Interview by Josh Harlan and Christopher Kagay

Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr.: The Question of Conservatism

HRP: How did you come to be a political philosopher?
Mansfield: I grew into it. It wasn’t a decision. My hero as an undergraduate was Sam Beer, a wonderful man, now retired. My father was also a professor of political science. My first notion was to be a Soviet expert — know thy enemy. I came to realize that I would be spending my life, if I did this, reading things with a 500 word vocabulary put out by apparatchiks. It was in my sophomore year that I met Sam Beer, who was interested in asking questions while studying comparative government that came out of political philosophy. Then I got more interested in those questions than in applications and it wasn’t until after I graduated that I got caught up in Strauss. His book Natural Right and History came out the year that I graduated [from Harvard], 1953. I had, by then, also met a couple of his students. I was never a student of Strauss’s. I met him at Berkeley. He was at the Institute for Behavioral Studies of all places, in Palo Alto. He was running an informal reading seminar.

HRP: What, in your view, is political philosophy and why should students and others care about it?
Mansfield: Let me answer from the standpoint of philosophy. I would say that political philosophy is about self-knowledge. You cannot think comprehensively without thinking about the conditions of thought, without thinking about what makes it possible to live the life of a thinker. The answer to that question is political because politics determines the conditions under which thinkers can think. Simply from the standpoint of a thinker or philosopher, I think political philosophy is a necessary pursuit, not accidental. It isn’t an option for him to be or not to be interested in politics. Political philosophy tells of the connection between philosophers or thinkers and non-philosophers, between what is intelligible in thought and what is not, or what is specific or highest in the human and what is shared more generally with the lowest in the human and even with other creatures, the rest of nature, that is, the need to stay alive. If you reflect on this, political philosophy appears as the crucial field of philosophy — not the highest, but the crucial. It is at the crux, where thinking meets non-thinking.

HRP: What does it mean to be a conservative? Are you comfortable with that label?
Mansfield: I’m not comfortable with that label because it’s merely political in the sense of temporary. In other circumstances I can well imagine being a
liberal and anyway there are difficulties with being a conservative. I think of
two especially. One is that if conservative means holding to tradition, tra-
dition often contains contradictory elements so that one has to be selective
and no longer simply conservative. Another difficulty is a question of
tactics. Should you go slow or go back? Going slow means keeping what
has been done and slowing down the rate at which it is being done. It means maintaining a con-
nection between the past and the present. Going back means making a break between the present
and the past and so no longer keeping that connection. You see this on the Supreme Court today.
Scalia wants to go back and this moderate group of Kennedy, Souter and O’Connor in the middle
wants to go slow. I think there is no way of saying which of those two is always the better conservative
position. Reagan was more of a go back. Bush was more of a go slow. Although Bush was obviously
much less successful, I think you can make an argument for each way.

HRP: Is there a point of view which would
identify conservatism as valuing social practices
which have emerged from the bottom up as the
result of tradition over ideas which have come
from the top down, as it were — attempts to
design social practices on a rational basis? Is
that a different view of conservatism?
Mansfield: No, I think that’s a reasonable view of
conservatism and it’s another reason why conser-
vatism is questionable as a uniform, universal
position. Clearly it’s often better to be rational and
rational seems necessarily, as you suggest, to come
from the top because what is rational comes from
what is most reasonable and that one would find with those who have the
most reason. Conservatives are in the habit of revering the founders, quite
rightly, but a founding is an unconservative action.

HRP: That seems like a fundamental paradox.
Mansfield: It is. Therefore it’s impossible always and with reason to be a
conservative.

HRP: Is a Straussian a certain kind of conservative?
Mansfield: No, not essentially. Strauss himself said that there is an odor of
conservative politics about those who follow my way of thinking — he once
said that. Although most of the Straussians are conservative, there are some
liberals. It’s essentially about reviving political philosophy and not about
changing America. To be a Straussian may be to be a conservative but that
isn’t what one is principally.

HRP: What attracted you to the work of Strauss?
Mansfield: What first grabbed me was his solitary courage in raising again
the question of classical political philosophy as possibly true. Also, I was
looking for an understanding of morals and politics which was in between
relativism and absolutism and this seemed to offer a reasonable middle.
"I'm not sure that this is the best political arrangement of all time. One should reserve in one's mind an allegiance to the best regime."

That was what initially attracted me. Another point was just his marvelous way with texts, his interpretations of texts, his ability to see things — and not just to make up things or to imagine them — but to see things and show that they were seeable, in texts that I had read quickly and superficially. Then later on I met him and he was by a very long shot the most intelligent person I ever met.

_HRP:_ Do your political beliefs derive from your study of political philosophy?

_Mansfield:_ The study of political philosophy provides at most an atmosphere for one’s political thinking, not a set of principles from which one easily derives policies. Policies are too specific to the situation. But perhaps one learns that from political philosophy, say, from Aristotle’s notion of the regime, that every regime has a certain character to which one must adapt one’s political thinking. It makes no sense to be an anti-democrat in an established democracy; so one takes one’s political premises as much from the situation as from the merely desirable. This is not to say that one should overlook alternative possibilities. It’s a much better citizen of democracy who’s aware of an antidemocratic regime, even of the advantages of such a regime, but that awareness has to be used with a view to the improvement of democracy and not with a view to some imaginary and perhaps worse alternative in our circumstances.

