

# Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

## Winter 2010

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## Thucydides' Philosophic Turn to Causes

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Thucydides' statement on the causes of the twenty-seven-year war between imperial Athens and the Peloponnesian league justly represents one of the most famous and most studied aspects of his History. (Thucydides' work has no official title; I adopt the widely used convention of referring to his work as the History, but without additional emphasis.) Despite such fame, however, scholars frequently ignore the statement of intent that directly precedes it (1.23.5). This is surprising. This statement not only introduces what is arguably the History's most famous sentence (1.23.6), it also represents one of Thucydides' rare explicit remarks on authorial intent. The tendency to ignore Thucydides' statement here is particularly problematic because it goes hand in hand with a more persistent failure on the part of scholars to appreciate fully the philosophic questions about divine law, epistemology and politics raised by his account of archaic Greek history known as his Archaeology (1.1-20). Failure to attend to these questions contributes to the narrow classification of Thucydides as a conventional historian or as a teacher of international relations and *Realpolitik*. My reading of the History's opening offers an introduction to Thucydides that challenges the historical, literary and political readings in favor of one that emphasizes his philosophic dimensions, dimensions which are inextricably linked to the practical political events to which his work is dedicated. Such a re-reading of his famous statement on the causes of the war leads to new interpretations of Thucydides' view of the war's origin, his account of Greek history and the connection between them.

I contend that Thucydides' compressed account of Greek history and his puzzling statement introducing the causes of the war prepare for the reader the indispensable conditions for self-knowledge. They highlight the

Greek confrontation with material necessity and the yearning for immortality in which that confrontation resulted, thereby prompting within the reader the need to inquire into what is in fact most needful for human beings, an inquiry indistinguishable from the pursuit of human wisdom. Those familiar with the History may not recognize initially the reading of the Archaeology that I will present; for one reason, it appears excessively theoretical and abstract, and such abstraction seems out of place in a work devoted almost exclusively to practical politics. But this abstract argument finds its “human face” in Thucydides. We discover the conditions for self-knowledge by retracing the steps by which Thucydides came to grasp the human wisdom that the war between the Peloponnesians and Athenians made possible, steps that he preserved in his account of that war and its origin. To retrace these steps ourselves, we must begin by carefully reconsidering the Archaeology and in particular its account of Greekness. By doing so we discover that the greatness of the Greeks consists in their discovery of politics as such, a discovery born from their response to the material necessities that characterize human life and whose principal component is attention to the common good. Thucydides’ intent in turning to the causes of a war between the two poles of Greek power, Athens and Sparta, is an attempt to make sense of the paradoxical insight that the birthplace of politics and the common good also gives rise to a war that destroys both. The treatment of the causes of the war that follows reveals how the Greek response to the demands of material necessity can lead to a war between two cities whose distinctively Greek character consists in the first genuine articulation of justice. As such, it reveals how justice can issue in injustice.

The importance of such an insight for Thucydides’ own path to wisdom, to say nothing of his treatment of practical politics, becomes transparent only in view of his criticism of Homer and the epistemological challenges posed by divine law that his Homeric criticism brings to light. Only in the wake of the criticism of Homer can Thucydides’ treatment of Greek politics be understood to have as its aim the articulation of the “absolutely clear beginnings” from which one derives the problems (and methods to address them) that are the proper subject of philosophic contemplation (Husserl 1965, 146). Indeed, Thucydides’ work appears to promise to articulate those pre-theoretical experiences necessary for engaging in theoretical reflection. For Thucydides, however, the crucial pre-theoretical experiences are essentially political and the problems that derive from those experiences and which are the proper subject of philosophic contemplation concern politics and divine law. The opening of his work represents the conscious effort

to produce a narrative that reflects Thucydides' own path to human wisdom, one that prepares the reader to discover the epistemological superiority of his approach to that of his poetic and conventionalist rivals.

To prepare this conclusion, I proceed in five steps. First I clarify the questions raised by his famous statement on the causes of the war. This passage invites us to wonder why exactly Thucydides thought that "no one should have the need to inquire into the source of so great a war among the Greeks" (1.23.5). To consider what makes this war so great and its source so worthy of attention, I return to a study of the Archaeology (second step) and I do so in light of the questions about Thucydides' personal transformation raised by the first two sentences of the History. To discover the reasons for this transformation and its effect on his approach to human affairs, one must study Thucydides' response to the challenges posed by Homer and the poets. To grasp fully the character of this response, however, requires us to reflect on the source of the justice that defines Greek political life (third step) and its relationship to power and to injustice (fourth step). Finally, I conclude by weaving together my readings of Thucydides' criticism of Homer and his inquiry into the birth of justice with his intention in turning to the war's causes. This last step enables Thucydides' treatment of practical politics in the History to be seen in high relief, by contrasting the textured surface of the foreground political action with the depth supplied by the philosophic dimension which is the proper backdrop of that action.

#### THUCYDIDES' INTEREST IN THE CAUSES OF THE WAR

While Thucydides has long been the preserve of classicists and historians, political scientists have increasingly focused on Thucydides' contributions to political and moral philosophy, and especially to classical understandings of justice (Bruell 1974, 11-17, and 1981, 24-29; Pouncey 1980; Connor 1984; Bolotin 1986; Euben 1986 and 1992; Palmer 1982, 1989, and 1994; Orwin 1994). But very few of those who focus on the History's philosophical dimensions situate Thucydides' interest in practical political and moral affairs within the context of his work's introduction. The two most notable exceptions to this are Clifford Orwin's "Thucydides' Contest" (1989) and the chapter on Thucydides in Robert Bartlett's *The Idea of Enlightenment* (2001). Orwin's "Contest" offers a ground-breaking reading of Thucydides' methodology and his response to the poets, shedding light on portions of his introduction that have either been ignored or misunderstood. Orwin understands Thucydides' Archaeology to "vindicate" his methods: because our access to the past is as limited as it is, Thucydides must adopt the methods

he does. Conceived as a response to the limitations attending our study of the past, Thucydides' methods adorn the truth to serve the truth (359). Those familiar with Orwin's essay will recognize my debt to his analysis. But Orwin would have one believe that the Archaeology vindicates his treatment of politics. There is, no doubt, some truth to this. But the reverse is also true, that Thucydides' subsequent treatment of politics vindicates the view of the ancient past that characterizes the Archaeology. In other words, Orwin's treatment, as impressive as it is, addresses only part of the story. We are left wondering why the truth about politics requires the particular adornment Thucydides gives it. This is the question which I address in this essay.

A similar difficulty emerges from the chapter on Thucydides in Bartlett's excellent work. Here one finds a rare study of Thucydides' interest in revealed religion and of how understanding his treatment of religion contributes to a recovery of classical political rationalism. And yet as seriously as Bartlett treats Thucydides' interest in religion, Bartlett's focus on the gods and references to "divine things" leaves the reader wondering about the connection between the History's unremitting focus on practical political events and the theoretical questions about religion his work raises. If Thucydides is in fact so interested in religion, then why is the vast majority of his work devoted to the practical events of a single war? Bartlett's comments near the end of his chapter on Thucydides highlight the challenge of this essay:

To be sure, it is very difficult to see how any insight into the nature of the human soul alone could be sufficient to preclude the possibility of gods who intervene in the lives of human beings by means of prophecy and oracles. Thucydides would seem to suggest that we begin to approach this difficulty by trying to understand the demand on the world that the devotion to nobility brings with it and, in understanding that demand, perhaps cease to make it... To see this is to begin to be open to the world as it manifests itself in the ordinary course of things. (101)

If Bartlett is correct, however, we still must understand why Thucydides decides to present his insights into the "nature of the human soul" through a work that never loses its practical political focus. If the human soul is in his purview, then why not say so? Why limit his single work to the political affairs of his day? There is perhaps no better place to begin this investigation than the introduction to his discussion of practical politics (1.23.5-6).

Scholars of Thucydides have long taken their cues for understanding his posture towards political history by their reading of his famous

statement on the causes of the war (1.23.6). Not surprisingly, the debate over what Thucydides means in this statement, especially by the distinction between the “truest cause” (*ἀlethestáten próphasin*) of the war and those “causes” (*aitíai*) openly alleged, is a long and thorny one (see Addendum). But while interpretations of the war’s causes widely differ, many share a common trait, either ignoring the statement’s immediate context or glossing over that context’s most curious features. By not reflecting on this context and the questions it poses about Thucydides’ interest in the causes of the war, most interpretations of the History miss an important opportunity to reflect more deeply on the character and function of the Archaeology that precedes it.

Neglect of this text’s complicated elements—that is, of Thucydides’ proemium, his problematic account of the Trojan War and confrontation with Homer, and his intricate account of the birth and development of “Greekness”—itself leads to two very different scholarly views of Thucydides. The first and more traditional view is that of the objective or scientific historian who records the war in the way that he does so as to provide practical political instruction to future generations (Cochrane 1929; Finley 1967 [1940], 118-69, and 1942; Bluhm 1962, 15-35; Romilly 1963; Adcock 1963; Brown 1989, 215-56). More recent scholarship, however, gives us a second view of an author impressed by the limits to human reason, whose single work not only has practical intent but also explores the essential characteristics of being and the way humans give meaning to the world (Euben 1986 and 1992; Hunter 1973 and 1982, esp. 102; Rawlings 1981, 272; White 1984; Connor 1978, 289-98; Rood 1998; Shanske 2006). Pouncey (1980) and Edmunds (1975, esp. 214) both argue for the practical intent of the work while detailing Thucydides’ concern with the limits to reason. I argue in this essay, however, that reflection on the way Thucydides introduces his discussion of practical politics at 1.23.5 prepares us for the proper recovery of the Archaeology and its place in the History’s opening, and thereby helps us to navigate between these competing views of Thucydides and his work, accounting for what they recognize as well as what they ignore or neglect.

The complete statement on the causes of the war and Thucydides’ intention in making them clear runs as follows:

As to why [the Lacedaemonians and Athenians] broke the thirty-year treaty, I have set down first the charges and the disagreements, so that no one should have to inquire from what source so great a war among the Greeks arose. For I consider the truest cause, but least apparent in speech, to be that the Athenians becoming great and putting fear into the Lacedaemonians compelled them to undertake the war. But the

charges openly spoken on either side, as a result of which they broke the treaty and began the war, were these. (1.23.5-6)

Before we turn to Thucydides' statement on the causes of the war, we are compelled to wonder about his reason for doing so. Why is it that "no one should have to inquire" into the "source" of this war? Is knowledge of the causes of the war intended as a practical means for readers to try to predict the outbreak of war, and especially great wars, in the future, or to teach us how to avoid or even to wage such wars? Thucydides offers no explicit answer, and this silence on his part is arresting. After all, Thucydides rarely makes explicit comments about his work in his own name. Of those he does make he devotes few to questions of intent. We cannot evade the question of his intent by simply assuming that Thucydides is an historian in the Aristotelian sense—that is, a chronicler of particular events as opposed to one concerned with universals, as is true of poets and philosophers (*Poetics* 1451a36-b11). Thucydides himself denies this characterization by expressly stating that he wrote this account of the war to help all those interested in uncovering the clear truth (*tò saphès*) of those things that have happened before and will happen again, human nature being what it is (1.22.4). The Aristotelian distinction between the practical and theoretical sciences does not apply to Thucydides and so cannot explain his intent in writing. We must therefore continue to wonder why Thucydides thought it important that no one should have to inquire into the source or origin of *this* war.

In thinking through this question, it deserves noting that the "inquiry" (*zetesai*) from which Thucydides seeks to relieve his readers in treating the war's causes as he does can refer to the need to seek or ask as much as to the seeking or asking itself (Cameron 2003, 45). However the word is translated, Thucydides' construction here clearly implies his concern with a certain need on the part of his audience. Thucydides turns to the causes of the war in order to relieve future readers of the *need* to make such an inquiry for themselves. But why would it be such a problem, from Thucydides' perspective, if his future readers do not have at their disposal an account of the source of this war and therefore must try to discover that source on their own? What is that peculiar need which Thucydides foresees in his future readers which would give rise to such an inquiry and which (he supposes) will be relieved by his lengthy treatment of the war's causes? We need to wonder what is so important about the source of this war, as distinct from the war itself, that it merits the kind of patient and complex treatment of the two or three—or 50 (1.89-118) or 200 (1.126-38)—years prior to the war

which Thucydides presents in Book One of his History. How does Thucydides' treatment of the causes of the war (both the *alethestáten próphasin* and the *aitíai*) illuminate its "source" (*pote èx ôtou*)?

To get our bearings on this issue, let us restate what seems clearest: Thucydides' statement of intent (1.23.5) suggests that he anticipated his readers would inquire into the source or origin of this war because it was a particularly great *Greek* war. The need he foresees his future readership having derives from this war's peculiarly Greek character. As his opening comments indicate, it was this character that led him to write an account of the war (1.1-2). The "most noteworthy" character of this war is such that we would naturally wonder about its source, a wonder which, if left unaddressed, might detract from his intention that the work be a "possession for all time" (1.22.4). One thus gets the sense that if we don't have the account that Thucydides gives us here we will not be able to provide it for ourselves. When it comes to the question of the war's source, Thucydides suggests to his reader, in effect, "if you have to ask, you'll never know."

To understand how Thucydides' treatment of the causes of the war could possibly impact his grand intent, we need to begin from the beginning; we need to return to the Archaeology. It is here where he justifies his great theme. It is thus from here that the need he envisions on the part of his reader arises. Thucydides' statement of intent is the first explicit sign that we should emerge from his Archaeology with a question that needs to be addressed, a question that can only be satisfied by the treatment of moral and legal questions which then follows (1.24-146). In turning to Thucydides' narrative, however, one must exercise care. His account of the distant past, like all his narrative, is unusually compressed, forcing its readers to tease out those insights that govern its composition. To appreciate the narrative's political wisdom, the reader must supply on his own the reflections that inform and unite the seemingly offhand details included in Thucydides' account. The reader can only do this by working backwards or inductively from what is given towards the recovery of Thucydides' political wisdom and thus the principles of the whole from which those details have been deduced and selected for inclusion in his account.

#### THE WAR'S GREATNESS, HOMER AND THE POETS

Scholars have traditionally held that the first nineteen chapters of Thucydides' work introduce those fixed principles of his political judgments (Pouncey 1980, 11, 46, 55; Connor 1984, 24, 26; Crane 1998, ch.

5). As a guide to these principles, this reading understands Thucydides to measure the war's greatness by equally fixed and fixable terms: the immense wealth, resources and allies of both parties (Finley 1942, 135, 140-44, and 1967 [1940], 83-93, 293; Romilly 1963, 248; Rawlings 1981, 12; Cogan 1981, 127-43; Saxonhouse 1978; Euben 1986 and 1992; Grene 1965 [1950]; Hornblower 1986). Thucydides thus chronicles the growth of Greek civilization, wealth and power out of its initial barbarism, penury and weakness (Kallet-Marx 1993, 3; Crane 1998, ch. 6). Fear and greed characterized early common life; self-interest brought together the strong and the weak. Following the example set by individuals, early cities observed only *Realpolitik* in their relations with each other. The steady march of material and technological progress, the goals and means driving human self-interest, characterize human history and measure political greatness (Hornblower 1986, 188). As such, the predominant scholarly view tends to conclude that Thucydides admits no genuine rightful limit on the pursuit of self-interest. All law, all justice comes from human agreement, or convention; considerations of necessity rather than of right govern political life (Saxonhouse 1978; Crane 1998, esp. chaps. 7 and 11; Brown 1989, 233-35). By appearing to anticipate the conventionalism articulated much later by Machiavelli and Hobbes (Saxonhouse 1978; Johnson 1993; Brown 1987 and 1989; cf. Forde 1992 and Palmer 1989 and 1992), Thucydides' History stands in sharp contrast to the poetic accounts which locate the roots and thus the dignity of justice in the benevolence of providential gods.

While there is much within the Archaeology to support this interpretation, I argue that Thucydides is best understood as a rival to both those who link justice to divine law and those who understand justice to be merely a matter of convention, purely the product of human agreement or custom. Indeed, as we will see below, both the poetic view and what I will call the conventionalist perspective are closer to each other than they are to Thucydides. Because so few scholars link Thucydides to the poets (though see Cornford 1907; Hunter 1973 and 1982; Shanske 2006), it is perhaps best to begin with the view of Thucydides as an exponent of the conventionalist account of justice sketched above. This widely accepted reading of the Archaeology encounters two difficulties. First, to conclude that the Archaeology represents Thucydides' fixed judgment, one must disregard his comment about the first nineteen chapters, namely that they only allow one to form a judgment of the past that will not err. They do not, by themselves, prove the inferiority of the past to this war. Such a claim requires additional argument; it requires a treatment of the war that follows, a war which "*would show itself*

to be greater than those having happened” (1.21, emphasis mine). The view presented in the Archaeology can only be conditional. Second, the emphasis on material and technological progress runs contrary to his claim that this surpassingly great war and the permanent utility of the work represent peaks (1.22.4). If material and technological progress genuinely measured greatness then another even greater war and another greater work relating it would be inevitable. This reading requires us, twenty-five centuries later, to understand as boastful foolishness his claim about the permanent utility of his work.

We can extract ourselves from these difficulties if we begin where Thucydides does, with his opening statements about the war's greatness (1.1.1-2). While many scholars note the differences between his statements regarding the war's greatness at 1.1.1 and 1.23.1, few note the differences between 1.1.1 and 1.1.2 (Loraux 1986 constituting a major exception). This is unfortunate since these two statements differ significantly and thus offer important clues as to how to approach what follows. Here, in the opening lines of the work, we glimpse Thucydides commenting on the greatness of this war and himself as author:

Thucydides, an Athenian, wrote the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians, as they warred against each other, beginning immediately at the outbreak of the war in the belief that it would be a great one and the most worthy of relation of all those wars having come before, on the grounds that both sides were in the height of preparation and because he saw the rest of the Greeks joining one side or the other, some straightaway and some intending to do so. For it was the greatest motion to have befallen the Greeks and a portion of the barbarians and, so to speak, the rest of mankind. (1.1.1-2)

While the first statement refers to the war, the second statement refers only to the “greatest motion” (*megíste kínesis*). What Thucydides means by the “greatest motion” here is opaque, though he provides no evidence to confine its meaning to “war” alone. Moreover, the first statement is based on his expectations about the war that is to come. Thucydides claims that he thought the coming war *would be* greater and more noteworthy than all previous wars because of the number of men already allied with Athens and Sparta as well as those who would join the conflict, and because of the advanced state of readiness of both principal combatants (1.1.1). This is the view of Thucydides as the war was about to begin. The second formulation, by contrast, states that the war *was*, or had proven to be, the greatest motion among the Greeks, having surpassed all previous human activities—*wars or otherwise* (1.2). To possess this definitive perspective requires considerable

experience of the war, if not of the entire war. The latter view thus enlarges the earlier view, expanding a perspective limited to wars to include virtually all human affairs. It thus does not limit its view of greatness to numbers of combatants or the material readiness of the belligerents. This is the view of the “post-war” Thucydides. The second statement is further distanced from the first by the fact that he makes his first statement in the third person, attributed to “Thucydides, an Athenian.” The post-war perspective, however, expresses the summary judgment of an author in the “perpetual present,” a temporality that belongs to the narrator and his audience. It is thus unclear from this latter statement whether Thucydides the author still identifies with Athens. Such an opening forces us to wonder if Thucydides’ view of the war’s greatness and his reasons for writing his History remained constant (Strauss 1963, 162; Parry 1973; Pouncey 1980, 6; Connor 1984, 11-12, 23; Forde 1989, 175; Orwin 1994, 205). Did Thucydides begin with one understanding about the impending war’s greatness and end with another very different understanding? If he did, then in light of which understanding did he compose his magisterial work? Such a tightly packed proemium invites us to read his no less compressed account of Greek history by wondering how he might have changed his view of the war’s greatness and what might have led him to refine his initial expectations.

The suspicions raised by this opening about Thucydides’ transformation are supported by a study of his views regarding political greatness. This study requires first unpacking his treatment of the Persian War and the Trojan War, wars he considers inferior to the one he relates. He dismisses the Persian War by noting that it was smaller than the present war: it only consisted in two land and sea battles (23). The assumption at work here is that the Peloponnesian War surpasses the Persian War because, over twenty-seven years, there were more battles by land and sea, something which is undoubtedly true (though consider Hanson’s claim about the remarkably few major land battles: 2005, ch. 5). But if size and numbers accurately measured a war’s greatness, one might expect Thucydides to address Herodotus’s claims about the enormous size of the Persian host under Xerxes (*Histories* 7.60 and 7.186), something he does not do. Failure even to consider this challenge raises a question about the credibility of his initial reliance on size and numbers alone.

The claim about the Trojan War’s greatness, by contrast, suffers from *three* problems. First, Thucydides claims that the Trojan War, contrary to the traditional view, was not a glorious attempt by fellow Greeks,

aided by gods, to right a wrong committed by barbarians, aided by other gods. It was the unprovoked attempt by Agamemnon, assisted only by those who feared his superior strength, to reduce and plunder a peaceful foreign city (1.9). Second, Thucydides asserts that if one averages the number of men by those in a Boeotian ship and those in one of Philoctetes' vessels, one will find that the number of men who went to Troy was certainly less than those in contemporary wars (1.10). Finally, the Greek expedition of Agamemnon lacked sufficient wealth and resources to press the siege against Troy with its entire force. Because they split their force into fighting and supply contingents, the Greeks could only carry the battle with part of their strength (1.11). This weakness explains the length of their siege.

Thucydides' first and third points simply abstract from Homer's epic. By introducing considerations alien to the tradition, Thucydides in effect debunks Homer. Such debunking seems out of character for a man who is willing to highlight the virtues of his military rival (4.106-7). His references to the *Iliad* indicate both his awareness of the Homeric tradition and his decision to deviate from Homer's version. His second point in particular underscores his quarrel with Homer. Thucydides states that the average man per ship multiplied by the total number of ships results in a contingent that was not very many. But if the reader actually does the math, he will discover that the Greek expedition to Troy was 102,000 men, an expeditionary force that is *three times* the size of Athens's free male population! Connor (1984, 21 n.6) is one of the few to note this number (though see Gomme et al. 1945, 114), but he claims that Thucydides did not bother "running the numbers," a calculation clearly implied by the passage. Such a reading runs contrary to Connor's overarching thesis about the exquisite care Thucydides otherwise employs in crafting his Archaeology. To put this number in context, one should remember that the combined Athenian forces in Sicily totaled 10,000–12,000 men (6.31; see also 6.25, 7.42, 7.87). It would thus require ten Sicilian expeditions—the single largest expedition of the whole war—to equal or approximate the size and scope of the Greek expedition to Troy.

By pretending that the expedition to Troy is so slight, Thucydides wins his victory by default, it seems, since Homer never really appears on the field of battle. Highlighting this number also casts a shadow on Thucydides' account of the Greeks' motives. Would more than a hundred thousand Greeks embark on a lengthy and dangerous journey, let alone spill their blood on distant shores for ten years, if they were moved by fear of Agamemnon alone? Of course, Thucydides reduces the fighting contingent in half. But this

requires us to believe that 51,000 men—out of the immediate reach of the Greek army (1.11)—so feared the power of Agamemnon that they were compelled against their will to cultivate barbarian soil and live off of plunder for a decade, hundreds of nautical miles from their own farms and families, in order to supply an army that for nine years got no farther than a beachhead at Ilium. Either Thucydides thinks the early Greeks were as slavish as the meanest farm animals or he deliberately abstracts from those high-minded concerns which could lead men to make such sacrifices voluntarily.

But it seems unlikely Thucydides would let his victory over Homer rest on such flimsy grounds. To establish the superiority of his account to Homer's, Thucydides must address Homer on his own terms. The authority of the Homeric tradition ultimately rests on the belief that it reveals the truth about the power of the gods, their interest in the affairs of men, and their efforts to enforce divine justice among men. Its power rests on the belief that such providential gods, through the divine Muses, revealed these truths to Homer. If the *Iliad* presents an accurate portrayal of men—as it must, if it was divinely inspired—then the siege of Troy reveals the extent to which men will sacrifice themselves in order to uphold their oaths, or protect their family name, or avenge the loss of their beloved. To surpass Homer's *Iliad*, Thucydides must reveal more fully than his poetic rival does the truth about man's concern for honor and the desire to overcome mortality through the glorious defense of divine justice, family honor, or love. To do that, he must reveal the truth about the origin and status of those high-minded concerns and the limits they impose on the narrow pursuit of self-interest. Are such limits imposed by providential gods? Or might they derive from nature or human convention? But Thucydides never explicitly takes up Homer on these points.

