

Interpretation

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- 223 *Lewis Fallis* The Political Significance of Friendship in Plato's *Lysis*
- 253 *J. A. Colen & Anthony Vecchio* The First Walgreen Lectures by Leo Strauss (1949)
- 355 *Edward J. Erler & Ken Masugi*
An Exchange
Schaefer contra Political Philosophy
- 375 *David Lewis Schaefer* Unretired: A Reply to "Schaefer contra Political Philosophy"
- 385 *Borys M. Kowalsky & Joseph Phelan*
Review Essay
Nietzsche and Modernist Art, Part I: The Value of *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Artists of the New Weimar*
- 401 *Kevin J. Burns*
Book Reviews
"From Reflection and Choice": *The Political Philosophy of the Federalist Papers and the Ratification Debate*, edited by Will R. Jordan
- 407 *Steven Forde* *Thucydides on the Outbreak of War: Character and Contest* by S. N. Jaffe
- 413 *Jerome C. Foss* *Good Things Out of Nazareth: The Uncollected Letters of Flannery O'Connor and Friends*, edited by Benjamin B. Alexander
- 419 *Steven H. Frankel* *Power and Progress: Joseph Ibn Kaspi and the Meaning of History* by Alexander Green
- 425 *Thomas Powers* *Multiculturalism in Canada: Constructing a Model Multi-culture with Multicultural Values* by Hugh Donald Forbes
- 431 *Aaron Zubia* *Taking Comedy Seriously: Stand-Up's Dissident Potential in Mass Culture* by Jennalee Donian

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Unretired: A Reply to “Schaefer contra Political Philosophy”

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I was surprised to learn from Professors Eler and Masugi that I had “retired from political philosophy.” Equally surprising was the vituperative language they employed in response to my critical review of *The Rediscovery of America*, beginning with their opening paragraph (I rely, they claim, on “rumor, innuendo, and slander”—or rather, “mean-spirited innuendo” and “hysterical slanders”—instead of “rational argument”). That one of these gentlemen should resort to such insults was particularly striking since I regarded him as an old friend, indeed a onetime dinner guest at my home. In fact, contrary to the (quite untrue) claim that my previous reviews of books by or about Harry Jaffa had exhibited “a pronounced personal animus against him,” that selfsame scholar had emailed me, when he learned that I had been assigned to review *Rediscovery* to express his “delight,” since he was “confident” I would “do a fine job.”¹ On the subject of hysteria, however, I imagine that other readers will share my surprise at their explanation of why they had difficulty getting their chapter “The Decline and Fall of the American Idea” into print, namely, the supposed hostility of editors to publishing an essay that “attacked too many conservative icons.”

¹ I am relieved to learn from the editors that Jaffa received word of the death of “his old friend and coauthor Allan Bloom” “with great sadness.” How Jaffa reconciled this reaction with his description of the AIDS epidemic as a sign of divine retribution, and his anxiety lest science find a cure from it, or why one would compose a critical review of a book by an old friend and title it “Sodomy and the Academy,” as Jaffa did, they do not explain. Also unmentioned by them in this connection is Jaffa’s apparent equation of the immorality of a physician’s serving a libertarian regime “in which every man is as free to do as he likes,” for example, by working to discover a cure for AIDS, and “serv[ing] Hitler or Stalin” (*Rediscovery of America*, 28–29).

Upon reflection, I fear that “Schaefer contra Political Philosophy” offers further confirmation of a fact that others had long lamented about Jaffa’s behavior: the manner in which his great learning was outweighed for some four decades by his determination to form a cult of followers, convinced (to paraphrase the Christian Bible) that there was no way to truth except through him. In other words, if you did not agree with Jaffa’s particular interpretations of philosophic texts or of the American political tradition, you could not be seriously engaged in studying political philosophy at all. And if you found Jaffa’s behavior, especially towards his erstwhile friends, objectionable, you must be denounced in the strongest possible terms, just as Stalinists once reserved their nastiest language for erstwhile Bolsheviks (Kamenev, Zinoviev, Trotsky) who had departed from the latest party line. In sum, while I myself (as I acknowledge in each of my reviews dealing with his work, including the opening two and concluding paragraphs of the one being discussed here) have learned a great deal from Jaffa’s scholarship, and while I know he was (as the late Michael Uhlmann, for one, attested) among the most devoted, even “charismatic,” teachers one could find of his subject, his habit of picking fights with former friends and benefactors, and with those who should have been his political allies, reflected a great danger that Strauss himself identified for philosophy, as Jaffa himself reminds us, but of which (as I note in my review) he unjustly accused his critics of succumbing to: its falling victim to sectarianism.