_HRP:_ There almost seemed to be a note of wistfulness in your voice when you said that it makes no sense to be anti-democratic in a democratic society. Do you think that in some ways we could be better off in a less democratic society or is that not a coherent question because then we wouldn’t be we, we’d be someone else?

_Mansfield:_ Well, it’s a difficult question. I didn’t mean to be wistful or nostalgic but realistic. I’m not sure that this is the best political arrangement of all time. One should reserve in one’s mind an allegiance to the best regime.

_HRP:_ Along the lines of your saying that this is not necessarily the best possible political arrangement, what is your view of those who claim that this is the last political arrangement, that somehow there’s a logic to history and the political evolution of society is moving towards this type of government inexorably?

_Mansfield:_ That’s Francis Fukuyama and his famous thesis, borrowed from Hegel and Kojève. It isn’t so much inexorable as it is looking at the trends which have actually occurred and the possibilities that presently exist. Somehow democracy has outlasted its totalitarian rivals in an impressive fashion and there doesn’t seem to be on the scene presently an alternative that looks viable.

_HRP:_ What about the emergence of Islamic fundamentalism?

_Mansfield:_ I don’t know about that. Fukuyama claims that this is not a viable alternative, that such regimes lose their faith very rapidly, that they depend on science and Western industrial economies and that those dependencies will necessarily have an effect.

_HRP:_ Do you think that the importance of the political philosopher withers away as the world becomes more similar politically?

_Mansfield:_ No. I think that we have not yet seen the last of chance events and that some powerful form of anti-democracy could easily spring up,
unforeseen, unforeseeable. It could be some kind of fascism. There are two main objections to liberal democracy which were made, one by communism, the other by fascism. Those two objections have some validity to them, even if communism and fascism don’t. Communism objected that liberal democracy is too selfish and unconcerned with the whole and fascism claimed that liberal democracy is base and unconcerned with the noble. Both of those are to some extent true. That’s why I would say that liberal democracy is not a complete fulfillment of human nature or the perfection of human nature. One could always imagine a challenge to it, a better regime. In practice, this better might turn out worse, as happened with communism and fascism, but people may well be tempted to try.

**HRP:** You’ve been identified as a critic of liberalism. What do you think is wrong with liberalism?

**Mansfield:** I published a book of essays in 1978 called *The Spirit of Liberalism* in which I present myself as a friend of liberalism. But it was the kind of friend who was subjecting to criticism the beliefs and practices of those who call themselves liberals; so I never really made it into their hearts.

I suppose I have become expressly conservative since then, but I think that one could define the main task of conservatism today as trying to make liberalism live up to its own principles, in many respects: In economics, to the market and private property, in culture, to the high standards of our universities, in constitutional law to the rights of the constitution and the institutions it established, etc. That’s not just a rhetorical tactic used to shame liberals but I think it’s true that they’ve gotten away from the things which made liberalism attractive. This happened especially in the late sixties, a very powerful epoch which has done infinite mischief.

**HRP:** But liberals would claim in response that many of the social changes which occurred brought rights and equalities to segments of the population which did not enjoy them in the past. It seems as if there has to be something to be said for that.

**Mansfield:** You’re probably thinking of the civil rights movement. That was the early and middle sixties, culminating in the passage of the first civil rights act which was not subject to filibuster from Southern senators — the first civil rights act represented a genuine consensus. This was 1964.

**HRP:** You’re not referring to that when you suggest that mischief was done in the 1960s.

**Mansfield:** Not that, or not that mainly. An interpretation of the civil rights act of 1964 came out the next year which first began affirmative action, and which I do think is a perversion of liberalism. It transforms our politics from constitutional politics to a result-oriented politics. It makes a very big difference how minorities or less-advantaged groups get their rights. That they get them by their own efforts and through means which provide equality under the law. Simply to give them an equal result denies their pride, gives them no sense of achievement, and builds too much government.

**HRP:** Some would contend that affirmative action is not results oriented in that sense, that affirmative action does not seek to take those who are of less merit on a particular scale and promote them equally along with those who have greater merit but that it diversifies the available criteria of merit such that it provides different standards for evaluating people of different backgrounds. Do you take issue with...
Mansfield: That’s a possibility, but in practice I don’t think it happens. In practice, people have been given things which they do not deserve on the basis of any reasonable criterion which is not result-oriented. The practice of affirmative action is much worse than the principle. If you listen to those who make the argument on principle you would think that if there’s a small difference, you would give them a push over the top as a sign that we’re now a community and don’t wish to despise any group within it. In fact what happens is that the advantage given by affirmative action is enormous. It goes as much to a black who comes from Scarsdale as to one from Harlem. This happens not only in admissions but even more in hiring. I’m very upset at what is happening on the job market for graduate students in this department. Major injustices are being done to white males which we will all be ashamed of in the next generation. The result has not been any improvement in our university community in race relations.

