

Book Reviews

The Crisis of Liberal Democracy: A Straussian Perspective. Kenneth L. Deutsch and Walter Soffer, editors. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988, 304 pp.; cloth \$44.50; paper \$16.95 (corrected edition*).

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The editors write, "The crisis of liberal democracy is best understood as a crisis of moral foundations," the moral neutrality of liberal democracy "concerning choices of ways of life." Liberal democrats often believe "assertions about the good" to be "noncognitive, radically personal"; perhaps as often, they concede cognitive, 'impersonal' status to such assertions but call individual freedom the highest good. As a result, "Liberal democratic regimes have failed to develop standards of political morality by which to judge and influence actions that affect the character and preservation of the regime itself"; on a loftier plane, they offer no "public vision of the good."

Against this tendency, Leo Strauss defended natural right. Liberal democrats 'need' natural right if they will not succumb to some form of nihilism more or less artfully concealed—and in a liberal democracy, public artfulness is too poor to conceal anything for long. Although liberal democracy, a modern regime, rests on modern natural right, which turns on itself and finally issues in nihilism, Strauss nonetheless sees nonmodern reasons to support the liberal regimes in contemporary circumstances. He would reestablish them in classical natural right.

The editors divide their book into three parts, with four, eight, and two essays respectively—a total of fifteen if the introduction is included. The first part contains essays discussing Strauss's views on "the question of natural right." The second part contains essays discussing liberalism and its relation to liberality, freedom and equality, consent, and nihilism. The essays in the third part concern liberalism in the United States.

In "Leo Strauss: Three Quarrels, Three Questions, One Life," Michael Platt provides an overview in which the details never blur. In politics, the contradictions between ancients and moderns, reason and revelation, philosophy and poetry, cause quarrels; among philosophers, they raise questions. But a true life is unitary, and a philosophic life proceeds with the knowledge that some questions

*The first edition of this book, published in 1987, contained numerous typographical errors. These errors have been corrected in the new edition. The press has also taken the opportunity to change the color from its initial and unfortunate lavender to a restful blue.

should be ranked higher than any contentious set of answers. Platt writes two marvelous sentences on Machiavelli, who raises all of these questions in an especially quarrelsome way: “. . . Machiavelli allows anger at God to become anger at the good. In this want of discrimination Strauss saw a failure of philosophy to be philosophic.” But by the same token, Strauss’s subordination of politics to philosophy never reduces politics to the status of mere rhetoric. Like Socrates, Strauss attends to human things in order to become more philosophic, not merely to defend himself or even to give liberally in a spirit “more charitable than true.” “The ancient Socrates is superior to Nietzsche and to his Socrates in both practical wisdom and solitude because he has found the least unsatisfactory reconciliation of philosophy and the city.” Perhaps glancing at those today who call Strauss a Platonist, a Nietzschean, an Epicurean, or some other thing, Platt calls Socrates the one “Strauss loved most”—Socrates, the philosopher most free of doctrines, the most full of questions, the example of the philosophic life.

Victor Gourevich reads Strauss’s *Natural Right and History* to ask if Strauss unqualifiedly endorses classical natural right. He carefully suggests that Strauss to an extent partakes of the historicism Strauss apparently attacks. Historicists claim that the Whole is unknowable even in principle because “where there are no human beings there can be no being,” and human beings come into existence only at a certain point in time; in saying that Socratic philosophy concerns itself with an “unchanging framework” of “fundamental problems and alternatives” that is “*coeval with human thought*” (emphasis added), Strauss gives at least part of the point to Heidegger. Strauss “refuses to speak of philosophy as a potentiality”; it is “no more than a possibility, and he refuses to subscribe to the classics’ understanding of it as a permanent possibility.” But if a historicist, Strauss eschews the thumotic dogmatizing of some moderns; unlike Platt, Gourevich believes Strauss to be somewhat of an Epicurean with respect to politics. To Gourevich, natural right and politics generally appear more as noble lies than as paths to philosophy.

Roger D. Masters discusses the preface to *Natural Right and History* as a path to better understanding the contrast between Aristotelian biology and modern physics. Masters ‘corrects’ Strauss, whose “formulation of the modern predicament seems to be derived substantially from Nietzsche.” Nietzsche shares the modern physics view of nature as a human construct. Against this, Masters defends Aristotelian biology, including the Aristotelian definition of man as a political animal. He blames monotheism and creationism for the exaggerations of modern physics, obsessed with problems of origin and making, problems now dangerously secularized. Masters errs, I think, in failing to mention Strauss’s considerable interest in Hans Jonas’ book *The Phenomenon of Life*, a statement of neo-Aristotelian biology. Strauss by no means believed modern physics to have refuted Aristotle on the level of biology.