By purchasing a "victory" over Homer at the expense of its credibility, Thucydides' account points to the difficulties facing any refutation of the poet. The Archaeology's apparently narrow focus on wealth, material resources, and the dominance of men's lower passions simply looks past the poet's concerns with the power of justice and the human capacities for devotion and sacrifice. So long as Thucydides takes his bearings from these measures, Homer not only stands unrefuted, he stands unaddressed. By subtly revealing the inadequacy of such indices of greatness, Thucydides, now seasoned by that great war, gently chastens our confidence in the criteria employed in his initial view of the war. Thucydides' intentionally problematic use of the measures associated with the conventionalist account of justice

points to a deeper conflict with Homer, one that forces us to ask why Thucydides' original criteria (1.1.1) weren't sufficient for gauging political greatness. What is more, the very shallowness of Thucydides' debunking of Homer compels us to inquire into his own understanding of providential gods and the status of divine right. If we are to know what makes this war surpassingly great, we must inquire into Thucydides' understanding of men's beliefs about the gods and men's hopes for themselves. But no sooner do we begin this inquiry then we confront an obstacle at the beginning of the *Archaeology*. Confronting this obstacle, however, will prove crucial to our effort to discover the path we seek; confronting this obstacle will show us why Thucydides thought he should precede his treatment of the war itself with such a lengthy and elaborate treatment of its causes.

#### ON ORIGINS, SPARTAN POWER AND SPARTAN JUSTICE

In chapter one of Book One, Thucydides notes that it is not possible to access the clear truth (*saphôs*) about the most ancient past (1.1.3). But without direct access to the most ancient past, how can he claim, as he so confidently does, that this war surpasses all others in greatness? Such a concession leaves open the possibility that affairs in the most distant past might surpass in greatness the present war. Furthermore, if one cannot know the clear truth about the most ancient past, then Thucydides' stated intention in writing the *History*—to help all those who desire to investigate the clear truth (*tò saphès*) of those things that have happened and that will happen (1.22.4)—appears groundless. If we refuse to assume artlessness on Thucydides' part, then what appears to be a contradiction must instead be an intentional riddle posed to the reader about the possibility of obtaining certain knowledge of human affairs. After all, if we are to possess knowledge even about the present state of political affairs—whether they constitute enlightened progress over a backward past or a decline from a glorious Golden Age—then we must know whether the most distant past, from the point of view of the present, constituted a peak or a valley. This means we must know the character of the first things—that is, whether at the beginning there is divine providence among the god or gods, an ordered and eternal nature or undifferentiated matter whose motions are governed by chance alone—since by virtue of being first they offer a decisive commentary on all that follows (Strauss 1963, 159). We might put this differently: without knowledge of the whole of which human and political affairs constitute a part, any knowledge of these affairs must remain purely conditional. Without knowledge of “the first things,” all claims to knowledge of contemporary affairs, no matter how impressive the

evidence in their favor, will rest on assumptions which in the course of time may be disproved.

Thucydides' confrontation with Homer, as we have seen, indicates that the approach to "first things" cannot depend on unmediated access to the ancient past or on an unquestioning trust in the traditional accounts of that past. Time has foreclosed the former route to us. Inquiry shows the uncertainty of and distortion caused by the latter. True knowledge requires an approach to the present that dodges the metaphysical presuppositions that ultimately condemn as insufficient in Thucydides' eyes both the poetic tradition and what we have called the conventionalist perspective. For instance, Thucydides could not accept the authority of the poetic tradition because it ultimately rests on the unverifiable claim that the divine Muses revealed to Homer the truth about the ancient past (1.21.1). As one commentator notes (Orwin 1989, 351), when it comes to the most important questions for Thucydides the choice between seeing with one's own two eyes and relying on hearsay from others is a no-brainer: one must choose seeing with one's own two eyes. Oddly enough, the conventionalist perspective suffers from the same flaw so fatal to the poets. For despite its pretensions to using "just the facts," the conventionalist perspective also relies on hearsay, namely that "facts," as it understands them, genuinely measure political events and their greatness. In other words, conventionalist methodology implies an epistemology. For while wealth, resources, the number of allies and men can all be objectively measured by the unaided human mind, these criteria rely on a priori assumptions about the power of reason and the intelligible character of the world. It requires one to know in advance that the "facts" and not things like oracles can show us what is objectively true about politics. Conventionalism thus assumes that one need not take seriously its epistemological rivals.

Thucydides was well aware of such shortcomings, as shown not only by his own respectful treatment of oracles but by the ways in which he and the Athenian soldiers responded to the discovery of the Carian corpses on Delos (1.8). Though brief, this episode is a singularly important example of Athenian piety since Thucydides refers to it four more times (3.104; 5.1, 32; 8.108.4; see Bartlett 2001, 102). During the sixth year of the war, the Athenians under the counsel of an oracle sailed to Delos to hallow the island, a task that *they* thought required exhuming all those buried on the island. But when the Athenians discovered the Carians buried in their armor, they were not led, as Thucydides seems to have been, to the anti-poetic conclusion that previous ages, reputedly closer to the gods, were more barbaric than the

present day. They did not conclude that the advance in material safety necessarily represents progress over the past. And they did not quit their pious task. Both Thucydides and the Athenians on Delos confront the same factual evidence and yet draw very different conclusions about the past. Of course, one could argue that the Athenians here do embrace a kind of progress, but the progress they embrace is a progress in piety. For while the Pisistratid tyrants only hallowed the area within the temple precinct, the Athenians of Thucydides' day hallowed the *whole* island (3.104). In order to simply accept the armor of the Carians as "evidence" of a non-poetic past, one would have to trust that it does reflect the intelligible character of political life, which is to say that one would have to simply accept that the principle of material progress governs all human life. "Facts" on their own do not disclose their meaning (Mara 2008, 27). The conventionalist perspective is thus no different from the Homeric tradition which requires one to trust that Homer was in fact inspired by the Muses. In his refusal to rely on hearsay for the most important questions, Thucydides stands in sharp contrast to both the poetic and conventionalist accounts of man, the gods and justice.

If Thucydides correctly understands the armor of the Carians to belie the poetic view of the past (as it seems he does), then his position must not derive from such evidence but from an approach to understanding the world around him which incorporates the fewest presuppositions. As Finley observes "What is crucial is that [the theory of the remote past that Thucydides offers in the *Archaeology*] is a theory derived from meditation about the world in which [he] lived, not from a study of history" (1975, quoted in Orwin 1989, 361, n. 15). Discoveries, like that of the Carians' armor, can support or ratify his understanding, but they cannot by themselves supply its basis. What then is the nature of Thucydides' approach to the political present that allows him to see such "discoveries" as confirmation of his view? To see this, we must unwind his positive account of the Greeks' greatness and in particular his treatment of Sparta in the *Archaeology*.

In preparing to assess properly the Homeric claims about the Trojan War's greatness, Thucydides surmises that if one judged solely in terms of what one could see for oneself (*tês phanerâs ôpseos*, 10.2), then some future judge of Spartan greatness, looking only at her "now" empty buildings, would surely judge her power at the time of the Peloponnesian War to be less than it indeed was. And were that same judge to view Athenian greatness in terms of her "now" empty buildings, he would judge her power at the time of that conflict to be double what it actually was. Thus one cannot dismiss

Homer's claims about the greatness of Agamemnon's Mycenae based on the present ruins of that ancient city, ruins which were evident even to Homer; it would seem that one cannot make accurate judgments about the past to which there is no direct access based solely on what one can see for oneself.

But in making this point, Thucydides relies on his knowledge of Sparta's present power in contrast to her deceptively modest buildings. Does he not rely on what he can see for himself under the present circumstances as a way of clarifying the truth about Sparta's "past"? And does he not do so in the very effort to show the weakness of relying on seeing with one's own two eyes? He appears guilty of the crime he warns others not to commit. The apparent contradiction recedes when Thucydides tells us to approach a city's greatness not in terms of its "external show" (*tàs òpseis*; 1.10.3), but in terms of its "power" (*tàs dunámeis*; 1.10.3). The problem is not so much "seeing for oneself" as opposed to "hearsay," but rather the kind of "sight" one employs. But if the war's greatness hinges on the greatness of the cities involved, as both his introductory comments (1.1) and his treatment of Mycenae (1.10) suggest, and if a city's greatness is to be understood in terms of its power, then how does one measure the "power" (*dúnamis*) of a particular city? What kind of "sight" do we need?

By using the example of Spartan power to reveal the weakness of "external show" as a measure of political greatness, Thucydides draws our attention to his comments about the substance of Spartan power made a few chapters later, where he identifies Sparta's reputation for power with good laws, a constant form of regime, and freedom from tyranny (1.18). Such comments on Spartan power are consistent with his earlier discussion of Mycenaean power. Like Mycenae, one cannot understand Spartan power if one looks only at her modest buildings—that is, her "external show"; Spartan power consists in what might be called "intangible" evidence such as good laws which give rise to and depend on the regime's stability and freedom. This freedom and stability in turn is purchased by the blood of those citizens willing to sacrifice themselves for their regime, itself mindful of the freedom of Greece (18). It is the unstated and intangible devotion of the Spartans to their regime and to the freedom of their fellow Greeks, in Thucydides' view, that constitutes the true core of Spartan power. In this respect, Sparta's attention to justice, or the common good, and her noteworthy accomplishments, must be contrasted with those Greek tyrants (mentioned in the preceding passage) who, because of their preoccupation with preserving themselves and their families, achieved nothing worthy of memory (17), no small defect in

Thucydides' view (1.1.1). The example of Sparta, to which Thucydides quietly points, thus suggests that if we are to understand a regime's power and hence its greatness, we must examine its laws, its dedication to its stability and freedom. That is, we must examine its attention to justice. But why should such a comparative study of regimes prove so fruitful? The earlier treatment of Mycenae (especially the tawdry tale about the origins of its greatness)—which the example of Spartan power in the present was intended to clarify—shows what is at stake in such an investigation.

According to Thucydides' account of Atreus and his son Agamemnon, Mycenae's power and greatness is rooted in a barbarian fratricide who assumed the throne under sordid circumstances and who consolidated his rule through the use of fear and flattery (1.9-11). The glory of Atreus' heir, himself no stranger to using fear as a political weapon, consists in the unjust effort to destroy a peaceful foreign city. Such origins certainly raise a question as to whether Mycenae possessed the good laws and the freedom to be considered truly powerful and hence truly great. After all, if political power and political greatness reside in something more than the stability of a regime, then the goodness of its laws and the freedom it defends must not be purchased through force or fraud. For if the just maintenance of power could legitimize its seamy acquisition, then the overthrow of any decent regime could *always* be justified after the fact. But can the justice which rests on injustice truly be considered "just," that is, without at least forcing us to revise our opinions about the undiluted character of this moral category? Acquisition of power and stability alone cannot suffice, since both are compatible with injustice. As the *de facto* rulers of the Peloponnese and the chief inheritors of the legacy of Pelops and his kin, the questionable laurels of Mycenae should rest uneasily on Spartan brows.

Such unease is heightened by Thucydides' loud silence about Lycurgus's divinely authorized legislation and Heracles' divinity, to say nothing of his comedic recasting of Minos—the reputedly divine source of Sparta's regime—as some big barbarian pirate (1.8). In this way Thucydides invites us to examine the regime itself—especially the source of its authority. After all, laws themselves are not sufficient to judge justice since "good" laws are always relative to the regime. It is precisely this difference in regime that allows Thucydides to distinguish Spartan rule from that of the Pisistratid tyrants, both of which were stable, passed good laws and provided a measure of freedom for their citizens (6.54). Nor is it enough for the act of founding to be decent. The justice that authorizes the founding, and its subsequent laws,

must be absolutely obligatory and binding. Political authority, if it is to avoid being strictly conventional, must be rooted either in nature or in the sanction of the gods. For if the regime does not derive its authority from the natural order or the sanction of the gods, then its claim on its citizens' obedience becomes vulnerable to the charge that it derives from particular and contingent foundations, making its demands culturally relative and arbitrary. In other words, if citizens do not understand the law to be absolutely obligatory, then they may easily rationalize their own lawlessness. And if a regime can no longer expect its citizens to restrain their selfish pursuits, to say nothing of risking their lives voluntarily for the good of their fellow citizens and other Greeks, then the city will not be able to preserve its regime and laws or the freedom associated with its way of life, the very ability Thucydides identifies with Spartan power.

By linking Mycenae and Sparta in this way, Thucydides invites us to connect the truth about Sparta's power to Sparta's justice and Spartan justice to the questions about first things and divine right, questions that are raised in the *very same context* by his debunking of Homer. That connection may be stated simply: to know the character of justice as expressed in a given regime one must know the truth about its source, which means one must possess knowledge of "the first things." But because Thucydides has already informed us that direct access to the distant past is not possible (1.3), then such knowledge must not be a *prerequisite* for understanding the present justice, power and greatness of a city. If it were, then Thucydides' treatment of Mycenae, insistent as it is on the need to see for oneself, would make little sense. His approach to Homer's assessment of Mycenae should therefore be understood as an effort to refine our approach to the present in a way that allows us to make sober, clear-sighted judgments about the present as well as the most distant past. Thucydides' analogy between Spartan and Mycenaean power suggests that reflection on the justice of contemporary political actors and their regimes should reveal the truth about justice simply. As with the armor of the Carians on Delos, it is not the revisionist history about Minos, the sordid stories of Atreus and Agamemnon, or Thucydides' silence about Lycurgus and Heracles that bring to light the questionable justice and power of the Spartan regime. It can only be his investigation into the truth about Spartan justice that makes so credible his particular selections and points of emphasis in the Archaeology, points which on their own appear slanderous.

To begin such an investigation one must first turn to his treatment of the war's causes (1.24-146), since there Thucydides "returns" to

the present to detail the charges and counter-charges regarding the violations of the thirty-year treaty between Sparta and Athens. If his presentation of this dispute is intended to introduce his analysis of the justice of present-day regimes, then Thucydides' interest in the war's causes comes to sight as an essential part of his desire to uncover the truth about first things and thus the source of the war. But how can his presentation of the war's causes contribute to an answer about whether the gods, an ordered nature or undifferentiated matter stand at the origins of the cosmos, not to mention any given regime? Is his treatment of practical politics meant to offer us that view of the present so necessary to approach political power and greatness correctly, a view undistorted by the presuppositions of the conventionalist and Homeric accounts? To sketch an answer to these questions, we must begin by reflecting on the problematic link between a city's power and its justice. By doing so, we begin to answer the questions we raised in relation to the commentaries of Orwin and Bartlett, questions that focused on the intersection between Thucydides' philosophic reflections and his unremitting focus on practical politics.

#### THE BIRTH OF JUSTICE AND THE GREEK DISCOVERY OF POLITICS

Initial consideration of a link between a city's power and its justice is problematic for two reasons. First, Thucydides nowhere makes this link explicit. To be sure, he refers to power throughout the *Archaeology*; *dúnamis*—"power"—and its cognates show up eleven times in the first nineteen chapters (2.4, 9.1, 9.2, 10.2 twice, 10.3, 11.1, 15.2, 17.1, 18.2 twice). But he does not explicitly refer to justice. Thucydides' well-documented reticence here, far from serving as evidence against this link, is consistent with his indirect procedure throughout the *History*. The bigger problem is that power is typically associated with the ability to aggrandize oneself; it is the means to get the goods one wants, and when one wants them, independent of others' welfare. Justice, on the other hand, is traditionally understood in terms of attention to the common good or serving the good of others (one's fellow citizens, or more widely, one's fellow allies and fellow Greeks). It is precisely in terms of attention to the good of others that justice, as I have referred to it, appears in the *Archaeology* (6.4, 18.1). Power and justice thus seem inextricably at odds. What sense does it make then to lead the reader to understand justice to be a power, indeed *the* power defining political life?

Most treatments of the *Archaeology* see a single, unbroken trajectory in the pursuit of power. It starts with individuals robbing from each other and ends with individuals and communities seeking rule over

others. But rule is not merely robbery writ large. Robbery is most effective when the victim doesn't know that the goods have been stolen, let alone who stole them. Rule on the other hand requires that the subjects know they are being ruled as well as who rules them. And while robbery can be understood solely in terms of low self-interest, it is much harder to explain the effort to dominate others in these terms since dominion is not always necessary for survival and can even mean risking one's life to obtain and preserve it. In the evolution from robbery to political rule as we find it in Greece, Thucydides sketches a fundamental transformation in human conduct.

Thucydides prepares the reader for this transformation by noting first that piracy was originally a matter of reputation for those who performed it nobly or beautifully (*kalôs*, 1.5.1-2). While what constitutes noble piracy remains unclear, men clearly began to distinguish piracy in terms of how it was performed from how much loot it secured. By introducing this distinction, men introduced one good among many other goods apart from booty—reputation. To receive this good, one had to be recognized and thus pursue more than mere self-interest. Indeed, one had to observe a certain limit in the pursuit of self-interest. The nature of this “limit” emerges more fully in the discussion of Greek dress that follows. Over time, Thucydides notes, the Greeks set aside the ancient practice of carrying weapons (*èsiderophórei*) on their person (1.5.3-6.3). The Athenians in particular took this a step further. They not only stopped carrying weapons; they embraced a luxurious manner of living, and from that luxury moved to a more moderate style of dress. But it was first in Sparta where the great among the citizens *chose* to observe an equality of appearance among the rest of the citizen body, or the many, adopting the more measured (*metría*) style of dress that came only of late to Athens. A sense of some legitimate restraint on one's outward conduct and appearance—and thus a concern for the common good—while the defining character of all of Greek life, emerged in Spartan politics first. (Thucydides employs here *isodiattoi* which is best rendered as “living on equality,” though the passage suggests that the Spartans adopted equality of dress to preserve the stability of the city and protect what was common to them all.) Understanding this particular Spartan practice should allow the reader to see what is true for all genuinely Greek cities. Thucydides then abruptly, and seemingly for no good reason, notes that the Spartans also originated the practice of wrestling in the nude and anointing their bodies with oils. By having one observation follow the other Thucydides invites us to uncover how one of his seemingly irrelevant asides (nude athletic competition) bears on one of his

most explicit and most important political notes. The connection between the two becomes clearer if one clarifies the differences.

Those who desire to dominate others in Spartan politics choose to conceal outward appearances of their superiority; they tacitly acknowledge the power of the common good. Those who aspire to dominate physically, on the other hand, choose to reveal themselves when competing; they assert the primacy of individual greatness. Such apparent differences, however, represent two sides of the same coin. Because the Spartan wrestlers anoint their bodies *after* they disrobe, the decision to exercise naked cannot merely be attributed to the desire to liberate one's range of motion. And by presenting this practice without reference to the prizes and honors that attend victory, Thucydides distinguishes the Greek practice from that of the Asians who cover themselves in their competition for prizes (1.6.6-7). For the Greeks, such competition must be understood independently of its reward; they do not compete for some honored *thing*; they compete for honor itself. By discarding their clothes, the Spartan wrestlers discard conventional covers and restraints. They assume for themselves an independence from convention and thus were the first to stake out a kind of non-conventional, or natural, self-sufficiency. Revealing oneself, or at least one's body, does not appear as a mere means to victory's goods.

If displaying oneself is not merely a means to the rewards of victory, beginning with reputation, then perhaps it is a part of the competition itself. Of course, one still competes to win, to dominate, and thus to enjoy the goods that such domination brings. But the concern for how one competes (clothed or unclothed) in effect mediates the concern for victory and its spoils. According to barbarian practice, by contrast, victory merely means getting a hold of the prizes. Possessing them signifies that one was superior in the contest and thus establishes that one was in fact worthier of the goods at stake; disclosing one's natural greatness before or during the contest is unnecessary. But by placing this condition or limit on their concern for victory, the Greeks subject victory and its spoils to the peculiar manner in which they were secured. In other words, according to this uniquely Greek practice, conquest or victory is not the first indication of one's superiority, of one's worthiness to possess such goods. The contest's outcome (victory or defeat) does not establish but *confirms* about the contestants what the audience should see first with their "own two eyes." Competing naked thus amounts to an act of self-assertion by the combatants. It represents their

claim to the goods of victory, claims made in light of their natural superiority and worthiness.

Such a revolutionary practice also manages to transform the goods for which one competes. For in light of the Spartan innovation, the possession of prizes alone no longer signifies one's superiority, or one's worthiness to possess them. Instead of deducing one's worth from what is won, the possession of goods is now to be determined by prior considerations of worthiness. This transformation in the nature of the goods won (as confirming, not establishing one's worth) suggests that the contest itself has been altered. For by asserting claims to goods in light of one's revealed superiority, the Spartans transform considerations of worth or value into claims of *deserving*. Before and in the example of the barbarians one was understood to be superior because one won the prizes of the victor. Now, in the example of the Greeks, one deserves to possess those goods because one openly stakes a claim to be naturally superior and competes to demonstrate that superiority.

To reconcile the Spartan practice of disclosure with the Spartan practice of concealment, we must recall the Archaeology's lesson that the mere possession of rule or territory is no indication that one deserves or will continue to hold it (1.2-5, 12-17). Thus in the continuing contest to retain their rule, the Spartan great voluntarily limit the open exercise of their power by concealing the appearance of their greatness. Like the grapplers, they eschew the concern for the outward show of material goods that follow from rule (or victory) in favor of considerations regarding *how* they rule. And like the Olympic combatants, they aim to establish their superiority over those they would rule in terms of self-sufficiency. In this case, they reveal their self-sufficiency by voluntarily foregoing the goods (such as lavish attire) that rule affords. For who else, but the supremely self-sufficient, could afford to forego the possession of such goods? One might even say that they do the wrestlers one better, since their restraint reveals the superiority of their characters, not their bodies. Because character is independent of biology, character also appears to be more "one's own"; the self-sufficiency they seek to reveal derives almost entirely from their own efforts. And by observing these customs conspicuously, the Spartans daily demonstrate their superior claim to rule.

This observation and the subsequent link between Olympic nudity and Spartan politics get reinforced by the Greek "triumph" over pederasty that such practice represents. As Ludwig observes, the nude training required for such contests required the Greeks to overcome the fear of pederasty that such practices would naturally entail. Male youths and their

fathers could overcome such fear only if those with whom they trained could be trusted not to take advantage of certain vulnerabilities—i.e., if potential pederasts possessed self-restraint and mastery of their sexual desires, or at least were fearful of law, both written and unwritten (2002, 261-318). Others have noted that this practice also reflects their mastery of shame (Forde 1989, 48, 175; Orwin 1994, 31; Bartlett 2006, 71) and thus a victory over those limitations imposed by traditional beliefs and customs. Such self-mastery affords them a new kind of liberation. Because self-restraint can serve as evidence of self-mastery, then dedication to the community's welfare can be understood as the disclosure of one's superior character, which in turn gets translated into the freedom to rule. The link between the Spartan elite and the grapplers now becomes clear. Spartan concealment, as a more sophisticated form of that disclosure practiced by the wrestlers, seems to be both a means to legitimate rule and an essential part of the rule itself. Concern for and dedication to the common good, viewed in light of the Spartans' nude exercises, represents the public flowering of those seeds initially found in noble piracy (1.5.2).

By crediting the Greeks with generating the concern for "the common," Thucydides credits them with discovering politics itself. If to one way of thinking, then, Thucydides is a teacher of "power politics," it is of a politics whose power is viewed in terms of measured restraint; it is not "might" that makes "right," as the adage goes, but "right" that makes "might." And by crediting the Greeks with the discovery of politics, he credits them with revealing more clearly than before the human source of the sense of a rightful limit on self-interest. Such an interpretation is, of course, by no means obvious. But what Thucydides tells us about the earliest *Athenians* lends it support. Forced to farm Attica's poor soil and dogged by the constant threat of starvation, the early Athenians could reasonably be expected to possess a heightened awareness of their vulnerability and exposure to need (1.2.4-6). The experience of such constant need seems to have impressed upon them the fact that no amount of material goods could ever free them from the threat of evils. Such awareness gets reinforced, paradoxically, by the fact that some of those who originally settled the city were no weaklings themselves. They too originally possessed power (he refers to these foreign exiles as *dunatótatoi*; 1.2.6) but clearly did not possess enough power to preserve themselves in their original communities indefinitely.

The depth of the Athenians' concern for self-sufficiency finds perhaps no more artful expression than in Thucydides' note that later generations, growing into a more luxurious way of life, discarded the convention

of wearing golden grasshoppers as pins in their hair (1.6.3), a convention intended to honor the city's autochthonous gods (Hornblower 1991, 26-27). By abandoning this convention as they freed themselves from poverty, the wealthy Athenians revealed their yearning to be free of their bond to this particular land and the physical neediness that that bond signified—a bond their initial poverty and belief in the city's autochthonous gods imposed on them. Their actions testify to their desire to break free from the limits imposed by both nature and the gods; they point to the impious desire for a complete and total freedom, and thus a self-sufficiency, that is entirely the product of one's own efforts. Owing itself to no one or no thing outside of oneself, such freedom appears, quite naturally, limitless. And by consistently drawing our attention to nudity (*àpodúntes*, *ègumnóthesán*, *gumnázesthai*) and the male reproductive organs (*diazómata*, *aidoía*) in this brief passage, Thucydides quite naturally leads us to reflect on evidence of man's greatest limitations, and above all his mortality (Ludwig 2002, esp. 153-69 and the chapter on "Civic Nudity"). Thucydides, at this early stage, quietly suggests that the seemingly limitless aims of a political enterprise like Athenian imperialism can be understood as the product of a heightened yearning for immortality. Indeed, one could argue that the amazing candor of Athenian imperial rhetoric reflects the political psychology inspiring the very "disclosure" practiced by Spartan wrestlers.