HRP: How does your criticism of liberalism apply to your Harvard colleague, John Rawls?
Mansfield: I did an article on him which was published in the book that I mentioned. I forget what’s in it. Essentially I think he tries to have his liberalism both ways. He prefers Kant to Locke because Kant has a certain moral elevation and Kant does not base his argument on the preservation of property. But Rawls doesn’t go anywhere near all the way with Kant’s moral sternness, an attitude which follows strictly from his premises, as everything in Kant does, and he does not comment on the political and moral policies actually proposed by Kant in his *Metaphysics of Morals*. So, he goes back in the direction of Locke in order to free himself from Kant’s moral strictness. It’s an inconsistent alternation, I think, between the desire to be moral and the desire to be compassionate. That would be a general summing up of his book that has, of course, many, many arguments in it.

HRP: You might be implying, then, that Rawls calls for a degree of redistribution which does not take sufficient account of merit?
Mansfield: Or of morality, but that looks towards the preservation of the community or the self-preservation of the community — his so-called “thin theory of the good,” which is a terrific qualification of Kantianism.

**HRP:** Does the original position seem to you like an effective mechanism for modeling a fair decision-making process for principles of justice?
**Mansfield:** Very ineffective, because it takes away the knowledge you need to know. You would decide one thing if you didn’t know what sex you were going to be and another if you did. There’s really no reason to be bound by your sexless decision once you’ve got a sex. He can’t give a reason for being
HNP: But isn’t that just the point? Then people would be more willing to choose a basic structure for society that was more equal in its treatment of different genders.

Mansfield: They would be more likely to choose a sexless structure at the time that they don’t know their sex, but why should they hold to that decision? It was, after all, a decision made in ignorance. The original position differs from the state of nature in Hobbes and Locke in that the latter is supposed to tell you what your true nature is. It’s supposed to be a statement of what you really are. In the state of nature, where there’s an equal ability to kill, you can see that men and women would be roughly equal because women, although somewhat weaker in brachial strength, can make up for it in cunning. There’s some truth to the notion of equality. In the case of the original position, it’s simply a counterfactual assumption which begs you to posit something which you know isn’t the case, namely that you have no sex. It begins by assuming that sex doesn’t matter. How do you know that?

HNP: Which philosophers do you think have affected your thinking the most?

Mansfield: I think Locke has the most wisdom for us regarding principles. But the most beautiful book for an American to read is Tocqueville’s Democracy in America, by far. It’s the best thing ever done about our country. It’s not a book of principles like Locke’s Two Treatises. The principles are there, they’re just not thematic. Aristotle I like. It’s always worth your while to find out what Aristotle has to say on any subject.

HNP: How consistent do you seek to be to some set of principles?

Mansfield: To repeat myself a little bit, here I take my bearing from Aristotle and his notion of the regime which is, I think, the fundamental concept for all political scientists. It tells you that it’s wrong to make abstract judgments on policy questions without relating them to the regime, that is, to the politics of a particular society at a particular time. So, you might want to adopt policies which are wrong abstractly but which are right for our kind of democracy. For example, reliance on rights one can question abstractly. After all, aren’t duties as important or more important than rights? But that isn’t us. We have a different premise. It doesn’t make sense to adopt a policy which doesn’t derive from a premise which is ours or foreseeably ours. That, I think, is the beauty of Tocqueville’s new political science. It accepts this new democratic revolution as a fact. It has some good things and it has some bad things. One can try to promote the good and prevent the bad but not with a view to some abstract situation. Usually, the philosophers who spend their time with policies reason much too abstractly, as if what they were saying were good for Persia or Egypt in ancient times. It’s a bit ridiculous because they’re comfortable suburban liberals and their abstractions are much more narrowly founded than they realize.

HNP: Where do your views on social issues part ways with those

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HNP: Where do your views on social issues part ways with those
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known as libertarians?

Mansfield: I’m not 100 percent against big government. Certainly during the Cold War we needed a big military. And I also think that government necessarily and rightly plays a formative role in society. I do agree with the libertarians that limited government is the best for us now. But limited government had to be established by a founding, which was not itself a stroke of limited government, but rather one which set up character, gave a tone to our whole society. Sometimes that tone and that character need to be recalled, impressive actions like the Civil Rights Movement or speeches which appeal to our patriotism – to the good things we share as Americans. So I don’t think one should always be belittling government. I do agree that government in recent times and especially since the New Deal has attempted to do too much, and we need less of it. So my favorite figure in recent American politics is Reagan.

HRP: Which actions rising with the New Deal, which functions of government, do you see as the most pernicious? And considering that most of the big government changes that you might view as pernicious were in response to at least what some Americans thought was a necessary wave of change, how better to bring about change than through government, through the increase in size of government?

Mansfield: Well, the New Deal made economic mistakes by attempting to establish what it called freedom from want. It made structural mistakes in the government by attacking American federalism, by immensely increasing government bureaucracy, and by setting in motion policies that have made us all more dependent on government, which means that we are less independent as citizens of a republic. And I think that is the meaning of the New Deal as a whole, and so I think as a whole it was mistaken, though parts of it may be valuable and lots of it may now be impossible to repeal. I think government is often needed for making big changes but it should make those changes in such a way as to leave space for free citizens to exercise their freedom on their own responsibility.

