

**WHETHER STRAUSS' ANCIENTS /MODERNS READING OF
THE HISTORY OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY
UNJUSTLY DEPRECIATES CHRISTIANITY**

Gary Glenn

I

I will defend Strauss' ancients/moderns distinction to Catholic scholars, especially my friends in this symposium, on the grounds that it is helpful in our own struggle with modernity. I am grateful for their agreement to this conversation and especially to Ken Grasso for organizing it.

Modernity is a problem for Catholic thought. Pope John Paul II argues in *Fides et Ratio* (1998) that modernity has undermined reason as a means to knowledge of truth and urged people of faith to come to reason's defense. He says reason and revelation stand or fall together against the irrationalism in which modern thought has at last culminated. He means, I think, the thought of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the popularizations of their "post-modern" progeny. He is particularly concerned about the "de-Hellenization" of modern theology.

Modernity's undermining of reason was also Strauss' theme. He argued that Western Civilization is a product of the unresolved tension between the claims of Greek philosophy and Biblical revelation.¹ This tension generates an energy that enables Western Civilization to renew, and thereby preserve, itself. Strauss lived that tension. Although the claims of philosophy were finally incompatible with those of revelation, he regarded these claims as not resolvable on any basis that both could accept. Accordingly, if reason rejects revelation as a form of genuine knowledge, that is dogmatic and therefore rationally indefensible. Thus, Strauss as philosopher could be neither a convinced believer nor a convinced unbeliever. He apparently lived in sympathy with his Jewish heritage, though not in strict observance of that heritage's forms. He took pains to re-appropriate that heritage's questions and learning and not let them be forgotten.²

II

Modern political philosophy, for Strauss, begins with Machiavelli's lowering of the goals of political life from classical virtue, happiness, and justice, to enabling rulers to get and keep power. Machiavelli shares Augustine's conviction that the classics failed to

reduce their political and ethical goals to practice. But whereas Augustine thought those goals required an otherworldly fulfillment, Machiavelli thought they expected more of human beings than their nature admits of. His “lowering” aimed to make these goals achievable in this world. One result is political life indifferent to morality, thereby drawing readers away from awareness of their souls and its health.

For Hobbes, the human problem is man’s tendency to war with his neighbors. Accordingly, he lowers the goal of politics to securing civil peace so citizens can enjoy their natural right to self-preservation. Its lowness makes it understandable and agreeable to people of low intellectual and moral capacities. Such a politics requires neither priests nor high-minded philosophers to teach demanding morality. The fear of death, properly exploited, is the self-interested—and therefore solid—basis for making men peaceful.

Whereas Hobbes attributes man’s war making to *natural enmity* (specifically “competition, distrust and glory”), Locke thought *natural scarcity* caused men to fight over the means to preserve themselves. Hence, politics should secure one’s right to the abundance which labor can produce from the “almost worthless” natural materials. Civil peace for the sake of private accumulation will make human life comfortable and men peaceful. Peace also requires withdrawing politics from conflictual religious disagreements which have proven impervious to rational resolution. This limiting government in matters religious is “liberty,” and this freeing individuals from nature’s poverty is “property.” Hobbes and Locke together inaugurate the modern liberal way of understanding politics as being limited to securing these individual rights.

Hobbesian-Lockean modernity thus understood is Strauss’ “first wave.” Two subsequent waves further lowered the goals for politics.

Classical thought took its bearings from a permanent human structure “given” by nature. The first wave still derived its goals from man’s nature—hence “natural rights”—but in a less exalted way. The second wave begins with Burke’s criticism of the abstract, pre-political, natural rights of the French Revolutionaries. The French Revolution taught Burke that grounding politics on such rights was incompatible with stable politics.³ In the U.S., this thinking—from Calhoun, to post-Civil War historicism, to Oliver Wendell Holmes—rejected the natural rights teaching of the Declaration of Independence. Calhoun’s rejection was in behalf of slavery. Post-war historicism was driven by the appalling slaughter, consequent to Lincoln’s insistence on preserving the Union, to secure the rights affirmed in the Declaration.⁴ It concluded

that the only safe rights are those which history has given to each people. This turn away from nature to history was developed theoretically in Hegel.