I can speak from personal experience here. While Erler and Masugi label me an “Eastern Straussian,” and consequently the member of “a school that clings to the ancients/moderns distinction as if it were an eidetic bridge that can never be crossed, convinced that those who believe it can be crossed are simply uninitiated in the mysteries of esotericism,” I was never taught, nor do I believe, any such thing—nor have I known anyone who does. While there is indeed a school of “West Coast Straussians,” that is, people whose intellectual life has been decisively shaped by Jaffa, I know of no comparable Straussian “school” in the (American) East, even though I have spent almost my entire career teaching in that part of the country. Having studied as an undergraduate with two prominent Straussians (Berns and Bloom) in the East, and then not only with Strauss but with two other distinguished students of his (Joseph Cropsey and Herbert Storing) at Chicago for my graduate degrees, I do not recall anyone setting forth the doctrine that Erler and Masugi describe—or, indeed, any set doctrine at all.

Of course, all those who studied with Strauss, and/or (then or later) with his students, learned of his (re)discovery of the fact of esoteric writing, as well as the emphasis he placed on the significance of the break in the history of political philosophy that was initiated by Machiavelli—in contrast to the reigning scholarly “consensus,” which was not only unaware of philosophic esotericism, but (partly for that reason) represented Lockean political philosophy in particular as essentially continuous with its ancient and medieval predecessors. But what we did with that awareness was our own business, and Straussians of my acquaintance have gone in multitudinous intellectual directions over the course of their careers. Quite simply, none of us were taught, as Jaffa’s students evidently were, to regard ourselves as our master’s acolytes, with a mission to inculcate a specific set of beliefs into our students. And as regards the ancient versus modern distinction in particular, while one of the first things we young Straussians learned was the significance of that distinction, one of the next things we gradually came to understand was just how nuanced the distinction was. (One study that first triggered my own awareness of the latter fact was Cropsey’s essay “Hobbes and the Transition to Modernity,” his contribution to the 1964 Strauss Festschrift *Ancients and Moderns*, which appeared the same year that I began my graduate studies.) Erler and Masugi’s explanation of my views, and those of my academic friends, is a figment of their imagination. But their claim “that Strauss used the ancients/moderns distinction...as a rhetorical device to attract...readers to ancient texts,” “rel[ying]” (as it does) on Thomas West’s “speculat[ion]” that “Strauss exaggerated” Locke’s “radical modernity,” or “Hobbiism,” only because he thought that “instill[ing] in his readers...a moral revulsion against modernity” was necessary to make them “more open to the attractions of classical political philosophy”—because Strauss “decided that the philosophers most likely to appeal to modern readers were the Greek classics”—borders on the absurd. (Did Strauss somehow extrapolate, from the status given to the classics in the undergraduate curriculum at the University of Chicago during his tenure there, that they—rather than, say, French postmodernism—were destined to sweep American intellectual life in the mid-twentieth century, if only he inspired enough students to hate modernity?)

I turn next to the charge that I fail to understand the (brief) first chapter of *Rediscovery*, which expresses what Erler and Masugi now describe as Jaffa’s “conflat[ion]” of Aristotle’s and Locke’s teachings, a conflation that indeed contradicts Strauss’s findings and threatens to restore the aforementioned scholarly consensus that Strauss refuted. But here they present me with a shifting target. When I denied that the supposed discovery which Jaffa prided

himself on having made midway through his career represented anything new, I was referring specifically to his reported realization that he had previously erred in taking for granted that Strauss's interpretation of Locke as in fundamental respects a Hobbesian "represented the Locke that informed the American Founding," even though "Strauss himself never said this Locke was the founders' Locke" (*Rediscovery*, 9). I don't know which Straussians (himself included) Jaffa is claiming were induced to think otherwise by the "spell" supposedly cast by Strauss's treatment of Locke in *Natural Right and History* (*NRH*). But the very fact of Locke's having written esoterically, so as to conceal the fundamentally antibiblical and in other respects revolutionary aspects of his teaching (following his adoption of what I call the Mary Poppins principle, originally stated by Lucretius: *Two Treatises*, I.7) so as to heighten its public palatability, *entailed* that most human beings, even statesmen and political thinkers of the capacity of Washington, Jefferson, and the authors of *The Federalist*, would fail to grasp the controversial underlying theoretical premises (and intended long-term effect) of his program. Not only did Strauss never say they grasped those premises; I highly doubt that Jaffa ever (even prior to his ostensible moment of enlightenment) thought they did either. As Erler and Masugi themselves remark, and as Jaffa and Strauss cannot have failed to be aware, "the Founders were not philosophers," and hence are unlikely to have "understood Locke the way Strauss did."

