Book review

Mark A. Menaldo, *Leadership and Transformative Ambition in International Relations* (Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA, USA 2013) 200 pp.

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Leadership and Transformative Ambition in International Relations is a work whose substance mirrors its name: Mark Menaldo, Assistant Professor of Political Science at Texas A&M International University, seeks with considerable ambition to transform reigning categories of international relations theory. The work is replete with erudite discussion of seemingly disconnected periods in international affairs, and it weaves a nuanced exegesis of Aristotelian moral thought through a dense set of examples ranging from the Pericles of Ancient Athens to Barack Obama of the modern moment. In general, the work succeeds in its ambitious task and is an excellent addition to the literature on International Relations and Leadership Studies.

Menaldo's central thesis can be summarized as follows: dominant approaches to the role of leaders in the international arena fall under the influence either of realism, strategic considerations of self-interest, or psychological reductionism. Each approach, Menaldo sets forth cogently, necessarily implies that the actions of a national leader are reducible to mere functions of forces outside the leader's self-conscious, self-controlled, and purposive expression of the values that particular leader holds dear, values the leader affirms upon a genuine deliberation about how the world *should* be. Such an account is unfaithful to the historical record, he argues, and is equally unfaithful to the potential a rare breed of future leaders will have to transform domestic and international institutions, politics, and policies.

The realist sees the global stage as a ceaseless contest among states to ensure their survival. The leader on this view is compelled by the anarchic world order always to advance the interests of the state he serves. The theorist of strategic self-interest sees the leader as necessarily concerned first and foremost with his own individual survival as a power holder and the maintenance of the coalitions that keep him ensconced as the national ruler. The psychological theorist holds that the leader is driven by his in-dwelling neuroses, irrational passions, or subconscious impulses, factors that are shaped in his early life and which the leader can never fully overcome by powers of self-critique, self-assessment, and self-improvement.

Menaldo argues that Otto von Bismarck shows how a leader often thought to be a realist can actually be seen as one who transcends a narrow focus on the state's survival and competitive advancement in the anarchic global arena: Bismarck on Menaldo's reading acted not as a steward of Prussia's power but as a grand amoral artist who sought to impress upon the indifferent tableau of a valueless nature his magnificent talent for high stakes gamesmanship. It's a breathtaking reading. The many wars

with external foes and the bitter *Kulturkampf* with internal ones were, ultimately, to no end whatsoever but to Bismarck's satisfaction of his considered judgment about himself, a judgment that he was special – that he was specially talented in the strategic calculations of the political game – and that his distinctiveness deserved to be expressed, no matter what the price. Breathtaking, but also question-begging. Was Bismarck really a man who held no ultimate attachment to any values – beyond the value of utilizing his own amazing talents – not even the values of the Prussian way of life that he was immersed in from birth? Was Prussia really a matter of indifference for Bismarck? Menaldo says Bismarck was indifferent to ideology and values, but it seems on this reading that he might best be viewed as someone intending to vindicate the value of humanity per se – showing it capable, in rare instances, of great acts, in his case, acts of exceptional shrewdness and calculative brilliance: animals could never express such a calculated cunning as this singular Chancellor from Schonhausen. In any case, *pace* the author's account, one suspects that Kissinger's interpretation of Bismarck as the arch-realist rings more cogently.

More persuasively, Menaldo next critiques the strategic theory of political self-interest. This approach maintains that leaders ultimately submit to the demands necessary for maintaining themselves in positions of political power. This is not to say that Menaldo claims that leaders are typically indifferent to maintaining power; that's an implausible view of political reality. Instead, Menaldo argues that some truly exceptional rulers – what Machiavelli calls the greats – can at one and the same time concern themselves with political survival and create new modes and orders: some leaders can imagine their survival as survival in a transformed political system. Crucially for Menaldo, they can imagine themselves as surviving in a new system, one they themselves devise, even when they could, by their talents and acumen, ensure readily their survival in the existing mode of power. Mere survival therefore does not dictate that they aspire to a new political system: they seek to survive in new modes and orders because they genuinely think the new structures they intend to birth are superior to the systems they seek to supplant. Additionally, some leaders can reflect on how future generations may well agree that the new order that they give rise to is better than what had gone before; thus, a certain kind of leader can be stimulated to great founding acts by contemplation of his lasting fame and treasured memory. Menaldo's arguments here inspire confidence in the assessments of that Florentine writer, Machiavelli, whose advice to princes won for himself an undying fame among political and social theorists.

