

interpretation

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- 297 David Lowenthal Leo Strauss's *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*
321 Jan H. Blits Socratic Teaching and Justice: Plato's *Clitophon*
335 Kit R. Christensen Individuation and Commonality in Feuerbach's
"Philosophy of Man"
359 Allan D. Nelson John Stuart Mill: the Reformer Reformed
403 Michael P. Zuckert Appropriation and Understanding in the History of
Political Philosophy: on Quentin Skinner's Method

Book Reviews

- 425 J. E. Parsons, Jr. *Locke's Education for Liberty* by Nathan Tarcov
429 Charles Butterworth *The Modern Self in Rousseau's Confession: a Reply
to St. Augustine* by Ann Hartle
432 Nicholas Capaldi *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life*
by Donald W. Livingston
434 Francis Canavan *Selected Letters of Edmund Burke* edited and with an
introduction by Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr.
435 Dennis Teti *American Conservatism and the American Founding*
by Harry V. Jaffa

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thority of the past and the claims of the future “substitute for divine law to ensure that present governments govern with a sense of shame.” Burke’s appeals to divine law were too explicit and too frequent to admit of that interpretation.

Similarly, one might argue with Mansfield when he says that “Burke does not say in the manner of Thomism that we have natural inclinations in our souls that are fulfilled in politics; the soul is not a theme of his.” Whether or not Burke says anything in the manner of Thomism, it seems a bit extreme to assert that the soul is not a theme of his. It is true that he seldom talks about the soul, but it is hard to see what else he means by his constant references to nature, feeling, reason, and virtue.

These may be only the nits that scholars love to pick and which are half the fun of academic life. They do not, in any case, seriously detract from the value of this well-edited selection of Burke’s letters.

American Conservatism and the American Founding. By Harry V. Jaffa. (Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 1984. xiv + 278 pp.: \$19.95.)

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Professor Jaffa’s Judaism lies near the heart of his impassioned yet meticulously reasoned commitment to American conservatism, a conservatism based on the principles of equality and liberty. Consider this exchange with Willmoore Kendall: “Harry, what have you got against slavery? You wouldn’t be one of the slaves,” said Kendall. “Did you ever hear of Moses?” Jaffa replied, “We Jews tried it once, and now we settle for constitutional government.” America’s moral commitment to equality is the fundamental principle to which Jews may appeal with confidence in order to protect their faith and way of life.

Jaffa’s project is to explicate and defend those twin pillars of Western civilization, reason and revelation. However their respective origins might differ, they have much more in common than either does with radical modernity, which attempts to undermine and replace them both. Yet by pointing to the tensions in thought between antiquity and modernity, reason and revelation, philosophy and the city, Jaffa’s works, with their dialectical or polemical style, are easily misunderstood by those who would rather express righteous indignation than take the pains to consider his central intention. Jaffa describes his intention movingly:

I believe the enterprise of western civilization is consummated each time a soul is saved from the dark night of fanatical obscurantism. It is consummated whenever one soul is released from the pessimism that truth is unobtainable, or not worth the trouble to obtain. It is consummated whenever a single soul is disabused of the proposition that the subjective intensity of one’s convictions matters more than their objective validity. Eternity is indeed the theme of philosophy; but it becomes such when the indi-

vidual soul becomes aware of its power to know, and when it discovers in this power the immortal ground of its mortal existence. This, above all else, is what is meant by saving western civilization, and reversing the decline of the West.

Jaffa's first book explored the confrontation between Aristotelian and Thomistic ethics, and he seems to have absorbed the ancient philosopher's moral-political framework. As a result, he views American politics, so to speak, through Aristotle's eyes. According to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, virtues such as justice, moderation, and courage are each a "median" between two extremes; yet virtue, being rare, is itself a kind of extreme. Virtue needs to be defended—extremely, if necessary. This claim shocks some, perhaps because of our habit of calling virtues "values" or "value judgments." Doesn't freedom imply we should be left to follow our own values, whatever they may be? Jaffa's enterprise consists in restoring the objective ground for the profound difference between good and evil, virtue and vice. "Values," he might say, belong in the Sears catalogue.