HRP: One of the changes of the New Deal was to legitimize the role of government in everyday life in a more active way, for instance in macroeconomic stabilization by providing, say, Social Security, and I think many would claim that those policies have been a tremendous success. You no longer see the tremendous cycle of depression that had ravished America in the 1870s and in the 1920s. And the elderly have gone from being an incredibly impoverished population to one which no longer suffers from poverty to such a great extent. Do you think that either of those programs in themselves or the precedent and philosophical change that they represent is something that we should be concerned about or be sorry about?

Mansfield: Well, it’s hard to speak except on the whole, and certainly there are amenities which come from the New Deal as you say. But one must be careful not to accept uncritically the New Deal’s version of past history. Also, the New Deal itself was not very successful economically until World War II, and not even then so successful, nor have we succeeded in abolishing the business cycle. Nor do we have the kind of virtue which people used to have that enabled them to live through good times and bad. As we get richer and more secure, it seems we get more concerned with security and less tolerant of insecurity. This is the dependency I’m speaking of. What
was the other thing you mentioned?

**HRP:** Social Security.

**Mansfield:** Oh yes, Social Security and the old. Well that’s good, except that most people do not have to look ahead to take care of themselves in their old age. This is bad for the family because it means that children don’t have to take care of aged parents, or don’t have the same degree of responsibility to do so. And it’s bad for the individual because you don’t have to save, or you have less reason to save for your old age. There’s a certain risk that comes from the desire to be riskless. That is loss of virtue, loss of virtue as it’s best understood in a liberal democracy, and that’s the virtue of self-reliance or responsibility.

**HRP:** Another provocative critic of modern America is Allan Bloom. What is your relation to Bloom’s thought, and your view of *The Closing of the American Mind*, for instance?

**Mansfield:** Well he was a very close friend. I miss him very much. His book I read in manuscript, and I have the honor of having seen and told him that it would make him famous. I didn’t realize it would be quite the success it was, but it did seem to me to be a marvelous statement which could not be ignored. And I still think it is. That is one of the books of our time. Anyone who hasn’t read it should do so right away—or anyone who has bought it and hasn’t read it. [peals of laughter] What it does intellectually or philosophically is to show how Nietzsche became an American citizen. That I think is the part which has not attracted so much attention. That’s a very important story. It is perhaps the essential story of the intellectual and even political history of our time. It’s the third part of the book. The first part, where he talks about students, gets everyone’s attention. That’s what sold the book. I think this other investigation is even more valuable.

**HRP:** Do you agree with Bloom’s pessimistic assessment of the intellectual caliber of young Americans?

**Mansfield:** No, it’s more the moral caliber. They’re too nice. And our virtue is being nice. That can be a kind of intellectual vice maybe. That’s his chief objection to it. We’re too nice, and this means we’re too open. Our receptivity is purely superficial because it doesn’t challenge anything in us that we believe. So this niceness comes out of lack of belief, and learning does not occur because one merely substitutes for lack of belief a superficial acquaintance with other cultures or Others, with a capital “O.”

**HRP:** What you’re saying seems to tie in with a claim Francis
One mustn’t simply look at the cuisine of different cultures, so to speak, and sample it. These things which shock us, what does that tell us about ourselves?

Fukuyama makes in *The New Republic*: “For many years now it has not been possible to speak too explicitly in polite society about the broad social character of various ethnic, religious and racial groups or to suggest that certain cultures are superior to others in promoting certain economic, social or moral values. To the extent that ‘civics’ is still taught in our public school system, the core teaching has been reduced to the view that other cultures are not ‘worse,’ just ‘different.’” (April 19, 1993, p. 41) Does this offend you?

Mansfield: Why yes, yes, it does offend me. It dismays me. People are being too easily and officially offended these days for me to want to use that word. But yes, that’s just what I was talking about. To appreciate another culture one should really try to see where it disagrees with ours, and why it does so. For example, why did the Hindus burn widows on the funeral pyre? It’s not enough to simply reject that out of hand as an oddity. Why did they do that? What was the reasoning behind that? What about the caste system? In other words, what are the arguments on its behalf? One mustn’t simply look at the cuisine of different cultures, so to speak, and sample it. These things which shock us, what does that tell us about ourselves?

HRP: Even though you suggested earlier that political philosophers who are liberal suburbanites may overestimate the reach of their abstraction, are you implying here that we can make some types of moral assessment of practices in other cultures that transcend the cultural division?

Mansfield: Yes, I think one can, sure. That’s what political philosophy attempts to do. Political philosophy is about the best regime, and so it compares different regimes, judges the different claims that they make. Regimes always speak for themselves, claiming certain advantages, especially advantages over other regimes; they contrast themselves with other regimes. Liberal democracy usually contrasts itself with anti-democratic regimes. It gives itself certain virtues, and a political philosopher tries to judge whether it really has those virtues and if there are other virtues which are missing. So, liberal democracy always looks more explicitly than implicitly at a picture of the best regime. It’s essentially utopian, transcultural. But every political regime makes a transcultural claim. It may not be aware of all the cultures that exist in the world but it claims to be better than they.

HRP: Do you feel a pressure not to make those kinds of transcultural claims?

