

Avi Lifschitz (ed.). *Frederick the Great's Philosophical Writings*. Trans. Angela Scholar. Princeton University Press 2021. 304 pp. \$39.95 USD (Hardcover 9780691176420).

Prussian King Frederick II, nicknamed the Great (1712-1786), was an enigmatic person whose life and political deeds provide perennial topics for historians. The 'Old Fritz' was an enlightened king, a ruthless military commander, a passionate flute player, allegedly gay, and most importantly a philosopher. Adolf Menzel's painting shows him in the circle of great men of his times: Voltaire, d'Allembert, La Mettrie or Count Algarotti. Frederick's chateau Sanssouci in Potsdam was a temple of free thinkers. Nowadays, a visiting tourist can even see the king's tomb on its terrace. Unfortunately, the greatness of Frederick the Great casts a long shadow on his literary works. They have often been studied as proof of the king's hypocrisy, or as part of the history of the German Enlightenment. Frederick's significance is seen only in creating the atmosphere of freedom that made the work of other philosophers of his time possible.

However, such condemnations are not fair. Frederick's works were not dilettantish; the 'philosopher of Sanssouci' was a versatile author, whose choice of topics cover satire, education, self-love, the art of war, the errors of the mind, and much more. It is true that he never created a coherent philosophical system, but in his opinion, the passion for systems had been a fatal pitfall for human reason (Frédéric le Grand, 'Réfutation du prince de Machiavel' in *Oeuvres de Frédéric le Grand*, Tome VIII, Berlin, 1848, p. 283). It is, therefore, more than laudable that fourteen of his philosophical works were translated into English by Angela Scholar and published with a thorough introduction by Avi Lifschitz, associate professor of European history at Oxford. The selected works include the King's best-known opus *Anti-Machiavel*, but they show him as an author of political treatises, epistles, moral essays, and book reviews (e. g. d'Holbach's *System of Nature*). His voluminous correspondence, his memoirs and analysis of the war strategy (e. g. his *General Principles of the War*) were left out, because the book is not confined to Frederick's most obvious political works. It rather wants to understand his notion of kingship and service to the state through serious engagement with his view of morality, self-love and philosophical debate in the public sphere of his times (viii).

Numerous biographies of Frederick the Great point out the inconsistency between his philosophical works and his political action, and it is hard to align his thoughts from *Anti-Machiavel* with his invasion of Silesia or his participation in Seven Year's War (1756-1763). Avi Lifschitz, therefore, offers three methodological prerequisites that seem to be necessary for reading Frederick's works without constant hesitation over their credibility: 1) To study them on their own terms, without comparing them to Frederick's political conduct; 2) To read them in their cultural context, since they were influenced by the philosophical debates of the time; 3) To approach them regardless of their sincerity or the psychological motives of their author (xvii).

After the introduction and a four-page summary of the principal events and publications that create the context of Frederick's works, the translated selection of the king's writings starts. Their order is chronological, and they are organized by the timeline in which they were written rather than the subject they cover. The notes that close the book shortly explain the reason why each of the texts



was written and its history. After the *Dissertation of the Innocence of Errors of the Mind*, Frederick's most famous opus *Anti-Machiavel* starts. While the standard *Preuß* edition – available in French on the internet thanks to the University of Trier – contains two versions of the book (one that was published, another that follows the king's preserved manuscript), only the first, officially published version is translated into English (13-81). The reason is obvious: the second version, bearing the name *Refutation of Machiavelli's Prince*, is problematic: one chapter is missing and other ones were not written at the same time. However, it was this version that the king liked to cite in his works (e.g. in his *Essay on Self-Love, Considered as a Principle of Morality*). A similar problem must have haunted the editor in the selection of the *Preface to History of My Age*, which follows *Anti-Machiavel* (82-86). Frederick wrote it twice, first for the 1746 edition, and a second one in 1775. Each of them is different, and almost thirty years filled with big events in Frederick's life separate them, however, only the older one is published in English translation.

After Frederick's *Dissertation on the Reason for Establishing or Repealing Laws*, there comes a surprise in the translation of two epistles, originally published in the King's *Œuvres du Philosophe de Sans-Souci* (1749), the book that entered the market in many pirated and mutilated editions and caused a decade of curiosity due to the fact that the versed epistles were dedicated mostly to men, and some of them dealt with quite titillating philosophical topics such as sexual passions (Epistle I, XIV, XVII). Avi Lifschitz's selection does not include those; instead, his choice contains Epistle XVIII dealing with the terrors of death and the fears of another life and the beautiful Epistle XX: 'To my Soul' (107-24). They nicely show Frederick the Great as the author of philosophical poems and epics, which were his preferred genre of intellectual self-expression (xvii). Their translation by Angela Scholar is cultivated and accurate, even though the fidelity of the verses are sacrificed to the meaning of the poem: when read aloud, they may hardly sound as poetic as their French originals were intended to.

The Preface to *Extracts from Bayle's Historical and Critical Dictionary* (125-28) and *Preface to Abridgement of the Ecclesiastical History by Fleury* (129-38) together with *Examination of the Essay on Prejudice* (160-178) and *Critical Examination of The System of Nature* (179-89) (both books written by baron d'Holbach), show Frederick as a reviewer. In this role, he not only talks about the books; he promotes his own thoughts and points of view. This is nicely seen in the violence of the *Preface to Ecclesiastical History*, where he talks of the moral evil of the popes, the Crusades, the constant quarrels between the emperors and the popes, and the absurd history of the medieval papacy, in which one pope kept excommunicating the other (134-38).

Sandwiched between these reviews are two important moral treatises: the *Essay on Self-Love, Considered as a Principle of Morality* (139-48) and *Letter on Education* (149-59). The first attempts its own interpretation of *amour-propre*, the widely discussed term in the Enlightenment. The *roi-philosophe* did not adopt Rousseau's or even Voltaire's understanding of this term but came with his own interpretation, which pointed out that self-love (*amour-propre*) can be the drive of sociable and patriotic feelings necessary to each society and state. This is also masterfully explained in the Introduction by Avi Lifschitz (xxxiii-xxxv).

Dialogue of the Dead between Madame de Pompadour and the Virgin Mary (190-94) is also a

nice surprise for a reader who knows the content of the standard *Preuß* edition of Frederick's works. Due to its scandalous nature which threatened to offend a lot of readers, it was not included in King's collected works and was published only in 1999. The English translation, therefore, offers a unique opportunity to find out why even Frederick himself considered its nature risky. *The Essay on the Forms of Government and the Duties of Sovereigns* (195-207) closes the book.

One could object that many more philosophical treatises could have been included (e. g. *Discourse on Satire* and *Discourse on Libels* have a lot to say on the tabloid-infested public scene of our days, *Moral Dialogue for the Young Nobility* or *On Manners, Customs, Industry, the Progress of the Human Mind in the Arts and Sciences* could be valuable to the scholarly study of the Enlightenment ethics). But every selection is imperfect. Truth be told, the translations of Fredericks's literary works into other European languages are much more selective, not to mention their sporadicity, so this English collection may serve as a source of the King's ideas even for non-native English-speaking philosophers and historians. The book is well-arranged, accurately translated and appropriately annotated. It also shows Frederick the Great in a different light than his biographies. After reading some of his works, a reader can truly see him as a unique, innovative and potentially dangerous king (xlii), which is more than right.

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