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Review of Political Theory for Mortals: Shades of Justice, Images of Death

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Political Theory for Mortals: Shades of Justice, Images of Death. By John E. Seery. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996. Pp. viii, 230. \$39.95 cloth, \$16.95 paper.)

Daring to go where plenty of mortals have gone before him, John Seery sets out to explore death. The resulting volume, more episodic than sustained, is brash, even feverishly energetic, as though Seery is desperately cheery about his chosen topic. This book is by turns witty and irritating, its interesting conjectures and lines of argument intimately mixed up with what this stodgy reader saw as frivolous posturing. It's easy to lampoon Seery's prose style; in fact, all one needs to do is quote it. Socrates, we learn, is "a blowhard buffoon," or at least readers might reasonably see him that way (45). Scripture, Seery complains, "seems maddeningly inscrutable on adjudicating the \$64,000 question, namely whether Jesus's kingship is more 'human' (and thus worldly) than 'divine' (and thus otherworldly)" (87). It's also easy to lampoon his self-indulgence or wonder about Californian pedagogy: "I sometimes point out to my students that they have never seen or observed infinity though they have been led to believe in this invisible concept" (146).

But it would be a mistake to reject this volume out of hand. After an opening erudite review of what sort of presence and absence death has been in political

theory, Seery offers four essays. Studies of Plato, Jesus, and Donna Haraway don't quite prepare the ground for the concluding chapter, a riposte to John Rawls.

Seery is the author of one volume on irony and the coeditor of another one. He hasn't forsworn his earlier interests. In fact, much of the discussion here looks like outtakes from that earlier work. His central concern in reading Plato seems to be to rescue Plato from the charge that he sought to compress Socrates' inescapably ironic stances into something pedantic or schematic. Plato, too, insists Seery, was a thoroughgoing ironist. Seery's understanding of irony might be described as generously broad; it might also be described as lacking structure. Anything resembling wit, mischief, what recently has been described as a rhetoric of self-erasure, maybe even plain obscurity, is fair game for him. Distancing himself from Straussians, Seery holds nonetheless that Plato's concern is not to paint a portrait of the just city. At a key moment (63–64), he suggests that the parable of the cave is supposed to jolt the reader into thinking about what she is doing in peering at the letters of Plato's own text, and that that unhappy experience in turn is supposed to establish a dialogic relationship of sorts between living reader and long-dead author. (How the long-dead author participates in that dialogue is not entirely clear.) Maybe justice isn't possible after all, but the quest for it remains invigorating and noble.

Seery's account of Jesus isn't notable for its piety. Oddly defensive about his right to explore this terrain (82–85), Seery finds much to admire in Norman O. Brown and Friedrich Nietzsche, little to pay attention to in the writings of the church fathers. His exquisitely up-to-date Jesus is wrapped up in masculine gender anxieties about giving birth; his followers are immersed in similar anxieties about circumcision. Seery thinks his reading of Jesus will help us find our way to a properly chastened understanding of democracy, though his argument for this view is terse, even peremptory.

The chapter on Haraway, whose work I much admire, isn't nearly as good as the others. Seery enjoys imagining Haraway herself as Mary Shelley and as pop star Madonna, but he seems to me carried away with himself: the analogies don't illuminate much.

Finally, Seery proposes that instead of imagining an original position, theorists of justice should consider the Final Position of death. Past the giggles generated by the initial inversion, there isn't enough on offer here to cash out the suggestion. Seery tells us that "shades require of one another an explanation and accounting for all sorts of erstwhile events and social arrangements" (161). (But maybe we should think that only the recently deceased give a damn, and their elders settle into serene apathy.) Despite his criticisms of Habermas, they get to talk a very long time about more or less whatever they'd like. The dubious pleasures of such sustained talkfests aside, the model is hopelessly underdetermined: without further stories about their motivations, their interests, and the like, we have no clue what they'd say or why it matters.

Seery opens his volume with a stinging attack on academic political theorists as unimaginative timeservers. An angry middle-aged man, he takes solace: “I’ve come to realize that I write, and write cheerfully, for the dead” (6). Perhaps his book was assigned to the wrong sort of reviewer.

Don Herzog, *University of Michigan*