Mansfield: Sure, especially when it comes to something difficult and embarrassing to us. Our principle is ‘All men are created equal.’ It’s hard to make judgments of different groups of Americans which imply that they’re not equal, in other words, to make ethnic characterizations. A characterization is always saying that a certain group has a certain character, which means that it has more of this and less of that, which means that it is unequal in some respect.

HRP: That seems like a key division between conservatives and liberals in contemporary America. Liberals to some extent would try to discourage an explanation of the differential success of different ethnic and cultural groups in the U.S. that involves a characterization of how their cultural differences might lead to different outcomes.
Mansfield: Or especially different virtues.

**HRP:** Or conservatives would be more willing, as Fukuyama is pointing to, to make assessments that some cultures hinder themselves in the American economic sphere and some do not.

Mansfield: That’s another example of liberalism not living up to its own principle. This used to be as much a liberal habit as a conservative habit. It’s only now that one becomes a conservative by not being a cultural relativist. Liberals used to have no qualms about denouncing illiberal regimes and illiberal practices by people within a regime. Now they’ve lost their own liberalism in multiculturalism or in relativism and they need to be reminded of what they ought, as liberals, to believe. How is it possible for someone who opposes grade inflation to be considered a conservative? There used to be a perfect consensus between liberals and conservatives that universities could not last without maintaining their standards. It’s only since the late sixties that this has come about.

**HRP:** Is that a fair characterization of those who criticize you on this issue? Were people characterizing your opposition to grade inflation in general or your specific racial explanation?

Mansfield: Both, I think. There’s a sign of movement among liberals and the Harvard administration on this issue. I’m hopeful that change is in the wind on this one. Dean Buehl’s letter was a first. For some years now they’ve been sending around the statistics on how each professor grades his students compared to how other professors grade those same students. This is the first time that an editorial came with that information, asking you whether it might be wise to change your behavior. So if liberals want to join the anti-grade inflation crusade they are certainly welcome.

**HRP:** Do you think that enough evidence is available to an individual professor to make claims about the possible racial causes of grade inflation without the administration releasing information about the average grades received by members of different racial groups at Harvard?

Mansfield: No, and it would certainly be better to have some statistics. Lacking them, one has to speak on the basis of personal observation and what one sees in others. It’s very common for white professors to over-grade blacks.

**HRP:** Do you think that the primary reasons for grade inflation were not the policies of draft boards in the Vietnam War and the increase in teaching by teaching fellows in the 1960’s and 1970’s, that is, graders who were younger and better connected to students?

Mansfield: The first I agree with and the second I think no. At the forum on grade inflation I quoted this old saw on aged professors: ‘The harder the arteries the softer the heart.’ When I began teaching, a young teacher was in a mood to be harsh so as to distinguish oneself from the students by making it clear that one was enforcing high standards and that being young meant being exacting. This, I think, is the same thing that Bloom was referring to when he spoke of the young nowadays wanting to be nice. Youth, I think, is much more naturally intolerant than tolerant and so you need a special explanation for the niceness of young graders.

**HRP:** In the 1960’s and 70’s the universities opened their doors not
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"I think affirmative action deserves to be on its last legs. It has been a big failure. It was altogether unnecessary in the first place."
HRP: How do you feel about that original argument and about the argument that affirmative action was a limited program designed to redress past wrongs and put everybody on equal footing. Are you more supportive of that?

Mansfield: Yes, if that had ever been seriously intended or were now carried out. I think affirmative action deserves to be on its last legs. It has been a big failure. It was altogether unnecessary in the first place. We could have admitted the same or a perfectly reasonable number of blacks without abandoning the principle of merit and without introducing these harmful new criteria of affirmative action together with a huge bureaucracy that enforces it and corrupts everything at this university. It was totally unnecessary and it has been a failure. What we should do now is to begin to eliminate it, first by confining it to blacks, who are the really wronged portion of our population, and second by setting a time after which we declare that enough has been done to hurt their pride and their dignity and that it’s now time to treat them like other Americans.

HRP: Do you perceive that there is more racial tension on campus than there used to be? Do you think that your comments in some way may have contributed to that?

Mansfield: No, I don’t think that they contributed to that. They may have exposed it to some extent. I think a certain exposure is healthy. There are too many things being thought on both sides which need to be said aloud and discussed openly. It’s much less of a community than it appears. This is what I hear and what I see.

HRP: Could you discuss the difference in the teaching of philosophy between the government department and the philosophy department?

Mansfield: Here you have as colleagues political scientists who treat you as utopian, over-theoretical, abstract, incomprehensible. In philosophy you have colleagues who regard you, on the contrary, as too much concerned with fact, with contingency, with the illogical and the non-mathematical. If you want to study political philosophy you have to ask yourself whether you want to be with people who are interested in politics or people who are interested in mathematical logic. This philosophy department is mainly analytic and does very little in the history of philosophy. I can imagine myself having much closer relationships with a philosophy department that paid more attention to the history of philosophy. The analytic philosophers think that real progress has occurred in philosophy. They mean by that that certain questions have been resolved and it’s no longer necessary to go back. Plato’s ideas, for example, have been refuted, so one doesn’t have to read Plato seriously as someone who might have the truth. One has to be aware of Plato; so you take him in your first year of graduate school and learn a little about “the theory of the ideas,” but one doesn’t take that as a serious claim to truth. I do. I regard the professors of philosophy as having wrongly settled questions that are still open and having greatly and dogmatically narrowed the field of possible answers. I’m interested in the history of philosophy and of political philosophy, not for antiquarian reasons, but because I think that’s where the truth lies, where the best statement of relevant possibilities can be found. That’s what I learned — that’s one of the main things I learned — from Strauss.