And yet desires for limitless freedom and self-sufficiency seem to be at odds with the earliest Athenians' initial experiences with both nature and politics. The encounter with an inhospitable nature combined with the political failures of those who relocated to Athens, seems to have made *these* Greeks keenly aware both that they require external goods to satisfy the various needs which plague them and that they can never have enough power to acquire all the goods necessary to satisfy their concerns. This initial awareness seems perfectly consistent with the Spartan display of nudity at Olympia, a practice that compels one to confront and accept the evidence of what one takes to be the deepest need (the need for immortality)—acceptance which, in its own way, aims at overcoming such an apparent need; the public display of one's nudity amounts to an effort to deny immortality the status of a need in any genuine sense, to relegate it to the status of a desire that those who are truly self-sufficient can live without. By voluntarily eschewing the possession of external goods, and directing instead their attention to the cultivation of virtue, the Greeks could establish their superior self-sufficiency—and thus their superior claim to rule—while circumventing the otherwise absurd effort to pursue limitless satisfaction. It is this rational

approach to the endless pursuit of goods (manifest in both Spartan and Athenian politics), predicated as it is on the awareness of one's mortality, which first elicits and then defines the concept of justice that constitutes the core of Greek politics, and its identification of Greek power with Greek greatness. Of course, if this is true, then Athenian imperialism, insofar as it *does* seek to establish permanent monuments of good and evil (2.41.4), represents the willful effort to overcome what cannot be overcome, to flee what cannot be fled and to possess what cannot be possessed. As a fundamentally irrational enterprise born from an otherwise rational self-awareness, Athenian imperialism seems to reflect Greekness at war with itself (for a more compact account of this section of the *Archaeology* and its relation to "Greekness" and to the *History* as a whole, see Dobski 2007, 98-111).

#### THUCYDIDES' STATEMENT OF INTENT REVISITED

We can now appreciate the full impact of Thucydides' interest in turning to and treating the causes of the war as he does. Thucydides' interest in the Greeks consists in the fact that they discovered politics and devotion to the common good. But the war he relates destroyed both these discoveries. Indeed *immediately* before he turns to the causes of the war he informs his reader that this war surpasses all prior wars because of the length and amount of suffering inflicted on and endured by men (1.23.1-4). In view of such devastation, his readers must wonder how such an intense and savage war could break out between Sparta and Athens and last as long as it did, if they represent the cradle of justice. According to this reading, the treatment of causes that follows should provide some indication as to how such a fratricidal war can occur between two cities whose distinctively Greek character consists in the first genuine articulation of justice. This means that Thucydides' intent in turning to the causes of the war should show how the source of justice also issues in injustice. Or to put a finer point on the *Archaeology's* lesson here, while justice and injustice seem to emerge out of the human response to the concern for immortal self-sufficiency, they are not in fact two distinct categories that share one root. Thucydides seems to suggest rather delicately here an even more radical view, namely that the justice which defines Greek life can also and at the same time be injustice.

While the treatment of causes that follows in 1.24-146 should reveal the character of this puzzling insight more fully, Thucydides' introduction already supplies some indication as to how justice and injustice can be so interwoven. As we have just seen, the Greek discovery of politics requires one to serve others and at the same time strive to establish one's own superiority

over others, to eschew material goods in an effort to pursue goods that will satisfy one's needs, to sacrifice one's interest but to do so out of concern for one's interests. It is this duality that stands at the core of Sparta's domestic politics, the treatment of which was intended by Thucydides to clarify Greekness itself. For just as the Spartan wrestler's practice of disclosure reflects the effectual truth behind the concealment of the Spartan elite, so too the amazingly frank efforts to justify Athenian imperialism throughout the History, efforts whose very frankness belie a desire to be seen by the on-looking Greek world as naturally superior and thus deserving of empire, reflect the effectual truth of Spartan attention to the common good. This, at any rate, is the suggestion of the Archaeology. But I am getting ahead of myself here. To draw this study to a close, we must recall the question about Thucydides' intention in turning to the political, legal and moral debates surrounding the violation of the thirty-year treaty. Why is it that if we *have* to "ask" about the war's source "we will never know"?

We can now state the answer simply: if we have to take up this inquiry into the war's source and if we have to do so without that unique preparation that Thucydides' introduction supplies, then "we will never know" the "source" (or "grounds") of such a war because we will never raise questions about the divine law and the concern for justice in a way that will illuminate the truth about first things. As a result, we will quite naturally fail to appreciate the importance of reflecting on the practical political events of Thucydides' day. Thucydides' Archaeology thus prompts the reader to the need to ask what is in fact most needful for human beings and to approach his presentation of the war's causes and the war itself with that question in mind.

Thucydides' Archaeology can do this because the Greek discovery of politics that it presents is predicated on both the awareness of man's profound dependence on material goods and the slightly dimmer awareness of the inability of material goods to satisfy the yearning for immortal self-sufficiency. If one is unaware of what makes the Greeks great, one does not understand the Greek confrontation with material necessity, on the one hand, and the striving for distinction among equals and the justice for which the Greeks are famous, on the other hand. Nor will one see how the confrontation with material necessity evolves into a desire for immortality, a desire that we seem to experience and thus conceive of as a need. Finally, one will not understand the importance to Greek politics of the vague awareness that the endless pursuit of material goods will never fully satisfy our needs, however we construe them. If one does not understand the importance of this

awareness, then can one truly possess such awareness? Can one be fully aware of one's own needs and yearnings and still fail to see both the importance of those needs and yearnings to our pursuits and the inability of external goods to address them? It would seem unlikely.

By leading his readers to such problematic self-awareness, Thucydides must also intend them to raise certain questions for themselves. For he cannot, for example, show justice and injustice to possess the same root, let alone suggest as he does that they can be the same thing at the same time, without leading his reader to wonder if justice possesses an unblemished integrity or if it possesses the same power always and everywhere. And he cannot show justice to be a means to political power without also tempting his reader to revise the notion that justice is simply serving the good of others in favor of a self-serving view of all politics as an exercise in tyranny. By carefully leading his readers to reflect on the tensions within Greek politics, Thucydides exposes his audience to the need to search for their adequate resolution, thereby inviting them to understand what is in fact most needful for human beings. These seemingly abstract reflections become less so when we recall that the *Archaeology* re-presents Thucydides' own steps towards that wisdom illuminated by his work's great theme. As such, it must arouse in the reader the same wonderment that our author surely experienced when he discovered the inadequacy of his original political views, the genuine difficulty of confronting Homer's authority, and the priority of justice to his own theoretical concerns.

Of course, we still must wonder how all of this helps prepare the reader to inquire into the nature of first things. Given that the *Archaeology* can only prepare the reader to approach and understand the lessons about politics and human nature that Thucydides' work presents to us in such vivid and gripping fashion, any lessons drawn from it can only be considered conditional, not definitive. To address fully the character of the first things, as the *Archaeology* bids us, requires a comprehensive engagement with the details of Thucydides' massive work. The limited focus of the present essay necessarily precludes such an engagement. But one might begin to bring into focus the relationship between the *Archaeology* and the *History* as it pertains to our understanding of the first things by reading Thucydides' *History* as a work of "political imagination," one that is not "simply illusory" but a "projection on experience that can be tested against and verified by practical outcomes" (Mara 2008, 49). In this case, we can test Thucydides' "projection" of this surpassingly great war against our own views regarding

the gods and the justice that we believe they support. And such testing, it seems, would lead us to conclude that our own view of the divine requires us to separate the justice sketched in his *Archaeology* from that handed down by the gods. After all, to claim that the divine law responsible for justice is at the same time responsible for injustice would be grossly impious. Such a law would be foolish and therefore bad. And we do not believe the gods to be fools or knaves. And yet Thucydides' peculiar sketch of the origins of justice and thus of Greek politics should also caution us against turning from a belief in providential gods to an ordered and eternal nature capable of supporting clear and distinct moral and political categories.

Of course, to understand fully how Thucydides' own interest in the enduring truth of "the human thing" (*tò ànthròpinon*; 1.22.4) fits with an apparent rejection of both providential gods and an ordered and eternal nature, requires a much more comprehensive treatment of Thucydides' work than I can offer here. But such treatment cannot be undertaken without first appreciating the distinctiveness of the *History's* *Archaeology* as I have presented it. And what makes the *Archaeology* so distinctive is not that it answers the question regarding the character of justice so much as it makes sure that the question about justice can be properly raised. For if the awareness of our own neediness supplies the basic precondition for raising questions about justice's problematic nature, and if we *need* to be prompted to that awareness (i.e., if we lack that awareness to begin with), then we cannot raise the question about the importance of justice. Remaining ignorant of our true needs and the problems associated with their genuine satisfaction, we would never be compelled to raise the question of the problematic nature of justice with respect to first things. By satisfying the need for such awareness, Thucydides' *Archaeology* does not relieve us of a particular task or inquiry so much as make possible that task or inquiry. Placed in its proper context, Thucydides' statement of intent in turning to the causes of the war between the Peloponnesians and Athenians promises to the reader that the focus on political, moral and legal matters in the sequel (24-146) will provide the groundwork for raising and pursuing the most historical of questions. We thus have our answer to the work of Orwin and of Bartlett regarding the questions raised at the outset: Thucydides' broader theoretical interests in religion and the human soul require his peculiar presentation of practical politics because such a presentation articulates those pre-theoretical experiences necessary for theorizing about first things and politics.

Of course, one may well wonder if one *really* needs the kind of preparation and guidance that Thucydides supplies in order to understand

fully those material necessities that humans encounter every day for themselves. Can't we dispense with the incredibly intricate preparation argued for here and jettison the special place reserved for the Greeks and for Greekness? But it bears recalling that for Thucydides the poetic and conventionalist alternatives to the study and appreciation of Greekness that he seems to advance require us to take for granted what is most in need of examination. To adopt their perspectives is to render oneself incapable of raising the fundamental questions that Thucydides wants us to raise because we will not see them as questions at all. Such alternatives to Thucydides' approach are appealing because they allow us to take for granted answers to the toughest questions; they emphasize "attractiveness" (*prosagógoteron*) over "truth" (*alethésteron*), playing into men's "carelessness" (*atalaipôros*; 1.20.3) and their willingness to take "what comes to hand" (*ta étoima*; 1.20.3). It is the path carved out by Thucydides that is so difficult to access (though not entirely without pleasure, *me aterpésteron*; 1.22.4). As our author points out, even the great Homer was complicit in that contradictory self-understanding characteristic of Greek life (3.104). And Thucydides—even *Thucydides!*—embraced the conventionalist perspective and was able to discredit it *only* after experiencing the greatest war of all time (1.1.1).



Writing during the last decades of the fifth century, in the later years of Socrates' own life in Athens (before Plato and Aristotle), Thucydides intimates a quasi-Socratic "turn" from the narrowly scientific study of man to a political science that promises to open a vista on the human soul and its place in the cosmos. His philosophic interests thus appear to be governed by an argument for the priority of practical political considerations, an argument that would seem to inform the entire History's construction. Indeed, Thucydides' introduction is constructed in such a way as to allow the reader to see the basis for that argument as well as to recognize the problems confronting the poetic and conventionalist alternatives. From such a perspective, theoretical explicitness obscures the pre-theoretical experiences so necessary to articulate the "absolutely clear beginnings" that he was after. Human beings do not begin with explicitly theoretical concerns, but with political disputes and beliefs regarding "the first things" which undergird political communities. As such, Thucydides' focus on and presentation of practical political affairs offer implicit objections to all efforts to study man apart from reflections on divine law and the concern for justice at the heart of political life.

## ADDENDUM

A study of *próphasis* is well beyond the scope of the present essay. Orwin's comprehensive treatment of Thucydides (1994) offers, among other insights, a guide to the vast literature on this subject (35-39, 213-14). Readers interested in plumbing the depths of the debate over its meaning will find Orwin's discussion invaluable. On the whole, I find Orwin's argument of how to render *próphasis* most persuasive. He argues, along with Sealey (1957, 1-12), that *próphasis* is best rendered as the truest reason of all reasons given, or the sufficient justification for the action taken. The *próphasis* of the war is thus no mere pretext and cannot therefore be considered qualitatively distinct from the "truest causes." Being the stated reason that is most true, the *próphasis* is of a piece with those causes that are unstated, but still true. For the scientific and medical uses of *próphasis* as "exciting cause," see Kirkwood (1952, 37-61, 41-47). For the rendering of *próphasis* as "pretext" as opposed to truest or exciting cause, consult Rawlings (1981, 272).

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All translations from the Greek are mine and are based on the Oxford Classical Texts manuscript as annotated by Henry Jones. References to the History are in the standard book, chapter, and section form. Where reference to Book One is clear, I cite only chapter and section.

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## Martin Luther's Restoration of Temporal Government

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*Martin Luther once boasted that no one since the age of the apostles had written in such praise of temporal government as he. Yet Luther's boast and his political thought in general have often been overlooked. A study of his seminal political work Temporal Authority and his major political writings that followed (including his controversial stand in the Peasants Revolt of 1525 and his harsh criticisms of the radical reformers) demonstrate Luther's determined project to restore temporal government to its rightful place as service to God.*

### INTRODUCTION

Martin Luther's praise for temporal government was emphatic and unfeigned: he called it the "most precious jewel on earth" and a gift as indispensable as life itself (WA 30 I: 153; LW 46: 238; WA 30 II: 556). Luther also believed his contribution to political thought represented an important watershed. He boasted that no one since ancient times had such high praise or compelling ideas about temporal government as he (LW 46: 95; WA 19: 624). Luther made such statements as a theologian and never as a magistrate, or, strictly speaking, a political theorist. Thus his boast, though exaggerated, was based in his belief that through his theological reform, he was restoring honor to temporal government that had long been removed by what he believed to be the sundry *theological* corruptions of sixteenth-century Europe. However, his boast and the political theory behind it remain generally unexamined. This essay provides an account of this boast and thus an exposition of the restorative emphasis in Luther's political thought.

Luther's rise to prominence as a political thinker was closely bound to his campaign to reform the church, for early on in the German Reformation, he discovered that reform was impossible without the committed help of secular powers. But the Roman church hierarchy *and* radical reformers rejected this role for secular authorities; thus Luther had to become a foundational theorist of the role of the secular magistracy in the Reformation.

Luther basically argued that there were *Zwei-Reiche* or "Two Kingdoms," each given by God, to which all Christians were subject. The spiritual realm was ruled by Jesus Christ through his Word; however, the temporal or secular realm was ruled by magistrates through law and coercion in order to ensure peace, order, and the protection of life and property. Unlike many subsequent German reformers (such as Philip Melancthon and Johannes Brenz), Luther argued that secular government was not intrinsically Christian; but he did argue that the two realms were divinely ordered and biblical. The two realms came directly from the fact that neither the advice of Paul to submit to secular authority nor the commands of Christ to turn the other cheek could be disregarded. The two realms were two complementary divine gifts through which God directed humanity. But Luther also argued for their strict separation: just as popes and priests had no business with human law, secular authorities had no authority in the affairs of the church.

However, for Luther exceptions to the limits of secular authority could be made in emergencies, particularly when radicals or "papists" interfered. In such times, a secular magistrate could conduct affairs in the spiritual realm as a *Notbischof* or "emergency bishop." In the immediate aftermath his political theory provided for the development of a Protestant *cura religionis* (magisterial control and leadership in the church) in the German Protestant lands. In the long term, as so many scholars have previously argued, Luther's political ideas helped bring about the consolidation of secular power (over law, church, and society) in European lands.

Despite this pre-eminence in Reformation political thought, Luther's place in the canon of political theory has frequently been dismissed or ignored. In fact, in the centuries between the Reformation and our present age, Luther was seldom considered to have said anything important about politics at all (see Addendum 1). Only in the mid-twentieth century, following a revival of Luther studies, did his political theory begin to enjoy a prominent place in the history of political thought (see Addendum 2). Yet even since then, anachronisms and misinterpretations have persisted: Luther continues to be seen as an early modern pioneer of individual conscience

and liberties, or an early theorist of the “separation of church and state,” or an ancestral father of modern absolutism, or even a forefather of German totalitarianism, without a great deal of attention to how political authority was seen by Luther himself.

Excellent scholarship in the last thirty years has restored Luther to prominence in political theory. Much of this revival is owed to the influential scholarship of Quentin Skinner. The second volume of Quentin Skinner's *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* was devoted to Luther's political ideas and their influence in the sixteenth century. Skinner argued that in Luther's thought there were two major political implications: first, that the church possesses no jurisdictional powers, and second, as a corollary, that the secular government must wield them (Skinner 1978, 12-15). Thus Skinner agreed with J. N. Figgis that Luther dismantled the “two swords” (civil and ecclesial power), as he stripped coercive power away from the *sacerdotium*. Skinner also argued that Luther's political writings embodied two influential principles: the New Testament (especially Paul) was the final authority on political questions, and the political stance prescribed by the New Testament was one of complete submission to authorities (19). Skinner attempted to demonstrate in a later chapter that the main influence of Luther's political thought was the encouraging and legitimizing of unified and absolutist monarchies.

James Cargill Thompson's *The Political Thought of Martin Luther*—one of the rare book-length monographs on the subject—represented a significant shift in the interpretation of Luther's political theory, emphasizing its theological foundations. “Luther's approach to political questions,” he wrote, “is always exclusively theological and moral” and hence is not concerned about the best regime, the origin of government, or institutional design (Cargill Thompson 1984, 5). For Cargill Thompson, Luther was not self-contradictory and incoherent, but in fact a great systematic theologian. Developed over his career, his systematic theology had definite political ideas and implications, and Cargill Thompson's book accounted for them with particular emphasis on the *Zwei-Reiche*.

Scholarship on Luther's political thought has since emphasized its theological foundations within a closely examined context of the sixteenth century's ecclesial and magisterial reform. Within this new mode of scholarship, David M. Whitford has recently argued that in order to properly understand Luther's political thought, several central ideas of Luther's theology and historical context must be taken into account (Whitford 2003,

180-81). First, Luther's overarching concern for his entire career was pastoral care and the salvation of souls; thus, his political writings were at their most basic level soteriological and hence quite unconcerned with the ideal regime and institutional design (cf. Steinmetz 1986, 24). Second, Luther's idea of liberty was paradoxical and religious, and any attempt to understand it as modern and liberal is mistaken. Finally, Whitford argues that for Luther the Bible was normative, and the theology he derived from Scripture had lasting implications for his political ideas. For example, Luther believed government to be a bulwark against the sin and chaos that wreaked havoc on creation. Temporal government was a gift of God to bring order to humanity via the rule and enforcement of law and thus provide knowledge of sinfulness and safe conditions for the spreading of the gospel. Government's key role in the ordering of creation also implied a theory of authority: like parents in the Bible, the authority of princes and magistrates came directly from God.

The study of Luther's political thought also owes a great deal to James M. Estes' monograph *Peace, Order and the Glory of God: Secular Authority and the Church in the Thought of Luther and Melancthon* (Estes 2005). In this book, Estes attempts to give a complete account of Luther's political thought—throughout his entire career—in the context and development of the history of the Reformation, and to examine it in tandem with the political thought of Philip Melancthon. Estes argues that over their respective careers, Luther's and Melancthon's political theories had each a mutual influence upon the other; thus, Melancthon was as concerned as Luther over the distinction of the “two regiments,” and Luther was equally as influential as Melancthon on the development of the *cura religionis* and the territorial church.

Even with this refreshing turn of recent scholarship towards the foundational theology and historical context of his political thought, a succinct evaluation of Luther's boast—that no one since the apostles had written in such praise of temporal government as he—remains to be given. That Luther made such a boast is of course duly noted by many scholars; in fact Cargill Thompson begins his book by discussing the claim. However, on what ground Luther could have believed himself to be worthy of such a plenary claim, and the value of that ground for providing a coherent understanding of all of Luther's political thought, has been too often passed over. That ground, it will be argued herein, is that throughout his life and career as a reformer, Luther emphatically asserted that his political thought was essentially *restorative*. Though his political ideas changed and developed

throughout the turbulence of the Reformation, a remarkable consistency remained over the character of his political project: to restore secular government to its divinely ordained purpose to bring order to the temporal world.

We need look no further than *On the War against the Turk*—where the boast occurred. In the introduction to this work Luther gave his dismal assessment (though obviously overstated) of political thought in the early sixteenth century. He was in the midst of defending a statement he made in his *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses*, one explicitly condemned by Pope Leo X in his bull *Exsurge Domine*, that fighting against the Turks was the same as resisting God's punishment (LW 31: 91-92; WA 1: 535-36; see Bohnstedt 1986). But the text provided more than this context: Luther's judgment about the sorry state of political thought (aside from its questionable historical accuracy) underscores how he saw his own political thought as a restoration.

This was the state of things at the time: no one had taught, no one had heard, and no one knew anything about temporal government, whence it came, what its office and work were, or how it ought to serve God. The most learned men (I shall not name them) regarded temporal government as a heathen, human, ungodly thing, as though it jeopardized salvation to be in the ranks of the rulers. This is how the priests and monks drove kings and princes into the corner and persuaded them that to serve God they must undertake other works, such as hearing mass, saying prayers, endowing masses, etc. In a word, princes and lords who wanted to be pious men regarded their rank and office as of no value and did not consider it service of God. (LW 46: 163; WA 30 II: 107)

Obviously, Luther believed his efforts to reform the church partly satisfied this want, but certainly his explicitly political works combated it more directly. Luther's boast was embellished, but not unfounded: as he saw it, his political thought sought to *restore* government to its rightful place amongst the most precious gifts of God.

#### I: TEMPORAL GOVERNMENT AS DIVINE GIFT

Luther's restorative project for temporal government began wholeheartedly in 1523—during the tumultuous early years of the German Reformation—when he composed *Temporal Authority*. It was recognized by friend and foe alike to be Luther's most significant political writing. *Temporal Authority* presented Luther's idea of the "two regiments," and with this distinction a major aspect of his restorative project was introduced.

At first glance, the “two regiments” does not appear particularly unique in the history of Christian political thought. Some variation on a dualism of ecclesial and secular authorities had pervaded Christendom since the early church. But Luther differed from the imperialist and conciliarist thinkers before him in that his political thought was derived from his theology. The two regiments and the two kingdoms made sense of power and authority in this world for human beings who were, as Luther had written in *Christian Liberty, simul justus et peccator*, both sinful yet justified; sixteenth-century political thought, in Luther’s view, had neglected this paradoxical condition.

Another point was that his version of the typical “dualism” was hardly typical. Even a cursory reading of *Temporal Authority* reveals a scheme different than Augustine’s “two cities” which were spiritual cities, defined by love of God or love of self, and inextricably intermingled with one another throughout history. Luther did adopt an Augustinian dualism in his distinction between the *Reich Gottes* or the Kingdom of God and the *Teufels Reich* or the Kingdom of the Devil. The parallels to Augustine’s two cities are clear enough; the subjects of each are known by whom they love and serve. Luther used the word *Reich* in two major ways: it could refer to the kingdom God (or the Devil) ruled over, or God’s rule itself. In either case, the two kingdoms’ power and influence were inescapable: for Luther all human beings were subjects of one and thus contested by the other. The importance of these warring kingdoms for Luther cannot be overstated. He felt their immediate presence throughout his life, and considered the creedal and political conflicts of his age signs of their contestation.

However, unlike Augustine’s two cities, Luther’s “two regiments” were another explicit dualism of divine governance within the Kingdom of God. Throughout *Temporal Authority* and other works, the *geistliche Regiment* (the spiritual government) and the *weltliche Regiment* (the temporal government) were presented by Luther as the spiritual and temporal instruments of the *Reich Gottes* on earth. It was also a sign that God was continually active in the world both through the eternal redemption promised through the spiritual government and the provision of order and earthly needs through the temporal government. The two governments were continuing gifts from God; in restoring each to its rightful place, Luther believed he would resolve the crisis of his age.

Luther did not base his restoration of temporal authority on his own speculation. Rather, he began where he most often did: he looked to

Scripture (see Althaus 1972, 43-45). In *Temporal Authority*, a biblical demonstration occupied a prominent place in the first of three sections of the essay. "First," Luther wrote, "we must provide a sound basis for the civil law and sword so no one will doubt that it is in the world by God's will and ordinance" (LW 45: 85; WA 11: 247). At the outset of *Temporal Authority*, Luther cited two New Testament epistles: Romans, which commanded, "let every soul be subject to the governing authority, for there is no authority except from God," and 1 Peter, which advised that "every soul be subject to the governing authority."

*Temporal Authority* began Luther's lifelong efforts to build his political theory on what he considered to be sound biblical theology. For Luther a restoration of temporal government demanded a renewed emphasis on the authority of the Bible that in his opinion had long been neglected and ignored. Throughout his career, Luther continued to defend the position that although temporal government did not impart redemptive grace, its purpose and origins were divinely ordained. For Luther, the consistency was not due to his own unwavering position on political matters, but to the consistency of Scripture, as he saw it, in affirming the high purpose of temporal government.

Well before writing *Temporal Authority*, in his seminal lectures on Romans at Wittenberg (1515-1516) Luther discovered the divine origin of government in this very familiar Pauline source. Both the *glosses* (interlinear and marginal text notes) and *scholia* (extended passage commentary) provided significant rumination on Paul's insistence (Romans 13:1) that the faithful were subject to governing authorities as these powers, whether exercised by evil men or not (and Paul was writing at the time of Nero), were instituted by God. In the glosses, Luther affirmed that obedience to temporal powers was the duty of every Christian: "Christians should not under the pretext of religion refuse to obey men, especially evil ones..." (LW 25: 109; WA 56: 123). Through Paul, Luther believed that all governments were ordained by God. Moreover, he agreed with the Pauline teaching that bad governments were simply those usurped and managed in ways not ordained, but were nevertheless under divine charge (LW 25: 109; WA 56: 123-24). Thus "evil" governments, insofar as they exercised political power, were to be "especially" obeyed as a test of the belief in the divine origins of government when worldly self-interest would push Christians to resist.

