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Private and Public Virtue in Euripides’ Hecuba

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The purpose of this essay, as its title suggests, is to explore the relationship between two competing conceptions of virtue, public and private, and to do so within the context of an often-overlooked but richly theoretical Greek tragedy, the Hecuba of Euripides. Though the tension between public and private moral claims is a perennial one, the Hecuba treats this tension in singular fashion, conveying through tragic suffering both the need for and the means of seeking balance. The pages that follow offer an interpretation of the Hecuba and situate the play in both its political and intellectual contexts. What emerges is a sense of Euripides’ value as a tragedian and theorist in addressing the problems surrounding virtue in private and public life.

Euripides’ Hecuba is set in the immediate aftermath of the Trojan War. The kingdom of Troy has been conquered; Hecuba, wife of Priam and queen of Troy, is among those who have been enslaved. The Greeks are just departing for home when a ghost appears to Hecuba in her sleep. It is Polydorus, Hecuba’s youngest son, whose welfare (along with a sizable inheritance of gold) she and Priam had entrusted during the war to the Thracian king, Polymestor. Polydorus was too young to manage the heavy armor of battle and was therefore useless to the Trojan war effort. His ghost has much to convey in the form of a prologue: as long as Troy stood, Polymestor cared for him, but when the city was taken, the Thracian king murdered him for the gold and threw his body carelessly into the sea. Now the ghost has begged the gods for a proper burial by his mother’s hand, and they have granted his request. But there is more. According to Polydorus, the ghost of Achilles has
appeared to the departing Greek troops and demanded the sacrifice of Polyxena (daughter of Hecuba, sister of Polydorus) as a final prize of war. And according to Polydorus, Achilles “will not be left without a gift by his friends” (Euripides 1995, 42–3; all subsequent line-number references are to this edition).

The action of the play is deceptively simple, consisting of three separate events: the sacrifice of Polyxena at the hands of the Greeks; the discovery of Polydorus’s corpse by Hecuba and her maidservants; and Hecuba’s subsequent punishment of Polymestor, in which she blinds him and kills his two sons. The “lessons” of the play, however, have vexed scholars for centuries (see Gregory 1991 for a powerful defense of the view, which we share, that Greek tragedies convey moral teachings; see also Heath 1987, 46). To be sure, such lessons as one may draw are to be found not in these events alone, but also (and especially) in the richly theoretical dialogue that surrounds them. Before Polyxena is sacrificed, the Greeks debate the matter in assembly. Before Odysseus collects the girl, he and Hecuba debate the justice of the Greeks’ decision. Before Hecuba exacts her revenge upon Polymestor, she and Agamemnon debate whether Agamemnon (as a Greek) should assist Hecuba in her essentially private dispute. And after Polymestor is punished, Agamemnon presides over a debate between Hecuba and Polymestor concerning the degree of Polymestor’s guilt. It is precisely out of these debates, we argue, that the most important lessons of the play emerge.

The traditional interpretation of Hecuba emphasizes Euripides’ novel and somewhat puzzling combination of two myths: the myth of “Polyxena’s Sacrifice,” and that of “Hecuba’s Revenge” (Kirkwood 1947; Conacher 1967; and King 1985). The challenge has been to illuminate the connection or movement between these two mythological fragments, and this is usually done by postulating a transformation in Hecuba’s character over the course of the play, from a passive to an active sufferer. But this solution raises questions of its own: what exactly is Hecuba’s transformation supposed to signify? And what has caused it? Answers to these questions have been both profound and varied. For some scholars, Hecuba’s transformation represents a movement from human to animal, as she becomes a Medea-like agent of unmeasured and unjust revenge (Reckford 1985; Nussbaum 1986; Arrowsmith 1991; and Segal 1993). For others, she becomes not a beast but rather a symbol of justice itself—a defender of divine nomos and an exemplar of moral action (Meridor 1978; Kovacs 1987; and Mossman 1995). At the same time, the efficient cause of Hecuba’s transformation has been variously located in the
cruelties of war (Abrahamson 1952), in the Greeks’ adherence to an archaic heroic code (King 1985), in Hecuba’s exposure to human wickedness (Kitto 1939 and 1960), in the insensitivity of political opportunists (Adkins 1966), in the “bleak logic of political necessity” (Arrowsmith 1991), and in the Greeks’ “imperialist mentality” (Gregory 1991).

Our interpretation takes a different point of departure by bringing the play’s numerous dialogues and debates to the fore, while allowing other questions—the issue of the play’s mythological sources; the question of Hecuba’s madness; the meaning of her provocative, but fleeting, soliloquy on nobility (591–608)—to recede slightly. In this fashion, we view the play as a clash between two basic moral outlooks and as a poignant reminder of the need for some sort of balance between them. The first outlook, articulated by Hecuba during her debate with Odysseus, locates moral responsibility in relationships among private individuals; the second, articulated by Odysseus, locates it in the polis and its needs. Referring to these moral perspectives later in the play as “private” and “public” (see, e.g., 858–860, 902–904), Euripides shows, in no uncertain terms, that tragedy ensues when the demands of one or the other go unnoticed. However, Hecuba is not simply, or not merely, a tragedy. For, as Hecuba is made to see that she cannot support her own moral code without the help of communal strength, and the Greeks are brought to see that they cannot completely disregard the moral interests of individuals, Euripides presents a world in which reflection on tragic experience opens the door for improvement in political life. Both moral perspectives, private and public, are tempered in this play and brought to a fragile middle ground. That middle ground is, to be sure, somewhat unsatisfying, especially to those who seek moral certainty. It is no surprise, therefore, that some scholars have found this to be no moral ground at all (Hogan 1972). However, our view is that Euripides’ Hecuba not only depicts a genuine and perennial tension in moral-political life but also draws attention to the elements that any successful balance must involve. As the following analysis will show, those elements include the cultivation of a sense of pity or respect for other people; a clear understanding of the radical freedom every person has to be just; a recognition of the importance of persuasion; and a proper understanding of the status of the gods (or the divine) in human affairs.

**TWO MORAL OUTLOOKS: PRIVATE AND PUBLIC**

In the debate between Hecuba and Odysseus over Polyxena’s fate (218–331), Hecuba is moved to articulate a coherent and compelling
moral outlook, according to which the Greeks’ decision to sacrifice Polyxena, as well as Odysseus’ active promotion of that decision, appear unjust. Moral responsibility, according to Hecuba—which exists even in relationships of victor and vanquished, master and slave, citizen and foreigner—is simply the duty incumbent upon every individual to treat other individuals with fairness and respect.

Hecuba’s moral outlook can be seen clearly in the way she once treated a much-weaker Odysseus. As she reminds Odysseus, he was once her captive inside the walls of Troy. Odysseus had disguised himself as a beggar in order to spy on his enemies, but he was discovered by Helen and immediately turned over to Hecuba (for a slightly different account, cf. Homer 1996, 4: 244–96). Hecuba certainly could have had Odysseus killed—perhaps should have, according to the logic of war. But instead she recognized him not as an enemy but as an individual human being, worthy of respect; she pitied him, spared his life, and smuggled him out of Troy. What she expects now from Odysseus is a gesture of recognition, pity, and kindness in return:

As you admit, you fell in supplication before me and grasped my hand and my aged cheek. I grasp you in the same way, and I ask for the return of the favor [charin] I showed you then, and I beg you: do not tear my child from my arms. . . . Those who have power ought not to exercise it wrongfully, nor when they are fortunate should they imagine that they will be so forever. I too was once someone of importance, but now I am so no longer: a single day has stolen all my happiness from me. (273–85)

From Hecuba’s perspective, moral responsibility consists in treating individuals with initial kindness (charis) and in returning favors for favors received (antidosis). From a strictly civic perspective, her kindness to Odysseus might be viewed as treasonous; but, for Hecuba, moral duty is not determined solely by the interests of the city, nor is it extinguished when the “other” becomes weak. (Indeed, questions of relative strength and weakness seem an ill component of moral reasoning in a world where fortunes change dramatically overnight.) Thus foreigners, even enemies, can and should be made friends (philoi) through private acts of kindness; and perhaps Hecuba’s hope—the hope of many who adhere to this moral outlook—is that a consistent give and take of personal favors might produce peaceful and secure relations among human beings.

Odysseus’s moral outlook, as revealed in his reply to Hecuba, is fundamentally different. His is a civic, or public, perspective, according to which the question of how people should be treated is decided not by reference to abstract notions of human worth or to private debts of friendship, but
simply by reference to what each person has done for the Greek cause. This outlook stands at odds with Hecuba’s in several respects. First, it entails a necessary distinction between Greeks and barbarians, friends and foes, allies and enemies, while Hecuba’s outlook does not. Secondly, it entails a sort of moral inegalitarianism that Hecuba’s outlook does not. Hecuba is, of course, a queen, and no friend of political equality (257–59, 604–8); however, she is a moral egalitarian insofar as she grants every individual the same degree of moral recognition. Odysseus, by contrast, grants more moral authority to those (such as Achilles) who supply the most service to the Greeks (306–8). And finally, Odysseus’s outlook is decidedly utilitarian in a way that Hecuba’s is not. He allows considerations of political health and political security to determine what should be done, while Hecuba radically ignores such considerations.

So far we have been rather abstract. But let us now see how these two moral perspectives play out in a material conflict: the clash between Hecuba and Odysseus over Polyxena’s fate. The question is whether or not the sacrifice of Polyxena is a just and morally responsible act. And since what is “just” (dikaios, 271) for Hecuba is determined by the appropriateness of the way individuals are treated vis-a-vis the way those individuals have treated others, the sacrifice of Polyxena makes no moral sense. In the first place, as Hecuba points out, Odysseus is in Hecuba’s debt: “Is it not then utter baseness [kakunê],” she inquires, “to put forward these proposals of yours? You have been treated by me as you admit you were treated, yet you do me no good but instead all the harm you can” (251–53). But more importantly, Polyxena has never harmed a soul; and this is the core of Hecuba’s argument: If Achilles wished to pay back those who killed him, is it right for him to murder her? She has done him no harm. [He ought to be asking for Helen as a victim for his tomb. For she caused his death by bringing him to Troy.] But if it is necessary that of captives the choicest and most beautiful be put to death, that honor does not belong to us. Tyndareus’ daughter Helen is the most outstanding in beauty, and she has clearly done him no less harm than we Trojans did. (263–70; Kovacs would delete the passage in brackets).

Again and again Hecuba comes back to the notion that one should not harm those who have done no harm to others. Thus, she cannot see justice in Polyxena’s sacrifice, nor can she see anything other than shameless irresponsibility in Odysseus’s promotion of it.

From Odysseus’s perspective, however, the sacrifice of Polyxena is just; for Odysseus defines justice in terms of what is good for one’s
Hecuba, . . . I am ready—I will not say otherwise—to save your life, since at your hands I enjoyed good fortune. But I shall not unsay what I said to the whole assembly, that since Troy has been captured, we ought to sacrifice your daughter to the most valiant man in the army since he has asked for her. It is exactly here that most cities get into trouble, when a man who is both valiant and eager to serve wins no greater prize of valor than his inferiors. Achilles is worthy of honor in our eyes, lady, since he died a most glorious death on behalf of the land of Greece. Is it not a disgrace [aischron] if we treat him as our friend [philô] while he lives but after he is dead treat him so no longer? What then will people say if occasion arises to muster the army again and fight the enemy? Will we fight or will we save our skins since we notice that those who die receive no honor? . . . As for us, if it is a bad custom to honor the brave warrior, we will incur the charge of hard-heartedness. Continue, barbarian peoples, not regarding your friends as friends and not honoring those who have died noble deaths, so that Greece may prosper while you enjoy the fate your principles deserve! (301–31)

It should be noted that Odysseus acknowledges some degree of personal indebtedness to Hecuba (301–2). However, he is emphatically not willing to let private debts stand in the way of what politically ought to be done. (One suspects that if Achilles had demanded Hecuba’s life instead of Polyxena’s, Odysseus would still have honored his request). For Odysseus, the city—its safety and that of its allies—stands as the ultimate criterion of moral evaluation. Justice is viewed as a public, not a private, thing; justice is getting what one deserves from the city in response to the service one has supplied to the city. As with Hecuba’s view of justice, this involves giving and receiving in due proportion. But the object toward which service is owed is here the city, not the private individual. And from this perspective, the sacrifice of Polyxena makes a certain amount of sense (Adkins 1966, esp. 198–200). Achilles is the city’s best protector and must be honored with whatever he desires. Polyxena is a barbarian and an enemy; she has no value, save her value as a prize.

Now, in this clash of moral outlooks one is of course moved to wonder, Who is right? Or, to pose the question in terms of literary interpretation: With whom is Euripides’ audience supposed to side? According to some commentators, we are clearly meant to side with the suffering Hecuba against the “savage egoism of Achilles” and his agent Odysseus (King 1985). Others would have us side with Odysseus on the grounds that his arguments are “stronger” and his competitive values are genuinely “Homeric” (Adkins 2000).
1966; see also Stanton 1995). It is our contention, however, that this question cannot be definitively answered in the way it is posed, since Hecuba and Odysseus are both, in a sense, right. Both Hecuba and Odysseus offer arguments that follow logically from their initial assumptions, and both sets of assumptions are, at least to some degree, compelling. The question that must be asked, therefore, is not Who is right? but rather: (a) to what degree are these two moral perspectives both necessary? and (b) how might they be reconciled one with the other? In the case of the sacrifice of Polyxena, the opportunity for reconciliation has been lost. She is to be killed—and this, because Odysseus threatens to use force if Hecuba and Polyxena do not comply. However, the broader political-philosophical issues that separate Hecuba and Odysseus are not resolved by force. And, even as Polyxena’s sacrifice is carried out, the necessity for some sort of reconciliation becomes evident.

**INTERLUDE: TWO CONCEPTIONS OF FREEDOM**

Before that reconciliation can be pursued, however, a brief discussion of Euripides’ treatment of freedom is necessary; for, this theme of the play at once amplifies and tests the limits of the distinction between the public and private outlooks emphasized thus far. The *Hecuba* is in some ways a sustained investigation into the meaning of freedom (see Daitz 1971, who emphasizes this in a singular and persuasive fashion). At first, that investigation centers on the distinction between those who have power, the Greek victors, and those who do not, the Trojan losers now become slaves (*douloi*); and it begins very early in the play, when Odysseus tells Hecuba of the decision to sacrifice Polyxena, and Hecuba attempts to dissuade him. Odysseus makes it clear that he has the power in this debate, as he tells Hecuba: “Recognize that hard necessity is upon you and this is the hour of trouble for you” (227–28).

For her part, Hecuba accepts her position in this agonistic struggle by pleading with Odysseus to listen to her questions: “But if slaves may address to the free (*tous eleutherous*) such questions as do not cause them pain or sting their hearts, it is right for you to reply and for us the askers to listen” (234–37). Odysseus, the Greek, is free, and his freedom is attended by a powerful political community. Hecuba, the slave, has none of that power and none of that freedom. She has no city, no king, no family to attend to her needs; and, thus, she is powerless. In the pleading that follows, however, Hecuba makes it clear that this kind of freedom may be very tenuous. There was a time when she was powerful and Odysseus was her slave, and Odysseus made humble supplication to her (239–48). This view of freedom, which we shall call “public” because it is so dependent on the public realm for its protection and sustenance, is, in
part, reflective of what Hobbes refers to as “the liberty of the commonwealth” (Hobbes 1996, 149). It is not the liberty of particular individuals as much as it is the liberty of political association. Individuals secure their freedom and their identity within the context of the public realm. In the course of her supplication to Odysseus, Hecuba aligns freedom and power in this fashion, although she warns of the danger of doing so when she argues, “Those who have power ought not to exercise it wrongfully, nor when they are fortunate should they imagine that they will be so forever. I too was once someone of importance, but now I am so no longer: a single day has stolen all my happiness from me” (282–85).

However, this is not the only type of freedom examined in the play. Indeed, a private understanding of freedom is offered in the character of Polyxena, when she refuses (contrary to all expectations) to plead with Odysseus for her life. Polyxena was once noble and free, her father was king of all the Phrygians, and she was mistress to the women of Troy; but now she is a slave. Her public freedom, then, is gone. (It should be noted that Euripides’ treatment of such reversals in fortune is not confined to those of noble birth. In other plays—*Medea, Electra* and *Helen*, for example—he has a nurse, a peasant, and slaves behave in a manner that would not be expected, given their station in life; see further Daitz 1971, 222–23.) What remains, however, is a beautiful and dignified conception of freedom—the freedom of Polyxena’s soul. Polyxena imagines that as a slave she will be bound perhaps to a “cruel-hearted master, who shall buy me for so much silver, me, the sister of Hector” (359–61), or that she will be compelled to “serve in the palace kitchen, to sweep the floors and to tend the loom, living a life of misery” (362–64). Her response to these imaginings is simple yet powerful: “It shall not be! From eyes still free [ομματῶν ελευθέρων] I shut out the light of day and consign myself to the world below!” (367–68). Freedom is now the refusal to be coerced and the refusal to be enslaved. It is predominantly a statement of personal autonomy; and it calls on those who have the courage to embrace it to choose death over actions considered undignified or unjust. For her part, Polyxena accepts that call. (On this understanding of freedom, compare Plato’s portrait of Socrates in the *Phaedo* [61e ff.]; and Cicero’s remarks about Cato in the *Tusculan Disputations* [1.30.74].)

Euripides provocatively intermingles these two notions of freedom in the final portion of this struggle between Hecuba and Odysseus. Hecuba pleads with Odysseus to allow her to be killed with Polyxena. When Odysseus refuses, Hecuba says, “I absolutely must be killed with my daughter!”
Odysseus responds: “Must? I am not aware that I have a master,” and thereby reminds Hecuba of his public freedom and power, and her status as a powerless slave (397). Polyxena, on the other hand, embraces her fate and thereby illustrates the power of private freedom, which can never be taken away. She commands Odysseus to cover her head and to take her to the slaughter, just as she commands the Greek soldiers, whose task it is to see that she does not try to escape or struggle: “You Argives who have sacked my city, I die of my own accord! Let no one touch my person, for I shall offer you my neck bravely! In the gods’ name, leave me free when you kill me [eleutheran de m’], so that I may die a free woman [hôs eleuthera thanô]” (548–50).

More will be said about these two conceptions of freedom, for freedom emerges again at the conclusion of the play and proves to be an important element in its teachings. At this point, however, it is important to note that Euripides’ treatment of this theme, while in many ways amplifying the public and private dichotomy set out above, also begins to test and strain that dichotomy. In fact, all of the Greeks, including the army, Achilles’ son, and the messenger Talthybius, acknowledge the sheer beauty and courage of Polyxena’s sense of freedom. They are deeply moved (indeed, moved to tears in Talthybius’s case) and pay tribute to her “supreme bravery and surpassing nobility” (579-80). But what could this possibly mean? For, in recognizing the beauty and nobility of Polyxena’s actions, they acknowledge the value of a type of private virtue that opposes public virtue, indeed a private notion of freedom that threatens the very public type they defend. Moreover, they acknowledge an individual, a slave and prize of war, as a person of value because of her actions and not because of her public persona or status. This reveals a tension in the Greek moral code. In the face of Polyxena’s individual courage and independence, the Greeks cannot maintain their extremely public perspective.

**The Call for Balance**

In the midst of the clash between public and private ethical perspectives in this play, a call for balance emerges as Euripides suggests that neither perspective, by itself, can operate to the exclusion of the other. This is suggested in two ways—first, by Hecuba’s own tragic fate. Hecuba elevated the needs of individuals, even those of foreigners and enemies, over the needs of her city. Since she maintained this approach even when her city’s needs were most dire—during wartime—we might say that she took her city entirely for granted. The results of this approach, however, appear in the ruin of Troy (hastened by the stratagems of Odysseus himself), and also in the subsequent
shattering of Hecuba’s moral world. Hecuba comes to realize suddenly and tragically that her faith in the integrity of individuals to act in morally responsible ways was conditioned upon the health of the very city she took for granted. As the ghost of Polydorus points out:

As long as the land’s boundary markers stood erect and the towers were unscathed and Hector my brother was successful in battle, I grew up well tended like a sapling at the court of my father’s Thracian guest-friend, … but when Troy and the life of Hector were lost, … my father’s guest-friend killed me, unlucky man that I was, for my gold, and having killed me cast my corpse into the billowing sea, so that he himself might keep the gold in his house. (16–27; cf. Hecuba’s line at 776)

Without cities such as Troy to encourage and enforce private moral bonds, individuals may well cease to act reliably. Thus, it is foolish, if not impossible, to maintain strictly private moral bonds, while denying the needs of civic life. This is a lesson that Odysseus explicitly tries to teach (didaskein, 299) Hecuba at the beginning of the play; and it is one that, by the end of the play, she has learned (see, e.g., 667–70, 714–20, 749–50, 1208–16).

On the other hand (and this is the second way in which Euripides calls for balance), commitment to a purely civic moral code, one that refuses to recognize individuals except in terms of their usefulness to the city, is shown in this play to be equally disastrous. This is the code embraced by Odysseus, as well as by a majority (107 ff.) of the Greeks. It is the code that allowed the “murderous son of Achilles” to “slaughter” (sphadzo) Troy’s king Priam on a god-built altar (23–24), and which required Agamemnon, before the Greeks could depart for Troy, to sacrifice his own daughter Iphigenia to the cause. The problem with strict adherence to this code—as the tears shed over Polyxena’s death attest—is that individual lives are not so easily blotted out. As human beings develop personal attachments, sometimes in unexpected places, the purpose of the city is in some sense to nourish and protect those attachments. When it fails to do so, civic life crumbles from within. Thus, the city may well benefit from the sacrifice of an Iphigenia or a Polyxena, but these sacrifices come at a cost in terms of private relationships. It is no surprise therefore—as Polymestor prophesies at the end of this play (1281)—that Agamemnon will return home to an angry Clytemnestra, who will avenge her daughter’s death with Agamemnon’s blood.

These tragic events invite further reflection upon the actions and assumptions that led up to them. The fundamental political-theoretical
flaw in Hecuba’s moral outlook lies in her understanding of human nature, particularly her assumption of human goodness. Hecuba’s *charis*, or granting of favors, constitutes an act of trust. And while some such act certainly lies at the root of all political life (as Hobbes would later write: “the first and fundamental law of nature . . . is to seek Peace and follow it,” 1996, 92), good will is sometimes not reciprocated; just as individuals sometimes seek violence instead of peace. Hecuba’s moral philosophy recognizes no such contingencies. A solution, however, is suggested by the Greeks; and this consists of “strength in numbers,” or the maintenance of a political community that can punish wickedness by force. The shortcoming of Hecuba’s moral outlook, therefore, points in the direction of the polis, and the claims that the polis places upon its citizens become legitimate. However, a strong polis entails a danger all its own, namely, the tendency toward collective injustice, or the use of the city’s strength to harm innocents for personal and/or collective gain. The Greeks in this play flagrantly disregard this danger, as they allow arguments of political utility to trump concern for private right. (Here Euripides would seem to be making a thinly veiled critique of contemporary Athenian foreign policy; see especially Thucydides 1998, III, 36–50.) The question, then, is how some sort of balance might be struck between these private and public moral outlooks.

Balance in this play comes by way of an interchange between Hecuba and Agamemnon. Polydorus’s body has washed up on the shore, and Hecuba now realizes that Polymestor has betrayed her. She seeks revenge, but she also understands that revenge will not be possible without some sort of communal support (749–50). The Greek general Agamemnon appears at just the right moment. But why should Agamemnon, a Greek, assist Hecuba in her essentially private dispute? It is precisely in Hecuba’s attempt to answer this question and to persuade Agamemnon to assist her that private and public moral claims begin to merge. How does Hecuba persuade him?

Her first strategy is to show Agamemnon that private crimes (i.e., those not involving any city directly) require public attention. Grasping Agamemnon’s knees in the ritual posture of supplication, Hecuba makes the following speech:

If you think the treatment I have received is such as the gods approve, I will bear it. But if not, punish for my sake the man, guest-friend most impious, who has done a deed most unholy, fearing neither the gods below nor those above. . . . Now I may be a slave and of no account. But the gods have force and so does the law
[nomos] that rules [kratôn] over them. For it is by virtue of law [nomôi] that we believe in the gods and distinguish right from wrong in our lives. If this law comes before your tribunal and is set at naught, if those who murder their guests or plunder the temples of the gods are not punished, then there is no more justice among men. (788–805)

This little speech has generated a great deal of scholarly controversy due to the ambiguity of the word nomos, which appears twice in line 800 and can be translated variously as “law” or “convention.” In this case, the meaning of the passage hinges on the choice. Martha Nussbaum (1986, 400), opting for “convention,” understands the passage to be saying that belief in the gods exists only through human convention, that convention in this sense “rules” the gods, and that human beings “make (not: find) basic moral distinctions” (a similar interpretation appears in Heinimann 1945, 121). However, Kovacs (1987, 101) correctly points out that when this passage is considered in context, that is, as an attempt to persuade Agamemnon why he should help Hecuba, Nussbaum’s atheistic reading loses its plausibility. This is an appeal, rather, to higher law and an attempt to remind Agamemnon that it is his responsibility as a ruler to enforce this law. Thus, Hecuba’s speech begins with the assumption (one that she and Agamemnon share; cf. 97, 788, 799, 853, 900) that the gods exist and have some “force” (sthenousi) in moral considerations. She then makes two claims which, however provocative, are not central to her argument: first, that the “law” according to which right and wrong is distinguished applies not only to mortals but to gods as well; and second, that it is through our awareness of this law that we come to believe in the gods. Agamemnon may agree or disagree with these claims; but Hecuba’s plea does not depend upon them. For her basic point is this: if Agamemnon believes in the gods (as he does), and believes that divine standards of right and wrong condemn Polymestor, then he must act to punish Polymestor.