The “third wave” (Nietzsche) rejects the turn to history partly because it had preserved the concealed, though partial, Christianity of the first wave. Neither nature (either classical or modern) nor history, provided a true account of the ground and end of political life. Nietzsche seemingly regarded this discovery as a catastrophe because the lack of a natural or historical horizon made human life unlivable. The classical and modern understandings, while false, were life sustaining. The discovery that human action lacks rational grounds means that meaningful life has to be created by the will to power of the greatest creators or founders. But this only remaining source of guidance is no longer “right and wrong” for we are now “beyond good and evil.”

This third wave culminates in Heideggerian existentialism.⁵ Nietzsche reveals that liberal modernity was based only on the will to believe in the soft side of New Testament morality (toleration, charity, kindness, recognition of the rights of others, even of the poor, the weak, etc.) after having abandoned belief in the New Testament God.⁶ But “we” can no longer believe in either a beneficent nature or a benevolent God whose solicitude for men commands them to care about one another; hence there is neither a this-worldly nor other-worldly sanction for relatively decent, if low, liberalism. This realization, when fully understood, undermines liberalism’s spirited willingness to defend itself⁷ enabling the strongest will to impose itself on liberal sheep. Heidegger once thought that might be National Socialism whose “inner strength and greatness” he publicly praised.

Thus does modernity’s generous hopes of improving human life in this world eventuate in an inability to rationally prefer decency to ruthlessness and to defend “generous liberalism” against its mortal enemies.

III

Strauss regarded this situation as a “crisis.”⁸ Though making human life longer and more comfortable, these successes were made defensible by the residue of pre-modern moral traditions which modernity progressively undermined as each wave developed.

Politically, liberal modernity turns away from virtue towards the pursuit of pleasure; and away from sacrifice for the common good towards private life for personal pleasure and advantage. It may *tolerate* higher ways of life as a private life-style. But it *encourages* an essentially

private, self interested, bourgeois way of life and a notion of rationality that eventuates in “specialists without spirit or vision and voluptuaries without heart.”⁹ It also encourages religious toleration which makes peaceful civil society possible. However, its relativism so intensifies that toleration as to weaken its resistance to the intolerance of which it is a “seminary.”¹⁰ Modernity’s weakness in defending itself against this consequence of its own principles, requires going outside of modernity to defend the real goods it has delivered.

Let me now reconnect Strauss’s ancients/modern framework with Christianity.

Heideggerian existentialism announces reason’s impotence regarding how man should live. Strauss’ project defends reason against the self-destructive belief that “the ways of life recommended by Amos or Socrates” are not evidently superior to that of specialists and voluptuaries. He seeks a remedy in “Socratic rationalism” as distinguished from Cartesian rationalism. The latter presupposes radical scepticism which the third wave shows leads to the abyss, rather than to the certainty which Descartes sought. Socratic rationalism rests not on “radical” but on “moderate” scepticism; on the need for knowledge of how we should live; on the assumption that nature makes such knowledge available to human reason; and on the view that such knowledge is accessed through existing opinions.

Strauss saw potential allies in “the Catholic and non-Catholic disciples of Thomas Aquinas,”¹¹ at least those who stress natural law as moral duties rather than rights, defend rule by the wise, and do not regard rule by the people as *required* by natural law. However, he thought some contemporary neo-Thomism instead intensifies, not resists, modernity’s dangerous proclivities. That side fostered private rather than political life, depreciates political prudence, de-emphasizes the intensity of relations among fellow citizens by stressing men’s equality of natural rights in an undifferentiated common nature, and is committed to democracy as almost the only justified regime. His reviews of books by Yves Simon, Jacques Maritain, and Heinrich Rommen reflect these concerns.¹²

IV

Strauss’ primary concern is modernity and its dangers. He judges that neo-Thomist thought can either promote or resist those dangers, and he tried to encourage the latter.

