The final way of seeing Pangle’s position and its problems is in his final chapter entitled “Kierkegaard’s Challenge,” a confrontation with Kierkegaard’s account of the binding of Isaac as presented in Fear and Trembling. Pangle regards Kierkegaard’s presentation of the “knight of faith,” i.e., Abraham on Mt. Moriah, as the exemplar of the religious alternative he rejects. But his reading of Kierkegaard is limited and his response unconvincing. Pangle has confronted Kierkegaard only through Fear and Trembling, a work that presupposes the foundational critique of the sufficiency of philosophy in Philosophical Fragments (and its completion in the Concluding Unscientific Postscript). For Kierkegaard, all human knowing is suspect or limited precisely because we cannot obtain certainty within the limits of creation. The foundation of complete knowing is incarnational. The eternal becomes temporal out of pure love, and the human knower finds himself “grasped” by the eternal in a moment of existential recognition. After such a moment, for Kierkegaard, Abraham’s response becomes entirely comprehensible as an absolute trust in God, whom one experiences as trustworthy.

Pangle rejects the Abrahamic position without confronting the epistemic teaching that Kierkegaard presents as a means to comprehend it. His retort is simply to assert that the binding is absurd to philosophy. Pangle’s response amounts to an enlightenment demand for “evidence” (his word) that any believer has actually followed Kierkegaard’s absolute faith. The demand is pointless. Believers recognize such a demand as one that fails to acknowledge the corruption at the heart of everything human. Pangle’s follow-up is merely ad hominum: since Kierkegaard himself did not fully live up to his teaching, we may reject what he taught. Pangle’s position is equivalent to the claim that since Christians do not completely live the life they proclaim, their proclamation of truth may be rejected. One could also say that since we have no evidence that anyone has ever lived the completely Socratic life, the teaching of Socrates may be ignored.

In the end, Pangle misses the most crucial question. This is the question that philosophy itself must ignore in its own questioning but which the Bible presents to us fully. The first question in the Bible is not humankind’s question about God or Creation. Rather, it is God’s question to man, to Adam just after he has sinned: “Where are you?” Faith’s answer, like Abraham’s, is “Here I am.” Such an answer is, perhaps, the beginning of the wisdom that all of us—philosophers or not—seek.

excoriator of “Behemoth University” and much of modern education. Magazines, daily newspapers, and the Internet are filled with discussions of neoconservatism, with often abstruse and half-digested reflections on neoconservatism’s relationship to Leo Strauss or Carl Schmitt. Most strangely of all, perhaps, the New York Times has named a reporter whose “beat” will be American conservatives and their world. This attention has been inspired and capped by an avowedly conservative administration in the White House. Indeed, the attention devoted to conservative ideas today rivals anything in the history of the American conservative movement, including the Reagan years.

In one sense, perhaps, such attention may be taken as a sign of health. Yet conservatives themselves are ill at ease with the direction and legacy of the Right. A recent article in the Washington Times, for example, quoted a number of prominent conservatives, such as Phyllis Schlafly and Donald Devine, expressing dismay that despite years in power, conservatives have not achieved their central goal of rolling back government and preserving local freedoms. The ongoing war in Iraq has only intensified conservative self-examination. Some conservatives have defended an activist foreign policy as legitimately conservative and a necessary response to the terrorist threat. Others see in policies such as the pre-emption doctrine just another excuse for government power to expand, and they invoke George Washington’s admonition against foreign entanglements.

These current controversies demonstrate the influence of two approaches that have dominated thinking about conservatism for the last five decades. On the one hand, there is “the movement,” the congeries of think tanks, publications, institutes, annual award dinners, activists, and public intellectuals that put Barry Goldwater on the political map and Ronald Reagan in the White House. On the other hand, there are the academics who have examined conservatism as a sociological or political phenomenon. There has been a small but steady stream of such academic work about American conservatism since its emergence in the 1940s and 1950s. The conservative “movement” has treated this scholarship with a benign neglect, which is partially justified: most of this work assumes that conservatism is not a coherent body of thought, not really a “legitimate” political orientation. Even after several decades, the two worlds rarely meet.

Both approaches arguably began in the same year. In 1953, Russell Kirk published his ground-breaking book The Conservative Mind and restored the Western conservative tradition to American culture. At the same time, Karl Mannheim wrote an essay arguing that conservatism was merely a reaction against liberalism that came into existence only in the face of massive social change; once a period of change ended, conservatism disappeared. Mannheim inaugurated a sociological analysis of conservatism that operated on the assumption that conservatism had no core beliefs; it was an unthinking reaction and a potential danger to the social order. Writers like Richard Hofstadter could write in the 1960s with a straight face that conservatism was simply a psychological disorder arising from status anxiety.