Of course, the conclusion here does not follow necessarily from the premises; but it does follow if two other assumptions are supplied, namely, (a) that the gods cannot be depended upon to punish every act of human wickedness; and (b) that failure to punish has serious social consequences. The first of these assumptions is never expressed, but it is certainly borne out by the very fact of Hecuba’s situation: Polymestor has committed a heinous crime and has gone unpunished. The second assumption is one that Hecuba spells out for Agamemnon in the closing part of her speech: “if those who murder their guests and plunder the temples of the gods are not punished, then there is no more justice among men” (802–5). The point could be further
elaborated, but it is clearly a consequentialist argument (similar, in this sense, to the argument Hecuba heard from Odysseus at line 313 ff.). If justice is to be served, it must be served by Agamemnon’s tribunal; and if it is not served, such neglect may lead to the end of justice on earth. It is Agamemnon’s responsibility as a public figure to act (844–45).

Agamemnon is evidently not persuaded—perhaps because he does not believe that failure to enforce justice in a foreign matter will jeopardize the practice of justice among the Greeks. In any event, he turns away. But Hecuba has another strategy: If she cannot convince Agamemnon that her case has public consequences, then perhaps she can persuade him that his failure to act will have private consequences for him. She tries again:

My prophetic daughter, whom the Phrygians call Cassandra, sleeps at your side. What weight will you give, my lord, to those nights of love? Or what return [charin] shall my daughter have for her loving embraces in bed, and what return shall I have for her? It is from darkness and from the delights of night that mortals receive their greatest favor [charis] Listen, therefore: do you see the dead man here? In benefiting him it is your kinsman by marriage that you benefit. (827–35, with minor alterations to Kovacs)

Again, human beings develop attachments in unexpected places. Agamemnon has taken Cassandra as his concubine and receives favors from her of a sort that warrant consideration. Though Agamemnon may be tempted to dismiss Hecuba as a foreigner (a nonentity from the perspective of the Greeks), his relationship to Cassandra complicates matters considerably. Cassandra’s responsiveness toward Agamemnon could change for the worse if he fails to seek justice for her brother.

Hecuba’s arguments here pull together the diverse claims of public and private morality in an impressive manner. She has learned from Odysseus, as from her own suffering, that the public realm cannot be taken simply for granted—that it requires the attention of individuals. She is now in a position to teach Agamemnon the opposite lesson, that the private realm cannot be taken for granted either, and that it requires the attention of cities. Indeed, when people see that private acts of injustice occur without consequences, they will eventually cease to act justly. Individuals will begin to seek their own advantage, causing harm to others; and the moral foundations of political life will wither away as civic peace turns into civil war. Just as Hecuba makes this connection plain, she reminds Agamemnon of why private relationships ultimately matter: it is precisely through such relationships that
human beings find delight. Agamemnon finds delight with Cassandra; however, this is merely symbolic for the delight found in all sorts of private relationships (especially those among family members, friends, and associates). These are certainly a part of what citizens defend when they go to war. Thus Odysseus had dramatically oversimplified matters when he suggested earlier to Hecuba (315–20) that war is for the pursuit of honor and that without honor people would no longer fight. War is in a sense for the pursuit of honor, but it is more fundamentally for the protection of those private relationships in which human beings find joy and meaning. Private relationships and public service are thus closely intermingled and depend upon each other to such an extent that they become difficult (if not impossible) to separate. This is indeed a tempered and balanced understanding of the relationship between private and public moral impulses, and it is one that Hecuba has arrived at only through the tragic conflict between these impulses in her own experience.

Psychological and Political Conditions for Moderation

Is Agamemnon persuaded by Hecuba’s appeals? His lines at the end of the scene suggest that he is: “It is the common concern [koinon] of each man privately [idiai] and each city that the bad should get bad treatment while the good enjoy good fortune” (902–4, with slight modifications from Kovacs. Emphasis ours.). But Agamemnon is nevertheless reticent to act, for he knows how the Greeks will see things: they will think that it was simply for Cassandra’s sake [Kassandras charin] that he acted and that he therefore allowed a “private matter” [chôris; literally, a separate matter] to impinge improperly upon public policy (855–60). In the end, Agamemnon extends to Hecuba his partial support. He is willing to share in the knowledge of her plot, but not in the execution of it. Yet, while his support is only partial, it is tremendously significant in terms of the political-philosophical lessons of the play. Hecuba and Agamemnon have reached a middle ground on the very abstract issues that she and Odysseus found intractable. This middle ground cannot be openly implemented in a political sense, because the Greek army (unlike Agamemnon) has not been persuaded. However, the play holds out the possibility of an openly balanced politics for the future. This would require educating the masses; and this might be done by exposing them to the very conditions that enabled Hecuba and Agamemnon to see eye to eye. (Euripides, of course, is in a unique position to do this through his art.) The ultimate question, therefore, to which this play supplies a thoughtful and significant answer is this: What are the conditions or methods through which Hecuba and Agamemnon reach their agreement?
The first important condition is certainly Agamemnon’s feeling of pity or compassion (epoikteirô, aideomai, eleos) for Hecuba. Forms of these words occur numerous times over the course of the play and factor significantly into its outcome. In Hecuba’s earlier debate with Odysseus, she had begged him to have compassion for her (aidesthēti me), but he refused (286, 321–25). Increasing the pressure, she then instructed Polyxena to “Throw yourself piteously [oiktrôs] at the knees of this man and try to win him over . . . so that he may take pity [epoiktirai] on your fate” (339–41). But Odysseus still refused to have pity. Turning his face away and hiding his hands in his robe, he simply closed himself off to supplication (342–44).

Odysseus’s refusal to feel pity in this scene is reminiscent of Cleon’s famous advice to Athens after the revolt of Mytilene in 428/7 BC (approximately two years before Hecuba was performed). Oligarchic factions within Mytilene had taken over the city; and Athens, after ending the revolt, decided rather hastily to put to death all the men of Mytilene and to enslave the women and children. On the following day, many Athenians had second thoughts, and an assembly was convened to discuss the matter. In support of the original decision, Cleon offers the following warnings about pity:

I persist against your reversing your first decision, or giving way to the three failings most fatal to empire—pity [oiktos], sweet-sounding speeches [hêdonêi logôn], and fairness [epieikeiai]. Pity or compassion [eleos] is due to those who can reciprocate the feeling, not to those who will never pity us in return [antoiktiountas], but are our natural and necessary foes. … Fairness [epieikeiai] should be shown toward those who will be our friends in future, instead of toward men who will remain just what they were, and as much our enemies as before. (Thucydides 1998, III, 40, 2–3, with alterations)

The perspectives of Cleon and Odysseus are strikingly similar, not only in their rejection of pity but also in their strict demarcation of “friends” and “enemies.” However, just as Athens would reject Cleon’s advice, so too does Euripides ultimately counsel something quite different regarding pity.

Indeed, the sequence of events following Odysseus’s refusal to feel pity—those involving Polyxena and the Greek troops, Polymestor and Polydorus, and finally Hecuba and Agamemnon—accumulate over the course of this play to suggest that pity is at once psychologically natural and politically efficacious. After Polyxena’s surpassingly beautiful speech to the Greek troops concerning freedom, everyone involved feels deep pity for her fate. Of course, their pity does not prevent them from conducting the sacrifice, but (in stark
contrast to Odysseus’s refusal to feel pity) it almost does. Achilles’ son (described earlier in the play as “murderous”) finds himself strangely “willing and yet not willing because of pity” (ho d’ ou thelon te kai thelon oiktôi) to kill the girl (566); and the Greek messenger, who reports the event to Hecuba, laments that he must “twice pay the penalty of tears shed in pity [oiktôi]” for her daughter (518–19). Later, we learn that it was precisely the absence of pity that governed Polymestor’s crime against Polydorus: he “rent the child’s flesh and cut his limbs with the iron sword, showing him no pity [oud’ oiktisas]” (720). And, finally, it is pity that Hecuba deliberately cultivates in Agamemnon:

If you regard [Polymestor’s] conduct as shameful, have compassion for me [aidesthêti me]. Pity me [oiktiron], and like a painter stand back and see what misery is mine: I was a queen but now I am your slave, I was blessed with children once, but now I am both old and childless, without city, bereft of friends, the most unfortunate of mortals. (806–11)

Hecuba’s plea for pity hits its mark and proves to be an important factor in Agamemnon’s decision to assist her: “Hecuba, I pity your son and your misfortune, pity too your suppliant hand. For the gods’ sake and for the sake of justice I desire that your impious host should pay you this penalty for his deeds” (850–53). Indeed, were it not for Agamemnon’s sense of pity, Polymestor’s crime would have certainly gone unpunished. Pity, thus, turns out to be not only an essential precondition for the moderate balance struck in this play between private and public morality, but also an essential component of the prosecution of justice.

But why does Agamemnon show pity where Odysseus and Polymestor did not? Perhaps this is due in part to Agamemnon’s character; however, it is also due to Hecuba’s ability to persuade him. And here lies a second important condition underlying the agreement reached between Hecuba and Agamemnon: the use of persuasion. (Interestingly enough, this is also something that Cleon, in the Mytilenian Debate, eschews.)

Persuasion is, of course, a controversial topic in the age of great sophists and orators during which this play was composed. In 427, the orator Gorgias made his first appearance in Athens, seeking military relief for his native city of Leontini, which was under siege by Syracuse. According to contemporary reports, Gorgias dazzled the Athenians with the novelty of his style and, persuading them to make an alliance with Leontini, won admiration for himself and his rhetorical art (Diels and Kranz 1952, 82 A4; cf. Plato Hippias Major 282b). “Speech,” Gorgias writes in his famous Encomium of
Helen, “is a powerful lord [dunastēs], which, by means of the finest and most invisible body, effects the divinest works: it can stop fear and banish grief or create joy and nurture pity [eleon epaudzēsai]” (Diels and Kranz 1952, 82 B11.8). At the same time, as Cleon suggests above, there was a deep distrust in Athens of political persuasion as an art (perhaps precisely because it nurtures pity): “The orators who delight people with their speaking,” Cleon warns the Athenians, “should find other less important arenas for their talents, in the place of one where the city pays a heavy penalty for a momentary pleasure, themselves receiving fine acknowledgements for their fine phrases” (Thucydides 1998, III, 40, 3; filling out the ellipsis in the quote above).

It is in this very context that Euripides identifies persuasion as a necessary condition for political balance—even though its effects are neither guaranteed nor always positive. Indeed, at first the play seems to support a Cleon-like attitude towards persuasion. For we are told early on that when the Greek troops debated the sacrifice of Polyxena, “the warmth of debate on either side was about equal until that sweet-speaking crowd-pleaser Odysseus” got up to speak (130–3; (“sweet-speaking” is hêdulogos—language strikingly similar to Cleon’s hêdonēi logôn; and “crowd-pleaser” is démocharistēs, which is conceptually equivalent to Cleon’s hoi terpontes logôi rhêtores: “orators who delight people with their speaking”). Arguing that it would be wrong to ignore Achilles merely to avoid shedding a slave’s blood, and appealing to the Greeks’ fear that someone among the dead might accuse them of ingratitude, Odysseus quickly and powerfully sways the army in favor of the sacrifice. As Hecuba points out a few pages later, the art of persuasion is clearly implicated by the political outcome: “What sophisma [i.e., what cleverness] did they imagine it was,” she asks Odysseus, “when they passed a sentence of death against this girl” (258–59)?

Yet, while persuasion seems, at first, blameworthy in this play, the complexities of its status become evident later on, when a much more moderate and politically astute Hecuba tries to persuade Agamemnon to help her. As Agamemnon appears reluctant to assist her, Hecuba speaks the following lines:

O misery! Where are you trying to escape to? It seems that I shall not succeed. O luckless me! Why is it that we mortals take pains to study all other branches of knowledge as we ought, yet we take no further pains, by paying a fee, to learn thoroughly the art of persuasion—absolute ruler [tyrannon] where mortals are concerned—so that we might be able to persuade people of whatever we wish and, at the same time, accomplish it? Why then should anyone still hope to accomplish things well [præsein kalôs]? (812–20, modifying Kovacs)
Hecuba’s thinking here is ambiguous, as is the status of persuasion itself. On the one hand, persuasion is like a “tyrant,” who seizes power by force to accomplish whatever his heart desires, whether just or not. (Compare Plato Gorgias 466b11–c2: where Polus compares rhetoricians to tyrants, who “kill whomever they wish, and confiscate possessions, and expel from the cities whomever it seems good to them.”) This is undoubtedly how Hecuba views Odysseus’s use of persuasion (see especially 256–57). However, to call persuasion a tyrannos is not necessarily to condemn it (see Liddell and Scott 1996, who translate tyrannos as “lord” or “master” and stress that it does “not necessarily imply cruel or overbearing conduct”; and compare Gorgias’s use of the word dunastês in the passage from his Encomium quoted above); it is simply to recognize that one cannot be politically successful without it. Indeed, even if what one desires is justice itself (as Hecuba does, 271, 805, 844)—and even if divine nomos is entirely on one’s side—success still depends upon the ability to persuade. For “where mortals are concerned” (as Hecuba puts it), justice does not simply take care of itself. What is just is often a matter of dispute, and those who are in a position to execute justice often fail to see their duty.

Thus, Hecuba comes to realize that skill at persuasion is a necessary condition for a just and responsible politics, one that balances private and public concerns. And yet, even as Hecuba secures Agamemnon’s pity and persuades him of his duty to assist her, she encounters another obstacle, namely, Agamemnon’s startling lack of freedom to act: “You have in me,” Agamemnon confesses, “someone ready to help in your labors and swift to come to your defense, but slow [bradun] if I am to be criticized before the Achaeans” (861–63). There is irony here, of course, since Agamemnon is the leading figure of the Greek army, and political freedom is one of the army’s hallmarks (see Kovacs 1987, 82; and on the anachronism involved here, see Easterling 1985 and Grube 1941, 29–37). However, Agamemnon’s lack of freedom is conspicuous in his very language. Bradus (which can be translated as either “slow” or “heavy”) suggests a certain inability to move at will. And what is true of Agamemnon is true of political leaders in other democratic regimes as well: When the demands of justice run contrary to public opinion, or simply stand outside the range of public concern, one finds oneself suddenly “tied down” or “hard pressed” to act.

The need to overcome this lack of freedom is a third condition for the balance achieved in this play. It is emphasized in Hecuba’s swift response to Agamemnon’s complaint:
O my! No mortal is free [eleutheros]! Either he is the slave of money or of fate, or he is prevented by the city’s multitude or its laws from acting as he thinks best. But since you are afraid and accord too much weight to the multitude, I shall set you free from this fear [egô se thêsô toutô eleutheron phobou]. (864–69)

Hecuba’s words, “I shall set you free from this fear,” are of course pregnant with meaning. In the most immediate sense, she is allowing Agamemnon to recuse himself from acting contrary to public sentiment, and thus freeing him from his fear of the political fallout from such an act. At the same time, however, Hecuba is demonstrating her own radical freedom to act, a freedom which is all the more poignant since she is a slave and a woman, and therefore regarded as politically and physically powerless (see especially 876–79 and 885). And, finally, Hecuba is instructing Agamemnon through her words and deeds what moral (as opposed to political) freedom entails. Earlier on in the scene Agamemnon had asked Hecuba if she desired to win her freedom back from him, to which she replied: “no indeed: for if I punish the guilty, I am willing to be a slave my whole life” (754–57). By the end of Hecuba’s exchange with Agamemnon she is, in a sense, asking him if he desires to win his freedom back. For, a political leader who cannot act in defense of justice is a moral slave to the masses. (As an aside, it seems that Agamemnon’s sense of moral freedom increases as the play draws to its close—perhaps in response to Hecuba’s coaxing; where he was at first extremely reticent to act, he ends up publicly denouncing Polymestor for his crimes and actively banishing him from his homeland.)

The final condition for the political balance reached at the end of this play is a proper understanding of divine involvement in human affairs, one that is neither too skeptical or cynical, nor yet too expectant. The Hecuba in fact offers a sustained meditation on this theme from its opening to its closing scenes. As the play opens, the existence of the gods is established as a given when the ghost of Polydorus reports firsthand of his experiences in the underworld, “where Hades dwells apart from other gods” (1–2). Near the end of his speech, Polydorus claims to have won permission from the powers below to receive a proper burial, thus confirming not only the gods’ existence but also their concern for human affairs (49–50). This concern is called immediately into question, however, by the gods’ failure to respond to Hecuba’s plight. As Hecuba awakes from a bad dream, in which the death of her children is foreshadowed, she turns immediately to prayer: “O gleam of Zeus’ daylight, O black Night” (68); “O lady Earth, mother of black-winged dreams” (70); “O
gods of the nether world, spare the life of my son!” (79); “O daimones, avert this fate from my daughter” (96–97). But Hecuba’s prayers go unanswered. Indeed, no sooner are they uttered than news comes of the Greeks’ plan to put Polyxena to death. Hecuba, not surprisingly, is moved to wonder “where there is some god or daimôn to help [her]” (163–64). As Polyxena is executed and Hecuba falls into despair, the Greek messenger Talthybius delivers one of the most frequently cited speeches of religious doubt in all of Greek literature:

O Zeus, what shall I say? That you watch over men? Or that you have won the false reputation for doing so, [false, supposing that the race of gods exist,] while chance in fact governs all mortal affairs? Is this not the queen of Phrygia rich in gold, the wife of Priam the highly blessed? And now her whole city has been devastated by the spear, and she herself, a slave, old and childless, lies upon the ground, defiling her luckless head in the dust. O the horror of it! (488–97; the line in brackets may be spurious.)

Talthybius’s doubt is not at all surprising, given the condition of Hecuba’s suffering, nor would it have likely fallen on deaf ears among Athenians mercilessly ravaged by war and plague. However, in terms of the “givens” established in Polydorus’s opening speech, it cannot be taken as the play’s final word on questions of religion; for the gods do exist; and they do care for human affairs. The challenge, then, is to understand how this is so, and to fashion responses that are fitting.

An unfitting response to the mysteries surrounding the gods is that of Polymestor. When he arrives at Hecuba’s tent (unaware that he has been found out), Polymestor allows Hecuba to characterize him as a eusebês anēr, a “pious man” (1004). Yet his real attitude toward the gods is revealed in his initial speech:

Hecuba, I weep as I see your city and also your daughter lately slain. Ah me! Nothing can be relied upon, not good repute nor yet the thought that a man in luck will never have bad fortune. The gods stir things together in confusion back and forth, adding disorder so that in our ignorance we might worship them. But why make these lamentations, which get us no further in our misfortunes. (954–61)

Here we have not religious skepticism (which Talthybius exhibited), but religious cynicism of an extraordinary sort (pace Kovacs 1987, 105, who views this speech as “pious and orthodox”). The gods exist, Polymestor believes, but only as self-interested troublemakers who exploit human ignorance for their own
purposes. From a fifth-century perspective, such a view was certainly not “orthodox” (see further Burkert 1985, 8 and 119–25), but more importantly it stands at odds with the religious assumptions of this play. The gods in this play are certainly mysterious; and they are sometimes absent when one would wish otherwise. But they are caring gods, who act (however unpredictably) as defenders of justice.

This is nowhere more clearly affirmed than in the final scenes of the play, beginning with Hecuba’s appeal to Agamemnon on behalf of divine nomos. Hecuba’s understanding of the gods is that they do exist and that they are subject to the very standards of right and wrong to which mortals themselves are subject. The problem is that the gods cannot be entirely relied upon to prevent or punish every act of wickedness that might occur (as Hecuba has learned from the death of Polyxena). Therefore, it falls to mankind, particularly to political leaders, to tend to matters of justice and injustice in the gods’ absence. This is not to say that the gods cannot, or will not, act; it is only to say that they may not act when action is required. That this view represents the genuine teaching of the play is then confirmed through powerful symbolic devices. Agamemnon, it turns out, would not have ultimately assisted Hecuba, were it not for a sudden and unexpected absence of winds, which he attributes immediately to divine causes: “It shall be as you ask,” he assures Hecuba.

For in fact if the army could sail, I would not be able to grant you this favor. As it is, since the god does not grant us favoring breezes, we must wait at our ease, watching for good sailing weather. May it turn out well somehow! It is the common wish of each man privately and each city that the bad should get bad treatment while the good enjoy good fortune. (898–904)

When Polymestor’s punishment is complete, the winds suddenly resume (1289), marking not only the completion of a divinely supported act, but also the correctness of the moral and theological understandings that led to that act. A view of the gods such as Hecuba embraces (Euripides would seem to be saying), one that neither rules the gods out nor depends upon them entirely, is required for a balanced and just political regime.

A Note on the “Justice” of Hecuba’s Revenge

Objections to the interpretation just offered will undoubtedly come from those who find in Hecuba’s revenge an act not of “balance and justice,” but rather of fiendish injustice. Here, for example, is Eric Voegelin’s comment on the play:
The *Hecuba* studies the misery that befalls the queen after the fall of Troy. … The order of her soul breaks down; she is now possessed by the demon of revenge that will draw the world into her own annihilation. With self-debasement and cunning she prepares the blinding of Polymnestor [sic] who had betrayed his trust and murdered her son for the treasure in his possession. And before the blinding she has killed his two innocent little children. The horror ends with the blind Polymnestor’s information, received from Dionysus, that the queen will be metamorphosed into a red-eyed dog. The order of *Dike* has fallen apart; the soul no longer becomes wise through suffering but breaks under its fate; and the heroine becomes a dog. (1957, 264–65)

Voegelin’s interpretation (note the use of the word “demon”) echoes a long line of commentators on the *Hecuba*. Gilbert Murray, for example, considers the queen a “kind of devil” (1913, 89), just as Max Pohlenz (1954, 279–81) refers disapprovingly to her *wilde Rachsucht* (wild vindictiveness) and her *teuflische Entschlossenheit* (fiendish resolution). This interpretation, in fact, has strong defenders even today, though it is noteworthy that it departs sharply from earlier commentators—particularly those of the Byzantine and Renaissance periods—who viewed Hecuba’s revenge as at once just and religiously edifying (see further Heath 1987, 41–43 and 47).

However, what is important to note is that nothing in this play itself necessitates the view that the queen has gone mad or that her act of revenge is supposed to seem unjust. The fact that Hecuba takes her vengeance out not only on Polymestor but also on his innocent children—however distasteful to modern readers—would not necessarily stamp her revenge with the mark of injustice for an ancient audience; for even in the fifth-century (see, e.g., Herodotus 1988, IX, 120), the death of an offender’s children before his very eyes was supported by Athenians as a legitimate (albeit, extreme) form of punishment. Moreover, Hecuba’s revenge “agree[s] with the spirit of the *lex talionis* much more than a sentence of death upon Polymestor,” since she was, by *his* act, left to live without children and without the light of hope (Meridor 1978, 35, n. 24). Secondly, the fact that Hecuba will (according to Polymestor) be transformed upon her *death* into a “dog with fire-like glances” (*kunôn pyrs’ echousa dergmata*), a grave marker by which sailors will navigate their ships (1265, 1273), should not necessarily cast suspicion back upon her act of revenge. In fact, if one considers carefully the image of the dog in earlier Greek literature and the way in which Euripides, at the end of other plays (e.g., *Bacchae* 1330ff.), transforms other characters into animals (without the slight-
est hint of moral disapprobation), one is likely to reach the conclusion, not that Hecuba’s act was unjust, but, rather, that it was exemplary and worthy of supernatural demarcation (see further Mossman 1995; Burnett 1994; and Meridor 1978).

More important, however, is the strong emphasis in the play on the justice (dikê) of Hecuba’s revenge, which makes interpretations such as Voegelin’s seem, finally, forced. In fact, Hecuba’s revenge is referred to as “just” no fewer than eight times in the final scenes of the play, both before the act is committed, and after—and not only by Hecuba herself (844, 1052, 1254, 1274), but also by Agamemnon (853, cf. 1131), the chorus (1024, 1030, cf. 1238–39), and even Polymestor (1253). This makes it difficult indeed to maintain that Hecuba has gone mad, without maintaining that Agamemnon and the chorus have gone mad as well. Moreover, the play strongly suggests at numerous points that Hecuba’s punishment of Polymestor is something that divine justice requires (715, 801, 803 and 1030); and since the requirements of divine justice are fulfilled, it is hard to see how (as Voegelin puts it) “the order of Dike has fallen apart.” And finally, it is noteworthy that in the closing scene, where Agamemnon presides as judge over the dispute between Hecuba and Polymestor, the issue focuses entirely on Polymestor’s guilt and not at all on Hecuba’s choice of punishment. This suggests that Hecuba’s acts were in fact fitting, or that (as Agamemnon concludes) Polymestor got exactly what he deserved (1250–51). In light of these considerations, it must be said that if Euripides had intended for his audience to view Hecuba’s revenge as unjust, he had a strange way of conveying it.