Unfortunately, far from demonstrating the originality of Jaffa's "discovery" regarding the Founders' thought, Erler and Masugi—hardly exhibiting the sort of close textual reading that Strauss encouraged his students and readers to practice—radically distort my argument. They attribute to me the claim "that Jaffa never proves that the Founders did not read Locke the way Strauss did," when I made no such argument whatsoever. But here is where my critics shift their ground. Instead of staking the claim of Jaffa's originality to his supposed discovery that the Founders did not read Locke as Strauss did, they go on to deny, on Jaffa's behalf, that *Strauss himself* ultimately stuck to his original interpretation of Locke's thought, thereby (they suggest) undermining the belief of "many Eastern Straussians," including Berns and Harvey Mansfield, that "Locke was a Hobbian." Instead, they claim to have demonstrated that "Strauss himself either recanted his position on the Hobbian Locke from *Natural Right and History* or revealed that he was dissembling all along" in espousing it. Their sole evidence for this remarkable assertion is the fact that in *The City and Man*, published a decade after *NRH*, Strauss cites the peroration of the Declaration of Independence to show that its signers ranked their "sacred honor" above their lives and fortunes, demonstrating that (as

Erler and Masugi put it) they "ranked the goods of the soul higher than the good of the body," and therefore that the framers "were not Hobbi-ans!"

Erler and Masugi's quotation from *City and Man* exhibits neither a recantation nor any dissimulation on Strauss's part. To the contrary: as noted in my review, in the opening lines of *NRH*, far from disparaging the Declaration as a merely Hobbesian document, Strauss quoted its assertion of self-evident truths, applauded the passage's "weight and elevation," and cited America's dedication to the "proposition" of men's equal and unalienable rights as having contributed to its rise to unrivaled power and prosperity. Strauss's uncovering of the radically Hobbesian foundations of Locke's doctrine later in *NRH*, culminating in its account of the Lockean understanding of human life as a "joyless quest for joy," does not contradict his praise of the Declaration itself, or the capacity of its principles to appeal to men's sense of honor or nobility, in *City and Man*. Nor does Strauss deny the manner in which the concluding chapters of Locke's *Second Treatise* appeal to just such a (non-Hobbesian) sense of dignity as the guarantor of men's resistance to tyranny—thereby arming what Locke called the otherwise "weak hands of justice" in the world (*Two Treatises*, II.16, sec. 176) with the force of aroused popular majorities. But it would hardly be to Strauss's purpose to emphasize to cursory (i.e., most) readers the underlying tension between what I shall call the "liberal" and "republican" elements of the Declaration. While content to let readers who lacked the patience to read much beyond the Introduction to *NRH*, or to do so with any care, regard him as a "natural law thinker," on account of his warning of the danger posed to our country's founding principles by the rise of historicism, Strauss can be said to have devoted the remainder of the volume to uncovering the inner difficulties that led to the decline of belief in what he called "modern natural right."²

Contrary to Erler and Masugi's conclusion, Strauss was not convinced that "a return to Founding principles," properly understood, sufficed to extricate us from the modern crisis. Without denying the practical merit of

² Nor, contrary to Erler and Masugi, was Strauss's discovery of the Hobbesian foundation of Locke's thought simply unprecedented. For a discussion of testimony to this effect by Locke's onetime pupil the Earl of Shaftesbury, see Jason Aronson, "Critical Note: Shaftesbury on Locke," *American Political Science Review* 53, no. 4 (Dec. 1959): 1101–4. And see Peter Laslett's discussion of the sometimes "violent" controversy over Locke's alleged Hobbi-ism during the 1690s (along with Locke's disingenuous denial of familiarity with Hobbes's writings) in the introduction to his edition of Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*, student ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 73–74. While Strauss undoubtedly provided the most thorough published analysis of Locke's Hobbi-ism, his awareness of that phenomenon was far from historically unique, and hence all the less likely to have been the product of "dissimulation."