Among the multitude of topics discussed in the essays reprinted here, Jaffa thinks the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan and a Republican Senate may have been a watershed election—a kind of electoral revolution that will change the face of American politics for many years. There have been only three or four such elections before 1980: Jefferson's, possibly Jackson's, certainly Lincoln's, and Franklin Roosevelt's. Samuel Lubell and Kevin Phillips have noted the phenomenon of realignment elections, but Jaffa has uniquely seen that such elections amount to a peaceful revolution in the way Americans understand their regime. In every watershed election the victorious party appealed to the founding principles of democracy to oust an entrenched, antidemocratic elite. The 1980 Republicans, Jaffa wrote shortly afterward, apparently succeeded in taking democracy back to the people, wresting control from a Democratic Party that had no stomach for continuing the fight against totalitarianism abroad, and moral indecency, economic redistributionism, and uncontrolled bureaucracy here at home. If this interpretation is correct, it would be ratified in the 1984 elections, just as FDR's revolution was ratified in 1936.

The paradigmatic U.S. election was 1860; the paradigmatic political drama the Civil War; and Lincoln is the paradigmatic American statesman. Jaffa, whose second book was a confrontation, in the form of an analysis of the Lincoln–Douglas debates, argues throughout the work under review that Lincoln always understood the Constitution, and American political issues generally, in the light of the Declaration of Independence's teaching that all men are created equal. For Jaffa's Lincoln, the Constitution itself is insufficient as a guide to the deeper issues of politics, such as chattel slavery. Trying to interpret the Constitution without a rigorous reading of the Declaration can lead to monstrosities like the Supreme Court's Dred Scott decision, according to which blacks "had no rights" that white men were bound to respect. Lincoln claimed that decision resulted from a conspiracy among the Chief Justice (Taney), the President (Buchanan), a

former President (Pierce), and the recognized national Democratic Party leader (Stephen A. Douglas). Yet Lincoln never supported breaking the law, disobeying the individual decision as between the slave Scott and his “owner.” Instead he proposed a Republican majority in Congress committed to reversing the principle of inequality the Dred Scott decision embodied by passing new laws confirming equality and setting slavery “on the course of ultimate extinction.” Lincoln’s “moderation” disgusted abolitionists quite as much as his “extremism” infuriated slavery apologists. Lincoln wanted democracy by enlightened consent—majority rule bounded by a proper understanding of natural (or as we now prefer to say, “human”) rights.

Lincoln’s greatness is revealed in his capacity to explicate the paradoxical principle of enlightened consent. He regarded it as the only way liberal democracy could be made moral and free, and his genius lay in reforming American democracy—notwithstanding a bloody Civil War—in accordance with that formulation. Lincoln is the archetype of the great statesman, possessing political capacity either to destroy or rebuild an entire regime. One need only study his Lyceum Address of 1838 to see that before Lincoln was 30 years old he was well aware of his extraordinary powers.

Jaffa’s democratic theme is gradually transformed into the general theme of political greatness. Three of the four dedicatory quotations on great statesmanship are from Calvin Coolidge, a President whose greatness Jaffa believes has been largely unappreciated. The noblest defense of democracy consists in showing the type of character that democratic regimes foster: “The man—or the character of the man—who bore the nation through that crisis [the Civil War], seems to me . . . the highest thing in the American regime,” he writes. Jaffa is making two complementary observations here. (1) Every kind of regime must generate defenders; democracy seems to have that ability to the greatest extent. (2) Democracy seems capable of producing a higher or nobler character type than any other regime.