C O N C L U S I O N

Euripides, the last and most controversial of the great Greek tragedians, is known for provocatively questioning the religious, political, and cultural conventions of his time. That he does this in the form of the dramatic art of tragedy is particularly significant to the ancient world, but not without meaning to our own reflections on political philosophy. In the Hecuba, a relatively obscure tragedy, Euripides examines the conflict between public and private virtue in a profoundly complex and instructive fashion. As we have seen, justice, moral responsibility and freedom can be located predominantly within the framework of the political community, where the power of that community calls its citizens to service, demands their allegiance to its values, and ensures their freedom within its confines. An alternative view of virtue identifies freedom as essentially located in the realm of the private,
an autonomous individual, and justice and moral responsibility as the reciprocity of trust among friends, family, and associates. Although these two perspectives are not mutually exclusive, they do exist in critical tension. The public realm often requires that a distinction be made between enemy and friend, and counterenances a kind of moral inequality based on that distinction. It often perceives justice as what the national interest requires and thereby is preoccupied with concerns of political health and security. Most dangerously, the public realm may ignore the individual, private realm altogether or, at best, relegate it to a decidedly secondary position with respect to the needs of the political community. The private realm places great emphasis on the trust and moral responsibility of individual relationships. In so doing, it often forgets that private trust and reciprocity are dependent upon the political community, on the power it possesses, and the stability it provides. On the one hand, Euripides shows us in dramatic fashion through the character of Hecuba what justice and freedom look like when one is without family and city, and when the gods are silent; on the other hand, he illustrates through Odysseus what forms justice and freedom take when civic self-interest is the only criterion. After exploring the ambiguous relationship between the public and private realms, Euripides suggests that a balance between these two realms is necessary if political life is to be truly just and free. Fundamentally, the character of Hecuba teaches us what she has learned, namely, that the public realm can never be taken for granted, that it requires the attention and nurturing of those who are most in need of it and most dependent upon it. Just as well, she teaches us that the private realm similarly needs attention and nurturing by the community, else the ever-expanding needs of that community will overwhelm the private relationships on which its very existence is predicated.

This reciprocal moderation between public and private virtue is not an easy achievement. Thus, Euripides spends considerable effort attending to the conditions for such a balance. Those conditions begin and end significantly in the suffering of individuals and in the capacity of others, both strong and weak, to take pity on those sufferings, literally to recognize, as the chorus of enslaved Trojan women does at the conclusion of the play, that “fate is hard” and at times capricious (1295). Feelings, like intentions, are insufficient to the task, however, and for that reason Euripides turns to persuasion as a necessary condition of any balance between public and private virtue. Justice does not simply take care of itself, any more than pity will convince us to be just. Those in a position to dispense justice, public or private, often need to be persuaded of that duty. Most especially is this true, Euripides tells us,
of political leaders (such as Odysseus and Agamemnon) who find it difficult to act outside the confines of public opinion. Finally, Euripides turns to what is perhaps the most controversial and mysterious condition necessary for a proper balance between public and private virtue, the place of the divine in human affairs. There is ample reason to believe that Euripides was as skeptical of the gods and their role in human affairs as any modern or postmodern. Indeed, as Hecuba makes abundantly clear in reference to her own suffering, the gods often appear to be silent when one would wish otherwise. Yet, there is an insistence that the gods care, in spite of the fact. Or perhaps, there is a more controversial insistence that the gods care; that the reciprocity of understanding that must exist in any balance of the public and private, must also exist in any relationship between the human and the divine. Euripides is not definitive on this; merely suggestive. What he is clear about is that if the public and private realms of justice and freedom are to be preserved, then the delicate and tenuous relationship between stranger and friend, city and individual, free and oppressed, must be given considerable attention. In that attention there is great danger in assuming superiority based on power alone. However, there is hope to be found—hope in compassion, in the power of persuasion, in the respect that must be given to nobility of character, and in the mysterious relationship that exists between humans and a sense of justice that transcends them.

REFERENCES


Beginning in the early decades of the twentieth century, a growing body of scholarship explored the tradition of numerological symbolism in works of literature and art. (See Male 1958, Hopper 1938, and Curtius 1953, 501–509; Peck 1980 offers a useful summary of number symbolism.) Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is perhaps the best known instance of this tradition, with its 100 cantos and many patterns of three, in imitation of the Trinity. But the tradition arose in antiquity and endured long after Dante. Its classical origins are Pythagorean and Platonist; the Bible has its own significant numbers; and in late antiquity, Christians integrated these classical and biblical strands. The tradition flourished in the middle ages and the renaissance; it continued into the eighteenth century, in iconography and in J. S. Bach’s music, at least.

In this same period, however, scholars of political philosophy rarely drew on this tradition to illuminate classic works. The famous exception, of course, was Leo Strauss (1972, 286–89), especially when he explained the significance of Machiavelli’s using twenty-six chapters in *The Prince*. As is common in scholarship on this tradition, Strauss used numerological symbolism to underscore what Machiavelli stated and exemplified in the work. Symbolic numbers, in other words, do not act ironically to undermine what a work says, but, rather, point up meanings presented directly. Machiavelli emphasized the role of *fortuna*, and his using the double of 13 proved another way of signifying this. Those who criticized Strauss’s exploration of number symbolism revealed how little they knew about the practices of literary composition in earlier periods.

In the spirit of Strauss’s exposition, I wish to set forth some findings on the numerological structure of Montesquieu’s *Spirit of the Laws*. As
far as I can discover, no scholar has attempted a numerological analysis of the work before, perhaps because writers in the Enlightenment are thought to be beyond such “medieval” concerns. The analysis underscores what is already well understood about the work: its ambitious scope, its emphasis on variety and diversity in the world, Montesquieu’s sense of genius in his achievement, and so on. For this reason, and because the project is so novel, I will not be addressing debated issues in scholarship or citing the work of Montesquieu scholars. As I understand it, Montesquieu’s numerological structure points to a grand design in the work as a whole. This design says something about the work’s character; yet, in the nature of the case, it reinforces characteristics explicit in the work’s discussions. Scholars already agree on these characteristics, for they are commonly associated with modern thinkers. Moreover, though I speak about the work’s structure, I am not concerned with the structure of its argument—that is, how its successive discussions relate to one another. I will describe the numerological structure of its six parts, 31 books, and 605 chapters and discuss what these components signify. I do not pretend to treat this subject exhaustively; I intend merely to begin it, hoping that others will pursue it further.

The structure of The Spirit of the Laws is broadly hexameral. (Although its first edition (1748) was not divided into six parts, the edition of 1750 was.) The story of creation unfolds in six days in Genesis 1, which contains 31 verses. Montesquieu matched this structure with the six parts and 31 books of his volume. More importantly, the number six symbolizes the fullness, variety, and fecundity of this world, aspects recurrently emphasized in The Spirit of the Laws. As the creation number, six clearly symbolizes the visible universe, from the heavens to the earth, with all the variety of its creatures. It is also the product of the first feminine and masculine numbers, two and three, respectively (2 x 3 = 6). Hence, it symbolizes offspring, the generations inaugurated by Genesis. Within the decad, then, six represents procreative multiplication and all that this entails. Like many modern thinkers after the great voyages of discovery, Montesquieu was profoundly aware, not only of the variety of climates, creatures, and cultures on the earth, but also that his knowledge of them far exceeded that of the ancients. The Spirit of the Laws exemplifies this awareness in many different ways, as is well known.

Montesquieu’s use of the number six followed that of a distinguished predecessor, Jean Bodin. Not only did Bodin compose his De la republique in six books, but he also set his Colloquium Heptaplomeres in a house with a “pantotheca,” designed in multiples of six: six feet square, with six
square compartments, producing $36 \times 36 = 1296$ small boxes. (See Bodin 1975, 4–5). Other versions of six follow. Though Bodin’s *Colloquium* has seven speakers, their discussions of religion feature the diversity of versions of ultimate Truth in this world. Six is the number of this-worldly diversity and complexity, even as seven suggests the sublimity of Truth, to be experienced fully in the sabbath of the soul’s rest in the vision of God. Bodin’s numerological play at the beginning of the work foreshadows the tensions to follow.

*The Spirit of the Laws* proves hexameral, not only by its division into six Parts, but also because its sequence of Parts parallels the six days of Genesis in certain respects. Part 3, for instance, treats the relations between climate and terrain, on the one hand, and various kinds of laws, on the other. This corresponds broadly with the third day of creation, when dry land appears on the earth and so do plants and trees. God creates climate and terrain on day three, and Montesquieu treats them in Part 3. A similar correspondence connects Part 4 and the fourth day of creation. On the fourth day, God creates the sun, moon, and the stars for the reckoning of time and the seasons. Part 4 begins with an epigraph from the *Aeneid* (1.741), referring to the bard Iopas, who sings about the movements of the moon and the sun through the heavens. These heavenly movements can be said to govern Part 4, with its discussion of commerce, preeminently by ship, and the voyages of discovery that so enlarged Europe’s sense of the human world. Navigation, of course, was based on reckonings taken from the height of the sun with a sextant, and movements of the moon govern the tides. Moreover, the sun and moon have ancient associations with gold and silver, respectively, the bullion that provided a medium of exchange for international commerce. The symbolism of the number four comes into play here, too, for it represents earthly extension in the four directions (north, south, east, west). In short, the fourth day of creation and the symbolism of four have several associations with Montesquieu’s Part 4, and his epigraph from the *Aeneid* underscores them.

To be sure, the correspondence between days three and four in Genesis, on the one hand, and Parts 3 and 4 in Montesquieu, on the other, are rather general. They could not be otherwise, for Genesis is brief and *The Spirit of the Laws* is extensive and filled with details. Nevertheless, they suggest that Montesquieu had a set of parallels in mind as a loose, perhaps somewhat playful, scheme. Such a scheme might illuminate Montesquieu’s disposition of the Parts of the work which, on the surface, seems to be somewhat arbitrary. For example, though it makes sense to discuss principles at the beginning, why should his discussion of terrain, in Part 3, come after his treat-
ment of defense, in Part 2? Logically, the nature of a terrain precedes, because it conditions, the kinds of offense and defense required. Similarly, why should a discussion of religion, in Part 5, come after that on commerce, in Part 4? Historically, the different forms of religion precede modern commerce and affect it. One way of answering such questions—though not the only way—is to pursue the parallels with Genesis and numerological symbolism in general. As I do so, beginning with Part 1, we should keep in mind how loose and playful Montesquieu can be with these associations.

Part 1, appropriately, discusses principles, for principles are “firsts,” and Montesquieu has three of them, each associated with a form of government: republican, monarchical, and despotic (book 2, chapter 1). So, too, does the first day in Genesis have three “firsts,” because the creation is effected by the Trinity. In the Catholic Church, this understanding stems from Augustine (Confessions 13.5.6). The Father is clearly signified by “God,” as is the Holy Spirit by “the Spirit of God” moving over the face of the waters. The Son is represented by “In the beginning” (In principio), for the Father created all things in his Word (Conf 11.9.11; 13.5.6). Montesquieu’s trinity of governments thereby echoes, albeit distantly, the Trinity. An even more playful correlation may be found in Montesquieu’s three being a four, for “republican government” has two forms, democracy and aristocracy (book 2, chapter 2). The Son of God has two natures, divine and human. The divine Trinity thereby proves a kind of quaternity, and so does Montesquieu’s trinity of governments.

Part 2 begins with two books treating the laws in relation to defensive force (book 9) and offensive force (book 10). This may be connected with the symbolism of the number two and with the second day in Genesis. The numerological tradition considered two, the dyad, to be “the first number,” for one is considered unity and, hence, not a number, for number implies plurality. Hence, two represents a “fall” from unity and symbolizes division and conflict. Division and conflict obviously entail the need for defensive force and imply the usefulness of offensive force. Analogously, on the second day in Genesis God creates a barrier for division and protection: “the firmament of heaven” divides (Gen. 1:6–7) the waters above from those below. Its “dividing” aspect is explicit in verses 6–7. Its protective character is revealed in Noah’s flood, when the Lord opens “the flood gates of heaven” (Gen. 7:11), by opening the protective barrier of the firmament. In all these instances, two is characterized by division—the creation of a barrier—and therefore by the prospect of conflict and enmity. Though the rest of Part 2 explores a dif-
ferent theme—how the laws form political liberty—its first two books are clearly connected with the traditional symbolism of the number *two*, which is reflected in the second day of Genesis.

Having already considered the parallels attaching to Parts 3 and 4, we may move on to Part 5. Its books reflect chiefly on the laws in relation to the religion established in each country. The number *five* may be related to religion because it is a “circular number”: all its multiples have *five* in its last digit. In this way, *five* can be said to “return to itself,” and it thereby symbolizes the return of the soul to God. *Five* is the number for “the immortality of the soul,” and so for religious visions of the afterlife. Though Christian orthodoxy did not believe in the actual pre-existence of the human soul before its conception, it inherited the circular imagery of “procession and return” from Neoplatonism, and this *exitus-reditus* scheme proved fundamental in Patristic and scholastic theology. Hence, *five* is an appropriate number for religion.

Nevertheless, there are latent numerological ironies, and these undergird Montesquieu’s ironic treatment of religious customs. The most obvious symbolic meaning of *five* is, not the immortality of the soul returning to God, but “the five senses.” In traditional theology, which is Christian-Platonist, sense experience is always shifting, never stable, because the sensible things of this world are mutable. The intellect, in contrast, apprehends truths invisible yet eternal, embodied in the faith of the Church. The five senses, in other words, are oriented toward the mutable variety and multiplicity of the external world, while the intellect is oriented toward immutable Truth, itself one as God is One. But after the Reformation, there are many Christian churches, many versions of the faith. The faith itself, purportedly one and eternal, now partakes of the instability and variety of sense experience. That is why there were laws for the establishment of religion, a problem Thomas Aquinas did not have to consider. Moreover, the different Christian faiths led to the wars of religion. In this light, it seems significant that there are 66 chapters in Part 5. The number 66 evokes the number of the beast, 666, in the Book of Revelation 13:18. That beast is traditionally associated with imperial Rome, persecuting the infant Church. Montesquieu’s 66 suggests that the Christian faiths are now tormenting the peace of the secular order.

This latent irony is reinforced by connecting Part 5 with the fifth day in Genesis, especially as Augustine comments on it in book 13 of the *Confessions*. On the fifth day, God creates the birds of the air and the beasts of
the sea, and he blesses them and commands them to “increase and multiply.” On the one hand, Augustine allegorizes the birds of the air as preachers of the gospel who spread it far and wide (13.20.26). God has multiplied these evangelists, and the true faith has spread over throughout the world. On the other hand, Augustine discovers a hermeneutic puzzle: God commands the creatures of the fifth day to increase and multiply, but He does not so command the land animals created on the sixth day, though obviously they do increase and multiply, yet He does give that command to human beings (13.24.35). As usual, Augustine resolves this puzzle through allegory. In fact, he finds it to be an allegory of allegorical interpretation: “Increase and multiply” symbolizes the many meanings to be found in Scripture (13.24.36–7). Augustine locates the truth of these many meanings only in the one true Church, because he excludes heretical interpretations from the truth, by definition.

By Montesquieu’s day, however, “heresies” had succeeded in being established as Churches. Part 5 of The Spirit of the Laws addresses the political difficulties caused by the Reformation. The command of the fifth day, “Increase and multiply,” applied not only to the multiple meanings of Scripture but also to the many churches they engendered. Moreover, the evangelists of these religions, like the birds of the air, had spread them all over Europe. I do not wish to claim that Montesquieu had his copy of the Confessions at hand when he decided to devote Part 5 to religions, though that is possible. But Augustine’s work has imbued Catholic theology and preaching over the centuries, and the Confessions especially has had a rich posterity. (See Courcelle 1963.) Montesquieu might have learned about Augustine’s allegory for the fifth day without reading it in Augustine. He is clearly working with some scheme of parallels with Genesis, and a piquant irony emerges when reading Part 5 against a religious allegory on its fifth day.

Part 6 begins with a book having only one chapter, the only such book in the whole volume. It concerns the laws of inheritance. This has obvious correlations with the sixth day in Genesis and the symbolism of the number six. On the sixth day, God creates human beings and commands them to “Increase and multiply,” and we saw earlier that six symbolizes offspring, the product of the first feminine and masculine numbers. The meanings of six thereby imply questions of inheritance, which Montesquieu features at the beginning of Part 6.

Parallels with later books in Part 6 emerge from the tradition that the Fall occurred on the sixth day in Genesis. The Bible gives no clear indi-
cation of how long Adam and Eve lived in the Garden without sinning, and the
theological tradition debated the issue. In Paradise Lost, Milton inclined to the
long view: his Adam and Eve remain sinless for over twelve days. (See Fowler
1971, 26.) In Paradiso 26. 139–42, Dante inclined to the short view: Adam tells
him that they lived sinless in the Garden for a little over six hours. Evidently,
Dante had a keener sense of human fragility, of the essential mutability of our
nature, than did Milton. The Catholic Church never committed itself to a view
on the issue. Nevertheless, however long we think the first human beings
might have lived without sin, the Fall is implied by allusion to the sixth day of
Genesis, and so, too, are all the vagaries of human history it entails.

Montesquieu’s sense of human mutability was as keen as
Dante’s. The instability of fallen human institutions is implied by the titles of
books 28 and 31: “Of the origin and revolutions of the civil laws among the
French” and “The theory of the feudal laws among the Franks in their relation
to the revolutions of their monarchy” (my emphasis). “Revolution” implies
change, whether from the turning of time or through violence. The content of
Montesquieu’s discussion in these books indicates, again and again, the con-
tingency, the impermanence, and instability, even, of laws and institutions,
which seem comparatively enduring to us mortals. Part 6 is characterized by
his sense of the history of France as typical of all things human and sublunary:
marked by the Fall, symbolized by the sixth day in Genesis.

The six Parts of The Spirit of the Laws have 31 books, just as
Genesis 1 records the six days of creation in 31 verses. Yet, the number 31 does
more than support the biblical parallel. It has other meanings, and these fit the
numerological significance of the chapters in the work. Thirty-one is a prime
number, the eleventh prime number if, consistent with numerological practice,
we do not consider one to be a number. Eleven is also a prime number, and so
thirty-one might be considered doubly prime, especially prime. Now, prime
numbers and elevens figure prominently in the number of chapters that
Montesquieu orchestrated for each Part and for the whole work. Consider the
following chart:

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<tr>
<th>PART</th>
<th>NUMBER OF CHAPTERS</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>105</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>97</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>116</td>
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<tr>
<td>Part</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>97</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>66</td>
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<td>124</td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>605</td>
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Parts 2 and 4 have 97 chapters each, a prime number. Part 3 has 116, 4 x 29, and twenty-nine is a prime number. Part 5 has 66 chapters, a multiple of eleven. Part 6 has 124 chapters, 4 x 31, and thirty-one is the eleventh prime number. (In the numerological tradition, one is “unity,” and therefore is not “a number.”) The whole work has 605 chapters, a multiple of the eleven-squared (5 x 11 x 11). Moreover, 605 signifies 11 through the common numerological practice of adding its digits (6 + 0 + 5 = 11). As we numerologists like to say, these are not accidents. Montesquieu’s chapters vary greatly in length, and fifty-seven of them are entitled “Continuation of the same subject.” (Personal communication from Stuart D. Warner.) He had reasons for manipulating his work in these ways, and some of them are numerological. What do these recurring elevens and prime numbers mean?

The numerological tradition assigns an unambiguous meaning to eleven: sin. Ten is a perfect number, because it completes the decad, and twelve also indicates fullness and wholeness (12 signs of the zodiac, 12 tribes of Israel, 12 apostles). Eleven symbolizes “sin” because it is simultaneously an excess, with respect to ten, and a deficiency, with respect to twelve. Nevertheless, it is somewhat curious that the unambiguous meaning of eleven as “sin” emerges from this ambiguity of “excess and deficiency.” (The books of the Bible were not divided into chapters until the middle ages, by monks familiar with the numerological tradition. No biblical book contains eleven chapters. Interestingly, two books contain 31 chapters: 1 Kings (1 Samuel in Protestant Bibles) and Proverbs. 1 Kings narrates Saul’s failure to establish the new monarchy, and Proverbs was held to be the work of the wise King Solomon. I like to think that Montesquieu knew of these two thirty-ones when he composed his.)

In my view, this ambiguity is significant in Montesquieu’s use of elevens. On the one hand, the traditional meaning of “sin” is consistent with the Augustinian notion that political life is the work of fallen human beings. The six Parts of The Spirit of the Laws end, as we have seen, by associating six
with the Fall—the note of deficiency. The Augustinian tradition often treats fallen life and politics by reducing them to sinful motives, such as “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” (1 John 2:16). On the other hand, six is also the number of this-worldly fullness, richness, variety, complexity—the note of excess. Political life is so difficult to understand because there is so much to take into account. The Spirit of the Laws gives ample testimony to the fallen eccentricities of human practices, especially religious ones, and to their abounding variety. Montesquieu’s numerology implies that, for a philosopher of politics and commerce, sin is not necessarily bad. The idea, of course, was shared by other moderns.

Montesquieu’s use of prime numbers suggests a similar duality: the quirkiness of the world and his genius in exploring it. The numerological tradition says practically nothing about prime numbers as such. In this light, Montesquieu’s use of primes suggests the novelty of his project, his sense of genius in accomplishing it. The Spirit of the Laws is itself a prime number, as it were: unlike any other work of political philosophy, uniquely itself, not reducible to any known literary genre. At the same time, in my view, Montesquieu is saying the same thing about the human world he explores. It, too, is unique and quirky, not reducible to clear and distinct ideas, even though analysis does illuminate some of its features.

These two characteristics may be seen, in another way, in Montesquieu’s playful use of hexameral structure in the work. The hexameral tradition was often encyclopedic: Genesis provided a structure for recording one’s lore on every aspect of Nature. For example, commentary on God’s creating the dry land might devolve into a treatise on minerals and their properties; commentary on the fifth day included a discussion of various kinds of birds, among which were bees. Nature was understood to be a static hierarchy of forms, from inanimate minerals to plants, animals, human beings, and angels, whose nine orders governed the nine heavenly spheres of the geocentric cosmos. The significant numbers in this hierarchy were all “good” because the order was held to be unfallen. Eleven did not appear, because sin did not exist.

Montesquieu alludes to this tradition with the hexameral scheme of The Spirit of the Laws, but the allusion highlights differences, rather than similarities. In the commentary tradition, Genesis 1 is the divinely inspired account of reality in its origin, the structure of Nature as God created it. Montesquieu uses the hexameral scheme for the political world of human history, which is not static and was not created by God. This scheme, then, is
only a scheme, a human structure for accomplishing certain ends. In this sense, it is like politics. Montesquieu uses the scheme loosely and somewhat playfully. It provides a way of organizing all the various reflections he wants to present. Like a hexameral commentary, *The Spirit of the Laws* is encyclopedic in its scope and breadth of learning. Yet, its subject is not the static, “closed” world of a divinely perfected Nature, but the dynamic, open world of human affairs in history.

Partly for this reason, *The Spirit of the Laws* presents itself as incomplete, in a sense, because completion is impossible. It ends “Italiam, Italiam … I close the treatise on fiefs where most authors have begun it.” The final sentence tells the reader to go to other authors in order to understand the history of fiefs up to Montesquieu’s day. The penultimate fragment alludes to *Aeneid* 3.523, when the Trojans see Italy in the distance, the prophesied goal of their journey, and repeat its name with joy. What they see, however, is the southeastern coast, and their goal is the mouth of the Tiber on the western side of the peninsula. They have a long way to sail before they reach their goal, and many labors to endure before they secure it. Their joy is premature. They have storms ahead, months of delay in Carthage, and war in Italy. So, too, Montesquieu implies, the journey of his book is ended, but incomplete. Any reader who wishes to understand the spirit of the laws has many labors ahead. The material to be understood is not comprehensible, finally, because it is too immense to be mastered. For all its scope, breadth of learning, and depth of analysis, *The Spirit of the Laws* does not finish the task implied in its title.

Another reason for this incompleteness is implied in Montesquieu’s use of the Genesis scheme. With its six Parts, *The Spirit of the Laws* presents itself as an account of creation. But the creation it accounts for is human, historical, dynamic, and open to the future. Not only is Montesquieu faced with an immense field of material, but the field will continually grow in the future as it has in the past. Aeneas’s men murmur “Italiam, Italiam” because they look hopefully to their future. Montesquieu’s final words in the work prove a complex gesture, for they evoke the classical past, the feudal past of fiefs, and the work of other writers, even as they look to the future. *The Spirit of the Laws* presents itself as a kind of political genesis, no more divinely inspired than are political institutions. Yet, like them, the work is simultaneously in touch with the past and open to the future. It remains incomplete because its subject is unmasterable, not only in fact, on account of its immensity, but also in principle, on account of its openness to the future.
Numerologically, in other words, *The Spirit of the Laws* is a six, and not a seven. Its field is resolutely this-worldly: it does not look to the seventh day of eternal rest in God as the goal of human life. The future it looks forward to lies in this world, not in another one. In the *Confessions*, Augustine notes that the biblical text has no “evening and morning” for the seventh day (Gen. 2:1–3), as it does for each of the first six (13.35–36). Hence, he interprets the first sabbath allegorically, as eternal life in God, the goal of all human striving. In the final chapter of *The City of God*, he celebrates this eternal sabbath as “the eighth and eternal day” after the resurrection of the dead, the “end without end” that fulfills all human effort. The great classical works of imaginative political philosophy also close with the immortality of the soul—Plato’s *Republic*, with “the myth of Er,” and Cicero’s, with “the dream of Scipio.” In this regard, Montesquieu aligns himself with the moderns. As far as politics are concerned, there is no single goal for human beings. Political institutions need not consider the immortality of the soul. Montesquieu locates such concerns firmly within Part 5, on religion. In Europe after the Reformation, the interests of religion exacerbate the problems of political order, rather than resolve them. Montesquieu’s six remains open to a horizontal future, in time; not to a vertical seventh day, in eternity.