Lincoln's exhortation to Americans, confronted with denials of the wrongness of slavery, to regain their "ancient faith" in the Declaration, it did not constitute a *philosophic* resolution of the problem that Strauss addressed in modern thought. Contrary to Thomas West, the historicist genie, once released as a (probably inevitable) long-term consequence of gaps in what Strauss labeled the "first wave" of modern political philosophy, could not simply be put back into the bottle. If Erler and Masugi disagree with this, they should acknowledge that their difference is with Strauss, not merely with me. (Indeed, they come close to such an acknowledgment by claiming to demonstrate, implausibly, that Jaffa's supposed "turn" reflected his having "pressed the theological-political question more deeply than Strauss did.")³

I conclude my response to the first part of Erler and Masugi's critique by addressing their summary of what they call the "Aristotelianized Locke" that they believe Jaffa showed to have guided the Founders. As they recount, from the facts that the Declaration refers to what are initially described as "rights" as "ends," which include "'Safety' and 'Happiness,' the alpha and omega of political life in Aristotle's *Politics*," and that *The Federalist* not only alludes (in its central number) to those lines "but also refers to 'happiness' and 'public happiness' far more frequently to describe the ends of government than it does the protection of rights and liberties," Jaffa inferred that the Founders were disguised Aristotelians! But the notion that government exists in order to promote the people's happiness is hardly peculiar to either Aristotle or the Founders. Nor is anything in that claim incompatible with Locke's prescription. What Jaffa and his acolytes blur is the difference between *how* happiness is portrayed by Aristotle and by the Founders—starting from the fact that Aristotle, unlike the Declaration, never uses the Lockean term "pursuit"

³ In fact, in the excerpt that they cite from the second chapter of *Rediscovery* (43), wherein Jaffa equates the idea of the state of nature, ostensibly governed (as Erler and Masugi remind us) at least *in foro interno* (according to Hobbes) by the law of nature, Jaffa directly contradicts the core of Strauss's interpretation, without acknowledging he is doing so. See Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 212–30, esp. 216 ("the tension between Locke's natural law teaching and the New Testament"); 220: "We thus arrive at the conclusion that Locke cannot have recognized any law of nature in the proper sense of the term," a judgment Strauss repeats at 226; 222 (noting Locke's denial of "the traditional view" that the conscience embodies the dictates of natural law) and 224 ("The law of nature cannot be truly a law if it is not effective in the state of nature," as Locke demonstrates it is not). Going beyond even Jaffa, Erler and Masugi maintain on his behalf that the idea that government is founded on a social compact constitutes a reassertion of "man's political nature," when the very point of that doctrine (a concomitant of the concept of the nonpolitical state of nature) is that contrary to Aristotle, we are *not* naturally political animals. Gullibly, and in utter disregard of Strauss's analysis, they accept Locke's equation of the natural law with "the will of God," and hence with reason, without attending to Locke's *reduction* of the dictates of reason to the mandate of self-preservation (*Two Treatises*, I.86).

in describing government's goal. More broadly, as Jaffa's *bête noire* Martin Diamond observed, while "*The Federalist* is not very explicit in defining happiness...there are firm indications," given its emphasis on security and on "the rights of property," "that what it had in mind has little in common with traditional philosophical or religious understandings of the term."⁴ If there was any dissimulation regarding this issue, it was not Strauss's.

I now offer a few thoughts in response to the second half of "Schaefer contra Political Philosophy," which offers a defense of the chapter wherein Jaffa launches what Erler and Masugi call a "seemingly frantic (and sometimes extreme) polemic" against his former friends and/or benefactors, particularly Diamond, Irving Kristol, and Mansfield (Bloom having been dispensed with in an earlier chapter). They excuse "what appears to the near-sighted and blind to be frantic and extreme analysis and predictions" on Jaffa's part by referring to his anticipation of "the nation's impending dissolution and doom," resulting from the "historicism, nihilism, and relativism that have infected both conservatives and liberals" today—as if such evils could be averted by launching trumped-up charges of national betrayal (readers may take that as a pun if they wish) against the aforementioned scholars. And they warn readers, in the spirit of Jaffa, not to "confuse prudence with moderation."⁵ They sidestep my observation that here as elsewhere Jaffa denounced Diamond and Kristol for making the same observations (regarding the relative moderation and sobriety of the American Revolution, in comparison with its Continental counterparts) that he himself had made prior to his break with Diamond over purely personal issues.