The Mannheim/Hofstadter tradition is not ancient history: in 2003, even after the Reagan Revolution and the emergence of new conservative media, researchers at the University of California at Berkeley could still report that political conservatives are defined by fear and aggression, “terror management” issues, and that Reagan shares a psychological profile with Hitler and Mussolini. This gap in understanding between the way conservatives have seen themselves and how academics see them helps to explain how
it is that conservatives can consider themselves forever outcast from American society, yet at the same time liberals can treat neoconservatives as a threat to the Republic.

These two collections continue that dichotomy. Scotchie, an occasional contributor to the paleoconservative magazine *The American Conservative* whose previous books include a study of Richard Weaver, has collected a representative sampling of paleoconservative writing. He is clearly a partisan in the conservative wars; all has been *Sturm und Drang* since the 1970s, with various conservative factions wrestling for control of “the movement” and for the soul of conservatism. Schneider, a professor of history at Emporia State University, on the other hand, is firmly in the Mannheim camp. He sees conservatism as a potent political force, but without much internal substance. He writes that conservatism is a “remarkable protean concept—conservatives have altered their ideas, have changed their policies, and have changed their perspective over the course of their movement’s history. Whither it goes in the next century is anyone’s guess.” In other words, conservatism is a sociological or political phenomenon, but not a substantive intellectual one. He keeps in line with his scholarly neutrality, Schneider is generally indifferent to the issues that have spilled gallons of conservative ink, such as who is a “real” conservative.

The term paleoconservative arose in the late 1980s to describe a loosely organized school of thought then emerging on the Right. Scotchie describes the paleo-world view as depicting “a grand battle royale waged between a mostly rural and small-town Middle America and their Washington-Manhattan-Hollywood tormenters.” This battle has included skirmishes with other conservatives. These “conservative wars” crested in the mid-1980s, but resurfaced after September 11, 2001, over issues of immigration, foreign policy, and national identity. Both Schneider and Scotchie recount the controversies: fifty years ago, the debate over the John Birchers; thirty years ago, the arrival of the neoconservatives; twenty years ago, the famous meeting of the Philadelphia Society that made public the Great Schism between the paleoconservatives and neoconservatives; a dozen years ago, the speech of Patrick J. Buchanan at the Republican National Convention; and so on, until today.

Scotchie tries to demonstrate continuity between the ideas of the paleoconservatives and those of a group of writers, politicians, and intellectuals known as the Old Right. While there are some similarities, the argument ultimately fails to persuade. The traditionalists of the 1930s and 1940s, even into the 1950s, were born into a particular tradition which they saw slipping away and which they wished to preserve. Russell Kirk, for example, stoutly defended the Depression-era Michigan of his youth against the left-wing revisionists and urban planners.

To read someone like Garet Garrett, the lead editorial writer of *The Saturday Evening Post* who defended an America of little regulation and maximum liberty, is to enter an America that is no more. The world the paleos wish to substitute for the modern liberal state is, while better than that alternative, still not completely satisfactory. Samuel Francis, for example, was writing in the 1990s of the “Middle American Radical,” not a category that would have appealed to Kirk or others on the Old Right. While provocative and at times prescient, the cultural solutions they propose are based in a tradition of thought beginning with thinkers like Gaetano Mosca or Max Weber rather than those to whom traditionalists like Kirk looked for guidance.

Schneider’s *Conservatism* includes forty selections organized in ten sections, such as “Traditionalism,” “The Plunge into...
Politics,” and “The Reagan Era.” Schneider explains the evolution of conservatism’s various factions, such as fusionism, libertarianism, and the rise of neoconservatism, but without taking sides (unless the omissions of the writings of Ayn Rand or David Brooks, for example, can be interpreted as taking sides). He acknowledges that the Old Right claim that neoconservatives “hijacked” conservatism is partially justified, but carefully qualifies this statement by observing that “it was not a conspiratorial coup. If anything, the neoconservatives helped reshape conservatism through their recognition of a changing political and intellectual climate.”

