

# Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Spring 2020

Volume 46 Issue 2

- 163 Michael Anton Montesquieu's *Considerations*: A Case Study in the Cycle of Regimes
- 187 Marco Menon Leo Strauss in Italy: The "Three Waves" of Italian Strauss Studies
- 229 James H. Nichols Jr. A Discourse on the Beginning of Tacitus's *Histories*
- 261 Thomas L. Pangle A Synoptic Introduction to the Ontological Background of Aristotle's Political Theory
- 291 Rong Hengying The Reception of Leo Strauss in China: Two Chinese Straussians, between Theological Temptation and Political Criticism
- 313 Paul Seaton **Review Essay:**  
*Naïve Readings: Revelles Political and Philosophic* by Ralph Lerner
- 331 Erik Dempsey **An Exchange on Carey:**  
Reviews of *Natural Reason and Natural Law: An Assessment of the Straussian Criticisms of Thomas Aquinas*, by James Carey
- 339 John W. Grant
- 345 Antonio Sosa
- 353 James Carey Reply to reviewers
- 371 Erik Dempsey
- 377 John Grant Reply to James Carey
- 383 Marco Andreacchio **An Exchange on Menon's Strauss:**  
Review of *Scritti su filosofia e religione*, by Leo Strauss, edited by Raimondo Cubeddu and Marco Menon
- 399 Marco Menon Reply to Marco Andreacchio
- 405 Marco Andreacchio Reply to Marco Menon
- 411 Michael R. Gonzalez **Book Reviews:**  
*Why Liberalism Failed* by Patrick J. Deneen
- 419 Till Kinzel *The Strauss-Krüger Correspondence: Returning to Plato through Kant* by Susan Meld Shell
- 427 Patrick Malcolmson *The Pursuit of Happiness and the American Regime: Political Theory in Literature* by Elizabeth Amato
- 433 Tomasz Stefanek *Kryzys nauki o polityce z perspektywy filozofii politycznych Leo Straussa i Erica Voegelina* by Marek Pająk

# Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

*Editor-in-Chief* Timothy W. Burns, Baylor University

*General Editors* Charles E. Butterworth • Timothy W. Burns

*General Editors (Late)* Howard B. White (d. 1974) • Robert Horwitz (d. 1987)  
Seth G. Benardete (d. 2001) • Leonard Grey (d. 2009) •  
Hilail Gildin (d. 2015)

*Consulting Editors* Christopher Bruell • David Lowenthal • Harvey C.  
Mansfield • Thomas L. Pangle • Ellis Sandoz • Kenneth  
W. Thompson

*Consulting Editors (Late)* Leo Strauss (d. 1973) • Arnaldo Momigliano (d. 1987) •  
Michael Oakeshott (d. 1990) • John Hallowell (d. 1992)  
• Ernest L. Fortin (d. 2002) • Muhsin Mahdi (d. 2007) •  
Joseph Cropsey (d. 2012) • Harry V. Jaffa (d. 2015)

*International Editors* Terence E. Marshall • Heinrich Meier

*Editors* Peter Ahrens Dorf • Wayne Ambler • Marco Andreacchio •  
Maurice Auerbach • Robert Bartlett • Fred Baumann • Eric  
Buzzetti • Susan Collins • Patrick Coby • Erik Dempsey •  
Elizabeth C'de Baca Eastman • Edward J. Erler • Maureen  
Feder-Marcus • Robert Goldberg • L. Joseph Hebert •  
Pamela K. Jensen • Hannes Kerber • Mark J. Lutz • Daniel  
Ian Mark • Ken Masugi • Carol L. McNamara • Will  
Morrisey • Amy Nendza • Charles T. Rubin • Leslie G.  
Rubin • Thomas Schneider • Susan Meld Shell • Geoffrey  
T. Sigalet • Nicholas Starr • Devin Stauffer • Bradford P.  
Wilson • Cameron Wybrow • Martin D. Yaffe • Catherine  
H. Zuckert • Michael P. Zuckert

*Copy Editor* Les Harris

*Designer* Sarah Teutschel

*Inquiries* ***Interpretation, A Journal of Political Philosophy***  
Department of Political Science  
Baylor University  
1 Bear Place, 97276  
Waco, TX 76798

*email* [interpretation@baylor.edu](mailto:interpretation@baylor.edu)

---

Ralph Lerner, *Naïve Readings: Reveilles Political and Philosophic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016, 221 pp., \$45 (cloth).

---

PAUL SEATON

ST. MARY'S SEMINARY & UNIVERSITY

*pseaton@stmarys.edu*

Ralph Lerner's book came out in 2016. It was timely then, it is timely now. It is timely precisely because it is not trendy, rather the times have shown how important old souls and perspectives such as his are. In the face of widespread democratic myopia, his wide-ranging studies from Franklin to Maimonides provide enlarged horizons within which to consider ourselves as Americans and as religious believers. In times such as ours, when emancipatory egalitarianism is beside itself (and has it out for traditional religion), he also can help us see what is lost by such attitudes: thought's capacity to make important distinctions and awareness of the intellectual adventures attendant to traditional faiths. Moreover, because he pays attention to earlier, more sober and prudent, strands of liberal thought (Lincoln, Burke, Tocqueville), he can help take the measure of today's.<sup>1</sup> As for today's populism and demagoguery of the Right, his authors express much deeper views of what *cura populi* entails.