He views Thomism from a sympathetic direction. Outside of Thomism, he is one of the few modern thinkers friendly to the view that

there is a human nature which provides guidance about moral duties. His ancients/moderns distinction helps show that the anti-natural law relativism and dogmatism in late modernity has roots in early modernity.¹³

His reservation about Thomistic natural law concerning prudence is a disagreement among friends. It stems from his view that reason unaided by revelation cannot issue in such universally valid rules of action as Thomistic natural law defends. There will be circumstances in which what is usually right by nature is wrong by nature. And vice versa. And exceptions to these rules are as much according to nature as are the rules. The paradigm of this occurs in Book I of Plato's *Republic*. While it is *almost always* by nature just to return what one has borrowed, if doing so in particular circumstances would harm the common good, natural justice forbids returning it. The weapon borrowed when the owner is of sound mind should not be returned when he is mad. This is why Strauss thinks that it is more by nature just for the wise to rule rather than for the unwise to rule according to the allegedly universal rules of action. The wise can judge competently when the common good requires acting contrary to the normal rules. Burke defends this view within modernity when he speaks of "the dreadful exigence in which morality submits to the suspension of its own rules in favour of its own principles."¹⁴

Strauss usually presented Christian political philosophy (Augustine, Aquinas, Suarez) as fundamentally ancient and not modern.¹⁵ This symposium came about partly because this strikes some Catholic thinkers as unjustly deprecatory. This objection, which thinks Christianity more a part of modernity, particularly more on the side of modern natural rights and of democracy than Strauss thinks it's best traditions admit, underestimates the extent to which philosophic modernity's reformation of medieval Christian ideas rests on a depreciation of reason incompatible with the medieval antecedents and on a denial of truth incompatible with revealed faith.

Categorizing Christian thought as "ancient" was part of Strauss' understanding that philosophic modernity abandons reason's ability to know the good and the common good understood in light of our moral duties to others. Christian thinkers persuaded of that should learn from him to hold modernity at arm's length.

Strauss would say that Aquinas builds on Plato and Aristotle, departing from them in ways that develops them.¹⁶ In contrast, modern political philosophy departs from them root and branch and pours anti-Christian meanings into medieval Christian-Platonic and Christian-Aristotelian political teachings (such as equality, natural rights, and

government by consent of the governed).¹⁷ From a Christian perspective, modernity tends toward public secularism or atheism; from Strauss' perspective, modernity tends toward the tyrannical post-modern universal and homogeneous state.¹⁸ Christianity and the ancients have the same opponents.

Strauss's ancients/moderns distinction benefits both Christianity and political philosophy. The latter studies what is knowable by unassisted reason, the former what can be known through revelation. If kept distinct, these can independently reinforce each other where they agree; and their tension can mutually energize each other where they disagree.

The alleged depreciation is instead a strategic necessity owing to the different place in the front that Strauss fought our common battle¹⁹ against modernity's loss of faith in reason's ability to know how human beings ought to live together in any decent way.

V

Let me attempt to respond to what seems specifically to trouble my friends about Strauss' ancients/moderns distinction.²⁰

Both Ken Grasso and Bob Hunt find the ancients/moderns distinction too dichotomous and question why a believer should care about fitting Christianity into it. Professor Hunt thinks that whether Christianity/Thomism is closer to the ancients or to the moderns is irrelevant since these are not Christian categories. Professor Grasso's thinks the distinctiveness of Christian Political Thought cannot be adequately appreciated within these categories.

I respond.

First, all Catholic political philosophy is built upon, derivative from, or a reaction to Augustine and Aquinas who, in turn, explicitly adopt and build upon Platonism and Aristotle. Thomism in particular is explicitly a variant of Aristotle. Therefore, as Christians, in order to understand our own tradition, we need to be clear about what we can accept from the classics (because it is true or genuine knowledge derived from reason without the aid of Revelation).

Second, modern thought is, in certain ways, inimical to Christian faith. Some of these ways are visible from within Christianity itself without the aid of reason alone. However, some of them are most readily visible from outside Christianity. Pursuit of wealth and of bodily pleasures is part of the "modern world." It is important for us to understand whether this is merely the result of innate and permanent human passions; or whether modern ideas intensify and cultivate those

passions. Strauss argues the latter. And he shows this revolutionary new world of “political hedonism” derives from Hobbes and Locke in particular, and more generally, from modernity’s deliberate turning away from concern with healthy souls and even from the question of what a healthy soul would be.