For Luther, the first letter of Peter also affirmed the divine source of temporal government. In 1523, the year that he had penned *Temporal Authority*, Luther wrote a commentary on the small New Testament

epistle. It contained in much more succinct and less expository form essentially what had been written in the former essay. In the second chapter of the first letter of Peter, Luther showed, God ordained temporal authority for external rule, to curb sin, maintain order and promote peace. Service and obedience to temporal government was an expression of loving one's neighbor (*LW* 30: 73-81; *WA* 12: 327-35).

Later, Luther's mature commentaries reiterated the solid conviction expressed in the earlier biblical studies. The *Commentary on Zechariah* (1527) was a prominent example. In the first chapter the minor prophet recalled a vision in which he sees angels whom God has sent to patrol the earth (Zech. 1:7-17). Luther's commentary accounted for God's rule of the world by means of angels; however, this dominion was only one and the least part of a fourfold rule. Temporal authority, though "the lowest and the least of the rules of God" (behind God, the angels, and apostles and preachers), was nevertheless a gift of God to humanity for the best purposes of life on earth (*LW* 20: 172; *WA* 23: 514). In this commentary, temporal authority included marriage and child-rearing, as well as the enforcement of law and the promotion of peace and order. Undoubtedly Luther interpreted the Book of Zechariah as a sharp criticism of the confusion of spiritual and temporal governments in his own time.

However, the Bible presented a major theological-political problem: temporal government punished wrongdoing, yet many prominent teachings of Christ in the Gospels call the faithful to non-resistance against evil, to love their enemies, and to turn the other cheek (especially in Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" in Matt. 5:25 ff.). This apparent conflict between the demands of the gospel and the necessity of temporal authority was not merely an erudite theological issue; it was one of the Reformation's biggest political challenges. According to Luther, defenders of the papal authority over temporal power appeared to stress the demand for submission to all authority, rendering the demands of the gospel as "counsel to those who would be perfect" (*LW* 45: 82; *WA* 11: 245). At the same time, a radical call to either forgo all politics or transform political authority in the form of a new church was beginning to arise from some reformers such as Thomas Muntzer, Andreas Karlstadt and the Anabaptists. Between these poles were the princes and their subjects of the evangelical territories. Without good counsel, subjects saw themselves stuck between choosing unconditional obedience and revolt, and the princes, like the Elector of Saxony John the Steadfast (1468-1532), to

whom *Temporal Authority* was dedicated, between maintaining order and Christian duty.

Luther's conception of the two regiments came directly from the fact that neither the advice of Paul to submit to authority nor the commands of Christ to turn the other cheek could be disregarded. The two regiments were the manifestation of two divine gifts, seemingly contradicting one another, but in fact complementing each other as two distinct ways in which God directed human beings on earth. In the spiritual regiment, the gospel of Christ ruled; in the temporal regiment, God ruled through law and worldly authority and demanded obedience.

Luther's great heresiographer Johannes Cochlaeus, like so many others at the time, considered *Temporal Authority* a ferocious attack on the authority of princes. It was a work in which, Cochlaeus said, Luther "burned with such anger and raved with so abusive a pen against the secular authorities" because several princes had banned his German translation of the New Testament (Cochlaeus 2003, 113). Duke George and Elector Joachim of Brandenburg protested that the essay had attacked them and princely authority (Brecht 1990, 119). Though these detractors would have opposed Luther anyway, their objections were not entirely without merit. *Temporal Authority* in part appeared to edge towards a Christian renunciation of all political authority. Luther wrote that "Christians, so far as they themselves are concerned, are subject neither to law nor sword, and have no need of either" (LW 45: 91; WA 11: 251).

Yet to summarize *Temporal Authority* thus would seriously misrepresent it, since at least a third of the essay was dedicated to affirming government as a gift of God, and arguing that all are subject to it. Moreover, recalling the paradoxical "inner" and "outer" natures in human beings from *Christian Liberty*, Luther's distinction of the two kingdoms/regiments made good sense of the Christian life in this world. No person was wholly Christian or righteous, and thus throughout life on earth, even life in faith, each person remained a sinful creature that must necessarily be restrained, controlled and brought to order through temporal government. Christians, insofar as they were Christians, had no need for temporal authority; but as sinful human beings, all people were subject to it to maintain an outward peace.

Luther emphatically argued that neither the spiritual nor temporal government was sufficient in the world without the other: "both must be permitted to remain; the one to produce righteousness, the other to

bring about external peace and prevent evil deeds” (*LW* 45: 92; *WA* 11: 252). The two governments, properly respected, brought the two natures of human beings into harmony, for “at one and the same time,” wrote Luther, “you satisfy God’s kingdom inwardly and the kingdom of the world outwardly” (*LW* 45: 96; *WA* 11: 255). Thus *Temporal Authority* warned that failing to keep the governments separate, or to respect the importance of each, would lead to a spiritual and political crisis.

According to *Temporal Authority*, this was precisely what had happened in the early sixteenth century. Spiritual government had subverted temporal power. Scattered throughout *Temporal Authority* were references to the papacy, and the church hierarchy that he claimed had wrongly assumed command of temporal powers in Germany. But *Temporal Authority* also criticized the secular powers for their encroachment into spiritual affairs. Of course, the banning of Luther’s German New Testament by certain princes was an immediate issue, which had also motivated Luther to pen *Temporal Authority* in the first place (*LW* 45: 83, 112; *WA* 11: 246, 267). But Cochlaeus’s accusation aside, Luther’s objection to this ban was more than a defense of his own translation, and more than a counter-attack to anti-reform princes: he believed that secular authority had wrongly exercised its powers in spiritual government.

## II: RESTORING TEMPORAL AUTHORITY

Luther’s objection was not that the secular government, by its delving into spiritual government, had become too aggrandized. In fact, it was the contrary: Luther believed that secular authority, by exercising spiritual authority which it did not (by God’s own design) rightly have (such as suppressing reform in the church through coercion), was compromising its governance over its own proper matters, while threatening the work of the gospel. Meanwhile the spiritual government was digging into secular powers and bidding the princes to execute spiritual affairs.

For the princes, their erroneous gain of spiritual authority was an affront to the divine gift of temporal government. This gain was in Luther’s view a trespass against the divinely ordered two governments. The consequence of the trespass, he warned, was the wrath of God. For temporal authorities who did not respect the bounds and duties of their offices, Luther wrote (paraphrasing Psalm 107:40) that God would pour contempt upon Germany’s princes. Luther supposed that God’s punishment to wayward secular rulers would come through a serf revolt or through an invasion by

the Turks (*LW* 45: 116; *WA* 11: 270). In Luther's view, there would be no way to avert it, "unless the princes conduct themselves in a princely manner and begin again to rule decently and reasonably" (*LW* 45: 116; *WA* 11: 270).

*Temporal Authority* defined the limits and contours of secular government, and Luther argued these limits would help restore it to its proper place as something divinely ordered and sustained. He defined the jurisdiction of secular government as the "laws which extend no further than to life and property and external affairs on earth" (*LW* 45: 105; *WA* 11: 262). Its foremost duty was to enforce the rule of law and to punish transgressors. Thus for Luther temporal government had the divinely ordained power to use the sword and to execute earthly justice. Moreover, Luther argued, Christians could in faith and good conscience serve the temporal government; for whatever was essential to the fulfillment of government's duties must also be divine service. Thus, "constables, hangmen, jurists, lawyers, and others of similar function," insofar as their tasks and duties upheld temporal authority, were servants of God (*LW* 45: 103; *WA* 11: 260-61).

In limiting temporal government, Luther was liberating it. Having jurisdiction over "body" and "property" alone implied that secular authority could have considerable duties and responsibilities under its control. Against canon law, Luther argued that marriage, all taxation and education ought to be relegated to temporal government's jurisdiction (on marriage, see *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, *LW* 36: 92-106, *WA* 6: 550-60; on taxation, Luther's letter to the Council of the City of Stettin (January 11, 1523), *LW* 49: 25-28, *WA Br* 3: 13-14; on education, *To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools*, *LW* 45: 339-78, *WA* 15: 360-78). Second and more importantly, Luther's idea of temporal authority freed it both conceptually and practically from any submission to the authorities of the church. Its authority and sanction did not depend on the grace of clerics, the approval of bishops or the donation of popes. Its power did not arrive through the mediation of the spiritual regiment. Divine sanction for temporal government, Luther believed, came directly from God without any intermediary, and *Temporal Authority's* "two regiments" was at the crux of the project.

After the mid-1520s, as it matured, Luther's political thought developed strands of a philosophy of law derived from the two regiments of *Temporal Authority*. Throughout his writings for the remainder of his career, Luther often argued that the laws of temporal authority which regulated the outer natures of human beings, and were made manifest in positive laws and

customs, were based upon reason and natural law (Cargill Thompson 1984, 79-90; McNeill 1941; Ehrhardt 1901). This development in Luther was part of a wider intellectual movement within the German Reformation. By the 1530s, Melanchthon and other reformers, by way of the ancient sources, were revisiting the questions of right and natural law. However, Melanchthon's legal philosophy, though in fundamental agreement with Luther's thinking, was much more careful and systematic (Berman 2003, 77-87).

On legal philosophy, Luther's ideas were often piecemeal and sounded reticent, but the reason was the preservation of the two regiments. On the subject of natural law, for example, Luther was cautious and muted. Though his *Commentary on Psalm 101* discussed natural law at length, affirming that positive law was derived from reason and natural law, he also warned that natural law and reason were often used to justify claims to spiritual authority that would undermine both church and secular government.

At present people are beginning to praise natural law and natural reason as the source from which all written law has come and issued. This is true, of course, and the praise is well placed. But the trouble is, everyone likes to think that the natural law is encased in his head. (*LW* 13: 160; *WA* 51: 211-12)

Luther was wary that natural law philosophy could be misunderstood, which would confused the regiments and jeopardize his restorative political project.

Luther's efforts to ground his political restoration in a philosophical theology is most evident in his mature insistence that political authority was a "holy order" instituted by God for the divine governance of creation, alongside the orders of the household and of the church. Gathering together what Luther said about them, one can conclude that these orders have some primordial status, contemporaneous with the creation of the world and the laws that govern it. There was also an immediate polemical purpose: by making government and households holy orders, Luther countered what he believed had been the Church's privileging of its own holy orders, from deacons to popes, seculars to cloistered, as the purest modes of life, most worthy to be called divine service. By insisting that political authority was such a holy order, ordained by God into the very order of creation, Luther could argue that he was restoring government to its rightful place as a divine institution and calling.

Luther's deathbed note, written days before his passing, testified to the importance of seeing political magistracy as a holy order. In it he

not only affirmed all three orders of creation, but the enormously important and difficult task associated with governing each order.

Nobody can understand Vergil in his *Bucolics* and *Georgics* unless he has first been a shepherd or a farmer for five years. Nobody understands Cicero in his letters unless he has been engaged in public affairs of some consequence for twenty years. Let nobody suppose that he has tasted the Holy Scriptures sufficiently unless he has ruled over the churches with the prophets for a hundred years. (*LW* 54: 476; *WA TR* 5: 317-18)

In this brief note, the contrast Luther made between the ecclesial order and the economical and political ones is striking. Understanding the Bible and governing the church required the miraculous: the experience of more than one lifetime and the gifts of grace and humility. However, understanding and governing politics—even though it was a holy order—was possible insofar as human reason was guided (aside from traditional revelation) by divinely tempered philosophy. Hence Luther could cite ancient pagan sources for their political wisdom, because “God willed to give temporal dominion to the heathen or to reason” and gave the world heathen “prophets” like Aristotle who aid in the understanding and preservation of temporal order (*LW* 13: 199; *WA* 51: 243).

Aside from pagan philosophers, Luther argued that the Bible readily affirmed temporal government as a holy order, especially the book of Genesis. Throughout the last decade of his life, Luther lectured on Genesis to his students at Wittenberg. Though long dismissed because of their transmission—they are lecture notes with some editorial interpolations and so are nearly impossible to precisely date—they have recently been considered to be definitive texts of Luther’s thought in general (Oberman 1992, 166-67; see also Maxfield 2008). One of the first of several discussions of temporal government and the three orders is found in Luther’s commentary on the seventh chapter of Genesis, in the midst of the Noah story. Noah’s faith is praiseworthy, Luther argued, because he “adds nothing, changes nothing, and takes nothing away from God’s directive but abides completely by the command he hears” (*LW* 2: 77; *WA* 42: 317). But a common plague throughout the ages and in the contemporary church, Luther argued, had been to alter God’s commands or superimpose something on top of them. Those who alter or superimpose on God’s commands do not respect the origin of them, but rather focus only on the command itself, debating whether it is reasonable, how it can be interpreted, *et cetera*; but Noah obeys the command because it is from God, even when that command—building an ark and

gathering animals for an imminent deluge—seemed unreasonable. According to Luther, Noah obeys God in ways that might be considered to be the most trivial. Yet, Luther argued, it is often in the most trivial things that God wants us to be obedient, including service to political government.

To govern a state, to be a spouse, to rear children—these things the papists regard as something unimportant. And yet experience shows that they are most important attainments, which human wisdom cannot achieve at all; and we see that at times even the most spiritual men have failed shamefully. If, then, we consider Him who gives the command, it will readily become clear that even though God’s commands appear ordinary and trivial, they are nevertheless of the highest order and cannot be carried out or fulfilled by any human being except with divine help. (*LW* 2: 79; *WA* 42: 318)

In his interpretation of subsequent verses, Luther wrote that confusion results from questioning the command, and not only skews the proper understanding of God and the church, but also of all three holy orders. Thus the world need not look for new revelations or complex philosophies and theologies: “let the clergyman teach in the church, let the civil officer govern the state, and let parents rule the home or the household. These human ministries were established by God. Therefore we must make use of them and not look for other revelations” (*LW* 2: 83; *WA* 42: 320-21).

In his lectures on Genesis, the three holy estates are always mentioned in conjunction with a call to restore church and government to their proper spheres. Relating the value of temporal government and the household to the earthy, familial stories of Jacob, Joseph *et al.* in the last part of Genesis, Luther argued that the “papists” and “monks” of his day disregarded the everyday saintliness of the three orders, thereby bringing chaos upon household, principality, and church alike.

But the papists haughtily despise all these things. “What is the Decalog?” they say. “What is faith? All this is common knowledge. I shall choose better and higher things. I shall abstain from the household, the state, and the church. I shall withdraw to a desert place, etc.” (*LW* 7: 311; *WA* 43: 530).

Insisting upon the holiness of temporal authority, Luther argued that its restoration was vital for ensuring the very survival of civilization itself.

Restoring temporal government as a holy order meant battling what Luther perceived to be a “monkish” attitude towards politics. Though he abundantly referred to monks and papists as the enemies of

temporal government in the Genesis commentary, the implications were far broader than the apparent vociferous rebukes to his contemporary papalists and mendicant orders. According to Luther, clerics and laypersons alike, all across the Western Church, still looked to monasticism as the purest calling of the Christian. Though Luther's first concern about this attitude was soteriological, the attacks on monastic privilege were also very political. Political service (alongside marriage and household management), Luther argued, had been relegated to an inferior status of service, hardly at all worthy of the godly man, threatening both salvation (in failing to receive grace) and political order (in failing to understand it as divine service). Yet doing good work in service of the government, Luther argued, was difficult enough for one life in one lifetime; rejecting its divine status was to implicitly say that being a perfect officer of government was easy (*LW* 3: 217; *WA* 43:30). Just as being married (commenting on the marriage of Abraham and Sarah), was a "far severer training in faith, hope, love, patience, and prayer than there is in all the monasteries," so too was service to government a life fraught with crosses to bear (*LW* 4: 21; *WA* 43: 151). Yet such difficulties were for Luther both the clearest sign that the "papist" attitude to temporal authority was dead wrong, and that godly service to government was divinely ordained and vitally necessary for maintaining the fabric of society (*LW* 7: 311; *WA* 43: 530; cf. *LW* 37: 365ff.; *WA* 26: 504ff.).

From its first foundation in *Temporal Authority*, Luther's restorative political thought was soon after called upon to resolve the sundry political problems that accompanied the Reformation in Germany. Thus Luther's political writings after *Temporal Authority*, and up to the end of his career, began to exhibit a more practical tone and were often written for some particular civil matter that the evangelical movement had brought into scrutiny. However, this change did not mean that Luther's political thought ceased to be a restorative political project; rather, through these practical matters his political thought maintained its resolve to restore temporal government to its godly purpose.

### III: REPRESENTING TEMPORAL POWER

One of the first concerns of Luther's restoration of temporal government was to reform the relationship between rulers and subjects. Among scholars, two views on this subject have dominated. On the one hand, primarily based on his early writings, Luther is seen as an advocate of complete obedience and submission to temporal authorities, and thus is labelled as a harbinger of the absolutist state in early modern monarchies (Figgis

1907). On the other hand, Luther's at first reluctant advocacy of armed resistance to imperial forces (post-1530), leads many to argue that Luther's views on obedience to temporal authority were either incoherent, or had undergone a major alteration (see Shoenberger 1979; cf. Wolgast 1977; Edwards 1983, 20-37; Brecht 1990, 369-428; Cargill Thompson 1975, 159-202). Considering Luther's restorative political project, both views are misleading. Luther never advocated absolute submission to temporal authority; he had always maintained that civil authorities had no business ruling over souls and spiritual matters. Thus he could advocate civil disobedience against the ban of his German New Testament, and also himself disobey the Edict of Worms from 1521 to the end of his life. Over his life and career, Luther maintained a strongly consistent view on subjects and their duties (see Whitford 2001).

Writing to both rulers and subjects, and basing himself on the view that temporal government was a divine gift, *A Sincere Admonition by Martin Luther to All Christians to Guard against Insurrection and Rebellion* (1522) made it clear that rebellion against duly instituted temporal authorities was not permissible. Luther's immediate concern in the *Sincere Admonition* was the growing resentment against the church amongst the populace, and the increasing sense that several reformers in his absence had become violent or had begun to encourage open revolt against both church and princely authorities. As in his *Open Letter to the Christian Nobility*, Luther at the time of writing the *Sincere Admonition* believed that princes and nobles would play a central and invaluable role in the reform of the church (*LW* 45: 61; *WA* 8: 679). Furthermore, Luther also argued that the sins of the spiritual authorities had become so bad that the wrath of God was imminent. While the *Sincere Admonition* made clear that subjects were to obey the temporal authorities, in Luther's thinking they were not without some recourse: they could "stir up the authorities to do something and to give commands" (*LW* 45: 61; *WA* 8: 679). Otherwise, their duty remained to obey. Even if the secular authorities were unwilling to act, Luther did not concede it as grounds for insurrection: subjects ought only to acknowledge their own sins, pray against the "papal regime," and let their mouths become the mouths of God's Word (*LW* 45: 65-66; *WA* 8: 681-82).

While *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved* (1526) did not counsel rebellion, armed resistance or insurrection, it did identify an occasion when subjects could disobey temporal authorities. Luther affirmed that the office of a soldier was an institution of secular authority, and thus was divinely ordained to enforce law and promote peace. But the remainder of the

treatise was centered on the justness of war. Luther distinguished between a war against legitimate government (which was always a rebellion), and a war against other powers or principalities. To Luther, it was just to defend against a rebellion but not to engage in one; it was just to wage war in self-defence but not in aggression. The justness of a war hinged on whether it upheld or attacked the divinely ordained secular authority. The soldier was not automatically to assume the justness of the war he was asked to fight, for God was the source of justice, and a war could be an affront to this justice. Thus *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved* allowed for the relinquishing of a soldier's duties if he deemed a war unjust; but insofar as it preserved the divinely ordained temporal authority, a soldier could perform his duties confident that he was fulfilling his earthly duties to God.

A subject could disobey orders that corrupted the gospel, but he could never mount armed resistance to the duly instituted (and thus divinely sanctioned) temporal authority. This appeared to be Luther's unshakeable position, until the Torgau meeting in 1530 when he reluctantly approved of armed resistance against imperial forces. The endorsement was hardly emphatic, and it was not without several complexities. As a pertinent example, Luther had previously considered the relationship between princes and the emperor as one of subjects to ruler; but he changed his view to make princes into political individuals with multiple and sometimes conflicting duties to their superiors (i.e. the emperor), and to divine, natural, and positive law. Luther was well aware that his guarded concession to the armed resistance of the "Lutheran" and "protestant" princes (as they had come to be known) against their Catholic opponents required some sort of public defence, and moreover the princes, notably Landgrave Philip of Hesse, had encouraged him to write one as soon as possible (see *WA Br 5*: 651, 653-55).

Luther's answer to the demand was *Dr. Martin Luther's Warning to His Dear German People* (1531). It was hardly an enormous departure from his previous insistence that armed rebellion was illicit. Throughout the work, Luther argued that rebellion was in no way permissible to Christians lest they imperil their souls (e.g. *LW 47*: 13-14; *WA 30 III*: 278-79). To defend the principalities that allied against the emperor, Luther argued that resisting the imperial forces was not in fact rebellion. His argument was not a semantic ruse. Luther argued that the aggression of imperial forces and allies was illegal. War against the protestant lands contravened divine, natural, and imperial law. For Luther, the most blatant transgression of the imperial side was that the protestant principalities were being persecuted and warred

against without any proper hearing of their positions, without any clear charge of their wrongdoings, and without any authoritative proclamations that their doctrines and actions had violated imperial laws (*LW* 47: 21ff.; *WA* 30 III: 284ff.). For Luther, armed resistance to the imperial forces was much more akin to self-defence than it was to rebellion or insurrection.

Thus Luther maintained that he had been true to his efforts to restore temporal government, despite the appearances of inconsistency over imperial resistance. *Dr. Martin Luther's Warning* was essentially a reiteration of the duties subjects had under temporal authority. A subject was to treat it with the respect that it deserved as an ordained government of God. For Luther, the emphasis on this duty and respect for temporal authority was one of the fruits of the evangelical gospel. To have complied with the pope and emperor would leave the restoration of temporal government at great risk. Luther's warning to the German people against imperial aggression concerned more than the cause of spiritual government; it sought to protect the gains the temporal regiment had made under the reform movement (*LW* 47: 52-53; *WA* 30 III: 317-18).

Luther's restoration of temporal government from its dependence on ecclesial authority brought new responsibilities and duties to rulers. His first extensive treatment of rulers was found in the third section of *Temporal Authority*. It took the form of pastoral advice to princes who wished to be both effective executors of their office and faithful Christians. Citing a proverb, Luther admitted it was addressed to a small audience: "who is not aware that a prince is a rare prize in heaven?" (*LW* 45: 120; *WA* 11: 273). The remainder of the work outlined the ways of the good prince. Luther advised that a Christian prince must give consideration and attention to his subjects and provide what is good and useful to them. He must also guard himself against his counsellors, not trusting in them fully, and he must remain wary of sycophants. He must be just in punishment and in war, defending against force by force, but otherwise secure peace. Finally, he must act in a Christian way towards God.

Undoubtedly for Luther the Christian ruler was the best ruler: he would be most apt to respect his temporal office as a divine gift and would be least likely to corrupt it to his own advantage. Nevertheless, secular authority, no matter whether under a pagan king or Christian saint, would remain a gift of God. Thus, honoring pagan secular authority was also very much part of Luther's restoration of the temporal regiment.

Luther's *Commentary on Psalm 82* (1530) argued that even tyranny was to command honor and respect.

Would God that only faithful men had this office and administered it faithfully and purely, and that it were not abused shamefully and hatefully! Nevertheless, abuse does not destroy the office; the office is true, exactly as temporal rule is a true and good office, even though a knave has it and abuses it. (LW 13: 49; WA 31 I: 196)

Honor was due to temporal authority regardless of who held office; for Luther this principle was rooted in the gospel. Previously, secular authority was subject to popes and clerics; according to Luther, the spiritual authority had usurped the divine ordination of temporal power.

Now, however, the Gospel has come to light. It makes plain distinction between the temporal and the spiritual estate and teaches, besides, that the temporal estate is an ordinance of God which everyone ought to obey and honor. (LW 13: 42; WA 31 I: 190)

This was not to deny that Luther saw wickedness in rulers and subjects alike, and lamented their influence and hoped for the better. But on eradicating sin, worldly government would make no progress, for “the people are too wicked, and the lords dishonor God’s name and Word continually by the shameful abuse of their [lordship]” (LW 13: 72; WA 31 I: 218). Yet this reality did not erase the gift of temporal authority; for Luther, after the ministry of the Word, there remained in this world “no better jewel, no greater treasure, no richer alms, no fairer endowment, no finer possession than a ruler who makes and preserves just laws” (LW 13: 54; WA 31 I: 201).

