general: readers who have some familiarity with Plato, Hobbes, and Marx, but who are green enough not to suspect that their ideas might be problematic. Does such an audience exist? Does anyone who reads the works of great thinkers need to be told that they

sometimes make mistakes? Perhaps, but I doubt it.

My second reservation concerns the book's assumptions. Despite its title, this book is not very reflective about what it means for an argument to be bad, or for a book to be great. This is partly a function of its size: there is no room for discussions of method or metaphilosophy. At the book's heart, however, is a view of argument that is much more controversial than its author seems to think. Runciman states this view at the start of the book: if a philosopher is serious, then 'he wants to persuade his readers that certain propositions in which he firmly believes are true' (2). The philosopher's writings may contain all sorts of devices and tropes, but these 'have failed in their purpose if the propositions they purport to endorse are at best implausible and at worst demonstrably false' (2). This view of argument is unduly narrow, in several ways. First, even when philosophers are trying to convince their readers of the truth of some proposition, they have more than one way of doing so. Runciman considers only the most direct: explicit chains of statements that have the proposition in question as their conclusion. As important as this strategy is, it is far from the only one. Consider the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, or the *Philosophical Investigations*, or the *Guide for the Perplexed*. All of these books seek to convince their readers to accept certain propositions. Only rarely, however, can readers point to explicit arguments of which the propositions in question are the conclusions. The texts do argue, but in subtle and indirect ways. Beyond that, we should not simply assume that arguments are nothing but attempts to convince someone of the truth of a proposition. Other views of argument are possible. For example, in *The Hermeneutics of Original Argument* (Northwestern U.P., 1998), P. Christopher Smith argues convincingly that for much of the history of philosophy, argument was understood more broadly: as any use of reasons to change an audience's way of seeing things and move them to action. Recent hermeneutical philosophy has resurrected this understanding of argument. This is not to say that Smith's view is obviously right. But it should be acknowledged as an option.

What I am suggesting is that the book's conclusions are not adequately supported by its arguments. If we share Runciman's view of argument, this is a fatal flaw. If, however, we think that a book's merit can depend on more than the apparent truth or falsity of its conclusions, we will be less worried. We may even think that a book can succeed precisely because it spurs us to reflect on questions it does not explicitly answer. In that respect, Runciman's book is a success—though probably not in ways its author intended.

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