Third, the relation of Christianity to modern thought is both important and ambiguous. Christian thinkers like Aquinas and Suarez, first developed the language of natural rights, the right of the community to consent to its rulers, and “regicide.” The latter was part of the idea that the community had a right to replace the king and also change the form of government, e.g. from kingship to democracy. These originally Christian ideas are related both to the superficially similar but finally very different teachings of modern political philosophers like Locke and Rousseau and to important state papers such as the Declaration of Independence and of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizen.²¹ It is easier to see that with the help of classical thought than from within Catholic thought alone.

One can see from within Catholic thought alone that the following Lockean teachings undermine Christian teachings: that all men have an unlimited natural right to acquire property, that “conjugal society” need not be more than a temporary contract until the children are raised, that there is no natural distinction between a wife and a concubine, that religious toleration excludes Catholics, and that all churches are to be tolerated only on condition that they submit to the political authority.

It is not so easy to see from within Catholic thought how Locke transforms the content and meaning of the originally Christian language of natural rights, government by consent of the governed, and social contract, giving them decisively new content. Christians insufficiently aware of the ancients/moderns distinction may think that the Christian origins of this language means that modernity is owing to Christian ideas and hence that Christianity’s existence within modernity is unproblematic.

It is still more difficult to see, solely from within Catholic political thought, Locke’s subtle but decisive transformations of Catholic ideas as part of a broader “modern project” initiated by Machiavelli and furthered by Hobbes, Locke, Bacon, Descartes, and thereafter, culminating in understanding the human good without reference to God in the thought of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and their “post-modern” progeny. Failing to see that, we end up talking only with each other and cannot communicate with those outside the faith.

Strauss's attempts to expose how this "modern project" endangers the human soul and to build intellectual resistance to it. To that end, he identifies "the Catholic and non-Catholic disciples of Thomas Aquinas" as elements of non-modern thought which still exist *within* modernity, but which are not primarily of modernity.

If Strauss has got right that modernity leads to the self-destruction of reason; the coming into being of the universal and homogeneous state in which human beings are to be reduced to grazing herbivores contentedly chewing their cud, ruled by the universal and final tyrant from whose dominion there is no place of refuge; in which all notion of human greatness is lost and human excellence or virtue is forgotten; in which not only self-sacrifice for the common good but even interest in being independent and self-sufficient is lost—if all this is a true diagnosis of where modernity is taking us as it develops, then it *matters* how Christian thought stands in relation to this movement. And it matters how Christianity relates to ancient thought, since modernity rejects both.

The second large objection to Strauss's ancients/moderns distinction is made by my friend Professor Steve Brust. He argues that Strauss disbelieves in universal moral principles. In particular, he rejects Strauss's apparent acceptance of Aristotle's teaching that all natural right is changeable.²² Brust interprets this to mean there cannot be any limits to just reprisal.

Brust's important concern goes very deep. It is, I believe, based partly on a misunderstanding of Strauss and partly on a disagreement with Strauss about how principles relate to practice.

Brust correctly understands Strauss's Aristotelian natural right to say that there is no theoretical rule for determining which of two conflicting rules of natural right should apply. However, Brust incorrectly understands this to mean that "there is no way to determine" when there are "no principles for telling you which principles should be used."

Strauss follows Aristotle in holding that there are universally valid ends but no universally valid rules of action. This is because theoretical principles of right are insufficient when principles either conflict or fail to serve the common good. But Strauss thinks such cases are rightly decided by the prudence of the wise man in a position to know how relevant circumstances affect the common good. If my understanding is correct, then Brust misunderstands Strauss to teach that "there is no way to determine." There *is* a way. The most theoretically sound principles always depend on prudence for their application. Theory is insufficient for practice.

Brust's objects that Strauss *does not* believe in universal moral principles. The usual criticism is that he *does* believe in them. It is worth thinking about why the rest of the (non-Catholic) scholarly world regards Strauss as a moral absolutist while Brust finds him not an absolutist. This disagreement might indicate that Strauss and Catholic thought are closer to each other than either of them are to the main currents of modern thought. That this is so, animates this defense of Strauss' ancients/moderns distinction to Catholic students of political philosophy.