The Schneider collection includes paleos such as Samuel Francis, as well as neoconservatives like Irving Kristol, and a response to paleoconservatism by Dan Himmelfarb. We see important pieces by Kirk, Friedrich Hayek, and Gerhart Niemeyer, and no less than three pieces by Frank Meyer (but no Willmoore Kendall). To his credit, Schneider is interested in the political as well as the intellectual aspects of conservatism. So he also includes such critical conservative documents as the Sharon Statement, which established Young Americans for Freedom, the statement of principles of National Review, and Goldwater’s 1964 nomination speech. This combination is appropriate, as conservatism has tended to organize around its political leaders, whose formulations of conservative principles include something for everyone in the hopes of electoral victory. Schneider’s introduction and commentary, while well-written and balanced, contain no real revelations for any well-informed conservative. They are more in the nature of a field guide for those unfamiliar with this world.

There is unmistakably a feeling of lament for lost opportunities in both collections. Sometime this is intentional: Thomas Fleming’s essay (included in Scotchie), “Trollope in the Stacks,” is an impassioned polemic against unthinking conservatives and the damage they have done to the culture. But one need not agree completely with the paleoconservative critique to feel that the conservatives have lost, or are losing, the major political and cultural battles of the twenty-first century. One can select almost at random from the Schneider collection to see what the original conservative hopes were. Meyer, for example, called for conservatives to create a “new intellectual and spiritual leadership, and on the basis of that leadership to move forward to the defeat of collectivist liberalism.” Have we seen anything of the sort?

Of the eight principles outlined in the statement founding National Review, only one—the defeat of Communism—has prevailed completely. One other, the defense of the competitive price system against inroads by labor, now seems merely antiquated. The record on the remaining six, including resistance to centralized government, opposition to social engineering, and resistance to global government and internationalism, is decidedly mixed. Conservatives have, in fact, championed the opposites of one or another of these at various times. Add to these the current controversies over bio-ethics, gay marriage, and immigration, and the cultural achievements of the Right seem modest indeed.

Hayek, in his famous 1959 essay “Why I Am Not a Conservative,” criticized conservatism for being unable to “offer an alternative to the direction in which we are moving. It may succeed by its resistance to current tendencies in slowing down undesirable developments, but, since it does not indicate another direction, it cannot prevent their continu-
ance." Forty years later, Policy Review opined that “modern ideological conservatism constitutes a completed body of thought” that had triumphed over liberalism and that “knows what the important questions are and it knows the answers to those questions.” What happened in the intervening decades? The editors do not say, but from the viewpoint of our present time, that assessment is wildly optimistic, and at odds with the basic conservative insight that complete answers to societal problems are for the radical only. More significantly, the Policy Review editorial argued that conservatism, like the broader culture, “worships two principal deities: More and Quick.” Neither of these conclusions would have been acceptable to most of the writers represented in other selections included in either Schneider or Scotchie, and it is something of an outlier.

What both of these books suggest is that conservatism needs a renewed attention to the direction in which we should be heading. Conservatives have been both in the political wilderness and the political mainstream; they have seen their arguments ridiculed, then parroted: the question now is what have been the results for the culture? Scotchie is too much the partisan to provide a full answer. According to paleoconservative lights, the only direction is a reaction against the tide. Schneider, for his part, is similarly not interested: his goal is to describe and collect, not predict or analyze. Oddly, the closing of that same Policy Review editorial quoted earlier provides a more balanced assessment of conservative prospects. It advocates a “critical self-scrutiny” so that conservatism does not go the way of liberalism, which has imploded from a failure to examine its own basic principles. If conservatives undertake that task, the selections in these collections can help point out both the promise and the missteps.

Vico or Nietzsche?

Thomas Albert Howard


When Giambattista Vico died in 1744, his funeral degenerated into a public controversy as the faculty of the University of Naples, where he taught, and members of the Confraternity of Santa Sofia, to which he had belonged, argued over which group should provide the pallbearers. The funeral procession was even delayed and the body left overnight in the deceased scholar’s home as the disputants worked out an agreement.

The episode serves well as a symbol of Vico’s intellectual legacy, which has been subject to much debate, controversy, and delayed appreciation. An obscure, poorly paid professor of rhetoric at the University of Naples for most of his academic career, Vico left behind a sprawling, puzzling body of work, at once anachronistic and prescient, historical and mythic, secular and religious, Christian and classical—and bristling with penetrating insights scattered amid long-winded analyses of dubious scholarly merit. His Principi di una scienza nuova (New Science), first published in 1725, has been widely hailed as a landmark in the history of ideas, a bold apologetic for the “human sciences” in a milieu in which the likes of Galileo, Newton, Bacon, and Descartes had championed inquiry into the natural world as