The next chapter sees Menaldo critiquing the psychological reductionism that has at times been especially popular in international relations literature. This approach sees great leaders as driven by subconscious drives, passions, and impulses. Although it may ultimately be impossible to prove or disprove, Menaldo gives strong reasons for concluding that some leaders master their impulses and self-consciously channel and redirect their underlying passions, all in the service of objectives they genuinely view as good for their country and the world at large. Menaldo raises a wealth of doubt-inducing questions about psychological reductionism and its failure to see at least some leaders as graced with impressive powers of self-mastery, and possessed of genuine convictions, born of mature deliberation, about what's good for the human condition. Woodrow Wilson serves as his case study. Some have seen Wilson's stern, unyielding, and moralistic leadership as a function of his insecurities born of a Freudian fear of an awe-inspiring father. Menaldo will have little of this: Wilson is depicted as a rational actor suffused with a firm commitment to principle and a dedication to better the human species. Although one might wish for a fuller treatment of

Wilson's religious convictions, which I believe would bolster his case here, the argument convincingly calls into question a reductionism that robs at least some great men of the power to form convictions to which they see themselves in good conscience bound to uphold free from compromise.

In the following chapter Menaldo presents his developed argument about Aristotelian moral psychology. He argues fruitfully from careful readings of the corpus Aristotelicum that the Philosopher has a nuanced view of human power. Some individuals can achieve the heights of ethical virtue, and they can crown their achievement with a proper sense of their own ethical worth. This is the core concept of magnanimity. Its defining features are that the ethical agent has mastered his pre-rational passions, is capable of deliberation aimed at his conception of the ethical telos, and his adroitness is sufficient to realize his objectives; further, the agent has engaged in in-depth introspection and knows that he has won through hard work a level of virtue superior to the common person. Such singular individuals will not readily seek to engage in everyday political debates about humdrum public management matters; they tend to see ordinary politics as beneath their dignity. On rare occasions, however, when momentous events demand superior virtue, the *spoudaios* who has garlanded his *phronesis* with *megalopsuchia* can rise to meet the community's needs: to paraphrase William Yancey, a great man can meet his momentous hour. Menaldo notes the difficulties that Aristotle's work presents for understanding the motivation that a man who sees himself as so much above his fellow citizens would have to serve the wishes of the *hoi polloi*; but the truly virtuous person, in Aristotle's view, will be driven by his sense of justice to operate within the rule of law to achieve power sufficient to tackle the pressing affairs, while not undermining the very system he seeks to save or to serve.

This section does not leave the reader without at least some puzzlement. Menaldo's example of the magnanimous person is Charles de Gaulle, although it is not clear that the telos that Menaldo sees as inspiring de Gaulle's great actions is truly Aristotelian: de Gaulle is depicted as seeking grandeur, which might be inconsistent with a full commitment to the rule of law. A person with de Gaulle's ambition for national grandeur might well be driven to skirt moral and political norms.

However, the thinness of the ethical concept that can inspire so-called transformative leaders is addressed squarely in the concluding chapters on Pericles. Pericles is depicted as the paradigm of a self-controlled person who deploys the full measure of his talent to transform the domestic and international arenas so they better accord with the leader's sense of what would make his community better. Detailed descriptions of the Periclean period are presented and a cogent display of a powerful personage is set before the reader. However, the goal to which Pericles was committed is in fact remarkably thin in Menaldo's reading: it is to convince Athens that their society has made them daring individuals and that they should affirm and celebrate this personality trait that defines Athenian civic spirit. Affirming Athenian daring is the telos for the Attic leader. To his credit, Menaldo recognizes that with so gossamer a conception of the moral good, transformative leaders can often be forces of social and political destruction and not agents of positive reform. Indeed, he concedes that 'I do not offer an ethics of transformative ambition,' a task 'better addressed by moral philosophers' (p. 175). Instead, his goal is to open space for the appreciation of the role of great personages in international relations theory, a task he succeeds in admirably.

A striking lacuna, however, is Menaldo's absence of any reference to transformative leaders animated by genuine religious conviction, understood as a reflexive, reasoned, and self-conscious dedication to the love of God and neighbor. We saw the real possibility

of this in assessing the life and deeds of Wilson. In fact, Niccolò Machiavelli – whom Menaldo seems highly to admire – has had recent attention paid to his thoughts on the role of genuine faith in the acts of the patriotic ruler, the ruler intending the best for his fatherland. (See Maurizio Viroli's 2010 work *Machiavelli's God*.) A parallel treatment of religion's role in the hearts and minds of a transformative leader could, I believe, aid the author's case. Despite this and other small deficiencies, the work is a substantial and very welcome contribution to Leadership Studies and International Relations.

REFERENCE

Viroli, Maurizio (2010), *Machiavelli's God*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.