Notes

1. *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), passim. “The Mutual Influence of Philosophy and Theology” in *The Independent Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 3, 1979, 111-118. “Jerusalem and Athens: Some Preliminary Reflections” (1967). Reprinted in Kenneth Hart Green, ed., *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 377-408.
2. See especially “On the Interpretation of Genesis” (1981). Reprinted in Green, 359-376.
3. Burke nevertheless believed in the pre-political, universal, transcendent natural rights of all human beings. What he rejected was the direct appeal to those rights, unmediated by the experience and practical embodiment of those rights for a given people, in given circumstances. See Gary D. Glenn “Burke” in Kenneth Deutsch and Joseph Fornieri ed., *An Invitation to Political Thought* (Belmont, CA: Thomson Publishing 2009), 351-380; and “Natural Rights and Social Contract in Burke and Bellarmine” in *Rethinking Rights: Historical, Philosophical and Theological Perspectives*, ed. Bruce P. Frohnen and Kenneth L. Grasso (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2009), 58-79.
4. See Carl Becker, *The Declaration of Independence* (New York: Knopf, 1922).
5. Leo Strauss, “An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism”, in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 27-46
6. See in particular “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man,” #5, in *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale at <http://www.handprint.com/Sc/NIE/GotDamer.html>. See also *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974) (1882, 1887), Book V, 343, “The meaning of our cheerfulness.”
7. See Leo Strauss, “Preface” to the English translation of *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 1-34.
8. Leo Strauss, “The Crisis of Our Time,” in Harold J. Spaeth ed., *The Predicament of Modern Politics* (Detroit: University of Detroit Press, 1964), 41-54.
9. Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* quoted in *Natural Right and History*, 42. Strauss uses the same quote in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, p. 5.
10. *Natural Right and History*, 5-6.
11. *Ibid.*, 2 and 8

12. That current Roman Catholic thought has become almost entirely committed to democracy see Robert Kraynak, *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy: God and Politics in the Fallen World* (Notre Dame, IN: Univeristy of Notre Same Press, 2001). Kraynak's argument coincides with Strauss' but from the perspective of a believer. See also Kraynak's "The Illusion of Christian Democracy" reply to a Symposium on his book in *The Catholic Social Science Review* IX (2004): 67-75.
13. "On Locke's Doctrine of Natural Right" *The Philosophical Review*, 61, 4 (October 1952): 475-502. And Hobbes' laws of nature are admittedly "but convenient articles of peace on which men may be drawn to agreement." *Leviathan*, ch. XIII.
14. *Select Works of Edmund Burke*, foreword and biographical note by Francis Canavan, vol. 2, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1999), 236.
15. Occasionally Strauss presents Thomas and Suarez as closer to the moderns than to the ancients. See the unpublished paper by Geoffrey M. Vaughan, "Rational Creatures and Political Animals: Leo Strauss on the Natural Law." See also Kevin Cherry, "Leo Strauss, Thomas and Thomists" (a paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Maritain Association, Washington, DC, October 2005).
16. I am indebted to Kevin Cherry, University of Notre Dame, for the thought in this paragraph.
17. Orestes Brownson is more perceptive than any other admittedly Christian thinker, about how Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and Jefferson manage these transformations. See Gary D. Glenn, "Are There Catholic Antecedents of the Declaration's Principles?," *The Catholic Social Science Review* XI (2006), 120ff. The footnotes will take the reader to relevant passages in Brownson's, *The American Republic* (1856).
18. See the Strauss/Kojeve debate in Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth ed., *On Tyranny* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
19. It is "our common battle" if one accepts the argument of *Fides et Ratio*.
20. Editor's Note: Prof. Glenn is responding here to comments made by Professors Grasso, Hunt and Brust at a panel on this subject at the 2007 Meeting of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists.
21. See Gary D. Glenn, "Are There Catholic Antecedents of the Declaration of Independence? A Conversation Between Archbishop John Ireland, Orestes Brownson, and the Twentieth Century," *The Catholic Social Science Review*, XI (2006): 115-132. And "Words That Sound-Alike But Have Different Meanings: Christian 'Natural Rights' and Kantian inspired 'Human Rights,'" *The Catholic Social Science Review* IX (2004): 21-28.
22. See *Natural Right and History*, ch. 3.