HRP: Why, from your point of view, do Anglo-American philosophers
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(such as those at Harvard) spend so little time considering European or “Continental” philosophy written after some mysterious dividing line in the late 19th century?

Mansfield: I would say that the philosophy department hasn’t come to terms with Nietzsche, who was, I think, the philosopher of our time, because he has revealed for us the problem of nihilism. I think that is the question which we face, and I think that most of the analytic philosophers evade it. They don’t take Nietzsche’s searing criticism of Western liberalism and of modernity as a whole with sufficient seriousness. So they continue their liberalism, utilitarianism, positivism — logical or not — their linguistic games, their mathematical models, without a careful, unblinking look at our situation. Our situation is that, as Nietzsche put it, God is dead, by which he meant not a merely personal God but any transcendent principle or ideal, because it has been killed by our historical consciousness. So, to overlook Nietzsche means to overlook the importance of history for contemporary philosophy and the power of historicism. Nietzsche’s main representative in the 20th century is Heidegger; so to come to terms with Nietzsche, one has to go through Heidegger. This would be a personal recommendation to the Harvard professors of philosophy.

HRP: What about very recent European thinkers such as Foucault and Derrida?

Mansfield: Those are all derivative from Heidegger, to the extent that they’re interesting. And if you read them, you would find that they assert that. It’s from them, in fact, that you could learn of the importance of Heidegger.

HRP: At Harvard, and perhaps at other prominent American universities, there seems to be a distinctive way philosophy is done in the philosophy department, and a distinctive way it’s done in the government department. And there seems to be a third and equally different way in which philosophy is treated in the ‘literary theory’ community. Why is the ‘lit crit’ community the subject of so much derision from the other academic communities which are concerned with philosophy? Camille Paglia is a good example of somebody who heaps unbridled derision on those people, on their standards, on their historical knowledge...

Mansfield: I think she’s perfectly right. They do deserve all the insults which she supplies. And I think that their philosophy and their politics are equally and perfectly superficial.

HRP: Now, when you say “they,” what community do you have in mind?

Mansfield: The community of deconstructionist literary scholars.

HRP: And at Harvard, whom might that include?

Mansfield: I don’t want to name names. But everybody knows that — I don’t need to. Paglia, you ask about... I think she is a serious intellectual commentator. She is sort of an auto-didact in a way, even though she was a student of Harold Bloom at Yale. And whether she’s a passing fad or not, we’ll have to see, but I think that the points she makes are serious and that her work is serious. She’s a force to be reckoned with and a marvelous woman besides.

HRP: Could you expand on your view that literary theory is pursued
in a superficial way at Harvard?

Mansfield: Well, those people read each other, they don’t read the fundamental philosophical texts, which in this case would be Heidegger, not just Derrida and Foucault, but the books of Heidegger which Derrida and Foucault read. So Heidegger and Nietzsche. And so it would require a serious coming to terms with the recent history of philosophy. And second, their politics are superficial. They are politicized but they’re not political. Their politics is a very small part of the current fashion — which is a fundamental trend in democracy — of the current fashion of egalitarianism. They simply assume, without argument, without examination of all the alternatives, that their view of human equality is the correct one, that no argument could be conceived in favor of traditional arrangements, or of alternative arrangements, but that everything which is the most advanced, is the most correct. So their politicization is as much an impoverishment of politics as of philosophy.

HRP: Why do you think that racial issues have so captivated current campus debate, instead of gender issues, at this point?

Mansfield: I think they’re both equally controversial in principle. But, I think, from the very beginning, men have not argued with the feminist revolution. There are only one or two books against it that I know of written by a man — some women have opposed it — but almost no man — there’s no Bull Connor as a male antagonist to the feminist revolution.

HRP: What is the feminist revolution and what’s wrong with it?

Mansfield: The principle of it is that men and women are equal in the sense of exchangeable. Anything a man can do, a woman can do. And anything a woman can do, a man can do. This is an extremely radical principle which has never been tried by any human society. Most of the feminists are moderates. A moderate feminist is one who believes that it’s possible for a woman to have a family and a career, and a radical feminist denies that and is more or less openly opposed to the family. This revolution I do not think can succeed, because it denies natural differences that cannot be repressed. So it will lead to and has already produced a good deal of frustration—in both sexes. Women will never succeed in being men, in being as successful in occupations which require aggressiveness as men are. And so, realizing this, or half-realizing this, they are trying to change the nature of those occupations to fix it so that aggressiveness counts for less.

HRP: Surely, when you refer to occupations that require aggressiveness, you are not limiting yourself to the infantry?

Mansfield: No.