John G. Gunnell makes an important contribution to the volume by bringing

Strauss before the bar of sincere moral indignation. Calling Strauss's work "rhetorical" in the pejorative sense, he describes the Straussian account of liberal democracy as "abstract," "intellectualized," and "ideational." Strauss's description of "the modern project" is a "tale," albeit not one told by an idiot. On the contrary, Strauss exhibits great cunning in the deliberate use of self-contradiction and academicist myth; Gunnell decries the thought that "dissembling is an acceptable form of education and scholarly exchange." He does not consider that Strauss may thereby repel the thoughtless and cause the thoughtful to think harder. Gunnell charges Strauss with knowing that philosophy cannot emerge from the cave, that "no philosophical solution to philosophical relativism and historicism" exists. He does not prove this assertion. Further, Strauss's "claim" that "value relativism" contradicts itself "is far from a compelling basis for embracing absolutism"; Gunnell does not produce any evidence that Strauss commended any such embrace.

The volume's second part begins with an exchange between Hilail Gildin and Victor Gourevich, an exchange that begins but does not end with a consideration of liberal democracy. Gildin observes that for Strauss, Nietzsche's critique of modern rationalism precludes a return to early modern political philosophy as a solution to the crisis of liberal democracy. But liberal democracy "derives powerful support" from premodern political philosophy—although very indirectly, as that philosophy was not democratic. Liberal democracies defend philosophy; through the rule of law, they also provide political stability based upon a certain kind of moderation. Both liberal democrats and Aristotle agree that in a political economy of abundance, constitutional democracy is the best regime one can reasonably hope for. "The essential difference between liberal democracy" and its principal contemporary rivals, communist oligarchies and tyrannies, "is that liberal democracy regards some things as more sacred than itself," and thus tries to leave them alone. In an era of vast technological power, this is no trivial good. "Liberal democracy gives the effort to preserve the western tradition, in a manner worthy of that tradition, a fighting chance."

Gourevich finds Gildin's reading of Strauss unduly 'optimistic.' Moderation is a virtue of conduct but not a virtue of thought, and Strauss distinguishes sharply between political men and philosophic ones: Political men crave the love of people but philosophers do not. The sharpness of this contrast ought to be maintained. If it is not, philosophic doubt will infect politics, and political dogmatism will pollute philosophy. In modernity, this could result in the *Straussian* promotion of "technology and material plenty and, hence, unleashing the passions that most contribute to them," thus overturning the very classical natural right Strauss intends publicly to uphold.

Gildin's reply occupies the central position in the volume. He finds it implausible to read Aristotle's *Politics* as a merely 'public' exercise. That is, political life exhibits rationally defensible virtues or an order of natural right not valuable *only* as a 'support system' for the philosophic life, and far from

merely involving an attachment to ‘us’ and a hostility to ‘them.’ Further, one need not regard the moral virtues “as ends in themselves”—as gentlemen do—in order to have “the right to strong, principled, and perfectly genuine political preferences and convictions.” As examples, Gildin cites Machiavelli and Alexander Kojève, prudently omitting the word “principled” from his description of them. Prudence is indeed the mediating virtue between philosophic and political virtue. This suggests a hierarchy of virtues, the lower approximating or imitating the higher. To Aristotle, “true piety consists in making oneself as like as possible to God, the exemplar of theoretical wisdom.” The pious gentlemen may be brought to sympathize with philosophers, if philosophers educate gentlemen prudently. Statesmanship, “the highest practical knowledge,” is both “essentially different” but inseparable from the highest theoretical knowledge.

The five remaining essays in the second part apply Straussian interpretive principles to the study of political philosophers who address issues now confronting liberal democracies. Richard H. Cox contrasts Aristotle and Machiavelli on liberality. Cox finds educated people today largely unable to “judge thoughtfully concerning the nature and purpose of private property,” a basis of liberty and of liberality. Aristotelian liberality, “a highly disciplined moral activity” guided by prudence, consisting of privately giving to the right people, at the right time, in the right way, overcomes the inordinate desire to protect one’s body by accumulating “external possessions.” Liberality contrasts with magnificence, the virtue associated with public giving. Machiavellian liberality consists of giving or appearing to give ultimately in order to take. All Machiavellian *virtù* is “a mode of acquisition of dominion,” and that includes both the courage of the lion and the prudence of the fox. Men give the name of liberal not to those who give virtuously but to those who give sumptuously. To avoid taking from one of his subjects in order to give to others—a dangerous practice—the liberal prince will plunder other cities. This is ‘frugality.’ The basis of ‘giving’ is getting.

Laurence Berns contrasts Aristotle with modern political philosophers on the themes of freedom and equality. To moderns, freedom means autonomy, self-legislation. Neither God nor nature ‘legislates’ for man; rather, the nonhuman is to be conquered. Although the American founders partake “in large part” of the “new science of politics,” much of their task requires an Aristotelian understanding of prudence and of liberal education. Their regime, although not identical to an Aristotelian polity or mixed regime, nonetheless imitates many of that regime’s best procedures and effects. Berns emphasizes the contemporary need to strengthen the aristocratic component of the regime: “Who is to educate the educators?”

Judith A. Best examines John Locke’s teaching on consent. Locke is no simple celebrant of modern auto-nomy. Although he agrees with Hobbes “that consent is the sole condition of legitimate government,” he rejects Hobbesian absolutism because tyranny is even worse than the State of Nature. It is worse

because it is even more unreasonable. "Consent is more than agreement; it is more than an act of will. It is an act of determinate will, an agreement to a specific thing: the protection of natural rights." But this "collapse of the distinction between reason and consent" causes a problem best exemplified in the American regime in the figure of Stephen A. Douglas. Popular sovereignty attempts to replace constitutional government; democracy would overthrow republicanism.