In his *Commentary on Psalm 101*, Luther wrote that the divine origin of temporal authority knew no bounds of culture or civilization, and could be seen abundantly in the examples of pagan antiquity. At length, Luther discussed God’s work through the great, those whom the ability to govern and to discern natural law and reason allowed to become great statesmen or else great political thinkers. These great people of political wisdom, such as Homer, Cicero, Cyrus, Alexander, Livy, and Aristotle, were to be emulated and/or read for their excellent examples or wise reflections (LW 13: 154-65, 199-201; WA 51: 209-15, 248-50).

For Luther there were two immediate forces which imperilled the reformation of politics. The *Commentary on Psalm 101* revealed them. One threat had been an obvious foe from the beginning. The Church of Rome in Luther’s mind had treated secular authorities with contempt,

usurped their duties and affairs, all the while neglecting the spiritual regiment (*LW* 13: 146; *WA* 51: 201). But the other threat had arisen since the movement to reform began. Radical Anabaptist reformers would also have had the spiritual government rule the temporal; some of these “schismatic spirits” had shunned the gift of temporal authority altogether (*LW* 13: 146-47, 204-5; *WA* 51: 201-2, 246-47).

Against the radical reformers who had denied the need for temporal government (either withdrawing from society or ignoring civil authority), or else sweepingly altered political offices to conform to their doctrines, Luther defended temporal government, often coming to the aid of specific German territories or writing against certain cities that adopted their faith and politics (Brecht 1990, 34-39). Luther combated the tendency of the radicals to spiritualize politics, and thus, alongside the “papists,” to confuse the spiritual and temporal regiments. The radical reformers drew few distinctions between the spiritual and temporal regiments: all things would be governed by what they considered to be the gospel message and the commands of God either through Scripture or direct revelation. For Luther, this spelled the destruction of both church and government; such a mingling of spiritual and temporal authority would imperil souls and unleash disorder in the temporal world.

Luther’s writings on the Peasants’ War of 1525 revealed his objections to the politics of the radical reformers. There were many different causes of the uprising, and it was not without many scattered and piecemeal forerunners in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Yet the primary cause of the 1525 uprising had to do with the abrogation of ancient peasant rights by lords, nobles, and landlords (many of whom were bishops and abbots) who were under increased pressures (financial and otherwise) to centralize their control over their territories (see Blickle 1981; Brecht 1990, 172-94; Grimm 1946, 115-32). In early 1525, a group of peasants from Upper Swabia summarized their demands in the pamphlet *The Fundamental and Proper Chief Articles of All the Peasantry and Those Who Are Oppressed by Spiritual and Temporal Authority*, otherwise more briefly known as the *Twelve Articles*. Overall, the *Twelve Articles* was a fairly moderate document: it affirmed the necessity of government and taxes, rejected outright revolution, based its claims and grievances on Scripture, and called upon theologians and some secular authorities for their judgment (*LW* 46: 8-16). Yet what had begun as a peaceful protest soon became a violent and bloody conflict spreading throughout several regions in Germany and Central Europe (Cameron 1991, 202-9).

The peasants' claim to be acting on gospel principles (sweeping aside any other moral or legal claims), was for Luther the radical reformation's parallel to the same error of the Roman Church: the radical reformers, far from spreading the gospel, were confusing the spiritual and temporal regiments. Luther's *Admonition to Peace, A Reply to the Twelve Articles of Swabia* took up the offer of the *Twelve Articles* to criticize the biblical basis for their grievances. Luther never denied that the peasants were suffering injustices at the hands of temporal authorities; in fact Luther considered the unrest part of God's righteous punishment for the abuse of their authority (*LW* 46: 19; *WA* 18: 293). What Luther did deny, however, was that the peasants had any biblical justification for revolt and rebellion against temporal authority. At the heart of his concern were the continued proclamation of the gospel and the survival of the common good of society. Luther feared that revolt would destroy the temporal regiment and thus imperil the preaching of the Word. The peasants' appropriation of the gospel for their own ends was erroneous and blasphemous, because in the name of God it called for the revolt against the institutions and authorities instituted by God. For Luther, such a contradictory position would only incur God's wrath.

As much as the *Admonition to Peace* had been sternly pastoral, *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants* was violent and reactionary. Yet in both writings Luther remained consistent in a vehement defence of temporal authority and intense opposition to those who challenged it. As Luther had learned from firsthand experience, the revolt had become openly violent and destructive. The peasants had violated their duties to obey secular authorities; they openly instigated rebellion, and most perversely, they were doing so in the name of God (*LW* 46: 49-51; *WA* 18: 357-58). Luther advised the secular authorities to take swift action. He argued that even rulers with reforming sympathies, after prayer and conciliatory efforts, ought in good conscience to unhesitatingly take to the sword, and their subjects to willingly obey them in wielding it (*LW* 46: 52; *WA* 18: 359).

Luther shocked many of his supporters with his harsh language in *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*. The work was considered by many to have encouraged the most heinous cruelty against the peasants by the secular authorities in suppressing and crushing the revolt.

Let whoever can stab, smite, slay. If you die in doing it, good for you!  
A more blessed death can never be yours, for you die while obeying  
the divine word and commandment in Romans 13[:1, 2] and in loving

service of your neighbor, whom you are rescuing from the bonds of hell and of the devil. (*LW* 46: 54-55; *WA* 18: 361)

Hence, soon after it had been published, Luther was compelled to write *An Open Letter on the Harsh Book against the Peasants*, accounting for his infamous rant against the peasant rebellion. Apologetic only as a defence rather than as a regret, *An Open Letter* reiterated what Luther had argued in the earlier works: the peasants had no Christian grounds to rebel and were attacking divinely instituted temporal government. Luther also condemned the bloodlust amongst the secular powers, but again, this was not simply based on general Christian principles. Luther's criticism of the wanton cruelty of the temporal powers in fighting the revolt was firmly based on his view of temporal government as divinely instituted. Unequivocally, abuse of the temporal office was sin, and that sin challenged the divine source of temporal authority. But the greater challenge still came from the peasants. Their desire for mercy after defeat was self-serving and unchristian: they mercilessly attacked and killed temporal authorities, and now demanded mercy and clemency from the very princes they sought to destroy (*LW* 46: 70; *WA* 18: 391). For Luther, these radical reformers sought to rule the world by the gospel via the sword, a plot that could only corrode the Word and subvert the gift of temporal government.

#### CONCLUSION

Luther's impetus for his political project was the same as it had been for his purification of the church: both church and temporal government had become unmoored from their divine missions and purposes. In the political realm, Luther argued that the usurpation of political powers by ecclesial authority, particularly the papacy, had rendered temporal government ineffective and far from its essential mission of maintaining order in this life. Throughout his career as a church reformer, despite apparent inconsistencies in his political views, Luther aimed at restoring honor to temporal government and delimiting its legitimate sphere of authority. From his early studies on Paul to his late commentaries on the Psalms and Old Testament prophets, from his early attacks on the abuses of the Church and the paradoxical freedoms of a Christian to his late polemics against the "papists" and the radical reformers, Luther defended a political theory that he believed restored temporal government to its high, divine purpose against what he perceived to be the gross abuses and neglect of his age.

Thus Luther's political thought was founded on a theology without being a theocracy (such a political system would be anathema to the German reformer). Unlike his "papist" opponents, temporal government was for Luther far from being an authoritarian arm of the church. But neither did Luther's political theory advocate any utopian politics by transforming the world into the kingdom of heaven through temporal government; for Luther this was the sin of the Anabaptists and radical reformers. In contemporary terms (anachronisms aside), Luther's restoration of temporal government would stand apart from all sorts of present-day political movements based in faith, including the "Christian Right," or Liberation Theology. For Luther, any political movement that failed to truly respect temporal authority as a divine gift, independent of but complementary to the church, would surely come to a disastrous end.

Luther's boast, while certainly hyperbolic, was based on what he believed he had done for sixteenth-century political theory: he had restored the divine purpose of government by bringing to light the political implications of his theology against the corruptions he perceived in his day. This was a task closely wedded to his theological stance and the reform of the church. For Luther, there was no contradiction in affirming the justification of humanity by faith alone and affirming the divine gift and necessity of temporal government on earth. Thus Luther aimed straight at resolving the crisis of the age by preaching a theology of justification from which he believed the church and her authorities had disastrously strayed, all the while buttressing a restoration of temporal government. Therefore Luther could claim that no one since the apostles—or perhaps St. Augustine—had praised temporal government as much as he.

#### ADDENDA

1. J. W. Allen, for example, charged that Luther's political ideas were "gravely misunderstood and his influence on political thought has been both misrepresented and very grossly exaggerated" (Allen 1928, 15). Allen's criticism was directed at J. N. Figgis, who had argued that Luther had exalted the secular state and was a father of early modern absolutism (Figgis 1907). Seminal works of social science such as R. H. Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* were as harsh as Allen's; on Luther's views on "social morality," Tawney argued "it is idle to scan them for coherent and consistent doctrine" (Tawney 1947, 79-80).

2. Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch inspired much Luther scholarship with provocative studies on the relationship between modern civilization and Protestantism in, respectively, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and *Protestantism and Progress* (the German title of Troeltsch's work translates as "the significance of the Reformation for the development of modern civilization"). Troeltsch's *The Social Teaching of Christianity* stirred controversy by linking Luther to absolutist states and the glorification of authority (Troeltsch 1992); this charge would be repeated decades later in the aftermath of German fascism and the Second World War. Karl Holl helped launch the "Luther renaissance" alongside two other towering German theologians, Karl Barth and Paul Althaus, leading members of warring theological schools in Weimar Germany (Holl 1932; Stayer 2000). For a recent reassessment of authoritarianism in German history and Luther's place in it, see Blickle (1997).

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## Tocqueville on Human Nature and Natural Right

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Tocqueville's account of American democracy makes no use of what might be thought one of its philosophical foundations, the theory of natural rights based on an interpretation of abstract and universal human nature. Yet at the same time he offers some important analysis of rights, natural right, and human nature. My paper is an exploration of these omissions and inclusions.

To be sure, the omission of natural rights doctrine does not mean hostility to the idea of individual rights as such. Tocqueville emphasizes the importance of the "idea of rights." He calls it a "beautiful" idea (DA 237), while also noting that it is exceedingly useful for democrats, because it elevates the "interests" which so predominate in the human heart (DA 239). Yet he omits to describe the idea of rights as a truth, or to link it to the theoretical arguments that formed a common thread among eighteenth-century proponents of democracy and opponents of monarchy. That Tocqueville was familiar with the theory of natural rights, and took a critical view of it, became clearer from his later remarks about the difficulty caused by abstract ideas when turned into a basis for political action in the era of the French Revolution (OR I.2, 97, and III.8, 242; see Addendum 1). Even in *Democracy in America*, however, he makes a point of stressing the limitations of "general ideas" and "abstract words" (DA 481), arguing that an "abundance of abstract terms" both "widens the scope of thought and clouds it" (DA 482). With others among the liberals in the French post-revolutionary era, Tocqueville's ideas turned toward "quasi-historical, comparative constructs" (Kelly 1992, 55) and toward a liberalism less bound to strict contract theory (Manent 1994, 80-83). (See Addendum 2.)

Yet if the absence of strict natural rights theory is notable, it is equally important to notice the lack of any attempt at a comprehensive theory intended to replace it, such as a ‘philosophy of history’ or a relativizing critique of abstract or general principles altogether. To be sure, Tocqueville cannot at all be thought oblivious to history. With some of the French liberals, he sought a return to the methods of Montesquieu and a way to adapt them to the understanding of social change (Siedentop 1994, 24-25). But he never proceeds down the path proposed by Hegel or Marx (see Addendum 3). Neither a theory of natural rights, nor a theory of history: does Tocqueville then lack altogether a framework for making his observations more generally intelligible than as a study of single cases? In particular, is he unaware of the power of the distinction between the natural and the conventional to illuminate important aspects of political life? (See Addendum 4.)

If *Democracy* first strikes us by the absence of natural rights theory, on a closer look it does appear that Tocqueville has something to teach his readers about both “natural right” and “human nature.” His comments are not systematically ordered, and they do not mount explicitly to the level of a ‘theory’; in this sense he anticipates what happened to reflection on these matters in the next century. But we ought not to conclude that he is unconcerned with the topic. To the contrary, the somewhat fragmentary character of his observations reflects an awareness, perhaps not fully articulate in terms of principle, of the new difficulties set for modern natural rights theory by the experiences of the revolutionary and post-revolutionary era in Europe and by the emergence of American democracy. That he offers comments of this kind at all, however, may well remind us how unavoidable are the paths leading a meticulous observer to draw distinctions between what is on the one hand ordinary, conventional, and historical and, on the other hand, what belongs to another category, the natural.

In the following, I will concentrate on three parts of his argument. First, in an early discussion of the role of law and the courts in American democracy, we find the term “natural right” linked to some observations about the higher law and its force for judicial and political authorities. Second, in later parts of *Democracy*, Tocqueville comments on tendencies of “human nature” that are very difficult to override or suppress and argues that democracies and aristocracies ignore them at their considerable peril. Finally, in his late *Old Regime and the Revolution*, he provides a brief but illuminating summary of his objections to the framework advanced by the intellectual forefathers of the French Revolution.

## THE JUDICIARY AND 'NATURAL RIGHT'

The first significant discussion of natural right occurs in a chapter on the American judiciary positioned between the analysis of colonial democracy and the analysis of the national constitution. The former concludes by pointing out an unusual combination of free self-government and unified central authority in the *pre*-constitutional era. The argument builds up to a contrast between the colonial situation and the orientation found in France, both the France of the old regime and the France of the revolutionary age. While the contrast initially works to the disfavor of the French, it suggests a deeper question about the locus of final authority, a question forcing Tocqueville to examine the tensions between legal and political judgment across several different regimes.

Tocqueville's analysis of pre-constitutional American democracy follows this path: it begins with pristine nature (the physical and geographical setting), moves to analysis of the heritage the settlers brought with them (British, Protestant), and concludes with an account of the emergence of democracy within the colonial communes (towns) and in the early period of development of the states (see Addendum 5). The commune is a form of associational life which had continued to exist in France until the onset of the modern era, when it was gradually emasculated by the institutions of a centralizing national state. But this form of local political organization was reborn in the earliest years of the settlement of North America, where the hand of government was minimal and people assembled themselves into self-governing communes. Tocqueville holds that there is nothing more natural than the impulse to associate (DA 193), and the commune seems to be the political form closest to that original natural impulse. The example of the North American communes demonstrates that a more natural republicanism all but extinguished in Europe could be reborn under the right conditions (DA 395-400). Yet over the communes is a unified colonial or state government empowered to legislate for all of them, if not authorized to administer their affairs directly (see Addendum 6). The structure made conflict quite likely. It is perhaps the frequency of such conflicts that stimulated the legal system to flourish.

Tocqueville examines the law and the courts in chapters 6-7 of Volume I, Part 1. These two chapters occupy a somewhat anomalous place in the first volume of *Democracy*. They follow a discussion of the local democracies, and precede a lengthy treatment of the national government and the federal constitution. The chapters seem out of place because they take

up aspects of the national government that appear to be *consequences* of the Constitution before the Constitution itself is discussed. Yet they are perhaps not out of order if we consider them in this light: they represent Tocqueville's attempt to explain more carefully the meaning of the singular unification of government which he attributes to the democracies of the new world. The chapters pursue the question: what is the highest authority at the center of the new democracy? Is it law? Or politics? Their placement suggests the answer was prepared in advance of the founding and forms a premise on which constitutional authority is built. The consequences for the judiciary are significant.

#### JUDICIAL REASONING IN CONSTITUTIONAL GOVERNMENTS

The first of these chapters is entitled: "Judicial Power in the United States and Its Effect on Political Society" ("Du pouvoir judiciaire aux États-unis et de son action sur la société politique"; DA I.1.6). The second concerns the political jurisdiction of the legislative body ("Du jugement politique"; DA I.1.7). Referring to the national judiciary, Tocqueville shows that its role presupposes a novel understanding of the law, a novelty by comparison with France and Great Britain specifically.

In America "judicial authority [is] invoked in almost every political context." Yet at the same time the American judiciary does not seem to Tocqueville to be partisan in its actions nor an object of partisan attack. To the contrary, it looks as if the national judiciary "preserved all the usually accepted characteristics of judicial authority" and "limited its sphere of action in the normal way."

The features of a judicial system that make it a legal entity rather than a political one are threefold. A judiciary in the proper sense must: (1) arbitrate when presented with a dispute over rights brought forward in a particular case by the parties concerned; (2) pronounce not on general principles but on particular cases (which, to be sure, may have implications that affect general principles, but the starting point must remain the specific case at hand); and (3) act only when "seized" of a matter in a case initiated by others, for there is "nothing naturally active about judicial power." These features belong to legal systems in general. As long as a judge stays within these boundaries, then the "natural sphere of his authority" is maintained; to pronounce directly on a "general principle" when no specific case is involved is to exceed "the sphere to which all peoples have agreed" to limit judicial power.

The judiciary may not properly “prosecute criminals, seek out injustices, or investigate facts” without doing “violence to its passive nature” (DA 100). If there is an inherent order to the operations of a legal system, it is apparently found in these structural limitations which “all peoples” understand.

Yet the American courts are given the novel authority to “base their decisions on the *Constitution* rather than on the *laws*” (DA 100-101, Tocqueville’s emphasis). Such an authority has been claimed elsewhere, but not conceded in actual fact, whereas in the United States “one finds neither party nor individual who contests it” (DA 101).

To be sure, the Constitution is “the primary law” and therefore “it is in a way the *natural right* of a judge to choose among legal provisions that which binds him most strictly” (DA 102; OC I.1, 102; my emphasis). This formulation perhaps means that the judge needs no specific rule in order to understand that judging requires choice among laws or to know that the more binding should be preferred to the less. In a formal sense, the action of the American judiciary continues to be legal in character: subordinate to the most binding law and in that way following the obvious norm of any legal system. In that sense, the “natural right” of the judge rests neither on a specific command of the Constitution nor on an obligation to an extra-constitutional principle relevant to all human beings. Rather, the obligation is to the very logic of law, a logic requiring that in one’s capacity as a judge one order the legal provisions to which one responds in terms of more and less binding and adhere to the former. Yet in its own way, the principle is abstract and universal. “All peoples,” Tocqueville asserts, understand the idea of a legal system and its proper sphere; all understand the idea of the judge who decides according to the law, without violating the “passive nature” required by this procedure. Whatever the empirical validity of this claim, Tocqueville here associates “natural right” with a norm derived from the idea of law followed to its logical conclusion. If judges are bound to decide according to the law, then they are bound to decide according to the law which binds them most completely. This is the logic of the judicial role, only disrupted when other considerations, especially political considerations, come into play.

On the other hand, Tocqueville has previously explained that the primary law in America emerged in the revolutionary era and *precedes* the Constitution. The Constitution is derived from the real “law of laws” in America, which is, he argues, popular sovereignty (DA 59, 397). The Constitution, in Tocqueville’s view, “represents the *will* of the whole people...

and can be changed by the *will* of the people...” (DA 101, my emphasis; Tocqueville’s term is “*volonté*”).

Tocqueville sheds some light on the effects of this authority by comparing two other methods for configuring the role of the judiciary and the relation between law and politics. In France, the Constitution is “supposed” to be immutable and the “first of laws”; “theory” leads to this conclusion. A difficulty with the French method is explained in a note which Tocqueville appended to this section (DA 724-25; OC I.1, 448-49). The “most important of all laws, that which regulates succession to the throne” lies at the basis of a monarchy built on “the natural order of succession from father to son” (DA 724). Yet the events of the revolutionary era and of 1830 show both monarchs and rebels altering the rule of hereditary succession to transfer the right to rule to another family, after which they declare the rule “perpetual” (DA 724). The act itself undermines the principle of heredity on which the monarchy stands. If the French judges were to act upon their natural right to take the Constitution as the grounds for decision, presumably returning authority to the original hereditary family, they would contravene another right, “the right of society in whose name they act. In this case ordinary reason must give way to reasons of state.” The calculation of what is to the advantage of the state, “*raison d’état*,” an eminently political act, takes precedence over the element of law in the actual French regime. The judges have a right to consult the fundamental law, but cannot act on it without infringing on a “right more sacred than their own” (DA 102). While the law may be said to be immutable, it is subordinated to political judgments made extra-judicially, because France evidently finds its most sacred right enshrined not in a Constitution but in the choices made for “reasons of state” in defiance of a Constitution otherwise proclaimed immutable.

In Great Britain, on the other hand, “Parliament has the right to modify the Constitution.” The Constitution “does not exist at all. Parliament, besides being the legislative body, is also the constituent one” (DA 101). It is empowered to do anything that is “not naturally impossible,” Tocqueville reports, citing Blackstone (DA 725). Given that premise, then the judiciary could not be authorized to pronounce a law unconstitutional, since any law duly passed by Parliament is by definition constitutional. In that sense, the Constitution cannot be said to exist in a sense independent of the ordinary course of legislation.

Now if “natural right” is found in the right of a judge to choose the law which binds him most fully, then we see several alternatives

in the examples which Tocqueville cites. The Constitution in France is proclaimed to be immutable, but the judge lacks authority to act according to it and therefore what is said to be immutable and higher is not effectively enforced through legal processes. In practice, “reason of state” prevails. In Great Britain, the judge is in effect bound by the legislature, and therefore there is no law higher than the decision of Parliament. The American case, on the other hand, illustrates a third possibility. The Constitution is the higher law, and therefore the judiciary acts by the “natural right” inherent in the logic of law when it claims to be bound by the Constitution more than by the ordinary legislative enactments. Yet the Constitution is not in fact immutable law but an expression of popular will. The people can alter it, as everyone recognizes. In this sense, the Constitution represents a fundamental political decision of the people and recognizes the right of the people to change their mind. The judges can interpret and enforce the Constitution understood to be the work of the people. Their views do not pretend to interpret an immutable rule. The “law” which they serve is incorporated in the choices made by the sovereign people, whose right the judiciary does not contest. Natural right as a judicial obligation to the highest law comes into union with the principle of popular sovereignty. The judiciary, Tocqueville notes, does not then become the constitution-making power, in the way that the French seemed to fear (DA 102), but an agent of the popular power. So “on this point politics and logic agree, and both the people and the judges can keep their proper privileges” (DA 102). The uncontested character of judicial authority in the United States is in this sense a corollary of an even more uncontested theme: popular sovereignty, the real “law of laws” of this society (DA 58-60; see Addendum 7).

To be sure, the connection between the judiciary and the popular will may very well work in two directions. The judiciary’s authority is subordinate to the popular will. On the other hand, in interpreting the popular will as expressed in the Constitution, a door opens for the judges to play a statesmanlike role, adjusting and adapting quite general constitutional imperatives in light of an understanding of the broader purposes at stake (see Addendum 8). Tocqueville recommends such a strategy rather explicitly (DA 150). But what concerns ought to guide this statesmanship? In his thematic discussion, he emphasizes the theory of federalism rather than individual natural rights theory. Judicial statesmanship must regulate and sustain the appropriate division of authority between the states and the national government. The objective is the preservation of national unity and constitutional authority (DA 147). Statesmanlike judges must, to be sure, cultivate a certain

amount of indirection when they rule on issues threatening to disrupt the union. They confront risks by challenging popular sovereignty too explicitly at either the state or the national level (DA 148-49). They will need to preserve a deep familiarity with the “spirit of the age,” i.e., the political temper of the times, in order to blend their judicial and their political prerogatives effectively (DA 150).

#### ON HUMAN NATURE AND DEMOCRACY

The resort to the term “natural right” in accounting for the judiciary indicates a certain familiarity with a concept of great importance but also a rather restricted sense of the place for natural right.

But we find the term “nature” occurring in other contexts throughout *Democracy in America*, sometimes used in what seems a rather casual fashion, but at other points characterizing apparently permanent features of human conduct freighted with political and moral significance. Some of the most interesting examples follow:

*Equality and inequality.* “One can conceive of nothing more contrary to nature and to the secret instincts of the human heart than subjection” to a body of citizens permanently stationed above the rest, one “with which the people are in daily contact but with which they can never mingle.” Tocqueville continues: “An aristocracy cannot last unless it is founded on an accepted principle of inequality, legalized in advance, and introduced into the family as well as into the rest of society—all things so violently repugnant to natural equity that only constraint will make men submit to them” (DA 399; OC I.1, 417). But on the other hand there are natural inequalities of ability or talent that are “very great” (DA 456-57; OC I.2, 44). “Intellectual inequalities come directly from God, and man cannot prevent them existing always” (DA 56).

*Association.* “After the freedom to act alone, the most natural to man is that of combining his efforts with the efforts of those like him and acting in common” (DA I.2.4; see Addendum 9). Moreover, “Democracy loosens social ties, but it tightens natural ones” (DA 589; OC I.2, 205).

*Self-interest.* Personal interest is “the only stable point in the human heart” (DA 239, cf. 433; OC I.1, 249), a point not explicitly tied to an observation about human nature but suggesting a fixed center holding steady even in times of deep change in beliefs, mores, and morality. At the same time, there are “feelings” that are natural to man or “rooted in nature itself,” including but perhaps not limited to “filial love and fraternal affection” (DA 589; OC I.2, 205).

*Religion.* Religion is a particular form of hope and “it is as natural to the human heart as hope itself” (DA 296; OC I.1, 310). (Tocqueville observes in *The Old Regime* that “To believe that democratic societies are naturally hostile to religion is to commit a great mistake” [OR I. 2, 97].)