The work’s emphasis on variety and abundance can be seen in two other significant numbers. First, 31, the number of books in *The Spirit of the Laws*, appears in a sequence of numbers presented as a calculus of luxury, in book 7, chapter 1: 0, 1, 3, 7, 15, 31, 63, 127. In this sequence, zero represents the physical necessities for sustaining life, and each subsequent number represents its doubling, beyond necessity, into luxury. Hence, 31 represents luxuries at 32 times necessity (2 to the fifth power), an extraordinary abundance of goods. Montesquieu’s 31 books mime this luxury with its extraordinary abundance of reflections. Second, Parts 2–5 have 23 books—another prime number—and 500 chapters. The number 100 signifies fullness and perfection, for it is the square of the decad (10 x 10). That is why Dante’s *Commedia* has 100 cantos. Montesquieu’s 500 chapters for the last five Parts of his work thereby signify its extraordinary fullness and its own kind of perfection, given Montesquieu’s conception of his task: the realities he reflects on cannot be mastered conceptually, yet *The Spirit of the Laws* explores them more fully and more perfectly than anyone ever has. One sign of this perfection is its highly finished literary style; another is its highly wrought numerological structure.

I have been arguing for an elaborate numerological design in
The Spirit of the Laws, and we might well test it by examining its centers. Leo Strauss was famously interested in the centers of a work, but so, too, are all scholars of numerological structure. (For the center of Dante’s Commedia, see Singleton 1965; for center structures in lyric poems by Boethius and Dante, see Durling and Martinez 1990, 6–18 and 53–70.) The Spirit of the Laws has 605 chapters; so, it has a central chapter, the 303rd. Because it has 31 books, we may look at the central chapters (8–9) of the central book, book 16. If Montesquieu planned the volume as a whole numerologically, its central chapters should reflect some of his central concerns.

This is exactly what we do find. The 303rd chapter of the work is book 19, chapter 12. In the first sentence of the second paragraph, Montesquieu refers to the title of his work: “Laws are established, mores are inspired; the latter depend more on the general spirit, the former depend more on a particular institution” (314; my emphasis). At the center of The Spirit of the Laws, Montesquieu comments explicitly on mores as the spirit of the laws. The chapter is entitled “On manners and mores in the despotic state,” and concerns itself specifically with the enclosure of women, in despotic countries, as opposed to their presence in public in Europe. We find precisely the same topic in Montesquieu’s other center. Book 16 is the center of the 31 books, and since it has 16 chapters, chapters 8–9 stand at its center. Chapter 8 is “On the separation of women from men” in polygamous societies, while chapter 9 treats “A link between domestic government and politics.” As in book 19, chapter 12, Montesquieu contrasts the servitude of women in Eastern despotism, domestic and political, with the private and public liberty they enjoy in the West.

Evidently, Montesquieu planned these chapters as centers for The Spirit of the Laws as a whole. They are over 50 chapters and three books apart, and yet they echo one another. In the central chapter of the 605, he illuminates the title of the work as a whole. In both centers, he discusses the parallel between private and public arrangements, contrasting East and West. The author of The Persian Letters explored the domestic enclosure of women in the East as a mirror of political despotism, and he puts the same concern in the two centers of The Spirit of the Laws. This concern has significant relations with the work as a six. As the product of the first female and male numbers, six symbolizes offspring through marriage. In other words, six symbolizes the family and its continuity through generations. The numerological centers in The Spirit of the Laws thereby intersect with one numerological meaning of the whole: the relations between men and women in the family reveal the spirit animating the laws.
In sum, *The Spirit of the Laws*, capacious though it is, has been polished *usque ad unguem*, as Horace put it, designed down to details like echoing centers and the numerological significance of its number of chapters. We have long known it as a masterpiece. I tried to indicate new aspects of Montesquieu’s achievement in the work. I am confident that his numerological design exceeds my vision, and I hope that others will pursue its details and illuminate its depths.

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I am grateful to Stuart D. Warner for many conversations about Montesquieu and for his encouragement in preparing this essay.


In reply to a letter from the Jewish congregation of Newport, Rhode Island, congratulating him on his presidency, George Washington, in 1790, states:

The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy, a policy worthy of imitation.

All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.

Falling back on wording used by his correspondents, Washington ends with the greeting:

May the children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants, while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig-tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid (Schlappes 1976, 80).

A few years earlier, in 1779, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing had voiced the same sentiments in his Nathan the Wise. Set in Jerusalem, at the time of the crusades, the play presents the world of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, even with their prejudices. With tragedy right under the surface of a
terse, witty dialogue, *Nathan the Wise* explores the chances for men of different faiths to recognize their common humanity and accept each other as brothers. Modeled on Moses Mendelssohn, Lessing's philosopher friend, the figure of Nathan, acclaimed for his wisdom, stands out like a beacon of reason in a sea of passions “sanctioning bigotry” and “assisting persecution.” The play’s repeated image of “the house,” as symbol of religious tradition, points to the precarious nature of Nathan’s rational credo in the world.

Besides a group of palm trees, a place for conversation between respective houses, the play offers three locations: Nathan’s house (with Nathan, his daughter Recha, and her Christian nurse Daja), the Monastery (with the Patriarch, and Friar Bonafides), and the Sultan’s palace (with Saladin, his sister Sittah, the dervish Al-Hafi, and various attendants). Most characters (like Saladin and Sittah, or the Patriarch) only appear in their own houses, defined, as it were, by their traditions. Some (like Al-Hafi, Friar Bonafides, Nathan and Recha) move between houses. One, a young Templar, at liberty in Jerusalem through Saladin’s pardon, and consequently Recha’s savior from her father’s burning house, does not seem to have a house and, therefore, appears in all three. That the play presents more than a few Muslims, the rulers of Jerusalem at the time, a few Christians, still keeping a foothold in the Holy Places, but only two Jews, exiles even in the promised land, is a fact worth noting.

A most poignant reminder of this, the play begins with Nathan returning from a long journey. The mention of Babylon, the place of exile, and Damascus, the place of conversion, tacitly conveys a sense of precariousness. Nathan’s dismay, not so much about the house, but about Recha’s almost having perished with the house (I, 1), takes on tragic significance against the background of his story, told much later in the play (IV, 7). Under the threat of persecution from the Patriarch (IV, 2), Nathan, for the first time in his life, speaks about the massacre of the Jews by the Christians in Darun, with his wife and seven sons burnt to death in the house of his brother. Lying in dust and ashes, Nathan, like Job, had ranted against God and the world for three days and nights. At the return of reason and the will to stand up again, the child of a friend had been entrusted to his care. Listening to the story, Friar Bonafides, the former squire who had brought the child and witnessed Nathan’s gratitude before God, exclaims: “Nathan! Nathan! You are a Christian! —By God you are a Christian! A better Christian never was!” Nathan’s reply: “Good for us! For what, in your eyes, makes me a Christian, that, in my eyes, makes you a Jew!” might be, in a few words, what the play is all about. The child, “created and raised to be the ornament of any house, of any
faith,” as Nathan puts it, is, of course, Recha. Nothing, to Friar Bonafides’ mind, could be more natural, more just, and therefore, if need be, more forgivable, than Nathan’s raising Recha as his own daughter, in his own house (IV, 7).

What does it mean, in this play, to have a house? A house defines one: it keeps things in, as well as out. It stands for the past, for something to come back to, but also for the future, for something to look forward to. In the light of this, more figurative, meaning, Nathan’s first reaction to the near ruin of his house: “Then, we’d have built a new, a more convenient one” (I, 1) sounds like a rather difficult task.

How difficult, becomes clear from the conversation between Saladin and Sittah, at the beginning of act II. Playing chess, a game of opposing houses, brother and sister discuss the lost chances of a marriage between their house and the house of Richard the Lionhearted. Nothing short of a utopia of mankind, Saladin’s vision of a house arising from “the first, the best of all the houses in the world” has come to naught over the bigoted claims of the other side (II, 1).

Against the framework of acts I, III, and V, with their attempts to foster an atmosphere of reason and good will among men, acts II and IV conjure up the prejudices standing in the way. Acting like the crisis in a life-threatening disease, act IV is the more shocking of the two.

Balancing that last outburst of “bigotry” and “persecution” (IV, 2; 4), the first meeting between Nathan and the Templar, in the center of act II, tries to cut through the common layers of mistrust and misunderstanding. Because the Christian knight will not come to the house of a Jew (I, 4), the meeting has to take place under the palm trees adjacent to Nathan’s house. Their bordering, on one side, Nathan’s house, on the other side, the Savior’s tomb, might betray Lessing’s understanding of nature as a link between Nathan and Christ, irrespective of the claims of either Judaism or Christianity.

In expectation of the meeting between the two men, Recha complains, first about the wall, then about the hedge, blocking her view of the knight’s approach (II, 4). Impermeable, like a wall, and permeable, like a hedge, a window overlooking both of them will allow Recha and Daja to be, at the same time, inside and outside the house.

The progress of the conversation between Nathan and the Templar can be gauged by the changes in address (II, 5). Recognizing each other, first by ethnic group, then by social status, Nathan breaks the barrier by
introducing himself by name. In answer to the dismissal of his thanks for Recha’s rescue, Nathan, moved to tears, kisses the Templar’s fire-stained mantle. Touched by this simple human gesture, the young man’s: “But, Jew –your name is Nathan? –But, Nathan– … I am perplexed–” shows the beginning of a greater openness on his part. Already forced to acknowledge the broadening of his: “You know how Templars are supposed to think” in Nathan’s: “I know how good men think; I know as well that all lands bear good men,” the Christian knight, with his resentment of the claim of the Jews to be God’s chosen people, throws up one last guard. Only to provoke Nathan to exclaim: “Ha! You know not how much closer I now shall cling to you –O come, we must, we must be friends!–  Despise my people as much as you want. We both have neither chosen our people. Are we our people? What do we mean by people? Are Christian and Jew rather Christian and Jew than man? Ah! If I had found in you one more to be content to bear the name of man!” The Templar’s whole-hearted: “Yes, by God, that you have, Nathan! … We must, we must become friends,” nevertheless points to the difference between “being” and “becoming” friends and, therefore, to the significance of time in human relationships.

Interrupting the conversation between Nathan and the Templar, a summons comes from the Sultan for Nathan to present himself at the palace (II, 6). In the center of act III, the conversation between Nathan and Saladin is, at the same time, the center of the play as a whole (III, 5-7). After his initial: “Come closer, Jew!” Saladin loses no time to address Nathan by name. Contrary to expectation, the Sultan feigns no interest in either monetary or political matters, but inquires after Nathan’s religious convictions. Nathan’s “Sultan, I am a Jew,” as well as Saladin’s “And I a Muslim. The Christian stands between us,” are called into question by the Sultan’s “Of these three religions, only one, for sure, can be the true one” (III, 5). Not to be caught in a trap, Nathan proceeds to tell a parable (III, 7). In the form of an historic account, the parable tells of a precious ring, handed down from father to son, as a symbol of supremacy in the house. Instead of to the first born, as might be expected, the ring, with the magic power to make the wearer beloved before God and men, is supposed to go always to the most beloved. Generations down, a father of three equally beloved sons tries to avoid the tyranny of the ring by ordering an artist to make two exact copies of it. Unable, even himself, to distinguish the original from the copies, the father, separately, gives each son his blessing and his ring. After the father’s death, the three sons, each with his ring, come to claim supremacy in the house.
Impatient with the ending of the parable, the Sultan, at first, resents Nathan's explanation: comparable to the rings, the three religions, distinguishable only in externals, like clothing, food, and drink, are essentially the same: handed down from our forefathers, and, therefore, taken on trust, they all are founded on history. Speculating about the possible loss of the original, the judge, appealed to by the three sons, advises them to each act as if they had the true ring. Trying to make themselves beloved before God and men, they, sooner or later, would come to prove its magic power. Appealed to as a latter-day judge of the outcome, Saladin rushes to grasp Nathan's hand: “I dust? I nothing? O God! . . . . . . . Nathan, dear Nathan! - . . . . . . . His judgment seat sure is not mine. –Go! –Go! –But be my friend.”

On the authority of Lessing’s statement:

If God in his right hand held all truth, and in his left hand the sole ever active striving for truth, albeit with the corollary of ever and always erring, and told me: choose! I would fall humbly to his left hand and say: Father, this one! the pure truth, surely is for none but you alone! From “Eine Duplik” (Lessing 1956, 27).

one might consider the possibility of the true ring having remained in the hands of the artist. Like the artist, in analogy to the God of the three religions, Nathan, as the mouthpiece of Lessing, crowns the play with a parable in which all lines of thought and action come together. As a telltale sign, no more chess playing occurs after this dramatic center piece.

This does not mean, however, that all bigotry, that all persecution, is at an end. In answer to Nathan’s invitation, the Templar had come to see Recha and fallen head over heels in love with her (III, 2). That is, his visit to Nathan’s house has to be thought of to coincide with Nathan’s audience at the Sultan’s palace. On his return from there, Nathan finds the Christian knight under the group of palm trees, for once identified as “near the monastery” (III, 8). Taken aback by Nathan’s hesitancy in calling him his son (III, 9), the young man falls an easy prey to Daja’s secret (imparted to him, as in the Garden of Eden, from behind a tree) that Recha is not Nathan’s daughter, but a Christian child raised in Nathan’s house (III, 10). In his confusion the Templar, without mentioning names, asks the Patriarch for advice (IV, 2). An example of bigotry and persecution, the Patriarch, appealing to papal and imperial law, sentences the Jew to be burned at the stake. His grotesque refrain: “No matter! The Jew shall be burned” will echo with terrifying reality in the hearing of Nathan’s story told to Friar Bonafides later in act IV. In the center
of these opposing scenes (IV, 2; 7), the Templar is granted an audience with Saladin (IV, 4). We should remember that it was the Sultan’s pardon that enabled the knight to rescue Recha from her father’s burning house. The motive for the pardon had been the young man’s uncanny resemblance to the Sultan’s long lost brother (I, 2; 5), in his time a favorite with Christian ladies (IV, 5). Apprised of Nathan’s recent reserve towards the Templar, Saladin scorns the flare-up of prejudice in the Christian. As we gathered from the first meeting between Nathan and the Templar (II, 5), the young man not only resembles the Sultan’s brother, but also Nathan’s friend who, years ago, had entrusted Recha into Nathan’s care.

That it is a little book, “ein Büchelchen,” that settles everyone’s relation to everyone in this play, is, I think, an ironic reminder of the role of “the book” in Lessing’s tradition. A miniature version of the book, the little book, kept by the squire, turned Friar, all these years, contains both prayers and names of relatives, a genealogy of sorts (IV, 7; V, 4). That it is written in Arabic seems to pose no problem for Nathan.

Between the dervish Al-Hafi, his longstanding Muslim friend, and Friar Bonafides, his newly found Christian sympathizer, Nathan finds himself in the company of two men who, sick and tired of human society, with all its conventionalities, desire nothing better than to live out their lives in the desert. Though touched and amused by Al-Hafi’s opinion that he be the only one worthy to come along, Nathan chooses to remain among men, in the world of different houses as we know them.

Waiting under the palm trees before Nathan’s house, the Templar blames himself for his rash disclosures to the Patriarch (V, 3). Like a counterpoint to Saladin’s earlier: “How from one good deed, though but a child of mere passion, so many other good deeds flow” (III, 7), the Templar’s: “What have I hothead set afoot! –That one sole spark of passion should be able to burn so much of our brain!–” acts as a threshold for his final confession to Nathan (V, 5).

To make a long story short: From the Friar’s little book it becomes clear that the Templar is not only Recha’s brother, but also the son of Saladin’s and Sittah’s brother who, years ago, had been Nathan’s friend as well. Though a form of universal brotherhood and, as such, an ideal solution to all the problems of the play, the ending, no less than a Deus ex machina in Greek tragedy, leaves much to be desired.
Too close to each other to become husband and wife, the Templar and Recha have lost a future, but gained a past. As the young man finally puts it: “You take and give me, Nathan! With full hands both! –No! You give me more than you are taking! Infinitely more!” In the light of the ring parable, told in the center of the play, gaining a past means coming to understand one’s origins. With a Christian mother, a Muslim father, and a Jewish upbringing, Recha, more than anything else, reflects Nathan’s religion of reason. “Created and raised to be the ornament of any house, of any faith,” as Nathan wanted Friar Bonafides to know, she is also the one who, in the end, seems most beloved. But that, as we remember, was the sign for being in possession of the true ring. That it is a daughter to carry on the tradition, and a daughter to make up for the loss of a wife and seven sons, broadens the scope of the ring parable. This scope is further enhanced by Recha’s carrying on the tradition not only of one, but of three houses, united in brotherhood through the wisdom and artistry of Nathan.

Yet, there is also a literary tradition Lessing’s play seems to carry on. In both Marlow’s *The Jew of Malta* and Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, the Jew’s daughter plays a critical role. In order to retrieve the gold from her father’s house turned into a nunnery, Abigail in *The Jew of Malta* converts to becoming a nun. In the end, she perishes with the house, set on fire by her own vengeful father. The story is the more abominable, as Barabas, the Jew, robbed of his wealth, sees himself in the role of Job, forsaken by God and the world. Much more lifelike, Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice* betrays her father not only by marrying a Christian, but also by eloping with some of Shylock’s most precious jewels. A much more complex character than Marlow’s Barabas, Shakespeare’s Shylock mourns the loss of his daughter as much as the loss of his wealth. Even though lavished over by poetry, the marriage of Jessica and Lorenzo, precarious from the start, does not promise well (Yaffe 1997).

Against the background of this literary tradition, the boldness of Lessing’s *Nathan the Wise* stands out even more. Not forced to convert, as Marlow’s Barabas or Shakespeare’s Shylock, Lessing’s Nathan is asked about his religious convictions. Living in the house of tradition, Nathan, even so, lives by the religion of reason. Modeled on Moses Mendelssohn, Jew and philosopher, Nathan, at the same time, recalls his biblical namesake. Yet, unlike Nathan the prophet, before King David, Lessing’s Nathan, before Sultan Saladin, trusts in the gentle force of reason. Where Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, with
the unfolding of its dramatic action, seems to explore the role of religion in
human life, Marlow and Lessing each preface their play with a remark on reli-
gion. On either side of Shakespeare’s portrayal of Shylock—Marlow’s Barabas
a curse, Lessing’s Nathan a blessing on mankind—Marlow’s “I count religion
but a childish toy, And hold there is no sin but ignorance” only appears to speak
the same language as Lessing’s “Nathan’s attitude against all positive religion
has always been my own.” Like a beacon of reason, shining through the ages,
the play’s motto: “Enter, for here too are gods” presents a saying of Heraclitus,
an early Greek philosopher, in a quote from Gellius, a late Roman historiogra-
pher. An invitation to his house, however humble, Heraclitus’s saying assures
us about the presence of gods. Whether “gods,” in the plural, refers to pagan
gods, and therefore, ultimately, to nature, or to the different notions about God
to be encountered in the play, Lessing leaves for the reader to ponder over.

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(Translations from Lessing are my own.)

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Yaffe, Martin D. 1997. Shylock and the Jewish Question. Baltimore and
Leo Strauss was the chief reviver of classical, or Socratic, political philosophy in the 20th century. An important characteristic of that philosophy is what Strauss called the “natural tension between the city and the philosophers” (Strauss 1964, 125). This tension, of course, is most famously represented by the trial of Socrates. Following in the tradition of Socrates, Strauss challenged the authoritative beliefs of his time, those beliefs he identified with historicism, positivism, relativism, and, ultimately, nihilism. Also in keeping with that tradition, Strauss was subsequently criticized because of this challenge. What has emerged is a conventional view of Strauss as elitist, reactionary, and anti-democratic (see Pangle 1989). One might conclude that, if he aimed to be a modern Socratic gadfly, he certainly achieved some measure of success.

But Strauss has also gained a staunch following, both in and out of the universities. There is an identifiably “Straussian” group of scholars and writers. Although this following is small in comparison with mainstream political science, many of Strauss’s students and students of his students have been successful in government, in academia, and in the media. However, several of his students have, as Thomas Pangle has put it, disagreed “sharply” over the meaning of Strauss’s work, especially as it bears upon the question of the philosopher’s relationship to the political community (Pangle 1989, vii). The main division within the group is between the so-called “Eastern” and “Western” Straussians. It should be noted that most of the more prominent Straussians, and certainly the greater number overall, is of the Eastern variety. In other words, though the Straussians are heterodox, there is something of an orthodoxy within that heterodoxy. The orthodox, or Eastern, Straussians have been represented most famously by the late Allan Bloom, but also by Walter
Berns, Harvey Mansfield, Pangle and others. The heterodox Straussians, on the other hand, are most importantly represented by Harry V. Jaffa.

Jaffa is identifiable conservative, perhaps more so than most Straussians (he drafted Barry Goldwater’s infamous “Extremism in the defense of liberty …” speech). However, he is notorious for his criticisms of conservative figures such as Judge Robert Bork and Chief Justice William Rehnquist (see Jaffa 1993, 1999). Jaffa has criticized these men for what he perceives to be their moral relativism, a predilection he believes they share with their liberal opponents. By questioning the conservative movement, and by arguing that it is not essentially different from ideological liberalism, Jaffa also appears as something of a philosophic gadfly. Strauss noted that the philosopher acts as an “umpire,” who, in the course of aiding the city, must raise the “ulterior question” of virtue, the question of the right way of life altogether (Strauss 1989, 54, 59). The raising of this question, in turn, brings upon the philosopher the ire of all sides in the community, even of those with whom he is ostensibly allied. By challenging his fellow conservatives, Jaffa has, indeed, suffered something of this fate.

Yet, while these political exchanges are worth noting on their own, Jaffa’s criticisms of the Straussians are more important for our present purposes, and perhaps more important altogether. For, the debate among the Straussians is, as it were, among and about the philosophic umpires themselves. In the 1970s, Jaffa began a rather thoroughgoing critique of other Straussians. He has since publicly criticized Berns, Bloom, Mansfield and Pangle, and Martin Diamond, among others, all of whom are or were the most prominent of the Straussians. I examine this phenomenon, not because civil wars are so fascinating (though they certainly are), but because Jaffa would appear to be, very crudely speaking, the most Socratic, because the most heterodox, of Strauss’s students. He is, one might say, the gadfly of the gadflies.

The rift between Eastern and Western Straussians is, for both sides, a dispute over the political status of the Socratic philosopher in Strauss’s understanding. In contrast with most Straussians, Jaffa stresses that Strauss’s “life and work had a motive that was not less political than philosophic. The political motive was to arrest and reverse ‘the decline of the West.’” That decline “consisted in the West’s loss of its sense of purpose.” Jaffa notes that the “core” of his own “life and work,” primarily through his study of Lincoln, is the recovery of “the proper understanding of the relationship between the Constitution and the Declaration [of Independence]” (Jaffa 1984a, 137, 130).
He suggests that Strauss concurred with him in the importance of this undertaking: “I believe that Strauss believed that my restoration of Lincoln was the most likely way to restore the aforesaid authority [of the principles of the Declaration], and that this was the form in which the statesmanship of classical political philosophy might become authoritative in our world” (Jaffa 1999b, 43). Jaffa regards his life’s work as an extension of Strauss’s, whose work he considers central to the revival of decent statesmanship. Indeed, the recovery of America’s principles is, for Jaffa, an essential part of the moral and political rebirth of the West.

Jaffa believes that he shares Strauss’s philosophic motive as well. “Do I not bring philosophy down from the heavens and into the city—making it practical and political,” he asks rhetorically, reflecting upon his defense of the Declaration against defenders of the Old South (Jaffa 1984a, 136). Jaffa here echoes Cicero’s description of the famous Socratic turn to the human things (Cicero 1960, 5:10). According to Jaffa, to bring philosophy down from the heavens and into the city is to make philosophy serve the city. The question is whether this amounts to a diminution of philosophy as such. Jaffa notes in another context that even Socrates defended his philosophical mission, at least exoterically, “by discovering its origin in a command of the oracle of Delphi—a god recognized by the city of Athens. He insisted that it would be impious for him to disobey that command” (Jaffa 1987a, 24). Of course, Socrates’ impiety is rather manifest in Plato’s Republic and elsewhere; he does appear to bring new gods into the city. Yet, Jaffa insists that Socrates shared the moral and political orientation of other men in the city; indeed, that he was affected in some way by the authoritative customs, laws, and gods of Athens. It is in the light of this problem of Socrates that we must consider Jaffa’s defense of the “ancient faith” of America.

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In one of the more telling confrontations, Berns criticized Jaffa for this emphasis upon the political, or even pious, dimension of political philosophy. Jaffa had initially criticized Berns for sanctioning Diamond’s view that the Declaration provided “no guidance” for interpreting the Constitution (see Jaffa 1978). He challenged Berns to debate the issue publicly, but Berns countered that the manner of the challenge was an “abuse of philosophy” and violated the “philosophic spirit” of Strauss’s example. Berns accused Jaffa of doctrinaireism, messianism, an inquisitorial spirit, and a lack of moderation. “Eternity, not history,” he noted, “is the theme of philosophy, which, Strauss
believed, must beware of wishing to be edifying. Jaffa, like Marx, wants to change the world, not to interpret it; he does nothing but edify” (Berns 1982, 45). Jaffa’s chief fault, according to Berns, is his attempt to employ philosophy in the service of politics, or to make the philosopher the defender of the city’s piety. Indeed, he calls Jaffa a “pest of a priest” (Berns 1984, 7).

Jaffa, however, denies that Berns understands Strauss adequately. He points out Strauss’s statement at the end of Thoughts on Machiavelli:

It would seem that the notion of the beneficence of nature or of the primacy of the Good must be restored by being rethought through a return to the fundamental experiences from which it is derived. For while ‘philosophy must beware of wishing to be edifying,’ it is of necessity edifying (Strauss 1958, 299).