That the times are always in need of critical analysis and address is suggested by his antique-sounding subtitle: "reveilles political and philosophic." These essays collectively sound a wake-up call (perhaps also an alarm); moreover, they do so in two keys, the political and the philosophic. The book jacket accordingly displays two bugles.

Remarkably, though, the instrument he employs to this dual end is a series of "readings," which he characterizes by the unprepossessing adjective,

---

<sup>1</sup> Lincoln confronted the perversion of the concept of democracy; Burke, the first ideological project of modern times; and Tocqueville, democracy's own tendencies to intellectual and spiritual reductionism. All have relevance to today's pathologies.

“naïve.” That the latter term is meant rather differently than its ordinary meaning, however, is indicated by a passage from Leo Strauss that serves as the epigram to the work: “There is no surer protection against the understanding of anything than taking for granted or otherwise despising the obvious and the surface. The problem inherent in the surface of things, and only in the surface of things, is the heart of things.”<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, the majority of the authors he considers worked at multiple levels, the political and the philosophic, the surface and depths, aiming through artful prose to shore-up or reorient their respective communities, while engaging in philosophical explorations and pedagogy. Perhaps a better term, therefore, would be the French phrase, *haute naïveté*.

This naïveté is equivalent to genuine open-mindedness, intellectual alertness, painstaking care, and the hope to learn something humanly important from another. Its ambitious aim is to account for every word in a carefully constructed text. It reads with pen in hand, produces lists as one pursues a theme or a thread, notes subtle and not-so-subtle shifts, detects relevant omissions, is alive to irony and jest; in short, it reads with great care and imagination, then reads again. One can already discern its importance in the life of the mind and, consequently, for democratic life.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, while Lerner rarely does so here, it allows for critical judgment, for endorsement and dissent. But it does so after having earned the right by painstaking efforts at comprehension.

A writer so self-conscious about reading as Lerner cannot fail to take care in his own writing. It is advisable, therefore, to apply something of the same hermeneutic to him. Let us continue, therefore, to attend to the surface of his text. Depths, we have been told, will beckon.

## I

The work is a collection of nine essays, chosen and arranged by the author himself. They are divided into three parts, and prefaced with a brief first chapter, “Looking for the Figure in the Carpet,” a metaphor for the type of reading in which he engages, which he styles “dialectical,” and an afterword in which the expert reader draws an explicit lesson for his readers. (To be

---

<sup>2</sup> The passage comes from *Thoughts on Machiavelli*.

<sup>3</sup> “We grow up on a diet of easy and rapid communication, bite- or byte-sized thoughts, and with the anticipation of nearly instant comprehension and response.... Here, then, is the first hurdle confronting modern democratic readers: they must adjust their habits of engaging with a text so as to conform better to a different kind of writing” (179–80).

sure, there may be others not explicitly drawn but intended, or to be gathered by the reader.) His revolves around a distinction between divine and human “providence” (220), thus retrospectively indicating a theme he had in mind throughout.<sup>4</sup> It is of no small theoretical and practical importance, of course: the nature of the divine’s relationship to humanity, and of man’s own care and provision for himself. The Declaration of Independence, with its “firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence” in the same breath as the United States take to arms, articulated a signal version in our history. Lincoln’s Second Inaugural limned another for a fratricidal people.

The three parts are entitled by the author and provide another set of thematic indicators. Part 1, “American Originals,” contains two essays on Benjamin Franklin and one on Jefferson’s “A Summary View of the Rights of British America” and concludes with a treatment of “Lincoln: The Statesman as Outsider,” in which Lincoln’s acute attention to “public sentiment” prior to his election as president is analyzed and admired. By the title we are alerted to the fact that America has produced its own originals. That the New World would be the site of novelty is perhaps not surprising. Our Great Seal (and later, the dollar bill) self-consciously proclaimed a *novus ordo seclorum*. However, in what ways these three thinkers and public men are *American*, in what ways *original* (vis-à-vis what previous forms or molds?), are questions that naturally come to mind. Lerner deals extensively with Franklin’s originality, leaves it to be teased out in considering the provocative author of “A Summary View,” and focuses on the period after 1854 when Lincoln “transform[ed]” himself in view of a new sense of mission.<sup>5</sup> Remarkably, all three originals worked diligently to change their fellow Americans and America itself. Originals can also originate.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. pp. 8, 9–10, 12, 18, 28–30, 32–33, 38–39, 81, 88, 98, 140, 143, 198, 205–9, 220.

<sup>5</sup> “Lincoln found a way to lead a reluctant, not to say hostile, public opinion toward a necessary confrontation with slavery as a matter of principle. In effecting this as a private citizen, Lincoln had somehow first to transform himself. Starting out as an ambitious office seeker eager for recognition, this one-term congressman and failed frontier politician-turned-wealthy railroad lawyer grew into something greater. When this outsider found himself aroused in 1854 ‘as he had never been before’ by the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, his moral outrage propelled him into a new arena and new heights. He was to discover to himself and others that he had the makings of a statesman of the first rank” (60).

Don E. Fehrenbacher helps articulate the raw elements and refined alloy of Lincoln’s soul: “In his relations with other Illinoisans one finds the same patience and respect for human dignity that characterized the wartime president. Ambition drove him hard in these years of preparation, and yet it was an ambition notably free of pettiness, malice, and overindulgence. It was, moreover, an ambition leavened by moral conviction and a deep faith in the principles upon which the republic had been built. The Lincoln of the 1860’s was much the same man under greater challenge” (69).