HRP: Could you expand on that? Are you including bond trading, are you including being a political philosopher?

Mansfield: Sure. Yes. Anything that requires more get-up-and-go, less regard for others, more initiative, more ruthlessness. I use qualities deliberately which are good and bad, but all of which I think men have more than women. Men, in general, have more than women — in general, because there are certainly examples of aggressive women and of — they used to be called — effeminate men. And this is not to say, as the feminists say, that the aggressive occupations — that is, the occupations which require one to leave the home — are better. I’m not saying that — they say that. They say that the things that men have been doing are better and more hon-
“Anything that requires more get-up-and-go, less regard for others, more initiative, more ruthlessness. I use qualities deliberately which are good and bad, but all of which I think men have more than women.”

HRP: But what about a moderate form of feminism that assumes that some occupations legitimately reward those who are more aggressive more than those who are less aggressive. That’s —

Mansfield: They do it legitimately and illegitimately — either way, they do it.

HRP: OK. Well let’s say that’s acknowledged by a moderate feminist, and that a moderate feminist might say, “All I’m asking for is that we have a society that truly allows individuals to compete with other individuals to show what level of aggression they have, free from the expectation that because they are of a particular gender they won’t be as successful.” A moderate feminist might say, “Choose the criteria for success. I don’t mind what they are, as long as they are fairly applied. Don’t subject me to the expectation that because I am a woman I can’t be a bond trader. Give me the equal chance to enter into that realm of competition.”

Mansfield: Well, that’s already stacking it in favor of aggression, because it’s that very competitiveness which women have less of than men. So no matter what the standards are, and this is why I think this applies very much more generally than simply to infantry, no matter what the standards are, if they are applied in a situation which contains competition, I think women are always at a disadvantage. And so they will always feel frustrated and cheated when they see that someone of less intellect and character than they succeeds better. Men are more used to that and more tolerant of it.

HRP: Do you think that these differences to which you are referring are primarily socialized or are primarily the product of some difference in biology?

Mansfield: Primarily natural, but also partly socialized. The socialization can work to confirm the natural differences or to try to eradicate them. At present we are doing the latter and, I think, with some success but with the prospect of frustration and failure. I should also mention the consequences for the family of feminism, which are dire. The family and quite a few other things, too, but especially the family, has long survived on the willingness of women to contribute more without being too concerned with the credit they get. And that is no longer or much less the case, and I think it’s hurting our families very much. A woman’s responsibility used to be to do the things that the “responsible” people didn’t do. That is, the everyday things. The things which are the real difference between human happiness and not — whether the house is in decent shape and the beds are made and dinner is there and the children are brought up.

HRP: Do you think that the real problem with the American family today is that many women in two-parent families are working, or the fact that many, many families today simply have no husband or father present?

Mansfield: Well, both. Irresponsibility is naturally greater in the male than in the female — that goes with aggressiveness and a certain desire to escape entangling attachments. But the feminists fail to realize that a liberated woman also liberates a man. When the woman goes to work, then the man no longer has to work for her, to support her. When a woman gets a right
to abort on her own, without any say from the father, then it is hard to say that the father still has responsibility when she doesn’t abort. Every child that’s born in America today is so as this result of the sole decision by a woman which, one could say, supersedes the responsibility of the father who engendered it.

**HJR:** But in the decision whether or not to abort, one might argue that women deserve to decide that question because they will have to suffer unique personal hardships, physical hardships for a certain length of time, based on a possible outcome of that decision.

**Mansfield:** That’s right, of course. That’s too bad. For this, they get the compensating pleasure of a closer bond with their children. “Hardship” is too strong a word — “discomfort” in modern circumstances is I think the most one could say, or “inconvenience.”

**HJR:** A libertarian might find the prospect of nine months of personal hardship so outrageous, so unfair, that that would overcome the claim to —

**Mansfield:** Not if she were a woman. Women like to have babies. That’s why they do, for the most part. And so do men, but not quite as much.

**HJR:** You used “she” for the first time in this interview. You don’t subscribe to the trend of using gender-neutral language.

**Mansfield:** Right, because it seems to me to rest on the premise, which I deny, that men and women are exchangeable.

**HJR:** But why not, then, alternate the use of male and female pronouns so that the straw person to whom one is referring varies, so that the straw person could be conceived of as male or female? But to use only the male pronoun in the course of a discussion seems to possibly indicate that one thinks that only men could be the appropriate subjects of the discussion.

**Mansfield:** No, it never has meant that. It has always been — in almost all cases — perfectly understandable when one is using “he” to refer to males and “he” the impersonal. And in those few cases where it’s unclear, you can make it clear by using “he” and “she” as they used to be used, when you want to draw attention to the sexual difference. The ridiculous aspect of this new usage is that it means to deny the sexual difference and instead draws attention to it. And there’s a certain compulsiveness — here I am a libertarian — a certain imposition of somebody else’s politics, which I don’t like. If we were doing it again, and it weren’t being proposed by feminists, with their crazy notions, I would be willing to entertain some sort of compromise.

**HJR:** Let’s return to the abortion issue for a moment. Do you think that couples should, jointly, have a right to abort a pregnancy?