The theme of human greatness is itself transformed into the book’s profound central issue: the age-old tension between politics and philosophy. Expounding the thought of his teacher, Leo Strauss, who learned it from Aristotle’s teacher Plato, Jaffa engages Professor Walter Berns and other fellow students of Strauss in a relentless confrontation designed to elevate the dignity and cognitive status of the political. His quarrel with them is that contrary to some “Straussian” proponents of the contemplative life, politics is not mere “history” or becoming, as distinguished from the “eternity” or being of which the philosophers speak. “The primacy of the good” (Jaffa’s title for his central chapter) holds for both ways of life. While different kinds of regimes may understand the good differently, philosophy cannot help but be political: it must articulate the rank order of regimes and defend the one or ones of highest rank, that is, those most open to the good. This the so-called Straussian defenders of “pure” philosophy are, to say no more, reluctant to do, even when the fate of the philosophic life itself is at stake in the

global struggle against those who would impose a universal homogeneous state. The truths of politics may or may not be “self-evident,” but nobility, virtue, and human dignity are no more illusions than the life of philosophy or of piety is itself an illusion.

Jaffa’s defense of American democracy rests on its foundation in nature. Nature may be understood as the eternal cosmic order, a part of which is the order of human nature. The glory of the American Founding Fathers was their extraordinary act of establishing an entire political system on the basis of a true understanding of human nature, described in the Declaration and in other writings in terms of natural rights. They provided Americans (and ultimately the whole world) with a permanent moral and political standard. Natural right implies natural law as a consequence: men cannot have a right by nature without taking their duties from nature as well. Certainly before 1776 no regime ever claimed to be founded in nature. Jaffa contends that because of the “dignity of the principles” it embodies, political philosophy, which comes to sight in the distinction between the natural and the conventional, is compelled to defend both American democracy and the integrity of moral virtue.

The scope of Jaffa’s intention is breathtaking: to rescue the West from nihilism. Nihilism—the opinion that there is no fixed or unchanging ground of morals, politics, or thought—is the end product of the historicism at the core of modernity. Historicism may be described as an opinion that the mind is transformed by the history of human experience such that “we” understand our forbears better or differently than they understood themselves—that is, “we” cannot understand them *as* they understood themselves.

Politically, historicism means that the form of regimes is determined by historical necessity. Historicism often assumes a progressive character, according to which the most recent regimes in the “process of history” must be superior to their predecessors; for example, Marxist Russia *must* represent an advance over republican America. Historicist philosophy, whether progressive or not, undermines the possibility of fundamental criticism of the character of regimes from any standpoint outside the historical process itself. The inescapable problem is that it is impossible to demonstrate the superiority of “our” epoch, when historicism rose to self-consciousness, without knowing whether “our” epoch is the final epoch; or, to put it differently, it cannot be known whether the philosophy of historicism is not itself only one phase of the historical process, to be transcended by some future nonhistoricist age. Historicism is logically and rationally self-defeating; it ends in the abyss of nothingness.

Professor Jaffa has probed the American political tradition to its deepest roots and demonstrated the high status of that tradition. Conservatism is the defense of tradition qua “our” tradition. Jaffa has shown what is unique and truthful in “our” tradition and has given Americans the profoundest rationale for the legitimacy of equality and liberty constituting the democratic way of life.

The twentieth century has lived from its first days in the shadow of Western

decline. That shadow was first limned by Nietzsche, who seems finally to blame it on his ancient teacher, who was also Plato's teacher, Socrates, the philosopher "who first brought philosophy down from the heavens." Nevertheless, the cause for the West's decline is also the cause for the West's hope: historicism, having dissolved the fixed order of nature, found that it had dissolved itself.

The posthistoricist world seems to have two choices left to it: either to live in the nihilist abyss, or to restore moral and political order, approximately as the classics understood it, reconstituted by what, following Strauss, I may term a "philosophy of the future." At any rate it is the achievement of Jaffa to have brought the political insight of the classics to bear on modern American democracy and ennobled democracy by articulating its highest possibilities. In doing so he has helped save the life of philosophic contemplation and of pious adherence to that "fear of the Lord" which Proverbs say is "the beginning of wisdom." Jaffa's work amounts to a substantial contribution to the endeavor of reversing the decline of the West.

William F. Buckley wrote a gracious forward to this book, and Charles Kesler provides an introduction carefully elaborating the significance of the Declaration of Independence for Jaffa's teaching.