*Behavior.* There is a “natural demeanor” in the conduct of American public officials, in contrast to those in France; “American officials blend with the mass of citizens; they have neither palaces nor guards nor uniforms” (DA 203; OC I.1, 210). Similarly, “Democracy...destroys or obscures almost all social conventions and...makes it harder to establish new ones” (DA 589; OC I.2, 205).

Other observations refer less to what is natural in the sense of original or universal, belonging to human beings apart from social conditions, than to features of personal or group life that emerge when society is fully developed, or in some cases simply when it is unchecked by constraints. One should understand in this sense some other important references to what is “natural” to democracy:

1. The social revolution toward equality reaches almost to its “natural limits” in America; it has come to its “fullest and most peaceful completion,” so that one can see “its natural consequences clearly...” (DA 18; OC I.1, 11-12).
2. There is a “natural link,” even in modern democracy, between opinions and tastes, acts, and beliefs, as one sees by contrast with partisans in the political struggles of France who are “driven beyond the natural limits” of their views toward more extreme positions (DA 16; OC I.1, 9).
3. Instability and agitation are “natural elements” of a democratic republic (DA 298; OC I.1, 312).
4. In the aristocratic societies of the past, “secondary bodies” formed “natural associations,” non-governmental groups cohering on the basis of clan, caste, or locale (DA 192; OC I.1, 197-98). Further, in the United States the “sovereignty of the Union is a work of art. That of the states is natural...” (DA 167; OC I.1, 171).
5. In small societies, “freedom is the natural condition,” because “government there offers too little attraction to ambition” and “it is not difficult for the governed to unite and by common effort overthrow both tyrant and tyranny” (DA 159; OC I.1, 162).
6. Democracies encourage many more to engage in the study of science than do aristocracies, and tend to point such students toward “the immediate practical applications of science” rather than toward

abstract truths. “This tendency is both natural and inevitable” (DA 463; OC I.2, 51).

7. On intellectual matters, a “taste for the pleasures of the mind [plaisirs de l’esprit], moreover, is so natural to the heart of civilized man...” that even in a society not particularly inclined to science, literature, or the arts, there will be “always a certain number of people who take to them” (DA 455; OC I.2, 42).

8. When democracy advances, its advocates lose the spirit of independence animating the struggle against the old aristocracies, and, as “the triumph of equality becomes more complete,” they gradually yield “to the instincts natural to that condition, strengthening and centralizing the power of society” (DA 689; OC I.2, 320).

What is described as “natural” functions in these various statements in two main modes. On the one hand, Tocqueville sees natural inclinations that appear very difficult to eradicate and that will likely be expressed in one form or another in public life. Human beings naturally wish to associate and act together; they find equality more acceptable than inequalities structured around class; they hope and therefore they believe; they prefer their interests; and they exhibit important inequalities in ability and taste. These inclinations are treated respectfully, and the statesman, Tocqueville claims, has good reason to protect them. On the other hand, the natural refers to the completion of an endeavor in some way that makes it full and coherent, as in the project of democracy reaching its natural limit. But what exactly is that “natural limit”? Is it the total domination of the life of a society by the democratic principle to the exclusion of all else? Or is there a “limit” that marks a border between the point where the full development is healthy and the point where it turns into something more akin to a cancer, growing but damaging the tissue in which its growth occurs?

In a significant example considered in the second volume of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville discusses two modes by which people might be linked together. Aristocracies divide people into castes; members of distinct castes can “hardly manage to think of themselves as forming part of the same humanity.” Between castes there is generally no sympathy and little mutual understanding. Yet a nobleman who has “no natural interest” in the serfs, or a serf who has “no natural interest” in the nobility, might nevertheless feel an interest in the welfare of his own serfs or his own lord. “It is clear that such obligations do not spring from natural right [du droit naturel] but from political right [du droit politique], and that society obtains what humanity by itself would not win. It was not to the man that one felt

bound to render assistance, it was to the vassal or to the lord. Feudal institutions made people very sensible to the sufferings of certain men but not at all to the miseries of the human race” (DA 561-62; OC I.2, 171-72). Natural right then refers in these comments to what originates in the common status of human beings sharing a similar nature. The recognition of a natural common humanity is defeated by the caste structure of feudal society. But feudal society has two tendencies. On the one hand, it maintains political right over against natural right by maintaining an unnatural system of caste distinctions. On the other hand, it permits or even fosters a modest bond between a particular lord and a particular vassal, although that bond does not extend generally to a class as a whole, to all lords or all vassals. A certain weakness of natural right and a certain strength of political right are displayed in this account (see Addendum 10).

Tocqueville links natural right more strongly with “humanity” before or apart from its division into political bodies or social ranks (see Addendum 11). A sense of natural right tends to emphasize what is universal and egalitarian. It has been weaker than the political right established through the conventions of a given society; those conventions tend to override or obscure natural right in its universal and egalitarian sense. Yet an awareness of common humanity lies close to the political principle of equality on which democracy relies. Democracy turns toward natural right in preference to the artificial structures of the old regimes. Nevertheless, even the modern democratic orientation toward awareness of a common humanity cannot always prevent the political right that creates division between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ between citizens and aliens or outsiders (slaves, aboriginal populations, non-citizens, foreigners), or sometimes even between distinct castes or classes. Moreover, within political democracy, the awareness of common humanity lends support to attractive and unattractive features of the regime. Insofar as democracy establishes equality, it builds on a natural sense of right and gains from that foundation. On the other hand, the natural sense of common humanity also supports the preference for an internal uniformity and sameness that threatens to corrupt democracy. While there is, to be sure, a “natural taste for liberty,” the “passion for equality is ardent, insatiable, eternal, and invincible.” Democrats “want equality in freedom” but will tolerate oppressive rule in order to achieve it or protect it, because they will “not endure aristocracy” (DA 506; OC I.2, 104). In this sense, therefore, the common humanity shared by all could threaten to become the exclusive principle of public life, suppressing the taste for liberty or the effects of natural differences of inclination and capacity that distinguish some from others.

Democracy, like other forms of political society, has what Tocqueville calls a “natural tendency” in a certain direction, in this case toward affirmation of equality and toward the “tastes and beliefs” compatible with it (DA 543; OC I.2, 150). As a general matter, the practitioner of the “art of legislation” needs to know when to encourage, and when to resist, the “natural tendency” of a given society. The artful legislator in a democracy must know how to “propagate” the tastes that offset the one-sided preference for equality; these are, among others, a “taste for the infinite, an appreciation of greatness, and a love of spiritual pleasures” (DA 543; OC I.2, 151). The “natural tendency” of democracy arises from a sense of common humanity, but as a political form it can acquire an intensity that invites a corrective response. From this point of view, the case for the political formation of right appears to have its uses. Political right must look to encourage features distinguishing rather than homogenizing human beings. These features, unequally distributed, require and deserve political support to the extent that they capture forms of human excellence otherwise too easily neglected in a democratic age.

Perhaps most immediately useful for this role is the associative tendency, which is itself among the most natural tendencies in mankind (DA 193; OC I.1, 198). The tendency to associate led originally to those small societies where freedom is most at home. Political right could negate natural right (as in the feudal class structure) but political right might be built up alternatively from the natural tendency to associate in families, clans, villages, communes, and civil and political groups for the purposes of common action. The functional possibilities of associations will depend heavily on the specific configuration given to the political order. Some societies are far more friendly to the freedom of association than others and far more likely to use associations for constructive purposes (see Addendum 12). Democracies, Tocqueville believes, may benefit profoundly from permitting associational opportunities, for doing so allows the natural right expressed in recognition of common humanity to be interwoven with the natural tendency expressed in freedom to associate with others for common purposes. In the best case, the mixture is supplemented by a statesmanship encouraging the qualities that are less common.

Tocqueville notes a wide range of features of human nature. Within the range, he does not see that human nature directs us unequivocally toward a high quality of political life with the same clarity with which it directs us toward a minimal sense of equality. Feudal structures largely overrode that awareness of equality in the past. In the new democratic era,

the awareness of natural equality comes much more fully into its own. The other important features of human nature, from the impulse to “associate” to the striving for the rare spiritual pleasures, can be accorded more scope for expression or less, according to the circumstances fashioned by tradition, by events, or by the efforts of statesmen and lawgivers. The story of these wider circumstances is the theme of the political history that interests Tocqueville. In Europe since the high middle ages, the struggle between the aristocratic order and the emerging democratic order shows that the sense of natural equality, however thin in past times, has slowly reasserted itself as an element within political right.

#### ON THE INFLUENCE OF ABSTRACT AND GENERAL IDEAS

In his late work *The Old Regime and the Revolution* (1856), Tocqueville commented on the influence exerted in France by the doctrines of the eighteenth century. These abstract doctrines encouraged some to presume that the past could be eradicated and the ground prepared for a new start, as if a society with centuries of history behind it could be treated like a slate to be wiped clean (see Addendum 13). The doctrines, he held, are “not only causes of the French Revolution, they are its substance”; and, he continues, they are “the most fundamental of its works, the most lasting, and in the long run the most valid.” By these doctrines, he means “the natural equality of men, the abolition of caste, class, and professional privileges, and in consequence of this the sovereignty of the people, the omnipotence of the social power, and uniformity of rules” (OR I.2, 96).

In the first volume of *Democracy in America* (1835) such doctrines are not treated as causes, even though American society practices much of what they require (see Addendum 14). Tocqueville’s study of American democracy’s origins apparently convinced him that the colonial democracies were shaped more by certain kinds of experience than by explicit theory, and so they were not inclined to the extreme practices that marred the revolutionary era in France. The settlers inherited British governing practices and Protestant mores and beliefs. With fortunate circumstances in support, they were able to experiment and refine this inheritance, deleting what failed to work and freely elaborating what suited their purposes and opportunities. Furthermore, when Tocqueville speculates about what will sustain the democracy for the future, he attributes more influence to the “mores” than to the laws. In other words the informal habits, beliefs, and practices are more influential than the commands that might be prescribed by theory to be

given explicit legal form. To the extent that he perceived strength and durability in American democracy, he thought they had much to do with its roots in practical experience and with tendencies allowing the effective shaping of practice in the future. The result was that equality of conditions, the abolition of caste (at least among those accepted into the citizen body), the sovereignty of the people, the influence of the social power, the uniformity of rules—all this emerged ‘naturally,’ we might say, rather than as an imposition from above. Yet ‘naturally’ in this expression has less to do with conceptual clarity than with the consequences of the gradual self-organization of a community of free citizens working from a particular set of circumstances and premises.

Indeed, it may have been these observations in America that awakened Tocqueville to reflect more than his countrymen on the difficulty posed by abstractions or by “general ideas.” For persons of his class and generation, skepticism about the influence of abstract theory seemed inevitable. But where might this skepticism lead? In *The Old Regime* he expressed his mistrust not only for the abstract theorizing of the Enlightenment but also for Burke’s proposed antidote for radical theory, the argument for the unqualified benefits of “tradition” (OR I.5, 106-7). Yet he had already begun to articulate the difficulties with such positions at a much earlier stage in the evolution of his thought. Two chapters written for the 1840 second volume of *Democracy in America* (DA II.1.3-4) describe the difficulties created by the modern attraction to general ideas, perhaps capturing something that his observation of real democrats had taught him to discern. General ideas have their uses, but they also systematically mislead. They are a kind of shorthand, always inexact, sacrificing precision in order “to permit human minds to pass judgment quickly on a great number of things” by establishing broad categories so busy people can get by without the exhaustive study of “particular cases” (DA 440). Democrats in particular need to rely on general ideas, for they need to conceive that all people are generally alike. For democrats, it “becomes an ardent and often blind passion of the human spirit to discover common rules for everything...” (DA 439). Tocqueville’s own study of course makes use of general ideas—for what else are the concepts “democracy” or “equality of conditions”?—but he integrates them fully with a meticulous attentiveness to actual practice. He attends with particular care to the distinction between those ideas which arise out of the engagement of free citizens in the government of their own affairs and the ideas promulgated by those deprived of political experience. Those who resort to abstract theory as an imaginative substitute for real political life may paint glorious pictures of utopia, but the literature they produce has become exceptionally harmful

when carried over into programs of public action. Tocqueville's resistance to the strict theory of natural rights, then, arises primarily from a sensitive grasp of the manner in which experience and thought interplay in the actual development of peoples. But this same realism also brings him to capture the multifaceted lessons conveyed by the careful observation of human nature and turn them to political account.

#### ADDENDA

1. In Tocqueville's rough notes for a projected but not completed second volume of *The Old Regime*, he draws specific attention to the role of abstract rights doctrine in the politics of the Convention. Describing the debates of 1789, he notes the declining influence of Montesquieu's thought and the new reliance on "natural law, the rights of man, and pure metaphysics with regard to government" and "speeches written like treatises of abstract philosophy" (OR, II, 57, 82-83, 148). Tocqueville did, however, link the modern and democratic idea of liberty with a right received from nature in an essay from 1836, but he distanced himself from adopting this view as his own (Kelly 1992, 61-62). Manent provides a searching account of Tocqueville's understanding of freedom (1996, ch. 9).

2. The links between Tocqueville and French liberals on other issues are examined by Siedentop (1994, ch. 2), Drolet (2003), and Kelly (1992). Zuckert argues that Tocqueville's political science oriented toward the social state was meant as an alternative to "the political science of human nature and natural rights" as developed by "Hobbes, Locke, and Jefferson" (1993, 8); similarly Winthrop, if for somewhat different reasons (1993, 215-16).

3. Wolin provides an overview of the relationship between theory and history in the context of the eighteenth century and after (2001, 50-56). Mansfield and Winthrop observe that Tocqueville joins other nineteenth-century liberals in turning "to history and away from human nature" (2000, xxvi-xxvii), and consequently he ignores the idea of an abstract and non-historical state of nature. While Tocqueville joins those who "protest" against such abstractions, he does not take the additional step of seeking to refute them through defending a principle of inevitable historical progress nor by proposing the historical relativizing of ideas. What he does advocate, by example more directly than by argument, is a maximum of concrete observation, a vital guide insufficiently developed in his own day as in ours. Pangle stresses the "circumspection" which Montesquieu taught and the French liberals adopted concerning the application of abstract norms (1990,

36-37). Hadari overstates an otherwise interesting argument in claiming that Tocqueville “assumed a thoroughly historicist attitude” (1989, 115-16). Furet and Mélonio note Tocqueville’s hostility to Hegelian thought on both the left and the right (1998, 71).

4. Ceaser (1985) and Mayer (1960, 111ff.) argue that Tocqueville’s “point of departure” began from an awareness of, and disagreement with, two contending intellectual movements in Europe, rationalism and traditionalism. Ceaser portrays a Tocqueville who begins from an awareness of intellectual orientations that need correction. Worth considering is the possibility that the careful observation of a democracy in actual practice first exposed the inadequacy of those orientations and shaped the search for a more adequate approach.

5. Schleifer notes that Tocqueville may have been initially inclined to treat *géographie* or the *situation physique* as “the primary force in the shaping of American society,” but he soon abandoned this view. Schleifer concludes that Tocqueville’s reflections on American society led him to develop a “distaste for materialistic doctrines” and to discover the importance of “beliefs about man’s dignity, freedom, and responsibility” (1980, 48, 60-61, 72).

6. By stressing the unity of government, I believe Tocqueville alludes to the fact that the European monarchies always found themselves confronted by an opposing power with significant claims on the obedience of the citizens. That power could very well be the church, but it also could be the hereditary nobility or perhaps the deeply-rooted traditional privileges of various secondary institutions (towns, corporations, provinces, guilds, estates, and so forth). As a consequence, authority was more divided or contestable than it appeared to be at first glance. Opposition to this very fact is the theme of the European “partisans of centralization” to whom he refers in this context (DA 87-90, 396-97). The colonial democracies, by contrast, contained no deeply-rooted traditional powers to contend against, such as a European nobility or an established church, let alone privileges enshrined in centuries of custom. The singleness of government authority in the colonies resembles what the “ancien régime” unsuccessfully sought to establish and what the revolutionaries pursued. Only in these colonial republics is it, at least in principle, achieved (DA 89). Nevertheless, the central governing authority in the colonies presides over towns which have not yet surrendered the right to administer their own local affairs freely.

7. Pangle argues that Publius “seems much more certain that republican government is dictated by the ‘genius of the American people’ and even by the ‘fundamental principles of the Revolution,’ than that it is dictated by nature or natural law.” The Framers “tried to find the surest ground of human security and dignity in a natural, competitive self-assertion: in an individualism that is properly regulated, not so much by deference to tradition and custom, not so much by ‘sentiment’ and conscience, as by *reason* dominating passion and sentiment through *law* that expresses indirect—but radical—popular sovereignty” (1988, 118, 127). Zuckert suggests that in Tocqueville’s view a “healthy and free politics” might best emerge when the “citizens can see [government] as something they have made...” (1997, 103).

8. An extended analysis of the federal judiciary occurs in I.1.8 (DA 138-55), and a subsequent analysis in I.2.8 (DA 263-76) explains the importance to a democracy of respect for law, the value of the jury system, and the beneficial influence of the practices of the legal profession.

9. The translation used here is that of Mansfield and Winthrop (Tocqueville 2000, 184). Lawrence errs in translating as follows: “The most natural right of man, after that of acting on his own, is that of combining his efforts with those of his fellows and acting together” (DA 193). Tocqueville wrote: “Après la liberté d’agir seul, la plus naturelle à l’homme est celle de combiner ses efforts avec les efforts de ses semblables et d’agir en commun” (OC I.1, 198).

10. Tocqueville resists identifying the political bonds formed in associations with natural right. In one of Tocqueville’s notes (appended to the passage on the issue of centralization), he quotes his ancestor Malesherbes as he addressed Louis XVI in 1775 on the issue of local self-government. Malesherbes maintained that there are rights to administer a community’s own affairs that are not owed to the “primitive constitution of the kingdom” but to the “right of nature and of reason” (DA 723; OC I.1, 447-48). Suppression of local self-government treats the citizens like children, subjecting them to an administrative authority acting like their schoolmasters. Tocqueville, referring to the same era, clearly sees the advantage of local self-government and understands it to build on a natural tendency to associate for common purposes. To that extent he looks at the matter as did his ancestor. But he associates the emphatic term “natural right” with what is owed equally to all humans and hence with its democratic sense.

11. In an unusual reference to a universal principle of justice, Tocqueville associated it with humanity in the sense of a hypothetical cosmopolitan majority: to refer to a higher law is to “appeal from the sovereignty of the people to the sovereignty of the human race” (DA 250-51; OC I.1, 261-62). He does not explain this ambiguous expression further. The sovereignty of the human race seems akin to the sovereignty of “the people,” suggesting a more universal form of majoritarianism. In a later comment, he suggests that the majority of the human race regards “humanity, justice, and reason” as higher in the moral order than the will of a given local majority (DA 395; OC I.1, 413).

12. Tocqueville notes the link between associations and partisan violence in unspecified European countries (DA 193-95). The place of association in Tocqueville’s work is examined in Maletz (2001), Galston (2000), and Sabl (2002).

13. Furet and Mélonio observe that for the French to establish a new regime based on the idea of natural rights required that they “condemn their tradition and forget their memories.” In the revolutionary attempt to do just that, the French afforded the “novel spectacle of a people collectively detesting its own history.” Because he understood this point well, Tocqueville “revived the theme of the ‘abstraction’ of the French Revolution, so dear to Romantic criticism of the Enlightenment” (1998, 15). I would add that Tocqueville gives the critique of what is “abstract” a substantial political foundation and frees that critique from its association with Romanticism.

14. Ceaser observes, following Tocqueville, that the Americans of the eighteenth century were more attracted to, and better practitioners of, the empirical, inductive forms of rationalism than the abstract and doctrinaire rationalism of the Enlightenment (1985, 659).

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*Democracy in America* is cited in my text as DA with volume, part, and chapter, plus page number, or simply with page number; *The Old Regime and the Revolution* is cited as OR with the number of the relevant book and chapter (and page number if necessary). Unless otherwise noted, I have used the Lawrence translation of DA (Tocqueville 1969) and the Kahan translation of OR (Tocqueville 1998). For the original texts, I have used the *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. J.-P. Mayer (Tocqueville 1951–). The text is cited as OC with volume and page number; *De la démocratie en Amérique* is published

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## **"Politics As Opposed to Tradition": The Presence of Nietzsche and Spinoza in the "Zionist Essays" of Leo Strauss**

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That Leo Strauss, at a certain point in his life, came to read texts esoterically is well known. Did he write esoterically? This question is more difficult. If we apply his "general observation" that "people write as they read" (Strauss 1952, 144) to his own authorial practice, we may suppose that he did write esoterically, at least from the time that he began to read in that manner. But if Strauss did not always read esoterically, there is little reason to believe that he always wrote esoterically. Consequently, it is safe to assume that the "Zionist essays" and reviews authored by Strauss prior to his discovery of esotericism are non-esoteric works that state the positions Strauss took in the 1920s on politics, science, religion, and tradition (see Addendum 1). This essay will furnish a precise articulation of what the "Zionist essays" illuminate about the early Strauss. It will demonstrate the power of a careful examination of the non-esoteric essays to show what Strauss actually held, taking us well beyond mere speculation about what Strauss might or might not have thought in his formative years.

I will proceed in four steps. First, I will examine the "style" of the "Zionist essays" and reviews, with a particular eye to the young Strauss's indebtedness to Nietzsche. Though he may have been some way from discovering "logographic necessity," Strauss was never a careless writer. The rhetoric of the early writings, with its peculiar combination of detached irony and impassioned moralism, repays attention. Second, I will consider what the rhetoric is meant to serve, the conception that Strauss names "our political Zionism." My aim is not to analyze political Zionism as such, but

rather to show that a specific conception of modern secular politics, with deep roots in the texts of Spinoza, motivated Strauss when he was involved in activities that are more overtly political than his later enterprises (e.g. writing esoteric commentaries, founding a school). Third, I will show that Strauss's deep investment in what he calls "politics as opposed to tradition" must be understood by examining his dissatisfaction with two prominent attempts ("cultural Zionism" and a spurious "Orthodoxy") to retrieve the tradition or to reconcile it with the Enlightenment. Finally, I will argue that while Strauss seems to display more respect for genuine Orthodoxy, his true opinion is that it no less flagrantly violates the demands of what Nietzsche calls the "intellectual conscience," since it proceeds (in his view) from assumptions that no philosopher as such can endorse. Attending to these features of the early Strauss—the combination of irony and moralism, the commitment to modern secular liberalism, the rejection of "idealist" proposals meant to overcome the dissonance between religion and reason—suggests that what we learn in reading the "Zionist essays" about Strauss is not merely interesting as biography or gossip. Since what changes in the esoteric works is arguably not Strauss's basic position, but only the mode of its presentation, the early non-esoteric writings can serve as an indispensable guide to the later work.

### 1. THE STYLE OF THE EARLY STRAUSS

"Style is the physiognomy of the mind. It is a more reliable key to character than the physiognomy of the body" (Schopenhauer 1897, 12). This apothegm from Schopenhauer suggests a way into the early Strauss. From his twenty-fourth to his twenty-sixth year, in the very middle of the period in which he was constantly reading Nietzsche, Strauss published eleven essays in three German Jewish periodicals. The irony and humor displayed in these essays strongly recalls that of Nietzsche. Here one comparison must stand for many. In the first *Untimely Meditation*, Nietzsche positions himself as a sharp critic of a popular writer whose thought and expression are notable for their sloppiness. On David Strauss's statement that "the belief in his resurrection credits Jesus' account," Nietzsche comments:

A man who prefers common mercantile terms to express himself about so uncommon an event must have spent his life reading remarkably bad books. The Straussian style everywhere betrays a history of impoverished readings. Perhaps Strauss spent too much time in reading his theological adversaries. But where did he learn to molest the ancient Judeo-Christian God with such petit-bourgeois images? For example, on page 105 he treats us to "*pulled the chair out from under*

*the body of the old Judeo-Christian God.*" Or, on the same page, *"the ancient personal God ran into something like a housing shortage."* Or, on page 155, we find that this very same god has been removed to a *"spare room where he might still be decently housed and employed after all."* (Nietzsche 1990, 67)

Nietzsche's procedure is to quote his target precisely, using his own words as the most telling evidence of his vacuity, accompanied by ironic comment as necessary. In "On the Argument with European Science" (1924), Strauss adopts a similar procedure:

Concerning Winkler, suffice it to quote his categorical judgment on Kierkegaard. "As a result of his unmethodical, strongly journalistic method and of his pathological inclination toward exaggeration and paradox, Kierkegaard was unable to exercise a decisive influence on the movement of the philosophy of religion" (p. 23). Also worth reading is the reference to the historical case of a "markdown" on Hegel's panlogism (p. 24), which opens up surprising possibilities for financial conduct in theology. (Strauss 2002, 111)

Strauss shares with Nietzsche a keen eye for the defects of writers in whom the corruption of language, along with the corruption of thought and culture, is particularly evident. Rather than directly state his contempt for such writers, he prefers to express it with gentle irony. Here are the first two sentences of a book review written in 1924:

In *Contemporary Religious Thinkers: On Changes in the Modern Views of Life*, which is a detailed review of the literature, Albert Levkowitz [Lewkowitz] wants to acquaint with contemporary philosophy those Jewish readers who, because of their other pursuits, have not had the leisure to learn about it from the sources, or from the usual reports in the daily newspapers. As a result, a certain crudeness in the argumentation and a certain repetition of things well known are unavoidable. (Strauss 2002, 106-7)

In two sentences, Strauss politely suggests the incompetence of his author (a rabbi and scholar). Why would readers who care nothing about philosophy, learning it neither from primary texts nor journalistic reports, suddenly wish to become acquainted with it? What kind of writer would provide a "detailed review of the literature" for the class of reader least likely to care about scholarly literature? The question answers itself: a remarkably imperceptive writer prone to a certain crudeness in argumentation and pedestrian repetition. Strauss does not say this exactly. He diplomatically describes the text's vices as an inevitable result of writing for non-readers. But the point is to suggest the rabbi's intellectual limitations, without naming them directly.