Space considerations compel me to limit the remainder of my response to the following points. First, while Erler and Masugi judge it "odd" for me to observe that Locke, unlike the Declaration, avoids calling the principle of natural equality "self-evidently" true, since he does assert that that there is "nothing more evident" than such equality, I think the distinction significant. To pursue the question of how far and in what way Locke regarded *any* claims as self-evidently true would require an investigation of the sorts of epistemological questions he addresses in his *Essay concerning Human Understanding*,

⁴ Martin Diamond, "Democracy and *The Federalist*: A Reconsideration of the Framers' Intent," in *As Far as Republican Principles Will Permit: Essays by Martin Diamond*, ed. William A. Schambra (Washington: AEI Press, 1992), 28–30.

⁵ Jaffa presumably took care to avoid such confusion when he coined the line that Barry Goldwater infamously pronounced in his acceptance speech at the 1964 Republican national convention, "extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice." Many voters, it appears, lacked the acute vision required to appreciate the prudence of that remark.

which I cannot undertake here. But for present purposes, I would stress that Locke simply *asserts* the (Hobbesian) proposition that human beings must be regarded as naturally equal and hence free, without offering any demonstration of its claim to “evidence.” Instead, for reasons that are unspecified in this context, he puts the burden of proof on those who would emphasize the ways in which people are unequal rather than equal by nature, despite subsequently acknowledging the extent of our natural as well as conventional inequalities.⁶

In effect, the doctrine of natural equality is just what Harvey Mansfield called it, to Jaffa’s chagrin: a half-truth—which, contrary to Jaffa, is not the same as a lie. Whereas Aristotle (as I noted) similarly denied that the natural inequalities among human beings are as great as those that distinguish us from other species (or from gods), such as would be necessary to justify the permanent or absolute rule of some individuals over others, he does not formulate this observation into a general principle, as Hobbes, Locke, and the Declaration do, as that would amount to an oversimplification. Hobbes and Locke chose to adopt such a simplified principle for popular consumption precisely because of its potential efficacy in liberating humanity from the claims of Christian theocracy—as Jefferson indicates in his 1826 letter to Roger Weightman on the Declaration’s meaning. (The significance of the letter in this connection has been emphasized by Mansfield in an essay on Jefferson.) In this regard, I agree with Jaffa that Locke’s undertaking might be understood in part as an adaptation of Aristotle’s political teaching to the new political climate created by Christian universalism. But unlike Jaffa I observe that it went far beyond what Aristotle could have intended (just as Machiavelli’s critique of the classical philosophers’ writings exceeds what would have been dictated by his anticlericalism).

Erler and Masugi also misrepresent my account of Michael Zuckert’s exposition of the Declaration’s reference to self-evident truth. His argument, which I find persuasive, is not that Jefferson regarded the truth of the Declaration’s principles as merely subjective. Rather, while Jefferson, as a student of philosophy, would have uncovered the reasoning on the basis of which Locke demonstrated those principles, in composing the Declaration, he was acting as spokesman for the American people as a whole (“We hold”), most of whom could not be expected to have worked out the demonstration for themselves, but whose unity as a people, and dedication to the Lockean principles of right, required that they take the principles for granted—forming

⁶ See note 14 of my review for an attempted elucidation of Locke’s underlying reasoning, drawing partly on Hobbes.

the foundation of an American civil religion. I don't think there's anything in Zuckert's argument that Jaffa should have found fault with. Neither should Erler and Masugi.

Finally, contrary to the editors' note 21, I don't believe that the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, which is surely not "the most powerful political party in the country today," refutes Mansfield's argument that since the issue of slavery had long been settled in this country, Jaffa should have devoted his energy to more pressing and timely concerns than sniffing out his rivals for intimations of Calhounism. The official Black Lives Matter movement (as distinguished from the slogan, which is unarguable) is grounded in Marxism, and while its antipathy to the principles of constitutional government, along with demands for "reparations" for slavery, and the 1619 Project, do constitute serious threats to the perpetuation of our republic, none of the squabbles in which Jaffa engaged with his ex-friends and should-have-been allies, as they are recorded in *The Rediscovery of America*, would have contributed to challenging those threats.