Jaffa remarks that this “is as good a summary statement of the intention of Leo Strauss’s life and work as I can imagine” (Jaffa 1984a, 145; cf. Lampert 1996, 107). He interprets Strauss to mean “that one cannot transcend the moral-political dimension of human life by turning away from it, but only by taking it with full seriousness. It is for this reason … that philosophy is said to be of necessity edifying.” Philosophy does have transcendence as its purpose; it desires to know the whole, to attain knowledge of the whole through the investigation of being, of what ‘is’ in the fullest sense. But Strauss could not mean by this, according to Jaffa, that philosophy necessarily is separated from moral and political concerns, for philosophy includes the restoration “of the beneficence of nature or of the primacy of the Good” (cf. Plato, Republic 505a). Knowledge as such cannot be divorced from knowledge of goodness. “I have … believed for a long time,” Jaffa says, “that the separation of concern with the moral virtues (or statesmanship) and philosophy, is dialectical rather than substantial.” We come to know what we can know by contemplating the moral questions at the heart of our existence as human beings, as moral and political beings. “We have access to theoretical wisdom,” Jaffa argues, “only by taking the moral distinctions with full seriousness.” Political philosophy thereby becomes “the key to philosophy itself” (Jaffa 1993b, 384n5, 369, 370).

Jaffa echoes Strauss’s statement that political philosophy is the “core of philosophy” or “the first philosophy.” Socrates came to see that “the things which are ‘first in themselves’ are somehow ‘first for us’.” Strauss notes that Hippodamus, for example, was not actually a political philosopher, because his conception of the best regime was almost entirely divorced from a
proper appreciation of what the city really is; he wrongly approached the ques-
tion of the city from a posture alien to the city itself. Socrates, on the other
hand, became the founder of political philosophy because he discovered that
the things that are “first in themselves” are “revealed in men’s opinions”
(Strauss 1964, 20, 19). Socrates inquired into opinions about the moral and
political things, especially the highest opinions pronounced in the city’s laws.
“I think Strauss’s preoccupation with the problem of Socrates in his later
years,” Jaffa writes, “reflects the conviction that the reconstruction of classical
political philosophy requires a reliance upon the moral distinctions as the key
to the metaphysical distinctions” (Jaffa 1993b, 370). But since the difference
between these distinctions is approached by the political philosopher dialecti-
cally, and not substantively, he never forgets that he is a thoroughly political
being; there is, as Strauss says, “no unqualified transcending, even by the
wisest man as such, of the sphere of opinion” (Strauss 1964, 20). Indeed, “there
is a straight and almost continuous way leading from the pre-philosophic to
the philosophic approach” (Strauss 1959, 81). The Socratic philosopher shares
with his fellow citizens the same orientation toward the good, although he
ultimately may doubt their beliefs about the good.

Berns’s characterization of Jaffa, however, appears accurate in
at least one sense. If the Straussians are really the gadflies of the city (or at least
of academia), then the gadfly of the gadflies would have to be a priest, if only
a priest of a certain kind. Such priestliness, or perhaps moral indignation gen-
erally, seems to be contrary to the way of the philosopher. For, the Socratic
philosopher does eventually challenge the beliefs of the city, its opinions about
the good. Strauss remarks that the “force of the moral demand is weakened in
Greek philosophy because in Greek philosophy this demand is not backed up
by divine promises.” The philosopher doubts the possibility of “perfect
redemption” and so concludes that “evil will never cease on earth.” He thus
resigns himself, however cheerfully, to live a life, unlike his fellow citizens,
“above fear and trembling as well as above hope” (Strauss 1989, 251).
Moreover, Strauss intimates, given the gulf between the philosopher and
the city, the philosopher may present himself as pious and political merely to
protect himself from the city’s prejudices and attacks (Strauss 1959, 93-94).

Pangle takes Strauss to mean “that the core of Socratic phi-
losophy was not decisively altered by the Socratic turn.” Socrates may have
come to reflect on “his need for students, admirers, and friends” and on “the
necessary attachment this entails to the well-being of the city and its civic edu-
cation and family upbringing”; he perhaps even awakened to the question of his own “unqualified atheism” and questionable cosmology. But this does not change philosophy as such, Pangle maintains. “What is new,” he writes, “is Socrates’ emphatic admission that his idiosyncratic way of life has to be justified according to standards acceptable to the city and its moral-religious beliefs.” After the turn, Socratic philosophy becomes “preoccupied to an unprecedented extent with mastering and practicing the art of rhetoric or communication” (Pangle 1989, 18, 13, 14, 17 emphasis added). The philosopher’s public piety is to that extent disingenuous.

Jaffa disagrees with Pangle, and he believes Strauss ultimately would as well (see Jaffa 1984b, 1985; and Pangle 1985). “But does ‘has to be justified’,” he asks, quoting Pangle, “refer only to the rhetorical exigencies of philosophy, or does it refer to a necessity lying at the heart of the philosophical understanding of reality?” Jaffa argues that the Socratic turn was constituted by the rejection of the “pre-Socratic reductionist understanding of moral phenomena.” Socrates’ decision to accept Athens’s judgment against him is based upon a wholly different understanding of those phenomena, one which rests upon the “primacy of the Good”:

Socrates demands an account of the goodness of right action, a goodness rooted in the goodness of being as such. For this, the core of philosophy itself must indeed take a new “turn.” Pangle’s account of the Socratic turn imputes to it little more than a new skill in inventing the myths by which one conceals the real nature of philosophy—which itself remains unchanged. It says nothing about discovering a ground in nature for human excellence, whereby the philosopher might become a lawgiver, or a teacher of lawgivers (like the Athenian Stranger), and thereby the teacher of civic excellence par excellence (Jaffa 1985, 22).

The distinction between pre-Socratic and Socratic philosophy, in Jaffa’s view, is that the latter rejects the former’s indifference to or ignorance of the proper understanding of nature as a guide for human action. It is true that Socrates never quite became a political leader or teacher of civic virtue in the typical sense (Pangle 1983; cf. Plato, Apology of Socrates 36c; Gorgias 521d). But Jaffa’s point is a broader one about the very nature of human conduct and its relationship to human thought, reflected in the actions as well as the argument of Socrates himself. Indeed, Strauss notes that “Socrates preferred to sacrifice his life in order to preserve philosophy in Athens rather than to preserve his life in order to introduce philosophy into Crete. … His choice was a political choice.
of the highest order” (Strauss 1959, 33). “The Socratic enterprise in the comprehensive sense,” Jaffa explains, “is that enterprise whereby codes of decent human conduct are recognized as exercises in reason requiring, so far as circumstances permit, that human conduct be made to conform to nonarbitrary standards” (Jaffa 1985, 22, emphasis added).

The “comprehensive sense” of the Socratic enterprise implies consequences for politics as well as philosophy. For Jaffa, political philosophy is not merely a politically benign way of life. Reflecting Strauss’s notion that there is a “straight and almost continuous way leading from the pre-philosophic to the philosophic approach,” he sees political philosophy as a natural extension of the city’s orientation toward the good. But reason, which in the city first takes the form of a commonsense acceptance of virtue and the good, is always open to its own corruption. “Political philosophy,” Jaffa explains, “in one sense, became necessary only when ‘sophistry’ undermined the gentleman’s unsophisticated attachment to his gentlemanship” (Jaffa 1984b, 16). The unsophisticated way of the gentleman must then be fortified with philosophy. The Socratic turn is, thus, largely a political phenomenon, not something left for the ivory tower or the Republic of Letters. The result is what Jaffa calls “Socratic statesmanship” (Jaffa 2000, 368). The language of Socratic rationalism appears in the very words of the greatest statesmen, men such as Lincoln and the Founders. Madison, for example, argued against the “sophism” of nullification (Madison 1900–1910, 9:599). Lincoln likewise characterized the argument for secession as an “ingenuous sophism.” Such an argument amounts to a “drugging” of the “public mind,” an undermining of reason as such (Lincoln 1953, 4:421-441). Lincoln’s speeches are, of course, particularly important to Jaffa, for in those speeches Lincoln shows himself to be “perhaps the greatest of all examplars of Socratic statesmanship.” Even though Lincoln “must save the Union from physical destruction … first he must save it from ingenious sophistry.” Indeed, the “salvation of the Union depends, first and foremost, upon the defeat of the Unjust Speech by the Just Speech, or the victory of philosophy over sophistry” (Jaffa 2000, 368). In Lincoln, we see in sharpest relief the “political reflection, or imitation, of the wise man” of which Strauss wrote (Strauss 1953, 142).

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But, is the difference between Jaffa and the other Straussian really anything more than a difference of emphasis? For example, many of the Eastern Straussians have written about America, and few of them have explic-
itly rejected its principles, though some perhaps do not completely accept them (see Deutsch and Murley 1999, chaps. 11-20). Moreover, Jaffa himself admits that political philosophy intends to “transcend the moral-political dimension of human life.” Pangle likewise reminds us that Xenophon portrays a mature Socrates investigating those things studied by the pre-Socratic philosophers, such as the nature of light and liquids and whether the beings are numbers (Pangle 1983, 18). Yet, even though he thinks the core of philosophy did not change with the Socratic turn, Pangle himself accepts Jaffa’s (and Strauss’s) basic premise concerning the “dialectical” character of Socratic philosophy. Socrates originated a new “kind of study in which, for example, the nature or idea of justice, or natural right, and surely the nature of the human soul or man, is more important than, for example, the nature of the sun” (Strauss and Cropsey 1963, 5; Pangle 1983, 18). In this sense, Pangle and perhaps most other Straussian can be understood to accept the “primacy of the Good.” In short, Jaffa and the other Straussians would seem to have much in common. Perhaps Jaffa really is too quarrelsome, too pious.

There is some reason to accept this conclusion. For example, even though the gentleman and the philosopher are both oriented toward the good, the conflict between them is rather acute. The gentleman, on the one hand, has a conviction that the divine somehow infuses nature with order and meaning that make sense out of life and the world. But this conviction, as Pangle notes, really rests on “deeply rooted longings or hopes” or “‘psychic’ needs” that render doubtful the “logical and empirical” adequacy of the arguments supporting the conviction. The philosopher, on the other hand, claims that the “greatest good” for man is precisely to make arguments about virtue, to live the examined life. Even though he “cannot claim to know the health of the soul, or its perfection, or the complete fulfillment and happiness of man,” the philosopher nevertheless claims increasing knowledge as a result of his questioning. Above all, to know that one does not have complete knowledge is “to know that the thing most needed is to continue this progress” in knowledge (Pangle 1983, 19-21). This questioning, skeptical way of life necessarily draws the philosopher into conflict with the gentlemen, and with the citizenry in general. Indeed, Strauss suggests that philosophy assumes the “self-satisfaction or self-admiration of him who steadily progresses in virtue. Socrates does not imply, as far as the happy few are concerned, that they should be contrite, be repentant, or express a sense of guilt” (Strauss 1989, 249-50). It is this certainty of the goodness of the philosopher’s way of life, his self-sufficiency, that Pangle emphasizes.
Jaffa, moreover, agrees that “philosophic activity … is in ten-sion with moral and political life.” This is not a surprising statement coming from Jaffa, for his own dialectical (some say merely polemical) exploits have created some tension between himself and others. Yet he suggests more, that for the philosophers “progress in wisdom, understood as progress in knowledge of ignorance, is sufficient to justify their way of life.” “The motivation of a Platonic dialogue,” Jaffa explains, “is not contingent upon its utility for any political or non-philosophic purpose. …The aporia of the dialogue, which reveals hitherto undisclosed knowledge of ignorance, is its own end.” He goes so far as to say that the way of life of the philosophers “is objectively best, and the morality that serves it is the objectively true morality” (Jaffa 1993b, 353–54). Jaffa seems here to come close to the view, which he imputes to the other Straussians, that political life, especially devotion to the good as the city conceives of it, is contrary to or at least exclusive of Socratic philosophy. He echoes Strauss’s telling statement on the nature and difficulty of philosophic inquiry:

> Philosophy as such is nothing but genuine awareness of the problems, i.e., of the fundamental and comprehensive problems. It is impossible to think about these problems without becoming inclined toward a solution, toward one or the other of the very few typical solutions. Yet as long as there is no wisdom but only quest for wisdom, the evidence of all solutions is necessarily smaller than the evidence of the problems. Therefore the philosopher ceases to be a philosopher at the moment at which the “subjective certainty” of a solution becomes stronger than his awareness of the problematic character of that solution. At that moment the sectarian is born (Strauss 1991, 196).

By virtue of his praise of the philosophic life, Jaffa would seem to agree with this assessment. But one cannot help but think of Berns’s indictment of Jaffa on the count of being edifying. With his resolute defense of America’s principles, Jaffa might appear to be the sectarian against whom Strauss warns. Jaffa appears to contradict his avowed claim that the philosophic life is the “objectively best” way of life. Hence, Berns and Pangle would be right to chastise him for quarrelling with his fellow philosophic umpires.

Jaffa, of course, disagrees with this criticism. But the basis of his response to the criticism is sometimes difficult to see, perhaps because it depends upon an essential similarity between the Socratic and the political ways of life. Pangle notes that the philosopher’s activity is accompanied by a “deep and austere pleasure”; he is identified with “erotics or love matters,” while the gentleman is identified with “longings or hopes” (Pangle 1983, 19–20).
defending the city as he does, however, Jaffa seems to suggest that these different qualities are the same in a decisive sense: while they have different desires and degrees of awareness of their desires, both the philosopher and the citizen nevertheless desire. That is, they are both human, possessing the natural characteristic of *eros*, and both ultimately long for that which will supply the defect of their knowledge (see Jaffa 1984a, 264–65). One might say that the principal difference between the philosopher and the citizen is not that one knows and the other does not, but that the philosopher is less sure of the city’s orthodoxy than is the citizen. Still, it may be the case that the philosopher does not doubt the orthodoxy itself, but doubts the citizen’s grasp of it. This possibility, of course, would depend upon the substance of the orthodoxy in question (Strauss 1968, 256; Jaffa 1987a). In either case, the citizen claims to know what he does not really know; at best, he does not know, but believes the city’s orthodoxy. Moreover, the typical citizen certainly does not claim god-like status any more than does the philosopher; both men are pious in this sense, they are somehow aware of their own limits. Neither man, as such, is without desire.

This conclusion at first appears incongruous with Strauss’s emphasis upon the philosopher’s “self-satisfaction or self-admiration” and its contrast with the citizen’s piety or guilt. Yet, we also are reminded of Strauss’s view that Socrates was himself a pious man. A pious man, Strauss observes, will not study “the things in heaven and beneath the earth,” because the gods do not approve such study. The pious man will study the human things instead. According to Strauss, “It is the greatest proof of Socrates’ piety that he limited himself to the study of the human things.” But Socrates’ piety surely was not manifested in an avowal of the gods of Athens. Rather, his piety rested in his skepticism, especially his skeptical appraisal of his own knowledge: “His wisdom is knowledge of ignorance because it is pious and it is pious because it is knowledge of ignorance” (Strauss 1964, 20). Knowledge of his own ignorance, knowledge that he lacks complete knowledge and lacks self-sufficiency, is the heart of Socrates’ piety. One might say that Socrates possesses a certain humility, a humility born of the recognition of his own limitations with respect to the highest things. Jaffa believes that this characteristic of the Socratic enterprise, or at least the enterprise in the “comprehensive sense,” must be distinguished from the prideful or magnanimous philosophy that Strauss elsewhere describes, that philosophy which so antagonizes the city. In other words, he insists that political philosophy must comprehend, or even be open to acceptance of, the prephilosophic way of life, at least insofar as that way of life remains pious.
Our situation in the modern world, however, differs from that of the Athenian Stranger who could, in effect, assume that his interlocutors remained pious. Our prephilosophic (or perhaps postphilosophic) way of life really is not pious. According to Jaffa, there is “no traditional piety” in the modern world which can form the “moral substratum” of the Socratic enterprise. We have lost our way, so to speak, because we have lost sight of the good or have rejected the notion that the good is something worth pursuing. “The abandonment of … the idea of the good,” Jaffa continues, “is both the necessary and the sufficient condition of radical modernity, of that moral relativism, positivism, and historicism, against which Strauss’s entire life was a protest.” Moral relativism, positivism, and historicism dominate our time, but they do not form a piety in the traditional sense. They are, strictly speaking, not a new religion, but a new, more virulent form of sophistry. The new sophists do not claim to believe, but to know that God or the idea of the good does not exist (or is irrelevant or is dead). This claim, Jaffa argues—even more so than the claims of the original sophists—has “denied the gentlemen … access to the self-understanding of their own gentlemanship” (Jaffa 1984b, 20, 16). Political philosophy today, he suggests, should be centered precisely on the recovery of the conditions of this self-understanding. But these conditions are marked not so much by speculative concern or enlightenment, but by moral and political concern, by the pious orientation of the prephilosophic city, by the desire to attain the Good or God.

This need to recover the moral or political orientation, Jaffa suggests, is part of “what Strauss meant by saying that modern man had dug a cave beneath the ‘natural’ cave, and that what he was trying to do was to make possible a return to that original cave” (Jaffa 1984b, 16; Strauss 2002, 1952, 155–56). This return to the “natural world” of “radically prescientific or prephilosophic” consciousness is, as Steven Smith notes, what Strauss intended when he famously wrote in his “golden sentence” that the “problem inherent in the surface of things, and only in the surface of things, is the heart of things” (Strauss 1953, 79; 1958, 13; Smith 1997, 358; Benardete 1978, 1). “Before we can even think about ascending to the lofty heights of philosophy, then,” Smith explains, “we must struggle hard just to find our way back into the cave that is the natural presupposition of philosophy” (2000, 794). Jaffa thus appears as a “priest” because his purpose is to lead others into the cave, so to speak, and not into the light. This does not mean that the ascent to the light is not desirable, but only that it is not possible without the cave. But because there is no traditional piety upon which to draw—since the new sophistry predominates—the
city’s piety, in effect, must be drawn from Socratic piety itself. This culminates, or so it would seem, in the regime explicitly founded upon the “laws of nature and of nature’s God.”

The foregoing is related, in part, to Strauss’s reflection that his own “turn” was occasioned by his critique of Carl Schmitt. Strauss appears to agree with Schmitt, though surely for different reasons, that, against modernity’s liberalism and nihilism, “the political must be brought out and shown to be completely undeniable” (Strauss 1982, 332). Jaffa seems to agree with this. While Socrates brought philosophy down from the heavens and into the city, Strauss brings man up from the lower cave and into the city, but with the aid of philosophy nonetheless. Both Socrates and Strauss “turn” to the city. Strauss states, with reference to Socrates’ definition of justice in Plato’s Republic, that “the political questions of great urgency do not permit delay: the question of justice must be answered by all means even if all the evidence needed for an adequate answer is not yet in” (Strauss 1964, 106). The political philosopher knows the necessity of taking politics seriously. “To put the matter bluntly,” Jaffa explains, “we cannot wait until we have an adequate answer to such questions as ‘What is courage?’ … before we train an army for war. Our enemy (and there is always an enemy) does not wait upon the outcome of our seminars before attacking” (Jaffa 1993b, 353–54). This requires that the political philosopher defend his city; in Jaffa’s case, of course, this means the defense of America. Rather than conceive of this defense as less than philosophic, Jaffa thinks of it as coterminous with Socratic philosophy itself. He therefore argues that it is the “Socratic enterprise … in which … ‘the laws of nature and of nature’s God’ become of paramount consideration in the deliberations of statesmen” (Jaffa 1985, 22).

Philosophy and statesmanship are joined in their pursuit of the Good, but what role do the “laws of nature and of nature’s God” play in such an enterprise? If this natural law is primarily Lockean, which Jaffa often suggests, is it not merely a species of that modern thought that Strauss famously criticized and rejected? This is a compelling question (see Pangle 1988; cf. West 2001, and Meyers 1998). But I suggest that it should first be set aside. For Jaffa rejects the claim that we ought to understand America through the lens of Strauss’s well-known distinction between ancients and moderns (Jaffa 1996a, 82). Rather, Jaffa finds his bearings by the “theological-political problem,” the problem that Strauss said had “remained the theme of my studies” (Strauss
In the most general sense, this is the problem of divine authority. On this question, consider Strauss’s statements at the end of The City and Man, where he comments on the relationship between philosophy and the prephilosophic city:

For what is “first for us” is not the philosophic understanding of the city but that understanding which is inherent in the city as such, in the prephilosophic city, according to which the city sees itself as subject and subservient to the divine in the ordinary understanding of the divine or looks up to it (Strauss 1964, 241).

The “classical philosophers,” Strauss argues, do not recognize the “concern with the divine simply” as “the primary concern of the city” (Strauss 1964, 240). This statement is striking because Strauss seems to suggest that the core of Socratic philosophy—the close engagement with the opinions of the city or what is “first for us”—is lacking in the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle. But he may mean to distinguish Plato and Aristotle from Socrates, the founder of political philosophy, who initially confronted what is “first for us.” Strauss does this perhaps because he aims to return political philosophy to its original, pious orientation, its exhibition of the “holy city in contradistinction to the natural city” (Strauss 1964, 241). On the other hand, Socrates himself may be an inadequate example if he aims at an unqualified transcending of the sphere of opinion. If he does, then he may not be pious enough. A movement of political philosophy beyond its original example would then be necessary; perhaps Strauss seeks some unprecedented account of the “remote or dark side of the city” (Strauss 1964, 240; 1983, 105–36). In either case, drawing important implications from Strauss’s comment, Jaffa suggests that, in order to understand correctly what is first for us, “we must be open to righteousness, as distinct from philosophy.” “In short,” he says, “we cannot look at the city from the perspective of philosophy a priori. The philosopher himself must look at it as a citizen, if he is to understand it as a philosopher” (Jaffa 1996b). It is with respect to the philosopher’s relationship to the “holy city” that Jaffa’s position differs most from that of the Straussians. To use Strauss’s words, Jaffa does not “start from seeing the city as the Cave,” but starts “from seeing the city as a world, as the highest in the world,” he starts “from seeing man as completely immersed in political life …” (Strauss 1964, 240).

Jaffa stresses the extent to which this emphasis on the political or the pious is consistent with philosophy; despite the darkness of the dark side, there still is light. But how is this possible? How can one be that philosopher who sees the city not as a cave, but as a world, and yet remain a
This is a most difficult problem. I suggest that it becomes less daunting for us once we recognize what Strauss and Jaffa take to be “first for us,” the holy city of our particular prephilosophic consciousness. Strauss often refers to the “City of Righteousness, the Faithful City” or the “City of God” or the life of the typical Jew or even of the religious person in general (Strauss 1964, 1; 1968, 8; 1997, 311–58). His holy city may be Jerusalem or perhaps the Biblical tradition of the West. In this case, Jaffa’s call for “righteousness” especially makes sense. But when Strauss refers to “the West” he always includes not only the Biblical religions, but also the tradition of Greek philosophy. Indeed, the West may be understood as a certain combination, at least on the level of politics, of these two traditions. For example, according to Strauss, there is “perfect agreement between the Bible and Greek philosophy in opposition to those elements of modernity” that are so detrimental to morality: the relativism and nihilism of the new sophistry. Reason and revelation agree, he says, “regarding the importance of morality, regarding the content of morality, and regarding its ultimate insufficiency.” Among other things, they agree that “the proper framework of morality is the patriarchal family” (1989, 246–48). Despite the “crisis” (Strauss 1964, 1) into which it has fallen, the West nevertheless enjoys the moral echo of Biblical religion and Greek philosophy.

Of course, reason and revelation do not exist in a simple harmony with one another. Indeed, Strauss refers to the “fundamental tension” between them. But he suggests that this tension has been “the core, the nerve, of Western intellectual history, Western spiritual history.” It is the “secret of the vitality of Western civilization” (Strauss 1989, 270). This vitality emerges from the fact that both “proclaim something as the one thing needful” to make up for the “ultimate insufficiency” of morality. But they disagree about just what that is. From the point of view of revelation, it is the “life of obedient love.” From the point of view of reason, it is the “life of free insight.” Strauss notes that “we can hardly avoid the impression that neither of the two antagonists has ever succeeded in really refuting the other” (Strauss 1953, 74–75). The pious observer’s life of obedient love is not, then, necessarily inferior to the philosopher’s life of free insight. In fact, Strauss goes so far as to say that the inability of philosophy to refute revelation, its inability to provide the comprehensive and convincing account of the whole required for such a refutation, seems to constitute the refutation of reason by revelation. Of course, he does not leave the issue there, for, to pose the idea of a tension between them assumes the disposition of the philosopher, one able and willing to question the authority of revelation in the first place. In this sense, Strauss may seem to
lean toward philosophy. In any case, he concludes that it is not possible to be both a philosopher and a theologian, or to be something which transcends or synthesizes both. Instead, he says, “every one of us can be and ought to be either one or the other, the philosopher open to the challenge of theology or the theologian open to the challenge of philosophy” (1989, 270).