Strauss's combination of indirection and ironic humor may be regarded as an instance of the "benevolent dissimulation" that Nietzsche commends at *Human, All Too Human* §293 "when trafficking with men" (Nietzsche 1996, 136). Like Nietzsche, the young Strauss is an ironist. The Lewkowitz review continues: "Standing on the solid ground of the religion of Judaism, the author can easily pass judgment on particular philosophers." What Strauss says: the ground is solid. What he means: the ground is anything but solid. Demonstrably lacking in judgment, the rabbi thinks his attachment to religious tradition entitles him to pass judgment on philosophers. Here Strauss has widened the target. Most people who imagine their religious tradition as a "solid ground" of certainty, standing firm against the corrosive critique of philosophy, are no less guilty of bad judgment. Yet rather than fulminate against those who claim to know what they do not know, Strauss uses good humor. "It is not without doggedness that the author is able to emphasize the ideal over against the philosophers of life, and to emphasize life over against the idealists" (Strauss 2002, 107).

Though Nietzsche's presence in the early essays is often subterranean, it can be explicit (see Addendum 2). About Simon Dubnow, author of the *Latest History of the Jewish Peoples*, Strauss remarks that he "belongs to those historians that Nietzsche, with Treitschke and Sybel in mind, referred to as historians with 'heavily bandaged heads'" (Strauss 2002, 103; the allusion is to *Beyond Good and Evil* §251). The young Strauss's most characteristic posture is that of a sophisticated observer who, in accordance with Nietzsche's "requisite for disputing," is able to "put on ice" the thoughts and passions of others (*Human, All Too Human* §315, Nietzsche 1996, 138; see also *Anti-Christ* §53, Nietzsche 1990b, 183). What some would describe as the abstract character of Strauss's discourse is (he says) due to "the fact that [he] made the effort to see things as they are, unprejudiced by vulgar Zionist ideologies." This is the antidote to "blathering pomposity," he assures us; "what seemed 'abstract' was in truth the rigorous formulation of our real inner state of affairs" (Strauss 2002, 118).

Reading Nietzsche gives the young Strauss a perspective that enables him to resist the power of groups intoxicated with a sense of their own superiority. Alluding to *Beyond Good and Evil* §251, Strauss acknowledges that "we ourselves were temporarily confused"—meaning that he too was once susceptible to the lure of self-proclaimed "Orthodoxy." "But now," Strauss claims, "we unambiguously profess the spirit of sobriety as opposed to that of pathetic declamation" (Strauss 2002, 66). This means, among other

things, adopting a skeptical, elenctic stance toward anything that purports to be an expression of what the spirit of the Jewish people demands. It means exposing the "joyful rough-and-ready" of the Frankfurt group's "rhetoricians" who "surmount obstacles of logic by means of enthusiasm" (Strauss 2002, 124). It may even entail admiration of one's enemies, insofar as they exemplify a commitment to argumentation absent in one's allies. Thus Strauss's qualified praise of Paul de Lagarde, whom he associates with "the best influence that anti-Semitism could exercise on our national life" (Strauss 2002, 79). The capacity to admire one's antipodes, when they exude seriousness of purpose and thought, is a trait that Strauss shares with Nietzsche.

Dispassionate irony is a recurrent feature of Strauss's style. Early in life Strauss cultivates what he will later describe as a natural preference for Jane Austen to Dostoevsky (Strauss 2000, 185). In his 1928 review of Freud's *The Future of an Illusion*, he expresses skepticism about the style that he associates with Dostoevsky. Responding to the claim that Ivan Karamazov's experience of the devil "tells him something infinitely *more important* and infinitely *deeper* than anything that the most admirable sciences would be able to tell him" (the ironic italics are Strauss's own), he writes: "But importance and depth are bad criteria when dealing with the *truth*. The most important and deepest claims of religion lose their force if God does not exist" (Strauss 2002, 206). But cool irony is not the only mode of the early Strauss. Occasionally excitement breaks through. In 1925, after proposing the replacement of the "alliance of Zionism and Orthodoxy" with the "alliance of Zionism and liberalism," he declares: "Today, the enemy is on the Right!" (Strauss 2002, 118). Another essay written in the same year, "Ecclesia militans," follows outright ridicule with stern moralism. Strauss's target in this essay is a Zionist group whose members included Erich Fromm, Fritz Gothein, Leo Löwenthal, Ernst Simon, and Ernst Michaelis. In his first salvo against this faction, he referred to it simply as "Frankfurt." Two years later, "Frankfurt" becomes "the separatist orthodoxy of Frankfurt" and the "Jewish Church" (Strauss 2002, 125). Strauss extends the comparison over a paragraph, using the language of Luther's "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" to indicate his own stance against the offensive of the "evil old enemy," who protects himself with his "cruel armor" and fights with his "arms."

Strauss's description of the Frankfurt group as the "Jewish Church" is arresting. One might suppose that he coined this phrase independently, as a natural extension of the proposed analogy between the medieval Church and the power-hungry Frankfurt group. But the reader with an eye

on Nietzsche's influence on Strauss's style will recognize its provenance in *Anti-Christ* §27, where Nietzsche speaks of the "Jewish Church." In criticizing his adversaries in the "Zionist essays," Strauss draws freely upon his continual reading of Nietzsche. Against the smug certainty that Frankfurt "always and on principle has a good conscience," he asks: "But does the unshakable possession of a good conscience not signify—the loss of one's conscience altogether?" (Strauss 2002, 128). If Frankfurt depends heavily on "psychological and sociological evasions and tricks," as Strauss claims, the opposed virtue would correspond to what Nietzsche calls the "intellectual conscience" (see *Human, All Too Human* §109, *The Gay Science* 1.2, *Twilight of the Idols* §18, *The Anti-Christ* §47). The virtue of the intellectual conscience is "probity," which Strauss commends by name in his essay on Paul de Lagarde (see Strauss 2002, 91). The extreme opposite of probity is willingness to engage in a "pious fraud," which he also attributes by name to Frankfurt (Strauss 2002, 125). Certainly it is possible that the young Strauss encountered the phrase "*pia fraus*" from his own reading of church history. But it seems more likely that he picked it up from the texts of Nietzsche, where it occurs several times (e.g. *Beyond Good and Evil* §105; *Twilight of the Idols* §5).

The young Strauss's style and character, as recoverable from a reading of the "Zionist essays," are decisively formed by Nietzsche in at least four respects. First, the reader cannot help but notice the assumption of a certain superiority to the dominant trends of his day, a superiority that makes his writing untimely in relation to the age in which it appears (see Addendum 3). Second, there is Strauss's disposition to write in a cool and ironic manner, whether expressed as "benevolent dissimulation" or as "putting on ice" the heated passions of those who feel more deeply than they think. Third, as seen most clearly in the essay on Paul de Lagarde, Strauss professes a willing to learn from and even admire his antipodes. Fourth, he takes from Nietzsche certain key concepts—particularly his respect for the "intellectual conscience" and its "probity," along with its refusal to countenance "pious fraud"—and makes them his own in his early writings. Nietzsche's influence on the young Strauss is difficult to overstate; in a well-known letter, Strauss acknowledged to Karl Löwith that between the ages of 22 and 30—the period in the very middle of which he composes the "Zionist essays"—he was "mesmerized" by Nietzsche and "literally believed everything that [he] understood of him" (Tucker 1988, 183). Nonetheless, Nietzsche is hardly the sole influence on the young Strauss. What must now be considered is the impact of the modern liberal tradition on the author of the "Zionist essays."

## 2. STRAUSS AS PROPONENT OF MODERN LIBERAL POLITICS

In the early years, both Strauss's irony and his occasional moralism are in the service of "our political Zionism," as he terms it (Strauss 2002, 135). At a comparatively early age, Strauss was not afraid to regard himself as the most philosophically informed polemicist for the cause of political Zionism. To understand Strauss's commitment to political Zionism, some clarity about Strauss's conception of "politics" is necessary. The early essays provide this clarity. In his first "Zionist essay," the 1923 "Response to Frankfurt's 'Word of Principle,'" Strauss expressly distinguishes himself from contemporaries like Walter Moses, the leader of *Jüdischer Wanderbund Blau-Weiss* (the Zionist group that Strauss joined when he was sixteen). Reflecting on the ostensibly "political" character of Moses's discourse, Strauss observes that "what he calls 'political' is political in the ancient sense of the word, rather than in the modern sense that is relevant for us." Moses's "ancient" version of the political is dangerous, Strauss holds, because it absolutely negates the sphere of the private. Moses wishes to replace the modern private sphere dedicated to the protection of individual freedom with something that is "not a modern Leviathan, but rather the pagan-fascist counterpart of that, which, in the case of the Frankfurt faction, bears a mystical-humanitarian stamp" (Strauss 2002, 65).

Those accustomed to hearing a pious tone in Strauss's use of the term "ancient" may be surprised by the young Strauss. In his early essays, Strauss rejects ancient politics in favor of a specifically modern politics that affirms a strong public/private distinction and the autonomy of the individual. He does not do this in an unsophisticated way. Strauss recognizes the possibility of objecting that Moses's sense of "political" is only spuriously ancient. He even allows that the attitudes of both Moses and Frankfurt are really "modern, even though they are antimodern, which is precisely what renders them inner-modern" (Strauss 2002, 65). The late modern reaction against the early modern is itself modern, even as it appeals to an ancient sense of the political. One might suppose an alternative route, whereby one escapes the modern by a genuine return to the ancients, as distinguished from an all-too-modern appeal to antiquity. Strauss considers this possibility, only to reject it. He is uncertain as to "whether the rejection of the modern spirit can be justified at all" (Strauss 2002, 65). Even if such a justification were available, it remains "self-evident" that "it is impossible to extricate oneself from modern life without employing modern means" (Strauss 2002, 65-66).

At least in his early years, Strauss wanted to emphasize both the difficulty and the undesirability of flights from the modern.

Why is Strauss so eager to expose the hollowness of anti-modern rhetoric? What about the modern does Strauss like so much? He answers: the goods of “‘science’ and ‘state’—those fruits of the anti-Catholic spirit” (Strauss 2002, 65). As one would expect from the author of “Ecclesia militans,” the early Strauss approves of the anti-Catholic spirit and its fruits. He recognizes that he possesses tendencies appropriately described as “liberal” and “individualist,” though he cordially despises romantic justifications for these tendencies. Modern Jews may appropriately describe themselves as “assimilated” or “liberal,” Strauss says, “but not because individualism and freedom are so beautiful, oh so beautiful” (Strauss 2002, 121). Despite his disdain for the sentimental rhetoric that seems to constitute a perennial temptation for particular liberals, Strauss leaves no doubt that he is committed to political liberalism. “The Zionism that I would like to characterize as primarily political Zionism is liberal, that is, it rejects the absolute submission to the Law and instead makes individual acceptance of traditional contents dependent on one’s own deliberation” (Strauss 2002, 118; see Addendum 4).

Political Zionism, as a form of specifically modern politics that celebrates the twin fruits of the anti-Catholic spirit, opposes itself no less to the Jewish religious tradition. Traditional Judaism is not merely apolitical. Since it does not believe that human political arrangements are capable of bringing about what Jews need, it is actively anti-political. Strauss emphasizes that traditional Judaism

excludes politics, that is, “politics” understood as a will sustained by the consciousness of responsibility for the existence and dignity of a people, whereby such existence is seen as depending on purely “natural” conditions, whether human or extra-human. (Strauss 2002, 119)

Strauss’s “political Zionism” constitutes a stand for what he explicitly describes as “politics as opposed to tradition” (Strauss 2002, 119). He acknowledges two types of attempt to minimize the fundamental tension between enlightened politics and religious tradition. The first is “the attempt to reach that synthesis of politics and religion by way of the ‘political’ elements in the biblical world (Judges and Kings in Wellhausen’s conception).” The second is “the attempt of *cultural Zionism* to bridge the opposition ...by perverting into a politics of the ‘spirit’ the realpolitik devised by Herzl” (Strauss 2002, 119). Neither attempt, he thinks, succeeds in overcoming the basic opposition. Political Zionism, understood as an extension of the

“realpolitik” he associates with Herzl and Pinsker, is the only way forward for the early Strauss.

### 3. STRAUSS’S CRITIQUE OF “ORTHODOXY” AND “CULTURAL ZIONISM”

A primary target in Strauss’s early writings is what he calls “cultural Zionism,” as distinguished from “religious Zionism.” Strauss understands religious Zionism as orthodox Judaism which either minimizes or denies the role of worldly political action in sustaining the existence and dignity of the Jewish people. Cultural Zionism, by contrast, seeks to defend Jewish values of a broadly egalitarian type, while rejecting the core assumptions held by orthodox believers that inform the original understanding and articulation of those values. Strauss gives two examples of cultural Zionism: the reduction of religion to “altruistic ethics,” which he ascribes to Ahad Ha’am, and “the socialism of a ‘community’” which he attributes to the early Martin Buber. Both make use of religious language, but mendaciously according to Strauss, since the type of society they defend is a “merely inter-human phenomenon” with no essential relation to the supernatural (Strauss 2002, 119). At its worst, cultural Zionism consists “in the arrogant attempt to impose on us by diktat a definite, mystical attitude, rather than a religious one, while trying to tell us that the affirmation of this attitude requires no ‘belief’” (Strauss 2002, 71).

Strauss’s attack on “cultural Zionism” assumes the form of a sustained polemic against the Frankfurt group and its self-predicated “orthodoxy.” Frankfurt’s pride in its Orthodoxy reveals its nullity, he thinks, because it does not affirm, or even acknowledge, the dogmatic presuppositions upon which any honest orthodoxy must base itself. In contrast to Strauss’s own advocacy of a secular political Zionism (see Strauss 2002, 135), Frankfurt-style orthodoxy demands “the submission of the Jewish people to the Torah” (Strauss 2002, 125). What Strauss finds problematic is not so much Frankfurt’s call for submission to the Torah as its utter disdain for reflection on the presuppositions that would justify submission. Instead, Strauss holds, the Frankfurt faction takes “submission” as a “war objective” (Strauss 2002, 124), a goal to be achieved by any means necessary, no matter how repugnant to reflection. He writes:

This objective can be realized without a fight once the existence of God and the divine provenance of the Torah have been acknowledged. Now, the weapon, or the trick, of Orthodoxy is to try to force the acceptance of this demand, without first having to obtain the acknowledgment

of its dogmatic presuppositions. One is compelled to resort to this trick because the acknowledgment of these dogmas could never be obtained from the majority of contemporary Jewry. One then makes do with the thoroughly dishonest doctrine that there are no dogmas in Judaism, a doctrine that seems to have been invented just for the purpose of fundamentally destroying any seriousness of the religious decision. (Strauss 2002, 125)

Intellectual honesty and moral seriousness, along with the individual freedoms affirmed and protected by modern liberalism—these are the goods to which Strauss is most visibly committed in his early essays, and which he takes Frankfurt to flout at every turn. The polemic against Frankfurt suggests that the early Strauss is an intriguing blend of Spinoza and Nietzsche, the two modern philosophers he seems to admire most. With Spinoza, he aspires to a rational defense of a hard-nosed modern liberalism, one that has no patience with final causes and has come to terms with “the displacement of teleologism by the more manly causalism” (Strauss 2002, 88), a displacement presumably enabled by the “hidden sting of a severe, manly doubt” (Strauss 2002, 71). One may think that the clear rejection of teleology is confined to the “Zionist writings” and offers no insight into Strauss’s later thinking. In the Preface to *Natural Right and History*, Strauss appears to voice weighty reservations about Spinoza’s comprehensive denial of final causes. Responding to the claim that “the nonteleological conception of the universe must be followed up by a nonteleological conception of human life,” Strauss says:

This “naturalistic” solution is exposed to grave difficulties: it seems to be impossible to give an adequate account of human ends by conceiving of them merely as posited by desires or impulses. (Strauss 1953, 8)

The casual reader will conclude that Strauss means to reject the Spinozist claim that a non-teleological universe requires a non-teleological view of man. But the reader who is aware of the young Strauss’s deep sympathy with Spinoza’s anti-teleology will notice an unmistakable hesitation. The Spinozist solution, Strauss says, “seems” impossible. Seems impossible to whom? To the many who treat appearances as fact—to the “people” (Strauss’s word, chosen with care) who are “forced to accept a fundamental, typically modern, dualism of a nonteleological science and a teleological science of man” (Strauss 1953, 8). The reader of the “Zionist essays” will strongly suspect that Strauss does not take such “people” to qualify as serious thinkers who deserve respect. Instead, he will connect them with the “typically modern dualism” that he associates with idealism and romanticism. Such “people,” who are numerous, must be radically distinguished from the few who have the stomach to

accept the “displacement of teleologism by the more manly causalism.” The reader of the “Zionist essays” will have little trouble discerning the ease with which Strauss can distinguish “typically modern” dualisms—including the view of the “modern followers of Thomas Aquinas”—from the more consistent naturalism of Spinoza (see Addendum 5).

The principled liberalism that Strauss envisages is based on reason rather than sentimental paeans to the beauty of individualism and freedom. It has as one of its primary aims the protection of religious minorities from tyranny, intolerance and persecution. In this respect, Spinoza is the principal inspiration for the early Strauss. One might be tempted to infer that after the publication of *Die Religionskritik Spinozas*, Spinoza loses his hold on Strauss, whose book seems to expose him as the archetypal rationalist who fails to provide a persuasive internal critique of orthodoxy. To see that such an inference would be much too simple, one may attend to the conclusion of an essay Strauss wrote on Spinoza in 1932, four years after he had completed *Die Religionskritik Spinozas*. Against popular tendencies urging either canonization or condemnation of Spinoza, Strauss writes:

It is sufficient that no one has been able to popularize him, no one has been able to turn him into small change, no one has been able to “cut him down to size.” And still we ask whether we owe him veneration? Spinoza will be venerated as long as there are men who know how to appreciate the inscription on his signet ring (“*caute*”) or, to put it plainly: as long as there are men who know what it means to utter [the word]: *independence* [*Unabhängigkeit*]. (Strauss 2002, 222)

Strauss is inspired by Spinoza. Yet the style employed by Strauss in advocating “politics as opposed to tradition” owes as much to Nietzsche as it does to Spinoza. It characteristically opposes romantic rhetoric with an ironic style that discloses unacknowledged presuppositions and unmasks adversaries with savage humor. The young Strauss’s critique of the Frankfurt group is animated by his commitment to probity and the intellectual conscience, a commitment that is inseparable from his continual reading of Nietzsche. But Strauss’s critique of Frankfurt is also Nietzschean in a more particular sense. In a passage from *Beyond Good and Evil* that Strauss would have known well, Nietzsche writes that

[N]obody is very likely to consider a doctrine true merely because it makes people happy or virtuous—except perhaps the lovely “idealists” who become effusive about the good, the true, and the beautiful and allow all kinds of motley, clumsy, and benevolent desiderata to swim

around in utter confusion in their pond. Happiness and virtue are no arguments. (Nietzsche 1989, 49)

When Strauss claims that Frankfurt trivializes “the religious decision” with rhetorical tricks and subterfuges, he unmasks its desire to connect the truth of a doctrine with its alleged pleasant consequences. Frankfurt justifies submission to the Torah not by reflective argument or historical evidence, but by the claim that “the politics of the peoples who do not stand under the rule of the Torah—‘the Tower of Babel’—leads to world war” (Strauss 2002, 125). Observation of the commandments for the sake of “pleasant consequences,” Strauss insists, is nothing more than a “pious fraud,” since “truths are not proved by the pleasantness of their consequences” (Strauss 2002, 125).

Despite the air of certainty with which Strauss states it, the claim that the pleasure or utility of a view bears no relation to its truth is not self-evident. Where does the young Strauss gain his assurance on this question? The thinker who most forcefully detaches the consideration of a view’s truth from its connection to pleasure or utility is Nietzsche. Here is *Human, All Too Human* §120:

*Proof by pleasure.* The pleasant opinion is taken to be true: this is the proof by pleasure (or, as the church says, the proof by power) of which all religions are so proud, though they ought to be ashamed of it. If the belief did not make blessed it would not be believed: how little, then, will it be worth! (Nietzsche 1996, 67; compare *Gay Science* §347 and *Anti-Christ* §50 on the “proof by potency.”)

In the same work, Nietzsche proceeds to question the “inner desire” of religious believers that “what makes happy should also be true,” since the “desire misleads us into purchasing bad reasons for good ones” (*Human, All Too Human* §131; Nietzsche 1996, 70). Nietzsche claims that Christianity “passionately repulsed the desire for reasons” and “pointed to the success enjoyed by faith: you will soon see the advantage to be derived from faith, it intimated, it shall make you blessed.” This tendency, which Nietzsche takes to be common to Christianity and the modern state, means that “the personal *utility* of an opinion is supposed to demonstrate its *truth*, the advantageousness of a theory is supposed to guarantee its intellectual soundness and well-foundedness” (*Human, All Too Human* §227; Nietzsche 1996, 109).

That Strauss clearly drew inspiration from this Nietzschean line of thought in his twenties is difficult to doubt. He identifies with Nietzsche’s distaste for mediations and compromises: “As Jews, we are radical; we do not like compromises. Let’s bell the cat!” he exclaims in 1925 (Strauss

2002, 133). Does Nietzsche's formulation of the sharp distinction between truth and utility remain with Strauss in later years? Consider this passage from the Introduction from *Natural Right and History*:

Even by proving that a certain view is indispensable for living well, one proves merely that the view in question is a salutary myth: one does not prove it to be true. Utility and truth are two entirely different things. (Strauss 1953, 6; see also the striking distinction between the useful and the natural at 107.)

Strauss never abandons his adherence to Nietzsche's uncompromising formulations. For Nietzsche, the aptitude to distinguish the question of a view's truth from its usefulness is characteristic of the free spirit. It distinguishes him from "bound spirits [who] hold principles for the sake of their usefulness" (*Human, All Too Human* §226; Nietzsche 1986, 141). Strauss will appropriate Nietzsche's distinction between the autonomy of free spirits and the obedience of bound spirits in later writings, as when he draws a strong contrast between "a life of obedient love versus a life of free insight" (Strauss 1953, 74; see also Lachterman 1991, 240, and Addendum 6). (On this point he is also inspired by Spinoza, who distinguishes between obedience to God's will, as taught by Scripture, and knowledge of truth, as sought by autonomous philosophy.) Like Nietzsche, the young Strauss is implacably opposed to "idealist" attempts to dissolve tensions that he thinks should be acknowledged and squarely faced. His identification of Germany as "the land of 'reconciliations' and 'sublations'" (Strauss 2002, 133) recalls any number of anti-Hegelian passages in Nietzsche. For the young Strauss, Nietzsche is exemplary in offering a sustained and powerful critique of idealist attempts to dissolve tensions between reason and revelation, a critique that Strauss does not hesitate to make his own in his polemics against "cultural Zionism." The Frankfurt group errs most visibly by offering a version of the discredited "proof by pleasure" accompanied by *pia fraus*. But Strauss considers all versions of modern idealism that deny the fundamental assumptions of traditional orthodoxy, without being resolutely atheistic, as subject to the radical Nietzschean critique.

#### 4. STRAUSS'S CRITICISM OF TRADITIONAL ORTHODOXY

Strauss's opposition to "Orthodoxy" stems not from its orthodoxy, but from what he understands as its weakness and mendacity. He quotes Lessing: "What is so nauseating is not orthodoxy itself, but a certain squinting, limping orthodoxy which is unequal to itself!" (Strauss 2002, 133). Some have thought that Strauss's forthright rejection of pseudo-orthodoxy

coexists with a healthy respect for genuine orthodoxy. That Strauss often displays more respect for traditional religious belief than contemporary idealistic reinterpretations is true. But this has no tendency to deny what is evident in the “Zionist essays”—that for the young Strauss, orthodoxy is strictly incompatible with the probity required by the intellectual conscience. In this section, I will demonstrate that Strauss’s understanding of the intellectual conscience drives him to reject not only the spurious orthodoxy of cultural Zionism, but also the traditional orthodoxy of religious Zionism.

To demonstrate Strauss’s commitment to this claim, we must consider the analysis of orthodox Judaism that appears in the early writings. The core of orthodoxy, as Strauss understands it, is its unconditional acceptance of dogmatic presuppositions about the nature of God and the status of divine revelation. Strauss’s 1925 essay “Biblical History and Science” clearly identifies the presuppositions of religious belief. In what follows, I enumerate these presuppositions along with quotations that convey the style of Strauss’s critique of those who would consider themselves “religious” while denying these presuppositions.