**Mansfield:** Yes, I do. I agree with President Clinton, that abortion should
When a woman gets a right to abort on her own, without any say from the father, then it is hard to say that the father still has responsibility when she doesn’t abort.

be safe, legal, and rare. The problem is, if it’s safe and legal, how is it going to be rare? So I would look for some way of reducing the number of abortions, a million and a half in this country every year, as an extravagant number.

**HRP:** But if, let’s say, an abortion, considered in the abstract, is not morally objectionable in the sense that it does not constitute the killing of a person, then why should the number that are performed matter at all?

**Mansfield:** It’s, again, a terrible irresponsibility to treat a fetus as an inconvenience. It’s not a person, but it’s a potential person, so it can’t just be treated as a disease or an excrescence. It’s a matter of life and death, not of a viable human being but of a future human being. How is a mother supposed to look on a child as someone she could have chosen to kill? That seems to me to open up a freedom which it would be better for us not to have. But, since we do have it, and since there are cases of real hardship — even real danger — I wouldn’t outlaw it altogether but I would put many burdens [on it]. One which my wife has proposed is a steeply progressive tax on abortions, so that the more money you have, the more tax you would have to pay to get an abortion. One of the worst things about abortions is that so many of them are done by people who are perfectly capable of raising a child but find it inconvenient.

**HRP:** But if a man has a veto over the abortion of a woman whom he has impregnated, unless there exist mechanisms to force that man to provide economic assistance to the child and the child’s mother, he basically has the ability to force a woman into economic hardship.

**Mansfield:** Or into the pleasure of having a child. You underestimate how much fun it is to have children. It’s a lot of work, too — I wouldn’t call it hardship, I would just call it work. But it’s the kind of work which is fun. I wouldn’t have missed it for anything in my life. I’ve had a happy life in all stages, but the happiest is the time when my children were young.

**HRP:** If the technology became available, would you put your notion of the pleasure of having children to the test and have one yourself?

**Mansfield:** Yeah, sure. But, I mean, that’s totally... Put it this way, I’m ready for grandchildren.

**HRP:** Do you think a family leave bill is an effort to help families?

**Mansfield:** I think that’s bad. No, I think it hurts families by producing greater independence of husband and wife from each other. And I’m against daycare, too — or government supported daycare. I think it’s better to have parents at home with their children, and [for them to have] a somewhat less affluent life.

**HRP:** But do you think that for the majority of Americans, the decision of whether a woman is going to work or not is really a choice between whether or not to purchase a second car, between affluence and membership in the middle class, or do you think it’s a decision between poverty and —

**Mansfield:** No, I don’t think poverty, no.

**HRP:** You don’t think that that’s the case?

**Mansfield:** Right, I think that’s much overstated. But I can see why a woman might want to take a part-time job [to] bring up the finances. That
doesn't require, in most cases, I think, a full-time job or a full-time career, and that's different from the justification that most feminists would use. I have to say that there is certainly a problem here for modern women — there's not enough for them to do in the home, especially after the children grow to a certain age. It's boring. They certainly need something else than the work of a housewife, so I don't mean to sentence them to a life of tending the kitchen. But they should take advantage of leisure, which a lot of men would envy if only they would reflect, to improve their minds.

**HRP:** On a personal note, have you had to assure the female partners in your life that you do not, in fact, wish to sentence them to a life of household chores?

*Mansfield:* Yes, and my feminism is that I work around the house. It's more practical.

**HRP:** Tells us about your upcoming book.

*Mansfield:* I'm gearing up for a general book on American politics. Three parts — our politics, our virtue, and our culture, and the interconnections. So, a very comprehensive thing, in which I definitely want to take up all the hot issues — women, blacks, gays, everything. But I've got a couple of things I've got to finish in before I get started on that.

**HRP:** Do you see yourself vying with Bloom for a definitive statement on modern America?

*Mansfield:* No, I don't want to repeat what he said, and so I won't make my focus the universities. My focus will be the Constitution, and how it stands today. How it's been transformed and whether that's been for the better or worse. But not narrowly political — our virtue and our culture, too. Our virtue is self-interest, plus responsibility, which I've been talking about at some length already. And our culture is this advancing multiculturalism, plus the universities, which are still valuable, worthy of defense, much in need of reform, and the arts and popular culture. All those things I want to talk about.

**HRP:** Where do you find the impetus to be a presence on campus, to be a crusader or to lead a fight which is often, at Harvard, not a popular one?

*Mansfield:* It comes from the horrible feeling that, if I don't speak, no one will. It isn't really ambition, because I [don't] care about running things or directing things or administering. It's a strong sense that things are out of sorts and somebody needs at least to draw attention to grave mistakes we're making.

**HRP:** Do you feel that some of the positions you've staked out have possibly adversely affected your relationship with students who might want to take your classes? How might a black or female student view you as a professor?

*Mansfield:* Well, people do choose courses for the opinions of the professor more now than they used to, which is a very bad thing. I don't think I can use that as a reason for silence, and I just have to hope that there are sufficient numbers of fair-minded students who will see, I think, if they try it, that I do my best to run an honest course. And I don't think that that's something that needs to be defined, because everybody knows what that means.