But does this not simply confirm the problem present from the outset: that philosophy and the city (in this case, Jerusalem) are irreconcilable? Indeed, if the West is what it is because it contains elements in “fundamental tension,” then the West might appear to be schizophrenic, as schizophrenic as that philosopher who continually attempts both to see the city as a world and still remain a philosopher. But Jaffa’s point precisely is that the two elements of the West are not so opposed. According to him, the life of obedient love at the heart of Biblical religion is compatible with, if not coterminous with, the life of free insight at the heart of Socratic philosophy. The reconciliation between them is possible, in short, because “Socratic skepticism and biblical faith stand on the same epistemological foundation. It is impossible to restore the claims of the one without restoring the claims of the other” (Jaffa 1993a, 203). This is perhaps Jaffa’s most striking claim: that despite the tension between reason and revelation, there is an essential similarity between them, at least such a similarity as to reconcile them at the level of morality and politics. But this similarity only comes to sight when one adequately appreciates the pious character of Socratic skepticism. “The skepticism that accompanied Socratic rationalism,” Jaffa argues, “applied necessarily to the enterprise of Socratic rationalism. That is to say, Socratic rationalism had to grant the premise that supplied the ground of faith.” As Strauss makes clear, any truly philosophical or rationally sceptical enterprise will recognize the limits of philosophy in the face of revelation, properly understood, that is, specifically, Biblical revelation as opposed to the gods of the pagan poets. Jaffa draws the apparently necessary conclusion from Strauss’s premises: “The reason in skepticism for continuing an endless inquiry, and the reason for ending such inquiry by turning to biblical religion, was one and the same reason” (Jaffa 1999b, 45, emphasis added). Socratic philosophy, according to Jaffa, leads or can lead to Biblical faith, albeit a faith of a somewhat heterodox kind (cf. Strauss 1964, 241; John Paul II 1998, sec. 42).

Jaffa suggests that his conclusion is not as strange or fantastic as it may seem when considered in the light of Strauss’s work, especially his well-known studies of Maimonides. The key, for Jaffa, is Strauss’s focus upon the unique characteristic of the Biblical teaching (Strauss 1963, xlviii; 1983,
That teaching is the “idea of the One God Who is separate from the universe, of which He is the Creator” (Jaffa 1993a, 197). Revelation and poetry are, thus, fundamentally distinct. Pangle, however, argues that, for Strauss, “What is most essential in the quarrel between Plato and the Bible is already present in the quarrel between Plato and the poets. …” (Pangle 1983, 20). Jaffa believes Pangle to be “profoundly mistaken” in this regard (Jaffa 1984b, 17; Strauss 1953, 80). In Plato, Jaffa explains, the gods become the “exoteric names” for the “intelligible necessities which are not gods, but ideas.” It is “precisely on this issue that the Bible differs both from Plato and the Greek poets; for the Bible affirms the unity of God and denies that this unity is subject either to multiplication or division” (Jaffa 1984b, 17). That is, knowledge of the Biblical God is not really possible:

[The] God of the Bible is not only one, but the only possible One. As such, He cannot become an object of knowledge…. It is because He cannot become an object of knowledge that He can, and indeed must, be an object of faith. There is therefore a clear and distinct epistemological reason why faith—and not reason—has primacy. … I cannot know anything of which there is and only can be one. If God is One, and if there can be no other God, there can be no idea of God. God is unique in that in Him no distinction can be drawn between the universal and the particular, which is the ground of all intelligibility within the dispensation of unassisted human reason (Jaffa 1993a, 197).

The Biblical God cannot become the puppet or the plaything of the philosopher, regardless of the latter’s rhetorical power, because God is not bound by an intelligible nature subject to man’s comprehension; rather, He is the Creator of that very nature. Therefore, the wisdom found in Biblical revelation, that is, knowledge of God’s speeches and deeds as they are set forth in the Bible, is the greatest antagonist to the philosopher’s conception of wisdom, that is, wonder at and articulation of the riddle of being (Jaffa 1984b, 17–18).

But the conflict between the Biblical and philosophical conceptions of wisdom does not mean that the life of faith and the life of reason are incompatible. Rather, Jaffa argues an often overlooked point that Strauss rather clearly suggests: that one should not simply presume the superiority of one over the other. That is, Strauss objects to attempts to transcend the conflict between the two or to synthesize them; he does not necessarily object to attempts to render them compatible. Otherwise, his charge to us to “live that conflict” (Jaffa 1989, 270) would be ridiculous. Jaffa suggests that philosophy, which is the continual revelation, so to speak, of more and more of what it is
that we do not know, is perfectly compatible with the life of belief in the Biblical God: “The Socratics, I think, go on speculating on mysteries; the children of faith worship God rather than trying to speculate on His mysteries.” Jaffa has “no fault to find with those who worship, and I’m not saying that there is any contradiction between speculating sometimes and worshipping sometimes” (Jaffa 1984a, 73, emphasis added). There cannot be any contradiction between speculating and worshipping if both share the same epistemological foundation.

Jaffa even provocatively suggests that the “speech” of the American Founding amounts to the “best regime” because it allows both speculating and worshipping to occur under the auspices of the city (Jaffa 1987a). The tension and conflict between reason and revelation are not fatal to moral and political things. On the contrary, Jaffa argues, the “genius of the American Founding consists above all in freely permitting this tension and this conflict to be the transcendent end of political life, the end which the activity of moral virtue ultimately serves.” One might say that the vitality of the West is subsumed and perpetuated in the regime grounded in civil and religious liberty. Instead of conceiving of the tension between reason and revelation as somehow detrimental to political life, the American Founding adopts that very tension as the basis for and completion of political life. “In this way,” Jaffa argues, “the very differences of Jerusalem and Athens become the highest ground of harmony and peace.” But this is, for Jaffa, the result of understanding America in the appropriately pious sense. The elements out of which America is born—reason and revelation—are resolved within the horizon of American political experience as such. That experience recognizes through the “laws of nature and of nature’s God” the mutual claims of philosophy and religion. The world of the American Founding, in other words, is not the byproduct simply of enlightenment philosophy, but is itself a reflection of the rational distinction between theory and practice, thought and action, at the heart of the West’s vitality:

There was never any intrinsic reason why the theoretical conflict between Jerusalem and Athens … should have racked Western civilization with sectarian political struggle. Unresolved theoretical questions call only for continuing—perhaps eternal—discussion. They ought not to make enemies of those who, on moral grounds alone, are friends. On the contrary, such discussions, according to Aristotle, are the ground of the highest form of friendship. In such discussions, unlike those of politics which call for decision and action, truth alone is the goal, and friendship itself requires that the
friends do not defer to each other’s opinions for the sake of any good extrinsic to the discussion itself. True theory ought therefore always to strengthen friendship, and therewith morality and good citizenship. Whatever undermines the moral consensus, however, undermines the possibility of true theory, of genuine philosophy and genuine religion (Jaffa 1993b, 352).

This statement casts light upon Jaffa’s remark, which we noted earlier, that the way of life of the philosophers is “objectively best.” We see that he does not thereby claim the philosophic life to be superior to the life of worship, for the philosophic life must accommodate itself to the profound claims of the life of obedient love. That is, the philosophic life is reconciled with the life of the city in a way not really available to Plato and Aristotle. Indeed, Jaffa’s language of the “best regime” is derived from classical political philosophy, but the classical best regime—most famously represented by Plato’s philosopher-king—was ultimately sanctioned by philosophy’s superiority to the city and its received piety (Strauss 1953, 140). Jaffa’s critics perhaps hold more closely to this classical reconciliation, however improbable or even hypothetical it may be. For Jaffa, however, the best regime of America is a practical reality insofar as it looks to its transcendent end, the eternal discussion between reason and revelation.

Moreover, according to Jaffa, that we may turn to faith in the Biblical God as a result of our skeptical inquiry is consistent with the original ground of such inquiry. Reason itself, he says, assumes a certain faith we have in the intelligibility of the words and ideas that are integral parts of that reason. He often explains that the use of the common noun relies on the evident but unexplainable capacity of the human mind to distinguish the universal “eidos or species” of a thing from the particular thing itself. The human mind somehow allows one to see that Socrates, while not identical with the idea of man as such, is nevertheless a man and not a dog. The common noun man comes to have a distinct meaning for us in its rather mysterious relationship to particular men in the world. “This experience of likeness and of difference,” Jaffa says, “underlies what I call the miracle of the common noun, which is truly the most miraculous of all possible human experiences. For it is the essential experience which makes language—and hence man—possible” (Jaffa 1984a, 71). The experience of the common noun is “miraculous” because we do not really know that thing, entity, or being that provides the “light” necessary for our mind’s eye to see the eidos of a particular thing. Aristotle calls it the “agent intellect,” but Jaffa stresses that “this is only giving a name to a question, it is
not an answer.” “What difference does it make,” he asks, “whether we call it God or the agent intellect?” (Jaffa 1999a, 62). He goes so far as to say that, “from Aristotle’s point of view … there is no necessary conflict between reason and revelation—if you get down to the real question, which is how thinking takes place” (Jaffa 1984a, 71, emphasis added). If he does get down to the real question, the philosopher must admit that his entire enterprise occurs within a reality of experience, the whole of which he cannot explain or understand. Indeed, he takes it on faith that the words and ideas really are true and do have meaning, at least in some sense. Reason, or philosophy, then, is inextricably bound up with revelation, or faith, from beginning to end (see the epigraphs to Strauss 1953; cf. Strauss 1968, 256; Jaffa 1993a, 201). Perhaps recognition of this reality opens a window to the possibility of that philosophic life immersed in the political.

But what of Strauss’s well-known view that “a philosophy based on faith is no longer philosophy” (Strauss 1983, 211; 1968, 256)? Jaffa forthrightly states that Strauss overemphasized the tension between reason and revelation for political purposes. Jaffa does not deny the difference between reason and revelation, but he does argue that in Strauss’s “desire that classical political philosophy provide the moral foundation for constitutional government that modern philosophy had destroyed, he had particular motives for absolutizing the difference between reason and revelation” (Jaffa 1999b, 45). Faith or religion cannot be the explicit ground for such government because the claims of faith and religion have been undermined most severely by modern philosophy’s corrosive effects. “In our time,” Jaffa argues, “revelation has become … confounded and confused with ‘value judgments.’ In the wake of the transformation of modern philosophy not into wisdom but into nihilism, the Bible itself has been interpreted to mean whatever is in accordance with anyone’s strongest passions” (Jaffa 1993a, 202). That is, “faith” itself has been divorced from reason altogether; it is now nothing more than belief or commitment. Modern science, with its distinction between facts and values, has rendered the direct appeal to revelation problematic because arbitrary:

But deference to the authority of revelation, from the Bible’s point of view, is not arbitrary. It is because God is … both One and separate that revelation is the necessary means for communicating to man his true place in the universe and his relationship to God. Revelation, although miraculous in its origin and its essence is not subjective; God is an objective reality, and He does not authorize subjective moralities inconsistent with the teachings of unassisted human reason (Jaffa 1993a, 203).
Indeed, Jaffa insists that even though the agent intellect is a “mystery,” it is still “no less a reality for being so” (Jaffa 1999a, 62). Likewise, even though it is something of a “miracle,” the common noun is nevertheless a part of reason. Our trust in the words that we use and our trust in the intelligibility of the world, generally, are not simply arbitrary, subjective acts of faith or will. Yet, so distrustful are we of revelation’s connection to reality that “even the highest lawcourt in the land is more likely to defer to the contentions of social science than to the Ten Commandments as the words of the living God” (Strauss 1964, 1). The state of social science, of course, is not much better than the state of religion, but it still has pretensions to some kind of reason or rationalism. Therefore, it is in the field of social science that the battle for reason is to be waged. The answer, according to Strauss, is “to show that political philosophy is the rightful queen of the social sciences” (Strauss 1964, 1). Since the new, sophistical “reason,” or science, is now authoritative, it is all the more urgent for reason itself to be saved from its own self-destruction.

But nevertheless, one might wonder why Jaffa does not emphasize the tension between reason and revelation the way that Strauss did. Jaffa’s reasons for this likely are political as well. Indeed, he can appeal to the Declaration in a way that Strauss could not. For Strauss, the question concerned the West. For Jaffa, on the other hand, the question concerns his own regime; perhaps Jaffa is more political because he can be more political. But it should also be noted that Strauss implies that his intention really is to revive Biblical faith, and that the revival of political philosophy is necessary for this task. That is, not only must reason be saved from the nihilism of modern science, but it must be saved in order to render revelation intelligible again. Jaffa summarizes and comments upon Strauss’s statement at the opening of The City and Man:

Strauss—addressing the “crisis of the West”—says that it is not sufficient to “obey and listen to the Divine message of the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City,” … But what is not sufficient may nonetheless be necessary. Strauss will undertake to show “to what extent man could discern the outlines of that City if left to himself,” i.e., without revelation. The purpose in so doing however is … “to propagate that message”—viz., the Divine message of the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City—“among the heathen.” I do not recall Strauss speaking elsewhere of “heathen.” What is most remarkable however is that the City whose outlines are sought by man’s unaided powers, and which we want to understand as clearly and fully as possible, is the Faithful City. Jerusalem and Athens seem to have become one (Strauss 1999b, 46–47, typographical errors in text corrected).
Jaffa sees reason and revelation as so complementary that, while still distinct from one another, they can appear to be one, certainly one with respect to the moral and political questions. Moreover, he sees Strauss’s true intention not to be the defense of philosophy against the claims of the city or even of revelation. Rather, he believes that Strauss thought of both reason and revelation as joined together against the atheism and nihilism of modern philosophy and science.

The agreement between reason and revelation, Jaffa argues, stems from the fundamental reality of man’s experience as a reasoning being. However, this does not imply the superiority of philosophy to the Bible, because such superiority would require the abandonment of skepticism and the love of wisdom for dogmatism and the actual possession of wisdom. Only philosophy in its modern form is so dogmatic as to claim superiority to Biblical faith. That is, modern philosophy is essentially unphilosophic: it claims to know what it does not know. Modern philosophy attempts to edify, but it fails to do so. We now are in a better position to understand Jaffa’s appeal to that philosophy which edifies. Strauss remarks that “Philosophy … must be on its guard against the wish to be edifying—philosophy can only be intrinsically edifying.” What makes philosophy “intrinsically” edifying is its concentration on the fundamental characteristic of the human mind, the experience of thinking, which, as Jaffa emphasizes, is itself tied to faith. Strauss continues:

We cannot exert our understanding without from time to time understanding something of importance; and this act of understanding may be accompanied by the awareness of understanding, by the understanding of understanding, by noesis noeseos, and this is so high, so pure, so noble an experience that Aristotle could ascribe it to his God. This experience is entirely independent of whether what we understand primarily is pleasing or displeasing, fair or ugly. It leads us to realize that all evils are in a sense necessary if there is to be understanding. It enables us to accept all evils that befall us and which may well break our hearts in the spirit of good citizens of the city of God. By becoming aware of the dignity of the mind, we realize the true ground of the dignity of man and therewith of the goodness of the world, whether we understand it as created or uncreated, which is the home of man because it is the home of the human mind (Strauss 1968, 8).

Jaffa suggests that this statement “more nearly approaches a confession of faith [by Strauss], than anything in any other writing of which I am aware.” He notes that Strauss makes no distinction between creation and eternity, the respective understandings of the world found in Biblical faith and Greek
philosophy. “Strauss says nothing here of the necessity to choose between these two opinions,” he emphasizes. Indeed, the “crisis of the West does not require us to make a choice, and we do not know that Strauss himself ever made it” (Jaffa 1999b, 48). That is, Jaffa implies that Strauss may very well have made the choice for the life of obedient love (cf. Strauss 1983, 150; 1997, 311-58). But for his need to defend reason and the West against modernity, Strauss may very well have made that way of life more apparent. In this respect, Jaffa believes that he has addressed the question of the tension between reason and revelation more adequately than others, because he has done so in a manner more consistent with Strauss’s implicit defense of revelation.

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We now are in a better position to assess Jaffa’s embrace of the “Lockean liberalism” of the American Founders. While a comprehensive account of this question is not possible here, a brief account of his understanding is necessary to complete this sketch of his Socratic enterprise. As we have seen, the main question for Jaffa is not whether, but how philosophy and piety coincide. The Founding, he argues, is the best regime because its principles represent the best answer to this question, the answer as seen from the point of view of both the philosopher and the city.

The American Founding is unusual, Jaffa intimates, because of the unusual character of its piety, which is different in kind from that of Socrates’ Athens; it is more akin to Socrates’ own piety. In contrast with ancient cities, America is essentially open and liberal. Unlike the Hebrews of old, the Americans chose themselves, they gave themselves laws pursuant to the Declaration’s social contract principles (Jaffa 1978, 59). But even though their piety is new and different, it is not without the usual significance for morality and politics. Their appeal to the “Creator,” the “Supreme Judge of the world,” in the Declaration is only the most obvious evidence of this:

That “firm reliance” upon Divine Providence with which the Declaration of Independence concludes, in virtue of which the Signers pledge to each other their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor, is the same as the faith with which Lincoln, in 1860, concluded his address at the Cooper Institute. “Let us,” he exhorted his audience, “have faith that right makes might, and in that faith, let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it” (Jaffa 1978, 133).

Jaffa immediately adds that, “The understanding, of course, flowed from the self-evident truths of the Declaration, the truths which constituted the laws of
nature, the laws which in their turn had been the work of a beneficent Creator” (Jaffa 1978, 133, emphasis added). God is the source of the beneficence that we see in nature. In the American Founding there is thus a “natural theology” which comprehends nature and the natural law as creations of God (Jaffa 1987a, 9). Strauss remarks that, “No one claims that the faith in America and the hope for America are based on explicit divine promises” (Strauss 1989, 233, emphasis added). But Jaffa writes of the “divine promise implicit in the proposition of equality” in the Declaration (Jaffa 1984a, 255, emphasis added). (Note that in the same essay [“Progress or Return?”], from which we have quoted, Strauss refers to the “divine promises” that are no part of Greek philosophy [Strauss 1989, 251]. He does not qualify those promises as either “explicit” or “implicit”; they are, of course, not backed up by divine promises of the Creator. Strauss’s allusion, in the same essay, to America’s lack of only “explicit divine promises” leaves us to wonder whether he thought, as Jaffa does, that there are implicit divine promises in America nonetheless.) Explicit divine promises are those found in the commands and promises of the Living God (Strauss 1989, 233). Implicit promises, on the other hand, are those connected to the Socratic enterprise. For it is the political philosopher who provides the possibility of “understanding” by deriving the “beneficence of nature,” or natural right, from the “fundamental experiences.” One might say that philosophy is the handmaiden of theology, at least in this respect (Strauss 1964, 1; cf. 1989, 72–73).

Just what are the “fundamental experiences” from which we derive natural right principles? Strauss refers to “those simple experiences regarding right and wrong which are at the bottom of the philosophic contention that there is a natural right” (Strauss 1953, 31–32, 105; see Smith 1997). In fact, he describes a kind of moral sense inherent in man’s nature, suggesting that man’s sense of freedom, a result of his capacity to reason and choose, is accompanied by

a sense that the full and unrestrained exercise of that freedom is not right. Man’s freedom is accompanied by a sacred awe, by a kind of divination that not everything is permitted. We may call this awe-inspired fear “man’s natural conscience.” Restraint is therefore as natural or as primeval as freedom (Strauss 1953, 130).

Man’s capacity to sense moral limits, to experience “awe” in this sensibility, is itself “sacred.” Man possesses a kind of natural and fearful piety. The untutored expression of this “natural conscience,” however, often leads, not to moderation, but to tyranny and cruelty, even a pious cruelty. Strauss remarks that it is not man’s inherent savagery but his very “divination of right” that
leads him to “elaborate absurd taboos.” If “man has not cultivated his reason properly,” Strauss notes, he will descend into evil (Strauss 1953, 130). Reason is cultivated to moderate, but not to eliminate, the fear that accompanies man’s sense of right. Philosophy, which first appears as intrepid, is itself beneficent, not because it is without fear, but, because it moderates man’s natural fearfulness, it inculcates a reasonable, or pious, fear. Philosophy supports both man’s natural piety and his natural freedom.

Jaffa interprets the natural right of the American Founding in terms similar to the simple experiences of natural right described by Strauss. The Declaration’s principle of human equality rests upon the idea that man is both free and limited, that he is the in-between being. Unlike animals, we have reason and so are free, but unlike God, we have fallible reason and so are limited. The “irreducible meaning” of the Declaration, Jaffa argues, the core truth readily accessible to all, is that “the government of man by man, unlike the government of beasts by man, is not founded in any natural difference between rulers and ruled. … As Jefferson was fond of saying, and Lincoln sometimes echoed, some men are not born with saddles on their backs to be ridden and others with spurs to ride them” (Jaffa 1982, 211). On the basis of these truths, Jaffa argues, we come to see the political necessity of government by consent and the moral necessity of protecting human rights. And if the self-evident truths are not so evident to everyone, then the political philosopher must simplify them even more:

[What] we need to be reminded of now, in this modern civilization of ours, is not to be told over and over again how complex it is. We know that. We need to be reminded about the simple elements out of which this complexity arose. We need to be reminded of what we are according to nature, to see what guidelines we can find amidst the enormously wider range of choices available to us (Jaffa 1984a, 61).

With the proper articulation, those truths available to us through our “natural conscience” assume a binding and authoritative form. Through the principles of the social contract the “natural sanction” for the laws of the community is “translated from that form visible only to philosophers, to one that is intelligible to nonphilosophers.” Through these principles “an unmediated universal nature” becomes the ground of America’s “particular laws” (Jaffa 1987b, 27).

We now can see more clearly what the “natural theology” of the Declaration is and how it allows for the possibility of the best regime as Jaffa understands it. Charles Kesler concisely summarizes for us Jaffa’s account:
At the Declaration’s core as understood by the Founders, Jaffa thus emphasized, was an ontological doctrine of man’s place in an intelligible universe, which reason and Revelation agreed in conceiving of as crowned by a perfect Being—the cause and end of the universe’s intelligibility. Accordingly, both natural and revealed morality rested on the premise that man is neither beast nor God (Kesler 1999, 277).

This doctrine is ontological because it rests upon the recognition of a “scale of being” within which man is situated (Jaffa 1987b, 9). Again, man holds the intermediary place between beast and God because he, unlike the former, possesses reason, but unlike the latter, possesses it imperfectly. This doctrine is theological because it consists of this notion of God, particularly the possibility that He is a free being without restraints, the One God of Whom we have some awareness through our pious reason as well as revelation. The “perfect Being” is the God of the Bible or the Good found in nature. In America’s regime of religious liberty, Jaffa notes, all sects agree that the perfect Being exists because reason allows us to conceive of such a Being, but the sects differ about the particulars of His existence. As Jaffa puts it, “reason forms an adequate idea of the essence of God, without necessarily implying His existence” (Jaffa 1987b, 9). Indeed, unbelievers may comprehend America’s natural theology—that all men are created equal—without possessing a sectarian view of God’s existence; nature is enough. We need not insist upon any particular existential account of God since we are already aware that we lack sufficient knowledge of the whole and of the One God, in any case. Indeed, we are not exactly sure how something as seemingly accessible as the common noun becomes a part of our thought and language; so it would be the height of both stupidity and impiety to insist politically upon one human account of God Himself. According to Jaffa, what matters politically, i.e., what matters for America’s moral and political theology, is the “essential,” rather than the existential, God. That is, natural right or natural law can reconcile politically the various religious sects because those sects agree with philosophy on the primary moral issues. In this way, one might say, philosophy becomes the city’s umpire in the most effectual manner (cf. Strauss 1989, 256).

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But what of the argument that the natural right of the Declaration is practically insufficient or even theoretically inconsistent with Strauss’s view? This is perhaps the most important issue for Jaffa, because the success or even the plausibility of his enterprise rests upon the possibility of
natural right as the immediate basis for moral and political obligation. Strauss did appear to defend the principles of the Declaration, at least insofar as he explicitly contrasted them with the abandonment of natural right and the creation of the “historical sense” (Strauss 1953, 1), the very thought that has placed modern man in the unnatural cave. A number of other comments by Strauss also cohere with Jaffa’s defense of the Declaration (see West 1993). Yet, writing near the end of his life, he remarked that, “Nothing that I have learned has shaken my inclination to prefer ‘natural right,’ especially in its classic form, to the reigning relativism, positivist or historicist” (Strauss 1953, vii, emphasis added, typographical errors in the text corrected). This classic natural right doctrine is “identical with the doctrine of the best regime,” which is the “rule of the wise.” Since the rule of the wise “must be absolute rule,” government by consent must be contrary to such natural right. But the Declaration appears to be a version of “egalitarian natural right,” which Strauss explicitly says was “rejected by the classics” (Strauss 1953, 144, 140, 118).

On the other hand, Strauss only says that he “prefers” classic natural right to modern natural right; again, he may be more open than is otherwise apparent. Moreover, he notes that, even in classic natural right, the many who are to be ruled usually do not recognize the wise as wise. “Therefore,” he says, “it is extremely unlikely that the conditions required for the rule of the wise will ever be met.” The classical philosophers therefore took account of the need to lower their aims, so to speak, in order to counter the tendency toward demagoguery and false philosophy. The “natural right of the wise must be questioned,” Strauss avers, “and the indispensable requirement for wisdom must be qualified by the requirement for consent.” The political problem consists in reconciling the requirement for wisdom with the requirement for consent.” Because the threat of tyranny is greater than the hope for philosophic rule, prudent counsel suggests a greater degree of freedom and power for the many than might otherwise be preferred. The need to reconcile wisdom and consent means that the “requirements of wisdom must be qualified or diluted” (Strauss 1953, 141, 152). The egalitarian natural right doctrine of the Declaration may therefore be compatible with the classic natural right doctrine that Strauss favored. At the very least, one can assume that he found the egalitarian form preferable to the nihilism of the “historical sense.”

Still, Strauss argues that, even though the requirements of wisdom must be qualified, moral and political life should emphasize wisdom, not consent:
According to the classics, the best way of meeting these two entirely different requirements—that for wisdom and that for consent or for freedom—would be that a wise legislator frame a code which the citizen body, duly persuaded, freely adopts. That code, which is, as it were, the embodiment of wisdom, must be as little subject to alteration as possible; the rule of law is to take the place of the rule of men, however wise (Strauss 1953, 141).