In "Nihilism and Modern Democracy in the Thought of Nietzsche," Thomas L. Pangle provides a brilliant introduction to Nietzsche's political thought. This thought begins, so to speak, with a critique of modern "decadence," the exposure of the "nihilism" or nothingness of the deepest convictions of both Jerusalem and Athens. All standards of significance and coherence "are in the last analysis arbitrary," a fact perceived only by philosophers who have "the historical sense" and therefore engage in "historical philosophizing." Because man is or has been "the esteeming animal," historical relativism threatens the death of man as well as the death of God, by giving man nothing to esteem. Pangle traces Nietzsche's historicist philosophizing about history, his attempt to show that Athenian reason and Jerusalemite conscience turn on themselves or self-destruct. Both finally yield either fully conscious nihilism or a sort of reverse Hegelianism in which history ends not at the summit of wisdom but in the exhaustion and self-contempt of the 'Last Man.' Nietzsche would avoid this whimpering apocalypse not so much by simply reinspiring man but by attempting to overcome 'man.' As Pangle need not remark, this attempt is neither liberal nor democratic.

Robert Eden's characteristically insightful essay, "Why Wasn't Weber a Nihilist?" illuminates the sort of concerns raised by Professor Gunnell. "Weber's perspective is a defense of politics, and as Strauss attempts to demonstrate, any defense of politics that abstracts from ranking the causes for which we fight is necessarily a defense of politics *against philosophy*; its root dogma must be the impossibility of political philosophy. My suggestion is that indignation in defense of politics is the basic problem of the social sciences, which Weber ultimately personified." Weber opposes egalitarian liberalism, natural right, vulgar nihilism, and Nietzschean nihilism, but he lacks the classical prudence needed to sustain these rejections. As a result, he falls into a milder version of Nietzscheism. Weber is to Nietzsche what Locke is to Hobbes, but perhaps without Locke's self-knowledge, and almost entirely without Locke's considerable prudence. Modernity finally jettisons the *via contemplativa*. All choices are restricted to the horizon of the *via activa*, politics.

Stephen Salkever begins the third part of the volume, on liberalism in the American regime, with the only sensible question not yet asked: "What if there is no crisis of liberal democracy?" Guided by such unmelodramatic souls as Aristotle, Publius, and de Tocqueville, he almost succeeds in showing that there is no crisis at all. Salkever objects to the way many "theorists" state the

problem, namely, as a conflict between liberty and equality, individual rights and interests versus majority power. He insists that democracy is not simply majority rule but “rule by people who are primarily concerned with income and security.” Democracy becomes liberal “not when it aims at protecting individual rights, but when the members of the ruling people are marked by the characteristic virtues of liberality or generosity or [!] moderation.” One can only admire this subtle Aristotelianizing of the issue. To Aristotle, “the poor who love wealth present greater possibilities for education in virtue than do the wealthy who love honor.” Both Aristotle and de Tocqueville consider aristocracy noble but dangerous, because the aristocratic love of honor (the desire-to-acquire as manifested among the few who are rich) can lead to the most spectacular crimes. But democracies lend themselves to the rule of law and custom—especially ‘middle-class’ democracies, where the many are too busy to rule directly. “The quality of any given democracy should be seen as advertorial, as it were—it depends on the attitude democrats take toward the pursuit of wealth, income, and security, a pursuit that is a necessary feature of our lives. This attitude in turn is primarily determined by the nature of customs or traditions that inform democratic life in particular places.” Democracies need education “in the light of [their] own best possibilities,” not some radical transformation. *Pace* Rousseau: We do not need citizens but good *bourgeois*. De Tocqueville shows that America in its local politics and its jury system does have a ‘citizen’ basis for its liberal regime, but this is no more (and no less) than a basis. Certain kinds of religion contribute to “habits of even-tempered benevolence and liberality, which are the measure of the best democratic lives.”

Salkever nearly abstracts the United States from the world. “Perhaps the most significant difference” between de Tocqueville’s America and ours, “is that it can no longer be said that we have no great wars to fear.” He does not say, “no great wars to deter.” That would raise questions of discipline and foresight, problematic in any democracy whether liberal or illiberal. Nor does he mention Soviet Russia. Those who ignore the political context of the most likely future great war, can much more easily deny the need for old-fashioned citizenship and its willingness to fight and to sacrifice for ‘God and country.’ They can more easily doubt the existence of any real crisis of liberal democracy. They can assume that some prudent balance of liberty and equality will suffice for the perpetuation of our political institutions, overlooking military efforts, which require more than liberty and equality.

In the volume’s concluding essay, William T. Bluhm asks, “Can individual preferences be the starting points for the construction of public order?” Surveying the writings of Bentham, John Harsanyi, John Rawls, Robert Nozick, and William Riker, he finds no solid answer. Rather like Weber, he concludes that “modern political science, to avoid cynicism and sterility, needs to address itself to questions about the nature of the good life, the character of trust and