Thus the sobriquet “statesman” found in the Lincoln title can apply to the colonial figures as well. As for the character of their statesmanly eminence, in keeping with Aristotle’s dictum that man is a political animal because he possesses *logos*, at once reason and speech, in each case it had a core intellectual component. In fact, the hybrid phrase “philosopher-statesman” used later in connection with Francis Bacon (78) is applicable, *mutatis mutandis*, to these eminently thoughtful Americans. Franklin’s and Jefferson’s reputations as philosophical men precede them, while Lerner quotes Lincoln limning his task as follows: “No policy that does not rest upon some philosophical public opinion can be permanently maintained” (69). He found his, and America’s, in the self-evident truths of the Declaration.

Therefore, we should not forget the theme of providence, divine and/or human. In fact, it is prominent in the essays on Franklin, who quite deliberately was an American original. Lerner speaks of “radical self-assertion” on Franklin’s part, of his having traveled far, intellectually and spiritually, from the “world of Bostonian orthodoxy into which he was born” (7). Nor was it just himself whom Franklin would wean from that “little world.” With Franklin, we enter into the fateful attempt by many to reform Protestant orthodoxy in the light and name of Reason (30–31). Lerner presents Franklin as emphatically secular in this regard: “both his starting point and his end point were firmly lodged in *this* world, in *this* life.” And he ventures the judgment that “perhaps it is a measure of his long-term success that today his bold project hardly seems revolutionary at all” (20). America, we learn, was to be the site of more than one revolution. One is reminded of Burke’s famous phrase, “The most important of all revolutions, a revolution in sentiments, manners, and moral opinions.”

Jefferson continued this revolutionary preparation on another level with his artful 1774 presentation of the American people as *sovereign*, superior to George or any earthly king.<sup>6</sup> The “people” of the preamble of the Declaration was being sketched *avant la lettre* by its future spokesman. In his turn, Lincoln attempted to instruct a divided people on the true grounds of their democratic sovereignty in their “ancient faith” in the natural rights bestowed by the Creator on all humans (62–63).

---

<sup>6</sup> “Jefferson’s text...is propounding a truly revolutionary view” (43). “The story that Jefferson tells... invokes the existence of the very audience it means to address. Before there can be a nation there must be a people. In this case that people must be roused.... That arousal is already in itself a revolutionary act” (55).

Judging from these paradigmatic cases, America itself is constituted in part, but deeply, by an ongoing effort to sort out and properly combine the sovereignties of the divine, the people, and the individual. These outstanding American minds felt compelled to instruct and shape their fellow citizens' on these august matters. Thanks to Lerner, we can consider both their substance and their style, with the two closely intertwined. For him, the privileged route to their thought is a careful reading of their textual products.

## II

Part 2 is the most ostensibly eclectic of the three. Its "Stories to Live By" considers, in turn, Bacon's treatment of "human ends" in his *Essays* and Gibbon's "Jewish Problem," that is, his treatment of the Jews in his great work, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*; it ends with "Tocqueville's Burke, or Story as History," with its oddly inverted second half promising to shed light on the key term in the title of part 2. In treating Burke's and Tocqueville's artful uses of history for their present political purposes, Lerner maintains that "any aggregation of human beings conscious of itself as linked in some significant way—all the more in cases where it conceives of itself as a *people*—needs and wants to hear its story told, and retold" (131).

This claim sheds retrospective light on the essays in part 1, all of which are about story telling and people forming, starting with Franklin's influential *Autobiography*. Titles are again telling. The charmingly Franklinian "The World through Franklin's Bifocals" presents Franklin as a modern day combination of Xenophon and Socrates, a philosopher who writes his own memorable story of coming to understand "the world," that is, God, the universe, and human beings' place therein (15).<sup>7</sup> The titular "bifocals" may refer to his complex consideration of reason and faith, his discriminating address to the few and the many, or, less likely, the duality of motives that actuated his endeavors, from a daily pursuit of his interest and amusement (often at others' expense) to his supreme personal ambition and consequent philanthropy, as he presented his wisdom in story form to his "posterity."

"The Gospel according to the Apostle Ben" might perhaps shock as much as amuse, but in any event it further articulates a man with a self-appointed mission of religious and moral reform, variously aimed at different human types. Its apostle models the type of searching (and playful) reflection on

<sup>7</sup> "Rather than sermonize, rather than state explicitly his largest lesson on how to look at the world and how to view our place in it, Franklin enacts a series of scenes in which we observe the drama and draw *his* conclusions on our own" (8; italics in the original).

*theologoumena* that the best can engage in, provides what some have called “theistic rationalism” to select others,<sup>8</sup> while in other ways encourages the common run to avoid ruinous folly and sloth in themselves and to detect those vices in others. All will eschew sectarianism and commit themselves to being “useful” to themselves and others. A new socio-religious horizon dawns.