Some of Strauss’s students seem to have taken their cue from this statement when interpreting the American Founding. Instead of emphasizing the egalitarianism of the Declaration, they emphasize the wisdom inherent in the Constitution’s structure and design, the premise being the rather Tocquevillian notion that an equality of rights necessarily implies or requires an equality of conditions (cf. West 1991). In this view, equality really is not a matter of natural right, but of history. Mansfield, for example, even remarks that the Declaration asserts a “self-evident half-truth” (Mansfield 1993). To counter this perceived problem, he stresses the many ways in which human beings are unequal and the ways that the Constitution protects those inequalities (Mansfield 1991). Jaffa, needless to say, criticizes Mansfield for doing just this, for diluting, as it were, the Declaration’s egalitarian natural right teaching (Jaffa 1996a, 80–102). In short, Jaffa argues that the Declaration’s constitutionalism is as wise as that of the Constitution itself. Indeed, the former is the ground of the latter.

Most Straussians nevertheless tend to believe that Jaffa’s argument conflicts with Strauss’s idea that the law ought, as far as possible, to mirror the wisdom and superiority—and therefore inequality—inherent in the natural right to rule of the wise. They finally must question the democratic character of the Constitution itself, to say nothing of the Declaration (e.g., Eidelberg 1986). Jaffa believes, on the other hand, that his interpretation of America’s principles supports Strauss’s argument for the rule of law. Here, too, Jaffa’s understanding differs markedly from other Straussians. He has pointed out the importance of the “transformation of the human condition” brought about by the emergence of the Roman Empire and the development of Christianity (Jaffa 1987b, 27). This transformation made the rule of law especially problematic, because it changed the very conditions of political identity and obligation. Jaffa believes that many Straussians, despite the historicism he detects in their arguments, lack an adequate appreciation of history as such, especially as it bears upon the question of the best possible regime. Jaffa, on the other hand, has elaborated a certain interpretation of history, a philosophy
of history, one might say (see, especially, Jaffa 2000, chap. 2). He explains the theological-political problem that emerged in Western history:

Once Roman citizenship became universal citizenship, the separate gods of the separate cities, whose worship Rome had both permitted and protected, lost their reason for being. If everyone was a Roman, then Roman law was everyone’s law. The separate gods of the separate cities had been the lawgivers of their cities. If there was but one law there must be only one God. Some form of monotheism was thus destined to become the Roman religion. The only question was what form. We observe here only that Christianity was able to combine the monotheism of Judaism with the universality of Roman citizenship (Jaffa 1987b, 25).

Prior to the emergence of the Roman Empire, every ancient city had its own particular gods that supported the laws of the city. Political obligation and lawabidingness had never been such a large issue because, however defective the gods of one’s city might be, they were still the gods of one’s city. The typical citizen in the typical ancient city—which is not to say every citizen—did not question his obligations to his city. As Strauss and Jaffa both note, even Socrates, who surely doubted the validity and authority of Athens’s gods, did not understand himself, in practical terms, to be a cosmopolitan man, however open to the whole he may have been as a philosopher; he remained loyal to Athens, for example, by fulfilling his obligations in war and by not fleeing the city after his conviction for impiety. However, once Christianity—a religion without a legislat ing god—became the religion of Rome and therefore of the world, the ancient understanding of politics no longer made sense. The understanding of moral and political phenomena implied in the natural right teachings of the classics, especially the emphasis upon law as a substitute for philosophic rule, would have to be modified to take account of this changed condition.

Jaffa’s discussion here is directly related to Strauss’s claim that what is needed is a philosopher who can see the “holy city” as it sees itself. Consider, in particular, Strauss’s reference to Fustel de Coulanges, who, “above all others,” has helped us in this direction (Strauss 1964, 240). Fustel’s history or anthropology of the ancient city allows us, in particular, to understand the city as it sees itself today. But Strauss alludes to the fact that, however great their contribution, Fustel and others like him, “Hegel above all, … failed to pay proper attention to the philosophic concept of the city as exhibited by classical political philosophy” (Strauss 1964, 241). Through his account of the ancient city’s transformation into the modern city, Jaffa attempts a correction of Hegel’s philosophy of history.
What was necessary after the demise of the ancient city, and what Jaffa believes the American Founders were eventually able to accomplish, was a political regime consistent with the aims of natural right but still consistent with the religious authority of the Christian West. The answer, as we noted above, was the turn to natural right itself as the direct ground of political authority:

Aristotle recognizes that particular polities will require particular institutions—that they will be the work of legislators acting in particular circumstances. But if these legislators can no longer crown their work by appealing to the authority of particular gods as the foundation of their laws, they must appeal directly to nature. They must have some way of translating the authority of a universal nature into the ground of particular laws. This, to repeat, is exactly what the doctrine of the state of nature accomplished (Jaffa 1987b, 27).

Jaffa believes that he does not ignore the need for law as a substitute for reason, but instead emphasizes the need for some foundation for law as such; we must find our way, theoretically and conceptually, up into the natural cave of political experience. America is liberal, unlike the ancient city, not only because it is based upon the principles of the social contract, but because it is essentially Christian in its roots. “The ground of individualism that we find in Locke’s state of nature,” Jaffa argues, “is anticipated by Christianity, in the idea of an individual, personal relationship, between each human soul and God, arising from Creation itself” (Jaffa 1987b, 24). But because politics—the first cave—is natural, Christians came to understand their religion, despite its emphasis on this personal relationship with God, to be consistent with political obligation. This is simply to say that the Americans saw their world not as a cave, but as a world. Locke’s social contract theory, then, was not, from their point of view, so much an imposition of the Enlightenment as it was a natural outgrowth of their simultaneous experiences both as Christians and as political men.

Jaffa, thus, argues against Berns’s contention that the Founders’ social contract ideas were “incompatible with Christian doctrine” (Berns 1984, 8). Berns cites Strauss’s statement that the idea of the state of nature, which is integral to Locke’s social contract theory, is “wholly alien to the Bible” (Strauss 1953, 215). Jaffa argues that the concept of the state of nature, and the natural law principles in general, were not understood by the predominantly Christian Founders in the manner that Strauss’s Hobbesian Locke may have understood them. But this just means that one must understand the
American Founding politically, not philosophically; that is, one must see the remote, or dark, side of the city. “Whatever status the idea of the state of nature may possess, as a historical concept,” Jaffa maintains, “it is a permanent attribute of our consciousness as members of a free society” (Jaffa 1987b, 17). That is, we know our rights “instinctively and politically,” in accordance with the piety of this particular city (Jaffa 1996a, 81). Everyone, Jaffa explains, is conscious that “he may, if necessary and at any time, take ‘the law into his own hands,’ either to defend himself, or to defend other innocent persons from unlawful violence. … That every normal human does understand this,” he argues, “proves that we are conscious of the law of nature in the state of nature, whether we conceptualize this consciousness or not” (Jaffa 1987b, 17). This is akin to the “natural conscience” that Strauss describes. From our recognition of our natural freedom and equality, we reason to the concept of a state of nature in which the natural law rules; we do not first hypothesize licentious individuals in the state of nature who then devise rules merely to secure their selfish interests. The principles of the social contract are, in effect, natural outgrowths of Christianity itself. For this reason, Jaffa emphasizes that Americans today must return to the original self-understanding of their Fathers; in doing so they will return to the roots of reason and revelation as he believes Strauss understood such a return.

According to Jaffa, then, much of the debate among the Strausssians concerning the philosophic pedigree of the Founding principles is, as it were, beside the point. For his part, he suggests that an “Aristotelian Locke” or a “Lockean Aristotle” is the chief philosophic source of America’s principles (Jaffa 2001). Through the principles of the social contract properly understood, the Founders fashioned an understanding of moral and political things that could withstand the tendency toward tyranny and internecine warfare endemic to the Christian politics that preceded them. But this is really to say that particular philosophic doctrines are less important than the Socratic enterprise itself. The Founders are more Socratic than they are Lockean or Aristotelian. According to Jaffa, they resemble that particular Socrates who, far from being a sophistical corrupter of youth, was really a defender of that “old-fashioned justice,” at least when such justice is properly understood, that is, when understood as natural right, the oldest justice there is (see Strauss 1989, 103–4; cf. Nietzsche 1986, 473–79). Much as Socrates stood as an antidote to the forces of decline in the Athens of his time, so the Founders reasoned against the tyranny and confusion of their Christian world. They are exemplars, with Lincoln, of that “Socratic statesmanship” which aims to guide moral and
political life by the lights of reason, however much at times such an endeavor may seem fleeting or futile.

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I have provided here only an outline of Jaffa’s understanding of the place of the political philosopher in the city. I have purposely avoided too much discussion of his lifelong study of Lincoln, especially his *Crisis of the House Divided* and *A New Birth of Freedom*. I have done so because one cannot, I suspect, understand Jaffa’s work on Lincoln (or the Founders or Churchill) without understanding his view of the “tension” between philosophy and politics. Therefore, the kind of inquiry provided here is really only preliminary to a fuller account of his thought. One should note that Jaffa himself does not spend much time explicitly discussing the kinds of themes that I have examined here, though they are, I suggest, ever-present in his work. He cares more to spend time in the marketplace, so to speak, questioning the dominant ideas of his time, rather than to partake in wholly abstract considerations of philosophy as such. His model is more Socrates than Plato or Aristotle or even Strauss. Most of the works under review here, especially Jaffa’s comments on the other Straussians, principally provide an introduction to the proper understanding of his Socratic enterprise.

**References**

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The Gospels According to Saints Isaac and Albert

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The practice of physics is based on two concepts. The first is an implicit, profound, yet simple act of faith. It is the belief that universal principles and laws govern the dynamics of the universe, from the microcosmic to the cosmic. It is the belief that the manner in which galaxies evolve, supernovas explode, black holes implode, our planetary system gyrates, electrons dance around nuclei, and nuclei fission are all governed by an inviolable matrix of physical laws. The second is the assumption that these principles and laws can actually be discovered. That this dual structure may be soundly based is attested to by the remarkable variety of its successful results. These range from the discovery of lasers and their use for the repair of detached retinas to the Hubble space telescope and the marvels of the universe it is now uncovering.

All of basic scientific research is to this end. Perhaps it is no more than an adult manifestation of the not-to-be-denied curiosity of the child who dismantles the family grandfather clock to see what makes it tick, but it is there. Progress in this endeavor is made, roughly speaking, by a species of dialectic between hypothesis and experiment. It starts with the attempt to cast observations of natural phenomena into a logical structure. The endeavor is to create a theory that encompasses the phenomena to be described. The resulting structure may suggest that with further study certain results should be obtained. The process then is to return to experiment and observation in a directed manner. If the new data are not in conformity with the theory, then the theory must either be modified or replaced. This process is as old as recorded history.

That it begins with an act of faith should not be taken to mean that there is any relation to oxymoronic “scientific creationism,” in which the scheme is turned topsy turvy. The act of faith of the believers in scientific
creationism is that the universal principles and laws are already known with certainty and finality. They need not be sought; they have already been revealed, and it is the task of the believers to fit all observable data into the pre-given structure. When Eddington, the great astronomer, once jested that no observation should be believed till confirmed by theory, he was describing perfectly the methodology of scientific creationism.

Put in simplest terms, a scientific theory consists of a set of axioms and definitions. There is then constructed a set of equations relating some of the defined entities. We shall see later how this applies for Newtonian mechanics.

The earliest instance of such a process occurred in that middle eastern area centered on the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. It coincides roughly with present-day Iraq. The various civilizations that flourished there, in turn the Sumerians, Assyrians, and Babylonians, were quite sophisticated. They had urban centers and elaborate governmental and social structures that included literate elite and priestly classes and the maintenance of written records. By 2000 BCE the Babylonians had a species of mathematics and astronomy. This scientific development was driven by religious concerns. They understood, through observation, that there were, apart from the sun and the moon, five celestial objects that moved through the fixed background of the stars. These were the planets Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn and were all identified as deities to be propitiated. Competence in astronomy was sufficiently advanced that priests of the temple of whatever organized religion could predict the advent of the new moon as well as lunar eclipses. They had a way to write numbers, do arithmetic, and solve simple algebraic problems. They laid the foundations for the structure of the mathematics we employ today and our current theories of space and time.

The Egyptian civilization evolved at the same time as that of Sumer, Assyria, and Babylon. The emphasis here was more on the arithmetic and geometry required to reestablish land boundaries washed away in the annual flooding of the arable lands bordering the Nile. Egyptian knowledge of astronomy was substantially inferior to that of their contemporaries. That there was also a burgeoning mathematics farther east in India and China, and that some of this knowledge filtered to the Near East is not to be gainsaid, but it had little influence on further developments.

The pre-Christian Greeks had access to this body of knowledge. They developed geometry far beyond anything previously imagined. So sound
was their work that at the present time the geometry of Euclid is taught in our high schools. They understood that the earth was roughly spherical and made measurements from which they calculated its diameter. Their achievements in astronomy were no less awe-inspiring. Even though it would not take hold till renaissance times, a heliocentric system was suggested by the astronomer Aristarchus. The precession of the equinoxes was a well-understood concept and was actually measured by Hipparchus. Greek astronomy evolved to the geocentric system of Ptolemy. It was a very complex system, but, with refinements, would provide for almost 1500 years ever more accurate ephemerides.

Preeminent among the classic Greeks was Aristotle, one of the greatest thinkers of all time. His domain of intellectual activity was universal in scope. Everything from astronomy through embryology and cosmogony to zoology was grist for his grinding. Of interest here are both his refinement of the picture of the universe provided by predecessors and his work on mechanics, the science of what makes objects move and why they move as they do. In cosmogony he envisioned the universe as a series of spheres concentric on the earth. Each of the planets had its own system of spheres, all interconnected and rotating about distinct axes. This was all contained within the outermost sphere that carried the fixed stars and was the limit of the universe. It had no beginning in time and, apart from the movement of the sun, moon, and observable planets, would endure unchanged forever. And, it provided a good qualitative picture of the observed motions of the visible planets and the moon.

The Aristotelian structure of the universe was ultimately rationalized into the Ptolemaic system, which dispensed with crystalline spheres altogether and described the motion in terms of (almost) coplanar, circular, geocentric orbits with epicycles sufficient to describe the motions with great accuracy.

Aristotle’s mechanics contained the idea that the heavier an object, the greater its acceleration in falling. Galileo’s apocryphal experiments at the leaning tower of Pisa demonstrated this to be incorrect. Aristotle stated that to keep an object in motion required the continuous application of some sort of impetus. That he would arrive at the former conclusion when it was so simple to check experimentally is an artifact of the Greek philosophical tradition. They believed that ratiocination was sufficient to uncover the laws of nature. Only in his biological studies did Aristotle perform hands-on examination.

Indissolubly related to his mechanics was his concept of time. In Aristotle’s approach time became inextricably linked with motion: “Not
only do we measure the movement by the time, but also the time by the movement, because they define each other.” This is essentially an operational definition. Think of sand glasses, pendulums, naval chronometers, and vibrating atoms. They all entail the concept of ‘before and after’ a view emphasized later by Leibniz, the great contemporary of Newton. Time is taken to be a temporal sequence which is measurable. This has been expressed latterly by the American philosopher, Woody Allen: “Time is Nature’s way of keeping everything from happening all at once.”

Both Aristotelian mechanics and Ptolemaic astronomy endured till the arrival of Copernicus, Tycho Brahe, Kepler, Galileo, Huygens, and their contemporaries. These were primary among those who provided “... the shoulders of Giants …” on which Newton said he stood to see farther than other men.

In the Copernican scheme the center of the universe was relocated from the earth to the sun. The earth and all the known planets revolved about the sun rather than the earth. It provided a much simpler structure than the Ptolemaic, though not necessarily more accurate. Its importance, and this cannot be overstated, was dislodging the center of the universe from the earth. These days we do not believe the universe to have a center. All points are equal. This is termed “the Copernican principle,” although Copernicus had a more limited view.

This was rejected by Tycho Brahe, who was an astronomer of superior observational skills coupled to a talent for the design and construction of instruments capable of supporting these skills. His contribution was the reduction of star and planetary observations to the most accurate set of tables ever produced before the advent of the telescope. He also recorded detailed observations of the paths of the planets. These would later prove to be invaluable to Kepler.

Brahe moved the center of the universe back to the earth, though with a substantially simpler scheme than that of Ptolemy. The universe was again geocentric. With the earth as the center of the universe, he took the sun to revolve about the earth, and the planets to revolve about the sun. This did what the Ptolemaic system did, but in far simpler fashion. There is actually no substantive distinction between the Copernican and Tychonic systems. The fixed stars revolved about the sun in the former, and the earth in the latter. Apart from the fixed stars, it is perfectly analogous to the distinction between a passenger on a train watching the platform move by, and a would-be passen-
ger on the platform watching the train roar past. The difference with respect
to the fixed stars was too slight to be observable till well after the time of
Newton and then only for the nearest stars. We have long since gone much fur-
ther and reject the idea that the universe has a preferred center.

In his last years Brahe was Imperial Mathematician at the
court of the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolph II in Prague. It was there that
Kepler became Brahe’s assistant and on Brahe’s death succeeded to his posi-
tion. Though thoroughly grounded in astronomy, he was a mathematician
rather than an observer. He did not have to be; he inherited the superb data of
Brahe. He returned to the Copernican scheme and used Brahe’s data to refine
the picture of the motion of the planets about the sun. He determined that the
planetary orbits were ellipses rather than circles modified by epicycles. He also
determined two other fundamental laws concerning planetary motion: the
speed at which a planet tracked its orbit and the period of its motion. These
three laws were the observational data on which Newton relied to construct his
mechanics and theory of gravitation.

Galileo was the first physicist in the modern tradition. He
experimented and hypothesized concerning dynamics in general, as well as the
behavior of objects under the impetus of the force of gravity in particular.
With remarkable prescience he emphasized the importance of mathematics as
the natural language for discussing physical law. This connection between
nature and number he expressed as, “Philosophy is written in this grand book
—I mean the universe—which stands continually open to our gaze, but it can-
not be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language and
interpret the characters in which it is written. It is written in the language of
mathematics and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometrical fig-
ures, without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it;
without these, one is wandering about in a dark labyrinth.”

It is doubtful that Galileo meant something as simple as the
obvious convenience of writing $2 + 2 = 4$ rather than presenting its content by
the statement ‘two plus two equal four’. Probably, he was expressing a version
of the belief of the Pythagoreans that there was a mystical connection between
mathematics and the real world. That such a connection exists is now believed
by many physicists and was well expressed by the late Nobel Laureate Eugene
Wigner: “… the enormous usefulness [of mathematics] in the natural sciences
is something bordering on the mysterious … there is no rational explanation
for it.”
It has been said that the greatness of a man in a given field can be judged by the extent to which he reduces the work of his predecessors to mostly historical interest. Such were the achievements of Euclid or Ptolemy. One, literally, did not have to have any knowledge of previous work in either geometry or astronomy, respectively, to pursue either field as presented by Euclid and Ptolemy. They provided a new starting point. And, so it was with Isaac Newton.

The fundamental bedrock on which physics is built is the structure of space and time. Newton began by defining a much more comprehensive and coherent structure than that of his predecessors. He stated explicitly that space and time were distinct entities: space furnished the arena in which any physical system evolved, and time, following Aristotle, measured its evolution. There was no reason to do otherwise, but he was now more explicitly precise. Space, following Euclid, was a flat, three-dimensional structure. It was the absolute space. His time was an absolute time which flowed uniformly everywhere. In effect, he populated space with an infinite array of clocks, all of which were in precise synchronism. These provided a universal absolute time. He now commanded the arena and how to describe what was happening in it.

The next step was to construct a system of dynamics. How would bodies move if there were forces to move them? And, to do this, he made precise the Galilean case of a body with no forces acting on it. This is analogous to the introduction of the zero in arithmetic, and equally as important, and became the basis for the first Newtonian Law: With no force acting on it a body at rest with respect to absolute space will remain so and a body in motion will move with a constant velocity with respect to absolute space. Such force-free masses are called inertial masses. The relative velocity of any two will be constant.

The second law states that if a force were applied to a mass its consequent time-rate change of momentum would be proportional to the applied force. (Momentum is defined as the product of mass and velocity.) The more common formulation: force equals the product of mass and acceleration applied when the mass is constant. It is sometimes said, erroneously, that the first law is just a special case of the second law. If this were true why state the first law? The answer is quite simple. The second law refers to a change (when the mass is constant) in the velocity; i.e., the acceleration. The acceleration is with respect to absolute space and the inertial masses serve to manifest it. The second law is vacuous without reference to the absolute space which the first law establishes.
The third law states that *Action and Reaction are equal and opposite*. If you press your hand on the desk, the desk presses back on your hand with equal and opposite force. If the drive wheel of a locomotive engine exerts a tangential force on the rail, the rail exerts an equal and opposite force on the wheel, and it is *this* force which drives the locomotive forward.

This completes the basic structure. Newton’s statement of the law of gravitation may be expressed concisely: “any mass point in the universe will attract any other with a force proportional to the product of their masses and inversely proportional to the square of the distance between them”. This is *not* part of the basic structure. It provides a particular application of the second law. The use of this force in the basic dynamics was exquisitely successful in describing the Keplerian theses concerning planetary motion. It also provides the tools for the theoretical calculations that will successfully navigate an astronaut to a particular spot on the moon. Other applications might, for instance, involve electrical or magnetic forces.

These three laws and how they function in the arena of space and time constitute the Gospels according to Saint Isaac. The teaching of freshman physics may accurately be described as the exegesis thereof.

There are a number of consequences. It is obvious that an inertial mass might have any (constant) velocity whatsoever with respect to absolute space. There is no implicit limit on the magnitude of this velocity. In principle, it might be infinite. Consider, now, a random collection of inertial masses. Today it is common to suppose that each such mass carries an observer, conveniently called an *inertial observer*, who can establish a coordinate system in which he is at rest. Take, as an example, the man standing on the platform and the man seated in the moving train.

Of the infinite set of possible inertial observers, there must be one which is at rest with respect to absolute space, but there is no recipe for determining this unique individual. Absolute space defines inertial observers and inertial observers define absolute space. This is obviously tautologous, and there is no way of resolving it. The concept of absolute space was deeply troubling, and it would not be adequately addressed till the advent of the Principle of Special Relativity, which solved the problem neatly by dispensing with it entirely.

The relationship between a pair of inertial observers is quite simple. If observer A judges the velocity of observer B to have a certain value,
say $V_{ab}$, and $B$ judges the velocity of $A$ to be $V_{ba}$, then these velocities are equal and opposite. For three inertial observers, $A$, $B$, and $C$ in relative motion, $V_{ab} + V_{bc} = V_{ac}$. For each inertial observer the second and third laws are valid. Two different observers of a force acting on a mass will both make the same judgment of the values of the force and mass. Each could describe collection of phenomena in his own system and the transformation equations would relate the two sets of data. A straightforward calculation shows that acceleration with respect to any inertial observer will have the identical acceleration with respect to all others. This collection of statements constitutes the *Galilean Principle of Relativity*, in recognition of Galileo’s researches into mechanics.

Because there is a universal absolute time, it follows that two inertial observers will make the same judgment as to the times at which two spatially separate events occur. If these were not simultaneous, the observers would make the same judgment as to their temporal order.

Newtonian mechanics and the associated Galilean Principle of Relativity have proven to be an extremely robust structure. It is employed even today in virtually all engineering enterprises, from designing bridges to landing men on the moon. However, only with modification is it applicable to problems in electromagnetic theory, and not at all to atomic and smaller-sized systems. The former of these, inapplicability to electromagnetic theory, leads ultimately to the Principle of Special Relativity, and the latter, at a later date, to quantum theory.

The inconsistencies between electromagnetic theory and the Newtonian structure manifested themselves strongly over the course of the 19th century. By 1825 experimental evidence had conclusively established the wave character of light. This implied the existence of a medium which undulated, which hypothesis was elaborated in the concept of “the ether.” This was an attractive notion, because “the ether” could be identified with Newton’s absolute space. The remainder of the century was occupied by increasingly convoluted descriptions of this ether and failed attempts to detect it.

In addition, there were attempts to formulate the laws for magnetic and electric phenomena in an ether. These were largely *ad hoc* in nature till Maxwell, in the mid-19th century, created a comprehensive theory of electromagnetic phenomena. It then became increasingly clear that there were irreconcilable conflicts between Newtonian mechanics and the transformation requirements of electromagnetic phenomena. These had to be identical; otherwise inertial observers in relative motion could not consistently describe the
same set of physical phenomena in two different coordinate systems.

By the end of the 19th century the speed of light had been fairly well measured. Accumulating experimental data suggested that the speed of light might be the same for any observer, and any ponderable mass was constrained to move at a lesser speed. Increasingly sophisticated experiments failed to detect the ether.

It was about now (1905) that Albert Einstein made a bold reassessment of the entire situation. His conclusions were drastic. He opted for a structure based on the necessities of electrodynamic phenomena and a revision of Newtonian mechanics to make it conform. He started by dismissing the relevance of both the ether and absolute space. If neither could be detected, neither could have any effect on what was happening. Time and space were no longer absolute. That absolute space was dismissed as the arena in which dynamics unfolded was no more than recognition that \textit{de facto} it never did. These hypotheses were profound metaphysical shifts. He did, however, retain the Newtonian first law, the law of inertia, and with it the concept of inertial observers.

The only remnants of absolute space and time were that the three dimensional space of any observer was a flat Euclidean 3-space. This implied that he could make spatial measurements in his system. The problem of time was more subtle. In his own reference frame, each observer could (by means of light signals) synchronize two spatially separated (and consequently all) clocks at rest in his reference frame. This established a uniform \textit{coordinate time}. The process applied identically to all inertial observers; each had his own flat space and coordinate time. It was shown later by the mathematician Minkowski that the 3-space plus coordinate time for an inertial observer was expressible as a 4-dimensional, flat, spacetime.

