

Book Review: The Forum and the Tower

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Introduction

There are few books on the subject of political theory quite as intriguing as Mary Ann Glendon's, *The Forum and the Tower: How Scholars and Politicians have Imagined the World, from Plato to Eleanor Roosevelt* in its analysis of the dichotomy between philosophers and statesmen. Much can be learned from both those that philosophized about grand political concepts, and those who practiced law and government. In fact, according to Glendon in the opening words of this book,

For as long as there have been governments and people to study them, statespersons and scholars have pondered the relative merits of life in the public forum and life in the ivory tower—the different skills required, the temperaments suited for one or the other way of life, and the relationship of the study of politics to its practice.¹

It is around these two different, but surprisingly related schools of thought, from which the main issue is formulated and addressed. Glendon, when talking of the famous Roman statesman and philosopher, Cicero, said, "...he cautioned [philosophers] that if they put their talents at the service of the polity, they must learn what the wise statesman knows: how to operate within the limits of the possible."² Simply put, Glendon shows the reader ideas of both the political philosopher as well as how statesmen hold their own value in the realm of politics and government.

Summary

The driving purpose of this book is to define the importance of those who participate in the "forum" and those who find themselves in the "tower." The "forum" refers to the realm of politics and governance and finds its grounding in the day-to-day challenges of reality. On the other side, the "tower" is symbolic of the philosophers and those who are captivated by the grand concepts of theory and idealism. Thus, the title of the book, *The Forum and the Tower*, refers to the necessary union of both vocations. Glendon conveys this union via a series of essays on notable political philosophers and politicians, beginning with Plato and concluding with Eleanor Roosevelt and Charles Malik. Each chapter discusses one or more providing the reader with a summary of their political or philosophical careers, what their worldviews were, and how they were formed. Most of these figures exhibited a preference or a propensity toward either the "forum" or the "tower." Some, however, symbolize the perfect union between the two, while others learned to appreciate the view that they once rejected. In addition to this, very few of these figures are similar in their thinking and beliefs. Glendon showcases a diverse collection of thinkers whether it be the realistic Locke or the idealistic Rousseau. Despite this, each figure adds in their own way to the tumultuous realm of political theory.

¹ M. A. Glendon, *The Forum and the Tower: How Scholars and Politicians Have Imagined the World, from Plato to Eleanor Roosevelt* (Oxford University Press, 2011), IX.

² *Ibid.*, XI.

Critique

For the reader, Glendon's purpose and reasoning is clearly conveyed. In every chapter, despite the varying opinions of the statesmen or philosophers being discussed, the idea of the "forum" and the "tower" are consistently highlighted. Displaying the humanity of each person, showing their reasoning behind their ideas and the driving forces that inspired them. Additionally, each chapter leads into the next as the author consistently correlates each figure with the previous one, such as describing how many were the influences of those that came after them. Finally, by the end of the book, the reader gains an understanding of the importance of both the idealism of philosophy and the realism of statecraft.

Personal Response

Given the summary and brief critique of the focus of this book, an in-depth analysis of the content and reasoning behind it is necessary. Glendon exhibits the purpose of this book in a very ingenious manner through the analysis of each philosopher and statesman. Despite the personal worldview figure, the author finds a way to show the reader how one way of thinking cannot exist without the other and how both must temper one another. Perhaps the best example of this is found in the chapter on Plato. In a discussion on Plato's last great work, *The Laws*, Glendon writes the following:

In fact, the regime outlined in the *The Laws*—with its checks and balances, private property, child-raising families, rights for women, and condemnation of homosexuality—is so different from the ideal polity of *The Republic* that some scholars have doubted the authenticity of the later work. But most, more plausibly, conclude that the Stranger is as close as we get to the voice of Plato himself, a Plato nearing the end of his journey through life, an old philosopher making one last attempt to advise princes, this time through written word.³

This quote refers to how Plato's *The Republic* is a much more idealistic book than that of *The Laws*, which is far more realistic and aware of the tumultuous nature of politics and governance. It is known that Plato was interested in politics, especially as he once desired to pursue a career in that realm.⁴ However, Plato was a very "tower-minded" philosopher, and Glendon expertly displays his possible transition into appreciating the realism of the "forum."

Realism and Idealism are not the only philosophies that are on exhibit in this book. Glendon also brilliantly conveys the clash between liberty and submission. On the side of liberty was the great English statesman Edward Coke. In fact, Glendon describes Coke as having once gotten into an argument with King James I over a matter of the law, in which Coke recited the Latin saying, "*quod Rex non debet esse sub homine sed sub Deo et lege*," which claimed that the King, while not under any man, was in fact under both God and the law.⁵ Additionally, Glendon also quotes Coke speaking of the importance of Parliament:

The Privileges of this House is the nurse and life of all of our laws, the subject's best inheritance. If my sovereign will not allow me my inheritance, I must fly to

³ Ibid., 16.

⁴ Ibid., 9.

⁵ Ibid., 82.

Magna Charta and entreat explanation of his Majesty. Magna Charta is called...the Charter of Liberty because it maketh freemen. When the King says he cannot allow our liberties of right, this strikes at the root. We serve here for thousands and tens of thousands.⁶

On side of submission to the King stood the philosopher Thomas Hobbes. According to Glendon, Hobbes was a spirited critic of Coke's view of law and rights.⁷ In fact, in his work *The Leviathan*, Hobbes claims that in order to have a good government, the people must submit to a King who wields absolute sovereignty.⁸ Perhaps the most significant difference between these two is that Coke actually served in the forum while maintaining his tower-like ideas on liberty and rights, while Hobbes remained exclusively in the tower. This contrast is but one example of how Glendon masterfully stresses the necessity of both the tower and the forum.

Conclusion

Mary Ann Glendon's *The Forum and the Tower: How Scholars and Politicians have Imagined the World, from Plato to Eleanor Roosevelt* is an intellectual goldmine for the reader that is fascinated by political theory. Through the analysis of many thinkers, the author successfully brings the often-opposing schools of practical politics and idealistic philosophy and unifies them in equal value. Glendon ultimately communicates to the reader that one must not stand firmly in the tower or the forum but rather apply both to their own political theory.

⁶ Ibid., 83.

⁷ Ibid., 86.

⁸ Ibid., 87.

Bibliography

Glendon, M. A. *The Forum and the Tower: How scholars and politicians have imagined the world, from Plato to Eleanor Roosevelt*. Oxford University Press, 2011.