Providence, perforce, is central to these reflections. Here, because of Franklin’s subtlety one has to cock an ear and listen attentively; Lerner does, and does so in a wider context than that provided by Franklin himself: “His tone of voice when alluding to divine providence suggests that he is on easy terms with the deity. His god is not that of his Presbyterian parents or of John Calvin, to say nothing of the Lord of Hosts who spoke to Moses out of a burning bush. . . . His is not a faith tortured by misgivings. He is ever-ready to enlist all of his *human* providence in support of whatever divine providence shines in his direction” (10; italics in the original). It comes as no surprise that Franklin’s reformed religion would be characterized not only as “free,” but “easy,” that is, quite sparse with doctrine and practices. It derives from “a god whose message to men is that they ought to focus their thoughts on their own business here on earth and leave the deity (however understood) to take care of his” (18–19).

After twice reading a Franklin who combines radicality with ingratiating insinuation, Lerner turns to Jefferson’s artful recounting (and recasting) of British Americans’ colonial history and character, as he preps them to stand as a proud people cognizant of their rights and sovereign dignity.<sup>9</sup> Here is popular storytelling of a constitutive sort. “Jefferson spins a tale that . . . would literally constitute a new people and a new nation” (43). Ever conscientious, Lerner indicates the limits of Jefferson’s achievement (54), while acknowledging its ambition and merits. The reader thinking along with Lerner might think ahead to the crucible of the Civil War, when the fissures of the original founding of that independent people came to a head.

---

<sup>8</sup> See Gregg L. Frazer, *The Religious Beliefs of America’s Founders: Reason, Revelation, and Revolution* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> “The [people] would discover—under the guise of being reminded—that they already constitute a separate people, with ancestors, history, interests, and characteristics distinct from those of other members of the British Empire. In the course of ostensibly urging George III to do the right thing, Jefferson spins a tale that, if accepted, would literally constitute a new people and a new nation” (43). Lerner judges that Jefferson is “an author who has mastered the arts of storytelling and satire” (44; cf. 45). He reminds us that Jefferson “took care to memorialize himself on his tombstone as ‘Author’” (44).

Be that as it may, Lincoln is treated next. We pick up the American story, now seen through Lincoln's eyes. Independence has been won, a Constitution ratified in which slavery was acknowledged but hemmed in, and a generation of statesmen have labored to keep the Union intact. And yet storm clouds gathered.

Lerner focuses on Lincoln's vigorous response to the Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854), which effectively repealed the Missouri Compromise, and to the view of "popular sovereignty" put forth by Stephen A. Douglas, which Lincoln considered a moral incoherence and political heresy. An increasingly divided people needed to be recalled to its originating commitments and world-historical vocation. The commitments centrally included the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, rightly construed, while the mission was to be a beacon of republican freedom to humankind. As told by Lincoln, America's story is one of estimable forefathers forced to confront harsh "necessity" in the form of extant slavery, but who advanced freedom as much as circumstances allowed, and the grave responsibility of their current descendants to keep faith with their principles and prudence. Of the Americans in part 1, in fact of all the statesmen treated by Lerner in the book, Lincoln's character and service to freedom receive the highest accolades (with only Burke as a rival).

As for part 2 itself, Burke and Tocqueville told their stories to, and for, Great Britain and France, respectively, while Gibbon, a "philosophical historian," told his for the republic of letters of his day and beyond, as well as future statesmen.<sup>10</sup> Burke and Tocqueville did so for the sake of a "manly, moral, regulated liberty" (Burke), the freedom "to speak, act, and breathe without constraint, under the government of God and the laws" (Tocqueville). Gibbon's "prodigious efforts" were to "lead...his readers to recognize and reject immoderation and hatred in all their guises" (117), especially (but not solely) religious. Bacon earlier articulated the *Ur*-version of Modernity's story, at once largely damning of the past and presenting the present as pregnant with an unprecedented future for humanity. The way into this glorious future would

<sup>10</sup> "In telling his story, Gibbon takes special pains to look at men and events as they might have appeared to those who ruled and administered the Roman Empire" (102). Consider, especially, his praise of Theodoric: "Theodoric had 'the glory of introducing into the "Christian world" a policy of religious toleration...because Theodoric's principal concern was peace, not zeal.... [He exhibited] the salutary indifference of a statesman or philosopher'" (106-7). Perhaps the most famous passage of *Decline* declares that "the various modes of worship, which prevailed in the Roman world, were all considered by the people, as equally true, by the philosopher, as equally false; and by the magistrate, as equally useful" (96).

be blazed—both illumined and wrought—by a new technological science at work for the relief of the human estate and the increase of human power. This was liberty in an emphatically emancipatory, even transformative, key.

In quite distinct ways, therefore, these essays provide instructive contexts and parallels to the American stories of part 1. The two great European liberals' elevated notions of human liberty, combining personal pride, respect for common humanity, and acknowledged limits, find counterparts and competitors in the Americans'. Moreover, all five raise the issue of the superior man's relationship to his fellows, most of whom fall well short of his excellences. All were men of great ambition, all wanted to leave indelible marks on their times and those to follow. But all were moved to benefit their fellows out of more than ambition. Just what that was in each case makes for illuminating inquiry and comparison.

Nor are these simply external parallels. Earlier than Jefferson, Burke explained the *malentendus* between the metropolis and colonies to the parties (48–49), finally siding with the latter's attachment to independent liberty. And Tocqueville told America's story in his great *Democracy in America*, primarily intended as an instructive example to his native France, but also as a cautionary tale to Americans. Conversely, Franklin and Jefferson were admirers of Bacon, whose thought entered deeply into theirs.