1. God is transcendent; he precedes religious “experience” and stands as its condition. To reduce God to “the reverent experience of the people” is “banal nonsense.” For the historic Jewish people God literally exists as a “substance that renounces all subtilizing.” Those in modern times who reduce “God” to the “needs of the soul” or the “sanctification of the human being” do not have genuine belief, and cannot say the prayers “truthfully” (Strauss 2002, 70).

2. God is the author of Scripture. This is expressed by the traditional doctrine of “verbal inspiration,” and entails belief (contra Hobbes, Spinoza, and modern critical exegesis) in Moses as author of the Pentateuch.

3. Since God is the author of Scripture, Scripture is true and inerrant. The genuinely orthodox are right to protest against the view sometimes urged by religious people that “one need not view all the stories in Genesis as true.” Strauss praises “the pious Bryan” (i.e. William Jennings Bryan) for his consistency in admitting that “if it were written in Scripture that the whale had been in the belly of Jonah, and that Jonah, for his part, had spit it out,” then “this too would have to be believed” (Strauss 2002, 132).

4. God has absolute power over nature; this power is manifested in miracles, as attested by Scripture. Religious belief without miracles is not religious belief.

5. God acts concretely in the course of human history, as attested by Scripture. God is a subject, not an object; he is an agent who “loves, chooses, rewards, punishes, he is Ruler of the world, also and especially of nature” (Strauss 2002, 133).

Without an unequivocal acceptance of these presuppositions, no orthodox belief is possible. “A minimal amount of doctrinal substance is completely inseparable from the essence of religion,” Strauss writes in 1923 against the Frankfurt group (Strauss 2002, 69). In one sense, the early Strauss approves of religious believers who candidly acknowledge the presuppositions of their faith. Yet he doubts that their stance is compatible with intellectual probity. On what grounds? In the 1924 essay on Paul de Lagarde, he writes:

Modern science destroyed the foundations of the medieval world, to which belong such things as the Ptolemaic system, and it was right to do this because the foundations did not stand up under *scientific examination*. It is *truthfulness* that demands the abandonment of the Orthodox doctrine about the way in which the biblical books came into being. In short, probity, the will to work, and frugality are the virtues that Lagarde praises most highly and most frequently. (Strauss 2002, 91)

Respect for truth, Strauss consistently asserts in the early essays, drives modern science. If we have any pretense to respect for truth, we cannot but endorse the presuppositions and methods of modern science. Strauss is aware of the view that modern science cares more about utility or power than truth; he dismisses it with the comment that “the doctrine of the fundamentally utilitarian character of modern science is a sentimental defamation” (Strauss 2002, 65). Intellectual probity requires one to embrace modern science. But why cannot one embrace modern science *and* orthodox faith? Strauss’s characteristic response to this question has two prongs. The first is to observe that none of the best minds in the history of theology ever judged serious faith to be logically compatible with the presuppositions of modern science. Perhaps the clearest expression of this view is found in the 1924 essay “On the Argument with European Science.” There Strauss writes:

If the renunciation of the claim to scientific validity is such a self-evident matter, as is today often asserted even from pulpits, how is it that such significant minds as all positive religions count among their orthodox theologians defended their tradition against science with almost unprecedented tenacity? Obviously the blow struck by science did not miss. That Moses wrote the Torah was regarded as true not just

in the traditional context and “inwardly,” but true, pure and simple; and whoever thought otherwise was a radical denier of the faith. There was a time, not so long ago, when the two powers, tradition and science, did not coexist peacefully on parallel planes, with no points of contact, but engaged in a life-and-death struggle for hegemony on the *single* plane of the “truth.” (Strauss 2002, 109)

The language of “life-and-death struggle” used by Strauss is a close echo of Nietzsche’s claim at *Anti-Christ* §47 that Christianity and science are “mortal enemies” (Nietzsche 1990b, 175). But this first prong of Strauss’s assertion of the implacable opposition between tradition and science does not settle the matter. It leaves open the possibility that the best theological minds, however intelligent, were simply wrong in their (historically-conditioned) assumption that religion and science operate on the same plane. To put this another way, the historical observation, even if true, cannot by itself eliminate the possible cogency of what Strauss calls a “Jesuit-pragmatist” or “transcendental-idealist” response to the challenge posed by modern science (Strauss 2002, 108). (Strauss’s use of “Jesuitism” to describe a tendency to evade the challenge of modern science by an elevation of “culture” may constitute another instance of indebtedness to Nietzsche; see Lampert 1996, 33, and *Beyond Good and Evil* §48 and §206.) Because Strauss knows this, his assertion of the tradition/science opposition contains a second prong. This is the persistent reiteration of the claim that no pragmatist/Jesuit/idealist reinterpretation of religion can simultaneously reconfigure itself as compatible with modern science and leave orthodox presuppositions intact. Any orthodox religion can try for such reinterpretation, but “such a tradition, if it is honest, will have to admit that it is no longer the old, unbroken tradition” (Strauss 2002, 108). When he speaks in this mode, Strauss is closer to the “moralist” aspect of his style; his exhortation is an appeal *ad verecundiam*. Often, however, Strauss uses irony to make the point. “While an idealistically reinterpreted religion may perhaps be the most amusing thing in the world, it can in any case no longer be religion” (Strauss 2002, 109).

In his early writings, Strauss clearly envisages a contest between traditional religious faith and modern atheistic science, a contest in which there can be only one victor. Strauss has qualified respect for a candid faith that fearlessly confesses its dogmatic foundations. Such faith is a worthy participant in the contest; it retains some of its power even today: “no atheist emerges unscathed from reading the Psalms and the prophets” (Strauss 2002, 133). Strauss’s awareness of the power and majesty of historical religion is not trivial; it shows that his main concern is not to moralize

against traditional religion. But this should not be confused with the view that it deserves rational approbation. When science encounters the Bible, “it has no right to speak of a factor of an active power called ‘God.’” It properly rejects dogmatic presuppositions in favor of rational assumptions. “For science the history of God’s rule necessarily turns into a history of theophany; it must become psychology. It must understand in what ultimate experiences talk about ‘God’ is grounded. It must analyze ‘God.’ God is not a subject; for science God remains merely an object” (Strauss 2002, 133). Contemporary historians and exegetes are to be commended when they retain fidelity to their scientific calling. That Strauss holds this view is clear from his defense of Simon Dubnow (whose work he had criticized quite harshly) against Ernst Simon’s attack. “Whatever one may think of the value of Dubnow’s historiography, the intention of this man, which aims at freedom from theological prejudice, redounds to his honor” (Strauss 2002, 134). The mark that Spinoza left on Strauss is not difficult to see.

For the early Strauss, the Enlightenment critique of tradition commands more intellectual respect than the “critique of the critique” that he associates with idealists and romantics. Strauss acknowledges that the Enlightenment critique achieved its historical success not only (or even principally) by the exercise of pure reason, but also by having (as Lessing put it) “laughed this Orthodoxy to death.” Yet even at its most comic, the rational core of the critique is strong enough to discredit the notion that one can “good-naturedly laugh at the Enlighteners” (Strauss 2002, 132). Neither good-natured laughter nor platitudes about the “shallowness of the Enlightenment” or the “soullessness, and so on, of the nineteenth century” (Strauss 2002, 126) should be confused with a real critique of the Enlightenment critique of tradition (see Addendum 7). The historical consequence of Enlightenment critique is that “the dogmatic presuppositions of orthodoxy have been recognized as questionable” (Strauss 2002, 128). The critique has “successfully placed a severe limitation on any claim to the validity of tradition” (Strauss 2002, 108). As a result, the “open discussion of theological problems has become a stormy issue ever since the verification of revelation, once customary in traditional theology, was made impossible by the European critique” (Strauss 2002, 125). Against fashionable reconciliations of religion and reason, or equally trendy assignments of each to distinct, non-interacting spheres, Strauss takes the intellectual conscience to prohibit modern man from accepting any of the presuppositions that are essential to revealed religion. “The habit of intellectual principles without reasons is called faith,” Nietzsche declares (*Human, All Too Human* §226; Nietzsche

1986, 140). Such a habit, typical of the bound spirit, is impossible for the free spirit. On this point, the author of the “Zionist essays” clearly concurs with Nietzsche’s conception of the intellectual conscience and its demands.

Undoubtedly the young Strauss gained confidence in his own ability as thinker and critic from his early reading of Spinoza and Nietzsche. Against the dominant tendencies of contemporary thought in Germany, “the land of ‘reconciliations’ and ‘sublations,’” Strauss urges his fellow Jews to face squarely the dual oppositions between tradition and science, tradition and modern politics. He invites them to join him in the project of building an unabashedly political Zionism that acknowledges these oppositions. Later in life, Strauss will criticize his early political Zionism on the ground that “it could not solve the Jewish problem because of the narrowness of its original conception, however noble” (Strauss 1997, 5). The modern liberal state cannot solve the Jewish problem, he says, because it cannot prevent discrimination against Jews by individuals or groups. In short, the theologico-political problem survives political Zionism. That Strauss rejects political Zionism as a solution to the Jewish problem—which he will come to judge as “insoluble”—is clear (Strauss 1997, 13). But it would be a hasty and unwarranted inference to conclude that Strauss abandons the basic postulates of his early writings which inspired him to embrace political Zionism, particularly the core oppositions between tradition and reason, obedience and insight, philosophy and revelation.

The reader who attends closely to the early essays will see much of Strauss himself in the thinkers explicated by the later commentaries. Full justification of this claim would naturally require another essay—or series of essays—devoted to close reading of Strauss’s later writings. Here I can only suggest it as a concluding reflection. To take one exemplary instance, drawn from *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Strauss finds that in Farabi’s *Plato* “the praise of philosophy is meant to rule out any claims of cognitive value which may be raised on behalf of religion in general and of revealed religion in particular” (Strauss 1952, 13). The reader of the early writings will readily perceive the harmony between the stance attributed to Farabi and that of Strauss himself, easily recollecting the grounds on which Strauss would deny “cognitive value” to religion. That the later Strauss does not assert, in his own name, the lack of cognitive value possessed by religion, is true. He has learned to combine audacity in thinking with moderation in speech. But this hardly suggests a chasm between the early and the later Strauss. Any commentator who is at the same time a genuine

philosopher, knowing that truth is *dangerous*, will follow Farabi's lead and "avail himself...of the specific immunity of the commentator or of the historian in order to speak his mind concerning grave matters in his 'historical' works, rather than in the works in which he speaks in his own name" (Strauss 1952, 14). Strauss's historical commentaries read as a series of artful efforts to guide "potential philosophers" from "the popular views which are indispensable for all practical and political purposes to the truth which is merely and purely theoretical" (Strauss 1952, 36). What can be learned about Strauss's thinking about the truth which is theoretical, as recoverable from a close reading of the early writings, casts much light on the works published after 1940. The early writings, it seems safe to say, provide an invaluable entry into the contents of the mind spoken more famously, if far more obliquely, by the later Strauss.

#### ADDENDA

1. In framing the matter thus, I am indicating at least tentative agreement with the claim that the mature Strauss is an esoteric writer. An influential argument for this view of Strauss may be found at Rosen 1987, 107-9, 118, 122, 137. More recently, Eugene Sheppard has argued that Strauss begins to practice "his unmistakable multilevel writing style" almost immediately upon arriving in the United States (Sheppard 2006, 79, 83, 91, 108). For a challenge to the inference from Strauss's esoteric reading to his esoteric writing, and to Rosen's argument in particular, see Zuckert and Zuckert 2006, 127-52. The debate between Rosen and the Zuckerts cannot be directly entered into here. Its outcome, while important, does not directly affect my reading of the "Zionist essays."

That Strauss was aware very early in his career of the possibility of esoteric writing seems likely. Well before he made what one recent biographer terms his "Farabian turn" (Tanguay 2007, 79-98), he would have known this pair of sentences from Nietzsche: "Truth and the belief that something is true: two completely diverse worlds of interest, almost antithetical worlds—one gets to them by fundamentally different roads. To be knowledgeable in this—in the Orient that is almost enough to constitute a sage: thus the Brahmins understood it, thus Plato understands it, thus does every student of esoteric wisdom understand it" (Nietzsche 1990b, 144-45). Strauss's legendary politeness may be illuminated by Nietzsche's claim that "a politeness which tells lies is possible in men of knowledge" (*Twilight of the Idols* §46; Nietzsche 1990b, 111).

2. Laurence Lampert argues (persuasively, I think) that Nietzsche goes underground, but hardly disappears from the writings published in the decade after the early Zionist essays. He detects “Nietzsche’s subterranean presence in *Philosophy and Law*” and sees that he is the “massive unnamed presence of the Introduction,” adding that “a furtive reader of Nietzsche had become a furtive writer with Nietzsche on his mind but not on his page” (Lampert 1996, 5-6). Against such readings, it has been proposed that Strauss clearly breaks with Nietzsche in the 1930s, launching a full-fledged critique of the “atheism from intellectual probity” held by Nietzsche (see, e.g., Janssens 2008, 94; Zuckert and Zuckert 2006, 33-34). In a future essay, I will say why I think such readings depend upon a misunderstanding of Strauss’s intentions in the Introduction of *Philosophy and Law* and the 1962 autobiographical preface to the English edition of *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*.

3. Two decades later, Strauss will conclude his 1944 lecture on “How to Study Medieval Philosophy” as follows: “For there are many important lessons which modern man can learn only from pre-modern, from un-modern thinkers” (Strauss 1996, 337). The clarification of “premodern” with the appositive “unmodern” suggests the abiding presence of Strauss’s affinity with Nietzsche’s thought, at least in this respect.

4. This aspect of the “Zionist essays” suggests the need to qualify Eugene Sheppard’s claim that Strauss universally scorns liberalism in his early thought (Sheppard 2006, 36). Sheppard’s determination to make the case that Strauss is a “conservative” may cause him to overlook evidence for the early Strauss’s advocacy of a version of liberalism based on reason, rather than any kind of aestheticism or romanticism. This commitment to liberalism does nothing to imply that he is uncritical of the weak liberal democracy of the Weimar Republic, presenting “the sorry spectacle of justice without a sword or of justice unable to use a sword” (Strauss 1997, 1) Sheppard is entirely correct to hold that Strauss is deeply sympathetic to Carl Schmitt’s critique of Weimar liberalism. For a clear distinction in Strauss between German liberal democracy and liberal democracy as such, see his 1941 lecture on German Nihilism (Strauss 1999, 359). A letter to Kojève of 3 June 1965 will suggest a (parallel?) distinction between reasoned political views and those of “U.S. liberals” (Strauss 2000, 313).

5. For evidence that Strauss’s respect for the “modern followers of Thomas Aquinas” does not increase in the years following the “Zionist essays,” see the letter to Voegelin of 9 May 1943, which states that “neo-Thomism is in its intent more radical” in its implementation, of course, it is

of a low level, and not worth considering” (Cooper and Emberley 1993, 18); see also Strauss’s letter to Kojève of 4 September 1949 (Strauss 2000, 244). No “typically modern dualism” for Strauss constitutes a serious challenge to Spinoza’s view. To support the claim that such dualisms lack seriousness, Strauss enlists the authority of Aristotle: “From the point of view of Aristotle—and who could dare to be a better judge than Aristotle?—the issue between the mechanical and the teleological conception of the universe is decided by the manner in which the problem of the heavens, the heavenly bodies, and their motion is solved. Now in this respect, which from Aristotle’s own point of view was the decisive one, the issue seems to have been decided in favor of the nonteleological conception of the universe” (Strauss 1953, 8).

Spinoza exerts a massive influence on the young Strauss, an influence which does not fail to leave its mark on later writings. Steven Smith goes so far as to suggest that “in the final analysis Strauss’s difference with Spinoza is not with what he said, but with how he said it” (Smith 2006, 83). Strauss’s fundamental sympathy for a nonteleological view of nature may also be detected in his regard for Lucretius. About *De rerum natura* he writes to Voegelin in 1949: “his poem is the purest and most glorious expression of the attitude that elicits consolation from the utterly hopeless truth, on the basis of its being only the truth, there is no idea of the use of the hopeless, godless truth for some social purpose, as is almost always the case with other fashions or trends; nor is there any aestheticism or sentimentality. I do not believe that people like Santayana or Valéry can understand Lucretius. The next approximation in our world is the scientifically slanted aspect of Nietzsche” (Cooper and Emberley 1993, 62).

6. Another instance of likely Nietzschean influence in *Natural Right and History* is Strauss’s repeated use of the phrase “sacrifice of the intellect” in the discussion of Max Weber (Strauss 1953, 72, 73, 76). The phrase has a long history in Christian devotion, but it seems likely that Strauss knew it from his reading of *Beyond Good and Evil* §23 and §229.

7. Shortly after he writes these words in 1925, Strauss seems to take the role played by mockery in the Enlightenment’s historical success as evidence that the critique of traditional religion is not rational at its core. Between 1926 and 1928, as he writes his book on Spinoza, he will claim that “through laughter and mockery, reason overleaps the barriers that she was not able to overcome when she proceeded pace by pace in formal argumentation” (Strauss 1997, 146). Similarly, the 1935 Introduction to *Philosophy and Law* will suggest that “the importance of mockery for the Enlightenment’s

critique of religion is an indirect proof of the irrefutability of orthodoxy” (Strauss 1995, 30). But while Strauss thinks that the Enlightenment critique’s use of ridicule points to its possible limitations, he never goes back on his early claim that the critique possesses an irreducibly rational core. In 1928, presumably after he finished the Spinoza book, Strauss addresses the issue directly in his review of Freud’s *Future of an Illusion*. Agreeing with Freud’s claim that religious doctrines are both unprovable and irrefutable, Strauss asks: “Does this mean, however, that science is not and cannot be the judge of religion?” He answers: “By no means. While the critique of religion cannot shake the doctrines of religion, it can certainly shake the justifications of these doctrines” (Strauss 2002, 205).

The young Strauss’s distrust of critiques that invoke “the shallowness of the Enlightenment” finds expression in one of his later students. “It seems absurd to me to say that Bacon, Descartes, Hobbes, Leibniz, Locke, Montesquieu and even Voltaire (who might be considered a mere popularizer of these others) were less deep than Jacques Maritain or T.S. Eliot—to mention two famous contemporaries from whose mouths I learned as a young man that the Enlightenment was shallow” (Bloom 1987, 292).

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Jan H. Blits, *New Heaven, New Earth: Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009, 238 pp., \$70.

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I had regarded myself as quite familiar with Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, a play of which I am inordinately fond, but reading Jan Blits's careful *explication de texte* showed me how much I had been missing. The work is a masterful reading of Shakespeare's great play, practically line by line, bringing out the richness of the poet's language and thought.

Blits promises not to "intrude any theory upon the play," and he is as good as his word. Instead, he allows the play to speak for itself, "by closely examining Shakespeare's plot, characters, language, structure, digressions, allusions and other devices." The only exception is that he copiously annotates the text with references to the Bible and to classical literature (Plutarch, of course, but also Livy, Cicero, Seneca and many other authors). This impressive scholarship provides useful background for many of the events and issues discussed in the play. The deviation from the author's promise may be justified on the grounds that Shakespeare could expect that his audience would be familiar with the Bible and would catch the allusions to it, and that the educated part of his audience would be similarly familiar with the classical sources.

As suggested by his choice of title, Blits reads *Antony and Cleopatra* as Shakespeare's portrayal of the transformation of the ancient world from paganism to Christianity, a change accompanied on the political level by the replacement of republicanism with empire. The two transformations are related: the pagan gods were seen as protectors of Rome against its enemies, and republicanism provided the framework in which ambitious

Roman aristocrats, rotating among the top political-military offices, competed with each other in winning military victories for Rome. Once Rome had conquered most of the known world and had absorbed the non-Roman populations into its political structure, the pagan gods no longer had this role to play. And the process of far-flung conquest, involving as it did the multi-year efforts of large armies operating at considerable distances from Rome, necessitated that generals remain in command of their legions for extended periods: eventually, the legions became loyal to their commanders rather than to Rome, setting the stage for the years of ruinous civil war that finally doomed the republic.

Thus, the way was opened for a universal empire ruled by a single individual who could obtain and secure the legions' loyalty. This political change cleared the way for the spread of belief in a single God, who did not distinguish between Romans and others, and whose message was peace, not victory in war. At the same time, the public-spiritedness of Rome's republican years gave way to a privatization of individual concerns. Citizens became subjects who could no longer find fulfillment in political-military activity, which no longer promised to reward successful generals with high office and long-lasting if not immortal glory. Such immortality as might be possible would have to be gained not through military glory but through humility and obedience to a universal God.

Blits's careful line-by-line interpretation of the play demonstrates how Shakespeare brings to life this transformation of political and religious life. All of its aspects, from the most political to the most personal, are carefully examined and illustrated. The reader gains an enriched understanding of the remarkable *tableau* Shakespeare has painted of this crucial period in the history of the West.

There is no doubt that Blits is correct in seeing the replacement of the Roman Republic by the Empire, and the concomitant devaluation of political-military ambition, as one of the play's main themes. For example, in a revealing phrase, one of Octavius Caesar's officers describes him to Cleopatra as "the universal landlord" (3.13.75; references are to act, scene and line, respectively, in the Arden edition of *Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. John Wilders [London: Routledge, 1995]). Similarly, the myriad New Testament allusions, both serious—e.g., Antony's claim that his love for Cleopatra is bigger than both earth and heaven and hence could be bounded only in a "new heaven, new earth" (1.1.17, alluding to Revelation 21:1)—and comic—e.g., Charmian's desire to "be married to three kings" and to "have a child

... to whom Herod of Jewry may do homage” (1.2.28-30; Charmian is one of Cleopatra’s attendants)—make clear that the transition from paganism to Christianity is also an intended topic of the play.

Nevertheless, one is left with a certain discomfort. After all, the way of life to which Antony and Cleopatra aspire doesn’t seem on the surface to have much to do with Christianity. It is true that it is a life devoted to love (consider Antony’s imploring Cleopatra to stop her teasing by evoking “the love of Love and her soft hours” [1.1.45]) but it is emphatically not the love of God. It is also true that the emerging political order in Rome, in which the ruler can be a coward “whose ministers would prevail/ Under the service of a child as soon/ As i’th’command of Caesar” (3.13.23-25), is insufficiently noble to retain Antony’s interest and allegiance.

However, Antony’s preferred alternative is a world in which “the nobleness of life” is to partake in a glorious love affair of the sort that only Antony and Cleopatra, the “peerless” “mutual pair,” are capable. This love affair, moreover, is not a private matter; Antony insists that its unmatched quality be recognized by “the world” “on pain of punishment” (1.1.37-41). In other words, Antony seems to seek an imperium of love and pleasure in place of the bureaucratized administrative apparatus that appears to be taking shape under Octavius Caesar.

Throughout the play, as Blits notes repeatedly, the various characters “express their deep dissatisfaction at gaining what they had long sought.” Blits attributes this to the turning against itself of “the self-satisfaction of private life” (6). As true as this observation is, there is one significant exception: in the most beautiful passage of a play that abounds in beautiful language, Antony’s subordinate and friend Enobarbus explains why Antony, despite his marriage to Caesar’s sister Octavia, will never leave Cleopatra:

Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale  
Her infinite variety; other women cloy  
The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry  
Where most she satisfies. (2.2.245-48)

Cleopatra offers, it would seem, the prospect of endless pleasure—unlike sexual pleasure, or the pleasures of eating and drinking, the pleasure provided by Cleopatra does not produce exhaustion or satiety. Whereas, in general, the Roman characters in the play understand Antony’s attraction to Cleopatra and Egypt in terms of sex, food, and drink, it is in fact difficult to say precisely what, for Antony, the pleasure provided by Cleopatra

consisted of: the one specific example Antony provides is strangely philosophic in character—he and Cleopatra will “wander [at night] through the streets, and note the qualities of people” (1.1.54-55; this is echoed later in the play when, after Actium, Antony is willing to surrender to Octavius, asking only for permission to live as a “private man in Athens” [3.12.15] ).

As Antony’s desertion at the battle of Actium in order to follow Cleopatra makes clear, this uncontrolled and uncontrollable desire for infinite pleasure proves incompatible with even minimally prudent political-military behavior, let alone with any notion of nobility as understood under the Roman Republic:

Egypt, thou knewst too well  
 My heart was to thy rudder tied by th’ strings  
 And thou shouldst tow me after. O’er my spirit  
 Thy full supremacy thou knewst, and that  
 Thy beck might from the bidding of the gods  
 Command me. (3.11.56-61)

Antony’s sought-after imperium of love and pleasure proves to be a mirage. Soon after the failure of this effort comes the “supper” (4.2.44) attended by Antony’s servants at which, as Blits notes, his behavior echoes that of Jesus (158). Despite Antony’s initial victory at Alexandria (whose full benefit is not obtained, apparently because of Antony’s desire to tell Cleopatra of his exploits, as if Antony were a medieval knight fighting for his lady’s glory: he postpones the final attack until the next morning), there ultimately remains nothing for Antony and Cleopatra but suicide. Antony’s failure paves the way for peace, but also, for “submission and humility, contempt for one’s present existence, and hope, even confidence, in a better life in death” (217).