The final piece of the structure was the speed of light. In examining this situation, Einstein tried imagining traveling alongside a ray of light at the speed of the ray. Were that possible, the observer would see the waves standing still. For him this was obvious nonsense. This consideration, together with the implications of the accumulating experimental evidence, led him to the conclusion that the speed of light would be the same for any observer regardless of the speed of the source. This implied that no observer could travel at the speed of light. (This was later verified by measuring the speed of light from each member of a double star system. The speed of light from the receding member was the same as that for the approaching member.)
The (mathematical) scheme relating the data collected (on the same event) by two observers in relative motion is called a Lorentz transformation. The codification of the analogous situation encompassing Galilean relativity and the Newtonian structure of space and time is called a Galilean transformation. It should be carefully noted that neither scheme encompasses any dynamics. Each specifies the nature of space and time in which a dynamical system evolves. The latter might be called the Galilean Principle of Relativity. The former is properly called the Principle of Special Relativity. The use of the term Principle rather than Theory is to emphasize that each provides a structure in which a dynamical theory may be constructed. Thus, Newtonian gravity and mechanical phenomena, generally, are modeled according to the Galilean Principle. For electrodynamics and high energy physics, for example, the Principle of Special Relativity provides a more accurate framework.

In the description of physical phenomena, the requirement that all inertial observers be completely equal has the immediate corollary that the form of the dynamical equations to be used by each observer be identical. And, a mathematical structure was required to preserve this form. In the Newtonian picture this was the set of Galilean transformations. In Special relativity the corresponding set was the Lorentz transformations.

The Principle of Special Relativity has some counter-intuitive, non-Newtonian consequences. They are purely kinematic effects of the Lorentz transformations rather than any dynamical considerations. An observer will judge a clock in motion to be running at a slower rate than an identical clock at rest. This is a symmetrical and reciprocal judgment for two relatively moving observers. This has actually been measured. The average lifetime of an unstable particle in motion for a given experimenter will be longer than identical particles at rest. There is another way of looking at this. Assume that each observer carries his own clock. An analysis of how observer A would measure the rate of the clock carried by the relatively moving observer B shows that he would judge it to have a rate less than that of his own. And, this judgment was reciprocal.

Also, the finiteness of the speed of light and its identity for every inertial observer leads to the fact that the simultaneity of two spatially separated events was not absolute. Two inertial observers in relative motion, depending on the arrangement, could judge the events to be simultaneous or in temporal sequence. Moreover, the sequence could even be of opposite order for these observers.
A similar situation exists for the longitudinal dimensions of an object in motion. They appear to be shortened in the direction of motion. (Such a foreshortening, called the Lorentz-Fitzgerald contraction, had already been suggested in the late 19th century to explain why the ether was not being detected. The extent of the contraction depends on the relative speed. Thus, two observers in relative motion will each judge the other’s yardstick to be foreshortened. Again, the effect is reciprocal and symmetric. Lastly, the mass of a moving object increases with its speed. This effect, too, had already been observed.

The second law still retained precisely the same relationship of force and rate of change of momentum. The expression for the force, however, had to be consistent with the Lorentz transformation. The simple special case of “force equals mass times acceleration” no longer had any applicability, because the mass would vary with the speed.

It took remarkably little time for this radical reformulation of the entire Newtonian structure to be accepted in the physics community. Contrary to popular opinion, not all new radical ideas are rejected. Einstein published his paper *On the Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies* in 1905. (This contained the Principle of Special Relativity.) Six years later he was Professor of Theoretical Physics in Karl-Ferdinand University in Prague. Although best known popularly for the Principle of Special Relativity and General Relativity Theory, it should be understood that Einstein in those early days had already become a colossus who bestrode all of physics. In that same year, 1905, he published four other papers, one of which, dealing with the photoelectric effect, would later earn him the Nobel prize. The other papers were of Nobel quality.

After the publication of his 1905 paper (the First Gospel according to St. Albert), and though still busy in many areas of physics, Einstein became more and more preoccupied with the enigma of gravitation. Simply put, the problem was that the Newtonian theory of gravitation had evidenced a small problem even before 1905. During the course of the 19th century it was found that there was a slight anomaly in the orbit of Mercury. It did not behave as it should have under a strict Newtonian regime. Much effort was spent in the latter part of the century on modifications of Newton’s inverse square law to accommodate this anomaly. These were uniformly unsuccessful. With the arrival of the Principle of Special Relativity it was felt that the solution lay in recasting Newtonian gravitation in a special-relativistic mold. These efforts were uniformly unsuccessful.
Einstein had very little to guide him. The minuscule anomaly in Mercury’s orbit was useless as a guide. Its utility was as a check on whatever theory of gravitation was under consideration.

The starting point for his considerations was the remarkable fact already known to Galileo that the mass of an object has two distinct aspects. The first is its role as a source of gravitational force. This is the force which acts reciprocally and universally between two masses. The second is its role as the inertial factor in \( F = ma \). Indeed, the apocryphal experiments of Galileo dropping different-sized weights from the Leaning Tower of Pisa were for the explicit purpose of determining if the gravitational and inertial properties of a ponderable mass were identical. As nearly as he could tell, they were identical. All the masses he checked had the identical acceleration. The greater the mass, the greater would be its gravitational force toward the earth. This was precisely counterbalanced by the increased inertial resistance.

This remarkable equivalence was also studied by Newton. He tested this experimentally with a pendulum and found the period to be independent of the amount or composition of the bob. The more massive the bob, the greater would be the gravitational force on it, but also so would be its inertial resistance. Were the two aspects identical, the period of the pendulum would be independent of the mass. Within the accuracy of his equipment, this is what Newton found.

The equivalence of inertial and gravitational mass became central to Einstein’s considerations. Part of Einstein’s genius was his ability to construct simple, transparent gedanken (thought) experiments to test an hypothesis. In this instance, he considered a mass on the floor of an elevator being accelerated upward in the absence of a gravitational field, and considered the same elevator and mass at rest in a gravitational field, which would cause the same acceleration. From the inside of the elevator the two situations cannot be distinguished; the acceleration and gravitational field had identical effects. He now proceeded to enlarge the principle to include all of physical phenomena. He examined the behavior of a ray of light passing (initially) horizontally through the accelerated elevator. By the time it reached the opposite wall, its exit point would be lower than its entry. Einstein conjectured that identical behavior was to be expected in a static elevator in a gravitational field. This he now generalized; no difference was to be expected in the same experiment conducted in either of the elevators. This became the celebrated Principle of Equivalence and the basis for further considerations.
In similar, if more complicated cases, he established that, of two identical clocks, the one in the stronger gravitational field would run more slowly. Also, he was able to conclude that a photon proceeding from a strong gravitational field to a weaker would be red-shifted; that is, its frequency would be reduced. He determined that energy as well as mass was the source of a gravitational field. Though rather difficult to measure, the gravitational field of a compressed spring would be greater than if it were relaxed.

Such is the importance of the presumed equivalence of the inertial and gravitational mass of an object, that it has to this very day been subjected to experimental tests of increasing sophistication and accuracy. If it were found not to be true, the General Theory of Relativity would not be correct. Today this equivalence has been verified to 1 part in $10^{12}$.

There was yet one more consideration: recall that if one were working within the confines of either the Principles of Special Relativity or Galilean Relativity, the corresponding set of transformations had to be used. Now, because of the equivalence of gravitation and acceleration, the group of basic observers had to include those in relative acceleration. This was the basis for the term General Theory of Relativity.

The bending of light in a gravitational field, coupled to the notion that light should travel along the “straightest” possible trajectory, leads to consideration of geodesics. A geodesic is the “straightest” line which can be drawn between two points on a surface. For a flat surface the geodesics will all be straight lines. A spiral staircase may be abstractly represented as a geodesic on a cylinder. Lines of longitude on the surface of the earth are geodesics; lines of latitude, other than the equator, are not. Latitude 89º North is a very small non-geodesic circle about the north pole.

Thus, assuming that light would travel on geodesics, which were generally curved, presented Einstein with the necessity of abandoning flat spaces altogether in favor of curved spaces. All the various effects he had previously considered could only be encompassed in a structure of curved spaces. Space is curved by the distribution of mass and energy. In fact, the curvature of space is gravitation. Light travels on geodesics in a curved spacetime. A force-free test mass (something too small to contribute to the gravitational field) will also travel on a geodesic. The astronauts floating about in a capsule orbiting the earth are moving along a geodesic in the gravitational field of the earth.

The Gospels According to Saints Isaac and Albert
It turns out that the Theory of General Relativity is not a generalization of the Principle of Special Relativity; it is purely a theory of gravity. In fact, any scheme that is in accord with the Principle of Special Relativity can readily be formally recast into a curved-space structure.

This is the Second Gospel according to St. Albert.

What, then, is the relationship between The Principle of Special Relativity and General Relativity Theory? Despite its name, General Relativity Theory is not a generalization of the Principle of Special Relativity. General relativity is a theory of gravitation. It entails a space (or, more precisely, spacetime) that is curved. Special relativity is a principle governing the form which a physical theory must have if constructed as a flat spacetime. There have been many attempts to construct a theory of gravitation in accord with the Principle of Special Relativity. If spacetime, then, is curved, what is the point of constructing a theory that operates only in a flat spacetime? The key is that it works in any domain sufficiently small that within it the curvature of space may be neglected. As a very simple example, consider a large, smooth sphere about the size of a basketball, and a thin sheet of lucite. The sheet of lucite may be placed tangent to the ball at any point. In the close vicinity of the point of tangency the geometry of both ball and sheet of lucite are closely similar. On the larger scale of the spacetime in which we reside there is a precisely analogous situation. At any ordinary point of the curved spacetime there exists a tangent (flat) Minkowski spacetime. It is in this tangent spacetime that special relativity operates. At a sufficiently far-removed point, the Minkowski spacetime there would not mesh with the former. There is no Lorentz transformation from the one to the other.

In accord with these Gospels, it is possible to calculate inter alia how to navigate a man to the moon and bring him back, why a laser works, and how to calculate both the structure of a proton and the dynamics of the universe.

**Reviewed by Susan Orr**

*Acquaintance with the Absolute: The Philosophy of Yves R. Simon* is a collection of essays on the work of Yves R. Simon, edited by his son, Anthony, who has added an extensive bibliography of over one hundred pages. The essays point to a mind well worth studying: one who would have been content to read, write, and contemplate metaphysics his whole life, but was born when life demanded more. As Raymond Dennehy suggests in his essay, Simon was primarily a metaphysician who died before he could write a book on it; his work is infused with metaphysical understanding. We are indeed fortunate because his work corrected many errors in all aspects of philosophy, from politics to metaphysics.

The book begins with an excellent introduction by Fr. James Schall, in which he limns the outlines of Simon’s lifework. In sixteen pages, he manages to bring to life in very precise terms the major struggles Simon dealt with, leaving it to the essayists to draw the arguments out further. Touching on Simon’s arguments regarding authority and the common good, democracy as the most natural regime, and the gift of the abundance in reality, Schall demonstrates that Simon has left us with many remedies for many errors that plague our age. But Simon’s contribution is even greater, as Schall notes, “Yves R. Simon thus must first be seen as a teacher who teaches us things we would not in all probability come across without him.”

The essays that follow cover the scope of Simon’s work, including metaphysics, science, and political theory. One minor irritant that makes the book more difficult is his son’s failure to arrange the essays in order of progression. It might have made it easier on the reader to place the essays in their natural order from the study of man to the study of being, as Fr. Schall does in his introduction. By placing the highest first, the reader must swim in
the deep end immediately. Be that as it may, the essays draw the reader to want to learn more about Simon.

Raymond Dennehy’s essay, “Yves R. Simon’s Metaphysics of Action,” contends that Simon’s *The Philosophy of Democratic Government* demonstrates the metaphysics contained within the Declaration of Independence by showing how Aquinas’s understanding of universals, nature, and essence are to be applied to the concept of equality. In order to do that, however, Simon must wrestle with the problem of Cartesian science, which misunderstands nature as simply extension, not as something that is. This error spreads deeply. Dennehy writes, “As there is no room for final causality in the Cartesian universe, so there is no meaning or direction in it; in short, there is no intelligibility. But for Simon, the intelligibility of things and events in the material universe is real because the term of completion for which they strive is real, namely, the pure actuality of God.”

Ralph Nelson in “Yves R. Simon’s Philosophy of Science” expands the theme of the failure of the modern philosophic enterprise by analyzing Simon’s *Foresight and Knowledge* and his other works on social science, which have as their task undoing the mistakes of Kantian idealism. This essay is a bit more difficult to work through, but so is his subject. A beginner in this field will have some difficulty, as Nelson assumes knowledge of the various schools of both Thomism and early twentieth-century philosophy, which could make for some confusion. Still, the essay is important because it works through an essential problem that Simon would not shy away from, one that split the neo-Thomists into distinct camps: those who cut off metaphysics from science and those who did not. Simon, following Jacques Maritain, chose the latter path, one that would allow him to rescue not only science but metaphysics as well from the positivists. The consequence, as Nelson points out, is “Since Simon has been extremely critical of the concept of social engineering, of the replacement of practical reasoning by technical, or at least the confusion of the two, his rejection of the notion that social science is pure theory makes not only an epistemological point but also a moral point, the concern for the manipulation of human beings.” Simon understood that the attempt to replace moral reasoning with social science would necessarily truncate the common good and thus human flourishing.

John F. X. Knasas, “Yves R. Simon and the Neo-Thomist Tradition in Epistemology,” is the most problematic essay in the collection because he alone among the writers finds error in Simon’s work. Unfortunately, his essay is also the most difficult to read, because he does not
always write with clarity; thus, it becomes difficult to judge who is correct, Knasas or Simon. One sentence will give the flavor of the problem: “This reply is called the retorsion or performative self-contradiction defense of realism.” Perhaps those immersed in the finer details of epistemology will find this illuminating, but most readers will not.

The problem he addresses, that is, How does man reach the truth? is vital for metaphysics. For Simon, as for Aristotle and Aquinas, the answer is through the senses. But not all Thomists followed the same path; some preferred the idea that man knows only mediately, because the senses cannot be trusted. Knasas sides with the latter; his argument hinges on the unreliability of memory. Because police often find eyewitness accounts unreliable, he reasons that man cannot know directly from the senses, but only indirectly. He thus fears “that at bottom Simon is claiming for our ideas a speculative faith analogous to religious faith. Such an interpretation is understandable in light of my claim that as described by Simon our ideas are not self-validating.” But this leap seems precipitous, because it hinges on collapsing two things: first, the capability of average citizens and philosophers, and second, memory and contemplation. Perhaps a lengthier essay could have drawn this problem out with more comprehensibility.

Having waded through the deep waters of epistemology, it is a delight to reach Russell Hittinger’s essay, “Yves R. Simon on Law, Nature, and Practical Reason.” Hittinger writes crisply, making several intriguing points well worth contemplating. For example, he notes that for all modernity’s talk of freedom versus the ancient understanding of man, modern man is actually much more bound by rules and regulations: “there is virtually no area of human conduct that is not regulated by public law, particularly by administrative law.” Instead of the axiom, what the law does not speak to, it forbids, law now cannot seem to shut up; it has something to say about everything. This has a further consequence of making positive law look unstable.

Hittinger also draws out some interesting details in his discussion of the difference between prudence and natural law. Natural law, as Simon shows, is quite limited in its reach, in what it forbids and what it commands, leaving a large scope of action to prudence. It is easy to tell what one ought not do; the difficulty arises in choosing various means to reach a common good. Oftentimes, there are several ways, each morally acceptable. In politics, someone in authority must choose. The great lesson in Simon’s A General Theory of Authority, as Hittinger shows, is that authority, rightly used, is not in conflict with democracy.
The next essay is by the preeminent Simon scholar, Vukan Kuic. He fleshes out the arguments that Hittinger begins regarding the common good. Not surprisingly, given his expertise, his essay is filled with intriguing insights. He shows that Simon understood the impulse to libertarianism, which gained adherents in the age of totalitarianism, but thought it insufficient to allow for human flourishing. As he notes, “the fault with modern individualism may not be so much its streak of egoistic hedonism as its misreading of human needs. True, we need others to survive, and we use others as they use us for our own ends. But we also need our fellow human beings gathered in society in order to become what is in us to be; and that ultimately means giving to others, not taking from them.” As Kuic shows, Simon’s contribution to political theory is to show that true liberty requires political authority. He illustrates this by drawing the reader’s attention to two men, Hamlet and Patrick Henry. One, at first glance, seems utterly free; but, because he does not use authority properly, his kingdom ends in utter ruin. The other exercises authority properly and helps to found a regime of liberty. His criticism of what he calls the “deficiency theory of government” is apt; however, it must be noted that collapsing its purest form in Marxism with that found in *The Federalist Papers* overstates matters a bit.

The final essay, by Robert J. Mulvaney, returns to the problem of knowledge and practical wisdom (*phronesis*). The essay demonstrates the problem of relying on modern social science to help alleviate conflicts in political life, as opposed to the political science of the ancients. Mulvaney notes that Simon would have modern man question the authority of social science, which makes recommendations based on utility, as Socrates did. Practical wisdom is the necessary tool when contemplating moral questions: the critical question is not whether it would be useful, but whether it would be good.

Yves Simon is a lively writer, and expecting the various essayists to be able to match his clarity and wit is perhaps expecting too much. Another problem with these kinds of books is that they are meant to be dipped into for illumination of the primary author’s insights, not swallowed whole as one must in a review. Yet, this book is a good supplement for any scholar of Yves Simon, with some essays more accessible than others. In an age when all are asked to question authority from no vantage point at all, Simon could prove to be a useful author to delve into. His slim volume, *A General Theory of Authority*, demonstrates that rightful authority does not close down one’s choices but makes them a greater possibility, not a lesser one. If, in reading this collection, one is drawn to read Simon, then it has served its purpose.
Professor Zank has collected and translated eighteen essays that Leo Strauss published as a young Jewish scholar in Weimar Germany. Addressed here are the theological and political themes Strauss revisited autobiographically in the 1965 Preface to his *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, whose German original was also written during this period. Substantively as well as chronologically, the essays mirror Strauss’s three-stage autobiographical retrospective: his partisan reflections on political Zionism, calling attention to its ongoing practical struggles and inherent theological limitations; his insider’s probings of the theological difficulties bound up with German-Jewish thought, pointing to their nearby source in Spinoza; and, finally, his philosophical perplexities in the aftermath of the Spinoza book, indicating a pressing need to rescue the theologico-political teachings of Maimonides and his predecessors from serious misrepresentation at the hands of Spinoza and his successors (Strauss 1996a, 1–7, 7–30, 30–31, or 1995a, 224–31, 231–56, 256–57).

Strauss’s youthful Zionist pieces comprise not only lively position papers arguing, among other things, a need for Jews to free themselves from thoughtless dependence on European culture, but also brief appraisals of articulate critics of that culture. These last include the Protestant theologians Rudolph Otto and Paul de Lagarde. Otto’s lucid description of the “holy,” the irrational or supra-rational core of biblical religion, is admirably unencumbered by apologetical or metaphysical rubric and is, in that regard, a non-Jewish example of the independence of mind to which Strauss exhorts his fellow Jews.
Lagarde’s antisemitic moralizing, while morally dubious, turns out to be not entirely irrational, but to rest on the putative mismatch between the politically rootless “Jewish spirit”—originally embodied, according to Lagarde, in the idealized Law formulated by the biblical Ezra following the Israelite state’s irreversible collapse, and subsequently passed on to Europe in congealed form as Christian dogma—and the spiritual requirements of German nationalism. Zank invites us to set Strauss’s Zionist pieces against the backdrop of the published précis of his dissertation on F.H. Jacobi, also included in this collection (Zank, 7, 25–26, 35, 60, 198; cf. 199). The dissertation, which examines Jacobi’s theologico-inclined distinction between forthright common sense (“couragiously believing”) and cautious scientific research (“timidly doubting”), shows how the former is not reducible to the terms of the latter but is their implicit judge. Zank suggests that Jacobi’s distinction permeates the Zionist pieces and survives in Strauss’s mature restatement of it as the distinction, or rather the unbridgeable tension, between Jerusalem and Athens, i.e., between biblical religion and classical political philosophy. However that may be, the mature Strauss, speaking autobiographically in 1970, described his dissertation as “a disgraceful performance” (Strauss 1997b, 460), and writing autobiographically in 1965, advised his readers “to understand the low in the light of the high” (Strauss 1996a, 2, or 1995a, 225)—in this case, to consider the historical or biographical preconditions for his philosophizing as illuminated by the theologico-political questions animating his philosophizing. The questions animating Strauss above all as a Jew during the Weimar years are, by his own later account, occasioned by the thought of Hermann Cohen, “the center of attraction for philosophically minded Jews who were devoted to Judaism … the master whom they revered” (Strauss 1983, 233; cf. 1996a, 15, or 1995a, 240).

Two essays on Spinoza’s *Theologico-Political Treatise* mark Strauss’s probing critique of and philosophical departure from Cohen. In “Cohen’s Analysis of Spinoza’s Bible Science,” Strauss rethinks Cohen’s view that, despite its appeal to the modern-scientific biblical philology which the *Treatise* founds, Spinoza’s harsh and one-sided critique of biblical religion—which sears Judaism yet coddles Christianity—derives from his reprehensible disloyalty to the religion from which he was rightly excommunicated. While agreeing with Cohen on the rightness of Spinoza’s excommunication, Strauss finds, on the contrary, that the latter’s disloyalty to Judaism is a consequence of his prior critique of religion, on which the new philology depends, and which was necessary, in turn, for “the struggle for the independence of science and the state from the church” which, thanks to the enterprise Spinoza himself
set in motion, “was hardly perceptible in Cohen’s time” (Zank, 159). In “On the Bible Science of Spinoza and his Precursors,” Strauss then summarizes the larger argument of his Spinoza book-in-progress: Spinoza’s differences with Maimonides, on the one hand, and with Calvin, on the other, boil down to whether or not reason is sufficient for judging the merits of either Jewish or Christian orthodoxy. The implicit claim of Spinoza’s that reason is sufficient is, as Strauss would later say, “ultimately not theoretical but moral” (Strauss 1996a, 29, or 1995a, 255).

Strauss’s leftover perplexities, leading him to the view that a return to premodern philosophy is both necessary and possible, come to the surface in four other pieces: a review of Freud’s The Future of an Illusion, a brief eulogy of Franz Rosenzweig, a review of Julius Ebbinghaus’s On the Progress of Metaphysics, and an evaluation of Spinoza’s theologico-political bequest to Jews. As for Freud’s way of stating the case for unbelief in the current “state of the struggle between belief and unbelief”—namely, that religion’s offer of comfort and meaning in the face of human misery deludes us concerning our real situation in the world—Strauss calls attention to it, but only as a preliminary to asking the fuller question, which Freud ignores: whether human misery, as he understands it, is, in Strauss’s words, “the same ‘misery’ that the believer knows as the misery?” (Zank, 208) In connection with Rosenzweig’s work, not only as a Jewish thinker but also as spiritual founder of the Academy for the Science of Judaism, and as author of a monumental introduction to Cohen’s posthumously collected Jewish Writings, Strauss praises his insistence that Jewish scholarship guide and foster Jewish life, i.e., that it be “political” (Zank, 212). Admiring Ebbinghaus, Strauss takes up his suggestion that the corrective for “the modern prejudice … that the truth has not already been found in the past” is “learning through reading [lesendes Lernen],” an admittedly long and arduous detour, which is needed if we are to return to the salutary, unsophistical naïveté that is the starting point of philosophy for the premoderns (Zank, 214f.). Finally, Strauss notes the several historical stages in Spinoza’s reception by European Jewry—condemnation by the Amsterdam community, vindication by Moses Mendelssohn, canonization by Heinrich Heine and Moses Hess, and, finally, neutrality among professional scholars, with the striking exception of Cohen—and asks how, if at all, Spinoza wanted to be received by Jews as Jews: on the evidence of Spinoza’s Machiavellian statement to the effect that restoring a Jewish state would be possible for Jews if, and only if, the spiritual foundations of their religion did not make them effeminate (Theologico-Political Treatise, ch. 3, end), Strauss concludes that the
statement, made in passing and by a deliberately neutral observer, attests to Spinoza’s private “independence” rather than to any insider’s concern for Judaism on his part (Zank, 222). In contrast, we may say that Strauss’s imminent turn to classical political philosophy seems to have been animated considerably by the question of whether it might be possible to maintain the philosophical independence exemplified by Spinoza, or some reasonable approximation to it, without thereby sacrificing public-spirited loyalty to Judaism, as Spinoza was led to do.

Among Strauss’s German-Jewish writings not included in this collection are two manuscripts that remained unpublished during his lifetime (“Religiöse Lage der Gegenwart” and “Die geistige Lage der Gegenwart”; Strauss 1997a, 377–91, 441–64), from which Zank quotes liberally in his editor’s introduction; and introductions of various lengths to ten Jewish writings by Mendelssohn, which were eventually published under Strauss’s own editorship in the Jubilee edition of Mendelssohn’s works (Mendelssohn 1972a, 1972b, 1974, passim, or Strauss 1997a, 467–605). There are also Strauss’s Maimonidean and related essays in connection with his Philosophy and Law of 1935 (e.g., 1997a, 125–234). All these are, or perhaps soon will be, available in translation in The Jewish Writings of Leo Strauss, the series of which the present volume is a part.

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