With this Baconian connection, another aspect of American originality comes to sight, its connection with scientific and technological modernity.<sup>11</sup> That this is problematic is indicated by Bacon's bold innovations in theory and practice in his new vision of humanity: "The prolongations of life, perhaps even indefinitely, perhaps even the resurrection of the dead, are possibilities his reconceived natural philosophy dangles before our eyes" (89). The work of thought in general is guided by, and eventuates in, "two Commands: Command [*Imperium*] over Nature and Command [*Imperium*] over Men" (90). The Bacon essay thus sheds light on Franklin's bold experiments with electricity and Jefferson's devotion to natural history. As Wilson Carey McWilliams observed, America conceived as a technological republic harbors within itself deep cross-currents and tensions.<sup>12</sup> We live with them yet.

---

<sup>11</sup> The connections may be more than scientific. Lerner quotes Robert Faulkner on Bacon's intention and manner: "Bacon, dancing with the opinions dear to others, manages to turn traditional opinions into enlightened opinions and to do this while disguising the transformation. His is a *revolution more insinuated than imposed*" (77; italics added). This could encapsulate Franklin's aim and procedure.

<sup>12</sup> McWilliams, *Redeeming Democracy in America* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011), "Science and Freedom: America as the Technological Republic."

## III

Of course, America, Great Britain, and France are not the only peoples formed by stories; they are not the only communities to navigate the cross-currents of tradition and innovative thought. There is the Jewish people and nation, and the Christian people and church.

With respect to the second, the pickings are exceedingly slim. The absence of any thoughtful Christian believer in these essays, whether American, modern, or medieval, is striking. The church does not get its own spokesman. And it is only with Gibbon that the Christian church is directly considered, but one has to note his less-than-benevolent attitude, a combination of religious skepticism and anti-intolerance ire. From yet another perspective, Judah Halevi proves no more sympathetic.

The treatment of Judaism and Jews is much more extensive and engaged. The first mention of things Jewish (quoted above) refers, appropriately, to the mysterious “Lord of Hosts” who deigned to speak to humans, to liberate His people, and to covenant with them. The mystery of Israel and its God is thus brought to the reader’s awareness. A seed is planted that will grow.

Part 2 then brings in Judaism, or the Jews, directly, but viewed from the outside, again by Gibbon. For the enlightenment thinker, the very persistence of the Jews is, if not an affront, at least a challenge to his principles and those he wished to inculcate (111). While acknowledging the historian’s humane sensibility, even compassion, vis-à-vis Jewish sufferings, Lerner explicitly prefers George Washington’s principled natural rights inclusion of Jews in the nascent nation (117–18). Enlightenment compassion was not sufficient to address the plight of Jews. Lerner also quotes the statesman Burke’s diagnosis that the Jewish plight was to be a people without a state (116).

In connection with Gibbon, Lerner ventures another criticism, one with significance beyond its direct object. The enlightenment thinker may have had a blind spot when it comes to genuine religious phenomena, especially the willingness to die for one’s faith and people (110). The categories of “fanaticism,” “enthusiasm,” and “superstition,” we are led to believe, are inadequate to understand the religious phenomenon, and the pair, “tolerance” and “intolerance,” to judge it morally and politically. One wonders, therefore, what an adequate philosophical approach to biblical religion might be. Two possible specimens are soon available.

It is with spurred interest, then, that in part 3 we turn to more direct treatments of Judaism by Jewish apologists of a much earlier era, Judah Halevi (ca. 1075–1141) and Moses Maimonides (1135–1204). We are promised “A Thread through Halevi’s Maze” and the results of “On First Looking into Maimonides’ *Guide*.” Strikingly, the two essays that make up part 3 are said to be “In Aid of Lost Souls.” Those souls need not be restricted to those envisaged by their authors at the time of their writing, although that should be one’s initial focus.

Nor should we gloss over the appearance of the old-fashioned term “soul,” as well as the hoary phrase, “lost souls.” We are about to enter into a very different intellectual and spiritual world. The title also alerts us to the theme of challenges confronting Jews such that their souls could be lost. Biblical Judaism confronted idolatry (“false gods”) in different forms, but medieval Judaism added the challenges of subsequent monotheisms, Christianity and Islam, as well as Greek philosophy. In these new circumstances, “aid” was necessary and, happily, forthcoming, but of a sort—or sorts—remarkably different from that found within Hebrew scripture. Lerner might have also entitled this unit “Jewish Originals.” Alas, with at least one, Maimonides, the guide to Jewish Law and Wisdom (Deut. 4:6) may also be a guide beyond.

#### IV

These two essays are by far the longest in the book, 44 and 33 pages, respectively. Both deal with exceedingly complex texts whose openings declare that they contain initially unseen depths. Their expositions in turn are lengthy and complex, but remarkably followable. Lerner’s naive reading shows itself to greatest effect in these penetrating engagements. I myself have never read a better introduction to the “proteanly rich” Halevi; and Maimonides’s daunting masterpiece is deftly handled. Still, there is an abundance of riches yet to be found in both originals, and my report will but scratch the surface of Lerner’s excavations.

