This book begins wonderfully and ends almost as wonderfully. But in the middle it sinks into what I can only call the slough of Straussian despond. This is a pity because the opening chapter promises much better, and because the closing chapter recalls the promise but also recalls, sadly, why it was not redeemed. Both chapters and especially the first provide an excellent review and critique of the state of liberal democratic thinking in the West. They run through the twists and turns of that thinking from Rawls’ own twists and turns onwards, and show just how inconsistent and self-refuting the whole enterprise has become. The conclusion that we need something different and better is compelling. The further conclusion that we should turn to Aristotle for that something different and better is also compelling. Thereafter, however, comes the slough. We do not get anything better; we do not get anything different; indeed, we do not even get Aristotle.

Collins indicts current liberal democratic thinking on the following grounds: it is based on and leads to a self-destructive relativism; it professes a neutrality between visions of the good which it cannot help denying and undermining; it stifles individuality and pluralism precisely when and as it touts them; it reduces the good to arbitrary preference; it eviscerates, if it does not outright forbid, serious political dialogue; it severs the connection between the good citizen and the good man or between the right and the good.
Collins then espouses herself, and in the name of Aristotle to boot, several of these theses as well as others that can also be found in current liberal thinking even if, for the most part, they are kept hidden from the masses. Let me instance some of them: there is an unbridgeable gap or irresoluble tension between the private good and the public good (pp. 46, 52, 56, 64-66, 68-70, 73, 76-80, 101, 107, 139, 141, 146, 168, 171, 172, 175-76); one may commit crimes for the sake of the public good not to mention the private good (pp. 85-88, 150, 165); the ultimate human good, if there is one, is unknowable or unattainable or both (pp. 95-97, 123-24, 128, 130, 137, 143, 145n29); the truth, especially about texts, is what we choose to make up and not what we might find to be really the case (pp.108-116n, 126, 136-37, 161-62).

As regards the last thesis, which may seem surprising, let me give one example. Collins notes that when Aristotle says that the education and habits that make a man morally serious and a kingly or political ruler are the same he adds a “nearly” to the “same” (p. 145n28). She wants to use this qualification of Aristotle’s to shore up her thesis that there is a gap or tension between the private and the public good and that Aristotle accepts this thesis, or that he accepts, as she puts it, that “the virtues of a good citizen are not exactly the same as those of a good human being”. She does not, however, mention that in the preceding sentence Aristotle has just said, without any addition of ‘nearly’ but with the addition of ‘must’, that the virtue of a man and of a citizen in the best city are the same. Nor does she mention that, in the previous clause of the sentence she does quote, Aristotle has just said, again without any addition of ‘nearly’, that “it is in the same way and through the same means that a man might become morally serious and that one might set up a city that is aristocratic or kingly.” Nor does she mention that
the part of the sentence she quotes is drawn as an inference from the part I have just quoted. Nor does she mention that the Greek word for ‘nearly’ (schedon) is missing in one of the manuscripts, that it may qualify the word ‘makes’ and not the word ‘same’, that it may qualify the whole clause and not any word in it, and that if it qualifies the whole clause, or even if it doesn’t, it need not express doubt about what is said but modesty in saying it (if I may appeal to the incomparable Bonitz).

Nor, further, does she mention that her own gloss on what Aristotle says is not the same as what Aristotle says. For to say with Aristotle that “the education and habits that make a man morally serious are nearly the same as those that make him kingly and political” is not the same as saying with Collins that “the virtues of a good citizen are not exactly the same as those of a good human being”. For it is perfectly possible (indeed it is positively required by what Aristotle has said in the previous sentence) that, while the virtues of a good citizen are exactly the same as those of a good human being, the education and habits that bring this about are only nearly the same. Or, to put it differently, it is possible that Aristotle is talking, in the latter case, of efficient causality and not of formal causality. Nor does she mention that the passage she quotes is in a context that recalls the end of the Ethics, that there Aristotle had indicated that if the city one lives in does not provide education to virtue one should provide it for one’s children and friends oneself, and that, if so, the education one gave could not, of course, be exactly the same as a future king would be getting, because it would not, and probably could not, involve giving one’s children practice in ruling and being ruled in public office (for the city might forbid it), whereas someone actually being trained to be a king of a city would certainly get this practice. Nevertheless giving one’s children education to virtue would
be *exactly* and not *nearly* the way and the means to set up a city that was aristocratic or kingly because one could only do this by having some people around, one’s children in this case, who had the virtues required of aristocrats and kings and who, therefore, could be put in charge of the city one was setting up.

In other words there is a host of other ways of reading the clause Collins quotes, and these other ways do not force one to make Aristotle contradict something he has elsewhere said including what he has said in the immediately preceding sentence. But none of these other ways does she mention or consider. The fact, therefore, that she chooses the reading that she does can only mean that, given half a chance (or even no chance), she will read into Aristotle what she wants or that she will make the text mean whatever she wants it to mean. What she wants it to mean is the theses I mentioned above. These theses are typically Straussian as well as liberal (one only has to think of Hobbes). For by a Straussian I do not mean simply someone who studied with Leo Strauss, or someone who admires him, or someone who imitates his way of reading and writing, or who claims to, or someone who studies his books. I mean primarily someone who adopts Straussian metaphysics. Straussian metaphysics is ontological despair: there is a fault running through human existence that makes perfection impossible; this fault is ineradicable and inescapable; it even extends to being itself; we humans, however, are not responsible for it; we did not cause it by some voluntary fall from paradise or golden age; its results nevertheless remain and, for all our lack of guilt, we must just put up with them.

Collins’ way of reading texts is Straussian. She uses it to insinuate Straussian theses and Strauss himself was the one who invented it or at least made it so popular.
Strauss did this, in part, to secure, or to preserve, a political system, liberal democracy, where people like him could hold and teach subversive views without subverting that system. For Straussian views would subvert democratic liberalism if they became widely believed or practiced. In fact, one of the reasons Straussians write books like this one of Collins’ is because they think these theses are becoming widely believed and practiced. But the problem, of course, is not that these theses are believed or even practiced (for Straussians believe and practice them), but that too many people are believing and practicing them and that too many of these too many do not see that they should not go around openly believing and practicing them. One must be oblique and indirect and say and practice them only in such a way that those who cotton on also cotton on to the fact that they too must be oblique and indirect. There are, as Strauss himself made clear, few better oblique and indirect ways to do this (or to get others to do the same) than to write commentaries on what other people have said, especially commentaries that do not say exactly, but only nearly (or not at all), what these other people said.

Of course, there would be little problem if the Straussian theses were false, for then Straussian hiding or obliqueness would not be necessary. But if the Straussian theses were false then either there would be no fault in human things or what fault there was would be curable. It is impossible to believe that there is no fault in human things; but to believe that the fault is curable is to believe that gods are possible (for the curing of the fault would make us gods). But gods are not possible, or so Straussians always say (p. 145n29). Aristotle of course thought gods were possible, and so did Plato. In fact almost everyone before Strauss and his teachers (principally Machiavelli and Nietzsche) thought gods were possible. But for some reason (love of the pleasures of living without hope or
of playing clever games of intellectual hide and seek or both?), Straussians do not want gods to be possible. That is also why Straussianism is so despondent – why, indeed, it is a slough of despond. But in gods, or the god, there is hope. That is why, as Aristotle said but Collins never says, the best is what we pray for.