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Peels, R.

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## *Book Reviews*



Andreas Kinning, *De onzichtbare Maat: Archeologie van goed en kwaad*. Prometheus, Amsterdam, 2020. 639 pages. ISBN 9789035138797.

Few books that are published these days are as ambitious in scope as this volume. Kinning attempts to understand how we, Western democracies in 2021, ended up where we are, where and why things went wrong, and how we can return to a morally and intellectually flourishing society. The main message is as simple as it is straightforward: things went wrong in the Enlightenment and in Romanticism, and we should return to the blissful synthesis of Greek thought and Christianity as we find it in the early church fathers until the late Middle Ages, in Augustine and Thomas Aquinas in particular. Kinning calls this synthesis the “European Tradition.” Things went wrong—he calls it a “second fall”—when modernity arrived on the stage. The book is a 600-page-long rejection of modernity and a plea to return to the European Tradition.

This tradition, according to Kinning, says that there is an invisible Measure out there in the world. Not man or humankind is the measure of all things, but God or a more abstract Measure—e.g., eternal ideas—that objectively exists, independently of us. No one has influenced this tradition more than Plato, especially with his idea that there are eternal *ideas* that are eternal *ideals*—of man, courage, goodness, beauty, triangle, rationality, and so on. We are merely instantiations of these more-general ideas. What counts is not the individual but the species, the community. We are plagued by our passions and affections, our fallen state. And that means that reason should rule over our earthly desires.

Kinning contrasts this European Tradition with contemporary dominant ideologies. Among them are unfettered market capitalism, which interprets the social world entirely in terms of producers and consumers, and hedonism, which says that a happy and fulfilling life is one in which you have what you want: food, drink, clothes, sex, and entertainment. He is, of course, right that these are dominant worldviews and ideologies in our time. At the same time,

religious movements like orthodox Christianity and orthodox Islam are still influential in Western Europe, the latter increasingly so. In addition, there are various secular movements that also reject ideologies like capitalism and hedonism.

I am on the fence about this book. On the one hand, there is much that I highly value about it. I admire its ambitious scope: Kinningg doesn't fall into the trap that many an academic falls into these days, namely, that of losing oneself in historical or systematic details while forgetting or not daring to address the big picture. The book looks at the history of Western civilization and asks normative questions: Where are we standing, where should we be heading? I value its consistent, somewhat Protestant adage of returning time and again *ad fontes*: we should first and foremost read Plato, the pre-Socratic philosophers, Aquinas, Bacon, Hobbes, and all leading thinkers themselves, and only then read secondary literature. Kinningg is just right about that. The basic metaphysical-normative picture of the world that the book sketches also deeply resonates with me: there is an invisible Measure out there in the world (and in God) about what the good life is, what is righteous, what is beautiful, and what is worth living for, and we should seek to lead a life of that kind rather than seeking a nonexistent true self or merely the satisfaction of our carnal desires. Its main line of thought goes against current neoliberal hedonistic thought and feeling, and I laud the author for his intellectual courage in firmly rejecting what so many in our days take for granted. He also rightly debunks many a modern myth about the past, such as the idea that the use of reason was distinctive of the Enlightenment. If there ever was any movement that excelled in using reason, it was, of course, Greek philosophy and medieval Christian Scholastics. What is at most distinctive of the Enlightenment is the use of *technical* and *instrumental reason*.

On the other hand, the book has some serious deficiencies. First and foremost, its pictures of Greek philosophy, Christianity, the Enlightenment, and Romanticism are all monolithic and stereotypical. Little attention—and often, none at all—is paid to the many shapes and sizes, colors and nuances in each of these movements. Take Kinningg's depicting of the Enlightenment. He boldly claims that it is based on an utter rejection of the European Tradition. Man is seen as a being that is entirely reducible to his desires, and life is understood in terms of maximizing utility. This may be true for Thomas Hobbes, and it might also be true for some of the founders of economic theory, such as Adam Smith, and for many French materialist thinkers, like the composers of the eighteenth-century *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*. However, it seems clearly false for influential figures like Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, Reid, Pascal, and many others. Kinningg takes a

single idea from a couple of thinkers and then generalizes that to an entire movement. A little bit of more careful reading in the oeuvres of other thinkers would have shown him how untenable that approach is. The Greek tradition is similarly painted rather monolithically, as if all Greek thinkers were rationalists like Plato and Aristotle. Obviously, there were also hedonistic thinkers, such as the Epicureans, who advocated the pursuit of pleasure and happiness, and even reductionistic materialist thinkers, such as Democritus.

Particularly problematic is Kinneging's failure to realize that, while there was indeed something of a synthesis between Christianity and Greek thinking, on many issues there was actually also a deep *division* between the two, as well as a *radical reform of* Greek philosophy by early and medieval Christian theologians and philosophers. Here are a couple of points on which Christianity drastically diverges from and actually distanced itself from mainstream Greek philosophy. The world has not been around eternally: it has been created at a specific point in time (the point at which time began)—only God is eternal. The body and the material world are as such good; there is nothing wrong with matter or flesh or sexuality. Only our fallen state corrupts matter. God will in the eschaton create a new material world in which we will live. The supremely important thing in life is not something abstract—a collection of ideas or the *telos* of things—but something personal: God himself. There are certain things that can be known about the transcendent realm by way of reason, but the most important things can only be known by way of revelation. Universality is found not in abstraction but in particularity, namely, in God's relation and history with Israel and the person of Jesus Christ. We can and should be redeemed not by reason or by trying to reach the noumenal realm but by clinging to Christ, who will redeem us; we cannot redeem ourselves. All humans are equal because they are created in the image of God—man and woman, free people and slaves. The list can easily be extended. On each of these points, Christianity has rejected mainstream Greek philosophy. The synthesis, which indeed came about, arose partly because Christianity replaced numerous ideas and orientations with different ones. The fact that Kinneging just looks away from any contradictions and tensions between Christian and Greek thought indicates that he has created a mold that he uses to understand these movements rather than letting them speak for themselves.

I won't say much on appendix 1, in which Kinneging briefly argues that the historical sources of Christianity don't warrant beyond reasonable doubt any belief concerning the historicity of Moses and Jesus Christ. It's simply an affront to the entire academic fields of Old and New Testament studies. I find it hard to see what would even motivate him to include the appendix, as it is not relevant to the book's message. Let me leave it at that.

There is something somber and complaining about the book: people hardly know Goethe's *Zauberlehrling* (24); universities have many intelligent people, even experts, but hardly any intellectuals (48); people should write less and read more (51); most of what has been written about the Enlightenment excels in lack of insight (52)—the list is endless. I understand the author's frustration with much contemporary empty culture, and it should be dismantled as such. Yet, it might have been wiser to seek a more positive tone and provide reasons for hope. An important characteristic of Christianity, the worldview he admires more than any other, is that it offers hope in a fallen world and that it is full of joy. Something of that attitude and disposition in life would have harmed neither the book nor its author.

*Rik Peels*

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities; Faculty of Religion and  
Theology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands  
*h.d.peels@vu.nl*