In keeping with the theme of storytelling, in the first essay Lerner particularly focuses on the dramatic character—the characters and complex course—of Halevi’s apologetic masterpiece. There are complications, however, to attend to. First, the story is nested within an authorial frame. By paying attention to the frame, Lerner allows us to see that Halevi puts intellectual distance between himself and the ostensible hero of the tale, “the Jewish sage,” and thereby invites the reader to actively assess each and all of the arguments, whether accepted or not by the other main protagonist,

the pious king of the Khazars. Therefore, while the account is ostensibly presented as the history of the conversion of a king (and hence his entire people) to Judaism because of convincing arguments, the alert reader of the dialogic drama cannot rest simply content with that storyline.

Further attention to the frame established by the author—this set of dialogic and dramatic events purportedly happened four centuries ago and yet is perfectly recounted (“just as it was”) from hearsay<sup>13</sup>—requires us to suspect the less-than-historical character of the tale recounted, as well as reminding us that it is very much a *consolatio* to a currently scattered, “despised,” and disoriented Jewish people. The eternal question of Judaism, Where is our God? remains in all its poignancy beneath the surface. Into the breach wrought by events and current status steps Judah Halevi, poet, Jewish thinker and apologist, and his character, “the Jewish sage.”

Yet, as we said, given the gap between author and chief character, one has to wonder about the ultimate status or final meaning of the character’s teaching and views, including the account he gives of current Jewish degradation (153–54), and the version of consolation and hope proffered by him in the text. On one hand, are they those of the Torah, which are premised upon Covenant, upon a dialectic of divine offer and human fidelity and infidelity, of divine chastisement and, ultimately, Fidelity? In some respects, yes; in others, no (cf. 158). And on the other, what does Halevi’s studied distance towards the sage indicate? There are reasons, some provided below, to hesitate before making the character the author’s spokesman. In short, one has an interpretive triangle of authoritative biblical text, constructed text, and creative author. Or if you wish, three sorts of Jews to consider: Moses and Jeremiah; a sage; and Halevi.<sup>14</sup> And if these were not enough, they are brought into dialogue with representatives of philosophy, Christianity, Islam, and, most strange, a rare sect, the Khazars! “Proteanly rich,” for sure.

As we said, a careful weighing of the sage’s words gives pause to take him simply as a spokeman for the author or for biblical Judaism. To begin with, early in the discussion “his retelling of Moses and Aaron’s encounter with Pharaoh departs significantly from the account in Exodus” (144): the sage is not above playing fast and loose with the biblical text itself.<sup>15</sup> And not

<sup>13</sup> Supplemented, again purportedly, by a history book (137, 155).

<sup>14</sup> And a fourth, once the king of the Khazars has converted.

<sup>15</sup> There are other instances: “The sage’s depiction of the people [during the sojourn in the wilderness] is more flattering than scripture’s. These were a socially cohesive band of brothers patiently waiting for God to fulfill the promises made to their ancestors” (148; but see also 150–51).

much later, the challenged sage indulges in an “ad hominem rejoinder [that] leaves something to be desired.” In fact, one could characterize it as a “broad-brush calumny” of the people of India; and this is immediately followed by “a speech noteworthy for its effrontery and historical revisionism” about the Greeks and the Greek philosophers, especially Aristotle (146). More such verbal legerdemain follows and is duly noted by Lerner.<sup>16</sup> It is therefore perhaps not surprising that at dialogue’s end the sage confesses himself ashamed of himself and in need of deeds of repentance. He vows to return to the Promised Land, a return that is at once physical and spiritual—one that implies that he has been in exile in more ways than one. This, however, makes both his teaching and his status puzzling.

To my mind, the deepest issue depicted and debated in the dialogue is that of the nature, achievements, and limits of reason and of faith, biblical or Jewish faith in particular.<sup>17</sup> That claim may come as no great surprise. *How* Halevi goes about considering the two, however, in themselves and in their actual and possible relationships, gives the text its special, even unique character and interest. Above I gave some idea of the intricacy of the tapestry woven by Halevi and to be unraveled by the reader. Here let me venture a superficial summary of the thread bearing upon reason and faith.

The initial phase of that thread of argument runs like this: the sage emphatically bases his defense of Judaism on the biblical documents and attested traditions of the Lord’s interventions in the lives of His people;<sup>18</sup> according to him, reason is too weak, too thin a reed, upon which to guide one’s life (“our slender, merely human resources” [152]). The practitioners of autonomous reason, the philosophers, perhaps arrive at knowledge of God as creator, but their theology leads to a remote, impersonal First Cause. And

---

<sup>16</sup> “The sage is quite unfazed by so telling and embarrassing a challenge. His lengthy explanation/exculpation borders on the bizarre and is a model of evasion (1.93–97)” (150).

<sup>17</sup> Other candidates for the deepest stratum include the distinction and relationship between “the natural order” and “the divine order,” history and Providence, and the complex character of tradition or Tradition.

<sup>18</sup> “The sage takes a different path. He makes it clear that his faith is in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, the God of history who redeemed the Children of Israel from the house of Egyptian bondage, provided for them with continuing miracles, and gave them a religious law armed with promises and threats...The sage insists that this historical experience, this record of observed events, is the true demonstration. He rejects a religion based on speculative premises because theory cannot settle all the doubtful points...[Here we see] the implicit critique of the sufficiency of reason” (143). “The Jews’ religious tradition is based on prophecy ‘which is more trustworthy than reasoning’ (1.67/18.9)” (147).

even then there is grave uncertainty, usually mixed with hubristic overreach.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, more suitable to reason is the evidence of a faithfully transmitted experience of the divine, of His will, His promises, and, yes, His threats.<sup>20</sup>

But there is much that complicates this first, rather dichotomous, sketch. The sage not only knows about philosophy but he employs it in his defense of authoritative tradition, in his presentation of the prophet-legislator, Moses (145), and in many other ways (e.g., “The sage shifts his grounds from biology to sociology” [150]). Philosophy, it turns out, is not simply inadequate or wrongheaded; faith can use its findings and instruments, perhaps needs to do so, for external apologetic reasons and internal reasons of coherent self-understanding.

But there is even more. There is a form of philosophy that is immune to the charges of presumption leveled against “the philosophers” and which can engage respectfully with biblical faith. It is encapsulated in a name: “Socrates,” he of “human wisdom,” that is, one with knowledge of his ignorance and a concomitant critical openness to claims of wisdom, including “divine wisdom” (168; 173). What the sage (and Halevi?) thus ends with is a Mexican standoff between two chastened protagonists, one following reason, the other following inherited faith and authoritative tradition, with both intrigued, challenged, and potentially enriched by the other.

In connection with Maimonides’s “theological-political” masterpiece, *Guide of the Perplexed*, Lerner appropriately spends a good deal of time

---

<sup>19</sup> “Here, the sage insists, is the great dividing line between the man of faith and the rebel. Those who acknowledge our lack of ‘consummate divine knowledge’ (1.79/20.8) fall back on a religion that teaches a way of life and prescribes a regimen in accord with the divine order. Others, following their own syllogistic reasoning, lose sight of the all-dispensing and all-disposing God and rely instead on their own ingenuity” (148). For the meaning of “the divine order,” see pp. 140, 148–49: “These are the doings of a god who wills whatever and whenever he wishes; they are not to be mistaken as stemming from nature, or the influence of the stars, or as chance occurrences.... [In] the highly public miracles and wonders that accompanied every stage of their flight from slavery to freedom... [one sees] the divine order manifesting itself and carrying with it an obligation to accept the religious law and the Sabbath.” Cf. also 153: “No, we [Jews] have been promised, and in fact enjoy, a privileged attachment to the divine order, while all the rest of the world conduct their affairs in accord with the natural course of things.” The prescriptions and commands of the Law are central to this: “the only way to attain to the divine order is through such directives as God ordains. The sage supports this conclusion with emphasis and enthusiasm.... Altogether these directives constitute the lasting tradition through which Jews maintain their connection to the divine order” (152).

<sup>20</sup> “Once again, he draws a sharp distinction between an attempt to know God through one’s powers of reasoning (an activity likely to lead to heresy and corrupting doctrines) and trying to know God through a prophetic vision, and by having experienced God’s distribution of rewards and punishments, and—in the case of the people at large—by accepting this tradition on faith” (167).

piecing together Maimonides's portrait of his addressee, a former student named Joseph ben Judah, who was troubled in his faith by his encounter with philosophy. The Bible speaks of God in images and parables, leaving the impression of corporeality and passions in the divine, while philosophy deals in demonstrations compelling to the intellect and arrives at an immaterial and impassible First Cause. Perhaps worse, the Bible commands beliefs in the utter unity and transcendent perfection of the Divine Character that run counter to the anthropomorphic traits. Its apparent incoherence, and the cogency of philosophical speculation, gravely troubled the precocious Joseph. He sought out Maimonides for assistance, travelling from Morocco to Egypt to study with the great teacher, but events caused them to separate. The *Guide* is the resumption of that instruction *in absentia*.

Joseph is an instance of a type, however, so the intention of the author of the *Guide* goes beyond these personal circumstances. Joseph represents those "very rare few" who have the intellectual and moral capacities to become true believers by their own efforts, although they stand in need of instruction, discipline, and even purification, again both intellectual and moral. In this connection, Lerner lists "the needed modesty, patience, dedication, and intellectual daring" (182) on the part of the student. Maimonides's demanding text is a regimen of intellectual gymnastics designed to inculcate these traits. "Avid and impatient," Joseph is in particular need of patience and modesty, but one should also note the last trait, intellectual daring, since the intended reader will have to fill in logical gaps and, more daringly, think highly unconventional thoughts on his way to the goal, which is true knowledge of the divine and his works. The way to insight, rest, and bliss will be laborious and wrenching.

In detailing the obstacles Joseph faces in himself and in coming to understand the apparently contradictory biblical teaching, his guide perforce talks about how the Bible teaches, especially about its use of figurative speech, and the obstacles found in human nature to grasping its true teaching. According to Maimonides, the vulgar or "multitude" are naturally incapable of conceiving an immaterial deity, hence the need for figurative language in scripture. But all start out as vulgar, and human nature remains even in the best natures. Joseph and his ilk will have to critically revisit habits and opinions inculcated "from infancy" and reorient their cognitive and affective faculties, including, importantly, their imaginations.

A final human type, that of the prophet, especially the prophet-legislator, understood as the privileged mediator between the divine and the people, completes a typology that helps make sense of the polysemic character of

Maimonides's complex text. The prophet is the perfection of intellect, imagination, and moral habits, the privileged recipient of effusions of the Divine Intellect. Tellingly, "Maimonides employs the neo-Platonic image of overflow or emanation...to account for the way in which a divine influence manifests itself" in him (201). This will not be the only Greek philosophic conception that Maimonides will apply to scriptural materials.

The typology, and the last type in particular, raises the question of Maimonides's own status. Nowhere does he claim to be divinely inspired. Quite the contrary, he is very much an autodidact: "Maimonides claims to have worked out all this on his own, using conjecture and supposition, and without the benefit of any special revelation or anything he might have received from a teacher" (204). Thanks to "the speculative premises that he is able to bring to his scrutiny of the scriptural and rabbinic texts" (*ibid.*), he is able to decode the great images and parables of Torah. Nor is this all: he is also able to create his own parables. The disciplined use of the imagination can do the work of the inspired prophet.

As with Halevi, a vast field opens up for survey and investigation within these parameters. Lerner is modest in his stated aim: "The approach to be adopted here is designedly partial, simple, and straightforward" (183). The results, however, are anything but. What is revealed about Maimonides's ultimate commitments and, tententially, the Divine he contemplated is more than a little disconcerting from an orthodox perspective.

To speak with brutal directness: Maimonides, the great Rabbi, the second Moses, fundamentally recasts scripture as Greek philosophy in the Hebrew language and idioms. To understand its true teachings about man, the world, and the divine, one needs Aristotelian philosophy, especially his physics and his metaphysics. And to understand the true character of the Law, one must turn to Plato's treatment of divine *nomos*, as adapted by Islamic philosophers. Three passages indicate this bold eisegetical project.

The *Guide* will address two large subjects: the "Account of the Beginning" and the "Account of the Chariot"...Maimonides proceeds to attribute to the sages an equivalence never stated by them and perhaps never even contemplated by them: that the "Account of the Chariot" corresponds to what the philosophers call "metaphysics," and that the "Account of the Beginning" corresponds to "physics." Whatever his predecessors, ancient and modern, may have had in mind, none had gone as far as Maimonides now goes in explicitly connecting scriptural and rabbinic figurative language to Aristotle's philosophy. The fundamental beliefs or opinions that underpin the practices of an

adherent of the religious law are thus to be viewed from a distinctly philosophic perspective. (188; cf. 204)

As for the Law itself, “[Maimonides’s] discussion of the law and of the prophet who brings that law are...informed by a philosophic (or political philosophic) understanding” (212). And finally: “[Maimonides] silently draws heavily on the political science of Plato, Aristotle, al-Farabi, and Avicenna in analyzing and explicating the phenomenon of prophecy and in distinguishing a divinely revealed law from ordinary human legislation” (199). The disconcerting truth is that “at multiple places in the *Guide*...Maimonides looks at his Jewish subjects from a vantage point outside that tradition” (212).

Where does that leave one in understanding Maimonides’s self-understanding? Early on, in considering Maimonides’s own claims for the “perfect” character of his work, Lerner notes remarkable verbal parallels between the Psalmist’s claims for the perfection of the Lord’s Law and Maimonides’s for his *Guide*. According to Lerner, “he came close to assimilating his handiwork to the divine, his guide or torah to that given to Moses” (182). But Maimonides understands the Torah in a way the Torah did not understand itself. His understanding is superior. Hence...

Lerner speaks of Maimonides’s “vast ambition to transmit his coherent understanding of matters human and divine” (183) in the *Guide*. If one were to italicize the “his,” one would draw attention to the understanding that Maimonides finds or rather attributes to Torah or Judaism. And the phrase “vast ambition” would hint at its fullest scope: to replace pious, traditional Judaism with philosophical Judaism, at least for a few.

## V

In *Naïve Readings*, we begin with America and paradigmatic Americans and end with Jews and Judaism as presented by two medieval philosophical apologists. As an American Jew, Lerner’s duality of interests comes as no great surprise. Still, it raises important issues. To begin with, one must note his explicit gratitude to his country, and to the father of his country, George Washington, for their principled welcome of Jews into the national community.

As a Jewish American, Lerner has two identities or communities of belonging. They overlap and interact, of course, but they also are distinct, if only because Judaism antedates America considerably. What their meanings are, how they are to be combined, are questions that come up in any number

of ways. How one is to approach this duality is a vital question for many, and not only Jews themselves.

Lerner's approach is rather distinctive and illuminating. It is worth piecing together. He reaches out to what Americans and Jews have in common, a common humanity and reason, and exploits the best resources of both. He declares himself a "friend...of liberty and human dignity" (128) and resonates with Lincoln's claim that aversion to slavery is a "natural sentiment" and with Gibbon's and Burke's compassionate indignation before wanton cruelty. As for reason, he appreciates and practices its highest forms. In other words, he employs "philosophy," and more specifically "political philosophy," to understand America and American citizenship and Judaism and Jewish identity.

He is aware that he is not the first to broach and pursue the questions of identity and community posed above, so he turns to predecessors with a claim to his attention. Employing the method of *cas eminentes*, a Peguyan phrase for "paradigmatic instances," he turns to his fellows—fellow Americans, fellow Jews—who were philosophic in their self-understanding and in their understanding of human community, of their communities. Hence this series of illuminating studies.

And by making providence a constant theme, Lerner reminds citizens of these communities, and philosophy itself, that the question of God is always present, always a legitimate part of the search for self-understanding and right action. If it has fallen into oblivion in our days, these careful acts of *anamnesis* performed by Ralph Lerner perhaps can help return it to its rightful place. I certainly hope so.

